



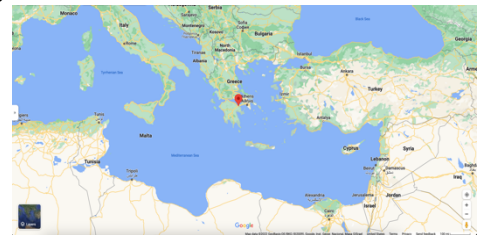
2 Corinthians 1:1-11 What Pain. Taught Us

Summary: When we suffer, God comforts us directly and indirectly, then uses us to comfort others.

This morning we begin our study of a new book in Scripture – Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians. And it opens with one of those passages you come back to time and time again because it helps you make sense out of the things you see and experience in life. Specifically, it helps you make sense of suffering, struggles, and pain – which I know are kind of academic theoretical concepts, but trust me, one day you’ll be glad you know this.

No. Of course I’m kidding. This stuff is immediately practical and if not for you then for someone you know. We all go through hard times in life, and this morning we’re going to see what God wants us to know about them and why, sometimes, going through a really rough season can be the best thing that ever happened to you.

The Apostle Paul is writing a letter to Christians living in the city of Corinth in the south of Greece in the first century. The city is still there today – I point that out because you need to know: the things we’re going to discuss are *not* theoretical or philosophic or academic. They involved real people, in real places, going through real suffering and trials.



I need you to understand that so you don’t write this off as something different from your normal life. You can go and walk the streets of Corinth today. And yes, some of the architecture and the details and the people have changed, but this is where it at all happened, with real people, in this real place.



And to these real people, the Apostle Paul really wrote:

2 Corinthians 1:1 Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God, and Timothy our brother,
To the church of God which is at Corinth, with all the saints who are in all Achaia:
2 Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

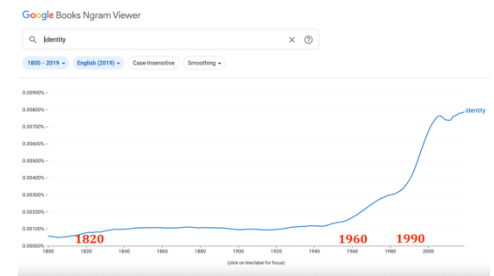
As Paul opens up his letter he says some important things I’d like to draw your attention to before we get to the stuff about suffering, because it’s actually going to lay an important foundation for when we get there.

First, Paul introduces himself as an **apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God**. He does this in most of his letters, he says here’s who I am, and here’s what ‘ve been called to do.

The thing I want to ask is: can you say the same? And if so, what difference does it make?

I've mentioned several times lately that people in our culture are struggling to find their identity, or to assert their identity. In a world where you can see so many other people online, we all want to know where we fit – who we are and why we're here.

Google has this cool tool that will let you see the frequency of the use of words in the English language, and when you look up the word "identity," it's a got that distinct hockey stick shape that indicates this is a word that is growing in popularity. People are writing about identity a LOT more than they used to. Usage was pretty stable from 1800 to 1960 and then it bumped up a bit, until sometime around 1990 when it began to rise right along with the development and spread of the internet.



Apparently, people have become very interested in identity. But how many of them are finding their identity anchored in a holy, creator, God? How many can say, I am what I am [by the will of God](#)?

I say this with the absolute greatest amount of compassion – how many of our identity issues could be resolved if people would simply allow God to speak to them about who they are and how and why He made them? That doesn't mean all their struggles would go away, *to the contrary!* We're going to see this morning that life is hard, *even if you know who you are and what you're supposed to be doing*. But, think of what a gift it could be, to know, with absolute certainty and clarity who God says you are and what your life is for.

Can you say, I'm Tim, husband to Elizabeth, father to Lucinda, Joel, and Vivian, [by the will of God](#)? Can you say, I'm Peter, a college professor by the will of God? I'm Michelle an accountant by the will of God. I'm Aaron, a Coast Guard officer; I'm Mark, a high school math teacher; I'm Cecilia an author and artist, [by the will of God](#).

Church, what I want so badly is for you to see that God has made you who you are. He has gifted you and called you to do certain things. There really is a sense of divine destiny to your life.

[Ephesians 2:10](#) For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.

I encourage you to think about, pray about, ask other people about, what difference it could or does make in your life and work and all the roles you fill, to have you there doing what you do, as someone who is called, directed, and empowered by God.

Your life and identity are going to be full of challenges and trials, but you are you, and the world needs you. You were made for a purpose. You have a certain personality. You're

better at somethings than other people. You're interested in some things that aren't interesting to other people. You were born at a time and place in history that you had nothing to do with. But God knew. He knit you together in your mother's womb. He numbers the hairs on your head. He knows all the details of your life and when it will end.

And in the meantime, He's given you work to do. The greatest of which is to know Him, worship Him, and enjoy Him forever. And then, to let that awareness of who you are, as shaped by the hand of God, affect your relationships with other people.

Which brings me to the next thing I want to point out in the introduction here, something else we'll build on in a moment – it's the connection and community we find.

Paul is writing this with [Timothy](#) at his side, and he's writing it to [the church in Corinth](#), the city, as well as [all the saints in Achaia](#), which is the name for the entire region of Southern Greece.

So, I want to highlight the communal identity we see here. I want to make a big deal about the fact that most of the New Testament are letters written to whole churches or groups of people. Most of the Old Testament is addressed, originally, to the entire nation of Israel. Today, you have your own personal copy of Scripture on your phone or tablet or as a physical book in your hand, but it's not just *for you*. It's for us. Together.

Yes, it has personal application. And yes, you should read it on your own. I'm not trying to take anything away from your personal connection with Scripture, but I am trying to emphasize, *from Scripture*, the communal aspect of most of the Christian life. We're in this together. Each of us with God, but then each of us with each other too.

The Christian life is not just about having God as Father, it's also about having each other as brothers and sisters. And that feels so weird in our modern, highly-individualized, preference-based culture. We want to be autonomous, we want to have our own opinions and make our own choices, some of which is good, but we also have to recognize we've been given a family to belong to. Even if that means we have to figure out how to deal with weird uncle Harold and crazy aunt Diane.

Friends, these two things can change your life: knowing that you have a personal identity – that Paul was [an apostle by the will of God](#), and knowing that you have a corporate identity too, that you're part of [the church](#) – those called out by God and adopted into His family – these two things are incredibly powerful building blocks for the foundation of your life and they will help you navigate the challenges, the frustrations, even the depression and despair that can come your way.

And that's what we're about to see next, that having an identity and having a place to belong won't keep you from hard times, but they make all the difference in the world for how you navigate them.

So here's a little more background for you: you need to know that Paul had been to Corinth before. He spent over a year there, and helped start the church. But then, after he left, they had some internal problems, some relational problems and some behavior problems – which you should know happen, even in church, even in churches started by Apostles. So, Paul wrote them a letter, First Corinthians, to deal with some of those issues.

Then, he promised to come visit, but something happened during his travels that kept him from getting back to Corinth, something so severe, he thought he was going to die and never see them again. Fortunately, he made it out of that situation, and now he's writing this letter to explain why he didn't make it, and to talk about some other issues before he comes to town again.

They had received word of what happened and that he was in danger, so he doesn't talk about what the threat actually was, but he shares what he learned through the whole situation. Notice what he writes:

3 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, 4 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. 5 For as the sufferings of Christ abound in us, so our consolation also abounds through Christ. 6 Now if we are afflicted, it is for your consolation and salvation, which is effective for enduring the same sufferings which we also suffer. Or if we are comforted, it is for your consolation and salvation. 7 And our hope for you is steadfast, because we know that as you are partakers of the sufferings, so also you will partake of the consolation.

First, and it all starts with this, notice what we learn about the character of God – He is [the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort](#)

And here is where I need the Holy Spirit to be at work in your life through this sermon. You see, I can read you this verse. We can agree on what it says, but I need the Holy Spirit to drive it down deep into your soul and help you believe it. I can't do that on my own. You *need* to know this, I *want* you to know this, but we both need God Himself to help us know *and believe*, that God is [the Father of mercies and God of all comfort](#).

This is His identity; this is His character. This is who He is. If you need mercy, He is the father of it. If you need comfort, turn to Him. That's how this works. When we need mercy, when we need comfort, we're supposed to look to God who, (vs 4) [comforts us in all our tribulation](#).

These six words are so important, because they tell us – life is hard, but God is good. Remember, Paul is writing to the church, *he's writing to Christians* and he's speaking of personal experience, and he says God [comforts us in all our tribulation, our troubles, our afflictions](#) which is radical because there are plenty of people who don't think they should ever have to go through anything like that, especially if they're a Christian, or a good

person. In fact, isn't that why I try so hard to live a good moral life, so that God will reward me and protect me?

But that's not what we see in Scripture. Instead, we see Christians, apostles, and even entire churches going through hard times. And yet, right there in the very pit of it all, Paul blesses and praises the God who **comforts us in all our tribulation**.

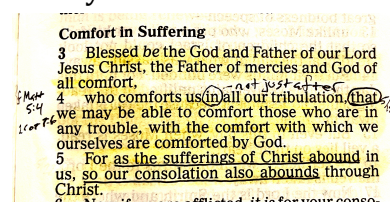
And I hate to say it, but sometimes grammar is important, and this is one of times. Look at the preposition, **in**. God comforts us **comforts us in all our tribulation**. I wish it didn't say that, but it does. I wish it said God comforts us *after* our tribulations, or even better, God comforts us by pulling us *out of* our tribulation, but no, it says **in**. God **comforts us in all our tribulation**.

The one good thing I can say about that is *it's true*. It's been proven over and over again. God really does show up in our darkest times and bring us comfort. Paul knew that. Later, in chapter 11, he'll give a partial list of all the hard things he has been through – shipwrecks, beatings, police brutality, sickness, mob violence, being on the run for his life. The man endured some hard times, and yet he was able to say, with absolute conviction, God **comforts us in all our tribulation**.

And some of you can say that too – you've been through hard things and walked with God through them. Things you would never ask to go through, things you pray no one else has to go through, but God brought you through it, or He's walking you through it right now, day by day, step by step – you never thought you could make it this far, but here you are – thanks to the Father of mercy and God of all comfort.

But here's where grammar becomes really important again – we learn why God comforts us: **that we may be able to comfort those who are in any trouble, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God**.

In my Bible I often circle words like **that** – it's my way of emphasizing the connection between what was just said and what follows, the circle, or really more of an oval, looks kind of like a link in a chain holding the two clauses together, which is what conjunctions do – they hook up words and phrases and clauses. You remember that from Conjunction Junction and Schoolhouse Rock. Or at least some of you do.



The point is, when we go through **tribulations**, troubles, afflictions, we learn things about God and ourselves **that** we are then able to use to minister to others.

Let me see if I can say this another way. I'm going to go through hard times. And so are you. So, when I go through hard times, God teaches me things, reveals Himself to me, comforts me, **so that** I can later do the same thing for you. God never wastes a scar. Never wastes our tears. Never wastes our suffering and struggles. He redeems them, using them to teach us and to equip us to comfort others.

Look again with me at verse 6 *Now if we are afflicted, it is for your consolation and salvation, which is effective for enduring the same sufferings which we also suffer. Or if we are comforted, it is for your consolation and salvation.*

Paul says, one of the reasons we go through hard times is *so that* we can learn things which will later qualify and equip us to help others. He had this mindset that the harder life became, the more he was going to learn and the more helpful he would be to others. That's a radical way of looking at hardship, but it could change the way we face tough circumstances – to look at them and say, I'm going to learn something about God from this that I'll be able to share with others.

Maybe you should look back on some of the things you've already been through and ask the question – what did I learn from that? And, who can use it? Who can be comforted by it? Friends, the truth of the matter is, God often entrusts us with things we learn in trials so that we can share them with others.

The word here for comfort in the Greek is *parakaleo*, it means literally to come alongside. In John 14 Jesus promised the Holy Spirit would come and bring us comfort after His resurrection, that he would be our *paraclete*. In fact, the King James Version of the Bible actually calls Him the Comforter in that passage – your Bible probably says Helper, or Advocate, or Counselor, those are all just different ways of trying to translate this idea of *parakaleo*, coming alongside to bring comfort, counsel, and help.

That's the Holy Spirit's role in our lives. But what you need to know is that sometimes He provides that *directly* and other times He does it *indirectly* by sending someone to us. You've probably experienced both. You've probably had moments when God ministered to you *directly*, through Scripture or through music, or by revealing a thought to your mind or an awareness of His presence.

But then there are times when he sends another human being along to be the expression of His comfort, counsel, and encouragement to you – it's still God at work in your life, but He's working *indirectly*. This is what Paul is saying, here in 2 Corinthians.

Of course, he's also saying that sometimes you get to be that person to someone else – you get to be God's divinely equipped and sent representative, His special envoy, His ambassador. And you'll get to share what you have learned of Him in a sensitive and compelling way with others. God *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.*

So friends, let me ask: how does God want to redeem your pain by transforming it into a qualification for ministry? I don't know the answer, but it's certainly worth you thinking and praying about.

One last thing to draw our attention to this morning, and that is to recognize the reality of the pain you've been through, or that you're going through.

Notice Paul says, **8 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.**

Now, remember who is writing this – **Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God.** You might think that if you knew your God-given identity and calling and you were walking in that, following God's will for your life, everything would be easy. You *might* think that. And you would be wrong. Paul, the **apostle of Jesus Christ, by the will of God**, was burdened beyond measure, above strength, and came to point where he assumed his life was over.

Christian, don't assume that just because your life is hard it means you're doing something wrong. Ease and comfort are not indicators of success or correct decisions. Sometimes life is really, really, hard even though you're doing everything right. God is still there with you, He promises to comfort you, either directly or indirectly. He wants to use this hard thing in your life to give you even greater knowledge of and confidence in Him. Paul says he learned something really, really, important during those dark times -

9 Yes, we had the sentence of death in ourselves, *that* we should not trust in ourselves but in God who raises the dead, 10 who delivered us from so great a death [past tense], and does deliver us [present tense]; in whom we trust that He will still deliver us [future tense], 11 you also helping together in prayer for us, that thanks may be given by many persons on our behalf for the gift *granted* to us through many.

It is a great day when a man or woman comes to the end of their self and realizes that they're not going to make it through this unless God shows up – when we learn not to trust in ourselves, but in God who raises the dead.

Do you believe in a God **who raises the dead**? If so, can you believe in Him through your difficult days? Can you trust His character, even when you can't make sense of your circumstances?

Oh Church, I love you, but I know you, and so I have to say, this is going to be one of the most challenging things for you, living here in this region, to accept. You are amazing people, accomplished people, driven, results-oriented people, but you should not **trust in yourselves, but in God who raises the dead**. Sometimes He lets you slip into what seems like overwhelming situations **so that** you will see there's no way out of it, or through it, unless He shows up. But He will – He's the **Father of mercies and God of all comfort**.

He *has* delivered you, He *is* delivering you, and He will continue *to deliver* you, if you will trust Him today. And then, He wants you to go, and share the comfort you received, the things you learned, with others. This is an essential part of your purpose and identity, it's why you're here, and why you've been through the things you've endured. God doesn't promise to keep you from pain, but He does promise that it can all be redeemed – that you can grow from it, learn from it, and discover ways to comfort others.

Maybe you're in need of that comfort today – then share your burden. Open up to someone, be real, let them know what you're working your way through, let them pray for you and carry that burden with you, let them minister to you. You need the Father of mercy and God of all comfort, and you need to receive comfort in His name, from the people around you who have learned faith stretching and soul strengthening things by walking through hard times already. God has put us all together for a reason, let us invite Him, and each other, deeper into our lives today.

Let's pray.



Sermon Application and Discussion Questions

2 Corinthians 1:1-11 What Pain. Taught Us

Summary: When we suffer, God comforts us directly and indirectly, then uses us to comfort others.

- What is your God-given identity? How comfortable are you in it? How sure of it are you? Do you think you can have as much confidence in your identity and calling as Paul the Apostle? Why or why not?
- In what ways you do see or sense evidence that God has been shaping your life, preparing good things in advance so that you might walk in them (Eph 2:10)?
- How do you experience the value of Christian community, of belonging to something bigger than yourself?
 - What are the benefits of emphasizing the individual's direct relationship with God?
 - What are the benefits of emphasizing the individual's relationship with God as part of the community of the church?
- How would explain what it means for God to be the Father of mercies and God of all comfort? Have you personally experienced Him in these ways?
- What is one of the worst things you've been through as a Christian? How did comfort you, or sustain you through that? Did you experience Him directly, indirectly through others, or both?
- How have you been comforted by other Christians when you went through something difficult?
- How have you been able to take something difficult you've been through and use it to counsel or encourage others?
- Why is it so hard to trust God's character in light of our circumstances at times? Have you learned anything that helps you focus your heart and mind on God during difficult times when circumstances seem overwhelming?
- AW Tozer once said, "Before God can use a person mightily, He must first wound them deeply." What do you think Towzer meant in light of 2 Cor 1:9?