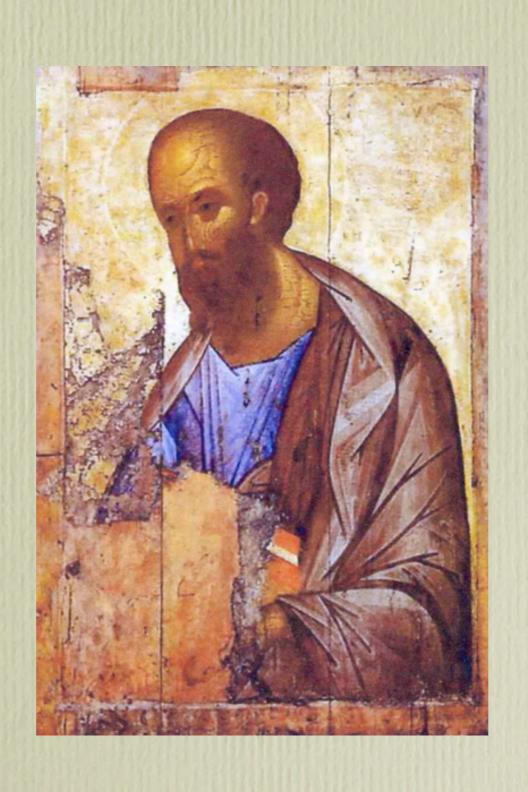
Paul's Second Letter to the Corinthians

02. 1:1-6



2 Corinthians 1:1-2

Paul, an apostle of the Messiah Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother.

To the church of God that is in Corinth, including all the saints throughout Achaia: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus the Messiah.

This is almost exactly the address used by Paul in his First Letter to the community. This time it is Timothy who is with Paul rather than Sosthenes. Paul refers to himself as an 'apostle', because he is writing an official letter by virtue of the commission given him by Christ himself and by the will of God.

Paul refers to himself as an apostle 'of the Messiah Jesus', because he is writing out of the communion which he has with the Risen Jesus.

Paul includes his co-missionary, Timothy, because he writes as a member of a community and is conscious of the fact that his missionary commission is a shared one. His letters are part of that apostolate.

Paul addresses the community as 'saints' because the Holy One is present in the community. 'All the congregation are holy ('saints'), everyone of them: the Lord is among them' (Numbers 16:3).

Grace to you and peace from God our Father.

The customary Greek greeting was χαίρειν (see Acts 15:23; 23:26). Paul uses a similar sounding word, χάρις ('grace') – a greeting that reminds the Christian assembly of God's action in their lives in drawing them to share the life of the risen Jesus – a life of communion in love with his Father through the shared bond of the Holy Spirit. Paul's prayer for the community is that they will continue to experience the graciousness of God pouring out his love upon them.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father.

The customary Jewish greeting was shalom ('peace' εἰρήνη). Paul repeats this greeting here, for his prayer is that they will experience the peace that is the fruit of grace: the fullness of life that happens when each member of a community contributes his or her gifts to the others in harmonious communion.

The grace and peace which is offered to us as Christians is an overflowing of the grace and peace with which the Father has filled the heart of his Son. Throughout this letter Paul stresses the fact that fullness of life is found only in Jesus, and it is to him, and to him alone, that we must look for life.

2 Corinthians 1:3

³Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus the Messiah, the Father of mercies [οἰντιομῶν] and the God of all consolation [παρακλήσις]

The section after the address usually sets the mood for the letter and this is no exception, though here Paul expresses his gratitude to God by way of praise. God is described by Paul as the Father of 'mercies' (οἰκτιρμῶν). In the Greek Old Testament οἰκτιρμος translates the Hebrew rhm which is related to the word for womb: 'the Lord your God is gracious and merciful, and will not turn away his face from you, if you return to him' (2 Chronicles 30:9). 'In your great mercies you did not forsake them in the wilderness' (Nehemiah 9:19). God has the kinds of feelings for us and demonstrates the kinds of care which a mother has for the child in her womb. Using the same word, Jesus invites us: 'Be merciful just as your Father is merciful' (Luke 6:36).

Paul also describes God as the God of all 'consolation' (παρακλήσις). The core of this word is the verb 'to call' (καλεω) and Paul uses the verb παρακαλεω frequently in his moral exhortations, for he sees himself as mediating the call of the Messiah to his readers to live a life of love with all that this implies. The noun παρακλήσις is used in the sense of an appeal (1 Thessalonians 2:3). However, because God always responds when we call, the Greek Old Testament uses this word to translate the Hebrew nhm as, for example: 'I am he who comforts you' (Isaiah 51:12); 'As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you' (Isaiah 66:13). God offer comfort to us when we cry out in distress. God hears the cry of the poor.

2 Corinthians 1:4

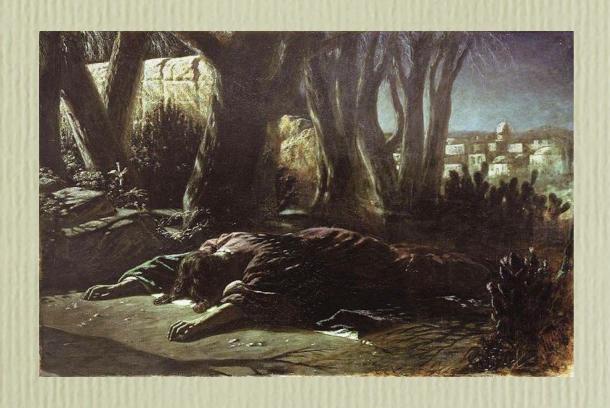
⁴The God of all consoltion consoles us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to console those who are in any affliction with the consolation with which we ourselves are consoled by God.

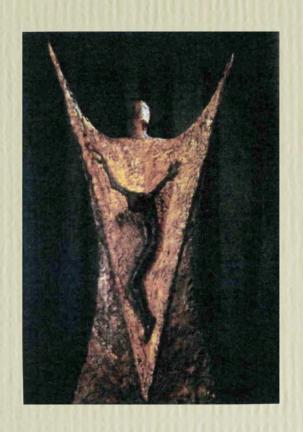
The consolation given by God is experienced at times of 'affliction' (θλίψις). Paul used this word in his letters to the Thessalonians in reference to the persecution which they were undergoing (see 1 Thessalonians 1:6, 3:3; 2 Thessalonians 1:4). He used it also for his own sufferings (1 Thessalonians 3:7).

Paul sees such suffering as necessarily part of being a disciple of Jesus, for, like Jesus himself, the Christians are experiencing the resistance of evil to the victory of love. The consolation which Paul experiences in his affliction teaches him how to reach out as an instrument of God's love to others, and in particular to the Corinthians, when they are suffering and in need of encouragement.

2 Corinthians 1:5

For just as the sufferings of the Messiah are abundant for us, so also our consolation is abundant through the Messiah.





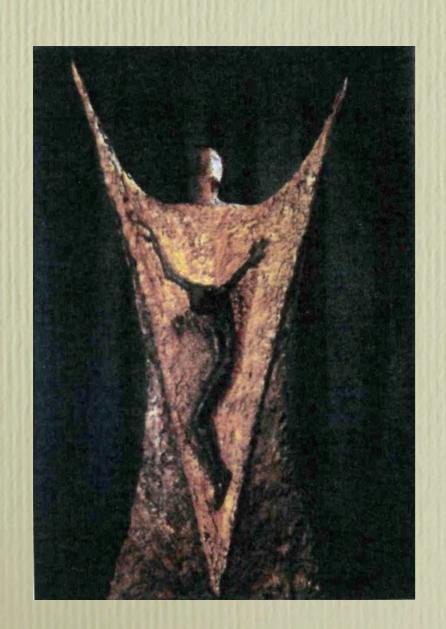
Suffering as a result of Paul's commitment to carrying out the commission given him by The Messiah. It is through accepting such suffering in love that the reign of the Messiah is realised.

Hebrews 5:7-9

'In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; and having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him.

2 Corinthians 1:6

If we are being afflicted, it is for your consolation and salvation $(\sigma\omega\tau\eta\varrho(\alpha))$; if we are being consoled, it is for your consolation, which you experience when you patiently endure the same sufferings that we are also suffering.



Galatians 2:19-20

'I have been crucified
with the Messiah.

It is no longer I who live.

The Messiah lives in me,

The life I now live in the flesh,
I live by the faith of the Son of God,
loving me and giving himself for me.'

We needed to see Jesus loving on the cross, not because God demanded a crucifixion, but because nothing less could convince us that in our suffering we, like Jesus, are surrounded by the unconditional and persistent love of God.

Suffering, even when unjustly inflicted, does not have to stop our loving.

- Sin cannot change the truth that God is love.
- This love, demonstrated in the way Jesus died, is the source of all our hope.
- If we believe it, we may dare the journey out of sin. If enough people believe it, there is still hope of realising Jesus' dream of God's will being done on earth as in heaven.

2 Corinthians 1:5

For just as the sufferings of the Messiah are abundant for us, so also our consolation is abundant through the Messiah.

'I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting' (Acts 9:5).

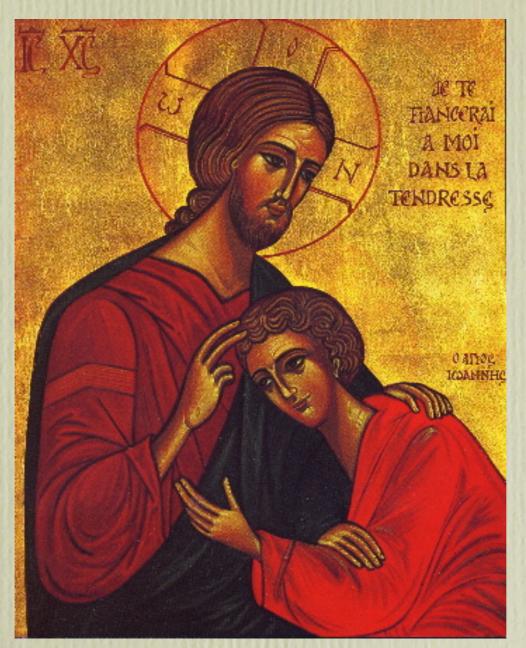
'It is no longer I who live, but it is The Messiah who lives in me' (Galatians 2:20).

Suffering as a result of Paul's commitment to carrying out the commission given him by The Messiah. It is through accepting such suffering in love that the reign of the Messiah is realised.

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Suffering in the life of a disciple



We reflected on this topic in the Sixth Presentation of the Letter to the Colossians. We will offer a slightly briefer reflection here.

It is natural to find suffering hard to accept. If we keep our eyes on Jesus, however, it is possible to glimpse in suffering a meaning that would otherwise evade us.

Ultimately we discover ourselves only in God's love

and to enjoy God's love we must transcend our own ego;

we must let go of our natural tendency to focus on ourselves;

we must learn to love.

It is here that suffering plays its irreplaceable role, for suffering forces us to recognise the basic flaw in our thinking that we are meant to be self-reliant.

It forces us to face our dependence and it invites us to trust, for we cannot reach the goal of our human fulfilment except in dependence upon and communion with God.

Without suffering, there is a tendency to stay fixed in a situation that works, that feels comfortable, and in which we feel affirmed.

Suffering threatens this equilibrium, and psychic energy is engaged which drives us to face whatever it is that is causing the suffering and the effects it has upon us, and to listen at every level to what is going on in our mind and heart as well as in our body.

When we listen, we hear ourselves being asked to let go, and to allow to die something that has seemed good, and perhaps has in fact been good, and to entrust ourselves to the grace that is being offered us in and through the suffering.

Suffering calls us to cry out in pleading prayer to God on whom we depend, entrust ourselves to God's grace, courageously endure whatever suffering is involved, and allow ourselves to undergo what feels like a kind of dying, believing that God will raise us up.

Death is the ultimate situation in which this happens, but all along the road of life there are 'dyings': the ordinary psychic stages of maturation; any occasion which requires that we leave someone or something we value; coming up against our own or other people's limitations which require us to let go our self-image or our image of others and our unrealistic hopes, dreams and expectations.

Each time we accept to 'die', we experience a deeper communion with God who loves us through our dying, and who raises us up to a fuller life of deeper intimacy.

Our fidelity, generosity and courage enable God to keep offering us a fuller life, beyond our experienced horizons.

But each acceptance of the offer requires a new dying. This will involve suffering until all roots of resistance to God's love have been burned away (purified) by God's Holy Spirit, the living flame of love.

When we contemplate Jesus in his suffering he gives us an example, and by sharing his Spirit with us he encourages and enables us to follow him along the path of letting go, the path of loving through suffering.

Let us listen to Paul: 'The Lord said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness." So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong' (2 Corinthians 12:9-10)

8. Much pain in our world results from our reaction to unjust suffering inflicted on us by others. We tend to hurt back. Or, when we do not do that, we store up the hurt and pass it on to others. In either case, the pain goes on and on.

If, however, we can bear suffering in love; if we can continue to offer love (to 'offer the other cheek'); if, while working against injustice, and while working to alleviate suffering, we are hated, excluded, reviled and defamed because of Jesus — then indeed we are blessed, for the suffering stops with us.

What is more, it exercises an extraordinary power for the conversion of those who cause us the suffering. It can give courage also to those who suffer and who do not know how to bear it.

For the disciple of Jesus there is a profound sense in which suffering can unite us to him. Truly, love is the greatest gift. But if we love the way Jesus loved, it will not be long before suffering enters our lives as it entered his. If, like Jesus, we love outsiders, we, like Jesus, will become outsiders. If, like Jesus, we take the part of the oppressed, we, like Jesus, will be oppressed.

This was Paul's experience. He wanted to know and live Jesus' life, even, and perhaps especially, when he experienced suffering.

'I have been crucified with the Messiah; and it is no longer I who live, but it is the Messiah who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, loving me and giving himself for me' (Galatians 2:19-20).

'May I never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus the Messiah, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world' (Galatians 6:14).

'If we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his' (Romans 6:5).

'We are heirs of God and joint heirs with the Messiah – if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him. I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us' (Romans 8:17-18).

10. Perhaps the most wonderful thing about suffering is that, through it, Jesus invites us to join with him in redeeming the world. It is this truth that caused Jesus' followers to find joy in their sufferings:

'I am now rejoicing in my sufferings for your sake, and I am completing what is lacking in my flesh of the afflictions of the Messiah, for the sake of his body, that is, the church' (Colossians 1:24).

'Rejoice insofar as you are sharing the Messiah's sufferings, so that you may also be glad and shout for joy when his glory is revealed' (1Peter 4:13).

It seems true that to experience Jesus as exalted we have to experience him as crucified.

To know the power of God's redeeming love, we need to look upon the one we have pierced (John 19:37).

With Thomas we need to put our hand into his pierced side and our fingers into his wounds (John 20:27) — the wounds of his brothers and sisters with whom, as the Son of Man, he still identifies.

The amount of good that is in our world, as a result of suffering borne in love, is immeasurable. Both Paul and James consider such suffering a privilege:

'God has graciously granted you the privilege not only of believing in the Messiah, but of suffering for him as well' (Philippians 1:29).

'My brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy' (James 1:2).

There is a mystery here that goes beyond our understanding. But our life-experience will not allow us to ignore it.

Christianity has no answers to the meaninglessness of suffering brought upon ourselves and others by our failure to listen to God. It does, however, show us a way to integrate suffering into our lives.

At the same time, it is apparent that there is excessive suffering in our world. People are degraded by it, dragged down by it, and have their lives rendered inhuman by it. Christianity lays upon everyone the duty to work against suffering and its causes. Like Jesus, we are to act as instruments of God, bringing healing and liberation to the sufferer.

When we do this we hear Jesus saying to us: 'I was hungry and you gave me food; I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink ... I was sick and you took care of me' (Matthew. 25:35-36).

While we strive, in response to God's grace and call, to be God's faithful servants in bringing about the reign of God here on earth, we recognise that our ultimate homeland is in the love-communion with God which we call 'heaven':

'Our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Saviour, the Lord Jesus the Messiah. He will transform the body of our humiliation that it may be conformed to the body of his glory, by the power that also enables him to make all things subject to himself' (Philippians 3:20-21).

In a future life we are assured of being finally and totally drawn into God's own love-communion, the communion enjoyed by the risen Jesus.

2 Corinthians 4:6 - 5:4

'It is the God who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus the Messiah.

But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us.

We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies. For while we live, we are always being given up to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus may be made visible in our mortal flesh ... [next slide]

2 Corinthians 4:6 - 5:4 (continued)

We know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus, and will bring us with you into his presence.

So we do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure, because we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal.

For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. For in this tent we groan, longing to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling ... so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life.'

When we recognise that, whatever the circumstances, God's will is that we love and be faithful to love; when we recognise that suffering is part of life and that its causes are complex and sometimes quite contrary to God's will, we see our task as accepting the suffering which we are unable to prevent, without letting it deter us from loving faithfully.

When we experience suffering ourselves or experience others suffering, we will not automatically assume that it is God's will. Rather, we will trust that God is present to all who are suffering, loving us to draw closer to God through our suffering, whatever its cause. We may even draw so close to Jesus through suffering that we embrace the opportunity to share with him in revealing God's love in this special way to those for whom Jesus gave his life.

Jesus was willing to lay down his life, not to die but to continue in the intimate life of love which he had with his Father. He laid down his life willingly 'in order to take it up again' (John 10:17), and he is encouraging his disciples to do the same, for he has come not that we might die but that we may 'have life and have it abundantly' (John 10:10).

Sharing his life we 'will not die' (John 6:50). 'Indeed, just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so also the Son gives life to whomever he wishes' (John 5:21).

The power that makes possible the victory of life over death is the power of love which, like everything else, he has from the Father (see John 5:26).

We are called to believe that suffering comes within the loving and wise providence of God. We are called to believe that God's will is to heal us and to liberate us from suffering.

Ultimately this will happen when we share glory with God's Son in heaven; but we can experience liberation here on earth when love heals, and when to be healed leads to greater love. If we continue to suffer, let us continue to believe in God's love. Let us keep hoping for God's redemption.

Let us remain faithful to loving. Then suffering itself will be experienced as a grace, deepening our love and bringing about our purification and redemption. Suffering is part of every life. Let suffering be a cross for us who are disciples of Jesus, for then we can embrace him who died there, knowing that he is embracing us.