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# 2 Corinthians

A STUDY WORKBOOK  
*Revised Edition*

Chad Sychtysz

# 2 Corinthians Study Workbook

(revised edition)

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# Introduction

SECOND CORINTHIANS is not one of the more popular books of the New Testament. It is not filled with doctrinal instructions. It does not address a number of church problems, as does its predecessor (what we call “1 Corinthians”). Its theme, content, format, and emphasis are altogether different from 1 Corinthians, and thus it does not appear to serve as a nice, neat sequel. The apostle Paul’s writing style is often more expressive (versus intellectual), making it difficult to read. “Its language is loose, cumbersome, and marked by sudden breaks; there are digressions and parenthetical asides throughout the letter.”<sup>1</sup> “It is the least systematic of all his writings and is filled with emotion. In it Paul displays grief, indignation, and great joy. It is very personal in nature and reveals the inner feelings of Paul as do none of his other writings.”<sup>2</sup> For these reasons, it lies in the shadow of its far more practical sister epistle, and is perhaps one of the least appreciated of Paul’s epistles.

What the second letter to the Corinthians *does* offer, however, is perhaps the most revealing look into the apostle Paul himself, as well as his disposition toward the work and struggles of a true apostle of Christ. It is more personally insightful and poignant (“a tumult of contending emotions”<sup>3</sup>) than any of his other extant writings; in it, “Paul bares his heart and his life as he does in none of his other letters.”<sup>4</sup> “Paul never wrote a more personal letter than 2 Corinthians. ... It is simply a letter in which he wears his heart on his sleeve and speaks without constraint, hiding neither his affection, nor his anger, nor his agony.”<sup>5</sup>

Admittedly, the flow in II Corinthians is disjointed in places and reveals haste; transitions are cumbersome (6:14) and grammatical breaks in the Greek text are common (e.g., 6:3; 7:5, 7; 9:11). Throughout the letter the emotional tone is at times painful (1:8–11; 2:13; 7:5), at other times enthusiastic (7:13–16; 8:2–4), and at still other times vigorous (10:7–8; 11:12; 13:2–3, 5). But these characteristics do not impugn the genuineness of the epistle. They reflect the writer’s concerns and personality.<sup>6</sup>

Second Corinthians provides a number of facets of Paul’s ministry that Acts does not. It also reveals a lot about his devotion to the Corinthians themselves, much more than is revealed in either Acts or 1 Corinthians.

**The City of Corinth:** Corinth [“ornament”] was an important commercial city of ancient Greece, being ideally situated on the western end of the isthmus between the Peloponnesian peninsula and

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1 Simon J. Kistemaker, “Exposition of the Second Epistle to the Corinthians,” *New Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House Co., 1997), 19.

2 H. I. Hester, *The Heart of the New Testament* (Liberty, MO: The Quality Press, Inc. 1963), 302.

3 R. H. Strachan, “The Second Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians,” *The Moffat New Testament Commentary* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1949), xxix.

4 R. C. H. Lenski, “The Interpretation of St. Paul’s First and Second Epistles to the Corinthians,” *Commentary on the New Testament* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1998), 804.

5 C. K. Barrett, *Black’s New Testament Commentary, vol. 8: The Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1997), 32.

6 Kistemaker, *Exposition*, 5.

the mainland. It was strategically positioned at the intersection of north-south land trade routes *and* east-west sea trade routes, providing safe passage between the Aegean and Adriatic Seas.

The city of Corinth was built at the foot of a high hill, on the top of which stood a citadel. This hill, which stood on the south of the city, was its defence [*sic*] in that quarter, as its sides were extremely steep. On the three other sides it was protected by strong and lofty ramparts. The circumference of the city proper was about forty stadia, or five miles. Its situation gave it great commercial advantages. As the whole of that region was mountainous and rather barren, and as the situation gave the city extraordinary commercial advantages, the inhabitants early turned their attention to commerce, and amassed great wealth. This fact was, to no inconsiderable extent, the foundation of the luxury, effeminacy, and vices, for which the city afterwards became so much distinguished.<sup>7</sup>

Corinth's beginnings date as far back as the 7<sup>th</sup> century BC. It quickly grew into a prosperous and influential city-state; its trademark Corinthian bronze and ceramics were sold on the international market. Its wealth and power peaked under the rule of Periander (ca. 625–583 BC), but thereafter began to decline under pressure from the Athenians. In the Peloponnesian War (431–404 BC), Corinth sided with Athens against Sparta, but the war greatly weakened Corinth to the extent that it was overtaken by Philip of Macedon (338 BC). Philip's son, Alexander the Great, used the city as a commercial center and tourist attraction; after Alexander's death (323 BC), Corinth emerged as the leading city of southern Greece and the Peloponnese. Nonetheless, during most of the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> centuries BC, it submitted to Macedonian domination.

In 196 BC, Corinth was given limited autonomy by Rome, but it rebelled against Roman rule only fifty years later. As a result of this, Rome thoroughly destroyed the city (146 BC), and it was a sparsely-populated ruin for one hundred years. In 46 BC, Julius Caesar declared Corinth a Roman colony, rebuilt the city, and re-populated it with freedmen and poor people who came from every corner of the Mediterranean world. Corinth rapidly regained its prominence, and along with it, unprecedented prosperity. "Its wealth was derived from its commercial traffic by sea and by land, its pottery and brass industries, and its political importance as the capital of Achaia [Greece]. At its height it probably had a population of 200,000 free men and 500,000 slaves."<sup>8</sup>

While Greece was known for its famous philosophies and philosophers, Corinth was not. "Its boast was trade and the arts. Corinthian brass became famous, and Corinthian capitals and pillars are still known in architecture."<sup>9</sup> It was these trades, and the great amount of taxes collected in transporting goods from one side of the isthmus to the other, that made Corinth wealthy and renown. Unfortunately, its paganism, hedonism, and wickedness also flourished; the term "Corinthian" became synonymous with gross immorality in the Mediterranean world. Not only this, but the city was steeped in idolatry and temple prostitution; Apollo, Poseidon, Athena, and Aphrodite

7 Albert Barnes, *Barnes' Notes*, vol. 11 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, no date; orig. published in 1885 by Blackie & Son in London), "Introduction," iii.

8 A. Rupprecht, "Corinth," *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, vol. 1, Merrill. C. Tenney, gen. ed. (Grand Rapids: Regency Reference Library, 1976), 961.

9 Lenski, *Interpretation*, 12.

were among some of the principle gods worshiped there. “There were attached [to the temple of Aphrodite] 1,000 priestesses who were sacred prostitutes, and in the evenings they came down from the Acropolis and plied their trade on the streets of Corinth. ... Corinth became a synonym not only for wealth, luxury, drunkenness and debauchery, but also for filth.”<sup>10</sup>

**Author and Date of Writing:** There is little dispute over the authorship of 2 Corinthians. Those who have attempted to do so have discredited themselves rather than disproved what nearly every Christian has believed for the last 2,000 years, namely, that the apostle Paul is the genuine author of this work. Both the internal and external evidence, especially when corroborating with what is recorded in Acts, overwhelmingly points to Paul as the author. In fact, “It would be difficult to find a composition more convincingly impressed with its author” than this one.<sup>11</sup>

The apostle Paul first visited Corinth on his second missionary journey (Acts 18:1ff), circa AD 51 or 52, a visit which followed a relatively poor reception of the gospel in Athens (Acts 17:16ff). He established a church in Corinth and remained there for eighteen months (Acts 18:11). Re-educating the worldly, sensual-minded Corinthians to think and act like Christians was a difficult process; even after all of Paul’s instruction, the Corinthians continued to grapple with their deeply-imbedded paganism.

What we call “First Corinthians” was in response to problems that Paul had heard were going on in the church in Corinth. (In fact, Paul had already written the Corinthians once before—a letter that has since been lost to history; see 1 Cor. 5:9.) After writing 1 Corinthians, Paul’s earnest intention was to revisit Corinth, but he sent Timothy and Erastus to them first (Acts 19:22, 1 Cor. 16:5–11), and also Titus. Paul waited anxiously for word from Titus as to how this letter had been received (2 Cor. 2:12–13), since it dealt with a number of difficult topics and required Paul to be rather forceful in some of his comments. After an agonizing delay, Paul finally learned that the Corinthians (in general) had received his letter in the spirit in which it had been written, and had repented of their sins (2 Cor. 7:6–9). There remained, however, a group of “false apostles” who challenged Paul’s apostolic authority (2 Cor. 11:12–13), and Paul’s response to these men is largely the subject of 2 Corinthians. It appears that Paul did not actually visit Corinth again until after the writing of this second epistle.

Second Corinthians was written from Macedonia (possibly Philippi), ca. AD 56–57, while Paul was on what is known as his third missionary journey (Acts 18:23 – 21:17). Paul wrote it in preparation for his intended visit to Corinth (2 Cor. 12:14, 13:1), in order to: smooth out the relationship between himself and the church there; bring closure to some of their past struggles; and instruct them with regard to the collection being gathered for the saints in need in Jerusalem.

**Purpose and Theme:** The overall occasion for this letter concerns the strained relationship between the Corinthians and Paul. Paul’s own credibility—personally and apostolically—at Corinth had been

<sup>10</sup> William Barclay, *Letters to the Corinthians* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1975, 2002), 3; bracketed words are mine.

<sup>11</sup> Philip Hughes, quoted in James B. Coffman, *Commentary on 1 and 2 Corinthians* (Austin: Firm Foundation, 1977), 297.



gravely threatened.<sup>12</sup> Two major reasons existed for this. First, there was the issue of the “immoral man” (1 Cor. 5) whose situation created a great deal of unnecessary tension between Paul and the Corinthians. Second, there were rebels within the Corinthian church (“a dangerous and defiant minority”<sup>13</sup>) who still resisted Paul’s authority. These men were likely Jews who themselves were being externally influenced by Jews elsewhere (as in Acts 15:1).<sup>14</sup> They claimed to know more about the gospel than did Paul, and they ridiculed his personal integrity and authority. Some of their accusations against him included cowardice, vacillation, personal insecurity, fiery talk with no substance, no letters of commendation (i.e., from Jerusalem), doubts about his knowledge of the Law (of Moses), insinuations about his honesty, and charges of self-ambition and profiteering.

It is clearly evident that Paul was both heartbroken and very angry over this. At the time of the writing of 2 Corinthians, Paul was in the process of collecting money from predominantly Gentile churches in Macedonia and Achaia (Greece) to give to the predominantly Jewish churches in Judea as a relief effort for the famine there. Paul’s opponents (“most eminent apostles,” as he sarcastically refers to them—11:5) claimed that he was collecting money for himself and had “deceived” the Corinthians by using other men (such as Titus) to make it appear that he was not involved.

Paul’s response to these charges, however, was not to vindicate himself to God, because he knew that he had done no wrong. Rather, it was to prove his sincere and godly intentions to the Corinthians. Furthermore, “It was [his] sublime conception of Christ that explains the earnestness of Paul’s propaganda, his solicitude for the churches that were threatened by the insidious sophistries of the Judaizers, and his uncompromising assault upon them.”<sup>15</sup> A “Judaizer,” as it will be used in this study, refers to a Jewish Christian who: has not yet let go of his Jewish heritage; compels Gentile Christians to conform to (elements of) the Law of Moses (e.g., Acts 15:1, 5); criticizes and undermines the authority of the apostle Paul because he does *not* compel Gentiles in this way; tries to marry Christianity and Judaism (a mixture of the Law and rabbinic traditions).

Second Corinthians’ design is not as well structured as we see in other letters, simply because of its highly emotional and personal content. The first nine chapters (1—9) indicate a kind of reconciliation between Paul and the Corinthians—at least, the Corinthians that respected, trusted,

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12 “The majority of the Corinthian Church had submitted to the injunctions of St. Paul, and testified the deepest repentance for the sins into which they had fallen. ... But there was still a minority, whose opposition seems to have been rather embittered than humbled by the submission which the great body of the Church had thus yielded. They proclaimed, in a louder and more contemptuous tone than ever, their accusations against the Apostle” (W. J. Conybeare and J. S. Howson, *The Life and Epistles of St. Paul* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1964], 438).

13 J. W. McGarvey and Philip Y. Pendleton, *The Standard Bible Commentary: Thessalonians, Corinthians, Galatians and Romans* (Cincinnati: Standard Publishing Foundation, 1916), 167.

14 These Jews are not of the same mind as those whom Paul confronted in, say, Galatians. They are not imposing circumcision on Gentile believers; they do not insist on keeping the Law of Moses; etc.—things Paul has had to refute elsewhere. “[These] opponents were Jews, but Hellenistic [i.e., Greek-cultured] Jews, who imitated the style of propaganda used by the inspired figures of the Hellenistic world. ‘In their behaviour [*sic*] and the style of their preaching they belong to that type of itinerant wandering prophets, magicians, and saviours [*sic*]...who gave themselves out to be God’s envoys, and sought to exalt themselves by revelations and miracles’ (Friedrich)” (Barrett, *BNTC*, vol. 8, 28–29; bracketed words are mine).

15 David Lipscomb, *A Commentary on the New Testament Epistles: Second Corinthians and Galatians* (Nashville: Gospel Advocate Co., 1979), 17.

and listened to him. The remainder of the epistle (chapters 10—13) carries a very different tone, and is pointedly directed at those within the Corinthian church who are causing friction, undermining Paul’s credibility, and gloating over their own knowledge and status.

Some think that there was a “sorrowful” (or “severe”) letter that Paul wrote in-between First and Second Corinthians (2:4, 7:8–9), and a personal visit in-between his visit to Corinth in Acts 18 and his intended visit after the delivery of “2 Corinthians” (12:14, 13:1–2). If this “sorrowful” letter did exist, it has not survived, to our knowledge. Barclay, for one, says that 2 Cor. 10—13 is “almost certainly” the “sorrowful” letter that has been appended to the rest of “2 Corinthians,” yet there is no good evidence for this.<sup>16</sup>

The suggestion has been made that chapters 10–13 refer to the letter written “out of an extremely troubled and anguished heart” (2 Cor. 2:4, HCSB). Two arguments favor this: (1) The tone changes between chapters 9 and 10. Chapters 1–9 reflect restored relations and the absence of hostility. Chapters 10–13 are filled with rebuke and Paul’s defense of his apostleship and conduct. (2) Chapters 1–9 reflect Paul’s joy and optimism. This is hard to account for if even a minority remained stubborn. Two arguments are given against chapters 10–13 being the harsh letter: (1) There is no manuscript evidence for such a division. (2) Chapters 1–9 could be addressed to the repenting majority and chapters 10–13 to an unrepentant minority.<sup>17</sup>

In my opinion, the far stronger of these positions is the latter, which upholds the unity and integrity of the entire epistle. “The epistle has come down through history as a unit; and the fulminations of critics who based their theory of a chopped-up letter containing fragments of other documents solely upon internal characteristics of the epistle have been repeatedly refused and frustrated.”<sup>18</sup>

While not an in-depth doctrinal treatise (as, say, Romans), 2 Corinthians does offer some theological teachings that are expounded upon nowhere else in the New Testament. These include: certain teachings on the “new covenant” (2:12—4:16); our earthly dwelling and heavenly “clothing” (4:7—5:10); and the “ministry of reconciliation” (5:11–21). Paul also offers revealing insight to the difficult ministry which Christ required of him (2 Cor. 11:22–33; see Acts 9:15–16), and provides the characteristics of a “true apostle” (2 Cor. 12:12).

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16 Barclay, *Letters*, 8–9.

17 R. E. Glaze, “Corinthians, Second Epistle to,” *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary* (electronic), Chad Brand, Charles Draper, and Archie England, gen. eds. (© 2003 by Holman Bible Publishers; database © 2014 by WORDsearch Corp.).

18 Coffman, *Commentary*, 298. However, the best treatment of this issue that I have found is in Kistemaker’s commentary (*Exposition*, 6–15), where he examines all the different theories but concludes that the unity of the book as it has come down to us is to be maintained.

**General Outline:**

- Salutation (1:1–2)
- Section One: Paul’s Physical and Spiritual Ministry (1:3—7:16)
  - Lesson One: Paul’s Comfort and Confidence (1:3–22)
  - Lesson Two: The Reason for Paul’s Writing (1:23—2:17)
  - Lesson Three: Ministers of a New Covenant (3:1–18)
  - Lesson Four: The Sacrificial Nature of Paul’s Ministry (4:1–18)
  - Lesson Five: Our Future Glory through the Ministry of Reconciliation (5:1–21)
  - Lesson Six: The Genuineness of Paul’s Ministry (6:1—7:1)
  - Lesson Seven: Paul’s Appeal for the Corinthians’ Affections (7:2–16)
- Section Two: Monetary Collection and Principles of Giving (8:1—9:15)
  - Lesson Eight: Paul Reminds the Corinthians’ of Their Pledge (8:1–24)
  - Lesson Nine: Principles of Charitable Contributions (9:1–15)
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  - Lesson Thirteen: Final Admonitions (12:14—13:10)
- Final Commendations and Closing Thoughts (13:11–14)

**Abbreviations Used in This Study:**

- NT: New Testament
- OT: Old Testament
- NAS or NASB: New American Standard (Bible)
- KJV: King James Version (Bible)
- NIV: New International Version (Bible)
- HCSB: Holman Christian Study Bible
- BNTC: Black’s New Testament Commentary (Series)
- JFB: Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary on the New Testament
- SBC: Standard Bible Commentary (by J. W. McGarvey and Philip Pendleton)

## Salutation (1:1–2)

“PAUL, AN APOSTLE of Christ Jesus by the will of God” (1:1)—a necessary introduction for a church wrestling with compliance to apostolic authority (see 1 Cor 1:1). In other words: Paul reasserts himself as an *apostle* of God writing to the “*church* of God” at Corinth. The mention of Timothy (1:1) does not put the two men on the same standing; Timothy is Paul’s “brother” in the faith and a fellow minister, but not Paul’s equal. The entire letter is written in Paul’s voice, with his words, and by his apostolic authority. Both the apostle and the saints [lit., holy ones] belong to and derive their approval from “God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” This immediately establishes the context of the letter: Paul is commissioned by God to instruct His saints, and God expects His saints to listen to that instruction. “Achaia” likely refers to the entire peninsula south of Macedonia, of which Corinth was the capital.<sup>19</sup> “Grace...and peace...” (1:2) are only possible for those who are: 1) *in Christ*, as bona fide members of His spiritual body (or, church; see Col. 1:18); and 2) walking in a manner worthy of Christ (Col. 1:10) and His gospel (Phil. 1:27).

### Section One: Paul’s Physical and Spiritual Ministry (1:3—7:16) Lesson One: Paul’s Comfort and Confidence (1:3–22)

**The God of All Comfort (1:1–7):** Mercy and comfort (1:3) are major themes of this letter, concepts which resonate throughout it in the form of “reconciliation,” “grace,” “life,” “glory,” “joy,” etc. “Mercy” is the sparing of that which is rightly deserved; it is often used synonymously with “compassion.” “Comfort” is derived from [Latin] *con-* (with) + *forte* (strength); literally, it means “to make strong together” or “to strengthen (through the encouragement of another).”<sup>20</sup> Paul recognized God as the original *source* of all mercy and comfort. “There are two things of which God is said to have the monopoly: He is ‘the God of *all* grace’ and He is ‘the God of *all* comfort. All grace comes from Him, all lasting comfort comes from Him.”<sup>21</sup> The implication is: no one will receive mercy, and therefore no one can be comforted, outside of a right relationship with Him. As God comforts one member of the body, so that comfort can be extended to others (1:4). This works in the same way as godly love: as God loves us, so we extend that love to one another (1 John 4:11, 19).

In proportion to the sufferings one must endure for the sake of Christ (see Acts 14:22 or 2 Tim. 3:12, for example), God provides divine comfort as a demonstration of His mercy (1:5). “Tribulation and consolation are wound together.”<sup>22</sup> Genuine comfort cannot be fully realized without having first genuinely suffered; the more intense the suffering, the sweeter and more appreciated God’s comfort will be. “All sunshine makes a desert” (Arabian proverb).<sup>23</sup> The specific

<sup>19</sup> McGarvey and Pendleton, *SBC*, 169.

<sup>20</sup> “Comfort” is from the Greek *parakleseos*, related to *paraklete*, translated “Comforter” or “Helper” in John 14:16, 26, et al.; this latter word Jesus used to describe the (work of the) Holy Spirit (A. T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, vol. IV [Grand Rapids: Baker Books; no date], 208–209).

<sup>21</sup> H. A. Ironside, *Addresses on the Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (New York: Loizeaux Bros., 1954), 17.

<sup>22</sup> Lenski, *Interpretation*, 812.

<sup>23</sup> Barclay, *Letters*, 205.

comfort to which Paul refers is the favorable report from Titus concerning how the Corinthians had received his previous letter (2 Cor. 7:6–7, 13). Paul had written to them strongly, and feared that they might not respond appropriately to what he had said. His intention was not merely to expose their errors, but to have them repent of their sins (2 Cor. 7:8–9). Paul does not keep his joy of being comforted to himself, however. He speaks freely of the “sufferings” that he (and others) had endured for the sake of the gospel (1:6–7). He sees a direct correlation between what has happened to him personally and what will profit the church in Corinth. Paul is not saying that anyone would literally be saved by his comfort, but that mercy, comfort, and compassion are instrumental in and contribute toward one’s salvation. Whatever he has learned and gained through God’s having comforted him is to the Corinthians’ spiritual advantage.

**Real Suffering, Real Comfort (1:8–11):** Paul is not speaking only in theoretical or abstract terms, however, when he talks about suffering. He is not giving them a sermon on “suffering” but is alluding to real-world and painful experiences that he has endured (1:8). His reference to his “affliction...in Asia” may allude to a specific event (Acts 19:23–41) or the general trouble he faced in the Roman province of Asia Minor (see 1 Cor. 15:32, a figurative expression). It is possible that he refers here to a situation that is nowhere else recorded in the New Testament, similar to the statement in Rom. 16:4.<sup>24</sup>

“Trust” and “deliverance” (1:9–10) are positive themes which accompany the concepts of suffering and comfort. One’s perilous physical, mental, or emotional situation ought to increase his dependence upon the soul-strengthening support that God alone can provide (Eph. 3:16–17). The “sentence of death” (later expounded upon in 2 Cor. 4:11–12) refers to the ever-present danger that Paul and his co-workers faced in preaching the gospel of Christ. This danger is due to: preaching to a hostile audience (specifically, unbelieving Jews); enemies within the brotherhood (who wanted Paul to fail so they might be justified); and the rigors of travel in the ancient world (robbers, bandits, storms at sea, wild animals, etc.). Just as God “raises the dead” (1:9; see Heb. 11:19), so He is able to raise the hopes of those whose circumstances seem hopeless (Rom. 4:18–21). “When the need is greatest, God is nearest.”<sup>25</sup> Paul faced peril and death on a number of occasions (as he later describes in 2 Cor. 11), yet he has always kept his faith in the Great Deliverer. His hope was not in man-made deliverance, or even in his self-resourcefulness, but in divine providence (1:10).<sup>26</sup> He also believed in the power of prayer, and especially the power of the *collective* prayers of God’s people (1:11; see Eph. 6:18–19, Col. 4:2–4, Phil. 1:19, and Heb. 13:18–19). With many prayers comes “many thanks,” since petitions to God are always to be accompanied with overflowing gratitude (Phil. 4:6, Col. 2:7).

**Confidence and Commitment (1:12–22):** “Confidence” (1:12) is another theme that repeatedly resurfaces throughout this epistle. Paul expresses his confidence in: the way that he (and fellow

<sup>24</sup> Coffman, *Commentary*, 310.

<sup>25</sup> Lenski, *Interpretation*, 830.

<sup>26</sup> On the other hand: “The Church’s worst times are not times of suffering, of martyrdom. The Church’s most dangerous periods are those when she is enjoying the patronage of the world. The Church is never in such grave danger as when the world is fawning upon it, when worldlings look upon it with favor” (Ironsides, *Addresses*, 30).

ministers) have conducted themselves (“in holiness and godly sincerity”<sup>27</sup>); the Corinthians themselves (2 Cor. 7:4, 16); and his being able to visit them soon, if all goes according to plan (1:15). Nonetheless, Paul realizes that not all of what he had written earlier was fully understood by the saints in Corinth (1:13–14); in fact, some of Paul’s writings are difficult for anyone to grasp (2 Pet. 3:16). Even so, the *intention* of his writing was so that they (and we) *could* read and *could* understand (see Eph. 3:4). He implies here that whatever he wrote earlier *had not changed*, and therefore he had no reason to retract any of it, but only to provide more clarity to what had been written.<sup>28</sup>

Paul also implies that he had been prevented from visiting them earlier, or that he had visited them only very briefly, and not as long as he had hoped (1:15–16). Regardless, he assures the Corinthians that he has not deceived them by failing to do what he had promised (1:17).<sup>29</sup> He is not making plans that only suit his own interests (i.e., “according to the flesh”); he has the concerns of the entire brotherhood weighing heavily upon him always (2 Cor. 11:28). Thus, “our word to you is not yes and no” (1:18)—he is not telling them one thing but doing the opposite. The gospel of Christ—just like God Himself—is not a contradictory message, nor should be the promises of those who preach that gospel. “God is faithful” (see also 1 Cor. 1:9 and 10:13) means that He does not talk out of both sides of His mouth, but whatever He promises, He is certain to fulfill. Paul is not saying, “I am as faithful to you as God is,” for Paul is only a man, even though he is a servant of the Lord. He can be delayed for reasons beyond his control (e.g., 1 Thess. 2:18), but God will not be. Even so, Paul is affirming the sincerity of his own personal promise to the Corinthians. Just as Christ is God’s “Amen” [lit., truly; yes; so be it] to believers, Paul is Christ’s “yes” to the church at Corinth (1:19–20). Christ is the One who *fulfills* the promises of God; “the eternal purpose” of God was “carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Eph. 3:11). Thus, He is “the Amen, the faithful and true Witness” of God’s promises (Rev. 3:14). “He [Jesus] is the personal guarantee of God that the greatest and least of His promises are true.”<sup>30</sup>

God the “Father of mercies” (recall 1:3) is also the One who “establishes [or, confirms],” “anointed,”<sup>31</sup> and “sealed” those who belong to Him (1:21–22). These are all divine actions; we initiate them through our faith, and we participate in them as believers, but it is God alone who carries them out.<sup>32</sup> “It is worth noticing that in the New Testament the act of anointing is never

27 Some manuscripts have *haploteti* (simplicity) instead of *hagioteti* (holiness); most of the commentators consulted favor this first usage: “in straightforwardness and godly sincerity ... we have conducted ourselves ...” (Kistemaker, *Exposition*, 54).

28 Lenski, *Interpretation*, 840–841.

29 “Vacillating” (NASB) is literally “fickleness” or “lightness (of sincerity)” or “levity” (versus seriousness) (W. E. Vine, *Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words* [STBC; no date], 92). Put another way: Paul was not making a joke of the Corinthians by betraying their confidence in him.

30 Barclay, *Letters*, 209; bracketed word is mine.

31 “Anointed” [Greek, *chrisas*] is derived from *chrīo*, from which we get “Christ” (Robertson, *Word Pictures*, vol. 4, 213). While we are not anointed in the same *way* as Christ, or for the same *reason*, we are anointed with the same *Spirit* (1 Cor. 12:13).

32 “The act [of our anointing] occurred in our baptism, as it did immediately after Christ’s baptism [Mat. 3:16]. By means of His anointing Christ was placed into His high office and position; our anointing did the same for us. He was made King and Priest in the supreme sense, hence the supreme way in which God anointed Him; we were made kings

ascribed to anyone but God.”<sup>33</sup> We are not bound to God merely by His desire to save us and our desperate need to be saved. Rather, our relationship with God is secured by a legally-binding covenant—one that is sealed by none other than Himself. To be “sealed” indicates an authoritative stamp of approval, indicating authenticity and ownership (Eph. 1:13–14, 2 Tim. 2:19). The wording here alludes to (but is not *reduced* to) a business transaction, which would be well-understood in the commercial trading world of Corinth.<sup>34</sup> What Paul emphasizes here is the *legitimacy* of the Christian’s fellowship with God: if God has given us His Spirit (Acts 5:32), then we most certainly belong to Him; it cannot be otherwise. Since we have the “pledge [lit., earnest; down payment<sup>35</sup>]” of His Spirit, we are guaranteed the *full* realization of His promise in due time (*if* we “continue in the faith” [Col. 1:23] and *remain* “faithful until death” [Rev. 2:10]).

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and priests under Him, hence the way in which our anointing took place by means of baptism. Those who conceive of baptism as a mere sign and symbol must place the anointing elsewhere than in baptism, a thing that is most difficult to do” (Lenski, *Interpretation*, 854; bracketed words are mine).

33 Lipscomb, *Commentary*, 34. This is true of spiritual anointing anyway; see Jas. 5:14 for a medicinal anointing.

34 Adapted from Strachan, *Second Epistle*, 59–60.

35 James Strong, *Strong’s Talking Greek-Hebrew Dictionary*, electronic version (database © 2003 by WORDsearch Corp.), #G728.

## Questions

- 1.) In discussing God's "comfort" (1:3–5), is Paul referring to a miraculous experience, or something of a practical nature—as in, something we can receive today?
  - a. Or, is God's "comfort" (or, "mercy") extended only in the form of sparing us from eternal punishment?
  - b. Can those who are not "in Christ" experience God's mercy in the same way that Paul speaks of it here? Why or why not?
  
- 2.) When a Christian chooses to suffer or rejoice only in private, how does this undermine the instructions of the gospel? What are the benefits of our shared positive *and* negative experiences (see 1 Cor. 12:26, Gal. 6:6, and 1 Pet. 5:9, for example)?
  
- 3.) Is God's deliverance from the trials we must face in our walk with Him conditional or unconditional? In other words, in expecting *Him* to perform in this way, is there anything required of *us*?
  
- 4.) Paul claims that "God is faithful" (1:18). But, to *what* is He faithful? To *whom*, exactly? Under what circumstances? What if He was *not* faithful?



## Lesson Two: The Reason for Paul's Writing (1:23—2:17)

PAUL NOW REVEALS (1:23–24) that there was more to the delay of his visit than whatever was detaining him.<sup>36</sup> He purposely “did not come again” right away in order to “spare” the Corinthians (by giving them time to repent), not because he was trying to avoid them (1:23–24). He did not want to come to them in an imposing way, but as fellow “workers with you for your joy.” Coming to them earlier would have, in his opinion, undermined that objective. He did not want another “sorrowful [or, painful]” visit, implying that there had already *been* one.<sup>37</sup>

**A Successful Disciplinary Action (2:4–11):** Many scholars and commentators believe that Paul had what has been dubbed an “intermediate journey” to Corinth between the time he wrote 1 Corinthians from Ephesus and the writing of this epistle (cf. Acts 20:2). This is considered the “sorrowful” visit (implied in 2:1–4) which allegedly prompted a letter (which, if it was indeed written, no longer exists). This would also explain the “third time” he would come to them (12:14, 13:1). Because of this sorrowful visit, the relationship between the Corinthians and Paul deteriorated considerably. Paul speaks of “sorrow from those who ought to make me rejoice” (2:3) and “much affliction and anguish of heart” (2:4) that he experienced as a result of it. He wanted to avoid a repeat of this. Instead, he desired to show his *love* for them.

Without mentioning names or details, Paul now refers to a disciplinary incident within the church at Corinth—an action which he had initiated against a certain brother (2:5–11). Many believe this person to be the one mentioned in 1 Cor. 5—the man who had his “father’s wife.”<sup>38</sup> In that case, Paul used his apostolic authority to demand that the Corinthians withdraw their fellowship from this man (1 Cor. 5:13). The purpose of that decision was twofold: first, not to destroy the brother involved, but to compel him to repent; second, to “test” the response of the Corinthian church with regard to apostolic instruction (see 2:9). The “majority” of the church apparently responded well (2:6), although it may be assumed that some: remained indifferent; sympathized with the man and thus did not end their personal fellowship with him; openly resisted Paul’s authority (to be dealt with later).<sup>39</sup> It is possible, too, that some believed the man deserved even more punishment. “Disciplinary action had been taken, but there were some who felt that it had not been sufficiently severe and who wanted to impose an even greater punishment.”<sup>40</sup>

In Paul’s view, however, the objective has been sufficiently fulfilled; the case against this man is now closed. It is now time to “reaffirm your love for him” since the brother has shown “excessive

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36 Some Bible scholars think that the next chapter ought to begin here, since there is an obvious transition in thought that flows seamlessly into chapter 2 (Barnes, *Barnes’ Notes*, 24). Thus, this workbook uses 1:23 as the beginning of a new section rather than keeping 1:23–24 with the previous one.

37 Glaze, “2 Corinthians,” *Holman* (electronic).

38 This has been the dominant view for centuries. Some doubt this, however, and suggest that the man was a “stranger” to the Corinthian church—i.e., someone from outside of their group (Strachan, *Second Epistle*, 70; Barrett, *BNTC*, 89; et al). However, such commentators offer no compelling evidence to deny what is the most natural conclusion.

39 This is also the conclusion of Kistemaker (*Exposition*, 78).

40 Barclay, *Letters*, 214.

sorrow.” In other words, the man repented of his sin and sought God’s forgiveness as well as that of the congregation. This calls for a different course of action on the part of the congregation, namely, to forgive this brother and receive him back in full fellowship (2:10). To refuse to forgive and restore fellowship with a repentant brother in Christ is just as wrong as it is to refuse to put an impenitent brother *out* of Christian fellowship. Paul approves of both positive actions: the putting *out* as well as the taking *back*. If they have forgiven him as a godly response toward this man’s penitence, then certainly Paul also has forgiven him. He is not going to stand in the way of appropriate Christian action.

To refuse to forgive (when the conditions *for* forgiveness have indeed been met) is to succumb to Satan’s “schemes,” since Christians are supposed to be a forgiving people (2:11; see Eph. 4:32). Satan’s malicious efforts are at the heart of every struggle against sin; the division of fellowship is one of his many devices. Satan did not seek only the brother who had sinned, but also sought to ruin, if possible, the entire congregation.<sup>41</sup> If the congregation withheld its forgiveness and fellowship for vindictive (or other) reasons, this would serve Satan’s interests, not God’s. However, having dealt correctly with this sin (instead of “arrogantly” as before; see 1 Cor. 5:1–2), Paul was pleased with the Corinthians’ response, if only they would now reinstate the penitent brother’s fellowship.

**Paul’s Relief over Titus’ News (2:12–17):** Paul’s original plan was apparently to leave Ephesus for Troas. There he would meet up with his co-worker, Titus, who was supposed to bring him news of how the Corinthians were doing and their regard for his authority. Titus did not come to Troas, however, and Paul himself was preoccupied, taking advantage of the “open door” of opportunity God had provided for him there (2:12). Titus’ delay caused Paul all kinds of anxiety, but he had work to carry out among the churches in Macedonia (2:13). It was there that Titus found him and gave him favorable news of the church at Corinth (2:14, implied). Paul’s elation and relief are very evident in this passage, and he characterizes the changed attitudes of the church in Corinth as a “triumph.” Whenever Christians submit to what Christ wants them to do, it is *Christ* who deserves the ultimate recognition, since He is the head of His church (Col. 1:18) and the One who provides direction for it.

Paul’s “fragrance” reference (“an aroma from death to death” for one person and “life to life” for another) likely alludes to a well-known military procedure in the ancient world (2:15–16a).<sup>42</sup> A victorious general, upon entering his own city, would be saluted with a procession marked with celebration and the burning of spices and incense.<sup>43</sup> This was the fragrance of victory and success.

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41 Lenski, *Interpretation*, 890; Lipscomb, *Commentary*, 39.

42 “The phrases *of death to death* and *of life to life* probably are idiomatic expressions that signify ‘death from beginning to end’ and ‘life from beginning to end.’ A similar example is recorded in Romans 1:17, where in some translations the wording ‘from faith to faith’ reads ‘faith from first to last’” (Kistemaker, *Exposition*, 92).

43 “The highest honour [*sic*] which could be given to a victorious Roman general was [what was known as] a Triumph. To attain it, he must satisfy certain conditions. He must have been the actual commander-in-chief in the field. The campaign must have been completely finished, the region pacified and the victorious troops brought home. Of the enemy, at least 5,000 must have fallen in one engagement. A positive extension of territory must have been gained, and not merely a disaster avoided or an attack repelled. And the victory must have been won over a foreign enemy and not in a civil war” (Barclay, *Letters*, 217; bracketed words are mine). It may very well have been the Roman “Triumph” that Paul had in mind when writing these thoughts.

His prisoners of war who followed in the march, however, would smell the same incense and know that death was near, as it was customary to execute captives as a symbol of the conquest of their people. This is the traditional and most natural explanation of this passage.<sup>44</sup>

However, in another interpretation, Paul may be referring to the aroma [lit., the sweet savor of sacrifice<sup>45</sup>] produced by his own burnt offerings and peace offerings given in honor of God (cf. Eph. 5:1–2). As a servant of Christ, Paul was made a spectacle to the world (1 Cor. 4:9), but a kind of priest to the King of heaven. As he smelled this aroma, he knew that it meant spiritual life for him, even though he was being led (ultimately) to his death because of his preaching.<sup>46</sup> The knowledge received *from* Christ, when properly exercised in Christian love, produces a “sweet aroma” *to* Christ (2:14). This knowledge provided for a Christ-like attitude among the Corinthians (the first “life” in 2:16a) and a refreshment to Paul himself (the second “life”). Those who reject this knowledge, however, will perish *because* of that rejection (2:15; see also 10:5). To the obedient believer, heavenly knowledge is the fragrance of victory; to the one who resists obedience, it is the smell of impending death. “By preaching the Gospel he [Paul] leads some to life, and at the same time sentences others to death.”<sup>47</sup>

“Who is adequate for these things?” (2:16b)—i.e., Paul and his fellow apostles recognize that they are not “adequate” to preach this knowledge/“fragrance” on their own merit, but have been commissioned by Christ for this very purpose. Thus, “we are not like” the opportunists [or: hucksters; charlatans; profiteers] who see some financial or personal gain in the preaching of the gospel (2:17). “The figure here is originally that of a tavernkeeper who mixes poor wine with good to increase his profits.”<sup>48</sup> In sharp contrast, Paul preached with the sincerest of motives (see 1 Thess. 2:1–6), and with all accuracy sought to represent Christ and His message.

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44 Conybeare and Howson, *Life and Epistles*, 444.

45 Barrett, *BNTC*, 99.

46 Kistemaker, *Interpretation*, 89–90.

47 Barrett, *BNTC*, 102.

48 Coffman, *Commentary*, 328. See also Marvin R. Vincent, *Vincent’s Word Studies*, electronic edition (database © 2014 by WORDsearch Corp.), on 2:16; “Paul uses the term of those who trade in the word of God, adulterating it for the purpose of gain or popularity.”

## Questions

- 1.) Paul grieved over what he had to say to the Corinthians (2:4), yet it was necessary that such words be said. This is often characterized today as “tough love.”
  - a. Under what general circumstances is tough love the best course of action?
  - b. When does tough love cease to be “love” and instead is only “tough”?
  
- 2.) Ideally, the goal of all corrective or punitive discipline is *restoration* (Mat. 18:15–17, Gal. 6:1–2, Heb. 12:10–11, et al). How does 2:5–8 bear this out so well?
  - a. Yet, how can “church discipline” be misunderstood by the congregation that is supposed to administer it—and what is the negative result when it is?
  - b. How is the congregation supposed to respond to the repentance of one who had previously been disciplined by it?
  
- 3.) What “advantage” does Satan seek to gain from Christians, especially in the matter of church discipline (2:11)? How can we avoid being “ignorant of his schemes”?
  
- 4.) Paul says, in essence, that Christ’s gospel is the source of spiritual *life* as well as the pronouncement of spiritual *death* (2:15–16). What is meant by this? Is it just as important to speak of the negative results of rejecting Christ’s gospel as it is to highlight the positive results of obedience to it?
  
- 5.) Can any good come from preaching Christ’s gospel out of selfish motives (2:17; see Phil. 1:15–18)? What if the message itself is corrupted (see 2 Pet. 2:1–3)?