

## **SECOND LETTER TO THE CORINTHIANS**

### **Occasion**

The Second Letter to the Corinthians was written because of events and problems that arose after Paul's first letter reached Corinth. We have no information about these circumstances except what is contained in the letter itself, which of course supposes that these are known to the readers. Consequently the reconstruction of the letter's background is an uncertain enterprise of which there is no complete agreement.

The Second Letter to the Corinthians is the most personal of all of Paul's writings, and presents to us Paul in the midst of his ministry. Paul is facing difficulties, disappointments and in this letter he deals with three main crises that have arisen in the Corinthian church. The confrontation with these problems caused him to reflect deeply on his relationship with the Christian Corinthians and to speak openly and frankly about it. The importance of the issues at stake between them requires from Paul an enormous effort of personal persuasion, as well as theological reflections about his apostolic charism, his vocation and mission, understood as a gift of the Holy Spirit and it is in the light of this gift of the Holy Spirit that he faces sufferings.

### **Authorship and Date**

Paul is generally believed to be the author of this letter based on the letter's signature, the testimony of some Church Fathers and the style of the letter.

Some biblical scholars have noticed a lack of continuity in this document. For example, the long section of 2 Cor 2:14-7:4 seems abruptly spliced into the narrative of a crisis and its resolution. Identical or similar topics, moreover, seem to be treated several times during the letter (compare 2 Cor 2:14-7:4 with 2 Cor 10:1-13:10, and 2 Cor 8:1-24 with 2 Cor 9:1-15).

For these reasons, therefore, some sustain that this letter is a composite of at least three other letters sent to Corinth over a certain span of time. If this is so, then Paul himself or, more likely, some other editor clearly took care to gather those letters together and give some literary unity upon the collection, thus producing the document that has come down to us as the Second Letter to the Corinthians. Others continue to regard it as a single letter, attributing its inconsistencies to changes of perspective in Paul that may have been occasioned by the arrival of fresh news from Corinth during its composition.

Paul composed this letter during his third missionary journey, while travelling from northern Greece to the Roman province of Macedonia (2 Cor 2:12-13; 7:5-6; 8:1-4; 9:2-4). It is generally dated about the autumn of A.D. 57.

### **Structure of the Second Letter to the Corinthians**

1. Address (2 Cor 1:1-11)
2. The Crisis between Paul and the Corinthians (2 Cor 1:12-7:16)
3. Past Relationships (2 Cor 1:12-2:13)
4. Paul's Ministry (2 Cor 2:14-7:4)
5. Resolution of the Crisis (2 Cor 7:5-16)
6. The Collection for Jerusalem (2 Cor 8:1-9:15)
7. Paul's Defence of His Ministry (2 Cor 10:1-13:10)
8. Conclusion (2 Cor 13:11-13)

### **Purpose and Content of the Letter**

Several are the reasons of the Second Letter to the Corinthians. The letter deals primarily with three crises that are also the main disappointments of Paul.

1. A crisis between Paul and the Corinthians, caused at least partially by changes in his travel plans (2 Cor 1:12-2:13), and the successful resolution of that crisis (2 Cor 7:5-16);
2. Further directives and encouragement in regard to the collection for the poor church in Jerusalem (2 Cor 8:1-9:15);
3. The confrontation with "false prophets" and their Corinthian followers. Paul wanted to strengthen his relationship with loyal supporters in Corinth and prevent them from falling victims to "false prophets". Paul's reflections on this matter are occasioned by the fact that the Corinthians had welcomed certain false apostles whom they preferred to him, missionaries who differed from Paul in a variety of ways, both in theory and in practice. Those differences led to comparisons. Either the visitors themselves or some of the local church members appear to have sown confusion among the Corinthians with regard to Paul's authority or his style, or both. In this context Paul clarifies and defends his apostolic authority. Paul deals at length with aspects of this situation in 2 Cor 2:14-7:4 and again in 2 Cor 10:1-13:10 defending his integrity as an apostle of Jesus Christ.

## **Themes of the Letter**

This Second Letter to the Corinthians is the most deeply personal of all of Paul's writings, and reveals much about his character. One moment he is venting his feelings of frustration and uncertainty, the next he is pouring out his relief, his tenacity and his affection towards the Corinthians.

Paul considers himself a spiritual father who is going through the painful experience of his children rising against him and choosing to go their own way.

### **Paul's defence of change in his travel plan (1:12-2:13)**

The letter opens with a greeting which introduces us to the next section which opens with an adaptation of the Jewish blessing. This then leads us into an introduction of the themes of the letter: the importance of sharing in Christ's sufferings and Paul's record of sacrifices on behalf of the Corinthians. Verses 1:12-14 makes us understand some complaints that the Corinthians made about Paul. Some had accused him of being proud and of having used the Corinthians to affirm his own importance. Paul firmly defends the integrity and rectitude of his own conduct and confirms that it is the grace of God which guides him.

In the following verses Paul clarifies why he changed his travel plans and did not visit the Corinthians as promised. The accusation was that he had cancelled his visit for other motives and due to his insincerity. Paul, to regain the trust of the Corinthians, answered back clarifying that the motive for cancelling his visit was not because he neglected them or wanted to avoid them due to the recent stormy relations, but was because of his love for them and to avoid causing further suffering after the painful previous visit.

In 2:1-4 Paul recalls his letter of tears to them. He assures them that his purpose was to bring them to repentance through his letter; to let them know of his love for them that he sent that letter, out of anguish of heart and many tears.

### **Paul's defence of his ministry (2 Cor 2:14-7:16)**

Paul makes a defence of his apostolic ministry against those Corinthians who accuse him of arrogance and boldness as an apostle. First of all Paul strongly underlines that his ministry, his vocation is a gift from God who is the source of his confidence which allows him to ignore his own unworthiness. At the same time, he is aware that his weakness and unworthiness shows that his work comes only from God as he is just an earthen vessel: "But we hold this treasure in earthen vessels, that the surpassing power may be of God and not from us" (4:7). Against such accusations of the Corinthians Paul's defence is that he is not in need of an external letter of recommendation since they themselves are his letter of recommendation, written in their hearts. Furthermore the Corinthians are a letter from Christ delivered by Paul and his companions and this letter has been written not with ink but with the Spirit of God (3:2-3).

What may seem like boasting therefore is simply Paul's effort to bring salvation to everyone since he is dominated only by the vision of Christ's love. The list he makes of his sufferings reflects Jesus' death in him so that he will be able to manifest Jesus' life in his own life. They validate his ministry. Refuting the accusations of his opponents, Paul affirms that he and his companions never impede anybody's way of salvation; on the other hand they do all they can to promote the way of salvation, undergoing all kinds of trials and suffering and challenges, pain and agony for the sake of the Gospel.

### **The Collection for Jerusalem (2 Cor 8:1-9:15)**

Paul praises the generosity of the Macedonians and appeals to the Corinthians to show equal generosity in favour of his collection on behalf of the "saints" in Jerusalem. This collection was of great importance for Paul not only from a humanitarian point of view, but much more for a theological reason since the generosity of the Corinthians toward the poor Church in Jerusalem would be a sign of their genuine faith and love. The collection was meant also to create among the Christians of the two Churches a spirit of unity and prayer and a mutual appreciation.

### **Paul's Defence of His Ministry (2 Cor 10:1-13:10)**

Chapters 10 – 13 form part of another letter that, as we have already mentioned, was incorporated in what we call the Second Letter to the Corinthians.

In these chapters Paul renews the defence of his ministry against his opponents who accuse him of being weak and unimpressive, powerful in his writing but weak in personal appearance. Paul answers to the accusations against him and appeals to the Corinthians to be obedient to the Gospel. As founder and father of their Church he has the apostolic authority to ask the Corinthians such obedience. His opponents can boast only of the gifts they affirm to possess while Paul is able to show the evidence of having founded the Church at Corinth, a work entrusted to him by God.

Attacked by these super-apostles Paul asks the Corinthians to put up with him for some time to hear his arguments. He has betrothed the Corinthians to Christ as a pure virgin and now he fears that she will abandon her devotion to Christ to go after others who preach a different gospel.

Paul calls his opponents “super-apostles” in a sarcastic way, counterfeit and dishonest workers disguising themselves as apostles of Christ who corrupt the Corinthians by presenting another Christ and a different gospel.

Attacked by accusation of weakness Paul launches into a boastful account of his credentials.

His labour and suffering, his daily care for the Churches, and his boast of the revelations to him. He speaks of all these boastings to meet his opponents but his real boasting is his weakness as he says: “I will rather boast most gladly of my weaknesses, in order that the power of Christ may dwell with me” (12:9).

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## **COLUMN**

### **Paul in his own words**

“Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, to the church of God that is in Corinth, with all the holy ones throughout Achaia: grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and God of all encouragement, who encourages us in our every affliction, so that we may be able to encourage those who are in any affliction with the encouragement with which we ourselves are encouraged by God. For as Christ's sufferings overflow to us, so through Christ does our encouragement also overflow.

If we are afflicted, it is for your encouragement and salvation; if we are encouraged, it is for your encouragement, which enables you to endure the same sufferings that we suffer”. *2 Cor 1:1-6*