

2 CORINTHIANS

*God's power is made perfect in weakness*

WRITTEN

56-57 AD

KEY VERSE

*"But 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 about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me."*

12:9

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PURPOSE

Defend their apostleship and prevent them from "crossing over" to their opponents, and ask for financial help for the church in Jerusalem

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## INTRODUCTION

This letter was written a couple of years after 1 Corinthians, and now there were other problems in Corinth. Since the last time, some false apostles had come to the church. They exalted themselves (3:1, 10:12) and looked down on Paul. They were concerned with speaking well, looking good, and getting paid for their speeches. Paul, on the other hand, was perhaps older than them, physically weak, and somewhat battered after a tiring life as an apostle. He never got paid either. He was accused of several things, including making plans in a worldly manner and changing them as he pleased (1:17), that he was only bold when he was away (10:1, 10), that he was untrained as a speaker (11:6) and probably that he did not have any spiritual experiences (12:1-9).

This is Paul's most personal letter. He argues that God's power is perfected through human weakness, and therefore he is more than happy to admit his weaknesses.

This letter addresses what true spirituality for a leader means. A "successful" leader is not successful in the eyes of the world but endures adversity so that God can give life to others through his ministry (4:12). A "successful" leader does not pretend to be perfect but admits their weaknesses. Paul's defense is interrupted in chapters 8 and 9 where he asks for help on behalf of the church in Jerusalem because at that time there was a famine in Judea.

### DATING AND PURPOSE

Written from Macedonia in AD 56-57 (Acts 20:1).

Main purpose:

1. Defend their apostleship and prevent them from "changing side" to their opponents.
2. Ask for financial help for the congregation in Jerusalem.

Main theme: God's power is made perfect in weakness (12:9).

### GREEK VALUES FOR SPEAKERS

* eloquence.
* good appearance.
* being paid like a professional.
* contact with the divine.

### POSSIBLE CHARGES AGAINST PAUL

* Is not sincere and lacks integrity (1:12-13).
* Is fickle when he makes plans (1:17).
* Do not care about the Corinthians (2:4).
* Cunning and wants to make money off the word of God (2:17, 4:2).
* Recommends himself (5:12).
* Bold through the letters when away, but *"timid"* face to face (10:1, 10).
* Live by the standards of this world (10:2).
* Untrained as a speaker and therefore preaching free of charge (11:6-11).
* No spiritual experiences (12:1-9).
* Trying to take advantage of the Corinthians (12:14-18).

### PAUL ON THE OPPONENTS

* Peddle the word of God for profit (2:17).
* Have letters of recommendation (3:1).
* Boast the outward appearance (5:12).
* Recommend themselves and use themselves as a benchmarks (10:12).
* Preach another Jesus and a different gospel in a different Spirit? (11:4)
* Claim to be apostles but are false apostles and servants of Satan (11:12-15).
* Boast in a worldly manner (11:18).
* Enslave, exploit, and take advantage of the Corinthians (11:20).
* Jews (11:22).
* *“Super-apostles”* (12:11)

### SOPHISTS?

* A new sophistic movement which arose in the first half of the 1st century.
* Experts in the art of speaking (rhetoric).
* Emphasized appearance, clothing, presentation, and the use of voice.
* Took payment.
* Could be accused of greed and no concern for "wisdom".
* “Only show and no content.”

### STRUCTURE

**Explaining the ministry (1:1-7:16)**

1:1-11 Sufferings and comfort.

1:12 - 2:13 Previous letter, changes of plan, Titus' report (Part 1).

2:14 - 7:4 Personal service.

7:5-16 Previous letter, changes of plan, Titus' report (Part 2).

8:1 - 9:15 The collection to Judea.

**Defending the ministry (10:1-13:13)**

10:1 - 12:13 Defense against accusations.

12:14 - 13:13 Third visit.

## OPENING: 1:3-11

* Which words are repeated the most? Why?
* What does Paul want to communicate in these verses?

Introducing themes:

### Comfort and encouragement → 2:7, 7:4, 6, 7, 13

*"Now instead, you ought to forgive and comfort him, so that he will not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow."* 2:7

*"I have spoken to you with great frankness; I take great pride in you. I am greatly encouraged; in all our troubles my joy knows no bounds."* 7:4

*"But God, who comforts the downcast, comforted us by the coming of Titus,"* 7:6

*"And not only by his coming but also by the comfort you had given him. He told us about your longing for me, your deep sorrow, your ardent concern for me, so that my joy was greater than ever."* 7:7

*"By all this we are encouraged. In addition to our own encouragement, we were especially delighted to see how happy Titus was, because his spirit has been refreshed by all of you."* 7:13

### Distress → 2:4, 4:17, 6:4, 7:4, 8:2, 8:13

*"For I wrote you out of great distress and anguish of heart and with many tears, not to grieve you but to let you know the depth of my love for you."* 2:4

*"For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all."* 4:17

*"Rather, as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way: in great endurance; in troubles, hardships and distresses;"* 6:14

*"I have spoken to you with great frankness; I take great pride in you. I am greatly encouraged; in all our troubles my joy knows no bounds."* 7:4

*"In the midst of a very severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity."* 8:13

### Sufferings → 8:13, 11:25

*"Our desire is not that others might be relieved while you are hard pressed, but that there might be equality."* 8:13

*"Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was pelted with stones, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea,"* 11:25

### “Death” (v. 9) → 2:14-16, 4:7, 10-12, 14, 6:9, 11:23

*"But thanks be to God, who always leads us as captives in Christ’s triumphal procession and uses us to spread the aroma of the knowledge of him everywhere. For we are to God the pleasing aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing. To the one we are an aroma that brings death; to the other, an aroma that brings life. And who is equal to such a task?"* 2:14-16

*"But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us."* 4:7

*"We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. 11 For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus’ sake, so that his life may also be revealed in our mortal body. 12 So then, death is at work in us, but life is at work in you."* 4:10-12

*"Because we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus from the dead will also raise us with Jesus and present us with you to himself."* 4:14

*"Known, yet regarded as unknown; dying, and yet we live on; beaten, and yet not killed;"* 6:9

*"Are they servants of Christ? (I am out of my mind to talk like this.) I am more. I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again."* 11:23

* Paul's sufferings become comfort and salvation for them (v. 6, as with Jesus).
* The gospel brings both suffering and comfort. We are called to share in Christ's sufferings, but we are also comforted by Jesus. Paul focusses on his sufferings in this letter.

## *“…always leads us as captives in Christ’s triumphal procession…”* (2:14)

The image was taken from Roman triumphal processions, where defeated enemies were led in a long procession through the streets of Rome.

*“…God, who always leads us…”*

* *"For it seems to me that God has put us apostles on display at the end of the procession, like those condemned to die in the arena. We have been made a spectacle to the whole universe, to angels as well as to human beings."* 1 Cor 4:9 → as slaves?
* Paul was God's slave who was led to death in Christ to give glory to God.

His sufferings and weaknesses revealed knowledge of God to the world.

*“Always”*: constant for Paul. His sufferings brought glory to God.

## *"...the pleasing aroma of Christ..."* (2:14-16)

Incense was used in triumphal processions as an offering to the gods.

Paul's sufferings were sacrifices to God's glory.

The effect is twofold, in the same way as the gospel (1 Cor 1:18-25).

* When Christians suffer, do we produce a response for or against Jesus (foolishness or salvation)?
* Therefore, suffering is part of our calling as Christians. And therefore, churches that are persecuted grow.
* Tertullian (ca. 160-220): *"The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church."*

Paul's ministry with sufferings and weaknesses legitimized him as an apostle. And he was not looking for riches (vv. 16b-17).

## 4:2-12

*"Rather, we have renounced secret and shameful ways; we do not use deception, nor do we distort the word of God. On the contrary, by setting forth the truth plainly we commend ourselves to everyone’s conscience in the sight of God. And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel that displays the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. For what we preach is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus’ sake. For God, who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of God’s glory displayed in the face of Christ. But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus’ sake, so that his life may also be revealed in our mortal body. So then, death is at work in us, but life is at work in you."*

### "WE HAVE THIS TREASURE IN CLAY JARS..." (4:7-12)

* Cheap clay pots were a strange container for a great treasure…The treasure is the gospel.
* Paulus was like a clay pot with many cracks. The power did not come from Paul.
* The weaker he was, the more the light of the gospel could shine forth.
* We do not need to be perfect in any way to convey the gospel.
* Our "cracks" give glory to God.
* It is often tiring to work for God.

## WHY DIDN’T PAUL LOSE HEART? (4:16 - 5:10)

1. Because inwardly he was being renewed day by day, despite physical toil (4:16).
2. Because the troubles were light and momentary (4:17).
3. Because what was seen was temporary, but what was unseen is eternal (4:18).
4. Because he would’ve received a heavenly body even if his body decayed (5:1).

The earthly appearance and success were not that important to Paul because he looked forward to eternity. When everything that exists, now fades anyway.

## WHAT PAUL ENDURES NOT TO CREATE OBSTACLES FOR THE GOSPEL (6:3-10)

Great endurance; in troubles, hardships, and distresses; in beatings, imprisonments, and riots; in hard work, sleepless nights, and hunger (vv. 4-5).

Proceeding in purity, understanding, patience and kindness; in the Holy Spirit and in sincere love; in truthful speech and in the power of God; with weapons of righteousness in the right hand and in the left; through glory and dishonor, bad report and good report. (vv. 6-8a).

Regarded as impostors, known, yet regarded as unknown; dying, and yet they lived on; beaten, and yet not killed; sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; poor, yet making many rich; having nothing, and yet possessing everything (vv. 8b-10).

## CHAPTERS 8-9: THE COLLECTION FOR THE CHURCH IN JERUSALEM - PAUL'S FUNDRAISING PROJECT (YEARS 44-57)

**Year 44**

*"One of them, named Agabus, stood up and through the Spirit predicted that a severe famine would spread over the entire Roman world. (This happened during the reign of Claudius.) The disciples, as each one was able, decided to provide help for the brothers and sisters living in Judea. This they did, sending their gift to the elders by Barnabas and Saul."* Acts 11:28-30

**Year 48**

The apostles in Jerusalem asked Paul to continue to *"remember the poor, the very thing I had been eager to do all along."* Galatians 2:10

**Year 56-57**

Wrote 2 Corinthians and encouraged them to complete the collection they started earlier (8:10-11).

**Year 57**

Visited the congregation in Corinth (Acts 20:2-3) and collected the gift. Wrote Romans from there:

*"Now, however, I am on my way to Jerusalem in the service of the Lord’s people there. For Macedonia and Achaia were pleased to make a contribution for the poor among the Lord’s people in Jerusalem. They were pleased to do it, and indeed they owe it to them. For if the Gentiles have shared in the Jews’ spiritual blessings, they owe it to the Jews to share with them their material blessings."* Romans 15:25-27

Handed over in Acts 21:17-26 (24:17), perhaps by the delegates mentioned in Acts 20:4 (cf. 1 Cor 16:3-4, 2 Cor 8:19-20).

## MOMENTS FROM PAUL'S "FUNDRAISING SPEECH" TO THE CORINTHIANS

Framed in grace (8:1, 9:14-15).

The obedience they displayed through giving was a confession of the gospel and led to God being praised (9:13).

**Motivation 1: Jesus' example and their love for him (8:9).**

The administration of that service was a ministry to God (9:12).

Not by compulsion: God loves a cheerful giver (8:8, 10, 9:5, 7).

But: Give/harvest with blessing (9:6) and God provides (9:8-11).

**Motivation 2: The fellowship with and the true love for the body of Jesus (8:4, 8:24).**

Strengthened the community (9:14).

Goal: Equality, don't give too much (8:3, 12-15, 1 Cor 16:2).

## CHAPTER 10

V. 2: Paul was accused of not being spiritual, but Paul showed in this letter what "true spirituality" is:

* It is not about great spiritual experiences or an appearance that exalted him, but a humble appearance that led him into suffering and difficulties for the sake of the congregation.

Vv. 3-5:

* *"Arguments" (v. 5)* (*logismos*): rhetoric/philosophy.
* Spiritual warfare: not against evil spirits but argumentation and apologetics against anti-Christian arguments.
* “Spiritual” = “non-physical” → reason and thoughts are also spiritual.

Vv. 12-18: The adversaries focused on themselves and compared others to themselves. Paul always focused on the Corinthians and on the ministry God had given him. He used God as the standard and not the people.

*"We fight in the world of thought. Evangelism is the fight for the minds of people. The world of ideas is where real evangelism takes place. There is divine power in the weapon of ideas, to demolish strongholds. Ideas change lives."* Andrew Fellows (the quote has been translated)

## PAUL'S SOCRATES DEFENSE (11:16 - 12:10)

*"I hope you will put up with me in a little foolishness."* 11:1

* Developed by Socrates when his disciples were impressed by the knowledge of the sophists who accused Socrates.
* He abandoned rhetoric and used irony to justify himself.
* One's wretchedness and weakness were proof of the truth of what one claimed.
* To defend oneself against false accusations, one could take on the role of "the fool" because one could then get away with making claims that would not normally be allowed.

A parody of sophisticated methods and what was important in an honor/shame culture.

He turned things upside down and boasted about things that no one else would have boasted about (11:22-30).

He used great rhetoric to "boast" of his sufferings (11:22-24).

11:32-33: The opposite of "Corona Muralis" (an award given to the first person to scale the city wall in an attack)? Paul's "crown" is that he was the first to step down from the wall. He was a Roman anti-hero.

## PAUL'S THORN IN THE FLESH (12:7-10)

* Headache (the early church).
* Many serious physical ailments (Cyprian).
* Earache (Tertullian).
* An unruly desire (Latin Church Fathers, Geneva Study Bible 1599).
* Various temptations (later Catholic tradition, Calvin).
* Gout.
* Kidney/gallstones.
* Malarial fever.
* Speech difficulties.
* Eye disease (v. 4, Gal 4:13-15, 6:11).
* A paralysis → stuttered and maybe appeared to be weird (from the visions).
* The opposition he faced in Corinth (Satan's angel/servant).
* Adversaries in general (Numbers 33:55, Ezek 28:24).
* The problems in the congregations.
* Constant persecutions (the early church).

Thorn = *“a messenger of Satan, to torment me”* (12:7).

Why did God allow this? *“…because of these surpassingly great revelations…to keep me from becoming conceited…”* (v. 7).

* Precisely for this reason, he was hesitant to boast about the revelations.
* God answered "no" to Paul's prayer for healing. His grace was going to be sufficient when Paul felt weak.
* Paul could complete the task God had given him even with this problem.

Our weaknesses have their natural place in our ministry.

A paradox: *"For when I am weak, then I am strong."* (v. 10)

If we act like we are perfect, there will be no room for God.

## REVELATIONS AND VISIONS

In the context of “weaknesses” in 2 Cor.

1. Should not become the basis for how others perceive us. We should not let such things come to the fore, but rather keep them to ourselves.
2. Paul did not speak about it until he saw the dangers of not doing so. He told it not as an encouragement, but to prevent the Corinthians from ending up as a sect.
3. Other things are more important, otherwise, everyone would have such visions. We cannot rest on such revelations. "You cannot exegete an experience." Exegesis is to analytically study the Bible to produce useful interpretations.

## PAUL'S WEAKNESSES

(1 Cor 4:9-13, 2 Cor 4:8-10, 6:4-5, 8-10, 11:23-28, 12:10)

*"For it seems to me that God has put us apostles on display at the end of the procession, like those condemned to die in the arena. We have been made a spectacle to the whole universe, to angels as well as to human beings. We are fools for Christ, but you are so wise in Christ! We are weak, but you are strong! You are honored, we are dishonored! To this very hour we go hungry and thirsty, we are in rags, we are brutally treated, we are homeless. We work hard with our own hands. When we are cursed, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure it; when we are slandered, we answer kindly. We have become the scum of the earth, the* *garbage of the world—right up to this moment."* 1 Cor 4:9-13

*"We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body."* 2 Cor 4:8-10

*"Rather, as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way: in great endurance; in troubles, hardships and distresses; in beatings, imprisonments and riots; in hard work, sleepless nights and hunger;"* 2 Cor 6:4-5

*"Through glory and dishonor, bad report and good report; genuine, yet regarded as impostors; known, yet regarded as unknown; dying, and yet we live on; beaten, and yet not killed; sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; poor, yet making many rich; having nothing, and yet possessing everything."* 2 Cor 6:8-10

*"Are they servants of Christ? (I am out of my mind to talk like this.) I am more. I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again. Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was pelted with stones, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my fellow Jews, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false believers. I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches."* 2 Cor 11:23-28

*"That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong."* 2 Cor 12:10

## A SUCCESSFUL LEADER…

1. Face adversity.
2. Endure adversity so God can give life to others through their ministry.
3. Do not pretend to be perfect but admittheir weaknesses.
4. Do not gain authority from being successful in the eyes of the world.
5. Not measured according to today's perception of what makes someone "spiritual", but from God's perspective.
6. Are not elevated above the rest of the congregation to show their ministries are a success.
7. Do not focus on their supernatural experiences.

*"Success in God's eyes is faithfulness to His calling"* Billy Graham.

## REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. What are my weaknesses?
2. What hardships am I going through that can lead to life for others?
3. What do I value most in a leader?
4. Is it the presentation or the content that makes someone a good speaker?
5. Am I "competing" with other Christians? (In appearance, education, status, spiritual experiences...?)
6. Do I have too much of my identity in my appearance, my education, etc.?
7. Is my life a success? Do I let God or men evaluate me?