

A Study of 2 Corinthians

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was one of a handful of German theologians to stand up to the Nazification of the German church. He was prominent in writing the famous Barmen Declaration, which rejected the infamous Aryan clauses imposed by Nazi ideology. Bonhoeffer's courage thrust him into the leadership of the Confessing Church along with other stalwarts like Martin Niemöller. Bonhoeffer went so far as to found an underground seminary in Finkenwald, Bavaria, which was closed by Gestapo chief Heinrich Himmler. This led to Bonhoeffer's joining the resistance movement and his being imprisoned by the Gestapo in April 1943. Bonhoeffer's Letters from Prison became a best-seller after the war.

Among the letters is a beautiful poem written to his fiancée Maria von Wedemeyer entitled "New Year 1945." Stanza 3 is famous:

Poignant words that became more so when, three months later, just as the war was ending, Bonhoeffer was hung in Flossenbürg prison.

Fast-forward to some eighteen years later, across the Atlantic in America, when another bride-to-be was grieving the death of her fiancé and found much comfort in Bonhoeffer's poem. Her fiancé, who died from injuries in a sledding accident, was the son of author Joseph Bayly and his wife Mary Lou. When she mailed Bonhoeffer's poem to them, Joe and Mary Lou also found comfort in "New Year 1945."

Twelve years after this (thirty years after Bonhoeffer's death), Joe Bayly received a letter from a pastor-friend in Massachusetts relating that he had visited a terminally ill woman in a Boston hospital for some time and had given her Joe's book of poems, Heaven, as comfort for her soul. The pastor said that the dying woman had stayed awake late the previous night to read it and told him of the comfort and help she had received from it. A few hours later she died. The woman, the pastor revealed, was Maria von Wedemeyer-Weller, Bonhoeffer's fiancée three decades earlier!

God's comfort circulates among his children — and sometimes it comes full circle, as it did from Dietrich Bonhoeffer to Maria von Wedemeyer in her grief to Joseph Bayly, Jr.'s grieving fiancée to Joe and Mary Lou Bayly in their grief and then back to Bonhoeffer's one-time fiancée as comfort in her dying hours.² Our text alludes to this astonishing cyclical nature of comfort — its mutuality — its overflowing nature.

By any estimation 2 Corinthians 1:3-7 frames the Bible's greatest text on comfort. The word "comfort" occurs no less than ten times in its noun and verb forms in this brief paragraph — essentially one-third of all thirty-one occurrences in the New Testament.³ Paul says more about suffering, and more about comfort, than any other writer in the Bible. And it is here that he says the most about it.

There is a reason for this, and it was to answer critics who held that the sufferings that characterized Paul's life were evidence that he was not an apostle because if he was the real thing he wouldn't be experiencing so much trouble. Paul answered that abundant suffering and abundant comfort are signs of apostolic authenticity.

Celebration of the God of Comfort (v. 3)

In 2 Corinthians 1:3-7, Paul carefully crafts his words as he recasts the traditional opening words of the synagogue blessing in Christian terminology to celebrate God as the God of all comfort: “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort” (v. 3).

The first of the nineteen synagogue benedictions then in use began, “Blessed art thou, O Lord our God and God of our fathers, God of Abraham, God of Isaac, and God of Jacob. . . .”⁴ Paul takes it and identifies “the God of our fathers” as “the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,” thus testifying to the dramatic revelation of Christ to him on the Damascus road and his radical conversion. This Christianized Jewish blessing is original here in 2 Corinthians and appears also verbatim in Romans, Ephesians, and 1 Peter. In restating the synagogue blessing in Christian terms, Paul was having a go at his Judaizing enemies, the fallen apostles in Corinth (cf. 2 Corinthians 11:22, 2 Corinthians 11:31). It was of the utmost importance for the apostle to establish in no uncertain terms that the God of Israel’s patriarchs was the God and Father of the Lord Jesus Christ.

The synagogue prayer of Paul’s day described God as “The Father of Mercies,” but here Paul enlarges it to include “and God of all comfort” — the first of the ten references to comfort contained in this short paragraph.

Paul’s intentionality is immense! Chapters 40 — 66 of Isaiah repeatedly speak of the comfort or consolation of the Messianic age. Isaiah 40 begins, “Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,” and the final chapter, Isaiah 66, says, “As one whom his mother comforts, so I will comfort you; you shall be comforted in Jerusalem” (Isaiah 66:13).

So when Christ came, the devout, including Simeon and Anna, were “waiting for the consolation of Israel” (Luke 2:25) — salvation and comfort. It was and is through Christ that the comfort of God the Father comes.

Here in our passage, the idea of comfort is “to strengthen much,” to encourage⁵ — to stand by another and encourage him as he endures testing. Paul wanted his hearers to understand that the merciful Father is the author of all possible comfort and consolation. There is no enduring comfort apart from him.

Paul’s heartfelt celebration of God was for his deliverance from deadly peril in Asia (cf. 1 Corinthians 1:8-11), and then the gentle comfort brought to him by the return of Titus with good news about the Corinthian church (cf. 2 Corinthians 7:6-7). For all this he passionately blessed God: “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort” (2 Corinthians 1:3). How beautiful.

The explanation of God’s comfort thus began with the celebration of God’s comfort.

Paul’s Apostolic Experience of God

As we consider what Paul says in 2 Corinthians 1:4-5 we must understand that Paul is referring to his own experience alone — that the plural “we”

and “us” is what is sometimes called the “apostolic we.”⁶ This is made clear when we get to 2 Corinthians 1:6-7 where there is a contrast between “we” (the apostle) and “you” (the Corinthians).

Description of God’s comfort. So here in 2 Corinthians 1:4 Paul describes his own experience of comfort and how it graced the Corinthians: “who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we are comforted by God.”

Paul was certainly one of the most afflicted men ever. He suffered cold, nakedness, beating, imprisonment, criminal assault, shipwreck, betrayal, desolation, desertion, and more. His was a life of perpetual death: “For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus’ sake” (2 Corinthians 4:11). However, this said, he found that God comforted him in all his afflictions. Not in some but in “all” of them!

Every one of Paul’s epic miseries was attended by God’s comfort. His repeated imprisonments in Asia Minor, in Greece, and Rome’s dank Mamertine prison were venues of God’s comfort. Through each of the forty lashes administered on five separate occasions, with the final lashes meant to bring him to the point of death, and through the torturous days of healing that followed each of the five beatings, he experienced the comfort of God. When he was stoned in Lystra with the largest stones being hurled upon his fallen body as the coup de grace, he experienced the comfort of God. Adrift like flotsam on the high seas (for the third time!), he knew the comfort of God again. When he was in danger from rivers — God’s comfort, danger from robbers — God’s comfort, danger from his people — God’s comfort, danger in the city — God’s comfort, danger in the wilderness — God’s comfort, danger from false brothers — God’s comfort. “In toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure” (2 Corinthians 11:27), Paul always experienced God’s comfort. Never once was he without the comfort of God.

The result was that Paul was able to comfort those “in any affliction” (imagine, any affliction) — and he did so with the comfort with which he had been comforted by God.

How did Paul comfort others with the comfort with which he had been comforted by God? Overall by his example — as they observed his attitude and deportment in and through and after his sufferings. And then there were his prayers. And of course, there were his gentle words of comfort, graced with authenticity and power so that God’s comfort was administered through him.

Affliction is essential. What we conclude here is that affliction was the key to Paul’s effectiveness in ministry, and affliction is the key to effective ministry today. How countercultural this is. It even runs counter to so much “Christian” thinking that regards affliction as an evidence of personal sin or deficient faith, and sleekness and ease as palpable evidence of divine blessing.

My own pastoral experience confirms Paul’s insistence that afflictions have been good for me and the ministry of the gospel — friends to authenticity

and effectiveness.

Bishop Paul Barnett observes that God's comfort does not terminate in the one who receives it.

This is something of what Maria von Wedemeyer-Weller experienced from Bonhoeffer to her to another grieving young woman to the Baylys and back to her. The circle all began with the experience of affliction and God's comfort overflowing to the comforted.

Explanation of God's comfort. 2 Corinthians 1:5 supplies the reason why suffering equipped Paul to pass on God's comfort: "For as we share abundantly in Christ's sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too." Here the "sufferings" of Christ do not refer to the atoning sufferings of Christ but to the sufferings that come to those involved in the service of Christ (cf. 2 Corinthians 4:11-12). They are "Christ's sufferings" because they come from following him and add to the fulfillment of the suffering destined for the Body of Christ (cf. Colossians 1:24). They are Christ's sufferings because he is in his people (cf. Acts 9:4-5). C. S. Lewis solemnized this truth in the epitaph of *The Problem of Pain* where he quotes George MacDonald: "The Son of God suffered unto the death, not that men might not suffer, but that their sufferings might be like His." In this respect, Paul's prayer in Philippians 3:10-11 is so right: "that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death; so that I may attain to the resurrection from the dead" (NASB).

The metaphoric expression conveyed in the original of a flood in overflow is memorable — "For just as the sufferings of Christ overflow to us, so also through Christ, our comforting overflows."⁸ The "for just as . . . so," especially in the Greek (*kathos . . . houtos*), gives the sentence a solemn ring, accentuating the idea of overflow surplus — the comforting overflows. The emphasis of verse 5 is upon Paul's experience of overflowing comfort — a flood of consolation.

Most recently he had experienced this overflowing comfort in Asia where, he says, "We were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death" (2 Corinthians 1:8-9). But God delivered him with resurrection power (cf. 2 Corinthians 1:9-10). And more, God comforted Paul with a visit from Titus who brought him the good news about the Corinthian church and their love for him (cf. 2 Corinthians 7:6-7).

Note that Christ is the center and source of all comfort. Just as Paul's union with Christ was the source of his suffering, so also Christ was the source of his overflowing comfort.

The Corinthians' Experience of God's Comfort (vv. 6, 7)

The application of God's comfort. The overflowing nature of God's comfort anticipates its abundant application. We see this in Paul's direct statement to the Corinthians: "If we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation;

and if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which you experience when you patiently endure the same sufferings that we suffer” (2 Corinthians 1:6). Paul views both his experience of afflictions and his experience of comfort as contributing to the Corinthians’ comfort. This is a dynamic way of looking at life because it endows all Christian living with elevated importance. The hard things we undergo as well as the comforts are all graces that together authenticate and empower ministry so that those who truly desire to minister will patiently accept their lot from God and work on it.

The thrust of Paul’s apostolic ministry was not reciprocal but was a one-way street issuing in a flood of comfort to others. In this, he lived like Christ his Savior. Paul links the Corinthians’ comfort to their patient endurance of sufferings: “it is for your comfort, which you experience when you patiently endure the same sufferings that we suffer” (2 Corinthians 1:6). The phrase “comfort, which you experience” is translated more literally as “comfort, which is energized”:9 “it is for your comfort, which is energized by patient endurance of the same sufferings that we suffer.” Patient endurance of the same sufferings that Paul suffered will energize and activate the comfort of God.

Truly, Paul’s patient endurance through multiple afflictions had been the key to his experiencing the comfort of God. Paul did not bolt from his circumstances or curse God for them but patiently endured them and thus found God energizing his comfort. What wisdom there is in this. As Peter would say, “But if when you do good and suffer for it you endure, this is a gracious thing in the sight of God. For to this, you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps” (1 Peter 2:20-21).

Are you suffering afflictions because of your commitment to Christ? Do not run. Do not curse your circumstances. Instead, patiently endure, and your comfort will overflow.

Confidence in God’s comfort. Despite the Corinthians’ disappointing history, their shameful questioning of Paul’s apostleship, their infatuation with more attractive ministries and accommodating theologies, their temporary rejection of his authority — despite all this, Paul viewed the Corinthian church with unshakable confidence. “Our hope for you is unshaken, for we know that as you share in our sufferings, you will also share in our comfort” (2 Corinthians 1:7).

Paul’s confidence was embedded in the Corinthians’ sharing in fellowship with him in both his sufferings and his comfort — because all believers have fellowship with Christ. As he wrote initially to the Corinthians, “God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord” (1 Corinthians 1:9). Also, believers have fellowship in the Holy Spirit. As Paul’s famous benediction has it, “The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all” (2 Corinthians 13:14). Indeed all believers have fellowship in the Holy Trinity, as John exclaimed: “indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ” (1 John 1:3). This fellowship with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit generates a fellowship in Christ’s sufferings and thus leads to Paul’s unshakable hope — “we know that as you share in

our sufferings, you will also share in our comfort” (2 Corinthians 1:7).

Despite the Corinthians’ checkered past, Paul was sure they would rise to their divine fellowship, ultimately experiencing the full comfort of God. As

Philip Hughes writes: “In the service of Christ . . . there may be disappointments, but there cannot be despair; there may be conflicts, but never doubt; there may be afflictions, but never without comfort.”¹⁰

How Paul’s exultant blessing resonates in our souls: “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort” (2 Corinthians 1:3). God our Father is the “God of all comfort.” As “the Father of mercies,” the most merciful Father, he is the author of all possible consolation.

I see this again and again as the people I shepherd testify to his comfort in the most disappointing and desperate times of life — even death. The Holy Spirit is near to them and speaks to their afflicted souls, and they breathe comfort.

For those who are afflicted and suffer for following Christ, this passage promises surpassing comfort. The truth is that God’s comfort always exceeds our afflictions. “For as we share abundantly in Christ’s sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too” (2 Corinthians 1:5).

Those who follow Christ know the greatest affliction — and the greatest comfort, a flood of comfort. “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort” (2 Corinthians 1:3).