

2 CORINTHIANS

Aída Besançon Spencer

THE PEOPLE'S BIBLE COMMENTARY

A devotional commentary for study and preaching

*Dedicated to
the Reverend Doctor William David Spencer,
co-worker with me for my joy,
whom I love dearly*

PREFACE

There are two things that have been upmost in my thinking in regard to this series and this book.

Many people have loved the devotional format of the exegetical notes in the People's Bible Commentary series—seminary students and laypeople. It is meaty and digestible.

Sometimes new Christians are not immediately attracted to 2 Corinthians. However, the more we study Paul and his theology, his grasping of the marvellous acts of God in his life in the midst of communicating these acts to others in his culture, the more we are drawn to this letter. In 2 Corinthians, Paul integrates theology and practice in an organic, subtle way. Moreover, many of the problems the Corinthians faced are similar to problems today: fascination with money and entertaining, authoritarian speakers yet an unwillingness to live a life of integrity devoted to serving the living Lord. Paul passionately pleads for a leadership and lifestyle of 'weakness'. This is a message we all need to hear every day.

Aída Besançon Spencer

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I enjoyed the opportunity to write this devotional commentary and appreciate Naomi Starkey of the Bible Reading Fellowship for having invited me to participate. My husband, William David Spencer, carefully edited every page and, as well, co-wrote the 1989 *Bible Study Commentary* on 2 Corinthians which was a helpful resource for this more extensive commentary. Karen Smith, pastor of discipleship at Pilgrim Church regularly prayed for the smooth completion of the work, as did the Network for Presbyterian Women in Leadership and many others. How could I succeed in studying God's message without God's help? Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary granted me a semester's sabbatical from teaching which was essential for the time and concentration needed. And my typist Kelli Brodrecht applied particular care and diligence as she worked hard to type my manuscript. Jinyoung Seo and editors of the Bible Reading Fellowship double checked the Bible references.

Many secondary works have been helpful, but a list of some of the cited works is given at the end of the Introduction (p. 25) in case any readers want to verify any information:

At the end of the study, I wrote a poem, together with my husband, to summarize figuratively some of the key thoughts of 2 Corinthians. The poem is printed overleaf; you may want to read it now and at the end of your own studies, as a way to encapsulate the book.

Beneath the Master Gardener

*The garden is devastated.
Where once were beauty and growth
are now broken stems and torn leaves.
Animals have breached the fences
and black rust lingers like crows.*

*The sun knows how to heal it,
if the gardener and garden give their welcome.
I bow my head beneath that grace and prune away the rust.
I mend protecting fences to grant it peace to grow.*

*A shadow Sabbath summons rest.
I straighten up and stretch sore muscles tendered by the work.
Luminous with life the garden glows at dusk.
Its health demands it keep the charge of Eden.*

*Like Eden, so many gardens lost,
overgrown or turned over to try again...
garden and gardener beneath the Master Gardener
find paradise at hand in every city yard and every country field,
tilling lives to yield lasting fruit.*

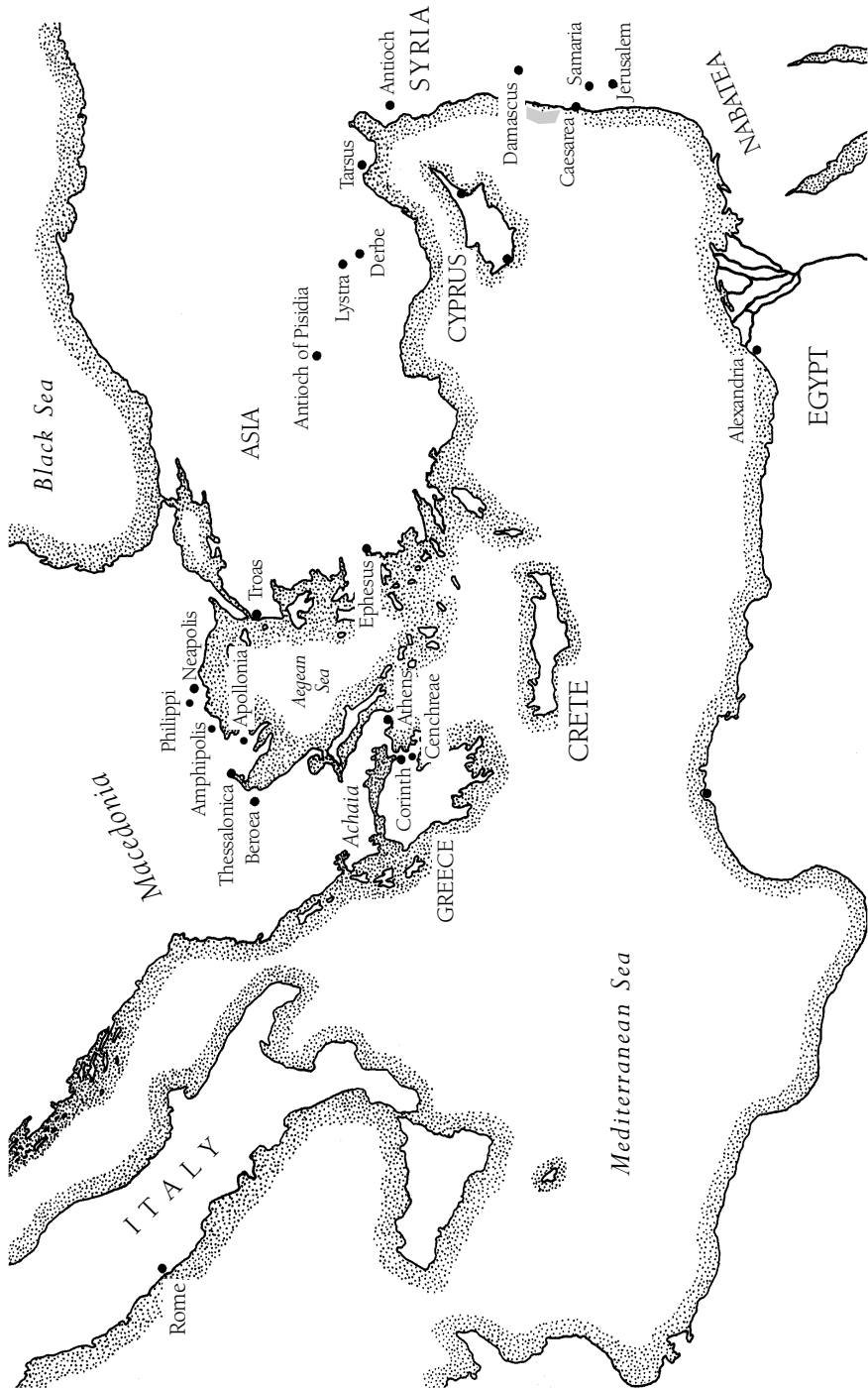
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CONTENTS

	Map of the Mediterranean world	12
	Introduction	13
1	Teachings in the midst of a letterhead	26
2	Praising God	28
3	Advancing God's mission despite troubles	30
4	Balancing consolation with sufferings	32
5	Hope in partnership	34
6	God the rescuer	36
7	The heart of the letter	38
8	Why write?	40
9	One visit too few	42
10	God is faithful	44
11	The authenticating God	46
12	Co-workers of joy	48
13	The why affects the how	50
14	Tested character is forgiving	52
15	An open door for love	54
16	Thanks to a victorious God	56
17	Speaking truthfully	58
18	Living letters	60
19	The empowering God	62
20	Good is not best	64
21	Having persistent boldness	66
22	In Christ stone turns to flesh	68
23	The liberating Spirit of Christ	70
24	The transforming mirror	72
25	Commendation by the truth	74
26	Jesus is the God preached	76
27	God enlightens	78
28	The paradox of clay and cross	80
29	Life for Jesus' sake	82
30	A psalmist models faith	84
31	The invisible is most heavy	86
32	Life will consume mortality	88

33	At home with God	90
34	Jesus is our judge	92
35	The future affects the present	94
36	Living for others	96
37	A new perspective in Christ	98
38	God the reconciler	100
39	Ambassadors	102
40	Working together with grace	104
41	Godly servants are commended	106
42	The right weapons	108
43	Wide open to truth and love	110
44	The weapon of attack	112
45	God's living sanctuary	114
46	Action based on promises	116
47	God's presence affects us	118
48	Love and boasting	120
49	Loosened by God	122
50	Godly and worldly pain	124
51	The seven manifestations of godly grief	126
52	Remembering the visit	128
53	God's grace enriches the poor	130
54	The Macedonians model giving	132
55	Eagerness can be loving	134
56	Poverty and prosperity	136
57	A year of giving	138
58	The principle of fair balance	140
59	Titus' eagerness to go	142
60	An accompanied gift	144
61	Tested believers	146
62	Christ's glory is incarnated	148
63	Zeal in Achaia	150
64	Why the brothers are coming	152
65	The paradox of giving	154
66	How to give	156
67	Seed and harvest	158
68	Riches result in thanksgiving	160

69	Many reasons for giving	162
70	Meekness and gentleness	164
71	Humble but bold	166
72	Waging war in the flesh	168
73	Why the Lord gives authority	170
74	Strong and weak	172
75	Measuring by God's canon	174
76	Boasting and commendation	176
77	Pure betrothed love	178
78	Paul's opponents	180
79	Untrained in speech	182
80	Salary as ministry	184
81	Paul attacks the super-apostles	186
82	The false angel of light	188
83	Paul's ironic boasting	190
84	Abusive leaders	192
85	Christ's fool	194
86	The life of a genuine minister	196
87	When weakness is worthwhile	198
88	Through a window in the wall	200
89	A vision fourteen years ago	202
90	Paul is taken away into Paradise	204
91	No better than the truth	206
92	The tormenting thorn	208
93	A prayer is heard	210
94	Signs of an apostle	212
95	Paul's financial independence	214
96	Paul defends their honesty	216
97	Paul's defence?	218
98	Practices affect expectations	220
99	Charges must be backed up	222
100	God's power gives life	224
101	Tests of all kinds	226
102	Community living	228
103	Three circles of loving peace	230



PBC 2 CORINTHIANS:

INTRODUCTION

2 Corinthians is a letter forged in the heat of difficult circumstances, where doctrine and practice integrate. The apostle Paul is a theologian, learned in doctrine, and a pastor who loves and desires the best for his people. Not a loner, he works with co-workers. His people love him and yet can be deceived and attracted to false leaders.

Because this letter is both a sensitive and a passionate communication, its transitions are subtle. Its tone changes. Nevertheless, when the church at Corinth first received this letter, not having heard from Paul for many months, they certainly did not tell the reader to stop after one sentence and they would hear more next week! I am sure they heard the whole message aloud. Later, they may have gone back to the letter and analyzed parts of it in detail: 'Read me the part about the fragrance! Read me the part about the angel of light! Read me the part about Paul's love for us!' So, too, I would recommend you begin your study of 2 Corinthians by using an easy-to-read version and reading all of it at one sitting in a quiet place where you will not be disturbed. (It takes me twenty minutes to read all of 2 Corinthians.) Then together we will go sentence by sentence through the letter in more detail. For the studies, I quote the New Revised Standard Version. Paul wrote the letter in the international language of his time, Greek, which in God's providence is still a living language today. Reading 2 Corinthians in ancient Greek is, therefore, of course, most accurate! But if you do not know Greek, the NRSV is very close to the original and clear and easy to understand today.

When Paul quotes the Old Testament, at times he does his own translation directly from the original Hebrew and at other times he quotes the Greek Septuagint version (LXX, which had been translated by a team of scholars in 250–200BC).

Who wrote 2 Corinthians?

Paul and Timothy are mentioned in the letterhead. Normally, both would be considered authors, but since 'I' is used only of Paul (2:1–13; 9:1–15; 10:1; 11:21—12:17; 13:6, 10) and Timothy is described in the third person (1:19), almost everyone agrees that Paul is the writer. Timothy is included on the letterhead as a partner in ministry, exemplifying Paul's concept of genuine leadership.

Paul is presented in 2 Corinthians as an apostle (1:1; 12:12), a Hebrew (11:22) (a descendant of Abraham and Eber) and a follower of Jesus Christ (1:2; 11:23). He has suffered greatly, been physically deprived, lived through dangerous situations and been imprisoned. He is well educated (11:6; Acts 26:24), passionate, bold and honest, but he does not want to frighten away his listeners. His skilful writing is admired even by opponents (10:10).

Every early Christian who mentions Paul sees him as a model. Clement of Rome, considering Paul part of his own generation and inspired by 2 Corinthians 11:23–25, writes:

Through jealousy and strife Paul showed the way to the prize of endurance; seven times he was in bonds, he was exiled, he was stoned, he was a herald both in the East and in the West, he gained the noble fame of his faith, he taught righteousness to all the world, and when he had reached the limits of the West he gave his testimony before the rulers, and thus passed from the world and was taken up into the Holy Place—the greatest example of endurance. (1 Clement v. 5–7)

Ignatius, who wanted to follow in Paul's footsteps, describes Paul to a later group of Ephesians as 'sanctified, who gained a good report, who was right blessed' (xii.2). Polycarp describes Paul as 'blessed and glorious', a man who 'taught accurately and steadfastly the word of truth, and also when he was absent wrote letters to you, from the study of which you will be able to build yourselves up into the faith given you; which is the mother of us all' (*Philippians* iii.2–3). In contrast, Paul saw himself as an example to sinners, that Christ Jesus came to save, of whom Paul was the foremost: 'I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence. But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus' (1 Timothy 1:13–14). Paul is a great example of a marvellous human transformation.

He enters the Bible as a young man (probably in his mid-twenties) who stood by approvingly, guarding the outer coats of the witnesses who were stoning Stephen (Acts 7:58–8:1). He was so stirred by this event, he himself set about to destroy the Church, extending its first major persecution over 130 miles to Damascus. On that road, Paul discovered that instead of promoting the living God, he had

been persecuting the promised Messiah, Jesus (Acts 9:5), and that he had been chosen by God to proclaim Jesus' name even if he had to suffer to do so (Acts 9:15–16). Some fourteen years later, Paul (Saul is his Jewish name), with co-worker Barnabas, was called to a special work (Acts 13:2). He had sojourned in Damascus, Jerusalem, Tarsus and Arabia (Galatians 1:17—2:1), but not until now did God consider Paul ready to be sent out from Antioch, his home church.

Paul was converted around AD33–35 during the reign of Roman Emperor Tiberius (AD14–37). Acts recounts his missionary journeys, which lasted several decades and ended in imprisonment in Rome (around AD59–61/62). Acts leaves Paul in Rome, under house arrest, still proclaiming Jesus as the promised Messiah (28:16, 30–31). Paul expected to be released (Acts 25:25; 26:32; Philippians 2:24). 2 Timothy and early church tradition testify to a second imprisonment, when Emperor Nero began to persecute Christians in AD64–68 (2 Timothy 4:6–7). This second imprisonment resulted in Paul's execution, around AD67–68 (Eusebius, *History* ii.25; iii.1).

Paul lived about 33 years as a Jew transformed by his relationship with Jesus the Messiah and, consequently, was used by God to transform thousands of other people by his exemplary life and his God-breathed writings (2 Timothy 3:16).

Who are Paul's co-workers?

In 2 Corinthians, Timothy, Silvanus and Titus are mentioned by name (1:1, 19; 12:18). When Paul uses the first person plural 'we' in 2 Corinthians, he tends to refer to his ministering team as together modelling the principles of genuine Christian service: the hardships *we* suffered (for example, 1:3–12; 7:5–6); 'our competence is from God' (3:1–18); 'we have wronged no one' (7:2; 10:3–7; 11:12); 'we are not commending ourselves' (5:12). 'I hope you will find out that we have not failed' (13:6) shows that Paul writes 2 Corinthians with his co-workers in mind. What makes each of these co-workers unique?

Timothy

Timothy works with Paul, providing a living model of Paul's teachings. His name is included not only in the 2 Corinthians heading, but in those of Philippians, Colossians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians and Philemon. Timothy is described by Paul as 'our brother' (2 Corinthians

1:1; Colossians 1:1; Philemon 1), Paul's spiritual child (Philippians 2:22; 2 Timothy 1:2), a minister (1 Timothy 4:6), a slave (*doulos*) of Christ Jesus (Philippians 1:1), a co-worker (Romans 16:21; 1 Corinthians 3:9; 1 Thessalonians 3:2) and evangelist (2 Timothy 4:5).

The son of a Jewish Christian mother and Gentile father (Acts 16:1), Timothy lived in Lystra, where he may have become a Christian when Paul passed through on his first missionary journey (Acts 14:6–7). All the Christians in his home town had spoken well of Timothy, and Paul wanted him to join his pastoral team. But to avoid the opposition of the Jews to having a hellenized Jew for a preaching companion, Paul had Timothy circumcised (Acts 16:3). Paul left Timothy in Beroea and Thessalonica to establish the Thessalonians in the faith (Acts 17:14). Timothy's job was to exhort and explain the part that afflictions have in the faith, and was apparently successful, for he was able to bring Paul good news about the Thessalonians' faith (1 Thessalonians 3:2–7). With the Corinthians, Timothy reminds them of the ways of Paul and serves, himself, as a model (1 Corinthians 4:16–17). Paul himself urges the Philippians to live according to the pattern that both he and Timothy gave them (Philippians 3:17). Timothy visits Paul in prison in Rome, serving his spiritual parent Paul, as Paul serves Christ.

Silvanus (also called Silas)

When Timothy joined Paul at Lystra, Silas (Latin 'Silvanus') was already travelling with Paul. As a leader among the Christians in Jerusalem, Silas was sent with Paul and Barnabas to confirm the Jerusalem Council's positive decision about the Gentiles (Acts 15:22). As a prophet, he encouraged and strengthened the new believers at Antioch (Acts 15:32). When Paul and Barnabas could not agree about John Mark, Paul invited Silas to join him on his second missionary journey (Acts 15:40). Silas, along with Paul, was imprisoned in Philippi after Paul commanded the evil spirit to depart from the fortune-telling woman. Silas was together with Paul 'praying and singing hymns' in the innermost cell (Acts 16:19–25).

When Paul was attacked in Thessalonica, the crowds also looked for Silas. Both of them were sent on to Beroea for their own protection. Silas, along with Timothy, stayed behind to teach the new believers in Beroea (Acts 17:5, 10, 14), but later they joined Paul in Corinth (Acts 18:5). Paul alludes to their preaching and writing ministry in Corinth

in his letter (2 Corinthians 1:19). They also wrote to the new Christians in Thessalonica while at Corinth (1 Thessalonians 1:1; 2 Thessalonians 1:1). Finally, years later (around AD64–68), Peter sent Silas with his letter (1 Peter), again both to encourage and to reinforce the written message with a living presence. Peter calls him a ‘faithful brother’ (1 Peter 5:12). Silas was a Christian who could be trusted.

Titus

Titus must have been quite a diplomat. He is the first person to intercede in difficult situations. Many times Paul urged him to go on his behalf to Corinth (2 Corinthians 8:6, 17; 12:18). Paul could expect that the highly sensitive Corinthians would not feel exploited by Titus. He also would intercede for the Corinthians (2 Corinthians 7:7, 15). An encourager (Titus 2:15), he also may have had organizational gifts and gifts of service (Titus 3:12–13). Titus was a Gentile who became a follower of Jesus. He accompanied Paul and Barnabas with the earlier collection for the Christians in Jerusalem (Acts 11:30; Galatians 2:1–3), as he did with the current collection (2 Corinthians 8:6). He also stayed at Crete to ‘put in order what remained to be done’ and ‘appoint elders in every town’ (Titus 1:5). Titus had to silence the circumcision party (Titus 1:10–12), an explosive task for a Gentile Christian who once had been a second-class Gentile God-fearer.

Paul abounds with affection when he writes of ‘brother’ Titus (2 Corinthians 2:13). He calls him his ‘loyal child’ (Titus 1:4), his ‘partner and co-worker’ (2 Corinthians 8:23). The last we hear of Titus is that he has accompanied Paul to Rome and then left for Dalmatia (2 Timothy 4:10). The early Church esteemed Titus and Timothy, calling them the first bishops appointed to the churches of Crete and Ephesus (Eusebius, *History of the Church* iii:4).

Paul worked with many co-workers, partners in ministry. As an apostle, a witness to the living Lord, Paul laid the foundation (1 Corinthians 3:10; Ephesians 2:20; 2 Corinthians 10:14). Silas, as a prophet, would receive and speak forth God’s message. Timothy, as an evangelist, would preach, baptize and instruct people in the basics of faith. Titus, as an encourager, would advocate and work on reconciliation between warring parties.

Why is Achaia included?

Today 'Greece' includes both the ancient provinces of Macedonia and Achaia. But when Paul wrote 2 Corinthians, 'Greece' included only Achaia (Acts 20:2). The city-states in Achaia had earlier united to try to defeat King Philip II of Macedon. By 150BC Corinth had become the capital of the league of cities in Achaia. When this Achaian League refused to disband, the Romans, led by consul Lucius Mummius, burned the city of Corinth in 146BC. In 44BC, because of its strategic position, Julius Caesar decreed the refounding of Corinth as a military precaution.

Why does Paul address 2 Corinthians to include 'all the saints throughout Achaia' (1:1)? Some of the issues with which Paul will deal are especially relevant to the entire province. The issue of collecting money for the poor Christians in Jerusalem is a matter for all the churches (9:2). Paul does speak directly to the Corinthians (1:23; 6:11). Only the Corinthians appear to be in revolt against Paul's leadership. Paul did not want the 'super-apostles' to leave Corinth and wreak the same havoc in another city. Paul appears aware that his letters, infused with God's prophetic message, have a larger audience, as he writes to the Colossians: 'And when this letter has been read among you, have it read also in the church of the Laodiceans; and see that you read also the letter from Laodicea' (Colossians 4:16).

When did these events occur?

Acts 18:2 tells us that, about AD49, Emperor Claudius issued a decree against Jewish Christians. As a result, Aquila and Priscilla transferred from Italy to Corinth. Then Silas and Timothy arrived from Macedonia. Now Paul could preach full-time. For a year and six months he stirred up the city with the startling message of Jesus (Acts 18:5). Finally, some enraged Jews dragged Paul before proconsul Lucius Junius Gallio (summer of AD51), placing Paul in Corinth around AD50–51. Acts 18:18 tells us he stayed about three months after his aborted trial, until late autumn 51/early 52, when he returned to Antioch.

Thus, Paul wrote 2 Corinthians after leaving Corinth in the autumn of 52 but before he collected the financial gift for the believers in Jerusalem (Acts 20:2–3). About five years later he was arrested in Jerusalem (around AD57).

Paul writes at least three letters to the Corinthians between the two

visits recorded in Acts. The first letter, in God's sovereignty, has not been preserved. Paul sends Titus with a letter about not associating with immoral Christians (1 Corinthians 5:9–10). Paul follows Titus' presentation of the letter with several visits by Timothy and Erastus (1 Corinthians 4:17; 16:10; Acts 19:22). Paul then receives news from Chloe's household about the Corinthians quarrelling (1 Corinthians 1:11) and a letter with questions, personally delivered by Stephana(s), Fortunatus and Achaicus (1 Corinthians 16:17). Paul writes his second letter (1 Corinthians in our canon) in the spring (around AD56) from Ephesus (1 Corinthians 16:8, 19), during his three years ministering in Ephesus (Acts 19:8, 10, 22).

Titus and Timothy return from Corinth to Ephesus. Paul himself makes a quick trip to Corinth, which ends up quite 'painful' (2 Corinthians 2:1–8; 1 Corinthians 4:19). This trip is not mentioned in Acts. Paul follows this second visit with a letter 'out of much distress and anguish of heart and with many tears' to let the Corinthians know of his 'abundant love' (2 Corinthians 2:3–9; 7:8–12) and foreshadows his 'third' visit in 2 Corinthians (12:14; 13:1). Titus personally brings this letter to determine the Corinthians' spiritual state and to remind them of the collection (2:13; 7:6–15). Some scholars think the letter of 'tears' was 1 Corinthians; however, I do not think this description well fits the tone and topic-by-topic discussion of 1 Corinthians. Other scholars think that 2 Corinthians 10–13 were originally the letter of 'tears'. However, papyrus 46, our earliest document (29–144 years older than the original), includes all 2 Corinthians' 13 chapters together, which is one of many good arguments for the unity of 2 Corinthians.

Paul had prearranged to meet Titus at the seaport town of Troas, in Asia, across from Macedonia (2 Corinthians 2:13; Acts 20:1). When Titus does not return, Paul in distress takes a boat across the Aegean Sea to Neapolis, a seaport town in Macedonia. They meet somewhere in Macedonia, where Paul discovers that, though Titus has had some success with the Corinthians (2 Corinthians 7:5–6), their submission to Paul's leadership has worsened. Paul writes 2 Corinthians in AD56 from Macedonia (9:2, 4–5). He has already received generous donations from the churches in Macedonia (8:2). Paul sends 2 Corinthians with Titus and others to prepare the Corinthians for the final collection and his third visit (8:6, 17–24; 13:1–10).

This next visit to Corinth appears to have gone well. He recounts,

‘Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to share their resources with the poor among the saints at Jerusalem’ (Romans 15:26). Romans was written soon after this third visit to Corinth. Clement, later in the first century, praises the Corinthians for their virtue, godliness, hospitality, obedience, humility and unity, qualities they did not have in AD56, even though again they have problems with disunity. According to Hegesippus, Corinth continued in orthodox doctrine until Primus became bishop (after 100) (Eusebius, *History* iv.22).

What was Corinth like?

Imposing Corinth stood as the hub of a three-city complex, straddling the south-west end of the tiny isthmus that connects the southern part of the Greek peninsula to the mainland. About two miles north was Lechaem, and over six miles east was Cenchreae, home of Phoebe (Romans 16:1–2).

In 44BC, Corinth was renamed ‘Colonia Laus Julia Corinthiensis’, rebuilt by a colony of freed Italians, Roman army veterans, Greeks, Egyptian merchants, Phoenicians, Phrygians, Jews and other Asians. Latin became its official language, and under Augustus Caesar, Julius Caesar’s adopted son, it flourished.

Into this mix a fully integrated church of Gentiles and Jews was planted. To the former Paul would write, ‘You know that when you were pagans, you were enticed and led astray to idols’ (1 Corinthians 12:2). To both Gentile and Jew he counselled, ‘Circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing; but obeying the commandments of God is everything’ (1 Corinthians 7:19). This brand new city lacked an aristocracy, so money and power ruled. Within less than twenty years of its refounding, Corinth became the capital of the province of Achaia and the administrative seat of the Roman government’s proconsul for southern and central Greece. Thus, by the time Paul arrived, Corinth had grown to be one of the largest cities in the Roman Empire.

Because the southern tip of Greece around the horn of Cape Malea was extremely dangerous, almost all trade and travel from the east to the west had to be done through Corinth. Corinth collected the imperial duties, becoming a major banking and commercial centre. Its crafts were renowned. Its pottery was beautiful; its bronze world-famous. Strabo wrote, ‘The city of the Corinthians, then, was always great and wealthy, and it was well equipped with men skilled both in

the affairs of state and in the craftsman's arts' (*Geography* 8.6.23). Further, the Isthmian games, second only to the Olympics, were celebrated every two years, going back under Corinth's control some time between 7BC and AD3.

Yet Corinth was infested with pagan temples. Towering over the city, perched on the sheer cliffs of the grey limestone of the mountain Acrocorinth, reclined one of Corinth's temples of Aphrodite, goddess of love. Over one thousand temple slaves or prostitutes once served the holy brothel of Aphrodite, and though the number may have lessened by the time Paul visited, decadence still characterized Corinth's religious rites. Temples abounded to Demeter, the Great Mother, Isis, Serapis, Asclepius, Apollo, Tyche, Hermes and the Pantheon—the many gods. Paul, Aquila and Priscilla probably had their store in the newly opened shop area on the Lechaemum Road, in the shadow of Apollo's sanctuary near the smaller meat market.

The Jews of the congregation, whose synagogue was also on the Lechaemum Road, initially resisted Paul, becoming abusive (Acts 18:6). But Crispus, the synagogue ruler, and his entire household believed. When the enraged synagogue members dragged Paul before proconsul Gallio, who summarily rejected their suit and tossed them out of court, they turned on Sosthenes, the synagogue ruler, and beat him in front of the court (Acts 18:17). (Paul later ministered in Ephesus with a Christian Sosthenes who may well have been this very same beaten synagogue ruler—see 1 Corinthians 1:1.)

What were the Corinthians like?

Corinth boasted of its intellectual activity, but it paled beside Athens and Alexandria. The church at Corinth, too, loved prophecy and knowledge, preferring speech over love (1 Corinthians 1:5; 13:8–9; 14:2; 2 Corinthians 8:7), but, like the city, the church pursued knowledge avidly but not wisely. As a result, members lorded it over one another and fell out in disputes, taking each other to court (1 Corinthians 1:10; 6:1; 11:18; 2 Corinthians 13:1, 11).

Corinth was a town of the *nouveau riche*: it had no real roots. What Paul highlights in the church was true of the city as well: 'your present abundance' (2 Corinthians 8:14). This sudden influx of wealth in a rootless boom town made Corinth like one vast drunken sailor, all at once rich with pay, squandering its swiftly gotten gains on pleasure. Indeed, Corinth was the most immoral city in Greece, perhaps in the

entire Roman empire. As early as the days of the satirist Aristophanes (about 450–385BC), Corinth had been working on its immoral reputation. He coined the verb *corinthiazomai* ('to live like a Corinthian'), meaning 'to practise fornication'.

What kind of people would be produced by such a city? Paul reminds the church of Corinth of what they had been—sexually immoral, drunken thieves, steeped in idol worship: 'But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God' (1 Corinthians 6:11). Residual sins such as incest (ch. 5) and sexual immorality (6:9–18; 2 Corinthians 12:21) had to be brought to attention and eradicated in the Corinthian church. Managing to be both immoral and ascetic (1 Corinthians 7:1; 2 Corinthians 2:6–7), the Corinthians only lacked moderation!

The Corinthians also were stingy. They were more likely to flaunt their newly gained wealth than share it (1 Corinthians 11:21–22). Like most miserly people, they wanted their preachers, Barnabas and Paul, to earn their own living and to minister *gratis* (1 Corinthians 9:6–18). Yet, when Paul received financial support from Macedonia, the Corinthians became jealous and suspicious that somehow Paul was taking advantage of them (2 Corinthians 7:2)! Though he had the right, Paul did not charge the Corinthians for his services to them, scrupulously avoiding the accusation of being a 'peddler' of God's word (2 Corinthians 2:17; 11:7–9).

Not all bad, the Corinthians could be loyal (1 Corinthians 11:2; 2 Corinthians 7:15), maintaining Paul's teachings. They did have a zeal for Paul and were grieved by his letter, wanting his approval (2 Corinthians 7:9), but they were fickle and unreliable. Paul was not certain of their total obedience (2 Corinthians 2:9). To Paul they were children in Christ (1 Corinthians 3:1; 2 Corinthians 6:13), still questioning such foundational doctrines as the resurrection of the dead (1 Corinthians 15:12).

That God could love the Corinthians, and Paul could persevere, despite continual disappointments, to love and serve them, is such a comforting thought for us all. For Paul assured the errant Corinthians again and again that he loved them (2 Corinthians 2:2–4; 7:3; 11:11; 12:15), deriving pride and joy from them (1 Corinthians 4:15; 2 Corinthians 7:3–16; 9:2).

He forgives all their failings because he regards them as a father

does a child. Indeed, he is their spiritual father (Acts 18:1–18; 2 Corinthians 10:14; 11:2; 12:14), and because of his parental love he can be hurt by their lack of devotion and harsh criticism (2 Corinthians 10:1; 11:5). Made vulnerable by his love for them, Paul wants their commendation for all his struggle and suffering on their behalf (2 Corinthians 3:1; 12:11). And he dreads the potential disappointment both he and the Corinthians may experience in one another when they meet (2 Corinthians 12:20–21). He is deeply disturbed by their lack of faith (2 Corinthians 11:1–3; 13:5), imploring them urgently to follow his example, as he follows the example of Christ (1 Corinthians 11:1).

Overview of letter

Paul constructs a chronological schema and inserts along the way theological truths that each event teaches. 2 Corinthians is like a slide or video show of a journey through the Mediterranean countries, which is periodically halted to explain what was happening in the participant's mind at each place.

- 1 In 1:3–11, Paul speaks of the troubles in Asia and what they teach about comfort and suffering.
- 2 In 1:12—2:11, Paul outlines his plans to enter Macedonia.
- 3 In 2:12—7:4, Paul has now moved on to Troas, a port between two land masses.
- 4 In 7:5—8:15, Paul has crossed the Aegean Sea into Macedonia and found Titus. In the midst of difficulties, Paul receives good news from Titus about the Corinthians (7:5–16) and the Macedonians (8:1–15).
- 5 When Paul envisions future travel south to the province of Achaia (8:16—9:15), he discusses the collection.
- 6 In 10:1–2, Paul envisions his entrance into Corinth itself. His tone changes as he thinks of the distressful abandonment of his leadership. Now, focusing on Corinth, he confronts his opponents directly (10:1—12:18).
- 7 All the different themes in the letter occur again in the conclusion (12:19—13:14).

Like a jewel whose many facets are studied, the theme of suffering and grace is reflected in different lights: whom it benefits; how decisions change; how confidence can persist in difficulties; how repentance is worth the pain; how people work together with God's provision; and how genuine leadership, by God's grace, persists in suffering.

The contents of 2 Corinthians may be outlined as follows:

Purpose: Paul defends his and his co-workers' leadership style as an honourable one (according to God's grace, not worldly wisdom) in order that the Corinthians may not be misled.

- 1 Introductory greetings (1:1–2).
- 2 Paul's defence: we behave sincerely with pure motives in God's grace (1:3—2:17).
 - a) Paul's team experiences afflictions in Asia (1:3–11).
 - b) Paul's planning was sincere (1:12—2:17).
- 3 Paul's explanation: our competence comes from God (3:1—5:21).
 - a) God's covenant written on living hearts causes frankness (3:1–18).
 - b) God's mercy encourages Paul in hard times (4:1—5:10).
 - c) Corinthians should be proud of Paul and his team (5:11–21).
- 4 Paul's warning: do not accept God's grace in vain (6:1—9:15).
 - a) Paul's plea: make room for us in your hearts (6:1—7:3).
 - b) Paul has confidence in the Corinthians (7:4—9:15).
- 5 Paul's warning: change or be disciplined (10:1—13:11).
 - a) Paul defends his team's actions as not worldly (10:1—11:11).
 - b) Paul explains his style of work (11:12—12:18).
 - c) Paul summarizes his defence (12:19—13:11).
- 6 Paul gives final greetings (13:12–14).

TEACHINGS *in the MIDST of a* LETTERHEAD

Letter writing was a popular genre of communication in ancient times, as it still is today. Students from primary school to university level were taught how to write letters. Demetrius thought that a letter was the form of composition which most reveals the writer's character (*On Style*, 227). A letter began with the name of the writer(s) and possibly a title ('Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother'), followed with the name(s) of the recipients(s) ('To the church of God that is in Corinth, including all the saints throughout Achaia'), and ending with a greeting ('Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ'). Often the letter itself began with a prayer, wish or thanksgiving. 2 Corinthians 1:1–2, in effect, is a letterhead.

An apostle and a brother write

Paul describes himself with one word, 'apostle'. An 'apostle' is an individual sent forth as an envoy of a person or a group with specific orders. For example, the different churches 'sent forth' someone to represent them with their collection for the churches in Jerusalem (8:23). Paul is also an 'apostle', but he is an apostle 'of Christ Jesus', in accordance with God's will. Christ Jesus 'sent forth' Paul when he called him on the road to Damascus. Paul, like the other apostles of Jesus, was appointed to bear witness to the resurrected Jesus (Acts 1:21–22; 26:16; 1 Corinthians 9:1). Supernatural works and suffering confirmed Paul's witness (2 Corinthians 12:12; Acts 2:43). In 2 Corinthians Paul's main intent is to defend himself as a genuine apostle in contrast to the more flamboyant false 'super-apostles' (11:5, 13).

Timothy, as well as Titus (2:13), Silas and others, are called 'brother(s)' in order to highlight the familial aspect of the church (compare John 19:26–27). 'Brother or sister' may also be a title showing a certain responsibility in Christian ministry (for example, 8:23).

For the Greco-Romans, secular 'church' was comprised of voting

adult citizens with ultimate authority to make important decisions, similar to a town council meeting. Jesus, too, uses ‘church’ to signify a final authoritative group of believers (Matthew 18:17). For all Christians, the ‘Church’ is the gathering of men, women and children who belong to God. One part of this Church is living in Corinth and in the province of Achaia. In the same way, even today, the Church continues to be the gathering of people who belong to God but who dwell in specific places around the world.

Grace and peace come from God

Paul uses the noun form ‘grace’, instead of the more usual form ‘greeting’ (as in Acts 23:26; James 1:1), and has the identical greeting in most of his letters (1 Corinthians 1:3; Romans 1:7b; Galatians 1:3; Ephesians 1:2; Philippians 1:2; Philemon 1:3). In 2 Corinthians, especially, grace will become a key principle of genuine godly leadership (1:12). ‘Grace’ is ‘gift’. It has the same root as ‘joy’.

Paul always wants good things for his readers. ‘Grace’ is a common Greco-Roman word which reminds the readers of the new covenant, while ‘peace’ is a common Hebrew word (for example, Luke 10:5; Exodus 4:18) which reminds the readers of the first, or old, covenant. ‘Peace’ literally refers to being physically safe and unharmed (Joshua 9:15). Peacemakers seek the well-being of others and of themselves, live justly and bring peace and reconciliation between people at war (for example, Psalm 34:13–14). Perfect grace and peace come from God. Thus, Paul’s greeting is also a prayer.

‘Lord’ is a term used of God the Father and now also of Jesus. For a Jew to call Jesus ‘Lord’—that is, equal to God—is a momentous act. ‘Lord’ was an ancient title for someone a slave was compelled to obey (Romans 6:16). The difference for Christians is that God gives people the freedom to choose. Their wills are not superseded as they were by slave traders (1 Timothy 1:10). While some people sold themselves into slavery, possibly for a time, in order to benefit educationally and economically, God invites all people to benefit for eternity—educationally, economically and in every other way—by willingly taking on Jesus as Lord (2 Corinthians 4:5; Romans 10:9–10).

PRAYER

As I read and study 2 Corinthians, may I learn more about your grace and peace and lordship in my life and in the church at large.

PRAISING GOD

Frequently Paul begins a letter by thanking God for some special trait the readers have (1 Corinthians 1:4–7; Philippians 1:3–7; Colossians 1:3–6; 1 Thessalonians 1:2–10; 2 Thessalonians 1:3–4) but in 2 Corinthians Paul begins by praising God (as he does in Ephesians 1:3), because the readers have few positive traits.

Eulogies are for the living God

First, Paul highlights that God is ‘blessed’. Many a devout Jew would similarly praise God, saying, ‘Blessed is he that...’ and adding an appropriate phrase such as ‘Blessed is he that made the Great Sea’ or ‘Blessed is he, the good and the doer of good’ or ‘Blessed is he, the true Judge’. Thus, Zechariah, a devout Jew, begins his prophecy: ‘Blessed be the Lord God of Israel’ (Luke 1:68). To ‘bless’ is to give a good word or to celebrate someone with praises. Who is more worthy of praise than God? God is worth celebrating because God is God, and therefore unique. God is also the ‘Father’ of Jesus, not in a sexual way, as a human begets a child, or as, in Greek myth, Zeus and Hera begot Ares, Hephaestus and Hebe. Rather, God is the ‘Father’ of Jesus in that God-the-Trinity caused one person of the Trinity to be born as a human, Jesus (Luke 1:35; John 1:14; Philippians 2:5–7).

When Paul calls God the Father of Jesus, he is highlighting the equality of Jesus with God (John 5:18). Paul probably also alludes to the very common ancient practice in which ‘father–son’ indicated the giving of all inheritance rights to a ‘son’. For instance, the Roman Emperor Gaius promised that he would appoint himself to be ‘father’ to his cousin Tiberius Gemellus—not simply a guardian, tutor or teacher—thereby stating that Tiberius would share ruling power with him (Philo, *Embassy to Gaius* iv). Similarly, God told David he would be to him ‘as a father’, signifying that David’s inheritance and covenant line would be guaranteed (2 Samuel 7:13–16). That promise was fulfilled in David’s descendant Jesus, to whom, of course, are continued in full measure all inheritance rights (Hebrews 1:5–8).

God the merciful advocate

God is to be celebrated also because God is the ‘Father’ or source of

godly characteristics. Paul highlights two words of equal importance: ‘mercies’ and ‘consolation’. ‘Mercies’ (*oiktirmos* in Greek) comes from the root idea of ‘ah!’ (*oi*), an exclamation of pain, grief, pity, astonishment. Here Paul uses the plural (‘mercies’) because he does not describe a one-time event but an ongoing characteristic. God is always ready to respond to humans in pity and, moreover, God is the source of pity. Paul wants the Corinthians to have mercy on him and therefore sympathetically understand why he did not recently visit them (1:23) and why Paul and his co-workers are genuine leaders (11:29). God’s ‘mercies’ is not a frequently used word, but Paul uses it at key places. It is the basis for his appeal to the Romans to present their bodies as a living sacrifice (Romans 12:1) and to the Philippians to complete his joy (Philippians 2:1–2). In other words, God’s mercy does not mean ignoring injustice. Rather, God has pity toward those unjustly treated. Thus, Paul can be sure of God’s mercy toward him in the midst of his own difficult situation.

The suggestion in this passage that believers should be merciful as God is merciful is made explicit elsewhere. Paul exhorts the Colossians to put on ‘mercies’ as if they were clothing (Colossians 3:12). And where did Paul learn this? Jesus himself exhorted, ‘Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful’ (Luke 6:36).

‘Consolation’ is the second characteristic of God that Paul highlights. Like ‘mercies’, it is an aspect of God’s love. Paul uses the noun and verb forms of this word ten times in 1:3–7 and 28 times throughout 2 Corinthians. ‘Consolation’, also translated ‘comfort’ and ‘encouragement’, literally means ‘to call to one’s side’ or ‘send for’. Sometimes it was used to signify summoning your friends to attend you in a trial, to call them as witnesses. Sometimes it was used of prayer. God is an advocate to whom we can always appeal for help. ‘Consolation’ is here modified by ‘all’ to indicate that God’s ‘consolation’ knows no limit.

Thus, Paul begins his letter by praising the always merciful and unlimited advocate, God.

PRAYER

*Do not, O Lord, withhold your mercy from me;
let your steadfast love and your faithfulness keep me safe for ever.*

Psalm 40:11

ADVANCING GOD'S MISSION *despite* TROUBLES

Paul's reason for thanking God gives, in microcosm, the principle behind the entire letter. Christians should not be evaluated as successful by the extent to which they do *not* suffer, because even suffering can be used to advance God's mission. Paul describes God as being full of 'consolation' because God's nature will become a source and a model of consolation for Paul and his co-workers and for the Corinthians and their relationships throughout the entire letter.

God the ceaseless advocate

After having described God by two characteristics ('mercies' and 'consolation', 1:3), Paul develops the latter characteristic ('consolation') by making more specific its context and result. God is the one consoling us (v. 4). God is the one who, not just once but continually, stands at our side defending us and helping us. In what context does God advocate for us? If God is our advocate, then affliction is our prosecutor. 'Affliction' or 'troubles' literally refers to 'pressure' or 'crushing'. For example, Jesus had to preach from a boat so that the crowd of people would not 'crush' him (Mark 3:9). The physical sensation of something pressing down on something else is similar to people discriminating against others ('oppressing' them) or causing some other difficulty ('affliction').

Paul uses 'affliction' many times in 2 Corinthians as a general term to describe the external and internal difficulties that exert pressure on a person—physical hardships (6:4–5), economic need (8:2, 13) and mental anguish about unreconciled relationships or about a person's welfare (2:4; 7:4–6). Such external difficulties can include famine, labour pains, slavery, persecution and imprisonment (Acts 7:10–11; 11:19; 20:23; Ephesians 3:13; John 16:21). Jesus warned his followers that difficulties were sure to come: 'Servants are not greater than their master. If they persecuted me, they will persecute you' (John 15:20).

Receiving help enables help

As Paul and his co-workers find themselves in the midst of these difficulties, they discover that God is there advocating for them. What is the result of God's actions? Paul and his co-workers become 'able to console' another group of humans, the ones who also are in the midst of difficulties. All these groups of people have a certain sympathy of mind. They have been in the same situation, in 'affliction'. Paul and his co-workers have been consoled by God and have learned how helpful it is to be consoled, and now they can transfer this help to others. Not only must we 'do to others' as we 'would have them do' to us (Matthew 7:12), but we can also 'do to others' *because* others 'have done to us'. Those who receive compassion can themselves go on to give compassion.

Paul writes up his thoughts in a chiastic, not a parallel, manner because he wants to show the interconnection of actions and how they begin and end with God. Imitating the Greek letter *chi*, a chiasm presents a comparison in a ABBA order, not a parallel (ABAB) order, as in 'food (A) for the stomach (B) and the stomach (B) for food (A)' (1 Corinthians 6:13). Paul's argument begins in 2 Corinthians 1:4 with God ('who'), then continues with humans ('us'), adds humans ('those') and concludes with 'God'. Humans have genuine responsibilities, but those responsibilities should be discharged in the atmosphere of God's sovereignty. Paul is describing a vital relationship between God and humans, showing how, from something negative, something positive can arise. Suffering is not something the Corinthians view in a positive manner. In 1 Corinthians 4:8–16, Paul has already had to begin to deal with the church's desire to live only a life of comfort.

Christianity is not simply a religion that works during times of ease. It works also during times of difficulty.

MEDITATION

Have you ever been able to help someone because you had received help from God? Today, prayerfully observe others with whom you have contact to see if you can 'console' them or find someone else who may be able to console them because they have been through the same situation.

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