

## **2 Corinthians**

### ***Niggles and Nuggets***

These studies are based on Paul's second letter to the Corinthians. In fact, Paul had quite a correspondence with them. In 1 Cor 5:9 we read: "I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral persons". That letter has not survived. We also read a little later of a letter which they had sent to Paul: "Now concerning the matters about which you wrote ..." (1 Cor 7:1). It, too, has not survived. Paul mentions in 1 Cor 1:11 that he had also received reports from people who had visited him from Corinth.

In 2 Corinthians he twice mentions a further letter, a "painful" letter, sent between 1 Corinthians and 2 Corinthians, which he sent instead of making a planned visit (2 Cor 2:1–3 and 7:8–9). In 2 Cor 2:4 he explains: "I wrote to you out of much distress and anguish of heart and with many tears, not to cause you pain, but to let you know the abundant love that I have for you." It, too, has not survived. He finally wrote 2 Corinthians. I treat it as a single letter, but some have suggested it might be a compilation of letters, including that its final four chapters (2 Cor 10–13) may have originally belonged to that painful letter or even belong to a letter written after 2 Cor 1–9.

Putting all this together along with the mention of his founding visit to Corinth in the Book of Acts we have a sequence of events (you might like to have a map handy to follow the travels):

- Paul founds the church at Corinth (Acts 18), where he wrote 1 Thessalonians and met Aquila and Priscilla who with other Jews had been expelled from Rome by Emperor Claudius in 49 CE.
- He stayed there for 18 months (Acts 18:11) and appeared before the proconsul Gallio, who we know from an inscription took up office around mid 51 CE.
- Paul left Corinth returning to Jerusalem and embarked on a third missionary journey during which he spent 2 years and 3 months in Ephesus, 53–55 CE (Acts 19:8–41). He must have written a first letter from there and then received the Corinthians' letter and reports from Chloe's people and in response wrote 1 Corinthians.
- He had planned a second visit after visiting Macedonia (1 Cor 16:4), but instead made an unscheduled visit from Ephesus and told the Corinthians he would visit them again twice on the way to and on the way back from Macedonia (2 Cor 1:16). He then, however, chose to abandon both visits because his unscheduled visit had been a painful experience (2 Cor 2:1). Instead, he sent Titus to Corinth with a confronting letter, the "painful letter" (2 Cor 2:4; 7:6–8), and set off by land to Macedonia via Troas where he hope to rendezvous with Titus on his return.
- Titus returned, but not till Paul was already in Macedonia (2 Cor 7:6). Paul wrote 2 Corinthians in response to what must have been concerning reports from Titus about Corinth, perhaps then even worse ones while he was writing it, accounting for the heightened concern evident in the final four chapters. Apparently, it had a positive effect and so made it comfortable for him to return as planned to Corinth for his third visit (2 Cor 12:14) and to write Romans from there.

Paul had trouble with the Corinthians. In these studies we explore their niggles and also the nuggets of wisdom which Paul gives us as he responds to them. 2 Corinthians is not a treatise or a sermon. It is a tortuous effort by Paul to defend his ministry and gospel and to restore the Corinthians to good

sense. To that end he employs the rhetorical skills at his disposal and his sound grasp of a theology which makes God and grace the centre.

Paul's final words have become familiar to us as a benediction, which both sums up his faith and, as we shall see, also sums up what he was wanting to convey in his letter. I cite it in its familiar wording.

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God,  
and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. (2 Cor 13:13)

There are four sessions:

1. Niggles in 2 Corinthians 1–7
2. Nuggets in 2 Corinthians 1–7
3. Money Matters and Faith: 2 Corinthians 8–9
4. Confronting More Niggles and Affirming Grace: 2 Corinthians 10–13

It will be useful to have read all seven chapters before doing sessions 1 and 2. In each study we will focus on particular passages. The same will apply for the chapters for sessions 3 and 4. Thus, each study asks you to read a passage or passages from 2 Corinthians, offers you a commentary which brings today's thinking into dialogue with the text, and includes some open-ended questions for you to use as springboards for your own discussion and action. The questions are deliberately very open, so you can have space to bring your own experience and questions to the text and take it where you need to go, which may differ from group to group.

If you are coming together as a group, make sure

- everyone can see everyone else
- everyone is included and is encouraged to participate as they would like
- there is room for people to agree, differ, be clear or confused, and be accepted
- people are encouraged to value each other's input, to listen without using that time to work out what you are going to say and without interrupting, and, when discussing a question, to keep the focus on the question

You will need at least one Bible translation. NRSV is probably best, but others might include NIV or some other new translation. The sessions are designed to last around 60 minutes and encourage you to explore not only what the texts meant on the basis of the latest historical research but also what they might mean for living today.

### **Making these studies work for you and your group.**

Adapt them to suit your group and its preferences. For instance, you can read the passage and the commentary and then look at the questions. Or you could first read the passage and note anything which popped out for you and then read the commentary, section by section, stopping to talk about anything that arises, before going right through to the end and looking at the questions. Or you could start with a general question on the topic before doing one of the above. Or you may want to circulate the studies in advance, so that people have already read the passage and commentary before they come. Then go through it when you come together in one of the ways mentioned above. ... whatever makes the studies work best for you!

For further information on the Revised Common Lectionary see weekly commentaries:

<https://billloader.com/lectionaryindex.html>

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## Niggles in 2 Corinthians 1 – 7

The first seven chapters form a unit and conclude with the plea: “Make room in your hearts for us!” (7:2), repeating Paul’s plea in chapter 6, “We have spoken frankly to you Corinthians; our heart is wide open to you. <sup>12</sup>There is no restriction in our affections, but only in yours. <sup>13</sup>In return—I speak as to children—open wide your hearts also” (6:11–13). To do otherwise would be to ally with darkness and unbelief, as he warns 6:14–7:1, using material traditionally targeting idolatry. Clearly, the relationship is rather fragile. In 7:2 he continues: “We have wronged no one, we have corrupted no one, we have taken advantage of no one.” We must assume that he knew well that some people were saying: “Oh yes, you have!”

What was going on that set Paul off to write the way he has in 2 Corinthians? In part, our knowledge is limited and so we need to exercise restraint in seeking answers. In this session we explore some of the niggles and Paul’s response to them. We begin with Paul’s first attempt to address some of the issues.

### Read 2 Corinthians 1:12 – 2:4

Notice Paul’s appeal to having a good conscience – some obviously thought he should have a bad conscience. When he speaks of boast, this is not about skiting. It is about making a claim about himself, indeed, defending himself. Paul’s footwork is always interesting. He is being frank with them. We had reference to frankness above in noting the wording of 6:11. They ought, he insists, to understand him, but he notes “as you have already understood us in part” – “in part”. “On the day of the Lord Jesus we are your boast even as you are our boast” – they should be proud of him as he is also proud of them and that should be how it will be when Jesus returns and at the judgement people’s achievement are assessed. The relationship is not there yet.

Paul then moves straight to one of their niggles. Why didn’t he visit them as he said he would on his way to Macedonia in northern Greece and again on his way back to Judea?! “Was I vacillating when I wanted to do this? Do I make my plans according to ordinary human standards, ready to say ‘Yes, yes’ and ‘No, no’ at the same time?” You can just imagine that some would have answered: “Yes, you do! A person following God’s guidance would surely know God’s will and not go changing his mind all the time!”

Paul has to answer the niggle. He had made an unscheduled visit to Corinth from where he was staying in Ephesus not so long ago and had told them there of his plan to visit them twice more on his way to and from Macedonia. That was already a change of plan because he had earlier said he would visit them after going to Macedonia on the overland route (1 Cor 16:5–6). That unscheduled visit must have been such a disaster, that he decided to skip the planned visits and instead go back to the earlier plan of taking the overland route to Macedonia rather than taking the sea route via Corinth.



6<sup>th</sup> century image of Paul in Ephesus cave

The most we know is that, as he indicates in 2:5, someone caused him pain on that unscheduled visit. That person had to be disciplined by the congregation (banned for a while?). There must have also been confrontation between Paul and the congregation because he insists: “But I call on God as witness against me: it was to spare you that I did not come again to Corinth ... I made up my mind not to make you another painful visit” (1:23; 2:1). More footwork: he doesn’t want to sound bossy, so he writes: “I do not mean to imply that we lord it over your faith” (1:24) and adds a compliment: “rather, we are workers with you for your joy, because you stand firm in the faith” (1:24) and “for I am confident about all of you, that my joy would be the joy of all of you” (2:3). He is and he isn’t.

Instead of going to Macedonia from Ephesus via the sea route and thus calling in on Corinth on the way and on the way back, Paul sent Titus to them with a letter: “I wrote to you out of much distress and anguish of heart and with many tears, not to cause you pain, but to let you know the abundant love that I have for you” (2:4). Paul really did care about them and wants them to know that. Caring sometimes means you have to change plans. Notice that his caring also extends to the person who wronged him. Love and care is what drives Paul, especially in such tricky situations and in the face of such niggles.

Paul is very open. He had headed up north on the land route and got to Troas where he expected to meet up with Titus who could brief him on the effect of his letter, but Titus did not appear (2:12). He went on to Macedonia. You can read what happened next:

### **Read 2 Corinthians 7:5–16**

Finally, Titus arrived with good news about Corinth. Paul continues to be very open: “For even if I made you sorry with my letter, I do not regret it (though I did regret it, for I see that I grieved you with that letter, though only briefly)” (7:8). It had the desired effect: “For see what earnestness this godly grief has produced in you, what eagerness to clear yourselves, what indignation, what alarm, what longing, what zeal, what punishment” (7:11). He exhibits a delicate vulnerability, firmness and affirmation. He cannot but be personally involved in the process. Handling such conflicts and strained relationships is never easy. The combination of this letter (2 Corinthians), following Titus’ visit, appears to have restored the relationship. Paul would have an extended stay in Corinth and wrote Romans from there.

The niggles were not just about his change of plans. He will come back to them in chapters 10–13, but already in these first seven chapters we can see that more was at stake. For some, even being as vulnerable as he has made himself by talking about change of plans and regrets means that he fails the common ideal of what it meant to be a man. Men, as idealised in Roman culture, do not admit to weakness, let alone tears, and always show themselves as in control. They impress. They exude power. Already in 1 Corinthians we can see that Paul had to face the criticism that he was a failure.

Apparently, people found Peter and Apollos more impressive. Paul hid behind the cross, they might say, because he embraced vulnerability and love.



Tagged as a weakling male, Paul makes it worse by speaking of his suffering and hardship. In the final four chapters he will challenge those who pride themselves in having impressive references, letters

of commendation from top church leaders. Already in these first chapters, however, he confronts the issue: “Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Surely we do not need, as some do, letters of recommendation to you or from you, do we? <sup>2</sup>You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, to be known and read by all” (3:1) and again: “Therefore, knowing the fear of the Lord, we try to persuade others; but we ourselves are well known to God, and I hope that we are also well known to your consciences. <sup>12</sup>We are not commending ourselves to you again, but giving you an opportunity to boast about us, so that you may be able to answer those who boast in outward appearance and not in the heart” (5:11).

To cap it off Paul makes vulnerability and weakness his commendation: “We are putting no obstacle in anyone’s way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry, <sup>4</sup>but as servants of God we have commended ourselves in every way: through great endurance ...” (6:3–4) which continues to produce a long list of situations of weakness and vulnerability (6:4-10). “That’s not success and victory, Paul. That’s failure!” his critics would reply.

In other parts, Paul confronts these niggles more directly as coming from people (including those in ministry) skilled in self-promotion and manipulation: “For we are not peddlers of God’s word like so many; but in Christ we speak as persons of sincerity, as persons sent from God and standing in his presence” (2:17). “Therefore, since it is by God’s mercy that we are engaged in this ministry, we do not lose heart. <sup>2</sup>We have renounced the shameful things that one hides; we refuse to practise cunning or to falsify God’s word; but by the open statement of the truth we commend ourselves to the conscience of everyone in the sight of God” (4:1). “We do not proclaim ourselves” (4:5). Ego so easily corrupts caring.

Paul sums it up, declaring: “But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us” (4:7). “Pathetic and weak,” his critics would say, “no better than a clay jar!” “Yes,” Paul would say, “A clay jar, but what a treasure love is!” “Indeed, this is our boast, the testimony of our conscience: we have behaved in the world with frankness and godly sincerity, not by earthly wisdom but by the grace of God” (1:12).



### **For Reflection and Sharing**

1. What insights or ideas in the passage and its commentary do you find particularly interesting, puzzling or challenging?
2. Why were some at Corinth so critical of Paul?
3. In what ways do you see similar issues troubling the church today and how can we best deal with them?

## Nuggets in 2 Corinthians 1–7

The opening statements in Paul's letters follow a standard pattern of the day. While we usually begin simply with "Dear X", they followed the pattern: "X to Y, Hi!" There was usually more. It was customary to make some positive remarks about the recipients or to give thanks for something about them. In the way Paul fills out this pattern we can often detect key emphases to follow in the letter. This is so in 2 Corinthians.

### Read 2 Corinthians 1:1-11

Clearly, suffering and consolation are a key emphasis. His explanation in 1:8–11 indicates that this was very real and recent. His thanksgiving includes both consolation while facing suffering and finally escaping it. But there is more: he even sees advantage in his going through suffering because it enables him to comfort and console the Corinthians when they face suffering. He turns the disadvantage around and sees it as enabling him to be more informed in caring for them. Love leads his thoughts.

In the light of the niggles we encountered in the first session, we may suspect that something else is in play here. Some at Corinth saw Paul's sufferings and vulnerabilities as signs he was not blessed by God. He did not measure up well to other leaders whom they knew, whose lives demonstrated God's blessing. They were strong and successful.

Paul meets these niggles in part by twice declaring: "We do not lose heart" (4:1, 16). After the first instance, he uses the image of having the treasure of the gospel in clay jars.



### Read 2 Corinthians 4:7 – 5:10.

Far from being ashamed of suffering, Paul sees it as part of what it means to be human. Perhaps he has the creation story in mind according to which God made humankind as a clay model and breathed life into it (Gen 2:7). Paul is not idealising suffering but insisting that for him to be faithful to love sometimes means going through tough times. He puts it starkly: "So death is at work in us, but life in you" (4:12). "Yes, everything is for your sake, so that grace, as it extends to more and more people, may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God" (4:15). It is all about "grace", love.

Paul's second reference to not losing heart (4:16) begins a personal reflection about hope. Common Jewish expectations of the day were that the body is like a tent. The earthly one will be replaced by a heavenly one. Usually this was expected to happen at the climax of history, which Paul and others believed was imminent, when Jesus would return and the day of judgement would take place. Resurrection bodies were spiritual in nature.

In the interim, those who died were deemed to be sleeping safely in the heavenly realms as they awaited the end. Paul can say, "We walk by faith, not by sight. Yes, we do have confidence" (5:7–8),

because he is convinced that God's love will be there for him in the heavenly realm as it was there for him in the earthly realm. This was not because he once underwent a conversion, significant as that was, but because he was openly and actively engaged in partnership with God. The difference is as important, for instance, as between having had a wedding and having an ongoing fruitful loving marriage. "For all of us must appear before the judgement seat of Christ, so that each may receive recompense for what has been done in the body, whether good or evil" (5:10). Not: were you converted at some stage, but have you been committed to your relationship and lived accordingly. Also, not detailed judgement about your every little act, but judgement about what kind of life you lived, your ongoing commitment.

Paul's assertion that his being vulnerable was not a sign of spiritual weakness was part of his defending the integrity of his ministry. His defence produces wonderfully rich insights, golden nuggets. The first is to be found in chapter 3.

### **Read 2 Corinthians 2:14 – 3:18**

Corinth was a Roman colony. So the Corinthians would appreciate the imagery of a triumphal procession, often filled with the aroma of torches and fragrant decorative branches waved about. Love is fragrant: some will welcome it; some will reject it. Paul quickly corrects any implication that he sees ministry or caring as his being winsome or attractive, parading himself. He rejects being "peddlers of God's word like so many" (2:17). It is not all about him, the personality cult model. It is all about love.



The nigglers at Corinth claimed Paul was no match for their impressive preachers who came with cvs and references from the very best. Paul's response: what counts is love and the love we have demonstrated towards you. You don't need more than that. Love speaks volumes. You are the evidence.

Paul goes on to ground his competence not in being a whiz-bang preacher of high credentials but as a bearer of the Spirit, whose chief fruit is love. The contrast between Spirit and letter almost certainly targets competing preachers who insist on followers keeping biblical laws on such matters as food, fellowship and perhaps also circumcision.

In Galatians he tells us how he fell out with Peter and James about the insistence that such laws meant that regular shared meals with non-Jews was forbidden (2:11–14). On many such matters they could say: "The Bible says so", the mantra of fundamentalists then and now. Paul will have none of it. Playing with the imagery of Moses veiling his face before God, Paul argues that treating scripture in this way distorts what it intends. He claims that Christ tells us how it should be read, namely as witness to who God truly is.

Turning to the Lord, the veil is removed, and we see that what God wants is freedom: "Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom" (3:17). Paul is not advocating freedom to do as you like, but freedom to follow love and subject all rules and laws to the test of



what now is the most loving way and setting aside those that don't. Paul sees progress in spirituality as allowing oneself to be transformed into the likeness of God's goodness and generosity.

The second most treasured gem in these chapters comes in chapter 5.

### **Read 2 Corinthians 5:11–21**

"The love of Christ urges us on". Urged on by love, God's love for us and others, shown for all to see in Christ. Not urged on by the ambition to make a name for ourselves or win plaudits. Love makes people come alive and "live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them" (5:15). That is not to be construed as though Christ is now the one wanting to make a name for himself and win plaudits. Christ's ambition was love and reflects God's agenda. It is not about viewing people from a human point of view, on the scale of human achievements, but seeing in a new way with new priorities.

Paul's statement in 5:17 is one of his best known: "So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!" At one level it reminds us of the promise of a new heaven and a new earth as a vision of renewal for the future in Isaiah 65:17. Here Paul applies it already to the present. Incorporate yourselves into the sphere of Christ's power and influence and you become engaged in renewal. That renewal, new creation, is about reconciliation, that is, helping people become one again with God. That is what God was doing in Christ: "In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself" and more: "and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us" (5:20).

Paul's statements reach a climax in the words: "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (5:21). We are to become God's goodness and generosity ("righteousness") in the world, God's "ambassadors". This is not just for ministers but for all who are incorporated into Christ. All are to share this ministry. Paul gives us this gem in the context of defending his ministry against Corinthians niggles and so goes on to declare: "We are putting no obstacle in anyone's way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry" (6:3). In doing so, he has bequeathed to us a way of seeing ourselves and understanding what being one with God really means.

### **For Reflection and Sharing**

1. What insights or ideas in the passage and its commentary do you find particularly interesting, puzzling or challenging?
2. What drives Paul?
3. "Ambassadors"? What images used by Paul do you find helpful in understanding what it means to be a follower of Jesus?

## Money Matters and Faith 2 Corinthians 8 – 9

Paul begins a new topic. For some, the transition in 8:1 seems abrupt and they speculate that perhaps these chapters are from a separate letter or even two separate letters and have been conveniently incorporated into 2 Corinthians. That is not impossible, but it may just reflect the fact that Paul did not dictate his letter all at one sitting. It looks very much like that. The topic is “sharing in this ministry to the saints” (8:4).

### Read 2 Corinthians 8:1–7

In the words “sharing in this ministry to the saints”, “sharing” is the Greek word *koinonia*, which can also mean “fellowship, communion”. The “sharing” is something deeply spiritual, a commitment together. The word for “ministry” is *diakonia*, widely used for ministry and service. Giving money is ministry, too. “The saints” or “holy ones” depicts fellow believers. Paul often uses it to describe the recipients of his letters. In relation to the collection, it means members of the church in Jerusalem. Paul wrote to the Corinthians about it in 1 Corinthians 16, where he mentions that he had given the same advice to churches in Galatia about making a collection. In Romans he is more specific, referring to “the poor among the saints at Jerusalem” (15:26).

There must have been poor people in every congregation, but the poor in Jerusalem were special for three reasons. The first is that there appears to have been a famine in Judea in the 50’s CE. The second is that it is likely that these are people living in Jerusalem who had sold up their possessions (as Acts 4:32–37 tells us) and now faced acute need.

The third reason belongs to the bigger picture which informed early Jewish thought about the climax of history and is reflected in the teachings of Jesus and the early church.



Its first expression comes in texts like Isaiah 25:6, “On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make a feast for all peoples” and Isaiah 2:2, “In days to come the mountain of the Lord’s house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised above the hills; all the nations shall stream to it.” It finds its echo in the parable of the mustard seed, where birds (symbol of the nations) would rest in its shade (Mark 4:30–32) and it is foreshadowed in Matthew’s story of the wise men of the nations coming to see baby Jesus. Paul apparently saw his own ministry as part of this hope: he was reaching out to the nations. In this regard, he appears to have seen the collection as a symbol of the hope’s fulfilment: the wealth of the nations comes to Zion.

### Read 2 Corinthians 8:8–15

Paul is appealing to the Corinthians to carry through on their commitment to contribute. Collecting funds to aid the poor is ministry. Paul tries a range of means of persuasion. Already in the opening

words of the chapter he is doing so by highlighting the generosity of the congregations in Macedonia where he is dictating his letter. Their generosity amid their own hardship was exemplary. In 8:7 he affirms the Corinthian strengths and urges they add such generosity.

Paul must tread carefully given the problems he had faced in Corinth from rival factions, so he insists he is not imposing the request as a command (8:8), but then suggests it will be a test of the genuineness of their love. He next cites the prime example of such generosity: Christ, himself, who “though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich” (8:9), referring not to money but to the wealth of forgiveness and hope. He goes on to insist that this is not about imposing an unfair burden on them but is about a “fair balance”. The appeal to justice can work sometimes when the appeal to be loving does not.

Paul goes on to describe Titus’s impending visit and those who will accompany him. We do not know who “the brother who is famous among all the churches” (8:18) is, who accompanies the funding drive, nor do we know the identity of the “brother whom we have often tested and found eager in many matters” (8:22). Persuasion returns in the words: “show them the proof of your love and of our reason for boasting about you” (8:24). There is a hint of trouble in the words: “We intend that no one should blame us” (8:20). In later chapters he comes back to the allegation that he was feathering his own nest.



This argument about boasting continues in the following verses in 9:1–5, where Paul mentions that he had held up the Corinthians’ commitment before the Macedonians and now appeals to the Corinthians not to embarrass him by failing to carry out that commitment. It may not be the best argument – save me from embarrassment – but Paul tries it. Again, he insists: this is not extortion; it is a voluntary gift (9:5).

### **Read 2 Corinthians 9:6–15**

Paul’s final appeals can be misleading and feed the aberration called the prosperity gospel, namely that if you follow Christ, you will become wealthy. Paul does, however, insist that loving also has its reward. He also suggests that all your needs will be met: “God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance ... always having enough of everything” (9:8). Paul’s understanding of “enough” is probably quite minimal as is his understanding of what people’s needs are, and probably far less than we imagine. Assuming he claims this of himself, he was far from prosperous and regularly went through hard times, as he has already indicated earlier in the letter and will extrapolate in later chapters. There is, at least, the wisdom that in giving and loving there is a fulfilment which comes from being what we were made to be. The story of Jesus gives us a perspective on what love means and costs and why paradoxically it is to be at one with God, oneself, and others.

Paul cites Psalm 112:9 to highlight what it means to be in tune with God: it is to be generous. “Righteousness”, a rather churchy word, means “goodness”. Paul always insists that such goodness is best not seen as a demand but as the fruit of embracing love and overflowing with it. He writes of “surpassing grace of God that he has given you” as the seed to be sown, which will bear fruit. He is

clearly combining notions of abundance together, abundance of benefit to self, to others, and as praise to God. For Paul, generosity in relation to human need is not an extra, a social obligation in addition to faith, but integral to faith. When our lives are open to God, we open ourselves to receive and spread generosity and love. Paul's persuasion is strongest when it puts our handling of resources at the heart of our spirituality.

In Romans, which Paul wrote after he finally made his visit to Corinth and was staying there, he expresses some concern about his collection. He mentions that he is going to Jerusalem with the collection before he comes to visit them, but then adds: "I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to join me in earnest prayer to God on my behalf, <sup>31</sup>that I may be rescued from the unbelievers in Judea, and that my ministry to Jerusalem may be acceptable to the saints" (15:30–31).

Why might it not be acceptable? Because, it appears, the Jerusalem church was unhappy about his very inclusive approach to non-Jews. Not only did he not require them to be circumcised but in Antioch he also tolerated having regular fellowship meals with them. James, their leader, Jesus' brother, had sent a delegation to Antioch to oppose such fellowship, which persuaded Peter and even Paul's companion Barnabas to desist from it, much to Paul's ire (Gal 2:11–13).

What, then, happened to the collection? Luke, the author of Acts, reports that when Paul arrived in Jerusalem he was received with suspicion. The Jerusalem leaders who met him said: "You see, brother, how many thousands of believers there are among the Jews, and they are all zealous for the law. <sup>21</sup>They have been told about you that you teach all the Jews living among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, and that you tell them not to circumcise their children or observe the customs" (Acts 21:20–21). The only reference to funds is that the Jerusalem leaders persuaded Paul to use them to pay costs related to four men under a vow (21:23–24). Otherwise, Luke reports nothing of the collection. This may well mean that the offering was not deemed acceptable, a sad outcome. We may never know.

### **For Reflection and Sharing**

1. What insights or ideas in the passage and its commentary do you find particularly interesting, puzzling or challenging?
2. What role did the collection have for Paul?
3. Raising funds to meet human need is best done with a focus on that need and so an appeal to care. Paul uses various arguments to try to persuade and you may be aware of many other strategies when churches seek funds, some healthy, some not so. What is your experience? Is it ministry? Is it an extra? Is it core?

## **Confronting More Niggles and Affirming Grace: 2 Corinthians 10–13**

As with chapters 8 and 9, the final chapters of 2 Corinthians, seem somewhat detached from what precedes, which has led some to see in them a separate letter, perhaps even the severe letter to which Paul pointed earlier (7:8). Alternatively, we are simply seeing the result of Paul's dictating the letter over a number of days. The sharpness of tone may well reflect that Paul senses that he must finally be more confrontational about issues hinted at earlier.

### **Read 2 Corinthians 10:1–18**

Paul is clearly angry and frustrated. He claims authority as the one who founded the church in Corinth and there are clearly issues of discipline which need addressing. He returns to them in the final chapter, warning that he will not be lenient in dealing with ongoing sin, which he lists in 12:21 as "impurity, sexual immorality, and licentiousness".

Clearly, however, there is more at stake. He faces criticism from some in Corinth. "For they say, 'His letters are weighty and strong, but his bodily presence is weak, and his speech contemptible'" (10:10). Paul plays on that sarcastically in 10:1, when he writes: "I who am humble when face to face with you, but bold towards you when I am away!" He is challenging his critics who, he argues, are operating with a typically human value system in contrast to his, which he claims, is based on values drawn from Christ.

As he proceeds, we see the clash of values. His opponents claim authority based on being apostles as apostles (= authorised envoys) with letters of authority which trump his authority. He implies that such people have been overstepping their limits by coming to Corinth, his mission territory, and causing trouble, something he has never done. He has no patience for competing with these intruders. His boasting or, better, sense of confidence, rests on fulfilling the task assigned to him as apostle to the Gentiles.



Theirs, apparently, rests on their reputation for great achievements and their impressive rhetorical skills. They are seducing the Corinthians, as he puts it, the way the snake (according to the Greek of Genesis) seduced Eve. He insists: "I think that I am not in the least inferior to these super-apostles" (11:5). "Such boasters are false apostles, deceitful workers, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ" (11:13). "I am not at all inferior to these super-apostles" (12:12). They are not super at all!

### **Read 2 Corinthians 11:1–6; 12:1–10**

We can build something of a profile of these "super-apostles". They are, like Paul, "Hebrews", "Israelites", and "ministers of Christ" (11:22). Already in 3:1 Paul had referred to such people coming with letters of commendation. They must have had impressive cvs: great preachers, miracle workers, successful. Paul challenges their image with his own boast, but with striking irony. What is on his cv?

Multiple forms of suffering, vulnerability, danger, living with anxiety about his churches (11:23–29). He had listed some also earlier in 4:7–12.

In chapter 12 he then reports two ecstatic experiences, which he describes as visions or revelations, but even then, speaking of himself only indirectly, adding “On behalf of such a one I will boast, but on my own behalf I will not boast, except of my weaknesses” (12:5). Even then, he brings himself down to earth with the report that he has lived with some kind of disability, which keeps him “from being too elated” (12:7). He does not even tell us what it is, despite myriad guesses ever since. The message he hears from God is: “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness” (12:9). One can imagine his super-apostle critics shaking their heads. “Paul, you are not showing the signs of a victorious believer.”

They also attacked Paul for the way he handled money. Already in 1 Corinthians 9 he had had to defend his decision not to follow the guidelines given by Jesus that envoys not work but let hosts supply their needs. Paul chose not to take advantage of that but worked part-time as tent maker.

You can just hear them saying: “You are also not upholding the instruction of Jesus, that you entrust yourself to God to supply all your needs. You have been receiving funding from the Macedonian churches, instead of accepting a stipend from us at Corinth. You lack faith!” There is now probably also an accusation that the collection is a swindle. Paul responds to such criticism: “Let it be assumed that I did not burden you. Nevertheless (you say) since I was crafty, I took you in by deceit. <sup>17</sup>Did I take advantage of you through any of those whom I sent to you?” (12:16–17; similarly, 7:2).



### Read 2 Corinthians 13:1–13

Paul returns in the final chapter to his impending visit and the warnings with which he began chapter 10. It is interesting that he speaks of power while affirming weakness. Paul’s focus is not winning the competition between impressive preachers but bringing the power of love to bear on the Corinthian situation. This issue is not his ego, but truth and love. “Put things in order, listen to my appeal, agree with one another, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you” (13:11).

2 Corinthians 10–13 is Paul at his most passionate. His problem is not unbelievers or even believers, but preachers who he sees are bent on self-promotion, engaged in seeking to impress with their achievement and their success. We still have them and sometimes they have allowed all kinds of abuses to take place under their watch. Some live luxuriously, seeing it as evidence of God’s blessing. Paul began 2 Corinthians pointing to comfort which he experienced in suffering vulnerability. For him, we live on the cross side of the story, where vulnerability and suffering may have their place, and where love matters most as it always will. To have faith is to share God’s love, not to win by human measures. For Paul, that was life and hope.

Titus will have taken Paul's letter to Corinth where it would have been read out to congregations. Who would not want to be a fly on the wall! We know next to nothing of the effect except that Paul then ended up spending some months at Corinth and wrote his very considered and calm letter to Romans from there. This suggests that his appeal must have been heard, at least by the majority. In it he could address some of the other major criticisms which kept surfacing and again his answer was not fundamentalist arguments about keeping all scriptural commands, but the centrality of love and grace.



### **For Reflection and Sharing**

1. What insights or ideas in the passage and its commentary do you find particularly interesting, puzzling or challenging?
2. Why was Paul so angry?
3. What is your experience of "super-apostles" in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?