

2 Corinthians – The Power of Weakness

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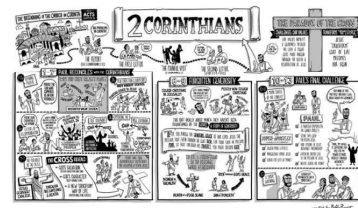
This morning, I will give an overview of the book of 2 Corinthians



Background

- A: The Corinthians can boast in Paul (2 Cor 1:12-22)
- B: Grief and comfort over painful letter (1:23-2:11)
- C: Looking for Titus in Macedonia (2:12-13)
- D: Contrast between belief and unbelief (2:13-4:6)
- E: Triumphant despite hardship (4:7-5:10)
- F: Christ's ministry of reconciliation (5:11-21)
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- D: Contrast between belief and unbelief (6:11-7:4)
- C: Finding Titus in Macedonia (7:5-7)
- B: Grief and comfort over painful letter (7:8-12)
- A: Paul can boast in the Corinthians (2 Cor 7:13-16)

Literary
Characteristics



Overview and
Applications

When reading a book of the Bible, you should always ask the following four questions

- Who is the author?** → **Paul**
- When was it written?** → **AD 55-57**
- Who was it written to?** → **The church in Corinth and Christians throughout Achaia**
- What is the book's main purpose?** →
- Address tension from previous letters/visits
 - Encourage generosity
 - Defend his apostleship
 - Emphasize God's power in weakness

There is a lot of evidence that Paul is the author

Names himself: "Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus..." (1:1)

Personal details: Travels, hardships, "thorn in the flesh" — match Acts & other letters

Style & vocabulary: Passionate, rhetorical, consistent with Paul's known letters

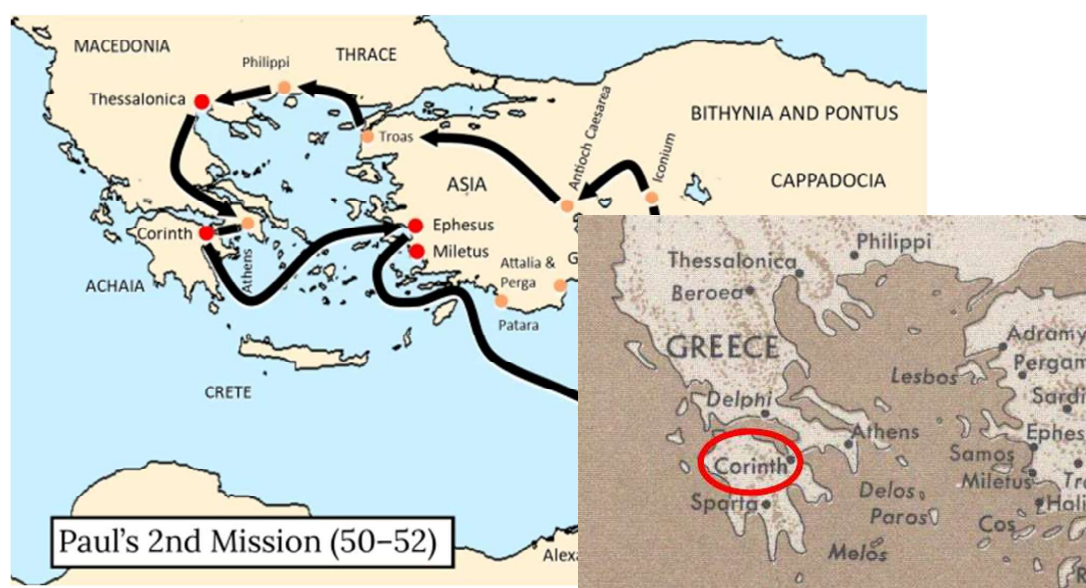
Early church acceptance: Quoted by Clement, Ignatius, Polycarp; never disputed

Historical fit: Matches timeline of 1 Corinthians, Titus' report, Jerusalem collection

Let's look at a simplified timeline of Paul's interactions with Corinth

Date	Event
A.D. 50–51	Paul founds the church (Acts 18:1-18).
Previous Letter	A lost letter warning about immorality (1 Cor. 5:9).
A.D. 54–55	1 Corinthians (from Ephesus)
Painful Visit	A quick visit to Corinth that goes badly (2 Cor. 2:1).
Severe Letter	Another lost letter urging repentance (2 Cor. 2:3-4, 7:8).
A.D. 55–57	2 Corinthians (from Macedonia)
A.D. 57	Third Visit — Paul spends 3 months (Acts 20:2-3); writes Romans

Paul visited Corinth on his 2nd missionary journey



<https://www.historyinthebible.com/>

What do we know about Corinth

Category	Details
Location & Geography	On the Isthmus of Corinth, linking northern and southern Greece; controlled two key harbors — Lechaenum (west, toward Italy) and Cenchreae (east, toward Asia). A major trade hub.
History	Destroyed by the Romans in 146 B.C.; rebuilt as a Roman colony in 44 B.C. by Julius Caesar. Became capital of the Roman province of Achaia in Paul's time.
Population & Culture	200,000+ residents plus many slaves. Cosmopolitan mix of Romans, Greeks, Jews, and travelers.
Religion	Temples to Aphrodite, Apollo, Poseidon; emperor worship; also had a synagogue (Acts 18:4).
Economy	Thrived on trade , pottery, bronze work, and shipbuilding. Wealthy elite lived alongside the poor.
Reputation	Famous for wealth, diversity, and immorality. The Greek verb "to Corinthianize" meant to live immorally.

Let's look at some literary characteristics of the book

1. Highly Personal and Emotional Tone

- More autobiographical than most of Paul's letters
- Shows Paul's "heart on his sleeve" in defending his ministry
- Includes raw expressions of fear, joy, sorrow, and relief (2:4; 7:5-7; 12:7b-10)

2 Cor 2:4 ⁴ For I wrote you out of **great distress** and **anguish** of heart and with **many tears**, not to grieve you but to let you know the depth of my love for you.

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2 Cor 7:5-7 ⁵ For when we came into Macedonia, we had no rest, but we were **harassed** at every turn—conflicts on the outside, fears within. ⁶ But God, who comforts the downcast, comforted us by the coming of Titus, ⁷ and not only by his coming but also by the comfort you had given him. He told us about your **longing** for me, your **deep sorrow**, your **ardent concern** for me, so that my joy was greater than ever.

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2 Cor 12:7b-10 Therefore, in order to keep me from becoming conceited, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. ⁸ Three times I **pleaded** with the Lord to take it away from me. ⁹ But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. ¹⁰ That is why, for Christ's sake, I **delight** in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

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2. He uses Contrast and Paradox to highlight spiritual truth:

- Weakness vs. strength (12:9-10)
- Life vs. death (4:8-12)
- Seen vs. unseen (4:16-18)

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2 Cor 4:16-18 ¹⁶ So we do not lose heart. Though our **outer self** is wasting away, our **inner self** is being renewed day by day. ¹⁷ For this **light momentary affliction** is preparing for us an **eternal weight of glory** beyond all comparison, ¹⁸ as we look not to the things that are **seen** but to the things that are **unseen**. For the things that are **seen** are **transient**, but the things that are **unseen** are **eternal**.

There are many of these contrasts (not comprehensive)

Verse	Contrast
2:16	aroma of death / aroma of life
3:6	letter kills / Spirit gives life
4:8-9	afflicted...not crushed; perplexed...not in despair; persecuted...not forsaken; struck down...not destroyed
4:10-12	death at work in us / life in you
4:16	outer wasting / inner renewing
4:18	seen (temporary) / unseen (eternal)
5:7	walk by faith / not by sight
6:8-10	dishonor & slander / honor & praise; sorrowful / rejoicing; poor / making many rich; having nothing / possessing everything

There are many of these contrasts (not comprehensive)

Verse	Contrast
7:4-6	affliction / overflowing with joy
8:2	affliction & poverty / abundant joy & generosity
8:9	Christ rich / became poor
12:9-10	power perfected in weakness; weak → strong
13:3-4	Christ's weakness at cross / lives by God's power; we're weak / live by God's power
13:9	we're weak / you're strong

Let's look at some literary characteristics of the book

3. Imagery and Metaphors – Paul uses vivid word pictures:

- **Fragrance of Christ** (2:14-16)
- **Clay jars** carrying treasure (4:7)
- **Ambassadors for Christ** (5:20)
- **Thorn in the flesh** (12:7)

2 Cor 2:14-16 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?

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2 Cor 4:7 ⁷ But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us.

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2 Cor 5:20 ²⁰ Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.

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2 Cor 12:7 ⁷ So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited.

Let's look at some literary characteristics of the book

4. Rhetorical Style

- Strong appeals and persuasion, with rhetorical questions (e.g., 6:14-16)
- Shifts between gentle encouragement (ch. 1-9) and sharp rebuke (ch. 10-13)
- “Boasting” sections (ch. 11-12) are ironic — Paul boasts in weakness to undercut his opponents

2 Cor 6:14-16a ¹⁴ Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers. For what partnership has righteousness with lawlessness? Or what fellowship has light with darkness? ¹⁵ What accord has Christ with Belial? Or what portion does a believer share with an unbeliever? ¹⁶ What agreement has the temple of God with idols? For we are the temple of the living God.

Let's look at some literary characteristics of the book

5. Structural Complexity

- Appears somewhat fragmented: sudden shifts in tone (1-9 warm vs 10-13 harsh) and topic (8-9 about giving in the middle)
- Scholars debate whether it was one unified letter, or a collection of multiple shorter letters Paul wrote to Corinth.
 - What seems “disjointed” to us could be perfectly normal to an ancient reader
 - No ancient manuscript ever circulated the letter in parts
 - The themes of reconciliation, generosity, and God’s power in weakness hold it together.

Some scholars have argued that chapters 1 - 7 have a chiasmic structure

- A: The Corinthians can boast in Paul (2 Cor 1:12-22)
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- A: Paul can boast in the Corinthians (2 Cor 7:13-16)

The book is organized into three main sections

Paul explains his
ministry and
reconciles with the
Corinthians
(Chapters 1 – 7)

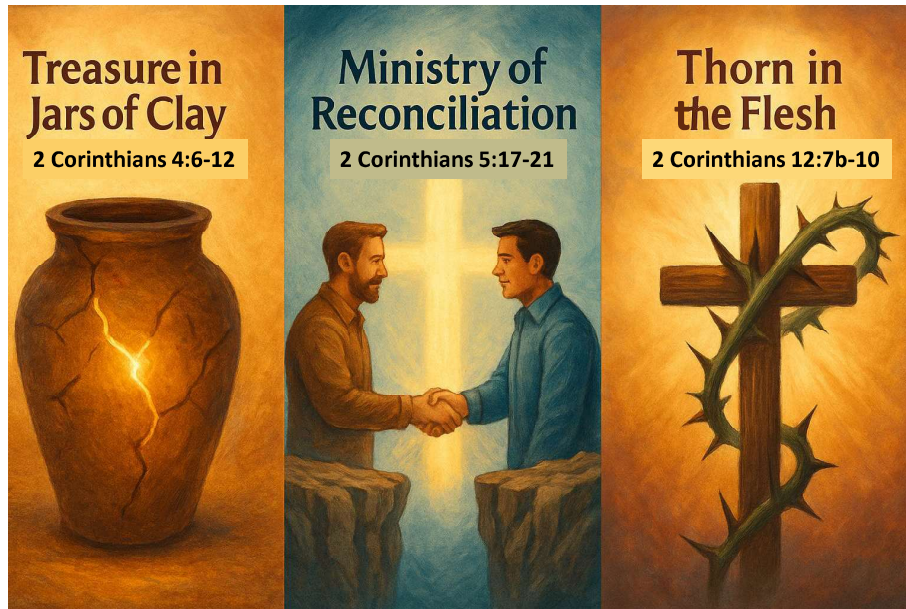
Collection for
the Jerusalem
church
(Chapters 8 – 9)

Paul defends his
apostleship
(Chapters 10 – 13)

Let's look at the Bible Project video



Since we don't have time to go through the whole book, I'm going to focus on three passages



Treasure in Jars of Clay (2 Cor 4:6-12)

2 Cor 4:6-12 ⁶ For God, who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of God’s glory displayed in the face of Christ.

⁷ But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. ⁸ We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; ⁹ persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. ¹⁰ We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. ¹¹ For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus’ sake, so that his life may also be revealed in our mortal body. ¹² So then, death is at work in us, but life is at work in you.

What is the “treasure” and why do you think Paul uses the image of “jars of clay”?



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We are fragile clay jars carrying God’s priceless gospel.

Our weakness highlights God’s power and sustaining grace.

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What is the “treasure” and why do you think Paul uses the image of “jars of clay”?



Ministry of Reconciliation (2 Cor 5:17-21)

2 Cor 5:17-21 ¹⁷ Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here! ¹⁸ All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: ¹⁹ that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people’s sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. ²⁰ We are therefore Christ’s ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ’s behalf: Be reconciled to God. ²¹ God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

**What does it mean that we are God’s ambassadors?
How should this affect our lives?**



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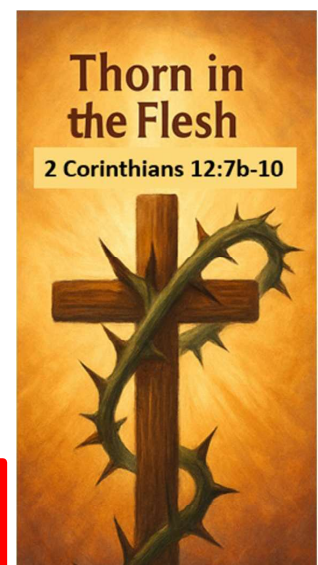
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Thorn in the Flesh (2 Cor 12:7b-10)

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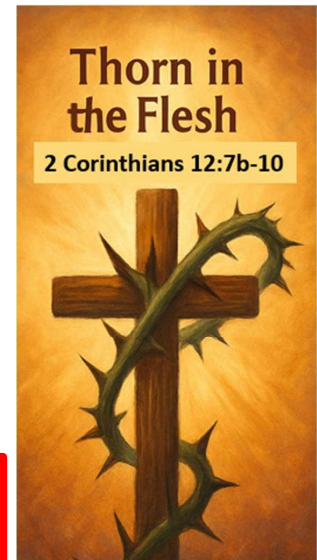
Why do you think God sometimes chooses not to remove our weaknesses or struggles, but instead says, 'My grace is sufficient for you'? How does that shape the way we view our own hardships?



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This book contains the strongest challenge to the wealth and prosperity gospel when Paul “boasts” about what he has gone through (2 Cor 11)

Category	Trouble / Experience
Physical Persecution	- Five times: 39 lashes from Jews - Three times: beaten with rods - Once: stoned
Imprisonments	Multiple imprisonments (not all recorded in Acts)
Travel Hazards	- Three shipwrecks - A night and a day adrift at sea - Constant journeys
Dangers	Faced danger from rivers, robbers, Jews, Gentiles, in the city, in the wilderness, at sea, and from false brothers
Hardships	Toil and hardship, many sleepless nights, hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure
Emotional Burden	Daily pressure of anxiety for all the churches

Paul has several reasons for his “boasting”

Boasting “foolishly” to expose his opponents

- His rivals (the “super-apostles”) boasted of their credentials, eloquence, and power.
- Paul plays their game — but flips it upside down. Instead of boasting in strength, he boasts in weakness.

Suffering is proof of true apostleship

- The beatings, lashes, shipwrecks, imprisonments, hunger, and danger are **not marks of failure** - they are evidence of his **faithfulness to Christ** and the cost of his ministry.

Weakness highlights Christ’s power

- By boasting in his hardships (not his successes), Paul shows that the gospel advances through **God’s power**, not human strength.

Humiliation rather than triumph

- He ends the list with a humiliating story (escaping Damascus in a basket, 11:32-33).
- He doesn’t show himself as a hero, he points to his **vulnerability/dependence on God**.

So what are some key takeaways from 2 Corinthians?

1. God’s Power in Weakness

- Paul’s sufferings show that God’s strength is made perfect in weakness (12:9-10).
- True Christian leadership is cross-shaped, not worldly.

2. Ministry of Reconciliation

- Believers are made new in Christ and sent as ambassadors (5:17-20).
- Reconciliation with God leads to reconciliation with others.

3. Authentic Christian Ministry

- Paul defends his apostleship not with status but with integrity, suffering, and faithfulness (4:8-9, Chapter 11).
- A model for pastors and disciples today.

4. Generosity and Grace

- Chapters 8-9 remind us that giving flows out of God’s grace.
- Christian community is marked by sacrificial generosity.

Questions?