

Last week we saw Paul address the idea of suffering. He did so because of the suffering he had experienced, and because he knew the situation the Corinthians were going through. But in 2 Corinthians 1:1 we see that the letter is addressed also to all the saints throughout Achaia. The content of 2 Corinthians was not just meant for the Corinthian church, but also for other churches in that region. There is universal application that even speaks to us.

The theme verse for this series is 2 Corinthians 8:9, which says that Jesus, who was rich, became poor so that we who were poor could become rich. It speaks of the riches we have in Christ, even in the midst of suffering. It's important to note that these riches aren't the same as the absence of suffering. When we experience hardship, it sometimes is hard to see how we are recipients of these riches in Christ. But in 1:4-5 Paul tells us that we share in the overflowing suffering of Jesus. So we should expect to suffer in this life, however God comforts us in the midst of suffering.

As we learned before, this comfort is not a sudden mystical occurrence that makes us feel unexplainably better. God provides comfort through our brothers and sisters in Christ, within this community of believers. We must share our lives with each other and be vulnerable so that we can share God's comfort with each other. Together we share in Christ's suffering, and we also should comfort and edify each other together. God doesn't need us to be able to comfort people, but He chooses to use us in this way so we can share in His work. This is vital because it is how we live out our unity in Christ. Christianity isn't just about the individual relationship with God, but it is about a communal relationship with God. It's about us and God, not me and God. We are united with Christ, but we are also united with each other in Christ.

We see this idea again in vv. 10-11. Paul mentions the idea of God's deliverance three times. But then he also says this deliverance occurs as the Corinthians help him by their prayers. Just as we play a part in bringing God's comfort to others, we also play a part in bringing His deliverance through prayer. How often do you pray for the needs of others in the church? Are you aware of the needs of others here? One of the detriments of the common evangelical

presentation of the gospel is that it focuses on your personal relationship with God. Many worship songs also have this emphasis on the relationship between me and God rather than us and God. This leads to an isolationist Christianity. We must not be in isolation in our faith. We must build up our community and build bonds with each other. This often does not occur on Sunday mornings, but rather in regular fellowship group meetings and during retreats. We have to spend time with each other so that we may experience this fellowship in Christ.

Going back to v. 3, what kind of comfort is it that we give each other? How is it from God? It must be more than just making each other feel better. Even nonbelievers can comfort each other in that way without any involvement from God. Most can comfort by empathizing, but this has nothing to do with Jesus. But Christians comfort each other with a comfort that is from God. We find a clue in the Greek words used for “comfort” in these verses, which are *parakaleo* and *paraklesis*. These words mean more than feeling better, but are better translated as encouragement. If someone is on the diving board for the first time, their parents don’t just try to calm them down, but rather they try to encourage them to jump. When people work out together, they encourage each other to endure the burn and keep going, not to stop just because it feels better. This encouragement or exhortation is more than just making someone feel better; it is pushing or urging them forward in faith. We should urge each other to continue to pursue faith in Jesus, because it is during hardship that many can easily fall away, just like the seed that fell in the rocky soil, which grew fast but withered when the sun was too hot (Matthew 13). Suffering is one of the biggest threats to faith because it causes us to question the reality of God’s goodness when we judge Him based on our own circumstances. We know God is good, but when we pray for the health or salvation of a family member and the prayer goes unanswered, our faith is shaken. This is why we must encourage each other not to abandon the faith. We must help each other keep our eyes on Jesus. In 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 Paul describes the resurrection of the dead and the transformation of those still alive in Christ, and then tells the Thessalonians to encourage each other with his words. Likewise we should comfort each other with this hope we have in Jesus, that though we are suffering now, He will return to fix everything one day. As one community, we must help each other endure in faith until the end.