

## Paul's Second Letter to the Church at Corinth

---

“He wasn’t much to look at.” This statement opens Frederick Buechner’s description of the apostle Paul in his book *Peculiar Treasures*, alluding to a description of Paul handed down to us through the apocryphal writing known as *The Acts of Paul and Thecla* where Paul is portrayed as “bald-headed, bowlegged, strongly built, a man small in size, with meeting eyebrows, and with a rather large nose.”<sup>1</sup> Though these comments are painfully honest, this ancient description provides insight into the difficulties Paul faced in his ministry among the Corinthians. Long before Buechner’s pithy comment, a significant number of believers at Corinth had concluded that Paul “wasn’t much to look at,” and they challenged his legitimacy and authority as an apostle on that basis. Paul’s letter to the church at Corinth, which we know as Second Corinthians, delves deeply into a theology of appearances and asserts that common, ordinary and unappealing vessels most clearly manifest the beauty, power and grace of God.

Much has changed in Corinth since the time of Paul’s last extant letter, which we know as First Corinthians. Or has it? Perhaps it is more accurate to say that some issues have changed, but the underlying problem has remained the same. In First Corinthians, Paul addressed myriad issues within the community—sexual immorality, lawsuits among believers, fornication, libertinism, uncertainty over eating meat sacrificed to idols, divisions over spiritual gifts and confusion about the resurrection of the dead—which resulted from acting according to worldly wisdom rather than godly wisdom.<sup>2</sup> The same proves true in the letter we know as Second Corinthians, where we find Paul defending his authority and legitimacy as an apostle from those who judge him according to earthly or worldly wisdom, and therefore seek to criticize and discredit Paul based on his appearance and his experiences in ministry. When you look beyond the symptoms, the majority of the problems mentioned in both letters derive from acting according worldly wisdom rather than godly wisdom (cf. I Cor 1.10, 18-2.16; II Cor 1.12, 10.12-18).

It would be a gross understatement to say that the history behind these two letters is complex. We know more about Paul’s interactions with the Corinthians than any other group. Nevertheless, reconstructing the historical context is uncertain because much is left to informed, yet ultimately speculative and creative, imagining on the part of the reader. Indeed, trying to decipher the

---

<sup>1</sup> Frederick Buechner, *Peculiar Treasures: A Biblical Who’s Who*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1979), 128.

<sup>2</sup> See especially I Cor 1.10-4.21 for a list of issues in the church at Corinth when I Cor was written, all of which derive from acting based on worldly rather than godly wisdom; cf. II Cor 1.12. Though the language is more explicit in I Cor (e.g. 1.17-31), the distinction between acting according to worldly and godly wisdom is implicit throughout II Cor as well (e.g. 1.3-12). In I Cor Paul rebukes those who act according to worldly wisdom and in II Cor Paul responds to those who judge his ministry according to worldly wisdom. Paul responds to the critiques of his “opponents” using rich irony that draws upon this contrast. The very things for which he is critiqued are, for Paul, evidence of his apostolic calling and proof that he is living according to the wisdom of God (e.g. I Cor 1.3-5). The treasure of redeeming grace is presented through people like Paul—who are feeble, frail, common and ordinary—so that the superlative power that brings reconciliation is understood to be God’s not the messengers (4.7). Weakness is essential to Paul’s apostolic calling because in human weakness divine power is most evident (12.9-10). As Luke Timothy Johnson notes, II Cor makes clear that “the glory of Paul’s gospel...comes not from rhetoric or worldly wisdom but from the presence of God’s power working through it...The message is powerful, the messengers are not,” *The Writings of the New Testament: An Interpretation*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 296. Therefore, Paul responds to his opponents *not* by rejecting their criticism, but, ironically, by accepting it as accurate. He is, indeed, flawed, frail, persecuted, poor in speech, substantial in letter and slight in person, but in this condition God’s power is most clearly revealed (cf. II Cor 12.9-10). As a result, Paul undermines their argument that his appearance, his persecutions and his poor rhetorical skills discredit and disprove his authority as an apostle. Paul glories in his weakness and shortcomings, because they allow God’s glory and power to shine through all the more clearly. Throughout II Cor letter we find the logic of 1 Samuel 16.7 informing Paul’s defense: “The LORD said to Samuel...the LORD does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart.”

relationship between Paul and the Corinthians based on the two extant letters is a bit like watching a movie with significant portions removed. What we do know is this. Paul first arrived at Corinth c. 51/52 CE and helped establish a community of believers (cf. Acts 18.1-18). He then departed and went to Ephesus where he remained for several years (cf. Acts 19.1-20.1). While away, Paul received news about the Corinthians from two verbal reports (I Cor 1.11, 5.1), a letter sent from the community (I Cor 7.1), and perhaps other, now lost, correspondence. From Ephesus, Paul sent two letters to Corinth—the first, now lost letter urged them to avoid fellowshiping with the sexually immoral (I Cor 5.9); the second, which we know as First Corinthians (c. 56/57 CE), addressed multiple issues.<sup>3</sup> It seems likely that Timothy carried this second letter to Corinth (I Cor 4.17; 16.10-11), which was not received well and caused a rift within the church.<sup>4</sup> Timothy reported this to Paul who made a brief, unplanned and “painful” visit to Corinth (II Cor 1.23-2.1). After departing, Paul wrote yet another (now lost) letter to the Corinthians “out of much distress and anguish of heart and with many tears” (II Cor 2.3-4) in order to test the community’s obedience to instructions given during the painful visit (II Cor 2.6). It is probable that Titus delivered the “tearful letter,” and then returned with a mixed report about the community (cf. II Cor 2.1-13; 7.5-16; 8.1-9.15; 12.18). Based on comments in Second Corinthians, the tearful letter appears to have diminished some hostility (see II Cor 2.5-11), however, the consequences of the painful visit were deep-seated and a significant portion of the church remained upset with Paul.<sup>5</sup> To make matters more complicated, sometime after the “painful visit,” outsiders arrived at Corinth and offered yet-another challenge to Paul’s apostolic influence and authority, which bolstered the group already at odds with Paul.<sup>6</sup> In response to Titus’ report (and perhaps other, now lost, reports from the

---

<sup>3</sup> After Paul’s departure, other apostles arrived (Apollos is mentioned in Acts 17.24-28, and Cephas/Peter is mentioned in I Cor 1.12) who “may have catalyzed spirited elements within the Corinthian community, producing some of the enthusiasm that Paul would have to criticize in 1 Corinthians.” Sometime during the period between his departure (c. AD 52) and the writing I Cor (c. AD 56) Paul wrote a now lost letter “warning the Corinthians not to have dealings with immoral people” (see I Cor 5.9). Then “while staying at Ephesus (AD 54-57), Paul got reports about Corinth, e.g., from ‘those of Chloe’ (I Cor 1.11; also 11.18)” as well as “a letter from the Corinthians (I Cor 7.1), perhaps in reply to his latter...and seemingly brought by Stephanas, Fortunatus, and Achaïus (I Cor 16.17-18) who probably added their own reports.” Finally, after receiving these verbal and written reports, Paul wrote what we now know as I Corinthians, Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 514-515.

<sup>4</sup> “The guilty parties [addressed in First Corinthians] did not accept [Paul’s] discipline passively. His bold rebukes caused them to lose face and sparked deep resentment. They counterattacked by impugning his motives, methods and person to undermine his authority in the church. The result: some members continue[d] as avid supporters of Paul, some waver[ed] and some comprise[d] a determined element of resistance to his leadership,” David E. Garland, *The New American Commentary: 2 Corinthians*, (Nashville: Broadman, 1999), 26. James M. Scott notes the shift in circumstances at Corinth between the writing of I and II Cor as follows: “Between the writing of the letters we now call ‘First’ and ‘Second’ Corinthians, the situation in Corinth had changed dramatically. When Paul wrote I Corinthians, his apostleship was not yet under attack within the Corinthian church, though its significance was being diluted by the many other ‘guardians’ who were gaining influence (cf. I Cor 1.10-12; 4.15). In I Corinthians, Paul could therefore point to his apostolic weakness and suffering as a basis of authority and exhortation (cf. I Cor 2.3-4; 4.8-17)...When he wrote II Corinthians, however, Paul’s legitimacy as an apostle was itself being called into question *because* of his weakness and suffering. Under the influence of the ‘false apostles’ (cf. II Cor 10.4, 13-15), some within the church were interpreting Paul’s apostolic lifestyle of suffering and weakness as a sure sign that his claim to be a true apostle of Jesus Christ was fraudulent,” *New International Biblical Commentary: 2 Corinthians*, (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1998), 1-2.

<sup>5</sup> As a result of the painful visit and the arrival of the “opponents” mentioned in II Cor, the church became more divided over Paul’s authority, which helps explain the bi-polar nature of Second Corinthians. At times Paul is gentle and affirming (II Cor 1.3-11; 7.5-16; 8.1-9.15; 13.11-14), at other times he is harsh and condemning (II Cor 6.14-18; 10.1-12.13). Numerous reasons have been set forth to explain this strange and seemingly fractured letter (see note 7), but the simplest explanation could be the eccentric and divided nature of the community at Corinth. Writing to a community at odds over the legitimacy of his authority, Paul seeks to address all groups and factions in a single letter, which could account for the disjointed nature of the letter and for the sudden change in tone from one unit of thought to another.

<sup>6</sup> The identity of Paul’s opponents at Corinth is a subject as fascinating as it is speculative. Much has been written on the matter, most of which is, at best, little more than an educated guess and, at worst, pure speculation. In the words of James D.G. Dunn, “the character of the opponents (if that itself is a correct description) will never be more than tantalizingly obscure—shadowy figures which seem to emerge with some clarity at some points only to disappear behind the shifting mists of our knowledge of the historical context,” quoted by Scott, *NIBC*, 11. All that can be known about these opponents and their ideas must be deduced from

Corinthians still favorable toward Paul), Paul wrote what we now know as Second Corinthians (c. 56/57 CE)<sup>7</sup> and sent it with Titus, in order to address a number of issues, none more pressing than the growing challenge to Paul's apostolic calling and ministry.<sup>8</sup>

Second Corinthians begins with a traditional greeting (1.1-2) in which Paul introduces himself as "an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God" (v 1a), a claim that he will defend throughout the remainder of the letter. This is followed by a thanksgiving for God's comfort in the midst of his

---

Paul's response. Thus, an objective analysis of Paul's opponents is impossible, because of none of us is often generous or fair in characterizing those with whom we profoundly disagree. Paul is no exception, and this should be kept in mind as we read his response to his opponents. As Luke Timothy Johnson put it, what can be known about the Corinthian opponents "will be a portrait only of Paul's perceptions, which were not necessarily fair or accurate....Paul's perception of his rivals is important mostly for leading us to his perception of his own ministry as an apostle," *The Writings*, 293. Nevertheless, theories abound regarding the identity and theology of these opponents to whom Paul responds. Scott suggests that there were at least two groups of opponents in Corinth: "(1) a minority within the church's own membership, which is probably splintered into several factions, and (2) certain outsiders who infiltrated the church," *NIBC* 11. Regarding the outsiders who arrived and bolstered the pre-existing opposition to Paul's authority, Scott sets forth the following analysis. They appear to be Jewish Christians (II Cor 11.22) who preach what Paul considers a "different gospel" (II Cor 11.4); they call themselves apostles and have letters of recommendation to demonstrate the legitimacy of their ministry (II Cor 3.1; 11.22-23); they have been successful in undermining Paul's influence at Corinth by questioning his authenticity as an apostle based on his self-commendation (II Cor 3.1; 4.2; 5.12; 6.4-10), appearance/speech (II Cor 10.1-2) and many trials and sufferings (cf. II Cor 1.3-11; 6.3-10); and they have been equally successful in exalting their influence by championing the superiority of their visions and revelations from God (II Cor 11.22-23; 12.1), their letters of recommendation (II Cor 3.1) and their speech (II Cor 3.1), *NIBC*, 11-12.

<sup>7</sup> Reconstructions of the history behind the writing of II Cor vary widely among scholars, and much depends on whether one believes that the letter is unified or is a compilation of several letters. If one assumes that II Cor is a single letter, it is easier, though no less complex, to provide a sketch of the events. In this case, everything mentioned in II Cor was written *after* the painful visit and tearful letter (cf. II Cor 1.23-2.4), and the entire letter can be interpreted in this context. If one assumes that the letter is a compilation of multiple letters written at different periods of time, it becomes nearly impossible to provide a progression of events, because one cannot do more than conjecture as to the time of the writing of each "letter" within the compiled letter that we call II Cor. If one accepts the unity of II Cor the correspondence is as follows: Letter A (now lost—I Cor 5.9), letter B (I Cor), letter C (the now-lost "tearful letter"—II Cor 2.3-4), and letter D (II Cor). If one rejects the unity of II Cor, the number of compiled letters ranges from two to five. A possible order of correspondence would be as follows: Letter A (now lost—I Cor 5.9), letter B (I Cor), letter C ("tearful letter" – now lost or II Cor 10.1-13.10), letter D (II Cor 2.14-6.13, 7.2-14), letter E (II Cor 1.1-2.13, 6.14-7.1), letter F (II Cor 8.1-24), letter G (II Cor 9.1-15), Brown, *An Introduction*, 548-9. A strong case can be made for both positions. In favor of unity is the fact that (1) no evidence exists that II Cor ever circulated in a form other than its current, canonical form, and (2) "complicated partition theories completely overlook...the difficulty...[of] undertaking the sort of complex editorial work the theories require," Garland, *NAC*, 38. In favor of disunity is the presence of "a number of seams in the letter [that] appear to some readers incompatible with its being a unitary composition. These scholars detect a striking difference in tone, for example, between chapters 1-9, which are irenic and conciliatory, and chapters 10-13, which are polemical and defensive. Chapters 10-13, in fact, are sometimes thought to be the 'letter written in tears' sent to the Corinthians *before* chapter 1-9....Even within the first nine chapters, moreover, there seem to be gaps. The detailed itinerary of 1.15-2.13, for example, breaks off without warning, only to be picked up as though nothing had intervened, in 7.5. The small segment 6.14-7.1, furthermore, appears to contain non-Pauline vocabulary and thought patterns, as well as to break the coherent and natural sequence of 6.13-7.2....Finally, both chapters 8 and 9 deal with the [Jerusalem] collection. But chapter 9 begins with such an independent tack...that some see in the two chapters separate notes on the collection. Second Corinthians is therefore commonly regarded as an edited collection. The case is not, however, absolutely conclusive," Johnson, *The Writings*, 292. Despite the fact that the letter seems to betray the hand of an editor, for our purposes it seems prudent to treat II Cor as a unified letter since there is no manuscript evidence to support a compilation theory. Even if you believe II Cor is a compilation of several letters, the editor(s) put the document together in its present form, so we can treat the document as a unified letter regardless of the pre-canonical process. As Brown put it, "surety is not obtainable...[but] from the earliest times II Cor has been presented in its present format and sequence. Consequently hearers and readers have had the task and opportunity of making sense of the present format," *An Introduction*, 551. Though this discussion is intriguing, nothing is lost in seeking to interpret II Cor by treating it as a unified whole, the overarching theme of which is Paul's defense of his ministry from critics at Corinth, drawing on the contrast between worldly and godly wisdom set forth in I Cor (cf. I Cor 1.10, 18-25).

<sup>8</sup> The contents of II Cor, in brief, are as follows: responses to disparagement of Paul's ministry and apostolic authority (II Cor 1.3-22; 2.14-7.4; 10.1-12.13); reasons for the painful visit and tearful letter (II Cor 1.23-2.4); instructions about the unknown, now-repentant member (II Cor 2.5-11); travelogues of Paul's effort to find Titus after his visit to Corinth (II Cor 2.12-13, 7.5-16); instructions regarding the collection for the Jerusalem believers (II Cor 8-9; cf. I Cor 16.1-4); and preparations for impending visit (II Cor 12.14-13.14)

trials and suffering in the place of a typical thanksgiving for the congregation's faithfulness (1.3-7).<sup>9</sup> Ironically, Paul begins this letter by calling attention to a key critique from his opponents, namely, his suffering and trials (1.8-14), which caused him to "rely not on [himself] but on God who raises the dead" (v 9).<sup>10</sup> At 1.15 Paul begins the often interrupted description of his travels in relation to his periodic interactions with the Corinthians.<sup>11</sup> In 1.15-2.13 Paul shares the reasons for changing his travel plans (1.15-24), explains his motives for writing the (now lost) "tearful letter" (2.1-4), exhorts the Corinthians to forgive the repentant member who opposed Paul during his previous, painful visit (2.5-11) and briefly comments about his efforts to find Titus, who had delivered the tearful letter and who was bringing Paul an update on the situation at Corinth (2.12-13).

Abruptly, Paul shifts his focus to the nature of his apostolic calling and ministry, building on his statements in 1.3-14 (2.14-7.4).<sup>12</sup> In this lengthy exposition, Paul provides one of the most insightful accounts of his identity as "an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God" (I Cor 1.1). For Paul, it is his submission to God's presence in Jesus that both legitimizes and empowers his ministry (2.14-17). Paul is the one who labors, but God is the one who makes his efforts fruitful (cf. I Cor 3.7). Therefore, God's messengers need not commend themselves or boast about their credentials,

---

<sup>9</sup> II Corinthians and Galatians are the only undisputed Pauline letters that *do not* contain a thanksgiving for the community to whom he is writing. In Galatians, Paul replaces the traditional thanksgiving with astonishment that they are "so quickly deserting the one who called [them] in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel" (Gal 1.6). Later we learn that the Corinthians, like the Galatians, are being tempted to accept a "different gospel" (cf. II Cor 11.4). In II Cor, Paul replaces the traditional thanksgiving with a thanksgiving for God's provision and faithfulness during his persecution and suffering, which is fitting since Paul is responding to criticism by those who point to his suffering and persecution (among other issues) as reasons to reject Paul's authority as an apostle. It is interesting that a lack of thanksgiving attends both Pauline letters that address opponents who are preaching a different gospel than the gospel proclaimed by Paul (cf. Gal 1.6; 2 Cor 11.4), see Scott, *NIBC*, 23. However, Garland suggests that we not make too much of the similarity in language because, "in contrast to his attack on the Judaizers who infiltrated the Galatians, Paul does not single out any particular false doctrine in condemning these Corinthians rivals. We may infer from this that it is primarily their haughty manner and actions that expose their faulty theological doctrine," *NAC*, 464. For traditional thanksgiving formulas compare: Rom 1.8-15, I Cor 1.4-9, Eph 1.15-23, Phlp 1.3-11, Col 1.3-14, 1 Thess 1.2-10, 2 Thess 1.3-4, 2 Tim 1.3-7, Phlm 4-7.

<sup>10</sup> From the start Paul undermines the major critique of his ministry—namely, his suffering and weakness—by stressing that weakness, trials and sufferings are the consequence of living according to "frankness and godly sincerity, not by earthly wisdom but by the grace of God" (1.12) and result in greater dependency upon God (1.9). Thus, "rather than rejecting Paul...the Corinthians ought to view Paul's apostolic experience as a vivid display of God's ability to sustain and deliver [God's] people," Scott, *NIBC*, 27. This concept is central to everything Paul says in II Cor. In fact, Paul's opening statements are so vital to understanding the whole letter that Garland suggests that II Cor 1.12-14 should be understood as the "theme statement of the letter." "Paul hopes the Corinthians will understand that he is their boast in the Lord and will see that they can and should be proud of him instead of denigrating him....If the messenger is discredited, then so is his message. This discrediting of his message is Paul's primary concern. He therefore argues throughout his letter that he has not brought discredit to his ministry and hopes that the Corinthians will affirm this fact (see 6.3). He hopes that they will see how God works powerfully through his weaknesses as God worked powerfully through Christ's sufferings. He may seem to be weak and of no account (I Cor 2.1-5; II Cor 10.10), but appearances are deceiving, *NAC*, 83-85.

<sup>11</sup> If one assumes that II Cor is a compilation of several letters (see note 7), we could reconstruct a core narrative dealing with Paul's travels and interactions with the Corinthians as follows: 1.15-2.13; 7.5-9.15; 12.14-13.10. This would leave 2.14-7.4 and 10.1-12.13 as separate discourses woven into this larger narrative. Even if one assumes that II Cor is a unified letter, it is helpful to identify 2.14-7.4 and 10.1-12.13 as interruptions to the overall flow of the narrative, both of which address Paul's understanding of his apostolic ministry.

<sup>12</sup> Raymond Brown comments, "an important factor in judging unity is whether the breaks from one section of II Cor to another are so sharp that they cannot be interpreted as a shift of focus within the same missive," *An Introduction*, 549. The sudden shift in topic here is judged by many scholars to be incompatible with a unified document. II Cor 7.5 picks up where II Cor 2.13 leaves off—II Cor 2.13, "But my mind could not rest because I did not find my brother Titus there. So I said farewell to [the believers at Troas] and went on to Macedonia." II Cor 7.5, "But even when we came into Macedonia, our bodies had no rest, but we were afflicted in every way—disputes without and fears within. But God, who consoles the downcast, consoled us by the arrival of Titus." The continuity of 2.13 and 7.5 makes 2.14-7.4 seem awkward and out of place, leading many to suggest that 2.14-7.4 is a later interpolation (see note 7). However, one can defend the unity of II Cor by noting that themes in 2.14-7.4 correspond to those introduced in 1.1-13.

indeed they cannot do so, because their “competence<sup>13</sup> is from God” who enables them to become “ministers of the new covenant” and transforms them into “the image of the glory of God” (3.1-16). The presence of God’s life-giving Spirit keeps Paul from despair despite his many personal shortcomings and professional setbacks, and enables him to avoid self-commendation and to focus on proclaiming “Jesus Christ as Lord” (3.17-4.6). In fact, Paul not only disdains those who “proclaim themselves” (i.e. who boast about their achievements), he glories in his flaws and weaknesses because God’s treasure<sup>14</sup> (“the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ,” 4.6b) is most clearly manifested in ordinary, inconspicuous, fragile and un-extraordinary individuals like Paul (4.7-5.10). Essential to Paul’s defense is the recognition that appearances are often deceiving (i.e. priceless treasure contained in unassuming containers, II Cor 4.7). By contrast, his opponents have focused on outward appearances rather than inward transformation, which has led them to misjudge Paul, just as Paul had previously misjudged Christ (5.11-6.10).<sup>15</sup> Paul concludes this portion of his defense with an appeal to the Corinthians still favorable to him to reject “unbelievers” (viz., those who have criticized his ministry and rejected his apostolic authority) and to “make room in [their] hearts” for Paul and his companions who “have wronged no one...corrupted no one...[and] taken advantage of no one” (6.11-7.4).

<sup>13</sup> Ικανότης – ability, sufficiency, adequacy or competency to carry out a task, Strong’s/Thayer’s definitions, G 2426.

<sup>14</sup> θησαυρός – treasury, storehouse, a deposit, wealth, the place in which good and precious things are collected and laid up, Strong’s/Thayer’s definitions, G2344.

<sup>15</sup> It is vital that the reader interpret everything in these sections in light of Paul’s defense of his ministry against his opponents. Failing to place individual verses in their larger context will lead to misunderstanding and misapplication of Paul’s intended meaning. II Cor 5.21—“For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God”—is a perfect example. This verse is often quoted in support of ransom, satisfaction and penal substitution atonement theories, and many commentators interpret this verse based on their presumed atonement theory. However, this verse says nothing about Jesus’ death or the consequences thereof. The topic in this unit of thought is viewing events from human rather than divine perspective (“from now on, therefore, we regard no one from a worldly perspective; even though we once knew Christ this way, we do so no longer,” 5.16). Paul’s entire defense in II Cor is predicated on these contrasting perspectives, and here Paul draws on divergent perceptions of Jesus to support his argument. In light of the context of II Cor 5.21, as well as I Cor 2.8 (which challenges the necessity of Jesus’ death for our reconciliation with God by making Jesus’ death the consequence of the political and religious leaders of the day acting according to worldly rather than godly wisdom), it seems that Paul understands Jesus’ death as a further example of judging events according to worldly rather than divine perspectives. According to worldly wisdom, Jesus was a sinner deserving rejection, condemnation and death. According to godly wisdom, Jesus was the means by which “we might become the righteousness of God” insofar as we respond to his call to become his disciples, to take his yoke (teachings) upon us, learn from him and embrace God’s ministry of reconciliation. This non-violent interpretation of Jesus’ death is supported by Paul’s comments in 5.14-15, which initially appear to confirm the necessity of Jesus’ death. Upon closer analysis, however, these verses reveal the transformation from self-centeredness to other-centeredness that takes place in the individual who chooses to live as Jesus lived (and even die as Jesus died). Put another way, these verses express the results of the new creation God works in human lives as they are transformed into the image of God and begin living for others rather than for self. The death Jesus dies is the culmination of his ethic, namely, a renunciation of selfishness and an embrace of selflessness, a rejection of violence and embodiment of non-violence even if it means death. This same ethic is manifested in those who are “in Christ,” that is, those who “live no longer for themselves,” who are “a new creation” and who are entrusted with “the ministry of reconciliation.” Seen from a worldly point of view, Jesus is both a failure and a cursed individual; seen from a divine point of view Jesus is a triumph and the righteousness of God. This is Paul’s point in II Cor 5.21. Finally, J. Denny Weaver explains some theological problems with using this verse to support a satisfaction or substitutionary atonement model. “If Jesus was made sin and was being condemned or punished by [God], as is the case with the punishment (compensatory violence) of satisfaction atonement, then those who killed Jesus must also have been acting in accord with the divine will and acting in a sense as agents of God. In this case, Jesus ceased being the revealer of God, and his opponents were entrusted with the divine mission of killing him as punishment on humankind, which stands in direct contradiction to the claim that in his mission Jesus’ human will cooperated in completed obedience with the divine will that sent him.” Therefore, Weaver concludes (citing Raymund Schwager), in II Cor 5.21 “‘God was not the direct actor, but he sent his son into the world ruled by sin, and thus, through the excess of sin making use of the law, he became sin and a curse....The power of sin is so cunning that it can get completely within its grasp the good and holy law and can so distort it that it works against God and his envoy,” *The Nonviolent Atonement*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 57.

At 7.5 the travelogue, which ended abruptly at 2.13, briefly resumes with no transition or acknowledgement of the extended discourse just described.<sup>16</sup> In 7.5-16 we learn that Paul reunited with Titus in Macedonia who brought an encouraging report, causing Paul to express joyous relief and consolation because of the Corinthian's positive response to his letters and the hospitality shown to Titus. In sharp contrast to other portions of the letter, Paul offers an extended praise of the Corinthians and expresses "perfect confidence" in them because their grief in response to his previous letter (cf. II Cor 2.4) caused them to reaffirm their love for Paul and their submission to his apostolic authority.<sup>17</sup>

At 8.1 the topic shifts once more,<sup>18</sup> addressing the monetary collection for the saints in Jerusalem (8.1-9.15). Paul first introduced the collection during his founding visit (I Cor 16.1-4) and Titus began organizing the collection, most likely when he delivered Paul's tearful letter (II Cor 8.6). This collection played a prominent role in what would turn out to be the final chapter of Paul's ministry,<sup>19</sup> and the generosity of the churches in Macedonia and Asia Minor demonstrated to Paul

---

<sup>16</sup> "The discussion of what Paul did when he arrived in Macedonia...after leaving Corinth continues the topic left off at 2.13, though with Paul now speaking in the plural instead of the singular. This, however, is another piece of evidence, for those who wish to see it, of possible tampering with several Pauline letters and combining them in less than clever ways. Here Paul is worrying about the effect of the painful letter he had previously sent to Corinth (2.2-4) until Titus returns with news of its reception and positive effect," *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Carolyn Osiek, "Second Corinthians," (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003), NOTE 7:5-12, 2069. Garland defends the unity of II Cor by arguing that "2.13 and 7.5 do not splice together seamlessly. In 2.12-13 we have the first person singular; in 7.5 we have the first person plural...Furthermore, a close connection can also be discerned between 7.4 and 7.5" because of theme of consolation mentioned in 7.4, which is the focus of 7.5-16, *NAC*, 34.

<sup>17</sup> The disparity between the positive comments in chapters 8-9 and the negative comments in chapters 10-13 have caused no little difficulty for those who assume II Cor is a unified document. Brown summarizes three views of the sharp variation in tone. (1) "Chaps. 10-13 came from a once independent letter written from another time," possibly the "tearful letter" mentioned in II Cor 2.3-4; (2) "chaps. 10-13 are part of the same letter as chaps. 1-9, but were an addendum prompted by new, disturbing information that came to Paul before he sent off chaps. 1-9;" (3) "chaps. 10-13 are part of the same letter as chaps. 1-9, and were intended by Paul from the moment he began writing II Cor. One then has to posit that Paul was reacting to the Corinthian situation in stages," *An Introduction*, 549-550.

<sup>18</sup> Garland notes, "The subject abruptly shifts in chaps. 8-9 to raising funds for the churches in Judea. This sudden turn in the argument, which seems to have nothing to do with what precedes, has caused many scholars to think that someone has inserted an independent letter or letters at this point. But the mention of Titus in 7.6-7, 13-15 provides an appropriate connection to Paul's instructions for a project in which Titus is to play a major role (8.6, 16-24)," *NAC*, 363.

<sup>19</sup> The collection for the believers in Jerusalem demonstrates a basic principle within the ethic of Jesus, namely, that the "haves" are called to help the "have-nots" (cf. Mt 6.19-24; 10.40-42; 11.28-30; 14.13-21; 15.32-39; 16.24-26; 19.16-30; 22.34-40; 25.14-46; Mk 6.30-44; 8.1-10, 34-38; 10.17-31; 12.28-34, 38-40; Lk 1.46-56; 3.1-14; 4.16-19; 6.27-36; 7.22-23; 9.10-17; 10.2-5-37; 12.13-21; 14.12-14; 16.1-13, 19-31; 18.18-30; 19.1-10). For the Corinthians, living by this standard means offering financial aid, but the principle extends to all aspects of life. Paul draws on this principle in 8.13-15 when he seeks to elicit the Corinthians' generosity—"I do not mean that there should be relief for others and pressure on you, but it is a question of a fair balance between your present abundance and their need, so that their abundance may be for you need, in order that there may be a fair balance. As it is written, 'the one who had much did not have too much, and the one who had little did not have too little.'" It is an uncomfortable message for those wedded to a capitalist economic system, where the individual always trumps the collective and any call to equity is castigated, but it is the biblical principal nonetheless. Those who have are to help those who do not have. The sharing of wealth and abundance, in whatever form it may come, is essential to New Testament Christianity. It is modeled in Acts 2.44-45—"all who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need." Whether or not this picture matched reality is another question. The "haves" helping the "have-nots" is the ideal set forth in the Bible, and it is this ideal that, in part, provides the impetus for Paul's collection. However, there are other influences as well. In Galatians 1.18-2.10 (written c. 54/55 CE, roughly a year prior to II Cor), Paul describes his meeting with Peter, James and other disciples in Jerusalem, who confirmed the soundness of his gospel, validated his ministry to non-Jews and "asked only one thing, that [he] remember the poor" (Gal 2.10). Since Paul mentions the collection in I Cor 16.1-4 (written c. 56/57 CE, very soon after his letter to the Galatians), it seems likely that this Jerusalem meeting provided the initial impetus for the collection (see Osiek, *NIB*, "Excursus: The Collection," 2070). Moreover, Scott suggests that Paul's ministry of reconciliation, which strives (with God) to create "one new humanity" (Eph 2.15) where there is no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female but everyone is united in Christ Jesus (Gal 3.28), provides a theological motivation for the collection. "[W]hen Paul accepts the obligation to 'remember the poor' (Gal 2.10), it fits very well with his commission as apostle to the nations, for he would be fulfilling the eschatological expectation of restoring Jerusalem's fortunes through the nations. The nations that have come to share in the

the proof of the Corinthians' love both for him and their fellow believers who were in need (8.7-8). Paul writes two distinct, yet complementary, messages regarding the collection.<sup>20</sup> The first (8.1-24) encourages the Corinthians to emulate the selfless generosity of Jesus (8.9) by giving a portion of their abundance to those in need (8.14), and introduces the individuals Paul is sending with Titus to help organize the collection (8.16-24). The Corinthians' contributions will teach them what the Israelites learned during the wilderness wandering—"the one who had much did not have too much, and the one who had little did not have too little" (8.15; Ex 16.8)—and will authenticate Paul's boasts about the Corinthians' generosity (8.24). In the second message (9.1-15), Paul continues to praise the Corinthians for their generosity (9.1-2), offers further explanation about why he is sending others with Titus to complete their offering (9.3-5) and gives further reasons for the Corinthians to share with those in need (9.6-15)—"the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully...you will be enriched in every way for your great generosity...[and] you glorify God...by the generosity of your sharing with [Jerusalem] and with all others" (9.6b, 13).

The topic suddenly shifts again, this time to a more caustic response to his Corinthian opponents and a lengthier defense of Paul's ministry against their criticism (10.1-12.13),<sup>21</sup> which provides the reader further insight into the critiques of his opponents and Paul's conception of his ministry. Paul was disparaged for the forceful rhetoric of his letters that was unmatched by his physical appearance and humble personality when at Corinth (10.1). He responds by revealing that boldness in their presence is unnecessary because of the divine power that supports and defends his ministry against criticism made according to human standards and earthly wisdom (10.2-11). His opponents have been commending themselves while censuring Paul, yet Paul refrains from commending himself and chooses to boast only in the LORD (viz., in God's power revealed most clearly in human weakness) because God's approval is what ultimately matters (10.12-18). Paul then critiques the Corinthians for being led astray from "a sincere and pure devotion to Christ" by his opponents who proclaim "another Jesus," offer "a different spirit" and preach "a different gospel" than Paul (11.1-6), responds to those who disparaged him for not accepting monetary support from the Corinthians

---

Jerusalemites' restoration ('the spiritual blessings') ought also to be of service to them in material blessings (cf. Rom 15.26-27). For Paul, the collection was part of the OT motif of the eschatological pilgrimage of Israel and the other nations to Jerusalem (cf. II Cor 9.9-10, citing Isa. 55.10 and Hos. 10.12)," *NIBC*, 173-174. Raymond Brown says much the same: "Surely a factor [behind the collection] is Paul's desire to unify his Gentile communities with Jerusalem...Thus it will be clear that Gentiles and Jews (especially those in the mother church) are one in Christ. Both psychologically and practically there are few things in life that bind together people and institutions more effectively than sharing their bank accounts," *An Introduction*, 551.

<sup>20</sup> While chap. 8 is addressed specifically to the Corinthians, chap. 9 is addressed more generally to the church of Achaia, and both make perfect sense apart from the other. The autonomy of each chapter has led some scholars to posit that two separate letters have been combined here. However, Scott defends the unity of II Cor by noting that the autonomy of chaps. 8 and 9 "makes sense insofar as 2 Corinthians was obviously designed as a circular letter, addressed 'to the church of God in Corinth, together with all the saints throughout Achaia' (1.1). Therefore, while most of the letter has focused on Paul's relationship with the Corinthians in particular, Paul broadens his scope to include the recipients of the letter in the rest of the Roman province. The presence of chapter 9 in 2 Corinthians may well explain why Paul addressed the letter more generally in the first place," Scott, *NIBC*, 184. For a more detailed discussion about the connection between chaps. 8-9, see Garland, *NAC*, 396-400.

<sup>21</sup> Another possible "seam" appears at 10.1 for those looking for evidence that II Cor is a compilation rather than a unified letter. Chapters 8-9 both address the collection for the saints in Jerusalem. 7.5-16 and 10.1-13.10 speak more directly to the rift Paul has experienced with a portion of the congregation. While the seam is not as explicit as the one between 2.13 and 2.14, there is a clear shift in emphasis between 7.16 and 8.1. When you consider that in 7.5-16 Paul is speaking about the consolation he received upon hearing that the Corinthians have responded positively to his "tearful letter" and that they treated Titus well during his visit, 7.16 and 10.1 seem to flow more smoothly than 7.16 and 8.1—7.16, "I rejoice, because I have complete confidence in you." 10.1-2 "I myself, Paul, appeal to you by the meekness and gentleness of Christ, I who am humble when face to face with you, but bold toward you when I am away, I ask that when I am present I need not show boldness by daring to oppose those who think we are acting according to human standards." If chaps. 8-9 are an interpolation, we can understand 7.5-16 as Paul's positive comments for those believers favorable toward him in order to prepare them for the negative comments for those believers who have opposed and criticized him in 10.1-13.10.

(11.7-11) and offers a harsh critique of his adversaries whom he regards as agents of Satan that disguise themselves as apostles of Christ (11.12-15). Despite his disdain for the empty, foolish boasts of his opponents, Paul feels compelled (cf. 12.11b) to become a fool in order to boast of his qualifications that far exceed those of his opponents (11.16-12.13).<sup>22</sup> Ironically, the very things for which he was being criticized—persecutions, sufferings and weakness—are the things about which Paul continues to boast (cf. 1.3-10), reiterating his belief that God’s power is most clearly revealed in weak and fragile messengers (cf. 2.14-7.4).<sup>23</sup>

The last section of the letter contains remarks intended to prepare the Corinthians for Paul’s upcoming visit (12.14-13.10). To that end, Paul informs them that: (1) he will still not be a financial burden to the them—a critique to which he responded in 11.7-11 (12.14-18); (2) all of his actions have been “for the sake of building [the Corinthians] up” (12.19); and (3) his hope is that when he comes for a third time he will not have to deal harshly with those whom he has already rebuked for behaving according to worldly wisdom rather than godly wisdom (12.20-13.10). Finally, Paul closes with an exhortation (“put things in order, listen to my appeal, agree with one another, live in peace,” 13.11), a greeting (“greet one another with a holy kiss; all the saints greet you,” 13.12-13), and a blessing (“the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you,” 13.14).<sup>24</sup>

---

<sup>22</sup> Johnson comments, “Paul is well aware of the delicate position in which this boasting puts him. In his theological lexicon, boasting is a mode of self-assertion he everywhere condemns as the epitome of ‘fleshly’ behavior (see 1 Cor 1.29; 3.21; 4.7; 5.6; 13.3)...But he does not stop boasting. Why? Because he is really boasting of the work of God in him, rather than of his human capacities. He repeats here his principle from I Cor 1.31: ‘Let [the one] who boasts boast in the Lord, for it is not the [one] who commends [themselves] who is accepted, but the [one] whom the Lord commends,’” *The Writings*, 294-295. Paul again subverts his opponents’ arguments by boasting in the very things they use as the basis for their critique, namely, his weaknesses and sufferings. Paul’s self-deprecation in I Cor is thought by many scholars to be a basis for the criticism leveled against him (cf. I Cor 2.1-5; 4.8-13; 15.9-11; see note 4), but instead of explaining away his sufferings and trials Paul glories in them, choosing to “boast of the things that show [his] weakness” (II Cor 11.30). This is illogical to those who live according to worldly wisdom, but it makes perfect sense to those who live according to godly wisdom, because in God’s economy divine “power is made perfect in weakness” (II Cor 12.9).

<sup>23</sup> This statement should reveal the difficulty caused by the partition theories, which regard Paul’s boasting in weakness—“If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness,” 11.30—appears confusing apart from 2.14-7.15. One could posit that 2.14-7.4 and 10.1-12.13 was a separate, unified letter that was later combined with other letters to form II Cor (see note 7 for more details). However, the complexity of such theories recalls Garland’s sage advice mentioned earlier: “complicated partition theories completely overlook...the difficulty...[of] undertaking the sort of complex editorial work the theories require,” *NAC*, 38

<sup>24</sup> The universal scope of Paul’s benediction is significant given the harsh words Paul has voiced in response to his opponents. As Garland notes, “Paul calls down God’s blessings upon *all* of them, including those who have given him so much trouble in Corinth,” *NAC*, 556. Paul embodies the ministry of reconciliation that he received from God—a ministry that seeks peace with all peoples, even with those who seek to harm and hinder him in his ministry among the Corinthians.

## Outlines of Paul's Second Letter to the Corinthians

---

### Raymond E. Brown<sup>25</sup>

#### DIVISION ACCORDING TO CONTENTS

- 1.1-1 Address/greetings and Thanksgiving, stressing Paul's sufferings  
1.12-7.16 Part I: Paul's relations to the Corinthians Christians  
    (a) 1.12-2.13: His deferred visit and the "tearful letter"  
    (b) 2.14-7.16: His ministry (interruption: 6.14-7.1)  
8.1-9.15 Part II: Collection for the church in Jerusalem  
19.1-13.10 Part III: Paul's response to challenges to his apostolic ministry  
13.11-13 Concluding greetings, blessings

### Carolyn Osiek<sup>26</sup>

- 1.1-2.17 Preliminaries  
3.1-5.21 True Basis for Commendation and Apostleship  
6.14-7.1 Separation from the Wicked  
7.2-16 Report from Titus: Good News  
8.1-9.15 Appeals for Generosity in the Collection  
10.1-13.14 The Painful Letter

### David E. Garland<sup>27</sup>

- I. Greeting and blessing (1.1-7)  
    a. Greeting (1.1-2)  
    b. Blessing for God's provision of comfort (1.3-7)  
II. The Painful visit and tearful letter: Paul's defense of his exceptional candor (1.8-7.16)  
    a. The issue of Paul's love for the church and his dependability (1.8-2.13)  
    b. Paul's defense of his frank criticism (2.14-7.3)  
    c. The report from Titus (7.4-16)  
III. Instructions for the collection for the saints (8.1-9.15)  
    a. The Corinthians' need to complete their collection (8.1-15)  
    b. The administration of the funds by Titus and the acclaimed brothers (8.16-9.5)  
    c. Divine principles of giving: why the Corinthians need to give generously (9.6-15)  
IV. Warnings in preparation for Paul's next visit (10.1-13.10)  
    a. Warning: Paul will boldly punish disobedience when present (10.1-11)  
    b. Self-commendation versus God's commendation (10.12-18)  
    c. Bearing with foolishness (11.1-21a)  
    d. Paul's foolish boasts (11.21b-12.13)  
    e. Paul's return to Corinth (12.14-21)  
    f. Warning: Paul may have to be severe in using his authority when present (13.1-10)  
V. Benediction (13.11-14)

---

<sup>25</sup> Brown, *An Introduction*, 542.

<sup>26</sup> Osiek, *NIB*, 2062.

<sup>27</sup> Garland, *NAC*, 19, 557-558.

## Commentaries on Paul's Second Letter to the Corinthians

---

- Barclay, William. *The Daily Study Bible Series: The Letters to the Corinthians*, revised edition. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1976.
- Brown, Raymond E. *An Introduction to the New Testament*. New York: DoubleDay, 1996.
- Furnish, V. P. *Anchor Bible: 2 Corinthians*. New York: Doubleday, 1984.
- Garland, D. E. *New American Commentary: Second Corinthians*. Nashville: Broadman, 1999.
- Harris, Murray J. *Expositor's Bible Commentary: Second Corinthians*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *New International Greek Testament Commentary: Second Corinthians*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005.
- Johnson, Luke T. *The Writings of the New Testament: An Interpretation*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986.
- Lambrecht, J. *Sacra Pagina: Second Corinthians*. Collegeville, Liturgical Press, 1999.
- Martin, Ralph P. *Word Biblical Commentary: Second Corinthians*. Dallas: Word Books, 1985.
- Matera, Frank. *New Testament Library: Second Corinthians*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003.
- Metzger, Bruce M. and Michael D. Coogan, eds. *The Oxford Companion to the Bible*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1993.
- Minor, Mitzi. *Smyth and Helwys Bible Commentary: Second Corinthians*. Macon, GA: Smyth and Helwys, 2009.
- New Interpreter's Bible: New Revised Standard Version with the Apocrypha*. Carolyn Osiek. "Second Corinthians." Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003.
- O'Connor, J. Murphy. *New Testament Theology: The Theology of the Second Letter to the Corinthians*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991.
- Scott, James M. *New International Biblical Commentary: 2 Corinthians*. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1998.
- Witherington, B. III. *Conflict and Community in Corinth: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on 1 and 2 Corinthians*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995.