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# WHERE CAN WE FIND COMFORT?

## Insights From 2 Corinthians

**W**here can followers of Christ find comfort when circumstances bring them to the end of themselves?

Paul's second New Testament letter to the Corinthians helps us answer that question. In his own words, the author of one of the most important letters ever written explains how he emerged from some of his darkest hours with insights that made life worth living.

May Paul's discoveries become our own. When we have nowhere else to turn, may we too find the "Father of mercies and God of all comfort" filling our lives with Himself.

*Martin R. De Haan II*

Managing Editor: David Sper

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# TROUBLED BEYOND MEASURE

**A**n inner-city pastor was asked about the extent of the drug problem in his community. Pain came to his face as he responded, “It is beyond measure.”

Then he talked about what he sees happening to the people he loves. He confided that he is struggling with the fact that out of the 25 young people he and his wife have sheltered in their own home, almost all are back on the streets dealing drugs again. He aches when he sees young people faced with the choice of either working for minimum wage or selling drugs for \$1,500 a day. He feels overwhelmed that so many of these young people see themselves as destined to

crime, prison, and hopelessness.

The emotions of this inner-city pastor are similar to the concerns that break the hearts of military chaplains. What can ministers in uniform do for those courageous men and women who survive the minefields and ambushes of the enemy, only to return home with the memories of the battlefield burned into their souls? What comfort can they give to those who wake up in a sweat in the middle of the night, reliving the terrors of the killing fields, reexperiencing the deafening explosions of incoming artillery, feeling guilt for nothing more than being alive?

Such pains, however, are not limited to battlefields or city streets. Who can live without being touched by the loss of a loved one, by broken health, or by the mental and emotional

distress of a family member or friend? Who can measure the problems endured by children of alcoholics, by the victims of sexual abuse, or by the countless others who have learned how to give a smile and a hard day's work while covering up their own story of personal torment?

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***Hurting people need more than words. They need someone to come alongside them.***

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Hurting people need words of comfort. But they need more than words. They need someone who can lighten the weight of their loneliness, their broken health, and their despair. They need a reassuring voice that firmly but gently says, "I'm here

now. Don't be afraid."

All too often, however, that comfort doesn't come. Eventually many of us learn that even the best parent, friend, spouse, or employer cannot give us the personal assurances we want for ourselves and others.

And only when there's no one else to turn to are we apt to pray one of King David's prayers:

*Hear, O Lord, when I cry with my voice! Have mercy also upon me, and answer me. When You said, "Seek My face," my heart said to You, "Your face, Lord, I will seek." Do not hide Your face from me; do not turn Your servant away in anger; You have been my help; do not leave me nor forsake me, O God of my salvation. When my father and my mother forsake me, then the Lord will take care of me (Ps. 27:7-10).*

# THE COMFORTER

When King David prayed for the comforting presence of God (Ps. 27:1-10), he knew he was asking for more reassurance than any mortal could give. What he could not have known, however, is that a real person would one day stand before a group of troubled disciples and say:

*Let not your heart be troubled; you believe in God, believe also in Me.*

*. . . My peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you.*

*Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid (Jn. 14:1,27).*

The Teacher who spoke these words did more than talk. He proved His credibility by helping troubled men and women. He stilled their storms, healed their withered, paralyzed legs, gave

sight to the blind, and fed thousands with a little boy's lunch. And just before returning to His Father, He backed up His offer of comfort by saying:

*I will pray the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may abide with you forever—the Spirit of truth (Jn. 14:16-17).*

When Jesus referred to the Holy Spirit as the Helper, He used a word that meant, "one called alongside of." So important would this promised Helper be to His disciples that Jesus said:

*It is to your advantage that I go away; for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you; but if I depart, I will send Him to you (Jn. 16:7).*

A few weeks later, the Comforter came, who would not only be *with* Jesus' followers but *in* them as well.

## HOW DOES THE SPIRIT OF GOD COMFORT US?

One of the things we learn from the Bible is that the reassuring Spirit of Christ works in ways that are not always our ways. This is graphically illustrated in the life of someone who probably experienced as much trouble as any war veteran, addict, sexual-abuse victim, or bereaved person you have ever met. Yet in spite of all his pain, he came through it praising “the Father of mercies and God of all comfort” (2 Cor. 1:3).

We know him as the apostle Paul, the converted killer-turned-spiritual-advisor. As a battered, bruised, and often sorrowing representative of Christ, Paul is a case study of how the Spirit of God can give comfort and help in the midst of trouble.

He is an example of someone who was able to get beyond the tormenting memories of what he had done to others (Acts 8:1-3; 1 Tim. 1:12-17) and what others had done to him.

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***Paul is a case study of how the Spirit of God can give comfort and help in the midst of trouble.***

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To give us some idea of what he had endured along the way, Paul wrote:

*Five times I received forty stripes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods; once I was stoned; three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I have been in the deep; in journeys often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils of my*

*own countrymen, in perils of the Gentiles, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren; in weariness and toil, in sleeplessness often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness (2 Cor. 11:24-27).*

Yet, Paul was more than a survivor. While remembering and bearing the scars of the past, he wasn't broken and embittered by his memories. He was able to look back and see that the darkest times had actually prepared the way for a sunrise. He wrote convincingly about a mysterious yet real source of comfort that freed him from his memories:

*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 tribulation, that we may be able to comfort those who are in any trouble, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. . . . We are hard-pressed on every side, yet not crushed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed (2 Cor. 1:3-4; 4:8-9).*

What was Paul's secret? Was his pain threshold so high that he didn't hurt the way the rest of us do? Was his body stripped of nerves? Or had he burned out so badly that he was like a glassy-eyed boxer who keeps coming back for more, no matter how many times he is knocked down?

I don't think we could make a case for any of the above. Paul was a prime candidate for disillusionment, yet he kept being renewed in purpose

for himself and for others.

So what was Paul's secret? That's what we are going to examine in the rest of this study. We can learn a lot about comfort by looking at the story of his life as it is told in his second letter to the Corinthians, his most personal letter. It is here that we will find a series of insights into the mind and heart of a man who was a living witness to the comfort of God.

In Paul's own words, we will find an explanation for his ability to survive experiences that have broken others. In 2 Corinthians we will see some of the many ways Paul experienced the love and comfort of God. And we will see how we too can find rescue and relief.

One of the first things we will learn from Paul's experience is that our

expectations may be part of the problem. We may want nothing more than a warm embrace and a reassuring word that will get us back on our feet and back to

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***The “God of all comfort” may ask us to leave the lowlands of our past and climb the mountains of our future—a new way of living and loving.***

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business as usual. But Paul's experience of comfort shows in some very specific ways that God may not want us to go back to where we were. The “God of all comfort” may ask us to leave the lowlands of our past and climb the mountains of our future—a new way of living and loving.

# WHERE CAN WE FIND COMFORT?

## WE FIND COMFORT IN THE:

### 1. God Who Comforts

## IN THE GOD WHO COMFORTS (2 Cor. 1:3-7)

Paul is an example of what can happen to a mind and life that has been touched and changed by the love of God. He illustrates how rich our lives can become when we learn to find our security and peace in “the Father of mercies and God of all comfort.” He also shows how much fulfillment we find when, having been changed by the love of God, we become more concerned about the needs of others than we are about

ourselves. With this in mind, Paul praised the God . . .

*who comforts us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort those who are in any trouble, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. For as the sufferings of Christ abound in us, so our consolation also abounds through Christ (2 Cor. 1:4-5).*

Paul let us know that God has a special interest in consoling those who are willing to join with Christ in caring for others. In another New Testament letter, Paul wrote:

*I now rejoice in my sufferings for you, and fill up in my flesh what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ, for the sake of His body, which is the church (Col. 1:24).*

In other words, Christ alone had suffered to pay

the price for our sins. No one else could do that. The cross was finished, once and for all! What Paul could do with the help of God, however, was to join Christ in a willingness to live for the interests of others. Like Christ, Paul put his own temporary well-being on the line to go to the rescue of those who needed help.

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***God has a special interest in consoling those who are willing to join with Christ in caring for others.***

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That meant trouble. For Paul it meant exposing himself daily to life-threatening circumstances (1 Cor. 15:31; 2 Cor. 4:8-11). It meant a daily willingness to die, if necessary, to show

the love of God. Yet, in the process, he was overwhelmed by God's ability to compensate for any trouble that he incurred along the way.

This is a truth for every child of God. It offers hope and comfort to prisoners, victims, veterans, and the oppressed. All of us who are in Christ can learn to die to our own self-centered interests so that the powerful life and love of God can flow through us. This is not an easy path. It is not a matter of doing what comes naturally. It is a matter of doing what comes supernaturally as we choose to join the resurrected Christ in His love for others.

In the short run, this approach to comfort may involve discomfort. Dying to self-preoccupied thoughts will hurt. Personal efforts in intercessory prayer, in the discipline of letter writing,

and in visiting the lonely involve a difficult and painful process. Yet, until we are willing to expose ourselves to the risk and discomfort of suffering with Christ, we will never know the fullness of His comfort. More important, until we experience the reassuring love of God, we will not be able to pass along that encouragement to others as Paul did. In fact, the more we share God's love and comfort, the more we will experience God's love and comfort in our own lives.

Having said this, we must be careful not to overburden the wrong people. There are times when pain is so intense that we must allow it to run its course. "Down time" is a part of God's plan. When He brings us to our knees in weakness, we must accept the down time as part of His work in our lives. We'll talk

more about that later.

What we've just been looking at is what is needed by those of us who are inclined to let self-pity and self-preoccupation make things worse. We

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need to understand that comfort must not be seen as an end in itself. It is to be seen as (1) a byproduct of suffering with Christ, and as (2) a preparation for equipping us to comfort and encourage others who suffer.

## Thinking through 2 Corinthians 1:3-7.

1. Whom does God comfort? (vv.3-5).
2. What qualifies as suffering for Christ?
3. Why does God comfort us? (v.4).
4. How can our comfort be comfort to others?
5. How can others receive this comfort? (v.7).
6. How much comfort can God provide? (v.3).

### WE FIND COMFORT IN THE:

1. God Who Comforts
2. **Weakness That Helps**

## IN THE WEAKNESS THAT HELPS (2 Cor. 1:8-11)

We have already seen that Paul began this letter with comfort on his mind. We noted that he didn't see his

comfort as something just for himself. He found that the solace and peace of God he experienced helped him lead his readers to that same place of spiritual consolation (1:6-7).

Let's see now what else the Holy Spirit used to bring Paul to this awareness of the "God of all comfort."

The following passage adds additional perspective to what Paul has already said about the consoling work of God. It shows a comfort that is found only when we learn to rely on God rather than ourselves.

*We do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, of our trouble which came to us in Asia: that we were burdened beyond measure, above strength, so that we despaired even of life. Yes, we had the sentence of death in ourselves, that we should not trust in ourselves but in God who raises*

*the dead, who delivered us from so great a death, and does deliver us; in whom we trust that He will still deliver us (2 Cor. 1:8-10).*

Here we see that Paul found comfort only after coming to the end of himself. Through thoughts and emotions of weakness and despair, he was brought by God to a reassuring hope he never could have known through merely good times. It was in helplessness that Paul learned to rely on the Lord and to take heart from God's ability to rescue him from the shadow of death (v.9).

Paul learned what no servant and friend of Christ can afford to miss. He discovered that the riches of God's comfort are not found in the self-sufficiency that is a natural byproduct of good times. He found that only when we are

brought to the end of ourselves are we in a position to see more of God than we have seen.

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***Paul found that only when we are brought to the end of ourselves are we in a position to see more of God than we have seen.***

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Like the Old Testament patriarch Job (Job 1), Paul learned that trouble does not come only to the godless. He found firsthand that a lover of God can also be stripped of strength. A faithful follower of Christ can go through almost unbearable physical agony (2 Cor. 1:8-9; 4:8-10; 6:4-10; 11:22-33), deep anguish of the soul (2:4), and a lack of personal

peace (2:13) before coming to the awareness of how completely and wonderfully God can comfort (1:3).

Paul's story is important because it shows the moods and seasons he experienced as a faithful follower of Christ. He didn't walk around feeling like the captain of a super-race (2 Cor. 4:7-5:4). He realized that life in the Spirit is not lived constantly in the mountains of emotional highs.

So he wrote, "We do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, of our trouble which came to us" (1:8). Just as there is no winner without competition, no victor without war, no wages without work, Paul knew that for the followers of Christ there is no crown of comfort without a cross of suffering.

But why is this necessary? As Paul discovered, trouble provides an environment for

growth. He learned that when we have "the sentence of death in ourselves," it is so that "we should not trust in ourselves but in God who raises the dead" (1:9).

The wise coach tells his team, as they are running body-wracking wind sprints, "No pain, no gain." Our wise Lord wants us to know something similar: Without something to expose our weakness we would get confused. We would think

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***For the followers  
of Christ, there  
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that we were smart, or strong, or competent in and of ourselves. Without circumstances that reveal our own need of the Lord,

we would settle for a life full of ourselves rather than a life full of Him.

Hard times reveal our need of God in ways that good times don't. That's one reason our Lord doesn't

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***Hard times  
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exempt anyone from the evidence that we are living in a sin-cursed world. To profoundly discover our need of Him, there are times we must let trouble run its course. Rather than trying to resist and deny what is beyond our ability to control, we need to accept pain, weakness, and even despair as seasonal winters of Christian growth. We don't need to feel guilty just because we

experience strong sensations of weakness, foolishness, and incompetence. Rather than feeling like spiritual failures, unable to do what needs to be done for others, we need to let trouble do its painful work in bringing us to God.

Let's not be misled about the comfort of God. As in Paul's case, it may be preceded by devastatingly difficult experiences. Our solace is that, in God's time, comfort eventually comes to those who put their weakness to work for God. For the person who lets his problems drive him to dependence on the Lord, comfort is on the way! We don't have to see it to know that it is coming.

### **Thinking through 2 Corinthians 1:8-11.**

1. What are we apt to be ignorant of? (v.8).
2. Why might we experience weakness? (v.9).

3. How far might our problems go? (v.10).
4. What perspective can the past give us? (v.10).
5. How can our weakness help others? (v.11).
6. How important is weakness?
7. What if we don't feel any weakness?
8. What errors are corrected by this passage?

#### WE FIND COMFORT IN THE:

1. God Who Comforts
2. Weakness That Helps
- 3. Conscience That Reassures**

## IN THE CONSCIENCE THAT REASSURES (2 Cor. 1:12-14)

What we have said about comfort up to this point is true—but it is not the whole story. Consolation is not

found only in the love of God. Neither is it found only by putting our weakness to work for us. It is also found in the reassurance of a good conscience.

A good conscience and the comforting, helping, encouraging role of the Holy Spirit go together. The Spirit will not bring to our hearts the reassuring peace of God's presence if we are violating our conscience.

In addition to God's written Word, we have our conscience, though imperfect, as an internal indicator of whether we are in step with His Spirit. Listen to the confidence that Paul found in knowing that his own heart did not condemn him:

*For our boasting is this: the testimony of our conscience that we conducted ourselves in the world in simplicity and godly sincerity, not with fleshly wisdom but*

*by the grace of God, and more abundantly toward you (2 Cor. 1:12).*

As an apostle of Christ, Paul could have used his spiritual authority as an opportunity for personal profit. He could have looked at every contact with the Corinthians as an opportunity to see what was in it for him. He could have flattered the church with insincere compliments or battered them with legalistic requirements that would have focused their attention on him rather than on heaven. Instead, Paul found peace of mind in knowing that he had taken the risk of caring enough to confront them with problems that were disrupting their spiritual health and ruining their reputation in the community.

Paul confronted a number of those issues in his first letter to the Corinthians. The

response to his letter was mixed. Some accepted it as a message from God and acted accordingly (2 Cor. 2:1-11). Others, however, responded by accusing Paul of meddling in matters that were none of his business. They accused him of trying to exploit them for his own profit.

These accusations hurt Paul, but not as much as if they had been true. He knew he had been honest with them. Even when they attacked his integrity by accusing him of not following through on his plans to visit them, he had an explanation that was in their best interest (2 Cor. 1:23-24). His conscience, he said, was clear.

In the confidence of a good conscience, Paul shared the consolation expressed by Job so many years before. Both suffered intensely. Both had to face unfair accusations. Yet both

had integrity. Both took courage in the knowledge that they had been living on behalf of others (see Job 29–31).

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***Nothing will rob us of the consolation and help from the Comforter of our souls more than an unresolved sense of guilt.***

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Nothing will rob us of the consolation and help from the Comforter of our souls more than an unresolved sense of guilt. If our conscience is troubled, we need to come clean. Without wasting another moment, we need to go to the cross of Christ. It is there we find the One who suffered on our behalf

to endure the grief and pain for all our sins.

If you've never done so before, you can accept in this moment the sacrifice of Christ, who died in your place. The Scriptures assure us that God will forgive anyone who believes on His Son (Acts 13:38-39).

If you have already trusted Christ as your Savior, you can confess your sins directly to God. You can claim the promise of 1 John 1:9, "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."

Then, if possible, it's important to confess your wrongs to those you have hurt. Don't worry about giving them further ammunition against you. Let them know that you have confessed your sins to God and that you accept full responsibility for your actions. Tell them

that you desire to have a clear conscience—with God and with them.

If you've lied, admit it. If you've injured others through neglect or theft or deceit or slander, seek their forgiveness. If you've abused a family member physically or emotionally, express to that person your deep regret and be ready to take whatever time or action is necessary to restore the relationship.

Don't do this just because you want the forgiveness and mercy of the other person. It may not come. You need to admit your wrongs because, before God, it's the right thing to do. Discover in the Lord Himself not only the strength that can be found in His forgiveness but also the comfort of a good conscience.

## **Thinking through 2 Corinthians 1:12-14.**

1. What helps our own peace of mind? (v.12).
2. What factors help the conscience to give us an accurate reading? (vv.12,21-22).
3. What is more important than our conscience? (1 Cor. 4:4).
4. How much worse might Paul and Job have suffered if they had been people-users rather than people-helpers?
5. What comfort is available to someone with a bad conscience? (Acts 13:38-39; Eph. 1:7; 1 Jn. 1:9).
6. Why and when is it important to confess our faults not only to God but also to people? (Mt. 5:23-24; Lk. 17:3-4; Jas. 5:16).
7. What kinds of suffering have you seen that have been made worse by a bad conscience?

## WE FIND COMFORT IN THE:

1. God Who Comforts
2. Weakness That Helps
3. Conscience That Reassures
4. **Sorrow That Changes**

## IN THE SORROW THAT CHANGES (2 Cor. 2:4-11; 7:8-12)

No one wants grief. Yet when it comes, it is too costly to be wasted. Sorrow must be put to good use. That's true whether we are mourning the loss of a loved one, a loss of health, or any other tragic reversal. If the energy of mourning can be translated into some positive change, there can be a feeling that the suffering or loss was not in vain.

Nowhere is this more true than when we mourn over sin. No kind of grief holds more promise. This is true whether we are broken over sin we find in ourselves

or in someone we love. This is the suffering that Jesus had in mind when He said, "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted" (Mt. 5:4).

Paul knew this kind of anguish of heart and the encouraging results that follow (2 Cor. 7:8-12). He realized that sin is worth crying over. Look at the emotion he described after confronting sin in the lives of the Corinthians:

*For out of much affliction and anguish of heart I wrote to you, with many tears, not that you should be grieved, but that you might know the love which I have so abundantly for you (2 Cor. 2:4).*

Then too, we need to take note of the encouragement and comfort the apostle called for when it became apparent that the man who had been confronted and put out of the church (1 Cor. 5:1-

13) had repented of his sin. In view of the man's change of mind, Paul's comfort mirrored the heart of God:

*This punishment which was inflicted by the majority is sufficient for such a man, so that, on the contrary, you ought rather to forgive and comfort him, lest perhaps such a one be swallowed up with too much sorrow. Therefore I urge you to reaffirm your love to him (2 Cor. 2:6-8).*

Here Paul emphasized the importance of providing a spiritual life-support system for the person who has responded to correction. He made it clear that once a person has repented of his sins, fellow believers are to extend comfort to him. They are to reflect the heart of the God of all comfort, the God who reminds us that "love will cover a multitude of sins" (1 Pet. 4:8).

Paul went on to show in verses 10 and 11 that we should be aware that one of Satan's tactics is to encourage the overkill of sorrow. He warned that a failure on our part to have a forgiving, comforting, and restoring spirit leaves us wide open for Satan to get a foothold in our life.

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***If we join God  
in confronting a  
wrong, we must  
be careful that  
we don't then join  
Satan in overdoing  
a good thing.***

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When church correction has done its work, it needs to be followed by an outpouring of restoring love. Corrective action must be followed up by encouragement that

is given to all involved—those doing the confronting as well as those who have accepted the correction:

*For even if I made you sorry with my letter, I do not regret it; though I did regret it. For I perceive that the same epistle made you sorry, though only for a while. Now I rejoice, not that you were made sorry, but that your sorrow led to repentance. For you were made sorry in a godly manner, that you might suffer loss from us in nothing. For godly sorrow produces repentance leading to salvation, not to be regretted; but the sorrow of the world produces death (2 Cor. 7:8-10).*

This is the sorrow that leads to life rather than regret and death—by far the most meaningful kind of grief. This is the sorrow that is not wasted.

Just remember that

God doesn't offer His comfort to those who sorrow merely because they have been caught in a wrong. Neither does He console by His Holy Spirit those who are suffering under the weight of their own foolishness without any change of mind or heart. The God of all comfort sends His Spirit and His people to comfort, encourage, and support those who have experienced the kind of sorrow that changes hearts.

### **Thinking through 2 Corinthians 2:4-11.**

1. Why should a good man grieve? (v.4).
2. How many should mourn over public sin? (v.5).
3. What is the danger of church discipline? (vv.6-7).
4. How might love be reaffirmed? (v.8).
5. What can give Satan a foothold? (v.11).

## WE FIND COMFORT IN THE:

1. God Who Comforts
2. Weakness That Helps
3. Conscience That Reassures
4. Sorrow That Changes
- 5. Spirit Who Empowers**

## IN THE SPIRIT WHO EMPOWERS (2 Cor. 3:1-6; 3:17-4:1)

Keep in mind that we are trying to understand the factors that enabled the apostle Paul to find comfort in the middle of enormous difficulty. Why didn't he crumble under the weight of his problems? Why didn't he respond to the criticisms of the Corinthians by saying something like, "Forget these people! Do they think I'm doing this for my health? I don't need this. If they think they can bite the hand that's feeding them and get away with it, they're in for a rude awakening. They've made their bed.

Now let them lie in it."

Or why didn't Paul say, "Oh, what's the use! Look what I get for all my hard work and self-sacrifice. I can't take this anymore. I deserve more respect than they're giving me. I can't stay in this business of being a people-helper any longer. If I do, I'll become absolutely burned out. If I stay here another day, I'll lose all my self-respect. I deserve better than this."

Why didn't Paul respond that way? Look at what he wrote in the first verse of chapter 4:

*Therefore, since we have this ministry, as we have received mercy, we do not lose heart.*

What was the ministry that caused Paul not to lose heart in all his trouble? The preceding chapter tells us what he was thinking:

*Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to think of*

*anything as being from ourselves, but our sufficiency is from God, who also made us sufficient as ministers of the new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life. . . .*

*Now the Lord is the Spirit; and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty. But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord. Therefore, since we have this ministry, as we have received mercy, we do not lose heart (3:5-6, 17-4:1).*

Chapter 3 gives the basis for Paul's confidence. He was offering the world more than rules and regulations. In some mysterious but real way, he was offering the world a "new covenant . . .

of the Spirit" (3:6). He wanted the Corinthians to realize that his confidence was not only in the written Word, but also in the empowering, encouraging, helping, comforting presence of the Spirit of the Lord.

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***Paul knew  
that while  
the letter kills,  
it is the Spirit  
who gives life.***

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In saying this, the apostle was not showing any disregard for the Word of God. He loved it. He wrote it. He taught it. He risked his life to communicate it. But his real hope and encouragement were not found merely in words. His strength and sufficiency were found in what he knew of the life-changing Spirit of God.

All too often we fail to see that the words and laws of God are not to be an end in themselves. They are to be a means to an end. They are there to help us come heart-to-heart with the Spirit of God. The rules show us our need of Christ.

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*The Word  
of God offers  
comfort only  
as it leads us  
to the Spirit  
of Christ.*

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The words show us the mind of Christ. But apart from confidence in the sufficiency of the Spirit of Christ, we will burn out—as people-helpers often do.

Paul should be an encouragement to us. In all his troubles, he took heart because he knew

he was working with the Spirit, who could make him competent for any task.

Do you need comfort today? Then pray in cooperation with the Spirit of the Lord. Read the Word in a way that will help you come to a new dependence on the Spirit. Discover for yourself how the very troubled Paul could say, “Therefore . . . we do not lose heart.”

**Thinking through  
2 Corinthians 3:1-6  
and 3:17-4:1.**

1. What was Paul's letter of endorsement? (vv.1-3).
2. Who wrote this letter of endorsement? (v.3).
3. How did Paul find confidence in this? (vv.4-5).
4. Why is dependence on God's Word alone not enough? (v.6).
5. What enabled Paul not to lose heart? (3:17-4:1).

## WE FIND COMFORT IN THE:

1. God Who Comforts
2. Weakness That Helps
3. Conscience That Reassures
4. Sorrow That Changes
5. Spirit Who Empowers
- 6. Faith That Sees**

### **IN THE FAITH THAT SEES (2 Cor. 4:7–5:12)**

Paul's second letter to the Corinthians also shows the role that faith played in enabling him to praise the "God of all comfort." If Paul had not learned to trust God's eyes rather than his own, he could not have endured the tides of pain and suffering that regularly flowed in and out of his life. If he had resolved only to believe in what he could see with his physical eyes, his life would have been filled with despair. Therefore he wrote:

*And since we have the same spirit of faith, according to what is*

*written, "I believed and therefore I spoke," we also believe and therefore speak, knowing that He who raised up the Lord Jesus will also raise us up with Jesus, and will present us with you. For all things are for your sakes, that grace, having spread through the many, may cause thanksgiving to abound to the glory of God. Therefore we do not lose heart. Even though our outward man is perishing, yet the inward man is being renewed day by day. For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory, while we do not look at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen. For the things which are seen are temporary, but the things which are not seen are eternal (2 Cor. 4:13-18).*

This emphasis on comfort-producing faith doesn't mean that the Lord wants us to throw away our sense of good judgment and reason. Just the opposite. He wants us to admit that it makes a lot more sense to trust the God who raised Christ from the dead than it does to trust the appearance of our ever-changing circumstances.

We often rely on the word of family, friends, or co-workers, who tell us about things they have seen that are beyond our own field of vision. But we need to trust God for what He alone can see. As we do, we will join Paul in finding reason not to "lose heart." Regardless of what our emotions and circumstances tell us, we can believe that . . .

- trouble is as temporary as God says it is;
- serving others is as worthwhile as God says it is;

- we are as immortal as God says we are;
- our ultimate future is as bright as God says it is.

Paul kept the faith through the most assaulting, discouraging, and perplexing situations (4:8-10). That faith, energized by the Spirit of God, enabled him to be the indomitable, death-defying servant that he was. It not only encouraged his heart, but it enabled him to bring the refreshing spirit of thanksgiving to others as well (4:15).

### **Thinking through 2 Corinthians 4:7–5:12.**

1. What was Paul's secret of being a survivor? (4:7-11).
2. What perspective can Christ give us? (4:11).
3. What perspective can faith give us? (4:13-14).
4. What perspective can others give us? (4:14-15).
5. Why didn't Paul lose heart? (4:15-16).
6. What was Paul's perspective? (5:17-18).

## WE FIND COMFORT IN THE:

1. God Who Comforts
2. Weakness That Helps
3. Conscience That Reassures
4. Sorrow That Changes
5. Spirit Who Empowers
6. Faith That Sees
- 7. Person Who Cares**

## IN THE PERSON WHO CARES (2 Cor. 7:4-10)

Another fact that comes through clearly in 2 Corinthians is that God often comforts through people who comfort. From the practical example of Paul we can see that the help and consolation of the Holy Spirit often comes through brothers and sisters in Christ. They come alongside us and become the comfort vehicle that the Spirit of God uses. The Scriptures bear this out over and over as we are called on to comfort and encourage one another. In this respect, the role of the Comforter is

carried out through every child of God who comes alongside a hurting person (2 Th. 2:16-17; Heb. 3:13).

This dimension of the comfort of the Spirit may not seem mystical or supernatural. But in many ways it is. Those who commit themselves to a role of encouraging others will often sense that they are not doing this work of comfort on their own. Very often they will sense that it is actually God comforting others through them.

This is exactly what we see in Paul's letter to the Corinthians. He wrote:

*I am filled with comfort. I am exceedingly joyful in all our tribulation. For indeed, when we came to Macedonia, our bodies had no rest, but we were troubled on every side. Outside were conflicts, inside were fears. Nevertheless God, who comforts the downcast,*

*comforted us by the coming of Titus, and not only by his coming, but also by the consolation with which he was comforted in you, when he told us of your earnest desire, your mourning, your zeal for me, so that I rejoiced even more (2 Cor. 7:4-7).*

Notice that despite Paul's spiritual stature, he placed himself in the category of "the downcast." Paul admitted, as he did earlier in 2:13, that he had times when he found no rest of spirit. He admitted to being afraid.

Paul, with all of his spiritual accomplishments, was not a man of steel. The record seems to be just the opposite. He was great, not because of his own strength but because in all of his personal weakness, unrest, and fear, he was used by a God of great power and purpose.

Furthermore, we see that Paul was not a lone pillar of granite standing independent, unaided, and without peer among the otherwise bare landscape of the New Testament church. He was not someone who had only something to give and nothing to receive.

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***If God  
uses people  
to comfort  
people, then  
we might be  
at either end.***

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Paul didn't position himself as being an iron man of God who needed no one and no provision other than God and God alone. Over and over this servant of Christ presented himself as someone who was as dependent on the encouragement of others

as they were on him (see 2:1-2).

But did this detract from the sufficiency of God? No, because Paul made it very clear that it was God who “comforted us by the coming of Titus, and not only by his coming, but also by the consolation with which he was comforted in you” (vv.6-7).

In other words, those who withdraw from people because they fear getting hurt may be withdrawing from the “God of all comfort” in the process. In isolating ourselves from loving others, we isolate ourselves from God, who desires in His own time to comfort us through others.

This can be very difficult for someone who has previously been deeply hurt by others. Everything inside may scream out, “Never again!” “Forget people, I’ve got my dog!” That’s understandable. But

it’s not God’s way. As a rule, our Lord does not comfort those who care more about plants, pets, work, or books than they do about people. Neither does He, as a rule, comfort those who try to play the game of Christian solitaire. Our Lord has a special pattern of using people to comfort people who comfort people.

### **Thinking through 2 Corinthians 7:4-10.**

1. To what extent did Paul need comfort? (v.5).
2. What does this say about wrong expectations?
3. How much comfort did Paul find in trouble? (v.4).
4. How did God comfort Paul? (v.6).
5. Why wasn’t God Himself enough for Paul? (v.6).
6. What was the secondary source of Paul’s comfort? (v.7).
7. What does this tell us about God’s comfort?

## WE FIND COMFORT IN THE:

1. God Who Comforts
2. Weakness That Helps
3. Conscience That Reassures
4. Sorrow That Changes
5. Spirit Who Empowers
6. Faith That Sees
7. Person Who Cares
- 8. Strength That Sustains**

## IN THE STRENGTH THAT SUSTAINS (2 Cor. 12:7-10)

This brings us to another principle of comfort that may be the most encouraging truth of all. What is this truth? Not that trouble must come, for that is a truth we already know, without much comfort. Neither is there much comfort in learning that the comfort of God is found by those who join heartily with God in His love for people. While that is true, it's a truth that would leave most of us always feeling terribly inadequate. High ideals can do that. High ideals can do

more than inspire us. They can also show us how far short we have fallen from where we should be. And who doesn't feel despicably selfish and self-absorbed when compared to the love God has shown for us!

Paul's experience shows us that God is able to provide a source of inner strength and help that is sufficient to sustain us in our distress. But that's not the most important truth. What is? That God extends to us help that is both sufficient and undeserved! God's comfort is enough, and we don't have to feel deserving of it.

Grace is "the undeserved favor and help of God." It is that undeserved help that is received by those who have been broken enough to bend the knees of their heart before God. This is the undeserved help in which Paul found so much comfort:

*And lest I should be exalted above measure by the abundance of the revelations, a thorn in the flesh was given to me, a messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I be exalted above measure. Concerning this thing I pleaded with the Lord three times that it might depart from me. And He said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness." Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me (2 Cor. 12:7-9).*

In other words, the Lord knows what we are made of—even if we don't. What effect did this have on Paul? Well, whether he was temporarily devastated or not we don't know, but he came out at the right place. He came out affirming that God's

grace, something he didn't deserve, was all the comfort he needed.

The message should be clear to us. Seek to know God on His terms. Desire to join Him in loving others. Learn to see life as He wants you to. But even when you've done all of this, don't expect to merit anything along the way. All the comfort we can hope for is comfort we don't deserve. Yet, praise the Lord, it is the comfort we don't deserve that the Lord delights to give to those who are broken and humbled before Him.

### **Thinking through 2 Corinthians 12:7-10.**

1. Why did Paul need to be troubled? (v.7).
2. What comfort is there when God's answer to our prayer is no? (vv.8-9).
3. What comfort is there in knowing that we don't deserve the help and comfort of the Spirit?

## A PLACE TO BEGIN

**W**e have looked at the conditions under which the Holy Spirit of God comes alongside us to comfort, strengthen, and reassure. We have seen that He is with us not to reinforce our own ways but to comfort and strengthen us in the ways of God.

Most important, the comfort of the Holy Spirit does not begin with minds focused on the Spirit of God Himself. Inner strength comes as we focus our attention on the Lord Jesus Christ. The comfort comes as we listen to the One who sent the Spirit—the One who says:

*Let not your heart be troubled; you believe in God, believe also in Me. In My Father's house are many mansions; if it were not so, I would have told*

*you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself; that where I am, there you may be also. And where I go you know, and the way you know. . . . I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me (Jn. 14:1-4,6).*

The first step is to say yes to Him. Have you done that? Do you recognize your own sin and unworthiness to approach the Father in your own merits? If you're not sure, read Romans 3:1-23. Then in the awareness of your own spiritual bankruptcy, put yourself at the mercy of Christ. Trust Him to be your Savior from sin. Trust Him to be the only One who will lead you to the Father and to the kind of comfort, in this life and the next, that only He can give.

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