

2 Corinthians 1:1-4

by St. John Chrysostom

Paul's second Epistle to the Corinthians emphasizes the comfort and consolation of God, encouraging believers to stand firm in affliction and to rejoice in their fellowship with Christ.

Scripture: 2 Corinthians 2:5

Topics: "Comfort In Suffering", "Christian Endurance"

Description

John Chrysostom preaches to the Church of God in Corinth, explaining the reasons for writing a second Epistle, highlighting the amendments made by the Corinthians since the first letter. He emphasizes the importance of finding comfort in God during afflictions, not only for personal solace but also to comfort others in need. Chrysostom commends the Corinthians for their readiness to help and their reception of Titus with kindness. He addresses the false Apostles who boast and criticizes Paul, subtly defending his delay in visiting them. The sermon concludes with a call to find joy and strength in God during trials, drawing parallels to the sufferings of Christ and the endurance of patriarchs like Job.

Transcript

Paul, an Apostle of Jesus Christ through the will of God, and Timothy our brother, unto the Church of God, which is at Corinth, with all the saints which are in the whole of 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 comfort us in all our affliction, that we may be able to comfort them that are in any affliction through the comfort wherewith we ourselves are comforted of God.

It is meet to enquire, first, why to the former Epistle he adds a second: and what can be his reason for thus beginning with the mercies and consolation of God.

Why then does he add a second Epistle? Whereas in the first he had said, I will come to you, and will know not the word of them which are puffed up, but the power; 1 Corinthians 4:19 and again towards the end had promised the same in milder terms, thus, I will come unto you when I shall have passed through Macedonia; for I do pass through Macedonia; and it may be that I shall abide, or even winter with you; 1 Corinthians 16:5-6 yet now after along interval, he came not; but was still lingering and delaying even though the time appointed had passed away; the Spirit detaining him in other matters of far greater necessity than these. For this reason he had need to write a second Epistle, which he had not needed had he but a little out-tarried his time.

2 Corinthians 1:5

But not for this reason only, but also because they were amended by the former; for him that had committed fornication whom before they applauded and were puffed up about, they had cut off and separated altogether. And this he shows where he says, But if any has caused sorrow, he has caused sorrow not to me, but in part (that I press not too heavily) to you all. Sufficient to such a one is this punishment which was inflicted by the many. 2 Corinthians 2:5-6 And as he proceeds, he alludes again to the same thing when he says, For behold that you were made sorry after a godly sort, what earnest care it wrought in you, yea, what clearing of yourselves, yea, what indignation, yea, what fear, yea, what longing, yea, what zeal, yea, what avenging! In every thing ye approved yourselves to be pure in this matter. 2 Corinthians 7:11 Moreover, the collection which he enjoined, they gathered with much forwardness. Wherefore also he says, For I know your readiness of which I glory on your behalf to them of Macedonia, that Achaia has been prepared for a year past. 2 Corinthians 9:2 And Titus too, whom he sent, they received with all kindness, as he shows when he says again, His inward affection is more abundantly toward you, while he remembers the obedience of you all, how with fear and trembling ye received him. 2 Corinthians 7:15 For all these reasons he writes the second Epistle. For it was right that, as when they were in fault he rebuked them, so upon their amendment he should approve and commend them. On which account the Epistle is not very severe throughout, but only in a few parts towards the end. For there were even among them Jews who thought highly of themselves, and accused Paul as being a boaster and worthy of no regard; whence also that speech of theirs; His letters are weighty, but his bodily presence is weak, and his speech of no account: 2 Corinthians 10:10 meaning thereby, when he is present he appears of no account, (for this is the meaning of, his bodily presence is weak,) but when he is away he boasts greatly in what he writes, (for such is the signification of his letters are weighty.) Moreover, to enhance their own credit these persons made a pretence of receiving nothing, to which he also alludes where he says, that wherein they glory, they may be found even as we. 2 Corinthians 11:12 And besides, possessing also the power of language, they were immediately greatly elated. Wherefore also he calls himself rude in speech, 2 Corinthians 11:6 showing that he is not ashamed thereof; nor deems the contrary any great acquisition. Seeing then it was likely that by these persons some would be seduced, after commending what was right in their conduct, and beating down their senseless pride in the things of Judaism, in that out of season they were contentious to observe them, he administers a gentle rebuke on this subject also.

2. Such then, to speak summarily and by the way, appears to me the argument of this Epistle. It remains to consider the introduction, and to say why after his accustomed salutation he begins, as he does, with the mercies of God. But first, it is necessary to speak of the very beginning, and inquire why he here associates Timothy with himself. For, he says, Paul an Apostle of Jesus Christ through the will of God, and Timothy our brother. In the first Epistle he promised he would send him; and charged them, saying, Now if Timothy come, see that he be with you without fear. 1 Corinthians 16:10 How then is it that he associates him here in the outset with himself? After he had been among them, agreeably to that promise of his teacher, I have sent unto you Timothy who shall put you in remembrance of my ways which be in Christ, 1 Corinthians 4:17 and had set everything in order, he had returned back to Paul; who on sending him, had said, Set him forward on his journey in peace that he may come to me, for I expect him with the brethren. 1 Corinthians 16:11

Since then Timothy was restored to his teacher, and after having with him set in order the things in Asia, for, says he, I will tarry at Ephesus until Pentecost, 1 Corinthians 16:8; had crossed again into Macedonia;

Paul not unreasonably associates him hereafter as abiding with himself. For then he wrote from Asia, but now from Macedonia. Moreover, thus associating him he at once gains increased respect for him, and displays his own exceeding humility : for Timothy was very inferior to himself, yet does love bring all things together. Whence also he everywhere makes him equal with himself; at one time saying, as a child serves a father so he served with me; Philippians 2:22 at another, for he works the work of the Lord, as I also do; 1 Corinthians 16:10 and here, he even calls him, brother; by all making him an object of respect to the Corinthians among whom he had been, as I have said, and given proof of his worth.

To the Church of God which is at Corinth. Again he calls them the Church, to bring and bind them all together in one. For it could not be one Church, while those within her were sundered and stood apart. With all the saints which are in the whole of Achaia. In thus saluting all through the Epistle addressed to the Corinthians, he would at once honor these, and bring together the whole nation. But he calls them saints, thereby implying that if any be an impure person, he has no share in this salutation. But why, writing to the mother city, does he address all through her, since he does not so everywhere? For instance, in his Epistle to the Thessalonians he addressed not the Macedonians also; and in like manner in that to the Ephesians he does not include all Asia; neither was that to the Romans written to those also who dwell in Italy. But in this Epistle he does so; and in that to the Galatians. For there also he writes not to one city, or two, or three, but to all who are scattered every where, saying, Paul an Apostle, (not from men neither through man, but through Jesus Christ, and God the Father, Who raised Him from the dead,) and all the brethren which are with me, unto the Churches of Galatia. Grace to you and peace. Galatians 1:1-3 To the Hebrews also he writes one Epistle to all collectively; not distinguishing them into their several cities. What then can be the reason of this? Because, as I think, in this case all were involved in one common disorder, wherefore also he addresses them in common, as needing one common remedy. For the Galatians were all of them infected. So too were the Hebrews, and so I think these (Achaians) also.

3. So then having brought the whole nation together in one, and saluted them with his accustomed greeting, for, says he, Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: 2 Corinthians 1:2 hear how aptly to the purpose in hand he begins, Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort. 2 Corinthians 1:3 Do you ask, how is this aptly to the purpose in hand? I reply, Very much so; for observe, they were greatly vexed and troubled that the Apostle had not come to them, and that, though he had promised, but had spent the whole time in Macedonia; preferring as it seemed others to themselves. Setting himself then to meet this feeling against him, he declares the cause of his absence; not however directly stating it, as thus; I know, indeed, I promised to come, but since I was hindered by afflictions forgive me, nor judge me guilty of any sort of contempt or neglect towards you: but after another manner he invests the subject at once with more dignity and trustworthiness, and gives it greatness by the nature of the consolation, so that thereafter they might not so much as ask the reason of his delay. Just as if one, having promised to come to one he longed for, at length arriving after dangers innumerable, should say, Glory to You, O God, for letting me see the sight so longed for of his dear countenance! Blessed be Thou, O God, from what perils have You delivered me! for such a doxology is an answer to him who was preparing to find fault, and will not let him so much as complain of the delay; for one that is thanking God for deliverance from such great calamities he cannot for shame drag to the bar, and bid clear himself of loitering. Whence Paul thus begins, Blessed be the God of mercies, implying by the very words that he had been both brought into and delivered from mighty perils. For as David also does not address God every where in one way or with the same titles; but when he is upon battle and victory, I will love You, he says, O Lord my strength; the Lord is my buckler :

when again upon delivery from affliction and the darkness which overwhelmed him, The Lord is my light and my salvation; Psalm 27:1 and as the immediate occasion suggests, he names Him now from His loving-kindness, now from His justice, now from His righteous judgment:-- in like way Paul also here at the beginning describes Him by His loving-kindness, calling Him the God of mercies, that is, Who has showed me so great mercies as to bring me up from the very gates of death.

And thus to have mercy is the peculiar and excellent attribute of God, and the most inherent in His nature; whence he calls Him the God of mercies.

And observe, I pray you, herein also the lowly-mindedness of Paul. For though he were in peril because of the Gospel he preached; yet says he not, he was saved for his merit, but for the mercies of God. But this he afterwards declares more clearly, and now goes on to say, Who comforts us in all affliction. 2 Corinthians 1:4 He says not, Who suffers us not to come into affliction: but, Who comforts in affliction. For this at once declares the power of God; and increases the patience of those afflicted. For, says he, tribulation works patience. Romans 5:3 And so also the prophet, You have set me at large when I was in distress. Psalm 4:1 He does not say, You have not suffered me to fall into affliction, nor yet, You have quickly removed my affliction, but, while it continues, You have set me at large: Daniel 3:21, etc. that is, hast granted me much freedom and refreshment. Which truly happened also in the case of the three children, for neither did He prevent their being cast into the flame, nor when so cast, did He quench it, but while the furnace was burning He gave them liberty. And such is ever God's way of dealing; as Paul also implies when he says, Who comforts us in all affliction.

But he teaches something more in these words: Do you ask what? Namely, that God does this not once, nor twice, but without intermission. For He does not one while comfort, another not, but ever and constantly. Wherefore he says, Who comforts, not, Who has comforted, and, in all affliction, not, in this or that, but, in all.

That we may be able to comfort them which are in any affliction through the comfort wherewith we ourselves are comforted of God. See you not how he is beforehand with his defense by suggesting to the hearer the thought of some great affliction; and herein also is his modesty again apparent, that he says not for their own merits was this mercy showed, but for the sake of those that need their assistance; for, says he, to this end has He comforted us that we might comfort one another. And hereby also he manifests the excellency of the Apostles, showing that having been comforted and breathed awhile, he lies not softly down as we, but goes on his way to anoint, to nerve, to rouse others. Some, however, consider this as the Apostle's meaning. Our consolation is that of others also: but my opinion is that in this introduction, he is also censuring the false Apostles, those vain boasters who sat at home and lived in luxury; but this covertly and, as it were, incidentally, the leading object being to apologise for his delay. For, [he would say,] if for this end we were comforted that we might comfort others also, do not blame us that we came not; for in this was our whole time spent, in providing against the conspiracies, the violence, the terrors which assailed us.

4. For as the sufferings of Christ abound unto us, even so our comfort also abounds through Christ. Not to depress the disciples by an aggravated account of his sufferings; he declares on the other hand that great and superabundant was the consolation also, and lifts up their heart not hereby alone, but also by putting them in mind of Christ and calling the sufferings His, and prior to the consolation derives a comfort from the very sufferings themselves. For what joy can I have so great as to be partaker with Christ, and for His sake to suffer these things? What consolation can equal this? But not from this source only does he raise

the spirits of the afflicted, but from another also. Ask you what other? In that he says, abound: for he does not say, As the sufferings of Christ are in us, but as they abound, thereby declaring that they endure not His sufferings only, but even more than these. For, says he, not whatsoever He suffered, that have we suffered; but even more, for, consider, Christ was cast out, persecuted, scourged, died, but we, says he, more than all this, which even of itself were consolation enough. Now let no one condemn this speech of boldness; for he elsewhere says, Now I rejoice in my sufferings, and fill up on my part that which is lacking of the afflictions of Christ in my flesh. Colossians 1:24 Yet neither here nor there is it from boldness or any presumptuousness. For as they wrought greater miracles than He according to that saying of His, he that believes in Me shall do greater works than these, John 14:12 but all is of Him that works in them; so did they suffer also more than He, but all again is of Him that comforts them, and fits them to bear the evils that betide them.

With which respect Paul aware how great a thing he had said, does again remarkably restrain it by adding, So our comfort also abounds through Christ; thus at once ascribing all to Him, and proclaiming herein also His loving-kindness; for, he says not, As our affliction, such our consolation; but far more; for, he says not, our comfort is equal to our sufferings, but, our comfort abounds, so that the season of struggles was the season also of fresh crowns. For, say, what is equal to being scourged for Christ's sake and holding converse with God; and being more than match for all things, and gaining the better of those who cast us out, and being unconquered by the whole world, and expecting hence such good things as eye has not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man! 1 Corinthians 2:9 And what is equal to suffering affliction for godliness' sake, and receiving from God consolations infinite, and being rescued from sins so great, and counted worthy of the Spirit, and of being sanctified and justified, and regarding no man with fear and trembling, and in peril itself outshining all.

5. Let us then not sink down when tempted. For no self-indulger has fellowship with Christ, nor sleeper, nor supine [person], nor any of these lax and dissolute livers. But Whoever is in affliction and temptation, this man stands near to Him, whoever is journeying on the narrow way. For He Himself trode this; whence too He says, the Son of Man has not where to lay His head. So then grieve not when you are in affliction; considering with Whom you have fellowship, and how you are purified by trials; and how great gain is yours. For there is nothing miserable save the offending against God; but this apart, neither afflictions nor conspiracies, nor any other thing has power to grieve the right-minded soul. But like a little spark, which goes out immediately if you cast it into a mighty deep, so does even a total and excessive sorrow die and disappear if it lands on a good conscience.

Such then was the spring of Paul's continual joy: because in whatever was of God he was full of hope; and did not so much as take count of ills so great, but though he grieved as a man yet sank not. So too was that Patriarch encompassed with joy in the midst of much painful suffering; for consider, he forsook his country, underwent journeyings long and hard; when he came into a strange land, had not so much as to set his foot on. Acts 7:5 Then again a famine awaited him which made him once more a wanderer; after the famine again came the seizure of his wife, then the fear of death, and childlessness, and battle, and peril, and conspiracies, and at the last that crowning trial, the slaying of his only-begotten and true son, that grievous irreparable [sacrifice.] For think not, I pray you, that because he readily obeyed, he felt not all the things he underwent. For though his righteousness had been, as indeed it was, inestimable, yet was he a man and felt as nature bade. But yet did none of these things cast him down, but he stood like a noble athlete, and for each one was proclaimed and crowned a victor. So also the blessed Paul, though seeing trials in very snow-showers assailing him daily, rejoiced and exulted as though in the mid-delights

of Paradise. As then he who is gladdened with this joy cannot be a prey to despair; so he who makes not this his own is easily overcome of all; and is as one that has unsound armor, and is wounded by even a common stroke: but not so he who is well encased at all points, and proof against every shaft that comes upon him. And truly stouter than any armor is joy in God; and whoever has it, nothing can ever make his head droop or his countenance sad, but he bears all things nobly. For what is worse to bear than fire? What more painful than continual torture? truly it is more overpowering in pain than the loss of untold wealth, of children, of any thing; for, says he, Skin for skin, yea, all that a man has will he give for his life. Job 2:4 So nothing can be harder to bear than bodily pain; nevertheless, because of this joy in God, what even to hear of is intolerable, becomes both tolerable and longed for: and if you take from the cross or from the gridiron the martyr yet just breathing, you will find such a treasure of joy within him as admits not of being told.

6. And does any one say, What am I to do ; for now is no time of martyrdom? What do you say? Is now no time of martyrdom? Never is it not a time; but ever is it before our eyes; if we will keep them open. For it is not the hanging on a cross only that makes a Martyr, for were this so, then was Job excluded from this crown; for he neither stood at bar, nor heard Judge's voice, nor looked on executioner; no, nor while hanging on tree aloft had his sides mangled; yet he suffered worse than many martyrs; more sharply than any stroke did the tale of those successive messengers strike, and goad him on every side: and keener the gnawings of the worms which devoured him in every part than thousand executioners.

Against what martyr then may he not worthily be set? Surely against ten thousand. For in every kind [of suffering] he both wrestled and was crowned; in goods, and children, and person, and wife, and friends, and enemies, and servants, (for these too even did spit in his face,) in hunger and visions and pains and noisomeness; it was for this I said he might worthily be set, not against one nor two nor three, but against ten thousand Martyrs. For besides what I have mentioned, the time also makes a great addition to his crown; in that it was before the Law, before Grace, he thus suffered, and that, many months, and each in its worst form; and all these evils assailed him at once.

And yet each individual evil by itself intolerable, even that which seems most tolerable, the loss of his goods. For many have patiently borne stripes, but could not bear the loss of their goods; but rather than relinquish any part of them were content even to be scourged for their sake and suffer countless ills; and this blow, the loss of goods, appeared to them heavier than all. So then here is another method of martyrdom for one who bears this loss nobly. And does any ask, How shall we bear it nobly?

When you have learned that by one word of thanksgiving you shall gain more than all you have lost. For if at the tidings of our loss we be not troubled, but say, Blessed be God, we have found far more abundant riches. For truly such great fruit you shall not reap by expending all your wealth on the needy, by going about and seeking out the poor, and scattering your substance to the hungry, as you shall gain by the same word. And so neither Job do I admire so much in setting wide his house to the needy, as I am struck with and extol his taking the spoiling of his substance thankfully.

The same in the loss of children it happens to see. For herein, also, reward no less than his who offered his son and presented him in sacrifice shall you receive, if as you see yours die you shall thank the God of love. For how shall such an one be less than Abraham? He saw not his son stretched out a corpse, but only looked to do so. So if he gain in the comparison by his purpose to slay and his stretching forth his hand to take the knife, Genesis 22:10 yet does he lose in that the child is lying dead here.

And besides, he had some comfort in the prospect of a good work done, and the thought that this so excellent achievement was the work of his own fortitude, and that the voice he heard came from above made him the readier. But here is no such thing. So that he had need have a soul of adamant, who can bear with calmness to see a child, his only one, brought up in affluence, in the dawn of fair promise, lying upon the bier an outstretched corpse. And should such an one, hushing to rest the heavings of nature, be strengthened to say the words of Job without a tear, The Lord gave, the Lord has taken away; Job 1:21 for those words' sake alone, he shall stand with Abraham himself and with Job be proclaimed a victor.

And if, staying the wailings of the women and breaking up the bands of mourners, he shall rouse them all to sing glory [to God], he shall receive above, below, rewards unnumbered; men admiring, angels applauding, God crowning him.

7. And do you say, How is it possible for one that is man not to mourn? I reply, If you will reflect how neither the Patriarch nor Job, who both were men, gave way to any thing of the kind; and this too in either case before the Law, and Grace, and the excellent wisdom of the laws [we have]: if you will account that the deceased has removed into a better country, and bounded away to a happier inheritance, and that you have not lost your son but bestowed him henceforward in an inviolable spot. Say not then, I pray you, I am no longer called father, for why are you no longer called so, when your son abides? For surely thou did not part with your child nor lose your son? Rather you have gotten him, and hast him in greater safety. Wherefore, no longer shall you be called father here only, but also in heaven; so that you have not lost the title father, but hast gained it in a nobler sense; for henceforth you shall be called father not of a mortal child, but of an immortal; of a noble soldier; on duty continually within [the palace]. For think not because he is not present that therefore he is lost; for had he been absent in a foreign land, the title of your relationship had not gone from you with his body. Do not then gaze on the countenance of what lies there, for so thou dost but kindle afresh your grief; but away with your thought from him that lies there, up to heaven. That is not your child which is lying there, but he who has flown away and sprung aloft into boundless height. When then you see the eyes closed, the lips locked together, the body motionless, Oh be not these your thoughts, These lips no longer speak, these eyes no longer see, these feet no longer walk, but are all on their way to corruption! Oh say not so: but say the reverse of this, These lips shall speak better, and the eyes see greater things, and the feet shall mount upon the clouds; and this body which now rots away shall put on immortality, and I shall receive my son back more glorious. But if what you see distress you, say to yourself the while, This is [only] clothing and he has put it off to receive it back more precious; this is a house and it is taken down to be restored in greater splendor. For like as we, when purposing to take houses down, allow not the inmates to stay, that they may escape the dust and noise; but causing them to remove a little while, when we have built up the tenement securely, admit them freely; so also does God; Who taking down this His decaying tabernacle has received him the while into His paternal dwelling and unto Himself, that when it has been taken down and built anew He may then return it to him more glorious.

Say not then, He is perished and shall no more be; for these be the words of unbelievers; but say, He sleeps and will rise again, He is gone a journey and will return with the King. Who says this? He that has Christ speaking in him. For, says he, if we believe that Jesus died and rose again and revived, even so them also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with Him. 1 Thessalonians 4:14 If then thou seek your son, there seek him where the King is, where is the army of the Angels; not in the grave; not in the earth; lest while he is so highly exalted, yourself remain grovelling on the ground.

If we have this true wisdom, we shall easily repel all this kind of distress; and the God of mercies and Father of all comfort comfort all our hearts, both those who are oppressed with such grief and those held down with any other sorrow; and grant us deliverance from all despair and increase of spiritual joy; and to obtain the good things to come; whereunto may all we attain, through the grace and loving-kindness of our Lord Jesus Christ, with Whom unto the Father, together with the Holy Spirit, be glory, power, honor, now and ever, and world without end. Amen.

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