

2 Corinthians 1:1-11
(Psalm 130; Matthew 7:24-27)
“The God of All Comfort”

Introduction

Many flee to Christ for help in the midst of hardship and suffering, and so we should. However, many who seek comfort in Christ are driven by the idea that Paul wrote this letter to correct: namely, the notion that the Christian life will *not* be marked by suffering and pain, but by health and success. While the Bible *does* invite us to a life of great blessing, it does *not* promise that our circumstances will be easier, our businesses more successful or our health better than those who do not know Christ.

Here are the circumstances that led to this letter: Traveling teachers, self-appointed apostles, had visited the church in Corinth and had attacked Paul, calling into question his apostolic authority. The substance of their criticism was this: In their view, Paul had experienced too much suffering and failure to be an apostolic model. In their eyes, he was not a very good illustration of successful ministry: he was too often in trouble with authorities, sometimes sick, sometimes anxious and discouraged. He seemed too weak to be a very good advertisement for the Spirit-filled life.

To this, Paul responded with a resounding defense of his own ministry and of the very nature of the gospel itself, a defense that should bring comfort to those who are going through difficult times, because he offers real life comfort that does not remove us from our circumstances, but rather gives meaning to our suffering and even shows how, in the end, our suffering can be a source of glory to God and of help to others. He stakes out his argument in these very opening verses of the letter.

He opens, as all ancient letters opened, by identifying himself and those with him, and by addressing those to whom he is writing. He emphasizes from the start that, no matter what these false apostles have been saying about him, he is “an apostle of Christ Jesus,” not because of any decision on his part, but because it was “the will of God.” Any who know the story of Paul’s conversion and call to ministry realize that it was that experience on the road to Damascus that transformed him from the primary persecutor of the church to its chief defender.

In these verses, he reminds the Corinthians that, just as he has been called by God to be an apostle, so too they have been called and set apart by God and are part of the larger church throughout the entire region of Achaia. As in all his letters, his greeting is a concise summary of the gospel: “Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” And then, he launches into the substance of what will be the letter’s theme.

Body

1. Paul begins by reminding us about this great God who meets us in our suffering and trouble (1:3-4).

The God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is also our Father. This great God who created all that is and who rules by his sovereign power, this one whom Paul describes so often as “the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,” is also the one who invites us to call him, “Abba.” This is so different from the great religions of the world, and even from so much of classical Christian theology that retains the name, but emasculates it by making God out to be unmoved and untouched by feeling and emotion.

Yet the biblical descriptions of God are rich in such language, and if it is all merely anthropomorphic, then the entire view of God that Jesus taught us is a lie. Didn't he say, “He who has seen me has seen the Father”? Was Jesus without deep and profound emotion? Certainly not. His love was passionate and protective; his anger at evil cold and clean.

God is full of compassion. This becomes all the clearer when we hear Paul describe God as “the Father of mercies.” This is exactly what Jesus revealed: When Jesus saw the crowds of people following him he was “moved with compassion, for they were like sheep without a shepherd.” How tragic it is when we seek to comfort those who have experienced great loss by saying things like, “The Lord had a reason for taking your child” or “for your house burning down” or “for you losing your job.”

Without realizing what we are doing, we stand before the great mysteries and hurts of life and make God the author of evil, and act as if he were just wishing that those who suffer would get the point, smile and move on. But when Jesus stood by the grave of his close friend, Lazarus, and saw his brokenhearted sisters and friends, Jesus wept. So God weeps with those who mourn. He is the “Father of mercies and God of all comfort.”

God comforts us in all our troubles. So, too, in these wonderful words: “the God of all comfort.” He not only cares deeply for us and feels compassion, but *he acts* to comfort his children. When we are distressed, he does not come along side with a theological tome explaining the problem of evil and suffering. Instead, he suffers with us, and brings life out of death, promising that the day will come at last when our tears will be wiped away, when he will restore to us those whom we have lost awhile, and that he will at the final day make all things new. But meanwhile, he is with us in our affliction.

2. Paul then reminds us that the essence of the Christian life is union with Christ, who suffered for us so that he might comfort us in our suffering and so that we might comfort one another (1:5-7).

If we are God's children, the sufferings of Christ will flow over into our lives, Paul makes the incredible statement in his letter to the Colossians, "Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church" (Col 1:24). Paul experienced this sharing in Christ's sufferings repeatedly in his ministry, and in later chapters he makes that case with his own life stories.

If we are God's children, the sufferings of Christ will flow out of our lives. Suffering brings glory to God and good to others by giving us the resources and credibility to comfort those who are suffering as we have. We know that we live in a broken world where people suffer great hardship and loss. We also know that it is those who have suffered devastating loss who are the greatest comfort to those going through hard times. It is a comfort to both: It helps redeem the loss for the one bringing comfort, and encourages the one in the midst of grief and loss to have someone along side who understands.

3. Finally, Paul uses his own experience to teach us that despair and suffering break our pride and teach us to look to the Lord alone (1:8-9).

Paul had been a proud man: proud of his Jewish birthright, proud of his Roman citizenship, proud of his education as a student of the great rabbinical teacher, Gamaliel, proud of his gifts as a thinker and leader, but it was what he suffered that made him increasingly like Jesus. He realized that his times of despair made him rely on God rather than on himself, and to look to the Lord alone for comfort and deliverance.

Conclusion

Paul ends this section with a word of encouragement and a call to prayer (1:10-11):

The Lord, who has delivered us in the past, can be trusted to deliver us in the future. Suffering puts us at the center of a community of prayer, as the body of Christ takes up the fight for us. And suffering finally issues in thanksgiving and praise when we have experienced the comfort of God through the prayers of his people.

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, 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 (1:3-4).

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