

COMFORT STILL MORE
2 CORINTHIANS 1:1-7

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a pastor and theologian in Germany in the 1930s and 40s. He not only was opposed to the doctrine of Naziism, but was one of only a few pastors to publicly oppose Hitler and his regime. His vocalism against Hitler propelled him into leadership of the Confessing Church of Germany and founding an underground seminary in Finkenwald, Bavaria, which was later closed by Gestapo chief Heinrich Himmler. Bonhoeffer then joined the resistance movement and was arrested and imprisoned in Germany by the Gestapo in April, 1943. He continued to serve the church by writing from prison, including his well-known, *Letters from Prison*, which became a best seller after the war.



Among the letters he wrote is a poem for his fiancée, Maria von Wedemeyer, entitled “New Year 1945.” The third stanza says:

Should it be ours to drain the cup of grieving
Even to the dregs of pain,
At thy command, we will not falter,
Thankfully receiving all that is given
By thy loving hand.

Those words of humble acceptance of God’s providence over suffering were followed by his execution three months later in Flossenbürg prison. He was martyred by hanging on April 9, 1945; V-E day was 30 days later on May 8, 1945. It almost seems to be tragically pointless.

It begs the question about suffering and what God is working in our suffering. Is it as unfair and pointless as it seems at times? Yes, suffering is hard. The kinds of persecutions God’s people have endured in history and are enduring even now are often bitter and harsh. But suffering is not unfair. Suffering is not pointless.

This year, we are thinking about how to *Excel Still More* in the calling that God has given us as a church. As we grow both numerically and spiritually, how can we persist in faithfulness to the Lord and maintain the distinctiveness of who God has made us as a church? So we are thinking about areas and ways that we can *excel in our spiritual life as a church* — particularly in loving one another. We’ve done it well. We want to grow in that excellence even more this year.

For the next two weeks, we are going to think on this theme of excelling spiritually, and this morning we are going to relate it to the theme of suffering, by looking at the opening verses of Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians. In 1:1-7, we will discover that...

IN SUFFERING WE RECEIVE GOD'S COMFORT AND ARE EQUIPPED TO SHARE GOD'S COMFORT WITH OTHERS.

In these opening verses to a struggling church, Paul reveals four realities about suffering and comfort:

BACKGROUND/CONTEXT (vv. 1-2)

1. God is **COMFORTER** (v. 3)
2. **WHEN** God Comforts (v. 4a)
3. **WHY** God Comforts (v. 4b-5)
 - The **PURPOSE** and universality of trouble (v. 4b)
 - The **NATURE** of trouble (v. 5)
 - The **EXTENSIVENESS** of comfort (v. 4c-5)
4. The **BENEFITS** of Troubles and God's Comfort (vv. 6-7)
 - Personal suffering is for **CORPORATE** benefit (v. 6)
 - Personal suffering produces **STEADFASTNESS** (v. 7)

Implications for Troubles and Comfort at GBC

BACKGROUND/CONTEXT (vv. 1-2)

- Corinth was a city known for its worldliness, but in that early church there was a man living in an incestuous relationship that even the secular world wouldn't condone (1 Cor. 5:1), but the church didn't do anything about it, so Paul wrote them a letter about the situation (1 Cor. 5:9), though that letter was lost.
- The Corinthians then wrote Paul a letter (1 Cor. 7:1) and he responded to that letter with the epistle known as 1 Corinthians because they were evidently apathetic about their sin (1 Cor. 5:2).
- False teachers, calling themselves apostles, then infiltrated the church and began attacking Paul's character and apostleship, turning the church away from the truth. Paul left Ephesus and went to Corinth for his "painful visit" (2 Cor. 2:1) to confront them.
- After leaving Corinth and returning to Ephesus, Paul wrote a "severe letter" (2 Cor. 2:4) and sent it to Corinth with Titus (7:5-16). This letter was also lost.
- Paul, anxious for news of the state of the Corinthian church, went to Macedonia where Titus came and reported that the Corinthian church had responded well to the letter and most of the Corinthians had repented of their rebellion against Paul (7:7) and their apathy about the sinning church member.
- With joy — and perhaps still some concern for their complete repentance — Paul wrote the letter known as 2 Corinthians. As you read this book, remember that there were two primary sins in the Corinthian church —
 - ✓ The incestuous man and the church's apathy in dealing with that known sin.
 - ✓ The rebellion of the false teachers against Paul's apostolic teaching and instruction.
- Corinth was a prosperous and licentious city; believers in Christ would have been identified as unique.
- While Corinth was wealthy, it was largely populated by Roman slaves who were placed there by Rome when she rebuilt the city around 50 B.C. after it was destroyed about 100 years earlier. So many of the members of the church would likely have been poor, slaves, and ostracized by the city.
- It is that background that Paul has in mind (in part) as he writes about trials/trouble and comfort.

1. God is Comforter (v. 3)

- When people suffer, the temptation is to denigrate His character and nature — "He doesn't know or care...He's not able...He is opposed to me..." This opening blessing corrects that thinking.
 - ✓ When Paul says **blessed be** he is using a form of praise, acknowledging God as the source of blessing. And here Paul praises God in three ways because He is the Giver of gifts to His people.
 - ✓ First, God is the **Father of our Lord Jesus Christ**. In this section, it seems that Paul is particularly thinking of Christ as the means of our salvation and our ultimate, final salvation *where sin, suffering, and death have been overcome and overwhelmed* (1:7-8). There is no more dread of sin and death.

- ✓ Second, God is the ***Father of mercies***, which means that He is the source and originator of mercy. He has compassion towards sinful and weak people (2 Sam. 24:14; Ps. 103:8, 13, 17; Mic. 7:18–19; Lk. 1:78; Rom. 15:9; Eph. 2:4). God is not uncompassionate; He cares and is moved to act by mercy.
- ✓ Thirdly, He is ***the God of all comfort***. If there is comfort to be found anywhere, it is found in God.
 - This word is familiar — it is often translated “help(er)” or “encourage(er).” It is used about personal relief, support, and help. Here, what is notable is that God is ***merciful***, seeing our distress and need, and then God acts to give us the ***comforting*** relief we need.
 - What is notable about this word is that it is used 29x in the NT, 20x by Paul, and 11x in this letter (6x in vv. 3-7!). It is likely that he stresses it so much because they had repented and had experienced the comfort of God’s grace in forgiveness.
 - Scripture consistently reminds us of His comfort (Is. 51:3, 12-13; 66:13; Mt. 5:4; 2 Th. 2:16-17).
 - Not only does God comfort, but He has placed His Spirit (whose name is “Comforter,” Jn. 14:16, 26) within us to be a constant source of peace and encouragement to us.
 - “No loss is too deep, no sorrow or pain too great, for the overwhelming and transcendent comfort that God freely gives in Christ.” [Mark Seifrid]
- When you are suffering, be sure to align your thoughts about God to Scripture’s revelation. What this Book says about God is true; what our hearts say when we are hurting is often mis-aligned to this Book.
 - ✓ When suffering are you consciously thinking about the final end of your salvation in Christ?
 - ✓ When suffering are you remembering that God is compassionate toward you (He cares) and that He has withheld His condemnation from you?
 - ✓ When suffering are you meditating on the fact that the eternal God comes to you as the tender Father to comfort you and give you peace?

2. When God Comforts (v. 4a)

- It is the nature of God to comfort; but *when* does He comfort? He ***comforts us in all our affliction***.
 - ✓ When there is ***affliction***, God comforts.
 - ✓ When Paul speaks about affliction, he is referring to *pressures*, circumstances that are *crushing*.
 - ✓ It can refer to distress, oppression, and tribulation (and Tribulation). Cf. Paul’s list — 11:23-29.
 - ✓ The sufferings of this world are real — that suffering comes from a fallen creation (illness), from our sins against others, and from the sins of others against us.
 - ✓ In this verse, he uses the pronouns ***us...we*** and we might assume that he is speaking of himself, and also the Corinthians. However, in v. 7, it is clear that he is speaking of himself and Timothy as distinct from the Corinthians.
 - ✓ That distinction would likely have provoked the readers to remember that *they* were the source of some of Paul’s affliction — he suffered because of their sin against them.

- ✓ Yet he is gracious and loving toward them, demonstrating the sufficiency of God’s comfort.
 - If others have sinned against you, find your comfort in God (and not angry retribution); He will make all things right (Rom. 12:17-21).
 - If you have sinned against others, find your comfort in repentance (7:11).
- To say that God comforts us in our affliction says that He comforts us just when we need it. His comfort may not always be removal out of the trouble (Daniel stayed in Babylon and was put in a lion’s den overnight), but He will grant you exactly what you need to endure (1 Cor. 10:13).

3. Why God Comforts (v. 4b-5)

- **The purpose and universality of trouble (v. 4b)**

- ✓ The words *so that* tell us *why* God places us in circumstances of trouble and suffering — so we will be equipped as agents of comfort to others (*so that we will be able to comfort those...*).
- ✓ When we have received the comfort of God in every source of affliction, then we also will be able to comfort others in all their sources of suffering (*in any* [all] *affliction*).
- ✓ God ministers His comfort to His people (v. 3) so they in turn are equipped to minister it to others: “The comfort of God is channeled through people (...2 Cor. 7:6) and by means of prayer (1:11).”
- ✓ The suffering of people is common: illness/surgery, car accidents, fires, high electrical bills, inflation, difficult relationships, computer breakdowns, temptations, ostracism are all common.
- ✓ The comfort of God is sufficient for all those afflictions (and *all* others). God comforts us so that we will be able to minister the same grace we have received to others. (Which means, that we need to be cognizant of and aware of the gracious comfort He is giving to us; He has made us stewards of the comfort that we have received from Him — it’s not ours to “keep for ourselves.”)

- **The nature of trouble (v. 5)**

- ✓ While suffering and trouble are common, Paul is also thinking about a unique kind of suffering — *the sufferings of Christ*. That is, the suffering that comes to us uniquely because of our belief in and identity with Jesus Christ (cf. 4:10-12; Col. 1:24; 1 Pt. 4:13).
- ✓ These are “Christ’s sufferings” not just because they are like His suffering, but because they are an expression of our identity with Him and they fulfill the destiny of the church’s suffering (Acts 14:22).
- ✓ The nature of trouble is that we will be rejected by the world (and even at times by the church — which is what Paul experienced from the Corinthians).
- ✓ Isn’t this the great heartache that we often have — not just that life is hard, but we see loved ones (parents, children, and siblings) struggling with life (and making foolish and ungodly decisions), and when we share the hope of the gospel with them they reject it, reject us, and become even more resolute in rebellion. You know what that is like and so do I. It’s heartbreaking (cf. 3 Jn. 4).

- **The extensiveness of comfort (v. 4c-5)**

- ✓ Just how extensive will God's comfort be? Sufferings may well be **abundant** (Paul's were — cf. ch. 11), but God's comfort is just as abundant **so also our comfort is abundant**).
- ✓ There is no suffering, trouble, or persecution, that outstrips God's grace to comfort us.
- ✓ Worldly affliction will always be outpaced by God's comfort (cf. **4:11-12, 16-18**).
- ✓ And notice that he says particularly that the comfort for our **sufferings of Christ** come **through Christ**. That is, Christ is the answer for our suffering. And He is not just the answer, but an abundant answer. He is more than sufficient for us. That hints at how God comforts us:
 - He comforts us through the gift of salvation that gives us a clear conscience (**1:2, 12**).
 - He comforts us by the gift of final salvation and the perspective that brings (**1:9-10**)
 - He comforts us by the prayers of the saints for us (**1:11**)
 - He comforts us through the reminders of His Word of His nature (**1:3-7**)
 - He comforts us by the indwelling of the Spirit who helps us (Jn. 15)
 - He comforts us by the use of the gifts of the Spirit in the body of Christ (1 Cor. 11)
 - He comforts us by the ministry of the presence of the saints with us in our trials (**Rom. 12:12**)
 - He comforts us by saving us from our sin and from His wrath (**1:6**)
- ✓ Whatever your suffering, He has met your need in Christ. He is comforting and will comfort.

4. The Benefits of Troubles and God's Comfort (vv. 6-7)

- **Personal Suffering is for Corporate Benefit (v. 6)**

- ✓ This verse amplifies that Paul said in v. 4 — “we suffer so, having received God's comfort, we can minister that same comfort to others.”
- ✓ Paul points to two particular benefits of his sufferings for the Corinthians:
 - **if we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation**. That is, the comfort that comes to the Corinthians is their eternal salvation (4:12; **7:10**). (Which means that when we are attempting to comfort sufferers, we should be pointing them to the hope of the gospel.)
 - ... If you are not a believer in Jesus Christ, whatever your problem is today, your greatest problem is your sin problem.
 - ... And Jesus Christ died to remove that problem from you and to give you liberty (**5:21**).
 - **if we are comforted...for your comfort...the patient enduring of sufferings**. The goal of our comfort is not just to make us “comfortable” (the recliner life), but to steel us to endure.
- ✓ I read it again this week: “Suffering sanctifies. God tests us in order to refine us.” That is absolutely true; the Lord uses suffering to loosen our grip on temporal and earthly attractions and to deepen our love for and attraction to Him.
- ✓ But He also uses suffering to prepare us for ministry. Suffering isn't just personal; it is corporate.

✓ Our suffering is not without a purpose; our suffering is about more than just receiving care and growing spiritually ourselves — our suffering is our equipping for ministry and service to others.

• **Personal Suffering Produces Steadfastness (v. 7)**

- ✓ In spite of all the problems in the Corinthian church, he said of them, ***our hope for you is firmly grounded*** — Paul is confident that they are grounded in Christ and resolute and steadfast.
- ✓ Athletes don't develop endurance by watching TV and eating chocolate donuts; farmers don't grow crops by sleeping late and not maintaining their tractors and implements.
- ✓ We will not grow in steadfastness if we do not suffer.
- ✓ Afflictions are normal — note ***sharers*** (fellowship) and ***our sufferings*** — they are common for all.
- ✓ There is unity in suffering; there is unity in God's comfort (we all have both suffering and comfort). The God-appointed end of suffering is that we grow in Christ.

CONCLUSION: Implications for Troubles and Comfort at GBC

- We are known for being a loving, caring, ministering, comforting church. Let us **excel still more.**
- What will it mean to excel still more? How do we comfort with excellence?
 - ✓ **Comfort** suffering sinners with the hope of the gospel
 - ✓ **Remind** sufferers of our *eternal* hope
 - ✓ **Pray** with and pray for sufferers
 - ✓ **Read** and minister God's Word to sufferers — His words are infinitely more hopeful than mine
 - ✓ **Remind** sufferers of the Spirit of God in them to help them
 - ✓ **Use** your spiritual gifts to serve sufferers with practical needs
 - ✓ **Be with** sufferers — practice the ministry of presence
 - ✓ **Watch** for people who are hurting and needy. (Go outside your normal circle of relationships.)
- Let me tell you of one sufferer that is a dear brother to our church and to me:
 - ✓ Some of you are aware of some physical difficulties endured by Pastor Dan Kirk — “brain fog.”
 - ✓ 1-1/2 to 2 years ago he was given a hard diagnosis; they changed it to a seizure diagnosis, but symptoms progressively got worse. Last month he and Chris went to Cleveland for more testing.
 - ✓ This week he received confirmation of the first diagnosis: early onset Alzheimer's. While there are many ways in which his function is “normal” it is severe enough that he has given up driving and this morning he has resigned as pastor of Calvary Bible Church. He is 58 years old.
 - ✓ He and his wife are grieving — “it's the hardest thing I've ever had to do.” Yet they are hopeful in Christ. He told me on Thursday, “We are following the Good Shepherd, so we are on the right path.”
 - ✓ How can you comfort this sufferer? Pray for him. Pray for his church (which is also suffering). And pray for me, as I go to preach at Calvary on his next to last Sunday, August 21.

BENEDICTION: **Hebrews 13:20-21**