

## Life's Tribulation

2 Corinthians 1:1-11

**As we begin what I trust will be a practical and down-to-earth study of Paul's second letter to the church at Corinth, we will need to see the blaring difference between the themes of 1 and 2 Corinthians.** 1 Corinthians is an account of a *church* which is being *instructed* and *corrected*, whereas 2 Corinthians is an account of a *man who is being used for God's great glory*. Nowhere does Paul open his heart to his readers so completely as he does in this second letter, as he relates some of God's dealings with him in his inner life. By revealing something of the price he has paid, his ministry is vindicated and his authority is recognized.

**Now in order to understand why Paul was having this problem concerning his leadership, we need to realize that the problem was not so as it was sociological or cultural.** They had a problem with their understanding of the nature of Christian leadership. Their background, of course, was the first Century Greco-Roman world where leadership was about strength of personality, being forceful, a great orator. **Theirs was the cult of the hero, of Hercules and Zeus.** In the first letter we read about the objections that were raised about Paul's leadership, the way people compared him to Apollos, apparently a great orator, or Peter, whose strong personality comes out so clearly in the gospels. But Paul wants to draw them away from these models that derive from secular culture to a more Biblical understanding.

**Now before we go any further let me suggest that the situation he addresses in 2 Corinthians is in fact not much different from our own.** Think about it: what is your image of the ideal leader? Whether it's a *politician* or the *coach of a sporting team* or a *business leader*, what sort of attributes would you expect of them? **Would you be looking for someone who was strong, purposeful, confident, high**

**achieving, successful, eloquent?** Now think about what you'd look for in a **Christian** leader. Does that word **Christian** make any difference? **The truth of the matter is that even in the church we have an image of leaders who are strong, forceful, confident, and eloquent.** We really don't want a pastor who is a bumbling idiot. Oh, he may be sweet and fun to be around, but he would be ineffective. We want a leader **who is strong, who can do no wrong, who will be an example to the flock, who will lead us to victory over our opponents.**

**But if you will look at the model we have for ideal leadership in the gospels, it has to be Christ himself.** And yet, He humbled himself and became like a servant; humbled himself to the point of being taken away and hung on a cross. We have as our model a leader **who was first and foremost a servant.**

**News has reached Paul from Titus (2 Corinthians 7:7) of the mixed reception of his first letter.** There were those, a majority, who had genuinely repented of sin in the church and dealt with it thoroughly; there were others, a minority, who challenged his authority, suspected his motives, and questioned the validity of his ministry. His answer, as recorded here, is an amazing mixture of tender love and stern rebuke.

Notice the language of verses 3-5, "All praise to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. He is the source of every mercy and the God who comforts us. He comforts us in all our troubles so that we can comfort others. When others are troubled, we will be able to give them the same comfort God has given us. You can be sure that the more we suffer for Christ, the more God will shower us with his comfort through Christ."

**One of the things that people often miss is that when Paul says we are to be partakers of Christ's suffering, it really does not so much refer to physical sufferings as it does the entering into the victory Jesus bore for us on the cross.** The only suffering we

encounter in sharing His victory is spiritual, and that is what Paul is talking about when he says we are to be partakers of Christ's suffering. In other words, the only suffering for a believer is the spiritual discomfort brought by resisting the pressures of the flesh, not a physical or mental suffering. Jesus has already borne for us all the suffering in the natural and mental realms.

**Romans 8:17-18 says we are to suffer with Him so that we can be glorified together.** Jesus isn't suffering physically or mentally, and if we are suffering with Him, we don't have to either. Hebrews 10:12-13 tell us that right now, He is our head and seated at the right hand of God. **As Christ's Body in the earth, our struggle isn't against flesh and blood, that is, against the physical or mental.** Instead, Ephesians 6:12 reminds us that we spiritually stand against **principalities, powers, rulers of the darkness of this world, and wicked spirits in high places.** That's why it's to God's Glory when we are **healed or delivered physically and mentally,** for we only have to fight in the **spirit realm.**

**As you have probably experienced, any time we are walking in the Word and fellowshiping with the Father, Satan will do his best to stop us.** He wants to stop this spiritual relationship. He knows as we receive revelation knowledge into our spirit, we will learn to lord over him in the physical and mental realms. Then his tactics to put us under the law of sin and death will be futile (Romans 8:2).

**James 1 says when we fall into different temptations and pressures, we should be happy about it! Why?** Because the trying of our faith works our patience - our steadfastness on God's Word. **In other words, the more our faith is tried, the more we will learn to trust in and rely on God's Word, and the more we will be strengthened in our spirit.** Then, when our patience (our steadfastness on God's Word) has its perfect work, we will be **perfect and fulfilled,** lacking nothing. It's when we **"lack nothing"** that we have been delivered. Therefore,

Paul is not saying that just because we have been saved by the grace of God that we are now destined to suffer physically or mentally.

**Having said that, look at this verse again and I think you will see it from a different angle.** Paul says, “Who comforts us in all our troubles so that we can comfort others.” It is obvious that Paul is speaking about something that has happened to him, an experience of affliction. He might have in mind the “thorn in the flesh” of which he spoke 2 Corinthians 12:7 (we will deal with this in much more detail when we get there). We know, of course, that Paul’s “thorn in the flesh” was *not* some type of physical ailment or sickness, but a wicked spirit sent by Satan to buffet him.

**So, although Paul does not tell us exactly the nature of the affliction, it is obvious that it was something far deeper than a mere physical experience.** In the 5<sup>th</sup> verse he says, “You can be sure that the more we suffer *for* Christ, the more God will shower us with his comfort *through* Christ.” And then notice how he opens his heart to us in the following verses and ties the physical abuse that he has suffered with the spiritual. In verse 8 he says, “I think you ought to know, dear brothers and sisters, about the trouble we went through in the province of Asia. We were crushed and completely overwhelmed, and we thought we would never live through it.” And he follows in verse 9, “In fact, we expected to die. But as a result, we learned not to rely on ourselves, but on God who can raise the dead.” Clearly Paul is speaking here about some deep experience through which he passed, for he speaks about the sufferings of Christ abounding in us.

**Now I realize there are people in this congregation who have experienced a whole range of trials and tribulations in your life.** Some of you may have suffered abuse of one sort or another, either as a child or as an adult. Some of you may be someone who suffers from depression. **Experts tell us that between 5 and 10% of the population will suffer from clinical depression at some time or other.** Some of you may have suffered the loss of loved ones. Parents or

spouses or children who have died; spouses who have abandoned or betrayed you. Some of you may be separated from your loved ones by great distances, or by family breakdown.

Having said that, I remind you once more of Jesus' words in John 16:33, "In this world you shall have tribulation..." In his book "The Purpose Driven Life" Rick Warren says, "Life on earth is a test." And because life is a test, the world is always looking at how we as believers respond to problems, people, success, conflict, illness, disappointment and even the weather.

Rick Warren continues, "When you understand that life is a test, you realize that nothing is insignificant in your life."

Surely that is what Paul had in mind as he talked about *life's struggles being an opportunity for each of us to draw our strength from Christ himself.* And when we indeed draw our strength from the endless source of strength and power, we begin to realize that every day is an important day and every second is a growth opportunity to deepen your character, demonstrate your love, or to depend on God.

And because of Paul's insight into the spiritual battles that believers encounter, one of the key words that he uses here in 2 Corinthians is *comfort or encouragement.* The verb is used eighteen times in this letter and the noun eleven times. If we would study the life of the Apostle Paul and his ministry, we would see that he has experienced a lot of trials and difficulties. In spite of the all the trials he experienced, Paul was able (by the grace of God) to write a letter saturated with *encouragement.* Out of his own difficult experience, Paul tells us how we can find encouragement in God.

Therefore, Paul is saying that regardless of the difficulty that you experience, you will also experience God's comfort. Verse 3 says, "He is the source of every mercy and the God who comforts us."

The benefit for every child of God is that with each problem that we experience, we also experience God's comfort.

**I am convinced that if we are going to experience God's comfort, we must know what it means.** I think sometimes, we have the idea that God's comfort simply means that God remove the problem from our lives. But that is not what the bible is teaching us here.

The meaning of the word translated "comfort" actually means "to come alongside to help." Actually the English word comfort comes from two Latin words meaning "with strength." When we go through trials, God comes by our side to give us strength.

**Paul was writing to the Corinthian church during a time of great distress.** And the message that Paul would like to tell the believers at Corinth is this: "No matter what difficulties, problems, or trials that you are facing in life, never forget that God is on your side to help you." God's comfort has the idea of conquering rather than convenience. Comfort does not remove our sufferings, our trials but rather it brings us the strength, encouragement and hope to deal with our difficulties.

Verse 3 says that God "is the source of every mercy and the God who comforts us." But the participle is in the present tense and active voice, and a literal translation would be "the God who is comforting us."

**Therefore, it is obvious that we can draw two descriptions here concerning God's comfort.**

**First, God comforts us personally.** As God speaks to us personally, He also comforts us personally. He may use the encouraging words of a brother or a sister, or He might use the messages of the songs or some preaching to comfort you, but actually it is Him comforting you in a personal way.

**Second, God comforts us perpetually.** Perpetual means continuing forever or unlimited. **God never runs out of comfort. God is in the business of comforting His people.** There will never be a time in your life when you will not experience God's comfort in times of problems. **God's comfort is always available.** God will never fail to comfort you.

**And, then, Paul says when we experience that kind of comfort, we can comfort others.** Verse 4 says, "He comforts us in all our troubles so that we can comfort others. When others are troubled, we will be able to give them the same comfort God has given us."

**You see, the Christian life is never a dead end street; we are designed simply to be a channel through which God can work and touch the lives of others.** In other words, after receiving God's comfort in your life, now you are ready to be used by God to extend His comfort to others.

**Remember, as I have said hundreds of times – God never waste time and He never waste experiences.** Therefore, we are to take the experiences in our own life to help and comfort someone else that might be experiencing the very same things.

**There is one last thing that I want you to see - God's comfort should cause us to praise Him for His goodness.** Verse 11 says, "As a result, many will give thanks to God..." This takes us back to verse 3 where Paul begins by saying, "All praise to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ."

**Remember, the focus is not us nor on how we have overcome the problem.** It is always on God, how He has stayed on our side and how He has empowered us and helped us thrive through the problems in life.