

The God of all comfort
2 Corinthians 1:1-2:13

Reading: Isaiah 40:1-2, 9-11.

Greetings
(1:1-2)

Paul is facing a very difficult task in writing this fourth letter to the Corinthians. He has written to them before, visited them in an attempt to reconcile them to Christ but still has little success. In this last letter (as far as we know), Paul begins with an apostolic salutation signalling the authority with which he holds in writing this letter. The apostolic note is sounded again in 1:21; 2:17; 4:5; 5:20; 10:8; 13:10. The problem for Paul was the challenge to his apostleship. There were men in Corinth claiming to be better apostles than Paul (11:5, 12f; 12:11). Paul refers to them as ‘super apostles’.

Timothy is mentioned as an endorsement of the task that Paul has in Corinth (Acts 18:3, 19:22). He has been referred to as Paul’s son, but in Christ he is also a brother. Note that in the first letter, Paul lists Sosthenes as the associate (1 Cor. 1:1). Sosthenes was the chief of the synagogue at Corinth (Acts 18:17).

This letter is addressed to the church in Corinth. The *ekklesia*, is the called-out people of God and as such they are the holy ones, *hagios*, made holy or separated by the Spirit of God. Achaia was a small province in the north of Greece, but after 27 BC the term is used to refer to the whole of Greece.

Father of mercies and God of all comfort
(1:3-11)

To begin with, Paul puts a link between suffering and comfort, a relationship which we put in antagonism.

The main theme in this section is the consolation. The word used is *parakaleo*, (*para* = by the side of, *kaleo* = call) from which we get the word, *parakletos*. This has been used with reference to Christ (1 John 2:1) and the Spirit (John 14-16). It is a difficult to translate this word. It has connotation with comfort, console and advocate, words used in various translations. Essentially, it means to be called to the side of. The meaning here is not merely words of comfort or consoling, but the comfort that comes from the presence of Christ and the Spirit of God coming alongside us. It is not just the state of mind, but the interaction of two persons. The image we should have here is that of a child, after having been hurt, comes running to the parents and gets a cuddle, being reassured of the continuing support from them. It is this experience that allows us to go and do likewise. This word runs right through this section and indeed throughout the letter. That is why Paul begins with thanksgiving to God - *eulogetos*, blessed or adorable.

In v. 5, ‘the sufferings of Christ’ do not refer to Christ’s suffering *per se*, but a shared suffering with us. ‘Abundant’ (*periseuo*) here refers to the overflowing of the suffering onto us, and so is our consolation. What Paul is saying here is that the trials and affliction experienced by God’s people are related to the suffering of Christ. It is the suffering of Christ overflowing onto His people, the church. They hated Jesus without a cause (John 15:25) and this hatred overflows to his followers. It is not the trials from our misdeeds. It is because of our identification with Christ, the suffering of the Messianic age. Just as Christ’s suffering is for our salvation, so our suffering is for the consolation and ‘salvation’ of others (v. 6). It is the encouragement that overflows to them.

Discussion: Does vicarious suffering only flow from Christ to us? Is it possible for the process to flow from one to the other seeing that we are one body in Christ? How is this then possible? The psalmist asked, ‘What I did not steal, must I now restore?’ (Ps. 69:4).

In like manner, His consolation overflows to us, i.e. He comes along side us as our advocate and speaks on our behalf (like the cuddle the child gets). Hence the aroma of the knowledge of Christ lies in the heart of the

epistle. We share with Christ in His suffering and hence the consolation. This is the logic of Paul's argument. What is central in Paul's thought is the identification (oneness) with Christ.

Discussion: Explain v. 6. 'If we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation; and if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which you experience when you patiently endure the same sufferings that we suffer.' In the light of what Paul has written, how does this inform us in our consolation of others?

It is not only the consolation that accompanies the suffering. God delivers us from those afflictions and near-death experiences. See the laments of the psalmists. The 'near-death experiences' could be the riot in Ephesus (Acts 19:23-41) or the exposure to beasts in the arena (1 Cor. 15:32).

The basis of Paul's comment in v. 9 that we would not rely on ourselves is because that ministry is the work of the Spirit (2 Cor. 3:1-6). v. 10 – expresses the timeless deliverance by God, past, present and future.

The sharing of these trials as well as the joys is the expression of the oneness of our lives in Christ. It is with this knowledge that we can pray together (v. 11). The words 'you also join in helping us' in v. 11 comes from the word, *sunupourgeo*, an interesting compound of *sun* – *hypo* – *ergon* (work), and used in relation to prayer here. What Paul is trying to say is that prayer is a work (what we do) that expresses the sense (reality) of our union together. It is also a way in which we express our corporate dependence on our Creator. He is here pre-empting what he emphasized in the heart of the letter – 'who is sufficient for these things?' This is the work of the Spirit and the prayers of God's people in a collective manner express this dependence. Paul said this of Epaphras as well.

¹² Epaphras, who is one of you, a servant of Christ Jesus, greets you. He is always wrestling in his prayers on your behalf, so that you may stand mature and fully assured in everything that God wills. ¹³ For I testify for him that he has worked hard for you and for those in Laodicea and in Hierapolis. (Col. 4:12-13)

Discussion: Our culture encourages leaders to display a strong and sufficient image. Is this a helpful image to present to the church?

Paul's Defence (1:12-22)

Here Paul begins his defence. He appeals to his conscience (v. 12) and his sincerity (v. 13). Our comprehension of the things of God and of others is only partial in the present, but on 'the day of the Lord Jesus', it will be clear. However, both conscience and sincerity are not verifiable qualities. We will be judged on the day of Jesus Christ and it will all be plain then. Until then, our sincerity will be seen by our openness and transparency. Say what is to be done and then do it. If the plan needs to be changed then declare the change and say why. There is nothing wrong in changing our flight path. A change in the weather demands that we do that. Those watching from the ground and not aware of the change in the weather will only understand us in part or not at all.

Paul discredits earthly wisdom. He contrasts that with the grace of God. Writing to the Greeks in Corinth, he must be referring to the logical consistency of Greek philosophy. I think this pre-empts the argument later regarding the consistency of Paul's plans and actions.

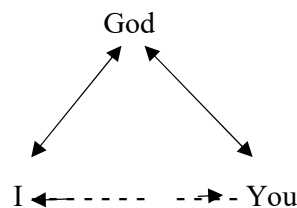
Paul defends his travel plans. Paul had earlier written to the Corinthians that he would visit them and stay for a period of time.

⁵ I will visit you after passing through Macedonia - for I intend to pass through Macedonia - ⁶ and perhaps I will stay with you or even spend the winter, so that you may send me on my way, wherever I go. ⁷ I do not want to see you now just in passing, for I hope to spend some time with you, if the Lord permits. (1 Cor. 16:5-7)

But now, he changed his plan and would not stay as long as intended earlier, but would call on them while passing through. The reason is given in 1:23 and 2:1. It was because of the opposition towards him. If he had continued with his plan, then he would have gone to them with a rod and he wanted to spare them that experience. Paul does not use a one plan fits all approach. That is why his opponent labelled him as inconsistent.

²¹ But it is God who establishes us with you in Christ and has anointed us, ²² by putting his seal on us and giving us his Spirit in our hearts as a first installment.

Our relationship is ‘established’ by God in Christ. In other words, it is God who puts us all together in the one body of Christ. Our accountability is not so much to each other as it is to God who establishes us in or into Christ. However, our relationship is marked by openness and sincerity. This is also well written in the opening chapter of Bonhoeffer’s *Life Together*. This truth is best summed up in the diagram below.



Discussion: Why, in view of the problems in Corinth, did Paul not stay to resolve them and instead made a fleeting visit?

Forgiveness and the New Covenant

(A new community, 1:23-2:4)

Paul writes ‘out of much affliction and anguish of heart and with many tears’ (2:4). This is part of the reason he refrains from visiting Corinth again. After three letters and several visits (including those of Timothy and Titus), the problems remain. He has told them of the power of the cross (1 Cor. 1:8) and the oneness of the body of Christ. They have not come to appreciate that as yet.

Paul did not regard himself as the one who has to go to fix up every problem in the churches. He had said his piece and he had sent Timothy with letters that he had written. He did not lord it over them. Paul’s understanding of the relational is illustrated in the diagram above. We do not relate to each other in a direct way. We do not need to tell others exactly what they need to do, except perhaps in an administrative situation. The Spirit will lead us into all truth and will direct our path. This is the primary relationship established by God (v. 21). Our relationship to each other is secondary to that. We ‘work for your joy’ and that means we work to enhance the relationship others have with the Lord, the source of joy. Our ministry is to point others to Christ, the primary relationship.

Forgiveness – an integral part of the New Covenant (2:5-13)

Paul is eminently aware of the body concept and the oneness in Christ. In changing his travel plans, he is conscious of the way God is directing him and what is the best arrangement for the Corinthian church. What is best is directed by the communal outlook rather than his personal preference.

³ ... for I felt sure of all of you, that my joy would be the joy of you all.

⁵ Now if anyone has caused pain, he has caused it not to me, but in some measure—not to put it too severely—to all of you.

¹⁰ Anyone whom you forgive, I also forgive. Indeed, what I have forgiven, if I have forgiven anything, has been for your sake in the presence of Christ,

‘... in the presence of Christ’ – the Christological focus of Paul.

There is personal distress on the part of Paul as he wrote to the Corinthians. He wrote out of 'much distress and anguish of heart and with many tears', in order that he would not cause them pain (v. 4). The personal was sacrificed for the well-being of the community.

Paul is holding out a tension between the 'I' and the 'community' here. He expresses his personal feelings and at the same time is mindful of how the Corinthian community feels. He shares with their feelings sometimes, but at other times, he sacrifices his own for the community.

This is an important fulcrum on which we plan and act. Forgiveness is an important component of this relationship. The reason is that Paul is aware of Satan and his devices. Forgiveness is at the heart of the work of the cross. This gives us freedom and relieves us from the guilt of sin that so enslaved us. The holding on to hatred is Satan's attack on the church and on all who name the name of Christ is very real.

Paul's reason for not staying in the absence of Titus is not fully known (v. 13). What we can say here is that when there is a heaviness of heart and the concern lies somewhere else, then it is not appropriate to continue the ministry because ministry is not merely a task to be carried out, but a work that is heartfelt and led by the Spirit of God. We will often be misunderstood. Be prepared for that.