



2 Corinthians

What we call Paul's second letter to the Corinthians was probably more likely at least his fourth letter to them (references in 1 and 2 Corinthians point to letters written before the ones we now have in the New Testament). By the time Paul wrote 2 Corinthians it is clear that relationships between the Corinthians and Paul have deteriorated badly. He knows he has hurt them but it is clear he has also been hurt by them. As a result 2 Corinthians reveals a vulnerable Paul probably more clearly than any other letter. In it Paul lays out his love for the Corinthians, his passion for the gospel as well as his belief that vulnerabilities are the way in which Christ's power is made complete and God's glory shines into the world.



How long will it take?

Reading time: 40 mins
Short of time? Just read 1.1-11; 3.6-4.12;
 5.16-21; 13.1-13



Genre

Epistle



Anything tricky?

A number of people don't think this is one epistle but at least two (with the join between chapters 9 and 10). This is certainly one of the more disjointed of Paul's letters (and not just between chapters 9 and 10), as you read it see what you think.



Inspiring quotes

And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit.

(2 Corinthians 3.18)

So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!

(2 Corinthians 5.17)

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

(2 Corinthians 12.9)



About the Author

2 Corinthians 1.1 gives the authors of the book as Paul and Timothy.

What do we know about him?

Paul is probably the best known of all the early Christians. Before encountering Jesus Christ on the road to Damascus, he was a zealous Pharisee who sought to maintain the purity of Judaism. After his experience on the Damascus road, he turned his zeal to proclaiming Jesus Christ among the Gentiles. This brought him into conflict with some other early Christians, not least Peter, who thought that followers of Jesus Christ should convert to Judaism. He travelled around the Roman Empire (though primarily in Asia Minor – modern-day Turkey – and Greece) proclaiming the good news of Jesus Christ and founding communities

of Christians as he went. He also wrote a large number of letters, 13 of which are preserved in the New Testament. 2 Corinthians is one of these.

Timothy was born in Lystra in Asia Minor of a Jewish mother and Greek father. Acts 16.1-3 recounts his meeting of Paul in Lystra and of Paul's desire to take him with him on his journeys. Paul often sent Timothy to communities that he had founded to take letters to them and so that he could report to Paul about what was going on, as indeed he did with the Thessalonians (see 1 Thessalonians 3.2 and 3.6). Two letters in the New Testament (1 and 2 Timothy) are reputed to be letters of encouragement from Paul to Timothy in Ephesus. Christian tradition identifies Timothy as the first Bishop of Ephesus.



About the times

2 Corinthians, like 1 Corinthians, was written in the early to mid-50s, possibly around ad 53-54.

What were people feeling?

The issue that lies behind 2 Corinthians is authority and leadership and what happens when relationships between leaders and communities break down. So here the people were feeling angry and hurt and Paul tried to mend the situation through the letter.



What kind of Book is it?

A epistle, though unlike some of Paul's letters, it reads as quite disjointed and uneven at times.



How is it structured?

1.1-2	Opening and greeting
1.3-7.16	Reflections on authority, glory and reconciliation
8.1-9.15	The importance of giving
10.1-13.10	On boasting and the super-apostles
13.11-13	Final greetings and blessing



Look out for...

As mentioned in the summary, a number of scholars think that 2 Corinthians is made up of more than one epistle. See what you think as you read – does it hang together? Could it be a single letter do you think?

The theme of boasting runs all the way through 2 Corinthians, look out for it and ask yourself what you think Paul is doing with the theme in the epistle.

Paul clearly has opponents in Corinth who were going out of their way to make his life difficult – look out for hints of who they were as you read and see if you can work out what the issue was between them and Paul.



What could this mean for me?

This letter was written when things were going badly wrong between Paul and the Corinthians. How do you think Paul handled this – is there anything to learn from for times when relationships between leaders and communities break down?



Discussion group questions

- Were there any parts of the book that you particularly liked or which inspired you?
- Were there any parts of the book that you disliked or which troubled you?
- What did *you* think the book was about?
- What did you think about Paul's repeated comments on boasting? Did you think they were subversive? Over-egging the pudding? Defensive? Hypocritical? Discuss what you think he was trying to say about boasting and what place boasting might have in the Christian faith.
- One of the themes that runs through the book is weakness and how we as Christians cope with things not going to plan. What difference might it make to our Christian faith if we took Paul's weakness message here more seriously?
- Another strand of teaching, particularly in chapters 8-9, is generosity. How did this make you feel? What is your view about generosity and the Christian faith?
- Did you read anything in the book that touched you, expanded your faith or made you think more deeply about your life and how you live it?



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