

2 Corinthians 1:1-11

- 1) In 1:3-12, words related to comfort occur ten times, and trouble three times, and suffering four times. The suffering Paul is referring to is what he calls “affliction” in 1:4 (NRSV, NASB); “troubles” (NIV), “trials” (JB Phillips), “sorrows” (Jerusalem Bible), “hard times” (Message). According to Barnett,

The Greek word contains the idea of “pressure”, the “pressure” which he felt as a result of his ministry. Paul’s challenge to idols and idolatry in Ephesus brought upon him such an oppressive sense of burden that he expected to die as a result of the experience (1:8-9). His insistence on sincere repentance among the Corinthians led him to write to them “out of great distress and anguish of heart and with many tears” (2:4; cf. 7:8-10). While Paul doubtless was as prone to money worries, health problems and relationship conflicts as other people, faithfulness to Christ and to the ministry were the chief source of his *troubles*. (30)

When things are going well in our ministries (as when Paul wrote to the Philippians) we may not feel this “pressure.” (And of course we also are free from it when we detach ourselves from kingdom work.) How have you struggled in the past with this sort of pressure in your work for the kingdom? Are you currently in a time of “pressure” (sorrows, trouble, hard times, affliction), or are you feeling more like Paul on a good day?

- 2) Thinking purely in terms of Paul and his context, how is he consoled by God in his affliction (1:4)? How does his affliction console the Corinthians when they suffer (1:6)?
- 3) Is it possible to be consoled by others when we are afflicted if we never tell others of our frustrations with ministry?
- 4) Both Job and 2 Corinthians have much to teach us about how we respond to trials. Like Paul, Job was a righteous man zealous for ministry, but unlike Paul, Job’s suffering appeared unconnected to this. (We don’t know the affliction Paul refers to in 1:3-11, but we may not be far off if we imagine the sort of persecution by civil authorities at the instigation of a local Jewish congregation which was attempted in Corinth.)

Among other things, the book of Job teaches us to *wrestle with God* rather than turning away; from his friends we learn to *face adversity in community*; from Elihu we learn that *God speaks in many ways* even when he appears distant; from (or despite) Satan we learn to *pursue God for God*, not for what we can get; and from Yahweh we learn to *trust God* even when we don’t know *why* we are afflicted – and we are reminded that as God cares for, and carefully designed his creation, so God also cares for us.

Name at least one thing we can learn about affliction from Paul’s words to the Corinthians. Does it apply to other forms of suffering as well?

- 5) Paul says that he was afflicted beyond what he was able to endure, so that he was “utterly, unbearably crushed”? In real ministry situations, there come times when we want to throw in the towel, even if we don’t fear for our lives as Paul did. Sometimes these low points indicate that we are to learn to rely upon God, and to persevere. At other times they mean we are to turn to other fields which are more likely to bear fruit—as when Paul shook the dust of the synagogues from his feet. Can you think of times when you were challenged beyond what you could bear, and felt it best to turn away? And other times when being overwhelmed led to greater reliance upon God?

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Fun fact: “2 Corinthians 12:2-4 relates a visionary experience in which Paul was transported to heavenly realms. Many apocryphal tales report additional ‘spirit journey’ undertaken by Paul. A Greek writing from the third century tells of how he **visited hell and brokered a deal** for all torments to be suspended for one day each week (on Sundays); thus even the damned have Paul to thank for getting them a day off.” (Mark Allan Powell, *Introducing the New Testament*, 301)

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A note on commentaries, after the fact: I used half a dozen to various degrees, with the main ones listed below. 2 Cor doesn’t exactly lend itself to commentaries, since much of what Paul is doing is at face value. The exception to this is Paul’s use of existing rhetorical practices. The Romans wrote whole manuals for how to navigate the sort of situation Paul was in, trying to write a letter to refute accusations. This explains the long-standing awkwardness of Paul’s saying multiple times he doesn’t want to boast, and boasting’s bad, and then turning around and doing just that. Barnett and Carson and Keener are the best, and BW3’s useful too. And of course IVP’s DPL’s entry is worth reading.

NT Wright’s Bible For Everyone: This is in the series in which Wright focuses mainly on producing anecdotes you might use in a sermon on the passage. I didn’t find this tremendously useful.

Ben Witherington III, Conflict and Community in Corinth: This is the best commentary when it comes to providing socio-rhetorical background. BW3 unpacks how Paul was following the letter-writing and rhetorical standards of his time. From this standpoint, it was somewhat useful.

Craig Keener’s in the NCBC series: This was my main reference. It has useful background and references to other passages, but still isn’t as much of a gem as, say, Keener’s Matt. commentary.

Barnett’s commentary in the IVP Bible Speaks Today series: This is useful to have at hand. While it doesn’t tend to deliver any deep insights, none of the rest of them do either, and this is still well-written and helpful. He wrote a bigger commentary too which I didn’t use.

Don Carson, A Model for Christian Maturity: This is devoted to 2 Cor 10-13. It’s slightly dated, being written in the 80s, but has the occasional gem of an insight. Much more useful than Wright.