

**Strength Through
Weakness**



**Studies in
2 Corinthians 1-5**

**Term 4, 2018
St Alban's Press**

'Strength through Weakness' 2 Corinthians 1-5

Introduction

If you ever feel that the Christian life is more of a struggle than it is meant to be, if you ever feel that you are not living the victorious Christian life but instead seem to struggle from one painful crisis to another then 2 Corinthians is a letter that will warm your soul.

In this letter Paul reminds his readers that the Christian life is all about weakness, so that in Christ we might be strong. It is a letter that comes out of a loving yet at times heart-breaking relationship that the Apostle Paul had with the Church at Corinth.

Many at Corinth failed to acknowledge Paul's authority as an Apostle. This issue was further heightened by the arrival of some Jewish ministers who challenged Paul's theology and argued that the covenant of Moses was still in force.

The City

Corinth, (found in modern day Greece), was a bustling city of significant commercial standing at the time of Paul's visits. It was re-established as a Roman colony in 44 BC. It stood on a narrow neck of land which made it a significant east-west sea trading port and important for land trade between north and south. It was a great and wealthy city that may have been home to up to over 700,000 people.

The Apostolic Connection

1. The founding of the church 50-52 AD Acts 18

Paul leaves Corinth and goes to Ephesus.

2. Paul sends a letter to the Corinthians, referred to in 1 Cor.5.9.

Paul learns from members of Chloe's household that the church is split into factions 1 Cor. 1.11. It seems about the same time Paul received a letter from the church asking for his advise on a variety of issues.

3. Paul responds with a letter which we know as 1 Corinthians. Timothy is sent to Corinth on a special mission 1 Cor. 4.17

4. A crisis breaks out and Paul makes a brief visit to the church. He is humiliated and returns to Ephesus in great distress. This is known as the 'painful' visit. 2 Cor. 2.1

5. Paul writes a strongly worded letter known as the 'tearful' or 'severe' letter.

6. Paul meets Titus in Macedonia. He is informed that the worst is over 2 Cor. 7.6-16. Paul then writes 2 Corinthians.

7. Paul visits Corinth in 56/57 AD for approx. 3 months. Acts 20.2.

The Structure and Content of 2 Corinthians

2 Corinthians is a powerfully emotional letter. Paul is called upon to defend his doctrine, his ministry and his character. These themes evolve throughout the letter. This letter is a mix of joy and sorrow.

It is a letter that has much to teach us about leadership, mission, conflict in the church and the life changing power of the gospel. This letter has a lot to teach us about God, who would choose the weak to demonstrate his power and about ourselves, who though being weak can demonstrate the awesome power of God that comes through the transforming gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.

May we be ready to learn that through Christ there is great strength to be experienced despite our obvious weakness.

Michael Crichton

CONTENTS

Study 1.	Comfort in Affliction	2 Cor.1.1-11
Study 2.	The Tyranny of the Unintended	2 Cor.1.12-2.13
Study 3.	A Letter from Christ	2 Cor. 2.14-3.6
Study 4.	The Surpassing Glory	2 Cor. 3.7-18
Study 5.	The Light of the Gospel	2 Cor. 4.1-6
Study 6.	Treasure in Earthen Vessels	2 Cor. 4.7-18
Study 7.	The Housing Crisis	2 Cor. 5.1-10
Study 8.	The Ministry that Reconciles	2 Cor. 5.11-21

Commentaries used in the preparation of these studies:

2 Corinthians	R.V.G.Tasker	Tyndale
New Testament Foundations	R.P Martin	Eerdmans
Message of 2 Corinthians	Paul Barnett	BST Com.
2 Corinthians	R.P Martin	Word

Study 1**Strength through Weakness****COMFORT IN AFFLICTION****2 Corinthians 1.1-11**

(Note: This is a long study, you may need to be selective)

Background**Read Acts 18.1– 19.1**

What do we learn from this of Paul's first visit to Corinth? What do we learn of Apollos, Priscilla and Aquila?

Read 1 Corinthians 1.10-17

What problems had the Corinthian church been wrestling with?
Draw up a list of issues that Paul addresses in 1 Corinthians.

1. When you face difficulties or personal pain in life where do you find comfort? Do you find solace in people or places or something else? Or do you struggle to find any comfort?

2. Read 2 Corinthians 1.1-11

Does anything strike you about Paul's introduction of himself in this letter? Discuss. (See Acts 9.)

Whose Church is the church in Corinth?

Do you think we sometimes forget who the church belongs to?
What problems can this cause?

3. Paul describes God as 'the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort.' v3

Note the Old Testament passages: Isaiah 40.1-5; 66.13

Is your experience of God one that sees him in these terms? How have you experienced God's compassion and comfort?

4. Do you offer God praise in times of trouble? Do you praise him for his comfort in the midst of difficult circumstances? If not, why not?

5. What is the channel or source through which our comfort comes? v5. Is there any comfort available to the non-believer in times of trouble?

6. Paul highlights a solidarity that exists between Christ and his people v5. What is the 'negative' aspect of this solidarity?

7. What do the following passages teach us about the suffering of Christians? 1 Peter 4.12-17, John 15.18-25

8. Do you experience suffering for the name of Christ? In what ways?

9. An educated guess would suggest that most of us here at St Alban's don't suffer for the sake of Jesus, we don't suffer because of our faith in him.

If that is the case—why is it so? Is it because we don't speak of Jesus openly or because we are lucky or what...?

How do you explain our lack of suffering for the Gospel?

Does anything need to change?

10. If God is the God of all comfort—shown supremely through Jesus—why do we balk at living bolder Christian lives?

11. The unity and intimacy of the New Testament Church that Paul envisages is inspiring. We cannot comfort one another in our troubles if we do not know and trust each other.

What can YOU do to strengthen your Christian relationships?

What can WE do as a Church at St Alban's to help develop more intimate relationships of trust and support? What stops us from developing these richer relationships Paul has in view?

12. Paul was speaking from experience. Note again verses 8-11. Verse 8b could be translated, '*We were indescribably, beyond the limits of our power, brought down into the depths.*' Barnett

It is difficult to know for certain what Paul had in view but it is likely he was thinking of the riots in Ephesus. See Acts 19.23-41

Have you ever been so overwhelmed in your Christian life that you despaired of life itself? When/Why?

13. What was the purpose of Paul's suffering? V9 Is this how you view your own sufferings?

14. Why are we so slow to rely on God and quick to rely on ourselves? Why do we struggle to acknowledge that we are 'weak' in many circumstances SO THAT we might enjoy the 'strength' that God offers to us?

15. What is the role of prayer in times of trouble? Is prayer weak? Where is its strength?

Where had Paul set his hope & why? Where must we set ours?



Points I want to remember in my prayers

Study 2**Strength through Weakness****THE TYRANNY OF THE UNINTENDED****2 Corinthians 1.12-2.13**

1. Have you ever made plans that changed at short notice that affected other people—and their response was less than understanding? How did you handle the situation?

Read 2 Corinthians 1.12-24

2. What impresses you about Paul's boast in v12? Why? Could you make the same boast?

3. Why are misunderstandings amongst Christians often so painful?

4. Paul was accused of being worldly and unwise by changing his plans. What explanation does he give? v23f

5. In your own words explain what Paul is describing in v18-20. How is this reassuring for you?

6. List and discuss the things God does for us in 1.21

i. _____ ii _____

iii. _____ iv. _____

What does this teach us about the Christian life? About God? How does this encourage you?

7. Read 2 Cor.1.23-2.13

Paul talks a lot about grief in these verses. Who or what is being grieved? Discuss.

8. Verses 2.5-11 seem to have in view the spiritual suffering of the church caused by one man! Why is division in the church so dangerous? 2.11.

9. The person in question has been punished 'by the majority', probably by the withdrawal of fellowship. Paul now exhorts his restoration. How is this to be done?

10. Does this situation Paul faced have anything to teach us about leadership, fellowship and conflict in the Church? What might that be?

11. Are we very good at restoring to the life of the Church brothers and sisters who have sinned? Why/Why not?

12. How can we better follow Paul's example of confronting sin and then restoring the repentant sinner in the life of the church?

Is this something only the Church leadership should do or do we all have a part to play? See Matthew 18.15-20



Points I want to remember in my prayers

Study 3**Strength through Weakness****A LETTER FROM CHRIST**
2 Corinthians 2.14-3.6

From what Paul writes in this next section it seems clear that those opposed to his leadership spoke of him as incompetent, lacking appropriate authority and having no sign of the power of God in his work. Paul mounts a sustained defense of himself and his ministry highlighting that his is a ministry of the new covenant.

Read 2 Corinthians 2.14-3.6

1. Far from being misguided Paul assures the Corinthians it is God who leads him. The images he uses here are from a victory march by a conquering Roman general.

How does Paul say the knowledge of God is spread?
Why is it difficult to separate the message from the messenger?

2. Are you an active fragrance for Christ? Paul makes it very clear that not everyone will like your smell! Why is it so? 2.15-16

3. Do you struggle with the fact that if you live the Christian life faithfully some people won't like you? How do you deal with this?

4. It has been suggested that political correctness has played a significant role in silencing Christians from speaking of Jesus today. Do you think that view is correct?

Are there other reasons why Christians are reluctant to share their faith with others?

What can we do to encourage each other to be more courageous in sharing our faith?

An idea: Have you considered asking someone to read the Bible One to One with you ie. John's gospel?

5. Notice: God led Paul '***always and everywhere***' in triumphal procession. v14.

There are some churches in our world today that have a strong emphasis on 'success' and 'triumph' or 'victory'.

What do you think are the hallmarks of a successful church or ministry? Why are 'numbers' an unreliable measure?

6. 'And who is equal to such a task?' v16—good question!!

Do you feel the burden of being 'a message' of life and death? Are we all too often indifferent to the plight of those outside of Christ? What can we do about this?

7. In v17 Paul mentions 'the many'. This is a reference to his enemies in Corinth. It was common practice to peddle ones 'religion' for profit in Paul's day. What are the two marks of Paul's ministry mentioned in his defense in v17?

i. _____ ii. _____

8. Paul's opponents had letters of recommendation, from whom we do not know. Paul's letters of recommendation were very different from theirs. (3.1-6)

Identify the characteristics of Paul's letter.

i. _____ ii. _____

iii. _____ iv. _____

v. _____ vi _____

What makes Paul's letter so impressive compared to his opponents?

9. Where was Paul's confidence? 3.4. Where can people in ministry sometimes foolishly place their confidence? What is usually the result?

Where are you tempted to place your confidence other than in Jesus Christ?

10. Why is a constant recognition of your own weakness a healthy thing for effective ministry? How does this differ from the way the world operates?

Is it possible to acknowledge ones weaknesses and yet still be confident? Explain.

11. Boldness and humility seem like opposites but were at the heart of Paul's ministry. How can we reconcile the two?

12. One of the great temptations for 'ministers' is to seek the approval of the congregations they serve rather than the approval of God—9'The audience of One'.

How can you encourage your leaders to honour God first and in so doing serve you—not vice versa!

Pray for your Church leaders, that they will be seek God's approval in their life above all else. Pray that God would help us to work with the leadership God has appointed in his Church. Pray that we all might be an effective fragrance of Christ as 'ministers' of the new covenant.



Points I want to remember in my prayers

Study 4**Strength in Weakness****THE SURPASSING GLORY!****2 Corinthians 3.7-18**

Paul's opponents were operating a 'back to Moses' ministry. (Barnett)

Paul in this section further highlights the difference between the ministry of the new covenant and the ministry of the old and there is simply no comparison—one is faded while the other has a surpassing glory!

Read 2 Corinthians 3.7-18

1. Following on from the preceding passage Paul in verses 7-11 makes a significant contrast between the two covenants. Draw up the contrast in the table below:

Old Covenant

New Covenant

2. As background it would be helpful to read **Exodus 34.29-35**. What do we learn from these verses?

3. Moses face was veiled so that the Israelites would not see its glory fade. In other words the glory of the old covenant like Moses shining face was temporary.

Is God a sadist to give us a law with the standard of perfection when he knew we could never accomplish such a standard? What then was its purpose?

4. What is the connection between hope and being bold—as far as Paul is concerned in v12? Should this hope have the same affect on us?

5. What is the only way that the veil of the law can be removed?
v14,16

6. Can you think of other forms of legalism that keeps people in the dark today?

7. In v14 it says that their 'minds were made dull' and their 'hearts were veiled'. It is worth considering, who did this?

Also consider: Are there particular things that dull the hearts and minds of people today to the glory of the gospel?

8. What is the connection between the veil, the spirit and freedom? What sort of freedom do you think Paul has in view?
See 3.16-17

9. What is actually veiled according to Paul's metaphor here? What are the consequences when it is unveiled?

i. _____

ii. _____

iii. _____

10. Who does the 'transforming'? v18 Note: Romans 8.28-30
What role do we have to play in this process?

11. Where does the world think 'glory' can be found? In what areas of life are you tempted to seek out glory, where ultimately it cannot be found?

12. In what ways do you feel the veil has been lifted from your eyes in your own life? Share examples if you are able.

13. How do we 'reflect' God's glory as he transforms us?

Why is the work of the Spirit indispensable?

Praise God for the new covenant that brings life, transformation and surpassing glory.

Pray for particular friends for whom the veil is still well and truly in place.



Points I want to remember in my prayers

Study 5

Strength through Weakness

THE LIGHT OF THE GOSPEL

2 Corinthians 4.1-6

We often talk about 'ministry' in our Christian groups. What ideas or activities do you associate with the word, 'ministry'?

Do you have a clear understanding in your own heart and mind about the ministry or ministries God has called YOU to? Share with the group what you think your ministry is.

Read 2 Corinthians 4.1-6

1. What ministry is Paul referring to in v1?

Note: 2.14 _____

3.3 _____

3.6 _____

2. Why would the nature of Paul's ministry cause him '*not to lose heart*'?

3. Do you ever find yourself 'losing heart' in ministry? Why or why not? Discuss.

4. Statistics tell a sad story of ministers and ministry. There are currently more ministers who have left the ministry than there are in the ministry in Australia.

What do you think would cause ministers/clergy to lose heart and leave the ministry?

What can we do to encourage people at all levels of ministry in the life of our church?

5. Can you think of examples where people today use **deception** to promote the gospel? v2 List them:

Can you think of examples where people today **distort** the word of God? Discuss.

6. What might cause a minister to use deception or distortion to promote the gospel?

7. Sometimes we may feel tempted to 'soften' the gospel so that it may sound more appealing to our unbelieving friends? What are some of the ways we might soften it? What might we leave out or over emphasize?

Read 1 Corinthians 1.18-31

8. How does this help us in our understanding of the gospel and our role in proclaiming it?

9. What was Paul's great concern in presenting the gospel to people? 4.2

- i.
- ii.
- iii.

10. Paul reintroduces the metaphor of the veil. Why does he suggest the gospel is veiled to some people? v3-4

What is the implication of this for us as we seek to reach people?

11. Note the description Paul gives of the veiled and perishing person. v3. Do you think of your non-Christian friends in these terms?

How could such an understanding of them be helpful for us?

12. What point is Paul trying to make when he compares the creation (Gen.1) and the light of the gospel? v6

Where is true knowledge and the glory of God to be found?

13. Verse 6 is a very uplifting verse with wonderful images. What is the source, the content and location of 'light'?

Pray for strength to be a 'herald' for Christ! What a glorious gospel we have to share!



Points I want to remember in my prayers

Study 6**Strength through Weakness****TREASURE IN EARTHEN VESSELS****2 Corinthians 4.7-18**

Paul continues to challenge the doctrine of the false teachers in Corinth. They promoted themselves, they spoke of power. Paul in complete contrast talks of weakness and the power that God demonstrates in his people in spite of and even because of their weakness. To Paul's opponents the idea of power in weakness was anathema - so it is for most in our world today!

1. When you think of treasure, what comes to mind?

When you think of power what ideas are common today?

What ideas, people or situations do you associate with weakness?

Read 2 Corinthians 4.7-18

2. What is the treasure Paul speaks of in verse 7? (see v6) What do the jars of clay refer to?

3. What is the source of Paul's power? How is this demonstrated in his life? v8-10 What is this power meant to do?

4. List the circumstances and outcomes for Paul in verse 8-10

1. _____ but not _____

2. _____ but not _____

3. _____ but not _____

4. _____ but not _____

Do Paul's circumstances seem foreign to you? Should such things naturally accompany gospel ministry or are they unique to Paul?
Note 2 Cor. 1.9-10

5. How do you respond when you feel hard pressed, crushed, perplexed or struck down in your Christian life? What is the best thing we can do in difficult circumstances? See 2 Cor. 1.10-11

6. 'The death of Jesus which Paul carries around in his body' is a reference to the fourfold distresses of v8-9 and anticipates two long lists of suffering in 6.3-10 & 11.23-29...The *death of Jesus in Paul's body* is his way of speaking of the physical and emotional pain associated with his ministry of the new covenant.'
Barnett BST p89

Can you identify examples of how you or other modern day Christians might carry around the death of Jesus in their bodies? Discuss them.

7. What does Paul see the cost of ministry achieving? v10-12

8. In what way is Jesus the ultimate example of what Paul is sharing of his own ministry experience? What implications should this have for us?

9. Do the benefits of the new covenant ministry outweigh the costs? Do you think most Christians are willing to count the cost today? Give evidence for your answer. Who ultimately loses if we fail to count the cost?

10. 'I believe therefore I have spoken' is a quote from Psalm 116. If you have time read the Psalm. What is the essence of this psalm? Why do you think Paul quotes it here?

11. In v13-15 Paul gives a number of motives for his ministry. What are they? Why could Paul not help but speak?

12. v16 repeats v1. What further reasons does Paul give us for not losing heart?

13. Death and wasting away are at the heart of this section of verses (7-18) and yet Paul seems to almost rejoice in it. Why?

14. 'Death in the end is irresistible.' What should be our response to this painful reality? v18

15. These verses give us an eternal perspective. Is there anything you need to change in your life so to reflect this perspective in your daily living? Discuss.

Praise God that though we are wasting away his glory is being revealed in and through us—his strength in our weakness!



Points I want to remember in my prayers

Study 7**Strength through Weakness****THE HOUSING CRISIS****2 Corinthians 5.1-10**

1. As a revision exercise look back through chapter 4 and note all the ways that 'glory' is used. It may be helpful and insightful to draw up a list.

The notion of death appeared early in Paul's correspondence, in relation to the dire circumstances he found himself in Asia (1.9-10), and is repeated in Paul's account of its activity within his own ministry (4.10-12), so that his body is wasting away (4.16-18). Barnett NIC p255

However the verses before us in this next section highlight that death is not final nor does it have the last word for God's people.

Read 2 Corinthians 5.1-10

2. In what ways do you think our earthly life is like a tent? v1

By comparison what has God got in store for us?

What is the connection between 4.18 and 5.1?

3. Note the tension between v1 & v2. 'We know'... yet 'we groan.'
What do we groan for? Read Romans 8.18-25

4. In what ways do you feel burdened by the earthly tent? v4 What should this 'burden' cause us to do? v2 Does it?

5. Why is the deposit of the spirit so important to the Christian hope? v5

How have you seen or experienced the work of the 'deposit' in your own life?

6. Do you personally feel the tension as Paul does of being at home in the body but longing to be with the Lord? v6-8 Discuss

7. We live in a world that seeks immortality here and now. People want to extend their natural lives in all sorts of ways. We want to stay young (looking) longer, people even deep freeze their bodies in the hope of medical science finding a solution to death.

How do these verses help us confront those sorts of issues?

8. The Rector once said, 'to truly live life you have to confront death.'

How do these verses assist us in doing that?

9. Do you have a goal in life? What is it?

What does Paul suggest our goal should be? How do we do that in reality ie. What does that look like? v9

10. Is judgment before God something Christians should fear? What impact should the idea of future judgment have in the life of the believer? v10

11. Read 1 Corinthians 15.50-58

How do these verses complement what Paul has said in 2 Cor. 5.1-10?

What encourages you most about this passage on the resurrection?

12. Take a few moments to consider is there something you need to do or stop doing so that you are living a life that is (more) pleasing to God?



Points I want to remember in my prayers

Study 8**Strength through Weakness****THE MINISTRY THAT RECONCILES**
2 Corinthians 5.11-21

We hear much these days about reconciliation. It is politically correct to seek reconciliation, it is also biblical. However it is sad to say that despite all the political rhetoric there are few examples in our world where true reconciliation between sinful people has been achieved. Paul in this next section passionately outlines the ministry of reconciliation that he has been called to which sees sinful mankind reconciled to his Creator and Redeemer, at the heart of which is the death of Jesus.

Read 2 Corinthians 5.11-21

1. Why would fear of the Lord lead to persuasion? 5.11 Does it have the same effect upon you? Why or why not?
2. In verses 12-13 Paul is actually taking aim at the false teachers in Corinth. What does Paul effectively accuse them of?
3. Paul introduces the motivation of Christ's love in v14. How can he be motivated by both love v14 and fear v11? Aren't they irreconcilable?

4. Paul was once a Pharisee, a zealot and a hater of Christians, but then he had an amazing encounter on the road to Damascus (Acts 9) and he was convinced that Jesus died for all. When did you become convinced?

How did it happen for you? What were you convinced of at that time?

5. How is it possible that in Christ all died? Who, or what died? Who are the 'all'? v14-15

6. In all honesty, who are you living for? For yourself, your husband, your children? Who should we live for? v15 Whose glory matters to you most?

7. If we truly 'live for him who died for us and was raised' how will that be seen in our lives? Be specific?

8. In v17 Paul uses the language of creation. What was the source of creation in Genesis 1? What is the source of our becoming new creations?

The answer is more specific than just God! Note: Genesis 1.3; 2 Cor.4.6

9. Verses 18-19 clearly assume that humankind is alienated from God. Why do non-believers find this idea so offensive? How can we help them to see that this is their reality?

10. Paul, having been reconciled to God, is given the ministry of reconciliation. Is this unique to Paul or do all Christians now have a ministry of reconciliation? V18

11. What is the role of an ambassador? As ambassadors for Christ what are we meant to do and be? v20.

12. Jesus is the righteousness of God, we are the sinful—he became sin so that we might become the righteousness of God—perfect substitution!
How has your life changed since becoming a Christian?

13. Note the passion of Paul's appeal: we try to persuade v11, Christ's love compels v14, we implore you v20

Do you have that sort of passion in your Christian life? Is one of the features of your life a passionate concern for the lost, the non-believers? If not, why not?

14. If some one asked you why you are a Christian—what would you say?

What can you do to become more actively involved in the ministry of reconciliation in your own life and in the life of our Church?

Pray that God might forgive our unbelief in the power of the gospel. Pray that God might forgive our apathy. Ask God to give us a fresh understanding of the message and ministry of reconciliation and the plight of the lost.



Points I want to remember in my prayers

5. Do you think Paul's list has anything to teach us about the price of gospel ministry we should be prepared to pay, or even expect, if we are serious about the ministry of evangelism?

6. Note the emotion with which Paul speaks about the Corinthians in v11-13. Do you experience that sort of intimacy with Christians in your Church? Do you experience that sort of vulnerability and openness? If not why not?

7. Our studies finish at this point but Paul's letter doesn't. A major theme throughout Paul's correspondence with the Corinthians has been strength in weakness.

Read 2 Corinthians 12.7-10.

What have you learnt about God's strength in your weakness through the study of this letter.

8. Is it your experience that God's grace is sufficient for you? Discuss.

9. Do you delight in your weaknesses for Christ's sake or are you always trying to cover them up?

10. Why is acknowledging our weaknesses almost mandatory before the power of God can be at work in our lives and in our ministries?

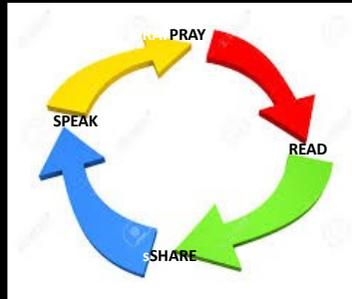
11. Praise God that he has called you though you are weak. Pray that God might help you to walk in faith in weakness in order to demonstrate the awesome power of God at work in your life.



Points I want to remember in my prayers



A Vision for Personal Spiritual Growth (MP3's)



ACCOUNTABILITY: Expectations – Evaluation - Consequences

Personal Challenge: Be a mission partner

- Pray for 5 non-believers specifically (weekly)
- Prayerfully seek to have a gospel conversation with 1 non-believer (1 x week)
- Once a month commit to have lunch/dinner/coffee with 1 person on prayer list.
- Meet monthly with 2 others in a MP3 support group to pray! (Build accountability)
- Seek to read gospel 1-2-1 with non-believer (disciples making disciples!)

