

2 Corinthians 1 (Part 1): 1-7 • The God of all Comfort

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The letter that we call 2 Corinthians is actually one of 4 letters that the apostle Paul wrote to the believers in the capital city of Corinth; capital of the region of Achaia.

In the 2 letters that we have, he mentions things that he wrote to them in 2 other letters that we don't have. And Paul wrote this letter from Macedonia around 55, 56 A.D., about a year or so after he wrote what we know as 1 Corinthians and about a year before he wrote the Book of Romans, which he wrote from Corinth.

By far 2 Corinthians is the most personal letter that Paul wrote. Even more personal than the personal letters he wrote to Philemon, to Timothy, to Titus. Even though those letters were written to specific individuals, he bears his soul in this letter more than in any other of his letters because there was stuff that was going on in the Corinthian church. And it's usually known as drama. Can you relate? Yeah, church drama.

You're going to find that 2nd Corinthians is largely about resolving church drama. We've all been through it. We've all experienced some form of church drama. And, we mess with each other sometimes, we step on each other's toes, we say stupid things. We believe things that aren't true. We assume that we know what somebody else is thinking, or intending, or whatever, and we get into trouble and drama ensues.

And there's a lot of people who respond to drama by just backing out. I mean that's the easy way to deal with drama, in any drama. Whether it's church drama, or your family drama, or business work related drama. Frankly, the easiest thing to do is just say, okay, and just cut somebody off, and not have anything to do with them any longer.

But you see for Paul that wasn't an option because he believed that his relationship with these people and the integrity that he had as a man, was connected to the message that he had brought to them, you see. For him, just to say..., and see, I don't think Paul would have really cared otherwise. Paul said

in other letters, I don't care what anybody says about me, and I don't care how anybody judges me, any human court. I really don't care. In fact, he says, I don't even judge myself because God is the ultimate judge, and He's the only one that really matters.

But if this were simply a matter of broken relationships where Paul's integrity was being called into question, he would have just said, whatever. You guys can believe whatever you want to believe.

But again, when a man like Paul goes and preaches the gospel to these people and he started this church. He went to Corinth, he planted this church there. He's the one who brought the gospel of Jesus to Corinth. For him to give in to the attacks and things that were going on against him was to, in a sense, admit defeat as well for the gospel, you see.

What was going on in Corinth is that some people had gotten to the Corinthians after Paul had been there and left, and these people were bad mouthing Paul for lack of a better way to put it. And so suddenly he found himself in a place where he felt the need to defend himself, and that's never a fun place to be.

I don't know if you've ever been attacked or your character's ever been attacked or assassinated. That's not a fun place to be, believe me. Been there. And, to just have to deal with that, you just would rather not. But, again, Paul believed that his life and his ministry were one and the same.

See, we tend to create a separation between life and ministry sometimes, I think or what we... I'll never forget years ago many years ago, when I was pastoring up in Washington for a short time. I call it my failed attempt to start a church. We didn't have a building of our own, so I rented this little office, so dumb.

Anyway, this guy showed up at my office one day and he was drunk. He was just blasted but he was preaching the gospel to me and telling me all about God and His Word and going through stuff like that. And I remember thinking, there's an inconsistency going on here, I think. And that's an extreme example.

But I think there's a tendency sometimes that we have to say, this is the gospel. And I can share the gospel, but this is my life and it really isn't necessarily connected. But see, Paul didn't think that way. For him, who he was as a man and how he lived his life was one and the same with the words that came out of his mouth related to the person of Jesus Christ. And that was huge to him then.

You're going to find as we go through 2 Corinthians here in this study that there's a very a complex relationship going on between Paul and the Corinthians, and it's difficult sometimes to reconstruct everything that was going on because we're only getting half of the conversation. You ever listen to somebody talking on the phone and you're trying to figure out what they're saying based on one person, one person's side of the thing? It's very, very difficult because, you're only getting half the story. And we're not hearing from the Corinthians here. We're hearing from Paul in his side of the thing. We're doing our best to put this thing together, but let me just tell you what we know. All right.

The reason I'm doing this, forgive me for not jumping right into the Word, but I think giving a little bit of background is going to help you understand what Paul is saying and why he's saying it later on down the road.

Here's what we know from what we get from these letters, and even, frankly, from some of the Book of Acts. Paul had originally planned to travel from Ephesus, where he was at this time, through Macedonia, and then to stop at Corinth on his way to Jerusalem. You see, there was a famine that had broken out in the area of Judea.

And so Paul's practice was to encouraged the churches that he had started to take up an offering to help the Saints back in Jerusalem, that was his goal. That's what he wanted to do. He was in Ephesus, I'm going over, I'm going to stop at Macedonia. I'll pop into Corinth and then I'll make my way to Jerusalem. Well, before he did that though, he sent Timothy ahead of him to stop in at Corinth and just touch bases with the body there on his behalf.

Well, Timothy got there and it was a train wreck. Some men had gotten to Corinth whom Paul is later going to call, false apostles. And they were, again, they were bad mouthing Paul to these people. They were calling into question his integrity. Even saying, even suggesting that these offerings Paul was taking up for the saints in Jerusalem were not legit. Which calls into question his own, integrity, and honesty, and sincerity, and so forth. And to a large part, it was working. A lot of the people were believing what these guys were saying.

When Timothy got back to Paul and told him, said, Paul, you're not going to believe it, but Corinth is a mess. Paul decided, okay, I need to go to Corinth first.

And so his plan was to go to Corinth right away, then make his way to Macedonia, then go back to Corinth on his way to Jerusalem. That was his plan.

And he did that. But when he got to Corinth, he found the church in total open rebellion against him and his message. And in his words, his visit there among them was, very painful, very difficult time. And apparently Paul was unable to resolve the issues on that visit. I don't know how that strikes some of you.

Some of us in this room are resolvers and then other people are not. But for those of us, I'm a resolver. What that means is, I have a hard time like even going to bed before I get things resolved. And some of you are like that. The rest of you, you sleep fine with things up in the air and messed up and stuff like that.

But there are some of us who are like..., and Paul just couldn't resolve things, right, while he was there. And so he had to leave. In fact, he felt it best to leave without resolving things because he felt that trying to press the issue would be too painful for the Corinthians.

What he did is he traveled back to Ephesus and when he got back there, he wrote a letter that we no longer have. And he sent it with Titus to Corinth. And it was a very strongly worded letter and it essentially warned them that unless they repented of their rebellious attitude, judgment would come to the church. And it was a hard letter, I'm sure, for him to write. He said to them, he wrote it with tears, and I'm sure it was a very difficult letter for them to read.

Now, to Paul's delight, most of the Christians in Corinth did respond well, they repented. Of course, Paul didn't learn about this until Titus got back to Macedonia and filled him in on this stuff. He tells about it in 2 Corinthians. He says, I just received word from Titus, and it's good news, and I'm really pleased to hear about it. But it must have been a very difficult time while he waited.

Here's the deal. Titus also brought back news that not everybody in Corinth had been satisfied or had responded appropriately to Paul's letter. There was still a small group of people who continue to reject Paul and consequently largely his gospel message. Paul sat down and he wrote them another letter and that's the one we're going to be studying, which is really 2nd Corinthians excuse me, 4th Corinthians. It's the fourth letter he wrote them but the second one that we have.

In the letter that we're going to be reading here over the course of however long it takes us, you're going to see that Paul is going to give a long defense of the legitimacy of his ministry and all the things that he'd done among them.

And as we study through 2 Corinthians, you're going to see here that there were essentially 3 goals that the Apostle Paul had in writing this letter to the

Corinthians. I'll put them up on the screen for those of you taking notes, might be helpful.

1. To strengthen and encourage those who remained faithful to him and his message
2. To encourage the church to complete the collection of funds for the believers in Judea as the expression of their repentance; and
3. To offer the small group that was still at odds with him one more chance to repent before he returned to confront those who challenged his ministry and his Gospel

Essentially, he wrote this letter first of all, **To strengthen and encourage those who were remaining faithful to him and the message** that he brought them, the gospel.

Secondly, he wanted, **To encourage the church to complete the collection that of money, funds, that he was eventually going to gather from them and then take to Jerusalem.** Keep in mind, when these guys came along and bad mouthed Paul and called into question his integrity, that offering stopped because everybody was, they believed a lie. Paul wrote them to say, look, this isn't for me, this isn't for my bank account. You're doing this for the Saints in Jerusalem. I want to encourage you guys to finish that.

And then thirdly, he wrote, **To offer to that small and still rebellious group of people, an opportunity to repent and to get right with the Lord lest he returned and he promised to return. And ultimately confront them as far as those who were still challenging his ministry and the gospel** that he presented.

Those are essentially the things that he desired to do in this letter. He took a pen in hand and he began to write. Let's look now, look in your Bible.

Verse 1, he writes, *“Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother,*

To the church of God that is at Corinth, with all the saints who are in the whole of Achaia:

² Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.”
(ESV)

Stop there if you would please for just a moment. Letters back in Paul's day were typically written on scrolls, which is why these kinds of letters would begin with the author of the letter. If they signed their names at the end, it would be very inconvenient for someone who was reading this from a scroll because they'd have to unroll the entire scroll to get to the end to see who wrote it and then roll it back up and start reading it.

Letters back in those days began with the name of the author. But you'll notice that Paul doesn't just give his name. He also establishes his calling. Look again in verse 1. He says, "*Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God.*" And there are 2 things that he's really emphasizing in this section of verse 1.

One, is that he's an apostle of Christ Jesus. Let me talk about that for just a moment. This is very important because, you see, the Greek word apostle is derived from a verb that means to send out. In his case, to be sent out. But it also, it wasn't just someone sent, it was someone sent with authority. It carried the idea that whoever did the sending had also bequeathed a sense of authority for this individual to represent them, right?

It'd be like if you couldn't go to talk to somebody, you sent someone on your behalf, but you sent them with what we would call today like a power of attorney to make financial or legal decisions in your name or on your behalf, right? Who is it that sent Paul? Notice he says, he says, "*Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus.*"

In other words, one sent forth with authority from Jesus. Paul is making it clear that he's been given authority from Jesus to do what he does. Now, you got to understand here, Paul is not a man on a power trip. He's not saying things like this to intimidate them or get them to cower at his feet or anything like that.

Paul is encouraging them or reminding them to understand that it was Jesus who sent him out to declare the gospel to them and that to reject him was essentially to reject Jesus. From the standpoint that, if you reject the His messenger right, if you reject His messenger, he says Jesus sent me.

Paul I suppose could have said that he was an apostle of the church of Antioch, because you'll remember in the Book of Acts it was when he was in Antioch that the church, while they were worshipping, a prophetic word was spoken, set apart for me Paul and Barnabas for the ministry to which I called them. (Acts 13:2) You guys remember? And it says that all the believers laid hands on Paul and Barnabas, and they said go, do the ministry that God's called you to. They were really the sending church. Paul could have said, Paul, an apostle, sent forth

from Antioch, but that would essentially mean that he came with the authority of Antioch. He wants them to know that he came with the authority of Jesus. I was sent forth from Him, right?

The second thing Paul emphasizes in his signature at the beginning of this letter is that he's an apostle "*by the will of God.*" Did you catch that? Very important. Paul wasn't voted an apostle by the search committee at Antioch. He didn't become an apostle because he had accumulated enough academic credits at the School of the Apostles where he graduated with honors. It didn't come that way.

Paul was declared, one sent forth by Jesus. You guys remember from the Book of Acts that Paul was actually named, Saul at the time. He was on his way to the city of Damascus. He had letters written by the high priest giving him permission to arrest anyone who considered themselves a Christian so that he could drag him by the hair if necessary back to Jerusalem to face charges of worshipping this person, Jesus of Nazareth. And he had every intent of fulfilling that mission, but you'll remember on the way, something happened.

Paul was met by Christ Himself in a blinding light that not only knocked him to the ground, but caused him to lose his sight for a period of time. And there Paul heard the voice of the Lord, and Paul never forgot those words. He never forgot that voice that spoke to him on the road to Damascus, because in that voice, Paul received confirmation that he'd been called. He'd been called by God.

In fact, later on, when God sent an individual to come and lay hands on him, that he might receive his sight again, there was a further confirmation that he had been called as an apostle to take the gospel into all the known world at that time. Paul never forgot those things. This was God's ministry here, not man's. And that was so important to Paul, he knew it wasn't his idea to go do this, nor was it his calling.

I got to be honest with you, I genuinely fear for men and women who go into the ministry by their own choosing. Now, I'm not suggesting that there's anything wrong with desiring the ministry. Paul talks about those who desire the office of elder, that being a good thing. But desire without confirmation of the Lord's calling is a train wreck. And it's going to present eventually a great temptation to quit when the going gets tough. And let me tell you something, in the ministry, the going always gets tough. That's why sometimes we call it the misery, rather than the ministry.

And there's no way that Paul would have gone through the things that he went through. He lists the things he went through. I mean, how many times was he

beaten? Stoned with rocks? Shipwrecked? He talks about going without proper clothing. Going without food on several occasions. Being cold. And there's no way, there's no way you go through something like that if it's your idea. Eventually you come to the place of going, this isn't worth it. But what is going to keep you where you need to be? This is God's calling. This is His idea, not mine, right? That's what's going to keep you on course.

All right, Paul goes on then here in the latter part of verse 1 to list the recipients of this letter. Notice in verse 1 he says, *“To the church of God ..., with all the saints who are in the whole of Achaia:”*

Notice he says, *“with all the saints.”* If you grew up in Roman Catholicism, like a lot of people have, you may have learned as you grew that Saints were very special people whom the church declared to be Saints because of various criteria that had to be met by the Catholic church.

The fact of the matter is, the word, Saint or Saints as it's used in the New Testament simply means, believers. And that means you're a Saint. You say, well, pastor Paul, you don't know me. No, I'm not talking about, I'm not saying you're a perfect person.

I'm saying the Bible calls you a Saint from the standpoint that you are a child of God and you've been set apart as a child of God to live your life unto Him. That's what it essentially means to be a saint.

Verse 2 goes on. He says, *“Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.”* Grace and peace. These are two wishes that are something we've come to associate with the apostle Paul. It's a regular part of his greeting in all of his letters.

But what exactly does it mean? Grace, to say, *“Grace to you.”* Well, essentially to wish someone grace is to say, may the Lord shower blessings on you that you don't deserve. That's it. This is a very nice sentiment. Somebody might be taken aback by it, say, what do you mean I don't deserve? Because we tend to like to think that our relationship with God is based on that. It's like, hey, I'm going to be a good person, God's going to bless me.

Actually, that's not the way it works. God's grace is, blessing and favor that you don't deserve. When you say to somebody, hey, grace to you, that's your way of saying, hey, may God just shower favor and blessing that you don't deserve. That's a good thing to say to somebody, by the way, even though they may be taken aback by it.

And then he would wish them peace. He says, “*peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.*” That is, by the way, shalom, in the Hebrew, but it's essentially to say to someone, may you experience profound richness in the knowledge that God is watching over your life.

You see, peace doesn't necessarily mean may you always live in a peaceful circumstance because we don't live in peaceful circumstances all the time, do we? We live in often very chaotic circumstances. We live in situations where in life presents us with just chaos.

What this issue or wish of peace is saying is, may you walk in the peace of God in the midst of your chaos. May you know that He's with you. May you know that God is sovereign, guiding and directing your life, even though it looks like everything's breaking lose all around you. And then to emphasize that, Paul's going to go on in these next verses and elaborate on this whole idea of peace in the midst of the storm.

Look what he goes on to say in verse 3. Read with me there or follow along as I read.

“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 may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. ⁵ For as we share abundantly in Christ's sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too. 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. ⁷ Our hope for you is unshaken, for we know that as you share in our sufferings, you will also share in our comfort.”

Now, if you had to read through those verses and pick out a single word that just really hit you repeatedly, obviously it's the word, comfort, isn't it? And so that's really what Paul's talking about. But you see today, to comfort someone, we think of it in terms of the comfort we would receive from a parent when you're scared or whatever that makes it all go away.

But that's really not the idea that the New Testament gives with this word, comfort. It speaks of encouragement that gets you through or comes alongside you during a time of need. It doesn't really make the difficulty go away. It's encouragement in the midst of the difficulty. Does that make sense?

But the point of what Paul is saying here about comfort or that God comforts us, is that the comfort that God brings into your life and in my life is not just that we would receive comfort. It's that we would then turn and comfort others or be a comfort to others, right?

And that's one of the reasons why, I have to tell you, I am so impressed by the life of the apostle Paul. He looked at life so differently than I do. I mean, I can't begin to attain to this man.

The apostle Paul actually looked at the difficulties and the trials in his life as an opportunity to gain an understanding or a better means of comforting others. In other words, the things he went through, he saw as an opportunity for him to extend comfort into the lives of other people.

See, I don't think that way, not without at least a good smack upside the head and a reminder from the Holy Spirit. I usually think of the difficulties that I go through as adding to my misery, right? Isn't that the way we all think? I'm going through a hard time and it's adding to my misery. Paul would go through a hard time or a trial, and he believed that it added to his ability to comfort other people.

He would literally look at a trial and say, wow, I'm going through this trial, and this is really going to help equip me to comfort other people. I don't know if you think that way, but I sure don't. And I am very self-centered frankly, in my suffering. I mean, when I'm suffering, I'm just, it's all about me.

That's what just impresses me so much about Paul. When he suffered, it was all about other people. I mean, that's not to say that Paul was removed from the suffering, but he literally thought about it as an opportunity to add to the arsenal of his ability to reach out and bless other people. And that's a selfless response that just absolutely humbles me.

I don't know if I've ever felt that way. I'd like to. But I'm not sure I ever have to be completely honest with you. Paul's life wasn't just about Paul, his life was about others.

In fact, he wrote to the church, we're going to see this later on, Paul's going to talk about Timothy, he's going to say. Timothy, I got nobody like Timothy. He's amazing. Everybody else just looks to their own interests, but Timothy, he looks to the interests of others, cares about other people.

Timothy had learned a lot from his time with Paul and that's what Paul is trying to pass along in these verses. Our lives, your life, my life, and the things that happen in our lives, and the comfort that we receive from those things, needs to be about blessing and comforting others, rather than just what we get out of it. Both good and bad.

I want to encourage you as you leave this place today, I want you to be thinking about the fact that there are people in this room who need to be comforted and you might be the one to do it.

You might just fall into conversation with somebody and something comes out in the conversation that makes you aware of the fact that they've been really going through a rough patch lately and they need the comfort of the Lord, and God may call upon you to do. It's like wow, you're not going to believe this but I went through a situation similar to that.

And by the way, I don't necessarily think you have to go through anything that somebody else went through in order to comfort them. It's like, you may have never experienced what they're going through, specifically. But I don't think that removes your ability to extend the comfort of the Lord. Because if you've received comfort from the Lord in any capacity, you have something to share, because you've been comforted, right?

Now, they may be more comfortable with someone who's gone through something that's very similar to what they're dealing with, and that's fine. But don't let it limit you from reaching out. I mean, if somebody is dealing with an issue that you've just never dealt with before, don't just say, well, gee, hope you find somebody that's been through something like that so they can comfort you.

You can just reach out and comfort with the comfort that you've received, and I think that's an important thing for us to think about. I hope that when you came here today, that's on your heart. What can I do? What can I do to comfort somebody else.

In fact, maybe even pray when you come on a Sunday or a Wednesday. Lord, I'd sure like to be able to just extend, the comfort that I so much need when I'm going through a hard time. Bring somebody across my path that I can just extend that comfort to, and just love on them.

Church drama, it's so much fun. But, like I said before, the easy thing to do is just drop it and say, I'm done. And we live in a day and age where, there's another church down the road. If things get a little dramatic between me and

somebody, I can just say, rather than force the issue of reconciliation or confrontation, which most people would rather die than face confrontation, it's just easier to go down the street, right? Just go to another church. No big deal. We're all going to be happier.

Frankly, some people just break away from church altogether. We've probably all known somebody who no longer attends church of any kind simply because they've gone through some dramatic trauma in their past. I get it, I've been witness to many of those traumatic sort of situations.

But, that's one of the reasons why the writer of Hebrews gave that exhortation. Listen, don't forsake the assembling of yourselves together, which is the habit of some. (Hebrews 10:25) We all know some who have decided to forsake the assembling of themselves with other believers because things got uncomfortable, it got dramatic, it got traumatic, it got hurtful. It happens.

I love how Paul just goes at this thing. Drama? Yeah, we got drama, but you know what? Jesus needs to be greater than our drama. We need to learn to come together and resolve these things and move on. And that's what we're going to see here in 2 Corinthians.