

# **TREASURE**

*in jars of clay*

## **2 CORINTHIANS**

**BIBLE STUDIES FOR ASHFIELD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**

# INTRODUCTION:

It's nice to receive a hand written letter in the mail, isn't it? The time that someone spends writing the words show they care for you, that they are thinking of you. Of course sometimes letters are written to express disappointment and perhaps even offer criticism. These letters are harder to write, and naturally they are very hard to read! Paul's letter to the church in Corinth is like this. In this letter Paul expresses his love for the church he helped establish through the preaching of the gospel. In preparation for the study, read Acts 18 which gives some of the background.

In this letter Paul has some very difficult things to say. More than any of Paul's letters we have in the New Testament, 2 Corinthians is full of anguish, emotion and even defensiveness. Since his first visit to Corinth, the relationship with the Corinthian church has become strained, and this letter is Paul's effort to restore the relationship.

It can be hard to work out what, precisely, has gone wrong, as we can only hear Paul's answers. But there are clues for us. If we fast-forward towards the end of the letter, we read passages like this:

*But I do not think I am in the least inferior to those "super-apostles". I may not be a trained speaker, but I do have knowledge. 11:5-6*

*I have made a fool of myself, but you drove me to it. I ought to have been commended by you, for I am not in the least inferior to the "super-apostles", even though I am nothing. 12:11*

It seems that since Paul's time in Corinth, others have come into the church flaunting their powers and qualifications as 'apostles' and turning the Christians against Paul. It seems that compared to these 'super-apostles' Paul looks unimpressive and weak and so Paul has fallen out of favour.

In an effort to defend himself, Paul talks a lot about his own ministry in this letter. But he actually takes an unusual approach. Rather than boasting about how impressive he is and playing the 'super-apostles' at their own game, he talks about his weakness and his suffering. For us it may not seem like a very winning strategy! But as we'll see, Paul wants to show that it is in his weakness that God's power is revealed. And that it is in what looks unimpressive that God is at work.

*These studies are designed to complement the Bible Talks at Church. Most Home Groups use them in the week **before** the Bible Talk, and find that this helps to prepare them to hear the talk. Hopefully, any unanswered questions will also be addressed.*

*The studies will work just as well for personal study. Perhaps you could find two or three short times during the week to work through each passage and set of questions*

## 2 CORINTHIANS 1:1-11: THE GOD OF ALL COMFORT

When we read the New Testament it can be easy to forget that much of it is in the form of letters. Our bibles are beautifully leather bound, the pages are gilt edged, the words are presented to us in neatly ordered type-face. But we need to keep realizing that they were letters. We are very much made aware of this as we read the introductory section to 2 Corinthians. As was normal practice at the time, it begins by introducing the writers of the letter - Paul and Timothy. Not having to wait to the end to see who signs off 'your sincerely...' And we're also told who the letter was addressed to.

As we'll work our way through this letter, we'll see that Paul sometimes strikes a 'negative tone'. But he still has a deep affection for them. And in the section that we'll look at today, Paul wants to encourage them with the knowledge of their great and comforting God.

### READ 2 CORINTHIANS 1:1-11

1. How does Paul describe himself v1?

This is a common way that Paul introduces himself in a letter (see Ephesians 1:1). But why would this be a particularly relevant point to make given some of the issues going on in the Corinthian church?

2. Who is meant to read this letter?

Not only is the church in Corinth supposed to read this letter, but all the Christians in Achaia (the southern part of modern Greece). So we realise that though this letter was addressed to a specific situation, Paul thought that what he had to say would be helpful for many others. It's a good reminder for us - we won't be studying this letter for the sake of historical curiosity. It will have much to say to us that can shape our own thinking and lifestyles.

3. How is God described v3?

Do people usually think of God in these terms? Why/Why not?

4. What is the 'cause and effect' of trouble and comfort that Paul talks about in v4-5?

Thinking about these verses, how do you think God brings comfort to a person?

5. From verses 5 and 7 what is the link that is drawn between Christ, Paul and the Corinthian Christians?

How might this reminder of the suffering that is shared by Christ, Paul and the Corinthian Christians help to counter a 'triumphant-prosperity' attitude that may have been creeping in because of the influence of the 'super-apostles'?

In verses 8-11 Paul talks about the particular trouble and hardship that he faced in the province of Asia (modern day Turkey). We can't be definite about what this hardship was. It was certainly something oppressive - emotionally, physically, spiritually. As Paul says, the pressure was too much to bear.

We are told in Acts 19 that while in the city of Ephesus a riot broke out against Paul because he was preaching the gospel. Perhaps this particular event was part of the hardship he was facing in an ongoing way- the realization of the strong and unrelenting opposition that he faced.

6. As Paul looks back at this extremely difficult time, what does he say was the purpose of this hardship v9?
7. Why is it good to rely not on ourselves, but on God?
8. In Paul's words about prayer (v10-11), how would you describe its power and effectiveness?



The Greek city of Corinth was destroyed in 146BC by the Romans, but was rebuilt by Julius Caesar around 44BC. By the time Paul first visited Corinth in AD 49-50 (recorded in Acts 18) it was a city with a population of around 80 000. The city had become extremely prosperous largely due to its unique geographical position. It was located on a narrow land bridge which caught the north-south land traffic, as well as the east-west sea trade. The Corinthians enjoyed their wealth as well as their entertainment and sports. Only second to the Olympic games, they held the 'Isthmian games' in the city's theatre which held up to 18 000 spectators. The Corinthian city was a melting pot of trade, religion and culture. The Corinthian mind-set of the day was a proud individualist 'I did it my way' sort of attitude. It may have been a young city, but the Corinthians knew they belonged to one of the most important cities in the whole Roman Empire.

## PRAYER POINTS:

Is there anyone you know going through a hard time. Pray for them!



## 2 CORINTHIANS 1:12-2:17: STINKING CHRISTIANS

Have you ever made up an itinerary for a trip and then had to change all your plans? Perhaps it was a relative who insisted that you stay an extra day or two. Perhaps you had car troubles along the way and that tiny town lunch stopover became your destination for a week!

In this section of the letter Paul refers to his change of plans to spend time in Corinth. It looks like this change had serious consequences. But as always in this letter, despite the problems, Paul is not afraid to expose his heartache for them. He longs for their maturity and he wants them to know just how much he loves them.

### THE CORINTHIAN ACCUSATION

*In this section of his letter Paul recounts past time spent in Corinth, plans to visit as well as a past letter that he wrote. It can be hard to keep the order of these things clear in your mind. Here is a reconstruction that may help:*



1. Paul first visits Corinth and stays 18 months there (Acts 18). Around 50-52AD.

2. Paul spends 3 years in Ephesus (Acts 19:1). During this time Paul receives reports of immorality and division within the Corinthian church. During this time Paul wrote the letter of 1 Corinthians.

3. From Ephesus, Paul plans to travel through Macedonia (northern Greece) and spend the winter in Corinth on his way to Judea (Acts 19:21, 1 Cor 16:6-8). But before he can leave, Paul receives disturbing news of a crisis in the Corinthian church. Paul decides to go to Corinth immediately.

4. Paul's second visit to Corinth (2 Cor 13:2). Around 55-56AD. Paul calls it his 'painful visit'. (2 Cor 2:1),

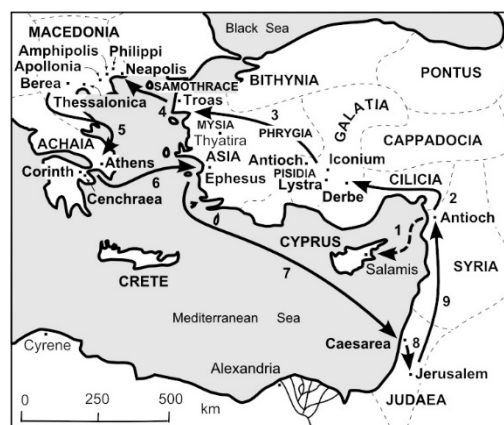
5. While in Corinth Paul realizes that the problems are so bad that he says that he will visit them twice more. (2 Cor 1:15-24).

6. After leaving Corinth, Paul decides to change that plan and visit them only once. Instead he wrote a letter to help address the problems (2 Cor 2:3-4; 7:8). This letter is lost. God (for whatever reason) chose not to preserve the in-between letter, but that in no way affects our reading (and being transformed by) the letter before us

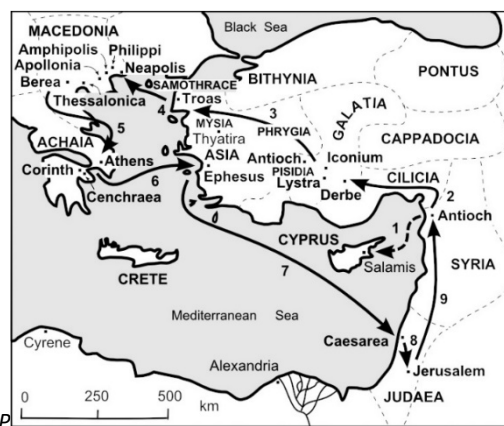
7. Paul sends this letter with Titus. Paul is very anxious about how the letter is received. He fears their reaction will spell the end of their relationship with him. A number of months followed until Paul is finally reunited with Titus in Macedonia. Paul is greatly relieved to hear that at least some in the church have responded positively to his letter. (2 Cor 7:5-16)

8. While in Macedonia, Paul wrote the letter of 2 Corinthians to prepare the church for his third visit. (2 Cor 13:1).

9. Paul's third visit to Corinth. Around 56-57AD. Stayed for 3 months. (Acts 20:3).



*Paul's Second Missionary Journey (Acts 15:39-18:22)*



## **READ 2 CORINTHIANS 1:12-2:17**

1. According to 1:15-2:11 Paul speaks of a change in travel plans. What is that change? And why do you think it would have been viewed negatively by the Corinthians?

Who likes a person who won't stick to what they say they will do?! When someone can't keep their word, they come across as weak, double-minded - even deceitful. With people coming into the Corinthian church and setting themselves up as the impressive new leaders (2 Cor 3:1), this change of plans would have been useful ammunition in their attempted character-assassination of Paul.

## **PAUL'S DEFENSE**

2. According to 1:12-2:4 what are the ways that Paul goes about defending himself?

### **Defense No. 1**

3. It seems the Corinthians were into boasting. It was a common thing to boast about your achievements and about the particular orators that you followed. Your status and standing before others was a very important aspect to life in Greek culture. Sounds familiar to us today! But in 2 Corinthians we see that Paul opposed such boasting. Read 11:16-21. So in verses 12-14, what is Paul's boast?

How is this a defense for Paul?

### **Defense No. 2**

4. In verses 18-22 Paul goes on to talk about God and his Son, Jesus Christ. What is the character of God that Paul wants to make clear?

How has this character of God been revealed in the history of the Old and New Testaments?

5. Paul's defense is that just as God has always been \_\_\_\_\_  
so has Paul been \_\_\_\_\_ to the Corinthians.

In defending himself, Paul goes theologically deep! He grounds his integrity and faithfulness to the Corinthians in the faithfulness of God to fulfill all his promises in Jesus Christ. For now it's worth noting that these new leaders in Corinth were probably Judaizers- insisting that Gentile Christians go back to a Jewish way of living. We'll look at this more next week. But Paul is making clear that all the promises of the Jewish Old Testament find fulfillment in Jesus. The Old Covenant finds its meaning in the New Covenant. It's a great reminder for us, that in working out how Christians should live - we first go to Jesus and the life that he gives us, not first to the Jewish law.

### **Defense No. 3**

6. According to 1:23-2:3, what was Paul's motive in cancelling the second trip to Corinth?
7. For Paul why was sending a letter a better strategy than turning up soon after his previous 'painful visit'?

### **LEADERSHIP AND LOVE**

These verses give us some extremely helpful ways of thinking about leadership and managing problems in the church. Discuss these questions together:

8. Paul's concern is not to 'lord it over' the Corinthian church (1:24). Today how could 'lording it over' be demonstrated by church leaders?
9. What should the attitude of leaders be (1:24, 2:4)? What will this look like in practice?

It seems that during Paul's 'painful visit' he wanted to correct some sort of immoral or divisive behavior. Perhaps while in Corinth a particular person opposed Paul and the church was not willing to take action against this man. Paul decided the best course of action was to write a letter instead of visiting them again. According to chapter 7 this letter had a good effect on them and they have changed in a godly way. But according to 2:5-11 the pendulum has now swung to the opposite extreme - from no action at all to extreme inappropriate action.

10. At what point should action be taken against a person in the church?

What is the danger if it is not handled properly?

### **A STRONG AROMA**

In verse 14 Paul gives thanks to God for the part he has played in a 'triumphal procession'. We need to realise that Paul is taking this term from a common Roman practice whereby a victorious army would march through the streets. The conquering general would be out the front with his soldiers, chariots, musicians and temple priests burning incense. But at the back would be the captured enemy soldiers. It was a victorious procession, but it was also a death march for the captured because at the end of the procession they would usually be executed.



A reconstructed relief panel from the original on the [Arch of Titus, Rome](#), c. 81 CE. The scene, showing the [triumph](#) of [Titus](#), is carved in three-quarter view and has Titus riding a four-horse [chariot](#) (quadriga) and shows him being crowned by a personification of Victory. The goddess [Roma](#) stands in front, holding the bridle of one of the horses. The two figures to the right of the chariot are personifications of the people of [Rome](#) (naked torso) and the Senate (wearing a toga). (Los Angeles County Museum of Art, L.A.)

1. Read v14 again. Do you think Paul is presenting himself as the victorious one out the front of the procession, or as someone at the back?

Perhaps surprisingly, it's actually fitting to see Paul's statement as a statement of being the captured one, the suffering one, the one being led to death. In 4:11, he says, 'For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake! so that his life may be revealed in our mortal body.' Paul's weakness and suffering is a big emphasis in this letter. Despite the criticisms of others, it's not something that he backs away from. In fact he is thankful!

2. In verses 14-16 Paul borrows the incense imagery of the triumphal procession to say that different people will smell a different sort of aroma. What will be the two different responses to the smell that is given off in Paul's life and message?
3. Why is it helpful for us today in knowing that there will always be two different responses to our Christian witness that looks weak and unimpressive?

## PRAYER POINTS:

Pray for leaders in our church.



## 2 CORINTHIANS 3: COUNTERFEIT CHRISTIANITY

If you've ever gone to a job interview, you would know that it can be a very nervous experience. In the interview it's important that you present yourself as competent. You need to show that you have ability. If possible, you need to show that have succeeded previously. It's also important that you have people who will back you up and act as referees. They are the ones who prove that all the great things you've said about yourself are correct!

Assessing someone for a job is one thing. But how do we assess the value of Christian ministry? 2 Corinthians has lots to say to us on this very topic.

### READ 2 CORINTHIANS 3

#### LOOKING UP PAUL'S REFEREES

1. Though Paul was regarded as ineffectual and lacking impact, was this actually the case? Paul may not have had referees that praise his ministry successes, like the new leaders in the Corinthian church. But what is the important thing that Paul can point to? (3:1-3)
2. Was Paul seeking praise for himself? Why/Why not? (v3-6)
3. From what Paul has to say here, what attitude is important when we think about the impact we may have in other people's lives?

#### TWO DIFFERENT SORTS OF GLORY

In 3:3-18 Paul speaks about his ministry and says that it involves the new covenant and the Spirit (3:3). He compares this with a ministry of the letter or the old covenant which involved Moses and the giving of the law (3:6-7). Here is some background that may help you:

The old covenant involved the giving of the law at Mt Sinai after Israel was rescued from Egypt. The law was to be kept 24/7. **Read Exodus 24:7** to see how the people promised to keep all the words of the Law. A bold promise! but it did not last long. Exodus 32 tells us that Israel constructed and then worshiped a golden calf, totally going back on their word. In his anger, Moses broke the two stone tablets that the commandments were written on. In His anger, God was going to wipe out all of Israel but outright destruction was averted because of Moses' pleading (Exodus 32:11-14).

When you look through the Old Testament, things don't really ever get that much better. The story of Israel is a story of rebellion. Despite their constant promises to keep the law and love God, their hearts are not in it. They constantly turn away from God and by their disobedience, the law condemns them. Eventually God brings his promised judgement

upon Israel.

In the midst of the continuing disobedience of Israel, God promises a future time of relationship with his people. This future time would not be based on the law, the old covenant, but a based on the Spirit, a new covenant where the people's hearts would truly be transformed so that they could love and live for God. Read these words from Ezekiel 36:26-27:

I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws.

But if we briefly go back to the time of the Israel at Mt Sinai when Moses broke those stone tablets we read of events that Paul mentions in 2 Corinthians 3. **Look at Exodus 34.**

4. Corinthians 3:3-18 makes a comparison between the old covenant and the new covenant. List all the differences you can find in these verses.

Old Covenant	New Covenant

It is probable that Paul's critics in Corinth have a Jewish background. Perhaps they find it unimpressive that while Paul has brought about the conversion of Gentiles, most Jewish people have been left unconvinced. Perhaps they are saying that Paul should be insisting that along with having faith in Jesus, people must keep the Jewish law.

5. How does Paul speak against this claim in 3:13-17

## PRAYER POINTS:

## 2 CORINTHIANS 4: LOUD AND CLEAR

Chapter 3 has emphasized the glory of the gospel message. Chapter 4 contrasts this glory with the sheer ordinariness of those who proclaim it, such as Paul. While his critics saw this as a negative, it's the true nature of gospel ministry, and serves to make the gospel message even more glorious.

### READ 2 CORINTHIANS 4

1. In 4:2-5 Paul describes the method in his ministry. Fill in the table below to show what Paul does and does not do?

We do not...	We do...

2. What would deception or distorting the word look like in practice?
3. When can we be tempted to think that the biblical message of Jesus needs to be changed and altered?
4. Why should appreciating the role of our own weakness and the role of the Spirit impact our method in ministry?

### A PORTRAIT OF PAUL

As always with this letter, we only have Paul's words, not the original criticisms of him. But as you read through this section, it seems that Paul is conscious of things said about him by those in the Corinthian church. If Paul's message was rejected by some (or many), and if Paul led a struggling sort of life, then it seems he's been judged to be ineffectual and weak. His message has not 'gripped' people. He's not the impressive speaker that people once thought. On top of that, Paul does not lead a particularly successful and prosperous life. He struggles! But Paul is not ashamed of these things. He speaks openly about his weaknesses and goes on to explain that though he is weak, God is powerfully at work through him.

### JARS OF CLAY

5. Clay jars were the common household container of Paul's day. There were used to hold almost anything and when they got chipped and broken, they were thrown away and replaced with another. What point is Paul wanting to make by describing our bodies as 'jars of clay' (v7)?

6. What is the treasure spoken of in verse 7? See verses 4-6.

7. Why is Paul unashamed of our bodily weakness and fragility?

For all of us, our bodies are slowly but surely declining. Some of us might not feel it, but others certainly do! Our bodies are weak and fragile and will ultimately fall victim to death. But it is in our weakness and mortality that God in the form of Jesus reveals himself to us. What a privilege - weak people like us have come to know 'the glory of God in the face of Christ'. It is all God's doing. Our weakness serves to show that it is all God's power at work in us.

God's power is also revealed in how he can help us to live out our lives...

8. Put the four 'we are. ...but nots' of verses 8-9 in your own words.

In your struggles in life, what comfort can you draw from these words?

In verses 10-12 Paul speaks of carrying around in our body 'the death of Jesus'. This is perhaps a description of the fact that he lives a life of suffering as described in verses 8-9. The 'life of Jesus revealed in our body' may be referring to the way God enables us to persevere in the midst of struggle and this shows the way of Jesus' life to others.

## **LOOKING TO THE FUTURE**

9. In verses 13-18 Paul continues to speak about our bodies, but from a different perspective. In verse 13, Paul quotes a line from Psalm 116, "I believe therefore I have spoken". From v14, what does Paul speak?

10. In 4:1 Paul can say "we do not lose heart" after he explains his gospel ministry that involves the Spirit, as compared to the old covenant that was all about the law. In 4:16, Paul uses that phrase again, "Therefore we do not lose heart". This time why can Paul say this?

11. In verse 17, what perspective does Paul have on his troubles? Why can he say this?

12. List the ways that this passage should shape the way we view suffering, weakness and our view of our bodies.

## **PRAYER POINTS:**



## 2 CORINTHIANS 5:1-9: TENTS AND HOUSES

This section continues the description of an earthly life that is wasting away and the eternal glory that replaces it (4:16-17). It describes what is unseen and eternal (4:18)

### READ 2 CORINTHIANS 5:1-9: A TRANSFORMATION

From 5:1-5:5 Paul compares the earthly tent of our body with our heavenly home. How does he describe each 'dwelling'?

The earthly tent / body	The heavenly home

1. What will be so good about being free of our earthly body? v4, v7-8
2. For what purpose were we made (v5)?
3. What makes Paul confident about the future (v6)?



How does Paul's confidence affect his view of life and death?

4. What, practically, does it mean to walk by faith and not by sight (7)? Can you give some examples of when you have done this?
5. Paul preferred to be away from the body and at home with the Lord (8). Why do you think we often live as if we prefer to be "at home in the body"?
6. What is Paul's goal in life (9)? How does this connect to v8?

## THE INTERMEDIATE STATE

There are two states of being clearly described here; the earthly tent and the heavenly home. But a third state is also hinted at; neither clothed with earthly dwelling nor heavenly dwelling, but rather being found naked (v3)/ unclothed (v4)/ away from the body and home with the Lord (v8). It is likely Paul is referring to the intermediate state between death and resurrection. This is not limbo or purgatory, but with the Lord (v8). See also Luke 23:43 and Revelation 6:9-11.

### **WESTMINSTER LARGER CATECHISM (1647)**

*Q. 86. What is the communion in glory with Christ, which the members of the invisible Church enjoy immediately after death?*

*A. The communion in glory with Christ, which the members of the invisible Church enjoy immediately after death, is, in that their souls are then made perfect in holiness, and received into the highest heavens, where they behold the face of God in light and glory; waiting for the full redemption of their bodies, which even in death continue united to Christ, and rest in their graves, as in their beds, till at the last day they be again united with their souls. Whereas the souls of the wicked are at their death cast into hell, where they remain in torments and utter darkness; and their bodies kept in their graves, as in their prisons, until the resurrection and judgment of the great day.*

*(Heb. 12:23; 2 Cor. 5:1, 6, 8; Phil. 1:23; Acts 3:21; Eph. 4:10; 1 John 3:2; 1 Cor. 13:12; Rom. 8:23; Ps. 16:9; 1 Thess. 4:14; Isa. 57:2; Job 19:26-27; Luke 16:23-24; Acts 1:25; Jude 1:6-7)*

## PRAYER POINTS

## 2 CORINTHIANS 5:10-21: A FRESH START

There's that old saying! 'You can't judge a book by its cover'. But knowing the saying doesn't stop us doing it. We make a decision about buying a book on the basis of whether the cover appeals to us or not. We pick a holiday spot on the basis of the images on the web. We pick a certain car over another because we like the shape. How something looks matters to us. And we also judge people on the basis of how they look. This is what Paul is going through. At least some in the Corinthian church are criticizing him for how his ministry looks. And so in the section we're studying today we'll see how Paul answers his critics by showing them what they really should be watching out for.

### READ 2 CORINTHIANS 5:10-21: MOTIVATION

1. What are Paul's two motivations (v10-15)?
2. How do these motivations compare to the motivations of other teachers in the Corinthian church? See 2:17.
3. What is Paul motivated to do?

How do you think these two motivations fit together?

Are they right motivations for us in the Christian life?

We should note that verse 14 is tricky. What does 'one died for all, and therefore all died' mean? In the context of verse 15, perhaps 'therefore all died' is referring to the fact that for all those who put their trust in Jesus they 'die to themselves' - they no longer live for their own selfish ambitions and desires but go on in living for the one who died for them and was raised again (see also Romans 6:1-14). 2 Cor 4:11 has this idea as well when it talks of Christian people constantly being given over to death in our suffering and service.

4. From what we've seen so far in 2 Corinthians, what does it mean that some in the Corinthian church 'take pride in what is seen rather than what is in the heart' v12?
5. Why does Paul want his readers to know the inner motivations that are compelling him onwards in his Christian ministry? v12

### TRANSFORMATION

The comparison between what is on the outside - seemingly impressive and strong - and what is really going on in the heart, is nothing new in the bible. When it came to selecting a new king after Saul (who was a bit of a dud), God said to the prophet Samuel, 'Do not consider appearance or his height, for I have rejected him. The Lord does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the

heart.' 1 Samuel 16:7. And as a result, a new and good king of Israel was chosen - David. Looking at what is 'seen', or as Paul puts it in v16, looking from a 'worldly point of view' was Paul's own attitude towards Jesus before he was a Christian. It's ironic that this 'worldly point of view' attitude is now being applied back at Paul!

Verse 17 speaks of a new creation inside people. In this letter Paul already used creation-type language when he said, 'For God who said "Light shine out of darkness," made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the fact of Christ.' - 2 Cor 4:6. See also Jeremiah 31:31-34 and Ezekiel 36:26-27.

6. In what ways are we tempted to look at others and focus on the outward, rather than what God has done in the heart?
7. When we look at church leaders today-what are some outward things that can take all of our attention?

## **RECONCILIATION**

Paul not only wants the readers of this letter to understand the inner motivations that compel him and the inward change that God brings about, but he also wants his readers to understand the ministry that God has given him. Despite how lowly some may view Paul's ministry, there is nothing more important in all the world than the task that God has called him to fulfill.

8. According to v17-18, how has the new creation inside people come about?
9. How is reconciliation made possible? v18-19, 21.
15. How does Paul view his own ministry? v20, 6:1

People are drawn to what seems impressive and exciting. Even in the Christian church, what often draws a crowd is an emphasis on prosperity and outward success. It was this way in Paul's day, and it's the same today, But Paul refuses to be distracted. His emphasis is imploring (v20), urging (6:1) people to be reconciled to God, made possible through Christ who took on our sin for us.

10. How are you personally, and we as a church, going at modeling the priority that Paul had?

## **PRAYER POINTS:**



## 2 CORINTHIANS 6-7:1: WHO TO LISTEN TO

In this passage Paul continues to defend his ministry. It's a tough situation to be in - he was appointed by God, he brought them the gospel, and now there are people saying he's a sub-standard apostle. It's helpful to notice from this section the things that mark out the genuine apostle, and the genuine Christian leader.

1. Imagine you are looking for a financial advisor, or a surgeon, or a mechanic. On what do you base your choice?

### READ 2 CORINTHIANS 6-7:1

Paul is continuing his argument that his advice is worth following. He and his team are Christ's ambassadors (5:20), God's fellow-workers (6:1). In this section he continues to urge those who have not repented to be reconciled to God and to him (Paul - see 5:12, 6:13, 7:2).

2. When is the best time to repent and be reconciled to God according to v2?
3. Why do you think Paul is so concerned that his ministry "not be discredited"? (v3)
4. In verse 4 to 10, Paul lists off a string of things that he says "commended his ministry." It's a strange mixture, at first jumping between personal hardships and personal qualities, then between extremes of glory and dishonour. Try to complete these lists... there are a couple of examples under each heading to start you off.

#### TOUGH TIMES

troubles  
hardships

#### SPIRITUAL FRUIT

endurance  
purity

#### OPPOSITE EXTREMES

glory and dishonour

#### AND YET...

genuine, and yet regarded as imposters  
known yet regarded as unknown

Sound like fun? How is it that Paul kept going through all this?

5. What does Paul mean by the words "having nothing, yet possessing everything" (10)?
6. Given that many in the Corinthian church are impressed with leaders who are strong, impressive and successful, what is surprising about the list that Paul gives here?
7. The relationship between Paul and the Corinthians needs reconciliation. Is good intent on one side enough to fix such a relationship (11-13)?
8. The command to not be yoked unequally with unbelievers (14-18) is often applied to believers not marrying unbelievers (see 1 Corinthians 7:39 for that instruction), however the context suggests it is the false teachers who must be separated from (see also 11:13-15). What other relationships might it include?
9. What does the image of being unequally yoked together suggest about the results of such a partnership?

What, practically, can go wrong with such a partnership?

10. What contrasts between believers and unbelievers does Paul use to support his command?
11. What promises motivate holiness (7:1)? How does this work practically?
12. How do we draw the line? We can't have nothing to do with unbelievers - we would have to leave the world (see 1 Corinthians 5:9-10)! Does John 17:15-16 help?

## **PRAYER POINTS:**

## 2 CORINTHIANS 7:2-16: TOUGH LOVE

Paul returns to the topic of the earlier tough letter he wrote (see 2:3-11).

### READ 2 CORINTHIANS 7:2-16

1. Correcting others always carries a risk - the risk of rejection. According to 7:2-4 how would you describe the Corinthians' response to Paul, and Paul's response to the Corinthians?
2. The Corinthians were distancing themselves from Paul. They aren't as keen on him as they once were. If you had friends who responded to you in this way, how would you act?

But for Paul he doesn't hold back. He bears his heart and makes himself vulnerable. He says even his emotions are tied to how the Corinthians are thinking of him (v5-7).

Earlier in this letter, 2:12-13, we heard about Titus. Paul sent a letter to Corinth to address problems in the church. He then sent Titus to find out how they received its correction. Paul was hoping to meet up with Titus in Troas to hear the news but Titus was not there. The anxious Paul then moved on to Macedonia (northern Greece). It's here that Paul finally met up with Titus.

3. What was the impact for Paul of finally meeting up with Titus (6-7)?

Paul spoke about how God brings comfort at the start of the letter, 1:3-4. Now we see it happening in real life. God brings comfort and his comfort comes through the agent of other people. It's always worth looking out for those opportunities for how you can be an agent of God to bring his comfort to those who need it.

4. What was the news that Titus brought?
5. This letter that Paul wrote must have hit on some very touchy subjects. After sending it, Paul was regretting that he had done so, v8. But once he heard the news from Titus, his worries were relieved. The Corinthians responded in the best way possible. They responded with 'godly sorrow', v10. What is the difference between worldly sorrow and godly sorrow?

6. From the passage, where did their sorrow lead to?

SORROW => \_\_\_\_\_ => \_\_\_\_\_ => NO \_\_\_\_\_

7. From your own experience (and the passage) where does worldly sorrow lead?

SORROW => ..... => \_\_\_\_\_

8. In verse 11 Paul goes into even more detail about what their sorrow produced. List the steps he mentions....
9. As well as producing a right response of repentance and life, the whole process of accepting Paul's correction has demonstrated something else. What is it, and why is Paul encouraged by this?
10. How open are you to correction? By the apostle Paul and his letters? From your Christian leaders? From your Christian friends?
11. How can we make ourselves more open to the process Paul speaks of?

What dangers will those doing the correcting need to avoid?

What will their motivation need to be? (Remember Paul's motives?)

## **PRAYER POINTS:**



## 2 CORINTHIANS 8-9: GIFTS FROM THE HEART

### READ 2 CORINTHIANS 8:1-15

1. Do you have to be rich to be generous?
2. What excuses do you give when you fail to be generous?
3. Try this bit of Macedonian Mathematics...  
Severe Trial + Overflowing Joy + extreme poverty = \_\_\_\_\_  
What does Paul say they did (v3 and 4)?
4. In verse 5, you'll spot a fundamental principle of Christian giving. What is it?  
  
How do you think this principle should affect what we do as a church?
5. What "grace" should motivate us in this (v9)  
  
How did we "become rich" through "his poverty"?
6. What principles can we draw from verses 13 to 15?  
  
Can we do better at relieving the needs of those in the church who have little?  
  
What changes would be necessary for this?

### READ 2 CORINTHIANS 8:16-24.

7. What principles of integrity does Paul put in place? Why?
8. What guidelines from these verses could you apply to our church Committee of Management?

### READ 2 CORINTHIANS 9

9. Paul is obviously trying to encourage to Corinthians to carry through what they had promised. What's he REALLY trying to achieve? (9:1-5)

## **IT'S ALL IN THE ATTITUDE!**

10. V6 is often quoted with the assumption that the generous financial giver will receive the same type of generous financial harvest. What example of blessing is found in v8 for the generous sower?

11. Notice the importance of our attitude as we give. Who should determine what each person should give?

How does this differ from the Old Testament system of giving a tenth?

12. Why is it wrong to give reluctantly, or under compulsion?

13. What HARVEST does God guarantee to produce in verse 10?

14. What sort of RICHES are promised in verse 11?

15. What are the results of generous Christian giving that Paul describes in verses 12 to 14?

What results could we expect by increasing the generosity of our giving?

How could we help one another more in this way?

It's fitting that Paul closes a section on giving by looking not so much on how much we're called to give, but on how much we've been given. From his heart flows a genuine thankfulness to God for his generosity to us in Christ. Not only that, our own generosity is fanned into flame by God's work in our hearts, and for that, says Paul, many will give thanks!

## **SOME PERSONAL POINTS TO PONDER....**

Do you have difficulty being generous?

How do you KNOW when you're being generous, and when you're not?

Have you been generous to anyone lately?

Are you contributing to gospel work with a cheerful heart?

## **PRAYER POINTS:**

## **2 CORINTHIANS 10-11**

### **WHOSE APPROVAL MATTERS?**

As Paul concludes his letter to the Corinthians, the problems he's facing come into clearer focus. Now, at last, his purpose becomes clear. His leadership has been opposed, his apostolic authority has been questioned, and his personal qualities have been criticised. As we read Paul's defense of his ministry, we can learn a lot about what Christian leadership should look like - and what it shouldn't.

1. What qualities do you look for and appreciate in Christian leaders? In what ways will Christian leaders be unlike leaders in other areas of life?

### **READ 2 CORINTHIANS 10**

2. Make a list of the criticisms people are aiming at Paul.
3. Why do you think Paul appears "timid"? What weapons does Paul use? How do they work? See also 2 Timothy 1:7.
4. What does it mean to "demolish arguments" and "take every thought captive" (v5)?
5. What mistake have the Corinthians made? (v7)
6. How does Paul answer the criticism that he "talks tough in his letters" but "wimps out" when he's with them?
7. What authority to correct and direct does Paul have? Why?
8. From verses 12 to 18, what do Paul's opponents seem to be boasting about?

### **READ 2 CORINTHIANS 11.**

Here's where Paul really takes the gloves off.

9. Why is Paul so concerned about the fact that the Corinthians are "wandering".
10. What is the attitude of the Corinthians to "new teachings"? (v4)
11. In verse 5, Paul first uses the term "super-apostles". That's how the new teachers who oppose Paul think of themselves. In what ways do they think they're better than Paul?

Do you think there are still "super-apostles" today? How can we identify them?

12. From verses 6 and 7, what two factors made the Corinthians label Paul as "second rate"?

In their eyes, Paul can't do anything right! The Corinthians are actually complaining that he didn't ask them for financial support when he was with them. (It was common for travelling speakers and teachers to be "paid to perform", much like celebrities today. Paul's "shows" were all free - which makes them treat him as worthless!)

13. Why do you think Paul was so keen to preach the gospel to the Corinthians "free of charge"? How can we imitate this?
14. Paul has some tough words for the "super-apostles." In fact, they're not super at all. What are they? (v13)

How can we avoid being duped by people like this?

15. How does Paul describe their approach in verse 20?
16. Paul decides to fight fire with fire. They're boasting - so will he. First, he matches them point for point on his Jewish pedigree. Then, in verses 23 to 27, he changes his approach. What does he boast of here?

List his hardships...

On top of all this, says Paul, there's the daily pressure of his concern for all the churches. What sort of concerns do you think these are?

17. In the end, what is Paul's only boast?

Genuine ministers will have genuine humility. Rather than pushing themselves forward, and pushing around their followers, they'll be servants like Christ. Rather than claiming special powers or privileges, or even special spiritual status, Paul says he's just an ordinary Christian. But that doesn't mean a Christian leader is without authority. Paul, as an apostle, was appointed by Christ himself, so his leadership and instruction must be respected - even by us, today. Christian leaders today will have the same authority, not in their own "divine appointment", but in their teaching of God's word given through his apostles like Paul.

## **PRAYER POINTS:**

## 2 CORINTHIANS 12:1-10: A THORN IN THE FLESH

UNINTENTIONALLY, philosopher Adolf Alexander Schroeders captured the genius of Paul's spirituality with these arresting words: "My burden carries me." Normally we think about the difficulty of carrying our burdens. But in reality our burdens carry us to Christ by convincing us that we are not self-sufficient. They are spiritual assets, not liabilities. "When I am weak, then I am strong" is Paul's final distinction between super-spirituality and the real thing.

### READ 2 CORINTHIANS 12.1-10

1. Paul continues his boasting (11:16). It is a difficult line to tread, because self-centred boasting is what he is accusing his opponents of. Up to this point, how has Paul argued for the authenticity of his apostleship (11:21-30, 6:3-10)?

Why does he say there is nothing to be gained (1) by boasting?

2. Paul describes his visionary experience by referring to "a man in Christ" (vv. 1-6). Why does he refer to his experience in this way? (4:5-7, 10:12-18)

Paul was caught up to the third heaven (2), or paradise (4). Jewish sources describe three heavens, and some relate the third heaven to paradise (2 Enoch 8, Apocalypse of Moses 37.5). It is "the place of God's presence, the supreme goal of all who know him"<sup>1</sup>. This was a vision of some sort. Paul isn't certain if it was in the body or out of it. Whether he went there physically, or just his spirit, or perhaps even just a vision or dream. But this uncertainty does not take away the certainty that it genuinely happened. He says that he received visions (1), but only mentions that he heard things of which he is not permitted to tell (4). These were for solely for his benefit, not to be passed on to the church.

3. Why doesn't Paul boast about his experience? (5-6)
4. Opinions concerning Paul's "thorn in my flesh" (v. 7) range from eye disease (Acts 9:9; Gal 4:15) to defective speech (10:10) to a chronic physical injury as a result of his trials (4:8-12; 11:23-25) to his ever-present opponents. While no conclusive answer can be given about the details, how did the thorn affect Paul's life?
5. How does Paul view Satan's part and God's part in his "thorn"?

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<sup>1</sup> Don Carson, *From Triumphalism to Maturity: A new exposition of 2 Corinthians 10-13*, Paternoster, 1996, 137.

6. In contrast to Paul's ecstatic experiences, the simple answer to his prayer (v. 9) is considered to be the summit from which we gain the most complete view of Paul's apostleship. What effect did this answer have on Paul himself?
7. How can knowing the purpose of thorns help you to be content?
8. How do you react when God seems silent about your repeated, urgent requests?

Why doesn't God just take the hurt away?

9. When have you seen God at work during a time of weakness?
10. How can you develop trust, and even delight, in God during times of weakness?

**PRAYER POINTS:**

Pray that you will be made strong even in your weak places, that you might serve Christ.

## **2 CORINTHIANS 12:11-13:14:**

### **AUTHORITY TO BUILD**

What makes a good leader? Political campaigns offer us a choice: Someone with vision or talent, but self-serving with questionable morality? Or someone willing to work for the good of those being led, even at personal cost? Or someone popular and inoffensive but also ineffective? In this final section of 2 Corinthians, we see clearly two options of leadership.

#### **READ 2 CORINTHIANS 12:11-13:14**

1. Why does Paul write this letter (11-13)?
2. What can we discern of the opponents' accusations against Paul from this section?
3. How have the super-apostles distorted Paul's ministry (see also 10:8-9, 11:7)?
4. In v14-15 how does Paul distinguish himself from the super-apostles?
5. Paul's defense of his apostolic character and authority in this letter may look self-serving. What is Paul's true motivation (19)?
6. Such authority is necessary if he is to command obedience, repentance and a growth in maturity. He fears that when he does come, he will need to show firm, unpopular leadership (v20-21). Why does he describe this confrontation as one in which *he* will be grieved and humbled, rather than the Corinthians being grieved and humbled?
7. Considering v20-21, how would you feel as the visiting team of missionaries? As the host church? How would you prepare for that confrontation?
8. What can the Corinthians expect from Paul's third visit (vv. 13:1-3, 10)?
9. Paul prefers to come to them in the gentleness and meekness of Christ (10:1) and as a loving parent (12:14-15). How do these two sides to his spiritual authority compare to the ministry of Jesus (13:3-4)?

10. 13:4 sums up the whole book. Why does the cross represent the heart of what Paul has been saying to the Corinthians?

11. Paul asks them to examine themselves not so much in their doctrine as in their experience (vv. 5-6). How could the Corinthians know experientially that they truly belonged to Christ?



HE WAS CRUCIFIED IN  
WEAKNESS, YET HE LIVES  
BY GOD'S POWER.  
LIKEWISE, WE ARE WEAK  
IN HIM, YET BY GOD'S  
POWER WE WILL LIVE  
WITH HIM IN OUR DEALING  
WITH YOU.

2 CORINTHIANS 13:4

12. In what ways does Paul show that he cares more for their passing the test than for his seeming to pass the test in the opinion of others (vv. 7-9)?

13. In v10 Paul describes his authority as given by God to build up, not tear down. Have you experienced church leaders who do this well? How might they do it better?

14. In what specific ways does Paul pray they will be built up (v. 11-14)?

15. Considering the problems in the church, how would his benediction in v14 be appropriate?

16. If you were looking for a new pastor, what leadership qualities modeled by Paul would you look for? Why?

## **PRAYER POINTS:**