

2 Corinthians 1:3-4

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[0 : 00] We all need to be comforted. Now, the circumstances that will produce that need are many and varied, and the urgency or the intensity with which we stand in need of comfort will also be a function of the particular trial or suffering that we are enduring.

There are lesser and there are greater trials that we experience. What is certainly true is that the absence of comfort is very often a far greater trial than the cause of the pain or the suffering itself, whatever that might be.

I think we would all be able to give our agreement to the statement that a man or a woman who is comforted can face and overcome the most desperate of circumstances, while the woman or man who is alone and comfortless can be crushed by seemingly far lesser trials.

And what about you? As you gather here this evening, how are you? Are you in need of comfort? Or as you look around, those who are here this evening, or indeed in your mind's eye, as you consider those who are your circle, be it of family or friends or acquaintances, are you able to identify those who stand in need of comfort?

[1 : 43] Maybe that is an answer you can respond to very, very quickly in your mind, for immediately there comes to mind somebody very much in particular who is indeed in need of comfort.

Can you help them? Are you willing to help? Are you or could you be of comfort? The Apostle Paul was very conscious of the need for comfort, both to receive and to give.

And he begins his second letter to the Corinthians, blessing God for the truth that He is the God of all comfort.

And I want this evening to consider the manner in which Paul describes God and describes the activity of God and the purposes of God in this matter of comforting.

And before turning to the particular verses, which are verses 3 and 4, that we'll be concentrating our attention on, let's read this first chapter of 2 Corinthians.

[2 : 53] Not the whole chapter, we'll read from the beginning of the chapter through to verse 11. 2 Corinthians chapter 1, reading from the beginning through to the end of verse 11, on page 1158 in our Bibles.

So let's read the beginning of this letter to the Corinthians. Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy, our brother.

To the church of God in Corinth, together with all the saints throughout Achaia. Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. 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, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God.

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

[4 : 21] 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.

Indeed, in our hearts we felt the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves, but on God who raises the dead.

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. 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.

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort. As we think particularly, not exclusively, but particularly, on what we find in verses 3 and 4 in this opening section of the letter to the Corinthians, there are three things I want us to meditate on this evening.

First of all, to think of the description that we have of God here, given to us by Paul. The description of God. But then immediately, having described God in this particular way, Paul goes on to speak of the activity of God.

[5 : 47] And we want to think briefly on this also. And then finally, notice the purpose of God in His activity. And we'll notice how each of these things flow the one from the other.

Let's think of each in turn. First of all, the description of God as we have it here, very wonderfully, very beautifully, in the verse there, in verse 3.

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

God here is described not only as compassionate. Paul is not simply saying that God is compassionate. Now, evidently, that is true.

But he is saying more than that in the language that he uses, in the manner in which he describes God. He describes God in this very suggestive way as the Father of compassion.

[6 : 51] The Father of compassion. He is, so to speak, the author, the source of compassion. He does, if we take the analogy, engender compassion.

Not that this compassion that is spoken of is somehow created ex nihilo, for compassion is of the very nature of God.

And so, as always existed, we might say potentially. And I'll explain what I mean by it having always existed potentially. Compassion is a manifestation of God's love that only finds expression in his relationship with his creatures, and very particularly with us, men and women.

Now, God's love is eternal. There's a wee chorus. I don't know if it's in English, but the words are in my mind in Spanish that speaks of God being the creator of love.

And, of course, that is not so. He hasn't created love because love has always existed. Love is part of God. It's part of God's very nature. God is love. And so, there was no need to create love.

[8 : 04] God has always been. And compassion is an expression of God's love, but it's an expression of God's love that is only present when he relates to us.

In his relationship in himself, in the Godhead between the Father and the Son and the Spirit, in that eternal relationship, there was always love, but there was never compassion, for there was no need for compassion.

Hence, we speak of compassion being of the nature of God, always present, if you wish, potentially. It finds expression in the presence of poor, miserable sinners, such as we are.

And as there are poor, miserable sinners, such as you and such as me, so that gives the opportunity, as it were, for that which is in the very nature of God to find visible expression, as he would demonstrate and show his compassion to us as the father of compassion.

And this compassion that he shows to us is a compassion for every circumstance of every soul in need of mercy, or the compassion of God.

[9 : 17] Indeed, the word itself that in the NIV is translated, the father of compassion in the singular, is actually a plural word. The manner in which it's translated is perfectly valid, but certainly the idea would seem to be that whatever is the need that we have that requires of the compassion of God, well, it is available in God.

He is the father of all mercy, of all compassion. So whatever your circumstance, and whatever your need, God is in a position and is willing to meet it.

He is the father of compassion. But Paul also describes him in a composite description, not only as the father of compassion, but as, and a very related idea, the God of all comfort.

The God of all comfort. If, as we've suggested, God's love finds concrete expression in the compassion of God towards us as we stand in such need of it, then we can say that his compassion is experienced by us in the comfort that he provides.

In the very moment of need, that comfort that we receive and that we enjoy, that we experience, is his compassion being experienced by us.

[10:48] His compassion takes, if you wish, palpable form as he comforts us in that dark place where we can find ourselves.

And note that it is God who is the God of all comfort, God in his triune identity.

It's interesting how Jesus, when he speaks of the coming or the sending of the Holy Spirit in John's Gospel, chapter 14 and verse 16, we are able to recognize how this characteristic of God, this activity of God, of comforting his people is an activity shared by the persons of the Trinity.

Because there in chapter 14 and verse 16, in bringing comfort to his disciples in the light of his impending departure, how does he bring them comfort? Well, there we read, I will ask the Father and he will give you another counselor or comforter to be with you forever, the Spirit of truth.

Notice how in this task of comforting his people, in that one verse, all three persons of the Trinity are mentioned. The Son who speaks of another comforter, the implication being very clear, I have been your comforter in our relationship, I am leaving, but I'll send you another comforter.

[12:14] But notice that the Father is involved also as the one who will send this comforter. He too concerned for this matter of comforting his people. The Father of compassion and the God of all comfort.

Now that comfort, as we will discover as we continue considering the material before us, this comfort is broad in its scope and application, but it is also worth noting that it has a very definite messianic fulfillment or component.

And we find that very vividly illustrated in the passage that we read in Luke's Gospel, where you have the aged Simeon awaiting the consolation, or the word used is the same word as we have here, the comfort of Israel.

And so in that sense, there was this great expectation among those who were godly and spiritual at the time of the coming of Jesus that as had been promised, Israel would receive and welcome the one who had come to comfort them.

And so in Jesus, we have, if you wish, the zenith of the expression of God's comfort as He comes to comfort His people with His salvation.

[13:40] And so here we have in these wonderful terms God described, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort. And so before going any further, let us just pause for a moment and stand in grateful awe of our God.

Let us for a moment contemplate in wonder and deep admiration and indeed appreciation at who He is and what He is like.

This is your God, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort. So God described, but here we have also at the beginning of this letter a description of the activity of God.

And it flows from the description. As Paul continues there in verse 4, this God of all comfort is, not surprisingly, the one who comforts us in all our troubles.

This is God's activity. He is the one who comforts us in all our troubles. Now, in the light of how God has been described, this is something that won't surprise us.

[14:54] God is a God who is engaged in and concerned for the comfort of His people. He comforts His children. He comforts you.

He comforts me. He comforts those who are in His family. And as we think of this activity of God, there's a number of truths that we discover in these verses that speak of this matter.

And let's just notice a number of them. First of all, notice that the object of God's comfort are very particularly and very especially the saints.

This letter is addressed very clearly and in its introductory words of greeting, we read to the church of God in Corinth together with all the saints throughout Achaia.

Paul is writing to the saints. And so when he goes on immediately in verse 4 to speak of this God who comforts us in all our troubles, we can quite rightly and legitimately understand this reference to us being a reference to those who are saints, to those who are part of God's family.

[16:07] They very particularly are the object of His comfort. Now that's not to say that God is disinterested in those who are not His own. But it is to recognize that He has a particular concern and is particularly willing and able to comfort those who are His own, those who are His saints.

That special love that God has for His own is on a number of occasions very evidently illustrated and described in the Scriptures.

It comes to mind the words of Jesus as He was heading to Calvary, having loved His own, He loved them to the uttermost. This special love of Jesus for His own that finds this wonderful and glorious expression as He hands Himself over to death in our place.

And so too, in this matter of comfort, as God's people, we are especially blessed and especially privileged to be the special objects of His comfort.

Might that even be an encouragement to those who as yet are not His own, to those who as yet have not put their trust in Jesus, that you would swiftly do so, that you too might enjoy this great privilege and experience of God's comfort.

[17 : 35] Another truth that is evident in what Paul says here, speaking of the activity of God as the comforter of His people, is a truth that Paul simply takes as a given that the troubles that require a comfort on the part of God are part of our normal experience as Christians.

Paul sees no need to explicitly make the point. He simply takes it as a given. There in verse 4, as he describes the activity of God, He is the one who comforts us in all our troubles so that we can and so on.

It's simply so obvious to Paul. It doesn't require explanation. It is something that Paul recognizes as if you wish self-evidently true that as Christians, we will be subject to all kinds of troubles.

Hence the need for God to respond in comfort for us. It is the normal experience of Christians to endure all kinds of troubles.

And indeed, that would be another truth that we can draw out from the language used here from Paul, that there is no circumstance, no trouble that escapes God's purposes and His capacity and willingness to comfort.

[19 : 00] He is the God who comforts us in all our troubles. There aren't particular troubles that are, if you wish, more worthy of God's comfort. We don't need to examine and torture ourselves and say, oh well, I don't think God would be interested in comforting me in this matter for this is a matter that I am personally responsible for.

It's my own foolishness that has led me to this place so I can't possibly hope for God to be willing or able to respond. There may be other more worthy occasions if I'm being persecuted for my faith. Well, there God certainly is almost duty bound to comfort me but in this trivial matter or in this matter that is the product of my own foolishness, surely God will not be interested.

But no, in all our troubles, whatever the cause, whatever the reasons, God is a God who loving us is willing to comfort us.

that doesn't mean that He will be a God who is unconcerned with the foolishness that led to the trouble, whatever that particular trouble was.

[20 : 06] But His concern to comfort us is a constant in all our troubles. And these troubles we might also note in which God comforts us can be severe in the extreme.

Paul himself goes on, having stated the truths that we find in these opening verses, he goes on to illustrate it from his own experience. And in verse 8 and following, he speaks of very severe suffering and hardship and trials that he endured.

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.

And though we're not given a clear description of what the trials were, they evidently were very severe in their nature to the point that he despaired even of life.

And in such trials, however severe they might be, perhaps particularly in trials of great severity, God was present to comfort him.

[21 : 18] Indeed, Paul identifies in severe trials particularly a purpose that lies behind it on the part of God. A part, or very specifically, that they would create in us a greater dependence upon him.

He goes on himself there in verse 9 to state, Indeed, in our hearts we felt the sentence of death, but this happened that we might not rely on ourselves, but on God.

And so even in this severe trial where in the first place he experiences the comfort of God, but he also is able to recognize that there was a purpose in it that he might more rely on God and not on himself.

As we continue to think of some of these truths that we find concerning the trials and the troubles that provoke in God, that produce in God this response of compassion and comfort, we can notice that Paul recognizes that there are some troubles that are peculiar to the saints.

There is a phrase used here that is the subject of much, I wouldn't say controversy, but diverse opinions as to what is actually being said there in verse 5, for just as the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives.

[22 : 43] And as I say, it's not surprising we read something like that, that there would be a number of ways of understanding this expression, the sufferings of Christ. Perhaps the most obvious one, and often the most obvious one is likely to be the most valid one, though it's not always so, but in this case perhaps it is, the sufferings of Christ can be understood as those sufferings that are endured because of our Christian profession.

And so I say sufferings that are peculiar to the Christian, sufferings that the Christian endures that those who are not Christians do not endure. Now we in our own country are at this time blessed with a freedom to worship and to profess our faith without fear of any meaningful persecution. But we know that that is not so in so many lands. We know that there are so many for whom to name the name of Jesus is to bring violence and persecution and opposition of many kinds. And so they are subject to, if you wish, the sufferings of Christ, that is those sufferings that they endure because of their Christian profession.

It's also suggested that when here Paul speaks of the sufferings of Christ that flow over into our lives, there is a sense in which Paul is recognizing that in the sufferings of the Christian, Christ participates even presently as the head of the body.

[24 : 19] So our suffering is shared by him and by extension, the suffering of other believers ought to be shared by us. And there, of course, this picture that is used of the body helps to illustrate that.

If one part of the body is hurting, then all the body hurts, and that certainly includes the head, that is Christ Jesus. And so there is this corporate solidarity in suffering, or certainly there ought to be, as others suffer, so we ought to suffer with them together as Christians, participating in the sufferings of Christ.

Christ. Well, there are many other ways in which this particular phrase is understood, but without coming to maybe a definitive conclusion on this particular language that is used, it is certainly true that Paul recognizes, and indeed in his own life experienced, suffering that was peculiar to him as a Christian.

Paul very particularly experienced that. And we too, in a measure, may also endure such suffering. The activity of God is that in all of these things, in all of these troubles, in those that may seem passing and trivial, in those that are very severe, in those that we endure because of our own folly, and we've created a problem, or those that we endure entirely as the victims of others, in all of these things, the activity of God, of the God of all comfort, is that he is the one who comforts us in all our troubles.

What does this comfort look like? What does it involve? Well, the word translated there, comfort, in verse 3, and indeed as the word continues to be used in the following verses, is part of that family of words in Greek that revolve around the verb *parakaleo*.

[26 : 20] That is where you have the name of the Holy Spirit as *parakletos*, or the comforter, the counselor. And the verb itself, as perhaps you've heard, explained on other occasions, is a verb that literally means to call to one side, or to accompany.

The comfort of God, as we would understand what it means on the basis of this verb then, is to have God, by His Spirit, accompanying us, and giving us strength.

God, the comfort of God is not, in the first instance, to experience deliverance from the trial, to experience deliverance from the cause of our pain, or indeed of the pain itself.

But rather, the comfort of God is to be accompanied by God in the midst of the trial, in the midst of the affliction. Now, that's not to say that God cannot, or indeed does not, on occasion, when He so choose, deliver us from a trial.

And when He does so, we are, of course, grateful for that deliverance. But the comfort that is spoken of here is particularly to be appreciated and to be valued when it is experienced in this way, as He accompanies us in the midst of our affliction.

[27 : 38] And the Spirit of God, who indwells the believer, He will prod us that we might cry out to the Father for help. He will guide us to all truth that we might understand the purposes of God in our suffering.

But most wonderfully of all, God by His Spirit is simply with us. We are not alone. He is indeed Emmanuel, God with us.

The activity of God. And then finally, and briefly notice that Paul here speaks of the purpose of God. We've already actually touched on one of the purposes of God in, in this case, in the severe suffering that it helped Paul to rely more greatly on God.

But thinking of the purpose of God particularly in His granting us comfort. And the purpose is very clearly identified there in what follows in verse 4.

He is the God of all comfort who comforts us in all our troubles so that, the language very clearly identifying a purpose so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God.

[28 : 51] So the purpose of God in comforting is not exhausted in the fact that we are comforted. It may seem almost obvious, well, what's the purpose of God in comforting?

Well, obviously the purpose is that the believer might be comforted. Well, clearly that is so. But the purposes of God are not exhausted in the fact that I, as a troubled believer, receive and enjoy comfort.

No, there is a further or we might even say a greater purpose. And Paul very clearly identifies what it is. It is that we, having been comforted, would be enabled to minister to others, to comfort others. And in this regard, maybe there's just a couple of things we could notice. First of all, we could notice, and this is a matter of, I think, indisputable observed fact that indeed those who aren't Christians could identify with, and it is this, that the very experience of suffering, and in the case of Christians who experience the consolation of God in that suffering, but the very experience of suffering can help us to sympathize with and to understand those who are suffering, who are afflicted.

We can console or advise or bring words of comfort with greater sensitivity and understanding and indeed authority. We can share from our own experience, and very particularly the manner in which God helped us in a particular trial.

[30 : 22] So in that sense, the suffering that we endure and the comfort that comes with it helps us to better serve and comfort others. I'm reminded it comes to my mind of one particular example of a lady in the congregation in Moyobamba when I was pastoring there, and she was suffering from terminal cancer.

And in the event, from the time in which we spoke with her about her thoughts in the face of this trial, to when she then finally died, maybe there was a year or so past.

But in that final year of her life, one of the things that she took upon herself as a ministry, a God-given ministry, was that she would visit others in the community, some within the church community and others in her neighborhood who were not Christians.

She would particularly seek out and visit those suffering from cancer. She herself was suffering from cancer. She was going to the coast every so often for chemotherapy and was suffering greatly. And this is what she did. And of course, the comfort she was able to bring to these people far exceeded anything the likes of myself could have possibly done. For she was enduring in her own experience this trial, this pain, this imminent death.

[31 : 50] And so when she would speak with others in similar circumstances, there was of course so much greater capacity and sensitivity and authority in the words that she would bring.

And so there is this in what is being said here, that having suffered and received comfort, we are better able to comfort others. But what Paul says here, while this is true, seems to go beyond that. Paul speaks of comforting others, to use the language there in front of us, with the comfort we ourselves have received from God. Paul is not just saying, well, you've experienced it and so you're better able to sympathize with others, though that is so.

Paul is saying that there is a sense, in a way that is marvelous, though also difficult to fully understand and grasp, that we share of the very comfort that we have received.

Indeed, the language is used further on in the passage of how comfort overflows in us. And of course, that language also would suggest or would hint at this possibility of us sharing in the comfort we receive.

[32 : 58] So not simply that we've experienced something and so we're better able to sympathize, but we've received from God something very tangible, His comfort. And of that comfort, we share with others.

And notice finally that Paul states that this comfort that we can bring is comfort that is available and helpful for those who are in any trouble, who comforts us, verse 4, in all our troubles so that we can

comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God. You know, in this matter, and especially as I've maybe illustrated it with the example of this Christian lady who, suffering from cancer, was better able to comfort those who were equally as suffering, we might respond, well, yes, I would like to comfort others, I'd like to help others, but I really don't feel able.

I don't know what to say. I don't seem to have any answers for those who are going through this particular trial. I know nothing of these things. And we might say, well, that's not for me. But here Paul would seem to suggest that all of us as Christians in some measure, of course there will be circumstances where some are better able and better positioned, as it were, to comfort some than others might be.

[34 : 19] But Paul does seem to very clearly suggest that all of us as Christians have the capacity to comfort others. And maybe we better recognize that when we think again of this verb that we've briefly commented on, that is translated to comfort, parakaleo, or to come alongside, or to accompany.

And is that not something we can all do? We maybe don't understand what the other person is going through. We don't feel their pain because we have never experienced it. We can't say, I know where you are, or I know what you're feeling, because we don't.

And it would be foolish to say that we did because we don't. But you can accompany. You can simply be there for that friend, for that fellow believer who is struggling or suffering a trial of whatever description, simply to be there, and in being there to be a comfort.

Well, as we draw things to a close, suffering and trials are part of our normal and permanent experience as believers, and trials of every kind.

Some peculiar to believers, others that we suffer along with others who are not believers, suffering common to the human condition. Some caused directly by our own sin and folly.

[35 : 46] Some the product of the sins of others. And other sufferings that simply happen for no obvious reason and with no evident or visible cause.

But be they what they may, the God of all comfort is able and willing to comfort us. And so, I would encourage you to seek His help.

And as you do, and as you experience His comfort, share that comfort with those who surround you. Well, may God help us all so to do.

Let us pray. Let us pray.