

Comforted to be a comforter * 2 Corinthians 1:3-11

January 08, 2017 * Langford Community Church * Graham Gladstone

At many times over the last year, I have found myself praying that God would pour out His comfort in people's lives. In hospital rooms, in the funeral homes, right here, every Sunday morning, we pray that God would comfort the people who are near and dear to your hearts.

And I know that many of you are in need of God's comfort. There are health issues, there are family conflicts and hardships, there's just 'stuff' that keeps us up at night, that needs more than a pat on the back and a good night's sleep to make things better. Is there some situation where you need comfort today? I want to invite you to name it and hold it in your mind as I speak this morning.

In the face of these trials, we need a gracious power that's bigger than us to reach in and touch our hearts. I feel that as a pastor – as I visit people in hospital and talk with people about illnesses – in my own strength, I feel totally inadequate to say anything comforting. I need, we need a larger-than-life, utterly sovereign power to intervene. We need God's comfort.

That's why I'm delighted to be able to open the Bible and read unequivocally that our God IS a God of comfort. God is not this unsympathetic taskmaster who says – boohoo just get over it - He is actively pouring out comfort in our lives.

He looks at the hardships that we face with empathy and compassion and He delights to walk with us, carrying us, through those trials. Our God comforts us.

Even more than that though, God comforts us so that we can comfort others. His comfort is not meant to stop in our lives but to overflow into the lives of others.

That's our big idea for today – God comforts us, so that we can comfort others.

God comforts us so that we can comfort others.

I want to explore that one piece at a time – God comforts us (part 1) – so we can comfort others (part 2) in the hope that it will comfort you and also equip you to encourage others.

Let's get right to it – part 1 – God comforts us. God comforts us.

Join me in 2 Corinthians 1 – I encourage you to have a Bible open so that you can see all of this for yourself – 2 Corinthians 1, starting at verse 3.

3 Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, 4 who comforts us in all our troubles...

Let's pause there.

That's a tremendously powerful statement that we need to stop and soak in. Our God is the Father of compassion, the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our trials.

The Father of Compassion, the God of all comfort!

When I read that this week, it knocked my socks off. What a title!

People call Michael Jackson the king of pop – why do they do that? Because he was the best there was. Because he defined pop music in such a way that it would never be the same again. Because pop music defined him.

Apply that here – our God is the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort. When it comes to comfort, there is no one like our God. He is the very essence of comfort; He is the source of all comfort.

We often think about God in terms of holiness and obedience and justice and that's very appropriate, but this is a really important reminder – our God is the King of Comfort.

And He exercise comfort for our benefit!

Look at verse 4 – He comforts us in ALL our troubles. Whatever you thought of earlier, that situation that keeps you up at night – that falls within the ALL here – God is committed to comforting you in that trouble, and indeed in *all* our troubles.

Now let me pause for a minute, just to say this: many of you have gone through or are going through absolutely heartbreaking experiences. I realize that. You are living trials far beyond anything that I have experienced and so I acknowledge that my ability to speak as a person is limited. As a servant of God though, speaking on God's behalf, bringing His Word to life, I want to offer you the comfort and hope that come objectively from God. I want to speak biblical words of comfort to you, words that transcend out experience.

Now that means that we need to talk about what we mean when we say 'God comforts us.'

Living in the 21st century, when we think about comfort, we often think about this – a pillow – the absence of pain, the presence of ease and rest and well, you know, comfort.

Those ideas are for sure in the word that Paul used, but also have to recognize that when Paul wrote that God is the God of all comfort, he meant that God is the God of this and this (pillow and brace).

I'll tell you what this is.

It was a warm and sunny day. I was out for a run and feeling great. My favourite song came on and I was flying down the path, wind blowing through my hair. I remember distinctly this feeling of 'This is awesome, I'm the King of the World!' and then SNAP – I stepped right on the edge of the pavement, twisted over my ankle and fell face first into a flower bed. A teen girl came by and used her cell phone to call me a cab and thus ended my awesome run for the day.

I didn't break my ankle or anything, just overextended a tendon, but boy, it was bruised and sore and I could barely walk for days. But when I put the brace on, the pain diminished; it allowed me to walk more freely and to do what I needed to do.

THAT's tucked into this word that Paul uses – God's comfort is both this and this – a pillow and a brace.

David Garland puts it well in his commentary on 2 Corinthians:

The comfort that Paul has in mind has nothing to do with a feeling of [sluggish] contentment. It is not some tranquilizing dose of grace that only dulls the pain, but a stiffening agent that fortifies one in heart, mind and soul. Comfort relates to encouragement, help and exhortation (and that's true – the Greek word that Paul uses means both). God's comfort strengthens weak knees and sustains sagging spirits so that one faces the troubles of life with unbending resolve and unending assurance (Garland, 60).

I think we need to hear that. God's comfort does not mean the absence of trials, but the unassailable presence of the all-powerful God with us in the midst of those trials.

Look at verse 5 –

5 For just as the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives, so also through Christ our comfort overflows.

Do you hear that? The sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives.

Just as surely as Jesus suffered, so too will we. Not as atoning sacrifices on the Cross, but as we take up our cross and follow Him, we will experience hardship. That just happens as human beings living in a fallen world.

But just as surely as that happens, 'so also through Christ our comfort overflows.'

Jesus had angels in the Garden to comfort Him but we have the very Son of God comforting us in trials of life.

I remember one day back in Woodstock taking Anna for a walk; she was very tiny and it was very cold and windy. We were still a few blocks from home and the wind picked up and was bitterly cold. Our snow suits were barely making a dent and so I pressed her face against my cheek to try to give her a little more warmth and I remember saying to her 'It'll be ok; just keep looking at me, just keep looking at me' and I also remember in that moment – 'hey, I just gave myself a sermon illustration.' In the face of trials, Jesus says to us 'it'll be ok, just keep looking at me, just keep looking at me.'

And that's a part of the comfort that God gives. Look at verse 6 –

6 If we are distressed, it is for your comfort and salvation; if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, * particular attention - which produces in you patient endurance of the same sufferings we suffer.

Do you see what's going on there? God's comfort produces patient endurance in the face of suffering. Not just this, but this. God's comfort means not just relief but endurance.

And I want you to see that Paul has given us a case study in what God's comfort looks like.. He shows us starting at verse 8 what it means to receive comfort from the Father of compassion – look at verse 8.

8 We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about the hardships we suffered in the province of Asia. We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired even of life.

9 Indeed, in our hearts we felt the sentence of death.

* Notice – when Paul says ‘hardships’, he doesn’t mean ‘math tests’ or long line ups at the grocery store – he’s talking about fearing for his life. We can’t put our finger on the specifics but I’ve seen some pretty compelling suggestions that he might be thinking here of the time when Demetrius the silversmith started a riot against Paul and his companions in Ephesus – that’s (Acts 19). Whatever the situation, Paul was facing a real hardship.

But look how he continues –

But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead.

God’s comfort, in the face of Paul’s trials, was given to allow Him to trust in the LORD with all His heart and lean not on His own understanding, knowing that since God was committed to him, God was leading him along the path of blessing.

10 He has delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us. On him we have set our hope that he will continue to deliver us, 11 as you help us by your prayers. Then many will give thanks on our behalf for the gracious favor granted us in answer to the prayers of many. (2Co 1:8-11 NIV).

God comforts us so that we might endure, relying exclusively on His strength.

And since He raises the dead, there is no trial too grave for Him to handle. If He delivers us in this life, then we have stories to share of how faithful He is. We encourage each other by sharing His answers to our prayers. And if He doesn’t, then we will be delivered into an eternity of rest (pillow) with Him, in His presence.

Our sufferings don’t atone for sin, but Jesus’ did – He suffered the judgment our sin deserved for our comfort and our salvation. Lean on Him. Trust Him, because He has committed Himself to you.

God comforts us – that is, He enables us to endure hardship by depending on Him – but that’s not the end of the story, is it?

I left off part of the verse when I read it way back in verse 3:

3 Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, 4 who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God. (2Co 1:3-4 NIV).

Do you see? Our experience of God’s comfort shouldn’t be like water flowing into a pool and stopping, but water flowing into a channel and flowing out.

God comforts us so that we might comfort others.

God does not comfort us to make us comfortable but to make us comforters (Jowett, quoted in Garland, 64).

And there’s tremendous wisdom in this. Just out of curiosity, I did some reading around the idea of ‘paying it forward’ – that sort of thing that you pay for your drink at Tim Horton’s and then the drink for the person behind you, in the hopes that they’ll pay for the person behind them. From what I can tell,

the Canadian record is 228 – that is over and over again, for three hours, 228 people got a free coffee and paid for the person behind them.

And a study done at Cornell University shows that this is actually a sociological reality – receiving help reliably increases the likelihood of being generous toward someone else.¹

So God, in His infinite wisdom, pours out comfort in our lives, so that we can ‘pay it forward’ and comfort others with the comfort that God has given us.

When we experience God’s comfort in the face of trials, He enables us to speak from experience into the lives of others going through the exact same things.

God comforts us so that we can comfort others.

How do we apply this?

Well, first of all – if you are feeling overwhelmed, allow God to comfort you. Listen for His voice, in the Bible, in the still, small voice of quiet reflection – wait upon the LORD and He will renew your strength. Know that God will comfort you with rest and endurance.

Second, let me say this – if you have experienced God’s comfort, then you are qualified to be a comforter. If God has been to you a pillow and a brace, then you are qualified to share that comfort with others.

I know – I KNOW – how much easier it is not to get involved with people in hardships, and some churches have this mentality that ‘the pastor does that work’ but the reality is that God will faithfully comfort you so that you are uniquely suited to share God’s comfort with someone else. The Father of compassion and the God of all comfort is working in your circumstances to enable you to speak comfort into someone else’s life.

Third, two ways to do that –

i. Share your stories. Colin Kruse writes - The testimony of God’s grace in one’s life is a forceful reminder to others of God’s ability and willingness to provide the grace and strength they need (Kruse, on 2 Cor 1:4).² That is, hearing how God helped you to endure a trial years ago may help someone else to endure a similar trial today. Christians were never meant to suffer alone – when one suffers, we all suffer – but God comforts us abundantly so that that comfort will overflow into the lives of our brothers and sisters. I can’t tell you how happy I am when I see you doing this – sharing your lives, sharing stories of God’s faithfulness, so that others are reminded that God IS at work and that God IS working things out for good.

And

ii. Pray for each other. That might seem too simple, but look again at verse 10 –

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/16/opinion/sunday/the-science-of-paying-it-forward.html>

² Kruse, C. G. (1987). 2 Corinthians: an introduction and commentary (Vol. 8, p. 62). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

10 He has delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us. On him we have set our hope that he will continue to deliver us, 11 as you help us by your prayers. Then many will give thanks on our behalf for the gracious favor granted us in answer to the prayers of many. (2Co 1:10-11 NIV).

Never underestimate the value of what you do by praying for another person. This verse alone gives two outcomes – first, you help another by your prayers. Paul is clear that our prayers are not whispers lost in the wind, but helps. Paul was facing deadly peril, and people prayed for him and he acknowledges here that it was real help. Second, God’s faithfulness is on full display when He answers our prayers. We see that deliverance has come not by accident but because the God of all comfort has moved. And He gets the praise. Did you notice how central that is to this passage? It starts verse 3 – Praise be to the God and Father who comforts us in our troubles and ends verse 11 – many will give thanks for that comfort. Pray for one another and God will act and in so doing show Himself faithful.

Testimony

Benediction

7 But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us.

8 We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair;

9 persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed.

10 We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body.

(2Co 4:7-10 NIV).