

The God who Comforts

2 Corinthians 1:3-7

2 Corinthians 1:3 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. 5 For just as the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives, so also through Christ our comfort overflows. 6 If we are distressed, it is for your comfort and salvation; if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which produces in you patient endurance of the same sufferings we suffer. 7 And our hope for you is firm, because we know that just as you share in our sufferings, so also you share in our comfort. (NIV)

One of the things which most discourage Christians is when major problems start to affect their lives. I'm sure we all know of people who once ran well as Christians but discouragement came and they no longer worship anywhere. Maybe there's been times when we have faced problems and wondered where God was in them and felt discouraged.

Paul writes to the Corinthians for a second time. In the first letter the church seemed like a disaster zone. That was probably enough to discourage a large chunk of the church. Once he had written the letter, his criticism of them was probably enough to discourage another chunk. In fact, he refers to that in chapter 7. That's besides all the other pressures and pains of life and persecution that they would experience as Christians.

As we look at this passage this evening we read this: *praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles.* When trouble comes, we have a God who comforts us in time of trouble. We always see trouble in a negative way don't we? There is a simple principle here: being a Christian does not immunise us from problems in life.

Now, we could argue that the Corinthians had it coming to them after what we read in the first letter. Surely they deserved chastisement after their behaviour? It's certainly the line taken by some Christians who believe unfettered blessings come when one shows much faith, is generous to a tee and who lives in obedience to Christ. Paul was all these things but trouble still came as standard as he goes on in this letter to describe. I'd go as far as to say that anyone seeking to follow Jesus and obey Him lands themselves in a spiritual battle and are never immune from the problems the world throws at them. In fact, being a Christian invites trouble. Do you have problems? It could well be that you're doing something right!

Paul recognises the problems the Corinthians are experiencing and highlights that fact that in their suffering God comforts them. What do we usually associate with the word "comfort". I usually think of comfort as being consolation: that shoulder to cry on, the comforting embrace, the one who makes us feel better by knowing how we feel.

Is that how God comforts? Yes, but not just that – there's much more. The Greek verb to comfort is *parakleo*. Recognise it? The Holy Spirit is referred to in John's gospel as the Comforter – a *paraclete*. It's what Jesus was to His disciples and what the Holy Spirit is to us now.

Parakleo – it's what Jesus did for His disciples and what the Holy Spirit does for us, His disciples, The meaning of the word is very broad but comforting embraces the following:

1. Comfort is strengthening
2. Comfort is having someone else to speak for us
3. Comfort is having someone else walk with us and help us
4. Comfort is being encouraged when we're down
5. Comfort is about being consoled
6. Comfort is learning something new about ourselves and God
7. Comfort is experiencing God speak to us

Bible translators tend to pick on particular words that *parakleo* means – comfort, help, counsel, advise, console. The Holy Spirit, our paraclete is variously translated Comforter, Counsellor, Advocate, Helper. None of these words can embrace the whole idea of *parakleo* or paraclete.

When we're down we're confident that we have the Holy Spirit who is with us, strengthens us, encourages us, picks us up, is our advocate with the Father, empowers us, consoles us, helps us. And it's through Him we learn and grow. Problem times are learning times because the paraclete helps us learn more about God and ourselves.

However, we also learn from this passage is that God doesn't just minister by His Spirit, but He gives us one another to be instruments of comfort. Our Helper brings other helpers to us. Let's continue reading in verse 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. 5 For just as the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives, so also through Christ our comfort overflows. 6 If we are distressed, it is for your comfort and salvation; if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which produces in you patient endurance of the same sufferings we suffer. 7 And our hope for you is firm, because we know that just as you share in our sufferings, so also you share in our comfort.*

The Helper brings helpers. As He brings comfort, so we comfort one another. As the Holy Spirit is THE Paraclete, we are the paracletes for one another, we console, help, speak for, encourage, empower and the rest. It's not a matter of maturity either. The Corinthians encouraged Paul.

So, we have a God who comforts us in our troubles. What do we mean by "troubles". We often tend to associate the troubles of the early church with persecution and the suffering that come with it, but Paul specifically uses the word "troubles" rather than those words to start with here.

What does it mean? Mounce describes the Greek word *thlibo* as denoting pressurizing, squeezing or crushing. The traditional translations have been trouble, affliction or tribulation. Mounce makes a connection to persecution via a link in Hebrews 11:37 where *thlibo* is one of the horrible things the saints of God suffered. There is a similar link here when Paul uses sufferings in verse 6 and refers to his own problems in Ephesus which are recorded in Acts 19. However I don't think that it's use in verses 3 and 4 are referring only to the troubles of persecution but reflect the many pressures the believers were experiencing. In a later chapter of this letter Paul lists all the things that had happened to him for the sake of the gospel. Some of them were persecution, some were the consequences of travel such as being shipwrecked three times.

Life is full of troubles – things that pressure us, things that squeeze us and push us to the edge. In the midst of those troubles, we have a God who comforts us. His comfort is not merely sympathetic, but empathetic. We read in verse 5 that "*For just as the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives, so also through Christ our comfort overflows.*" We find comfort in our troubles because we have a Saviour who has experienced human suffering. Paul doesn't use *thlibo* to describe Jesus' troubles but the much more severe *pathema* – suffering. He comforts us in troubles because He knows what trouble is because He's been more than pressured – He's suffered. He's had trouble with a capital T.

At times when we are troubles, pressured, squeezed, overcome almost with our problems, we have a God who comforts us because He knows exactly how we feel because He's been there and He desires to encourage us and turn our problems into opportunities.

Which leaves me with one final issue. Why do we have a God who is prepared to comfort us. Let me go right back to verse 3:

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort. (NIV)

All praise to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is our merciful Father and the source of all comfort. (RSV)

We have a God who is our merciful Father. In this passage which focuses on the second description of God as comforter, this phrase goes almost unexpanded, but mercy lies at the heart of the matter. The word for mercy here is *oiktirmos* which means compassion, pity or mercy. It's an emotion that comes to the surface from deep within. God is deeply moved by us and that is reflected in compassion for our situation. In fact most translators use the word compassion rather than mercy. Why doesn't Paul use love here? Implicit in compassion is love, but the whole idea of this passage is that God's comfort for us is borne out of deep compassion for our needs - He sees our state and has compassion.

Translators tend to use mercy and compassion relatively interchangeably, but for me mercy and compassion have slightly different foci. Take a look at Daniel 9:9: *You are merciful and forgiving, although we have rebelled against you. (TEV)* In Daniel mercy is associated with pardon and forgiveness. But the context of the passage in 2 Corinthians mercy is broader. The sense is pity for the state we find ourselves in, or that persecution has brought to and compassion would embrace this thought better than mercy to my mind although that's a matter of taste perhaps. Comfort is the proactive consequences of God's compassion as the source of all comfort as he consoles, encourages and gives us the opportunity by His Spirit to draw us out of the situation we are in.

Our God is deeply compassionate. It's no surprise really because He is a God of love. One consequence of love is the emotion of compassion that wells up out of us to show comfort for those who hurt.

Are we troubled, do we have problems, are we suffering. Let's call upon the God of compassion and of all comfort to bring us encouragement, consolation, help through His indwelling Spirit and through the people He has brought to us as part of His church.

Father, thank you for the depth of your compassion that wells up from You when you see us getting into a mess even though that mess may be a consequence of our actions. Lord, as we look at all the problems that seem to swallow us up, thank You that the Holy Spirit is always with us. Through Him may we know the whole breadth of the comfort You bring and may we recognise those who You bring to us to provide that comfort as well. As the Holy Spirit does His work of comfort in our lives, may we grow as followers of Jesus and be comforters ourselves. By the power of your Spirit, may we see all the opportunities that come from the troubles we currently perceive. Help us to reflect Your love by giving us a heart of compassion to those who need comfort, help and encouragement. In Jesus' name. Amen

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