

“The God of All Comfort”
II Corinthians 1:3-7
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Receive now God’s Word from II Corinthians 1:3-7 which says [3] *Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, [4] 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 ourselves are comforted by God. [5] For as we share abundantly in Christ's sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too.[6] 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. [7] Our hope for you is unshaken, for we know that as you share in our sufferings, you will also share in our comfort.*

This is the Word of the Lord.

I probably knew Pastor Reeder the least out of all the staff here at Briarwood. I've only been here for about three months, but I wanted to share very briefly with you about how I got here. About a year ago, I started looking for full time ministry openings and as I was applying and interviewing, I had a few criteria in my mind. Number one, the church had to be organizationally healthy, where I could learn from best practices about church operations and leadership. That was a very specific thing that I was looking for. Number two, the church had to be a place where I felt like both my wife and I could grow, especially through strong preaching and teaching. Number three, the church had to be in a location where I felt like we could flourish as a family. These three things are what I had been praying for in the last year.

Lo and behold, a position opened up at Briarwood Presbyterian Church. It was the position for the pastor of Pastoral Care. I bet that you weren't expecting I would say that. So, I applied, not really because I thought I was qualified for that position, but because it was Briarwood and the senior pastor was Dr. Harry Reeder – a strong teacher, preacher and he's written several books on leadership. I was rejected for that job. Pastor Jim Alexander beat me out for that job and praise God that he did, because I would have been awful at it and not long after that opening was filled, the position for the pastoral singles ministry opened up and that was actually a position that I was excited about, even apart from Briarwood. So, I must admit that I was a little embarrassed applying to another position in the same church and you know how applications go. They ask you, what do you specifically like about this role? I thought to myself, “they're definitely not going to take me seriously anymore” but then something happened that I retrospectively interpreted to have been God's providence.

I was living in Peoria, Illinois, at the time, and I was attending Grace Presbyterian Church, and they were hosting their annual missions conference and in this particular year, the keynote speaker was Pastor Harry Reeder. So of course I attended. After one of the sermons, I went up to the front. I introduced myself to both Harry and Cindy, who was there as well, and I said, “My name is Sam Park. You don't know me, but I know you and I've applied to your church.” Harry said, ‘Is that right? Tell me a little bit about yourself.’ I said, “I graduated from Westminster Theological Seminary.” Then he grabbed me by the shoulders and he kind of brought me in and said, ‘Well, that makes you family already.’ We talked for a little bit. Then he asked me to email my resume and application directly to him, not to his admin assistant, not to

Marie but directly to him because he wanted to make sure to look at it. Then about a week later, I got an email from Briarwood asking if I had time for an interview.

I knew Pastor Reeder the least here, but I am here largely because of him. I'm here because, first of all, I applied to Briarwood wanting to learn from Pastor Reeder in particular, and I'm here because he put in a good word for me. He later interviewed me and no doubt he had an influence in my being hired. That is not related to my sermon, but I wanted to share that with you and thought it would be appropriate, given where we find ourselves as a church family in the passing of Harry Reeder. Let's pray and then get into this text.

Prayer:

O, gracious heavenly Father, there are just times when we do not feel like bowing to Your Word and yet perhaps it's especially during those times that we need to hear Your Word. I ask for this reading this in this very hour that You would allow our hearts and our minds to cling to Your Word, knowing that in Your Word is comfort in life. We pray these things in Jesus' Name, Amen.

As it is with his other letters, Paul's introduction helps us identify the main themes and focus of the letter and perhaps that couldn't be any clearer than in the introduction to II Corinthians. During the Scripture reading, you should have noticed certain words that re-appeared again and again. The word suffering and affliction combined occur seven times in our passage and eight times if you extend the passage to verse 11. The Greek word for suffering, is *pathéma* and it appears, a total of 16 times in the New Testament, nine times within Paul's letters, and four of those nine or within the letter of II Corinthians, all of them in this passage. The Greek word for affliction is *thlipsis*. That word occurs about 45 times in the New Testament, 24 of those instances are within Paul, nine of those 24 within II Corinthians and four within this passage.

Suffering used in this passage means something like external afflictions or calamities. It can refer to internal struggles, but the word is used primarily to denote sufferings of an external kind. Afflictions used here means pressure or oppression. If you've ever experienced acute stress, anxiety, fear, depression, sorrow, you know exactly what this word means. In all of those conditions, there's a common feeling of pressure and although it's emotional and psychological in nature, as the condition becomes more severe, you begin to feel an almost physical burden wearing you down. It actually feels like there is this physical pressure that's suffocating your heart and your mind. Paul uses both of these words suffering and affliction I think in order to speak comprehensively about both internal and external struggles.

Not only does Paul use those words a total of eight times from versus three through 11, but he uses them with greater frequency than any other author, and he uses it with greater frequency than in any other passage. So, to put it another way, our passage has the highest concentration of suffering. It is the densest passage on affliction, and that is meant to be striking. What is even more striking than that is the fact that this is not a passage about suffering. In fact, there's another word that appears in even greater frequency and concentration, and in that word is comfort.

Comfort or its verbal counterpart to comfort occurs ten times within II Corinthians 1:3-7. The Greek word for comfort is *paraklésis* and when used with this sense of comfort or comforting, they occur about 31 times in the New Testament. Of those 31 times 25 instances are by Paul, more than any other author. Once again in the New Testament, 17 of those 25 instances are in II Corinthians and ten of those are found in II Corinthians 1:3-7. Scott Hafemann, a New Testament scholar says this about this passage; 'If Paul is the apostle of comfort within the New

Testament, then II Corinthians is the letter of comfort with chapter one verses three through seven being the paragraph of comfort.’

I want to draw a correlation for you here that I will expand upon later. The reason why Paul talks about comfort more than any other author is because he talks about suffering more than any other author. Those two, go hand in hand. So, in this introduction to II Corinthians, the main topic not just for this passage but for the whole letter, really couldn't be any more emphatic. It's this; the comfort that comes from God in the midst of sufferings. We're going to go through this passage under three points. Number one, the source of comfort. Number two, the purpose of comfort. Number three, the fellowship of comfort.

Let's begin with the first of those, the source of comfort. II Corinthians 1:3 says [3] *Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort.* The Jews had a practice, they still do to my understanding, of pronouncing a blessing or a thanksgiving at various occasions before eating food, engaging in praise, and carrying out certain laws. These were called *berakahs*, from the Hebrew word for blessing – Baruch. There are about 100 of them, and every single one of them began with the phrase ‘Blessed be the God...’ or ‘blessed be the Lord...’. So, Paul clearly shows himself to be rooted in Jewish culture when he opens his letter with the standard berakah formula, ‘Blessed be the God’, but in distinction from the Jewish tradition, he continues to say, ‘Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.’

Now, if you were a Jew, you would have expected Paul to have said something like this ‘Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel,’ or ‘blessed be the God and Father of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob’ but in this modification, Paul is recognizing the work of Jesus Christ and the culmination of all of God's promises to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in Jesus Christ. So, from the very outset, with this deliberately aberrant benediction, Paul is indicating that the comfort he's about to talk about is the comfort that flows not just from God, but more specifically from the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

We are used to thinking about benedictions as blessings or pronouncements of good and well-being from God to man, but what does it mean when the direction of that is reversed? When Paul blesses God? Paul, by the way, is not the only person to bless God. We see this all the time in the Psalter. For example, Psalm 103:1 says [1] *Bless the Lord, O my soul and all that is within me, bless his holy name.* Benedictions can have this dual function. It either describes the Divine act of blessing humans or the human act of giving thanksgiving and praise to God in response to those very blessings and gifts. The difference, however, between a typical thanksgiving and a benediction like this one is that whereas the former, a thanksgiving, focuses on the gifts given, the latter focuses on the giver.

That is significant in this letter, because what is conspicuously absent in this introduction is the typical Pauline thanksgiving and indeed, we find this benediction in the place of that thanksgiving. See, the Corinthians had a problem. They were richly blessed with every gift so that they were not lacking in anything, as Paul describes in his previous letter, I Corinthians 1. But they had taken those gifts that God had given them and repurposed them for selfish ambition and vainglory so Paul, discerning that it might be counterproductive for him to give thanks like he normally does for the Corinthians and their many gifts, instead, he writes a benediction. In so doing, he shifts the focus away from the gifts, away from the Corinthians toward God Himself, and in a sense he offers up the thanksgiving to God that the Corinthians had failed to do. This God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is the Father of mercies and the God of all comfort.

Now think about the context in which Paul is writing this. He's in the midst of suffering.

II Corinthians 1:8-11 says [8] *For we do not want you to be unaware, brothers, of the affliction we experienced in Asia. For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself. [9] Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death. But that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead. [10] He delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us. On him we have set our hope that he will deliver us again. [11] You also must help us by prayer, so that many will give thanks on our behalf for the blessing granted us through the prayers of many.*

His suffering was so intense that he despaired of life itself. Death was imminent, and it is in that context that he chooses to bless, to praise God's merciful character. He does not interpret his present affliction as a sign of God's cruelty, but of His mercy and the reason for this is because in the midst of his afflictions, Paul had encountered numerous times the God who was the God of all comfort.

When you hear that word comfort, what do you think of what immediately comes to your mind? For me, it's my wife. That's the first thing but I also think of my bed. A massage maybe, comfort food, Thanksgiving dinner followed by food coma, followed by a lazy nap, maybe drinking coffee when it's snowing or raining outside. That's comfort, right? Wouldn't it be great if God was the God of all comfort in this sense, if He made our lives comfortable, easy, relaxed, stress free? But this is not what Paul means when he uses the word comfort ten times in our passage.

As I already said, the Greek word for comfort is *paraklésis*, perhaps that word made you think of someone in the Bible – the Paraclete. That's a title that's ascribed to the Holy Spirit. In the Gospel of John right before His crucifixion, Jesus spent time encouraging His disciples in anticipation of what was about to happen, not only at the appointed time come for Him to leave them, but Jesus knew that after He left, the disciples would experience the most severe persecutions imaginable. In light of the near future, Jesus said to them repeatedly, “I will send you a Helper” and He said this in reference to the Holy Spirit, who would be specially poured out upon the Apostles because of what they had to endure. Some translations say, “I will send you a Comforter or an Advocate,” but regardless of the translation you're looking at, the word there is *parakléto*s which comes from the word *paraklésis* – comfort. So as you've probably deduced by now, the word does not mean to make easy, to make comfortable.

Comfort means to strengthen, to encourage. Do you see what the word itself assumes? Comfort necessarily assumes suffering otherwise there would be no need for strengthening or encouragement. This is why comfort goes hand in hand with suffering. This is why eight instances of the words suffering and affliction are counterbalanced by ten instances of the word comfort. This is why Paul says in II Corinthians 1:4 says, the God of all comfort [4] *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 ourselves are comforted by God.* God is the source of all comfort in this sense. He does not promise to take away our sufferings, but He does promise to comfort us in the midst of them.

Now, I am going to spell out an implication of this for you more explicitly. The source of your comfort is not within yourself. It's not you. God does not necessarily comfort you by providing you with a subjective feeling of relief or psychological support. Being comforted by God isn't something that happens when you receive this emotional feeling of peace, and that would be entirely subjective and comfort then would depend wholly upon you. The source of comfort is God. It comes from outside of you and it flows from God. Specifically, it flows from the God and Father of a Lord Jesus Christ so it comes from God through His Son who died and

rose again. So, comfort is dependent wholly upon God, His character and what He has done on the cross. This is not to say that a subjective peace cannot result from this truth. It very well might, and it often does, but that is not necessary.

Here is an illustration of what God's comfort might look like. If you've worked with children at all, then you'll know that children need a lot of comforting. On the first day of nursery or Sunday school, the parents come in with their children holding their hands. It's loud, it's hectic. There's a lot of excitement but if you look at the children's faces, especially the new ones, you'll realize that they are terrified. All these new faces, new teachers, new classmates, new classroom. The last thing that they want to do is to let go of their parent's hands, but there comes that moment when the parent has to part with the child. How is that child going to be comforted? What has to happen? The mother has to bend down. She has to place her hands softly on her son's shoulder, gently look into his eyes and say, 'son or daughter, don't worry, I'm going to be right here when you finish.' The comfort depends entirely upon the word or promise of the mother. The strength of that comfort has nothing to do with the way in which the child might feel in response but it has everything to do with the character of the comforter. So likewise, God is the God of all comfort and in your affliction, He will not leave you, nor forsake you, but He will deliver you.

Point number two is, the purpose of this comfort. Why does God comfort us? We see this in again II Corinthians 1:4, that the God of all comfort comforts us in all our afflictions so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. Now, the first thing that you should note is that when Paul uses the first person plural pronoun us or we, he's not referring to the church in general. He's not saying we Christians, for by we, Paul is referring to the Apostles – we apostles. That applies to every instance in which Paul uses that pronoun throughout our passage. Paul's immediate concern here is to defend the apostleship and specifically to clarify what role sufferings have to play in the Apostles lives. Having said that, the application from Paul as an Apostle to us as the church is not difficult to make sense. Paul writes that the afflictions he faces and the comfort he receives are then channeled to others who are in affliction, namely the church.

Notice what he says later, at the end of II Corinthians 1:6, *[6] 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.* So, what's the purpose of God comforting us, whether that be us as in the apostles or us as in the church? It is so that we might comfort others. If I sit with you for a while. Paul is saying that the Divinely ordained purpose of God comforting you is so that you can turn around and comfort others. Let's think about that some more.

If God comforts us in order that we might comfort others, and if God's comfort, if the Word itself assumes that we are presently suffering afflictions, then by inference, what must we conclude? Not only does God comfort us so that we might comfort others, but He also allows for sufferings for the same purpose. God allows you to suffer so that you might comfort others in their sufferings. II Corinthians 1:6 confirms this interpretation when Paul says, 'If we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation, and if we are comforted, it is for your comfort.' Notice the parallel structure there. If we are afflicted, what's it for? It's for your comfort. If we are comforted. What's that for? It's for your comfort. So, Paul parallels being afflicted and being comforted, and he says that the purpose of both is one and the same. It is for your comfort.

I want to add one more dimension to this. There's a sense in which the degree to which Paul is able to comfort this church is proportionate to the degree to which he suffers. This is

especially evident in II Corinthians 1:5 which says *[5] For as we share abundantly in Christ's sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too*. So, through Christ, we share abundantly in comfort too. Notice the word abundantly in that verse. Paul's abundant comfort is directly proportionate to his abundant suffering. It's almost like Paul is describing an equation. The more he suffers, the more he experiences God's comfort. The more he experiences God's comfort, the more that he can comfort the Corinthians with that same comfort. This is why Paul says, in the midst of his suffering, 'blessed be God, praise God' and then he invites the church to join him in that thanksgiving.

This didn't apply just to the Apostle Paul. It also applied to the Apostle Peter. Jesus says in Luke 22:31 says *[31] Simon (Peter), Simon, behold, Satan demanded to have you that he might sift you like wheat*. That's a fascinating statement as and it's very reminiscent of Job. Apparently, Christ had a previous conversation with Satan about Peter, but let's look further at the passage.

Jesus goes on to say in Luke 22:32, *[32] but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail* (That is Christ acting as Peter's advocate or comforter). *And when you have turned again, strengthen your brothers*. As is the case with Paul, Christ directs Peter's sufferings ultimately, for the sake of strengthening his brothers. Peter suffers so that Christ might comfort him, so that Peter might in turn comfort the church.

More than Paul, more than Peter, this pattern applies supremely to Christ Himself, doesn't it? Christ endured sufferings throughout his entire life in ministry, which climaxed on the cross. Certainly, He endured the cross in order to expiate our sins and propitiate the wrath of God, but why else did Christ suffer? Hebrews 4:15 says *[15] For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin*. Christ's present intercession, His activity of strengthening and comforting us in the midst of our sufferings through His Spirit is effective because He has suffered in every way that we have. He is intimately acquainted with all of your sorrows. So, what we've already said about Paul, we can say most supremely of Christ's suffering. Christ was comforted by His Father in Heaven and by a Holy Spirit for the purpose of comforting the Church.

If you have ever suffered even a little bit, you'll know that Paul's perspective on suffering is extremely counterintuitive and countercultural. Whenever we face affliction or pressures, what tends to happen? By default, we are drawn inwards upon ourselves and everything becomes about me but Paul says the purpose of your sufferings has nothing to do with you. It has everything to do with others. Let me be more specific. Your sufferings have everything to do with the edification of the church. They are designed to strengthen the Church of Christ.

I've come to learn very quickly that while on the one hand Briarwood is a richly blessed church, especially from a resource standpoint. Briarwood is also a suffering church. I receive emails from both Tammy Wells and Julie Olmedo every day. There's a hospital list that we receive and it seems like every week, at least every week that I've been here, someone is called home. Even this past week, we mourn the death and celebrate the life of our longtime elder Shirley. In fact, that was the very last email that I received from Pastor Reeder, an invitation to attend that service and honor our father in the faith. We're going to continue to be a suffering church because Pastor Reeder himself, our senior pastor, our leader, our general, was also called home by our Lord. In addition to the pain and grief that the Reeders in particular, and that our church family as a whole will be facing, there's going to be a lot of decisions that have to be made, a massive hole to fill, and we're going to feel the pain of his absence. Even as a suffering church, my prayer is that we will learn to look beyond ourselves, that God will give us the eyes

to see our role in the larger body of Christ and the Kingdom of God and then, in the midst of our afflictions, in the midst of this present pressure, that we will learn to bless God, to praise Him for He is the God of all comfort.

This leads us to our final point, which is the fellowship of comfort. II Corinthians 1:5 says [5] *For as we **share** abundantly in Christ's sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too.* Just a moment ago, I highlighted the word abundantly in that verse. Now let me highlight the word 'share' for as we share abundantly in Christ suffering so through Christ, we share abundantly in comfort, too. Now, what's interesting is that in the original Greek, the verb to share is completely absent. It's not there. More literally this is how verse five would read – *for as the sufferings of Christ abound, two or in us, so also through Christ, our comfort abounds.* If you're thinking that sounds kind of awkward, then welcome to Greek translation. It sounds awkward because the Greek construction there is somewhat awkward, but I point this out not to correct the ESV translation, but to actually agree with it. Even though the word share is not there, I think they've translated this spot on.

This is what the translating committee of the ESV noticed I think. They observed that II Corinthians 1:5 is in a parallel construction with II Corinthians 1:7 which says [7] *Our hope for you is unshaken, for we know that as you **share** in our sufferings, you will also **share** in our comfort.* Obviously, the word share is repeated again twice, but this time in verse seven, that word share actually is there and the word is *koinos*. It means share, to take part. It refers to a partnership. You can hear the similarity, can't you? *Koinos* is related to *Koinonia*, from which we get Christian fellowship. Paul is saying that just as the Apostles experience and share in the sufferings of Christ, just as they labor as co-partners of Christ Himself, and enjoy fellowship with God through that suffering and through the consequent comfort, so also the Church shares in a partnership and fellowship with the Apostles in so far as we suffer for Christ holding fast to the confession that we have received from the Apostles.

When you suffer for the Gospel, when you suffer for the name of Christ, when you suffer for His church, or when you suffer in the pathway of obedience, when affliction surrounds you, afflictions that may be totally out of your control, such as the passing of a loved one, and in the midst of that affliction, you don't grumble. You don't complain. You don't curse God but you remain steadfast in your faith and for that reason, your life itself becomes a testimony to the hope that we have in the Gospel of Jesus Christ – when you suffer in that way, you are blessed and you're blessed because Jesus, our Lord and Savior, will strengthen you. By His strength and comfort, you will continue to obey and follow Christ. You will, not because of your strength, but because of the strength of Christ, you will continue to obey and follow after Him. Not only will you follow Christ, but you'll turn around and comfort your brothers and sisters so that they follow Christ. There is then a sharing, a partnership, a fellowship that results from this comfort.

In closing, I want to spell out this Pauline chain in this fellowship of comfort. First, God the Father comforted His Son in His earthly ministry and in the midst of His afflictions. Second, Christ comforts His Apostles while He was with them and then, even after He left through the power of Holy Spirit, whose name is the Comforter in the midst of their affliction. Third, the Apostles now comfort the church in the midst of our afflictions. The early church experienced that firsthand in the way that the Apostles pastored and cared for them. But we too can know this comfort through the Apostolic writings, through the Scripture they wrote. The fourth and final link in that chain is we too turn around and comfort one another.

Do you see then, how solidarity results through the series of suffering and comfort? The fellowship we have with Christ through the Ministry of the Apostles overflows and results in the

fellowship that we have with each other. To say that another way, the suffering and comfort that we experience are meant to function as a glue that binds us together with Christ and binds us together with His church. Don't ever succumb to the temptation of viewing your afflictions apart from the body of Christ.

Earlier today, Bruce and Brian mentioned that they've been receiving texts and messages from all around the churches in Birmingham, in the state of Alabama, in the United States and from all around the world – 40 countries, I think that's what Brian said. They are not the only ones. I have a pastor friend who's a member at Naperville Presbyterian Church, and he shared with me that this morning when their senior pastor, Dane Ortlund, the author of the book titled Gentle and Lowly, got up to pray, he also prayed for us, for Briarwood and he mentioned how Briarwood had lost their fearless general, and he lifted our church up unto the Lord that God might comfort us. In sorrow and grief, we may feel alone, but we are not alone. We have each other, and more importantly, we have our Lord Jesus Christ. Let's pray.

Prayer:

Gracious Heavenly Father, we depend upon You every hour and as a church, we feel this all the more strongly for the next days and weeks and months and years, we are going to have to depend upon You. We ask that You would strengthen us, that You would do so by the power of Your Holy Spirit, but that You would also do so by stirring in the hearts of each of our members and the larger body of Christ, the desire to encourage and comfort one another. And as we exercise this mutual comforting, may You build up Briarwood Church all the more stronger for the sake of Your Name and for the sake of Your Kingdom. We pray these things in the comforting Name of Jesus Christ, Amen.