GOD’S COMFORT

2 Corinthians 1:1–2:11

Key Verses: 1:3,4

“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.”

What do you do when you’re going through something hard? Some people just have to tell others all about it, in great detail. Some try to handle their hardships very privately, without anyone else’s help. But as Christians, what *should* we do when we’re experiencing some kind of difficulty? In today’s passage Apostle Paul shares his own personal experience. In this first lesson in our study of 2 Corinthians we want to think mainly about three things: first, who God is; second, how we can receive his comfort; and third, what the purpose of God’s comfort in our lives is. May God open our hearts and speak to us personally through his living words today.

Paul wrote the letter of 1 Corinthians while he was in Ephesus teaching the word of God to many people. As we saw in our studies, the church in Corinth, which Paul had started, was having many difficulties which he needed to address. Paul wrote them 16 chapters on a wide variety of issues. Now it was about a year and a half later. By this time Paul had left Ephesus in Asia Minor and was traveling throughout Macedonia, the northern part of Greece, revisiting the churches he had begun on his first missionary journey. Paul wanted to encourage these churches and collect a relief offering for poor Jewish Christians in Jerusalem, which he was planning to take in person. Paul not only was planting churches but also striving to build unity between Jewish and Gentile Christians all throughout the Roman Empire. While doing this, he personally faced various hardships. At the same time, he had to give pastoral care to all the churches that needed it. Paul was carrying quite a load of responsibilities.

As we read this letter of 2 Corinthians we find that one of Paul’s main concerns, in the midst of everything else, was this church in Corinth. Paul really wanted them to be a healthy church body and a source of blessing to the people in Achaia, which was the southern part of Greece. So how had this church responded to what Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians? Evidently, not very well. We know that Timothy, Paul’s right hand man, had delivered that letter in person. But when he returned to Ephesus, he evidently let Paul know that that letter was not well received. Paul was so concerned that he changed his plans and made an emergency trip to Corinth in person. That visit didn’t go well, either. Afterwards Paul wrote them a brief letter, which we don’t have. He couldn’t stop thinking about what was happening in Corinth. Their relationship was about to break. So he sent Titus his other helper to see how they were responding to him. While he was serving in Macedonia, the situation in Corinth was constantly in the back of his mind. Finally Paul decided to write them this 13-chapter letter of 2 Corinthians. He probably worked on this letter to them for several months. He was hoping that after they read it, he could actually visit them again in person.

What was the main problem in Corinth? Frankly, some people were opposed to Paul and critical of him. They just couldn’t trust him. They questioned everything he was doing: his travel plans, his collecting an offering, where and how he spent his time, his letters, and his teaching. We know this because in this letter Paul spends a good deal of time defending himself and his apostleship. It seems that by now, some Jews had come to Corinth from Jerusalem to poison people’s minds against Paul and teach them a different way. One of their main criticisms was that if Paul were really an apostle, why would he be suffering so much? So through this letter Paul really wants the Corinthians to understand him better (1:14). And he shows how suffering is very much an essential part of Christian life. In fact, suffering proves who is a true follower of Jesus.

Paul opens this letter with a typical greeting. Read verses 1,2. He begins by saying he is “an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God.” He’s indirectly referring to the unusual way he got started serving Jesus. At first he had been strongly against Christianity. But the Risen Jesus met him, forgave his sins and called him to be his servant. Ever since Paul had been trying to obey what God wanted him to do. Being an apostle of Christ was not his own idea, but the will of God upon his life. This simple truth proved that Paul was legitimate and was the source of his spiritual authority as a servant of God, someone we should listen to. He also introduces Timothy as “our brother.” Paul was building up Timothy so that people would respect him as God’s servant and welcome him to serve in Paul’s place. Paul addresses them as “the church of God in Corinth.” Despite all their problems and issues, he acknowledges that they belong to God because God had worked in them to help them accept the gospel of Jesus. He adds, “…together with all his holy people throughout Achaia…” Evidently God had been using this church to spread the good news of Jesus to many people living in that area. Paul greets them with grace and peace from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. God’s grace and peace are always what we need most.

Usually Paul begins his letters expressing thanks to the people he is writing. But he begins this letter by praising God. Read verse 3. Who is God? He’s the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. He’s the one who sent Jesus to this world. He’s the one our Lord Jesus came to restore us to. He’s the real object of our faith. Paul also describes him as “the Father of compassion” and “the God of all comfort.” How do we think about God? What is our view of him? It may not seem like such a big deal, but it’s really quite important. Many people ignore if there really is a God. Many think if he’s there, he’s irrelevant, not engaged with this real world. Or they think God is just trying to control us, or even ruin our lives. The Bible tells us there are many attributes of God. God is the Creator. God is all-powerful, all-knowing, all-wise, and most holy. But here Paul says God is the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort. Compassion is at the core of who God is, and it *should* be at the core of who Christians are, too. What is compassion? Basically it means a deep awareness of others’ suffering and sympathy for what they’re going through. Compassion is the opposite of indifference. Paul says God is the Father of compassion. It reminds us of how God is so often praised in the Old Testament: “The LORD is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love. He will not always accuse, nor will he harbor his anger forever; he does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities. For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us. As a father has compassion on his children, so the LORD has compassion on those who fear him; for he knows how we are formed, he remembers that we are dust…” (Ps103:8–14; cf. Ex34:6,7; Ps86:15; 145:8; Joel2:13; Jon4:2). We experience God’s compassion especially through how he forgives our sins.

Paul also calls him “the God of all comfort.” What a statement! He’s not just the God of comfort but the God of *all* comfort. All the comfort we could ever need is in God. Really? We human beings seek comfort in many ways—physical comforts, material comforts, comfort food, comfort in the bottle, comfort in friends or family or children or even in illicit behavior or relationships. What *is* comfort, anyway? In Greek the word here is “paraklesis,” and it means to come alongside someone, to experience what that person is experiencing, to understand what that person is going through. So we have the expression, “Walk a mile in my shoes.” It means, “Until you do, you won’t ever understand.” To be understood deeply might be the greatest comfort there is. We may try to teach or comfort people, but without really understanding, we can’t even begin to do so. Sometimes it seems like no one in the world understands us. But we can praise God because he’s the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort. We can always turn to him, no matter what’s going on. God cares, God understands deeply, God loves and accepts and really wants to help us. Instead of looking for other means of comfort, we should turn to him. We may not be able to talk to people about our struggles, but we can tell God anything and everything. In the midst of many difficulties in ministry Paul found comfort in God himself. In verses 3–7 Paul repeats this word “comfort” nine times. Why? Partly it was because by this time Paul had received a report from Titus about the Corinthian church. When Titus told Paul of how the Corinthians had sincerely repented, Paul really received God’s comfort (7:5–7). But also, Paul wanted the Corinthians to experience God’s comfort. Why? Read verse 4. Here he really wants them to know the *purpose* of God’s comfort. Many people think of comfort only in a very personal way. In fact, those who constantly are seeking personal comfort can seem pretty selfish. But God comforts us in all our troubles not to pamper us, but to equip us. Paul says it’s “so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God.” What are these troubles? In Greek the word means “distress,” referring to an oppressive state of physical, mental, social or economic suffering. Some people may not seem to suffer at all. But actually everyone suffers in his or her own way. Every human life is a unique story of various kinds of suffering, great and small, and put together, they make up who we are. There’s the saying, “Only a widow knows a widow’s heart.” It means as we go through our own troubles, they are not meaningless; they help us understand others out there who are going through the same things.

The real question here is not about the sufferings and troubles we’re going through, but how we *respond* to them. Many people pretend to be okay. They’re ashamed of having any problem. They try to brush their problems under a rug or hide them away in a drawer, or at least get away from them as fast as possible. Some people who suffer can become very self-centered, thinking they are victims, and they become very hard and bitter. But Paul tells us here that if we turn to God while we’re suffering, we will experience his comfort. Turning to God may not take away our troubles, but his comfort enables us to patiently endure them (6b). And God’s comfort does something else for us, too. Read verse 4 again. Experiencing God’s comfort enables us to comfort others. God’s comfort makes us more compassionate, more empathetic, more useful. God’s comfort in our lives makes us a source of comfort. In fact, if we haven’t experienced God’s comfort, we don’t have anything to give —we just feel burdened. We ourselves first need to receive God’s comfort; then we can comfort others. It means we need to open ourselves up to God, let God minister to us in all our needs, open our hearts to his love, and learn to rely on God our Father instead of on ourselves. If we try to get through our troubles with our own willpower or clever minds or abilities, we can never experience God’s comfort.

Read verse 5. Here Paul switches from troubles generally to “the sufferings of Christ.” All human beings suffer, but these sufferings are particular to Christians. Of course when Jesus suffered on the cross for our sins, it was “once for all,” a unique experience that no one else can fully understand or ever need replicate. But as our Lord Jesus denied himself and carried his own cross to the end, he calls us all to deny ourselves, carry our own cross and follow him. Our cross is the same cross as his, in the sense that it’s God’s same work to save sinners. This work of saving souls always involves personal sacrifice and suffering. There’s no quick and easy or smarter or safer way. If we don’t sacrifice and suffer, if we’re only trying to protect and preserve ourselves, we can’t save others (Jn12:24). His sufferings also include rejection and persecution because of the gospel. In verse 5 Paul uses the word “share.” In Greek it’s the word *koinonia*—and it means to share fellowship. Paul wrote in Philippians 3:10 that he wanted to experience “the fellowship of sharing in [Christ’s] sufferings, becoming like him in his death…” Paul embraced these sufferings so that he could know Christ better. So here he uses the word “abundantly.” “Abundantly” and “sufferings” are two words that don’t seem to go together—they seem like opposites. But Paul wants us not to avoid or just try to do the bare minimum, but to be very positive about it and wholeheartedly embrace the sufferings of Christ. Why? He says because when we do, “our comfort will abound through Christ.” It tells us that the only way to experience God’s comfort fully through Christ is to welcome his sufferings into our lives. Doing this goes against the grain of our nature to preserve ourselves, so we need a decision of faith to really do it.

In verse 6 Paul says that whether he’s distressed or comforted, it is for the Corinthians. It shows us how God’s comfort makes us selfless people who can forget about ourselves and really focus on helping others. In verse 7 Paul shares his hope, that the Corinthians will continue to share in the sufferings of Christ and also share in experiencing God’s amazing comfort. In verses 8,9a he goes on to share his own personal sufferings. He seems to be referring to the riot caused in Ephesus when he preached against idols and the silversmith who was making them turned the whole city against him and his gospel (Ac19:23–34). Preaching the gospel still makes people mad because it challenges their values and way of life, so we should be prepared. In verses 9b,10 Paul says that this suffering helped him to rely not on himself but on God who raises the dead and who continues to deliver his servants as our source of hope. In verse 11 Paul asks them, instead of harboring criticism, to earnestly pray for him. In verses 12–14 he really wants them to understand his integrity and godly sincerity. And in verses 15–17 he gets at what he’s really trying to say. He wants them to understand why he had to change his travel plans. In 1 Corinthians 16 he said he would try to stay with them for several months in the winter. But evidently he was unable to do that. He had come quickly and left, and now was busy in Macedonia. The Corinthians were going through so many hardships and were wondering why Paul wouldn’t come and spend time with them. In verses 18–22 he turns their attention to God. We may not be able to trust people, and we can get disappointed even by his servants. But God our Father is “faithful.” He always keeps his promises. All God’s promises made in the Bible are “yes” to us in Christ, the Son of God. When we experience this gospel, we can live for the glory of God. God is the one who helps us all stand firm in Christ. Paul says God also “anointed us, set his seal of ownership on us, and put his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come” (22). Paul repeats this in 5:5. This is truly our comfort, the presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives. The Spirit testifies with our spirit that we are God’s own children (Ro8:16), we belong to God, and by the help of the Holy Spirit we’re going to get through all we have to go through in this world until we make it home to heaven. Paul may not be able to be with the Corinthians, but they have the best and the most sure and concrete comfort, the Holy Spirit. In verse 23 Paul says it was to spare them that he did not return to Corinth. In 2:1 he said he made up his mind not to make another painful visit. He wanted to stay away until they could digest what he was telling them. And in 2:3 he explains that instead of coming in person, he wrote them another letter so that they could be prepared when he did come. In verse 4 he shares honestly that he wrote that letter “out of great distress and anguish of heart and with many tears.” It tells us that he was not just being clever with words or manipulative, but how much he really loved them. In verse 5 he mentions a person who caused grief. It seems to be the person who publicly opposed Paul when he made his brief emergency visit. People in the Corinthian church were shocked at how rude that person had been to Paul. Paul seems to have told them in his letter afterwards to give that person some church discipline so that he could realize how wrong he was. But now things are different. In verses 6,7 Paul tells them that was enough and that now they should forgive and comfort the offending person so that he would not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. It tells us that Paul was emphasizing God’s comfort to help them put it into practice. In verse 8 Paul writes, “I urge you, therefore, to reaffirm your love for him.” Paul gave them this direction of church discipline to test their obedience (9). Read verse 10. In this one verse Paul repeats the word “forgive” five times. Forgiveness is the best expression of God’s comfort. It’s also the way to defeat Satan’s work to cut and divide relationships (11).

Read 1:3,4 again. May God help us to see him as the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, the one we can turn to at any time, with any problem. May he help us see all our troubles, whatever they are, as the way to experience his compassion, his comfort and his forgiveness. As we do so, may God also show us how to really become a source of comfort to others.