

## SESSION 1: PAUL'S HISTORY WITH CORINTH

### PREFACE

March 16, 2025

It is not uncommon to begin a new study being thoroughly, even surprisingly impressed by the text. After all, we typically read bits and pieces of God's word, a few verses here, a phrase there, all intermingled with familiar and profound pieces with which we have grown up—only occasionally examining the totality of a book, phrase by phrase, verse by verse, and even more rarely investigating the backstory behind the book and its author. *Why did he write it? What was in his mind as he wrote it?* In the case of the NT letters, *What had earlier occurred between the author and its recipients? What was their relationship—if any?*

So it is perfectly natural that when one digs deeply into any one portion or book of Scripture, one comes away impressed by what is revealed there. I had this experience with the study of the Thessalonian letters, with Hebrews, and certainly with First Corinthians.

And now we come to *Second Corinthians*—which is actually the fourth letter the apostle Paul penned to this church—and it is truly a most remarkable document, made so in no small way by the background, the backstory that required, even *demanding* it be written.

Second Corinthians is without question the most painfully personal letter Paul ever wrote to a church. My principal translation these days is the *Legacy Standard Bible* (LSB; a close cousin of the NASB), for its unwavering faithfulness to the original Hebrew, Koine Greek, and Aramaic. As valuable as it is for *study*, it is, admittedly, not the most friendly when it comes to just reading the text as a narrative. It was when I read 2 Corinthians in the ESV that the emotions in and behind the letter really came home to me. I was overwhelmed by what could only be termed *embarrassment* for the apostle, for what comes out in this letter is the uncomfortable, even tortuous relationship Paul had with the Corinth church. In this letter the apostle bares his soul to its members—and it is not pretty. (For example, if you want to experience the contrast, read Paul's letter to the Colossians, then read 2 Corinthians.)

Aware of this, we naturally wonder, *Why? Why is Paul's voice so different in this letter from his first (extant) letter to the Corinthians—and his letters to other churches as well?* So that we can understand this letter before us, it is thus incumbent upon us to work our way back through the history between the apostle and the Corinth church. I can think of no other NT letter that requires such, to this extent.

## PAUL AND THE CORINTHIANS

The time-span for the relationship between Corinth and Paul is from c. AD 50 to c. AD 56. 📅 In the spring or summer of 50, Paul arrives in Corinth from Athens during his second missionary journey. 📅 We accept that Paul and his fellows were guided by the Holy Spirit, but on a human, tactical level it made perfect sense for them to focus on the cities of this region.

All dates are approximate.

This story begins in Paul's second missionary journey, but finishes during his third.

- Their journey had taken them to **Thessalonica**, the capital of the Roman province of Macedonia; it had a natural harbor, so was on the trade routes, and the populace was multi-cultural, worshiping (as in Corinth) the Greco-Roman Pantheon, Imperial cult, Egyptian cults, and had several Jewish synagogues.
- **Athens** was a large, multi-cultural city in which philosophy and debate were honored.
- **Corinth**, too, was multi-cultural, sophisticated, a gleaming metropolis, and an important stop in key trade routes.

If one was intent on spreading the gospel of Christ and reaching as many as possible from distant lands, these were vital hubs for such evangelistic missionary work. So it was important to establish solid, foundational churches in these cities.

Nonetheless, this was a discouraging time for the apostle. In Athens, alone and surrounded by statues to pagan deities and with mixed reception to his teaching, he is eager to leave the city. After his rather unpleasant stay in Athens (Acts 17:32-33), Paul arrives in Corinth—probably in AD 50—where he will be encouraged by the presence of fellow believers, such as Priscilla and Aquila, who were Jews and, probably, already Christians—and, not insignificantly, fellow tent-makers (18:1-3).

After he is settled in Corinth, Silas and Timothy travel south from Macedonia to join Paul (18:5), and in the same year they found the Corinth church.

Paul stays in Corinth for about eighteen months (18:11). After this, he departs for Ephesus with Aquila and Priscilla. Leaving the couple in that city, Paul continues on to Caesarea, then on to Jerusalem, arriving there in mid-October 51 (18:18-23).

Meanwhile the eloquent and charismatic Apollos takes up *his* ministry in Corinth as Paul travels north to Antioch in late fall of 51, and then continues on to Ephesus (19:1), reaching there in late spring 52. Imagine his joy at being reunited with his dear friends Aquila and Priscilla. While in Ephesus Paul enjoys a productive, far-reaching ministry that will last two years and three months.

In the summer or autumn of 52 Paul receives news from Corinth, prompting him to write his first (lost) letter to that church, which included his call “not to associate with sexually immoral people” (1 Corinthians 5:9).

Around this same time, after just a few months in Corinth, Apollos leaves there and joins Paul in Ephesus. Included in the group joining Paul in Ephesus was Sosthenes (1 Corinthians 1:1), so here were at least two individuals—Sosthenes and Apollos—with knowledge of the situation in Corinth. Shortly thereafter, in summer or early autumn of 53, Paul writes his second letter to the Corinth church—our *First Corinthians*.

Interwoven throughout this story is Paul’s plan to visit Corinth to collect from them funds for the church in Jerusalem. He refers to this near the end of his second letter to them (First Corinthians), but its tone seems to assume that he has spoken or written to them about this earlier. So throughout, his purpose is two-fold: the spiritual health of the Corinth church, and to collect funds for others.

**Read 1 Corinthians 16:1-4.**

Following this Paul shares his plans with them.

**Read 1 Corinthians 16:5-9.**

This means he intends to visit the Corinth church in late spring or early summer of 54, and stay with them through the following winter months (54/55). *Before* sending this letter to the church via ship, Paul sends Timothy on a trip through Macedonia, that would include a stop in Corinth—but Paul expects his letter to arrive before Timothy (1 Corinthians 4:17; 16:10).

Timothy arrives in Corinth early spring of 54, and yes, the letter we know as First Corinthians had arrived at the church before him. What Timothy discovers, however, is that things are not well in the church and at least some of Paul’s instructions in that letter have not been carried out.

For example, there were some who, despite Paul’s counsel against it, were continuing in sexual immorality and others who were continuing to sow divisiveness in the body (2 Corinthians 12:21). There were also false teachers gaining in influence.

So Timothy does not remain in Corinth as long as anticipated, and probably leaves as soon as shipping reopened in late spring of that year. Paul’s disciple either reports the situation to the apostle in a letter, or travels to Ephesus to meet with him in person.

This will throw off all of Paul’s best-laid plans that he outlined at the end of the previous letter (1 Corinthians 16:1-9). Receiving this report from Timothy, Paul immediately cancels his trip through Macedonia and travels directly to Corinth, 📦 which would have taken, from Ephesus, three to four days or possibly up to two weeks.

“Macedonia” includes Philippi, Berea, Thessalonica, and Amphipolis, Apollonia, and Neapolis.

This will mark the beginning of Paul’s low point in his relationship with the church. Commentators struggle to find the right descriptive terms for this visit:

- “grievous, crisis visit”
- “bitter and distressing”
- an “unhappy confrontation”
- “no happy reunion between father and children”
- Paul himself describes it as “painful,” “sorrowful”

Let me summarize this by reading a paragraph from George Guthrie’s commentary.

*George Guthrie*: During this crisis visit to Corinth, the apostle experienced emotional turmoil and even humiliation; in short, the confrontation with the church was deeply painful, though Paul was patient even as he warned those who were living in sin (2 Cor. 2:1-4; 12:21; 13:2). Either before or shortly after he traveled back to Ephesus, the apostle was openly attacked, and the majority of members in the church failed to respond appropriately by defending their apostle (2:5-11)... Paul now had two problems: First, he needed to set things right with the church in Corinth. Second, he needed to follow through in a way that would not jeopardize the collection for Jerusalem.

That describes the painful *visit*; now will come a painful *letter*. Some time during the summer of 54, Paul writes a follow-up letter to the Corinthians and has Titus deliver it. 📧 Paul refers to this letter in 2 Corinthians.

### **Read 2 Corinthians 2:1-4.**

As he mentions in 1 Corinthians (16:1-4), his original plan was for that church to gather a collection for Jerusalem, then appoint a few men from their body to carry the gift to that church. But now he apparently changes his mind about that and will inform them in his next letter (2 Corinthians 8:16-24) that Titus will be the one to deliver their gift to Jerusalem. Even though he had changed his original plans based on their behavior, Paul now, perhaps in this third, “sorrowful” letter, informs them of his intention to visit them again only after going through Macedonia and Achaia.

Piecing together the apostle’s movements and ministry actions, from The Acts and his other letters, leaves us with the impression that his intentions and plans were in a state of constant flux, and that he was always on the move—even going in circles. But that is not the case. Yes, events sometimes caused him to alter his itinerary, but he could also stay in cities for extended periods, for example Corinth in his first visit, and Ephesus even longer. In all of this we discover his heart for those he had introduced to Christ—and especially with the Corinthians, the pain, even anguish, he experienced as a result of their poor behavior—behavior not just in their personal lives, but *toward him*.

This would be the second letter from Paul to Corinth that is no longer extant. Paul wrote at least four letters to the Corinth church; we have the second and fourth.

And we must remind ourselves that all this was going on—all the travel, the back and forth between leading and smaller cities—*on foot*. Then there was perilous travel on the sea, and long waits for winter to pass. And when plans changed or were thwarted by exterior forces, communication from one city to another, or to a region, was accomplished, again, on foot.


We now come to Paul's writing of his fourth letter to the church: our 2 Corinthians.

Paul is once again in Ephesus in the summer or early fall of 54. Corinth is not the only place where there is turmoil causing challenges and outright threats for the apostle. In Acts 19:23 Luke tells us that "Now about that time there occurred no small disturbance concerning the Way." While in Ephesus Paul had expected to meet up with Titus, who was on his way back from delivering the aforementioned painful letter. But he didn't show, which certainly must have added to Paul's apprehension.

So he continues on to Macedonia. When he pens his final letter to Corinth he will describe this period as one in which he had no rest in his spirit, was troubled and fearful (7:5). But finally Paul "found emotional relief and God's comfort in Titus's arrival" (Guthrie). Not only was his disciple's presence an encouragement to Paul, but Titus also brought word that, generally, the church had responded favorably to his painful letter.

Paul must also have met up with Timothy around this time (1:1), as he begins what was probably a multi-week process of writing this letter perhaps in the fall or winter of 54, which he sent to Corinth with Titus and two other brothers (8:16-24) later in the winter or early spring.

The letter Paul delivered to the Corinth church, carried by the three brothers and in advance of his own visit, was intended to accomplish at least two things:

- There remained in Corinth those who were actively working against Paul and his ministry;  the letter (our 2 Corinthians), his three advance men, and his subsequent visit were meant to thwart the efforts of these ne'er-do-wells and bring the church back in line to his mission.

"For such men are false apostles, deceitful workers, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ" (2 Corinthians 11:12-15).

- The second purpose was the collection for Jerusalem; Paul exhorts them to restart the collection and complete it (8:11; 9:3-5).

Paul is in Macedonia, but before he returns to Corinth he will travel to Illyricum (Romans 15:19), staying there for several months. So it is possible “that Paul spent the next year, from the winter of 54-55 and through autumn of 55 ministering in Macedonia and Illyricum” (Guthrie).

Some time around the beginning of January 56 Paul arrives in Corinth after passing back through Macedonia from Illyricum. He will spend three months in that city while writing his letter to the Romans (Acts 20:3). He intends to then travel to Syria, but somehow the Jews in Corinth thwart that, so he and his fellows return to Macedonia instead, “leaving Philippi after the Feast of Unleavened Bread,” then continuing on to Jerusalem.


We have no evidence that Paul ever again visited the Corinth church, but what he writes to Timothy (2 Timothy 4:20) hints at that possibility.

**Erastus remained at Corinth, but Trophimus I left sick at Miletus.**

## CONCLUSION

Based on what we have in writing from God’s word, it seems to me that Paul’s relationship with the Corinth church body was unique among all the churches to which he ministered. In some respects, it is a tale of unrequited love: Paul is *passionate* about the church, its people and its standing before God. He *loves* them! But there is precious little love felt or demonstrated from them, as we read in Chapter Six.

### Read 2 Corinthians 6:11-13.

He pleads with them a little later in Chapter Seven: 

It is my prayer that we all will gain from this study—not just information, more than just gospel truth, but real insight into the raw humanity at work in the church, and particularly between its members and its shepherds.

Make room for us in your hearts. We wronged no one, we corrupted no one, we took advantage of no one. I do not speak to condemn you, for I have said before that you are in our hearts to die together and to live together. (vv2-3)