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II Corinthians (Intro) "The Setting, The Author, The Cause" January 6, 2019

Let's open our Bibles this morning to my favorite book in the Bible, II Corinthians. It's my favorite because we're teaching it right now.

I'm having you open up there so you'll know where it is for next week, because we're not going to read a verse. But I would like to give to you a background, a setting, the author, and the cause for it being written. And I hope that you'll take notes. This is going to be our subject for the next several months on Sunday mornings. It's going to require a little bit of a different approach. It isn't as much devotional as we've been going through the Psalms and the Proverbs. It will be a tad more doctrinal. It will be ever so practical. So I hope you'll kind of follow along and make the effort. Having the background to me makes all the difference in the world. The setting for the writing gives its import to us in its application.

II Corinthians is by far Paul's most personal letter. It's probably your least familiar. I don't know how many verses you would be able to say, well, I know that's in II Corinthians. It is the least read by most Christians in the New Testament. It is the least organized of Paul's letters. It is by far less structured than anything else when it comes to laying out an outline for it. It is the most emotional letter, because Paul's relationship with this church was on that level as well. They had torn his heart out. Things had not gone as he had hoped, and he is not afraid to say so.

It was written by Paul on the third missionary journey, towards the end, after he had been 15 years or so on the road, in three missionary journeys. It is an apostle who is brokenhearted, and yet determined to not give up. He is very weak, but he is strong. He is overwhelmed with emotion, and yet determined to see it through.

II Corinthians is Paul's last of several letters that he

wrote to the Corinthians. I'll point those out to you. There are more than two, even though we only have two. And it is written by a man whose heart ached for a church that was not doing well. God had begun a good work there. Paul knew that He would finish it, but yet it was a struggle.

When Paul arrived in Corinth, he must have thought that he got off on the wrong planet. If you know anything at all about Corinth, Corinth in Paul's day was the political capital of Greece. It was destroyed in 146, I think, BC, by the Romans for rebellion. It was rebuilt 100 years later, 46 BC, by Julius Cesar. It was the perfect place to run a business. It was on two seaports and two seas: The Ionian Sea and the Mediterranean as well. The Aegean actually comes in on the northern part of it. The city was pretty new when Paul got there. It was only 90 years old. And it was a place known as the Vanity Fair of the Roman Empire. It was a favorite for ex-pats to move, ex-soldiers of the Romans as well, entrepreneurs, and visionaries. It was a destination for tourism and for perversity. No town came close in the Roman Empire for perversion. It was a terrible place morally. The amphitheater, which still stands today, seated some 18,000 people; the concert hall, 3,000 more. Up on the Acrocorinth, up on the hill above the city, stood the temple of Venus. Venus is called Aphrodite by the Greeks, called Ashteroth by the Phoenicians. Same goddess. She was the God of sexuality. And every night thousands of prostitutes from the temple would invade the town down below and invite folks involved to be in their religious services, if you will. It was such a bad place that the term to corinthianize meant to commit adultery. A Corinthian woman was a prostitute. The name was just synonymous with the perversion.

If you want to get a feel for what Paul felt being here, he wrote the book of Romans from here, and you can read Romans Chapter 1 which tells you about the idols and the idolatry and the things that he was seeing. Paul showed up here, though, a broken man. He writes in the I Corinthians letter, "Brethren, I want you to know that we didn't come to you, your city, with excellency of speech or wisdom when we declared to you the testimony of Jesus. We wanted to know no one among you except for Christ in Him crucified. So when I came, I was there in weakness. I was there in fear. I came with much trembling. My speech and my preaching were not

persuasive words that men would use, but I came in the demonstration of the power of God's Spirit, that your faith should not be in the wisdom of men but in the power of God."

We know Paul came to Corinth on his second missionary journey, which took place from about 50 to 55 AD; that he came thereafter having visited the churches that he had planted on his first time out there in Galatia, or today what would be Turkey, and then having really no place to go or sureness to go, he spent a couple of months it would seem bouncing around Asia, just not knowing really where to go, except the Lord kept shutting the doors until he got over to Troas on the coast and he had no place else to go. And then the Lord came to him in a vision and showed him a man who was over in Macedonia, the northern part of what we would know as Greece, inviting Paul to come and bring the gospel to Europe.

By the time that Paul arrived in Corinth, though, he was at the end of his rope. He was discouraged. He was alone. That second trip through Europe had been tough for him. The times where he was able to spend with people had been short. The responses had been very uneven. The loneliness made it all the worse.

Paul's first stop was a place called Philippi. He was initially doing pretty well. He met a lady at a river. They had a study that was started, but it wasn't long before he was jailed and beaten. He left actually Luke behind to try to take care of the church at Philippi. He went down the road to Thessalonica, where he was able to stay for three weeks before a riot chased him out of town, almost got him killed. He went to Berea, where for a time they seemed to leave him alone, and it was a good time of sharing, but it wasn't long before the Thessalonians who hated Paul traveled the miles to get to this city and then to take him out with a riot as well.

When he left Berea, he left Silas and Timothy behind to take care of things. And Paul got on a boat and he went 250 miles to Athens, all by himself. He was isolated. There was no persecution in Athens, but very little fruit as well. People were intellectuals and they liked to talk, but no one seemed to care. So he traveled 50 or so more miles to Corinth.

So he shows up in Corinth with just a history of being

beaten and chased out of town, escaping within an inch of his life. This had not been a good trip. This European vacation was not much of a vacation. So he arrives gunshy and a little bit hesitant. He was not his usual self. He was shying away from the confrontations. He was by himself.

And he started in Corinth to just not only look around the city, but he would just go to the synagogue on Saturdays and try to meet with the people. But it wasn't Paul, the one with his usual boldness. You can write in the margins, if you take any notes, that you might want to go read Acts Chapter 18, which is the report from the Lord of the planting of this church in Corinth. But suffice it to say, Paul arrived at the end of himself. He was close to giving up. He didn't think this was really going anywhere. This town was filthy. He needed his friends. He needed some encouragement. He would need a visit from the Lord to restore his hope. Things were not good.

We are told early on in Chapter 18 of Acts that he went looking for work. As God guides, Paul met two Jewish believers who hired him and gave him a place to live, Priscilla and Aquila. They were tent makers, as Paul had been. He called them in the Romans letters his fellow laborers in Christ. He said that they had risked their lives for him from time to time, that he was thankful for their ministry, so were the churches amongst the gentiles, and so was the church that would eventually be meeting in their house. They became good friends. Later when Paul would leave here and travel to Ephesus on his way home, he would leave them there. They would begin what would become the church of Ephesus. Eventually they would begin to meet in the home of Aquila and Priscilla.

Aquila and Priscilla had left Rome, we are told in the Bible, because of the persecution under Claudius the Emperor in 49 AD, who issued an edict. Historically we have that all of the Jews were demanded to move out of Rome, and so they left. They came here to Corinth. They started a new business, if you will. And God began to use them mightily.

And so Paul worked with them all week, made tents, and then on Saturdays he'd go to the synagogues and he would begin to minister there. In fact, we are told in Chapter 18 verse 4 of the book of Acts that he would show up

every week and he would reason with the people that were there, and he would seek to persuade both the Jew and the gentile. The word "to reason" means to dialogue. He would try to start up conversations with folks to convince them of who the Lord was. But Paul was taking it slow. Remember, he was by himself for months there. He didn't stir up any trouble. He was invited back every week. He's still on good standing. Every place we've seen him go, he was loud and he was confrontational and he was willing to just lay it out there, and it all resulted in difficulty. And so in Corinth, in this place by himself, he kind of backed away, and it seemed to go well and it went well until his friends finally arrived, until Silas and Timothy came from where he had left them behind, from Macedonia.

And then Paul heard the good news from them. Things were great back there where he had run away. In Thessalonica, where he had only been able to spend three weeks, they were doing great. In Philippi, where he had been beaten and kind of told get out of Dodge, the church had actually gathered an offering for him to help support him as he moved along. The group showed up. Paul couldn't have been more excited, and that next Saturday he went back to the synagogue. He didn't go quietly. He went loudly. And he was his old self again, and he began to just speak to the people, and the good news, like I said, from Thessalonica had blessed him. I mean, imagine being in a place for three weeks and then having to run away, and thinking, well, that didn't do any good. And yet this church in Thessalonica would be established and it would be a strong fellowship with great witness throughout the area.

He wrote to them, I Thessalonians Chapter 3, "But when Timothy came to us, and he brought to us the good news of your faith and of your love, how you always have a good remembrance of me, and you desire to see me, as we also desire to see you brethren. In all of our affliction and our distress we were comforted concerning you by your faith. For now we live, if we hear that you can stand fast in the Lord." Good news for Paul. He felt like his ministry had actually done something, though he had lived for the last several months thinking, how could this have ever worked out at all?

When Paul gets to Chapter 11 of this book, he will say that the brethren in Macedonia always supplied and helped

with the burdens that he had, though he didn't ever want to be a burden to anyone. He said, "They are always there for me, these churches in the north," of which Thessalonica and Philippi and all were a part. So Paul was excited. It seems like from II Corinthians Chapter 11 that Paul received enough financial help to be able to go full time, if you will, after the lives of the people there and spend his days evangelizing the city.

You will read in Acts Chapter 18 that as these boys showed up, that Paul felt compelled in the spirit to really begin to preach. It kind of released him from that fearfulness and discouragement, and Paul began to forcefully preach that Jesus was the Messiah of the scriptures and the fulfillment of the prophecies and all. And so the reaction was no longer, well, just come back. In fact, the reaction in the synagogue was swift. They said he was a blasphemer. They opposed him. They tore their clothes, told him to get out. It wasn't going very well. "His blood be upon us and upon our children, and upon our heads," and all. And they were just furious with Paul. In rejecting Jesus, they rejected themselves. That's the way it's written in Greek in the middle voice. You're turning away the gospel, but you're hurting yourself. And so Paul didn't last at the synagogue very long. In fact, he shook the dust off of his garments. He said to them, "I am clean from now and I'm going to the gentiles." He had given them everything he knew, first kind of piecemeal and reserved, then both barrels, and still no response. And so he stepped away. "Your blood be upon your own heads", which is one of those clauses of responsibility. This is your responsibility. I think the spies said the same thing to Rahab. So Paul had done all that he could. He'd laid out the word diligently and carefully. Now they have to answer for their lives.

So Paul goes looking for a place to meet, and of all places in Corinth, he finds a place right next door to the synagogue. If you want to avoid conflict, maybe on the other side of town. But not Paul. He moves right next door. Like, you could see his place from the door of the synagogue. And he moved there to begin to teach, and the fellow's name was Justice, and he had -- like I said, he was right next door. And God began to move in an undeniable way in Corinth. This all in the 18 months that Paul spent there.

Eventually the chief ruler of the synagogue, a fellow named Crispus, got saved. That must have been a frustration for the synagogue. He and his family came and started meeting with Paul. Paul will mention in his first letter to the Corinthians that he baptized his family, and it did nothing but infuriate further the religious folks in town. In fact, you read there in Acts 18 verse 8 that many of the Corinthians began hearing the word of God and believing. Paul was now in his element and God was richly blessing, and many folks came and some were baptized. Imagine sitting in synagogue every week and looking out the door, and you see the affluent and the idolater, the religious leader and the prostitute, all gathering for church, and Paul preaching and teaching and all, and what a witness that must have been to them.

Paul's problem was he had had such problems in the past, that as God began to bless and the church began to grow, that his mind said this: How long before they come beat me up here? How long before I suffer again? This is not going to work out. Now they're noticing next door. I don't want to end up in prison again. And he began to worry about the blessings that were coming because of the work that God was doing. And it weighed heavily upon his heart, so you'll read in Acts 18 that one night the Lord came to stand by Paul in a vision. And he said to Paul, "Don't be afraid. Continue to speak. Don't be silent. I am with you. No attack on you will hurt you. And I have many people in this city." And that was the end of the message from the Lord. It seems like the timing was perfect. Paul had a great need, and Jesus' words to him revealed that the Lord knew his need. He said to him, "Don't be afraid." You can presume he was afraid. Though things were going well, his friends had showed up, the ministry was blossoming, all he could think about was how bad things had gone in all of the times before. Lystra, Philippi, Thessalonica, Berea, Athens, now here. Not good. It had been very difficult for Paul.

And Paul wasn't a super saint. I know you read in the Bible and go, "Man, that guy." Well, he flinched just like you would when people took a swing at his head. It wasn't easy for Paul. So Paul had been brave and Paul had been encouraged with his friends and -- like most ministry, when you do it with somebody else, it's a little easier. His friends had helped him. But the Lord saw what Paul was going through in the ministry, and he was touched with the feelings of his infirmity. He knew

that Paul needed an encouraging boost, and he came to with words that were just amazing. Paul had in fear been, I think, backing up and backing away a little bit. Jesus told him not to be afraid. In fact, "Don't be afraid. Speak out. No one here is going to hurt you." That was Paul's word. "I have a lot of people to reach in this city." That was Paul's desire too. But what kept him away was the suffering, the difficulty, the past experience.

And so the Lord came to Paul and He encouraged him. I love the words, "Speak. I'll be here with you. I'm not leaving you." I'll tell you what: The surest defense against fear is the awareness of God's presence with you. David learned that. He wrote in Psalm 23, "Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil because You are with me." Paul learned that here. He would write to the Romans from here, "If God be for you, who can be against you?" He learned it well. And no man will hurt you. Jesus comes to Paul in Corinth and said, "I'm going to protect you from what you have experienced everywhere else." Now, that's not a promise that He made in every city. In fact, if you read the book of Acts, you'll find Paul was a pin cushion. He was beat up by everyone, stuck by just every situation, but not here. Here God had promised to take care of him and to get him through. Sometimes God takes you through trials. Other times He delivers you from trials. This is one of those places where God said, I'm going to deliver you from them. Why one and not the other, I don't know. Why this place needed this assurance. I know Paul was going through it. But I certainly don't know why the Lord doesn't do that in every city for us.

I do love the phrase, "I have a lot of people here," which interested me because God speaks of those in Corinth that were not yet saved as belonging to Him. That night some of those would-be followers of the Lord were sitting in bars out on the hill with prostitutes, out partying and struggling and straying, and yet God saw them as His own. Paul would write his last letter to Timothy, II Timothy Chapter 2, and he would say, "Here's something you should know: The Lord knows those that are His." And God saw in that city those who needed to hear and those who would come. In Athens, Paul, where he had stopped before, ran into the intellectuals. They made very poor kind of soil for the gospel. But here in the filth capital of the world, there were many hungry

hearts, lonely hearts, disillusioned lives. Consumed with worldly pleasure, longing to be found. That was God's view of Corinth.

I don't know what God's view of Whittier is, or La Habra, or Brea, but I suspect that God also has many in this community that He wants to reach; that amongst the difficulty and the sinfulness, He sees many who are needing to be reached by His people.

How does God reach them? Well, Paul, when he wrote to the Romans from here, wrote in Chapter 10, "How shall they call upon Him in whom they have not believed? And how can they believe in someone that they haven't heard about? And how can they hear without a preacher? And how can they preach unless they are sent. 'How beautiful on the mountains or on the hills are the feet of those who bring the gospel of peace.'" So God's plan has always been to plant Christians in communities that are struggling, and let them shine, preach and share. To Paul, He made a promise, "You'll be fine here. They're not going to rise up. They're not going to drag you into court. They're not going to tear you apart." Well, they actually did drag him into court, but God defended him.

So the Lord gave a promise to Paul that was amazing. And for the next 18 months, Paul would stay here and not keep silent. How did he reach the lost? Go read Acts 18. He taught the Bible. For Gentiles who had no biblical background, Paul taught the ultimate new believers class every day from this little house. With one word from the Lord, Paul pressed on. He was encouraged. He did something he hadn't done up to this point in all his years of traveling: He stayed in one place, stayed there a year and a half, saw tremendous fruit, loved this place. From this place, from Corinth, Paul would write the two letters to the Thessalonians. He would write the letter to the Romans. He would eventually write the letter to the Hebrews. This was a pretty profitable place for Paul to be.

When Paul -- and maybe I should say this: The church in Corinth was a remarkable church that, despite the resistance, saw Paul stand strong, preach in faith, and watch God's hand just bring the cross to bear. People got saved in every direction. It was an amazing revival in a very sad town. From here, 18 months later -- I'm going to get you to why he wrote the letter, I hope. If

I remember now. From here Paul would leave to go to -- well, he's going to go home, but in order to get home, he would go through Ephesus. When he landed there with Aquila and Priscilla, he saw the city and went, man, this would be a great place for a church. And he got really excited about the prospects of the ministry there, starting a harvest field. But Paul was anxious to get to Jerusalem and home for the feast and all, and so he left Priscilla and Aquila there, and he said, "Look, Lord be willing, I'll be back." And I should tell you, he came back within a year.

But Paul headed home to Antioch and Syria through Jerusalem. And then when he got home -- he was such a vagabond, he didn't stay very long. In 56 AD he turned around and went back out on what we know as his third missionary journey. And the first place he effectively stopped after checking on churches was in Ephesus, and this time rather than staying there 18 months, he stayed in Ephesus three years. And he ministered from there and the church was planted. You can find that in Chapter 19 and 20 of the book of Acts. In Ephesus, third missionary journey, and a year or two or three or four maybe even after the church in Corinth had been planted.

I Corinthians Chapter 5 tells us that Paul wrote a letter to the Corinthians that we don't have. It is a letter of correction. They responded with questions. He heard about the problems there from some travelers that were passing through what would have been a normal route, and so he sent them a letter. They sent him a letter back. We don't know what they said other than what Paul refers to in I Corinthians. But as a result of their letter back from his letter (that we don't have), Paul wrote I Corinthians. And he had intended to visit them to gather a collection from the gentile churches for the poor in Jerusalem. It was something that he really believed that the Lord wanted him to do. But for now, he sends Timothy with this letter to Corinth with the injunction, I Corinthians I think 16, gather the help, and dropped off this letter, I Corinthians, and then come back to see me.

When Timothy returned to Ephesus, he brought bad news back rather than good news. "The church is being filled with false teachers. They are after you. They're looking to discredit you. They're accusing you of all kinds of things. They're questioning your doctrine, your commitment, your godliness. 'You've suffered so much,

God can't be with you.'" And on and on, this list of attacks on Paul, so the work of Paul could be undermined, took place. There's a growing apostasy in the church. They're led by false teachers who'd come out of Jerusalem.

In response, Paul makes an unscheduled trip from Ephesus to Corinth. It isn't in the book of Acts. It is only mentioned in a couple of places in Paul's letters to the Corinthians. For example, in II Corinthians 12:14, Chapter 13 verse 1 as well, Paul said, "I am ready to come to you for the third time." Well, we only know that he went there once, but we assume then that he had gone there a second time, and we put it there because as you read through the lines, and you'll get it as we go through it, Paul made another second trip there because of all of the things that he heard about how bad things were going. Paul called this trip in this book, it was a sorrowful time.

His authority was being questioned and challenged, and the worst thing was some of the people in the church that he had loved and ministered to had gotten on board with this rebellion led by these Judaizers, the mixture of law and grace, and folks who kind of hounded Paul's steps. So, they began to wonder was Paul for real, and was he somebody that we could trust. They said things like, and we get it from this book, his ministry is lackluster compared to others. His speech is dull. He's not eloquent like others. There's no polish. His personal appearance is horrible. They wondered why he kept changing his travel plans if he was being directed by the Lord. They were put off because he wouldn't take money for services like everyone else, and what was he up to anyway, with wanting to gather this money for the poor? How come he didn't have any letters of recommendation like all of these false prophets had in town from Jerusalem? They began to wonder about Paul. They began to question who he was. And the church that he had poured his heart and his life into for a year and a half, seemed to be turning against him and to the work of God, and Paul was broken by it. Not because he was the subject of criticism. I don't think you'll find any of that being a concern to him. He was interested in these people doing well with the Lord and he saw them being led astray.

So Paul goes, it doesn't go well. He comes back and he

writes a more severe letter. We don't have this one either. It's a third letter, III Corinthians that we don't have. He sends it by the hand of Titus, who is a little bit more aggressive than Timothy, not quite as retiring. And he says to Titus, "Go deliver the letter. See if you can set things straight. I don't want to go there again with a lot of sorrow." You'll read that in Chapter 2 verse 1 of this letter, "I don't want to go back there and have the same kind of sorrow that I had the last time."

With Titus gone, Paul continues to minister in Ephesus, but the three years is almost up. But a riot breaks out in town that just almost costs him his life. It was led by a bunch of idol makers that were losing money because the city was turning to Jesus and away from these idols. So Paul has both the concern that he has for this church, plus his ministry in Ephesus is pretty much ending. And he leaves, and he goes to Troas, which is up the coast to Asia, but it is also the place that the Lord had sent him into Europe to begin with. It was a place that he and Titus had agreed they'd meet and he would give a report to Paul of what was going on. Paul was anxious to hear if that third letter had made any difference, if Titus was able to get through, if God had done anything in real response to the prayers.

So Paul gets to Troas and he finds this door of ministry opened to him that he could not have believed taking place. If you read Chapter 2 here in our book, verse 12 and 13, he'll make mention of that. He'll say, man, the Lord opened a door of ministry here. But Paul didn't have it in his heart. He was so concerned about this Corinthians church. And so he began to minister and he was faithful while he was there, but it wasn't in his heart to do it, so Paul -- it's interesting in Troas Paul found an open door, but so worried about not finding -- he got back on a boat. He went across the Aegean. He went to Macedonia, Philippi, Thessalonica, Berea where he had gone before. He finally meets Titus, probably in Philippi. And Titus said, "Paul, things are really changing. There's a lot of people that are turning back to the Lord. Their opinion of you has been restored. They remembered what a faithful man you were. There's some guy still in power and certainly things aren't good yet, but they're better." And Paul couldn't have been happier. In fact, he will write in Chapter 7 verse 5, "For indeed, when we came to Macedonia, our bodies had no

rest, we were troubled on every side. Outward there were conflicts for us, inwardly we had fear. Nevertheless God, who comforts the downcast, comforted us by the coming of Titus, not only by his coming, but also by the consolation with which he comforted us in you, when he told us of your earnest desire, and your mourning, and your zeal for me, I rejoiced even more. Not that I sought to make you sorry with my letter. I didn't. And I regret that it made you sorry, but if I made you sorry unto repentance, I'm not sorry for that." He couldn't have been more excited. And so Paul gets this really good news that at least the church is coming around.

When he got that news there in Macedonia, probably in Philippi, Paul wrote this letter. You see where we are now? Look it, we're right here. Paul wrote II Corinthians. He wrote it with the intention of encouraging them. He would end up there down the road as he travels. He would spend some time there with them as well. He sends this letter with Titus and at least two other people with him. Possibly Luke was another according to chapter 8 of this book. It is a letter that is on the one hand filled with thanksgiving and gratitude and excitement; it is on the other hand a letter that seeks to still deal with the remnant of the rebelliousness, especially the false prophets that had planted themselves in the church. This book reflects the character of Paul, maybe like no other. He's humble, he's weak, he feels inadequate, he's very reluctant to defend himself when he is attacked, he's passionate for the church, his spiritual concern for their safety and their growth. For Paul it was all about the church. He's uncompromising in his message. He's willing to suffer for the sake of God's people. But every verse would say to them, I love you and I'm praying for you. The verse in II Corinthians 5:21, which I'm sure you know, "For he made Him who knew no sin to become sin for us, so that we could be made the righteousness of God in Him" are only 15 words in Greek and they are the epitome of a concise kind of profound declaration of God's substitution for our sins.

So I think you're going to like the book. If you've ever shared with someone who walked away from the Lord, if there's ever someone who betrayed you, if you've worked hard to help and see that it seems to have gone for nothing, this is a pretty captivating book. Eventually - - and I'll end with this, this morning. I know we've

gone a little longer. Eventually Paul will make it to Corinth. He will spend three months with them there. It's the last time that we know he spends time with them. He'll write that book of Romans either in his second visit or this one. He hands it to a lady named Phoebe. It was meant to be a letter of recommendation to the churches where she was going. It turned out to be one of the most powerful books that we have in the Bible.

While in Corinth, ready to go home after the end of his third trip, Paul gets ready to get on a boat which is to sail him all the way to Caesarea. It's hundreds of miles. But as he gets on the boat, he discovers a plan that some people have to throw him overboard, so things weren't perfect yet. So he didn't get on the boat. He went back kind of this way, the way he came across the Aegean, and headed home from there. And then he headed for Jerusalem, where he'd get arrested and spend years in prison, and then go to Rome and eventually gets killed.

I hope that gives you a background. Is that adequate? Would that help you? And don't make me do this three times. Next week we'll start with the first 11 verses, so read ahead. It will become your favorite book as well.