

Comfort in Uncomfortable Trials

Scripture Focus

2 Corinthians 1:1–11

Summary

Paul offered praise to God for His gracious comfort. Paul explained that trials never exhaust God's comfort. Because He comforts us in our trials, we can respond to them properly.

Topic

God's comfort

Theme

God's gracious comfort makes it possible to respond to trials with peace and confidence.

Desired Learner Response

The learner will respond to trials in a godly manner.

Outline

I. Personal Greetings

II. Comfort in Suffering

- A. The God Who helps (1:3)
- B. The reasons for suffering (1:4–11)
 1. Opportunities to help others
 2. Comfort from Christ
 3. Example for others
 4. Reliance on God
 5. Prayer and thanksgiving

Materials

- Resources 1 and 2
- Visuals 1 and 2
- Clear containers of water
- Bleach
- Food coloring

Memory Verses

"Blessed be God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies, and the God of all comfort; who comforteth us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort them which are in any trouble, by the comfort wherewith we ourselves are comforted of God"
(2 Corinthians 1:3, 4).

GETTING STARTED

Texts That Touch the Heart

Most text messages are practical. We use them to tell our spouse to stop by the store to get bread, to let a friend know we have arrived at a restaurant, or to ask if dinner is ready—even though we are in the same house. But occasionally, we will send or receive a text that communicates or touches our hearts. Sometimes to build us up, and other times to wake us up.

ASK: When was the last time you sent or received a text message that was personal rather than practical? (Q1)

ASK: Was the text the kind that comforts or confronts? (Q2)

The apostle Paul wrote 2 Corinthians as a personal letter meant both to comfort and confront the church at Corinth. He spoke of God's abundant grace, sharing his testimony of experiencing God's enabling strength in trials.

It Hurts!

Every believer experiences unpleasant suffering. However, God's grace and the prayers and comfort of Christian friends can ease the pain.

ASK: What kind of suffering do you think is the hardest to endure? Why?

ASK: What are common things people turn to for help during suffering?

In 2 Corinthians 1, Paul wrote about how God's comfort in our suffering helps us to properly respond to those who are suffering.

SEARCHING THE SCRIPTURES

Corinth was the least Greek of all the Greek cities in Paul's day. Furthermore, the city fell inside the boundaries of the Roman Empire, but it reflected Roman culture far less than other major Roman cities. Italians, Greeks, Jews, and others of the Mediterranean world populated the city. Slaves made up about seventy-five percent of the population. The other twenty-five percent enjoyed so much wealth that they caused the city to be characterized as a wealthy city.

VISUAL: Display visual 1. Discuss the significance of Corinth's location.

Corinth's location made it an important city. Corinth was located on an isthmus, a narrow piece of land that connected northern and southern Greece and separated the Gulf of Corinth from the Saronic Gulf. In Paul's day, ships were unloaded at one gulf and then wheeled to the other gulf, where they were reloaded. The effort saved sailors from the long, dangerous trip by sea around Achaia (southern Greece). Under Nero (AD 67) workers unsuccessfully attempted to cut a canal through the rock. In 1893 the canal was finally dug.

VISUAL: Display visual 2 to show the canal cut through the isthmus.

Corinthians worshipped Aphrodite, the goddess of sensual pleasure and self-indulgence. The religion, with its hundreds of sacred prostitutes, debased the city's residents. The rest of the Roman world readily recognized Corinth for their immorality. When describing a person with loose, immoral conduct, the rest of the Roman world simply said the person lived like a Corinthian.

Paul invaded the debased city of Corinth with the gospel of Christ. His invasion led to a successful church plant. Not surprisingly, the Corinthian church desperately needed Paul's instructions and God's grace.

When Paul wrote letters to the churches that he had started on his missionary journeys, he always opened with a greeting. Second Corinthians is no exception.

I. Personal Greetings (2 Cor. 1:1, 2)

Certain members of the Corinthian church opposed Paul, believing he was not truly an apostle. Appropriately, he mentioned his apostolic credentials in the first words of 2 Corinthians.

READ: 2 Corinthians 1:1. **ASK:** To what did Paul attribute his apostleship? (Q3) *The will of God.*

Paul's election through God's will gave him his authority. No man in his right mind would have chosen the kind of life Paul lived. He was exposed to physical danger, hardship, insult, abuse, persecution, loneliness, anxiety, conflict, and fear. Paul was an apostle because God had willed it. Thus Paul opened 2 Corinthians with a strong affirmation of his apostolic authority.

Paul was writing to *the church of God*. Since God was its ruler, the members of the Corinthian church were not free to make decisions according to their likes and dislikes. They were required to submit their decisions to God's will.

Paul also addressed this letter to *all the saints*. In other words, Paul was writing this letter to believers. A saint is a born-again person who is set apart to the Lord.

Paul wished the Corinthian believers grace and peace. Grace is what God gives, and peace is what we receive. Grace is the divine favor God showers on us; peace is the inner rest that grace makes possible. Both grace and peace come *from God our Father, and from the Lord Jesus Christ* (1:2).

ASK: Why do you value grace? peace? (Q4)

Paul's opening statements painted a brief but grand backdrop of the blessedness of God. Paul did not do so haphazardly. He intentionally emphasized God's blessedness because he was about to launch into a discussion on trials and suffering.

RESOURCE: Display resource 2. **ASK:** How do people naturally respond to trials? (Record learners' answers on the left half of the resource.) *Become depressed, get angry, indulge in harmful activities.*

II. Comfort in Suffering (2 Cor. 1:3–11)

A. The God Who helps (1:3)

When Trials Come	
Natural Responses	Proper Responses
	1. Recognize the sufficiency of God's help.
	2. Endeavor to comfort others.
	3. Draw on Christ's comfort.
	4. Exemplify trust in God.
	5. Fully rely on God.
	6. Enlist the prayers of other believers.

2 CORINTHIANS 1:1–11

Despite all his adversities, including those caused by some Corinthians who refused to accept him as an apostle, Paul offered praise to God. *Blessed be God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ*, he wrote in verse 3. The word translated *blessed* comes from two Greek words meaning *to speak* and *well*, thus *to speak well of*. The word is always addressed to God.

ASK: What two reasons did Paul give in verse 3 for speaking a good word for God? (Q5) *God's mercies (kindnesses) and comfort.*

Paul referred to God as the *Father of mercies*. This expression reflects the theology of Psalm 103:13: *As a father pitieth his children, so the LORD pitieth them that fear him*. He is the fountainhead from which all mercies flow. A Jewish prayer pleads, *O Father, merciful Father, ever compassionate, have mercy upon us*. Paul's hymn of praise views God in a similar manner.

On the other hand, God is the *God of all comfort*.

ASK: What is significant about God's being the God of all comfort? (Q6) *Genuine, lasting comfort comes from God. Nothing else can replicate the comfort that comes from God.*

God is the source and the author of encouragement. We are accustomed to think of the Holy Spirit as the comforter, but the Father also performs this ministry. *All* emphasizes the completeness and adequacy of God's comfort for any need that arises.

ASK: How has a trial given you a deeper appreciation of God's comfort? (Q7)

RESOURCE: Display resource 2. Reveal the first proper response to trials: Recognize the sufficiency of God's help.

B. Reasons for suffering (1:4–11)

We live in a fallen world with sin-cursed bodies. Suffering is unavoidable. Yet suffering is not without purpose. God allows us to suffer for several reasons. How we respond to suffering is of utmost importance.

1. Opportunities to help others

READ: 1 Corinthians 1:4. **ASK:** Why does God allow believers to suffer? (Q8) *So they might be able to comfort others with the comfort they experienced during the suffering.*

We should seek to encourage others who are going through any trials, but those who have gone through trials similar to ours are often the ones to whom we can offer the greatest encouragement and blessing.

RESOURCE: Display resource 2. Reveal the second proper response to trials: Endeavor to comfort others.

ASK: What sufferings have you experienced that now provide an opportunity for you to minister to others? (Q9)



TESTIMONY: Describe a time when someone helped you through a trial by sharing how God helped him or her through a similar trial. (Q10)

ASK: What precautions should you take when helping someone through a trial like one you have faced? (List the learners' answers on the board.)

Remember that his trial is not exactly like yours; the person going through the trial may not be learning the same lesson you learned; the person going through the trial might be reacting differently than you did; the fallout from the trial may not be the same as the fallout from your trial.

2. Comfort from Christ

Verse 5 is a somewhat difficult verse to interpret. What did Paul mean by *the sufferings of Christ [which] abound in us*? It is likely he was referring to sufferings that Christians endure because they identify with Christ. Christians in Paul's day, and many since, suffered because of persecution. Paul, in the context of this chapter, went on to speak of the persecution he suffered for the cause of Christ.

READ: 2 Corinthians 1:5. **ASK:** What is the correlation between suffering and Christ's comfort? (Q11) *As our suffering increases, Christ's comfort toward us increases.*

OBJECT LESSON: Display two clear containers. Fill one with water mixed with a dark food coloring, and label it *Suffering*. Fill the other with a solution of water and bleach, and label it *Comfort from Christ*. Display a clear mixing bowl labeled *My Life*. Pour the colored water into the clear mixing bowl after you read the first half of verse 5. Then pour the bleach solution into the same clear mixing bowl after you read the second half of verse 5. Explain that when suffering comes into our lives, Christ's comfort abounds to help us deal with the suffering. In the end, we gain from the suffering by having experienced Christ's comfort.

Suffering for Christ results in an overflowing of consolation from Christ. Apart from Christ, suffering leads to despair. With Christ at our side, suffering leads to encouragement.

RESOURCE: Display resource 2. Reveal the third proper response to trials: Draw on Christ's comfort.

3. Example for others

READ: 2 Corinthians 1:6, 7. **ASK:** Who did Paul say would benefit from his suffering? (Q12) *The Corinthians who were watching Paul and learning how to deal with suffering from his example.*

In verses 6 and 7 Paul related his afflictions and encouragement to the Corinthians' spiritual welfare. *Whether we be afflicted* could mean *when we are afflicted*. It was not a matter of probability but of actuality. Paul was continually afflicted. Second Corinthians 6:4 and 5 make this clear, and 11:23–28 expands the matter even further.



Paul suffered his afflictions while taking the gospel to the Corinthians.

God encouraged Paul in his trials so the Corinthians would have an example of God's gracious comfort. The Corinthians could look at Paul's life and know that God's grace is sufficient to meet their needs as they suffered for Him. Thus Paul regarded his experiences as beneficial to the Corinthians. He was confident that they would partake of both his sufferings and his encouragement and would, therefore, endure.

RESOURCE: Display resource 2. Reveal the fourth proper response to trials: Exemplify trust in God.

4. Reliance on God

In verses 8–10 Paul related to the Corinthians a severe trial he had recently endured. It seems the full details of this incident had not yet reached Corinth. He informed them of what had happened to him.

READ: 2 Corinthians 1:8. **ASK:** How did Paul describe the degree to which he suffered? (Q13)

ASK: Describe the role Paul's own strength played in helping him get through this trouble. (Q14)

Apparently the trial had occurred in Asia. Some commentators suggest that it was the riot of Demetrius (Acts 19:23ff.). Some commentators believe a nearly fatal illness beset Paul in Asia. Still others think it was a period of persecution not mentioned in Acts. Whatever it was, Paul was *pressed out of measure, above strength*. Sometimes we feel like this too. Our trials seem more than we can bear. It is at times like this when we need to draw closer to the God of all comfort.

In Paul's case the trial was a major crisis. He *despaired even of life*. He bore *the sentence of death*. Humanly speaking, his situation was utterly hopeless.

READ: 2 Corinthians 1:9. **ASK:** Why might Paul have been tempted to trust in self to get him through his trouble? (Q15) *Paul had been successful as an apostle. God had used him in miraculous ways.*

ASK: What does society tell us to do when we are facing trouble? (Q16) *Look within ourselves for strength and answers.*

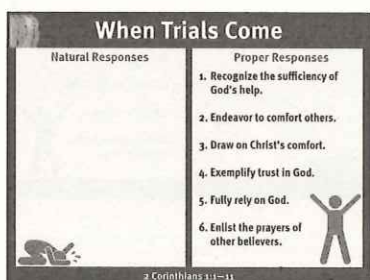
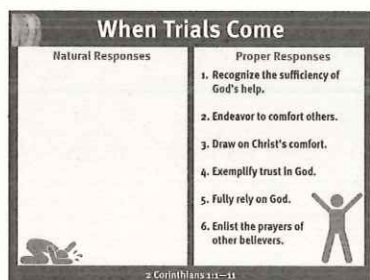
Back in Asia Paul had learned that he could not trust in himself *but in God which raiseth the dead* (1:9). God had allowed Paul to experience trouble and trials that far exceeded what Paul could handle on his own so Paul would rely completely on God.

RESOURCE: Display resource 2. Reveal the fifth proper response to trials: Fully rely on God.

ASK: What situation has taught you to rely completely on God? (Q17)

5. Prayer and thanksgiving

The final reason God allows trials to come our way is seen in verse 11. Trials



cause prayer, which results in thanksgiving. When Paul was going through this time of danger and suffering, the Corinthians were praying for him. Prayer does make a difference.

RESOURCE: Display resource 2. Reveal the sixth proper response to trials: Enlist the prayers of believers.

The last part of verse 11 seems more complicated than it really is. The idea is that many people in Corinth had prayed for Paul. Those praying people were God’s gift to him. Because their prayers had been answered, many would give thanks to God.

ASK: Describe a time in your life when you prayed especially fervently. (Q18)

God answered the Corinthians’ prayers on Paul’s behalf and delivered him from a potentially devastating crisis.

When Trials Come

Natural Responses



Proper Responses

1. Recognize the sufficiency of God's help.
2. Endeavor to comfort others.
3. Draw on Christ's comfort.
4. Exemplify trust in God.
5. Fully rely on God.
6. Enlist the prayers of other believers.



2 Corinthians 1:1-11

MAKING IT PERSONAL

Use the following activities to help the learners personalize Paul’s message about responding to suffering.

Showing Comfort

Have learners select one person or family who is undergoing a difficult trial. Ask learners to share specific actions they will take in the coming week to comfort that person or family. (Q19)

Comforting Verses

Ask volunteers to share verses of Scripture that have comforted them during their trials. Direct them to the list in the study book under question 20 for additional comforting passages.

Summary and Memory Verses

Use resource 1 to review the response for this lesson: By God’s grace I can respond to trials with peace and confidence.

Encourage your learners to memorize 2 Corinthians 1:3 and 4. Give them an opportunity to quote the verse in class next week.

Waves of Grace

By God's grace I can ...

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

6.

7.

8.

9.

10.

11.

12.

13.

Abundant Grace

Topic

Sincerity

Theme

A godly life is the best answer to criticism.

Desired Learner Response

The learner will live sincerely in the sight of God.

Materials

- Resources 1 and 3
- Fake flowers

Sincerely Yours

Scripture Focus

2 Corinthians 1:12—2:17

Summary

Some members of the church at Corinth disputed Paul's claim to be an apostle. This lesson examines Paul's claim to sincerely be an apostle of Jesus Christ on behalf of the Corinthian believers.

Outline

I. Paul's Sincere Life and Ministry (2 Cor. 1:12—2:4)

- A. In his methods (1:12)
- B. In his writings (1:13)
- C. In his mutual glorying (1:14)
- D. In his plans (1:15—2:2)
- E. In his intentions (1:23—2:4)

II. Paul's Charge for the Sincere Believer (2 Cor. 2:5—11)

III. Paul's Sincere Concern for the Church (2 Cor. 2:12, 13)

IV. Paul's Sincere Confidence in God (2 Cor. 2:14—17)

Memory Verse

"For we are not as many, which corrupt the word of God: but as of sincerity, but as of God, in the sight of God speak we in Christ" (2 Corinthians 2:17).