

Small Group Leaders Notes

2 Corinthians 1:1-7:4

Introduction to 2 Corinthians

What sort of place is Corinth?

1 Corinthians 1:18-2:5

Wisdom, Power, Wealth & Status are all very important

Roman Colony - Rich and Poor. Status and appearance would have been very important. Similarly wisdom and power were a big deal (1 Corinthians 1:18-2:5)

Many inhabitants of Corinth were prosperous, and “wealth and ostentatious display became the hallmark of Corinth.” Many other inhabitants were also impoverished. A writer from the second century explained why he did not go to Corinth: “I learned in a short time the nauseating behaviour of the rich and the misery of the poor.” Because the city was relatively new, its aristocracy was fluid. Since it was refounded largely as a freedman’s city, upward social mobility was more attainable than in other more established cities of the empire with their entrenched aristocracies. Socially ambitious Corinthians could seize the opportunity to advance themselves. As a result, there was an even greater preoccupation with the symbols of social status in this city. The citizens were obsessed with their status and their ascent up the ladder of honour. (Garland)

—> See something of how the rich treated the poor in 1 Corinthians 11:17-22

Famous for Immorality

Temple to Aphrodite - To Corinthianize was to live a promiscuous life with drunkenness and debauchery (1 Corinthians 5:1)

When is Paul writing?

2 Corinthians is Paul’s 4th letter to Corinth preparing the way for his 3rd visit.

1st Visit ‘Fruitful Visit’ - Acts 18 Paul founds the church and stays in Corinth for 18 months. 1st in Synagogue (v1-4) then next door (v5-11, v18). Once he leaves Apollos and Peter visit Corinth (1 Corinthians 1:12, Acts 19:1.)

Paul’s 1st letter “Previous Letter” (mentioned in 1 Corinthians 5:9) - He’s heard about serious sexual immorality in the church and in this 1st letter he tells them not to associate with the sexually immoral in the church.

Paul’s 2nd Letter “1 Corinthians” is in response to the Corinthians who have got in touch with Paul asking certain questions (see 1:11, 6:12, 7:1 etc.) Paul sends Timothy with this letter (4:17 and 16:10-12.)

Paul’s 2nd Visit “Painful Visit” - This isn’t mentioned in Acts. He mentions this in 2 Corinthians 2:1 and 13:2. It seems that when Timothy gets back to Paul he has bad news,

sexual immorality was still a problem and so Paul had gone to try and sort things out - it was a visit of warning. For whatever reason this had been a painful visit and so when the problem persisted Paul wrote his 3rd letter to them instead of visiting as he had initially said he would (that's what's going on in 2 Corinthians 1:15-2:4)...

Paul's 3rd Letter "Severe Letter" Mentioned in 2:3-4, 7:8-12. It was obviously a tough letter but it has had the desired consequence as it has brought genuine repentance and godly sorrow. Titus delivered this letter and that's why in 2 Corinthians 2:12-13 Paul was so desperate to find Titus and hear his news (see also 7:5-7).

Now around this time some "Jewish Super-Apostles" seemed to have arrived in Corinth (more about them later.) Paul writes his 4th letter "2 Corinthians" to address the problems that these newcomers are causing. He also writes to sort out the details of the collection for the Jerusalem church which seems to have stalled. He also writes to prepare the way to visit the Corinthians again (what will be his 3rd visit which is recorded in Acts 20:1-3.)

All this detail might be confusing but the important thing to see is how heavily invested Paul is in this church. In 2 Corinthians 11:28 Paul says "I face daily the pressure of my concern/anxiety for all the churches." In 12:14 he refers to himself as like a parent to them. He's invested a lot of time, energy and emotion in this church. If at times 2 Corinthians seems like quite an emotional and personal letter that's because Paul was so heavily invested in this church. He's like a jealous dad who has promised the Corinthians to their husband Christ (11:2-4) and so he's worried that they're turning away from Christ.

Why is he writing 2 Corinthians?

The "Super-Apostles"

What do we learn about them from chapter 11:1-23? (Groups)

11:3-4 - Preaching a different Jesus

11:5 - Eloquent trained speakers

11:12-15 - Trying to elevate themselves, false apostles, deceitful, servants of Satan.

11:18 - Boasting in the ways the world does.

11:20 - Enslave and exploit the Corinthians (probably financially, unlike Paul 11:7-11.

11:22-23 - Jewish

Corinth was hung up on wisdom, power, status and appearance and the "Super-Apostles" seem to have tapped into that. They seem to be saying that Paul is an inferior apostle because he's so weak and unimpressive. They pride themselves on what is seen 5:12-13 and they really just preach themselves 4:5. From chapters 11 and 12 they seem to boast in their spiritual experiences. They seem to have no place for weak ministry and poor Christians (some have suggested that the reason that the collection for the poor Christians has stalled in Corinth is because of the super-apostles.)

At the centre of this letter is the question of what is genuine Apostolic Christian

Ministry? What does it look like? What is it shaped by? How can you tell who is the real deal and who is a fake? Paul's desperately concerned that the Corinthians will walk away from Christ because of these "Super-Apostles" so he's writing to show them what true Christian ministry and the true Christian life is really like."

5:12-13 and 12:19 - Key verses!!! Take Pride in Paul and his genuine apostolic ministry so they can answer those who take pride in what is seen rather than what is in the heart.

There are 2 sides to 5:12 - he wants them to boast about Paul and his authentic gospel ministry (we'll see what that is in a bit) but that is not all. He wants them to boast in Paul **so that** they can answer the super-apostles and their followers who are all about what is seen.

So 2 good questions to ask as you read and prepare to study each passage of 2 Corinthians;

1. How does this passage encourage us to boast in Paul and his genuine apostolic ministry?
2. How does this passage help us to answer the critics of Paul?

As we read 2 Corinthians it could sound very defensive from Paul. It could sound like he is just trying to defend himself. 12:19 makes it clear that he's not just wanting to defend himself he also wants to build them up and strengthen them.

e.g. of How they train people to spot fakes - not by studying the fakes but by studying the genuine closely. As we read 2 Corinthians we'll see what genuine gospel ministry looks like and therefore also what the genuine Christian life looks like. This will help us to spot false gospel ministry and false expectations for the Christian life (of which there are many around today.)

What's the big message of 2 Corinthians?

Message of 1 Corinthians - The true message of Jesus is weak and foolish

Message of 2 Corinthians - True gospel ministry/gospel living is weak and foolish

To the super-apostles it is all about power, strength and wisdom. You can start to see how appealing this must have been to the Corinthians in Corinth with their city's culture. 1 & 2 Corinthians are closely linked around this theme.

We've seen that the super-apostles boast in their power and wisdom and elevate themselves - how does Paul counter this in his letter? **What does Paul tell us about genuine gospel ministry in the following passages? (Groups)**

1:3-11 - They're attacking Paul for his weakness and he starts with his weakness and suffering. He's not ashamed of his suffering and weakness. He shows that weakness and folly is at the heart of the gospel, ministry and the Christian life.

4:7-18 - Death in us so that there's life in you. He's weak so that God is glorified. He doesn't want people to look at him and think "Wow!" He wants the glory and focus to go to God - unlike super-apostles.

12:1-12 - He has had great experiences and visions and he has demonstrated among them the marks of the apostles (12:12) but he's also suffered greatly and been kept humble so that God's power may be seen through his weakness.

Time and again he brings it back to the weakness and poverty of Christ - 1:5, 8:9 & 10:1. In many ways **this is a letter that shows us what it looks like to take up our cross and follow Christ.**

There is suffering and pain now but glory later. At times we will look and feel weak and foolish (both individually and corporately) but glory awaits. It encourages us to expect weakness and brokenness now, whilst being confident of glory with Christ to come - **5:1-10...**

It encourages us not to despise these things but to see that through them God is glorified.

Similarly it encourages us not to despise the ordinary and mundane in the Christian life.

These things can seem weak and unimpressive, particularly if there's a church down the road that seems to be really strong and impressive. True Christian ministry and the normal Christian life aren't necessarily impressive and super-natural, they'll appear very ordinary and unimpressive but through our weakness God is glorified.

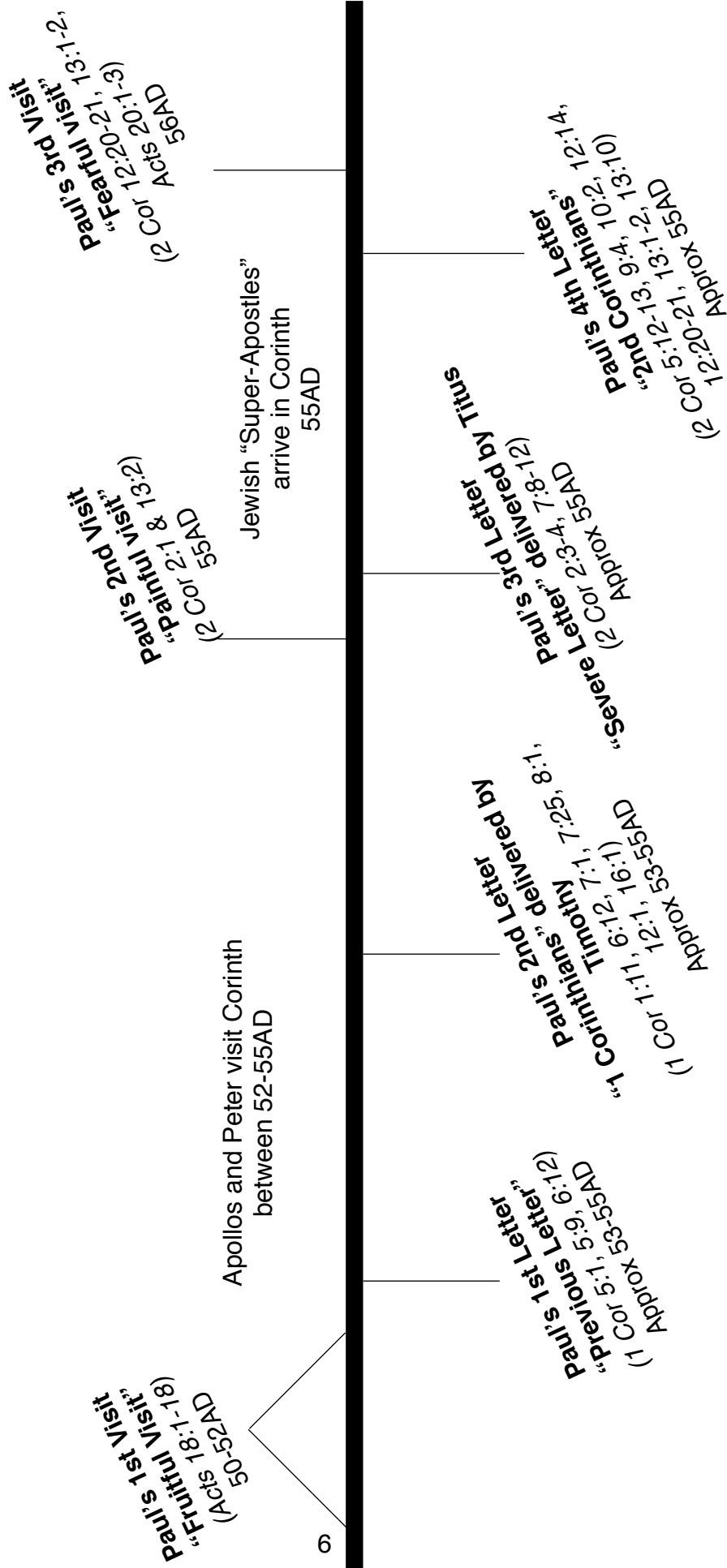
So why are we studying 2 Corinthians now?

Because in many ways we're a very ordinary, mundane church, in a very ordinary suburb of a very ordinary town. Many of us live very mundane, ordinary lives - we shouldn't despise this but rather studying 2 Corinthians will encourage us to seek to glorify God where we are and in what we are doing.

Because in many ways we are very weak, broken and unimpressive - both corporately and individually. There is a lot of weakness, brokenness, suffering and pain in our church family and when we see that it is only natural to ask whether this is how it's meant to be as the people of God? Especially when other churches both locally and online are all about success, flourishing, growth etc. Like the Corinthians we can find ourselves despising weakness. We constantly need to be reminded that following Jesus means suffering and weakness now but glory later. The way to glory is the way of the cross.

Because we need to be reminded of what genuine gospel ministry looks like. Not just so we can spot the fakes but also so that in our own ministries (whatever they might be) we can be those who embrace genuine gospel ministry. Remembering that gospel ministry isn't just the work of the staff and elders but it's all of us in our different ways as the body.

Paul and the Corinthians



Small Group Leaders Notes

2 Corinthians 1:1-11

Context

- **The 'Super-Apostles'** - Corinth was a place that valued wisdom and power. The Super-Apostles had tapped into this and were portraying Paul as an inferior apostle because we had suffered so much and seemed so weak. With this in mind you would expect Paul to play down his weaknesses and play up his strengths. Instead he starts the letter by drawing attention to his weakness and suffering so that God might be glorified.
- **Paul's aim in 2 Corinthians** - 5:1-13 and 12:19 are key to understanding Paul's aim in writing 2 Corinthians. He doesn't just want to defend himself, his primary goal is to strengthen the Corinthians and help them to answer the 'Super-Apostles' who pride themselves in their strength and wisdom and what is seen.

Structure

- **v1-2 - Greetings**
 - It is very tempting to skip over v1-2 as they seem so formulaic. They seem like the standard way Paul always starts his letters. Yet v1 contains two important reminders for the apostles.
 3. *Paul is an Apostle of Christ Jesus appointed by the will of God* - This isn't just any old Christian leader who is writing to them, this is an apostle appointed by God (unlike the super-apostles who are self-appointed.) As Kruse says *"Paul needed to emphasise this authority at the beginning of his letter because it had been called in question at Corinth."*
 4. *The Church at Corinth in the Church of God* - The Corinthians are God's and God's apostle is writing to them. As Paul will say in chapter 11 "I am jealous for you with a godly jealousy. I promised you to one husband, to Christ, so that I might present you as a pure virgin to him." Paul is like a spiritual father to them and Christ is the groom they've been promised to.
 - Barnett helpfully summarises these first two verses by saying;
"It may be observed that the substance of this letter is encapsulated within the first verse: 'the apostle ... to the church'. Here on the one hand is the church; here on the other is the apostle who now addresses it. The question is: Will the church at Corinth submit to the authority of the apostle Paul?"
- **v3-7 - God's Comfort in our Suffering**
 - "... the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles..." (v3-4)
 - God is the source of all compassion and comfort. He is the compassionate Father and the source of all true comfort. As Tripp says, "There would be no such thing as compassion on earthy if it were not for God." If our Heavenly Father is compassionate and comforting then this should also be the mark of his children. It is not only that God is the source of all comfort but he is also active in comforting us...
 - "... so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God..." (v4-6)

- Comfort is to be passed on - As we receive God's comfort it is not just for us. We receive God's comfort so that we will pass it on to others. We are not the end of the line, we are part of a chain of comfort, we are to pass it on. "God's comfort is not to terminate on the one who receives it" (Barnett.) We see this idea in v3 and also in v6 "If we are distressed, it is for your comfort and salvation; if we are comforted it is for your comfort..." This means that our suffering and receiving comfort are opportunities for ministry/service. God's comfort is designed to be poured into and then out of our lives. In a sense then we can say that our suffering is not really ours. It belongs to God because it is an instrument that he uses to bring comfort and even salvation to others.
- The goal of God's comfort is that his people will endure (v6) - God wants his people to grow in endurance and stamina. When troubles and sufferings come they are not only an opportunity to experience and pass on God's comfort, they are also opportunities to build up endurance.
- *"For us, the word "comfort" may connote emotional relief and a sense of well-being, physical ease, satisfaction, and freedom from pain and anxiety. Many in our culture worship at the cult of comfort in a self-centered search for ease, but it lasts for only a moment and never fully satisfies. Watson comments that the word "comfort" "has gone soft" in modern English... he 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 pains 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."* (Garland.)

- **v8-11 - Paul's Story of Suffering**

- In these verses Paul tells us of his recent experience of trouble while he was in Asia. This may be referring to the riots in Ephesus in Acts 19 but no one seems to be certain. Whatever the particular trouble was it was clearly beyond what Paul and his companions could endure (v8.)
- Paul and his companions felt that they couldn't take any more and yet God's purpose was clear - "But this happened so that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead." Though this experience had been a terrible it had brought Paul to a place where he had greater confidence in God and his power (see also v10.) Paul's reliance on God had increased. Through Paul's suffering, God was achieving his good purpose for Paul.
- As the Corinthians prayed for Paul there was a sense in which they were helping Paul "... though there is no suggestion that God is dependent upon human help or prayers." (Barnett.) The end result of all of this is that God is widely praised as people see Paul being clearly helped by God.

v3-7 can be summarised as;

God comforts us in our troubles...



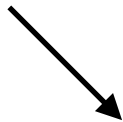
... So we will comfort other people in their troubles...



... So they will patiently endure

v8-11 can be summarised as;

Overwhelming troubles came...



... So that Paul would increasingly rely on God not himself...



... So that God would be praised

Tricky Bits

• **God's Sovereignty and Suffering**

- There is great potential that a bible study on this passage could become a philosophical debate about God and suffering. While there is nothing wrong with such a debate, these Bible studies are not the best place for them.
- When considering the issue of suffering we need to remember 3 key things that the Bible teaches;
 1. God is sovereign over everything... even suffering
 2. God is eternally good and loving
 3. God has a purpose for our suffering though this isn't always apparent to us
- The best thing we can do in this study is to focus on what this passage tells us about our suffering;
 - First it reminds us that we follow a suffering saviour (v5). We have a God who knows what it is to suffer, this is an amazing comfort as we suffer.
 - Second it shows us that God can use our suffering for our good and the good of others (v4, v6.)

- Thirdly, God's sovereignty means that he is also the source of all comfort (v3.) You can't say that God is sovereign over suffering without also saying that he is sovereign over and therefore responsible for all comfort too.
- Fourthly we see that God's purpose for us in our suffering is that we would rely less on ourselves and more on him. In that way we are being conformed into the likeness of the Lord Jesus.

- **Sharing in the Sufferings of Christ**

- As Christians we are united to Christ and we follow a suffering and crucified Christ. Jesus warned his disciples that they would suffer as he suffered and so we should not be surprised that as Christians we experience suffering.
- In talking of us sharing in the sufferings of Christ Paul is not saying that we share in the crucifixion. Rather he is speaking more generally of how Christ suffered and so Christ's people will suffer.
- This idea of sharing in Christ's suffering is important in the context of 2 Corinthians. The 'super-apostles' seem to have had no time for weakness and suffering. The following quote from Garland is long but worthwhile;

“Some Corinthians doubted that the reign of Christ could ever triumph through such a weak and perishable apostle whose life always seemed to be at risk. His mission seemed to be filled with nothing but mishap. Where was the evidence of God's power? For some who evaluated him from a worldly perspective, Paul's unending suffering cast doubt on his apostolic power, and the shame that some attached to this travail subverted his authority in the church. They may have thought that God would do a better job of watching over him if he were doing what God wanted. In response to such doubts, Paul asserts that he shares the same divinely ordained paradox that “constituted” the life and destiny of Jesus Christ: comfort from suffering, life from death, strength from weakness, and wisdom from foolishness (see 11:30; 12:5, 8–10; 13:2–9). His apostleship conforms to the death and resurrection of Christ (see Phil 3:10–11), not the expectations of worldly wisdom.”

Big Idea - Receive and share God's comfort with others so they will continue to rely on God.

Suggested Applications

- **Troubles come so that we'd rely on God not ourselves - so move towards God not away from God in tough times.**
 - When tough times come we instinctively look to ourselves for the resources to cope. Like Paul we need to realise that we don't have the resources to cope and instead look to God and commit ourselves to him.
 - When those in our group are struggling a key part of comforting them is to lovingly point them towards Christ, encouraging them that they can rely on him through this trial.

- **God has a purpose in suffering and troubles - so let's not just pray for healing.**
 - This might be controversial but I think that it is an important point. When someone is suffering or experiencing difficulty our immediate reaction is to pray for healing or a removal of this situation. That is not wrong but because God is sovereign and has a purpose in everything we should also pray that he would be achieving his purposes in this person's life. Let's pray that this difficulty would cause them to rely more on God and that through it they would be able to support and comfort others.
- **A great way to share God's comfort with people is to tell stories of God's comfort to us, as Paul does.**
 - Paul provides us with an example of how to share God's comfort with people. He tells the story of how God comforted him in a time of great difficulty and this is a great model for us. We might not feel particularly gifted at pastoral care but hopefully with a little bit of thought we can all tell the story of one time when God comforted us. When telling our stories we need to remember to be honest about our struggles (as Paul was in v8-9) so that people who are struggling can relate to us. Then we need to make sure that we make God the hero of the story (see how Paul does this in v10-11.) God might have used particular people to bring his comfort to us, but like Paul we should aim for God to get the praise (v11.)
- **Weakness and struggle are not things to be embarrassed about, they're a normal part of being a Christian.**
 - We can often be embarrassed about our suffering and struggles as if they are a sign that something has gone wrong. That seems to be how the Corinthians were thinking. Paul reminds us that we follow a crucified saviour and that God's power is revealed through our weakness. He also encourages us to see that our suffering provides us with the opportunity to grow closer to him and to serve others. When we start to think of our suffering and troubles as belonging to God rather than ourselves it begins to turn us out, away from ourselves, to focus on serving and comforting and encouraging others.

Suggested Bible Study

Suggested Starter Question - There were some people in Corinth who looked down on Paul because he had suffered so much and seemed so weak. How do we tend to view suffering and weakness? How do we react when they come into our lives?

The aim of this question is to provide a short introduction to the context of the letter and to help us start to think about suffering and weakness. As we go through the passage we will see that Paul is not embarrassed about his suffering instead he sees God's sovereignty and comfort and the ways in which his suffering are actually opportunities to serve and encourage other people. This may well be very different to our natural reaction.

Digging into v1-7

1. What do these verses tell us about;

- 1. God the Father**
- 2. Jesus Christ**

The big things that we see are that God the Father is the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort. See the notes above for what this means.

We also see that Jesus is the one who suffered and so as his followers we share in his suffering.

2. Why does God comfort us in times of trouble? (What's his purpose - v4, v6.)

This is really important! God doesn't just comfort us for our sake. He comforts us so that we will then comfort others! God's comfort isn't meant to terminate with us.

Applying v 1-7

3. How do these verses encourage us when we're suffering?

They help us to see that God is not distant in our suffering. He's the God of all comfort and in Christ he knows what it is to suffer, this is a great comfort. It also shows us that God has a purpose in our suffering. It is not random and pointless, instead it's an opportunity to serve.

4. How do they challenge our attitude to suffering and tough times?

I think the big challenge here is to see that suffering and hardship actually provide us with an opportunity to serve and comfort others. So often when we suffer we turn in on ourselves and just focus on ourselves and what we're going through. These verses encourage us to get our heads up and look around for others who we can comfort with the comfort we have received from God. In a sense these verses should challenge our self-centred approach to suffering and comfort. God's comfort isn't just for me to receive, it's also for me to share.

Digging into v8-11

5. We're not told exactly what happened to Paul and his friends, but how does Paul describe their experience? (v8-9)

Whatever happened to them it was clearly very difficult and stressful. They were under great pressure, they despaired of life itself and crucially they felt unable to cope. Don't get too bogged down in speculating about exactly what they were going through. If it were important then Paul would have told us.

6. What was God's purpose for Paul through this time of trouble? (v9-10)

Paul clearly tells us that this came so that they would not rely on themselves but instead rely on God. You might want to explore what it looks like to rely on ourselves in tough times and what it would look like to rely on God instead?

Applying v8-11

7. Think about God's purposes in Paul's troubles (v4, v6, v9-10). When someone is going through a tough time how do you think we should pray? (Should we just pray for God to end their troubles?)

As I said in the application section above this might be a controversial line of application to pursue but I do think that it's important none the less. So often we just pray for people to get better without stopping to think why our Sovereign God has brought this into their lives. At the very least we could pray that through this experience they would rely more on God and less on themselves. Similarly we could pray that this would provide them with an opportunity to minister and share God's comfort with others.

8. Paul shows us that a great way to share God's comfort with others is by telling stories of how God has comforted us. Give opportunity for people to share stories of how God has comforted them in tough times.

See the application section for a bit of guidance on how to share such stories. You might like to do this as one big group or you might like to split into pairs.

After this study it would clearly be great to spend time praying. Give thanks for the way that God has comforted people in the group in the past. Pray also for those who are going through tough times at the moment, remembering what we discussed in question 7.

Small Group Leaders Notes

2 Corinthians 1:12-2:4

Context

- **Paul's Visits and Letters** - This passage can be quite confusing if we are not clear on the background to 2 Corinthians. In 1 Corinthians 16:5-7 Paul had told the Corinthians that "After I go through Macedonia, I will come to you... if the Lord permits." As things turned out he made an unscheduled visit to Corinth beforehand to deal with a pastoral situation (2 Corinthians 2:1.) This was a painful visit both for Paul and the Corinthians. As a result of this visit he changed his plans (See 2 Corinthians 1:15-16, and 1:23) because he was worried that another visit would only cause more pain (2:1.) Instead of visiting them he wrote a 'severe' letter (this is the letter that he refers to in 2:3-4). The Paul and the Corinthians timeline that we looked at in our Pit Stop session should hopefully help.
- **The Corinthians' accusations against Paul** - From the way that Paul speaks in 1:12 and 1:17 it seems that some in Corinth were accusing Paul of being fickle and worldly in the way that he had changed his itinerary. They seem to be questioning his integrity and his sincerity. These accusations may have been stirred up by the super-apostles who were questioning Paul's authenticity as an apostle.
- **1:1** - In the opening verse of the letter Paul reminded the Corinthians of who he was and who they were. He was an Apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God and they were the Church of God. He was reminding them that he was appointed as an apostle by God and that they were the church of God. This connection between Paul and God and the Corinthians and God is a theme that runs through our passage (see 1:18-23.)

Structure

In his defence against the Corinthians' accusations Paul calls two witnesses - his conscience (1:12) and God (1:23.) These two witnesses help us to divide the passage into two parts; 1:12-22 and 1:23-2:4.

- **1:12-22 - As God's Apostle Paul is Faithful not Fickle**
 - **Paul's Faithfulness - v12-17**
 - *The Charge Against Paul* - In v12 Paul says that he doesn't rely on "worldly wisdom" and then in v17 he speaks of making plans in a "worldly manner." Here is the Corinthians accusation against Paul; he's not a real apostle of God, he's worldly.
 - *Paul's Boast* - Paul boasts in his integrity. He has conducted himself with God's wisdom and godly sincerity (v12.) He has written to them so that they too can boast in Paul and his integrity (v13-14.) He asserts that his motivation has always been to benefit the Corinthians (v16) and so he is adamant that he has been faithful not fickle (v17.)
 - **Paul's Faithfulness is rooted in God's Faithfulness - v18-22**
 - **God's Faithfulness in his Word to the Corinthians - v18-20**
 - At first v16 might seem like diversionary tactics from Paul but they are key to his argument that he is faithful. Paul's message in a nutshell is "Just as God is faithful so his apostle is faithful."

- When Paul said “yes” he didn’t mean “no”, he wasn’t lying to the Corinthians when he said that he planned to come to them. He changed his plans for good reason but he did not lie to them.
- In v18 Paul’s personal message to them (about his visit) is subsumed within his preaching message to them. Paul faithfully preached to them a message of a faithful God who has faithfully kept all his promises in Christ. Why would the Corinthians now doubt the faithfulness of Paul?
- “God’s faithfulness is to be seen (1) in the Son of God preached in Corinth as God’s unambiguous, unretracted, and now-eternal “Yes,” and (2) in the fact of all the promises of God having been kept in the Son of God, as proclaimed by the apostles. Likewise “faithful” is the “word [message]” of Paul, the minister of the God who speaks unambiguously (cf. 1:13) and who keeps his promises.” (Barnett.)
- **God’s Faithfulness in his Purposes for the Corinthians - v21-22**
 - God is at work in Paul and the Corinthians in the present (v21.) He has already anointed them by putting the Spirit into their hearts (v22.) This past action of God guarantees his future plans for them as it “guarantees what is to come.” Therefore they can trust God’s faithfulness to finish the work that he has begun in them.
 - In all this the big point is that God is faithful and so the Corinthians can trust the faithfulness of Paul as God’s apostle.
- **1:23-2:4 - As God’s Apostle Paul is Motivated by Love for the Corinthians**
 - *Paul’s Goal in Writing instead of Visiting* - Paul did not visit them as he had originally planned (1:23 and 2:1). Instead he wrote a letter to them (2:3, 2:4.) He wrote to them so that when he did finally visit them they would share in his joy rather than his grief.
 - *Paul’s Motivation for Writing instead of Visiting* - The Corinthians suspect that Paul wrote his letter to grieve them (2:4) but Paul assures them that his motivation in writing was not to grieve them to but show them how much he loved them (2:4.) Indeed his very reason for not visiting was to spare them grief (1:23, 2:2.) Again as God’s apostle Paul was motivated by love for them reflecting the God whom he serves.

Tricky Bits

- **The Background Detail** - There is lots of background detail in this passage and it can get quite confusing. We need to remain clear on the criticism of Paul that he is fickle and worldly and Paul’s response that as an Apostle of God he is faithful and loving. When all the details get a bit overwhelming stop and ask yourself “What is the big thing that Paul wants the Corinthians to understand from this section?” 1:18 seems to be a good summary of what Paul is trying to get across.
- **Paul’s ‘digression’ in 1:18-22** - It can feel like Paul throws in a bit of meaty theology to distract the Corinthians and us from the accusations being levelled against him. There are two dangers with this sub-section. First we might struggle to see how it relates to Paul’s defence and therefore ignore it. Secondly we might read v18-22 in isolation and just delight in the theology of these verses without reading them in the context of this section. Again 1:18 and 1:19 are key. Notice the linking word ‘for’ at the start of v19. Paul is arguing that he is faithful as God is faithful. The faithfulness of God that Paul unpacks in v19-22 is the foundation of Paul’s faithfulness as an apostle.

Big Idea - As God's Apostle, Paul is faithful and loving like the God he serves.

Suggested Applications

- **Our relationship with God's Apostle and God's Word**
 - The primary message of this passage is that God's apostle and God's message is faithful therefore it raises questions of our attitudes to God's word and the apostle Paul.
 - It therefore raises questions such as, "What is my attitude to God's word?" Do I see it as something that is full of contradictions? When I do find parts of the Bible that seem to be contradictory how should I understand them in light of God's faithfulness?
 - Similarly "What is my attitude to Paul?" Many Christians today see Paul as harsh and unloving or as someone who contradicts himself. What is my attitude to him? Like the Corinthians we need to recognise that Paul is an apostle of God therefore as Paul Clarke has written, "Any distance that exists between me and the apostle, exists between me and God."
 - Again, many people today will draw a distinction between the loving words of Jesus and the harsh words of Paul. Yet Paul is a faithful apostle of a faithful God, therefore we should not try to separate what God says through Jesus and what God says through Paul.
- **Our relationship with our Leaders**
 - This passage raises questions of how we view our church leaders. Am I the sort of person who is quick to criticise them? Am I gracious in giving them the benefit of the doubt or do I judge them harshly? What values do I look for in church leaders?
- **Our relationship with those we lead**
 - For those of us involved in any sort of church leadership or ministry (whether that is paid or voluntary) we need to ask ourselves whether we would describe ourselves as faithful or fickle? Can we say that the decisions that we make are always motivated by love? This is a passage which stresses how leaders in God's church should be those of integrity, this should lead to much honest and humble repenting for those times when we have not acted with such integrity.

Suggested Bible Study

Starter Question - What sort of things do you look for in a leader?

This whole passage is about Paul's integrity as a Christian leader. With this in mind it would be good to start by discussing leadership and the qualities that we look for in a leader. Be careful that the conversation doesn't turn negative. Let's not be like the Corinthians and be quick to moan about our leaders.

Digging into the Passage

1. What had Paul intended to do? (v15-16)

He'd intended to visit them twice as he went to and from Macedonia. I wouldn't worry about giving people too much detail, just make sure they see what he had said he would do.

2. What did he end up doing instead? (1:23-2:4)

Instead of visiting Corinth he had written to them. Again I wouldn't worry about giving people too much detail from outside the passage.

3. How do you think the Corinthians had reacted to this change of plan? (1:12, 1:17, 1:24)

From the way that Paul writes it seems that some were questioning his integrity (v12), and were accusing him of being fickle and worldly in the way that he made his decisions (v17). There also seems to be a suggestion that they thought that Paul was lording it over them by changing his plans at will (v24.) Try and help the group to understand how the Corinthians would have felt.

4. How does Paul answer the charge that he's fickle? (v18-22)

This is the key bit of the study but also the trickiest bit. The big thing to see is in v18-19. Paul argues that he has been faithful in what he said to the Corinthians just as the God whom he preached to them is faithful. Paul's faithfulness and integrity is rooted in the faithfulness and integrity of God which he has shown to Paul and the Corinthians. You may want to pause at this point and dwell on the wonderful truth of God's faithfulness that Paul expounds in these verses and what it means for us.

- Why should the Corinthians have confidence in Paul's integrity?

Here's an alternative way of asking Q4. It might be worth using if the group is struggling. It helps us to see that underpinning Paul's integrity is God's integrity.

5. What was Paul's reason for changing his plan?

- Why didn't he visit?

- Why did he write instead?

Here we see that Paul's motivation for what he has done was love for the Corinthians. He wanted to spare them from further pain and grief and instead acted in order to show them just how much he loved them. With this in mind imagine how Paul must have felt when he heard that the Corinthians were questioning his integrity?

Applying the Passage

- 6. For those of us involved in any sort of Christian Leadership whether at home or church - Why is our integrity so important? Could we say with Paul that our consciences testify to our integrity?**

Integrity is vital for Christian leaders whether that is parents, pastors, or Sunday school leaders because we're leading as God's representatives. We might not be apostles but how we lead will affect people's view of God. As we delight in the faithfulness and integrity of God towards us we are to express this in our conduct with others.

All of us can think of times when we have not acted with the integrity that we should have. Instead of just sweeping it under the carpet let's spend time confessing and repenting in full assurance that God is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins as we confess them to him.

- 7. Many people in the church today are critical of Paul for being harsh and unloving. How would you answer such people from this passage? Who are we really criticising if we criticise Paul?**

Paul is God's apostle therefore to criticise Paul of changing his mind or being unloving is to criticise God himself. You often hear people say that they like Jesus but not Paul. This passage shows us that you can't play God and Paul off against each other.

- 8. The Corinthians were quick to criticise Paul when he didn't meet their expectations? How do we respond when our leaders don't meet our expectations? How should we respond?**

Again we don't want to let our study turn into a moan about leaders who have disappointed us. Undoubtedly some of us will have been hurt by leaders in the past. It would be a great idea to spend time praying for leaders and maybe particular situations, let's pray that our leaders would always be motivated by love for the people God has entrusted to them and let's pray that they would always speak and act with an integrity that honours God.

Small Group Leaders Notes

2 Corinthians 2:5-3:6

This is quite a big passage with a number of different themes and so you may decide that you want to split the passage in half and study it over two weeks. If you are going to do this then I would suggest dividing the passage into 2:5-13 and 2:14-3:6.

Context

This is one of the passages in 2 Corinthians where a good amount of background detail can help to make sense of the passage.

- **Paul's love for the Corinthians** - In our previous passage Paul told us that he decided to write to the Corinthians instead of visiting them because of his love and concern for them (1:23-2:4.) This theme of love and concern for the Corinthians continues in Paul's desire to see them forgive their repentant man so that they will be united (2:5-11) and in his leaving a great gospel opportunity in Troas so as to find Titus who had news of the Corinthians (2:12-13.) Throughout 1:3-2:13 Paul wants to show the Corinthians that he is constantly motivated by love for them rather than lording it over them (re-read 1:3-11 and 1:12-14 and 1:23-24 to see how this theme keeps reoccurring.)
- **Paul's previous letter to the Corinthians** - This letter is not 1 Corinthians, it's another letter that has been lost to us. Paul tells us that he wrote the letter instead of visiting them (2:1-4.) He tells that he wrote out of great distress for them (2:3-4), he wanted them to know how much he loved them (2:4.) Although we don't know exactly what Paul said in the letter it seems that he wrote urging the Corinthians to punish a man who was unrepentant in a particular sin (2:5-6.) Although the letter was painful and obviously said some tough things (7:8) it seems that the Corinthians did what Paul had said (2:6, 2:9, 7:9-13.)
- **Titus** - It seems that Titus had delivered the painful letter to the Corinthians. This would explain why Paul is so desperate to find Titus so that he can hear from Titus how the Corinthians have responded to his letter (2:12-13, 7:5-7 and 7:13-16.) This helps us to understand why Paul would walk away from an open goal opportunity to preach the gospel in Troas. It also reinforces how concerned Paul was for the Corinthians.
- **The man who had caused grief** - There is much debate about who this man is and what he had done. He clearly had grieved Paul and the rest of the Corinthian church (2:5 and 7:12.) Some commentators suggest that this man is the man mentioned in 1 Corinthians who was sleeping with his step-mother (1 Corinthians 5:1-2.) Commentators such as Barnett suggest that the Corinthians had not initially put this man out of fellowship as Paul had told them to in 1 Corinthians. They suggest that even when Paul visited Corinth again (2:1) the matter was not resolved and that this was why the visit was so painful for Paul. It is only when Paul wrote the letter delivered by Titus that the Corinthians finally seemed to have obeyed Paul and punished the man appropriately. The good news is that the man seem to have repented (1:6-7) and so now he is to be forgiven and comforted (2:7-8.) If he was in some way put out of the fellowship then he is now to be readmitted into full membership. Don't worry about the precise background details too much. Focus on what we know - someone had caused grief (2:5), he had been suitably punished (2:6), he'd responded appropriately to this

punishment and so now was to be forgiven and accepted so that unity might be restored (2:8-11.)

- **‘Super-Apostles’ and the New Covenant** - This is the first passage where Paul begins to mention those who are opposing him (2:17, 3:1.) He will go on to say more about them in later chapters (see the Introduction to 2 Corinthians for more details.) Throughout the letter Paul is keen to show that he is a genuine apostle and gospel minister as opposed to these ‘Super-apostles.’ In chapters 3-7 that involves placing a big emphasis on the New Covenant and New Covenant Ministry as opposed to the Old Covenant. This theme begins to emerge in 3:4-6 and will be developed further in our next passage.
- **Romans Triumphs in the Ancient World** - In 2:14-16 Paul takes an image from the Roman world that the Corinthians would have been familiar with and he gives it a Christian twist. When Roman military leaders had won a great victory they were granted a triumphal procession on their return to Rome. The great victorious leader would be at the front and following on behind would be some of the people he had defeated who were now his captive slaves. It may be that the ‘Super-Apostles’ were portraying themselves as triumphant victors who were sweeping all before them. Paul turns this on its head and says that Christ is the triumphant victor and that Paul and his companions are just like the captors. As part of the Roman victory processions incense would be burnt along the route to make the experience one that involved smell as well as sight and hearing. Paul takes this aspect of the processions and applies it to his job as a gospel minister who is the fragrance of Christ. To some that smell will be the pleasing smell of life, to others it will be the stench of death.

Structure and Notes

2:5-11 - Paul’s Concern that the Corinthians Forgive the Repentant Man

- *“He has grieved all of you...”* - Although Paul clearly had been hurt by the whole situation (2:4) yet he is more concerned about the grief that has been caused to the Corinthians (2:5.) Throughout the letter we see how Paul is more concerned about the Corinthians than himself. Here is a key mark of a true gospel minister.
- *“You ought to forgive...”* - This is the big message in these verses. Notice how many times the word or the idea of forgiveness are used in v7-11. Now that the many has repented Paul is desperate that loving unity be restored so that Satan might not bring division in the church (see Ephesians 5:26-27.) Again we see Paul’s loving concern for the Corinthians coming through as he emphasises that he has forgiven so that Paul’s unity with the Corinthians might not be harmed. (See Tricky Bits below for what it means for Paul to forgive in the sight of Christ.)

2:14-3:6 - The Marks of True Gospel Ministry

- *Paul’s Smell* - As servants of the gospel Christians are smelly... in the sense that we are the aroma of Christ in the world (2:14-16). As we go out in the name of Christ and proclaiming the gospel of Christ will we receive two different reactions. Some people will love the smell of Christ on us because through Christ they can have life. Yet for others we will be the smell of death. Here is a reminder to us that Jesus and the gospel divide people. As we hear the gospel we are either attracted or repelled so we really shouldn’t be surprised when the gospel provokes strong responses, both

positive and negative. In light of this it is no wonder that Paul asks the rhetorical question “Who is equal to such a task?”

- *Paul's Sincerity* - Paul contrasts himself with his opponents by emphasizing his godly sincerity (2:17). Whereas they peddle the gospel for money in a deceptive way, Paul speaks before God with sincerity knowing that he is sent from God. This theme of being sent from God is an important theme in 2 Corinthians as seen by Paul's introduction of himself in 1:1.
- *Paul's Commendation* - Again Paul contrasts himself with his opponents (3:1-3.) It seems that the 'Super-Apostles' came to the Corinthians with impressive letters of recommendation (the equivalent of a CV or the kind of glowing reviews you get on the back of a book.) This may have fitted with Corinthians culture where speakers were expected to come with commendation. Paul's letter of commendation is the Corinthians themselves. The very fact that there is a church at Corinth is Paul's letter of commendation as a genuine gospel minister. Paul's letter wasn't written by people, it was written by Christ. Paul's letter wasn't written with ink but with the Spirit who had brought repentance, faith and new life in the Corinthians. Finally Paul's letter isn't written on stone or parchment but on Paul's own heart. As Garland says;

“Paul carries around in his heart the memory of their response to his preaching. This metaphor expresses his love for the community while providing unequivocal proof of his legitimacy at the same time. Paul appeals to the results of his preaching in Corinth. God alone can provide the validation of his ministry. Indeed, God wrote a letter for him in the sense that God's power, through the Spirit, founded the church when they responded to Paul's preaching of the gospel (see 1 Cor 3:6). He does have a letter, so to speak, in the Corinthians themselves; their very existence is divine testimony to power of his apostleship... They cannot question the legitimacy of his ministry without simultaneously questioning the legitimacy of their own origins as a community”

- *Paul's Competence* - Paul has already raised the question of who is competent for such a task of proclaiming the gospel (2:17). Now he tells us that he is only competent for such a task because God makes him competent (3:4-6.) Perhaps his opponents acted as if they were competent in themselves. Paul wants the Corinthians to be clear that he is only competent because God makes him competent. We will come to application in a moment but for now it is worth reflecting on this glorious truth - God makes us competent for the ministry he has for us. We should rightly feel inadequate and incompetent to do anything for God on our own.... Yet God makes us competent by the Spirit for what he wants us to do. Just because we feel inadequate for a particular ministry doesn't mean that God doesn't want us to be involved in that ministry. It's right that we feel our incompetence so that we rely fully on God to make us competent.

Tricky Bits

- ***What was the punishment the church inflicted?***

We are not told exactly what form the punishment took but it would seem likely that it involved some sort of denial of fellowship (for passages related to church discipline see Matthew 18:15-17, 1 Corinthians 5:1-5.) What we do know is that it was carried out by the majority of the church and it was sufficient. Paul might have been concerned that those in the church who had been particularly grieved by this man would have continued or intensified the punishment even though the man seems now to have repented. Paul's desire is that unity be restored now that the man has repented. Paul isn't arguing for unity at all cost, remember he was the one who urged them to discipline the man in the first place. Paul has been clear that discipline needed to be carried out, but now that it has worked and the man is repentant he is keen for loving unity to be established again.

- ***How can Paul forgive in the sight of Christ?***

Paul is highlighting the solidarity and unity between himself and the Corinthians which has been threatened by this whole episode. He's emphasising that they are united in forgiveness. Paul seems to consider himself to be spiritually present in the discipline procedure even though he is physically absent (see 1 Corinthians 5:1-5.) Paul also seems to want to stress unity not only between him and the Corinthians but between him and Christ. Again he will repeatedly emphasise that he is Christ's apostle and so there's no division between Paul and Christ on this matter.

Big Ideas - Paul's genuine apostolic ministry is seen in his deep concern for the Corinthians, his sincerity before God, his commendation from God and his complete reliance on God.

Suggested Applications

- **There is a right place for church discipline** - The issue of church discipline is largely ignored by churches today. The thought of church members coming together to discipline an individual who is unrepentant of sin does not sit easily with us. We are rightly wary of examples where this has been taken too far and yet the Bible insists that there is a right place for discipline. If you are going to split the passage and study it over two weeks then you may want to explore this area in more depth by considering some of the other Bible passages where the issue is raised (see earlier in the notes.) In all this we need to note Paul's desire both for genuine repentance and for subsequent reconciliation. This is not about revenge.
- **Genuine gospel ministry is marked not by an impressive CV but by loving concern, reliance on God and a fruitful response** - Remember that throughout 2 Corinthians Paul is showing us what genuine gospel ministry looks like. In this passage we've seen Paul's deep concern for the Corinthians, his utter dependence on God and his commendation from God which is seen in the way the Corinthians responded to the gospel when Paul preached to them. Here are the things that we should use to evaluate real gospel ministry.
- **We shouldn't expect any gospel ministry to be easy** - Paul really doesn't glamourise gospel ministry in this passage. It can involve deep concern and unpleasant discipline (2:5-11), it can involve anxiety (2:12-13), it means being a captive of Christ (2:14) who is often going to receive negative reactions (2:16) and it is a task that we are

inadequate for on our own! We won't have Paul's unique apostolic ministry, but whatever gospel service we are involved in will often involve struggles and difficulties. There will be great joys when people come to faith and life but there will also be tough times.

Suggested Bible Study Questions

Suggested Starter Questions;

A. When someone mentions 'Church Discipline' what comes to your mind?

If you are going to split the passage in half then this question might help you to launch your study of 2:5-13 as it raises the thorny issue of church discipline. You might want to explore the emotions and motivations that tend to be associated with church discipline as this will set up Paul's great concern for the Corinthians to be united in love.

B. Have you ever been faced with a task that you felt completely inadequate for?

This question can be used to launch a study into 2:14-3:6 as it picks up the theme of competence and adequacy that Paul repeatedly refers to in the passage. At this point people could talk about Christian service or they could talk more broadly about situations where they felt inadequate.

2:5-13

1. What had Paul urged the church to do?

He seems to have urged the whole church to punish this man who has grieved them. Try not to spend too long debating exactly what he had done or what the punishment was.

2. What was Paul now urging the church to do?

Paul is now urging the church to forgive and restore - see how many times he emphasises this in these verses. You want to be clear that Paul is not contradicting himself. The aim of the punishment was to bring the man to repentance and now that he has repented Paul wants the church to restore loving unity.

3. What was Paul's big concern?

Paul wants the church to be united in love so that Satan does not have a foothold to divide the church.

4. How does 7:5-13 help us understand why Paul left Troas to find Titus?

Help the group to see that Titus is the one who is going to bring Paul news of how the Corinthians have responded to his previous letter. Paul therefore leaves the open goal for gospel ministry in Troas because he is so concerned to hear how the Corinthians responded.

5. Some people in Corinth thought Paul didn't care about them. What is your overall impression of Paul from these verses?

The complete opposite is true. From first to last Paul has been deeply concerned for the Corinthians. If you have the time you might want to review some or all of the different ways he has displayed his concern for them so far in the letter.

2:14-3:6

6. What different reactions did Paul and the gospel receive in v14-16?

The gospel divides people. To some it's life and to others its death. The gospel has always divided people and it always will. We shouldn't be surprised when we see it divide people today.

1. Why was Paul not surprised by these different reactions?

Because he knew that he was simply a humble captive of Christ and he understood the gospel. He understands both the beauty and offence of the gospel. Perhaps if we've been Christians a long time we might lose sight of how offensive the gospel really is.

2. How do these verses encourage and prepare us for serving Jesus?

They encourage us because as we proclaim the gospel there are those who will receive it gladly because it brings them life. At the same time it warns us that some people will not receive the gospel and may even be hostile because they find the gospel so offensive.

7. In 2:17-3:6 Paul begins to contrast himself with his opponents. How is Paul different to these people?

Firstly he doesn't peddle the gospel for profit because he speaks as one sent by God. Second he doesn't need human letters of recommendation. His letter of recommendation is the Corinthians and the dramatic transformation and fruit that the Spirit and the gospel brought about in them. The fact that the Corinthian church exists authenticates Paul's claim to be a genuine gospel minister.

1. How do these verses help us to identify and evaluate real gospel ministers?

They encourage us to look for the fruit of changed lives brought about by the gospel. Just because someone has an impressive CV or because lots of other people say nice things about them doesn't mean they are necessarily a genuine gospel minister.

8. Paul asks the question 'Who is equal to such a task?' How would you answer that question from 3:4-6?

On our own none of us are sufficient for such a task, but what is impossible for us is possible for God. It is God who makes us competent to serve him in whatever ways he wants us to serve.

1. Many Christians feel inadequate for the different ministries God has given them to do. In what ways are they right to feel like this?

On the one hand that is a right and godly feeling - we are not adequate for any ministry no matter how big or small it might be...

2. What do we need to remember when we feel inadequate to serve God?

God is the one who makes us adequate for the task. We shouldn't hide behind our feelings of inadequacy. Instead we should look to God to equip us for ministry. Our sufficiency for gospel ministry does not come from ourselves and our natural abilities but from God and his gospel. With this in mind we should not be scared of serving in new ministries. It will quickly become apparent to us and to others where God is equipping us for this ministry.

Small Group Leaders Notes

2 Corinthians 3:7-18

Context

- **2:14-7:4 - Genuine Gospel Ministry** - This is the central section of the letter and contains many of Paul's key themes. In this section Paul lays the contrast between himself and those who peddle the word of God for profit (2:17.) Central to this section is the apparent weakness of Paul's genuine gospel ministry (4:7-12, 5:1-5, 6:3-10) and the power and glory of God that is displayed through this weakness.
- **3:4-6 - The Ministry of the Spirit** - Chapter 3 is one of those passages where the paragraph divisions and headings can be misleading. The NIV starts a new paragraph with a new heading between v6 and v7 when in fact the themes and ideas that Paul introduced in 3:4-7 are continued in 3:7-18. In 3:6 Paul introduced the themes of the New Covenant and the Spirit who gives life and he will now develop these themes in 3:7-18 (see v7-11 and v16-18 in particular.) In light of this it would seem that the "peddlers of the word of God" who Paul was contrasting himself with in 2:17-3:6 are still Paul's target in 3:7-18. It would seem that these Jewish 'Super-Apostles' were bringing an Old Covenant ministry based on Moses and the law to Corinth. Paul wants to show how necessary the ministry of the New Covenant is and how it is far more glorious despite appearances.
- **4:1 - "... Therefore... we do not lose heart"** - Again we need to remember that the chapter divisions were not original to Paul, they have been added in later by an editor. When we see how chapter 4 begins we see that 4:1-2 are the application of 3:7-18. When preparing to teach a passage I always write or type out the passage myself without any of the chapters divides, verse numbers or paragraph breaks. This helps me to see the text as the original author wrote it and makes it easier to spot continuing themes and applications.
- **Exodus 34:29-35** - The story of Moses coming down the mountain with the two stone tablets having spoken with the Lord is the key image that Paul uses and develops in this passage. With this in mind it will be well worth you spending some time reading Exodus 34 and familiarising yourself with that passage as you prepare to study 2 Corinthians 3. It would probably be worth while reading at least part of Exodus 34 with your group during the study as we shouldn't assume that everyone is familiar with the story from Exodus.

Structure and Notes

- **3:7-11 - The New Covenant Ministry of the Spirit is more glorious than the Old Covenant Ministry of the Law**
 - **Glory** - The word glory is the key word in v7-11. Stop and count how many times the word occurs in these verses in one form or another (notice it comes again twice in v18.) Crucial to understand these verses is to help the group spot just how often the word glory is used as Paul contrasts the glory of the Old Covenant with the even greater glory of the New Covenant.
- **The Glory of the Old Covenant** - Paul is not down on the Old Covenant. Moses coming down the mountain with his radiant face holding the stone tablets was

glorious! Paul’s argument in these verses is that the Old Covenant is “deglorified because it is outshone by the new just as the low wattage light is outshone and superseded by the midday sun. Thus, Paul secures the “glory” of the old while insisting that the new has overtaken it, rendering it—in effect obsolescent.” (Barnett.) To help our groups see the point that Paul is making in these verses we need to first help them to see that the Old Covenant really was glorious. Paul isn’t saying “The Old Covenant wasn’t glorious but now the New Covenant is glorious.” Instead he’s saying, “The Old Covenant was glorious but now the New Covenant is EVEN MORE glorious.”

- **The Greater Glory of the New Covenant** - In v7-11 Paul sets up three rhetorical contrasts between the Old Covenant and the New Covenant so that we will appreciate that, in spite of appearances, New Covenant Gospel ministry is even more glorious than Moses’ Old Covenant ministry. Notice how he does this three times in v7-8, v9-10 and v11. Notice the repeated used of “if” and “how much more” in these verses (“If the Old Testament was glorious... how much more glorious is the New Covenant?”) The contrasts between the Old Covenant and the New Covenant in this passage can be summarised as;

Old Covenant	New Covenant
... Brings Death by the Law (v7)	Brings Life by the Spirit (v6, v8)
... Brings Condemnation (v9)	... Brings Righteousness (v9)
... Is Transitory (v11)	... Lasts (v11)
Was Glorious (v7, v9, v11)	Is Even More Glorious (v8, v9, v11)

Here’s a helpful summary from Garland;

“Paul’s point: if glory accompanied something that leads to death (see 1 Cor 10:1–12), how much more glory will accompany the ministry of the Spirit that leads to life (3:8). The glory of God revealed in the face of Christ that shines in our hearts (4:6) is far greater. It will never be abolished, and looking at it does not lead to death but allows believers to begin the transformation into that perfect glory (3:18).”

- **3:12-18 - The New Covenant Ministry of the Spirit brings glorious freedom, life and transformation**
 - **Boldness** - It is always good to look out for how Paul applies the truth he is expounding to himself. Notice therefore how v12 is Paul’s application of v7-11 for his ministry. In effect he is saying “Our New Covenant Ministry is even more glorious than Moses’ Old Covenant Ministry... THEREFORE... we are very bold.” The word bold has the sense of “openness”. This idea of openness contrasts with the veiled approach of Moses (“...We are not like Moses, who would put a veil over his face...”) Paul’s boldness does not come from who he is but rather comes from the glorious New Covenant ministry that God has entrusted to him. Paul knows that he is a fragile jar of clay (4:7) but he also knows that what God has entrusted to him is treasure and so he is bold/open.

- **Veil** - If the key word in 3:7-11 was 'glory', then the key word in 3:12-18 is veil. Look at how many times Paul uses the word or the idea in these verses? Notice too how he uses it in slightly different ways (contrast v12 and v15-16.) Paul takes the detail of Moses putting a veil over his face in Exodus 34 and he skilfully uses this detail as an image to explain both the blindness of Israel (v14-15) and how this blindness/veil can be removed (v16) and what happens when it is removed (v18.) The glory of God was literally veiled in Exodus 34 but is now figuratively veiled from them due to the dullness/hardness of their hearts.
- **Christ** - Crucially it is only in Christ that the veil is removed. In many ways Paul could be speaking autobiographically here. Looking back he can see that he was blinded. Though he like all Jews sat week after week in the Synagogue hearing the Old Testament (law of Moses) being read he was blind to see the glory in the Old Covenant that pointed to Christ. Paul's point is that because of this veil of ignorance and hardness simply reading the Old Covenant is not enough. Only when someone turns to Christ through the preaching of the gospel can the veil be removed. Perhaps these Jewish 'Super-Apostles' were majoring on the law thinking that the law could produce transformation in people. Paul is clear that it is only Christ who can bring life, freedom, transformation and glory.
- **Spirit-Powered Life and Transformation** - "Those whose minds are veiled from the glory in the old covenant do not change or progress. They are like creatures who live in a stagnant lifeless pond. On the other hand, those who are unveiled see the glory of the Lord Jesus and are transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory." (Barnett) The transformation that Paul speaks of here is not the physical transformation that undoubtedly will come when we see Christ and our bodies are made glorious like his (Philippians 3:21.) Instead the transformation that Paul speaks of here is the transformation of character that produces the fruit of the Spirit in us.

Tricky Bits

- ***"...To prevent the Israelites from seeing the end of what was passing away" (v13)*** - The difficulty here is what does Paul mean by "the end". What is the end? On the one hand the end of what was passing away was the temporary glory and radiance of Moses face. Moses knew that his Old Covenant Ministry and it's glory was transient, it was not an end in itself. It pointed forward to an end beyond itself in the ministry of Christ and the New Covenant.
- ***"But their minds were made dull..." (v14)*** - This verse raises the thorny issue of God's sovereignty in hardening people's hearts. Paul is implying that "God did not let them understand the promises made under the Mosaic covenant which would be fulfilled in Christ" (Barnett.) Reading this verse in the wider context of the New Testament we see that this hardening of Israel was part of God's plan for bringing in the Gentiles (Romans 11:25.) Whilst this might seem hard on Israel we need to recognise that ultimately this is for Israel's good (Romans 11:11-12, 26.)
- ***"Now the Lord is the Spirit..." (v17)*** - This tricky phrase needs to be unravelled by reading it in context. The Lord could refer to God the Father but in this context is more likely to refer to Christ as Christ has just been mentioned in v14 and v16 as the one who removes the veil. The phrase "The Lord is the Spirit" is not saying that the second and

third persons of the Trinity are one and the same because of the next phrase in v17 - "and where the Spirit of the Lord is..." This means that "The Lord" to whom one "turns" and "the Spirit of the Lord" are separate "persons" (Barnett.) When we understand it like this we can see that the Spirit is the Spirit of Christ, the Spirit of the living God (3:3.)

- **"There is freedom"** - What is the freedom that Paul is referring to here? Is it freedom from condemnation? That is certainly a possibility because in v9 he has talked about how the Old Covenant brought condemnation but the New Covenant brings righteousness. Alternatively the freedom that he speaks of in v17 could be the freedom to see and contemplate the glory of the Lord which is mentioned in v18. For what it is worth I think the second one is more likely because it fits the immediate context of v12-18. The whole point of the veil is that they were unable to see the glory of the Lord but now in Christ the veil has been removed and so they are now free to contemplate the Lord's glory.

Big Idea - New Covenant Gospel Ministry can seem weak and insignificant but it's actually glorious, enduring, life giving and transforming!

Applications

- **Don't judge gospel ministry by its appearance because it's even more glorious than Moses coming down the mountain** - What is more glorious, Moses coming down the Mountain carrying the 10 Commandments with his face radiant and thunder and lightning in the background OR a Christian seeking to share their faith with a colleague in their lunch break? Instinctively we would say that Moses coming down the mountain appears more glorious, but it's not! New Covenant ministry of sharing Christ is more glorious than the ministry of Moses because the New Covenant brings righteousness not condemnation, Spirit-powered life and transformation instead of death and because it endures rather than fades away. This passage challenges our tendency to judge things by appearance. When we gather together on a Sunday and proclaim the gospel to one another, when we run small and seemingly insignificant Christianity Explored courses, or when a group of Christian teenagers gets together in their school to start a CU it can look insignificant but it's not. Whenever we're involved in New Covenant ministry of sharing Christ we are involved in something that is even more glorious than Moses coming down the mountain with the stone tablets! What a massive encouragement as we serve and speak for Jesus in seemingly insignificant ways!
- **Be bold and confident in sharing the gospel and serving Christ** - Following on from the previous application is Paul's application of 3:12 and 4:1 of being bold and confident as we share the gospel! It's only with Jesus that the veil can be removed and people can be made righteous and know life and transformation in the Spirit so let's be bold as we share Christ with friends, family and colleagues. Yes, it can seem insignificant compared to the grandeur of Exodus 34 but only the gospel can bring life!
- **Give thanks that the veil has been removed from your eyes** - Before we get carried away thinking about our gospel ministry we need to stop and give thanks that

God has removed the veil from our eyes. Whether we were Jew or Gentile we were blind (see 4:4 as well as 3:14). We could not see the glory of the Lord in Christ, it didn't make sense to us and yet God has graciously removed the veil from our eyes!

- **Expect transformation in yourself and others** - As we come to know Jesus and contemplate his glory he will, by the Spirit, make us more like him! That's the wonderful promise of 3:18 yet I wonder how expectant we are of this kind of transformation? Perhaps we expected this kind of change when we started out with Jesus but perhaps over the years our expectations have been lowered. Similarly what are your expectations for your group as you gather together to contemplate the Lord's glory week by week in Home Groups. Do you actually expect people's lives and characters to be transformed? Now of course we can't bring about that transformation by our efforts alone, it requires the Spirit, but are we praying for and expecting to see God continue to transform us and our group as we study his word?

Bible Study

Suggested Started Question - "What seems more impressive and glorious?"

At the end of this study we want the group to see and believe that New Covenant Ministry of sharing Christ with people is even more glorious than Moses' Old Covenant Ministry. To help us do this you could play a game of "What seems more glorious...?" and have a list of options, e.g. Playing Football at Wembley or playing Football on Bolton Hill? The aim would simply be to get the group to see that we normally judge things by appearance. Any sort of starter question that involves this idea of judging by appearances will work well so why not be imaginative.

Digging into the Passage

1. As you read v7-11 look out for words that Paul keep repeating. What's his basic point?

The key word that gets repeated is obviously glory. The aim of this question is to get the whole group into the passage and starting to follow Paul's argument in these verses. If you wanted to you could print off the passage from biblegateway.com and get the group to circle/underline/highlight the repeated words - this could be done in pairs so no one feels exposed.

2. In these verses Paul contrasts Old Covenant Ministry with New Covenant Ministry. What are the key differences?

Again this is an observation question designed to get people into the passage. You can reassure them not to worry if they don't understand words like righteousness, others in the group can help with this. Again you could split the group into pairs and get them to complete the following table...

Old Covenant	New Covenant
(v7)	(v6, v8)
(v9)	(v9)
(v11)	(v11)
(v7, v9, v11)	(v8, v9, v11)

3. As you read v12-18 what words or pictures does Paul keep repeating?

Again this is a nice straight forward observation question that should help people to see Paul's repeated use of "veil." Hopefully the group will notice how Paul shifts from talking about a literal veil to a metaphorical veil.

4. What is Paul saying about his fellow Jews?

A. What is their problem?

There is a veil stopping them seeing the glory of God because their minds have been made dull. This is where someone might raise the question of God's sovereignty and his

fairness in this. It would therefore be worth having thought about this. Hopefully the Tricky Bits section above might help.

B. What do they need?

Paul is clear that they need Christ. Only Christ can remove the veil. This might be worth exploring if you have time. Simply teaching moral laws is not enough, it will not work! Only Christ can remove the veil. Is there an application here for our society? We often hear Christians longing for Christian values to be taught in our schools. Now that is not a bad thing, but Christian values alone will not remove the blindness and veil from people's eyes - only Christ can do that!

At this point it might be worth showing the group that our minds were veiled and our eyes were blind even though we aren't Jewish (4:3-4.)

5. When the veil is removed from our eyes what should happen?

When we come to Christ we are now free to behold the glory of the Lord. That is such a wonderful privilege and blessing and it should result in us being transformed by the Spirit into the image of Christ. You could ask the group what you think this will look like and the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5 might help. The key here is to see that transformation is meant to be part of the Christian life.

Applying the Passage

6. Picture Moses coming down the mountain. His face is radiant and he's carrying the 10 commandments having just spoken with God. Now picture us as we meet as a church at Hall Cross on a Sunday.

A. Which seems more impressive?

Instinctively we would say that Moses coming down the mountain with a radiant face is more glorious than our gathering in a school hall on a Sunday.

You could offer a series of examples such as Sharing the gospel with a friend at work, or a bunch of school kids starting a CU and inviting friends to hear the gospel. All these things seem so unimpressive compared to Moses and his ministry and yet...

B. Which is more glorious? Why?

The implication of this passage is that when we gather on a Sunday morning or when we try to share the gospel with people we are actually involved in something that is more glorious than Moses coming down the mountain! That's because of what we saw in v7-11. New Covenant ministry brings life, righteousness and transformation that lasts, whereas the Old Covenant ministry brought condemnation and death and didn't last.

This is the big punchline of the study so work as hard as you can to help the group see and feel this - if they get nothing else make sure they get this!

7. How does this passage change our attitude to church on a Sunday?

Questions 7 and 8 are where 3:212 and 4:1 help us see that we should be bold and confident. Often we lose heart when we think about church or evangelism because our efforts seem so weak and insignificant but actually we're part of something glorious. Really encourage the group to discuss particular situations or ministry that they are involved in and help one another to see how glorious this ministry really is!

8. How does this passage encourage us to be bold in evangelism?

9. How does this passage challenge our expectations when we study the Bible together each week?

I would guess that many of us turn up week by week with low expectations. In many cases the Bible study is probably secondary to the fellowship we enjoy together. 3:18 should encourage us to have high expectations that as we contemplate the glory of Christ in his word it will change us. Help the group to explore what our expectations tend to be and what they should be as we study the Bible? For those involved in other bible ministry this passage challenges us to examine our expectations as we teach others - transformation is the goal, not just contemplating the Lord's glory!

Small Group Leaders Notes

2 Corinthians 4

Context

- **Paul's Ministry vs the Peddlers Ministry in 2:14-7:4**
 - Throughout this key section of the letter Paul is contrasting his genuine apostolic ministry with the ministry of his opponents who "peddle the word of God for profit" (2:17). With this in mind we begin to see possible allusions to their ministry in chapter 4 as Paul says "we have renounced secret and shameful ways; we do not use deception, nor do we distort the word of God" (v2.)
 - Throughout this chapter and this section Paul defends the apparent weakness of his ministry in the face of the apparently impressive ministry of his opponents. Through this he shows us what to expect that genuine gospel ministry will look like.
- **God's work of Creation**
 - In v6 Paul quotes from Genesis 1 to say to compare what God did in creation with what he has done in Christians. Just as God spoke and created light in the beginning, so now he speaks and causes the light of God's glory to be revealed to those who previously were spiritually blind.
- **Paul's Experience on the Damascus Road**
 - It is possible to see hints at Paul's own conversion story in what he says in this passage and indeed in the previous passage. Paul was blind to the light of the gospel and could not see the glory of God and yet on the Damascus Road God literally shone the light of Christ onto Paul's eyes so that he saw God's glory displayed in the face of the risen Christ.

Structure

Before we dive into the notes it is worth standing back and seeing the big overarching structure of this chapter. Notice how the phrase "We do not lose heart" comes at the beginning and end of the chapter (v1 and v16) and acts as bookends around the rest of the chapter. This idea of not losing heart holds the chapter together. In v2 and v5 Paul tells us what this means for his ministry. Then in the rest of the chapter he gives us several great reasons why he does not lose heart.

In my mind the structure therefore looks something like this...

We don't lose heart and we continue to proclaim Christ plainly... (v1-2)

... Because that's how God opens spiritually blind eyes (v3-6)

... Because our present sufferings glorify God and show people Christ (v7-12)

... Because our present sufferings will end when God raises us to be with him (v13-15)

... Because our present sufferings are preparing us for future glory (v16-18)

We don't lose heart (v16)

Notes

v1-6 - We don't lose heart as we continue to proclaim Christ because that's how God opens blind eyes

- **“We renounce secret and shameful ways... setting forth the truth plainly” (v2)**
 - Notice the contrasts that Paul employs here. Firstly he contrasts Losing Heart with shameful ways. Then he contrasts the shameful ways (presumably of his opponents - see context) with setting forth the truth plainly.
 - The result of setting forth the truth plainly is that Paul commends himself to everyone (including the Corinthians who seem to have been doubting him) in the sight of God. This is important because the ministry that Paul has is from God (v1) and therefore is done in the sight of God (v2.)
- **“If our gospel is veiled... it's because the god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers” (v3-4)**
 - If Paul sets forth the truth plainly then why doesn't everyone believe? Why doesn't everyone see the glory of Christ as the gospel is proclaimed to them? Paul's answer is simple - Satan blinds the mind of unbelievers. The problem is not with the message. The gospel is faulty, the problem is the opponent.
 - Notice how Paul is continuing to use the image of the veil that we saw last time in 3:12-18.
- **“For what we preach is not ourselves but Jesus Christ as Lord...” (v5)**
 - Barnett helpfully observes that what we get in these verses is the Means, Content and Manner of this New Covenant Ministry.
 - The **Means** of this ministry is preaching by which Paul doesn't just mean sermons but proclaiming/declaring the gospel.
 - The **Content** of this ministry is Jesus Christ as Lord. Implicit here is the idea that the Jesus who was crucified is now risen and reigning. The message to be proclaimed is all about Christ; who he is and what he is done and not about Paul.
 - The **Manner** of this ministry is perhaps the most striking. Paul goes about this ministry as a servant/slave. In this respect Paul is modelling himself on Christ who did not come to be served but to serve. Here again is a stark contrast between Paul and his opponents.
- **For God... made his light shine in our hearts...” (v6)**
 - Here is the key reason why Paul does not lose heart when people are blinded to the gospel - it is God who opens blind eyes. It is vital that we understand God's role in evangelism and our role in evangelism. Our job is to proclaim Christ as clearly as we can but it is God who opens blind eyes. We preach Christ, God opens blind eyes and therefore Paul doesn't lose heart in the face of unbelief.

v7-12 - Our Present Sufferings glorify God and show Christ to people

- **“We have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God...” (v7)**
 - Here again in these verses we find the theme of power in weakness being played out. Paul is a fragile jar of clay and yet God's power is at work in him. God doesn't just work around Paul's weakness he works through it so that there can be no doubt where the power originates. It comes, not from Paul, but from God.

- As Barnett says;
“Striking is the contrast between the radiant treasure of the knowledge of God/ Christ in the heart (4:4, 6) and the inexpensive and easily breakable receptacle that bears it, an earthen pot. Such vessels are both cheap and fragile, thus having no enduring value in their own right. Only their contents give them worth.”

- **“We are... but not... so that...” (v8-12)**

- Paul can be brutally honest about his weaknesses because he knows that his weaknesses display the glory and life of Christ. If Paul were more impressive then it might hinder people from seeing Christ and that is the whole point of Paul’s ministry (see v4 and v6.)
- Pay attention to the rhythm in these verses. In v8-9 we get the repeated pattern “We are... but not...” Then in v10-12 Paul tells us of the reasons for his weakness by using the phrase “So that” in v10 and v11 and then “so then” in v12. He tells us that he carries the weakness and sufferings of Christ in his body so that the life of Jesus may be revealed (v10-11) and so that the Corinthians may have life at work in them (v12). More on this later.

v13-15 - Our Present Sufferings will end when God raises us to be with him

- **“Since we have that same spirit of faith, we also believe and therefore speak...” (v13-14)**

- Although Paul’s use of the Psalm may be a bit confusing (see below) the overall point of these verses is clear - Paul believes that God will raise him with Christ to be with God and therefore Paul doesn’t lose heart (v1 and v16) instead he speaks the gospel clearly (v2) and boldly (3:12.)

- **“All this is for your benefit...” (v15)**

- Again we see suffering and weakness have come to Paul for the good of the Corinthians (see v12.) Here’s a constant theme throughout the letter - Paul ministers and suffers for the Corinthians! If the Corinthians were tempted to doubt Paul’s concern for them (see 1:12-2:4) then Paul repeatedly shows how everything he does (even his suffering) is for their good.

v16-18 - Our Present Sufferings are preparing us for future glory

- **Outwardly wasting away but inwardly renewed (v16)**

- We need to be careful how we understand the outward person and the inward person. Paul is not simply distinguishing between the body and the soul as the Greeks did. That would separate body and soul in a way that the Bible never does. The Bible is clear that we look forward not just to a spiritual resurrection but a physical resurrection. I think the best way to understand what Paul means by outward and inward is to see outward as “that which belongs to this age” and inward “as that which belongs to the age to come” (Barnett.)

- **Our troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory (v17)**

- Here again is another reason for our suffering and weakness. Not only can it display Christ and bring good for others but it is also preparing us for eternal glory. It is not that our suffering earns eternal glory. Instead when we suffer it causes us to fix our eyes on the unseen, eternal glory that is to come
- Here again is another reason why Paul does not lose heart.

- **So we fix our eyes on what is unseen (v18)**
 - We started the chapter by seeing that Paul continues to proclaim Christ clearly because he doesn't lose heart and now at the end of the chapter we see that he focuses on what is unseen and eternal because he doesn't lose heart.

"Troubles help us to understand that there is no future for us here in this tawdry, fading existence. Therefore we focus, increasingly, on the unseen, resurrected and glorified Christ (4:4–6, 14)" Barnett.

Tricky Bits

- **Paul's use of Psalm 116:10 in v13**
 - David had been critically ill but God had delivered him from this. David believed that God had done this and so he spoke. Paul has this same sort of faith. He believes that God raised the Lord Jesus from the dead (v14) and so he also believes that God will raise us with Christ therefore Paul speaks boldly of Christ.
- **The unexpected change of v12 after the pattern of v10-11**
 - The pattern in v10 and v11 is "The Death of Jesus is in **us** *SO THAT* the Life of Jesus may be revealed in **us**. When we come to v12 we are therefore expecting a similar pattern but Paul subtly changes it to "Death in **us** BUT Life in **you**. Here we see again how everything that Paul goes through and does is for the sake of the Corinthians. Even his suffering is for their good (see also v15). How can any of them claim that he doesn't care for them?
- **How do we apply what was true of an Apostles to us?**
 - Paul was an apostle and we are not so does that mean that we can't take any applications from a passage like this? There is certainly a danger of forgetting that Paul was an apostle and applying everything he says about himself to us as if there is no distinction between us. Having said that, much of what Paul says about himself in this passage is applicable to all Christians. Like him we are not to lose heart even though people don't always respond positively to our evangelism. Like him we will know what it is like to be weak and fragile and yet like him we're also not to lose heart.

Big Idea - Don't lose heart, keep on enduring sufferings and proclaiming Christ!

Applications

- **Don't lose heart when people seem blind to the gospel, but rather keep proclaiming Christ as clearly as you can**
 - It can be so discouraging when loved ones just do not seem to get the gospel. We can explain the gospel clearly and pray for them for years, they can hear the most amazing sermons, see answers to prayer and attend lots of evangelistic courses and yet still remain. In such situations it is very easy to blame ourselves or the gospel and lose heart. This passage gives us reason not to lose heart but to persevere in speaking of Christ and praying for them. Their unbelief is not because the gospel is faulty but because the god of this age has blinded their minds. Such a perspective should drive us to our knees in praying for people.
- **Don't lose heart when suffering comes, but rather fix your eyes on what is eternal and trust God to bring good out of your suffering.**
 - If Jesus suffered then we will suffer. Suffering isn't a sign that things are going wrong, rather suffering is part of being a Christian.
 - We will all be able to relate to Paul's description of himself as a jar of clay. We all have weaknesses and frailties and they are not there by accident, they are used by God for his glory.
 - When we really get to grips with v7-18 we find a number of deeply encouraging and liberating truths to help us in times of suffering and weakness. Firstly our weaknesses are frailties provide an opportunity for God's power to be displayed. As people see us persevering in spite of our weaknesses it shows that it must be God's power that is sustaining us. Secondly our suffering and weakness can actually be used by God to bring salvation and life to hoers. Thirdly when suffering comes and we are reminded of how frail and transient this life is it provides us with an opportunity to take our eyes of the things of this age and fix them on the permanent, eternal things to come.
 - As we see some of the ways that God works through our suffering and weakness it should help us to stop resenting our weaknesses and begin to embrace them and even boast in them because through our weaknesses God's power is displayed. Such a change in attitude will also change how we pray for one another in times of weakness and suffering. We will still pray for suffering or weakness to be removed, but not before we've prayed that God might use it for his good purposes.

Suggested Bible Study

Starter Questions

- a) **Can you think of a situation in life where you felt like giving up but you didn't? What kept you going?**

OR

- b) **Are there times when you feel like giving up as a Christian? What has kept you going so far?**

These two questions both have the same aim, it's just that the first is more general and the second is a bit more specific. You could use one or both of them together. The aim is to get us thinking about the idea of "losing heart" which is a key theme in this passage. Any sort of starter activity or question that gets us thinking about losing heart or giving up would help to introduce this study.

Digging into and Applying v1-6

1. **It is easy to lose heart when we have been sharing the gospel with someone and nothing seems to happen.**

1. **Why doesn't Paul lose heart?**
2. **What does he do instead?**
3. **How do these verses help you to not lose heart in evangelism?**

Paul doesn't lose heart because he knows what is happening when someone doesn't believe. He knows it is because Satan has blinded them. He also knows that it is God alone who can open blind eyes as the gospel is proclaimed. Paul knows that God has entrusted him with the ministry of proclaiming Christ (see back into 3:7-18 and 4:5). This means he doesn't take it personally when people don't believe. He also doesn't start doubting the gospel. Instead he continues to set forth the gospel as plainly and clearly as he possibly can and he continues to look to God to do the work of opening blind eyes.

There will be many in our groups who have been sharing the gospel with friends and family and praying for them for years without any sign of fruit. We want to be aware that many of them will be quietly losing heart and giving up hope. We want to gently and sensitively guide our groups through these verses so that they see the rich encouragements that are here. As people talk about individuals or situations that are on their hearts why not spend time praying for each other, applying what we've seen in this passage before you move on with the rest of the study.

An alternative set of questions for v1-6 could go like this;

- 1) *What do these verses say about people who aren't Christians?*
- 2) *What do these verses teach us about our role in evangelism?*
- 3) *What do they teach us about God's role in evangelism?*
- 4) *How do these verses encourage us not to lose heart in evangelism?*

Digging into and Applying v7-18

2. It is also easy to lose heart in times of suffering or weakness. How does Paul describe himself in v7-12 and v16-18? What sort of picture does he paint of himself?

This is just designed to be an observation question to help the group see what the passage says. Paul describes himself as a jar of clay (v7) - a cheap, fragile, basic household item. He talks about being hard-pressed (squeezed), crushed, persecuted and struck down (v8-9). This hardly seems very impressive and glorious does it? Then in v16-18 he talks about how he is outwardly wasting away. So here is Paul the fragile, failing, weak gospel minister. No wonder some people looked down on Paul.

3. Paul seems very weak and fragile, so why does he not lose heart?

There are several reasons in these verses why Paul does not lose heart. Firstly Paul's weakness and fragility allows God's power to be seen (v7). Secondly it means that the life of Christ can be displayed (v10-11) and this brings life to others (v12 and v15). Finally Paul's weakness causes him to get some perspective and focus on the unseen eternal glory that God has prepared for him.

To help your group you might like to use the following questions to lead them through these verses in a more ordered way.

1. What is displayed through Paul's weakness? (v7-12)

God's power and the life of Christ.

2. How might God's power and the life of Jesus be seen in us when we are weak?

This is a chance to apply what we're thinking about to ourselves and our situations. Perhaps your group have examples of how their weakness and suffering has been an opportunity to point others to God.

3. What is Paul's weakness achieving for other people? (v12 & v15)

It's bringing life and benefit for others because his weakness displays the power of God and the life of Christ. In other words it seems that his weakness and suffering provides an opportunity to share the gospel and point people away from himself and towards God.

4. How could our weakness and frailty bring life for others?

Again here is an application question designed to get us thinking about how we might actually use our weakness and frailty for the sake of the gospel. This is a really liberating thought - my suffering and weakness need not simply be something I endure and wish away. Rather it is an opportunity to glorify God and point people to Christ!

5. What is Paul's weakness achieving for Paul? How? (v16-18)

Paul's weakness and frailty is actually achieving an eternal glory. It's not that his suffering earns him an eternal glory. Rather his present suffering and frailty causes him to look forward and long for the permanence of eternity.

4. Instead of losing heart Paul fixes his eyes on what is unseen and eternal. How do you fix your eyes on something you can't see?

There's a bit of a paradox in v18 isn't there? How do you see what can't be seen? Paul is obviously speaking in terms of faith rather than literal sight. He's also letting his present suffering and weakness remind him of how temporary and fleeting this life is and as he remembers this it causes him to look forward to his permanent eternal glory to come. In

this sense we need to learn to let our suffering point us forward. So often we can just fix our eyes on our weaknesses and frailties, instead we need to learn to see them as temporary signs which point us on to what is permanent.

1. Think of your current struggles and weaknesses. How will fixing your eyes on eternity make a difference?

The big thing here is helping us to see that everything about our lives now is temporary, it won't last. Paul's troubles only appear light and momentary when viewed in the context of eternity. It's only as we fix our eyes on what is permanent and eternal that we see how temporary everything in this age now really is.

Small Group Leaders Notes

2 Corinthians 5:1-10

Context

- **Chapter 4 “We do not lose heart”**— 5:1 begins with “For” which immediately tells us that there is continuity between what Paul has been saying at the end of ch4 and what he is about to say in ch5. Paul has just told us that he doesn’t lose heart in spite of his present suffering and weakness (4:1 and 4:16). Instead he fixes his eyes on what is unseen and eternal rather than what is seen but only temporary (4:18.) Paul’s eyes are fixed on the eternal glory and resurrection body that are waiting for him because of Christ. In chapter 5 he continues to tell us why he doesn’t lose heart (4:16). The big reason in v1-5 is that his eternal, permanent resurrection body is waiting for Paul either when he dies or Christ returns.
- 5:11 “We know what it is to fear the Lord” - It is worth noticing that our passage is linked not only with what has come before but what is coming next. “Since then” in 5:11 acts as a linking phrase which picks up what Paul has said in 5:10. Since Paul will have to appear before the judgment seat of Christ he therefore knows what it is to fear the Lord and so he tries to persuade others of the truth of the gospel. Notice again how the theme of gospel ministry runs through chapters 3-6. Time and again Paul has told us that he is bold and confident in this apparently weak ministry because he knows the eternal reality (see 3:4-6, 3:12, 4:1-2, 4:13-14, 5:6.)
- **The Hope of Glory** - Linked to the previous point is the repeated theme of glory in these chapters. Whereas Paul’s opponents were all about power and glory now in their ministry. In contrast Paul’s ministry seems weak and unimpressive but Paul is confident of future glory and so he often speaks of the hope of glory (see 3:12, 3:18, 4:14, 4:16 and 5:1-5.)

Structure and Notes

- **Don’t lose heart, our permanent resurrection bodies are waiting - 5:1-5**
 - **Earthly tent versus Eternal House (v1)** - Here Paul is contrasting his present, temporary, mortal body which will be destroyed by death and his permanent, eternal body which is to come. Human life now is like a tent because it is temporary and fragile. We often like to think that this life is what is permanent and real and that life after death is somehow less real. Paul’s imagery here shows us that it is really the other way round. As real as this life is, the life to come will be even more real and permanent.
 - It is worth noticing that Paul is using the language of a heavenly house in a different way to Jesus in John 14. There Jesus was referring to heaven and preparing a place in heaven for his followers. Here Paul is using the image of the house to speak specifically about our resurrection bodies (4:14.)
 - Notice also Paul’s absolute confidence when he says “We know...” Christians can be certain of what is unseen because of Jesus’ resurrection 4:14.
 - **Groaning, longing, burdened (v2-4)** - Although Paul is absolutely confident of the future his present experience is one of groaning, longing and being burdened. This is not the groaning of doubt or fear but the groaning of hopeful longing for our resurrection bodies. It isn’t a hopeless groaning (I know all about this sort of groaning as a Sheffield Wednesday fan). Instead Paul groans because he has such a wonderful hope. He groans and longs for what is to come. The key here is to pay close attention to the linking words such as “because” at the beginning of v3 and in

v4. This groaning for what is to come seems to be the same sort of groaning that Paul speaks about in Romans 8:18-25.

- ***Clothed versus Unclothed (v2-4)*** - Having used the picture of tent/house Paul now shifts his metaphor to clothing though he purposefully mixes his metaphors in v2 so that we see that he is still talking about the same thing - our resurrection bodies. A number of commentators suggest that the idea of being clothed here has the sense of putting on a coat over our existing clothes. This would certainly fit with the picture in v4 where the mortal is swallowed up by life. Paul is longing for the day when he will be able to put on his resurrection body.
 - What does it mean for us to be “unclothed” and “naked”. The nakedness here does not mean somehow being exposed and ashamed before God. As a Christian who has been clothed with Christ (Galatians 3:27) and so they have nothing to fear before God. Instead, in this context, to be naked is to be without a body (more on this in the tricky bits below.)
- ***God fashioned us for this very purpose... (v5)*** - Here is a verse that gives us great hope and confidence in this temporary and fragile life where we groan and long for what is to come. It is God who has made us in this way so that what is mortal will be swallowed up by life. It is also God who causes us to groan and long for the future because he has put his Spirit in us as a deposit guaranteeing what is to come. We would not groan if it weren't for God. These longings and desires ultimately come not from us but from God who has planted them in us by his Spirit (again you might like to read Romans 8 where many of these ideas run in parallel.)
- ***Be Confident as you wait to be at home with the Lord (v6-8)***
 - ***Be Confident (v6, 8)*** - The big overarching theme of confidence reappears. Back in 4:14 this confidence came from Jesus' resurrection and here it comes from the fact we have the Spirit (5:5) who guarantees our future resurrection. Similarly the idea of living by faith and not by sight picks up what Paul was saying in 4:18.
 - ***Home in the body, away from the Lord (v6, 8)*** - While this world and our mortal bodies are our homes we are away from the Lord yet we groan and long to be with the Lord. Here Paul echoes what he says in Philippians 1:23. Paul rightly longs to be with Christ, seeing him and enjoying his glory. I find this a challenging statement as we so often have the opposite attitude. So often we live as if this life is the first prize and the life to come is some sort of consolation prize. We need to remember that this life is temporary and fragile like a tent whereas the life to come is like a permanent eternal house where we will be with Christ which is better by far.
- ***Fear and Please the Lord because one day we'll stand before him (v9-10)***
 - ***Please him (v9)*** - Paul's goal to please the Lord now flows out of his confidence for the future (notice how v9 begins 'So'). Paul's ministry in the present is set between his confidence that God has raised Christ (4:14) and his confidence that God will raise Paul (5:6.) As we live and minister for Christ we too should have this same basic goal to please Jesus in whatever we are doing because we are confident about what God has done in the past and what he will do in the future.
 - ***We must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ (v10)*** - There are tricky elements to this verse which we will deal with below. For now notice that everyone will appear before the judgment seat of Christ, there are no exceptions. Notice also that this life matters. There really is a connection between this life and the life to come.

Tricky Bits

- **When do we get our resurrection bodies? Immediately after we die or is there a delay?**
 - This passage can generate quite a debate around exactly when Christians receive their resurrection bodies. Broadly speaking there are 2 alternatives;
 - **Christians receive their resurrection bodies as soon as they die** - Garland and others argue that because Paul says “We have” in 5:1 that implies that as soon as Christians die they have their resurrection body without delay. A slight variation on this view is to say that when Christians die their souls sleep until the Resurrection of the Dead at the end of the age when they will receive their resurrection bodies. In this view Christians who die are unaware of the delay in receiving their resurrection bodies. For them it seems as if they receive their resurrection bodies immediately after their death.
 - **Christians receive their resurrection bodies at the end of the age and so are ‘naked’ but with Christ between their death and the resurrection of the dead at the end of the age** - Barnett and others who hold this view argue that ‘nakedness’ in this passage refers to a state of disembodiment between death and the resurrection of the dead. Ideally Paul longs for Christ to return before he dies so that Paul will go straight from his mortal body to his resurrection body without an intervening period of nakedness (5:4.) Elsewhere Paul is adamant that Christians who die and are therefore are naked until the resurrection are with the Lord (Philippians 1:21-23 and 1 Thessalonians 4:14-17 and Luke 23:43.) Personally I think I favour this option where there is a brief period of disembodied nakedness between death and the resurrection of the dead. In this period Christians are waiting to be clothed with their permanent resurrection bodies and they are with Christ which is a great thing and better than being in our tents but away from him now. Even within this view it is perfectly possible that Christians are “asleep” and therefore not conscious of the delay and their nakedness.
 - Whichever option we take let’s not get bogged down in endless debate. Focus on the big facts that are not in doubt. Our mortal tents will one day fail, but as Christians we look forward with great confidence to the fact that we will be clothed with a permanent home. What is mortal will be swallowed up by life! Hallelujah!
- **Doesn’t 5:10 contradict the idea of salvation by grace alone through faith alone?**
 - As this verse is at the end of the passage there is a temptation as Bible study leaders to spend so much time on the previous 9 verses that there isn’t time to study this tricky and apparently contradictory verse. Don’t give in to temptation.
 - Everyone will be judged but Paul seems to be clearly focusing on believers in this verse (notice his use of “we” and “all”.)
 - Let’s start with what this verse definitely can’t mean. It can’t mean that we are saved entirely by our works. That would go against all the teaching of the New Testament and would undermine the confidence that Paul has been speaking of in this passage. This verse also can’t mean that we are initially saved by Christ but then have to maintain our salvation or add to our salvation by our good works. This again would rob us of our confidence that Paul has been at pains to stress.
 - Barnett suggests that *“A more consistent explanation would be that believers do not face condemnation at Christ’s tribunal (see Rom 5:16, 18; 8:1) but rather evaluation*

with a view to the Master's commendation given or withheld (1 Cor 3:10–15; 4:5; cf. Luke 12:42–48)."

- Paul Clarke of St Helens Bishopsgate puts it like this *"It is vital to see that no believer's salvation will be in doubt on that day – think back to the hope that Paul outlined in 3.12, and think forward to 5.17 where we learn that all those in Christ have already become a 'new creation.' It may be better, therefore, to think of the judgement about which Paul is speaking as a 'family prize-giving' at which the Lord Jesus rewards His people for the works they have done in His name. But even though our salvation will not be in doubt, we should not minimise the significance of this judgment. It will be universal (we must all...) and it will be individual (so that each one may receive...). We cannot hide behind our family, or our church, or our spouse. It matters how we live – to some extent at least, the degree of our eternal 'reward' is determined by it."*

Big Idea - As Christians we can be confident that we will have a resurrection body so we should aim to please Jesus now in everything.

Applications

- **Don't forget your current body is just a tent**
 - It can be so easy to think that our present bodies and this life in this world is what is permanent. So often we get caught up with the things of this world and maintaining our current bodies as if they are the only body we will ever have. Unlike the rest of our society we know that if and when this earthly body fails we have a better and permanent body waiting for us. As Christians our attitude to our body has the potential to be a major way of standing out from the rest of society.
- **Long for the new creation and your resurrection body**
 - Paul says "meanwhile we groan, longing to be clothed..." I wonder whether stifle those groans. We can be so busy with the things of this life that we don't look forward to what is to come. The more we fix our eyes on what is to come (4:18) the more we will groan and long for it as we struggle in this life. I recently read a sermon by Jonathan Edwards (the 18th century Theologian not the Triple Jumper) on 2 Corinthians 5:8. It was a heart-warming sermon that helped me to fix my eyes on what is to come. The thing that struck me most was how much time Edwards had clearly spent thinking about Christ's return and our resurrection bodies. Today we have lost the ability to sit still and think. We're constantly moving from one thing to another. Without going back to an 18th century lifestyle we need to work hard to spend time meditating on the future that is ours in Jesus.
- **Don't lose heart in the face of frailty and old age**
 - In many ways this is similar to the first application. Like everyone else Christians will grow old and frail, there is no avoiding this. Unlike everyone else we have reason to be confident in the face of such decline. This passage is rich with encouragements for those of us who are all too aware of how weak and temporary our current tents are.
- **Aim to please the Lord in everything**
 - We know that we will stand before the Lord and we know that our salvation is secure so we have every motivation to please the Lord now. Remember that 5:11 flows on immediately from this verse and so we see that Paul is specifically thinking about his ministry of persuading others.

Bible Study

Starter Question - In what ways does our society fixate on our bodies and our health? In what way do we idolise our bodies?

This question is designed to get us thinking about our bodies which will be a major focus on the passage. We want to start by recognising that our bodies are very important to us and we spend lots of time and money trying to maintain them as best we can. This should set us up to study this passage where we will get a biblical perspective on our present bodies in light of our guaranteed future.

Digging into the Passage

1. Paul is full of confidence in this passage. What is he so confident about? (v1, v6, v8)

1. What is Paul trying to convey with the tent/house comparison in v2?

Paul is confident that when his present, mortal, earthly, tent of a body dies he will have a glorious, heavenly, permanent resurrection body. He wants us to see the great contrast between our present, temporary and fragile bodies and our permanent, solid future resurrection bodies.

2. Why can Christians be so confident about their future? (v5, 4:14)

God has given us the Spirit as a deposit guaranteeing what is to come. What is more we can look back to Jesus' resurrection and know that because God raised Christ, he will raise us also.

3. What is Paul's attitude to the present and the future? (v2-4, v6-8)

1. How does your attitude compare to Paul's?

Paul groans and longs for his future resurrection body. Unlike so many of us who are perfectly comfortable and at home in our present bodies, Paul longs to be out of the tent and into the house. He desperately feels the burdens and frailties of this life in this body and he longs to be in his perfect, permanent resurrection body with Christ. My attitude is very often the exact opposite of Paul's. I fix my eyes on the present and not the future and I long to stay in this body and to prolong this tent-like existence for as long as possible. So often I treat this life as if it is like the permanent house whereas in fact it is just a tent that will be destroyed. My attitude to death (the destruction of the tent) is often entirely negative and yet Paul sees it as a positive (death not necessarily the process of dying) because then he will be clothed in his heavenly dwelling.

4. Why is Paul so keen to please the Lord? (v9-10)

At first this seems strange. Surely Paul's confidence in Christ would mean that he didn't feel any great need to please the Lord. Hasn't Christ done everything for Paul? This thinking misses the point. Paul's salvation is not in doubt, he's not trying to please the Lord to earn salvation. Instead because he is so certain of the future he wants to please Christ because he knows for certain that one day he will be stood before him. We need to see that here, as well as in other passages, the Bible does seem to speak of heavenly rewards for Christians. Exactly what they are is not necessarily clear, but scripture does seem to suggest that they exist and so they are to motivate us to serve Christ now.

Applying the Passage

5. How does this passage...

1. ... Encourage us when we are feeling weak and frail?

There is so much in this passage to encourage us and many of us really need encouraging at the moment. Take the time to dwell on some of the great things we've been told about the future. Think about how our present bodies are temporary. Think about how we're looking forward to permanent bodies. Think about how what is mortal will be swallowed up by life. Think about how the Spirit in us now guarantees our future. Remember that the big application in this section is to confidently fix our eyes on what is unseen rather than what is seen (4:16-18). Spend time letting our passage help you to do that. Think too about practical responses to this passage as we're encouraged.

2. ... Challenge us when our focus is all on this life?

So often we think and act like everyone else who has no hope for the future. For everyone else their current bodies are all they will ever have and so they do everything they can and spend vast amounts of time and money on their bodies. How easy it can be for us as Christians to slip into that same sort of idolatry of our bodies. Spend time talking about the ways in which we can be just like everyone else when it comes to our bodies. What should a godly care and concern for our bodies look like? How should this passage change our attitude to old age, ill health, and death?

3. ... Spur us on when we are tempted to be lazy Christians?

It can be easy to think that God's grace means we can sit back and do whatever we like as Christians because Jesus has done it all. Whilst we should rejoice in the fact that we are saved entirely by God's grace and that we can contribute nothing to our salvation that shouldn't cause us to be lazy. We will have to stand before Jesus and individually give an account for our lives and so we should long to please him now considering all that he has done for us. You might want to briefly explore the idea of rewards in heaven though make sure you bring it back to how they are to spur us on to live for Jesus now.

Small Group Leaders Notes

2 Corinthians 5:11-6:2

Context

- **Appearing before Christ (5:10)** - Paul has just told us that he makes it his goal to please the Lord because he knows that one day he will have to appear before the judgment seat of Christ and give an account. This idea continues in 5:11 where he tells how this impacts his ministry - “we try to persuade others.”
- **Criticism from his Opponents** - Throughout chapters 2-7 Paul has in mind his opponents who are casting doubts on the authenticity of his apostolic ministry. He introduced us to these ‘peddlers of the word’ in 2:17 and said that in contrast “we speak before God with sincerity as those sent from God.” This theme of sincerity before God is picked up again in 5:11 when he says “What we are is plain to God, and I hope it is plain to your consciences” (see also 1:12-14 and 4:2.) Paul wants to contrast himself with the paddlers who commend themselves (3:1-4 and 5:12) by showing that he is commended by what God is doing through his ministry (3:1-6.) Paul has already told us that his ministry is New Covenant Ministry (see chapter 3) and now he tells us that this new covenant ministry is one of reconciliation (5:18 and 6:3).
- **Paul and the Corinthians** - Don’t forget how much Paul has invested in the Corinthians (remember the timeline.) Paul wants the Corinthians to take pride in Paul and his ministry so that they can answer the accusers of Paul (5:12). He wants them to have confidence in both his methods and his motivation (see 1:12-14 and 5:12 and 7:12.)

Structure and Notes

There are a number of ways that you might divide up this passage but I think that the simplest way is to focus on who does what in the different verses;

- **What Paul does - 5:11-13**
 - **“We try to persuade others” (v12)** - Motivated by a healthy fear of the Lord, Paul tries to persuade other people of the truth of the gospel. It is worth pausing to consider the different words Paul uses to describe what he does. Back in 4:2 he said that he “set forth the truth plainly.” Then in 4:5 he said “we preach... Jesus Christ as Lord.” Now he speaks of trying to persuade people. Paul has many different techniques in his evangelistic toolbox (see Acts 17:4, 18:4, 19:8, 26:28, 28:23.) The content is always the gospel of Jesus Christ as Lord but his approach changes - this is worth bearing in mind as we consider our own evangelism. One size doesn’t always fit all.
 - **“What we are is plain to God...” (v11-12)** - Paul knows that he won’t just stand before God at the end of his life, he also ministers before him constantly now. He speaks before Christ (2:17) and so he does so with sincerity having renounced secret and shameful ways (4:2.) Here is the Christians motivation as we live each day - all we do is plain to God, he sees it all. This therefore shapes how Paul tries to persuade people. There are no underhand tactics, no inappropriate emotional manipulation, no tampering with the gospel because God sees everything and one day Paul will have to stand before the Lord and give an account.
- *See the ‘Tricky Bits’ below for help understanding v13.*

- **What Christ has done - 5:14-17**

- **Christ's love compels (5:14)** - In case we think that Paul is only motivated by a (healthy) fear of the Lord this little phrase shows us that there is a dual motivation in gospel ministry. Paul not only fears standing before Christ in the future, he is also compelled by Christ's love for him displayed so beautifully at the cross. These two events (one in the past and one in the future) drive Paul on to persuade others in a God-honouring way.

- **Christ's death means we live for him not us (5:14-15)** - Notice the parallel structure in these verses;

v14	v15
One died for all...	He died for all...
... Therefore all died.	... that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him...

- Here we see that Christ's death means that our old life, when we lived for ourselves, died when we came to faith. We now live a new life for Christ motivated by his love and sacrificial death for us.

- **Christ's death means we have a new perspective (5:16-17)** - You can hear Paul's autobiographical tones in these verses as he speaks of how the death of Christ transforms our outlook and perspective. When we become a Christian a radical change occurs (the old has gone and the new has come) and so Paul now views Christ and other people in a radically different way. Just think back to what happened to Paul on the Damascus Road to see how this was true of Paul.

- **What God has done - 5:18-21**

- **Reconciled us to himself (v18, 19, 21)** - The relationship between us and God was seemingly damaged beyond repair because of our sin (v19) and yet in Christ God has made a way for us to be reconciled to him (through Christ - v18, in Christ - v19.) God is in the business of reconciliation and repairing relationships. This is vitally important for the Corinthians who's relationship with God's Apostle Paul has been damaged and needs repairing (more on this below.)

- **Gives us the ministry of reconciliation (v18, 19, 20)** - It is not only that God reconciles us to himself, that alone is marvellous. What is even more amazing is that God then entrusts his people with the ministry of proclaiming this reconciliation. Now obviously Paul had this ministry in a unique way as an Apostle but it is also true that all believers have been entrusted with the gospel. As we proclaim the gospel to people we too are partakers in this ministry of reconciliation.

- **What will the Corinthians do? - 6:1-2**

- Having told the Corinthians what he does and what Christ and God have done Paul then lands his big appeal to the Corinthians - be reconciled to God! Their relationship with God's Apostle is not what it should be and so their relationship with God is not what it should be. Paul is worried that they might have received God's grace in vain (see the Tricky Bits below.) In some ways this appeal to be reconciled to God (and his Apostle) is the central appeal of the book. Consider passages such as 1:12-14, 5:12, 7:2-4.)

Tricky Bits

- **In what way was Paul out of his mind? (5:13)**
 - Broadly speaking there are two options;
 1. Paul was so zealous for Christ that people thought he was mad. This fits with Acts 26:24 where Festus accuses Paul of being out of his mind. It also fits with how Jesus' family viewed him (Mark 3:21.)
 2. Paul is referring to private ecstatic spiritual experiences. We know from 12:1 that the 'super-apostles' made a big deal of their experiences to legitimise their ministries. Paul also had such experiences (12:1-7) but Paul knows that they are meant to be kept private rather than be made public.
 - Whichever option you take we can be clear that Paul was in his 'right mind' as he ministered to the Corinthians. This again touches on a major repeated theme of how everything Paul does is for the benefit of the Corinthians (see for example 5:15 and 1:23-2:4.)
- **“Be reconciled to God... we urge you not to receive God's grace in vain.” Aren't they Christians already? Could they lose their salvation? (5:20-6:2.)**
 - Why is Paul imploring Corinthians to be reconciled to God? Calvin suggests that it is because we sin daily and so need to be daily reconciled to God. Whilst it is true that we do continue to sin as Christians and need to continually repent of our sin I don't think this is what Paul has in mind here.
 - Remember the context of this passage. The Corinthians are somewhat alienated from God's Apostle because of the Peddlers and they are tolerating another Jesus being preached to them (11:1-4.) Tied up with this is the great danger that they will walk away from the gospel message of reconciliation that Paul has just been explaining in 5:14-19.) Paul's concern is that, under the influence of the peddlers, the Corinthians will walk away from this message and therefore losing its benefits.
 - We need to hold this fearsome warning with Paul's confidence in the Corinthians (7:16.)
- **In what sense has the New Creation already come? (5:17)**
 - Again there are two options;
 1. Paul is referring to the individual Christian as a New Creation (see the NIV footnote.) In this case each individual Christian is a foretaste of the New Creation that is still to come.
 2. Paul is referring more broadly to the New Creation (as it is in the main body of the NIV text.) In this case Paul is saying that the New Creation is experienced now by faith. This might fit with what he was saying in 5:1-10.
 - Whichever way you take it there seem to be links with the previous section. Christians shouldn't be deceived by appearances. They may be weak and suffering, they may be outwardly wasting away, but inwardly they are being renewed day by day... (4:16-18.)
- **Is Paul saying that everyone will be saved (universalism) in 5:15 & 5:19?**
 - This cannot be what Paul is saying because if he were saying that everyone is saved then why would he feel the need to implore the Corinthians to “be reconciled to God.” I think the “all” in 5:14-15 refers to all Christians, all those out of the world who will respond to God's message of reconciliation. In Christ, God has provided the means of the world being reconciled to himself. Reconciliation requires both sides to come towards one another. God, in Christ, has done his part, the question is whether people will respond and move towards him.

Big Idea - Be reconciled to God and then live and speak in a way that helps other people experience this amazing blessing.

Applications

- **Be Reconciled to God**

- This is the vital and key application from this passage as we can see when we consider the strength of the language Paul uses and the way in which he builds up to the climax of 5:20-6:2. In many ways this is one of the big applications of the whole book. There will be some in our groups who have never actually received God's grace and they need to be urged to respond to Christ and receive the reconciliation and new birth that he offers. For others of us there is a danger that like the Corinthians we could become somewhat bored with the same old gospel of reconciliation through Christ. If that is us then there is a great danger that we might move away from the gospel and therefore miss out on its benefits. Let's examine ourselves afresh as we study this passage to see whether we really are in the faith (13:5.)

- **Live for God as his New Person**

- Jesus' death didn't just reconcile us to God, it also killed us. The old has gone and the new has come! We died with Christ and therefore we are to live our new life for him, compelled by his love and in reverent fear of standing before him. When we think of what God has done for us in Christ, how can we not live for him in every area of our lives?

- **Speak for God as his Ambassador**

- Whilst we are not Apostles like Paul we are still, to a lesser degree, God's ambassadors in the world and therefore we have been entrusted by God (through the Apostles and by the Spirit) with the message of reconciliation. We are God's ambassadors living in a foreign land who are to speak for our King to a world estranged from their creator telling them that today is the day to receive his wonderful offer of reconciliation.

Bible Study

Starter Question - When a relationship breaks down what needs to happen to bring the two parties back together?

Reconciliation is the big theme of this passage and so we want to begin by thinking about how we might go about reconciling, friends, spouses, siblings and colleagues etc who are alienated from each other. Any starter question or activity that gets us moving in this direction will do the job.

5:11-14

1. What does Paul do?

c) What's his motivation?

The combination of these verses with 5:20-6:2 help us to see that Paul tries to persuade everyone to be reconciled to God through Jesus. Paul's motivation is both that he is compelled by Christ's love (notice the "For" in v14) and a healthy fear of having to stand before Christ one day (5:10-11.)

2. How do you think this should shape our evangelism as individuals and as a church?

Like Paul we should renounce secret and shameful ways (4:2). We shouldn't use tactics or approaches that would displease God. Instead we should speak and act remembering that God sees everything (even our hearts). In this sense we should live for the approval of God and him alone.

5:14-17

3. How do you think Jesus death should change;

- a) Our attitude to ourselves?**
- b) Our behaviour?**
- c) Our attitude to others?**

This question jumps straight to application so you might want to add in a preceding question such as "How did Jesus' death change Paul?" The big thing we want to understand and apply is the idea that we died with Christ and we now belong to Christ (v14-15.) We are not our own, we were bought at a price, therefore we should seek to honour Christ with our bodies as we live and speak for him. Christ's death also transforms how we view other people (v16-17.) Part of repenting is repenting of our previous views not only of Christ but of other people. Perhaps before we looked on Christians as weak fools, now though we see that this isn't the whole truth.

5:18-20

4. What has God done for us through Jesus?

God has reconciled us to himself at great cost to himself and what's more he has then given us the ministry of proclaiming the gospel message of reconciliation. Be aware that it may take a bit of care to help people see that whilst we're not apostles we are still to be ambassadors for Christ though not in exactly the same way as the apostles.

5. How can we be Ambassadors for Christ as we go about our everyday lives?

We might be tempted to think that it's only overseas missionaries or church workers who are ambassadors for Christ. Yet we all live our day to day lives surrounded by people who are alienated from God and need the gospel message of reconciliation. In this sense we are all ambassadors. Try to encourage your group to talk about their day to day lives whether that is at home or at work. What could they do to be Christ's ambassadors as they live as colleagues, neighbours, spouses, parents etc Don't rush this question, I think it has the potential to be very helpful in applying the passage.

5:20-6:2

6. Why did the Corinthians need to be reconciled to God?

It's not that they hadn't apparently received God's grace already . The problem was that they were in danger of abandoning the gospel message of reconciliation through Jesus and so they were in danger of losing the benefits of the gospel.

7. In what ways might we be in danger of receiving God's grace in vain?

For some in our group who aren't Christians they need to be reconciled to God through Jesus. For those who are Christians the danger is that like the Corinthians we can slowly creep away from the gospel, moving our confidence from what Jesus has done and instead placing our confidence in ourselves.

a) How can we make sure that we don't receive God's grace in vain?

We need to keep examining ourselves and what we hear. We need to be very careful about what we listen to. The Corinthians were being enticed by what the pedlars were teaching. In our modern internet age when you can listen to all sorts of preachers from all over the world we need to be careful that we are taking in clear gospel teaching.

Small Group Notes

2 Corinthians 6:3-7:4

Context

This passage brings to a close a section that has run from 2:14-7:4. A number of themes have been central to this section.

- Paul's integrity in his ministry as God's servant. Paul's God-given ministry is the New Covenant ministry of reconciliation through the gospel (see 3:4-11, 5:21 and 6:3.) As Christ's Ambassadors Paul acts with integrity knowing that he is accountable to God (see 1:12-14, 2:17-3:1, 4:1-2, 5:11-12 and now 6:3.)
- Paul's deep love and concern for the Corinthians has motivated him in his dealings with them (see 1:23-2:4, 2:13, 3:2, 4:12 and now the repeated appeal of 6:11-13 and 7:2-4.)
- Paul's suffering for the sake of Christ and the Corinthians (see 1:3-11, 2:14, 4:8-9, 6:3-10 and then 11:23-33 and 12:10.)

Structure and Notes

At first the structure to this section is not necessarily apparent as Paul seems to move from his suffering (6:3-10) to his appeal to the Corinthians to open their hearts to him (6:11-13) to his appeal to them not to be yoked with unbelievers (6:14-7:1) before returning to his appeal to make room in their hearts for him (7:2-4.) The key to understanding the structure of this passage is to see how Paul's similar appeals in 6:11-13 and 7:2-4 bookend his appeal for holiness in 6:14-7:2 thus tying 6:11-7:4 together as one unit. We will consider the place of 6:14-7:1 further under Tricky Bits. Having recognised that 6:11-7:4 is one section based around Paul's appeals to the Corinthians we can then see that in 6:3-10 Paul is reminding them of his credentials as an Apostle. His appeals to them in 6:11-7:4 therefore come with the weight of God's Apostle. In this way we can see continuation with the previous verses (5:20-6:2.)

• **6:3-10 - Paul's Credentials as a Servant of God**

- v3-4 - Paul has already made clear that there is a close link between the message and the minister (5:18-19). As a result he is at pains to make sure that nothing in his life should detract from the gospel message.
- v4-10 - In these verses sets out the pattern for his ministry in a structured way;
- **v4c-5 - 9 Hardships** that Paul endures as a servant of God which can be broken down into 3 sets of 3s.
 - 1st Hardships associated with general suffering - "in great endurance, in troubles, hardships and distresses..."
 - 2nd Hardships endured at the hands of others - "in beatings, imprisonments and riots..."
 - 3rd Hardships endured as part of self-disciple - "in hard work, sleepless nights and hunger..."
- **v6-7b - 8 Qualities** of a Servant of God, each being introduced by "in..." - "in purity... .. in the power of God."
 - On these qualities Garland says;
"In summary, Paul assumes that the gospel is discredited by those ministers who are lustful, impure, ignorant, overbearing, indignant, rude, unkind, and hypocritical in their love, cultivating those whom they think can benefit them in some way. Such ministers have neither the Holy Spirit nor the power of God."

- **v7c-8b 3 Combinations** introduced by either “with” or “through” - “with weapons of righteousness... bad report and good report.”
- **v8c-10 - 7 pairs of contrasts** that express the experience of a servant with the repeated word “... yet ...” - “genuine yet regarded as unknown... having nothing, yet possessing everything.”
- Garland draws an interesting comparison between these verses and the Beatitudes of Matthew 5;

6:4–5 in troubles, hardships and distresses; in beatings, imprisonments and riots	Blessed are those persecuted for righteousness sake (Matt 5:10)
6:6 in purity	Blessed are the pure in heart (Matt 5:8)
6:8 through glory and dishonour, bad report and good report; genuine, yet regarded as impostors	Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me (Matt 5:11 / Luke 6:22)
6:10 sorrowful, yet always rejoicing	Blessed are those who mourn (Matt 5:4)
6:10 poor, yet making many rich; having nothing, and yet possessing everything	Blessed are the poor (Luke 6:20 / Matt 5:3)

Garland, D.E., 1999. *2 Corinthians*, Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

- **6:11-7:4 - Paul’s Appeal to the Corinthians as a Servant of God who loves them**
 - The appeals in these verses and in the previous passage (6:1-2) are Paul’s big applications in this section that has run from 2:14-7:4. We are therefore reaching the climax of what Paul has been saying.
 - **6:11-13 - Paul appeals for the Corinthians to show the same love and affection for him as he has shown for them.** He will return to this appeal in 7:2-4.
 - **6:14-7:1 - Paul appeals to the Corinthians to pursue holiness.**
 - *6:14 - “Do not be yoked together with unbelievers...”* All the rest of 6:14-7:1 hang off this summary appeal. Paul makes the same appeal positively at the end of this mini-section in 7:1.
 - This passage is normally applied to the issue of a Christian marrying a non-Christian but the application goes broader than this.
 - The background to this passage seems to be the idolatry and idol feasts that were prevalent in the city of Corinth and it’s pagan temple (v16). This had been an ongoing problem in the Corinthians church (1 Corinthians 8). Paul is therefore specifically calling the Corinthians to separate from the pagan cultic idolatry of the rest of the city. Paul is not banning all contact with non-Christians (see 1 Corinthians 5:9-10) nor is he saying that people who become Christians should automatically leave their non-Christian partners (1 Corinthians 7:12-16.)

Equally Paul is not talking about Christians separating from other Christians. Some people try and argue this from the reference to “Come out from them...” in v17 but this seems to ignore the wider context.

- v14-16 - The call to not be yoked with unbelievers in idol worship is then supported by a series of rhetorical questions that each make the same point - godliness and ungodliness don't mix.
- v16-18 - The point made by the rhetorical questions is then backed up by the use of several Old Testament promises that God makes to his people with regard to their holiness. (notice the use of 'For' in v14 and again in v16.)
- 7:1 - Paul repeats his appeal of 6:14 but this time does so positively by appealing for perfect holiness out of reverence for God.
- **7:2-4 - Paul's Summary Appeal**
 - v2 - *“Make room in your hearts...”*
 - Notice the repetition from 6:11 of the Corinthians opening/making room in their hearts for Paul.
 - Notice also the repetition of Paul's integrity that we saw at the beginning of this passage in 6:3-4. Paul is drawing all the key threads together as he makes his big appeal to the Corinthians.
 - Thirdly, notice how these repetitions act as bookends tying the whole passage together. Paul's appeal for them to embrace him and his appeal for them to be holy go together. If they embrace Paul as the Apostle then they will respond positively to his appeal for holiness.
 - v3-4 *“I do not say this to condemn you...”*
 - Considering the force of what Paul has said in the last few chapters and the bluntness of his appeal it is amazing to see once again Paul's love and concern for the Corinthians. Everything Paul says and does is for their benefit. As he makes these tough appeals to them he wants them to see that as God's servant he really is for them!
 - It is also striking how confident Paul is about the Corinthians. He is greatly encouraged by them which hints at the news that Titus has brought to Paul (7:5-16.)

Tricky Bits

- ***“How can Paul say ‘we commend ourselves...’ (6:4) when previously he had said, ‘we are not trying to commend ourselves to you again... (5:12)? Isn't that a bit hypocritical of Paul?***
 - The key here is to notice who Paul is commending himself to. In 6:4 and 4:2 he says that they commend themselves to everyone by their conduct as they carry out their ministry. In 5:12 there is a crucial difference because there he says that they are not trying to commend themselves to the Corinthians specifically. Paul is not boasting to the Corinthians as others seem to have (see 2:17-3:1). Instead Paul is saying that he lives his life in such a way as to endorse and not undermine the message he proclaims. In this way he will later argue that the Corinthians should commend him (12:11.)

- ***“How does not being yoked to unbelievers fit with opening wide their hearts to Paul?” What are 6:14-7:1 doing here?***
 - It is worth you knowing that many commentators go to great lengths debating whether or not these verses were originally here in 2 Corinthians. Some argue that these words were originally written by Paul but that they were not originally here at this point in the letter. Some argue that they were one of the previous letters from Paul to the Corinthians that we do not have. Other people suggest that this section was not even written by Paul and is a later addition.
 - I believe that this section was written by Paul here in chapter 6 and that it fits with the surrounding context.
 - Firstly as mentioned above the appeals of 6:11-13 and 6:14 are in many ways two sides of the same coin.
 - Secondly if Paul originally went straight from 6:13 to 7:2 then it would seem strange that he repeats himself as he does. The repetition of 7:2 makes sense because he is coming back to what he had said in 6:11-13.

Big Idea - Embrace Paul and his pattern of Christian service and holiness

Applications

- **Embrace Paul, his teaching and his pattern of Christian service**
 - We are not Apostles so we have to be careful how we apply 6:3-10. Having said this there is much in Paul’s example that we should seek to imitate including his love for the Corinthians, his willingness to suffer for the gospel, his purity and patience etc.
 - The primary application of this passage for the Corinthians was for them to embrace Paul and his teaching, that is still the big application today. Paul gets a bad press in many Christian circles and there are parts of his teaching that are uncomfortable yet he was an apostle commissioned by God and so, like the Corinthians, we should embrace Paul and what he says because of who he is.
- **Pursue holiness**
 - Again we are not in the same situation as the Corinthians. We do not live in a town where the entire social life of the town revolved around worship of idols in a pagan temple. Having said that, the call to pursue holiness and to purify ourselves is as clear and relevant for us today as it was for the Corinthians. God’s promises are just as true for us and so the motivation for purity should be just as strong.

Bible Study

Starter Question - None of us like receiving correction but we often find it easier to receive from some people rather than others. When are you more receptive to receiving correction?

With this starter question we are trying to do two things. Firstly we are raising the issue that Paul has some tough things to say to us and to the Corinthians. Secondly we want to begin to see that we are more likely to receive correction from people that love us and who are people of integrity and who live out what they say. This is exactly what we find in Paul in this passage.

Digging into 6:3-10

1. In what ways have Paul and his companions commended the gospel?

There probably will not be time to pick out and consider all the different things that Paul says in these verses. Perhaps the best thing to do is invite the group to pick out the things that they find most striking. If you wanted to help your group you might ask them the following supplementary questions; a) What had they experienced for Christ? b) What qualities have they displayed?

Applying 6:3-10

2. What picture of the Christian life emerges from these verses?

Again it won't be possible to consider everything and we have to be aware that we aren't the Apostle Paul. Nevertheless there is much in these verses that does describe the Christian life. You might like to focus particularly on v8-10 and the contrasts that capture something of how the Christian life can seem compared to how it really is.

Digging into 6:11-13 and 7:2-4

3. How would you describe Paul's relationship with the Corinthians?

Paul is full of love and concern for the Corinthians. He doesn't want to condemn them he just wants the best for them in everything. In contrast the Corinthians are holding back from Paul. They are doubting him. Paul speaks about them as his children. It's as if the Corinthians are teenagers who aren't seen keen on dad anymore because he's not cool enough any more.

Applying 6:11-13 and 7:2-4

4. What do you think it would have looked like for the Corinthians to open wide their hearts to Paul?

This is an important question. Instead of jumping straight to how these verses apply to us we need to think about how they applied to the original readers. Their relationship with Paul is slightly different to us so we need to be careful as we apply this. Hopefully from what we have seen in recent weeks we see that they Corinthians were distancing themselves from Paul because of the newcomers. Paul is urging them to have confidence in him and to receive his message and be reconciled to God.

5. What do you think it will look like for us to open wide our hearts to Paul, his teaching and his pattern for the Christian life?

Nowadays Paul often gets a bad press from many Christians who don't like certain aspects of his teaching. Similarly the description of the Christian life that Paul presents in 6:3-10 is not very appealing. The temptation is that we do not open our hearts to what God's apostle is saying. We need to remember who wrote these somewhat uncomfortable passages.

Digging into 6:14-7:1

6. What does Paul urge the Corinthians to do? (6:14 and 7:1.)

It's important to help the group see that this is not just about marriage. By considering the original context in Corinth we see that the issue was one of idols and the pagan temple (v16) we can then see that this is not just about marriage, it is a bigger and broader point.

7. Why is Paul so insistent on purity?

It's vital that we see and delight in the wonderful promises that God makes to his people in these Old Testament quotes. The living God promises to receive us and be our God and Father. We also need to remember who we already are in Christ. We are God's temple, we are righteous in Christ. When we see who we are and who God is it will motivate us to pursue purity with a passion.

Applying 6:14-7:1

8. The particular issue in Corinth was the immorality associated with idol feasts in the pagan temple. This is probably not a particular issue for any of us. In what areas is the battle for purity fiercest for us?

Here's the tough but vital application question. We don't like to talk about our struggles and failings, especially in a large group and yet if we are to help and spur one another towards godliness and purity then we need grapple with what it will mean for us to pursue purity. To help the group do this you might like to break into smaller groups or even in pairs to apply these verses and then to pray for one another.