

The Epistles of Paul

Week 5: II Corinthians

Purpose:

The second part of a lengthy discourse and conversation with the church in Corinth, II Corinthians is another compilation of letters from Paul to the community. This time they are divided between a lengthy letter of reconciliation (likely after a difficult rebuke and course correction) followed by more warnings regarding “super apostles”. The letter hits on many of the same themes as I Corinthians, but goes deeper into the weeds, focusing on more nuanced ideas and issues.

1. Have you read II Corinthians before? Have you studied it? What did you think?
2. What do you think occurred to have Paul be so connected with the Corinthians Church?
3. In reading part II, did anything stand out you had overlooked in part I?

Key Verse(s) of the Week, II Corinthians 5:6-7

“⁶So we are always confident; even though we know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord—⁷for we walk by faith, not by sight.”

Opening Prayer:

Hear our prayer, O God, as we are opened to the promises of your word. May your Holy Spirit lead us in your path. May you reveal to us your grace and love through the words to the Corinthian Church. In the name of Jesus we pray. Amen.

Introduction and Background:

While the first Letter to the Corinthians was written in the early 50s, this letter was several years later, perhaps even as late as 58 or 60. It contains several of the same broad themes but delves deeper into issues. Of primary interest are the first seven chapters which seem to outline a message of reconciliation and forgiveness. Most scholars point to this exchange as a single letter seeking to make amends following a difficult visit from Paul in which there was considerable rebuke and correction.

In chapters 8 and 9 there is an unusual request for an early epistle. Paul names the difficulty currently ongoing within the Jerusalem church and asks for financial support to aid the congregation. This is one of the few direct indications of communication between the early churches. It is not known whether the church in Corinth continued to support the church, but the exchange is powerful.

In the final section of the epistle, Paul touches on an earlier issue from I Corinthians regarding apostles and who claims whom. The people are still associating their faith with certain disciples and others are even placing themselves above others based on some of the practices they are keeping. Paul rebukes this practice and urges the community to come together as one.

1. What is the most important aspect of this epistle? Why do you think Paul took the time and care to write so often?
2. Why is reconciliation important in Christian communities? How do we sometimes ignore the need for reconciliation?
3. If we assume this letter is one of the later ones written by Paul, what can you already see about his own theology and writings from earlier letters?

Today’s Focus Passage, II Corinthians 4:16-5:10

So we do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. ¹⁷For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory

beyond all measure, ¹⁸because we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal.

For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. ²For in this tent we groan, longing to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling— ³if indeed, when we have taken it off* we will not be found naked. ⁴For while we are still in this tent, we groan under our burden, because we wish not to be unclothed but to be further clothed, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life. ⁵He who has prepared us for this very thing is God, who has given us the Spirit as a guarantee.

So we are always confident; even though we know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord— ⁷for we walk by faith, not by sight. ⁸Yes, we do have confidence, and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord. ⁹So whether we are at home or away, we make it our aim to please him. ¹⁰For all of us must appear before the judgement seat of Christ, so that each may receive recompense for what has been done in the body, whether good or evil.

1. What is the main point of this passage?
2. How does this passage discuss reconciliation?
3. What does it mean to be the body of Christ?

Discussion:

Here in II Corinthians 4/5, we encounter Paul engaging the Corinthian church in both reconciliation as well as a deep discussion on the nature of the body of Christ. While this has been mentioned before, here is a powerful theology of church and faith. Rather than simply telling the church what they should do, Paul calls their attention to the Holy Spirit. It is not there just to exist, but to give encouragement and support in difficult times. Paul points to their ongoing issues as difficult times.

The body of Christ is laid out in faith, rather than physical terms. In fact, Paul even points to the physical body as that which keeps us away from understanding faith. All this, Paul points out, is preparation for the inevitable return and reign of Christ.

1. How have you experienced the body of Christ?
2. What has kept you from fully having faith? What holds you back?
3. What do you imagine the reign of Christ looking like?

Conclusion:

II Corinthians completes the discussion began in I Corinthians, shifting from practical matters to ones of reconciliation and faith. Paul encourages the church, makes amends for difficult times before, and pushes them to look deeper in faith. As the epistle ends, we look forward to the eventual reign of Christ.

Close in prayer