

# 2 Corinthians 1 Commentary-Wayne Barber

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## A Look at the Book – 2 Corinthians

Father, may we understand the words that we just sang, “On Christ the Solid Rock We Stand.” Our hope is in You forevermore. Lord, let that go deep into our lives. Help us to realize who, and whose, we are. And, Lord, I just pray that as we come to the Word, that in my weakness, Your strength will be made perfect. Lord, draw us all into what your word has to say to us tonight. We ask you to do that Lord, we can’t, Lord, thank You that You can. Lord, in my weakness would You be my strength? In Jesus’ name, amen.

Well, turn with me, as we start a brand new study, to the book of 2 Corinthians. You know, when I was praying about this and deciding where to go, it dawned on me, just really as I was studying this weekend, and that is that I’ve preached through the whole New Testament, I haven’t preached Matthew, Mark, and Luke and 2 Corinthians. And so I am really looking forward to this. I have never had the chance to go through it to study it to teach it. I’ve preached from it, but I’ve never taken the book and looked at it as a whole and I’m so looking forward to it.

Any time we start a brand new message I just want to make sure you understand that’s God invitation for us to join Him in what He has to say to us both corporately and individually. The title is “A Look at the Book,” but really I apologize for that title, because we’re not really going to get to the book. We’re going to back up and kind of run toward it and then next week we’ll get more and more into it, but we’ll start it tonight. I believe God spoke to us in Habakkuk. I’ve had so many of you echo that to me. God has a message for us in 2 Corinthians. So I just pray that He’ll speak it to us and we’ll hear it clearly.

Now, to introduce 2 Corinthians we really have to go back and understand some events in Paul’s life concerning his relationship to Corinth and to the Corinthian believers. It’s in Acts 18, that we discover that the church was founded through the apostle Paul. In fact, let me read some of those verses to you. Acts 18:1, “After these things he left Athens and went to Corinth. And he found a certain Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, having recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had commanded all the Jews to leave Rome. He came to them, and because he was of the same trade,...” Now, many people don’t know this but the apostle Paul chose to really earn his living in another way. He wouldn’t accept things, unless people just gave them to him, he didn’t ask for help. As a matter of fact he was the very one who championed the fact that it was okay to do that, but he chose to be an exception to the rule. And he was a tentmaker.

It says, “because he was of the same trade,” he worked with them, Priscilla and Aquila, and “he stayed with them and they were working; for by trade they were tentmakers. And he was reasoning in the synagogue every Sabbath and trying to persuade Jews and Greeks. But when Silas and Timothy came down from Macedonia, Paul began devoting himself completely to the word, solemnly testifying to the Jews that Jesus was the Christ. And when they resisted and blasphemed, he shook out his garments and said to them, ‘Your blood be upon your own heads! I am clean. From now on I shall go to the Gentiles.’ And he departed from there and went to the house of a certain man named Titius Justus, a worshiper of God, whose house was next to the synagogue. And Crispus [the first convert in the church of Corinth], the leader of the synagogue, believed in the Lord with all his household, and many of the Corinthians when they heard were believing and being baptized.”

What a beautiful picture of how God just decided to birth a church right there in Corinth. The book of 1 Corinthians, in our Bible, is actually the second letter that Paul wrote to these Corinthian believers. First Corinthians 5:9 references a first letter that has been lost. We don’t really know a lot about it except he said, “I wrote you in my letter not to associate with immoral people.” So we know that there was another letter somewhere. First Corinthians was really his second instructional letter that he wrote to the Corinthian

believers there in Corinth.

Now I want to inject something here—that the New Testament evangelists are not what we think of evangelism today. Ours is so shallow compared to this. The evangelists like Paul didn't just see people come to Christ and move on. They took a personal responsibility with people that were led to Christ. They sometimes stayed with them up to two or more years. Paul did that in Ephesus and two other places, but if they didn't stay with them, he would at least stay in touch with them and make sure that they were being disciplined and grounded in the message of grace. I wish we could grasp this concept of evangelism in the 21st century. The responsibility that goes with the opportunity to share Christ with others.

It's like the man who was elk hunting and he was way off with a guide and that big herd of bulls walked out. That big old herd bull walks out; it's a good shot, 200-250 yards. He's got his rifle all set, high powered, got the right caliber bullet, and he's got that scope and it's right on the right place and just as he slips the safety off and his finger touches the trigger, just before he pulls it, the guide that was with him leans over into his ear and says, "Remember, before you pull the trigger, it's ten miles back to camp."

Now, how many understood exactly what I just said? You see, some of you don't understand what I'm talking about. The work is not in pulling the trigger, the work is once the trigger has been pulled. And that's exactly what the New Testament evangelist understood. You don't lead a person to Christ and then leave them off and go off to somebody else. You take a personal responsibility in making certain that they're being grounded in the Word of God.

Well, Paul was deeply concerned for the Christians there in Corinth, particularly about their walk with Christ. First Corinthians 1:11 tells us that he wrote the letter—1 Corinthians, which was his second letter—to deal with various problems that had come to him by the family members of the household of a lady by the name of Chloe. We don't know a lot about her. It says in verse 11, "For I have been informed concerning you, my brethren, by Chloe's people." So evidently she was trustworthy because you don't just take somebody's word and news had come to him of some real problems in the church.

First Corinthians 4:1-18 shows us that he also wrote the letter to head off some of the skepticism that some people were questioning whether or not he truly, legitimately was an apostle. And by the way, he continues to face that and faces it in 2 Corinthians that we'll be studying. He also wrote in 1 Corinthians that they had written to him. They had evidently had some problems that they didn't know what to do with and they wrote Paul, and in 1 Corinthians 7:1 it says, "Now concerning the things about which you wrote." So he began to answer their questions. He also wrote to them to set up Timothy's visit. That's very important; 1 Corinthians 4:17 states the fact that Timothy is going to be coming to them, and then 1 Corinthians 16:10-11 talks about Timothy's visit to the believers there in Corinth. He also wanted to prepare them for his own personal visit. He has leaving Ephesus and was going to go to Macedonia and he wanted to let them know that as soon as he got there he was coming down to visit with them, 1 Corinthians 16:5-9 tells us about Paul's visit.

Now we don't know much about Timothy's visit, there's not a lot that is told to us, except that in 2 Corinthians 1:1 he's already come back. How do you know that? Because Paul says, "Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother." So he was there to assist him as Paul was writing the letter to the Corinthians. Evidently, when Timothy did visit the church it was to help them, to instruct them. That was what this was all about. He came back to Paul and brought some disturbing news about the Corinthian believers. It really bothered Paul. So Paul, instead of going to Macedonia first, he had planned to come and see them, but he was going from Ephesus to Macedonia and come down. But instead of doing that he sailed from Ephesus directly to Corinth. This was evidently bad news that Timothy brought. In fact, the situation was so bad that he intended to leave them, go to Macedonia and come back again after he left Macedonia.

So whatever Timothy told him was not good about the church. When he got to Corinth he got into a personal attack by a certain individual, we don't exactly know who that individual was, probably questioning the credibility of Paul being an apostle. This is found in 2 Corinthians 2:5. It's a little vague, but if you understand what he's saying here, "But if any has caused sorrow, he has caused sorrow not to me, but in some degree—that I may not overcharge you all." Then he says in verse 12, "So although I wrote to you it was not for the sake of his cause that had done the wrong." Now, who was this guy? We don't know. "Nor for his cause that suffered the wrong." Paul suffered that wrong. "But that our care for you in the sight of God might appear unto you."

The thing that we've gathered that had hurt Paul so deeply when he got to Corinth was not necessarily that he was under a personal attack by this individual, but that the Corinthian believers didn't come and stand behind him. And that dug deep into the heart of the apostle Paul. Instead of returning for his second visit when he left there, he went to Macedonia, but he didn't come back. He'd planned to do that, the news had been bad, but because of the overwhelming problem that he ran into, he goes on back to Macedonia and then he goes straight to Ephesus.

Once he was back in Ephesus, he wrote a third letter which evidently was a scolding kind of letter, a very severe letter. From what we know about this letter, which has also been lost, he wrote the Corinthian church to straighten up in certain matters, but particularly to deal with that individual who had caused him the kind of harm that he had caused. Like I said, the letter is lost. And

not only that, we don't know for a fact who took the letter to them, but most everybody believes it was Titus because he says something in 2 Corinthians that gives us that indication. It's 2 Corinthians 7:14-16. Now Paul told Titus before he takes the letter, he said, "I believe the Corinthians this time are going to respond." And he had great encouragement that those believers would finally pay attention and listen. Second Corinthians 7:14 says, "For if in anything I have boasted to him about you, I was not put to shame; but as we spoke all things to you in truth, so also our boasting before Titus proved to be the truth." In other words, we told him what we were going to do. "And his affection abounds all the more toward you, as he remembers the obedience of you all, how you received him with fear and trembling. I rejoice that in everything I have confidence in you."

Paul sent Titus with that affirmation in his heart. Maybe God gave that to him, that they were going to respond this time, it wasn't going to be the difficult uphill battle that he'd had before. He was so excited to hear the news back from Titus. He was going to meet him in Macedonia but he couldn't wait. He had to go down to Troas to catch up with him, to find out how they responded. And Titus brought back a good report. Now listen, 2 Corinthians is Paul's joyful response to the good news that Titus brought back to him when he caught up with him there at Troas.

So 2 Corinthians would be the fourth letter Paul had written to these people trying to instruct them, to disciple them, to discipline them, to correct them, the things that were necessary to keep them on the right road. Probably it was written about six months after 1 Corinthians had been written.

But today what I want to do—and these two things I want to bring out—I want us to back up, to make certain we have a feel for what is going on. We need know something about Corinth, and we need to know something early on about the Corinthian believers and about how they were living, because you see the beautiful progression that comes into 2 Corinthians.

The place called Corinth

So first of all, the place called Corinth. Do we even know where it is? Let's be sure we understand where Corinth was and some things about it. Scripture doesn't tell us much about the city of Corinth, but history does. In fact, Corinth is a very insignificant city today, but it is significant historically. It was located about 45 miles southwest of Athens. How many of you have been to Athens, Greece? It's located on an isthmus. Now I'm going to challenge some of you. Do you know what an isthmus is? An isthmus is a narrow strip of land that connects two large bodies. And hopefully on the map you can see that little tiny strip of land that connects the two parts of Greece. Geographically you have to understand that when Rome conquered Greece it divided the country into the northern and the southern part. The isthmus connected the northern and southern parts. Corinth was on the eastern side of this little isthmus, this little small piece of land. Before Paul's day, Corinth had been destroyed by the Romans in 146 BC, but 100 years later Julius Caesar rebuilt the city which would be the city which Paul would know about when he came into it.

When it was rebuilt it was basically a Roman colony. It became the capital city of the Roman province of Achaia. You see that many times in Scripture, as a matter of fact you'll see that in 2 Corinthians 1:1. Achaia is that southern part of Greece. So Corinth was a very strategic city in the time that Paul knew about it. It couldn't help but be a strategic city; it was a crossroads made up of Greeks, made up of Roman officials, businessmen and even people from other lands, particularly Jewish people. There were a lot of Jew in Corinth at the time Paul went there.

In ancient times if you were traveling from northern Greece to southern Greece you had to go right through Corinth. In fact, ships that would normally sail all the way down and go around the tip of Greece were lured, these Corinthians were so industrious in their thinking, they talked the sailors instead of sailing all that long way and coming around the tip of Greece to bring their ship in, and they would pull them across that little isthmus. Now they wanted to build a canal, which was not built for centuries. So what they did, they built a road and they lined it with logs and they took slave labor and those slaves would take those ships and pull them across that little small isthmus there to save those sailors all that distance of having to sail around the tip of Greece. Today, instead of this road, there's a huge canal. We stood there and looked down on the ships that come through that spans the two gulfs on each side. Now this caused Corinth to be a wealthy, wealthy city, one of the wealthiest cities in all of Greece.

Another thing about Corinth that you want to know about is its participation in athletics. The Olympic Games were begun at Athens. And, by the way, I have a funny story about that. Do you remember when Atlanta got the Olympics back in 1996, Greece was supposed to get it, that was the 200th anniversary of the Olympics, but Atlanta got it. Well, the funny story is that I was in Alaska with my family and instead of flying over the other way, I was going to Thessalonica, Greece, from Alaska, but instead I came back the other way. And we flew all the way to Atlanta, through Salt Lake. My family went to Chattanooga, I got on another plane and flew to Thessalonica, Greece. That's a long way. But in the Atlanta airport I realized I'd been in this shirt for a long time. That's a long flight from Alaska to Atlanta, and so I went into a little shop there in the concourse and the only shirt I could find that was my size was a shirt that said, "Atlanta, home of the 1996 Olympics." I didn't know the animosity between Greece and Atlanta, I didn't know it, so I put it in the bag and I got on the plane, , and right before we got there, about an hour, I went in to freshen up and I put on that shirt, "Atlanta, home of the 1996 Olympics." I'll never forget this, I got off the plane and I kept noticing everybody looking at me with a kind of contempt, and I'm thinking, "What is the deal?" Well, the guy that met me when I finally got through customs, he saw the shirt, and

one ran and got right in front of me and the other got right behind me since there were some things on the back of it, and they just walked me through the airport.

I said, "What are you guys doing?" They said, "Wayne, that's a good way to get yourself killed over here, by wearing that particular shirt at this time." Well, we associate the Olympics with the Greeks and we associate it with Athens, but what a lot of people don't know, there were two sets of those games. There were the Olympic Games that were in Athens, but there were the Isthmian games that were held in Corinth. In fact, this is why we believe that Paul went to Corinth to make tents. Because the people that came from all over the world to that event stayed in tents. That was a great way to make some money for his ministry, and that's why he went there and met Priscilla and Aquila.

Well, Corinth was prominent and it was wealthy in the world of that day. But here's the problem: it was morally decadent. It was known for its immoral temple that hovered over the city. You see, like most Greek cities they had an acropolis, and that means a high place. It stood about 2,000 feet above sea level because it's a coastal area. This acropolis was used for two things: one was for defense. Obviously you get up high and if anyone comes after you, you go to the high place. It was even big enough for neighboring people to come and be safe on top of that acropolis. But the saddest use of that acropolis was that it housed the pagan worship of the worst kind. It was totally built around immorality. At the top of that acropolis stood the pagan temple of Aphrodite, the goddess of love. In that temple were 1,000 women priestesses, or so they called themselves, that were actually prostitutes, ritual temple prostitutes. Now, can you imagine this being a part of religion? That was a part of that pagan religion. At night, since these women could not solicit men on the street, they would put on the bottom of their shoes, "follow me," and they would come off the top of that acropolis and they would walk down, you can still see the road they walked down, and walk through the town, and these sailors and businessmen and foreign people, they would see that and they would follow those tracks and be led right into all of that idolatry.

It was a pagan, terrible place. Even to the pagan world Corinth was known for its moral corruption. In fact, there was a phrase in Greek that was used back then, "You behave like a Corinthian." But it was never used unless somebody was participating in gross immorality or drunkenness. Corinth was a very, very rich, but a very, very evil city. Horribly depraved. And right in the middle of Corinth is a little church that God had planted. The believers that had come to know Christ in the work that Paul had there, how he shared in the synagogue, had been saved out of this pagan setting. Let me read to you 1 Corinthians 6:9-11. Let me just show you what I'm talking about.

Paul says, "Or do you not know that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived; neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor homosexuals, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers, shall inherit the kingdom of God." But watch what he says, "And such were some of you; but you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, and in the Spirit of our God." What a beautiful picture. This shows you what they came out of. The believers came out of this kind of debauchery there in the city.

Well, even though they were saved out of it, the moral decay of that city and the constant battering of the minds of the people was like a pull of gravity, trying to pull it right back into its grasp. It was always there trying to pull them into the immoral things of that day and the worldly concepts of that people of that day. The people who were believers had to live in that kind of garbage every day of their life. But here's their problem: the problem was, instead of a church getting into Corinth because of the transformed lives of believers, Corinth got into the church. And this is why Paul had to write 1 Corinthians. And some of the problems that came out of it weren't because they were saved out of it, but because they allowed it to come back in. And the world got inside the church and this is why Paul had to write that first epistle.

So the first thing is the place called Corinth. But let me introduce an early introduction to these Corinthian believers and the problem that resulted because they bought into the schemes and ways of the world. The people of the church of Corinth. We've seen the place called Corinth, but let's look at the people of the church of Corinth.

The people of the church of Corinth

In the book of 1 Corinthians, we learned how the Corinthian believers were so affected by the worldly mindset. You have to understand that it was constantly bombarding—and I'll tell you what, it's like reading the newspaper in the 21st century. The essence of their spiritual problem is found in 1 Corinthians 3:1-3. Look there with me. I want to show you what Paul had to say about them. "And I, brethren, could not speak to you as to spiritual men, but as to men of flesh, as to babes in Christ. I gave you milk to drink, not solid food; for you were not yet able to receive it." Now, nothing he says in that is an indictment to these people. Babies act like babies. They need milk; they can't eat meat. I remember one time trying to give my daughter something she couldn't chew and everybody ran and screamed and grabbed it out of my hand and I looked at everybody and said, "What are you doing?" They said, "Wayne, she doesn't have teeth. She can't chew it, she needs milk." Babies attach themselves to flesh. Whoever birthed them, they're going to hang on for dear life until they grow up and get old enough to stand on their own two feet. Nothing here is an indictment to them until you get into the middle of verse 2.

Here comes the indictment, "Indeed, even now you are not yet able." Now that's the indictment. When a baby is born you want it to grow up. A baby is beautiful. I've got our two grandchildren on my desktop. Every time I turn in on I smile. But, you know, I don't want them to stay there. I want them to grow up. And Paul said that the problem with the church here, yes, you were birthed in the kingdom, but he said you will not grow up. You still can't take the meat of the Word.

Then in verse 3 he says, "for you are still fleshly." And then he gives the evidence of how they're still fleshly, which means they're still living their lives according to what they can do, what men can do. He says, "For since there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not fleshly, and are you not walking like mere men?" And this jealousy and strife had caused such division in the church, included the way they looked at their pastors. Some were "Paul followers," who was the first pastor. And others were "Apollos followers," who was the second pastor. It's interesting, isn't it? They adapted themselves to one, one or the other, but not both.

It says in 1 Corinthians 3:4, "For when one says, 'I am of Paul,' and another, 'I am of Apollos,' are you not mere men?" Do mere men not do that? They love the flesh of this world. Well, this among other things, like I said, caused great division in the church. The Corinthians believers who just chose not to grow up, and they're saved, were totally involved to the wisdom of the world. It grabbed them: the intelligentsia around them, the wealth that was in Corinth. The immorality was just one of the things they bought in to. And Paul had to address this problem and started his whole epistle that way. And I want you to see some things that he said.

Like I said earlier, it's almost like reading the newspaper today about Christians in the 21st century who believe that somehow, because of what they know, that they have such intelligent creativity, that they can reach people that God can't touch through His Word. That's exactly what happened here and I'll show you in just a minute. To refute the wisdom and the creative ways of men that they had bought into, Paul shows them that God chose a foolish message, and He chose a foolish method to accomplish their very salvation. The message of Christ dying on the cross for our sin was the foolish message, and the foolish method was the preaching of that word.

He begins in verse 18 and says, "For the word of the cross is foolishness for those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God." Now, Paul wanted to show them that God is not impressed in any way with the wisdom of men. He's never impressed with the wisdom of men. He says in 19, "For it is written, 'I will destroy the wisdom of the wise and the cleverness of the clever I will set aside.'" In fact, Paul challenges them: "Where is the wise man?" Show me, "Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For in the wisdom of God, the world through its wisdom did not come to know God. God was well pleased through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe." His examples of this were not only the Jews but the Gentile believers, the Gentiles themselves.

Now 1 Corinthians 1:22 says, "For indeed Jews ask for signs," they've got to see it, but see, it's got to be believed; and then he turns it around, "and the Greeks, they search for wisdom." They have to understand it, but it's known only by revelation. Verse 23, "But we preach Christ crucified, to Jews a stumbling block, and to Gentiles foolishness, but to those who are the called," the ones in that group that are going to respond, "Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. Because the foolishness of God" both in His message and in His method, "is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men."

Then He turns it to their own salvation. This is such an interesting verse, verse 26, "For consider your calling, brethren, that there were not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble; but God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things which are strong, and the base things of the world and the despised, God has chosen, the things that are not, that He might nullify the things that are." But then Paul wanted them to know why God chose the foolish message method of the cross and the foolish method of preaching the Word of God. He said in verse 29, "that no man should boast before God."

He reminds them that only through what Christ did were they believers. It wasn't through what any man did, it was what Christ did. He said in verse 30, "But by His doing you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification, and redemption, that just as it is written, 'Let him who boasts, boast in the Lord.'" That the whole reason it was done that way. Paul then defended why he was what he was, and why he did what he did. Verse 1 of chapter 2, "And when I came to you, brethren, I did not come with superiority of speech or of wisdom," I didn't have all these creative ways of doing something outside of the foolish method God had given, "proclaiming to you the testimony of God."

The word "superiority" that is used there, "superiority of speech or of wisdom," Paul says he was careful not to overshadow message of the Word of God. He was so careful not to do that. Paul never wanted to use anything that would cause the people to walk away with that on their minds instead of the message of God. He says in verse 2, "For I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified." Now that's an important verse there. That word "crucified" there is in the perfect tense. Perfect tense means that something happened back here—and in this text he's talking about He was crucified—and he's talking about that has a continuing influence on our life, even now as believers. It's the crucifixion of Christ that put all of us to death, all of our fleshly methods, all of our worldly ways, all of our fleshly ideas died when we were crucified with Him, when we received the Lord Jesus as

our Lord and Savior. Galatians 2:20, "I am crucified with Christ, nevertheless I live; yet not I but Christ lives in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God who loved me and gave Himself for me."

Do you see what Paul is saying here? He's saying there is nothing in my flesh that can contribute to the reaching of people for salvation. Nothing in my flesh whatsoever. It died at salvation. Therefore I have to come back to the age old method that God has given, the foolish method and the foolish message which is the preaching of the Word of God. I do not want anything that will in some way come up and overshadow the message and the thoughts that God wants to share with the human heart through His Word. Paul said that my creativity is a poor contrast to God's Word when it's preached properly. And he says in verse 3, "And I was with you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling."

You know, it took years of my life to understand what that meant. It only comes when we understand how weak and ineffective we are in our flesh. We can do great things in the corporate world, we can do great things in the political world, but when it comes to the kingdom of God, we're on a brand new page and we have to understand our own personal, fleshly incompetence. And when we see our weakness and our inability, and that God is not impressed with all the ideas we offer to Him and ask Him to bless, it is then that we tremble in the face of what we represent. We are all desperate for His power.

Paul says in verse 4, "And my message and my preaching were not in persuasive words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power," and then he says why. He comes back to the same thing. If you want to know what drove Paul, what motivated him from the time he started his ministry to the time he died, it's right here in verse 5, "so that your faith would not rest on the wisdom of men but on the power of God."

Well, did the Corinthian church get the picture? Absolutely not. They fell into the same trap many have fallen in to. They didn't seem to get it. Chapter 5, sin went undisciplined in the church. Chapter 6 it was so bad that they would even sue each other in public, pagan court, ruining their witness to others over something trivial like money. In chapter 7 their families were upside down. In chapters 8-10 they used the precious message of God's grace as a license to walk all over their weaker brother. In chapter 11 they desecrated the Lord's Supper. He said every time you come together you bring shame on His name. In chapter 12 they thought that anything emotional must be spiritual. In chapter 13 they knew nothing of God's love. In chapter 14 they're babbling in an unknown tongue, a practice that was not only wrong, the whole premise was wrong. It wasn't for believers, it was for unbelievers. In chapter 15 they didn't believe the bodily resurrection of Jesus. Paul said if you don't believe that then you can't know Him, because that's part of the gospel. And then in chapter 16 they knew nothing of stewardship to the church.

All because they would not yield themselves to Christ and allow Him to do through them what only He in His power could do. Their faith rested on the wisdom and creativity of men instead of on Christ. And the proof of the immaturity was in the pudding. You just had to study the book and you saw through it.

Well, this is early on and I want to make sure you see that, because there is going to be a transition here. And there is hope. We've seen the place called Corinth, not a good place to live because of the influence on everybody. We've seen the people early on of the church there, but next time we'll begin to get more and more into 2 Corinthians. We sang about comfort earlier. It's used ten times in the first 11 verses. Paul has a lot of great things to say in 2 Corinthians. It's a powerful book, quite unlike what he's dealt with them before, and that's an encouragement to me. It ought to be an encouragement to you, that there have been days in my life that I couldn't wait to share my creative ideas with God to where I finally figured out He wasn't interested. And the only time that God is impressed is when He looks at me and sees Himself. And for that to happen I've got to come to the end of all of my earthly ideas and ways and thoughts and I've got to learn to bow before Him and go back to the foolish method and go back to the foolish message and continue to do what God said to do and then God touches the hearts of people.

I believe that we'll see that there's great encouragement in this book. We don't have to walk after the flesh. We don't have to look like the world to reach the world. Christ has been reaching it for a long time. It's nothing new to him. In fact, our son and his wife are about to have their first child. One day—he was all nervous—I said, "You know, having babies, it's been around for a long time. It's not something real new." Christ reaching different cultures, different people, different races, has been around for a long time. He chose a foolish message and He chose a foolish method, but it has to be done in the power and demonstration of God and it will do its work.

Well, that's the early-on look at the church of Corinth. I was at a conference for youth pastors of all denominations. I was one of the speakers, but I had a seminar, and I didn't know what to do. And I said, "Is ministry received or is it achieved?" Is it something man in his own wisdom comes up with and does for God and ask Him to bless, or is it something he receives from God as he walks in yieldedness to His Word and to His will? I didn't think anyone would come; there was standing room only. When I finished I didn't know if anybody had heard a thing I said. Have you ever taught some place and you didn't know? They look at you like a calf at a new gate and you haven't got a clue if they heard a thing you said?

Nobody left, everybody just sat there. I said, "You're free." They just sat there. Finally one guy stood up and he said, "Can I say

something?” And I said yes. He said, “When I got saved I knew that it was nothing about me that got me saved, and when I got in the ministry I understood unless it was God’s Word, unless it was the Spirit of God anointing His Word, it wasn’t going to accomplish anything eternal. But you know what happened to me? I got up under a committee that started looking for numbers and I became numbers-driven for the last five years of my life. I have lost my joy, I have lost my sense of purpose, and I beat myself up anytime we have one less than we had the week before.” He began to sob. We just stopped and had prayer for him. He finally sat down still weeping.

Another man said, “Can I say something?” For one hour and 45 minutes we saw people come back to the foolish message and the foolish method. That’s the way they started, that’s what God set up and that’s the way it’s going to be finished. And that’s the church of Corinth. Thank God they came around. And I think we’re going to enjoy

Second Corinthians. As a matter of fact, you’re going to see more of Christ in you, the hope of glory in 2 Corinthians than in just about any epistle we’ve looked at except for Galatians. It’s powerfully packed in this small epistle.

So you say, how do you take something home with you? Let me ask you a question. Have you ever had someone personally attack you because of your stand on the Word of God and the will of God? You don’t have to be a pastor to be in that boat. Somebody at work? Let me ask you another question. Have you ever had somebody attack you, and your friends wouldn’t stand behind you, and they stayed quiet and left you standing there by yourself? You can just walk through this whole study in the background and find all kinds of ways it can apply to your life. How much is the world affecting the way you do things? And what is it in your life that has somehow become so superior over the message of the Word of God shared or preached in Spirit power and demonstration that people walk away with that and miss the whole message of what God was trying to say? There are a lot of things we can take home tonight.

The one I want you to take home is that there is hope. There sure is hope. We’ve got to be brought back to where we departed.

## **2 Corinthians 1:1**

### **The God of All Comfort – Part 1**

Well, turn with me to 2 Corinthians and we’re going to look a little deeper into that little fact of “God is good, all the time.” All the time! We’re going to see His goodness as we talk about the “God of All Comfort,” and this is part 1. You’ll understand when we get into it because the word “comfort” is not even mentioned until verse 3, but we have so much to see about the character of God.

I want you to get into this with me as we think of the apostle Paul and what he’s doing here. If you’ve read through the book, hopefully you’re seeing what I’m trying to tell you: only Christ, living in a person, can cause that person to believe the best in the people who have done him wrong. Only Christ, living in you and living in others that love Him, only He can make us see the best in the lives of people who have treated us wrongly. That’s what God’s love does. In fact, in our class on Wednesday nights we’ve been talking about that. We’re talking about loving the unlovable and what God’s love is and what it isn’t. And one of the things we’re discovering is that God’s love in a believer causes him or her to always give his brother the benefit of the doubt. That is exactly what Paul is doing in 2 Corinthians. He’s obviously been comforted by God, God is the only one Who can comfort us. And now He chooses to give the Corinthian believers the benefit of the doubt.

By the way, he has little to go on because of the way they’ve treated him. He’s had a bad experience with the church of Corinth. But he’s led by the Lord to love them and to comfort them in this fourth epistle that he’s written to them.

The word “comfort” in God’s Word, particularly in 2 Corinthians, is found 19 times. So you begin to see a little bit of what the epistle is all about. But it’s used 10 times in verses 3-11 of chapter 1. It’s a powerful theme in this epistle. The word for comfort is a good word to know. It’s the word here translated to this particular epistle *parakaleo*. *Para* means “alongside;” *kaleo* means “to call, to call alongside somebody. To comfort and to encourage that individual. It’s the word used to describe the Holy Spirit who is the divine Comforter that Jesus sent to live in the lives and hearts of believers.

Paul, again, had had a very difficult experience with the believers of Corinth. In fact, his third letter, which we went over last week—which has been lost, we don’t have it—was one of those letters evidently that just scalded every single one of them. And it led them to deal with a particular individual that had caused him great strife. And he believed in those Corinthian believers that they would respond correctly. He’d had a tough time with them but he even tells Titus who we believe took the letter to them, he tells him, “I believe they’re going to respond correctly this time.” The letter that we’re studying, called 2 Corinthians is technically his fourth letter that he has written to the church there in Corinth.

I’ll have to tell you this. I love teaching and I love preaching, but I tell you, when I make a mistake I’ll let you know. Last week in my

message I said Paul couldn't wait to find out the message that Titus had for him about how the Corinthian church had responded and I said he was in Macedonia, couldn't find him and he went to Troas to meet him. I apologize; it was the exact opposite. He went to Troas to find him and then he went on to Macedonia. Finally he caught up with him before then because he just couldn't wait to hear how the Corinthian church had handled that very difficult letter that he had written to them. I was exactly backwards.

Paul had chosen, even before sending that letter, to hope the best in the Corinthian believer. I tell you, that's the love of God. You won't find that anywhere else. You can't come up with that kind of love. God does that in our hearts. He puts such a love in us that never gives up on anybody; it never quits believing in the Christ that lives within other believers. What a powerful word that is to us in the 21st century as we learn to love one another in Christ even when we're treated wrongly.

In 2 Corinthians, instead of beginning this letter chastening the people, which basically his other three letters had done, he begins by comforting them. He's made a choice. So today we're going to begin to see how he comforts them. We're going to be looking at the God of all comfort, but today we're really going to be looking at the character of the one who does the comforting. The comforting part we'll hit in verse 3.

The pleasure of God to use His people

Three things I want you to see to hopefully encourage your heart. First of all, as we look at God and Who He is, God is good when? All the time. Now let's just look at His goodness. Let's just look at see how He's so good to us. Not only does He comfort us, but some other things we need to know. First of all, the pleasure of God to use His people.

It's incredible, God could speak and get it done, but God chooses to use His people and involve them in what He's doing. In 2 Corinthians 1:1, it says, "Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother." It's such an awesome thing to know that God had a purpose for them and has a purpose for us. He has a plan for any of us long before we ever knew Him and mostly before we were ever born. "Paul," now listen to the words, "an apostle." God had set Paul apart in his mother's womb before Paul had ever even experienced birth. Galatians 1:15 says, Paul speaking, "But when God, who had set me apart even from my mother's womb."

Little did Paul know he would be born a Jew. He had no choice in that, that's the way he was born into this world. Little did he know he would be gifted with such an intellectual mind that he could argue with the Greek philosophers there on Mars Hill. Little did he know that he would have the schooling of Gamaliel, which would teach him the law like nobody else in the whole New Testament. Little did he know that God orchestrated his life from the time long before he was ever born. Can you imagine the godhead in heaven, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit? You know, "We need a man, we need a preacher to the Gentiles, we need a preacher of grace; but this man has got to be a Jewish man, because unless he's a Jew in a strict family, circumcised the eighth day, then he won't appreciate all the covenants of the promises. We need a man that's of high intellect, we need a man taught by Gamaliel, we need a man that knows the law better than anybody else because then he, above everybody, can appreciate the message of God's grace. We need a man that would end up penning three-fourths of the New Testament.' Paul had no idea about that. "Paul, an apostle."

You know, I wish for all of us that we could understand the plan that God has for our lives. Have you discovered it yet? By walking in faith God leads you right into it. Before we were ever born, God has a purpose and a plan for each one of our lives. He's no respecter of persons. God has a purpose for each one of us. What a difference that would make if believers were still looking for what they already have in Christ Jesus. They're always trying to get into a room that they're already in, if they would just bow before Him, they would begin to discover the purpose and the plan that God has for their lives.

"Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother." Now it becomes very apparent here that Timothy has returned. Paul had sent him to Corinth; we know he's back with Paul because he's mentioned there. It's fitting that Paul includes the name of Timothy because Timothy was there when the church of Corinth was first begun. According to Acts 18, Silas had come with Timothy down to see Paul, Paul had been making tents, but when they got there he pushed the tent-making aside and they focused in on preaching the gospel, and as a result of that the church of Corinth was born. Paul so loved Timothy. He calls him "our brother." But in the Greek it's "Timothy the brother." The definite article is used there, and what a powerful change that makes, what a compliment. What Paul is saying is not only is he my brother and our brother, but he's the brother. He's the example of what a true brother in the Lord Jesus Christ really is. And Paul so loves him. He says in Romans 16:21, "my fellow worker." He calls him "my beloved and faithful child in the Lord" in 1 Corinthians 4:17. He calls him "my true child in the faith" in 1 Timothy 1:2. And he calls him very tenderly "my son" in 1 Timothy 1:18. He calls him "my beloved son" in 2 Timothy 1:2. He calls him "God's fellow worker in 1 Thessalonians 3:2. So there's a real connection between Paul and Timothy.

But even though Timothy's name is mentioned, Paul is the one doing the writing in this epistle. How do you know that? Because he uses that first person plural "we, we, we," all the way down to verse 15 and then in verse 15 he changes it to first person singular and carries that through the book. And he says in verse 15, "And in this confidence I intended at first to come to you." He puts it in



that first person singular, and then in chapter 10:13 he says, "For this reason I am writing these things."

"Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus." Now, I want you to see what he's saying here when he says, "Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus." That's significant for us to understand in a couple of ways. First of all, he's holding up his badge of authority given to him by God. Let me help you understand that. The other day I was coming back from a luncheon and I was trying to get to a 2:00 appointment and I got held up. There had been some kind of wreck, I don't know what kind because I couldn't see beyond where they'd let you go. They had the street blocked off, they had a fire truck, they had an ambulance, they had two police cars, and this lady policewoman had stopped traffic and would not allow us to go any further. Now I had a 2:00 appointment, it's about five minutes to two, I'm not that far from the church, but now this is rather a dilemma. Now, here's this lady and she had the authority to stop traffic. Why? Because she had the badge. And that badge was given to her by someone who had the power to give her that authority. She had the authority she needed to deal with the situation.

Now the apostle Paul, when he pulls out his badge, is usually doing something that's interesting. In some of his epistles, Philippians for instance, he doesn't do that. He says, "Paul, a bond servant." He doesn't have doctrinal problems he's trying to correct. He doesn't need to pull his badge. But it signals the authority that God has given to him in Christ, the power of all is in God, but He's allowed him to be an apostle in the New Testament. Now you say, why would he pull out his badge? What is he doing here? Well, to discipline, to correct, to protect, to chasten, but just like the police woman, he had to pull his badge out to deal properly with the situation. You see, his apostleship, if you haven't studied 1 or 2 Corinthians, his apostleship was under hostage by many people that didn't like Paul. They questioned his authority, they questioned his apostleship. Those in the church that wanted to live like they wanted to live couldn't stand it when Paul would stand before them and say, "thus says the Lord" to have the authority to determine the doctrine in the church. In fact, you're going to see him defend this in chapter 10 all the way through chapter 13 of our study. He takes four chapters to defend his apostleship. Why? Because it's under attack.

So in that first verse when he says, "Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus," look out, strap your seatbelts on, he's pulling out his badge of authority. Now make sure you understand there are no apostles today like the apostles in Paul's day. We have the Word of God and these apostles were those who helped give it to us. In fact, Ephesians 2:20 tells us that our faith is built upon the apostles and the prophets. We don't have those kinds of apostles today. There are many people saying "I'm now an apostle in the same sense Paul was." That is ridiculous. God has spoken in His Word and that's it. And He used the apostles and prophets to give us that foundation. We don't need to go back and rebuild the foundation.

Now in today's time, we don't have apostles like that, but when the Word of God is preached along with it comes His authority. Whereas back then Paul was one of the ones writing and penning the word that we have today. But here's what I want you to see: "Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus." It was such a pleasure for God to use Paul and Timothy as His vessel to the Gentile churches. How do you know that? How do you know it was God's pleasure? Thank you for asking. "Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus," but look at this, "by the will of God." I've been waiting a long time to get back into the New Testament because I love the power and strength of these words.

Let me explain to you the word "will." There are two words that are translated "will," but this particular word is thelema. It's not His demand, it's not talking about His demand; He doesn't demand that Paul become an apostle, that's not the emphasis of the word. But it's the word describing an expression of pleasure. It's that which brings joy to God. Wow. God took great pleasure. It brought God great joy to give Paul the authority of being an apostle in the New Testament church. I love that thought.

Isn't it interesting that the very thing that displeased the Corinthian believers brought great joy and pleasure to God in doing. That's sometimes the way it is. But, you see, God loves to draw us in to what He's doing. He loves to use His people. So we see the pleasure of God to use His people. I had lunch today with a couple. They came out of another religion and they've been saved for so many years now, and they were saying, "Wayne," and the lady was particularly weeping, and she said, "Wayne, isn't it awesome that God that made the world and that sent His Son would let me be used in His kingdom?" And I was thinking of the excitement and the enthusiasm in her voice. It's been a long time since I've seen Christians in different places, I'm not talking about you, but seen believers come to that place and say, "Oh, God, do You mean You take pleasure in using me in Your kingdom's work?" That's Who He is. It just delights Him when He can find a willing vessel through which He can do His work. God uses His people. God uses His people. He takes great pleasure in doing so.

Let me ask you a question: are you being used of God today? Are you allowing God to do through you what He wants to do? That's the bottom line. Paul has decided to believe the best in the Corinthians. He's decided to trust the Christ that lives in them, but listen, he has no evidence to go on other than the report by Titus that they're doing any better than when he wrote that epistle to them. He just chooses to believe that. And I'm just asking you a question: do you wake up in the morning and it overwhelms you that God wants to use you? Does it do something? Does it make you feel like that God loves me so much that in His goodness and in His character He really wants me to be useable in what He's doing? That's the goodness of God.

The purpose of God to locate His people

But secondly, not only does He use His people and take pleasure in using His people, but the purpose of God to locate His people. Let me explain that. No one is where they are by accident. Do you understand that? How many understand what I'm just telling you? We're here by divine appointment and it's the purpose and pleasure of God to put us where He puts us. God plants His people where He wants them so they can affect the world that is around them.

"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." Now, first of all, let's take that last phrase: "with all the saints who are throughout Achaia." Remember that Achaia was mostly the southern part of Greece. It did involve some of that central part. These letters that were written by Paul were read by all the believers in a particular area, not just at the Corinthian church. They would pass that letter around and everybody that was a believer would get a chance to hear it and to read it. The word "saints," the "saints that are in Achaia," the word "saint" refers to a believer. Now I know that there are religions who say that man makes saints, etc. No, sir! A saint is a believer, and the word means someone who has been set apart unto God to be useable to God. And He says, "I put them wherever I want to put them." They're strategically located all over Greece, because Achaia was not a town or a city; it was an area of all southern and part of central Greece.

So again, "Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, to the church of God which is at Corinth," now hang onto this. "The church of God which was at Corinth" was not the only place where God had His people, as we already have seen in that verse. But in Romans 16:1, he calls about the church which is at Cenchrea and then in Acts 8:1 he talks about the church which is in Jerusalem. In Acts 13:1, the church which is at Antioch. So the church is wherever you find God's people, and that's what I want you to get in your mind. You see, we're not the church; we're just a piece of it. Wherever you find God's believers, He takes great pleasure in using them, but He takes a great purpose in locating them and placing them in areas where they can influence the people around them.

In this word, all these words are pregnant with meaning to the Corinthian church. Don't ever for one second read a verse and think it's trite. He used it over here, he's using it here. It's just a simple greeting. No sir, no sir. The word for church is the word ekklesia. The word ek, which means "out from among something." If I had a pen in my pocket and I took it out, that would be ek. If I had a pen on the outside attached to my pocket, next to it, but not in it, it would be apo. It's a different preposition. Ek means out of something: you were in it, you were involved in it, you were part of it, it misses you now that you've been taken out of it. And then there's the word koleo, which means "the called out ones." It is never used of a pagan religion no matter where you find it. It's only used of God's people and has tremendous meaning to all of us. The term is especially reserved for believers who make up the body of Christ. It applies not only to change of life, but it applies to a change of lifestyle of the one who claims to be a believer. It doesn't mean that we're not to be in the world, it simply means that we're not to be of the world. The world is not to be in us.

You say why am I making a big deal out of this? Because I've studied 1 Corinthians. What a need they have of hearing this, because the church in Corinth had allowed Corinth to get inside the church and when he calls them the church that is at Corinth, he reminds them you came out from among those kinds of lifestyles. Yes, I want you in it, but I don't want you of it. You're the called out ones. First Corinthians tells us the whole story as we looked at last time. By using the word church, which is Christ's body, we need to understand the church is wherever you find it; it doesn't matter where it is. It only has one head, and that is Christ Himself.

Paul, in speaking of the order and the form of how the husband and wife deal with one another, he says in Ephesians 5:23, "for the husband is the head of the wife, as Christ also is the head of the church." And he qualifies to being the head for he says, "He himself being the Savior of the body." It's speaking of Christ in Colossians 1:18, Paul says, "He is also head of the body, the church." You say what's the relation here? Oh, listen, it would be so fitting for Paul to say this to the Corinthians because you know what? The Corinthians didn't look at Christ being the head of the church. Some were of Paul, some were of Apollos, some were of Cephas, which is the Aramaic name for Simon Peter; they were of men as if men were the head of the church. Oh, how in the world we're ever going to pop this balloon that the preacher is not the head of the church; the elders are not the head of the church. The head of the church, which is the body of Christ, is Christ Himself.

So the church is located wherever God has chosen to put it. I don't know what neighborhood you live in, but you're the church in that neighborhood. You're light because you're in Christ; and you're salt; and God has put you wherever he has put you. You say you tried to buy a house up here but it fell through and we ended up moving over here and God says, "Well, look here." And God put you right where He wanted you to be. And if you're sent, then you're put, and you've got a purpose in being there: to influence the world that is around you, to allow Jesus to be Jesus in you. And no matter where you're found and no matter where you're put, Christ is your head because He's the only head of the church. No matter where it's found. The church is to be in the world but not of the world. A boat in the water is by design, but water in the boat is disaster.

I was bass fishing with a friend of mine who is a professional, but the one thing about professionals, you know, they say the more you do something the less careful you become and the most injuries happen to people because they've gotten so used to what they're doing they forget to pay attention to the basics. And I'm standing on the back deck, it's a bass deck. And I don't know if you

know a bass boat has the lower part and then it has a big deck you stand on, that's where you fish from. Now when water gets up there, it's serious. If it's down in the other part, that's okay, but if it's up there it tells you how much water is in that boat. He had forgotten to put the plug in the boat. And I'm standing there, we're fishing at night so you don't recognize it right off, and I kept noticing I was squishing every time I'd take a step. And we were fishing along and I said, "Kenny, I'm in water." He said, "What!" Because you see, water in the boat is disaster. The boat in water is by design.

We're not to be of the world. Our head is the Lord Jesus Christ. He takes pleasure in using us to draw us into His work. He wants us to be the influences to the people that are around us. That's why He strategically has a purpose in locating us here and here and here. How many times in my life I've wanted to move someplace else without ever influencing the place where I've been. The key is, are we blooming where we're planted? Do people see us as the church of the Lord Jesus Christ and are they being influenced by God's locating us where He has put us. Are you influencing the world around you here in Albuquerque? Are you living under the headship of Christ? Are you realizing that God is wanting to use you in a powerful way? Have you asked yourself "how did I get here? Was it accident or was it divine providence of God that He put me where I am?"

So the pleasure of God is to use His people, but the purpose of God is to locate His people. The church of God, which is at Corinth. Oh, by the way, all the saints which aren't in Corinth but in Achaia, I have a word for you. Oh, you mean the church can be in different places? Absolutely.

The passion of God to enable his people

Thirdly, the passion of God to enable His people. This is the goodness of God; this is Who we serve. He doesn't come into our lives to turn it over to us. He enables us. Paul says in verse 2, "Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." Grace and peace are two of the most important words you can find in the spiritual vocabulary. I wish sometimes we could just stop and go down the rows and say what do you believe grace means? What do you believe grace means? And it would be real interesting what people think grace is. In understanding the word grace we must ask, what part of grace is Paul talking about? Because I want you to understand something: grace is a huge subject. Grace is a house in which all the blessings of God live in, Christ being its source. He is the house and everything that we need for life and godliness is found in this one word, grace. The believers in Corinth had already received "saving grace." He couldn't be talking about that. He says in 1 Corinthians 1:4, "I thank my God always concerning you for the grace of God which was given you in Christ Jesus." So he's not talking to them about saving grace.

But grace is not only that which saves you, grace, Christ, is that which transforms your life. Once Christ, who is the source of grace comes to live in us at salvation, He then wants to live His life through us, He wants to replace us. That's living grace, that's what we've been talking about for years. He wants to live His life, daily transforming us from glory to glory to glory, and we'll see this in 2 Corinthians. Paul is wishing for them to experience living grace. He wouldn't tell believers "grace to you." They've already received it. He's talking about living grace.

Galatians 2:20, which has been the key verse and is becoming more and more life's verse, "I have been crucified with Christ and it's no longer I who live but Christ lives in me and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave Himself up for me." And then Paul says the most classic words in verse 21 of that chapter, "I do not nullify the grace of God." He says, "If salvation came through the law, then Christ died needlessly." If righteousness comes from the law, Christ died needlessly. In verse 21 he says "I do not nullify the grace of God."

See, Paul is saying to these believers, "You need the grace of God to go on. Yes, you need it for salvation, but Christ is the essence of the grace of God. And by your learning to walk by faith, you release Him in your life and He replaces you." That's what living grace is. That's how He uses you where you're located. That's how you can begin to discover the goodness and the pleasure of God to be involved in your life. Paul says, "I do not set aside," which the word really means, "I do not frustrate Christ living in and through me. This is what grace is all about." Listen, this is what grace is all about.

"Grace to you and peace." Now Paul knows from his own personal experience nothing satisfies the believer more than the living grace of God. Nothing. We sang about it, "He's more than enough for all of me." So he says, "Grace to you and peace." Have you noticed in the Bible that peace always comes after grace, never before it? You see, until you've experienced the grace of God, there's not going to be any peace. And that's how salvation occurs: He transforms you, He deals with your sin and you become a brand new believer and then you have peace. Well, it's the same thing once you become a believer. As you walk by faith in him, that peace saturates your life. The Corinthians will have no peace until they come back to the living grace of God. Until they come back to living by faith, letting Jesus be Jesus in them.

Now, I want to tell you what: if you've not studied 1 Corinthians you won't understand the power of this statement because in 1 Corinthians they know firsthand how not to receive this grace. They know how to set it aside, they know how to frustrate it, and they also know the consequences that come when you do that. That's why Paul continuously starts his letters that way: Grace to you.

Grace to you, and peace. That only flows in the life of a person who's living and walking in the living grace of God.

So in the first two verses we see the goodness of God, Who, as we'll continue to see, is the God of all comfort as we go all the way down through verse 11 in the weeks to follow. He is so good to use His people. I cannot tell you how many times I've been overwhelmed just by the fact that God would even choose to use me. My wife spoke at a ladies' thing last week and she came back and she sensed that God had used her and it just overwhelmed her. She was not the same all day long. She just basked in that all day long. "God actually used me!" That's the goodness of God, folks.

I tell you the only people not enjoying what I'm saying tonight are the people who are sitting there thinking, "I'm not about to let God use me." You see, that's the only thing that can frustrate it. That's the only thing that can set it aside: an attitude that says I'm not going to trust Him. The purpose of God: maybe you're here and you don't know why you're here and God is beginning to say to you, "It's not economically, and it's not other ways. It's spiritually: I have put you here for a purpose. I have located you where you are and don't move until I relocate you where I want you to be." Because we're here to influence the people who are around us, and in the goodness of God to enable His people. He doesn't assign something to us He doesn't enable. That's the living grace that God has for us.

So as we wind down in this message, let me just ask you some questions. Now don't answer. I used to do conference work and say, "Let me ask you a question." And somebody would answer. I'd say, "No, don't do that." Some of these get a little bit personal. These are just for you. What is God's plan in your life? What is His plan in your life? It's only realized as you walk by faith, not frustrating the grace of God. And let me ask you this question: are you allowing God to influence the people that are around you, whether it's your neighborhood, whether it's at work, wherever it is? Are you living in the enabling power of God? Are you living in that enabling power, conscious of it? Paul said in Philippians, "I want to experience Him." Are you experiencing Him; are you experiencing that enabling power in your life?

Corinth was a tough deal. Paul had determined in his mind, he even said this later on, "I have determined that I'm not going to write this letter for your pain. I'm writing this to comfort you." He's made a choice: he's chosen to believe in the Christ in the believers in Corinth, regardless of how they have treated him and how they have refused over the past. He's excited about this one act of obedience they have paid to him, as they respond to that third letter. But they have a choice to make just like we have a choice to make. Are we going to bemoan the place where God has put us? Or are we going to frustrate the grace of God? Or are we going to say, "Jesus be Jesus in me; no longer me but thee. Resurrection power, fill me this hour, Jesus, be Jesus in me." And start letting Him use us as vessels to touch a city that is desperate to know what we're hearing tonight. What are we going to do?

You know, so many people think of missions as over the seas. Well, that's part of it. It's also across the street. We've got an opportunity here people if we could understand a church of God in our city, and we could begin to get in touch with the fact that God takes pleasure to use us. And maybe that revival we've been praying for could come as we start walking by faith and getting a part of the plan God has for our life.

Most of you know that I worked with Dr. Spiros Zodhiates for ten years. I was his co-host on a program called "New Testament Light." It was radio and television. And as I look back on it, I was thinking of this when I studied, how God has used that man. Spiros is an interesting man. Born in Cyprus, didn't speak English until he was 15 years old. And when he was about 9 or 10 years old his brother, older brother, got saved. He was out with somebody that was a believer that was planted in Greece, on Cyprus island, shared the message of Christ with him. Somebody took pleasure in the fact that God takes pleasure in using them. And they were faithful, they walked by faith. And God enabled them: his brother came to know Christ. His brother came home that night and told his parents and they kicked him out of the house; made him pack his clothes and leave because they were Greek Orthodox, very strong, very stringent. They said, "You get out of here, you're not welcome in this house anymore."

The next morning the mama went out to get the milk because that was back in the days they would bring the milk, and some of you remember that in our country. And she went to get the milk and when she went to get the milk, the older brother had been on his knees all night long praying for his family. It so touched his mama that she said, "Alright, if you have that kind of commitment, come in and share with us what you have heard." And Spiros and his mother and father came to know Christ. And God located him several places, but then God relocated him to America. And not only in America, but God moved him to Chattanooga, TN. He's written over 400 books. For ten years, seven hours a week I did my study with him. He never looked at an English text; it was always in the Greek text. That's how I know any Greek that I have. But God used this man.

You see, folks, who's sitting in here tonight? I wonder if the next Billy Graham is sitting out there and God is simply trying to say to you, "Do you know that I put you here for a purpose? Do you know that I take great pleasure in using you and stop trying to figure out what I'm doing? Just let me do it. And do you understand that I live in you to enable you to be everything that I've planned for you to be? Do you understand that?"

He says this to a group of Christians that have really given him a hard time. And he begins to focus on the God who is behind all the

comfort we're going to be looking at in the next several weeks. Is God using you? Is this world different because you're here? Are we allowing Jesus to be Jesus in us? And are we allowing Him to help us to understand the plan He has for our life?

What is God saying to you today, this very hour? If you're not a believer, He wants to come live in you and show you that He has a purpose for you, too. It's incredible. God is good, all the time. That's who we serve.

## **2 Corinthians 1:3**

### **The God of All Comfort – Part 2**

Turn with me to 2 Corinthians 1, and we're going to be looking at verse 3. The God of All Comfort, Part 2. The God of all comfort. We saw last week in verse 1 the phrase, "Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God." By the will of God, and we found that the word "will" means not just what God demands, but it's that in which He takes great pleasure. He gets great joy out of something here. God took pleasure in making the apostle Paul. He made him an apostle in the New Testament and God took great joy using the apostle Paul. When we finally come to that place in our life and begin to realize that God wants to use us, and as long as our heart is beating, then God has a purpose for us; when we begin to realize, then we begin to understand that God wants to do His work through us. Not about us doing anything for Him, it's what He wants to do through us. Then we begin to realize that to use us He locates us. He puts us where we can be the most influential to the world which is around us. As we saw last week in the phrase, "to the church of God which is at Corinth." But the church just isn't at Corinth and so he adds, "with all the saints who are throughout Achaia."

God had His people all over Greece. God had them scattered exactly where God wanted them to be because He wanted to use them to influence the world around them. All of us today are strategically located right where God wants us to be, and until He moves us, we have a purpose of being influential, the right way, around us. And last week, I bet 15 or 20 people came up to me and said, "You know, it's given me a brand new purpose of where I am. That God didn't by accident put us out here. We're here providentially."

Well, that's what we saw and Paul says in verse 2, "Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." If we're going to be used of God, if we understand that God wants to use us, do something through us, we understand that He's located us where He wants us to be and He wants to influence the people around us, we have to participate in His grace or it will never take place. You see, we can't, God never said we could; He can, He always said He would. What is He talking about "Grace to you"? He's talking about living grace. Jesus being Jesus in us. And unless we're going to live that way, we cannot influence the world around us the way He would have us to influence them.

And not only that, we cannot be useable to Him. God wants to use us with a surrendered, yielded heart to Him so that He, through us, can touch the world that is around us. And that's the enabling power, the transforming power of His grace. And it's then, only then, when you're living surrendered to Him, understanding that you accept the place that God has put you, understanding He wants to use you to touch the people around you, that's when you have peace like you have never had before. "Grace to you and peace."

But there's something you need to understand: as we let Jesus be Jesus in us, as we allow Him to touch the people around us by His grace enacted in our life, there's something we've got to realize and it's critical. Just because God is using us where we are, just because we have this peace of our heart to know that God in us we're doing good and we're allowing Him to do through us what He wants to do, doesn't mean that the people around us are going to enjoy it. Especially within the church. This is a hard thing to say, but this is contextual. I don't have an agenda in my heart. Don't jump ahead of me. Paul is writing this and we're going to see how he's had a difficult experience with the Corinthian believers. And we're going to see how he found the comfort that he needed in God and in God alone.

The pronouns he uses in verses 3-11, "we," "us," "our," are either speaking of Paul and his company around him, Titus and Timothy and others, or it's a writer's way of referring to himself in the plural. Many times you see that in Scripture. It's one person talking, but he speaks as if it's more. But it's intensely personal. Paul has been through a crisis in his life. He's been through suffering; he's been through sorrow caused by the people of Corinth. He went there to influence the world of Corinth and he did, for the right way, but many believers didn't like what he was doing.

The Lord Jesus says in John 15:18 so very clearly, "If the world hates you, you know that it hated Me before it hated you." And in verse 19 it says, "If you were of the world, the world would love its own, but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, because of this the world hates you." You say, "That's the world, that's not the church." I know, but contextually if you study 1 Corinthians, it was the world of Corinth that got into the church. The church did not get into the world of Corinth and influence it for the kingdom. No, they let the world inside the church and that same mindset is what's caused Paul the grief in his heart.

All of that Jesus said in John 15 was in the context of what we've just talked about. A branch learning that the only way that it can bear fruit is to abide in the vine. Jesus is the vine. And when Jesus is allowed to express His life through us as the branch as we abide in Him, it's Him and His Word that the world cannot stand. Even the world within the church, the people that won't walk with God, cannot stand Christ and His Word. You see, you expect to find the criticism and all the other things, the hurtful things that people do to you, you expect to find that in the world. But what catches us off guard, it's like a curve ball that hits you, is when you find it inside the church. And Paul had found it inside the church at Corinth. He had found the hatred that was directed toward him certainly from the world, but he also found it within the walls of the church.

So what he says in verses 3-11 is powerful encouragement to you and for me. When we seek to let Jesus be Jesus in us, when we seek to be the branch, and let the vine produce the fruit through our lives, it helps us to understand better why it all has to happen. And we find like Paul found, the source of our comfort is not going to be in individuals as much as it's going to be in God. He is the resource that we run to; He is the refuge that we run to.

Let me ask you a question today. What's going on around in your life today? Don't raise your hand or say anything but just think about it. What's going on in your life today? Are you catching grief because you simply want to let Jesus be Jesus in you? Are you catching grief from the people that you never dreamed it would come from simply because you want to seek to let Jesus live His life through you? Well, you're in good company. The apostle Paul would put his arm around your shoulder this morning and in the passage of scripture say, "Listen to what I have to say. I've been there and I've done that and I have received comfort beyond explanation from God and only God."

Paul has good news for all of us today. In verse 3 he breaks out into praise. I want you to notice, and this is the only verse we're going to look at, but he breaks out into praise and when he does he doesn't praise God for what He's done for him. He doesn't praise God for what He could do for him. He praises God for Who God is. And unless we have a high view of Who God is, praise will never emanate from our hearts. God doesn't have to do anything in our life. We sang it awhile ago, "Blessed be the name of the Lord." He gives, but He also takes away. You see, the only way you can say that is if you have a high view of Who He is and then praise just emanates out of your heart. It doesn't matter how difficult life is, it doesn't matter what you've had to go through because you're understanding the character of God and that He is worthy of praise.

Paul doesn't speak of what He's done for him until he begins in verse four. Verse 3 is just praising God for Who He is. He's the eternal source of all comfort. And there are four things he praises God for in this passage.

He praises God for His character

First of all he praises God for His character. He says in verse 3, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort." Now, go to that first little phrase, "Blessed be THE God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ." It's important first to recognize that the definite article is put before God, which signifies and glorifies Him, that He's the One and only God. He's the one and only God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. But isn't it interesting, we even sang it, "Blessed BE the name of the Lord." The little "be," if you've got a good translation and if you don't have a good translation I encourage you to buy one, is in italics. How many of you know what it means when it's in italics? It means it's not in the original text. And when you look at it in the original text it's quite different than what you see.

You see, the original text should say, "Blessed, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ." When the verse is missing in the original Greek text, it's like a Hebraism. It's when a statement is made that is so put into concrete, nobody ever should challenge it and nobody can ever change it. That's what he's talking about. "Blessed, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ." You see, the word 'blessed' is the word *eulogetos*.

It comes from two words. *Eu* means "will," and the word *logetos* means to speak well of something. And it's not a verb. "Blessed be" is not a verb. We act as if it is. God needs to be blessed. "Blessed be the name of the Lord." "Blessed be the God and Father." No, that's not what he's saying. It's not a verb, it's an adjective, and it's an adjective describing the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. The word 'blessed' is a special word, especially of God because it speaks of someone or something that is worthy of praise, inherently worthy of praise. God is inherently blessed. We don't have to bless Him. He doesn't need that from us, whether He ever does anything or whether He doesn't do anything; He is inherently worthy to be blessed.

You see, God didn't create us because He needed praise. I've heard people talk like that. Boy we better praise Him because that's why we're here. God needs our praise. No! God doesn't need our praise. God can do without us in a second because of Who He is. He's God! But because of Who He is He chose to create you and me. And He doesn't need our praise, but we desperately need to praise Him because He's the only one Who deserves to be praised. The ending of this little word *eulogetos*, that little *tos*, that word, in that form, is only used of God and the Lord Jesus Christ all through scripture. Why? Because there is no one else and nothing else that is inherently worthy of all praise. God is worthy of our praise. Not just because of what He's done. No, it's because of Who He is. And that is so important to understand.

So the word, "blessed" here refers to the worth of God to be praised. It refers to His Holy, unique character. There is no One like Him. And He deserves the praise of all because that's Who He is. Paul praised the character of God, "Blessed, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ." I want to say it again: before he ever recounts anything that God has done for him, he doesn't praise Him for that first, he praises Him for Who He is.

We just studied Habakkuk and in chapter 1, Habakkuk wasn't praising God, but when Habakkuk caught a glimpse of Who he was dealing with, the last chapter shows that he just simply bows in the presence of the One Who is worthy to be praised. Understand something: we have got to come back to a high view of God. And when we have a high view of God, we'll have a high view of His Word, and when we have a high view of His Word, we'll have a high view of His grace that He offers to us so that we can be useable to the world in which He has located all of us. Paul is drawn in praise to the character of the One that deserves that praise. And that's the way it should be in our lives all the time. No matter how bad life gets or no matter how good life gets, with all that aside, God is still worthy of our praise.

He praises God for His covenant

Secondly he praises God for His covenant, to show you the character of God, that He doesn't need our praise, but yet God loves us so much He created us. He created us that we might have fellowship with Him, be in covenant with Him. He wants a relationship with us. Verse 3, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ." What does that mean, "God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ?" It just puzzles me.

Well, in the Old Testament you find the one particular phrase over and over again. It is very similar except that it says, "the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." Why would it be stated that way? If He's God of one, He's God of all of them. But the reason it's stated that way is that God made covenant with Abraham. And then He passed that covenant on to Isaac, and then He passed that covenant on, not to Esau, but to Jacob, whose name was changed to Israel and Israel had twelve sons, and what He's speaking of in the Old Testament is that God is a covenant God. And He's not only in covenant with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, but with all of their physical seed, the whole nation of Israel. Because of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, they were in covenant with God. And it was the physical seed that could enjoy the blessings of that covenant.

Well, the phrase in the New Testament, "our God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ," is very similar. It's essentially the same. It denotes that God now is in covenant with us with a much better covenant in Hebrews 8:6. It's a spiritual covenant; it's an eternal covenant. And because of the Lord Jesus Christ, who is in covenant with His Father, that through Jesus, the Mediator of that covenant, then now God, the Father, is not only in covenant with His Son, but He's in covenant with all of the spiritual seed of the Lord Jesus Christ, all of the children of God, the family of God.

By saying "God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ" he's not in any way doubting the deity of our Lord Jesus. Jesus has always been God. Jesus is His earthly name. But Christ has always been the Son of God. The term explains a special relationship that God the Father had with the Son in this covenant relationship for the redemption of mankind. God is the Father of Christ's divine nature by eternal generations. Christ was always the Son of God. I want to make sure we get this clear in our mind. Christ was always the Son of God. In John 1:1, "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God," speaking of the Lord Jesus. And he uses the imperfect tense. And I know sometimes I can't get it out like it gets in and it just frustrates me, but the imperfect tense is continuous action in the past: no beginning and no end.

"In the beginning was" and always had been and always will be the Word. "And the Word was with God," always had been and always will be with God. "And the Word was God," always had been and always will be God. Christ has always been God. He is God incarnate. He is the Son of God. However, let's take it a step further. He became the Son of Man. He's always been the Son of God, but He came to earth to become the Son of Man. He got His human nature by miraculous conception. Jesus Christ, the eternal Son of God, came to earth to be born of a virgin, the Son of Man. And He received His human nature from the nation of Israel, from the tribe of Judah and the line of David, as was promised in the everlasting covenant to Abraham.

In John 1:14, after all that he's saying that He's always been God, he says in verse 14, "And the word [Jesus] became flesh," and he uses the aorist tense. At an historical time an event took place on this earth and that event was the miraculous birth of our Lord Jesus into this world. He had always been the Son of God but He came to earth to be the Son of Man; the God-Man. And that aorist tense points to that event: the immaculate conception. >

You see, Paul is not in any way doubting the deity of Christ by saying that God is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. But what he's pointing to is a covenant relationship between God the Father and God the Son, and therefore, since there is that relationship, and since Jesus went to the cross for you and me, then through Jesus we can enter into a covenant relationship with the Father. I've said it a hundred times: Christianity is not a religion, Christianity is a covenant relationship with God the Father through the Lord Jesus Christ Who is the Mediator of this better covenant. It is through Christ, the eternal Son, our Redeemer, that we're sons of God—now listen—and God is now our Father. Since He has that special relationship with His Son, because of that He has that special

relationship with you and me. Because of our covenant relationship we can now come into His presence. We can benefit from all that He is and all that He's about. We can come to Him.

In this one country I went to, the church was a refuge from God. Isn't that sad? Instead of a place to point you to God, we run to Him, He is our refuge. So whenever Paul was in need, when Paul had been burdened down, he knew where he could run. He knew he had a covenant relationship with God the Father. When we're treated wrongly as Christ was, and when we're in depths of despair as Christ was as the Son of Man, we are the children of God, and as God the Father was to Jesus, so Jesus becomes to us. Our Father welcomes us to Himself; He understands our suffering. He understands that the Lord Jesus suffered in all manner like we are and yet without sin. He's our High Priest. We can run to Him and He understands and cares about you and me.

So I understand what Paul was doing here. Praise Him. Praise Him for His character. He is worthy to be praised, but praise Him for His covenant. He didn't need people but He chose to create us; He wanted us to be in relationship to Him. He wanted us not to have a physical relationship with Him, but to have a spiritual relationship to Him which is forever. And because of Jesus the Son, we can run to Him and call Him Father. Paul has discovered this and in the scene around this are the hard difficulties he went through at the church of Corinth. He had to write them three letters; this is the fourth letter he's written to them. And the third letter he wrote to them is lost. It must have been a very difficult letter and when he sent it with Titus he couldn't wait to hear back how they would respond and they responded correctly. Paul is so comforted; he writes 2 Corinthians and he starts immediately praising the God of all comfort. Praising Him for His character; praising Him for His covenant.

He praises God for His compassion

And thirdly he praises Him for His compassion. You see, not yet has He done anything—yes He's done many things—but Paul is not referring to what He's done, but to Who He is. He's a compassionate Father. I wonder how you think of God the Father today. You see, what we do many times is take earthly fathers and try to compare them to Christ and to God. You can't do that. They're nothing alike. He's the perfect Father—think about being the perfect father—and so therefore He cares perfectly for His children. Verse 3 again, "Blessed be the God and Father of OUR Lord Jesus Christ." Because He's "our" Lord Jesus Christ, His Father is also our Father. And then he says, "the Father of mercies," and this case, meaning a father—when it's attached to mercies and not to God—means He's the originator of all mercies. To put it in my own terms, God the Father is the well out of which all mercies flow.

The word for "mercies" in the plural form, indicating many, many different ways in which God shows His mercies, the many different types of His mercies that are available in Him. The word for 'mercies' is the word *oiktirmos*. Now, that's a different word from what most people think it is. This is the word that does not point to something that somebody does, it points to the heart behind what somebody does. This particular word is so unique from the word that means the deeds that somebody does, the merciful deeds that they do. But *oiktirmos* is the heart that is behind it. This word describes the compassionate heart that God has; that's Who He is. It's not like something He does. It's Who He is.

From researching this word we find several encouraging things about this mercy, this mercy and compassion of God. The heart and the character of God encourages us to entrust ourselves to Him. Today we present our bodies to Him as living sacrifices. In Romans 12:1, "Therefore I urge you brethren, by the mercies of God [exact word, *oiktirmos*], present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God which is your spiritual service of worship." And what he's saying here is, why would we go anywhere else? Why would I not surrender myself to Him? He's a merciful God; He's the perfect Father who wants to be in a covenant relationship with me. The way He treated Jesus is the way now Jesus treats me.

And so it's like the disciples who said one day to Jesus, "Lord, if we leave You, where would we go? There is no other place to go." All the times in my life that I've chosen to go other routes to find what I was looking for and couldn't find it, I mean, you could write a book about it. And here He is standing there in front of me saying, "Do you understand Who I am?" In Romans 2:4 he said, "It's the goodness and the kindness of God that leads a man to repentance." Why would I go anywhere else? Maybe you're a skeptic and you're in this congregation this morning. Why would you go anywhere else? God is a compassionate God. He's demonstrated that by sending His Son to die for us on the cross. He's a God of mercies; He's the Father of all mercies.

And I'll tell you what, this mercy which enables us, which draws us to Him, is also the very mercy that comforts us when we suffer. You see, once you get involved in this relationship and you begin to walk with God, that mercy overflows and you begin to receive the benefit of that. You say, how does that happen? I want to share something with you. Make sure you catch what I'm saying here. When we allow Jesus to be Jesus in us, He is the well of mercy. And when we allow Him to come and comfort our hearts, not only does He comfort us, verse 4 will go on to say, but He uses us now to comfort somebody else.

Many of you are wondering what kind of ministry you have and you're wondering what is your gift, etc., etc. And maybe you're still confused. Listen: look at your life and see the places where you've been comforted and watch and ask God, "God, now You've comforted me, let me be a comfort to somebody else." And that's the Lord Jesus using you in their life. Colossians 3:12 says, "So as those who have been chosen of God, holy and beloved, put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience."



And the word compassion is that very word for mercy there. What he's talking about here is put on the Lord Jesus Christ. Put on the Lord Jesus Christ. Ephesians 4:24 says the same thing. He says, "Put on the new man which is Christ in us." The Father of all mercies.

We've run to Him and He's shown His mercy to us and now He wants to use us to show mercy to others. We're never told to show grace: we're told to show mercy. Why? Because all of us have suffered, either from the consequences of personal sin or just from being alive on this planet earth seeking to live a life that is receptive to Him. We've all suffered and therefore we show mercy, but it's Christ in us, the Father of mercy, the well of all mercies, and it's so desperately needed.

You may be here today and you need the mercy of God. You need that desperately. In times of distress it is needed. Even in the Old Testament you never see this change, except it gets much more glorious in the New Testament as He comes to live in us. But God, our Covenant God, has always been there in times of distress for His people. Why? Because He's a Covenant God. One leads to the other. In 2 Samuel 24:14 it says, "Then David said to Gad, 'I'm in great distress.'" Boy, I can really relate to David. If you've ever read the Psalms, he's in trouble three-fourths of the Psalms, and I can always relate to him. I can always relate to him. And he's crying out to God and he says, "I'm in great distress." And look what he says, "Let us now fall into the hand of the Lord" —I like that: let's just cave in to God's hand. We can't handle it ourselves—"for His mercies are great." And then he shows the contrast. He says, "but do not let me fall into the hand of man," because a man, apart from the mercies of God, will never show you what God will show to you. And if you ever find mercy in an individual don't you ever praise that individual, praise the God, the Father of all mercies that lives within him. That's what you're experiencing. God does that in our lives.

It's also needed in times of sinful rebellion. Anybody here sin this past week besides me? Some of you just won't be honest. Boy, I'll tell you, when you've sinned and you know you've sinned, you need His mercy big time. And you want to run. What Paul is saying is it's as much what He is as Who He is. You run to Him; He's the Father of mercies in times of rebellion. In times of Babylonian captivity, for 70 years, Daniel, it says in chapter 9, he understood it. He understood how his own people didn't deserve God's mercy, and he says in Daniel 9:9, "To the Lord our God belong compassion and forgiveness, for we have rebelled against Him."

How many times I've driven down here to preach and acted like a pagan on the road before I got here. Walk inside and you think, "What in the world are you doing, Barber, standing up behind a pulpit telling anybody anything?" And you know what I have to do anytime—and it's not as much as I have to do, I'm drawn to do—is to get before God and say, "God, You always said it would be that way, You help me understand the wickedness of my flesh, but, oh God, this afternoon, I need Your mercy. I need Your mercy." It's incredible how we run the wrong way when we sin: we run away from Him instead of running to Him. Paul said, listen to Who He is. Look at His character. He's deserving of all praise. Look at His covenant heart. He covenanted with man through the Lord Jesus Christ and because of that, because He's in covenant with us, look at His compassion. He's the Father of all mercies.

He praises God for His comfort

Well then finally, Paul praises God for His comfort. "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort." The God of all comfort. This word "comfort" is the word we have been waiting for since verse 1. We've already looked at it in our introduction. The word "comfort," as we saw the last time, is *paraklesis*. It's the word *para*, which means alongside or near, and *kaleo*, which means to call. "To be called alongside someone," the act of coming alongside someone to encourage them, to exhort them, to give them comfort in times of distress. And He's the God of all comfort. It's the heart of God towards us.

"To come alongside us." Do you realize that's the word for the Holy Spirit? It's called the Divine Comforter, and it's that same exact word. And when we live surrendered lives to Him, then God uses us to come alongside a brother. But when we're not living the way we should live, or we're going through different and difficult valleys in our life, God uses a brother, and in his life brings him alongside of us to encourage us. God is the God of all comfort. And that word "all" means "all." But don't jump too quickly. It means each and every time that you've been comforted and then all of those times when it's put together. God is the Author of it all.

I was listening to Moody Radio one day. I was going through a hard time, just leave it there: I was going through a hard time. And I was listening to the radio and a fellow up in New York said, "Listen, why don't we try for the next 30 days to have a 'God-watch'?" And I thought to myself, "Now, what's a new program coming along?" But the more he talked the more he made sense to me. He said, "The problem with us is we're in covenant with this covenant-keeping God, but we're not even looking for all the different ways in which He's comforting us and in which He's encouraging us and in which He's loving us."

So I decided to do it. It radically, radically affected my life. All of a sudden I began to notice. Somebody would send me a little card, right at the right moment. By the way, that's happened many times here. Thank you! And I thank you when you encourage. You don't know what that does. But as God makes us more sensitive to the needs around us, that little note that would come at the right time, that email that would come at the right time.

One of the things that is very special to me, and I'm just going to be very personal with you today, is that I love wildlife. You say, "You

like to shoot it." No, wait, there's a balance in all of this. But I love to see game, I love to see the deer, I love to see things like that. And sometimes, I haven't pulled the trigger on a buck in a lot of years because I just enjoy watching them a lot of times. And one day I came to a stop sign and I just stopped and I leaned forward and I put my head on the steering wheel and I just wept. I said, "God, I don't understand what's going on. I don't understand. Will You please help me?" I was just crying out to Him.

I rose up to look at the traffic and I looked to my right and a doe deer walked up, stopped, turned her head and just looked at me. I'd never seen a deer there since I'd lived there for almost ten years. But that day, that moment, God had something there just to catch my attention and I had to write that down: God, thank You.

I wonder if you've noticed how many times God has done that in your life this past week? Are you thanking Him and praising Him for it? He's the God of all comfort. "Well, I was comforted the other day because such and such came to me." Quit deifying the individual and start deifying God! God came to you: He used an individual to do it. He used an individual that was surrendered, located where he was supposed to be, that influenced the world around him. That's what it is. The praise never goes to man. The praise always goes to the Father Who is the well, the source, of all comfort.

Again, there is no true comfort that does not originate from God; no true comfort. As the Father was comforting to Him, He is comforting to us. The Lord Jesus becomes the embodiment of that. It says in Philippians 2:1, "Therefore, if"—and that "if" is the first class condition "if," which means "since," no doubt here—"since there is encouragement in Christ." And there's our word right there. He's the well out of which it flows. And so we see that the source is God.

He praises God for His word

But let me show you this: the most precious way in which an individual can be comforted is not by seeing the deer, not having somebody come up and put their arm around you—oh, that encourages you to a point—but the greatest comfort that God gives to you and me is through His Word. All of God's Word is a comfort to you and me. It's amazing how many people run away from the very thing that is meant to comfort them. In Romans 15:4, "For whatever was written in earlier times was written for our instruction so that through perseverance and the encouragement of the Scriptures [that's the word right there] we might have hope." When the Word is proclaimed, when it's shared with a brother, when it's taken outside these walls and shared with someone, that is a comfort. It may sting at first, but it only hurts to heal. It's a comfort, it's God's divine way of comforting us on this earth.

To illustrate this, Paul's preaching was called an exhortation and that word means "comfort." It's the same word. Paul says in 1 Thessalonians 2:3, "For our exhortation [which means his preaching] does not come from error or impurity or by way of deceit, but just as we have been improved by God to be entrusted with the Gospel, so we speak, not as pleasing to men, but God, Who examines our hearts." The word "exhortation" is our word. So the greatest way in which God encourages us and comforts us as His children, and we're in covenant relationship with Him, and He has such a compassionate heart, is through the Word of God.

So Paul praises God. He hasn't praised Him for what He's done yet. He praised Him for Who He is, for His character; he praised Him for His covenant relationship that He wanted through the Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. He praises Him for His compassion, He's the Father of all mercies, and he praises Him for His comfort.

Let me ask you a question today: are you running to men to find this? You see, this is where we mess up, because this individual didn't do for you at a certain time. Listen, that's not the issue. The issue is: God cares about you. Now, maybe that individual is having a bad day. Maybe he wasn't sensitive to the Spirit of God and couldn't encourage you, but God will find another way. God will always encourage His people. That's Who He is. And He'll do it through His Word.

Are you seeking to live for the Lord and you're catching a rough time for it? You're in good company. But remember where your source is and start watching for how God is showing you comfort and compassion in ways you hadn't even thought about around you. It's God inviting you into His presence. Every time you go through a difficult time, God just simply gives you an invitation, "Run to Me, come on, run to Me; you're okay, come on," and puts His arms around us and He comforts our hearts.

You know, many have been the times that I've been there. I wish I could say that it's been a piece of cake to let Jesus be Jesus in me. It's been bitter sweet because I have a problem and I look in the mirror every morning and I see it. Biggest problem that I face all day long is not you, not anybody out there, but it's me. I've got to learn this.

Years ago I was doing a meeting in Alabama. A good friend of mine was pastor of the church there. When I got there he asked me, "What's wrong with you, Wayne? Where's the smile; where's the joy?"

And he said, "Wayne, listen, let's go fishing." He came by and picked me up at the motel and we took off in the dark and he put a little CD on that I'd never heard. "Be strong and take courage. Do not fear or be dismayed." It's right out of Joshua and that thing started going and God just reached through the Scriptures in song and grabbed my heart. And I tell you, by the time we got back that afternoon, the smile was back on my face and the joy was back in my heart. God had comforted me.

Where are you running to? You don't run to people, you run to Him. And in the stillness of being in His presence, His Word begins to refresh your soul and that's how He comforts you. Yes, you can be consoled; somebody can put their arm around you. You can see a deer and it will just bless you. But I'll tell you what will really comfort you will be the Word of God that He speaks to your heart. He's the God of all comfort. That's what praise is all about. If you know Who He is, you'll be drawn to Him and you'll run to Him. That's what Paul does as we get into this chapter.

## **2 Corinthians 1:4-7**

### **The God of All Comfort – Part 3**

Turn with me to 2 Corinthians as we continue in our study of this wonderful epistle of the apostle Paul. We're going to talk about "The God of All Comfort," and this is part 3. We're continuing as we see Paul develop this in the first chapter. We're going to be looking at verses 4-7 in just a few moments.

When a person has the truth of God's Word revealed to his heart, that he's born into this world as a sinner, separated from God: only God's Word and the Holy Spirit can convict a person of this. And when he realizes that he has no hope of ever being good enough to be saved from the penalty of death assigned to him, and then when he realizes now why Jesus came but the Lord Jesus Christ, God's Son came into this world to be born of a virgin, to die for his sin and that He resurrected the third day, and then ascended back into heaven, and when he understands why Jesus came—it was for him. When John 3:16 is no longer for "God so loved the world," he can put his own name in there.

I remember the day in my own personal walk when it was "for God so loved Wayne," and it overwhelmed me that God would do that. When he realizes this and he bows before Him, confessing himself to be a sinner, but confessing Jesus now to be his Lord, giving all that he knows of himself to all that he understands of God, then Christ in that moment delivers him from the penalty of eternal death and gives to him eternal life.

I don't know if you've ever thought about this with understanding from scripture: Christ is eternal life, and He comes to live in the believer, in the Person of His Holy Spirit. Immediately in the moment when that person reaches out to God and God comes to live in his heart, that individual is a brand new creation. He is now indwelt by God Himself. He's now a vessel through which God can do His work. It's what God wants to do with us; that's why He leaves us down here on planet earth: to continue His work through those who have professed Him to be Lord.

You see, Christianity is not a religion that mandates that a person has to be good in order to earn righteousness. No, Christianity is not that at all. Christianity is a relationship with God the Father through His Son Jesus Christ. And we are His vessels now, bought with a price, set apart for His use. I've told this story from time to time but it's on my mind so act like you haven't heard it and maybe you'll enjoy it again. But when I was in Reno I needed a haircut and we'd just moved to Reno, hadn't lived there very long, so I asked a friend of mind would he tell me where to go get a haircut. Well, his wife chimed in and said, "I'll tell you where." And she gave me the address and told me the lady's name to ask for.

Well, I called and got an appointment and when I walked in I knew I'd been set up. It was really different—it was a beauty salon. One of these places that men don't go. And I walked in and the music was playing and here comes this lady with a spiked haircut. And I was kind of marveling at whoever it was that didn't know how to cut and shape her hair. And she walked up to me and said, "You must be Wayne."

The first thought I had was, "No, I'm Ralph and I'm out of here. I don't want my hair to look like yours!" And I went over and I sat in the chair and she began to tell me about this wild weekend that she'd just had and she got real detailed. I said, "That's good, I've got the point." And then came the question: I love this question "What do you do?" I love this question because the answer makes hives break out on people's faces. People that are presidents of companies no longer are able even to talk to you. And she said, "What do you do?" And I said, "I'm a preacher." This was after she had told me all this stuff. I thought she'd back up a little bit. She didn't back up. She looked at me and said, "I'll tell you one thing, religion never worked for me." And I said, "Praise God, it never worked for me either."

And she said, "I thought you were a preacher?" I said, "I am, but I don't preach religion. I do not preach religion. Religion is performance-based. I preach grace, and I preach Christianity which says Jesus paid that debt for me and that He comes to live in me to do through me what I could never do in a thousand years." She took me back to wash my hair. And she said, "How do you teach this message of grace, of Christianity being a relationship?" And I took her to Romans 6. Now if you know anything about Romans,

that's a tough chapter. And here's a little lady that didn't know Philippians from the Philistines. I mean, she didn't understand anything in Scripture. And when I finished sharing with her, and I left tears rolling down her face, she said, "You mean to tell me I've been trying to be good all these years but I can't be good? But Jesus Christ is good and He wants to come and live in me and be the goodness in and through me?" And I thought to myself, all over this world I have preached to believers who still haven't got it.

Christianity is a relationship. And when we come to Him we are now His vessel. The word "saint" means to be set apart unto Him. For what? For His use. Now that a person understands that, God wants to use him to influence the world that is around him. And we saw this: God takes great pleasure in using His people. This is how 2 Corinthians 1 starts. Paul starts off and says, "Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God," and the word "will" doesn't just mean "that which He intends to do," it means "that which He takes great pleasure in doing." God took great pleasure in using the apostle Paul and Timothy and all of us that are here. God took great pleasure. But to use us, God purposely locates us where He wants us to be. He knows where we can be the most influential. Paul says, "to the church of God which is at Corinth with all the saints who are throughout Achaia," Achaia being the southern and central part of Greece. And we've just seen here that God has located His people in strategic places all over Greece. He had them exactly where He wanted them.

You say, "I don't know why I'm living in this neighborhood. I don't even like the street I'm on." Did God put you there? Maybe He's got you there for a reason and you've never seen it yet. He puts His people, and He doesn't put light where there's light, He puts light where there is darkness. Now, for us to be used where He has located us and for Him to take great pleasure in using us to influence those around us, then we must understand that we must participate in His enabling grace. Grace at salvation is faith alone in Christ alone. No works on my part. But the grace now that we walk in is called "living grace," Christ living His life through us. That's what this grace is all about: not me working for Him; Him doing His work through me.

And Paul brings that out in verse 2. He talks to people who are already saved and he says in 1 Corinthians 1 they've already received the grace of God. He says to them, "Grace be unto you." And He speaks of that living grace that comes only when we're yielded to Him. Colossians 2:6, "As you therefore have received Christ Jesus, so walk you with Him." And when we walk that way, trusting Him by faith, then we participate in that living grace and He enables us to touch people around us. Christ in us begins to influence people around us.

And when that takes place there's a peace that will flood your life that you've never known before. He says, "Grace to you and peace." The peace of God, not the peace with God. That came at salvation. But the peace of God. Those believers who have begun to understand that they are set apart in this world, that they're a vessel to be used of God, and that God has located them and that God has given them the enabling grace to influence the people around them and who walk in that peace relationship with Him, they begin to understand what life is all about. But here's the painful side to this truth, everything I've said from the opening of our message, here's the painful side: both believers and nonbelievers who do not like the fact that we're allowing Christ to live through us will cause a lot of problems in our life. Have you noticed this yet? Have you already come to discover that when you yield to Christ, the world is sometimes not as friendly as you thought they would be?

See, light and darkness, they don't get along real well. Christ in us, now remember what I'm saying here, will offend the one who chooses to live his life his way. And you can expect a lot of pain. You can expect physical pain from what they might do to hurt you. You can expect emotional pain because of what they'll say about you. The flesh hates God and anyone associated with Him. You say, "I don't believe that." Well then, study the New Testament. The word "persecute" is used 41 different times in the New Testament. The word has to do with those who come after you to hurt you either physically or emotionally. In fact, Paul said in 2 Timothy 3:12, "Indeed all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted." He didn't say "may be," he said "will be."

You say, "Why do you bring this up? We're talking about 2 Corinthians." I know, because last time we were together we saw Paul in verse 3 break into praise. He said, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort." What's that got to do with anything? These are the words of a wounded heart, a man who's been deeply wounded both physically and emotionally. Why? Because he's stopped being religious and started walking under grace and his life has been one trial after the other, but he's learned to find comfort with the God of all comfort.

Do you realize the word "comfort" itself implies automatically that one will go through tough times? That he will have to endure unlovable people. He'll have to endure hateful words and on and on. The believer in the early years of Christianity in the book of Acts, when they would come to know Christ, the first eight chapters, were Jewish people that were converted over to Christ before it moved out into the Gentile world. By becoming a believer they were automatically choosing something that they knew would bring great trouble and pain in their lives. In fact, many of the families would completely disown them; their names were taken off of any heritage.

Christ in these people caused the world to hate them and many paid the supreme price of being martyred for the saints. Let's just take Paul for instance. I'm going to preempt a little bit of what we're going to study in chapter 11. Let me just show you what the apostle Paul has to say about pain in his life because he wanted to be a vessel used of God. In 2 Corinthians 11 he's refuting those

who claim he's not an apostle and he's coming against the false apostles. And he says, "Are they servants of Christ? (I speak as if I'm insane) I more so; in far more labors, in far more imprisonments, beaten times without number, often in danger of death. Five times I received from the Jews thirty-nine lashes. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, a night and a day I have spent in the deep. I have been on frequent journeys, in dangers from rivers, dangers from robbers, dangers from my countrymen, dangers from the Gentiles, dangers in the city, dangers in the wilderness, dangers on the sea, dangers among false brethren; I have been in labor and hardship, through many sleepless nights, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure."

And this is just a broad brush that Paul gives of the pain that came as a result of his being saved and of his being a vessel that God wanted to use. We know from 2 Timothy for instance, that he was finally martyred for the faith: he was put to death. Galatians 6:17 says, "From now on let no one cause trouble for me, for I bear on my body the brand marks of Jesus." You see, what we need to know today in the 21st century, you say, "I'm glad I didn't live during that time." Oh, friend, let me help you. The last 25 years there have been more people martyred for Christ than in the history of Christianity, mostly in Muslim worlds, mostly in dark areas, going on right now even as I speak.

But that's not the point. The point is, from our text, that we have a God of all comfort. We have good news. Paul had learned that he wasn't by himself. Paul had learned that when he went through these difficult times, he could praise the God of all comfort. This is the place that we all must find our comfort. When we're beaten up by those who want a more flesh-friendly Christianity, we need to run to the God of all comfort.

Well, today we're going to find out even more about that comfort. We looked at that verse 3 last time of how he praises the God of comfort. He praises him first of all for Who He is. Now he begins to get into what He has done and what he has experienced and knows about this God of all comfort. He's brought comfort to all the believers in Corinth and Greece, or He can. And Paul wants them to know that.

#### The meaningfulness of our comfort

Three things I want you to see tonight: first of all is the meaningfulness of our comfort. The most meaningful thing about the truth that God is the God of all comfort, to me, and you'll see it in the verse in a minute, is that this is true all the time. Just like that little phrase: God is good all the time; all the time God is good. And we're going to see it right here. The God of all comfort is always, immediately, accessible to those who come to Him. God is always there to comfort us in times of distress.

Look at verse 4. He comes out of that verse praising God for Who He is and he says, "who comforts us in all our affliction." Now Paul is speaking from his own experience. The "our" there is his group. He's not speaking generally; he's speaking very specifically. The word for comfort is our same word. It's a little different. It's *parakaleo*. It means "in our times of need to come alongside to help us get through whatever it is we're going through." But like I said, the beautiful thing is it's in the present tense, active voice. Paul's giving a testimony. And he's saying, "Listen, all you believers in Corinth, and all of you believers that are all over Achaia, I want you to know something: God has never failed me. Every time I've gone through the pain and the problems that come when you let Jesus be Jesus in you, God has always been there in the time of need." Present tense, active voice means, "Hey folks, this is Who He is." He makes a choice: active voice means He makes a choice to be this way. You don't have to beg God to come to your side. God is already there, and the moment we turn to Him He's always accessible.

To me that's a glorious truth. It was certainly to Paul. Christ lives in us to always comfort us, in the uncomfortable situations that are going to arise simply because we're serious about Him. To us, it's just like that "our." All the pronouns here, the first person plural pronouns, they're used of his group, Paul and his group. Paul refers to himself and his companions, "who comforts us in all our affliction."

Now it would be good to know what that word "affliction" is. It's used 34 times in the New Testament. It speaks of a very difficult and stressful situation. Personally, Paul is talking about those things he had to endure. He suffered only because he loved Christ. I'm going to keep saying that. I'm going to be a broken record on this. We're talking about this kind of comfort, this kind of affliction. That's what Paul is pointing to. But Christ had always been there to comfort him.

The word for "affliction" is the word *thlipsis*. It's a Greek word and it means "to be pressed in from all directions." Let me ask you a question: when you become a believer and you start getting serious with God and you get into His Word and you let His Word renew your mind and Christ begins to work through your life, has anybody felt sometimes as if you can't take anymore from the persecution that comes? Maybe it's verbal, maybe it's an attitude, maybe it's somebody that won't even talk to you anymore, but you feel it everywhere you go. Has anybody felt that pressing in on you from all sides, whether it be at work or at home, whether it be in the neighborhood or wherever it is? That's the World.

Years ago, the USS Thresher, the nuclear sub, it went down so deep that the pressure on the outside overtook the pressure on the inside and exploded that submarine. That's the word *thlipsis*. Sometimes you just feel like, is there a friend anywhere? I mean, my

goodness, all I'm doing is trying to love Jesus. All I'm doing is sharing His Word. What is everybody's problem, and it begins to push in on you and everywhere you turn it's there. He says, "He comforts us." He's always there. Sometimes we're looking in the wrong direction. He's always there.

"Who comforts us in all our affliction." The word "all," we skip right by it, but in the Greek it has a much more poignant meaning: it means Paul refers to each and every time, it's almost as if God gives him a remembrance of each and every time he's turned to Him and then he looks back at it and the word "all" means each and every time, but every one of them when you put them all together. And I think what Paul's doing by introducing this, to the church of Corinth who hadn't always done it right, he wants them to know that they better get used to the fact that it's not always popular to walk with Christ and to allow Him to live His life through your life. Hard, stressful, difficult times will come upon us when we choose to say yes to Christ. That's the painful side of it.

Is there a joyful side? It's certainly greater than the painful side, but we need to be mindful of that. The meaningfulness of our comfort, and I hear it from Paul, is in the fact that there is not a trial for which there is not His comfort. And it's the heart of God to help us to understand that we're not going through it alone. He's there to comfort us. He's always there to comfort us.

You say, "I'm a believer and I trust God, but I don't feel like He's anywhere around." I can only ask you one question back: who moved? He says in Hebrews, "I'll never leave you and I'll never forsake you." I want you to understand, if you're looking for comfort and you're a believer, you already have it: the Comforter lives within you. And it comes when you are willing to reach out for it, as we're willing to bow and say, "Oh God, I can't, You never said I could. You can, and You always said You would."

The ministry of our comfort

Well, the meaningfulness of our comfort. But the second thing I want you to see is the ministry of our comfort. There's something about this going through things that helps us. It's amazing how going through difficult times as Paul did, and turning to God for your comfort in the midst of those times, opens your eyes to others who may be going through the same thing. Isn't it incredible how you walk right through life and miss three-fourths of it and it's right around you? But when you've turned to Him and you've been broken and cried out to Him and you've received His comfort, that opens your eyes to people around you.

He says in verse 4, "who comforts us in all our affliction so that," that's very important, "so that we will be able to comfort those who are in any affliction." I just love that phrase, "so that we will be able." God never wastes experiences. Go back, think about all the difficult times you've had living surrendered to Christ. Now listen, there are other forms of suffering: there's the kind I've brought on myself. There are other things, there are sicknesses and things that can come physically, and certainly that's involved, but that's not the narrow context here. He's dealing with believers. And what he's saying is that God doesn't want to waste your experiences. You go through something and you think nobody cares; God cares and He'll get you through it. But on the other side of it, He opens your eyes to others. And all of a sudden you have a sensitivity towards them that you didn't have before because you've been there and you know exactly what the answer is.

Manly Beasley was a great mentor and friend. He's in heaven now and getting joy now in everything he ever preached on. Great preacher on faith. He had 14 different terminal diseases during his lifetime. They had to carry him to the pulpit and when he would stand at the pulpit he would grab both sides and you would have thought he'd never had a sick day in his life and as soon as he preached he would collapse and they'd put him in a wheelchair and take him off. Even until the day he died.

He had gone through some terrible times, just walking with the Lord. And God had just comforted him in everything he had to deal with. And my wife went through a terrible time—this was physical, this was not because of persecution. This was another kind but it all interrelates. And she went through a whole year of such depression she said, "If I had to emotionally prove that God existed, I could not do it. But I believe, because I believe, because I believe." And Manly would pick up the phone wherever he was in the country and call my wife and he'd say, "I know exactly how you feel." You see, he'd been there and God had gotten him through and that had opened up his mind and his heart to others who were going through a similar thing.

"So that we might be able." The word "able" is the word *dunamai*. It means to have the ability to do something. "You mean that my trials are not just for me to get through, but God wants a ministry to other people, but it's for me to be so comforted by God that I might learn to comfort others?" Hear me clearly, "Yes! Yes! Yes!" We look at life as if it's an affront to who we are; that it's a stumbling block to what we want to be. And God says, "Are you kidding Me? I'm orchestrating your life. I know exactly what you're going through. But I also know somebody else that needs this message and won't get it until you go through it."

All of us want the faith to walk through things, but none of us want the schools we have to go through to get it. Paul is saying that what you're going through, you're not an island to yourself. And when you go through it and you turn to the God of comfort—and the specific context is when you're being persecuted for your faith but it can go in any direction as you'll see in just a moment—that you can comfort others.

"So that we may be able to comfort those who are," and here it opens it up right here, "in any affliction." Paul lifts the lid off of just

being persecuted. He now covers every base, from any affliction, any and all afflictions: it covers all manner in saying that. Of stresses and hurtful situations that one might be going through and God's trying to comfort that individual and give him the peace in the midst of it, the peace that's in the midst of a storm, so that when he comes out he's going to open his eyes to somebody that's been right there in front of him that he hasn't even seen before. But He makes him sensitive to that individual.

And what Paul is saying to me is that unless we have been there and received the comfort of God ourselves, we can't be as sensitive to those who are around us going through afflictions. And that's how God uses it in a positive way in our life. The key is not just the fact that we all suffer. That's not what he says. It's not because you suffer: everybody suffers. But that you've received comfort from the Lord, that's where the message comes in and that's what points people to the God of all comfort. This makes us a candidate to minister to others who are hurting.

We started doing something on staff just this past week and I can't wait until we do it again. It is called a prayer walk. You're going to hear a lot about prayer walking coming up in months to come; so much so that it's going to become a part of our life. We call it prayer walking. Many times, I've done it for years in my life, and didn't call it that, didn't know that was what it was called. But what we did, we broke up: the ladies went one way and the men went another way. We broke into groups, and by the way, you've been prayed for tonight. This is so much fun, watching you walk in the door you didn't know that we were right in here praying for you, and we prayed over every room in this church and the hallways, and we just asked God to make us sensitive to the people that come in here and sensitive to the people that work in here because I'm telling you, God has that kind of thermometer inside of us and can make us sensitive if we'll just open our eyes. He's the God of all comfort, not just for us, but for other people. Open your eyes.

You say, "I don't have a ministry." Let me ask you a question? What valleys have you been through in your life? When have you had the faith and how did God bring you through? That's your ministry right there, because you comfort wherein you have been comforted. And that's the ministry God gives to you.

It's incredible how we have tunnel vision going through life. It's all about us, and then when God doesn't let it happen the way we want it to, it's His fault. And we never understand how somebody around us needs exactly what God wants us to discover in Him. We need one another. The meaningfulness of comfort is the fact that he's always there. He's always there. The ministry of our comfort: when we allow Him to comfort us and He opens our eyes to others who need exactly that same comfort. It moves us to move to them.

The measure of our comfort

Then the third thing is the measure of our comfort, the measure of it. Now I chose that word carefully because I want you to see the dimensions of it. You need to make sure that it's not us comforting anybody. I want to go back to what we started with: it's Christ in us, the Divine Comforter that comforts people through us. It's not us, it's Christ in us.

Paul says in verse 4 again, "who comforts us in all our affliction so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction," but notice what he says, "with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God." That's why we sing the song all the time to keep it on people's minds. It's not about us, it's about Him. "Jesus, be Jesus in me; no long me but Thee. Resurrection power, fill me this hour; Jesus, be Jesus in me." He comforts us as we yield to Him and as we're comforted by Him He reaches out through us and touches others with the same comfort, because it's the same Comforter.

He in us makes us sensitive to come alongside those who around us are suffering what we have been through. But Paul continues to show this measure of his comfort when he says, verse 5, "For just as the sufferings of Christ," now listen to this carefully, "are ours in abundance," speaking of himself and his group; the persecution has come to them, "so also our comfort is abundant through Christ."

Now what did he just say? Basically, first of all he says to the degree that we have suffered, and to the degree that we have received comfort, is to the degree that we can minister to anybody. I love what Tozer said, "to him that he trusts much, suffers greatly." Paul shows the specific suffering that he's talking about here. He says he's experiencing, now listen carefully, the sufferings of Christ. Let me read it again: "For just as the sufferings of Christ are ours in abundance, so also our comfort is abundant through Christ."

I want you to turn to Philippians 3:10-11. Paul had prayed this prayer. This was the desire of Paul's heart. He says that he wanted to know Christ, to experience Christ daily in his life. Look at this, "that I may know Him, and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death; in order that I may attain to the resurrection from the dead." Now did you see it? "that I may know Him, and the power of His resurrection [and the what?] the fellowship of His sufferings."

There's not a person in here that is a believer that doesn't want to experience Him. I don't want to just go to church and talk about Him. I want to experience Him; I want to know Him. I want to know Him when I go through the valleys in life. I want to know Him when I go through the daily life. I want to experience Him. But now watch: when that happens, that's when you don't experience your sufferings; you experience the sufferings of Christ. You know why? Because every bit of the flack that comes your way is not

directed at you, it's directed at the Christ Who lives in you. And you literally become a sharer in the sufferings of Christ.

I'll tell you, get used to it. When you choose to say yes to Christ, this is an unfriendly world, and light and darkness conflict with one another. And it's not us that offends them: it's the Christ in us that offends. This is the kind of suffering that Paul is talking about when he says, "for the sufferings of Christ are ours in abundance," but he also says, "so also our comfort is abundant in Christ." Do you see it? To the degree that we suffer for His sake, to the degree that we suffer because we let Him be Who He is in our life, is to the same measure that we receive the comfort that He wants to give to us. But even better than that, to that deeper degree, we're able to minister to other people who are also suffering the sufferings of Christ.

And then he brings it home in verses 6-7; he puts it all together. Look what he says, "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; 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." In other words, as Paul and his crew learn to go through affliction, learn to go through the difficult times, the sufferings of Christ, yielding to the comfort of Christ, they were then becoming those who could share that comfort with Corinth and with all of Achaia and all of Greece.

Paul says that this comfort is "effective in the patient enduring of the same sufferings which we also suffer." Let me explain that. Anyone—this might bless you, it does me, hopefully it does—anyone who is allowing Christ to live through his life is going to go through—now listen carefully—the same exact sufferings that the apostle Paul went through: the sufferings of Christ. That puts us in some pretty good company, you reckon?

You know, I had somebody say that to me one day and they said, "What's wrong?" And I told him all my problems. And he said, "Boy, you're in good company, aren't you?" I said, "What do you mean?" And he just went back and showed me Paul, stuff I already knew and I wished he hadn't told me. I wish I would have said it. But we need to be reminded of that, folks. It's no different today than it was the day that Paul walked on this earth. This world is as hateful towards God today as it was back then, and when we start letting Jesus be Jesus in us, that which comes towards us is equalized by the comfort God gives to us, and then we have a ministry of encouragement to others who are going through the very same things.

Well, Paul is encouraged just knowing that the Corinthians, if they do suffer now, because this has been a pretty upside down church, but at least they're suffering now, is the right kind of suffering. That's something he milled on. He says in verse 7, "and our hope for you is firmly grounded." The word "hope" is that which is expected to happen. I've got expectations for you. Remember, he told Titus when he took this third letter to them—this is the fourth letter that he wrote, 2 Corinthians—he told him, "I believe they're going to come around. I believe there's hope there." And he's picking up on that again. He says, "our hope for you is firmly grounded." The words "firmly grounded" means "that's something I can build on now. Now that I see that you're suffering for the right reasons and not because of sin you've inflicted on yourself, man, I've got something to build on."

You know, you never want people to suffer, but if they do suffer, you want it to be for the right reasons, and that's what Paul is saying. "I have hope for you now that maybe you are living the life that I've been preaching to you." Persecution is not fun, but if it's present, it is simply indicative of the fact that the individual is yielded to the Lord Jesus Christ.

Understand where this context is, folks, it's no place else: it's right there. When we start saying yes to Jesus and He starts using us to influence the world around us, the darkness will rise up. There will be those who desire to live godly lives who will be persecuted. You say, "I've never had any persecution in my life." I can't answer all of those questions, but I can ask you one. Are you sure you're letting Jesus be Jesus in you?

I'm telling you, it will threaten families. How many of you have had your family threatened because you're a believer? Anybody in here? How about at work? Anybody had people at work come down on you because of your beliefs? Yes. See, that's the kind of hostile world we live in, but isn't it good we suffer His sufferings? And He's within us to comfort us, and not only that, to reach out and grab hands with somebody else who is going through it and encourage them.

He's the God of all comfort. Don't think it a strange thing this next week when you start living yielded to Christ that you catch it from the people that used to enjoy your company. John 3:19-20, I believe it is, says, "this is the judgment: that light has come into the world but people will not come to the light because their deeds will be exposed."

Do you realize what we are? We're lights. Everywhere we go is like a spotlight coming on. And a lot of folks just don't like that. But I'm glad we're here together: we can encourage each other and be encouraged from the apostle Paul. And you know what? He had no idea that for generations what he wrote back to the church in Corinth was going to encourage people like you and me in the 21st century. He didn't know that. This is God's Word. He's still encouraging people, isn't he, because he's been to the God of all comfort.

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## 2 Corinthians 1:8-11

### The God of All Comfort – Part 4

Turn with me to 2 Corinthians 1, and we're going to be looking at verses 8-11 today. This is the "God of All Comfort, Part 4". One of the great things about studying the scripture, at least in my life it is, is that it teaches us, and this is my words, but life is like a quarry. You know what a quarry is? That's where all that rock is chipped out. Life is like a quarry. You see, life and all the circumstances of life, are used of God to shape us and conform us into the image of Christ. Now, how do we know that? Romans 8:28 says, "And we know that God causes all things to work together, for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose."

Now the "good," sometimes we don't see the good when the pain is going on in our lives, but the good comes out in verse 29: "For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son so that He would be the firstborn among many brethren." You know, the only down side to that as far as we're concerned, certainly not as far as God is concerned, is that the tools that He uses to chip away the old ugly flesh that is still resident in our life, they're not of our choosing. Don't you wish you could choose the tools that God would use? But we don't get to do that. Not only that, the tools that He chooses to use sometimes can be painful at best to our flesh particularly.

You see, God uses life to chisel us down to where there is much less of us and so much more of Him. One of the tools that He chooses to use is persecution that comes from letting Jesus be Jesus in us. As we saw last week, it's not persecution at us; it's persecution that is coming to Him. We actually experience the sufferings of Christ. Persecution is never a welcome guest, I don't care who you are, I don't care what kind of veteran you are. In persecution, it's never a welcome guest. We don't look forward to it, we don't want it, but it's going to come if we make a stand and if we make a vessel that Christ can use.

If anyone should be used to persecution, I mean, he could have a PhD in it, is the apostle Paul. We saw last week in our study, just a real brief look in 2 Corinthians 11 of what he had been through because of his just saying yes to Jesus. He says in Galatians, "leave me alone, don't let anybody trouble me. I've got the brand marks of Jesus on my body."

Well, Paul had found his comfort in the midst of all the persecution he'd been through. And that's what we are seeing in our text. He had found that the God of all comfort is always there, and it's such a precious thing. In fact, it's so much so that he burst out into praise in 2 Corinthians 1:3. He says, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ," actually it's much more emphatic than what the English can bring out, "the Father of mercies and God of all comfort."

Then in verses 4-7 he begins to show how precious this comfort really is to him and should be to us. He showed us the meaningfulness of God's comfort in our life. And the meaningfulness is in the fact that God is always there to comfort His own. It's not like you have to pass a test; you don't have to go through a class. God is always there. The word "comfort" in verse 4 when it says, "who comforts us in all our affliction," is in the present active tense. Present tense means He's always comforting us, and the active voice is so impressive to me, maybe not to you, but the active voice means this is His own choice. He doesn't do this because He has to; He does this because this is Who He is. He's the God of all comfort. That's so precious.

But not only that, we saw the ministry of our comfort. Affliction drives us to the God of our comfort and when we get there we realize that when He comforts us, it's not for us alone. No man is an island, but God uses the comfort in our life so that then we can become a vessel through whom He can reach out and touch other people with that same comfort. He says, "who comforts us in all our affliction," verse 4, "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." And he puts the word "in" in there. That's not just persecution, that's any affliction. God comforts us so that we can now comfort others in any affliction.

Life is not accidental. Some people believe this and that bothers me that they don't seem to understand that God's in control. As far as God is concerned, He never wastes any experience in our life, even failure. He'll weave it into His perfect plan. But God uses these experiences and these trials and these difficulties to prepare us so that we now might be able to comfort others. But we also saw, Paul shared with us the measure of our comfort. He says in verse 6, "But if we are afflicted," speaking of he and his team, "it is for your comfort," speaking of the Corinthians, "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;" and that's a powerful verse because the Corinthians had never suffered for the right reason. They had suffered because of sin in their life. The church was upside down. Yes, they had a lot of suffering, but it was self-inflicted and he said, "If you're going to suffer, suffer for the right reason."

Then verse 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." And that's his point: if you're sharers of the right kind of suffering. It's apparent that God, through the suffering that Paul had gone through, and the comfort for which he had received, God had tenderized his heart toward these Corinthian believers.

There's been a real rift between him and the Corinthian believers. They treated him pretty toughly and so now his greatest desire is that they will glorify God and as I said, learn to suffer for the right reasons. Paul says, "If that happens, then my hope is firmly grounded. I have something I can build upon if you're living yielded to Christ. I can help you. But I can't do much for you if you're going to live to yourselves."

Well, today in our study we will see Paul's suffering in a beautiful light that should encourage each of us. We're going to get a glimpse of how suffering purified Paul. You know, it's funny how we deify the Bible characters. "Paul was part of the Trinity." No! God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Ghost. Now, he may have his application in, but there's been no vacancy in the Trinity. He's still down here with the rest of them. We tend to deify them. No. God used suffering to purify Paul and squeeze out the message so that it can get across to you and me even in the 21st century.

Suffering purified Paul and then, when he was purified, it stabilized his hope; but it also opened the door to the possible reconciliation between him and the Corinthian believers. It's a precious thing: God sometimes takes pain in our life to bring us to the end of ourselves as we see today, and then He'll give us a fresh hope. But in that moment we're going to start seeing people in a different light. They're no long threats, they're opportunities.

Well, look at verses 8-11 and we're going to begin to see what God can teach us about what I would want to call the ministry of affliction. Ron Dunn, who's in heaven now, preached a series of sermons and he called it Strange Ministers. And the reason he called it Strange Ministers is because of the pain that we sometimes have to go through to get across the truth that God is trying to teach us. Ron's son committed suicide. Ron was manic depressive and fought that all of his life. His other son was suicidal. His daughter was in a car wreck and had to have a leg amputated. His wife had cancer. I mean, here's a man who had a walk through the valley, but he had learned something: in the midst of it God was going to purify him, and God would use that to deepen his own walk. He was one of the greatest preachers that ever lived here on earth.

#### The purification of our affliction

Well, there are several things we want to share. First of all is the purification of our affliction. Let's look at that purification. Let's look at the process here of what's happening in Paul. Now I'm told, that if you put quail in an area, you stock it with quail, and there are no hunters, and there are no predators in that area that would threaten those quail, that those quail, over a period of time, will either die out or will certainly decrease in number. But they tell me that if you put quail in an area where they're hunted and there are predators that are preying upon them, they say give it a few years and you'll have more quail than you could possibly count. Because there is something about being persecuted that brings about a better result. Well, I don't know about quail, but I certainly know about the Christian life. That's exactly what Paul is saying. Persecution, affliction, in a strange sense, is necessary in our life because it is a purifying element in our walk with God.

Purification is meant to drive us to Him. Paul illustrates this in a dramatic way. Look at verse 8. First of all, he showed that he has an intention to bare his heart to these Corinthian believers. Now sometimes when you go through bad times you tend not to want anybody to know about it. But this is not the apostle Paul in this text. Paul said, "I want you to know what we've been through because if you don't know what we've been through you won't understand our comfort, and if you don't understand our comfort, then there can be no ministry from us to you. Verse 8, "For we do not want you to be unaware, brethren, of our affliction." The word "want" there is thelema. And thelema is the same word we saw in verse 1 when Paul said, "Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will," it's the word for "will," and he translates it here "we do not want." It's a powerful word, just as God intended to use Paul; Paul intended to tell the Corinthians about his affliction.

You have to see the intensity in this. If you just read it casually, you miss it. Paul says, "I've got a burden. I want you to know something and I'm going to tell you about it." It was for their good. "For we do not want you to be unaware, brethren, of our affliction." The word "not" there, there are two words for "not" in the Greek language. And I know this will excite you. But one of them is a relative not, but the other one is ou and it means not in any way, shape, or form. Now when I was growing up and I wanted to go do something and I asked my mother and she said, "No," I want to know which one she's using. Because if she uses ou, hang it up brother, it's over. But if she uses it in a relative sense, it could change depending on the circumstances. Usually with my mother it was the relative one. With my daddy it was absolute. So I'd always go to my mom.

Paul says, "We do not [in any way, shape or form] want you to be unaware of something." The word "unaware" is the word agnoeo. It means to be without understanding; to be ignorant of something. And the word "affliction," "we do not want you to be unaware of our affliction," the word "affliction" is the word thlipsis. We've already seen this word in verse 6. It's more inward, but it also involved the outward. It's the inward, emotional stress that comes from outward physical threats and pressure in your life. Paul wanted them to know about the extreme persecution that he and his team went through when they were in Asia.

He says in verse 8, "For we do not want you to be unaware, brethren, of our affliction which came to us in Asia." Now, we don't know for certain what he's talking about. We wish we did. We wish there were more details in this that would pull us into the story, but Paul

doesn't give those. What's he talking about when he was in Asia? It could have been a lot of things because he experienced a lot of trials when he was ministering in Asia. Most probably he's referring to what happened to him in Ephesus, because Asia in that day is today modern day western Turkey. It's not Asia that we think of, it's a different Asia. When you see it, don't ever connect the two because they're not connected. And Ephesus is the capital city of Asia, of this area. And Ephesus was also the headquarters of Paul when he was doing his work in any part of that region of the world.

If it happened in Ephesus—and we don't know, we're reading between the lines—perhaps it's the incident that took place in Acts 19. Let me tell you about that because if we read it, it would take us way too long. There was a man by the name of Demetrius there that was a silversmith and Paul had really caused him some financial damage. Paul was a threat wherever he preached Christ to those who lived for themselves. Always the gospel threatens people who walk after the flesh. Paul preached Christ crucified and he preached there is no other God. Because of this Demetrius was suffering financially. Why would a silversmith suffer financially because a man is preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ? Because Demetrius, among others, was selling little silver statues, the false goddess Artemis, also known as Diana. That's the Greek name for it.

There was a great temple built for Artemis, built on top of a big hill overlooking Ephesus. I've been there. It's beautiful, built up on top of that hill that overlooks the whole city. Back in the days when Paul would go there it was a seaport. Now it's about ten miles inward because it's filled in since that time. There was a huge business of selling these little statues. People would come from all over the world: it was one of the wonders of the world and people would come to Ephesus to see this magnificent temple to the false goddess called Artemis. Well, as you walk up the street there and it makes a turn, you pass the amphitheaters right here and you walk down the street and you make a turn, there's the library over here, and you begin to walk up, this is probably the best archeological remains anywhere in the world. But as you walk up that street, there are little shops, you can see where little shops were, like a strip mall we'd have today, and each one of those shops had people selling these little silver statues of Artemis.

Well, the more Paul preached Christ and the more he preaches that there's only one true God—and it certainly isn't Artemis at the top of the hill—people were getting converted and guess what? They stopped buying those little statues. Isn't it amazing how the gospel of Jesus Christ, yes, it will change society, but it will also threaten the society that is built upon greed. You've got to get rid of Christianity if you're built upon greed, because greed comes from serving the god of the flesh and there is no other God but the Lord Jesus Christ. Christianity is definitely not profitable for those who sell sin.

Well, these greedy merchants in this city of Ephesus, led by the man named Demetrius, they began to spread the news that this man was in here, he's preaching against our goddess in the temple on top of the hill and he's hurting us in every single way. And a riot broke out. You know, Paul just seems to have that magnetism about him. A riot broke out. The people seized two of his partners, they didn't get Paul, they drug them into the amphitheater. Oh, I wish I could take you there; it is something else. This amphitheater is almost completely there as it was in the days of Paul.

And they went in this amphitheater, and the book of Acts 19 says they began to shout, "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians. Great is Artemis of the Ephesians." And the scripture even says in chapter 19 that there were many in that crowd who didn't have a clue why they were there. Isn't that kind of the way it still is? People rally for something negative and people just jump in. They don't really care what's going on. And so they're all in this amphitheater, and you say, "Why would you say the noise is deafening?" Because I have been there and the way they were constructed is incredible. They didn't have microphones like we have today and you can get 125 or so feet from somebody and it was built in a semi-circle and you can face the stone of that wall that goes all around and up above were the seats, and you can whisper, and somebody can be on the other side, I've done it, and you put your ear down to the stone and you can hear what he's whispering 150 feet away and all that he's doing—that's the way the sound, the acoustics of those amphitheaters were incredible. And here are people not whispering, they're shouting. "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians."

To make a long story short, it became so bad, and the murderous and hateful attitude of the crowd became so violent, that Paul, you know Paul, he was going to jump right in the middle of it, and his disciples grabbed him and said, "Don't you dare go up there." And they had to sneak him out and he was taken over to Macedonia. Had they gotten their hands on the apostle Paul they would have ripped him to shreds. And we don't understand the thlipsis. We don't understand the pressure, the stress that he was under, but it appears that he might be bringing it out here in 2 Corinthians; the fear that was in that crowd.

Maybe he was referring to this event. But the problem is that we just don't know. That gives us an idea, but we just don't know. The account in Acts only gives brief details of the horrendous time that Paul had with his team. But what we do know is that it was life threatening. We know that for a fact: verses 8-9 tell us that. Look at verse 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," listen carefully to each phrase, "we were burdened excessively, beyond our strength, so that we despaired even of life; 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."

Now Paul says, "I want you to know this, Corinthians. I want you to understand: you've been suffering because of sin. I want you to understand what suffering for the sake of Jesus is all about. I want you to understand the depth that you can be driven to because of

persecution in your life.” The word “burdened” is bareo. A similar word is barus which is a form of that word, which is talking about something that is so heavy on top of you that it is crushing you down. You know, he says in another place, “bear one another’s burdens,” and it’s the word barus, when you see a brother that is being crushed and oppressed and he can’t carry the load.

Then there’s another version that says, “Every man should bear his own burden.” That’s a different word, phortion, and that means every man has his own backpack to wear. But when it comes to this word right here, there are times in everybody’s life it is crushing them down and they can’t seem to handle it and he tells us to go and help that person bear that burden. That’s the word barus. Something so heavy on top of you that it’s pushing you down and down and you can’t stand it.

The word “excessively” is kata here, which means down, or against. To be pressed down to the point you just can’t take it anymore. And remember Paul has already opened the door: this is persecution, what it can do to you. And it’s a very human emotion. And they are human people we’re dealing with here. It’s coming from everywhere.

The rest of the verse explains things for us, “we were burdened excessively, beyond our strength, so that we despaired even of life.” Now Paul says, “We didn’t have the strength in ourselves to bare up under it. It was beyond our strength.” You know, we live in this macho day, don’t tell anybody you can’t do something. Are you kidding me? Suck it up, boy. When the going gets tough, the tough get going. And that’s the way we’re brought up. And the apostle Paul says there are going to be times in your life you better admit that you can’t do it because if you can’t admit you can’t do it, what’s going to happen is that you’re not going to receive the comfort that God can give to you in that situation. You’re not going to be enabled.

It’s kind of like in the book of James. He says, “If any of you lack wisdom.” Now the first key to that is that you have to admit that you don’t have it. You see, what’s happened to us in the 21st century is that we have to prove ourselves to be something we know good and well we’re not. We’re trying to live a standard and we can’t even live up to it ourselves. But here’s Paul saying “we despaired even of life,” and the words there mean we were at a total loss to know what to do to save ourselves. They thought they were going to die. Verse 9 says, “indeed, we had the sentence of death within ourselves.” Some people say that sentence of death could be that there was a warrant out for their arrest after this riot and they were going to arrest them and put them to death. Possibly, but when he says, “within ourselves,” I think what he’s saying is “we have come to the conclusion within that we were going to die. We were at the end of ourselves. There is not one single thing we can do to help ourselves.” He knew and expected death to be the result of what was going to happen.

You have to keep asking yourself, why is Paul being this gut honest? Why is he telling them this? He says, “I don’t want you to be unaware in any way shape or form. I want you to understand what we have been through: suffering for Christ.” What is the message he’s trying to get across to the Corinthians? Well, if you’ll continue in verse 9 he answers that: “so that we should not trust in ourselves, but in God who raises the dead.” Paul is so clear. Paul is saying, “these horrific experiences that happened to us, Corinthians, are good things because God has used them to drive us to the point we couldn’t do it anymore.” One of the biggest problems of Corinth was fleshly wisdom and doing it in their own strength and he said, “God had brought us to this point to where we would learn to trust Him. He drove us to the end of ourselves to purify us of ourselves so that we would learn to trust Him.”

All they’re saying is that their hope was, and they did have hope, they put their hope in the One, in God, who raises from the dead. Their hope was this: that even if they were put to death—what affliction are you going through today? Maybe it’s not persecution, maybe it’s sickness or illness, or something else—but even if it brings you to the point of death, God is the One Who raises the dead. Now that ought to light your fire. Isn’t it interesting: we know these things in our head, but when we’re in the midst of a trial we act as if we don’t have a clue.

Paul and his team believed God could deliver them from death

There are two things that are involved here. First of all, Paul and his team believed that God could deliver them from the jaws of death. Now that’s my term, that’s nothing scriptural. That’s my term: the jaws of death, or the actual death itself in my mind. In other words, if they died, they knew they’d be with Him. And death could not hold them in its jaws.

At the funeral of a 26-year-old man the pastor said something I’ll never forget as long as I live. In a funeral he got up and he said, “Oh, death! Where is your sting?” Kind of like, “come on, death, answer back.” “Oh, death! Where is your victory?” What is he doing? He’s quoting out of 1 Corinthians 15 and, of course, it goes on to say, “Thanks be unto God for the victory that is in the Lord Jesus Christ.” But I will never forget, and I’ve never been in a funeral where somebody started it that way. He just put his hand on his hip and he said, “Oh, death! Where’s your sting? Oh, death! Where is your victory?”

Why would he do that? You see, Jesus has conquered sin and death and if we get to the point of death, if we’re in any affliction, particularly persecution and it brings us to the point we think we’re going to die and there’s not a single thing we can do to save ourselves. At that point it begins to be overwhelming to us that Jesus is the resurrection. Jesus has conquered death. Death is nothing more than a homecoming for believers. It’s graduation day for those that have been believers down here on this earth and have walked faithful before God. So the jaws of death, they weren’t afraid of it anymore because they had been driven to the end of

themselves, God had purified them and brought them to the marvelous understanding of this truth.

Paul and his team believed God could deliver them from the threat of death

But secondly they also believed that God could deliver them from the gates of death, the threat of death. The point is that because of tribulation He did do that this time. He rescued them from death. But the point is because of tribulation they were purified of trusting themselves. You know there is something to be said about a person who is driven to the end of himself and he cannot do one single thing: it's in that moment he realizes that Jesus is everything he needs.

There is a purification of trials and afflictions

You know, when Jesus is all that you have, that's when you realize that He's all you want, all you need. So there's a purification of trials and afflictions. God uses it to drive us to the end of ourselves. Whatever is over our head is under His feet. And that's when we begin to understand it. We don't understand it in a setting like this. Oh, we do mentally, we comprehend it. But when we're there it drops in there and makes an 18-inch journey from the head down to the heart. And we begin to understand what is going on.

What is it that is afflicting you? In any area, is it persecution? Is it a trauma that you're going through? Is it a sickness that you're facing and what God says is, "What could be the worst thing?" You say, "Well, if I die." And God says, "Excuse me? You're just a vapor." You know, isn't it amazing we're spending all of our time trying to keep people down here while God is spending all of His time trying to get them up there. We talk as if we understand. I'm telling you, I don't think I fully comprehend it. You won't fully comprehend it until you have been to the point where there is nothing else you can do and then God says, "Now let's go back to what you used to talk about to others and tell them. Let's make sure you understand this. I'm the One Who raises from the dead."

It brings a stabilization of our hope

So the purification of our affliction; there's a purifying element of being afflicted no matter what area it comes from. But secondly, what this does is when we come to the end of ourselves, it brings a stabilization of our hope. What happens is that our hope begins to get threatened. It becomes uncertain when it should be certain. But when we get to the end of ourselves, when we get to that place, then God stabilizes our hope. Hope springs eternal in the heart of one who has been to the end of himself and God has revealed Himself afresh as the One Who raises the dead. He understands that even death cannot conquer us. You know, you can kill the messenger, but you can't kill the message, so God's work is going to continue right on. And we're going to be with Him. The stabilization of our hope.

Verse 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; 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; 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." Paul says in the midst of that awful trial, God delivered them from impending death. That's the first thing he says.

He says, "Let me give you the end of the story. I'm not giving you all the details but it was so bad we were at the end of ourselves, we knew we were going to die, but God rescued us; He delivered us." But the word "delivered" is perhaps a word you don't fully understand. I didn't. The word "delivered" is the word *rhōmai*. This is the word meaning "He drew them to Himself." It's the most beautiful word in Scripture. Paul is even talking about "He'll deliver me," and yes, he was put to death, but God still delivered him. He drew him to Himself. Sometimes it means, contextually, "he was taken away from the danger." Sometimes he was rescued in the midst of the danger. God simply drew him to Him. And you see, once you're in His presence, it doesn't matter what's going on around you. It's like you're in a raging river and it's sweeping you down in its current and you can't do a thing. The coldness of the water is just about to bring you to the point of hypothermia and you can't move and you're weak and you're sucked into that current and you're trying to cry out and it's feeble. "Help! Help!" You can't help yourself and suddenly a pair of giant, strong hands and arms reaches out and He pulls you out of that current, but not only pulls you out of the current. Oh, no, no, no. He pulls you to Himself and wraps His arms around you and holds you there until you can quiet and until you understand you've been delivered. That's the word.

I tell you one thing that will go home with you. When God rescues us it doesn't mean necessarily He took us out of danger. He may have left us in the midst of it. He may even let us go to the point that we die; and in death His arms are still there and takes us right on to be in His presence forever. It doesn't necessarily mean He rescues us from danger. However, in this particular context, it does. This word has more a meaning of "drawing to Himself." It's a beautiful.

Talk about comfort. You think Paul hadn't received the comfort of God? He's explaining it now. "But at the very end when I thought I was going to die, God drew me to Himself." I'll tell you one thing: some of those few times in my life I've understood any of this to any degree, just being in His presence is all I want anyway. If you study the book of James, that's really what it's saying. It's not saying that you'll be delivered from everything. What it's going to say is you can find yourself complete in the midst of it. God will draw you to Himself.

Verse 10, "who delivered us from so great a peril of death." Look at the hope now that has arisen within Paul, this eternal certainty of hope. The word "hope" means that which has absolutely no uncertainty whatsoever. Affliction has driven him to a point that he cried out and when he cried out, God was right there. He's the God of all comfort; He's always there and immediately showed him that there was nothing that could happen to him that hadn't already been taken care of when Jesus died on the cross, resurrected, and came to live in his life. There's nothing that can happen to us that He cannot conquer. He'll draw us to Himself.

Paul, having been afflicted to the very depths of his soul, having trusted in Christ, now has his hope stabilized. He's back on his feet. Do you see how the process of affliction produces this awesome result? I don't know if, when we studied Philippians, if you caught it or not, but what grabbed me was the apostle Paul had been in prison approximately four years, maybe even five, when he wrote Philippians. And yet he says in that book, "I can't speak for you, but as for me, to live is Christ and to die is gain." Do you understand that he didn't just live this way all the time? You know, we still think of him, we still deify these guys. No! What I see is, 'I have counted all things lost, because I have lost all things.' Actually he counted them lost before he ever lost them.

You know, God strips us down to where there is nothing else left and it's in that moment when we've been stripped down, whether it be persecution, whether it be sickness, whether it be anything else, and He brings us to the end of ourselves, and at the end of ourselves is when we look and for the first time perhaps we see Him. Then His Word suddenly takes a meaning that it's never taken before and the things we've sung and the things we've carelessly shared suddenly become so real to us that we can say with Paul, "For me to live is Christ, I don't want anything else. And to die is gain."

Paul said He will continue to deliver us even if we die: He is our deliverance. And then Paul says something else: "and yet He will deliver us." He says it three times. "He has delivered us." Then he puts it in the present tense, "He continues to deliver us." And then he says it again, "And yet He will deliver us." Boy, that is hope that has been stabilized.

How many are living as if they even expect Him today? But I'll tell you what, when God puts you in the throes of distress and He puts you in the valley, all of a sudden that becomes a truth that you want to sing and will ring in your ears. You begin to say, "Home! Home!" You begin to see it for the first time.

You see, what Paul is saying is something for us to be encouraged by. He was comforted by the God of all comfort. He was at the end of himself; he thought he was going to die. God revealed Himself: I'm the One Who is the Deliverer. I'll deliver you even if you die." And now his hope has been so stabilized he says, "And yet He will go on delivering me. And yet," and I think he points to the end now, "and He will deliver me." His hope has been stabilized.

It brings a reconciliation of our prayer

So the purification of our affliction, the stabilization of our hope, but finally, the reconciliation of our prayer. Now this verse 11 is not an easy verse. Certainly prayer is involved in praying for others. And don't hear me wrong when you don't hear me say it as emphatically as you want me to say it. I think there's something else going on here. Listen to me; you can't pray for someone when there's animosity and division between the two of you on your part. When you still have that hatred, when you still have that contempt, when you still have whatever it is. It's very difficult to pray and have that at the same time. When a believer who has hurt another begins to sense the softening of God in his heart and begins to realize the depths to which this person has been through, and that believer begins to pray for this someone, then reconciliation has either occurred or it's on its way to occurring.

The Corinthians had hurt Paul deeply. Don't ever forget this. This is not a church like Philippi; this is not a church like Thessalonica. This is a different church. This church had bruised and beaten this man. He spends the last four chapters of this whole epistle defending those at Corinth who had questioned him being a true apostle of God. But Paul has been so purified; Paul has been brought to the end of himself. Paul has received the comfort of God, and because of this it has tenderized his heart towards the very people that have hurt him. But can the same be said of them towards him? They don't even understand what he's been through. This must be factored in to verse 11.

He says, "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." The phrase, "you also joining us in helping us through your prayers" is an interesting one. It's really one Greek word mainly. It's *sunupourgeo*. It means to work together up under somebody. And it describes the manner in which you do this. In other words, how can they come up under Paul, how can they help him, how can they undergird him? With prayer, and certainly that's a beautiful picture of what prayer is. It's an undergirding. But it's in the present tense. You pray, and you keep on praying. This is the way you can work with me.

But it's the active voice, and this to me is important. Active voice means you do it of your own choice. Don't let it be because I'm telling you to do it. You see, because of the way the Corinthians had treated Paul, I do not believe Paul is thanking them for praying for him when he was going through his affliction. They could care less except about themselves. Nor do I think he's begging them to pray for him. There's nothing that we know in Paul's relationship in the Corinthian believers that would even begin to suggest that.

But I believe what he's saying is that he has greatly suffered and in that suffering, his suffering was for the right reason because he was a believer that let Jesus be Jesus in him. The Corinthians had suffered because of their own self-infliction: they because of their own sin and their own worldliness. Yes, they'd suffered but it wasn't the right kind. And then Paul says, "I was comforted. In the midst of it, at the point of death, I was comforted." And that comfort from the God of all comfort, he's now passing on to the Corinthians. I believe he's saying "This enrichment that I'm sharing with you, I really want you to see the worth of it. It ought to lead you at least to pray a thanksgiving for what God has done."

You see, these sincere prayers would then result in God getting all the glory, and this was the heart of Paul all along. When he writes the hard things to Corinth, he just wants God to get the glory instead of man. And he said, "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."

Paul's ultimate concern for the Corinthians was that they be rescued from danger, but the right kind; that they come to the place in their life that when they do suffer it's for the right reason. And he said then God can be honored and your prayers will cause many to give thanks for what God has done. Paul's not praying for himself, he's not confined to his own little world. It stretches to the entire world and he wants people to understand where he's been and he wants people to understand what God has done for him. But they can't understand it if they're going to live after their flesh.

I personally believe that beside the danger he faced in Asia, one of the things that burdened him down excessively was the way the Corinthians had treated him. I believe it broke his heart, drove him to the very ends of his self. But Paul makes it clear to the Corinthians that he has given his life to a great and powerful God who supports and comforts him no matter what is going on in his life. But the most beautiful thing that reveals his heart is that now he's letting them know, "I need you. I need you, Corinthians." The ball is now in their court because until they begin to live a yielded life they will never even begin to understand the suffering he's talking about and therefore cannot know the comfort he wants them to know.

When the Corinthian believers are joyfully giving thanks to God for His intervention in Paul's life, having understood because of their own experience the depths of suffering he's been through, and when that happened, then Paul's hope had been fully grounded. He knows then that they're where they ought to be.

You see the picture of this whole thing is that if we're suffering and in affliction, let's make sure it's the right kind of suffering. And if it's a disease we face or if it's death we face, listen, we didn't ask that to come on us. Let's make sure we go through it the right way. And that's what Paul would say to us today. Because if you will allow yourself to get to the end of yourself, you're going to see truths that you've never seen before. They'll become more important to you than ever. You'll see Him as your deliverer. Maybe He'll rescue from the situation, maybe He won't: He'll take you on to be with Himself. But He is the eternal Deliverer of all and He'll draw you to Himself in the midst of whatever you're going through.

I love what Michael Bolton said. He said, "God is not concerned about our happiness but He's concerned about our holiness." Our relationships, and that's what Paul's concerned about because that's God's heart in him. He wants the Corinthians to get up off their good intentions and start living the way they should be living and stop suffering from the consequences of sin and start suffering for the right reason. And when they get to the end of themselves he wants them to know the same comfort he had because now he's comforting them. It's being passed on to someone else.

What are you going through today? What's facing you today? What affliction is facing you, whether it be persecution or something else? How has what you're going through driven you to Jesus? How has it purified your heart towards others? How has your hope been restored? How now could you carry a grudge against anyone when you're in that place? You remember John Mark? Remember Paul and John Mark had a little bit of a problem? John Mark bailed out on him and he came to the point that Paul said he wasn't taking him with him. Barnabas said, "Oh, come on." And Paul said, "I'm not doing this." And there was a rift between Paul and Barnabas. Barnabas took John Mark, Paul took Silas and they separated. I mean, Paul could not take it that a guy would abandon and bail out on him in the midst of difficult times when he needed him. But in 2 Timothy, when he's about to die, he says, "Timothy, come see me, come before winter. Bring my coat because I'm cold and bring my parchment because I'm bored to tears. By the way, bring John Mark. He's useful to me."

Who is it right now that is on your top ten hit list? Who is it? You mark my words: you get to the end of yourself and you're going to face the Maker. I guarantee you there's not going to be one bone of contention in your life because suddenly you'll realize that wasn't worth fooling with. You're now seeing what's real. And, folks we need to get hold of this truth, I'm telling you; because in heaven there's not going to be anything but relationships. You better deal with them now. And if we won't deal with them, God will put you in the fires to burn off that old flesh and he'll bring you in to yourself and He'll reconcile you with a brother. The pressure will push you to the truth.

## 2 Corinthians 1:12

### The Ingredients of a Pure Testimony

I don't know if you know who Vance Hapner is, he's in heaven. If you don't know him you'll get to know him one day. Vance Hapner said one day, "You know what's wrong with Christianity today? We've lost the wonder of our salvation." Think about it. What a wonderful time of the year to celebrate the wonder of our salvation. Well, if you'd turn with me to 2 Corinthians 1. The Lord is so awesome in putting verse 12 right where He put it: right after verse 11. The last time we were together we looked at verses 8-11 and I had no idea, didn't plan it, how verse 12 was going to fit with Palm Sunday, the day that the Lord Jesus made His triumphal entry into Jerusalem. Today we're going to take the Lord's Supper. And you know the Lord's Supper does not talk about His resurrection like baptism does, it brings out His death.

The Lord's Supper helps us understand what it cost God for us to have what we have in Christ Jesus. And of course 1 Corinthians 11:28 says we are to examine ourselves before we ever partake of this Supper. And the verse that we're going to look at today, which is in the flow of what we've been teaching causes us to be able to examine ourselves. Let me just get you in to it. It's 2 Corinthians 1:12. Let me get you into it today by helping you to understand a word that's going to come up in the text.

God has give to every man whether he's a believer or an unbeliever, a built-in alarm system that lets us know if we're choosing to do what is morally right. It's an inner witness. It's called the conscience. We don't talk about it much, but it's very important. The Greek word is the word *suneidesis*. It's the moral inner witness to one's conduct when it comes to doing right or wrong. Now there's a difference however, in the programming of the believer's conscience and the unbeliever's conscience. The unbeliever's conscience is trained and programmed by the moral degradation of the world in which a person lives. It only knows right and wrong, which is defined, by the way, in the vocabulary of the world that's around it.

Let me give you an illustration of that. Recently I was in another state staying in a motel, I was speaking there, and it was almost a brand new one. It was very new, I don't know if it was brand new or not, but it was pretty new. And so when I checked out, the little lady behind the desk there, she was young and just full of life it seemed like, and when I came out she said, "How did you like our motel? How did you like it?" And I said, "Well, I've stayed in a lot of motels but the one thing I liked about it was your shower heads." Don't you hate to be in a motel somewhere and you get in the shower and there's about four drops every 30 seconds that fall? There's just no water that comes out. This was one of those great big round ones and, I mean, water just gushed out. Oh, and it was above my head. Now how many times have I ever stayed in a motel that had a shower head above my head? You short people, I'm telling you. You don't have a clue. Discrimination in our country is not black and white, it's short people against tall people. I want a shower over my head.

And I was telling her how much I liked that shower, and she said, "You know what? I'm glad you told me that. My roommate"—and I kept thinking she was going to say "she;" I mean, if you've got a roommate certainly it's a "she" —and she said, "My roommate, when he gets in the shower," and she went on and on. And I'm thinking here I am, a total stranger to her and in the vocabulary of the world in which she lives, her conscience has been trained by a false set of standards that said you can live with one another long before you ever get married, even if you don't get married. And so it's socially acceptable. And so her conscience did not in any way condemn her that she was doing what was morally wrong.

So you have to be real careful. You see, a person who is an unbeliever doesn't understand that right and wrong is relative. In other words, what is right and wrong at home when you're bringing up your children doesn't become right and wrong when they go to the university. And if you don't understand that, wake up and smell the roses. The mores of society change all the time. Right and wrong is so relative to so many different people. But a believer, however, has his conscience trained by the Spirit of God and enlightened by the Word of God. We know the difference between good and evil, not just right and wrong, and there's a huge difference in that.

Good and evil comes from God's Word and it's absolute and it never changes from the home to the school to the workplace, no matter what age you are and no matter the century in which you live. And when we live controlled by the Spirit of God and the Word of God, our conscience then bears witness to us and it does not condemn us, it doesn't accuse us: it defends us. So the conscience, the inner witness to the fact that good is being done, empowered by the Holy Spirit of God, it will defend us. It will defend us.

And this is the way you and I want to live. We want to live with our conscience defending us, not accusing us. Because you see, it works in tandem with the Holy Spirit of God. You see, those that would accuse us are a dime a dozen. Folks, they're everywhere. So what are we going to do when we're accused? Paul addressed the fact that people just want to accuse and examine in their own light of what is moral and what isn't. In 1 Corinthians 4:3 he says, "But to me it is a very small thing that I should be examined by you, or by any human court." And the idea is that when people criticize us they get in little groups and they form a courtroom and the pronounce sentence upon us, right there, wherever it is. And Paul said if you want to do that it's fine with me. That doesn't bother me. He says, "in fact, I do not even examine myself. I am conscious of nothing against myself, yet I am not by this acquitted; but the



one who examines me is the Lord." That's right.

Boy, when you can live a life that's being examined by the Lord, then your conscience will not condemn you; it will defend you. The apostle Paul is a great example to all believers. He says in 2 Timothy 1:3, "I thank God whom I serve with a clear conscience the way my forefathers did." That word 'clear' is the word for 'cleansed'. A cleansed conscience, cleansed of any soulishness of my heart. I'm thankful that I can say I serve Him with a clear conscience.

You see, the Corinthians had attacked his credibility. They had attacked him even being an apostle, and the apostle Paul had to live in the midst of this kind of thing: people accusing him on the right and accusing him on the left. But the thing that did not accuse the apostle Paul was his conscience. He had a pure testimony. He was what he said he was. His walk matched his talk. And that's what we're talking about today: a pure testimony. When our walk matches our talk.

I want you to listen in 2 Corinthians 1:12 as to how a man with a pure, clear conscience can speak. Let's just listen to what he said. He said, "For our proud confidence is this, the testimony of our conscience, that in holiness and godly sincerity, not in fleshly wisdom but in the grace of God, we have conducted ourselves in the world, and especially toward you." When our walk matches our talk our conscience will bear witness that we have a pure testimony. And we can be at rest. Even when others accuse us, we can be at rest because our conscience defends us.

Today we want to look at what a pure testimony is and hopefully as we do this you'll be examining yourself because we're getting ready to take the Lord's Supper this morning. I want you to think about what a pure testimony is. I want you to think about your life and let God speak to your heart.

The heart of a pure testimony

First of all I want you to see the heart of a pure testimony. Verse 12 again, "For our proud confidence is this, the testimony of our conscience that in holiness and godly sincerity, not in fleshly wisdom but in the grace of God, we have conducted ourselves in the world, and especially toward you." Now, let's dissect that first part of it. He says, "For our proud confidence is this, the testimony of our conscience that in holiness," and then let's skip those next few words; we'll pick them up later, "we have conducted ourselves in the world, and especially toward you."

Now the words 'proud confidence', we have two English words, which is one Greek word. It's the word *kauchesis*. Here it means "the cause for boasting," actually it means "the cause for rejoicing, for glorying in something." Most of the time when you see boasting, it's in a wrong light, but this one is in a right light. This is the right kind of boasting: it's a rejoicing. And Paul says, "We come to you with proud confidence." He says, "Our proud confidence is this: the reason for our rejoicing is this, the testimony of our conscience."

Now the word "testimony" is *marturion*. It's the word that means the confession of a witness on the stand about something that is known. It's somebody giving and bearing a witness, bearing a testimony. Paul says if our conscience, which we have discovered now is the moral witness within ourselves of whether we're doing those things that are right, if our conscience could speak for us today, this is what it would say: "For our proud confidence is this, the testimony of our conscience," and here's what the testimony of his conscience would be, "that in holiness we have conducted ourselves in the world and especially toward you."

Now, that word "holiness" is a very special word. In fact, in some Greek texts it's not even used here, but it's the word that is found also in Hebrews 12:10. Only two places at the most do we find this particular word. It's a special word. It's the word *hagiotēs*. *Hagiotēs* is that which describes the purity of one's heart. Now, it's not what one does; holiness is another word. This is the heart from which he does whatever he does: it's the purity of his heart. It's the holiness that comes into the heart of a believer that has been refined by the tribulations of life. It's a person that has been through it; it's a person whose flesh has been stripped away and it's down to just him and God. It's a pure heart.

-In fact, in Hebrews 12:10 it would be good if you'd just turn there and look at the context here. Let's look at verses 9-11. It's important to see the context of where this word "holiness" comes from and how does a person have a heart like this? Well, it says in Hebrews 12:9, "Furthermore, we had earthly fathers to discipline us, and we respected them; shall we not much rather be subject to the Father of spirits, and live? For they [the earthly fathers] disciplined us for a short time as seemed best to them, but He disciplines us for our good." Now that word "discipline" is talking about the different tribulations we go through in life, the different trials we go through in life. They're not accidental. God uses them as a spiritual quarry where He chips off the rough edges of our life. He says, "but He disciplines us for our good, that we may share His holiness." And that's the word right there. Then he says, "All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful; yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness." —

Now what he tells us here is that holiness is directly tied to Christ. It is His heart in us. He says in verse 10, "so that we may share His holiness." And this is the word that he uses: *hagiotēs*. And verse 11 says it's equated "with the peaceful fruit of righteousness." You see it's when we have been purified through the trials of our life that there's so much less of us and so much more of Him that

this holiness is seen by others. It's the divine well out of which we do everything we do: it's Christ's heart beating in and through us.

Paul says his walk was out of a refined, pure heart. I'll tell you what, in our text in 2 Corinthians, the King James version does not use that word. It's a different text, haplotes, and that's translated "simplicity." And the two thoughts put together are powerful. The word "simplicity" means that he's not double-minded. And that's Paul's whole point. He says, "My conscience is bearing me witness: I'm not double-minded. Everything I've done among you has come out of the purity of a heart that has been refined over and over and over again through the difficulties of my life." His heart was pure among the Corinthians and among the whole world. Everywhere he went he worked out of a heart that was pure. He said, "For our proud confidence is this, the testimony of our conscience, that in holiness... we have conducted ourselves in the world, and especially toward you."

So when others sought just to tear him down—and he spends four chapters in 2 Corinthians defending his apostleship because the people he's writing to, the church of Corinth didn't like him being an apostle; they didn't want to live up under the authority of anything. It's like the book of Judges, "every man did what was right in his own eyes," so he was constantly being attacked—But the thing that defended him was his conscience. His conscience bore witness to the fact that what he was doing, yes, it was morally right, it was good, it was out of the very heart of God.

So Paul was able to go right on living and being a vessel in the midst of all kinds of difficult circumstances because within himself he was at rest, he was at peace. Let me ask you this morning as we prepare for the Lord's Supper. Is your heart pure before God today? Is your heart pure? And if it is, why is it bothering you when people accuse you? Why does it bother you if your heart is at rest? Why does it bother you? It wasn't bothering Paul and Paul's conscience was bearing witness to him, that he was coming out of a pure heart.

You know what happens to most of us when we're accused, myself included? It's because we probably have done something wrong and we automatically assume there's guilt somewhere within us. Remember the Lord Jesus with the disciples there on that last night, speaking of this week and what it represents? And He looked at them and He said, "One of you will betray Me." All of the heads did not turn to Judas. You know why? God knew that Judas would do that from day one, but He never let on. He loved Judas just like He loved the rest of them. They never understood that it was going to be Judas. That's what real love does. But I'll tell you what happened. Peter said, "Lord, is it me?" And John said, "Lord, is it me?" You know why? Because their conscience was accusing them. There had probably been situations in their life that they already had done that and we know that Simon Peter, just a few days later, he denies Jesus three times and the book of Mark says he cursed and said, "I don't even know the man." There was something within them that was accusing them, condemning them. They thought they were the ones.

Do you know how to live? The way Paul lived. To live with a clear conscience, so that even when you are accused, even when you are brought before others because of something they fabricated about you, you can stand in the midst and be at rest within because your conscience does not accuse you. It defends you because good has been done out of a pure heart in your life.

The motive of a pure testimony

Well, the second thing I want you to see today as we examine ourselves is the motive of a pure testimony. It's very similar to the heart of it. He says, "For our proud confidence is this, the testimony of our conscience, that in holiness," and then he adds, "and godly sincerity, not in fleshly wisdom... we have conducted ourselves in the world, and especially toward you." Now notice that phrase, "in godly sincerity." He's attaching it again to God. God is the only One Who can produce holiness; He's the only One Who can produce this sincerity.

The word "sincerity" is the word *heilikrineia*. It's that which is pure, that which is clear, that which is transparent. You know, bass fishing, you want cloudy, murky water. You know why? So the bass can't see you and you can't see the bass. And so therefore the lure is what attracts them and that's a good day when you've got a murky river or lakes that have been fed by those murky rivers. You want to get around that water and get you a good black worm and start working that sucker, or get you a dark colored lure that works through there. I mean, it's wonderful. But the thing you don't want when you're bass fishing, but really you do want when you're trout fishing, is clear water; because in clear water everybody sees everything. The fish see you, you see the fish, and no fish get caught. That's usually the way it works. Clear, you can see the bottom; you can see everything that you look at, it's transparent.

That is the word "sincerely," that we're transparent. There are no murky waters in what we do. There's nothing hidden as an agenda somewhere over here and somebody finds out to late later on. And what Paul says is, "I have lived among you with a heart that is pure and with a sincerity with you about my life. There is nothing hidden in me." He uses the word in 1 Corinthians when he told them in 5:8 to this very group of people, "Therefore let us -celebrate the feast." And he's talking about celebrating Christ, our Passover, but he uses Old Testament terms. He said, "Not with old leaven, nor with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of [and he uses this word] sincerity and truth." —

Now if you put those two together, what is he saying? When a person is sincere, there is no leaven in his life, in his motive, in his heart. You see, leaven is sin. Now, you ladies know what leaven is. You put leaven in certain things and it causes that to rise. You

know what leaven is. As a matter of fact a doctor told me that cancer is similar to that. It's something that causes a reaction to the things that are around it. The apostle Paul says leaven is sin. He said, "I've been among you and there's not been any sinful motive in my life. There's nothing hidden in me. My conduct was something that did not come out of the sinful flesh amongst you." He was pure and it was out of God Himself; it was Christ living through Paul.

Godly sincerity is what Christ produces in us when we allow Him to live His life through us. Paul uses the word in 2 Corinthians 2, and it describes the motive of his preaching; but he also attaches it to the fact that it has to come from God. He says in 2 Corinthians 2:17, "For we are not like many, peddling the word of God," and there are many people today who are doing that and people are buying it, "but as from sincerity," and then he makes sure that everybody understands, "but as from God, we speak in Christ in the sight of God." He understands this because it was Christ living His life in Paul and living His life through Paul. Christ produced within Paul a pure heart, the very heart of God Himself, and his sincerity was something God produced in him. He had no fleshly motive whatsoever.

So he says again, "For our proud confidence is this, the testimony of our conscience, that in holiness and godly sincerity," and then he makes a contrast here, "not in fleshly wisdom." Now there's one thing you have to understand about Paul, and if you've studied 1 Corinthians you have seen it, because he spends the first four chapters describing how his wisdom did not come from man, which by the way they were enamored with. He said, "My wisdom comes from God." And involved in that word "wisdom" is not only a man's message, but it's also a man's methods. And he says, "I didn't come in front of you with fleshly wisdom, I came in sincerity, the kind of sincerity that only God can produce. I have a pure testimony."

And so when they question him as to who he was, they questioned his methods, they questioned his message, his conscience didn't condemn him. He could stand and take it because he knew he was being examined by the Lord. It didn't matter what people were saying about him; he knew that he was walking in a right relationship with God, his conscience bearing witness to him.

Now let me ask you a question today. What do people say about you? The people that are closest to you? Do you do what you do with God's heart, with pure motives? Are you transparent? Are you who you are full of Jesus? Or are your message and your methods of the flesh? Do you say what you say with God's heart, with pure motives? You know, we know one of the things over the years, 43 years now in the ministry, one thing I've noticed, there are a lot of people who can pray the stars down. They've got it down to an art. Prayer, like everything else, has become an art, rather than the heart of somebody responding to God. And yet, as soon as they finish praying they can walk outside and say some of the ugliest things you ever heard come out of a person's mouth to somebody. This is what James is talking about. The book of James says how can bitter water come out of a sweet well? It can't produce that kind of thing.

You see, when you live a life that is dominated by the Lordship of Christ, the Holy Spirit of God is in control of you and then your conscience is constantly going to defend you. Are we talking about perfection? Absolutely not, but we're talking about predictability. A person whose heart has been touched and tenderized by God, his conscience is not his problem even though people would tend to accuse him. He knows in his relationship with God that he has a pure testimony.

#### The power of a pure testimony

Well, the heart of a pure testimony: only God can produce that; and the motive of a pure testimony; but the third thing is the power of a pure testimony. It's as if Paul waited until the last to explain how it all happens; how God puts it together. Look what he says, "For our proud confidence is this, the testimony of our conscience, that in holiness and godly sincerity, not in fleshly wisdom," and then he adds the little phrase that's the catchall for everything, "but in the grace of God, we have conducted ourselves in the world, and especially toward you." Note that little phrase, "but in the grace of God."

Here we are again. Do you see it? God's grace, the same grace he talked about in verse 2 when he says, "Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." Grace is God's divine and transforming power. Maybe you're here and you don't seem to understand this. Christianity is not what you can do to make yourself sincere or what you can do to give yourself a holy heart. No, it's what God does in you. And when you allow Him to work through you, then He will produce a pure testimony. He will produce a pure heart. He will produce pure motives.

Put the verses together that we have studied in chapter 1 and it will light your fire. When I was looking at the flow, this is a divine flow in this chapter. In verses 1 and 2 of chapter 1, God takes pleasure in using us. And He locates us where we can be useable the most. And He gives us His grace. We are to be able to be influential to people around us. It's really not us influencing anybody. It's Christ in us touching people around us. In verses 3-7, not everybody likes it. In fact, in the midst of the pain we need to understand the comfort of the One who is near us, the One Who is always there and He comes to us and we go to Him. We draw to Him, He draws near to us. And we walk through that valley being comforted by the Lord Jesus Himself.

And in verses 8-11 it tells us that no matter how bad it gets, persecution itself is beneficial to us because it purifies our hearts and

our motives. And as we turn to God for His comfort, He stabilizes our hope, puts us back on our feet and He teaches us that even death can't conquer us and then we saw that He even tenderizes us toward the people that have treated us wrongly. We start getting to the point of wanting to seek reconciliation.

And you say, "That's a precious process." Yes, it is, but what Paul is doing in verse 12 is showing you the result of it. He's been there; he's been through the tribulation. God has purified his heart, God has put his feet back on the ground, God has given him a heart to reconcile with people that have done him wrong. And so we see then what a pure testimony is, as to how it's shaped and how it's formed by God himself in the crucible of life.

It brings us to the point that there's so much less of us and so much more of Him. And that's what Christianity is all about. Paul said in Philippians that "I may gain Christ." What he means is this right here: that there might be so much less of me and so much more of Him. Paul has beautifully shown us how the grace of God produces the heart of a pure testimony. It produces the motives of a pure testimony and the power of a pure testimony in the believer.

Now let me read it one more time and let's just listen as we examine ourselves. What is your testimony this morning? Is your conscience accusing you or defending you? Now if you've not been in the Word of God you can't really go that route, because, you see, you've already calloused your mind as to what God expects. But if you're seeking to walk with God, how does your conscience handle what I'm talking about this morning? Verse 12, "For our proud confidence is this, the testimony of our conscience, that in holiness and godly sincerity, not in fleshly wisdom but in the grace of God, we have conducted ourselves in the world, and especially toward you."

What is your testimony this morning? Is our conscience accusing or defending us? In 1 Corinthians 11:27, this very same group of people that 2 Corinthians is written to, Paul has some things to say that are pretty tough. He talks about the Lord's Supper which we're about to enter into. And remember in verse 28 he says that every man examine himself. He says in verse 27, "Therefore whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner, shall be guilty of the body and of the blood of the Lord. But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For he who eats and drinks, eats and drinks judgment to himself, if he does not judge the body rightly."

I want us to take some time this morning and think about our testimony. What will our children say about us? What will our husband or wife say about us? What will our co-workers say about us? Can we say amongst them when we stand in front of them, "My testimony is clear and pure? My conscience bears witness. I've been with you in holiness, the very heart of God. I've been with you in sincerity. I've been transparent; there are no other motives whatsoever. I want nothing for myself." Can we go there? Can we say what you see is a product of the grace of God working in our lives? That's what a pure testimony is all about.

Many times I have preached in this place as much as any place else, and people have gotten angry with me, they have even left saying, "He knew something and he was bringing it out." I was in a meeting just recently and I was preaching and a fellow was sitting right down front. I was doing an ordination and I looked down at him and I was telling him about all the things he would have to endure, and how people would hate the message he's preaching and how they would come at him, and I was just loving on him really, using 1 Corinthians 4. I did not know seventeen feet to his right was the biggest problem he'd ever had in his life. And after the service was over somebody came to me and said, "Did you know that? Did he talk to you?"

Isn't it interesting, your conscience will either defend you or it will accuse you. And right now it works in tandem with the Spirit of God. If the Spirit of God is convicting you, that's when it condemns and that's when we need to run to the altar and receive the cleansing of His blood.

## **2 Corinthians 1:12-2:6**

### **Evidence That God Proves Us Guilty**

Turn with me this morning to 2 Corinthians as we continue to move right along as we study this wonderful book, this letter of Paul to the Corinthian church. We're talking about a mini-series within a big series. It's called, "When Our Walk Matches Our Talk," and this is part 2 of that. I want to emphasize the fact of the evidence that convicts us as guilty.

You say, "Where in the world are you headed with this?" Well, just hang on and I think you'll understand. When I was in youth and recreation work, I had a gymnasium and I did all the recreation activities and the camps and everything. And we had a big banner, I had a big banner put up all the way the length of the wall in that gym and on it were huge letters that said these words: If you were on trial for being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you?

And that came in real handy, especially when we were having church league men's basketball games. You see, when I was growing

up I was in city league ball and you had to be bleeding to have a foul. I mean, I want to tell you the worst group I've ever dealt with has been in the church leagues. When you have Mr. Deacon and Mr. Sunday School Teacher, and whoever it is, playing basketball, funny things come out of them, especially when you make a call they don't like. And so that sign really helped me out. I'd just walk up to them and put my arm around them and just get them over to the side and point to the sign. If you were on trial for being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you? That usually solved the whole situation. Sometimes we had to do more drastic measures.

Well, today in our text in 2 Corinthians 1, we're going to see that the apostle Paul had all the evidence that was needed to convict him as being guilty of being a Christian. Now it is this evidence in our lives that people see. This is the evidence in our lives that touches people that don't know about the Lord Jesus Christ. When we're in the restaurant, when we're across the street, when we're doing our normal thing during the week, when they look at us and see the evidence that we really are what we say we are. Our walk is matching our talk; this is what we call "missions" across the street and around the world.

How do we become a part of reaching people for the Lord Jesus Christ? And I know this sounds simple, but as I was studying this message, God gave me the answer. The answer is right in front of my face. You know where it starts? It doesn't start out there; it doesn't start with somebody who is really good at raising funds. I'm terrible at that. Where it starts is each individual person that makes up the church begins to have an intimate walk with the Lord Jesus Christ. Letting Jesus be Jesus in and through us. You see, it's only then that we get to join Him in what He's already up to in this world. He's the One Who prompts the heart to give; He's the One Who gives direction to the needs that He puts within our grasp. He in us makes a lasting impression on the people that are around us.

The thing that changes the image of the church is not what we do with the property, it's not cutting the grass. We are the church: it's when we come to that place of surrender in our lives and Jesus is Jesus in us. That's what changes the world. And it's so exciting to see people who are allowing God to do that.

Recently I had the opportunity to fly to California for less than 24 hours. And it was in a beautiful place. I was speaking to the Young Professional Organization in America. That's the CEO's and presidents of companies that are 40 years old and under. And they told me they were going to have a limo to pick me up. I got outside and there was a lady standing there saying, "Mr. Barber?" I walked over and said I was Wayne and she said, "I'm your limo driver." And this limo driver got me in there, and I was sitting in the back. And it wasn't thirty seconds into the drive and she started talking to me and she said, "I just want you to know I'm a born-again believer and I love the Lord Jesus Christ." And she found out I was a preacher and liked to have talked the ears off my head before we got to that place. It was awesome. She's been working with this company for two years and she's going to Bible school and she just wanted to tell me about it.

I had the opportunity to speak the next morning and turned right around and went back, it was less than 24 hours. I got in that limo again and it wasn't my little friend. It was another fellow and he was about early 50s. And I said, "What do you do?" And he said, "Man, I'm a surfer. And I came out here to California because I love to surf." I said, "Really? How long have you been with this company?" He said, "Oh, ten, twelve years. But let me tell you this. That's not really what I do now." And I said, "What do you mean?" He said, "This just makes my money. When I got out here to surf, I came to know the Lord Jesus Christ. I'm a believer and I live my life just to tell people about Jesus." And I'm thinking, "Where am I?" Man, it was awesome! And I'll tell you one thing: they made an impact on me.

Let me ask you this question: is there enough evidence in your life this morning to convict you of being a believer when you're out in the world that you're in? See, this evidence is what we'll see today in the apostle Paul. And the apostle Paul was the greatest missionary in his day and he tells us why. He says it's because he came to understand that Jesus was living in him now as a believer. On the Damascus road he had a life changing experience and he just let Jesus be Jesus in him.

And according to Romans 15:18, he reached a Gentile world—that God had assigned, by the way, to him—and in verse 18 of that chapter he said it was a result of Christ working through him. He said, "For I will not presume to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me." Well, one of the things that Christ accomplished through Paul was the church of Corinth. Acts tells us about that. When he went over to Corinth and he met Priscilla and Aquila who were tentmakers and he got to know them and here comes Silas and Timothy and they started preaching the Word of God and the church of Corinth was birthed. Now, we're studying the book of 2 Corinthians. They are the result of a man that said, "I want to have a walk with God; I want to let Jesus be Jesus in me."

That's what I'm trying to tell us today. It starts right there. Well, when the church began, the apostle Paul learned what it takes some of us a lot longer to learn. There were some who hated him. You know why? Because he preached the Word of God which did something that they didn't like. It raised the standard in their lives and they didn't want to live under anybody's authority. As a result of that the church of Corinth was upside down, enamored by the world and the way the world does things.

They were constantly trying to find any flaw in the character of the apostle Paul. And we're going to see today what they did. An unfortunate thing happened that he had to change his plans, and we understand it from a textual study today. But because he didn't do what he said he was going to do—he has a good answer for it—the people that didn't like what he preached used this to tear the man down. He's not a man of his word is what they said. As a result of this, you see, it's the same old thing that goes on in the 21st century: tear the man down, you can tear the message down, and then you don't have to live up under any kind of authority.

But I want to tell you something: the apostle Paul lived daily with such a clear conscience that their accusations had no weight against him. This is something that is so important. Several weeks ago we studied verse 12 and what it means to have a pure testimony. I hope you understand this: when you have a clear conscience that does not condemn you, the Holy Spirit not convicting you, then you can face anything. The accusations that come, and they will come, they just come and go, and you'll go right on. You'll continue to walk right on regardless of the unfounded accusations of others. The testimony of a clear conscience is an indisputable and an indestructible witness to the people around us. It is evidence that we are believers, regardless of the accusations that come against us.

The world, no matter how much it hates us, has to stand back and take notice of a person that keeps his head up and continues right on, focused, because he has a clear conscience, he has a pure testimony and whatever accusation comes his way that is unfounded does not bother him. Verse 12 says that's just why he really starts it off this way: "For our proud confidence is this, the testimony of our conscience, that in holiness and godly sincerity, not in fleshly wisdom but in the grace of God, we have conducted ourselves in the world, and especially toward you." Paul says this to the Corinthian believers. Jesus was being Jesus in Paul and that was Christ's witness in him. That was evidence that he was who he said he was.

Now I want to ask you one more time before we get into the message today, I'm not meddling, I'm just asking. Is there enough evidence in your life Monday through Saturday to convince and convict others and to convict you that you truly are a believer? Well, let's see some of the evidence, and these are evidences that normally you don't think about. There are many more than what's here but we're in a context and a context is very focused. So I want you to see how Paul kept on keeping on as evidence of the fact that Jesus was being Jesus in him. I want you to see some things that maybe you've never thought of.

He kept on in spite of the fact that he was unappreciated

First of all is this: he kept on in spite of the fact that he was unappreciated. You know, all of us that are believers today know by now that not everybody rejoices when we become believers. And the hardest thing in the world for a believer is when he surrenders his heart to Jesus and nobody around him seems to appreciate him or the fact that he's a believer.

In 2 Corinthians 1:13 he says, "For we write nothing else to you than what you read and understand, and I hope you will understand until the end." When the Corinthian believers read Paul's letters, even though they were very tough—remember this is the fourth letter he's written to these people and this is probably the best one of all of them because they've been really tough—they had no trouble in understanding what he said when he wrote to them. You see, he didn't try to impress them; he didn't try to use big words whether he was speaking or writing to them. He just shared his heart with them. He spoke honestly and plainly. He never used methods that would in any way shut down the message he was trying to get across.

In fact, in 1 Corinthians 2:1 he said, "And when I came to you, brethren, I did not come with superiority of speech." Paul was a transparent individual; he might have taught the deep things, Simon Peter said that "Our brother Paul, he says some deep things sometimes, hard to understand." He had a mind and he would take them deep and he would challenge them and he would stretch them, but it was plain what he was saying. They could understand what he was saying. He had no agenda at all; what he wrote and what he said was right there in front of you. What you see with Paul is what you have. He said what you read you understand.

I heard a person say one time, "Read the man's life first, and then read his book." They'd read his life. He'd been with them; they knew who he was. They knew good and well who he was. Now they could read his letter. But they understood only to a point. Verse 14 adds another thought, "just as you also partially did understand us, that we are your reason to be proud as you also are ours, in the day of our Lord Jesus." See, they didn't fully appreciate the apostle Paul. The phrase, "you also partially did understand us," hinges on the word "understand." The word "understand" in the Greek is *epiginosko*. And *epiginosko* means to fully understand, to fully grab something, to fully understand something. It's not just to be informed by what your mind has comprehended; it's to be transformed as you take what has been comprehended and act upon it.

You may understand it in your head but maybe it hasn't made the 18-inch journey down into your heart. Now let me make sure you understand what I'm saying here. They could comprehend what he wrote. They understood that. But not acting upon it would then keep them from *epiginosko*. That's fullness of knowledge. Knowledge is just something you comprehend; *epiginosko* is what you thoroughly comprehend having acted upon it. You see, one can read something and simply understand it but not appreciate it by allowing it to dig deep into their life and change their behavior.

The Corinthians understood what Paul said. They comprehended what he had said. Particularly his third letter that told them to deal with a man in that church. They didn't want to do that: fear had gripped them. But finally they're going to go ahead and act upon it, but right at this point they haven't. They've only partially understood the message and partially understood the messenger. You see, they didn't appreciate Paul for who he was. They didn't understand the gift that Paul was to those people in their day. And so Paul continues to say that "we are your reason to be proud, as you are also ours."

But then he says this: "in the day of our Lord Jesus." Now what is he talking about there? Well if you look at the context and read on over in 5:10, he talks about the judgment seat of Christ. And he's talking about this, and he talks about it in 1 Corinthians 3:13, the day when all believers will stand before God one day and we will be rewarded for that which we allowed Him to do through us, epiginosko, as opposed to that which we did for Him which may have come out of gnosis, but we never acted upon the fact that it was supposed to be Christ in us. Not what we do for Him, but what He does through us.

The apostle Paul says on that day, at least, it is going to be on that day that we're going to start understanding and appreciating what God has allowed in our life. The people He's put there and the messages He's allowed us to hear. Listen, I've said this many times: if there are any rewards for me on that day, it's a day of reward, not a judgment, we're judged at the cross, but it's a day of rewards. And if there are any rewards for Wayne Barber that day, I'm going to have to take most of them and give them to others that God has put into my life that probably when they were in my life, I didn't appreciate them. But one day, in the day of the Lord Jesus Christ, I'm going to see them for what they truly were worth and I'm going to be proud of them as they hopefully will be proud of me. That's what he's saying.

The sad part is they just didn't appreciate Paul in the day he was living. They didn't appreciate his message, they didn't appreciate his position that God had given him as an apostle. The Corinthian believers didn't seem to get it and appreciate the gift that Paul was to them. Probably because he loved them so much he said the hard things that we'll look at later in the message. But one day, one day they would. They only partially understood him at that point. They hadn't acted upon everything he had said and they hadn't appreciated the One who had sent him. But one day they would appreciate him for allowing Christ to do the difficult things through him.

But in the meantime, even though they didn't appreciate him, even though he spends the last four chapters of 2 Corinthians defending himself from the critics and the skeptics in Corinthian, even through all that he kept on keeping on, and that's the evidence that proves him guilty of being a believer right there. When people don't appreciate us, and they won't, write it down, don't get bent out of shape, if your conscience is clear, your testimony is pure, you'll keep right on keeping on and that will be the evidence that people will look on and say that person loves the Lord Jesus Christ. They're moving on in spite of the fact that they're unappreciated.

When I used to referee in basketball, I had an old referee tell me, "If you've got your head in the stands, which totally does not appreciate you, then get off the floor. You don't need to be in the game." And it's the same way with a person walking with Jesus. You can't put your head out there with people that don't appreciate who and what you are. Let your clear conscience hold you up and keep on keeping on. The evidence that Christ is living in us, the evidence that proves us guilty to a lost world, is that we keep on keeping on even when people don't appreciate us.

He kept on in spite of the fact that he was misrepresented

But secondly, he kept on; he just kept on keeping on in spite of the fact that he was misrepresented. Not only will we not be appreciated, but we'll be misrepresented by those who hate the Christ in us. In verse 15 and following, Paul finally unveils the incident that had taken place that had caused his writing mainly the whole first chapter of 1 Corinthians. It was an incident. There was an unfortunate event that took place that they criticized him for and they told people he was not a man of his word: that he didn't do what he told them he would do.

Paul had written to them in 1 Corinthians 16:5-7 and told them that he wanted to come to them on his way to Macedonia and see them. And then he was going to go to Macedonia and then he was going to come back and see them again. He was going to bless them twice. He had intended to pick up a collection that they'd been taking up for the suffering saints over in Judea. But he changed his plans. He had promised them he would come two times, but he got bad news. He had sent Timothy to them, and in 2 Corinthians 1 we find that Timothy is back. Timothy had come back and said, "Paul, I don't think you want to hear what I'm about to tell you. It's awful over there in Corinth and they are ripping you to shreds. They're attacking your character."

How do we know that? By the way he replied. Those who wanted to discredit him took this incident. See, what Paul did when he heard from Timothy that all this bad stuff was going on, he didn't go to Macedonia. He went immediately to where he could sit down and write them the third letter that we do not have. Probably Titus took it then and, boy, he just scolded them in that letter. And for the fact that he didn't come to see them, those skeptics, those people who hated him, spread the rumor, "You can't trust Paul. Paul is not a man of his word."

You see what they did? They didn't even know the circumstance; they didn't even understand why he hadn't come. According to verse 12 they had accused him of acting out of fleshly wisdom. Fleshly wisdom refers to how the flesh acts and disregards commitments and disregards the feelings of people that are involved. Paul said, "I didn't act that way. When I chose not to come it wasn't because of some frivolous whim of my flesh. I'm not irresponsible in what I do." Paul said it was his honest intention to come to them. Verse 15, "And in this confidence I intended at first to come to you, that you might twice receive a blessing," two times he was going to go there, "that is, to pass your way into Macedonia, and again from Macedonia to come to you, and by you to be helped on my journey to Judea."

Man, how those skeptics took that, accused him of being fickle. But they did something else. This is how they get to us. They see an inconsistency or what they perceive to be an inconsistency, not even knowing the facts, and they use that as leverage to tear down what he was saying. They said just as he was fickle in his choices, he was fickle in what he preached; you can't trust anything the man says. So Paul is responding in verse 17, "Therefore, I was not vacillating when I intended to do this, was I?" It's a question he's going to answer. "Or that which I purpose, do I purpose according to the flesh, that with me there should be yes, yes and no, no at the same time?"

What he's saying there is "You mean when I say yes I really mean no, or if I say no I really mean yes? You think that's the way I am? Do you think I'm that fickle in my life?" The word "vacillate" means to be fickle or untrustworthy in something. And Paul tells them that his word is his bond. And Paul says, "If I tell you yes, it's going to be yes." And of course he's including the fact unless some unforeseen circumstance comes about. "If I tell you no, I mean no. I'm not fickle in what I say. I'm not fickle in my character. I live under the Lordship of Jesus Christ. My conscience bears me witness of that."

But isn't it interesting how quickly negative people are when they perceive an inconsistency in somebody's life? When they don't know the facts, when they've never bothered to sit down and discuss it with somebody, how quickly they will take that and use it against an individual simply because their own flesh has a problem with that person. And never give them the benefit of the doubt. I want to share that with you. People that walk in that spirit, I don't care what they do, they can stand on their heads, speak in an unknown tongue, they can do whatever they want. It means nothing to me if that individual doesn't love another person enough to give him the benefit of the doubt.

One of the first signs of a believer walking in the Spirit, he always gives his brother the benefit of the doubt. That's why, like Paul, it's very important to have a pure conscience when people don't give you that benefit of the doubt. When you know that your conscience is not condemning you and the Spirit of God is not convicting you, when your walk matches your talk and you keep on keeping on, even though people don't appreciate who you are, oh they will one day, and even though they misrepresent you simply because of a perceived flaw in your character, that is evidence that Jesus is being Jesus in you. Because you know why? Jesus had to do the same thing. And when He lives in us, He enables us to keep on keeping on when people don't appreciate us and when people misrepresent us based on a perception that's not even real.

He kept on keeping on knowing that he was being validated by Christ

Well, thirdly, you wonder how does a man do that? Hopefully you're beginning to understand Christ lives in us. Here's the real reason for the whole thing but it comes up in this point in our text. He kept on keeping on knowing that he was being validated by Christ. Our defense is Christ in us. And that's a beautiful thing. That's where our testimony comes from. Verse 18, "But as God is faithful, our word to you is not yes and no." There's no verb in the statement, but God is faithful. There's no "is". That's a Hebraism. When you see a statement like that, that's an unchangeable characteristic of God. And the word "faithful" there, *pistos*, means He's true to His word. You'll never find Him any different. God is always true to His Word. Now what Paul is doing here, he says, "But as God is faithful," He's true to His Word; He doesn't say yes and mean no with it, "our word to you is not yes and no." In other words, there's no fickle meaning behind what we say. God is not about breaking His promises, so neither is Paul because God lives in him. The Faithful One lives in him.

Then he says in verse 19, "For the Son of God, Christ Jesus, who was preached among you by us—by me and Silvanus and Timothy—was not yes and no, but is yes in Him." Hopefully we can get the meaning out of it. The message of salvation in Christ Jesus that Paul preached to the Corinthians would never change. Salvation would always be in Christ Jesus. Paul didn't preach one day "yes, salvation's in Him," and then the next day say, "no, salvation is under the law." And then the next day say, "yes, salvation is in Him." Paul says, "No, that's not what I did. Salvation is always yes in Him."

The phrase "yes in Him" is in the perfect tense, which means it never changes, it's always going to be that way and so Paul says, "My message is as strong as it's ever been and I'm not fickle in anything that I do." Verse 20, "For as many as may be the promises of God, in Him they are yes; wherefore also by Him is our Amen to the glory of God through us." The promises of God refer to all God's promises, but particularly the promises of the Old Testament, of the Messiah. Every promise God ever made, they didn't have the New Testament, but every promise that God has ever made is found in Christ and is "yes in Him." They're all fulfilled in Christ



Jesus. They are yes in Christ.

So Paul adds, "Therefore also, since they're all in Him and they're yes in Him, therefore also through Him is our Amen to the glory of God through us." Bottom line, what he's saying is Christ is faithful. God is faithful and God lives in me and every one of His promises that are found in Christ, they're going to be yes. They're not yes and no, yes today, no tomorrow. No. They're all found in Him. "But that same faithful God that is faithful to His Word lives in us," Paul says, "lives in me and therefore it's a guarantee that I'm a man of character." Because that's who it is you're dealing with, Paul is telling them.

As a matter of fact he goes on and extends that. He says Christ has already confirmed me before you. He says in verse 21, "Now He who establishes us with you in Christ." Isn't it amazing how some people just don't pay attention? That if they just want to know if a man is faithful or have a man of integrity, just watch what God's doing in their life. And that's what Paul is saying. The word "establish" means to confirm. Paul says, "When I came among you God confirmed me in your midst. What do you mean I'm fickle and I'm not a man of my word?" And not only that, he said Christ had enabled him. It goes on and says, "and anointed us is God."

The word "anointed" is not something mystical. It's the empowerment, the enablement to do what God has assigned us to do. And he says, "Everything that I did in your midst, you didn't attribute that to me. You knew that came from God. God not only confirmed me, God enabled me." Then he also had been sealed by the Spirit. He's talking about his own salvation that's secure. But he has another meaning in this. It means "I've been authenticated in you." You've seen the Spirit of God working in me, verse 22, "who also sealed us and gave us the spirit in our hearts as a pledge." Not only a pledge that we'll have eternal life one day, but that pledge is a guarantee that we're of God.

Paul could have a totally pure conscience: he didn't do anything of his own when he was with you. As he says in Romans, "I would speak of nothing except that which Christ has accomplished through me. And you saw it. You understand that," he says to the Corinthians. They knew this; there was evidence in his life that proved him guilty of being who he said he was: a believer.

So Paul now calls God to his side as his witness. He said, "You want to accuse me? You want to come against me? The skeptics there in Corinth. I call God to come and take His stand beside me." He says in verse 23, "But I call God as witness to my soul, that to spare you I came no more to Corinth." Paul had good reason not to go to them as he had promised. See, they didn't know this; listen folks, understand this in your relationships: always make sure you know the other side. Don't let a perception cause you to judge a brother. You may be doing to him what the Corinthians did to Paul.

Paul said, "I had a good reason. The reason I didn't come to you was to spare you. I'm not some egotistical minister that says because of how you've been acting you're not even saved. That's not what I'm trying to say." Verse 24, "Not that we lord it over your faith, but are workers with you for your joy; for in your faith you are standing firm." "Your position in Christ is well secured in Him. I'm not here to threaten that," Paul says. "But I tell you what I am doing here. Your actions are not acceptable, and as His apostle and His preacher of His Word, I'm addressing what's wrong in this situation."

You see, it was Christ Who validated his actions. Paul said, "I'm not what you perceive me to be. I'm a man that has a walk with God and there's evidence in my life to convict me guilty." So the evidence was that he kept on keeping on when people didn't appreciate him because he had a clear conscience. He kept on keeping on when people intentionally misrepresented him and presented a total different perception that was even wrong. But he kept on keeping on because he knew that Christ in him validated him. Do you know that today? Is that keeping you going? Is that keeping you moving on? It's a beautiful thing to have a clear conscience. Your sins confessed up today, walking with God, Christ in you vindicating who you are.

He kept on keeping on even when he had to say the hard things

And that's where missions start: right there. If we don't have that kind of life, then what are we doing? No one can refute Christ working in our life. But the final thing I want you to see today, fourthly, he kept on keeping on even when he had to say the hard things. It's interesting, only those who love you will tell you what you need to hear; not what you want to hear, but what you need to hear.

You see, Paul so loved these people who didn't appreciate him, who intentionally misrepresented him because they didn't like the standard of God's Word that he'd preached to them. You see, he was willing to tell them the hard things. He so loved them he was willing to tell them the hard things. This was his way of sparing them when he wrote to them instead of coming to them. He had some hard things to say. There's no telling, my imagination goes wild. What would it have been like if Paul would have gone there? I have a funny feeling there would have been some scalded dogs in that place. He would have come in and he would have hammered those people. He chose not to do that.

Instead he felt like "if I write them it will be better. I chose not to go because I love you, to spare you the sorrow that I would have brought to you. Instead I wrote to you. That's what I chose to do." And that's his third letter he speaks of. Verse 1 of chapter 2, "But I determined this for my own sake, that I would not come to you in sorrow again." Every time Paul had been with them it had been a

sorrowful time because of the sin that was in Corinth. He said, "For if I cause you sorrow, who then makes me glad but the one whom I made sorrowful?" He didn't want that kind of relationship. And then he says in verse 3, "And this is the very thing I wrote you, lest, when I came, I should have sorrow from those who ought to make me rejoice; having confidence in you all, that my joy would be the joy of you all."

You know what he did? He said, "I had confidence when I wrote. I just really believed in my heart; I'm going to trust the Christ in you. And I believe you're going to handle this rightly. I believe you're going to respond the right way so that when I do see you it won't be a sorrowful time the next time, it'll be joyful." Well, but it still broke his heart. I want you to see the heart of this guy. He hated to tell them the hard things, but he had to. Verse 4, "For out of much affliction and anguish of heart I wrote to you with many tears." This broke his heart to say what he had to say. And evidently, we don't have that letter, but boy it was tough; "not that you should be made sorrowful, but that you might know the love which I have especially for you."

"Broke my heart. I want you to understand. I don't want you to be sorrowful because I was in tears writing you. I want you to understand how much I love you. That's why I told you the hard things. That's why you misrepresent me. That's why you don't appreciate me. You don't like to hear the hard things, but I love you enough that I had to write them to you." He shows that the one who caused him so much grief; there was an individual in that church that had started that whole thing. It only takes one. And others had gotten in on it. It had fallen on the innocent as well as the guilty.

You see, Paul's letter was read publicly and the people that were innocent, they didn't even know what was going on. They had to hear the same message that the guilty had to hear and he said, "I'm just so sorry that even the innocent had to listen to this." And then in verse 5, "But if any has caused sorrow," he talks about that individual, "he has caused sorrow not to me, but in some degree," and that's the same word "partially," "in order not to say too much—to all of you."

Isn't it interesting how the one who refuses to let Jesus be Jesus in him, the one who will never give his brother the benefit of the doubt, the one who is always not appreciating that which God has given as a gift to the people, the one who intentionally misrepresents an individual based on a perception of a flaw in his character, isn't it interesting how when he does what he does, he doesn't just hurt the individual, he hurts the whole church? I wish all of us could come to understand that we're not islands unto ourselves. And people that will not let Jesus be Jesus in them, like many that were in Corinth, were not just hurting Paul, they were hurting the whole church of Corinth. Nothing is done that doesn't affect somebody else. It's a domino effect. And Paul, God's man, out of love for them was willing to say some things that they did not want to hear, and instead of going to them and blasting them straight out he said, "I'm not going to do that. I'm going to write to you because I want you to understand my heart: that I love you. So that when I see you the next time I believe you're going to respond and when I see you the next time it won't be sorrowful. It will be a time full of joy."

Well, he shows, and we won't get to it today, in verse 6 what they did and they did discipline this guy evidently to extreme. Paul said, "You've done enough." They obeyed and dealt with the one causing all the trouble. They finally exercised church discipline which should have been done way before.

So far what we've got is the evidence of one who is convicted as guilty of being a believer can be tested out when people don't appreciate him. He keeps right on keeping on when people misrepresent him intentionally based on a little bit of knowledge, a false perception, assuming it's a flaw in his character. He's a person that keeps on keeping on knowing that Christ in him validates him. He is his defense; and he keeps on keeping on even though he has to say the hard things to people that he loves.

Father, mother, have you been there? When you've had to tell your children stuff they didn't want to hear? And they didn't appreciate the fact that God has given you as a gift to them, and they misrepresented you because they didn't like what you were doing? Trying to pitch mother against father or father against mother, but you had to keep on keeping on because you knew Christ in your heart was not condemning you. Your conscience was pure and clear because you have only the good things for the child in your heart, even when you had to say the hard things.

One of the beautiful things about this is there's another evidence but it will have to come in the next message. You know what Paul says? "You've done what I've asked you to do." That's why he wrote 2 Corinthians, in response to their response to that third letter. They did, they responded right, they dealt with him. He said, "Now you've done enough, but I want to tell you, go back to the same individual, put your arm around him. Comfort him and forgive him and get him back on his feet."

Isn't that awesome? How do you know a person has enough evidence in him to prove him guilty of being a believer? Church discipline is not kicking him out of the church; Church discipline is restoring them to usefulness in the kingdom. But that's our next message on what forgiveness and what Paul's talking about is all about. So let me ask you the final question again today.

In the way you live your life, is there enough evidence, if you were on trial today at your job for being a Christian? You're not appreciated there for being a believer and they constantly try to misrepresent you because they are jealous or threatened by the Christ in you, is Christ validating you? And are you even willing to share the hard things with them out of the love in your heart? Is

there enough evidence in this congregation today out there, if we were put on trial for being a Christian, would be found guilty. If the answer to that question is yes, we are ready now to reach the world for Jesus. But if it's not right in here, it'll never be right out there. Missions begins right here in my walk with Jesus Christ. That's where it starts and it touches the people around me.