

THE LIVING ROOM SERIES

# ALL THINGS NEW

A STUDY ON  
2 CORINTHIANS

KELLY MINTER

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## MEET THE AUTHOR

KELLY MINTER IS AN AUTHOR, SPEAKER, AND SONGWRITER. SHE IS PASSIONATE ABOUT WOMEN DISCOVERING JESUS THROUGH THE PAGES OF SCRIPTURE. SO WHETHER IT'S THROUGH STUDY, SONG, OR THE SPOKEN WORD, KELLY'S DESIRE IS TO AUTHENTICALLY EXPRESS CHRIST TO THE WOMEN OF THIS GENERATION. SHE HAS FOUND DEEP HOPE AND HEALING THROUGH THE BIBLE'S TRUTHS, MAKING HER MESSAGE PERSONAL AND RELATIONAL.

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Kelly writes extensively and speaks at women's conferences and events around the country. She has her own event called *Cultivate: A Women's Gathering Around The Word*. This Biblically based and stylistically simple event is for women of all ages. Kelly also partners closely with Justice and Mercy International, an organization that cares for the vulnerable and forgotten in the Amazon and Moldova. Kelly's music includes *Loss, Love & Legacy*, which complements her Ruth study, and the worshipful *Finer Day*, and *Hymns & Hallelujahs*. To view more about Kelly's studies, books, music, and calendar, visit [www.kellyminter.com](http://www.kellyminter.com).



# INTRODUCTION

If you had asked me at the top of writing this study why I wanted to spend a year in 2 Corinthians, I would have pointed to all those wonderful passages like the thorn in the flesh, Christ's power in our weakness, the heavenly bodies we will one day receive, God's comfort in suffering, and a whole two chapters on generosity. These passages have been like firm trellises throughout my life, around which I've wrapped myself as the winds blew or the rains came or even when the warm sun shined. I've literally grown up on these beloved texts.

One of the earliest spiritual metaphors I learned was from 2 Corinthians, where Paul talks about carrying the treasures of knowing Jesus in fragile jars of clay. This has been especially meaningful to me because I've always longed to be a more steadfast, high-performing Christian. However, my best and truest efforts have never amounted to what I needed them to—at my core I have always been dyed-in-the-wool earthen. I simply cannot get away from this. But after meditating on Paul's words I'm reminded I don't have to. "For when I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Cor. 12:10). The page where this verse resides is well worn in every Bible I've ever owned.

Perhaps more than anything it is this weakness and honesty with which Paul writes that has so moved me. Scholars have often described 2 Corinthians as Paul's most personal letter, and this may be one of the reasons I never tire of returning to its pages. For the sufferer, Paul writes to us about the Father of unrivaled comfort and compassion. It is a passionate, pleading, even provocative letter at times, where Paul lays bare his outstretched heart to a community of somewhat inconsistent believers who frankly don't seem to care for him as much as he does them. Paul's heartbreak over their failures and enthusiasm over their restoration remind us of how relational the ministry of the gospel is. I just don't ever want to forget that if I lose my heart for people I've lost the purpose of ministry.

Speaking of ministry, if your only experience with the Christian faith has been rule-bound and oppressive, well then, might I invite you to the new covenant version? Paul spends valuable ink explaining that, since the coming of Christ, the ministry of the gospel is more gracious, humble, powerful, Spirit-filled, life-giving, and freeing than we ever imagined. He seems to sum the whole thing up in one word: glorious.

So that is how I began—eager to write about all the things I knew I loved about 2 Corinthians. Yet, after having immersed myself in the text, I discovered it was the passages less familiar to me that have so surprised and changed me. My hope is that you too might discover afresh a letter you thought you already knew. And if you've never done a Bible study before, all the more reason for you to explore its pages. One of the great anchors of Paul's letter is that Christianity isn't for the religious elite—I promise, the Corinthians will do a great job of backing this up. I warmly invite you, seasoned believer or new explorer, on a journey through this ancient letter.

The old has passed away, behold the new has come.



# SESSION 1 VIEWER GUIDE

## ALL THINGS NEW

### GROUP DISCUSSION:

What do you hope to gain from this study and the time spent together?

Kelly says the gospel is made for real life and that the church of God is meant to thrive in real life. What does that mean to you?

Why do we have such an aversion to admitting weakness? What is Paul's overall message about weakness?

When a relationship becomes painful do you tend to close your heart to protect yourself or keep it open? What was Paul's response to the Corinthians who misunderstood him? How can we learn from him?

When you hear the statement, "Jesus came to make all things new," how do you respond? Why is there such hope in that statement?

From this introduction to 2 Corinthians, what do you most look forward to diving into? Explain.

*Video sessions and Hymns & Hallelujahs available for purchase at [LIFEWAY.COM/ALLTHINGSNEW](http://LIFEWAY.COM/ALLTHINGSNEW)*



## SESSION 2

# THE CHURCH IN A CITY

My friend Kelly is a twentysomething singer/songwriter. She's growing up in the thick of country music land, navigating the weeds of fame while plucking the daisies of getting to be artistic for a living. I'd asked Kelly to be part of a group that would work through the personal study and provide feedback. She obliged and offered great insight. You wouldn't believe how refining the process is for a manuscript when a group of women of all ages and demographics take their minds and the Holy Spirit inside them to the Word. Kelly, Amy, Jessica, Marcie, Julie, Julee, Karen, and Karen (lots of same names) brought their wisdom and sometimes their pushback to the table. What you hold in your hands is all the better for it.

At the culmination of our study, Kelly asked if we could meet for coffee, even though she doesn't drink coffee, poor soul. She had some things she wanted to discuss regarding 2 Corinthians. We jotted a date on the calendar because you don't have to ask me twice to meet you for coffee, conversation, and Corinthians. That's almost too much goodness for one morning! We slid two chairs up to the reclaimed wood bar, because everything in this world is now made of reclaimed wood. (I don't know if you've noticed this. I suppose all this wood in its original state was just claimed wood—people saw a log and claimed it. Now it's reclaimed. In 100 years will everything be reclaimed reclaimed wood? I wonder about these things.)

In some ways, Kelly's mulling over 2 Corinthians yielded more revelation than questions. She'd become acquainted with the problems in Corinth—its lust for power, zeal for social status, penchant for pleasure, vulnerability to deception so

similar to our own—and noticed Paul's message was not only different from the prevailing mantras of the day, but that he actually swam against the current, dodging the culture and all its values that were rushing past him downstream. Paul was headed to a different destination. He was on mission for Jesus. And when your mission is different than what the world pines after, you'll find yourself maneuvering through the oncoming crowds.

"Everything is the opposite!" Kelly said, lifting her tea in the air. "I mean everything Paul says is like the exact opposite of what we're told we're supposed to live for." (Toss in the flash and fame of the music industry, and the opposites become polar.)

I knew what Kelly meant. After nearly a year in this letter, I too felt the inescapable tension between Paul's life and the life of ease and comfort. But Paul champions the paradoxical life of a believer with unfathomable love. Here are just a few of the opposites: Our celebrity industry prizes

youth, beauty, and, in many ways, perfection, while Paul writes about boasting in our weaknesses so Christ can receive the glory. We're taught to be razor-sharp competent so we can claw our way to the top of our businesses, but Paul says our competency exists so we can be better ministers. When someone offends us, we batten down the doors and windows of our hearts so as not to be invaded again. However, to a church

*Paul champions the paradoxical life of a believer with unfathomable love.*

who'd bruised Paul, he returned with both hands on either side of his heart stretching it as wide as it would reach. When we finally get a little authority handed to us we think it's for bossing everyone around, but could it be our authority is for building people up and working for their joy? Paul thought so. Our instincts tell us to hang onto our money so we can spend it on ourselves and have plenty for later, while Paul points to a poor church in Macedonia who wanted to give what little money it had away because the members saw it not as a duty but—get this—a privilege.

No doubt Kelly was onto something. The Christian life is indeed one of paradox. What Jesus holds dear is opposite of what we in our natural states cling to. What struck me about our conversation, though, was that Kelly's acute revelation hadn't left her deflated or guilt-ridden. She didn't come saddened by the text. On the contrary, she was relieved. She found Paul's message remarkably freeing.

She was happy to know she can still love music and write songs and flutter from stage to stage like the cutest warbling morning bird, but she no longer has to do it for the fluctuating approval of humans. Of course, this will be a struggle, but she knows anew that in everything she puts her hand to she can—she must—concern herself with whether she's pleasing Jesus. She need not concern herself with keeping in step with the latest fads when being commended by

Him is the highest praise. He is the One that satisfies. And it won't matter if her career lands her on the grandest stage in NYC or in the choir pew of a country church; however the Lord wants to use her gift will be her joy. And whomever the Lord brings across her path will be her ministry.

Yep, 2 Corinthians is a letter of opposites. A letter about discovering the quiet joys of swimming upstream, despite the hoots and hollers from quick pleasures that zip by us with the current. It's a letter about the adventurous faith of hanging all our hope on God, even though trusting our strength and pride to get us by almost always seems safer and more familiar. It's about an abiding peace at the ocean floor of our souls that oddly doesn't roll in after a visit to the spa, more assets in the portfolio, or a new white kitchen. Instead of having to earn or buy our peace, peace comes when our sins are no longer counted against us because God sent His Son Jesus into the world, who took our sins upon Himself. Paul calls this reconciliation.

As you work your way through 2 Corinthians, be on the lookout for opposites. Note the way Paul unconditionally loves the Corinthians, what he rejoices in, whom he trusts, and what he calls home. Do this, then think about what the world loves, what it celebrates, hopes in, and lays its head upon in the wee hours of the night. As you consider the striking differences, never forget you've been empowered to live beautifully and blatantly set apart because—since Jesus's death and resurrection—the old has gone, the new has come. And last time I checked, old and new are as opposite as they come.

# DAY 1

## A SEEMINGLY UNLIKELY PLACE FOR A CHURCH

2 CORINTHIANS 1:1-2

Whenever I visit a city I've never been to before, I start Googling it to death. Something about seeing the actual landscape of a place, eating at its restaurants, and strolling its well-known streets make me want to better understand its history and happenings. And, of course, determine what movie stars live there. The same is true when I start studying a book of the Bible. Learning about context and historical placement is vital to gaining a more accurate understanding of the book at hand.

Before we begin reading 2 Corinthians, let's set the stage with a few important elements we'll refer to throughout the study. Reconstructing the time line of Paul's visits and letters to the Corinthians is not without complications, but doing so gives us a good handle on the setting. Paul first visited Corinth and established the church there in A.D. 50-51. We learn from 1 Corinthians 5:9 that he wrote an instructive letter that is now lost. After hearing about significant problems in the church, Paul wrote the letter we know as 1 Corinthians around A.D. 53-54. Closely following that letter, he wrote what is referred to as the "sorrowful letter," also presumed to be lost. This brings us to 2 Corinthians, which Paul wrote in response to hearing the church had a few victories along with several failures that needed to be addressed. We'll become well acquainted with these issues in the days ahead, issues that will feel surprisingly familiar to us 2,000 years later.

**LET'S BEGIN THIS JOURNEY TOGETHER BY LOOKING AT THE FIRST TWO VERSES OF 2 CORINTHIANS. READ 2 CORINTHIANS 1:1-2.**

*Paul was writing to the church of God at \_\_\_\_\_*

Think of the most culturally electrifying city you've ever visited. You may have memories awash with the arts and sporting events, a shopping spree surrounded by bustling commerce. You may have taken in a play or a movie, or had your senses stirred with ancient paintings or relics while strolling through museums. Perhaps you grabbed a hot dog from a steaming street cart or followed a waiter in a tuxedo to the finest meal your fork has ever pierced—a great city has both frankfurter and filet. You certainly spotted the wealthy being chauffeured about town, possibly at the same time you heard coins tumbling into the cup of the homeless. If you're like my sister, Katie, you spotted a celebrity—she finds them everywhere she goes. (She attributes this to putting on her "famous eyes" as soon as she gets to a popular destination.) Bright lights and garish signs, taxi horns and

### CORINTHIAN CHRONOLOGY:

- A.D. 50-51  
Paul establishes church in Corinth
- A.D. 52  
Writes instructive letter. (1 Cor. 5:9)  
This letter is lost.
- A.D. 53-54  
Writes 1 Corinthians.
- A.D. 54  
Makes "sorrowful visit" to Corinth.
- A.D. 54  
Writes "painful letter" (2 Cor. 2:3-4).  
This letter is lost.
- A.D. 54  
Writes 2 Corinthians
- A.D. 56  
Makes final visit to Corinth

symphonies, violence and class, rich and poor, and everyone in between, trying to find their way in this place we've known since nearly the beginning of time: the city.

You could make the argument that first-century Corinth was the citiest of cities.

When Paul arrived in the early A.D. 50s, Corinth was at the pinnacle of its development. A commercial epicenter of southern Greece, perched on an isthmus (think Seattle) that brimmed with tourists and trade due to its two harbors, Lechaenum and Cenchreae, Corinth was thriving, wealthy, and steeped in a blend of Roman and Greek culture. Tourists and locals could indulge in every good imaginable from wines to linens, olive oil to fresh drinking water, spices and meats, while inhaling the sea breeze rolling in through the ports where merchants and travelers came and went. A destination for world-class sporting events and entertainment drew the masses to this metropolis of approximately 80,000 people with 20,000 more on the outskirts. The ancient city of Corinth boasted everything you could ever want. But as we know: having access to everything we could ever want doesn't always end up being what we thought we wanted.

*The ancient city of Corinth boasted everything you could ever want. But as we know: having access to everything we could ever want doesn't always end up being what we thought we wanted.*

The richness of Corinth's culture had its downside, as do our own modern day cities. Prostitution, slavery, foreign pagan practices, poverty, and sexual perversion of all kinds coalesced within its territory. The term *Corinthianize* as even coined to describe debauchery and moral baseness that certainly didn't originate in Corinth, but was celebrated there. False gods were everywhere. The temple of Aphrodite, the Greek goddess of love and life, was a central shrine in Corinth. As one put it, Corinth was the "Vanity Fair" of Rome.<sup>2</sup>

**PERSONAL TAKE:** *Given this information, describe what could be surprising about Paul writing to the church in Corinth.*

**TURN TO ACTS 18:1-11 AND READ ABOUT PAUL'S FIRST VISIT TO CORINTH. WE'LL GATHER SOME BASIC FACTS FROM THIS PASSAGE, SO THINK FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF A REPORTER.**

*What couple did Paul live with and what country had they moved from?*

*What type of work did Paul do to support himself?*

cut hair

make tents

fish

all of the above

What two people groups did he teach in the synagogues?  
Jews and \_\_\_\_\_.

According to verse 8, what happened to many of the Corinthians Paul taught?

How long did Paul stay and teach God's Word to the Corinthians?

- 1 ½ Years
- 2 years
- 6 months
- 12 years

Looking back at the second paragraph of today's lesson, when did Paul first arrive in Corinth? Early A.D. \_\_\_\_\_.

Your Bible may show in red the Lord's direct words to Paul in Acts 18:9-10. Where did the Lord tell Paul He had many people?

One night the Lord spoke to Paul in a vision: "Do not be afraid; keep on speaking, do not be silent. For I am with you, and no one is going to attack and harm you, because I have many people in this city."  
Acts 18:9-10, HCSB

This is a comforting and encouraging word for wherever we live.

**PERSONAL REFLECTION:** *You may not live in the heart of a major city, but most of us live well within the reach of a city's influence. In the columns below, describe the benefits and obstacles of being a believer in Jesus in a wildly diverse place like "the city."*

BENEFITS	OBSTACLES

One of the reasons I'm passionate about 2 Corinthians is because of how relative it feels at this time in my life and in the culture in which I live. If the church worked in Corinth, it can work in the places you and I inhabit. I admit that sometimes I think our world is too far gone with abuse, racism, and moral depravation. However, if the gospel of Jesus transformed Corinth's prostitutes, arrogantly religious, oppressively wealthy, pagans, farmers, merchants, athletes, slaves, and synagogue leaders (like the one you just read about in Acts 18), then the good news of Jesus Christ can transform

the people of our cities today. And though I'm tempted at times to think that God's people are only found in religious settings, God had His people in Corinth. In the city. Just like He has you and me in the cultural settings we live in.

**READ THE OPENING LINES OF 1 CORINTHIANS 1:2 BELOW:**

**To the church of God in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be his holy people, together with all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ—their Lord and ours:**

*Paul gives an additional description of the believers in Corinth: To those \_\_\_\_\_ in Christ Jesus.*

Hagiazo: to make holy, i.e. (ceremonially) purify or consecrate ... hallow, be holy, sanctify.<sup>4</sup> When God saves us we're purified and set apart for His purposes.

If Paul were writing to a group of monks or nuns you might think, *Okay, they've got a good shot at this holiness, sanctification, purity thing.* But to people in the middle of a wide-open boomtown like Corinth, with no prior history of Christianity, to be seen in God's eyes as holy?<sup>3</sup> (See margin for definition.) Second Corinthians reminds us that God's church shines most brightly in the darkness rather than in already-lit sanctuaries.

**PERSONAL REFLECTION:** *What specifically about your culture makes it difficult for you to live a holy life? (Don't even think about writing down a generic answer on our first day together. Write what's hard for you in your culture. Be specific.)*

In the days ahead we'll see Paul pursuing God's people with unrivaled fervor. They were a struggling church that had bought into the trends and passions of the environment in which they lived. As one writer put it, "Many of their faults can be traced to their uncritical acceptance of the attitudes, values, and behaviors of the society in which they lived."<sup>5</sup> Uncritical acceptance. I can relate to this. If I'm not alert and aware, I can uncritically accept the prominent whims of the day and hardly realize it.

**PERSONAL REFLECTION:** *Without a judgmental spirit, how have you seen the Western church at large uncritically accept certain cultural norms that are blatantly unbiblical?*

We'll dig much deeper into Scripture in the coming days, but today I wanted you to understand the context of what we'll be studying. I'm excited to journey with you as we examine together what some have called Paul's most personal letter.

Dear friend, as you embark on this study, know you are not alone. As Paul put it best in his opening words, we're in this together, *with all the saints*.

**PERSONAL RESPONSE:** *I have no doubt the Lord is going to surprise you over the next eight weeks. What is your single greatest hope in studying 2 Corinthians?*

## DAY 2

# THE GOD OF ALL COMFORT

2 CORINTHIANS 1:3-11

I once held the idea that if I followed the principles laid out for me in Scripture, if I loved God and made solid, biblical choices, I would be blessed with some version of a really good life, void of heartbreak or catastrophe or sickness. As I grew older, I gradually realized that following God didn't guarantee this premium package, this safeness. I'd seen really godly people suffer and read about such believers in Scripture. Still, I somehow felt that if I did my part then God would be obligated to do His: build me the kind of life we covet here in America and protect me from pain. This seemed like such a reasonable expectation.

For in bringing many sons to glory, it was entirely appropriate that God—all things exist for Him and through Him—should make the source of their salvation perfect through sufferings. Hebrews 2:10, HCSB

For the record, I do believe obedience yields blessing and that God delights in giving us material and relational gifts, often in response to our following Him. Even still, my understanding of how suffering fit—or didn't fit—into the bigger paradigm of the Christian faith was deficient. The Bible reveals that suffering has its place in our lives, even Hebrews 2:10 explains that Jesus was made perfect through suffering. What I'd missed all those years of pining for what made me feel good and attempting to protect myself from whatever I feared "coming upon me" (in the words of Job) was really quite simple: suffering is part of the blessing.

I hope this brings more relief to you than alarm. The thought of suffering shouldn't thrust a bolt of terror through our hearts because as we will study today, God is especially present in our suffering. But neither should we set out for a life of pain, martyrdom, and victimhood in Jesus' name. We've been around the woe-is-me people in their Gap® sackcloth, and they're painfully not enjoyable. Bottom line, we shouldn't fear suffering, but we don't need to be looking under rocks for it either.

### READ 2 CORINTHIANS 1:3-11.

*In verse 3 Paul praises God as the Father of \_\_\_\_\_ and the God of all \_\_\_\_\_.*

*List every positive you can find about suffering in these verses. Take your time, considering even indirect benefits.*

You've already noted that Paul opens his letter to the Corinthians by acknowledging two of God's characteristics that meet us in our afflictions (trouble or tribulations). Notice the impact of Paul's phrase in verse 3, "Father of mercies" (or compassion). Paul didn't say that God is a merciful Father, though He is, rather that He's the Father of mercies. He's the very source and origin of all compassion. He is compassion's first and only fountain—the Father from whom all compassion flows. This is a paradigm shift for the person who sees God as someone who only occasionally taps into His kind side.

Let's consider the original language of the word *mercies* (compassion). The Greek word is *oiktirmos* and is used only five times in the New Testament. It means "Bowels in which compassion resides, a heart of compassion, emotions, longings, manifestations of pity"<sup>6</sup> or "the inward parts."<sup>7</sup> When we look at the definition of this word, we get a strong sense of feeling. According to Scripture, I want you to hear today that the Lord feels for you.

#### **LOOK UP PHILIPPIANS 3:10.**

*Paul's goal was to know the power of Christ's resurrection but he also wanted to share in His sufferings. What benefit came with this? (A specific word is used.)*

#### **TURN BACK AND READ 2 CORINTHIANS 1:5.**

*In this passage Paul states that Christ's sufferings overflow into our lives. What do you think this means?*

When Paul talks about the sufferings of Christ spilling over into our lives, he could mean a few overlapping ideas: 1. Sufferings on account of Christ. 2. Sufferings ordained for us by Christ. 3. Sufferings associated with Christ. 4. Sufferings like Christ endured. What I believe is important for us to know is that as believers, we will suffer certain things that are distinct to our association with Christ. Many Christians are suffering severe persecution around the world while others are hurting in lesser, but still painful, ways for their faith. For example, you may have been passed over for a promotion, lost a job, endured ridicule from friends, been betrayed or abandoned, all because of your belief in Jesus. Paul realized there is a certain fellowship that takes place with Jesus in times of suffering because no one knows suffering better than He does. It's part of His territory.

**PERSONAL REFLECTION:** *How have you become more deeply acquainted with Jesus as a result of sharing with Him in His sufferings?*

I've yet to meet a person who enjoys suffering, but I've met many who've found intimacy with Jesus in the midst of their suffering. There are certain parts of Jesus you just can't know on a path of ease, and once you've tasted that closeness with Him you wouldn't trade it for the smooth course. In addition to experiencing a special fellowship with Jesus (Phil. 3:10), Paul reveals another reason why suffering brings blessing.

*Whenever Christ's sufferings overflow into our lives what overflows out of us (2 Cor. 1:5)? This is so awesome to me!*

In the city of Manaus, Brazil, there's a natural phenomenon called *The Meeting of the Waters*. This is where the Rio Negro and Rio Solimoes meet and form what the Brazilians determine to be the official start of the Amazon River. The Rio Negro is black and looks like a river of Coke®; The Rio Solimoes appears to be flowing with coffee and cream. (These are my best scientific descriptions.) When you sail on this part of the Amazon, you're floating down one grand body of water that's made up of two rivers distinct in appearance, temperature, minerals, and speed. Even though the Negro and Solimoes don't appear to mix for several miles, they are one. And as Christ's sufferings and comfort can also seem incongruent, you will never have one without the other—the sufferings of Christ and His comfort flow together. As Charles H. Spurgeon put it, "when the scale of trials is full, you will find the scale of consolation just as heavy."<sup>8</sup>

**PERSONAL REFLECTION:** *As you look back on what you have suffered, how has Christ's comfort met you at every turn? As you consider your response, know that our pain can often cloud our ability to see the goodness of God. So depend on the truth of Scripture.*

*Look back at 2 Corinthians 1:8-9. Though we don't know the specific trials Paul endured:*

*1. Where did they take place?*

*2. What effect did they have on Paul?*

*What reason does Paul give in verse 9 for having gone through these hardships?*

**PERSONAL RESPONSE:** *When has your pain caused you to rely on God instead of yourself (you may be in the midst of this right now)? How has the transfer from depending on yourself to God changed you? What have you learned about your own limitations and about God's inexhaustible, resurrection power? Take some time with this. And if you're not experiencing Him in your suffering, ask Him to help you identify His comfort in your trial.*

*According to verse 10, where does all of Paul's hope lie?*

One of the most beautiful declarations in all of Scripture is found in verse 4, "He comforts us in all our afflictions, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any kind of affliction" (HCSB). When we traverse through difficulty, it's often hard to see outside of our pain. But we find great purpose in our suffering when we realize our experiences will serve as unique comforts to others going through similar trials.

*Describe a season when someone brought you timely comfort because God had ministered to him or her in a trial similar to your own?*

If we want to be able to comfort others with the comfort we've received from God, we need to be "comfort-able." What I mean is that I've experienced times in my life where I didn't want to be comforted or didn't know how to be, where I was plain mad and determined to sulk under anger's roof. If we find ourselves in a situation where we are inconsolable, unable to be comforted or encouraged, there is a problem. Receiving comfort requires humility and vulnerability before the Lord, open hands that say we don't know it all or have it all and need our Savior.

**PERSONAL RESPONSE:** *Where do you need to be comforted? What's keeping you from pouring out your heart to the Lord and receiving comfort from Him today?*

After working through this study, a friend of mine shared that the phrase, "On him we have set our hope" (2 Cor. 1:10) had at one time been a lifeline for her. She was pregnant with a child whom the doctors were concerned would not survive. In the midst of her pregnancy, she said she "envisioned hanging all my hope on the Lord as if on a hook." She couldn't hang her hope on her husband, her other children, the doctors, not even on her precious child surviving. She could only hang her whole life's hope singularly on the Lord, regardless of what might come. She tenderly shared with our group that her child did not linger long on this earth but her hope in the Lord remains.

*God's comfort  
is overflowing  
in nature.*

As the Negro and Solimoes rivers flow as one, Christ's suffering and His comfort run together in our lives, side-by-side. As Christians, we never have to suffer without Christ's comfort, and I believe there are certain comforts we will never know apart from His suffering. If you are plodding through a trial, perhaps an unbearable one far beyond your ability to endure, draw from God's comfort that runs straight through the person of Jesus into your life. He promises it in measure to your pain. And when you're met with God's consolation, you'll be eager to bind up the wounds of another person who's in similar pain because God's comfort is overflowing in nature. You'll have more than enough to share.

# DAY 3

## A CHANGE OF PLANS

2 CORINTHIANS 1:12-24

The strangest thing is happening to me. Suddenly parent-isms have been tumbling into my vocabulary. You don't need to be a parent for this to happen; you simply have to have had parents. For instance, when the milk is a week past its expiration date I now say, "It's perfectly fine," which my mom used to say about anything that had the current year stamped on the carton. I am also a huge employer of one of my dad's favorite expressions, "Good grief." My friends distance themselves whenever I use it in public—which is all the time. Growing up, one of my mom's most common phrases in response to my badgering her about something I wanted to do was, "We'll see." It took me 20 years to realize this was code for, "The answer is 9 percent no way, kiddo," but hope springs eternal. I use "we'll see," all the time with my nieces and nephews. It's a great way to hedge your bets, especially if you might need to change your plans.

As we go along, we'll discover that Paul was anything but a "we'll see" kind of guy. His yes was yes and his no was no, but this didn't mean he never had to change his plans. In today's reading, Paul will explain to the Corinthians why he didn't visit them when he originally intended. We'll also discover a few things about how the Corinthians felt about this.

### READ 2 CORINTHIANS 1:12-24.

If there's one thing about studying 2 Corinthians that's challenged me personally, it's that Paul doesn't shy away from difficult relationships. We'll get into this further, but the Corinthians had some issues with Paul, and his not showing up when he said he would was one of them. But before Paul jumps into an explanation of his actions, he first establishes his heart toward them.

*Revisit verse 12. Paul and his friends have related to the Corinthians with holiness and sincerity. Where does Paul claim these attributes originate?*

*Based on 2 Corinthians 1:12-13,17-19,24, what can you surmise were some of the accusations the Corinthians had against Paul? Make a list.*

*Before we move too far into the heart of today's passage, let's get our bearings on where we are in the time line of Paul's relationship with the Corinthian church. According to verses 15-16, what were Paul's initial travel plans?*

The church had not responded well to 1 Corinthians. Paul's ministry co-laborer, Timothy, had visited the Corinthians after Paul wrote that letter, reporting significant problems—moral issues, corrupted beliefs, and relational factions, to name a few. As a result Paul sailed from Ephesus to Corinth to deal with the Corinthians in person, which he'll refer to in 2 Corinthians 2:1-2 as a "sorrowful visit."

Paul may have told them during this difficult visit that he'd see them again on his trip from Macedonia back to Judea.<sup>9</sup> However, when the Corinthians continued to attack him, it's reasonable to assume he made the decision to not return for a while. **You probably can relate to the sadness and frustration of trying to reconcile a difficult relationship when nothing seems to be working. Sometimes you just need distance.**

*Are you in the middle of a relationship you don't know what to do with? If so, describe it below. My prayer is that the Lord will use this study to give you wisdom and grace in that relationship.*

Today's text reveals the Corinthians had questioned Paul's motives for not coming. Although he loved them dearly, a band of opponents had stirred up the Corinthian church, casting doubt about the true and sincere nature of Paul's devotion. Might I insert here that, for me, this is the worst. I hate to be misunderstood, especially in a situation where I've actually bent over backwards, sacrificed, stood up, or went out on a limb for someone. I'm not saying this happens to me often, but when it does I wrestle with two basic decisions: 1. Do I trust the Lord with my reputation, resting in a clear conscience before Him (v. 12)? 2. Can I continue to love those who have accused me?

**PERSONAL REFLECTION:** *What is your default reaction when you're misunderstood or falsely accused?*

*Paul wasn't into mixing his yeses and noes, saying one thing but doing another. According to 2 Corinthians 1:18-19, why was his ministry toward the Corinthians straightforward and trustworthy?*

It's usually not meant positively when someone tells you you're being defensive about something. We may think the only godly response is to remain silent and never explain ourselves. (Proverbs 9:8 says not to rebuke a mocker.) But sometimes explaining our actions is not only appropriate, but also vital to the relationship. So how do you know if you should defend yourself or not? Here's a litmus test I use: If defending myself is motivated by self-protection and characterized by pride, anger, fear, or self-righteousness, it's most likely from my flesh. Whereas, if defending myself is motivated by love for the other person and characterized by clarity, humility, kindness, and sincerity, it's from the Spirit. We'll note throughout our letter that Paul was clearly defending himself, not for self-defense's sake, but for the love of the Corinthians.

*What reason does Paul give for not having gone to Corinth (v. 23)?*

*What is Paul working for in verse 24?*

*The Corinthians' ...*

- |                                   |                                 |
|-----------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> hope     | <input type="checkbox"/> purity |
| <input type="checkbox"/> security | <input type="checkbox"/> joy    |

Whether we serve as bosses, teachers, mothers, ministry leaders, or have other positions of authority, we could solve a multitude of problems if we worked for the joy of those we oversee. In other words, if we're motivated by power, significance, position, advancement, money, or self-worth, then our leadership is not based on God's love. The people we serve can tell if we're leading them out of our own self-interest or for their joy.

**PERSONAL RESPONSE:** *How does Paul's gracious response throughout today's text specifically encourage you to respond when criticized or misunderstood?*

I sat with my 80-year-old English friend, Rhona, today. I was commenting on the crossword puzzles she works to keep her mind sharp and how she stays young by traveling and taking care of her grandkids. Her response was pure English, "Oh, but you never know what might strike you!" It's true. Sometimes things strike. Our circumstances can shift and the people we love can drift. Life can float us a few yeses and then slip us a handful of noes. In a world that can feel so unsure, Paul reminds us the ballast of our souls is this: *as surely as God is faithful* (v. 18).

Do you see what Paul is saying? God is not capricious. He doesn't give yeses after a good night's rest and noes when He's in a bad mood. He doesn't trick us by mixing messages. He is faithful. We may know this intellectually, but have we allowed the faithfulness and trustworthiness of God to settle into our hearts? And do we believe that everything that truly matters is "yes" in Jesus Christ? End today by filling in the following phrases however you see fit.

*Because God is faithful, He will* \_\_\_\_\_.

*Because God is faithful, I will* \_\_\_\_\_.

## DAY 4

# SINCERE AND STRAIGHTFORWARD

2 CORINTHIANS 1:12-24

Today we're going to dig deeper into the text we studied yesterday. I had to camp out here a little longer because this text holds so much wisdom for us, especially we highly relational women who can occasionally be passive-aggressive, insincere, or codependent—or is it just me? (It's probably just me.) First, let's revisit the word *sincere* in verse 12. Remember Paul explained to the Corinthians that postponing his trip came from a sincere heart. Not because Paul's heart was perfect, but because the sincere love he had for the Corinthians was from God—something he specifically wanted them to know.

*I want you to see something really interesting about Paul's use of the word sincere in an earlier letter. Turn back in your Bible and read 1 Corinthians 5:6-8. What metaphor does Paul use to describe the difference between purity and sincerity versus malice and wickedness?*

The Feast of Unleavened Bread is a festival the Israelites celebrate in remembrance of their deliverance out of Egypt. Ridding their houses of yeast was symbolic of their purity before God. All these years later, Paul was reminding the Corinthian church that a much more insidious yeast needed to be removed, the one in their hearts. This leaven of malice and evil was spilling into conversations and spreading into relationships and poisoning their community. Just as yeast enters a batch of dough and spreads its effect throughout, so does the sin we allow to fester in our thoughts and hearts. Paul was urging the Corinthians and us to get rid of the evil and live with sincerity! (This was way before the gluten-free muffin—Paul was so ahead of his time.)

So, here's a little test I put out to my Bible study group. I'm calling it, "How Sincere Am I?" Respond to each of the following questions with the word that best fits your response: *never, rarely, occasionally, or often*. Include any additional thoughts you have to each response.

*Do I manipulate the truth to get something I want, avoid a difficult situation, or make myself look better?*

*Am I straightforward in my commitments and responses so that others know what I'm really thinking?*

*Do the people around me trust my heart and integrity even when I've hurt them?*

*Do I often say one thing but mean another?*

*Can I say my conscience is clear before God?*

Sincerity is somewhat of a lost quality in our time, overrun by manipulation, shading the truth, passive-aggressive responses, lying, and flattery. How much richer could the body of Christ be if we were pure and sincere toward one another, as well as to those in the world?

*Paul details more specifically what sincerity looks like. Revisit 2 Corinthians 1:17-20. What two small, single-syllable words does Paul emphasize in this text?*

*In verse 17, what does he say he does not do in the same breath (or simultaneously)?*

*What does it appear the Corinthians were accusing Paul of being?*

*wishy-washy*

*shady*

*fickle*

*all of the above*

We may not purposefully tell people yes when we really mean no, or say no when we really mean yes, but each of us do it in more subtle ways. We say things like, "No, really, I'm fine," while giving someone the silent treatment. We said yes to our spouse at the altar, but now flirt with a coworker. We claim we've forgiven someone, but punish that person by withholding intimacy.

Or maybe we make a commitment to something but carry it out annoyed—essentially saying yes with a huge no in our hearts. Or the opposite—we say no with our words while every other part of our lives is saying yes to what we should be resisting.

A friend of mine who's married and a new mom said this, "When you're married, a lot of times it starts out as less about manipulation or shading the truth and more about keeping the peace and avoiding disagreement. Over time, continuing to just 'keep the peace' may build into silent treatment or a grudge when a brief discussion about the situation would have been the better choice. If we approach the situation with sincerity and honesty, the approach Paul displayed, then we are on the right path in our relationship."

**PERSONAL REFLECTION:** *Are you in a current situation where your yes is not really yes, or your no is not really no? If so, prayerfully commit to straightening out your yeses and noes in this situation.*

If we stopped here we'd have a really helpful lesson in integrity and forthrightness. But I'm so grateful Paul doesn't stop here because today's study is about so much more than merely upping our integrity meter. Go with me here.

*Who had Paul and his friends been preaching about to the Corinthians (v. 19)? The \_\_\_\_\_ of God, \_\_\_\_\_.*

Do you see that this is not merely a message in trying to do better, but is all about the person of Jesus? Paul goes even further.

*All the promises that God has made are \_\_\_\_\_ in Christ (v. 20).*

**PERSONAL TAKE:** *Why do you think Paul includes this section about God's promises always being "yes" in Jesus as part of his defense to the Corinthians?*

A distinction of the Christian faith is that it's not merely about achieving moral standards or looking like well-behaved Christians for the sake of being really good people. Paul had already spent much of his life in that pursuit, achieving a stellar Jewish education, being a member of the Pharisees, being trained by a top rabbi, and executing self-righteousness flawlessly. But he realized all of his "goodness" amounted to nothing but a dung heap. That's literally how he put it in Philippians 3:8.

More than that, I also consider everything to be a loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. Because of Him I have suffered the loss of all things and consider them filth, so that I may gain Christ. Philippians 3:8, HCSB

Now that he is defending his actions to the Corinthians, his point is that

*Jesus is God's yes to us for the life of meaning and hope we are longing for.*

being wishy-washy or untrustworthy toward them would go against one of his core beliefs: God is faithful. He cannot lie. He cannot go back on His Word. He made a covenant promise to redeem His children, and every promise included in that is “yes” in Jesus. Jesus is God’s yes to His promise to Abraham that by Abraham’s seed all the nations in the world would be blessed, and yes to His promise that David’s throne would be established forever. And Jesus is God’s yes to us for the life of meaning and hope we are longing for.<sup>10</sup> In other words, “For in relation to [Jesus], every last one of God’s promises receive ‘yes’ for an answer.”<sup>11</sup> If God is not fickle with His yeses and noes, well, then neither was Paul.

I wonder if one of the reasons we’re not always sincere or straightforward in our relationships is because we’re not grounded in the “yes” of Christ. I know I’ve waffled, and at times manipulated, situations because I’ve wanted to make my life work the way I wanted it to. Sticking to a yes or no may have threatened that pursuit. But when I’m able to trust God’s faithfulness, both His character and rule over my life, I don’t have to be manipulative or insincere.

**PERSONAL RESPONSE:** *As we close today’s study, what’s been the most convicting part for you? If you can connect it to a specific verse from our text, write the verse alongside what you’ve learned.*

# DAY 5

## NOT TO BE OUTWITTED

2 CORINTHIANS 2:1-11

In the first part of today's reading we'll encounter a situation every one of us has faced: making sad the people we depend on to make us happy. In other words, when we have to confront a friend we love and enjoy, someone we like to go shopping with, and we know this confrontation will make our friend upset, maybe even mad, then who will we have to help us try on jeans? If it's a daughter who needs correcting, how will you deal with being the un-fun mom for a spell? If it's a spouse or boyfriend who's done something particularly hurtful—and you know you need to say something—who's going to take you out to dinner that night? We've all dealt with this dilemma, which is one of the reasons I love the way Paul addresses this scenario.

### READ 2 CORINTHIANS 2:1-4.

*In your own words, summarize why Paul decided to stay in Ephesus.*

*According to verse 4, describe the emotions Paul experienced while writing his painful letter. (Note: This sorrowful letter appears to be a lost letter Paul wrote after his difficult visit to Corinth, most likely delivered by Titus.)*

*For what express purpose does Paul say he wrote this letter (v. 4)?*

One of the reasons we avoid confronting sin in another person's life is that we've made happiness the chief goal of our relationships—our own or the other person's. But true love shoots much higher than mere happiness. It shoots for holiness, which is not, as we may fear, stiff or boring. Holiness is the foundation on which thriving relationships find their footing. Whatever sin Paul was addressing in the lives of the Corinthians—sin that was eating them alive (some of which we'll find out in more detail)—he wasn't confronting the Corinthians to hurt them, but rather to let them know how deeply he cared! Perhaps one of the most tragic ways we fail to love someone is when we say or do nothing while they run off the rails, all because we don't want to upset the applecart—usually, our applecart.

*Holiness is the foundation on which thriving relationships find their footing.*

**PERSONAL REFLECTION:** Briefly write about a time when someone took a risk to lovingly call you out on something, and in doing so, demonstrated his or her deep love for you.

*According to verse 4, Paul wrote not for the sake of causing \_\_\_\_\_.*

Instead, Paul wrote to express his love. In the original language Paul grammatically positioned the word *love* in a way the Corinthians couldn't miss. He had a deep love for them and an equal desire for them to know that he loved them. Goodness, who hasn't felt this way about someone we've desperately wanted to see healed, restored, or delivered? We may love a person deeply, but something may be preventing him or her from knowing it. Paul wanted to make sure the Corinthians knew of his love.

**PERSONAL RESPONSE:** *You may have someone in your life you long to see free from sin. I wonder if this person interprets your desire as being motivated by something other than love? Even if you've approached him or her in humility, mercy, and kindness, does this person view you as a killjoy or holier-than-thou? Explain. Pause and pray that this loved one will receive your concern and correction as love.*

#### **READ 2 CORINTHIANS 2:5-11.**

*Before we get into the details of who the person Paul mentioned might be, to whom did this person grieve and cause pain (v. 5)?*

*Why did Paul advise the church to forgive and \_\_\_\_\_ him (v. 7)? Fill in the blank and respond.*

Some believe the offender in this passage is the man Paul wrote about in 1 Corinthians 5:1-5 who had committed incest. Other scholars disagree because the details in that passage don't seem to match the ones in 2 Corinthians. What we do know is that this specific person had attacked Paul personally, which in turn, affected the whole church community. This man's offense seems to be the focal point of a lot of the heartbreak Paul was experiencing with the Corinthians. Whatever his offense, it was significant.

In response to Paul's directive, the Corinthian church had taken some sort of disciplinary action toward this man, probably removed him from fellowship for a time, but now Paul was calling for his restoration. The discipline had been effective, and now it was time to restore the man to the community.

**PERSONAL TAKE:** *You've already noted that Paul urged the church to forgive and comfort this person. In verse 8 he tells them to reaffirm their love for him. What do you think this reaffirmation of love looked like and why was this extra step necessary?*

*We're about to focus on one of the most powerful words in all of Christendom, a word mentioned several times in verse 10. Write it below.*

*According to verse 11, what reason does Paul give for offering forgiveness?*

**PERSONAL TAKE:** *Why do you think forgiveness protects us from being taken advantage of or outwitted by Satan? Give this some thought. If it helps you to think in opposite terms, how does not forgiving allow Satan to gain a foothold in our relationships?*

A friend of mine who's a missionary talked once about forgiveness and 2 Corinthians 2:10-11. He said something so powerful that I wrote it down in the margin of my Bible and return to it often, "Forgiveness protects us from the strategy of Satan in our lives." This, my dear friends, will serve and protect us for the rest of our lives.

*"Forgiveness protects us from the strategy of Satan in our lives."*

## READ COLOSSIANS 3:13.

*We're to forgive, just as \_\_\_\_\_.*

If you have the extra time, spend a few minutes meditating on Matthew 18:21-35. Here, Jesus gives the example of a servant whose significant debts were forgiven, yet when later put in a position to show forgiveness, mercilessly demanded a much smaller debt be repaid. The point is that when we harbor unforgiveness toward someone, we've started to lose touch with our own need for forgiveness and to lose sight of the forgiveness Jesus has freely given us.

**PERSONAL RESPONSE:** *Is there anyone you need to forgive? The situation can be current or it could be a wound that happened 30 years ago. The person could be in your home or may not even be alive anymore. If you can't think of anyone, let's go another step. Do you gossip about a particular person or rejoice in his or her misfortunes? If so, this may mean you have a root of bitterness toward that person that can only be dug out through forgiveness. Take the steps needed to extend forgiveness. This may mean a face-to-face conversation, a personal letter, or perhaps just a prayer. Or it could be a combination of these steps. Feel free to use the margin to detail your plan or write your prayer.*

When we don't forgive, teams form, bitterness brews, and division ensues. Let's protect ourselves from the strategy of Satan in our lives. Let's reflect on the forgiveness the Lord has shown us and offer that forgiveness to others. Let's forgive, comfort, and reaffirm our love to those who have hurt us. When we do so, we will clearly display the unique power of the Christian faith shown in Scripture: "For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, *the forgiveness of sins*" (Col. 1:13, emphasis mine).

*When we don't forgive, teams form, bitterness brews, and division ensues.*

(Note: While forgiveness is always necessary, there may be some instances where comfort or reaffirmation of love is not appropriate or wise considering the circumstances. Seek the Holy Spirit's leadership and wise, godly counsel in these situations.)

We've had a great first week together. I hope you're excited to keep going. Paul's relationship with the church in Corinth was anything but simple, which is one reason I find it so refreshing. Second Corinthians is a real letter to a complicated group of people much like ourselves, and unless your life is perfectly put together, this is the kind of letter we need.

My hope is that you've already experienced some of the comfort and compassion from the Father of all mercies Paul wrote about in this opening chapter. My desire is that you've placed your hope on this compassionate God like a satchel bearing all of its weight on a single hook. If you find yourself navigating a difficult relationship, perhaps you have leaned on the wisdom Paul used to love, instruct, and correct with good measure and timing. I know you'll do your best to not be easily offended, but when you are, don't allow unforgiveness to lurk in the corners of your heart. We don't want the enemy to outwit us. May we freely give what we've been freely given.