

Paul's second inspired letter to the Corinthians is one of the most personal of his letters in the New Testament, assuming a knowledge of people, places and events. A brief historical background can help understanding.

- Following the crucifixion, resurrection and ascension of Jesus, the Church began at Pentecost and grew rapidly in and around Jerusalem. Persecution against the church increased and the church scattered. In Antioch Gentiles responded to the gospel in large number.
- A key persecutor, Saul – later known as Paul, was miraculously stopped by God and became a powerful witness to Jesus Christ. He became part of the Antioch church who released him to do missionary work.
- On his second trip Paul founded the church at Corinth, spending about 18 months there. From Ephesus on his third trip Paul wrote at least 2 letters to Corinth, one of which is 1 Corinthians, in response to problems which exist in the church. He made one quick, unsuccessful trip (the “painful visit”) and sent Timothy as well.
- At some point Paul communicated his plans to visit Corinth again but then changed plans. Perhaps another letter was written (the “severe letter”) and Titus was sent to Corinth.
- A riot forced Paul to leave Ephesus and he headed to Troas and then Macedonia looking for Titus and news of Corinth. In Macedonia he met Titus and from there wrote 2 Corinthians.

The letter follows a general typical format and the main content prepares the Corinthians for Paul's planned visit: (1) He answers questions about his failure to come earlier. (2) He instructs concerning a previously arranged, collection for the poor. (3) He exhorts them to accept his authority and deal correctly with false challengers. In preparation it is helpful to examine the “people” mentioned in the salutation.

1. **Paul**, as an apostle, was an authorized representative, of Jesus Christ. (Cf. Galatians 1-2.) This gave special authority to what he wrote. (This letter was “inspired” and hence the very work of God.) By declaring his apostleship immediately at the beginning of his letter, Paul anticipates his later defense against impostors.

We should guard against skipping familiar words, since we can then miss significant thoughts.

2. **Timothy** is not included here as a co-author, though Paul may report some commonly shared experiences. Though a “son in the faith” to Paul, he was also his “brother.” There are hints that Timothy may not have been well received on his last visit to Corinth (1 Cor 16:10; cf. Paul's concern for Titus' reception in 2 Cor 2:13; 7:5-7). Hence, the mention of Timothy here may have been intended to reestablishing his importance.

We are reminded that our relation to God through Christ is a great equalizer. For Paul, the spiritual father, Timothy was still “our brother”. For the Corinthians, Timothy was to be respected. So also we in Christ have no basis for thinking more highly of ourselves.

3. **The church of God which is at Corinth** should not be given our cultural meaning for “church”. In the NT it primarily used of the people whom God has called out from the world to be His own, not a building or a meeting. Neither is “church of God” a denominational name but a reminder that the church belongs to God. Touching the church means touches God, as Paul himself learned when the ascended Jesus asked him why Paul was persecuting Him. “At Corinth” introduces the dual nature of the church. It exists as the true Church, the Body of Christ (all those who have placed their trust in Jesus since the time of Pentecost until Jesus returns, whether living or dead, and only those), and as a local, imperfect expression of that on earth.

Be careful how we treat the church. Though we may not be charged with persecuting Jesus, would we be neglecting Him or speaking badly of Him? Neither should we act as if there is no other expression of the church except ourselves or so stress being a part of the greater Body of Christ that we fail to be a part of a local church. (We are commanded to keep meeting together; cf. Hebrews 10:25.)

4. **The saints who are throughout Achaia** refers not to a special class of believers but to all those believers who were living in the Roman province of southern Greece. Believers are “saints” because they have a holy standing in Christ before God and have been set apart by the Spirit from this sinful world unto God. (One who is “holy” or “set apart” is the basic meaning of “saint.”)

Remember that God views true believers – you and me – as saints, holy ones, those set apart for Him. We do not become saints, because of what we do. But we do need to live up to what we are.

5. **God our Father** is the one by whose will Paul was an apostle, but He is also the source of grace and peace. Grace refers to favor which has not been earned. With peace it is at the heart of the gospel. Every human being apart from Christ is at enmity with God because of our sinful rebellion against God. But God shows us favor which we have not earned by sending Jesus to endure the penalty for our rebellion in our place. All who place their trust in Jesus are forgiven and enter a relationship of peace with God. By this grace we enter into a new relationship with God. He becomes our Father. God as a gracious Father is foundational to Paul's thinking in this letter.

This should be for us a truth which we live out, not merely repeated or professed. God is our Father and the source of grace and peace.

6. **The Lord Jesus Christ**, by being associated with God the Father in this manner, is being made equal to God. Grace and peace can only come from God. As “Lord” He is One to be obeyed as God himself, because He is God. The name “Jesus” emphasizes His humanity, a name by which He was not known prior to the incarnation. “Christ” is the Greek word for the OT Hebrew “Messiah,” i.e., the “Anointed One”. He is God's promised, appointed deliverer. By the work of Christ on the cross, we can have peace with God the Father.

The Lord Jesus Christ is central to the message which we preach. We must come to the Father through the Son. It is not sufficient to talk about God or belief in God.

We too often skip over words that seem so familiar, like the “dear” at the start of our letters. But this letter to the Corinthians, as well as the rest of the Bible, is God's message to us. He wants us to hear His words and to listen carefully and to do what He says. This is a real letter to people with real problems. God gives real solutions.