

Suffering and Leadership: *Paul's Relationship with the Corinthians*

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**Abstract**

This paper considers the relationship between suffering and leadership as described by Paul in 2 Corinthians 10-13. Authority is a large part of Paul's explanation. He describes how it is established in weakness. He goes on to explain how follower acceptance of and submission to authority remains through the leader's life lived, words spoken. Paul also discusses both the aim and challenges of authority. Overall, Paul centers his discussion on relationship, especially within the context of suffering. Finally, the paper analyzes Paul applying his knowledge within the context of the same letter as he relates to the Corinthians in 2 Cor 1. Corinth has suffered; Paul has suffered, but that suffering must be explained and addressed for each party to be comforted and edified.

### Hamlet

Hamlet suffered, and we are given an elegant description of his struggle within this speech so carefully prepared by Shakespeare:

“To be, or not to be, that is the question:  
 Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer  
 The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune<sup>(65)</sup>  
 Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,  
 And by opposing end them. To die, to sleep—  
 No more—and by a sleep to say we end  
 The heartache, and the thousand natural shocks  
 That flesh is heir to. 'tis a consummation<sup>(70)</sup>  
 Devoutly to be wish'd. To die, to sleep—  
 To sleep—perchance to dream. Ay, there's the rub!  
 For in that sleep of death what dreams may come,  
 When we have shuffled off this mortal coil,  
 Must give us pause—there's the respect<sup>(75)</sup>  
 That makes calamity of so long life.” (Hamlet | Act III, Scene I)

Hamlet must decide what to do in this tragedy. There are no fewer sufferings in the modern day, but they take different forms. My goal is not to analyze the legitimacy of suffering in a fallen world experienced by all humanity but instead to consider the relationship suffering has with authority and leadership, especially as it pertains to Christians. Unlike Hamlet, Christians have a frame of reference from which to address the topic of suffering: the Bible. Specifically, we will be considering Paul's second letter to the church in Corinth.

### Introduction to 2 Corinthians

To appropriately approach Paul's second letter to the Corinthians, we have to understand the letter's context and relationship to Paul's other letters. The following outline lists Paul's relationship with the church in Corinth:

#### **Quick Overview of the Correspondence (taken from “The Epistles to the Corinthians”)**

- First visit to Corinth lasting 18 months (c. AD 51)
- Goes to Jerusalem, then travels to Ephesus to begin a three-year stay (c. AD 53–55)
- Writes the “previous letter” [Corinthians A] (c. AD 53–54)

- Hears of reports from the Corinthians
- Writes “1 Corinthians” [Corinthians B] (c. AD 54–55)
- Deploys [sic] Timothy to Corinth
- The “painful visit” (Second visit)
- The “severe letter” [Corinthians C]
- Leaves Ephesus and meets Titus in Macedonia
- Writes “2 Corinthians” [Corinthians D] (c. AD 56)
- Visits Corinth a third time

Paul actually wrote 4 letters to the church in Corinth: A) the “previous letter” referenced in 1 Cor 5:9; B) 1 Corinthians; C) the “severe letter” which Paul describes in 2 Cor 2:3-4, 9; and finally D) 2 Corinthians. Paul has a long history with this church and uses his authority to assist the church in understanding both the strategic and immensely practical aspects of living as a Christian in a local community. The interactions between the parties were painful with mistrust and broken promises along the way. Paul has hurt and been hurt by this church, so Paul’s fourth letter—2 Corinthians—comes after Paul receives a positive report from Titus and is encouraged by what he hears. In this letter, Paul explains what drove him in his interactions and relationship with the Corinthians.

While Paul explains himself late in 2 Corinthians, there is a distinctive shift within the letter. Chapters 1-9 have “a sense of optimism, while [chapters 10-13 have] one of pessimism. Paul is first excited and has “perfect confidence” in them (2 Cor. 7:16), but in 10-13 he says, “For I fear that perhaps when I come I may find you not as I wish” (2 Cor. 12:20)” (The Epistles to the Corinthians). Although there has been some debate among scholars whether 2 Corinthians was actually 2 letters, that discussion does not change the approach taken for this analysis. This paper considers the relationship between suffering and leadership as described by Paul in 2 Corinthians 10-13. The topics will be covered in the following order: how authority is gained, how it remains, it’s aim, and it’s challenge. These topics are not addressed in this order within the text, but all biblical content is taken from chapters 10-13. After the framework is laid, we

will turn to 2 Corinthians 1 to see Paul applying these same principles as he opens his letter to the Corinthians.

### **Discussion of Authority and its Origins**

Beginning s discussion of authority requires an appropriate frame of reference. Yukl (2002) says, “Authority involves the rights, prerogatives, obligations, and duties associated with particular positions within an organization or social system. A leader’s authority usually includes the right to make particular types of decisions for the organization.” This definition gives us some clues into authority: 1) it requires an organization or social system; 2) it is typically associated with a position; 3) it is often linked with the term leader and/or leadership. As we study 2 Corinthians, we can find each of these elements as they relate to suffering. The organization or social system being addressed is the church in Corinth. Paul is taking a position as an apostle of Christ, and Paul is using his authority as the “parent” of this church (2 Cor 12:14). As this article is not intended to merely apply within the church, I have chosen to relate this discussion of authority to leadership to broaden its applicability for Christian leaders.

### **Authority is Established in Weakness**

Authority, like salvation, is established in weakness. Paul gives us ample material to analyze his understanding of authority in 2 Corinthians 10-13. Paul says, “since you seek proof that Christ is speaking in me. He is not weak in dealing with you, but is powerful among you. For he was crucified in weakness, but lives by the power of God. For we also are weak in him, but in dealing with you we will live with him by the power of God” (2 Cor 13:3-4). The source and strength of Paul’s ministry comes not from his own power, but the power of Christ at work in him. Christ himself sets the example for us as he was “crucified in weakness.” Christ’s own authority is established in weakness, so Paul is asserting that any authority given by God and

resting on the power of God must have as its origin personal weakness “in him.” The only way that a leader may deal with those under his care is to “live with him [Christ] by the power of God,” and begin as “weak in him.” Simply, authority given and derived from Christ has to have as its origin subservience to God proven through weakness. For that reason, Paul says, “If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness” (2 Cor 11:30). Paul actually seeks to establish his authority through his own shortcomings.

### **Christian Leadership Derives from Suffering**

If authority is established in weakness, Paul also states, “Or did I commit a sin in humbling myself so that you might be exalted, because I preached God's gospel to you free of charge? I robbed other churches by accepting support from them in order to serve you. And when I was with you and was in need, I did not burden anyone, for the brothers who came from Macedonia supplied my need. So I refrained and will refrain from burdening you in any way” (2 Cor 11:7-9). Paul seems to link the leadership and authority given to him by taking the burden on himself instead of burdening the church in order to present the gospel “free of charge.” While the church looked down on him for not accepting pay for his teaching, Paul provides this action as a two-fold support of his position. He bore the burden of supporting himself and he bore the reproof of the church for not accepting pay.

Secondly, Paul seems to link the amount of authority given with the level of suffering endured:

“Are they servants of Christ? I am a better one--I am talking like a madman--with far greater labors, far more imprisonments, with countless beatings, and often near death.

Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I

was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure.” (2 Cor 11:23-27).

In order to establish his authority in addressing the church, Paul does the opposite of what one might expect. He provides here a lengthy list of his sufferings. What is interesting to note within this list is that none of these sufferings can be described as self-imposed. Every one of the sufferings originates from an external source. This is important to note, as we cannot personally gin up sufferings to establish our authority. Sufferings come upon Christians, so any action must be in response to the suffering and not an attempt to impose suffering on one’s self for self-promotion.

### **Leadership Builds through Mutual Hardship**

While Paul explains why he did not accept pay for the gospel, this action stole an opportunity for suffering from the Corinthian church, “For in what were you less favored than the rest of the churches, except that I myself did not burden you? Forgive me this wrong” (2 Cor 12:13)! Paul laments that he did not allow the church to suffer in supporting him financially as that support would have allowed them growth, yet even now he still refuses to accept their support; he says of the Corinthians that he “seek[s] not what is yours but you” (2 Cor 12:14). This disagreement between the parties actually allows for shared hardship. The hardship I’m describing is not financial, but emotional. Should the church support the apostle? Yes. Should he accept their support? No. This discrepancy creates a tension. Paul will not take the support so the gospel is free, which causes the church to question whether Paul “was crafty ... and got the

better of [them] by deceit” (2 Cor 12:16). Therein Paul is offered the opportunity to present that same gospel yet again, which only affirms his weakness and Christ’s strength.

Blackaby (2001), finds a similar motif outside the Bible and goes so far as to say, “So many of history’s great leaders suffered major failures, crises, and disappointments in their development as leaders that these traumas almost seem prerequisite to leadership success. If any conclusion can be drawn from the biographies of great leaders, it is that none enjoyed easy paths to greatness. It could, in fact, be argued that, had they avoided hardship, greatness would also have eluded them” (p. 41).

When we consider the extent of suffering in the world, it should not surprise us to find leaders that have suffered. However, the link between perceived “greatness” in the world and the extent of suffering endured by these leaders should give us pause to consider that this motif aligns with Paul’s language in 2 Cor 10-13: Authority is established in weakness, derives from suffering, and builds through mutual hardship between leader and follower.

### **Follower Relationship to Authority**

Authority comes from above, but also implies an understanding between leader and follower that must be maintained. Paul discusses that relationship and how to maintain that understanding in 2 Corinthians 12. Any relationship must consider the expectations of the leader and followers as well as the intent of the organization as a whole. For Christians, follower acceptance of and submission to authority relies upon the life lived and words spoken by the leader. Paul says it this way, “Though if I should wish to boast, I would not be a fool, for I would be speaking the truth. But I refrain from it, so that no one may think more of me than he sees in me or hears from me” (2 Cor 12:6). What matters is not the loftiness of the leader or the leader’s reputation with others that matters most; instead, it is the example provided by the leader in the



presence of the followers as well as the manner and content of speech given by the leader than support his claims. Paul's stance is that lowliness makes a good leader and you won't know the sincerity of that lowliness except in their presence. Blackaby (2001) says, "Leadership is ultimately based on trust. Since people choose to follow leaders they trust, their confidence must have a foundation. That foundation is honesty" (p. 104). Honesty in Paul's case is consistency of words and deeds.

Paul provides an example for leaders today in how authority remains, and he gives some practical application for a life well lived with acceptable words spoken: speak of others, not yourself; suffering prevents conceit; followers lift up their leader; relationship is paramount; righteousness is the aim; and unrighteousness results in mourning.

### **Speak of Others, Not Yourself**

2 Corinthians 12:1-5 provides an example of Paul boasting in a man being called up into the 3<sup>rd</sup> heaven and boasting on his behalf:

"I must go on boasting. Though there is nothing to be gained by it, I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord. I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven--whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows. And I know that this man was caught up into paradise--whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows-- and he heard things that cannot be told, which man may not utter. On behalf of this man I will boast, but on my own behalf I will not boast, except of my weaknesses."

Paul's goal in this description is to encourage the saints that boasting on the work of God is not a bad thing, but boasting about the work of God within your own life tends to bring about pride. Therefore, Paul chooses to boast on another and not himself to God's glory and not his own.

### Suffering Prevents Conceit

Another method used to prevent pride and ensure God's glory is suffering, but this suffering is not aimless, pointless, or needless. It is specifically applied to Christians to force constant dependence on God. Owen (2006) says,

“So even with his [God's] own, he may, he does, leave them sometimes to some vexatious distempers, either to prevent or cure some other evil. ... Now if this be the state and condition of lust [sin] in it's prevalency, that God oftentimes suffers it so to prevail, at least to admonish us, and to humble us, perhaps to chasten and correct us for our general loose and careless walking, it is possible that the *effect* should be removed and the *cause* continued, that the *particular* lust should be mortified and the *general* course be unreformed? He, then that would really, thoroughly, and acceptably mortify any disquieting lust, let him take care to be equally diligent in all parts of obedience, and know that every lust, every omission of duty, is burdensome to God [Isa. 43:24], though but one is so to him” (p. 89).

In other words, sometimes we are left to struggle with sins we'd rather not have to deal with for the very purpose of keeping us reliant on God. We don't grow in the area we'd like in order to grow in the area God has in mind. Even if sin doesn't cause the suffering, we suffer that Christ might be our “all in all” and remain clear in our focus. For Paul, this suffering took the form of a “thorn in the flesh” explained in 2 Cor 12:7-10,

“So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited. Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is

made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong."

The important component of the thorn in the flesh is not the identity of the thorn, but its function. It served to keep Paul weak in order to show forth the glory of God.

### **Followers Lift Up the Leader**

It is up to the followers to lift up the leader. This was not occurring within the Corinthian church. Their lack of trust in Paul and his methods identifies another opportunity for Paul to explain the gospel and its power in weakness. He makes himself a fool for their sake to help them understand the relationship between authority and suffering in 2 Cor 12: 11-12,

"I have been a fool! You forced me to it, for I ought to have been commended by you. For I was not at all inferior to these super-apostles, even though I am nothing. The signs of a true apostle were performed among you with utmost patience, with signs and wonders and mighty works."

Paul makes the case that it is specifically because he is "nothing" and has suffered that he is granted authority within the church.

### **Relationship is Paramount**

Paul desires relationship with these Christians. He feels responsibility for these Christians, and he has a great love for this church in Corinth. Yet, Paul also spends a lot of time defending his technique to gain trust. He has to continually prove that what he has preached he does indeed live or trust cannot be maintained. Malphurs (2003) says, "If people do not trust those who would lead them through change, they will resist that change. The message here is

clear. Any leaders in an organization will need sufficient credibility with their people before they can introduce new organizational values” (p. 129).

Establishment and maintenance of trust helps explain why Paul’s writing so often provides why he acts in the way he does, the what that should result from the gospel properly understood, and the implications of that within the people’s lives—fruit of the spirit, diminishing sin, love for God and one another. He spends so much time writing and caring for them specifically for their benefit: “Here for the third time I am ready to come to you. And I will not be a burden, for I seek not what is yours but you. For children are not obligated to save up for their parents, but parents for their children” (2 Cor 12:14). Even when hurt, Paul does not diminish in his love for the Corinthian church.

### **Righteousness is the Aim**

The relationship that Paul desires with the church is not an end in itself. The goal of the relationship is righteousness. It is not a righteousness that Paul produces, but one which he promotes to the church’s edification:

“Have you been thinking all along that we have been defending ourselves to you? It is in the sight of God that we have been speaking in Christ, and all for your upbuilding, beloved. For I fear that perhaps when I come I may find you not as I wish, and that you may find me not as you wish--that perhaps there may be quarreling, jealousy, anger, hostility, slander, gossip, conceit, and disorder” (2 Cor 12:19-20).

The premise of suffering and indwelling sin makes relationships difficult. We are not the leaders we would be, followers are not what we would wish, and we suffer as a result. Ideally, the work would be complete, but righteousness is not yet perfected until glorification. Instead, we must

struggle through imperfect relationships while bearing in mind that righteousness is the aim; not just ours and not just theirs, but the righteousness of us all.

### **Unrighteousness Results in Mourning**

Finally, since there is a leader/follower relationship with a goal of righteousness and God's glory, failure to see lives changed through the power of the gospel results in mourning for the leader. The leader enters into another form of suffering because of his or her desire to see righteousness produced within the lives of the followers. In Paul's case, "I fear that when I come again my God may humble me before you, and I may have to mourn over many of those who sinned earlier and have not repented of the impurity, sexual immorality, and sensuality that they have practiced" (2 Cor 12:21). Paul has no desire to see unrepentant hearts. He prefers to delight in the righteousness evident in believer's lives. Either way, he is forced as the leader to join in the suffering of his followers. Unrepentant hearts create suffering for Paul specifically because he cares. If he didn't care or take personally his role in the lives of the people within this church, he would not suffer so. Neither would we have considered him an effective leader.

### **The Goal of Authority**

Christian authority does not exist in a vacuum. Instead, it comes with a readymade goal defined by our new identity in Christ. This goal contains three elements: 1) a consistent message; 2) the centrality of Christ; and 3) a requirement to undermine inappropriate claims. When placed in authority, leaders must begin with a consistent message, "Let such a person understand that what we say by letter when absent, we do when present" (2 Cor 10:11). Malphurs (2003) says, "I have defined organizational values as the constant, passionate, biblical core beliefs that drive the ministry" (p. 144). Values are more than beliefs. Words must match actions. No leader may present words they have not applied within their own lives and expect to remain relevant.

Otherwise, those words really don't represent the beliefs of the individual. This doesn't require a one-size-fits-all kind of approach to leadership. Leadership style may shift dramatically depending on the situation, the roles, and the responsibilities of the individuals involved. Goleman (2002) presents six different leadership styles: "visionary, coaching, affiliative, democratic, pacesetter, and commanding" (p. 55). Each has its place, but trust and consistency are still the foundation of effectiveness.

A consistent message is one thing, but one that centralizes Christ is a must within the church, "For even if I boast a little too much of our authority, which the Lord gave for building you up and not for destroying you, I will not be ashamed" (2 Cor 10:8). Ultimately, it is the Lord who gave the authority. Paul goes on within 2 Cor 10:13-18 to focus on Christ's headship within the effort:

"But we will not boast beyond limits, but will boast only with regard to the area of influence God assigned to us, to reach even to you. For we are not overextending ourselves, as though we did not reach you. For we were the first to come all the way to you with the gospel of Christ. We do not boast beyond limit in the labors of others. But our hope is that as your faith increases, our area of influence among you may be greatly enlarged, so that we may preach the gospel in lands beyond you, without boasting of work already done in another's area of influence. "Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord." For it is not the one who commends himself who is approved, but the one whom the Lord commends.

God assigned the role. The preaching of the gospel of Christ is the goal of that role. The strengthening of faith within Corinth allows for that gospel to continue its spread. Boasting is in the Lord, and ultimately it is the Lord who will commend the effort.

Finally, a leader must undermine inappropriate claims:

“We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ, being ready to punish every disobedience, when your obedience is complete (2 Cor 10:5-6); And what I do I will continue to do, in order to undermine the claim of those who would like to claim that in their boasted mission they work on the same terms as we do” (2 Cor 11:12).

If a leader is given a role and message to proclaim, implied within that role and message is a need to undermine those that claim to offer the same message and yet distort it.

### **The Challenge of Authority**

Authority also has challenges that must be borne by the leader. Paul’s authority resulted in anxiety, “And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches. Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to fall, and I am not indignant” (2 Cor 11:28-29)? These verses are an interesting view of anxiety because they should give pause to those who may seek leadership. A leader who really cares necessarily will be anxious for those in his or her care. A leader literally joins in the sufferings of his or her followers.

Another challenge of authority is helping followers do what is right even as the leader fails. Paul struggled with this concept in 2 Cor 13:7, “But we pray to God that you may not do wrong--not that we may appear to have met the test, but that you may do what is right, though we may seem to have failed.” The implication is that God is in control and the one that keeps one from doing wrong, but the example of the leader is a strong one. If righteousness is the aim, and the message is brought by fallen man, this challenge is one well worth pondering. Kelley (2001) presents one possible answer to this dilemma in his presentation of commitment. He says,

“Effective followers are committed to something—a cause, a product, an organization, an idea—in addition to the care of their own lives and careers. Some leaders misinterpret this commitment. Seeing their authority acknowledged, they mistake loyalty to a goal for loyalty to themselves. But the fact is that many effective followers see leaders merely as coadventurers on a worthy crusade, and if they suspect their leader of flagging commitment or conflictive motives they may just withdraw their support.”

This commitment seems to be just what Paul continually emphasizes. He wants no commitment for himself, but to Christ and his gospel. By keeping the focus on Christ, Paul desires to make good followers without getting in the way as the “leader.”

The final challenge of authority listed by Paul in these chapters is his desire to use authority to build up and trust God for restoration. Authority requires a leader to meet the needs of followers. If followers require reproof, it is the role of the leader to provide it. The challenge comes in that a caring leader would prefer to encourage and build up instead of confronting and restoring those who have fallen. We want followers to succeed, yet authority requires us to both confront and encourage depending of the state of the follower. Paul says it this way:

“For we are glad when we are weak and you are strong. Your restoration is what we pray for. For this reason I write these things while I am away from you, that when I come I may not have to be severe in my use of the authority that the Lord has given me for building up and not for tearing down” (2 Cor 13:9-10).

### **2 Corinthians 1: Paul’s Use of Authority**

Knowing that Paul was working from the framework presented in 2 Cor 10-13 allows us a better opportunity to understand the opening chapter of 2 Corinthians. Remembering the position of the writing of 2 Corinthians within the context of Paul’s interactions with the church



in Corinth, we can understand why Paul was so interested in describing the relationship between authority, leadership, and suffering. He had caused the church to suffer. He had suffered over and through his relationship with this church. He had just had a “painful visit” he did not hope to repeat followed up by a “severe letter” to the church. Yet, through all this he had just received a favorable report from Titus about the church. Paul’s relationship with this church had been rocky. Bearing this in mind, we are going to consider 2 Cor 1:1-10 as Paul begins his fourth letter to this church. These verses can be considered the introduction and beginning sections of the chapter. We will only consider these sections as they specifically address suffering within the context of the relationship between Paul and this church.

### **Introduction**

After introducing the authors of the letter (Paul & Timothy), and describing himself as an apostle “by the will of God” and Timothy as “our brother,” Paul then identifies his audience, the Corinthian church. This is the only instance of author versus audience used within this section.

Paul begins his address with repeated use of God, Jesus Christ, Father, and Lord. This language identifies God as the source of the “grace” which Paul offers. God is described as father first (ours and Christ’s). Then in verse 3, Jesus Christ is identified as father of “mercies” and “all comfort.”

Building off of this identity of Christ, Paul uses inclusive language with the Corinthian church—words like us, our, all, we. He identifies with his audience as they share in Christ’s role as the father of mercies and all comfort. By sharing in the language, Paul is showing that he and Timothy also share in the “affliction” of the church. Yet this affliction is not without purpose or end. The purpose of affliction is comfort, but not just for the Christian in affliction. The purpose

of that comfort is in order that comfort may be shared with other Christians in “any” affliction. God comforts us, so we can share that comfort to others.

### **Beginning**

Verse 5 then shifts from the sharing of comfort to the sharing of sufferings. In this case, however, we don’t share with each other, but with Christ. In fact, it is the sharing of sufferings with Christ that allows us to share in comfort with him as well.

The language shifts at this point away from the previous inclusive language and creates a leader/follower relationship. Paul and Timothy are now the “we” and “our” used with the Corinthian church described as “you” and “your.” This shift is important as Paul now wants to separate the recipients of affliction and suffering from the general to the specific. The “afflicted” now becomes Paul and Timothy. Yet they are afflicted for the church’s comfort and salvation (v. 6). If Paul and Timothy are “comforted” it is also for the church’s comfort. Yet the path to comfort in this case comes from the church patiently enduring the same sufferings that Paul and Timothy endured. Comfort comes from suffering in both cases. Either the leader suffers or the followers suffer, but either way the result should be comfort.

The beauty of verse 7 is that while the language keeps the church and the authors separate, they still share together in both sufferings and comfort. Therefore, while the leader and followers are still separate in role, they are also joined in their experience with Christ.

The rest of this section then details a specific affliction experienced by Paul and Timothy in Asia. Within this context, it is obvious that Paul intends this section as a source of comfort for the church in Corinth that they might put their hope in a God who delivers. This explanation also fits with Paul’s previous interaction with this church. If he can deliver from death itself, God is

able to deliver the church in Corinth from whatever sins, sufferings, and peril existed in their past.

### **Discussion of 2 Corinthians 1**

We have earlier considered how Paul describes the gaining, maintaining, challenges, and aim of leadership. Paul gained leadership from God. He maintained it through suffering, weakness, and humility. His authority was challenged because of the perception of his failures within the church, and his aim remained to fulfill his responsibility of keeping the gospel foremost.

Paul knew that he was dealing with a church that had suffered even at his own hand. His authority, given to him by God, required him to repeatedly confront this church over its sin. The authority wielded by Paul was gained from God himself through Christ on the road to Damascus. Yet Paul does confront the church from a position of humility granted him by his own sufferings. His authority is maintained in continued weakness. His introduction to this letter sets the tone for the rest of it. Paul is encouraging the church, while preparing them for the fact that suffering will come and has come. This challenge of Paul's authority based on Paul's insistence on leading from weakness creates a tension as the church suffers. In all likelihood, the Corinthian church wanted a leader that they could revere, not one who insisted on Christ's retention of all reverence. Paul instead joins with the church in acknowledging his own suffering and weakness. However, that suffering and affliction is not the final result. Ultimately, comfort is the outcome. The suffering may not go away, but neither will the comfort by this explanation. Continued suffering forces the leader into a position of weakness and magnifies the glory of God. Therefore, Paul remains consistent in his leadership aim.

### **Conclusions on Leadership and Suffering**

While leadership is often sought in this world, those desiring positions of leadership must be cognizant of all that leadership entails. The path to leadership is often fraught with suffering. That suffering allows the leader more than just empathy as others go through trials of their own. Suffering does not necessarily imply a future in leadership. It does, however, create a context to offer comfort to others. It opens doors that might otherwise remain closed. Personal suffering offers the leader the opportunity to provide comfort to those in the midst of trials. God uses suffering as a proving ground for Christian leaders. The gospel is best presented from weakness so that the comfort gained from the truth of Christ's life, death, resurrection, and ascension is real and presented to others for the reality that is present in the leader's life.

The experience of leadership entails suffering as well. Any suffering undergone by followers must be borne by the leader as well if he or she genuinely cares about the followers. Leadership implies suffering. To care is to suffer. Therefore, the leader then genuinely joins in the sufferings of others. However, all suffering should not be viewed as sanctification and summarily dismissed. All suffer in a fallen world, but it is only the Christian who joins in Christ's sufferings.

Finally, there is no end to Christian weakness, regardless of position. The gospel is understood through weakness as we identify ourselves as sinners in need of a savior. The gospel is maintained through weakness as there is no arrival date when life entails no more suffering and sin until Christ's return. The gospel is taken forth in weakness as we offer nothing to others beyond what we ourselves received.

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