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Lesson 1

Background of 2 Corinthians

There are two main sources for studying the background of Paul's second letter to the Corinthians. One is the book of Acts, and the other is 1 Corinthians. The summary below titled The Historical Setting of 2 Corinthians represents the background supplied mainly by those two books. Study this summary carefully, and you will have a good grasp of what caused the writing of 2 Corinthians.

It would be helpful to begin your study of background by reading Acts 18:1-18a. This is Luke's historical record of Paul's *first* evangelistic ministry in Corinth. You will learn here the origins of the gospel witness in this notable Greek city.

It goes without saying that the best preparation for the study of 2 Corinthians is a study of the first epistle.¹ The self-study guide on 1 Corinthians furnishes descriptions of the city of Corinth and its people, and so these will not be repeated here.

Some questions about the historical setting of 2 Corinthians are still unresolved. This does not jeopardize a profitable study of the epistle, however. For a book of such an intensely personal nature, 2 Corinthians excels in the amount of doctrine and practical Christian living it teaches. This will become evident in the course of your study of the epistle itself.

I. THE HISTORICAL SETTING OF 2 CORINTHIANS

Observe how 1 and 2 Corinthians fit into this chronological sequence:

1. Founding of the Corinthian church, on Paul's second missionary journey, A.D. 50 (Acts 19:1-17). Paul was approximately fifty years old. He remained at Corinth for about eighteen months, liv-

1. Not all title combinations in the Bible (e.g., 1, 2, 3 John) have such detailed historical connections as do Paul's two epistles to the Corinthians.

ing with Aquila and Priscilla and working part time in the tent-making business to support his evangelistic ministry.

2. Arrival at Ephesus on the third missionary journey, A.D. 52. Paul had these two contacts with the Corinthian church before writing 1 Corinthians from Ephesus:

(a) A short visit to combat incipient opposition to the apostle's ministry, and to correct other evils.² His mission was apparently not effective. (Read 2 Cor. 2:1; 12:14; 13:1-2. Note the reference to a forthcoming "third time" visit.)

(b) A letter referred to in 1 Corinthians 5:9. At least part of this so-called "previous letter" was written to correct existing evils in the church. The letter is not part of the New Testament canon, because it was not divinely inspired Scripture.³

3. A three-year teaching and evangelistic ministry in Ephesus on this third missionary journey (Acts 19:8, 10; 20:31; 1 Cor. 16:8), including a fruitful ministry (Acts 19:10-12, 17-20) and severe trials (Acts 19:9; 19:21-20:1; 20:31; 2 Cor. 1:8). Paul writes 1 Corinthians toward the end of this mission, around A.D. 55. Titus may have been the one to deliver the letter to Corinth. (If the short visit mentioned above was not *before* writing 1 Corinthians, it would be placed here.)

4. A "painful" letter to the church (2 Cor. 2:3-4; 7:8).⁴ This may have concerned an offense given to Paul in person during the short visit cited above. (Cf. 2 Cor. 2:5-11.) Titus may have been the bearer of this letter to Corinth.⁵

5. Departure from Ephesus, and a ministry at Troas, discontinued when Paul could not find Titus (2 Cor. 2:12-13). Was Paul ill at Troas? (See 2 Cor. 4:17ff.)

2. This unrecorded visit is placed *before* 1 Corinthians by A. Robertson and A. Plummer, *First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians*, pp. 21-25; and by Henry Alford, *The Greek Testament*, 2:52-54. The visit is placed *after* 1 Corinthians by Merrill Tenney, *New Testament Survey* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1953), p. 298; and by S. Lewis Johnson, "The First Epistle to the Corinthians," in *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary*, p. 1228. This is one of the unresolved questions.

3. Paul obviously wrote many letters in his lifetime besides those that were "God-breathed" (2 Tim. 3:16).

4. Some view the letter referred to by "I wrote" (1 Cor. 2:4) as being 1 Corinthians, and the sinning brother as the one in 1 Corinthians 5:1-5.

5. Johnson, p. 1228.

6. To Macedonia, for a ministry there (2 Cor. 2:13; Acts 20:1-2).⁶ Troubles multiply (2 Cor. 7:5). Titus arrives from Corinth; he shares mixed news:

(a) of a spiritual awakening in the Corinthian church (2 Cor. 7:6ff.)

(b) of problems still existing in the church (e.g., 2 Cor. 10:2, 10, 12; 11:4; 12:16, 20-21)

Paul writes 2 Corinthians from Macedonia to prepare the way for his third visit. Titus (with two companions) delivers the epistle to the church (2 Cor. 8:6, 16-24).

7. Paul's final visit to Corinth—three months of ministering (Acts 20:2-3). (See Rom. 16:21-23 for names of Paul's associates at this time.) Paul writes Romans. He escapes a plot against his life (Acts 20:3) and continues on to Jerusalem (Acts 20:3–21:17).

II. THE WRITING OF 2 CORINTHIANS

A. Date

A.D. 56 and 57, depending on how soon after 1 Corinthians (A.D. 55) the letter was written.

B. Place Written

Macedonia (cf. 7:5). One tradition assigns Philippi as the city of origin.

C. Purpose

At least three main purposes can be seen in the epistle:

(a) to give instruction in doctrine and practical exhortations

(b) to give further instructions for the offering being gathered for the poor saints in Jerusalem (e.g., 2 Cor. 9:1-5)

(c) to make an extended defense of Paul's apostleship in view of false accusations by some in the Corinthian church (e.g., 2 Cor. 10:10; 11:13-15; 13:3)

6. Paul's *original* plan (cf. 2 Cor. 1:15-16) was to go from Ephesus to Corinth directly by sea, then to Macedonia, then back to Corinth (thus a "second benefit" for the Corinthians, 2 Cor. 1:15), finally on to Jerusalem. His *changed* plan (1 Cor. 16:5-8; Acts 20:3) was to go first to Macedonia, then to Corinth, then to Jerusalem via Macedonia. The reason for delaying his visit to Corinth was to "allow the Corinthians by God's help to remedy the evils, and then to arrive in their midst" (R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul's First and Second Epistles to the Corinthians*, p. 858). One consequence of this change was that the Corinthians charged Paul with not being a man of his word (2 Cor. 1:17).

D. Style and Characteristics

Variety of style is obvious in the epistle. Erasmus describes it this way: "Now he boils up like a limpid spring, suddenly he rolls away with a great noise like a mighty torrent bearing all before it, and then he flows gently along, or expands like a placid lake over all the land."⁷ The subject matter usually determines the style. For example, when Paul assumes the role of shepherd of the flock at Corinth, his style is placid and relaxed. When he defends his apostleship, his words rush along like the mighty torrent.

In this "most letter-like of all the letters of Paul,"⁸ the apostle is intensely personal, revealing the intimate joys and fears of his tender heart. More is learned about the character and life of an apostle from this epistle than from any other portion of the New Testament.

Contrasts abound in the epistle: glorying and humiliation, life and death, sorrow and consolation, sternness and tenderness. One is aware in reading 2 Corinthians that for Paul the Christian life is all out for Christ or it is not real life at all. The color gray cannot be detected in this book.

E. Unity of the Book

Some modern critics hold that the original 2 Corinthians was not as long as it now stands (e.g., that chaps. 10-13 were not part of the letter).⁹ It should be recognized, however, that in no ancient manuscript of this epistle is there "any trace of a division at any point in the letter, or any variation in the arrangement of the material; and in no early Christian writer is there any suggestion that the document is composed of parts of different letters, or that it was not all written at one time to meet one particular situation."¹⁰ In your survey studies of the next lesson you will be observing evidence of a structural unity in the company of diversity of parts.

F. 1 and 2 Corinthians Compared

The following comparisons are suggested by W. Graham Scroggie:¹¹

7. Quoted by C. F. Kling, *Lange's Commentary on the Holy Scriptures, Corinthians*, p. 5.
8. R. V. G. Tasker, *The Second Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians*, p. 10.
9. For an able defense of the unity of 2 Corinthians, consult Tasker, pp. 23-35.
10. *Ibid.*, pp. 23-24.
11. Adapted from W. Graham Scroggie, *Know Your Bible*, 2:142-43.

1 Corinthians	2 Corinthians
objective and practical	subjective and personal
insight into the character of an early church	insight into the character and ministry of Paul
deliberate instruction	impassioned testimony
warns against pagan influences	warns against Judaistic influences

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What was the setting of the writing of 1 Corinthians?

What were the main purposes of this first epistle?

2. What was the setting of the writing of 2 Corinthians?

What were its main purposes?

3. One author writes this about 2 Corinthians: "The progress of thought in this epistle is like the movement of a mighty army advancing over rugged terrain still inhabited by pockets of stubborn resistance."¹² What particular subject of the epistle may he have in mind?

12. Wick Broomall, "The Second Epistle to the Corinthians," in *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary*, p. 1261.

Lesson 2

Survey of 2 Corinthians

The skyscraper view of a book of the Bible should always precede the student's ground-level tour. In such a view he is more interested in the *general* layout of the book than in the full details of its individual parts. Large movements, turning points, highlights, and atmosphere are some of the things looked for in survey study. This is the important preliminary work that helps the student become familiar with the book and gives him a feeling of being "at home" when he moves from room to room in the book in the analytical stage.

Approach this eighth book of the New Testament as though you have never seen it before. Keep in mind only the setting of the book, discussed in the previous lesson. For this survey study you might even want to imagine that you are a member of the church at Corinth, reading Paul's letter for the first time. Anything you can do to expose *yourself* to the message of the letter will make spiritual response easier, deeper, and more fruitful.

One of the projects of survey study is to read the entire book in one sitting. Many Bible students shy away from this because they are not accustomed to reading more than a chapter at a time. As one writer says,

No masterpiece of world-literature has suffered so much by piece-meal reading as the Bible. . . . In Sunday schools it is taught with an equal disregard of book divisions; and even in home study and private reading the same hop-skip-and-jump method is generally followed.¹

1. C. Alphonso Smith, *What Can Literature Do for Me?* (New York: Doubleday, 1924), pp. 14-15.

Even if you do not complete all the exercises of this lesson, be sure to read the thirteen chapters of the epistle in one sitting. You will be glad you did.

I. A FIRST SCANNING

Spend five to ten minutes scanning the entire letter, reading only the first two verses of each paragraph. What does this reveal about the *general* contents of the letter?

Most of the New Testament epistles have the customary opening and closing salutations. Observe the length of these in chapters 1 and 13.

II. A FIRST READING

This is the one-sitting reading that can be completed easily in fifty minutes. Try reading aloud. Don't tarry over any of the details. Read to be impressed. Make mental notes and record some of your impressions.

III. SEGMENT TITLES

Observe on Chart B that 2 Corinthians is divided here into twelve segments (not including the introduction and conclusion). (A segment is a unit of study, usually of a chapter's length. Often it is shorter or longer than a chapter, depending on where the break of the writer's thought appears.) Mark the segment divisions in your Bible. Then read each segment and record a segment title on the chart.² (See the two examples.)

SEGMENT TITLES														CHART B	
1:1-2	1:3	1:12	sufferings	2:14	made sorry	4:7	5:11	7:4	8:1	9:1	10:1	11:1	11:16	12:14	13:11-14

2. A segment title is a word or phrase taken from the Bible text that is a clue to the main content of the segment. The sum total of titles is *not* intended to be a formal outline of the book.

The locations of divisions not beginning with the first verse of a chapter are based on the following considerations:

1:3-11. This is an opening testimony of Paul. Actually his testimony carries over into the next verses and paragraphs (in fact throughout the epistle), but there appears to be a new beginning at 1:12.

1:12-2:13. Observe the many references to Paul's *coming* to Corinth. This is the main reason for not making a new division at 2:1 but carrying the segment through 2:13.

2:14-4:6. This segment is about Paul's ministry *specifically*, such as preaching (4:5).

4:7-5:10. At 4:7 Paul begins to talk about the "outward man," "earthen vessels," the "body." The subject continues throughout the segment.

5:11-7:3. At 5:11 Paul returns to the subject of ministry, especially the *message* of that ministry ("ministry of reconciliation," 5:18).

7:4-16. Some Bibles make a new paragraph at 7:5 instead of at 7:4.³ However, in view of the subjects *comfort* and *tribulation* in 7:4, and of the connective "for" in 7:5, it seems better to include 7:4 with the new division.

12:14-13:10. The connecting common phrase is "the third time" (12:14 and 13:1). This is the basis for including 12:14-21 with 13:1-10.

IV. OBSERVATIONS AND OUTLINES

We will use the survey Chart C as the point of reference for the remainder of our studies.⁴ Suggestions for study are given below.

1. *Main divisions.* Read chapters 8 and 9 and observe the common subject here. Refer to the survey Chart C and note that this passage is the second of three main divisions in the epistle. Scan chapters 1-7 again, looking for testimonial and doctrinal passages. Then scan chapters 10-13 and observe how frequently Paul defends his apostleship. Read 13:3 for Paul's reasons for devoting four chapters to the subject.

Chart C shows the three main divisions of 2 Corinthians. This much about the structure of the epistle is clear. Beyond this, how-

3. Observe, for example, how 7:5 picks up the narrative that had been temporarily suspended at 2:13. It is for this reason that the section 2:14-7:4 is often viewed as a parenthesis in the epistle. More will be said about this later.
4. Advanced students may want to develop their own survey chart in independent study. Help on the survey method of study is given in Irving L. Jensen, *Acts: An Inductive Study* (Chicago: Moody, 1968), pp. 43-54. The analytical chart method is applied throughout the remainder of the book.

ever, it is difficult to find a logical development of the theme of each division that could be represented by any detailed outline.⁵ The explanation of this absence of strict logical structure is to be found in the intimate, personal quality of the letter, one that pulsates with emotion. As someone has observed, “Feeling cannot be reduced to system; it vanishes under the dissecting knife.”

2. *Kind of content.* Observe the threefold outline: Testimonial and Didactic; Practical; Apologetic.

3. *Paul’s ministry.* What are the two main parts of the epistle on this subject?

4. *Tone.* Be alert to change of tone as you move through the epistle.

5. *Biographical setting.* The three main divisions are related to the historical setting. Study the two outlines by T. Zahn that appear at the top of the chart, keeping in mind the setting discussed in the previous lesson. As we have seen, Paul sent this letter to prepare the way for his visit to Corinth, which he wanted to be a success.

6. *Gifts.* The main subject of the central division (chaps. 8-9) is “gifts.” Study the outline on the chart. Read the climactic last verse of chapter 9. Observe on the bottom of the chart the epistle’s threefold outline on giving and receiving. What is the difference between a gift rejected and a gift received?

Study the outline on “Gifts” developed in chapters 1-7. Observe that while Paul was conscious of trials (e.g., sufferings, sorrow), he never lost sight of gifts from above to help and inspire him in the trial.

7. *Key words and verses.* Note the ones cited on the chart. Read the verses in your Bible. You may want to add to these lists as you move on in your studies.

8. *A title.* The title on the chart reflects the two main subjects of the epistle: *ministry* and *gifts*.

Master the contents of Chart C. Of all the charts in this study manual, you will want to refer most often to this one. Whenever you are analyzing a particular passage, be aware of the context. This is a major contribution of a survey chart.

5. A commendable attempt at outlining is to be found in Alfred Plummer, *Second Epistle of St. Paul to the Corinthians*, pp. 20-21.

V. IMPORTANT PASSAGES

1. *Important subjects* discussed by Paul in 2 Corinthians include:
 - (a) the Old and New covenants contrasted (chap. 3)
 - (b) Christ's substitutionary atonement (5:21)
 - (c) the gospel of reconciliation (5:18-20)
 - (d) separation from worldliness (6:14-7:1)
2. *Key passages* include the following. Read the passages and record the contents:
4:7-12

4:16-18

5:1-10

5:17-21

6:4-10

8:9

9:8

11:23-33

12:1-10

13:14

-
3. What *autobiographical notes* about Paul do you learn from the following passages?
11:23-27

11:32-33

12:1-4, 7

VI. RETROSPECT AND PROSPECT

Do not leave this lesson without thinking back over various verses you have read in your study. Fix in your mind the ones that have stood out for whatever reason. If you are studying in a group, share your impressions with the other members.

Prepare yourself for a closer look at the book as you move into the lessons of *analysis* that follow. Do your studying in utter dependency on the Holy Spirit for illumination to see and understand all that 2 Corinthians has for you.