



2 Corinthians

(Introduction & background information provided is from the ESV study Bible)

Author and Title

The apostle Paul is the undisputed author of 2 Corinthians. Although some scholars have questioned whether Paul wrote [6:14-7:1](#), due to its unique vocabulary and subject matter, these differences are more likely due to the fact that in this passage Paul is quoting a collage of Scripture. Second Corinthians is actually the fourth letter that Paul sent to the church he founded in Corinth ([Acts 18:1-17](#)), together with the house churches “in the whole [province] of Achaia,” of which Corinth was the capital ([2 Cor. 1:1; 11:10](#); cf. [Rom. 16:5, 23](#); [1 Cor. 16:15, 19](#)). The four letters are (1) the previous letter mentioned in [1 Corinthians 5:9](#); (2) our 1 Corinthians; (3) the tearful, severe letter mentioned in [2 Corinthians 2:3-4](#); and (4) our 2 Corinthians.

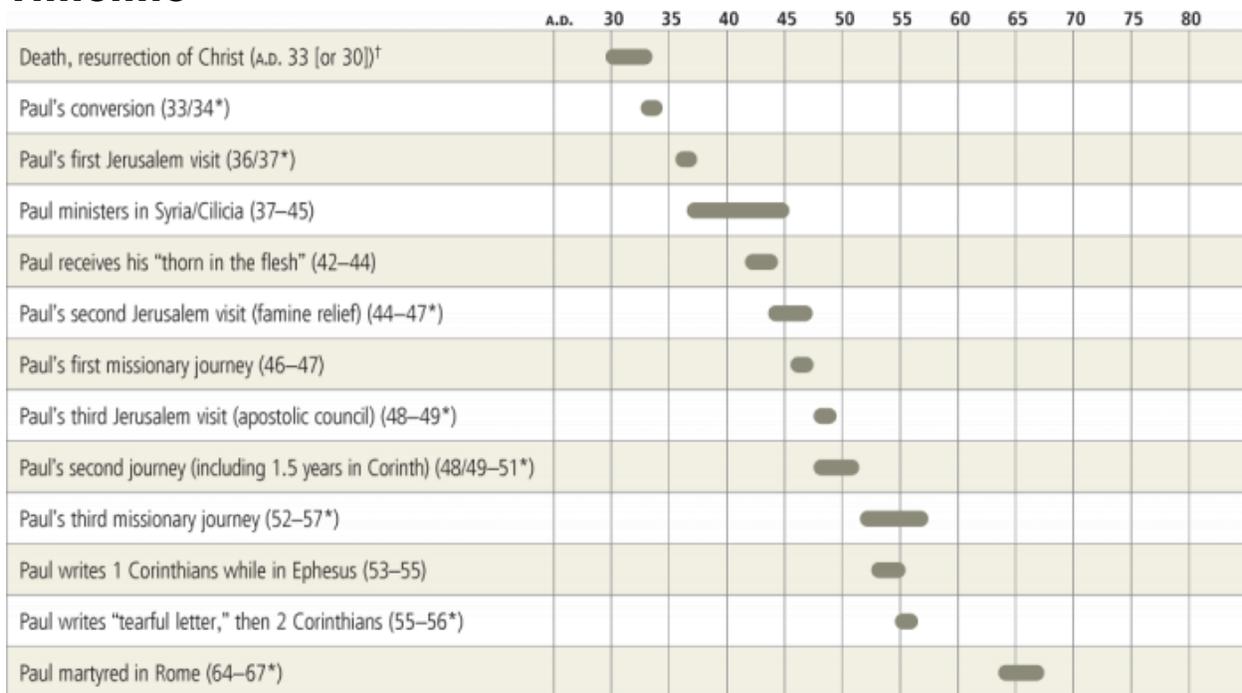
Theme

The central theme of 2 Corinthians is the relationship between suffering and the power of the Spirit in Paul’s apostolic life, ministry, and message. In addition to calling into question Paul’s motives in organizing a collection for believers in Judea (8:20-21; cf. 2:17; 12:14-18) and questioning his personal courage (10:10-11; 11:21), Paul’s opponents had argued that Paul suffered too much to be a Spirit-filled apostle of the risen Christ. Paul argues that his weakness as an apostle

is the very means by which believers are comforted (1:3-11) and God in Christ is made known in the world (2:14-17; 4:7-12; 6:3-10; 11:23b-33). Paul's sufferings embody the cross of Christ, while his endurance amid adversity, with thanksgiving and contentment, manifests the resurrection power of the Spirit (12:7-10). Paul's suffering as an apostle is thus the very means God uses to reveal his glory (1:3-4, 11, 20; 4:15; 9:11-15; 10:17-18).

Paul therefore sees a close tie between the Corinthians' acceptance of his apostleship and the genuineness of their faith. To reject Paul and his proclamation is to reject Christ himself, since Paul's message, ministry, and manner of life are one. This explains why 2 Corinthians is the most personal of all of Paul's letters, filled with deep emotion

Timeline



* denotes approximate date; / signifies either/or; † see *The Date of Jesus' Crucifixion*, pp. 1809-1810

Purpose, Occasion, and Background

Second Corinthians is a response to a complicated history between Paul and the Corinthian church, which must be reconstructed from the evidence available today (see note on Acts 20:1). Originally, Paul had planned to travel from Ephesus through Macedonia to Corinth (see map) on his way back to Jerusalem to deliver the money he had collected for the believers in Judea (1 Cor. 16:5-9). In the meantime, he sent Timothy to visit the Corinthians on his behalf (Acts 19:22; 1 Cor. 16:10-11). When Timothy arrived in Corinth, he found that the church was in turmoil, most likely in response to the arrival of Paul's opponents from the east.

When Paul learned of this he decided to proceed immediately to Corinth to resolve the issues first, then travel on to Macedonia before returning to Corinth for a second visit on his way to Jerusalem (the proposed “second experience of grace” of 2 Cor. 1:15).

Paul’s visit, however, turned out to be very “painful” as a result of the church’s open rebellion against him (2:1, 5-8; 7:8-13; 11:4). At that time, Paul decided it was best to suffer humiliation and leave, without retaliating, in order to extend mercy to the Corinthians (1:23-24). Once back in Ephesus, Paul sent Titus back to Corinth with a tearful and severe letter (now lost), warning the church of God’s judgment if they did not repent (2:3-4; 7:8-16).

To Paul’s great joy, the majority of the Corinthians did repent, which Paul discovered when he met Titus in Macedonia (7:5-16). But there was still a rebellious minority who, under the influence of Paul’s opponents (11:12-21), continued to reject Paul and his gospel. In response, and as yet another act of mercy, Paul wrote 2 Corinthians from Macedonia in anticipation of his third, impending visit to Corinth before going on to Jerusalem (12:14; 13:1).

The mixed nature of the church in Corinth, not to mention the opponents whom Paul addresses indirectly throughout the letter, explains the complex nature of 2 Corinthians and its sometimes sudden shifts in focus and tone. This has led some scholars to suggest that it is a compilation of as many as six fragments. There is no evidence, however, that 2 Corinthians ever contained less than or more than its present content, or that it was arranged in a different order.

Paul’s letter is an extended defense of the legitimacy of his apostolic ministry and its implications. It is intended to accomplish three overlapping purposes: (1) to strengthen the faithful majority and the purity of the church (primarily chs. 1-7); (2) to complete the collection as the expression of their repentance (primarily chs. 8-9); and (3) to offer the rebellious minority one more chance to repent before Paul returns to judge those still rejecting him and his message (primarily chs. 10-13). Thus, chapters 1-7 focus primarily on the past track record of Paul’s ministry, chapters 8-9 on the present responsibility of the repentant, and chapters 10-13 on the future judgment of those still in rebellion against the gospel.

History of Salvation Summary

God brought about salvation through the weakness of Christ’s crucifixion, in fulfillment of Psalm 22 and Isaiah 53. Christians in turn are to find strength in Christ and not in themselves. (For an explanation of the “History of Salvation,” see the Overview of the Bible.)

Key Themes

1. The cross of Christ, embodied in the suffering of his apostle, unmasks the erroneous teaching of "false apostles" and "servants of Satan."	<u>11:13-15</u>
2. In fulfillment of <u>Jer. 31:31-34</u> and <u>Ezek. 36:26-27</u> , Paul is a servant of the new covenant (<u>2 Cor. 3:6</u>), whose ministry and message of the cross mediates the Spirit of the living God and God's righteousness to believers.	<u>3:3, 6-9; 5:14-15, 21</u>
3. Endurance amid adversity and Christlike behavior, both made possible by the grace of God and modeled by Paul himself, are the greatest display of God's presence, power, and glory in this fallen world.	<u>1:12-14; 6:1, 14-7:1; 9:13-15; 12:7-10; 13:4</u>
4. The presence and power of the Spirit transforms believers into the image of God seen in Christ, which is the dawning of the new creation characterized by the righteousness of God. Believers therefore embody the new creation of the new covenant by living for the sake of others. This is made possible by the reconciliation with God brought about by the cross.	<u>3:18; 4:4, 6; 5:15, 17-21</u>
5. Repentance expresses itself in holiness, which is defined as a purity-producing love for God and his church and a unity-creating love for one's neighbor.	<u>6:14-7:1; chs. 8-9</u>
6. Christ, as Savior, is also the universal Judge, who will one day pass judgment on all people according to their deeds. In anticipation of this day, the Spirit transforms those in whom he dwells as a guarantee of the "eternal weight of glory" to come for believers at the resurrection.	<u>1:14, 22; 3:6, 8-9, 18; 5:5, 9-11</u>

The Setting 2 Corinthians

c. A.D. 55-56

Paul wrote 2 Corinthians from Macedonia a year or so after writing 1 Corinthians, during his third missionary journey. He had just finished his three-year ministry in Ephesus and was visiting the churches in Macedonia as he made his way to Corinth. In Macedonia he met Titus, who had returned from Corinth with news about the church there.



Outline

- I. Paul's Defense of His Legitimacy as an Apostle (1:1-7:16)
 - A. Salutation (1:1-2)
 - B. Introduction to the letter (1:3-11)
 - C. Paul's boast (1:12-2:17)
 1. The content of Paul's boast (1:12-14)
 2. The reason for Paul's first change of plans (1:15-22)
 3. The reason for Paul's second change of plans (1:23-2:4)
 4. The application of Paul's example to the Corinthians (2:5-11)
 5. Paul's visit to Troas and Macedonia (2:12-17)
 - D. Paul's ministry of the new covenant as a ministry of the Spirit (3:1-18)
 1. The reality of the Spirit in Paul's ministry (3:1-6)
 2. Paul's interpretation of Exodus 32-34 (3:7-11)
 3. Paul's application of Exodus 32-34 to his own situation (3:12-18)
 - E. Paul's encouragement in his ministry (4:1-6:13)
 1. The new covenant dawning of the new creation (4:1-6)
 2. The new covenant power of the resurrection (4:7-18)

3. The new covenant motivation for the life of faith (5:1-10)
4. The new covenant ministry of reconciliation (5:11-6:2)
5. The new covenant support for the legitimacy of Paul's ministry (6:3-13)
- F. Paul's call for church discipline as an expression of repentance (6:14-7:1)
- G. Paul's joy over the repentant Corinthians (7:2-16)
- II. Paul's Appeal to the Repentant Church in Corinth Regarding the Collection (8:1-9:15)
 - A. The collection as the grace of God (8:1-15)
 - B. The commendation of Titus and the brothers (8:16-9:5)
 - C. Generosity, joy, and the glory of God (9:6-15)
- III. Paul's Appeal to the Rebellious Minority in Corinth (10:1-13:10)
 - A. Paul's defense of his humility as an apostle (10:1-11)
 - B. Paul's defense of his authority as an apostle (10:12-18)
 - C. Paul's defense of his boasting like a fool (11:1-21a)
 - D. Paul's boast in his service and suffering (11:21b-33)
 - E. Paul's boast in his heavenly vision and subsequent weakness (12:1-13)
 - F. Paul's final defense and appeal to the rebellious (12:14-13:10)
- IV. Closing Greetings (13:11-14)

FOR SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION

BIBLE STUDY FOCUS - "Paul's JOY: An echo of Advent"

MAIN TEXT: 2 Corinthians 7:4-9

Instructions for Small Group Time:

Option 1: Send the main text to small group members so they can read it ahead of time.

Option 2: Read the text together when you meet

Basic Bible Study Practices:

1. As people read the text, ask them to pay attention to key words
2. As people read the text have them highlight key words, people, and places
3. As people read the text have them pay attention to repetition of key terms, ideas, and people
4. If people are given the opportunity to read the text ahead of small group time, have them read it at least twice so they become familiar with its contents.

SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Read 2 Corinthians 7:4-9 (also feel free to read more verses to gain a deeper understanding of context).
2. What are some specific questions or themes that stick out to you about this passage? Take a few minutes and discuss them as a group.
3. What is joy? Is there a difference between having joy versus being happy? If so, what is the difference?
4. What are some verses in the Bible that speak specifically about joy? Read them together as a group.
5. Do you believe that true joy can be found when going through hardships? Why or why not?
6. Do you believe that true joy can be found in Jesus alone? Why or why not?
7. With all that has happened this year, how have you been protecting your joy? How will you continue to protect your joy going forward?

Extra Resources

The Bible Project - Overview of 2 Corinthians: <https://youtu.be/3lfPK2vfC54>

The Bible Project - "Joy": <https://youtu.be/qvOhQTuD2e0>