

Chapter Summary: 2 Corinthians

Though we aren't sure of the details, the believers in Corinth were confused and disappointed by the way Paul behaved toward them after sending the letter known as 1 Corinthians. It seems Paul appeared unexpectedly in Corinth shortly afterward, even though he'd written that his visit would be sometime later. And while Paul had planned to stay with them for some time, "possibly all winter," apparently, he left as abruptly as he came.

It is thought that Paul quickly departed because his conflict with the Corinthians had intensified. They had promised to contribute to the offering being collected for suffering believers in Jerusalem, but they hadn't followed up on their plans. Harsh words had been exchanged. Then, soon after Paul left, the believers received an even harsher letter from him (no copy of it survives today) demanding their support of Paul against his critics.

Things got even worse when the Corinthians discovered from Titus, Paul's co-worker who delivered that "harsh" letter, that Paul had gone to Macedonia (in northern Greece) to start gathering the offering. Were they offended because Paul hadn't come back to begin the collection in Corinth (in southern Greece) as he said he would? Had they come to distrust Paul's word?

In the end, no doubt influenced by Titus, most of the Corinthians gave Paul the benefit of the doubt and united against the unnamed man who was his most vocal critic. Titus headed north into Macedonia, met up with Paul there, and reported that the believers in Corinth had "done everything necessary to make things right." Paul gratefully sent him back with another message that we have today, known as 2 Corinthians.

In this letter, Paul tries to clear up the confusion the Corinthians have about him. In the four main sections of the body of the letter, Paul recalls all the steps that have led to his present relationship with them. These four sections all start out by referring to a particular place.

Paul first pictures himself back in Ephesus, across the Aegean Sea in Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey). He explains that he and the believers in Ephesus faced deadly trouble and had to flee, alluding to the riot described in Acts.

Paul then describes traveling to Troas, where he expected to meet Titus and get a report. But Titus wasn't there. Had he been delayed because things were going badly? Were the Corinthians refusing to be reconciled? Throughout this letter Paul is remarkably honest about his depression, anxiety, and suffering. Paul was reeling from a sense of loss and uncertainty until he finally met up with Titus and heard good news from Corinth.

Paul next addresses his present situation in Macedonia, focusing on the arrangements being made to collect the offering for the Jerusalem church.

Finally, Paul carries his reflections forward into the future, writing about what he expects to happen when he arrives in Corinth. In addition to the good report, Titus has briefed him on a troublesome new development there. Some people calling themselves "super apostles" had come to the city and challenged Paul's authority. They had already won a following among the believers, seemingly by reinforcing the Corinthians' error that Paul had already addressed in 1 Corinthians: that being spiritual means being freed from the body.

So, Paul finishes his letter by offering an impassioned defense of his own ministry. He shows he can match the "super apostles" credential for credential. But Paul had earlier emphasized an even more important point - he didn't need any outside endorsements: "The only letter of recommendation we need is you yourselves." Paul insists that the believers are the fruit of his ministry.

Overall, Paul's letter reveals that the character of authentic Christian ministry is like the work of Jesus himself: it involves taking up our own cross. Just as God's covenant faithfulness was shown in the surprising, suffering path the Messiah took, so it will be with the Messiah's followers: "Although He was crucified in weakness, He now lives by the power of God. We, too, are weak, just as Christ was, but when we deal with you we will be alive with Him and will have God's power."