

GOSPEL of *Grace*
FELLOWSHIP

2 Corinthians

Jesus Christ, Our Sufficiency

by Dana Burkinshaw

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F - L - I - G - H - T

F – The apostle Paul wrote the book of 2 Corinthians (2 Cor. 1:1). Paul was around 50 years old and at the end of his third missionary journey when he penned this letter. Departing from Ephesus (where he had stayed for more than two years), he headed to Macedonia to pursue various ministry opportunities. It was in Macedonia that he wrote 2 Corinthians, hoping for a chance to make a personal visit to the Corinthian church.

Paul wrote 2 Corinthians between AD 56 & 57 (a month or so after 1 Corinthians) from Philippi.

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L – Sometime after Paul wrote 1 Corinthians, false teachers infiltrated the church at Corinth, spreading opposition against Paul because they thought he was unqualified to be an apostle of Jesus Christ. Their information began to erode the church’s confidence in Paul, so he sent Titus as a representative to deal with the situation, and as a result, the majority of the church reconsidered their attitude and repented of their actions. Paul wrote 2 Corinthians to express his joy at their turnaround and to appeal to them to accept his authority.

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L – Paul wrote more about himself in this letter than in any other. He explained his ministry in the first 7 chapters, talked about the collection for the saints in chapters 8-9, and defended his apostleship in the last 4 chapters. Several times throughout the book – especially in his fool’s speech (2 Cor. 11:16-33) – he referred to the many hardships he had suffered for the gospel. Overall, though, as he explained his absence, enlisted their help, and established his own apostolic credentials, Paul’s key word was *encouragement*. His affection for the Corinthian church, though stern in places, is clear throughout.

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I –

- Paul’s Correction (1:1-2:13)
- Paul’s Explanation (2:14-6:10)
- Paul’s Exhortation (6:11-7:16)
- Paul’s Collection (8:1-9:15)
- Paul’s Vindication (10:1-13:13)

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G – God’s plan to populate his kingdom with redeemed people centers on what may be called **the Great Exchange**: “He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him” (5:21). This verse is perhaps the clearest & most succinct declaration in the whole of the Bible of what theologians refer to as vicarious (or substitutionary) atonement – that God made Jesus a substitute for us, to pay for our sin.

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G – As Isaiah wrote, “He was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement for our peace was upon him, and by his stripes we are healed” (Isa. 53:5). The prophet was seeing this Great Exchange, God giving us his righteousness in exchange for our sin. To us it seems like God got a bad deal – all our failures, botches, shortcomings, abuses, infractions, & filthiness for all his righteousness, blamelessness, & perfection. But that was his plan all along: At the cross, God treated Jesus the way we deserve to be treated so that he could treat us the way Jesus deserves to be treated. This truth is the salient core of the gospel message.

F-L-I-G-H-T

G – If you take that to heart, all the hardship you go through in this life has a much greater purpose. That truth can help you past the pain. “Our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory” (2 Cor. 4:17). Your suffering is not hopeless, but will be worth it in the end. But because Paul opened his heart to make these points, being straightforward & honest about his own personal hardships, they made a deeper impact on the Corinthians and still resonate with us today.

F-L-I-G-H-T

H – Corinth was a prominent city in NT times, known particularly for its theaters, athletics, religions, & cultural life – and for the seedy side of each of those things as well. Being a seaport city it was ready-made for the sleazy-made-easy activities for which this traveler’s town had become known.

Paul visited the city multiple times to preach the gospel & encourage the Christians in the area. During his first visit to Corinth, sometime around AD 50, Paul stayed for 18 months & helped plant the seeds that would germinate into the Corinthian church (probably in AD 52). It was during Paul’s 3rd missionary journey (AD 52-57) that he most likely wrote his letters to the Corinthians.

Map of Corinth



View of Corinth



F-L-I-G-H-T

T – **Don’t waste your suffering.** As an apostle, Paul experienced an abundance of persecution – and not just from the world, but from within the church as well. As hard as it may be, God has a purpose for whatever you’re going through. Making the most of your suffering is a sign of true Christian maturity, which produces contentment and joy.

F - L - I - G - H - T

T – Seek & promote forgiveness, especially in the church.
Paul encouraged the church to restore an individual who had repented of an offense for which Paul had recommended forbidding his attendance in 1 Corinthians (2 Cor. 2:7). Further, he told them to embrace the man again, “lest Satan should take advantage of us; for we are not ignorant of his devices” (v.11). Allowing unforgiveness in the church would play right into the devil’s hands, giving him a foothold from which to divide the congregation.

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F - L - I - G - H - T

T – Ministry is not an easy road. Many people think serving the Lord by working for a church must be great – you get to work with other believers for the glory of God, after all! While that’s true, ministry is by no means easy. What Paul experienced – trials both in & outside the church, physical hardship, in-the-trenches spiritual warfare – isn’t unusual; it’s the norm.

Cheerful giving is part of your faith. You can tell a lot about a person’s spirituality (or lack thereof) from his attitude about money. Paul praised the Corinthians for willingly giving to his ministry (2 Cor. 9:2). The spiritual benefits of giving follow the principle of sowing and reaping. “So let each one give as he purposes in his heart, not grudgingly or of necessity; for God loves a cheerful giver” (v. 7).

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To Whom Written?

The letter was written to a church that Paul founded on his second missionary journey (Acts 18:1-17). In his letter Paul addresses two groups in the church at Corinth:

- Majority (1-9) – “you all” – jubilant in tone (2:3-5; 3:1-2; 5:10; 7:13)
- Minority (10-13) – “some” – sad & severe in tone (10:2,12; 11:4; 12:21)

There were false teachers who had infiltrated the church. Precisely who they were is a subject of debate. There are three main views:

- Hellenistic Jews claiming to be in the line of Moses
- Gnostic or Docetic false teachers denying Christ’s humanity
- Palestinian Jews claiming to be apostles of Christ (11:22)

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Contrast with 1 Corinthians

1 Corinthians	2 Corinthians
objective & practical	subjective & personal
systematic	sentimental
pagan influence	Judaistic influence
Paul’s mind	Paul’s heart
character of church	character of Paul

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Purposes of 2 Corinthians

- To answer the false teachers who had entered the church at Corinth (11:13-15)
- To defend his apostleship & message (12:12)
- To reveal his trials & triumphs as an apostle of Christ (chaps. 4, 11)
- To show the consolation provided in the service of Christ (1:3-7; 4:17)
- To encourage their giving to the poor (chaps. 8-9)
- Of course, overall, it was written to encourage the Corinthians to be jubilant & triumphant in their Christian faith (2:14).

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Theme, Key Verse, Doctrine

Theme of 2 Corinthians: Jubilation in Christ
Key Verse “Now thanks be to God who always leads us in triumph in Christ” (2:14).
Doctrinal Value:

- Old & New Covenant (3:6-18)
- Substitutionary Atonement (5:21)
- Reconciliation to God (5:18-20)
- Separation from the World (6:14)
- Life & Death (5:1-10)
- The Trinity (13:14)
- The Nature of an Apostle (12:12; 1 Cor. 9:1; 15:5-7; Acts 1:21-22)

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Paul's Life

There are details of Paul's life in this book not found elsewhere in his writings:

- He had visions (12:1-4).
- He suffered from a thorn in the flesh (12:7).
- He suffered many perils (11:23-27).

More than any other letter of Paul, 2 Corinthians allows us a glimpse into his feelings about himself, about his apostolic ministry, and about his relation to the churches he founded & nurtured. This letter is autobiographical in tone, though not in framework or substance.

The Painful Visit

After writing 1 Corinthians from Ephesus, Paul found it necessary to make "a painful visit" to Corinth and back – painful because of the strained relationship between him and the Corinthians at the time. Luke does not record this visit in Acts. It is to be inferred, however, from 2 Corinthians 12:14; 13:1-2, where Paul describes his coming visit as the "third." Apart from the inferred painful visit, he has visited Corinth only once before. The statement in 2 Corinthians 2:1, "For I decided not to make another painful visit to you," implies a past painful visit that can hardly be identified with his first coming to give them the joyful tidings of salvation through Jesus Christ.

The Lost "Sorrowful Letter"

Whatever the reason for Paul's making the short, painful visit, he was unsuccessful in bringing the church into line. On returning to Ephesus, therefore, he wrote a now lost "sorrowful letter" to Corinth, which at first he regretted having sent (2 Cor. 2:4; 7:8). Despite frequent attempts at identification, his descriptions of the sorrowful letter do not fit 1 Corinthians, which exhibits considerable criticism on Paul's part, but hardly any sorrow.

The Lost "Sorrowful Letter"

So the sorrowful letter is his second lost one to Corinth. It commanded the church to discipline a particularly strident individual who was leading the opposition against Paul (2 Cor. 2:5-10). Titus carried the letter to Corinth.

Meanwhile, knowing that Titus would return via Macedonia & Troas and being anxious to hear from Titus the reaction of the Corinthians, Paul left Ephesus & waited in Troas. When Titus failed to arrive quickly, Paul went on to Macedonia, where Titus finally met him and reported that the majority in the church had repented of their rebellion against Paul & had disciplined the leader of opposition to him (2 Cor. 2:12-13; 7:4-16).

Summary of Corinthian Church

- Paul evangelizes Corinth during his second missionary journey.
- Paul writes a **lost letter** in which he commands the Corinthian church to disassociate from professing Christians to live immorally.
- Paul writes **1 Corinthians** from Ephesus during his third missionary journey to deal with a variety of problems in the church.
- Paul makes a quick, "painful" visit from Ephesus to Corinth & back to straighten out the problems at Corinth but fails to accomplish his purpose.

Summary of Corinthian Church

- Paul sends another **lost letter**, called the "sorrowful letter," in which he commands the Corinthians to discipline his leading opponent in the church.
- Paul leaves Ephesus & anxiously waits for Titus, first at Troas & then in Macedonia.
- Titus finally arrives with good news that the church has disciplined Paul's opponent & that most of the Corinthians have submitted to Paul's authority.
- Paul writes **2 Corinthians** from Macedonia (still on the third missionary journey) in response to Titus' favorable report.

1:1-3:3

The letter opens with a greeting & thanksgiving for **comfort** from God in persecutions & hardships. Paul opened his heart to the church he helped found at Corinth, extending God's grace & blessing his name – not because that was a spiritual-sounding thing to do, but because it was God's grace & blessing that had allowed him to survive a number of trials with a full heart, and he wanted those things to comfort the Corinthians too.

Paul then begins to describe his ministry as sincere & holy and defends himself against the charge of vacillation – failure to carry out a threatened further visit – by claiming that his words are just as affirmative as the promises of God in Christ and by explaining that he has delayed his visit to give the Corinthians time for repentance. Their repentance would make for an arrival under happier circumstances than otherwise.

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1:1-3:3

Part of Paul's purpose was to let the Corinthians know that he wasn't looming over their shoulders, looking to criticize & judge them. He was standing with them & pulling for them, and when he had previously sought to correct their behavior, it gave him no joy to use tough love. *"For out of much affliction and anguish of heart I wrote to you, with many tears, not that you should be grieved, but that you might know the love which I have so abundantly for you"* (2:4).

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1:1-3:3

Pleased that the Corinthian church has disciplined his leading opponent, Paul advises **restoration** of the man into churchly fellowship. This would be shown especially by allowing him to participate again in the Lord's Supper. This section closes with a metaphor of Christ as a victorious general entering Rome in **triumphal procession**, and another metaphor in which the Corinthian Christians, as Paul's converts, are a **letter of recommendation** for Paul written by Christ himself.

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3:4-7:16

Paul now describes the superiority of his gospel over the Mosaic law. The fading of God's glory from the face of Moses when he descended from Sinai represents the **temporariness** of the Mosaic covenant. Christians are free from the condemnation of the law. But just as Moses reflected the fading glory of the old covenant, Christians should now reflect the **permanent, greater, and increasing glory** of the new covenant.

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3:4-7:16

How amazing that God should entrust the preaching of this glorious gospel of the new covenant to poor, weak human beings! But although we feel our inadequacy, writes Paul, we do not despair. The hope of resurrection makes us overlook our present physical dangers in preaching the gospel. With awareness of tremendous privilege & responsibility as a minister of the new covenant, Paul claims **conscientiousness & integrity** no matter how adverse or favorable the conditions of his ministry.

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8:1-9:15

Paul shifted the emphasis to giving. He was taking up a collection for fellow believers in Jerusalem who were suffering through a financial crisis. Knowing that God is faithful both when you have needs & to use you when others have needs, it only makes sense to give joyfully. You can give out of sheer obedience, or you can enjoy doing it, knowing that you can't outgive God and that he loves it when you take pleasure in giving back to him. You can either be a sad giver (doing it grudgingly), a mad giver (out of necessity), or a glad giver (cheerfully).

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8:1-9:15

Pleading for a generous offering to the church in Jerusalem, Paul presents the **liberality of Macedonian Christians** as worthy of Corinthian imitation. Even more so is the **self-sacrifice of Christ**. Sometime *you* may need help, Paul argues. Furthermore, you eagerly seized on the idea of such an offering when I first mentioned it some time ago. Do not prove that my bragging to the Macedonians about you zeal was unfounded.

10:1-13:13

The opponents of Paul have accused him of boldness when absent, cowardice when present. He therefore reminds the Corinthians that **meekness** is a virtue of Christ. But like Christ he can be **bold** in their presence if he wants – and will be, if necessary, though in the Lord, not in himself.

10:1-13:13

In these chapters Paul presents the credentials of his apostolic ministry:

- His sincerity as a preacher (he did not even accept wages from the Corinthians)
- His extensive sufferings
- Special revelations from God
- Miracle-working powers

10:1-13:13

But Paul carefully guards against boastful pride by repeatedly insisting that the recalcitrants are forcing him to write in this vein and also by mentioning his weakness, particularly his *“thorn in the flesh”* (12:7-10). Paul understood that the weaker the human instrument, the stronger the divine support required.

Among the suggested identifications of this thorn in the flesh are epilepsy, eye disease, malaria, leprosy, migraine headaches, depression, stammering, and false teachers. The letter closes with an appeal that Paul’s next visit may not have to be an occasion for rebuking the Corinthians again.

Sin or Sinless?

2 Corinthians 5:21 - How could Jesus be made sin when he was sinless?

Paul asserts here that Jesus was *“made...to be sin,”* but many other Scriptures insist that Jesus was *“without sin”* (Heb. 4:15; 1 Peter 3:18). How could Jesus be without sin if he was made sin for us?

Sin or Sinless?

Jesus was without sin *actually*, but he was made to be sin for us *judicially*. That is, by his death on the cross, he paid the penalty for our sins and thereby cancelled the debt of sin against us. So, while Jesus never committed a sin *personally*, he was made to be sin for us *substitutionally*.

The issue can be summarized as follows:

Christ Was Not Sinful	Christ Was Made to Be Sin
in himself	for us
personally	substitutionally
actually	judicially

Greatest or Least?

2 Corinthians 11:5 (1 Cor. 15:9) – Was Paul the greatest or the least of the apostles?

In 2 Corinthians 11:5 Paul claims, *“I am not at all inferior to the most eminent apostles.”* Elsewhere he would have us believe that he is *“the least of the apostles”* (1 Cor. 15:9). It would seem that both could not be true.

Paul is speaking in different contexts. In the first passage he is speaking with respect to his *ability, training, and zeal*. However, unlike the other apostles, Paul had persecuted the church of Christ before his conversion and, therefore, considered himself unworthy even to be an apostle (Acts 9:1; Gal. 1:13). So with respect to his *preconversion antagonism to Christ*, he rightly considered himself *“the least of the apostles.”*

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Contribution of 1 & 2 Corinthians

Because so many of the topics treated in these epistles are occasional & closely related to particular cultural circumstances, 1 & 2 Corinthians offer potent opportunities to observe how the unchanging gospel, taught in the languages & cultures of the 1st century, was first applied to changing circumstances. For instance, the particular form of the Corinthian denial of the resurrection may not be popular in the 21st century (although an adaptation of it is returning in some sectors of the New Age movement), but Paul’s strenuous insistence on the historical reality of the resurrection of Jesus as part of the nonnegotiable “given” of the gospel may be applied in many circumstances.

Also, 1 Corinthians 15 constitutes not only the earliest written list of witnesses of Jesus’ resurrection but the most important NT treatment of the nature of the resurrection.

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Contribution of 1 & 2 Corinthians

No part of the Pauline corpus more clearly illuminates the character of Paul the man, Paul the Christian, Paul the pastor, & Paul the apostle than do these epistles. He thereby leaves some substance in his invitation to imitate him, and thereby imitate Christ (1 Cor. 11:1)

Because in 1 & 2 Corinthians Paul passionately develops a theology of the cross that shapes Christian ethics, Christian priorities, & Christian attitudes, the apostle directly confronts all approaches to Christianity that happily seek to integrate a generally orthodox confession with pagan values of self-promotion.

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Contribution of 1 & 2 Corinthians

The cross not only justifies, it teaches us how to live & die, how to lead & follow, how to love & serve. These two letters therefore speak volumes to contemporary Western Christianity, which often prides itself in its orthodoxy but is far more comfortable with 21st century secularism than it has any right to be. Along the same lines, 1 Corinthians makes an enormous contribution to the doctrine of the church – its nature, unity, diversity, characteristics, conduct, interdependence, & discipline.

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Contribution of 1 & 2 Corinthians

These two epistles constitute the most telling condemnation of arrogance, self-promotion, boasting, & self-confidence in the Pauline corpus; conversely, they describe in practical terms the nature of Christian life & witness, emphasizing service, self-denial, purity, & weakness as the matrix in which God displays his strength. Perhaps the high-water mark is the emphasis on love as *“the most excellent way”* (1 Cor. 12:31-13:13) all Christians must pursue.

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