



“I have twice worked through 2 Corinthians with Dane Ortlund’s marvelous commentary and benefited enormously. Now this volume distills the insights of that exegetical work. Weakness, deprivation, loss, exclusion—things the world sees as curses—will, if met with faith in Christ, turn out to be blessings. God’s power generally comes to us through our weakness. Ortlund unfolds the implications of this radical, counterintuitive, and countercultural message in ways that are deeply provocative but also profoundly comforting.”

**Tim Keller**, Founding Pastor, Redeemer Presbyterian Church, New York City; Cofounder, Redeemer City to City

“Most Christians think they know the theology of the apostle Paul. But few, I fear, know Paul himself. I have always believed that the best way to discover the heart of this man is by reading and reflecting on 2 Corinthians and the way in which the dawning of the new age transformed this formerly angry Pharisee into the apostle of Jesus Christ. This epistle, to the surprise of many, is my favorite New Testament book. Dane Ortlund’s excellent unpacking of its theology only confirms my esteem. If you’ve never immersed yourself in 2 Corinthians, this short treatment of its primary focus is the place to begin. I trust it will lead you to take a deep dive into the way in which the gospel enabled Paul to find strength in the midst of weakness, peace in the midst of conflict, and hope in the face of constant opposition.”

**Sam Storms**, Founder and President, Enjoying God Ministries

“A theological commentary on this surprisingly neglected New Testament epistle is long overdue. This volume gives us a systematic overview of Christian teaching as found in 2 Corinthians that will be of immense value to students and teachers alike.”

**Gerald Bray**, Research Professor of Divinity, Beeson Divinity School; author, *Biblical Interpretation: Past and Present*

“Dane Ortlund has done us a great service in writing this book: no one should preach through 2 Corinthians without reading it! Writing on 2 Corinthians is often complex and even confused, but this reliable guide is succinct, crystal clear, profound, and, like the letter itself, immeasurably rich. Short enough to serve the preacher well, it manages to handle all the key points of debate deftly. The chapters ‘Inaugurated Eschatology’ and ‘Strength through Weakness’ alone are worth the purchase price. I cannot commend this book highly enough.”

**Gary Millar**, Principal, Queensland Theological College; author, *2 Corinthians for You*



*Ministry in the New Realm*

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# Ministry in the New Realm

*A Theology of 2 Corinthians*

Dane C. Ortlund

 **CROSSWAY**<sup>®</sup>  
WHEATON, ILLINOIS

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*To Dr. Hans Bayer,  
teacher, discipler, encourager, friend*





“This quest may be attempted by the weak with as much hope as the strong. Yet such is oft the course of deeds that move the wheels of the world: small hands do them because they must, while the eyes of the great are elsewhere.”

ELROND, AT THE COUNCIL OF ELROND,  
J. R. R. TOLKIEN, *THE LORD OF THE RINGS*



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## Series Preface

THERE ARE REMARKABLY FEW TREATMENTS of the big ideas of single books of the New Testament. Readers can find brief coverage in Bible dictionaries, in some commentaries, and in New Testament theologies, but such books are filled with other information and are not devoted to unpacking the theology of each New Testament book in its own right. Technical works concentrating on various themes of New Testament theology often have a narrow focus, treating some aspect of the teaching of, say, Matthew or Hebrews in isolation from the rest of the book's theology.

The New Testament Theology series seeks to fill this gap by providing students of Scripture with readable book-length treatments of the distinctive teaching of each New Testament book or collection of books. The volumes approach the text from the perspective of biblical theology. They pay due attention to the historical and literary dimensions of the text, but their main focus is on presenting the teaching of particular New Testament books about God and his relations to the world on their own terms, maintaining sight of the Bible's overarching narrative and Christocentric focus. Such biblical theology is of fundamental importance to biblical and expository preaching and informs exegesis, systematic theology, and Christian ethics.

The twenty volumes in the series supply comprehensive, scholarly, and accessible treatments of theological themes from an evangelical perspective. We envision them being of value to students, preachers, and interested laypeople. When preparing an expository sermon

series, for example, pastors can find a healthy supply of informative commentaries, but there are few options for coming to terms with the overall teaching of each book of the New Testament. As well as being useful in sermon and Bible study preparation, the volumes will also be of value as textbooks in college and seminary exegesis classes. Our prayer is that they contribute to a deeper understanding of and commitment to the kingdom and glory of God in Christ.

Sometimes regarded as Paul's impassioned, heartfelt, but disjointed response to disparate problems in the church, 2 Corinthians presents distinctive challenges for readers wishing to learn from its teaching on a range of topics. The letter covers everything from the new covenant and the signs of an apostle to reconciliation and generous giving. Dane Ortlund's *Ministry in the New Realm* locates the common thread throughout 2 Corinthians in the inauguration of the kingdom of God, which reveals God's power through human weakness. Read with this framework in mind, Ortlund's volume unpacks the letter's remarkably comprehensive vision for Christlike ministry that is both profoundly theological as well as thoroughly practical.

Thomas R. Schreiner and Brian S. Rosner

# Abbreviations

BDAG	Frederick W. Danker, Walter Bauer, William F. Arndt, and F. Wilbur Gingrich. <i>Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature</i> . 3rd ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000
BNTC	Black's New Testament Commentaries
BTNT	Biblical Theology of the New Testament
<i>CTJ</i>	<i>Calvin Theological Journal</i>
<i>ETL</i>	<i>Ephemerides Theologicae Louvanienses</i>
<i>HTR</i>	<i>Harvard Theological Review</i>
<i>JETS</i>	<i>Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society</i>
<i>JSNT</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of the New Testament</i>
<i>JTS</i>	<i>Journal of Theological Studies</i>
LCL	Loeb Classical Library
LNTS	Library of New Testament Studies
LXX	Septuagint
<i>Neot</i>	<i>Neotestamentica</i>
NICNT	New International Commentary on the New Testament
NIGTC	New International Greek Testament Commentary
NSBT	New Studies in Biblical Theology
<i>NTS</i>	<i>New Testament Studies</i>
SNTSMS	Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series
SSBT	Short Studies in Biblical Theology



<i>Them</i>	<i>Themelios</i>
<i>TynBul</i>	<i>Tyndale Bulletin</i>
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary
WUNT	Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament

## Introduction

# A Letter Like No Other

THE OVERARCHING THEOLOGICAL MESSAGE of 2 Corinthians is this: in the new realm that was inaugurated when Jesus ascended and the Spirit descended, life and ministry are flipped upside down such that God's strength interlocks not with human strength and sufficiency but with human weakness and pain.

That summary has two basic parts: (1) we today live in the dawning new realm that the Old Testament anticipated, the new creation that was expected to come at the end of history; and (2) the basic pattern for joy and growth in this new realm is paradoxical, as life comes through death, strength through weakness, comfort through affliction, and so on—as was the pattern of Christ himself. These two points will form the first and last chapters of this book, with the intervening chapters exploring other key themes of 2 Corinthians, all flowing out of the new creational age in which believers find themselves between the first and second comings of Christ. But before we get into the heart of this study and the theology of 2 Corinthians, let's pause to consider this epistle from a broader perspective.

There is nothing in the Bible quite like 2 Corinthians. The present volume explores and synthesizes the theology of this letter. That is appropriate, as the message of the Bible and of each of its sixty-six books is centrally theological—that is, revealing of God and his ways with humanity. The Bible also has rich historical and literary qualities, but

these serve the more basic theological message. This is particularly noticeable in the letters of Paul. “The preaching and teaching of Paul,” Geerhardus Vos says in his opening sentence of an essay outlining Paul’s theology, “possess more than any other New Testament body of truth a theological character.”<sup>1</sup>

So we will reflect in this volume on the theology of 2 Corinthians. And in the first sentence of this introduction I have given a summary of what that theology is. But before focusing on this, we should note the distinctiveness of 2 Corinthians from a broader angle. In at least four ways, this letter of Paul’s stands apart from the other letters we have in the New Testament: this letter is more autobiographical, more raw, more interpersonal, and more defensive. These four qualities overlap to varying degrees, but they are still worth considering independently, given how distinctive each is throughout 2 Corinthians. These features are not so much the *content* of the letter’s theology as much as they are what *shape* its theology, so it is worth beginning our study by getting these elements before us.

### Autobiographical

Every reader of Paul’s letters faces the unique challenge of hearing only one side of a conversation. Like hearing someone speaking on the phone on the other side of the room, we do not know the exact situation to which the apostles are responding in their letters. It would be easy to make too much of this challenge; God has given us precisely what we need for life and salvation in the sixty-six books of Scripture, including the letters. Yet the challenge, while ordered by God’s wisdom, remains.

In 2 Corinthians, however, this difficulty is lessened through the pervasive autobiographical details Paul divulges. Throughout this epistle we hear him explicitly identifying events of his own life and ministry to the church at Corinth. No letter in the New Testament

1 Geerhardus Vos, “The Theology of Paul,” in *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation: The Collected Shorter Writings of Geerhardus Vos*, ed. R. B. Gaffin Jr. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1980), 355.

is pure systematic theology, of course. Every letter bears the marks of personal context between apostle and recipient church. And yet opening to 2 Corinthians immediately after a reading of, say, Romans or Ephesians, we are quickly struck by the autobiographical transparency with which Paul writes.

Paul speaks of his near-death experience in Asia (1:8–11), his travel plans (1:15–24; 2:12–13), his interaction with an offending sinner (2:5–11), his friendship with Titus (7:6–7, 13–15), a letter he previously wrote to the Corinthians and the damaging effect it had on their relationship (7:8–9), his fruitful fundraising in Macedonia (8:1–5), and his own sufferings throughout chapters 10–13.

The Bible is not a sort of pure doctrine that has floated down from heaven from the very throne of God, giving us divine truth in the form of timeless abstraction. No, the Bible is mediated to us through fellow fallen human beings, such as the apostle Paul. And the personal circumstances of each biblical author form an evident part of their writing. God speaks to us today through the earthy and painful lives and minds of ordinary men and women. In 2 Corinthians, perhaps more than in any other book of the Bible, we see this.

## Raw

It's difficult to know exactly what word to use, but I think you know what I mean by the word *raw*—Paul's emotions are right on the surface of the letter, and he isn't trying to hide them. The letter is pervasively and unashamedly impassioned.

Paul never views his churches as mere converts or numbers. He views them as his sheep, his disciples, his spiritual charge—even his own children. And while it is not clear precisely what all the dysfunctions in the church at Corinth were, it is evident that Paul's concern is not ultimately with his own reputation or with what the Corinthians think of him. He is concerned centrally with the way that a worldly pattern of thinking is infecting the church and eroding their own soul health.

One could hardly blame a young Christian for turning to 2 Corinthians for the first time and thinking: “Am I reading the *Bible* here?” Perhaps in our own early journey with Scripture we had read the soaring creation narrative of Genesis, the thundering Sinai episode as the law is given in Exodus, the dancing poetry of the Psalms, the earthy wisdom of Proverbs, the enrapturing teachings of the Lord Jesus in the Gospels, or the piercing gospel logic of Romans, and then we read Holy Scripture saying:

I call God to witness against me—it was to spare you that I refrained from coming again to Corinth. (2 Cor. 1:23)

I am acting with great boldness toward you; I have great pride in you; I am filled with comfort. (2 Cor. 7:4)

Accept me as a fool, so that I too may boast. (2 Cor. 11:16)

Are they servants of Christ? I am a better one—I am talking like a madman—with far greater labors, far more imprisonments, with countless beatings, and often near death. (2 Cor. 11:23)

Is this really Holy Scripture? Indeed. To be sure, the epistle of 2 Corinthians is unapologetically impassioned—but what else would we expect of a document that is the very word of God? God himself is impassioned. He is not the deity of a Platonic worldview, distant and cold and detached. He is not a calculating chessmaster, moving pieces on the chessboard of the world in a dispassionate way. No, this is the God who speaks of his people as his own bride and of their faithlessness as unspeakable harlotry. This is the God whose heart churns within him as he considers their wickedness:

How can I give you up, O Ephraim?

How can I hand you over, O Israel?

How can I make you like Admah?

How can I treat you like Zeboiim?

My heart recoils within me;  
 my compassion grows warm and tender. (Hos. 11:8)

And ultimately this is the God who rolls up his sleeves and enters into the muck and mess of this desperately fallen world in the incarnation of his own Son.

God is impassible, unable to be pained or swayed by any outside influence, but that is not to say he is not impassioned. So when we come to 2 Corinthians and find the word of this God mediated to us through the raw passion of an anguished apostle, we ought not be overly surprised.

As we explore the theology of 2 Corinthians, then, we should not bracket out or skip over the parts of this letter where Paul is pleading, longing, frustrated, or indignant. All of it is God's word to us, and all of it informs the overall theological message of the book.

### **Interpersonal**

Third, 2 Corinthians is uniquely interpersonal, or relational, in nature. By this I mean that throughout the letter we see Paul referring to his own colleagues and also speaking to the Corinthians about his relationship with them.

Right from the start Paul identifies his letter as coming from him "and Timothy our brother" (1:1). It is not unusual for Paul to pull in a colleague or two as he greets a recipient church. What is unusual is that he would loop back to interpersonal realities so pervasively throughout the letter. Perhaps only Galatians offers a comparable level of interpersonal reflection. In both letters, reflection on the vertical (how God and people relate) is strongly complemented by reflection on the horizontal (how people relate with other people). This dual dynamic is captured representatively in the final few verses of 2 Corinthians:

Finally, brothers, rejoice. Aim for restoration, comfort one another, agree with one another, live in peace; and the God of love and peace

will be with you. Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the saints greet you. (13:11–13) (*horizontal*)

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. (13:14) (*vertical*)

But it isn't just the opening few verses and the closing few verses that surface Paul's horizontal concerns. Paul spends the bulk of the first two chapters of the letter seeking to salvage his apparently fragile relationship with the Corinthian church, going to some length to justify his change of travel plans that led him to write the Corinthians a letter instead of visiting them in person. As we arrive in 2 Corinthians 7 we once more find ourselves in an extended interpersonal reflection as Paul speaks of the comforting presence of Titus, who reassured Paul and Timothy of the Corinthians' good will.

Chapters 8 and 9 are rightly thought of as having to do with money and financial generosity, but both chapters are filled with interpersonal considerations—the sending of the brother famous for preaching (8:18–19), for example, or the commendation of Titus (8:16–24). As Paul himself says, through these actions Paul and his companions “aim at what is honorable not only in the Lord's sight but also in the sight of man” (8:21)—in other words, not only that which has to do with the vertical but also that which has to do with the horizontal.

And of course chapters 10–13 transition from positive interpersonal realities in Paul's life to negative ones, though the chapters maintain a strong horizontal focus, as Paul castigates the spiritual fraudulence of the “super-apostles” (11:5) and defends his own apostolic credentials. And we also continue to see the depths to which Paul's heart and welfare are lovingly bound up with that of the Corinthians. In 12:21, for example, Paul reflects on his impending visit to Corinth and speaks of *himself* being humbled by God if the *Corinthians* have remained in sin—not how many Christian leaders

today view their relationship to their people. In 13:5, similarly, Paul expresses hope that the Corinthians will pass the test of spiritual maturity—but then turns around in 13:6 and says that if the Corinthians fail, it is also Paul’s own failure. In texts such as these, unique in the Pauline corpus, the apostle binds his own welfare with that of the Corinthians in a most striking way.

Paul’s defense of his ministry in these closing chapters to the epistle leads us into the fourth and final distinctive mark of 2 Corinthians.

### **Defensive**

In no other letter is Paul so manifestly eager for his ministry to be validated.

This may raise questions for some: Is Paul being petty? Is he overly concerned for his good name? Is he violating Proverbs 27:2: “Let another praise you, and not your own mouth”? Is Paul falling prey to the common fallen impulse to self-justify rather than collapsing into the freedom of letting God be the one to defend him?

On the one hand, Paul is, like all of us, a fallen human being. He is not any less in need of God’s saving mercy than we are. On the other hand, 2 Corinthians is inspired and inerrant, and we must be careful not to impugn Scripture as tainted in any way that would be out of accord with our conviction about Scripture.

The answer is that apparently there is a third option beyond (1) unhealthy defensiveness and (2) modestly and quietly avoiding any defense of oneself whatsoever. That third option is healthy defending of oneself—a defense that is ruthlessly objective with regard to oneself because the ultimate purpose is not self-concern but concern for something outside of you—for example, the truth of the gospel or (in the case of 2 Corinthians) the nature of truly apostolic ministry in the new age, in which weakness and rejection are legitimate badges of divinely sanctioned authenticity.

If Paul does not defend himself but allows the Corinthians to be beguiled by the super-apostles’ fleshly “theology of glory” as



opposed to the “theology of the cross” (to use Luther’s phrases<sup>2</sup>), then these believers whom he loves will continue their slide into the enticing stupor of a Christianity that is outwardly impressive. The Corinthians’ spiritual welfare, not Paul’s name, is what drives Paul’s defense of his ministry. This is an important model for us in Christian ministry today. While we must be appropriately self-suspicious and vigilant not to seek to justify ourselves before God or men (that is the gospel’s job, not ours), it is not only permissible but imperative that we defend ourselves when the attacks on us, if victorious, will result in the spiritual impoverishing of those under our care.

### Summarizing the Theology of 2 Corinthians

These, then, are some of the distinctive elements of 2 Corinthians—not the theology itself but features that shape the way the theology of this book comes to us. Let us now briefly consider the theology of this book, then, mindful of the above characteristics of the letter. The rest of the chapters of this book will explore the various prominent theological themes that make up this summary.

Above I identified the theology of 2 Corinthians:

In the new realm that was inaugurated when Jesus ascended and the Spirit descended, life and ministry are flipped upside down such that God’s strength interlocks not with human strength and sufficiency but with human weakness and pain.

The two primary emphases are inaugurated eschatology and strength through weakness. Inaugurated eschatology is, we could say, the stage on which 2 Corinthians is played out, and strength through weakness the costume. The former (inaugurated eschatology) is the broader context or framing, and the latter (strength through weakness) the

2 See especially Luther’s “Heidelberg Disputation (1518),” in *Martin Luther’s Basic Theological Writings*, ed. Timothy F. Lull and William R. Russell, 3rd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2012), 14–25.

specific individual and existential experience of those who belong to that broader context.

But beyond these two macro-themes to 2 Corinthians are other vital building blocks, without which these two themes disintegrate. Some of these are explicit in the above theological summary (Jesus, the Spirit, pain), while others are more implicit but remain important themes for 2 Corinthians as a whole (Satan, friendship, heaven). And all these together make up the chapters of the present study.

Throughout this project, I am seeking to be ruthlessly focused on 2 Corinthians itself, letting it stand forth in all its distinctiveness. Themes that are important to Paul's theology broadly understood but minimally on display in 2 Corinthians will be accordingly treated lightly or not at all. For example, right at the heart of Paul's theology, taking Acts and his thirteen epistles all into view with a wide-angle lens, is the notion of grace, rightly put front and center in John Barclay's groundbreaking 2015 monograph,<sup>3</sup> as well as in other studies.<sup>4</sup> Yet grace as "incongruous" gift (to use Barclay's adjective) is virtually nowhere in sight in 2 Corinthians—at least as it is popularly understood, as God's gratuitous goodness to people. Paul certainly uses the word *charis*, the standard Pauline term for "grace," but in this letter it normally denotes some kind of gracious human activity (horizontally), not divine gift (vertically).<sup>5</sup> Thus Frank Thielman's proposal of the "center" of Paul's theology as "God's graciousness toward his weak and sinful creatures,"<sup>6</sup> while about as good as any, does not sit particularly comfortably with 2 Corinthians. I take Richard Gaffin's proposal for a center to Paul's theology as more broadly encompassing of the particular message of 2 Corinthians: "The

3 John M. G. Barclay, *Paul and the Gift* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2015).

4 E.g., Jonathan A. Linebaugh, *The Word of the Cross: Reading Paul* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2022), though the focus throughout is more narrowly Romans and Galatians. Moo begins his synthesizing discussion of Paul's theology with an exploration of "grace." Douglas J. Moo, *A Theology of Paul and His Letters: The Gift of the New Realm in Christ*, BTNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2021), 377–78.

5 E.g., 2 Cor. 1:15; 8:4, 6, 7, 19.

6 Frank Thielman, *Theology of the New Testament: A Canonical and Synthetic Approach* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), 232.

center of his theology is the death and resurrection of Christ in their eschatological significance.”<sup>7</sup>

A second example of an otherwise major Pauline concept that does not figure prominently in 2 Corinthians is the notorious matter of the “law” in Paul and how he understands the Mosaic code to function in the life of the believer in the new covenant era. While any treatment of Paul’s theology as a whole must grapple with Paul and the law (the two editors of the present series having provided two of the best<sup>8</sup>), not a single instance of *nomos* occurs in 2 Corinthians. Paul does reflect at length on the distinctive differences between the old covenant and the new covenant in 2 Corinthians 3, but even there the focus is not on the “law” specifically (i.e., Mosaic code) but rather the passing glory of the old realm and the inaugurated glory of the new realm. Questions of the ongoing relevance of the Mosaic code for today’s Christians, then, while pressing in terms of Pauline theology generally, do not naturally present themselves from a study of 2 Corinthians specifically.

These two otherwise central Pauline themes of “grace” and “law” are but two examples of the way we must allow 2 Corinthians to speak on its own terms and not read broader Pauline concerns into it, if we are to let the distinctive contribution of this unique epistle shine forth clearly.

If otherwise vital Pauline notions such as “grace” and “law” are nowhere near the heart of Paul’s concerns in 2 Corinthians, what is the heart or center or core burden of this letter? There is more than one equally valid perspective on this, so we should avoid any forced or narrowly dogmatic answer to this question. But we must right away note the pervasive presence in 2 Corinthians of notions associated with the dawning of the latter-day eschaton. One way to make this point is in Douglas Moo’s comprehensive treatment of Paul’s theology. He identifies “five basic ‘umbrella’ blessings”<sup>9</sup> of this new aeon: new cove-

7 Richard B. Gaffin Jr., *By Faith, Not by Sight: Paul and the Order of Salvation*, 2nd ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2013), 29.

8 Thomas R. Schreiner, *The Law and Its Fulfillment: A Pauline Theology of Law* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1998); Brian Rosner, *Paul and the Law: Keeping the Commandments of God*, NSBT 31 (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2013).

9 Moo, *Theology of Paul*, 464.

nant, the Spirit, new creation, salvation, and life.<sup>10</sup> Strikingly, as we will see in the pages of this study, *all five* are conspicuously present in 2 Corinthians. Indeed, 2 Corinthians is probably the best option for the Pauline letter that most robustly brings together these five new realm blessings most consistently.

With the inaugurated new realm as the controlling context of 2 Corinthians, I will retain this context in mind as I proceed through each chapter, unfolding the primary theological topics of this letter as follows:

1. Inaugurated Eschatology: The Framework for New Realm Ministry
2. Jesus Christ: The Launcher of New Realm Ministry
3. The Spirit: The Sign of New Realm Ministry
4. Satan: The Enemy of New Realm Ministry
5. Friendship: The Method of New Realm Ministry
6. Heaven: The Hope of New Realm Ministry
7. Strength through Weakness: The Secret to New Realm Ministry

We begin, then, by setting out in more detail the framing of the whole letter: inaugurated eschatology.

<sup>10</sup> Moo, *Theology of Paul*, 464–69.



# Inaugurated Eschatology

## The Framework for New Realm Ministry

### Inaugurated Eschatology in the New Testament Generally

The central message of the New Testament is soteriological—a message of saving grace in Jesus Christ for undeserving sinners, both Jew and Gentile. But this salvation does not appear in a historical vacuum. The coming of Jesus and the salvation he brings is a point of historical culmination; he arrived “when the fullness of time had come” (Gal. 4:4). But this historical culminating point in Jesus is not simply a particularly decisive event in history. It is a new beginning.<sup>1</sup> Specifically, it is the

1 Ridderbos: “What is meant by this ‘fullness of the time’ is not only the maturation of a specific matter in the great framework of redemptive history, but the fulfillment of the time in an absolute sense. The time of the world has come to a conclusion with Christ’s advent. However much this fulfillment still bears a provisional character and the perfectum is followed yet again by a *futurum*, nevertheless the pleroma of the time or of the times is here spoken of as a matter that has already taken effect and thus in principle has been settled.” Herman Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline of His Theology*, trans. John Richard de Witt (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1975), 44–45. Ridderbos is speaking here of Gal. 4:4 specifically and beginning his treatment of the basic structures of Paul’s theology more generally. Vos similarly comments that the phrase “the fullness of time” in Gal. 4:4 “certainly means more than that the time was ripe for the introduction of Christ into the world: the fullness of the time means the end of that aeon and the commencement of another world-period.” Geerhardus Vos, “The Eschatological Aspect of the Pauline Conception of the Spirit,” in *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation: The Collected Shorter Writings of Geerhardus Vos*, ed. R. B. Gaffin Jr. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1980), 93.

beginning of the new creational age that the Old Testament longed for.<sup>2</sup> Two thousand years ago the latter days dawned. The eschaton (lit. “last time”) arrived. It has yet to be completed—a point that must not be lost sight of (and which is clear in 2 Corinthians, such as when Paul anticipates the future “day of our Lord Jesus” in 1:14). But the present evangelical consciousness tends to focus on what we await, not what we already have, so in the present study I am going to push hard in the direction of what we already have. And so I say with force and clarity that while the central message of the New Testament is soteriological, the overarching context of that salvation is *eschatological*. Running just under the surface throughout 2 Corinthians and the entire New Testament and surfacing at times explicitly is the framework of inaugurated eschatology from which all of Paul’s thinking and writing flow.

It is worth clarifying exactly what we’re talking about from the perspective of the New Testament as a whole before going specifically to 2 Corinthians. Some contemporary New Testament scholars have held inaugurated eschatology front and center in their theologies of the New Testament—G. K. Beale (influenced by Geerhardus Vos), for example, and Thomas Schreiner (influenced by George Ladd).<sup>3</sup> But I am not aware of any treatment of 2 Corinthians in a focused way that self-consciously maintains the lens of inaugurated eschatology.

In a standard systematic theology text, “eschatology” refers to matters pertaining purely to the future and comprises the last chapter of the book. “Eschatology” as I will be using it in this book refers not to the future but to the future-as-having-been-launched-back-into-the-present. And so we call it inaugurated eschatology—the last things have been inaugurated, decisively begun, already.<sup>4</sup> What was expected

2 An artful and brief exposition of the biblical narrative as one of creation to new creation can be found in Frank Thielman, *The New Creation and the Storyline of Scripture*, SSBT (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2021).

3 G. K. Beale, *New Testament Biblical Theology: The Unfolding of the Old Testament in the New* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011); Thomas R. Schreiner, *New Testament Theology: Magnifying God in Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008).

4 It is a bit ironic that the past century’s main pioneer of this point places “eschatology” last in his magnum opus. See Geerhardus Vos, *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. and trans. R. B. Gaffin Jr. (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2020).

to happen at the end of history has been launched back and dropped into the middle of history.<sup>5</sup> Christ's first coming—especially his resurrection—began the eschaton, and his second coming will escalate the eschaton into its full blossoming.

William Manson expressed this vividly in 1953:

When we turn to the New Testament, we pass from the climate of prediction to that of fulfillment. The things which God had foreshadowed by the lips of His holy prophets He has now, in part at least, brought to accomplishment. . . . The supreme sign of the Eschaton is the resurrection of Jesus and the descent of the Holy Spirit on the Church. The resurrection of Jesus is not simply a sign which God has granted in favor of His Son, but is the inauguration, the entrance into history, of the times of the End. Christians, therefore, have entered through the Christ into the new age. . . . What had been predicted in Holy Scripture as to happen to Israel or to man in the Eschaton has happened to and in Jesus.<sup>6</sup>

The reason that it often does not feel as if the eschaton has in fact arrived is that the old age, the realm of sin and death, continued existing alongside the new realm that dawned in Christ. When Christ returns, that old realm will once and for all cease. We can see why theologians speak, then, of “the overlap of the ages.” We who live between Christ's two comings live in a strange tension, one that was not experienced by Old Testament saints (for whom there was old realm but not new realm) nor will be experienced by citizens of the new earth (for whom there will be new realm but not

- 5 I have been influenced by the strong emphasis Oscar Cullmann places on the coming of Christ as taking place at “the midpoint” of history, though Cullmann is perhaps less clear on all that has been inaugurally fulfilled at that midpoint; see Oscar Cullmann, *Christ and Time: The Primitive Christian Conception of Time and History*, trans. F. V. Filson (London: SCM, 1962); Oscar Cullmann, *Salvation in History* (New York: Harper and Row, 1967).
- 6 William Manson, “Eschatology and the New Testament,” in *Scottish Journal of Theology, Occasional Papers 2* (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1953), 6.



old realm). We must immediately clarify that this does not mean believers are “split down the middle,” half of each believer belonging to the old realm and half to the new realm. Many days it may feel that way—or indeed, that we belong far more to the old realm than the new! But the clear and persistent teaching of the New Testament is that our basic identity is as citizens of the new creational age that dawned when Christ was raised from the dead. Our spiritual ID card now says “new realm” where it used to say “old realm.” “Our citizenship is in heaven” (Phil. 3:20).

A word on terminology: I will be using the word *realm* in this book in an effort to communicate as clearly as I can, though this is not the only serviceable word. Other ways we could describe this new period of history are new creation, new era, new order, new covenant, new aeon, new world, new epoch, new kingdom, new age, and so on.<sup>7</sup> I prefer *new realm* as that which is, in my judgment, least open to misunderstanding. It also usefully overlaps semantically with the language of “kingdom” in Jesus’s teaching in the Synoptic Gospels. Douglas Moo uses this verbiage in his 2021 treatment of Paul’s theology, and I found it useful there, so I gratefully carry forward that language here.<sup>8</sup>

Let’s press more deeply now into what I mean by inaugurated eschatology or the dawning of the new realm. When we speak of the new realm having erupted in the middle of history, what are the actual biblical markers sustaining such a claim?

7 Throughout this volume I will use several of these monikers synonymously with “new realm,” and in particular “new creation” and “new creational realm” as analogous titles to “new realm.” But for the sake of consistency, I will most often use “realm” language. For a specific defense of new creation as the key unifying center of New Testament theology, see G. K. Beale, “The Eschatological Conception of New Testament Theology,” in *The Reader Must Understand: Eschatology in Bible and Theology*, ed. K. E. Brower and M. W. Elliott (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 11–52.

8 Douglas J. Moo, *A Theology of Paul and His Letters: The Gift of the New Realm in Christ*, BTNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2021). Moo himself is clear on the centrality of inaugurated eschatology in the New Testament—e.g., “The dominant and distinctive feature of all New Testament teaching is the way the early believers celebrate their identity as members of the new realm” (374).

We can look at it this way: What were the major events or markers that God's people in the Old Testament were anticipating? What, according to the prophetic ministry they had received, were they expecting to happen at the end of history? When Mark tells us that Joseph of Arimathea "was also himself looking for the kingdom of God" (Mark 15:43), what exactly was the content of that eager expectation?

From the perspective of the Old Testament, a constellation of world-shaking events would signal and usher in the latter days and the new creational kingdom, or what we're calling "the new realm":<sup>9</sup>

1. Messiah would come.
2. God's enemies would be defeated.
3. The fall in Eden would be undone.
4. Sin would be judged.
5. The nations would stream to Jerusalem.
6. God's people would be vindicated over their enemies.
7. God's latter-day kingdom would be ushered in.
8. The dead would be raised.

Here's the key point: from the vantage point of the New Testament, *every one of these expectations has been fulfilled*:

1. Messiah has come (Rom. 1:3–4).
2. God's enemies were decisively triumphed over—not on a battlefield but on a cross (Col. 2:13–15).
3. A second Adam has succeeded where the first Adam failed—in being tempted by Satan, for example (Luke 3:38–4:13). Moreover, the second Adam's exorcisms (driving demons out of people) were a middle-of-time accomplishing of what Adam failed to do (driving Satan out of Eden).

9 The content of these next few paragraphs has been adapted from Dane Ortlund, "Bible Q&A: Why Are There Two Testaments in the Bible?," Crossway, March 4, 2014, <https://www.crossway.org/>. Used by permission.

4. Sin was judged once and for all at the cross. The cross was the end-time judgment on sin, all funneled down onto one man (Rom. 5:9; 1 Thess. 5:9).
5. The Gentiles are now flooding into the kingdom as never before (Rom. 15:8–27).
6. God’s people have been vindicated in their justification (Rom. 5:1). The declaration of “innocent” anticipated at the end of time has been announced in the present based on a middle-of-history event.
7. As Jesus himself announced, the kingdom is here (Mark 1:15; cf. Acts 20:25; 28:31; Rom. 14:17). We are now in the latter-day kingdom or realm (Heb. 1:2).
8. In Christ, the dead have been raised (Eph. 2:6; Col. 3:1; cf. Rom. 6:4).

The message of the New Testament is not that some of the Old Testament anticipations have been fulfilled and some haven’t. The message of the New Testament is that *all* of the Old Testament anticipations have been fulfilled—but in an already / not yet way. A future consummation is still needed at every point. We call it *inaugurated* eschatology, not *fulfilled* eschatology. But the decisive moment has nevertheless already quietly taken place in the person and work of Jesus.

The preceding analysis does not mean that the Old Testament saints or prophets were wrong in expecting all eight of the above promises to occur at the end of human history. They saw truly, but they saw from a distance. Geerhardus Vos uses the image of mountain peaks, helpfully communicating that while from a distance the peaks may look next to one another, one may actually discover a great distance between various mountain peaks once one arrives in the mountains themselves.<sup>10</sup>

### **The Significance of Resurrection for Inaugurated Eschatology**

That eighth and last point above, about the dead being raised, is particularly significant and requires a bit of further reflection. In speaking of the launching of the eschaton, we must zero in on the resurrection

<sup>10</sup> Vos, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1095–96.

as the key event that launched the new realm. That event should not be viewed in isolation from the entire “Christ event” (as some theologians refer to it)—his virgin birth, sinless life, and atoning death (leading up to his resurrection); and his bodily ascension, present intercession, and impending return (flowing out from his resurrection). But the New Testament does appear to present his rising as the decisive moment in causing the eschatological sun to rise on the world stage.

This is evident, for example, in the repeated centralizing of Christ’s resurrection in the apostles’ preaching in Acts. And toward the end of Paul’s other letter to the church at Corinth, we have the New Testament’s clearest teaching on the eschatological import of Christ’s resurrection. There Paul writes,

But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. But each in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ. (1 Cor. 15:20–23)

In using the Old Testament agricultural image of the “firstfruits” (*aparchē*), Paul is doing two important things. First, he is vitally and organically linking together Christ’s resurrection with ours. Throughout 1 Corinthians 15, Paul argues both ways—not only saying that without Christ’s resurrection, believers will have no resurrection, but also arguing that without our resurrection, not even Christ has been raised (1 Cor. 15:12–20). Second, he is saying that the final resurrection that was expected to happen to all the saints at the end of the age *has, in Christ’s raising, already begun*. The wondrous significance of using the image of “firstfruits” is that the firstfruits is the initial ingathering of one single and whole harvest. The initial gathering guarantees and anticipates the full harvest in due time.<sup>11</sup>

11 Paul uses the word *aparchē* a few other times elsewhere in his letters, where it does not have the charged eschatological meaning that it does in 1 Cor. 15:20, 23 but nevertheless helpfully reinforces the notion that an *aparchē* is always the initial ingathering of an

When Jesus was raised from the dead, the new realm began. Eden 2.0 quietly erupted in the middle of history rather than at history's end. He was not raised in the way Lazarus was (John 11:1–44) or the little girl (Mark 5:35–43), both of whom were raised to mortal existence, only to die again.<sup>12</sup> Jesus's resurrection was to an immortal existence, the life of the age to come, which was not pure continuity with one's previous mortal existence (as with, say, Lazarus) but apparently also included discontinuity. I deduce this from the fact that others had difficulty recognizing him (Luke 24:16) and he appeared to be able to defy the laws of physics with regard to a locked door (John 20:19). At the same time, the risen Jesus ate breakfast (John 21:9–13) and let Thomas touch his physical wounds (John 20:27), so apparently the risen life is just as physical as this mortal existence is.

And the teaching of the New Testament is that *believers' resurrection is not only a matter of the future*. It is not as if Jesus's inaugural resurrection merely guarantees ours, though it does do that. During the course of this new realm in between his two comings, any time that a sinner is enabled by the Spirit to exercise faith in Jesus for salvation, that person is immediately and irreversibly united to Christ, and one aspect of what happens is this: that believer experiences resurrection. Not physically but spiritually—and, we should add, literally. To be sure, we must be careful to avoid the overrealized error of Hymeneus and Philetus, who wrongly taught that “the resurrection has already happened” (2 Tim. 2:18), referring to the final bodily raising of believers. In 2 Corinthians we will see that Paul can speak of a final consummating resurrection yet to come (2 Cor. 4:14). But we must nevertheless press home the point that the key reality in final resurrection has, even now, already taken place. It is not a mere metaphorical resurrection, as if “resurrection” is simply a particularly beautiful way of expressing the wonder of salvation. No, believers are actually raised. The hardest part has been done. The most decisive thing has been accomplished, for they

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organically connected single harvest (Rom. 11:16; 16:5; 1 Cor. 16:15; and the only other New Testament use, Rev. 14:4).

<sup>12</sup> Vos, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1114.

are joined to a risen Christ. We “have been raised with Christ” (Col. 3:1); Christ was raised, but for us who are in him, God also “raised us up with him” (Eph. 2:6). We are co-resurrected with Jesus. While we await the final consummating reality of that resurrection—the physical component—we are already, in principle and in an inaugurally guaranteeing way, literally-spiritually raised.

### Every Aspect of Pauline Theology Is Eschatological

Let us pause and reflect on all we have considered thus far in this chapter. What we are seeing is that rather than eschatology being a final, freestanding element of New Testament theology, *every aspect of New Testament theology is inherently eschatological*. As Vos pithily put it, “to unfold the Apostle’s eschatology means to set forth his theology as a whole.”<sup>13</sup>

Justification is an eschatological reality because we are once-and-for-all acquitted now, in Christ, but the public vindicating manifestation of that awaits Christ’s return. Sanctification is an eschatological reality because in Christ we have been once-and-for-all cleansed positionally, but we await final actual moral cleansing upon Christ’s return.<sup>14</sup> Christian living and killing sin is to be understood eschatologically: in Christ, we have become participants in the dawning new creation, and this is our basic identity, so we are empowered and motivated to live in accord with who we most deeply now are. And so on. Beale explains:

[T]he apostles understood that they were already living in the end-times and that they were to understand their present salvation in Christ to be already an end-time reality. *Every aspect of their salvation was to be conceived of as eschatological in nature*. To put this another way, every major doctrine of the Christian faith has an end-time tint.<sup>15</sup>

13 Geerhardus Vos, *The Pauline Eschatology* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1930; repr., Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1994), 11.

14 I am speaking of positional sanctification, not progressive sanctification.

15 Beale, “Eschatological Conception,” 18 (emphasis in original).

Even the gospel itself is eschatological. Consider a text such as Mark 1:14–15, the thesis statement of the entire Gospel of Mark: “Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God, and saying, ‘The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.’” Note that Jesus himself presents the gospel as answering a “when” question: “the *time* is fulfilled.” The gospel not only answers a “what question” (our sins being forgiven) but also locates us in a certain historical aeon.

It is, therefore, imperative that if we are to understand the theology of 2 Corinthians, we understand it within this broader framework of inaugurated eschatology. This is true for all twenty-seven books of our New Testament, but in the course of this volume we will increasingly see that inaugurated eschatology is not an occasional matter Paul loops into his argument in 2 Corinthians. Rather, an eschatological outlook is always present throughout the letter, sometimes explicit but apparently always implicit. The ceiling lowers on a reader’s understanding of the macro coherence and the inner logic of the letter without wearing the “tinted sunglasses” of inaugurated eschatology.

Having clarified generally what I mean by “inaugurated eschatology” throughout this book, we turn now to consider the letter of 2 Corinthians specifically.<sup>16</sup>

### Inaugurated Eschatology in 2 Corinthians

In no other chapter of this book will we take so much time before getting to the actual content of 2 Corinthians. But it was necessary to do so in this opening chapter as clarity about the dawning new realm informs all that follows in a paradigmatic way.

It would be inaccurate to suggest that the new realm is the main point of 2 Corinthians. The main point or purpose of 2 Corinthians

<sup>16</sup> For an extended defense of the eschatological structure of the New Testament as I understand it, see Richard B. Gaffin Jr., *In the Fullness of Time: An Introduction to the Biblical Theology of Acts and Paul* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2022), 245–320. For a verse-by-verse treatment of 2 Corinthians with inaugurated eschatology integrated as a consistent hermeneutical axiom, see Dane Ortlund, *2 Corinthians*, in *Romans–Galatians*, vol. 10 of *ESV Expository Commentary* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020).

is to spare the Corinthian church from being led astray from gospel health by the super-apostles. But the new realm that Christ inaugurated is indeed the context, without which we will misunderstand text after text in the letter.

Think of a Christian father trying to help his son understand the importance of respecting his teachers at school. The presenting issue is respect for authority, just as the presenting issue for Paul is the peril of the worldly thinking of the super-apostles. But the broader context for the father's instruction, which will always be present and which he will at times appeal to explicitly, is the reality that his son is a part of his family, under his paternal care and love, and belongs not to the world but to his Christian family. Knowing this context provides empowerment and motivation for his son. Similarly, the controlling and all-informing context for 2 Corinthians and the takedown of the super-apostles is the reality that the Corinthian believers are part of the dawning new realm, citizens of the inaugurated kingdom. This is who they now are, and this citizenship provides the wonder, calm, and gratitude that will fortify them to fend off the allure of the super-apostles' impressive veneer.

In the remainder of this chapter we will survey the most conspicuous examples of inaugurated eschatology in 2 Corinthians. These are the places where Paul's pervasive subterranean hermeneutic bubbles to the surface—particularly clear examples, in other words, of how Paul is thinking of human history at every point in his writing. We will pass over the two references to the Spirit as the “guarantee” or “down payment” (2 Cor. 1:22; 5:5), which are among the most notable instances of the beginning of the new realm, because I will handle these below in chapter 3 on the Spirit.

### *New Covenant, New Creation*

We begin with the recognition that in no other letter does Paul explicitly bring together the themes of “new covenant” (2 Cor. 3:6) and “new creation” (5:17) each of which tingles with eschatological significance.

Both phrases are rare in Paul—the *phrases* are rare, not the concept. Here we should remember James Barr's seminal and salutary



clarification that words and concepts ought not be held too rigidly apart: a concept may be present where a word is lacking (and contrariwise we must avoid illegitimate totality transfer, importing more into a single word than context warrants).<sup>17</sup> More recently, N. T. Wright has argued for the pervasive presence of the notion of “covenant” in the Old Testament even though the word is relatively infrequent, and Beale has made a similar argument with regard to “creation” in the New Testament.<sup>18</sup> And so we hold open the possibility that the concepts of new covenant and new creation are latent throughout Paul’s writings. Indeed, if this book were a survey of all of Paul’s writings, I would argue that they are. But as we are focusing only on 2 Corinthians, let us note with interest that only in this letter does he explicitly mention both.

The phrase *kainē diathēkē* (“new covenant”) occurs in only one other place in Paul: 1 Corinthians 11:25, which is picking up the words of Jesus in Luke 22:20 in the context of the institution of the Lord’s Supper.<sup>19</sup> The phrase *kainē ktisis* (“new creation”) also occurs just one other place in Paul: Galatians 6:15, where it is set as the transcending alternative to viewing either circumcision or uncircumcision as informing one’s spiritual identity. Both phrases are fraught with eschatological import. The first, “new covenant,” reaches all the way back to Exodus and Sinai and signals the fulfillment of the prophecy of Jeremiah 31:31–34 and the whole swath of biblical anticipation that text represents (of a new law giving that is internalized and of forgiveness of sins). The second, “new creation,” reaches even further back, to Genesis 1 and the first creation, and picks up the theme of de-creation/re-creation that rumbles through the Old Testament, bringing this hope of a restored

17 James Barr, *The Semantics of Biblical Language* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961). An example of a study that examines Paul’s understanding of new creation with treatment of 2 Cor. 5:17 but also by recourse to other conceptually overlapping texts (such as Rom. 6:1–11; 7:1–6; Gal. 2:19–20) is Moyer V. Hubbard, *New Creation in Paul’s Letters and Thought*, SNTSMS 119 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

18 N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, vol. 1 of *Christian Origins and the Question of God* (London: SPCK, 1992), 260, appealing to the same point made by E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion* (London: SCM, 1977), 420–29; Beale, “Eschatological Conception,” 23–24.

19 This Greek phrase also occurs in Heb. 8:8; 9:15.

Eden to decisive fulfillment. That which is eschatological in Paul is also protological because the coming eschaton would be a new creation—that is, a return to Eden but in an escalated and invincibilized way. Put more simply, the theme of “new creation” signals that eschatology not only looks to the future but also looks to the past. As the Dutch Reformed tradition has helpfully emphasized, God’s work of salvation in the New Testament is not sweeping away all that has happened and starting over from scratch but is rather a work of restoration.<sup>20</sup>

The significance of these two texts does not, however, lie only in the two verses in which they occur (2 Cor. 3:6; 5:17). Their significance lies in the context in which each occurs. Second Corinthians 3 and 5—the new covenant chapter and the new creation chapter, respectively—are each extended reflections on the new realm that has dawned in Christ and on what this new realm means for Paul’s apostolic ministry vis-à-vis the super-apostles.

To take just the first six verses of 2 Corinthians 3, Paul is defending his apostolic ministry. He uses two arguments to make the broader point that he is truly “commissioned by God” (2:17). In 3:1–3 he argues that the Corinthians themselves and the new life they are experiencing in Christ are the “letter of recommendation” validating Paul’s ministry. In making this point Paul alludes to Ezekiel 36 and the promise of the internalization by the Spirit of divine law on the “tablets” of human hearts rather than stone. This is itself a reflection of Paul’s conviction about inaugurated eschatology as he is communicating the fulfillment of the prophetic hope in Ezekiel 36 for this kind of radical internalization of God’s law and the gift of the Spirit that the Old Testament anticipates at history’s end.

In 3:3–6 Paul moves from the Corinthians themselves as validating to Paul’s ministry to God as validating his ministry. Paul’s legitimacy as an apostle is not based on his own self-resourced credentials. Rather, “our

20 A particular focus in the work of Herman Bavinck, as shown in Jan Veenhof, *Nature and Grace in Herman Bavinck*, trans. A. M. Wolters (Sioux Center, IA: Dordt College Press, 2006); Herman Bavinck, *Holy Spirit, Church, and New Creation*, vol. 4 of *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. J. Bolt, trans. J. Vriend (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 589–730, esp. 715–30.

sufficiency is from God” (2 Cor. 3:5)—but notice how Paul then goes on to explain this divinely resourced sufficiency—“who has made us sufficient to be ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit. For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life” (2 Cor. 3:6). Having just alluded to Ezekiel 36, Paul now alludes to Jeremiah 31, which, like Ezekiel 36, emphasizes the future internalizing of God’s law in the latter days.

In 2 Corinthians 3:1–6, then, the presenting issue is Paul’s rejection of the notion that he is incompetent to serve as a representative of God. But the way in which he argues this is by appealing to the eschaton as having arrived. The new covenant, the final and climactic binding agreement between God and his people that would transcend all previous covenants and ensure his people’s spiritual safety, is here. He argues the *what* from the *when*. Paul does not argue for inaugurated eschatology; he argues from it.

This brings us to 2 Corinthians 5, where we find Paul once again assuming that the new realm has dawned and arguing from that reality as he continues to defend his ministry. The literary high point of the second half of the chapter is 5:17: “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.” As with Romans 8:1, Paul (perhaps in a flurry of apostolic enthusiasm) does not use a verb in the first half of this verse but simply blurts out (rendering the text with wooden literalism): “If anyone in Christ—new creation.” The terseness of the syntax suggests that Paul is eager simply to place union with Christ immediately in the broader context of the new creational age that was promised in the Old Testament. Paul is not speaking of union with Christ making one a “new creature,” true as that may be conceptually in light of other biblical texts. The point is rather that those in union with Jesus are swept up into the new spiritual cosmos that now exists in between Christ’s two advents.

The second half of the verse then drives home the comprehensiveness of this new state of affairs, repeating the language of “new” (*kainos*): “the old things have passed away, behold the new things have come” (my translation). Those united to Christ do not experience a new reality here, a new reality there. Rather, we have been ushered into a

completely new sphere of existence. Nor does Paul say, “If anyone is in Christ, he is promised that one day he will be part of the new creation; the old will pass away, the new will come.” No, while there remains a vital aspect still to come, Paul’s point in 5:17 is the totality of newness that has *now* washed over the believer. This truth anchors the entire second half of 2 Corinthians 5 as Paul explains why it is imperative for the good news to be shared with unbelievers. This reconciliation with God is not merely about a new state of affairs for an individual (though it *is* gloriously that). We become members of the dawning new creational realm. As Vos puts it, reflecting on 2 Corinthians 5:17: “The *καὶνὴ κτίσις* spoken of in II Corinthians 5:17 means the beginning of that world-renewal in which all eschatology culminates.”<sup>21</sup> And Paul is talking about this being a present reality for those in Christ.

Beyond the broader contexts of 3:1–6 and 5:1–21, we will now consider a handful of other key texts in 2 Corinthians in which the inaugurated eschatology latent throughout this epistle surfaces.

*From Glory to Glory (3:18 in the Context of 3:7–18)*

Above we briefly considered 2 Corinthians 3:1–6 and its reference to the new covenant. That text goes on in 3:7–18 to draw out a sustained comparison and contrast between two realms: the old realm (of the law, condemnation, death, and lesser glory) and the new realm (of the Spirit, righteousness, life, and greater glory). Paul reflects on the veil that Moses would wear in Exodus so that his radiant face would not overwhelm the Israelites, and he makes an analogy with new covenant believers, saying that in the dawning eschaton, turning to Christ takes away the spiritual veil that lies over our hearts. Paul makes clear that the new realm glory brought by Christ is “permanent” (3:11) as opposed to the passing glory of the old realm; this is why I speak throughout this study of the new realm as having been “launched” or “inaugurated”—it has begun, never to pass away. The climax of the passage is 3:18: “And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord,

21 Vos, “The Eschatological Aspect,” 93–94. Similarly Gaffin, *In the Fullness of Time*, 255–61.

are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.”

Most English translations understand the phrase *apo doxēs eis doxan* (lit. “from glory to glory”) as the ESV does: “from one degree of glory to another.” The reader of the English text is thus confined to understand the text as denoting individual gradual spiritual experience. It is possible that this is what the text means. But I think it more likely, given the broader context of 2 Corinthians 3, that Paul has in mind two aeons of glory, two epochs—two *realms*, as I have been calling them. Paul has just been exploring a sustained contrast between two different eras of redemptive history, and the most heavily repeated attribution of each one is its relative glory. It is worth getting the key verses out in front of us:

Now if the ministry of death, carved in letters on stone, came with such glory that the Israelites could not gaze at Moses’ face because of its glory, which was being brought to an end, will not the ministry of the Spirit have even more glory? For if there was glory in the ministry of condemnation, the ministry of righteousness must far exceed it in glory. Indeed, in this case, what once had glory has come to have no glory at all, because of the glory that surpasses it. For if what was being brought to an end came with glory, much more will what is permanent have glory. (2 Cor. 3:7–11)

I have underlined the references to *doxa* to highlight this primary focus here. If Paul has been contrasting two different realms throughout 2 Corinthians 3, and has been doing so in terms of glory, then when we hear him refer to glory in 3:18 we should be encouraged to understand it in an aeonic way likewise. As we behold the glory of Christ, we are transformed from the glory of the old realm into the glory of the new realm.<sup>22</sup>

22 I have made an extended exegetical defense of this reading in Dane C. Ortlund, “From Glory to Glory: 2 Corinthians 3:18 in Biblical-Theological Perspective,” *CTJ* 54, no. 1 (2019): 11–33.

*Light Shining in Darkness (4:6 in the Context of 4:1–6)*

Paul continues the language of veiling and glory in 2 Corinthians 4:

Therefore, having this ministry by the mercy of God, we do not lose heart. But we have renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways. We refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God's word, but by the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God. And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. (2 Cor. 4:1–6)

This is a dense paragraph theologically, but we are focusing in this chapter only on the strain of inaugurated eschatology running through 2 Corinthians. To that end I note the striking way in which Paul frames salvation in 4:6, where he explicitly casts new realm participation (God shining in our hearts) in terms of the first creation (God causing primordial light to shine in Gen. 1). Paul's use of the first creation to speak of salvation in Christ suggests that he views this salvation as a new creational reality.

This idea is strengthened by two further observations. First, Paul is going to return to new creation language explicitly in the next chapter at 2 Corinthians 5:17. Second, Paul likely has in mind not only Genesis 1 when speaking of light shining in darkness but also Isaiah 9:1 LXX (9:2 in English versions), which in fact is the only text in the Septuagint with the exact phrase Paul uses here (*phōs lampsei*). And Isaiah 9, itself drawing on Genesis 1, is one of the more richly eschatological texts in the Old Testament. Paul is likely

bringing together both Genesis 1 and Isaiah 9 to speak of Christian salvation as a new creational reality.

*The Day of Salvation (6:2 in the Context of 6:1–2)*

After Paul speaks of the ministry of reconciliation and the fact that those who are united to Christ find themselves part of the new creation, the apostle pleads with the Corinthians “not to receive the grace of God in vain” (2 Cor. 6:1). But why? The specific grounding that Paul gives is nothing less than the new creational realm in which he and the Corinthians were now living:

For he says,

“In a favorable time I listened to you,  
and in a day of salvation I have helped you.”

Behold, now is the favorable time; behold, now is the day of salvation. (2 Cor. 6:2)

Paul quotes Isaiah 49:8, the context of which is God’s assurance of Israel that he will deliver them despite their waywardness. Isaiah goes on to elaborate on the promised future blessings that will flow to God’s people:

Thus says the LORD:

“In a time of favor I have answered you;  
in a day of salvation I have helped you;  
I will keep you and give you  
as a covenant to the people,  
to establish the land,  
to apportion the desolate heritages,  
saying to the prisoners, ‘Come out,’  
to those who are in darkness, ‘Appear.’”

They shall feed along the ways;  
 on all bare heights shall be their pasture;  
 they shall not hunger or thirst,  
 neither scorching wind nor sun shall strike them,  
 for he who has pity on them will lead them,  
 and by springs of water will guide them.  
 And I will make all my mountains a road,  
 and my highways shall be raised up.” (Isa. 49:8–11)

The striking thing is not so much what Paul quotes but what he then immediately goes on to say of this text from Isaiah 49: “Behold, now is the favorable time; behold, now is the day of salvation” (2 Cor. 6:2). Paul is claiming that the longed-for day of which Isaiah 49 speaks had arrived in the first century. Ridderbos makes the point elegantly in expounding 2 Corinthians 6:2: “Nothing less is intended than that the decisive, long-expected coming of God has dawned, the hour of hours, the day of salvation in the fulfilling, eschatological sense of the word.”<sup>23</sup>

This text is not in the first instance exhorting evangelistic zeal when it speaks of today being the day of salvation, though that is a legitimate extrapolating application. The text is building on the notion of new creation (5:17) and asserting that those experiencing the righteousness of God (5:21), union with Christ (5:17), and reconciliation with God (5:18–19) find themselves living in the latter days promised in Isaiah 49.

*The Temple of the Living God (6:16 in the Context of 6:14–7:1)*

After speaking of the dawning of the “day of salvation” (i.e., the new creational realm), Paul enumerates the labors of his apostolic ministry (6:3–10) and then exhorts the Corinthians to avoid being yoked with unbelievers (6:14–7:1). While it might at first seem that 6:14–7:1 is a

23 Ridderbos, *Paul*, 45. Similarly Leonhard Goppelt, *The Variety and Unity of the Apostolic Witness to Christ*, vol. 2 of *Theology of the New Testament*, trans. J. E. Alsup (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1982), 59–60; Gaffin, *In the Fullness of Time*, 269–72.



distraction and irrelevant digression from the broader flow of Paul's argument, in fact it is perfectly fitting if we bear in mind the latent substructure of inaugurated eschatology. The Corinthians have been operating according to the mindset of the old realm, with its focus on outward impressiveness. Paul, therefore, catalogs the way his own ministry has borne marks of both "honor and dishonor" (6:8), and *both* sides of that equation validate new realm ministry (as will become especially clear in chapters 10–13). He then exhorts the Corinthians to beware of falling back into the mindset of the old realm, with all its worldly patterns of thinking; rather, they should "not be unequally yoked with unbelievers" (6:14).

And once more we sit up and take notice at the grounding Paul gives for this ethical injunction, for his reasoning is again the dawning now in the middle of history of the eschaton that was anticipated by Old Testament believers to happen at the end of history.

The overarching eschatological reality that Paul claims as buoying his exhortation is that Christian believers "are the temple of the living God" (6:16). That in itself is an eschatological claim. Paul is not saying that New Testament believers are "like a temple";<sup>24</sup> he is claiming that we are the final temple-to-end-all-temples, the truest and deepest fulfillment of all that was taking place in the Old Testament temples: the presence of God among his people. We no longer enter a temple to meet with God. God has made us into his own temple and is indwelling us so that we ourselves, as believers, have become the eschatological temple. All that the tabernacle and the temple were seeking to capture—restored fellowship with God—has been accomplished in the new age. In Eden, God and man dwelt in harmony. With sin, that fellowship broke and God retreated. The tabernacle, however, was a miniature garden of Eden—complete with a sky-blue ceiling and a lampstand decorated like a flourishing tree (Ex. 25:31–26:37). Eden and then the tabernacle and temple were tangible, physical locations where the im-

24 Contra C. K. Barrett, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, BNTC (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1973), 202.

mortal met the mortal, where the supernatural and the natural collided, where the eternal and the temporal intersected, where the sacred and the profane stood face-to-face. The temple was where the divine and the fleshly could meet—never to mix, but to come into brief contact with one another. It was where God dwelt (cf. 2 Cor. 6:16). Rumbling through the Old Testament was the development of the theme of the presence of God among his people, a presence centered in the most sacred of Jewish places, the tabernacle and then the temple. But at the center of all human history, the divine and the fleshly did mix: “And the Word became flesh and tabernacled [*eskēnōsen*] among us” (John 1:14, my translation; cf. 2:19–22). And then those united to Christ by faith become part of that living temple (Eph. 2:19–22).<sup>25</sup>

Paul’s claim in 2 Corinthians 6 that Christians are the end-time temple of God reflects a substructure of inaugurated eschatology for at least three reasons.

First, Paul’s broader theology consistently speaks of the church as the eschatological temple of God (1 Cor. 3:16–17; 6:19–20; Eph. 2:19–22).<sup>26</sup>

Second, we find the phrase “of the living God” (*theou zōntos*) one other time in 2 Corinthians, namely, in 3:3 as Paul draws on Ezekiel 36 to claim that the Corinthians “are a letter from Christ delivered by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts.”<sup>27</sup> There we find this language of “the living God” explicitly associated with the dawning new realm anticipated by Ezekiel 36 and with the Holy Spirit, which as we will see is a key defining mark of the dawning of the new realm.

Third, returning to the text at hand, the Old Testament passages that Paul then immediately brings to bear on his claim that the church is the latter-day temple of God underscores the eschatological significance of this portion of 2 Corinthians 6. We do not have space to go into a

25 In this paragraph and in a few that follow below, I have adapted sections of Ortlund, *2 Corinthians*, 488–90. Used by permission.

26 See G. K. Beale, *The Temple and the Church’s Mission: A Biblical Theology of the Dwelling Place of God*, NSBT 17 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 245–68.

27 Paul Barnett, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 350–51.

full exegesis of these texts.<sup>28</sup> But we must note with interest that Paul thoughtfully (if imprecisely with regard to wording) stitches together a catena of several Old Testament texts to insist to the Corinthians that true believers find themselves living in the long-anticipated new realm. The particular proof of this at this point in Paul's argument is that the Corinthian believers are themselves the templing presence of God. It is this theme of the presence of God that draws Paul back to Leviticus 26:12, which forms the first part of the constellation of Old Testament quotes in 2 Corinthians 6:16–18. Throughout the Old Testament, God promises that he will be his people's God and they his people, a promise clearly anticipated in the tabernacle/temple but that burst onto the scene in the coming of Christ, where presence with God was truly accomplished. That God "dwelling among" his people is a temple reality is made clear by examining the immediate context of Leviticus 26, where God says, "I will make my dwelling [lit. 'tabernacle'; Hebrew *mishkan*] among you" (Lev. 26:11).

In 2 Corinthians 6:17 Paul transitions from a text in Leviticus to one in Isaiah, perhaps deliberately tying together both the Law and the Prophets to underscore the whole Old Testament nature of his point about the temple and the presence of God. He cites Isaiah 52:11, and we remember that throughout 2 Corinthians 5–7 Paul is drawing on Isaiah 40–55 to argue that the Corinthians and all believers (whether Jew or Gentile) are the true people of God. Specifically, Isaiah 52:11 is a call for God's people to come out from Babylon and return to Jerusalem. Paul thus takes a text that originally applied to Israel's return from exile and applies it to the Corinthians' situation to call them to dissociate not geographically but spiritually from the paganism around them.

The last line of 2 Corinthians 6:17 ("then I will welcome [*eisdechomai*] you") is drawn not from Isaiah but from Ezekiel 20:34 LXX, where God promises to "gather" (*eisdechomai*) his people out of the nations among whom they are exiled and scattered. This return from exile theme is

28 For that I refer the reader to Beale, *Temple and the Church's Mission*, 253–56, or to Barnett, *Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, 351–55.

viewed in Isaiah 40–55 as a second exodus event and hooks into the Leviticus 26 text, which is a promise of God’s presence following the first exodus.

Throughout this constellation of Old Testament quotes, then, Paul is melding two major whole-Bible themes: the return from exodus/exile, and the temple. These reflect the land promise and the divine-presence promise of the original call of Abraham (Gen. 12:1–3). Even in Isaiah 52:11, which speaks of return from exile, the temple theme is not absent: the verse goes on immediately to identify who is to “go out”: “you who bear the vessels of the LORD” (Isa. 52:11)—that is, the priests of the temple. But notice what Paul does in 2 Corinthians. He applies this statement, made originally to Israel, to the Gentile Corinthians. Paul understands the Corinthians to be fulfilling the promise made to ethnic Israel in Isaiah 52. This fits with Paul’s overarching point that the new realm has broken in on the Corinthians. Consequently, how could they live as if they still belonged to the old realm?

In 2 Corinthians 6:18 Paul concludes by drawing on a high point of Old Testament redemptive history: God’s promise to David (among other promises) to be a father to him (2 Sam. 7:14). While Hebrews 1:5 speaks of Christ himself as the fulfillment of this promise, Paul is applying the Davidic promise to the Corinthians. This can be so only when we bear in mind the hermeneutical presupposition of corporate solidarity. Christ is the fulfillment of the Davidic hope, but those who are in Christ become coheirs of that fulfillment by virtue of their union with and representation by Christ. Given the presence of texts from Isaiah 40–55 throughout these middle chapters of 2 Corinthians, it is likely that we should understand Paul’s reference to God’s “sons and daughters” to be picking up Isaiah 43:6: “Bring my sons from afar / and my daughters from the end of the earth.” This is, like Isaiah 52:11 and Ezekiel 20:34, a context in which God is speaking of returning his people from exile and using exodus categories to do so (see esp. Isa. 43:2–3).

Before leaving the temple theme we must note in passing one more text from 2 Corinthians, this time toward the end of the epistle. In Paul’s famous thorn-in-the-flesh passage, which we will consider at greater

length in the final chapter of this volume, he says, “I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me [*episkēnōsē ep’ eme*]” (12:9). The use of the verb *episkēnōō* here is arresting as this is tabernacling language. The glory of God rested upon the tabernacle in days of old, the days of the old realm. Now that Christ has come and launched the new realm, God’s power—wonder of wonders—rests upon us *directly*, and yet not in the way we would expect. It rests upon weakness. More attention needs to be given to this passage later in this volume, but for now note the repeated use of tabernacle/temple language in 2 Corinthians as signaling the dawn of the latter days, the final eschaton, the new realm.<sup>29</sup>

*The Signs of a True Apostle (12:12 in the Context of 12:11–13)*

In 2 Corinthians 12 Paul is continuing to reestablish his apostolic legitimacy vis-à-vis the fraudulent impressiveness of the super-apostles. In the course of this defense he reminds the Corinthians that “the signs of a true apostle were performed among you with utmost patience, with signs and wonders and mighty works” (12:12).

Some of us reading this today are immediately thrown into the question of whether these signs were meant to continue beyond the first century or not. But it is beside the point to ask whether these signs continue today; either way, we can all agree that in Paul’s day these were signs of the dawning new age. For in these self-attesting apostolic demonstrations we are drawn back to the “signs and wonders” of the exodus event (Ex. 3:20; 7:3; 10:1–2; Num. 14:22; Deut. 4:34; Josh. 24:17). Later Old Testament writers likewise speak of the exodus as a demonstration of “signs and wonders” (e.g., Ps. 105:27 in the context of 105:26–36), and the New Testament too reflects on the exodus as a liberation accompanied by “wonders and signs” (Acts 7:36).

29 We have now seen the themes of new covenant (2 Cor. 3), new creation (2 Cor. 5), and new temple (2 Cor. 6) in the letter—three of the five themes that Dumbrell viewed as capturing the basic biblical storyline (the other two being new Israel and new Jerusalem). William J. Dumbrell, *The End of the Beginning: Revelation 21–22 and the Old Testament* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2001).

Just as 2 Corinthians 5–7 draws on Isaiah 40–55, then, and teaches that salvation in Christ is the new and final exodus, so here we see a briefer signal that in the generation of Paul and the apostles the new and final exodus has been launched. The miracles performed by God through Paul were not merely proofs of divine power to validate Paul’s ministry—they were, in addition to this and transcending it, a demonstration that the new realm longed for throughout the Old Testament had dawned in the first century.

*He Lives by the Power of God (13:4 in the Context of 13:2–4)*

We could say much exegetically about 2 Corinthians 13:4. Beginning partway through 13:3, we read that Christ “is not weak in dealing with you, but is powerful among you. For he was crucified in weakness, but lives by the power of God. For we also are weak in him, but in dealing with you we will live with him by the power of God” (13:3–4). Disciplining ourselves to consider only what the text offers with regard to inaugurated eschatology, we note the way that Paul organically connects both the weakness of Christ and believers as well as the power of Christ and believers.

First-century Christians with an underdeveloped sense of the dawning new realm of which they are a part might track with the notion that “we also are weak in him.” But what about this idea, apparently equally true, that “we will live with him by the power of God”? As is generally the case in Paul’s letters, when he speaks of “life” and “living” he is referring not to living as humans on the earth in some generic way but specifically to the resurrection life of the age to come. Some will note that Paul seems to speak of this resurrection existence as future (“we will live with him”). But the context suggests that the text be read as a gnomic future, speaking of what is broadly true now.<sup>30</sup> In other words, Paul is saying, “We are weak, as those united to a weak Christ—but it is also just as certain that we will simultaneously experience the power of

30 Cf. Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), 571.

resurrection life as well, even now.” If Paul were referring to the future when he says, “We will live with him by the power of God,” it would hardly make sense for why this is a relevant point in speaking of his imminent visit to the Corinthians, a visit that Paul is claiming will involve not only Christian weakness but also Christian power. Moreover, Paul has already in the previous chapter overlaid divine weakness and strength as simultaneous in the human experience: “*When I am weak, then I am strong*” (12:10).

In sum, 2 Corinthians 13:4 reflects the same logic as is laid out at length in 1 Corinthians 15: the resurrection of Christ and the resurrection of believers are both mutually bound up with one another. The added element in 2 Corinthians 13 is that this logic is filtered through a power-through-weakness rubric.

## Conclusion

The purpose of this opening chapter has been twofold. First, I explained what is meant by inaugurated eschatology. Second, I positioned 2 Corinthians as a document that is itself written with a lens of inaugurated eschatology and that, therefore, requires its readers to use that same lens if they are to understand it deeply. We considered several texts in which inaugurated eschatology explicitly surfaces, evidencing a pervasive substructure to the letter of a Pauline conviction that the new creational realm has dawned.

In the chapters that follow we will bear in mind the framework or context of inaugurated eschatology as we pursue individual theological themes that are prominent in the letter. We begin with Jesus Christ.