

TTB - 2 Corinthians 7-13

Corinth

- Corinth is located on the west end of the Isthmus of Corinth, a narrow strip of land that connected the main part of Greece, where Athens was located, with the Peloponnesus, where Sparta was located.
- It was a major port city, controlling both the port of Lechaenum on the western side of the isthmus, and the port of Cenchreae on the eastern side of the isthmus. This position allowed Corinth to control trade throughout the region. They even created a paved road between the two ports so that ships could be docked at one port to have their cargo unloaded and carried to the other port, avoiding the 200-mile long journey around the Peloponnesus.
- The city walls of Corinth were 6 miles in circumference, and the city boasted a population of as many as 200,000 people.
- That population was known for being immoral. There was even a colloquial expression, “to Corinthianize,” which meant to engage in immoral behavior.

Paul's work in Corinth

- You may have heard some of this before, but let's summarize Paul's connection with Corinth.
- Paul first arrived in the city in the year 50 CE during his second journey, and stayed there for 18 months. We are told briefly about his experiences in Acts 18.
- Paul's time in the city was initially very successful, but ended up being quite tumultuous. He attended the local synagogue of the Hebrews (archaeologists have found a lintel from this building), and succeeded in convincing some of the local Jewish and God-fearing Gentiles about the Messiah. However, after on particularly difficult argument with some non-believing Jews, Paul made a dramatic exit of the synagogue, marched next door to the home of a God Fearer named Titius Justus, and started his own messianic synagogue. (Acts 18:7)
- It was during his time in Corinth that Paul wrote his letters to the community of believers in Thessalonica that you studied with Derek a few weeks ago.
- Eventually, Paul was forced out of the city by the local Jewish leadership, but he kept in contact with the community he had built there through letters.

Paul's Letters

- Paul actually wrote at least four letters to the Corinthians, of which we have three.
- Daniel Lancaster (Chronicles of the Apostles) sums up the issues in Corinth in this way:

- Paul's two epistles to the Corinthians grant us an up-close and personal portrait of the Corinthian community he was leaving behind. They were a diverse community of Jewish believers, God-fearing Gentiles, and recently converted pagans. They were not perfect people.
 - They struggled to maintain cohesion after Paul left. They often differed in their opinions and practices regarding such matters as gender roles, sexuality, the use of spiritual gifts, and the doctrine of the resurrection. Some found it difficult to adapt to Judaism's strict standards of modesty in dress and conduct. Sexual immorality was a problem. The Corinthian leadership struggled with censuring members who were engaged in immorality. A lack of qualified leaders to serve as judges in civil suits encouraged the community to use secular courts. The Corinthian believers misused ecstatic utterances and allowed charismatic antics to disrupt worship services. Philosophical monotheists among the Corinthians chafed at the prohibition on things sacrificed to idols and struggled with the concept of a literal resurrection of the dead. Visits from other apostles led to factionalism. Some among the Corinthians began to question Paul's authority and apostleship. In his letters, Paul addresses these issues and several other problems with genuine pastoral concern.
- Paul's first letter to the Corinthians has been lost. He refers to the letter in 1 Corinthians 5:9-11.
 - His second letter to the Corinthians is what we now know as 1 Corinthians. He wrote that letter while living in Ephesus during his third journey.
 - After writing that letter, he visited Corinth for a short period (see 2 Corinthians 2:1), in what was apparently a difficult visit.
 - His third letter, sometimes called the "severe letter," is actually found attached to the end of 2 Corinthians, chapters 10-13, which we will discuss tonight.
 - His fourth letter, which has a much more conciliatory tone, can be found in 2 Corinthians 1-9.
 - After this fourth letter, Paul stayed the winter of 56-57 CE in Corinth, continuing to guide the congregation in the proper path of a disciple of Jesus.

Chapter 10

- With that context in mind, let's begin our examination of Paul's epistles.
- I want us to start with chapters 10-13 instead of chapter 7 because these chapters were written first. They are Paul's third letter to the community.
- As Lancaster said, "Some among the Corinthians began to question Paul's authority and apostleship," and Paul write this letter in his own defense.
- **[10:1-2]** Paul says that the humility he shows when with the Corinthians in person has been misinterpreted as weakness.

- **[10:3-6]** We are in a battle of the spirit, not a battle against other human beings.
- **[10:7-11]** His opponents say that “his letters are weighty and strong, but his bodily presence is weak, and his speech is of no account.”
 - Paul might come off stronger in his letters than he does in person, but he wants the Corinthians to recognize that his actions when present are actually in concert with the words of his letters.
- **[10:12]** These people who are comparing themselves with Paul and with others are doing so just to try to make themselves look good. They are boasting about themselves.
- **[10:13]** Paul, on the other hand, does not boast by comparing himself to others, but he limits his defense to the things that God has called him to and allowed him to accomplish.
- **[10:14-16]** His first defense is that he and his companions were the first people to bring the good news to the Corinthians, and the first to lead them to the Messiah. He wants that work to be successful so that the influence of that work can expand to other local communities.
- **[10:17-18]** Paul then quotes Jeremiah 9:24, again saying that he is boasting only in the work the LORD has given him.

Chapter 11

- **[11:1-2]** Paul now asks for some leeway as he defends his apostleship and his authority. He again reminds them that he is the one who led them to the Messiah (using the metaphor of marriage).
- **[11:4]** Paul now calls the Corinthians out for being feeble-minded and easily swayed. He says they have accepted “another Jesus... a different spirit... [and] a different gospel.” And that their willingness to believe this hogwash shows how feeble-minded they are.
- **[11:5-6]** These “super-apostles” are making it sound like Paul is inferior, possibly because he is not as well-spoken as they are. He says that while he may not be as well-spoken, he is more knowledgeable than them.
- **[11:7-11]** Paul now reminds the Corinthians that while he was living there for 18 months he refused to take a salary from them, choosing instead to work full time as a tentmaker, as we see in Acts 18:1-4. Acts 18:5, though, tells us that when his companions Timothy and Silas came from Macedonia, apparently with some support from the congregations there, Paul was able to devote himself to teaching more.
- **[11:12-15]** Paul has some very harsh words for those “super-apostles” who are speaking evil against him and his work. He calls them “false apostles, deceitful workmen.” He says they are like the adversary, disguising themselves as servants of righteousness while spreading ill will among the community.

- **[11:16-21]** Paul considers this boastful attitude being displayed by the super-apostles to be unbecoming of a true follower of Messiah. Remember, “Let him who boasts boast in the LORD.” This boastful attitude is foolish talk.
 - But Paul says that he’s going to do some foolish boasting himself, since these super-apostles think of themselves so highly.
- **[11:22-29]** Paul’s list is pretty extensive! But he still considers this boasting to be useless talk of a madman.
 - Does this section remind you of any other teachings of Paul?
 - **[READ Philippians 3:4-12]**
- **[11:30]** Paul does not want to boast in the things that make him look good, but in the things that show how weak he is and how much he has suffered (not succeeded) in his mission.

Chapter 12

- **[12:1]** Paul continues boasting, but he now turns to boasting about his spiritual experiences.
- **[12:2-4]** Paul is so cautious about talking about this experience that he doesn’t even want to say that it was him who had it!
 - He is referring to a teaching in the Jewish mystical tradition from the first century called *Ma’asei Merkava*, the Work of the Chariot, which were mystical teachings from the scriptures about the throne or chariot of God in Ezekiel. The sages believed that studying the Work of the Chariot could lead to sublime revelations of truth and insight.
 - Followers of this tradition would go out into the desert to pursue the kind of mystical experience Ezekiel had, a vision of the heavenly realm and the throne of God.
 - It is possible that this revelation came to Paul during his visit to Jerusalem about 9 years before he wrote this letter, when he was there with Barnabas to talk with the Apostles. In Acts 22:17, Paul says, “It happened when I returned to Jerusalem and was praying in the temple, that I fell into a trance...”
- Daniel Lancaster (Chronicles of the Apostles) explains some context behind this vision:
 - The type of vision Saul described sounds like a typical first-century apocalypse, in which case we may surmise some generalizations about the vision. The word apocalypse (ἀποκάλυψις) means “unveiling.” An apocalypse involves an invitation to ascend to heaven in the manner of Enoch or Elijah. Once in the heavens, the person experiencing the apocalypse receives something like a guided tour by an angel or heavenly being. He is shown different rooms and levels of the supernal realm. He sees angelic beings and, sometimes, the throne of God. He sees the repose of the righteous in Paradise, and sometimes, he also sees the punishment of the wicked in Gehenna. He sees the powerful forces of good and evil locked in a cosmic struggle that manifests itself on earth. The forces

of evil might appear in symbolic forms as monsters or beasts representing the spiritual power of imperial forces and human kingdoms on earth. He might hear prophecies, predictions, and revelations about the future, the present, or the past. He may be instructed to publish some of the things he sees and hears. He may be told to conceal other things. Ultimately, he is encouraged to see that soon, God will intervene directly and bring an end to the dominion of evil. Terrible days of judgment will come upon the earth, the wicked will face his wrath, and the righteous will receive reward. The dead will be raised for a final judgment. In the end, God's righteous judgment will vindicate those who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness.

- Saul says that he was caught up to the third heaven. Jewish eschatology often speaks of seven heavens, but Saul probably had a different schema in mind where the first heaven is the firmament, the second heaven contains sun, moon, and stars, and the third heaven is the unseen abiding place of God outside the bounds of the created order. He describes the place at which he arrived as Paradise (*Gan Eden*), that is, the abode of the souls of the righteous dead where they await the resurrection. In that place, he heard utterances, which he was forbidden from repeating.
- **[12:6-9a]** Paul downplays his own experiences, saying that boasting about things like this is foolish, but that if he did boast about it, it would still be the truth. He then says that God gave him “a thorn” to keep him humble, something to remind him of how small and unimportant he actually was.
 - We are not told in the scriptures what this thorn was, but scholars put together a few different possibilities.
 - Some think that Paul was afflicted by cataracts or another eye issue, pointing to Galatians 6:11, where Paul says, “See with what large letters I have written to you with my own hand!”
 - Other scholars think it might be connected to a difficult marriage, pointing out that he does not appear to have a wife, which would be uncommon for a rabbi like himself in those days.
 - Whatever the issue was, Paul considered it to be a difficult burden. However, it is in this context that he says something that should be encouraging to us all:
 - “Concerning this I pleaded with the Lord three times that it might leave me. And He has said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness.”
- **[12:9b-10]** This weakness Paul boasted in was what gave him strength.
 - What do we call this principle? What is that idea that turns things upside down? The Kingdom Inversion Principle?
 - We cannot overemphasize just how important this principle is for us, and just how much comfort it should give us. Paul doesn't just boast in his weaknesses, he says, “I **delight** in weaknesses, in insults, in distresses, in persecutions, in difficulties...” — anything he has to endure for the sake of the Messiah.

- So may it be for us!
- **[12:11-13]** Paul then turns to the Corinthians again, and reminds them that boasting like this is foolishness, but that they drove him to it by accepting the claims of the “super apostles” instead of defending Paul.
 - Paul defends his apostleship in verse 12, giving a list of signs that follow a true Apostle of the Master, specifically signs, wonders, and miracles.
 - Signs, wonders, and miracles were the distinguishing marks of apostles all the way back to the beginning. (Acts 2:43; 5:12)
- **[12:14-18]** Paul continues his defense, reminding the Corinthians that he did not abuse his position with them for financial gain, and he worked hard so that he would not be a burden to them, treating them like his own children. He didn’t take advantage of them, and he didn’t send his disciples to take advantage of them or to deceive them.
 - He then tells them that he’s going to make a third trip to visit with them and try to work things out.
- **[12:19-21]** Then Paul describes what he’s really trying to do. He says that he’s not really trying to defend himself, but he’s trying to build up the believers in Corinth, to give them more understanding about the truth in Christ.
 - He says that when he comes he’s afraid that they will see him as someone different than they want or expect, and that he will see them in the same way.
 - However, what he is afraid of seeing in them is much worse than what they might see in him.
 - Notice the differences.

Chapter 13

- This chapter sums up what Paul expects to see and do when he makes it back to Corinth.
- **[13:1]** This is a direct quote from Deuteronomy 17:6. Paul is not coming to them just to visit or to have a chat. He is coming to set up a *bet din*, a court of judgement, so that he can put those in the community who are causing trouble on trial.
- **[13:2]** Those who are continuing to live in sin will need to be brought to judgement.
 - **[READ 12:21]** Those are the ones he’s coming to bring to judgement.
- **[13:5]** This is great advice for all of us! We should consistently test ourselves to ensure that we are truly in the faith, in other words that we are being faithful.
 - Remember, πίστις (*pistis*) = both faith and faithfulness
- **[13:6]** Paul even says to test him and his companions, to ensure that they are in the faith, as well.

- He's confident that they are in the right in these situations, but the important thing here is for us to know that it is proper for us to watch our spiritual leaders to ensure that they also are being faithful.
 - Not a test of querulousness, but a test of love and patience.
- **[13:9-10]** Paul's heart comes out here, and it is a heart that I think all leaders in the faith should have:
 - To rejoice when those we lead are strong, even if it means we are weak.
 - To see them become mature. That is my prayer for you all here in this class.
- **[13:11]** Paul ends his harsh letter with some comforting instructions: "rejoice, mend your ways, be comforted, be like-minded, live in peace." Those are good instructions for us, as well.

Chapter 7

- Okay, let's go back to chapter 7, right in the middle of Paul's fourth letter to the Corinthians, which he wrote after he wrote the letter we just studied.
- From what he says in Chapter 7, he sent Titus with that severe letter and with the warning that the Corinthians really needed to get their act together before Paul headed up to visit them.
 - **[READ 7:4a]**
- **[7:6-7]** Apparently the Corinthians listened to Titus' warnings and Paul's letter and repented.
- **[7:8-9]** The letter and Titus' words worked. They were sorry for their wayward actions, but that sorrow led them to true repentance.
- **[7:10-11]** That is what true godly sorrow does: It leads to true repentance.
 - What is repentance? (turning) — dig into this more.

The Collection

- Paul then turns to the main focus of his fourth letter: The collection he is taking up among the Gentile congregations in the Diaspora on behalf of the Messianic Jewish believers in Jerusalem.
- Why was Paul taking up a collection for the Jewish believers in Jerusalem? It's a key part of his mission among the Gentiles who are coming to faith and an important element of the Kingdom of God.
- When Paul was given his original commission as the Apostle to the Gentiles, the leaders in Jerusalem (Peter, John, and James the brother of Jesus) gave him one requirement in his work:
 - Galatians 2:10 — They only asked us to remember the poor—the very thing I also was eager to do.

- “The poor” here is the *Eviyonim*, the poor Jewish believers in Jerusalem who were living with all things in common and dealing with severe lack. It is more expensive, more difficult, to live as a faithful Jew. Even more so when the Temple was standing, since the Jewish believers in Jerusalem were obligated to observe temple sacrifices, which could be quite costly. We see an example of this in Acts 21, when Paul is asked to personally assist four other Jewish believers, who had taken a Nazirite vow like he had, with their costly temple sacrifices.
- But for Paul, this collection was not just a fulfillment of his own obligation. For him, Gentiles are prophetically called to support Jewish believers in their faith and observance. The prophet Isaiah often discusses the future kingdom, when the Gentiles from the nations will join with the Jewish people, to follow the God of Israel and to be faithful to him.
 - God’s design from the very beginning was that the nations of the earth would come back to him, and would be blessed through their association with the people of Israel. He told Abraham:
 - Genesis 12:3 — And I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse. And in you all the families of the earth will be blessed.”
 - Isaiah paints a beautiful picture of the redemption that is the sign of the Kingdom. God says that Israel will come back from their exile and that the Gentiles, the nations, will be the ones to do it.
 - Isaiah 49:22 — This is what the Lord GOD says: “Behold, I will lift up My hand to the nations and set up My flag to the peoples; and they will bring your sons in their arms, and your daughters will be carried on their shoulders.
 - God accomplishes his redemption of Israel THROUGH the Gentiles. But not just generally, he does it through their humility and service to the people of Israel.
 - Again, go back to Genesis 12 — “I will bless those who bless you.”
- This is what Paul is thinking of when he takes up this collection. Not long after he wrote this letter to the Corinthians, he writes a letter to the community in Rome, and he explains why this collection is so important.
 - Romans 15:26–27 — For Macedonia and Achaia [that’s the region where Corinth is located] have been pleased to make a contribution for the poor among the saints in Jerusalem. For they [the Gentiles] were pleased to do so, and they [the Gentiles] are indebted to them [the Jews]. For if the Gentiles have shared in their [the Jews] spiritual things, they are indebted to do them a service also in material things.
- I cannot over-emphasize how important this teaching is. I am so very sad that this concept has been lost in the Christian Church. Paul made this collection for the Jewish believers in Jerusalem a major aspect of his work. He talks about it constantly. He encourages his followers to give generously, to think about how much they have benefitted from the faith, the teaching, and the

blessings of the Jewish people and to return to them just a small portion of that blessing in material wealth back to the Jews as they struggle to live faithfully to the covenant that they have been given.

- I want to encourage all of you in this, as well. As we have studied in Through the Bible over the last two and a half years, you have all gained much nourishment in your faith through the teachings of the Jewish people. You have been blessed by their insights, and I hope you have gained more spiritual maturity through those insights. Even more so, you have been blessed through the ultimate Son of Abraham, the Messiah, through whom we Gentiles have been given access to the faith we now hold on to.
- So, like Paul encouraged the communities in Asia Minor, Macedonia, and Greece, I encourage you to support the Messianic Jewish believers who are striving to be faithful to the covenants of God.
 - If you want a suggestion about the best way to do that, may I recommend you consider donating to the Beth Immanuel Mikveh Fund?
 - [Video and link]
- In the second part of chapter 8, Paul explains that Titus is bringing this new letter to the Corinthian congregations, and that he will be taking up the collection.
 - Paul is also sending another well-known and respected brother in the faith with Titus, with the goal of ensuring that the gift is collected with proper administration.
- Paul continues to discuss this gift in chapter 9, and I'd like to use some of what he says in my own encouragement:
 - He says that he's been boasting to other congregations about how generous the Corinthians were being, and he does not want that boasting to be untrue.
 - **[READ 9:6-15]**
- This is not compulsory, but I encourage you, as Paul encouraged the Corinthians and the other Gentile congregations, to support our Jewish brothers and sisters in the faith. Support them in their covenantal faithfulness. Support them in their observance of the Torah. Support them as they shed a light to the rest of the Jewish world, showing that the Messiah was a faithful, Torah-observant Jew himself, and that he calls the entire people of Israel to that faithfulness.

I'll end our lesson tonight with the prayer that Paul wrote at the end of his third letter to the Corinthians: "May the grace of the Master, Yeshua the Messiah, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all."