

2 CORINTHIANS

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BACKGROUND

2 Corinthians is actually Paul's fourth letter to the Corinthian church. The first letter, dealing with the problem of fornication in the church, has been lost ([1 Cor. 5:9](#)). The second letter (our 1 Corinthians) dealt with various problems he had become aware of. Paul wrote a third letter to the church at Corinth that was harsh and disciplinary in nature (see [2 Cor. 2:3-4](#); [2 Cor. 7:8-9](#)). This letter has been lost as well; but according to a report Paul received from Titus, it apparently accomplished its purpose ([2 Cor. 7:6-8](#)), leading Paul to write this fourth letter (2 Corinthians), in which he comforted those who had gotten themselves right with God ([2 Cor. 1-9](#)) and strongly defended his apostleship against some who were opposing his authority ([2 Cor. 10-13](#)).

AUTHOR

Paul ([2 Cor. 1:1](#); [2 Cor. 10:1](#); see [Romans: Author](#)).

DATE

A.D. 56, about six months after Paul wrote 1 Corinthians (see [1 Corinthians: Date and Location](#)).

» **See also:** [Illustration: Epistles of Paul, The](#)

LOCATION

Paul left Ephesus in the spring of 56 (after writing 1 Corinthians) and was bound for Troas, where he hoped to meet Titus and get a report from Corinth ([2 Cor. 2:12-13](#)). Failing to find Titus there, he continued on to Macedonia ([Acts 20:1](#)), where he did meet Titus and heard from him about the situation in Corinth, whereupon he wrote this letter.

RECIPIENTS

See [1 Corinthians: Recipients](#).

PURPOSE

- To explain why his plans for another visit to Corinth had changed ([2 Cor. 1:12-2:4](#))
- To instruct concerning the restoration of an offending brother ([2 Cor. 2:5-11](#))
- To express his joy over the revival in the church as a result of his harsh letter ([2 Cor. 2:12-13](#); [2 Cor. 7:15-16](#))
- To discuss his motivation for ministry and to defend himself against his opponents ([2 Cor. 2:12-6:10](#); [2 Cor. 10-13](#))
- To encourage holiness ([2 Cor. 6:11-7:16](#))

- To encourage generous giving ([2 Cor. 8-9](#))

UNIQUE FEATURES

- 2 Corinthians is the most autobiographical of Paul's letters, giving an intimate view of his personal life and ministry.
- It is the least doctrinal of his letters, with the possible exception of Philemon. Yet it contains deep doctrinal truths ([2 Cor. 3-8](#), especially [2 Cor. 5](#)).
- It gives insights into the character and tactics of false teachers and of Satan.

COMPARISON WITH OTHER BIBLE BOOKS

Romans:

- Romans is primarily doctrinal and secondarily practical; 2 Corinthians is primarily practical and secondarily doctrinal.
- Romans is the most systematic, and 2 Corinthians the least systematic, of Paul's letters.

Galatians and Hebrews:

- 2 Corinthians emphasizes the New Covenant, as do Galatians and Hebrews.

OUTLINE

1. PAUL EXPLAINS HIS ACTIONS ([2 Cor. 1:1-2:11](#))

1. Salutation ([2 Cor. 1:1-2](#))
2. His sufferings in Ephesus ([2 Cor. 1:3-11](#))
- C. His change in plans ([2 Cor. 1:12-2:4](#))
- D. His recommendation concerning the offender ([2 Cor. 2:5-11](#))

II. PAUL DEFENDS HIS MINISTRY ([2 Cor. 2:12-7:16](#))

- A. The fragrance of Christ ([2 Cor. 2:12-17](#))
- B. His calling from God ([2 Cor. 3:1-6:10](#))
 1. His letters of recommendation ([2 Cor. 3:1-6](#))
 2. The glory of his message ([2 Cor. 3:7-18](#))
 3. His sincerity and suffering ([2 Cor. 4](#))
 4. His assurance ([2 Cor. 5:1-10](#))
 5. His ministry of reconciliation ([2 Cor. 5:11-21](#))

6. His faithfulness amid suffering ([2 Cor. 6:1-10](#))

C. His challenge to the Corinthians ([2 Cor. 6:11-7:16](#))

1. Exhortations to holiness ([2 Cor. 6:11-7:1](#))

2. Gratitude for their growth ([2 Cor. 7:2-16](#))

III. PAUL EXPLAINS THE COLLECTION ([2 Cor. 8-9](#))

A. Examples of giving ([2 Cor. 8:1-9](#))

B. Encouragement to give ([2 Cor. 8:10-15](#))

C. Arrangements for the collection ([2 Cor. 8:16-9:5](#))

D. Benefits of giving ([2 Cor. 9:6-15](#))

IV. PAUL DEFENDS HIS AUTHORITY ([2 Cor. 10-13](#))

A. His power in Christ ([2 Cor. 10](#))

B. Comparison with false apostles ([2 Cor. 11:1-12:13](#))

C. Plans, exhortations, benediction ([2 Cor. 12:14-13:14](#))

TIMELINE

A.D. 35:	Paul's conversion
A.D. 52:	Paul in Corinth on 2nd journey
A.D. 56:	Paul writes 1 Cor., lost letter, 2 Cor.
A.D. 57:	Paul in Corinth on 3rd journey
A.D. 60:	Paul imprisoned in Rome
c. A.D. 67:	Paul martyred

[2 Cor. 1:1-7](#) *Comforted to comfort.* Paul began with thanksgiving to the "God who comforts us," who enabled him to extend comfort to the Corinthians whether he himself was in comfort or in suffering. *Comfort* in Greek combines two words: *para* (alongside) and *kaleo* (to call). To comfort is to answer someone's call, to walk alongside, to cheer, guide, and defend that person. Its noun form, *parakleiton*, was often used of a legal counsel or "advocate" in a trial (see [1 John 2:1](#)). Paul's comforting of the Corinthians helped establish them in their salvation ([2 Cor. 1:6](#)). Paul would come back to the theme of comfort at the end of the letter (see [2 Cor. 13:11](#)).

Each member of the Trinity is a Comforter:

- Father ([2 Cor. 1:3](#); see [Isaiah 49:13](#))
- Son (see [Isaiah 61:2](#); [John 14:1](#); [2 Thes. 2:16](#))
- Holy Spirit (the "Counselor"—[John 14:16, 26](#); [John 15:26](#); [John 16:7](#))

Fellowship with God is the remedy for the suffering of all who, like David, have looked for comforters but found none (see [Psalm 69:20](#)).

[2 Cor. 1:8-11](#) *"He delivered me from death!"* Paul reported having undergone a time of great despair, increasing his sense of dependence on God. Many, including the Corinthians, had prayed for him during that time. Like Abraham, he had trusted in a God who was able to raise the dead ([2 Cor. 1:9](#); see [Hebrews 11:17-19](#)).

[2 Cor. 1:12-2:4](#) *"I changed my plans. It's as simple as that."* Paul could write with a clear conscience, knowing that his testimony among the Corinthians had been godly and consistent ([2 Cor. 1:12-14](#)). He was not double-minded as some had apparently assumed ([2 Cor. 1:17-18](#)). He had originally planned to visit them en route to Macedonia ([2 Cor. 1:15-16](#)).

Paul interrupted his explanation of his change of plans to speak of God's faithfulness regarding our salvation, sanctification, and eternal security ([2 Cor. 1:19-22](#); see exposition on [§John 10:22-30](#)).

He then resumed his explanation: If he had come to Corinth when he originally planned to, it would have been with a severe rebuke. He wanted to wait till the visit could be one of joy ([2 Cor. 1:23-2:2](#)). He had, however, written to them concerning many problems ([2 Cor. 2:3-4](#); see [Background](#)). [2 Cor. 2:1](#) may indicate he had paid an unpleasant visit to Corinth before writing his third letter (compare [2 Cor. 13:1](#)).

[2 Cor. 2:5-11](#) *"Restore the repentant, lest Satan reclaim him."* Paul had told the church to excommunicate an unrepentant man due to his immorality (see exposition on [§1 Cor. 5:1-8](#)). They had done so; the man had repented; but they had refused to forgive him. Paul urged them to do so, to protect both him and themselves from further temptation.

[2 Cor. 2:12-17](#) *The savor of life, the smell of death.* Recalling his anguish over not finding Titus in Troas ([2 Cor. 2:12-13](#)), Paul offered thanks to God, who assures believers of victory regardless of when or where problems arise ([2 Cor. 2:14](#)). Paul likened his ministry to a Roman victory parade, during which the successful general (Jesus) would lead both conquerors (the saved) and captives (the unsaved) to their respective destinies ([2 Cor. 2:14](#)). From the parade would ascend the fragrance of burning incense. To the captives, it was the smell of death; to the conquerors it was the savor of life ([2 Cor. 2:15-16](#)). He defended his apostleship against charges that he was doing it for material gain ([2 Cor. 2:17](#); see [2 Cor. 1:12](#); [2 Cor. 11:9](#); [2 Cor. 12:13](#); exposition on [§1 Cor. 4:6-13](#) and [§1 Cor. 9:1-18](#)).

The presence of truth brings both life and death. Joseph's presence in prison was death for the baker but life for the butler (see [Genesis 40](#)). Christ's presence on the cross meant death for one thief but life for the other (see [Luke 23:39-43](#)).

» **See also:** [Illustration: Characteristics of the Gospel Ministry](#)

[2 Cor. 3:1-6](#) *Real-life letters of recommendation.* Though Paul was beginning to defend himself (see [2 Cor. 2:17](#)), he didn't need to do so, nor did he need letters of recommendation; all the recommendation he needed was breathing and walking about in the lives of his converts. The legalistic Judaizing teachers who plagued Paul's work (see exposition on [§2 Corinthians 11:16-33](#)) carried impressive letters of introduction from Jerusalem ([2 Cor. 3:1](#)). Prior to his conversion, Paul had done the same (see [Acts 9:2](#)). Now, his testimonials were

- *personal*: "Your lives are a letter"
- *permanent*: "written in our hearts"
- and *public*: "everyone can read it" ([2 Cor. 3:2-3](#)).

» **See also:** [Illustration: Characteristics of the Gospel Ministry](#)

[2 Cor. 3:7-18](#) *The story of two glories.* Paul contrasted the temporary glory of the law of Moses, which brought the knowledge of sin and death ([2 Cor. 3:7](#); see [Romans 3:20](#); [Romans 7:10](#)), with the eternal glory of God's New Covenant of grace (see [Hebrews 8:7-13](#)), which brings the power of inward transformation ([2 Cor. 3:18](#)). When Moses brought the law down from Sinai he wore a veil over his face, so that the people would not be frightened (see [Exodus 34:29-35](#)), but also, said Paul, so that they could not see how the law's glory was fading ([2 Cor. 3:7, 13](#)). The New Covenant of grace is superior to the law, for its glory, given by Christ, will never fade ([2 Cor. 3:8-11, 16-18](#)). Sadly, today, as in Paul's day, a veil still blinds the eyes of most Israelites concerning their Messiah ([2 Cor. 3:14-15](#)).

God's goal is to make us "more and more like him," traditionally translated "from glory to glory" ([2 Cor. 3:18](#)). This process will last throughout all eternity, but he wants to begin it now!

» **See also:** [Illustration: Characteristics of the Gospel Ministry](#)

[2 Cor. 4:1-6](#) *Preaching in the light.* Again Paul proclaimed his sincerity as an evangelist ([2 Cor. 4:1-2](#); see [2 Cor. 1:12-14](#); [2 Cor. 2:17](#)), unlike other so-called evangelists and even Satan himself, who try to deceive ([2 Cor. 4:2-4](#)). While Satan aims his light at the eyes, blinding his followers, God directs his light at the heart and feet, to indwell and guide ([2 Cor. 4:3-6](#)).

» **See also:** [Illustration: Characteristics of the Gospel Ministry](#)

[2 Cor. 4:7](#) *Priceless treasure, perishable vessels.* Believers carry the "treasure" of the gospel in the "perishable containers" of their mortal bodies. One of the world's largest (108.3 carats) and most famous diamonds, presented to Queen Victoria in 1850, is displayed against a simple black cloth inside a bullet-proof case in the Tower of London. The black background brings out by contrast the diamond's dazzling glory. Likewise, God has entrusted his most prized treasure to us.

» **See also:** [Illustration: Characteristics of the Gospel Ministry](#)

[2 Cor. 4:8-18](#) *Spiritual success through suffering.* Paul had suffered many hardships, being often knocked down but never knocked out ([2 Cor. 4:8-10](#)), allowing him to demonstrate God's power and presence in his weak and decaying body ([2 Cor. 4:11-15](#)). The conclusion: The grief down here is nothing compared to the glory we'll know up there ([2 Cor. 4:16-18](#)).

» **See also:** [Illustration: Characteristics of the Gospel Ministry](#)

[2 Cor. 5:1-10](#) *The believer's new body.* By faith believers know that, when their present body dies, they will be given an eternal body, made and guaranteed by God ([2 Cor. 5:1-8](#)). With this assurance, they live to please God, knowing that someday they will stand before him in judgment ([2 Cor. 5:9-10](#); see exposition on [1 Cor. 3:10-17](#)).

» **See also:** [Illustration: Characteristics of the Gospel Ministry](#)

2 Cor. 5:11-21 *Representing the Savior, reconciling the sinner.* Mindful that God would someday judge him ([2 Cor. 5:11](#); see [2 Cor. 5:10](#)) and compelled by Christ's love ([2 Cor. 5:14](#)), Paul was eager to proclaim the gospel ([2 Cor. 5:11-16](#)). We are ambassadors for Christ, pleading with the unsaved to receive his offer and be reconciled by his grace ([2 Cor. 5:17-21](#)). Christians, like ambassadors, are

- citizens of the state they represent (see [Phil. 3:20](#); [Col. 3:1-2](#))
- chosen for the assignment (see [John 15:16](#))
- called home before war is declared (see [1 Thes. 1:10](#); [1 Thes. 4:13-5:10](#))

» **See also:** [Illustration: Characteristics of the Gospel Ministry](#)

2 Cor. 6:1-10 *"Keep the faith, just as I have."* Paul pleaded with the Corinthians not to toss aside the gospel but to accept it and remain faithful while God's door of welcome was still open ([2 Cor. 6:1-2](#); see [Isaiah 49:8](#)). Paul had himself been faithful in spite of terrible trials and hardships and was thus used by God to accomplish many wonderful things, including establishing the church in Corinth ([2 Cor. 6:3-10](#)).

» **See also:** [Illustration: Characteristics of the Gospel Ministry](#)

2 Cor. 6:11-7:1 *Some keys to fellowship.* Despite all his sufferings, Paul had shared his very heart with the Corinthians; he urged them to respond in kind ([2 Cor. 6:11-13](#)). If they would get serious about living holy lives, separating themselves from all wrongful ties with unbelievers, then God would be able to have the kind of fellowship he desired with them ([2 Cor. 6:14-18](#)). In light of God's desire for their fellowship, the Corinthians should turn from all uncleanness and live in wholesome fear of him.

» **See also:** [Illustration: Characteristics of the Gospel Ministry](#)

2 Cor. 7:2-7 *Found: Titus, with a happy tale!* Again Paul spoke of his openness toward the Corinthians ([2 Cor. 7:2-4](#)); and again he demonstrated that openness by telling of the panic attack that led him from Troas to Macedonia in search of Titus ([2 Cor. 7:5](#); see [2 Cor. 2:12-13](#)), and of his joy upon finally finding Titus and hearing the good news from Corinth ([2 Cor. 7:6-7](#)).

2 Cor. 7:8-16 *A letter both sad and glad.* Referring again to his harsh letter to the Corinthians (see [2 Cor. 2:3-4](#)), Paul recalled how distressed he had felt as he wrote those words of rebuke. His sorrow had turned to joy, however, when Titus reported that the letter had caused them to repent and seek revival. They had shown the type of sorrow that produces true repentance, rather than the "sorrow without repentance" that leads only to deeper despair ([2 Cor. 7:10](#)).

2 Cor. 8:1-8 *The Macedonian example of giving.* Paul then spoke of the offering he was taking for the famine-stricken church in Jerusalem ([2 Cor. 8-9](#); see exposition on [Acts 20:1-6](#)). He began by pointing to the wonderful example of the Macedonian believers who, after dedicating themselves to God and in the midst of great hardship, had collected a large offering. He urged the Corinthians to do likewise ([2 Cor. 8:7-8](#)).

2 Cor. 8:9 *Christ's example.* Of course, history's greatest example of sacrificial love was Christ himself. Though rich beyond imagination, he chose to become poor to make us spiritually rich. He

became what he was not (poor), that we might become what we were not (rich). The sinless Son of God became the Son of Man so that sinful sons of men might become sons of God.

2 Cor. 8:10-15 *"Finish what you started!"* The Corinthians had begun an offering for Jerusalem a year previously but had lapsed. Paul urged them to resume their effort, not feeling they had to give more than they were able, but simply doing their fair share.

2 Cor. 8:16-9:5 *"I've bragged about you, so don't let me down."* Paul would send Titus and two other men, who could be depended on to collect and deliver their gifts ([2 Cor. 8:16-24](#)). He was sending them ahead of time so that the Corinthians would have their gifts ready when he arrived ([2 Cor. 9:5](#)). Paul had told the church in Macedonia that the Corinthians had already begun an offering ([2 Cor. 8:10](#)); he hoped Titus's early visit would encourage them to intensify their efforts and not let him down ([2 Cor. 9:1-4](#); compare [1 Cor. 16:2](#)).

2 Cor. 9:6-15 *Sow much, reap much; sow little, reap little.* Paul spoke of the blessedness of giving ([2 Cor. 9:6](#); see [Luke 6:38](#); [Acts 20:35](#)), of how giving should be done in the church, and of the results of generous giving:

- Rules for giving:
 - Each individual must decide the amount he or she gives ([2 Cor. 9:7](#)).
 - All giving should come from the heart ([2 Cor. 9:7](#)).
- Results of giving:
 - God will meet the needs of the giver ([2 Cor. 9:8-11](#)).
 - The giving will meet the real needs of others ([2 Cor. 9:12](#)).
 - The recipients will praise God and pray for the giver ([2 Cor. 9:12-14](#)).

2 Cor. 10:1-6 *My weapons of war.* Turning his attention to those at Corinth who were challenging his authority (see [2 Cor. 11:5, 13](#)), Paul defended himself against their attacks ([2 Cor. 10-13](#)). Though Paul and his ministry partners may not have been as impressive in person as were his opponents ([2 Cor. 10:1-2](#)), he had on his side the full armor of God (compare [Ephes. 6:13](#)), which could knock down the Devil's strongholds, refute arrogant arguments, and change rebellious hearts. In defeating Satan, one cannot simply fight fire with fire; one must use blood—the blood of Christ (see [Rev. 12:11](#))!

2 Cor. 10:7-11 *"Don't be fooled by outward appearances."* Calling attention to Paul's mild demeanor, his enemies sought to belittle him by pointing out that, while his letters seemed weighty and forceful, in person he was unimpressive and was a poor public speaker ([2 Cor. 10:7-10](#)). Paul assured them that on his next visit he would be as stern in person as he had been in his letters ([2 Cor. 10:11](#)).

2 Cor. 10:12-18 *The only basis for boasting.* Paul's enemies had been trying to win followers by comparing themselves to each other and to Paul ([2 Cor. 10:12-14](#)), whose work they were trying to claim as their own ([2 Cor. 10:15-16](#)). Paul, however, would seek only God's approval ([2 Cor. 10:17-18](#)).

2 Cor. 11:1-4 *"I will boast because I'm jealous!"* Moved by "the jealousy of God himself," born of his desire to keep the Corinthians faithful, Paul asked them to allow him for a moment the "foolishness" ([2 Cor. 11:1](#); [2 Cor. 11:16-19](#); [2 Cor. 12:11](#)) of comparing himself to his opponents

([2 Cor. 11:5-12:13](#)). Jealousy is not the same as envy. Jealousy is the desire to possess one's own things. It is a good and natural trait, if kept in proper bounds. Envy is the desire to possess the things of another. This is always wrong.

[2 Cor. 11:5-15](#) *Paul and the apostate apostles.* Paul began his comparison of himself to his opponents by noting that, though not as gifted in public speaking as they were, he was just as knowledgeable ([2 Cor. 11:5-6](#)). He had ministered to the Corinthians without charge ([2 Cor. 11:7-9](#); see [2 Cor. 12:13, 16](#); [Acts 18:1-17](#); [1 Cor. 4:12](#)), unlike his opponents (see [2 Cor. 11:16-21](#)). He made such comparisons not out of pride but out of fear that these "false apostles," empowered by Satan himself, would lead the Corinthians astray, thus frustrating God's grace and Paul's ministry ([2 Cor. 11:10-15](#)).

[2 Cor. 11:16-21](#) *"Why do you let them exploit you?"* The Corinthian believers had allowed the godless false apostles to make them their spiritual slaves, taking everything they owned and shamelessly exploiting them. Being made "slaves" ([2 Cor. 11:20](#)) may refer both to financial exploitation and to the legalism promoted by these Judaizers (see exposition on [§2 Corinthians 11:22-33](#) and on the [§Galatians 1-6](#)).

[2 Cor. 11:22-33](#) *"All right, let's compare credentials."* Paul had everything the false teachers bragged about and more. If they boasted of their Jewish heritage, he could do so much more ([2 Cor. 11:22](#); compare [Acts 22:3](#); [Phil. 3:4-6](#)). If they boasted of their ministry, he could boast of a ministry validated by incredible sufferings both physical and emotional ([2 Cor. 11:23-32](#)). This passage provides our most complete account of Paul's hardships.

[2 Cor. 12:1-6](#) *A close encounter in the third heaven.* Modestly speaking in the third person ([2 Cor. 12:2](#)), Paul related a vision God granted him of paradise, where he heard, saw, and experienced things too glorious to express in human words.

[2 Cor. 12:7-10](#) *Thorns and grace.* Following his ecstatic experience ([2 Cor. 12:1-6](#)), God allowed Satan to severely afflict Paul, lest he become proud. After repeatedly asking God to remove the affliction, Paul finally learned to thank God for it, realizing how much it had taught him about the sufficiency of grace.

Some scholars believe Paul's "thorn in the flesh" was chronic ophthalmia, a disease of the eyes not too painful but at times repulsive to the onlooker. The onset of Paul's ailment, 14 years before this time ([2 Cor. 12:2](#)), would have coincided with his entrance into Galatia, which had been occasioned by some sort of physical infirmity ([Galatians 4:13-15](#); [Galatians 6:11](#)).

[2 Cor. 12:7](#) is Paul's fifth reference to Satan in this letter. From these five mentions we learn several things about the Devil:

- his *title*: "the god of this evil world" ([2 Cor. 4:4](#))
- his *tactics*: to take advantage of (see [2 Cor. 2:11](#)), inflict suffering on ([2 Cor. 12:7](#), compare [Job 1-2](#)), and blind unbelievers (see [2 Cor. 4:4](#))
- his *treachery*: disguising himself as an angel of light (see [2 Cor. 11:14](#))
- his *trustees*: false teachers (see [2 Cor. 11:15](#))

2 Cor. 12:11-13 *"Only a true apostle could do what I did."* Paul had felt compelled to show the superiority of his ministry to that of the false apostles only because the Corinthians themselves had failed to see it. His ministry differed from that of the false teachers in that it was confirmed by miracles and was free of greed.

2 Cor. 12:14-21 *"Ready or not, I'm on my way!"* Once again Paul announced his proposed visit (2 Cor. 12:14). Once again he reminded the Corinthians that ministry, not money, had been and would be his only purpose; neither he nor Titus nor any other coworker had taken advantage of them—nor would they ever do so (2 Cor. 12:14-19). He expressed concern for their speedy repentance and reformation (2 Cor. 12:20-21).

2 Cor. 13:1-14 *Third time's the charm?* By the authority of Christ, Paul again urged the Corinthians to seriously assess their spiritual situation. He hoped his next visit would establish two things: that he was truly an apostle and that they were truly believers (2 Cor. 13:1-10). He closed with a brief benediction (2 Cor. 13:11-13). On "third time" (2 Cor. 13:1), see exposition on §2 Corinthians 1:12-2:4.