

Authentic Comfort

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[0 : 00] don't worry, everything will be fine. She'll be right. Don't be sad. It'll all work out.

Have you ever heard these kinds of words said to you before? Have you ever said something like this before? Imagine the scene where something terrible has happened, a loved one has died, something quite painful, and people keep coming up to you and they try to offer you comfort. But it's not actually comforting. It's all a fake. Comments that sound nice, but actually just make the person think they're doing the right thing. You know, imagine sharing a painful truth with a friend and they say, I'll pray for you. Maybe you've been that person, you've said, I'll pray for you, and you just totally forget to actually pray for them. We say things that sound good, but they can have no substance. We can offer fake comfort. I've heard of people who don't like being with their friends when they're sad because it's really tough. They don't like being with people when they're grieving. So they just say, oh, don't be sad. Don't cry. Everything will be fine. And I know I've said those things too. But they're not comforting. I think we give fake comfort easily. We seek comfort in other places. Does anybody want to admit that they eat comfort food? Does anybody have a preferred comfort food, Mark? What's your preferred comfort food, brother? Ice cream? That's a good one. I always use a teaspoon these days. It's safer that way. There's retail therapy. We go shopping to make ourselves feel better. But they're fake comforts. Do we know where real, authentic comfort comes from?

And do we know how to share authentic comfort with those in need? Today, we're starting a new series, authentic. And we're looking at the book of 2 Corinthians. And Paul calls people to be authentic, to have authentic relationships, to be authentic and real Christians, to have authentic love and generosity and humility, to not pretend and not fake it, but to be real with one another and God.

[2 : 30] And today, as we'll see, to have authentic comfort and to share it. So I'm going to pray for us. Heavenly Father, thank you, Lord, that you have made us people who are not alone and isolated, but that we get to be in relationships with other people. Father, help us today to understand what authentic comfort can look like and how you have given it to us, Lord. Amen.

Before we can get into the topic of authentic comfort, we need to understand where this letter is placed and who the church of Corinth were. So we're going to do a bit of a brief history lesson for Corinth.

Corinth in the first century was, it was the hot new town. And they were pursuing money and pursuits of pleasure. One commentator describes the society with five descriptors. Individualism, that valued self-sufficiency, wealth as the key to status, displays of accomplishment and possessions to get praise, competition for honour as a normal thing, and then pride in your neighbourhood as a reflection of your social location. And so it creates this population who is all about pursuing money and wealth. But that description of Corinth in the first century doesn't really sound that different to us today, does it? And so into this city, God sends the apostle Paul. Paul's message of the gospel confronts the materialism and individualism. And this city in Corinth had a difficult pull of security and social status to ignore when following Jesus.

And so coming to the letter that we're looking at to Corinthians, it's actually at least Paul's fourth letter to the church in Corinth. We just don't have the other letters. Paul initially stayed for about a year and a half before travelling, but he stayed in touch as their apostle pastor via letters.

[4 : 39] And it appears that after he leaves, some opponents come in. And Paul calls them the super apostles. And we'll see them a little bit later in this series. And they come in and they preach a different gospel with a different Jesus. One that looks a little bit more attractive to the world. One that doesn't look so weak. A Jesus that maybe doesn't die on the cross because that looks a bit weak to humans.

And so Paul heads back. And in 2 Corinthians, he talks about visiting Corinth as a painful visit. The church had questioned Paul and his authority and they'd attacked him. And so Paul leaves without retaliating in a lot of grief. And then Paul sends his brother Titus with a severe letter of warning, calling on the church to repent. And Titus comes back to Paul and Paul hears from Titus that the church has indeed repented. And so Paul sends this letter to Corinthians. He defends himself and his job as an apostle. And he defends the gospel that he's called to preach. And we see a hint of that at the very start in verse 1. Often when we read Paul's letters, we can skip a little too quickly over his introductions. But have a look at verse 1 with me. Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God.

He is not an apostle by the will of man, but by God's will alone. And so the themes of Paul's authority and dependence on God in his weakness are going to continue right through this letter of 2 Corinthians. Having put that in place, kind of knowing the context and the relationship between Paul and this church, we come to Paul praising God and describing who he is. Have a look with me at verse 3 as we see the comfort he offers.

I think this is a really beautiful description of God. That he is the father of compassion and the God of all comfort. From him comes compassion and comfort. To have compassion means to suffer with.

The first half of the word compassion, com means with. And the second half, passion, originally meant suffering. That's why Jesus' crucifixion is called the passion. I'm not sure if you've seen Mel Gibson's movie from a number of years ago, The Passion of the Christ. This is why the crucifixion is called the passion. Because passion originally meant suffering. Now we've taken it to mean strong emotions. And so when we put these two words together, compassion means with suffering.

[7 : 46] And so Paul praises God because he is the father of compassion. God's son Jesus came and was with us and suffered. Jesus is compassion. He is with us in our suffering. Jesus knows what our suffering is like because he has been there. He has lived with us in body and he has endured the pain of the cross.

And so he has been with us in our suffering. But not only that, God is our strength. He is the God of comfort. Now the word comfort means to strengthen. Imagine that moment when you were down in the depths.

To comfort someone is to lift them up, to strengthen them, to walk with them until they are strong enough. That is our God. He has experienced our suffering and he walks with us to bring us back to our strength in him.

And Paul is not just referring to feelings. It's not just a feeling of relief or being comfortable. It's not God is comfortable like giving you a cushion on a chair.

But instead he can speak of being at peace. All because God has comforted Paul in the past. Paul knows God's comfort because he's delivered him.

[9 : 12] We'll see this in verse 10, that his comfort comes from God being a deliverer. And he trusts that the God who has delivered will deliver him again. The experience of God's deliverance in the past gives him hope that he will be delivered in the future.

And that means that in the present, he has comfort. His God is strong and he will deliver him. Paul's comfort doesn't come from things that are fake, you know, from comfort food or from retail therapy. It comes from the God of comfort. I really love this description of God. I think it is just a wonderful summary of the gospel, these two titles.

The God of compassion and the God of comfort. And it shows his fatherly affection for us. And in verse 4, Paul describes what this God does. Verse 4.

Now, reading this part of Paul, he uses the word comfort about seven times.

[10 : 21] And it's very... he keeps using the word so it can get confusing. So we'll go a little bit slowly. So what happens is God comforts Paul, but not Paul alone.

God comforts Paul so Paul can comfort others. God has been faithful to Paul and he's seen that through his hardship and struggles.

And God has strengthened him in all his troubles. And Paul connects his suffering to Jesus' suffering in verse 5. For just as we share abundantly in the suffering of Christ, so also our comfort abounds through Christ.

Both Paul's suffering and comfort come through Jesus. Now, this might seem like a strange idea, but Paul views every kind of comfort and suffering as an expression of the same kind of suffering and comfort that Jesus himself experienced under God's hand.

Jesus was under the sovereign control of God and he suffered death on the cross. And Paul following Jesus, well, he's not killed on a cross, but he has troubles too because he is seeking to obey God under his hand.

[11 : 39] And so not only does Paul suffer like Jesus, but he's comforted like Jesus. Jesus trusted in God, that God was committed to him, that he was following his plan, and God would deliver him even from death.

And so Paul is able to be comforted and strengthened by his confidence that God would rescue him, even if it's through death. He has a hope in the resurrection.

And so Paul has this hope, and so he can pass it on to others. God comforted Jesus, which gives Paul comfort, and now Paul knows that he can share that comfort with others who follow Jesus. Verse 6, Paul is saying that there is this close family relationship between those who follow Jesus. We're more than just people sitting in a room together. There is actually a close family bond. There is this special relationship between believers in the church.

[13 : 04] Our comfort and our compassion comes from Jesus to us, but it also goes out from us to each other. It doesn't and shouldn't stop with us.

I recently read about a widowed single mother, and her name was Ashley. She was in the middle of moving house when she was taken captive by an escaped murderer and held hostage for seven hours.

Ashley had been a drug addict. She'd lost custody of her daughter. But God had been working in her life. She had begun to read the Bible and other Christian books.

And when she was taken captive, she spoke to this murderer who had escaped. She spoke to him and read some of the Bible to him.

She offered the comfort which she had received to this man so that her captor, this escaped murderer, eventually released her and he allowed himself to be re-arrested.

[14 : 16] Ashley had begun to see God's compassion and comfort in her life found only through Jesus, and that meant she was able to offer it with someone who was going through the same thing.

This comfort God offers isn't for us alone. We can't hoard it. This isn't fake comfort. Imagine if, in this situation, Ashley is being held for seven hours by this murderer and she just tried to offer him fake comfort.

Don't worry. You'll be fine. Go and get arrested. The police will take good care of you. Imagine if she had tried to offer fake comfort.

The comfort she offers from God is honest about sin. There is no sugarcoating it. But this comfort seeks help and hope from the only one who can give it and the only one who can give forgiveness. Paul has been able to comfort because he has first comforted in his sufferings. And it's hard not to want to ask Paul the question, well, what were your sufferings, Paul?

[15 : 31] What had you actually gone through? And he doesn't give us all of the detail, but he mentions a little bit. He tells us what has happened to him. It's not the details, but it's the process that he has gone through and how God has shaped him.

Paul does this and he reveals his own vulnerability and weakness so that God would be seen to be strong. Verse 8. We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about the troubles we experienced in the province of Asia.

We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired of life itself. Paul is really clear and honest at this point.

He is not going to hide away the fact that he suffered. He's not afraid of this church knowing the pain that he's gone through. He doesn't care that it might lower him in their eyes.

I've heard people say to me, James, don't mention your sin when you're preaching. People will think less of you.

[16 : 38] And people want to put preachers on a pedestal, so don't talk about that. People want to put you on that kind of pedestal to follow. And I say, no, I can't do that.

Paul certainly can't do that. And I definitely can't. Rather, I would be, I would far prefer to be honest with my own weaknesses and how God is working in my life and my vulnerabilities, so that we can all see how God is working in my life and encourage you and comfort you in yours.

And that's what Paul is doing here. He doesn't want this church to trust in rumors that they've heard. He wants to inform them so they know what's happening to him.

Paul and Timothy were under great pressure, so much so that they despaired of life itself. Now, our understanding of mental health has increased a lot since then, since the first century. But what Paul is sounding like, it sounds like he is in depression. They had no hope. They were suffering and could see no way out. Verse 9, Indeed, we felt we had received the sentence of death.

[17:52] They saw no way out. Only death is coming. But God had a purpose. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves, but on God who raises the dead.

He has delivered us from such a deadly peril and he will deliver us again. Paul says, Is it possible that Paul had not trusted in God?

Paul, who had seen Jesus himself appear to him? Paul, the apostle, who had planted churches and seen miraculous deeds of God, is it possible that this Paul stopped relying on God?

Could he have gotten so caught up in the work that he was doing that he stopped relying on God?

And so God used hardship and suffering to remind them that they only had God to depend upon.

Paul shows his vulnerability, his weakness for the benefit of the church. He was distressed to the point of thinking they were going to die. But God has comforted him.

[19:13] God has delivered and God has been his strength. Pulled him out of that situation so that he depends on God and shares that message of hope.

Paul's language here, the language of being so close to death, the sentence of death, it's really evocative. I think he's drawing a parallel here between the sentence of death that he received and Jesus' sentence of death.

And he's saying, Jesus was given a sentence of death and Jesus was delivered from death and I was given a sentence of death and I was delivered. Just like Jesus was saved from death, God has saved me from death and he will deliver us again.

This is so important. This is, as we'll see in this whole letter, Paul reveals his vulnerability and weakness and the importance of depending on Jesus in these situations.

The Corinthian church thought that it disqualified him for being an apostle but it is central to the gospel. Paul has shared his weakness.

[20:26] The church in Corinth have an issue with it. They think, you know, you shouldn't be weak. You should be like our super apostles. But Paul is going to take time throughout this letter to explain that he is living out the gospel.

That he might appear weak but that the man that we worship, Jesus, well he appeared weak too when he died on a cross. All to show God's power raising him from the dead.

And Paul, in his weakness, shows God's power delivering him as if he was dead. And so it is this suffering of Paul's which means that God's comforted him so that he can now comfort the church in Corinth.

As a church, one of the things that we value is humble authenticity. Where we declare war on our desires to live independently of God.

Central to who we are is a desire to weaken our pride and develop humility. So we desire to be vulnerable with our imperfections, with our issues.

[21:39] That shows that God's love is greater. To be authentic in relationships that are about knowing and caring for others.

Not just about manipulating and gaining power from our relationships. And also having a willingness to confront sin, being quick to confess.

When we are authentic with one another, we can share the comfort that God gives us. I think there are at least four things that are helpful for us to be aware of to help us to share God's comfort.

So I think there are at least four things that are comforting that are worth sharing. So have a look at this list. I'd encourage you to write this list down. Make a note of these things in your phone. Write it on the back of your hand, on someone's leg next to you, whatever you like.

In our lives, when the Holy Spirit puts our sin to death, that is worthwhile sharing. Share the joy that God is working and that He changes our lives.

[22:48] So that's the first thing. When the Holy Spirit puts our sin to death, tell someone about it. When you have endured hardship and God has delivered you, share that God comforts you and has helped you endure to help others endure.

Third, when God provides in miraculous, last-minute ways. When God just, you know, if it's a time of financial hardship, you're not sure how you're going to afford the next meal for your family, and

God provides in that last minute, share the comfort from knowing that we have a God who provides for us, who knows our needs.

when God brings reconciliation between you and someone having conflict, share that, that God not only reconciles us with Him, but that He reconciles us with each other.

Share the comfort that comes from the outworking of the God who forgives us. Share these and many more to remind each other of the compassion and comfort our God gives us in Jesus.

But I have a concern, brothers and sisters. I'm concerned for us as a people and as a church. We might hate it when people show fake comfort, but are we willing to show real, authentic comfort?

[24 : 22] Paul could only comfort the church because of what he had gone through, how he had been delivered, and it's the same for us. There are barriers to us showing and sharing how God is working in us.

There are barriers that want to stop us from being vulnerable with each other and allowing other people to actually comfort us. If you hadn't noticed, I'm an Aussie male and I know the temptation to not show or share weakness.

other Aussie males can be like predators where they see weakness and so they jump on it and they joke about it, usually to make themselves feel better.

It comes from a fear of being weak and so we always have to act as the alpha male. We always have to pretend that we have everything together. We can't share or show weakness.

Now there are many different cultural ways of behaving that show our desire to protect ourselves and to not be vulnerable.

[25 : 31] So we try and protect ourselves in a multitude of different ways. But both Jesus and Paul are an encouragement to us. They are both willing to be seen as small and weak and vulnerable because it shows how big and how powerful our God is.

That was totally against the culture then, especially in Corinth and it's totally against our culture today. How is the cross of Jesus clashing with your preferences to protect yourself and to look strong and in control?

we need to have a willingness to be vulnerable and to appear weak with other people. And then there's the matter of who.

Who can I be vulnerable with? Many of us aren't just going to go out over a coffee or a tea and a biscuit and start opening up deep issues and being vulnerable.

That's not who we are. Remember that woman Ashley who was held captive? She was held for seven hours with him. Maybe that's what we need. You know, we just divide each other up, lock each other in rooms for seven hours and we'll have close relational bonds.

[26 : 50] Maybe not. But we're here every week sitting next to each other. To share comfort we actually need to spend time with each other.

Paul lived with the church in Corinth. He knew them and they knew him. How well are you connected here at church? Would you like to know people more deeply?

Would you like people to know you more deeply? It is going to take time and a willingness to be vulnerable. Why don't you invite someone to lunch today?

Why don't you invite them over? It doesn't really matter the food. I think the willingness to spend time with people is more important.

And why don't you share maybe one of those four things that we looked at a moment ago. Why don't you share one of those about how God has worked in your life to comfort others. It will take time and effort and a willingness to be vulnerable.

[27 : 59] C.S. Lewis said that friendship is born at the moment when one person says to another, what? You too? I thought I was the only one. How much more with the gospel?

You have gone through hard times in your life. I thought I was the only one. God has comforted me knowing that Jesus has died for me and has forgiven me.

How much of a comfort is he for you? Let me pray. Heavenly Father, thank you again that you do not make us as people to be isolated and alone.

Father, we are people made to be in relationship with others and we all crave deep relationships with other people, Lord.

Father, we ask that you would not let us leave this place without seeking to get to know someone more. Give us a willingness to be vulnerable just like Jesus was and just like Paul was so that we can show how much you have loved us and comforted us in our lives, Lord.

[29 : 13] We ask this in your son's name all for your glory. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.
Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.
Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.