
2 Corinthians

Lesson 2

“2 Corinthians 1”

Objective: To explore the ancient text of 2 Corinthians in order to understand more fully and completely the call of God for us today as we seek to live out our lives in service to the Kingdom of God, to His glory, His Honor and His will. These ancient texts can challenge us, and inspire us, to live life more fully as participants in God’s story of redemption and love. At the core, the hope and desire for doing this study is that we will be continually transformed more fully and completely into useful instruments in the hands of God for bringing His message of love and compassion, and life to every creature.

Materials: The Bible, Commentaries, journal articles, dictionaries, the internet and other resources as may be appropriate. It is also our hope that each person will bring to the discussion and class times the things that God has placed upon their heart through their unique journey as people seeking the face of God and the life He seeks to bring.

Procedures

1. To explore biblically and logically what matters most to God in order to understand how we are to live. This will entail exploring the background of these texts in order to understand more fully their intended meaning for their original target audience.
2. We will also seek to explore how these ancient texts, addressed to ancient peoples, should, and must challenge us today in our walk of faith and obedience to the will of God.

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 - 3.** We intend in each instance to offer some practical suggestions as to how the call of God, through His Apostle, Paul, calls us to live our lives in such a way as to reflect our confident hope and expectation in the power of God. We seek the face of God.

In many ways the book of 2 Corinthians is one of the most difficult of Paul's letters for the interpreter because of a number of issues: some would challenge the unity of the letter itself, saying that this is actually a compilation of multiple letters; and another reason is that some of the issues raised in this letter are so explosive. In this letter Paul appears to have been nearly at war with other Jewish Christians. These Jewish Christians were probably from Jerusalem, and it appears that they may have been traveling around deliberately seeking to sabotage his work in Galatia, Corinth and perhaps elsewhere. In the letters to the Corinthians Paul wrestles with a variety of forces that threaten to alienate him from the converts at Corinth. The focus of 2 Corinthians in particular is to effect reconciliation between Paul and his converts there. In both letters the goal is reconciliation, but in each of the letters the rhetorical strategy is different as are the reasons for their composition.¹

As far as we can tell 2 Corinthians is actually the fourth letter that Paul has written to Corinth. It is important to remember as we read this letter that Paul wrote a letter to the

¹ Ben Witherington III, *Conflict and Community in Corinth* (Grand Rapids MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1995), pp. 327-328.

Corinthians and not a sermon, or a narrative like the Gospels, or even a theological treatise. Letter writing was a common form of communication in the ancient Greco-Roman world and Paul follows the basic literary conventions for this type of communication. Paul's letters were not exactly private communication as they were written to entire churches, but neither were they intended for just the general public. These letters contain carefully constructed arguments rather than material hastily composed in the midst of the busyness of a day. Despite their careful crafting they were not intended as artistic creations for a wide audience, they were intended for a specific group.² We need to keep these things in mind as we read and interpret these letters. These letters were originally intended for Corinthian Christians living in the first century A.D. and not for 21st century Americans who have a very different worldview and generally see life in very different terms than these early Christians will have seen life.

We need to note three other things as we proceed into the letter of Paul: First, ancient letters had a very recognizable

² Mitzi L. Minor, *2 Corinthians*, in the Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary series (Macon GA: Smyth & Helwys Publishing Incorporated, 2009), p. 23.

pattern that Paul followed fairly closely. Second, in the Greco-Roman world letters served the same purpose as a “visit.” These letters are sent in lieu of a visit because circumstances are stopping him from making a personal visit. Finally, it is highly likely that Paul had no idea that the letter he was writing would one day be regarded as Holy Scripture in the way that it is regarded today.³ As Paul begins his letter he lets his addressees know who he is and lays out his title of authority before them. Paul is an apostle, someone who is as we might say today, someone sent on a mission, a missionary. He holds to this task because it is the will of God Himself. He then adds that along with himself Timothy their brother who is to some extent a co-author with Paul in this endeavor, though some would disagree with this assessment. Clearly Timothy is portrayed in a different light than Paul and certainly not of the same authority, but simply as “the brother” (ὁ ἀδελφός). Certainly placing the article before the name of Timothy indicates that he is someone familiar to the audience, which has prompted Bible translators to translate here

³ Mitzi L. Minor, *2 Corinthians*, pp. 23-24.

as “our brother.” This however, is actually an interpretation of what is meant and not actually what is said by Paul here.

The address continues designating that this letter is addressed to the “church of God existing in Corinth, along with all the holy ones existing in the whole of Achaia.” Achaia is shown on the map to the right and was an area at the southern end of modern day Greece.⁴



One of the things of note is how Paul addresses his audience. He addresses them as “Holy Ones,” or “Saints” (τοῖς ἁγίοις). This usage causes confusion for us today because of the Catholic usage of this terminology as designating one who is thought to have an exceptional level of holiness, a likeness to God, one who has been declared a saint by the Catholic church. Paul does not use the term in that way, he uses this term as a designation of all who have become disciples of Jesus Christ, all who have put on Jesus. For Paul this is a term that applies to all who are Christians and though honorific in nature it should also

⁴ Map from - By Shadowxfox - Own work, CC BY-SA 4.0, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=45059691>

act as a challenge to remind us of our calling to holiness and to be like God more and more. For Paul there is a reference both to the saving work that has been performed by God, but also a reminder that we are called back to our original mission of being image-bearers of God (Genesis 1:26-27). We are restored back to a state where we are now able, through the power of God, to fulfill our original destiny as human beings created in the image of God.

At verse 2 Paul inserts his typical greeting which is a prayer of blessing. This blessing begins with the focus on “grace” (χάρις) which is something that Paul continually focuses upon. He recognizes the need and the power of grace for those who would follow Christ as disciples. We are continually in need of the grace of God in order to maintain our relationship and to give us the “peace” (εἰρήνη) to continue our journey of life and discipleship. Notice the source from which he expects these things to come. It is not some sort of quest for something already within us. The source of “grace” and “peace” are from “God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” Very often in the West, among the philosophers of Greece and others, there was a search for something buried deep within a person that once released would

bring enlightenment and peace, this is not what Paul is praying for his audience to discover here. Here Paul is praying for gifts from above that will empower and inspire the Saints in their journey with God.

In verse 3, Paul begins the sentence with an adjective and there is no verb supplied at all. Because of this lack of a verb determining the meaning of what Paul is saying here requires some speculation. According to Greek grammar either the optative (“be”), or the indicative (“is”) can be supplied. The meaning of the adjective that Paul uses here (Εὐλογητός) comes into play here when trying to determine what he means to say. Paul could either mean to praise God, or he could be suggesting that “blessedness” is an intrinsic part of the character of God. Both are certainly true. Taking into consideration usage of such terms elsewhere (Ephesians 1:3 and 1 Peter 1:3), though the decision is difficult, it likely better to go with the indicative (“is”) here. Therefore, it would be better to go with the translation of the New English Translation here which has: **“Blessed is the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort,”** thus highlighting the nature of God. This

would also seem to align with what is said in verse 4 where Paul continues to highlight the role of God in blessing those who are in need of consolation.

Another thing of note here in verse 3 is a theme that will continue in several different permutations throughout not only 2 Corinthians, but also is heavily rooted in 1 Corinthians, which is Paul's usage of the concept of "Father." Here the reference is to God as "Father" while later on Paul will use this as a reference to himself and his role of providing guidance and even discipline to his children (2 Corinthians 2:1-4). Myrick makes a case that Paul uses the term "father" in a way that aligns more fully with Jewish usage than with Greek philosophical usage. His article is primarily focused on the issue of Paul's role in disciplining the Corinthians and what his expectations are. The picture of fatherhood that is painted in the Old Testament, and within ancient Judaism, is a picture that concentrates on a father correcting his children. This can especially be seen in passages from Proverbs (1:8; 4:1; 6:20; 15:5; 30:17). The right to discipline is founded on the foundational premise that fathers were to be obeyed, or there were severe consequences for the children. Note this message in

Proverbs 13:1: **“A wise son accepts his father’s discipline, but a scoffer does not listen to rebuke.”** (NET cf. 15:5; 29:15; 30:17).⁵

Here in verse 3 Paul lays a foundation for his audience for what is to come: some tough things that he must say to them as their spiritual father and giving them a direction to go when they are in need of consolation. Much of what Paul is going to say in this letter is going to be hard for his audience to hear and I believe that here in the introduction he is laying the foundation for the fact that they are going to be in need of comfort and an understanding of why Paul is correcting them. In standing in this role as spiritual father, Paul stands within Jewish traditions both in the Bible and of those that continued in the Second Temple period. In the Talmud and other Jewish writings the rabbis were depicted as spiritual fathers and on the basis of the Scriptural wisdom tradition they would confront and correct their disciples. The Qumran community also adopted the paternal tradition and therefore likens the role of pastoral leaders to that of a father (CD 13:9) who is actually obligated to “correct” and “test” his erring

⁵ Anthony A. Myrick, “‘Father’ Imagery in 2 Corinthians 1-9 and Jewish Paternal Tradition,” in *Tyndale Bulletin* 47:1 (1996), pp. 163-171.

children (1QS7; 8:21-24). In the *Psalms of Solomon* God's discipline of the righteous is likened to that of a father for his beloved son (*Psalms of Solomon* 13:7-10; 18:3-4, 7). This pastoral function for discipline was not seen as harsh and of condemnatory nature, but came from a spirit of love and mercy.⁶ Not disciplining a child was seen as unloving, uncaring and ungodly.

Paul will implicitly give warning to his audience in 2 Corinthians when he, Paul, in a fashion reminiscent of the Jewish paternal tradition demonstrates a father-like manner by confronting, disciplining and testing his spiritual children who had veered off the path of God's will (2 Corinthians 2:3-9; 7:8-10; 10:6). Rather than avoiding confrontational situations, which would be more our modern tendency, Paul, like a good Jewish father, appropriately took the hard step of disciplining his children even when this led to discomfort and pain for both him and his audience. Paul's pastoral function of correction is an act of love, echoing the Jewish tradition and was absolutely a necessity if the Corinthian church was going to grow in maturity and faith.⁷ Paul,


⁶ Anthony A. Myrick, "Father' Imagery in 2 Corinthians 1-9 and Jewish Paternal Tradition," in *Tyndale Bulletin* 47:1 (1996), pp. 163-171.

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in the early verses of 2 Corinthians, links the idea of Father with the mercy and consolation of God in a manner that aligned with this perspective of a father's role as disciplinarian providing this discipline not in some capricious fashion, but motivated from love.

In verse 5, Paul refers to the sufferings that he and his companions are going through as being "abundant," but as abundant as those afflictions are so also is the consolation equally abundant through Christ. The affliction that Paul is talking about there is not simply any and all affliction in some general way. The affliction that he talking about here is the affliction that comes as the direct result of Paul and his companions service to Christ.⁸ It is important to note that in no way does Paul seek to convince the Christians at Corinth that somehow to live as a Christian is to live some kind of charmed life. So often today there seems to be the idea that suffering will either be less for the Christian, or perhaps even non-existent. This message is as diametrically opposed to the Christian message as is possible and is a perversion of that message. Paul, nor Christ, never promises a life free from suffering. A disciple follows the master, in this case Jesus Christ,

⁸ Mitzi L. Minor, *2 Corinthians*, pp. 27-28.



who suffered, and bled, and died. This is at the heart of the discipleship for the Christian, suffering.

In verse 6, Paul takes this topic of suffering even further stating their suffering is endured to benefit the Corinthian Christians. He goes on to indicate as he goes into verse 7 that there should be the expectation that they too will suffer. Paul makes clear connections between following Christ and suffering and hope. They are all tied up together in an interconnected mass that cannot be separated as long as one is walking the path of discipleship. For Paul too there appears to be a clear connection between suffering, consolation and hope. Walking this path seems to give Paul a confidence that this is the true path of faith. If there was no suffering then could a person truly be on the path of Christ? How would it be possible for a disciple to be following their master, who suffered, and bled, and died, and to have no suffering themselves?

At the same time, as we move into verse 8 Paul makes it clear that the suffering that they have endured has been tremendously harsh; so harsh in fact that they have despaired of life itself. Verse 9, it was as if they had received a sentence of

death, but even in this Paul keeps his eyes clearly on his prize and focuses upon trust in God. That focus is placed in God as the one who “raises the dead.” The faith here reminds me of the faith of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego (Daniel 3:17-18⁹). Verse 10 then continues this tremendous message of faith; a faith that God will continue to rescue, and then Paul moves into verse 11 expressing a confidence in the Corinthians that this will be all the more the case because of the prayers that they will lift up on Paul and his companions’ behalf. Paul links their prayers in such a way with his own faith as to indicate his confidence not only in God, but also in the Corinthian Christians.

Verse 12, begins in a very defensive manner indicating that Paul and Timothy have behaved in a way that has not gone in any way against their conscience. Their behavior has been marked by pure motives and sincerity in a manner that is beyond merely human effort; they have done this by the grace of God. Their conduct has been, both toward the Christians at Corinth, and toward the world, excellent. This defensive stance would seem to

⁹ **17** If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to deliver us from it, and he will deliver us from Your Majesty’s hand. ¹⁸ But even if he does not, we want you to know, Your Majesty, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up.” NIV - 2011.

indicate that there was at least the perception on the part of Paul that there were some bad motives being ascribed to Paul and Timothy. Paul wants his audience to understand that the things he has done are from God and not simply his own desires, or wishes. Paul is so sure that these things are correct and good that there is the expectation (verse 14) that on the Day of the Lord Jesus, which appears to refer to the day of judgment, Paul and Timothy will be able to boast in them. Paul proclaims a powerful confidence in their interconnectedness. They will be able to boast in each other. They share in the same motives and confidence.

Starting in verse 15, the defensiveness of Paul continues as he now reverts to the first person and answers what seems to be a charge that Paul has been double-minded in his plans to visit Corinth. Paul indicates that he does not make his plans according to ordinary human standards. Paul, in this section, connects his plans, and indeed his heart, with the Spirit in such a manner as to indicate that indeed the people of Corinth are special to him. Paul seems to have been severely stung by whatever accusations he is answering; those accusations in some way have expressed that Paul is less than sincere, double-minded, and did not really want

to come and visit the Corinthians. Paul seeks to link everything back to the Spirit and express a love and confidence that can be nothing less than of divine origin with regard to his plans.

He goes on to express in verses 23 and 24 that he did not come to them earlier in order to spare them. In 2:1, we are told that it was his intent to spare them from another painful visit. The implication clearly being that he wanted them to have more time to come to their senses and to begin to act in a manner that would not require Paul to be so harsh with them. In other words, it was their behavior, their bad behavior, that kept him away. Paul here sets up much of what is to come, but continues this theme of him being in the role of a caring and concerned parent, along with God. In this role, he has obligations to act on their behalf; to act as a father disciplining unruly children who were in need of correction.


Verse 24 expresses the concern that he does not wish to be perceived as too harsh, or domineering and as if standing in the role of a father who does not wish to exasperate his children (Ephesians 6:4; Colossians 3:21) Paul avoids, for a time, coming to them. Paul indicates a solidarity of himself and his companions with the Corinthians that seeks the desired outcome of

“joy” (χαρᾶς). This little word “joy” passes us by in this text without much notice from theologians and interpreters, but it actually stands as a crucial word in the text. It stands out as the purpose, the reason, or at least a reason, that Paul and his companions are working for the people of Corinth. Some writing has been done concerning “joy” among modern psychologists as they seek to treat their patients. Henry Close gives this speculation regarding the importance of “joy.” “Yet I wonder if the major part of healing and growth is not so much the working through of problems as it is the awakening of this dimension of life—the dimension of joy.”¹⁰

Close recounts some of his exploration of “joy” and its importance in life. One of his patients once stated that, “... it was wrong to expect perpetual happiness from life. Instead, there were isolated moments of joy in which life really became alive. It was the existence of these moments that gave life its meaning and made it worthwhile.”¹¹ I suspect that it is the case that Paul, a man filled with the Holy Spirit of God, recognizes the power and the importance of “joy.” He understands that it can sustain us through

¹⁰ Henry T. Close, “The Experience of Joy,” in *The Journal of Pastoral Care*, 35:3 (1981), pp. 177-187.

¹¹ Henry T. Close, “The Experience of Joy,” in *The Journal of Pastoral Care*, 35:3 (1981), pp. 177-187.



difficult and troubled times and hope of attaining more “joy” propels us to do things that otherwise would be quite impossible for us. Defining exactly what “joy” is can be difficult and so often it is only possible to describe joy in terms of events, or happenings, but in reality it is not the events, or happenings that bring the joy; joy is more mystical and mysterious than that.

So often within the context of Christianity “joy” has been seen as the purview of mystics and therefore seen as somewhat inaccessible to ordinary people. If, however, this is something that is really important it is a serious mistake to ignore and marginalize it. So often our approach to God has been through our sin and his providing salvation for us from it. Therefore, this means that we only approach God through our pathology, through something negative. Surely this is not intended to be the only way that we experience God; as a cure to what ails us. Surely God is far more than this; meant to be far more than this.¹² This seems to me to be another form of idolatry in which we form God into the image of what we need rather than seeking to grasp the magnitude and majesty of who and what He truly is.

¹² Henry T. Close, “The Experience of Joy,” in *The Journal of Pastoral Care*, 35:3 (1981), pp. 177-187.

The mystics on the other hand approach God both through their pathology and through joy. A common element in their approach to God is to be found in their humility. There is an undeniable humility in confessing one's sins, one's despair, one's bondage and one's emptiness. There is also an equal, or perhaps greater, humility that is necessary for a person truly to experience love, beauty, trust and joy. "It is a serious mistake to insist that the only approach to God is through our pathology."¹³ Joy is a major topic in the Bible and especially in the New Testament. There are far more references to joy than to sadness, weeping, mourning, anguish, anger and distress put together in the New Testament. The life of Jesus on earth embodies joy. Joy is a characteristic attribute of the Kingdom of God and it is the birthright of the every Christian man and woman. William Tyndale, in the 1525 *Prologue* to his translation of the New Testament, summed his thoughts up in this way by reminding us that "*euangelio* (that we call gospel) is a Greek word, and signifyth good, merry, glad and

¹³ Henry T. Close, "The Experience of Joy," in *The Journal of Pastoral Care*, 35:3 (1981), pp. 177-187.

joyful tidings, that maketh a man's heart glad and maketh him sing, dance and leap for joy.”¹⁴


We will explore this concept of “joy” more as we move along, but it should be noted that Paul is working for the “joy” of his audience in Corinth. He sees this as important and perhaps anticipated the fact that much of what he is about to say is going to be hard for them to take. He therefore wants them to understand his motivation and his hope. He seeks their joy. Through their remembrance of, and their hope for, joy they will be able to endure the hardship of what is to come and be able to continue on the road of discipleship. Paul, through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit guides them toward success as followers of Christ.

¹⁴ Graeme M. Griffin, “Whatever Became of Joy?” In *The Journal of Pastoral Care*, 40:2 (1986), pp. 143-149.

Synopsis

This letter is one of the most difficult in the New Testament for a variety of reasons, but not least because it has some hard things to say to its audience. Troublemakers, likely from Jerusalem, have been traveling around spreading discord and discontent in the churches Paul planted. 2 Corinthians seeks to deal with issues that are causing disunity and factions within the church there and are in danger of spreading even more widely. Paul seeks to use the convention of the letter in lieu of another painful visit in person. As Paul begins the letter he lets his audience know that he is doing these things as an “apostle” of Christ Jesus and not simply based on his own authority. Paul addresses his letter to people that he respects, as “holy ones,” and he has high standards for his expectations of them as such.

Paul sets out from the beginning letting them know that he seeks for them grace and peace from God and Jesus. He also lays out the role of God as a father bringing consolation and thus begins to lay the foundation for his parental role as one who brings discipline to those of the congregation who are in error. Paul, and his companions, have suffered much for the Christian



message and particularly for the people at Corinth. They are willing to do this for their consolation. Suffering is certainly a part of discipleship of Jesus Christ. Paul has the expectation that the Corinthians will pray for him, and his companions, and that God will rescue them again.

There is also a defensive element in this chapter where Paul is clearly aware of some disparaging motives that have been ascribed to him and his companions. In light of this, Paul seeks to assure them of the purity of his motives and the surety of his plans. He also makes them aware of the role of the Spirit in the making of his plans. He then goes on to express to them that a part of the reason he did not come was to spare them another painful visit. Behind Paul and his companions, motives is the good of the church in Corinth, and more than that their “joy.” In everything Paul is seeking the welfare of the church in Corinth. He also begins laying a foundation of hope that will allow them to hear the hard things he must say to them and central to this foundation is the concept of “joy.”

Questions

1. What do you think it means for Paul to be sent on a mission by God?
2. Are people sent on a mission by God today the way Paul was? Why, or why not?
3. What do you think it means for a person to be called a “saint?”
4. What are some of the responsibilities that go along with being called a “saint?”
5. How is being a “saint” related to being in community with other believers?
6. What is the role of a father in the consolation of a child? Why?
7. When you think of your father what are some images that come to mind? Why?
8. How do fathers and discipline relate to each other?
9. Is discipline necessary? Why, or why not?
10. What is the role of sufferings in life?
11. How are suffering and humility related?
12. How do you know if someone is humble?

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13. Is humility important? Why, or why not?
 14. What is hope and how do you get it?
 15. How do you think Paul perceives community from what you read in verses 12 through 14?
 16. What is the “seal” that Paul speaks about in verse 22?
 17. How important is “joy” to you? Why?
 18. Where does joy come from?
 19. How would you define joy?
 20. How does joy affect the way you perceive God?