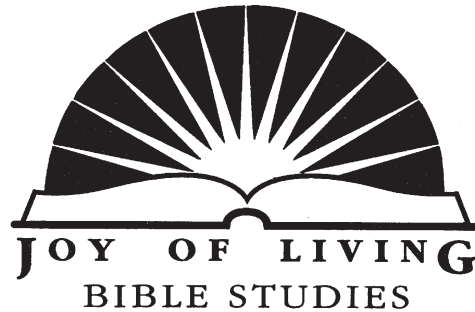


2 Corinthians

Lesson 1



Introduction

“As a boy, he worked long hours in a factory in Naples. He yearned to be a singer. When ten years old, he took his first lesson in voice. ‘You can’t sing. You haven’t any voice at all. Your voice sounds like the wind in the shutters,’ said his teacher. The boy’s mother, however, had visions of greatness for her son. She believed that he had a talent to sing. She was very poor. Putting her arms around him, she encouragingly said, ‘My boy, I’m going to make every sacrifice to pay for your voice lessons.’

“Her confidence in him and constant encouragement paid off! That boy became one of the world’s greatest singers [of his time]—Enrico Caruso! [1873-1921]

“Say It Now

“If you have a tender message,

Or a loving word to say,

Don’t wait till you forget it,

But whisper it today!

“The tender words unspoken,

The letter never sent,

The long-forgotten messages,

The wealth of love unspent.

“For these some hearts are breaking,

For these some loved ones wait,

Then give them what they’re needing

Before it is too late!”¹

This book of 2 Corinthians is known as a book of encouragement. In response to the problems Paul had dealt with in 1 Corinthians, Titus had apparently been sent to Corinth by Paul to follow through with this situation. Now, having met in Macedonia, Titus had given Paul a mostly encouraging report. Because of this positive report, Paul couldn’t wait until his next visit to Corinth to compliment the Corinthians where it was justified, and to encourage them where it was needed. As we study prepare to be encouraged.

Paul the Apostle

Heroes are made, not born. Each generation has their heroes, from sports figures to statesmen. However, as that generation dies out,

the names of their heroes die also, with few exceptions. Not so for Paul, the great apostle to the Gentiles. Except for our Lord Jesus Christ, Paul’s name towers over all others in the history of Christianity.

Many things go into the making of a hero, but the top two qualities of my own personal hero would be commitment and dedication. Most heroes do not set out to be heroes. They simply set a goal for themselves, and commit time and energy to developing their God-given talents and abilities. By focusing on the goal, prioritizing their time, and pressing ahead through sheer determination, many realize the attainment of their goal and reach the pinnacle of their chosen field. Along the way someone recognizes their achievements and they become heroes to many.

Some very wise person said many years ago, “If you really want to succeed, form the habit of doing the things that people who are failures don’t like to do.” How true!

The apostle Paul certainly possessed these qualities. He had a lot going for him, humanly speaking. Listen to the impressive array of qualities he possessed even before he became a Christian, some inherited, others developed through commitment and dedication. “If anyone else thinks he has reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for legalistic righteousness, faultless” (Philippians 3:4-6).

Paul was, at one time, known by the name Saul (see Acts 13:9). He was a zealous Pharisee, seeking to destroy the church. He is first brought to our attention in Acts 7, during the stoning of Stephen: “[They all] dragged him [Stephen] out of the city and began to stone him. Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul” (verse 58). “And Saul was there, giving approval to his death... But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off men and women and put them in prison” (8:1,3). Saul, later known as Paul, didn’t know what it meant to be half-hearted in his commitment and dedication to anything.

In Acts 9 we have the remarkable “Damascus road” story of Saul’s conversion to Christ, followed by the account of God’s call upon his life. God sent one of His disciples, Ananias, to go to Saul and commission him with God’s call. Ananias was understandably reluctant to go, for Saul’s reputation as the persecutor of the church had brought fear into the heart of many of the disciples. But God encouraged Ananias

1. Walter B. Knight, *Knight’s Treasury of 2,000 Illustrations* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1963), p. 237.

in verses 15,16: “Go! This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel. I will show him how much he must suffer for my name.” And suffer he did! It was this commission from God and the indwelling power of God in the Person of the Holy Spirit, combined with Paul’s commitment and dedication, that made him the hero he is. How grateful we should be to God for this great hero of our faith! I look forward to meeting him in heaven one day and thanking him personally for his great contribution to the cause of Christ.

A Letter of Encouragement

Paul wrote thirteen New Testament letters (possibly fourteen, since some scholars believe he also wrote the New Testament letter entitled “Hebrews”). Paul traveled extensively throughout most of the Roman Empire, preaching the Gospel, establishing churches, and teaching the new converts the wonderful truths of the Old Testament and that Christ was the fulfillment of God’s righteous requirements. “For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes” (Romans 10:4, NASB).

This second letter to the Corinthians is different from all of Paul’s other letters. Here Paul opens his heart to share his difficulties and discouragements. “We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about the hardships we suffered in the province of Asia. We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired even of life. Indeed, in our hearts we felt the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead” (2 Corinthians 1:8,9).

Perhaps someone who is reading these pages has just received “the sentence of death” from their doctor or some other source. Paul has wonderful words of comfort, consolation, hope and encouragement: “We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed [without a way], but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus’ sake, so that his life may be revealed in our mortal body” (2 Corinthians 4:8-11).

Have you ever felt so hemmed in by circumstances that it seemed there was no way out? Most of us have at some time. Paul’s words can be very heartening when we find ourselves experiencing the “spiritual pits.”

The goal of this great apostle’s life can be found in the words of Philippians 3:8-9: “I consider everything [earthly] a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith.”

While bringing all his energies to bear upon achieving his goal, the desire of Paul’s heart was that his life would bring great honor and

glory to the person of Christ and be used of Him to expand and promote the cause of Christ on earth. “As servants of God we commend ourselves in every way: in great endurance; in troubles, hardships and distresses; in beatings, imprisonments and riots; in hard work, sleepless nights and hunger; in purity, understanding, patience and kindness; in the Holy Spirit and in sincere love; in truthful speech and in the power of God; with weapons of righteousness in the right hand and in the left; through glory and dishonor, bad report and good report; genuine, yet regarded as impostors; known, yet regarded as unknown; dying, and yet we live on; beaten, and yet not killed; sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; poor, yet making many rich; having nothing, and yet possessing everything” (2 Corinthians 6:4-10).

What a series of contrasts and conflicts Paul brings before us. But then, life is like that, isn’t it? Where did the “health and wealth” theology of our day come from? It certainly cannot be found in the testimony of this outstanding leader of the family of God.

Inner Peace in the Midst of Suffering

Many people have the mistaken belief that, if our desire is to do the will of God, everything should fall into place for us and we should have smooth sailing. According to this line of reasoning, if we are not walking with the Lord but are out of His will, then our lives will fall apart and nothing will go right. This simply is not borne out in the Scriptures. Consider the Lord Jesus Christ, who sought always to please the Father. He was put to death on a Roman cross. Consider Jeremiah, one of Israel’s great prophets, who brought God’s message of impending judgment unless they repented. He was put in stocks and thrown into the dungeon (see Jeremiah 20, 37).

Or think of the prophet Jonah, who was commanded by God to go to Nineveh and warn them of coming judgment. He refused to do so and deliberately chose to disobey God and run away. Even though he was out of God’s will, when he went to the docks to book passage, there was a ship waiting for him (see Jonah 1). Of course, when the storm on the sea threatened to sink his ship and Jonah was swallowed by a great fish after being thrown overboard, he was finally convinced to go to Nineveh and preach.

We want a life of ease, success, and comfort. However, real life is rarely like that. It was our Lord Himself who said, “In this world you will have trouble” (John 16:33). Paul echoed this in 2 Timothy 3:12: “In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.”

Listen to Paul’s testimony in this regard from 2 Corinthians 11:23-27. “Are they servants of Christ?... I am more. I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again. Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from

false brothers. I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked.”

Paul knew what it was to suffer for the sake of the Gospel but he also knew what it was to have great inner peace (see Romans 5:1; Philippians 4:7). Have you experienced this inner peace? You can. Consider the following.

The Importance of the Gospel

1. God has proven His love for you and has taken the initiative in providing you with the way to come to Him. “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God’s one and only Son” (John 3:16-18). “But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8).

2. All people are sinful, therefore separated from God, and in need of a Savior. “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23). “As it is written: ‘There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God’ (verses 10,11).

3. Jesus Christ is God’s only provision for man’s sin; He alone can bring us to God. “Jesus answered, ‘I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me’” (John 14:6). Either this is a true statement or Jesus is the greatest liar and egotist the world has known; He has also perpetrated the biggest hoax ever presented to the minds of men! Is He a liar, an egotist (perhaps a lunatic), con man, or Savior? You must decide for yourself.

4. We must believe the Gospel, which is written in capsule form in 1 Corinthians 15:3,4: “For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures.”

5. We must receive Christ as our Savior and Lord. “To all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God” (John 1:12). “If you confess with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved” (Romans 10:9,10.)

If you agree with these things and would like to make Christ your Savior and Lord, you might repeat to God the following prayer: “Father, I believe that you love me even though I am sinful and separated from you. I believe that Jesus Christ, your only Son, died for my sins and that you have raised Him from the dead. I now receive Him as my personal Savior and Lord. I give you the freedom, Father, to make me the kind of person you want me to be. Amen”

Remember, God is more interested in the attitude of your heart than in your words. If you prayed this prayer, look up the following Scriptures: 1 John 5:10-13; Ephesians 2:8,9. Ask God to confirm in your heart that you are His child according to Romans 8:16.

Corinth—Its History and Its Culture

Corinth was the capital of the Roman province Achaia, and the most important city in the province. It occupied a strategic geographical position. It was located about 40 miles west of Athens on a narrow isthmus between Peloponnesus and the mainland. Trade routes between the North and South of the province had to pass through the city, and much of the commerce between Rome and the East was brought to its harbors. It was situated at the southernmost part of the isthmus at the foot of the impregnable Acrocorinthus, its 1,900-foot-high citadel. To the East was the Aegean Sea and on the West was the Corinthian Gulf. In ancient time the city was known as “two-sea’d Corinth.”

It was very dangerous and treacherous sailing around the southern capes of the Peloponnesus, as well as time consuming. Many of the smaller ships and their cargoes were hauled across the narrow isthmus on a track. The cargoes of the larger ships were often removed at the harbor and hauled across the isthmus and reloaded on another ship on the other side. There were several attempts to cut a ship canal across the isthmus. Nero attempted one about A.D. 66, but neither he nor any others were successful until one was opened in 1893; it is still in use today.

Corinth has an ancient and interesting history. It was settled by the Phoenicians who introduced many profitable wares and established the worship of Phoenician deities. Later, Greeks from Attica became supreme, and are probably responsible for naming the city Corinth. These Greeks glorified the games being held there in honor of Poseidon, the god of the sea. The Dorians conquered the city about 1074 B.C. A series of important colonies was founded about 585 B.C. and Corinth became a strong maritime force. The Macedonians held the city from 335-197 B.C., except for a brief period.

The Romans declared Greece and Corinth free in 196 B.C. But Corinth was totally destroyed by the Roman consul Mummius in 146 B.C., as a consequence of a rebellion against Rome. It was rebuilt in 46 B.C. as a Roman colony by Julius Caesar and declared the capital of Achaia. It rapidly became prominent once again.

Ancient Corinth was abandoned in 1858 because of a severe earthquake. A new town was then built a few miles away. Modern Corinth is has a population of about 30,000 people. Nothing marked the ancient site of Corinth except seven columns of an old Dorian temple, until archaeologists began excavating the site after its ruins were uncovered by an earthquake in 1928.

In Paul’s day, under Roman rule, Corinth was a city of wealth, luxury, and gross immorality. It had no rivals as a city of vice. “To live like a Corinthian” meant to live a life of debauchery. In a stage play, it was customary for the Corinthian to come on the scene drunk. There

were temples dedicated to many gods in Corinth. They were naturally attracted to the worship of Poseidon, because so much of their prosperity came from the sea.

The temple of Aphrodite, the goddess of love, was the chief center of worship. It was located on the Acrocorinthus and had more than a thousand prostitutes in her service. Worshippers came from all over the world. The worship of Aphrodite produced great immorality and corruption.

Corinth drew much of its wealth from the sea but it had many other important industries. Its pottery and brass were famous all over the world. The Isthmian games, which were held every two years, made Corinth famous as a great center of Hellenic life.

At the peak of its power, Corinth's population was probably about 200,000 free men, plus about 500,000 slaves. The citizenry of Corinth was made up of different nationalities who had been attracted to the city for various reasons, including a large group of Jews and some Gentile converts who had been brought under the influence of Judaism because of its monotheism and morality.

Paul's Involvement in Corinth

Paul's first visit to Corinth is recorded in Acts 18. He arrived from Athens, where he had not been well-received. He began his work in Corinth in fear and trembling (see 1 Corinthians 2:3), but a special revelation from the Lord encouraged him to speak freely and boldly, and assured him that no harm would come to him (see Acts 18:9,10). Paul became acquainted with Aquila and Priscilla on this visit, who were fellow Christians and fellow tentmakers. During his 18-month stay in Corinth, he lived with them, working at his trade to provide for himself, so that his motives for preaching the Gospel would not be looked upon with suspicion.

Paul preached in the synagogue at Corinth every Sabbath, but soon met strong opposition from the Jews; he then turned from them and gave his attention to the Gentiles (see Acts 18:6). Titius Justus, a God-fearing Gentile, whose home was next-door to the synagogue, gave Paul the use of his home, where Paul continued to preach and teach. Many believed and were baptized, including Crispus, the ruler of the synagogue, and his family (see Acts 18:7,8).

Gallio, the older brother of the Roman philosopher Seneca, was appointed proconsul of the region of Achaia, and came to Corinth to govern during Paul's visit. According to an inscription found at Delphi in 1908, this was about the year 51 A.D. The Jews brought an accusation against Paul before Gallio, charging Paul with preaching a religion that was contrary to Roman law. However, Gallio refused to hear the case and dismissed the Jews. Apparently he looked at this quarrel as just differing interpretations of Jewish law. After Gallio's dismissal of the case, some of the Greek bystanders beat Sosthenes, the ruler of the synagogue.

Gallio's action in dismissing this case was of great importance. It amounted to an authoritative decision by a highly-placed Roman official that Paul's preaching was not an offense against Roman law.

From this experience Paul gained a new idea of the protection the Roman law afforded him as a preacher of the Gospel. After this incident Paul stayed for some time in Corinth, leaving eventually to go to Jerusalem and Antioch, stopping off briefly at Ephesus.

After Paul's departure, problems began to develop in the church in Corinth. Word reached Paul of these problems and he wrote a letter (which we do not have) in response to this news (see 1 Corinthians 5:9). Further word came from Chloe that the problems were growing within the church (see 1 Corinthians 1:11). Then a delegation of three men was sent to Paul with a letter containing questions about many issues confronting the congregation (see 1 Corinthians 7:1; 16:17,18). Paul wrote 1 Corinthians from Ephesus about 55 A.D. to counteract these problems.

The letter known to us as 2 Corinthians was written by Paul on his third missionary journey from somewhere in Macedonia. He met Titus there, who gave him a report on the church at Corinth. This letter reveals to us that false teachers in Corinth had tried to discredit Paul and had been successful in turning the church against him. Titus had been dispatched to Corinth by Paul to counteract this revolt and seems to have helped greatly in bringing about a change. His report was encouraging, for the most part. The majority had repented of their treatment of Paul and had thrown out of the church the man who had led the attack on him. Paul's authority had been acknowledged once again. It was this report of Titus that provoked the writing of this letter.

The following is a basic outline of 2 Corinthians:

- ☛ Chapter 1:1-14—Paul begins by reminding the Corinthians of his relationship to them.
- ☛ Chapter 1:15—2:3—Paul gives his itinerary.
- ☛ Chapter 2:4-11—Paul discusses his previous letter.
- ☛ Chapter 2:17—7:16—Paul begins the subject of false teachers and reviews his ministry there at Corinth, demonstrating the validity of his message and urging them not to turn away from the truth.
- ☛ Chapter 8:1—9:15—The collection for the poor Christians in Jerusalem.
- ☛ Chapter 10:1—13:13—Paul gives a strong defense of his authority as a genuine apostle of Jesus Christ and points out the deceptive influence of false apostles.

As we study this letter we will be deeply moved by Paul's words of love and encouragement. As he urges the Corinthians to be committed to the truth of God's Word and to reject all false teaching, let us take his message to heart and make the same commitment.

Study Questions

Before you begin each day:

- ☛ Pray and ask God to speak to you through His Holy Spirit.
- ☛ Use only the Bible for your answers.
- ☛ Write down your answers and the verses you used.
- ☛ Answer the “Challenge” questions if you have the time and want to do them.
- ☛ Share your answers to the “Personal” questions with the class only if you want to share them.

First Day: Read the Introduction to 2 Corinthians.

1. What new or helpful thought did you find in the notes or from your teacher's lecture? What personal application did you choose to apply to your life?
2. The suggested memory verse is 1 Corinthians 16:13,14, or you may choose a different verse. Share your memory verse with your discussion group or with someone else to encourage them.

Second Day: Read 2 Corinthians 1:1—2:4, concentrating on chapter 1:1,2.

1. Paul calls himself an apostle. Look up “apostle” in your dictionary or Bible dictionary and write the definition here.
2. What characteristics of God did the apostle wish the Corinthians to receive? (2 Corinthians 1:2)
3. What do you learn about God's grace in the following verses?
Ephesians 1:7,8

Colossians 1:21,22
4. What do you learn about God's peace in these verses?
John 14:27

Philippians 4:6,7
5. Challenge: In your own words tell why you think grace always comes before peace when they are used as a greeting throughout all of Scripture.
6. Personal: Have you received God's grace through believing His Son Jesus died for your sins? Are you experiencing God's peace in your life regardless of your circumstances? Why not pray about this now?

Third Day: Read 2 Corinthians 1:1—2:4 again, concentrating on chapter 1:3-5.

1. Who did Paul praise and what did he praise Him for in 2 Corinthians 1:3?
2. Read 1 Peter 1:3-5. How does this passage say that God showed His compassion and comfort to us?
3. According to 2 Corinthians 1:4, what does God do for us? When and why does He do it?
4. Challenge: Read Psalm 107 and list some of the ways God comforted the people of Israel. Pay special attention to verses 6,13,19, and 25-32.
5. Personal: In what way has God comforted you? Be specific as to how He did this. Share with your group if possible.
6. a. What does Paul say in 2 Corinthians 1:5?

b. Challenge: How does Hebrews 12:2,3 relate to this?

Fourth Day: Read 2 Corinthians 1:1—2:4 again, concentrating on chapter 1:6-11.

1. What does Paul say about suffering and comfort in 2 Corinthians 1:6,7?
2. What results in our lives if we suffer for Jesus' sake according to the following verses?
Philippians 3:10,11

1 Peter 1:6,7
3. In 2 Corinthians 1:8-10 Paul tells how greatly he had suffered. Why did he say this had happened, and what had God done for him?
4. Personal: In what way are you suffering now? Have you learned, as Paul did, not to rely on yourself but upon God? Why not ask God to help you do this now?

5. a. What does Paul say about the power of prayer in 2 Corinthians 1:11?
- b. Challenge: What else do you learn about the importance of prayer in the following verses?
Ephesians 6:18,19
- Colossians 4:2-4
6. a. Personal: How faithfully do you pray for others? Do you need to set aside a certain time each day to spend in prayer?
- b. Challenge: Based upon what you learned in these first 11 verses, how can hardships draw you closer to God?

Fifth Day: Read 2 Corinthians 1:1—2:4 again, concentrating on chapter 1:12-14.

1. How had Paul and Timothy conducted themselves according to 2 Corinthians 1:12?
2. a. Look up “holiness” or “holy” in your dictionary or Bible dictionary.
- b. What is said about holiness in the following verses?
Leviticus 20:26
- Romans 12:1
- 1 Peter 1:13-15
3. a. Personal: How do these verses challenge you to be holy? Be specific about areas in which your life needs to change.
- b. Re-read the last sentence of 2 Corinthians 1:12. How was Paul able to conduct himself in holiness according to this verse?

4. What did Paul hope the church at Corinth would do with his writings according to 2 Corinthians 1:13,14? What do you think this means?

5. Paul says they “will boast of you in the day of the Lord Jesus,” meaning at the time of Jesus Christ’s return to earth. Read 1 Thessalonians 2:19,20 to help you understand this.

6. Personal: Are you telling others about Jesus Christ? Will you have the joy of “boasting” in them when Jesus returns?

Sixth Day: Read 2 Corinthians 1:1—2:4 again, concentrating on chapters 1:15—2:4.

1. How many times did Paul plan to visit Corinth and what was his final destination according to 2 Corinthians 1:15,16?

2. Why did Paul change his travel plans? See 2 Corinthians 1:23 and 2:1,2.

3. In 2 Corinthians 1:17-20 Paul defends his actions by pointing the Corinthians to the ultimate ground of affirmation—the eternal “Yes” spoken to us by God through Christ. What attributes of God do you think this reflects? Read 1 Corinthians 1:9 and Hebrews 13:8 to help you with your answer.

4. According to 2 Corinthians 1:21 who caused Paul to stand firm in Christ? How does verse 24 add to this?

5. a. Read 2 Corinthians 1:21b, 22. What does God do for each Christian?

- b. Personal: Read Ephesians 1:13,14, which amplifies this. Put your name in this passage as you write it down to claim God’s wonderful truth as your own. If you haven’t yet believed in Jesus Christ as your Savior, would you like to pray about it now?

6. Pray for and with the members of your discussion group. Thank God for the things you are learning about Him through studying His Word. You may wish to record prayer requests, answers to prayer, and praise in a separate prayer notebook.