

(T) Welcome to **Discipleship training On The Air**. In this teaching series, you will have an opportunity to learn to know the Bible. As you listen to this programme, make notes in a notebook or record the programme. Today we introduce the SECOND letter to the CORINTHIANS. We will learn about the writer and the characteristics of the letter, the occasion, purpose, date and place of writing the letter, the division of the letter and the main message of the letter.

### **POINT 1. THE WRITER AND CHARACTERISTICS OF 2 CORINTHIANS**

The letter begins with the words, “Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God.” That the apostle Paul was the author or writer of the second letter to the Corinthians is not a matter of dispute in reputable scholarly circles. The evidence from the letter itself and the evidence from history point only to Paul. In no letter do we find so much *autobiographical information*. In no letter do we find so many *unexplained references* to people, situations and events with which the writer and the audience were obviously very familiar and did not need a more precise explanation of names, places and times. A forger would have taken much pain to explain every detail to his readers in order to give them the impression that he was well acquainted with these facts. No forger would have mentioned *the deadly affliction* that overtook Paul in Asia (1:8), or *his visionary rapture* and subsequent *thorn in the flesh* without giving more precise information concerning the nature of these experiences (12:2-12). No forger would have just mentioned *the brothers* who accompanied Titus to Corinth without disclosing their names (8:18,23; 12:18). No impostor would have been able to reproduce the swift changes of mood, the alternating joy, affection, and sternness, and the sudden digressions and switches of subject that characterises this letter. Like in his other letters, Paul refers to the false teachers and their false teachings with irony rather than with a frontal attack. This letter is characterised for its *sublime teaching of doctrines, warmth of feeling, spontaneous expression and elevation of spirit*. The second letter to the Corinthians is especially characterised by its emphasis on *the triumph of God’s grace in and through the everyday experience of the Christian in whatever circumstances he may find himself, whether it is an experience of exaltation or of suffering*.

### **POINT 2. THE OCCASION AND PURPOSE OF WRITING 2 CORINTHIANS**

#### **First. 2 Corinthians is an explanation of why Paul changed his travelling plans.**

This purpose becomes especially clear in chapters 1-7. In 2 Corinthians 1:15-16, Paul said that he had originally planned to pay the Corinthians a double visit. He had planned to visit Corinth before his journey up to Macedonia and again on his return from Macedonia. But the disturbing news about the state of affairs in the Corinthian church caused Paul to send Timothy to them in stead (1 Cor 4:17) and to write his first letter to the Corinthians. He sent this letter with Titus to Corinth and in it mentions his change of travelling plans. Paul described his first letter to the Corinthians as “a letter written out of great distress and anguish of heart and with many tears” (2:4). He said that his first letter to the Corinthians was “a test to see whether they would be obedient in everything” (2:9), because he dealt with a number of serious aberrations in the Corinthian church.

Paul had arranged with Titus to meet him on his return from Corinth at Troas, but they finally met in Macedonia. Titus brought both encouraging and discouraging news from Corinth. The encouraging news was that the majority of Corinthian Christians had responded to Paul’s 1 Corinthians letter “with godly sorrow and repentance”, so that they were eager to clear themselves of the offences in their church (7:5-11). The discouraging news was that there was still a recalcitrant group within the Corinthian church. Incited by some false apostles, this group made several false accusations against the apostle Paul.

#### **Second. 2 Corinthians is a gentle admonition to complete the collection for the needy Christians in Jerusalem.**

This purpose becomes especially clear in chapters 8-9. The Corinthian Christians should prepare for Paul’s third visit to them by setting their own house in order. One of the things they had started a year ago, in A.D. 55, but never completed was the collection for the needy Christians in Jerusalem. It is possible that they had neglected this due to their internal quarrels or due to the incitement of the false teachers, who desired to discredit Paul. Nevertheless, Paul sent Titus ahead with this 2 Corinthians letter to supervise the completion of this collection.

#### **Third. 2 Corinthians is a defence against the false apostles and their false teachings.**

This purpose becomes especially clear in chapters 10-13 (11:1-15). Certain false teachers, who claimed to be ‘apostles’, had infiltrated the ranks of the Corinthian church. In order to promote their own position, they had gone out of their way to discredit Paul and to call into question the genuineness of his apostleship. They made several false accusations against Paul:

One. The false teachers said that Paul was unreliable, because he had changed his travelling plans (1:17). Paul answered this accusation by saying that he had changed his travelling plans in order not to make another painful visit to them (1:23; 2:1). Instead of paying them a double visit, he planned to pay them only one longer visit and possibly even spend the winter with them. And he planned to send them his 2 Corinthians letter by the hand of Titus in order to help them to prepare for his third visit to Corinth. He would first travel to Macedonia and then to Corinth. Thereafter he would travel to Jerusalem.

Two. The false teachers said that Paul was not a genuine apostle, because he had come to Corinth without letters of commendation (12:11). These false teachers had succeeded to penetrate the ranks of the Corinthian church by certain letters of commendation that they had presented *to the Corinthian church* on their arrival (“to you”, 3:1). When they departed, they would require similar letters of commendation *from the Corinthian church* in order to penetrate another unsuspecting church (“from you”, 3:1)! These false teachers were largely dependent on these letters of commendation as a kind of clearance bill so that they could be given the freedom to market their merchandise in spiritual things profitably (4:2; compare 1 Timothy 6:3-5). Paul answered this accusation by reminding the Corinthians that his *sufferings* (4:8-12; 6:4-10; 11:23-33), *revelations* (12:1-10) and *signs* (12:12) *are the proofs of the genuineness of his apostleship!* Paul had founded the church at Corinth. To require letters of commendation from him or to require that his ministry or character need to be boosted by self-commendation (4:2; 5:12; 10:12) would be ludicrous. His personal character, the quality of his ministry and the spiritual results of his ministry were enough proof that he was a genuine apostle of Jesus Christ!

This does not mean that Paul was against letters of commendation. Such letters had become customary and were indeed necessary in the early Christian Church, because of the appearance of many false teachers. These false teachers sought to lead a parasitic existence by imposing themselves on the local churches as itinerant teachers or preachers. Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians was a kind of letter of commendation for Timothy (16:10-11) and his second letter to the Corinthians was a kind of letter of commendation for Titus and his companions (8:22-24). Paul maintained that these false teachers had unreliable credentials and were unworthy adventurers.

Three. The false teachers said that Paul was unimpressive in his authority and in his speaking. They said that Paul may seem impressive from a distance in his letters, but from nearby he would make no impression and his message would not be worth listening to (10:10-11; 11:5-6). These false teachers were probably Greek speaking Jews, trained in the Greek science of logic and oratory (cf. Acts 6:9; 9:29; 21:27). Paul answered this false accusation by saying that these false teachers or false apostles would discover his authority in his speaking and actions when he came to Corinth (1:23; 2:1; 13:2,10; cf. 1 Corinthians 4:19-21)!

Four. The false teachers said that Paul had no love and that he was crooked, because he did not accept financial support. They whispered that Paul’s unwillingness to allow the Corinthian Christians to contribute to his material needs was an indication that he did not love them (11:11). They even invented the false accusation that Paul probably used the collection funds to line his own pocket (12:18). Paul answered that, unlike these false teachers who required payment for their preaching, he made it his goal to preach and teach the Corinthian Christians completely free of charge (11:7-12). It was his aim never to be a burden to them (12:13; cf. 1 Cor 9:7-18). And Paul absolutely denied that he or his fellow workers had ever exploited them (12:14-18).

The second letter to the Corinthians was written largely with the purpose of refuting the accusations and insinuations against him with which these intruders had been poisoning the minds of the Christians at Corinth. The letter is Paul’s defence of the integrity of his personal character and of his apostleship. The letter is also an exposure of these intruders as impostors (11:13-15). Paul did not defend himself out of self-interest, but in order to protect the church that God had founded through him. These false so-called apostles taught another gospel that was different from the gospel that Christ had entrusted to Paul (11:4; cf. Gal 1:6-9). Paul repudiated their vicious slander and warned them that he would deal severely with any one who continued to trouble the church (10:6; 13:10).

### **POINT 3. THE DATE AND PLACE OF WRITING 2 CORINTHIANS**

While Paul was still ministering in Ephesus during A.D. 56, he had sent Titus to Corinth with our first letter to the Corinthians to prepare for his third visit and especially to supervise the completion of the collection for the needy Christians in Jerusalem. Paul had arranged with Titus to meet him on his return at Troas. At Troas he found an open door for preaching the gospel. Because he did not find Titus in Troas, he travelled across to Macedonia, probably to Philippi or its port, Neapolis. There he met Titus (2:12-13; 7:5-7). The news brought by Titus caused Paul to write another letter, our second letter to the Corinthians. Titus carried this letter back to Corinth. Acts 20:2-3 and Romans 15:19 relate that Paul was ministering in Macedonia all the way to Illyricum at that time. Thus, he wrote the second letter to the Corinthians from somewhere in Macedonia.

In 2 Corinthians 8:10, Paul made reference to “last year”. This must have referred to some time in A.D. 55, when Titus had visited Corinth and, with the co-operation of the Corinthian Christians, had made a start with the collection for the needy Christians in Jerusalem. This would have been on some occasion prior to the writing of the first letter to the Corinthians. Titus probably carried the very first letter that Paul wrote to the Corinthians, which he mentions in 1 Corinthians 5:9 and which was subsequently lost. Thus, 2 Corinthians was written in the autumn of A.D. 56, about six

months after the writing of 1 Corinthians. His purpose was to teach that “God’s power is manifested in the apostle’s weakness”.

#### **POINT 4. THE DIVISION OF 2 CORINTHIANS**

The second letter of Paul to the Corinthians may be given **the title**: “2 Corinthians - the triumph of God’s grace over and through human frailty” or “2 Corinthians - the complete sufficiency of God’s grace, which gives strength through weakness.” The letter portrays Jesus Christ as our Sufficiency, that is, we need no more and no less than Jesus Christ himself in all our circumstances.

**The theme** of 2 Corinthians is written in 2 Corinthians 3:5-6, “Not that we are competent (sufficient, capable) in ourselves to claim anything for ourselves, but our competence (sufficiency, capability) comes from God. He has made us competent (able and effective, thus worthy) as ministers of a new covenant.”

The structure of the second letter to the Corinthians is determined by Paul’s coming third visit to Corinth. The letter may be divided into three parts:

#### **The first part deals with the past: Paul explains to the Corinthians his change of travelling plans.**

He reviews his *past*, that is, recent, experiences and their bearing upon the church at Corinth. The first part is recorded in chapters 1-7. It consists of five sections:

In chapter 1:1-11, Paul says that, after having faced death in Asia, he is able to comfort the afflicted people of Corinth. In chapter 1:12 to 2:4, he says that he had changed his travelling plans and had delayed his coming to Corinth in order to spare them.

In chapter 2:5-11, he orders the restoration of the Corinthian offender.

In chapter 2:12-13, which is continued in chapter 7:5-16, he says that he had travelled from Ephesus to Troas to meet Titus and preached the gospel in Troas. When he did not find Titus there, he travelled on to Macedonia.

Chapter 2:14 to 7:5 describes how this open door at Troas and the good news from Corinth caused Paul to focus his attention on “the triumphs and glories of the Christian ministry even amidst suffering”. This is *an extended digression* from the framework, but not from the contents of this letter.

Chapter 7:5-16 is a continuance of section five. The sorrow, which Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians had caused them, worked for their good and this encouraged Paul.

#### **The second part deals with the present: Paul urges the Corinthians to prepare for his coming visit by completing the collection for the needy Christians in Jerusalem.**

He expresses his *present* desire that the collection for the needy Christians at Jerusalem shall be continued energetically. The second part is recorded in chapters 8-9. It consists of three sections:

Chapter 8:1-15 is about the pattern of giving, which is shown by the self-sacrificial giving of Macedonia and Jesus Christ himself.

Chapter 8:16 to 9:5 is about the administration of Christian gifts.

Chapter 9:6-15 is about the results of generous giving.

#### **The third part deals with the future: Paul assures the Corinthians of the certainty and imminence of his visit.**

He defends himself against the false charges of his opponents and assures them that the purpose of his *future* visit is not to tear them down but to build them up. The third part is recorded in chapters 10-13. It consists of three sections:

In chapter 10, Paul reminds his opponents in the church at Corinth that Corinth is within the province of his apostleship.

In chapter 11:1 to 12:13, he warns his opponents that they must not think that he is a sham apostle. His sufferings, revelations and signs are the proofs of his apostleship!

In chapter 12:14 to 13:14, he assures the Corinthians that the purpose of his third visit is not to burden them, nor to exploit them, nor to tear them down, but to build them up.

#### **POINT 5. THE MAIN MESSAGE OF 2 CORINTHIANS**

The main theme of 2 Corinthians is “*the complete sufficiency of God’s grace, which gives strength through weakness.*” This theme is bound up with the whole argument for the genuineness of Paul’s apostolic authority. His enemies had blamed Paul for being a weak person, unreliable, unimpressive, unloving and crooked. While Paul denies their false accusations throughout this letter, he does not deny or hide his weakness or self-inadequacy. On the contrary, it is precisely when he is weak and totally inadequate, that God is able to use him in his service. It is only when he is weak that it becomes inescapable apparent that the power of his ministry is entirely the power of God. It is this amazing contrast between his own human frailty and God’s all-conquering strength manifested through him that his apostleship is unshakeably authenticated to the world.

Therefore, on the one hand, Paul draws attention to his sufferings, perils, hardships and feebleness of health, which he endured during the fulfilment of his task. And on the other hand he draws attention to God's great power that is manifested in and through his ministry. In this way he drives home to his readers the truth of this startling paradox that human weakness and divine strength go hand in hand. *Human frailty is not a handicap or a barrier, but rather provides the ideal opportunity for the triumph of God's grace and power.* The degree to which a worker of God asserts his own adequacy, to that degree does he deny and withdraw from the sole sufficiency of the grace of God. And the degree to which the worker of God asserts his own inadequacy, to that degree does he depend on the sole sufficiency of the grace of God.

For example, in 2 Corinthians 1:8-9 Paul says, "We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure ... that we might not rely on ourselves but on God." In chapter 2:12-14 he says, "I had no peace of mind ... but God always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ." In chapter 3:5-6 he says, "Not that we are competent in ourselves to claim anything for ourselves, but our competence comes from God." In chapter 4:7-10 he says, "We have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. We always carry around in our bodies the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body."

### **ASSIGNMENT FOR NEXT WEEK**

First. During the next week, read Galatians 1-6. Next week we will introduce the letter to the Galatians.

Second. See the workbooks "Go and preach God's Kingdom" and Internet on [www.dota.net](http://www.dota.net)

Third. Listen every SATURDAY to WEDNESDAY on the radio to "Discipleship training on the air".