

R. Kent Hughes has called 2 Corinthians “the most emotional of all the apostle’s writings,” which “bears a fierce tone of injured love, of paradoxically wounded, relentless affection.” It is a book written to Paul’s converts who had turned their back on him and come to question everything about his authority and his ministry. His heart bleeds as he writes these passionate words to his friends.

Important Background

Paul first visited Corinth in Acts 18. There, he met Aquila and Priscilla, and together they laboured with the gospel for eighteen months to plant a church in the face of much Jewish opposition. From Corinth, he travelled to Ephesus, then to Jerusalem, and then back to Ephesus. It was from Ephesus that he wrote 1 Corinthians.

As we saw in 1 Corinthians, Paul planned to visit the church again to take up a collection for the Jerusalem saints. He sent Timothy ahead of him, however (1 Corinthians 16:1–11). From 2 Corinthians, we gather that Timothy encountered growing apostasy, planted through the efforts of Paul’s enemies. Receiving this report, Paul made the decision to visit Corinth himself, hoping to set matters straight before being on his way. This turned out to be an extremely “painful visit” for him (2:1).

As you read 2 Corinthians, it quickly becomes evident why this visit was so painful. What Paul found in Corinth was a church that questioned his authority, even his apostleship. Hughes puts the painful visit into perspective:

If Paul was for real, why was there so much suffering in his life? they asked. Also, why was his ministry so lackluster when compared with the ministry of others? Why was his preaching so dull? And why did he change his travel plans if God was actually directing his life? Moreover, what lay behind his refusal to accept payment for his services, as most preachers did? Was he really collecting money for the poor? Why didn’t Paul have letters of recommendation like the others? Why didn’t he regale them with stories about God’s power in his ministry? Was it because there were none? Tragically, this attack on Paul’s ministry and person had led many of his Corinthian converts to reject him and his preaching for a different gospel.

Paul left Corinth so deeply wounded that he determined not to visit there again (2:1). Arriving back in Ephesus, he sent a “severe” letter to Corinth by the hand of Timothy (2:5). (This letter is lost to us, but was written between the writing of 1 and 2 Corinthians.) He pleaded for repentance, and it appears to have worked—at least to some degree (7:8–9). However, as 2 Corinthians bears witness, there was still an element in the Corinthian church that rejected Paul’s authority and teaching. He therefore wrote 2 Corinthians as a defence of his ministry, even as he planned a return trip to the city (12:14; 13:1).

TO THINK ABOUT

We can sometimes get the erroneous impression that faithful servants of God are unswayed by their critics—that they callously shake the dust from their feet in the face of opposition and move on to better things. Second Corinthians will paint a very different picture. Do you think it is right for God’s servants to take to heart—even to take personally—the opposition that they face? Why, or why not?

Second Corinthians is a letter that shows us how we ought to think about the gospel and the care of souls. The opening verses introduce us to this theme.

Paul’s Greeting

Verse 1 contains two distinct clauses. In each, we find one aspect of Paul’s emphasis throughout this letter.

1. **Apostolic authority** (v. 1a)—“Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother.” He will go to some pains in this letter to defend his claim to apostleship. Apostles carried unique authority in the first century. They were men who were chosen and commissioned directly by the risen Christ to carry out missionary work and exercise oversight over churches. To reject apostolic authority was to reject divine authority. It was to reject Jesus Christ himself.

TO THINK ABOUT

Apostolic authority was unique to the first century—specifically, to thirteen men chosen and commissioned by the risen Christ. (The New Testament does occasionally use the Greek word *apostolos* in an unofficial sense to describe those sent by a local church to plant churches—i.e. of missionaries—but the OFFICE of apostle was reserved for thirteen men.) To buck apostolic authority was to directly challenge God. In what sense do elders of local churches today bear authority? How, if at all, does this differ from apostolic authority?

2. **Church centrality** (v. 1b)—“To the church of God that is at Corinth, with all the saints who are in the whole of Achaia.” Here, Paul parallels “church of God” with “all the saints,” highlighting that, in God’s economy, all Christians are saints.

TO THINK ABOUT

Given what you know of the church at Corinth, would you be quick to designate them “saints”? How could these believers, who had sinned so grievously against Paul, still be considered saints?

Paul’s confidence that he would be heard rested in the fact that these believers were the church, not of Paul, but “of God.” They were God’s children, and he was confident that God’s children would discern God’s truth and respond appropriately to it.

These two emphases—apostolic authority and church centrality—flow into Paul’s benedictory greeting: “Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” Only those who recognised Paul’s authority and the centrality of the church would be in a position to receive divine “grace” and “peace.”

Paul’s Writing

We will spend many months in 2 Corinthians, as we did in 1 Corinthians, but it may prove helpful from the outset to consider some of the grand themes of this letter before we jump into the text proper next week.

Second Corinthians does not necessarily flow as neatly as 1 Corinthians did, in large measure because Paul is writing with great passion. We can, however, see some major sections in this letter. After the introductory material (1:1–2:11), Paul sets out in 2:12–7:1 to defend his authority and ministry. Then, in 7:2–9:15, he largely lays out the implications for repentant Corinthians, and in 10:1–13:14 the implication for unrepentant Corinthians. These are only broad categories, and the nature of the letter allows content from these sections to bleed into one another.

We learn from 2 Corinthians what authentic new covenant ministry looks like. In many ways, 2 Corinthians provides a litmus test for genuine ministry, contrasting it with unbiblical counterfeits. Throughout the letter, we learn that human weakness is the source of ministerial strength, and that suffering is the vehicle through which God displays his power and glory (see, for example, 4:7–12; 6:3–10; 11:23–30; 12:9–10; etc.).

Remember that Corinth was a city that boasted in its self-made wealth and power. Power, wealth and influence were matters of high importance in Corinthian society, so Paul’s description of true gospel ministry would have flown in the face of what the Corinthians expected.

TO THINK ABOUT

Have we moved beyond the false impressions of the Corinthians that faithful gospel ministry is measured by external matters like power and influence? Where do you see the Corinthian lie evident in the world in which we live in the 21st century?

Hughes summarises well Paul’s burden: “*The gospel does not ride on health and wealth but on weakness. The ministry of the Spirit is not one of splash and flash but of meekness and weakness. The gospel does not need the front pages of any paper. And when it brags, it brags of its weakness—and of God’s power.*”