

THE LOOKOUT

MAY 2024

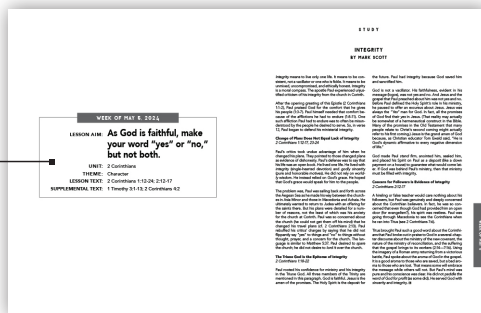
Unit: 2 Corinthians

Theme: Character

Overview: We move from a study of 1 Corinthians to a study of 2 Corinthians. Scholars debate how many letters were written to this troubled church (1 Corinthians 5:9; 2 Corinthians 2:3-4, 9; 10:9-10). But the completed canon of the New Testament includes these two. The word *troubles* could be used to summarize 1 Corinthians. Second Corinthians could be summarized with the word *character*. Someone said, "Reputation is what others think of you; character is what you really are." Paul did not have the best reputation, but he did have outstanding character; his character is on display in 2 Corinthians. Students will learn that integrity, perseverance, hope, and generosity are key qualities of character.

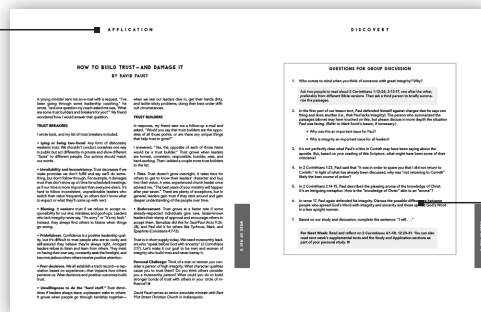
HOW TO USE

Each week has a **lesson aim**, **lesson text**, and **supplemental text**.



Tabs indicate the week of each lesson.

Each week features three sections: **Study**, **Application**, and **Discovery**.



Use the **Discovery** questions to study, discuss, and apply the Scripture passages in a group or class.

WEEK OF MAY 12, 2024

LESSON AIM: "Fix [your] eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal."

UNIT: 2 Corinthians

THEME: Character

LESSON TEXT: 2 Corinthians 4:1-18; 11:23-31

SUPPLEMENTAL TEXT: Colossians 3:1-3; 2 Peter 3:8-14

PERSEVERANCE

BY MARK SCOTT

Perseverance (nicknamed Percy) was a car-sized rover designed to explore the Jezero crater as part of NASA's Mars 2020 mission. It was so named because it had to persevere to reach its destination. Believers are also called to persevere to reach their destination. *Perseverance* means to continue to work to achieve something despite difficulties or opposition. It means to be tenacious, determined, resolved. The apostle Paul knew much about perseverance, and he wrote more about this quality in 2 Corinthians than in any of his Epistles.

The text selections for this lesson come from two profound (and larger) passages about the ministry of the apostles and the church (2 Corinthians 2:14—7:16; 10:1—12:21). In the first selection, Paul was quite straightforward about his take on the ministry—i.e., didactic and plainspoken. In the second section, he used sarcasm to make his point.

We Have This Ministry

2 Corinthians 4:1-6

Paul's commendation from the church came from the fruit of his ministry with the people. Their lives were like letters from Jesus read by everyone. These "living letters" were a testament to the reality of the new covenant which promised freedom and transformation (2 Corinthians 3:17-18). The mercy associated with this new covenant caused Paul twice to say he would not lose heart in this ministry (4:1, 16). He was all-in.

Paul was so all-in that he had no interest in *secret and shameful ways*. He did not use *deception*, nor did he *distort the word of God*. Instead, Paul's life was an open book. He presented God's truth *plainly* (openly). If there was a veil over what Paul preached, it was to unbelievers due to the deception of the devil. The enemy so blinded people that they could not see *the glory of Christ, who is the image of God*.

If Paul said anything about himself, as opposed to preaching Christ and him crucified, it was only that he was a servant *for Jesus' sake*. Paul's outward ministry was a product of the light of the gospel that moved him from the inside. In a verse of prepositional overload (v. 6), Paul said that God made his light *shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of God's glory displayed in the face of Christ*.

We Have This Treasure

2 Corinthians 4:7-18

Paul's capacity for perseverance was rooted in the gospel, not in personal strength (i.e., the container that is the

human body). He referred to that "container" as a jar of clay (or, as *The Message* phrases it, "the unadorned clay pots of our ordinary lives"). This is why Paul could give four contrasts of being *pressed . . . but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed*.

The empowerment in these jars of clay was in proportion to Paul staying connected to Jesus. Just as a jar was used to carry contents (water, for example), so Paul carried around the gospel. The contents of that jar (Paul) were the death and resurrection of Jesus. Since Jesus called his followers to deny themselves and take up their crosses daily (Luke 9:23), Paul knew that being given over to death (perhaps physically) was part of sharing in the life of Jesus.

Paul employed Psalm 116:10 to advance his argument about his gospel in general and the resurrection in particular. Paul knew that jars of clay wear out (waste away). But because of the power of the gospel, *inwardly we are being renewed day by day*. Troubles in this world prepare us for the world to come.

We Have This Résumé

2 Corinthians 11:23-31

Paul said, "We have this ministry," and "We have this treasure." He did not say, "We have this résumé." But he might well have said it because so much of the content of chapters 10–12 was Paul's résumé or calling card. Instead of letters behind Paul's name (e.g., BA, MDiv, or PhD), Paul listed trials as his claim to genuine ministry. And the tone of that list was sarcasm. In his defense, Paul used familiar techniques employed by other rhetoricians of his day. In addition to sarcasm, he used interrogation, apostrophe, and catalogs.

Paul's list is long and impressive. Just reading through it makes one feel spiritually puny. Paul listed eight persecutions (hard work, prison, floggings, exposure, beatings [with lashes and rods], being stoned, shipwrecked, and left in the open sea. He then listed eight ways, situations, and places that he faced danger (constantly on the run, rivers, bandits, people, city, country, sea, and false believers). Finally, he listed five challenging conditions he had endured (labor/toil, sleeplessness, scarcity of food, cold and exposure, and anxiousness).

Most churches would think twice before employing Paul on their ministry staff. He was not afraid to list his weaknesses because it allowed him the privilege of boasting about God. His above-board approach to ministry gave him the confidence to persevere. ■

APPLICATION

WE DO NOT LOSE HEART

BY DAVID FAUST

Earlier this year, I spoke for a missionary conference in Northern Ireland attended by young adults just starting out and older workers nearing retirement. Some of the missionaries are single, some are married, and some are parents and grandparents. Most of them live far from their extended families.

They serve in diverse places (Scotland, Germany, Spain, Italy, the Czech Republic, Ireland, France, and the Balkans), but they face common problems. How do you make disciples for Christ in a postmodern culture dominated by secularism, materialism, and cynicism toward traditional religion? Picturesque stone church buildings dot the landscape of Europe, but few Christians gather to worship in those museum-like buildings. Meanwhile, Islam threatens to fill the spiritual vacuum.

The missionaries I met were cheerful and upbeat during the conference. Despite whatever hardships and loneliness they face, these bright, devoted workers are determined to persevere.

Shining in Dark Places

Our conference theme was drawn from the ancient hymn, “Be Thou My Vision.” The song’s melody comes from a folk tune named for an Irish village called Slane. History tells us that on Easter Sunday in AD 433, the local Irish king issued a decree prohibiting anyone from lighting a flame until the king lit a candle in observation of a pagan Druid festival. To show that only the true Lord deserves praise, the missionary known as Saint Patrick defied the king, climbed to the tallest hill in the area, and lit a fire to honor Christ. Centuries later, the melody of “Be Thou My Vision” reminds us of Patrick’s heroism, for it is named after the place where Patrick shined his light: the Hill of Slane.

The song’s original lyrics, later translated into English in the early 1900s, were penned by a sixth-century Irish

poet named Eochaid “Dallán” Forgaill. After the boy lost his eyesight at an early age, his mother nicknamed him Dallán, which means “little blind one.” That’s right: The person who wrote, “Be Thou my vision, O Lord of my heart,” could not see, but by faith he praised the High King of heaven.

Faithful—Whatever Befall

How can we make disciples in nations where an indifferent majority shows little interest in God? How can we serve the High King of heaven when the ground-level problems of earth drag us down? God is “the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End” (Revelation 21:6)—but he is also the Lord of the middle. He is there to help when we’re in the middle of the complicated problems that arise because we’re serving Christ in non-Christian cultures.

European missionaries face daunting challenges, but they have not given up hope. Like the apostle Paul, who spread the gospel in first-century Greece, Italy, Israel, and Turkey, these faithful workers “do not lose heart” (2 Corinthians 4:1, 16). After all, Paul wrote, though our bodies are “jars of clay,” Christians possess a treasure that enables us to be “hard-pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed” (2 Corinthians 4:7-9). We persevere, encouraged by these words penned long ago by an Irish poet who couldn’t see:

High King of heaven, My victory won,
May I reach heaven’s joys, O bright heaven’s Sun!
Heart of my own heart, whatever befall,
Still be my vision, O Ruler of all.

Personal Challenge: Write a note to a church leader or a missionary. Thank them for their service and encourage them to persevere. ■

DISCOVERY

QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

1. Describe the most pressure-packed situation you ever personally endured. How were you able to persevere through it?

Ask two people to read aloud **2 Corinthians 4:1-18; 11:23-31**, one after the other, preferably from different Bible versions. Then ask a third person to briefly summarize the passages.

2. In 2 Corinthians 4:2, Paul wrote, "We do not use deception, nor do we distort the word of God."
 - Why is this the best approach for sharing God's Word?
 - What is likely to happen if a Christian were to try some other approach?
3. What do you think Paul was referring to when he wrote about "this treasure in jars of clay" (2 Corinthians 4:7)?
4. In 2 Corinthians 4:7-12, Paul indicated that Jesus Christ's mission was a matter of life and death, and our personal mission as a Christ follower is also a matter of life and death.
 - How have you been "hard pressed on every side," "perplexed," "persecuted," and/or "struck down" (vv. 8-9) as a Christ follower? What were the circumstances?
 - How is Jesus' life being "revealed in [y]our mortal body"?
5. It is good for individuals to experience renewal (vv. 16-18).
 - What are some activities or practices that help you renew physically?
 - What are some activities or practices that help you renew spiritually?
6. Turning to the second part of our lesson text, 2 Corinthians 11:23-31 . . .
 - What do you consider to be the worst hardship Paul suffered?
 - Is there a weakness that you are willing to boast about? (See v. 30; and think carefully before sharing your weakness in front of a group.)
7. Based on our study and discussion, complete the sentence: "I will . . ."

For Next Week: Read and reflect on **2 Corinthians 5:1-21**. You can also read next week's supplemental texts and the Study and Application sections as part of your personal study. 📖