

2 Corinthians 1:1-11 “The God of All Comfort”  
Isaiah 51  
Psalm 25

February 28, 2016

Isaiah speaks of how the LORD comforts Zion (v3),  
When God redeems his people and ransoms them from exile,  
that is how God *comforts* his people.

Nowadays we tend to think of comfort in terms of “ease” and contentment.  
Comfort, for us, is all about “peace of mind” – emotional well-being.  
Comfort, in the modern world, is all about *me* and *my* happiness.

In scripture (and through most of human history)  
comfort had to do with strengthening weak knees and fortifying faint hearts.

Our psalm of response, Psalm 25, asks God to bring comfort and help to the afflicted.

Sing Psalm 25  
Read 2 Cor 1:1-11

## 1. Paul’s Greeting to the Corinthians (1:1-2)

Ancient letters have a standard format.

The standard format included the sending, the recipient, and a greeting, like this:  
“Paul the apostle,  
to the church at Corinth,  
good health and greetings.”

So it is important to see how Paul expands on the standard greeting –  
because it shows us what was really important to Paul.

So first let’s look at the sender:

### a. “An Apostle of Christ Jesus” (v1a)

*Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother,*

Paul did not choose his own career.

God called him.

Back when he was known as Saul of Tarsus,  
Jesus had appeared to him on the road to Damascus.

In Acts 9:15-16, the Lord Jesus said to Ananias that Paul  
“is my chosen instrument to carry my name  
before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel.  
I will show him how much he must suffer for my name.”

An apostle is one who is sent.

Jesus has sent Paul to testify – to bear witness to Jesus.

And indeed, the message of 2 Corinthians  
is “the relationship between suffering and the power of the Spirit  
in Paul’s apostolic life, ministry, and message” (ESV Study Bible)

We keep seeing this all over the Bible!  
The only way to glory is the way of the cross.

Paul also identifies Timothy as the co-author of the epistle:  
“and Timothy our brother.”

Timothy is not an apostle – he is a brother.  
And not anyone’s brother but “our” brother.  
Yes in one sense, Paul, as an apostle, is a superior over the church.  
But Timothy is not merely “your brother” – but “our” brother.

Given that Paul writes so much in the first person singular,  
many people have tended to ignore the idea of Timothy as co-author.  
But at the very least,  
Paul is communicating to the Corinthians  
that he is *not* writing this letter alone.  
Even an apostle does not minister alone!

Throughout his life, Paul always has a “traveling presbytery” with him.  
There are fellow-workers, preachers, colleagues, interns –  
who labor side-by-side in the gospel with Paul.  
The plurality of the eldership is at the heart of Presbyterian church polity.  
Both in the local church, where we have multiple elders and pastors,  
and in the regional church, where the presbytery provides oversight  
for all the churches in the region,  
we believe that no one should be a “lone ranger” elder or pastor.  
If even the apostles did not operate in that way, neither should we!

And you see this principle at work in Paul’s way of describing the church as well:

**b. “The Church of God That Is at Corinth” (v1b)**

*To the church of God that is at Corinth, with all the saints who are in the whole of Achaia:*

Corinth was a city preoccupied with wealth and with the symbols of status.  
Corinth had been destroyed by Rome and lain desolate for a century.  
It was re-established as a Roman colony (with Latin-speaking colonists)  
in the time of Julius Caesar.  
Since the Roman city was only 100 years old,  
there were not many “old families” in Corinth.  
Upward mobility was easier in Corinth than elsewhere,  
and so people tended to be more skittish about their newfound status.

But how do you rise in ancient Corinth?

Through patronage – the cultivating of connections, a good marriage –  
all of which can enable you to attain wealth, power, and status.

“The Corinthian correspondence reveals that Paul  
had to deal with a church overcome by vanity  
and rent asunder by an overweening desire for honor and distinction.” Garland 24

But Paul speaks not only to the church in Corinth,  
but also to the saints in all Achaia.

Achaia is the name of the province that included all of southern Greece.  
So I want you to think about what Paul’s address tells us  
about his view of the church.

If someone wrote a letter to our congregation and said,  
“To Michiana Covenant Church, with all the saints  
who are in the whole of northern Indiana...”  
or even “who are in St. Joseph County” –  
we wouldn’t know quite what to do with it!

Paul assumes that there is some sort of organic connection between  
“the church of God that is at Corinth”  
and “all the saints who are in the whole of Achaia.”  
If Paul sends a letter to Corinth,  
he can be confident that *all the churches* in Achaia will read it.

I’m not going to argue that modern Presbyterianism existed in ancient Rome!  
But plainly, the churches in Achaia were connected to each other  
more intimately than most modern churches!

But it’s also important to think about the way that Paul describes his addressees:  
“the church of God” – the word “church” means “assembly.”

There were all sorts of “assemblies” in the ancient world –  
so “ekklesia” was not particularly a religious term.  
That’s why Paul says, “church of God.”  
This is the assembly where God’s voice is heard.

But he also calls them “saints” – holy ones –  
those who are set apart and called out from the world to belong to Jesus.

“Saint” is not a special category to be applied only to “super-Christians.”  
All those who belong to Jesus are *saints* – you are all *holy* in Christ.

And you another part of this in Paul’s greeting:

**c. “Grace to You and Peace” (v2)**

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

The standard Greek greeting was “chairein” – greetings.

But Paul says “charis” – grace.

The standard Hebrew greeting was “shalom” – peace.

And Paul translates that into Greek – “eirene” – peace.

Grace and peace.

As you read Paul’s epistles, you start realizing that these two words summarize the whole message of the gospel!

Grace – we were dead in our sins – we were weak and powerless –  
but God was gracious to us, and he sent his Son to die for our sins,  
and to raise us up out of our sin and misery into fellowship with himself.

And Peace – if grace is the heart of the message of the gospel,  
peace is the goal of the message of the gospel:

since we have been justified by faith, we *have peace* with God (Rom 5:1).

God’s *purpose* in redemption is to bring *shalom* – to restore *peace* and well-being.

And that’s why Paul says “grace to you and peace  
*from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.*”

No longer are we strangers and aliens –  
no longer are we outcasts without hope.

Rather, we are now children of God.

God is *our Father*.

At least, he is the Father of those for whom Jesus Christ is Lord.

In the Greek translation of the OT, they used the greek word “kurios” (Lord)  
to translate the name of God – Yahweh.

And Paul regularly identifies Jesus as the “Lord” of the OT.

In 1 Corinthians 8, Paul echoed the language of the “Shema”

(Deuteronomy 6, which we sang earlier:

“Hear, Israel, the LORD our God, the Lord is one...”)

And Paul affirms that there is no God but one.

But then he adds,

“But for us there is one God, the Father,

from whom are all things and for whom we exist,

and one Lord, Jesus Christ,

through whom are all things and through whom we exist.”

*Yes*, the LORD our God, the LORD is one.

And the Father is that *one* God.

And Jesus is that *one* LORD.

If you asked Paul, “how many Gods are there?”  
He would look at you funny and say, “one!”  
Well, is the Father God?  
Of course.  
Is Jesus God?  
Of course.  
Is the Holy Spirit God?  
Of course.

But the Father is *not* the Son!

Indeed, this is made clear already in verse three:  
“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ...”  
He is not only *our* Father,  
he is also the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ!  
And indeed, it is only *because* he is the Father of our Lord Jesus  
that he becomes *our* Father.

God sent his Son into the world in order that the world might be saved through him.  
And this is where our second point takes us.

## **2. Comfort in the Midst of Affliction: the Way of the Cross (v3-7)**

Paul usually opens his letters by giving thanks to God for the church he is writing to.  
The fact that Paul *does not* do that here is important.  
2 Corinthians is a letter that seeks to resolve conflict  
between Paul and the church in Corinth.  
He is not yet in a position to *thank God* for what God has done in the Corinthians.

And so instead, he blesses God for what God has done for *him*.  
Paul uses the plural pronoun “we” – but as you see in verse 8,  
the “we” refers to Paul  
(and maybe Timothy and other members of Paul’s traveling presbytery).

I want you to see two things in verses 3-7:  
First, the movement of comfort – from God to us to others.  
And Second, the pattern of comfort, which is Christ.

First, notice the movement of comfort in verses 3-4:

### **a. The Movement of Comfort: from God to Us to Others (v3-4)**

*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.*

What is *comfort* for Paul?

Comfort is not the absence of affliction.

Paul is not saying that God removed his affliction.

Yes, God has delivered Paul from certain perils –  
but the focus of verse 4 is on how God comforts us  
*in* all our affliction.

Comfort comes from God in the midst of our affliction.

God's comfort may or may not include the removal of affliction.

But God's comfort always encourages and strengthens you.

And that is because the source of comfort –

the source of consolation and encouragement –

is God himself – “the Father of mercies and God of all comfort.”

Paul says that comfort moves from God to us to others.

God's comfort is not designed simply for *you*.

As Pastor Jon reminded us last week,

God has joined us together with Jesus as one body,  
so that we might be one new community in him.

Why does God comfort you in the midst of your 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.”

God does not comfort you so that you might be comfortable!

The purpose of God's comfort does not *end* with you!

God comforts you so that you might be able to comfort others.

If you try to hoard comfort – if you keep it all to yourself –

you will find that you become increasingly uncomfortable.

Because comfort – consolation from God – is designed to be given to others.

Paul says that what Jesus has done is not just save individuals.

What God has done in Jesus is save a *people* for himself –

a people that are now inseparably linked to one another as well.

And that's what we see when we see the *pattern* of comfort, Christ Jesus himself:

#### **b. The Pattern of Comfort: Christ (v5-7)**

*5 For as we share abundantly in Christ's sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too.*[\[a\]](#)

What does it mean to *share* in Christ's sufferings?

We know that Jesus died to pay the penalty for our sin.

He died in our place.  
Sometimes people misunderstand what this means.  
Some say that Christ suffered, so that you don't have to!  
Jesus got all the bad stuff, so that you get all the good stuff!

But that's not the way Paul says it.  
It would be more accurate to say that Jesus passed through suffering to glory,  
so that you might pass through suffering to glory, too!

Indeed, as we'll see later in 2 Corinthians,  
there were those in Corinth who said that Paul's weakness and afflictions  
demonstrated that God was not really with him.

Hey Paul, if you are an apostle "by the will of God" –  
then how come God makes you go through all this suffering?!

And in verses 5-7 Paul's response is to remind them of the sufferings of Jesus.  
The pattern of comfort is Jesus Christ himself,  
who passed through affliction and death for us.

And think about what it means for Christ to be our pattern.  
It's not just that Jesus suffered – so therefore we suffer too.  
Listen again to how Paul says it:  
"as we share abundantly in Christ's sufferings,  
so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too"

Our imitation of Christ is rooted and grounded in participation in Christ.  
Let me say that again:  
Our imitation of Christ is rooted and grounded in participation in Christ.

If you have been united to Christ by faith,  
then you will share in his sufferings –  
and you will share in his resurrection glory.

Later in 2 Corinthians 4:10-11, Paul will speak of how he bears in his own body  
the *death of Jesus*.

After all, if we have been united to Christ,  
so that his life becomes ours,  
that means that his suffering and death becomes ours.  
And that means that our suffering is intimately connected to his.  
What he bore on the cross was *really* your suffering.  
What you share in your afflictions is *really* the cross of Jesus.

Union with Christ – participation in Christ –  
*means* that the imitation of Christ

is not just going through the outward motions!

Your imitation of Christ – your sharing in his sufferings –  
is not just an analogy

(He suffered a lot – I suffer a little – so that’s “imitation”)

No!!

As one commentator puts it,

“Christians do not merely imitate, follow, or feel inspired by Christ,  
but actually live in him, are part of him”

(Hanson, quoted in Garland, 67),

so that we truly *share* in his sufferings.

That’s why Paul can go so far as to say in verse 6:

*6 If we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation;*

How can Paul say that “if we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation”?

How can Paul’s sufferings be for “your salvation”?!

Because Paul’s suffering is bearing in his own body the death of Jesus.

Yes, it’s true that Jesus’ suffering and death is the *only* atoning sacrifice  
that has *ever* brought salvation to the human race!

But *all* Christian suffering now participates in that once-for-all act.

So *yes*, your suffering has a salvific role to play in the lives of others!

*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.*

So you see how the pattern plays out:

Paul shares in Christ’s sufferings,

which is to be an encouragement to his fellow-sufferers –

because those who share in Christ’s suffering

will also share in his comfort.

And in verses 8-11, Paul explains how this has worked out over the last few months.

### **3. So How Does This Work? The Example of Paul (v8-11)**

#### **a. Paul’s Afflictions in Asia (v8)**

*8 For we do not want you to be unaware, brothers, [b] of the affliction we experienced in Asia. For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself.*

We don’t know exactly what episode in his life Paul is referring to.



But that's okay – because Paul's point is the big picture.  
And the main point is that Paul was overwhelmed –  
“utterly burdened beyond our strength” –  
so that “we despaired of life itself.”

Even Paul could have days like that!  
Days where he was ready to give up hope – and die.

**b. Affliction Makes Us Rely on God Who Raises the Dead (v9-10)**

*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.*

Why does God bring suffering into your life?

You need to hear verse 9.

“That was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead.”

Suffering and affliction makes you rely on the God who raises the dead.

Your hope is *not* that you will *survive* all your afflictions.

Your hope is the God who raises the dead.

This is where the Christian ethic differs from Stoicism.

The Stoic endures pain and suffering as a part of the natural order.

The Christian endures pain and suffering  
for the joy set before us of the resurrection!

*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.*

Certainly God will sometimes deliver you from affliction in this life,  
but v10 only makes sense in the light of verse 9.

Because I *know* that God will raise the dead,

*therefore* we have a sure hope that he *will* deliver us again – and again,  
even – and especially – the last time, when he raises my body from the dead!  
(but Paul doesn't spell that out until chapters 4-5!)

And then in verse 11, Paul explains how you can help – indeed, how you *must* help!

**c. And You Help Us by Prayer (v11)**

*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.*

What does prayer do?

What does prayer accomplish?

James tells us that the prayer of a righteous man avails much.

Paul here speaks of how many will give thanks on our behalf

“for the blessing granted us through the prayers of many.”

Prayer is effective.

Prayer works.

When God’s people pray, it brings blessing to Paul – and to others.

But how does prayer work?

God uses prayer to accomplish his purposes.

Augustine’s mother Monnica prayed for *years* for the conversion of her son.

And when he finally came to faith,

he was convinced that her prayers were a major reason for his conversion.

If no one prays, then nothing happens.

Paul is convinced that his deliverance occurred *because* of the “prayers of many.”

I *know* that you are praying for me!

How do I know?

Because it’s working!

God is delivering me from my minor afflictions – and bringing comfort to me,  
so that I might comfort you in the midst of your afflictions...