

2Cor 2026-09-27b

We continue our look at the setting for this book of 2 Corinthians. We'll complete that and dive into the text here. Looking at the way the Apostle Paul himself has been viewed both in his own day, across the centuries, and especially in more recent times up to and including our present day, it is a reminder that Satan will attack strategically the things that are most valuable to believers.

The power of God comes into the life of believers in our age through the Spirit of God and the Word of God. To divert attention from God the Holy Spirit is one of the primary attacks in our day. If you listen to those who are in the progressive Christianity, deconstruct, reconstruct camp to any extent—I'm not suggesting that you do, but if you are exposed to that or to people who are influenced by it, there is a signature lack of appreciation for or reference to God's Holy Spirit.

It just doesn't come up. What is happening in the world? What has happened in history? What my dad used to say, "Who shot John?" I don't know who John was, but looking at circumstances and who's to blame and some materialistic, social, economic, or political correction that needs to be made rather than focusing on the basics, the mechanics, if you will, of Christian life, service, and function, which is grounded in and founded on the presence and power of God's Holy Spirit. It is our gift in this age.

Without the presence of the Holy Spirit, without His guidance, without His comfort, as we're about to see, without His leading us into all truth, bringing to our minds pertinent promises and principles and doctrines, we are in big trouble, because without the power of the Spirit we are left with the energy of the flesh. "Cursed is the man who trusts in man and makes flesh his arm, his strength, whose heart departs from the Lord" (Jeremiah 17:5). Departing from the Holy Spirit is departing from the Lord, because what may be known of Christ is revealed to us by the Holy Spirit.

Jesus left. He said, "I will not leave you orphans. I will come to you. I will send you another Comforter. He will lead you into all truth" (John 14:18, 16:13), the Holy Spirit. Anybody you hear purporting to teach or preach Christian faith, the Christian walk, the Christian life, Christian service and function, if they talk for more than 10 minutes and don't mention the Holy Spirit, something's wrong.

We are dependent. How many times have we reviewed this principle? The power of God comes into the life of the believer by the Spirit of God and the Word of God. Jesus Christ is synonymous with the Word, John 1, and we only understand that Word in spiritual power, spiritual terms. God's Holy Spirit enables, makes it possible (1 Corinthians 2:14). Our prayers get no higher than the ceiling without God, the Holy Spirit (Romans 8:26).

So both directions of communication depend upon the presence and power of the Holy Spirit. This is obviously, manifestly, and suspiciously lacking in much of what passes for Christian teaching, Christian emphasis, and the kingdom view, kingdom now, King Jesus, kingdom people, kingdom work emphasis that is increasingly influential in our day. And you can be zealous, but not according to knowledge; Paul talks about this in another place (Romans 10:2).

This passage is, this book is critical to our understanding and recognizing the foundation upon which it rests. Here's a little bit of historical background, just so we know why Paul says what he says to this particular group, because he does refer to his recent interactions with this group, and they can be confusing.

I'll give an overview here, but then as we encounter these references to letters or to visits, we'll put them in context as we go. But just as background, there is dispute amongst, again, scholars, and even those really trying to understand what's going on in the missionary journeys of Paul. How many letters did he write to Corinth? Opinions range from three to five letters. We have two of these letters. There could have been as many as five. I think there were probably three.

But how many times did Paul visit Corinth? This appears to be either two or three times. If it was essential for us to understand these numbers, they would be more explicit in scripture. But we look at acts for the progress and destinations in Paul's various journeys, and we look at his letters for references to visits. He wants to come. He did come. He came last time. He wrote a letter. This was the effect. So this is helpful in understanding. We want to understand why these things are being said so that we can then interpret them and apply them in our own case.

Here's what we do know. Paul first came to Corinth in the spring of AD 51, Anno Domini 51. For your erudition and proper use, BC always comes after the year number, and AD always precedes it. So it is 598 BC, before Christ, and it is 51 preceded by Anno Domini, the year of our Lord, 51. So we say AD 51.

Paul first came to Corinth, and he ministered there for a year and a half. Paul knows this group. He knows their names. He knows their personalities. He knows their predilections, their ascent or descent with his teaching. He was there a year and a half, starting in AD 51.

Then in the fall of AD 52, he went with Priscilla and Aquila to Ephesus. And they stayed in Ephesus, Aquila and Priscilla did, and Paul traveled on to Jerusalem. At Ephesus, this is where Priscilla and Aquila meet Apollos, and they teach him and give him a better understanding of what's going on.

And then Apollos goes to Corinth. So Paul was in Corinth, he leaves. Priscilla and Aquila run into Apollos, teach him more accurately, and then send him back to Corinth.

We know this in Acts 18:18-28. That's point one. Paul has been there, Apollos has been there. Remember 1 Corinthians, "Some say, I am of Paul, others say, I am of Apollos" (1 Corinthians 3:4), Acts 18:18-28.

Point two, while Apollos is in Corinth, Acts 19, verse one, in the fall of AD 53, Paul goes back to Ephesus, went to Jerusalem, he's gone back to Ephesus. This is the third missionary journey. You've got maps in the back of your Bible that will show the various missionary journeys. This is the third. Goes to Ephesus, and he stays in Ephesus two and a half years. And that becomes sort of the base of operations and his center for travels and ministry to the surrounding provinces. This is recorded in Acts 19. Paul's home base in Ephesus, ministering to that whole region.

Paul writes a letter to Corinth while he is in Ephesus. And he mentions this letter in 1 Corinthians 5, verse nine. "I wrote to you in my epistle not to keep company with sexually immoral people." He mentions that in 1 Corinthians, which means there was a prior letter to 1 Corinthians. "I wrote in my letter, don't keep company with sexually immoral people." This letter was misunderstood by the Corinthians. They didn't catch the drift. And this is described in 1 Corinthians 5:9-11. This letter has not survived. We don't have a copy of it. And that letter was evidently written while Paul was doing this Ephesian ministry. That's point two.

Point three, Paul learned of this misunderstanding that they had not gotten the message from this earlier letter. Maybe that's why it's not recorded. Perhaps it wasn't sufficiently inspired. But Paul found out that they didn't understand that letter. And he was made aware of additional problems in Corinth from members of the household of Chloe. People from Chloe's household go to Ephesus and tell Paul things are not good in Corinth. This is 1 Corinthians 1:11. Then Stephanas, Fortunatus, and Achaicus come and corroborate and substantiate that news. This is sort of a delegation from Corinth.

This is mentioned in 1 Corinthians 16:17. So the upshot of this is, Paul was in Corinth for a year and a half. He has left. Apollos has come to Corinth, but there are problems. Paul writes them a letter. They don't understand the letter. People from the household of Chloe and then these three guys lead a delegation to talk to Paul and say, Look, things are really going haywire in Corinth. That's 1 Corinthians 16:17. And they ask Paul questions about these issues that are dividing the Corinthian group. So 1 Corinthians was written to try to fix those problems. 1 Corinthians, we've already covered that book.

However, point four, 1 Corinthians didn't fix those problems. So it's likely that Timothy is the one who informed Paul things are still not good in Corinth. This is suggested when you look at 1 Corinthians 4:17 and 1 Corinthians 16:10. Four-17 of 1 Corinthians says, "I'm going to send Timothy to you. He's my beloved and faithful son in the Lord. He will remind you of my ways in Christ as I teach everywhere in every church." And he mentions it again in 16:10 of 1 Corinthians: "If Timothy comes, see that he may be with you without fear. He does the work of the Lord as I also do." So along with 1 Corinthians, Paul sent Timothy to Corinth to try to straighten this stuff out.

Timothy apparently returns and says, "I couldn't get it fixed." Corinthians are a problem group. Paul comes, Apollos comes. Paul writes them a letter, two letters. Timothy goes, Timothy comes back and says this is still a mess in Corinth. So Paul decides to pay the church a second visit. He sailed directly from Ephesus to Corinth. This visit is referred to in 2 Corinthians 2:1: "I came to you and it was painful, It was a sorrow. And I've determined this within myself. I would not come again to you in sorrow."

First time in Corinth, the year and a half, that wasn't sorrowful. But by the time he's writing our epistle, 2 Corinthians, he has been back and it was painful. And he said, "I'm not going to come a third time for another painful visit."

That's 2 Corinthians 2:1. And this appears to be implicated with the individual mentioned in 2 Corinthians 2:5 and 2 Corinthians 7:12. This may be the individual mentioned in 1 Corinthians that has his father's wife, his stepmother, he ends up shacking up with her.

So this is background. Why does 2 Corinthians contain what it contains? Why does he say what he says? These are some of the issues.

People have been there multiple times. Multiple letters from Paul have come and they haven't grasped the message. They haven't taken it on board in the presence and power of the Holy Spirit and benefited from the correction, benefited from the instruction.

Clear so far? This is why 2 Corinthians is being written.

So, number five: after this painful visit mentioned in 2 Corinthians 2:1 and Paul goes back to Ephesus, he sends a third letter that's also not in our New Testament. Titus brought it. It grieved Paul deeply to write this letter. He said, "I didn't want to make a third painful visit. So I sent Titus with the last letter you got." This is between 1 Corinthians and 2 Corinthians. And he was pretty forthright and pretty harsh. And he talks about this in chapter seven, verses eight and nine of 2 Corinthians.

He wrote this stark letter telling them the problem in very direct terms. He wrote this from Ephesus. While he's in Ephesus, you had the events of Acts 19, where the silversmiths promote a riot, and Paul has to leave Ephesus in the spring of AD 56, bound for Macedonia. Bound for Macedonia. This is Acts 20, verse one. He stops in Troas where he hoped to hook up with Titus, this is 2 Corinthians 2:13, and receive news from him about what's going on in Corinth.

Leaving Ephesus, stops in Troas. Timothy, Titus rather, is going to bring him up to date on what's going on in Corinth. He couldn't find Titus there. And so he went on to Macedonia and he's very concerned, is Titus okay? That's chapter seven, verses five and six.

But when he gets to Macedonia he finds Titus, and Titus gives him good news about the wellbeing of the Corinthian church, but bad news about a group opposed to Paul. Paul receives this news from Titus that things have improved in the Corinthian church, but there is a consolidated opposition in Corinth that is actively attacking Paul on multiple fronts. This gets back to our introduction, that "Paul should not be listened to" as a theme of this opposition.

So in Macedonia, Paul writes a fourth letter, which is this letter. There's good news and bad news, in other words.

Then—that would be point 6, point 7: Paul then makes his third visit to Corinth during the winter of AD 56, 57. This is recorded in Acts chapter 20, verses two and three. "When he had gone over that region and encouraged them with many words, he came to Greece and stayed three months when the Jews plotted against him as he was about to sail to Syria, he decided to return through Macedonia."

So in summary, (1) first visit to Corinth, (2) first letter to Corinth, now lost, (3) second letter to Corinth, which is 1 Corinthians, (4) second visit to Corinth, painful visit, 2 Corinthians 2:1, (5) a third letter to Corinth, now lost, (6) a fourth letter to Corinth, our letter, (7) a third visit to Corinth.

The two lost letters, God didn't decide we needed to have the content of those. So as a result, this letter at which we are now looking, 2 Corinthians, is perhaps the most personal and intimate communication that we have from the apostle Paul to a church. He bares his soul, he professes his love for the Corinthians despite the problems and their various attitudes toward him across time.

His primary concern is false teachers, this group that has solidified into opposition. They claim to be apostles, they've entered the church or consolidated their power within the church. They promote their own ideas and their attack is to both discredit the person of Paul and the message of Paul.

They attack him personally, his characteristics, his presence is weak and his apostleship is tied with that. He's not really authoritative, and then his message, they disagree with his message. So the person and the message of the apostle, 2 Corinthians is designed to address that.

It defends the authenticity of his apostleship and the authenticity of his message. What a pertinent message for us today that under attack, our Scriptures are something in which we can have confidence to which we appeal. We see the fruit of this as the Holy Spirit works in our souls individually and in our midst as believers in a fellowship, whether it is this fellowship or the fellowship of believers in our families, our coworkers, others that we know.

These promises and principles and doctrines, these truths bear fruit. "You will know them," Jesus said, "by their fruit" (Matthew 7:16, 20). Is there fruit? Are we changed by what we learn and what we remember? We have recently studied the book of James and the emphasis on not just hearing the word, but seeing it put into practice so that it affects our attitudes, our words, and our actions. Attitudes, words, and actions, these things that flow out of a transformed heart, the transformation done by the word.

If what we look at is the word of God, it will supernaturally renew us and transform us and deliver us from the power of sin and our fallen nature and the pressure of Satan and the ways of the world. Only the word of God has that power. A nursing newborn knows when it has found its mother's milk.

It is an instinct. It is built-in recognition. This is good and nutritious.

We as believers recognize when we are exposed to the truth of God in its supernatural, powerful, eternal presence in our lives. It has to make a difference. It is the power of God.

Romans 1:16, Paul says, "I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ. "I don't hesitate to proclaim it or identify with it, "promote it, defend it, teach it." Why? It is the power of God for deliverance to everyone who believes, to everyone who places their faith in it, whether they're a Jew or a Greek. So, Paul in 2 Corinthians isn't just on the defensive, "I really am an apostle, I really did see Jesus." He's not apologetic in his defense. He's not being self-protective.

He recognizes that the acceptance of his ministry and the acceptance of his message are essential to the Corinthians' wellbeing. Peter's not there, John's not there, James, the son of Zebedee is not there, other apostles are not there. Their Word of God has come exclusively through Paul and those whom Paul influences, which is Priscilla, Aquila, and Apollos, first and second generation teaching that comes from Paul. If somebody undercuts Paul, what are the Corinthians left with in terms of New Testament truth? So his defense isn't defensive, it is essential to the authority of the message. And that is just as true today as it ever has been.

So, who are these opponents that are attacking Paul's person, his apostleship, and his message? It's not real clear. It's sort of like some of the early church fathers who are writing against someone, and we don't have the someone's original argument. So you have Contra Appion and other early church works.

And we only know about the opposition from what is said defending against their attacks. It could be that they are Hellenistic Jews. They could be Jews that are Gnostic or Docetic.

In other words, they have a perverted form of Christianity and they're attacking Paul on that front. A third view is that they were Palestinian Jews rather than Diaspora Jews or Hellenistic Jews. These Hellenistic Jews, Greek would be their first language rather than Aramaic.

And they could be like Palestine, like Stephen from Palestine, or from the Diaspora like Timothy. But it doesn't really matter who they are. It is the substance of their argument that matters.

Just as today, you don't have to know if it's Keith Giles or someone else who is attacking the authority of the Pauline corpus in the New Testament. What matters is, is it true? Not so much who's saying it, but is what they are saying true? Otherwise, we would have more identification of the group in the scripture if that's what we needed to know. One thing you know about scripture, it tells us what we need to know, not always what we might like to know.

So as we look at this book by way of a broad outline, the first seven chapters are going to be a look at Paul's ministry, specifically as it relates to the Corinthians, and then generally as what a servant of Christ in that first century gets exposed to and undergoes. So the accusation that his ministry and his message are suspect, he rebuts this in those first seven chapters. Chapter eight and nine, this is the second section of the book, this has to do with the collection of money to contribute to the saints back in Jerusalem.

The Corinthians initially were excited about the chance to contribute to these fellow believers, but it was a flash in the pan, they didn't actually follow through. And this could have been a result of this opposition where those attacking Paul's apostleship say, he's going to take the money for himself, don't contribute, it's not going to get to its destination. Then the final four chapters in 2 Corinthians are a defense of his apostleship and a denunciation of those who oppose him and oppose Christ.

And he does this by emphasizing his identification with Christ. Jesus said, "If they hate me, they will hate you" (John 15:18). The more we are identified with Christ, the more we will be subject to opposition because of Christ.

"If you suffer for My name's sake," Jesus said in the Beatitudes, "you are blessed. Rejoice, be glad. That's the reason they persecuted the prophets before you" (Matthew 5:11-12). So Paul's affirmation to the Galatians, "I no longer live, but Christ lives in me," Galatians 2:20 is what you find in 2 Corinthians 10-13.

So as we look together at this book, we accept as authoritative the calling of the messenger, the apostleship of Paul, the authoritative nature of the message as a result, and the application for us, which is to resist the attack on scripture, which is one half of this two-pronged attack: "We're going to dismiss the Holy Spirit, and we're going to attack scripture." This is widespread, and in many ways it is subtle. When people no longer appeal to scripture, especially the Pauline scriptures, if they're only going to preach what's in the gospels to Christians, who need the revelation of the mysteries that come through Paul and Paul alone, to only teach the gospels ...

The gospels are wonderful. There's nothing I love better than looking at the words and works of the Lord Jesus, but we have to understand them in the framework of what His mission was. And we also have to appreciate what Jesus left us by way of the New Testament corpus of truth.

So with that as a background, trust the Scriptures and cultivate the leading and the presence and the power of the Holy Spirit. This is God's gift to us. This is God's power within us. And this is what we have to prioritize, daily rehearsal in our mind, in our soul of what we know of the Word of God, daily hygiene, acknowledging our sins, cultivating humility as we saw in James to ensure that the word of God will do its work, transform us so that our attitudes, our words and our actions are truly those of believers who love the Lord Jesus.

With that, we will close for this morning. We will start in on the text next Sunday. Our Wednesday night is going to return to the Old Testament and I hope to see you then. Let's close in a word of prayer.

Father, thank you for the truth of your Word. Thank you for its power to transform us as nothing else can. Thank you for the example of the Lord Jesus who lived by every word that proceeded from you. We pray that God, the Holy Spirit will lead us into that truth, enable us and empower us to represent the Lord Jesus and reflect your glory in his in the time that remains to us in this life.

We ask it in Jesus' name, amen.