

NT / COMMENTARY

FEATURING



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CHRIST-CENTERED

# Exposition

EXALTING JESUS IN

2 CORINTHIANS



# More Than You Can Bear

## 2 CORINTHIANS 1:1-11

**Main Idea:** God does allow on you more than you can bear so that you can learn that you need him.

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**M**y parents' generation was a different generation in how they raised children. Parents and children had distinct roles. Parents didn't cater to children's feelings or be buddies with them. Their goal was to raise children. And in my family, if you hated them in the process, they accepted that as long as you became what God wanted you to become.

Their discipline was tough and left an impression. I was never merely punished. I don't remember them saying something like "You're not doing such-and-such for a while." I just knew that I was restricted from what I was able to do for a season until the temperature of the house changed. I knew everything was okay, but the discipline was harsh, and there was no one to report it to in those days. It was just a different day and age. My oldest sibling is about seventy years old, and all of us remember living under our parents' strict leadership.

As much as we would like to exalt the glory days, although good parents, our mother and father could have used some compassion pills when correcting us. One deficiency was how they dealt with family issues. In my late thirties and early forties I began learning stuff about my family that I never knew because in that generation, parents didn't communicate with their children. My parents didn't deal with issues. You wouldn't know your dad had cancer everywhere in his body until you found out at the funeral. They withheld intimate communication.

And we viewed our elders as strong because they wouldn't tell anyone anything. They wouldn't talk to you. They weren't emotional. They were emotionally unavailable most of the time, and that created relational distance between parents and children.

Respectability was maintained, but intimacy was absent in those relationships. There can be no deep relationship without intimacy. There can be no deep relationship without sharing our brokenness. If people think we're okay all the time, it's a problem. I can't be around someone who is lying about how he is doing all the time. I can't be around someone who doesn't ever go through difficulty. I can't be around someone who can't say, "I'm having a bad day." I can't, because to be human is to wrestle and to struggle at times. We must recognize this; if we're not wrestling, it's a problem.

In fact, as we look at 2 Corinthians, we find a letter teaching believers in Christ to "keep it 100"—to be truthful and authentic—in every single area of life. Yet many of us aren't experiencing the freedom and the enjoyment found in Christ because we don't engage our brokenness.

Many of us aren't experiencing freedom because we try to medicate ourselves into believing that our brokenness doesn't exist. But Paul, being an apostle of the Lord, writes one of the most heart-wrenching letters in the Bible. Other letters, like Romans, reveal his theological astuteness, the might of his pen and his mind. But we see Paul's heart in 2 Corinthians. We hear a shepherd being honest about his brokenness. We hear a shepherd being transparent for the sake of the sheep. We discover that Paul needed counseling, and he went through counseling. We encounter Paul as he goes through numerous trials. Indeed, sometimes he felt like dying. But he doesn't leave us in those desolate places. He wants to shepherd us and help us see that being honest about our own struggles opens the door for God to help us.

If we can't be honest with what we need, we can't receive what we need. We may be determined to act strong and self-sufficient, but Scripture invites us to see our weakness and to be people who know that if it had not been for the goodness of God, we would be lost. Paul in 2 Corinthians offers us the freedom to be truthful people who can say, "I'm tired, I'm sick, and I'm tired of being sick and tired." Scripture encourages me to admit, "I want to look at my life and deal with the issues. I want to deal with the mess. I want to deal with my past. I want to deal with my pain. I want to deal with my disappointments. I want

to deal with my medication. I want to deal with myself. I want to deal with my family. I want to deal with my children. I want to deal with all of that.”

We can examine everything because whom the Son sets free is free indeed. “You shall know the truth,” says Jesus (John 8:32 NKJV), and the truth isn’t just the information that’s in the Bible. It’s our telling the truth about what’s going on with us so that the truth can set us free. So we come to a passage where Paul is direct and transparent. I only have one main point: **God does allow on you more than you can bear.**

## We Are Blessed in Christ

### 2 CORINTHIANS 1:3

Paul speaks straightforwardly in this passage. In verse 3, he says, “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.” Notice *blessed*. The word here is not a verb. Paul is not asking us to bless God. *Blessed* is an adjective. Now, if we understand the adjective, we’ll respond with the verb.

In other words, *blessed* describes God as being inherently self-sufficient: God doesn’t need anyone. So God looks to himself for what he needs, but he doesn’t need because he’s always supplying to himself. He never experiences how to do without because he has everything. *Blessed* means one who is inherently filled with everything he needs for himself. Paul is describing God as being in a constant state of sufficiency. Can you imagine that—never needing because you *are*? That’s God. That’s why we’re not God: because we feel the need for need, but he never feels the need for need. That’s what makes *him* God and not *you or me*.

Paul says, “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.” He establishes it relationally. We’re in a relationship with Jesus Christ, which connects us to him being blessed. Because he’s blessed inherently, we can’t be around him and not experience the blessed One. It’s impossible to be in God’s vicinity for real and not experience what he’s releasing. We need to be open to recognizing that he’s inherently self-sufficient and doesn’t need anyone. Grandmama used to say, “He’s God all by himself, and he don’t need nobody else.” She could have written a doctrine manual because she recognized the self-sufficiency of the almighty God and said it in a way that could be understood.

## We Receive Mercy and Comfort

### 2 CORINTHIANS 1:3

#### *God Is the Father of Mercies*

Paul calls God two things in this verse. He's "the Father of mercies and the God of all comfort." When he calls him the Father of mercies, he's talking about his relational activity with us as a father. Some of you can't relate to him being father because you've experienced heartache with your father. But don't transfer your heartache to God the Father. God the Father is the only real one. He's not a deadbeat dad. He doesn't miss a payment. As a matter of fact, he doesn't have to make a payment because he supplies all we need. So we don't have to get with anyone to set up a way to give us what we need. God just releases it on his own as the Father of mercies. So he fathers us, he shepherds us, he's relationally related to us. Additionally, Paul put "mercy" in plural—"mercies." Now, perhaps you will understand why it's not just "mercy." God is the Father of "mercies" because we who are messed up, who know we're messed up, know that we can't have only one dose of mercy.

If you really know how messed up and broken you are, then you know you're in need. One time my grandmother showed me a counter with probably fifty medicines on it. I said, "Grandmama, what's all that for?"

She said, "Baby, this is my heart medicine. This is my high blood pressure medicine. This is my foot medicine."

And I said, "Why do you have all that?"

"I have all these medicines because each medicine is necessary for me to take in order for me to deal with what I'm going through so that I can feel better."

Mercy is a multivitamin pill of God for everything we need. God has a mercy for our hurt. God has a mercy for our frustration. God has a mercy for our loss. God has a mercy for our grief. God has a mercy for our depression. God has a mercy for every single thing in our life. I'm so glad and I'm so excited that I have a God who has enough for me because he's enough. The progressive walk of life with God leads to realizing that he is not only constantly giving us what we need but also *not* giving us what we deserve: that's mercy. Sometimes mercy is God not giving us something.

### *God Is the God of All Comfort*

Next, he's the "God of all comfort." The word *comfort* means coming alongside someone and holding her up when she's going through a trial. It assumes we're going through something. The Bible even uses a form of this word to talk about the Holy Spirit, the *paraclete*, the one who comes alongside and gives help in the midst of brokenness and struggle.

So we see that our God is the God of every mercy, and he's the God of all comfort. This word here for "comfort" reminds me of a word or idea in *Star Wars*. *Comfort* means to give someone resilience for sapping energy. In the battle of the Jedi against the Sith, sometimes Jedi troopers are beaten down. Their resilience and emotional strength are waning because the battle is raging against them. However, the Jedi have a force capability that they keep secret. It's called "battle meditation."

Battle meditation allows them to fight alongside their troopers and use the Force to boost morale and turn the tables against the enemy. Similarly, in the midst of loss, God's comfort is battle meditation for you on this earth when you're going through hardships, when you're in brokenness, and when you're in a battle. God can send strength through his comfort for all that you're undergoing.

God does sometimes provide relief in the midst of the stress. Scripture says we have a God who "comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any kind of affliction" (v. 4). I remember when I was weightlifting and trying to build up to 350 pounds on the bench press. I was on the bench with 275 pounds on, and I was lifting.

My arms became like spaghetti and every muscle just said, "Eric, it's over; stop it." But someone was standing over me as I was holding the weight.

He said, "I think you've got one more in you."

I said, "I don't have one more."

He said, "You've got one more." He didn't fully take the weight off of me, but he tapped it to encourage me that I had a little bit more push. He wanted me to extend my muscles just a little bit more. Suddenly, I found strength from somewhere that I didn't know I had because someone was standing over me and encouraging me. I'm trying to communicate that the God of all comfort will comfort you and me in our distress.

Notice, too, that he comforts us *in it*, not from without. That means that when we go through difficulty, he's in there with us; he's there with

us in our distress. God is present in the distress with us. So no matter what we're going through, we're never alone in our distress. That's why he's called the God of all comfort. That means he comprehensively knows how to give us resilience in our brokenness. But look at what the text says: God does this so that we can comfort others.

## We Comfort Others

### 2 CORINTHIANS 1:4

God trains believers in their suffering to comfort others by the comfort that he gives them. He is with you, but you may go through points in your trial where you don't think God is there with you. Scripture says "in any kind of affliction." That means you don't have to go through the same thing someone else went through to comfort them because affliction is affliction. In other words, all affliction makes an emotional impact. We'll see later in chapter 4 that affliction points to being surrounded by crowds.

God is training you and strengthening you—not just for your own sake. You thought you just wanted relief for yourself, but the goodness of God, who's the God of all comfort, has enough comfort for you that can overflow to someone else. My wife is my hero in this because you can look at her and not know she has an illness. She has ulcerative colitis: there are open sores inside her body. Yet if you saw her, you wouldn't know this.

I remember when my wife started going to a support group. She said, "Babe, I went through all this, and I want to go to support group because I need to be encouraged. But I also think that somebody else can hear what God did for me." She said, "When I look back over our marriage, I see many times God was my comfort. Early on, our son Manny went into the ICU. At one point I couldn't walk. Later I needed a liver transplant, and I got a liver transplant in my twenties. Then I went from the liver transplant to having cancer twice—then the third time when we were starting a ministry. And then, all of a sudden, I get rejection and infection. And I've been to the emergency room two hundred times in our marriage. I've spent six months of our marriage hospitalized." So she goes into the support group and starts telling her story, and the members respond, "You should be a little more bitter than you are. You should be angrier than you are."

## God Holds on to Us

### 2 CORINTHIANS 1:4-7

What happens in her support groups? Sometimes I've gone, and I've seen when people who were complaining hear her story and stop complaining. What can you say to a person who's been to hell and back? When God takes you somewhere and brings you back from it, it's not for you to brag about that. You made it; it's not about your bragging that you survived. It's about your bragging about the God who held on to you because, if truth be told, you didn't hold on to him.

There were some days when you wanted to curse out everyone. There were some days when you wanted to shoot someone. There were some days when you wanted to hurt someone. There were some days when you wanted to hurt yourself. If you think about what God brought you from, and if you can be honest about where he brought you to, the testimony is God's holding on to you, not that you're holding on to him. You are not that strong. I am not that strong. The testimony of our lives is the strength of Christ.

When we share abundantly in Christ's suffering, God has a comfort level that meets our pain levels. I remember when my wife had her second C-section. She went into surgery, and she was in pain. They gave her anesthesia, but she started feeling pain again. I said to the nurse, "You're going to put some more in her, right?" So he gets the supervisor, and he gave her some more. When we got back to her room, they gave her a cord with a red button and said, "Whenever you feel pain, Mrs. Mason, just press the button." When she went home, she was beginning to heal but was told to take Tylenol for her pain. At every level of her pain, the medical team had medication for her.

For every level of your pain, every level of your brokenness, God has an "anesthetic." He has something that can give you and me comfort, but we have to push the red button. Christ can comfort us.

Paul next said, "If we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation" (v. 6). How interesting that he speaks so much of suffering. We don't hear it as much today. We hear, "It's your season," and "Your breakthrough is coming." I share that perspective as a pastor every now and then, but the overshadowing reality is pain. We're either going into a trial, we're in a trial, or we're coming out of a trial. Now, if you haven't been in one yet, it's coming. Another one's coming because your life is



filled with the cycle of brokenness to help you know God more deeply. If you and I did not know affliction, we would not know the Lord.

Paul goes on to say, “Our hope for you is firm” (v. 7) He’s saying, “We know that as you share in our sufferings, you will also share in our comfort.”

## We Are Overwhelmed

### 2 CORINTHIANS 1:8

Paul is confident in God. He’s confident that God will cover the Corinthians in the midst of their brokenness. Look at verse 8. He says, “We don’t want you to be unaware.” He explains, “We were completely overwhelmed—beyond our strength—so that we even despaired of life itself.” Now what type of preacher tells people, “I had more on me than I could bear”? I imagine you’ve heard it said, “God doesn’t put on you more than you can bear.” But 1 Corinthians 10:13 is speaking of temptations that we choose. The verse says, “No temptation has come upon you.” The context refers to acting like a fool in the world and God loving us enough to not let us continue in our folly. So he won’t allow on us more temptation that will destroy us completely.

We like to think God won’t put or allow on us more than we can bear because we like to be viewed as strong. But in order to be strong, we have to be viewed as weak. Paul said, “We were completely overwhelmed.” We were so overwhelmed that “we even despaired of life.” In other words, he said, “We wanted to die.”

Notice he didn’t say, “Right now, in the name of Jesus, I tell you, despair, go away!” Yes, Paul healed people. Paul raised the dead and cast out demons! Nevertheless, his life became so painful that he wanted to die. Yet interestingly we, as believers, can’t admit our burdens: “I want to die. I was suicidal. I’m sick of what’s going on in my life.” Let us begin to recognize that God is using our suffering to bring us to the end of ourselves.

## We Learn that We Need Him

### 2 CORINTHIANS 1:9-11

But listen to the reason Paul shares his brokenness. He says, “Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death” (v. 9). He said, we felt like it was over, but that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on

“God who raises the dead” (v. 9). So God allows on you more than you can bear so that you can know you need him. Theologically, we’ll say, “I need the Lord.” But practically we function like we don’t need the Lord. Indeed, no matter how mature we become, God has to remind us that we need him. So he will allow something bad to happen to us.

Why? Because when everything’s okay—when money’s in the bank, you have a significant relationship, you can go on a date without breaking the bank, you can go shopping and buy a bunch of stuff, your bills are paid, it’s warm in the house during the winter, it’s chilly in the house during the summer, everything’s all right for you—God says, “See, that’s why you’re not praying anymore.” Then he takes some of that hedge of protection off of you and lets some stuff happen to you. All of a sudden, a little bit of hell comes into your house. Then you start praying again, “Father God, I need you today! God help me!”

The problem is, you needed him just as much on the day when you had everything as on the day when hell broke loose. God has to remind you that you need him—when you become too self-sufficient, when you become too self-reliant, when you are a boss and run it all. Yes, “you running you” puts all kinds of things on the table. You have deals on the table, but God is going to make some deals not come through. He’s going to make you lean. He’s going to let you get sick. He won’t let some good stuff happen to you so you can cry. He’s more concerned with your being close to him with nothing than to have everything and not have him.

God does put on you more than you can bear, so that you can know that you can’t bear it. My son Manny once didn’t fear anything. He didn’t fear heights, and he wasn’t afraid of water when he was about three years old. I said, “Boy, you can’t just dive into the pool. You can’t swim.”

He said, “No, I want to jump into the water.”

“Okay,” I thought, “I’m going to get into the water this time. I’m going to let him jump into the water.” I got into the water, and I strategically placed myself. Then he jumped into the water, went under, and I said, “One, two, three, four, five.” Then I went and got him. All his McDonald’s shot across the pool. People started getting up out of the pool. I looked at him. I said, “What lesson did you learn? Can you swim? No. No.” I said, “One day, you’re going to learn how to swim, but you can’t just dive in there. Okay?”

“Yes, sir.” And guess what? He learned that day that he needed me.

Sometimes God will let you begin to drown. He’ll let you take in some water. Then he’ll grab you like a cat grabs its kittens and hold you up and look you in the face. “What lesson did you learn today?” And do you know what you need to say? “God, I need you.” That’s your life’s purpose statement. God is pushing your life in a direction so that you consistently know your need for him. Everything you go through is for you to be reminded of that reality. Never forget it.

And the moral of this story is, “What do I do about this?” Just get ready for another challenge. When you forget that you need the Lord, learn to need the Lord. When you don’t think you need the Lord, learn to thank him. When everything’s full, learn to lift him up. When nothing’s going wrong, learn to know that everything you have in the good season is because of him, not because of your hard work.

There are many people working hard, and they still don’t receive anything in return. The harvest you receive could not come if it had not been for God. The glory of this life is that Jesus Christ came, and he got on the cross and experienced the feeling of abandonment; he experienced the brokenness of the pain and the loss of his life, so that as we follow in his example, we wouldn’t say, “My God, my God, why did you forsake me?” In other words, he experienced the feeling of forsakeness so that you and I wouldn’t ever feel that way. And God raised him up on the third day so that we can know this hope: that trouble doesn’t last always.

Until you learn the reality that trouble doesn’t last always, you need to learn that he’s a mind fixer. You need to learn that he’s a heart regulator. You need to know that he’s a healer. You need to know that he’s a bridge over troubled water. You need to know all those things, but you don’t learn those in the daylight. You learn those things in the midnight.

### Reflect and Discuss

1. What kind of parent would you like to be? How much would you like to communicate your feelings to your children?
2. What kind of father do you think God is? Has your image of what kind of father he is changed? How so?
3. When someone asks how you are doing, do you always say, “Fine”? Are there some people you would answer truthfully? Why?
4. How do you feel blessed through your relationship with Christ?

5. What mercies have you received from God?
6. How has your past helped you comfort other people?
7. Do you believe God never gives us more than we can handle? Why?
8. When have you thought you did not need God? Does that thought tend to come when you are feeling comfortable or when you are succeeding through difficulties by your own strength?
9. How has God showed you that you need him?
10. How has your relationship with Christ provided mercies, comfort, and assurance?

# CHRIST-CENTERED EXPOSITION

WITH AUTHORS AND SERIES EDITORS

David Platt, Daniel L. Akin, and Tony Merida

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**Eric Mason** (DMin, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary) is the founder and lead pastor of Epiphany Fellowship in Philadelphia, as well as the founder and president of Thriving, an urban resource organization committed to developing leaders for ministry in the urban context. He has authored four books: *Manhood Restored*, *Beat God to the Punch*, *Unleashed*, and *Wake Church*.

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