

2 Corinthians 1:1-11

The God of all Comfort

2 Corinthians is a personal and passionate appeal for the church at Corinth to accept the apostle Paul (6:11-13 & 7:2). The church seems to have been seduced by people called “super apostles” to value what is strong and impressive in the eyes of the world and distance themselves from what seems weak and unimpressive. Paul defends himself against charges that his extensive suffering, ordinary public speaking, refusal to take money from his hearers and his changing travel plans are signs that he is not worth following. Although the matter is deeply personal for Paul, his main concern is not for his own feelings, but for the Corinthian’s relationship with Jesus. (See 11:1-11).

1. In what ways might we as Christians look or be made to feel “weak” in the eyes of the world? How does this make you feel? What particular temptations come when we feel like this?

Read 2 Corinthians 1:1-11.

2. What do we learn from verses 1 & 2 about how Paul described himself and the Corinthians? In light of the background (see intro above) how might these descriptions serve Paul’s purpose?
3. In verse 3 God is praised as the “father of mercies and God of all comfort”. The idea of “comfort” has a rich Old Testament background. How does God comfort and promise to comfort his people in these passages from Isaiah? Isaiah 40:1-5 & 27-31, 49:13, 51:3 & 12-16, 52:7-10, 61:1-3, 66:12-13. How can these same promises be a comfort to us?
4. From verses 4-7...
 - a. What links does Paul make between Jesus and his ‘afflictions’ and comfort?
 - b. How does Paul’s experience of being comforted benefit the Corinthians?
 - c. What expectations about suffering and comfort can we form from these verses?
 - d. How does this paragraph address the accusation that when Christians (or Christian leaders) suffer it is a sign of weakness or that God is not with us?
5. In verses 8-11, Paul gives a specific example of being comforted in affliction.
 - a. What purpose/benefit did Paul see flowing from his suffering? (v 8-9) Have you seen or experienced this yourself?
 - b. What is it that particularly comforts Paul (v 9-10)? To what extent do you have this mindset? If your ‘hope’ is fuzzy or weak, how could you cultivate it to be ready for the time when suffering comes?
 - c. What else was important for Paul being comforted? (v 11)
6. To what extent do you experience the comfort that Paul speaks of here? Is there anything you personally, you as a group, or we as a whole church could do better/differently to facilitate the giving and receiving of this comfort?
7. Praise God for his comfort. Pray that those who are currently suffering, and we who will one day suffer, might experience his comfort, in a way that enables us (in turn) to comfort others.

2 Corinthians 1:12-2:13 Why Paul didn't visit?

1. What reactions might you have if your 'pastor' said he was coming to visit you, but then didn't, choosing instead (after a 'conflict' with you) to first preach the gospel in another area? Do you think you'd easily give him the "benefit of the doubt", be quick to criticize, or perhaps distance yourself from him? Why?

Read 2 Corinthians 1:12-2:13. (The map and summary of the history of the relationship between Paul and the Corinthians will help to make sense of some of the details).

2. In 1:12-22 Paul asserts and explains that, although he did change his mind and travel to Macedonia before coming to Corinth, he has been faithful.
 - a. What is Paul's assertion in v 12? What is his aim in defending himself (v 13-14)?
 - b. How do the points about God's faithfulness relate to Paul's claim to faithfulness? Try and summarize his argument in v 15-22 in your own words?
3. In 1:23-2:13 Paul calls on God as a witness to his motives.
 - a. Why didn't Paul come to Corinth in the way he'd originally planned, but instead made the 'painful' visit and sent a letter (v 1-4)? What were his motives?
 - b. From 2:5-11, what seems to have been the outcome of his approach? What does he now ask of the Corinthians?
 - c. Why did Paul then travel from Troas into Macedonia, rather than direct to Corinth? (For the significance of Titus see 7:5-9.)
4. What shapes/drives Paul's decision making? How does this passage help us to trust him as a genuine Apostle?
5. Can you think of situations when a godly minister/leader might make decisions that you find hard? By what criteria does this passage encourage you to judge them?
6. In what ways might your motives and priorities need to change to be like the apostle Paul's? (eg. Would you love brothers and sisters enough to make a 'painful' visit, write a painful letter or change your ministry plans – even if you know they have been in conflict with you?).
7. Pray that like Paul (following Jesus) you and the leaders of our church would love people who stray, seek to win them back to Christ and his Apostle, and then forgive them.

2 Corinthians 1:1-2:13 Paul & the Corinthians

2 Corinthians is a personal and passionate appeal for the church at Corinth to accept the apostle Paul (6:11-13 & 7:2). The church seems to have been seduced by people called “super apostles” to value what is strong and impressive in the eyes of the world and distance themselves from what seems weak and unimpressive. Paul defends himself against charges that his extensive suffering, ordinary public speaking, refusal to take money from his hearers and his changing travel plans are signs that he is not worth following. Although the matter is deeply personal for Paul, his main concern is not for his own feelings, but for the Corinthian’s relationship with Jesus. (See 11:1-11).

1. In what ways might we as Christians look or be made to feel “weak” in the eyes of the world? How does this make you feel? What particular temptations come when we feel like this?

Read 2 Corinthians 1:1-11.

2. What do we learn from verses 1 & 2 about how Paul described himself and the Corinthians? In light of the background (see intro above) how might these descriptions serve Paul’s purpose?
3. Paul says he has received God’s comfort when in the midst of his ‘afflictions’.
 - a. How did God comfort Paul?
 - b. What various benefits flow from Paul’s experience of being comforted?
 - c. What expectations about suffering and comfort can we form from these verses?
 - d. How does this paragraph address the accusation that when Christians (or Christian leaders) suffer it is a sign of weakness or that God is not with us?
4. To what extent do you experience the comfort that Paul speaks of here? Is there anything you personally, you as a group, or we as a whole church could do better/differently to facilitate the giving and receiving of this comfort?

Read 2 Corinthians 1:12-2:13.

In this section Paul defends his decision not to make an extended visit to Corinth on his way to Macedonia, but to go first to Macedonia. (The map and summary of the history of the relationship between Paul and the Corinthians will help to make sense of some of the details).

5. Why did Paul go to Macedonia rather than Corinth? What shapes/drives his decision making? How does this passage help us to trust him as a genuine Apostle?
6. Can you think of situations when a godly minister/leader might make decisions that you find hard? By what criteria does this passage encourage you to judge them?
7. In what ways might your motives and priorities need to change to be like the apostle Paul’s? (eg. Would you love critical brothers and sisters enough to make a ‘painful’ visit, write a painful letter or change your ministry plans for their sake?).

A reconstruction of the communications between Paul and the Corinthians

1. **First Visit** (1 ½ years) – Paul visited Corinth on his 2nd Missionary Journey and planted the church. (Acts 18).
2. Letter 1 (now lost) – referred to in 1 Corinthians 5:9 & Corinthian reply mentioned in 1 Corinthians 7:1.
3. Letter 2 (= **1 Corinthians**) written from Ephesus on his 3rd journey, mentions a planned second long visit, after passing through Macedonia. See 1 Corinthians 16:5.
4. **Painful Visit** – 2 Corinthians 2:1 seems to indicate that Paul next made a brief & 'painful' visit (presumably during the 3 years he was based in Ephesus – Acts 19).
5. Letter 3 – a 'severe' letter (now lost) following up the painful visit is mentioned in 2 Cor 2:3-4.
6. After this, rather than travelling first to Corinth and then to Macedonia (as he presumably had said he would in his painful visit or severe letter) Paul follows his original plan (1 Cor 16:5) and goes via Troas to Macedonia (2 Cor 1:15-16).
7. Letter 4 (= **2 Corinthians**). While in Macedonia, after receiving good news (from Titus) of the positive effect of the 'severe' letter (2 Cor 7:6-7), and bad news of the influence of the 'super-apostles', Paul writes to prepare for a coming third visit (2 Cor 12:14 & 13:1,10).
8. **Third Visit** – Presumably part of his journey from Macedonia to "Greece" in Acts 20:1-2.



2 Corinthians 2:14-3:6 Who is Competent?

1. Do you sometimes feel inadequate to “share Christ” with other people? If so, in what situations? How does this make you feel?

After answering challenges about his suffering and his change of plans, from 2:14-7:4 Paul sets out a wonderful description of authentic Christian ministry. (Notice how in 7:5 Paul returns to where he left off in 2:12-13). His aim in this is to appeal to the Corinthians to accept him as their apostle (6:11-13 & 7:2-4). Following the somewhat depressing and defensive tone of 1:12-2:13, 2:14 introduces a positive note: “But thanks be to God...”

Read 2 Corinthians 2:14-3:6.

2. The image of verse 14 is of a Roman victory parade – where a conquering ruler rides triumphantly into the city with his captives trailing behind in a show of public humiliation. The captives were on display to bring glory to the victorious general. In Paul’s image, who is the victorious ruler, and where does Paul see himself (and us)?
3. Apparently it was a custom in these parades for sweet smelling incense to be offered in thanks to the ‘gods’. In verses 15-16 what aroma is being spread about? Who or what do we smell like? What responses and outcomes result from this? What is at stake? (No wonder Paul asks “who is competent for this?”!)
4. From verses 14-17 what is God’s role, and what is our role in spreading the aroma? How might we be tempted to think/act in ways that are inconsistent with these principles?
5. In 3:1-3 Paul raises the issue of how a true minister of the gospel is commended to others. In contrast to physical “letters of recommendation” (like our CVs), what does Paul say commends his authenticity? How might this be understood and applied in our context today?
6. In 3:4-6 Paul returns to his question of 2:16 – “Who is competent for this?” What is his answer?
7. How does this whole passage help us to have confidence when we otherwise feel inadequate to speak to others about Jesus? What steps could you take to apply this your heart to help lessen the feelings of inadequacy that might stop you from speaking?
8. Thank God for his gospel work in the world. Pray that he would work powerfully through us, with all our inadequacies, to bring life to those around us.

2 Corinthians 3:7-18

Glorious Ministry

1. What ideas / images / concepts does the word “glory” bring to your mind? In what context might you ever say that something is “glorious”?

Using arguments we wouldn't normally think about, 2 Corinthians 3:7-18 is a hard passage for us to understand. Its overall thrust however is clear: New Covenant ministry (the ministry of the gospel) is more glorious than Old Covenant ministry, even that of the great Moses. This gives us great reason for boldness.

2. Read 2 Corinthians 3:1-18 along with the background to this passage in Exodus 34:29-35. What was impressive about the ministry of Moses? How might something like this be attractive to people today?
3. In what ways does Paul see that New Covenant ministry is more glorious than that of the Old Covenant?

	Old Covenant Ministry	New Covenant Ministry
Location (v 3)		
Means (v 3)		
Outcome (v 6)		
Result (v 9)		
Duration (v 10-11)		

4. Time to think! Why do you think seeing all this leads Paul to be bold in his ministry (v 12)?
5. From verses 12-16 Paul further explains his boldness, by comparing the people involved in the ministry of each covenant. Noting that the image of the “veil” seems to be put to different uses, what are the differences between...
 - a. The messengers of each covenant?
 - b. The recipients of each covenant?
6. Verses 17 & 18 seem to be a climax to Paul's thinking. Try and make sense of this section by listing (in your own words) the wonderful privileges of being a Christian, of living and serving in a New Covenant.
7. From a human perspective being a Christian serving in New Covenant ministry can seem to be far from “glorious”. We are tempted to be ashamed, afraid, feel discouraged and overwhelmed, or have doubts about how real and powerful the gospel is. By reflecting on the true nature of New Covenant ministry, Paul is motivated to ‘not give up’ (4:1 & 4:16-17). How might this perspective similarly help you to ‘not give up’ in the ministry of making and growing disciples of Jesus?

2 Corinthians 4:1-6 Simple Ministry

1. When are ministers and churches (and you) most tempted to lose heart, or even give up faithfully proclaiming the apostolic gospel about Jesus?

In this section of the letter (2:14-7:4), Paul is describing authentic Christian ministry. His aim is for the Corinthians to accept him fully (7:2-4), and to see the ministry of the 'super-apostles' for what it is (see 5:12). Having shown how his competence is from God (2:14-3:6), and that he is privileged to be a minister of the new covenant (3:7-18), Paul now says "*since we have this ministry... we do not give up.*"

2. In verse 2, Paul sets out the method of authentic ministry, describing both what he renounces and what he does.
 - a. How might Christians today be tempted to deceive or distort the message of the gospel? (Think about what might be added, subtracted or adapted).
 - b. What other 'shameful secret things' might we need to avoid? (Try and think of methods we use, or be tempted to use, that could fall under this description).
 - c. What does Paul's positive method look like in our world? To what extent do we trust this approach?
3. In verses 3 & 4 Paul describes the reason why many don't receive and respond positively to the gospel.
 - a. To what extent are you conscious of this reality?
 - b. How does acknowledging the role of 'the god of this age' (Satan), and recognizing that only the minds of 'those who are perishing' are blinded, help us to persevere in prayerfully proclaiming Christ?
4. In verses 5-6 Paul summarizes his message.
 - a. How are we tempted to 'proclaim ourselves'? (Think about the kind of conversations you might have at work or in the community)
 - b. Do you think the message we preach is sufficiently focused on "Jesus Christ as Lord"? Why or why not?
 - c. Why (in verse 6) does Paul say that he preaches Jesus Christ as Lord? Try and describe in your own words what God has done.
5. In recent years it has been popular for Christians to repeat (or re-tweet) the saying "Preach the gospel. Use words if necessary". What do you think the apostle Paul would have made of this approach?
6. Having read this description of authentic gospel ministry, for what can you give thanks? What would be good to pray for yourselves, and for those who preach in our churches?

2 Corinthians 4:7-5:10 Living for Eternity

1. How much do you think about “eternity”? To what extent does it actually shape your life now?
2. Recall from previous studies that, in this section of the letter (2:14-7:4), Paul is describing authentic Christian ministry. His aim is for the Corinthians to accept him fully (7:2-4). In particular, it seems that Paul’s suffering is a problem for those who judge things by ‘outward appearance’ (5:12). Chapter 4 begins and ends with the words “we do not give up” (v 1 & v 16). **Read verses 7-15.**
 - a. What sense do you get from verses 8 & 9 of the degree of suffering Paul experienced in his ministry? (You might also like to fill out the picture by reading 11:22-33).
 - b. What purposes does Paul see in his suffering (helping him not to give up)? For whose benefit does he persevere? (Look for the ‘so that’ statements in v 7, 10, 12 & 15.)
 - c. How might these same purposes help you to keep going when Christian service is hard? How might seeing these help you to encourage someone else not to give up?
3. In verse 14 Paul mentioned his faith that God would one day raise him from the dead. From verse 16 his focus shifts to his own suffering, death and resurrection. Read 4:16-5:10.
 - a. What do we learn here about Paul’s understanding of life now, and about his longings for eternity? (v 1-4)
 - b. Why is Paul confident about his eternal future? (v 5-8)
 - c. In light of all this, what is Paul’s aim in life? What other reality motivates him to pursue this aim? (v 9-10)
4. How does this section ‘speak to’ the Corinthian problem of judging Paul by ‘outward appearance’ (5:12)?
5. How might we be tempted to focus on ‘what is seen’ (on what is ‘temporary’), and to walk ‘by sight’ rather than ‘by faith’?
6. How else might thinking like the apostle make a difference to
 - a. Our aims in life?
 - b. Our perseverance through hard times?
 - c. Facing suffering and death?
7. What does this part of the Bible lead us to pray about?

2 Corinthians 5:11-6:13 An Open Heart

In this part of the letter, Paul is reaching the climax of his 'appeal'. Facing criticism from those who "take pride in outward appearance, rather than in the heart" (5:12), Paul 'opens wide his heart' to the Corinthians, and calls on them to respond to him.

1. Read the whole passage (5:11-6:13). What does Paul specifically say is his purpose in writing this letter? What does he call on the Corinthians to do?

2. Paul 'opens his heart' to the Corinthians by describing what motivates him to engage in gospel ministry, even if it looks unimpressive to those who judge by outward appearance. In each of these sections, how is Paul motivated by what he understands of God and what he has done / is doing / will do?
 - a. v 11-13 (see also v 9-10)

 - b. v 14-15

 - c. v 16-17

 - d. v 18-21

3. To what extent are the realities that motivate Paul also 'real' for us? How might we allow our own thinking and living to be motivated by these?

4. In 6:1-2 Paul makes a direct & urgent appeal to the Corinthians. From the context of this letter, what do you think he has in mind when he calls on them not to "receive God's grace in vain"? How do the things that motivate Paul, also support his appeal?

5. From 6:3-10 Paul commends his ministry by being open about its character. Try and summarize in a short phrase what commends God's ministers:
 - a. v 4-5

 - b. v 6-7

 - c. v 8-10

6. What features of the list would give you confidence to accept someone's ministry to you? How does it challenge the criteria by which we might be tempted to judge ourselves or others?

7. Pray together that we might both recognize and exhibit the marks of genuine ministers of the gospel – not taking pride in outward appearance, but what is in the heart. Pray that we would accept the teaching of the Apostle Paul, not receiving God's grace in vain. Pray also for God's ministers in our church and city to persevere in lovingly and boldly proclaiming the truth, and for churches to accept them and the truth they preach.

2 Corinthians 6:14-7:16 Godly Repentance

Paul had written a strong letter to the Corinthians calling on them to deal with someone in their church who was involved in a serious sin. Then he went to Macedonia and had 'no rest' as he waited for his messenger (Titus) to bring news of how the church in Corinth had responded to his letter (2:1-13). Had they accepted Paul's call for them to repent?

1. Read 2 Corinthians 6:14-7:16. What news of the Corinthian response did Titus bring to Paul? What sense do you get from Paul's language as to how he felt?
2. Re-read 6:14-7:1. These verses come in the middle of two appeals for the Corinthians to accept Paul (6:13 & 7:2). The 'flipside' of accepting Paul (and therefore Christ) is to separate from all that is impure. Perhaps Paul has in mind false teachers who preach a different gospel & turn people away from him (5:12,11:4). Perhaps not all the Corinthians had repented of involvement in pagan idolatry and sexual immorality (13:21). Certainly this is a general principle for all Christian people.
 - a. What do you think it means for us today to "not be mismatched with unbelievers", to "come out from them and be separate", to "cleanse ourselves from every impurity of the flesh and spirit"?
 - b. In what situations do you personally (and we as a church) find this challenging?
 - c. What thinking (from this passage) will help us to keep separating ourselves from what is impure?
3. From 7:8 Paul writes of his joy & comfort that, even though his challenging letter to the Corinthians initially grieved them, it ultimately led to their repentance.
 - a. What are the contrasting characteristics of the two kinds of grief? (v 10)
 - b. Can you think of examples of these two kinds of grief over sin (in yourself or others)?
 - c. What were the features of the Corinthian repentance (see v 11) that led Paul to be comforted (v12-13a)?
 - d. Are there any areas of your life, where you experience sorrow over sin, but where real change has not yet followed? What could you do to actually change?
 - e. In what ways would verses 13b-16 have reassured the Corinthians?
4. This section of the letter shows us a wonderful model in Paul 'pastoring' the Christians at Corinth. What might we learn from his example when we see other Christians in spiritual danger from false teaching or involvement in sin, and when we see signs of God's grace in their lives?
5. What would be good for you to pray in response to hearing God's voice from this passage?