



The Whole Story: 2 Corinthians

Main Point: God's power is sufficient for believers, through our weakness and suffering, to produce new life in us.

Payoff: This letter shows how the gospel creates an upside-down, counter-cultural view of wisdom and success. We are strong in Christ when we are weak.

Overview: This was a follow-up letter to 1 Corinthians.¹ Paul says he writes to avoid another painful visit to this church (see the conflict from 1 Corinthians). However, Paul is on a mission to collect offerings from churches to send on to Jerusalem. This collection (chapters 8-9) were to relieve the suffering caused by a famine in Judea. Meanwhile, the church in Corinth was listening to other voices claiming strength and authority. Paul contrasts his ministry with those of the "super-apostles" based on his own weakness, and the gospel's sufficiency

Structure:

1-7 Ministers of a New Covenant

8-9 Generosity among Churches

10-13 Paul's Defense of his Ministry

Themes:

The Sufficiency of Christ: Paul is teaching the church what they should and should not be "boasting" in.² We should not, as Christians, boast in our own strength, but in God's power at work in us. 2 Corinthians 10:17 famously echoes Jeremiah's words: "let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord." God makes us sufficient in our weakness (12:9) and he makes grace "abound" in us (9:8). In Christ, he gives us new life (2 Cor. 5:17), makes us competent to be ministers (3:4-5), and gives us the strength to be generous (9:8ff). We become just like Christ, who was "crucified in weakness, but lives by the power of God."³ To summarize all of this, Paul uses the analogy that we are like Jars of Clay ... easily broken, but containing an immense treasure – the gospel.

New Life: Amidst suffering and pain, Paul is optimistic. He has tasted the new life that Christ's resurrection provides for believers. Almost every chapter in this letter describes that new life in some way:

- We have the Spirit inside us, who gives us a permanent glory (3:3, 11)
- Our outer self is wasting away, but our inner self is renewed daily (4:16)

¹ In Corinthians 5, Paul says to expel the person who is unashamedly committing sexual sin. In 2 Corinthians 2:5-11, Paul says to restore that sinner.

² "Boast" shows up in 13 verses: 1:12, 14, 5:12, 7:14, 8:24, 9:1, 10:8, 10:17, 11:10, 17, 30, 12:1, 9.

³ 2 Cor. 13:4.

- We are a new creation! (2 Cor. 5:17)
- We are God's temple (chapter 6)
- We can have joy and generosity in Christ (chapter 7-9)
- We live with the resurrection power of God (13:4)

Advice for Reading:

Track a few repeated words and ideas to really get a sense for the message of 2 Corinthians: weakness, boasting, sufficiency, suffering, and new life. That will allow you to connect individual passages with the main theme and circumstances which prompted Paul to write. Remember also that this is part of an ongoing conversation with the church from 1 Corinthians that not always been faithful to Paul's teaching.

Main Application:

Learn the secret of the Christian life: that we are strongest when we are weak and Christ's power shines through us. This is a backwards way of living, so it will take some time to work out what this looks like in your life, but the treasure that awaits you is priceless.