

## **Introduction to KYB 2 Corinthians**

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### **Introduction**

Nearly 4 years ago, when I first started to prepare notes for a new KYB study of 2 Corinthians, someone asked me, 'What's an old letter written in the 1<sup>st</sup> century got to say to anyone in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?' Then somewhere along the line I came across a quote from Dane Ortland, editor and writer of Bible studies in the US, who said, 'The Christian life is impossible to live without 2 Corinthians!'

Wow! Two extremes! But today, as I reflect back on what I have learnt in preparation for our study this term, I think I know what Dane Ortland is getting at. 2 Corinthians is possibly the most powerful letter I have ever read. Let me tell you why.

### **First of all, let's look at Paul's history with the Corinthians**

The apostle Paul's relationship with the Christian church at Corinth stretched over 7 years. Paul founded the church at Corinth around 51AD during his second missionary journey. The young church received about 18 months of teaching from the apostle before he continued his journey to Ephesus and back to Antioch via Caesarea and Jerusalem.

Around 5 years later three members of the Corinthian church brought a letter to Paul when he was back at Ephesus on his third missionary journey. It is full of questions that reveal some very serious problems occurring in the fledgling church. So as their father in the faith Paul responds pastorally to their various questions and problems in the letter we know as 1 Corinthians.

However it seems Paul's letter was not well-received by some. You see, since Paul's first stay in Corinth, local believers had been swayed by false teaching from visitors who had stirred up the people against Paul. They argued that Paul's theology was in error, and specifically, that the Old Testament covenant, Moses' covenant, was still in force. They argued that they were more legitimate ministers because of their mystic and paranormal abilities, claiming Paul lacked these superior gifts. Along with these challenges the church had also failed to deal with moral problems involving church members, not recognising the seriousness of the situation for their faith and witness.

So, as 2 Corinthians 2 records, Paul hurried to Corinth to help but the visit was extremely painful (2:1). He returned to Ephesus and from there wrote what he calls a 'sorrowful' letter (2:4) and sent it to Corinth with Titus. Then Paul waited with eager anticipation to hear back from the Corinthians. In his concern he changed his travel plans in order to meet Titus in Macedonia (rather than wait for him to get all the way back to Ephesus) and was overwhelmed and delighted to hear good news. God had used his letter to bring about the renewed commitment of the majority of Corinthian believers.

The worst was over. The majority of the Corinthians had shown a great love for Paul and great sorrow at the pain which recent events had caused him (7:7). Their grief at the 'painful' letter had initiated a godly sorrow which produced repentance rather than personal annoyance or wounded pride (7:9). The offending person had been dealt with (although not all the Corinthians agreed about the degree of punishment (2:6-8) and Paul's expectations of the Corinthians' loyalty towards him had not been in vain (7:14). Titus himself had returned with his love for the Corinthians greatly increased (7:15). And so the early chapters of the letter are filled with Paul's thankfulness and rejoicing and gratitude to God.

However Paul knew there was still a rebellious minority who continued to be swayed by the super-apostles who accused Paul of being fickle, proud, unimpressive in speech and appearance, dishonest and unqualified as an apostle of Jesus Christ!

### **So how had these 'super apostles' gained such a foothold in the little Corinthian church?**

According to commentator Timothy Strange, Corinthian culture glorified self-appreciation (I like me) and self-gratification (If it feels good, do it). Sound familiar? The drive towards wealth and social advancement through your reputation, your job, where you live, who you vote for and especially through your sport, was all consuming. Prevailing philosophies kept people focussed on this life, rather than the afterlife, striving to maximise pleasure and minimise pain by all means possible. These philosophies affected people's approach to the religions of the day. Religious devotees worshipped powerful, *visible*, demonstrations of their gods at work.

But the gospel Paul preached, and upon which the church at Corinth had been founded, was a gospel of suffering. 2 Corinthians 4:7 is a key verse...*we have this treasure in jars of clay to show how this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us*. Some commentators have called it a 'down is up' gospel. Back in his first letter to the Corinthians Paul had reminded them that 'God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. God chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things – and the things that are not – to nullify the things that are, so that no-one may boast before him' (1 Corinthians 1:27-29).

Believers steeped in Corinthian culture struggled to see past the seen, to the unseen. For them, there was a great tension between *visible* human experience and the seemingly *invisible* power of God.

Both Jewish and Gentile believers at Corinth were affronted by Paul's suffering as an apostle of the crucified Christ. The Jewish believers remembered the old covenant which promised material blessings as a reward for obedience. New Gentile believers struggled with cultural notions of 'maximum pleasure and minimum pain'.

So in all of his letter Paul draws from the depths of his personal, apostolic experience, seeking to explain the relationship between suffering and the glorious gospel of Christ. He teaches the Corinthians that the gospel is about human experience and the power of God. Theology and biography entwined. And he introduces this balance beautifully in 2 Corinthians 4:8-9 when he talks about being...

*Hard pressed – Paul's human experience.....but not crushed – the power of God*

*Perplexed – Paul's human experience.....but not in despair – the power of God*

*Persecuted – Paul's human experience.....but not abandoned – the power of God*

*Struck down – Paul's human experience.....but not destroyed – the power of God*

This is not just theory for the apostle. Paul knows that God's people can be hard pressed, perplexed, persecuted and struck down. But Paul also knows that it is in our human experience that the power of the gospel is revealed.

So perhaps this is what Dane Ortlund is getting at when he says the Christian life is impossible to live without 2 Corinthians. Because the fact is that we all walk through pain. In different ways, for different reasons, at different seasons of life, hardship washes over us. Just looking at my own life, during the last 5 years my brother passed away from cancer, my 6yo great nephew died unexpectedly from a treatable illness, my husband was made redundant after a 38 year career, my 1yo granddaughter developed brain seizures. And what about your list? How can we possibly remain faithful and cheerful in the face of suffering's onslaught,

without God's insistence throughout this letter that his deepest consolations are mediated to us in, not after, sorrow?

Paul's summary of this truth is found in 4:16-18...*therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.*

### **So why did Paul write the letter we call 2 Corinthians?**

Paul wrote to the Corinthians to prepare the way for his imminent third visit to them. In chapters 1-2 he attempts to explain why he changed his earlier plan to visit them and why he wrote the letter they received via Titus instead. In chapter 7 he expresses his joy that the moral problems dealt with in the painful visit and the sorrowful letter have been resolved. In chapters 8-9 He encourages them to be prepared to give to the collection of money for the suffering Christians in Jerusalem, which he would be receiving during his visit. But the major part of the letter is devoted to Paul's clear answer to these newly arrived 'super-apostles' and their 'different' gospel in chapters 3-6 and to their assault on his character in chapters 10-13.

Paul was the apostle of Christ to the Gentiles in both his writing and his person. The risen Lord Jesus had given this authority to Paul in his historic commissioning of him on the road to Damascus. Acts 9:15 records of this historic event, *'But the Lord said to Ananias, Go! This man is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their Kings and to the people of Israel'*. Paul refers to the nature of this apostolic authority twice in his letter to the Corinthians, saying in chapter 10:8, *'So even if I boast somewhat freely about the authority the Lord gave us for building you up rather than tearing you down, I will not be ashamed of it'* and again in chapter 13:10, *'This is why I write these things when I am absent, that when I come I may not have to be harsh in the use of my authority – the authority the Lord gave me for building you up, not for tearing you down'*.

Paul's apostolic authority is mediated to all generations of Christians through his letters which now form part of the canon of Scripture. And the letter of 2 Corinthians is very important because it is Paul's major defence of that authority, both then and now. Paul gives a very powerful answer to the question, 'Why should Paul have authority over churches and Christians today?'

### **So then, what can we look forward to when we read 2 Corinthians?**

We will be challenged by Paul's experience of God, his understanding of Christ's work on his behalf and his authority as an apostle. But perhaps the greatest challenge to contemporary society is Paul's willingness to suffer for the sake of the gospel because of his love for God's people.

Those of us who are experiencing difficulty and breakdown in relationships will be taught and encouraged by Paul's attitudes and actions towards the Corinthians. This letter demonstrates how to be authentic or *real* in a day when the notion that *Christ* is powerful in us is less attractive than the other gospels of 'health, wealth and prosperity' or triumphant spirituality. Sometimes our prevailing culture causes us to think that **we** are powerful in Christ but 2 Corinthians shows us that **Christ** is powerful in us. An alternative translation to 2 Corinthians 4:7 says, *'But we have this treasure in earthen vessels that the excellence of the power may be of God and not of us'*.

And as we read this letter perhaps we will recognise the insidious impact of our prevailing (pagan) culture on the expression of faith in our community. As in the Greco-Roman society of Paul's day, public image is of greatest importance. Such things as self-sufficiency, wealth, property, self-appreciation and boasting are highly valued in

Australian society today. Paul's pleading argument for the humility of the gospel of a crucified Christ is both confronting and liberating.

More than any other book of the Bible perhaps, 2 Corinthians turns upside down the idea that the way to joy is ease, comfort, health, and pain-avoidance. Rather, as Paul says in 2 Corinthians 1:9 about the difficulties and trials of life....*but this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead.* After all, for Jesus himself, the way up was down. We follow the Saviour in this pattern, looking with hope to the new earth and the end of all sorrow and pain.