



## Second Corinthians

### Second Corinthians 1:1-2:13: Conciliation

Paul's second epistle to the Corinthians in our Biblical canon begins as do all his letters, with a formal greeting, in this case, from Paul and his colleague Timothy to the community in Corinth and throughout the province of Achaëa (1:1–2). This may have been the actual greeting of the final letter in the sequence of Paul's correspondence.

The rest of what we have called letter D (1:1–7:16) performs two major functions. It finalizes arrangements for Paul's upcoming visit with the community and it celebrates the reconciliation that has been achieved between the apostle and his sometimes fractious congregation. Paul lays out his current situation and his travel plans in two segments, at the beginning (1:3–2:13) and at the end (7:5–16) of the letter. The meditative celebration of reconciliation occupies the central portion (2:14–6:13). Some scholars have suggested that these blocks of material comprise two different letters, but that analysis ignores the strong links between Paul's initial "thanksgiving" section (1:3–11) and the subject matter and themes of 2:14–6:13, 7:2–4. These chapters thus appear to be a single letter with a set of practical comments framing a more meditative, and emotional, central section.

This analysis omits one segment of the letter (6:14–7:1), which fits poorly within its context and does not contribute either to the themes of the central section, nor to the practicalities of the beginning and conclusion. As suggested in our introduction, that passage is probably a fragment of another letter, which we shall discuss in due course.

### Paul's Thanksgiving (1:3–11)

As is the case in all Paul's letters, with the exception of Galatians, a word of prayer, usually a thanksgiving, follows the formal greetings. The relevant section of this letter begins with a "benediction" (v 3) and ends with a reference to thanksgiving (11). These sections often reveal the concerns that weigh on Paul's mind as he writes and vv 3–7 perform that function quite clearly. In the course of the first six verses Paul mentions "consolation" nine times. He has been consoled in his affliction (v 4), which enables him to console others, particularly the recipients of this letter (v 6). Affliction is something that both Paul and his congregation share (v 7), but because they share that affliction with Christ, the source of abundant consolation (v 5), they can have hope for the future. All of this language constitutes a highly emotional appeal, what ancient orators would label an appeal to *pathos*. Paul proceeds to specify what the afflictions

are that beset him and he describes details of his life designed to evoke a sympathetic response, such as his imprisonment “in Asia” (probably in the city of Ephesus) and his condemnation to death there (vv 8-9), obviously not carried out. Yet, as Paul and his addressees are united in their consolation, they are also united through prayer in their afflictions, a fellowship that itself is a cause for thanksgiving (v 11).

It is interesting that Paul does not describe what afflictions have best the Corinthians, but, if our analysis is correct, some of that affliction resulted from Paul’s own words and deeds.

Paul’s Travel Plans and Reflections on his Relationships (1:12–2:13)

Another standard part of much ancient personal correspondence was a description of the situation of the sender. The next block of material focuses on Paul’s situation, but with a constant eye toward how he has interacted with the Corinthians.

Paul begins by continuing the emotional appeal to the Corinthians begun in the thanksgiving section. He uses the theme of “boasting,” which played such a major role in the letter preserved in 2 Corinthians 10–13. Here “boasting” does not have the edgy, ironic tone that it does in the chapters of that painful letter. Paul begins, perhaps a bit defensively, by saying that he “boasts” in his own frankness and sincerity. That remark puts a rather pleasing label on the rhetoric of the painful letter. Paul appeals for understanding (v 13), claiming that he is not writing in a way that cannot be understood, perhaps another gesture toward his earlier sarcastic tone. But in the end, “boasting” is not about him but about his congregation (v 14).

The major portion of the discussion of travel plans (1:15–2:4) deals with the fact that Paul had planned to come to Corinth by way of Macedonia in the north (v 16, the region of Paul’s first missionary activity in Europe), but he finally decided against doing so (v 23). This is probably the planned trip that Paul mentioned in 1 Cor 16:5. Paul’s decision requires some explanation. Is he simply a vacillating flip-flopper (v 17)? No, he says. Despite his change of mind about visiting, he was guided by a single purpose. His fidelity ultimately to the welfare of the Corinthians mirrors the fidelity of God (v 18), a fidelity expressed in his son Jesus (v 19).

Paul elsewhere reflects at length on God’s fidelity, particularly in Romans 9–11 and argues passionately that God is indeed consistent and faithful even when it does not appear so. Although the argument is not as developed here as in Romans, the point is the same. Paul’s apparent indecisive vacillation masks a deeper and consistent affirmation, a “Yes” directed at the Corinthians, as God’s “Yes” expressed in Jesus is directed at his Church. Paul concludes this condensed reflection on fidelity with an allusion to the ritual of baptism (vv 21–22). He thus reminds the Corinthians once again of what he and they have in common, not simply a ritual of anointing (v 21), but the common life of the Spirit (v 22), something on which he had commented at length in 1 Corinthians 12–14.

Paul now offers a more pragmatic explanation of his decision not to visit Corinth (1:23–2:4). He wanted to spare the Corinthians (v 23) the agony of another “painful visit” (2:1). Instead, Paul

says, he wrote an emotional “letter with many tears” (2:4), which probably included 2 Corinthians 10–13. Interwoven with the factual explanation are further emotional appeals. He asks (v 2), if he caused pain, who could make Paul glad except the one whom he had offended? The verses express Paul’s yearning for the restoration of a positive relationship with his congregation. His own emotional state is the subject of the section’s concluding. Paul’s actions were not meant to cause pain but to be an expression of his love (v 4).

Yet another explanation of Paul’s decision not to visit rests in the events that were unfolding in Corinth (2:5-11). Paul’s description of those events is somewhat oblique, but he reveals something of what was afoot. Some single individual in Corinth had been primarily responsible for “pain” that Paul and the Corinthians have felt (v 5). A majority inflicted some punishment on him (v 6). Perhaps this is the punishment that Paul recommended in 1 Cor 5:4–5 for a man who had been guilty of what Paul judged to be sexual immorality (living with his step-mother). Paul’s recommendation in that earlier letter was harsh; the man was to be expelled from the community, handed over to Satan. Whoever the object of Paul’s ire and the community’s action was, Paul now offers different counsel. The community should “forgive and console” him (v 7), lest he be overwhelmed with sorrow. Paul establishes here a fundamental principle that guides the whole of the first seven chapters of 2 Corinthians: reconciliation is the necessary condition for consolation. Both reconciliation and consolation are based in love, which Paul asks the Corinthians to show to their disciplined member (v 8). Paul practices what he preaches and declares his own forgiveness for those whom the congregation has forgiven (v 10). Once again, he emphasizes that his actions are done in solidarity with and to support the congregation (v 10). If in 1 Corinthians Paul had apparently been willing to condemn a member of the congregation to Satan, he now declares that adopting the path of reconciliation is a way to outwit Satan’s wiles (v 11). Has Paul simply changed his rhetorical strategy here, or has he in fact learned something about life “in the presence of Christ” (v 10) by his experience?

Paul concludes his remarks about his travel on a very concrete note (2:12-13). He came via Troas, in what is now northwestern Turkey. He was anxious that he did not find Titus there. This remark is initially opaque to a modern reader but would have made good sense to the Corinthians. As Paul will make clear when he returns to the issue of his travel plans (7:6-7), Titus had been sent as his emissary to Corinth to affect the reconciliation that produced the consolation that Paul now celebrates.

Yale Divinity School, 409 Prospect Street, New Haven, CT 06511

[www.yalebiblestudy.org](http://www.yalebiblestudy.org)