

The God of All Comfort

2 Corinthians 1:1–11

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Introduction: Beginning a New Series

Today we begin a new sermon series through the book of 2 Corinthians, and we will spend the next fourteen weeks working through it together. One of the reasons I have felt led to this book is something I have noticed in my own daily Bible reading — a gentle sweetness that this letter carries. It brings comfort to my soul, and my hope and prayer is that it will do the same for yours.

Background: Paul and the Church at Corinth

Before we read our passage, I want to share some background on the when, where, and why of this letter. Of all the churches Paul planted, the church at Corinth was his problem child. It was the congregation that gave him the most grief and caused him the greatest trouble — which may be why, of all the letters Paul wrote, he wrote the most to Corinth.

Based on archaeological finds, we can date Paul's first arrival in Corinth and the founding of the church there to 50 AD — a little over thirty years after the cross and resurrection. Paul stayed in Corinth for more than a year and a half, perhaps longer, and this would be the longest he had remained in any single location up to that point in his ministry. The Lord told him to stay, and so he did. Near the end of that period, around 51 or 52 AD, the Jewish community brought Paul before Gallio, the Roman Proconsul, on charges of “persuading people to worship God contrary to the law” (Acts 18:13). Gallio responded by declaring that he was no judge of Jewish religious disputes and released Paul. This episode tells us something important: thirty years after the resurrection, Rome still did not recognize Christianity as something distinct from Judaism. That would change within twelve years.

Soon after the trial, Paul left Corinth, visited the church in Jerusalem, returned to Antioch, and then traveled to Ephesus, where he remained for three years — preaching the gospel from approximately 53 to 56 or 57 AD (see Acts 19–20). During those years, something was going wrong in Corinth.

When the people of Corinth became Christians, they did not automatically become Christlike. Their old culture and old ways of thinking still exerted a deep pull on their behavior, and we can all understand that — sanctification is a slow process. During Paul’s time in Ephesus, he received word from Corinth that things were not going well. First Corinthians gives us the full picture: competing factions (1 Cor. 1:11–13), sexual immorality (1 Cor. 5:1–13; 6:9–20), lawsuits among believers (1 Cor. 6:1–8), confusion about marriage (1 Cor. 7), idolatry (1 Cor. 8–10), disorder in worship (1 Cor. 11–14), and theological confusion about the resurrection (1 Cor. 15).

Hearing of these problems, Paul wrote a letter of instruction — one we do not possess today, known to us only because Paul references it in 1 Corinthians 5:9. I imagine it was fairly brief, because he followed it with the much longer letter we know as 1 Corinthians, which addresses these problems at length. Then, not long after writing that letter, Paul made a personal visit to Corinth — most likely by sea, a fairly direct journey. And that visit did not go well.

Something happened during Paul’s second visit to Corinth in which he was publicly wronged and humiliated (2 Cor. 2:5–8). We have no narrative account of exactly what took place, but from scattered references throughout 2 Corinthians a clear enough picture emerges. Paul’s apostolic authority was challenged. His physical appearance was mocked. His speech was dismissed as unimpressive. And his refusal to accept financial support from the Corinthian congregation was twisted into evidence that he did not truly love them. What seems to have wounded him most deeply was that the congregation did not come to his defense (2 Cor. 2:5–8; 7:12). So Paul left — without resolving the crisis, hurt and in much pain.

Back in Ephesus, Paul wrote a third letter, which he describes as severe — written not to cause pain, but to demonstrate the depth of his love and to demand accountability. That letter, too, is lost to us.

The date is now around the end of 56 AD. Roman persecution of Christians has not yet begun in earnest, but the storm clouds are forming on the horizon. In 56 or 57 AD, Paul himself is severely persecuted by the citizens of Ephesus and driven out of the city (Acts 19). Seven years later, in 64 AD, Emperor Nero will set fire to Rome and blame it on the Christians. That storm is coming, and Paul knows it. After leaving Ephesus, Paul travels north to Macedonia — what we would call northern Greece — and there Titus finds him with news from Corinth. Titus reports that the church has grieved and repented. The man who had wronged Paul has been disciplined. The congregation is longing for Paul to come to them. Paul receives this news flooded with relief and joy. He describes that moment in 2 Corinthians 7:6–7:

But God, who comforts the downcast, comforted us by the coming of Titus, and not only by his coming but also by the comfort with which he was comforted by you, as he told us of your longing, your mourning, your zeal for me, so that I rejoiced still more.

But Titus also brings word that those same storm clouds of persecution are beginning to gather above Corinth, and this weighs on Paul. And so, there in Macedonia, Paul sits down and writes the letter we call 2 Corinthians.

With that in mind, let us open it and begin reading.

Reading the Passage

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, To the church of God that is at Corinth, with all the saints who are in the whole of Achaia: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort...

— 2 Corinthians 1:1–3

Achaia is the lower peninsula of Greece where Corinth is situated. And there, in the opening breath of this letter, we meet the phrase that will anchor our study today and carry us through the entire book: *the God of all comfort*.

Paul is writing to Corinth for several reasons. There is a need for reconciliation between himself and the congregation. He wants to expose false teachers who have caused so much damage. He wants to invite them to participate in a ministry of mercy toward the church in Jerusalem. But one of the most important purposes of this book is comfort — that the people of Corinth, standing on the edge of a storm, would be comforted by the Lord through the power of the cross and resurrection. The theology of the cross dominates 2 Corinthians, and out of it Paul proclaims the comfort of God.

What Comfort Actually Means

Before we read further, we need to define what Paul means by the word *comfort*, because it is almost certainly not what most of us first think of.

If you ask someone what comfort means, they will likely describe something like ease — no pain, no pressure, no difficulty. Sitting in a soft chair with a good book and a warm drink. In our ordinary usage, to comfort someone means to remove the source of their distress, to make the discomfort go away.

But that is not what Paul means.

The Greek word translated here as *comfort* is παράκλησις (paraklesis). It is a compound word. The first part, *para*, means “alongside” — as in a parachute, which comes alongside you in a fall; a paramedic, who comes alongside you in a crisis; a parachurch organization, which comes alongside the local church; or parallel bars, which run alongside one another. *Para* denotes something that comes near to assist. The second element is καλέω (kaleo), the Greek word meaning “to call.” And so a παράκλησις is one who is called alongside to help — to advocate, to strengthen, to sustain.

To be comforted, in Paul’s sense, means that someone comes alongside you in the midst of pain or affliction and gives you what you need to get through it.

It is like a schoolteacher working with a seven-year-old child who is struggling to learn to read. That teacher does not say, “This is too hard for you — let’s not worry about it.” She comes alongside that child, patiently, and gives him what he needs to move through the difficulty.

It is like the drill sergeant in boot camp. He does not look at the new recruits and say, “Those miles are too long — let’s skip the run today.” He comes alongside, gets close, and gives them what they need to get through it.

It is like the nurse who leans over a patient about to undergo open-heart surgery and says, “There is a great team here. It’s going to be okay” — and then prays with that person. She doesn’t say, “This is a frightening surgery — let’s call it off.” She gives them what they need to face it.

It is like the marriage counselor who sits with a husband and wife on the edge of divorce. The counselor does not make the pain disappear overnight. The problems are not solved in a session. But she draws near, and she gives them what they need to work through the affliction they are in together.

That is παράκλησις. That is the word translated here as *comfort*.

Now apply it to God — the God of all comfort. His comfort is not the removal of pain. It is God Himself, present in the pain, coming alongside the person in affliction to sustain and strengthen them so that they move through it with purpose and with hope.

God Comforts Us in All Our Afflictions

Reading on, we see that Paul places no qualifier on the reach of this comfort.

| ...who comforts us in all our affliction...

| — 2 Corinthians 1:4

What if your affliction is the result of your own sin or bad choices? He comforts us in *all* our affliction. What if the affliction was caused by what someone else did to you? He comforts us in *all* our affliction. What if the affliction is loneliness — the slow ache of feeling unseen and unknown? He comforts us in *all* our affliction. What if it is grief, that heavy weight of deep loss? What if it is persecution, suffering because of your faithfulness? What if it is a physical illness that will not go away, a body that is breaking down, a diagnosis that frightens you? He comforts us in *all* our affliction.

There is no affliction, no suffering, no pain that the comfort of God cannot reach.

And because of that comfort extended to us, Paul continues: *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.* The comfort we receive from God works in us, and then through us to others who are also in need.

Here Paul is saying something importantly different from the way our world tends to think, and the distinction matters. Our world says that if a person has been through a particular kind of suffering, they are better equipped to help others who face the same kind of suffering. Someone who has lost a loved one may have something unique to offer someone in grief. Someone who has walked through addiction or trauma understands from the inside what that experience is like. This is not wrong — shared experience matters, and I am not arguing against it.

But that is not what Paul is saying. The comfort Paul has to give is not drawn primarily from his shared experience of suffering. It is drawn from the comfort he himself has received from God. Notice how he phrases it: we comfort others *with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.* The ability to bring comfort to another person begins with having first been comforted by God. Shared experience is not enough. A person can only give what they have already received.

So how does one receive this comfort of God that is available in all our afflictions? Paul explains, and it comes down to two movements.

Recognizing Whose Suffering It Really Is

The first movement in receiving the comfort of God is a shift in understanding — a recognition of whose suffering and affliction it actually is. Notice verses 5 through 7:

For as we share abundantly in Christ's sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too. 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. Our hope for you is unshaken, for we know that as you share in our sufferings, you will also share in our comfort.

— 2 Corinthians 1:5–7

Who owns the suffering? Christ does. The suffering is His.

One way of reading this is straightforward: when a person suffers persecution on account of their witness for Christ, they are so united with Christ that they share in His sufferings. But Paul has already told us, back in verses 3 and 4, that the comfort of God reaches into *all* afflictions — not only those that come from faithful witness, but even those that come as consequences of following the ways of this world, making bad decisions, or living in the wreckage of sin. How does that kind of suffering constitute sharing in Christ's sufferings?

The answer is rooted in the vicarious and substitutionary nature of Christ's atoning work on the cross. Scripture says that Jesus died for our sins (1 Cor. 15:3). And 2 Corinthians 5:21 tells us exactly how:

For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

Jesus does not merely represent sinful humanity — He literally takes what is ours, our sin, makes it His own, and gives us what is His, His righteousness. Now extend that same logic to our suffering, as Isaiah 53 does:

Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed.

— Isaiah 53:4–5

The good news of Jesus Christ is that He not only took our sins upon Himself and nailed them to the cross — He also carried our griefs and our sorrows. He did not remove our worldly afflictions, because we clearly still experience them. But through faith we become so united with Him that our afflictions and sufferings and grief become His. And because our suffering is His, the victory that is His becomes ours.

In practical terms, this means there is nothing you are going through — nothing — in which God in Christ, through the Spirit, is not present with you. Being present with you in it, He shares with you abundantly everything you need to sustain and strengthen you in that affliction.

And the comfort that Christ shares with us abundantly is the power of the resurrection. Jesus Christ rose from the grave. That victory over the tomb is a comfort to us not only in the knowledge that we too shall live forever, but in the assurance that no matter what we are going through, there is a resurrection power greater than anything this world can do to us. There shall be a deliverance from whatever darkness or affliction we are presently suffering. We will get through this. You will get through this — because Jesus Christ rose from the grave.

So the first step in finding the comfort of God is this: recognize that Christ carries your suffering. You are not alone in it.

Stopping the Reliance on Yourself

The second movement is harder, perhaps, but equally necessary. Regarding your afflictions — stop relying on yourself, and rely instead on God. Paul describes this with startling candor in verses 8 and 9:

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.

— 2 Corinthians 1:8–9

We do not know precisely what affliction Paul is describing here. Whatever it was, it was severe enough to bring him to the point of despair — to a place where he expected to die. And then comes the pivot:

But that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead.

— 2 Corinthians 1:9

There it is. That is how we find the comfort of God. We find it when we stop relying on ourselves and rely instead upon the Lord.

I know that is not what we want to hear. We want a method. We want a technique. We want eight practical steps. But Paul does not offer those. He says that God brought him to the sentence of death precisely so that he would stop trusting in himself. The comfort of God comes when we stop trying to secure it through our own strength, our own intelligence, our

own capacity to manage things and get things done. It comes when we rely upon Him — the God who raises the dead, the God who is victorious over the very worst this world can do.

What does that look like in practice?

It means you stop reading your affliction as abandonment. One of the deepest lies that suffering tells us is that God has looked away — but Paul has already established that your affliction belongs to Christ. Trusting the God who raises the dead means trusting that His ownership of your pain is evidence of His presence, not His absence.

It means you grieve without despair. Trusting in resurrection power does not make you stoic or numb — it makes you someone who can feel the full weight of loss without being afraid it will destroy you. You know there is something yet to come.

It means your hope is not circumstantial. The person who trusts in themselves hopes when things look hopeful. The person who trusts the God who raises the dead hopes when everything says not to — because that hope is anchored not in the situation, but in the empty tomb.

It means you become a living argument for the gospel. A person who suffers without being consumed is a witness — testifying that there is a power at work in them greater than what the world can see.

The Faithfulness of God, Past, Present, and Future

The comfort of God is available to us in all our afflictions: because He has made our afflictions His, He is not absent from any of them; because He is the God of the resurrection on which we are called to rely; and because He is faithful — He has delivered His people in the past, He is delivering them in the present, and He shall deliver them in the future.

Notice how Paul says this in verse 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.

— 2 Corinthians 1:10

The verbs here move deliberately through time. *He delivered us* — past tense. *He will deliver us* — in the Greek, this is actually a present tense, meaning he is doing it right now, in ways we may not yet be able to see. *He will deliver us again* — future tense. God is the God of all comfort because He is always faithful. He has brought me through affliction before. He is doing it now. He will do it again. Therefore my hope is in Him.

We Are Never Alone

And one final word from our passage: we are never alone in this. God has given us Himself — “Behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matt. 28:20). He has given us His Holy Spirit — “And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper, to be with you forever” (John 14:16), and that Helper is a παράκλητος, a Comforter called alongside us. And He has given us the church, the community of faith. We see this in verse 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.

— 2 Corinthians 1:11

If God is the God of all comfort, why does Paul ask this church to pray for him? The answer is simply this: the comfort of God does not bypass the community of God. The Lord sustains us and gives us strength through one another. Prayer is not a footnote to the theology of comfort — it is one of the primary instruments through which God’s comfort reaches us. The church praying for you is God comforting you. And notice that Paul says *the prayers of many* — the wider the circle of those praying, the wider the circle of those who will give thanks when God delivers. Your affliction, brought to God through the prayers of His people, becomes a future testimony of His faithfulness.

So let us pray for one another.

A Prayer of Comfort at the Lord’s Table

Today is Communion Sunday, and I want to lead us in a guided prayer built around these truths before we come to the Lord’s Table.

Father of mercies, God of all comfort — we come to you now not because we have it all together, but because you have promised to come alongside us in every affliction. We take you at your word. So we bow before you as people who are carrying real weight.

Silence.

In this moment, name before God in the quiet of your heart the affliction you are carrying. Whatever it is. The grief. The diagnosis. The broken relationship. The weight of a decision you cannot see the end of. The loneliness. The shame of a bad choice. Name it before Him.

Silence.

Lord, we name these things before you — and now we receive what your Word has declared. These afflictions are not ours alone. You have borne our griefs. You have carried our sorrows. Thank you for not being far away, but near and present in every affliction we feel.

Silence.

We confess to you, Lord, that we often try to manage these things ourselves. Forgive us for that. We lay down our self-reliance right now and trust the God who raises the dead. We know that because Christ rose from the tomb, you can bring us through this. We believe that. Help our unbelief.

Silence.

We thank you that you are faithful — that you have brought your people through before, that you are doing it right now in ways we cannot yet see, and that you will do it again. Our hope is not in our circumstances. Our hope is in the empty tomb.

Silence.

And now, Lord, we pray for one another. Turn to those around you — pray for the person on your right and on your left, and for any others who come to mind in this moment.

Silence.

For those who are grieving — Lord, come alongside.

For those who are sick, or sitting with someone who is — Lord, come alongside.

For those whose marriages are strained — Lord, come alongside.

For those who are lonely, who feel unseen — Lord, come alongside.

For those who are afraid of what is coming — Lord, come alongside.

For those who have failed and do not feel worthy to be at this table — Lord, come alongside.

Silence.

We come now to this table — the table that proclaims the comfort of God. Prepare our hearts and our minds as we partake in the bread and the cup, proclaiming the Lord's death until He comes again. Amen.