

The Book of 2 Corinthians

Session 1: Introduction and Timeline

As we continue to move through Paul's epistles, we now come to the book of 2 Corinthians. As part of our introduction to the book of 2 Corinthians, let's look at a timeline of Paul's interaction with the Corinthians.

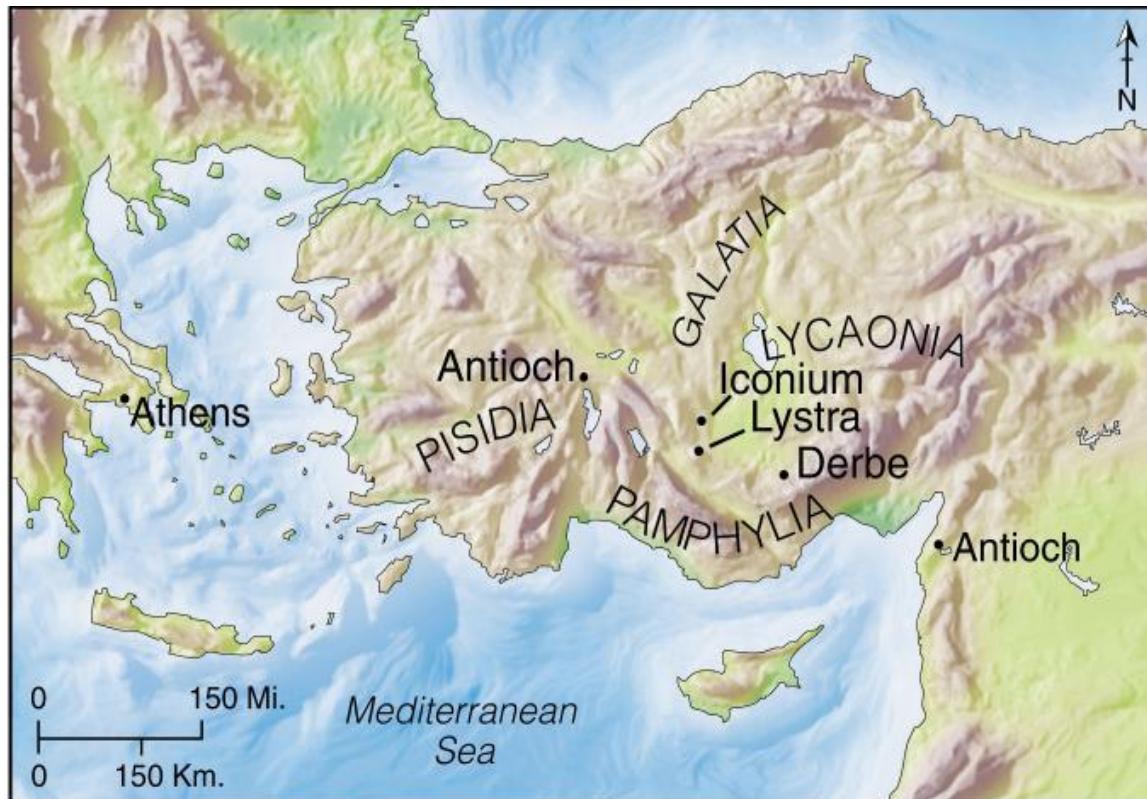
Paul did not go to Corinth on his first apostolic journey.



As you can see, Paul and company sailed to Cyprus. From there they left Paphos and landed at Perga in the humid region of Pamphylia, a narrow strip of land between the Mediterranean Sea and the Taurus Mountains.

John Mark left them in Perga, but Paul and Barnabas traveled up the steep road into the higher elevation of Pisidia in Galatia. When the Jews rejected his message, Paul preached to Gentiles, and the Jews drove Paul and Barnabas out of the Pisidian city of Antioch.

Having been thrown out of Antioch in Pisidia, Paul and Barnabas descended the mountains, going east into Lycaonia.



They went first to Iconium, a commercial center on the road between Asia and Syria. After preaching there, they had to flee to Lystra, 25 miles south. Paul was stoned in Lystra, but he and Barnabas traveled the 50 miles to Derbe, a border town. The pair then retraced their steps back to Antioch in Pisidia.

Paul and Barnabas went back through the cities where they had ministered and appointed elders in every church, ordaining them by the “laying on of hands, and prayer.”

Acts 14:21 And when they had preached the gospel to that city, and had taught many, they returned again to Lystra, and to Iconium, and Antioch,
22 Confirming the souls of the disciples, *and* exhorting them to continue in the faith, and that we must through much tribulation enter into the kingdom of God. 23 And when they had ordained them elders in every church, and had prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord, on whom they believed.

By returning back through Lystra, Iconium and Antioch, they “confirmed” the minds and hearts (“souls”) of their converts. What does that mean? It means they “strengthened” or “established” their disciples by the teaching of fundamental truths. They also exhorted them to continue in the faith, as there was much opposition (verse 22).

Looking at the end of verse 22, what does Paul mean when he says “we must through much tribulation enter into the kingdom of God?” He is not saying that it is a requirement, but rather that “it will happen.” That is, opposition to the truth of Paul’s gospel and doctrine cannot be avoided in this fallen world; persecution and afflictions are to be expected. But this is meant to encourage them as it was these sufferings which God would use to bring them into His kingdom with eternal glory as they held fast to their faith.

Verses 23 - Notice that as Paul selected some in each group to lead these new churches, they ordained them, which we know from other scriptures included prayer and the laying on of hands. Though they are called “elders,” they were all new converts, so “elder” seems to be the name of an office. The job of the elders was to rule the church, watch over the church, and teach Paul’s doctrine to the people.

After ordaining elders, Paul and Barnabas went down the mountains back to Pamphylia on the coast.



Stopping first in Perga, where they had landed, they went west to Attalia, the main port that sent goods from Asia to Syria and Egypt. There they found a ship bound for Seleucia, the port of Antioch in Syria. This ended their first missionary journey.



After Paul's first journey, there arose a dispute when some Judeans taught that Gentile believers had to be circumcised to be saved. Paul and Barnabas went to Jerusalem to discuss this situation with the leaders there. After the Jerusalem council made its decision, Paul and Barnabas returned to Antioch with the news.

As long as most of the first Christians were Jewish, there was little difficulty in welcoming new believers; however, Gentiles (non-Jews) began to accept Jesus' offer of salvation. The evidence in their lives and the presence of God's Spirit in them showed that God was accepting them. Some of the early Christians believed that non-Jewish Christians needed to meet certain conditions before they could be worthy to accept Christ. The issue could have destroyed the church, so a conference was called in Jerusalem, and the issue was formally settled there, although it continued to be a problem for many years following. The following is an outline of the three points of view at the conference.

Group	Position	Reasons
Judaizers (some Jewish Christians)	Gentiles must become Jewish first to be eligible for salvation	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. They were devout, practicing Jews who found it difficult to set aside a tradition of gaining merit with God by keeping the law. 2. They thought grace was too easy for the Gentiles. 3. They were afraid of seeming too non-Jewish in the practice of their new faith—which could lead to death. 4. The demands on the Gentiles were a way of maintaining control and authority in the movement.
Gentile Christians	Faith in Christ as Savior is the only requirement for salvation	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. To submit to Jewish demands would be to doubt what God had already done for them by grace alone. 2. They resisted exchanging their pagan rituals for a system of Jewish rituals—neither of which had power to save. 3. They sought to obey Christ by baptism (rather than by circumcision) as a sign of their new faith.
Peter and James	Faith is the only requirement, but there must be evidence of change by rejecting the old lifestyle	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. They tried to distinguish between what was true from God's word versus what was just human tradition. 2. They had Christ's command to preach to all the world. 3. They wanted to preserve unity. 4. They saw that Christianity could never survive as just a sect within Judaism.

As the debate raged between the Gentile Christians and the Judaizers, Paul found it necessary to write to the churches in Galatia. The Judaizers were trying to undermine Paul's authority. The debate over Jewish laws and Gentile Christians was officially resolved at the Jerusalem council.

What the Judaizers said about Paul	Paul's Defense
They said he was perverting the truth.	He had received his message from Christ himself (Acts 9:15; Galatians 1:11-12).
They said he was a traitor to the Jewish faith.	He was one of the most dedicated Jews of his time. Yet, in the midst of one of his most zealous acts, God had transformed him through a revelation of the good news about Jesus (Acts 9:1-30; Galatians 1:13-16).
They said he compromised and diluted his message for the Gentiles.	The other apostles declared that the message Paul was preaching was the true gospel (Acts 9:28; Galatians 2:1-10).
They said he was disregarding the Law of Moses.	Far from degrading the Law, Paul put the Law in its proper place. He wrote that it shows people where they have sinned and points them to Christ (<u>Galatians 3:19-29</u>).

After the Acts 15 conference, Paul decides he wants to return to the churches he and Barnabas established to see how they are doing.

Acts 15:36 And some days after Paul said unto Barnabas, Let us go again and visit our brethren in every city where we have preached the word of the Lord, *and see how they do.*

But there is a dispute about who should go with them, which ends up with Paul and Barnabas separating. Barnabas and John Mark head to Cyrus while Paul, Luke, and Silas set out on a second missionary journey to visit the cities Paul had preached in earlier. This time they set out by land rather than sea, traveling the Roman road through Cilicia and the Cilician Gates—a gorge through the Taurus Mountains—then northwest toward Derbe, Lystra, and Iconium.



Once they get there, they run into Timothy. Since that first journey, Timothy, his mother Eunice and grandmother, Lois, had believed the gospel and were saved. Paul decides to take Timothy with him as part of the group. While at Derbe and Lystra, Paul has Timothy circumcised to appease the Jews who knew Timothy's father was a Greek, but his mother was Jewish. Of all of Paul's companions, it seems that Timothy was his favorite.

The Spirit told them not to go into Asia, so they turned northward toward Bithynia. Again the Spirit said no, so they turned west through Mysia to the harbor city of Troas. At Troas, Paul received the Macedonian call (Acts 16:9), and he, Silas, Timothy, and Luke boarded a ship. They sailed to the island of Samothrace, then on to Neapolis, the port for the city of Philippi. Philippi sat on the Egnatian Way, a main transportation artery connecting the eastern provinces with Italy.



And now we begin our timeline in earnest.

Spring, AD 52: Paul arrives in Corinth for the first time. This is during his second apostolic journey.



This second journey is recorded in Acts 15:36-18:23.

Summer, AD 53: Paul is brought before Gallio. In Acts 18, Gallio is introduced as the Roman proconsul of Achaia, the southern region in Greece (the northern region was referred to as Macedonia).



Specifically, Gallio is mentioned in connection with the Apostle Paul's trial in Corinth, where Jewish leaders brought Paul before Gallio, accusing him of violating Jewish law. However, Gallio dismissed the charges, stating that the dispute was a matter of Jewish religious law and not a concern for the Roman court.

Autumn, AD 53: Paul leaves Corinth sailing for Syria, arriving by mid-October.

Late Spring, AD 54: Paul arrives in Ephesus for a period of extensive ministry.

Summer, AD 54: Paul receives news of the Corinthians and writes a letter to them.

1 Corinthians 5:9 I wrote unto you in an epistle not to company with fornicators:

An *epistle* is a letter. Paul says in 1 Corinthians that he has already written a letter to them; this was in the summer of 52AD.

Autumn, AD 54: Apollos joins Paul in Ephesus.

Summer/Autumn AD 55: Paul writes First Corinthians and sends it to Corinth while sending Timothy to Macedonia.

Spring, AD 56: Timothy arrives in Corinth, finding the church in disarray.

Late Spring, AD 56: When shipping opens, Paul travels to Corinth for the “sorrowful visit” and then returns to Ephesus.

2 Corinthians 2:1 But I determined this with myself, that I would not come again to you in heaviness.² For if I make you sorry, who is he then that maketh me glad, but the same which is made sorry by me?³ And I wrote this same unto you, lest, when I came, I should have sorrow from them of whom I ought to rejoice; having confidence in you all, that my joy is *the joy* of you all.

Summer, AD 56: In Ephesus, Titus reports to Paul, who writes the sorrowful letter.

2 Corinthians 2:4 For out of much affliction and anguish of heart I wrote unto you with many tears; not that ye should be grieved, but that ye might know the love which I have more abundantly unto you.

Late Summer, AD 56: The riot in Ephesus precipitates Paul leaving the city after teaching for two years and three months.

Acts 19:8 And he went into the synagogue, and spake boldly for the space of three months, disputing and persuading the things concerning the kingdom of God.⁹ But when divers were hardened, and believed not, but spake evil of that way before the multitude, he departed from them, and separated the disciples, disputing daily in the school of one Tyrannus.¹⁰ And this continued by the space of two years; so that all they which dwelt in Asia heard the word of the Lord Jesus, both Jews and Greeks.

Winter, AD 56/57: Paul ministers in Troas, then Macedonia, where he writes Second Corinthians.

Autumn, AD 57: Paul evangelizes in Macedonia and Illyricum (see Romans 15: 19).

Romans 15:19 Through mighty signs and wonders, by the power of the Spirit of God; so that from Jerusalem, and round about unto Illyricum, I have fully preached the gospel of Christ.

Autumn/Winter, AD 57: Paul makes his way back through Macedonia.

January-March, AD 58: The apostle stays for three months in Corinth and writes the epistle to the Romans.

With that timeline, let's focus on some details. Evidently, when Timothy arrived in Corinth, perhaps in early spring of AD 56, things were not well in the church, and at least some of Paul's directions in First Corinthians had not been acted upon. There were, for instance, those who continued to be involved in sexual immorality and divisiveness.

2 Corinthians 12:21 *And* lest, when I come again, my God will humble me among you, and *that* I shall bewail many which have sinned already, and have not repented of the uncleanness and fornication and lasciviousness which they have committed.

Plus, the false teachers in Corinth were gaining influence.

It is possible that as soon as shipping opened in the late spring of AD 56, Timothy headed to Ephesus to report to his apostle. Paul immediately left for Corinth for a grievous crisis visit, which disrupted his previously made plans of traveling first through Macedonia before going to Corinth.

1 Corinthians 16:5 Now I will come unto you, when I shall pass through Macedonia: for I do pass through Macedonia.⁶ And it may be that I will abide, yea, and winter with you, that ye may bring me on my journey whithersoever I go.

During this crisis visit to Corinth, the apostle Paul experienced emotional turmoil and even humiliation. In short, the confrontation with the church was deeply painful, though Paul was patient, even as he warned those who were living in sin. Paul was openly attacked and the majority of the members in the church failed to respond appropriately by defending their apostle.

Paul now had two problems. Firstly, he needed to set things right with the church in Corinth. Secondly, he needed to follow through in a way that would not jeopardize the collection for Jerusalem.

To address the first problem, in the summer of AD 56, the apostle sent Titus to Corinth with the “painful letter” mentioned. In this letter, he informed the church that he had changed back to his original travel plans and would not be visiting them before going to Macedonia.

2 Corinthians 1:15 And in this confidence I was minded to come unto you before, that ye might have a second benefit; ¹⁶ And to pass by you into Macedonia, and to come again out of Macedonia unto you, and of you to be brought on my way toward Judaea.

Rather, Paul planned to go through Macedonia and then to Corinth to accomplish the second need related to the collection.

Paul’s relationship with the Corinthians was stormy. It began well in the 1 ½ years when Paul was in Corinth. When Paul received word from Timothy that the church was in bad shape spiritually, Paul decided to pay the Corinthians a brief visit and continue on his way. But what a shock was waiting for Paul!

Paul’s authority and apostleship was called into question. If Paul was really sent by God, then why was there so much suffering in his life, they asked? And why was his ministry so lackluster when compared to others? Why was his preaching dull? Why did Paul refuse to accept payment for his services when most preachers did accept payment? Was Paul really collecting money for the poor in Jerusalem? Why didn’t Paul have letters of recommendation like others? These attacks led many of the Corinthians to reject Paul and his preaching for “another gospel.”

Paul left Corinth devastated.

2 Corinthians 2:1 But I determined this with myself, that I would not come again to you in heaviness.

After arriving back in Ephesus, Paul sent Titus to Corinth with a new and severe letter.

2 Corinthians 2:4 For out of much affliction and anguish of heart I wrote unto you with many tears; not that ye should be grieved, but that ye might know the love which I have more abundantly unto you.

Paul, admonished, the Corinthians to get themselves back on track, and they did. The majority of the church came back to Paul, but some still rejected him. And then Paul writes 2 Corinthians in AD 55.

This is the most emotional of all of Paul's writings. As one commentator put it, "Second Corinthians bears a fierce tone of injured love, of paradoxically wounded, relentless affection."

If you have ever invested your life in another person, so that they come to Christ only to see them led astray by someone else, then 2 Corinthians is for you. Paul has two great goals in this book, 1) to preserve his apostleship, and 2) to preserve the Corinthian church.

Just to give a broad scope of the book, from 2 Corinthians 2:12-7:1, Paul gives the most compelling defense of his apostleship and ministry in all his letters. Then, in chapters 7-9, Paul lays out the implications for the repentant Corinthians.

Chapters 10-13 describe the implications for those who still reject Paul.

But, I would like to present a more detailed outline of the book of 2 Corinthians.

1:1-11 – Introductory issues regarding the "sufferings of Christ;" Phase 2 of the policy of evil (PoE) and the design for the effectual working of the doctrine in this epistle.

1:12-2:17 – The "Sufferings of Christ" related to issues of personal integrity primarily coming from those within the church.

3:1-4:6 – The "Sufferings of Christ" related to issues of personal integrity coming from those outside the church.

4:7-9:15 – The "Sufferings of Christ" related to issues of ministry integrity primarily coming from those outside the church.

10:1-13:14 – The “Sufferings of Christ” related to ministry integrity primarily coming from those within the church.

As we move through the chapters, we will flesh out the outline to provide more details about the individual categories of the Sufferings of Christ (SoC).

At the end of each session, I will give you the verses I think we will cover the next Tuesday session. Please take time to read each passage daily and familiarize yourself with the verses. This will greatly enhance your understanding of the teaching.

Finally, in the book of 2 Corinthians, Paul is setting forth the pattern for ministry in Christ. The keynote idea of the book is that weakness is the source of strength, and suffering is the vehicle for God’s power and glory.

Look how Paul describes his ministry in 2 Corinthians 4:7-12.

2 Corinthians 4:7 But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellency of the power may be of God, and not of us. ⁸ *We are* troubled on every side, yet not distressed; *we are* perplexed, but not in despair; ⁹ Persecuted, but not forsaken; cast down, but not destroyed; ¹⁰ Always bearing about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life also of Jesus might be made manifest in our body. ¹¹ For we which live are alway delivered unto death for Jesus' sake, that the life also of Jesus might be made manifest in our mortal flesh. ¹² So then death worketh in us, but life in you.

Again, in 2 Corinthians 6:3-10, Paul describes his ministry in terms of suffering and weakness.

2 Corinthians 6:3 Giving no offence in any thing, that the ministry be not blamed: ⁴ But in all *things* approving ourselves as the ministers of God, in much patience, in afflictions, in necessities, in distresses, ⁵ In stripes, in imprisonments, in tumults, in labours, in watchings, in fastings; ⁶ By pureness, by knowledge, by longsuffering, by kindness, by the Holy Ghost, by love unfeigned, ⁷ By the word of truth, by the power of God, by the armour of righteousness on the right hand and on the left, ⁸ By honour and

dishonour, by evil report and good report: as deceivers, and *yet* true;⁹ As unknown, and *yet* well known; as dying, and, behold, we live; as chastened, and not killed;¹⁰ As sorrowful, yet alway rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and *yet* possessing all things.

In 2 Corinthians 11:23-30, Paul gives his ministry qualifications by “boasting” in his sufferings.

2 Corinthians 11:23 Are they ministers of Christ? (I speak as a fool) I *am* more; in labours more abundant, in stripes above measure, in prisons more frequent, in deaths oft.²⁴ Of the Jews five times received I forty *stripes* save one.²⁵ Thrice was I beaten with rods, once was I stoned, thrice I suffered shipwreck, a night and a day I have been in the deep;²⁶ *In* journeyings often, *in* perils of waters, *in* perils of robbers, *in* perils by *mine own* countrymen, *in* perils by the heathen, *in* perils in the city, *in* perils in the wilderness, *in* perils in the sea, *in* perils among false brethren;²⁷ In weariness and painfulness, in watchings often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness.²⁸ Beside those things that are without, that which cometh upon me daily, the care of all the churches.²⁹ Who is weak, and I am not weak? who is offended, and I burn not?³⁰ If I must needs glory, I will glory of the things which concern mine infirmities.

And finally, in 2 Corinthians 12:9-10, Paul shares the famous declaration of Christ.

2 Corinthians 12:9 And he said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness. Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me.¹⁰ Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ's sake: for when I am weak, then am I strong.

This theology was, in the eyes of the Corinthians, foolish. Who boasts in their weakness and suffering? People today still find these to be unacceptable.

2 Corinthians has a lot to teach us and we have a lot to learn.

Closing Prayer:

Heavenly Father, as we prepare to study the book of 2 Corinthians, we realize this is a book from which we will learn how to be comforted in the midst of our sufferings. Thank you for the example of our apostle. We pray to understand the doctrine and put it to work in our lives so that we are transformed in our inner man. Amen.

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The Most Important Decision