

2 Corinthians 1 • Inside the Heart of the Church

Introduction

It has been observed that whereas 1 Corinthians is akin to taking the roof off and allowing one to peek into the workings of the Church observationally, 2 Corinthians is a much more personal look into the heart of the Church in Paul's expression of his love and concern for the work of the Lord. At the outset of addressing a series of very personal, spiritual issues, this opening chapter largely deals with the question as to why the righteous suffer, providing the background of his personal experiences. Many false teachings in various forms attempt to misrepresent a right relationship with Christ as one which only experiences good health and blessings, but the whole of Scripture from beginning to end is replete with examples to the contrary. Paul provides some reasons why God permits this to happen.

¹Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother,

To the church of God which is at Corinth with all the saints who are throughout Achaia: ²Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

³Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, ⁴who comforts us in all our affliction so that we will be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. ⁵For just as the sufferings of Christ are ours in abundance, so also our comfort is abundant through Christ. ⁶But if we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation; or if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which is effective in the patient enduring of the same sufferings which we also suffer; ⁷and our hope for you is firmly grounded, knowing that as you are sharers of our sufferings, so also you are sharers of our comfort.

[Read v.1-7]

Q: What are the two basic things being repeatedly compared and contrasted in these verses?

A: "Comfort" and its variants is used 9 times, "affliction" & "suffering" and their variants are used 7 times.

Q: Why might the definition of "comfort" actually be an extension of what we learned about spiritual gifts in 1 Corinthians 12-14?

A: The Greek word "parakaleo" rendered "comfort" carries with it not just the meaning to call upon and care for someone, but to exhort and admonish the person in the course of doing so. It expresses "comfort" of the whole person, both physical and spiritual. In 2 Co. 14:3 we learned that the primary goal of spiritual gifts is for "edification and exhortation and consolation".

Q: How do we know that the sufferings mentioned are not strictly restricted to physical ailments and also include their spiritual and emotional counterparts?

A: Firstly, v.4 specifies "those who are in any affliction", secondly v.6 connects it to the issue of "salvation", and v.6 & 7 identify it with "patient enduring" and "our hope". Strictly speaking, this is addressing all suffering on every level.

Q: From whom is comfort specifically identified as ultimately coming from?

A: "God the Father" (v.3) and "Christ" (v.5)

Q: How do we know that this is also a defining role of the Holy Spirit as well?

A: One of the names by which Christ identifies the Holy Spirit is "Comforter". What is rendered in some Bible translations as "Helper" in John 14:16 is the Greek word "Parakleton", derived from the same Greek word for "comfort".

"I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may be with you forever;

— John 14:16

Q: What does Paul state in v.4 as the first reason why we experience both comfort and affliction?

A: "...so that we will be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God". This is not strictly a personal process between just us and God alone, but an experience to empower us to in turn do the very same thing for others.

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Q: When Paul uses the phrase “sufferings of Christ” as in v.5, is he speaking about our having to do something to atone for sin?

A: No, what Christ suffered in order to atone for our sins could only be accomplished once and for all exclusively by Him and Him alone, not by any other, much less us. This concept, used elsewhere in the New Testament, suggests that we suffer in the same character of Christ for His sake and glory, and that He in turn suffers with us in this present life.

always carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body. For we who live are constantly being delivered over to death for Jesus’ sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh.

— 2 Corinthians 4:10–11

Q: What are the four benefits provided in v.6-7?

1. “...it is for your comfort and salvation...” (v.6) It does not work exclusively for the individual, but has a beneficial effect on everyone.
2. “...is effective in the patient enduring...” (v.6) Patience and endurance are highly prized attributes of a mature Christian which are by-products of suffering and trials.
3. “...our hope is firmly grounded...” (v.7) The biblical definition of “hope” is “future fact”, not just wishing for something. Putting God’s Word and ways into practice so as to properly deal with both sufferings and comfort applies the truth so that we are not easily uprooted from our faith.
4. “...you are sharers...” (v.7) Not just of the comfort, but the sufferings. Remember, we are the “Body” of Christ, not individual parts operating and feeling independently of each other. (1 Co. 12:26)

And if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; if one member is honored, all the members rejoice with it.

— 1 Corinthians 12:26

Application: One of the primary reasons we experience the dual aspects of suffering and comfort personally is so that we might in turn comfort others.

⁸For we do not want you to be unaware, brethren, of our affliction which came to us in Asia, that we were burdened excessively, beyond our strength, so that we despaired even of life; ⁹indeed, we had the sentence of death within ourselves so that we would not trust in ourselves, but in God who raises the dead; ¹⁰who delivered us from so great a peril of death, and will deliver us, He on whom we have set our hope. And He will yet deliver us, ¹¹you also joining in helping us through your prayers, so that thanks may be given by many persons on our behalf for the favor bestowed on us through the prayers of many.

[Read v.8-11]

Q: Sorry for the grammar lesson, but what might be particularly revealing as to the three tenses used by Paul in v.10 when it comes to the greater issue of faith?

1. “...delivered us...” is the past tense.
2. “...will deliver us...” is the future tense.
3. “...we have set our hope” is in the present tense.

Point: Such things refine our individual faith so that we come to trust God in every situation, in every way.

Q: But was Paul and company completely alone in either their sufferings or the deliverance brought about by God?

A: “...you also joining in helping us through your prayers...” (v.11)

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Q: What does Paul indicate is the chief benefit of others' prayers? Is it just a ritual or polite formality performed on someone else's behalf?

A: "...so that thanks may be given by many persons..." (v.11) It becomes a testimony of God's faithfulness and power not just to those for whom they prayed, and not just as an answer to prayer for those who prayed, but to others who see both the sufferings and the comfort.

Point: Prayer is the way which the separate parts of the Body of Christ continue to minister to each other even though they may be separated by time and space. It allows the gifts of the Spirit to not just continue operating, but to become a visible witness of God's working.

Application: The dual aspects of suffering and comfort result in increased confidence in Christ and a visible witness of His working.

¹²For our proud confidence is this: the testimony of our conscience, that in holiness and godly sincerity, not in fleshly wisdom but in the grace of God, we have conducted ourselves in the world, and especially toward you. ¹³For we write nothing else to you than what you read and understand, and I hope you will understand until the end; ¹⁴just as you also partially did understand us, that we are your reason to be proud as you also are ours, in the day of our Lord Jesus.

[Read v.12-14]

Q: How does "the testimony of our conscience" in v.12 connect with "in the day of our Lord Jesus" in v.14?

A: It is speaking to what will ultimately take place in eternity when all things are reconciled in Christ. This carries with it the meaning of being faithful to God's Word and ways in this present life so as to be presented acceptable according to God's standards in the next. This is why Paul specifically states in v.12, "conducted ourselves in the world"; the ultimate issue is what takes place after life in this world.

Q: How does this connect with Paul's statement in v.13, "I hope you will understand until the end"?

A: The goal is to continue behaving and living faithfully for the whole of this present life as it transitions to the next. This is about a lifetime of faithfulness, not something temporary.

Q: What is the goal of our earthly conduct?

A: "...in holiness and godly sincerity...we have conducted ourselves in the world, and especially toward you"; (v.12) this is specifically contrasted with "not in fleshly wisdom".

Q: But is there an earthly benefit for the present of what has taken place?

A: "...we are your reason to be proud as you also are ours..." (v.14) It is a mutual benefit of faith both for those literally participating in sufferings and comfort as well as those in prayer and support of those experiencing them.

Application: Regardless of conditions, even through sufferings and trials, a biblical Christian is proven by biblical behavior.

¹⁵In this confidence I intended at first to come to you, so that you might twice receive a blessing; ¹⁶that is, to pass your way into Macedonia, and again from Macedonia to come to you, and by you to be helped on my journey to Judea. ¹⁷Therefore, I was not vacillating when I intended to do this, was I? Or what I purpose, do I purpose according to the flesh, so that with me there will be yes, yes and no, no at the same time? ¹⁸But as God is faithful, our word to you is not yes and no. ¹⁹For the Son of God, Christ Jesus, who was preached among you by us—by me and Silvanus and Timothy—was not yes and no, but is yes in Him. ²⁰For as many as are the promises of God, in Him they are yes; therefore also through Him is our Amen to the glory of God through us. ²¹Now He who establishes us with you in Christ and anointed us is God, ²²who also sealed us and gave us the Spirit in our hearts as a pledge.

[Read v.15-22]

Q: What is meant by, “In this confidence”?

A: It was because of their love and understanding expressed by their prayers and support of him, and their history of right and loving treatment of him, which allowed him to change his plans. It is actually a very deep and profound compliment to their spiritual relationship and maturity in Christ.

Q: What is at the heart of all this “yes” and “no” rhetoric? What is the real issue?

A: There are those who might come to believe that if the messengers of God’s promises waver back and forth, that God’s promises themselves cannot be relied upon as solid and uncompromising.

Q: Why might this be particularly relevant to the issues of suffering and comfort discussed to this point?

A: Because biblical faith is our trust that regardless of the situation, the promises of God are true in Christ.

Point: *Even though Paul made plans and had personal intentions, the fact is that they were not changed because of a personal failure or slipping into sin, but changed by circumstances allowed by God. There is a lesson here for us in that although we make plans, God sometimes overrules them for purposes not always immediately revealed at the time. And just because suffering or trials may be incurred because of these changes, it does not mean that God is nonetheless in control.*

Q: How is this overall passage summarized as to God’s greater purposes?

A: There are three greater spiritual things at work:

1. Established in Christ. (v.21) This is the confirmation of our salvation.
2. Anointed in God. (v.21) This is being set apart for His service and ministry.
3. Sealed in the Spirit. (v.22) This is the promise given in this life assuring we will be redeemed for the next.

These have the additional meaning of God being in control of our past, present and future.

Application: *The dual aspects of sufferings and comfort actually enable us to claim the promises of God both for this life and the next.*

²³But I call God as witness to my soul, that to spare you I did not come again to Corinth. ²⁴Not that we lord it over your faith, but are workers with you for your joy; for in your faith you are standing firm.

[Read v.23-24]

Q: What does Paul mean when he says that he changed his plans “to spare you”?

A: If we follow the historical setting provided in Acts and other New Testament writings, Paul promised to visit the Corinthians, but was delayed, and subsequent plans failed as well. Corinth, as can be seen from these letters, had a lot of problems and Paul had previously assured them that if necessary, he would come to aggressively correct their behavior. His delay apparently “spared” them the rod.

What do you desire? Shall I come to you with a rod, or with love and a spirit of gentleness?

— 1 Corinthians 4:21

Q: What had changed in the interim which negated the need for the rod, so to speak?

A: “...in your faith you are standing firm”. (v.24) The issues undermining their faith to which Paul prolifically and specifically addressed in the previous letter had apparently been corrected.

Q: What is important about Paul’s statement, “Not that we lord it over your faith”?

A: Biblical leaders do not exert authority just because they are in charge; they are concerned that the truth is always expressed in the proper context of love and exhortation, a way of continuing the theme of extending “comfort” in this teaching.

Application: *Christians consciously avoid being an additional source of suffering, but a continual source of comfort.*