



# Corinthians

# Weak

# is strong

Studies in the book of 2 Corinthians

**PART ONE:** Weeks 1-6

Group Applications

Personal Study



four  
oaks  
church



# A Note from Your Pastors

**W**ritten communication is a mystery. When I write, I'm arranging blots of ink (well, pixels currently, but they will become ink!) on a page, and through this exercise I have all the tools of human imagination, comparison, emotion, and truth at my fingertips. Because I know you can read this arrangement of hooks and lines and scribbles, we can share some things. I can move you. Even take over your brain to make you think about an elephant, or about your breathing. Did you notice you are breathing? There I go, arranging these marks to make you self-conscious.

Have you ever read something and it absolutely slayed you? Delighted you? Really, any number of responses is possible. It dropped your jaw. Introduced a creeping kind of fear. Made you smile and peek up from the page, looking around to find someone to invite into the words. What happens in that moment? You sat down as one kind of person, with one state of mind or perspective, and then this engagement with paper and letters and phrases and metaphors actually affected you. It moved you.

I first had this strange experience while reading *Homeward Bound* in 1993. I can still remember the exact location in the room when I looked up from the book and found that I had been transported through time and place by mere words. Bodger needed to get home, and I spent a few hours completely lost in his story; just utterly overcome by desire to see these pets get back home. The story enthralled me, to be sure, but it was reading that left me in awe. It fascinated me.

God, of course, knew He could move us as well. And He wanted to share Himself with His people. So He carried men along by the Holy Spirit to write. They arranged ink on a scroll or a parchment, and in so doing they truly communicated God to us. God's character, truth, ways, thoughts, and desires were shared with us. It shouldn't surprise us God would use words to communicate. In the beginning was the Word. And He spoke! It is the essence of God to share and communicate and gather us up into Himself.

When God desired to be known, He did so by communicating in written words. We ought to engage this communicative mystery with joy. More than that, we ought to engage it

together. Encountering God in this mysterious, real way is a community gift, and we take leadership in this task seriously.

Nehemiah spells out the task quite well, “They read from the book, from the Law of God, clearly, and they gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading (Nehemiah 8:8).” As pastors, we want you to encounter God and share in His life through His word. We want it to be clear, so that you understand. All the other joys of our life together flow from understanding the scripture. First, the words were read clearly and explained. Then, as a result, “all the people went their way to eat and drink and to send portions and to make great rejoicing, because they had understood the words that were declared to them (Nehemiah 8:12).” That, my friends, is a successful church experience.

As your pastors, we want you to revel in His word. We want you to be moved. This means we give a significant portion of each of our worship services attempting to show you the meaning of the text. We read the words and then spend time using speech, that other mysterious mode of sharing what is in our brains and hearts, to stir you up. We invite you into the heartbeat of the scripture.

This study book is another attempt to help you encounter God in the scripture. The text for each week is featured along with some context to help you understand what you’ve read. There is also a personal study section that will help you make deeper connections to other parts of the Bible and apply it to your life in thought and action. Additionally, there is a section for group application where we meet together in small groups to discuss what impact the Bible should be having on us. Finally, we included a short reading to give you an idea of how you can be served by supplemental books.

In the end, we love you and want to do the best we can to help you love your Bibles. We are praying this booklet helps you. We pray it drives you, again and again, to share in the life of God by pouring yourself out in the scripture. Then, let’s meet on Sundays to worship in Jesus together and share together what we’ve found. We are praying with and for you as we start 2 Corinthians.

Can’t wait to read the words with you,

Lance, for the pastors.

# Series Introduction

Corinth was an important city, with an important church, for a number of reasons. It was significant in almost all the ways you'd imagine an ancient city to be. For one thing, it was closely tied to both of the massive empires of the time. Founded as a leading Greek city, it was completely destroyed by Rome in the 2nd century BC and was left as ruins for more than 100 years.

After a century, it was repopulated as a kind of Roman Colony and, therefore, became a place of diversity in religion, social status and wealth. The city adopted Roman laws, political organizations, and institutions. The official language of Latin is predominant in the extant inscriptions. Eight of 17 names in the New Testament of persons connected to Corinth are Latin. Many of the city's residents would have been slaves ("In the time of Paul, one third of the population consisted of slaves, and Corinth was a main depot for the slave trade in the Aegean.").<sup>1</sup>

Corinth lay between vital trade routes, connecting two sea passages through a narrow isthmus. It hosted leisure activities in the form of an Olympic-type competition called the Isthmian Games and was also a major religious city with the (in)famous cult of prostitution surrounding Aphrodite. In addition to Aphrodite, historians have noted temples or altars dedicated to Poseidon, Palaemon, Artemis, Dionysus, Helios, Hermes, Apollo, Zeus, Isis, Eros, and others.<sup>2</sup>

Corinth was a significant Biblical city in the sense that the Apostle Paul spent seven years there in planting, teaching and emergency discipleship/correction. These facts combine to place Corinth at the forefront of New Testament epistles with not one, but two, lengthy letters addressed to the congregation there. Considering many of the epistles are only four to five chapters long and a city like Rome only garnered 16 chapters of scriptural content (fantastic as it is!), the fact that Corinth is front and center for a combined 29 chapters should create cause for great interest (in addition to the fact that it is the Word of God).

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<sup>1</sup> David E. Garland, 2 Corinthians (vol. 29; The New American Commentary; Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1999), 23.

<sup>2</sup> Colin G. Kruse, 2 Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary (vol. 8; Tyndale New Testament Commentaries; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1987), 18.



2 Corinthians is, in fact, at least the third letter of Paul to the church in Corinth. 1 Corinthians 5:9 mentions an earlier letter that we do not have. Paul also sent Timothy to the church in what can only be described as an intentional effort to shepherd them through massively difficult church discipline issues. The issues included man-centered schisms (1 Corinthians 1-3), sexual impropriety (1 Corinthians 5), and selfish divisions (1 Corinthians 11).

One of the major themes of 2 Corinthians revolves around humility and weakness. Paul insisted that he came not in status or strength but weakness instead. This would have been hugely counter-cultural, and was intended to teach a city enamored with status. One historian commented that Corinth was a place of unbridled ambition. Reflecting upon the Corinthian world, a man was forced to ask, “What created a city like this? What kind of people created such a city?” His answer: people “impressed with material splendour and intent on raising their standing in the world.”<sup>3</sup> In this society one can only rise via a “combination of patronage, marriage, wealth, and patient cultivation of connections.”<sup>4</sup>

This paradox of strength through weakness runs deeply through all of Jesus’ and Paul’s ministries. It is why we focused on it for this sermon series. It is why we’ve titled it “Weak is Strong.” We trust you will find great strength in emptying yourself. You will find your life when you lose it.

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<sup>3</sup> Stansbury, *Corinthian Honor, Corinthian Conflict*, 87.

<sup>4</sup> David E. Garland, *2 Corinthians* (vol. 29; *The New American Commentary*; Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1999), 23–24.

# Week 1

## 2 Corinthians 1:1-7 (ESV)

**P**aul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, To the church of God that is at Corinth, with all the saints who are in the whole of Achaia: 2 Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. 3 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, 4 who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which

we ourselves are comforted by God. 5 For as we share abundantly in Christ's sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too. 6 If we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation; and if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which you experience when you patiently endure the same sufferings that we suffer. 7 Our hope for you is unshaken, for we know that as you share in our sufferings, you will also share in our comfort.

## Context

- 2 Corinthians opens with a fairly standard salutation, common to many of the Pauline epistles. At this point, his ministry has become so entwined with Timothy (to whom he would pen 1 and 2 Timothy, and in so doing called him “my beloved child”) that he co-authors this letter with him. This, I suppose, could be akin to an email cc in modern times, but probably indicates shared sentiment and elderring as well. Timothy was well-known to the church in Corinth (1 Cor 4:17).
- From the outset Paul is quick to identify himself as an apostle. Though common as a salutatory identifier, this defense or commendation of apostleship was a fairly dominant theme for Paul for a number of reasons. He was not an original apostle and had not been with Jesus for His earthly ministry. From other letters, especially Galatians, we see that the authenticity of Paul's apostleship left him open to critique from many. In this letter, he will spend a massive chunk of

the first seven chapters defending the sincerity and genuineness of his ministry in Corinth, especially against “one who caused him pain,” according to 2:5-8.

- Paul’s authority to teach and lead this church had likely come into question, especially from those who favored Apollos or some other minister in the church. He is writing to show them he intends to care for them and has been commissioned by God to do so (2 Corinthians 13:10 (ESV)—For this reason I write these things while I am away from you, that when I come I may not have to be severe in my use of the authority that the Lord has given me for building up and not for tearing down.)
- We can glean a few things about the local church in this area from Paul’s introduction. He writes it to the “church at Corinth, with all the saints who are in the whole of Achaia.” This indicates that the identity of this local church was in the city of Corinth, but their influence most likely extended to the whole region of modern day Greece.
- The letter opens with a prayer to God for comfort. This introduces us to the significant trials Paul has endured and the state of his emotional life during this

period. In fact, it becomes a hallmark of 2 Corinthians that Paul is open, sincere, honest and vulnerable throughout.

“This letter is the outpouring of his heart occasioned by the information which he received. More than any other of Paul’s epistles, it bears the impress of the strong feelings under the influence of which it was written.”<sup>1</sup>

- Paul’s understanding of our “share” in Christ is vast. We share His God and Father, His sufferings, His comfort and His hope. This is the only source of strength in weakness, that we are sharing in the life of Christ.
- More than sharing just in the life of Christ, we find that Paul connects the experience of the church in Corinth together with himself. They have shared in his and Timothy’s suffering, and will also be a part of the comfort that God brings them. All things considered, you could find in verses 3-7 a good, or more robust, definition of fellowship (“share” here is from κοινωνός, the same root word for “fellowship” in the New Testament). It is not only potlucks and Bible studies.

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1 Charles Hodge, *An Exposition of the Second Epistle to the Corinthians*. (New York: A. C. Armstrong & Son, 1891), I.



# Personal Study

- Consider the life of the Apostle Paul. What elements of his story point to his authority as an apostle? Where do we see these accounts in scripture? Read Galatians 1:11 and following for a good start.

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- The kind of spiritual friendship Paul and Timothy enjoyed was unique and profoundly impactful. What role have Christian friends and mentors played in your life? Can you list a few people who have or have had this kind of role in your life? Take some time to thank God for them and perhaps to communicate your gratitude to them for the relationship you share.

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- Read Romans 15:1-7. How are we to act when we encounter weakness in others? Where do you see the language of 2 Corinthians 1 show up in these verses?

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- Read Isaiah 66:13. What is unique about the picture of God in this verse?

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# Group Application

- Talk about a time you were comforted by God and/or by others in the midst of your affliction. What was the situation? How were you comforted (the Word, prayer, letters, counsel, listening ear, etc.)?

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- According to this passage, suffering and affliction are inextricably linked to comfort. Explain how and why you think God ties these two realities together. (See Psalm 119:50 for additional help.)

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- Rather than complaining, Paul praises God for His mercies and comfort in the midst of affliction. How is he able to do this? How can we learn from him?

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- Which aspect of the sermon most impacted you? How do you plan to apply the sermon to your life? How can your group help you and pray for you?

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# Short Reading

## **From Believing in Hope: A Meditation on Hope, Expectations and the Nature of Faith by Joseph P. Lehmann**

We must also be very careful in how we present the promises of God which we can confidently affirm. Ironically, we often jeopardize the faith of other believers when we fail to carefully define how God has promised to treat us in the here and now. Take for instance 2 Corinthians 1:3-4, where Paul describes God as “the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles....”

Seven years after my wife’s death, I am still trying to figure out just what this verse promises. On the one hand I am tempted to argue on the basis of my experience that God doesn’t always comfort us in all our troubles. For every time His presence has filled the room and His arms of love have held me close, there has been a night when God has remained silent and distant and, for all I know, aloof and uncaring.

When I shared this thought with a friend, he reminded me that “comfort” is a relative term. After all, not everyone derives the same sense of comfort and contentment from a purring cat or a bar of chocolate. But this is tantamount to arguing that God

is like the husband who gives his wife a new toaster for their anniversary when she was expecting a romantic trip for two to a bed and breakfast. No matter how much he may need the toaster, she is unlikely to see it as a deep expression of her husband’s love.

Now I doubt my friend meant to imply either that God is ignorant of the things that really comfort us or that He would be so clumsy as to offer us comforts He knows to be unappealing. Rather, he was arguing that God had offered me genuine comfort in good faith, but that I had failed to appreciate it as such. If this is true, then God’s comfort is not relative, but absolute, with discrete characteristics which we can learn to recognize.

When we fail to define just how God has promised to deal with us, when we fail to teach people how to recognize God’s comfort, or His presence, or His love in their day-to-day lives, we leave these truths open to all sorts of misinterpretation. Without the revelation of Scripture (and who in the midst of crisis and tragedy is going to do an in-depth word study on “comfort”?), we invoke our culture’s “default” definitions. And thus we come to expect God to comfort us by making the pain go away, just like Mother did when we scraped our knee as a child.



It is not enough, then, merely to affirm the truth we find in Scripture. We must make sure that our hearers understand it, that they form accurate expectations of how God will deal with them in the days to come, always allowing room for God to act in ways that transcend the ordinary — both by exceeding our expectations and by refusing to allow Himself to be bound by them.

In his first letter to Timothy, Paul warned his son in the faith to “watch your life and doctrine closely” (1 Timothy 4:16). I have learned I must add my expectations to that list. For if I do not keep careful watch on them, I have found I will persevere in neither life nor doctrine, to my own eternal loss and my hearers’ as well.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Lehmann, Joseph P. “Believing in Hope: A Meditation on Hope, Expectations, and the Nature of Faith.” *The Journal Of Biblical Counseling* “On Suffering” (2013): (c) 2013, published by CCEF

## For Further Reading

- A. Suffering and the Sovereignty of God by John Piper and Justin Taylor
- B. When God Weeps – Joni Eareckson Tada

# Notes

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# Week 2

## 2 Corinthians 1:8–11 (ESV)

**F**or we do not want you to be unaware, brothers, of the affliction we experienced in Asia. For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself. 9 Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death. But that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises

the dead. 10 He delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us. On him we have set our hope that he will deliver us again. 11 You also must help us by prayer, so that many will give thanks on our behalf for the blessing granted us through the prayers of many.

### Context

- Paul wants the “brothers” to know his trials in Asia which would have informed his understanding of suffering and comfort (from the preceding verses) and help to explain why he wasn’t coming to them in person. The trials in Asia are not given to us in specific detail. We do know that there was wide-spread persecution of the church in this period, many times directed by the Roman leadership. We find a general timeline of Paul’s intentions and the difficulty he encountered in Acts chapter 19. Acts 19:21–23 (ESV) — 21 Now after these events Paul resolved in the Spirit to pass through Macedonia and Achaia and go

to Jerusalem, saying, “After I have been there, I must also see Rome.” 22 And having sent into Macedonia two of his helpers, Timothy and Erastus, he himself stayed in Asia for a while. 23 About that time there arose no little disturbance concerning the Way.

- When we read passages like the one above in Acts, it is a good reminder for us that scripture is written in a “context.” And by that we mean that God used human personalities, places and circumstances to deliver truth. We are often tempted to read the Bible in a compartmentalized way but should press on to think about the connections between leaders and cities and regions.



- A footnote from the ESV is helpful in understanding the plural use of brothers. “Or brothers and sisters. The plural Greek word adelphoi (translated “brothers”) refers to siblings in a family. In New Testament usage, depending on the context, adelphoi may refer either to men or to both men and women who are siblings (brothers and sisters) in God’s family, the church.”<sup>1</sup>
- They despaired of life itself. This was not simply a bad day. Refusal to embrace the depth of human sadness in the face of trials and real grief is not a hallmark of Christianity. It is decidedly un-Christian to put on a mask in that way. Paul was not ashamed that the pressures of life had moved him to a very difficult spot emotionally.
- This passage gives us a practical application of the doctrine of resurrection. The early church rested their preaching and hopes and faith on the resurrected Jesus. Our teaching is much more on the cross (maybe in a helpful way to bring about humility in a world of comfort and long life) but this persecuted people saw the necessary hope of the resurrection as absolutely vital to faith. In this instance we are to

<sup>1</sup> The Holy Bible: English Standard Version (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2001).

understand that what Paul experienced taught and shaped him. He was still benefiting from the trial. “The Greek verbs are in the perfect tense, indicating events in the past with continuing consequences. Thus the ordeal in Asia, whatever it was, still impinged on Paul while also stimulating ongoing reliance and hope in God. We may say that the new, deep awareness of death was accompanied by a new, deep trust in God.”<sup>2</sup>

- Paul connects the blessing of God to the prayers of many. Within a few short verses we find an amazing doctrine of prayer. God is in control. He can raise the dead. We were burdened “in order to rely on Him,” Paul says. However, despite all of God’s control, we pray because He brings things about through prayer. We are not in control when we pray but God has chosen to respond to prayer. We cannot demand and He does not always answer. But He does respond. And when He responds we can say, “God answered this because you prayed.” This is a mystery, to say the least. A mystery and a privilege.

<sup>2</sup> Paul Barnett, *The Message of 2 Corinthians: Power in Weakness* (The Bible Speaks Today; Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 33–34.

# Personal Study

- For a refresher course on the resurrection, read 1 Corinthians 15 slowly and thoughtfully. How important is the resurrection? What is lost when it is lost?  

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- Consider a time when you despaired? What was the basic fear or grief driving the despair? How does the gospel speak to this fear or grief?  

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- Read Psalm 27. When David is despairing from circumstances and adversaries, what helps him? List a few things you find in the text.  

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- “The criteria for coming to Jesus is weariness. Come overwhelmed with life. Come with your wandering mind. Come messy.”<sup>1</sup> – Paul Miller. Consider this statement. Do you struggle with needing to “clean up” before you pray?  

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<sup>1</sup> Paul E. Miller (2009-05-15). A Praying Life: Connecting With God In A Distracting World (Kindle Locations 433-438). NAVPress - A. Kindle Edition.

# Group Application

- Have you ever been in a place of desperation like Paul and his companions were? If so, describe the situation. How did God help you through it?

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- What does Paul say was God's purpose for him being under "the sentence of death"? How can this encourage you when you go through difficult times?

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- When you encounter difficulty, do you tend to reach out to others or turn inward? What reasons does Paul give for us to reach out? How can this help you?

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- What ways do you need to reach out to your group today and ask for prayer? Are there any ways you can thank God for things your group has been praying for?

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# Short Reading

## **From A Praying Life: Connecting with God in a Distracting Word** **by Paul E. Miller**

If God is sovereign, then he is in control of all the details of my life. If he is loving, then he is going to be shaping the details of my life for my good. If he is all-wise, then he's not going to do everything I want because I don't know what I need. If he is patient, then he is going to take time to do all this. When we put all these things together—God's sovereignty, love, wisdom, and patience—we have a divine story. People often talk about prayer as if it is disconnected from what God is doing in their lives. But we are actors in his drama, listening for our lines, quieting our hearts so we can hear the voice of the Playwright.

You can't have a good story without tension and conflict, without things going wrong. Unanswered prayers create some of the tensions in the story God is weaving in our lives. When we realize this, we want to know what God is doing. What pattern is God weaving?

### THE PRAYING LIFE...GIVES BIRTH TO HOPE

If God is composing a story with our lives, then our lives are no longer static. We aren't paralyzed by life; we can hope.

Many Christians give in to a quiet cynicism that leaves us unknowingly paralyzed. We see the world as monolithic, frozen.

To ask God for change confronts us with our doubt about whether prayer makes any difference. Is change even possible? Doesn't God control everything? If so, what's the point? Because it is uncomfortable to feel our unbelief, to come face-to-face with our cynicism, we dull our souls with the narcotic of activity.

Many Christians haven't stopped believing in God; we have just become functional deists, living with God at a distance. We view the world as a box with clearly defined edges. But as we learn to pray well, we'll discover that this is my Father's world. Because my Father controls everything, I can ask, and he will listen and act. Since I am his child, change is possible—and hope is born.

### THE PRAYING LIFE...BECOMES INTEGRATED

Many assume that the spiritual person is unruffled by life, unfazed by pressure. This idea that the spiritual person floats above life comes from the ancient world and, in particular, the Greek mind—although we see it strongly in the Eastern mind as well.

But even a cursory glance at Jesus' life reveals a busy life. All the gospel writers notice Jesus' busyness, although Mark in particular highlights it. At one point Jesus' family tries to stage an intervention because he is so busy. "Then he went home, and the crowd gathered again, so that they could not even eat. And when his family heard it, they went out to seize him, for they were saying, 'He is out of his mind'" (Mark 3:20-21). Given the sacredness in the ancient world of eating together, Jesus' life seems out of balance. But he loves people and has the power to help, so he has one interruption after another. If Jesus lived today, his cell phone would be ringing constantly.

The quest for a contemplative life can actually be self-absorbed, focused on my quiet and me. If we love people and have the power to help, then we are going to be busy. Learning to pray doesn't offer us a less busy life; it offers us a less busy heart. In the midst of outer busyness we can develop an inner quiet. Because we are less hectic on the inside, we have a greater capacity to love . . . and thus to be busy, which in turn drives us even more into a life of prayer. By spending time with our Father in prayer, we integrate our lives with his, with what he is doing in us. Our lives become more coherent. They feel calmer, more ordered, even in the midst of confusion and pressure.

## THE PRAYING LIFE...REVEALS THE HEART

Finally, as you get to know your heavenly Father, you'll get to know your own heart as well. As you develop your relationship with him, it will change you. Or more specifically, he will change you. Real change is at the heart level.

We keep forgetting God is a person. We don't learn to love someone without it changing us. That is just the nature of love that reflects the heart of God. Because God's love is unchanging, the second person of the Trinity, Jesus of Nazareth, now has a scarred body. The Trinity is different because of love. As you develop your relationship with your heavenly Father, you'll change. You'll discover nests of cynicism, pride, and self-will in your heart. You will be unmasked. None of us likes being exposed.

We have an allergic reaction to dependency, but this is the state of the heart most necessary for a praying life. A needy heart is a praying heart. Dependency is the heartbeat of prayer. So when it starts getting uncomfortable, don't pull back from God. He is just starting to work. Be patient.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *ibid*



## For Further Reading

### A. Prayer by Tim Keller

## B. The Power of Prayer in the Believers Life by Charles Spurgeon

# Notes

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal blue or grey ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are approximately 20 lines visible. The paper has a slight shadow on the right side, suggesting it's resting on a surface.

# Week 3

## 2 Corinthians 1:12-14 (ESV)

**F**or 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. 13 For we are not writing

to you anything other than what you read and understand and I hope you will fully understand— 14 just as you did partially understand us—that on the day of our Lord Jesus you will boast of us as we will boast of you.

### Context

- Paul uses the word “boast” 52 times in his writing. Forty-one of those uses occur in letters to the Corinthians. Gospel preaching is only effective when the perfection and Lordship of Jesus can replace the dominant idols in a person’s life. In this case, the ostentatious pride and status seeking city of Corinth is confronted with an apostle who boasts in weakness, who glories in simplicity.
- Conscience, a moral compass, is a gift from God to be stewarded. In letters dealing with matters of sin and law, Paul often leans on the conscience in directing people.
- Wisdom was a prized virtue in Corinth, especially when accompanied by rhetorical flourish. Paul made it clear, again and again, to the church and those looking in that he would rather the power rest on God than on manipulation or celebrity-level skills.
- Verse 13 reveals the very personal history with this church. There are often vague phrases like this that attempt to get at an event or issue that brought about confusion or difficulty. In many instances we are left unsure of what caused the strife. Many scholars think the issues stem from a change in plans on Paul’s part... he had initially intended to visit them before changing plans and sending Timothy.

- Paul has a fatherly affection for this church and consistently writes through that perspective. He rejoices in them and

will one day boast of them before the Father in the same way Christ delights in the church.

## Personal Study

- Read 1 Corinthians 1:26–29 (ESV). How does Paul's desire to live simply and not by earthly wisdom line up with his admonition in that passage? What did Jesus look for in disciples?

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- Read 1 Corinthians 10:23-33. What role does the conscience play in this passage? What issue is Paul dealing with? Are there contemporary or personal areas where you have confusion on what might be righteous?

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- What does it look like for you to live simply? Does it involve consistent joy and excellence in your calling? Read 1 Thessalonians 4:9-12. Do you have some room to grow in simplicity?

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# Group Application

- Share a time when you boasted—for good or bad.

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- Normally, we think of boasting as being sinful. However, what did Paul boast of and why was this okay?

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- Paul seems to highlight his character as much as his message. How did Paul describe his character and conduct? Why is this important, especially when one has been criticized as an impostor? How can this relate to us when we are sharing the gospel? (See 1 Corinthians 2:1-5 for more insight.)

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- How did Paul want himself and the Corinthians to view one another? (Think: What was the value of telling the Corinthians this?)

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- Which aspect of the sermon most impacted you? How do you plan to apply the sermon to your life? How can your group help you and pray for you?

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# Short Reading

## From Every Good Endeavor: Connecting Your Work to God's Work

### Vocation and the "Masks of God"

No one took hold of the teaching of the first book of Corinthians, chapter 7 more powerfully than Martin Luther. Luther translated the word "calling" in these verses as *Beruf* in German, the word for "occupation," and mounted a polemic against the view of vocation prevalent in the medieval church. The church at that time understood itself as the entirety of God's kingdom on earth, and therefore only work in and for the church could qualify as God's work. This meant that the only way to be called by God into service was as a monk, priest, or nun. They were called "the spiritual estate," everyone else's work was worldly, and secular labor was seen as akin to the demeaning necessity that the Greeks saw in manual labor. Luther attacked this idea forcefully in his treatise *To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation*:

It is pure invention [fiction] that Pope, bishops, priests, and monks are called the "spiritual estate" while princes, lords, artisans, and farmers are called the "temporal estate." This is indeed a piece of deceit and hypocrisy. Yet no one need be intimidated by it, and that for this reason: all Christians are truly of the

spiritual estate, and there is no difference among them except that of office. . . . We are all consecrated priests by baptism, as St. Peter says: "You are a royal priesthood and a priestly realm" (1 Pet. 2: 9). The Apocalypse says: "Thou hast made us to be kings and priests by thy blood."

Luther is arguing here that God calls every Christian equally to their work. In his exposition of Psalm 147, Luther lays out his basic idea of vocation, explaining why this is so. He looks at verse 13, which assures a city that "God strengthens the bars of your gates." Luther asks how God can strengthen the bars—provide for the security and safety—of a city. He answers, "By the word 'bars' we must understand not only the iron bar that a smith can make, but . . . everything else that helps to protect us, such as good government, good city ordinances, good order... and wise rulers... this is a gift of God." How does God give a city security? Isn't it through lawmakers, police officers, and those working in government and politics? So God cares for our civic needs through the work of others, whom he calls to that work.

In Luther's *Large Catechism*, when he addresses the petition in the Lord's Prayer asking God to give us our "daily bread," Luther says that "when you pray for 'daily bread' you are praying for everything that contributes to your having and enjoying your daily bread... You must open up and

expand your thinking, so that it reaches not only as far as the flour bin and baking oven but also out over the broad fields, the farmlands, and the entire country that produces, processes, and conveys to us our daily bread and all kinds of nourishment.” So how does God “feed every living thing” (Psalm 145: 16) today? Isn’t it through the farmer, the baker, the retailer, the website programmer, the truck driver, and all who contribute to bring us food? Luther writes: “God could easily give you grain and fruit without your plowing and planting, but he does not want to do so.”

Then he gives an analogy to show us why God works this way. Parents want to give their children everything they need, but they also want them to become diligent, conscientious, and responsible people. So they give their children chores. They could obviously do the chores better themselves, but that would not help their children grow in maturity. So parents give their children what they need—character—through the diligence required for the chores they assign them. Luther concludes that God works through our work for the same reason: What else is all our work to God—whether in the fields, in the garden, in the city, in the house, in war, or in government—but just such a child’s performance, by which He wants to give His gifts in the fields, at home, and everywhere else? These are the masks of

God, behind which He wants to remain concealed and do all things.

In his exposition of Psalm 147, verse 14, Luther goes on to ask, How does God “make peace in your borders?” His answer is, through good neighbors, who practice honesty and integrity in their daily interactions and who participate in civic life. He even sees marital sexual relations as part of this pattern. God could have given us children directly. “He could give children without using men and women. But He does not want to do this. Instead, He joins man and woman so that it appears to be the work of man and woman but He does it under the cover of such masks.”

And so we see what Luther means by God’s vocation. Not only are the most modest jobs—like plowing a field or digging a ditch—the “masks” through which God cares for us, but so are the most basic social roles and tasks, such as voting, participating in public institutions, and being a father or mother. These are all God’s callings, all ways of doing God’s work in the world, all ways through which God distributes his gifts to us. Even the humblest farm girl is fulfilling God’s calling. As Luther preached, “God milks the cows through the vocation of the milk maids.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Keller, Timothy (2012-11-13). *Every Good Endeavor: Connecting Your Work to God’s Work* (pp. 77-80). Penguin Group US. Kindle Edition.





[illegible]

# Week 4

## 2 Corinthians 1:15–2:4 (ESV)

**B**ecause I was sure of this, I wanted to come to you first, so that you might have a second experience of grace. 16 I wanted to visit you on my way to Macedonia, and to come back to you from Macedonia and have you send me on my way to Judea. 17 Was I vacillating when I wanted to do this? Do I make my plans according to the flesh, ready to say “Yes, yes” and “No, no” at the same time? 18 As surely as God is faithful, our word to you has not been Yes and No. 19 For the Son of God, Jesus Christ, whom we proclaimed among you, Silvanus and Timothy and I, was not Yes and No, but in him it is always Yes. 20 For all the promises of God find their Yes in him. That is why it is through him that we utter our Amen to God for his glory. 21 And it is God who establishes us with you in Christ, and has anointed us, 22 and who has also put his seal on us and given us his Spirit in our hearts as a guarantee. 23 But I call God to witness

against me—it was to spare you that I refrained from coming again to Corinth. 24 Not that we lord it over your faith, but we work with you for your joy, for you stand firm in your faith.

### Chapter 2

**F**or I made up my mind not to make another painful visit to you. 2 For if I cause you pain, who is there to make me glad but the one whom I have pained? 3 And I wrote as I did, so that when I came I might not suffer pain from those who should have made me rejoice, for I felt sure of all of you, that my joy would be the joy of you all. 4 For I wrote to you out of much affliction and anguish of heart and with many tears, not to cause you pain but to let you know the abundant love that I have for you.

# Context

- Continuing the same theme of a planned visit gone wrong, Paul makes explicit mention of his decision to not return. This promised return, unfulfilled due to persecution and other hardship, is a source of angst in the church. It makes them question Paul's sincerity and intentions.
- It seems odd to describe a pending visit to someone as an opportunity for them to experience grace. Paul understood (and really believed!) that his presence and teaching were being used by God to form the church. Indeed, Paul would 'work with them for their joy.'
- We also learn that Silvanus was part of the envoy who visited and taught in the churches. Silvanus is mentioned directly in the opening of the letter

to the Thessalonians (another Greek outpost). He is also commended by Peter in 1 Peter 5:12. By Silvanus, a faithful brother as I regard him, I have written briefly to you, exhorting and declaring that this is the true grace of God. Stand firm in it.

- The story of the Bible is basically a story of a promise between God and His covenant people. Every single promise is kept and affirmed in Jesus Christ.
- Though hardship in Asia is the explicit and direct reason for Paul's change of plans, we also see that he was wrestling through the difficulty of his last visit. It was painful. He dealt forcefully with the sin of the church and was pained by accusations from those whom he loved.

# Personal Study

- Paul is often seen as a relentless pursuer of mission and church planting. A doctrinal giant. Those things are true but there is another side to Paul as well. Read Romans 1:8-15. What do we learn of Paul in these verses?

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- Read Ephesians 1:3-14. Note how the plan (promise) of God finds fulfillment in Jesus. What is the name given to the Holy Spirit? What does he secure for us?

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# Group Application

- Have you ever made plans and had to change them (of course!)? If possible, share a funny story of how your plans got all mixed up.

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- Paul planned to see the Corinthians, but was unable to. Even though his plans changed, what does he point the Corinthians to that never changes? How can the promises of God give strength to us in the midst of changing circumstances?

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- Paul needed to say some hard words to the Corinthians that caused him much “anguish of heart.” Why is it necessary for Christians to speak tough words sometimes? What can we learn from Paul about the attitude of our hearts when we have to confront someone in sin? (See Galatians 6:1ff for further insight.)

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- Is there someone that you need to lovingly confront today? Ask your group to pray for you—that God would give you wisdom, humility, and gentleness.

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# Short Reading

## **From The Good News We Almost Forgot: Rediscovering the Gospel in a 16th Century Catechism by Kevin DeYoung**

### 53. Q. WHAT DO YOU BELIEVE CONCERNING “THE HOLY SPIRIT”?

A. First, He, as well as the Father and the Son, is eternal God. Second, He has been given to me personally, so that, by true faith, He makes me share in Christ and all His blessings, comforts me, and remains with me forever.

Many Christians rarely think about the Holy Spirit. God the Father we know about. God the Son we think about all the time. But God the Holy Spirit? It is often true: Traditional conservative Christians know too little about, and cherish too lightly, the person and work of the Holy Spirit. But before we pursue this criticism too far, we need to remember that the New Testament itself says a great deal more about Jesus Christ and God the Father than it does about the Spirit.

More importantly, we must not forget that the work of the Holy Spirit is first of all to glorify Christ (John 16:14). So whether we realize it or not, we are very intimately connected with the work of the Spirit, because wherever we are drawn to Christ

as Savior, led to worship Christ as Lord, made to behold Christ as glorious, we are being operated on by the Holy Spirit.

The focus of most of our churches (like the Creed and the Catechism) is on Christ and not the Spirit, because that’s the focus of the apostolic gospel, the New Testament, and the Holy Spirit Himself! Of course, this is not to suggest that singing to the Holy Spirit or worshipping Him is inappropriate. Far from it. Every person of the Trinity is equally glorious and deserving of praise. But Spirit-led worship has at its heart not an emotive experience (though emotions are good), nor a spontaneous feel (though spontaneity isn’t bad), but rather a Christ-exalting, cross-focused, Word-centered event where the name of Jesus is praised in the power of the Spirit to the glory of God the Father.

Answer 53 outlines the doctrine of the Holy Spirit using two broad categories: the person and the work of the Spirit. Remember, the Holy Spirit is a person—a teaching (Luke 12:11–12), speaking (Acts 13:2), interceding (Rom. 8:26), grieving (Eph. 4:30) person—distinct from the Father and the Son. The Holy Spirit is not a force or a principle of nature or a mode of God’s existence. The Spirit is eternal God.

He is everywhere, which does not mean the Spirit is everything or in everything, but rather that there is nowhere we can

go where the Spirit isn't also present (Ps. 139:7). The Spirit is eternal (Heb. 9:14). The Spirit alone knows the mind of God (1 Cor. 2:10–11). The Holy Spirit is fully divine, His name being used interchangeably with the name "God" (see Acts 5:3–4, where lying to God and lying to the Holy Spirit are equated, and 1 Corinthians 3:16 and 6:19, where the temple of God and the temple of the Holy Spirit are used synonymously). The Holy Spirit is active in our salvation along with the Father and the Son (1 Peter 1:1–2). Jesus commands His disciples to be baptized in the name (singular) of all three persons (plural) of the Trinity, underlying the equality of rank, power, and majesty among Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, while also emphasizing their fundamental unity (Matt. 28:19; cf. 2 Cor. 13:14).

The second category concerns the work of the Holy Spirit. The first thing the Catechism notes here is that the Holy Spirit "has been given to me personally." The Holy Spirit is not simply an omnipresent being who is with us in the sense that He is everywhere and so wherever we go there He will be also. The Spirit lives within us (1 Cor. 6:19) and makes His dwelling in our hearts (2 Cor. 1:22; Gal. 4:6). We have fellowship with Him (2 Cor. 13:14). This physical imagery should not be understood spatially as if the Spirit gets His mail delivered in the upper left chamber of that beating muscle in the chest. Rather, the Spirit dwells in us by animating

our personality, shaping our character, renewing our mind, and stirring our emotions. His presence is not a physical residence as much as an experienced reality.

The Catechism goes on to mention three benefits we experience through the work of the Holy Spirit. (Note: The words "by faith" in the Catechism are important. The Spirit does not work to make anonymous Christians who have the blessings of Christ apart from belief in Christ. The benefits are only ours by faith. It is by trusting in Christ, resting in Christ, and depending solely on Christ that the Holy Spirit works in us.) The first benefit is that we share in Christ and all His blessings. Surely if anyone is blessed of God, it is His Son. And by the Spirit, we too now share in all His blessings. We too are looked on with favor. Everything Christ accomplished is ours. All He won is ours. The promised inheritance of Abraham is ours (Gal. 3:14). All this and more because we belong to Christ and Christ's blessings belong to us through ministrations of the Spirit.

The second benefit is the Holy Spirit's comfort. Most of us have heard that the Holy Spirit is a Comforter (John 14:16 KJV). Other translations render *paracletos* a "Helper" (ESV), a "Counselor" (NIV), or an "Advocate" (NRSV), but the truth is still there: God comforts His people by the Holy Spirit. This happens in a number of ways.



The Spirit may supernaturally strengthen your soul and give you a peace that passes understanding or a calm confidence in the work of the Lord (Acts 9:31). He may also comfort you through other Christians as you share in the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. As the Spirit of truth, He will often speak to you through the Word of God, leading you into all truth (John 16:13), encouraging you with the words of Scripture He inspired and now illuminates. He may cause you to remember a precious biblical truth or direct your thoughts to the finished work of Christ or give you eyes to see more clearly the glory of God.

The third benefit is the Holy Spirit's presence forever. In heaven, the Spirit will continue to teach us more about the inexhaustible riches of Christ. He will continue to be the personal bond that unites believers in fellowship. And He will continue to minister to us the presence of God the Father and God the Son, who together with the Holy Spirit are triune God, blessed forevermore, amen.<sup>1</sup>

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1 DeYoung, Kevin L. (2010-03-26). *The Good News We Almost Forgot: Rediscovering the Gospel in a 16th Century Catechism* (pp. 104-105). Moody Publishers. Kindle Edition.

## For Further Reading

- A. *The Sovereign Spirit* by D. Martyn Lloyd Jones
- B. *Dynamics of the Spiritual Life* by Richard Lovelace

# Notes

This image shows a blank sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

# Week 5

## 2 Corinthians 2:5-11 (ESV)

**N**ow if anyone has caused pain, he has caused it not to me, but in some measure—not to put it too severely—to all of you. 6 For such a one, this punishment by the majority is enough, 7 so you should rather turn to forgive and comfort him, or he may be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. 8 So I beg you to reaffirm your love for him. 9

For this is why I wrote, that I might test you and know whether you are obedient in everything. 10 Anyone whom you forgive, I also forgive. Indeed, what I have forgiven, if I have forgiven anything, has been for your sake in the presence of Christ, 11 so that we would not be outwitted by Satan; for we are not ignorant of his designs.

### Context

- The word for pain that Paul uses can be translated as “sorrow.” When Paul hears about the sin of another, he is not thinking about how it affects him, but how it damages the church. His response is not hatred or self-righteousness, but a deep sense of sadness because of how much pain sin causes in the lives of people he loves.
- When Paul writes to the Corinthians, he wants to make sure they’re obedient in everything. In Acts 20, Paul tells the elders at Ephesus that he did not shrink from declaring to them the

whole counsel of God because he wants Christians to know everything God desires of them. It’s always tempting to think obedience in one area exempts us from obedience in another, but God calls and gives us grace to obey him in all that He asks of us.

- There’s a lot of tenderness and gentleness in these verses. Paul makes sure to remind the church that the repentant man is their brother whom they love. They must “reassure” him of their love. Paul’s vision of the church is not a place of perfection, but a place of graciousness and love that bears with each other’s sins.

- Paul mentions Satan’s “designs.” We often fail to realize how much smarter Satan is than us, but that goes to show how deceptive Satan is. The idea that there is an adversary trying to destroy the church can sound ridiculous, but it was a serious matter for Paul. He knew that the ultimate battlefield for the church was a spiritual one.
- In the same vein, we often forget that everything the church does is “in the presence of Christ.” Every staff meeting, counseling session, Bible study, Sunday gathering, and church discipline case is done with Christ presiding over it. A church that disobeys the word of God does so in the presence of God himself.

## Personal Study

- Read Matthew 18:15-20 and compare it to 2 Corinthians 2:5-11. How do these two verses inform how the church should respond to sin?

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- Read 1 Corinthians 7:9-13. What are the marks of genuine repentance?

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- What is the significance of Paul’s comment in verse 10?

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- What does Paul’s use of both the words “beg” and “test” reveal about his relationship to the church at Corinth?

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- Paul warns that a failure to forgive opens the door for Satan’s plans. What can Satan accomplish through a church that fails to forgive? How has failing to forgive left you open to temptation?

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## Group Application

- Tell a story of forgiveness-either you forgiving someone or someone forgiving you. Explain the circumstances and how it made you feel.

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- What situation caused much pain to the Corinthian church? (See 1 Corinthians 5 for help.) Paul initially rebuked the Corinthians for not disciplining the individual in question, but now the church has gone too far in the other direction by withholding forgiveness and comfort. Which tendency do you have—to not confront or to not forgive?

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- Talk about the purpose of church discipline, as well as the importance of forgiveness and restoration. Where do we get the strength to forgive someone who has sinned against us? (See Ephesians 4:32 for help.)
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- Is there someone from whom you are withholding forgiveness? How can you take steps to forgive this person? How can your group help and pray for you?
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## Short Reading

### From *Extravagant Grace* by Barbara R. Duguid

William Cowper, the poet and hymn writer, was originally trained to be a lawyer but had to give up that ambition because of his depression. He attempted suicide three times and was institutionalized for a while in an asylum for severe depression. It was there in the asylum that he came to faith in Christ, through the influence of an evangelical doctor.

Cowper began attending (John) Newton's church when he moved to Olney, and he and Newton became close friends, collaborating on hymn-writing projects. Yet his struggles with depression returned,

to the point where he was no longer even able to attend church. Newton continued to care for and encourage Cowper, taking long walks with him and helping him in the midst of black despair.

What a wonderful providence of God that he led these two men to be richly blessed by one another. Newton saw God's glory in Cowper, and with great gentleness and patience sought to relieve his suffering and make his gifts amiable to the body of Christ. He did not rebuke Cowper for his weak faith or ongoing struggle with depression, but he walked with him lovingly.

Though never cured, Cowper experienced a remission of his depression for a period of about nine years, which coincided with his discovery of the doctrines of grace. These

relieved his conscience and persuaded him, in his best moments, that his safety rested in God's grip on him and not on the strength of his own faith. Newton's understanding of the suffering that sin and weakness cause made him a man full of mercy and grace toward those who remained unable to thrive emotionally under the burdens God called them to bear.

Newton's own careful analysis of the state of the believer caused him, like the mature Christian he described in his letters, to make every allowance for other believers'

failure. His response to those who wrote to him in a state of despair over their ongoing sin never held the tone of "How could you do that?" Rather, his response was habitually "Of course you did that: you're a sinner, and that's what sinners do." He reasoned that sinners have so many things going against them in this world that we should never be shocked when they fall. Instead, we should be constantly amazed when they don't!<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Duguid, Barbara R. *Extravagant Grace: God's Glory Displayed in Our Weakness*. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2013. 165. Print.

## For Further Reading

A. Pursuing Peace by Robert D. Jones

B. When Forgiveness Doesn't Make Sense by Robert Jeffries

# Notes

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# Week 6

## 2 Corinthians 2:12-17 (ESV)

**W**hen I came to Troas to preach the gospel of Christ, even though a door was opened for me in the Lord, 13 my spirit was not at rest because I did not find my brother Titus there. So I took leave of them and went on to Macedonia. 14 But thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession, and through us spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of

him everywhere. 15 For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing, 16 to one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life. Who is sufficient for these things? 17 For we are not, like so many, peddlers of God's word, but as men of sincerity, as commissioned by God, in the sight of God we speak in Christ.

### Context

- Every time Paul traveled to a new place he had one objective in mind—preach the gospel. The preaching of the gospel is the normal way in which people come to saving faith. Service, hospitality, kindness and charity are all important, but the gospel does not spread unless someone says something. God gave us His words so that we would use them.
- A person's "spirit" is hard to define, but it can be described as the source or power by which a person feels, thinks, and decides. When Paul says he does

not find "rest" in his "spirit," he is not chucking his reasoning out the window, but combining it with his emotions and judgment to make an educated decision. It's not entirely rationalistic because it's obviously something Paul felt, but it is also not completely emotional because it was informed by his circumstances and reasoning.

- Being a Christian in a hostile world is tough, and Paul knew that. That is why he was disappointed when he did not find Titus in Troas. Titus was a fellow co-worker of Paul's and someone in whom Paul found comfort. These personal insights to Paul help us see

him and his co-workers as real people with real friendships bonded together through joy and suffering.

- The phrase “triumphal procession” is literally translated “triumph in Christ.” Paul is painting a picture of a conquering Christ who triumphs over the world. This is a strange statement considering Paul’s opening remarks of suffering. This is one of the paradoxes of the Christian life. On the one hand, we suffer in this life and we face many setbacks and crushing disappointments. On the other hand, we are assured of

victory in Christ and that His plan for the world will come to pass. Paul’s future hope gives him present support.

- Paul the great evangelist, preacher and apostle, looked at his life as a Christian and wondered to himself “who is sufficient for these things?” If Paul felt inadequate, what hope do we have? And that’s the point. God’s grace is not only enough for us—it is all we have. Everything Paul did was by the grace of God, and Paul found his joy and empowerment in that fact.

## Personal Study

- What is Paul trying to communicate with the imagery of the “fragrance” of the knowledge of Christ?

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- Make a list of all of God’s actions in this verse compared to our actions. How does this affect your perspective on evangelism and ministry to others?

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- What is the determining factor between whether someone receives Christ as a fragrance from death to death, or a fragrance from life to life?

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- Paul calls false teachers “peddlers of God’s word.” Read 1 Timothy 6:3-10 and write down the characteristics of a false teacher.

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- What is the relationship between a Paul’s view of preaching the gospel and Paul’s sincere character?

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# Group Application

- Paul describes believers as having the “aroma of Christ.” Describe to the group someone you know who spreads the fragrant aroma of Christ.

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- When the gospel is preached, there are only 2 possible responses. What are they? Can you think of a story in the Bible that illustrates this point?

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- According to verse 17, how did Paul handle God’s Word? How should that encourage us as we share the gospel?

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- There are some people who are currently experiencing the aroma of Christ as a fragrance of death rather than a fragrance of life. As a group, pray for these individuals and ask that God would give you boldness to speak Christ to them and that God would save them.

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# Short Reading

## From the sermon, *The Two Effects of the Gospel* by Charles Spurgeon

The gospel is to some men “a savour of death unto death.” Now, this depends very much upon what the gospel is; because there are some things called gospel, that are “a savour of death unto death” to everybody that hears them. John Berridge says he preached morality till there was not a moral man left in the village; and there is no way of injuring morality like legal preaching. The preaching of good works, and the exhorting men to holiness, as the means of salvation, is very much admired in theory; but when brought into practice, it is found not only ineffectual, but more than that—it becomes even “a savour of death unto death.”

So it has been found; and I think even the great Chalmers himself confessed, that for years and years before he knew the Lord, he preached nothing but morality and precepts, but he never found a drunkard reclaimed by shewing him merely the evils of drunkenness; nor did he find a swearer stop his swearing because he told him the heinousness of the sin; it was not until he began to preach the love of Jesus, in his great heart of mercy – it was not until he preached the gospel as it was in Christ,

in some of its clearness, fullness, and power, and the doctrine, that “by grace ye are saved, through faith, and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God” that he ever met with success.

But when he did preach salvation by faith, by shoals the drunkards came from their cups, and swearers refrained their lips from evil speaking; thieves became honest men, and unrighteous and ungodly persons bowed to the scepter of Jesus. But ye must confess, as I said before, that though the gospel does in the main produce the best effect upon almost all who hear it either by restraining them from sin, or constraining them to Christ, yet it is a great fact, and a solemn one, upon which I hardly know how to speak this morning, that to some men the preaching of Christ’s gospel is “death unto death,” and produces evil instead of good.

But, blessed be God, the gospel has a second power. Besides being “death unto death,” it is “a savour of life unto life.” Ah! my brethren, some of us could speak, if we were allowed this meaning, of the gospel as being “a savour of life” to us. We can look back to that hour when we were “dead in trespasses and sin.” In vain all Sinai’s thunders; in vain the rousing of the watchmen; we slept on in the death-sleep of our transgressions; nor could an angel have aroused us.

But we look back with joy to that hour when first we stepped within the walls of a sanctuary, and savingly heard the voice of mercy. With some of you it is but a few weeks. I know where ye are and who ye are. But a few weeks or months ago ye too were far from God, but now ye are brought to love him. Canst thou look back my brother Christian, to that very moment when the gospel was to thee—when thou didst cast away thy sins, renounce thy lusts, and turning to God’s Word, received it with full purpose of heart? Ah! that hour—of all hours the sweetest! Nothing can be compared, therewith.

I knew a person who for forty or fifty years had been completely deaf. Sitting one morning at her cottage door as some vehicle was passing, she thought she heard

melodious music. It was not music; it was but the sound of the vehicle. Her ear had suddenly opened, and that rough sound seemed to her like the music of heaven, because it was the first she had heard for so many years. Even so, the first time our ears were opened to hear the words of love—the assurance of our pardon—we never heard the word so well as we did then; it never seemed so sweet; and perhaps, even now, we look back and say,

“What peaceful hours I then enjoyed!

How sweet their memory still!”

When first it was “a savour of life” unto our souls.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Spurgeon, Charles. “The Two Effects of the Gospel.” Sermon. Exeter Hall, Strand. 27 May 1855.

## For Further Reading

A. The Transforming Power of the Gospel by Jerry Bridges

B. Bold Love by Dan Allender/Tremper Longman

# Notes

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## **Four Oaks Community Church**

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