



Getting the Most Out of *2 Corinthians*

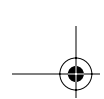
Life is relational. We hope and hurt the most about relationships with people who matter to us: A special friend we are in danger of losing. An employer who misunderstands our actions. A spouse who is distant and cold. A brother in Christ who has spoken behind our back. A family member long estranged. These may be parts of the web of relationships that make up our lives. When a valued relationship is hanging by a slender thread, we are often at a loss to know what to say or do. Should we tell the truth even if it hurts? Should we avoid confrontation? Should we share what is going on inside us even if it shows we are weak and struggling, far weaker than we would like others to know?

Second Corinthians is all about relationships—not perfect ones but real ones. In this letter the apostle Paul reveals that he is struggling deeply in his relationship with the believers in Corinth. Though he founded this church, they have apparently rejected him. This letter is an attempt at reconciliation. What made Paul's relationship more complicated was the seeming contest between Paul and his converts. The Corinthians were enjoying charismatic ecstasy. They had their orators, theologians, super-saints and super-apostles. They were strong, wise and triumphant. Paul, in contrast, was weak, foolish and seemingly a failure.

In similar circumstances most people try to use strength and wisdom to win their way back. They create just the right leadership image. But Paul chose to pour out his soul to them, trusting that in the process Christ would be revealed. In this letter Paul is both medium and message. This great Christian leader takes the enormous risk of telling how confused, upset and weak he is. In 1 Corinthians Paul lets us see inside a first-century church. But in 2 Corinthians Paul lets us see inside a first-century Christian, the apostle himself. Through his large heart we see into the heart of God and the heart of the Christian message.

Paul founded the church in Corinth about A.D. 50. It was a lively church composed of first-generation Christians but infected with many of the problems associated with a mission. Corinth was the Las





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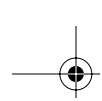
Vegas of the Roman Empire. Some new believers polluted the church with their secular standards in business and sexuality. They argued that all things are permissible in Christ. Others got superspiritual and boasted about their visions, prophecies, words of knowledge and spiritual experiences. In the course of time they wrote Paul asking for advice. Paul wrote 1 Corinthians in about A.D. 55 to address these questions and various problems. Then it seems the Corinthians turned against the founding apostle, a crucial fact to know in order to understand 2 Corinthians. This letter was born in hurt.

Paul paid a second “painful visit” (2 Corinthians 2:1) and wrote a “sorrowful” letter, now lost, from Ephesus (2:4). It is highly likely that Paul then came to Macedonia (2 Corinthians 7:5), modern Greece, where he was reunited with Titus from Corinth and from which he wrote 2 Corinthians, probably while in Philippi.* Later in A.D. 56 Paul visited Corinth again to receive their gifts for the poor Christians in Jerusalem.

As 2 Corinthians was written, Paul had several problems with the Corinthians: he changed his travel plans and did not come when he said he would (2 Corinthians 1:12—2:4); they failed to discipline the person who caused a grievous offense (2:5-11); their contributions for his collection for the Jewish Christians had lapsed (8—9); he accepted financial support from the Macedonians (Thessalonica and Philippi) but not from the Achaians, especially the Corinthians (11:7-11). Paul also conflicted with newly arrived ministers in Corinth who preached a different gospel, probably a return to a form of Judaism (2:14—7:4; 10:1—13:14). Some individual Corinthians criticized Paul because he was a powerful letter writer but a weak speaker who was unimpressive in person.

This relational conflict becomes the medium for revealing the distinctive message of this book: Christ meets us at our point of desperate weakness, *not only before we are saved but after*. Against the false triumphalism of his opponents, Paul proclaims a gospel in which God’s power is demonstrated best in human weakness. We have the Christ-treasure in earthen vessels or, as Phillips powerfully paraphrases, “in a common earthenware jar.” In a day when authentic Christianity seems less attractive than superspirituality or the “gospel of health, wealth and prosperity,”





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Paul's searing honesty offers exactly what the world so deeply hungers for: it tells us how to be real. As we walk through Paul's relationship with the Corinthians step by step, we discover how God in Christ is prepared to meet our deepest relational needs just as we are and where we are.

Suggestions for Individual Study

1. As you begin each study, pray that God will speak to you through his Word.

2. Read the introduction to the study and respond to the personal reflection question or exercise. This is designed to help you focus on God and on the theme of the study.

3. Each study deals with a particular passage—so that you can delve into the author's meaning in that context. Read and reread the passage to be studied. The questions are written using the language of the New International Version, so you may wish to use that version of the Bible. The New Revised Standard Version is also recommended.

4. This is an inductive Bible study, designed to help you discover for yourself what Scripture is saying. The study includes three types of questions. *Observation* questions ask about the basic facts: who, what, when, where and how. *Interpretation* questions delve into the meaning of the passage. *Application* questions help you discover the implications of the text for growing in Christ. These three keys unlock the treasures of Scripture.

Write your answers to the questions in the spaces provided or in a personal journal. Writing can bring clarity and deeper understanding of yourself and of God's Word.

5. It might be good to have a Bible dictionary handy. Use it to look up any unfamiliar words, names or places.

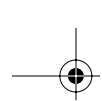
6. Use the prayer suggestion to guide you in thanking God for what you have learned and to pray about the applications that have come to mind.

7. You may want to go on to the suggestion under "Now or Later," or you may want to use that idea for your next study.

Suggestions for Members of a Group Study

1. Come to the study prepared. Follow the suggestions for individ-





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ual study mentioned above. You will find that careful preparation will greatly enrich your time spent in group discussion.

2. Be willing to participate in the discussion. The leader of your group will not be lecturing. Instead, he or she will be encouraging the members of the group to discuss what they have learned. The leader will be asking the questions that are found in this guide.

3. Stick to the topic being discussed. Your answers should be based on the verses which are the focus of the discussion and not on outside authorities such as commentaries or speakers. These studies focus on a particular passage of Scripture. Only rarely should you refer to other portions of the Bible. This allows for everyone to participate in in-depth study on equal ground.

4. Be sensitive to the other members of the group. Listen attentively when they describe what they have learned. You may be surprised by their insights! Each question assumes a variety of answers. Many questions do not have “right” answers, particularly questions that aim at meaning or application. Instead the questions push us to explore the passage more thoroughly.

When possible, link what you say to the comments of others. Also, be affirming whenever you can. This will encourage some of the more hesitant members of the group to participate.

5. Be careful not to dominate the discussion. We are sometimes so eager to express our thoughts that we leave too little opportunity for others to respond. By all means participate! But allow others to also.

6. Expect God to teach you through the passage being discussed and through the other members of the group. Pray that you will have an enjoyable and profitable time together, but also that as a result of the study you will find ways that you can take action individually and/or as a group.

7. Remember that anything said in the group is considered confidential and should not be discussed outside the group unless specific permission is given to do so.

8. If you are the group leader, you will find additional suggestions at the back of the guide.

*This reconstruction follows that proposed by Victor Paul Furnish, *2 Corinthians*, Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 1984), pp. 54–55.

