

About one year after Paul's first letter to the Corinthians he wrote a follow up letter. The year was approximately A.D. 56. In the first letter, the main thrust was unity with one another. He gave some defense of his role as an apostle. It seems that the attacks on his apostleship continued, and so in this letter he continues to defend that calling given to him by Jesus in Damascus (Acts 9:15,16ⁱ). He encourages the Corinthians to be united with him in his ministry.

*Corinth was a sports and entertainment culture. Caesar had reinstated the Isthmian games in Corinth (which were second only to the Olympics). The city's theater held up to 18,000 and the concert hall some 3,000. Travel, tourism, sex, and religious pluralism were woven together in Corinth's new culture. Significantly, while Nero never visited Athens and Sparta, he spent considerable time in Corinth, enjoying the adulation of its voluptuous populace. The similarities to modern Western culture are so striking that a California pastor, Ray Stedman, used to call Paul's Corinthian letters "First and Second Californians"! Like California, it was a melting pot of cultures. It was a place where people could make a name for themselves.*ⁱⁱ

The content of this second letter to the Corinthians is completely contrary to the culture of Corinth. Over and over, it will declare that God is proclaimed through the weakness of man (2 Corinthians 12:9ⁱⁱⁱ). It tells us that God uses suffering to humble his messengers and make their message even more powerful. If they were discounting Paul because of his weaknesses, Paul's answer was that that is the way God gets all the glory (1 Corinthians 1:27-29^{iv}). The world boasts in health and wealth and fame, but that is the power of man. God uses weak and broken things (Matthew 21:44^v). They do not make headlines, but they instigate the transformation of souls that affect entire nations.

Paul, with the help of Timothy, Aquila and Priscilla had made an inroad into this city establishing a remarkable church. But about three years later he sent Timothy to prepare the church for an offering for the poor. But Timothy encountered resistance to Paul's ministry, probably the work of Paul's enemies in Jerusalem. Paul decided he had to go and see for himself. He described it as a painful visit in this second letter (2:1^{vi}). His apostleship was in question. If he was an apostle, why was he suffering? Why was he not more eloquent? Why did he not talk about the miracles attesting his calling? Why did he refuse to accept payment for preaching? Where were his letters of recommendation and on and on? Doubts had been sown by Paul's detractors. And that gave the detractors opportunity to teach a different gospel. **Nothing is more painful to a pastor than to see the wolves sneak their way into a flock and turn some from the simple truth of the all sufficiency of Christ.** After returning to Ephesus, he wrote the first letter calling for repentance. The Holy Spirit worked a wonder and restored the Corinthian church (7:8,9^{vii}), but not everyone was on board. Then, planning on a third visit, Paul wrote this letter we have begun to study.

¹ Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, To the church of God that is at Corinth, with all the saints who are in the whole of Achaia: 2 Corinthians 1:1 "An apostle of Christ Jesus" is Paul's declaration of authority. He is God's appointed representative for the Messiah Jesus. Paul did not say "of Jesus Christ" for he in writing "Christ Jesus" he was emphasizing that it was God's Great

Representative whom he represents. Therefore, to ignore Paul's instruction is to ignore God's instruction.

"Called by the will of God," is a reminder to the church that he did not choose to be an apostle, rather God chose him. He was on his way to persecute Christians when God arrested him. There was nothing in it for him. What motivation could his detractors point to? He paid his own way working with his hands. He gave up a successful religious career and became an enemy of those who previously honored him. He was now the persecuted. It is not pride that motivates him to defend his calling, it is faithfulness to Jesus and His grace.

"And Timothy our brother," whom Paul met in Lystra and where Timothy converted to faith in Jesus and became a disciple of Paul (Acts 14). He became such a faithful assistant that Paul could say there was no one like him in his concern for the churches. Paul referred to his service as that of a son with a father (Philippians 2:20-22^{viii}).

"To the church of God that is in Corinth." Paul has declared his authority, but here he declares the exalted position of the believers in Corinth. Despite all the corrections and rebukes that Paul writes to them, they are those called out from the world to be an assembly of God. They are God's dwelling place in the city of Corinth. Paul adds that the letter is to all the saints who are in the whole of Achaia. Saints means sanctified ones. Church implies the gathering of the sanctified ones. It is not based upon their behavior, but upon their faith in Jesus as their Savior. As such, the letter is to us as well. We are most likely as guilty of sin as those in the church of Corinth, and yet God sees us as His saints, His dwelling place in our city, because of the righteousness Jesus has merited on our behalf and His payment for our sins.

² Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. 2 Corinthians 1:2 Romans would greet one another with the word *charein*. It is the equivalent of our "hello." Paul replaced it with the Greek word for grace, *charis*. Grace is the great need of mankind. Since we have all sinned, we all need the grace of God to draw us to the redemption merited for us on the cross of Christ. Grace convicts us of sin. It is the grace of God that calls us to serve the Lord, an undeserved honor. It is grace that rewards us for faithfulness. We need grace more than we need the air we breathe.

When you have received the grace of God, you have the peace of God, His *shalom*. The Hebrew idea is not just to be calm but to be blessed with every good thing. The Father is the giver of all good things (James 1:17^{ix}), and they come to us through His son, the Lord Jesus Christ. Remember, that Jesus name means YHWH's salvation.

³ Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, 2 Corinthians 1:3 Paul addresses comfort and suffering more than any other author of Scripture. In verses 3 to 7 Paul uses the word comfort in noun and verb form ten times making this the most important passage in Scripture on comfort.

Verse 3 is an intentional reworking of a synagogue prayer. "*Blessed art thou, O Lord our God and God of our fathers, God of Abraham, God of Isaac, and God of Jacob...*"^x Paul is reinforcing the truth that the God of the patriarchs is the Father of the Lord Jesus Christ. Paul uses the same reworked Jewish prayer in Ephesians (1:3^{xi}), Romans, and Peter does the same in 1 Peter (1:3^{xii}). It was a way of countering the Judaizers who he calls false apostles later in this letter (11:13^{xiii}).

The synagogue prayer of Paul's day described God as "The Father of Mercies," but here Paul enlarges it to include "and God of all comfort"—the first of the ten references to comfort contained in this short paragraph. Paul's intentionality is immense! Chapters 40 to 66 of Isaiah repeatedly speak of the comfort or consolation of the Messianic age. Isaiah 40 begins, "Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem," and the final chapter, 66, says, "As one whom his mother comforts, so I will comfort you; you shall be comforted in Jerusalem." Isaiah 66:13 So when Christ came, the devout, including Simeon and Anna, were "waiting for the consolation of Israel" (Luke 2:25^{xiv})—salvation and comfort. It was and is through Christ that the comfort of God the Father comes.^{xv} When Simeon and Anna looked at that little baby, they were looking at the source of salvation and comfort (Luke 2:28-32^{xvi})!

The word Paul uses for comfort in this passage means to stand by someone to encourage them and strengthen them as they go through a time of testing. It is not the mushy kind of comfort we think of today but engenders strength and courage to endure. Indeed, as he will share in verses 8-11 that he has recently been delivered from a deadly peril. He was also comforted by the news that Titus brought from the Corinthian church, for they had repented upon reading Paul's lost letter. Verse three is Paul erupting in praise for how God has delivered him and for the blessed change in the church of Corinth. Nevertheless, Paul will spend a good deal of the letter vindicating his apostleship.

When we have the grace and peace that comes from God our Father and the Lord Jesus, we too can bless the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ because we experience God as the Father of mercies and God of all comfort. The mercy we have received because of Jesus' atoning work on the cross is the greatest and most needed mercy in all our lives. We too can know the God of all comfort who stands by us to strengthen us as we go through the suffering and testing that we all experience. It makes you wonder how those who do not know Christ endure the inevitable trials of life. That is one reason we want to share Jesus with them. We want them to experience the same comfort, and we can play a part in that as the next verse indicates.

⁴ who 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. 2 Corinthians 1:4 As I was studying this passage, I heard a testimony of someone who had been through some things so painful that just to bring them to mind meant breaking down in tears. And yet there was a testimony of God strengthening and directing through it for a higher purpose. I know it is true in my own life. I am more open to the love and grace of God, more useful because I have been broken over my failures, by family tragedy, by pain in the heart. People say I am humble, and I cringe because I know how selfish I am, the pain I have caused others, and the revelation of my selfishness just goes deeper with time. And yet, the fact that I am forgiven and considered righteous because of what Jesus has done for me comforts and encourages me (Philippians 1:6^{xvii}).

The Apostle Paul was afflicted to a degree few will ever experience. Lashed five times to a degree that was meant to bring a person to the point of death. His back must have been one giant scar. He was stoned and left for dead, floating in the sea like a piece of driftwood three times, forsaken by His companions, attacked and accused by his own people, in hunger and thirst, sleepless nights, and other dangers (2 Corinthians 11:24-27^{xviii}). And yet through it all, even when despairing of life itself, the comfort of God

came through and strengthened and upheld him. That was why he could send these words of comfort to the Corinthians. When we teach what we have not experienced it carries little weight, but when it comes out of personal experience, the ring of authenticity reaches the hearts of all who are open to hear it.

⁵ For as we share abundantly in Christ's sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too. 2 Corinthians 1:5 In Colossians 1:24 Paul wrote, *²⁴ Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church...* I will never forget when a missionary in Japan asked me what that verse meant. I stumbled around trying to give him an answer that did not really satisfy him. It made me search for an answer. I concluded that it has nothing to do with Jesus' atoning death, but rather what His body, the church, endures to advance the kingdom of God in a world ruled by Satan (4:11,12^{xix}). Jesus referred to him as the prince/ruler of this world (John 14:30^{xx}). We suffer for one another and with one another. They are *His* sufferings because He is in us and feels our suffering (Acts 9:4,5^{xxi}).

C. S. Lewis solemnized this truth in the epitaph to *The Problem of Pain* where he quotes George MacDonald: *"The Son of God suffered unto the death, not that men might not suffer, but that their sufferings might be like His."* In this respect, Paul's prayer in Philippians 3:10,11 is so right: *"that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death; in order that I may attain to the resurrection from the dead"* (NASB).^{xxii}

This is what verse 5 is addressing. The church's suffering is Christ's suffering, for we are His body (1 Corinthians 12:27^{xxiii}). As the suffering of some of us overflows into the lives of our brothers and sisters in Christ, so the comfort overflows to meet the need. In other words, the more we suffer to live out a righteous life in this fallen world, the more abundantly we share in comfort that God gives. We receive comfort from the family of God who have gone through the same kind of suffering, which is comfort from God. Often, He comforts us directly, giving us a song or words of Scripture, and then we in turn share that with those who are suffering in a similar way. In fact, I just did that a few moments before I started working on this message. The night before a song on the radio addressed a pain in my heart and the heart of someone I care about, so I forwarded the song to them to comfort them. The song writer probably had received those words of comfort from the Lord in his own pain. And round and round the comfort flows from believer to believer. We should recognize that this is God's work in and through us.

Paul could have lived out his life as a respected Pharisee with less suffering. Instead, he chose to follow Jesus who had chosen him, and in the process, he shared in Jesus' suffering and in His comfort (Acts 9:16^{xxiv}). The same choice is presented to us on various occasions. We can conform to the world or follow Jesus and share in His afflictions and in His overflowing comfort. But I would add that even the most glamorous lives often hide deep pain that receives little or no comfort. That is why the rate of drug addiction and suicide is so high among those the world looks up to.

⁶ If we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation; and if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which you experience when you patiently endure the same sufferings that we suffer. 2 Corinthians 1:6 Suffering and affliction are a part of life in this fallen world. The believer is not exempt, though some so called Christians claim otherwise. The difference between the believers suffering and the suffering of the

unbeliever is spelled out here by Paul. Our suffering is met with the comfort that comes from God. It has the purpose of being able to relate to others in their suffering and to share the comfort that we have received from God. This changes our outlook and attitude toward the suffering we endure. We know there is a greater purpose even when we cannot see it (Romans 8:28^{xxv}).

We experience that comfort and relate to others in their afflictions when we patiently endure. If we lose hope and stop trusting in the outcome described here, we refuse the comfort that comes from God. Then it is our own fault for wallowing in our own pity. That does nothing but make us more miserable and reveals we are not clinging to the promises of God. Then the world sees no difference in us.

To patiently endure is one of my favorite Greek words, *hupomone*. It is to bear up under a burden until it is lifted (Matthew 24:13^{xxvi}; Romans 8:17^{xxvii}). One translator says the Biblical use of the word is a *“constancy in desire that overcomes the trial of waiting, a soul attitude that must struggle to persevere, a waiting that is determined and victorious because it trusts in God.”*^{xxviii}

We look to God for His comfort which often comes through others who have suffered, which helps us to patiently endure. And then whether the burden is lifted or not, we become the encouragers who help others patiently endure.

Remember that James says that we should consider it all joy when various trials come our way and test our faith. It is through them endurance is learned and the effect of endurance is spiritual maturity (James 1:2-4^{xxix}). If you really want to know how spiritually mature you are, look at how you deal with the various trials God allows to come your way. Did you murmur and complain? Did you despair and think there was no purpose for the trial? Or did you patiently endure? If you are like me, there are times you do pretty well and other times when you are ready to throw in the towel. If trials do not stretch our faith, they are not accomplishing a whole lot.

Also remember that these sufferings, according to verse 5, are sharing in Christ's sufferings with the promise that through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too. If some of the Corinthians disparaged Paul because of His abundant suffering, they were forgetting that we are followers of Christ who suffered so greatly for us. So much for the bed of roses Christianity. We live in a fallen world among fallen people. The message of the freedom the gospel brings will often stir up animosity against us, the messengers. Do not be surprised by fierce opposition. The Scriptures warn us that it is normal (Acts 14:22^{xxx}).

These verses outline four reasons God allows suffering in the lives of believers. Each situation has its own unique reasons, but Paul gives us four that turn us away from self-pity and isolation. The first is consolation or comfort. What we do with suffering is what makes the difference. We can use our own suffering to comfort others who are suffering. We cannot truly relate to someone going through something we have not experienced. I have not lost a child. But some of you have, and you can better relate to and help someone else who has just lost a child. I can comfort someone whose father took his life when they were young, or were in a cult, or had a parent with Alzheimer's or had friends betray them. Each of us has suffered and can use that suffering to comfort others with similar suffering with the comfort we have from God.

Paul writes here that it is also for salvation. Paul was enduring all he went through to proclaim the gospel and see others saved. *The salvation of the lost is a reason to*

endure. And part of our witness is how God works through us despite our suffering. If everything is wonderful in your life, it can be an excuse for others to say, “Sure he believes in God. Life is easy for him!” But when you share from your weakness the response is more likely to be, “If he believes despite his suffering, it must be real.”

God uses suffering in our lives to teach us to endure. Trees grow strong roots because of the wind. Butterflies have the blood pushed into their wings through the struggle to escape the cocoon which enables them to fly. Every trial we endure prepares us for the next and more difficult one. It is like exercise that builds muscle as we increase resistance. Our endurance in trials is also a testimony to the unbeliever.

The final reason is that our suffering helps us share with the body. We see a need and try to help meet it. We sympathize and share our story and verses that helped us. And others do the same with us. This is the interdependence that would not be as deep and rich without suffering. We weep with those who weep (Romans 12:15^{xxxi}). We help one another not to become discouraged or apathetic but to see how God is working in our lives. We share the comfort that helped us bear up under our suffering.

You might be thinking, “Gee thanks pastor, real encouraging message that I will get to suffer.” But remember, suffering is the result of sin in the world. All people suffer. The difference is that we have the comfort of God that often comes through our brothers and sisters who have endured something similar. And if your aim is to grow spiritually, then as James said, you can rejoice when trials come your way. They mature you for the glory of God. And that, brothers and sisters is why we are here, for God’s glory.

Solo Deo Gloria!

Questions:

- 1 What is the difference in emphasis in the two letters to the Corinthians?
- 2 What is the source of verse 3?
- 3 How does that relate to the third section of Isaiah?
- 4 What is our main source of comfort?
- 5 To what degree was Paul afflicted? Why?
- 6 What does “share in Christ’s sufferings” mean?
- 7 What are some ways in which we receive the comfort of God?
- 8 What does the Greek word *hupomone* mean?
- 9 Review the four reasons God allows suffering in our lives?
- 10 How can we live out this message?

ⁱ **Acts 9:15-16 (ESV)**

¹⁵ But the Lord said to him, “Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel. ¹⁶ For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.”

ⁱⁱ R. Kent Hughes, [2 Corinthians: Power in Weakness](#), Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2006), 14.

ⁱⁱⁱ **2 Corinthians 12:9 (ESV)**

⁹ But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me.

^{iv} **1 Corinthians 1:27-29 (ESV)**

²⁷ But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; ²⁸ God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, ²⁹ so that no human being might boast in the presence of God.

^v **Matthew 21:44 (ESV)**

⁴⁴ And the one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and when it falls on anyone, it will crush him.”

^{vi} **2 Corinthians 2:1 (ESV)**

¹ For I made up my mind not to make another painful visit to you.

^{vii} **2 Corinthians 7:8-9 (ESV)**

⁸ For even if I made you grieve with my letter, I do not regret it—though I did regret it, for I see that that letter grieved you, though only for a while.

⁹ As it is, I rejoice, not because you were grieved, but because you were grieved into repenting. For you felt a godly grief, so that you suffered no loss through us.

^{viii} **Philippians 2:20-22 (ESV)**

²⁰ For I have no one like him, who will be genuinely concerned for your welfare. ²¹ For they all seek their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ. ²² But you know Timothy’s proven worth, how as a son with a father he has served with me in the gospel.

^{ix} **James 1:17 (ESV)**

¹⁷ Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change.

^x benediction from E. Schüer, *Jewish People*, 2.456

^{xi} **Ephesians 1:3 (ESV)**

³ Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places,

^{xii} **1 Peter 1:3 (ESV)**

³ Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead,

^{xiii} **2 Corinthians 11:13 (ESV)**

¹³ For such men are false apostles, deceitful workmen, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ.

^{xiv} **Luke 2:25 (ESV)**

²⁵ Now there was a man in Jerusalem, whose name was Simeon, and this man was righteous and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him.

^{xv} R. Kent Hughes, [2 Corinthians: Power in Weakness](#), Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2006), 23

^{xvi} **Luke 2:28-32 (ESV)**

²⁸ he took him up in his arms and blessed God and said, ²⁹ “Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace, according to your word; ³⁰ or my eyes have seen your salvation ³¹ that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, ³² a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel.”

^{xvii} **Philippians 1:6 (ESV)**

⁶ And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.

^{xviii} **2 Corinthians 11:24-27 (ESV)**

²⁴ Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. ²⁵ Three times I was beaten with rods.

Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; ²⁶ on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; ²⁷ in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure.

^{xix} **2 Corinthians 4:11-12 (ESV)**

¹¹ For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus’ sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. ¹² So death is at work in us, but life in you.

^{xx} **John 14:30 (ESV)**

³⁰ I will no longer talk much with you, for the ruler of this world is coming. He has no claim on me,

^{xxi} **Acts 9:4-5 (ESV)**

⁴ And falling to the ground he heard a voice saying to him, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” ⁵ And he said, “Who are you, Lord?” And he said, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.

^{xxii} R. Kent Hughes, [2 Corinthians: Power in Weakness](#), Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2006), 25

^{xxiii} **1 Corinthians 12:27 (ESV)**

²⁷ Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.

^{xxiv} **Acts 9:16 (ESV)**

¹⁶ For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.”

^{xxv} **Romans 8:28 (ESV)**

²⁸ And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.

^{xxvi} **Matthew 24:13 (ESV)**

¹³ But the one who endures to the end will be saved.

^{xxvii} **Romans 8:17 (ESV)**

¹⁷ and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him.

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^{xxix} **James 1:2-4 (ESV)**

² Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, ³ for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. ⁴ And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.

^{xxx} **Acts 14:22 (ESV)**

²² strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying that through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God.

^{xxxi} **Romans 12:15 (ESV)**

¹⁵ Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep.