

2 CORINTHIANS

Suffering and the Power of the Spirit

Introduction

- Paul wrote 2 Cor with two concerns in mind: (1) to report that people responded well to the “sorrowful letter” (7:8), and (2) to defend his apostolic ministry ahead of his final visit
- Paul’s opponents assumed that Paul suffered too much to be a spirit-filled apostle of the risen Christ
- Paul’s critics called into question Paul’s motive for taking a collection for believers in Jerusalem (8:20-21; cf. 2:17)

Christ Confronts Culture

- Research into the background of the city of Corinth reveals that first century people desired “health, wealth, protection and material sustenance, not moral transformation”
- Religious services, like other social gatherings, were ways to gain fellowship, especially when they revolved around lavish meals
- Materialism, individualism, religious pluralism, and a civic pragmatism presented a formidable challenge for the gospel and its messengers

Christ Confronts Culture

- Into this world God sent Paul to suffer as an apostle of the crucified Christ, carrying his treasure in a “jar of clay” (4:7)
- Paul’s message of the cross was indeed an affront to Hellenistic Jews and Gentiles
- Both as its founder and pastor, Paul had to deal head-on with the socio-cultural identity of the city of Corinth
- The Christian church in Corinth had a difficult time being in the world, but not of it
- Given the cultural challenges, the key issue was what it meant to be “spiritual” Christians in that environment

Christ Confronts Culture

- Another challenge posed against the gospel in Corinth was that “the church” actually met in small groups in various houses (cf. 1 Cor 16:19). Due to government regulations, they were not able to secure a public meeting place
- These house churches made it difficult to respond with one voice to the various concerns that were dispersed throughout the various groups
- On top of that, there were Paul’s opponents who claimed to be true apostles and preached a message of health and wealth from suffering (2:17; cf. 3:1-18; 11:22-23)

Central Theme

- The central theme of this letter is the relationship between suffering and the power of the Spirit in the life of Paul
- Paul insists that God allowed suffering as a way to reveal the Cross of Jesus and the power of the Spirit
- This revelation took place in one of two ways:
 - God either rescued Paul from adversity when it was too much to bear (e.g., 1:8-11)
 - Or, God strengthened Paul in the midst of adversity that he might endure his suffering (e.g., 4:7-12; 6:3-10)

1:8-11

- ⁸We 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. ⁹Indeed, 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. ¹⁰He 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, ¹¹as 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

4:7-12

- ⁷ But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. ⁸ We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; ⁹ persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. ¹⁰ We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. ¹¹ For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that his life may also be revealed in our mortal body. ¹² So then, death is at work in us, but life is at work in you.

6:3-10

- ³We put no stumbling block in anyone's path, so that our ministry will not be discredited. ⁴Rather, as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way: in great endurance; in troubles, hardships and distresses; ⁵in beatings, imprisonments and riots; in hard work, sleepless nights and hunger; ⁶in purity, understanding, patience and kindness; in the Holy Spirit and in sincere love; ⁷in truthful speech and in the power of God; with weapons of righteousness in the right hand and in the left; ⁸through glory and dishonor, bad report and good report; genuine, yet regarded as impostors; ⁹known, yet regarded as unknown; dying, and yet we live on; beaten, and yet not killed; ¹⁰sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; poor, yet making many rich; having nothing, and yet possessing everything.

Lessons from Paul

- Enduring suffering patiently deepens our appreciation of God's character as a God of compassion and comfort, so may we have the capacity to minister to others
- ³ Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion 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 (1:3-4)

Lessons from Paul

- Suffering brings us to the end of ourselves (self-reliance) and drives us to depend on God alone
- ⁹Indeed, 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 (1:9)

Lessons from Paul

- Suffering leads to identify with Jesus' suffering
- ⁵For just as we share abundantly in the sufferings of Christ, so also our comfort abounds through Christ (1:5)
- Paul could identify with Christ's suffering because he viewed himself as "a person in Christ" (12:2), who was engaged in the service of Christ (4:11)

Lessons from Paul

- Our experience of God's comfort (his help, consolation, and encouragement) in our suffering qualifies, equips, and obliges us to comfort others undergoing any type of suffering
- ⁴who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God (1:4)
- ⁶If we are distressed, 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 (1:6)

Lessons from Paul

- Paul's teaching on suffering is implied in four stages:
 - Paul's own suffering, which are Christ's suffering (1:4)
 - Paul's experience of God's comfort by his Spirit (1:5)
 - The Corinthians' sufferings
 - The Corinthians' experience of God's comfort mediated through Paul (1:6-7)

Lessons from Paul

- Suffering is not forever
- Suffering is both light and momentary in comparison with the eternal glory that is produced by suffering patiently endured
- ¹⁷ For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all (4:17)
- ¹⁷ Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory.
¹⁸ I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us (Rom 8:17-18)

Arranging a Collection

- From AD 52-57, Paul devoted much time and energy to arrange a collection among the Gentile churches for the “poor” in Jerusalem (Rom 15:26)
- He regarded the “contribution” (*koinonia*) as an act of fraternal love that expressed the “partnership” or “fellowship” of members of the body of Christ, and the unity between Jews and Gentiles
- This act of giving also symbolizes the Gentile’s spiritual indebtedness to the mother church in Jerusalem (Rom 15:19, 27)

Arranging a Collection

- Paul appeals to various motives to prompt the Corinthians to generous giving (8:1-15)
 - The example of Macedonian churches (v. 1)
 - Their own potential and desire for excellence (vv. 6-7)
 - The love of Christ who gave himself (vv. 8-9)
 - They should seek equal sharing of supply (vv. 13-14)
 - The equality was seen in God's giving of Manna (v. 15)

Arranging a Collection

- Paul also illustrates the twofold result of generosity (9:6-15)
 - Those “cheerful givers” who sow generously will reap generously in “all grace” (vv. 6-11, particularly v. 8)
 - “Generosity will result in thanksgiving to God” (vv. 11b-13)

Conclusion

- God's will for God's people is spiritual transformation into Christlikeness, not our comfort or happiness
- ¹⁸ And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit (3:18; cf. Rom 8:29)
- Christians live in a fallen world, where suffering is the norm, not the exception
- The fact that many of us are free from suffering now is all by God's grace
- Our knowledge of God is reinforced by the Spirit of God

Applying 2 Corinthians Today

- As a defence of Paul's apostolic ministry, this letter is filled with challenges for Christians in the 21st century
- The fact that Paul was willing to suffer for the gospel's sake, coupled with his experience of God and his understanding of the Cross, the letter calls into question the "easy believism" of many Christians today
- The letter also reveals that ministering to others is not a matter of technique or program, but sharing with others the same truth, mercy, and comfort we have experienced in trusting God