

Blessed Be the God of All Comfort, in our Suffering and Loss of a Loved One
2 Corinthians 1:3-4

Preached by Pastor Phil Layton at Gold Country Baptist Church on September 18, 2011

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God Moves in a Mysterious Way, His Wonders to Perform
 He Plants His footsteps on the sea, and rides upon the storm.
 Deep in unfathomable mines of never-failing skill
 He treasures up His bright designs and works His sovereign will.
 Ye fearful saints, fresh courage take; The clouds ye so much dread
 Are big with mercy and shall break In blessings on your head.
 Judge not the Lord by feeble sense, But trust Him for His grace;
 Behind a frowning Providence, faith sees God's smiling face.

25 days ago, to the very hour I am giving this sermon first service, about 50 feet from where I'm standing right now, I heard the news that my 3-month-old son, Mark Joseph Waleza Layton, had died. Days before I was going to see him and bring him home, God did. God did, to borrow words in that hymn, what was "unfathomable" to my "feeble sense... a mysterious way"? I couldn't trace the foot-steps of God on the water or see His face behind the dark clouds of what Cowper called "frowning Providence." In the initial moments there was disbelief, shock, confusion, stabbing heart pain, disbelief again ... and waves of emotion that began to roll in, as another line of another hymn says "when sorrows like sea billows roll ..."

That day, after praying and weeping with my family and friends, as the calls and visits settled a little, I picked up this Book. But where would I turn? The Psalms? The place God led me, the book I didn't leave or read from another book for a long time was 2 Corinthians. What Paul wrote to the Corinthians many years ago, I felt as if God had written those verses in this book directly for me on that day. I couldn't leave this book. I lived this book, especially 2 Cor. 1:3-4

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 will be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.

I pray today this Scripture is fulfilled in our hearing, as it has been happening in my life, I pray it would happen in your life today, tomorrow, in the future, everyday, through Christ, for the sake of others who need the comfort of others, including you. God has been growing me, and I pray He is growing us as a church in what this text is talking about, for the good and growth of us all.

I can't share with you everything that God has taught and brought me through these past 3 ½ weeks, but I have shared many of them on my blog memoirs, which I've also listed on your note sheet. In the context of this text, I want us to see some of the comfort God has for us. It doesn't take a Bible scholar to know what the key word is in v. 3-7. It's repeated several times in context, the word "comfort." In my translation, the word "comfort" is repeated 10x:

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 will be able to **comfort** those who are in any affliction with the **comfort** with which we ourselves are **comforted** by God.*

⁵ For just as the sufferings of Christ are ours in abundance, so also our **comfort** is abundant through Christ. ⁶ But if we are afflicted, it is for your **comfort** and salvation; or if we are **comforted**, it is for your **comfort**, which is effective in the patient enduring of the same sufferings which we also suffer; ⁷ and our hope for you is firmly grounded, knowing that as you are sharers of our sufferings, so also you are sharers of our **comfort**.

If you have the NKJV, it translates it “consolation” in v. 5-7, but it’s the same Greek word throughout the passage: *paraklesos*. A form of this word is used as a title for the Holy Spirit: *paraklete* = the one who comes alongside as Helper/Comforter. This is God’s nature: “Father of mercies, *God of all comfort*.” God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit = 3 persons, one *God of all comfort*.

Jesus once comforted His disciples saying He would leave but that the Father would send His Spirit as *another Helper/Comforter* (John 14:16, Greek word for “another of the same kind”). Acts 9:31 “they were going on...*in the comfort of the Holy Spirit*.” How does God comfort us?

1. It Starts When We Bless God in our Affliction

Verse 3 begins where we need to begin: “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.” Paul blesses God for who He is (“Father of mercies”), blesses God for what He does (“comfort”). That’s a great pattern for us as well, to start in our prayers, in our thinking, in the morning, in our lives, by blessing God for who He is and for what He does. In OT language, “*blessed be the name of the Lord*” means “His character, who He is, His nature, essence.”

This is not about feeling thankful *for the* affliction, this is blessing God *in the* affliction, for who God is, for His character, not for the calamity itself. Notice carefully how it’s worded in v. 4: “*in our affliction*.” When something tragic or terrible happens in our sin-cursed world of death and disease and disaster, we’re not to bless *things of this world that God has cursed*, but we are to bless God. Not *be happy for tragedy* nor to *blame God for evil things*, but to *bless God for His goodness in even evil things* that God has a good intent in (Gen 50:20) as He moves in mysterious ways/Providence.

We’re not to call things good that are not good (a child killed by a drunk driver, evil terrorists crashing planes) but we can and must trust and bless the God who permits/purposes things that are not good and works them together to bring good out of it (Rom. 8:28). It’s what John Flavel called “the mystery of Providence.”

Job 1 gives a classic tragic example of “all affliction” (2 Cor. 1:4). Sometimes people say they read the book of Job because they can identify with Job in suffering. I don’t know anyone who can fully identify with Job: 4 different messengers within 45 seconds or so tell him his vast business has just been destroyed by the terrorist Sabaeans, firestorms/lightning consumed his entire livelihood, his whole empire stolen by others, all his employees killed, everything he had spent his whole life building - gone the same day, and worst of all, a storm just killed all 10 of his children in a natural disaster! The worst possible suffering in a few minutes or less perhaps in the history of the world...other than the suffering of Jesus on the cross.

No one could be with Job and truly say “I know what you’re going through ...” No one except the Lord Himself, who was with him, and who enabled Job to bless the Lord in the deepest loss possible. 2 Corinthians 1:5 says this “abundant comfort” is “through Christ.”

Where did Job start? Job 1:20: tore his robe, mourned, fell to the ground ... and *worshipped* (what one theologian called the 2 most stunning words in the whole OT in context). Then Job said in v. 21 ‘*The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away. Blessed be the name of the Lord.*’ *Through all this Job did not sin nor did he blame God* [or “charge God with wrongdoing”]

He didn’t blame God; he blessed God in the worst affliction ever. He did not charge God with wrong, he recognized God’s right to give or take, though he didn’t know why, he could by God’s grace, bless the name of the Lord (i.e., His character, who the LORD is).

Job wasn’t comforted by 3 earthly friends, but he had 3 in heaven: the Father of all comfort, the Comforting Son-Savior-Shepherd, and the Holy Spirit, his Comforter where man could not be. Job didn’t know why and never knew why all of his afflictions came, but he blessed the name of the Lord (His character and nature and what he knew to be true about God, Job worshipped and praised). And in all his afflictions Job experienced God’s comfort (James 5:11).

Blessed be the Name of the Lord In the land that is plentiful
 Where your streams of abundance flow Blessed be Your name
 And blessed be Your name When I'm found in the desert place
 Though I walk through the wilderness Blessed be Your name
 ... When the darkness closes in, Lord, Still I will say
Blessed be the name of the Lord, Blessed be Your name
Blessed be the name of the Lord, Blessed be Your glorious name
 And blessed be Your name When the sun's shining down on me
 When the world's 'all as it should be' Blessed be Your name
 And blessed be Your name On the road marked with suffering
 Though there's pain in the offering Blessed be Your name
 You give and take away, You give and take away
 My heart will choose to say Lord blessed be Your name

My wife and I wrote these words in our first prayer request on 8/24 “Although we do not understand God's plan we trust and love Him for blessing us with our son, that we will never know physically. Our hearts are heavy, but we praise Him ... [and we quoted that passage from Job 1]: 'And he said, "...the Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away. BLESSED BE THE NAME OF THE LORD.'”

Exactly 1 week later I said those same words over his little coffin by the grace of God. We wept ... *and worshipped*. Even a broken heart can still choose to say “Lord blessed be Your name” as the song says “when there’s pain in the offering ... on the road marked with suffering.” By God’s grace, our heart can choose to say “blessed be Your Name.”

Don’t get the impression that was easy or we felt warm and fuzzy or happy – we felt weak and frail and hurting – but God is strong. His power is perfected in weakness, His grace is sufficient for me. And His grace can enable us to bless God even in the affliction. For Paul, this was not just something he knew intellectually or hypothetically or theoretically, he knew this experientially. So do I.

In 2 Samuel 12, so did David when his son died. 2 Samuel 12:19 says: *when David saw that his servants were whispering together, David perceived that the child was dead; so David said to his servants, “Is the child dead?” And they said, “He is dead.”*²⁰ *So David arose from the ground, washed, anointed himself, and changed his clothes; **and he came into the house of the LORD and worshiped.** ...*²² *He said, “While the child was still alive, I fasted and wept; for I said, ‘Who knows, the LORD may be gracious to me, that the child may live.’*²³ *“But now he has died; why should I fast? Can I bring him back again? **I will go to him, but he will not return to me.**”*²⁴ *Then David comforted his wife Bathsheba ...*

I’ve received that same comfort David had, and so has my wife.

We see this pattern in David’s psalms: starting in worship, blessing the name of God in the midst of mourning, suffering. Not ignoring the realities of grief, but not being immobilized by them either, he starts by blessing God and baring his soul transparently before God and committing to still worship, bless, praise God regardless. It made all the difference for him and it can for us, too. It has for me. It may be the hardest thing to do ... but it begins the healing process

How do I bless God? What does that mean, exactly? We say “God bless” but what does it mean to *bless God*? How can *we* bless God? When people say things like “God bless America,” in English we may think of God’s favor on us, prosperity, peace, protection, or adding some other benefits to us. But we can’t add anything to God – we can’t give God prosperity, peace, protection. But in the Bible’s original language, to “bless God” is different.

David in Ps 34:1 *I will bless the LORD at all times; His praise shall continually be in my mouth...*

Notice this is a commitment: “I will bless the Lord ...” not when I feel like it, no he says in v. 1 “at all times.” Not just good times.

³ *O magnify the LORD with me, And let us exalt His name together.*

To bless the Lord is to praise the Lord, magnify, exalt His name (His person, His character, nature, who He is and what He does). Notice the same pattern as our passage in Corinthians, starting with blessing God in suffering, not waiting for deliverance. This psalm is written in the context of trouble/fear, but he starts blessing God.

⁴ *I sought the LORD, and He answered me, And delivered me from all my fears ...*⁶ *This poor man cried, and the LORD heard him And saved him out of **all his troubles.** [very similar phrase to 2 Cor 1:4] ...*⁸ *O taste and see that the LORD is good; How **blessed is the man who takes refuge in Him!** [blessing on all who trust, take ...]*

He starts blessing God, then God blesses him. We say “God bless America” but America needs to start blessing God, praising God.

¹⁷ *The righteous cry, and the LORD hears And delivers them out of **all their troubles...** [similar to 2 Cor 1:4] ¹⁹*Many are the **afflictions** of the righteous, But the LORD delivers him out of **them all.****

Psalm 103:1: “*Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless His holy name*
² *Bless the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits ...* ⁴ *who redeems your life from the*
pit and crowns you with love and compassion, ⁵ *who satisfies your desires with good things ...*

This is the way so many of the psalms begin in their suffering, and this is where Paul begins in our passage, which takes us to point #2. As we start with blessing God in the affliction, then ...
God will Bless and Comfort Us Through It

Whether suffering the loss of a loved one or other pain or financial difficulty or family problem or personal health issue or interpersonal relational issue or other trial or trouble or tribulation, the text of 2 Corinthians 1:4 covers all of that and more:

*“who comforts us **in all our affliction** [or troubles / tribulations] so that we will be able to comfort those who are **in any affliction** ...”*

There is no suffering, sorrow, struggle, trouble, tribulation, trial, or turmoil that is beyond the comfort of God. 2 Corinthians 1 uses a general word for “difficulties/afflictions” and then to make it even more emphatic, v. 4 adds “all” and then adds “any” (not just some, any of them, all of them, all kinds, all the time). Look at end of v. 3

*“... the God of **all** comfort”* (not just comfort, all comfort)

As we weep with those who weep we can be comforted with them:

⁷ *and our hope for you is firmly grounded, knowing that **as you are sharers of our sufferings, so also you are sharers of our comfort.***

We share in prayer, v. 11: *you also joining in helping us through your prayers, so that thanks may be given by many persons on our behalf for the favor bestowed on us through the prayers of many.*

I have experienced that verse as well, the help of many in prayer, I have felt your prayers across the ocean on my trip, and as it says, many gave thanks for God’s favor on us, from the prayers of many. It’s comforting to know others suffer with you and share with you not only in the suffering, but they share the comfort with you, v. 7. This is what I shared by letter on 8/24 to Didier who had suffered the loss of our baby boy in his arms that sad day:

Dearest Brother Didier and Sister Annie,

We love you so much, and love our Lord, and pray His love is being known by you and Annie. This has probably been one of the most difficult days and nights of your life and ministry. Please know we weep with you who weep and our heart breaks with you and for you in this loss we share. Mark Joseph was our son and we know you both loved and cared for him as your own son and he was as much a part of your home as he would have been in our home. As hard as this is for us we cannot imagine the grief and sorrow you are feeling watching this precious son die. I pray you find comfort from the God who knows what it is like for His precious Son to die, Jesus, and who brought light from that very dark day.

I would like to come to be there for Mark’s burial or funeral ... I would also like to come to encourage you and your family and church and assure you of the love from our family and church family, and would like to ... do whatever I can to help you rest and heal ...

Please know we are not angry and we know you took such good care of the sweet baby, but God had written the days for him in His perfect will which we cannot change (Psalm 139:16, Ephesians 1:11). We will still worship though the Lord gave Mark and the Lord has taken Mark away, blessed be the name of the Lord (Job 1:20-22). Our whole church is praying for you and your family that your sorrow will not be too great but that God's sweet grace will comfort you.

In the deep love of Christ, Brother Phil and Sister Jaime

His reply next day, 8/25: 'Thank you my brother and sister for your letter ... Thank you very much for accepting to come even though ... **Praise be to God who gave us His precious words which can comfort us in any circumstance ... God bless you.** Didier'

God comforts us through words, especially His, and God blesses us as we begin by blessing / praising Him. Blessing God out loud, even writing down what I know to be true about God from His Word and blessing Him, thanking Him, I've found that's part of how God uses His word to comfort in affliction

Psalm 119:12 *Blessed are You, O LORD; Teach me Your statutes.*

When you read the rest of Psalm 119, it's clear it was written in affliction and suffering, but he starts as Paul does, blessing God. Not only "*Blessed are You ...*" but he says "*Teach me ...*" What a great pattern for us to pray: bless God, ask Him to teach you in it.

²⁵ *My soul cleaves to the dust; Revive me according to Your word.*

I love his transparency! And I love the answer in v. 50: *This is my comfort in my affliction, That Your word has revived me.*

v. 28 is another great prayer answered later in the Psalm: *My soul weeps because of grief; Strengthen me according to Your word.*

God's Word is our source of life and strength in low times, all time

⁶⁷ *Before I was afflicted I went astray, But now I keep Your word.* ⁶⁸ *You are good and do good; Teach me Your statutes ...* ⁷¹ *It is good for me that I was afflicted, That I may learn Your statutes.*

We don't know all of why God brings affliction in our lives, but we do not part of why He does from passages like these, and that He has things for us to learn in them that we wouldn't otherwise. 2 Sundays ago I preached to our brothers and sisters in Congo on 2 Peter 1, "God's precious and magnificent promises ..." and I can tell after what God taught me the 10 days prior to that sermon, those promises of God were more "precious and magnificent" to my soul.

Which brings us to our last point, in 2 Corinthians 1. To review:

1. We Should Bless God in our Affliction (v. 3)
2. God Will Bless and Comfort Us Through It (v. 4a)
3. **God Calls us to Bless and Comfort Others as a Result (v. 4b)**

ALL of us should always be blessing God (v. 3) because He is the God of ALL comfort (v. 3), and He comforts ALL His children in ALL their affliction (v. 4) ALL the time so that ALL of us will be able to comfort ALL we know, in any and ALL of their afflictions!

As we bless God *in it*, God will bless and comfort us *through it*. As we bless God (in the sense of praise) God blesses us (sense of grace, favor, comfort, spiritual well-being, love, even joy, peace). Paul says “*Blessed be God...who comforts us in all our affliction*”

Verse 4 says “God comforts us ... [but that’s not the end, it adds] *so that we will be able to comfort ...*” We all naturally wonder about God’s purpose for us in our suffering, but a big part of the answer is bigger than us and has to do with others. God comforts us not so that we will be comforted *only*, but so that we will *be able to give the same comfort to others* that God has given to us. God intends all of us (not the professionals or the pastors, all of us) to be able to comfort one another, and one way He does that is by putting us in positions where we need that comfort (in suffering, sorrow, grief).

God isn’t just able to use those things for good, He *intends* those for good (Genesis 50:20). He works them together for the good of those He has called according to His purpose, those who love God (Romans 8:28). But an important insight in those familiar verses is that the good is not just for the sake of an individual going through it, is for the sake of “*many people*” (Genesis 50:20 also adds), it is not just for *me*, it is for “*those who love God*” (Romans 8:28 says). In our text today, God comfort us, not just for us, but so that we will be able to comfort others. It’s not just about us, it’s far bigger than just us, it’s about God, His purposes (plural) for His people. God intends us to fulfill His will, not just for us, but for others, too.

In God’s providence, our congregation has lost many in 2010-2011

- in recent weeks, even days, a number lost a parent or loved one
- 12 in our congregation have lost a spouse within the last 2 years, for many, life partner for decades. Real area of ministry growth for us beyond the funeral – I’ve been praying for God’s help for ongoing support for the widows, widowed, or other lonely, and I would welcome your thoughts and desires to be apart of that type of ministry afterwards.

Several weeks ago I was reading a book called *Ministering to the Mourning*. I also ordered an excellent little book by James White, called *Grief: Your Path Back to Peace* (at bottom of bulletin note sheet, I would recommend for anyone who has suffered a loss). I didn’t realize when I ordered that book how timely it would be for me in God’s providence. I read it *for me first* on my trip to DRC.

I had been praying and sharing with the Elders this year a heart for the hurting and praying God would give us more of a heart for the bereaved among us, and I believe God is answering that prayer. In God’s providence, He has been answering that prayer for me in ways different than I prayed, “beyond what I could ask or think.” I am encouraged to see how God might use us to better encourage, comfort, and minister to one another through this process/passage.

I wrote back to Didier 8/25 to try to comfort him ‘we hurt with you and pray for you and are concerned for you and hope we can comfort you and that God will comfort where we cannot.

These verses from 2 Corinthians I feel were not only written by Paul but also express my heart to you and your wife from us: 2 Corinthians 1:3-5, 7, 9-11; 2:5; 4:1, 7-10, 16-18

2:4 *For out of much affliction and anguish of heart I wrote to you with many tears; not so that you would be made sorrowful, but that you might know the love which I have especially for you ...* ⁸ *Wherefore I urge you to reaffirm your love for him.*

4:1 *Therefore, since we have this ministry, as we received mercy, we do not lose heart ...*

4:8 *we are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not despairing ...* [contrast mortuary in D.R.C., wailing, grief without hope]

... ¹⁵ *For all things are for your sakes, so that **the grace which is spreading to more and more people may cause the giving of thanks to abound to the glory of God.*** ¹⁶ *Therefore we do not lose heart, but though our outer man is decaying, yet our inner man is **being renewed day by day.*** ... ¹⁸ *we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal but the things which are not seen are eternal*

5:7 *for we walk by faith, not by sight—*

7:6 *But God, who comforts the depressed, comforted us ...*

[I wrote to Didier] I don't know if maybe you can read those words in your Bible to your wife for us, but you are right, God has given us His precious Word to comfort us, and I pray they will.

Our Jesus is “a man of sorrows and familiar with suffering or grief” (Isaiah 53:3) and He carries our griefs and sorrows (Isaiah 53:4). Jesus wept greatly at the death of Lazarus and they said “see how much He loved him” (John 11). I love what it says in Hebrews 2:10-18, and 4:15-16 and 13:20-21 and hope those verses also comfort you ...’

Didier told me when I was there how much reading those verses in 2 Corinthians comforted him and his wife. I experienced the reality of our text, that God comforts His people so they can comfort His people with the comfort God gave them. We're not the first people to lose an child in circumstances like that. God has helped others through that and God used them to help us through it, Praise the Lord.

And God comforted us so that we could comfort others, Didier and Annie, and Angelique and Gracia, and Peter and Dorcas, not just the Christians in Congo, God used me to minister to non-Christians. God has already used what I've been through to encourage and to minister to many over there in ways I only could in person. And God used me to minister to many here from a distance in ways that I couldn't in a hundred sermons in person. I was able to be a witness to many in the D.R.C., Christians and non-Christians, of the comfort Christ gave me that I wanted to share with them and still come and thank them and be with them and encourage them even though my son was gone, for me to still come to Africa encouraged them greatly. Many far beyond our church were following my blog (surprising stats how many page-views per day and outside U.S.)

God Moves in a Mysterious Way, His Wonders to Perform

There is so much more I could share that I don't have time to – if you have time and you haven't already read them I'd encourage you to read the blogs I wrote, especially on 9/10, 9/11 and 9/13 (<http://lifeatthelaytons.blogspot.com>). In God's Providence right before I left Congo, God brought another little boy to the orphanage who is adoptable and who my wife and I are pursuing adopting and we greatly treasure your prayers in that

We will try and share updates on our blog as we're able. The Lord gives, the Lord takes away...and sometimes, the Lord gives again. I dreaded coming home on that plane empty-handed, like Naomi in the book of Ruth who lost her son Mahlon (then 2nd son Khilion) and said in Ruth 1 "I was full ... but I have come back empty."

The Lord gave Naomi her sons, the Lord took away, and then He gave again, so at the end of the book of Ruth the Bethlehem ladies say "Naomi has a son ... better than ten sons."

The Lord gave a son to David, the Lord took away in 2 Samuel 12, and then the Lord gave again, the same chapter said after David comforted Bathsheba in the loss of their baby, the text then says the Lord gave them another son, and they named him Solomon.

The Lord gave sons and daughters to Job, and the Lord took them away, and then the Lord gave again. At the end of the book of Job, the last chapter says the Lord gave children again and all he lost.

Sometimes it is the Lord's will for us to lose people in our earthly family, and the way He gives again is by Himself filling the void, God Himself as Father to the fatherless, Husband to the widow. God gave up His Son for us ... He adopts us. Have you lost a earthly brother? You have gained a heavenly Elder Brother in Christ. Jesus is not ashamed to call us His brothers.

God doesn't always give us more earthly family, but He does spiritually. Jesus said whatever loss we have in our earthly family, *"brothers or sisters or mother or father or children ... he will receive a hundred times as much now in the present age, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children ..."*

In other words any loss in an earthly family for Christ is more than made up by a new spiritual family we have in Christ, in the church. The Lord gives, the Lord takes ... and sometimes He gives again. Always He gives spiritually. Sometimes He gives in other ways. Whether He gives or takes or gives again, we'll bless His name.