

The God of All Comfort

Let's turn together to the 2nd letter to the Corinthians. This morning we are starting a series we're calling Messy Grace.

Several years ago we went through 1 Cor. and we called that series *Letter to a Really Messed Up Church*. The church in Corinth was really messed up:

- They are arrogant
- There are serious divisions within the church
- The church thinks being ok with incest is evidence of their spiritual maturity
- The poor went without and the rich got drunk in their communion services
- The charismatic gifts were being abused
- Some were denying that believers would be resurrected on the last day
- And many in the church were questioning Paul's legitimacy as an apostle

So Paul writes this really messed up church a letter, what we know as 1 Cor. And that letter helped – a lot! The church took Paul's rebuke to heart, repented of their arrogance, strongly addressed the incest, and as a church began to move in the right direction.

2 Cor. is a letter written to a much-improved church, but it's still messy. God's grace is working, and mess is still happening. Messy grace. That's the story of the church. We can try to airbrush away the imperfections, but that isn't reality and God can't anoint unreality.

Messy grace is the story of the church, and the story of my life and yours. Progress and mess. Spiritual insight and spiritual blind spots. A life getting cleaned up (sanctified) but some serious clutter being crammed into a closet, and dust being swept under the rug.

Some people call this progressive sanctification. Let's call it messy grace. But let's not lose sight that it's grace. God's grace working in us individually and corporately as a church. Messy, yes, but *grace*! Let's pray and then read 2 Cor. 1:1-8

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:

2 Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

3 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, **4** 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. **5** For as we share abundantly in Christ's sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too. ^[a] **6** 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. **7** Our hope for you is unshaken, for we know that as you share in our sufferings, you will also share in our comfort. 2 Cor. 1:1-7

The mess of affliction

The key words in this passage is “comfort” and “affliction”. Comfort occurs 10x, affliction occurs 8x.

The Greek word for affliction is derived from the verb meaning to press. Affliction is made up of things like pain, suffering, hardship, opposition, and distress. It can come in different forms, but whatever form it takes, affliction presses – squeezes - our hearts, and what comes out, at least at first, is often messy.

Affliction can be like knocking life over and spilling everything onto the floor. Messy.

When things are going good, it’s easy for us to think we’re doing well and growing in Christ, then affliction hits and stuff comes out of us and we’re like, “where’d that come from?” It came from our heart, it was in there all the time. Affliction doesn’t create the mess, it just squeezes it out.

But here’s the thing: it’s a mess, but at least it’s a real mess. Affliction has a way of pressing us out of our “I’ve got it all together” image into raw reality. Affliction sands off the superficial layers over our hearts and leaves our hearts raw, but it’s raw that’s real. This is who I am. I’m struggling with doubts. I’m battling with discouragement. I’m tempted to be angry with God: why me, Lord? Why this, Lord? The curtain comes down and the real us is revealed. And the real us is a mess.

The grace of comfort

But another curtain comes down: God uses affliction in our lives to reveal Who He is. He is the Father of mercies and the God of all comfort. God draws near to the afflicted, to the broken, to the hurting. And we know our heavenly Father in a deeper way. Those who feel their need for mercy come to know the Father of mercy. Those who need comfort, come to know the God of all comfort. Not just as a concept, not just know about comfort, but we experience comfort from His loving hand deep within our affliction-pressed heart.

In his commentary on 2 Cor. Chuck Swindoll makes a distinction that I feel is an important one. God brings good out of affliction but affliction in itself isn’t good. We shouldn’t think of pain, suffering, and death as good, or as our friends. They are the product of a fallen world. God redeems good out of bad, but that doesn’t make the bad good.

I don’t know about you, but I don’t particularly want to suffer. I don’t go looking for affliction. I don’t think that makes me a bad Christian, I think it makes me normal. Affliction isn’t the good, God’s ability to redeem affliction and comfort us is the good.

The greatest good thing that God brings out of affliction is our hearts become raw enough to feel our need for comfort and then experience the deep comfort that only the God of all comfort can provide.

Then, having experienced God’s comfort, we can comfort others out of the comfort we have received.

That’s a key part of what “comfort” is: the Greek word Paraklesis means to come alongside to encourage and to strengthen. The Holy Spirit is called the Paraklete, the Comforter. God comes alongside to strengthen us, give us courage, encourage us. Then we are better able to come alongside someone else who is hurting with encouragement and strength. Come alongside – that’s an important part, coming

alongside. When someone is hurting and in pain, and the mess of raw reality is coming out of them, we don't just send them an emoji text, we find out how we can come alongside and encourage them.

Giving comfort is more than just warm and fuzzies. Warmth and human touch is an important part, don't get me wrong, but the goal of comfort isn't to make someone comfortable, it's to strengthen them to keep going. It's to encourage them not to give up.

Comfort isn't the same thing as comfortable. God doesn't promise to give us a comfortable life, no more danger, no more trouble, no more worries, no more crisis. Comfort helps us be brave in the face of danger. Take heart in disheartening situations. To have hope when things seem hopeless.

Now there's an important question this passage raises. Look at verses 5-6 with me:

⁵ For as we share abundantly in Christ's sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too.^[a] ⁶ 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. 2 Cor. 1:5-6

Some teachers say from this that Paul is talking only about the sufferings that come in the service of Jesus and the gospel. He is certainly talking about that – he was suffering for the gospel, and that suffering overflowed to comfort and ministry to the Corinthian church.

But the Christian life is full of afflictions. I was talking to a brother the other day whose wife has to have surgery for a serious issue, and he confessed he was struggling with fear. Real affliction, but not related to their witness for Christ. It's just life and life is full of hardships and pain and brokenness and even death. And these press on our hearts just as hard when they're not a result of our Christian faith as when they are.

God is the God of *all* comfort. Not *some* comfort in specific circumstances. So yes, we should be willing to suffer for the sake of Christ and in that suffering we will experience God's strong comfort. That is primarily what Paul has in mind here, but personally I believe God wants us to know His paraklesis, His comfort, in any and all afflictions.

Grace in the crush

Paul shares his own personal experience with affliction starting in verse 8:

⁸ For we do not want you to be unaware, brothers,¹ of the affliction we experienced in Asia. For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself. ⁹ 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. ¹⁰ 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. ¹¹ 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. 2 Cor. 1:8-11

Paul says they were utterly burdened beyond their strength. I think the NIV captures the meaning better: *We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired of life itself.*

Maybe the Revised Version is even better: ⁸ *We do not want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters, of the affliction we experienced in Asia; for we were so utterly, unbearably crushed that we despaired of life itself.*

Paul and his team faced afflictions to the point that they were “utterly burdened”, “under great pressure”, “utterly, unbearably crushed”. The press of afflictions were so great they despaired of life. The pain went so deep, and so far beyond their ability to endure, they thought they would die.

And at that point, when Paul came to the end of his strength, when he had nothing left in the tank, God had him where He wanted him. God’s purpose for the press of afflictions weren’t to kill Paul but to bring him to the end of himself. Verse 9:

But that [the pressure, the unbearable crush] was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead. ¹⁰ He delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us.

They got to the end of themselves and found God. Paul learned not to rely on himself, but on God. The grace in the crush was learning to rely on God and seeing God deliver him.

For the Christian there’s a beauty in affliction, there’s a grace in being utterly crushed.

Maybe you’re going through something now that’s pressing down on your heart and what’s coming out is pretty messy. We can’t avoid affliction all our lives. At some point – probably at many points – we will suffer. We will be heartbroken. We will be crushed. We will come to the end of our strength.

It’s then we can experience God’s comfort, and learn to rely not on ourselves, but on God who raises the dead. Even death doesn’t end it when God’s involved. If death can’t kill our hope then certainly nothing short of hope can.

Comfort brings hope to our souls, and hope brings comfort to our souls.

One way we can come alongside and comfort one another is by praying for one another. There is great comfort in knowing someone is praying for you when you’re going through a hard time. One, it says that they care. And that’s comforting. And two, there’s power in prayer. God hears prayer. God answers prayer.

Let me close with this encouragement.

Sometimes when someone is going through a hard time, we don’t know what to say, so we avoid them. Let’s come along side of them with words of encouragement and courage. Comfort. Sometimes when the press is on, and someone’s life gets really messy – they don’t look like the perfectly put together Christian, we can be tempted to write them off.

God doesn’t. We shouldn’t. Let’s come alongside. Let’s pray. Let’s comfort. Let’s be a vessel of God’s courage poured into them. And when we’re afflicted let’s allow God to do that in our lives through our brothers and sisters.

If you are going through...