

Thanks to the God of Consolation

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[0 : 00] And I encourage you to open the Bibles to page 937. And as I said at the beginning in the notices, we're beginning a series on 2 Corinthians that will run through the Sunday mornings and Wednesday evenings in January and then in February, finishing the last few chapters in the evening service in February.

So let's pray now as we come to God's word for his help. Heavenly Father, thank you that you speak so clearly in the words of scripture. We pray now that your word will be clear in our minds and in our hearts and that you'll write it there so that we may believe it and obey it for Jesus' sake. Amen. There's an attraction about strong leaders. When we think of leadership, we tend to think of somebody who is strong or who ought to be strong, at least.

And on the whole, we don't particularly like leaders who are apparently weak. We see that in politics, for example. One of the attractions, I guess, for many of John Howard was that he was regarded as a strong leader who made strong and firm decisions.

Whether or not we agreed with them, there was a strength to him. I suspect that's one reason why Kevin Rudd has succeeded where Kim Beasley failed, is that Kevin Rudd is seen to be a stronger leader than Kim Beasley was.

[1 : 30] We remember back, or some of us do, to Margaret Thatcher, the Iron Lady. Even though she polarised Britain in the years that she was Prime Minister of Britain, nobody disagreed that she was a very strong person.

In fact, so much so that she made her successor, John Major, look pretty wimpish by comparison when he became Prime Minister. It's not just in politics, but in business, in sport, in community life, and often in church life.

The same is that one of the key things that we look for in leadership is strength. Well, the Apostle Paul was one of the great Christian leaders, but the Corinthian church, which he had founded, thought little of him as a leader.

And that's the dominant theme through this letter, although there are a number of other themes that come to the surface from time to time. For the Corinthians, they thought Paul was weak, and therefore, in a sense, sidelined as a leader.

And it's in response to that dilemma and issue that Paul is, in part, writing this letter. It's not only going to deal with the issue of leadership.

[2 : 46] I mean, 13 chapters on that one single issue might be a little bit excessive, we might think. But as we unpack that issue, we understand more of the nature of God's power, God's strength, more of the nature of what being a Christian and a Christian leader is meant to be like.

We also, therefore, understand more, indeed, of the whole gospel, and therefore, the purposes and plans of God in general. Paul had a fairly tumultuous relationship with the Corinthian church.

As I said, he founded it in about 50 to 52 AD. He was there for 18 months. We read about that in Acts of the Apostles, chapter 18. Corinth was a city, or still is, on the Peloponnese of Greece.

It's a sort of big blob that's almost an island off to the west of Athens. It's connected to the mainland by just a thin stretch of land. It was a city of trade, a cosmopolitan city, very large.

Some estimate three-quarters of a million people, which would have made it a very significant city, indeed, if that estimate is right, in the first century AD. It was a place noted for its depravity and immorality.

[3 : 58] It was a shipping port, and it was very cosmopolitan. Lots of people from lots of nations would pass through and stay and work there and so on. After being there 18 months and establishing the church, Paul moved on, as the Acts of the Apostles recounts for us.

And at a later stage, he writes back to the Corinthian church. Now, that letter is lost. We don't have that. When he writes what we call 1 Corinthians, he acknowledges that it was an earlier letter that we don't know.

So 1 Corinthians is really 2 Corinthians. And probably after that, he wrote another letter that's lost. And so what is 2 Corinthians is probably 4 Corinthians. Some might even say 5. Well, don't get too confused by that.

But it seems that Paul had an ongoing correspondence dealing with a whole range of theological, moral issues that were arising in the church in Corinth. When he writes 2 Corinthians, he writes it from northern Greece.

And it's before another potential visit back to Corinth. In fact, it seems that he's made a second, briefer visit there. And now, possibly, he's planning a third visit, as we'll see through this letter.

[5 : 06] Now, one of the things about the Corinthian church, as they thought about Paul, comes to the surface in the letter. We sort of glean things. Paul doesn't explicitly write, this is what you think of me.

But through the letter, we get a glimpse of what it seems the Corinthian church were thinking about the apostle Paul. Remember, they're not writing about somebody who's unknown to them.

They're writing about the person who founded their church, who evangelized and brought to conversion, in effect, humanly speaking, many of those Corinthian Christians. But they think that he's a bit worldly, irresolute.

That comes later in chapter 1. That he may be morally timid. That he lacks inner strength. Some of them even think maybe he's guilty of theological error.

Later on in this letter, in chapter 4. Some suggest that he's not really an apostle. He's a bit of an imposter. Maybe even corrupt in chapter 7. And then especially in chapters 10 and 11, this issue becomes the key focus.

[6 : 12] And there it seems that there are those in the Corinthian church who are saying that Paul is not a true apostle. That he's weak in speech. That he's actually a foolish person. And that he's perhaps even deceitful or crafty.

Well, we'll deal with those issues as they come through the letter. But it's in that background that Paul writes to the Corinthian church. What has led the Corinthians to some of those views and criticisms appears to be the arrival in their midst of some who are claiming to be apostles.

They might even be claiming to be what we might call super apostles. We are the real apostles. Paul, bit of an imposter. And it seems that some of the Corinthians have been swayed by this teaching.

Now, we don't know the full detail of who these people were or the full detail of what they taught. Some of that, again, we glean through the letter. Part of it is that they certainly are Jewish Christians, if indeed they're Christian.

And they're claiming that Christians need to uphold the Old Testament laws of Moses. So they have a very strong attachment to the Old Testament laws. And therefore would regard Paul as being a bit heretical or morally loose or whatever in his own teaching about the Old Testament.

[7 : 32] They also seem to be teaching that apostles should be strong, successful, not being afflicted. They're the ones who are held up, a bit like the ancient Greeks would hold up their gods.

They're always physically perfect, fully strong. You never hear the Greek myths of the gods as the gods are weak or vulnerable. And if you see the statues of the gods, you never see the gods who look frail or weak.

They're always the epitome of muscular strength and beauty as well, I guess. And that seems to be part of the teaching of these false apostles, that the apostles ought to be strong people, successful people, without afflictions and without weakness.

Well, against that background, Paul begins the letter by diving straight in to the issue of affliction and suffering. And as he does so in this letter, the suffering that he's speaking about, at least at the beginning, whilst part of it may be because of persecution, he's actually speaking in a broader context.

Sometimes in the New Testament, we have to be a bit careful when the word suffering is used because sometimes it's simply persecution. And we ought not therefore simply say he's talking about the sort of sufferings that we might face if it's ill health or bereavement or something.

[8 : 52] But here it's a bit more general than that. And what he's doing is raising one of the great issues that humans face. One of the big theological and moral dilemmas for people, whether

Christian or not, is the issue of suffering.

And out of this chapter or section of chapter today, I think we'll learn some things about the nature of general suffering for people. Paul begins the letter standardly, in a sense, for the ancient world. He says who he is. He says who his recipients are. He gives them a greeting and he expresses a thanksgiving. Note that Paul, when he begins the letter, says he is an apostle of Christ by the will of God.

And maybe there just generally, subtly, without drawing too much attention to it, is staking his claim for true apostleship. He's not an apostle because of his own ambition, but rather he's an apostle by God's will, an apostle of Christ.

He also mentions Timothy, who appears to have been with him at the time. He writes to the church of God in Corinth. When we think of the word church, most usually we think of a building.

[10:01] So people say, where is your church? You have a nice church, they say to me, meaning the building. And sometimes, depending on who it is who's saying it, I'll say, yes, many of them are lovely.

And they look at me a little bit oddly. But you see, we are the church. The word church literally means the gathering together, the assembly of people. So we belong to the church, and we are the church, in particular, when we gather.

It seems to be the emphasis in the New Testament. We meet in this building, which in a sense houses the church. But this is not the church. We, who are believers, are the church.

Notice that it's the church of God. It's not Paul's church. It's not the Corinthians' church. It's God's church. And the senses of ownership and possession. We also belong to the church of God.

It's not fundamentally my church, or your church, or the archbishop's church, or the Anglican church. It's the church of God. We belong to God.

[11:05] We're possessed and owned by him. He is the owner of us. It's in Corinth, because that stresses its locality. We are, in a sense, the church of God in this bit of Doncaster, perhaps.

And he says to them, grace and peace. Standard ancient greeting would just say the word greeting. The Greek word for greeting is very similar to the Christian word or the theological word grace.

And maybe because of the closeness of the words, Paul so frequently changes it deliberately to express a Christian greeting. In this case, as often in his letters, grace and peace.

Grace, because grace summarizes what the Christian faith and gospel is all about. God's favor to us that we don't deserve. And peace, because peace with God is the fundamental benefit of the gospel of God's grace about his son.

As usual, then, Paul expresses some thanksgiving. Begins that in verse 3, when he says, Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

[12:12] The language is slightly Jewish language. Blessed be the God is a language that you pick up in Jewish prayers of the day, as well as sometimes in the Old Testament as well.

Maybe Paul's deliberately doing that because he knows that these other apostles who are in Corinth are claiming the strength of root and connection to the Old Testament.

So Paul perhaps wants subtly to just show that he himself is an apostle truly called by God who knows the Old Testament.

Notice how it's not strictly Old Testament language because it's blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. So it's adapted properly to express a greeting that acknowledges that the God of the Old Testament is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ as well.

Notice then what he goes on to say. This God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is the Father of mercies and the God of all consolation. The word for mercies is the same word for compassions.

[13:16] It's again a Jewish way of saying things. And he's the God of all consolation or another word would be comfort that's used here. This is introducing the theme of this section dealing with afflictions and comfort.

It's language that comes out of the Old Testament reminiscent perhaps of Isaiah who said comfort comfort my people quoting God. And in other places uses the same term as well.

And then in the Psalms we find perhaps an even closer allusion to the words that Paul is using here. In Psalm 103, as a father has compassion for his children, so the Lord has compassion for those who fear him.

Picking up the language of a father to children, but the father of compassion. So Psalm 103 is often used indeed at burial services today in the Anglican service.

A key attribute then of God, as Paul is describing him here, is that he's a God of comfort or compassion. Not just in an abstract way, because verse 4 goes on to say, who consoles us or comforts us in all our affliction.

[14:30] In fact, the word comfort occurs ten times in this little paragraph. It's a key theme. Now we need to pause to understand that expression correctly. Who comforts us in all our affliction.

Very often we might look to God for comfort out of our affliction. That is, our affliction may be ill health, bereavement, grief, depression, unemployment, stress of some sort.

And so we look to God to remove that affliction from us, or to move us out of it, and thereby comfort and console us. But what Paul is saying here is that God consoles us or comforts us in all our afflictions.

Now it's true, of course, that there are times when God actually lifts us out of our afflictions, or takes them away from us. But Paul is saying something deeper here.

That God comforts us in our afflictions. The afflictions may not go away. The grief, depression, the illness, the sadness, the stress may still be there.

[15:40] But in the midst of them, God comforts and consoles us. What is this comfort? Well, it's not, you see, it's not necessarily the relief and ease of a pain that's gone.

But rather it's what we might call God's strengthening grace. Not simply to endure. I mean, lots of people endure, maybe bitterly, the pain or affliction they're suffering.

But rather to endure with Christian faith. With indeed Christian hope. Maybe even with Christian joy in the midst of the affliction.

That's where God's comfort and consolation is seen and noticed. It doesn't mean there's no pain.

But it means that in the midst of pain, the person afflicted or suffering knows the strength, the grace, the hope, has faith, even joy.

Because they know God. They know who God is. They know where this leads. And therefore they endure with faith in the midst. Strengthened by God's comforting grace.

[17:00] And we'll see how that works itself out in the verses that follow. Because what Paul, as he explores this theme, seems to allude to four benefits that come out of affliction.

And it's in understanding those benefits that we see how God's comfort actually strengthens us.

The first benefit comes in this verse, verse 4.

So that we may be able to console those who are in any affliction with a consolation with which we ourselves are consoled by God.

Now again, we need to be careful here to understand this correctly. Paul is not simply saying it's good to share your experience of suffering with others who are going through the same thing.

So if you're suffering from some particular illness, form a group so that those who are suffering the same illness can learn what it's like. That's not what Paul's saying.

[18:01] Paul is certainly saying that God's comfort and consolation to us in our affliction does not terminate with us. But is actually then meant to be channeled from us to others.

So our ministry to others out of our affliction is not just this is my suffering. But this is how God has consoled and comforted me in my affliction and suffering.

That is, the purpose of affliction sometimes is for the benefit of other people. That we may be the channels of God's consolation and comfort to others.

Whether or not they even know God at that time. It's a very powerful testimony. But in the midst of our affliction, we give testimony to God's grace and comfort and strength and hope for the benefit of others.

Not even, in fact, for our benefit. But for theirs. That's what Paul's saying is one of the key benefits of consolation. So that as we experience God's comfort and strength in our afflictions, whatever they may be.

[19:11] We may then be and are called to be used by God for the benefit of others. Not simply sharing the pain. But testifying to God's comfort and consolation in our afflictions.

Even if we're still suffering from those very same afflictions. It seems as though, from this letter, that the other apostles are making claims, in effect, that Christians and Christian leaders ought not be suffering or afflicted.

They ought to be what some might call triumphantly victorious in their Christian living. As though they're freed from pain. And always miraculously delivered or healed.

And there are certainly some who would preach that sort of gospel even to this day. Now without doubting that God can miraculously heal. We in this church have seen over the years that I've been here.

A number of miraculous healings by God. Twelve months ago, we were praying fervently for Jeff and Ray's daughter who was critically ill at death's door.

[20 : 21] Miraculously healed. I remember some years ago praying for a friend of mine. Whom they'd given up for and thought would die. From cerebral malaria in Jerusalem.

And I saw him a few weeks ago perfectly well. A miraculous healing indeed. And we could think of many others. And we know that God sometimes miraculously, amazingly delivers us out of affliction.

And he can continue to do that. But not always does he promise to do that. And not always does he do it. But his promise is that he will console and comfort us in our afflictions for the sake of others.

And so Paul's message here is more biblical and more correct than the super apostles so-called.

Who seem to be distorting the truth in Corinth. Paul's got a deeper and I think more correct theology.

One that actually helps us in every situation. Because it's how God actually works. Sometimes you see God's grace and power more evident when somebody is not relieved of their suffering.

[21 : 30] But continues in it in Christian faith and joy. And I think of people, some of whom are here now, some of whom are no longer with us at Holy Trinity. Whose endurance with faith and joy and hope through their ill health or bereavements or suffering or pain or financial problems, whatever it is.

Has been a wonderful testimony to the grace and comfort of God. Very powerful testimony. I think of some of the funerals I've taken of Christian believers who've not been healed despite our prayers.

And yet their dying in faith and their funerals in faith are a very powerful testimony to the comfort and consolation of God in our afflictions. And that's what Paul is saying is valid Christian experience here.

Countering those who would say otherwise in the church of Corinth. The triumphalistic Christian view sometimes leaves little room for the cross. For we must remember that our own saviour died on the cross.

Tragically on the cross. Of course for our benefit. And of course he's raised from the dead. But the Christian life is a life of the cross and the resurrection. And that's what Paul goes on to allude to I think in the next verse.

[22 : 48] For just as the sufferings of Christ are abundant for us. So also our consolation is abundant through Christ. Here I think the second benefit of suffering and being afflicted is alluded to at least.

That is we are identifying more strongly in the sufferings of the Lord Jesus Christ. When we are afflicted. Whether it's persecution or the general sufferings of our fallen world.

Christ suffered. And where there's a sense of his sufferings abundant for us. Encouraging us and strengthening us when we suffer. But of course the cross is not the end of the story.

The resurrection is the next point of the story. And out of that flows the comfort and consolation as well. So a second benefit seems to be our identity with Christ.

Christ who suffered and brings us comfort. In addition Paul goes on to say in verse 6. If we are being afflicted. It is for your consolation and salvation.

[23 : 52] If we are being consoled. It is for your consolation. Which you experience when you patiently endure the same. And after that, if we are being afflicted. If we are afflicted.

If we are afflicted. If we are experiencing grief. We are authoring us regarding Christ. If we are afflicted. We are choosing our mandatory afflictions. I consider we are preparing for that. And while we are making we welcoming orders. Take care to the low contrast. And easy. In the past sales. When we are creating. Let us add other things in women Exchange. Now with your Eltern family and visiting. Let us break our child status. Then notice that in our society stand. We call patience church. Let us keep our kinetic.

To the exact same thing. We call this level affliction. We call this Mikey. That's more crazy. We call the 2013 jail.