

# SMALL GROUP GUIDE

## 2 CORINTHIANS OUR WEAKNESS & GOD'S STRENGTH

## **2 CORINTHIANS 01/04: TATTERED TREASURE**

Do you know anyone who writes real letters? I'm not talking about birthday cards or sticky notes to let your mom know you're going to be late. I am talking about a real letter that requires time, paper, a pen, and a stamp. Isn't there something so special about a real letter in this age of texting and email?

Letters are special. Letters are personal. Letters are meaningful. That's why the Apostle Paul wrote so many to the churches he helped plant. He loved them, cared for them, and wanted the best for them. This study will explore the second letter Paul wrote to the Corinthian church. Fortunately for us, these letters are packed full of spiritual power despite the Corinthians' complex problems. Every scribbled word was designed to help them grow into the people God deeply desired them to become. Likewise, God has the same heart for you. So, these words are not just for ancient people in pews made of marble. Every single word will draw you closer and closer to Jesus.

In the bustling streets of Corinth, a thriving church was busting at the seams. Paul helped start it, but things went off the rails when he left. They began to infuse pagan customs with their faith, and this caused division within the congregation. Paul wrote First Corinthians to set them straight. In Second Corinthians, the tone is much more gentle, while still stern. Paul was stern because he knew the dangers of pride, which still seemed to pollute the people of this church. They had seen great success and had let it get to their heads.

Like an artist, Paul wanted to chisel away at their spiritual rough edges and push them toward a life of service and generosity—ensuring their hearts didn't succumb to the siren song of selfishness. Paul saw great potential in these people and offered them a reality check.

Have you ever had a reality check? You know, those times when you realize that the truth may be a little more complicated than you thought? Maybe you performed well but still didn't get the athletic scholarship. Maybe you crushed the interview but still didn't get your dream job. Maybe you realize you're not as mature as you once thought when you look back at your actions. Reality checks are hard. That is what the Apostle Paul wanted to give the Corinthians.

Do you know how the kids who misbehave seem to spend the most time with the principal? Well, Paul wrote more to the Corinthians than any other church for similar reasons. They were constantly making foolish decisions, disregarding his kind advice,

and getting called to his proverbial office. Second Corinthians was written less than a year after First Corinthians. So, did they listen? At first glance, it looks like they still have a lot to learn. Paul pointed out that they had grown prideful and allowed division between classes to define their fellowship, and this ultimately created division (2 Corinthians 6).

Paul needed to help them see their intrinsic design as humble servants, not spotlighted celebrities. Since pride was becoming such a problem, he penned Second Corinthians to help them wrestle with their limitations. Simply put, we have no idea how limited we really are in this life. However, our limitations are invitations for God to fill in the gaps. God sees the gap between our ability and our inability and gives us His strength for the space between. To quote Paul writing to his friends in Corinth, “That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties.” (2 Corinthians 12:10). Take a look at how the Apostle Paul discusses our lives in chapter 4. This passage gives us two principles to help us understand our weaknesses against the backdrop of God's strength.

**READ: 2 Corinthians 4:7-18**

“But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. We are hard-pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that his life may also be revealed in our mortal body. So then, death is at work in us, but life is at work in you.”

**You Are Flawed Yet Formed**

Paul simply wanted the Corinthians to understand that they were not as self-sufficient as they thought. Sure, God had been good to them. Sure, they had wealth. Sure, the church was booming. However, allowing those blessings to become pride was a major mistake. Everything they cherished was a gift from God. At their core, they were flawed. Paul wanted them to see that the secret to even more spiritual success was understanding that they needed to accept their shortcomings and surrender to God's power. Why? Because our God brings purpose to our imperfections.

In Second Corinthians, Paul uses a recurring metaphor, calling us “jars of clay.” Talk about a perplexing illustration. I am sure you've been called some funny things, but have you ever been called a jug made of dirt? That's what Paul calls you.

What does he mean by that? Humans are delicate. Jars of clay are brittle, fragile, and easy to shatter. They're temporary, too, as they will eventually return to the dirt, where they will break down to rejoin the soil. As a human, you are fragile, cracked, and will eventually end up in the ground. This is the reality check the Corinthians desperately needed.

At first, this may seem insulting, but let me offer you another perspective. Personally, I collect ceramics and art. Whenever I travel to a new place, I always strive to find a piece of pottery to add to my growing collection of flower vases, coffee cups, decorative bowls, and quirky sculptures. When exploring galleries, I always value the pieces with extra personality. They have slight imperfections. They are slightly warped. They are not perfectly aligned. Why do I do this? I want it to be obvious the items are homemade and not purchased from Target.

Paul does not want us to loathe ourselves, not at all. Rather, he wants us to understand the source of our worth. We must recognize our limitations and vulnerabilities and see them as divine signatures from our Creator. Like slight imperfections on a piece of pottery, they give us personality and character and help us stand out from all the others.

Are we tragically flawed? Yes, you bet. However, we are also intentionally formed. God has carefully shaped and formed each one of us with distinct talents, personalities, and experiences. Maybe God allowed you to have that learning disability to help you see His strength at work in your life. Maybe God allowed your talents to not land you a starting position because He wants you to use your time for Him. God sees every imperfection as a place to reveal His power through our surrender.

### **We Are Tattered but Treasured:**

When we hear "jars of clay," we do not have much context for that. Most of the jugs and jars in your house are decorative. They house things like keys, and plastic flowers. Interestingly, that is probably not what came to mind for Paul's audience. When they thought of large jars, they thought of ancient piggy banks. Without an organized banking system, they stored their money in clay pots hidden throughout their homes. I believe this illustration is intentional.

Ancient piggy banks were not the goofy, bright pink, unblemished piggy banks we see today. They were used and abused. They had cracks, chips, and imperfections.

Honestly, they were likely designed to be buried. Yet, despite their wear and tear, these jars served a crucial purpose—they safeguarded something valuable. Archeologists have unearthed clay pots containing hundreds to thousands of precious coins around the area near Corinth.

Historians, such as those at the Aydın Museum, suggest that hoarding precious coins, jewels, and valuables in clay pots was part of the Greco-Roman culture. The practice was so common that Jesus told a parable about a man who found such a jar of coins and sold all his possessions to buy the field where it was buried to attain the rights to the treasure (Matthew 13:44). The Greek word for treasure used by Jesus is the same word that Paul used in 2 Corinthians 4:7. They seem to be talking about the same thing. So, this may as well be a treasure chest.

In the same way, Paul says that we are like these crumbling jars. Our lives may display proof of struggle and pain, but a treasure resides within us—the Holy Spirit. Your weakness does not disqualify you. Instead, it serves as a canvas for God’s strength and grace to be displayed. May you embrace your identity as “flawed yet formed” and “tattered but treasured.” You may seem plain to others, but you contain something precious to God.



A coin hoard stored in a clay jar at the Aydın Museum. Photo: Mark Wilson.

## TALK IT OUT

*Go through these questions with your circle. Be honest. Be open. Talk through the tough stuff.*

Ice Breaker: Go around your circle and share this week's highs and lows. What was the best part of your week, and what was the lowest part of your week?

Q1: What's one thing that stood out to you from today's message?

Q2: The Corinthians were serving Jesus in amazing ways, but they struggled with pride. Why do you think Paul saw their pride as a problem that needed to be addressed?

Q3: Do you tend to rely on God more when life is great or when you are facing hardship? Why do you think that is?

Q4: What does it mean to be a "jar of clay" according to this passage?

Q5: Once you recognize your shortcomings or need for God, how can you rely on Him?

Application: Think about an area in your life where you tend to rely on your own strength instead of seeking God's help. How can you shift your perspective and invite Him into that area?

## READING PLAN

*READ THESE PASSAGES IN ORDER EVERY DAY*

2 Corinthians 1:1-11

2 Corinthians 1:12-24

2 Corinthians 2:1-11

2 Corinthians 2:12-17

2 Corinthians 3:1-6

2 Corinthians 3:7-18

2 Corinthians 4:1-6

Do the following with each passage:

ASK– God to connect with you here. In prayer, start by slowing down and inviting God to be present. Begin with focus and openness to see what God has for you today.

READ– the selected section of Scripture slowly. Take note of the words and phrases that intrigue you, reading them a second time if necessary.

REFLECT– on what grabs you. How does this passage personally relate to your own life and experiences?

RESPOND– to the Scripture. Speak directly to God about what's on your mind and heart. Look for ways to live out what you've uncovered.

## 2 CORINTHIANS 02/04: **SPIRITUAL SORROW**

While most of First Corinthians is harsh, there are sections of Second Corinthians that are downright wholesome. Paul is proud of his people. As he continues to write, he points out that they have made progress and gotten their lives right. And then, he points out just how happy that made him. Paul was a proud pastor.

Have you ever had a conversation with someone who cared about you, but their words still managed to sting? We have all been there. Maybe someone pointed out your faults. Maybe they said that you are changing. They may have even told you that you need to get your life back on track. Yes, those words cut, but they're from a place of care. Paul felt that tension in his writing. He goes as far as to say, "Even if I caused you sorrow by my letter, I do not regret it. Though I did regret it—I see that my letter hurt you, but only for a little while" (2 Corinthians 7:8-9). Paul understands that harsh words can cultivate holiness and happiness. Thus, he had no problem sharing harsh words. Let's take a look at how he explained his perspective.

### **READ: 2 Corinthians 7:8-12**

"Even if I caused you sorrow by my letter, I do not regret it. Though I did regret it—I see that my letter hurt you, but only for a little while—yet now I am happy, not because you were made sorry, but because your sorrow led you to repentance. For you became sorrowful as God intended and so were not harmed in any way by us. Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death. See what this godly sorrow has produced in you: what earnestness, what eagerness to clear yourselves, what indignation, what alarm, what longing, what concern, what readiness to see justice done. At every point, you have proved yourselves to be innocent in this matter. So even though I wrote to you, it was neither on account of the one who did the wrong nor on account of the injured party, but rather that before God you could see for yourselves how devoted to us you are."

Healthy confrontation creates transformation. You have likely seen this play out all over your life. You must be made aware of a problem in order to do anything about it.

A few years back, my doctor sat me down for an awkward and uncomfortable conversation. With concern, she cleared her throat and said, "You have to get your life together. You will not stay well if you do not make drastic changes." My too-large

stomach twisted into knots. I felt called out, challenged, and defensive. I was embarrassed and honestly considered switching doctors.

However, she was right. I needed to make changes, and I am thankful she was willing to have the tough talk. We started a plan to get my health under control. At first, I hated our visits. They'd weigh me, check my vitals, and comment on the still-concerning condition of my health. However, as I put in the work, making significant strides in diet, exercise, and decision-making, something shifted. Now, I actually like going to the doctor.

My doctor didn't call me out because she was angry; she did it because she cared. She wanted something better for me, and now I am experiencing the joy of what she pressed me toward. I have completely transformed my health with the help of a medical team, years of hard work, and too much spinach. Think of a doctor talking to a patient they are deeply concerned for, and that's the nature of Paul's letters to the Corinthians. He shares caring concerns, uncomfortable conversations, and specific solutions—all aimed at life change.

So, why do these tense talks transform us? Healthy confrontation allows us to see our current condition. We must first be aware of our problem before we can make any changes. That's why Paul felt the need to call the Corinthians out in his first letter. He knew they needed change. However, there was hope in every harsh word on the page. Paul knew they were capable of change. That's why he was talking to them in the first place. Healthy confrontation offers hope for a better tomorrow. Though it may seem hard at the moment, momentum comes one small step of obedience at a time.

This was certainly true for my doctor's visits. As I saw my numbers improve and gained more control over my health, I felt encouraged and hopeful for a brighter future. The same goes for Paul's letters—his harsh-yet-hope-filled words showed the Corinthians that better days were ahead if they were willing to put in the work required for lasting transformation. He broke it down by examining three things we experience when confronted with our sins: sorrow, repentance, and salvation.



## **Sin Leads to Sorrow**

In this passage, Paul expresses both regret and rejoicing regarding the sorrow his previous letter caused his friends in Corinth. They felt bad. They felt sorry. They felt like they had let their pastor down. Sure, they were filled with sorrow, but Paul says their sorrow was not designed to harm but to heal. He explains, “Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death” (2 Corinthians 7:10).

What does he mean by that? When you have “godly sorrow,” you feel remorse about the ways your decisions are hurting yourself, harming others, and going against God’s design. However, it’s not the same as shame. Paul points out that God-given sorrow leads to life, and world-given sorrow leads to death. So, conviction is life-giving, but condemnation is life-taking. When we observe a necessary change in our lives, we must ensure that our conviction leads us to change and not shame.

In our lives, we often encounter reality-check moments that bring natural discomfort and sorrow. It could be a friend pointing out a harmful habit or a mentor challenging our choices. Instead of succumbing to shame, recognize that these moments are expressions of genuine care. Godly sorrow is distinct: it aims not to condemn but to guide toward positive change.

Anyone brave enough to have those conversations with you is worth keeping around. Praise God for friends who are willing to have tough talks, just as Paul desired the Corinthians to be aware of their need for change and embrace the discomfort as an opportunity for transformation.

## **Godly Sorrow Leads to Repentance**

Think about a time when you faced corrective advice or feedback. Maybe a teacher pointed out a mistake, or a parent shared worries. The initial discomfort often gives way to reflection and a desire for change. This is the core of godly sorrow. Paul highlights that the sorrow he caused the Corinthians led them to repentance, a turning away from the old ways.

Similarly, when we embrace godly sorrow, it propels us toward a positive shift in behavior. It’s not about dwelling in guilt but redirecting our path toward righteousness.

Consider the areas in your life where godly sorrow can bring about repentance. Maybe it's acknowledging the need for forgiveness in a strained relationship or addressing laziness that hinders your spiritual growth. Embrace the transformative power of godly sorrow and conviction, recognizing that they lead to a renewed life.

### **Then, Repentance Leads to Salvation**

Some people may associate sorrow and repentance with shame and condemnation. Paul disagrees. He emphasizes that godly sorrow brings repentance. What does repentance bring? Salvation.

Repentance, in its truest form, is a change of mind that leads you to turn toward Christ in surrender. When God calls us to “repent,” He’s simply asking us to return to Him. Repentance is a homecoming where we change our minds and turn back to God for help.

It’s important to understand that repentance is not a one-time event. Rather, it’s a continual process of turning away from sin and turning toward God. As we experience godly sorrow and embrace repentance, we are setting ourselves up for spiritual growth and setting ourselves free from spiritual apathy.

Your journey with Jesus lasts forever. It’s a life-long process of becoming more like Christ. Through salvation, we’re given the gift of eternal life with God, which also transforms our present life. We become happier because we live a life that serves others. We become healthier because we live a life free of destructive patterns. We become holier because we are letting God mold us each and every moment.

As we close, how is God trying to mold you in this moment? Take an honest look at your life, decisions, and situation, and ask, “God, what do I need to change?” Then, let the tough talk begin.

Thank God for tough talks. Praise Jesus for painful corrections. They mold us into the people God intended us to be. Embrace His ongoing transformation. As the Corinthians made Paul proud through their godly sorrow and repentance, may you find the joy of putting God’s corrections into action.

## **TALK IT OUT**

*Go through these questions with your circle. Be honest. Be open. Talk through the tough stuff.*

Ice Breaker: Go around your circle and share this week's highs and lows. What was the best part of your week, and what was the lowest part of your week?

Q1: What's one thing that stood out to you from today's message?

Q2: Think about a time when you received corrective advice or feedback. How did it initially make you feel? Did it lead to any positive changes in your life?

Q3: How does godly sorrow differ from dwelling in shame?

Q4: What does "repentance" mean?

Q5: How does cultivating an ongoing mindset of repentance contribute to your spiritual growth?

Q6: Are there any destructive behaviors in your life that you need to turn away from? How can we support each other while we break these cycles?

Q7: In what ways has surrendering to Christ brought positive changes in your life?

Application: Who is one person in your life you can trust to give you godly guidance? Pray about asking them to become your mentor this week.

## **READING PLAN**

*READ THESE PASSAGES IN ORDER EVERY DAY*

2 Corinthians 4:7-18

2 Corinthians 5:1-10

2 Corinthians 5:11-15

2 Corinthians 5:16-21

2 Corinthians 6:1-10

2 Corinthians 6:11-18

2 Corinthians 7:1-8

Do the following with each passage:

ASK– God to connect with you here. In prayer, start by slowing down and inviting God to be present. Begin with focus and openness to see what God has for you today.

READ– the selected section of Scripture slowly. Take note of the words and phrases that intrigue you, reading them a second time if necessary.

REFLECT– on what grabs you. How does this passage personally relate to your own life and experiences?

RESPOND– to the Scripture. Speak directly to God about what's on your mind and heart. Look for ways to live out what you've uncovered.

## 2 CORINTHIANS 03/04: **BOUNTIFUL BLESSINGS**

People tend to be harsh on the Corinthian church because their reputation was notorious for immorality and debauchery. However, Paul also knew them for their generosity. For context, Corinth was a very wealthy city with a booming economy. Historically, we understand they helped fund much of Paul's mission work, housed many traveling missionaries, and became major contributors to the gospel's spread. They even came together to help collect an offering designed to support persecuted believers in Jerusalem. Toward the middle of his letter, Paul reminds them not to forsake their generous spirit.

Generosity used to be hard for me. When I first moved out of the comfort of my mom's house to start a new life seven hundred miles away, I had no idea how obvious that character flaw would become. Cash problems made me crazy. Paying rent made me red in the face. I would snap at people for refusing coupons. I would regurgitate rude statements to my newlywed wife whenever she returned from Target. I found myself in a downward spiral at the kitchen table while opening our cell phone bill.

In 2016, my unhealthy relationship with money became both apparent and appalling. Unpaid bills stacked up. Debt seemed insurmountable. I spent too much money on French cheeses. These avoidable issues bred numerous fights and sleepless nights. Something had to give if I was going to fully live.

Let me be vulnerably honest. I was greedy. We often assume that greed is reserved for the wealthy. Images of Scrooge McDuck swimming in a pool filled with gold coins cross my mind, but that's not how it looks. That picture is far from the truth. Anyone can struggle with greed. Some of the wealthiest people in the world are the most generous, whereas I was in the lowest tax bracket but lived like Ebenezer Scrooge. I was a stressed wreck, and money was often the cause. When you uncover your stressors, you also pinpoint the places where you lack trust. I didn't have a money problem—I had a trust problem. I failed to trust God with my finances, which ultimately led to an inescapable feeling of emptiness.

I was a pastor who didn't give to the church. It makes me tremble to admit that, but it's true. Justification wasn't hard. "I give a lot of time to the church; I don't need to give my money, too," I would reassure myself during my long drives home. "God doesn't need my money, anyway," I would recite while spending the money I should have been tithing. I desperately needed a new way to approach finances.

The Holy Spirit spoke to me in September of that year, not through a loud voice from heaven but from the passenger seat of my car. He spoke through my wife. “We really should start giving to the church,” she calmly suggested. Immediately, conviction hit me like a pile of gold bricks.

This was an intervention moment. That night, we wrote a likely-to-bounce tithe check to the church and dropped it on the plate the next morning. We hardly had enough money to cover the bills after that, but we knew it was the right thing to do. The next week, a generous gentleman randomly wrote me a check for twice the amount of our tithe check. This was God’s way of saying, “You can trust me. I got you.” As we have grown in our generosity, God has never failed to provide for our family. The more we seem to give, the more He seems to provide.

Take a look at how Paul describes the principle of generosity in Second Corinthians chapter nine.

**READ: 2 Corinthians 9:6-8**

“Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to bless you abundantly, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work.”

While Paul was proud of how far the Corinthians had come, there were still places where they were harboring their old ways. Specifically, their pride had allowed them to be stingy despite being one of the wealthiest congregations in the world. For context, the Corinthians had previously agreed to contribute a large donation to persecuted Christians in Jerusalem. With the kindness and sternness of a spiritual father, Paul raises the issue with them, encouraging them to embrace godly generosity (2 Corinthians 9:5).

In the next section, when discussing generosity, Paul leverages the illustration of sowing and reaping. This language jumped off the pages for the farmers sitting in the pews of the Corinthian church. Many of the men in the service had dirt under their fingernails from their exhausting morning in the fields. They understood that they had to invest in seeds and labor in order to produce a crop to feed their families.

Harvest requires sacrifice. If a farmer stores up all his seeds in a vault and refuses to plant them, he won’t have a harvest. His family won’t have any food. The same is true for

you. If you have a need, consider planting a seed. This passage promises that you won't just receive what you give. You will receive more than you give. Don't think of this like a money-back guarantee; rather, think of it as a guide for life. You get what you give. If you need love in life, share love with others. If you need kindness, be kind to others. If you need encouragement, encourage others. If you want God's blessings, actively choose to bless others. The same is true in our finances. If you sow generosity, you will reap generosity.

This isn't because God wants to take money from your bank account; rather, He wants to take greed out of your heart. Generosity proves that God is our top priority. Greed is a curse, and generosity is the cure. Here are three gifts that God gives us when we give to others.

### **Authentic Joy**

We often think happiness is found in a new pair of shoes, a nice car, or a few extra zeros at the end of our bank statement. That is far from the case. All of those things are nice, but they won't bring us true joy.

It's easy to become consumed by an obsession with "more." More money. More clothes. More stuff. Don't fall for it. True fulfillment lies in acts of generosity. Paul says, "God loves a cheerful giver" (2 Cor. 9:7). Simply put, giving makes you happy. This means that genuine happiness cannot be found in material possessions or temporary pleasures; it is uncovered through acts of kindness and generosity.

### **Abundant Harvest**

Paul used the analogy of sowing and reaping to convey the principle of generosity. Farmers need to plant good seeds to have good food on the table. We must do the same in our lives. However, this investment is attached to a promise.

Paul promised the Corinthians that God would "bless them abundantly" when they gave. When we give, God gives back. This does not mean giving is like a gamble, where we treat God like a slot machine. We don't give because we want a return on our investment. That's a backward way to approach generosity. Think of it like this. God has given you everything you have.

From the roof over your head to the money in your banking app, God has given it all to you. Since God has given you so much, shouldn't generosity be your natural response? The promised reward is just a bonus.

## **Awareness of Your Priorities**

Paul knew something significant. Generosity is the secret to clarity when it comes to your priorities. Do you struggle to be generous? You may struggle with greed. Are you taking all of this in and assuming it doesn't apply to you at all? You may struggle with pride. Giving measures our priorities because it shows if we own our stuff or if our stuff owns us.

You can put your trust in your bank account, or you can put your trust in God. One can change within a moment, and the other hasn't changed for all human history. The correct choice is obvious: just trust God. It's impossible to pursue greed while also pursuing God. Your hope is in your savior, not your savings. Your security is in God, not greed.

Your life is a field ready for planting, and every act of generosity is a seed that you sow. Just as a farmer invests in the promise of a harvest, your investments contain the promises of God. He will bless you. He will give you joy. He will help you become more aware of your priorities.

What seeds will you plant? What harvest do you desire? What investment do you need to make? Get out there and get planting! Whoever sows generously will also reap generously.

**NOTE:** THIS BIBLE STUDY WAS ADAPTED FROM AN EARLIER SERIES "CALLED DUCKS IN A ROW." THE ILLUSTRATION AND TEXT ARE THE SAME, BUT THE POINTS HAVE BEEN ADJUSTED TO CONTAIN MORE CULTURAL BACKGROUND FOR A STUDY ON 2 CORINTHIANS.

## TALK IT OUT

*Go through these questions with your circle. Be honest. Be open. Talk through the tough stuff.*

Ice Breaker: Go around your circle and share this week's highs and lows. What was the best part of your week, and what was the lowest part of your week?

Q1: What's one thing that stood out to you from today's message?

Q2: Who is the most generous person you know? What are they like?

Q3: What does Paul promise the Corinthians will receive when they give?

Q4: Why should generosity be a natural response to God's blessings?

Q5: How does developing a heart of generosity contribute to our overall purpose and happiness?

Application: Choose one person or organization that you can be generous toward this week. It could be a friend in need, a local charity, or even a stranger you encounter. Take intentional steps to sow seeds of generosity and make note of the joy that comes from generosity.

## READING PLAN

*READ THESE PASSAGES IN ORDER EVERY DAY*

2 Corinthians 7:9-16

2 Corinthians 8:1-9

2 Corinthians 8:10-15

2 Corinthians 8:16-24

2 Corinthians 9:1-7

2 Corinthians 9:8-15

2 Corinthians 10:1-6

Do the following with each passage:

ASK– God to connect with you here. In prayer, start by slowing down and inviting God to be present. Begin with focus and openness to see what God has for you today.

READ– the selected section of Scripture slowly. Take note of the words and phrases that intrigue you, reading them a second time if necessary.

REFLECT– on what grabs you. How does this passage personally relate to your own life and experiences?

RESPOND– to the Scripture. Speak directly to God about what's on your mind and heart. Look for ways to live out what you've uncovered.



## 2 CORINTHIANS 04/04: **THORNS AS TEACHERS**

Second Corinthians needs context. Not understanding it would be like going to a music festival and staying in your car. Sure, you'll get a feel for what went down from the sound echoing into your window, people chatting in the parking lot, and your friends flexing on social media. However, imagine how much better it'd be if you got closer. Context allows us to get closer and better experience the meaning behind Paul's epistle.

Jerusalem, the capital city of Judea, was experiencing a devastating famine, which had a significant impact on the people of Corinth due to their deep love for the Jerusalem church and their economic role as trade partners. As people faced starvation, struggles, and even death, believers found themselves abandoned by both their government and their fellow citizens. It was in this context that Paul sought to empathize with his suffering friends and share a powerful example of his own weakness and how God's strength showed up in it.

There is so much beauty in the Christian life. However, like a beautiful rose, it will inevitably have painful thorns. Speaking of roses makes me think about the time I saw the world's most beautiful rose garden in one of the world's most beautiful cities. I adore Paris. It's part city and part art museum. Every breath you take is filled with the aroma of flowers, chocolate, and vehicle exhaust. Every step stumbles you onto a new architectural marvel. Plus, have you ever had a croissant? Minus the filthy side streets and insane crime rate, Paris is nearly perfect.

When traveling in Paris one spring semester, a step stumbled me into the Gardens of Bagatelle. This garden is often considered one of the best rose displays in the world. This charming garden, located in the Bois de Boulogne Park, boasts a stunning collection of over 1,200 varieties of roses.

My favorite area of the park by far was the Bagatelle Rose Tunnel. It's a fragrant passage through a beautiful technicolor tunnel packed with climbing roses. During that trip, my favorite tunnel attacked me. While walking through the captivating corridor one afternoon, I pressed against the wall to take a quick selfie. (Don't judge me—my shirt matched that part of the wall.) While pulling away, my arm got snagged on a cute yellow rose. Suddenly, I felt a prick of pain, and a small pool of red formed on my forearm.

“How can something so beautiful make me bleed?” I asked myself.

Paul knew the pain. When closing out his letter to the Corinthians, Paul explained, “In order to keep me from becoming conceited, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me” (2 Corinthians 12:7). Just like a thorn that pricks our skin, our struggles and challenges can cause pain. However, in the midst of life’s most painful challenges, we can learn valuable truths from the thorns.

**READ: 2 Corinthians 12:5-10**

I will boast about a man like that, but I will not boast about myself, except about my weaknesses. Even if I should choose to boast, I would not be a fool, because I would be speaking the truth. But I refrain, so no one will think more of me than is warranted by what I do or say, or because of these surpassingly great revelations. Therefore, in order to keep me from becoming conceited, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

**Thorns make great teachers.**

In this passage, the Apostle Paul opens up about the metaphorical thorn in his flesh. Paul’s transparency about his weakness demonstrates that even the most devoted followers of Christ face trials. His experience reveals that thorns are not just sources of pain but opportunities for growth and transformation.

The Apostle Paul explains to his friends the presence of a “thorn in the flesh” as a constant reminder of his weakness. As we have discussed, our weaknesses create space for God’s strength to manifest. Furthermore, despite pleading for the removal of his thorn, Paul receives a profound response from God: “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Corinthians 12:9). Paul’s limitations taught him a lesson. He needed to rely on God alone, and he needed this thorn to keep him reliant on God.

God knows you, so He allows thorns to teach you. The Apostle Paul found supernatural strength through surrendering to God and accepting that the thorn was part of God's plan for him. That didn't matter, though. God's grace was sufficient. May we, too, find the same comfort: "[God's] grace is sufficient for you" (2 Corinthians 12:9).

### **Thank God for your thorns.**

Paul explained, "Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Corinthians 12:10). While the thorn was unpleasant, he still praised God for it. He saw that the struggle kept him closer to the God of salvation. Thank God for thorns. They remind you of your reliance on Him.

Paul reveals the nature of our spiritual thorns here. They are designed to constantly remind us of our human vulnerability and God's capability. In Paul's ministry, he helped heal the sick, raise the dead, and give sight to the blind by the power of God. But, he was still stuck with this perplexing pain despite God's power constantly on display nearly every day. Thank God for thorns. They remind you of your limitations.

Just like Paul, we all have thorns in our lives that remind us of our weaknesses. These thorns can be physical, emotional, or mental and come in various forms. Whatever our thorns may be, we must learn to thank God for them. Your struggles are not in vain. God is using them to train you. If it feels like too much, rely on God's strength. You will be able to push through. Thank God for thorns. They keep you closer to Jesus.

Owning our shortcomings is not just about accepting our weaknesses but embracing them. Thanking God for our thorns is not an easy thing to do. It requires humility, surrender, and faith. But when we do, God brings strength to our weakness. It's about recognizing that our flaws and imperfections do not limit us if God is within us. Lean on God. A thorn in your flesh may be just what you need to grow more reliant on the Spirit.

Paul's letter to the Corinthians should fill you with hope. As humans, we are weak. However, we serve a strong God. You are limited, but God is unlimited. You may need to make sacrifices, but God provides everything you need. You may feel pain in this life,

but God brings beauty from brokenness. So, if you have been feeling weak, you are in good company. Like Paul, allow God to fill in the gaps of your weakness with his strength. His might is right with you. Surrender to it and watch what God can do.

## TALK IT OUT

*Go through these questions with your circle. Be honest. Be open. Talk through the tough stuff.*

Ice Breaker: Go around your circle and share this week's highs and lows. What was the best part of your week, and what was the lowest part of your week?

Q1: What's one thing that stood out to you from today's message?

Q2: Paul prayed for God to remove his thorn, but God never did. How do you think that made Paul feel? What did he do in response?

Q3: After Paul pleads for God to remove the thorn, God says, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." What do you think this means in this context?

Q4: In what ways can our struggles and limitations draw us closer to God?

Q5: Are there any pain points in your life that require you to rely on God? How has that impacted your faith?

Application: Commit to journaling about your weaknesses and challenges this week. Reflect on how they have shaped your journey with God, seek gratitude, and ask God where they are taking you.

## READING PLAN

*READ THESE PASSAGES IN ORDER EVERY DAY*

2 Corinthians 10:7-18

2 Corinthians 11:1-15

2 Corinthians 11:16-23

2 Corinthians 11:24-33

2 Corinthians 12:1-10

2 Corinthians 12:11-21

2 Corinthians 13

Do the following with each passage:

ASK– God to connect with you here. In prayer, start by slowing down and inviting God to be present. Begin with focus and openness to see what God has for you today.

READ– the selected section of Scripture slowly. Take note of the words and phrases that intrigue you, reading them a second time if necessary.

REFLECT– on what grabs you. How does this passage personally relate to your own life and experiences?

RESPOND– to the Scripture. Speak directly to God about what's on your mind and heart. Look for ways to live out what you've uncovered.