PAUL'S SECOND LETTER TO THE CORINTHIANS

The King's Jars of Clay

2 Corinthians, Unfiltered

For teens who think they've heard it all

BILL McLEOD

Papa Bill Books

The King's Jars of Clay: Paul's Second Letter to the Corinthians, Unfiltered

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All Scripture quotations in this book are from the NIV. Some are abridged, with omissions marked by ellipses; paraphrases are not placed in quotation marks.

Pronouns referring to God the Father, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit are capitalized for reverence in the author's own words. Inside Scripture quotations, capitalization and wording follow the 2011 NIV exactly.

AI Disclosure. This book was written by Bill McLeod with the assistance of artificial intelligence tools for drafting, research, and editing. All content was reviewed and approved by the author, who takes full responsibility for it. Readers are encouraged to open the Scriptures and study them for themselves.

A WORD TO THE READER

Before You Start

If you've read the earlier books in this series, you know the saying by now: "If you want to get something done, hire a teenager while they still know it all." It's been in every book. It's not leaving now.

But this letter comes from someone who had stopped pretending to know it all. In 2 Corinthians, Paul is tired, hurt, misunderstood, and honest about all of it. He talks about despairing of life itself. He admits he cried while writing. He describes a painful problem God refused to take away. He defends himself against people who mocked the way he looked and talked. It's the most personal letter Paul ever wrote.

That makes it a great letter for anyone who has ever felt weak, criticized, or not impressive enough. The church in Corinth was falling for flashy leaders with big personalities, polished speeches, and impressive résumés. Paul had none of that, at least not the way they wanted. What he had was scars, tears, and a message about a crucified King.

And here's the twist that runs all through this letter: God's power shows up best in weak people. Paul compares himself to a cheap clay jar holding a priceless treasure. The jar is cracked and ordinary on purpose, so everyone can see the treasure is what matters.

You may feel like a cracked jar. Good. You're exactly the kind of person God loves to use.

How This Book Works

This book walks through all 13 chapters of 2 Corinthians, in order, one chapter of this book for each chapter of the letter. Each one explains what Paul is saying and why, adds background about Corinth, Paul's travels, and the people he was dealing with, and shows how each piece fits Paul's big theme of strength in weakness.

Before chapter 1, a short section called Setting the Scene tells the story of what happened between 1 Corinthians and this letter: a painful visit, a letter written in tears, a long wait for news, and a group of rival teachers. Don't skip it. This letter is hard to follow without it.

Each chapter ends with a Key Verse quoted word for word from the New International Version (NIV), the same translation used for every Scripture quotation in this book (pronouns for God are capitalized in the author's own words out of reverence; inside Scripture quotations, capitalization follows the NIV exactly); Real Talk questions to think through alone or argue about with friends; and sometimes a Try This challenge.

Because this is a short letter, this book quotes it sparingly and explains it mostly in my own words. So keep a Bible open next to it and read each chapter of 2 Corinthians for yourself. Paul told the Corinthians to examine themselves. Do the same with this book. Don't take my word for it. Take His.

FOR THE ADULTS

A Note for Parents and Youth Leaders

Thank you for putting this book in a teenager's hands. Like the earlier books in this series, on Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Acts, Romans, and 1 Corinthians, it's written for readers who can smell a sermon coming a mile away. I've tried to write honestly, directly, with some humor, and with real respect for what these readers can handle.

This book follows the letter format of the Romans and 1 Corinthians volumes, walking through the letter chapter by chapter. Because 2 Corinthians is short, I've quoted it sparingly and relied mostly on paraphrase and explanation. Wherever Scripture is quoted directly, in the chapters and in the Key Verses, the wording is from the New International Version (NIV). Background is included where it helps, and I've tried to stay with what's well established rather than speculation.

The events behind this letter have to be pieced together from hints in the letter itself, and scholars reconstruct them in slightly different ways. I've told the most widely accepted version and noted where there is real debate, including the long-running question of whether 2 Corinthians as we have it combines more than one of Paul's letters.

Second Corinthians is especially valuable for teenagers who struggle with insecurity, comparison, criticism, or suffering. It also

has important teaching on forgiveness and restoring someone who has done wrong (chapters 2 and 7), on generosity (chapters 8 and 9), on discernment about leaders who look impressive (chapters 10 to 12), and on dating or partnering closely with people who don't share one's faith (6:14), which I've addressed briefly and with care.

The Real Talk questions are designed for discussion. They work well for a youth group, a small group, a family dinner table, or a car ride. Don't rush to the right answer. Let them wrestle. Faith that has been thought through tends to last.

My prayer is that every reader who feels weak, ordinary, or not enough will hear Jesus' words to Paul as words to them: My grace is sufficient for you.

Grace and peace,

Bill McLeod

Papa Bill Books

BEFORE YOU OPEN THE LETTER

Setting the Scene

Where We Left Off

If you read 1 Corinthians, you remember the church in Corinth: gifted, proud, divided, and messy. Paul wrote that letter from Ephesus, across the Aegean Sea, around AD 54 or 55. He sent Timothy to visit them and planned to come himself after traveling through Macedonia.

You might expect the next letter to say, thanks for listening, everything is fixed. It doesn't. Things got worse before they got better. The story of what happened next has to be pieced together from clues in 2 Corinthians and Acts, and scholars tell it in slightly different ways. Here's the version most of them accept.

The Painful Visit

Something went wrong in Corinth, badly enough that Paul changed his plans and made a quick trip across the sea to deal with it. It didn't go well. In 2 Corinthians 2:1, Paul calls it a painful visit. Later, he talks about coming to them a third time, which tells us there had been a second visit we don't read about in Acts.

During that visit, it seems, one person in the church openly attacked or insulted Paul, and the rest of the church didn't stand up for him. Paul left hurt and humiliated. He decided not to come back right away, and some of the Corinthians accused him of being unreliable because he kept changing his travel plans.

The Tearful Letter

Instead of visiting again, Paul wrote a letter. He says he wrote it out of great distress and anguish of heart, and with many tears. It was a severe letter, calling the church to deal with the man who had wronged him and to prove their loyalty. Scholars often call it the tearful letter or the severe letter.

Where is that letter now? Some think it's 1 Corinthians, but most think 1 Corinthians doesn't match Paul's description. Many believe it was lost. Others think part of it survives as chapters 10 to 13 of 2 Corinthians. Either way, Paul sent it with his co-worker Titus and then waited anxiously to hear how the church responded.

The Long Wait

While he waited, Paul faced something terrible in the province of Asia, the region around Ephesus. He doesn't tell us exactly what it was. It may have been a riot, an imprisonment, or a serious illness. Whatever it was, Paul says he felt he had received the sentence of death.

Then he traveled north to Troas, a port city, hoping to meet Titus coming back with news. Titus wasn't there. Even though there was a great opportunity to preach in Troas, Paul was so restless that he left and crossed over to Macedonia, still looking for him.

Finally Titus arrived, and the news was good. Most of the church had repented, dealt with the offender, and longed to see Paul again. Paul was flooded with relief, and he wrote 2 Corinthians from Macedonia, probably around AD 55 or 56.

The Super-Apostles

The good news wasn't the whole story. A group of traveling teachers had arrived in Corinth. Paul sarcastically calls them super-apostles. They were Jewish, proud of their background, and gifted speakers. They carried letters of recommendation, boasted about their spiritual experiences, charged the church for their teaching, and compared themselves favorably with Paul. They said his letters were powerful but in person he was weak and his speaking was nothing special.

The Corinthians, who already loved impressive speakers, were tempted to follow them. Much of 2 Corinthians is Paul answering the question: what does a true servant of Jesus look like? His answer is not what anyone expected.

One Letter or Several?

Read 2 Corinthians straight through and you'll notice something. Chapters 1 to 9 are mostly warm and relieved. Then chapter 10 suddenly turns sharp, sarcastic, and fierce. There are other surprises too: a short section in 6:14 to 7:1 seems to interrupt the flow, and chapters 8 and 9 both talk about the same collection of money as if starting fresh.

Because of this, many scholars think 2 Corinthians combines two or more of Paul's letters, collected together when his letters were copied and shared. A common view is that chapters 10 to 13 were a separate letter, either part of the tearful letter or a later letter written after more bad news. Other scholars think it was always one letter, written over time as Paul dictated and received new reports, and that a change of tone is natural when he turns from the loyal majority to the rival teachers. No ancient manuscript shows the

letter in pieces; every copy we have contains it as it stands. Either way, all of it is Paul, and all of it is Scripture.

What Happened Next

Paul did visit Corinth a third time. Acts 20 says he spent three months in Greece, and that's where he wrote Romans, in about AD 57. He mentions in Romans that the believers of Achaia, the region around Corinth, had given generously to the collection for Jerusalem. That suggests this letter worked. The messy family listened.

About forty years later, a church leader in Rome named Clement wrote to the Corinthians because they were fighting again. Some things take a long time to change. But God never gave up on them.

The Map

Chapters 1 to 7: Paul explains his change of plans, the tearful letter, and what real ministry is like: weak clay jars carrying God's treasure, ambassadors of reconciliation, and hearts opened wide.

Chapters 8 and 9: The collection for poor believers in Jerusalem, and what generous giving looks like.

Chapters 10 to 13: Paul answers the super-apostles, boasts about his weaknesses, describes his thorn in the flesh, and prepares for his third visit.

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CHAPTER 1

The God of All Comfort

2 Corinthians 1

Paul starts this letter the usual way, with his name, the church's name, and a greeting of grace and peace. This time Timothy is listed with him. But right after the greeting, instead of jumping into the problems, Paul bursts into praise. And the word he can't stop using is comfort.

He calls God "the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort." In just a few sentences, Paul uses the word comfort, or a form of it, about ten times. God comforts us in all our troubles, he says, so that we can turn around and comfort others who are hurting, with the same comfort God gave us.

That's worth slowing down for. Your pain is not wasted. The hard thing you've been through might be the very thing that lets you help someone else someday. People who have been through grief can sit with the grieving in a way others can't. People who have fought anxiety can recognize it in a friend. God doesn't just comfort you for your sake. He comforts you so the comfort can keep moving.

> BACKGROUND CHECK **Comfort**
>
> The Greek word Paul uses, paraklesis, is related to a word Jesus used for the Holy Spirit in John 14, sometimes translated Advocate, Helper, or Comforter. The idea is someone who comes alongside you. Comfort in the Bible isn't just a soft feeling. In older English, comfort came from a Latin word meaning to

make strong. God's comfort doesn't just make you feel better; it gives you strength to keep going.

Then Paul gets honest about how bad things had been. Something happened to him in the province of Asia, the region around Ephesus. He doesn't say what. It may have been a riot, an arrest, or a serious illness. But he says the pressure was so far beyond what he could handle that he gave up hope of surviving. He felt like he'd already been sentenced to death.

Here's what's remarkable. This is the apostle Paul, the great missionary, the man who wrote much of the New Testament, admitting that he despaired. If you've ever felt like you couldn't go on, you're not a bad Christian. You're in Paul's company.

But Paul says something came out of it. It happened so that he would stop relying on himself and rely on God, "who raises the dead." When you've reached the end of your own strength, you find out what God's strength is like. And Paul thanks the Corinthians for praying for him. Their prayers were part of how God rescued him.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The God Who Raises the Dead**

This phrase was part of a famous daily Jewish prayer that praised God as the one who gives life to the dead. For Paul, it had a new meaning. He had met the risen Jesus. If God raised Jesus, He could rescue Paul from anything, and one day He will raise Paul too. That's where hope comes from when every other hope runs out.

Then Paul turns to an accusation. Some people in Corinth were saying Paul was unreliable. He had told them he would visit, and then he didn't. They said he was the kind of person who says yes and no in the same breath, who makes promises he doesn't keep.

Paul's answer is interesting. He says his message about Jesus was never a mix of yes and no. And then he says something beautiful: every one of God's promises finds its yes in Christ. All the promises God made in the Old Testament, to Abraham, to David, to the prophets, come true in Jesus. And that's why believers say "Amen" through Him, which means, so be it, it's true.

Paul's travel plans may have changed. God's promises never do.

So why didn't Paul come? He calls God as his witness: it was to spare them. If he had come back right then, it would have been another painful confrontation. He didn't want to lord it over their faith. He wanted to work with them for their joy.

KEY VERSE

For no matter how many promises God has made, they are "Yes" in Christ.

2 Corinthians 1:20 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Think of a hard thing you've been through. Could God use it to help you comfort someone else? How?
2. Paul admits he felt hopeless. Why do you think it's important that the Bible includes moments like that?
3. Paul's plans changed, but God's promises didn't. What's one promise of God you need to hold on to right now?

CHAPTER 2

Forgive Him

2 Corinthians 2

Paul keeps explaining why he didn't come back. He decided he wouldn't make another painful visit. He'd already had one, and it had hurt everyone. If he made the Corinthians sad, who would be left to make him glad?

So instead, he wrote them a letter. And he describes how he wrote it: "out of great distress and anguish of heart and with many tears." It wasn't written to hurt them, he says, but to let them know how deeply he loved them.

That's the tearful letter you read about in Setting the Scene. Sometimes love requires saying hard things. But notice how Paul did it: with tears, not with a smirk. There's a big difference between a friend who corrects you because they love you and someone who corrects you because they enjoy being right.

> BACKGROUND CHECK **The Man Who Caused Grief**
>
> Paul mentions someone who caused grief, not just to Paul but to the whole church. He doesn't name him, which is kind. Most scholars think this was the person who opposed Paul during the painful visit. For a long time, many readers assumed he was the man in 1 Corinthians 5 who was sleeping with his stepmother, but most scholars today think this is a different situation. Either way, the church had now disciplined him.

Then Paul says something surprising. The punishment the majority gave this man is enough. Now it's time to forgive him and comfort him, so he isn't crushed by too much sorrow. Paul urges them to reaffirm their love for him.

Think about that. This man had hurt Paul personally. And Paul is the one saying, that's enough, welcome him back. Paul says whoever they forgive, he forgives too.

Why does it matter so much? So that Satan won't outwit us. Paul says we know how he works. One of Satan's favorite tricks is to take a person who has sinned and repented, and convince them, or the people around them, that they can never be forgiven. A church that disciplines but never forgives isn't being holy. It's being outsmarted.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Discipline and Restoration**
>
> In the Bible, the goal of correcting someone is always restoration. Jesus told Peter to forgive not seven times but seventy-seven times. Paul tells the Galatians to restore someone caught in sin gently. Here he tells the Corinthians that once a person has turned around, the church must welcome them back with love. Holding on to someone's past when God has forgiven it is its own kind of sin.

Then Paul tells a short travel story. He went to Troas to preach, and God opened a door for him there. But he couldn't settle down, because Titus hadn't arrived with news from Corinth. So he said goodbye and went on to Macedonia.

Then, suddenly, Paul breaks into praise again. God, he says, always leads us like captives in Christ's victory parade. Remember the Roman triumph from 1 Corinthians 4? A conquering general marched through Rome with his army and his prisoners, and incense was burned along the route. Paul says believers are like that parade, spreading the fragrance of Christ everywhere they go.

To some people, that smell is the scent of life. To others, it's the smell of death. The same message of Jesus draws some people in and makes others angry. Who is up to a job like that? Paul's answer comes in the next chapter: nobody, on their own. But he adds that unlike many, he doesn't peddle God's word for profit. He's not selling the gospel like a street vendor. He speaks with sincerity, as someone sent by God.

KEY VERSE

For we are to God the pleasing aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing.

2 Corinthians 2:15 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. What's the difference between correcting someone out of love and correcting them because you like being right?
2. Is there someone you need to forgive, or someone a group you belong to needs to welcome back?
3. Paul says believers spread the aroma of Christ. What do people around you notice about Jesus when they're around you?

CHAPTER 3

Letters on Hearts

2 Corinthians 3

The rival teachers in Corinth arrived with letters of recommendation. That was normal in the ancient world. If you traveled to a new city, you'd carry a letter from someone important saying, this person is trustworthy, please welcome them. The super-apostles probably had impressive ones.

So Paul asks: do I need letters of recommendation to you, like some people? Then he answers his own question. You are my letter. You, the church in Corinth, are the proof of my ministry. He says they're a letter from Christ, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on stone tablets but on human hearts.

That's a powerful idea. The best evidence for Jesus isn't an argument or a certificate. It's changed lives. And here's the challenge: you're a letter too. People who never open a Bible are reading your life. What does it say?

> BACKGROUND CHECK **Tablets of Stone**
>
> When Paul mentions stone tablets, he's thinking of the Ten Commandments, which God wrote on stone and gave to Moses at Mount Sinai. But the prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel promised that one day God would make a new covenant and write His law on people's hearts, replacing hearts of stone with hearts of flesh. Paul says that's exactly what the Spirit is doing now.

Paul says he isn't competent in himself for this job. His competence comes from God, who has made him a minister of a new covenant, a covenant of the Spirit. Then Paul makes a striking contrast: "the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life."

He doesn't mean the law is bad. He means rules written on stone can tell you what's right, but they can't change your heart. They can only show you where you've failed. The Spirit actually gives new life.

Then Paul tells a story from Exodus 34. When Moses came down from the mountain after meeting with God, his face glowed so brightly that the Israelites were afraid to look at him. So Moses wore a veil over his face. That old covenant came with glory, Paul says. But that glory was fading. The new covenant has a glory that lasts and is far greater.

Paul uses the veil as a picture. He says that when the old covenant is read, it's as if a veil still covers people's hearts, keeping them from seeing clearly. But whenever anyone turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Freedom**
>
> "Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom." This doesn't mean the freedom to do whatever you want. Remember 1 Corinthians, where some people used freedom as an excuse for sin. The freedom Paul means is freedom from condemnation, from fear, from trying to earn God's approval, and from the veil that keeps us from seeing God. It's the freedom to see Him clearly and become like Him.

And here's the end of the chapter, one of the most hopeful verses about how Christians grow. All of us, with faces unveiled, look at the Lord's glory, and as we do, we're being changed into His image, from one degree of glory to the next.

You become like what you look at. Spend your time staring at a screen full of people who make you feel worthless, and you'll start feeling worthless. Spend your time looking at Jesus, and you'll slowly start looking like Him. It doesn't happen overnight. It's ever-increasing. But it's real, and it's the Spirit's work.

KEY VERSE

Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.

2 Corinthians 3:17 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Paul says the Corinthians were his letter of recommendation. If someone read your life like a letter, what would they learn about Jesus?
2. What's the difference between rules that tell you what's right and the Spirit who changes your heart?
3. You become like what you look at. What are you looking at most? How is it shaping you?

TRY THIS *Spend ten minutes this week reading about Jesus in one of the Gospels with no phone nearby. Then write down one thing about Him you want to imitate.*

CHAPTER 4

Treasure in Jars of Clay

2 Corinthians 4

Paul keeps talking about his ministry, and the theme is clear from the start: we don't lose heart. He uses that phrase twice in this chapter, once at the beginning and once near the end, like bookends.

He says he doesn't use tricks or twist God's word. He just sets out the truth plainly. If people still don't see it, it's because the god of this age, Satan, has blinded their minds so they can't see the light of the gospel. Then Paul makes an important point: what he preaches isn't himself. He preaches Jesus Christ as Lord, and himself as their servant for Jesus' sake.

That was a direct contrast to the super-apostles, who seem to have been very interested in promoting themselves.

Then Paul goes back to the very first page of the Bible. In Genesis 1, God said, let there be light, and light shone out of the darkness. Paul says the same God has made His light shine in our hearts, so we can see His glory in the face of Jesus. Becoming a Christian is like creation all over again. God speaks, and light floods into a dark heart.

And then comes the picture that gives this book its title. "But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us."

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Jars of Clay**
>
> Clay jars were the cheapest containers in the ancient world. They were used for everything from storing grain to carrying water to holding oil lamps. They cracked easily and were thrown away when they broke. Corinth was famous for its pottery, and broken pieces covered the ground around the city. Nobody kept treasure in a clay jar because the jar was impressive. Sometimes, though, people hid valuables in plain clay pots precisely because no one would look there. The Dead Sea Scrolls were found in clay jars in caves.

The super-apostles wanted to be impressive containers, golden vases that people would admire. Paul says he's a clay pot, ordinary and breakable. And that's the point. When people see something amazing come out of an ordinary jar, they know the power belongs to God.

Then Paul describes what life as a clay jar is like, in four pairs. Hard pressed on every side, but not crushed. Perplexed, but not in despair. Persecuted, but not abandoned. Struck down, but not destroyed.

Read those slowly. Paul doesn't say Christians never get pressed, confused, attacked, or knocked down. He says all of that happens. But it never has the final word. You may be hard pressed, but you won't be crushed.

He says he carries around the death of Jesus in his body, so the life of Jesus can show up there too. His suffering is a kind of daily dying, but it's producing life in others.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Wasting Away and Being Renewed**

Paul was probably in his late forties or fifties when he wrote this, and his body had been through beatings, stonings, shipwrecks, and years of hard travel. He knew he was aging and wearing out. But he says that while his outer self is wasting away, his inner self is being renewed day by day. Your body will get older. Your heart and spirit, with God, can keep getting younger.

Then Paul makes a comparison that seems almost unbelievable after everything he's been through. He calls his troubles light and momentary. Light? Momentary? Paul had been beaten nearly to death. But compared to the eternal glory that's coming, a glory that far outweighs everything, he says, his troubles are like a feather on a scale.

So where does Paul look? Not at what's seen, but at what's unseen. Because what you can see is temporary. What you can't see is forever.

KEY VERSE

But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us.

2 Corinthians 4:7 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. What makes you feel like a cracked clay jar? How could God use that very weakness?
2. Which of Paul's four pairs (pressed but not crushed, perplexed but not in despair, persecuted but not abandoned, struck down but not destroyed) describes your life right now?
3. What would change if you looked at your troubles in light of eternity?

CHAPTER 5

New Creation

2 Corinthians 5

Chapter 4 ended with Paul fixing his eyes on what's unseen and eternal. Chapter 5 keeps going in that direction. Paul talks about what happens when our bodies die.

He compares the body to a tent. A tent is temporary. You pitch it, live in it for a while, and one day you take it down. Paul was a tentmaker, so he knew tents well. If this earthly tent is destroyed, he says, we have something far better waiting: a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not made by human hands.

Meanwhile, we groan. We feel the weight of living in bodies that get sick, tired, and old. But Paul says we don't want to be without a body, like a ghost floating around. We want to be clothed with a new, heavenly body, so that what is mortal is swallowed up by life. And God has given us the Spirit as a deposit, a down payment guaranteeing that the rest is coming.

> BACKGROUND CHECK **The Down Payment**
>
> The Greek word Paul uses for deposit was a business term for the first installment of a payment, money put down to guarantee the full amount would follow. In modern Greek, a form of the same word is still used for an engagement, a promise that a wedding is coming. The Holy Spirit living in you now is God's promise that everything else He has said will happen.

So Paul is confident. As long as we're at home in this body, we're away from the Lord in a sense, and he'd rather be with the Lord. In the meantime, "we live by faith, not by sight." Whether he lives or dies, his goal is to please Jesus.

Then Paul says something sobering. We must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, to receive what's due for what we've done in the body, good or bad.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **The Judgment Seat**
>
> In the middle of Corinth's marketplace, archaeologists have found a large raised stone platform called the bema, the judgment seat. It's very likely where Paul stood before the Roman governor Gallio in Acts 18. Everyone in Corinth knew what it looked like to stand before the bema. Paul says believers will stand before Christ's. For those who trust Jesus, this isn't about whether they're saved; Romans 8 says there's no condemnation. It's about how they lived, and what will last.

Because of that, Paul tries to persuade people. And what drives him isn't fear, but love. "For Christ's love compels us." Jesus died for everyone, so that those who live would no longer live for themselves, but for Him.

That changes how Paul sees people. He no longer looks at anyone from a worldly point of view, judging them by looks, money, popularity, or status. He used to see even Jesus that way, as a failed, crucified Messiah. Not anymore.

And then comes one of the most famous verses in the Bible: "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!"

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **New Creation**
>
> The NIV footnote gives another translation: if anyone is in Christ, that person is a new creation. Both are true. When you belong to Jesus, you are made

> new. But Paul's words are also bigger than one person. He's saying that God's whole new creation, the new world He promised, has already started. When someone trusts Jesus, they become part of it.

All this comes from God, Paul says. He reconciled us to Himself through Christ. Reconcile means to bring enemies back together as friends. God wasn't counting people's sins against them. And now He has given us the job of spreading that message.

So Paul calls himself an ambassador. An ambassador represents a king in a foreign country and speaks with the king's authority. Paul says God is making His appeal through us, and the message is simple: be reconciled to God.

The chapter ends with what's sometimes called the great exchange. God made Jesus, who never sinned, to be sin for us, so that in Him we could become the righteousness of God. Jesus took what we had, our sin. We get what He had, His right standing with God. It's the most unfair trade in history, and it's all grace.

KEY VERSE

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!

2 Corinthians 5:17 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Paul says we live by faith, not by sight. What's one area of your life where you need to trust God even though you can't see how it will work out?
2. Paul stopped judging people by worldly standards. What worldly standards are you tempted to use when you size people up?
3. What does it mean to be an ambassador for Christ at your school?

TRY THIS *Write down three things that were part of your "old" life and three things God has made new, or that you want Him to make new.*

CHAPTER 6

Open Wide Your Hearts

2 Corinthians 6

Paul keeps speaking as an ambassador. He urges the Corinthians not to receive God's grace in vain, as if it doesn't make any difference. He quotes Isaiah about God's time of favor, and then says it plainly: now is the time. Today is the day of salvation.

People often say, I'll get serious about God someday. When I'm older. After I've had my fun. Paul's answer is: now. Not because God is impatient, but because grace is offered today, and you aren't promised tomorrow.

Then Paul describes his life as a servant of God, and it's one of the most intense lists in the Bible. He commends himself not with letters of recommendation but with endurance. In troubles, hardships, and distresses. In beatings, imprisonments, and riots. In hard work, sleepless nights, and hunger.

But he also lists the character God built in him through all of it: purity, understanding, patience, kindness, the Holy Spirit, sincere love, truthful speech, and the power of God.

Then comes a series of contrasts that sounds almost like a poem. People called them impostors, but they were genuine. Unknown, yet well known. Dying, yet still alive. Beaten, but not killed.

Sorrowful, yet always rejoicing. Poor, yet making many rich. Having nothing, yet possessing everything.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Paradox**
>
> A paradox is something that sounds impossible but turns out to be true. The Christian life is full of them. You find your life by losing it. The first will be last. The weak are strong. Paul's list is a string of paradoxes. From the outside, Paul looked like a failure. From God's point of view, he was rich beyond measure.

Then Paul's tone turns tender. He's spoken freely to them, he says, and opened wide his heart. He isn't holding back his love. They're the ones holding back theirs. So, speaking to them like a parent to his children, he asks them to open wide their hearts in return.

Relationships take two people. Paul had done everything he could. Now it was their turn.

Then comes a section many scholars think interrupts the flow, beginning with the words, "Do not be yoked together with unbelievers."

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Unequally Yoked**
>
> A yoke was a wooden beam that joined two animals so they could pull a plow together. Deuteronomy 22 told Israel not to plow with an ox and a donkey yoked together; they're different sizes and strengths, and they'd pull in different directions. Paul uses that picture for close partnerships between believers and unbelievers. In context, he seems especially concerned about the Corinthians joining in idol worship or following false teachers. Christians often apply this verse to marriage and dating as well, and to business partnerships. Paul is not telling believers to avoid friendships with people who don't believe; in 1 Corinthians 5 he says that would mean leaving the world. He's warning against being bound so closely to someone that they pull you away from Jesus.

Paul asks a string of questions. What do righteousness and wickedness have in common? What fellowship does light have with darkness? What agreement is there between God's temple and idols? And then he reminds them who they are: we are the temple of the living God.

He quotes several Old Testament promises woven together. God will live among His people and be their God. He will welcome them. He will be a Father to them, and they will be His sons and daughters. Notice that daughters are included. The main passage Paul draws on, 2 Samuel 7, speaks of a son; Paul's version says sons and daughters, perhaps echoing Isaiah 43, where God gathers His sons and daughters from far away.

KEY VERSE

I tell you, now is the time of God's favor, now is the day of salvation.

2 Corinthians 6:2 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Why do people put off taking God seriously until later? What does Paul say about that?
2. Which of Paul's paradoxes (sorrowful yet rejoicing, poor yet making many rich, having nothing yet possessing everything) is hardest for you to understand?
3. How can you tell the difference between a healthy friendship with someone who doesn't believe and a partnership that pulls you away from God?

CHAPTER 7

Godly Sorrow

2 Corinthians 7

The chapter begins by finishing the thought from chapter 6. Since we have such amazing promises from God, Paul says, let's clean out of our lives everything that contaminates body and spirit, out of reverence for Him.

Then Paul goes back to the story he started in chapter 2. Remember, he had left Troas and gone to Macedonia, still waiting to hear from Titus. Now he tells us what happened next.

When he got to Macedonia, things didn't get easier. He had no rest. There was conflict on the outside and fear on the inside. Paul is honest again. He's not a superhero. He gets scared.

"But God, who comforts the downcast, comforted us by the coming of Titus."

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Titus**
>
> Titus was a Greek believer, not Jewish, and one of Paul's most trusted co-workers. In Galatians 2, Paul tells how he brought Titus to Jerusalem, and the apostles there didn't require him to be circumcised, a major moment for Gentile believers. Paul later left Titus in charge of organizing the churches on the island of Crete, and wrote him the short letter we call Titus. Here, Titus is the one Paul trusted with the hardest job: delivering the tearful letter and facing the church afterward.

God comforted Paul through a person. Titus showed up, and he brought good news. The Corinthians missed Paul. They were sorry. They were concerned for him. And Paul's joy was greater than ever.

Then Paul talks about the tearful letter. He admits he had regretted sending it at first. He knew it would hurt them. But now he's glad, not because they were hurt, but because their sorrow led them to repent. They were sorrowful in the way God wanted.

And then Paul explains the difference between two kinds of sorrow. "Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death."

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Two Kinds of Sorrow**
>
> Worldly sorrow is being sorry you got caught, sorry for how it makes you look, or sorry in a way that spirals into shame and self-hatred. It focuses on you, and it leads nowhere good. Godly sorrow is being sorry because you see how your sin hurt God and others, and it leads you to turn around and change. Peter and Judas both betrayed Jesus. Judas was filled with despair. Peter wept, turned back, and was restored. Same sin. Different sorrow.

Paul lists what godly sorrow produced in the Corinthians: earnestness, eagerness to make things right, indignation, alarm, longing, concern, and readiness to see justice done. That's what real repentance looks like. Not just feeling bad, but taking action.

Then Paul explains why he wrote the tearful letter in the first place. It wasn't mainly about punishing the person who did wrong, or even defending the person who was hurt. It was so the Corinthians would see for themselves how devoted they really were.

Paul is also thrilled for Titus. Titus had gone to Corinth probably expecting the worst. Instead, they welcomed him with respect and

obedience, and now he loves them even more. Paul had bragged about them to Titus, and they didn't embarrass him.

The chapter ends with a sentence that must have felt like sunshine to the Corinthians after everything that had happened: Paul says he's glad he can have complete confidence in them.

Chapters 1 to 7 started with Paul in despair and end with Paul full of joy. The relationship is being repaired. That's what reconciliation looks like in real life.

KEY VERSE

Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death.

2 Corinthians 7:10 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. God comforted Paul through Titus. Who has God used to comfort you? Could God use you to comfort someone else this week?
2. What's the difference between being sorry you got caught and being sorry you did wrong?
3. What does real repentance look like after you've hurt someone?

CHAPTER 8

The Grace of Giving

2 Corinthians 8

Chapters 8 and 9 change the subject to money. Paul was collecting a gift from the Gentile churches for poor believers in Jerusalem. You may remember it from 1 Corinthians 16, where Paul told them to set aside money every Sunday. The Corinthians had started strong a year earlier, but then the conflict with Paul happened, and the collection stalled.

So Paul tells them about the churches in Macedonia, the region to the north that included cities like Philippi and Thessalonica. Those churches were going through a severe trial, and they were extremely poor. But their joy overflowed into generosity. They gave as much as they could, and even more than they could afford. Nobody pressured them. They actually begged Paul for the privilege of helping.

> BACKGROUND CHECK **Macedonia and Achaia**
>
> Corinth was the capital of Achaia, the Roman province in southern Greece, and it was one of the wealthiest cities in the region. Macedonia, to the north, had been hit hard by wars and Roman taxes over the centuries, and the churches there faced persecution. So Paul is comparing a rich church with poor churches, and the poor churches were the generous ones. It's a pattern you still see today. People with the least often give the most.

Then Paul says something important. The Macedonians "gave themselves first of all to the Lord." That's where generosity starts. When you belong to God completely, your money belongs to Him too. Giving isn't really about money. It's about who owns your heart.

Paul calls giving a grace. The Corinthians were proud of their gifts: faith, speech, knowledge, earnestness. Paul says, great, now excel in this gift too, the grace of giving.

He's careful to say he isn't commanding them. He wants their love to be real, not forced. And then he points them to the greatest example of all: "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich."

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Rich and Poor**
>
> Before Jesus came to earth, He shared the glory of heaven with the Father. Then He was born to a poor family, laid in a feeding trough, grew up as a tradesman in a small town, had no home during His ministry, and died owning only the clothes that soldiers gambled for. Paul says He did it all for us. Everything we give is a small echo of what He gave.

Paul gives practical advice. Finish what you started. Give according to what you have, not according to what you don't have. God isn't asking for the impossible. If the willingness is there, the gift is acceptable.

The goal, Paul says, is equality. Right now the Corinthians have plenty and the Jerusalem believers are in need. Someday it might be the other way around. He quotes the story of the manna in the wilderness, when God fed Israel with bread from heaven: those who gathered a lot didn't have too much, and those who gathered a little didn't have too little. God's people take care of each other.

Then Paul explains who will carry the money. Titus is coming, eager to help. With him is a brother praised by all the churches, and another trusted brother. Why so many people? Because Paul wants to avoid any criticism of how the money is handled. He's taking pains to do what is right, not only in God's eyes but in people's eyes too.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Handling Money Honestly**

Paul knew that money and ministry can be a dangerous combination. His opponents may already have been accusing him of being in it for the money. So he made sure the gift was handled by several trustworthy people chosen by the churches, not by him alone. Churches and ministries today still follow this principle. It's not because leaders are assumed to be dishonest, but because honesty that can be seen protects everyone.

KEY VERSE

For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.

2 Corinthians 8:9 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. The poorest churches were the most generous. Why do you think that often happens?
2. What does it mean to give yourself to the Lord first, before you give anything else?
3. What's something you have plenty of, whether money, time, skills, or attention, that someone else needs?

CHAPTER 9

A Cheerful Giver

2 Corinthians 9

Paul keeps talking about the collection, almost as if he's starting over. He says he doesn't really need to write about it, and then writes a whole chapter. (This is one reason some scholars think chapters 8 and 9 were once separate notes, though others think Paul is just being polite.)

He's a little worried. He'd bragged to the Macedonians about how eager the Corinthians were. A year ago, they were the first to say they wanted to help. Their enthusiasm had inspired others. But what if Paul shows up with some Macedonian believers and finds the Corinthians haven't actually collected anything? That would be embarrassing for everyone.

So he's sending the brothers ahead to make sure the gift is ready, a generous gift, not one squeezed out of them.

Then Paul uses a farming picture. If you plant only a few seeds, you'll get a small harvest. If you plant a lot, you'll get a big one. Generosity works like sowing.

> BACKGROUND CHECK **Sowing and Reaping**
>
> Paul isn't promising that if you give money, God will make you rich. Some preachers have twisted this passage that way. Look at the purpose Paul gives: God will supply what you need so that you can keep being generous. The

> harvest isn't luxury. It's more good work, more thanksgiving to God, and a heart that looks more like His.

And then a verse many people know by heart: "Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver."

Notice what Paul doesn't do. He doesn't set a percentage. He doesn't use guilt. He says each person should decide in their own heart. And the attitude matters as much as the amount. God isn't impressed by a big gift given with a grumpy face. He loves a cheerful giver.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Cheerful**
>
> The Greek word Paul uses for cheerful is hilaros. You can probably hear the English word it eventually gave us: hilarious. Paul isn't saying giving has to be a joke. But he is saying it should come from a glad, light heart, not a heavy, resentful one.

Paul promises that God is able to bless them abundantly, so that in everything, at every time, they'll have what they need to do every good work. He quotes a psalm about a person who scatters gifts to the poor. And he says the God who gives seed to the farmer and bread to eat will also supply and multiply their seed.

Then Paul shows how far the effects of their gift will reach. It will meet the needs of the believers in Jerusalem. It will make many people thank God. The Jerusalem Christians will praise God for the Corinthians' faith and generosity, and they'll pray for them with real affection.

Think about what that means. Jewish believers in Jerusalem, who might have had doubts about Gentile Christians, would receive a gift from Greek believers they had never met. That gift would say: we're

one family. A few coins collected on Sundays in Corinth would help heal one of the biggest divisions in the early church.

And then Paul does what he always does. He turns from human generosity to God's. "Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!" Whatever we give, it's tiny compared to the gift God gave us in Jesus. Our giving is just a thank-you note.

KEY VERSE

Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.

2 Corinthians 9:7 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Why do you think God cares about the attitude of a giver and not just the amount?
2. Some people say giving will make you rich. How does Paul's purpose for God's blessing (so you can keep giving) correct that idea?
3. Paul's collection helped bring Jewish and Gentile believers together. How could generosity help heal a division in your school, church, or family?

TRY THIS *Decide in your heart one specific thing to give this week, money, time, or something you own, and give it cheerfully without telling anyone.*

CHAPTER 10

Weapons That Work

2 Corinthians 10

Chapter 10 feels like a different letter. The warm, relieved tone of chapters 1 to 9 suddenly turns sharp and intense. That's why many scholars think these last four chapters were once a separate letter (see Setting the Scene). Others think Paul simply turned from the loyal majority to deal directly with the rival teachers and the people listening to them. Either way, Paul is now taking on the super-apostles.

He starts by appealing to them by the humility and gentleness of Christ. Then he quotes what people were saying about him. They called him timid in person but bold in his letters. In other words: Paul is brave on paper, but when he shows up, he's a pushover.

Paul says he hopes he won't have to show them how bold he can be in person.

Then he talks about how Christians fight. We live in the world, he says, but we don't fight the way the world does. Our weapons aren't the world's weapons: manipulation, insults, power plays, and slick talk. Instead, they have divine power to tear down strongholds.

> BACKGROUND CHECK **Strongholds**
>
> Ancient cities had fortresses, strongholds built on high ground, where defenders could hold out against attack. Corinth itself had one on the giant

rock of the Acrocorinth that towered over the city. Paul says the real strongholds he fights against aren't stone walls. They're arguments and proud ideas that set themselves up against knowing God. Pride, lies, and wrong ideas about God can wall people in.

Paul says he demolishes arguments and every proud idea that opposes the knowledge of God, and he takes every thought captive to make it obey Christ.

That's a powerful picture for your own mind. Not every thought that pops into your head deserves to stay. Some thoughts are lies: you're worthless, God doesn't care, nobody likes you, you'll never change. You don't have to let them run free. You can arrest them, hold them up to what Jesus says, and refuse to obey them.

Then Paul quotes one of his critics directly. Some people said his letters were weighty and forceful, but in person he was unimpressive and his speaking was nothing.

BACKGROUND CHECK **What Did Paul Look Like?**

The Bible never describes Paul's appearance. A second-century story called the Acts of Paul and Thecla describes him as a small, bald, bow-legged man with eyebrows that met in the middle and a slightly hooked nose, though it adds that he sometimes looked like an angel. No one knows if that's accurate. But his critics in Corinth clearly didn't think he looked or sounded like a star.

Paul doesn't argue that he's actually good-looking or a great speaker. He says what he is in his letters, he'll be in person too.

Then he makes a sharp observation about his rivals. They measure themselves by themselves and compare themselves with each other. That's not wise. It's like a group of people deciding who's tallest by comparing only with each other while all standing in a hole.

Comparison is a trap teenagers know well. Who has more followers, better clothes, a nicer house, more friends. Paul refuses to play. He will only boast about the work God actually gave him to do, which includes bringing the gospel to Corinth in the first place. And he hopes to go even farther, to preach in places beyond them where no one has heard about Jesus yet.

The chapter ends with a quote from Jeremiah: "Let the one who boasts boast in the Lord." Because in the end, it isn't the person who praises himself who is approved. It's the person the Lord praises.

KEY VERSE

we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.

2 Corinthians 10:5 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. What weapons does the world use to win arguments or get its way? What would it look like to fight differently?
2. What's a thought you often have that isn't true? What does Jesus say instead?
3. Why is comparing yourself with others such a trap? Who are you most tempted to compare yourself to?

CHAPTER 11

Boasting Like a Fool

2 Corinthians 11

Paul hates what he's about to do, but he feels forced into it. The super-apostles were boasting about their credentials, and the Corinthians were impressed. So Paul says, put up with me while I act like a fool for a moment. I'm going to boast too.

But first he explains why he cares so much. He's jealous for them with a godly jealousy. He uses a wedding picture: he promised them to one husband, Christ, like a father arranging his daughter's marriage, and he wants to present them to Jesus pure and faithful. He's afraid that, just as the serpent deceived Eve, someone is leading them away from sincere devotion to Christ.

The rival teachers, he says, preach a different Jesus, bring a different spirit, and teach a different gospel. And the Corinthians put up with it easily.

Then Paul brings up money again. The super-apostles charged for their teaching. Paul preached for free. In Corinth, that made Paul look less important, because in their culture, good teachers were expensive. But Paul says he didn't want to be a burden to them. Believers from Macedonia had helped support him while he was there.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Masquerading**

Paul says Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light. Corinth had a big theater where actors wore masks to play different characters. Paul says the false apostles are doing the same thing, wearing a mask of righteousness. Evil rarely shows up looking evil. It usually shows up looking attractive, confident, and spiritual. That's why discernment matters.

Then Paul begins his foolish boasting. Are they Hebrews? So is he. Israelites? So is he. Descendants of Abraham? So is he. Servants of Christ? He says he's talking like a madman now, but he's more.

And here's where the boasting takes a strange turn. The super-apostles probably boasted about their successes, their gifts, their visions, their impressive speaking. Paul boasts about his sufferings. And the list is staggering.

He has worked harder, been in prison more often, been flogged more severely, and faced death again and again. Five times he received the thirty-nine lashes from Jewish authorities. Three times he was beaten with rods by Roman officials. Once he was stoned. Three times he was shipwrecked, and he spent a night and a day adrift in the open sea.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Thirty-Nine Lashes**

The law of Moses said a guilty person could be given up to forty lashes, and no more. Jewish authorities gave thirty-nine, to make sure they didn't accidentally break the limit. It was a brutal punishment that could leave scars for life, or kill. Paul received it five times. Being beaten with rods was a Roman punishment; Acts 16 describes it happening to Paul and Silas in Philippi. Of the three shipwrecks Paul mentions, none is the famous one in Acts 27. That one hadn't happened yet.

He's been in danger from rivers, robbers, his own people, and Gentiles. In danger in the city, in the country, and at sea. In danger

from false believers. He's gone without sleep, without food, without warm clothes. And on top of everything, every day, he carries the weight of worrying about all the churches.

Then Paul says something that flips the whole idea of boasting upside down. If he has to boast, he'll boast about the things that show his weakness.

He ends with a story that sounds almost funny. In Damascus, soon after he became a Christian, the governor under King Aretas had the city guarded to arrest him. So Paul's friends lowered him in a basket through a window in the city wall, and he escaped.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **The Basket and the Wall**
>
> In the Roman army, the highest honor for bravery was a crown awarded to the first soldier to climb over an enemy city's wall during an attack. Paul's story is the opposite. Instead of being first up the wall, he was the first down it, in a basket, running away. That's the story he chooses to end his boasting with. Some heroes.

KEY VERSE

If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness.

2 Corinthians 11:30 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Paul says evil often looks attractive and spiritual. How can you tell the difference between a true leader and a fake one?
2. Why do you think Paul boasted about his sufferings instead of his successes?
3. What's one weakness or embarrassing moment in your life that God might want to use?

CHAPTER 12

My Grace Is Sufficient

2 Corinthians 12

Paul keeps boasting, and he gets to the area where the super-apostles probably bragged the most: visions and revelations. Paul could top them. But watch how he does it.

He talks about "a man in Christ" who, fourteen years earlier, was caught up to the third heaven, into paradise, and heard things too amazing to put into words. He doesn't know whether it happened in his body or outside it. Only God knows.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **The Third Heaven**
>
> Jewish writers sometimes described the sky, outer space, and the dwelling place of God as layers of heaven. The third heaven meant the very presence of God. Paradise, a Persian word for a beautiful walled garden, was also used for God's presence. Paul is describing an experience of being brought right into the place where God lives.

Who was the man? Almost everyone agrees it was Paul himself. But he talks about it in the third person, as if it happened to someone else. Why? Because he refuses to make himself the hero. The experience was real, but he won't use it to build himself up. He'll boast about that man, but about himself, he'll only boast about his weaknesses.

Then Paul tells us something very personal. To keep him from becoming proud because of these amazing revelations, he was given a thorn in his flesh, which he calls a messenger of Satan, to torment him.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **The Thorn in the Flesh**
>
> No one knows what Paul's thorn was. People have guessed for two thousand years: an eye problem (Galatians 4 hints that Paul had trouble with his eyes), chronic pain, malaria, epilepsy, a speech problem, constant persecution, or a particular enemy. Maybe it's good that we don't know. Whatever your thorn is, a disability, an illness, anxiety, a family situation, or a struggle that won't go away, Paul's story can be your story.

Three times Paul begged the Lord to take it away. And the Lord said no. Not because He didn't love Paul, but because He had something better in mind. Here's what Jesus told him:

"My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."

That's not the answer Paul wanted. But it changed everything. Instead of complaining, Paul says he'll boast all the more gladly about his weaknesses, so that Christ's power can rest on him. He even delights in weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and difficulties, for Christ's sake. "For when I am weak, then I am strong."

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **When God Says No**
>
> Sometimes Christians are told that if you have enough faith, God will always heal you or take away your problem. Paul had more faith than almost anyone, and God said no. Sometimes God removes the thorn. Sometimes He gives grace to carry it. Both are His love. A no from God is never an absence of God.

Then Paul steps back. He's made a fool of himself, he says, but they drove him to it. They should have been defending him. He showed them the marks of a true apostle, including signs, wonders, and miracles. The only way he treated them worse than other churches was that he never took their money. Then, with a bit of sarcasm, he asks them to forgive him that wrong.

He's coming for a third visit, and he still won't be a burden. He doesn't want their stuff; he wants them. Parents save up for their children, not the other way around. He'll gladly spend everything for them. "If I love you more, will you love me less?"

The chapter ends with Paul's fear. He's afraid that when he arrives, he'll find quarreling, jealousy, outbursts of anger, selfish ambition, slander, gossip, arrogance, and disorder. And he's afraid he'll find people who never repented of sexual sin. He doesn't want to come and grieve over them.

KEY VERSE

But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."

2 Corinthians 12:9 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Why do you think Paul talked about his amazing experience as if it happened to someone else?
2. Do you have a thorn, something you've asked God to take away that hasn't gone away? What would it look like to hear Jesus say, My grace is sufficient for you?
3. What's the difference between being weak and being useless? How does God use weak people?

TRY THIS *Write down one weakness you've been hiding or ashamed of. Then write 2 Corinthians 12:9 underneath it, and pray about it every day this week.*

CHAPTER 13

Examine Yourselves

2 Corinthians 13

This is Paul's last chapter, and he's about to visit for the third time. He quotes the law of Moses, which said that every charge must be confirmed by two or three witnesses. He's warned them twice already. When he comes, he won't spare those who keep on sinning.

Some of them were demanding proof that Christ was really speaking through Paul. Paul's answer goes back to the cross. Jesus was crucified in weakness, but He lives by God's power. In the same way, Paul is weak in Him, but by God's power he'll live with Him, and deal with them.

Then Paul turns the tables. You want to test me? "Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves." They had spent so much time evaluating Paul that they'd forgotten to evaluate themselves.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Testing Yourself**

Paul's challenge isn't meant to make sincere believers anxious. It's meant to wake up people who are coasting. Here are some honest questions to ask yourself: Do I trust Jesus, or just know about Him? Do I want to obey Him, even when I fail? Is the Spirit producing change in me, even slowly? Do I love other believers? If the answer is yes, even weakly, take heart. If you're not sure, that's a great conversation to have with God and with someone you trust.

Paul says he hopes they'll discover that he hasn't failed the test. But that isn't really his concern. His prayer is that they'll do what's right, even if he ends up looking like a failure. He doesn't care about his reputation. He cares about them.

He says he's glad to be weak if they're strong. And his prayer is that they'll be fully restored. That's why he's writing these hard words now, while he's away, so that when he comes, he won't have to be harsh. The authority God gave him is for building up, not for tearing down.

Then Paul closes with five quick commands. Rejoice. Aim for full restoration. Encourage one another. Be of one mind. Live in peace. And he gives a promise: the God of love and peace will be with them.

After the warnings, the boasting, the sarcasm, and the hurt, the letter ends where Paul's heart always was: with love, peace, and family. Greet each other warmly. All God's people send greetings.

And then the final blessing, one of the most beloved in the whole Bible, still spoken at the end of church services around the world.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Father, Son, and Spirit**
>
> Paul's closing blessing mentions the Lord Jesus Christ, God the Father, and the Holy Spirit together, side by side. The word Trinity doesn't appear in the Bible. But verses like this one, written within about twenty-five years of Jesus' resurrection, show that the earliest Christians already worshiped one God who is Father, Son, and Spirit. The grace of Jesus, the love of the Father, and the fellowship of the Spirit: everything Paul has written in this letter comes down to that.

Grace from Jesus, who became poor so we could become rich. Love from the Father, who reconciled us to Himself. Fellowship from the

Spirit, who lives in us like a down payment on everything to come. That's what holds a messy, hurting, weak church together. It's what can hold you together too.

KEY VERSE

May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.

2 Corinthians 13:14 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. The Corinthians were busy testing Paul and forgot to test themselves. Why is it easier to judge others than ourselves?
2. Paul cared more about them doing right than about his own reputation. What would it look like to care about people that way?
3. Which of Paul's five final commands (rejoice, aim for restoration, encourage one another, be of one mind, live in peace) do you need most right now?

THE END (AND THE BEGINNING)

Now What? The Bottom Line

You've just walked through Paul's second letter to the Corinthians. Underneath all the hurt, the travel plans, and the arguments with rival teachers, there's one message Paul keeps coming back to. He calls it the message of reconciliation: God is making enemies into friends through Jesus.

Here's what the Bible says, as plainly as I can put it.

1 God made you, and He wants you back.

Paul says God is reconciling the world to Himself. That means there's a broken relationship He wants to fix. You weren't an accident. You were made to know Him.

2 We've all turned away.

Not just the obvious rebels. The proud, the impressive, the religious too. The Bible calls it sin, and it separates us from God.

> *for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,* **Romans 3:23 (NIV)**

3 Sin has a real cost.

God is good, so He doesn't shrug off evil. The Bible says the result of sin is death, separation from God forever.

> *For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.* **Romans 6:23 (NIV)**

4 Jesus traded places with you.

This is the great exchange at the center of 2 Corinthians. Jesus, who never sinned, took our sin on Himself on the cross. In return, everyone who trusts Him receives His righteousness. And then God raised Him from the dead.

> *God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.* **2 Corinthians 5:21 (NIV)**

5 You can't earn it. You receive it.

The super-apostles in Corinth loved to boast about their credentials. Paul said the only thing worth boasting about is the Lord. Salvation isn't a résumé you build. It's a gift you receive by trusting Jesus.

> *For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.* **Ephesians 2:8–9 (NIV)**

6 Turn and trust.

Paul begged the Corinthians, on Christ's behalf, to be reconciled to God. That invitation is for you too. Turn from running your own life, and trust Jesus as your Savior and King. It doesn't mean you'll never fail again. It means you belong to Him, and you're a new creation.

> *If you declare with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.* **Romans 10:9 (NIV)**

So what do you do with that? You don't need perfect words. You can talk to God honestly, right now, wherever you are. If it helps, you could pray something like this:

God, I've been running my own life, and I've sinned against You. I can't fix that myself. I believe Jesus, who never sinned, took my sin on Himself, and that You raised Him from the dead. I want to be reconciled to You. Forgive me. I trust Jesus as my Savior, and I want to follow Him as my King. Make me new. When I feel weak, help me trust that Your grace is enough. In Jesus' name, amen.

If You Just Said Yes

Tell someone. A parent, a youth leader, a pastor, or a Christian friend. Paul says God has given His people the message of reconciliation. Start by sharing it with one person.

Read the real thing. Read 2 Corinthians straight through in a Bible, a chapter a day. Then read Philippians, a short, joyful letter Paul wrote from prison.

Find your people. Get connected to a church where the Bible is taught and Jesus is honored. Look for leaders who are humble and faithful, not just impressive. Ask about being baptized.

Talk to God every day. Be honest about your weaknesses. Paul was. He can handle it.

Not Sure Yet?

Not ready? That's honest, and honesty is a good place to start. Paul told the Corinthians to examine themselves and see whether they were really in the faith. Keep asking. Keep reading. Talk to someone you trust. Just don't settle for "I already know all that."

Because if Paul is right, the things that make you feel weak and ordinary are exactly where God's power wants to show up. That's worth finding out for yourself.

For when I am weak, then I am strong.

2 Corinthians 12:10 (NIV)