

PAUL'S VIEW OF SUFFERING IN 2ND CORINTHIANS

In the introduction to 1-2 Corinthians, I suggested that one of the major themes of 2 Corinthians is Paul's defense of his suffering in the midst of false accusations. It seems as if the nature of his suffering made the Corinthians question whether God was behind him, and whether Paul was truly a faithful apostle. But through his writings on suffering, we are able to better understand how we should view suffering as Christians.

2 Corinthians 1: Receiving comfort (from God) and extending comfort (to others) in suffering. Paul does not shy away from discussing how hard his ministry was in this opening chapter of his letter to the church in Corinth. He writes of their affliction that it was so difficult that "we despaired of life itself" and "felt that we had received the sentence of death" (1:8-9). But rather than launching into a rant of complaint, Paul gives the lesson in 1:9-10—But that was to make us rely not on ourselves, but on God who raises the dead. He delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us. On him we have set our hope that he will deliver us again." This is Paul's ultimate hope in suffering: reliance on God—the one who is all-powerful, the one who raises the dead. Suffering is ultimately meant to drive us nearer to God. Each time we suffer we face a question: *will I allow this to push me further from God in anger, or nearer to God in reliance?* That's the question Paul invites us to consider in our own lives.

But even earlier in 2 Corinthians 1, he helps us understand how we make it through suffering, even with the hope of God. We must view suffering as an opportunity to be comforted by God, and to bring that comfort to others. He develops this in 1:3-4, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, *with the comfort that we which we ourselves are comforted by God.*" Here's the irony of this passage: the Corinthians were questioning Paul's ministry/salvation because he was suffering; and yet it is in the gospel that we are brought into the truest message of suffering, and given the means to comfort those who are suffering. Notice the progression of the verses: it begins with God's character, moves into how we experience his character, and ends with bringing others into that experience. Only because God is the father of mercies and God of comfort can we hope to be comforted in our sorrow. Suffering with God is infinitely better than suffering without him—for he is the God of mercy and comfort. Therefore, he is able to comfort us in our affliction and suffering. We will see more in 2 Corinthians of what that practically looks like. And yet, it is through our suffering—and how we meet God through it—that we are then able to comfort others. Notice that our lives should follow the pattern of Jesus: just as his suffering ends up bringing comfort in our suffering; so we use our suffering to ultimately bring comfort to those who are suffering.

How? By showing them who God is. This is what we are called to.

There was a time in high school where someone in our friend group was unexpectedly killed in a car accident. I remember feelings of shock, confusion, and not knowing how to be a spiritual leader during such a time. But I remember coming to this verse and realizing: I was being called to minister to others with the same gospel and comfort in God that had brought comfort in me. I pray that we would all grow in this: that the gospel meets us in our suffering in such a way that we are able then to be a witness to others. This is the heart of Paul.

2 Corinthians 4: Don't lose heart, your suffering is not eternal. Something inherent in the nature of suffering—whether physical, emotional, or spiritual—is that it feels heavy, burdensome, and inescapable. In those moments, we need the words of verses 16-18. “So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. For this light momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.” How does God comfort us in our suffering (2 Cor. 1:3-4)? One answer is by helping remind us of what is coming for those of us who are in Christ. What is coming is an eternity of suffering-less pleasure in knowing and experiencing God. Truths like this help remind us: this present suffering (as terrible as it may be) cannot hold a candle to the joy that is coming. In other words: eternity with Jesus is worth infinitely more than even a pain-free life on this earth. The principle is true in terms of time (verse 18—this experience will be eternal), but it is also true in terms of magnitude (verse 17—this eternal glory is weighty beyond all comprehension, far beyond our current suffering). If you are in the need of encouragement in the midst of suffering—personal pain, familial loss, difficult relationships, or even a season that doesn't make sense—meditate on this vision and its fuller expansion in texts like Isaiah 25 and Revelation 21-22. There you will find your heart moved and lifted high in anticipation of your future with God in eternity—not only that suffering will not be present (praise God!) but that God will be there and all will be made right.

2 Corinthians 12: God's grace in the midst of suffering. It's hard to imagine a more difficult and concentrated season of suffering that Paul's description in 2 Corinthians 11:21-29. I encourage you to read it and ponder the weight of it. He then describes this situation further in 2 Corinthians 12. He explains that God gave him a thorn in the flesh to keep him humble (12:7-8). We don't know what it was, but for our purposes, it matters that it was another form of suffering. But then Paul gives the lesson from God beginning in verse 9. “But he said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.’ Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities.

For when I am weak, then I am strong.” How could Paul be content in the midst of all of that suffering?! The answer is in verse 9: God’s grace is sufficient in the midst of suffering. This is a necessary correlation with 2 Corinthians 4. God doesn’t turn his back on us in our suffering and say: *well, heaven will be better anyway—just long for that and wait for that day to come.* No—he offers us himself in the midst of suffering. He who is the God of comfort and mercies, the God of grace is near during times of suffering. He doesn’t expect us to just make it to the end alone—he is there with us, in the word, by his Spirit, as we navigate the suffering in this life. In summary: 1) see your suffering as a way to drive you nearer to God, 2) see your suffering as a way to make you long for eternity with him, and 3) see your suffering as a particular way that God’s grace is made known to you in this life.