

The God of Comfort

2 Corinthians 1:1-11

January 14, 2006

What does it mean to follow Jesus Christ?
What does it mean to really follow Him, as He
calls us to the God's word?

That's the radical question I want to raise with
you, not only today, but also throughout 2007.
And the means of asking will be to work our
way through the Second Letter of Paul to the
Corinthians. It's perhaps the least read and
least studied book of the New Testament.
That's a pity, because nowhere is Paul more
personal about what the Jesus-following life
meant to him.

**A life radically, fully centered on God and
His will**—that's one way to describe what 2
Corinthians is all about. **A life radically
given over to God's service**—that's another
way to describe it.

There are no half-measures in the Jesus-
following life. Either you are **following** Him
as a **faithful disciple**, or you are **denying**
Him as an **unfaithful disciple**. It's a yes or
no choice, not a maybe. Jesus did not give us
a third option.

Now, to understand any portion of Scripture,
background is essential. In the case of this
book, and the city it was sent to, background
seems very familiar.

I want you imagine a place where money is
everything. Self-help teachers are everywhere.
A place where people may be born poor, but
by their imagination and hard work become
rich. A place where the economy is strong
even though there is worry about the threat of

war. A place where sports is followed closely. A place where sexual standards are loose and marriages don't last. A place where peoples from many nations have come to live and bring with them their languages, religions and customs.

If you answered, "Los Angeles, 2007 AD" you'd be right. And if you answered "Corinth, 55 AD", you'd be right as well.

Wealth and health made Corinthians society go around. This extended to religion. The Corinthians adored gods devoted to making money and keeping health. They worshipped gods of pleasure and sex. They loved gods of happiness and prosperity.

When the message of Jesus came to Corinth, it ***wasn't*** a good fit. At the heart the Christian faith is a crucified Lord. And it was a faith that didn't bolster personal success or indulgent pleasure; it was and is a faith that demands personal transformation, moral purity and sacrifice.

But some accepted it anyway. Many accepted it as it, but there was a problem. Many Corinthian believers began to reshape the Jesus message into something that fit their lives and demands better. And they did that by latching onto the doctrine of the resurrection. Jesus did die, but He rose from the dead. So some reasoned, because of His suffering for us, all our suffering is now in our past! We **now** experience resurrection life—to its fullest! Yes, we can have Jesus and wealth and success and health—we can have it all!

To put it another way, they wanted to be Jesus-followers who would fit in just fine with Corinthian society. They wanted a God of comfort and prosperity and wealth and

happiness. And they tried to turn Jesus into that kind of god.

Paul will have nothing to do with this false Jesus, this watered-down Jesus. Instead, what Paul shares with them is **the real God of comfort**. When God comforts or consoles us, it's not an end in itself. There's a reason. And the reason is He comforts us because life is hard—and life following Jesus, the crucified Lord can be very hard.

Let's look to the opening of 2 Corinthians. First, have a look at **the greeting** in vs. 1-2.

¹Paul, 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:

²Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

In many ways, Paul follows the standard letter writing form of the time. That went, "From (name) to (name), greetings." That was often followed by a blessing, like Paul does here. One thing he consistently does in his letters is to trade the word for "greetings" (*charein*) for grace (*charis*). He wants it clear up front that it's not really just a letter from Paul, but also a letter **from Christ through His apostle**, the man Paul.

Let's move on to **the blessing**. Now this is much longer than the standard blessings found in ancient letters because God Himself is the focus of the letter. Look at vs. 3-7:

³Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, ⁴who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any

trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God. 5For just as the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives, so also through Christ our comfort overflows. 6If 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. 7And our hope for you is firm, because we know that just as you share in our sufferings, so also you share in our comfort.

Paul is speaking from experience here. As we'll see in vs. 8-11, he's reflecting on his recent experiences in the province of Asia, where he "felt the sentence of death" (vs. 9). No letter recounts more of the struggles and sufferings of Paul as 2 Corinthians.

In vs. 3-7, Paul follows the Jewish blessing pattern called a *berekah*. Then in vs. 8-11, he gives some context to his words by his experiences. Let's look at vs. 8-11:

8We 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. 9Indeed, 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. 10He 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, 11as 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.

Do you realize how counter-cultural Paul's message was to the Corinthians? You can tell he's already aiming at the health and wealth distortion of the faith that the Corinthians were

playing with. Following Jesus, in Paul's experience, meant danger. It meant living a life under the shadow of Jesus' cross. Yes, God is the God of comfort. But it's not comfort as the absence of hardship. Instead, suffering and comfort walk hand in hand in the Jesus-following life.

Paul is giving us some valuable teaching here about God's character, about the purpose of suffering and about service.

1. God is sovereign over all of life and even over all we suffer.

Paul is focused, radically focused, on God Himself. He knows that life is not all about us; it's all about Him.

There's a flow here that Paul wants us to understand. Maybe the key is vs. 5:

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

It starts with Christ's sufferings. Anyone who then aligns Himself with Jesus will experience a kind of "overflow" of Christ's own sufferings. Remember what Jesus said:

If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.
(Matthew 16:24)

The cross-bearing life is what we signed on for when we said yes to him. Think of it this way—when you believe, you go through baptism, you don't sit in a hot tub! Remember what else Jesus said, in John 15:

18 If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first.

20b If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also.

Imagine how totally unpopular these words would be to the Corinthians! The Corinthians hungered after a religion that gave them good times, not after a faith centered on a suffering Lord. And now the idea that those who follow Him would to some degree share in His sufferings would be a terrible thing to hear.

But—here’s the beauty. Marching along side suffering we find God’s comfort. God is “the Father of compassion” 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.

So the flow goes this way:

- Christ suffers
- We suffer with Christ
- God comforts us
- Then we are able to comfort others with the comfort God gives us

Which means, point 2:

2. Suffering is part of life—but it should not be accepted or reviled.

Two equal and opposite mistakes can be made about suffering. One is to think that suffering is just “a natural part of life.” That idea has brought a lot of people comfort, but that doesn’t mean that it’s a Biblical idea. The whole bundle of suffering, sickness and death, according to the Bible, is **not** natural. That whole bag of sorrow was unleashed when our first parents sinned.

Suffering is never an end in itself. It’s an enemy. On the other hand, it’s to be

expected. They crucified Jesus, and down the centuries they've killed millions of us who follow Jesus. I'm not trying to be morbid, that's just the way it is. Here in the United States, we think it's persecution if someone is rude to us when they find out we're a Christian. That's just an annoyance. It's persecution where people are beaten up, go to jail, and even die for their faith.

To think that somehow we'll be exempt from persecution or suffering is a distortion of the message of Jesus. He was blunt about the dangers. Go ahead and check the references in the message outline today¹.

So, in these opening words to 2 Corinthians, Paul tells us that **God is sovereign over our whole lives, including suffering**, he tells us that **you shouldn't either revile suffering, or think that just an 'natural part of life.'** Now he tells us that...

3. God uses suffering—specifically our response to suffering—as a way to bring glory to His name.

Look again at vs. 9-11:

9Indeed, 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. 10He 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, 11as 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.

Focus on 9b:

¹ Matthew 20:22; 23:34-35; 24:8-10; Mark 13:9-13; Luke 21:12-19, John 15:18-21; 16:1-2.

"But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead."

Paul is referring to an incident that happened while he was over on the other side of the Aegean Sea, in the Roman province of Asia. We don't know the details, but this is the key: Paul thought he was about to die. That situation made him rely on God even more—in his words, "this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead." Winston Churchill said, "Being shot at wonderfully concentrates the mind." Persecution—actually, any hardship—doesn't come from God, but is used by God to "concentrate our minds" as well as our hearts. We focus on what's important.

God has a passion that we don't give our lives over to trivial pursuits. Used to be, you could buy a notepad that said on the top, "Dumb Thing I Have to do Today." And most of the things we have to do are, well, kind of dumb. They won't matter a month from now. We stumble out of bed...kind of like the old Beatles song:

*Woke up, fell out of bed,
Dragged a comb across my head
Found my way downstairs and drank a cup,
And looking up I noticed I was late.
Found my coat and grabbed my hat
Made the bus in seconds flat...*

That's not a life worth living! That's not what the Jesus-following life is all about. It's not about the "Dumb Thing I Have to do Today." It's about the truly significant things God's invited you to be a part of.

Get this firm in your heart, these two truths:

First,

Life is all about knowing and serving God through His Son, Jesus Christ. It is not found in following our mud puddle-sized dreams, but it God's ocean of possibilities.

Second,

The only real and lasting hope is found in Him, not in ourselves.

Way back in 1563, some great believers wrote something called the Heidelberg Catechism. The very beginning says this—these are wonderful words:

What is your only comfort in life and death?

That I am not my own, but belong with body and soul, both in life and in death, to my faithful Savior Jesus Christ. He has fully paid for all my sins with His precious blood, and has set me free from all the power of the devil. He also preserves me in such a way that without the will of my heavenly Father not a hair can fall from my head; indeed, all things must work together for my salvation. Therefore, by His Holy Spirit He also assures me of eternal life and makes me heartily willing and ready from now on to live for Him.

That's a life radically, fully centered on God and His will. That's a life radically given over to God's service.

It's football season. I want to bring this down to earth with a video illustration about a High School football coach who really gets what Paul's talking about here and who shares it with his players. Let's see that video.

VIDEO
Prayer/End