

## Through the Bible @ 30,000 Feet

*2 Corinthians* | *Christian Suffering: Spent with Joy*

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Pastor Jeremiah Knoop

### INTRO:

In **northeastern Nigeria** there is an Islamic terrorist group known as **Boko Haram**.<sup>1</sup> This terrorist group was founded in 2002 with the aim of purifying Islam. Over the past two decades, the group has become infamous for its brutality, killing over 300,000 children and displacing over two million people from their homes. This group has been responsible for massacres, mass abductions, food crises, famines, and although the president of Nigeria claimed that Boko Haram was “technically defeated” in 2019, Islamic terrorism is continuing to spread throughout Nigeria.

Just a few years ago, the United States House of Representatives referred to Nigeria as the most dangerous place for Christians in the world.<sup>2</sup> In the **Voice of the Martyrs** *prayer guide*, they noted that nearly all Christians in northeastern Nigeria have lost family members due to targeted persecution by Boko Haram (and other terrorist groups), especially in the north – but the persecution is continuing to spread south.<sup>3</sup>

Perhaps some of you remember hearing the story of the day that Boko Haram invaded the home of a Nigerian woman named **Amina**...

At 7:00 PM on **October 2, 2012**, a group of armed Boko Haram militants stormed into Amina’s home in northern Nigeria. They told all the men to lie down on the floor. After tying their hands behind their backs, the terrorists brought all the men outside and told them to denounce Christ. They said, “If you are not going to denounce Christ, we are going to kill you today.” The dad (Daniel) and every single one of his sons refused!

So, they killed Daniel, and then they took a knife to the oldest two sons (Daniel and Manga) and then left them to die. But God spared her sons, and the boys said that they eventually came to see the scars on their necks as a testimony of God’s presence.

**Five years later**... Amina was with five men and ten other women travelling to a funeral when the Boko Haram showed up again. They started shooting car, and Amina was shot three times before falling unconscious. When she woke up in the Sambisa Forest, all the men were said, and the women had been taken hostage. There were held there for 8 months while the Nigerian government negotiated with the Boko Haram. During those 8 months, the women faced tremendous pressure to renounce their faith in Jesus – with the constant threat of death hanging over their heads. But the day finally came when the women were released.

And as Amina reflects on the persecution that she has endured, this is what she said: “*I thank God that I knew the Bible, and the Bible doesn’t hide anything about persecution. Anything can happen anytime. A Christian should not be afraid... All these things that happened to me, it makes me come closer to Him more and more.*”<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Boko\\_Haram](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Boko_Haram)

<sup>2</sup> <https://lausanne.org/content/lga/2022-05/christian-persecution-in-nigeria>

<sup>3</sup> [https://www.persecution.com/globalprayerguide/nigeria/?\\_source\\_code=WHPB20C](https://www.persecution.com/globalprayerguide/nigeria/?_source_code=WHPB20C)

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.opendoorsuk.org/news/latest-news/amina-nigeria-love/>

When we think of suffering as a Christian, these are the kinds of stories that we tend to come to our minds. We look at Christians like Amina in northern Nigeria, and we think “*that is what it means to suffer as a Christian.*”

And that’s true... but that’s not **all** it means.

Today, we are looking at the apostle Paul’s second letter to the church in Corinth – in which Paul talks a lot about suffering as a Christian.

Paul uses at least two different words to describe “**suffering**” (πάσχω & πάθημα), and these two words carry the idea of any “*misfortune*” or anything “*unfavorable*” that happens to a person.

So, in Paul’s mind, Christians experience all kinds of suffering:

- We suffer because we are human beings living in a fallen world (**Rom. 8:18–22**).
- We suffer as we struggle with our sin (**Rom. 7:5; Gal. 5:24**).
- We suffer because we are followers of Jesus; we are Christians (**Phil. 3:10**).

When Paul speaks of “*suffering*”, I think what he has in mind is every kind of suffering that a Christian endures...<sup>5</sup>

- The kind of suffering that pierces your skin with blades and bullets
  - **AND** the kind that pierces your heart with words and feelings
  - **AND** the kind that pierces your soul with your own sin.
- The kind of suffering that makes headlines...
  - **AND** the kind that is hidden to everybody else (except for you)

When we think of suffering, we can tend to idolize a person’s *skin* – over a person’s *soul*.

- as if broken bones were more hurtful than broken relationships
- as if the woman whose husband was murdered is suffering more than the woman whose husband walked away...
- as if dying for Jesus in a hostile country was harder than living for Jesus in a sinful country.

When we look at what Paul has to say about suffering, we need to be clear that, although our experiences of suffering are not identical (not by a long shot), every single Christian knows what it means to suffer.

So, the **QUESTION** we are asking today is: *how do we suffer as followers of Jesus?*

## PRAY

### CONTEXT...

- Paul plants a church in Corinth (**Acts 18:1–17**)
- Then he writes the church a letter to help them deal with all kinds of problems (**1 Cor**)
- Since that time, false teachers snuck into the church & stirred up the people against Paul.<sup>6</sup>
  - It’s amazing how *easily deceived & easily swayed* people can be. We’re so **fickle**.

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<sup>5</sup> Persecution is certainly a form of Christian suffering, but it’s not the only form.

<sup>6</sup> See: **2 Cor. 11:4, 13, 20**.

- So, Paul sends a Christian brother named **Titus** to go to Corinth and help address this crisis in the church.<sup>7</sup> Titus spends a season there with the church: exhorting them, encouraging them, teaching them, reminding them of truths that they had forgotten... and then he eventually returns to Paul with joy at the spiritual growth that had taken place in Corinth.<sup>8</sup>
- So, Paul sits down to write them a letter, and there seems to be **three main themes**:
  1. To express his joy over their repentance and spiritual growth.<sup>9</sup>
  2. To remind them of his God-given calling as an apostle (for any who might still doubt).<sup>10</sup>
  3. To help them embrace suffering – as a Christian – with joy.

If anybody has a right to teach us about Christian suffering, it's Paul.<sup>11</sup>

In **chapter 11**, Paul says, “*Look, I know it's foolish to compare suffering, so I'm going to talk like a fool for a minute, because you need to know that I have the authority to write a letter like this.*”

Are they ministers of Christ? —I speak as a fool— I am more:  
 in labors more abundant, in stripes above measure, in prisons more frequently, in deaths often.  
 From the Jews five times I received forty **stripes** minus one.  
 Three times I was **beaten** with rods; once I was **stoned**; three times I was **shipwrecked**;  
 a night and a day I have been in the **deep**;  
 in **journeys** often, in *perils* of **waters**, in *perils* of **robbers**, in *perils* of **my own countrymen**,  
 in *perils* of the **Gentiles**, in *perils* in the **city**, in *perils* in the **wilderness**,  
 in *perils* in the **sea**, in *perils* among **false brethren**;  
 in **weariness** and **toil**, in **sleeplessness** often, in **hunger** and **thirst**,  
 in **fastings** often, in **cold** and **nakedness**—  
 besides the **other things**, what comes upon me daily: my deep concern for all the churches.  
 ~ 2 Cor 11:23–28

In other words, when Paul talks about suffering, he is speaking from very personal experience.<sup>12</sup>

Not only did Paul suffer as a Christian, but he suffered with JOY.

Great is my boldness of speech toward you, great is my boasting on your behalf.  
 I am filled with comfort. **I am exceedingly joyful in all our tribulation.**<sup>13</sup>  
 ~ 2 Cor 7:4

**Q. What is your natural response when life is hard?** Like when...

- somebody doesn't treat you well... you're overlooked, undervalued, passed over, cheated...
- your friends are mean to you at school... your children aren't listening to you...
- somebody is rude to you on the phone... or somebody cuts you off in traffic...
- when you are wrestling through sin, temptation, addiction... or infertility... or loneliness...
- you have been shot three times and are being held captive in a terrorist camp...

<sup>7</sup> 2 Cor 12:18; c.f., 7:6, 13; 8:6, 16, 23.

<sup>8</sup> 2 Cor 7:13–16.

<sup>9</sup> 2 Cor 7:13–16.

<sup>10</sup> 2 Cor 1:1; 10:13–16; chapter 11; 12:11–13.

<sup>11</sup> Indeed, Jesus appointed Paul for suffering (Acts 9:16).

<sup>12</sup> See also 2 Cor 6:4–5.

<sup>13</sup> See also 2 Cor 12:10. And...not only did Paul endure suffering **WITH** joy, but he endured suffering **FOR** the joy of others. “Not that we have dominion over your faith, but are fellow workers for your joy...” (2 Cor 1:24).

This past week at our Wednesday Connection, we looked at the life of **William Wilberforce**. This man endured all kinds of suffering throughout his entire life:

- death of family members... debilitating health... an uphill battle in the British Parliament as he fought for the abolition of the slave trade... slander... threats... the loss of friendship

And one of the things that is so attractive about Wilberforce is how he responded to a life full of suffering: he endured his suffering with **supernatural joy**. Somebody who knew him said, “*By the tones of his voice and expression of his countenance he showed that joy was the prevailing feature of his own mind...*”<sup>14</sup>

- Others who knew him said that he seemed to always be **smiling** & always **singing**... even as he was always **suffering**...

That’s not normal! In my experience, that isn’t the way people *normally* respond in the midst of hardships.

- When somebody cuts you off in traffic... most people don’t break out in song.
- In the midst of our hard times (whatever they are...), most people would **NOT** describe themselves as being “*exceedingly joyful*” (7:4).

So, what was **Wilberforce’s** secret? What was **Amina’s** secret? What was **Paul’s** secret?  
**How do we learn to embrace our suffering – with joy – as a follower of Jesus?**

As you read through **2 Corinthians** this week, here are three things that Paul wants to teach us about suffering as Christian. He wants to teach us about...

1. Our **COMFORT** in suffering: *God*.
2. Our **CONFLICT** in suffering: *Sin & Satan*.
3. Our **COMPULSION** in suffering: *joy in serving others*.

1. Our **COMFORT** in suffering | Paul teaches us where we find comfort in our suffering.

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 tribulation, that we may be able to **comfort** those who are in any trouble, with the **comfort** with which we ourselves are **comforted** by God.

For as the sufferings of Christ abound in us, so our **consolation** also abounds through Christ.

~ 2 Cor 1:3–5

**Where do you run for comfort when you are going through hard times?**

- Refrigerator? Medicine cabinet? Wine cellar? Television screen? Spouse? Social media dump?

I think one of the reasons that so many people in our country are perpetually unhappy is because we are all looking to medicate our pain in the things of this world...instead of running to God for comfort.

Paul could speak of being “*exceedingly joyful in all our [hard times]*” because he knew where to go for comfort: **God**.

- Somebody might say, “*Well...of course the answer is God! How wonderfully cliché...*”
  - If we know the answer, **then why** are there so many sad, bitter, and angry Christians?
  - If we know the answer, **then why** are so many Christians FAILING this exam?

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<sup>14</sup> Miss Sullivan (see Piper’s biographical sketch of Wilberforce).

I think the reason that there are so many non-joyful Christians in our country is because, in fact, we **DON'T** know that God is the answer... to our comfort – in the midst of suffering.

But Paul knew...

A. He found his comfort in **the PROMISES of God** in suffering (4:17–18)

For our light affliction, which is but for a moment,  
as working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory.

~ 2 Cor 4:17

WHAT A PROMISE!!!

- i. Our hardship is “*but for a moment*”. It’s not forever.
  - a. This hard thing that you’re going through...it’s not going to last forever.
  - b. There is an expiration date to your suffering.
  - c. There will be an end to your tears... and your trials... and your temptations...
  - d. **But the glory that God has in store is going to last forever.** It’s “*eternal*”.
- ii. And our hardships are “*light*” in comparison to the “*weight*” of the glory.
  - a. Paul is holding on to the promise that the heaviness of your affliction is nothing compared to how the glory is going to feel when this life is over.
- iii. Our hardships are “*working for us*”.
  - a. They aren’t meaningless. They aren’t random.
  - b. They aren’t roadblocks on the path to glory.
  - c. Rather, they are servants of your everlasting joy.
    - i. Paul is holding on to the promise that his afflictions are working for him...
    - ii. And he holds that same promise out to us.

I have no idea how you face hardships w/o having promises like this rooted deep in your heart.

B. He found his comfort in **the POWER of God** in suffering (1:8–9)

For we do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, of our trouble which came to us in Asia:  
That we were burdened beyond measure, above strength, so that we despaired even of life.

Yes, we had the sentence of death in ourselves,  
**that** we should not trust in ourselves but in God who raises the dead...

~ 2 Cor 1:8–9

- Paul says, “God brought us to the point where it felt like we were going to die...and He did that for a purpose: **iva** so that we would learn to trust in the God who raises the dead.”

Church, if God has the power to breathe life into a dead man, He has the power to breathe life into your situation. Paul found comfort in trusting that God has all the power over every situation in our lives. In fact, Paul says that he learned to see those hard times (when he was burdened beyond strength) as a trophy of God’s power. His sufferings and his weakness didn’t make him feel like a failure; it made him feel like a trophy of the grace and power of Jesus.

...Therefore most **gladly** I will rather boast in my infirmities,  
that the power of Christ may rest upon me.<sup>15</sup>

~ 2 Cor 12:9

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<sup>15</sup> See also 2 Cor. 13:4

C. He found his comfort in **the PROCESSION of God** in suffering (2:14)

A **procession** is a group of people moving in the same direction together; and God uses suffering as a vehicle to move his people in the same direction together...

Now thanks be to God who **always leads us in triumph in Christ,**  
And through us diffuses the fragrance of His knowledge in every place.

~ 2 Cor 2:14

Paul found comfort in knowing that God was using **everything** in his life (including his suffering) to lead him to triumph in Christ.<sup>16</sup>

Paul knew that **THE CROSS** wasn't where Jesus lost; it's where Jesus *won*! **THE CROSS** isn't where Jesus was finally defeated; it's where Jesus finally *crushed* the head of the enemy!<sup>17</sup>

- All of Jesus' sufferings were part of a procession to victory over sin and Satan.
- Paul knew this. And he also knew that he was **in Christ**,<sup>18</sup> and so that's how he viewed his own suffering: as part of a procession to victory over sin and over Satan.

That may seem like foolishness to you, but that's ALWAYS how God works.

He uses every trial in your life (from *allergies* to *al Qaeda*) to *sanctify* you & to *show* His power.<sup>19</sup>

## 2. **Our CONFLICT in Suffering.**

For to this end I also wrote, that I might put you to the test, whether you are obedient in all things...  
Lest **Satan** should take advantage of us; for we are not ignorant of his devises.<sup>20</sup>

~ 2 Cor 2:9, 11

For even if our gospel is veiled [hidden], it is veiled to those who are perishing,  
whose minds **the god of this age** has blinded, who do not believe...

~ 2 Cor 4:3-4

I think another one of the reasons that there are so many unhappy & exhausted Christians in our country is because we don't know who the enemy is:

- We think **Joe Biden** or **Donald Trump** is the enemy... or other **political parties**
- We think the **Islam Terrorists** are the enemy... or our **mother-in-law**... or **Covid 19**
- We think organizations like **Planned Parenthood** are the enemy... or **denominations**

And this mindset just sabotages our joy because it feels like we are surrounded by enemies, and it feels like all our enemies are winning.

- But Paul knew that his only real conflict in the world was with Satan. **EPHESIANS 6:12**
- However...though Satan has *lost*, he has not *left*. **1 PETER 5:8**
  - Paul didn't spend his energy fighting every shadow of suffering that came into his life.
  - He knew who his enemy was, and that brought *clarity* and *focus* into his suffering.

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<sup>16</sup> "Oh, victory in Jesus, my Savior forever. He sought me and bought me with His redeeming blood. He loved me 'ere I knew Him, and all my love is due Him. He plunged me to victory beneath the cleansing flood" (Bartlett, **Victory in Jesus**).

<sup>17</sup> "Oh, Your death is hell's defeat. A cross meant to kill is my Jesus' victory" (Crowder, **My Victory**).

<sup>18</sup> Phil 1:21.

<sup>19</sup> Rom 8:28; Gen 50:20.

<sup>20</sup> See also: 2 Cor 12:7; Eph 6:12; 1 John 2:16; 1 Peter 5:8.

### 3. Our **COMPULSION** in Suffering.

In the book of **James**, we read that we are to “count it all joy when you fall into various trials” (1:2).

But most people have trouble finding any joy in suffering at all because it takes away the things that they treasure most in this life.

What do we treasure most in this life?

- Health | and sickness takes that away.
- Freedom | and being held in a terrorist camp takes that away.
- Fairness | and getting cut off in traffic takes that away.
- Comfort | and leaving home to become a missionary takes that away.
- Security | and giving generously to the work of the kingdom takes that away.
- Predictability | and opening your home & your life to people (*like orphans, strangers, homeless, foreigners...*) takes that away.

And so we **run** and **hide** and **excuse** and **complain** and **vent** and **push** and do everything we can think of to **protect** ourselves from suffering because we don't want to lose what we treasure most.

But Paul said, “*You can have it all...because none of these things are what I'm after!*”

Now for the third time I am ready to come to you.  
And I will not be burdensome to you; for I do not seek yours, but you.  
For the children ought not to lay up for the parents, but the parents for the children.  
And I will very gladly spend and be spent for your souls...<sup>21</sup>  
~ 2 Cor 12:14–15

I will very gladly spend my health and my freedom and my justice and my comfort and my security and my space and my sense of predictability... for the sake of the gospel because what I treasure more than anything else is the glory of God in your soul.

The word “**compulsion**” means “*a very strong urge to do something.*”

Paul's compulsion in suffering was not to run or to hide or to get back...

His compulsion was to spend everything (to lose everything – which is what we would call suffering) for the sake of the gospel.

### **CLOSE**

Our vision as a church is to make joyful followers of Jesus of all the nations. As NC dreams together of how God might use us to reach the nations, the message of **2 Corinthians** is critical for us.

We want God to **FILL** us with a desire to see people and families and our city and this culture and the nations come to know Jesus and surrender their lives to follow Him with joy.

We want God to make this mission so compelling (so compulsive) that we would put **EVERYTHING ON THE TABLE** as a resource for God to use: **use my home, My family. My income. My savings account. My time, health, safety, years...** all of it is **YOURS**. Gladly spent for your souls.

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<sup>21</sup> See also: 2 Cor 5:14–15.