**GOSPEL CENTERED MINISTRY: SERVING IN WEAKNESS AND POWER**

**A Study in 2 Corinthians (Fall 2015)**

**Week 1: Introduction (2 Corinthians 1:1-11)**

**Outline:**

I. The letter opening and prologue (1:1-11)

A. The letter opening (1:1-2)

B. Prologue (1:3-11)

1. Praise God for his encouragement! (1:3-7)

2. Paul's recent deliverance (1:8-11)

***The Letter Opening (1:1-2)***

* *"Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God and Timothy our brother, to the church of God that is at Corinth, with all the saints who are in the whole of Achaia: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." (1:1-2)* -- The introduction to the letter follows the normal pattern of ancient letters by naming the sender, the recipients, and a greeting and wish for good fortune. However, it is adapted by Paul for his specific purposes and emphases. He is not just sending a personal letter to some friends, he is writing with apostolic authority that is not simply given him by human beings. He addresses them as one who is sent by God and for God's purposes. He also writes to a group of people who have been set apart for God as his church. Just as Paul has been set apart for his work and ministry, so they have been set apart as God's chosen people. And his greeting is more than simply a wish for good fortune. It is essentially a prayer for them to know and experience the blessings that are theirs through the gospel.

"...by the will of God..." -- Paul points out that he is an apostle because God appointed him to the position (see also 10:8; 13:10). While this is something that he mentions in other letters, it may carry even more significance in this letter because of the questions and attacks that seem to have been raised by his opponents in Corinth. This problem is addressed in a very interesting manner by Paul throughout the letter as he vividly demonstrates that he doesn't want to defend himself, but must because of the gospel ministry he has been called to (Acts 9:15-16; Galatians 1:15-16). His love for Christ and for the people of God compels him.

*"...to the church of God that is at Corinth, with all the saints who are in the whole of Achaia..."* -- What we need to notice first is that this is God's church (also 1 Corinthians 1:2; 10:32; 11:16, 22; 15:9; 2 Corinthians 1:1; Galatians 1:13; 1 Thessalonians 2:14; 2 Thessalonians 1:4). Paul's apostleship is by God's will, his message is God's message, and the people to whom he writes are God's church. As he begins to defend his ministry in this setting, he wants such things to be clear to everyone. This is not just about him and his opponents. It is about the gospel of God and those who would oppose it.

He also mentions that his letter is for all those who are in the province of Achaia which expands the scope of his message beyond that of just the Corinthian church. While the issues being dealt with are those of the church at Corinth, the application of these truths is for all believers. The Corinthians are a local manifestation of the Body of Christ, but they are also part of the universal Body of Christ that includes those in the surrounding regions.

*"...Grace to you and peace..."* -- These greetings actually are as much of a prayer as anything. Paul's desire is for God's people to know God's grace and peace in all its fullness in their lives. Grace is a rich term that emphasizes the foundational characteristic of the gospel. We are saved by grace (Ephesians 2:1-10), we live our lives by the grace in which we now stand (Romans 5:1-5), we are constantly being taught by grace how to live in this present life (Titus 2:11-14), and we are called to grow in grace (2 Peter 3:18). Much more could be said about grace, but it is meant to be the atmosphere in which we see all of our life being lived. And peace calls to mind the Old Testament concept of *shalom* that speaks of a holistic sense of well-being that is given by God and which also flows from the gospel.

*"...from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ."* -- The source of all of this is God and Jesus. When we put such statements together with all of the times that the work of the Father and the Son are equated, we cannot help seeing an emphasis on the divinity of Jesus. He is the source of this grace and peace along with the Father. As we shall see in 2 Corinthians, this is also the case with the Holy Spirit.

***Praise to God for his encouragement! (1:3-7):***

* *"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 affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God." (1:3-4)* -- This opening is unique in Paul's letters. Paul usually begins with a thanksgiving for his readers and what God is doing in them and through them. He also regularly mentions his prayers for the church and occasionally asks for prayer for himself and his ministry later on in the letter if at all. In 2 Corinthians he changes all of that. He begins with a note of praise to God for his grace in comforting him so that he can in turn minister comfort to the Corinthians. While his focus is still on the church, there is much more about Paul's experience of God's help in his struggles and how the Corinthians' prayers have provided help in his life and ministry. It is a fitting way to begin this letter that is focused so much on the nature of true gospel-centered ministry.

*"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort..."* The note of praise for God is based on the comfort/encouragement that God has provided in the overwhelming struggles he has faced in ministry (1:8-11). While we have the capacity to provide certain kinds of comfort to one another as those who are made in the image of God, true comfort comes from God. He is the one who is characterized by being merciful and gracious to those who are in need. It is specifically his comfort and encouragement that we seek as believers. And when we receive it, it is important that God be praised for it. No matter what else Paul is going to say about his suffering in ministry throughout this letter, the tone is set here in these verses. God is to be praised for it all. He is the true source of mercy and comfort. What a privilege it is to have access to him all the time (Hebrews 4:14-16).

*"...who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God..."* -- While praise is certainly our first priority when we experience the comfort of God, there is also another response that we should have. God comforts us so that we can comfort others. This is to be the natural reaction of those who are believers. We are to seek our comfort from God (Psalms!). When God comforts us we are to pass that comfort on to others. However, we are not called to a generic comfort ministry as if it doesn't matter what kind of comfort we provide. It is to be the comfort we have received from God. We are to minister comfort to others is such a way that they too will praise God for it when they experience it. It is impossible to have this type of a ministry if we ourselves are not looking to God for our comfort. We need to see him as the source of such encouragement and are then to seek to minister to others in such a way that they too see their comfort as coming from God.

Another thing to notice is how this comfort that we receive in our afflictions then "qualifies" us to comfort others in "any kind of affliction." We have to beware of our professionalized sense of how to help each other. It is usually thought that only those who have experienced the same exact kinds of things can truly minister to some else. This is not the case here. While there can be many benefits of shared experience, it is not necessary to minister comfort to another person. Why? Because the comfort we are passing on is a comfort we have received from God. Also, while we may not have the exact same experiences, we do have the same kinds of struggle with sin, Satan, and our sin-saturated world. We can lovingly, sensitively, and humbly point people to the comfort that God provides which is the only true and lasting comfort.

* *"For as we share abundantly in Christ's sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too. If we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation; and if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which you experience when you patiently endure the same sufferings that we suffer. Our hope for you is unshaken, for we know that as you share in our sufferings, you will also share in our comfort." (1:5-7) --* It is quite clear from what Jesus taught (see John 15) and from Paul's own testimony (see Philippians 3) that Christians should expect to be treated in the same way that Jesus was. We may not be put to death for or faith, but persecution is inevitable. On top of that, we will also face the problems that are the common lot of every person who lives in this sin-saturated world. However, we should not just expect that such suffering will happen, but we should be ready to embrace it wholeheartedly as those who love Jesus and long to be like him. It is this perspective that we see in these verses. Paul not only accepts that he has to face such suffering, he demonstrates that his suffering and God's comfort are important for his ministry to the Corinthians. His affliction and comfort are, at least partially, designed to make him able to effectively carry out this ministry of comfort.

*"...which you experience when you patiently endure the same sufferings that we suffer...* The path to this kind of comfort only comes through the path of following Jesus. If we follow Jesus, we will be called to patiently endure such sufferings. We will be treated like Jesus as will all of our brothers and sisters in Christ. Here is what seems to be a very clever way to tell the Corinthians that they need to make sure that this is their course in life. They are to be following Christ like Paul is following Christ. This is the path to experiencing God's comfort and encouragement. It only happens when we "patiently endure the same sufferings."

*"Our hope for you is unshaken, for we know that as you share in our sufferings, you will also share in our comfort."* -- After telling them that they must walk the same path of patient suffering to know this comfort, Paul expresses his confidence that they will do it. While so many things may be shaken up at the moment, he still has an "unshaken" hope that they share both in his suffering and in his comfort.

* *"For we do not want you to be ignorant, brothers, of the affliction we experienced in Asia. For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt we had received the sentence of death. But that was to make us rely not on ourselves, but on God who raises the dead. He delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us. On him we have set our hope that he will deliver us again." (1:8-10)* -- Here Paul opens up a little about the extent of the "affliction" they faced in Asia. We don't know exactly which event Paul is referencing here although some have suggested his experience at Ephesus (1 Corinthians 15:32; 16:8). We can't pinpoint it precisely especially when we read of the extent of Paul's suffering during the course of his ministry (2 Corinthians 11:23-29). However, it was so severe that he truly felt that they were going to die. As we read these personal experiences of Paul throughout 2 Corinthians, we are given a picture into the extent to which we can count on God's comfort in our lives. We can carry it even to the door of death (Psalm 23). And as we see in so many places in Scripture, God has a purpose for it all that we can even rejoice in (Romans 5:1-5; James 1:2-4).

*"...But that was to make us rely not on ourselves, but on God who raises the dead."* One of the main themes of 2 Corinthians is the fact the power of God is manifested in our lives through our weakness. Ministry done in our own power is weak and useless. God uses many things in our lives to teach us that we serve through his power. Paul points this out in numerous places throughout his letters (i.e. Colossians 1:28-29), but does it most powerfully in this letter (2 Corinthians 12). The purpose of this brush with death was to remind him that he couldn't rely on himself. The power for ministry only comes from God. But what a power it is! The God who carries us through such afflictions is the God who raises the dead. The same God that Abraham trusted when he went to offer his son Isaac as a sacrifice is the one who empowers us for such ministry (Hebrews 11:17-19). This is the God we rely on!

* *"You also must help us by prayer, so that many will give thanks on our behalf for the blessing granted us through the prayers of many." (1:11)* -- This verse provides us with a powerful truth concerning prayer. Paul wanted the Corinthians to know that their prayers were essential to his ministry. They could "help" him by praying. Through their prayers God would empower Paul and his companions in their ministry. The result would be many more people giving thanks to God. In other words, God would receive more thanks and praise because of the ministry that would be done through Paul and a key part of that would happen through the prayers of the Corinthians. Prayer is real and effective ministry. This shouldn't surprise us because prayer is an expression of our dependence on God. As we pray for others, we are calling out to the God who is able to do something about their situation. It is one of the ways that we rely not on ourselves, but on God who is able to raise the dead.