

## Week of July 23 - 29

### Letters to the Corinthian Church

How many letters did Paul write to the Corinthian church? The answer is not as easy as it seems. We have two letters in the Bible, but both of these letters mention yet another letter. Many believe Paul wrote four letters to the Corinthian church, but only two of them survived and are in the Bible. A history of Paul's correspondence and visits to Corinth might look something like this.

#### First Visit

In Acts 18, Paul visited Corinth for the first time on what we call his "second missionary journey" and stayed for 18 months. Paul lived with Priscilla and Aquila and established the church at Corinth about 51-52 AD

#### First Letter – Lost letter from Paul

Often referred to as "The Lost Letter," it's mentioned in 1 Corinthians 5:9. Chronologically, it is the first letter Paul wrote to the church at Corinth. We don't have any information about it.

Having returned to Antioch at the end of his second missionary journey, Paul established Ephesus as the base for his travels that are called his "third missionary journey." He probably wrote this initial letter during his time in Ephesus. Word had reached Paul about troubles in the Corinthian church, and he wrote to address those problems.

#### Letter from Corinth to Paul

Then the church at Corinth wrote a letter to Paul that is mentioned in 1 Corinthians 7:1 that reached him while he was at Ephesus. Several controversial issues among the Corinthian believers existed, and they wanted Paul's advice on resolving these issues.

#### Second Letter – 1 Corinthians

This is the letter we know as 1 Corinthians. Chronologically, it is the second letter Paul wrote to the Corinthian church. He dictated this letter to Sosthenes during his time in Ephesus toward the beginning of his third missionary journey (approximately 54-55 AD). He responded to the issues raised by the letter he received from Corinth and the report he received from Chloe's people (1 Corinthians 1:11).

#### Second Visit – Sorrowful Visit

In a visit not recorded in Acts, Paul makes a brief second trip to Corinth from Ephesus on his way to Macedonia. This visit mentioned in 1 Corinthians 16:5-8 and referred back to in 2 Corinthians 13:1-2 is sometimes referred to as "the sorrowful visit." Paul made this trip during his extended stay in Ephesus. Timothy had visited Corinth and brought back some news that Paul believed he needed to deal with swiftly.

#### Third Letter – Severe letter from Paul

Often referred to as "the severe letter," this is the letter that caused the sadness mentioned in 2 Corinthians 7. Chronologically, it is the third letter Paul wrote to the Corinthian church (2

Corinthians 2:4; 7:8) and was probably written during Paul's second visit to Macedonia, after his second trip to Corinth and before he returns to Ephesus.

#### **Fourth Letter – 2 Corinthians**

This is the letter we know as 2 Corinthians and is the fourth letter from Paul to the Corinthian church. He wrote this letter during his third visit to Macedonia, approximately 56 AD after Titus had arrived with encouraging news about the situation in Corinth. Instead of returning to Corinth, Paul sent Titus back to Corinth. When Titus joined Paul in Macedonia, Paul rejoiced at the news (2 Corinthians 7:5-7, 13) and wrote this letter to prepare for his coming to see them again (third visit), as he collected money for the poor in Jerusalem (2 Corinthians 9:1-5).

In 2 Corinthians, Paul also defends his authority as an apostle. He reminds them that he founded the church in Corinth, and he had every right to instruct them in the ways of the Lord regarding conduct and gathering together as a church. When Paul finally arrived in Corinth, he spent all winter there, and, while there, wrote Romans.

#### **Paul's Introduction (2 Corinthians 1:1-11)**

Paul opened 2 Corinthians by introducing himself and Timothy, then immediately began talking about suffering and being comforted by God. He mentioned that the Corinthian believers have been experiencing suffering by unbelievers, and told them that he too had suffered, saying, "for we were so utterly, unbearably crushed that we despaired of life itself."

Paul then makes an interesting statement saying, "Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death so that we would rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead."

A major subject that Paul discussed later in his letter is the subject of God providing strength in his weakness, which is always referring to the physical weaknesses of our mortal and fragile bodies. Later, Paul talked about his thorn in the flesh, which in context also refers to some physical weakness related to persecution or suffering.

#### **Paul's Change of Plans (2 Corinthians 1:12-24)**

Paul then discussed how he wanted to visit the church in Corinth, but had been unable to. He explained that he wasn't indecisive, but instead following the will of God.

He also made an important statement regarding the Holy Spirit of God being God's seal on the saved, saying, "by putting his seal on us and giving us his Spirit in our hearts as a first installment."

Paul then explains that it was for their benefit that he did not visit them.

#### **Forgiveness for the Sinner (2 Corinthians 2:1-17)**

Continuing to discuss why he didn't visit the Corinthian believers, he said it was to avoid a "painful visit." Paul explained what he is referring to, saying that it was because of a believer who had been disobedient, who was now needing to be forgiven and consoled. It appears Paul was talking about his first letter to the Corinthians, and the situation may be the man living in sexual sin. Paul said, "I wrote for this reason: to test you and to know whether you are obedient in everything."

Whoever was doing wrong had repented of his actions, and Paul instructed them to forgive and console him. He adds, "Anyone whom you forgive, I also forgive."

Paul then compared himself and those with him as "the aroma of Christ," essentially explaining that wherever they went, their presence influenced others.

### **Paul's Ministry (2 Corinthians 3:1-18)**

Having just said he and his companions had an influence wherever they went., Paul explained that he wasn't bragging and didn't need to boast because the believers themselves were proof of his work. He compared the believers in Corinth as "a letter of Christ, prepared by us," explaining that God's Spirit is the ink and their hearts are the paper. His purpose in making this comparison was to clarify that the believers and their faith were the result of all his hard work.

Paul then defended himself by saying that God made him and his companions "competent to be ministers of a New Covenant." He also made a statement about the Holy Spirit and the Law, which he explains in-depth in the book of Romans.

He talked about the glory of the New Covenant, comparing it to the glory of the Old Covenant through Moses, explaining that those who do not understand who God is have a veil over their minds, whereas those who understand God's New Covenant see his work. According to Paul, this understanding of God's New Covenant is what transforms us through the Holy Spirit into the image of Jesus Christ.

### **Paul's Honest Ministry (2 Corinthians 4:1-6)**

Paul now explained that because of the reasons he listed in the previous chapters, and because of God's mercy, he and his companions had refused to deviate from the true teaching of God's message of salvation through Jesus Christ. He clarified that he and his companions don't sin, saying, "We have renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways and refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God's Word..."

He explained that it is unbelievers who can't understand because they've been blinded from seeing the truth.

Paul said he didn't teach what will uplift himself, but only what uplifts Jesus Christ. He clarified that the miracles he and the other apostles performed were from God, explaining that there is nothing special about themselves.

### **Paul's Tired Ministry(2 Corinthians 4:7-18)**

Paul elaborated on his weaknesses, comparing himself to "clay jars," saying that while he may be weak, he isn't defeated because of God's strength. He continued to explain that God resurrects the dead, which is why they still have hope even as their current bodies age and weaken. "Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day."

When Paul spoke of weakness in 2 Corinthians, he made it clear he was speaking of being physically weak, such as being cold, hungry, or aging. There is no context at all in 2 Corinthians that suggests Paul's weaknesses is something related to sin. On the contrary, he made it clear throughout all his letters that anyone who refused to stop sinning will not be saved. Paul was always speaking of physical sufferings, which he stated plainly.

### **Our Heavenly Dwelling (2 Corinthians 5:1-10)**

Paul spoke of their hope of resurrection, saying that even when they die, they will live because of God's Spirit living inside of them. Paul said, "for we walk by faith, not by sight." He was speaking of the confidence of knowing that God will resurrect us, even if we die.

Paul then explained that obedience to God was important because everyone "must appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each may receive compensation for what has been done in the body, whether good or evil."

### **A Ministry of Reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5:11-21)**

Paul explained his point by saying, "And he died for all, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them." Paul was saying what Jesus says in Matthew, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."

Jesus calls us to stop obeying ourselves and instead follow God; this is the first and greatest commandment. Jesus also says that anyone who refuses to deny themselves and instead obey God is not worthy of being saved, "and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me."

Paul then explained that everyone is a new creation, still speaking of the fact that believers will be resurrected with an imperishable body.

He said he and his companions' role was to be "ambassadors for Christ," and urges the Corinthians to "be reconciled to God."

It is important to mention that Paul was making a case to the "believers" in Corinth that he was a messenger of God's true message of salvation and that he was urging these "believers" to be reconciled to God.

Paul's tone of voice in 2 Corinthians is less harsh than in 1 Corinthians. In 1 Corinthians, Paul makes statements like, "Do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived! Fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, male prostitutes, sodomites, thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, robbers—none of these will inherit the kingdom of God."

Then in 2 Corinthians, Paul seemed slightly apologetic for his harsh and made statements like, "For all of us must appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each may receive compensation for what has been done in the body, whether good or evil." And Paul said, "Be reconciled to God." He's still telling his audience not to sin but made this point with a gentler tone of voice.