
The Interpretation Bible Studies Leader's Helps—Second Corinthians

The IBS Leader Helps are designed to facilitate group study by providing lesson plans for the ten units in each of the Interpretation Bible Studies. These lesson plans utilize a variety of interactive methods, which have been chosen for the express purpose of engaging participants in the learning process. Each participant in the group should have a copy of the IBS study book and should make a commitment to do the assigned preparation for each session.

The sessions are planned for one hour. If the time allotted is shorter than an hour, it will be necessary to be selective about the activities, choosing those that are most appropriate for your group.

Leader Preparation

- *Read the book of 2 Corinthians* in its entirety before beginning to teach. It is important to familiarize yourself with the overall content of the book, so you can see how the individual passages fit into the larger scope of the book.
- *Skim through the whole study book* to discern its flow. This is especially helpful if there are multiple teachers, in order to prevent leaping ahead into the next lesson.
- *Prepare the room ahead of time.* For informal discussion and ease of sharing, a semicircular arrangement of chairs works best. Position yourself as one of the group, instead of setting yourself apart as “the authority.”
- *Secure necessary teaching aids.* A newsprint easel is an invaluable asset. Be sure to have markers and masking tape if you wish to display the sheets for future reference. A map of the world at the time of Paul's ministry will be very helpful. Check the

teaching suggestions for other necessary materials, such as hymnals, paper, pencils, art materials, and so on.

- *Prepare necessary handouts.* A folder for each participant's handouts is helpful, but not essential.
- *Keep the key idea firmly in mind.* Make sure all activities point participants toward this goal.
- *Pray for God's guidance.* Prior to making preparations for the session, allow time to pray for each participant and for yourself.

Suffering and Encouragement (2 Corinthians 1:1–22)

Key Idea: The letter we have preserved in the canon as 2 Corinthians gives us first of all words of comfort and encouragement.

Advance Preparation

- Cut simple dove shapes from white paper. Each participant will need several.
- On newsprint or a dry erase board, print the text of 2 Corinthians 1:1–3a with a black marker. You will also need markers in five colors (red, blue, green, orange, purple, or other available bright colors).
- Locate copies of *The Presbyterian Hymnal* and familiarize yourself with the suggested hymn (the hymn tune is the same as the familiar hymn “Love Divine, All Loves Excelling”).
- If possible, obtain a map that shows Paul’s missionary journeys.

Opening (5 minutes)

1. **Sing a hymn.** Invite the group to sing “Called as Partners in Christ’s Service” (*The Presbyterian Hymnal*, #343)
2. **Prayer.** Pray this prayer or one of your own choosing:

Amazing and gracious God of love, the apostle Paul pleads with the Corinthians to “make room in your hearts for us.” Grant that we may come to a study of this letter, not only with discerning minds, but with an open heart, that we may find in it the very word of God. For we ask it in the name that is above all names, Christ Jesus. Amen.

Presentation (20 minutes)

- 3. The world of Corinth.** Call participants' attention to the map you posted (or refer them to the map on p. 6 in the text). Note where Corinth is located. Summarize the following information in your own words:

Corinth was a prosperous commercial crossroads in classical antiquity. Its location on the Isthmus of Corinth, overlooking the two ports of Cenchreae and Lechaëum, allowed it to command a major east-west trade route between the Aegean and Ionian seas. The sea voyage around the southern coast of the Peloponnesian peninsula was considered difficult and dangerous; consequently, merchants shipping goods between Asia and Italy preferred to send their cargo via Corinth. Small ships could actually be carted across the isthmus; shipments from larger vessels were unloaded, transferred on land to the other side, and reloaded at the other port. . . . Corinth hosted the Isthmian games, an athletic festival second only to the Olympic games in importance Corinth's prosperous commercial life, however, was interrupted in 146 B.C.E. when the Roman army captured the city, destroyed its buildings, and either executed or enslaved its inhabitants. The site stood virtually abandoned until, on the initiative of Julius Caesar, the city was refounded as a Roman colony in 44 B.C.E, less than a hundred years before Paul's arrival on the scene. Many of the colonists were former slaves, Roman freedmen who would have discovered in the newly refounded city opportunities for economic and social advancement not available to them elsewhere. . . . In our reading of Paul's letter, it will be useful to remember that he was writing to a church in a city only a few generations removed from its founding by colonists seeking upward social mobility (*First Corinthians*, Richard B. Hays, pp. 2–3).

Corinth is often described as an exceptionally licentious city, but most of the evidence for this relates to the earlier Greek city and not to the Roman. In Paul's day it was probably no worse or no better than any large cosmopolitan area (*Second Corinthians*, Ernest Best, p. 1).

4. **The church at Corinth.** Ask a volunteer or volunteers to read aloud Acts 18:1–21 to learn about the church at Corinth. Then ask participants what they know about the early Christian church. Point out that the church in Corinth would have been a house church, probably meeting in the villa of a wealthier member. Paul's first letter to the Corinthians was occasioned by problems in the church. One notable problem was that the wealthier members would bring food befitting their social status and go first to the dining room of the house, eating up most of the food before poorer members arrived.
5. **The situation.** Ask participants to read pages 4 and 6 and summarize the reasons for the letter we call Second Corinthians.

Exploration (20 minutes)

6. **Letter writing in the ancient world.** On the newsprint containing the text of 2 Corinthians 1:1–3a, underline “an apostle of Christ Jesus” with a red marker. Note for participants that Paul sees himself as sent.

With a blue marker, underline “Timothy.” Note for participants that Timothy probably acted as Paul's secretary in recording the letter; today the equivalent might be the initials included by whoever inputs a letter for the writer.

With a green marker, underline “saints.” Note for participants the following from the text of Ramsay's *Second Corinthians*: “To Paul, all Christians are saints, ‘holy,’ set apart because they know the good news” (p. 7).

With an orange marker, underline “Grace to you and peace.” Ask, What does Ramsay say about these two terms?

With a purple marker (or some other color), underline “the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.” Ask, What does Ramsay see as significant in this short prayer?

7. **Affliction, consolation, and encouragement.** Divide the group into two small groups. Ask one group to read verses 1:3–9 and “First Comes Affliction” (pp. 8–9) and the other group verses 3–7 and “The Purpose of Suffering: Consolation”

(p. 9). Ask both groups to read “Encouragement” (pp. 9–10). Ask, What do you think it means to refer to the Holy Spirit as the One “called to be beside” you?

Discuss question 1 on page 12.

Response (10 minutes)

- 8. Scripture’s promises.** Give each participant several of the white paper doves you prepared. Call their attention to the portion of the text on page 12, where Ramsay discusses God’s promises. Say, Ramsay says that the “Old Testament is a book of promises, many literally never fulfilled.” What is your response to that statement?

Ramsay refers to the contract that guarantees the sale of a house. What kind of “seal” do we receive from God?

In response to question 4, have participants write on the paper doves their favorite scripture promises.

Closing (5 minutes)

- 9. Reading a hymn text.** Call participants’ attention to what Ramsay says about “Amen” on page 12. Then ask for four volunteers to read the four verses of “Called as Partners in Christ’s Service.” Ask participants to respond to each verse with a unison “Amen!”

Before participants leave, check to be sure no one is allergic to incense or scented candles.

- 10. Assignment.** Ask participants to read 2 Corinthians 1:23–2:17 and unit 2, “Tough Love and Victory.” Also ask half the participants to research incense and burnt offerings in a Bible dictionary. Ask the other half to look up a Roman emperor’s triumphal entry.

Tough Love and Victory (2 Corinthians 1:23–2:17)

Key Idea: Paul's passionate devotion to this congregation is revealed as he both comforts the afflicted and afflicts the comfortable.

Advance Preparation

- Obtain some incense or a scented candle and matches. Check to be sure that no participants are allergic to or sensitive to strong odors. If some participants are allergic, then bring a bowl of potpourri instead.
- If possible, obtain copies of *Sing the Faith* (Geneva Press), the supplement to *The Presbyterian Hymnal*. The closing activity suggests singing “The Fragrance of Christ,” #2205. If your group is not familiar with the hymn, plan to read the verses and refrain as suggested in the activity.
- Print the litany response from the closing on a sheet of newsprint and post it where it can easily be seen.
- You will need newsprint, markers, and tape.

Opening (5 minutes)

1. **Lord's Prayer.** Invite participants to reflect on those they have wronged or who have wronged them. Have they sought forgiveness, or have they offered it? After a few minutes of silent reflection, ask participants to pray the Lord's Prayer in unison. Tell them that when they reach the petition “Forgive us our debts” to pause for a time of silent prayer in which they can ask forgiveness from God for those they have wronged. Also pause after “as we forgive our debtors” and allow time for them to reflect on forgiving those who have wronged them. Finish the prayer.

Presentation/Exploration (35 minutes)

2. Hasty e-mails. Remind participants that in the preceding unit, the writer referred to the *Family Circle* cartoon in which “Amen” was defined as pushing the “Send” button at the end of an e-mail. Ask,

Have you ever written an angry or flippant e-mail and pushed the send button (added the “Amen”) too quickly? What was the result? Did you have occasion to regret your words? What is the danger in emotional words written in haste? Can severe words ever be a good idea? Point out that in this case, Paul’s severe words apparently helped.

- Discuss questions 1 and 2 on page 20.
- Ramsay includes as an illustration the words of the young woman on whose experience *Dead Man Walking* was based (pp. 16–17). Ask a volunteer to read the words of Debbie Morris. How do participants respond to this kind of forgiveness? What other examples of this radical forgiveness can they think of?
- Ask, Can you ever push the “Send” button on forgiveness too quickly? Is there such a thing as cheap grace?

3. Exploring figures of speech. Ask participants to turn to pages 17–18 in the text. Point out that the study suggests that Paul is mixing figures of speech in 2:14–16.

- Ask, What are the three word pictures included here (Christ as the victorious Roman general riding in a victory procession with the conquered trophies and victims, including Paul; the fragrance of the knowledge of Christ; and the aroma)?
- Briefly review the information Ramsay includes about the images and ask participants to share the research they did for homework. Point out that another commentator, Ernest Best, writes that one difficulty with the victorious general image is that Paul regarded himself as a soldier of Christ rather than as his prisoner of war, making this image difficult to understand. But he suggests:

We probably come nearer the true idea when we realize that the Greek word rendered “leads us in triumph” often is used without any idea of triumph, as meaning “display publicly, make known.” With this meaning the first picture joins up neatly with the sec-

ond: “Thanks be to God who displays us publicly in Christ (or ‘himself’) through us everywhere.” Paul is God’s chosen and public means of spreading the gospel and the gospel has an attractiveness all its own. (IBC, *2 Corinthians*, pp. 25–26)

- Ask, What do you think of this interpretation? Which one seems more plausible to you? Why?
Ask several participants to read the following passages aloud: Genesis 8:21; Exodus 29:18; Leviticus 1:9. Review the material in the text about burnt offerings and the contrasting sensory impressions incense would convey to the victorious and the conquered in a victory parade (pp. 18–19).
- Say, Ramsey cites Søren Kierkegaard’s observation that the most subtle trick of Satan is to get people to do the right thing for the wrong reason. How do you respond?

Response (15 minutes)

4. **Reflecting on the Christian life.** Light the incense or scented candle (after determining that no participant is allergic or sensitive to strong odors), or pass around a bowl of potpourri. Ask participants to reflect silently on question 3 on page 20. Then ask them to call out responses popcorn style and record them on newsprint. Post the list on the wall to use in the closing litany.

Closing (5 minutes)

5. **Sing a hymn.** Sing “The Fragrance of Christ” (*Sing the Faith*, #2205). If your group is not familiar with the hymn, ask volunteers to read the verses aloud, with the group reading the refrain between the verses.
6. **A Litany of praise for the Christian life.** Be sure the incense or scented candle is still burning. If not, light it again and read the following litany, with participants reading the response from 2 Corinthians.

Leader: Thanks be to God, who through us spreads in every place the fragrance that comes from knowing Jesus Christ.

People: Thanks be to God!

Leader: Thanks be to God for the fragrance of the Christian life:

For _____ (read one of the responses from the newsprint)

People: Thanks be to God!

Leader: For _____ (read another response)

People: Thanks be to God!

Leader: For _____ (read another response)

(Continue until all responses have been included.)

People: Thanks be to God, who through us spreads in every place the fragrance that comes from knowing Jesus Christ. Amen.

7. **Assignment.** Ask participants to read 2 Corinthians 3:1–18 and chapter 3 in the text. Also assign each participant the name of another member of the class. Ask them to imagine this person is going to visit the church at Corinth and have them write a letter of introduction.

Our Mission and Our Glory (2 Corinthians 3:1–18)

Key Idea: We, like Paul, can become reflections of Christ's glory if we open ourselves to the work of the Holy Spirit.

Advance Preparation

- Obtain a copy of a Jerusalem Bible.
- Print the affirmation from A Brief Statement of Faith on a sheet of newsprint and post it where it can easily be read.

Opening (5 minutes)

1. **Prayer.** Pray the following or a prayer of your own:

*God of grace,
you have given us minds to know you,
hearts to love you,
and voices to sing your praise.
Fill us with your Spirit,
that we may celebrate your glory
and worship you in spirit and in truth;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*

—Reprinted by permission from Book of Common Worship, © 1993
Westminster John Knox Press.

Presentation (15 minutes)

2. **Sharing letters.** Ask volunteers to read the letters of introduction they wrote. Discuss the kinds of qualities one would want to describe in a friend when writing such a letter to those who are strangers to the person.
3. **Letters written on the heart.** Ask volunteers to find and read aloud the following passages:
Jeremiah 31:33

Ezekiel 11:19

Ezekiel 36:26

- Discuss question 1 on page 26.
- Ask
 - How might the “letter” (your life) written by the Holy Spirit read differently than a letter of introduction written by a friend?
 - How do you think we make ourselves open to the Holy Spirit?
 - What obstacles can you identify in your own life to being so inscribed by the action of the Spirit?
 - Has there ever been a period in your life when you felt you belonged in the “dead letter” office?

Exploration (20 minutes)

4. **Old versus New Covenant.** Remind participants that the word *testament* means covenant. Therefore the Old and New Testaments can be called the Old and New Covenants. Ask a volunteer to read aloud Exodus 34:29–35. Refer the group to the last paragraph at the bottom of page 23 about the blinding glory of Moses’ face when he descended Mount Sinai. Then ask a volunteer to read aloud the last paragraph of that section (middle of p. 24). Invite them to come up with other metaphors that compare the Old and New Covenants.
5. **In the light of Christ.** Refer the group to the section on pages 24–25, “Only Christ Enables Us Fully to See That Glory.” Ask them to comment on the following: “Christians are always to read the Bible in the glorious light of Jesus Christ, taking as our authority what, even in stories of violence and outdated rules, points to him”
 - Ask, What do you make of this statement? Do you agree?
 - Discuss question 3 on page 27.
(Alternative activity: Refer participants to pp. 24–25 where the author speaks of the story about Bill Moyers’s Genesis program. Then have them identify stories of violence from the Old Testament and write a headline that recasts the story in the light of Christ.)

- 6. Freedom in Christ.** Ask someone to read aloud Exodus 33:17–23.
- The author says that Paul implies that if we want to see God, look at Jesus. Ask participants to name events or stories about Jesus that give them a glimpse of what God is like.
 - Discuss questions 2 and 4 on pages 26 and 27.

Response (15 minutes)

- 7. Reflections of Christ's glory.** Call the attention of the group to the last paragraph on page 26. If you have been able to obtain a copy of the Jerusalem Bible, have someone read 2 Corinthians 3:18. Give the group time to reflect on the names of “saints” they know that reflect Christ's glory. Ask them to write down the names of their saints, along with qualities that mirror Christ's image. When all have finished, have them discuss their responses.

4

The Christian's Courage (2 Corinthians 4:1–18)

Key Idea: Though we may sometimes falter, the Christian's hope restores courage.

Advance Preparation

- Obtain a Bible dictionary and a concordance.
- Locate enough small, clay flowerpots for each participant to have one, along with votive candles or tea lights and matches.
- Print the responsive reading on a sheet of newsprint and post it where it can easily be seen.
- You will need newsprint, markers, and tape.
- You will also need copies of *The Presbyterian Hymnal*, or another hymnal that includes “Amazing Grace, How Sweet the Sound.”

Opening (10 minutes)

1. **Responsive reading.** Read selected verses from Psalm 138 responsively.

People: I give you thanks, O Lord, with my whole heart.

Leader: I bow down toward your holy temple and give thanks to your name for your steadfast love and your faithfulness.

People: I give you thanks, O Lord, with my whole heart.

Leader: For you have exalted your name and your word above everything.

People: I give you thanks, O Lord, with my whole heart.

Leader: On the day I called, you answered me.

People: **I give you thanks, O Lord, with my whole heart.**

Leader: You increased my strength of soul. The Lord will fulfill his purpose for me

People: **Your steadfast love, O Lord, endures forever.**

- 2. Prayer.** Lord, we give thanks that by your mercy we are called to be engaged in Christian ministry. Help us not to lose heart. Amen.

Presentation (10 minutes)

- 3. Three charges.** Ask participants to refer to pages 28–29 to find the three charges made against Paul and how he refutes each charge. List these on newsprint.
- 4. Finding contrasts.** As suggested in the text on page 30 (and in question 4 on p. 33), have participants read 4:7–12 and find the contrasts. List them on newsprint.

Exploration (30 minutes)

- 5. Treasures in clay jars.** Ask a volunteer to read Genesis 1: 26–30 and 2:4b–7. Ask, What does it mean to say someone has “feet of clay”?

Point out that Ramsay says that although we are still clay, we are gradually being transformed from the inside out.

Read the following, or put the information in your own words: The Dalits in India, the so called “untouchables,” have difficulty living into the Christian notion of the Body of Christ, for ancient culture and religion have excluded these Christians from God’s body for so long. The Rig Veda, an ancient Hindu religious text written around 1000 BCE,

outlines the vision of caste as God's body parts. The untouchables are not even included in the imagined body parts of God.

A Dalit theologian describes the Hindu caste system as being like a pyramid of earthenware pots set one on top of the other with the Brahmins and other high caste peoples at the top, while the untouchables are at the bottom. Within each earthenware pot, men are placed at the top and women of that caste are placed at the bottom like crushed and wasted powder.

Ask,

- What other groups of people might envision themselves as the crushed clay pots of our society?
- How do you respond to the image of the treasure in clay pots (question 3 on p. 33)?
- Ramsay remarks that “Paul loves paradoxes. Precisely as the sufferings and death of Christ are manifested in his frail body, there the life of Christ can shine through, too. Sometimes we, too, get a glimpse of Christ's glory as we see people who have gone through suffering for the sake of their Lord.” When have you experienced such a glimpse in someone's life?

- 6. Definitions of glory.** Ask participants to share what they found when they looked up the word *glory*. Use the concordance to look up biblical references that include *glory*. Ask participants to respond to the phrase “eternal weight of glory.” Ask

What does the text tell us about the phrase?

Discuss question 1 on page 32.

Response (5 minutes)

- 7. Transformation from the inside out.** Give each person a clay pot and a tea light or votive candle. Ask that they reflect silently on how they see themselves being transformed from the inside out by the work of the Holy Spirit. In what ways would they like to reflect more of Christ's glory? After several minutes of silent reflection, ask participants to bring their clay

pots to the table and light the candles.

Closing (5 minutes)

- 8. Sing a hymn.** Close by singing “Amazing Grace, How Sweet the Sound” (*The Presbyterian Hymnal*, # 280).
- 9. Assignment.** Ask participants to read 2 Corinthians 5:1–21 and unit 5, “Ambassadors Far from Home.” Also ask participants to give some thought to question 1 on page 39 and to be ready to discuss it. Suggest that participants collect some newspaper or magazine articles about current issues of concern in your community.

5

Ambassadors Far from Home (2 Corinthians 5:1–21)

Key Idea: Paul presents images of one reality we cannot yet see: the life to come.

Advance Preparation

- On newsprint, print some scriptural phrases about the life to come, such as “a new heaven and a new earth”; “Lord, you have been our dwelling place. . .”; “I go to prepare a place for you . . .”; “Today you will be with me in paradise.”
- Collect some newspaper or magazine articles about current issues of concern in your community to supplement articles brought by the group.
- Obtain paper, pencils, colored markers, or other art materials.
- You will need copies of *The Presbyterian Hymnal* and *Sing the Faith* or another hymnal.

Opening (5 minutes)

1. **Sing a hymn.** Sing a hymn about the life to come, such as “I’ll Fly Away” (*Sing the Faith*, #2282).

Presentation (15 minutes)

2. **Sharing visions of the life to come.** First ask participants to share some of the more common pictures painted in popular culture of the afterlife. Then ask participants to share their thoughts on question 1 on page 39. Ask
 - What do you look forward to in the life to come?
 - How do you picture the eternal life?
 - How does your picture differ from the popular conception of how it will be?
 - What questions, fears, and reservations do you have?

- 3. Life today.** Ask the group to respond to the following:
“. . . our assurance for life to come is no excuse for neglecting our responsibilities in this life now. (p. 36) Ask
—How do you think the church should balance the expectations of the life to come with our responsibilities in this life now?

Exploration (20 minutes)

- 4. Using Christian lenses.** Refer the group to “We Are Ambassadors Wearing Spectacles” (pp. 37–39). Ramsay quotes John Calvin as saying that looking at the world through the gospel is like putting on a pair of spectacles. Ask them to look over the articles they brought as well as those you collected. After giving them a few minutes to read and reflect, Ask
—How would we see those issues and people differently through Christian lenses?
—We often talk about what Christians should *do* about certain societal problems. How is this different from *seeing* a problem differently?

Discuss question 3 on page 39.

- 5. Ambassadors for Christ.** Ask the group to read over the description of ambassadors on pages 38–39. Ask
—How do you respond to this image? Is there an image that makes this clearer to you?

Response (15 minutes)

- 6. Images of reconciliation.** Ask someone to read the section of the Confession of 1967 found on page 38. Then read the following or put it in your own words:
In speaking of the atonement in which God reconciled God's self to us, Shirley Guthrie (*Christian Doctrine*) says that the followers of Jesus used various analogies or metaphors already at their disposal in daily life to interpret his death in positive terms. But these images do not describe

a theory of atonement or plan of salvation that explains what God must do or what must happen to Jesus if God wants to save the world. They used the images not to explain what God must do in order to save us but to interpret what God actually did do. Second, it is no accident that in the New Testament several images are used to interpret the meaning of Jesus' death. No one of them is adequate by itself. Every one has limitations and needs the emphasis of the others for a total grasp of the picture.

Ask the group to choose one of the images used here (including Ramsay's image of the delete button), or to come up with one of their own, and write a few words, draw a picture, or use symbols to explain the image. When everyone is finished, ask those who are willing to share their interpretations.

Closing (5 minutes)

7. **Sing a hymn.** Sing "When We Are Living" (*The Presbyterian Hymnal*, #400).
8. **Assignment.** Ask participants to read unit 6. Also assign some of the following Psalms of lament to participants to read: Psalms 3–7, 13, 17, 22, 26, 38, 44, 74, 79, 80, 83.

Portrait of a Passionate Pastor (2 Corinthians 6:1–7:16)

Key Idea: Like the Corinthians, through “godly grief” we too can experience the replacement of dissension by repentance and love.

Advance Preparation

- On newsprint, print the opening litany and post it where it can easily be read.
- If you have access to a *Peanuts* cartoon strip, make a drawing of Charlie Brown. In a cartoon bubble over his head, put the words, “Good Grief!”
- You will need hymnals with the suggested closing hymns (or another hymn on the cross of your own choosing).
- You will need newsprint, markers, and tape.

Opening (5 minutes)

1. **Read a litany.** Divide the group into two parts for the litany.

Leader: See, now is the acceptable time;
See, now is the time for salvation!
We are putting no obstacle in anyone’s way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry; but as servants of God we have commended ourselves in every way:

Right: through great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger;

Left: by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, truthful speech, and the power of God;

Right: with weapons of righteousness for the right hand

- Left:** and for the left;
- Right:** in honor and dishonor,
- Left:** in ill repute and good repute.
- Right:** We are treated as imposters, and yet are true;
- Left:** as unknown, and yet are well-known;
- Right:** as dying, and see—we are alive;
- Left:** as punished, and yet not killed;
- Right:** as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing;
- Left:** as poor, yet making many rich;
- Right:** as having nothing, yet possessing everything.
- All:** Lord God, through your scripture you have spoken frankly to us. Your heart is wide open to us. In return, open wide our hearts to you also. Amen.

Presentation (15 minutes)

2. **Do not be mismatched . . .** Ask participants to respond to the author's comments about whether 6:14–7:1 belongs to the letter or is an addition. Then ask someone to look up and read aloud Deuteronomy 22:10. Point out that if a donkey and an ox are yoked together, they are mismatched and will be unable to pull a plow together smoothly. Read the following statement from Ramsay (p. 43): "I know a family man who quit his good-paying job. A Christian just could not work in a firm that was cutting corners like that, he explained."

Ask

—How do you respond to this statement? What would you do in this situation?

Discuss question 2 on page 45.

Exploration (25 minutes)

3. Reviewing the structure of the letter. Review the fragments of the letter using the information under “The Joy of Reconciliation” (p. 43). Jot down an outline of the structure of the letter on newsprint as you talk.

Discuss question 1 on page 45.

4. Good Grief! Ask participants to read a Psalm or portions of a Psalm of lament that they read as a part of their assignment.

Call the attention of participants to the excerpt from Short’s *The Gospel According to Peanuts* (sidebar, p. 45). Ask them to respond to Short’s definition of godly grief. Do they agree or disagree? If you made a drawing of Charlie Brown, jot down participants’ responses next to the bubble with the words “Good grief!”.

Discuss question 3 on page 45.

Response (10 minutes)

5. Review. Ask participants to respond to question 4 (p. 45) with what has been most meaningful to them in the chapters of 2 Corinthians so far. List their responses on newsprint.

Closing (5 minutes)

6. Sing a hymn. Sing “In the Cross of Christ I Glory” (*The Presbyterian Hymnal*, #84) or “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross” (*The Presbyterian Hymnal*, #101).

7. **Assignment.** Ask participants to read unit 7. Also ask for volunteers to research the work of Church World Service by going to www.churchworldservice.org. Someone can also research your denomination's mission and service online. If you belong to the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), the Web site address is www.pcusa.org.

Also ask for volunteers to research the economic indicators for the United States and its present level of poverty. Information about poverty and children is available from the Children's Defense Fund.

Good News about Giving (2 Corinthians 8:1–9:15)

Key Idea: The opportunity for giving is always good news, for we should give in gratitude for what God has given us.

Advance Preparation

- On separate sheets of colored construction paper or poster board, print the list of favorite verses from this portion of 2 Corinthians found on page 46. Tape these on the walls of your classroom.
- Borrow one of the offering plates used in your service of worship. Make a display tent by folding an 8" × 11" piece of paper or poster board in half. Print on it the words “Put yourself here!” and stand it up in the offering plate. Put it on a table at the front of the classroom.
- Ask your pastor for a copy of your church’s budget and record of giving for the past year. Make copies of it for the participants. If possible, invite a member of the stewardship committee to be present to explain the information and answer questions.
- You will need copies of *The Presbyterian Hymnal* or another hymnal with the hymn “Take My Life.”

Opening (5 minutes)

1. **Sing a hymn.** Sing “Take My Life” (*The Presbyterian Hymnal*, #391).
2. **Pray together.** Pray the following prayer:

*Righteous God,
you have taught us that the poor shall have your kingdom,
and that the gentle-minded shall inherit the earth.
Keep the church poor enough to preach to poor people,
and humble enough to walk with the despised.
Never weigh us down with property or accumulated funds.*

*Save your church from vain display or lavish comforts,
so that we may travel light
and move through the world
showing your generous love
made known in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*

—Reprinted by permission from Book of Common Worship, © 1993
Westminster John Knox Press.

Presentation (10 minutes)

3. **“Put Yourself Here!”** Ask participants to read over the verses you posted as well as the placard you placed in the offering plate. Ask them to choose the verse or statement that strikes them the most positively as an incentive for stewardship and to go and stand beside it. When they have positioned themselves, go around the room and ask for comments about why they made the choice they made.

Remind them that Ramsay states that 2 Corinthians 8–9 “. . . is probably the most inspired and inspiring fund-raising message ever penned” (p. 46). Do they agree or disagree?

Exploration (20 minutes)

4. **Striking a fair balance.** Ask participants to respond to the following statement in the text on page 48:

Presbyterian minister and author Don Shriver tells about startling a group of Christian industrialists. He proposed that a Christian would measure our economy not by the total wealth of our nation but by how well we share. The bottom line is not the gross national product but how well off our poorest citizens are, especially in comparison with others.

Have participants discuss this statement in the light of the research they did on economic indicators and the poverty level in the United States.

Ask, How would you rate our economy using this yardstick?

Ask for volunteers to read aloud Exodus 16, the story of God's gift of manna to feed the Israelites. Discuss how much is "enough."

Ask, How do we judge whether or not we have enough to live? How does this affect how we decide about our giving to the church?

5. **The administration of our gifts.** Have participants who researched the work of the denomination and the work of Church World Service on our behalf to report on what they found.
6. **The rewards of giving.** Ask participants to read 2 Corinthians 9:6–15, and, as suggested by Ramsay, list the promises God makes to those who give. Discuss Ramsay's statement that "Hilarious' giving is an act of praise."

Response (20 minutes)

7. **Write a letter.** As suggested in question 4 on page 50, hand out copies of your own congregation's budget and giving patterns. Ask the member of the stewardship committee you invited to explain the budget and answer any questions. Invite participants to write the letter they imagine Paul might write to your congregation about its stewardship. After allowing several minutes for letter writing, invite participants to read their letters.

Closing (5 minutes)

8. **Take an offering.** Distribute index cards or slips of paper. Ask participants to write down their responses to God's gifts to us and place them in the offering plate.
9. **Sing a hymn.** Again sing "Take My Life" (*The Presbyterian Hymnal*, #391), this time as a closing prayer.

- 10. Assignment.** Ask participants to read unit 8, “The Authority of a ‘Fool’.” Also ask them to be prepared to share favorite scripture passages in the opening time next session. Ask for volunteers to research new sects and religions on the Internet (see the sidebar on p. 55 for suggested key words for a search).

The Authority of a “Fool” (2 Corinthians 10:1–11:29)

Key Idea: The issue of Paul’s authority is as basic to our faith as it was to Paul’s interactions with the Corinthians.

Advance Preparation

- You will need newsprint and markers as well as paper and pencils for the participants.
- You will again sing “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross” (*The Presbyterian Hymnal*, #101).
- Locate your own favorite scriptures and be prepared to read or recite them in case participants have neglected to identify their own.

Opening (10 minutes)

1. **Reading or reciting favorite scriptures.** Invite participants to read or recite their favorite passages of scripture.
2. **Pray together.** Pray the following or a prayer of your own choosing:

Gracious God, we give thanks for words of scripture that comfort and uplift us, words of beauty and power. But we give thanks, too, for words of scripture that are hard to hear. Open our ears to hear the message of your word. For we ask it in the name of Christ, in whom be all honor and glory. Amen.

Presentation (10 minutes)

3. **A different kind of war.** Summarize for participants the information in the first three paragraphs on pages 51–52 about the different tone of these chapters, emphasizing that the issue is Paul’s authority.

Ask a volunteer to read aloud 10:1–6. Then have someone read Ephesians 6:11–17. Invite participants to respond to the military imagery in these passages. Now ask them to read verses 7–18 and ask that they identify examples of sarcasm in Paul’s defense of himself

4. **Paul’s *curriculum vitae*.** Invite participants to write a *curriculum vitae* for Paul. They can use the information in unit 8, in 2 Corinthians 10, and in others such as Galatians 1:11–24 and Philippians 1:12–14.

Discuss question 1 on page 56.

Ask, What do you think were the characteristics and qualifications of the “super-apostles” to whom Paul refers in 11:5? How did they compare to Paul?

Exploration (25 minutes)

5. **Dangers and hardships.** Divide the group into two smaller groups. As suggested in the text on page 55, have one group make a list of the different kinds of dangers Paul enumerates and the other the kinds of hardships he endured. After allowing a few minutes, ask each group to list on newsprint what they found.
6. **Choosing a church.** Again in the small groups, ask one group to make a list of criteria they *would* realistically use to choose a new church in a new city, while the other lists criteria one *should* use (question 1 on p. 56). Compare the two lists.

Ask those who researched sects and new religions to report on what they found. Discuss the appeal of such groups. How should the Christian church be responding in the face of such an appeal?

Response (10 minutes)

7. **Sing a hymn.** Invite the participants to focus on the words of verse 2 as they sing “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross” (*The Presbyterian Hymnal*, #101).

Closing (5 minutes)

- 8. Closing silent prayer.** Invite participants to join in a time of silent prayer. After several minutes of silence, end by reading the final verse of “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross.”
- 9. Assignment.** Ask participants to read unit 9, “Powerful Weaklings.” Also ask that they read the passages from Acts listed on page 58 under the section “An Indescribable Spiritual ‘High’.”
Ask for volunteers to research Christian mystics such as Julian of Norwich and be prepared to share something about the mystics’ lives and faith.

9

Powerful Weaklings (2 Corinthians 11:30–12:10)

Key Idea: A powerful mystery of our faith is that we gain strength when we allow the Holy Spirit to work in and through our weakness.

Advance Preparation

- On separate sheets of newsprint, print the types of channels of mediated experience of God listed on page 59: sacraments, the Bible, sermons, Christian friends, study groups. Tape the sheets around the walls of your meeting space. Provide markers with each sheet.
- On poster board or colored sheets of paper, print the following:
 - the sidebar on page 60 about prayer.
 - “Prayer is receiving and responding, speaking and listening, waiting and acting in the presence of God” (Book of Order).
 - “Prayer means calling upon God whose Spirit is always present with us . . . Prayer brings us into communion with God. The more our lives are rooted in prayer, the more we sense how wonderful God is in grace, purity, majesty and love. Prayer means offering our lives completely to God, submitting ourselves to God’s will, and waiting faithfully for God’s grace. Through prayer God frees us from anxiety, equips us for service, and deepens our faith” (Study Catechism).
 - “Prayer is none other than an expanding of our heart in the presence of God” (John Calvin, *Corpus Reformatorum* 37:402).
- Recruit two persons to help with the response activity of spiritual reading of scripture. Ask them to read over 2 Corinthians 12:7b–10

Opening (5 minutes)

1. **Sing “Jesus Loves Me!”** Invite participants to join you in singing “Jesus Loves Me!” (while you probably do not need hymnals to sing this familiar hymn, it is found in *The Presbyterian Hymnal*, #304).
2. **Pray together.** Pray the following prayer or one of your own choosing:

God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, as adults we are reluctant to admit our weakness, even to ourselves. Yet we know that it is through acknowledging our weakness that you are able to impart strength. Make us vulnerable to your saving grace. For we ask it in the name of Christ Jesus. Amen.

Presentation (20 minutes)

3. **Paul the mystic.** Ask participants to summarize the visions and inspired dreams of Paul they read about in the passages from Acts. Then discuss the two important points about Paul's spiritual experiences as enumerated on page 58.

Call the attention of participants to the sheets of newsprint you posted on the walls. Invite them to read each of the categories of the mediated experience of God and to write their names on each sheet that represents a way they have had an experience of God.

When everyone has had a chance to record their names, ask for volunteers to share how God has spoken to them through each type of experience.

Discuss question 2 on page 61.

Point out that through the centuries, many Christians have had experiences of God similar to those of Paul. Julian of Norwich is one such mystic. Ask persons who researched Julian and other Christian mystics to share what they found.

Exploration (20 minutes)

- 4. Exploring our weaknesses.** Ask volunteers to read aloud the following:

Acts 9:23–25 (the account Paul makes reference to in 2 Cor. 11:32)

Acts 9:8

Galatians 4:12–15

Galatians 6:11

Invite participants to speculate as to what Paul’s “thorn in the flesh” was.

Discuss question 1 on page 61.

- 5. Prayer—answered and unanswered.** Call participants’ attention to the statements about prayer you posted and ask them to respond. Which seem closest to their own understanding of prayer?

Discuss question 3 on page 61.

Ask, What about the times when it seems that our prayers go unanswered? How do you explain these times?

Response (10 minutes)

- 6. Spiritual reading of scripture.** Tell participants that they will now experience a spiritual reading of a portion of the scripture they have studied today. Invite them to find a comfortable position for sitting and to breathe in and out slowly and deeply, breathing out any distractions and breathing in a sense of the presence of God. Tell them that they will hear the scripture read several times.

Read 2 Corinthians 12:7b–10 aloud yourself. Then read it again, slowly. Ask participants to listen for the word that beckons, addresses them, or stirs or unnerves them. Invite them to repeat this word to themselves, and then in turn to repeat it aloud.

Ask another person to read the passage aloud. This time invite participants to pay attention to the feeling or image that

is connected to the word or phrase they identified. Following the reading, invite persons to state that feeling or image.

Ask a third person to read the passage aloud. Participants are to pay attention to how the word or phrase and the feeling or image connect with the context of their lives right now.

Invite them to explore in silence how God is present to them or how God is calling them.

Close with a time of extended silence.

Closing (5 minutes)

7. **Closing Prayer.** Following the time of silence, invite participants to pray sentence prayers. Close with your own prayer.
8. **Assignment.** Ask participants to read unit 10, “The Last Words: Grace, Love, and Communion.” Also ask them to read Acts 18:1–17.

The Last Words: Grace, Love, and Communion (2 Corinthians 12:11–13:13)

Key Idea: Through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit we can continue to grow toward perfection.

Advance Preparation

- On newsprint or poster board, print the words of 2 Corinthians 1:2 and 2 Corinthians 2:13. Post it where it can easily be seen.
- Get copies of your church's mission statement and copies of worship bulletins that contain prayers of confession.
- If possible obtain a copy of *Christian Doctrine*, by Shirley Guthrie. Read over chapter 5, "Who Is God? The Doctrine of the Trinity."
- On separate cards, print the four group-assignment statements in activity 5 (or photocopy that section of this session and cut the assignments into four separate strips).
- You will need newsprint, markers, slips of paper, and pencils for the participants.
- If you think anyone is not familiar with the Apostles' Creed or the doxology, both are found in *The Presbyterian Hymnal*.

Opening (5 minutes)

1. **Passing the Peace.** Ask participants to form a circle. Tell them that you will pass the peace using the words of 2 Corinthians 1:2:

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

Turn to the person on one side of you and repeat the words, shaking hands or hugging him or her as appropriate. That person will pass the peace to the next person. Continue around the circle.

2. **Sing the doxology.** Sing the doxology together.

Presentation (10 minutes)

3. **Reviewing Paul's first and second visits.** Summarize the information in the text on pages 62–63. Ask someone to briefly describe Paul's first visit to Corinth as recounted in Acts 18. Recall the previous discussion about the painful second visit referred to in the beginning of the epistle.

Exploration (30 minutes)

4. **Paul's final message.** Call participants' attention to the opening statement of the unit, that 2 Corinthians is really a kind of love letter, that of a father to a wayward child. Read aloud the statement of Chrysostom found on page 64, the summary of Paul's message in these last chapters.

Discuss question 1 on page 66.

With copies of your church's mission statement and printed copies of prayers of confession from worship bulletins, ask participants to answer question 3 on pages 66–67. List other ways to engage in self-examination or elements participants feel are missing from your church's practices of self-examination.

5. **Discussing the Trinity.** Ask participants to respond to this statement of Shirley Guthrie:

When we speak of God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, we refer not to the gender of God but to the kind of relationship that exists between them in the inner life of God, and between the triune God and us.

—*Christian Doctrine*, p. 76.

Guthrie says that while the doctrine of the Trinity is not found in the Bible, the Bible does speak of the one God who is present and at work in three ways. Divide participants into four groups and assign to each group one of the following

unsatisfactory ways to describe the Trinity. Ask them to discuss and decide what is the fallacy of the approach assigned to them:

1. God is like the heavenly board of directors of a corporation made up of three equal partners, each of whom has a particular responsibility.
2. God is like a committee or board in which there is one big boss and two subordinates who go out to do what the boss orders: one God (the Father) and two “agents” of God (the Son and Spirit) who are invested with divine authority and power but are still less than God.
3. God is like three players on a football team sitting on the sidelines and waiting their turn to get into the game, one after the other going out onto the field to substitute for each other.
4. God is like a man or woman who “wears three hats” or fulfills several functions at the same time—spouse, wage earner or member of a profession, and church officer or civic leader.

After allowing time for discussion, have each group share their responses. Then tell them that Guthrie translates the ancient doctrine of the Trinity this way:

“‘One God in three persons’ means *one personal God who lives and works in three different ways at the same time*” (p. 84).

6. **Grace, love, and peace.** Ask participants to respond to the statement in the sidebar on page 66.

Response (10 minutes)

7. **Our response to the letter.** As suggested in question 4 on page 67, the end of the study is a time for evaluating what has been learned and what difference it will make. Ask participants to share what things in the letter and in this study have meant the most to them. Record their responses on newsprint. Then dis-

tribute slips of paper and pencils. Ask that they jot down on the paper a response or responses they will make in their lives as a result of the study.

Closing (5 minutes)

- 8. The Apostles' Creed.** Close by reciting the Apostles' Creed together. Then pass the peace again as you did in the beginning of the session, this time using the words of 2 Corinthians 13:13:

*The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ,
the love of God,
and the communion of the Holy Spirit
be with all of you.*