

Week 1, 2 Corinthians 1: 1–11

Hook



Main Point: The comfort in our trials teaches us to reflect back on God’s grace.

Current Event: Valentine’s Day retail spending was more than \$18 billion in 2015 with nearly 55 percent of consumers celebrating the holiday. Participants spent on average \$142.31 on Valentine’s Day-related gifts; men spent \$196.39 compared to the \$99.87 women spent on their significant others.¹ Pets are not forgotten on the international day of love as Americans were projected to average around \$26 on their four-legged friends in 2016.²

What do you typically spend on Valentine’s Day gifts for your significant other or friends and family?

What is the most practical Valentine’s Day gift you have received?

Have you ever re-gifted a Valentine’s Day present? How did it turn out?

Transition Sentence: Today’s lesson will explore the opportunity that believers have to re-gift others with the comfort that God provides to them.

¹ <http://www.usnews.com/news/blogs/data-mine/2016/02/11/valentines-day-spending-set-for-record-after-economic-progress>

² <http://www.forbes.com/sites/niallmccarthy/2016/02/12/valentines-day-2016-americas-20-billion-dollar-day-of-love-infographic/#6145fd192060>

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Book

Main Point: The comfort in our trials teaches us to reflect on God’s grace.

Text Summary: 2 Corinthians 1:1–11 Affliction is real to Christians. It was certainly real to Paul. Within the context of the Corinthian church, this body of believers has experienced a great deal of rebuke and theological correction from the apostle Paul. During his ministry, Paul himself experienced a great deal of affliction and unfortunate circumstances. In the opening of this particular letter to the Corinthian church, Paul wants to encourage them that affliction and difficulty are not dead ends. They serve a greater purpose. He encourages these believers and us to see that in our affliction we secure ourselves firmly to God and trust in His strength that is unrivaled, for the sake of our comfort and rescue, and for the sake of His glory. Secondly, our pain and trying circumstances become balm to the souls of others when they themselves experience trials of the same kind. Through the comfort we give and the encouragement we bring, God is heralded as the Great Rescuer and the One who is strong to save.

Introduction to 2 Corinthians

After planting the church in Corinth, Paul left the city in order to start other churches. However, after he departed, he received word of divisions, competition and unhealthy relationships forming in the church that was dear to him. That was the reason for Paul’s writing 1 Corinthians, which we studied this past fall. However, the problems in Corinth were still not resolved; the church was in turmoil, potentially stemming from opponents of Paul.³

So the apostle returned to the church in Corinth in hopes of setting things right. The visit did not go as planned. Instead of finding support and an attitude of teachability, Paul was met with strong opposition from one man in particular (mentioned in 2:5 and 7:12) and open rebellion from the church at large.⁴ Described as the “painful visit” in 2 Corinthians 2:1, this event was devastating to Paul; he would not accomplish his mission of bringing restoration to the church but would instead leave Corinth in humiliation. He chose to depart instead of fighting against his opponents so that he could extend mercy to the Corinthians.⁵

After this ineffective visit, Paul wrote a strong letter to the Corinthian church, cited in 2:4, 7:8–9. This is referred to as the “severe letter.” This letter, unlike his previous visit, had the effect

³ Crossway Bibles, *The ESV Study Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2008), 2219.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 2219.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 2220.

Paul wanted.⁶ Titus connected with Paul in Macedonia and delivered news that the majority of the people repented of their rebellion and had restored zeal for Paul (7:5–16). However, a remnant of rebels remained under the influence of Paul’s opponents; these false apostles rejected both Paul and the Gospel he preached (and lived out).⁷

This brings us to 2 Corinthians. It’s a complex letter that is personal and intimate in its nature; in it, Paul will express his deep love for the Corinthians and defend the authenticity of his apostleship and his message.⁸ These false teachers sought to discredit both the person and the message of Paul while promoting their own ideas.⁹ These opponents would cast aspersions on Paul, including his reliability (both in his actions and his words, 1:17) and his intentions concerning the money that was being collected for the poor in Jerusalem.

The ESV Study Bible sites the three overlapping purposes of 2 Corinthians:

- 1) To strengthen the faithful majority and the purity of the church (primarily chapters 1–7);
- 2) To complete the collection as the expression of their repentance (primarily chapters 8–9);
- 3) To offer the rebellious minority one more chance to repent before Paul returns to judge those still rejecting him and his message (primarily chapters 10–13)¹⁰

Weakness is an important subject throughout this letter, nuanced in different ways. But the point is clear: in our weakness, the Gospel message goes out and is proclaimed through the power of God’s divine strength.

2 Corinthians 1:1–7: [Read]

Sub-Point: God comforts us so that we can comfort others.

Verses 1–4 The letter begins with a salutation in which Paul makes introductions: He, Paul, is an apostle, a station not of his choosing but one which God gave to him.¹¹ They are the church at Corinth, a congregation that belongs to God, as do the saints (individuals set apart for God’s purposes) living in the area of Achaia (the country in which Corinth sits). He greets the readers

⁶ Mark Dever. *The Message of the New Testament*. [Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2005], p. 192.

⁷ Crossway Bibles, *The ESV Study Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2008), 2220.

⁸ David K. Lowery, “2 Corinthians,” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, ed. J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck, vol. 2 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 552.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 552.

¹⁰ Crossway Bibles, *The ESV Study Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2008), 2220.

¹¹ David K. Lowery, “2 Corinthians,” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, ed. J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck, vol. 2 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 554.

with grace and peace. Grace being the love of God in action, and peace, the result of that love in the believer's life.¹²

In these next several verses, we see a major aspect to Paul's joy in the Gospel: comfort in affliction. The fact that Paul is familiar with suffering and finds something positive to come from it is a point of contention between the apostle and his adversaries. Paul's opponents (who will be described in greater detail later) pointed to the fact that he endured a significant amount of suffering, too much suffering for an apostle of the risen Christ. Certainly someone in that position would not be faced with as much pain as Paul was.¹³

However, the truth is that suffering is a reality for the believer. But there is good news—God provides comfort in times of affliction. It's a kind of comfort that a man cannot produce on his own but has the Father of all mercies and God of all comfort at its source (v. 3). Whether He provides deliverance from the affliction or encouragement and peace through the affliction—God provides comfort.

This comfort isn't meant to be hoarded by the recipient, it's meant to be passed on to others (v. 4). The comfort *and* past/present/future affliction that a believer experiences is meant to benefit others. God wants us to share our lives together in order that we comfort and encourage one another through affliction that we ourselves have previously experienced or affliction we are currently wading through.

So be confident in what the Lord has taken you through so that you can come alongside others to comfort them and walk with them, just as the Lord walked with you and sustained you. In verse 6, when Christians bring comfort to one another through their own experiences, it is the very conduit through which God then brings divine comfort. What a joy it is to serve one another in this way!

How has God shown Himself to be the Father of mercies and God of all comfort in your life?

According to verse 4, who ultimately gives us comfort in our trials and for what purpose are we brought comfort? Whom has God used in your life to comfort you through afflictions?

What pains has God used in your life to help bring comfort to others?

Verses 5–7 In verse 5, Paul mentions sharing abundantly in Christ's sufferings—this is referring to the suffering that Christians will endure as a consequence of their relationship to Christ. Unlike his opponents, Paul understands his suffering not as evidence of a false ministry but as a

¹² David K. Lowery, "2 Corinthians," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, ed. J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck, vol. 2 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 554.

¹³ Crossway Bibles, *The ESV Study Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2008), 2219.

means by which God strengthens other believers (vv. 6–7).¹⁴

In what ways is the Gospel communicated accurately through our own weakness? What Scripture passages come to mind to support that idea?

2 Corinthians 1:8–11: [Read]

Sub-Point: Christians rely on God’s strength, not their own.

Verses 8–10 Verse 8 is a moment of great transparency for Paul. His desire is not to keep the reality of his affliction hidden, but to bear the weight of his affliction to his fellow brothers and sisters. This is a great lesson for us. Paul doesn’t shy away from honesty or try to make the situation sound better than it was.

Paul viewed his situation as dire. In verse 8, the rare word used for “utterly, unbearably crushed” implies the total unavailability of an exit from oppressive circumstances.”¹⁵ Paul felt certain about his situation. He believed all hope was lost. He wasn’t able to rescue himself.

But Paul has a unique perspective concerning the situation. He says it was for the greater purpose to show God’s ability to rescue in the very situations where we can do nothing. Longman and Garland explain, “Paul’s resources were undermined and his dependence was on a God who raises the dead and can rescue the dying from the grip of death.”¹⁶

Though we do not know the exact situation Paul was in, it affected his outlook and his theology.¹⁷ This circumstance “forced him to abandon self-reliance and to trust in God’s power” (v. 9).¹⁸ But here’s the main point of Paul’s encouragement: God is faithful to comfort and rescue. That can be through the gift of perseverance during a hardship, or the release from the difficult circumstance. Whatever happens, God is able. This is Paul’s focus in verse 10. God has acted faithfully before and he will continue to do so, no matter the circumstance.

Why might Paul want the Corinthian Christians to be aware of his struggles and hardships?

What does it mean to rely on God’s strength instead of our own? What situations in your life have helped you to learn reliance on His strength?

Why are we hesitant to trust in God’s strength rather than our own? What makes trusting in God difficult for the Christian?

¹⁴ Crossway Bibles, *The ESV Study Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2008), 2223.

¹⁵ Longman III & Garland, *Romans – Galatians*, p. 443.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid., 444.

¹⁸ Ibid.

What reason does Paul give in verse 10 for why he relied on God?

Verse 11 Paul closes with a call for prayer. He believed in the power of prayer and that deliverance comes through prayer. Paul, as he writes in verse 11, also believed that thanksgiving should be offered to the One who delivers us.¹⁹ When God acts, His children must be quick to recognize the blessing of His work in our lives. And because we can come to Him freely in prayer, we must also share in the joy that it is to pray on behalf of one another. For when victory comes, the body that prays and wrestles together will celebrate together.

What tools have you used to keep track of prayer requests, thanksgivings and answered prayers?

¹⁹ Kruse, *2 Corinthians*, p. 68.

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Took



Main Point: The comfort in our trials teaches us to reflect on God's grace.

Discussion: A Belgian draft horse has the potential to pull about 8,000 pounds. Logically, two Belgian draft horses would be expected to pull around 16,000 pounds. But something incredible happens when one of these animals is partnered with another, their potential to pull jumps to somewhere between 30,000 and 32,000 pounds.²⁰ The Christian community is similar in that we operate with so much more power and potential together; this is how the Lord designed the body. God provides the believer with comfort and encouragement that is meant to be reciprocated to others in the Church.

How has your Bible Fellowship helped you through difficult times?

Who in your life could use encouragement and comfort? How can you seek to provide that this week?

Lesson Conclusion: God's power is so much greater than our own. He can rescue us in any situation He so chooses. The power of our circumstances and hardships are not enough to match the mighty hand of God. Though this is true about God, Paul sees a different aspect to the reality of affliction. Paul sees the nature of encouragement and comfort that comes through the community of faith when shared experiences equal shared hope and ultimately shared trust in Christ. In the middle of affliction, it's difficult to see through the storm. Paul's encouragement to the Christians in Corinth from this opening chapter of 2 Corinthians is that we must see through to the other side, that in time, the way God meets us in our hardships will bring joy, comfort and peace to others who will go through the same circumstance. All the power is God's alone. May we rest in our weakness as we rely on God's strength.

Challenge

²⁰ <http://www.daveramsey.com/blog/how-to-broaden-your-circle-of-trust-with-clients>

Trust that God knows what He is doing with your life. Find hope in His plan for you. Doubting God can become a habit if we aren't careful. We need to trust that He is for us, even when it doesn't look like it.

Look for those who need comfort. In light of all that God has done in your life, look around for ways to comfort others and bring the hope of the Gospel to their lives. Struggling isn't easy. It's certainly not easy to do alone. Ask the Lord to give you the strength to care for and comfort those in your life with the comfort God has given you.

Rely on God's strength. We can have a great deal of pride in our own abilities. No matter what they are, we can easily drift into self-sufficiency. Whatever our situation, we need to look to the Lord for strength and ability. Relying on God is the path to peace, not relying on self.