

An Apostle's Life: Praise, Trouble, Comfort

2 Corinthians 1:1-11

Turn to 2 Corinthians 1 please. I intend this letter of Paul to be our main Scripture for until May. I chose this for two reasons. One, this has always been my favorite pastoral letter. We call 1 and 2 Tim. and Titus the "Pastoral Epistles," but I think 2 Corinthians is the real pastoral epistle.

When I was a seminary student, a pastor came and spoke for one week from 2 Corinthians. He had been in some crisis as a pastor, and he had found deep renewal by reading about Paul's troubles and how they were the marks of a real minister.

I was not a pastor, and I had not seen troubles, but I loved those two or three sermons; for some reason I do not understand I devoured that stuff. A few years later 2 Corinthians was big part of my doctoral dissertation. This letter has given me a biblical perspective on being a servant of Christ that I do not hear very often, and it has helped me for nearly 40 years.

The other reason I picked 2 Corinthians is that in May, I am teaching 2 Corinthians, first time I've ever taught a whole course just on this book, and it helps me a lot for a course to go through that Scripture week by week with you. So, our text for today is 2 Cor 1:1-11.

*Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother,  
To the church of God in Corinth, together with all his holy people throughout Achaia:  
2 Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.*

Verse 1, Paul is an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God. He did not ask for this, he did not seek it, he was going the other way as hard as he could. Paul's conversion not normal.

Christ just took over his life. "Why are you persecuting me? Go into the city and someone will tell you what to do." Ananias came and said, "Paul, you are the Lord's chosen instrument to proclaim his name." Conversation over. He was an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God.

*3 Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassions and the God of all comfort, 4 who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God. 5 For just as we share abundantly in the sufferings of Christ, so also through Christ our comfort abounds. 6 If we are troubled, it is for your comfort and salvation; if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which produces in you patient endurance of the same sufferings we suffer. 7 And our hope for you is firm, because we know that just as you share in our sufferings, so also you share in our comfort.*

Paul usually begins letters by thanking God for what God is doing in the church he writes to. In Galatians there is no thanking God at the start, but there is in all the rest. In 2 Cor, though, Paul praises God for what God does in Paul's own life.

Not what God does in the Corinthian church, but what God does in Paul. No other letter is like that. And the reason is that the Corinthians need to be educated about what life is actually like for a genuine apostle of Christ Jesus. And we can use this education, too.

What do you think it was like to be a real apostle? One way or another, most of this letter answers that. I tend to think about the powerful preaching of apostles, and all those converts, large numbers coming to Christ. And the miracles, people healed, a few raised from the dead, being in prison and miraculous escape. Things like that. But that is not Paul's thinking.

If we can get our heads around vv3-4, we've got the basic idea: *Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassions and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God.*

God is the Father of compassions and the God of all comfort. This is a bit stronger than just saying God has compassion on people and he comforts them. It is that, but more. "*Father of compassions and God of all comfort*" means this is a part of God's character and his nature.

He has compassion like a good parent has compassion, it is his typical response; and when he has compassion on people he sends comfort. Comforting people also is his typical response. Compassion and comfort pours out of him, he can hardly help it. That's what he's like.

And Paul loves God for that. So he begins by praising that God. Verse 3 begins by praising God, and our text ends with v11, and you will see that at the end of v11 we have people thanking God. The opening of this letter begins and ends with people praising God and thanking God. Remember that, because in between it will get nasty.

Vv3-4 again: *Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassions and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God.*

Which troubles are we talking about? "All our troubles." All of Paul and Timothy's troubles. "Those in any trouble." This is not complicated, my brothers and sisters. Paul says that he and Timothy get God's comfort IN ALL THEIR TROUBLES, so they can comfort those IN ANY TROUBLE with that same comfort.

Christians have all kinds of troubles. There is no evidence that the Corinthians were being persecuted, and we know that the Corinthians were *not* among the poor churches. Not persecuted, not living in poverty. All believers have troubles, some severe, then just as now.

We perhaps thought that the original apostles, with all that faith, and that power of the Holy Spirit, and all those miracles, did not have ordinary troubles. If we are even close to that, let's just keep reading. Paul will say that the mark of real apostles is more troubles than the rest, more often and more severe. Relief? No. But comfort? Yes, lots. Endurance? Yes. Praise? Yes, lots.

And why does the Father of compassions and God of all comfort keep comforting the apostle? *So that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God.* God compassionately comforts his servants in all their troubles, so that his servants can compassionately pass comfort on to *others* in all *their* troubles.

Let's go on, vv5-7. *For just as we share abundantly in the sufferings of Christ, so also through Christ our comfort abounds. If we are troubled, it is for your comfort and salvation; if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which produces in you patient endurance of the same sufferings we suffer. And our hope for you is firm, because we know that just as you share in our sufferings, so also you share in our comfort.*

“*Sufferings of Christ.*” What might that be? “*Just as we share abundantly in the sufferings of Christ.*” And then he says, your “*patient endurance of the same sufferings we suffer.*” So the Corinthians have the same sufferings, which must mean they also share in the sufferings of Christ. What are the sufferings of Christ?

V 5 begins, “for just as we share abundantly in the sufferings of Christ.” It sounds like the sufferings of Christ are the same troubles he already been writing about, does it not? And that was, “*in all our trouble*” and “*those in any trouble.*”

The commentaries get too lofty here, in my humble opinion. They say the sufferings of Christ means the persecution and troubles that come from preaching the gospel. But vv3-4 made clear that we are talking about all troubles. Just like James, at the beginning of his letter, and Peter at the beginning of 1 Peter, talked about all kinds of troubles and testings.

There is nothing to indicate that the Corinthians were preaching the gospel or being persecuted, but they suffer the same sufferings as Paul, and those are the suffering of Christ.

In vv3-4 he calls them *troubles*, then in 5-7 he calls them *sufferings*, but he also calls them *troubles* in v6 and v8 (NIV *distressed* in v6 is the same Greek word as *troubled*, which I changed to *troubled* in what I read to you). The sufferings of Christ and the common troubles are Paul's two ways of speaking about the same experiences, common to apostles and to ordinary believers, like the Corinthians and like us.

This paragraph says that: *Christ, in his life, shared in all the normal sufferings of humanity.* And we his followers, because we follow Christ and are bound to Christ, we also have all kinds of troubles. And the reason is, that Christ, our champion and our savior and our hero and our lord, had all kinds of troubles, so we do also, because we being made to be more like him.

What this says is that *all the troubles of believers are believers sharing the sufferings of Christ*, because we are bound to him and follow him. I can't find any evidence here for taking the sufferings of Christ as just ministry (etc.) troubles.

Vv 5-7 again: *For just as we share abundantly in the sufferings of Christ, so also through Christ our comfort abounds. If we are troubled, it is for your comfort and salvation; if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which produces in you patient endurance of the same sufferings we suffer. And our hope for you is firm, because we know that just as you share in our sufferings, so also you share in our comfort.*

Paul's life has many sufferings and troubles, and his life also has all sorts of comforts in that suffering. Why does Paul's life have so much trouble and comfort? *If we are troubled, it is for your comfort and salvation; if we are comforted, it is for your comfort!*

Jesus lived a life of service and a life of troubles, and full of comfort from his Father, and he did this all so others would benefit, others including us in this room. In the same way, his apostles lived a life of serving others and a life full of troubles and comfort from the Father through Christ, so that others would benefit.

This is not the ultimate explanation for why there is evil in the world, it does not claim to be. But the apostles looked at Christ's life, why Christ came, and how he lived, and they were called to do the same. And here's what the apostles' comfort produced in the Cor'n believers:

Vv6b-7 - *Which produces in you patient endurance of the same sufferings we suffer. And our hope for you is firm, because we know that just as you share in our sufferings, so also you share in our comfort.* It all happens so ordinary believers can patiently endure their sufferings, and be comforted in these sufferings.

In the late chapters of 2 Corinthians we find out more clearly why Paul began this way. There were a different kind of apostles in Corinth. False apostles. Super apostles. They claimed "faith," and so they had plenty of money and did not have troubles, and they were very good preachers.

Better preachers than Paul. Those other apostles told the Corinthians that Paul was not really an apostle, too troubled and beat up, too poor, Paul had hardly any visions and revelations, not like them, and he's not a great speaker. This argument would work just as well in North America, I think, as it worked in Corinth. This is why Paul educates them and us on real apostles.

In vv3-7 Paul described the big picture of being an apostle. Remember that this is all a reason to praise God for his endless compassion and comfort. In vv8-11 Paul brings up one particular event in his past that is an example of what he's talking about.

<sup>8</sup> *We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about the troubles we experienced in the province of Asia. We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that*

*we despaired of life itself. <sup>9</sup> Indeed, we felt we had received the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead. <sup>10</sup> He has delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us again. On him we have set our hope that he will continue to deliver us, <sup>11</sup> as you help us by your prayers. Then many will give thanks on our behalf for the gracious favor granted us in answer to the prayers of many.*

Don't miss this: Paul was under great pressure, far beyond his ability to endure, not just beyond but far beyond, so that he despaired, despaired of life itself. This is very brief, we have no details, and don't know any more about this than this line. *We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt we had received the sentence of death.*

When we learn that we are about to die, that's not a good feeling. I haven't been told that in so many words, but I'm pretty sure I'll feel despair and dread. Paul sometimes seems to say he's above that, but only after he's had a while to make peace. This pressure on him was far past his ability to endure, he could not see any way that he'd live through this, and he despaired!

What does that mean, *far beyond our ability to endure*? Don't know, but it's not good. We need to assume Paul was pleading with God for help, and not getting any help, and didn't know why. My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

The apostles did *not* always feel God's comfort and compassion, and they were *not* always in a place to comfort and encourage others. During that trouble in Asia, Paul was *not* comforted, and *not* ready to comfort others. Now, as he writes 2 Cor, he can use that story to comfort them.

V9b - *But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead.*

Paul experienced a renewal through this terrible time in his life. God wanted Paul to learn something, God wanted to deepen Paul's faith. God wanted Paul to rely on the God who raises the dead. The only way God could get Paul to that place was to put Paul where he was under great pressure, he despaired of life itself, he felt he had received the sentence of death.

At that dark time, God had a comfort to offer Paul that did not make sense otherwise. "Paul, I'm the God that raises the dead, you know this, you're going to have to rely on my raising the dead, nothing else is working here, is it?" "No God, nothing else is working, I will put my hope in you, because you're the God who raises the dead."

A Winnipeg chiropractor helped me quite a bit this summer with some leg troubles. I decided I needed to give God credit for this. I said to the chiropractor: "Do you serve the God of the Bible?" He grinned, and said, "Yes, I do." (I did not know what he'd say, but I hoped.) "Me too," I said, "He's the God that raises the dead; it's a no-brainer." Then I told him that I asked that God for help with my legs, and the chiropractor had been that God's answer to my prayers.

He's the God that raises the dead. Why would we not serve that God? That was not the only comfort at all that Paul got from God, but in that dark time in Asia, that was God's comfort to Paul, and it was a great comfort to him. And then, God rescued him from the danger!

*He has delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us again. On him we have set our hope that he will continue to deliver us,<sup>11</sup> as you help us by your prayers. Then many will give thanks to God on our behalf for the gracious favor granted us in answer to the prayers of many.*

I will close by repeating what seem to me the most important teachings we've seen today.

But first, please, please, promise me that no one here feels guilty, because they **don't** have troubles right now? At the end of John, Jesus told Peter something unpleasant about Peter's future. Peter turned to John and asked Jesus, "what about him?" Jesus: "If I want him to live until I return, what is that to you? You follow me." Jesus assumes the right to put followers living beside each other on very different life paths.

1, God is always the compassionate Father and the comforting God. It is in his character, he can hardly be anything else. It is right that we would praise God for this.

2, Christ himself, and his apostles, had many troubles of all kinds, just as our church has.

3, Why did Christ and the apostles have many troubles? So that the compassion and comfort and encouragement they received could be passed on to us and to others. True of us?

4, Paul found himself in trouble far beyond his ability to endure, and he despaired, **so that** he would learn something new about trusting God; **so that** he would move his hope from this world to the resurrection. This was God's compassion and comfort to Paul in that dark time.

5, God's response to our troubles is not what we want. We want relief. God wants something else: we learn to want what God's wants. He slowly changes us. God wants us to be able to comfort others, and he wants us to trust in the God that raises the dead. That's where this goes.

6, This whole picture begins with praise for God, and ends with thanks to God. God's compassion and comfort overwhelm Paul, and overwhelm this letter opening. Paul speaks of his great trouble and suffering, but there's not a hint of self-pity in this. Just praise and thanks to God. There is a great flood of God's kindness over all these troubles and sufferings, and comfort and compassion and encouragement, a steady flood of God's care and help.

Amen.

*PRAYER: Our Father, we praise you that you are the Father of compassions and the God of all comfort. We thank you that your compassion and comfort are a part of all our troubles and sufferings. We want to be faithful to you in the place we find ourselves. Encourage us, give us patient endurance, and guide us with your Spirit, in the place we find ourselves. May your will for us become our will for ourselves. Thank you that your compassion and comfort are always a part of our troubles and sufferings. We thank you that you are the God who raises the dead. Amen.*