

Grace to You :: *Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time*

Blessed Is God, Part 1

Scripture: 2 Corinthians 1:3

Code: 47-2

It is now that time when we learn what God has for us from the text of Scripture. Take your Bible and open it, please, to 2 Corinthians chapter 1. We have just begun a study of this tremendous epistle and though we've only been in it for really a week, already it is dawning on us what tremendous treasure will be found as we work our way through these 13 chapters.

To begin our study this morning, I want to read...if I might...starting at verse 3 down through verse 11. "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. For just as the sufferings of Christ are ours in abundance, so also our comfort is abundant through Christ. But if we are afflicted it is for your comfort and salvation or if we are comforted it is for your comfort which is effective in the patient enduring of the same sufferings which we also suffer. And our hope for you is firmly grounded, knowing that as you are sharers of our sufferings, so also you are sharers of our comfort. For we do not want you to be unaware, brethren, of our affliction which came to us in Asia, that we were burdened excessively beyond our strength so that we despaired even of life. Indeed we had the sentence of death within ourselves in order that we should not trust in ourselves but in God who raises the dead, who delivered us from so great a peril of death and will deliver us, He on whom we have set our hope and He will yet deliver us. You also joining and helping us through your prayers that thanks may be given by many persons on our behalf for the favor bestowed upon us through the prayers of many."

This opening section of Paul's letter is crucial to his purpose. It also is crucial for us because of its instruction along the theme of comfort in trouble. But before we consider what it means to us, we have to understand what it meant to him and why he wrote it. If there is one ringing theme in this epistle, it is Paul's defense of his integrity, his defense of his apostolic authority. Not for his own gain, not for his own popularity, not for his own prominence, but for the protection of the church and the protection of the truth. What is behind the scenes in this letter, what prompted this letter was a strong and growing assault on the Apostle Paul in Corinth, an effort to destroy his credibility so that his message could be undermined.

There were some false teachers that had come into Corinth. They had infiltrated the church. They wanted to bring another gospel. They wanted to preach another Jesus than the true ones. They wanted to bring their damnable heresies, their demon-doctrine, they wanted to bring their Satanic lies

and they wanted them to be believed. And in order to find an entrance and to gain an audience, the first thing they need to do was topple Paul from the pedestal. They had to assault his authority because, after all, he was the one who articulated the truth, he was the one who set the standard, he was God's Apostle and so he had to come down. They had to tear him down. They had to destroy him and with him the truth he taught. And in the vacuum would come the error. These false teachers did everything they could to destroy Paul, they attacked him at every conceivable point. And then trying to replace him with themselves, they claimed to have credentials from Jerusalem and to have represented the truth of God when in fact they were messengers of Satan and their leader is even called such in chapter 12 verse 7, there he is called a messenger of Satan.

They had come into Paul's beloved church at Corinth and they were tearing in to the Apostle Paul, destroying his reputation, destroying any future or past ministry he had had and doing everything they could to tear the church apart and confuse it with error and then turn it over to Satan. This was of grave concern to the Apostle, and it is that very assault that is behind the penning of this letter which we know as 2 Corinthians. And from the beginning to the end Paul is defending the integrity of his own spiritual life and the authenticity of his apostleship.

Now let me summarize briefly the circumstances that are behind this epistle and I want you to follow very carefully because apart from this foundation you lose the great impact of what is here and you lose the understanding of the very opening paragraph which I read to you.

Paul had spent 18 months in the city of Corinth. During that 18 months, God had used him to plant the church there and to strengthen the church. Eighteen months of intense teaching and preaching had effected a strong and aggressively moving church.

At the end of that 18 months he left Corinth, headed east to Syria to return really back to his home church to bring his second missionary tour to an end. He promised the Corinthians that some time he would come back. Somewhere along the journey, we don't know where, as he was going back to Syria or when he arrived there or at some point, some news came to him about the Corinthian church. And the news indicated that there was immorality in the church and it wasn't being dealt with.

And so, he wrote them a letter. That letter dealt specifically with immorality and how to deal with it in the church. That letter was not inspired by the Holy Spirit, it came from the heart and mind of the Apostle Paul. It surely was a helpful letter and I'm sure a good letter and I'm sure a letter that reflected the heart of God, but not an inspired letter. And so it is lost to us. We don't have that letter. The basic content of it, however, you can find in 1 Corinthians chapter 5 verses 9 through 13, there you have the basic summary of what was in that letter. He says in 1 Corinthians 5:9, "I wrote you in my letter not to associate with immoral people," and then he goes on further to discuss that down through verse 13 and tells them to remove such an immoral person from the congregation. So that was a summation of that initial letter that he wrote, having to do with immorality.

Now we're not surprised to hear that. After all, Corinth was filled with immorality. There were hundreds if not thousands of temple priestesses that would come down and they plied their priesthood through fornication and adultery. They were prostitutes. There was rampant immorality in that city. In fact, the verb in the Greek language "to Corinthianize" means to commit lewd or immoral acts, to go to bed with a prostitute. The city was known for that. That's what its reputation was. It was a vile and wicked place from the moral side. And so it doesn't shock us that the church was having a battle with this pervasive immorality.

But what concerned Paul was not just the sin but the failure to deal with it and to allow that sinning person to have some ongoing relationship to the life of the church. And so he wrote the letter to deal with that.

After that letter, word came back to Paul. It came back, for example, from the family of Chloe, according to 1 Corinthians 1:11, and also from Apollos, according to 1 Corinthians 16:12. And so the word came back about how they responded to that original letter. He also received a letter from the Corinthians themselves. They actually wrote to him, according to chapter 7 verse 1 of 1 Corinthians. And so he got word from Chloe's house, word from Apollos and an actual letter most likely brought to him by Stephanas, Fortunatus and Achaicus as mentioned in chapter 16 and verse 17 of 1 Corinthians. So there's an ongoing dialogue with this church which is so much a part of Paul's heart.

Now after he got word back from Chloe and Apollos and the others and the letter from Corinth, he was still concerned. Apparently things were not properly resolved. Apparently they hadn't really dealt the way they should have dealt with the issues at hand. And so he sent Timothy. Timothy, as you well know, was his son in the faith and reflected very much the character and the priorities of Paul. We find that indication of sending Timothy in 1 Corinthians 4:17 and also in Acts 19:22 and he sends Timothy back to find out more detail about the status of his beloved church and to deal with the problems that were there.

At some time soon, even immediately after he sent Timothy back, he was compelled by the Spirit of God to write another letter. This letter is 1 Corinthians. This was an inspired letter. At the time he was in Ephesus in Asia Minor. He had come back to Ephesus really beginning his third missionary journey. And he would be there for three years, in Ephesus, founding the church in Ephesus and the satellite churches in the cities of Asia Minor which are named for us in Revelation 2 and 3. The time was about 53 or 54 A.D. He was now on his third missionary journey. He had been at this over 20 years. He is showing great concern for the Corinthian church because of what he has heard. He sends Timothy and then under the inspiration of the Spirit of God he pens a letter. And that letter is what we know as 1 Corinthians. And when he writes it, it reflects what he had heard from Chloe, what he had heard from Apollos, and perhaps what he had heard from other sources and things are even worse than the first letter indicated. Factions, law suits, worldly wisdom, incest, disorder at the Lord's

table, corruption of worship, corruption of spiritual gifts, deprioritization of preaching and prophesying, poor leadership, loveless attitudes, confusion about the resurrection, you can all that to the immorality. It's gotten worse, not better.

And I believe it is at that point during the three years in Ephesus after sending Timothy, writing the letter to the Corinthians and in the letter he reflects that he doesn't know whether Timothy will get there before or after the letter. Timothy had some other things to do on the way. I believe at some point during that three years, Paul actually left Ephesus and went to Corinth himself. The reason I come to that conclusion is because in chapter 13 verse 1, Paul tells about an upcoming visit and says, "this is the third time I'm coming to you." Indicating that there was a second. The first time he planted the church. And I believe the second time was during the time he was three years in Ephesus he made a journey there. Chapter 2 verse 1 also gives a similar allusion when he says, "I determined this for my own sake that I would not come to you in sorrow again." So you have the founding visit and then a sorrowful visit. I think the sorrowful visit is the one that he made while he was in Ephesus. Some would call it the painful visit.

And he went there to address all this sin that he wrote about so strongly, so sarcastically in 1 Corinthians and in that prior letter. He went there personally. He may have even heard from Timothy about the situation. He then came back, after making the visit he came back to Ephesus and he wrote a third letter. The third letter has been called by some "the severe letter." He really writes them a diatribe. He really lets them have it. He is grieved and he is broken hearted. And he writes a severe letter out of that attitude. In fact, look at 2 Corinthians 2:4, "Out of much affliction and anguish of heart I wrote to you with many tears, not that you should be made sorrowful but that you should know the love which I have especially for you." Verse 9, "To this end also I wrote, that I might put you to the test, whether you are obedient in all things. I wrote calling you to submission to my apostolic authority and of the Word of God which I proclaimed to you."

I wrote out of anguish and sorrow and tears to you. Why? I'll tell you. When he went to visit them from Ephesus, you know what he found? He found not only all of the sins and all of the iniquities and all of the problems that he had addressed in 1 Corinthians but he found something else...he found a mutiny had begun. Some false teachers, some false apostles had come into the life of the church and they were assaulting Paul and assaulting the church. They were trying to undermine the truth and supplant it with lies.

You say, "Well, couldn't Paul be just referring to 1 Corinthians when he says out of much affliction and anguish I wrote to you with many tears?" No. Because 1 Corinthians was not written out of affliction and anguish and tears. That's not the tone of it. Secondly, look at chapter 7 of 2 Corinthians and verse 8, "Though I caused you sorrow by my letter, I do not regret it though I did regret it." That letter that he wrote, that severe letter was so strong that he felt bad after he wrote it until he heard how they responded to it. He felt bad, he regretted it. That's another indication that it wasn't 1

Corinthians because why would he regret writing an inspired letter? Why would he regret writing one that had been given to him by the Holy Spirit?

So, this...this third letter before 2 Corinthians was attempting to deal with what he ran into when he went there. And what he ran into was a mutiny to add to all the rest of the stuff, the new problem, the arrival of the false apostles claiming authority from Jerusalem and demanding allegiance to both themselves and their teaching at the expense of Paul and the truth. They attacked Paul every way they could. They attacked his apostleship, said he wasn't a true apostle because he didn't hit...have the qualifications of the originals. They questioned his authority, they said he was self-authenticated. They questioned his honesty, said he doesn't tell the truth. They questioned his purity. I believe even accusing him of doing what he did for sexual favors from women. They questioned his love and affection for the church. They used every conceivable angle to attack his character. They even accused him of embezzling the money that was given for the poor saints in Jerusalem and putting it in his own pocket. And they were doing all of this to rip him down, to destroy him so they could take his place. And then according to chapter 11 verse 2 and following, preach another Jesus and another gospel from hell.

They said Paul was brave from a distance but he was a coward face to face, chapter 10 and verse 11 indicate that. They suggested in chapter 11 and verse 12 he alludes to it, that he had no love for the church at all but was utterly self-centered. All of this being led by some guy that he calls "a messenger of Satan" trying to destroy this church. And, you know, this church was so strategic. There it was right on the little neck between the great Achaia which is the northern part of Greece and the Peloponnesus, the bottom part and everybody coming north and south went through there and all the people carrying their ships across the Isthmus going east and west, it was the heart of the spread of the gospel in that whole part of the world. And to corrupt that church was to corrupt the message all over the world. Satan picked his target very well.

And so, when the Apostle Paul went there and found out what was going on in this mutiny, his heart was broken. He was in deep affliction and painful anguish and covered with tears were his cheeks. And it was in that attitude that he penned this letter. His heart was broken because of the investment he had made, because of what was at stake. And it wasn't his reputation, it was the truth of God and the church of Jesus Christ. He was feeling that pain and that anguish that only a pastor feels when people in his own congregation shatter him, devastate him. Not an uncommon experience, by the way.

The letter was delivered by Titus, this severe letter, according to 2 Corinthians 12:18. And Paul regretted that he wrote it once he got it out of his system. Have you ever done that? Written a letter and wish you could get it back? Well that's exactly the way he was feeling. It wasn't inspired by the Holy Spirit and he was saying to himself, "Whatever they thought of me, by the time they get this then they're going to hate me more. I wish I could get it back." But he couldn't. And in fact, he had to wait

for Titus to return. And he waited and he waited and he was just very very upset in the waiting. Look at 2 Corinthians 2:12. He said, "I came to Troas for the gospel of Christ and when a door was opened for me in the Lord, I had no rest for my spirit." Why? "Because I couldn't find Titus." I just...I needed to get with Titus and find out what did they think of the letter? "I had no rest for my spirit." He was restless and he couldn't sit still, even though there was an opportunity to preach, he couldn't take it because he was too upset about the Corinthian situation and so he left and he went from Troas to Macedonia to the city of Philippi to meet Titus. And he met him there.

Chapter 7 tells us about the report. Verse 5, he says, "We came to Macedonia, our flesh had no rest. We were afflicted on every side, conflicts without, fears within." I mean, the man is a mess. He's getting it from the outside and he's torn up on the inside because he so passionately loves this Corinthian church and he knows what's at stake. And then he says, "But God who comforts the depressed comforted us by the coming of Titus." Titus arrives.

And what did Titus say? Verse 7, "He came and he reported to us your longing and your mourning and your zeal for me." Wow! All the good news. So I rejoiced even more. And though I caused you sorrow by my letter, I don't regret it though I did regret it. Why? "I rejoice...verse 9...not that you were made sorrowful but that you were made sorrowful to the point of...what?...repentance." Sorrowful according to the will of God.

Oh, he was so relieved...so relieved. When Titus got him this news, the majority have repented, Paul, and the majority have longings for you, and mourning over what's happened. They're zealous for you. They stand with you, Paul. They're loyal to the truth. And that is why having heard from Titus he writes 2 Corinthians. That's how this letter fits. This is the last of the four, the second of the inspired. And it has a tone of joy in it. I mean, it sure starts that way. After the salutation he says, "Blessed is God." It starts with joy and praise and thanksgiving.

But you know something? It's not just that because all the way through these 13 chapters he defends his apostleship. Why? Because though the majority had repented, Paul was too wise and too experienced to think for a moment that the minority had gone away...they're still there. The false apostles are still around salivating like wolves. They're still eager to tear up that church. There are still some dissenters who joined in the mutiny who for the moment have been quieted by the majority but when they get their opportunity they will go after it again. All the issues are not settled and for whoever isn't quite yet sure, he writes this letter which forever and always removes any question from any reasonable person's mind about the authenticity of the Apostle Paul.

This letter reaffirms in very personal, very heartfelt, very intimate detail the legitimacy of this man's claim to apostleship and ministry. He doesn't do it in the third person, he does it in the first. He doesn't do it by listing some theological principles, he just opens up his heart. And when you're done with this thing, if ever you questioned his authenticity, you'll never question it again.

Now as I read to you, the tone of the first verses may help us with a little bit of an insight into another area of attack. He is suffering. He is suffering greatly. Timothy would have told him that if he arrived there. Titus would have told him that when he arrived there. Paul would have reiterated that to them when he went. The word all around the Greek and Roman world that circulated among the churches certainly incorporated all of Paul's sufferings. He recites them in chapter 11 as we shall see. He suffered immensely. He suffered constantly. I just read you where he confesses that he had conflicts without and fears within and continual suffering.

And certainly you know that when the false apostles attacked him, what they said among other things was..."Look at all the man's suffering, can't you see the picture? He's in sin, he's unfaithful and God is just pouring it on. All of this is reflective of his failures and his sins. And God is just giving it to him with both barrels. The man is a fake and a fraud. He's immoral. He's an embezzler. He's a phony. And God is just tearing into him. Can't you see it?" Just twisting the reality.

And so, when Paul opens, he starts out by saying, "God is coming to me in my affliction. Yes, God is coming to me in my anguish. But He's coming to me as the Father of mercies and the God of all comfort because I'm suffering...verse 5 says...the sufferings of Christ." I'm not suffering for sin. I'm not suffering because God is angry. This isn't wrath. God is comforting me in all my affliction, he says in verse 4.

He starts out by blessing God. There's no confession of sin here. There's no acknowledgement of the need for chastening and discipline. Quite the contrary. Here is a faithful man proclaiming the gospel, paying a price as Satan and his hosts of demons and men assault him mercilessly. And in it all, the tender gracious Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and the God of all comfort is coming alongside and helping him.

So in this very opening section I think there's a note of defense against one very strong accusation. And this opening section also comes on a very positive tone. "Blessed is God." Why? Because He comforts me. And he goes through all those 11 verses...or actually from 3 to 11, all that section affirming the comfort and the compassion and the mercy of God.

People, I'm telling you, there's so much richness here that it is very frustrating not to be able to preach this whole thing. In the first service I thought I'd get all the way through point three and I didn't even get to point one. That is painful because this is so rich. This has got to be the greatest single passage on comfort anywhere in the Bible. And he is saying to them, "You may be attacking me and they may be accusing me of sin and the judgment of God. I want you to know while they're attacking me, God is comforting me. Now are you going to join their attack on me? Or are you going to side with God who is comforting me?"

He will take his readers and us through this comfort, starting there in verse 4 down to verse 11. And it is a...it is a rich, rich study. He will show us the promise of comfort. He will show us the purpose of comfort, the parameters or boundaries of comfort, the partnership of comfort, the power of comfort, the perpetuity of comfort and the participation of comfort. I mean, it's comprehensive and it is absolutely profound stuff.

But before he actually gets in to his unfolding of the comfort of God in his life which is so personal, he starts out by addressing God in verse 3. Let's look at it. Literally, "Blessed is God...blessed is God." And then he wants to identify God. It starts with praise, affirmation that God is to be well spoken of, that's what blessed means. But how does he identify God? What God? What God is he blessing? What God is he praising? What God is he exalting in and extolling? It is this God, "The God who is God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the God who is known as the Father of mercies and God of all comfort." Marvelous titles.

If he had been a Jew living in the Old Testament time, he would have identified God this way, he would have said, "Blessed be God the father of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob," would he not? That's how God was identified, by those who represented Him, by those through whom He spoke. But in the New Testament, He is not identified as the blessed God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, He is identified as the blessed God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. For now, the God who once spoke through the fathers, who once spoke through the prophets has in these last days, Hebrews 1 says, spoken unto us by His Son. And His Son is different than the fathers, and different than the prophets.

In what sense? In the sense that His Son, as the writer of Hebrews says, is the radiance of His glory and the exact representation of His nature. This is the God who is revealed incarnate in the Lord Jesus Christ. He is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. That is to say the Son and the Father share the same essence...whatever God is, His Son is. Whatever I am, my son is. Whatever my father is in terms of essence, I am. God the Father, Christ the Son speaks that they are equal in nature. That is precisely what they have intended to say. In John's gospel chapter 1 we couldn't have it more clearly put, "No man has seen God at any time, the only begotten God who is in the bosom of the Father, He has revealed or explained Him." You can't see God but when you see Christ you see God. Jesus said, "If you've seen Me," John 14, "you have seen the Father."

In John chapter 5, a most significant portion of Scripture, chapter 5 verse 17, Jesus said, "My Father is working and I am working." In other words, He said to those Jewish leaders, what God does I do. and they were talking about the Sabbath, of course. They were saying Jesus as a man is violating the Sabbath, and His answer was, "God can do anything He wants on the Sabbath and so can I." And they got the message. He was claiming to be God. And all the more, it says, they were seeking to kill Him not only because He was breaking the Sabbath but He was calling God His own Father, making Himself equal with God. And again the New Testament emphasizes for us that which is at the heart

and soul of Christianity, that is that Jesus Christ is God in human flesh. And so, the Apostle Paul blesses God. What God? Not just the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, not any other God, not some god of the pagans, but the God who is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the one who revealed Himself in Christ, who is one with Christ.

In John 17, Jesus coming to the end of His life said, "Father, glorify Me with the glory I had with You before the world began. After the incarnation, take Me back to being face to face with You in full glorious equality."

Over and over again this phrase that God is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is reiterated. The Apostle Paul uses it in Ephesians 1:3. John uses it in 2 John 3. And not only in those places, it is repeated other times as well, that God revealed Himself in Christ. And that God is the God who is the Father, one in essence, with His Son, Jesus Christ. That is the heart of the Christian faith. If you don't believe that, no matter what else you believe you cannot be a Christian.

But there's more. Look back at that phrase in verse 3. Not just the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ but would you notice, God is seen as the God of our Lord Jesus Christ. How can He be one with God and have God as His God?

Well that's a fair question. Back in John 20 verse 17, Jesus said, "I ascend to My Father and your Father, My God and your God." On the cross He said, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" Mark 15:34. Listen carefully. In His deity He is equal to God. In His humanity, He is submissive to God, right? In the incarnation He is God and He is also 100 percent man. As man He must submit Himself fully to God. And God is not just His Father in deity, that is one in essence, He is His God in humanity. Jesus in His condescension, Jesus in His submission comes down, takes on the form of a servant and obeys God and identifies God as His God. That's a marvelous reality.

In that incarnation He even restricted His divine knowledge, didn't He? He said, "No man knows the day nor the hour, not even the Son of Man." In His incarnation He submitted Himself to not knowing something voluntarily. He submitted Himself to not using His attributes voluntarily, taking upon Himself the form of a servant. God becomes His God, that is to say the one over Him, to whom He submits as well as His equal. And so you have in this marvelous blessing both the humanity and the deity of Christ brought magnificently together in one statement...Blessed is the God...what God?...the God who is the God of and the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

And if you were to take the time, and we won't, to look at "Lord Jesus Christ," you have in that great title all of the redemptive work that the Lord came to do. Lord, speaks obviously of deity. Lord speaks of sovereignty. Jesus, His name, speaks of sacrifice, it speaks of humanity. He is the one who came to save His people from their sins...that's what Jesus means. Christ is the term for anointed one, or Messiah. His whole redemptive work, His sovereign work, His Messianic work is all bound up in this

name. And so, when Paul is blessing God, it isn't just any God, it isn't just the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, it is the God who revealed Himself in Jesus Christ, the very Lord Jesus Christ who is the anointed one and the Redeemer and the sovereign one, the one who submitted Himself in incarnation and could say God is My God. All of the gospel is tied up in that great, great benediction.

But then he adds these two titles for God and they are both taken from the Old Testament. He says, "God who is also the Father of mercies and God of all comfort." He could have chosen a myriad of titles for God but he chose those two because he wants to make the point that God is coming to him in his suffering, God is coming to him in his pain and his affliction but it isn't to chasten and it isn't to discipline, it is to comfort. Which means he's not in sin, God is on his side. God is not tearing him down, God is picking him up.

Look at that phrase, "the Father of mercies." What does it mean? Well that's the language of Jewish liturgy again. That comes out of the synagogue prayer. The synagogue prayer says, "Our Father, merciful Father, ever compassionate, have mercy on us." This is the language of the Jew who cried out for tender mercy, who cried out for pity from God. For God to look at his miserable sinful condition, his deprivation, his desperation and treat him with kindness and treat him with love and treat him with tenderness. God does that. David said to God in 2 Samuel 24, "I'm in great distress. Let us now fall into the hand of the Lord for His mercies are great. But do not let me fall into the hand of man." I'd rather fall into God's hands, His mercies are great.

Over and over again in the Psalms you have that. One particular will suffice. "Just as a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear Him. For He Himself knows our frame, He is mindful that we are but dust."

Down in verse 17, "His loving kindness is everlasting. His righteousness to children's children." In other words, God is kind, God is merciful. Micah the prophet said in chapter 7, "Who is a pardoning God like You? And who gives mercy and pity and grace so full and so free?"

That's not just an Old Testament term, though. Paul loved to think of God as a God of mercy. In fact, in Romans 12:1 he says, "I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the...what?...mercies of God." What are they? They're everything listed in Romans 1 to 11. Everything in the whole story of salvation. All the component parts of salvation outlined in Romans 1 to 11 are the mercies of God. It is God's mercy demonstrated in His saving sanctifying glorifying acts.

And so, Paul says..."I, I just want to praise the Father of mercies, the one who is the source of mercy, the one who is the source of pity, the one who gives tender compassion."

I can rejoice in my trials. I'm not distressed. I'm not in despair. I'm not in depression. Why? Because my God who is revealed to me in Jesus Christ is merciful and compassionate and full of tender pity

for those He loves.

But there's even more. He then calls Him, "The God of all comfort." Isaiah loved to think about that, Isaiah 40, "O comfort, O comfort you, my people." Isaiah chapter 51, twice, once in verse 3 and once in verse 12, "Isaiah chapter 66 and verse 13, Isaiah celebrates the comfort of God. You'll find it elsewhere in the Old Testament, God is a God of comfort. The Greek word is *paraklesis*, we get the paraclete, a familiar word to us. One who comes alongside to help. God is the God of all help, all comfort.

Now let me just talk about the word "comfort" because we're going to need to understand it as we go through the text next week. When I say the word "comfort" to you, what do you think of? Comfort. "Oh, a big soft bed...or a big stuffed chair...or just having eaten your favorite meal and your wife has nothing for you to do...and your kids are gone and the lawn is mowed...and everything works...or a hammock on your vacation, swinging in the breeze without a care...comfort."

That's not what it means here. Sorry. It's connected to a Latin root and the Latin root is *fortis*, which means brave. It is not talking about ease, it is not a synonym for ease, softness, a settled feeling. It is a synonym for courage, bravery, strength. He's not saying God came to me and gave me a cushy life. He's saying God came to me in the middle of my trouble and gave me strength. He came to me and gave me courage. He gave me boldness. He made me brave. In fact, God is the source of all comfort. To put it another way, God is the ultimate source of every act of true comfort. And apart from God there's no true comfort.

There's plenty of heartbreak. His character was assaulted. His church was assaulted under Satanic power. To go along with all the physical pain, he had all of that pain on the inside, but in it all God had come to him and made him brave and made him bold and made him courageous and made him strong. God had encouraged, fortified him. And that's why he blesses God...for that.

So much to say about comfort. And starting in verse 4 next week you'll see it richly unfold.

Father, we thank You for this encouraging word. We thank You that You're the God who was the God of the Lord Jesus Christ to whom He submitted in His incarnation to do His redemptive work. He was fully man and so He can teach us how to submit. But beyond that, You were not just the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, You were the Father. That is to say, He was equal with You and the one we worship is not just a man but God as well. Not only can He sympathize but He can give us the power to overcome. We thank You, O God, that You are the Father of mercies, that You look at Your children with pity and compassion and tenderness and that You are the only source of comfort. All comfort comes alone from You. You're the one who encourages us, who makes us brave and bold and strong in the midst of our trials. We thank You that You came to Paul and You made him strong when he had conflicts on the outside and fears on the inside because we have the same...conflict all

around us on every front, fear and anxiety on the inside. Perfect setting for You to come to us as the Father of mercies and the God of all comfort. We thank You for the testimony of this wonderful man. We thank You for the way in which he struggled...not for his own sake but for the sake of the church and the truth and the people he loved. And he found you adequate in all his struggles. And may we know that You have not changed, You come to us in Christ as You came to him, full of tender mercy, full of compassion. And You comfort us in all our affliction. May we know the fullness of that comfort. May we know the courage, the strength and the bravery to move ahead triumphantly, in Your strength for Christ's sake. Amen.

"BLESSED IS GOD"

It is now that time when we learn what God has for us from the text of Scripture. Take your Bible and open it, please, to 2 Corinthians chapter 1. We have just begun a study of this tremendous epistle and though we've only been in it for really a week, already it is dawning on us what tremendous treasure will be found as we work our way through these 13 chapters.

To begin our study this morning, I want to read...if I might...starting at verse 3 down through verse 11. "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. For just as the sufferings of Christ are ours in abundance, so also our comfort is abundant through Christ. But if we are afflicted it is for your comfort and salvation or if we are comforted it is for your comfort which is effective in the patient enduring of the same sufferings which we also suffer. And our hope for you is firmly grounded, knowing that as you are sharers of our sufferings, so also you are sharers of our comfort. For we do not want you to be unaware, brethren, of our affliction which came to us in Asia, that we were burdened excessively beyond our strength so that we despaired even of life. Indeed we had the sentence of death within ourselves in order that we should not trust in ourselves but in God who raises the dead, who delivered us from so great a peril of death and will deliver us, He on whom we have set our hope and He will yet deliver us. You also joining and helping us through your prayers that thanks may be given by many persons on our behalf for the favor bestowed upon us through the prayers of many."

This opening section of Paul's letter is crucial to his purpose. It also is crucial for us because of its instruction along the theme of comfort in trouble. But before we consider what it means to us, we have to understand what it meant to him and why he wrote it. If there is one ringing theme in this epistle, it is Paul's defense of his integrity, his defense of his apostolic authority. Not for his own gain, not for his own popularity, not for his own prominence, but for the protection of the church and the

protection of the truth. What is behind the scenes in this letter, what prompted this letter was a strong and growing assault on the Apostle Paul in Corinth, an effort to destroy his credibility so that his message could be undermined.

There were some false teachers that had come into Corinth. They had infiltrated the church. They wanted to bring another gospel. They wanted to preach another Jesus than the true ones. They wanted to bring their damnable heresies, their demon-doctrine, they wanted to bring their Satanic lies and they wanted them to be believed. And in order to find an entrance and to gain an audience, the first thing they need to do was topple Paul from the pedestal. They had to assault his authority because, after all, he was the one who articulated the truth, he was the one who set the standard, he was God's Apostle and so he had to come down. They had to tear him down. They had to destroy him and with him the truth he taught. And in the vacuum would come the error. These false teachers did everything they could to destroy Paul, they attacked him at every conceivable point. And then trying to replace him with themselves, they claimed to have credentials from Jerusalem and to have represented the truth of God when in fact they were messengers of Satan and their leader is even called such in chapter 12 verse 7, there he is called a messenger of Satan.

They had come into Paul's beloved church at Corinth and they were tearing in to the Apostle Paul, destroying his reputation, destroying any future or past ministry he had had and doing everything they could to tear the church apart and confuse it with error and then turn it over to Satan. This was of grave concern to the Apostle, and it is that very assault that is behind the penning of this letter which we know as 2 Corinthians. And from the beginning to the end Paul is defending the integrity of his own spiritual life and the authenticity of his apostleship.

Now let me summarize briefly the circumstances that are behind this epistle and I want you to follow very carefully because apart from this foundation you lose the great impact of what is here and you lose the understanding of the very opening paragraph which I read to you.

Paul had spent 18 months in the city of Corinth. During that 18 months, God had used him to plant the church there and to strengthen the church. Eighteen months of intense teaching and preaching had effected a strong and aggressively moving church.

At the end of that 18 months he left Corinth, headed east to Syria to return really back to his home church to bring his second missionary tour to an end. He promised the Corinthians that some time he would come back. Somewhere along the journey, we don't know where, as he was going back to Syria or when he arrived there or at some point, some news came to him about the Corinthian church. And the news indicated that there was immorality in the church and it wasn't being dealt with.

And so, he wrote them a letter. That letter dealt specifically with immorality and how to deal with it in the church. That letter was not inspired by the Holy Spirit, it came from the heart and mind of the

Apostle Paul. It surely was a helpful letter and I'm sure a good letter and I'm sure a letter that reflected the heart of God, but not an inspired letter. And so it is lost to us. We don't have that letter. The basic content of it, however, you can find in 1 Corinthians chapter 5 verses 9 through 13, there you have the basic summary of what was in that letter. He says in 1 Corinthians 5:9, "I wrote you in my letter not to associate with immoral people," and then he goes on further to discuss that down through verse 13 and tells them to remove such an immoral person from the congregation. So that was a summation of that initial letter that he wrote, having to do with immorality.

Now we're not surprised to hear that. After all, Corinth was filled with immorality. There were hundreds if not thousands of temple priestesses that would come down and they plied their priesthood through fornication and adultery. They were prostitutes. There was rampant immorality in that city. In fact, the verb in the Greek language "to Corinthianize" means to commit lewd or immoral acts, to go to bed with a prostitute. The city was known for that. That's what its reputation was. It was a vile and wicked place from the moral side. And so it doesn't shock us that the church was having a battle with this pervasive immorality.

But what concerned Paul was not just the sin but the failure to deal with it and to allow that sinning person to have some ongoing relationship to the life of the church. And so he wrote the letter to deal with that.

After that letter, word came back to Paul. It came back, for example, from the family of Chloe, according to 1 Corinthians 1:11, and also from Apollos, according to 1 Corinthians 16:12. And so the word came back about how they responded to that original letter. He also received a letter from the Corinthians themselves. They actually wrote to him, according to chapter 7 verse 1 of 1 Corinthians. And so he got word from Chloe's house, word from Apollos and an actual letter most likely brought to him by Stephanas, Fortunatus and Achaicus as mentioned in chapter 16 and verse 17 of 1 Corinthians. So there's an ongoing dialogue with this church which is so much a part of Paul's heart.

Now after he got word back from Chloe and Apollos and the others and the letter from Corinth, he was still concerned. Apparently things were not properly resolved. Apparently they hadn't really dealt the way they should have dealt with the issues at hand. And so he sent Timothy. Timothy, as you well know, was his son in the faith and reflected very much the character and the priorities of Paul. We find that indication of sending Timothy in 1 Corinthians 4:17 and also in Acts 19:22 and he sends Timothy back to find out more detail about the status of his beloved church and to deal with the problems that were there.

At some time soon, even immediately after he sent Timothy back, he was compelled by the Spirit of God to write another letter. This letter is 1 Corinthians. This was an inspired letter. At the time he was in Ephesus in Asia Minor. He had come back to Ephesus really beginning his third missionary journey. And he would be there for three years, in Ephesus, founding the church in Ephesus and the

satellite churches in the cities of Asia Minor which are named for us in Revelation 2 and 3. The time was about 53 or 54 A.D. He was now on his third missionary journey. He had been at this over 20 years. He is showing great concern for the Corinthian church because of what he has heard. He sends Timothy and then under the inspiration of the Spirit of God he pens a letter. And that letter is what we know as 1 Corinthians. And when he writes it, it reflects what he had heard from Chloe, what he had heard from Apollos, and perhaps what he had heard from other sources and things are even worse than the first letter indicated. Factions, law suits, worldly wisdom, incest, disorder at the Lord's table, corruption of worship, corruption of spiritual gifts, deprioritization of preaching and prophesying, poor leadership, loveless attitudes, confusion about the resurrection, you can all that to the immorality. It's gotten worse, not better.

And I believe it is at that point during the three years in Ephesus after sending Timothy, writing the letter to the Corinthians and in the letter he reflects that he doesn't know whether Timothy will get there before or after the letter. Timothy had some other things to do on the way. I believe at some point during that three years, Paul actually left Ephesus and went to Corinth himself. The reason I come to that conclusion is because in chapter 13 verse 1, Paul tells about an upcoming visit and says, "this is the third time I'm coming to you." Indicating that there was a second. The first time he planted the church. And I believe the second time was during the time he was three years in Ephesus he made a journey there. Chapter 2 verse 1 also gives a similar allusion when he says, "I determined this for my own sake that I would not come to you in sorrow again." So you have the founding visit and then a sorrowful visit. I think the sorrowful visit is the one that he made while he was in Ephesus. Some would call it the painful visit.

And he went there to address all this sin that he wrote about so strongly, so sarcastically in 1 Corinthians and in that prior letter. He went there personally. He may have even heard from Timothy about the situation. He then came back, after making the visit he came back to Ephesus and he wrote a third letter. The third letter has been called by some "the severe letter." He really writes them a diatribe. He really lets them have it. He is grieved and he is broken hearted. And he writes a severe letter out of that attitude. In fact, look at 2 Corinthians 2:4, "Out of much affliction and anguish of heart I wrote to you with many tears, not that you should be made sorrowful but that you should know the love which I have especially for you." Verse 9, "To this end also I wrote, that I might put you to the test, whether you are obedient in all things. I wrote calling you to submission to my apostolic authority and of the Word of God which I proclaimed to you."

I wrote out of anguish and sorrow and tears to you. Why? I'll tell you. When he went to visit them from Ephesus, you know what he found? He found not only all of the sins and all of the iniquities and all of the problems that he had addressed in 1 Corinthians but he found something else...he found a mutiny had begun. Some false teachers, some false apostles had come into the life of the church and they were assaulting Paul and assaulting the church. They were trying to undermine the truth and supplant it with lies.

You say, "Well, couldn't Paul be just referring to 1 Corinthians when he says out of much affliction and anguish I wrote to you with many tears?" No. Because 1 Corinthians was not written out of affliction and anguish and tears. That's not the tone of it. Secondly, look at chapter 7 of 2 Corinthians and verse 8, "Though I caused you sorrow by my letter, I do not regret it though I did regret it." That letter that he wrote, that severe letter was so strong that he felt bad after he wrote it until he heard how they responded to it. He felt bad, he regretted it. That's another indication that it wasn't 1 Corinthians because why would he regret writing an inspired letter? Why would he regret writing one that had been given to him by the Holy Spirit?

So, this...this third letter before 2 Corinthians was attempting to deal with what he ran into when he went there. And what he ran into was a mutiny to add to all the rest of the stuff, the new problem, the arrival of the false apostles claiming authority from Jerusalem and demanding allegiance to both themselves and their teaching at the expense of Paul and the truth. They attacked Paul every way they could. They attacked his apostleship, said he wasn't a true apostle because he didn't hit...have the qualifications of the originals. They questioned his authority, they said he was self-authenticated. They questioned his honesty, said he doesn't tell the truth. They questioned his purity. I believe even accusing him of doing what he did for sexual favors from women. They questioned his love and affection for the church. They used every conceivable angle to attack his character. They even accused him of embezzling the money that was given for the poor saints in Jerusalem and putting it in his own pocket. And they were doing all of this to rip him down, to destroy him so they could take his place. And then according to chapter 11 verse 2 and following, preach another Jesus and another gospel from hell.

They said Paul was brave from a distance but he was a coward face to face, chapter 10 and verse 11 indicate that. They suggested in chapter 11 and verse 12 he alludes to it, that he had no love for the church at all but was utterly self-centered. All of this being led by some guy that he calls "a messenger of Satan" trying to destroy this church. And, you know, this church was so strategic. There it was right on the little neck between the great Achaia which is the northern part of Greece and the Peloponesus(?), the bottom part and everybody coming north and south went through there and all the people carrying their ships across the Isthmus going east and west, it was the heart of the spread of the gospel in that whole part of the world. And to corrupt that church was to corrupt the message all over the world. Satan picked his target very well.

And so, when the Apostle Paul went there and found out what was going on in this mutiny, his heart was broken. He was in deep affliction and painful anguish and covered with tears were his cheeks. And it was in that attitude that he penned this letter. His heart was broken because of the investment he had made, because of what was at stake. And it wasn't his reputation, it was the truth of God and the church of Jesus Christ. He was feeling that pain and that anguish that only a pastor feels when people in his own congregation shatter him, devastate him. Not an uncommon experience, by the

way.

The letter was delivered by Titus, this severe letter, according to 2 Corinthians 12:18. And Paul regretted that he wrote it once he got it out of his system. Have you ever done that? Written a letter and wish you could get it back? Well that's exactly the way he was feeling. It wasn't inspired by the Holy Spirit and he was saying to himself, "Whatever they thought of me, by the time they get this then they're going to hate me more. I wish I could get it back." But he couldn't. And in fact, he had to wait for Titus to return. And he waited and he waited and he was just very very upset in the waiting. Look at 2 Corinthians 2:12. He said, "I came to Troas for the gospel of Christ and when a door was opened for me in the Lord, I had no rest for my spirit." Why? "Because I couldn't find Titus." I just...I needed to get with Titus and find out what did they think of the letter? "I had no rest for my spirit." He was restless and he couldn't sit still, even though there was an opportunity to preach, he couldn't take it because he was too upset about the Corinthian situation and so he left and he went from Troas to Macedonia to the city of Philippi to meet Titus. And he met him there.

Chapter 7 tells us about the report. Verse 5, he says, "We came to Macedonia, our flesh had no rest. We were afflicted on every side, conflicts without, fears within." I mean, the man is a mess. He's getting it from the outside and he's torn up on the inside because he so passionately loves this Corinthian church and he knows what's at stake. And then he says, "But God who comforts the depressed comforted us by the coming of Titus." Titus arrives.

And what did Titus say? Verse 7, "He came and he reported to us your longing and your mourning and your zeal for me." Wow! All the good news. So I rejoiced even more. And though I caused you sorrow by my letter, I don't regret it though I did regret it. Why? "I rejoice...verse 9...not that you were made sorrowful but that you were made sorrowful to the point of...what?...repentance." Sorrowful according to the will of God.

Oh, he was so relieved...so relieved. When Titus got him this news, the majority have repented, Paul, and the majority have longings for you, and mourning over what's happened. They're zealous for you. They stand with you, Paul. They're loyal to the truth. And that is why having heard from Titus he writes 2 Corinthians. That's how this letter fits. This is the last of the four, the second of the inspired. And it has a tone of joy in it. I mean, it sure starts that way. After the salutation he says, "Blessed is God." It starts with joy and praise and thanksgiving.

But you know something? It's not just that because all the way through these 13 chapters he defends his apostleship. Why? Because though the majority had repented, Paul was too wise and too experienced to think for a moment that the minority had gone away...they're still there. The false apostles are still around salivating like wolves. They're still eager to tear up that church. There are still some dissenters who joined in the mutiny who for the moment have been quieted by the majority but when they get their opportunity they will go after it again. All the issues are not settled and for

whoever isn't quite yet sure, he writes this letter which forever and always removes any question from any reasonable person's mind about the authenticity of the Apostle Paul.

This letter reaffirms in very personal, very heartfelt, very intimate detail the legitimacy of this man's claim to apostleship and ministry. He doesn't do it in the third person, he does it in the first. He doesn't do it by listing some theological principles, he just opens up his heart. And when you're done with this thing, if ever you questioned his authenticity, you'll never question it again.

Now as I read to you, the tone of the first verses may help us with a little bit of an insight into another area of attack. He is suffering. He is suffering greatly. Timothy would have told him that if he arrived there. Titus would have told him that when he arrived there. Paul would have reiterated that to them when he went. The word all around the Greek and Roman world that circulated among the churches certainly incorporated all of Paul's sufferings. He recites them in chapter 11 as we shall see. He suffered immensely. He suffered constantly. I just read you where he confesses that he had conflicts without and fears within and continual suffering.

And certainly you know that when the false apostles attacked him, what they said among other things was..."Look at all the man's suffering, can't you see the picture? He's in sin, he's unfaithful and God is just pouring it on. All of this is reflective of his failures and his sins. And God is just giving it to him with both barrels. The man is a fake and a fraud. He's immoral. He's an embezzler. He's a phony. And God is just tearing into him. Can't you see it?" Just twisting the reality.

And so, when Paul opens, he starts out by saying, "God is coming to me in my affliction. Yes, God is coming to me in my anguish. But He's coming to me as the Father of mercies and the God of all comfort because I'm suffering...verse 5 says...the sufferings of Christ." I'm not suffering for sin. I'm not suffering because God is angry. This isn't wrath. God is comforting me in all my affliction, he says in verse 4.

He starts out by blessing God. There's no confession of sin here. There's no acknowledgement of the need for chastening and discipline. Quite the contrary. Here is a faithful man proclaiming the gospel, paying a price as Satan and his hosts of demons and men assault him mercilessly. And in it all, the tender gracious Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and the God of all comfort is coming alongside and helping him.

So in this very opening section I think there's a note of defense against one very strong accusation. And this opening section also comes on a very positive tone. "Blessed is God." Why? Because He comforts me. And he goes through all those 11 verses...or actually from 3 to 11, all that section affirming the comfort and the compassion and the mercy of God.

People, I'm telling you, there's so much richness here that it is very frustrating not to be able to preach this whole thing. In the first service I thought I'd get all the way through point three and I didn't even get to point one. That is painful because this is so rich. This has got to be the greatest single passage on comfort anywhere in the Bible. And he is saying to them, "You may be attacking me and they may be accusing me of sin and the judgment of God. I want you to know while they're attacking me, God is comforting me. Now are you going to join their attack on me? Or are you going to side with God who is comforting me?"

He will take his readers and us through this comfort, starting there in verse 4 down to verse 11. And it is a...it is a rich, rich study. He will show us the promise of comfort. He will show us the purpose of comfort, the parameters or boundaries of comfort, the partnership of comfort, the power of comfort, the perpetuity of comfort and the participation of comfort. I mean, it's comprehensive and it is absolutely profound stuff.

But before he actually gets in to his unfolding of the comfort of God in his life which is so personal, he starts out by addressing God in verse 3. Let's look at it. Literally, "Blessed is God...blessed is God." And then he wants to identify God. It starts with praise, affirmation that God is to be well spoken of, that's what blessed means. But how does he identify God? What God? What God is he blessing? What God is he praising? What God is he exalting in and extolling? It is this God, "The God who is God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the God who is known as the Father of mercies and God of all comfort." Marvelous titles.

If he had been a Jew living in the Old Testament time, he would have identified God this way, he would have said, "Blessed be God the father of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob," would he not? That's how God was identified, by those who represented Him, by those through whom He spoke. But in the New Testament, He is not identified as the blessed God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, He is identified as the blessed God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. For now, the God who once spoke through the fathers, who once spoke through the prophets has in these last days, Hebrews 1 says, spoken unto us by His Son. And His Son is different than the fathers, and different than the prophets.

In what sense? In the sense that His Son, as the writer of Hebrews says, is the radiance of His glory and the exact representation of His nature. This is the God who is revealed incarnate in the Lord Jesus Christ. He is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. That is to say the Son and the Father share the same essence...whatever God is, His Son is. Whatever I am, my son is. Whatever my father is in terms of essence, I am. God the Father, Christ the Son speaks that they are equal in nature. That is precisely what they have intended to say. In John's gospel chapter 1 we couldn't have it more clearly put, "No man has seen God at any time, the only begotten God who is in the bosom of the Father, He has revealed or explained to Him." You can't see God but when you see Christ you see God. Jesus said, "If you've seen Me," John 14, "you have seen the Father."

In John chapter 5, a most significant portion of Scripture, chapter 5 verse 17, Jesus said, "My Father is working and I am working." In other words, He said to those Jewish leaders, what God does I do. and they were talking about the Sabbath, of course. They were saying Jesus as a man is violating the Sabbath, and His answer was, "God can do anything He wants on the Sabbath and so can I." And they got the message. He was claiming to be God. And all the more, it says, they were seeking to kill Him not only because He was breaking the Sabbath but He was calling God His own Father, making Himself equal with God. And again the New Testament emphasizes for us that which is at the heart and soul of Christianity, that is that Jesus Christ is God in human flesh. And so, the Apostle Paul blesses God. What God? Not just the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, not any other God, not some god of the pagans, but the God who is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the one who revealed Himself in Christ, who is one with Christ.

In John 17, Jesus coming to the end of His life said, "Father, glorify Me with the glory I had with You before the world began. After the incarnation, take Me back to being face to face with You in full glorious equality."

Over and over again this phrase that God is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is reiterated. The Apostle Paul uses it in Ephesians 1:3. John uses it in 2 John 3. And not only in those places, it is repeated other times as well, that God revealed Himself in Christ. And that God is the God who is the Father, one in essence, with His Son, Jesus Christ. That is the heart of the Christian faith. If you don't believe that, no matter what else you believe you cannot be a Christian.

But there's more. Look back at that phrase in verse 3. Not just the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ but would you notice, God is seen as the God of our Lord Jesus Christ. How can He be one with God and have God as His God?

Well that's a fair question. Back in John 20 verse 17, Jesus said, "I ascend to My Father and your Father, My God and your God." On the cross He said, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" Mark 15:34. Listen carefully. In His deity He is equal to God. In His humanity, He is submissive to God, right? In the incarnation He is God and He is also 100 percent man. As man He must submit Himself fully to God. And God is not just His Father in deity, that is one in essence, He is His God in humanity. Jesus in His condescension, Jesus in His submission comes down, takes on the form of a servant and obeys God and identifies God as His God. That's a marvelous reality.

In that incarnation He even restricted His divine knowledge, didn't He? He said, "No man knows the day nor the hour, not even the Son of Man." In His incarnation He submitted Himself to not knowing something voluntarily. He submitted Himself to not using His attributes voluntarily, taking upon Himself the form of a servant. God becomes His God, that is to say the one over Him, to whom He submits as well as His equal. And so you have in this marvelous blessing both the humanity and the

deity of Christ brought magnificently together in one statement...Blessed is the God...what God?...the God who is the God of and the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

And if you were to take the time, and we won't, to look at "Lord Jesus Christ," you have in that great title all of the redemptive work that the Lord came to do. Lord, speaks obviously of deity. Lord speaks of sovereignty. Jesus, His name, speaks of sacrifice, it speaks of humanity. He is the one who came to save His people from their sins...that's what Jesus means. Christ is the term for anointed one, or Messiah. His whole redemptive work, His sovereign work, His Messianic work is all bound up in this name. And so, when Paul is blessing God, it isn't just any God, it isn't just the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, it is the God who revealed Himself in Jesus Christ, the very Lord Jesus Christ who is the anointed one and the Redeemer and the sovereign one, the one who submitted Himself in incarnation and could say God is My God. All of the gospel is tied up in that great, great benediction.

But then he adds these two titles for God and they are both taken from the Old Testament. He says, "God who is also the Father of mercies and God of all comfort." He could have chosen a myriad of titles for God but he chose those two because he wants to make the point that God is coming to him in his suffering, God is coming to him in his pain and his affliction but it isn't to chasten and it isn't to discipline, it is to comfort. Which means he's not in sin, God is on his side. God is not tearing him down, God is picking him up.

Look at that phrase, "the Father of mercies." What does it mean? Well that's the language of Jewish liturgy again. That comes out of the synagogue prayer. The synagogue prayer says, "Our Father, merciful Father, ever compassionate, have mercy on us." This is the language of the Jew who cried out for tender mercy, who cried out for pity from God. For God to look at his miserable sinful condition, his deprivation, his desperation and treat him with kindness and treat him with love and treat him with tenderness. God does that. David said to God in 2 Samuel 24, "I'm in great distress. Let us now fall into the hand of the Lord for His mercies are great. But do not let me fall into the hand of man." I'd rather fall into God's hands, His mercies are great.

Over and over again in the Psalms you have that. One particular will suffice. "Just as a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear Him. For He Himself knows our frame, He is mindful that we are but dust."

Down in verse 17, "His loving kindness is everlasting. His righteousness to children's children." In other words, God is kind, God is merciful. Micah the prophet said in chapter 7, "Who is a pardoning God like You? And who gives mercy and pity and grace so full and so free?"

That's not just an Old Testament term, though. Paul loved to think of God as a God of mercy. In fact, in Romans 12:1 he says, "I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the...what?...mercies of God." What are they? They're everything listed in Romans 1 to 11. Everything in the whole story of salvation. All

the component parts of salvation outlined in Romans 1 to 11 are the mercies of God. It is God's mercy demonstrated in His saving sanctifying glorifying acts.

And so, Paul says..."I, I just want to praise the Father of mercies, the one who is the source of mercy, the one who is the source of pity, the one who gives tender compassion."

I can rejoice in my trials. I'm not distressed. I'm not in despair. I'm not in depression. Why? Because my God who is revealed to me in Jesus Christ is merciful and compassionate and full of tender pity for those He loves.

But there's even more. He then calls Him, "The God of all comfort." Isaiah loved to think about that, Isaiah 40, "O comfort, O comfort you, my people." Isaiah chapter 51, twice, once in verse 3 and once in verse 12, "Isaiah chapter 66 and verse 13, Isaiah celebrates the comfort of God. You'll find it elsewhere in the Old Testament, God is a God of comfort. The Greek word is *paraklesis*, we get the *paraclete*, a familiar word to us. One who comes alongside to help. God is the God of all help, all comfort.

Now let me just talk about the word "comfort" because we're going to need to understand it as we go through the text next week. When I say the word "comfort" to you, what do you think of? Comfort. "Oh, a big soft bed...or a big stuffed chair...or just having eaten your favorite meal and your wife has nothing for you to do...and your kids are gone and the lawn is mowed...and everything works...or a hammock on your vacation, swinging in the breeze without a care...comfort."

That's not what it means here. Sorry. It's connected to a Latin root and the Latin root is fortis, which means brave. It is not talking about ease, it is not a synonym for ease, softness, a settled feeling. It is a synonym for courage, bravery, strength. He's not saying God came to me and gave me a cushy life. He's saying God came to me in the middle of my trouble and gave me strength. He came to me and gave me courage. He gave me boldness. He made me brave. In fact, God is the source of all comfort. To put it another way, God is the ultimate source of every act of true comfort. And apart from God there's no true comfort.

There's plenty of heartbreak. His character was assaulted. His church was assaulted under Satanic power. To go along with all the physical pain, he had all of that pain on the inside, but in it all God had come to him and made him brave and made him bold and made him courageous and made him strong. God had encouraged, fortified him. And that's why he blesses God...for that.

So much to say about comfort. And starting in verse 4 next week you'll see it richly unfold.

Father, we thank You for this encouraging word. We thank You that You're the God who was the God of the Lord Jesus Christ to whom He submitted in His incarnation to do His redemptive work. He was

fully man and so He can teach us how to submit. But beyond that, You were not just the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, You were the Father. That is to say, He was equal with You and the one we worship is not just a man but God as well. Not only can He sympathize but He can give us the power to overcome. We thank You, O God, that You are the Father of mercies, that You look at Your children with pity and compassion and tenderness and that You are the only source of comfort. All comfort comes alone from You. You're the one who encourages us, who makes us brave and bold and strong in the midst of our trials. We thank You that You came to Paul and You made him strong when he had conflicts on the outside and fears on the inside because we have the same...conflict all around us on every front, fear and anxiety on the inside. Perfect setting for You to come to us as the Father of mercies and the God of all comfort. We thank You for the testimony of this wonderful man. We thank You for the way in which he struggled...not for his own sake but for the sake of the church and the truth and the people he loved. And he found you adequate in all his struggles. And may we know that You have not changed, You come to us in Christ as You came to him, full of tender mercy, full of compassion. And You comfort us in all our affliction. May we know the fullness of that comfort. May we know the courage, the strength and the bravery to move ahead triumphantly, in Your strength for Christ's sake. Amen.

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