

SECOND CORINTHIANS

BIBLE STUDY TEXTBOOK SERIES

STUDIES IN
SECOND CORINTHIANS

by
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This volume is dedicated to
Gale Kinnard Butler
“fairest among women . . . whom my soul loves”
wife for four decades, and
co-laborer in the ministry of the Gospel
for three decades. . . .

. . . there would have been no ministry without her!

and
to Sara Ann Butler
our “princess”-granddaughter

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INTRODUCTION

Have you ever read someone else's diary? My sister and I became privy to our mother's daily diary recently, after the Lord called her home to heaven. It was a very emotional, intimate and strengthening experience. After reading Second Corinthians a man said he felt like a person would after rummaging in an old desk and discovering the daily diary of a preacher named "Paul." He said he felt almost as if he should not have been reading the pages because they were so intimate and special. But he was captivated with the desire to learn as much as he could from this great servant of the Lord, so he was unable to put the book aside until he had read and reread it.

You will feel something when you study Second Corinthians! You may say to yourself, "Yes, Paul, I know how you felt about that because I have had the same experience!" The letter may make you feel sympathy, disgust, shame, determination, and even anger. And it will not be only your emotions that are stirred. It will also attack your mind. You will have to think. A number of doctrines and spiritual principles for life will demand understanding and decision. It will build your faith and strengthen your capacity to live the sanctified life.

This epistle should be "required monthly reading" for every preacher, missionary, and Sunday School teacher. It should be required study for all Bible college students. Elders and deacons would be more sympathetic toward preachers if this epistle was read once each month at "board meetings." Don't just read it — partake of it! It is God's Word, lived and learned by God's greatest servant, to encourage all his other servants.

BACKGROUND

Authorship:

This epistle is so certainly from the pen of the apostle Paul Thiessen (in *Introduction To The New Testament*, Eerdmans, pg. 206-207) says, "Both the external and the internal evidence for the genuineness of this Epistle are so strong that we really need not dwell on these points. . . ." *Polycarp* (69-156 A.D., pupil of the apostle John) quotes II Cor. 4:14 and 8:21 in his *Epistle to the Philippians*; *Irenaeus* (130-200 A.D.) frequently quotes from II Corinthians (e.g. 2:15-16); *Tertullian* (160-220 A.D.) cites II Cor. 11:14 in his *Treatise on the Soul*; The Epistle is mentioned in the Muratorian Canon (170 A.D.) and is found in both the Old Syriac (ca. 150 A.D.) and the Old Latin (ca. 150 A.D.). The writer of the epistle twice calls himself, "Paul" 1:1; 10:1); the subject matter parallels all we know of Paul the apostle historically and theologically. That the apostle Paul was its author is certainly established beyond any reasonable doubt.

Historical and Cultural Background:

The student is referred to introductory notes in *First Corinthians*, by Paul T. Butler, College Press, for background material on the city of Corinth and the establishment of the church there.

Occasion and Date:

Paul established the church in Corinth on his second missionary journey (Acts 18) about 50-51 A.D. After a year or more there he returned to Palestine (Acts 18:18-22); thence, eventually, to Ephesus (A.D. 54) on his third missionary journey (Acts 18:24-19:41) where he stayed three years. During this time he wrote a "first" letter to Corinth (I Cor. 5:9) not preserved. Receiving word from the household of Chloe of the many problems in the Corinthian congregation, he then wrote First Corinthians. In spite of Paul's strong condemnation and warning about division the party-spirit continued, agitated by Judaizing factions insisting on observance of the law of Moses and Jewish traditions (see II Cor. 3:1-18; 10:7; 11:13). When this news reached

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Paul at Ephesus, he made a short visit to Corinth to deal with it, but failed in the attempt (II Cor. 2:1; 12:14,21; 13:1,2), and he returned to Ephesus.

Plummer, Barclay, Thiessen, et al. think Paul, soon after returning to Ephesus from his "short, second visit," wrote a "severe" third letter sending it to Corinth by Titus (II Cor. 2:3,4,0; 7:8-12). Plummer thinks that the major portion of this "severe, third letter" is preserved in chapters 10 through 13 of what is now our extant Second Corinthians. That theory has been successfully disproved by Bernard.

While waiting for Titus to return with a report of the effect of his "severe, third letter," trouble arose in Ephesus, and he left that city before he had planned to do so (Acts 20:1). Paul started to Macedonia, via Troas, to meet Titus returning from Corinth. The two met in Macedonia in the fall of A.D. 57 as Paul was visiting churches in the region of Philippi and Thessalonica. Titus' word was that the long letter we now call First Corinthians had accomplished much good (II Cor. 7:6), but at the same time, his "short second visit" and his "severe, third letter" had not solved the problem of party-spirit and division; he was told, in fact, that some "false authorities" at Corinth were attacking his motives, his integrity and his authority as an apostle of Christ. Against the background of this news and Paul's deep concern, he determined to visit Corinth "a third time" and he wrote (from Macedonia) Second Corinthians, which appears to have been his "fourth" letter to the congregation there. He sent Second Corinthians on ahead to the church by the hand of Titus (II Cor. 8:6, 17). A little later Paul reached Corinth, and spent the winter of A.D. 57 there (Acts 20:2, 3), as he had planned (I Cor. 16:5, 6). While in Corinth, he wrote his great Epistle to the Romans.

Purpose:

Second Corinthians is probably the least known of all Paul's letters. It has even been called by some "Paul's unknown letter." That is a tragedy. Christians are much poorer because so few have had the motivation or self-discipline required to study a type of writing which demands personal involvement of mind and emotions. In Second Corinthians we are called upon to evaluate a person, not just a doctrine.

BACKGROUND

Second Corinthians is the "Jeremiah" of the New Testament. It is a very personal letter from the heart of this mighty apostle. Here we see him dealing with the trials and joys of his ministry from a subjective and intimate perspective. Here we are exposed to the ministry of the gospel as it stabs the human heart, defeats and depresses. Here we are involved in the experience of the ministry as it is actually lived out in life, "up close, and personal." Accepting the mission of Christ as a life-time calling will bring one a life fraught with personal adversaries and psychological turmoil. But its victories and rewards are beyond all comparison to its trials (II Cor. 4:16-18). In this letter the Holy Spirit bears witness with the spirit of Paul that a life devoted to the proclamation of the gospel is the most challenging, useful and fulfilled life ever! That is what Second Corinthians is all about!