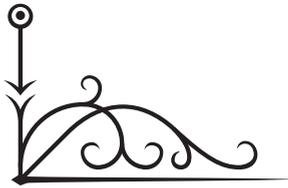




God's Power
IN OUR WEAKNESS

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a study of the Second Epistle to the Corinthians



God's Power in Our Weakness...*a study of the Second Epistle to the Corinthians*
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ABOUT THE COVER:

The cover of this study is a creative response to the prayerful reading, meditation, and discussion of the Second Epistle to the Corinthians. Our prayer is that throughout this study, as you read and meditate on Scripture, the Spirit will stir you to find creative space in which you can enjoy the presence of your Creator. To God be the glory forever!

"The first response any work of art makes upon us is surrender.
Look. Listen. Receive. Get yourself out of the way." – C.S. Lewis

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All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the Holy Bible, *English Standard Version* (ESV)

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Introduction

Of the thirteen letters in the New Testament attributed to the apostle Paul, 2 Corinthians is his most personal. In this remarkable letter, Paul gives the most insight into the ways he suffered for his preaching of the gospel. Paul does more than list the physical persecutions he experienced, he also shares his inward struggles and anxieties for the Corinthian church. Dr. Sam Storms writes, “But nowhere does Paul pull back the curtain on his life and expose his inner self to such a degree and with such brutal honesty as he does in 2 Corinthians.”¹

Paul’s concern for the Corinthian church is amplified because of people who were seeking to discredit him. At several points in 2 Corinthians, Paul defends his ministry against these “super-apostles” (2 Cor. 11:5). His defense of himself points not to his own strength of leadership, but to God’s sufficiency in his weakness (2 Cor. 3:5).

Biblical commentators believe that Paul wrote two or three other letters to the Corinthians that are not included in the New Testament. (See, for example, 1 Cor. 5:9-11, where Paul refers to a letter sent before 1 Corinthians.) Knowing that other letters were written helps us better understand passages like 2 Corinthians 2:1-9, where Paul refers to a previous letter whose content is not included in 1 Corinthians.

¹Sam Storms, *A Sincere and Pure Devotion to Christ*, vol. 1 (Wheaton, Crossway, 2010), 12. I recommend this two-volume set by Dr. Storms as the most helpful resource. It contains 100 short stories covering 2 Corinthians.

God has chosen to give us His inspired Word in 2 Corinthians to bring us instruction and encouragement when facing hardships for His sake. He has given us personal glimpses into Paul's life so we can learn how to rely on God's power rather than our own strength. God's power in our weakness is a foundational truth throughout 2 Corinthians.

Within the nine units of this study, it is suggested that you familiarize yourself with the weekly Scripture reading and sermon teaching prior to your group meeting.² Spend time considering the questions related to the text and make a note of any thoughts or discussion points that come to mind. You will also have a few REFLECTION statements in each unit. These sections should encourage and challenge each of us in the application of 2 Corinthians. Daily consider your response to these reflection points and feel free to share with others as you feel led.

As you study this remarkable letter, may you learn to draw strength from God's Spirit in your times of weakness. And may you grow in what Paul sought for the Corinthian Christians: "a sincere and pure devotion to Christ" (11:3).

In Christ,



David Beaty

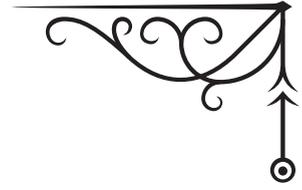
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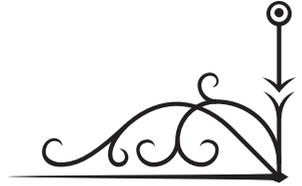
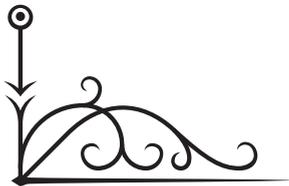
David Holcomb

Minister of Discipleship

² riveroakchurch.org/resources



UNIT 1



2 Corinthians Chapter 1

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, To the church of God that is at Corinth, with all the saints who are in the whole of Achaia: ²Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. ³Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, ⁴who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. ⁵For as we share abundantly in Christ's sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too. ⁶If we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation; and if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which you experience when you patiently endure the same sufferings that we suffer. ⁷Our hope for you is unshaken, for we know that as you share in our sufferings, you will also share in our comfort. ⁸For we do not want you to be unaware, brothers, of the affliction we experienced in Asia. For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself. ⁹Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death. But that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead. ¹⁰He delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us. On him we have set our hope that he will deliver us again. ¹¹You also must help us by prayer, so that many will give thanks on our behalf for the blessing granted us through the prayers of many. ¹²For our boast is this, the testimony of our conscience,

that we behaved in the world with simplicity and godly sincerity, not by earthly wisdom but by the grace of God, and supremely so toward you. ¹³For we are not writing to you anything other than what you read and understand and I hope you will fully understand— ¹⁴just as you did partially understand us—that on the day of our Lord Jesus you will boast of us as we will boast of you. ¹⁵Because I was sure of this, I wanted to come to you first, so that you might have a second experience of grace. ¹⁶I wanted to visit you on my way to Macedonia, and to come back to you from Macedonia and have you send me on my way to Judea. ¹⁷Was I vacillating when I wanted to do this? Do I make my plans according to the flesh, ready to say "Yes, yes" and "No, no" at the same time? ¹⁸As surely as God is faithful, our word to you has not been Yes and No. ¹⁹For the Son of God, Jesus Christ, whom we proclaimed among you, Silvanus and Timothy and I, was not Yes and No, but in him it is always Yes. ²⁰For all the promises of God find their Yes in him. That is why it is through him that we utter our Amen to God for his glory. ²¹And it is God who establishes us with you in Christ, and has anointed us, ²²and who has also put his seal on us and given us his Spirit in our hearts as a guarantee. ²³But I call God to witness against me—it was to spare you that I refrained from coming again to Corinth. ²⁴Not that we lord it over your faith, but we work with you for your joy, for you stand firm in your faith.

IN CONTEXT

The apostle Paul begins this letter to the church at Corinth by praising God for the comfort he has received from the Lord during his sufferings. In fact, Paul writes of suffering and comfort more than any other writer in the Bible, and it is here that he mentions it most often—no less than ten times in 2 Corinthians. To get an idea of why comfort was so critical and how Paul suffered for preaching the gospel, read 2 Cor. 4:8-11 and 2 Cor. 11:23-29.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Read 1:3-7. What benefits does Paul see in his sufferings?
2. How do you think God comforted Paul in his afflictions?
3. Read 1:8-11. What benefit came from Paul's hardships in Asia?

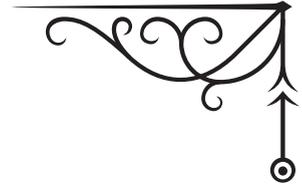
4. What role does Paul see prayer playing in his escape from future deadly perils?

5. Read 1:12-24. Paul is defending himself in light of a change in his plans to visit the Corinthian church. Apparently, some in the church then challenged his integrity for failing to visit when he had indicated he might come. Paul points them beyond himself to the Lord, who never wavers, and whose promises never fail.

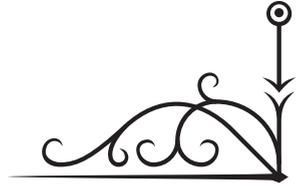
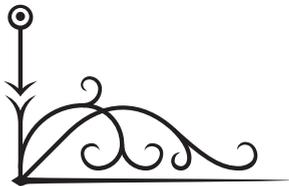
Why does Paul say that all of God's promises find their "yes" in Jesus Christ?

REFLECTION

- As you think about the teaching of 2 Corinthians chapter 1, can you recall a time of hardship or suffering in your life when you grew closer to the Lord?
- Why is it that significant spiritual growth can come out of times of suffering?
- How can we be more purposeful about seeking to grow through trials and hardships?



UNIT 2



2 Corinthians Chapter 2

For I made up my mind not to make another painful visit to you. ²For if I cause you pain, who is there to make me glad but the one whom I have pained? ³And I wrote as I did, so that when I came I might not suffer pain from those who should have made me rejoice, for I felt sure of all of you, that my joy would be the joy of you all. ⁴For I wrote to you out of much affliction and anguish of heart and with many tears, not to cause you pain but to let you know the abundant love that I have for you. ⁵Now if anyone has caused pain, he has caused it not to me, but in some measure—not to put it too severely—to all of you. ⁶For such a one, this punishment by the majority is enough, ⁷so you should rather turn to forgive and comfort him, or he may be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. ⁸So I beg you to reaffirm your love for him. ⁹For this is why I wrote, that I might test you and know whether you are obedient in everything. ¹⁰Anyone whom you forgive, I also forgive. Indeed, what I

have forgiven, if I have forgiven anything, has been for your sake in the presence of Christ, ¹¹so that we would not be outwitted by Satan; for we are not ignorant of his designs. ¹²When I came to Troas to preach the gospel of Christ, even though a door was opened for me in the Lord, ¹³my spirit was not at rest because I did not find my brother Titus there. So I took leave of them and went on to Macedonia. ¹⁴But thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession, and through us spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of him everywhere. ¹⁵For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing, ¹⁶to one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life. Who is sufficient for these things? ¹⁷For we are not, like so many, peddlers of God's word, but as men of sincerity, as commissioned by God, in the sight of God we speak in Christ.

IN CONTEXT

Paul notes that his change in travel plans was due, in part, to his reluctance to make another “painful visit” to the Corinthians. While we do not know the specific issue that caused such pain to Paul and the Corinthian church, we do know that it presented an opportunity for Paul to teach the church the importance of forgiving those who hurt us.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Read 2:1-11. Why did Paul write the Corinthians in advance of his visit?
(vv.1-4)

2. Verses 5-8 indicate that the church had been called to apply some form of punishment to a person who had caused a significant problem to Paul and to the church. This punishment was likely a removal of the offender from the fellowship of the church, in hope that this action would bring him to repentance and reconciliation.

Why does Paul now tell the church it is important to forgive the offender?

3. What dangers might there be if they do not forgive him?

4. Why does Paul give a warning in verse 11 about Satan's "designs"?

5. Words like "punishment" and "discipline" may seem out of place in a discussion about how a church treats its members. We recognize that it is only by God's grace and mercy shown to us that we are part of Christ's body. And we know that Jesus taught us to love even those who are our enemies (Matthew 5:44).

As you prepare for your small group discussion, read the following passages:

- Matthew 18:15-20

- 2 Corinthians 5:1-13

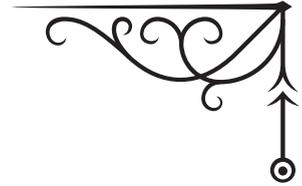
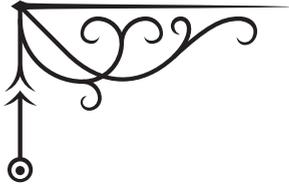
- Revelation 2:12-25

REFLECTION

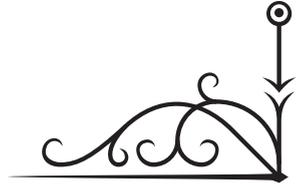
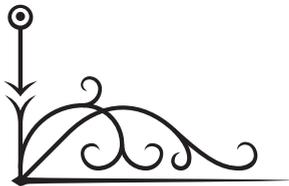
- When, if ever, is it right to judge someone in the church?

- What is the purpose of judging someone's behavior or doctrine (teaching) in the church?

- What are the consequences of not judging wrong behavior and doctrine in the church?



UNIT 3

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2 Corinthians Chapter 3

Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Or do we need, as some do, letters of recommendation to you, or from you? ²You yourselves are our letter of recommendation, written on our hearts, to be known and read by all. ³And you show that you are a letter from Christ delivered by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts. ⁴Such is the confidence that we have through Christ toward God. ⁵Not that we are sufficient in ourselves to claim anything as coming from us, but our sufficiency is from God, ⁶who has made us sufficient to be ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit. For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life. ⁷Now if the ministry of death, carved in letters on stone, came with such glory that the Israelites could not gaze at Moses' face because of its glory, which was being brought to an end, ⁸will not the ministry of the Spirit have even more glory? ⁹For if there was glory in the ministry of condemnation, the ministry of

righteousness must far exceed it in glory. ¹⁰Indeed, in this case, what once had glory has come to have no glory at all, because of the glory that surpasses it. ¹¹For if what was being brought to an end came with glory, much more will what is permanent have glory. ¹²Since we have such a hope, we are very bold, ¹³not like Moses, who would put a veil over his face so that the Israelites might not gaze at the outcome of what was being brought to an end. ¹⁴But their minds were hardened. For to this day, when they read the old covenant, that same veil remains unlifted, because only through Christ is it taken away. ¹⁵Yes, to this day whenever Moses is read a veil lies over their hearts. ¹⁶But when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed. ¹⁷Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. ¹⁸And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.

IN CONTEXT

The apostle Paul continues to defend himself in light of accusations brought by false teachers in the Corinthian church. He refers to these false teachers as “peddlers of God’s word” (2:17), and makes clear that his credentials are of the heart, authored by Christ, not those drafted by men as commendations.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Read 3:1-6. Why does Paul say the Corinthians were his “letter of recommendation”?
2. How does he balance his confidence in the fruitfulness of his ministry with humility?
3. Read 3:7-18. Why does Paul refer to the commandments given by God to Moses as “the ministry of death”?

4. What do you think Paul means by the “veil” he references in verses 13-16?
(See Exodus 34:29-35.)

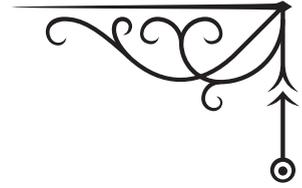
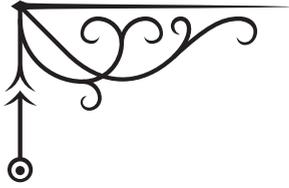
5. How does the Lord remove the veil from a person’s heart?

6. How does God transform our lives, and what part do we play?

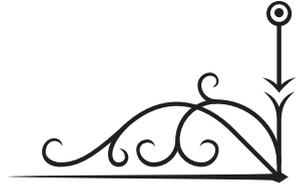
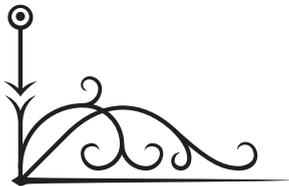
7. Why is this life transformation a process that occurs over time? (v. 18)

REFLECTION

- To what degree do you see God's transforming work occurring in your life?



UNIT 4

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2 Corinthians Chapter 4

Therefore, having this ministry by the mercy of God, we do not lose heart. ²But we have renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways. We refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God's word, but by the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God. ³And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. ⁴In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. ⁵For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. ⁶For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. ⁷But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us. ⁸We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; ⁹persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed;

¹⁰always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. ¹¹For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. ¹²So death is at work in us, but life in you. ¹³Since we have the same spirit of faith according to what has been written, "I believed, and so I spoke," we also believe, and so we also speak, ¹⁴knowing that he who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus and bring us with you into his presence. ¹⁵For it is all for your sake, so that as grace extends to more and more people it may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God. ¹⁶So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. ¹⁷For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, ¹⁸as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.

IN CONTEXT

In chapter four, the apostle Paul continues to provide teaching from his own experiences in ministry. None of his experiences of suffering—even his rejection by some in the church—have been wasted, as God uses them to teach us.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Read 4:1-6. In chapter three, Paul talked about the “veil” that lies over the hearts of some people. Now he mentions people to whom the gospel is “veiled.” Why are the hearts of some people blinded?
2. How can spiritual sight come to these people?
3. Read 4:7-16. What does Paul mean by “treasures in jars of clay”?

4. Why does he use this imagery?

5. What do you think Paul means in v. 12 when he writes, “So death is at work in us, but life in you”?

6. How does Paul keep from becoming discouraged by his ongoing suffering for preaching the gospel?

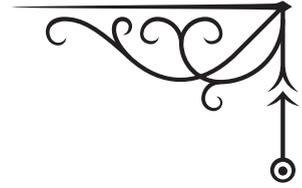
7. What does Paul mean when he writes of his “inner self” being renewed day by day”? (v. 16)

8. What guides Paul's perspective on life?

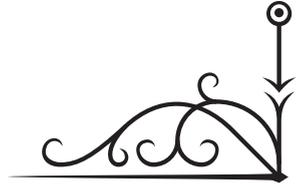
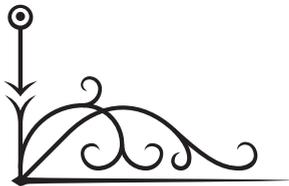
REFLECTION

- How often do you think about eternity?

- What things in your life might you see differently if you saw them in light of eternity?



UNIT 5



2 Corinthians Chapter 5

For we know that if the tent that is our earthly home is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. ²For in this tent we groan, longing to put on our heavenly dwelling, ³if indeed by putting it on we may not be found naked. ⁴For while we are still in this tent, we groan, being burdened—not that we would be unclothed, but that we would be further clothed, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life. ⁵He who has prepared us for this very thing is God, who has given us the Spirit as a guarantee. ⁶So we are always of good courage. We know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord, ⁷for we walk by faith, not by sight. ⁸Yes, we are of good courage, and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord. ⁹So whether we are at home or away, we make it our aim to please him. ¹⁰For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil. ¹¹Therefore, knowing the fear of the Lord, we persuade others. But what we are is known to God, and I hope it is known also to your conscience. ¹²We are not commending ourselves to you again but giving you cause to boast about us, so that you may be able to

answer those who boast about outward appearance and not about what is in the heart. ¹³For if we are beside ourselves, it is for God; if we are in our right mind, it is for you. ¹⁴For the love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died; ¹⁵and he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised. ¹⁶From now on, therefore, we regard no one according to the flesh. Even though we once regarded Christ according to the flesh, we regard him thus no longer. ¹⁷Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. ¹⁸All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; ¹⁹that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. ²⁰Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. ²¹For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

IN CONTEXT

Paul continues to use lessons from his own life to teach the church. In chapter 5, he provides more insight into the value of living with an eternal perspective. He was confident that the afflictions, or suffering, were only temporary, and that shortly we would be transformed for all eternity.

(See also Paul's writing in Philippians 3:20-21 and 1 Corinthians 15:51-53.)

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Read 5:1-10. Why does Paul refer to our human body as a “tent”?
2. In what way is the Holy Spirit a guarantee of what we will experience in eternity?
3. Based on verses 6 and 7, what does it mean to walk by faith?

4. What happens to our souls when we die?

5. Read 5:11-21. What motivates the apostle Paul in his ministry?

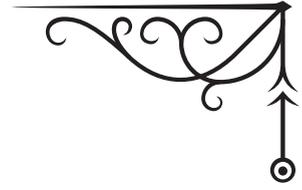
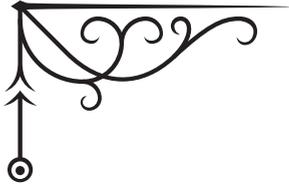
6. What does it mean to be “a new creation”?

7. What is the ministry of reconciliation?

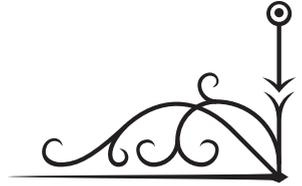
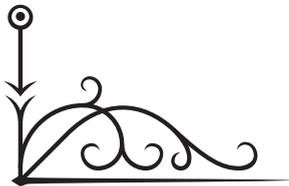
REFLECTION

- Do you consider yourself an “ambassador for Christ”?

- What steps could you take to be more effective at helping others become “reconciled to God”?



UNIT 6

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2 Corinthians Chapter 6

Working together with him, then, we appeal to you not to receive the grace of God in vain. ²For he says, "In a favorable time I listened to you, and in a day of salvation I have helped you." Behold, now is the favorable time; behold, now is the day of salvation. ³We put no obstacle in anyone's way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry, ⁴but as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way: by great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, ⁵beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger; ⁶by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, the Holy Spirit, genuine love; ⁷by truthful speech, and the power of God; with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left; ⁸through honor and dishonor, through slander and praise. We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; ⁹as unknown, and yet well known; as dying, and behold, we live; as punished, and yet not killed; ¹⁰as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich;

as having nothing, yet possessing everything. ¹¹We have spoken freely to you, Corinthians; our heart is wide open. ¹²You are not restricted by us, but you are restricted in your own affections. ¹³In return (I speak as to children) widen your hearts also. ¹⁴Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers. For what partnership has righteousness with lawlessness? Or what fellowship has light with darkness? ¹⁵What accord has Christ with Belial? Or what portion does a believer share with an unbeliever? ¹⁶What agreement has the temple of God with idols? For we are the temple of the living God; as God said, "I will make my dwelling among them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. ¹⁷Therefore go out from their midst, and be separate from them, says the Lord, and touch no unclean thing; then I will welcome you, ¹⁸and I will be a father to you, and you shall be sons and daughters to me, says the Lord Almighty."

2 Corinthians Chapter 7

Since we have these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and spirit, bringing holiness to completion in the fear of God. ²Make room in your hearts for us. We have wronged no one, we have corrupted no one, we have taken advantage of no one. ³I do not say this to condemn you, for I said before that you are in our hearts, to die together and to live together. ⁴I am acting with great boldness toward you; I have great pride in you; I am filled with comfort. In all our affliction, I am overflowing with joy. ⁵For even when we came into Macedonia, our bodies had no rest, but we were afflicted at every turn—fighting without and fear within. ⁶But God, who comforts the downcast, comforted us by the coming of Titus, ⁷and not only by his coming but also by the comfort with which he was comforted by you, as he told us of your longing, your mourning, your zeal for me, so that I rejoiced still more. ⁸For even if I made you grieve with my letter, I do not regret it—though I did regret it, for I see that that letter grieved you, though only for a while. ⁹As it is, I rejoice, not because you were grieved, but because you were grieved into repenting. For you felt a godly grief, so that you suffered no loss through us. ¹⁰For godly

grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret, whereas worldly grief produces death. ¹¹For see what earnestness this godly grief has produced in you, but also what eagerness to clear yourselves, what indignation, what fear, what longing, what zeal, what punishment! At every point you have proved yourselves innocent in the matter. ¹²So although I wrote to you, it was not for the sake of the one who did the wrong, nor for the sake of the one who suffered the wrong, but in order that your earnestness for us might be revealed to you in the sight of God. ¹³Therefore we are comforted. And besides our own comfort, we rejoiced still more at the joy of Titus, because his spirit has been refreshed by you all. ¹⁴For whatever boasts I made to him about you, I was not put to shame. But just as everything we said to you was true, so also our boasting before Titus has proved true. ¹⁵And his affection for you is even greater, as he remembers the obedience of you all, how you received him with fear and trembling. ¹⁶I rejoice, because I have complete confidence in you.

IN CONTEXT

In chapters 6 and 7, Paul continues to teach the church from his own experiences of hardship. He defends himself and his ministry as he pleads with the Corinthians to “make room in your hearts for us.” (7.2).

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Read 6:1-11. Notice how Paul commends himself (v. 4) to the Corinthians in this passage. Why does he point to things like purity, patience, and love—along with his many sufferings—as marks of the genuineness of his ministry?
2. Read 6:14-7:1. What does it mean to be “unequally yoked” with unbelievers?
3. How do we determine whether a relationship (marriage, business partnership, friendship) constitutes being “unequally yoked” with an unbeliever?

4. How can we avoid being influenced toward sin while still reaching people who need to know Jesus?

5. Read 7:2-16. Paul refers to a letter he had written that led to both grief and repentance on the part of the Corinthians. What does he mean by “godly grief”? (v. 10)

REFLECTION

In his devotional commentary on 2 Corinthians, Dr. Sam Storms comments on Paul’s “tough love” in his correspondence with the Corinthians. Storms writes:

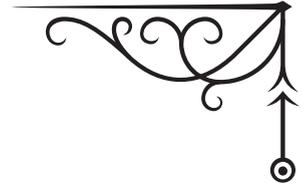
Often we excuse our failure to speak truth into people’s lives because of the pain and emotional discomfort it may cause them.... To ignore sin in the name of love is not only unbiblical, it also betrays the very nature of love itself, which by definition always seeks the ultimate spiritual welfare of its object, even at the expense of immediate personal peace.³

³ Storms, *A Sincere and Pure Devotion to Christ*, vol. 2, 25.

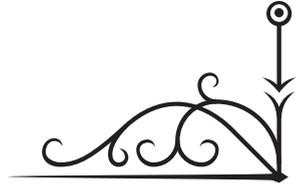
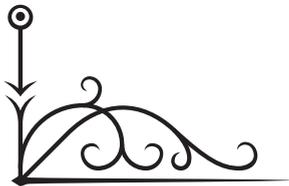
- Do you agree with Dr. Storms?

Why or why not?

- What factors should guide you in a decision about whether to confront someone about a sin?



UNIT 7

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2 Corinthians Chapter 8

We want you to know, brothers, about the grace of God that has been given among the churches of Macedonia, ²for in a severe test of affliction, their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. ³For they gave according to their means, as I can testify, and beyond their means, of their own accord, ⁴begging us earnestly for the favor of taking part in the relief of the saints—⁵and this, not as we expected, but they gave themselves first to the Lord and then by the will of God to us. ⁶Accordingly, we urged Titus that as he had started, so he should complete among you this act of grace. ⁷But as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in all earnestness, and in our love for you—see that you excel in this act of grace also. ⁸I say this not as a command, but to prove by the earnestness of others that your love also is genuine. ⁹For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich. ¹⁰And in this matter I give my judgment: this benefits you, who a year ago started not only to do this work but also to desire to do it. ¹¹So now finish doing it as well, so that your readiness in desiring it may be matched by your completing it out of what you have. ¹²For if the readiness is there, it is acceptable according to what a person has, not according to what he does not have. ¹³For I do not mean that others should

be eased and you burdened, but that as a matter of fairness ¹⁴your abundance at the present time should supply their need, so that their abundance may supply your need, that there may be fairness. ¹⁵As it is written, “Whoever gathered much had nothing left over, and whoever gathered little had no lack.” ¹⁶But thanks be to God, who put into the heart of Titus the same earnest care I have for you. ¹⁷For he not only accepted our appeal, but being himself very earnest he is going to you of his own accord. ¹⁸With him we are sending the brother who is famous among all the churches for his preaching of the gospel. ¹⁹And not only that, but he has been appointed by the churches to travel with us as we carry out this act of grace that is being ministered by us, for the glory of the Lord himself and to show our good will. ²⁰We take this course so that no one should blame us about this generous gift that is being administered by us, ²¹for we aim at what is honorable not only in the Lord’s sight but also in the sight of man. ²²And with them we are sending our brother whom we have often tested and found earnest in many matters, but who is now more earnest than ever because of his great confidence in you. ²³As for Titus, he is my partner and fellow worker for your benefit. And as for our brothers, they are messengers of the churches, the glory of Christ. ²⁴So give proof before the churches of your love and of our boasting about you to these men.

2 Corinthians Chapter 9

Now it is superfluous for me to write to you about the ministry for the saints, ² for I know your readiness, of which I boast about you to the people of Macedonia, saying that Achaia has been ready since last year. And your zeal has stirred up most of them. ³ But I am sending the brothers so that our boasting about you may not prove empty in this matter, so that you may be ready, as I said you would be. ⁴ Otherwise, if some Macedonians come with me and find that you are not ready, we would be humiliated—to say nothing of you—for being so confident. ⁵ So I thought it necessary to urge the brothers to go on ahead to you and arrange in advance for the gift you have promised, so that it may be ready as a willing gift, not as an exaction. ⁶ The point is this: whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. ⁷ Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. ⁸ And

God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that having all sufficiency in all things at all times, you may abound in every good work. ⁹ As it is written, “He has distributed freely, he has given to the poor; his righteousness endures forever.” ¹⁰ He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness. ¹¹ You will be enriched in every way to be generous in every way, which through us will produce thanksgiving to God. ¹² For the ministry of this service is not only supplying the needs of the saints but is also overflowing in many thanksgivings to God. ¹³ By their approval of this service, they will glorify God because of your submission that comes from your confession of the gospel of Christ, and the generosity of your contribution for them and for all others, ¹⁴ while they long for you and pray for you, because of the surpassing grace of God upon you. ¹⁵ Thanks be to God for his inexpressible gift!

IN CONTEXT

In chapters 8 and 9, the apostle Paul moves from issues related to his own challenges to the topic of generous giving. These two chapters provide the most extensive teaching on the subject of giving in the New Testament.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Read chapter 8. Paul first notes the generosity of the Macedonian churches, who gave out of their “extreme poverty” to meet the needs of Christians elsewhere. Note his use of the word “grace” in verses 1, 6, and 7. Why is giving an “act of grace”?
2. Notice also Paul’s references to the words “prove” or “proof” (v. 8, v. 24). Why is generous giving proof of our love?

3. Based on verses 12-15, should our giving be in proportion to our wealth?

Why or why not?

4. Read chapter 9. Why do you think Paul uses the agricultural imagery of sowing and reaping to teach about material giving?

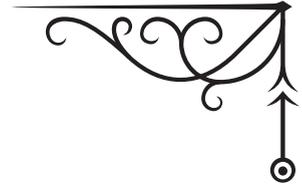
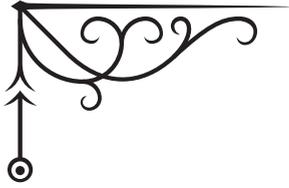
5. Is he trying to teach us that we give in order to get from God?

If not, how would you explain verses 6-9?

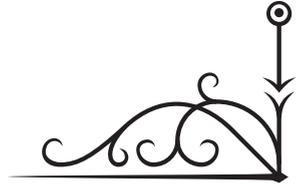
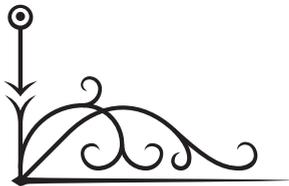
6. In addition to meeting the needs of God's people (v. 12), what else results from our generous giving?

REFLECTION

- How should the grace of God, demonstrated in sending His own Son for our salvation, guide our own thinking about giving?
- Do you find it difficult or easy to give with a generous heart?
- Do you find it true that where our treasures are, there also is our heart?



UNIT 8

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2 Corinthians Chapter 10

I, Paul, myself entreat you, by the meekness and gentleness of Christ—I who am humble when face to face with you, but bold toward you when I am away!—²I beg of you that when I am present I may not have to show boldness with such confidence as I count on showing against some who suspect us of walking according to the flesh. ³For though we walk in the flesh, we are not waging war according to the flesh. ⁴For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds. ⁵We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ, ⁶being ready to punish every disobedience, when your obedience is complete. ⁷Look at what is before your eyes. If anyone is confident that he is Christ's, let him remind himself that just as he is Christ's, so also are we. ⁸For even if I boast a little too much of our authority, which the Lord gave for building you up and not for destroying you, I will not be ashamed. ⁹I do not want to appear to be frightening you with my letters. ¹⁰For they say, "His letters are weighty and strong, but his bodily

presence is weak, and his speech of no account."¹¹Let such a person understand that what we say by letter when absent, we do when present. ¹²Not that we dare to classify or compare ourselves with some of those who are commending themselves. But when they measure themselves by one another and compare themselves with one another, they are without understanding. ¹³But we will not boast beyond limits, but will boast only with regard to the area of influence God assigned to us, to reach even to you. ¹⁴For we are not overextending ourselves, as though we did not reach you. For we were the first to come all the way to you with the gospel of Christ. ¹⁵We do not boast beyond limit in the labors of others. But our hope is that as your faith increases, our area of influence among you may be greatly enlarged, ¹⁶so that we may preach the gospel in lands beyond you, without boasting of work already done in another's area of influence. ¹⁷"Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord."¹⁸For it is not the one who commends himself who is approved, but the one whom the Lord commends.

2 Corinthians Chapter 11:1-15

I wish you would bear with me in a little foolishness. Do bear with me! ²For I feel a divine jealousy for you, since I betrothed you to one husband, to present you as a pure virgin to Christ. ³But I am afraid that as the serpent deceived Eve by his cunning, your thoughts will be led astray from a sincere and pure devotion to Christ. ⁴For if someone comes and proclaims another Jesus than the one we proclaimed, or if you receive a different spirit from the one you received, or if you accept a different gospel from the one you accepted, you put up with it readily enough. ⁵Indeed, I consider that I am not in the least inferior to these super-apostles. ⁶Even if I am unskilled in speaking, I am not so in knowledge; indeed, in every way we have made this plain to you in all things. ⁷Or did I commit a sin in humbling myself so that you might be exalted, because I preached God's gospel to you free of charge? ⁸I robbed other churches by

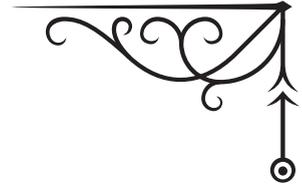
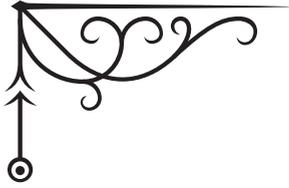
accepting support from them in order to serve you. ⁹And when I was with you and was in need, I did not burden anyone, for the brothers who came from Macedonia supplied my need. So I refrained and will refrain from burdening you in any way. ¹⁰As the truth of Christ is in me, this boasting of mine will not be silenced in the regions of Achaia. ¹¹And why? Because I do not love you? God knows I do! ¹²And what I am doing I will continue to do, in order to undermine the claim of those who would like to claim that in their boasted mission they work on the same terms as we do. ¹³For such men are false apostles, deceitful workmen, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ. ¹⁴And no wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. ¹⁵So it is no surprise if his servants, also, disguise themselves as servants of righteousness. Their end will correspond to their deeds.

IN CONTEXT

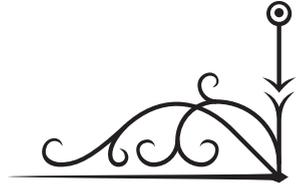
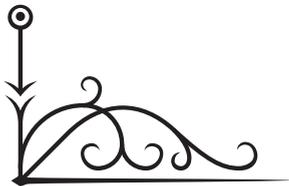
In chapter 10, Paul returns to a defense of himself and his ministry among the Corinthians. His accusers said of Paul: “His letters are weighty and strong, but his bodily presence is weak and his speech is of no account” (v. 10). As difficult as it must have been for Paul to feel rejected by a church he loved, God used his response to teach us His truth.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. In bringing correction to the church, Paul refers to the “weapons of our warfare” (v. 3). What are these “weapons”?
2. As Paul’s accusers were maligning him, they were also “commending themselves” (v. 12). What does Paul teach us about this practice of comparing ourselves with others?
3. Read 11:1-15. What is Paul’s greatest desire for the Corinthians?



UNIT 9

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2 Corinthians Chapter 11:16–33

¹⁶I repeat, let no one think me foolish. But even if you do, accept me as a fool, so that I too may boast a little. ¹⁷What I am saying with this boastful confidence, I say not as the Lord would but as a fool. ¹⁸Since many boast according to the flesh, I too will boast. ¹⁹For you gladly bear with fools, being wise yourselves! ²⁰For you bear it if someone makes slaves of you, or devours you, or takes advantage of you, or puts on airs, or strikes you in the face. ²¹To my shame, I must say, we were too weak for that! But whatever anyone else dares to boast of—I am speaking as a fool—I also dare to boast of that. ²²Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they offspring of Abraham? So am I. ²³Are they servants of Christ? I am a better one—I am talking like a madman—with far greater labors, far more imprisonments, with countless beatings, and often near death. ²⁴Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. ²⁵Three times I

was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; ²⁶on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; ²⁷in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. ²⁸And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches. ²⁹Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to fall, and I am not indignant? ³⁰If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness. ³¹The God and Father of the Lord Jesus, he who is blessed forever, knows that I am not lying. ³²At Damascus, the governor under King Aretas was guarding the city of Damascus in order to seize me, ³³but I was let down in a basket through a window in the wall and escaped his hands.

2 Corinthians Chapter 12

I must go on boasting. Though there is nothing to be gained by it, I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord. ²I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows. ³And I know that this man was caught up into paradise—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows— ⁴and he heard things that cannot be told, which man may not utter. ⁵ On behalf of this man I will boast, but on my own behalf I will not boast, except of my weaknesses— ⁶ though if I should wish to boast, I would not be a fool, for I would be speaking the truth; but I refrain from it, so that no one may think more of me than he sees in me or hears from me. ⁷ So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited. ⁸ Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. ⁹ But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. ¹⁰ For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong. ¹¹ I have been a fool! You forced me to it, for I ought to have been commended by you. For I was not at all inferior to these super-apostles, even though I

am nothing. ¹² The signs of a true apostle were performed among you with utmost patience, with signs and wonders and mighty works. ¹³ For in what were you less favored than the rest of the churches, except that I myself did not burden you? Forgive me this wrong! ¹⁴ Here for the third time I am ready to come to you. And I will not be a burden, for I seek not what is yours but you. For children are not obligated to save up for their parents, but parents for their children. ¹⁵ I will most gladly spend and be spent for your souls. If I love you more, am I to be loved less? ¹⁶ But granting that I myself did not burden you, I was crafty, you say, and got the better of you by deceit. ¹⁷ Did I take advantage of you through any of those whom I sent to you? ¹⁸ I urged Titus to go, and sent the brother with him. Did Titus take advantage of you? Did we not act in the same spirit? Did we not take the same steps? ¹⁹ Have you been thinking all along that we have been defending ourselves to you? It is in the sight of God that we have been speaking in Christ, and all for your upbuilding, beloved. ²⁰ For I fear that perhaps when I come I may find you not as I wish, and that you may find me not as you wish—that perhaps there may be quarreling, jealousy, anger, hostility, slander, gossip, conceit, and disorder. ²¹ I fear that when I come again my God may humble me before you, and I may have to mourn over many of those who sinned earlier and have not repented of the impurity, sexual immorality, and sensuality that they have practiced.

2 Corinthians Chapter 13

This is the third time I am coming to you. Every charge must be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. ²I warned those who sinned before and all the others, and I warn them now while absent, as I did when present on my second visit, that if I come again I will not spare them—³since you seek proof that Christ is speaking in me. He is not weak in dealing with you, but is powerful among you. ⁴For he was crucified in weakness, but lives by the power of God. For we also are weak in him, but in dealing with you we will live with him by the power of God. ⁵Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Or do you not realize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you?—unless indeed you fail to meet the test! ⁶I hope you will find out that we have not failed the test. ⁷But we pray to God that

you may not do wrong—not that we may appear to have met the test, but that you may do what is right, though we may seem to have failed. ⁸For we cannot do anything against the truth, but only for the truth. ⁹For we are glad when we are weak and you are strong. Your restoration is what we pray for. ¹⁰For this reason I write these things while I am away from you, that when I come I may not have to be severe in my use of the authority that the Lord has given me for building up and not for tearing down. ¹¹Finally, brothers, rejoice. Aim for restoration, comfort one another, agree with one another, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you. ¹²Greet one another with a holy kiss. ¹³All the saints greet you. ¹⁴The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.

IN CONTEXT

We may wonder why God inspired Paul to spend so much time defending himself in the writing of 2 Corinthians. We get the answer to that question in 12:19 where Paul writes:

Have you been thinking all along that we have been defending ourselves to you? It is in the sight of God that we have been speaking in Christ, and all for your upbuilding.

All of this is for our upbuilding, so let's keep studying!

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Read 11:16-33. As you read Paul's list of the things he suffered, is there one that seems to have troubled him the most?

2. Read 12:1-10. Most commentators believe the person mentioned in verses 2-5 was Paul himself. With this understanding, why was Paul given a "thorn" in the flesh? (v. 17)

3. Scholars debate what is meant by Paul's thorn in the flesh. Some believe it had to do with the persecutions that seemed to follow Paul wherever he went. Others think the thorn was a physical ailment. Whatever it was, it seems that God did not free Paul from it in response to his pleas (v. 8).
What spiritual truth are we taught through Paul's experience?

4. Think carefully about verse 9 of chapter 12. Based on this verse, how would you define God's "grace"?

5. How is God's power "made perfect" in our human weakness?

- What is meant by "the third heaven" in 12:2?

6. Read 13:11-14. Why are these words such a fitting conclusion to the Book of 2 Corinthians?

REFLECTION

Spend two minutes meditating on the words of 2 Corinthians 13:14.

- What does it mean to you that the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God the Father, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you?

- Pray that this benediction will become a reality in your life.

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