

# 2 Corinthians

## *Ministry of the Heart*

09:30	Welcome	
09:35	Session 1	A Bird's-Eye View of 2 Corinthians
10:45	Coffee	
11:15	Session 2	The Privilege and Power of Gospel Ministry
12:30	Lunch	
13:45	Session 3	The Necessity of Pain in Gospel Ministry
15:00	Coffee	
15:20	Session 4	The Purpose of Pain in Gospel Ministry
16:25	Close	

## A Bird's-Eye View of 2 Corinthians

- I. Backdrop — what's been happening in Corinth?
- II. Structure — what is the skeleton of the book?
- III. Message — what major point is Paul making in the letter?
- IV. Purpose — what does Paul want his letter to achieve?

\* What are the best & worst things about being involved in gospel ministry?

\* What causes believers to lose heart in faithful gospel ministry? What is it about more worldly models of ministry that can prove attractive to us / God's people?

### I. Backdrop

#### i. Corinth itself

- prominent city state in Ancient Greece
- strategic port location
- destroyed by Romans in 146BC
- rebuilt by Julius Caesar in 44BC
- provincial capital of Greece
- a 'Roman' city obsessed with power, wealth, social status, outward appearances and success



## ii. Paul's history with Corinth — a checkered relationship

- Paul planted the church and stayed for 18 months (Acts 18:1-11)
- Paul wrote a letter and the Church replied (1 Cor 7:1)
- Paul heard of factions in the Church (1 Cor 1:11) and wrote **1 Corinthians**
- Paul made a 'painful visit' (2 Cor 2:1) which resulted in a more tense relationship
- Paul wrote a 'severe letter' to resolve the conflict and test their obedience (2 Cor 2:3, 9)
- Paul wrote that letter about a matter of church discipline for their own sake (2 Cor 7:12)
- Paul learns from Titus that the letter did some real but 'partial' good (2 Cor 7:6-11)
- Paul also hears of the growing influence of the 'Super-Apostles' & the stalled collection
- Paul plans to visit again (2 Cor 12:14, 20; 13:1, 10)
- Paul writes **2 Corinthians** as a pre-emptive strike in an effort to resolve issues 'fully' before his arrival (2 Cor 13:10)

## iii. Paul's hopes for 2 Corinthians

*<sup>12</sup> For our boast is this, the testimony of our conscience, that we behaved in the world with simplicity and godly sincerity, not by earthly wisdom but by the grace of God, and supremely so toward you. <sup>13</sup> For we are not writing to you anything other than what you read and acknowledge and I hope you will fully acknowledge — <sup>14</sup> just as you did partially acknowledge us — that on the day of our Lord Jesus you will boast of us as we will boast of you.*

2 Corinthians 1:12-14

\* A defence of Paul's actions and ministry in the past

\* An appeal to acknowledge Paul's ministry not just 'partially' but 'fully'

\* Why does it matter whether or not they acknowledge Paul fully?

\* Why does Paul mention 'the day of our Lord Jesus' here?

#### iv. The root issue in Corinth

*We are not commending ourselves to you again but giving you cause to boast about us, so that you may be able to answer those who boast about outward appearance and not about what is in the heart.*

2 Corinthians 5:12

\* The key contrast is between 'outward appearance' and 'the heart'

\* Corinthian culture was obsessed with 'outward appearance': fame, talent, material success, power, prosperity, blessing, health, positivity, high quality experiences, compelling oratory and glory; it despised failure, rejection, suffering and weakness.

\* The 'Super-Apostles' epitomised the Corinthian values of 'outward appearance' while Paul epitomised the values of 'the heart.'

\* Those cultural values were so deeply engrained that they were shaping the way the Church thought about the Christian life, the Church and Christian ministry.

	1 Corinthians — Christian life	2 Corinthians — Christian ministry
<b>Symptom</b>	A Christian life focussed on the 'already' that is glory-shaped, not cross-shaped (1 Cor 4:8)	Christian ministry that looks good on the surface (2 Cor 5:12; 11:13-15) but does not reach the heart
<b>Appeal</b>	'Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ.' (1 Cor 11:1)	'We implore you on behalf of Christ. Be reconciled to God.' 'Make room in your heart for us.' (2 Cor 5:20; 6:11-13; 7:2)

## v. A closer look at the Super-Apostles

### a. Their identity

'Hebrews, Israelites, descendants of Abraham & servants of Christ' (11:22-23)

Glowing letters of recommendation (3:1)

Large numbers of followers (note the 'many' in 11:18)

They teach about Jesus, the Spirit & the gospel (11:4)

But they are 'false apostles, deceitful workmen' (11:13)

They 'disguise themselves as servants of righteousness' but serve Satan (11:13-15)

They 'boast according to the flesh' & 'make slaves' of others (11:18, 20)

They are 'without understanding', 'false brothers' & will be condemned (10:12; 11:26, 15)

### b. Their criticisms of Paul

His letters 'frightening' and cause 'pain' (10:9; 2:4; 7:8-9)

His 'bodily presence is weak & his speech of no account' (10:10)

He does not keep his word (1:17) & is not competent to serve Christ (3:5)

His wisdom is 'according to the flesh' (1:12) as is his planning (1:17) & ministry (10:3)

He may not even be a Christian (10:7; 13:3)

He is weak & his life is a catalogue of suffering (4:8-9; 11:21-13:4)

He does not accept money for his ministry (11:7; cf. 11:20; 12:13)

He does not love the Corinthians (11:11)

### c. The choice facing the Corinthian church

*Will they follow the super-apostles' model of ministry that looks strong, successful and wealthy on the surface, or will they follow Paul's?*

*It might look weak and unimpressive and include suffering, but it comes from the heart and reaches to the heart.*

*Paul's heart is open to them — but will they open their hearts & come back to him & therefore to God?*

#### **d. How worried was Paul about the Corinthians?**

It is helpful to distinguish two distinct groups in Corinth who are causing Paul concern - the 'unrepentant minority' and the 'equivocating majority'.

##### **The unrepentant minority**

Paul 'fears' that there are still some in the congregation who, unlike the 'sorrowful sinner' (2:5-11), have not repented of their wickedness (12:20-21; 13:2). Paul longs for the wicked to be restored (13:9, 11) lest his labours prove in vain (12:21).

##### **The equivocating majority**

The primary target of the letter, however, is the 'equivocating majority' — those who currently acknowledge Paul partially but not fully. While Paul has a real concern for them, he has ultimate confidence that they will make the right decision and renew their confidence in faithful ministry.

##### **Concern**

*I am afraid that as the serpent deceived Eve by his cunning, your thoughts will be led astray from a sincere and pure devotion to Christ.*

2 Corinthians 11:3

##### **Confidence**

*Our hope for you is unshaken, for we know that as you share in our sufferings, you will also share in our comfort.*

2 Corinthians 1:7

*I rejoice, because I have perfect confidence in you.*

2 Corinthians 7:16

*Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Or do you not realise this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you?*

2 Corinthians 13:5

## II. Structure — what is the skeleton of the book?

In many ways, the letter traces the story of Paul's relationship with the Corinthians.

Paul's relationship with the Corinthians		
2 Corinthians 1-2	The past	A history of real tension and pain
2 Corinthians 7:2-16	The present	Joy in partial acknowledgement
2 Corinthians 8-13	The future	An appeal for 'complete obedience' (10:6)

Putting this together with what we saw in 1:13-14 helps us to see how the different parts of the letter fit together.

2 Corinthians	
1:1-2:13	<b>Introduction: the case against Paul refuted</b> i) He's too weak! (10:10) Reply: I'm unashamed of my suffering because it is a necessary sign of union with the crucified and risen Christ — 1:5 ii) He's too fickle! (1:17) Reply: Everything I've done has been motivated by love — 2:4
2:14-7:2	<b>Reasons to boast <u>fully</u> in Paul</b> He is God's man, the loving, servant-hearted proclaimer of God's glorious salvation in Jesus - i.e. he is God's Apostle doing God's work in God's way
7:3-16	<b>Paul's joy in their <u>partial</u> acknowledgement of him in the present</b> Shown in their 'earnest' response to his severe letter & welcome of Titus
8:1-13:14	<b>Paul's appeal to acknowledge him <u>fully</u> in the future by:</b> i) Completing the promised financial collection (8:1-9:15) These chapters are not a random digression on giving! ii) Boasting in Paul, not the super-apostles (10:1-13:14) These chapters are not a separate letter bolted on the end!

### III. Message

#### i. The need for clarity

The majority of evangelical ministers knew not how to lay down the gospel, so that a man of plain and ordinary understanding should know how to take it up.

Thomas Chalmers, *Institutes of Theology*

No sermon is ready for preaching until we can express its theme in a short, pregnant, sentence as clear as crystal. I find the getting of that sentence is the hardest, the most exacting & the most fruitful labour in my study. I do not think any sermon ought to be preached, or even written, until that sentence has emerged, clear & lucid as the cloudless moon.

J H Jowett

\* One reason we are sometimes accused of having sermons that are 'too academic' and 'sound like lectures' is that we are not always great at distilling our faithful exegetical insights into a 'message'. What exactly is God saying to us *here*?

\* One reason our teaching can feel disjointed is that we do not always do the work of trying to discern the message of the book as a whole. How would you finish the sentence '*God included this book in the bible to teach us that....*'?

\* Understanding the message of the whole book is a great help to us as we try to comprehend and communicate the message of individual passages within it.

#### ii. An attempt at clarity

Paul expounds his own authentic ministry from 2:14-7:2. Any summary is bound to be reductive and simplistic, but the place he most clearly describes his own ministry is in 4:5:

*What we proclaim is not ourselves but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake.*

This is the ministry that Paul wants the Corinthians to 'acknowledge fully' and 'boast in,' and support, in contrast to the counterfeit, superficial, unfaithful model of ministry commended by the super-apostles. This authentic ministry looks weak by worldly standards but it reaches the heart and is the way God works. Christ himself was crucified in weakness but lives by the power of God (13:4), and God's power is made perfect in weakness (12:9). This produces a 'message' sentence for the letter that is something like:

***God's power rests upon the the loving, servant-hearted,  
weak-looking proclamation of Christ as Lord.***



## IV. Purpose

### i. The purpose of a purpose statement

No biblical writer took up his pen to jot down 'a few appropriate remarks' on a subject. Each one wrote to affect lives.

Haddon Robinson, *Expository Preaching*

\* Therefore, we want to be asking: what is the transformative intent of this book? What did Paul want to happen when his letter was read? How did he want the Corinthians' to change in their thinking, their affections, and their behaviour?

Lecturing is about passing on information; preaching is about transformation. One is about getting people to understand Biblical truth; the other is about pressing Biblical truth into their lives... One is explanation, the other is proclamation.

Murray Capill, *The Heart is the Target*

\* We are not merely giving a talk about / discussing the contents of the Bible — we are proclaiming God's truth to feed God's people and further God's work.

\* We want the author's purpose to become our teaching purpose, ultimately because the Holy Spirit is a better pastor than any of us!

### ii. Explicit statements of purpose in the letter

#### a. Full acknowledgement of Paul & his ministry / full obedience

<sup>13</sup> For we are not writing to you anything other than what you read and acknowledge and I hope you will fully acknowledge — <sup>14</sup> just as you did partially acknowledge us — that on the day of our Lord Jesus you will boast of us as we will boast of you.

2 Corinthians 1:12-14

In advance of his next visit (13:10), Paul wants the Corinthians to move from acknowledging him partially to acknowledging him fully (1:13-14). This is also expressed as progressing from their encouraging 'obedience' to his severe letter (7:15) to a place of 'complete obedience' (10:6).

## b. Boasting in Paul

*We are not commending ourselves to you again but giving you cause to boast about us, so that you may be able to answer those who boast about outward appearance and not about what is in the heart.*

2 Corinthians 5:12

- \* Paul wants the Corinthians to have good reason to boast in his authentic ministry.
- \* He also wants to equip them to answer those who advocate a model of ministry that looks good on the surface but is unable to reach the heart.

### What does it mean to 'boast in Paul'?

In 2 Corinthians, boasting in Paul is not primarily about holding unashamedly to his *doctrinal position* (e.g. Reformed distinctives of divine sovereignty in salvation; the 'Solas' etc.), nor even to upholding his teaching on the important *ethical issues* of our day (gender & sexuality; the value of all human life); in the first instance it is about being willing to embrace his *model of ministry*, even though it looks weak and stands so squarely in contrast to the values of our day.

If the Corinthians do boast in Paul in that way, his own *boasting about them* will be vindicated (8:24; 9:3).

In the famous 'fool's speech' of 11:16-12:10, Paul *boasts ironically* about his own ministry to distinguish himself as clearly as possible from the false teachers, and to help the Corinthians to see the Christ-like nature of his own ministry.

## iii. An attempt at a purpose statement

***Boast fully in the genuine & glorious but weak-looking, loving  
& servant-hearted proclamation of Jesus Christ as Lord***

- \* Fully confident *in* genuine, cross-shaped gospel ministry
    - wise to the wolves; unashamed, delighted commitment to the true
    - what sort of ministry do I seek out, boast about, celebrate, encourage & pray for?
  - \* Fully confident *for* genuine, cross-shaped gospel ministry
    - convictions, character, values, expectations, endurance
    - what sort of ministry am I involved in? (NB: not just a question for leaders)
    - what sort of Christians am I willing to identify with?
-

## The Privilege and Power of Gospel Ministry

*We are not commending ourselves to you again but giving you cause to boast about us, so that you may be able to answer those who boast about outward appearance and not about what is in the heart.*

2 Corinthians 5:12

Throughout 2 Corinthians, Paul is: —

- \* **Training all of us to boast in authentic, heart-changing ministry**
- \* **Equipping all of us to expose counterfeit, superficial ministries**

so that

method

It is therefore vital that we understand the nature of true gospel ministry.

\* What are the best & worst models of Christian ministry that you've seen?

\* What sort of leaders / leadership style does the world esteem? What sort of leaders / leadership do you *naturally* find most attractive?

## 2 Corinthians 2:14–3:18

‘The theological heart of the letter’ and Paul’s primary exposition of the nature and values of true gospel ministry. This is where Paul will train us to boast in authentic, heart-changing gospel ministry, and thereby equip us to expose counterfeit ministries.

- I. The overwhelming responsibility of true gospel ministry
- II. The defining hallmarks of true gospel ministry
- III. The God-given competence for true gospel ministry
- IV. The life-giving power of true gospel ministry

### I. The Overwhelming Responsibility of True Gospel Ministry

#### i. The triumphal procession

##### a. The victory of Christ

##### b. The death sentence of Paul

*For I think that God has exhibited us apostles as last of all, like men sentenced to death, because we have become a spectacle to the world, to angels, and to men.*

1 Corinthians 4:9

#### ii. The aroma of Christ

##### a. A fragrant offering to God — dignity

##### b. A fragrance among people — division

- from death to death

- from life to life

*‘Who is sufficient for these things?’ (v16)*

## II. The Defining Hallmarks of True Gospel Ministry

### To self-commend or not?

Type	References	Outcome	Verdict (10:18)
'Self-commending'	3:1; 5:12; 10:12, 18	Praise to man	Not approved
'Commending of self'	4:2; 6:4; cf. 7:11	Glory to God	Commended by God

Despite the criticisms Paul is facing in Corinth, he has absolute confidence in the authenticity and godliness of his own ministry, and wants the Church to share that confidence, for their own good.

*What we are is known to God, and I hope it is known also to your conscience.*

2 Corinthians 5:11

### The defining hallmarks

\* If you had to come up with a list of the 'defining hallmarks' of a true gospel worker, what would be on it?

#### i. Sincerity — motives that withstand scrutiny before God, transparency

1:12

1:23

2:17

**ii. Love — undramatic but unsurprising!**

2:4

3:2

10:8; 12:15; 13:10; cf. 11:20-21

*Have we valued love highly enough?*

**iii. Fruit**

3:3                      Written by Christ

Delivered by us — Postman Paul!

3:4

**iv. Faithfulness — less of a focus than we might have expected?**

4:2

4:5

cf. 11:4

**v. (Signs)**

12:12

### III. The God-given Competence for True Gospel Ministry

This is the answer to Paul's own question in 2:16 — '*who is sufficient for these things?*'

*Not that we are sufficient in ourselves to claim anything as coming from us, but our sufficiency is from God, who has made us competent to be ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit.*

2 Corinthians 3:5-6

#### i. Competence does not come from within ourselves

a. Challenge to the self-commending

b. Comfort to the self-doubting

#### ii. Competence comes from God

a. Salvation as a gift

b. Ministry as a gift

c. 'We'

3:12

3:18

4:6

4:16

5:1

5:9-10

5:17

5:21

## IV. The Life-giving Power of True Gospel Ministry

### i. Our work for God is glorious (3:6-12)

	<u>Old</u> covenant ministry	<u>New</u> covenant ministry
<b>Location, v3</b>	Tablets of stone	Tablets of human heart
<b>Means, v3</b>	Written with ink	Written by the Spirit
<b>End, v6</b>	The letter kills	The Spirit gives life
<b>Result, v9</b>	Condemnation	Righteousness / justification
<b>Duration, v10-11</b>	Temporary	Permanent
<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>Glorious</b>	<b>Far more glorious</b>

Paul's point is not that Moses' ministry was inglorious — it was wonderfully glorious in its inauguration, its content and the enormous privilege it bestowed on Israel. But even so, the Law itself could not give life. That is why the new covenant ministry modelled by the Apostle Paul and practised by believers today is even more glorious.

The glory of the new covenant ministry entrusted to us by God drives our work for God.

*Since we have such a hope, we are very bold.*

2 Corinthians 3:12

**\* Genuine ministry very rarely feels or looks glorious but it really is**

**\* Counterfeit ministry often looks glorious, but don't be seduced**



ii. Our experience of God is glorious (3:13-18)

	Moses	Israelites	Christians	Result
<b>Veils?</b>	Veiled face	Veiled hearts	Veil removed	<b>We behold the Lord</b>
<b>Changed?</b>	Fading glory	Hardened minds	Being transformed	<b>We become like the Lord</b>

**\* We behold the Lord**

**\* We become like the Lord**

**\* *'Therefore, since we have this ministry... we do not lose heart.'* (2 Cor 4:1)**

Our ministry genuinely leads to people knowing God

Our ministry genuinely leads to people becoming like God

\* What impression of ministry do we give to those around us?

\* How can we train our congregations to support & share in this glorious ministry?

## The Necessity of Pain in Gospel Ministry

### The appeal

*<sup>13</sup> For we are not writing to you anything other than what you read and acknowledge and I hope you will fully acknowledge — <sup>14</sup> just as you did partially acknowledge us — that on the day of our Lord Jesus you will boast of us as we will boast of you.*

2 Corinthians 1:13-14

\* Paul planted - they drifted - they've returned partially - will they return fully?

### The method

*We are not commending ourselves to you again but giving you cause to boast about us, so that you may be able to answer those who boast about outward appearance and not about what is in the heart.*

2 Corinthians 5:12

\* Paul is doing God's work in God's way; the super-apostles are not

\* Paul expounds the nature of his own genuine, glorious new covenant ministry in order to give the Corinthians reason to boast in it, and thereby to equip them to see through the impressive-looking but superficial and inauthentic ministry model of the super-apostles.

### The danger

*Therefore, having this ministry by the mercy of God, we do not lose heart.*

2 Corinthians 4:1

\* What tends to make you 'lose heart' in genuine gospel ministry? (2 Cor 4:1)

\* When discouragements come in ministry, how do you respond to them?

## Session outline

- I. The Litmus Test of Weakness
- II. The Pattern of Weakness and Life
- III. The Promise of Power in Weakness
- IV. The Variety of Weakness and Suffering
- V. The Purpose of Weakness and Suffering

## I. The Litmus Test of Weakness

### i. Full acknowledgement of Paul

As Paul looks to the future, the question is: will the Corinthians 'fully acknowledge'

- the Apostle's collection for weak and suffering saints (8-9)?

- the Apostle whose ministry is marked by weakness and suffering (10-13)?

### ii. Proof

7:7-8

8:24

13:5

\* The way the Corinthians respond to Paul's tests will be a proof to them and to others of the reality of their faith.

## **II. The Necessity of Weakness**

### **i. Jesus — his suffering was necessary for our salvation**

5:14-15

8:9

13:5

See also Mark 8:31; 9:31; 10:33-34; Luke 24:46-47

### **ii. Paul / us — our suffering is a necessary consequence of our union with Christ**

1:5-7

4:10-12

11:7

13:4

### **iii. The Macedonians — the models of godly affliction / weakness**

8:1-5

### **iv. The Super-Apostles — the antithesis of cross-shaped living and ministry**

11:20

cf. 10:7; 12:15

### III. The Promise of Power in Weakness

CHRIST	PAUL
Weakness → Power	Weakness + grace → Power
<i>Christ was crucified in weakness but lives by the power of God (13:4)</i>	<i>I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest on me... for when I am weak, then I am strong. (12:9-10)</i>

1:5

\* NB Comfort = gospel strength, not just compassion

12:9

\* NB This was Paul's settled, not his instant, response to weakness.

\* What does it look like when the power of Christ rests on his servants? (2 Cor 4:7-9)

#### IV. The Variety of Weakness and Suffering

Character  
assassination  
(1:17; 10:10)

Physical  
persecution  
(e.g. 11:24-25)

Dangers of fallen  
world (11:25-26)

Financial struggles  
'in hunger & thirst,  
often without  
food' (11:27)

Pressure of 'my  
anxiety for all the  
churches' (11:28)

Satanic attack –  
'messenger of  
Satan' (12:7)

#### V. The Purpose of Weakness and Suffering

'We know that for  
those who love God all  
things work together  
for good.'  
*Romans 8:29*

2 Corinthians gives a  
worked example  
through the lens of  
Paul's suffering

---

## The Glorious Purpose of Pain in Gospel Ministry



### I. The Glory of God

*We have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed.*

2 Corinthians 4:7-8

- \* PRIVILEGE** As we proclaim Christ, we reflect the light of the knowledge of the glory of God to the world.
- \* PAIN** God deliberately renders us 'afflicted in every way', 'perplexed', 'persecuted', and 'struck down'.
- \* POWER** The grace and power of Christ sustain & enable us to endure our trials.
- \* PURPOSE** Everyone knows that both the power for us to persevere, and any gospel fruit that emerges, comes from God alone, not us.

## II. The Godliness of the Suffering Believer

1:8-10

12:7

James 1:2-5

4:10-11

4:16

\* This is how God transforms us 'from one degree of glory into another' (see 3:18)

## III. The Growth of the Gospel

*So death is at work in us, but life is at work in you.*

2 Corinthians 4:12



## IV. The Glory to Come

### i. The hope of glory motivates us

4:13-14

### ii. Suffering actually prepares glory for us

4:17-18

#### \* CHALLENGE

\* Do I care more about the glory of God, and my growth in godliness, and the advance of the gospel, and the glory that awaits me, or about my present ease and comfort?

#### \* COMFORT

Not one ounce of my pain is pointless. God has promised to achieve great good through it.

#### \* CONCLUSION

*Therefore, having this ministry by the mercy of God, we do not lose heart.*

2 Corinthians 4:1

## Reflection

- \* How does meditating on God's purpose for our pain guard us against losing heart in our gospel ministry?
  
- \* How has studying 2 Corinthians today given you cause to want to boast fully in the genuine & glorious but weak-looking, loving & servant-hearted proclamation of Jesus Christ as Lord?
  
- \* How has studying 2 Corinthians today equipped you to answer those who boast in a model of ministry that might look good on the surface but does not reach the heart?

## Resources

### Commentaries

Murray Harris, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians (NIGTC)* \*

David Garland, *2 Corinthians (New American Commentary)* \*\*

Paul Barnett, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians (NICNT)* \*\*

? George Guthrie, *2 Corinthians (BECNT)* \*

? Linda Belleville, *2 Corinthians (IVPNTC)* \*\*\*

* technical
** semi-technical
*** non-technical

### Bible study leaders' notes

<https://www.st-helens.org.uk/resources/study/43/> \*\*\*

### Video Introduction

<https://www.st-helens.org.uk/resources/video/125/> \*\*\*