

2 Corinthians 1: The God of all Comfort

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Second Corinthians is a personal letter to an audience that the Apostle Paul knew very well. Paul had planted the first church in Corinth about five years earlier while he lived there for 18 months. Paul was originally Saul of Tarsus, a Jew who was so well educated in Judaism in Jerusalem that he had become a Pharisee, the highest religious office someone from the tribe of Benjamin could attain. In Jerusalem Paul had persecuted Christians and led the charge to arrest all of them. While on a mission to arrest Christians, he encountered the glorified Christ on the road to Damascus. Jesus personally called and commissioned him to be Christ's ambassador to the Gentiles. Therefore, after much input from the Lord and ministry experience in Tarsus and Antioch, Paul was sent out on three missionary journeys to Asia Minor (modern day Turkey), Macedonia, and Greece. On Paul's second journey through Asia he crossed over the Aegean Sea to Macedonia where he planted the first church in Philippi. Then Paul planted a church in Thessalonica but he was persecuted and threatened so leaving disciples there to carry on, he moved on to Berea where he planted another wonderful church. But a disturbance arose there also and he fled to Athens in about 52 AD. Alone now, Paul went to the Areopagus at Mars Hill where all the intellectuals and philosophers gathered to debate. After a spirited presentation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, a few Athenians were converted but most of them scoffed at him. Then in the Spring of 52 AD, Paul journeyed on down to the important port city of Corinth—think San Francisco or New Orleans, a wild and woolly place with a reputation for prostitution, debauchery, and perversion. It was a center for the Roman slave trade. Corinth was so immoral that its name became slang for sexual vice—to Corinthianize meant to corrupt and a Corinthian girl was a prostitute. Into this dark depraved city Paul came alone in "much fear and trembling" according to 1 Cor. 2. Paul had been arrested and beaten in Philippi, harassed and chased out of Thessalonica, threatened in Berea, laughed out of Athens, and now he was broke in Corinth. He got a job making tents there and went to the local synagogue every Sabbath to present Jesus as the promised Messiah. In spite of all his adversity, the Lord used him to lead many to Christ, so many that there arose a movement within the Jews to stop him. Paul shook off their rejection and said, "From now on I will go to the Gentiles in Corinth". Paul stayed in Corinth for 18 months and hundreds of people believed in Christ during that time and formed a large church in Corinth. All the while he was leading people to Christ, he was also being persecuted, threatened, and even arrested, but God was blessing him in the midst of all the trouble.

Paul returned to his home church in Antioch, and then began his third missionary journey. All the while Paul's disciples were sending him messages about the progress and state of affairs in the churches. The report he got from Corinth was not good. They were still involved in many of their previous immoral activities and there were serious divisions within the church there. While in Ephesus, Paul wrote a letter of admonishment to Corinth we still have a copy of in our Bible called First Corinthians, and fortunately the congregation responded favorably. But later while Paul was traveling to Macedonia, he received troubling news that false teachers were undermining him and altering the true Gospel in Corinth. Therefore Paul sent Titus ahead to check out the situation. Meanwhile Paul was delayed by great affliction in both Asia and Macedonia so severe he said "we were burdened excessively beyond our strength, so that we despaired even of life, indeed we had the sentence of death". Fortunately Paul made it to Macedonia where Titus returned to him with good news that most of the Corinthians had repented and reaffirmed their belief in the truth and their loyalty to Paul.

Therefore Paul wrote what we call his second letter to the Corinthians from Macedonia to explain why he was so late in coming to Corinth, but also his main theme was a defense of his integrity, his Apostleship, and a defense of the true Gospel of Jesus Christ. 2 Corinthians is an amazing display of paradoxes that reveal the simultaneous comfort and mercies of God despite the rash of trouble, danger, and threat of death that the world offers. In 2 Cor. 4:8-9 we read "we are afflicted in every way, but not crushed, perplexed but not despairing, persecuted but not forsaken, struck down, but not destroyed". Paul had been prevented from coming to Corinth as he promised because the enemy had arrested, beaten, and tried to kill him, but God mercifully had delivered Paul and given him the comfort he needed to continue the ministry. Throughout Paul's journeys, God had always been with him protecting him. Paul was always in danger, but God was like a SAFETY NET always there to catch him and save him from death. Paul felt the confidence and comfort of God's SAFETY NET, so he was always willing and able to efficiently carry out the ministry God gave him.

The Golden Gate Bridge 1933-1937

Most people think the great bridge in San Francisco got its name because of the color it was painted which made it look gold when the sun shines on it. Actually it was named because it spans the Golden Gate Strait which is the entrance to San Francisco Bay from the Pacific Ocean. The strait is one mile wide and was named by John C. Fremont in 1846 after the harbor entrance in Istanbul called the Golden Horn. The bridge is actually painted orange because that color gives better visibility in a fog. The Golden Gate Bridge was opened in 1937 as a suspension bridge 4200 feet long, which was the longest suspension

bridge in the world until 1964. Over 2.5 billion vehicles have crossed it since then. The American Society of Civil Engineers has declared it one of the “wonders of the world”. In the late 19th and early 20th century America, bridges and railway trestles were being built across all the major rivers, chasms, and ocean bays. It was a given that many workers would fall to their death during the construction of these projects. The acceptable mortality rate was the loss of one life per one million dollars of the cost of the project. Project after project proved the reliability of that number. Since the budget for the Golden Gate Bridge was \$35 million, it was accepted that 35 workers would fall to their death during its construction. From the height of the bridge a person would be traveling 75 mph when he hit the freezing water with a 7.5 mph current, therefore the survivability rate was zero. In 1932, the Golden Gate Bridge District was created to sell bonds to finance the bridge but because of the depression, nobody bought them, so Bank of America stepped up and bought the entire issue. Soon after construction a worker fell to his death, and the head of the project, Joseph Strauss, also the engineer of the bridge, insisted on putting in a safety net under the bridge similar to what circus trapeze performers use. The powers that be were shocked and resistant to the cost and time of building a safety net over a mile long and a football field wide, but Strauss campaigned, demanded and got his safety net. He also was the first to force all workers to wear hard hats and goggles for protection. It was expensive and it did delay the project, but amazingly they finished the bridge in 1937 under budget and earlier than expected. They came to find out that because of the safety net the workers were comfortable and confident and so could work harder and more efficiently. Also it proved that the pressure of no safety net caused more accidents and deaths. Instead of the projected 35 people falling only 19 fell and were all saved. Without the fear and pressure people are happier and more efficient. By the way, those 19 guys formed a survivors club called “halfway to hell club”.

As believers in Christ, we also have a safety net called God’s mercy and grace. If we fall it catches us, forgives us, and reestablishes us. It makes us confident, hopeful, and free of fear in a world of danger. My eternity is assured and even now “I can do all things through Him who strengthens me”.

2 Corinthians 1:1-11, Paul’s Greeting and Gratitude for Gods Comfort

In Paul’s opening greeting to the Church at Corinth he identifies himself as “Paul, an Apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God”. The Greek word we translate Apostle simply means sent one, but in the first century churches it was used for a special office of men sent specifically by Jesus to preach the Gospel by Christ’s direct authority. A true Apostle had to have been an eyewitness of the risen Christ, called directly by Jesus to represent Him, and given revelation directly from Christ to teach to the churches. Therefore these divinely appointed emissaries had authority and authenticity, which set them apart from all other teachers. Of course they would be the authors and the sources for the revelation we called the New Testament in the Bible. This sets the tone for this letter because one of the problems he was addressing was the false teachers who were trying to criticize Paul and usurp his position. After establishing himself as the inspired by God author of this letter, Paul identified his audience as “the church of God at Corinth with all the saints”. It’s hard for me to imagine how Paul could call the people in the church at Corinth saints, but we must remember the N.T. authors thought of all believers in Christ as saints. The Greek word we translate as saints means holy ones, and in God’s eyes everyone who has believed in Jesus is forgiven and the righteousness of God has been imputed to them. Therefore in spite of all their shortcomings addressed in First Corinthians, they are saints positionally. In verse 2, Paul’s salutation is “Grace to you and peace from God” because they are recipients of the free gift of God, which is the atoning work of Christ on the cross. They had been alienated from God by sin, but now through the Lord Jesus Christ they were united in a personal relationship with God. The sole source of salvation and forgiveness is God. People chase their own worldly dreams in search of grace and peace, but only God can give it.

In 2 Cor. 1:3-4, Paul praises God as the sole source of comfort that can overcome severe affliction. Paul had been delayed in coming to Corinth because of persecution, arrest, beatings, and threat of death. God had delivered him, and empowered him to persevere and overcome adversity that no human could overcome on their own. Paul identified the Lord as “the God of all Comfort” which excludes any other source of comfort and emphasizes the adequacy of God’s comfort. The word “comfort” occurs ten times in verses 3-7, therefore the emphasis in this passage is obvious. In the world, people get a little stressed out so they eat “comfort food”, but that just makes you fat and your problems are still there. They drink alcohol, take sedatives, or go on vacations to relax, but that is all temporary and not at all what Paul is referring to. The comfort of God gives you purpose and meaning and provides permanent solutions to your problems. The Greek word used here for comfort means literally to “stand beside a person to encourage him when he is being severely tested.” These are the kind of tests that would crush and destroy mortal men apart from God. If you doubt this just go and read Paul’s list of some of his tests in 2 Cor. 11:23-28, “labors, imprisonments, beaten times without number, in danger of death, five times received 39 lashes, three times beaten with rods, stoned and left for dead, shipwrecked, dangers in journeys, rivers, danger from robbers...labor and hardship, hunger and thirst, cold and exposure...” just to name a few that God helped him through. More than that, this comfort of God equipped him for the ministry of being used by God to comfort and encourage others. God blessed Paul in spite of his circumstances so he could become a blessing to his disciples and the churches. How did Paul comfort others? He comforted by his example and attitude, his prayers, and loving gentle words. But his past affliction was the key to Paul’s ministry.

In 2 Cor. 1:5-7, we read that God's Comfort is never outweighed by suffering. In the world people are overwhelmed and often give up, but in Christ God's comfort is abundant. The sobering reality is that suffering is abundant in this fallen world. Job 5:7 says "Man is born for trouble", and David said in many of his Psalms "God why do you hide in times of trouble?" Jesus made it clear to His disciples that they would suffer terribly and be martyred, "If they persecuted (and killed Me), they will also persecute you". Nevertheless, God has indwelt Christians with His Holy Spirit who leads us and comforts us through the many afflictions that life offers. Having experienced the pain and persevered with the hope we have in Christ, we become mediators God uses to comfort and witness to others. Because Paul suffered, the Church at Corinth was saved and comforted and taught how to persevere. God's work cannot fail. Therefore there will be disappointments but not despair, conflict but not surrender, and afflictions will always be met by God's comfort. The ultimate comfort being that we know the end from the beginning. This is why Paul could say in Romans 8:18, "I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us (in the resurrection)". Again in Romans 8:35, "Who (or what) shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or peril, or sword?...But in all these things we overwhelmingly conquer through Him who loved us and gave Himself up for us".

As an example of God's comfort, Paul related in 2 Cor. 1:8-11 an affliction which delayed him in Asia. This affliction had oppressed him beyond natural endurance, but he believed that something good came out of it. The "sentence of death" had a result that they stopped trusting in their own self reliance and had to completely live by faith in Someone who was so powerful that He had even raised the dead, which is an obvious reference to God raising Jesus from the dead. The same God that raised Jesus delivered Paul in Asia, Paul even included the Corinthians in this miracle because they prayed for Paul's deliverance. We believe God is sovereign, and He always planned for Paul to be delivered and write this letter about it, and God planned for Paul to get to Corinth, but the intercessory prayers of believers are stressed throughout Scripture as vital because prayer emphasizes the dependence of man and the sovereignty of God. He has blessed us by involving us in His program of redemption and choosing to work through our prayers.

Conclusion—What do we take away from Paul's Experience?

In Warren Wiersbe's commentary he said the important take away is three fold: Remember

1. What God is to you—the giver of all mercies and the God of all Comfort
2. What God does for you—He is able to make your trials work out for good.
3. What God does through you—let Him use you to minister to others.

The men who were saved by the SAFETY NET while building the Golden Gate Bridge were said to be members of the "Halfway to Hell Club", but we who have believed in Jesus as our Savior are in the "Already but Not Yet Club" meaning we are already citizens of Heaven but it's not yet realized. We also now have a SAFETY NET in Christ so that no matter what obstacles or trouble the world puts in our path, we can be comforted that Christ will stand beside us to encourage us when we are severely tested. Even better, God will cause all things to work out for good and He will use us to comfort and minister to others. In the meantime, because we have a safety net, we can operate even now efficiently without pressure and in all confidence of our future.

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