

Praise God for His Comfort 2 Corinthians 1.1-7

Samuel Rutherford, a Scottish pastor in the 17th century, reportedly said that when he “was cast into the cellars of affliction, he remembered that the great King always kept his best wine there.”

Similarly, Charles Spurgeon said, “They who dive in the sea of affliction bring up rare pearls.” That is, in trials, there is blessing to be found through the nearness of Christ; we can experience his great love and comfort.

Two things come into your life when you become a Christian: **affliction and comfort.**

- That’s what this passage is about.
- Obviously, by virtue of living in a fallen world, you will have affliction; but there’s more; if you are following Jesus Christ, you will have some measure of added affliction – that’s reality.
 - “Through many tribulations we enter the kingdom” (Acts 14:22)
- But the good news is that **in the affliction, we can experience divine comfort.**
- We find an unusual experience of strength, nearness of the Lord and assurance that we’re his.
- We find the best wine in the basement; we find rare pearls in the sea of affliction.

In 2 Corinthians, Paul “opens his heart wide to the Corinthians,” as he explains and defends his ministry, and this includes several lists of afflictions. (4:8–10; 6:4–7 11:24–29)

Why would he do this? Let me explain the situation here.

If Paul had to give a relationship status on Facebook with the Corinthians, he would likely choose: “It’s Complicated” – that was Paul and the Corinthians.

“If there was one church that caused Paul to pull his hair out and made him age before his time, it was probably the ‘church of God in Corinth.’” (Wright, Bird)

- We have two letters, though the letters indicate that Paul wrote at least four.
- 1 Corinthians is the second one and 2 Corinthians is the fourth.

Backstory

- Corinth, the capitol of Achaia, a Greco-Roman city, was prosperous, cosmopolitan, pluralistic, and immoral.
- It was known for public boasting and self-promotion (Witherington)
- It was a manufacturing city, with prosperous pottery manufactures, tentmakers & more
- It sat at the foot of this massive mountain, Acro-Corinth [upper Corinth] that still towers over the city, and the temple of Aphroprodite sat atop it – the goddess of fertility, with cult prostitutes.
- In Paul’s day the city was about 80K people with 20K in outlying villages.

- Part of the reason for its prominence was due to the strategic location on the isthmus between the two halves of Greece.
- Impressive, traveling public speakers obsessed with status, and self-promotion often visited.
- Many flooded into the city for the Isthmian games as well, including tentmakers.

Paul in Corinth

“Planting Visit.” In AD 51, Paul spent 18 months there as he established the new church (Acts 18), where he met Priscilla and Aquilla who were tentmakers along with Paul.

- He encountered many hardships there but people were converted and a church was est.
- He then went to Ephesus where he stayed for about three years, and there he was the focus of a mob riot, but was able to escape.
- **When he writes 2 Corinthians, he writes as a guy who looked like death.**

“Painful Visit and Painful Letter”

- After Paul left Corinth on this initial visit, Apollos visited the church in Corinth, and probably Peter as well.
- These visits were good, but it caused some divisions as it formed like a personality cult.
- Then there were **serious moral problems** in the church.
- Paul learned of all this in Ephesus, and so he wrote his first letter urging believers to not engage in sexual immorality (1 Cor 5:9-10). We **don't** have this letter. This is the first letter.
- His next letter (**1 Corinthians**) was written from Ephesus around AD 53 – answering all sorts of questions and addressing all kinds of problems.
- The letter got a mixed reaction, as Timothy reported back to Paul, causing Paul to make **an emergency painful visit** to address the factions and problems (**2 Cor 2:1**).
- This painful visit **was dejecting to Paul**. Someone attacked him and (2:5–8; 7:11–12) no one from the church defended him.
- After this, he wrote **the third letter** (the **“painful letter”** 2:3-4) calling the church to repent take action against a particular offender (**7:12**)
- Titus delivered the painful letter; stayed there and witnessed the church’s repentance and commitment to Paul, and he energize them for the Jerusalem offering. (7:14)
- Titus reported back to Paul with the good news (2:6); the majority responded properly and this comforted Paul. (7:6–7, 9, 11, 13, 15).
- The painful letter and Titus’ report brought some healing in the relationship.
- Then, at some point during all of this correspondence, these **“super-apostles”** arrive in Corinth and create new problems. (11:5)
- Paul responds with **2 Corinthians, the fourth letter** (around AD 55).
- These false apostles claimed their ministries were superior to Paul’s, and began to **tarnish his reputation. What was being taught was that...**

- Paul was **unreliable**; he said he was going to visit, but he didn't...
- His **appearance** is too weak (Paul rebukes the Corinthians for only seeing things through outer appearances)
- He had no **“letter of recommendation”**
- He **suffered** too much to be an apostle (Similar to prosperity theology today)
- He was not a good **speaker**
- He's not **successful**

Paul was under attack big time in Corinth, in a church he planted and a church he loved.

So then 2 Corinthians

- (1) Celebrates the reconciliation with the the majority of the church, (though the rift wasn't completely mended – “Your restoration is what we pray for” [13:9; cf., 13:11]);
- (2) Gives further instructions about the collection for the saints in Jerusalem, and
- (3) Addresses these super apostles

Overview:

- **2 Cor 1-7** – Paul explains and defends his gospel ministry (and this defense wasn't just for himself; he saw that the gospel was at stake in whether he was accepted or rejected, as Christ's apostle)
- **2 Cor 8-9** – Paul exhorts the church to give generously to the collection
- **2 Cor 10-13** – Paul exposes the false apostles

In this letter, we see Paul most vulnerable; we see his heart.

- It's explosive and emotional at times.
- This unfiltered pathos may cause you to ask, “Am I reading the Bible here?” (Dane)
- It is written with tears; we see Paul's pastoral and missional heart.
- He was the “father” to the Corinthians through the gospel. They're like a 4 yr old church

In this letter, Paul

- Affirms his love for them
- Corrects and rebukes them
- Defends his own ministry against criticism
- Magnifies the gospel over against the false gospel of the super apostles
- Shows us that God's power is revealed through human weakness and suffering.
 - “If the super-apostles asked for Paul's credentials, he would show them his scars.” (Bird)

We are called to follow after Paul as he follows after Christ.

- We are weak too (like “**clay pots**”), but there is strength in this weakness.
- We too have the gospel to proclaim as ambassadors of Christ; urging the world to be reconciled to God.

Greeting (v. 1-2)

- This is pretty standard.
- Paul is sent by Christ with apostolic authority.
- This was due to “**God's will.**”

- This is important as we see in the letter; that Paul's ministry was to be accepted because God called him and sent him.
- The letter is not just for Corinth, but for all of Achaia ("for Raleigh" and "NC")
- The Greek/Jewish blessing combined "Grace and Peace to You"

Praise the God of All Comfort (1:3-7)

This letter begins differently than Paul's letters.

- He usually begins with a **Thanksgiving** to the church (except for Galatians).
- Only **Ephesians** begins this way (a Christianized version of the Jewish blessing)
- **He also usually prays for the church but here he requests prayer for himself (1:11).**
- **He is defending his ministry from the beginning**
 - One of the arguments was that Paul suffered too much, so he goes into suffering and comfort.
 - He wants them to see the place of suffering in the Christian experience.

In diving into this subject, Paul gives us perhaps the greatest text on divine comfort.

- The word "**comfort**" occurs about ten times here.
- In the letter as a whole the *paraklēsis* word group ("comfort," "consolation," "appeal") is a dominant theme in the letter. **29 of 59 instances in the NT are here (Garland)**
- The word "**affliction**" and "suffering" also reappears a number of times in this passage and in the book.
- The idea of being a suffering apostle needed explanation; especially in a city that valued wealth, power, showmanship, and appearances.
- Paul teaches here and throughout the letter that abundant suffering and abundant comfort are in fact signs of apostolic authenticity.

Paul teaches us four truths related to affliction and comfort, which I can summarize with four words (1) praise, (2) purpose, (3) participation; and (4) perseverance

#1: Praise. Praise God for his comfort and his mercies. (1:3-4a)

God's Nature: "**Father of the Lord Jesus.**"

- Emphasis on the **humanity** of Jesus.
- It reminds us of the one we follow, the suffering Christ who experienced the comfort of the Father.
- **That before we experience glory we must travel the road of suffering.**
- In affliction, **we will not be abandoned; for we belong to God.**
- So we take comfort in the nature of God, and the pattern of Jesus.

All **mercies** and all **comfort** come from God.

The "**Father of all mercies**"

- **We may show mercy and compassion but it pales in comparison to to God's mercy.**
- **His is constant and unchanging.**
- **We see his mercy most fully in the cross of the Lord Jesus bringing salvation to sinners.**
- **He is merciful in giving life to the dead**

Notice the “**all**” – comfort/mercies

- He may use someone to minister it: (see 7:5ff, Titus; eg, Jonathan and David.)
- Visits, sermons, prayers of others.

“**God of all comfort**”

- Like 1 Peter 5:10, “God of all grace” who meets us in trials, so here the God of all comfort meets us and strengthens us in our afflictions.
- Romans 15:4-5 “God of endurance and encouragement” meets us in discouragement
- In every loss, pain, sorrow, disappointment, our God is present to strengthen and bless, to help and to heal.

He comforts us in “all our **affliction**”

“**affliction**” refers both to external hardship (eg, beatings) and inner torment (7:5; eg, “anxiety for all the churches”), pressure, burden, distress, trouble

- Paul probably has both in mind here
- Some are cataloged in this letter (4:7-12; 6:4-10; 11:23-29)
- In Acts we read of plots, riots, false accusations, imprisonments, and stoning.
- He goes from one affliction to another.

What is this **comfort**?

- Many things may bring us comfort: **massage, hot tub, fireplace, etc.**

What is this kind of comfort?

- Well, it’s a real personal experience. It’s felt in suffering.

David Garland: For us, the word “comfort” may connote emotional relief and a sense of well-being, physical ease, satisfaction, and freedom from pain and anxiety. Many in our culture worship at the cult of comfort in a self-centered search for ease, but it lasts for only a moment and never fully satisfies.... The comfort that Paul has in mind has nothing to do with a sleepy feeling of contentment. It is not some tranquilizing dose of grace that only dulls pains but a stiffening agent that fortifies one in heart, mind, and soul. Comfort relates to encouragement, help, exhortation. God’s comfort strengthens weak knees and sustains sagging spirits so that one faces the troubles of life with unbending resolve and unending assurance.

- God’s comfort strengthens weak knees and sagging spirits so that we can face the afflictions of life with resolve and assurance.
- There is no one else or nothing else that can give you this endurance: it comes from God.
- Sometimes, God may deliver you from affliction, other times, he strengthens you in it.
- Either way, he’s good and to be trusted; as the God of all comfort and father of mercies.
- His comfort is sufficient for all our troubles.

Garland goes on:

“We know God’s promises best when we are in the direst need of them, when we are, as Paul says, “harassed at every turn” with “conflicts on the outside, fears within” (7:5). We

learn in such circumstances that God's comfort is sufficient to overcome the slings and arrows that cut us to the quick and the sorrows that break hearts. The same power that raised Christ from the dead is available to comfort us. Christians also learn that, unlike the Greek pantheon of gods who are quite unconcerned about human anguish, their God cares for them."

Recall in Isaiah 40-66, the prophet says that comfort and consolation will be one of the signs of the Messianic age.

40:1 "Comfort, comfort my people...

66:13: As one whom his mother comforts, so I will comfort you; you shall be comforted in Jerusalem. (v. 13).

- When Christ came, the faithful, like Simeon and Anna, were "waiting for the consolation of Israel" (Luke 2:25)
- This comfort that we can experience is a result of Christ's saving work, and it is an already-not-yet reality.

The divine comfort we experience now, is a foretaste of that which we will experience in the new creation.

So praise the God of all comfort, and father of all mercies.

#2: Purpose. God comforts believers so that they can comfort others (1:4b)

We don't have all the answers for our afflictions.

- Job never got all the answers, did he?

But one of the reasons for our suffering is to equip us to minister to others.

Point One: Suffering enables to have deeper fellowship with God.

Point Two: Suffering enables us have deeper fellowship with other believers.

God's comfort to us never terminates with us.

We become agents of hope and healing to others.

- Difficult child? You may be a comforter to those in the same position...
- Abusive parent?
- Cancer?
- Infertility
- Opposition to your ministry
- Wayward child

God comforts us not to make us comfortable but to make us comforters.

- He strengthens us so that we may strengthen others.

Your greatest hardship will often lead to your greatest ministry.

- It will equip you and prepare you to sympathize with, and minister to, those suffering in a similar way.

#3: Participation: Believers participate in the cross-shaped pattern of life that Christ experienced ahead of us (1:5)

Previously Paul spoke of being comforted by God, but he introduces Christ to this theology of suffering and comfort.

He specifically brings up the doctrine of union with Christ.

- We who were united to Jesus participate in his cross-shaped pattern of life.
- We share in his sufferings. (Phil 3:10-11)
- And we share in God's comfort.

Jesus suffering on the cross was unique; it was to take away our sin and bring us to God.

- But we will suffer as we follow him, as we take up our cross in sacrificial obedience.
- When we do, we experience God's nearness, strength and power in our weakness.

And notice the word "abundantly" or "overflow" in the CSB.

"Through Christ" - this comfort is **not available outside of Christ.**

- The suffering never outruns the comfort!
- The comfort "overflows."
- There's more than enough comfort!
- God always gives a surplus, and God intends it to overflow to others.

Isaiah 43:1-2

Fear not, for I have redeemed you;

I have called you by name, you are mine.

- 2 When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;
and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;
when you walk through fire you shall not be burned,
and the flame shall not consume you.

He is with us. We are with united to Christ.

As Jesus experienced the Father's comfort, so will we.

As Jesus was raised to life after death, so will we.

#4: Perseverance. If you endure faithfully, you will experience his comfort (1:6-7)

Paul continues his point, but make it more personal, telling the Corinthians that all this affliction is "for you."

6a: Some in Corinth that he suffered too much but Paul says that it is because of his afflictions for the gospel that they experience "**comfort**" and "**salvation.**"

Why should they hate on the one who brought them the gospel – and suffered greatly in so doing?

- The Corinthians did not appreciate the significance of the apostle's suffering.
- Later he says "death is at work in him," so that "life" might be at work in them (4:12).

Suffering is often tied to salvation: suffering on the part of the evangelist, dying so others may live.

- Someone made some sacrifice for you to come to faith; obedience, risk, boldness, at the very least taking time to share with you.

- We will not see people come to faith without sacrifice, time, commitment...

But he's also been comforted, and he wants to pass that on to them.

6b: He goes on to say that his comfort produces endurance in them, enabling them to suffer in a similar way.

So don't miss the application in this phrase, "**patient endurance**"

- We are called to patient endurance until the end.
- It is when we endure patiently that we experience God's power, and I think we can say we experience a sense of assurance of salvation.
- When we endure in suffering, we can say, "I am a Christian."

Many profess faith in Christ under easy circumstances, but then when some pressure comes, or trials come, they walk away.

- It is when we endure that we experience God's power and a sense of confidence of our standing with God.
- "It is difficult to know the true spiritual state of those who have only known the mountaintop but never the valley, only ease but never pain. But there is strange encouragement in the distressing afflictions of the Christian experience. This is safe ground. For this is the path Christ walked, and in finding ourselves on that path we know we are not fair-weather disciples." (Dane Ortlund)

7: in this letter, Paul notes the Corinthians' disobedience, but he never loses confidence in them (see 2:3; 7:4; 9:3)

- How so? His **hope** is focused on God's work for them and in them.
- Paul repeats that they **share in suffering** (there's no "our" in Greek, it's "the" suffering and "the" comfort).
- The sufferings more likely refer to **the sufferings of Christ; the sufferings of Christian experience.**
- That's where his confidence lies.
- **There are problems but at least they're suffering!**
- **Since they share in his sufferings, they will share in his comfort and his glory.**

Final Reflections

- The call is not to go looking for suffering.
- The call is to be faithful.
- And when you're faithful to Christ in this present evil age, anticipate affliction; be faithful in the midst of affliction and you will experience divine comfort that will strengthen you in it.

So church, let's

- Praise the God of all comfort and father of mercies;
- Be comforters to those who are afflicted;
- Persevere through Christ, by the Spirit, and experience God's comfort.