

July 7, 2024 West Valley Presbyterian Church



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Last month we looked at the first three chapters of Daniel, because this book has a lot to tell us about how to live as a religious minority, and still stay true to God. And since that is our situation outside these walls, I found Daniel to be very helpful; and I hope you did too.

But what about within these walls? This month and next month, we will be looking at Paul's second letter to the Corinthians, since it's about how to live as a Christian within the church. Paul's life was not easy, and he refers to his struggles more than once in this letter. He dealt with persecution outside the church, which we also heard about in Daniel. And he also dealt with problems inside the church, which had cropped up while he was elsewhere starting other churches.

2 Corinthians as we've had it since it was preserved and circulated, is in several sections; and the point of it is how to live as a Christian in the long term. At first, "long term" wasn't much of an issue for the church. Both Paul and his converts expected Jesus to return any day, so they were more concerned about things like converting as many people as possible. But as days stretched into years, well, the churches needed some rules so folks could get along.

Families need rules, right? And the rules change as the family's needs change? When the children are little, the rules are things like, "Take turns". When the children get older, the rules are things like, "Get your work done before you go out." In the same way, church rules also change as the church's needs change. The Corinthians had to figure out ways to work out problems and grow to maturity in Christ. That's what 2 Corinthians is about; and that's still today what churches need to do. And the framework for working out problems in the congregation is comfort: the comfort that comes from God, and that we offer to one another. Like in the title slide picture. That is how Paul's letter begins, by telling us about comfort.

SLIDE 2- 7

Hear now the word of God as it comes to us from 2 Corinthians 1:1-7.

¹ 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 his holy people throughout Achaia:

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

³ Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, ⁴ who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God. ⁵ For just as we share abundantly in the sufferings of Christ, so also our comfort abounds through Christ. ⁶ If we are distressed, it is for your comfort and salvation; if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which produces in you patient endurance of the same sufferings we suffer. ⁷ And our hope for you is firm, because we know that just as you share in our sufferings, so also you share in our comfort.

Here ends the reading of God's holy word. Join me in saying, Thanks be to God.

So here we are, the church of God at Miller and Bollinger, together with all our fellow Christians throughout the South Bay; and God says to us, "Grace and peace to you" – the same grace and peace that he gave to the church in Corinth nearly 2000 years ago. What might that grace and peace feel like? Well, it might feel like comfort. In his letter, Paul goes straight from grace and peace, to comfort: "the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort".

And what is God's comfort like? Do we just settle into it and rest, like if we stretched out in a recliner? Probably not, because the comfort Paul is describing in this passage is active. In verse 4 Paul says that God "comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble, with the comfort we ourselves receive from God." God actively comforts; we receive God's active comfort; and then we pass it on to someone else in need of comfort.

It works like this: (demonstration with bucket, several glass jars, and water). God is the ultimate source of comfort, which he pours into our lives like this (water-filled bucket, pour water into a large jar). Now what happens to that water if it just sits in the jar indefinitely? It gets dusty and stale, right? But if the water in the jar is poured out to other jars (demonstrate), it doesn't get a chance to get dusty or stale. It's actively moving, and thus remains of better quality. Comfort is like a stream of water that keeps on moving.

Paul and Timothy had plenty of reason to seek comfort from "the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort!" Further on in Chapter 1, Paul writes that when he and Timothy were in the province of Asia, they "were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired of life itself." And then there's more details about Paul's suffering in Chapter 11, if you want to read that far ahead. In Chapter 11, Paul says that, over

the course of his years in ministry, he has constantly been in danger- both from traveling and from the authorities. He's been shipwrecked three times; been beaten with rods three times and with whips five times; been frequently imprisoned; and often been thirsty and hungry and cold. Wow. I guess I should stop whining the next time I get stuck in a traffic jam while commuting to Cupertino!

It amazes me that Paul could praise God in the midst of all of that - saying that God comforts them in all their troubles, not so that they could feel better, but so that they can comfort other people who are having trouble. Yes, God comforts them in the midst of wounds and inadequate food and clothing; but God's comfort doesn't mean they miraculously get to live a comfortable life. It doesn't mean that Paul gets to put up his feet in an easy chair. No; God comforts him, SO THAT he can pass that comfort along. And that is a huge blessing.

Why is that? It's because God's comfort is active. God's comfort moves. God's comfort does things. It doesn't just sit there like still water in a jar, getting stale and dusty. It stays fresh because it moves from one person to another, just like this water moving from one jar to others (demonstrate again). Comfort is more like a river than a pond. When you comfort someone else, you can feel the power of God at work coming through you. You get to feel it twice, in fact; once when God comforts you, and once again when you are allowing God to comfort others through you. Comfort going through you feels amazing. We would all be blessed if we allow God's comfort to move in us and through us, by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Perhaps that is one reason God doesn't remove troubles from Paul; rather, God comforts him in the midst of them. Because then, God can bless Paul twice: once, directly, in the midst of his own troubles; and then again through Paul when he comforts others in the midst of their troubles. As Paul says in verse 6, "If we are distressed, it is for your comfort and salvation." And why is that? Well, Paul's distress is caused by his work of evangelism. The things he did and said brought about suffering for him. But at the same time, his evangelizing also brought about salvation and comfort for the Corinthians. So in order to keep on going, Paul needed God's comfort. And he got it. As he says, God is the one "who comforts us in all our troubles", verse 4. God comforts Paul for his own sake; and also, because when Paul is comforted, he can pass on that comfort to others - making him twice blessed.

And just as God does not remove troubles from Paul, but rather, comforts him the midst of them, so also God does not remove all our troubles from us. Now, we don't have the same kinds of troubles that Paul did. In many ways we are more comfortable and healthier than even the richest king in Paul's day. But do we still have troubles? Of course we do. All of us do. We have plenty of problems; they're just different from the ones that Paul dealt with.

But there is one kind of problem which many of our brothers and sisters even today share with Paul- and that is persecution for being a Christian. Paul says in verse 5, "For just as we share abundantly in the sufferings of Christ, so also our comfort abounds through Christ." That still happens today. Our ECO denomination is working out a partner agreement with the Synod of the Nile in Egypt; so we sent a team of representatives to last year's Synod of the Nile meeting, led by Jenn Haddox, the director of Global Engagement. The Synod of the Nile reciprocated by sending a

few of their representatives to our National Gathering last January, that Nancy Hobbs and I attended. It was an honor to hear them speak.

In Egypt, 90% of the population are Muslim, and 10% are everything else. The Christians are under a lot of pressure. Churches get blown up; and Christians have a hard time getting jobs or permits. Yet it was good to hear that even with all the social pressure against them, the churches are growing. Jenn Haddox reported that the whole ECO group was “inspired by the level of commitment and passion we experienced [in Egypt] being poured out before God. American church prayers seemed wimpy by comparison.” Our persecuted brothers and sisters in Egypt are indeed being comforted through Christ. And they in turn can, and do, pass on that comfort to others by inspiring them.

How do we receive God’s comfort? Well, first you have to be open to it. If I were to pour water into this jar, but it had a lid on it, what would happen? (demonstrate) OK, how can you open yourself up to God? You’ve heard this before; but, the very best way I know of to open yourself to God is by sitting down and praying, “Lord, help me to open myself to you,” (take the lid off) and then try to be quiet before Him for at least a few minutes. (pour water in) And if that doesn’t work, you can always try reading verses 3 and 4 to yourself, out loud, slowly, and let God’s word sink into your soul.

SLIDES 8 AND 9

And how do we pass on comfort to one another? Keep in mind that when we comfort someone else, it’s not about making ourselves feel better. Comforting with God’s comfort is not about dishing out a cheery motto. It’s not about saying, “Let me know if there’s anything I can do,” as you go on your way to do something else. Comforting is about listening to the person, the same way that God listens to you and doesn’t interrupt or change the subject. Comforting is about praying for the person, and bringing him or her before God, based on what you heard the person say to you. It’s about asking God what might be helpful. Then, if a particular Scripture passage comes to mind, feel free to pass it along to the person. Or if a task comes to mind, like driving the person to a doctor’s appointment, then ask if that would help. Or if one of those Care Notes that we have in the office have helped you, you could pick one up for someone else. The best thing we can do is to share the same comfort that we ourselves have received from God.

SLIDE 10

Could you use some comfort from God this morning? Don’t we all want that? Let’s pray that God would open our hearts and minds to him, and sit in silence for a minute or two, so we can listen. At the conclusion of the prayer, we will go into the celebration of the Lord’s Supper. May the Holy Spirit open our hearts, and draw us closer to our Lord.

Lord our God, Father of compassion and God of all comfort, we your people are here. May your Holy Spirit open our hearts, and help us to receive the comfort that only you can give. //

Lord our God, help us to comfort others, with the comfort that we have received. May your comfort remain active, by the power of the Holy Spirit. For it is in Jesus' name that we pray. Amen.