



ENJOYING GOD'S COMFORT

Believers find comfort in knowing that others benefit from and God is honored through their trials.

2 CORINTHIANS 1:3-14

Consider the different ways we use the phrase “comfort zone.” It can refer to a mental state in which people feel familiar with and in control of their circumstances. There’s also a negative sense for “comfort zone.” We may be urged to get out of our comfort zone—take risks, attempt things we’ve never done before.

What kinds of situations would you consider to be in your “comfort zone”? What things have you recently attempted that were “outside your comfort zone”? What are the advantages of staying in your comfort zone and of going outside your comfort zone?

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

2 CORINTHIANS 1:1–2:13

Paul lived outside his comfort zone as a traveling church planter. He was called by God to take the gospel where it had never been proclaimed. Helped by God's Spirit, he gladly faced unbelievable risks. As we'll see in this week's study, he had recently been so overwhelmed that he thought he would die (2 Cor. 1:8).

Paul, however, was not beyond needing comfort in the midst of these trials. He knew that comfort can come both from God and from others. He began Second Corinthians by praising God for the comfort He had given him. Further, Paul explained to the believers that divine comfort extended both from him to them and from them to him. Christians can find comfort in knowing that others benefit from their trials and that God is honored through such trials.

The opening chapters of this letter reveal quite a bit about the relationship between Paul and the Corinthian church, as well as some issues that had been going on since he wrote 1 Corinthians. The reminder that he was an apostle of Christ Jesus by God's will (1:1) serves as an important prelude to a larger defense of his apostleship in this letter.

False apostles had made inroads into the church at Corinth and cast doubts on Paul's authority because of his continual suffering and hardships. These false apostles became the target of Paul's rebuke. His sufferings for Christ did not invalidate his status as an apostle. On the contrary, Paul indicated that all believers can expect affliction (1:7). Enjoying God's comfort is the larger theme of the first chapter that flows from Paul's suffering and affliction.

Paul's travel schedule (2 Cor. 1:15–2:3, 12–13) is not incidental but necessary to understand the context for the letter as a whole. After Paul founded the church, problems arose quickly, which he wrote about in a letter we do not have (see 1 Cor. 5:9). While in Ephesus, he heard about additional problems in the church and wrote 1 Corinthians to deal with them as well as other issues the Corinthians asked him to address. Apparently, the false apostles arrived during this time and caused more problems for Paul. In response, Paul left Ephesus for a brief visit to Corinth that didn't go well, so he wrote a severe letter rebuking the church (see 2 Cor. 2:4; 7:8–9), which also we do not have.



Paul postponed his plans for another visit, although still had it in view (see 2 Cor. 12:14; 13:1).

Read 2 Corinthians 1:3-14 in your Bible. Highlight each occurrence of the word “comfort.” From whom and to whom did comfort flow? What did Paul say was the purpose of the comfort he received from God?

KEY DOCTRINE: *God the Father*

God as Father reigns with providential care over His universe, His creatures, and the flow of the stream of human history according to the purposes of His grace.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

COMFORTED (2 COR. 1:3-7)

³ Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, 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. ⁵ For as we share abundantly in Christ’s sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too. 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. ⁷ Our hope for you is unshaken, for we know that as you share in our sufferings, you will also share in our comfort.

VERSES 3-4

Paul began with praise to ***the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ***. He referred to the Lord as ***Father*** twice in verse 3. God the Father is kind and compassionate toward His children. He provides for them and protects them, yet He does not withhold suffering and sorrow. Suffering, of course, has a purpose, not the least of which is to demonstrate the greatness of God’s character toward us.

Paul also described God as the ***Father of mercies***. He is merciful and compassionate by His very nature (Ex. 34:6-7). Paul told the Ephesians, God is “rich in mercy” (Eph. 2:4). In addition, He is the ***God of all comfort***. This affirmation grounds Paul’s claim that God ***comforts us in all our affliction***. Surely, Paul saw his share of affliction, but in every case he found comfort from the Lord.

There is purpose behind the comfort we receive from God. Not only does God’s comfort give us reason to praise Him, it is also ***so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction***. Nothing is wasted in God’s economy. Paul wanted the Corinthians to know that the suffering he had undergone for the gospel had provided an opportunity for God to comfort him. As a result, he was *able to comfort* them.

VERSES 5-7

Paul noted that ***we share abundantly in Christ’s sufferings***. Just as Jesus was reviled and rejected, so also His followers will be. We should not be amazed that the world hates us since it hated Jesus too. But ***through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too***.

Both affliction and comfort in Paul’s life would be useful for the Corinthians’ comfort for two reasons. First, it was for their ***salvation***. Paul didn’t mean his sufferings were the grounds for their salvation, since only Jesus died for sins. Rather, Paul’s afflictions occurred because he preached the gospel by which they were saved. If Paul had tried to avoid persecution and suffering for spreading the gospel, many Gentiles (including the Corinthians) would not have heard and received salvation.

Paul’s Afflictions (2 Cor. 11:24-27)

- *thirty-nine lashes (on five occasions)*
- *beatings with rods (three times)*
- *stoning*
- *shipwrecked (three times)*
- *various other dangers, including robbers*
- *toil and hardship*
- *sleepless nights*
- *hunger and thirst*
- *cold and without clothing*



Second, Paul's comfort became their **comfort** and would produce in them patient endurance. Paul knew that "all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted" (2 Tim. 3:12). Yet, the Corinthians could rejoice in their afflictions because affliction produces endurance, which produces character, which produces hope (Rom. 5:3-5). Paul was confident they would endure **the same sufferings** he suffered as they lived for Christ. He was certain they would also **share in** the **comfort** God provides.

How might the sufferings of a believer be used by God to impact the lives of others? How does a person's attitude when facing suffering influence others? To what examples can you point to illustrate your response?

BIBLE SKILL: *Use a Bible atlas and Bible dictionary (print version or on the Internet) to learn about places mentioned in Scripture.*

Find the locations of Corinth and Ephesus, and the provinces of Asia and Macedonia in a Bible atlas. (Tip: check the atlas index or search on the Internet.) Then use a Bible dictionary to learn more about these places during the time of Paul. How do these places enter into an understanding of the background of 2 Corinthians? What motivated Paul to continue to plant churches in these areas knowing the difficulty he would face?

TESTED (2 COR. 1:8-11)

⁸ 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. ⁹ 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. ¹⁰ 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. ¹¹ 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.

VERSES 8-9

Paul could speak of the comfort he received from the Lord because he had been tested in the fires of affliction. He didn't want the Corinthians to be **unaware** of the **affliction we experienced in •Asia**. Paul gave no specifics on what happened to him. It is possible that the riot in Ephesus stirred up by Demetrius the silversmith was on Paul's mind (Acts 19:21-41), or maybe a combination of beatings, imprisonments, and other life-threatening dangers (2 Cor. 11:23-27).

Although Paul didn't mention the specifics, he did describe the severity of his afflictions. He and his companions **were so utterly burdened beyond their strength**. In fact, Paul **despaired of life itself**. The word for *despaired* literally means "out of passageway." He considered his sufferings so bad that there was no exit, no way out from them.

Paul realized the immense spiritual value of afflictions, even the prospect of death for the gospel's sake. The purpose behind his afflictions was **to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead**. God's grace is sufficient to lead us into greater trust in Him through times of testing (see 2 Cor. 12:9-10).

VERSES 10-11

God **delivered** Paul **from such a deadly peril**. God spared his life and increased Paul's trust and confidence in Him. In fact, the apostle believed that as he continued the mission of the gospel, God would deliver him again. He knew that God would deliver him through any trial or test or circumstance until the time for him to enter God's heavenly kingdom (see 2 Tim. 4:18).

Not only did God increase Paul's trust in Him, he also increased his hope. As a result, Paul said, **we have set our hope that he will deliver us again**. Paul told the Romans, "May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope" (Rom. 15:13). The focus of Paul's hope was not deliverance, but God Himself, in whom he had learned to trust.



Why is hope such a powerful thing? How is the hope described by Paul different from wishful thinking?

There's another facet of Paul's hope and confidence during times of affliction, and that was the awareness that God's people were praying for him. He counted on the Corinthians to join in helping him endure by offering prayers on his behalf. He asked the Ephesians to pray that God would give him boldness to preach the gospel (Eph. 6:19-20). He said confidently to the Philippians that his own deliverance would come through their prayers for him (Phil. 1:19).

As those intercessory prayers were answered, and Paul saw deliverance in times of testing and affliction, many would **give thanks** on Paul's behalf **for the blessing granted us through the prayers of many**. Indeed, there is great cause for rejoicing and thanksgiving when God answers prayer. But Paul was not soliciting prayers for his own selfish reasons, rather for the benefit of others as God's grace reached more people for His glory (2 Cor. 4:15). Paul's desire was for God to be honored, which would lead the Corinthians to give thanks to Him.

ACCEPTED (2 COR. 1:12-14)

¹² For our boast is this, the testimony of our conscience, that we behaved in the world with simplicity and godly sincerity, not by earthly wisdom but by the grace of God, and supremely so toward you. ¹³ For we are not writing to you anything other than what you read and understand and I hope you will fully understand— ¹⁴ just as you did partially understand us—that on the day of our Lord Jesus you will boast of us as we will boast of you.

VERSES 12-14

Paul began his letter by identifying himself as “an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God” (2 Cor. 1:1). Because of the negative influence of false apostles in the Corinthian church, Paul wanted his readers to accept him as one who had proven himself among them. He wasn't interested in their validation of his apostleship, but rather their acceptance of him as a source of pride and joy in bringing them the gospel.

Paul declared, **our boast is this** because his **conscience** testified to the truth of how he had proven himself among the Corinthians. His conduct in the world and toward them was proven by **simplicity and godly sincerity**. Paul had lived his life above reproach, regardless of the slander the false apostles had lobbed at his character. His life and actions reflected holy motives, and his conduct was sincere—it held up to careful inspection.

Of course, Paul wasn't boasting in himself or his own human wisdom to defend his actions. Rather, he admitted that anything good and praiseworthy was because of **the •grace of God**.

Paul's integrity was at stake, it seems. And perhaps, the love he had for the Corinthians was being questioned as well (see 2 Cor. 2:4; 1 Cor. 16:24). He marveled that even though he had poured himself into this church and loved them as a father in the faith, they still only partially understood him and his ministry among them. Their relationship had seen its share of ups and downs, but reconciliation was evident (see 2 Cor. 7).

Paul concluded this section by telling the Corinthians: **you will boast of us**. They should reject the disparaging remarks of the false apostles and recall the sincerity and purity of Paul's ministry among them. Even more, they should have defended Paul and boasted about the work of God through him in Corinth and beyond.

The Corinthians were a source of pride for Paul, too. He would boast about them and the gospel fruit among them **on the day of our Lord Jesus**. Paul said something similar to the Thessalonian church: "For what is our hope or joy or crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus at his coming? Is it not you?" (1 Thess. 2:19-20). The Philippian church was also Paul's "joy and crown" (Phil. 4:1). Like the Thessalonians and the Philippians, the Corinthian church was a cause for boasting and pride in Paul's heart—they were the crowing achievements of his gospel ministry.

What is the relationship between a person's integrity and our willingness to recognize or accept their role in kingdom work? What would be a greater source of pride—being a person of integrity or being recognized by others for the work you do? Explain.



IN MY CONTEXT

- Believers can be comforted when facing sufferings because God is present and using those experiences to impact others.
- Believers can celebrate a testing of their faith, knowing that God will strengthen them and demonstrate His power.
- Believers can recognize the work of God in and through others, accepting them as co-laborers.

Discuss with your group ways God is encouraging your group members through someone who is suffering and the way they are facing that suffering. What can your group do to be encouragers to others?

How is God testing your faith? What are you learning about Him and yourself through that test? Who can encourage you through your difficulty?

With whom can you share insights you gained from this lesson? How can you share those insights in an encouraging way?

Prayer Needs
