



PACKET 1



UNFILTERED

REAL FAITH IN A FAKE WORLD

SMALL GROUP LESSONS

PACKET 1

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LESSON 1 The God of All Comfort.....	2
LESSON 2 Forgiveness and Restoration	8
LESSON 3 God’s Triumph Smells Different	13
LESSON 4 One Degree of Glory to Another	19



"Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God."

2 Corinthians 1:3-4 (NIV)

One of the things I've learned as a pastor is if you talk to a person long enough and dig deep enough, you discover they have experienced heartache. Life is difficult and sometimes it seems like heartache is around every corner. Over time, you could lose jobs, friends, or money. You could experience a health crisis of your own or the illness of a loved one. It is inevitable that the hardships of life will find you. The difference is that as a follower of Christ, you also have the comfort of God always available to you.

Perhaps you sit with a broken heart or broken hopes right now. God wants you to know that He never wastes anything. When tragedy strikes, when that heartache comes, and when life gives you its worst, God's divine counsel is in His word to offer care and comfort.

In 2 Corinthians 1:3, the Apostle Paul calls God something unique: "the God of all comfort." The word used for "Comfort" is the same word that is used to describe the Holy Spirit and it means "called alongside to help." This Comforter is strong enough to penetrate the inner chambers of your heart and give you the strength to make it through.

Paul is saying that no matter what you go through, you never go through it alone. God is always right beside you to help, strengthen and comfort you. He is the source of all true comfort. The comfort of God is not like temporary relief found in addictions, distraction or entertainment. The comfort of God stands because God Himself stays right with you.

Paul goes on to tell you that God "comforts us in all our affliction" (2 Corinthians 1:4). This verse does not say that God "comforts us and keeps us from affliction." I wish it did. He doesn't keep affliction away, but He doesn't stay away either. Your Good Shepherd comes close and stands with you in the trouble, never abandoning you.

Allow the Holy Spirit to come alongside and comfort you. You will never know just how much God cares about you and how much He loves you until you go through trials and find He is standing right beside you to comfort and strengthen you.

Prayer: Father, you can make all things new. I know You won't waste the pain of my life. Show me how You want to redeem it. And show me how to walk closely with You in pain and in joy. In Jesus' Name, Amen.¹

¹ Devotional by James Merrit found @ <https://www.touchinglives.org/devotionals/the-god-of-all-comfort->

ICEBREAKER

What's the most comforting smell to you? (coffee, cookies, fresh-cut grass, etc.)

READ IT

Read 2 Corinthians 1:1-2:4

EXPLORE IT

1. What titles does Paul give to God, and what does Paul say God does for His people?
2. What hardships does Paul say he and his companions faced in Asia, and what does he say they learned through the experience?
3. What does Paul say about the letters he has written and what he hopes the Corinthians will fully understand in 1:13-14?
4. What specific actions in verses 21-22 does Paul say God has taken to establish believers in Christ, and what does He give them as a guarantee?
5. As He opens up chapter 2, how does Paul describe the emotions with which he wrote his previous letter, and what was his purpose in writing it?

APPLY IT

What's the frequency?

In 1 Corinthians, Paul is basically saying, “Church, we need to talk,” and he tackles all kinds of issues division, sin, worship problems, and confusion about the resurrection. After that letter, things got messy, and Paul had a really painful visit. But many people actually listened and made changes. So 2 Corinthians is Paul coming back to say, “I love you, I’m for you, and here’s why I do what I do.” It’s a mix of healing, encouragement, and Paul opening his heart to them. Together, the letters show a tough conversation followed by a restored relationship

“We are reading somebody else’s mail about a fight they’ve had and how they are now working to restore the relationship.”²

6. Paul’s honesty in 1 Corinthians led to hurt feelings and strained relationships. What keeps us from speaking truth when we know it may cost us relational comfort?

Everybody hurts!!!

Paul deliberately begins this letter by anchoring the Corinthians in the character of God—a crucial move since they were questioning Paul’s suffering and therefore doubting his ministry. The word oiktirmos (“mercies”) speaks of deep, visceral compassion, and paraklēsis (“comfort”) refers not to sentimental relief but to strengthening help in affliction³. David Garland notes that God’s comfort is “God coming alongside His people to empower them,” not simply to soothe them.⁴ Paul’s point is that suffering does not contradict God’s goodness; it becomes the arena where God’s compassionate presence is most clearly revealed. This shapes how we endure hardship today, reminding us that we are not abandoned but accompanied.

7. Paul says the more we share in Christ’s sufferings, the more we experience His comfort (1:4–5). Where have you seen hardship draw you closer to Jesus instead of farther from Him?

² <https://renew.org/summary-of-2-corinthians> by John Whittaker

³ ESV Study Bible. English Standard Version Study Bible. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008. Commentary on 2 Corinthians 1:3–7.

⁴ Garland, David E. 2 Corinthians. New American Commentary, Vol. 29. Nashville: B&H Publishing, 1999. Material referenced throughout 2 Cor. 1:3–2:4.

Paul's affliction validated his apostleship and demonstrated God's sustaining power, thereby strengthening others' confidence in God. Our suffering, when carried faithfully, becomes a means of discipleship, modeling resilience and pointing others toward the God who sustains His people.⁵

- 8. Paul says his sufferings help others (1:6–7). How have other people's painful experiences strengthened your faith, and how might God use your struggles to strengthen someone else?**

Paul's despair was not spiritual defeat but spiritual formation. Hardship stripped away self-confidence so that Paul could experience God's life-giving power. This principle applies today: God often uses the limits of our strength to direct us toward His.⁶

- 9. Paul says he was pushed "beyond his strength" so he would rely on God (1:8–9). What situations right now are pushing you to rely less on yourself and more on God?**

Prayer forms a bond of solidarity between believers, creating shared joy in God's answers. Paul's theology of prayer encourages the church today to pray boldly and specifically, knowing God truly works through the petitions of His people.⁷

- 10. In 1:11 Paul says prayer helped deliver him. How have you personally experienced the power of others praying for you — and how could you strengthen someone else through prayer this week?**

⁵ Walvoord, John F., and Roy B. Zuck, eds. *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: New Testament*. Colorado Springs: Chariot Victor, 1983. Commentary on 2 Corinthians 1–2.

⁶ Garland, David E. *2 Corinthians*. New American Commentary, Vol. 29. Nashville: B&H Publishing, 1999. Material referenced throughout 2 Cor. 1:3–2:4.

⁷ *ibid*

Shiny Happy People

*Paul argues that his ministry is marked by “simplicity and godly sincerity,” not by worldly cleverness, manipulation, or self-promotion. This was a direct contrast to the values of Corinthian culture, which prized rhetoric, charisma, and status. Paul saw his conduct as an open book because his ministry was shaped by the grace of God, not the techniques of human wisdom.*⁸

- 11. As our church seeks to do ministry well, how do we strike a healthy balance between excellence and authenticity—between doing things well and not becoming driven by appearance or impressiveness?**

Paul explains that his change of plans was not deception but pastoral sensitivity. He refrained from making another difficult visit because he did not want to “lord it over” the Corinthians but to work with them for their joy. One commentator emphasizes that Paul models non-coercive leadership, giving space for repentance and growth.⁹ Carson notes that true spiritual authority seeks the good of others rather than asserting dominance. Healthy confrontation today requires the same blend of truth and patience—correcting without crushing, guiding without controlling.¹⁰

- 12. Paul chose not to make another painful visit because he wanted to lead in a way that produced joy, not heaviness. What does this teach us about leading others—whether in the church, at home, or at work—with patience, timing, and sensitivity?**

- 13. When have misunderstandings damaged a relationship in your life, and what helps you rebuild trust when communication breaks down?**

⁸ Hughes, R. Kent. *2 Corinthians: Power in Weakness*. Preaching the Word, Crossway, 2006.

⁹ Garland, David E. *2 Corinthians*. Vol. 29, *New American Commentary*, B&H Publishing, 1999.

¹⁰ Carson, D. A. *The Cross and Christian Ministry: An Exposition of Passages from 1 Corinthians*. Baker Academic, 2004.

True spiritual authority seeks the good of others rather than asserting dominance. Healthy confrontation today requires the same blend of truth and patience correcting without crushing, guiding without controlling.¹¹

- 14. How can you practice this kind of wise, gentle, patient approach when you need to confront someone in your own life?**

Talk About the Passion

*Verse 4 is one of the most personal statements in all of Paul's letters. Paul's "anguish of heart" and "many tears" reveal that his correction was motivated by love, not anger or superiority. Garland (NAC) writes that Paul embodies the paradox of Christian leadership: the stronger the correction, the deeper the love must run. The ESV Study Bible notes that Paul wanted them to know his heart so they would receive his correction as an expression of affection, not rejection. This models a relational ethic in which truth is delivered with tenderness, and confrontation flows from genuine love.*¹²

- 15. How does this challenge the way you approach hard conversations, correction, or forgiveness in your own relationships?**

¹¹ *ibid*

¹² ESV Study Bible. English Standard Version Study Bible. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008. Commentary on 2 Corinthians.



A man once joined a monastery where the monks were allowed to speak only two words every ten years. After the first decade, the abbot asked him for his two words. “Bed hard,” he said. Ten years later: “Food bad.” After thirty years, he stood up and declared, “I quit.” The abbot sighed and replied, “I’m not surprised. All you’ve done since you got here is complain.”

Some of us treat church conflict the same way: we nurse the grievance for years, rehearse it every chance we get, and finally announce we’re leaving - never realizing the whole time we’ve been the problem. Paul refuses to let the Corinthian church become that kind of place. A man has sinned publicly, been disciplined by the congregation, and has now repented. The danger now is not the original offense but the refusal to forgive.

Forgiveness is the mark of a healthy church.

ICEBREAKER

On a scale of 1–10, how good are you at forgiving people? Now ask the person you came with to rate you honestly, and if you came by yourself you get to ask your small group leader!

READ IT

Read 2 Corinthians 2:5–11

EXPLORE IT

1. According to verses 5–6, who was grieved by this person’s sin?
2. What two things does Paul command the church to do instead of merely punish?
3. What reason does Paul give for urging forgiveness and comfort?
4. According to verse 8, what are they to “reaffirm”?
5. What reason did Paul give for writing this letter?
6. Who uses unforgiveness in his schemes?

APPLY IT

After Paul’s “painful visit” to the church at Corinth, the Apostle thought it better not to visit the congregation there immediately but instead to send a letter of reproof in hopes that the church would amend its ways and seek reconciliation. This was no easy choice for the Apostle, but it was necessary because an in-person visit would have made restoration more difficult (2 Cor. 1:12–2:4). Second Corinthians 7:2–16 makes clear that this letter of reproof brought about the repentance that Paul was looking for among the Corinthians, but today’s passage gives us the first indication that the Apostle’s correspondence was successful.

Paul makes reference to one who has caused pain at Corinth and who has since endured some kind of “punishment by the majority” (2:5–6). The Apostle is speaking of someone who has come under the discipline of the church. Based on other passages such as 7:12, commentators believe that the man in question was someone who opposed him during his painful visit to Corinth, but identifying the man and his exact actions is difficult. Historically, many commentators have said that the man is the same man from 1 Corinthians 5 who was engaged in an incestuous relationship with his stepmother. This is possible, but many modern commentators view it as unlikely because the offender seems to have sinned specifically against Paul during the painful visit after 1 Corinthians was written. In any case, from 2 Corinthians 2:5–11, we see that the church, after the painful visit with Paul and the hard letter of reproof, had taken action against the man, most likely excommunicating him.

Certainly, Paul had wanted the church to take action as a necessary part of reconciling with the Apostle. The problem, however, was that the church had gone too far and was not forgiving and restoring the man to the congregation upon his repentance. They had missed the purpose of church discipline, which is to bring about restoration to Christian fellowship, not revenge (see Matt. 18:15–20). So, Paul calls the church to forgive and reaffirm their love for the sinner by restoring him to fellowship. John Calvin comments: “The end of excommunication, so far as concerns the power of the offender, is this: that, overpowered with a sense of his sin, he may be humbled in the sight of God and the Church, and may solicit pardon with sincere dislike and confession of guilt. The man who has been brought to this, is now more in need of consolation, than of severe reproof.”¹³

7. Some people worry that forgiving quickly makes sin look cheap. Others worry that forgiving slowly damages people and churches. Where is the Biblical balance? How does the Gospel itself help us get it right?
8. Why does Paul tell the Church that the man might be “overwhelmed by excessive sorrow” if they do not forgive (v. 7)? Is this possible? How have you seen it in someone’s life or even experienced it yourself?
9. In verse 6 Paul writes that the punishment by the church to cut ties with this man was “enough” or “sufficient”. What do you think he means by that? How do we know when the punishment has been enough?

¹³ <https://learn.ligonier.org/devotionals/love-for-the-penitent>

The church is called to discipline sinners, but care must be taken to understand why. The church is full of sinners, of course, and exists to welcome with open arms weak, faltering, sinful men and women. Church discipline is exercised toward impenitent sinners who profess to be Christians. We can put it like this: when a sinner is penitent (as here), pastors are called to protect the sinner from the church; when a sinner is impenitent (as in 1 Corinthians 5), pastors are called to protect the church from the sinner. All is done for the sake of the body.¹⁴

10. Paul says he forgives “for your sake” (v. 10). How can one person’s forgiveness (or refusal to forgive) affect the spiritual health of the entire church?
11. How can a church create a culture where repentance is met with safety and restoration rather than shame or fear while still taking sin seriously? What might that practically look like in a small group?
12. Paul commands them to “reaffirm your love” for him. The word “reaffirm” (kyroō) is a legal term for ratifying an official decision. How does this change the way we usually think about forgiveness? What are some practical, tangible ways a group can show love and restore fellowship to someone who has been disciplined but is now repentant?

¹⁴<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/course/knowning-bible-2-corinthians/#week-3-pauls-pastoral-strategy-2-cor-112-217>

C.S. Lewis wrote, “To be a Christian means to forgive the inexcusable because God has forgiven the inexcusable in you.” That’s easy to quote when we’re the ones needing forgiveness; it’s harder when we’re the wounded party. Yet Paul says love “keeps no record of wrongs” (1 Cor. 13:5) and now shows what that actually looks like in real church life.

The same apostle who told the Corinthians to “deliver such a one to Satan” in 1 Corinthians 5 is now urgently pleading that they welcome the sinner back with open arms. Discipline without the goal of restoration is just punishment. Forgiveness without truth is just excusing sin. The Gospel holds both together, and a healthy church will too.

- 13. Satan’s schemes are rarely dramatic; they’re usually subtle. Here Paul warns that unforgiveness gives the devil an “opportunity” or “foothold” (literally, a beachhead to launch further attacks). What are some practical ways unforgiveness opens the door to Satan in a local church?**

- 14. Think of a time when someone forgave you when you didn’t deserve it. How did that act of grace affect you?**

Now reverse it: is there someone right now from whom you are withholding the comfort and reaffirmation Paul commands here? What concrete step could you take (a conversation, a letter, a public word in a small group setting, prayer together, etc.)?

- 15. Paul doesn’t name the offender in this letter. How do you think this fits in with the point of the passage?**



“The recent death of my mother at age eighty-three strongly suggests to me that I may join her in a couple of decades — if her genes have anything to say about it. And, of course, this doesn’t factor in disease or trauma. Morbid thoughts? I don’t think so. Notwithstanding our love for our family and friends, and the loss they will feel at our departure, if one one-hundredth of what the Scriptures say about Heaven is true, it is a wonder that when we get old we hang on to life as we do. So I embrace the statistical realities of a possible score of years.

It is actually a sweet thing to grow old as a Christian. It is always “far better” to be with the Lord (Philippians 1:23). Death, as C. S. Lewis said, is “Chapter One of the Great Story . . . which goes on forever and ever in which every chapter is better than the one before.”

But there is another spiritual reality that we ought to embrace but that is not so easy to do. That reality is this: A vibrant, useful spiritual life is a death march in which the marcher repeatedly dies. It is the path pioneered and mastered by Christ. And it is the course that Paul strode as he said, “I die every day!” (1 Corinthians 15:31). It is the course celebrated in the triumphal procession, which is at the heart of the passage before us.”¹⁵

ICEBREAKER

What’s one impressive (non-spiritual) victory you’ve witnessed in sports, a military movie, or elsewhere?

READ IT

Read 2 Corinthians 2:12-17

¹⁵ Huges, R. Kent. Preaching the Word, Article: Triumphal Procession in Christ (2 Corinthians). 2012.

EXPLORE IT

1. Why did Paul go to Troas, and why was his Spirit not at rest? (vv. 12-13)
2. Who does Paul credit for his triumphs? (v. 14)
3. What two contrasting groups of people experience Paul's aroma, and what is the eternal result for each (vv. 15-16)?
4. How does Paul contrast his ministry approach with that of many? (v. 17)
5. What four qualities does Paul attribute to his own ministry that distinguish it from the false teachers? (v. 17)

APPLY IT

Anxiety or Doxology?

These verses tell of a plan Paul had to meet Titus at Troas, and the anxiety it caused Paul when Titus did not appear. Paul will resume his recounting of those events later in chapter 7, but for now he launches into a long description of how his own ministry—even through these terrible afflictions—has been upheld by the greatness of the gospel and the power and comfort of the Holy Spirit.

As we read these chapters, we ought to notice how many times Paul says something like “Therefore we do not lose heart” or “Therefore we are always of good courage.” How—in the face of suffering that ranged from riots to betrayal—did he not throw up his hands and quit? In these chapters, he tells us.¹⁶

6. How is it possible for Paul's restlessness about Titus in v.13 to coexist with his confidence in God, as expressed in v.14 (“thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumph”)?

¹⁶ ESV Story of Redemption Bible. Crossway, 2018.

7. Identify one current anxiety or distraction in your life (like Paul's worry over Titus). How can you intentionally shift your perspective from anxiety to the doxology of v.14 this week, thanking God that He leads you in triumph through Christ?

Battles Only God Can Win

The verb here rendered “leads . . . in triumphal procession” (Gk. *thriambeuō*) is used just one other place in the NT (Col. 2:15). There it refers to the spiritual enemies of the gospel being triumphed over in the cross. Here it is Paul and his comrades who are being triumphed over. But what does the word mean? Almost certainly Paul has in mind the Roman postvictory military procession to which this word (with its Latin equivalent *triumphare*) alludes. Murray Harris outlines the picture:

At the head of the procession came the magistrates and the senate, followed by trumpeters and some spoils of wars such as vessels of gold. . . . Then came the flute players, ahead of white oxen destined to be sacrificed in the temples, along with some representative captives from the conquered territory, including such dignitaries as the king, driven in chains in front of the ornate chariot of the general. . . . The victorious soldiers followed, shouting “*io triumphe!*” (“Hail, triumphant one!”). As the procession ascended the Capitoline Hill, some of the leading captives (usually royal figures or the tallest and strongest of the conquered warriors) were taken aside into the adjoining prison and executed.

Paul understands himself to be a prisoner led along in triumph. By whom? He has just spoken of not being outmaneuvered by Satan (2 Cor. 2:11). Here he speaks of “God . . . in Christ” as the triumphant one who has conquered Paul in battle—a blessed defeat, a liberating captivity, a freeing enslavement. The deeply paradoxical nature of Christian life and ministry that informs this entire letter comes through clearly. Paul the captive is exulting in the victory of his captor.¹⁷

8. What are some realms in which you’ve seen that Jesus is victorious?

¹⁷ ESV Expository Commentary. 2 Corinthians 2:12–17 Section Overview: Victory through Captivity. 2020.

9. What does the metaphor of the Roman "triumph" (v.14), where captives often follow the victor, imply about a believer's status and the display of Christ's glory?
10. Considering the weight of the Gospel (v.16), what is one person or group of people you have been hesitant to share the Gospel with? What is one small step you can take today to move towards fulfilling that calling?

Peddling the Gospel or Preaching the Gospel?

Paul affirmed his sufficiency negatively and positively. Negatively, he declared, "For we are not, like so many, peddlers of God's word" (2:17a). This denial was pointed at his detractors who actually did trade in the Word because the word "peddle" references traders who would dilute their wine with water or use false weights — all suggesting tampering with the Word or watering it down for personal gain. Paul never watered down God's Word to make it more palatable. He never looked to see which way the wind was blowing. He never practiced the homiletics of consensus. He never held back.¹⁸

11. How would you explain the difference between a ministry that "peddles the word" and one that speaks "in sincerity, as from God" to a new Christian? What are the key warning signs of a "peddler"?

¹⁸ Hugues, R. Kent. Preaching the Word, Article: Triumphal Procession in Christ (2 Corinthians). 2012.

12. Reflect on why you serve God. In what subtle ways might we serve God for personal gain? What concrete steps can you take to speak more "in sincerity, as from God" (v.17)?

A Powerful Fragrance

I'm reminded of the lines we all know: Only one life, 'Twill soon be past, Only what's done for Christ will last.

That is true. And truly I have no trouble accepting the brevity of life, be it a score of years or much less. I, in fact, embrace it.

But there is a parallel principle that is far more daunting — and that is to embrace the triumphal procession (which is at the heart of this great letter) and live its death principle to the fullest.

The way to live is to understand that weakness, suffering, and death are the means by which the fragrance of the knowledge of Christ wafts to the ends of the earth. And then to be like Paul and not fight it, but embrace it!¹⁹

13. If Paul's life and message are the "aroma of Christ," what kind of "aroma" do you think your own daily habits, speech, and priorities are giving off to those around you? Is it clear who you represent?

¹⁹ Ibid.

14. Based on v.17, how will you evaluate the next Christian book, sermon, or podcast you encounter? What criteria will you use to discern if the speaker is faithfully proclaiming the pure Word or subtly "peddling" it?
15. How can we better hold each other accountable to speak "as from God" (with purity, sincerity, and faithfulness to the truth) rather than merely sharing personal opinions or popular trends?



"I had Luther in mind as I came to this passage in 2 Corinthians 3. In 1511, Luther visited Rome. He made the journey on a kind of spiritual quest. He arrived there in deep spiritual anguish, hoping—by his own testimony—to find some way to unburden his soul. But instead of relief, those four weeks became nothing more than a cycle of dutiful religious observances, which only deepened his disillusionment.

As a devout monk, he operated under the common assumption that a good God must certainly accept a good man who does all he can. That sounds sensible to many even today, but for Luther it only intensified the ache within him. He left Rome more troubled than when he arrived, asking a haunting question: *How could anyone ever know if they had done enough to merit grace?* How could it be that a man so rigorously religious—so completely devoted to God—still had no sense of peace, no real assurance, no living experience of the God who had been the focus of his entire existence?

Most people on the street assume that a religious person understands the gospel. They assume that someone immersed in spiritual activity would grasp what Paul is describing here in 2 Corinthians 3.²⁰

ICEBREAKER

What's a qualification you once thought mattered a lot (for a job, hobby, or role), but later realized wasn't nearly as important as you expected?

²⁰ Sermon Excerpt from Alistair Begg found at: <https://www.truthforlife.org/resources/sermon/the-ministry-that-brings-righteousness/>

READ IT

Read 2 Corinthians 3:1-18 & Exodus 34:29-35

EXPLORE IT

1. What tension or problem in the church might Paul be addressing here? What clues in the passage help you identify it?
2. What is the progression of Paul's thought in this passage? If you had to summarize his flow in three steps, what would they be?
3. Where do you see Paul using contrasts to make his point? What do those contrasts reveal about the issue he's dealing with?
4. What words or ideas seem to repeat or stand out in this passage? Why might those be important to Paul's overall message?
5. If someone asked you, 'What is Paul ultimately trying to say in this section?' what would you say and what evidence from the text would you point to?

APPLY IT

"YOU YOURSELVES ARE OUR LETTER OF RECOMMENDATION"

The fundamental error of the Corinthians, according to Paul, lies in their assumption that the legitimization of an apostle—and therewith the Gospel itself—is subject to human judgment. Everything is to be judged according to appearance. Throughout the letter, Paul is dealing with the practical reasoning of the Corinthians, which is blind and misdirected. The Gospel is at stake: it is not the Corinthians who are to judge the Gospel, but the Gospel that is to judge them...

6. Considering passages like Acts 18:27, Romans 16:1-2, and 1 Corinthians 16:3, what seems different about the Corinthians' situation that makes Paul resist the idea of letters of recommendation here in 2 Corinthians 3?

- ### How might these measurements shape what we believe the Gospel is doing?

21 of 26

“BUT OUR SUFFICIENCY IS FROM GOD”

“Paul’s little phrase “through Christ” is crucial. The crucified and risen Christ is the vehicle of his empowerment. His confidence is thus a confidence that life is given in and through death—not just any death, but the death of Christ in which he shares. This is the mission and ministry of the new covenant that Paul unfolds in vv. 4-11: the newness of the covenant of the Spirit is the life and righteousness that it brings out of the death and condemnation worked by the old covenant.

Paul immediately qualifies and defines the confidence given to him through Christ. He remains inadequate and insufficient in himself and thus cannot suppose that anything in his service comes from him. Nevertheless, his rhetorical question “Who is sufficient for these things?” (2:16)—namely, the impartation of death and life—does not end in an aporia. Nor is the Corinthian requirement of commendation of the apostle justified. The sufficiency of the apostle remains God’s sufficiency and in no way becomes a strength, quality, or virtue of his own. Nothing comes from Paul, yet life and death are enacted through him. Paul has been torn away from himself. His life and identity, calling and work have been determined outside him. His boasting is a boasting in the Lord and decidedly not in himself, his powers, and his abilities.”²²

8. What does it look like to distinguish between confidence in ourselves and confidence “through Christ”?

9. What do you think Paul means when he says, “... but our sufficiency is from God, who has made us sufficient to be ministers of a new covenant...”?

10. Paul admits his own insufficiency, yet he still participates in God’s life-giving work. How does that tension challenge the way we often think about being “qualified” or “ready” to serve?

²² Seifrid, Mark A.. The Second Letter to the Corinthians (The Pillar New Testament Commentary (PNTC)) (pp. 119-120). Eerdmans. Kindle Edition.

“FOR THE LETTER KILLS, BUT THE SPIRIT GIVES LIFE”

“This is what is especially new about the new covenant. The letter of the law showed what was required, but provided no power to live it out. It is the Spirit that gives power to obey. Notice that the Spirit does not abolish the law, but instead empowers us to walk in obedience to it.

Augustine wrote:

But, because the law commands by the letter and does not help by the Spirit, whoever listens to the letter of the law in such wise as to think that it is enough for him to know what it commands or forbids, whoever trusts in the strength of his own free will to accomplish it and does not take refuge in faith in order to be assisted in his approach to the Spirit that quickens lest the letter find him guilty and kill him, that man has a zeal of God, but not according to knowledge.

It is not enough to have the letter of the law, but we must also have the Holy Spirit, who comes by faith to those who believe the gospel. Who are those who come to believe the gospel? Those who recognize what the law requires and also that they cannot do it, cannot keep it, and in fact are condemned by it. Laws cannot change hearts; only the Spirit can.”²³

- 11. Augustine warns that hearing the law without relying on the Spirit leads to “zeal... but not according to knowledge.” What do you think he means by that? How does that deepen Paul’s point?**

- 12. Trent Casto says that people come to faith by recognizing what the law demands and that they cannot keep it. How does that understanding shape the way we think about the gospel itself?**

²³ Casto, Trent. 2 Corinthians (Reformed Expository Commentary) (pp. 104–105). P&R Publishing. Kindle Edition.

“WHAT ONCE HAD GLORY HAS COME TO HAVE NO GLORY AT ALL”

After Moses had commanded Israel all that the Lord had spoken to him on Sinai, Moses placed a veil (or cover) over his face (v. 33). This practice became the pattern: Moses would enter the tent of meeting to speak with the Lord. He would then come forth and announce to “the sons of Israel” what the Lord had commanded him (v. 34). As he did so, they would see Moses’ face, and its radiance. Afterward, Moses would cover his face until he went in to speak with the Lord (v. 35).

Paul understands Moses’ action as an effective parable, much like the prophetic signs performed by Jeremiah or Ezekiel. What Moses does to himself comes upon “the sons of Israel.” The story of Moses thus anticipates the story of Israel. The narrative dynamic correspondingly now shifts: whereas Paul earlier interprets Israel’s fear as the inability of the sons of Israel to gaze at the glory of Moses’ face, he now indicates that Moses placed the veil on his face so that they would not be able to gaze at “the goal of that which is done away with.”...

Moses prevented the “sons of Israel” from looking upon “the goal of that which is done away with.” Paul here theologically interprets the “glory of Moses’ face” (v. 7) as a figure of his theology of “the letter and the Spirit.” The glory of Moses’ face was the glory associated with “the letter,” which brought death and condemnation. This glory has been made to be no glory at all by the brilliance of the glory of the new covenant, which brings the Spirit and righteousness (v. 10). The glory of Moses’ face thus holds the promise of something greater. Yet, as Paul makes clear, the connection between the two “glories” becomes apparent only in Christ (v. 14).²⁴

- 13. What stands out to you personally about the way Paul uses the story of Moses’ veil? What part of the analogy connects with you, confuses you, or makes you think differently about the passage?**

- 14. Paul describes the glory connected with Moses and the old covenant as something that was “fading.” What do you think he wants us to understand about the limits of the old covenant by using that idea of fading?**

²⁴ Seifrid, Mark A.. The Second Letter to the Corinthians (The Pillar New Testament Commentary (PNTC)) (pp. 163-164). Eerdmans. Kindle Edition.

15. When Paul says that the full meaning of the old covenant's glory can only be seen "in Christ," what do you think he means? How does Christ help make sense of what came before Him?

"FROM ONE DEGREE OF GLORY TO ANOTHER"

"As we behold the Lord in his glory, a transformation happens, which changes us into the same image that we are beholding. Paul says again, "We all . . . are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another" (2 Cor. 3:18). The word translated "transformed" here is used only three other times in the New Testament, and two of those references are describing Jesus' glorious transfiguration on the mountain with his disciples (Matt. 17:2; Mark 9:2). This transformation is not just for a few Christians, but rather for all who turn to the Lord and who have had the veil removed. We are all being transformed into the same image we are beholding. What image is that? The image of the glory of God, the very image of Jesus. When Paul refers to Jesus as the image of God (2 Cor. 4:4; Phil. 2:6; Col. 1:15), he is mostly denoting Jesus' function of giving visible expression to the divine. By beholding him, we increasingly give visible expression to the invisible God. One Puritan pastor has captured it beautifully:

In this glass we behold that wisdom by which we are instructed, that righteousness by which we are justified, that power by which we are preserved, that grace by which we are chosen and called, that goodness by which we are relieved and supplied, that holiness by which we are transformed, that glory to which we shall be conformed.

This is what real transformation looks like: it increasingly looks like Jesus. In this one verse, Paul is showing both the strength of the revelation of the glory of the Lord to transform us and also the need to make daily progress in it."²⁵

16. Paul says we become what we behold. When you think about your own life, what kinds of things tend to shape you the most? How does that help you understand what Paul is saying here?

²⁵ Casto, Trent. 2 Corinthians (Reformed Expository Commentary) (pp. 124-125). P&R Publishing. Kindle Edition.

17. Paul describes transformation as something that happens “from one degree of glory to another.” What might that phrasing suggest about the pace, process, or nature of spiritual growth?
18. This passage says all believers are being transformed into the image of Christ. What part of Jesus’s character or life stands out to you as something God has been forming in you recently—or something you long to grow in?