



2 CORINTHIANS

A 12-WEEK STUDY

Dane C. Ortlund



J. I. Packer

THEOLOGICAL EDITOR

Dane C. Ortlund

SERIES EDITOR

“This series is a tremendous resource for those wanting to study and teach the Bible with an understanding of how the gospel is woven throughout Scripture. Here are gospel-minded pastors and scholars doing gospel business from all the Scriptures. This is a biblical and theological feast preparing God’s people to apply the entire Bible to all of life with heart and mind wholly committed to Christ’s priorities.”

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KNOWING THE BIBLE

J. I. Packer, Theological Editor
Dane C. Ortlund, Series Editor
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Genesis	Ecclesiastes	John	Colossians,
Exodus	Isaiah	Acts	Philemon
Leviticus	Jeremiah	Romans	Hebrews
Joshua	Daniel	1 Corinthians	James
Ruth, Esther	Hosea	2 Corinthians	Revelation
Ezra, Nehemiah	Matthew	Galatians	
Psalms	Mark	Ephesians	
Proverbs	Luke	Philippians	

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Knowing the Bible: 2 Corinthians, A 12-Week Study

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Published by Crossway

1300 Crescent Street
Wheaton, Illinois 60187

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Cover design: Simplicated Studio

First printing 2016

Printed in the United States of America

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Trade paperback ISBN: 978-1-4335-4792-8

EPub ISBN: 978-1-4335-4795-9

PDF ISBN: 978-1-4335-4793-5

Mobipocket ISBN: 978-1-4335-4794-2

Crossway is a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers.

VP 26 25 24 23 22 21 20 19 18 17 16
15 14 13 12 11 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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S E R I E S P R E F A C E

KNOWING THE BIBLE, as the series title indicates, was created to help readers know and understand the meaning, the message, and the God of the Bible. Each volume in the series consists of 12 units that progressively take the reader through a clear, concise study of that book of the Bible. In this way, any given volume can fruitfully be used in a 12-week format either in group study, such as in a church-based context, or in individual study. Of course, these 12 studies could be completed in fewer or more than 12 weeks, as convenient, depending on the context in which they are used.

Each study unit gives an overview of the text at hand before digging into it with a series of questions for reflection or discussion. The unit then concludes by highlighting the gospel of grace in each passage (“Gospel Glimpses”), identifying whole-Bible themes that occur in the passage (“Whole-Bible Connections”), and pinpointing Christian doctrines that are affirmed in the passage (“Theological Soundings”).

The final component to each unit is a section for reflecting on personal and practical implications from the passage at hand. The layout provides space for recording responses to the questions proposed, and we think readers need to do this to get the full benefit of the exercise. The series also includes definitions of key words. These definitions are indicated by a note number in the text and are found at the end of each chapter.

Lastly, for help in understanding the Bible in this deeper way, we would urge the reader to use the ESV Bible and the *ESV Study Bible*, which are available online at www.esvbible.org. The *Knowing the Bible* series is also available online. Additional 12-week studies covering each book of the Bible will be added as they become available.

May the Lord greatly bless your study as you seek to know him through knowing his Word.

J. I. Packer
Lane T. Dennis

WEEK 1: OVERVIEW



Getting Acquainted

“When I am weak, then I am strong,” says Paul the apostle¹ (2 Cor. 12:10). This is the high point of 2 Corinthians, Paul’s final letter to the church at Corinth. It is also the pervasive theme of the letter. God turns upside down our intuitive expectations of how the world works.

Throughout this letter Paul upends the natural Corinthian outlook on life, which is simply the natural universal outlook on life—that the way to joy and comfort and satisfaction is to put oneself forward, be impressive, throw one’s weight around, exercise power and authority, have one’s needs met. Paul confronts this deeply embedded natural outlook with a theology of the cross, in which serving the needs of others, even at great pain to ourselves, is the path to joy. Just as Jesus taught that a grain of wheat must fall to the ground and die before it bears fruit (John 12:24–25), so this paradoxical truth is the pervasive and unifying theme of 2 Corinthians—a theme rooted in Jesus’ own experience of life through death and strength through weakness (2 Cor. 13:4).

This letter confronts each of us with the logic of the gospel, a logic that defies our natural inbred intuitions about the way to be happy. In our weakness, we discover the surprising power of God. (For further background, see the *ESV Study Bible*, pages 2219–2222; available online at www.esvbible.org.)

Placing It in the Larger Story

Jesus Christ has come in the flesh at the climax of human history. Paul the apostle has been chosen by the Lord to be a key player in proclaiming Christ

WEEK 1: OVERVIEW

and his gospel to the world. After planting churches around the Mediterranean world, Paul writes letters back to these churches to strengthen them in their discipleship. The church at Corinth was particularly troubled, being tempted by false apostles to believe that Paul's weakness and sufferings proved he was a fake. Paul reminds the Corinthians of what has been true throughout redemptive history:² it is regularly the weak, the outsider, the crucified, through whom God powerfully works in the world.

Key Verse

“He said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.’ Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me.” (2 Cor. 12:9)

Date and Historical Background

As he wrote 2 Corinthians in AD 55/56, Paul had visited Corinth in recent months in what he describes in this letter as a “painful visit” (2 Cor. 2:1). Apparently, the Corinthian church had been largely hostile and demeaning toward Paul due to his general unimpressiveness in appearance and speech. Paul decided to give the church some space, so instead of an immediate visit he wrote them an anguished and tearful letter (2:3–4), which was then brought to them by Titus. This letter, written after 1 Corinthians but before 2 Corinthians, is now lost.

Titus reported back to Paul that much of the Corinthian church did indeed repent and again embrace Paul's authority (2 Cor. 7:5–16), though the sharp words throughout 2 Corinthians indicate there was a vocal minority still rejecting Paul. Perhaps Paul also feared that this minority would influence others in the church to join them against Paul.

All this explains the contorted nature of Paul's tone throughout 2 Corinthians—at times comforting his readers like a tender father, while at other times stringently attacking his accusers and defending his apostolic authenticity. Paul loves the Corinthians and wants them to see the power and glory of a gospel that humbles the powerful while strengthening the weak.

Outline

- I. Paul's Defense of His Legitimacy as an Apostle (1:1–7:16)
 - A. Salutation (1:1–2)
 - B. Introduction (1:3–11)
 - C. Paul's boast (1:12–2:17)

1. Content of Paul's boast (1:12–14)
 2. Reason for Paul's first change of plans (1:15–22)
 3. Reason for Paul's second change of plans (1:23–2:4)
 4. Application of Paul's example to the Corinthians (2:5–11)
 5. Paul's visit to Troas and Macedonia (2:12–17)
- D. Paul's ministry of the new covenant as a ministry of the Spirit (3:1–18)
1. Reality of the Spirit in Paul's ministry (3:1–6)
 2. Paul's interpretation of Exodus 32–34 (3:7–11)
 3. Paul's application of Exodus 32–34 to his own situation (3:12–18)
- E. Paul's encouragement in his ministry (4:1–6:13)
1. New covenant dawning of the new creation (4:1–6)
 2. New covenant power of the resurrection (4:7–18)
 3. New covenant motivation for the life of faith (5:1–10)
 4. New covenant ministry of reconciliation (5:11–6:2)
 5. New covenant support for the legitimacy of Paul's ministry (6:3–13)
- F. Paul's call for church discipline as an expression of repentance (6:14–7:1)
- G. Paul's joy over the repentant Corinthians (7:2–16)
- II. Paul's Appeal to the Repentant Church in Corinth Regarding the Collection (8:1–9:15)
- A. Collection as the grace of God (8:1–15)
 - B. Commendation of Titus and the brothers (8:16–9:5)
 - C. Generosity, joy, and the glory of God (9:6–15)
- III. Paul's Appeal to the Rebellious Minority in Corinth (10:1–13:10)
- A. Paul's defense of his humility as an apostle (10:1–11)
 - B. Paul's defense of his authority as an apostle (10:12–18)
 - C. Paul's defense of his boasting like a fool (11:1–21a)
 - D. Paul's boast in his service and suffering (11:21b–33)
 - E. Paul's boast in his heavenly vision and subsequent weakness (12:1–13)
 - F. Paul's final defense and appeal to the rebellious (12:14–13:10)
- IV. Closing Greetings (13:11–14)

As You Get Started

Do you have a sense at the outset of this study of any specific emphases of 2 Corinthians? Without using your Bible, do any particular passages from

WEEK 1: OVERVIEW

2 Corinthians come to mind? Has this letter already been meaningful to your own walk with the Lord in any specific ways?

What is your current understanding of what 2 Corinthians contributes to Christian theology? That is, how does this letter clarify your understanding of God, Jesus Christ, sin, salvation, the end times, or other doctrines?

What aspects of the epistle³ of 2 Corinthians have confused you? Are there any specific questions you hope to have answered through this study?

As You Finish This Unit . . .

Take a few minutes to ask God to bless you with increased understanding and a transformed heart and life as you begin this study of 2 Corinthians.

Definitions

¹ **Apostle** – Means “one who is sent” and refers to one who is an official representative of another. In the NT, refers specifically to those whom Jesus chose to represent him.

² **Redemptive history** – A view of human history that observes the way God has graciously steered events and entered into our space and time repeatedly down through the centuries, culminating in the coming of Jesus Christ.

³ **Epistle** – Basically the same as “letter.” A literary form common in NT times. Epistles typically included: (1) statement of author and recipient; (2) brief greetings and expressions of thanks; (3) the body of the letter; (4) personal greetings and signature; and (5) a closing doxology or blessing. Twenty-one books of the NT are epistles.



THE BOOK OF 2 CORINTHIANS contains Paul's defense of his ministry and teaching, helping his readers see that the gospel is full of seemingly paradoxical truths—strength from weakness, life through death, and comfort in affliction.

In this accessible study, Dane Ortlund highlights how the gospel confronts and subverts our culture's expectations, showing how the good news about Jesus humbles the powerful while strengthening the weak.

ABOUT THE *KNOWING THE BIBLE* SERIES

Over the course of 12 weeks, these studies explore books of the Bible and:

- Ask thoughtful questions to spur discussion
- Show how each passage unveils the gospel
- Tie the text in with the whole story of Scripture
- Illuminate the doctrines taught in each passage
- Invite you to discover practical implications
- Help you better understand and apply God's Word

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BIBLE STUDY

