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LifeChange
SERIES

A NavPress Bible study on the book of
2 CORINTHIANS

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Titles in the LIFECHANGE series:

<i>Genesis</i>	<i>2 Corinthians</i>
<i>Exodus</i>	<i>Galatians</i>
<i>Joshua</i>	<i>Ephesians</i>
<i>Ruth & Esther</i>	<i>Philippians</i>
<i>1 Samuel</i>	<i>Colossians/Philemon</i>
<i>Proverbs</i>	<i>1 Thessalonians</i>
<i>Isaiah</i>	<i>1 Timothy</i>
<i>Mark</i>	<i>Titus</i>
<i>Luke</i>	<i>Hebrews</i>
<i>John</i>	<i>James</i>
<i>Acts</i>	<i>1 Peter</i>
<i>Romans</i>	<i>1, 2, & 3 John</i>
<i>1 Corinthians</i>	<i>Revelation</i>

HOW TO USE THIS STUDY

Objectives

Most guides in the LIFECHANGE series of Bible studies cover one book of the Bible. Although the LIFECHANGE guides vary with the books they explore, they share some common goals:

1. To provide you with a firm foundation of understanding and a thirst to return to the book;
2. To teach you by example how to study a book of the Bible without structured guides;
3. To give you all the historical background, word definitions, and explanatory notes you need, so that your only other reference is the Bible;
4. To help you grasp the message of the book as a whole;
5. To teach you how to let God's Word transform you into Christ's image.

Each lesson in this study is designed to take 60 to 90 minutes to complete on your own. The guide is based on the assumption that you are completing one lesson per week, but if time is limited you can do half a lesson per week or whatever amount allows you to be thorough.

Flexibility

LIFECHANGE guides are flexible, allowing you to adjust the quantity and depth of your study to meet your individual needs. The guide offers many optional questions in addition to the regular numbered questions. The optional questions, which appear in the margins of the study pages, include the following:

Optional Application. Nearly all application questions are optional; we hope you will do as many as you can without overcommitting yourself.

For Thought and Discussion. Beginning Bible students should be able to handle these, but even advanced students need to think about them. These questions frequently deal with ethical issues and other biblical principles. They often offer cross-references to spark thought, but the references do not give obvious answers. They are good for group discussions.

For Further Study. These include: (a) cross-references that shed light on a topic the book discusses, and (b) questions that delve deeper into the passage. You can omit them to shorten a lesson without missing a major point of the passage.

If you are meeting in a group, decide together which optional questions to prepare for each lesson, and how much of the lesson you will cover at the next meeting. Normally, the group leader should make this decision, but you might let each member choose his or her own application questions.

As you grow in your walk with God, you will find the LIFECHANGE guide growing with you—a helpful reference on a topic, a continuing challenge for application, a source of questions for many levels of growth.

Overview and details

The study begins with an overview of the book of 2 Corinthians. The key to interpretation is context—what is the whole passage or book *about*?—and the key to context is purpose—what is the author’s *aim* for the whole work? In lesson one you will lay the foundation for your study of 2 Corinthians by asking yourself, “Why did the author (and God) write the book? What did they want to accomplish? What is the book about?”

In lessons two through thirteen you will analyze successive passages of 2 Corinthians in detail.

After you have completed the final lesson, you may want to review 2 Corinthians, returning to the big picture to see whether your view of it has changed after closer study. Review will also strengthen your grasp of major issues and give you an idea of how you have grown from your study.

Kinds of questions

Bible study on your own—without a structured guide—follows a progression. First you observe: What does the passage *say*? Then you interpret: What does the passage *mean*? Lastly you apply: How does this truth *affect* my life?

Some of the “how” and “why” questions will take some creative thinking, even prayer, to answer. Some are opinion questions without clear-cut right answers; these will lend themselves to discussions and side studies.

Don’t let your study become an exercise of knowledge alone. Treat the passage as God’s Word, and stay in dialogue with Him as you study. Pray, “Lord, what do You want me to see here?” “Father, why is this true?” “Lord, how does this apply to my life?”

It is important that you write down your answers. The act of writing clarifies your thinking and helps you to remember.

Study aids

A list of reference materials, including a few notes of explanation to help you make good use of them, begins on page 125.

This guide is designed to include enough background to let you interpret with just your Bible and the guide. Still, if you want more information on a subject or want to study a book on your own, try the references listed.

Scripture versions

Unless otherwise indicated, the Bible quotations in this guide are from the *New International Version of the Bible*. Other versions cited are the *New American Standard Bible* (NASB) and the *King James Version* (KJV).

Use any translation you like for study, preferably more than one. A paraphrase such as *The Message* is not accurate enough for study, but it can be helpful for comparison or devotional reading.

Memorizing and meditating

A psalmist wrote, “I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you” (Psalm 119:11). If you write down a verse or passage that challenges or encourages you, and reflect on it often for a week or more, you will find it beginning to affect your motives and actions. We forget quickly what we read once; we remember what we ponder.

When you find a significant verse or passage, copy it onto a card to keep with you. Set aside five minutes during each day just to think about what the passage might mean in your life. Recite it over to yourself, exploring its meaning. Then, return to the passage as often as you can during your day, for a brief review. You will soon find it coming to mind spontaneously.

For group study

A group of four to ten people allows the richest discussions, but you can adapt this guide for other sized groups. It will suit a wide range of group types, such as home Bible studies, growth groups, youth groups, and business studies. Both new and experienced Bible students, and new and mature Christians, will benefit from the guide. You can omit or leave for later years any questions you find too easy or too hard.

The guide is intended to lead a group through one lesson per week. However, feel free to split lessons if you want to discuss them more thoroughly. Or, omit some questions in a lesson if preparation or discussion time is limited. You can always return to this guide for personal study later. You will be able to discuss only a few questions at length, so choose some for discussion and others for background. Make time at each discussion for members to ask about anything they didn’t understand.

Each lesson in the guide ends with a section called “For the group.” These sections give advice on how to focus a discussion, how you might apply the lesson in your group, how you might shorten a lesson, and so on. The group leader should read each “For the group” section at least a week ahead so that he or she

can tell the group how to prepare for the next lesson.

Each member should prepare for a meeting by writing answers for all of the background and discussion questions to be covered. If the group decides not to take an hour per week for private preparation, then expect to take at least two meetings per lesson to work through the questions. Application will be very difficult, however, without private thought and prayer.

Two reasons for studying in a group are *accountability* and *support*. When each member commits in front of the rest to seek growth in an area of life, you can pray with one another, listen jointly for God's guidance, help one another to resist temptation, assure each other that the other's growth matters to you, use the group to practice spiritual principles, and so on. Pray about one another's commitments and needs at most meetings. Spend the first few minutes of each meeting sharing any results from applications prompted by previous lessons. Then discuss new applications toward the end of the meeting. Follow such sharing with prayer for these and other needs.

If you write down each other's applications and prayer requests, you are more likely to remember to pray for them during the week, ask about them at the next meeting, and notice answered prayers. You might want to get a notebook for prayer requests and discussion notes.

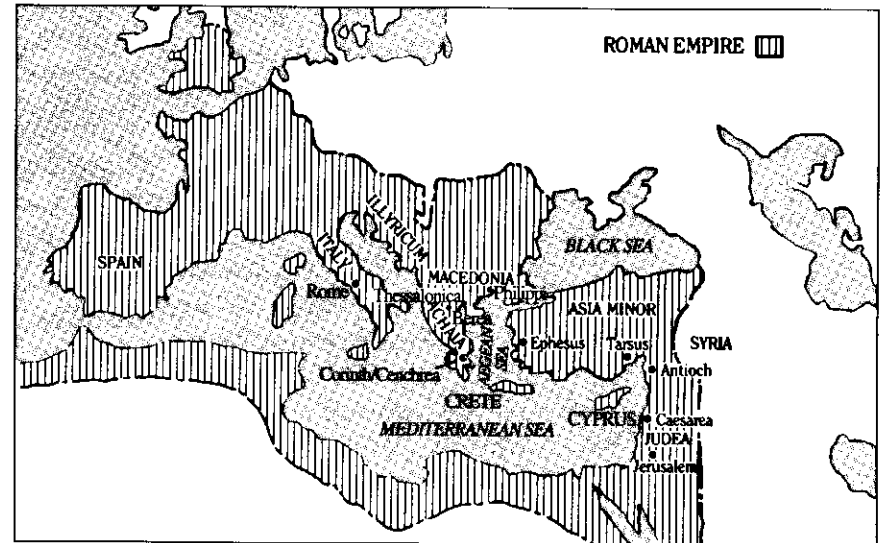
Notes taken during discussion will help you to remember, follow up on ideas, stay on the subject, and clarify a total view of an issue. But don't let note-taking keep you from participating. Some groups choose one member at each meeting to take notes. Then someone copies the notes and distributes them at the next meeting. Rotating these tasks can help include people. Some groups have someone take notes on a large pad of paper or erasable marker board (performed shower wall-board works well), so that everyone can see what has been recorded.

Pages 125-128 list some good sources of counsel for leading group studies.

INTRODUCTION

Historical Background

Map of the Roman Empire



Corinth was a key economic crossroads in the ancient Mediterranean area. Located on a narrow isthmus forty-five miles southwest of Athens, Corinth had controlling access to two major seas: the Aegean to the east and the Ionian on the west. Corinth thus became a prosperous trading center first in the Greek Empire and later in the Roman one.

With its worldly wealth, Corinth also gained a well-deserved reputation for worldly ways. The worship of Corinthian Aphrodite, for example, featured a temple with 1,000 priestesses—sacred prostitutes with whom male worshipers acted out fertility rites. Needless to say, this temple was a major drawing card for the sailors

who frequented the city. So rampant was this sort of behavior in Corinth that the Greeks coined a verb, *Korinthiazomai*, which meant “to live like a Corinthian in the practice of sexual immorality.”

In Paul’s day Corinth had a population estimated at 250,000 free persons, plus as many as 400,000 slaves. Although not an intellectual center like Athens, many of its people nevertheless were interested in Greek philosophy and placed a high premium on “wisdom” (see, for example, 1 Corinthians 1:18-31). However, the church at Corinth evidently did not contain many of these philosophy fans (1 Corinthians 1:26).

Most of the Christians at Corinth were probably Gentiles, even though a Jewish synagogue did exist in Corinth. In 1 Corinthians 12:2 Paul notes that on the whole, the Corinthian Christians were previously led around by “dumb idols,” a phrase hardly befitting a Jewish convert.

Paul and the church at Corinth

Paul was a missionary for much of his life, both before and after his conversion to Christianity. He was a Jew by birth, but his education was far from what a normal Jew would have received. His learning encompassed not only the Pharisaic approach to the Jewish law but also the Greek disciplines of rhetoric and classical literature. As a Pharisee, he believed that God had set him apart to study and live by the Law of Moses, and like a good Pharisee, he expected a Man to arise who would liberate Israel from the grip of Roman domination. Accordingly, when some Jews began saying that Jesus (who obviously hadn’t overthrown Rome) was this predicted Messiah, he stood against them with a vengeance!

In a sense, Saul (Paul’s Jewish name) became a zealous anti-Christian missionary. His first appearance in the New Testament is that of a persecutor of the church of Jesus Christ. He officiated at the stoning of Stephen; he imprisoned every Christian he could get his hands on in Jerusalem; and he even made “missionary trips” to areas outside Palestine to bring back believers in Christ who had fled for safety (Acts 7:58–8:3, 9:1-2; 1 Corinthians 15:9; Philippians 3:6). His mission was to stop the spread of Christianity.

On such a trip to Damascus, Saul had a blinding encounter with Jesus Christ. This event, which took place around A.D. 35, led him to turn from Pharasaism to a devoted obedience to the living and resurrected Christ. He ended up joining those he had been persecuting! Formerly he was a missionary against the church of Christ. Now he became a missionary par excellence for the cause of Christ.

Paul founded the church at Corinth around A.D. 51 or 52, during his second missionary journey (Acts 18:1-17), after having passed through Macedonia (Acts 16–17). Following his initial ministry in the city, which lasted over a year and a half (Acts 18:11), Paul’s contact with the Corinthians proceeded something like this:

1. After leaving Corinth for his first trip to Ephesus, Paul wrote a letter to the Corinthians (see 1 Corinthians 5:9; “the previous letter” is now lost to us).
2. Some time later, during his second stay in Ephesus (around A.D. 55), Paul wrote a second letter (our 1 Corinthians), occasioned by disturbing reports he had received from some of the Christians at Corinth.

3. That letter evidently was not sufficient to resolve the difficulties of the fledgling church, so Paul paid a personal visit to Corinth. He was later to call this a “painful visit” (2 Corinthians 2:1) since he was unable to resolve the problems there and was openly insulted by one or more opponents. These opponents may have been Corinthian Christians, but it is more likely that they were Palestinian Jews (2 Corinthians 11:22). Whether they were professing Christians or not we cannot be certain.
4. His authority having been openly challenged, Paul left Corinth for Ephesus and sent a letter to Corinth by the hand of his fellow worker, Titus. This “tearful” letter (now lost to us; see 2 Corinthians 2:3) called for the punishment of the one who had wronged Paul during the apostle’s painful visit. In addition, Paul instructed Titus to organize a collection for the Christians in Jerusalem (2 Corinthians 8:6).
5. Paul continued his ministry in Ephesus, then went through Macedonia again to organize the collection on behalf of the Jerusalem church. There he met Titus, who informed him that the majority of the Corinthians had taken the admonitions of Paul’s “tearful letter” to heart and had responded favorably (2 Corinthians 7:5-16).
6. Paul continued his evangelistic work and eventually returned to Macedonia, where he heard of fresh problems at Corinth. This, along with Paul’s concern for the collection, prompted the apostle to write yet a fourth letter to the church at Corinth (our 2 Corinthians), probably before the onset of winter in A.D. 56.
7. Paul spent three months in Greece, primarily in Corinth (the “third visit” he mentions in 2 Corinthians 12:14 and 13:1; see Acts 20:2-3). During this time he probably wrote his most famous work, the letter to the Christians at Rome.

Occasion and purpose of 2 Corinthians

As the previous section suggests, two circumstances prompted Paul to send this letter to Corinth: the news from Titus that the Corinthians had taken his “tearful letter” to heart, and the arrival of fresh disturbing news about the situation at Corinth.

At the center of the controversy were those in Corinth whom Paul labeled “false apostles” (2 Corinthians 11:13). These were evidently Jews from Jerusalem who were teaching that adherence to the Law of Moses was necessary for salvation. Paul responded with a carefully crafted theological argument (2 Corinthians 3:1–5:21) showing the superiority of the new covenant of Christianity over the old covenant of Judaism. In addition, these false teachers were trying to usurp Paul’s apostolic authority, challenging his credentials (3:1, 10:12-18) and exercising a domineering style of leadership over those who would follow them (11:20).

If the man or men who had openly humiliated Paul previously were followers of the false apostles, then it appears that the Corinthians took to heart Paul’s criticisms and largely rejected these renegade teachers for a while, since Paul commends the Corinthians for having responded favorably to his “tearful letter.” But Paul’s opponents were evidently persistent, for Paul found it necessary to devote

the last third of this letter to demolishing the arguments of the “false apostles.”

Paul’s purpose in writing 2 Corinthians, then, was to defend the gospel of Christ by forcefully reminding the Corinthians that what they had heard Paul preach was indeed God’s truth. To do this, the apostle had to spend much time defending both his ministry (2:14–5:21) and his integrity, since the truth of the gospel was inextricably linked to whether or not Paul was truly an apostle of Christ. But Paul’s spirited self-defense was not meant as an end in itself; rather, it was necessary in order to ensure the spiritual welfare of the Corinthian church (12:19).

The unity of 2 Corinthians

Even the casual reader will note a pronounced change in tone between the end of chapter 9 and the beginning of chapter 10. In 2 Corinthians 1–9 Paul, while critical of the Corinthians at points, is able to say things like “I have confidence in you” (7:16). In chapters 10–13, however, he appears to see the situation in Corinth as desperate, so much so that he speaks with a forcefulness unparalleled in the earlier chapters. For this reason some scholars have posited that chapters 10–13 represent portions of a letter written either before (such as the “tearful letter”) or after 2 Corinthians 1–9.

Without going into the arguments for or against the unity of 2 Corinthians, two things need to be said. First, there is absolutely no manuscript evidence indicating that 2 Corinthians was ever anything but a unified document. Second, there is enough common ground between the themes of chapters 1–9 and chapters 10–13 to argue for 2 Corinthians being a unified letter. While not unaware of the critical problems surrounding this letter, the present study guide will presuppose the unity of 2 Corinthians.

Principal themes

“God’s ability revealed through human inability” is a theme that ties together the entire letter. Paul’s opponents at Corinth were evidently being seduced by those who claimed powerful worldly credentials and attacked Paul as being a weakling. In reply, Paul argues that the gospel does not involve strong people doing great things for God, but rather teaches that God does great things through, and despite, our afflictions or weaknesses (see 2:16, 3:4-5, 4:7-12, 6:4-10, 10:17, 11:30, 12:7-10).

The biggest contrast between chapters 1–9 and 10–13 is Paul’s rhetorical boasting in the latter section, which is completely absent in the former. Why Paul added a final broadside against his opponents after dealing with them more subtly in chapters 1–9 is not clear. Perhaps he reviewed what he had dictated in chapters 1–9 and concluded that the situation at Corinth demanded stronger medicine. Or perhaps he received further news after completing chapters 1–9. In any event, the differences between the two sections of the letter are more of tone and emphasis than of substance. The basic themes and purpose remain consistent throughout this most personal of Paul’s letters. His pastoral concern for the Corinthians and his absolute dependence upon the power of God shine

forth like a lighthouse beacon, guiding his spiritual children past dangerous shoals that would sabotage their faith.

An outline of 2 Corinthians

- I. Paul defends his conduct and apostolic ministry (1:1–7:16)
 - A. Greetings and thanksgiving (1:1-11)
 - B. Paul’s singleness of purpose (1:12-22)
 - C. Why Paul changed his plans (1:23–2:4)
 - D. Discipline and forgiveness (2:5-11)
 - E. On to Macedonia (2:12-13)
 - F. Major digression: Apostolic ministry described
 1. Triumph of the gospel (2:14-17)
 2. Letters of the heart (3:1-3)
 3. A life-giving ministry (3:4-6)
 4. The glory of the new covenant (3:7–4:6)
 - a. It brings life, not death (3:7-11)
 - b. It unveils an everlasting glory (3:12-18)
 - c. It enlightens our hearts (4:1-6)
 5. Priceless treasure in cracked pots (4:7–5:10)
 - a. Through death to life (4:7-15)
 - b. “We walk by faith, not by sight” (4:16–5:10)
 6. The ministry of reconciliation (5:11–6:2)
 - a. Motivation for ministry (5:11-15)
 - b. The message of reconciliation (5:16–6:2)
 7. A pastor’s plea to his troubled flock (6:3–7:4)
 - a. The perils of Paul (6:3-10)
 - b. A plea for loyalty (6:11–7:4)
 - G. Paul resumes his narrative: Salutary effects of spiritual discipline (7:5-16)
- II. The collection for the saints at Jerusalem (8:1–9:15)
 - A. The need for the collection (8:1-15)
 - B. The work connected with the collection (8:16–9:5)
 - C. The results of the collection (9:6-15)
- III. Paul vindicates his apostolic authority (10:1–13:14)
 - A. The power of Paul’s ministry (10:1-11)
 - B. The scope of Paul’s ministry (10:12-18)
 - C. Paul’s jealousy for the Corinthians (11:1-6)
 - D. Financial dependence and independence (11:7-12)
 - E. False apostles (11:13-15)
 - F. Playing the fool (11:16-21a)

- G. Boasting in weakness (11:21b–12:13)
 - 1. More perils of Paul (11:21b-33)
 - 2. The vision and the thorn (12:1-10)
 - 3. The need to be foolish (12:11-13)
- H. Final appeal, admonitions, and farewell (12:14–13:14)
 - 1. No burden except love (12:14-18)
 - 2. Fears about the unrepentant (12:19-21)
 - 3. A stern admonition (13:1-4)
 - 4. “Examine yourselves” (13:5-10)
 - 5. Conclusion (13:11-14)

LESSON ONE

2 CORINTHIANS

1:1-11

Overview

First impressions

The best way to get acquainted with 2 Corinthians is to read the entire letter before doing any in-depth study. This should only take you about an hour if you read quickly to gain an overall impression of Paul’s message.

If your Bible has subtitles for the various sections of 2 Corinthians, use them as guides to help you catch the drift of Paul’s argument. At the same time, realize that these subtitles, like chapter and verse divisions, are not part of the original text and may at times lead you in the wrong direction!

As you read, jot down answers to questions 1-3.

1. What are your first impressions about 2 Corinthians? (For example: Why did Paul write it? What are the principal themes? What impression do you get of Paul?)

2. Repetition offers a clue as to what a writer is trying to emphasize. What key words or phrases do you find repeated throughout 2 Corinthians?

3. If you find outlining helpful, fill in the following outline with titles for the various sections. If you prefer, fill in the outline as you complete each lesson of the study guide. A detailed outline appears on pages 13-14.

1:1–7:16 Paul defends his conduct and apostolic ministry

1:1–11 _____

1:12–22 _____

1:23–2:4 _____

2:5–11 _____

2:12–13 _____

2:14–7:4 Major digression: Apostolic ministry described

2:14–3:6 _____

3:7–4:6 _____

4:7–5:10 _____

5:11–6:2 _____

6:3–7:4 _____

7:5–16 Return to Paul's narrative

7:5–16 _____

8:1–9:15 The collection

8:1–15 _____

8:16–9:5 _____

9:6–15 _____

10:1–13:13 Paul vindicates his apostolic authority

10:1–18 _____

11:1–21a _____

11:21b–12:13 _____

12:14–21 _____

13:1–13 _____

Paul's introduction (1:1-11)

Paul's introduction here follows the same basic form as his letters. The apostle expands upon the standard contemporary introduction, "greetings" (Greek *chaire*; see for example James 1:1), by writing "grace [*charis*] and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." In this way he underscores two major themes in his letters: the grace of God toward sinful humanity, and the peace between God and mankind that resulted from the coming of Jesus Christ and His work of reconciliation on the cross. Paul follows by thanking God for working in the lives of both himself and his readers.

Greeting (1:1-2)

Apostle (1:1). From the Greek *apostello*, "to send"; hence, one sent to preach the gospel. In the New Testament this word refers to those who (1) had seen the risen Christ and (2) had been commissioned by Christ as authoritative spokespersons in His stead. The word may also derive from the Greek Old Testament translation of the Hebrew who was an "ambassador," or one who spoke with

the full authority of the one who had sent him (see for example 1 Samuel 25:4-5 and 2 Samuel 10:1-2.)

The fact that the New Testament apostles “saw, heard, and handled” the Word of Life (1 John 1:1-3) indicates that their authority in Church history is unique, since by definition no one living after the time of Christ and the apostles could be an eyewitness. For this reason the Church has always regarded the apostolic writings—our New Testament—as uniquely authoritative for Christian faith and conduct.

4. Paul refers to himself as an apostle “by the will of God” (1:1). State in your own words what you think Paul means by this phrase. Why do you think he emphasized it?

Thanksgiving (1:3-11)

5. As in all of his letters, Paul’s major theme appears in this first section of 2 Corinthians. In 1:3-7, which two key concepts are consistently repeated by Paul? (A concept is represented either by one word, or by two or more words with the same basic meaning.)

6. Taken together, these two concepts display the theme of 2 Corinthians. In your own words, write in one sentence what you see as the theme of 2 Corinthians 1:3-7.

Comfort (1:3-7). Both the noun (“comfort”) and the verb (“comforts,” “are comforted”) derive from the Greek *parakaleo*. It means literally, “to call alongside” and hence, “to encourage” (Colossians 4:8), “exhort” (Acts 16:40), “console” (Matthew 2:18), and as here, “comfort.” The noun form, “comforter” (*paraklesis*), is the word Jesus used when speaking of the Holy Spirit (John 14:16,25; 15:26). It is translated “counselor” in the *New International Version*, and was used as a legal term meaning “counsel for the defense” or “advocate.” The picture is one of the Spirit of Christ standing beside Christians to defend them from whatever opposition Satan might hurl at them.

7. How does God use “troubles” (1:4) in a Christian’s life?

For Further Study:
Read John 14–16. How does the Holy Spirit act as a “comforter” to believers?

For Thought and Discussion: Share an experience you have had in which someone else’s affliction has enabled that person to be a comfort to you, or an affliction you have undergone has enabled you to comfort someone else.

Optional Application:
Pray that the Holy Spirit will be your “Comforter” this week in one specific area of need in your life.

For Thought and Discussion:

How does Paul's attitude toward suffering differ from the way most of us typically respond to suffering? How did Paul acquire this attitude?

For Thought and Discussion:

How easy is it for you to view suffering as Paul did? Why is that? What would help you cultivate his attitude?

8. Do "the sufferings of Christ" (1:5) refer primarily to (a) the pain Christ suffered on the cross, or (b) the persecutions suffered by those who follow Christ faithfully? Explain your answer. (Note: Paul's view of "the sufferings of Christ" was probably shaped by his encounter with Christ on the road to Damascus; see Acts 9:4-5.)

9. What lesson does Paul want the Corinthians to learn from the terrible "hardships" (1:8) he endured in Asia?

10. How does Paul's description of God as the one "who raises the dead" (1:9) strengthen the point he is trying to make in 1:8?

11. What two results does Paul see coming from the prayers of the Corinthian Christians (1:10-11)?

12. Read 1:3-11 again. Does "comfort" here mean (a) consolation in affliction, or (b) deliverance from affliction? Cite evidence from the text to support your choice.

13. On the basis of 1:3-11, how would you characterize Paul's relationship with the Christians at Corinth?

Your response

14. What truth from 1:1-11 seems personally relevant to you today?

For Further Study:
Read Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. Make a list of themes common to 1 and 2 Corinthians.

15. How will you respond to this truth?

16. List any questions you have from this overview.

For the group

This “For the group” section and the ones in later lessons are intended to suggest ways of structuring your discussions. Feel free to select what suits your group. The main goals of this first lesson are to gain a general understanding of 2 Corinthians, and to get to know the people with whom you will be studying.

If you read the entire book, this may be the most time-consuming lesson of the study. The group leader should advise members to allow between one and two hours for reading 2 Corinthians. If reading the whole book is an impossible demand on someone’s time, he or she should try to get a general impression of 2 Corinthians by skimming portions of it to take note of repeated ideas.

Worship. Some groups like to begin with prayer and/or singing. Some pray only briefly for God’s guidance at the beginning, and leave extended prayer until after the study.

Warm-up. The beginning of a new study is a good time to lay a foundation for honest sharing of ideas, getting comfortable with each other, and encouraging a sense of common purpose. One way to establish common ground is to talk about what each group member hopes to get out of your group—out of your study of 2 Corinthians, and out of any prayer, singing, sharing, outreach, or anything else you might do together. You can include what you hope to give to the group as well. If you have someone write down each member’s hopes and expectations, then you can look back at these goals later to see if they are being met. You can then plan more time for prayer or decide to cover 2 Corinthians more slowly if necessary.

You may decide to take about fifteen minutes at the beginning of your discussion of lesson 1 to discuss goals. Or, you may prefer to take a whole meeting to hand out the study guides, introduce the study, examine the “How to Use This Study” section on pages 5-8, and discuss goals.

First impressions. From lesson 1 you should get, above all, first impressions of the book’s themes and purposes on which to build deeper discoveries later. To focus your discussion, each group member might choose a section that was especially meaningful to him or her, and explain why. Ask group members to describe briefly what sort of person Paul appears to be. This open sharing could help introduce members who do not know each other well.

You probably will not feel it necessary to discuss question 3 (the outline). However, do share ideas about why Paul introduced this letter the way he did (1:3-11).

Application. If application is unfamiliar to some group members, choose a sample paragraph from 2 Corinthians and discuss possible ways of applying it. Try to state specifically how the passage is relevant to you and how you might act in light of it. Think of responses that you might actually do, not just ideal responses. Don’t forget to emphasize that prayer for ability, courage, discipline, and guidance to do something are appropriate applications of a passage.

Give the group a chance to voice any questions about the book or its historical background. You may decide to postpone answering some questions until you deal with the relevant passage, but you can keep a list of the group's questions.

Wrap-up. The wrap-up is a time to bring the discussion to a focused end and to make any announcements about the next lesson or meeting. For example, at the end of the present session (lesson 1), lead into lesson 2 by asking group members to ponder how Paul's remarks in 1:3-11 were meant to prepare the Corinthians for what he would say in 1:12-2:13.

Worship. Praise God for Paul's dedication to the gospel and his love for the Corinthians. Praise God also for insight to understand Paul's message and wisdom to apply it to your daily life.