

SECOND CORINTHIANS

1:1-11

Introduction

The repetition of certain words catches your attention as you read these first few verses of Second Corinthians:

1. Skim verses three through seven and you see “comfort,” “comforts,” “comfort,” “comfort,” “comforted,” “consolation,” “consolation,” “consolation,” and “consolation.”
2. Go back and skim verses four through eight and you see “tribulation,” “trouble,” “sufferings,” “afflicted,” “sufferings,” “suffer,” “sufferings,” and “trouble.”

These verses teach you how to be comforted in your sufferings; and they tell you how to comfort others in their sufferings.

“Comfort” is the action word, so let’s make sure we understand what it means. When we think of the word comfort we have a tendency to expand it to mean *comfortable*. For example: Although we had adequate facilities during our stay in Tegucigalpa, we were not comfortable. I looked forward to returning to the comforts of a decent mattress, hot running water, and clean public bathrooms.

Being or becoming comfortable is not what the word comfort means in these verses! It is not a weak, sentimental word. The word itself in the original language means *with strength*. It is a tough word, a disciplined word – in many ways the very opposite of comfortable. You can see its meaning most clearly in verse six:

2 Corinthians 1:6 Now if we are afflicted, *it is* for your consolation and salvation, which is effective for enduring the same sufferings which we also suffer. Or if we are comforted, *it is* for your consolation and salvation.

Comfort, or consolation, is “effective for **enduring**... sufferings.” It is not intended to *end* suffering, but rather to *endure* it. **Christian comfort is the strength which is effective for enduring suffering.**

There are at least two sources for the strength which is effective for enduring suffering: Your Father in heaven, and your fellowship on earth. We'll organize our thoughts around two points: #1 Ask Your Father To Provide The Strength Which Is Effective For Enduring Suffering, and #2 Ask Your Fellowship To Pray For The Strength Which Is Effective For Enduring Suffering.

#1 Ask Your Father To Provide The Strength
Which Is Effective For Enduring Suffering
(v1-3)

Second Corinthians is the last in a series of four letters that Paul wrote to the church there. Two of these letters God did not inspire as Scripture; they have been lost. The two inspired letters are the ones we call First and Second Corinthians - but they are not in the order that these titles suggest.

Paul founded the church in Corinth somewhere around 52 or 53AD. He stayed there for about a year and a half; then he went to Ephesus, where he remained for a few weeks. From there he made a quick trip to Jerusalem, returning again to Ephesus. While he was at Ephesus, he wrote a first letter to the church at Corinth, a letter which is lost to us. It is referred to in First Corinthians 5:9, where Paul says he wrote to warn them about following a worldly life style. In response to that letter, the Corinthians wrote back with many questions. They sent their letter by the hands of three young men who are mentioned in First Corinthians. In reply to that letter, Paul wrote what we now call First Corinthians. In it he tried to answer their questions.

Evidently that letter did not accomplish all that Paul intended. There was a bad reaction to it, and in Second Corinthians 2:1 we learn that he made a quick trip to Corinth. How long that took we do not know. Paul calls it a "painful" visit. He had come with a rather sharp rebuke to them, but again he did not accomplish his purpose. Again there was a great deal of negative reaction. So when he returned to Ephesus he sent another brief letter in the hands of Titus to Corinth to see if he could help them. This third letter is also lost to us.

Titus was gone a long time; transportation and communication were very slow and difficult in those days. Paul, waiting in Ephesus, grew

very anxious to hear what was happening in the church there. He became so troubled that he left Ephesus and went to Troas and then up into Macedonia to meet Titus. There in Macedonia, probably in the city of Philippi, he and Titus came together. Titus brought him a much more encouraging word about the church, and in response to that, out of thanksgiving, Paul wrote his fourth letter to them, what we now call Second Corinthians, although it was really the fourth of a series of letters.

2 Corinthians 1:1 Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God, and Timothy *our* brother,
To the church of God which is at Corinth, with all the saints who are in all Achaia:
2 Corinthians 1:2 Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

One of the ongoing problems at Corinth was criticism of Paul's apostleship. The false teachers who despised the message of the grace of God which Paul preached tried to label him a self-appointed apostle. Paul declares that he was appointed an apostle "by the will of God." His authority was from God and not from man.

"Grace... and peace" are always in that order; they are never reversed. You cannot experience peace with God until you have received the grace of God through Jesus Christ, your Savior.

Paul launches immediately into his subject:

2 Corinthians 1:3 Blessed *be* the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort,

Paul is subtly but very definitely pointing you to the Lord, Jesus Christ, as your example in suffering. In a moment, in verse five, he will mention "the sufferings of Christ" which we share as His followers. **Since we share in His sufferings, it follows that we should be able to share in the strength which is effective to endure sufferings.**

Jesus Christ suffered. As He did, He looked upward to God, His Father in heaven, knowing that God is "the Father of mercies." The mercy that His Father bestowed upon Jesus in His suffering was "comfort" – *strength which was effective to endure*, right up to enduring the suffering of the Cross upon which He gave Himself for the sins of the world.

The writer of Hebrews puts it like this:

Hebrews 12:2 [look] unto Jesus, the author and finisher of *our* faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

Often we want to *end*, rather than *endure*, suffering... Or to *escape*, rather than *endure*, suffering. There is nothing wrong with seeking to end or escape suffering; but ultimately you must realize that suffering is from the hand of your merciful Father and can be endured with the strength God alone can provide:

1. Jesus Himself prayed, in the Garden of Gethsemane, to end or escape the suffering of the Cross that was before Him. Yet He endured the suffering of the Cross with the strength God provided in response to His asking.
2. Later in this letter the apostle Paul will pray three times to end or escape from his suffering, what he calls his “thorn in the flesh.” In response God provides him with the strength which is effective to endure his suffering.

What was true for Jesus and Paul is true for **you**. As you suffer for the sake of Jesus Christ, your Father in heaven, the Father of mercies, will give **you** comfort – the strength which is effective for enduring suffering.

Furthermore, enduring your suffering is not a dreary, discouraging, gritting of your teeth. It is not the product of your own strength or self-discipline or capacity for pain. It is the supernatural release of joy and peace right in the midst of your trouble.

Let me give you another way of understanding what is meant in this passage by “comfort.” The Greek word throughout this section translated into English as “comfort” and “consolation” is *paraklesis*. Some of you will recognize that word from previous Bible studies as the name given to the Holy Spirit. Jesus promised He would send the Paraclete – another comforter – to come and strengthen you. In another portion of Scripture Jesus encouraged you to ask your Father for the Holy Spirit – to ask, to seek, to knock. The indwelling Holy Spirit strengthens you in a way that is effective to endure suffering.

Are you suffering? Ask God your Father, the Father of mercies, to comfort you by His Spirit, with the strength that is effective for enduring your suffering.

#2 Ask Your Fellowship To Pray For The Strength Which Is Effective For Enduring Suffering (v4-11)

God comforts you in your suffering so you can comfort others:

2 Corinthians 1:4 who comforts us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort those who are in any trouble, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.

This verse is most often understood to teach that people with similar experiences can best encourage you when you are suffering what they have already gone through. While that can indeed be true, you should not limit yourself to seeking out only those who know exactly what you are going through. Paul says that God “comforts us in **all** our tribulation” so that you can “comfort those who are in **any** trouble” – not just the same trouble you have experienced. In other words, the focus should be on the comfort you received from God, regardless the similarities or differences in your sufferings compared with others.

2 Corinthians 1:5 For as the sufferings of Christ abound in us, so our consolation also abounds through Christ.

The “sufferings of Christ” means your sufferings for the sake of Jesus Christ – as a Christian. This is a promise that you will have abundant sufferings in your Christian life... *But your comfort will be just as abundant!*

2 Corinthians 1:6 Now if we are afflicted, *it is* for your consolation and salvation, which is effective for enduring the same sufferings which we also suffer. Or if we are comforted, *it is* for your consolation and salvation.

When sufferings are sent to you by your merciful Father, they are often for the benefit of others. People watching you can see that God’s comfort is strength that is effective for enduring the suffering. It is for their consolation and salvation. “Salvation” in this context means the present experience of God’s saving power to sustain you.

2 Corinthians 1:7 And our hope for you *is* steadfast, because we know that as you are partakers of the sufferings, so also *you will partake* of the consolation.

As a parent, I wish I could spare my children from all hardship and suffering. As a pastor, I wish that I could spare the flock of God from all hardship and suffering. I know that I cannot; **and** I know that it would not be good in the long run to be spared. If you do not experience suffering, you cannot experience the comfort that only God can provide to endure it.

Paul was no stranger to suffering. He discusses an episode from his own life in verses eight through ten:

2 Corinthians 1:8 For we do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, of our trouble which came to us in Asia: that we were burdened beyond measure, above strength, so that we despaired even of life.

2 Corinthians 1:9 Yes, we had the sentence of death in ourselves, that we should not trust in ourselves but in God who raises the dead,

2 Corinthians 1:10 who delivered us from so great a death, and does deliver us; in whom we trust that He will still deliver *us*,

Many commentators believe that Paul is here referring to the riot at Ephesus recorded in Acts Chapter Nineteen. We can't be sure, but whatever it was, Paul not only believed that he was going to die, but he actually despaired of life! Paul was in a deep depression. Yet as his sufferings abounded, *so did God's comfort abound!* At the very moment he despaired of life, God comforted him that He could raise him from the dead if necessary. In that heartfelt moment he learned that he could trust God to "deliver" him and to go on delivering him. God took him from "having the sentence of death in himself" to being able to triumphantly declare, "to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord." Only such abundant suffering could release such abundant comfort.

Now Paul gives you a key which unlocks the comfort only God can provide:

2 Corinthians 1:11 you also helping together in prayer for us, that thanks may be given by many persons on our behalf for the gift *granted* to us through many.

Only God can provide the strength which is effective for enduring suffering. *But He has chosen to release strength into your heart as others pray for you.* You must therefore share your sufferings in fellowship with other believers; their prayers are God's means for "helping" you be comforted. God's comfort is a "gift granted" to you in response to their prayers.

It is a mystery of God's Sovereignty that He responds to prayer. In Psalm 106:23 you read,

Psalm 106:23 Therefore He said that He would destroy them, Had not Moses His chosen one stood before Him in the breach, To turn away His wrath, lest He destroy *them*.

God would have destroyed the children of Israel but for the prayers of Moses on their behalf. It doesn't make your prayers the source of power, but they are the resource through which God has determined, in His Sovereignty, to release His power.

When you share your sufferings, and others help together in prayer for you, it leads to "thanks being given by many persons." It multiplies the effect of God's work in your life; your life, with its abundant suffering and its abundant comfort, touches many others.

Conclusion

As I said earlier, it is not wrong with seeking to *end* or *escape* suffering. Both Jesus and Paul asked God for an end or an escape from their suffering. Ultimately you must realize that suffering is from the hand of your merciful Father and can be **endured** with the strength God alone can provide. Your Father in heaven is the source of this kind of comfort; your fellowship on earth is a resource for its release in your heart and life.

Pray; ask others to pray. The "gift" of the Holy Spirit's comfort will be granted to those who ask.