

Synthetic Bible Studies

Containing an outline study of every book of the Bible
with suggestions for Sermons, Addresses and
Bible Expositions

By

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LESSON EIGHT

II CORINTHIANS

Paul's second Epistle to the Corinthians has long been a favorite of mine, and often have I found myself turning to it for instruction and comfort; but nevertheless, I have always regarded it as one of the most difficult of all his writings to analyze, or break up into its structural parts, for the teaching of others.

Quoting Dean Alford, Paul had now left Ephesus, from which place the first Epistle had been penned, and had crossed over into Macedonia (Acts, chaps. 19, 20), whence he wrote the present one (8:1-9:2). He had heard of the effect produced on the Corinthians by his first Epistle (2:3-3:8), and was now on his way to visit them (7:14; 13:1).

The general reception given to his letter had been favorable, but all had not quietly submitted themselves to it. He had adversaries in the church, those who opposed some of the doctrines he taught, (as we might readily gather from the argumentative tone and the spirit of rebuke of his first Epistle), and these were more embittered than ever, seeking to undermine and belittle his authority as an apostle, on the ground perhaps, that he was not one of the original twelve.

It was, therefore, for the double purpose, first, of comforting those who had submitted themselves to his teachings and rebukes, and secondly, of defending his personal character and apostolic authority against the impugnors of both, that he wrote this second Epistle. For this reason we find "consolation and rebuke, gentleness and severity, earnestness and irony succeeding one another" in his utterances, at short intervals, and without notice.

Erasmus, quoted by the author before named, says: "Such is his versatility, that you would hardly think one and the same man was speaking. At one time he wells up gently like some limpid spring, and by-and-by he thunders down like a torrent with a mighty crash, carrying everything with him by the way."

The Epistle opens, as do all his writings, when addressed to a collective church, with words of salutation (1:1, 2). This is followed, as in other cases, by thanksgiving, or an ascription of praise to GOD (v. 3), from which he glides easily and gracefully, like a craft from its moorings, into those personal matters which make the Epistle at once so interesting to read and yet so difficult clearly to understand.

I. Personal Matters

These personal matters refer first, to physical sufferings of a very serious nature he had undergone (1:4-11), the precise character and time of which are not mentioned. How precious, however, to note the purpose for which these affections had befallen him, and the key it affords to our own experiences and duties under similar circumstances (vv. 4-7).

Secondly, he explains the reason of his delay in visiting them (1:12-2:13). You may remember that, in his first Epistle, he had promised this visit; but the fact that he had gone into Macedonia first, instead of coming directly to them (Acts 20:1-3), had disappointed his friends and given added occasion to his enemies.

In explaining the cause of delay, however, he reaches the subject not directly and bluntly, but by a series of easy approaches. He is governed by a spirit of love towards them (1:12-15); and it was in no mere fickleness he had seemed to change his mind or delay his purpose (vv. 16-22), but in order to spare them (1:23-2:4). In this connection, he refers to the case of the incestuous offender dealt with in the first Epistle (chap. 5), and directs his readmission to the fold of the church on the ground of his repentance (vv. 5-11). Throughout his present journey he had been solicitous to hear from them, and grieved by disappointment in that respect (vv. 12,13).

II. The Apostolic Office

Next, he enlarges upon the duty and dignity of his office (2:14-7:16). Perhaps his object in this is in preparation for his later defense of himself against his adversaries. However that may be, it seems to have been suggested by his allusion to his present journey, and the occasion for it (vv. 12, 13).

In speaking of the spiritual triumph and success of his ministry (vv. 14-16), he would not have them suspect a spirit of egotism on his part, nor any necessity of commending himself to them (3:1). The latter, indeed, was not required, when they considered the manner in which He had been used in their salvation and spiritual upbuilding (vv. 2-6).

This allusion leads to an allegorical contrast between the Jewish and Christian ministrations showing the superiority of the latter over the former (vv. 7-18). Attention is called to the rather obscure expressions in verses 13 and 14, which refer to the transaction in Exodus 34. It is usually

thought that Moses spoke to the Israelites with his face covered to hide the glory of GOD shining there. His face was unveiled, the people saw the glory as he spoke; but when he had ceased speaking, the veil was put on that they might not look on the end, or the fading, of that transitory glory. "They were permitted to see it as long as it was necessary to be seen as a credential of his ministry," says Alford, "but then it was withdrawn from their eyes. Thus the declaration of GOD's will to them was not in openness of speech, but was interrupted and broken by intervals of concealment," which is not the case in the Christian dispensation of which Paul was a minister.

Continuing his reference to his apostolate in the next chapter (4), he speaks of his spirit in its exercise (vv. 1-6), his sufferings (vv. 7-15), and his hopes (vv. 16-18). Indeed, the declaration of his hopes carries us into chapter 5, extending as far as verse 10, where, "in the midst of this highly personal matter, occurs one of those grand expositions of Christian faith and hope which are the resting-places of believing hearts in all time." Alford explains 5:3 thus, "Seeing that we shall verily be found clothed, and not naked," believing it intended to substantiate and explain verse 2. "It thus asserts strongly the truth of the resurrection in a glorified body, probably in reference to the deniers of that doctrine" who are alluded to in the first Epistle.

From the consideration of his hopes he passes abruptly to that of his motives in his ministry (5:10-16), in which connection would call your attention to verse 11. As commonly understood, it refers to the thought of the perdition awaiting ungodly men as that which moves the apostle to "persuade" them, but the truth is rather, that he is referring to his own fear, his Godly fear, in view of the day referred to in verse 10 when he must give account of his stewardship to CHRIST. He is living under the consciousness of his "appearing" there, and this keeps him faithful in warning the unsaved.

This allusion to his persuading men in the light of the judgment seat of CHRIST, diverts him, for the moment, from the main theme of his apostolic office, to the persuasion of these Corinthians not to receive the grace of GOD in vain (5:17-6:2), i. e., not to receive it without allowing it to bring forth in them the fruit of holiness, as they were in danger of doing. Immediately, however, he returns to the character of his office, with the sufferings it has entailed (6:3-10). His heart breaks forth in an appeal to the church at this point (vv. 11-13), and once again he exhorts them to the separated life which his earlier Epistle so clearly intimates to be a necessity in their case (6:14-7:1). He pleads with them to receive him into their hearts, assuring them once again of his love for them and deep interest in them, notwithstanding the tone of severity it had been necessary for him to use in writing to them before (7:2-16).

III. Contributions for the Saints

Leaving the subject of his apostolic office, he begins another which seems far enough away from it, and yet in his own heart evidently very near, viz: the needs of the poor saints in Jerusalem. Chapters 8 and 9 are occupied with this.

That metropolis of the church was passing through dark and stormy days, and its common chest seems to have been replenished by contributions from all the daughter churches. Macedonia, in its poverty, had contributed very liberally it would seem, but as yet the wealthy and flourishing Corinthians had been more backward, and the apostle therefore devotes nearly one-sixth of his

present letter to arguments and pleadings for greater generosity on their part.

An outline of these chapters would provide an invaluable store of material for preaching on this theme. For example, Paul enjoins the duty of Christian giving upon these Corinthians:

1. By the example of the churches in Macedonia (8:1-4). They Were poor, yet lavish. The effect of divine grace on their hearts.
2. By the sense of congruity in the Christian life (8:7). They already abounded in other gifts such as faith, utterance and knowledge; liberality therefore was expected. Its absence would be a serious defect in the symmetry of their spiritual experience.
3. As a proof of their love and gratitude to JESUS (8:8, 9), who, though rich, yet for their sakes had become poor.
4. In consideration of what they had professed to be willing to do. Regard for their promises (8:10,11).
5. In consideration that the offering would be appreciated not according to its size, but according to the spirit in which it was given (8:12).
6. In consideration that the case of the poor saints should not fall on a few but that all might be equally burdened (8:13-15).
7. In consideration that the apostle's honor was. at stake (8:24; 9:3, 4). He had boasted of their willingness.
8. In consideration that as they sowed they would reap (9:6).
9. In consideration that GOD was able to reward them (9:8-11).
10. In consideration that they would thus glorify GOD (9:13).
11. In consideration that they would thus secure the prayers and love of the saints (9:14).

IV. The Apostle's Defense

At chapter ten, the apostle begins the direct personal defense of himself against his rivals and enemies, which continues till the close of the Epistle.

It is in this portion of the Epistle most especially we perceive "the delicate and intricate alternations of gravity and irony, earnest pleading, and sportive rallying, which make it very difficult of interpretation."

Chapter 10 gives us a description of his practice, as an apostle, not to labor in the fields of others (vv. 14-16); but it begins with an ironical allusion to the opinion held concerning him by some of his enemies in the church (vv. 1, 2). This opinion is plainly stated in verse 10.

Chapter 11 gives a narrative of his perils in the furtherance of his sacred office. He feels ashamed to boast, but he does it for their sakes (vv. 1-4). Some idea of the foolish charge made against him may be gathered from verses 5-10. That he had preached the Gospel to them freely seems to have been one of these charges. And who were his accusers, and how does he regard them (vv. 12-15)? It is at this point that he enlarges upon his great sufferings (vv. 16-33). But these sufferings were not his only credentials as an apostle, for what of that mysterious vision that came to him, as recorded in 12:1-12?

He now reminds them that he is coming again to them a third time (12:14-13:1). It is a grave declaration for them under the circumstances, and he accompanies it with exhortations and denunciations. The closing greeting is very brief as befits the general tone of the end, and the letter ends with the "benediction" in the name of the holy trinity, which has become the accustomed form of dismissal throughout the centuries of the Christian church.

~ end of Lesson 8 ~
