

Introduction

1. Paul begins almost all of his letters with thanksgiving for his readers:
 - a. Romans 1:8: **“First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for you all...”**
 - b. Ephesians 1:16: **“I do not cease giving thanks for you...”**
 - c. Philippians 1:3: **“I thank my God in all my remembrance of you...”**
 - d. Colossians 1:3: **“We give thanks to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, praying always for you...”**
 - e. 1 Thessalonians 1:2: **“We give thanks to God always for all of you, making mention of you in our prayers...”**
 - f. He does the same in 2 Thessalonians, Philemon and even 1st Corinthians

2. However, unlike most of Paul’s letters, 2nd Corinthians is missing such thanksgiving in the introduction:
 - a. If we remove 1 Timothy and Titus which begin immediately with instruction, that leaves only one other book that begins in a similar fashion (without thanksgiving)—and that’s Galatians
 - b. Both Galatians and 2 Corinthians have something else in common—the churches there were having major issues and Paul’s letters to them contain some of the most candid and terse rebukes we find in any of his writings
 - c. The Galatians were starting to adopt a works-based view of salvation (legalism) so Paul came right out of the gate swinging: **“I am amazed that you are so quickly deserting Him who called you by the grace of Christ, for a different gospel...”** (1:6) and later calls them **“foolish Galatians”** who had become bewitched (3:1)
 - d. As we learned in our introduction to 2nd Corinthians last week, the Corinthians also had their issues, including falsely accusing Paul of a number of things
 - e. While this is purely speculation, it might be that Paul wasn’t feeling particularly thankful for the Corinthians at this point—would any of us had we been treated like Paul had?
 - f. What’s remarkable here is that in spite of this, Paul continued to care about them, love them and minister to them (not only in this letter but in yet another future visit that he will make)

3. Something we need to keep in mind is here is this:
 - a. Chapters 1-7 are basically Paul’s defense of his conduct, change of plans and his ministry as an apostle
 - b. So, his treatise on suffering fits within that context
 - c. There is no doubt that as Paul reflects on his sufferings, and the Corinthians apparent misunderstanding of such suffering, the he chooses to focus on the bigger picture of what such suffering reveals about God

A. God provides compassion and comfort in times of trouble (1:3)

1. Paul begins by blessing God for his compassion and comfort during recent affliction
2. He identifies God as the ultimate source of compassion and comfort (3):
 - a. He is the **“Father of mercies”**
 - 1) When I define mercy I often use the phrase “not getting something we deserve”

- 2) However, in this instance it is best understood as pity or compassion, much like the NIV translates it: **“Father of compassion”**
 - 3) Peter used the same word when he wrote: **“Blessed be the God and father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great mercy (compassion) has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead...”** (1 Peter 1:3)
 - 4) While Peter had in mind how God’s compassion saved us from sin and spiritual death, as we’ll see in a moment Paul is referring to how this same compassion provides comfort in times of earthly affliction
- b. He is the **“God of all comfort”**:
- 1) Paul uses a word here that many of you are already familiar with: parakaleo, which is where we get the word paraklete or Helper from (e.g. a reference to the Holy Spirit)
 - 2) It means to encourage or console someone
 - 3) But notice here that Paul doesn’t just say God is a god of comfort, but that He is the God of **“all comfort”**:
 - a) This is Paul’s way of saying that God is the God of **total** and **complete** comfort
 - b) This sets the comfort we find in God apart from all other forms of comfort which are lacking by comparison
 - c) It’s similar to the peace that we find in God when we are filled with anxiety: **“Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus”** (Philippians 4:6-7)
3. These two traits—God’s compassion and comfort—are what drove God to comfort Paul and his companions during their afflictions: **“comforts us in all our affliction”** (4a):
- a. The **“us”** here is primarily a reference to Paul and his companions as is demonstrated by the **“we”** vs. **“your”** in v. 6 and **“our”** vs. **“you”** in v. 7—so Paul is reflecting on the comfort he had received from God during the recent persecution he faced in Asia (described in vs. 8-11)
 - b. The word for affliction here is the word for tribulation, which is generally reserved for oppression, persecution, distress and the likes which are from **external** sources or outward circumstances--In the NT, it is used most often (almost, but not quite, universally) to refer to the suffering and persecution believers face because of their relationship with Jesus
 - c. However, while Paul may have comfort when persecuted in mind here, we see God’s compassion and comfort extend to us at other times as well:
 - 1) Later in this letter, Paul writes that God comforts the downcast (2 Corinthians 7:6)
 - 2) Jesus said He would comfort those who mourn (Matthew 5:4): **“Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.”**
 - 3) He promised rest for the weary (Matthew 11:28): **“Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.”**
 - 4) Paul wrote that the Scriptures are a source of comfort and provide us with hope (Romans 15:4)
 - 5) Isaiah referred to God giving Israel comfort after sinning (Isaiah 12:1): **“And in that day you will say: ‘O Lord, I will praise You; though You were angry with me, Your anger is turned away, and You comfort me.’”**

B. When God comforts us, it enables us to comfort others (4b-7)

1. Paul saw a purpose in both his suffering and the comfort he received from God (4b): **“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.”**
 - a. The severe persecution Paul faced certainly qualified him to understand what other Christians were facing
 - b. Likewise, because God comforted him at such times, he would certainly be able to encourage others that God would do the same for them
 - c. This kind of experiential knowledge is more powerful than simple head-knowledge or theology
 - d. This is why James is able to state so confidently that trials produce endurance: **“Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing (e.g. because you know by your experience) that the testing of your faith produces endurance.”** (James 1:2-3)

 2. Paul explains how he was able to comfort the Corinthians in their own suffering (5-6):
 - a. As his sufferings on behalf of Christ were abundant, so was the comfort he received from God (5): **“For just as the sufferings of Christ are ours in abundance, so also our comfort is abundant through Christ.”**
 - b. The suffering he endured, was for the Corinthians benefit—both their comfort and their salvation (6a): **“But if we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation;”**
 - 1) 2 Corinthians 4:7-15 (esp. v. 12 and v. 15)
 - 2) Colossians 1:24-25
 - c. The comfort Paul received from the LORD helped the Corinthians have endurance in their own suffering and afflictions (6b): **“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;”** (ESV is clearer: **“if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which you experience when you patiently endure the same suffering that we suffer”**)

 - d. Paul was confident that the Corinthians would be comforted just as he had been comforted (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”**
3. In the same way, when we experience God’s compassion and comfort at difficult times, it better prepares us to minister to those who face affliction (especially when the suffering is similar)

Reading Phil Huey’s emails after the sudden death of his daughter prepared me to face our issue with Kimberly in the hospital

C. The afflictions we face have divine purposes (8-11)

1. Paul wanted the Corinthians to understand the severe persecution he and his companions faced in Asia (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;”**
 - a. While Paul doesn’t provide specifics, it’s possible Paul is referring to the events that took place in Ephesus when his preaching against idolatry caused a city-wide riot (Acts 19:23-41):

- 1) Paul's preaching had such an impact throughout all of Asia that Greeks were turning away from the man-made idols and shrines made by the silver-smiths
 - 2) So, a silversmith by the name of Demetrius gathered together all the other silversmiths because he was afraid that Paul's preaching would destroy their business of making idols
 - 3) Luke reports that this filled the men with rage leading to city wide-confusion (likely a riot), and a mob of thugs dragging Paul's traveling companions, Gaius and Aristarchus, into the theatre
 - 4) When Paul decided to go to the theatre himself, his disciples and even some of the political and religious leaders urged him not to, likely fearing for his life
 - 5) Fortunately, the town clerk was able to calm the riot before anything more happened
 - 6) At this point, Paul left Ephesus and traveled to Macedonia (possibly because ministry in Ephesus had become too dangerous for him)
- b. Whether or not the situation in Ephesus is what Paul has in mind here, he describes the afflictions he faced in Asia as beyond intense (8b):
- 1) Paul and his companions were **"burdened excessively"** (CSB: **"completely overwhelmed"**; NIV: **"under great pressure"**; NKJ: **"burdened beyond measure"**)
 - 2) What they faced was **"beyond our strength"** (lit. "beyond our power")
 - 3) Things were so bad that they feared for their very lives: **"so that we despaired even of life"** (the word that Paul uses here for despair implies complete and utter despair)
2. Paul saw at least two divine purposes in the afflictions he faced in Asia:
- a. The first purpose was that the Lord used it to teach Paul to trust in Him, rather than in himself (9): **"indeed, we had the sentence of death within ourselves so that we would not trust in ourselves, but in God who raises the dead;"**
 - 1) He could trust the LORD because He is the God who **"raises the dead"**
 - 2) And, this God did indeed deliver Paul and his companions (10): **"who delivered us from so great a peris of death"**
 - 3) And Paul was convinced that God would continue to deliver him and his companions (10b-11a): **"and will deliver us, He on whom we have set our hope. And He will yet deliver us, you also joining in helping us through your prayers,"**
 - b. The second purpose was that it would result in thanksgiving to God for his favor (11b): **"so that thanks may be given by many persons on our behalf for the favor bestowed on us through the prayers of many."**
 - 1) The word translated "favor" here is *charismata*, which refers to gifts of grace
 - 2) Paul saw his afflictions in Asia, and subsequent deliverance, resulting in many people thanking God for the favor/grace He showed Paul and his companions

We have a great example of that here in Walker—think of the many (likely hundreds of) people that have been rejoicing and giving thanks to God for what He has done for Walker and his family

Conclusion

1. It's not clear why Paul began his letter with a discussion on suffering and comfort instead of his more regular thanksgiving and praise

2. There is some evidence that the Corinthians saw Paul's suffering and afflictions as a weakness, and even looked down on him for it
3. So, Paul may have been establishing the fact that such things are not evidence of weakness or unfitness for ministry, but rather reveal something else:
 - a. First, his afflictions revealed that God is the Father of Compassion and God of all comfort, because just as his sufferings on behalf of Christ were abundant, so was the compassion and comfort he received from the LORD
 - b. Second, Paul's sufferings were on behalf of others, and prepared him to comfort others with the same comfort God afforded him
 - c. Finally, his troubles were not without divine purposes—in Paul's case they taught him to rely more fully on God and resulted in thanksgiving to God for his amazing gifts of grace