

Comfort for the Afflicted

2 Corinthians 1:1-11

Comfort for the soul

A little girl came home from a neighbor's house where her little friend had died. "Why did you go?" Questioned her father. "To comfort her mother," said the child. "What could you do to comfort her?" "I climbed into her lap and cried with her."

The most tender moments often come from the most unlikely places. Nothing soothes the heart more than a tender word, timely note or comforting embrace. When life hurts, our hearts ache for comfort and relief from the pain. When we suffer at the hands of another or feel crushed by painful circumstances, COMFORT and COMPASSION are the ointments to apply to our wounded souls.

A comforted soul is a peaceful soul, a restful soul and a hopeful soul. The opening verses to one of my favorite worship songs, "Mighty to Save", sings

Everyone needs compassion
A love that's never failing
Let mercy fall on me
Everyone needs forgiveness
The kindness of a Savior
The hope of nations

Comfort also brings security and confidence, even though all may not be well outside, there can be peace inside. *IT IS LIKE THOSE PASSENGERS ON BOARD A SHIP which was caught in a violent storm off a rocky coast threatening to drive everyone to destruction. In the midst of the terror, one daring man, contrary to orders, went to the deck, made a dangerous passage to the pilot house and saw the steerman, at his post holding the wheel unwaveringly, and inch by inch, turning the ship out, to sea. The pilot saw the passenger and smiled. Then, the daring passenger went below and gave out a note of cheer: "I have seen the face of the pilot, and he smiled. All is well."*

True comfort quiets the anxious heart and provides stability to wavering faith through life's stormy waters.

Paul & the Corinthian church

If there was one man who was well acquainted with both the sufferings and comfort of Christ, it was the Apostle Paul. He truly experienced an exorbitant amount of affliction and suffering for the sake of Christ. No other believer will ever likely experience to the same degree the amount of suffering he endured (Acts 9:15-16; 2 Cor.11:23-29). To that end, God greatly glorified Himself through Paul to demonstrate His power and the triumph of Christ's resurrection for all believers. Through Paul, God teaches how your union with Christ is your sufficiency in this life and hope of glory in the next life.

In looking at the letter of 2 Corinthians, there is a noticeable theme which jumps out at the very beginning. This theme is woven through the fabric of Paul's letter like a signature

design incorporated by an artist. THIS THEME IS THE EXPERIENCE OF GOD'S COMFORT IN THE MIDST OF AFFLICTION AND SUFFERING.¹ Paul's reason for writing 2 Corinthians was borne out of a long and arduous relationship he had with the church in Corinth. His relationship with the church was more like a roller-coaster ride, as he rode many emotional ups and downs in his experiences with them. LIKE those relationships you have with family or friends where its GREAT one moment, then it seems to fall apart the next. In fact, 2 Corinthians is at least the fourth letter Paul wrote to the church to shepherd and guide this developing flock.

In Acts 18 we read how Paul first met with Aquila and Priscilla in the Jewish synagogue and established the church in local homes (18:10). Paul remained a total of 18 months in Corinth before he was brought before a Roman tribunal by opposing Jews, and eventually left for Ephesus. He remained in correspondence with the church writing at least two letters, one previous to our First Corinthians (1 Cor.5:9).²

However, problems and false teachers continued to rise within the church finally prompting Paul to leave Ephesus and travel to Corinth to settle the matter personally. During his visit he was severely rebuffed by a dissenting member of the church while the rest of the congregation sat idly by.³ This was a painful encounter for Paul as his authority was seriously challenged on the basis of his apparent weakness and suffering in the ministry. When he returned to Ephesus he wrote another letter, a "severe letter" (2 Cor.2:4), responding to the false charges and rebuking the church for their toleration of such a dissenting incident. He sent Titus with the letter and anxiously awaited their response.

Meanwhile, Paul traveled to Troas then Macedonia while waiting to hear from Titus. While in Macedonia, the churches underwent intense persecution which Paul also experienced. Titus finally arrived bringing the good news of the Corinthian's repentant attitude and desire to be reconciled with Paul (2 Cor.7:5-7, 13-16). In reply Paul wrote our 2 Corinthians to tell of his current situation, his delight in their reconciliation, and a further response to the challenges of his apostleship.

Paul experienced much hardship with the people at Corinth. He also suffered intense affliction for the cause of Christ. Yet through it all, God's merciful comfort abounded to him during these times enabling Paul to more effectively minister to those who loved. Just as Paul experienced God's comfort through intense affliction, so you can know **GOD'S ABUNDANT COMFORT IN THE MIDST OF YOUR AFFLICTION.**

¹ Scott J. Hafeman, *2 Corinthians*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2000), 59

² Simon J. Kistemaker, *New Testament Commentary: Exposition of the Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 1997), 3

³ James M. Scott, *2 Corinthians*, NIBC (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1998), 2-3

I. The Blessings of God's Comfort [vs.1-7]

1:3-4 *Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.*

As Paul began this letter, it is apparent that his recent experiences were possibly the most trying times in his life. They were so severe he thought he was going to die under the pressure he faced. Paul is not specific as to the nature his affliction, but instead focuses on praising God for the very thing his opponents called into question: *his suffering*. Paul opens with blessing God and directing the Corinthians attention to the character of God. It was Paul's intention to ground them in the precious understanding of God's sovereign power displayed through his weakness.

THE SOURCE OF YOUR COMFORT: THE FATHER

- Paul's first thoughts are to give praise and blessing to God our Father. His blessing follows a pattern found in many psalms, [41:13; 72:19; 89:52; 106:48] as he highlights the aspects of God's character. Paul identifies God's character in two ways: the FATHER OF MERCIES, and the GOD OF ALL COMFORT. God is a merciful, compassionate Father. It is how He described Himself to Moses when giving the Law, "*The LORD, the LORD God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in loving-kindness and truth*" (Exo.34:6). It's also how David described Him in Psalm 103:13, "*Just as a Father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear Him.*"

God is what you want in your dad, He is who you want as an understanding Father. Knowing that your Father is merciful and compassionate toward His children is your reassurance during times of affliction. Just as God's mercy sustained Israel for 40 years in the wilderness, where their sandals did not wear out, nor did they lack in food or supplies, God sustains and comforts all His children.

*"Our emotional comfort comes not from within ourselves, but from God's commitment to sustain and save His people, no matter what."*⁴

- Out of the 17 occurrences of the Greek word "comfort" (*paraklesis*) Paul used in 2 Corinthians, 10 of those happen in vs.3-7. It is the same type of word used for the Holy Spirit, "Comforter", and carries with it the "sense of standing beside a person to encourage him when he is undergoing severe testing."⁵ The GOD OF ALL COMFORT characterizes the Lord as the source and creator of any and all comfort and mercy you receive.⁶

⁴ Hafeman, 61

⁵ Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, *Paul's Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1962), 11

⁶ Ralph P. Martin, *2 Corinthians*, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco, Tex.: Word Book, Publisher, 1986)

Was your father compassionate or an example of comfort? Moms tend to be better at it, but when dads display comfort to their children there is often a stronger sense of security. No matter if your earthly father was or wasn't compassionate, your heavenly father is. And when you know that his actions toward you are merciful and comforting, the more secure and confident you will be in the midst of affliction.

THE SUPPLY OF YOUR COMFORT: THE SON

1:5 *For as we share abundantly in Christ's sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too.*

- Another reason why God is to be blessed is because He provides the supply of your comfort. Paul acknowledges God as the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. This relationship is appropriate because it is *in Christ* you receive your redemption, adoption and identity as God's child. It is *in Christ* you call God your Father and experience His character of comfort. The comfort that comes through Jesus Christ is a constant overflow He provides to His afflicted children.⁷

The term "affliction" (*thilipsis*) is used 24x by Paul and "suffering" (*pathema*) 9x, both are mentioned 3x in these verses. According to one commentator, "affliction" can "refer to a distress or pain brought about by outward circumstances or by mental and spiritual states of mind."⁸ Paul draws a dynamic correlation between sharing in the **sufferings of Christ** and **His comfort**. This is the mark of a true disciple of Jesus Christ, who made it clear we would share in His sufferings. "Remember the word that I said to you: 'A slave is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you" (Jn.15:20).

Paul often gave testimony of sharing in the sufferings of Christ, "I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I do my share on behalf of His body, which is the church, in filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions" (Col.1:24)

"...that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death" (Phil.3:10)

The Apostle Peter also clarified the issue of suffering,

"Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing, as though some strange thing were happening to you; but to the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing, so that also at the revelation of His glory you may rejoice with exultation. If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you. Make sure that none of you suffers as a murderer, or thief, or evildoer, or a troublesome meddler; but if anyone suffers as a Christian, he is not to be ashamed, but is to glorify God in this name." (1 Peter 4:12-16)

⁷ Hughes, 12

⁸ Hafeman, 62

“Apart from [Christ], suffering leads to despair, not consolation. But Christ, let it be remembered, is no longer suffering in humiliation, for He is now exalted in glory. If we are called to fellowship in the sufferings of the Christ of humiliation, it is the Christ of glory who mediates an abundance of comfort to us.”⁹

Suffering for Christ is inevitable in the life of the believer, but the comfort given through Christ is to be abundantly expected. Paul knew this spiritual equation: *the greater the suffering, the greater the comfort!* If you’re suffering righteously for Christ, or feeling pressed down under the weight of life, then know the abundant supply of comfort provided by your Savior to sufficiently match ALL your affliction.

THE STEWARDSHIP OF YOUR COMFORT: CHURCH BODY

1:6-7 *If we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation; and if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which you experience when you patiently endure the same sufferings that we suffer. Our hope for you is unshaken, for we know that as you share in our sufferings, you will also share in our comfort.*

Why do God’s people have to suffer affliction? If we’re His children, wouldn’t He try to protect us from those things that hurt us? Isn’t that how we parent, to protect our kids?

- Just as the goal of parenting isn’t to prevent and protect from every type of suffering, the goal of God’s comfort isn’t to remove all affliction but equip you with enduring, unshakable faith to be shared with others in ministry. *“Believers receive comfort as a trust or stewardship to be passed on to others. This purpose of comfort is to equip the comforted to be comforters.”¹⁰* When you have experienced divine comfort, you become qualified to minister and encourage others during their times of anguish.

The unregenerate world only knows how to empathize and sympathize in a very temporal sense. When someone has experienced the same type of grief – such as the death of a loved one to a certain type of cancer, or an accidental tragedy, hardship or natural disaster – it can be encouraging to hear how someone “made it through” similar circumstances, what hope they held onto, or what motivation they had to continue.

Yet, most often times no one knows exactly what you’re feeling or going through, and no amount of encouraging words can lift the spirit if no purpose is understood. **THIS IS NOT TRUE FOR THE BELIEVER.** The comforts of this passage are for the committed. Paul says that a believer who has experienced the comfort of God is equipped to share that divine comfort with those under “any/every affliction.” **Like a special agent selected for an important mission**, you become a divine agent of God’s comfort to the afflicted, who have not yet experienced the comfort of Christ.

⁹ Hughes, 14

¹⁰ John F. MacArthur, *2 Corinthians*, MacArthur New Testament commentary (Chicago, Ill.: Moody Publishers, 2003), 22

II. The Experience of Paul's Afflictions [vs.8-11]

1:8-11 For we do not want you to be unaware, brothers, of the affliction we experienced in Asia. For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death. But that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead. He delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us. On him we have set our hope that he will deliver us again. You also must help us by prayer, so that many will give thanks on our behalf for the blessing granted us through the prayers of many.

- Paul was God's ordained vehicle to minister comfort to the Corinthian church. Paul applies the purpose of his experience and comfort directly to the afflictions of the Corinthian church. He makes it clear how his sovereign affliction and divine comfort applied for their spiritual maturity. Paul states clearly he was taught not to rely on himself, but on God, who has the power to raise the dead. Paul knew of the transforming power of the gospel, and he also learned of God's power in the sovereign control over life's afflictions.

*"The gospel is not a coping mechanism, but the promise of resurrection life in the future, the inauguration of which is God's power for a new life in the present."*¹¹

- God crushed Paul's self-reliance by teaching him, through life threatening circumstances, to not rely upon himself, but on his sovereign God. Paul experienced God's power and comfort which in turn were to be used for the comfort of the Corinthians. The ministry of sharing his comfort with them was so God could produce in them an ability to patiently endure their suffering. The Corinthians were to view Paul as their example of how to receive God's comfort and respond in the midst of their own sufferings. Paul was making it clear to them that he was right there with them in understanding their affliction and encouraging them how to endure it.

Practically, how does this work in the midst of your affliction?

YOUR VIEW OF GOD

- Defining God is the starting point of every personal theology. Remember God is not to be defined by our perception of His actions as either good or bad. Instead, His actions derive from His character. **GOD WILL ALWAYS ACT CONSISTENTLY WITH HIS NATURE, HE CAN NEVER ACT CONTRARY TO WHO HE IS.** Going back to His own description of His character, *"The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation."* (Exo.34:6-7)

Do you see God as your source for comfort? Do you believe His love toward you is at maximum capacity and nothing can separate you from the love of Christ! Do you trust His plan for you will work all things together for good, to the glory and praise of His name.

¹¹ Hafeman, 77

“If we are going to learn to trust God in adversity, we must believe that just as certainly as God will allow nothing to subvert His glory, so He will allow nothing to spoil the good He is working out in us and for us.”¹²

YOUR VIEW OF AFFLICTION/SUFFERING

- How do you view the hand of God toward you? Is His rod something you fear and cower away from? Or like David, can you assuredly say, *“Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.”* (Psa.23:4)

“For Paul, suffering is not intrinsically good, nor is it a Christian virtue. Rather, suffering is a page in the textbook used in God’s school of faith. It is not suffering itself that teaches us faith, but God, who uses it as a platform to display his resurrection power in our lives, either through deliverance from suffering or comfort within it.”¹³

- As 2 Corinthians continues, Paul’s perspective on affliction is more holistic. Not to downplay the intensity of the experience of his affliction, for Paul felt “the sentence of death,” meaning he had renounced all hope of survival if not for God’s divine intervention. But Paul later states, *“But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to 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 manifested in our bodies**”* (4:7-10). Then, *“For this **light momentary affliction** is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison”* (4:17).

Paul knew the purpose of his affliction. Do you know yours? If you are enrolled in God’s school of faith, then one of your core courses will be “The Afflicted Christian.” Unlike other classes you’ve attended and see no relevance to your life, this course brings present and practical purpose to your everyday living!

YOUR VIEW OF MINISTRY

- There is no comfort in suffering if God is not sovereign over it. The comfort He provides is proportionate to the need. Just as God assured Paul, *“My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness”* (12:9). Yet all these experiences are to be shared within the body. As our life becomes more privatized through personal technology, the danger of isolation grows larger. But the Christian life is meant to be lived in the fellowship of the church. *“Believers are in a partnership with each other and must never view their suffering in isolation.”¹⁴*

¹² Jerry Bridges, *Trusting God: Even When Life Hurts*, 26

¹³ Hafeman, 67

¹⁴ MacArthur, 1:4b, 6-7

A few specific areas on when sharing comfort is appropriate:

- 1) **Prayer** – *“You also must help us by prayer, so that many will give thanks on our behalf for the blessing granted us through the prayers of many.” (1:11)*
- 2) **Restoration** – *“For such a one, this punishment by the majority is enough, so you should rather turn to forgive and comfort him, or he may be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. So I beg you to reaffirm your love for him.” (2:6-8)*
- 3) **Visitation** – *“But God, who comforts the downcast, comforted us by the coming of Titus, and not only by his coming but also by the comfort with which he was comforted by you, as he told us of your longing, your mourning, your zeal for me, so that I rejoiced still more... And besides our own comfort, we rejoiced still more at the joy of Titus, because his spirit has been refreshed by you all.” (7:6-7, 13)*
- 4) **Repentance** – *“So although I wrote to you, it was not for the sake of the one who did the wrong, nor for the sake of the one who suffered the wrong, but in order that your earnestness for us might be revealed to you in the sight of God. Therefore we are comforted.” (7:12-13)*

CONCLUSION

The call to the Corinthian church was to rely on God’s comfort in the midst of their trial, to patiently endure, trusting themselves to the Father of mercies and God of all comfort. The call to us is to know how the nature of God relates to you in your time of affliction. Also His plan is for you to share with one another in both your sufferings and your comfort, and how the comfort of God enables you to endure. All the while our heavenly Father is teaching you not to rely on yourself, but on Him who has the power to raise the dead.

Comfort for the Afflicted
2 Corinthians 1:1-11

I. The Experience of God's Comfort [vs.1-7]

The Source of your comfort: *The Father*

The Supply of your Comfort: *The Son*

The Stewardship of your Comfort: *Church body*

II. The Experience of Paul's Afflictions [vs.8-11]

Your View of God

Your View of Affliction/suffering

Your View of Ministry