

Second Epistle to the Corinthians - Introduction

by Arno Clemens Gaebelein

The second epistle to the Corinthians is a defense of the apostle's character and authority, and a demonstration of true ministry in the body of Christ.

Scripture: 2 Corinthians 2:13

Topics: "Pauline Epistles", "True Ministry"

Description

Arno Clemens Gaebelein delves into the second epistle to the Corinthians, emphasizing its inseparable connection with the first epistle and the undoubted authorship of Paul. The origin of the second epistle is explored, detailing Paul's deep concern and troubled mind about the Corinthians' reception of his first letter, leading to the sending of Titus to gather information. The sermon discusses the circumstances surrounding the writing of the epistle in Macedonia and the mixed emotions Paul experienced upon hearing about the Corinthians' repentance. The characteristics of the second epistle are highlighted, showcasing its personal nature, rapid transitions, and the Apostle's self-defense against attacks on his character and ministry. True ministry in the body of Christ is a central theme, with practical truths applicable to all believers.

Transcript

Introduction

This second epistle is inseparably connected with the first Paul had written to the Corinthians. Its authorship is undoubted, for no other epistle bears such distinctive marks of the author and brings out all which characterized him as a servant of the Lord Jesus Christ. From critical sides it is claimed that between the first and second epistles, there must have been another letter of the Apostle, more severe in tone than the first epistle. This letter the critics maintain was lost. This supposition is mostly founded on chapter 2:3-4 and chapter 7:8. The statements made by the apostle in these passages, it is argued, cannot be explained by the message of the first epistle and the situation described is altogether too strong to have been created by the first epistle. But there is no need to invent an intermediate letter to explain the tone and burden of this second epistle. The first epistle contains sufficient material to produce the effects in the Corinthians and also in the mind and heart of the apostle of which he writes in the above passages. 1 Corinthians 4:18-21; 5:1-8; 6:5-8; 11:17-22 and 15:35-36, account fully for the great Apostle's solicitude

and emotions.

How the Second Epistle Originated

After the first epistle had been written and delivered to the Corinthians, Paul seemed to have been greatly troubled in his mind about how the church in Corinth would receive and treat his inspired communication. The first epistle had been written with many tears and deep soul-exercise. He knew that it would make them sorry, yet he was in doubt and unrest about it all. Titus had evidently been sent by the Apostle to Corinth to ascertain the truth about this matter and to find out what effect the first epistle had upon the Corinthians. Others think that Timotheus had first returned from Corinth and had brought very painful news, which greatly increased the anxiety of Paul and he sent, therefore, another letter through Titus to the Corinthians (the letter which is claimed was lost). However, this is only a conjecture.

At the time of writing this epistle, Paul had left the province Asia (2 Corinthians 1:8) where he had been in some great peril. In leaving Asia he had come by Troas, where the Lord had opened a door for him to preach the Gospel (2 Corinthians 2:12). In Troas he fully expected to meet Titus and receive the much longed for report from the Corinthian Church. "I had no rest in my spirit, because I found not Titus my brother" (2:13). He therefore sailed to Macedonia. It was in Macedonia where Titus met him and told Paul about his visit to Corinth. "For when we were come into Macedonia, our flesh had no rest, but we were troubled on every side; without were fightings, within were fears. Nevertheless God, that comforteth those that are cast down, comforted us by the coming of Titus; and not by his coming only, but by the consolation wherewith he was comforted in you, when he told us of your earnest desire, your mourning, your fervent mind toward me; so that I rejoiced the more" (2 Corinthians 7:5-7). The tidings which Titus brought were in the main good tidings. They had mourned over the wrong which the first letter had pointed out and they had repented; however, it is also clear that not all had been settled. There were still his enemies who attacked him and they became evidently more bitter against him on account of the strong letter he had written to the church. He wrote therefore, this second epistle in which he expresses the comfort which the news of their repentance had brought him, but in which he also very strongly defends his personal character and his apostolic authority.

This establishes beyond controversy the fact that the epistle was written in Macedonia. The exact place can hardly be ascertained. The note at the end of the epistle "written from Philippi" is simply traditional. It is more likely that he spent some time in Thessalonica. The time when this second epistle was written must have been the early autumn of 57, A.D.

The Contents and Characteristics

That in many ways there is a vast difference in the two epistles to the Corinthians cannot escape even a superficial reader. The second epistle is a far more personal one than the first and there is less doctrinal matter mentioned. One of the leading characteristics is the rapid transitions, which emanated not from the moods of the great man of God, but from the deep exercises of his soul. Anxiety, indignation, resentment, trust and love are linked together in rapid succession. A critic begins his remarks on this epistle with the following words "Of all Paul's epistles this is the most obscure. It is a veritable cloudland." But another writer expresses the value of this Epistle in a true way, when he says "What an admirable epistle is the second to the Corinthians! How full of affections! He joys and is sorry; he grieves and he glories: never was there such care of a flock expressed, save by the great Shepherd, who first shed tears over Jerusalem and afterward blood." Dean Alford remarks on this grand document: "In no other epistle are

matter and style so various, and so rapidly shifting from one character to another. Consolation and rebuke, gentleness and severity, earnestness and irony, succeed one another at very short intervals and without notice." Still another gives a good summary of the contents of this epistle.

"Personal experience, and this used for the help of others in their trials; the work of the Lord in all its varieties, with the action of the Holy Ghost answering to it; the truth of God in its distinctive shape and highest forms, or the glory of Christ contrasted with the spirit; in former days hidden under the letter; the walk and service which befit such revelations of grace; the affections called into action by all this in the midst of sorrow and suffering, with evil abounding and grace much more abounding; the trials and wants of saints, calling out the loving remembrance of others; the opposition of self-seeking men, employed of the enemy to hinder the blessing of saints and to lower the glory of Christ, to distract the weak and give scope for unscrupulous activity; but on the other hand the energy of the Holy Ghost working not only to vouchsafe heavenly visions, and so give faith its object, but to manifest Christ in weakness and suffering where the power of Christ may rest, are all brought out with remarkable force and fulness."

The Apostle's Self-Defense

While the epistle to the Galatians is the defense of the doctrine of the Gospel against false teachers, the second epistle to the Corinthians is the defense of his own personal character, his apostolic authority, his motives and his ministry. His adversaries, Judaizing teachers and others, who were continuing the sectarian spirit, had charged him with many things, slandering his character and belittling his apostolic authority and efficiency. What they had spoken against him we learn from the epistle itself. They depreciated his person. "For his letters, say they, are weighty and powerful, but his bodily presence is weak, and his speech contemptible" (10:10). "Though I be rude in speech (as they had accused him) yet not in knowledge" (11:6). The reason why he speaks in this epistle so much of his self-sacrifice, his zeal, his sincerity, his manly courage, his untiring service and his many sufferings, is that he had been attacked and belittled in all these things. It is well known that Paul means "little." Saul had been changed to Paul, the little one. Unlike his namesake in the Old Testament, King Saul, whom Samuel had rebuked, with the words "when thou wast little in thine own eyes," the great Apostle was little and remained little in his own estimation, the mark of every true servant of Christ. He called himself "less than the least of all saints" (Ephesians 3:8). Yet in this epistle he is forced to boast in order to vindicate his character and ministry. In chapter 12:11 we read "I am become a fool in glorying; ye have compelled me; for I ought to have been commended of you; for in nothing am I behind the very chiefest apostles, though I be nothing." Thirty-one times he speaks of glorying or boasting and that because he was compelled to do so. In this way we learn of some new things which happened in the life of the Apostle Paul which are unrecorded elsewhere. These are: his escape from Damascus in a basket (11:32-33); his great experience in being caught up to the third heaven (12:1-4); his thorn in the flesh (12:7, etc.); his remarkable sufferings and privations (11:23-27). The fact that these experiences were not mentioned by him till he was compelled to do so and to show that, if he wanted to boast in something, he had abundant reasons for doing so, manifests his great humility.

True Ministry

The epistle is a wonderful mine in spiritual and practical truths. The one great truth which may be traced throughout the entire epistle is the ministry in the body of Christ, the church. And the apostle himself in making his self-defense is a pattern of what true ministry in the body of Christ is and what it means. Here are blessed, spiritual lessons and principles which apply to God's true children at all times. All who desire

to be devoted to the Lord Jesus Christ in these days, need these practical truths. May it please God to lead us into them and enable us by His grace to walk in His truth.

The Division of Second Corinthians

We divide this epistle into three parts, which is the most satisfactory division.

I. TRUE MINISTRY AS MANIFESTED IN THE LIFE AND CHARACTER OF THE APOSTLE. Chapters 1-7

1. The Introduction. Chapters 1:1-7
2. Paul's Experience and Explanations. Chapter 1:8-24
3. His Deep Exercise Concerning Them. Chapter 2
4. The Ministry of the New Covenant as Contrasted with the Old. Chapter 3
5. The Character of the True Ministry. Chapter 4
6. Concerning the Future; The Ministry of Reconciliation. Chapter 5
7. Ministry in Connection with Testings and Trials. Chapter 6:1-13
8. The Apostle's Appeals and Rejoicing. Chapter 6:14-7:16

II. THE MINISTRY OF GIVING. Chapters 8-9

1. The Examples and Principles of Giving. Chapter 8
2. Exhortation and Encouragement. Chapter 9

III. THE APOSTLE'S SELF-DEFENSE AND VINDICATION. Chapters 10-13

1. The Defense of His Authority. Chapter 10
2. Answering His Adversaries. His Boasting. Chapter 11
3. Revelations in which He Might Glory. The Marks of His Apostleship. Chapter 12
4. Still Absent, Yet Coming. The Conclusion. Chapter 13

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