

THE MACARTHUR
NEW TESTAMENT
COMMENTARY

1 CORINTHIANS

John MacArthur

MOODY PUBLISHERS/CHICAGO

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Called to Be Saints

(1 Corinthians 1:1-3)

1

Paul, called as an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God, and Sosthenes our brother, to the church of God which is at Corinth, to those who have been sanctified in Christ Jesus, saints by calling, with all who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, their Lord and ours: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. (1:1-3)

Rather than placing their names at the end of a letter, as is the modern custom, ancient Greeks put their names at the beginning, allowing readers to immediately identify the author. In a joint letter, the names of the others involved in sending the message were also given. **Paul** always gave his name at the beginning of his letters and frequently named other church leaders who, in some degree or other, joined him in writing. In 1 Corinthians he mentions **Sosthenes**, and in 2 Corinthians, Timothy (2 Cor. 1:1; cf. Phil. 1:1; Col. 1:1; 1 Thess. 1:1; 2 Thess. 1:1; Philem. 1).

Next was given the name of the addressee, the person or persons to whom the letter was sent, which for the present letter was **the church of God which is at Corinth**. Then words of greeting or blessing were often given, as in v. 3. Paul used such a threefold salutation in all of his New Testament letters.

Paul also generally referred to himself as **an apostle**, not for the purpose of identity—that is to distinguish himself from other Pauls in the church or simply

to inform his readers of his office—but to indicate at the very beginning that he was writing first of all as an emissary of the Lord. His apostleship established his authority. Even in his letters to Timothy, his close associate and “true child in the faith” (1 Tim. 1:2), Paul calls attention to his apostleship (1 Tim. 1:1; 2 Tim. 1:1). Only in Philippians, the Thessalonian letters, and Philemon does he not mention his apostleship in his opening words.

His description of himself as **an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God** was not a reflection of pride or self-glory. He was not flaunting his position of authority, as some speakers and writers often do with their titles, degrees, and accomplishments. Self-glory was the furthest thing from Paul’s intent. Later in this same epistle he refers to himself as “the least of the apostles, who am not fit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God” (15:9).

Sometimes, however, it is important to establish one’s right to speak authoritatively on a subject. A person, for instance, who has no medical degree or training or experience would never get a hearing at a conference on medicine. A person’s credentials give some indication as to whether or not what he has to say should be taken seriously. Paul did not mention his apostleship in order to gain honor as an individual but to gain respect as a teacher of God’s Word. He was not an apostle by his own appointment, or even by the church’s appointment, but by God’s appointment—**by the will of God**. At the outset he wanted to establish that what he had to say was said with God’s own authority. Since his message was so corrective, this was of great necessity.

FIVE REASONS FOR PAUL’S ASSERTING HIS APOSTLESHIP

I believe there are perhaps five reasons why Paul, unlike the other apostolic writers, was so careful to assert his apostleship in his letters. First of all, he was not a part of the twelve. He had not been called by Jesus during His earthly ministry to be one of the inner circle of disciples who accompanied Him “beginning with the baptism of John, until the day that He was taken up from us” (Acts 1:22). Of that original group, one (Judas) was disqualified and was later replaced by Matthias (Acts 1:21-26)—who, though identified by casting lots, was chosen by God (v. 24). With the selection of Matthias the apostolic ranks were again complete. Beginning at Pentecost the apostles were clearly the authoritative voice of the gospel. When Peter gave his message at that time, he did so “taking his stand with the eleven” (Acts 2:14; cf. v. 37), and the infant church in Jerusalem devoted itself to “the apostles’ teaching” (v. 42). The apostles were the Lord’s supreme earthly representatives, and they preached and taught with His authority. With Christ as the “corner stone,” the apostles were the foundation of the church (Eph. 2:20).

As far as we know, however, Paul never saw or heard Jesus during that time. Paul was first known to the church as a bitter enemy and persecutor, “breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord” (Acts 9:1; cf. 8:1). He not only had not chosen to be a follower of Christ but had chosen to oppose Christ’s followers with all his might. Even after his conversion there was no way he could retroactively be-

come one of the twelve. Yet he declared himself to be an apostle, based on the same foundational qualifications as those of the twelve. He, too, had seen the resurrected Christ (Acts 9:3-6, 17; 22:11-15; 1 Cor. 9:1; 15:8) and he, too, in unique revelations, had been specifically chosen by the Lord to be an apostle (1 Cor. 1:1). He was concerned to establish the fact that he was equal to the twelve as a foundational teacher of revealed truth.

Second, I believe that he emphasized his apostleship because of his dealings with detractors and false teachers, by whom he was continually being challenged and harassed. The Judaizers were particularly strong and persistent in opposing Paul's authority and doctrine and in questioning his motives. Even some who claimed to be his friends resisted his leadership and questioned his teaching. Such ridicule and persecution Paul considered to be badges of apostleship. "For," he said, "I think, God has exhibited us apostles last of all, as men condemned to death; because we have become a spectacle to the world, both to angels and to men" (4:9). In spite of denials, Paul's teaching was true and reliable, for he was a divinely called apostle of Jesus Christ.

Third, Paul emphasized his apostleship because of his relationship to Christ. This emphasis was for the benefit of fellow believers. The Christians in Jerusalem, especially, had not been sure about the genuineness of Paul's faith. Having known him, or known of him, as Saul of Tarsus, the fierce persecutor of the church, they had difficulty believing that he could now be a reliable Christian leader, much less an apostle (Acts 9:26). Their fears were, of course, also fed by the accusations and detractions of the false teachers. It was not hard to believe the worst about him. Christians in other places also had misgivings. Legalistic Judaizers, for example, had confused many Christians in Galatia both about the gospel (Gal. 1:6; 3:1-5) and about Paul's authority in teaching it (1:11-2:10). He therefore carefully reminded the Corinthian church of his full apostolic authority in writing this letter to them, pointing out that, when he had ministered among them, he did so in God's power and wisdom (1 Cor. 2:1-7).

Fourth, Paul emphasized his apostleship to point up his special relationship to the church in Corinth itself, which was "a seal of [his] apostleship in the Lord" (9:2). They, of all people, should recognize his special calling and position. Their very existence as a body of believers was a proof of his right to address them with divine authority. He had been the instrument God used to bring them to salvation.

Fifth, Paul emphasized his apostleship in order to show his special relationship to God as His emissary. He was **an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God**. He was saying, in effect, "What I say to you is delegated by God. I am His apostle, and my message to you is God's message to you."

When the Jewish supreme court, the Sanhedrin, was asked to arbitrate a serious dispute or to give an interpretation regarding Jewish law or tradition, they would send their decision by an *apostolos* to the parties involved, who were often represented through a synagogue. As far as the message was concerned, the *apostolos* possessed the full authority of the Sanhedrin. He did not speak for himself, but for the Sanhedrin. Yet he was more than a messenger. He was an emissary, an envoy, an

ambassador. Paul was God's envoy, God's ambassador (cf. 2 Cor. 5:20; Eph. 6:20), God's **apostolos**. While among them he had not preached his own message to the Corinthians, but God's message. He was not now writing his own message to them, but God's message.

In light of the twelve, in light of false teachers, and in light of his relationship to Christ, to the Corinthian church, and to God the Father, Paul was fully an apostle. He was careful to establish the legitimacy of his apostleship in order to establish the legitimacy of his message.

THE PURPOSES AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF THE APOSTLES

Apostles were chosen by God to work in the founding and forming of the church, after which time apostleship ceased. When all the apostles had died, the office of apostle no longer existed. They were selected, sent, and empowered by God for that period in the history of the church, which was over when their lives were over. As the human founders and foundation of the church, the apostles had particular purposes and responsibilities.

First, as eyewitnesses, they were to preach the gospel—the true, complete, and authoritative gospel of Christ's substitutionary atonement by His death and resurrection and of salvation by faith in Him (1 Cor. 1:17-18; cf. 9:14). Their teaching was equivalent to Christ's teaching. As will be developed in a later chapter, there is no distinction, as some interpreters maintain, between what Paul (or Peter or James or John) teaches in the New Testament and what God teaches. Paul's statement in 1 Corinthians 7:12 ("I say, not the Lord"), for example, simply indicates that Jesus, during His earthly ministry, gave no specific teaching on the subject being discussed (that of a believer's remaining with an unbelieving spouse). As an apostle, Paul was qualified to teach in behalf of Christ, and his teaching was as authoritative as if spoken from Jesus' own lips.

The apostles also were to be devoted to prayer and to ministering the word (Acts 6:4) and to equipping believers for service in order to build up Christ's Body (Eph. 4:11-12). Finally, they were to evidence their apostleship by performing miracles (2 Cor. 12:12).

Sosthenes our brother may have been Paul's amanuensis, or secretary, at the time this letter was written. The fact that his name is included in the greeting, however, indicates that he not only penned the letter but fully agreed with Paul about its message.

This is no doubt the same Sosthenes mentioned in Acts 18, one who knew the Corinthian situation well. He had been a leader of the synagogue at Corinth, probably replacing Crispus, the former leader who had become a believer (Acts 18:8). On one occasion Sosthenes was beaten for his involvement in bringing Paul before the civil court at Corinth (Acts 18:12-17). Some ancient manuscripts of the text report that the Jews beat him and other manuscripts report that the Greeks beat him. If by the Jews, it no doubt was because he represented them so poorly at court. If by the Greeks, it was because they resented his taking up their court time with a matter that concerned only

Jewish religion.

Now, however, Paul could refer to Sosthenes as “our brother,” indicating that some time after the incident just mentioned—and perhaps partly because of it—this former opponent of the gospel, like Paul himself, had become a Christian. Having likely been converted under Paul’s preaching and having worked with the apostle for perhaps a year or more in Corinth, Sosthenes was known and respected by the Corinthian believers whom he now joined Paul in writing.

SAINTHOOD

To the church of God which is at Corinth, to those who have been sanctified in Christ Jesus, saints by calling, with all who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, their Lord and ours. (1:2)

The church to whom Paul was writing was not the church of the Corinthians but **the church of God** which was located at Corinth. The church is a body of people who belong not to themselves or to any leader or group but to God. Believers, whether pastors, officers, or ordinary members in the church, together compose Christ’s earthly Body and all are called to be stewards of it (Eph. 4:11-13). We are not our own, individually or collectively, but have all been bought with the price of Christ’s blood (1 Cor. 6:20).

POSITION AND PRACTICE

All believers **have been sanctified in Christ Jesus** and are **saints by calling**. A saint, as the term is used in the New Testament, is not a specially pious or self-sacrificing Christian who has been canonized by an ecclesiastical council. The Greek word translated **saint** is *hagios*, meaning “set apart one,” or “holy one.” The Corinthian believers were holy in God’s sight, regardless of their sinful living and distorted doctrine. They were saints because they had **been sanctified** (from *hagiazō*), set apart from sin, **made holy in Christ Jesus**. According to Scripture, every true believer in Jesus Christ—whether faithful or unfaithful, well known or unknown, leader or follower—is a set apart person, a holy person, a saint. In the biblical sense, the most obscure believer today is just as much a saint as the apostle Paul. This is the believer’s position in Christ.

Holiness, in that positional sense, is not a matter of good works, of holy living. As Christians we should live holy lives, but holy living does not make us holy. To the extent our living is holy, it is because, in Christ, we already *are* holy and have the counsel and power of His Holy Spirit. We are holy because the Sanctifier (the One who makes holy) has already sanctified us in response to our trust in Him (Heb. 2:11). Christ’s work, not our own, makes us holy. We are “saints by calling.” That refers to the efficacious call of God to salvation (1:24, 26).

Like all believers, the Corinthians were **saints** because God called them to

be saints (cf. Gal. 1:6; Eph. 4:1,4; Col. 3:15; 1 Tim. 6:12; 1 Pet. 2:9, 21; 3:9; 2 Pet. 1:3; Jude 1). “We have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all” (Heb. 10:10; cf. v. 14). By His own sacrificial work on the cross, Jesus Christ sanctifies those who believe in Him. He sets them apart (the root meaning of *hagiazō*) for Himself, cleanses them, and perfects them. God provides holiness through His Son. Man’s part is to claim holiness, to claim sainthood, by faith in the Son (Acts 26:18). We have a new nature, the divine nature, and have escaped the corruptions of the world, possessing all things related to life and godliness (2 Pet. 1:3-4).

Paul’s declaring all the Corinthian believers to be saints was quite a declaration in light of the things—very evident from the rest of this letter—that characterized their living. The Corinthian church was far from being saintly in the sense in which the term is often used. They were particularly worldly and immoral, yet in his opening words Paul stressed that every one of them who had truly believed in Jesus Christ was saved and was a saint. Not only are all saints saved, but all the saved are saints. Every believer has the right to call himself a saint. None of us is worthy of the title, but God has declared us to be saints because of our trust in His Son. Our practice, our behavior in our humanness, needs to be conformed to our “saintly” new divine nature.

Paul seems to have been especially determined to make that truth clear to the Corinthians. Virtually the entire letter of 1 Corinthians, beginning with 1:10, deals with wrong doctrine and wrong behavior. It seems that nearly every serious doctrinal and moral error imaginable could be found within that congregation. Yet Paul begins the letter by calling them saints. In practice they were gross sinners, but in position they were pure saints. We should note that there were, no doubt, some in the church who were not saints at all, who were unbelievers (16:22).

It is important for every Christian to keep in mind the great difference between his position and his practice, his standing and his state. God sees us as righteous, because He sees us through His righteous Son, who has taken our place, and because He has planted in us a righteous new nature. Without keeping this important and encouraging truth in mind, it is impossible to clearly understand 1 Corinthians or any other part of the New Testament.

Presidents do not always act presidentially, diplomats do not always act diplomatically, kings do not always act kingly—but they are still presidents, diplomats, and kings. Christians do not always act like Christians, but they are still Christians.

Some years ago a young boy, whose father was a pastor, was put in jail for stealing some merchandise from a department store. His father happened to be playing golf with some of the church leaders at the time and received a call while on the golf course to come down to the jail to get his son. Thinking it was a mistake, the pastor took the other men with him to the police station, where embarrassment abounded. The deepest impression of the incident left on the boy’s mind was made by the repeated reminders he received from those men, and from many others afterward, about who his father was. “Having a father like yours,” they would ask, “how could you have done what you did?” Yet as humiliating and painful as the experience was, the boy knew he was still his father’s son. He had not acted like a son of his father should have acted, but

he was still a son.

As Christians one of the strongest rebukes we can have when we sin is to be reminded of who our Father is. And reminding ourselves of whose we are should be one of our strongest deterrents to sin. Remembering our position can compel us to improve our practice.

Further, Paul increased the Corinthians' sense of responsibility by reminding them that they were linked in spiritual life to **all who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, their Lord and ours**. This is added to heighten their sense of identity and responsibility with all "who have received a faith of the same kind as ours" (2 Pet. 1:1).

Before Paul took the Corinthians to task for their failures as Christians, he carefully and lovingly reminded them that they were Christians. They belonged to God and to each other in a far-reaching fellowship. That in itself should have been a rebuke to them and no doubt pierced the consciences of those who were at all spiritually sensitive. In 1:2-9 he summarizes their position and their blessings as believers in Jesus Christ, as children of God, as saints. "Look at what you are! Look at what you have!" Only then does he say, "Now I exhort you, brethren" (1:10).

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. (1:3)

Paul used a common form of Christian greeting (cf. Rom. 1:7; Gal. 1:3; Eph. 1:2; 1 Pet. 1:2; 2 John 3; Rev. 1:4; etc.). **Grace** is favor, and **peace** is one of its fruits. Peace (Greek *eirēnē*) was used as the equivalent of the Hebrew *shālôm*, still the most common Jewish greeting today. The peace of which Paul speaks here is "the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension" (Phil. 4:7). It is the peace that only Christians can have, for only Christ can give it (John 14:27). The world does not have and cannot give that kind of peace. The greeting "grace and peace" is appropriate only for believer to believer, because it speaks of blessings that only they possess.

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Comfort in Trouble

(2 Corinthians 1:1–11)

1

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, to the church of God which is at Corinth with all the saints who are throughout Achaia: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. 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 will be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. For just as the sufferings of Christ are ours in abundance, so also our comfort is abundant through Christ. But if we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation; or if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which is effective in the patient enduring of the same sufferings which we also suffer; and our hope for you is firmly grounded, knowing that as you are sharers of our sufferings, so also you are sharers of our comfort. For we do not want you to be unaware, brethren, of our affliction which came to us in Asia, that we were burdened excessively, beyond our strength, so that we despaired even of life; indeed, we had the sentence of death within ourselves so that we would not trust in ourselves, but in God who raises the dead; who delivered us from so great a

peril of death, and will deliver us, He on whom we have set our hope. And He will yet deliver us, you also joining in helping us through your prayers, so that thanks may be given by many persons on our behalf for the favor bestowed on us through the prayers of many. (1:1-11)

Trouble is an inescapable reality in this fallen, evil world. Eliphaz, one of Job's would-be counselors, declared, "Man is born for trouble, as sparks fly upward" (Job 5:7). With that sentiment Job, certainly no stranger to trouble, agreed: "Man, who is born of woman, is short-lived and full of turmoil" (Job 14:1). Jeremiah, the weeping prophet, lamented, "Why did I ever come forth from the womb to look on trouble and sorrow, so that my days have been spent in shame?" (Jer. 20:18). That life is filled with trouble, sorrow, pain, disappointment, disillusionment, and despair is the testimony of the rest of Scripture.

Adding to the pain of trouble is the disturbing reality that God sometimes seems distant and unconcerned. Job cried out despondently, "Why do You hide Your face and consider me Your enemy?" (Job 13:24). The psalmist asked pensively, "Why do You stand afar off, O Lord? Why do You hide Yourself in times of trouble?" (Ps. 10:1). Speaking for Israel, the sons of Korah asked God, "Why do You hide Your face and forget our affliction and our oppression?" (Ps. 44:24). The prophet Isaiah affirmed, "Truly, You are a God who hides Himself, O God of Israel, Savior!" (Isa. 45:15). Even David, "a man after [God's] own heart" (1 Sam. 13:14; cf. Acts 13:22) and "the sweet psalmist of Israel" (2 Sam. 23:1), had moments of doubt and discouragement. In Psalm 13:1 he asked despairingly, "How long, O Lord? Will You forget me forever? How long will You hide Your face from me?" while in Psalm 22:1 he expressed his anguish in words echoed by the Lord Jesus Christ on the cross: "My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?" (cf. Matt. 27:46).

Many people today question why bad things happen to good people. But Scripture rejects the underlying assumption that people are truly good. The apostle Paul declared, "There is none righteous, not even one" (Rom. 3:10; cf. Pss. 14:1-3; 53:1-3) because "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23; cf. 1 Kings 8:46; Ps. 143:2; Prov. 20:9; Eccles. 7:20; Jer. 17:9). Consequently, because "God is a just judge, [He] is angry with the wicked every day" (Ps. 7:11 NKJV). Bad things happen to all people because they are sinners who live in a fallen, sin-cursed world.

Because believers are redeemed sinners who live in a fallen world, bad things even happen to them. In fact, God allows those things to happen for several important reasons.

First, God allows bad things to happen to His people to test the validity of their faith. According to Proverbs 17:3, "The Lord tests hearts."

Second Chronicles 32:31 says, “God left [Hezekiah] alone only to test him, that He might know all that was in his heart.” Centuries earlier Moses told Israel, “The Lord your God has led you in the wilderness these forty years, that He might humble you, testing you, to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep His commandments or not” (Deut. 8:2). Peter wrote,

In this [salvation] you greatly rejoice, even though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been distressed by various trials, so that the proof of your faith, being more precious than gold which is perishable, even though tested by fire, may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ. (1 Peter 1:6-7)

Those tests are not for God’s sake, because the omniscient God knows every person’s heart. Instead, they reveal to those tested whether their faith is real. No trial, no matter how severe, can destroy genuine saving faith, because the saved “one . . . endures to the end” (Matt. 24:13).

Job, the most faithful man of his time, went through almost inconceivable suffering. He lost his wealth, all of his children were killed, and he was stricken with a painful, debilitating disease. Worse, those closest to him turned against him; his wife foolishly urged him to “curse God and die!” (Job 2:9), while his friends’ inept counsel finally drove him to exclaim in exasperation, “Sorry comforters are you all. . . . How then will you vainly comfort me, for your answers remain full of falsehood?” (Job 16:2; 21:34). Most disconcerting of all, though Job knew of no major sin in his life, God seemed to be his implacable enemy. In Job 19:6-11, he cried out in despair and confusion,

Know then that God has wronged me and has closed His net around me. Behold, I cry, “Violence!” but I get no answer; I shout for help, but there is no justice. He has walled up my way so that I cannot pass, and He has put darkness on my paths. He has stripped my honor from me and removed the crown from my head. He breaks me down on every side, and I am gone; and He has uprooted my hope like a tree. He has also kindled His anger against me and considered me as His enemy.

Desperately seeking sympathy from his friends, Job pleaded with them, “Pity me, pity me, O you my friends, for the hand of God has struck me” (Job 19:21).

Yet despite his misery, suffering, and despair caused by Satan’s violent assaults (cf. Job 1:6-12; 2:1-7), Job’s faith in God remained intact. In Job 13:15 he confidently declared, “Though He slay me, I will hope in Him.” Confronted by God’s glorious, majestic holiness, Job expressed genuine repentance for having doubted Him:

I know that You can do all things, and that no purpose of Yours can be thwarted. “Who is this that hides counsel without knowledge?” Therefore I have declared that which I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know. “Hear, now, and I will speak; I will ask You, and You instruct me.” I have heard of You by the hearing of the ear; but now my eye sees You; therefore I retract, and I repent in dust and ashes. (Job 42:2-6)

The prophet Habakkuk also faced a dilemma that tested his faith. Distressed by the rampant sin in Israel, he cried out to God,

How long, O Lord, will I call for help, and You will not hear? I cry out to You, “Violence!” Yet You do not save. Why do You make me see iniquity, and cause me to look on wickedness? Yes, destruction and violence are before me; strife exists and contention arises. Therefore the law is ignored and justice is never upheld. For the wicked surround the righteous; therefore justice comes out perverted. (Hab. 1:2-4)

To his dismay, God’s answer was the opposite of what he had hoped for. Instead of bringing a spiritual revival in Israel, God was going to bring devastating judgment on the nation. Even more perplexing, He chose to use a godless, pagan nation as the instrument of that judgment:

Look among the nations! Observe! Be astonished! Wonder! Because I am doing something in your days—you would not believe if you were told. For behold, I am raising up the Chaldeans, that fierce and impetuous people who march throughout the earth to seize dwelling places which are not theirs. They are dreaded and feared; their justice and authority originate with themselves. Their horses are swifter than leopards and keener than wolves in the evening. Their horsemen come galloping, their horsemen come from afar; they fly like an eagle swooping down to devour. All of them come for violence. Their horde of faces moves forward. They collect captives like sand. They mock at kings and rulers are a laughing matter to them. They laugh at every fortress and heap up rubble to capture it. Then they will sweep through like the wind and pass on. But they will be held guilty, they whose strength is their god. (Hab. 1:5-11)

Yet despite his confusion over a worse nation being the instrument of Israel’s judgment, Habakkuk’s faith endured. Though the dilemma did not change, he expressed his continued trust in God’s faithfulness, justice, and holiness:

Are You not from everlasting, O Lord, my God, my Holy One? We will not die. You, O Lord, have appointed them to judge; and You, O Rock, have

established them to correct. Your eyes are too pure to approve evil, and You can not look on wickedness with favor. Why do You look with favor on those who deal treacherously? Why are You silent when the wicked swallow up those more righteous than they? (Hab. 1:12-13)

Those whose faith is genuine will pass the tests God allows in their lives, bringing them assurance, confidence, and hope.

Second, God allows bad things to happen to His people to wean them from the world. Trials strip away the worldly resources that believers trust in, leaving them completely dependent on divine resources. Before He fed the five thousand “Jesus, lifting up His eyes and seeing that a large crowd was coming to Him, said to Philip, ‘Where are we to buy bread, so that these may eat?’” (John 6:5). Philip and the other disciples immediately took inventory, and the results were not promising: “Philip answered Him, ‘Two hundred denarii worth of bread is not sufficient for them, for everyone to receive a little.’ One of His disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother, said to Him, ‘There is a lad here who has five barley loaves and two fish, but what are these for so many people?’” (John 6:7-9). But Philip and the others missed the point: “This He was saying to test him, for He Himself knew what He was intending to do” (John 6:6). Jesus used this incident to show the disciples the futility of trusting in human resources.

Third, God allows bad things to happen to His people to call them to their heavenly hope. To the Romans Paul wrote, “We also exult in our tribulations, knowing that tribulation brings about perseverance; and perseverance, proven character; and proven character, hope; and hope does not disappoint” (Rom. 5:3-5). Those who hope for heaven will never be disappointed in this life, and suffering is the first step in producing that hope. Paul expressed his heavenly hope when he wrote to the Corinthians, “Momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison, while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal” (2 Cor. 4:17-18). The greater the burden of trials that believers bear in this life, the sweeter their hope of heaven becomes.

Fourth, God allows bad things to happen to His people to reveal to them what they really love. Those who seek the proven character that suffering produces (Rom. 5:3-4), and to be fellow sufferers with the Lord Jesus Christ (cf. Acts 5:41; 1 Peter 4:13), will gladly endure trials. But those who focus on worldly things will react with anger and despair when trials strip them away.

The way Abraham faced the severe trial involving his son Isaac revealed his love for God. Genesis 22:1-2 says, “God tested Abraham, and said to him, ‘Abraham!’ And he said, ‘Here I am.’ He said, ‘Take now your

son, your only son, whom you love, Isaac, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I will tell you.” Abraham must have been shocked at this seemingly incomprehensible command. Isaac was the son he had longed for for decades. Then, when Abraham was old and his wife past her child-bearing years, the unbelievable announcement came that they were to have a son (Gen. 18:10, 14). So incredible was the news that their long-cherished hopes were to be realized that both Abraham (Gen. 17:17) and Sarah (Gen. 18:12) initially greeted it with laughter. Further, Isaac was the son of the covenant, through whom Abraham’s descendants were to come (Gen. 17:19; 21:12; Rom. 9:7).

All of God’s promises and Abraham’s hopes were bound up in Isaac. Yet when God commanded him to slay Isaac as a sacrifice, Abraham was ready to obey. God stopped him, then spared Isaac and provided another sacrifice. Abraham’s willingness proved that he loved God above all else, even more than his own son. And he also believed in God’s promise that through Isaac the nation would come—he believed that if he killed him, God would raise Isaac from the dead (Heb. 11:17–19).

Fifth, God allows bad things to happen to His people to teach them obedience. The psalmist acknowledged, “Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I keep Your word. . . . It is good for me that I was afflicted, that I may learn Your statutes” (Ps. 119:67, 71). The painful sting of affliction reminds believers that sin has consequences. God uses trials to bring believers to obedience and holiness, as the writer of Hebrews reveals:

You have forgotten the exhortation which is addressed to you as sons, “My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor faint when you are reprov’d by Him; for those whom the Lord loves He disciplines, and He scourges every son whom He receives.” It is for discipline that you endure; God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom his father does not discipline? But if you are without discipline, of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. Furthermore, we had earthly fathers to discipline us, and we respected them; shall we not much rather be subject to the Father of spirits, and live? For they disciplined us for a short time as seemed best to them, but He disciplines us for our good, so that we may share His holiness. All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful; yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness. (Heb. 12:5–11)

Sixth, God allows bad things to happen to His people so He can reveal His compassion to them. Believers’ suffering allows Him the

opportunity to display His loving-kindness, which, David declared, is better than anything else in life: “Because Your lovingkindness is better than life, my lips will praise You” (Ps. 63:3). Believers never know God more intimately than when He comforts them in their suffering. Isaiah exults, “Shout for joy, O heavens! And rejoice, O earth! Break forth into joyful shouting, O mountains! For the Lord has comforted His people and will have compassion on His afflicted” (Isa. 49:13; cf. 51:12; 52:9; 66:13). This revelation of God’s compassion enhances worship.

Seventh, God allows bad things to happen to His people to strengthen them for greater usefulness. The more they are tested and refined by trials, the more effective their service will be. “Consider it all joy, my brethren,” wrote James, “when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing” (James 1:2–4).

Finally, God allows bad things to happen to His people to enable them to comfort others in their trials. Jesus said to Peter, “Simon, Simon, behold, Satan has demanded permission to sift you like wheat; but I have prayed for you, that your faith may not fail; and you, when once you have turned again, strengthen your brothers” (Luke 22:31–32). After enduring his own trial and experiencing God’s comfort, Peter would be able to help others. As we will learn later in this chapter, Paul’s opening emphasis to the Corinthians is that God “comforts us in all our affliction so that we will be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God” (1:4).

As was customary in ancient letters, the epistle begins with the name of the sender, **Paul**. As he did in eight of his other epistles, he declared himself to be **an apostle of Christ Jesus** (cf. Rom. 1:1; 1 Cor. 1:1; Gal. 1:1; Eph. 1:1; Col. 1:1; 1 Tim. 1:1; 2 Tim. 1:1; Titus 1:1). Since false teachers invariably challenged his apostolic credentials, Paul states that he was not self-appointed, but an apostle **by the will of God** (cf. 1 Cor. 1:1; Eph. 1:1; Col. 1:1; 2 Tim. 1:1). Although he was not one of the Twelve, Paul was personally chosen to be an apostle by the Lord Jesus Christ (Acts 26:15–18; 1 Cor. 15:7–10). As an apostle, the truths he wrote to the Corinthians are the inspired words of the living God. Thus, the false teachers’ attack on his credibility was also an attack on God’s divinely revealed truth.

Timothy was not an apostle but Paul’s beloved **brother** in Christ. He was a native of Lystra, a city in Asia Minor (modern Turkey). His mother and grandmother were devout Jewish believers (2 Tim. 1:5), but his father was a pagan Greek (Acts 16:1). After joining Paul on the apostle’s second missionary journey, Timothy became his protégé and cherished son in the faith. Paul wrote two inspired epistles to him, and he is mentioned in eight others, six of them in the salutation.

Timothy was such a faithful reproduction of Paul that the apostle confidently sent him as his representative to the churches in Macedonia (Acts 19:22), Philippi (Phil. 2:19–24), Thessalonica (1 Thess. 3:2), and Ephesus (1 Tim. 1:3). The Corinthians also knew him; he was there when the Corinthian church was founded (Acts 18:5) and later served as Paul’s personal emissary to that congregation (1 Cor. 4:17; 16:10).

As was his custom, Paul extended his greetings **to the church of God which is at Corinth**. They were a community of believers that belonged to God, since “He purchased [them] with His own blood” (Acts 20:28). Paul did not identify **the saints who are throughout Achaia** to whom he also extended his greetings. There was, however, a church at Cenchrea (Rom. 16:1), a city about eight miles away that served as Corinth’s port. As he did in the salutations of all his letters, Paul wished the Corinthians God’s **grace and** the divine **peace** that is one of its benefits. Both come only **from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ**.

As noted in the introduction to this volume, the major theme in this epistle is Paul’s defense of his apostleship against the many and varied attacks of the false teachers at Corinth. In this opening section of 2 Corinthians, Paul defended himself against the false charge that his trials were God’s punishment for his sin and unfaithfulness. The apostle made the point that God was comforting him in his suffering, not chastening him. In so doing, he penned what is undoubtedly the most significant passage on comfort anywhere in Scripture. In it Paul describes the person, promise, purpose, parameters, power, perpetuity, and participation of comfort.

THE PERSON OF COMFORT

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, (1:3)

After the salutation Paul began the body of his epistle with the affirmation that God is to be **blessed**. *Eulogētos* (**blessed**) is the root of the English word “eulogy” and literally means, “to speak well of.” The Old Testament frequently refers to God as the “the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob” (e.g., Ex. 3:6, 15, 16; 4:5; 1 Kings 18:36; 1 Chron. 29:18; 2 Chron. 30:6). But the New Testament identifies Him as **the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ** (cf. 2 Cor. 11:31; Rom. 15:6; Eph. 1:3, 17; 1 Peter 1:3), since “God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways, in these last days has spoken to us in His Son, whom He appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the world” (Heb. 1:1–2).

Unlike Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and the Old Testament prophets, **Jesus Christ** is the same essence as the Father; “He is the radiance of His glory and the exact representation of His nature” (Heb. 1:3). Jesus shocked and outraged the Jewish authorities by boldly declaring, “I and the Father are one” (John 10:30). To His equally obtuse disciples Jesus stated plainly, “He who has seen Me has seen the Father” (John 14:9). Paul wrote to the Philippians that Jesus “existed in the form of God” (Phil. 2:6), and to the Colossians, “He is the image of the invisible God” (Col. 1:15) and, “In Him all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form” (Col. 2:9). The New Testament teaching that Jesus is God in human flesh is the central truth of the gospel (cf. John 1:1; 5:17–18; 8:58; 20:28; Rom. 9:5; Titus 2:13; Heb. 1:8; 2 Peter 1:1; 1 John 5:20), and those who reject it cannot be saved (John 8:24).

Some may wonder why, since they are fully equal, the Father is referred to as **the God . . . of our Lord Jesus Christ** (cf. Mark 15:34; John 20:17). In His deity Jesus is fully equal to the Father, but in His humanity He submitted to Him. Paul’s statement reflects Jesus’ submission to the Father during the Incarnation (cf. John 14:28), when He voluntarily gave up the independent use of His divine attributes (Phil. 2:6–7; cf. Matt. 24:36).

The title **Lord Jesus Christ** summarizes all of His redemptive work. **Lord** describes His sovereign deity; **Jesus** (the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew name Yeshua; “God saves”) describes His saving death and resurrection; **Christ** (“anointed one”) describes Him as the King who will defeat God’s enemies and rule over the redeemed earth and the eternal state.

Paul further described God using two Old Testament titles. He is **the Father of mercies** to those who seek Him. Faced with a choice of punishments, David said to God, “Let us now fall into the hand of the Lord for His mercies are great” (2 Sam. 24:14). In Psalm 86:15 he wrote, “But You, O Lord, are a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness and truth.” “The Lord is compassionate and gracious,” he added in Psalm 103:8, “slow to anger and abounding in lovingkindness.” Later in that same psalm David further praised God’s mercy, compassion, and lovingkindness: “Just as a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear Him. . . . The lovingkindness of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting on those who fear Him” (vv. 13, 17). The prophet Micah described God’s mercy and compassion in forgiving sins:

Who is a God like You, who pardons iniquity and passes over the rebellious act of the remnant of His possession? He does not retain His anger forever, because He delights in unchanging love. He will again

have compassion on us; He will tread our iniquities under foot. Yes, You will cast all their sins into the depths of the sea. (Mic. 7:18–19)

The New Testament also reveals God's mercy. Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, spoke of "the tender mercy of our God, with which the Sunrise from on high will visit us" (Luke 1:78). To the Romans Paul wrote, "Therefore I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship" (Rom. 12:1). Later in that epistle he declared that "the Gentiles [would] glorify God for His mercy (Rom. 15:9). In Ephesians 2:4 he described God as "being rich in mercy." It was "His great mercy [that] has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead" (1 Peter 1:3).

The Old Testament also reveals God to be the **God of all comfort**. In Isaiah God said of suffering Israel, "Comfort, O comfort My people," says your God" (Isa. 40:1). In Isaiah 49:13 the prophet exulted, "Shout for joy, O heavens! And rejoice, O earth! Break forth into joyful shouting, O mountains! For the Lord has comforted His people and will have compassion on His afflicted." "Indeed," he confidently asserts, "the Lord will comfort Zion; He will comfort all her waste places. And her wilderness He will make like Eden, and her desert like the garden of the Lord; joy and gladness will be found in her, thanksgiving and sound of a melody" (Isa. 51:3; cf. 52:9; 66:13).

In the New Testament Jesus promised, "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted" (Matt. 5:4). To the Thessalonians Paul wrote, "Now may our Lord Jesus Christ Himself and God our Father, who has loved us and given us eternal comfort and good hope by grace, comfort and strengthen your hearts in every good work and word" (2 Thess. 2:16–17).

Paul had experienced much pain, suffering, and heartbreak, particularly because of the false teachers at Corinth. They slandered his character to discredit him in the minds of the people and, even more painful to the apostle, sought to deceive the Corinthian church with lies about the gospel. But in God's merciful comforting of him he received the strength he needed to carry on. For that Paul was deeply grateful and blessed God.

THE PROMISE OF COMFORT

who comforts us in all our affliction (1:4a)

God comforts His people not only because He is by nature a merciful comforter but also because He has promised to comfort them.

The Lord is a “friend [who] loves at all times” (Prov. 17:17); “a friend who sticks closer than a brother” (Prov. 18:24), who promised, “I will never desert you, nor will I ever forsake you” (Heb. 13:5; cf. Deut. 31:6, 8; Ps. 37:28; Isa. 41:10).

The apostle Paul knew this blessed truth not only by divine revelation but also from his experience. Later in this epistle he wrote, “But God, who comforts the depressed, comforted us by the coming of Titus” (2 Cor. 7:6). In Romans 8:31–39 he wrote,

What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him over for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things? Who will bring a charge against God’s elect? God is the one who justifies; who is the one who condemns? Christ Jesus is He who died, yes, rather who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who also intercedes for us. Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? Just as it is written, “For your sake we are being put to death all day long; we were considered as sheep to be slaughtered.” But in all these things we overwhelmingly conquer through Him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Having paid the ultimate price to redeem believers, the death of His Son, God will be with them to love, strengthen, protect, and comfort them in every extremity. Paul previously had reminded the Corinthians, “No temptation has overtaken you but such as is common to man; and God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will provide the way of escape also, so that you will be able to endure it” (1 Cor. 10:13). To the Philippians he wrote, “He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus” (Phil. 1:6). It is God’s sovereign plan to be with His children and comfort them.

Affliction translates the Greek word *thlipsis*, which literally means, “pressure.” Throughout **all** the stress, persecution, and trials he experienced in his turbulent life, Paul experienced God’s comforting, strengthening presence. The apostle’s life was thus an amazing juxtaposition of **affliction** and comfort, a seeming paradox he expressed later in this letter:

But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, so that the surpassing greatness of the power will be of God and not from ourselves; we are

afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not despairing; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body. For we who live are constantly being delivered over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. (4:7–11)

Because God constantly comforted and protected him, Paul was indestructible until the time came in God's sovereign plan for him to die. Though his enemies repeatedly tried to kill him (cf. Acts 9:23; 14:19; 20:3; 21:30–31; 23:12–13), they were unsuccessful, because "there is no wisdom and no understanding and no counsel against the Lord" (Prov. 21:30). The promise to all believers is that God will faithfully sustain and strengthen them as long as they are obedient to His will, until His appointed time to bring them to Himself.

THE PURPOSE OF COMFORT

so that we will be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. . . . But if we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation; or if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which is effective in the patient enduring of the same sufferings which we also suffer; and our hope for you is firmly grounded, knowing that as you are sharers of our sufferings, so also you are sharers of our comfort.
(1:4b, 6–7)

Paul viewed God's comforting of him not only as an end in itself to express His care and fulfill His promise but also as the means to an end. Suffering believers receive God's comfort **so that they will be able to comfort those who are in any affliction.** Believers receive comfort as a trust or stewardship to be passed on to others. This purpose of comfort is to equip the comforted to be comforters.

God had used Paul to confront, challenge, and convict the Corinthians. As noted in the introduction to this volume, 2 Corinthians is the fourth letter Paul wrote to them; in addition to 1 Corinthians, the apostle wrote them two noninspired letters. In those letters Paul rebuked them for their sin. Now, having confronted them, he was able to comfort them with the **comfort with which** he had been **comforted by God.** Paul viewed himself as a conduit through which God's comfort could flow to the Corinthians—a conduit widened by all the suffering he had endured. Those who experience the most suffering will receive the most

comfort. And those who receive the most comfort are thereby most richly equipped to comfort others.

An incident in Peter's life illustrates that truth. Knowing that he would soon face a severe trial (his denial of Christ), Jesus said to him in Luke 22:31–32, "Simon, Simon, behold, Satan has demanded permission to sift you like wheat; but I have prayed for you, that your faith may not fail; and you, when once you have turned again, strengthen your brothers." Having received divine comfort in his trial, Peter would then be able to draw from that to comfort and strengthen others.

Paul reminded the Corinthians that believers **are comforted by God**, who alone is the source of true comfort. As noted earlier, Paul wrote later in this epistle that it is God "who comforts the depressed" (2 Cor. 7:6). The early church experienced "the comfort of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 9:31). Paul reminded the Thessalonians that it is "God our Father who has loved us and given us eternal comfort and good hope by grace" (2 Thess. 2:16). Comfort based on human wisdom is short-lived, because it does not address the deep issues of the heart. The only true source of hope and strength is God's supernatural, transcendent comfort that comes by the Spirit and the Scriptures.

In the course of godly living and ministry, it is inevitable that believers will be **afflicted**. Paul warned Timothy that "all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted" (2 Tim. 3:12). But in God's providence, even the apostle's suffering brought **comfort and salvation** to the Corinthians. Paul could have been referring to the time of their salvation, when he suffered much to bring them the gospel (cf. Acts 18:1–17). But more likely the apostle referred not to their justification but to his ongoing involvement in their sanctification. Perhaps no other church caused Paul more pain and grief than the Corinthian assembly. Even after the apostle had invested at least eighteen precious months of his life ministering in Corinth, the church remained divisive, worldly, and rebellious. But God comforted Paul in his affliction, enabling him to better comfort the very people who had caused part of his suffering.

Not all the Corinthians, of course, were suffering for their sins. Some were, like Paul, suffering for righteousness' sake. The apostle was able to extend to them **comfort, which was effective in** strengthening them for **the patient enduring of the same sufferings which** he and Timothy **also suffered**. And in the mutuality of ministry in the body of Christ, they were then enabled to comfort Paul. Believers are in a partnership with each other and must never view their suffering in isolation. When they suffer for Christ, God comforts them and equips them to comfort others.

Because righteous suffering for Christ is a mark of true believers (2 Tim. 3:12), Paul was able to say confidently to the faithful believers in

Corinth, **Our hope for you is firmly grounded, knowing that as you are sharers of our sufferings, so also you are sharers of our comfort.** They demonstrated the reality of their faith by their willingness to share Paul's and Timothy's **sufferings** for the gospel. Because of their faithful endurance, they **also** were **sharers of** the same **comfort** with which God comforted Paul and Timothy.

THE PARAMETERS OF COMFORT

For just as the sufferings of Christ are ours in abundance, so also our comfort is abundant through Christ. (1:5)

Though God is the God of comfort who comforts His children, there is an important condition for receiving that comfort. God does not promise comfort to those who suffer for their unrepentant sin, but to those who suffer for Christ. Those who experience **the sufferings of Christ . . . in abundance** will find that God's **comfort is abundant through Christ**. Thus, God's promised comfort extends as far as believers' suffering is for the sake of Christ.

Peter stated the conditions for receiving God's comfort in 1 Peter 4:12–16:

Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing, as though some strange thing were happening to you; but to the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing, so that also at the revelation of His glory you may rejoice with exultation. If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you. Make sure that none of you suffers as a murderer, or thief, or evildoer, or a troublesome meddler; but if anyone suffers as a Christian, he is not to be ashamed, but is to glorify God in this name.

Believers will receive comfort in this life and rewards in eternity "to the degree that [they] share the sufferings of Christ." When they "are reviled for the name of Christ, [they] are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God" will strengthen and comfort them. But then Peter cautions, "Make sure that none of you suffers as a murderer, or thief, or evildoer, or a troublesome meddler," since the promise of divine comfort does not extend to such people. Sinning Christians can expect God's chastening instead of His comfort (cf. Heb. 12:5–11).

Paul counted it a privilege to share the **sufferings of Christ**. He wrote later in this epistle that

we are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not despairing; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body. For we who live are constantly being delivered over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. So death works in us, but life in you. (4:8–12)

He reminded the Galatians, "I bear on my body the brand-marks of Jesus" (Gal. 6:17). To the Colossians he wrote, "I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I do my share on behalf of His body, which is the church, in filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions" (Col. 1:24). In Philippians 3:10 he expressed his longing to "know [Christ] and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death" (cf. Rom. 8:17). That believers will suffer for Christ is a constant New Testament theme (cf. Matt. 10:22; Luke 14:27; John 15:18–20; Acts 5:41).

THE POWER OF COMFORT

For we do not want you to be unaware, brethren, of our affliction which came to us in Asia, that we were burdened excessively, beyond our strength, so that we despaired even of life; indeed, we had the sentence of death within ourselves so that we would not trust in ourselves, but in God who raises the dead; who delivered us from so great a peril of death, (1:8–10a)

To show the Corinthians the power of God's comfort, Paul reminded them of a serious, life-threatening situation from which God had delivered him. The apostle used the phrase **we do not want you to be unaware** or its equivalent six times in his epistles (cf. Rom. 1:13; 11:25; 1 Cor. 10:1; 12:1; 1 Thess. 4:13). It expressed his great concern that his readers not have inadequate information.

The situation that produced the **affliction which came to Paul in** the province of **Asia** is unknown. It may have involved Paul's being beaten (cf. 2 Cor. 11:23–25), imprisoned (cf. 11:23), or both. Since he gave them no details, the incident must have been well-known to the Corinthians. But though they were aware of the situation, they did not know its severity or how God had worked in it. It had evidently happened recently, after Paul wrote 1 Corinthians, since he did not mention it in that letter. Since it happened in **Asia**, before he came to Macedonia (2:13), it likely took place in Ephesus, the chief city of **Asia**. In 1 Corinthians 16:9,

Paul wrote to the Corinthians that he planned to remain in Ephesus, “for a wide door for effective service has opened to me, and there are many adversaries.” Possibly, one or more of those adversaries had come close to taking the apostle’s life.

So severe was the trial, Paul wrote, **that we were burdened excessively**. He was unbearably crushed to the point of depression by something **beyond** even his formidable **strength** to endure. The situation was so serious that Paul **despaired even of life**. The Greek word translated **despaired** literally means “no passage,” “no way out,” or “no exit.” Paul saw no escape from the desperate situation that threatened his **life**. **Indeed**, he added, **we had the sentence of death within ourselves**. *Apokrima* (**sentence**) appears only here in the New Testament. It refers to an official judgment, a legal decision, or resolution. In his own mind, Paul had passed the **sentence of death** on himself; he believed he would die for the gospel’s sake. He wrote to Timothy shortly before his execution, “I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come” (2 Tim. 4:6). But unlike the situation he refers to here, that future realization caused Paul no despair, because he knew his work was done (2 Tim. 4:7–8).

God had a purpose for allowing Paul’s suffering: to teach him **not to trust in** himself. God took him to the extremity from which no human resources could deliver him because, as He said to Paul later in this epistle, “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness” (2 Cor. 12:9). Only the **God who raises the dead** had the power to deliver Paul from his ordeal; man’s extremity is God’s opportunity. Thus, God’s power alone comforted Paul and **delivered** him **from his great peril of death**.

THE PERPETUITY OF COMFORT

and will deliver us, He on whom we have set our hope. And He will yet deliver us, (1:10b)

Paul was confident that God not only had delivered him in the past but also would **deliver** him in the future. Because God is faithful, He is always ready to comfort and deliver His children. In Lamentations 3:21–23 Jeremiah wrote, “This I recall to my mind, therefore I have hope. The Lord’s lovingkindnesses indeed never cease, for His compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is Your faithfulness.” As Paul’s life drew to a close, he confidently described God’s faithful comforting of him:

At my first defense no one supported me, but all deserted me; may it not be counted against them. But the Lord stood with me and strengthened me, so that through me the proclamation might be fully accomplished, and that all the Gentiles might hear; and I was rescued out of the lion's mouth. The Lord will rescue me from every evil deed, and will bring me safely to His heavenly kingdom; to Him be the glory forever and ever. Amen. (2 Tim. 4:16–18)

Paul knew that God would bring him safely through every circumstance until it was time for him to enter the Lord's presence. Peter wrote of the same reality in 2 Peter 2:9: "The Lord knows how to rescue the godly from temptation, and to keep the unrighteous under punishment for the day of judgment." The constancy of God's comfort led Paul to describe Him as **He on whom we have set our hope** (cf. Ps. 71:5; Rom. 15:13; 1 Tim. 1:1). The more believers suffer and experience God's comfort, the stronger their **hope** in Him grows (Rom. 5:3–5).

THE PARTICIPATION OF COMFORT

you also joining in helping us through your prayers, so that thanks may be given by many persons on our behalf for the favor bestowed on us through the prayers of many. (1:11)

As noted in the previous point, the apostle was confident that God would continue to comfort him in the future. But he urged the Corinthians to participate in that gracious work of God by **joining in helping** him **through** their **prayers**. Paul understood, as did James, that "the effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much" (James 5:16). Therefore he viewed the prayers of the saints as crucial to his ministry. He implored the believers at Rome, "Now I urge you, brethren, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to strive together with me in your prayers to God for me" (Rom. 15:30). To the Ephesians he wrote, "With all prayer and petition pray at all times in the Spirit, and with this in view, be on the alert with all perseverance and petition for all the saints, and pray on my behalf, that utterance may be given to me in the opening of my mouth, to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel" (Eph. 6:18–19; cf. Col. 4:3; 2 Thess. 3:1). He wrote confidently to the Philippians, "I know that this will turn out for my deliverance through your prayers and the provision of the Spirit of Jesus Christ" (Phil. 1:19; cf. Philem. 22). In 1 Thessalonians 5:25 he said simply, "Brethren, pray for us." Paul understood the balance between God's sovereign purpose and believers' responsibility.

In prayer, human impotence casts itself at the feet of divine omnipotence. When God's people intercede for each other, His power and sovereign purposes are realized. Thus, the purpose of prayer is not to manipulate God but to exalt His power and submit to His will. When God answered the Corinthians' prayers for Paul, **thanks would be given by many persons on the apostle's behalf for the favor bestowed on him through the prayers of many.** Prayer, like everything else in a Christian's life, is to glorify God (cf. 1 Cor. 10:31).

Katharina von Schlegel's magnificent hymn "Be Still, My Soul" expresses the confident hope of every believer in God's comfort:

Be still my soul: the Lord is on thy side;
 Bear patiently the cross of grief or pain.
 Leave to thy God to order and provide;
 In ev'ry change He faithful will remain.
 Be still, my soul: thy best, thy heavenly Friend
 Thro' thorny ways leads to a joyful end.

Be still, my soul: thy God doth undertake
 To guide the future as He has the past.
 Thy hope, thy confidence let nothing shake;
 All now mysterious shall be bright at last.
 Be still, my soul: the waves and winds still know
 His voice who ruled them while He dwelt below.

Be still, my soul: the hour is hastening on
 When we shall be forever with the Lord,
 When disappointment, grief, and fear are gone,
 Sorrow forgot, love's purest joys restored.
 Be still, my soul: when change and tears are past,
 All safe and blessed we shall meet at last.