

The Flavour of God's Comfort

2 Corinthians 7:4-16

Turn to 2 Corinthians 1 please. Our main text is 2 Cor 7, but we need to take a look at chapter 1 first. I call this sermon, "the flavour of God's comfort." When God comforts us, what actually happens? What does he actually do, and what does that feel like? 2 Corinthians 7 will not be the only way God comforts us, but it is one of the important ways.

Comfort, and the Opening Blessing I'm going to read Paul's opening blessing, 2 Cor 1:3-6, four verses, and in those verses "comfort" occurs nine times. The NIV only has eight, but in Greek there are nine, and I've adapted the NIV so now it also has nine.

*2 Cor 1:3-6 Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort,<sup>4</sup> who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort by which we ourselves were comforted by God.<sup>5</sup> For just as we share abundantly in the sufferings of Christ, so also our comfort abounds through Christ.<sup>6</sup> If we are troubled, 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.*

God pours out much comfort. That's the first thing to notice here. These lines also mention "trouble" three times, and "suffering" three times. Life is not easy. It's clear from these lines that the Corinthians also had troubles and sufferings, and the comfort does not take that way. But God was bring comfort to Paul, and also to the Corinthian believers, and so also to us.

*God comforts us IN all our troubles*, says v4. He does not take them away, that comes later when Christ returns, but he now he gives *comfort*. Through Christ, v5, *comfort abounds*, it overflows. Much comfort.

Why does this happen? *V6 If we are troubled, 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.* "If WE are troubled, it is for YOUR comfort, if WE are comforted, it is for YOUR comfort."

It all happens to passed on to other believers. This is not the ultimate explanation for evil. But this was Paul's practical working understanding. He served Christ, so he would use his troubles and his comfort to serve Christ.

This is not comfort for pleasure seekers, this is comfort for servants of Christ. Here's what we read in 2 Corinthians 5: *Christ's love compels us in this way: since one died for all, those who live should no longer live for themselves, but for him who died for them and was raised again.*

Since he died for us, we should no longer live for ourselves, but for Christ, who died for us and was raised again. We are all Christ's servants, we live for him. The bedrock of our lives is that we are followers of Christ, and servants of Christ. We want HIM to be pleased with our lives, we want our lives to make HIM look good.

Other things in our life are all add-ons. What hold our lives together, what is never an add-on, what gives us meaning and purpose, what we never leave, is that we live for him who died for us and rose again, we serve and honour him. At the End, that's the only thing that will matter, and we know that, so it guides us now.

Christ's love for us compels us, it pushes us and it insists, that since he died for us, we will live for him. IN THAT LIFE, God comforts us. The comfort of God is not for pleasure seekers, but for servants of Christ.

The Story Behind 2 Corinthians – There was a story behind 2 Cor 1-2, and then Paul left it to talk about what life was like for servants of Christ, and what service to Christ was like. In our text today, beginning at 7:4, Paul picks up the story again. So I will tell it to you again.

After 1 Corinthians, which he wrote from Ephesus, Paul visited Corinth. That visit did not go well, mostly because one person in the church went after Paul, criticized and him and injured him in some way, not physically but with words, it seems (2:5-11; 7:12).

What was worst about this for Paul was that the Corinthian church did not correct this, the church did not support Paul, the church just let it happen.

Paul left. When he left, he said he would go to Macedonia, and then come a third time to Corinth, and when he came back he would not spare the Corinthians. He left Corinth with much unresolved, it was rough between him and that church (1:23; 13:2).

After that difficult visit, and after Paul had left, he changed his mind about going back there after he'd been in Macedonia. That church was too raw, if he went back and did not spare them, he thought that would be bad for them.

So he put off that visit, and instead wrote a painful letter, which we don't have, and sent it with Titus to Corinth. The letter was hard on them, but not as hard as the visit would have been. He says plainly in 1:23 that it was to spare them that he did not return when he had said he would.

So he sent Titus with this painful letter, and he told Titus to deliver it and help the Corinthians respond, and then meet Paul in Troas, and tell Paul how it went in Corinth.

Now turn to 2 Cor 2:12. *Now when I went to Troas to preach the gospel of Christ and found that the Lord had opened a door for me, <sup>13</sup> I still had no peace of mind, because I did not find my brother Titus there. So I said goodbye to them and went on to Macedonia.*

The Lord had opened a door for Paul. That means he was preaching the gospel, and no one was stopping him, and people were coming to the Lord. I would think that for any believer, especially an evangelist like Paul, that would be an exhilarating experience. What could be better?

But Paul had no peace of mind, because Titus was supposed to be in Troas and tell him how that letter went in Corinth, and Titus was not there. So Paul left behind preaching the gospel, and left behind the Lord's open door, because he was worried sick about that Corinthian church.

Paul headed to Macedonia, Titus would have to go through Macedonia to get to Troas, and if Titus was not in Troas then Paul would probably meet him in Macedonia.

Can you see here how much Paul loved that church? This is for us. When the Corinthian church did poorly, Paul suffered, but he did not leave it behind. Servants of Christ love the church.

Paul leaves Troas to find Titus Right at that point, at 2 Cor 2:13, Paul stopped telling his story. The Corinthians know what happened when Titus came to them with the painful letter, but they don't know what Titus told Paul, or Paul's reaction.

Paul has been on a long detour, from 2:14 to the beginning of chapter 7, to explain what it's like to serve Christ, and this service actually looks like. Paul picks up the story in 7:4. As we go through 7:4-16, I want you to think about the times you've been comforted in ways like the way God comforted Paul.

In the letter opening, the word "comforted" happened nine times in those four verses. In 7:4-7 Paul uses the same word five times. The NIV has only four of them, and sometimes translates it "encouraged," but I put it back to "comfort," because Paul wants us to remember his opening.

*7:4 I have spoken to you with great frankness; I take great pride in you. I am greatly comforted; in all our troubles my joy knows no bounds.*

In the opening, 1:4, Paul wrote that God comforts us "in all our troubles." Here he begins with that same phrase, *I am comforted, in all our troubles my joy knows no bounds.* It's a deliberate reminder that we're finding out one way God comforted Paul.

God did not take Paul's troubles away, it seems not to occur to Paul that he would, but in all his troubles he's greatly comforted and has overflowing joy.

*7:5-6 The Comfort of Meeting a Love One For when we came into Macedonia, we had no rest, but we were harassed at every turn—conflicts on the outside, fears within. But God, who comforts the downcast, comforted us by the coming of Titus,*

Paul did not have family, but Timothy and Titus must have been like sons to him. Paul had sent Titus on a difficult task, and Paul was comforted to meet Titus, a person he loved, whom he had not seen for a long time.

I know you experience things like that. You meet someone you love who's been gone. Has it occurred to you that this was a compassionate God bringing comfort to you? *God, who comforts the downcast, comforted us by the coming of Titus.* It is one of the simple ways that God has compassion on you: he arranges meetings with the people you love.

7:7a Comfort of others passed on to Us [God comforted us when we were downcast by the coming of Titus,] *and not only by his coming but also with comfort by which you comforted him.*

Titus himself was in some distress, more on this later, but the Corinthians comforted Titus, and Titus used that to comfort Paul. Remember that this is still all from God. This is God comforting his servants, on whom he has endless compassion. Remember at the start, Paul said God comforts us so we can comfort others?

God used the Corinthians to comfort Titus, then God used Titus to comfort Paul. This is all God bringing comfort to Paul. God's servants share our good stories, this is a regular part of church life, and by this means God shows his compassion toward us, and God comforts us.

7:7b The Comfort of Reconciliation [*Titus*] *told us about your longing for me, your deep sorrow, your fervent concern for me, so that my joy was greater than ever.*

That short visit by Paul to Corinth, when someone attacked and injured Paul with words, and the church did nothing to improve matters, left Paul in much distress, not about the one person as much as about the whole church. There was a big barrier between Paul and the Corinthian church, and Paul was grieved, troubled, anxious.

And in this matter, the Corinthians responded wonderfully. We already read a hint of this in chapter 2, where Paul urged the church to stop punishing this person and receive him back.

But read this line again through Paul's eyes, Paul who had been so poorly treated by the whole church. 7:7b [*Titus*] *told us about your longing for me, your deep sorrow, your fervent concern for me, so that my joy was greater than ever.*

It was the joy of reconciliation. *My joy was greater than ever.* Paul was delighted. Paul worked for this. He wrote a direct letter, which we do not have, and sent Titus to read it. But it worked.

You all know about you hurting someone, or they hurt you, and there is a barrier that was not there before, and should not be there. And then the matter gets cleared up. Huge relief. Has it occurred to you that this would be the compassionate God bringing comfort and joy into your troubled life? That's how Paul took this, and we should as well.

7:8-9 Relief that Difficult Words Helped not Harmed *Even if I caused you sorrow by my letter, I do not regret it. Though I did regret it—I see that my letter hurt you, but only for a little while—<sup>9</sup> yet now I rejoice, not because you were made sorry, but because your sorrow led you to repentance. For you became sorrowful as God intended and so were not harmed in any way by us.*

Folks, it is a problem that we are so reluctant to have difficult conversations. It is true in our society, and it is true in the church. Someone's actions trouble us, and we fume inside ourselves, and we'll talk to others about it, but not to the one who should hear it.

Our society has an unspoken rule that we will never say someone else does wrong, we will accept everything. We find it hard to break that rule. And if we are on the receiving end, we assume the other person is wrong because they are breaking the rule. So we don't speak this way.

That's not love. If we could have honest respectful conversations about difficult things, it would help a lot. If we could speak to each other directly, but without attack, speak courteously, and be heard, and have an honest and respectful conversation.

And each cut the other person a little slack when it gets intense, or the person gets grumpy, we'd be better off. Christ cuts us slack when we are grumpy, we could just do that for others.

If you speak directly to a person, and they don't respond well, do NOT decide never to speak directly again. That would be solving one problem by creating another problem. We follow Christ, and live in his ways, we don't get to change just to protect ourselves.

Paul said difficult things to the Corinthians, and he did not know if they would take it well or not, and after he sent the letter he second guessed himself and feared he'd been too direct, but they responded well. This was all a part of what God used to comfort Paul. Happens to you?

7:10-11 God sorrow and world sorrow *Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death.<sup>11</sup> See what this godly sorrow has produced in you: what earnestness, what eagerness to clear yourselves, what indignation, what alarm, what longing, what concern, what readiness to see justice done. At every point you have proved yourselves to be innocent in this matter.*

World sorrow wishes the distress was not happening, but world sorrow mostly just wants to feel better, and looks for a way to feel better. And that is the way of death. God sorrow happens when we are distressed, we decide that we can act differently and we will act differently.

You can tell God sorrow by the result: it leads us to do the right thing. That's the only reliable indicator. And God sorrow is always the grace of God. God sorrow is when God uses the distress to open our heart to acting different, and we do act differently.

That's what happened when Paul wrote his difficult letter to Corinth. He did not know what would happen. If they were offended, it would make things worse. But God worked, and they responded in a way that was totally delightful to Paul. The comfort of a difficult conversation that goes well, that takes things a big step forward. Does God ever bring this comfort to you?

7:12-13a Paul's Confidence in the Corinthians Even though things were rocky between Paul and the Corinthian church, Paul was pretty sure there was still real affection for him over there. It had not come out during the visit, but he thought it would come out when they got the letter.

<sup>12</sup> *So even though I wrote to you, it was neither on account of the one who did the wrong nor on account of the injured party, but rather that before God you could see for yourselves how devoted to us you are.* <sup>13</sup> *By all this we are comforted.* They could see that they loved Paul.

7:13b-16 Comfort from Titus' Comfort *In addition to our own comfort, we were especially delighted to see how happy Titus was, because his spirit has been refreshed by all of you.* <sup>14</sup> *I had boasted to him about you, and you have not embarrassed me. But just as everything we said to you was true, so our boasting about you to Titus has proved to be true as well.* <sup>15</sup> *And his affection for you is all the greater when he remembers that you were all obedient, receiving him with fear and trembling.* <sup>16</sup> *I am glad I can have complete confidence in you.*

It seems that Titus was worried about taking this severe letter to Corinth. With good reason. He had not been there before, he did not know them or they him, he knows there was some kind of blowup between Paul and the Corinthians which is not resolved.

He is Paul's delegate, and he knows that the letter of Paul that he carries is direct. He's supposed to introduce himself and read this and lead them into repentance. I'm guessing Titus did NOT want that job. Can't blame him. Paul tells him the Corinthians will respond well, but Paul does not really know, and Titus was not enjoying this task.

But the Corinthian church treated Titus well, very well. Titus was happy, his spirit had been refreshed by the Corinthians, Titus now had affection for that church himself, Titus remembered that the Corinthian church had been obedient to his suggestions.

And this was God's comfort for Paul. This is the comfort of two people you love getting along with each other. Paul loved the Corinthian church, and Paul loved Titus, and he really wanted it to go well between Titus and the Corinthian church, and he had a good feeling about it, but he was not sure. But it DID go well, Titus enjoyed them and was refreshed, so Paul was delighted.

I've had this. Two people I love who have meet and connect well with each other, that's a joy to see. What I would not have done, though, was consider that as God bringing comfort and encouragement to me. But we should take it that way. It is God bringing comfort.

Comfort in Corinth Someone read 2 Corinthians out loud in the Corinthian church. Probably Titus again. Imagine how much the Corinthians enjoyed this. For several paragraphs Paul has gone on about how well the Corinthian church responded to Titus and Paul's severe letter. This was the most encouraging part of this letter to the Corinthians believers.

They will have loved hearing about how pleased Titus was with them, and how Titus praised their godly response to the severe letter.

They will have loved just as much to hear about Paul's own relief, and confidence in them, and how God comforted Paul with the news Titus gave him about the Corinthians, and how delighted and overjoyed Paul was. This all must have been so encouraging to the Corinthians. They knew that when Paul left things had been ugly, and they wanted that to be better, and it was.

So the letter, this part of it at least, comforted the Corinthians. Paul got comfort from the Corinthian church, and in these paragraphs he's passing it back to them, and when Titus read this to Corinth, God was comforting those believers in Corinth with these words.

That's the flavour of God's comfort. It comes from people, and is good news about people. It is designed for those that are servants of Christ, who love Christ and love people and love the church. If Paul had dismissed the sinful Corinthian church, he'd have had far less grief and anxiety. He'd also have had less grief and joy.

But he loved them deeply, so he got sorrow, and he also got comfort and joy. And the comfort and joy came from God, because God had compassion on Paul, as he has on us.

God's comforts work best on such people. It requires servants of Christ to love each other and to talk to each other.

Amen.