

THE BIG READ (8)

Jesus in 2 Corinthians

A. Introduction

1. Every book of the Bible has one dominating theme – Jesus is the Christ.

“Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. He told them, ‘This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem.’”
(Luke 24:45-47)

Jesus is the Christ who will suffer and die.

Jesus is the Christ who will rise from the dead on the third day.

Jesus is the Christ who will forgive the sins of all who repent.

Jesus is the Christ who will be preached to the nations.

2. After the four Gospels that tell the story of Jesus’ earthly life, and Acts which traces the spread of the gospel from Jerusalem to Rome, the remainder of the New Testament is made up of epistles or letters that were sent to individual Christians or churches.

These letters address specific situations in the lives of believers and through them we are taught how to live as God’s people.

3. 2 Corinthians is the next of the New Testament letters written by the apostle Paul.

If 1 Corinthians is one of the hardest letters to summarise, 2 Corinthians is one of the hardest letters to get to grips with full stop!

“If we gave a prize, Paul’s most incomprehensible letter, 2 Corinthians would probably win it. Even seasoned readers of Paul’s letters come away from this one with little enlightenment. Part of the problem lies in the fact that we have little idea of the letter’s historical context. Paul is responding to one or more conflicts between himself and other parties at Corinth, but, other than that we can infer from the letter, we have no idea who those parties were or precisely what the fuss was about. The other part of the problem lies in the fact that the letter seems to be composite. An editor apparently put it together from several distinct components. These can be recognised from the abrupt change of tone, interruptions in the flow of thought, and inconsistencies between different parts of the letter.”
(Delbert Burkett)

Whilst I’d disagree with his view that 2 Corinthians is several distinct components, I agree that it is not an easy read in the sense of how it hangs together.

4. It is likely that Paul wrote this letter while he was in Macedonia in AD54/55 (see 2 Corinthians 2:13 and 7:5).

B. Why did Paul write this letter?

1. Paul planted a church in Corinth around AD51/52.

According to Acts 18:1-18, he spent a year and a half in Corinth, establishing and strengthening the church.

But after he left some issues to do with the beliefs and behaviour of some of the members of the church had arisen.

Some of them were extremely serious.

2. News about the problems in the church at Corinth had reached Paul.

Information came from some of the servants of a Christian lady called Chloe (1 Corinthians 1:11).

In response Paul wrote them a letter – we don't have a copy of this one (1 Corinthians 5:9).

The Corinthians responded with a letter raising some additional questions (1 Corinthians 7:1).

In response Paul wrote them a second letter, which we know as 1 Corinthians, that addressed the problems in the church and answered the questions asked by the church.

3. After Paul sent 1 Corinthians, Timothy visited the church in Corinth.

"If Timothy comes, see to it that he has nothing to fear while he is with you, for he is carrying on the work of the Lord, just as I am." (1 Corinthians 16:10)

Timothy found opposition in Corinth to Paul, so Paul went to Corinth himself ('the painful visit').

"So I made up my mind that I would not make another painful visit to you." (2 Corinthians 2:1)

The suggestion is that Paul was verbally assaulted by a member of the church and the other members did nothing about this.

After leaving Corinth, Paul wrote another letter (which we do not have a copy of) that was a severe letter.

"For I wrote to you out of great distress and anguish of heart and with many tears, not to grieve you but to let you know the depth of my love for you." (2 Corinthians 2:4)

"Even if I caused you sorrow by my letter, I do not regret it. Though I did regret it – I see that my letter hurt you, but only for a little while – yet now I am happy, not because you were made sorry, but because your sorrow led to repentance." (2 Corinthians 7:8-9)

Titus, then visited Corinth, and discovers that Paul's letters produced some of the changes wanted (the man had been disciplined and repented), but another problem had arisen – the so called 'super-apostles' who have been undermining Paul's ministry.

"But I do not think I am in the least inferior to those "super-apostles"." (2 Corinthians 11:5)

As well as this issue, there was continuing issue of the collection for the church in Jerusalem (1 Corinthians 16:1-4).

4. Having heard Titus' report, Paul now writes another letter (number 4) – 2 Corinthians.

A letter reminding them about their commitment to the Jerusalem church.

A letter that will deal with these 'super-apostles'.

C. The Story of 2 Corinthians (or rather The Story of Jesus in 2 Corinthians)



1. After Paul's opening greeting in 1:1-11, there are three main sections to 2 Corinthians.

Chapters 1:12-7:16: Paul defends his ministry to the church.

Chapters 8:1-9:15: Paul appeals to the church for generous giving.

Chapters 10:1-12:13: Paul warns the church about the 'super-apostles'.

In the remainder of the letter (12:14-13:14), Paul announces his plan to visit the church again and gives some concluding greetings.

2. In 2 Corinthians 1:12-7:16 Paul defends his ministry to the church.

In this section, after explaining why he changed his plans, Paul shows how he is a genuine minister of the gospel in contrast to the super-apostles.

He says "Look at the effect my ministry had on people" (2:12-3:6)

"You show that you are a letter from Christ, the result of our ministry, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts." (2 Corinthians 3:3)

He says "Look at the message I preached and the methods I used" (3:7-4:7)

"Rather, we have renounced secret and shameful ways, we do not use deception, nor do we distort the word of God. On the contrary, by setting forth the truth plainly we commend ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God." (2 Corinthians 4:2)

"For we do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake." (2 Corinthians 4:5)

He says "Look at what I was prepared to endure to make Christ known" (4:8-5:10)

"We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed, perplexed, but not in despair, persecuted, but not abandoned, struck down but not destroyed." (2 Corinthians 4:8-9)

He says "Look at my motives" (5:11-21)

Paul then appeals to them to accept him and the message he brings (6-7).

3. In 2 Corinthians 8-9 Paul calls the church to be generous in their giving.

Paul cites the examples of the Macedonians and urges the Corinthians to emulate them when Titus returns to Corinth to complete the collection.

"And now, brothers, we want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches. Out of the most severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity." (2 Corinthians 8:1-2)

4. Then, in 2 Corinthians 10:1-12:13, Paul deals with the "super-apostles".

Paul demonstrates his authority as a genuine apostle.

Unlike the super-apostles who boast about themselves, he boasts about Christ.

"But, "Let him who boasts boast in the Lord." For it is not the one who commends himself who is approved, but the one whom the Lord commends." (2 Corinthians 10:17-18)

Unlike the super-apostles who are all about their achievements, Paul writes about his non-achievements, because they show Christ's power at work in him.

"If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness." (2 Corinthians 11:30)

But Paul shouldn't have needed to demonstrate that he was a genuine apostle, because the Corinthians had already seen the signs of a true apostle when he was with them.

"The things that mark an apostle – signs, wonders and miracles – were done among you with great perseverance." (2 Corinthians 12:12)

So who are these "super-apostles"?

"For such men are false apostles, deceitful workmen, masquerading as apostles of Christ. And no wonder, for Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light. It is not surprising, then, if his servants masquerade as servants of righteousness. Their end will be what their actions deserve." (2 Corinthians 11:13-15)

5. Paul is a true minister and a true apostle because his preaching was full of Christ and his ministry was patterned on the Christ's – strength displayed in weakness.

D. Jesus in 2 Corinthians

1. Jesus appears to be weak.

He is meek and gentle.

"By the meekness and gentleness of Christ, I appeal to you." (2 Corinthians 10:1)

He became poor.

"For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor." (2 Corinthians 8:9)

He suffered and died.

"For just as the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives." (2 Corinthians 1:5)

"We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus." (2 Corinthians 4:10)

"For sure, he was crucified in weakness." (2 Corinthians 13:4)

2. Those who serve Him appear to be weak too.

Paul personally was unimpressive.

"I, Paul, who am "timid" when face to face with you... in person he is unimpressive." (2 Corinthians 10:1, 10)

Paul went through many trials.

"I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again. Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea. I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false brothers. I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked." (2 Corinthians 11:23-27)

Paul was aware of his own frailty and weakness.

"Though outwardly we are wasting away." (2 Corinthians 4:16)

"To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassing great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. Three times I plead with the Lord to take it away from me." (2 Corinthians 12:7-8)

3. Yet look at what this supposedly weak Jesus who is preached by weak servants does.

He fulfils all of God's promises.

"For no matter how many promises God has made, they are "Yes" in Christ." (2 Corinthians 1:20)

He transforms us into His likeness.

"And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit." (2 Corinthians 3:18)

He reveals to us the glory of God.

"For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ." (2 Corinthians 4:6)

He makes us into new creations.

"Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!" (2 Corinthians 5:17)

He reconciles us to God.

"All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them." (2 Corinthians 5:18-19)

He bears our sin and makes us righteous in God's sight.

"God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." (2 Corinthians 5:21)

He makes us spiritually rich.

"For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich." (2 Corinthians 8:9)

And His grace is sufficient for every need His weak people have in this life.

"My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weakness, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong." (2 Corinthians 12:9-10)

4. Does this sound to you like someone who is weak?