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2 Corinthians

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2 Corinthians

A. Overview and Summary.

1. This is actually the third epistle the Apostle Paul wrote to the church at Corinth. As was explained in the synopsis of 1st Corinthians, the very first letter from Paul has never been discovered, although he references it in 1 Corinthians 5:9. It is believed that Paul wrote this letter in late 55AD or possibly early 56AD from Philippi during his third missionary journey.
2. Whereas 1st Corinthians is a corrective letter pertaining to Paul's confrontation of moral decay in the Corinthian church, this epistle is Paul's defense of his apostleship and confrontation of heresy brought in by false teachers. Although not a doctrinal book overall, many scholars consider 5:21 the clearest and most concise rendering of the substitutionary atonement of Christ in a single New Testament verse.

B. Chapter One.

1. The chapter opens by Paul stating he is an Apostle by "God's will" which is the first mention of his defense of his apostolic status. He writes mentioning Timothy as a co-sender of the epistle (1:1). He then presents his viewpoint of suffering under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, saying that He comforts us in our affliction so that we may be a comfort to others (1:4). He then relates how he suffered greatly: "For we don't want you to be unaware, brothers, of our affliction that took place in Asia: we were completely overwhelmed—beyond our strength—so that we even despaired of life. Indeed, we personally had a death sentence within ourselves, so that we would not trust in ourselves but in God, who raises the dead. He has delivered us from such a terrible death, and He will deliver us. We have put our hope in Him that He will deliver us again while you join in helping us by your prayers" (1:8-11). It is believed that this occurred while he was in Ephesus, as recorded in Acts chapter 19. He also suffered on many other occasions for the sake of the gospel.
2. He then says his conscience testifies he and his companions conducted themselves towards the world and to the Corinthians in sincerity and purity and not by fleshly wisdom but by God's grace (1:12). He then discusses his travel plans to Corinth which was postponed but encourages them with: "Now it is God who strengthens us, with you, in Christ and has anointed us. He has also sealed us and

given us the Spirit as a down payment in our hearts (1:21-22). The indwelling Holy Spirit is a tremendous validation that God will complete the work of perfection in us (Philippians 1:6).

C. Chapter Two.

1. He discusses the man who had greatly sinned and how he had written to them in 1 Corinthians about the need to discipline him as a church. They followed his instructions and now he writes: “The punishment inflicted by the majority is sufficient for that person. As a result, you should instead forgive and comfort him. Otherwise, this one may be overwhelmed by excessive grief. Therefore, I urge you to reaffirm your love to him” (2:6-8).
2. He concludes with: “But thanks be to God, who always puts us on display in Christ and through us spreads the aroma of the knowledge of Him in every place. For to God, we are the fragrance of Christ among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing. To some we are an aroma of death leading to death, but to others, an aroma of life leading to life” (2:14-16). This is an analogy to a victorious military parade where the triumphant procession of victors would lead captives along a parade route to the destination where the captives would be executed. Incense would be burned along the way so to the victorious, it would be an aroma celebrating victory. But to those who would perish, it would be an aroma of coming death. To those being saved, Paul and his companions were like an aroma of eternal life. But to those who rejected the gospel, it was an aroma of coming death and eternal torment.

D. Chapter Three.

1. He opens the chapter by likening the Corinthians to living letters: “You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, recognized and read by everyone. It is clear that you are Christ’s letter, produced by us, not written with ink but with the Spirit of the living God—not on stone tablets but on tablets that are hearts of flesh” (3:2-3). He then presents his competence of the ministry of the New Covenant, not of letters but of the Spirit (3:6).
2. He then discusses the New Covenant by comparing it to the Old Covenant under Moses. When Moses would commune with God, his face would take on a radiance. But afterward, Moses would cover his face with a veil so that as the radiance faded, the Israelites would not see that happening and lose heart. He says that even today, a veil is over the heart of those hearing the Law being read,

“but whenever a person turns to the Lord, the veil is removed. Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. We all, with unveiled faces, are looking as in a mirror at the glory of the Lord and are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory; this is from the Lord who is the Spirit” (3:16-18).

E. Chapter Four.

1. He opens with a statement of the truth of his ministry: “we have renounced shameful secret things, not walking in deceit or distorting God’s message, but commending ourselves to every person’s conscience in God’s sight by an open display of the truth (4:2). He continues with likening his body as a clay jar containing God’s treasure: “Now we have this treasure in clay jars, so that this extraordinary power may be from God and not from us. We are pressured in every way but not crushed; we are perplexed but not in despair; we are persecuted but not abandoned; we are struck down but not destroyed. We always carry the death of Jesus in our body, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body” (4:7-10).
2. He concludes with: Therefore, we do not give up. Even though our outer person is being destroyed, our inner person is being renewed day by day. For our momentary light affliction is producing for us an absolutely incomparable eternal weight of glory. So, we do not focus on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal” (4:16-18).

F. Chapter Five.

1. He writes of his longing to put on his dwelling in heaven. He confirms God’s promise to us through the Spirit given to us as a down payment of eternal life with Him (5:2-5). He gives what will become a very famous verse: “we walk by faith, not by sight” and a charge to be well pleasing to Him (5:7;9). A stern admonition follows this: “For we must all appear before the tribunal of Christ, so that each may be repaid for what he has done in the body, whether good or bad” (5:10). This points us back to what we are building with in chapter 3.
2. He gives us an encouraging word which many have chosen to memorize: “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away, and behold, all things have become new” (5:17). He then gives us a ministry: “Everything is from God, who reconciled us to Himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation” (5:18). He concludes this chapter with

the forementioned verse (in the introduction) that gives us a concise statement of the substitutionary atonement of Christ: “He made the One who did not know sin to be sin for us, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him” (5:21).

G. Chapter Six.

1. Paul gives us a summary of the character of his ministry: “giving no occasion of stumbling in anything, that our ministry not be blamed; but in everything commending ourselves, as ministers of God, in much patience, in afflictions, in necessities, in distresses, in stripes, in imprisonments, in tumults, in labors, in watching, in fasting; in pureness, in knowledge, in longsuffering, in kindness, in the Holy Spirit, in love unfeigned, in the word of truth, in the power of God; by the armor of righteousness on the right hand and on the lee, by glory and dishonor, by evil report and good report; as deceivers, and yet true; as unknown, and yet well known; as dying, and behold, we live; as chastened, and not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing all things” (6:4-10).
2. He warns us not to be in partnership with unbelievers: “Do not be mismatched with unbelievers. For what partnership is there between righteousness and lawlessness? Or what fellowship does light have with darkness? What agreement does Christ have with the Devil? Or what does a believer have in common with an unbeliever? And what agreement does God’s sanctuary have with idols? For we are the sanctuary of the living God” (6:14-16a).

H. Chapter Seven.

1. Paul opens with an admonition: “Therefore, dear friends, since we have such promises, let us cleanse ourselves from every impurity of the flesh and spirit, completing our sanctification in the fear of God” (7:1). He continues with praise for the Corinthians with confidence and pride of them in all Paul’s and his companion’s afflictions.
2. He goes on to say that the previous letter he sent, although grieved them, he does not regret sending it (7:8). He concludes the chapter by expressing comfort over the joy that Titus had when he came because his spirit was refreshed by them (7:13b).

I. Chapter Eight. The chapter is devoted to Paul's appeal to the Corinthians to complete the collection begun a year ago for the brothers in Jerusalem. He concludes with some details about how the funds collected will be administered with the assistance of Titus whom the churches in Macedonia trust with such a large amount (8:7).

J. Chapter Nine.

1. Paul continues with instructions about giving: "The person who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the person who sows generously will also reap generously. Each person should do as he has decided in his heart—not reluctantly or out of necessity, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to make every grace overflow to you, so that in every way, always having everything you need, you may excel in every good work" (9:6-8).
2. The chapter concludes with a promise: "Now the One who provides seed for the Sower, and bread for food will provide and multiply your seed and increase the harvest of your righteousness. You will be enriched in every way for all generosity, which produces thanksgiving to God through us. For the ministry of this service is not only supplying the needs of the saints, but is also overflowing in many acts of thanksgiving to God. They will glorify God for your obedience to the confession of the gospel of Christ, and for your generosity in sharing with them and with others through the proof provided by this service" (9:10-13).

K. Chapter Ten.

1. Paul defends his apostolic authority. He has some in mind whom he wishes to confront when he plans to come who are accusing Paul and his companions of unspiritual behavior (10:2). He reminds them our weapons of spiritual warfare are not worldly but powerful through God for the demolition of strongholds. He is ready to punish any disobedience once it has been confirmed (10:4-6).
2. He says that he does not mean to terrify them with his letters. He refers to some who say: "'His letters are weighty and powerful, but his physical presence is weak, and his public speaking is despicable.'" Such a person should consider this: "What we are in the words of our letters when absent, we will be in actions when present" (10:10-11).
3. He concludes with: "But we have the hope that as your faith increases, our area of ministry will be greatly enlarged, so that we may proclaim the good news to the regions beyond you, not boasting about what has already been done in

someone else's area of ministry. So, the one who boasts must boast in the Lord" (10:15b-17).

L. Chapter Eleven.

1. Paul introduces his concern that the Corinthians are being led astray by false teachers: "But I fear that, as the serpent deceived Eve by his cunning, your minds may be seduced from a complete and pure devotion to Christ. For if a person comes and preaches another Jesus, whom we did not preach, or you receive a different spirit, which you had not received, or a different gospel, which you had not accepted, you put up with it splendidly!" (11:3-4). He then reminds them he did not take support from them but "robbed other churches by taking pay from them to minister to you" (11:8).
2. Paul concludes the chapter with his qualifications and the many sufferings he has endured including being beaten, shipwrecked, stoned, receiving 39 lashes from the Jews, and a multitude of dangers from many sources. And not to mention, the daily pressure on him for the care of the churches (11:22-28).

M. Chapter Twelve.

1. Paul opens with a narrative of a man with a vision. Although he does not claim to be that man, most Bible scholars believe it was Paul. Possibly a vision given to him when he was stoned and left for dead. "I know a man in Christ who was caught up into the third heaven 14 years ago. Whether he was in the body or out of the body, I don't know, God knows. I know that this man—whether in the body or out of the body I don't know, God knows— was caught up into paradise. He heard inexpressible words, which a man is not allowed to speak" (12:2-4).
2. To avoid boasting or self-exaltation, Paul tells us of a physical ailment that he suffered, which he calls a "thorn in the flesh". "I would not exalt myself, a thorn in the flesh was given to me, a messenger of Satan to torment me so I would not exalt myself. Concerning this, I pleaded with the Lord three times to take it away from me. But He said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness." Therefore, I will most gladly boast all the more about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may reside in me" (12:7b-9). Many bible scholars believe this describes an ailment that Paul had with his eyes. He often uses a scribe and signed the letter to the Galatians with "large letters" (Galatians 6:11). This might be a besetting symptom from his Damascus experience when a light forced him to the ground and he was blind for a few days.

3. He continues to defend his apostolic status: “The signs of an apostle were performed with great endurance among you—not only signs but also wonders and miracles” (12:12). He closes with his love for the Corinthians and his desire that they would be built up in the faith (12:19). He expresses his sorrow for those who have not repented of their former sins: “I will grieve for many who sinned before and have not repented of the moral impurity, sexual immorality, and promiscuity they practiced” (12:21b).

N. Chapter Thirteen.

1. This chapter contains Paul’s final warnings and exhortations. He begins with: “Every fact must be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses. I gave a warning when I was present the second time, and now I give a warning while I am absent to those who sinned before and to all the rest: If I come again, I will not be lenient, since you seek proof of Christ speaking in me. He is not weak toward you, but powerful among you” (13:1b-3). “Test yourselves to see if you are in the faith. Examine yourselves. Or do you yourselves not recognize that Jesus Christ is in you? —unless you fail the test” (13:6).
2. He closes with an exhortation and a blessing: “Finally, brothers, rejoice. Become mature, be encouraged, be of the same mind, be at peace, and the God of love and peace will be with you. Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the saints greet you. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all” (13:11-13).

O. Discussion Questions, Application and Passing it on.

1. Do you understand what the “Substitutionary Atonement of Jesus Christ” is? A suggestion is to memorize 2 Corinthians 5:21, which, as explained before, is a concise presentation of that doctrine in one verse. Be able to use that verse and be able to explain what it means in your personal evangelistic outreach.
2. Chapter two describes how Paul and his companions were an aroma of life and death, presenting this as an analogy to a military parade with burning incense, with victorious soldiers but captives being led to their execution. How do you view yourself? Are you an aroma bringing life to some by the gospel, yet also an aroma of death to those who are perishing?
3. Chapter four opens with Paul declaring that they have renounced shameful and secret things and are not walking in deceit or distorting God’s message. As you look at the current Christian culture, what evidence do you see that this is not

being followed by many in prominent positions in Christian ministry? Have you renounced such things yourself?

4. Are you ready to stand before the Judgment Seat of Christ and account for the things done in your body after salvation? (2Cor. 5:10). If not, what steps do you need to begin now?
5. In Chapter six, Paul cautions against joining yourself to an unsaved person (mismatched or, as older translations say, unequally yoked), which is like yoking together two animals that are not the same. How might you apply this to your life in dating or in future marriage?
6. Chapter nine presents a spiritual truth that if you sow, or distribute, sparingly, you will reap accordingly and if you sow generously, you will also reap accordingly. How might this apply to how you manage your finances, health, or time for God's kingdom work?
7. Chapter eleven warns against false teachers. How could you recognize false teachers today? Do you know some who preach the "prosperity gospel" or a message that is unbalanced and inconsistent with the whole context of Scripture?
8. Have you repented of your former sins of moral impurity, sexual immorality, and promiscuity you practiced? (12:21).
9. Have you tested yourself to ensure you are in the faith? (13:6). How would you have the assurance that you truly are in the faith?

This New Testament survey was provided by Joshua Nations (JoshuaNations.org)