



## Comfort in Affliction

2 Corinthians 1:1-7

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I'd like to invite you now to take your copies of God's Word and turn to the New Testament. We're going to begin a new series this morning in Paul's second letter to the Corinthians. We just concluded a series in Micah, and as is our custom, we go from the Old Testament to the New Testament, back to the Old, and back to the New, because all of God's Word is helpful for God's people. It is helpful for us to grow in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. Our text this morning is 2 Corinthians 1:1-7. Please give attention to the reading of God's Holy Word. For the Word of the Lord is completely without error, the Word of the Lord is completely sufficient, and the Word of the Lord is completely authoritative. Second Corinthians, beginning at chapter 1:

*Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, to the church of God that is at Corinth, with all the saints who are in the whole of Achaia: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who 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.*

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

Thus far the reading of God's Holy Word. Let's pray for his blessing upon it. Heavenly Father, we ask that you would open up your Word to us that we might behold in it marvelous things, that we might behold the Lord Jesus Christ in all of his glory, that we might see what he has done, how he has redeemed us from our sins, from death and hell, and how he has sent his Spirit that we might grow in the knowledge and grace of the Lord Jesus. Lord, may your Word take deep root in our hearts. This we ask in Christ's precious name, amen.

What is comfort? For many, it is synonymous with ease. That is, when we think about comfort, perhaps the first thing that comes to mind is about heat during the winter and air conditioning during a hot Texas summer. Even when we think about it as a verb, as an action, we think about to comfort someone means to soothe them, to bring relief to them. That may be why we, as Americans, have generally not been able to understand the Bible's discussion of comfort.

You see, compared to the rest of the world...in fact, compared to the rest of all of the world in all of history...we live in luxury, in great comfort, so we don't think we need to be comforted. But today, in our present situation, we

know more about being tossed and turned, we know more about fear and worry than we once did. We know more about pain and suffering.

So I think we are ready to hear Paul's letter today about the comfort of the gospel, about the God of comfort, about our need to comfort each other. This entire book is about the comfort God gives to his people, but our text this morning is perhaps the greatest text on comfort in all of the Bible. The word *comfort* appears in this text 10 times. As you read it, it can be even difficult to get through because the word appears over and over and over again.

Do you need comfort today? Do you know someone who needs comfort? Then listen on as we look this morning at Paul's great passage on comfort, that we might see three things this morning. First, we will see the *God of comfort*. Secondly, we will see the *comfort for the minister*. Then thirdly, we will see *comfort for God's people*. The God of comfort, comfort for the minister, and comfort for God's people.

Let's begin, then, with the context for this letter. This letter, 2 Corinthians, is the third largest letter Paul has written. That's why in your Bibles it appears third in the list of Paul's epistles...Romans, 1 Corinthians, and then 2 Corinthians. You may not have realized this, but your Bible is not organized in chronological order of the letters. They're organized in the size of Paul's letters. So, this is the third largest letter Paul has written.

He wrote it in Macedonia, which is essentially northern Greece, in AD 55. He wrote this one year after writing 1 Corinthians, and in one year from *this* point he will write the book of Romans. This letter was actually the fourth letter Paul wrote to the church at Corinth. Not every letter Paul wrote to every church became Scripture. First Corinthians, for example, mentions a previous letter Paul had sent, and in *this* letter of 2 Corinthians Paul mentions a tearful letter he has written. If we add those all up, it takes us to four.

Let's think now just for a moment about the city of Corinth, the place where this church was located. Paul had planted this church with the help of Silas and Timothy and Priscilla and Aquila who were living in Corinth at the time. Corinth was a wealthy trade city. It was known as the third most prominent city in all of the Roman empire after Rome and Alexandria. It was a wealthy city with very little social tradition. That was because it had been completely destroyed in 146 BC, and it was not rebuilt until 44 BC.

So now this city Paul has planted a church in is some 80, 90, 100 years old, much younger than all of the other cities around it...Athens, Sparta, Ephesus, Rome. So, in a way, Corinth was a lot like modern America. It was filled with confidence, with entrepreneurialism, with materialism, and yes, with sin. Now, Paul's relationship to the church at Corinth is also important. Paul lived in Corinth for 18 months while he planted this church, longer than in many of the places where he ministered.

After planting this church, Paul went to the city of Ephesus. About three years after founding this church, he wrote the first letter to the Corinthians that we have in our Bibles. He wrote this letter to address concerns he had about the church and its people. Then Paul sent Timothy, his son in the faith, to go and check in on the church, to see how things were going. To his shock, Timothy found a growing apostasy. He found growing ungodliness. He found challenges and difficulties in this church at Corinth.

Paul decided, upon hearing this news from Timothy, to quickly go back to Corinth to see if he could help, and when he arrived he experienced great pain. After bringing the gospel to Corinth, after bringing the Lord Jesus Christ and the knowledge of forgiveness of sins to the people of Corinth, after building the church up, establishing its leaders, and living among them, he met with a church that didn't trust him, that criticized him, that thought he was old news, that he didn't really have the weight he should have, didn't have the authority he should have.

They compared Paul unfavorably to a whole list of new teachers they had, so-called super-apostles. So Paul left discouraged. He then sent Titus back with what has been called a *severe letter*, calling the Corinthians back to repentance, to come back to Jesus. The majority in that church did indeed repent and come back to Paul and to the gospel, but there were still some in the church who held a grudge against Paul, who thought his gospel was weak, that it needed encouragement and extra material.

It's in *this* context that Paul writes this letter. He's preparing for a third visit to Corinth. Paul is writing from a place of pain, from a place of rejection, of suffering. It's suffering after he has invested his life in these believers at Corinth, in this church. He wants to see the church flourish in the gospel. Now, this has been a somewhat more lengthy introduction than we are used to, but I think it's important for us to understand what Paul is writing here, because Paul writes as someone who is hurt, and he's writing to those he loves.

### **God of Comfort**

He begins, then, in our text by showing them the God of comfort. He wants them to see right away that God has not abandoned them in their pain; in fact, that God is using Paul's pain and their pain and affliction to bring them comfort. So he starts with what might seem to be a typical greeting for Paul. He says, "Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God..." In nine of his letters, Paul describes himself as an apostle, one who is sent by God.

Paul is reminding his readers (and you) of what God has done in his life. You see, Paul never tried to hide his past. In fact, he did quite the opposite. He spoke of how God had taken a sinner, a persecutor of the church, and had made him into an instrument of the gospel. Paul was never the same after he met Jesus on that road to Damascus. We will read in weeks to come about all that Paul endured in the service of the gospel and of Jesus in this book, but Paul would not have traded what he endured for anything but the service of Jesus.

Do you think about what God has done for *you* or are you too often focused only on the difficulties that are in your life? Paul is reminding you here this morning to look to the Lord and what he has done, to make that primary, to not have the Lord hidden by your circumstances and your difficulties, because the Lord has indeed done marvelous things for you.

Next, Paul reminds us that God has done various things to establish this church at Corinth. This is part of the reason for my lengthy introduction. You need to remember what happened at Corinth. The church at Corinth was, to put it mildly, a mess. If you're not sure about this, use some of your time later today to read the book of 1 Corinthians. You can probably do it in about 30 minutes. You will see the mess that was found in the church of Corinth, all of the sin that was found in that church.

This church had rejected Paul's authority. It had wandered from the faith. It had chosen super-apostles over Paul and had emphasized the glory of themselves over the glory of God. Yet to whom does Paul write? He writes to the church of God at Corinth. He writes to the saints. Think about that for a moment. This is what God has done. It's the story of the Bible.

In short form here, just in this greeting, God has taken sinners, rebels, and he forms them into his people, and when he speaks of them, he speaks of them in terms of what he is doing and what he will accomplish, not in terms of who they are now. Paul doesn't write to the miserable sinners in Corinth. He doesn't write to the ungrateful louts. No, he writes to the church of Jesus Christ...saints. That's how God views you, because that's what God has done. Don't ever forget this, especially when you're discouraged in affliction. The Lord is the one who does wondrous things. He establishes you. He never forgets you.

So, who is this God? Well, Paul tells us in verse 3. He says, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort." Paul begins here with a typical Jewish benediction, but he modifies it. It would have been a greeting in the synagogue to say, "Blessed be God, the God of our fathers," and then to refer to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, but Paul makes this greeting, this blessing, explicitly Christian. He focuses us on Jesus Christ.

That's the first thing he wants us to know about God: he is the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Paul never wants us to try to understand who God is apart from Jesus. That's the great thing about the gospel. Jesus is the one who restores us to God. Jesus is the one we come to God through. Jesus is the one through whom God blesses us. Jesus is our mediator. He is God himself, but for our sake he became man, and as such, God is also *his* God, *his* Father. Jesus did that for you so you could have God as *your* Father.

Paul also describes God as the *Father of mercies*. This has the idea of compassion or of pity. It's the same concept Paul uses in Romans, chapter 12, when he tells us to think about the mercies of God so that we might live lives of holiness. God is both compassionate and the source, the Father of all compassion. Do you know someone who knows you? Do you need someone to know what you need in terms of compassion and mercy? God knows. Do you need someone to come alongside you? God does. He is a merciful and loving God. Never forget that.

The third way Paul describes God is as the *God of all comfort*. God is described here as the unique and sole source of all comfort. This goes even further than compassion. The word here means to come alongside and to call. God is not only there for you; he calls to you. He strengthens you. That's where our English word *comfort* comes from. It comes from a Latin word that means to strengthen much. To be comforted is to be strengthened.

What a word of comfort this is from Paul. There is no circumstance in which God is unable to comfort you, to strengthen you. Notice how comprehensive Paul is, that God is the Father of *all* comfort who comforts in *all* affliction, in *any* affliction. He is the God of all possible comfort. There is no comfort without God. He comforts in any, in *all* afflictions.

There is no trouble that can separate us from God. He has shown that to you in Jesus. God knows what affliction is like. He knows what suffering is like. It's exactly when you are afflicted that the love of God is made greater in

your life and heart. This is the great God of comfort that Paul reminds us we must run to. This knowledge kept Paul going and it will keep *you* also.

Well, now that we've spent much time setting the stage as to what Paul knows about affliction and comfort and, more importantly, who the God of comfort is, let's move a bit more quickly through the application of that comfort...first to the minister and then to God's people. Let's look, first, in verses 4 and 5, at comfort for the minister.

### **Comfort for the Minister**

It's not that this application is unimportant, but we're going to see much more of this application throughout all of the book. The most crucial thing for you and me to see is who God is. Then everything else falls into place. When we see that God is the God of all comfort, then we can understand how we are comforted.

Now Paul turns in verse 4 and begins speaking about himself and his ministry. He says that God is the one 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. This is the job of the minister. He talks about how he experiences comfort from God and that allows him to comfort others. That's what the minister does. He relays the reality of God's work to others.

Perhaps the best way to do this is to pass on your experience to others. You can't tell others to read the Bible if you don't or to pray when you won't. Why? Because unless you experience the life-changing work of Jesus through his means of grace, you can't properly tell others about it. So Paul says that God comforts him in all his affliction, and Paul knew what he was talking about here. Paul had been imprisoned, beaten, stoned, driven from cities. He had been in danger from enemies and in danger from so-called false friends.

He had seen others try to tear down the work of the gospel he was building. If anybody would be discouraged, ready to quit, it would be Paul, but God was always there for Paul in all of his afflictions. Not just in the hardest ones or in some of the particular ones but in *all* of them, and this helps us to understand affliction. Why does God allow affliction? Why doesn't an all-powerful, all-loving God protect us from all troubles? Well, our answer is: so that we will be a comfort to others.

Paul says that explicitly. He went through affliction so he would be able to comfort others when *they* were in affliction. That includes you. Are you having trouble right now? Most of the world is. Are you unsure of finances or health or others around you? Paul is comforting you right now with his words. He has told you about the God of all comfort who he knows personally. Do *you* know that God? If you need comfort today, then what you need is the God of all comfort.

Paul also makes it clear that his relationship with the God of all comfort comes through Jesus Christ. We might take that for granted, but we cannot. Paul reminds us that one of the reasons we have affliction is because we are in Christ. Look with me at verse 5. "For as we share abundantly in Christ's sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too." In verse 5, Paul is writing about that we share abundantly in Christ's sufferings.

This was especially true of Paul. He knew this not only from what he suffered, but he knew it from the very first words Jesus said to him on that road to Damascus. You may recall that Jesus confronted Paul and said, "Paul, Paul, why do you persecute me?" I could just imagine proud Saul of Tarsus on his horse, who had been knocked off. He sees the blazing light, and he hears this voice. I can imagine him saying, "Who *are* you? I don't persecute *you*. Sure, I'm attacking a bunch of lazy Christians all over the place, some heretics, but I'm not persecuting *you*."

Of course, Paul would come to know what *we* know from God's Word: when God's people are persecuted, when God's people are afflicted, Jesus is afflicted. That's because Jesus so identifies with his people that their affliction is his own. That's what Paul is saying here. So this doesn't just apply to gospel ministers; it applies to everyone who names the name of Jesus Christ. If you hope to share in Jesus' crown, then you have to carry your cross. Jesus does not promise you a life of ease and comfort in that sense, but he *does* promise to comfort you.

Do you see how Paul puts this? In verse 5 there is a *so* and an *as*. *As* you abound in sufferings, *so* you abound in comfort. There's only one place to get comfort, and that's from Jesus. Notice that there are many afflictions (plural), but there is only one comfort. There is one comfort that fits all. It's the Lord Jesus Christ. Comfort is from God, but everything we receive from God comes to us through the Lord Jesus Christ.

### **Comfort for God's People**

Let's move on now quickly to the experience of comfort by God's *people* at Corinth, comfort for the *people* of God. Paul gives us here in verse 6 two conditional clauses: *if*. In each case, they represent a reality. It is not *if* in the sense of "If possibly this were true," but it is more "Because this is the case." "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."

This is immediately what we see in verse 6, because Paul was certainly afflicted. We've talked about that. What was the reason for Paul's affliction? Well, one reason, as we've seen, was so God could bring comfort to Paul, but there's another reason, and he states this clearly. The reason Paul was afflicted was for *your* comfort. Now what does *that* mean? Let's think about that for a moment.

Paul has said he was afflicted and that his affliction brought comfort from God. Even more than that, that he experienced comfort through the Lord Jesus Christ, and he experienced this so the Corinthians would know comfort. They saw Paul patiently endure. They saw him endure in his afflictions, and they saw God comfort him, and that allowed *them* to patiently endure with the afflictions *they* experienced.

Paul writes, "If I was comforted, it's for your comfort, and this comfort energizes or is at work in others as they endure." That's what the word *experience* means in verse 6. "The comfort which you experience." It means to be at work in, to energize. So, as you experience affliction, you should know that it brings comfort from God, comfort that you otherwise would not have had, and it brings opportunities for others to see you be comforted by God.

One might even say that affliction is a blessing. This is hard to imagine, but the Bible is clear that God works in trials and sufferings and that when God is at work you are blessed. We see it in the epistle James has written. "Count

it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds." Paul writes in Romans 5, "Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance."

Peter says in 1 Peter 4, "But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed." Over and over again, the Scripture reminds us that our sufferings, our trials, our afflictions are not only but for a moment, are not only not to be compared with the glory that is to come, but they are something we should rejoice in because they allow us to see God at work in our lives.

Paul then brings this passage to a close with hope. It seems odd to think about affliction bringing hope, but that's what Paul says in verse 7. "Our hope for you is unshaken, for we know that as you share in our sufferings, you will also share in our comfort." We think, I fear, that we would be much more hopeful about life if life would go better. I know I have to catch *myself* from thinking that way. I get most discouraged when things are hard, and when things are easy I think I can take on the world, but that's not what real and true hope is.

We can fall prey to this, especially in times of affliction and trouble. Who among us does not get more hopeful when we see statistics come out about the virus situation that are better, when cases are down, when fatalities are down, when there are empty beds in hospitals, when there is a multiplicity of ventilators? Who does not become more hopeful then by those statistics?

Paul's thinking is more in line with what he has written before. As you share in affliction, you will share in comfort, and as you share in comfort, you will share in Christ who is the only channel of comfort, and as you share in Jesus Christ, you know you have hope. That's what Paul is pointing you to. He wants you to lift your eyes from your circumstances and put them on Jesus, because that's where your hope should be fixed.

No matter what happens around you, no matter what your circumstances are, Jesus is fixed. He is your true and great hope. So, even when we are afflicted, even when we suffer, that suffering allows us to focus on Jesus and it gives us great hope. Our hope is based on Jesus. The truth is that your connection to Jesus is best through affliction and suffering. Now, we don't *want* suffering, but when suffering comes, we have to put it in its proper perspective. We must use it to look to Jesus.

Beloved, unlike some who preach a health and wealth gospel, I'm not going to tell you that you will never suffer. Unlike much of our society that believes it has a right to comfort and ease, I am not going to tell you that, but I *will* tell you that God is the God of all comfort. Not just in *some* situations, not just *some* comfort, but in *every* situation he provides *every* comfort.

Be encouraged. Jesus told you in this world you will have tribulation, but always remember Jesus has overcome the world. Your hope is not found in your health or in your 401(k) or even in your ability to do what you desire each and every day. Your hope is found in Jesus. Amen.