



2 CORINTHIANS

Student Copy

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Outline

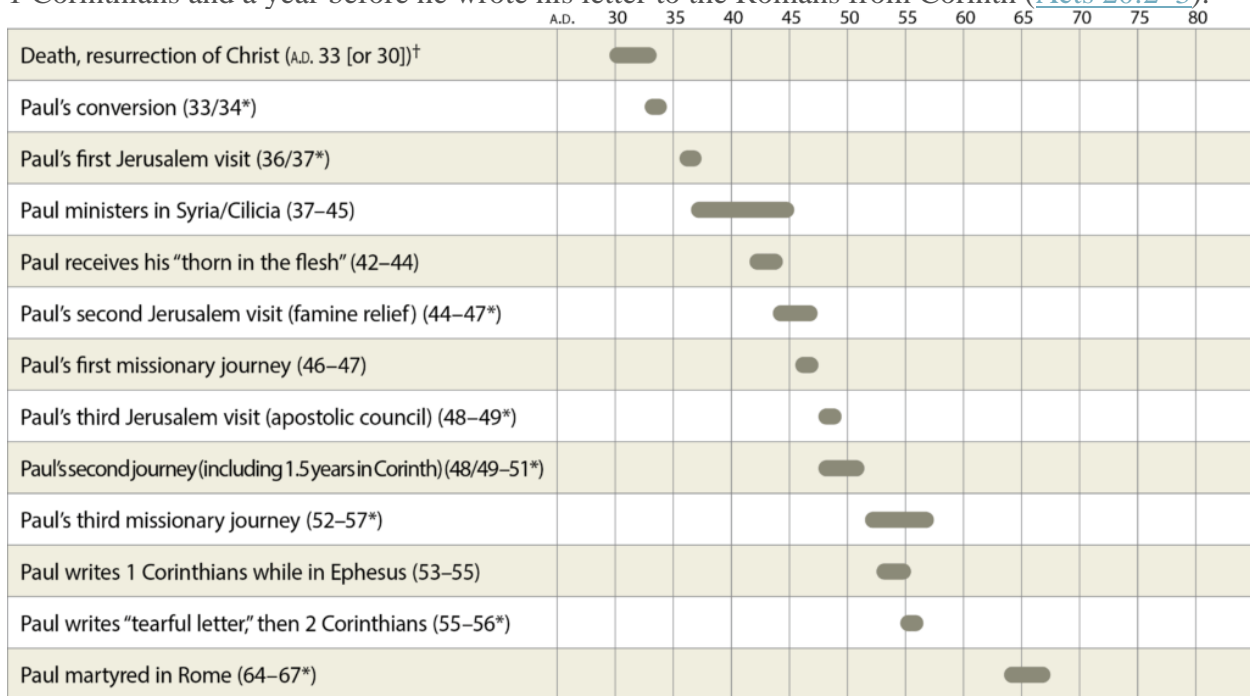
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Introduction

The apostle Paul is the undisputed author of 2 Corinthians. Although some scholars have questioned whether Paul wrote [2 Cor. 6:14–7:1](#), due to its unique vocabulary and subject matter, these differences are more likely due to the fact that in this passage Paul is quoting a collage of Scripture. Second Corinthians is actually the fourth letter that Paul sent to the church he founded in Corinth ([Acts 18:1–17](#)), together with the house churches “in the whole [province] of Achaia,” of which Corinth was the capital (2 Cor. 1:1; 11:10; cf. [Rom. 16:5, 23](#); 1 Cor. 16:15, 19). The four letters are (1) the previous letter mentioned in 1 Corinthians 5:9; (2) our 1 Corinthians; (3) the tearful, severe letter mentioned in 2 Corinthians 2:3–4; and (4) our 2 Corinthians.

Date

Paul wrote 2 Corinthians from Macedonia around A.D. 55/56, a year or so after writing 1 Corinthians and a year before he wrote his letter to the Romans from Corinth ([Acts 20:2–3](#)).



* denotes approximate date; / signifies either/or; † see *The Date of Jesus' Crucifixion*, pp. 1809–1810

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Themes

The central theme of 2 Corinthians is *the relationship between suffering and the power of the Spirit in Paul's apostolic life, ministry, and message*. In addition to calling into question Paul's motives in organizing a collection for believers in Judea ([2 Cor. 8:20–21](#); cf. 2:17; 12:14–18) and questioning his personal courage ([2 Cor. 10:10–11](#); [11:21](#)), Paul's opponents had argued that Paul suffered too much to be a Spirit-filled apostle of the risen Christ. Paul argues that his weakness as an apostle is the very means by which believers are comforted ([2 Cor. 1:3–11](#)) and God in Christ is made known in the world ([2 Cor. 2:14–17](#); [4:7–12](#); [6:3–10](#); [11:23b–33](#)). Paul's sufferings embody the cross of Christ, while his endurance amid adversity, with thanksgiving and contentment, manifests the resurrection power of the Spirit ([2 Cor. 12:7–10](#)). Paul's suffering as an apostle is thus the very means God uses to reveal his glory (2 Cor. 1:3–4, 11, 20; 4:15; 9:11–15; 10:17–18).

Paul therefore sees a close tie between the Corinthians' acceptance of his apostleship and the genuineness of their faith. To reject Paul and his proclamation is to reject Christ himself, since Paul's message, ministry, and manner of life are one. This explains why 2 Corinthians is the most personal of all of Paul's letters, filled with deep emotion.

Background

Second Corinthians is a response to a complicated history between Paul and the Corinthian church, which must be reconstructed from the evidence available today (see ESV Study Bible note on [Acts 20:1](#)). Originally, Paul had planned to travel from Ephesus through Macedonia to Corinth on his way back to Jerusalem to deliver the money he had collected for the believers in Judea (1 Cor. 16:5–9). In the meantime, he sent Timothy to visit the Corinthians on his behalf ([Acts 19:22](#); 1 Cor. 16:10–11). When Timothy arrived in Corinth, he found that the church was in turmoil, most likely in response to the arrival of Paul's opponents from the east. When Paul learned of this he decided to proceed immediately to Corinth to resolve the issues first, then travel on to Macedonia before returning to Corinth for a second visit on his way to Jerusalem (the proposed “second experience of grace” of 2 Cor. 1:15).

Paul's visit, however, turned out to be very “painful” as a result of the church's open rebellion against him ([2 Cor. 2:1, 5–8](#); [7:8–13](#); [11:4](#)). At that time, Paul decided it was best to suffer humiliation and leave, without retaliating, in order to extend mercy to the Corinthians (1:23–24). Once back in Ephesus, Paul sent Titus back to Corinth with a tearful and severe letter (now lost), warning the church of God's judgment if they did not repent ([2 Cor. 2:3–4](#); [7:8–16](#)). To Paul's great joy, the majority of the Corinthians did repent, which Paul discovered when he met Titus in Macedonia ([2 Cor. 7:5–16](#)). But there was still a rebellious minority who, under the influence of Paul's opponents ([2 Cor. 11:12–21](#)), continued to reject Paul and his gospel. In response, and as yet another act of mercy, Paul wrote 2 Corinthians from Macedonia in anticipation of his third, impending visit to Corinth before going on to Jerusalem ([2 Cor. 12:14](#); [13:1](#)).

The mixed nature of the church in Corinth, not to mention the opponents whom Paul addresses indirectly throughout the letter, explains the complex nature of 2 Corinthians and its sometimes sudden shifts in focus and tone. This has led some scholars to suggest that it is a compilation of as many as six fragments. There is no evidence, however, that 2 Corinthians ever contained less than or more than its present content, or that it was arranged in a different order.

Paul's letter is an extended defense of the legitimacy of his apostolic ministry and its implications. It is intended to accomplish three overlapping purposes:

1. To strengthen the faithful majority and the purity of the church (primarily chs. 1–7);
2. To complete the collection as the expression of their repentance (primarily chs. 8–9); and
3. To offer the rebellious minority one more chance to repent before Paul returns to judge those still rejecting him and his message (primarily chs. 10–13).

Thus, chapters 1–7 focus primarily on the past track record of Paul's ministry, chapters 8–9 on the present responsibility of the repentant, and chapters 10–13 on the future judgment of those still in rebellion against the gospel.

Lesson 1

The Strange Path of Comfort (2 Cor 1:1-11)

Paul opens his letter by introducing himself as an apostle and then immediately teaching the Corinthians about the nature of true comfort. Unlike every other Pauline letter, Paul begins not by addressing the readers directly (usually with thanksgiving), but by speaking about God. Right from the start of this letter, Paul draws the Corinthians' eyes to the source of true comfort: God himself. And this comfort is experienced most profoundly in the midst of our own perplexities and trials.

[Second Corinthians 1:1–11](#) drives home the paradoxical nature of true comfort: Those in Christ experience comfort not by avoiding, but by going through, affliction.

1. **Greeting (2 Cor. 1:1–2)** Paul opens his letter by immediately designating himself as an apostle, literally “one who is sent.” Skim through 2 Corinthians and note places where Paul returns to the theme of his legitimacy as a true apostle. What appears to have been the problem Paul is addressing regarding his own apostleship?
2. What does it mean for Paul to call the Christians of Achaia (the region in which Corinth was located) “saints” ([2 Cor. 1:1](#))? Are you a saint? Why or why not?
3. “Grace to you and peace” ([2 Cor. 1:2](#)). With the exception of Galatians, Paul begins all his letters this way. Why is grace the note on which Paul begins his letters? What does this remind us about concerning the Christian faith?
4. **Comfort through Affliction (2 Cor. 1:3–11)** Reflect on Paul’s description of God the Father in [2 Corinthians 1:3](#). Consider your own life from this past week or so. Has God (as described in this verse) been real to you?

5. Consider the calm that would descend into our generally frenetic lives if we were to walk with such a God and know him as such. Jot down a few thoughts for future reflection. The Bible is not naive but utterly realistic. Notice this passage's honesty about the difficulties of life. According to [2 Corinthians 1:4, 6](#), why do we experience affliction?

6. What does it mean to “share . . . in Christ's sufferings” ([2 Cor. 1:5](#))? Does it mean Christ's sufferings were not enough to atone for our sin, so we need to help with our own suffering? Consider also [Philippians 3:8–11](#).

Lesson 2

Paul's Pastoral Strategy (2 Cor 1:12-2:17) Part 1

After opening with a powerful reminder of the comfort of the gospel ([2 Cor. 1:1–11](#)), Paul moves into the main body of the letter. In the second half of [2 Corinthians 1](#) and all of [2 Corinthians 2](#), Paul explains why he changed his mind and did not visit Corinth. Ultimately, Paul defends his actions as having been done out of love and in the best interests of the Corinthians. Here and throughout 2 Corinthians we see the deeply pastoral side of this letter.

In [2 Corinthians 1:12–2:17](#), Paul explains why he had not visited the Corinthians as originally planned.

1. Paul describes his “boast” in [2 Corinthians 1:12, 14](#), and speaks of boasting in 2 Corinthians more often than in any of his other letters. Yet in [1 Corinthians 13:4](#), he had told the Corinthians that love does not boast. There are evidently bad and good kinds of boasting. How would you articulate the difference? Consider [1 Corinthians 1:31](#) and [Galatians 6:14](#) as you answer.
2. What does Paul mean by the “day of our Lord Jesus” ([2 Cor. 1:14](#))? In light of the Old Testament’s theme of the “day of the Lord,” what is Paul implicitly affirming about Christ?
3. What does [2 Corinthians 1:15](#) tell us about Paul’s motives driving his travel plans? What does he ultimately want for the Corinthians? Note also [2 Corinthians 1:23–24](#).
4. Paul had apparently been accused of “vacillating” by not visiting Corinth ([2 Cor. 1:17](#)). How does Paul defend himself in [2 Corinthians 1:17–22](#)? List several ways.

5. The first sentence of [2 Corinthians 1:20](#) is one of the richest statements of biblical theology in all the Bible. What is Paul saying? How would you explain the role of Jesus as he relates to the entire Bible?

Lesson 3

Paul's Pastoral Strategy (2 Cor 1:12-2:17) Part II

1. In [2 Corinthians 1:22](#), Paul calls the Holy Spirit our “guarantee” (note also [2 Cor. 5:5](#) and [Eph. 1:14](#)). This word means “down payment” or “deposit.” Think of a down payment made on a house. What does that down payment indicate? What is Paul telling us about the role of the Holy Spirit?
2. In [2 Corinthians 2:1–4](#), Paul reiterates his love for the Corinthians and his desire for their welfare, mentioning the previous letter he had written to them (which we do not have). What does Paul say were his reasons for writing them that painful letter?
3. In [2 Corinthians 2:5–11](#), Paul calls the Corinthians to forgive and welcome a member of the church who had grievously sinned. Perhaps this member was the leader of the rebellion against Paul. Yet in [1 Corinthians 5](#), Paul had instructed this same church to expel a sinful man from the church—to hand him over to Satan and have nothing to do with him. What is the difference between these two situations?
4. What is the fundamental motivation for Christians to forgive others? Consider [Matthew 6:14–15](#) and [Colossians 3:13](#) as you answer.
5. Why was Paul's “spirit . . . not at rest” in Troas ([2 Cor. 2:12–13](#))?
6. On the outside, Paul was anything but impressive. He was an afflicted, often rejected apostle. But in this final paragraph of [2 Corinthians 2](#), Paul describes himself in terms of triumph and glory. What is Paul getting at? How does this encourage you in your own walk with the Lord?

Lesson 4

The New Covenant (2 Cor 3:1-18) Part 1

Paul brings to a close his explanation of why he had not visited Corinth by remarking that while no one is “sufficient” for apostolic ministry ([2 Cor. 2:16](#)), he is nevertheless “commissioned by God” ([2 Cor. 2:17](#)). Paul picks up and develops this theme in [2 Corinthians 3](#), defending his sufficiency for ministry despite how unimpressive he may seem by the world’s standards. Paul develops his argument through a sustained comparison of his own ministry with that of Moses, noting that although Moses’ ministry was glorious, Paul’s is even more glorious—for it is the ministry of the Spirit, the ministry of the new covenant.

In [2 Corinthians 3:1–18](#), Paul explains his work as the ministry of the new covenant, a ministry of life and Spirit much more glorious than the ministry of Moses.

1. In ancient times, leaders were often validated through recommendation letters—much like the references we provide when applying to a school or for a job. Paul has no such letter, but he has something even better; what is it, according to [2 Corinthians 3:2](#)? What does Paul mean?
2. Throughout [2 Corinthians 3](#), Paul is drawing heavily on the Old Testament as he validates his ministry. Familiarize yourself with the following texts: [Exodus 24:12; 31:18; 32:15](#). What is Paul referring to by “tablets of stone” ([2 Cor. 3:3](#))? In light of [Ezekiel 11:19](#) and [Ezekiel 36:26](#), what is Paul saying in [2 Corinthians 3:3](#)?
3. What does Paul identify as the source of his confidence before God ([2 Cor. 3:4](#))? How does [2 Corinthians 3:5](#) drive this home even deeper?
4. Paul refers to the “new covenant” in [2 Corinthians 3:6](#). Read [Jeremiah 31:31–34](#). What are the marks of the new covenant, according to this Old Testament passage? How is Paul bringing this text to bear in [2 Corinthians 3](#)?

5. What does Paul mean by “letter” ([2 Cor. 3:6](#))? This is not the only time Paul sets up a letter/Spirit distinction—see also [Romans 2:29](#) and [Romans 7:6](#). In light of all three texts, what is the basic contrast Paul is drawing out?

Lesson 5

The New Covenant (2 Cor 3:1-18) Part 2

1. **Paul versus Moses (2 Cor. 3:7–18)** As you study [2 Corinthians 3:7–18](#), familiarize yourself first with [Exodus 32–34](#), especially [Exodus 34:29–35](#). How do you see Paul bringing the Old Testament to bear on his line of thought?
2. Make a list of everything Paul says about Moses’ ministry versus everything he says about his own ministry. How would you sum up those differences?
3. Does Paul say Moses’ ministry lacked glory, or had it ([2 Cor. 3:7–11](#))? There was nothing inherently wrong with the old covenant—the problem was with people. As Paul explains in [Romans 7](#), the law is holy and good; it is when sinful humans come under the law that the problem emerges! How does the ministry of the new covenant deal with and overcome this problem?
4. In [2 Corinthians 3:12–18](#), Paul begins to apply his argument to the present experience of his readers. What is his basic point of application?
5. [First Corinthians 3:18](#) is perhaps the richest statement in all the Bible about the way believers grow—the doctrine of progressive sanctification. Paul says that “we all” (as opposed to just Moses) “with unveiled face” (as opposed to Moses’ veiled face), “beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another.” The Greek word for “transformed” here is used just one other time in the New Testament—in [Romans 12:2](#) (“Be transformed by the renewal of your mind”), where once more a gradual process of change is in view. Reflect on how Paul teaches that we are changed—namely, by beholding the Lord, not by sheer willpower, four- or 12-step programs, or mind-emptying meditation. What does it mean to behold the glory of the Lord? How does that actually happen?

Lesson 6

Life through Death (2 Cor 4:1-18)

In one of the richest and most precious chapters in the Bible, Paul explains why he does not “lose heart” ([2 Cor. 4:1, 16](#)) in his ministry. He continues to speak in terms of the paradox of the Christian life—here specifically as “life through death.” It is through our weakness and even our death-like experiences that God demonstrates his surpassing power and sufficiency ([2 Cor. 4:7](#)). All the glory therefore belongs to God ([2 Cor. 4:15](#)).

In [2 Corinthians 4:1–18](#), we see that while those in Christ deteriorate outwardly, internally they are being renewed by the gospel.

1. Note in [2 Corinthians 4:3](#) the way Paul picks up the language of “veiling” from the previous chapter. What does it mean for the gospel to be veiled? In [2 Corinthians 4:4](#), to what or whom does Paul attribute this veiling?
2. Note the parallel phrases concluding [2 Corinthians 4:4, 6](#). Write out these phrases, indicating which words from [2 Corinthians 4:4](#) are parallel to words in [2 Corinthians 4:6](#). Jot down a few observations that arise from these parallels.
3. To what ancient event is Paul contrasting Christian conversion in [2 Corinthians 4:6](#)? Consider [2 Corinthians 5:17](#) as you reflect on the answer.
4. What is Paul getting at by saying that the gospel is a “treasure in jars of clay” ([2 Cor. 4:7](#))? What is the paradox here? What, according to [2 Corinthians 4:7](#), is the purpose of this paradox?
5. Note the four pairings in [2 Corinthians 4:8–9](#). Why, in light of the surrounding verses, do you think Paul says none of the horrible experiences of this life can finally overcome us?

6. One of the truths of the New Testament is that Jesus died in our place. Another truth, taught here and in [Romans 6](#), is that we join him in his death. He died as our substitute with respect to sin, but union in his death informs our Christian life. Trace Paul's logic through [2 Corinthians 4:10–12](#). What is Paul essentially communicating?

7. In [2 Corinthians 4:13](#), Paul quotes from [Psalm 116:10](#). The apostles often quote an Old Testament text as a “tip of an iceberg,” intending the reader to recall the whole context of that Old Testament text. Flip back to that psalm and notice what the rest of that psalm says, especially the rest of [Psalm 116:10](#). How is this a particularly relevant text for Paul to cite in [2 Corinthians 4](#)?

Lesson 7

Reconciliation with God (5:1-21) Part I

Paul moves at this point in his letter to explain more carefully the exact message of his new covenant ministry. He begins by explaining why we need not lose heart when our bodies are dying—we have a new, indestructible body coming ([2 Cor. 5:1–10](#)). Paul then moves into the message of reconciliation that God has entrusted to him ([2 Cor. 5:11–21](#)).

In [2 Corinthians 5:1–21](#), Paul tells us of our future hope of physical resurrection and the present offer of reconciliation with God that secures this hope.

1. What does Paul mean by the “tent that is our earthly home” and a “building from God . . . eternal in the heavens” ([2 Cor. 5:1](#))? Why might Paul have used this analogy?
2. In biblical teaching, believers who die today exist in the intermediate state, living as disembodied spirits in the presence of God in heaven. But this is not our final state. Our final, permanent state after Jesus returns to earth will be an embodied physical existence with invincible bodies ([2 Cor. 5:1](#); see also [1 Cor. 15:35–56](#); [Phil. 3:10–11, 20–21](#)). How does Paul speak of the intermediate state in [2 Cor. 5:2–4, 8](#)? What does he consider to be the *best* state of existence?
3. In [2 Corinthians 5:5](#), Paul calls the Spirit our “guarantee.” He used this same language in [2 Corinthians 1:22](#), and also in [Ephesians 1:14](#). In the context of [2 Corinthians 5:1–10](#), what is the significance of the Spirit as our down payment or first installment? What is Paul saying?
4. What, practically speaking, does Paul see in [2 Corinthians 5:6–7](#) as the result of the promise of future resurrection?
5. What does it mean to “walk by faith, not by sight”? Consider the context here, and the whole letter of 2 Corinthians.

Lesson 8

Reconciliation with God (5:1-21) Part II

1. In [2 Corinthians 5:9–10](#), Paul speaks of pleasing God before he speaks of appearing before the judgment seat of Christ. Does this contradict his teaching on justification by faith? How do the teachings on justification by faith and appearing before the judgment seat of Christ cohere?

2. List all the reasons Paul gives in [2 Corinthians 5:11–21](#) for sharing with others the gospel of reconciliation with God.

3. [2 Corinthians 5:14–15](#) provides a succinct summary of what it means to live as a disciple of Christ. How would you put this in your own words? Does this description of the Christian life match the way you normally think of life in Christ?

4. In [2 Corinthians 5:17](#), Paul says, literally, “Therefore, if anyone in Christ, new creation.” He seems to be saying that if you have been united to Christ, you are swept into the new creation that dawned with the first coming of Christ. Read [Isaiah 43:18–19](#); [65:17–23](#); [66:22–23](#) and reflect on what Paul may have had in mind when he spoke of this new creation.

5. Reflect on the language of reconciliation in [2 Corinthians 5:18–20](#). In everyday speech, what do we mean by “reconciling” two people? What change does this bring? What is Paul saying God was doing in Christ?

6. [2 Corinthians 5:21](#) is one of the Bible’s clearest statements of substitutionary atonement. (See [1 Peter 3:18](#) for another.) Specifically, we see here the doctrine of imputation. What should it mean for you as you roll out of bed tomorrow morning into another day?

Lesson 9

True Relationships and True Repentance (2 Cor 6:1-7:16) Part 1

Paul moves now to demonstrate once more the sincerity and authenticity of his work as an apostle sent from God. The first half of [2 Corinthians 6](#) is one of the many powerful depictions of God's power in Paul's weakness, and in the second half of the chapter, Paul exhorts the true believers in Corinth not to join hands with those rejecting his apostolic ministry. In [2 Corinthians 7](#), Paul continues arguing for his apostolic authority and distinguishes between true and false repentance—suggesting that he prompted true, godly grief among the Corinthians, ultimately for their own good.

[Second Corinthians 6–7](#) demonstrates Paul's apostolic authority and his sincere desire for the Corinthians' good.

1. Paul quotes [Isaiah 49:8](#) in [2 Corinthians 6:2](#). Scan the context of [Isaiah 49](#) and consider what Paul is saying to the Corinthians. Paul goes on to say that the day of restoration promised in [Isaiah 49](#) has dawned in the present time. Remembering what Paul has just said in [2 Corinthians 5:17](#), what is Paul's reason for quoting [Isaiah 49:8](#)?
2. Ponder the paradoxes of [2 Corinthians 6:3–10](#)—utter realism about difficulties, yet supreme hopefulness as well. How does this list support Paul's ministry as an apostle?
3. Consider especially [2 Corinthians 6:10](#) as you bridge this passage into your own heart and life. How does this verse affect you? Do you find it liberating?
4. Paul is sometimes viewed by Christians as a complicated, somewhat dry, deeply theological thinker. He was certainly a powerful mind. But notice [2 Corinthians 6:11](#) (as well as [2 Cor. 7:2](#)). What do you see of Paul here? What might we today learn from what Paul writes in this verse?

5. One of the great themes of the Bible is the need for God's people to separate themselves from the godless world around them. What Old Testament text(s) are cited here, and what basic point is Paul making in [2 Corinthians 6:14–7:1](#)?

Lesson 10

True Relationships and True Repentance (2 Cor 6:1-7:16) Part II

1. What is the motivation for personal holiness in [2 Corinthians 7:1](#)?
2. Reflect on how personal holiness in 2 Cor 7:1 is a gospel motivation. Is Paul saying that we should be holy so that God will give us promises, or *because* God has already given us promises? What are the promises being referred to (see [2 Cor. 6:16–18](#))?
3. What paradox do you see in [2 Corinthians 7:4](#), and how does this relate to the letter as a whole? Recall what we said in Week 1 of this study about strength through weakness as the macro-theme of the letter.
4. In [2 Corinthians 7:5](#), Paul picks up the narrative where he left off in [2 Corinthians 2:13](#). What has Paul been writing about in the five intervening chapters? Why do you suppose he spends so much time on this?
5. Paul reflects at length on the difference between “godly grief” and “worldly grief.” How do these look the same on the outside? How are they different, according to this passage?
6. What role does Titus play throughout this chapter? What do you take from this as you consider your own life and ministry in the local church?

Lesson 11

Where Real Generosity Comes From (2 Cor 8:1-9-15)

Paul has now defended at length his true legitimacy as an apostle, against objections to the contrary from some at Corinth. He now encourages the Corinthians to join once more in collecting a financial gift for believers in Jerusalem (see [2 Cor. 8:10–11](#)). Throughout these two chapters, we again see Paul appealing to the grace of God, and also once again relying heavily on his coworkers.

In [2 Corinthians 8:1–9:15](#), Paul exhorts the Corinthians toward financial generosity in light of the gospel of grace.

1. Note what Paul says in describing the generosity of the Macedonians in the opening verses of [2 Corinthians 8](#). Most of the time we think of grace in terms of something the Macedonians themselves would have received. How can Paul here (and throughout these two chapters) call their generosity the “grace of God”? Describe in your own words the dynamics of the heart taking place in the Macedonians.
2. Paul says his exhortation to the Corinthians to contribute is not a command ([2 Cor. 8:8](#)). What, then, is it? What does it mean to respond to this type of leading as compared to obeying a command? What differentiates these two kinds of obedience?
3. Ponder [2 Corinthians 8:9](#), one of the richest statements of the gospel in the Bible. What is Paul saying? How is he connecting money and the gospel?
4. What principle is Paul laying down in [2 Corinthians 8:12](#)? How does Jesus’ teaching in [Luke 21:1–4](#) complement Paul’s words here?

5. Read the story ([Ex. 16:9–21](#)) Paul alludes to in [2 Corinthians 8:15](#). How is Paul bringing that story to bear on the point he is currently making? Remember that the theme of 2 Corinthians, as we are seeing, is that the ways of God are upside-down from the ways of the world and our natural intuitions.

6. List the various motives Paul cites in the paragraph from [2 Corinthians 8:16–8:24](#). How would you summarize Paul’s reasons for seeking financial relief for the Jerusalem believers?

7. Paul brings forward yet another motive for giving in [2 Corinthians 9:6](#). What is it? How do we see this principle at work in the natural world (note, e.g., Jesus’ words in [John 12:24](#))? Is Paul saying the way to get rich is to give away money? If not, what is his point?

8. According to [2 Corinthians 9:8](#), what is the ultimate source of our good works?

Lesson 12

True Versus False Leadership (2 Cor 10:1-11:15) Part I

Paul turns at this point in his letter and directly addresses those opposed to his ministry due to his alleged weakness. For this reason, some have trouble believing this is the same man who had written in such a warm pastoral tone earlier in the letter! But it is the audience, not the author, that has shifted. Here Paul will defend his ministry by continuing to drive home the truths that God's ways are not our ways and that the gospel gives believers a paradigm upside down from that of the world. Under the gospel, and supremely for Christian leaders, weakness is strength and life comes through death.

1. In [2 Corinthians 10:1–11:15](#), Paul teaches us that true leadership is outwardly unimpressive and is for others' good, as opposed to false leadership, which is outwardly impressive and self-serving.
2. What does it mean for Paul to appeal to the Corinthians "by the meekness and gentleness of Christ" ([2 Cor. 10:1](#))? Why might Paul have spoken of Christ in this way, given what was happening in the Corinthian church?
3. What are the weapons of divine warfare Paul refers to in [2 Corinthians 10:3–4](#)? How does this differ from the "weapons" or tactics employed by his opponents in Corinth?
4. Paul does indeed "boast" of his authority. But to what end ([2 Cor. 10:8](#))? What is the purpose of this authority, unlike the motives of his opponents? See also [2 Corinthians 12:19](#) and [2 Corinthians 13:10](#) as you answer. Reflect on what Christ has done for us and how Paul's motive in ministry is a "gospel" motive.
5. Note what Paul's opponents are saying of him in [2 Corinthians 10:10](#). Reflect on the opening two chapters of 1 Corinthians, especially [1 Corinthians 2:1–5](#). How does Paul handle his opponents' attacks throughout the Corinthian correspondence? Do you find this principle personally liberating in your own life, given the inadequacies you feel?

Lesson 13

True Versus False Leadership (2 Cor 10:1-11:15) Part II

1. In light of [2 Corinthians 10:12](#), how are Paul's opponents establishing their own credibility? What is Paul's alternative to this?

2. Read [Romans 14:14–17](#). How do Paul's words there inform his line of reasoning in [2 Corinthians 10:15–16](#)?

3. What does it mean to “boast in the Lord” ([2 Cor. 10:17](#))? How is this the polar opposite of the conduct of those opposing Paul?

4. Follow the analogy Paul uses in [2 Corinthians 11:1–3](#). Who, spiritually speaking, is the father, the daughter, the husband, and the one leading the daughter astray in this analogy? What light does this shed on how Paul views his relationship to the Corinthians?

5. How would it have been “humbling” to Paul to preach the gospel at no charge to the Corinthians ([2 Cor. 11:7](#))?

6. Consider Paul's description of the false leaders in [2 Corinthians 11:13](#). As you ponder [2 Corinthians 10:1–11:15](#), how would it have been evident that these men were false teachers?

Lesson 14

Strength through Weakness (2 Cor 11:16-12:10)

After several chapters defending his ministry and showing how the gospel in various ways upends the world's mindset regarding affliction, joy, grief, and money, Paul comes to the climax of his letter. Here at the heart of 2 Corinthians, the apostle gives us the key that unlocks this entire letter and indeed his entire ministry: strength through weakness. It is in our unimpressiveness, our afflictions, our inadequacies, our pain, that God's power and grace are manifested. That is backward to the way we naturally think. This culmination of 2 Corinthians is a timely word to each generation of the church, including ours today.

In [2 Corinthians 11:16–12:10](#), Paul crystallizes the principle fundamental to his apostolic ministry and to our Christian lives today: strength through weakness.

1. Why would Paul refer to himself as a fool throughout [2 Corinthians 11:16–21](#)? What does he mean by this? What other ironies do you see in these verses—in [2 Corinthians 11:21](#), for example?
2. As he did in [2 Corinthians 6:3–10](#), Paul mixes good and bad, blessings and pains, in the list of [2 Corinthians 11:22–29](#). Why would he do this?
3. Why would Paul have received 39 lashes? What kinds of breaches of the law would incur this punishment?
4. In [2 Corinthians 11:30](#), Paul concludes his litany of sufferings amid privileges and gives the reason for his boasting. What is that reason? What is Paul's strategy toward the Corinthians here?
5. Paul concludes [2 Corinthians 11](#) by mentioning an experience in which he was ingloriously brought down. In [2 Corinthians 12](#), he then goes on to describe an experience in which he was gloriously brought up. What was this glorious experience?

6. Why might Paul speak of himself in the third person in [2 Corinthians 12:2–4](#)?

7. Why was a “thorn” given to Paul? Notice that the reason is given twice, at both the beginning and the end of [2 Corinthians 12:7](#). Yet Paul says that this thorn was from Satan. Given the reason for the thorn, could it have been ultimately from Satan?

8. It is evidently not immature to ask the Lord to remove the “thorns” of our lives. But he may choose to allow our thorns to remain. If he does, what great reality will support us, according to [2 Corinthians 12:9](#)? What was the result of this reality for Paul in [2 Corinthians 12:9–10](#)?

Lesson 15

A Final Pastoral Plea (1 Cor 12:11-13) Part 1

Paul concludes 2 Corinthians by reflecting on his imminent visit to the church at Corinth, which would be his third visit there. As he has throughout this letter, he speaks of the legitimacy of his apostolic ministry ([2 Cor. 12:14–21](#)). He also continues to the very end his theme of strength through weakness, this time clinching this principle in the experience of Christ himself ([2 Cor. 13:4–5](#)). Finally, Paul calls those hostile toward him to reconsider whether they truly belong to Christ ([2 Cor. 13:1–10](#)).

In [2 Corinthians 12:11–13:14](#), Paul launches a final plea to the Corinthian church, commending the genuineness of his ministry and calling the Corinthians to confirm the genuineness of their faith.

1. What are the “signs of a true apostle” ([2 Cor. 12:12](#))? Why would Paul appeal to these?
2. What does this appeal imply about the work of the “super-apostles” ([2 Cor. 11:5; 12:11](#))?
3. What, according to [2 Corinthians 12:16–18](#), was Paul being accused of by some of the Corinthians? How does he head off this attack?
4. Where else in 2 Corinthians have you seen Paul say what he says in [2 Corinthians 12:19](#)? What motive of Paul surfaces once more at the end of this verse? What must be the fundamental resource driving this motive (remember [2 Cor. 5:14–15](#))?
5. What would it mean for Paul to not find the Corinthians as he wished, and for the Corinthians to not find Paul as they wished ([2 Cor. 12:20](#))?

6. How would Paul be humbled, as he says in [2 Corinthians 12:21](#), in coming to Corinth?

Lesson 16

A Final Pastoral Plea (1 Cor 12:11-13) Part 2

1. What is meant by true repentance?
2. Note Paul's reference to repentance in 2 Cor 12:21. Remembering [2 Corinthians 7](#), what kind of repentance/grief is Paul pursuing here?
3. What does Paul mean when he says he will "not spare" the Corinthian opponents when he visits ([2 Cor. 13:2](#))? Does this mean Paul does not, after all, wish them well ([2 Cor. 12:19](#))? How is this loving of Paul?
4. Consider the way God doesn't spare (so to speak) his own children from discipline ([Heb. 12:5-11](#)).
5. How does [2 Corinthians 13:4](#) cohere with the theme of the book as a whole, crystallized in [2 Corinthians 12:10](#)?

Lesson 17

A Final Pastoral Plea (1 Cor 12:11-13) Part 3

1. Paul returns to the theme of his own weakness twice in this passage, in [2 Corinthians 13:4](#) and [2 Corinthians 13:9](#). What is the relationship between Christian weakness and Christ's weakness, according to [2 Corinthians 13:4](#)?
2. What is the heart of Paul's string of exhortations closing out this letter ([2 Cor. 13:11–12](#))? Read [John 17:20–23](#) as you answer. Consider your own life and reflect on what the Lord might be saying to you in light of this text.
3. The final verse of this letter contains the only explicitly Trinitarian benediction in all of Paul's writings. What does Paul identify as the unique blessing of each person of the Trinity? How is each uniquely appropriate, given each person's role in our gracious salvation?
4. How can believers and churches live out Paul's benediction?
5. In spite of everything and throughout the chapter, Paul gave them three evidences of his fatherly love for them. Search the following verses for those evidences. Explain your answers.

