

JEREMIAH
BIBLE STUDY SERIES

2 CORINTHIANS

THE CALL TO RECONCILIATION

DR. DAVID JEREMIAH

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Prepared by Peachtree Publishing Services



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INTRODUCTION TO

The Letter of 2 Corinthians

“O Corinthians! We have spoken openly to you, our heart is wide open. You are not restricted by us, but you are restricted by your own affections” (2 Corinthians 6:11–12). The apostle often found it necessary to “speak openly” to the believers in Corinth. The letters he wrote to the congregation (including the epistle we recognize as 1 Corinthians) often contained strongly worded arguments and difficult truths for the believers to accept. Inevitably, his words offended some of the factions in the church . . . who turned on Paul by questioning his authority as an apostle and his sincerity toward them. This put Paul in a delicate position. He had no reason to apologize, for he had done nothing wrong, but he was deeply concerned about the believers’ wellbeing and salvation, so he did not want to alienate them. Paul’s second letter to the believers in Corinth represents his masterful solution to the problem

AUTHOR AND DATE

The writer of this letter identifies himself as Paul (see 1:1 and 10:1), and the epistle contains a number of details about his life that fit with what we know of the apostle based on his other letters and the book of Acts. Although the letter appears to have been unknown to Clement of Rome, an early church father who lived c. AD 35–99, it was quoted by other early church leaders, including Polycarp (c. AD 105), Irenaeus (c. AD 185), and Tertullian (c. AD 210). Today, nearly every biblical scholar agrees with the early church’s claim that the apostle penned the letter. It is likely that

Paul wrote the epistle shortly after 1 Corinthians, in the fall of AD 56, from somewhere in the region of Macedonia—most likely the city of Philippi.

BACKGROUND AND SETTING

Paul arrived in Corinth during his second missionary journey, c. AD 52, and ministered in the city for a year and a half. After departing, Paul wrote the letter of 1 Corinthians, c. AD 55, from the city of Ephesus and sent Titus, his fellow minister, to deliver it to the church. It appears the believers corrected many of the abuses Paul called out in that letter, but a new problem arose when a faction arrived from Palestine (known as the Judaizers) and began to again create divisions in the church. This prompted Paul to pay a “painful visit” to the believers in Corinth. After he left, he was again criticized by the anti-Pauline faction, which prompted him to write a “severe letter” to the church. Paul must have wondered how the believers would take this letter, but his fears were allayed when Titus arrived and said it had been well received. In gratitude, Paul penned 2 Corinthians 1–9 during further ministry work in Macedonia . . . and then learned the faction against him was still trying to undermine his authority. In response, Paul penned 2 Corinthians 10–13 and sent Titus to deliver both parts to the struggling church.

KEY THEMES

Several key themes are prominent in Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians. The first is that *there is a cost in following Christ*. In Paul’s absence, false teachers had journeyed to Corinth and were attacking his authority as an apostle. In response, Paul outlines the price he often paid in service to Christ and the gospel (see 1:8–11; 6:3–13; 11:22–29) and models forgiveness for one individual in particular who had spoken against him (see 2:3–11). Paul’s listings of hardships reminds us of Jesus’ warning about the cost of being a true disciple (see Luke 14:25–33).

A second theme is that *followers of Christ have been reconciled with God*. Paul provides a concise summary midway through the letter of what it means

to be made right with God. When we choose to put our faith in Christ, we become a new creation in Him—the old nature passes away and we embrace the new life of righteousness that God has for us. Once we experience this new life, we are compelled to become “ambassadors for Christ” and share the message of reconciliation with the world (see 2 Corinthians 5:12–6:2).

A third theme is that *believers have a responsibility to give to others* (see 8:1–9:15). One of Paul’s main causes was a collection that he was taking up among the Gentile churches for the believers in Jerusalem. These Jewish followers of Christ had been subjected to persecution, ostracized from society, and were suffering from a famine in the region. For Paul, it was the duty of those who had been given much from God to share those resources with others in need. His instructions to the believers in the matter provide us with the most detailed description of sacrificial and generous giving found anywhere in his epistles.

A fourth theme is in regard to *the characteristics that should define a leader in the church*. Paul understood that the attacks against him were the result of Satan’s attempts to undermine the work of the gospel. So he called on the believers to recognize that this was taking place and then outlined the traits that should define a person who claimed to represent Christ in leadership. For Paul, boldness in defending the gospel and boasting in the grace of Christ set apart true godly leaders from those who operate out of more carnal motives (see 10:1–12:10).

KEY APPLICATIONS

All too often, believers today have preconceived ideas of what the Christian life should look like. We picture a care-free existence . . . when the Bible promises just the opposite. In this letter, the apostle Paul helps us change this mindset by providing examples from his own life to reveal what it means to be a true follower of Christ—a road that includes pain, trials, obstacles, and suffering. But it is a road that in the end is worth all the struggle, for we have the promise from God that those who travel it faithfully will receive the gift of eternal life.

A QUESTION OF SINCERITY

GETTING STARTED

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal blue or grey ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are approximately 20 lines visible. The paper has a slight shadow on its right side, suggesting it's resting on a surface.

SETTING THE STAGE

If you have ever been reprimanded for something you did, you have a good idea of how many of the believers in Corinth felt after their interactions with Paul. The apostle never minced words when he confronted the believers about their spiritual immaturity and their tolerance for idolatry and sexual immorality. Needless to say, many of the church members did not receive the admonitions in the spirit in which they were intended.

As a group, the Corinthians had a fairly high opinion of themselves—and a surprisingly low opinion of Paul. Complicating matters further was the fact that many in the church believed they had a legitimate claim against the apostle. Paul had wanted to visit them and had even promised to make the trip. However, certain complications had prevented this from happening.

The first of these was a life-threatening event in Asia. The apostle Paul offers few details about the specifics concerning this event, but it had a devastating effect on him—prompting him to despair “even of life” (1:8). The second complication was Paul’s realization that his relationship with the Corinthians had deteriorated to the point that a personal visit would have been counterproductive. So he tells them plainly, “I call God as witness against my soul, that to spare you I came no more to Corinth” (1:23).

Factions in the Corinthian church had seized on the apostle Paul’s decision not to follow through on his original plan. They had accused him of being insincere. Paul’s rivals on the itinerant speaking circuit added fuel to the fire for their own gain. They thought they had Paul backed into a corner. What they failed to realize was that Paul had the truth—God’s truth—on his side.

EXPLORING THE TEXT

Comfort in Suffering (2 Corinthians 1:1–7)

¹ Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God, and Timothy our brother,

To the church of God which is at Corinth, with all the saints who are in all Achaia:

² Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

³ Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, ⁴ who comforts us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort those who are in any trouble, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. ⁵ For as the sufferings of Christ abound in us, so our consolation also abounds through Christ. ⁶ Now if we are afflicted, it is for your consolation and salvation, which is effective for enduring the same sufferings which we also suffer. Or if we are comforted, it is for your consolation and salvation. ⁷ And our hope for you is steadfast, because we know that as you are partakers of the sufferings, so also you will partake of the consolation.

1. Paul opens by referring to himself as an *apostle* of Jesus Christ—an important point for him to make given that many in the church were questioning his authority. What praise does Paul then give to God? What does Paul say God is able to do for us (see verses 1–4)?

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

4

knowledge of the event. What effect does Paul say that this episode had on himself and his companions (see verses 8–9)?

4. What hope did Paul place in God in spite of this trial? What does he ask the Corinthian believers to do for him and his companions (see verses 10–11)?

Paul Defends His Sincerity (2 Corinthians 1:12–14)

¹² For our boasting is this: the testimony of our conscience that we conducted ourselves in the world in simplicity and godly sincerity, not with fleshly wisdom but by the grace of God, and more abundantly toward you. ¹³ For we are not writing any other things to you than what you read or understand. Now I trust you will understand, even to the end ¹⁴ (as also you have understood us in part), that we are your boast as you also are ours, in the day of the Lord Jesus.

5. Paul’s experience in Asia forced him to abandon any notions of self-reliance and trust completely in God for deliverance. How does Paul now describe his “boasting”? How was his ministry different from that of others who had come to Corinth (see verse 12)?

6. By this time, the believers in Corinth had received the letter we call 1 Corinthians and another “severe letter” letter from Paul (which is not known to us today.) What did Paul say about his intentions in writing these letters? What did he ask the believers to remember about his conduct (see verses 13–14)?

Paul Defends His Change of Plans (2 Corinthians 1:15–24)

¹⁵ And in this confidence I intended to come to you before, that you might have a second benefit—¹⁶to pass by way of you to Macedonia,

²³ Moreover I call God as witness against my soul, that to spare you I came no more to Corinth. ²⁴ Not that we have dominion over your faith, but are fellow workers for your joy; for by faith you stand.

[illegible]

8. What additional reasons does Paul give for not coming to Corinth (see verses 23–24)?

REVIEWING THE STORY

Paul began his letter to the Corinthian believers by stating that he and his coworkers had recently endured a time of “trouble” in Asia that made them despair for their lives. Paul said that he had to rely even more on God during this time and considered it a blessing if his sufferings led to the consolation and salvation of others. Paul’s hope for the believers remained steadfast. The apostle then responded to accusations that he was insincere in his dealings with the Corinthians or was fickle and unreliable because of his change in travel plans. Paul reminded the believers that he had preached about a Jesus who was reliable and trustworthy—so how could he thus be anything less than sincere and trustworthy?

9. How did Paul identify himself in order to remind the Corinthian believers of his authority (see 2 Corinthians 1:1)?

10. How did Paul respond to the death sentence hanging over his head in Asia (see 2 Corinthians 1:9)?

11. In what did Paul say that he boasted (see 2 Corinthians 1:12)?

12. What comment did Paul make to remind the Corinthian believers of his credentials as an apostle (see 2 Corinthians 1:21–22)?

APPLYING THE MESSAGE

13. How would you respond to someone who accused you of being insincere or hypocritical in your Christian faith?

14. What would you say or do if you discovered that one of your closest Christian friends was being insincere or hypocritical in his or her faith?

REFLECTING ON THE MEANING

Paul was facing a threat in his relationship with the Corinthians. Members of the congregation were listening to the apostle's opponents, who stood to gain if his reputation took a hit. The believers were questioning Paul's sincerity and implying that his ministry to them had been motivated by something other than God's call. They were saying Paul was a hypocrite—one who holds others to a certain spiritual standard but ignores that standard himself.

Paul understood that his reputation was at stake, so he offered a carefully reasoned defense of his actions. Of course, he had the advantage of knowing that he *had* been sincere in his dealings with them—that he was operating from a position of innocence. Sadly, this is a luxury not all believers enjoy. Maintaining sincere and God-honoring interactions with others is a constant challenge. Many times, we open ourselves to criticism and accusations of being insincere or hypocritical. As was the case with Paul, if those criticisms and accusations follow us around, they can damage our reputation and our Christian witness and ministry.

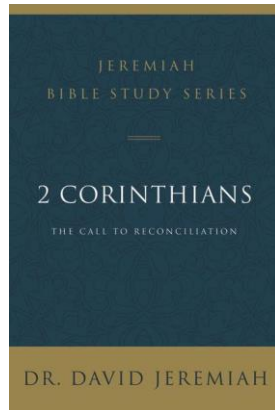
There are three simple steps that we can take in our lives to protect or repair our reputation and maintain our spiritual sincerity. The first step is to *pray*. We commit our plans to God and ask Him to guard our hearts against insincerity. We ask Him to make us aware, through the prompting of the Holy Spirit, of past interactions in which we were less than sincere. This gives us the opportunity to seek out people we may have offended and make amends.

The second step is to *examine ourselves*. The roots of our insincerity could spring from a desire to be liked (saying things people want to hear) or a cavalier attitude toward making plans (agreeing to things without first checking schedules), or from a place of ignorance (being unaware of how others perceive us). Examining ourselves involves gathering input from others—people whose judgment we trust—so they can shine a light on areas in our lives that we cannot see. Of course, inviting scrutiny will require us to swallow our pride, and we will discover things about ourselves we do not like. But that information is necessary and valuable.

The third step is to place a *renewed emphasis on sincerity and integrity*. We do this in both big and small ways. We look for opportunities to sacrifice our time and energy for others. We practice what we preach. We do not commit to certain plans until we are sure we can fulfill the commitment. To paraphrase Jesus' words in Matthew 5:37, we let our yes be yes and our no be no. We commit to speaking the truth in love, even when the truth is hard for someone to hear. We build a reputation as someone whose walk with Christ is genuine and sincere.

JOURNALING YOUR RESPONSE

What are some areas in your life where you need to be more sincere?



2 CORINTHIANS

JEREMIAH BIBLE STUDY SERIES

The apostle Paul founded many churches in the Roman Empire, including one in the prominent city of Corinth. But after personally ministering to them for years, he saddened to one day discover that he is being viciously slandered and ridiculed by adversaries who have arrived in the region. Paul responds by penning a second letter to them, defending not only his authority as an apostle of Christ but also the truth of the gospel he had so painstakingly modelled in their midst. Paul's words reveal the cost of following Christ—and also the ultimate rewards that await those who are faithful to Jesus.

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