

February 21, 2021

THE FATHER OF MERCIES AND GOD OF ALL COMFORT

2 Corinthians 1:1-11

(1 of 22 in a series through 2 Corinthians)

When we open our Bibles to the book of 2 Corinthians, we have to realize that there is a lot of history leading up to the opening words of this book, and it's a history we can put together simply from the pages of Scripture. Paul had planted the church at Corinth and had stayed a year-and-a-half teaching them the Scriptures (Acts 18:11). Then, as he did for many of the churches he planted, after leaving, he wrote them a letter. Interestingly, however, we don't have this letter. We only have a reference to it in 1 Corinthians 5:9 as Paul wrote, "I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people." Then, sometime after this first letter, things seem to come off the rails at Corinth. I mean *way* off the rails. The church was divided. They stopped practicing church discipline and even began bragging about their tolerance of sexual immorality. They were taking one another to court. Some were showing up to take the Lord's Supper before others arrived and getting drunk with the wine. There were unhealthy marriages throughout. They were using their spiritual gifts not to minister to one another but to demonstrate that they were better than one another. And some of them were denying the resurrection of the dead. It became a church none of us would feel comfortable joining.

So Paul wrote a second letter to them—the letter we know as 1 Corinthians. At the end of that letter Paul told them that he was going to visit them after passing through Macedonia (1 Cor 16:5), but that visit ended up being a very painful visit, and so Paul decided that he wouldn't visit them again for a while (2 Cor 2:1). My guess is that this was a painful visit because Paul had to spend much of his time with them rebuking and confronting them concerning sinful practices. Therefore, seeing that he didn't want to visit again so soon after such a painful visit, Paul decided to send Titus to them, and he would take with him another letter from Paul. So, if you're keeping score, that's the third letter, and like the first, we don't have that letter. And Paul says of this letter, "I wrote to you out of much affliction and anguish of heart and with many tears, not to cause you pain but to let you know the abundant love that I have for you" (2 Cor 2:4). And here's the good news—that letter had its intended effect. When Titus returned to Paul, he reported that the Corinthians had mourned over their sin, repented, and were longing to see him (2 Cor 7:6-9).

And yet Paul still seemed to have some who opposed him in Corinth and wanted to convince the Corinthians not to listen to him. Paul sarcastically refers to them in this letter "superapostles" (2 Cor 11:5) because their main tactic to suggest they were better than Paul was to point to worldly credentials. They could point to letters of recommendation, the high fees they commanded for speaking, and the fact that their lives looked pretty smooth. Paul, in contrast preached for free, came with no letters of recommendation, and lived through immense suffering. And so Paul writes one final letter to the Corinthians to address these issues and get everything in order

before visiting them again (2 Cor 13:10). That final letter is this letter we will look at over the next twenty-two sermons—2 Corinthians.

Because these “super-apostles” were touting their more superficially impressive ministry, Paul’s theme in this letter is largely going to focus on the power of God in our weakness, the demonstration of his strength when we have nothing left to give. In other words, what these “super-apostles” saw as weaknesses were actually avenues to see the power and glory of the Lord. You’ll see that theme come up repeatedly in this letter, and it’s on a very similar note that Paul begins this letter. Knowing that his opponents point to Paul’s suffering as a reason for which Paul should be dismissed, the apostle chooses to take that issue head on in these opening verses. He notes what God does in suffering and why it is such a powerful vehicle of grace to us. So, let’s start where Paul does, by noting the Lord’s comfort in our suffering.

The Lord’s comfort in our suffering

After Paul’s opening greeting in verses 1-2, he writes in verses 3-4a, “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.” In other words, Paul starts out with praise—blessed be God. But why? It is because of who God is and what he does. Let’s start with the latter. What does God do? Paul tells us that God “comforts us in all our affliction.” That is, every time an affliction rises up in your life, it is accompanied by the comfort of God. Again, Paul repeats this idea in verse 5, declaring, “For as we share abundantly in Christ’s sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too.”

Notice that Paul doesn’t say that God will keep affliction from coming to us or always take it away when it does come to us, but does tell us that he comforts us in all our affliction. In the midst of your pain (not after it’s gone), in the midst of your questions and hurt (not after they’re fully answered and relieved), God is there—in the midst of your suffering—as the God of all comfort and Father of mercies. There aren’t exceptions. No affliction comes to us except that it is answered with the very comfort of God. And notice that this flows out of who God is. Paul identifies him as the “Father of mercies” and “God of all comfort.” God is simply being who he is when he lavishes mercies and comfort on you so that you may be strengthened and endure in your afflictions. It is not enough to say he always gives us comfort. Rather, we can say that the God of comfort himself is always with present with us.

Let’s stop and think about God’s heart for us with what he says here and elsewhere in the Scripture. It’s easy for us to focus on our affliction and suffering and feel crushed, overwhelmed, and even unloved in the midst of it. But let’s think about what God has revealed. He tells us that the Holy Spirit, when in our weakness we don’t know what to pray, intercedes for us perfect prayers. He tells us that the Son who took on flesh can sympathize with us, understanding our pain and hurt from the inside. And then he tells us that he is the Father of all mercies and God of all comfort. Do you see how clearly God is telling us that he is not absent in our suffering but with us and not callous but loving, eager to lavish love, comfort, and mercy?

When you find yourself in extreme, prolonged affliction, it can be some of the most debilitating, all-encompassing feeling. You may be so drained that you don't know how to form words in prayer, wish you could transfer someone else's mind into your body so that they could feel on the inside your hurt, pain, sorrow, fears, and struggle, and you can feel so alone. But your Father wants you to know that his Spirit prays when you can't find words, the Son knows your pain on the inside and is sympathizing with you in your weakness, and he is present with you with comfort and mercy. Believe him, cry out to him, and know that he is there.

That's where Paul starts. And so do you see why belittling suffering is a belittling of an avenue through which we know the heart and love of God for us? That's what Paul wants us to see, and yet he spends the rest of this text showing more of what God is accomplishing through our affliction, and that's what I want us to focus on now—God's many purposes in our suffering.

God's purposes in our suffering:

To equip us to comfort others

As Paul describes God as the one who comforts us in all our affliction, he begins to outline purposes for this suffering and comfort, writing, "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" (v. 4). One reason why the Lord takes you through times of suffering (and the comfort that accompanies it) is so that you might be equipped to comfort others in their suffering. And as such, you become an extension of the comfort of God.

Now, let's make sure we catch that. One reason the Lord may be taking you through a time of painful difficulty is so that he might make you an instrument through which he comforts others. In other words, when you face trials and ask, "Why?" part of the answer may well be, so that you can comfort your brother or sister. It may well be that you're going through the suffering you're going through and being comforted by God in it because the Lord wants to use you to comfort someone else at another point, and you're going to be uniquely qualified to be that instrument of comfort because of the suffering and comfort you've experienced from God. Paul looked at his own suffering that way. That's why he said, "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" (v. 6). And someone else may be going through suffering and comfort right now for your sake.

So, in a world full of suffering, the Lord is constantly equipping others to comfort us or equipping us to be nothing less than a manifestation of the Lord comforting his people. That is, just as we understand that when we do good to the least of our brothers or sisters, so we do unto Christ—those receiving comfort are united with Christ. But it's also true when we're on the ministering end. We minister as representatives of Christ. The Lord demonstrates his love for you by equipping others to demonstrate his comfort and love to you in tangible ways. What a good God he is and what a blessing we have to manifest his love for others. So, that's one thing, but Paul lists more. So let's look at another purpose of our suffering.

To give us vindicating perseverance

At the very end of verse 6 Paul makes reference to the Corinthians “patiently endur[ing] the same sufferings that we suffer.” Then, he follows that note of their patient endurance in suffering by saying, “Our hope for you is unshaken, for we know that as you share in our sufferings, you will also share in our comfort” (v. 7). Why is Paul confident that they know the Lord that he can say he hope for them is “unshaken”? It’s because they’re demonstrating it by patiently enduring suffering and receiving the comfort of God.

As long as things are going well in someone’s life, he or she can testify all day long how much they love the Lord and are bent on following him, but it’s when suffering enters the picture that we really see what’s genuine. And so it is with you and me. As the Lord appoints suffering in our lives and brings us through it, clinging to the comfort and hope and mercy that we have in him, it testifies to the world that we are children of God. The Lord gives us those opportunities in our suffering and comfort to shine as lights in the world. He is honoring us by allowing us to be living testimonies that our Lord is worth clinging to even when our lives are full of suffering. He may be using you to uphold his worth and value to your unbelieving neighbor who is watching. And yet Paul continues. Another purpose is:

To drive out our self-reliance

Starting with verse 8, Paul gives a personal example of him walking through this very thing. If the Corinthians are thinking, “Paul, this sounds great and is easy to say, but have you actually lived this out?” he answers loud and clear—yes. He writes, “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” (vv. 8-9).

Paul doesn’t point us to an easy example of suffering, does he? He notes a time in his life—and we don’t know the specific time—when he was in Asia (modern-day Turkey) and went through such an intense time of suffering that he and his companions were certain they were going to die. He had no strength. He didn’t think he could go on. He felt that he’d received a death sentence from the Lord. If there was ever a time where one might ask, “Where is the comfort of God in this?” this would seem to be it. And yet, even there, Paul tells us that God was comforting, working, pouring out mercy. One way Paul was comforted was by the Lord revealing to him that he was moving Paul to rely on God more instead of himself.

And, again, let’s not underestimate what a gift that is. That’s mercy. Trusting in ourselves only ever leads to sins like anxiety and envy. It is not only sinful but miserable. Trusting in the Lord and relying on him, however, allows us to know and experience the tender presence and faithfulness of the Lord. And yet, as much as I’m sure we could all testify to that, there is constantly this underlying temptation to get our lives to the point that we don’t have to rely on God, isn’t there? And so the Lord uses suffering as a weapon against that. Through suffering he

shows our weakness, inadequacy, and insufficiency. But it is all so that he might drive us to himself, to rely to him and experience his goodness and faithfulness. That may well be what he's doing now in your suffering. But, again, there's more. Paul also notes that suffering comes to us:

To build our faith in the resurrection

Paul makes an interesting connection in verses 9-10. He writes: "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." Now, when Paul says, "He will deliver us again," I think that's a reference to the resurrection. Paul is saying that he is confident that God will deliver him from death itself by raising him from the dead. Death will not have the last word or be victorious in Paul's life. And the main reason I think that's what he's talking about is his reference to God in verse 9. He doesn't just say that his suffering and comfort was to make him rely on God but on God *who raises the dead*. So, introducing this idea of God raising the dead in verse 9, Paul moves on in verse 10 to note that God will deliver him (in the resurrection).

But if that's the case, then Paul is making an interesting argument here, isn't he? It seems that he's saying that when the Lord taught Paul to rely on him through that affliction in Turkey, he did it in order to deepen his hope and confidence that God would deliver him again—at the resurrection. It's as if everything we go through in terms of suffering and comfort in this life is to build our hope in the certainty of the resurrection, of our final salvation. Perhaps we could think of all suffering and comfort as a dress rehearsal of sorts where we suffer and know the comfort of God again and again, so that as we continue through life, our confident hope that he will deliver us in the end, grows.

And the reason that's so important is because if you believe the resurrection is coming and is real and is certain, then it changes everything about this life. Suffering can be seen as "light" and "momentary" in light of the coming "eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison" as Paul will say in a few chapters (4:17). Every sacrifice for obedience appears as merely an investment whereby we store up eternal treasure. And we could go on because the resurrection changes everything. But, we can lose sight of it. Focus only on this world. And feel our hope weaken. Suffering and comfort constantly trains our heart to look to the resurrection and know that our deliverance is coming.

Every time we experience God's kindness and comfort in the midst of our suffering, it is an opportunity to build our confident hope that the resurrection is coming. His small comforts are merely pointing us toward the ultimate comfort when he'll deliver us from even death itself. So allow our suffering and his comfort to solidify your confidence in the resurrection and let the resurrection impact all of life. And finally, Paul tell suffering and comfort are:

To give others a chance to pray with and for us

Thus far you might think that Paul thinks one-sidedly in his comfort. He suffers and is comforted for the Corinthians' comfort and salvation. But Paul shows that is not the case. He ends this section, writing, "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" (v. 11). And in doing so, he exposes us to one more purpose in our suffering: it gives others a chance to pray with and for us.

When God saves us, not only does he unite us with Christ, he unites us with other believers—the church. Therefore, we should not only find ourselves running to the Lord for our comfort but also inviting brothers and sisters into our lives to pray for us. Just as I said that when we comfort others, we are comforting as representatives of Christ, so when we reach out to others for their prayers, we should not see that as *not* turning to Christ. Rather, are reaching out to his body in order that they might aid us in boldly approaching the throne of God with us and for us.

And this corporate prayer for our struggles has the benefit of allowing many to give thanks as the Lord answers and sustains us and comforts us in our suffering. As I pray for you and get news of the Lord's comfort in your life, not only is my heart relieved because of my love for you, but I give thanks to God with you and am encouraged by the Lord hearing and answering my prayers. Now, multiply that across the church. That's what Paul is envisioning.

There is a great desire in all of us to live our lives without suffering. Surely if we could snap our fingers and never face health struggles, financial struggles, emotional struggles, struggles that produce anxiety and worry, and the like, we would. But the Lord appoints these things in our lives for our good. It is in the suffering itself that the God of comfort comes to meet us and comfort us, and there is a way of knowing his presence and comfort in suffering that simply isn't mimicked in times outside of suffering. Not only that, but the Lord uses these things to equip us to minister to and comfort others, to show us we belong to him, to drive out our self-reliance, to build our faith in the resurrection, and to allow us to invite others into our lives through prayer. What Paul's opponents were seeing as a weakness, Paul holds up as a avenue through which the Lord is powerfully working in his kindness toward us. Let us know him more in and through our suffering, and let us thank him now as we remember his kindest act—the sending of his Son to live, die, and be raised for us—as we come to the table. Amen.