I. Introduction and Structure

In this lesson, we come to Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians. As with the Thessalonian congregation, we have the opportunity here to infer how a first-century Christian church reacted to an apostolic epistle.

A. First Nine Chapters

The first nine chapters of 2 Corinthians seem to be very positive, particularly in comparison with the perplexing set of problems that Paul had to address in his first epistle; and we may infer that the Corinthians reacted largely positively to Paul’s various commands, and made substantial improvement in their walk with the Lord. Chapters 8 and 9, at first glance, seem unrelated to anything previous in the letter, but unpack the brief remarks that Paul made in 1 Corinthians 16:1-4 about the collection for the needy Christians in Jerusalem.

B. Chapters 10 through 13

Chapters 10-13 seem to have a quite different tone than any of the nine chapters that precede them, as Paul suddenly leaves his conciliatory tone and in no uncertain terms very sharply warns the Corinthians against accepting the advances of false teachers who have infiltrated their midst. These three quite different parts of 2 Corinthians have led scholars to propose a variety of hypotheses to explain their relationship. In more critical or skeptical scholarly circles, there have been various proposals of multiple letters collected together at some early point in Christian history and put on one scroll, which then has come to be known as 2 Corinthians.
There are even questions about the sequence of these various portions of 2 Corinthians if, in fact, the idea of partitioning into multiple letters be adopted as a possibility. Some, for example, would argue that chapters 10-13 form an intermediate letter that preceded the writing of 2 Corinthians, when they had not yet responded as positively to Paul’s initial teaching of 1 Corinthians. Others keep chapters 10-13 where they are but imagine them following the sending of chapters 1-9, after Paul later learns that false teachers—Judaizers, of a kind similar to what we saw as we discussed Paul’s letter to the Galatians—had come to town and were troubling the church afresh.

More conservatively, we may imagine chapters 10-13 simply being written after a pause in Paul’s dictation of the letter. It was common in the ancient world for letters to be dictated orally to an amanuensis, or to a scribe, often over a several-day period of time, not unlike the way some people even write letters today—even when they write by themselves but put it aside and then continue it a bit later.

It may well be that the Corinthian church had made great strides in improving in many areas, but that there was one area that prominently still figured in Paul’s need to address what they were lacking—namely, issues of financial stewardship, thus accounting for the sequence of chapters 1-9; and that in between his dictation of these chapters and his completion of the letter, fresh news arrived to Paul suggesting that new trouble was afoot in Corinth.

C. Chapter 2:14-7:4

There are still other problems that scholars have found in trying to analyze the somewhat disjointed structure of 2 Corinthians: 2:14-7:4 seems to be a major digression. Paul has been talking about his travels, the fact that he has now left Ephesus, he has made it to Macedonia, he will shortly be arriving in Corinth again—information incidentally which all helps us to date this epistle to approximately the year 56, just after Paul’s three-year ministry in Ephesus as part of his third missionary journey. But this discussion is suddenly interrupted in 2:14 only to be resumed in 7:5. One could take that entire middle section out and the text would flow smoothly as if nothing had ever intervened.
The same phenomenon attaches to the small unit, 6:14-7:1. If 2:14-7:4 has been called Paul’s major digression, this latter passage is often called his minor digression, as he addresses the theme of not being unequally yoked with unbelievers. And yet, that short passage seems to have little to do with the surrounding context, could be removed, and 6:13 and 7:2 flow very naturally as though nothing had intervened.

Depending on one’s understanding of how free early Christians felt to combine various letters together into one scroll, then, these disjointed seams of Paul’s writing have led some to think of many different letters all collected together in a sort of anthology in 2 Corinthians. Other more conservative writers, however, have tried to find literary explanations by which the unity of 2 Corinthians can be preserved, particularly in light of the fact that there is no textual evidence from the ancient world that would suggest any of these pieces of 2 Corinthians ever circulated separately.

D. Extended Communication

But before we are too critical of some of these other proposals, we do have to make mention of the fact that the evidence of 1 and 2 Corinthians together does clearly reveal that more communication was going on between Paul and Corinth than has been preserved in our canon—communication that was both oral and written. In fact, we may highlight at least five letters that went back and forth between Paul and the Corinthians, even if we are not prepared to speak of more than this.

First Corinthians 5:9 alludes to a previous correspondence of Paul to the Corinthian church. Here is a clear reference to a letter which obviously has been lost. Presumably it was not preserved because it was not as universally theologically significant as those that have been preserved. First Corinthians 7:1, we have already alluded to, describes a previous letter from the Corinthians to Paul; and it, too, has not been preserved, although we can reconstruct the questions that it asks by means of the topics Paul addresses in the latter segment of 1 Corinthians. What we call 1 Corinthians, therefore, is at least Paul’s second letter to them. And if the references in 2 Corinthians 2:4 and 7:8
back to a painful or severe or sorrowful letter are judged to be too harsh a description of 1 Corinthians, they may well point to yet another lost letter, a letter that was penned and received in between the writing and reception of what we call 1 and 2 Corinthians. That makes our 2 Corinthians the fifth item of correspondence and the fourth letter that Paul wrote to Corinth. If chapters 10-13 be separated off as a separate piece, or any of the other proposals that we have mentioned, then there may well be even more.

Nevertheless, for the Christian the authoritative form is the canonical form of the letter, and we must come to grips with the letter as a unity in the form we now find it.

II. Outline

One very simple outline of all 13 chapters, a simple a-b-a structure, refers to chapters 1-7 as describing Paul’s apostolic ministry, in what we might call tender tones. Chapters 8-9 then become the focal center of the letter, the one major remaining ethical issue that has to be addressed—namely, questions of financial stewardship, the offering for Jerusalem in this case. Chapters 10-13 can then be seen, perhaps even as deliberately planned, as balancing out the tender tones of chapters 1-7 by resuming a discussion of Paul’s apostolic ministry, this time in comparison with the false teachers, in much tougher tones.

A more speculative and more detailed outline of the first seven chapters, a section that seems to have both a major and minor digression, may account for what seems to us somewhat disjointed by appealing to the well-known ancient device, a literary form of outlining material, both oral and written, known as a chiasm, or a chiasmus—namely, inverted parallelism. In its simplest form this is an a-b-b-a form, but it could and often was extended to a-b-c-b-a, a-b-c-d-c-b-a, and so forth. We will propose an outline, admittedly somewhat speculative, that perhaps accounts for the various literary seams in 2 Corinthians 1-7 in terms of precisely such an inverted parallelism.

III. Explanation of Paul’s Ministry (1:1-7:16)

A. Greetings and Thanksgiving (1:1-11)

Following his introduction to this letter that has been
called a letter of apologetic self-commendation, following the introductory greetings, Paul launches into the conventional thanksgiving, verses 3-11. In this section Paul introduces an important motif that will recur throughout his letter: explanations from a Christian perspective of why believers must suffer. The reason for introducing this topic is because of the hardships Paul himself has experienced as an apostle, and because of the trouble the church of Corinth has had coming to grips with suffering in the context of Christian life or ministry.

Way back in 1 Corinthians 4:8 and following, Paul has had to compare using ironic, even sarcastic or scathing, language—the suffering and persecution and shame and ignominious circumstances he has faced as an itinerant Christian apostle and leader, as over against the seeming life of ease and triumphalism of the would-be Corinthian leaders.

He unpacks this theme at a number of points, then, throughout 2 Corinthians, the first of which comes in this introductory thanksgiving. And he gives here one of several reasons that we will highlight as we proceed through the letter for why Christians suffer: in this case, because it enables us to give others who are suffering the kind of comfort that can come only from God in Christ, which we ourselves may receive on those occasions in which we suffer.

**B. Confidence in Motives (1:12-22)**

The body of the letter then begins with 1:12 as Paul describes his ministry with the Corinthians. Verses 12-22 include and enunciate Paul’s confidence in his motives—that he was not vacillating despite changed travel plans, but rather trying to spare Corinthians more sorrow or grief that he would have had to inflict on them if they had not yet responded positively to his previous injunctions.

**C. Paul’s Sorrow (1:23-2:11)**

Chapter 1:23-2:11 alludes specifically to Paul’s sorrow over the offending party in Corinth who had to be punished. We commented in the last lesson that we can’t prove that this is the same man as the incestuous offender of 1 Corinthians
5, but it is suggested by many commentators that it might well be. Here Paul seems to speak of someone who has personally offended him, which does not describe any of the details of 1 Corinthians 5; but if, in fact, Paul has made an intervening journey to Corinth in between the visits actually narrated in the book of Acts, which this section of 2 Corinthians seems to presuppose, it may well be that there was a personal confrontation between Paul and this offending individual during that otherwise unnarrated occasion.

Now, however, the man has responded properly and Paul encourages his rehabilitation, a reminder that disfellowshipping or excommunication, even in the most severe cases of Christian church discipline, is never purely punitive, but always done in the hopes that it will jar the person into their senses, lead to repentance, and lead to them being welcomed back into Christian fellowship.

D. Travel to Macedonia (2:12-13)

Chapter 2:12-13 then begins to enunciate Paul’s travels to Macedonia. It is from these verses and those that are paired with them in chapter 7 that we learn that Paul is en route. He has already left Ephesus, he has made it as far as northern Greece, he has sent Titus ahead of him to check up on the circumstances in Corinth, is eagerly hoping that he will rendezvous soon with Titus and receive a good report. But at this point, in narrating his travels he has not yet received that report, and so he continues on hurriedly and expectantly.

E. Christian and Non-Christian Living (2:14-4:6)

What seems at first glance to be a digression beginning in 2:14 can actually be explained as following naturally from the comment that Paul has just made. The fact that he is traveling, an itinerant minister waiting to meet up with Titus, reminds him of another kind of travel—the forced marches of prisoners of war being led in chains captive back to the city of the triumphant warring armies. He feels like just such a prisoner of war taken captive, at least by human standards, but recognizes also that this can be seen as a victory parade, paradoxically from a Christian perspective. What Paul then does in 2:14-4:6 is to itemize
a series of contrasts between Christian and non-Christian living that proceed by means of a very Jewish rhetorical device, by what has been called a chain-link reasoning or catchwords.

This is not material that yields itself easily to Western linear outlines, but rather one key word, epitomizing the theme of a particular section of Paul’s thinking and writing, then naturally triggers a related word which leads him through what today we might call almost a stream of consciousness writing to the next topic, and so on.

As Paul is traveling to Corinth, he is reminded of the fact that itinerant ministers in the ancient world often took with them letters of recommendation, especially as they were going to new communities. Others who knew them and could vouchsafe for their integrity, wrote letters that could then be passed on to people who did not yet know them. Paul makes the point that the Corinthians need no such letters of recommendation, for he was their founding apostle. He was the one who first established the church. But the catchword “letter,” used first of all to refer to a scroll or document, then makes Paul think of the expression “the letter of the law,” and he moves to contrasting those who are still following a very legalistic, scrupulous adherence to all of the fine points of Old Testament law with the freedom that Christ has brought with the Spirit.

The letter of the law contrasts with the age of the Spirit, which brings the law written on our hearts and internalized in a nonlegalistic fashion. This reference to the Spirit then leads him to a further discussion of the ministry of that Spirit, who brings contrasting degrees of glory as one compares the old covenant with the new covenant.

And as a particular poignant illustration of those contrasting degrees of glory, Paul next thinks of the veil that Moses put over his face as he came down from Mount Sinai so that the people would not be dazzled by the blinding glory. But, compared with the new covenant, Paul says that glory is very temporary and fading. Obviously, he is not thinking of some literal corresponding event in the new covenant age, but rather to the glory more metaphorically that the Christian dispensation reveals.
When people come to Christ, then, out of the law, it is as if a veil were removed from their face. This cluster of contrasts, while not as readily yielding to a linear outline, nevertheless makes good sense in ancient rhetorical approaches. But all of this talk about the affliction of Paul’s ministry, about the hardships of Christian service, then lead him to balance off with a compensating treatment of the glory that is to come.

F. Present Afflictions/Coming Glory (4:7-5:10)

Chapter 4:7-5:10 contrasts the present afflictions with the coming glory of the Christian life. Here, in turn, appear both one of the most poignant catalogs of how Christians may suffer, to the very point of almost seeming defeated, and yet God protects them from ever completely capitulating. Chapter 4:15 nicely summarizes, then, a second reason that Christians have to suffer—that the surpassing greatness of the power may be seen to be of God. Paul has already described our human bodies’ circumstances as having the treasure of God in very frail earthly vessels. People do not look up and take notice if someone has all of the world’s circumstances in their favor and are living happy, triumphant lives. But they do stand up and take notice if people somehow live victoriously despite circumstances that by the world’s standards would suggest they had no reason for joy or happiness or victory.

Chapter 5 then proceeds to the theme of the coming glory, and is one of the important teaching passages in the New Testament on the coming resurrection of believers following judgment day, and particularly on what historically, for the most part, has been taken as a passage teaching the intermediate state—that is, believers, upon their deaths and prior to Christ’s return and the resurrection of all believers to bodily existence, will, nevertheless, while absent from the body, 5:8, be at home with the Lord. There will be conscious existence, with Jesus, even in this preresurrection and therefore, apparently, disembodied state.

G. Reconciliation (5:11-21)

Second Corinthians 5:11-21 forms the heart, or the center, of this unfolding chiasm, or inverted parallelism as Paul
then comes to the core of Christian ministry. The theme that dominates these verses and characterizes them is the theme of reconciliation—first of all with God, and secondly with fellow humans. Reconciliation, like justification, which we discussed in the context of Galatians, is a well-known metaphor from Paul’s world for the canceling of enmity between previous warring and hostile parties.

And in this context, too, we read in verses 18-21 a key statement on the substitutionary atonement of Jesus Christ that made this reconciliation possible. From this point on we may proceed more rapidly, because 2 Corinthians simply begins to repeat and rehearse, though with some important additional comments, the themes that have been mentioned thus far, the second half or backside, as it were, of this chiastic or inverted parallel structure.

H. Backside of Chiasmus (6:1-7:16)

Chapter 6:1-10 contrasts present afflictions with present glory; Chapter 6:11-7:4, another series of contrasts between belief and unbelief, this time described in terms of Christ versus Belial, another name for Satan. Chapter 7:5-7 now resume a discussion of Paul’s travels, the relief that he has in meeting up with Titus and receiving the good report, the Corinthians’ appropriate godly sorrow that has driven the offending man to repentance (verses 8-13a), and Paul’s newfound confidence in the Corinthians (verses 13b-16).

IV. Collection for the Saints (8:1-9:15)

As Paul then turns in chapters 8-9 to the one remaining important ethical issue, that of stewardship, the collection for Jerusalem—we may enunciate a number of important principles that apply to Christian giving in any time and place. Chapter 8:1-15 itemizes four of these. Christian giving must be sacrificial (verses 1-4). It must be surrendering of one’s entire self to Christ and to whatever service is needed (verses 5-7).

It ought to be done with sincerity (verses 8-11), and proportionately (verses 12-15). Here the principle is enunciated of what some readers today have called the graduated tithe. Interestingly there is no New Testament passage clearly applicable to believers this side of Pentecost that commands Christians to give
ten percent. For the very poor this may be an undue hardship on them, but for most middle class or well to do Christians, ten percent is probably far too little, given the acute human needs, spiritually and physically of our world today, including among more than 200 million impoverished Christian brothers and sisters. Rather, the principles of verses 12-15 would suggest that the more one makes, the higher percentage one should consider giving to the Lord’s work.

Chapter 8:16-9:5 then stresses how Paul goes out of his way so that the integrity of this collection not be compromised in any way, another crucial theme in many modern contexts. And 9:6-15 closes his discussion by reminding the believers in Corinth of the rewards of Christian giving, not by any means limited to or even primarily involving material reward, but involving the spiritual reward of people giving praise to God, perhaps even in the evangelistic context. If Christians today were to be seen widely to be very scrupulous and generous and compassionate in the use of their funds, there is no doubt it would have a very significant evangelistic impact. Unfortunately, so many compromising models have actually been deleterious to the cause of Jesus Christ.

V. Vindication of Paul’s Apostleship (10:1-13:14)

A. Paul against the False Apostles (10:1-11:33)

Finally, in chapters 10-13, Paul turns to these newly arrived false apostles and Judaizers in Corinth. Throughout these chapters he applies a well-known Greco-Roman rhetorical device of boasting, but turns it on its head: Whereas the false teachers were boasting in all of their Jewish credentials, in all of their spiritual accomplishments and maturity, Paul says he will boast in his weakness. Chapter 11:16-33 offers the most poignant catalog thus far of Paul’s sufferings as a persecuted and itinerant apostle for Jesus Christ. This is what he will boast in, and this is the one area in which the false teachers cannot match him.

B. Thorn in Flesh (12:1-10)

Chapter 12:1-10 introduces us to the famous “thorn in the flesh.” We’re never told what it is, presumably some recurring bodily affliction that kept Paul quite humble despite the otherwise remarkable visions that he describes
having of the very heavenly throne room of God in this same context. Here again is a key principle for Christian response to suffering:

We are often kept in such humble positions to keep us dependent on God. In fact, the one red-letter verse, the one direct word from Jesus in this entire epistle, comes in verse 9, in which Paul says that His power is made perfect in weakness.

Rather than seeing suffering as something exceptional or unusual, rather than trying to say, as some Christians try to do, that God does not want people to be poor or diseased in any situation and that it is always His will if they have enough faith to overcome this—this verse teaches exactly the opposite. Health and wealth may well be the exceptional situation for the Christian, and situations of suffering the norm.

The rest of 2 Corinthians then gives a miscellany of closing exhortations and greetings, and Paul brings the letter to a close. Overall, 2 Corinthians is one of the strongest statements in Scripture against that attitude which has been called a “triumphalist spirit,” a belief that we can arrive, that we can become spiritually perfect or extremely mature, or attain to some high measure of spiritual blessing in this life. For a whole variety of reasons, God is often much better able to use us in our spiritual and physical weakness.