

2 Corinthians 1:1-14

Introduction

The start of a series on 2 Corinthians. It is actually the fourth letter Paul wrote to the church at Corinth, for we have references to two other letters written (1 Corinthians 5:9; 2 Corinthians 2:4) which have not survived. Our 1 Corinthians was Paul's second letter, and our 2 Corinthians was Paul's fourth. This one is the most autobiographical of Paul's writings. We do not just learn about his teaching, but we meet the man. It is as if we can see his face, touch his hand, catch the accent of his voice and see the tears in his eyes.

It is also a very difficult book in some ways. Missionaries have found it to be the hardest of Paul's letters to translate into other languages. It is certainly beneficial to read it in a modern English translation. **Our mouth is open to you and our heart enlarged. Ye are not straitened in us but ye are straitened in your own bowels** (A.V. translation of 2 Corinthians 6:11), needs some explanation!

Yet despite the problems, it is full of ravishing texts for the preacher and the reader. Some of our most quoted texts are from 2 Corinthians. **If any man is in Christ** (2 Corinthians 5:17), **God was in Christ reconciling the world** (2 Corinthians 5:19), **My grace is sufficient** (2 Corinthians 12:9), **The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ** (2 Corinthians 13:14).

Not intending to deal with every single verse, but to major on the themes of this epistle. The first theme we meet is that of suffering. Paul normally starts a letter with gratitude for God's goodness and blessings. But here he launches immediately into his sufferings and the grace of God which has sustained him. We read of the sufferings which the apostle endured and the lessons he learnt through them. It has relevance to all of us, because suffering is one of the most real and puzzling and powerful aspects of life, and not least the Christian life.

Suffering which the apostle endured

Paul describes what he is going through as **the sufferings of Christ** (2 Corinthians 1:5), which are abounding in him. These sufferings come to him because of his service for Christ and his Christian witness. Christ knew all about suffering and warned His disciples that they would know about it too if they were to be loyal to Him. **If they persecuted me they will also persecute you** (John 15:20).

In a letter to a friend, Samuel Rutherford wrote, "God has called you to Christ's side, and the wind is now in Christ's face in this land, and because you are with him, you cannot expect to be in the lee side or sunny side of the brae."

We are not sure of the nature of Paul's sufferings. Later he speaks of beatings, prison, stoning, shipwreck, dangerous journeys and perils, and his burden for caring for all the churches (2 Corinthians 11:6ff). There is also the mysterious **thorn in the flesh** (2 Corinthians 12:7). He was undoubtedly faced with fierce critics and enemies in the

church who accused him of changing his mind, without full knowledge of the facts. They did not realize he had changed his plans out of consideration for them.

Problems in churches, then and now, can cause much anguish and suffering. 2 Corinthians shows a frustrated and criticized man. He has a broken heart and is up against it. Ministers today may not have to face the violent physical affliction endured by our fathers, but they can still expect agonies of the soul, betrayal by friends, gross ingratitude. Hence mental and spiritual suffering which tests a man's faithfulness.

Or was Paul referring to a particular thing which caused suffering (uproar in Asia, severe illness which brought him to death's door, fear of drowning)? Was it the build up of a number of things and then finally one thing which broke the camel's back? He speaks of troubles, hardships, being under great pressure beyond endurance, and despairing of life itself (2 Corinthians 1:4,8). He could not take it any more; he was at the end of his tether. And his readers had contributed to bringing him to that point, though other problems were involved also.

He had earlier written to them out of great anguish (2 Corinthians 2:4). We must never forget that the thoughtless word and needless criticism can help to bring someone to the end of their tether. So here is Paul in trouble, suffering and even in despair of his life. Being a Christian means bearing a cross, not a cushion, for a badge. What is our position now? Are we feeling low and discouraged?

The grace which sustained Paul

God came to Paul in this situation and gave him comfort. Between verses 3-7, Paul uses the (Greek) noun "comfort" or the verb "to comfort" no less than ten times. We tend to use the word "comfort" for tea and sympathy, commiserating and sympathizing. But the New Testament Greek word, and the original meaning of the English word, is much stronger. "Comfort" is linked with "fortress" and "fortify". The Bayeux Tapestry portrays a scene where "William comforts his troops" at the Battle of Hastings. He is not handing out tea and biscuits to his wounded troops. He is poking them in the back with his sword, strengthening and fortifying them for the continuing battle.

The Greek words, παρακληδις and παρακαλεω, and the original English meaning, imply not only consoling, but also encouraging, strengthening, helping and supporting. In our suffering and affliction, God not only commiserates with us but also encourages us to get up and get on with it, advance, be strong, and be made adequate. In every situation where he was brought to despair even of life, Paul found strength and courage.

Here is the testimony of Christian experience. God does not always take us out of the situation, but He gives strength and makes us adequate. He does not always lighten the load, but He strengthens the back. After speaking of tribulation, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, peril and the sword, Paul tells the Romans, **In all these things we are more than conquerors** (Romans 8:37). Not in some, not in most, but in *all*, we are conquerors. Conquerors not just when life is sweet and rosy, but in all these adversities – through Him who loved us. No wonder Paul begins this epistle after the usual greetings with **Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord**

Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion, and the God of all comfort (2 Corinthians 1:3).

In the hard places of life, Paul had made a new discovery. Sometimes people think they know all there is to know about someone – until one day they see him in a new set of circumstances, and discover something they did not know about him. So here, Paul makes a new discovery about God through these hard circumstances. He had never realized or thought of him before as that kind of God, the God of all comfort. God never gives us a task without giving us the “comfort” – the strength and support – to do it. He never permits a trial without giving “comfort” – the grace to bear it.

And Paul is not only grateful to God, but also to his readers, who helped him in his situation by their prayers (2 Corinthians 1:11). How much Paul owed to the prayers of others. Have you asked people to pray for you, and remembered to thank them for their prayers? God works for and strengthens others when we pray for them. It is a ministry we can all render to others, and there is none so important. We may not have money, strength or ability, but we can pray. When did you last say to someone you would pray for them? Did you mean it? Did you remember to? Or was it just a nice way of ending a conversation or a way out of an embarrassing situation? Prayer is a very practical force, and we must use it to the full.

Lessons which Paul learned through suffering

Suffering is a terrible experience, but it can be a source of much good. Our life would be poorer without it. By it we learn lessons we would learn no other way and we are equipped to help others in ways otherwise impossible. Paul’s suffering had enlarged his ministry. The comfort he had received from God, he was able to pass on and comfort others.

If we have been through some experience and found God’s enabling, we can sympathize and encourage with conviction and out of personal experience. We can say, “I know, and I have proved...”, “I know what you are going through, I have been there before you, and I can assure you from my own experience.”

Sir James Barrie spoke of his mother after she had lost her favourite son, “That is where my mother got her soft eyes and why other mothers came to her when they lost a child.” Richard Baxter, speaking after the death of his wife, “I will not be judged by any that never felt the like”, in other words, he could only be comforted by people who he knew had suffered likewise.

The supreme example – **We do not have a High Priest who is unable to sympathise with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are – yet was without sin. Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need** (Hebrews 4:15).

Paul shows us there is a purpose in suffering and adversity which goes beyond self. We naturally explain all in terms of self. Why me? Is God disciplining me? What sin is being revealed to me? Am I worse than others? But God may be permitting certain things for the sake of others – that we may be better able to help them, and be more

effective servants of the Lord, and we are given a special ministry from Him thereby. We only have this ministry because we have first known adversity. **If we are distressed, it is for your comfort and salvation; if we are comforted it is for your comfort** (2 Corinthians 1:6).

Also suffering had a profound affect on our relationship with the Lord. **We despaired even of life.. that we might not rely on ourselves, but on God, who raises the dead** (2 Corinthians 1:8,9). To rely on God rather than own ability is important in the Christian life, but it does not come naturally. It means unlearning habits of a lifetime. We are not broken of it through the ordinary events of life. It takes all God can do to root up our self-confidence, and he has to do it by bringing us to despair. He has to do it for salvation, sanctification, guidance, and living the Christian life. Again and again God has to bring us to the end of our resources and selves – else we never learn and never grow.

Failure, defeat, disappointment and adversity are weapons God has to use to accomplish His purpose. In dark days and trials, when the future is foreboding and wearing us down, God is preparing us for the experience of His love. This has special application to Christian life and service. The greatest menace in Christian life and service is our own self-sufficiency. It is hard to learn **Apart me you can do nothing** (John 15:5). God has to deal firmly with us and throw us back utterly upon Himself. How easy it is to be busy in God's work without relying on Him, neglecting prayer life, and the person and ministry of the Holy Spirit.

“Sometimes God puts us on our back to make us look up.” For every prayer in days of prosperity, there are many more in days of adversity.

*From every stormy wind that blows,
From every swelling tide that flows,
There is a calm, a sure retreat,
Tis found beneath the mercy seat.*

Conclusion

How the Scriptures speak to our condition. Life is no bed of roses for Paul or for us. Paul made discoveries of the greatness and power and love of God, and these are available to us today too. **Taste and see that the Lord is good** (Psalm 34:8).

*Are you standing at wit's end corner, blinded with worry and pain
Feeling you cannot endure it, that you cannot bear the strain,
Bruised by the constant suffering, dizzy and dazed and numb?
Remember, to wit's end corner is where Jesus loves to come.*