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

Blessed Is God, Part 2
Scripture: 2 Corinthians 1:4-7
Code: 47-3

Second Corinthians chapter 1 verses 3 through 11, and though we cannot in any one message cover all of that text, we're working our way through what is wonderful and rich study of comfort.

I had the great joy of being in Ireland this summer, something which I have desired to do for many years of my life for a number of reasons, not the least of which is I heard of the beauty of the place and I wanted to enjoy the creative hand of God and see what He had done there. And you think you've seen green, but you haven't seen green until you've been to Ireland. They have a folksong called "Forty Shades of Green," it is green. But in order to be so green there is a lot of mist and a lot of fog. It rains this gentle almost constant kind of mist. And the fog sometimes obscure the beautiful green mountainsides.

As I think about that I have to recognize that that's in some ways a parable of life. Wherever you find a Christian life that is covered with the mists and the fogs of sorrow, you will likely find the verdant green beauty of the soul. Great hearts, you see, are the product of great troubles. The trials of life inevitably provide God with the opportunity to humble us and humbling is the path to glory. He allows so much trouble in order that He might give so much comfort and so much strength that we might not in our own strength but in His become all that He wants us to be.

If anybody knew what it was to be humbled, if anybody knew what it was to have his life shrouded by mists and fogs, if anybody knew what the constant dripping rain of tribulation was, it was the Apostle Paul. Instead of fighting, he embraced it. Instead of resisting, he welcomed it. And even reached the point in his spiritual experience where in this very same letter, chapter 12, he says, "Most gladly therefore I will rather boast about my weaknesses that the power of Christ may dwell in me, therefore I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties for Christ's sake for when I am weak then I am strong." He had learned that the trouble and the trial and the pain that came to his life was the very rain and mist and fog that God used to make him the magnificent Christian that he was. He learned that God's strength is only perfected in our weakness, only when we have come to the extremity of life where we have no human solution can God invade the sane and do what only He can do so that He gains all the glory and make beauty out of the darkness.

Earlier in the service I read for you Psalm 42. And certainly Psalm 42 speaks to this very issue. The psalmist in writing the Psalm, along with the one that follows it, Psalm 43, found himself in a severe

mist and a fog of trouble. It was deep enough trouble to have brought him continual tears. He was mourning all the time. He had been disallowed from the worship at the house of God. He no longer could assemble with God's people, the faithful. He was being mercilously attacked by his enemies. It was having a physical effect on him. He felt abandoned by God. He felt oppressed. Though he was undeserving, he felt his soul panting after God, his eyes endlessly shedding tears and the threatening situation seemed to be worsening.

But sprinkled through that Psalm are moments of lucid thought when he stops listening to himself and talks to himself. Rather than listening to the complaints, he was silently articulating to his own troubled soul. He took command of his inner voice and began to speak to himself. He called out to his depressed heart and he asks of series of questions, and he asks them several times. He says, "Why are you in despair, O my soul? Why have you become disturbed within me?" And then he answers his own query, "Hope in God." And says, "For I shall yet praise Him for the help of His presence, I shall yet praise Him, the help of my countenance and my God."

It simply when he took his eyes off his situation and put them on his God that things began to change. When he stopped listening to his troubled soul and started talking to it that there was an alteration in his mood. He affirms that God will come and God will bring His help. And not only that, he says God will not just help his situation but God will help his countenance, which means God will change his face. In other words, the man who is depressed and despairing, disquieted and miserable and unhappy always shows it in his face. The troubled woman can be seen to be troubled by looking at the face. And the psalmist says God will come and He will help and my face will get better. I will lose that drawn haggard vexed troubled perplexed disquieted appearance and begin to look composed and calm and peaceful, balanced, bright and hopeful. God's going to come and God's going to take care of me.

God then was the source of his comfort. And it was his faith in God that made him say, "I will yet praise Him. There will be a song in the night."

The psalmist is articulating what certainly Isaiah grasped. The prophet was ever ready to affirm the comfort of God in dire circumstances. In chapter 49 of Isaiah's prophecy and verse 13 he writes, "Shout for joy, O heavens, and rejoice, O earth, break forth into joyful shouting, O mountains, for the Lord has comforted His people and will have compassion on His afflicted."

In chapter 51 and verse 12 Isaiah says, speaking for God, "I even I am He that comforts you." Chapter 52 verse 9, "Break forth, shout joyfully together for the Lord has comforted His people." And then that wonderful expression in chapter 66 and verse 13, "As one whom his mother comforts, the Lord says, So I will comfort you and you shall be comforted."

In the New Testament, Jesus when He was about to leave, Jesus who had been the comforter, who had comforted the troubled disciples in all of their troubles said to them, "I will not leave you comfortless." Because I go doesn't mean you'll be without a comforter, in fact, "I will send to you another comforter, one just like Myself." God is a comforter. Christ, God incarnate, is a comforter. And the Holy Spirit, God, the third member of the trinity is also a comforter. And so, the Apostle Paul can sum up the comfort received from the trinity with the words, "I can do all things through Him who strengthens me," Philippians 4:13. He who comforts, encourages, emboldens and makes me brave.

It is this very issue of comfort and trouble that is addressed in our text. It is this very issue that is in the heart of the Apostle as he launches into this long and very important letter. Paul is expressing his thankfulness to God, his gratitude to God for being a comfort in the midst of all of his pain. This epistle will catalog for us much of Paul's pain. There is an indication of it, as we shall see, in chapter 1. He describes his pain and persecution in chapter 4 verses 8 to 12. He talks about it again in chapter 6 verses 4 and 5. He talks about in chapter 7 verses 5 and 6. He talks about it in some great detail in chapter 11 verses 23 and following. He talks about it again in chapter 12. All throughout this letter Paul is letting us feel the ache in his heart over the various trials and troubles that afflicted him. Really nothing is held back. He doesn't do it for the sake of sympathy. It is the badge of his apostleship. It is the evidence that he is genuinely the servant of God. It harks back, as it were, to the words of Jesus who said, "If they hated you...if they hate Me they will hate you. If they rejected Me they will reject you." The servant is not above his master.

And here is the Apostle Paul saying, "You want to know what my apostolic credentials are...look at the suffering for the cause of Christ." It isn't for self-promotion. It isn't for sympathy that he chronicles this, it is part of his credentials and there are others that he will express in this letter. This is a very personal affirmation of Paul's apostolic credentials, the whole letter. Not from an academic or pedantic or theological or systematical approach but it's just his heart sharing the things that have set him apart as God's servant and an Apostle of Jesus Christ.

But one of the major marks of his apostleship was pain...not just the physical pain of persecution but the pain of disappointment that came in working with all the churches and certainly Corinth inflicted that pain on him. This is the fourth letter he's written them. Only one of them is recorded in Scripture, 1 Corinthians, and then this one. The other two are lost to us, but he was deeply grieved and wounded by them, by their sin and by their defection away from him and from the truth to false doctrine and false apostles. And he prompted him to write this letter. But he wants them to know that in spite of all of his pain, in spite of all of his trials, he's not moaning, he's not complaining, he is rejoicing because no matter what the extent of his trials, that is the extent to which the comfort of God has gone. No matter how weak he has become, it is to the extent of his weakness that the power of God has been revealed. Therefore his suffering is part of equipping him for ministry by virtue of enabling him to comfort others and to express the power of God.

Now remember, the group of false teachers claiming to be true apostles had infested the church at Corinth and effected a rather serious mutiny. They had led some of the Corinthian believers, no doubt a large number of them, to rebel against the Apostle Paul. Their plan was very clear. They wanted to teach heresy. They were representatives of Satan, disguised as angels of light and they wanted to teach heresy. But in order to teach heresy they had to destroy those who had taught truth, namely Paul. And so they attacked Paul with slanderous lies, accusing him of all kinds of sins, everything from immorality to embezzlement. Said he was a fake and a fraud and he lacked credibility, he lacked integrity. He was not from God. He did not represent the truth. And they got people to believe them and this mutiny came against Paul and that's what caused him to write the third letter which Timothy...rather which Titus took. Titus has now come back and reported that most of the people responded with repentance. They affirmed their love toward Paul. He writes 2 Corinthians back and in part he thanks them for their sorrowful repentance, he thanks them for their affirmation of love. He thanks them for holding the truth and not listening to the false apostles.

But he also knows there's a minority of people who are still there and that this mutiny will not go away. And so he writes this letter in part to say thank you for your response to the last one, but in larger part to reaffirm his apostolic credentials. He writes such a comprehensive letter, such an unarguable presentation of his apostolic integrity as to hope to put to bed forever this mutiny.

Now apparently one of the assaults on him was an assault on the fact that he was being punished for sin. Of course, they had accused him of everything from immorality to embezzlement. And they were simply saying, "You know how much Paul suffers, how much persecution he endures, how difficult life is for him, well figure it out, folks, God's chastening him for all his sins."

But Paul answers that falsehood right in these verses, verses 3 to 11, by saying, "God comes to me but He doesn't come to me in chastening, He comes to me in comfort. God isn't doing this to me because of some sin, He's putting me through this to make me powerful and to enable me to have a greater ministry."

Let's read verses 3 through 8 for this morning and set this in our minds. "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 afflictions 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." Let's stop right there, we won't get pass that.

That very simple and somewhat repetitious little text tells us some very profound things about God's comfort in our suffering. First of all, it reaffirms to us the promise of comfort...it reaffirms to us the promise of comfort. Look at verse 4, "Who comforts us in all our affliction." Paul is saying, "Look, first of all I want you to know that the God of all comfort never fails. It is His nature. It is His promise...I will not leave you comfortless, Jesus said..." The God of all comfort, the Father of tender mercies, pity and compassion will always bestow the appropriate encouragement, comfort, strength on His people.

The Lord who is a friend sticking closer than a brother, the Lord who is with us always is near as hands and feet, as near as breathing. The Lord who never leaves us or forsakes us, the Lord who takes up residence in us, the Lord who has unlimited resources, the Lord who promises to be the supply of all our need according to Christ Jesus, the Lord who says He is the God of comfort will comfort us in all our affliction. Paul speaks this not so much out of revelation but he speaks it out of revelation and experience.

It's much like Romans 8. Turn to Romans 8 for just a moment. At the end of the chapter he says, "If God is for us...in verse 31...if God is for us, who can be against us?" And, of course, the answer is no one because no one is as powerful as God. "And if God didn't spare His own Son but He delivered Him up for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things?" If He already gave us the greatest gift which was His Son, the most magnanimous gift, the most sacrificial gift, if He already gave us the greatest gift then He doesn't mind the nickels and dimes of comfort to help us in our trials. That's what he's saying. If He already made the supreme sacrifice, He surely is willing to make lesser ones. If He gave us the greatest grace, He will give us the lesser ones. If He gave us Christ, won't He give us the rest? Do you think somebody successfully can bring a charge against God's elect? No. God already has declared us righteous. Who is going to condemn us? Not Jesus Christ, He died for us.

So what is there that could separate us from God's love in Christ? What is there? Tribulation? No. Distress? No. Persecution? No. Famine? No. Nakedness, peril, sword? No. In fact, in these things, he says, just as it is written for Thy sake we're being put to death all day long. We were considered as sheep to be slaughtered but in all these things we overwhelmingly conquer through Him who loved us.

It doesn't matter what comes...tribulation, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, peril, sword...we triumph in Him because He comes with comfort...not death, verse 38, not life, not angels, not principalities, not things present, things to come, powers, height, depth, no created thing can separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord. There is God loving His children through every extremity. And as Paul writes that, beloved, I would just remind you that this is not simply revelation, this is experience. Paul had known tribulation, he had known distress, he had known persecution. He had known famine. He had known the threat of the...of the sword, peril, nakedness.

He had been assaulted by death in life by fallen angels, the principalities, all of it. And he's saying I've been through it all and I can tell you not only by revelation but from personal experience that God never ceases to be there...never. It's foolish for the psalmist to say, "I'm in despair, where is God? Why has He forgotten me? Where did He go? Why are you despairing, O my soul? Why are you troubled? Hope in God. His presence is there."

You see, in God's sovereign plan He stays by His children. And so the Apostle Paul can say, "I will speak well of God...verse 3...I will bless...that's what it means...His name because He comforts us in all our affliction," that's His nature, that's His promise. In fact, there is no trial that will ever come upon you, Paul told the Corinthians in the last letter, chapter 10 verse 13, but such is as common to man and God who is faithful will never allow you to be tested above that you are able, but will with that testing always make a way to escape.

And according to Philippians 1:6, the one who began the good work in you will make sure it is perfected until the day of Jesus Christ. God will do whatever He needs to do to sustain you to strengthen you.

Look at the word "afflictions," it's just the word thlipsisin the Greek, it means pressure. And in Paul's life there was always the pressure trying to crush out his life or trying to restrict and confine his ministry and debilitate him. But in all of that...that word "all" is obviously comprehensive and inclusive, no matter what came by way of powerful pressure, God was there. And He was comforting Paul. And the word "comfort" again doesn't mean giving him ease, it means strengthening, encouraging, ennobling, making brave, bold, courageous. God was there giving him the strength to go through.

In God's sovereign plan, until the moment when the Lord wanted Paul to die, he was indestructible. You can read right away in chapter 9 after his conversion, the Jew...the Jews got together a plot to try to kill him. As soon as his conversion is described for us there and then the hiatus he had while God prepared him for his ministry in Arabia and then as he comes back to preach, it's continuing. You come into chapter 14, the hostility is still there. They try again to kill him. They throw him on the dump outside the city and he's supposedly dead and the Bible says he arose, stood up, got on his feet, went back into the city, preached again...as if to say, I'm going to go right back doing exactly what I was doing where I was doing it, kill me if you must.

You find him in chapter 16, they've got him stocks and God blows the whole jail to bits. The church is planted in Philippi, a jailor and his family are converted and Paul's on his way again. You find him in Acts chapter 27 and he's in a situation where there's a shipwreck and everybody is afraid that all are going to drown and nobody drowns because Paul is on the ship and God is going to save everybody along with him. He was...he was indestructible in the purpose and plan of God as long as God wanted him to serve and to preach. And he had that confidence that God would be there to strengthen him in every trial until the plan was fully complete. He experienced it. And he sought that same glorious

experience of God's power in his weakness, God's comfort in his trial for every Christian. So the promise of comfort is a promise to all believers that God is going to be there beside us as long as we are serving Him, faithfully sustaining and strengthening.

Let's look secondly at the purpose of comfort. The purpose of comfort is indicated in verse 4 also. He says, "Who comforts us in all our affliction...here comes the purpose...so that, or in order that, or for the purpose that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God."

My, this is a wonderful truth...a wonderful truth. He sees comfort, listen to this, he sees comfort not as an end in itself but as a means to an end. He sees comfort as a trust, as a stewardship. He sees God's comfort as something not intended to end with him but to be passed on. And he is saying, "If I have suffered it is so that God could comfort me so that I could comfort you when you suffer." The purpose of comfort then is to make us into comforters. God is a comforter, Christ is a comforter, the Holy Spirit is a comforter and so should we be. Paul is, in effect, saying I'm so happy to be comforted by God in my distress so that I can use the comfort He gave to me and the strength He gave to me to strengthen you.

It's interesting, really, the sovereign God used Paul to humiliate the Corinthian church. The first three letters that he wrote were humiliation, to knock them down, to convict them, to confront them, to bring them to their knees, to crush them, to cause them to repent and change. God used Paul to humiliate them and then God allowed Paul to suffer so he could come right back and strengthen them with the strength for which he himself had been strengthened by God.

Paul knew that those who received the most trouble will experience the most comfort. And those who experience the most comfort are thereby able to comfort others the most. So Paul saw God just passing comfort through Him.

He had been distressed, humiliated, afflicted, hurt. And he was such a noble soul. He wasn't perfect but he was such a noble Christian. And it didn't seem to matter. I mean, he might of complained, you know, because he was such a precise and disciplined Christian, but he didn't because he saw all the pain that he suffered, terrible bodily pain and deprivation and anguish of soul over the defection of the believers and the battle with error and demons and false doctrine and all of that. He saw all of that as a means of devastating his own human pride and weakening him to the point where the strength of God was infused into him and that's what made him the mighty man that he was. And he could see himself as merely a conduit through which God could pass comfort and strength to others because he had experienced so much of it.

It's reminiscent of our Lord's words to Peter in Luke 22. The Lord knew that Peter was going to be tempted by Satan severely and he was going to deny Christ. And Jesus said to him, "Satan has

desired to have you so that he can sift you like wheat, but when you are converted, strengthen the brethren." What's going to happen to you, Peter, is this...you're going to get hit with all the fury of hell in some temptation, but I'm going to hold you through that. There will be times of failure but I won't let you go. And when you get through that and you turn around...and he did, he went out and wept..what?...bitterly, and that was expressive of his repentance, and after that the Lord said to him, "This is needful for you to go through this because I want to use you to strengthen others in their trials. We seek not only comfort from God for ourselves, says Paul, but we seek broken hearts to comfort with the strength we have received from Him.

Now just a note about this, at the end of verse 4, he says, "We are comforted by God." God alone brings true comfort. There is no comfort anywhere else. God is the God of all comfort, verse 3 says. All comfort comes from God. The rest is a sham. You see psychologists and psychiatrists and analysts and whoever, just average people trying to comfort folks in human realm...in a human realm with human solutions and it's all short-lived and doesn't endure, doesn't solve the problem. And along comes the Christian and has the experience of the fullness of God's supernatural transcendent comfort. That's the only true strength.

God, he says, has comforted me in every affliction I've ever experienced. And...so that I could pass it on to you. Here is a...here is a humility, beloved, that is really unusual. Here is a man who is saying..."I will suffer whatever I need to suffer if it can make me a blessing to someone else."

There's a third principle here about comfort. The parameters of comfort. I believe that comfort is limited. Even though God is the goal...God of all comfort, and has comforted us in all our affliction, there's a reason why. There are limits, there are parameters, there are boundaries to comfort. Look at verse 5 and here we meet the parameters. "For just as the sufferings of Christ are ours in abundance, so also our comfort is abundant through Christ."

What is he saying? Listen to what he's saying. God's comfort extends to whatever level we suffer for Christ. Did you get that? The boundary of God's comfort is righteous suffering, righteous suffering. The sufferings of Christ will be ours in abundance, he says, and so will the comfort. The comfort will be equal to the suffering. What suffering? Not suffering for sin but suffering for Christ.

Look at 1 Peter chapter 4, this is a very important text, 1 Peter chapter 4. I want to read verses 12 through 16 with some comment. First Peter 4:12, "Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you which comes upon you for your testing, as though some strange thing were happening to you." Now listen to this in verse 13, "But to the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing." Why? Because to whatever degree you suffer for Christ, you will be comforted by Christ. And further, the same verse, "So also that at the revelation of His glory you may rejoice with exaltation." And what does that mean? That adds another component, to the degree that you suffer for Christ you will be comforted. To the degree that you suffer to Christ and are comforted, you will be

rewarded in eternity. Your eternal reward is connected to the degree of your suffering, as is your comfort.

Verse 14, he gives you an illustration. "For if you're reviled for the name of Christ, you're blessed." It doesn't matter what happens to you for the name of Christ, God will bless you, the Spirit of glory, the Spirit of God will rest on you. The Holy Spirit will come to you with power. That's what he means. Strength will be infused. You will be strengthened in the inner man by the Spirit of God, as he told the Ephesians. When you are reviled for the name of Christ, you...you should be blessed by that because the Spirit is going to come to you, He's going to infuse you with strength. It's a privilege. And that's going to be a part of your eternal reward.

But, there's another side to this, verse 15, "By no means let any of you suffer as a murderer or thief or evil doer or a troublesome meddler, busybody." He says, now I want you to understand what I'm saying, folks, there's no promise of future glory, there's no promise of the present power of the Holy Spirit to comfort and strengthen you if your suffering is a suffering for sin. Peter's comfort didn't come until he repented. And it never does come when we sin. God is not saying, "Well in all your sin I'll comfort you," no, in your sin it's more likely that He would chasten you because every son whom He loves, He...what? He chastens and scourges because He wants to perfect holiness.

So, the parameters for God's promise of comfort are the sufferings of Christ. So he says...go back to the verse then in 2 Corinthians, he says, verse 5, "For just as the sufferings of Christ are ours in abundance..." He says it never ends. Frankly for him, it really never did. I mean, it just went on all the time. Look at chapter 4, verse 1 he says, "Well, we don't lose heart, I mean, we're getting it all over the place all the time, endlessly, we don't lose heart." Verse 8, "We are afflicted in every way, we're not crushed. Perplexed, not despairing. Persecuted, not forsaken. Struck down, not destroyed. We always carry about in our bodies the dying of Jesus. We're constantly being delivered over to death for Jesus' sake." Verse 12, "Death works in us." That's okay. Verse 14, "We know that He who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus and will present us with You. And we do all these things for your sakes so that the grace, the saving grace of God can spread to more and more people."

It's okay, sufferings of Christ abound. They're all over the place. This is my life. In Galatians 6:17 he says, "I bear in my body the scars of Jesus." People are hitting me, they want to hit Him, He's not here, they hit me instead. That's exactly what he meant. Colossians chapter 1 and verse 24, "I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake and in my flesh I share...I do my share on behalf of His body in filling up what is lacking in Christ's affliction." I'm taking what they mean for Christ, they're giving it to me because He's not here. That's okay. I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake. I'll take the pain if it can bring you to Christ. I'll take the pain if it can change your life. As he said to the Romans, sufferings of this world aren't worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be ours some day in Christ. In fact, to the Philippians he said, "That I may know Him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His...what?...sufferings." I want that. I want that.

The servant is not above his Lord, Matthew 10. If He suffered, I suffer. I'll gladly bear His reproach, Hebrews 13:13, we ought to be willing to bear His reproach. I'll take the scars for the blows meant for Jesus who took the blows meant for me because in this world I may have tribulation, Jesus said, but He is the one who overcomes the world.

Paul could certainly say, as he does in verse 5, that the sufferings of Christ are ours in abundance. I mean, he had a tremendous amount of suffering. The implication there is also that Timothy had experienced that, the plural pronoun indicating that he's including Timothy who is named in verse 1. We get a lot of it. But to the extent that we suffer for Christ, he says, is the extent to which we are comforted through Christ. Tremendous.

The promise of comfort comes from God. The purpose of comfort comes through us to others. The parameters of comfort are defined by the suffering for Christ. Don't expect God to come with great strength and comfort to you if you're in sin. He'll pour out His Spirit of grace and glory on you when your suffering is for righteousness sake.

Fourthly, the partnership of suffering. This harks back a little to the second point but approaches it a little more intensely. The partnership of suffering, in verses 6 and 7. He says, "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."

He says, "If in the course of my godly living, if in the course of my ministry of serving Christ I am afflicted, Timothy is afflicted, any of us who represent Christ are afflicted, it is so that in being afflicted we may be comforted so that we can comfort you...so that we can bring you salvation." It's for you, he says, don't you know it's for you? Don't you understand? I mean, to say nothing of what he wrote them in 1 Corinthians 12 where he said to them, "If one member suffers, all members suffer with it, if one member is honored, all members rejoice with it." I mean, he is saying to them, "Isn't just plain ole common Christian love going to take over here and you're not going to accuse me of something because I'm suffering, where's the sympathy, where's the empathy?" I mean, wouldn't it be just the right thing to say...here's a brother, a member of the body suffering, we suffer when he suffers. And when he rejoices, we rejoice. He doesn't even deal with that. He simply says to them, "Look, when we're afflicted it's so that we can comfort you and bring you salvation. And when we are comforted after our affliction, it's again so that we can comfort you."

There must have been a lack of compassion toward Paul by the Corinthians, there must have been a hard-heartedness, a coldness, a failure to comprehend that Paul's pain and suffering and affliction had been by God's will and God had allowed it in his ministry for the sake of perfecting the man. Again, he was going to be the man God wanted him to be through the mists and the fogs of trouble. He says, "Don't you realize the partnership here? Don't you realize how my suffering is linked to you?

It was my willingness to suffer, my afflictions that molded and shaped me into the man that God made me who had come to you and preached to you." And now he says, "It is my willingness to put my life on the line by God's grace and in the power of the Spirit be afflicted and comforted that allows me to continue this ongoing relationship that will comfort you and bring you to the final salvation."

And I think that's what he's saying here. God is using me as an instrument for your perseverance. In that sense, salvation is referred to, it could be that he was even referring back to the time of their salvation that he suffered much in getting them the gospel. But I think because the comfort comes first in the text, he says, "For your comfort and salvation," it probably means for your ongoing persevering deliverance unto the final salvation. Here was a man who had had so much anxiety, so much pain he was just torn up on the inside, as we noted last week about the Corinthians, he wrote them a letter then, 1 Corinthians, then another letter, then 2 Corinthians. They have taken tremendous amounts of his time, 18 months there. They have taken a huge part of his heart and stomped all over it. This is a man who has poured much into this congregation of people and they have given him much grief. And he is saying, "I've gone through so much of your own affliction that you've put on me, in addition to that much more affliction, but in all of it don't you realize God comes to me and makes me strong so that I can come to you and make you strong and bring you to the final salvation?"

Did you see the partnership in all of this? Don't you see the connectedness? Don't you see the solidarity here? If I've been comforted, he says in verse 5, it's for you. Because it becomes effective in enabling you to patiently endure the same sufferings which we also suffer. There's an interesting note. You know what that tells us? Some of the people in the Corinthian church were getting the same kind of sufferings Paul was getting. What does that mean? They were suffering for righteousness sake and that indicates there was a corps of committed people there. It may well have been the majority, certainly Titus was encouraged by the repentance and sorrow that he saw when he went there, and Paul rejoices, later on we'll see that, chapter 7, at the report about their repentance and their loyalty to him and to the truth. He's saying, "Hey, there are people in that congregation right there who are suffering the same kind of suffering I'm suffering. And don't you understand God is allowing me to suffer and to be comforted so that I can come to you and comfort you when you go through the same suffering I've already been through? And, in fact, you can comfort me too because you've been there. Don't you see the mutuality of all of this? Don't you see how all of our sufferings enable us to minister to each other? That's the partnership in this whole thing, you're not out there doing your own thing. You represent the Lord Jesus Christ, you suffer persecution, you suffer rejection in your family, at your job, in school, wherever it might be. That could escalate in our culture, believe me. Whatever persecution and hostility you receive for the sake of Christ for the glory of His name, for speaking a word of witness, for lifting up Jesus Christ, whatever pain you receive for that you know you will be comforted with and God will enable you to comfort others who will also having been comforted by God be able to comfort you.

I think the thing that you want to see here is to get beyond yourself. When you suffer in your life the things that come in your life for righteousness sake, not...we're not talking about the sin suffering, chastening things, but for righteousness sake, when you suffer you realize that you are tied together with a whole of the body of Christ in their pain. I'm so glad for the little things that I may have suffered in my life so that when I go to eastern Europe and sit down with a group of people who have lived a life of deprivation that you can't even understand, there may be a little sense in which I can offer them the comfort of God. I'm equally glad that when I sit with them they have experiences of God's comfort at levels I don't understand and they can commit to me their strong confidence in God who brought them through. I'm so glad I can understand that.

I can look at people in various situations in the world and though I have not experienced exactly what they've experienced, I've experienced enough of the comfort of God and the afflictions that I have had even minimally to be able to give them some of the confidence that God has poured into me through the times of trial.

It's a partnership we're in. And you never can look at your own suffering independent of the whole body of Christ. You can't bet a "poor me" mentality...a self-preservation attitude that says I'm not about to take a stand for Christ, I might suffer. You better take a stand for Christ, suffer, be comforted so God can use you to comfort others. There are some in the Corinthian church who are suffering for the Kingdom, for righteousness, for the gospel. The same reason Paul is suffering, ordinary faithful Christians. And he says we can mutually share in each other's lives the comfort we have received from the Lord. And this, he says, is effective because it allows you to patiently endure through these sufferings.

How does it do that? Because you see someone else doing it. He strengthens you. Because the lessons that you've...that he's learned come to you and you learn them. It helps you endure. We call that encouraging people. That's really what comfort is because we've been there, we know there's light at the end of the darkness.

And then in verse 7, "And our hope for you is firmly grounded." He doesn't really doubt that God will be faithful and bring them through the difficulties. Our hope for you is firmly grounded. Why? What's it grounded on? Because we know that as you are sharers of our sufferings, so also you are sharers of our comfort. I know you're going to be all right because there is a group in that church that are suffering for the cause of Christ and God will comfort you and strengthen you. And through that strength your hope will stand.

The partnership of comfort then goes like this...the multiplication of suffering in Paul's life multiplies divine comfort to him and that makes him capable of comforting other Christians who are suffering the same kind of affliction and this comfort aids their endurance. So Paul says whether I was afflicted or

whether I was comforted, in my affliction it was for you. It was to make me strong, make me courageous, make me bold so that I could come to you and give you confidence.

In spite of all the pain they had inflicted on Paul, and they had inflicted a lot of it, some of them in the church, he saw them not as the enemy but as partners to be helped. Even though they had hurt him so deeply and given him so much anxiety, he wanted to give them nothing but the gift of comfort. And he believed in them because there were some of them faithful enough to suffer for the same things he was suffering for.

The promise of comfort...God will comfort in every situation. The purpose, so that through you someone else can be comforted. The parameters, comfort extends only to the extent of suffering for Christ's sake. The partnership, you're not alone, you're not in isolation, whatever pain and difficulty you go through you don't have to dwell on for your own sake, how it effects you, how it debilitates, how it makes difficult life for you, but rather to see how God can use it in the church for others.

The next point is a great point but we don't have time for it. I didn't think we'd get to verse 8.

Father, we thank You this morning that You have shown us simply really, ever so simply, and You've reminded us that You're the God of all comfort. So much could be said, and the best of what could be said is to make the passage clear. We can only trust that we have been able to do that. So many issues of life that we can put in a completely different perspective if we understand this when we live for you and suffer for it, when we speak the gospel, when we lift up Christ and suffer for it and we are humiliated or shamed or put down or persecuted or treated unkindly, we're just right at the point where Your spirit will rest on us and fill us with strength, making us more able to minister to others who suffer the same.

Lord, make us whatever You want us to be, whatever degree of suffering for the sake of the King is required to shape us for ultimate usefulness, we ask that You would bring. May we like Paul say I gladly therefore will rejoice in my weakness. Make us weak, weaken us, O God, in the human realm so that we may be strengthened in Your strength, Your power and we'll thank You in Christ's name. Amen.

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