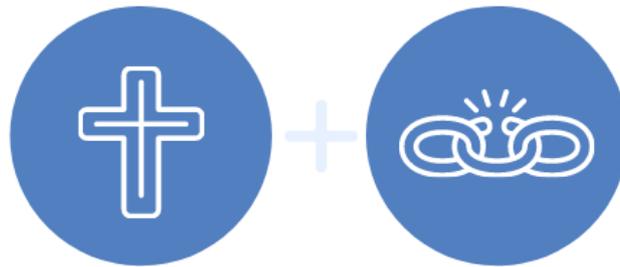


# 2 Corinthians

Perfect in weakness



But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me.  
2 Corinthians 12:9

Bible studies and notes for individuals and groups.

St Phil’s Anglican Church Eastwood. 2021.  
St Mark’s Anglican Church, Ermington. 2021



# An introduction to 2 Corinthians

## Introduction

Paul writes his fourth letter to the Corinthians (known to us as “2 Corinthians”) after facing many struggles. During his visit there, some people in the church at Corinth had treated him very badly, criticising him and discouraging him. But Paul deeply loves them. As he writes this letter, he writes to thank some for their comfort and to address issues amongst others. It is a difficult letter to write.

## 1. Timeline

AD 50–51 was Paul’s first visit to Corinth. Paul established the church and stayed with them for 1½ years.

Around AD 55 Paul wrote 4 letters that we are aware of. The first seems to have been lost. **The second letter, known to us as 1 Corinthians**, was written from Ephesus early in AD 55.

Later in AD 55, Paul made a second visit to Corinth, known as the ‘painful visit’. He dealt with emergency disciplinary issues then wrote a third severe letter known as “Corinthians C” from Ephesus. We don’t have this letter either.

Later in 55 AD, **he wrote the fourth letter, known to us as 2 Corinthians**. This was written and sent from Macedonia.

## 2. The problems behind the writing of 2 Corinthians

In Corinth certain men were

- claiming to be apostles (chapters 11:5, 13, 12:11),
- Preaching a rival gospel (1!:3f)
- Exploiting the Corinthians (11:20)
- Attacking Paul’s apostolic standing and ministry.

These opponents were likely to have been Palestinian Jews (2 Cor 11:22), who are claiming superiority over Paul because of their contact with Jesus, their Jewish descent, their Spiritual gifts and their references

Timothy was unable to deal with the new problems at Corinth, so Paul paid a visit – which was painful for himself and his converts (1 Cor 2:4f).

### 3. Purpose of the letter

In response to the good news (their response to the 3<sup>rd</sup> letter) from Titus, Paul wrote 2 Corinthians and dispatched from Macedonia some months after writing 1 Corinthians. Paul prepares them for a 3<sup>rd</sup> visit (13:1f).

The purpose of 2 Corinthians is three-fold:

- For Paul to explain the motives and actions in previous dealings and express his relief at their response. (ch 1-7)
- To encourage them to participate generously with the collection for the Jerusalem Christians (ch 8-9)
- To deal with the problems of his opponents once and for all (ch 10-13)

### 4. Structure

1:1–11            Introduction

Greeting, thanks for the comfort he received during his recent afflictions.

1:12–2:13            Personal defence

Paul takes time to return to give the Corinthians time to repent and discipline those causing troubles (2:2-11).

2:14–7:4            Defence of the ministry of the New Covenant

Paul responds to challenges over his authority and ministry.

Central to this letter is Paul's work as an ambassador for Christ. His appeal is for people to be reconciled to God.

7:5–9:15            Paul in Macedonia—Titus brings news from Corinth

In 7:5-16, he returns to the beginning issues in his relationship with the Corinthians. From 8:1, he turns to the matter of the collection for God's people in Jerusalem.

10:1–13:10        Prepare for Paul's third visit

Paul reiterates his commissioning from Christ (10:1-18). He has authority also to punish every disobedience (10:6). They had seen the TRUE apostleship of Paul, but had since been lead astray by the FALSE apostleship of others.

13:11-14            Final greetings

## **5. Themes**

### **5.1 Eschatological (end times) and the centrality of Christ**

The link between suffering and glory is central to the theme of 2 Corinthians. When Christians suffer, God is able to display his power in their lives.

### **5.2 God's new covenant**

Paul compares the new covenant with the covenant at Sinai (2 Cor 3:6-18), and compares the new and old creation (2 Cor 4:6-5:21) and speaks of living for others, for the sake of Christ (2 Cor 5:15, 8:1-9:14).

### **5.3 Apostolic ministry in the New Covenant**

Paul's authority was being undermined by false apostles. They were preaching another gospel, another Jesus (2 Cor 11:4). Whilst they assert authority over others and live at their expense, Paul tends for his converts and gives himself in service to them.

## **6. References**

Paul Barnett *The Message of 2 Corinthians* - Bible Speaks Today series. (Inter-Varsity Press. 1999)

G.F. Hawthorne, R.P. Martin & D.G. Reid (eds), *Dictionary of Paul and his Letters* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1993)

# Outline of Studies

## Study 1: Comfort

2 Corinthians 1:1-11, 1:12-24

## Study 2: Weakness

2 Corinthians 2:12-17, 4:1-18

## Study 3: Reconciliation

2 Corinthians 5:1-10, 5:11-6:2

## Study 4: Repentance

2 Corinthians 6:3-13, 7:1-16

## Study 5: Generosity

2 Corinthians 8:1-15, 9:6-15

## Study 6: Suffering

2 Corinthians 11:1-15, 11:16-33

## Study 7: Challenges

2 Corinthians 12:1-10, 12:11-21

# Study 1: Comfort

## 2 Corinthians 1:1-11, 1:12-22

### Opening discussion

Have you ever been treated badly by a group of people? If so, how did you feel and how did you respond to them?

1. Read the following excerpts from Paul Barnett's commentary on 2 Corinthians for some background:

“The first letter, written about two years earlier than the second (in about 54 or 55) reveals that not all the Corinthians acknowledged Paul's authority as an apostle...

That Paul in his second letter as well as in his first continued to admonish the Corinthians about idolatry and immorality indicated that these were ongoing, unresolved problems among them...

The second and major source of criticism of Paul arose, apparently, from the recent arrival of certain Jewish 'ministers' or 'apostles' (as they called themselves)...

They argued for their legitimacy as ministers on the grounds of mystic and paranormal abilities, claiming that Paul lacked these superior gifts and, moreover, that he was personally and morally deficient in many ways...

2 Corinthians, then, was written to prepare the way for Paul's pending farewell visit to them. In it he attempts to explain why he deferred the third visit and wrote to them instead (chapters 1-2)...

As we read the opening chapter, consider how has Paul been treated and what he must be feeling as he writes his fourth letter to the church in Corinth.

### READ 2 Corinthians 1:1-11

2. What main topic(s) seems to be the focus of Paul's introduction to this letter? What words or themes seem to emerge straight away, and why do you think this is?

3. What is the relationship between suffering and comfort in this passage?
4. Paul shares about suffering that was a “sentence of death” and of times when they “despaired of life itself”. Why does he say God allowed him to experience such extreme suffering?
5. How has your past suffering lead to a greater dependence upon God today?

**READ 2 Corinthians 1:12-22**

6. How does Paul defend his character and ministry to the Corinthians, and why?
7. How does Paul draw in here the significance of the Old Testament?
8. How does Paul explain the role of the Holy Spirit? How is this important for us today?

***If you have time***

**READ 2 Corinthians 1:23-2:11**

9. This passage shares more about why Paul delayed his visit and wrote to them first. What are you think are the main reasons he wrote first?

## Study 2: Weakness

2 Corinthians 2:12-17, 4:1-18

### Opening discussion

Who are some of the strongest Christians you know? What makes them seem strong to you?

### READ 2 Corinthians 2:12-17

1. What does it mean for us to be an aroma of life to some and an aroma of death to others?
2. Read the following quote from Barnett:  
“Christian triumphalism, although a contradiction in terms, has had its appeal in many subsequent generations. The Emperor Constantine believed that he won his greatest battle through the first two Greek letters of Christ’s name which were inscribed, cross-like, on the shields of his soldiers. Many subsequent Christian leaders have sought victory in battle in and for the name of Christ. In the Middle Ages it was believed that God was glorified through soaring cathedrals and spectacular church ceremony... In our own century, triumphalism has been used of some church growth movements and the development of the so-called ‘great churches’. For his part, Paul constantly applies anti-triumphalist language to his ministry throughout his letter.” (from Barnett’s commentary on 2 Corinthians - pages 52-53)

What does Paul mean when he says that God leads us as ***captives*** in a ***triumphal*** procession? How is he using “anti-triumphalist language” here?

3. Can you think of an example where people “peddle the word of God for profit”?

## READ 2 Corinthians 4:1-18

4. From verses 1-6, How is Paul's ministry different to those who oppose him?
  
5. What do you think is Paul's definition of "preaching"?
  
6. In verse 7, how does the image of "jars of clay" help us to understand
  - a. who we are?
  
  - b. the power of the gospel?
  
7. What do verses 8-12 tell us about the purpose of our suffering?
  
8. What does it mean to "carry around in our body the death of Jesus"?
  
9. Does verse 16 relate back to the image of the treasure in "jars of clay"?
  
10. Looking at verse 18: Are there times that you feel your eyes become more fixed on the "seen" rather than the "unseen"? Why?

## Study 3: Reconciliation

2 Corinthians 5:1-10, 5:11-6:2

### Opening discussion

What is your dream holiday location? Why?

### READ 2 Corinthians 5:1-10

1. What do these verses teach us about death for a Christian?
2. What does verse 4 tell us about our life on earth and our expectations?
3. In verse 4, how do you understand the idea of the Holy Spirit being given as a deposit and a guarantee of what is to come?
4. How do we live by faith and not by sight? (verse 7)
5. In what way do you think we will receive what is “due us for the things done while in the body”?

## READ 2 Corinthians 5:11-6:2

6. What does it mean in verse 11 to “fear the Lord”? What action does, or should, this fear lead to?
  
7. Are you compelled by the love of Christ, as Paul is in verse 14? If so, what are you compelled *to*?
  
8. “...although the death of Christ is sufficient for all people, it is efficient only for those who believe in him.” (Barnett, page 111).  
How does this help to explain Paul’s words in verses 14 and 18? That is “one died for all” (v14) and “God, who reconciled himself to us through Christ” (v18)
  
9. What does it mean for you to be an ambassador for Christ?
  
10. What are the implications for our ministry if “now is the day of salvation”? (6:2)

## Study 4: Repentance

2 Corinthians 6:3-13, 7:1-16

### Opening discussion

What sorts of things do you think bring joy to people in our world?

### READ 2 Corinthians 6:3-13

1. Again, in these verses, Paul seems to be making a comparison between himself (with Timothy and Titus) and the “false apostles” from Corinth. What differences does he outline in their character and ministry?
2. What do verses 11-13 tell us about the Corinthians’ relationship with Paul and what seems to have happened between them?
3. Verse 4 says: “Rather, as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way: in great endurance; in troubles, hardships and distresses;” How can we do this ourselves?
4. “Sacrifice is at the heart of the gospel and also at the heart of ministry – whether it is in evangelizing unbelievers or providing pastoral care for the flock of Christ. The service of God, where it is true to him, is never easy and is frequently painful.” (Barnett, p 126). Do you agree? Why or why not?



## Study 5: Generosity

2 Corinthians 8:1-15, 9:6-15

### Opening discussion

Have you ever been amazed by an act of generosity?

### READ 2 Corinthians 8:1-15

1. What stands out for you about the Macedonian's generosity?
2. In verse 7, why do you think the Corinthians struggled to excel in generosity when they excelled in so many other areas of faith?
3. Why do you think people today in our wealthy society might find it difficult to be generous?
4. What is Paul's approach to encouraging the Corinthians to be generous in verse 8-9? Do you think this is manipulative? Or pastoral?
5. What does Paul mean when he says "the goal is equality" in verse 14?
6. Consider verse 12. Do you think you are "willing" to be generous?



## Study 6: Suffering

2 Corinthians 11:1-15, 11:16-33

### Opening discussion

What are the most common things for people to boast about in our society? If you were to boast of one thing yourself, what would it be?

### READ 2 Corinthians 11:1-15

1. In verses 1-4, why does Paul talk about the Corinthian church as a bride, and what is his concern for this bride?
2. “In these verses, Paul gives three reasons why the Corinthians should ‘put up with him’ ... First, as apostle and evangelist he feels divine jealousy for the Corinthians at this time of spiritual danger for them (verses 2-3). Secondly, the Corinthians are vulnerable to falling away from Christ through their interest in an untrue gospel (verse 4). Thirdly, Paul states that he is in no way inferior to these ‘super-apostles’ (verse 5)” (Barnett, page 164).  
The ‘super apostles’ he refers to are the false apostles who have appeared in Corinth and made themselves out to be better than Paul. In what ways does Paul counter their argument that they are better than him?
3. What is the end result for the false apostles (verse 15)?
4. What makes a Christian a good minister of God’s word?

5. What do these verses tell us about the work of Satan in God's church?

**READ 2 Corinthians 11:16-33**

6. What do you think of Paul's boasting in verses 16-29? Consider **how** he does it and **why** he does it.

7. Paul's point comes home to us in verse 30. What do you think of this in reality? Have you ever known of someone to boast in their weaknesses?

8. As this letter progresses, we can see Paul building a theology of suffering for the Christian. What have you gained so far from this understanding of why God allows Christians to suffer? What stands out for you?

## Study 7: Challenges

2 Corinthians 12:1-10, 12:11-21

### Opening discussion

What would you consider your greatest weakness?

### READ 2 Corinthians 12:1-10

1. It seems Paul is now responding to challenges to show his accreditation for ministry by telling of the visions and revelations he has had. Of course, Paul did have these sorts of experiences, but he refuses to boast about them.

Barnett says in his commentary, “Paul is saying: ‘I want you to look at what I am, not what I was. The man I want you to take into account is not the one who experienced an astonishing revelation then but the one you see now, in all his weakness’, *so no-one will think more of me than is warranted by what I do or say* (verse 6).” (Barnett, page 177)

Paul refuses to be accredited by any ecstatic or supernatural experiences.

a. Why?

b. Do you know of people who seek recognition of their ministry authority by sharing their spiritual experiences?

c. Do you know of people who seek recognition of their ministry authority by sharing their weaknesses?

2. From verses 7-9, How did God keep Paul humble? Why did God do this?

3. Do you think from verse 10 that Paul really and truly delights in his weakness and these other things? What can we learn from this?

### **READ 2 Corinthians 12:11-21**

4. From verse 12, what are the marks of a “true apostle”?
5. In verse 19, Paul seems to make an amazing announcement about his purposes in “boasting”. What was his real purpose in boasting?
6. What is Paul’s concern over his next visit in verses 20-21? Are they well founded concerns?

### **READ 2 Corinthians 13:1-14**

7. This chapter brings home the theme of restoration. How have you seen this theme unfold throughout 2 Corinthians?
8. What restoration would you like to see in your own relationships?

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