

Truth for Today

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The God of all Grace: The God of all Comfort

The expression "The God of all comfort" is found in 2 Corinthians 1 as part of a description of the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. It will be well to read the relevant verses, commencing at verse 3. "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. For as the sufferings of Christ abound in us, so our consolation also abounds through Christ. Now if we are afflicted, it is for your consolation and salvation, which is effective for enduring the same sufferings which we also suffer. Or if we are comforted, it is for your consolation and salvation. And our hope for you is steadfast, because we know that as you are partakers of the sufferings, so also you will partake of the consolation."

Let us first consider the phrase, "The Father of mercies". The thought connected with "Father", is that of source, author or originator of all mercy. Mercy meets us in our needs. Although mercy is available to the whole of mankind, in the teaching of these verses it is especially to the Christian. This fatherly care is made available to us from the heart of a loving Father who reaches out to Christians in the testing circumstances of life. A Father of mercy seeks to provide help and support during our difficulties.

The verse goes on further to the phrase that is the title of our talk, the God of all comfort. The English word 'comfort' masks the depth of meaning contained in the original Greek. The Greek word translated 'comfort' means 'someone who is asked to come along side.' This, I believe, deepens our understanding of this word 'comfort'. Here we have a God who is willing and, yes, even desires to bring comfort of the greatest magnitude and yet waits to be invited. In this phrase we learn a great deal about the heart of God. A God who does not rush into our lives and will not give the impression of pushing into a situation until asked. There is a parallel thought when we think of how God has made freely available salvation for mankind. Though His heart of love goes out to all, yet we are given the opportunity to decide for ourselves. We know that to decide against salvation through faith alone in the finished work of the Lord Jesus Christ will incur eternal loss but then it would be that person's choice. It is the same with the desire of a loving Father God who cares beyond all measure and waits to be asked. There are many situations, no doubt, when Christians have been so wrapped up in their problems that they have not thought about simply asking the God of all comfort to come and help.

There is a need really to understand comfort.

Verse 4 brings to our attention the situation in which Paul could see the "God of comfort" working when he stated, "Who comforts us in all our tribulation". Tribulation means pressure and affliction. The things that trouble us could surely be grouped under those two words. Pressure or stress, are, the "in words" of today. Annually, thousands are found seeking the doctor's help for a whole variety of stressful situations. There is pressure at work, with tighter time scales on projects, budget restrictions, rising costs, and increasing work load. Then there are social pressures, to ensure that home and family are seen to be at least as good as the neighbours in terms of house, car, holidays and the latest trendy clothes. In terms of the family, the issue of the right school becomes an additional pressure. After a few years of dealing with the right choice of schools, then comes the question of college or university. The list just grows and the pressure increases but never goes away.

Then there are other kinds of potential causes of stress: illness, accident, death, divorce and a whole host of other family related problems. All such difficulties have the potential of raising the level of stress that people face today. Christians are not exempt from the stressful situations of life; like everyone else, there are difficulties to be faced and experienced.

It is in this kind of world situation that the believer can turn to a Father God and ask for the necessary support. In one way or another, I am sure we all identify with affliction, pressure or stress. The question is, Have we made room for the "God of all comfort" to come along side and help?

When there is a major disaster, one of the actions authorities now take is to call in counsellors to help people deal with the associated trauma. Trauma has become a major concern relating to a wide range of issues: war, accidents, work, health, family, etc. The growth of the counsellor syndrome, especially dealing with group issues, has become a major

factor in dealing with trauma. However, very few turn to the God who knows all about us for help and lasting peace. For the Christian, “the God of all comfort” should be the first person to be contacted for assistance and support.

As often with the experiences gained from a loving God, there is an additional lesson to be learned. As we come through the help given by the drawing along side of the God of all comfort, we are challenged in our Christian lives to pass on such help to others. The Christians at Corinth were going through great times of difficulties and Paul had written to them to help put right those things that had gone so disastrously wrong.

In 1 Corinthians 1, party factions had come in, causing “in fighting” which was a disgrace to them all and the Spirit’s unity was outwardly in tatters. What was becoming obvious to Paul was that the Corinthian believers, mainly of Greek origin, had reverted to their own wisdom instead of seeking help from God. So Paul challenges them to seek the wisdom of the Spirit to deal with the disagreements, see 1 Corinthians 2. In chapter 3 he highlights their carnal approach to Christian matters and how they had reverted to being infants in their spiritual approach to problems. They were in great danger of their Christian works being found useless in the judgment day.

The next major problem was the toleration of the sexual immorality of one of the Christians at Corinth; the problem was being ignored by the church. Paul states that they were arrogant in regards to this problem which was damaging to the testimony, see chapter 5. If allowed to continue, then those who were less spiritual might think such behaviour was acceptable and so the sin would spread to others. It needed urgent and serious action by the elders. 1 Corinthians 5:11 states, “But now I have written to you not to keep company with anyone named a brother, who is sexually immoral, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or an extortioner - not even to eat with such a person.” In this verse, Paul extends the list of sinful practices which, if found in a Christian fellowship, would be damaging to the Christian testimony. Such issues needed dealing with even to the exclusion from the privileges of the Christian family. Such features should not be found in a Christian; they would be detrimental to such a person and their behaviour would also be damaging to the Christian fellowship as a whole.

Now it is the God of all comfort who brings comfort!

The sadness and trouble that abounded as a result of such sin must have been immense in this company of believers. When Paul states in 2 Corinthians 1:4, “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 need to see how our own experiences can be of help to others in our fellowship. This is sound practical Christianity that we need to practise. So the second letter of Paul would no doubt be very timely as the believers had been exposed by the first letter to their failures. Now Paul shows them how to be “Good Samaritans” and pour in oil and wine to bring about healing.

There is so much hurt in the world and the Christian company is not exempt. Let us be found as helpers in a world of hurt, but we must start in our own Christian company and not ignore the home need. If we belong to a company of Christians and we have unresolved issues causing pain to fellow believers, then we are not in a suitable state to help those who are in need of salvation. How can they possibly experience the healing of salvation in our fellowship?

Paul knew all about suffering and consolation.

In 2 Corinthians 1:5, Paul states, “For as the sufferings of Christ abound in us, so our consolation also abounds through Christ.” This verse may primarily speak of what was true for the apostles, but I am sure that, for those with the same commitment to Christ, it will be true also. Many commentators limit this verse to Paul’s particular ministry, the Gospel in its widest sense. We can readily understand how Paul and his companions would indeed suffer in the cause of Christ and His Gospel. There would be opposition, contempt, persecution, trial, and want, as experienced by the Lord Jesus Himself during the whole of His public life. But Paul and his companions were also aware of the consolation and comfort that they experienced from God coming through the Lord Jesus Christ. This enabled them to endure the hardships through which they passed. The comforts which Paul derived from Christ were those, no doubt, which arose from a real sense of His presence, His supporting grace and from His love shed abroad in his heart. The consolation was more than sufficient to overcome all the trials which Paul and others endured.

But were the sufferings only related to Paul’s Gospel ministry? In chapter 11 we have the detail of the sufferings Paul endured in his travels, at the hands of people opposed to the Gospel. In verse 28, we have his additional burden, “Besides the other things, what comes upon me daily: my deep concern for all the churches.” Paul understood Christ’s deep concern for His people. Paul remembered how the Lord Jesus spoke to him on the Damascus road: “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting ME?” Acts 9:4. Paul identified so well with his risen Lord that the care of all the churches fell upon his shoulders. How well Paul felt their problems and he laboured tirelessly for their recovery.

Paul understood difficult times.

Paul's concern for their wellbeing continues in verse 6, "Now if we are afflicted, it is for your consolation and salvation, which is effective for enduring the same sufferings which we also suffer. Or if we are comforted, it is for your consolation and salvation." Paul had a very positive outlook on his own situation and, regardless of all his hardship he saw the benefit to believers and to the Corinthian saints in particular. This assurance would tend to provoke their favour, and strengthen their affection for him, as it would show them that he was interested in their blessing. In a similar way, all Christians should feel acutely their obligation to the Lord Jesus Christ.

Paul's hope for them was steadfast.

In verse 7, Paul closes this consideration on the extent of his concern for the Corinthians with this last consideration, "And our hope for you is steadfast; because we know that as you are partakers of the sufferings, so also you will partake of the consolation." How wonderful was Paul's deep conviction that they would not fail under the current pressure of the multitude of their problems but that they would, by God's grace, come through triumphantly. "Our hope is steadfast", said Paul in his letter. He knew that there was a solid work of God in their souls and that, in the end, God's new creation in them would not fail. Satan was throwing all kinds of difficulties at them, stirring up the flesh but, in the end, God would be victorious. They would come through and, once again, be a shining light of united testimony in that idolatrous city of Corinth. Why did Paul have this strong conviction? "Because we know that as you are partakers of the sufferings, so also you will partake of the consolation." Yes, there would come the moment when they would ask the God of all comfort to come along side and help them through. God would, in His kindness, restore them to the vibrant Christian company they had been, just as when Paul and others first worked among them to the saving of their souls for eternal blessing. Not only did the Corinthian believers suffer from internal strife but, from this verse 7, it is probable that they also suffered persecution from those who once were their friends and neighbours in pre-conversion days.

In verse 11, we have Paul thanking them for their prayer support while he was in difficulty elsewhere. Paul was very aware of the need of prayer for the servants of God who were going through difficulty. We know of Paul's prayer for them; it was not just a one sided care. Paul greatly valued the Corinthian Christians' prayers, as he did those of all saints. This caring attitude of Paul is also seen in his letter to the Roman believers, Romans 15:5, "Now may the God of patience and comfort grant you to be like-minded toward one another, according to Christ Jesus." Here Paul was concerned with those whom we might term "weak in the faith". Paul's instruction is to care for such by seeking "not to please ourselves". This means not allowing sin into the Christian company but, at the same time, understanding that there are some who may not fully understand Christian teaching on certain issues. It is with love and care that we help fellow believers in those situations.

What lessons can we learn from our consideration of the "God of all comfort"?

Where there is pressure in the stressful situations of life, we need to stop being self reliant. In our afflictions, or whatever kind of trouble we find ourselves in, we need to turn prayerfully to the God who is waiting - to ask God to come along side and into our lives to provide the support that we need. The second half of this prayerful action, when we have unburdened our heart to our caring God, is to leave the burden there and accept His guiding hand to lead us through.

We are to remember that He will bring comfort into all our tribulations. There is not a difficulty which He is unable to handle. The size of the problem is not a restriction; nothing is too trivial and nothing is too great. As I am considering this subject, the news on the radio has just brought to the attention of listeners in the United Kingdom the needs of a family of four children, all boys, who have a very rare cancer and need a bone marrow transplant. The interviewer asked the father, "How do you get through each day?" The reply was given, "As committed Christians we rely upon God, it's the only way". To understand the magnitude of their problem it is considered that there are only about 100 people in the whole world who suffer from this rare illness!

The next major benefit that comes out of difficult situations where we experience the comfort of a God who cares is for us to be similar care workers. There are a tremendous number of care workers in our country today. This is seen in the many residential homes for the elderly. Then there is that vast army of home carers providing the practical support to help people maintain their independence in their own homes. Verse 4 of our chapter teaches that we too need to be care workers among suffering fellow believers. As we experience God's care we are given an insight into how we can also supply the same kind of loving care to support others.

A caring attitude seeks the wellbeing of others; it promotes healing, recovery and restoration. Non Christians might not understand the deep hurt that a believer goes through. What is troubling a Christian and causing distress might well be considered "normal" to a non Christian. In that situation, the wrong kind of advice and support is likely to be given.

How important then is the pastoral activity of caring among Christians. The Lord Jesus said in John 13:34-35, "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another." The kind of love shown by the Lord Jesus to His own disciples is the same standard of love and care that we should show to one another.

Caring and being a comfort by coming along side to help is a very real and practical means of showing "love for one another". The coming along side is the seeking to help bear the burden and enter into the situation in a caring attitude. Lending support without being intrusive can be a very real and positive act of caring. It is not necessarily talking and showing well intentioned portions of Scripture, valuable though the word of God is. It might be appropriate to be silent or to weep with those that weep, Romans 12:15.

Finally from Romans 15:4, "For whatever things were written before were written for our learning, that we through the patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope." The Scriptures are the very words of God and are in themselves a source of comfort. As we read God's word, it comes along side into our hearts and minds, giving that living support and often providing the answers to what is causing distress. Therefore, in this dual way of prayer and the reading of Scripture we have access to the God of all comfort.

"Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you completely; and may your whole spirit, soul, and body be preserved blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ", 1 Thessalonians 5:23. And from Romans 15:33, "Now, the God of peace be with you all. Amen."

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