

2 CORINTHIANS

GOD'S STRENGTH
IN OUR WEAKNESS

A 13-LESSON STUDY

REFORMED EXPOSITORY
BIBLE STUDY

ZACHARY GROFF
and **TRENT CASTO**


P U B L I S H I N G
P.O. BOX 817 • PHILLIPSBURG • NEW JERSEY 08865-0817

REFORMED EXPOSITORY BIBLE STUDIES

A Companion Series to the Reformed Expository Commentaries

Series Editors

Daniel M. Doriani

Iain M. Duguid

Richard D. Phillips

Philip Graham Ryken

1 Samuel: A King after God's Own Heart

1 Kings: The Rise and Decline of David's House

2 Kings: The Decline and Fall of Israel and Judah

Esther & Ruth: The Lord Delivers and Redeems

Ecclesiastes: Enjoyment East of Eden

Song of Songs: Friendship on Fire

Daniel: Faith Enduring through Adversity

Matthew: Making Disciples for the Nations (two volumes)

Luke: Knowing for Sure (two volumes)

John: The Word Incarnate (two volumes)

2 Corinthians: God's Strength in Our Weakness

Galatians: The Gospel of Free Grace

Ephesians: The Glory of Christ in the Life of the Church

Philippians: To Live Is Christ

1 Timothy: Defend the Faith

Hebrews: Standing Firm in Christ

James: Portrait of a Living Faith

1 Peter: Grace-Driven Discipleship in a Difficult Age

CONTENTS

Series Introduction	7
Introducing 2 Corinthians	9
Lesson 1: The God of All Comfort (2 Corinthians 1:1–2:4)	15
Lesson 2: The Aroma of Christ to God (2 Corinthians 2:5–17)	23
Lesson 3: Our Letter of Recommendation (2 Corinthians 3:1–18)	31
Lesson 4: Eternal Treasure in Jars of Clay (2 Corinthians 4:1–18)	39
Lesson 5: Home Is Where the Heart Is (2 Corinthians 5:1–10)	47
Lesson 6: Ambassadors for Christ (2 Corinthians 5:11–6:2)	55
Lesson 7: Servants of God (2 Corinthians 6:3–7:16)	63
Lesson 8: Christ Who Became Poor (2 Corinthians 8:1–24)	71
Lesson 9: The Church of Good Cheer (2 Corinthians 9:1–15)	79
Lesson 10: The Apostle’s Entreaty (2 Corinthians 10:1–18)	87
Lesson 11: A Little Foolishness (2 Corinthians 11:1–33)	95
Lesson 12: The Apostle’s Boast (2 Corinthians 12:1–21)	103
Lesson 13: The Power of the Lord (2 Corinthians 13:1–14)	111

SERIES INTRODUCTION

Studying the Bible will change your life. This is the consistent witness of Scripture and the experience of people all over the world, in every period of church history.

King David said, “The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul; the testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple; the precepts of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the LORD is pure, enlightening the eyes” (Ps. 19:7–8). So anyone who wants to be wiser and happier, and who wants to feel more alive, with a clearer perception of spiritual reality, should study the Scriptures.

Whether we study the Bible alone or with other Christians, it will change us from the inside out. The Reformed Expository Bible Studies provide tools for biblical transformation. Written as a companion to the Reformed Expository Commentary, this series of short books for personal or group study is designed to help people study the Bible for themselves, understand its message, and then apply its truths to daily life.

Each Bible study is introduced by a pastor-scholar who has written a full-length expository commentary on the same book of the Bible. The individual chapters start with the summary of a Bible passage, explaining **The Big Picture** of this portion of God’s Word. Then the questions in **Getting Started** introduce one or two of the passage’s main themes in ways that connect to life experience. These questions may be especially helpful for group leaders in generating lively conversation.

Understanding the Bible’s message starts with seeing what is actually there, which is where **Observing the Text** comes in. Then the Bible study provides a longer and more in-depth set of questions entitled **Understanding the Text**. These questions carefully guide students through the entire passage, verse by verse or section by section.

It is important not to read a Bible passage in isolation but to see it in the wider context of Scripture. So each Bible study includes two **Bible Connections** questions that invite readers to investigate passages from other places in Scripture—passages that add important background, offer valuable contrasts or comparisons, and especially connect the main passage to the person and work of Jesus Christ.

The next section is one of the most distinctive features of the Reformed Expository Bible Studies. The authors believe that the Bible teaches important doctrines of the Christian faith and that reading biblical literature is enhanced when we know something about its underlying theology. The questions in **Theology Connections** identify some of these doctrines by bringing the Bible passage into conversation with creeds and confessions from the Reformed tradition, as well as with learned theologians of the church.

Our aim in all of this is to help ordinary Christians apply biblical truth to daily life. **Applying the Text** uses open-ended questions to get people thinking about sins that need to be confessed, attitudes that need to change, and areas of new obedience that need to come alive by the power and influence of the Holy Spirit. Finally, each study ends with a **Prayer Prompt** that invites Bible students to respond to what they are learning with petitions for God's help and words of praise and gratitude.

You will notice boxed quotations throughout the Bible study. These quotations come from one of the volumes in the Reformed Expository Commentary. Although the Bible study can stand alone and includes everything you need for a life-changing encounter with a book of the Bible, it is also intended to serve as a companion to a full commentary on the same biblical book. Reading the full commentary is especially useful for teachers who want to help their students answer the questions in the Bible study at a deeper level, as well as for students who wish to further enrich their own biblical understanding.

The people who worked together to produce this series of Bible studies have prayed that they will engage you more intimately with Scripture, producing the kind of spiritual transformation that only the Bible can bring.

Philip Graham Ryken
Coeditor of the Reformed Expository Commentary series

INTRODUCING 2 CORINTHIANS

Weakness has never been popular. Suffering doesn't sell. We have an inherent attraction to people and ministries that are strong, polished, and outwardly successful. We live in an age of celebrity culture, and that is as true in the church as it is anywhere else. And yet this New Testament letter declares that the outward trappings of success are no substitute for genuine Christianity. External polish, enthusiasm, and momentum are not to be mistaken for saving faith, genuine repentance, and humble service.

The apostle Paul's **main purpose** in writing this letter is to demonstrate the connection between suffering in the service of Christ and the manifestation of God's power through the weakness of his servants. Paul provides a much-needed corrective to our obsession with strength and helps us grasp how God is glorified in our weakness. At a more concrete level, Paul writes to prepare the Corinthians for his upcoming visit. Throughout the book, he encourages the majority who support him (chapters 1–7), he asks them to prepare a gift for the poor Christians in Judea as evidence of their repentance (chapters 8–9), and he warns those who are still rebelling to repent before he arrives and demonstrates his apostolic power (chapters 10–13).

Our **key verses** for understanding the message of Paul's letter are 2 Corinthians 12:9–10.

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. 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.

When Paul's opponents sought to discredit him on account of his suffering as an apostle, Paul defended the integrity of his ministry by pointing to those very same sufferings—as well as to the impact his ministry had made in the lives of the Corinthians.

Perhaps more than for any of Paul's other letters, an understanding of this book's **audience** and historical **context** is essential for grasping its message. Paul addressed it to “the church of God that is at Corinth, with all the saints who are in the whole of Achaia” (2 Cor. 1:1). This means that he expected it to be read to the churches in the surrounding region of Achaia as well as to members of the Corinthian church. Corinth was a wealthy city with a reputation for bronze artistry and wanton sexuality, and churches nearby were likely being influenced by events there.

More germane to the central issue of this letter, however, is that the Corinthians' view of leadership and ministry had been thoroughly shaped by Greco-Roman values rather than biblical ones. The Corinthians valued the ability to get things done, strong rhetorical skills in public speech, certain occupations, wealth, education, and status. Corinth was not so different from many cultures today. But dubious figures had slipped into the church and were arguing that Paul was not a legitimate apostle due to his weaknesses, sufferings, and refusal to take an income from the church. Scholars debate the exact identity of these opponents because Paul never describes them or calls them out specifically. He generally calls them “false apostles” (2 Cor. 11:13) or sometimes “super-apostles” (11:5; 12:11). In Paul's absence, these men were drawing the hearts of the church members away from him and from the gospel by undermining his ministry. Paul spends much of this letter defending the integrity of his ministry against these attacks.

Although the title of the letter is *2 Corinthians*, this is actually Paul's fourth letter to the Corinthians. Though it is difficult to put together precise dates, we can be certain of the following chronology of events.

- Paul first visited Corinth and planted a church there in the early 50s.
- After ministering in Corinth for eighteen months (see Acts 18:11), Paul set sail for Syria and ultimately settled into an extended ministry in Ephesus (see 19:10).

- From Ephesus, Paul sent his first letter to the Corinthians—what we might call the *previous letter*, which he references in 1 Corinthians 5:9. We do not possess this letter today.
- After that, Paul received a report from Chloe’s delegation (see 1 Cor. 1:11) about the church in Corinth. *First Corinthians* was Paul’s response to that report.
- Paul sent Timothy to Corinth around this time (see 1 Cor. 16:10).
- When Timothy returned to Paul in Ephesus, he brought painful news about the state of the church in Corinth. Paul decided that the issues were serious enough that he needed to go and visit the church in person. This visit is known as the “painful visit” (2 Cor. 2:1), and it occurred a year earlier than he had originally planned. His painful visit did not resolve the issues in the church. Before leaving he told them that he would visit them again before and after going to Macedonia.
- Afterward, however, Paul decided that revisiting the church so soon would just cause more grief (see 2 Cor. 2:1–2), so he sent Titus, along with a third letter, back to Corinth. This letter is known as the *severe letter* (see 2:3–4; 7:8–12), and Paul had some regret over sending it. Knowing it would grieve his friends in Corinth, he was anxious for months about how they would respond.
- Paul left Ephesus under great affliction (see 1:8) and went north to Troas in hopes of reconnecting with Titus and hearing a report on the Corinthians (see 2:12–13). But Titus was not there. So Paul went on to Macedonia, where he successfully met up with Titus and heard that his severe letter had accomplished its purpose (see 7:5–7).
- Paul was ready to return to the Corinthians for a third time. Around the year 55, while in Macedonia, he wrote a letter to prepare them for his next visit. This letter, his fourth letter to that church, is the one that we call *2 Corinthians*.

As he defends his ministry and prepares the church for his visit, Paul addresses a wide variety of **themes**, such as how the glory of the new covenant surpasses that of the old, the way Christians should view affliction in this world, the role that suffering plays in the lives of those who minister

the gospel, and the destiny that awaits Christians after death. He also holds forth to readers, both then and today, about the generosity that the gospel produces within Christians, no matter the amount of wealth they have; the kinds of qualities we should seek within our Christian leaders; the characteristics of ministries that God approves; and the role that the Holy Spirit plays in both our lives *and* our ministries. In short, Paul helps God's people discover and delight in the fact that he demonstrates his strength most powerfully through the weakness of his servants.

The **structure** of the letter can be considered in three parts. In chapters 1 through 7, the apostle recounts a history of his relationship with the Corinthians while defending the legitimacy of his apostolic ministry and the superiority of the new covenant. In chapters 8 through 9, having ascertained their repentance, he prepares them to give to a collection for Jerusalem when he arrives. In chapters 10 through 13, he warns the unrepentant about what will take place during his third visit, when he will demonstrate the power of his apostolic ministry. We can better understand the complexities of the letter's interpretation when we realize that in chapters 1 through 9 Paul is addressing the repentant Corinthians directly and the rebellious individuals indirectly, while in chapters 10 through 13 he addresses the unrepentant directly and the repentant indirectly.¹

Paul's sufferings, consolations, and apostolic ministry (1:1–7:16)

Greetings (1:1–2)

God of all comfort (1:3–11)

Paul's explanation of his change of plans (1:12–2:4)

Forgive the repentant sinner (2:5–11)

Triumphal procession (2:12–17)

New covenant ministry (3:1–4:18)

Our heavenly home (5:1–10)

Ministry of reconciliation (5:11–6:13)

Bringing holiness to completion (6:14–7:1)

Paul's pride and joy over his readers' repentance (7:2–16)

1. See Scott J. Hafemann, *2 Corinthians*, NIV Application Commentary (Zondervan, 2000), 32–33.

The collection for the Christians in Jerusalem (8:1–9:15)

Encouragement to be generous from the Macedonians' example (8:1–15)

Commendation of Titus and his companions (8:16–24)

The cheerful giver (9:1–15)

Paul defends his ministry and warns his opponents (10:1–13:14)

Paul's defense of his ministry (10:1–18)

The contrast between Paul and the false apostles (11:1–15)

Paul's foolish boasting (11:16–33)

Paul's thorn in the flesh (12:1–10)

Paul's concern for the Corinthians (12:11–21)

Paul's final warning (13:1–10)

Final greetings (13:11–13)

Benediction (13:14)

Trent Casto

Author of *2 Corinthians* (REC)

LESSON 1

THE GOD OF ALL COMFORT

2 Corinthians 1:1–2:4

THE BIG PICTURE

Paul the apostle wrote to the Corinthians from the perspective of one who had planted their church and had years of personal experience with the congregation. He was deeply aware of their particular strengths, their specific shortcomings, and their acute struggles with sin and dissension. In short, he knew them. And he loved them. With pen and ink, he ministered to them from afar as he prepared to visit them in person. Therefore, his message is one of deep personal concern for a flock that faced confusion and disunity.

As with all Scripture, someone else was active in producing this epistle: the Holy Spirit of God, who knows all things and loves his people with a perfect and everlasting love. Thus the message of this missive possesses timeless spiritual significance. The divine comfort and encouragement of this Spirit-inspired letter is for today's church in Africa and Australia, Asia and the Americas, as much as it was for the first-century church in Corinth. Believers in every age share one source of strength: the God of all comfort.

Read 2 Corinthians 1:1–2:4.

GETTING STARTED

1. What traits or characteristics do you immediately associate with leaders? Think specifically of church leaders first, then business leaders, and finally political leaders. Does your list of traits change as you progress from one category of leadership to the next? Why or why not?
2. Reflect on a time when an authority figure disappointed you with a change of plans, but with good reason. What was that reason? What made it a *good* reason? How did that person communicate their reason to you (and to others)?

OBSERVING THE TEXT

3. How does Paul's opening greeting in 1:1 describe the apostle himself, Timothy his associate, and the recipients of this epistle? Describe what we know of their relationships with God and with each other (1:1–2).

4. What outcomes did Paul say resulted from his affliction, his distress, and even his comfort (1:6, 9)?

5. What “boast” did Paul make in order to defend himself to the Corinthians (1:12)?

UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT

6. What does it look like for us to “share abundantly in Christ’s sufferings” in this life (1:5)?

7. Paul says in 1:8–9 that he and his associates suffered serious distress in Asia, but he does not give details. What did he want his readers to know about the nature, if not the circumstances, of the distress that his ministry team experienced?

8. Whom was Paul confident that God would “deliver . . . again” (1:10)? What two reasons does he give for that confidence?
9. What did Paul ask the Corinthian church to do in 1:11? Why did he make that request?
10. What wrongdoing did Paul realize he could be accused of (1:15–18)? What point of connection do you see between the way Paul explains that change of plans and the way 1:19–20 describes the gospel he has proclaimed (1:19–20)?
11. Why did Paul say he was so committed to ministering to the Corinthians (1:24; 2:4)?

An Apostle of the First Order, pgs. 7–8

Paul is not just another man with an opinion in Corinth. He is not just another traveling preacher carrying his letters of recommendation. Paul is an apostle of the first order.

APPLYING THE TEXT

16. Suffering may sometimes seem senseless, but it is never useless. What have you discovered about Christ through your suffering that you can personally share (or have shared) with others who suffer loss, pain, and sorrow? What does helping sufferers “by prayer” look or sound like (1:11)?

17. According to Paul’s rationale in 2 Corinthians 1:12–14, what is the Christian’s point of reference for faithful living? What standard of faith and practice undergirds what you have learned to believe about Jesus and about how you can emulate him in your life? Conversely, what future event do you anticipate as you serve Christ today?

18. Paul exercises a form of Christian discipline as he silences rumors and corrects confusion. What characteristic distinguishes such discipline (2:4)? What bearing does this characteristic have on how, when, and why you should discipline your children, recover beloved friends who are “caught in any transgression” (Gal. 6:1), or even “rebuke an older man” (1 Tim. 5:1)?

PRAYER PROMPT

Relatively few of us will be called to go into foreign missions or to pioneer church-planting work. But God calls all of us to pray for the advancement of the gospel, the extension of the church, and the coming of the kingdom. Take your church's prayer guide or bulletin and find the church planters and missionaries that it lists. Pray for those who are ministering in difficult and dangerous fields. Pray for God to deliver them from "deadly peril," just as he delivered Paul and his associates (2 Cor. 1:10). Partner with your pastor and supported missionaries through prayer so that the people they are serving will also join in offering thanks to God "for the blessing granted [them] through the prayers of many" (1:11). Pray specifically for particular mission works in your community and abroad, always aiming for the increase of Christ's glory around the world as he is acknowledged, worshiped, and praised. Thank God for his abundant love for sinners and for the gracious salvation in Christ that is proclaimed through the ministry of his Word. Finally, seek the divine blessing of the Holy Spirit, who continually comforts and strengthens the church for Christ's sake.