

Lesson 1

Comfort in Uncomfortable Trials

2 Corinthians 1:1-11

“Blessed be God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies, and the God of all comfort; who comforteth us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort them which are in any trouble, by the comfort wherewith we ourselves are comforted of God” (2 Corinthians 1:3, 4).

Remarks like the following punctuate every prayer service in Bible-believing churches:

“Please pray for my husband. He has been experiencing a lot of pain after injuring his back.”

“I’d like to request prayer for my mother. She is a strong Christian, but she is having a hard time coping with the report that she has liver cancer.”

“Let’s keep praying for Bart and Melinda. As you know, Bart lost his job recently, and Melinda’s health has not been good.”

“Pray for the Smiths in Bangladesh. They lost their house and possessions in the devastating flood that hit that country last week.”

Do you wonder why God’s people suffer? Have you recently encountered pain or trouble and asked, “Why me?” If these hard questions

trouble you, peek over the shoulders of the first-century Corinthian believers and read the opening part of 2 Corinthians, the inspired letter that Paul wrote to them. It provides the answers we all need.

Getting Started

1. What kind of suffering do you think is the hardest to endure? Why?

2. What are some common things people turn to for help during suffering?

Searching the Scriptures

Paul wrote this letter to the church in Corinth. Many would have doubted that a church could survive in that big, bustling seaport. Corinth was located on an isthmus, a slender piece of land three and one-half miles wide that connected two large areas, northern and southern Greece. The isthmus lay between two gulfs. Ships would come to Corinth to be unloaded in one gulf; then the ships would be wheeled overland and reloaded in the other gulf. It was more economical to do this than to sail all the way around southern Greece. Since travelers from far and wide crossed through Corinth, a multitude of languages could be heard in that city.

Not surprisingly, Corinth was a pleasure-mad city. Part of that pleasure came from the Isthmian Games, which were headquartered there. Gladiators fought to the death as the citizens of Corinth cheered or jeered them. Life was held cheap in Corinth, as reflected in the nature

of the Games and in the extensiveness of slavery. The slave population may have been as high as 75 percent.

How could a Christian church survive in Corinth? Sensual pleasure and self-indulgence characterized the city. For example, religious prostitution thrived. The temple of Aphrodite alone had a thousand prostitutes! The entire Roman Empire knew of Corinth's wickedness. The Romans even coined a saying, "to live like a Corinthian," to describe people with loose, immoral conduct.

The church in Corinth had its problems, as one might expect. Paul wrote to try to get the Corinthians to put the church in order. In that letter, which we call 1 Corinthians, he dealt with the problems of division, immorality, lawsuits between Christians, drunkenness and gluttony at the Communion table, and misuse of spiritual gifts.

We may piece together from 2 Corinthians 2:1 and 4, 12:14, and 13:1 and 2 that Paul had visited Corinth after writing 1 Corinthians. During that visit, he had confronted the church about its failure to resolve the issues he had discussed in 1 Corinthians. Later he wrote a second letter (a lost letter that God did not place in the New Testament), rebuking the Corinthians for their unwillingness to take remedial action. Finally he received word that the church had repented, so he wrote 2 Corinthians from Macedonia and followed it with a personal visit (Acts 20:1–4). However, a group in the Corinthian church still opposed Paul and scoffed at his claim to be an apostle.

3. Read 2 Corinthians 1:1. To what did Paul attribute his apostleship?

It is amazing to think that some Corinthians still doubted Paul's apostleship after the suffering he was willing to endure on their behalf. Perhaps they did not like what they read in his first two letters to them. Undermining his authority would give them an excuse to ignore his rebuke and warnings.

4. How might the following designations from verse 1 have encouraged the Corinthians?

“the church of God”

“saints”

5. Grace and peace are gifts from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ (v. 2). Why do you value
grace?

peace?

6. The word “blessed” means literally “speak a good word.” What two reasons did Paul give in verse 3 for speaking a good word for God?

Paul intentionally emphasized God’s blessedness. About to launch into a discussion on suffering, Paul wanted his readers to understand that all suffering must be seen against the backdrop of God’s blessedness.

7. What is significant about God’s being the God of *all* comfort?

As the fountainhead of mercy and comfort, God is willing and able to sustain His children through suffering. We need not panic or pine (sigh) in our afflictions, because He “comforts us in all our tribulation.”

8. How has a trial given you a deeper appreciation of God’s comfort?

In verses 4–11 Paul presented **five reasons why God allows suffering**.

9. According to verse 4, what is **one reason** why God allows believers to suffer?

Talking to someone who has been through a trial similar to the one you are experiencing can provide you with a huge lift.

10. What sufferings have you experienced that now provide an opportunity for you to minister to others?

11. Describe a time when someone who had experienced a trial helped you with a similar trial.

The **second reason** for suffering is so we will know and appreciate the comfort that comes from Christ.

12. Read 2 Corinthians 1:5. What is the correlation between suffering and Christ's comfort?

Paul was well-acquainted with the comfort of Christ. Because of his devotion to the Savior, ungodly men opposed him, and intense trials dogged his steps. Nevertheless, the Savior's comfort abounded toward him (v. 5). Similarly, every affliction we encounter because we stand for Christ and serve Him brings with it an unlimited supply of divine help.

A **third reason** God brings us trials and suffering is found in verses 6 and 7.

13. Who did Paul say would benefit from his suffering (vv. 6, 7)?

As God was comforting Paul in his trials, he was an example to the Corinthians. In essence, Paul's experiences benefited the Corinthians by his modeling how to respond to trials.

Beginning in verse 8, Paul told the Corinthians of an experience that took him to the depths of despair. It happened somewhere in Asia. Paul did not say precisely what happened to him. Perhaps he was referring to the time when Demetrius the silversmith opposed the preaching of the gospel and started a riot against him (Acts 19:23–40). But it does not seem that Paul was apprehended in the riot. So some suggest that a near fatal illness caused Paul to despair. And others have suggested that Paul was referring to shipwreck or persecution or to the problems heaped on him because of rebellion by the Corinthian church.

14. According to 2 Corinthians 1:8, how did Paul describe the degree to which he suffered?

15. Describe the role Paul's own strength played in helping him through the trouble he described (v. 9).

God was teaching Paul to rely on Him during trials. Reliance on God is the **fourth reason** God allows suffering in our lives.

The trouble Paul experienced was severe. He thought he had reached the end of his life and that death was knocking on the door. He wrote that he "despaired even of life" and "had the sentence of death" in him (vv. 8, 9).

16. What situation has taught you to rely completely on God?

17. What would you say to a Christian who claims to be desperate?

Prayer and thanksgiving form the **final reason** God allows us to experience trials and suffering.

18. What evidence do you see that prayer works (vv. 9–11)?

Paul was delivered out of his life-threatening crisis partly because the Corinthians prayed for him. He testified, “Ye also helping together by prayer for us.” Because the Lord answered the Corinthians’ prayers, many believers offered thanks (vv. 10, 11).

19. Has anyone ever thanked you for praying for him or her?

20. How did the Lord answer your prayers for that person?

21. According to the following passages, how should you pray for others?

Romans 1:9

Ephesians 1:15, 16

2 Timothy 1:3

Making It Personal

22. Select one person who is undergoing a difficult trial.

What specific action will you take this week to comfort that person?

23. a. List the three most prevalent trials you are now facing.

(1)

(2)

(3)

b. Meditate on the following Scripture passages. Ask God to supply you with His abounding grace so you might face your trials with peace and confidence.

Psalm 23:4

Psalm 71:19–21

Psalm 119:49–52, 76

John 14:27

Philippians 4:6, 7

1 Peter 5:7

24. Call a friend and ask him or her to pray for you in the midst of your trial.

25. Commit 2 Corinthians 1:3 and 4 to memory. Write the verses below.