

## 2 Cor 1:1-11 Paul's Introduction to the Letter

A famous classic novel begins with the words, "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times." In the Christian life, sometimes the worst of times also turns out to be, in a certain way, the best of times. It may be that only in the midst of great suffering do we experience the grace of God in a very personal way. We may feel closest to God when we are under great distress and adversity. As God told Paul, "My strength is made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor 12:9). We experience the grace of God most fully only when we also experience our own weakness.

That was Paul's experience, and he tells us about it in the book of 2 Corinthians.

About 15 years ago, we studied through 1 Cor, so I thought it was about time that we made our way through 2 Cor.

At the time Paul wrote this letter, he was planning to travel to Corinth for a third visit. He'd been there not many months before, but that visit had not gone well. He sent a rather harsh/severe letter to the church, but they had responded well to that letter. There were still problems in the church that Paul wanted to address, so he was planning to visit the church in Corinth again in the near future. So this letter is preparing the way for his upcoming visit.

Last week, we looked at some introductory matters regarding the book, and today we'll consider the first section—vs. 1-11.

We find in this passage that Paul had suffered greatly for his Christian faith, but he'd also experienced the comfort of God in his suffering. God had rescued him from his afflictions, and Paul was confident that God would continue to rescue him and to provide help in his suffering.

And we can expect the same comfort in our times of tribulation and affliction. We all experience difficulties in life, and it's during those times that we value God's comfort.

Remember that part 1 of the book gives us Paul's Explanation of His Conduct and Apostolic Ministry (chapters 1-7). Before he begins that explanation, he opens his letter with an introduction (1:1-11)—that's what we're looking at this morning.

Let's look at Paul's introduction to this letter.

### I. Salutation (1:1, 2)

- A. Paul, of course, is the author of the book. He mentions that Timothy is with him when he wrote the letter.

Ancient letters normally began by naming the sender, his rank or profession, and the recipients, which was followed by a greeting and wish for good health.<sup>1</sup> This salutation follows the same basic format.

B. Paul describes himself as “an apostle of Jesus Christ...”

1. In the original language, it says “Paul apostle...” Paul begins almost all of his letters with a reference to his status as an apostle.
2. What is an apostle? The root word means, “to send.” An apostle is one sent out as an authoritative messenger or representative. Paul was sent by Jesus and had authority as his ambassador/spokesman.
3. Apostle was an important title, because some in the church were questioning Paul’s apostolic authority. Here in the very first words of the book, Paul asserts his authority as “apostle,” which means that he is a spokesman and representative of Jesus himself.
4. And his apostleship is “by the will of God.” Jesus called him to this position and gave him this authority. He’s not a self-proclaimed apostle as others might be; God called him to that position.

Acts 9:15 refers to Paul as a “chosen vessel to carry [the name of Christ] before Gentiles and kings.”

Since Paul is an authoritative representative of Christ, what would be true of those in the church that oppose him or resist his instructions? They would be resisting God. When you reject God’s representative, you reject God himself.

Do people today have this same kind of apostolic authority? Are there still apostles like Paul living today? No, there are no apostles like Paul today. No one today has the same qualifications or calling as the original apostles did.

Some people today call themselves apostles, but they certainly are not apostles in the same way Paul was.

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<sup>1</sup> David E. Garland, *2 Corinthians*, vol. 29, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1999), 47.

The closest thing we have to apostles today are pastors of local churches. Pastors represent Christ and proclaim the message of Christ, but we don't have the same authority as the original apostles. We don't believe in apostolic succession.

- C. .1 The recipients of the letter are the church at Corinth along with all the saints in the region—Achaia.
  - 1. Paul had started this church in Corinth on his second missionary journey as recorded in Acts 18.
  - 2. He has spent 1.5 years there, so he knew the people very well. Many of the people in the church were converted under his ministry.
- D. .1end He calls his readers “saints.” The word simply means “holy ones,” and it applies to any Christian. Christians are set apart from the world and set apart unto God. Every Christian is a saint and should live up to that name.
- E. .2 Paul's standard greeting—“Grace be to you and peace from God our father and the Lord Jesus Christ.”
  - 1. The traditional Greek greeting was “Greetings to you,” but Paul changed that a bit, using the same root word, and says “Grace to you.”
  - 2. The standard Hebrew greeting was “Shalom”—peace, and Paul incorporates that as well. He puts together a form of the Greek and the Hebrew statements in his greeting—grace and peace.

## II. Gratitude for divine comfort (1:3–7)

- A. Some important words
  - 1. .3 Paul describes God in a couple of ways
    - a) *God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ*—this affirms that Jesus is the Son of God, a basic Christian belief.
    - b) *The father of all mercies and the God of all comfort*—Paul is going to have a lot to say about both the troubles he's experienced as well as God's comfort in those troubles. God provides both mercy and comfort for those who trust in him.

2. Vss. 3-7 are interesting in that they mention the words “comfort/consolation” about 10 times, and “trouble/tribulation/suffering” about 7 times. So the point here is clear: Christians often suffer trouble and tribulations, but in those experiences, we also experience God’s comfort/consolation.
3. .4 The word for “comfort” (παρακλήσεως,) means “to come alongside.” It’s the same root word translated at “consolation” throughout the paragraph. God provides help, comfort, and encouragement during times of distress.
4. And that comfort can come in many different forms. It could be a feeling of assurance that God is with you, but it also might be in the form of a phone call or card from a friend, a prayer from a fellow believer, or just a pat on the back or a hug.

**Quote:** The comfort that Paul has in mind ... 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.<sup>2</sup>

5. We need this comfort in the time of trouble, and there are several words here to describe hardships:
  - a) Tribulation/trouble/hardship (θλίψει)
  - b) Suffering (παθήματα)
  - c) Suffer (πάσχομεν)
  - d) Throughout the letter, Paul describes the kinds of tribulations, troubles, and sufferings he experienced—plots against his life, riots, false accusations, imprisonments, ship wrecks, and stoning. Paul seems to have gone from one dire situation to the next, one crisis after another. Paul knew all about suffering.

Ac 9:16 *“For I will show him how many things he must suffer for My name’s sake.”*

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<sup>2</sup> David E. Garland, *2 Corinthians*, vol. 29, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1999), 60.

B. Some important statements

1. *.4 Who comforts us in all our tribulation* – God provides mercy and comfort to those who suffer.
  - a) The suffering/tribulation in view here is the suffering associated with following Christ—“the sufferings of Christ” (vs. 5). Paul and his colleagues suffered because they followed Christ, and so did the Christians in the church at Corinth. Most 1<sup>st</sup> century Christians suffered for their faith.
  - b) In fact, the common experience for many Christians for many centuries has been opposition and persecution. It’s still happening today in many parts of the world.

**App:** Paul had gotten only a few sentences into this letter and is already talking about Christian suffering. Many professing Christians today think that suffering is never within God’s will. They think that only sinners suffer. If a Christian is suffering, it must be because he’s in sin or is out of God’s will. Christians are supposed to enjoy their “best life now.” We are supposed to enjoy health, wealth, and prosperity, not suffering or tribulations.

But Paul’s words here clearly indicate that suffering was a common experience among the believers at Corinth. They were suffering for their faith in Christ. Persecution is a normal part of the Christian faith and experience.

Is it possible that some of us will suffer for our faith in Christ? I think it’s quite probable that some of us will experience opposition and hostility if not outright persecution because of our faith in Jesus and the Bible.

**E.g.,** new law in Canada which makes it illegal to proclaim Christian morality. Simply reading certain texts from the Bible in public would be illegal. Same thing would happen here if certain lawmakers get their way.

**Quote:** Suffering comes for anyone who preaches the gospel in a world twisted by sin and roused by hostility to God.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> David E. Garland, *2 Corinthians*, vol. 29, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1999), 62.

So suffering for the cause of Christ is a very real possibility. As Paul told Timothy, “all that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution (2Ti 3:12).

2. .4b “...that we may be able to comfort those who are in any trouble...” This is a purpose statement. Those who have experienced both suffering and God’s comfort are equipped to comfort others who suffer.

One of the benefits of experiencing pain is that you can sympathize with others who are feel the same pain. Those who have endured affliction themselves are the most understanding when others endure the same kind of afflictions. Those who have such experiences are equipped to help others through similar experiences.

Experience is a great teacher; we can learn a lot through hard experiences. And those who learn through experience are in a position to help others facing similar problems.

**Quote:** God does not comfort us to make us comfortable but to make us comforters.<sup>4</sup>

God is the ultimate source of all comfort, but we can be channels of God’s comfort to others. We should seek to do that for those who are suffering. How can God use you and me to bring help, aid, and encouragement to those who suffer?

Imagine how difficult afflictions are for those who suffer alone. Suffering hardship is bad enough, but it’s far worse when no one comes along side to offer help, aid, and encouragement. That’s what we are called to do, especially for fellow Christians.

In fact, one of the best things we can do for ourselves is to help others in their time of need. If you are feeling sorry for yourself, the best pick-me-up is care for others. Caring for others is a great way to help yourself feel better.

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<sup>4</sup> David E. Garland, *2 Corinthians*, vol. 29, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1999), 64. Quoting Jowett.

The most miserable people are those who focus on themselves and turn away from others. Selfish people are often lonely people. It's easy to focus on your own pain and shut out others, but that is a recipe for depression and despair. Comforting and consoling others in their time of need helps those who suffer and helps yourself.

3. .5 When suffering for Christ abounds, consolation abounds through Christ. For the Christian, much suffering is also accompanied by much comfort/encouragement.

a) Notice the words “as” and “so.” Just as the suffering abounds, so the comfort/encouragement abounds. Without the abundant suffering, we would not have the abundant comfort/encouragement.

b) The words “sufferings of Christ” refer here to opposition and persecution we endure for the Christian faith, the sufferings due to our connection with Christ.

Those who serve Christ will experience some of the same mistreatment that Jesus experienced.

John 15:18 *“If the world hates you, you know that it hated Me before [it hated] you.*

Mr 13:13 *“And you will be hated by all for My name’s sake. ...*

c) For many Christians, suffering for Christ “abounds” or “overflows.” I.e., there is lots of it. But when there is a lot of suffering for Christ, there is a lot of consolation/comfort from Christ.

4. .6 Similarly, suffering affliction for Christ may benefit others. When you suffer for Christ, you are equipped to encourage others who suffer for Christ.

In a certain sense, the people of the church at Corinth were saved because of Paul’s sufferings. In a human sense, the fact that Paul had been willing to suffer persecution resulted in the salvation of the people there in Corinth.

5. .7 Those who suffer can be “steadfast” (βεβαία) – firm, steady, certain—in the knowledge that they will also partake in the consolation/comfort that God provides. If God allows us to experience tribulations and afflictions, he will also provide comfort/consolation so that we might endure it—“you will partake of the consolation.”

**Quote:** We know God’s promises best when we are in the direst need of them.<sup>5</sup>

It’s often in those times of distress and anguish that we sense God’s comfort. When all is going well, we don’t really need encouragement or help. But when the world has fallen apart, that’s when we need God’s comfort.

He does not promise that God will remove the affliction or the persecution, but that God will provide consolation—encouragement, aid, help—through the experience.

If we have experienced God’s comfort, we should seek to comfort others. Perhaps you and I could be used of God to bring comfort, encouragement, and help to those who are suffering. In fact, we are obligated to do so. Those who have endured suffering ought to be the first in line to comfort others who are suffering.

**Trans:** So one of the first things that Paul mentions in the letter is Christian suffering and the comfort that God gives to those who suffer.

### III. Deliverance from a deadly peril (1:8–11)

Paul next relates some details about what happened to him in Asia—that is, not east Asia, but Asia Minor, what we today call western Turkey. Asia was a province on the west coast of Turkey, just across the Aegean Sea from Greece. The region in view here is likely near the city of Ephesus.

A. .8 Paul and his colleagues suffered great opposition and persecution. Note the words that he uses to describe this terrible experience:

1. .8 *Trouble*—sometimes translated as “tribulation.” – affliction, distress
2. .8 *Burdened* (grieved, weighed down) *beyond measure*, above strength

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<sup>5</sup> David E. Garland, *2 Corinthians*, vol. 29, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1999), 60.

3. .8 *We despaired even of life*—they were not sure that they’d survive this experience.

The rare word (ἐξάπορηθῆναι) (“despaired”) implies the total unavailability of an exit (*poros*, “passage”) from oppressive circumstances.<sup>6</sup> They were on death’s door; they were doomed—and no rescue was in view.

4. .9 *We had the sentence of death in ourselves.*

- a) That doesn’t mean that they had been officially sentenced to death by the Roman authorities, but it felt that way.

Note that they experienced this “in ourselves.” So this was not a legal verdict or threat; it was an inner feeling of doom or impending death.

- b) The sufferings that they endured were like being on death row in prison; they believed that they could have been killed at any time.

- c) And that sense of impending death brought about a feeling of despair. Paul was not certain that he’d be rescued. His death was a real possibility.

Whatever the experience was, it was intensely painful and life-threatening. And the physical suffering they endured resulted in emotional distress. They were burdened and in despair.

**App:** The idea that Christians never suffer emotional distress is simply not biblical. Paul’s testimony is that he was burdened “beyond measure” and even “despaired...of life.” That seems to describe some very significant emotional trauma. Christians today may experience deep emotional stress while under difficult circumstances.

We should not be surprised when physical suffering creates emotional trauma. Humans are body and soul; our physical and emotional natures are tied together. Suffering in one area may create suffering in another area. We should not be surprised when that happens, and we should not think that it would not happen to Christians.

But we should remember that God is at work in and through our afflictions. God has a purpose for the trials he allows us to experience.

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<sup>6</sup> Murray J. Harris, “2 Corinthians,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Romans through Galatians*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin, vol. 10 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1976), 321.

B. .9 The lesson learned from this experience: “we should not trust in ourselves but in God who raises the dead.”

1. Suffering can teach us some important lessons. God has a purpose behind the afflictions he allows us to experience. Maybe God is trying to teach you something through affliction.
2. One of the purposes in suffering, or one of the lessons learned through it, is the error of relying on self. Times of tribulation and affliction drive us to trust God rather than ourselves or others.
3. Self-confidence is not a Christian virtue. It may be a virtue of western culture, but it’s not a biblical virtue. Our trust should not be in ourselves, but in God.

*2 Corinthians 3:5 Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to think of anything as being from ourselves, but our sufficiency is from God,*

**Quote:** We frequently need a good dose of helplessness when we are ... stripped of all false self-confidence before we learn humility and open ourselves up to God’s power.<sup>7</sup>

4. .9end Our confidence in God is not misplaced because he “raises the dead.”
  - a) God raised Christ from the dead.
  - b) God has promised to raise believers from the dead. This is the resurrection of the just.
  - c) God has even promised to raise unbelievers from the dead. This is the resurrection of the unjust.
  - d) If God can do that, he can do anything. Since God can raise the dead, he can certainly deliver his people from their afflictions or comfort them in their troubles.

C. .10 God delivered (ἐρρύσατο) them, and Paul trusts that God will continue to deliver them.

Paul and his colleagues were in a desperate condition, their lives hanging by a string, they were at death’s door. But God rescued them from that situation, and God will continue to deliver them.

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<sup>7</sup> David E. Garland, *2 Corinthians*, vol. 29, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1999), 79–80.

Notice the verb tenses here—“delivered us” (past), “does deliver us” (present), and “will deliver us” (future). Of course, that’s true of salvation as well—past, present, and future.

When we are in the midst of trials and tribulations, we can trust God to comfort us, to draw near to us, and to help us go through those experiences.

In some cases, we must simply endure these experiences and bear up under them for long periods of time. And we also know that God allows believers to suffer and die under distress and persecution. Many believers have experienced torture and death for their Christian faith; God did not deliver/rescue them from the affliction. They were “faithful unto death” (Rev 2:10). It’s in God’s providence whether we are rescued or not. Often we must bear our infirmities and afflictions permanently.

We certainly pray that God would deliver us from evil (Mt 6.13), but we should not be shocked or resentful if God might allow us to experience distress and even death.

D. .11a Prayer helps to bring about such delivery.

1. Prayer is especially important when people are suffering.
2. The church at Corinth prayed for Paul during his affliction and trouble, and God answered those prayers.
3. Paul sees his deliverance as a gift given to him by many prayers for him. God often achieves his purposes through the prayers of his people.
4. What a great privilege to “help together in prayer” for those who suffer, especially for those suffering for the name of Christ.

**App:** Trouble and tribulations are always occasions for prayer. One of the ways that God can use us to comfort others is to pray for them in their afflictions. Isn’t it good to hear when people tell you that they are praying for you? Praying for others is a way that we can bring comfort to them in their time of need. Make sure that you are involved in helping together in prayer. Often, that’s all we can do.

E. .11b Many people are thankful when God delivers his people.

We trust that God will come along side of us to provide encouragement and comfort in our time of need. Perhaps God can use us to be that source of encouragement and comfort for those who suffer.

And when we experience deliverance from our trials, we must be quick to thank God for rescuing us.

When we go through the trials and tribulations of life, and especially when we suffer for the name of Christ, we can be sure that God will be with us and will provide comfort, aid, and encouragement. Jesus said, “In the world, you will have tribulation” (Jn 16:33). The apostles confirmed that it is through much tribulation that we enter the kingdom (Acts 14:22). God has not promised that we would avoid the problems that are common to man. But God will be with us to provide comfort, aid, and encouragement.

As difficult as trials and tribulations are, they may provide opportunities to experience God’s comfort, to see prayers answered, and to be equipped to help others who suffer.

All of us should be available to comfort others in their times of afflictions. One of the great benefits of being a part of a local church is that we can expect others to be there to help us in our times of need. We can be the means God uses to bring comfort, aid, and encouragement into the lives of those who suffer. At the very least, we can help others through our prayers.

This passage should give us hope and confidence as vs. 7 affirms: “we know that as you are partakers of the sufferings, so also *you will partake* of the consolation.”