

## ABIDE: A BIBLE READING CHALLENGE

# JOURNEY THROUGH THE NEW TESTAMENT

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## A TRUE PASTOR'S HEART

### *2 CORINTHIANS*

Just as a reminder, it's important to understand the background of any book you attempt to engage with when studying the Bible. The reason this is important is because if you don't, it's easy to just read the book as a random accumulation of verses instead of a moving, breathing narrative that has a real purpose and a real human audience that would have originally engaged with it.

With this in mind, 2 Corinthians is probably one of the most heartfelt writings you will ever engage with because it is the passionate plea from a pastor's heart toward a struggling congregation. Paul bears his heart in this letter more than any of his other letters.

It appears from Paul's approach that after his last letter there was still a small, vocal minority in the church that was dead set against Paul and his authority over them. And while there were commendable actions taken by the church, this was still proving to be a problem for the congregation as a whole.

It was getting ugly. If we follow the progression of the letter, we find that Paul begins to answer some statements he had been informed of while he was away. Let's talk about a few of their arguments:

1. These opponents had told the congregation that Paul's word couldn't be trusted. The first part of **2 Corinthians 1:17** says this, "When I therefore was thus minded, did I use lightness?" The word 'lightness' means fickle. Paul had told them that he would be back around to visit but he had not been able to come. These members that set themselves against Paul started to tell the congregation that Paul's word couldn't be trusted and that Paul didn't know what he wanted to do. Is he coming, or is he not? Paul is defending himself and asking them, "Did it look or sound like I was back and forth in my thinking when I was with you?"
2. Paul was accused of being prideful. **2 Corinthians 3:1** says, "Do we begin to commend ourselves? or need we, as some others, epistles of commendation to you, or letters of commendation from you?"
3. There was a running rumor that Paul perhaps was not fit mentally to lead. **2 Corinthians 5:13** "For whether we be beside ourselves, it is to God: or whether we be sober, it is for your cause." Paul informed them that whatever appeared to be odd or out of sorts with him was because of either the ministry God had called them to, or directly related to their service and for their benefit.

4. Paul had to answer critics who pointed to his physical appearance as evidence that Paul was not fit to lead. 2 Corinthians 10:10, “For his letters, say they, are weighty and powerful; but his bodily presence is weak, and his speech is contemptible.” They said, “Sure his letters are great. But have you really considered this guy in person? He looks terrible. On top of that, he’s not a very good speaker.”

Nothing was off limits. These people used anything to throw off the influence of the apostle. Accusations were flying, challenges were continually thrown down, but as those against Paul were baring their teeth, the apostle was bearing his heart. It’s a sad book of the Bible. It’s been said that this letter was written with a quill dipped in tears as Paul wrote to call this congregation to Christ and to unity.

### *How to Think About 2 Corinthians*

There are three easy ways to identify sections in this letter that will help you navigate this letter.

**Paul Declares His Ministry (Chapters 1-5)**— In these chapters, Paul takes the time to explain his future plans to visit, the mentioning of the man who was having an affair with his father’s wife, and the extent of his ministry.

**Paul’s Change of Plans (Chapter 1- Chapter 2:2:4):** After the introduction, Paul explains why he was not able to come to Corinth as he had originally intended.

**Paul’s Call for Forgiveness (Chapter 2:5- 13):** From the last letter sent, Paul was pleased to discover that this man had responded to the church discipline in repentance, and asked the congregation to completely forgive this man as he had. This is what church discipline is all about!

**Paul’s Conversation on Ministry (Chapter 2:14- Chapter 5):** Paul goes into great detail about the glory of God as it relates to life in ministry and why exactly he is motivated to do what he does and suffer as he does.

**Paul Deepens His Instruction (Chapters 6-9)**— In this section Paul affirms their partnership together in ministry, and also encourages their giving to Christians who were suffering in Jerusalem.

**Let’s Partner in Ministry (Chapters 6- Chapter 7):** These chapters have to do with why and how to do ministry together. Paul points out that there are certainly attitudes and actions that keep progress from happening in the Lord’s work.

**Let’s Partner Financially (Chapter 8- Chapter 9):** Paul mentions information from the last letter to these church members about the suffering that was currently happening in Jerusalem and urging them to follow the example of other churches that had been involved. Further, in these chapters are fantastic instructions on how the financial life of a church should operate.

**Paul Defends His Apostleship (Chapters 10-13)**— Paul begins by explaining how to engage in spiritual warfare. If this carnal attitude of these Christians can be recognized and conquered, then real progress can be made in their relationship to God, in their relationship to Paul, in their relationship to each other, and their relationship to the people who need the gospel all around them. However, pride was keeping them from doing anything significant for God. Pride is a true spiritual prison, and one in which some of this church was trapped. Paul then talks about how to guard against false preaching, the signs of an apostle, and what he will do about the people once he would finally arrive back to this church.

**The Marks of Maturity (Chapter 10):** Paul told the Corinthians that the reason he preached the way he did was because it is God’s word that is powerful, not because the human presentation was powerful. Paul informed them that when he waged a spiritual battle of preaching, the weapons he used were spiritual and not carnal. Paul explained that he did everything possible to stay away from pride, but many were, by pride, judging his ministry.

However, the true measure of an individual is what God thinks, and not what they can get others to think of them. This is Christian maturity.

**The Marks of an Apostle (Chapter 11-12):** Paul here goes into great detail about the life that God had called him out of, the hardships that he has faced since being won to Christ, and the evidence for them to consider regarding his apostleship.

**The Marks of a Christian (Chapter 13):** Paul mentions here that they had better be ready when he comes because, he's not only going to confront these accusations head on, he is going to require two or three witnesses to be produced as to how the information was even considered in the first place. Paul also points to the fact that the thoughts and attitudes that were being displayed were decidedly unChristian and that they might do well to sit and think for a moment if they are even in the faith.

### *What to Look for in 2 Corinthians*

**Contrasts**— From the introduction, you might think that the book of 2 Corinthians is just full of negativity. Every place the discussion has taken us to so far is how Paul had critics, and what Paul was doing to defend himself and the work he was doing. If we're left with that impression, then we'll be left with the wrong impression. Because despite all of this mess Paul is dealing with, woven all throughout is a contrasting message of beauty and encouragement. Let's just mention a few:

**Paul Was in Trouble but Experienced Comfort:** 2 Corinthians 1:3-4 "Blessed by God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies, and the God of all comfort; who comforteth us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort them which are in any trouble, by the comfort wherewith we ourselves are comforted of God."

Paul received direct comfort (encouragement from God) in his times of trouble, and then turned right around and used his experiences to help others through their own trouble. How do we use our trouble? Do you have trouble and only experience trouble? Do you have trouble and only talk about trouble? Or do you experience this godly contrast? Do you experience God's comfort in your trouble and then use it to help others who are struggling?

**Paul's Life Was Threatened but Experienced the Life of Christ:** 2 Corinthians 1:8-9 "For we would not, brethren, have you ignorant of our trouble which came to us in Asia that we were pressed out of measure, above strength, insomuch that we despaired even of life: But we had the sentence of death in ourselves, that we should not trust in ourselves, but in God which raiseth the dead."

Paul was sure he and his ministry partners were about to die, and said, "Well, I guess this is it." But God wasn't done with them. God was showing them how to trust Him.

**Paul's Life Was in Disarray but God Sustained Him:** 2 Corinthians 4:8-9 "We are troubled on every side, yet not distressed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; cast down, but not destroyed; Always bearing about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life also of Jesus might be manifest in our body."

The more chaos Paul experienced, the more he was sustained by God for the express purpose of people seeing more of Christ in his life.

*What to Gain from 2 Corinthians*

**God Has Purpose for Everything**

This is the rainbow that connects our sorrow to glory. Everything you or I experience in this life, inside of God's will, is completely, and totally meaningful. Every hurt, every piece of confusion, every slander, every setback God uses to perfect us, and for us to help perfect others.

You should know that God is so powerful, and so wonderful, and so good, that God not only uses the good to bless us, but the bad to bless us. God is not limited at all by the shambles of our life that we have to bring Him. In fact, it displays more of His beauty, and more of His grace as the glory of Christ begins shining brighter and brighter from our lives as we submit to Him.



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