

2 Corinthians (notes by Val Whiteman)

Because I won't have time to go into background on Sunday 31st January 2021, I decided to suggest a separate study on 2 Corinthians.

There are good commentaries you might like to look at The one I have is in the series "The Bible speaks today" by David Prior.(1 Corinthians)

Corinth

When Paul was there Corinth was a relatively young city. It had been razed to the ground in 146 BC by the victorious Romans and then, being in a strategic position, it had been rebuilt as a Roman colony by Julius Caesar around 46 BC. Paul went there in 50 AD. It was and still is on the isthmus which leads from the north to the Greek mainland. The isthmus at this point is about 4 miles wide and in ancient times ships were unloaded at one Corinthian port and goods portered over the isthmus to the other port. If the ships were sufficiently small they were rolled over the isthmus pulled by slave teams. Nero tried and failed to have a canal cut. (that was only managed in the nineteenth century.) Although in Greece it wasn't a Greek city. As a port it was cosmopolitan, and this was reflected in the number of temples found there.

Pausanias, who wrote in the early second century, said of Corinth that in the market place there were 3 statues of Zeus, 2 of Hermes, and one each of Poseidon, Apollo, Aphrodite and Athene. (quoted in N.T. Wright *Paul and the faithfulness of God*, SPCK, 2013 p 255).

On the hill above the city there was a huge temple to Aphrodite, from which cult prostitutes came down into the city each evening. The Temple of Apollo provided young male acolytes. Every taste catered for. Imagine a huge modern port city with brothels, restaurants of every kind, bars , casinos and you have ancient Corinth.

It was here that Paul came in 50 AD. The account is in Acts 18. At first, after he had met Aquila and Priscilla, both tentmakers and refugees from Rome, he worked with them and testified to Christ in the Jewish synagogue. When the Jews rejected him, he moved next door to the house of Titius Justus. He preached to the Gentiles there for about eighteen months and then moved on to Ephesus.

While he was in Corinth, he was clearly tired from the many attacks he had suffered for the Gospel and he must have been discouraged because God spoke to him in Acts 18:9.

“Do not be afraid; keep on speaking do not be silent. I am with you and no one is going to attack and harm you because I have many people in this city.”

When the new proconsul, Gallio, came to Corinth, the Jews complained about Paul but Gallio simply said it was a matter of Jewish law, and left them to it. They beat up Sosthenes, the synagogue ruler, in the sight of Gallio, who did nothing. (It may be that Sosthenes, like his predecessor Crispus, became a Christian, because a Sosthenes is mentioned as possibly the scribe for 1 Corinthians.).

Paul had a special place in his heart for the Corinthian church, but after he left things did not go too well. There were factions, and evangelists came from elsewhere to influence the church. Paul wrote on several occasions to the church and we have may be 3 of the possible 4 letters in 1 and 2 Corinthians. There may be a first, lost letter and it is possible that the “angry letter” he says he wrote is contained in 2 Corinthians 10-13. Read them and see what you think. Paul also seems to have visited Corinth on an occasion not mentioned in Acts, may be while he was at Ephesus for 3 years during his third missionary journey.

In his letters Paul is keen to stress that Jesus is the centre of the Corinthians’ lives. They need to keep to Paul’s teaching on the nature of Jesus and not stray. They don’t need special knowledge which sets some people apart (gnosis), but they do need love (c.f. 1 Corinthians 13) They find the spiritual gifts attractive and stress them but not the deep commitment in love to Jesus and to each other.

Paul’s love for the Corinthian church and his desire that they should grow in faith makes him anxious that they should grow, and upset when they accuse him of various failings. Some one in the church has really overstepped the mark. We don’t know the name or the event, but the Corinthians have rebuked him, and Paul accepts that this episode is now over (2 Corinthians 2:5ff). In 2nd Corinthians from which the Sunday teaching is taken, Paul answers the criticism that he is weak and timid, unlike the bold “apostles” who have come to teach the church at Corinth. They seem to be men who try to take the church back to Judaism, from what Paul says. They are also eloquent and persuasive (ch.11)

Paul calls them “false apostles, deceitful workmen”, and it is in this context that he talks about his own credentials, and his own “weaknesses.”

Paul really cares for the Corinthian church. He started it, he watched it grow over 18 months, and for a further 3 years or so, he’s had reports from the front line. It’s difficult for us with 20 centuries of Christian teaching, to go back to times before the Gospels were widely available, to where church organisation and church teaching weren’t set in stone, to where fledging churches faced persecution from all sides, Jewish and pagan. The values of the Christian church were truly revolutionary. You said, “Jesus is Lord”, not the emperor- a dangerous thing to do. You lived a moral life in an immoral city. You loved one another, so the city treasurer saw himself as the brother of the lowliest slave women. We forget how revolutionary Christianity is or should be.

With the joy of grace from a loving God, with freedom in that grace, came persecutions. Paul describes his own journey in evangelism in 2 Corinthians 11:

2 Corinthians 11

²³⁻²⁷ I’ve worked much harder, been jailed more often, beaten up more times than I can count, and at death’s door time after time. I’ve been flogged five times with the Jews’ thirty-nine lashes, beaten by Roman rods three times, pummelled with rocks once. I’ve been shipwrecked three times, and immersed in the open sea for a night and a day. In hard travelling year in and year out, I’ve had to ford rivers, fend off robbers, struggle with friends, struggle with foes. I’ve been at risk in the city, at risk in the country, endangered by desert sun and sea storm, and betrayed by those I thought were my brothers. I’ve known drudgery and hard labour, many a long and lonely night without sleep, many a missed meal, blasted by the cold, naked to the weather.

²⁸⁻²⁹ And that’s not the half of it, when you throw in the daily pressures and anxieties of all the churches. When someone gets to the end of his rope, I feel the desperation in my bones. When someone is duped into sin, an angry fire burns in my gut.

The context for this letter is that the Corinthians are finding Paul less than satisfactory as an evangelist. They accuse him of being “timid” when he’s with them, an unimpressive orator. They’ve had new Jewish evangelists

who are far more impressive and with a more appealing message. They are developing the “pick and mix” Christianity we see such a lot in our own times. Jesus is not enough for some people; they have to adapt the message to suit themselves.

One thing that gets adapted is the effect of living a Christian life, rooted and grounded in Christ. We are familiar with the Prosperity Gospel- that in its wildest form says that God gives you good things if you pray to him- the nice car, the big house. We know that that is plain silly. Jesus didn't die so we can all have Mercedes, or a Rolex but there are other more subtle temptations to change the Christian walk with Jesus and we need to be sure that we are not led astray by fancy teaching which makes the Gospel more within our control. Jesus is Lord, not me.

Paul stresses to the Corinthians their need to focus on Christ as all in all for them. We are most of us mature as Christians, so we shouldn't need telling to listen to people in authority, those like me who dare to speak to the church. Is what I say consonant with what the Bible says about Jesus? If not, don't listen to me, or anyone else who strays. Glib talkers are rife, particularly now we have the Internet and we can access anyone in the world. Test the messages you have. If they don't link with the Gospel you read and the Christ you know then think very carefully why not. Be wise. If you are worried talk to someone you respect about your concerns.