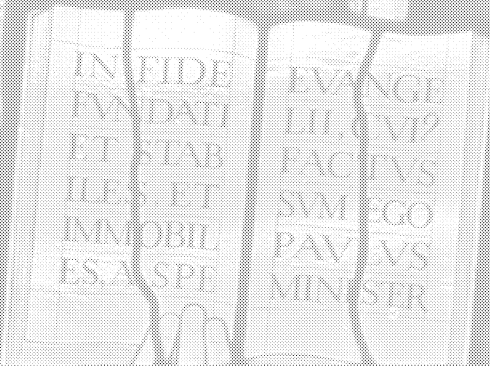


# *2nd Corinthians*

**Steve Ray**

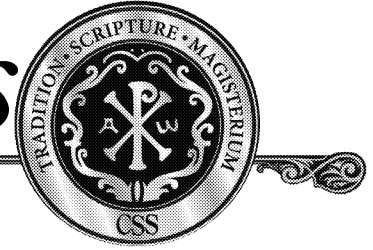




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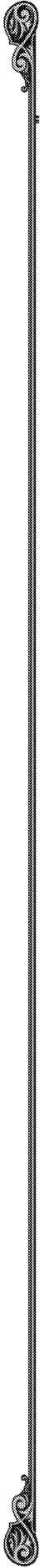
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# 2nd Corinthians

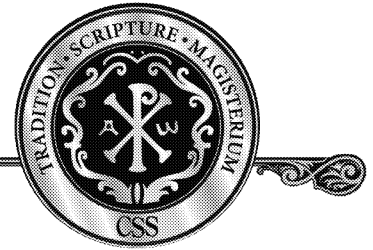


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# 2nd Corinthians



## Introduction



**Lechaion Road, Corinth**


Nothing in Paul's other writings comes close to the gut wrenching personal tone of this intimate epistle. Here, he bears his heart to his beloved Corinthians even though he suggests he is very uncomfortable doing so.

This letter was written after Paul had left Ephesus and was in Macedonia on his way to Corinth. It was written only a matter of months after First Corinthians. A lot had happened between these two letters. Apparently an opponent had infiltrated the ranks in Corinth criticizing Paul and throwing suspicions on everything Paul had said and done. Paul sarcastically refers to this opponent as a "super apostle" and appeals to the Corinthians to retain their loyalty and affection for him, the one who had brought them to Christ and demonstrated the power of the Holy Spirit in their midst.

Paul had visited them briefly from Ephesus but it had not gone well. He had written them a brief but tearful letter which was delivered by Titus, a strong advocate of Paul. Titus was well trusted by the Corinthians and his presence along with Paul's tearful letter seemed to have turned most of the church back to loyalty to Paul. This sorrowful letter was then followed up with the second letter.

In this letter, Paul opened his heart to them, demonstrating his love and affection, his suffering and sacrifice on their behalf.

Though wandering a bit and sometimes seeming disjointed, the letter is intimately personal and the least systematic of all Paul's letters. Nevertheless, there is a structure to the letter. After a brief introduction, the apostle gives an account of his spiritual labors, revealing his affection for the believers there and displaying mixed emotions about a mixed response to his early epistles. In chapters 8–9 he gives a detailed explanation for sharing



of our earthly means and requests them to contribute money to the suffering church in Jerusalem. He then becomes impassioned in a defense of his gospel and his credentials as an apostle, which is followed by a short conclusion.

While primarily a positive letter, commending those in Corinth, there were also new problems that had cropped up in this Greek city. The false teacher or teachers had slipped in among the believers with dangerous teachings and challenging Paul's apostleship. Such false apostles followed Paul around the Empire poisoning the sheep Paul had gathered into flocks (churches). What was this different "gospel" preached by Paul's foes? It was most probably the same legalistic Judaizing gospel so aggressively counteracted in Romans and Galatians. Did these Greeks and Romans need Jewish circumcision and a strict adherence to all the 613 laws of Moses before they could be Christians? Did the "simplicity of Christ" require obedience to the multitude of ceremonies and sacrifices of the Jews? Paul says those who teach such things are "false apostles, deceitful workmen, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ." Paul compares them to Satan and says, "Their end will correspond to their deeds." Sadly, it is a fact of history that true authority is often challenged with no shortage of naïve followers ready to jump on the bandwagon shouting slogans and waving banners. It happens today, as in Paul's day, with those who break with the Church, spurn her authority, start their own groups, or just as egregious or more so, some work their corruption and corrosion from within. Paul has no patience for such evil—his deep love and intense concern for the flock required action, stern words and discipline. He was a father protecting his children as well as a shepherd guarding his flock.

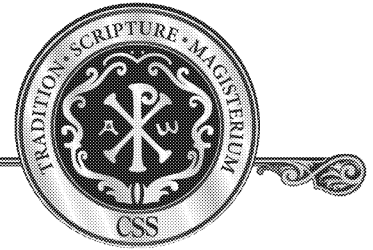
Paul also defended himself by letter against those who corrupted the gospel and challenged his authority in person. His opponents chided: "his bodily presence is weak and his speech contemptible". Paul was at a disadvantage but this was never a problem for Paul. He ably defends his special call as an apostle, the truth of his gospel, and his singular authority over the church in Corinth.

In the midst of his defense we have a remarkable passage, possibly the pinnacle of the epistle in which Paul opens his soul and even gives us a fleeting glimpse behind the curtain of time recalling his sublime experience of being caught up into the third heaven—to Paradise. How many have wished he had told more—at least try to describe the indescribable! But alas, as we hold our breath waiting for Paul to expand on this ecstasy, we instead crash back to earth with the reality of the body and suffering.

It is a heart-wrenching letter. We learn things about Paul we find nowhere else such as the multitude of sufferings, the thorn in his flesh, and his vision of heaven. He gives an intimate portrayal of himself and his rich humanity is quite evident. This uniquely personal and revealing glimpse into the soul and ministry of the great apostle to the Gentiles—and to the world—was written on something simple like papyrus with a quill pen around AD 56—probably the fall of the year. Timothy collaborated with Paul in its writing and Titus personally delivered it. It is the last we hear of the Corinthians until Clement of Rome follows up with them in the year AD 96—they were embroiled in new troubles then, but still strong in the faith—no doubt a result of the firm foundation and labor of prayers selflessly expended by the rugged traveler and apostle from Tarsus.



# 2nd Corinthians



## Lesson 1: *Paul Defends His Integrity and Ministry*

### Introduction

Paul's First Epistle to the Corinthians names Sosthenes as "co-author"—he was Paul's fellow-worker who was with him during the dictation of that letter. In this Second Epistle to the Corinthians Paul honors his faithful young fellow-worker, Timothy, by placing his name alongside his own as "co-author." Timothy was an unusual young man who was loyal to the apostle Paul right up to the end. He had been with Paul on his first trip to Corinth, helping him to preach the good news of Jesus Christ and establish that local church. It was likely that Timothy had just visited Corinth and brought Paul news of more problems there that needed to be addressed. By including Timothy's name in the introductory greeting, Paul may be strategically letting the Corinthians know that Timothy had arrived with the "bad" news and was in complete agreement with Paul's response in this epistle.

Even though Paul introduces himself as "an apostle" in most of his epistles (with only three exceptions), it is especially significant here because the purpose of this second letter is to defend exactly that—his apostleship. Paul has enemies in Corinth who are working to undermine his authority, but he is confident of his calling and his apostleship, and states so right from the beginning.

### 2 Corinthians 1:1-24

1 Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother. To the church of God which is at Corinth, with all the saints who are in the whole of Achaia:

2 Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

3 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, 4 who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. **5 For as we share abundantly in Christ's sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too.** 6 If we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation; and if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which you experience when you patiently endure the same sufferings that we suffer. 7 Our hope for you is unshaken; for we know that as you share in our sufferings, you will also share in our comfort.

8 For we do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, of the affliction we experienced in Asia; for we were so utterly, unbearably crushed that we despaired of life itself. 9 Why, we felt that we had received the sentence of death; but that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead; 10 he delivered us from so deadly a peril, and he will deliver us; on him we have set our hope that he will deliver us again. 11 You also must help us by prayer, so that many will give thanks on our behalf for the blessing granted us in answer to many prayers.

12 For our boast is this, the testimony of our conscience that we have behaved in the world, and still more toward you, with holiness and godly sincerity, not by earthly wisdom but by the grace of God. 13 For we write you nothing but what you can read and understand; I hope you will understand fully, 14 as you have understood in part, that you can be proud of us as we can be of you, on the day of the Lord Jesus.

15 Because I was sure of this, I wanted to come to you first, so that you might have a double pleasure; 16 I wanted to visit you on my way to Macedonia, and to come back to you from Macedonia and have you send me on my way to Judea. 17 Was I vacillating when I wanted to do this? Do I make my plans like a worldly man, ready to say

Yes and No at once? 18 As surely as God is faithful, our word to you has not been Yes and No. 19 For the Son of God, Jesus Christ, whom we preached among you, Silvanus and Timothy and I, was not Yes and No; but in him it is always Yes. 20 For all the promises of God find their Yes in him. That is why we utter the Amen through him, to the glory of God. 21 But it is God who establishes us with you in Christ, and has commissioned us; 22 he has put his seal upon us and given us his Spirit in our hearts as a guarantee.

23 But I call God to witness against me—it was to spare you that I refrained from coming to Corinth. 24 Not that we lord it over your faith; we work with you for your joy, for you stand firm in your faith.

ONE OF THE BEST WAYS TO MEDITATE UPON GOD'S WORD IS THROUGH MEMORIZATION.  
A SUGGESTED MEMORY IS PRINTED IN BOLD WITHIN THE BIBLICAL TEXT  
OR YOU MAY WISH TO CHOOSE A VERSE OF YOUR OWN.

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## Points to Ponder

### ***Ecclesia*, Paul's Sufferings, and Prayer**

Paul begins: "To the church of God which is at Corinth, with all the saints who are in the whole of Achaia" (2 Cor 1:2). Corinth was situated in Achaia, so Paul is writing this letter not only to the local church in Corinth, but to all the believers throughout Achaia, which would include the mainland of Greece, including Athens.


How are the phrases, "church of God" and "the saints," tied together? The word *church* in Greek is *ecclesia*, which means *called-out ones*. The Corinthian believers have been summoned out of the world to become a new society; they are thus consecrated and set apart for God. This leads to the word *saint*. Being a saint in this context is based on the fact that they *are* the *ecclesia*. People often think the word *saint* is narrowly defined to mean *sinless*, but in fact the word has another, wider meaning, which is: *consecrated or set apart for God*. Thus, even though the "saints" are still sinful, they are saints in the sense that they have been called out by God and consecrated to him. The saints in heaven are *saints* in both senses of the word, and we are called to strive for the same.

The word *church* (*ecclesia*) is the word used in the Old Testament to refer to the assembly of Israel. In this way we see that God is now expanding his covenant to the world. The "called-out ones" are no longer just the Jews associated with Jerusalem; the Gentile Christians are now part of God's new society, which is the "New Israel" that God is forming in and through the *ecclesia*. This is the way Paul sees the Corinthian church.

Paul is under attack by enemies and false teachers in Corinth. It grieves him and causes him great sorrow, but he does not dwell on his own situation. His whole life is focused on others, not himself. Thus he says that God the Father comforts him in his afflictions—and uses Paul's sufferings so that Paul is able to comfort others with the same comfort that God has given him (2 Cor 1:4). The word *comfort* literally means to come to one's side, therefore, to come to one's aid, like a friend who walks beside Paul and helps him to carry a heavy burden up a steep hill. God walked alongside Paul to aid and comfort him, and Paul sees that divine comfort as a means to comfort others (Heb 2:18). As soon as his own load is lifted, Paul reaches over, lifts the load from the backs of the Corinthians, and begins to carry their burdens. Everything is about building up others and the Church, not himself. Paul is an example of how one can live out 1 Corinthians 13.

There is a principle in the Kingdom of God that no matter how much suffering, temptation, or misfortune we





encounter, the grace, comfort, and victory of God always exceeds the adversity. Paul affirms this in verse 5. He says that no matter how much things overwhelm us, the grace of God will always exceedingly comfort us and give us victory.

Ephesus was in modern day Turkey; it was the most important city, and the gateway to Roman Asia. Paul writes: “For we do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, of the affliction we experienced in Asia; for we were so utterly, unbearably crushed that we despaired of life itself” (2 Cor 1:8). We are not informed of the nature of this great tribulation. In Acts we are told of one instance where Paul was brought before the local government because the makers of the idols of Artemis were outraged at him (Acts 19:23-40). But it is doubtful that this one confrontation would cause him to despair of his life. Paul’s unnamed suffering that brought such grief has been a matter for much speculation. In short, he was greatly burdened and desperately needed the comfort of God.

Paul’s suffering was so acute that he felt he “had received the sentence of death.” He does not despair, but looks to God for comfort. Paul refuses to rely on himself; instead he relies on God who raises the dead. Even death cannot stop God who gives Paul the victory. His eyes are not on the problems and the crushing weight of his suffering, but on the Lord who did deliver, does deliver, and will deliver. It is in God that all of Paul’s hopes are anchored.

Paul’s confidence is also in the prayers of those who are holding him up before God. Asking for the prayers of others, or saying “I will pray about that,” can often become a cliché, but for Paul it is far from a trivial statement. Prayer is the bedrock of his life, as it was for Our Lord. Jesus said, “For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them” (Mt 18:20). Prayer in the Church is not just an individual project, but a family one as well.


## Clear Conscience

Paul now displays his proud confidence in the fact that his conscience is clear. He has conducted himself in all holiness and godly sincerity. There were some in Corinth who were accusing Paul of nefarious motives, and improper conduct and teaching. However, Paul is unquenchable in this matter. He stands tall because he knows that he has always acted with the highest standards and the holiest of conduct, not only in the wider world, but most especially with the Corinthians.

Paul uses the word *conscience* with a view to the end of time and the final judgment. He has no fear of that day, or the judgment, because he has conducted himself nobly, with honest integrity. Do his enemies in Corinth have this same confidence? He boasts of his work with the Corinthians, as they can boast of Paul. He then brings up the matter of wisdom. In his first epistle to them, Paul chided the Corinthians for their attachment to a worldly, human wisdom. He now reminds them again of this matter by asserting that he himself has transcended “earthly” wisdom for heavenly wisdom by the grace of God, and it is with that heavenly grace that he has conducted himself in the world and in Corinth.

Paul had intended to come to Corinth with a sure confidence, but now explains his change of travel plans. It is difficult to glean from this passage exactly what Paul’s plans had been and now are. It is clear that his enemies accused Paul of vacillating, not being able to make up his mind or not being straightforward. It seems he had decided to visit Corinth twice during his journey to Macedonia—on the way there, and on the way back. This double visit is probably what Paul meant by his use of “double pleasure” (2 Cor 1:15). His trip to Judea mentioned in the next verse is the same trip mentioned in 1 Corinthians 16:1-4 in which he would be taking the money he collected to the suffering church in Jerusalem. It seems that Paul intended to sail from Ephesus to Corinth, travel by land north to Macedonia, and then back by land to Corinth before setting sail across the Mediterranean to Jerusalem in Judea. Paul had expected the Corinthians to help him with his trip to Jerusalem, presumably with money and supplies.

Verse 17 begins with Paul stating his original intention, “Was I vacillating when I wanted (intended) to do this? Do I make my plans like a worldly man, ready to say Yes and No at once?” Paul had wanted to come to Corinth, but had not yet done so. He had changed his plans and cancelled at least one of the trips. The way his sentence is worded in the Greek suggests that some were making a specific charge that he was fickle or uncertain. Paul states, “I was not fickle when I planned to visit you. And I do not make my plans like the people of this world, ready to say yes, yes, and no, no at the same time.” Paul makes it clear by the use of these two questions that he does not say one thing, and then deny it all in the next breath. He is not a liar, nor is he uncertain.



God is faithful, says Paul, and because of his faithfulness our words have never been Yes and No at the same time. By God's steady faithfulness we, too, have been steady and not vacillating. Paul has integrity, and God himself witnesses to his integrity.

On first reading this passage, it can appear confusing. Behind it there are people lying about Paul with accusations and malicious slander. Paul had planned to visit Corinth, but things were currently so tense and rancorous there that he changed his plans to avoid giving them grief (2 Cor 1:23). Paul's adversaries jumped on this change of plans to accuse him of being uncertain, of being someone who made promises he didn't keep—and never intended to keep. You cannot get a definite Yes or No from this man!

And if that isn't bad enough, the antagonists charged, if Paul is untrustworthy in his simple promises, such as when he will visit, how can we trust what he says about God and salvation? Paul replies that we can trust God because in Jesus there is no switching back and forth between Yes and No. The promises of God are always Yes in Christ. In other words, the message has credibility based in part on the integrity of the messenger. And the messenger in this case, Paul himself, has proved over and over again that he has integrity and trustworthiness.

Our message is true, says Paul, because we have proven to be faithful, and the word we preached is true because of Christ. Never has Paul vacillated in his preaching of Christ, nor has Christ vacillated in his faithfulness to his promises. A change in travel plans for a good reason does not imply uncertainty in what Paul taught about God and his Son Jesus Christ.

Paul then brings in two other men who were closely linked to him, his message, and his integrity. These two men had been faithful servants to the Corinthians, and their faithfulness was unquestioned. Paul is saying, it is not only I who is proven truthful in the preaching of Jesus Christ, but also Silvanus and Timothy. All three of us were straight as arrows, and we were always Yes with you, and never Yes and No, because we taught you the truth of Jesus Christ who is never uncertain and always faithful. Paul writes: "...in [Jesus] it is always Yes. For all the promises of God find their Yes in him. That is why we utter the Amen through him, to the glory of God" (2 Cor 1:20).

Paul knows that the Corinthians conclude their personal and liturgical prayers with "Amen!" What does *Amen* mean? It comes from the Hebrew and is a declaration of belief. It is an affirmation at the end of a prayer meaning, "So be it!" Christ was the affirmation of the Father, the "Amen" and the Yes to all the promises of a faithful God. As the liturgy says, "Through him [Jesus Christ], with him, in him, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, all glory and honor is yours, almighty Father, God, forever and ever." To this truth the whole congregation acclaims, "Amen."

So even if Paul changed his plans in one instance, God could never change or waiver; and what Paul taught about him is always true because God is eternally faithful to his promises. What a heartwarming and powerful affirmation—God keeps his promises! He keeps his promises through his Son Jesus Christ who came to earth and died to fulfill the promises of God, and to prove that all of God's promises will be fulfilled. Amen!

## Four Gifts from God

Paul now mentions four things that God has done for the Corinthians: He *established*, *commissioned* (anointed), *sealed*, and *pledged*. Talk about faithful and unwavering—look what God has done! And this was revealed and taught by Paul and his fellow workers. They proved faithful in relaying the message that God is faithful.

*First*, God "establishes us with you in Christ Jesus." This applies to both the teachers and the taught. The covenantal relationship with God had once been exclusive to the Jews; now it includes the Gentiles as well. The Corinthian believers are now established and rooted in the New Covenant with God through Christ. The word *established* meant to *make firm, stable, or reliable*. Psalm 2 is all about such stability. It explains that the tree which is planted with deep roots near a river is richly established and can weather any adversity.

The next three things may apply only to Paul in this context, but most likely they apply to all the believers he is addressing as well. Each of the following three actions of God is the result of baptism.

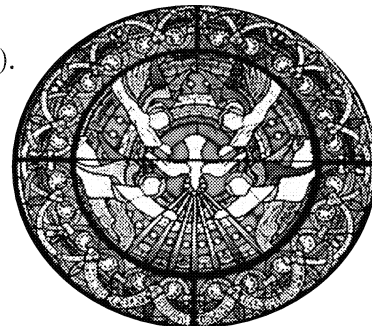
*Second*, Paul uses the Old Testament terminology of *anointing*—pouring olive oil over someone's head—which attests to the fact that the person has been set apart for God's work. In this context, verses 21 and 22 signify that

God affirms Paul's integrity. There is a word play in the original Greek: "God is the one establishing us with you in the Anointed One and anointing us" (cf. 1 Jn 2:20, 27). Remember that the words *Messiah* and *Christ* both mean *Anointed One*.

*Third*, God has "sealed us." This is rich terminology! It is worthwhile seeing how that word is used elsewhere in the New Testament (Jn 3:33, 6:27; Rom 4:11; Eph 1:13, 14; 4:30; 2 Tim 2:19; Rev 2:17, 7:3; 9:4). This is a word the Corinthians were very familiar with since it was used every day in the business world. Documents and containers of merchandise were sealed to guarantee that no one tampered with the contents. A person witnessing a document would press his seal into hot wax to attest to the rolled-up document. By putting his seal in their hearts, God has attested to the truth and integrity of Paul's tradition and teaching.

Even today a trademark or copyright sets a product or creation apart for its owner. God has placed his seal upon Paul and the Corinthians. How often do we think of ourselves as wearing the trademark or brand of Jesus Christ? Does our teaching and our way of living bear witness to that seal?

*Fourth*, Paul says God has "given us his Spirit in our hearts as a guarantee" (2 Cor 1:22). Again Paul uses a word very familiar to the Corinthians because it was commonly used in commerce. A guarantee was a down payment or a "layaway" sum made on a purchase, which guaranteed that full payment would be made later. The Holy Spirit was the down payment given to Christians as God's guarantee that in time he would fully redeem them. This is why Christians in the early Church referred to the burial of deceased Christians as a "deposit" because God would come later to make a withdrawal, like a businessman did after making a deposit at his bank.



## Conclusion

Paul concludes his thoughts by calling God as a witness against him. He returns to the alleged vacillations with which he is charged. His enemies said that if he couldn't be trusted with his proposed travel arrangements, why should he be trusted in the more important matters of his teaching. At this point in the epistle, Paul reveals why he had changed his travel plans, and why he did not come to Corinth as originally planned.

He did it for the sake of the Corinthian believers, not because he was uncertain or saying Yes and No at the same time. Paul knew that if he went to them at that time, it would be untimely and painful. Problems were ripe, emotions volatile, wounds open. He writes, "But I call God to witness against me—it was to spare you that I refrained from coming to Corinth" (2 Cor 1:23).

This chapter ends with Paul affirming that his goal is not to "lord it over your faith," which must have been a charge made by his opponents. Paul sees the Corinthian believers as his fellow workers in the kingdom of God. And his work, as well as Timothy's (and that of his other fellow workers), was to bring them joy, not sorrow. Finally, Paul affirms that they are standing firm in their faith.

## Catechism Connections

- Learn how we can be co-workers with God for the benefit of his kingdom. CCC 308
- Discover how our sufferings can have a redemptive effect when joined with the sufferings of Christ. CCC 618
- Understand why our sufferings can complete what is lacking in Christ's for the benefit of the Church. CCC 1508
- Learn why Jesus is God's "Anointed One." CCC 694
- Understand how God the Father has indelibly sealed us in Christ. CCC 698
- Learn about the Holy Spirit's transforming power in the liturgy. CCC1107



## Rome to Home

“The Holy Spirit is the source of truth and life-giving principle of the identity of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church. The Holy Spirit is also the source and principle of the sacramental life through which the Church draws the strength of Christ, participates in his holiness, is nourished by his grace and grows and advances on her journey toward eternity. The Holy Spirit, who is at the origin of the Incarnation of the Word, is the living source of all the sacraments instituted by Christ and at work in the Church. It is precisely through the sacraments that he gives people ‘new life,’ associating the Church to himself as his co-worker in this saving action.”

**Pope John Paul II**

*General Audience, January 30, 1991*

## Study Questions

*It's best to read the entire Scripture readings for this lesson and Points to Ponder before responding to the study questions.*

1. Paul addresses “the Church of God which is at Corinth” and “all the saints who are in the whole of Achaia” (2 Cor 1:1). Why does Paul use the word “saints” in speaking of the people in Achaia? What is the difference between this use of the term “saints,” and those canonized by the Church and others who are now in heaven? (See Points to Ponder; CCC 823)
2. Why had Paul changed his mind about coming to Corinth. Who does he name as the co-author of this letter to them? (See Points to Ponder; 2 Cor 1:23)
3. Give a description of God based on Paul’s words about him in this chapter (See 2 Cor 1:3-10, 20).





8. What word does Paul say that Christians utter through Jesus Christ for “the glory of God?” What does this word mean? (See 2 Cor 1:20; CCC 1062, 1065)

## Voices of the Saints

“Love is the union of God and the soul.”

— St. John of the Cross

## Questions for Reflection

*The following questions are intended to help you reflect upon ways in which the discoveries you’ve made in this lesson can be applied to your own life.*

1. We have seen how Paul maintained his optimism despite many trials. How do you cope when you are in the midst of troubling times? Do you grumble and complain, or do you “offer up” your tribulations, and trust God to get you through?
2. Think of some of the worst times of your life. How did you cope, and what got you through those times? What have you learned from Paul’s example?

## Summary: Lesson 1

In this lesson, we observed that:

1. The faithfulness of Christ is the model for all Christians in every vocation and circumstance.
2. By saying “Amen,” a Christian proclaims that he adheres to all the truths of the faith.
3. The “Amen” is said at the end of the Church’s public worship, and has been since the beginning of the Church.
4. In the sacraments of Baptism and Confirmation, the Holy Spirit anoints the soul with grace, and incorporates it into Christ.
5. In the sacraments of Baptism, Confirmation, and Holy Orders, the Holy Spirit impresses a seal, mark, or character on the soul that is perpetual, cannot be repeated, and cannot be erased.



Altar in Sacred Heart Parish, Salisbury, NC



**Notes:**