

# “On Him We Have Set Our Hope”

## The First in a Series of Sermons on 2 Corinthians

*Texts: 2 Corinthians 1:1-11; Isaiah 40:1-11*

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In the past year, we spent some thirty-two Sundays (and nearly a year) making our way through Paul’s first letter to the Corinthian church. In our series on 1 Corinthians, we saw a number of remarkable parallels between first century Corinth and contemporary Southern California. Based upon reports from members of the Corinthian church (Chloe’s household) who met up with Paul in Ephesus (where he was staying when he wrote his epistle), and based upon certain questions the Corinthians had put to Paul in writing, we witnessed Paul instruct, correct, exhort, and rebuke the Corinthians about a whole range of subjects; including proper decorum in worship, gifts of the Spirit, the sacraments, church discipline, sexual immorality, and a proper view of marriage. But what happened after the Corinthians received Paul’s first letter? Did things improve? Or, did the Corinthians continue to struggle? Well, in 2 Corinthians we get our answer.

We begin a new series on 2 Corinthians, and the first issue to deal with is this: “What happened after Paul wrote his first letter to the Corinthians?” Apparently, a great deal, and not all of it good. Having written and then sent his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul stayed on in Ephesus and informed the Corinthians that he would visit them when he could—remember the “wait till your apostle gets home” comment? Paul’s reason for delaying his visit was that “*a wide door for effective work has opened to me*” (1 Corinthians 16:9), meaning that Paul had a current opportunity in Ephesus (or in Asia Minor) which required his full attention. So, he would come to Corinth if and/or when this door had closed.

Meanwhile, Paul did send Timothy to Corinth. But when Timothy got there, he found that the church was a complete mess. Somehow, Timothy got word of this back to Paul, and then the apostle quickly changed his plans and made what he describes as a “painful visit” to Corinth (2 Corinthians 2:1). It is also clear that between the time Paul had written his first letter to the Corinthians, and then made his “painful visit,” two or more individuals calling themselves “apostles” were stirring up all kinds of anger in the congregation toward Paul. In chapter 11, Paul will openly rebuke these men, calling them false apostles because they were, apparently, teaching false doctrine and causing great strife in the church.

In 2 Corinthians, which was written after his “painful visit,” Paul speaks of being horribly mistreated, and mentions that his work in preaching the gospel was being undermined by the false apostles (2 Corinthians 2:5-8; 10, 7:12). Instead of going back to Corinth again, Paul recounts how he decided to write yet another letter (known to us as the “stern letter”) as he explains in 2 Corinthians 2:4. “*For I wrote to you out of much affliction and anguish of heart and with many tears, not to cause you pain but to let you know the abundant love that I have for you.*” This so-called “stern letter” was hand-delivered to the Corinthians by Titus (who may have been less timid than Timothy). This letter has now been lost to us.<sup>1</sup> Despite all the problems in Corinth, Paul instructed Titus to take up a collection for the struggling Christians in Jerusalem, which is a very clear indication that Paul did not consider the Corinthian church to be apostate, nor did he believe that the cause was lost.

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<sup>1</sup> For the background to 2 Corinthians, see Carson, Moo, Morris, An Introduction to the New Testament, 264-267.

So, after sending the Corinthians the letter we know as 1 Corinthians, after sending Timothy and Titus to Corinth, and then after undertaking a “painful visit” to Corinth and while there enduring the ire of the congregation as stirred up by the false apostles, and then having sent a stern but now lost letter of rebuke, after all of this, remarkably when Titus arrived back in Ephesus with a substantial offering for the poor in Jerusalem, Paul’s whole tone now changes. Now, as he writes the first nine chapters of 2 Corinthians, he is rejoicing. In 2 Corinthians 7:6-7, he writes, “*but God, who comforts the downcast, comforted us by the coming of Titus, and not only by his coming but also by the comfort with which he was comforted by you, as he told us of your longing, your mourning, your zeal for me, so that I rejoiced still more.*” As one writer has aptly put it, in 2 Corinthians 1-9, Paul’s letter “breathes an atmosphere of bruised relations that have recently eased. There is a noticeable sigh of relief that the worst is over.”<sup>2</sup>

But it really wasn’t. When we come to chapters 10-13 of 2 Corinthians, suddenly Paul’s tone is once again that of great concern. What happened? Are these chapters part of another letter that was added to the earlier nine chapters? Is 2 Corinthians really two letters put together? While all kinds of explanations have been proposed to solve this problem, the simplest and the best answer is that as Paul was composing this letter we know as 2 Corinthians, he received distressing news from Corinth. In the first century, you could not just sit down at a word-processor and then crank out a letter in a few minutes, in an hour, or even in a day—you had to have the proper materials (which were rare and expensive), you needed to figure out how to make what you wanted to say in a letter fit within the space limitations of the scroll or parchment which you were using, etc. So, it is very plausible that Paul had finished chapters 1-9, and while in the process of writing received more bad news from Corinth. So, the apostle wrote the final four chapters of 2 Corinthians expressing his frustration to the point that he even was now considering making yet another trip to Corinth (2 Corinthians 12:19-13:10).

Why go through all of this confusing explanation? The reason is that even after Paul’s first letter (1 Corinthians), his “painful visit,” sending Timothy and Titus (the latter along with the now lost letter, the so-called “stern letter”), and then getting news from Titus that the situation had improved, only to hear additional bad news before completing this particular letter (known to us as 2 Corinthians and unlike the missing letters, is included in our canon), this tells us that the Corinthians struggled mightily even with an apostle shepherding them. They struggled because of the same reason that every Christian congregation struggles—churches are made up of justified sinners, people who have real problems, who face difficult circumstances, who have different personalities, and who come from various cultures, and stations in life. This is why word and sacrament, the diligent use of church discipline, and proper church government are so important—this is how Christ rules his unruly church. Whatever peace and harmony we enjoy are gifts from God. This is why we must diligently strive to preserve these things.

**S**o, with that bit of historical background in mind, we take up the opening verses of that letter we know as 2 Corinthians.

Paul opens this letter with what at first glance appears to be the standard greeting, found throughout his letters. “*Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, To the church of God that is at Corinth, with all the saints who are in the whole of Achaia: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.*” But upon second glance, we see that Paul is making several important points in this greeting which arise from the particular circumstances in Corinth.

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<sup>2</sup> Carson, Moo and Morris, An Introduction to the New Testament, 267.

First, Paul identifies himself as “*an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God.*” In order to speak to the Corinthians with true apostolic authority, Paul must remind the Corinthians of his apostolic credentials. Unlike those self-appointed false apostles in Corinth who were attacking Paul’s reputation and questioning his abilities to do his job, Paul is the genuine article. As recounted in Acts 9, the Risen Christ himself appeared to Paul and specifically commissioned Paul to be Christ’s apostle to the Gentiles. Since Jesus himself had appointed Paul to this office, Paul therefore possesses an authority unlike any of these self-appointed apostolic pretenders troubling the Corinthians. Given all that had transpired between Paul and the Corinthians in the previous months, it is important to establish why Paul’s word must be heeded, and why the Corinthians must not let these false apostles deceive them. It is in this context that Paul mentions Timothy, who is now with Paul in Ephesus, effectively reminding the Corinthians that Paul has heard directly from Timothy about what was still going on in Corinth.

Second, although we tend to read through these opening greetings quickly without stopping and reflecting upon what they mean, they are loaded with important doctrine. The Corinthians, despite their sin and struggles, are identified by Paul as “saints”—people who are called by God and set apart for God’s purposes. Knowing what we know about the Corinthians, we would hardly think that the word “saint” would apply to them, but like all other Christians, the Corinthians have been called by God to faith in Jesus Christ through the preaching of the gospel, and are thereby set apart by God, for God. We tend to think of saints as “holy people,” while the Bible speaks of saints as those who have been justified through faith (so that they are “reckoned righteous”), and who are currently in the process of being conformed to the image of Jesus Christ (sanctification). In this sense, every Christian believer is a saint, and every saint is holy because Christ’s righteousness has been imputed to them.

Third, Paul speaks of grace and peace coming to the Corinthians from God the Father and from Jesus Christ. Not only is grace extended from God to sinners, Paul puts the Father and Jesus Christ on the same footing as the source of such grace and that peace which flows from it. It is quite remarkable that Paul assigns this to Jesus every bit as much as he does to the Father. This is, of course, but another way in which Paul affirms the deity of Jesus Christ.

In verses 3-7, Paul uses a number of expressions taken directly from the Jewish liturgy<sup>3</sup> indicating that the blessings mentioned not only come from God, but they are especially realized in the person of his son, our Lord Jesus Christ. The words Paul recites contain a number of loud echoes from Isaiah 40 (our Old Testament lesson). Isaiah’s message was that when the Messiah comes, God will bring comfort to his people in the midst of their afflictions. So it is important to keep Isaiah 40 in mind as we go through the opening words of 2 Corinthians 1, because even though Paul does not quote from Isaiah 40 directly, there are echoes of it throughout Paul’s opening words of 2 Corinthians.

In verse 3, Paul utilizes the standard opening lines from the synagogue liturgy, “*blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort.*” Although Paul opens this letter with the typical Jewish ascription to praise to God, he places Jesus Christ along with the Father as the object of his blessing. As Christians ascribe praise to God, it is proper to ascribe such praise to Jesus as well. If God is the Father of all mercies, and the God of all comfort, then, as we will see, such mercy and comfort is realized through consideration of the sufferings of the person of his son, Jesus.

Next, Paul introduces the theme of comfort, using a word which may also be translated as

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. Ralph Martin, 2 Corinthians, Word Biblical Commentary, Vol. 40, 7.

“encouragement.”<sup>4</sup> The comfort of which Paul speaks is not a sense of ease, nor is it physical comfort as when we plop down in our favorite sofa or chair. Paul is speaking of the kind of comfort which sustains us in the trials of life. This becomes clear in verse 4, when Paul says that it is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ “*who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.*” This kind of comfort is what encourages us when we as Christians are called to suffer (or endure affliction). This is also the theological category used by Zacharius Ursinus in our catechism (*The Heidelberg Catechism*) when he asks in the first question and answer “what is our only comfort in life and in death?” and then lists these verses as the basis for this question and answer.

The suffering of which Paul speaks is not only that suffering associated with the trials, and the ups and downs of life, there is also an eschatological dimension here. Paul is reminding us that God’s people will continue to suffer various afflictions at the hands of unbelievers until Jesus Christ comes back. Paul’s point is that God will give us that comfort and encouragement we need to endure these trials, so that we persevere to the end of our lives in faith, so as to be delivered from his wrath on the last day.

Paul even tells us why God comforts us in these trials—so that we are able, in turn, to comfort others when they go through the difficult trials of life. No one can help someone when they suffer like someone who has gone through the same kind of sufferings. Those who have lost loved ones know what to say to others when death comes. Those who have survived cancer know what to say when someone learns they too have this dreadful disease. Those who have lost everything and who have come back from the brink know what to tell those going through the same sorts of things. Those who have done really stupid things which come back to bite them, can speak with a certain authority when giving counsel to others about to make the same mistake. This is one of the ways in which God comforts us in the midst of our own trials—through the support and counsel of others who have been through the same sorts of things.

Ultimately, human suffering can only make sense in the light of the life and death of Jesus Christ. Indeed, when Paul speaks of that affliction which is sure to come, and when he reminds us that God promises to comfort us, the apostle immediately directs us to the suffering of our Savior. In verses 5-6 he writes, “*for as we share abundantly in Christ’s sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too. If we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation; and if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which you experience when you patiently endure the same sufferings that we suffer.*”

We share in Christ’s suffering by trusting in his suffering throughout his life and especially in his death on Calvary to save us from the guilt and power of our sin. No one suffered more and carried a greater burden than did Jesus. The more we learn to look to Christ, the more comfort we will find, and the greater our confidence that we will endure our particular trial. As the author of Hebrews reminds us, “*for we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin*” (Hebrews 4:15).

As Paul points out, the comfort we receive comes through sharing in the sufferings of Christ. Not only has Paul had the personal experience of finding comfort throughout all his difficulties with the Corinthians—who have treated him quite harshly—Paul reminds the Corinthians (and us) that such trials have a purpose. Paul endures these things for the sake of the churches and their members. His endurance is, in turn, to be an example to those in these churches who see Paul sustained by the comfort

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<sup>4</sup> Martin, 2 Corinthians, 9

given him by Christ. Paul may be every bit as weak and ineffective as his opponents have charged that he is. But it is in his weakness that Christ comforts him. It is because Paul accepts the fact that he is weak, ironically that is when he is at his strongest.

The same thing holds true for us. When we have nothing else to which to cling, and when realize that we still have Jesus Christ (or better, he has us), then we are strong. For he is all we need. Because we receive such wonderful comfort (encouragement) from Jesus (that one who knows human suffering and affliction better than anyone), we are instructed to patiently endure whatever trials we face, so that in times of affliction we are comforted and then grow strong in faith, as in the example Paul set for the Corinthians, and for us. No doubt, suffering and affliction will come. And, no doubt, Jesus will be there to comfort us, because he himself has suffered in ways we cannot imagine, and he is that one who, in turn, promises to comfort us during our various afflictions.

This is why Paul can speak so confidently about Christian hope in verse 7. *“Our hope for you is unshaken, for we know that as you share in our sufferings, you will also share in our comfort.”* Paul’s trials have been real and difficult. He knows that as Jesus has sustained him throughout his ministry and in his painful dealings with the Corinthians, so too Jesus will sustain all those who likewise suffer. Therefore, Paul’s hope is firm (unshaken). When speaking of hope being unshaken, Paul uses a banking term referring to something which was secure and reliable—as in a security. In Romans, Paul uses the same word in reference to God’s promises (Romans 4:16). Because of the sufferings of Christ and because of his resurrection from the dead, Paul knows that God will not fail to keep his promises. Paul knows why every Christian can count on God to do what he has promised to do. Paul knows that even as God has delivered him from countless trials and comforted him in his affliction again and again, so too, Paul knows that God will do this for each of the Corinthians as well as for us. In effect, Paul’s words here almost function as a prayer.

As is often the case in Paul’s letters, he illustrates his theological point using an example (usually drawn from redemptive history), although here he appeals to a recent experience. In verses 8-11, Paul refers to his trials in Asia Minor (where Ephesus was located) to make the point that God not only has promised to deliver God’s people in the midst of affliction, he has the power to do so. This becomes clear in verse 8, when Paul informs the Corinthians, *“for we do not want you to be ignorant, brothers, of the affliction we experienced in Asia.”* Whenever Paul uses the phrase “we do not want you to be ignorant,” he is calling attention to the reason *why* he wants the Corinthians to be confident in the power of God to sustain his people in the midst of great trial.

In the latter half of verse 8, Paul begins to explain the difficult circumstances in which he found himself. *“For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself.”* If there is such a thing as the “victorious Christian life,” Paul, apparently didn’t know anything about it. Whatever it was he experienced in Asia, it nearly overwhelmed him. In fact, things were so difficult that Paul wondered how he would live through it. As he says in verse 9, *“Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death.”* Whatever this affliction entailed, Paul thought his life was over.

But nothing happens without reason. As Paul goes on to say in the last half of verse 9, *“But that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead.”* The phrase Paul uses here comes from the Eighteenth Benediction of the Jewish liturgy, but is reinterpreted in the light of Jesus’ resurrection. At some point, Paul had resigned himself to the fact that he was about to die (seemingly in a violent way as a martyr at the hands of others). But even then he did so in hope, because, Paul knew that God raised the dead. He had seen the Risen Christ with his own eyes. The point to be drawn from Paul’s

unspecified trial in Asia—which holds true for pretty much any serious trial God brings our way—is that because of affliction, we are forced to rely upon God, who, in turn, comforts us in the midst of our afflictions. This is why Christians affirm that suffering, as terrible as it is, has a purpose.

In verses 10-11, Paul describes how his difficult experience in Asia helped prepare him to deal with the problems in Corinth. *“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. You also must help us by prayer, so that many will give thanks on our behalf for the blessing granted us through the prayers of many.”* If God could rescue Paul from deadly peril, then surely God will deliver him from the cruelty he has experienced in Corinth. Paul directs us to set our hope on Christ, knowing that Jesus can and will deliver us. This also becomes the basis upon which the Corinthians themselves are to earnestly pray about the situation they face, because it is through these prayers that God will deliver them from their present difficulties. Then they can truly offer prayers of thanksgiving for all of the benefits they have received—the fruit of sharing in the sufferings of Christ.

**W**hat, then, should we take with us by way of application?

First, because the world in which we live is fallen, suffering is a fact of life. Even though he is an apostle, Paul suffered to the point of death because of the nature of his apostolic ministry. The Corinthians were suffering because they were dunderheads—but they were suffering, nonetheless. I know it sounds like some trite cliché, but it is so true. God never promises us a way out of suffering, but he does promise us a way through suffering. Furthermore, God promises to be with us in the midst of our suffering, and that he will never leave us or forsake us.

Second, it should be equally clear that in God’s economy suffering has a purpose. Although God doesn’t always chose to tell us why we go through difficult trials, he does promise to comfort us and encourage us in the midst of these trials, often times through the ministry of others to us. Trials not only drive us to seek the mercy and grace of Christ, they force us to swallow our pride and seek the help of others. Helping others is not only a good thing for the person suffering—we need the help—it is also a good thing for those who help others to share in their affliction with them. As we share in the sufferings of others, we are not only helping alleviate affliction, together we share in the suffering of Christ.

Finally, Paul is a realist when it comes to suffering. He doesn’t like and he doesn’t seek it. He’s not a masochist. Paul knows that God has a purpose in these trials. These trials reveal that which we fear most—we are weak and that often times, we do not control our circumstances, but that God does. When the apostle despairs of life itself—yes, even apostles get to the point where they feel like they cannot go on—Paul knows to seek the sustaining mercies of God, by looking to the sufferings of Christ. Jesus knows what affliction is. He is called “the man of sorrows” for a reason. And as he suffered and died for our sins his sacrificial death was followed by his glorious resurrection. Because the suffering of Jesus ends in triumph, so will ours.

And this is why Paul exhorts us *“on him [Jesus], we must set our hope.”* Because he will deliver us!