

In the opening of this second letter to the Corinthians, Paul shared about the sufferings that are common to mankind, but especially about those we experience for the cause of Christ. He told them that when we do, we also share in Christ's comfort. Then that comfort we receive from God we share with others who are going through their own times of suffering. While suffering is never enjoyable, James tells us to rejoice in them because the outcome is learning endurance and that matures us (James 1:2-4<sup>i</sup>). In our short passage for today Paul is telling them of the suffering he endured in Asia, and how our prayers for one another bring blessings and cause many to be thankful.

*<sup>7</sup> Our hope for you is unshaken, for we know that as you share in our sufferings, you will also share in our comfort.* 2 Corinthians 1:7 We become concerned about a person's faith when they go through suffering. We see that hardships either drive us to Christ or we become bitter and move away from Him. Paul maintains an unshakable hope in the Corinthians continuing to follow Christ because he knows that the comfort he and his team received from the Holy Spirit will be experienced by them as well. That should reassure us when we see someone we know is in Christ going through a very difficult time. We can rest assured of that they will receive God's comfort.

We can however refuse that comfort. Some people will wallow in their self-pity and refuse to be comforted. It is a way of complaining that God allowed a hardship to come into our lives and therefore we reject His comfort. I have concluded that while God is sovereign over all things, we cannot blame the difficulty on Him. It is usually a result of our sin or that of others. He knew it would happen, but He plans to use it for our good. It is as Joseph declared to his brothers when they tried to lie to him and tell him that before their father died, he asked Joseph to forgive them. Joseph wisely replied, <sup>19b</sup> *“Do not fear, for am I in the place of God?”* <sup>20</sup> *As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today.* Genesis 50:19b-20 God takes the actions of fallen man and uses them to bring Himself glory. But we must welcome the comfort, not blame and be bitter against God. As one song writer wrote, “I will praise Him in the storm.”<sup>ii</sup>

I do not hesitate to tell those who are struggling to go to God in prayer and to read the Psalms. I know they will find comfort there. That is because that is where I have found comfort. That is what Paul was teaching in the verses just before this one. We comfort others with the comfort with which we were comforted of God. Sometimes we share a specific passage that spoke to us when we were going through a similar trial.

The word “our” is not in the original text (*our* suffering and *our* comfort). Paul may be referring to verse 5 about sharing in *Christ's* sufferings to remind them of the promise of *His* suffering and *His* comfort. We do not know historically of any persecution toward this church, for it seems it was getting along too well with its culture. Paul may be contrasting their ease and lack of suffering with his suffering to remind them that the power of God is demonstrated through weak lives, not powerful and secure worldly lives. The spiritual ecstasies they were experiencing as they exercised the gifts of the Spirit were far removed from the sacrifice and suffering of a soldier of the cross (2 Timothy 2:3<sup>iii</sup>). This speaks to us, the American church, and reminds us what Paul wrote Timothy, *she who is self-indulgent is dead while she lives* (1 Timothy 5:6<sup>iv</sup>). If we want to see God at work, it will require us to die to ourselves and persevere through hardship.

<sup>24</sup> *Then Jesus told his disciples, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.* Matthew 16:24 That does not sound like a comfortable life of pleasure.

<sup>8</sup> *For we do not want you to be unaware, brothers, of the affliction we experienced in Asia. For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself.* 2 Corinthians 1:8 This promise of comfort in sufferings came out of Paul’s personal experience in Asia, which refers to a Roman senatorial province of which Ephesus was the capital. He does not describe exactly what the affliction was, but he does tell us it was so severe that he despaired of life itself. In other words, he would just as soon have died. We saw in his first letter that God will not test us beyond what we are able to bear and will with the testing provide an escape (1 Corinthians 10:13<sup>v</sup>). That does not mean it will not seem like it is unbearable. Paul says they were “*utterly burdened beyond our strength.*” But he did experience the deliverance he declared in the first letter that will be ours in Christ. That deliverance often comes with the faith and comfort from God to endure, or it can come in our graduation from this life. I have stood by the bed of dear brothers and sisters and seen them pass peacefully from the trials of this life and go on to their heavenly reward. That is up to God’s timing and will for each individual.

We rarely face the physical persecution Paul faced, but we do suffer physical maladies that can cause us to “despair of life itself.” We face rejection of loved ones over misunderstandings that deeply grieve our hearts. Emotional conflict with those we love can be devastating. Recently during the pandemic many lost their source of employment or had to close a business they invested their life’s savings into. Suicide rates have gone up. Despairing of life is something our culture is very familiar with. Depression can strike Christians just as easily as it can unbelievers. I have experienced it. I left a ministry and people I loved because sin was not being dealt with. During those days of darkness, I was driven to the Scriptures and sought help. I learned about equal and accountable elders. I learned that you must fight depression by making yourself do what you do not want to do with the help of God. I forced myself to get up, to take time to take walks in nature, to read the Psalms, to try to count my blessings and sing songs of praise. Little by little the darkness lifted as I began to allow the comfort of God to replace the darkness.

Once again, we see in these verses that following Jesus does not mean we will not experience trouble or affliction as some in the church of Corinth may have thought. Paul’s reason for sharing his experience is not to talk about himself. He is explaining that suffering is normal, and the Christian has the advantage over the world in that we have the comfort from God in our sufferings. This brings praise to God and helps us rely more fully on Him.

I still would have liked to have been there and asked the one who delivered the letter what Paul was referring to. Maybe it was the silversmith riot in Ephesus from which Paul had to flee. (See Acts 19:23f.) Or it could have been a flare up of his thorn in the flesh, some physical malady that became severe (2 Corinthians 12:7<sup>vi</sup>).

<sup>9</sup> *Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death. But that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead.* 2 Corinthians 1:9 Paul and his team thought they were going to die. Though there is much speculation about what the situation was, but perhaps it is better not to know. It is more applicable to all our situations when we do not know the details but instead know how they felt, because at times we feel the same. Most of us here do not face the danger of physical persecution.

But we all face times when we feel like we have reached the end either emotionally, or health problems, or conflicts that seem unsolvable. We wish God would just take us home so that we do not have to continue to face the situation day after day and one sleepless night after another.

There is a silver lining to those depths of despair. They cause us to rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead. By that I do not think that Paul meant his hope was to die and go to heaven, but rather that the power that raised Jesus from the dead is at work in us to see us through the trial. Whether we live or die we are the Lord's (Romans 14:8<sup>vii</sup>). The Greek expresses "raises the dead" as a permanent attribute of God (see Romans 4:17<sup>viii</sup>). He wrote to Timothy that "our Savior Jesus Christ, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel (2 Timothy 1:10<sup>ix</sup>) Jesus is continually our life-giving spirit (1 Corinthians 15:41<sup>x</sup>).

Our nature is so independent and self-trusting that we need these crises to get us to look beyond ourselves to the One who can deliver us from what we think are impossible situations. For nothing is impossible with God (Luke 1:37<sup>xi</sup>)! His power can lift our heads. His life in us can give us joy even in pain. His touch can make the sick whole again.

The world just went through a pandemic. Regardless of where it came from, God allowed it. And we looked to man to solve it. Instead of trusting God who raises the dead, the world looked to man. I am not saying that God cannot gift man with insight to create cures, but I am saying there seemed to be little or no repentance, no looking to God. That is the response God is looking for. We did not cry out as a nation, "God forgive us for extinguishing the lives of 50+ million innocent babies!" Now that the epidemic seems to have passed, mobs are threatening the lives of anyone who is pro-life and attacking pro-life clinics. As a nation our response to Covid seems to become more lawless.

The church did not plead for forgiveness for becoming so much like the world that we have lost much of our witness. We trusted in man's untested inventions, locked ourselves away, closed our churches, kept six feet away from anyone, and most people still got sick regardless of how many boosters they received. I am afraid that this was just the first of many wake-up calls from God to turn us back to Him and give us some backbone to stand up for our convictions regardless of the cost to us.

One thing it did that was positive is wake us up to the indoctrination that was going on in our education system. I have been warning of this for twenty years. It is another reason for us to repent, that we could let our children be indoctrinated with unbiblical ideologies. This nation has taken a 250-year journey from education for the purpose of reading and understanding the Bible to education to accept and welcome perversion and a godless universe.

In times of crisis and despair, turn away from trust in man and turn to God who raises the dead, our life-giving spirit. Is that fanatical? If being biblical is fanatical, may we all be fanatics. It is better to trust in the Lord than to put trust in princes (Psalm 118:9<sup>xii</sup>). Make sure your heart is right with God and do what the Word and the Spirit lead you to do. That will always be an act of love, the first fruit of the Spirit.

Garland writes that in the Talmud, *The second benediction of the eighteen benedictions (Shemone Esre) addresses God as the one "who revives the dead."* For Paul, however, this Jewish confession has a more specific content that has become the heartbeat of his faith; God is the one who raised the crucified Jesus from the dead

(Romans 8:1<sup>xiii</sup>; 10:9<sup>xiv</sup>; Galatians 1:1<sup>xv</sup>; Colossians 2:12<sup>xvi</sup>; 1 Thessalonians 1:10<sup>xvii</sup>). Paul does not trust himself to just any god in general but to the one God who raised Jesus from the dead. He therefore does not take the abundant suffering that comes his way with a gloomy stoicism but with a sense of triumph because of the power of Christ's resurrection.<sup>xviii</sup> May God help us develop that attitude!

To the elite in the Corinthian church who boasted in their generosity or their spiritual gifts, Paul's message of power in weakness was a healthy blow to their pride. To us today, it helps the humble know that God is more likely to work through them than anyone who struts around prideful of their abilities. Paul is confronting the Corinthians mind-set to open their eyes to the way God works. In the fourth chapter of this letter, he will tell them, <sup>7</sup> *But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us.* 2 Corinthians 4:7

<sup>10</sup> *He delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us. On him we have set our hope that he will deliver us again.* 2 Corinthians 1:10 Despite the intensity of the trial, God delivered them. It was not the first time, and it would not be the last. Every time God delivers us, our faith should be increased so that we trust God to a greater degree in the next trial. God is increasing our faith and teaching us to turn from trusting in self to trusting fully in Him. That is why He allowed the trial to come our way. We can learn from the trials, or we can ignore what God is teaching us and have to face the same trial again. I often say when some trial is repeated over and over that God is testing me to see if I have learned the lesson or He is driving home the point.

I am often impatient. So, God blesses me with the slowest line in the store. It does not matter how short the line is, all the other lines will be faster. If I am in a hurry to drive somewhere, God puts a pokey driver in front of me. I am learning to just laugh and declare, "Look how much God loves me!" And then add a silent prayer that I will really trust Him to see things are done in His time. And that is what trials teach us: trust God! Know it is for a reason and in God's hands and that He can and will deliver us at the right time (2 Timothy 4:18<sup>xix</sup>).

The last sentence in this verse is a declaration. We set our hope on Him! We should not look to man or wealth or anything other than God, our Deliverer (2 Samuel 22:2<sup>xx</sup>; Psalm 18:2<sup>xxi</sup>). That is because we know He will deliver us. He is not saying he hopes God will deliver them, but that he knows He will. Can you say the same? "I have set my hope on Jesus who will deliver me!" Do you believe it? Is Jesus life-giving spirit where your confidence lies?

<sup>11</sup> *You also must help us by prayer, so that many will give thanks on our behalf for the blessing granted us through the prayers of many.* 2 Corinthians 1:11 Paul embodies his own teaching that we need one another. God has fashioned us to work together as one body. Paul, as God's mouthpiece, called to be an apostle, needed the prayers of believers to strengthen him to endure and to be delivered from the trials. Though he knows God will deliver him, here he implies that they play a part in that by petitioning God for him. He knows he cannot do it on his own. If he needed others prayers, then we surely do! Are you on the prayer chain? If not, ask Thomas to put you on or put a request in the offering.

The deliverance that is the result of the prayers of believers will result in many giving thanks (4:15<sup>xxii</sup>). Every time a prayer is answered, we should be thanking God that we can pray His will into the earth. What a holy privilege we have to participate with God. Certainly, God does not need us, but He has sovereignly chosen to include us in His

work. That is because He wants us to lay up treasure in heaven and see how gracious He is to hear us and act on our behalf. But the goal of it all is that thanksgiving overflow to the glory of God.

Do you pray for our missionaries? We have been introducing the ministries we support in the call to worship. Do you pray for those who minister in this church? I count on your prayers and the prayers of a team of partners who do not live here. I know that if I am an instrument of God for His glory it has a great deal to do with their prayers, and I give thanks to God for them.

Our House of Prayer time on Sunday afternoon is just an hour, but we cover so many topics and needs. But it has always been difficult to get people to commit to praying. For a while, we had almost twenty people coming, which is great for our church size, but little by little it dwindles back down to a core of six to eight. Perhaps we need to watch Jim Cymbala's video again on the House of Prayer. If we could just see the way that God works through our prayers, we would have to move into the sanctuary for more space. A man next to me on a plane was telling me how the church he attends in Modesto, California has more people on prayer night than in their Sunday service. When we cry out together for God to move, it is amazing to see what can happen.

In this verse I believe Paul is pleading with them to start praying for him and his coworkers more often, and mainly because it will cause them to be more thankful to God. But it is a challenge to us as well. Sure, you can, and you should pray without ceasing (1 Thessalonians 5:17<sup>xxiii</sup>), but I would encourage you to join us for that hour of prayer as well so that your thanksgiving to God might abound for His glory. Then we will even thank God for our afflictions that cause us to depend on God. That is what Paul is doing in this passage. He recognized the truth of what he taught in the first letter. We all need one another. We all work together. We all have a part. The ones who seem to be on the front lines are only successful because of the part others play. Let us all do our part for the glory of God and the liberation of those who enslaved to sin. Let us not give in to despair but persevere for the salvation of others. And let us encourage and lift up in prayer those going through hardship, remembering that we are one with them.

Let me briefly summarize: God allows trials teach us endurance. We turn from self to God. Looking to Jesus, our life-giving spirit, sees us through. We can accept God's comfort or grow bitter. Victory in Jesus glorifies God and gives experience to comfort others and grows our faith for future trials. We also need one another's prayers.

I will close by jumping ahead to Paul's conclusion about suffering in chapter 4. *17 For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, 18 as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.* 2 Corinthians 4:17-18

Questions:

1 Why was Paul's hope in them unshaken? 2 How difficult was the trial Paul endured in Asia? 3 What kinds of trials in our lives compare with Paul's? 4 Do Christians sometimes suffer depression? 5 What was the purpose of those difficulties? 6 How does God help us endure? 7 How do we set our hope on Jesus? 8 How does that help us with future trials? 9 How could the Corinthians help? 10 What is the result of their help?

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<sup>i</sup> **James 1:2-4 (ESV)**

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

<sup>ii</sup> by Bernie Helms and John Mark Hall

<sup>iii</sup> **2 Timothy 2:3 (ESV)**

<sup>3</sup> Share in suffering as a good soldier of Christ Jesus.

<sup>iv</sup> **1 Timothy 5:6 (ESV)**

<sup>6</sup> but she who is self-indulgent is dead even while she lives.

<sup>v</sup> **1 Corinthians 10:13 (ESV)**

<sup>13</sup> No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it.

<sup>vi</sup> **2 Corinthians 12:7 (ESV)**

<sup>7</sup> So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited.

<sup>vii</sup> **Romans 14:8 (ESV)**

<sup>8</sup> For if we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord. So then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's.

<sup>viii</sup> **Romans 4:17 (ESV)**

<sup>17</sup> as it is written, "I have made you the father of many nations"—in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist.

<sup>ix</sup> **2 Timothy 1:10 (ESV)**

<sup>10</sup> and which now has been manifested through the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel,

<sup>x</sup> **1 Corinthians 15:45 (ESV)**

<sup>45</sup> Thus it is written, "The first man Adam became a living being"; the last Adam became a life-giving spirit.

<sup>xi</sup> **Luke 1:37 (ESV)**

<sup>37</sup> For nothing will be impossible with God."

<sup>xii</sup> **Psalms 118:9 (ESV)**

<sup>9</sup> It is better to take refuge in the LORD than to trust in princes.

<sup>xiii</sup> **Romans 8:1 (ESV)**

<sup>1</sup> There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

<sup>xiv</sup> **Romans 10:9 (ESV)**

<sup>9</sup> because, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.

<sup>xv</sup> **Galatians 1:1 (ESV)**

<sup>1</sup> Paul, an apostle—not from men nor through man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead—

<sup>xvi</sup> **Colossians 2:12 (ESV)**

<sup>12</sup> having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead.

<sup>xvii</sup> **1 Thessalonians 1:10 (ESV)**

<sup>10</sup> and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come.

<sup>xviii</sup> David E. Garland, [2 Corinthians](#), vol. 29, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1999), 80–81

<sup>xix</sup> **2 Timothy 4:18 (ESV)**

<sup>18</sup> The Lord will rescue me from every evil deed and bring me safely into his heavenly kingdom. To him be the glory forever and ever. Amen.

<sup>xx</sup> **2 Samuel 22:2 (ESV)**

<sup>2</sup> He said, "The LORD is my rock and my fortress and my deliverer,

<sup>xxi</sup> **Psalms 18:2 (ESV)**

<sup>2</sup> The LORD is my rock and my fortress and my deliverer, my God, my rock, in whom I take refuge, my shield, and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold.

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<sup>xxii</sup> **2 Corinthians 4:15 (ESV)**

<sup>15</sup> For it is all for your sake, so that as grace extends to more and more people it may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God.

<sup>xxiii</sup> **1 Thessalonians 5:17 (ESV)**

<sup>17</sup> pray without ceasing,