

SMALL GROUP STUDY QUESTIONS FOR 9/20/09
2 CORINTHIANS 1:1-11

A. 2 CORINTHIANS 1:1-2

Paul begins this letter with an absolute assertion that he is an apostle that has been appointed directly by the will of God. Later in 2 Corinthians we will read of the tension between Paul and the Corinthians who have succumbed to the influence of false apostles in their midst. This as well as the difficult relationship that Paul has had with the Corinthian believers, necessitates that he assert his authority and remind this church that it is God who has called him to be their spiritual leader. This letter is directed to the church/assembly at Corinth as well as all the saints who are throughout Achaia. Although 2 Corinthians addresses a very specific set of problems in Corinth, there are theological truths that Paul wishes to establish among a much broader group of people.

By reminding the Corinthians of their “sainthood” Paul is making the point that by virtue of being in Christ they are the “called apart ones” or “the separated ones.” Paul spent much of 1 Corinthians explaining to them that they are now the Temple of the Holy Spirit and as such they are called to a lifestyle that reflects Christ. In their new life, they (and we) are called to separate themselves from their culture, from their societal values, from their old life, and to identify themselves with Christ. God is their Father, as Paul stresses in 2 Cor. 1:1, and His parental relationship with us is modeled in the relationship that He has with His Son Jesus. As the Corinthians look to God as their Father, to Jesus as their model to imitate, and to the Holy Spirit’s transformative power, Paul encourages them to make wise decisions concerning their relationships, their lifestyle choices, and their theology.

Read 2 Corinthians 1:1-2

2 Corinthians 1:1-2 (NAS)

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, To the church of God which is at Corinth with all the saints who are throughout Achaia: ² Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

1. What does Paul assert in the opening line of this letter?

- *He is an apostle of Jesus Christ*
- *His apostleship is not proclaimed by others or himself, but determined by the will of God.*
- *He is a partner with their brother Timothy.*
- *The church of Corinth is unified under God.*
- *This letter is intended for a broader audience than just Corinth. It is meant for all the saints in the region.*

2. Why would Paul need to assert his authority as an apostle?

Simply put, because his authority has been called into question. For Paul's words to have any weight, he has to establish that he has been divinely directed by God. It is God who has placed Paul over this congregation, it is God who has given Paul the vision and the passion for this group of people, and it is God working through Paul guiding this congregation in applying the gospel of Christ to their lives and to their cultural situations.

B. 2 CORINTHIANS 1:3-4

As Paul introduces the subject of God comforting us in our affliction, he has a twofold purpose. The first is to continue asserting his apostolic authority. His afflictions are like a badge he wears to validate his ministry. All of his sufferings have been a result of taking the gospel to the Jews first and then to the Gentiles. We know from Acts 18 that there was turmoil in Corinth. The Jews opposed Paul during this visit, sought to place him on trial before the Roman ruler Gallio. Not being successful, they turned their anger toward the synagogue ruler Sothesenes and beat him. Although Paul did not suffer harm in Corinth, something occurred that caused him to fear and as a result he receives a vision of comfort/encouragement from God. Throughout his ministry though, Paul did suffer greatly and in 2 Cor. 11:23-27, he provides an extensive list of the afflictions that he has endured for the sake of the gospel. Later in this letter, Paul challenges the false apostles with his sufferings (2 Cor. 11). Paul has been greatly afflicted because of his calling. Do the false apostles have the same love for this congregation, a love that was modeled by Christ? The answer is no. Paul has experienced deep affliction, yet he has also experienced deep, abiding comfort. Paul has seen God move in unfathomable ways throughout his journeys into Macedonia, Greece, and other regions of the Roman Empire. God has surrounded Paul with faithful, spirit-filled people who aid him in ministry and continue to minister in his absence. Paul has been granted visions of God's faithfulness toward him, and he has a great awareness that the Spirit is leading him in all that he does. Paul's suffering leads to tremendous rewards and have enable him to comfort others as they endure afflictions and hardships.

Regarding the Corinthians, it does not appear that the church was in a great deal of danger or had experienced affliction in the same way that Paul had. Their afflictions may have come as a result of separating from their culture, separating from Temple worship, giving up seeking status, and reorienting their perspectives on what is true and honorable. Regardless of what their personal afflictions are, Paul promises that the Father of mercies and comfort will meet them in their pain. It is this experience of God's compassion that will enable them to be compassionate towards others.

The second purpose of Paul's discussion is to remind the Corinthians that a future oriented perspective is what they need in order to grow in maturity in Christ. Paul has a great deal of problems that he has to address with this church. He is speaking a truth that God will comfort them in their pain, but this is not the primary purpose of this

passage. In this section, Paul uses a traditional synagogue liturgical benediction as he begins his letter with the subject of God's character as a God of comfort and mercies. The word comfort is *paraklesis*, which means "a calling to one's aid, encouragement, or comfort." This theme sets the tone for Paul's letter and will continue to be developed throughout the book. There is a rich Old Testament background for the idea of comfort/consolation (particularly in Isaiah 44-46). In the Old Testament comfort/consolation is linked to a future time when God set all things right. Although Paul makes a powerful statement of God's compassionate love towards us in our painful moments (and he certainly experienced this in his own life), there is also a future aspect to God's comfort that will be fully realized when we are with Him eternally. In all of Paul's writings, he has one foot firmly planted in the present and the other firmly planted in his future resurrected life. It is this global perspective of the blessings of Christ's resurrection that motivates Paul in everything that he does. In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul spends 58 verses describing Christ's resurrection, the believer's future bodily resurrection, and the impact that this has on our earthly lives. The sure knowledge of the future encourages us in the present and gives us access to a God who not only cares about our individual circumstances, but who also has a much broader plan to ultimately bring everything under His rule. As Paul sets up the introduction to the rest of his letter to the Corinthians, he firmly draws the Corinthians into the shared experience of God's compassionate love that is made available to them through the matchless event of the resurrection of Christ.

Read 2 Corinthians 1:3-4

2 Corinthians 1:3-4 (NAS)

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 will be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.*

3. How is God described in this passage?

He is the Father of Jesus, the Father of mercies, the God of all comfort but He doesn't simply rest in His greatness, He offers His greatness to us. He allows us to experience His comfort. He desires for us to experience His comfort in all our afflictions. Paul's afflictions were both external (shipwrecks, beatings, imprisonment, being chased from various towns) and internal (fear) and God responds with visions of comfort to allay his fears (Acts 18:9-10).

4. How does He act towards us? How does this description of God make you feel?

The passage says that God acts compassionately toward us (toward Paul and toward the Corinthians too) by comforting us in our pain, in all our pain.

C. 2 CORINTHIANS 1:5-7

In 2 Cor. 1:5-7, Paul concludes the thought begun in 1:3-4. God comforts and encourages us in our affliction, resulting in a sympathetic view toward others who are also in need of encouragement in their circumstances. As we continue in 2 Corinthians 1, Paul moves from the general to the specific, explaining that his own sufferings are the result his ministry, which includes the church at Corinth. Paul views his converts, his spiritual children, as sharers in his affliction, but also as participating in his comfort and encouragement. Paul begins this letter to the Corinthians by reminding them of their deep-rooted relationship. They are participating in Paul's life, through their prayers, by sharing his pain, and by encouraging Paul in his pain. In a similar way, Paul shares with them in their troubles. Paul is reminding them that they are intimately entwined with him in a way that transcends individual circumstances. It is evident that Paul loves these people deeply, that he has agonized over their travails, and that he desires to be in their hearts.

Throughout the New Testament, the theme of suffering and rejoicing/exultation go together. The idea of suffering is linked to this present age and the idea of rejoicing is linked to our future hope in Christ's revealed glory, our bodily resurrection, and our subsequent participation in His future kingdom. (Rom. 8:18, 2 Cor. 1:3-11, Phil. 3:10-11, Heb. 2:10, 1 Pet. 1:11; 4:13; 5:10). Paul has previously devoted 1 Corinthians 15 to the very topic of Christ's resurrection as the event that secures for the believer our own bodily resurrection and inclusion in all things glorious. The fact of Christ's resurrection and the believer's resurrection is not meant to be merely a lesson in doctrine rather it is intended as a tremendous source of encouragement for the believer in one's present circumstances. Paul's sufferings mirrored Jesus' suffering in many ways, so maybe he understood the comfort of Christ in a unique way, but regardless of what they are we all have our own troubles and hardships to bear over the course of our lives. Paul has suffered greatly and he proudly identifies his sufferings as a privilege and a byproduct of his ministry. The only way he was able to endure all that was handed to him, was to focus on his future hope in Christ and to take comfort in the knowledge that his fellow believers were sharing in his pain. Commentator Ralph Martin writes, "Those who receive encouragement from God are qualified to enter sympathetically into the experience of others whose pathway leads them through a vale of tears."¹

I recently had to send my five year old daughter to school with her arm in cast up to her shoulder. She was terrified, and we both had a horrible morning as she kicked, screamed, and yelled at her teachers. All she wanted was to go home. I was on the other side of the door crying, wanting to take her away but also knowing that my

¹ Ralph P. Martin, *2 Corinthians*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 40, 11.

intervention would only prolong the situation. I left the school in heartache and headed down to Alamo Plaza hoping to distract myself. In the course of an hour I encountered five people I knew and one person that I had never met before, all of whom brought great comfort to my soul. One of my friends had seen my daughter in the morning crying and she later saw her at school smiling. She was able to share this with me and soothe my troubled heart. Although this is such a minor incident compared to what Paul experienced, it is still an illustration of God working in my life to use his people to encourage me in my pain.

Read 2 Corinthians 1:5-7

2 Corinthians 1:5-7 (NAS)

⁵ For just as the sufferings of Christ are ours in abundance, so also our comfort is abundant through Christ. ⁶ But if we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation; or if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which is effective in the patient enduring of the same sufferings which we also suffer; ⁷ and our hope for you is firmly grounded, knowing that as you are sharers of our sufferings, so also you are sharers of our comfort.

Read Romans 8:18-23 and 1 Peter 4:12-13.

Romans 8:18-23 (NAS)

¹⁸ For 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. ¹⁹ For the anxious longing of the creation waits eagerly for the revealing of the sons of God. ²⁰ For the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will, but because of Him who subjected it, in hope ²¹ that the creation itself also will be set free from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God. ²² For we know that the whole creation groans and suffers the pains of childbirth together until now. ²³ And not only this, but also we ourselves, having the first fruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our body.

1 Peter 4:12-13 (NAS)

¹² Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing, as though some strange thing were happening to you; ¹³ but to the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing; so that also at the revelation of His glory, you may rejoice with exultation.

5. What is linked to suffering in these two passages? How do you respond to this?

6. How have you experienced God's comfort in your pain?

7. How have you been able to comfort others?

D. 2 Corinthians 1:8-11

In 2 Corinthians 1:8-11, Paul specifically mentions afflictions that he and his fellow workers experienced in Asia. In the book of Acts, when Paul undertakes his missionary travels, the Holy Spirit prevents him from going into Asia (Acts 16:6) and directs him to Macedonia (which is North of Achaia where Corinth is located). Later, Paul does enter Asia, where Ephesus is located. Although he had great success there, he also had great opposition. In 1 Cor. 15:32, Paul states that he “fought wild beasts in Ephesus.” In Acts 19:23-20:1, Luke refers to a great uproar in the city of Ephesus. He writes, “and about that time there occurred no small disturbance concerning the Way,” (19:23). Later in Acts 20:29, Paul prays with the elders of Ephesus and warns them of savage wolves whose intent is to destroy the flock. It is not certain that Paul is referring to the particular incident recorded in Acts 19, but it is certain that there was significant opposition in Ephesus, the leading city of Asia. If Paul does refer to the uproar that Luke records, this event would have happened after Paul had written his severe letter to the Corinthians and would not have known of the severity of his troubles. Paul’s description of the depth of struggle is intensely strong. He is not speaking of some nebulous troubles, but of a suffering in which he looks death in the face. This must have jolted his readers. When real hardship comes, most relational differences tend to fade into the background. Paul’s description of his travails must have softened the hearts of his readers. In the face of this, Paul turns his hope to the one certainty which stands true: that God has the power to raise the dead. He has demonstrated this power through His Son and He promises to demonstrate this truth in the life of all believers. Romans 8:11 says, “But if the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, He who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit who indwells you.” This verse has always brought me much assurance in knowing that if God can raise Jesus from the dead, how much can he do in our lives to resurrect and redeem the hardship and pain. Paul is consoled in that he not only has experienced God’s past deliverance, but he will continue to depend upon God’s saving power in his life. Before Paul launches into the body of his letter, he concludes this section with gratitude for the Corinthian believers’ presence in his life through their prayers.

Read 2 Corinthians 1:8-11

2 Corinthians 1:8-11 (NAS)

⁸ For we do not want you to be unaware, brethren, of our affliction which came to us in Asia, that we were burdened excessively, beyond our strength, so that we despaired even of life; ⁹ indeed, we had the sentence of death within ourselves in order that we should not trust in ourselves, but in God who raises the dead; ¹⁰ who delivered us from so great a peril of death, and will deliver us, He on whom we have set our hope. And He will yet deliver us, ¹¹ you also joining in helping us through your prayers, that thanks may be given by many persons on our behalf for the favor bestowed upon us through the prayers of many.

Read Romans 8:11

Romans 8:11

¹¹ But if the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, He who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit who indwells you.

8. What is the basis of your hope as a believer?

9. What hope does it give you to know that the same Spirit who raised Jesus from the dead, also dwells in you?