

GARY MILLAR
2 CORINTHIANS
FOR YOU



the goodbook
COMPANY

*To my parents, John and Lorna (d 2002)
and my in-laws, Warner and Sheena,
With deep thankfulness in Christ for their relentless
love, support and encouragement*

2 Corinthians For You

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SERIES PREFACE

Each volume of the *God's Word For You* series takes you to the heart of a book of the Bible, and applies its truths to your heart.

The central aim of each title is to be:

- Bible centred
- Christ glorifying
- Relevantly applied
- Easily readable

You can use *2 Corinthians For You*:

To read. You can simply read from cover to cover, as a book that explains and explores the themes, encouragements and challenges of this part of Scripture.

To feed. You can work through this book as part of your own personal regular devotions, or use it alongside a sermon or Bible-study series at your church. Each chapter is divided into two (or occasionally three) shorter sections, with questions for reflection at the end of each.

To lead. You can use this as a resource to help you teach God's word to others, both in small-group and whole-church settings. You'll find tricky verses or concepts explained using ordinary language, and helpful themes and illustrations along with suggested applications.

These books are not commentaries. They assume no understanding of the original Bible languages, nor a high level of biblical knowledge. Verse references are marked in **bold** so that you can refer to them easily. Any words that are used rarely or differently in everyday language outside the church are marked in **grey** when they first appear, and are explained in a glossary towards the back. There, you'll also find details of resources you can use alongside this one, in both personal and church life.

Our prayer is that as you read, you'll be struck not by the contents of this book, but by the book it's helping you open up; and that you'll praise not the author of this book, but the One he is pointing you to.

Carl Laferton, Series Editor

Bible translations used:

- ESV: English Standard Version (this is the version being quoted unless otherwise stated)
- NIV: New International Version, 2011 edition
- KJV: King James Version (also known as the Authorised Version)

INTRODUCTION TO 2 CORINTHIANS

After many years of passing through Changi Airport, I finally made it out through arrivals to actually spend some time in Singapore. And I loved it! Not only is chilli crab possibly the greatest dish under heaven, but the city is just about the most vibrant and complex place I have ever visited.

It's so British, with stunning colonial architecture.

It's so Asian, with hawker centres everywhere.

It's so American, with the soaring towers of the banking district dwarfing everything else.

It's so Chinese, with the island state's symbol—the “merlion” (a lion's head with a fish's tail)—standing proudly at the heart of the city.

Singapore, with its fusion of east and west, old and new, rich and poor, is just about as close to Corinth as we are ever likely to get.

Reinvented

Like Singapore, the port city of Corinth had an ancient history, but had recently been reinvented, refounded by **Julius Caesar*** in around 44 BC.

Like Singapore, Corinth rapidly became a flourishing financial and trade centre—by the middle of the first century it was booming.

Like Singapore, Corinth was a city where the pressure was on to climb the social and economic ladder—although such is the pressure on education that I think people from Singapore get higher grades.

Like Singapore, Corinth was a melting pot—it became home for a generation of Roman freedmen and retired soldiers, as well as many Jews who had been expelled from Rome by **Claudius** in AD 49. This group of Jewish exiles, alongside the native Greeks, threw themselves into life in this brash new city.

* Words in **grey** are defined in the Glossary (page 189).

When Paul showed up in Corinth for the first time, he found a *city with a Roman face, a Greek heart, a large Jewish minority and a deeply ingrained universal desire to impress*. It's hardly a shock then that when Paul preached the **gospel** and a church was born, life got pretty complicated. What else would you expect from a bunch of people who are mostly Greek, following a suffering and dying Jewish **Messiah**, in the middle of a Roman city which prides itself on always coming out on top. Welcome to the mess that is Corinth.

Now I know that church is always messy. I know that **ministry** is always more complicated than we first think. But it's also true that some places are more messy than others. And Corinth was one of those places. And Paul's relationship with the messy church he had planted in this complex city was—yes, you guessed it—*messy*.

Planting problems

After his initial stay in Corinth, when the church was planted (Acts 18:1-18), Paul heard that things had very quickly gone downhill. So about a year later, while he was in Ephesus, he wrote them a letter (now lost) explaining to them that sexual immorality in the church is not acceptable (he refers to that letter in 1 Corinthians 5:9).

That initial letter didn't do the trick, so about a year later (probably AD 53), he wrote the long letter that we know as 1 Corinthians, which covers a huge number of practical and **theological** issues.

You would hope that this might have fixed things in Corinth, but six months after that, Paul's apprentice, Timothy, passed through the port city and found that the church was in a complete mess. In fact, it was in *such* a mess that Paul dropped everything and made what he refers to in 2 Corinthians 2:1 as "the painful visit". Things did not go well, and it seems that Paul left Corinth unsure of whether the church would ever get back on track. His relationship with them was close to breaking point, and their grip on the gospel was weakening.

So he sent **Titus** with the letter he describes in 2:4:

“For I wrote to you out of much affliction and anguish of heart and with many tears, not to cause you pain but to let you know the abundant love that I have for you.”

This letter seems to have had some positive effect, and so several months after that, sometime in late 54 or 55, two years after the church plant began and about a year after writing 1 Corinthians, Paul wrote 2 Corinthians (which confusingly was actually at least the fourth letter he’d written to them), which Titus again delivered.

It’s important for us to appreciate this difficult history as we start to read 2 Corinthians because it goes some way to explaining why Paul both *loved* the Corinthians and was *driven nuts* by them in equal measure. He has more recorded interaction with them than any other church he planted. Their issues take up more of the New Testament than those of any other church. And at this point in their relationship, it was still not entirely clear whether the church would flourish and grow or crash and burn—which explains why this is the most passionate, honest, vulnerable, heartfelt letter in the Bible. The battle for hearts and minds was still on in Corinth. In particular, the leaders that Paul left behind continued to waver. So Paul wrote again in an attempt to persuade them to stick with him and the gospel.

This letter is the place to go for a description and embodiment of what gospel ministry is all about.

That’s why I think this letter is the place to go in the New Testament for a description and embodiment of what *gospel* ministry is all about. For Paul, “gospel ministry” is what we all do—it means walking with and serving Jesus. This letter is written *for all of us*.

Ministering with messy people

When it comes to ministry in the messiness of the church and the complexity of our world, I think this letter is the place to start. When it

Introduction

comes to Christian leadership, this letter is the place to start. When it comes to the battle for a gospel-shaped approach to life in our hearts and our minds, this is the place to start. When it comes to life in the mess, this is the place to start. 2 Corinthians walks us through how to live by faith in our broken world. It's the key to embracing our weakness and living in the strength which God himself supplies.

So let's get reading!

1. BEGINNING WITH GOD

As he writes another letter to his much-loved but thoroughly infuriating brothers and sisters in Corinth, in the first 11 verses Paul wants to make sure that whatever they are going through, whatever their issues may be, they have got the fact that God himself is the foundation of life and ministry. In this passage, Paul sets out a vision which is radically God-centred and rests on three huge convictions about God himself.

God rules and provides for his church

When writing a letter in the ancient world, the writer would start by introducing themselves. But Paul is never content simply to write his name; he always wants to pack as much encouragement and **theology** into his letters as possible—and 2 Corinthians is no exception. He starts like this:

“Paul, an **apostle** of Christ Jesus by the will of God, ... To the church of God that is at Corinth ... **Grace** to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” (1:1)*

At the risk of stating the obvious, *this letter starts with God*.

Undergirding everything that Paul writes in this letter is the fact that *God rules and provides for his church*. The church is not *our* project; it is *God's*. The church is not *our* community; it is *God's*. Ultimately the church is not even *our* responsibility; it is *God's*. And when

* All 2 Corinthians verse references being looked at in each chapter part are in **bold**.

it comes to thinking about ministry, the Christian life and the church, this perspective changes everything.

Paul clearly sees himself as God's emissary, with the dignity and sense of responsibility which that brings. He says he is "an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God" (v 1). He doesn't come on his own authority, nor is he pursuing his own agenda. The idea of an "apostle" comes from the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament that Paul used, where the word is used to describe God's prophetic messengers. Apostles are sent with a message from God. So Paul says that he has been appointed by God himself to advance God's plans by announcing the message of Jesus Christ to the world. The Corinthians may still be making their mind up about Paul, but his

confidence is firmly in the fact that he has been commissioned by God himself, and that both he, and his sidekick, Timothy, come with God's own authority to speak to what is God's church.

Leaders are ultimately appointed by Christ and are accountable to Christ.

This is actually the first distinctive of all Christian leadership. It is God who selects, appoints and sends leaders. Leadership is not something we grab or plot to achieve.

It is not something we have by right. Character, convictions and competencies are all really important, but even when we have all these things, it doesn't *entitle* us to lead. In the church of Jesus Christ, leaders are ultimately appointed by Jesus Christ and are accountable to Jesus Christ. When any local church appoints leaders, in effect, all they are doing is recognising what God has already done in equipping and shaping leaders for his church. And that's what makes being a leader in the church of Jesus Christ so scary!

Being one of Christ's appointed assistant leaders, if I can put it like that, is a serious thing. That's why leaders in the New Testament are held to such a high standard. Paul writes to Timothy:

"The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the office of

overseer, he desires a noble task. Therefore an **overseer** must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach.”

(1 Timothy 3:1-2)

That’s why we need to push those who aspire to be leaders in the church so hard. That’s why the work of equipping leaders is a serious business—because in the church, leaders are both appointed by God and held accountable by God, because they are given the job of looking after the church of God. God both rules and provides for his church—which is why Paul writes to “the church of God that is at Corinth” (2 Corinthians **1:1**). We are part of his church rather than him sponsoring ours!

A very irate lady once yelled at me, “You are destroying my church!” I gently pointed out, in a way which was theologically accurate but probably a little bit incendiary, that the church didn’t actually belong to her but was the church of the Lord Jesus Christ, and neither she nor I had the right to tell God how to run it; which is basically what Paul says here—the church is the church of God.

Whether we are talking about the group of house churches scattered across Corinth, or add in the rest of the “holy ones”, those Jewish and Gentile believers scattered across the rest of southern Greece who were all part of God’s **new-covenant** people, or whether we include the local gathering that you are part of, it is the church of God. Our God established it, and he will care for it. As Jesus said, “I will build my church and the gates of hell will not overcome it” (Matthew 16:18). God both *provides for* and *rules* his church—a fact which is underlined by the most overlooked phrase in all of Paul’s writing: “Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ” (2 Corinthians **1:2**).

Grace and peace

In every letter that he writes to a church, Paul opens with this deceptively rich phrase. The word “peace” is instantly understandable to

Jews, with the announcement of *shalom* from God—the promise of the flourishing wellbeing that comes from being in right relationship with the living God. And to both Jews and Gentiles, “grace” declares the undeserved favour of God towards sinners. Paul’s formula encapsulates all that God the Father holds out to us in the Lord Jesus Christ through the gospel—*grace and peace*, both of which were in short supply in the turmoil of Corinth.

It would be really easy to skip over this, but we shouldn’t because this is a key part of Paul’s thinking about the church. Because the church belongs to God and is provided for by God, we have every right to expect the church of the Lord Jesus to be marked by grace and peace. The fact that God has chosen us and rescued us has changed, is changing and will change us. The knowledge of his love for us and the experience of his forgiveness should soften us beyond measure, and make our churches the most accepting and forgiving communities on the planet. And the fact that we have been accepted by God, forgiven, credited with Jesus’ **righteousness, sealed with the Spirit** and given the guarantee that he will *never* let us go should cause us to heave a collective sigh of relief, and relax. Our lives as God’s people, our life as the church, is to be a life of grace and peace, because the God of grace and peace rules and provides for his church.

It is very easy to overestimate our own importance: to imagine that we have more power, and more significance than we actually do. But if you and I are to be useful in God’s kingdom, it is important we realise that there are some things that are beyond us. For a start, we can’t actually change anyone. We can’t bring people to life, or make them more like Jesus—in fact, we can’t even change their minds. *And on top of that, we can’t plant, grow and build churches.* Ultimately, that’s God’s job. The church starts with him, belongs to him, is protected and nurtured by him.

Of course, we need to be wise—we need to make sure that we have the convictions, character and competencies to serve Christ faithfully in our nation and beyond. Of course, we need to make sure

we are using the gifts and the wisdom God has given us. But at the end of the day we need to make sure that it has lodged firmly in our skulls that no church we plant or pastor or revitalise or teach or are part of will ever be “mine”. We are never more than caretakers of the church that our God has brought to life and cares for more than we will ever imagine.

So I hope you’ve got this foundation that undergirds all authentic ministry: God rules the church—and he provides for the church in every way, holding out grace and peace in the Lord Jesus. As Paul continues this ongoing battle for the hearts and minds of the people of God in Corinth, he starts with the fact that the church belongs to God. In the rest of our passage, Paul outlines two more key ways in which God holds out his grace and peace to us, his people—ways in which God provides for us, for his church, through the gospel.

The Father of mercies

In **verse 3**, the thought of God showing us grace and peace moves Paul to “benediction”; literally it makes him “speak well” of God. First, he says, “Blessed... be the Father of mercies”. The word “mercies” is commonly used in the Old Testament to describe the tender way in which God showers his people with kindness. He then goes on to introduce the key idea in verses 3-7: our God is also the God who offers “comfort” (v 3) in every conceivable situation.

Now I confess that I have a cultural problem in reading this text. When I hear the word “comfort”, I am hindered by the fact that the number one brand of fabric softener in the UK and Ireland is called—you guessed it—*Comfort*. The word instantly conjures up hazy images of fluffy towels gently brushing perfect skin, and Labrador puppies gently frolicking in a sea of softness. Comfort for us is a warm and fuzzy word. But for Paul, and for the rest of the New Testament, the word he uses is a long way from warm fuzziness. “Comfort” in the New Testament includes everything from an arm round the shoulder to a kick in the pants!

David E. Garland, New Testament Professor at Baylor University in the US, explains it like this:

“The comfort that Paul has in mind has nothing to do with a languorous feeling of contentment. It is not some tranquilizing dose of grace that only dulls pain but a stiffening agent that fortifies one in heart, mind and soul. Comfort relates to encouragement, help, **exhortation**. God’s comfort strengthens weak knees and sustains sagging spirits so that one faces the troubles of life with unbending resolve and unending assurance.”

(2 Corinthians, p 60)

This is why, in John’s Gospel, Jesus himself used the same word to describe the Holy Spirit as the “Comforter”, which enfolds the fact that he is the one who convicts us of sin, strengthens us, emboldens us and transforms us. And why does Paul’s choice of word matter so much? It matters because it clarifies the very nature of the gospel-driven life and ministry we are all called to.

Living for Jesus is hard. But the great news is that our God—Father, Son and Spirit—is committed to supplying the resources, encouragement, correction and resolve that we need to keep living for him. And that’s only the start, as we’ll see in part 2.

Questions for reflection

1. Have you grasped the fact that the church belongs to God? Is that reflected in the way you speak about church? Care about church? Treat your brothers and sisters?
2. If leadership is so important, what should we pray for leaders? How should we invest in future leaders?
3. Grace and peace are the twin marks of the local church, according to Paul. Why should the gospel produce these marks? How does that happen?