

## God of All Comfort (2 Corinthians 1:3–11)

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### Introduction

We begin the new year with a new study—2 Corinthians. I recently felt compelled to look at 2 Corinthians and sensed the Lord’s leading to bring its truth into our lives at this difficult time. We need to get a little background first.

#### 1. A brief history of Paul’s ministry in Corinth

Paul labored on his second missionary journey in the Macedonian cities of Philippi, Thessalonica, Berea, and briefly in Athens before going to Corinth. His first visit to Corinth is recorded in Acts 18. Not long after Paul settled in Corinth, he was joined by Silas and Timothy. His efforts to preach the gospel were vigorously opposed by the Jews to the extent that Paul was forced to declare, “*Your blood be on your own heads! I am innocent. From now on I will go to the Gentiles*” (Acts 18:6). The resistance of the Jews was so intense that the Lord appeared to Paul in a vision to encourage him, saying, “*Do not be afraid, but go on speaking and do not be silent, for I am with you, and no one will attack you to harm you, for I have many in this city who are my people*” (Acts 18:9, 10). He continued there for a year and six months, facing extensive hostility.

#### 2. Corinth was a major city in the Roman province of Achaia on the Adriatic Sea. Because it was a commercial center, it was a very prosperous pagan city, filled with luxury and immorality. A common expression of the day was “to live like a Corinthian,” which meant to live licentiously. The church also battled internal issues of prideful division, toleration of immorality, lack of church discipline, lawsuits against brothers, pressures to compromise with idolatry, unsubmitive women, abuse of the Lord’s table, abuse of spiritual gifts, denial of Christ’s resurrection, and persecution. Lots of problems.

Second Corinthians was written to express Paul’s gratitude for the repentant majority and to appeal to the rebellious minority to accept his authority. This book gives us great insight into Paul’s personal life as he defended his conduct, character, and calling.

#### 3. This epistle has also been the target of critical scholarship. The major issue is its unity. Many claim a clear difference in the first nine chapters with the last four as to tone and subject matter. Some argue that chapters 10–13 were part of a letter, now lost, referred to by Paul in 2:4. The best answer for this apparent disunity is the focus of the two parts. The first part of the epistle deals with the repentant party while the last part deals with the rebels. Paul wrote this letter from Macedonia during his third missionary tour (A.D. 56 or 57). Some suggest that was likely his *fourth* letter to the church at Corinth, if the letter mentioned in 7:8 is another epistle that is now lost.

### I. The Character of the Comforter (1:3, 4)

#### 1. Paul begins his letter by ignoring the recipients, which he normally did not do (no thanksgiving or prayers) but begins by expressing his gratitude to God. He used a similar approach in the letter to the Ephesians (1:3). The difference is that Ephesians is a general epistle written *to the saints* who are in Ephesus, not to a particular church. In addressing the church this way, Paul emphasizes that this community belongs to God and sits under the apostolic authority of Paul received from God. In a similar fashion, Paul opened the first epistle (1 Corinthians 1:2).

Paul describes the Sovereign Overseer under two heads: (1) He is the Father of mercies. God is the source of all acts of pity and mercy. The term translated *mercies* is an old word that describes acts of pity (plural) based on compassionate feelings (Daniel 9:9). The term is translated “*compassionate hearts*” in Colossians 3:12.

(2) He is also “*the God of all comfort.*” The “tribulation” of believers is not inconsistent with God’s mercy and should not cause any to doubt His mercy. He is “*the God of all comfort,*” the One who imparts *the only true and perfect comfort in every instance* (Psalm 146:3, 5, 8; James 5:11). The emphasis here is upon His *deity*. This comfort flows from His pity and is experienced when He pities us. However, this comfort is supernatural

2. The reason Paul presents God's pity and comfort is to inform his readers that God comforts them in order for them to be His agents to comfort others. *Affliction* (*thilipis*, meaning "to press") is the gracious gift of God that teaches believers not to live according to the flesh (2 Corinthians 10:3–6). The purpose clause in verse 4 informs us that to follow Christ and obey Him means that we must give ourselves for others. That is what loving one another means (v. 5).

## II. The Consolation of Suffering (vv. 5–7)

1. Paul states the fact that believers will suffer as Christ did. However, "*Christ's sufferings*" (*pathema*, "*suffering misfortune, calamity, evil, or affliction*") are not to be understood as having any redemptive quality but rather as *identifying* the believer with Christ in His life and mission (vv. 16, 17). In the body of Christ, there is to be this sharing (1 Corinthians 12:26). As Jesus was despised and rejected, suffering the hatred and abuse of the world, so those who follow Him will also suffer the same kind of abuse (Matthew 5:11, 12; John 15:18, 19; 1 Peter 4:13, 14).
2. The purpose of our suffering is stated in verse 6. Here is a great illustration of the church as a community of consolation. When one suffers, all suffer, or when one is comforted, all are comforted. A view commonly held was that all suffering was a kind of "karma"—deserved retribution for wrongdoing. The book of Job illustrates this problem. Paul's opponents in Corinth may have assumed his suffering negated his claim of apostleship, also seeing the suffering as a sign of weakness and divine judgment. Paul reminds the church that his sufferings were brought on because of the gospel, which displayed God's power (4:7–9).
3. The encouragement of suffering is that God will fulfill His purposes for each of His own (v. 7). The Greek word, *elpis*, "*hope*," refers to a confident expectation of deliverance. It indicates a firm trust that God will fulfill His promises in accomplishing His purposes. Paul sums up in Titus 2 the principles laid out in 2 Corinthians (vv. 11–14).

## III. The Necessity of Prayer in Suffering (vv. 8–11)

1. As an example, Paul applied the principles to himself, turning his attention to his own sufferings and tribulation in Asia (modern Turkey) in verses 8–11. The suffering he endured in Ephesus taught him to rely solely on the Lord.
2. Paul's *confidence* is expressed in verse 10. He felt pressed beyond measure, despairing even of life, so that he would not rely on himself but on God who raises the dead. He had no other choice but to wrestle with God for the strength that he would never find in his own ability.
3. Paul's *comfort* lay in God's faithfulness. However, here Paul introduces the importance of prayer (v. 11). Prayer is a vital weapon in the spiritual war God is waging with principalities and powers of darkness. The result is that "*many will give thanks on our behalf for the blessing granted us through the prayers of many.*" That is a powerful testimony.

## Lessons

1. We should not be surprised by suffering. Until we are present with the Lord, we will suffer (1 Peter 4:12, 13).
2. We need to look after one another. I remind you that God "*comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God*" (v. 4).
3. We need to "*pray for one another, that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working*" (James 5:16).