

Context for leaders

Paul visited Corinth and planted a church there around AD 50-52 (Acts 18). He then wrote at least four letters to the church. 1 Corinthians was actually his second letter (see 1 Cor 5:9). His relationship with them became stormy and after a painful visit (2:1), he wrote 'letter of tears' (see 2 Cor 2:4) calling for their repentance. Some did that and came back to Paul and his gospel, but others still rejected his ministry.

And so Paul wrote the letter we know as 2 Corinthians around AD 55-56. In many ways, it is a defence of his apostolic ministry but also an exposition of the power his gospel has to change and comfort those who receive it. He begins with the theme of comfort.

A question to start:

If you've had a bad day, where do you go for comfort? Food, TV, a glass of wine, a pint, a phone call, a hug, a run ... or something else?

If it's worse than a bad day, where do you go then? How does your faith comfort you?

Sender and receiver (vv1-2)

1. How does Paul introduce himself as he starts his letter (v1a)? Why do you think he puts it this way?

2. How does Paul describe those who are receiving his letter (v1b)? Does anything strike you about this description?

→ How might Paul's status as an apostle and our status as 'the church of God in Wandsworth' affect the way we read and study this letter? What can we be praying for ourselves as we read it?

Praise the God of all comfort (vv3-7) ⁱ

3. How does Paul describe God as he begins (v3)?

→ Do we think of God like this as the source of all comfort? Where else do we think comfort comes from?

→ Look up Isaiah 40:1-2; 66:13 and Luke 2:25-32. How can we access the comfort and compassion of God?

4. To what extent did God comfort Paul (v4a)? (Look up 11:23-27 to get a taste of Paul's sufferings!) Why did God comfort Paul in all these afflictions (v4b)?

5. What two things did Paul share with Christ (v5)? ⁱⁱ How do you think this experience enabled him to comfort others when they suffered?

6. How did Paul view the hard things that happened to him as well as the comfort he received (v6)? How did this perspective give him confidence about the Corinthians (v7)?

→ How does Paul's description of comfort and suffering challenge our approach to hard times? What does it say to the idea that we should avoid suffering at all costs? Why might we buy into that idea and how can this passage help us not to?

→ What experiences of suffering have given you opportunity to comfort others, especially Christians? Have Christians who've suffered ever had opportunity to comfort you? How did it feel to receive that comfort? What was helpful about it?

→ How have the sufferings of other Christians helped you keep going in your faith?

→ How might we use suffering as an opportunity to share our hope in a gospel of comfort with non-Christian friends? Describe any opportunities you've had to do that.

Why suffering is essential (vv8-11)

7. How does Paul describe the troubles he'd undergone in Asia (vv8-9a)?ⁱⁱⁱ

→ Have you ever sensed this kind of 'death sentence' hanging over you? (Perhaps in pairs.) Have you ever seen it in a Christian friend or family member?

8. What did Paul realise about why God had allowed him to suffer and so much (vv9b-10)? How did this realisation give him confidence for the future no matter what it held?

9. What's surprising about the way the paragraph finishes (v11)? What does this teach us about the way God brings his comfort into the lives of his people?

→ How does this encourage us to pray for suffering Christians? For each other, for those we know and don't know, for those in Christian leadership etc.

→ Why might we sometimes give up praying for those who suffer? Why should we persevere in asking God to comfort them instead? How can our prayers be part of God's plan?

A question to finish (in pairs/small groups):

How would you like what we've learnt today to change your approach to suffering next time it comes along, whether in your own life or in the life of a friend?

ⁱ Paul's opponents claimed that his sufferings were evidence that he wasn't a genuine apostle. 'If he's the real thing, he won't be experiencing so much trouble.' But Paul claims that abundant suffering and abundant comfort and in fact signs of apostolic authenticity.

ⁱⁱ Paul is not saying that he shared in the atoning / redemptive sufferings of Christ but that sufferings come to those involved in the service of Christ. They are Christ's sufferings because Christ is in his people, cf. Acts 9:4-5.

ⁱⁱⁱ We are not sure exactly what perils Paul faced in Asia, but they were clearly life-threatening. His death was a very real possibility.