

God of all compassion and comfort

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[0 : 0 0] Well, as Jeff has said, we're starting a new series today in the second letter to the Corinthians. We might not get to the end of it by the end of the year, but we'll come back to it next year.

Now, there is in life many things we desire. And by and large, except for a small minority of people, we probably all share them in common.

So take, for example, the topic of health. All people desire to be healthy, not sick. Or if you're a student, good grades, perfect even, but definitely not to fail.

We desire money rather than to be poor, to be loved rather than hated. And in these pandemic times, we want more freedoms, not restrictions.

Fewer cases of COVID, not more. And personally, to be COVID negative rather than positive. There is therefore a positive sphere we would like to inhabit.

[1 : 1 3] Some people call it their happy place. And yet in life, we sometimes find ourselves outside it. Maybe not in relation to everything, but perhaps one or two.

But when it happens, we try really hard to get back into it. So, for example, when I fell recently and broke my wrist, I was keen to get back to my happy place of bike riding.

And when it didn't happen, for a while there, it was a bit depressing. And so, when it doesn't happen for us, we either worry or get angry or depressed. And it's no different even for Christians.

Because as humans, no one delights in pain or suffering. As Christians, we may do just a little bit more, perhaps pray, and hope God would come to our aid. So, now in our passage tonight, as we begin 2 Corinthians, God shows us the good He intends for us, even when we sometimes find ourselves outside our happy place.

Now, when that happens, there are still blessings. Things we can still experience of Him, which surprisingly we may not, if all is well and rosy.

[2 : 3 1] And all this is summarized in the prayer in verses 3 and 4, which is really today's big idea as well, if you're looking for one. What does it say? Well, it's on the slide.

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God.

It's not hard, is it, to pick the most repeated word? Comfort. You see, when we get to life when it isn't rosy, what happens and what we get from God is His comfort.

Now, this prayer is like the one in Ephesians, praising the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, as in the next slide. But whereas, in Ephesians, the focus is on the spiritual blessings in Christ, here it's God's comfort in times of trouble.

You see, when life is filled with trouble or affliction, God's blessing comes to us in the form of comfort. And just as the promise in Ephesians is all-encompassing, so you notice the superlative, every spiritual blessing in Christ, so here, the superlatives come in the form of the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so we can comfort others in any trouble.

[4 : 08] In other words, this assurance is good for any situation. It's not like those cheap movie tickets you buy that expires after six months, which, thanks to COVID, is unusable, or when it's only valid on Tuesdays after 9pm, when you'd rather be in bed.

No, God's comfort is applicable to all troubles, whatever the situation, whenever it occurs. Now, there's really so much to unpack in these two verses, but what Paul does now is elaborate on it in verses 5 to 11.

And so what I propose that we do is look at them, these verses 5 to 11, as our way to understand verses 3 and 4 better. Now, if you look at the outline, which was either on the website or in a church app, I've divided the rest of the passage as follows.

So in verses 5 to 7, Paul shows us the pattern of God's comfort. Verses 6 to 8, yes, there's no overlap, there's no typo there, there's an overlap, deliberately.

We've got the nature of God's comfort. So, pattern of God's comfort, now nature of God's comfort. And then finally, in verses 9 to 11, we have the goal of God's comfort.

[5 : 29] And all these expand on Paul's praise in verses 3 and 4. And as we understand how God works, we'll hopefully share in the same awe that Paul has for God, that overflows with praise, just as he did.

Now, what do I mean by the pattern of God's comfort? Well, listen to verse 5, which says, For just as we share abundantly in the sufferings of Christ, so also our comfort abounds through Christ.

If we are distressed, it is for your comfort and salvation. If we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which produces in you patient endurance of the same sufferings we suffer. And our hope for you is firm, because we know that just as you share in our sufferings, so also you share in our comfort.

Now, as I can see it, there are two aspects to this pattern. The first relates to the principle that as Christians, we're all in Christ. Being in Christ means we share in everything that Christ is.

We participate fully in Him and what He's achieved. And normally, as we read the Bible, we focus on the positives, like participating in His death and substitutionary atonement, or sharing in His eternal life through His resurrection, or having God as our Father because God is His Father.

[6 : 54] Hence, if you notice in verse 2, which we didn't really cover on the slide, Paul offers them grace and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

But then in verse 3, this is because He's the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. It implies that God is our Father because we're in Christ.

And so this comfort we receive is likewise because of Jesus. That's the pattern. In fact, it follows that the comfort we receive is the same comfort that God gave to His Son Jesus.

For example, in the Garden of Gethsemane or on the cross. Although perhaps not to the same degree as we experience. But notice what else is shared as well in these verses.

Paul says that it's when He and others with Him share in Christ's suffering. That is, experience suffering either as Christ did or because of His sake, for His sake.

[7 : 57] It's when they share in Christ's suffering that God's comfort abounds to them through Christ. And a few verses later, Paul says that too with us, the Corinthians and us, that we share in this comfort as we share in the same suffering.

So it's a package deal, isn't it? This participation in Christ. We get everything. The suffering as well as the comfort as well as all the other things that we have in Christ.

It's not like ordering a Big Mac, for example, where you can ask for no onions or pickles. No, here a serve of God's comfort comes with the side of suffering.

And Paul doesn't confine the type of suffering here. In fact, he speaks of all and any trouble, doesn't he? But whatever they are, the underlying challenge is always to remain faithful through that suffering or trouble.

Not giving in to sin or unbelief in the face of suffering, but standing firm. So that's the first aspect, that as we participate in Christ, we participate in all that Christ has for us.

[9 : 12] The suffering and the comfort. But the second aspect of this is how this comfort is transmitted. It's the chain of transmission, if you like, to use a very COVID buzz phrase for our times.

Paul says that this comfort is transmitted through Christ. And in turn, verse 3, we transmit or mediate God's comfort when we ourselves have been comforted through Christ.

So God comforts us through Christ so that we then comfort others. See the chain of reaction there? With the comfort of God. And so Paul elaborates in verse 6, if they're distressed, meaning if they endure hardship, that is Paul, then it's for the Corinthians' comfort and salvation.

Paul serves them by denying his own needs. If, on the other hand, Paul is comforted later on, however that might be, then it also is for their comfort, the Corinthians' comfort as well.

Paul is therefore modelling the pattern of God's comfort, which he's praised God for in verse 3. He's able to comfort the Corinthians because he has first been comforted in Christ.

[10 : 27] Now what then is the nature of this comfort as we get to the next point? And normally here, when we think about comfort, we often think in terms of, you know, when someone is suffering and we want to comfort them, the thing we try and do is to take away or alleviate their suffering, isn't it?

And that's natural. You've got a headache? Go take some Nurofen. You feel cold? Put on a jumper. And with things of this nature, that's the right response.

But that's not necessarily the case with God and with spiritual conditions or other forms of suffering. Particularly when it relates to things we have no control over, whether it's terminal illness or hardship in life or persecution.

So read what Paul says here carefully and what we see is that the comfort God offers isn't necessarily to take away the trouble. Instead, in verse 6, Paul says that if we are comforted, it is for your comforted which produces in you patient endurance of the same sufferings we suffer.

Patient endurance implies the suffering is still there, isn't it? And yet, they experience God's comfort with it. Paul likewise shares his own experience in verse 8.

[11 : 48] We do not want you to be uninformed, he says, brothers and sisters, about the troubles we experience in the province of Asia. We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure so that we despaired of life itself.

It's probably talking about the experience in Ephesus, which you can read of in Acts. But again, God didn't rescue Paul immediately. On the contrary, they were pushed to the very edge, far beyond their ability to endure, despairing of life.

But in the midst of it, actually probably because of it, what they experienced was the blessing of God's comfort. Not in the absence of suffering, but in the midst of suffering.

And in fact, Paul is probably saying that the more abundant the suffering, the greater the comfort that they received. Which again, if you look at Jesus' life, is rather similar as well, isn't it?

Whether it's the 40 days in the wilderness or at Gethsemane, Jesus wasn't spared from his trials or suffering, was he? And yet, we read that God, his Father, ministered to him.

[12 : 57] So in fact, in Luke, Jesus was full of the Spirit when he entered the wilderness. So this comfort then, contrary to what is popular, is not soft and sort of cuddly type of comfort, is it?

But rather a more robust comfort where it comes in the form of God's strength and encouragement and wisdom to enable us to endure and overcome the suffering.

Not to take it away, but to help us remain faithful through it. Well beyond, often, what we imagine we can bear. Now I also know that the Holy Spirit isn't mentioned explicitly here, but I believe that's his work in these times.

Incidentally, the word here for comfort is the same one we find in John's Gospel. So in chapter 14, verse 16 and 17, when Jesus talks about sending another advocate, the word advocate is the same word here as comfort.

That's why some translations have the word *paraclete*, which is the Greek version of comfort, or the Greek translation. Jesus then is the original comforter, as he says here, and the Spirit is sent as another comforter.

[14 : 18] And in John chapter 14, verse 26, just a little on, Jesus says, the Spirit will teach us all things and remind us of all the things that he's taught the disciples. And so the nature of this comfort isn't mere sympathy or empathy, but wisdom and a reminder of God's character and promise to give us hope to strengthen us to endure.

It's comfort that sustains us even when the afflictions don't go away. To which we may then ask, why does God do it like that?

Well, why doesn't he just take it away? Because surely he can, can't he? Well, of course he can. But not if he has other goals in mind for us, which is what we learn in verse 9.

For Paul says, indeed we felt we had received the sentence of death, but this happened. Why? The reason? That we might not rely on ourselves, but on God who raises the dead.

We all love to be self-sufficient, don't we? Sort of the thought of relying on others doesn't sort of sit well with many of us, does it? It almost takes away our human dignity when we're helpless or powerless.

[15 : 37] You know what? You mean I can't even look after myself? Is what we think? And so perhaps that's why we need to be pushed to our limits, doesn't it?

Because unless it happens, we don't think to turn to rely on God. often we need to get to that point so that we learn not to rely on ourselves, but to trust in God.

And incidentally, Paul adds as a reminder that the God we are relying on has the power to raise the dead, even His Son. That's who we are being asked to rely on and the power that He has.

And so Paul has no hesitation in praising this God as the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort because he himself has seen firsthand the extent of the way God's power has been at work in His trials.

He's seen God's very nature of compassion translating into comfort. And often our appreciation of just how compassionate, how great this compassion of God is comes only when our life's circumstances puts us to the test, doesn't it?

[17 : 01] Or puts God's character to that test. It's like being in a concrete bunker. I'm not sure how many of you have been in, but if you've visited around Europe and gone into those bunkers, you know how secure it is only when a typhoon or hurricane passes by as you're in it.

I wasn't in one when it happened, but you can imagine the fierce winds outside battering. That's when you know how good this bunker is because then you know how safe and secure you are within it.

Likewise, it's when we're in the depths of our despair that we know deeply the comfort that God can provide. It's only at that time that we know how precious His Word is for us, how He truly understands what we're going through as we read His words of comfort and how wonderful the gift of His Son Jesus is and the assurance that He gives us of salvation.

And I know that many of you have been at these very points because you've shared them with me. how life has been difficult during this very period of the pandemic.

And these words from Paul could literally have been yours, couldn't it? How you've been pushed to despair of life even. And yet, at the very same time, you've also shared with me that it is in these very times that you've known just how close God is to you, how real He is, more so than any other time in life.

[18 : 40] How you've grown in your faith like you've never done before. Because you've been brought to the point, haven't you, of not relying on yourself but on God. And I say that when we endure patiently until we come out on the other side, then what we have is that precious experience of going through this very valley of the shadow of death as it says in Psalm 23 and seeing first hand, experiencing first hand, God's deliverance and rescue.

And then you can say and I know some of you already can, exactly what Paul says in verse 10. He has delivered us from such a deadly peril and He will deliver us again.

That's a note of secure hope, isn't it? On Him we have set our hope that He will continue to deliver us as you help us by your prayers. That many will give thanks on behalf for the gracious favor granted us in answer to the prayers of many.

You see, when you've tasted God's compassion and comfort once, you know how to draw from it again. You've developed a secure hope and a resilient faith.

Not a fledgling faith that you might have if you're a young Christian that's sort of maybe, you know, full of enthusiasm and idolism. And let me say there's nothing wrong with that.

[20 : 09] All faith in Jesus is good. But this mature, resilient faith allows you to withstand greater trials. It's like a mighty campfire that's not easily put out.

No matter what's thrown at it. No matter how strong the wind is around. It's very different, isn't it, to that flickering flame of a candle or a matchstick.

Or if you're watching Survivor when they just first strike that flint, they're trying to get it to go and it goes out again. Not that kind of faith, but the one where the campfire is just roaring and you know you have to throw a lot at it, water or whatever, to douse it.

And so when you realize this great blessing of this sort of faith that God achieves through trouble, that is something that God will be working to use in you down the track, then you're able to learn to sit quietly in it, in this period when you're still going through it.

Not to rush to quick relief, but actually to see the Lord's working through you to the end. Because when we get to the relief too quickly, we don't learn to wait on the Lord, do we?

[21 : 29] We're like constantly checking our watch to see when it's going to end. When the patient waiting that the Lord needs us to do is to just allow God the time to help us experience and see His grace and mercy more and more fully.

Now everyone is familiar with that verse, verses 22 and 23 from Lamentations chapter 3 that Michelle read tonight. I'm sure she was very tempted to sing along to it because she sang along to it this morning.

It says, Because of the Lord's great love we are not consumed, for His compassions never fail. They are new every morning. Great is your faithfulness.

Great is your... Now, that's probably enough. Now, far be it for me to criticize Colin's songwriting here, but I actually have to say that this song is probably a little too upbeat for the context.

I think this is a minor key, but even so, if you look at the other verses for context, so verse 24 it says, I say to myself, the Lord is my portion, therefore I wait for Him.

[22 : 40] The Lord is good to those whose hope is in Him, good to the one who seeks Him. It is good to wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord. Many things I've just spoken about. And then listen to what he goes on to say.

It is good for a man to bear the yoke while he is young. So all you young around here, take note. Let him sit alone in silence for the Lord has laid it, that is affliction, on him.

Let him bury his face in the dust. There may yet be hope. That's the context of those verses, isn't it? But see what he's saying, the great love and compassion and faithfulness that is to be savored of the Lord comes by waiting inside silence, bearing the yoke of affliction, bearing his face in the dust, in that period of grieving and mourning as he waits on the Lord.

It's in the pits that he truly learns God's great love and faithfulness. And so it's as the saying by Corrie Ten Boon goes, you may never know that Jesus is all you need until Jesus is all you have.

You may never know that Jesus is all you need until Jesus is all you have. And so if you're still following along on the outline, then the first word of application is for those who are currently in that situation, in trouble, knowing that during this time, my encouragement to you is God is teaching you not to rely on yourself, but on him and his son, Jesus.

[24 : 19] And so let me encourage you to wait silently for his salvation, for his rescue, and in that waiting, know his great love and comfort to you.

But know too that God provides your brothers and sisters to be that means of comfort. Paul, you see, seeks help from the Corinthians, asking them to pray. I think that's one way for others to comfort you and share in your suffering.

And Paul expects that when God answers those prayers, then it will turn into thanksgiving by others for him. So, if that's what you're going through at this moment, then don't do it alone.

Lean on your brothers and sisters. Allow them to encourage you, to comfort you, to pray for you. But know too that as you're comforted by them, one day, God may use this very experience so that you will then comfort others.

what you're going through right now is not for nothing, but rather you're learning perhaps that God can use you later to serve others with the comfort that you're now receiving.

[25 : 31] And so, for those of us who have already done that, those of us who have been rescued from trouble, then we need to be mindful it's not, oh, thank you God, and then we're sailing off into the sunset. Rather, if we've been comforted, then it's time for us to look around to see who may need the comfort that we've been comforted by God for.

Recall what has encouraged you in the past. What words of Scripture were most helpful? What actions by others were most comforting to you? How did they pray?

What did they say? How did they show you care? If you can, show that to others in need now as well.

Now, of course, the most challenging situation arises, I think, when we all feel like we're in a time of affliction, like now in this pandemic. We all feel like we need understanding and comfort.

Now, well, what then? Who's going to comfort whom? That's tricky, isn't it? Well, perhaps let me suggest that what we could do is we all could do a little of each, can't we?

[26 : 37] We can comfort even as we're being comforted. And not everyone's the same. Some will need more than others. But if we can comfort others in the things that we're not troubled by, and others can comfort us in the things that we are, then we're on our way, aren't we, as the body of Christ, to be able to strengthen and comfort one another with the comfort of God.

In fact, I think when we do that, when we take the focus away from ourselves and what we're feeling down about, and instead turn to help others, and we do that to each other, then we all start to be comforted together, and we all begin to see how God is at work in us, isn't it?

To grow us in compassion for one another, even as we all may be going through suffering. So friends, I hope we can see the pattern here, that as we go through 2 Corinthians in the coming weeks, that there's this great truth that is unlike the world, that we'll begin to discover, that what may be undesirable in the eyes of the world, are the very things that God will use to show His greatness most clearly.

His power in our weakness, His glory through humility, His comfort in affliction, abundant life in the face of death.

It's all the things that people don't want in this life, is what God uses, actually, to show us His great glory and His great compassion. Let's pray.

[28 : 18] Father, we praise You as the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, for You comfort us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort others with the comfort we have received from You.

Comfort now those who are afflicted beyond their ability to bear. Strengthen those who despair with life. Empower them by Your Spirit.

Open our eyes to the suffering and weakness and struggles of our brothers and sisters around us, and perhaps even across the world. Help us to encourage and strengthen them in the faith.

Help us to labor in prayer for them. Teach us how we may share in the sufferings of Christ, and bear with one another's burdens. In Jesus' name we pray.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.