

A Study of Second Corinthians

Week One

2 Corinthians 1:1-2:4

Day One

1:1 Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, To the church of God in Corinth, together with all the saints throughout Achaia: 2 Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. 3 Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, 4 who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God.

v. 1 – Paul was an apostle because God made him one, not because he had chosen to be one or because some movement or group had made him one. Plus, he was an apostle of Jesus, not of any church or denomination. I believe that there are modern apostles, since the word apostle literally means “sent forth,” and men and women are still being sent forth to do God’s work. The funny thing to me is when someone assumes the title of apostle and doesn’t go anywhere, but ministers or pastors locally. That is humorous, like little boys walking around in grown men’s shoes.

Paul mentioned Timothy in his greeting, so we know that Timothy was with Paul when he wrote this letter. It doesn’t appear that Timothy contributed to or collaborated on the letter at hand. If he did, he certainly has never received any credit for doing so. If you would like to do more reading on the greatest assistant of all time, I have commented on Timothy’s service to Paul in my commentaries on Acts and Philipians.

Many have made much of Paul’s greeting to the church in the city of Corinth, offering this as proof that there should be only one church in every area. If you follow this thinking, there would or should only be one church at Pittsburgh, Harare, Nairobi and New York.

I think this is really a stretch to conclude this, given the size and complexity of the body of Christ today. When Paul ministered, one could visit the church in the city because there weren’t many people in the city who were saved. Today, there are thousands and thousands of people, representing many churches and denominations. It is idealistic, unrealistic and unbiblical to think that there could or should be that kind of unity in the larger body today.

v. 2 – Paul closed his last letter to Corinth with a blessing of peace and opened this one with the same blessing. Notice also that there are two mentions of Jesus in the first two verses. It was always about Jesus for Paul, nothing more and certainly nothing less. It was never about him (Paul), that’s for sure.

vs. 3&4 – This is one of my favorite concepts in the Bible. God comforts us so that we can comfort others with the comfort with which he comforted us. What a great picture!

This helps make sense of our trials and tribulations, for they are designed to make us more sensitive to the plight of others. As we know what they feel from firsthand experience, we can then minister to them effectively because we have been where they are. We comfort with the comfort that we at one time received.

Do you have this dynamic working in your life? Do you thank God for your trials, looking for how you can use what you are learning and going through to help others? Do you see that your suffering is building something in you that only suffering could build? Are you thankful for your trials, or bitter? Have your hardships caused you to look outward to others, or draw inward into yourself?

Day Two

5 For just as the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives, so also through Christ our comfort overflows. 6 If we are distressed, it is for your comfort and salvation; if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which produces in you patient endurance of the same sufferings we suffer. 7 And our hope for you is firm, because we know that just as you share in our sufferings, so also you share in our comfort. 8 We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about the hardships we suffered in the province of Asia. We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired even of life.

v. 5 – Jesus suffered, not only on the cross, but in His life and ministry. He left us an example of how we should respond when suffering. Jesus suffered even though He was perfect in every way, so we should not think suffering in our own lives a strange thing. But if we suffer in Christ, then we shall also be comforted in Christ. If we don't suffer, we won't ever know that comfort. We also won't know how to respond to others who are suffering. **Does this make sense?**

v. 6 – Of course, suffering is a part of our walk as we follow Jesus and a common topic throughout the New Testament. Here are a few examples. **Can you think of any others?**

For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for him, since you are going through the same struggle you saw I had, and now hear that I still have (Philippians 1:29-30).

But even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed. “Do not fear what they fear; do not be frightened” (1 Peter 3:14).

So then, those who suffer according to God's will should commit themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good (1 Peter 4:19).

v. 7 – Paul didn't despair over the hard times that the Corinthians were going through, for he knew that suffering and comfort were a “package deal.” He had experienced that himself and expected that his suffering churches would have the same comfort. Here are some more verses on suffering for you to consider.

Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted (Hebrews 2:18).

Although he was a son, he learned obedience from what he suffered and, once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him (Hebrews 5:8-9)

To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps (1 Peter 2:21).

v. 8 – Paul mentioned his sufferings while in Ephesus, which almost seemed unbearable. There exists what I call an Old Testament mentality to hardship and suffering among some. That mentality reasons that they (or others) have done something wrong when they suffer or go through hard times. This attitude causes them to look for the way out of their hardship by some formula, saying, or action. Paul, however, suffered for doing the work that God wanted him to do. He had done nothing wrong, but shared in the sufferings of Christ. And he knew that there was no shortcut out of or around his appointed suffering.

Are you suffering in any way? Have you asked God, “Why?” Have you looked for a way out? I’m not saying you’re doing anything wrong, but there may be something you aren’t seeing? This suffering is producing something that only it can produce. Therefore, you can allow it to work in you while you cry out to God for mercy and relief.

Day Three

9 Indeed, in our hearts we felt the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead. 10 He has delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us. On him we have set our hope that he will continue to deliver us, 11 as you help us by your prayers. Then many will give thanks on our behalf for the gracious favor granted us in answer to the prayers of many. 12 Now this is our boast: Our conscience testifies that we have conducted ourselves in the world, and especially in our relations with you, in the holiness and sincerity that are from God. We have done so not according to worldly wisdom but according to God's grace.

v. 9 – We know some of what Paul went thorough in Ephesus from Luke’s record in Acts 18-20. But none of what Luke reported seems to have the sense of impending death—danger, yes, but not death. So other things must have happened that caused Paul to think that he might die. Paul’s perspective on that sentence of death was that God used it to teach him and his team not to rely on themselves but God. **Isn’t that the ultimate goal of much of our tribulation: to teach us to trust and focus on Him?** There is a line to a song that says, “Let’s forget about ourselves, and concentrate on Him, and worship Him.” That’s easy to sing about, but harder to do. So here we see another “benefit” to our suffering; it teaches us to trust God and not rely on our resources.

v. 10 – Paul had been trusting, was trusting and would continue to trust the Lord as he carried out his work. That should be our testimony as well: I have trusted, am trusting and will trust. The fact that Paul had decided to trust God for deliverance meant that he expected to need more danger and more deliverance from those dangers. It's obvious that Paul did not romanticize his work for Jesus. He knew it would never be easy and that it would involve danger and life-threatening circumstances. **Have you set your hope on God to deliver you in every and all situations?**

v. 11 – Paul saw another benefit to suffering: it would cause others to pray for him. As they prayed and he was delivered according to their prayers, those praying would thank God for answering their prayers. So let's summarize the benefits of tribulation:

1. It will make us sensitive to the needs of others.
2. It will give us comfort with which to comfort others.
3. It will teach us not to rely on ourselves but to trust God.
4. It will cause others to pray for us.
5. It will cause those praying to thank God for His answers.

That's a pretty impressive lineup of benefits. No wonder God allows the trials to come into our lives. Those trials enable us to reap tremendous benefits. That is why we must thank God in the midst of our trials. It is more evidence that we must learn to trust Him.

v. 12 – Paul took the opportunity to do a little boasting. His boast was that his team and he had conducted themselves with the highest level of integrity and holiness when it came to his relationship with the churches he planted. He did this not according to the world's standards but according to God's standards. And his conscience bore witness that he had done so well. Of course, Paul had been criticized for his conduct toward the Corinthians, just as almost all leaders are, and would answer more of those charges as this letter progressed.

We refer to Paul as St. Paul. We see him in stained glass church windows, portrayed with an angelic look and a halo. But he had many opponents and critics in the early church. He was anything but an angel to some. It is important that we identify with his image as it was and not as it has become 2,000 years later if we are going to do God's will today. For God's will involves pressure, criticism, tribulation, hardship and misunderstanding. We serve a perfect God in an imperfect world. You cannot do something for God and *not* be criticized and misunderstood. I think history bears this out repeatedly. **So are you ready to follow in Paul's footsteps, to do something for God and to pay a high price to get it done? Don't answer too quickly.**

Day Four

13 For we do not write you anything you cannot read or understand. And I hope that, 14 as you have understood us in part, you will come to understand fully that you can boast of us just as we will boast of you in the day of the Lord Jesus. 15 Because I was confident of this, I planned to visit you first so that you might benefit twice. 16 I planned to visit

you on my way to Macedonia and to come back to you from Macedonia, and then to have you send me on my way to Judea.

v. 13 – Paul did write a few things that were hard to understand, but that is probably because we are viewing it from a distance of 2,000 years. All in all, Paul’s letters and hence his teaching, was straightforward, not given to impress but equip the reader to do and live God’s will. There are some, myself included, who have assumed that if it is from God then it will be a bit complicated and hard to understand. This isn’t the case. I am going to jump ahead in this letter and quote a verse I try to keep in mind when I write and teach:

But I fear, lest by any means, as the serpent beguiled Eve through his subtlety, so your minds should be corrupted from the *simplicity* that is in Christ (2 Corinthians 11:3 KJV emphasis added).

If it’s complex, more often than not it isn’t from God. That doesn’t mean that God isn’t complex; in fact, He’s inscrutable, unknowable. But when God says “don’t steal,” that’s not complicated. When He says, “Love your wife” or “Submit to your husband,” it’s clear what He intends. It is hard to obey those commands because of our sinful nature and not because they aren’t hard to understand.

v. 14 – Paul acknowledged that the Corinthians did not fully understand him or his work. They did in part, but his hope was that they would understand more in time and be able to give thanks for him as he did for them. I think it’s the desire of every leader to be understood for what he or she is trying to do. Yet leaders are walking out ahead of many others and thus people often can’t see what the leader sees.

It’s like being on a walk two miles ahead of the rest of the group. That person out front can see things that the others can’t, so the others may be questioning or grumbling about the path being taken. The leader can call back and explain what he or she is seeing up ahead. But if the followers don’t understand what is being seen or if they don’t trust the leader, they can continue not to appreciate the path until they arrive to the place that the leader was trying to tell them about. **Do you appreciate your leaders for what they are doing and seeing? Do you thank them that they are trying to take you to a place where you can see it for yourself?**

vs. 15&16 – Paul may have been referring to the trip he had hoped to make that he mentioned in 1 Corinthians 16. He had wanted to visit the Corinthians on the way there and on the way back. He wanted to pick up the offering they had collected so he could go on from there to Judea to deliver the money to the Jerusalem church. As we will see in the following verses, that trip didn’t materialize, for whatever reason.

Paul had hoped that they would benefit from his visits, which should be the intent of all that we do—the benefit of others. **How well are you benefiting the lives of others? What can you do to improve?**

Day Five

17 When I planned this, did I do it lightly? Or do I make my plans in a worldly manner so that in the same breath I say, "Yes, yes" and "No, no"? 18 But as surely as God is faithful, our message to you is not "Yes" and "No." 19 For the Son of God, Jesus Christ, who was preached among you by me and Silas and Timothy, was not "Yes" and "No," but in him it has always been "Yes." 20 For no matter how many promises God has made, they are "Yes" in Christ. And so through him the "Amen" is spoken by us to the glory of God.

v. 17 – Paul got into hot water, so to speak, because he mentioned he may come by Corinth and then didn't. It is interesting to me that he began his letter with a defense of why he ended up not coming as he had said he would. I've said that Paul was a great leader; he wasn't a perfect leader. Yet many people, especially in church, don't allow leaders to be imperfect. They want perfection. This isn't to say we should ignore bad behavior from spiritual leaders, but we can never expect them to be perfect.

How high are your expectations where your spiritual leadership is concerned? Every leader has strengths and weaknesses. We should allow them to be themselves, realizing that they can't do everything and be everything to everyone.

v. 18 – Paul tried to explain that he wasn't "talking out of both sides of his mouth" as one saying puts it. He wasn't saying that he would come, while he knew that he would not come. Yet, I get the feeling here that Paul was being a bit defensive about this issue and took off on a spiritual teaching about why he didn't come to Corinth. As I said, no leader is perfect, except for Jesus. It is obvious that Paul was stung by the criticism that came from the church there.

It seems that Paul did not want them to think that his message to them was inconsistent, even if they perceived that his travel promises were.

v. 19 – Paul made the point that his message about Jesus, the message that had come not only from him but also from Silas and Timothy, was in no way inconsistent of "yes" and "no." I'm not sure why Paul felt the need to say this, but perhaps his opponents had said, "Can we trust anything that this man says? He said he would be here and now he isn't coming. What else has he said that we can't put our trust in?"

Whether we like it or not, we leaders are under scrutiny and it is more intense than for those not in leadership. This scrutiny comes with the territory, so to speak. I would think this is why James wrote:

Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly. We all stumble in many ways. If anyone is never at fault in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to keep his whole body in check (James 3:1-2).

I'm sure that even Paul stumbled every once in a while over what he said. I stopped expecting perfection from my leaders. I also came to the point where I could be honest with my leaders to express disappointment or disagreement. I also stopped expecting perfection from myself.

v. 20 – While leaders and followers are imperfect, God is perfect. His promises are true and His word is yes and amen. I have stopped expecting things from my leaders and fellow believers that I can only receive from the Lord. I am learning to keep my expectations in God and not put them in others. And I have admitted that I am less than perfect in my own relationships with others, so why should I expect them to be perfect?

Has someone disappointed you in the church? Was it a leader? Then I urge you to forgive them and move on, keeping your eyes fixed on Jesus as your model and source of help. Then I further urge you to examine your own life to see if there is any area in which you can improve where your relationships with other people are involved.

Day Six

21 Now it is God who makes both us and you stand firm in Christ. He anointed us, 22 set his seal of ownership on us, and put his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come. 23 I call God as my witness that it was in order to spare you that I did not return to Corinth. 24 Not that we lord it over your faith, but we work with you for your joy, because it is by faith you stand firm.

vs. 21&22 – There are times when I think that it is my prayer life, Bible reading, worship or other disciplines that keep me close to God. If I am not careful, all those good and necessary activities can lead to a life and mindset of “works.” Yes, all those things are required spiritual disciplines, but ultimately, it is God who gives me the grace to perform and maintain those disciplines. I can neglect those disciplines, however, to my own hurt, so they are important. I must develop those important habits, but I can't ever allow myself to believe that somehow they are enabling me to earn God's favor. They cannot and do not.

God set His seal upon us, which is the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is a down payment on the good things of God yet to come. We have the Spirit as a foretaste of our eternal life in Christ. Paul expanded on this truth later in chapter five, but he also wrote about it to the Ephesians:

And you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession — to the praise of his glory (Ephesians 1:13-14).

Do you realize that you have the Holy Spirit of God living inside you? The same Spirit that raised Christ from the dead lives in you! And that presence is just a down payment,

just a foretaste of things to come! It will only get better.

And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit, who lives in you (Romans 8:10-11).

So I must ask: if the Spirit is living in you, what are you doing with His presence? What difference has it made in your life? Your prayer life? Your ministry to and for other people?

v. 23 – Then Paul told the real reason he didn't visit Corinth: He wasn't happy with what was going on there, and he feared lest his visit cause more pain than good. So he decided to postpone his visit, and some interpreted that as being double-minded and whimsical.

v. 24 – Paul did not lord it over their faith. Good gracious, I wish that some of my fellow leaders and pastors would read that verse and take it to heart. We are not to lord over our spiritual work, even when we are right and even if God has given us the authority that would enable us to do so! Paul referred to his authority being given to build up later in this letter, so we will address this issue more at that time, but I leave with a similar exhortation from another letter:

Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers — not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not greedy for money, but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock. And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away (1 Peter 5:2-4).

If you are a leader, are you lording over anyone or any situation? If you are, please repent and stop.

Day Seven

2:1 So I made up my mind that I would not make another painful visit to you. 2 For if I grieve you, who is left to make me glad but you whom I have grieved? 3 I wrote as I did so that when I came I should not be distressed by those who ought to make me rejoice. I had confidence in all of you, that you would all share my joy. 4 For I wrote you out of great distress and anguish of heart and with many tears, not to grieve you but to let you know the depth of my love for you.

v. 1 – Paul did not want to bring pain to the church there, so he bypassed them on his journey. I would think that Paul would not have been concerned about this, based on the tone of his letters to them. But the church was probably in so much turmoil and so divided that Paul decided to let the dust settle, so to speak, and not go there. You don't have to confront every bad or imperfect situation. Sometimes it is best just to let it mature.

v. 2 – If Paul would have gone, he would have grieved them, which in turn would have grieved him. No one enjoys doing ministry that is unpleasant, so I suppose there was some self-protection in Paul’s decision. And there is nothing wrong with that. It is interesting that Paul faced “wild beasts” in Ephesus (see 1 Corinthians 16), but he didn’t want to face the division or the accusations in the Corinthian church.

v. 3 – Ultimately I think Paul just put his trust in the Holy Spirit to intervene in the situation there. That is never a bad strategy. The Spirit is able to start, build and maintain the Church. We have heard stories of churches that were started and then those who started them had to leave the area or country. When they returned, the church was growing and dynamic. The Holy Spirit is able to lead and communicate His leadership commands where the Church is concerned. That is a source of great confidence for church leaders, although we need to be reminded of this from time to time. **Are you confident and trusting in the Spirit’s ability to lead your church? Or are you trying to help Him out?**

v. 4 – It would seem that Paul’s letter had upset the church, and he knew that his presence would only do more of the same. Paul stated that he prayed and cried over the first letter that he wrote. Someone once told me that tears are the main preparation for any leader who has to tell people difficult things or deal with church problems. It is only when we don’t want to deal with those things or when we cry over having to do so that we are ready to do the work of an apostle or pastor. Does this make sense?

In my early years of ministry, I was *always* confronting people, speaking the truth in love or so I thought. Then I realized that I didn’t have all the truth or very much love, so I changed my style to one of more grace and compassion. I still have a long way to go in those areas, but I am counting on the same Spirit who builds the Church to build me! *Help me, Spirit, to be the leader, workers and brother that You would have me to be. Amen.*