

Comforted So As To Comfort Others

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[0 : 00] Let's turn now briefly to 2 Corinthians chapter 1, and we can read again at verse 3, looking at verses 3 and 4 for a little time this evening.

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, 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.

Well, as the people of God, we want to be and we ought to be a counter to the individualism that's so common in the world, and common today as much as in any other day, when people live so much for themselves, the fellowship of God's people, the fellowship that God's people are, ought to be an antidote to that and a counter to that.

And it's doubtful if any benefit we receive from God is not connected in some way to other Christians and indeed to others who are not necessarily Christians.

It's doubtful if we receive any benefit from God that is not in some way or other intended for us to try towards helping others with something of what we've received from God.

[1 : 31] And that's the circular argument we find here, or reasoning in the Apostles' words in these two verses, because he talks here obviously about the comfort with which God comforts his people in all their affliction. And he's giving thanks to God, blessed be God, for that.

But he doesn't leave it at that. He doesn't want us to simply individualize that and come to God seeking comfort just for our own personal consuming of that comfort for ourselves.

He wants us to think also of how that should lend itself to a ministry of comfort to others beside ourselves, so that we, he says, may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.

So, although it, of course, is important that God's comfort comes to comfort our hearts, our lives, our minds, not just at times of loss and sorrow with bereavement, but there's so much of a need of comfort in so many circumstances of life. The comfort of God is designed to match exactly whatever kind of situation we're in that needs God's assurance and God's comfort.

So, Paul here is talking about, first of all, the source of comfort, who is specifically God the Father. And we see something of what's related to that in the verses. But also, as we say, the outcome of our comfort, or indeed you might say the purpose of our comfort being twofold, although it's here specifically mentioning the comfort we may be able to comfort others with. Let's look at these two. The source of our comfort is God the Father. Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

[3 : 26] And he describes God with these very closely related descriptions, the Father of mercies and the God of all comfort. So often in the Bible, you're thankful that God names himself in ways that are associated with our particular needs. He is the God here of all comfort, the Father of mercies, because the apostle is dealing with the context of our suffering, of our specific needs, as those who are in afflictions of different kinds. And you'll find God, of course, described elsewhere as the God of peace, and other descriptions like that. And that again is tailored to the circumstances that are being addressed in God's Word. So here is God, God the Father. And notice they say, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Now the older A.V. translation is possibly better here in a sense because it says, blessed be God, even the Father of our Lord and Savior

Jesus Christ. Our Lord Jesus Christ. And that's really making it, in a way, just specifying which person and which God he is in fact stating here. When he says here, blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, that's not necessarily a wrong translation. But when you put it the other way, blessed be God. Well, who is this? Who is this God? How is he designated? How is he characterized?

Blessed be God, this God, who is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, and is also his God, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Now, of course, that gives us a whole lot of big theology, which we're not going to go into tonight at all. But the relation between God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, his Son, here you find him described as the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Not simply the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, not simply the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, but both in the same person of God the Father. But that's the God he's actually setting before the Corinthians. Blessed be God.

Which God? Who is this God? And which person of the God? Well, specifically, this God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. But then he goes on to describe him as the Father of mercies. Let's take that first before we come to the God of all comfort. The Lord all ties so snugly together. The Father of mercies.

And you notice the word mercies is plural. He's not saying the God of mercy as if he were going to the source only and just looking at it as God's mercy that provides the comfort for us. That, of course, is true. But he's using a word here that means, when he uses it in the plural form like this, it actually means something like God's acts of mercy. You think of God being merciful. Well, how do you know God is merciful? Because he acts mercifully. Because we experience him in doing various acts that show his mercy. He's the God of the Father of all mercies. The Father of mercies. The specific acts of kindness and mercies and compassion that God exercises towards us. You might say that God is the specialist of mercies. He's the one who actually acts like the great eternal consultant who comes to bestow mercies out of his store of knowledge and compassion as he comes to meet us in our needs. The psalm we sang, Psalm 103, of course, has that built into it, doesn't it? And it's, as we say very often, I frequently say this at times of, at funerals or wakes when we're very often using that psalm, the frailty of man, like the flower of the field, the wind passes over and it is gone. But the mercies of God, or the mercy of God is from everlasting to everlasting. The loving kindness, the mercy, the compassion, the mercies of God, they go on towards his people. They're constantly exercised. He's constantly exercised towards them. And so there is the emphasis there of mercies, plural, the acts of God that stem from him being merciful and actually show behind it the pity of God, the compassion of God for his people. But you also find it's not just derived from God as the father of mercies. And that's, of course, true of the word father. He's saying here that these mercies actually have God the father as the origin of them. He is the father of these mercies. He's the one from whom they proceed. Not only, however, are they derived from God, they're also devised by God.

[8 : 31] And I think of the way that the father actually devises the mercies in such a way that exactly meet your need. Think of the different context in which we need the comfort of God, the mercies of God, the ways in which we have God specifically coming to meet our needs in all the times of affliction and the difficult, different, different and difficult circumstances we face. Well, God's grace and God's mercies are designed specifically for these, that variety of need, if you like, so that the grace you receive and the mercies you receive, God has taken account of the specific circumstances that you are in. He doesn't just have a kind of generalized mercy that doesn't really pay attention to the detail of our need. If it's bereavement, then the comfort that God gives is a comfort that's tailored to the need of that comfort in that circumstance. If it's whatever other kind of need we have,

God's manifold grace, God's comfort is also shaped or tailored to meet with that specific need. That's such a wonderful truth about God. It's somewhat difficult to apprehend, but as you go on in the Christian life, you realize that God isn't just being merciful and God doesn't just throw mercies towards our needs specifically. And only God can do that. You know, how often we come to times of stress or trauma, trying to help people or come alongside them, and you'll find such as some of the circumstances I mentioned earlier for prayer and tragedies of that kind, you come alongside these people, you see them or go and see them or whatever, and you say, well, I'm really sorry, but I just don't have the words that can really fit with the circumstances you've got. And of course, that doesn't harm anybody to admit that. And sometimes you'll find that that's very beneficial to them because they don't have the words for it.

And when they find somebody like a minister or an experienced Christian coming and saying, well, I can't find words for this. And when you go to God in prayer and you say to God, well, Lord, I know these circumstances.

I know what they're going through, at least from the outside, but I don't have words to put this before you in words that can adequately describe it and pray in words that actually describe this because I can't do it.

But God is never like that. God is never stuck for a grace or a comfort that specifically meets the need of the time.

[11 : 26] It is always shaped to the need of your soul. It is always designed and derived and devised by him as the father of mercies.

And you see he's saying here, he comforts us in all our affliction. We say that the need that we face is always met by God specifically.

That's why the apostle can say he comforts us in all our affliction. He's absolutely convinced whatever the affliction is, whatever form it takes, however different it may be from one person to the next, however different it may be from the affliction we had some time ago.

Nevertheless, he's saying he comforts us in all our affliction. He doesn't leave any of them out. He's not in any way caught out by any circumstances that overtake us.

He's always ahead of the game, if you like, because as we heard, he of course has sovereignly planned everything for us in any case. But even within that, he's got this wonderful, tailored, shaped grace and comfort to meet us in our affliction, in all our affliction.

[12 : 41] So he's the father of mercies, these great acts of kindness and comfort toward us. But he's also the God of all comfort, the God of every comfort.

He's not just the source and the author of them. This is a word which is very interesting in some of the words related to it as well. This word comfort, it really means literally to come alongside of someone.

You know what it's like when perhaps there's somebody that you know or is close to you, close to you personally but not necessarily geographically close to you, and you hear of something that's happened in their lives, of some loss or other or some illness, and yes, you send them a card, you send them your thoughts on a card, or you might phone them or something.

But you know deep in your heart you'd really love to just sit alongside them and hold their hand, be there right alongside them. Well, when God comforts, that's what he does.

He doesn't do this from a distance. He doesn't do this at arm's length. He is the God of all comfort, the God who comes alongside. And where have you better seen that than in the person of Jesus himself?

[13 : 56] Think of all the times that you read in the Gospels of Jesus coming into a situation. Remember, Jesus is God, and it's God manifest in the flesh. It's God revealed to us.

It's God showing us of his own grace and his comfort through Jesus Christ, his Son. The times that he comes, he doesn't just come into a situation where he meets with people in their need, whether it's bereavement or illness or whatever it might be, anxiety, and just come in there without dealing with the situation exactly.

He comes alongside them. He comes right into the circumstance with them. Way better than, for example, in Martha and Mary's situation, we often refer to at the time of their brother's loss, the loss of their brother Lazarus.

And he came right alongside, didn't he? He didn't just shout from a distance. He didn't send somebody else to represent him. He came in alongside of these bereaved sisters, and he spoke to them.

Or in the case of Mary, we believe he didn't necessarily speak to her. And that also reminds us that it's not the words that we are able to say that necessarily make a difference.

[15 : 10] It's just our presence. It's just you being beside someone. It's just you taking the trouble to get alongside them. Even if you sit there and just hold their hand or whatever, how meaningful that is, that here's somebody here with me in my pain.

Somebody who doesn't necessarily know how to describe it, or even how to pray about it. But they're here. And they're here with me. And that's true of God as it is true of no other.

He comes alongside. Now this word comfort, as we say, that's literally what it means, the inner meaning of it. But it's related to the words that are used in the Bible of both Jesus and the Holy Spirit.

The comforter. The word in Greek is parakletos. And this word that's in the text here is paraklesios.

You can see how close they are if I just pronounce them that way for you. So that you can see this is so wonderfully tied together. The Holy Spirit is our counselor, comforter, as you find Paul describing the Holy Spirit in Romans and other places.

[16:22] And then you go to John's writings, the first epistle of John. We have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ, the righteous one. And he's the propitiation for our sins.

We have a parakletos. We have a counselor, an advocate with the Father. We have someone who comforts us. You see, that's your wonderful privilege as a Christian, is that each of the three persons of the Godhead has a specific relationship to your comfort and to the need that exists in your life where you need that comfort.

The Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. What an unparalleled, unmatched ministry you and I are privileged to have when God is our comforter.

And that's what you have. He is the God of all comfort to comfort us in all our affliction. But there's one other point for God as the source.

God the Father especially is the source of our comfort. And that other point is that it's through Christ. You cast your mind forward to verse 5. For as we share abundantly in Christ's sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort as well.

[17:42] And then he goes on, if we're afflicted, it's for your comfort and so on. So through Christ we share abundantly in comfort. Now he's saying, we share abundantly in Christ's sufferings. And of course he doesn't mean by that.

He doesn't mean that the sufferings of Christ, all the sufferings of Christ, are exactly the same as the sufferings we go through in our experience. What he's saying is that, because of course Christ's sufferings, many of Christ's sufferings were due to his bearing of the sin of his people.

They were atoning sufferings. Suffering that included his paying the price and the penalty of sin, which we do not and could not bear. But nevertheless, it's analogous to Christ's sufferings in the sense that the cause that he was suffering for, the cause of God himself, is the cause for which we are called on to suffer in union with him, united to him.

You see that in Paul's writing, for example, Philippians chapter 3 verse 10, where he's been giving his testimony, and he talks there about that he wishes to, or wants to grow more into the sufferings of Christ, where he put it specifically that he might experience the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of his sufferings, being a partaker of his sufferings.

And you find the same sort of thing in 1 Peter chapter 4 and verse 12, where Peter again is writing, of course, to people who were suffering themselves. And in 1 Peter chapter 4 there, he's talking especially about the sufferings of Christians in the world as he wrote to them.

[19:29] And in verse 12, Beloved, don't be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you as though something strange were happening to you, but rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings.

In other words, he's pretty much similar to Paul. There, if you like, there's a set of sufferings in which both Jesus and his people share as they witness to God, as they witness to truth, as they witness to righteousness.

All of that is common to the life of Christ on earth, and therefore is common to the life of his people in union with him as well. And what he's saying here is that it's therefore because we're suffering along with Christ, as it were, so through Christ we share in comforts as well, the comfort which God brings to us also through Christ.

Everything really is for Christ's sake and through Christ. Now here's the difference with the world, because as you know yourself, and as I know myself, we've tried, perhaps in the past, most of us at least, to try and find comfort or satisfaction from the things of the world.

The greatest comforts that the world can bestow are really just, you might say, short-lived injections to dull our pain ahead of an eternity without a drop of comfort.

[20:59] That's for the person who's not in Christ. The greatest comfort that the world can give is nothing much better than just a short-lived injection to dull your pain ahead of an eternity without a drop of comfort.

Go to the other side. What is Paul saying? The greatest sufferings in the experience of the Christian are only what he calls our light affliction later on in this very epistle, ahead of an eternity of comfort without a drop of pain.

You see how opposite the two things are. And here he's saying to us, what a marvelous privilege, what a wonderful thing to be a Christian, to be Christians together, to share in this ministry of comfort, as we'll see in a minute, just to comfort one another from the comfort we receive from God. That's the first thing then, the source of our comfort. It's God the Father, the Father of mercies, the God of all comfort, and it's all through Christ. But let's briefly look, in closing, at the outcome or the result or even the purpose of this suffering, it's so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted of God.

Now, of course, there's an individual benefit. Paul doesn't at all intend us to deduce from this that comfort is just for our personal enjoyment or comfort and benefit, and that's really as far as it goes, as if it didn't go beyond the borders of this life.

[22 : 38] And he goes on in chapter 12 to actually tell us something about that. I'll just mention it in passing. You can follow it through yourselves. But in terms of the personal, individual experience of God's comfort, all he's saying here concerning the thorn that was given him in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, three times I pleaded with the Lord, but he said, my grace is sufficient for you.

My power is made perfect in weakness. Therefore, says Paul, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ then I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities.

For when I am weak then I am strong. That's his personal view of comfort in his situations of distress and of affliction. And of course, Paul hadn't come to that mindset just instantly when he was changed by Christ the moment he had come to know him.

No, he says to the Philippians again that in Philippians 4 if I remember rightly that's where he says I have learned in whatsoever state I am therewith to be content.

Something that he learned, something that he learned from the experiences of life and from God's teaching it didn't come instantly. And for us as well of course that's how it is.

[24 : 09] You can't take all this in at once in terms of our personal experience but the more you go on in knowing Christ and in following Christ and in experiencing Christ you learn this principle for yourself.

That's why it is as I think we said in the Lord's Day so important that we'll see perhaps more of it next Lord's Day but it's so important for the fellowship of God's people to have those who are experienced and those who are less experienced share together in these experiences of God's comfort toward our affliction and that's why it's so needful to be together in various circumstances. That's by the way of course. But notice he's saying 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.

The Father's purpose is not simply to give us individual comfort. It's so that we will then extend that to others that are in need of that comfort.

And you notice what he's saying with the same comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. And ultimately you see what he's saying it's not our comfort that we're required to bring to people because how can we just bring comfort if it's just got its source in ourselves.

[25 : 33] He's not just he's not talking about bringing our comfort he's talking about being comforters yes but what comfort is it we bring them? The comfort of God. The comfort with which we have been comforted by God.

And we convey that as best we can to others. And as we bring that to others it helps it helps us to have this perspective on our own afflictions and our own sufferings.

So when you find yourself and I find myself in affliction of whatever kind and stress and trauma and whatever kind of affliction it is the question to ask is not simply how can I benefit from this?

That's not irregular that's not out of place but it has to go beyond that to how can I help others from this? How can I convey something of this comfort that I'm receiving or have received from God so that I become a comforter of others in their own circumstances too?

That's really what he's saying. Blessed be this God who comforts us in all our affliction so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction but it's with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.

[26 : 58] It's a circular kind of comforting program isn't it? It begins with God it comes to us and it leaves us or at least it should and as much as possible to rely on God it goes out to others who are in need of comfort and of course all of that implies that there's a rich fellowship and blend of different people together in the one fellowship of God's church so that as we get to know one

another's circumstances and hear of one another's difficulties and afflictions as was prayed for here tonight we do it collectively and we do it with a view to being comforters from the comfort and with the comfort that we ourselves receive from God as he comforts us so they're great verses really aren't they we've just touched the surface of it really but there is God described wonderfully as the source of our comfort and the one who has designed this comfort for us and the purpose of it so that we might extend comfort to others in their afflictions may he bless his word to us let's pray

Lord our God we pray that we may learn your comfort day by day that we may carry all our concerns into your presence and be conscious whenever we do so that we come to the God of all comfort the Father of mercies Lord help those tonight who need your comfort not only those mentioned already in prayer but others of us here who know Lord that we need your comfort at this time in our anxieties over ourselves or family members or others we pray that you bless especially those who need your comfort most acutely and who are in the midst of distress and suffering we pray that you bless them oh Lord known to us and also unknown although they are brought to our notice through various items of news we pray oh Lord that we may be as thankful as the apostle was in knowing of your comfort so that we too may be able to say blessed be God the father of mercies the

God of all comfort the God and father of our Lord Jesus Christ hear us we pray and listen to all our prayers this night oh Lord spoken and silent we pray this in Jesus name amen let's conclude now by singing in psalm 71 psalm 71 again it's the Scottish Psalter and it's on page 311 psalm 71 from verse 18 through to verse 21 and now Lord leave me not when I old and gray headed grow till to this age thy strength and power all to come my show thy most perfect righteousness O Lord is very high who has done so great things done O Lord O God who is like unto thee thou Lord who great adversities and sore to me did show shalt quicken and bring me again from depths of earth below my greatness and my power thou wilt increase and far extend on every side against all grief thou wilt me comfort send these verses to God's praise and now

Lord leave me not when I old and great headed grow till the day I strength and heart to the world to come my shore and thy most perfect righteousnessunt mein prophet to thee thou

Lord who great adversities and sore to me it show shall quake and bring me again from depths of earth below my greatness and my power thou will increase and far extend and every side against all grief thy wealth me I am percent and

[32 : 41] I will me and I will me