

THE SECOND EPISTLE OF PAUL TO THE CORINTHIANS, CALLED  
**SECOND CORINTHIANS**

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**Historical Context.** ([Read the history up to this point...](#)) Paul had been in Ephesus from where he wrote the first epistle (1 Cor. 16:8), sending it by the hand of Titus (2 Cor. 12:18). He remained in Ephesus because a great door was opened in the gospel (1 Cor. 16:9). Shortly thereafter, a riot broke out in Ephesus over the effect Paul's preaching had on idol-makers. As a result of this tumult, the door was closed in Ephesus, and Paul departed for Macedonia (Acts 20:1). But when one door closes, another door opens. This time the Lord opened a door "in the gospel" at Troas (2 Cor. 2:12), and after spending a little time there, Paul arrived in Macedonia. It was in Macedonia that Titus came to Paul with good news, that the Corinthians had received the first epistle, and were repentant (2 Cor. 7:5-7). Therefore, Paul wrote the second epistle to explain why he had delayed coming, and to remind them to have their collection for the poor Judean assemblies ready, and to assure them that he was indeed coming; *"This third time I am coming to you. In the mouth of two or three witnesses shall every matter be established"* (2 Cor. 13:1). He sent the second epistle again by the hand of Titus. Finally, Paul did come to Greece, and spent three months there, making good on his promise to come to them (Acts 20:2-3). It was during that stay that he wrote the epistle to the Romans, and sent it as a letter of commendation for Phebe, who was from the assembly in Cenchrea, a port of Corinth.

**Themes of the Epistle.** There are a number of ways this epistle can be viewed, none of which are conflicting. I prefer to think of it as several points of view; like levels in a multi-story building. Let's explore each.

1. *Canonical: Restoring Grace.* At the surface level, 2 Corinthians is a follow-on to the first epistle. The first epistle was almost exclusively corrective. Happily, the Corinthians had taken the first epistle to heart and corrected many (though not all) of the disorders that had previously existed, including the excommunication of the wicked person in 1 Cor. 5. The second epistle is very much *restorative*, although there are still elements of further correction. Even at the time of the first epistle, the deeper issue in Corinth was the challenge to the authority of Christ in Paul's apostleship. However, due to the open sin and many ecclesiastical disorders in Corinth, Paul could not address these deeper matters initially; they were in danger of coming under an apostolic rod. But when the first epistle was received by the saints, and the evil judged, then Paul's heart was open to address the deeper concerns. The emotional intensity is much higher in 2 Corinthians than in the first epistle, because Paul is getting into deeper waters. In fact, in some ways this letter resembles an emotional roller-coaster; oscillating back and forth between expressions of how hurt Paul was, and expressions of much he loved them. It is not that Paul didn't love the Corinthians in their low condition (see 1 Cor. 16:24), but that he was not free to show that love the way he desired. Once repentance was worked, Paul's mouth could be opened and his heart expanded toward them (2 Cor. 6:11). Furthermore, the assembly had excommunicated a wicked person, and by this time that brother had come to repentance as well. The assembly needed to restore that brother, "*lest perhaps such a one should be swallowed up with overmuch sorrow*" (2 Cor. 2:7). So we can see in this sense, a very basic theme of the epistle is *restoring grace*.
2. *Practical: Christian Ministry.* If we take the elevator up to the second floor, we see a practical theme that runs through the entire epistle. It deals with the service of the Apostle Paul, his desire for the saints to have a part in that service, and the need for the Corinthians to recognize his apostleship. There was still division in the assembly ("*ye have acknowledged us in part*", 2 Cor. 1:14), and more details are revealed about the character of those factions. One of those sects, the Christ-party, was challenging the authenticity of Paul's apostleship, having among them "*false apostles, deceitful workers*" (2 Cor. 11:13). These individuals were steadily and subtly trying to turn the assembly against the Apostle Paul. In ch.1 they accused Paul of being fickle and a promise-breaker. In ch.10 they accused Paul of being weak in person. In ch.12 they accused Paul of being deceitful and self-seeking. None of

this was true. Paul had stated his intention to visit Corinth, but had delayed because he desired their blessing. Paul wanted them to receive the first epistle and profit by it before he came. If he had come earlier, it would have been in judgment (with a “rod”), and the result would have been his having “dominion” over their faith. Therefore, Paul gives a detailed account of his service and missions, revealing the deeper motives of his heart (ch.1-7). Then, he exhorts the saints to help in the ministry through prayer, and giving financially (ch.8-9). Finally, he deals with the serious issue of rebellion against apostolic authority, and demonstrates through numerous proofs the authenticity of his apostleship (ch.10-13). Paul keeps coming back to the defense of his apostleship, and his expressions get stronger the farther he goes. In this sense, the overarching theme of the epistle is *Christian Ministry*, as exemplified by the Apostle Paul.

3. *Doctrinal: The Spirit’s Work to Manifest Christ in Us.* If we take the elevator down to the basement level, so to speak, to examine the doctrinal foundation of the epistle, we find still deeper themes. After giving an account of his journeys and decisions (ch.1-2), Paul then speaks of how he ought to be welcome in Corinth without a letter of commendation, because the Corinthians were really the fruits of his own labors. This causes him to open up the subject of the Spirit’s ministry... “writing” Christ on the hearts of Christians. This ministry of the Spirit is a complete contrast to the ministry of the law, which is really a ministry of death (ch.3). This leads Paul to speak of the outflow of the life of Christ through the believer, that which hinders it, and what God’s is doing through us (ch.4). The trials that overtake us and break down our physical bodies are allowed by God to let the light of the glory of God shine out through us to the world! Finally, if things get so bad, naturally speaking, that the believer dies, we have a resurrection body awaiting us that is suited to heaven (ch.5). Then all the practical results of these truths follow in the subsequent chapters.
4. *Positional: In the New Creation, though Still in the Old.* Lastly, we take the elevator to the upper levels to get a broad overview of the epistle compared to other epistles, and we see new themes connected with the believer’s position. As we know, some New Testament books deal with the believer’s deliverance from sin (Romans), others with our walk in this world (Philippians), and others with our portion in heaven (Ephesians). Bible students often speak of these differences in terms of the typical teaching in Exodus, with the Israel’s journey from Egypt to Canaan. The second epistle to the Corinthians is a “wilderness” epistle. By that, we mean it has to do with the believer’s life on this earth, travelling home to heaven. Much of it corresponds to Israel’s journey through the Sinai Desert. For example, we find that

our physical bodies are breaking down so that the light of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ might shine out. However, there is also a theme of New Creation that is brought out, particularly in ch.5, which corresponds better to the land of Canaan in Old Testament typical teaching. For example, we find that if any man be in Christ, there exists a new creation, in which old things are passed away, and all things are become new. At the end of the epistle, Paul recounts his experience of being caught up to the third heaven (ch.12). In addition to a proof of Paul's apostleship, this serves as a glimpse of what our life will be when totally removed from earth and present with the Lord in glory. In this "positional" sense, 2 Corinthians puts the believer physically on earth, but spiritually in heaven. Second Corinthians touches on the basis of Ephesian truth in a verse here or there [\[1\]](#), but it does not fully develop it.

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