

## Course Outline

### Countering Misguided Views about Christian Maturity, Part 3

#### *II Corinthians*

##### I. Introduction

- a. The situation in between I and II Corinthians is extremely difficult to reconstruct. The following outline is supported by a broad cross-section of scholarship, but every point is debated somewhere along the line. Paul originally hoped to visit Corinth soon after his stay in Ephesus, probably shortly after Pentecost in AD 55 (II Corinthians 16:8). He originally hoped to sail directly across the Aegean Sea, stop in Corinth en route to Macedonia and then return the way he came (II Corinthians 1:15-16). After receiving I Corinthians, however, the church in Corinth did not react as positively as Paul had hoped. So Paul was compelled to make an abbreviated visit to and from Corinth while he was still ministering in Ephesus and sent another letter, which has not been preserved. Whichever one of these events took place first (more likely the visit) seems again to have exacerbated the situation. In II Corinthians 2:1 Paul calls the visit a “painful” one, and 13:1 (“This will be my third visit to you”; cf. 12:14) confirms that this was a separate visit from his initial stay in Corinth described in Acts 18. Chapter 2:4 describes Paul’s writing out of “great distress and anguish of heart and with many tears,” but 7:8-13 describes the godly sorrow that the letter provoked. Some imagine this letter to be the same as I Corinthians, but the language of II Corinthians 2:4 seems too strong for that.
- b. The situation is made more complicated by 2:5-11 (cf. 7:8-13), which calls the Corinthians to welcome back into their fellowship and forgive a church member that they had disciplined. It is natural to assume that this is the incestuous offender of I Corinthians 5:1. But II Corinthians 2:5 and 10 read as if this man had personally offended Paul in some way, so many commentators think that the latter verses refer to an entirely separate incident.

##### II. II Corinthians 1–9 vs. II Corinthians 10-13

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- a. Second Corinthians 10–13 break sharply from the largely relieved and congratulatory tone of the first nine chapters of the epistle in ways that have suggested to some that they form the body of this “sorrowful” letter of Paul, which chronologically would have thus preceded chapters 1–9. But although Paul’s language is harsh enough in chapters 10–13 to merit this label, he has an entire group of false teachers in view in those five chapters, not one primary offending party. *Perhaps the best resolution is to assume that the man living with his stepmother personally offended Paul when he arrived in Corinth for his second visit, that this led to the painful letter—no longer preserved—in between what we call I and II Corinthians, and that only after receipt of that letter did the Corinthians take appropriate and successful remedial action against the man.*
- b. The change in tone between II Corinthians 1–9 and 10–13 could then be explained in one of three ways: (a) Paul knew all along he would have to include some pointed words for those Corinthians tempted to follow the false teachers (apparently Judaizers, similar to the ones encountered in Galatia), but he praises them first for their appropriate handling of the disfellowshipped offender and for a generally good response to Paul’s other instructions; (b) Paul received fresh news as he was dictating the letter—probably not all in one sitting—that new trouble had broken out in Corinth, and so he has to change his tone; or (c) chapters 10–13 form the body of a later letter after receipt of such fresh news. The abrupt and jarring change of tone seems to make (a) less likely than (b) or (c), and the lack of any manuscript evidence for these sections ever having circulated as a separate letter perhaps makes (b) preferable to (c).<sup>38</sup>

## III. II Corinthians 8–9

- a. There are still other theories about the composite nature of II Corinthians. Chapters 8–9 on the collection for Jerusalem seem unrelated to the rest of the letter and have been treated as a separate epistle and even broken down into two letters themselves, one per chapter (since 9:1 appears to start all over again as a fresh introduction to the topic).<sup>39</sup>

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### IV. Major and Minor “Digressions” in Chapters 1–7

- a. Chapter 2:14–7:4 seems to function like a long digression; the text would read completely smoothly if one passed over these verses and moved directly from 2:13–7:5. The same is true of 6:14–7:1; Paul’s thoughts in 7:2 resume exactly where 6:13 left off. So some scholars also attribute one or both of these sections to separate letters, and the similarities between 6:14–7:1 and various Qumran writings lead a few such writers to suggest that Paul was borrowing from an Essene Jewish source similar to some found among the Dead Sea sect. We believe, though, that there is a way to make sense of the letter as it stands and that we do not need to partition it into separate documents (see under “Analysis” below).

### V. Suggestions Concerning Overall Structure

- a. At any rate, Paul is now writing at least the majority, if not all, of what we call his second epistle, probably in AD 56, as he has left Ephesus and traveled overland to Troas and Macedonia, and will soon be arriving in Corinth (2:12-13; 13:1). He had dispatched Titus to prepare the way for his visit and has been eager to get his report as to how things were in the church (2:13; 7:5). When he finally meets up with him, he is greatly relieved to learn of the generally positive response of the Corinthians thus far (7:6-7). Shortly thereafter he begins to write this epistle. It may be described as a *letter of apologetic self-commendation*, as Paul waxes eloquently about the nature of, and in defense of, his apostolic ministry.<sup>40</sup>

## Analysis

### VI. Introduction and Thanksgiving (1:1-11)

- a. The blessing and the theme of suffering in vv. 3-7
  - i. After a brief salutation (vv. 1-2), Paul couches his opening prayer in the form of a blessing or praise to God, primarily for God’s comfort in the midst of affliction, which he can pass on to others (vv. 3-7).
- b. The prayer and Paul’s life-threatening danger in vv. 8-11

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- i. He is particularly grateful for rescue from some recent life-threatening event (vv. 8-11). This probably refers to one of the more severe persecutions he has experienced (cf. 11:23-27) and may be the same event as that to which he alludes in I Corinthians 15:32 when he fought “wild beasts” (almost certainly a metaphor for his human enemies) in Ephesus. An early Christian tradition of an Ephesian imprisonment of Paul, if reliable, could be part of what he is describing as well. Why Christians suffer and how they can cope from a major theme of this letter, and Paul’s opening thanksgiving gives one answer to these questions: *accept God’s comfort and use it to comfort others when they go through similarly difficult times*. There is no question that Christians often relate better to those who are afflicted when they have had similar experiences.

### VII. Paul’s Apostolic Ministry with the Corinthians (1:12–7:16)

- a. Perhaps some of the perplexities in the structure of these chapters can be alleviated if we see in them a large *chiasmus* (inverted parallelism).<sup>41</sup> The first and last sections correspond to each other, the second and next-to-last, and so on. This was a far more common device in literature of all kinds in the Ancient Near East than it is in our world today.

### VIII. Paul’s confidence in his motives (1:12-22)

- a. Paul begins with a defense of his change of travel plans but with hopes of a growing relationship of mutual appreciation with the Corinthians (vv. 12-14). The reason he did not come to them as first anticipated was not because he was vacillating (vv. 15-17). After all, faithfulness to one’s word is part of the integrity of the gospel (vv. 18-22).

### IX. Paul’s sorrow (1:23–2:11)

- a. Rather he wanted to spare the Corinthians’ further sorrow and come only when matters had improved between him and them (1:23-2:4). Now he is glad to learn they have taken appropriate disciplinary action against the offender—the man has repented, and he should be welcomed back (2:5-11).

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### X. Paul's travels to Macedonia (2:12-13)

- a. Despite the delay and circuitous travel route, Paul is now at last coming, and he does not stop elsewhere even for worthwhile ministry. "No good purpose is served," we learn, "in any Christian's attempting a piece of service when his or her real interests lie elsewhere."<sup>42</sup> We expect Paul to continue with a description of his travels but instead he breaks into a long digression from this topic (2:14–7:4). This section, however, should actually be seen as the heart of the body of the letter on the nature of Paul's apostolic ministry.

### **A series of contrasts: Those saved vs. those perishing (2:14–4:6)**

### XI. The victory procession viewed from two perspectives (2:14-17)

- a. Paul's literal travels lead him to reflect on another kind of travel procession—a victorious army returning from battle with prisoners of war in its train.<sup>43</sup> This is the imagery behind the verb translated "leads in triumphal procession" in 2:14. One and the same parade is glorious for the army and ignominious for the P.O.W.'s. So too Paul's apostolic travels, filled with so many hardships, seem to discredit him in the eyes of those who judge by worldly standards but are a sign of legitimate ministry among those in the process of being saved (vv. 14-16). A similar thought arises in the Rabbinic teaching that Torah is an elixir of life for some, but a deadly poison for others.

### XII. Written vs. living letters of recommendation (3:1-6)

- a. Verse 17 considers how other itinerant Greco-Roman teachers often traveled seeking money for ministry as they went. They also advertised themselves by letters of recommendation from people who knew them (3:1). This leads Paul to contrast these written letters with the Corinthians whom he calls living letters of recommendation for himself (3:2-6).

### XIII. The letter vs. the Spirit (3:7-11)

- a. But speaking of letters calls to mind also the contrast between the "letter"

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of the Law and the Spirit (v. 6), a contrast that occupies vv. 7-18 as well. The old covenant was the age of the Law; the new covenant, of the Spirit. If the former came with the glory associated with Moses' shining face (Exodus 34:29-35), how much more glorious the new covenant (vv. 7-11).

### XIV. Contrasting ways of viewing the Law (3:12-18)

- a. But not everyone recognizes the arrival of a new covenant, because not all read the Law Christologically. Paul likens those who don't see Jesus in the Old Testament to people who are veiled, just as Moses veiled his face to hide the glory he received on Mt. Sinai.<sup>44</sup> But those who remove this "veil" recognize that Scripture points them to Christ, whose Spirit brings freedom from the Law and moral transformation as they are successively recreated into God's image (vv. 12-18).<sup>45</sup>

### XV. Summary (4:1-6)

- a. Chapter 4:1-6 repeats and summarizes the main themes of this section: Paul's renunciation of deceptive forms of self-commendation, his straightforward presentation of the gospel, the twofold response of acceptance and rejection with which it meets, and the rationale for both kinds of response.

### XVI. Present afflictions vs. coming glory (4:7-5:10)

- a. The glory of the new covenant, however, is hidden in the fragile, mortal, sinful, and persecuted human bodies of believers. But Paul sees a positive side to this otherwise depressing state of affairs. When believers live above their grievous circumstances, it becomes more apparent to others that God's supernatural power sustains them (4:7-12). Here is a second reason for suffering and a reminder of how to cope. A third is the eternal glory that one day will far more than compensate for the worst of suffering in this life (vv. 13-18). Hence Paul can refer to his intense catalog of persecutions as "light and momentary troubles" (v. 17). He elaborates on the eternal glory in 5:1-10 as he refers to the expectation of our resurrection bodies. The most common interpretation of this section throughout the history of the church has been

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to see it as a key teaching passage on the “intermediate state of the believer.” In other words, Christians who die before Christ’s return enjoy the conscious presence of the Lord in a disembodied state awaiting the final resurrection (see especially v. 8). More recently, it has become increasingly popular to see the resurrection body (v. 1b) as given to the believer immediately upon death (v. 1a; cf. vv. 3-4 in which Paul prefers “overclothing” to being found naked).<sup>46</sup> But this view seems to require Paul to have changed his mind (or “developed” in his beliefs) from I Corinthians 15:23, 52. The traditional perspective is still quite defensible.<sup>47</sup> The judgment of believers (as depicted previously in I Corinthians 3:13-15) will then be the public demonstration of God’s justice and mercy, not a first time determination of the fate of the dead (v. 10).

### XVII. The core of ministry: Reconciliation (5:11-21)

- a. Here is the *theological heart of this epistle*; some would argue it is the center of all of Paul’s theology.<sup>48</sup> If chapters 1–7 are chiastically structured, then this text is also the center of the chiasmus, and such structures have their climax at their centers. This tightly worded passage contains numerous items of crucial Christology: Christ’s universal atonement (vv. 14-15), as one who was more than an ordinary man (v. 16), bringing about in the salvation of believers the foretaste of the promised recreation of the cosmos (v. 17), offering Himself as our substitute and experiencing the wrath and judgment of God we deserved (vv. 18-19, 21). On the basis of Christ’s sacrificial ministry, reconciling God and believers, we are called to be “ambassadors” of that reconciliation (v. 20).

### XVIII. Present afflictions vs. present glory (6:1-10)

- a. To the extent that chapters 1–9 follow the typical Greco-Roman letter structure, here begins the more direct exhortational material. Paul urges the Corinthians to continue to return to a true understanding of the gospel that is not embarrassed by the style of his apostolic ministry and his afflictions (vv. 1-3). Paul also seems to retrace his steps through the topics discussed in sections A–E above, but in reverse order. Verses 4-10 contain another

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poignant catalog of his sufferings comparable to 4:7-12, but this time he contrasts them with present blessings that help to offset them.

### XIX. Christ vs. Belial or believers vs. unbelievers (6:11–7:4)

- a. The second exhortation appeals to the church in Corinth to restore their original affection for Paul (6:11-13; 7:2-4). Into this context Paul inserts his command not to be unequally yoked with unbelievers because of the vast gulf that separates belief and unbelief (6:14–7:1, recall the contrasts of 2:14–4:6). The verb “yoked” is not the same one that is used elsewhere for “marriage,” and in this context the only kind of “mismatch” that is described is between Christianity and idolatry, so that is probably what Paul has primarily in mind (cf. also v. 16 with I Corinthians 10:14-22). For the minority of Christians in Corinth from a Jewish background, he may also be thinking of avoiding the “yoke of the Torah,” a common Hebrew expression for assuming responsibility to obey the commandments of Moses. In the Old Testament, people separated from false religion geographically (vv. 17-18, quoting Isaiah 52:11; Ezekiel 20:34, 41), but Paul has already rejected that approach (I Corinthians 5:10), so presumably he is thinking here of moral separation from sin, not physical separation from sinners.

38 See especially Murray J. Harris, “1 Corinthians,” in *Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin, vol. 10 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976) 379-80; noting other possible explanations, too, for the change in tone. Most recent commentators, however, have opted for (c). Philip E. Hughes, *Paul’s Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962) xxi-xxxv, defends (a).

39 See especially Hans Dieter Betz, *2 Corinthians 8 and 9* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985).

40 Linda L. Belleville, “A Letter of Apologetic Self-Commendation: 2 Corinthians 1:8–7:16,” *Novum Testamentum* 31 (1989) 142-63.

41 For details see my article, “The Structure of 2 Corinthians 1–7,” *Criswell Theological Review* 4 (1989) 3-20. This is admittedly a minority perspective, but then, unlike most of Paul’s letters, lack of consensus among scholars as to its structure suggests that perhaps the standard alternatives are inadequate.

42 Ralph P. Martin, *2 Corinthians* (Waco: Word, 1986), 42.

43 On this section and its narrative flow, see especially Scott J. Hafemann, *Suffering and the Spirit* (Tubingen: Mohr, 1986).

44 This paragraph contains one of the hardest statements to translate or interpret in the letter in v. 13b. The Greek reads literally, “so that the children of Israel might

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not attend to the end of that which was being abolished." In view of the same participle ("being abolished" or "fading away") used of the covenant in v. 11, it is probably best to see Paul's use in v. 13 also as referring to the end or goal of the covenant and not merely the fading radiance on Moses' face (as in v. 7). Cf. further Linda L. Belleville, *Reflections of Glory* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1991), especially p. 295.

45 On the interpersonal attributes associated with this transformation, see R. Ward Wilson and Craig L. Blomberg, "The Image of God in Humanity: A Biblical-Psychological Perspective," *Themelios* 18.3 (1993) 8-15.

46 E.g., Murray J. Harris, *Raised Immortal* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985) 219-26.

47 See especially Joseph Osei-Bonsu, "Does 2 Corinthians 5:1-10 Teach the Reception of the Resurrection Body at the Moment of Death?" *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 28 (1986) 81-101.

48 Especially Ralph Martin, *Reconciliation* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1981).

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