

2 Corinthians 1:1-11 – True Comfort

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BIG Idea: In Jesus God comforts us so we can comfort others

Outline

- The Original and the Sequel
- 2 Corinthians: Authentic Christianity (v1-2)
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Reflection Question:

- How can you be comforting others with the comfort you have received in Jesus?

Intro: The Original and the Sequel

Well it is sometimes said that ‘the sequel is never as good as the original’. It might be with a movie, a book, a TV show, a music album. Sometimes the sequel isn’t as good as the original. I know that’s certainly the case for two of my all-time favourite Christmas movies. And of course I’m talking about Home Alone and Die Hard. The originals, the first movies, are better than the sequels.

Today we start a new sermon series in the book of **2 Corinthians**, It’s the sequel, if you like, to 1 Corinthians, the original. And I’ve got to say, it’s a hard act to follow. 1 Corinthians, is a theological blockbuster. It’s a letter that’s so rich in what it teaches us about the cross and the resurrection, and how Christians are to live as God’s church. 1 Corinthians is a blockbuster. It’s got everything! So how do you follow that up?

Well friends before we start speculating on whether 2 Corinthians will be as good as 1 Corinthians, I must warn you that 2 Corinthians is a different sequel than what you’re used to. For a start, it’s actually not the sequel – it’s not the second letter in the series. It’s most likely the fourth letter that Paul has written to this church, but only the second one remaining and which is given to us in Scripture.

And because of that, 2 Corinthians is also a different kind of sequel because we’re looking at Scripture. We are looking at God’s word. Which means it’s already a blockbuster. So friends as we come to look at 2 Corinthians, we’ve got to remember that it’s not up to 2 Corinthians to meet our expectations. But because it’s God’s word then it will give us the right expectations

And in this opening passage of 2 Corinthians which we are looking at today, we are given the right expectations of comfort and hope. As this passage was read out for us before, the word that keeps coming up is ‘comfort’. It’s everywhere in this passage.

And I don’t think this could be more timely for us to hear. At the moment we need comfort. We need hope. With this corona virus our world has been disrupted, and we’re all feeling it to greater or lesser degrees. We’re all feeling immense grief at the loss of lives and livelihoods.

During this corona virus crisis, there have been two images which have stuck in my mind. The first one is the satellite photo over Iran showing the mass graves of people who have died. The second one is of those long lines of people waiting outside Centrelink because they have lost their jobs.

We live in a world that is grieving and in need of comfort, true comfort. And this passage shows us where true comfort is found, and how if you are a follower of Jesus, you are in a unique position to give comfort to others.

2 Corinthians: Authentic Christianity (v1-2)

And the opening verses, which are easy to skim over, show us that we can have comfort because what we are reading is true. It’s authentic. It’s not fake. It’s the real deal.

In 2 Corinthians, chapter 1, verse 1 we read that this letter is from:

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother,

These are words written by the apostle Paul who speaks and writes with the authority of the Lord Jesus. So right from the outset, this is no ordinary letter written by any ordinary person. It is God’s Word.

And this is a letter written: *To the church of God in Corinth* – a city which was a major hub of commerce and culture, bringing with it lots of idolatry. A city not too different to Sydney. So this is a letter written to a real church, in a real place, at a real time. It’s authentic and true.

And so is the message of this letter. In verse 2 Paul sketches out the authentic gospel which Christians believe. God pouring out his grace to us through his son Jesus and us and bringing peace with God.

And because of this grace and peace then Christians show grace and have peace with one another. That is what it truly looks like to follow Jesus and be his disciple. And these opening verses capture what this letter is about. If you had to sum up the message of 2 Corinthians, then it’s about authentic Christianity and authentic Christian discipleship.

The God of Comfort (v3-7)

So how is this authentic gospel a comfort and encouragement for us amidst troubles and hardship?

Well as Christians, all comfort that we receive starts with the God who comforts us. That's what we see in verse 3. Have a look with me:

3 Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort,

We're reminded here that the God we worship and the God who loves us is our Heavenly Father. A Christian writer once said that, 'no one else but Christians can call God their Father'. We have a Heavenly Father who dearly loves and cares for His children. His character is one of compassion and overflowing comfort. I don't know about you, but I can picture here a parent picking up their crying child, putting their arms around them, and wiping away their tears. God comforts us.

And this is not the first place we see this in the Bible. In Isaiah chapter 40 it says:

1 Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.

2 Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins.

(Isaiah 40:1-2)

God's comfort to his people is seen in his forgiveness of our sin. We have a Father who comforts us by not only wiping away our tears, but more importantly wiping away our sin.

And in verse 4 we see that our Heavenly Father ...*comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God.*

You see, when God comforts us, it doesn't stop with us, but it flows out to others. God comforts us so that we can comfort others in their troubles.

And we see this pattern quite often in the Bible. For example: We love others, because God first loved us. We forgive others because we have been forgiven greatly by God.

And likewise, we can comfort others because we have been comforted by God.

We have experienced the true comfort that God gives and hold this out to others in their troubles.

You see there are many places that you can turn to for comfort. You might seek comfort in someone you know and trust, like a best friend. You might find comfort in a special place where

you can get away from everything. You might even consume some comfort food that you pull out when you're feeling down - for me it's dark chocolate.

But you see, as nice as they are, all those things are temporary and they don't give us lasting comfort. But in our Heavenly Father we have eternal comfort that far outweighs anyone or anything we might turn to. Only a Heavenly Father who dearly loves you and who would give His own Son so that you can be forgiven, can give you lasting comfort.

And this comfort from God is of course centred on His Son Jesus. It's through Christ and our fellowship with him that we have comfort. In verses 5 to 7 that's what we see. As Christians, we share in Christ's sufferings, as well as the comfort that He give us. As verse 5 says, this comfort from Christ overflows to us. The point Paul is making is that as a follower of Jesus you will both share in the sufferings of Christ and you will also receive comfort through Christ. When you trust Jesus it means that like him, you will face troubles in this life. You will suffer for following Him. Jesus said to those who would follow Him that: 'they must deny themselves, take up their cross and follow Him'. A path of suffering. That's what Paul says here quite openly in verse 7 about the Corinthians "sharing in our sufferings".

So what this means is that trouble and hardship should not come as a surprise for you if you're a follower of Jesus.

But you see we also receive great comfort in the Lord Jesus. He entered the same broken world we live in, and He experienced the troubles of this world. And just as on the cross Jesus' blood flowed out, so too does his comfort to us. Jesus is the one who brings God's comfort to this world by having compassion on sinners and dealing with sin. It's through Him that we have God's eternal comfort

And that comfort we have in Jesus helps us to endure amidst troubles and hardship. Quite often when you're going through a rough period in life and experiencing great troubles you can wonder, 'Why me?', 'Why am I going through all this pain?' And there are many other questions we can ask.

But do you see there in verse 6 that the comfort we have in Jesus is effective during troubles and hardship. It produces patient endurance.

It might be hard to see it at the time, but God's comfort allows us to grow in our character. So during this coronavirus season and all the troubles that we face, as Christians it is a time where we can be growing in patient endurance. And the reason why we can endure patiently is because

of our sure and certain hope. We have a sure and certain hope in our Heavenly Father who loves us. And we have a sure and certain hope in his Son Jesus.

And that's what Paul highlights in the last few verses of this passage. He shares about the sure and certain hope that he has and how that was a comfort to Him.

A Comforting Hope (v8-11)

And Paul does this by sharing a testimony of how he experienced God's comfort. From verse 8 Paul shares about a troubling time that he went through in the province of Asia. He says there in verse 8 that:

...We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired of life itself. 9 Indeed, we felt we had received the sentence of death.

“Stressful” would probably be an understatement of what Paul was going through. To say that you “despaired of life itself” means that this was a traumatic episode for Paul. He was finished. He had hit rock bottom. This was very deep and dark valley that he was walking through. Maybe that's an experience you have had. where you feel that you just can't go on anymore. Maybe you're feeling close to it right now. That you feel like you've hit rock bottom or close to it.

Now our curiosity makes us want to know what Paul went through here. But he doesn't tell us. From Paul's life we know that it could be a range of things: being imprisoned, flogged and beaten, insulted, kicked out of the public square, people trying to kill him, being shipwrecked, the pastoral grief of being isolated from fellow Christians as he was quite frequently. We don't know what this situation is and Paul doesn't tell us.

But what we do know, and what we are told is of the comfort and hope that Paul found in this troubling event. He says there in verse 9:

...this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead.

As Paul concludes that the reason why he went through this hardship and trouble was so that he would trust in God and not himself. It took him to hit rock bottom, to see and be reminded that he couldn't go on by himself and his own strength.

Every summer I'm part of a beach mission team. And last summer I got chatting to a couple, Bill and Jane, who I've known for a few years. And they've been through quite a lot of hardship over the past few years including among other things a few relationship breakdowns and significant health problems. These guys aren't Christians but they said to me about all had been through that: "God only gives you what you can handle". And as I've thought about that, what Bill and Jane said is the precise opposite to what Paul is saying.

God actually gives us **more** than what we can handle. That's what verses 8 and 9 are saying – that this experience Paul had was "beyond his ability to endure". And this was so that he would trust in God.

You see, the gospel and being a Christian is not a self-improvement or do-it-yourself activity. It's the opposite. We are humbled as we see that we can't improve ourselves. And we are totally dependent on God and his power.

For Paul, this event showed him that the only person he could find hope and comfort in is God. And not just any God, but the God who raises the dead! That's the conclusion Paul reaches here. He was brought low to see his need to trust in God.

Have you considered that when you are brought to your knees, and have hit rock bottom, that this is so that you would trust in God? At this point in time, God is mercifully showing us that we cannot rely on ourselves but only on Him.

If we are turning to medical research, governments, business, the economy, the 'Australian spirit', or something else then we've come to the wrong conclusion. We can only trust in the God who raises the dead.

And that is where our true hope and comfort lies: in the resurrection of the dead. Just as we are united to Christ and will suffer like Christ, so too will we be raised as the Lord Jesus was. That is the resurrection hope and the comfort that we have as Christians.

And that is the eternal comfort we can hold out to a grieving world that so desperately needs comforting. We have a Heavenly Father who loves us more than anyone else does and who showed us by raising his own Son from the dead.

So that neighbour or colleague of yours who is despondent and down, you can share with them the comfort you have received from God and how Jesus gives you a certain hope amidst all the uncertainty in life.

And for us as a church, it's the same comfort we give to one another. We comfort each other by sharing the love and comfort we have received from God. We remind each other that God can and has raised the dead. That no matter how bad things get, we have a God who raises the dead – a God who will raise you from the dead!

And finally do you see in verses 10 and 11 that the hope we have in our God who raises the dead fuels our lives and our prayers. Paul says there in verse 10:

10 He has delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us again. On him we have set our hope that he will continue to deliver us, 11 as you help us by your prayers. Then many will give thanks on our behalf for the gracious favour granted us in answer to the prayers of many

The reason why Paul can press on is because God has delivered and saved him. His confidence and hope is in the God. Every step he takes is because God has saved him. He has been comforted by God. Therefore, we too set our hope on the God who has delivered us in Jesus and the One who will deliver us at the end.

And this hope fuels our prayers. Because God has delivered we know that he can deliver. That's why we pray to Him. We are praying to a God who acts, a God who comforts. And Paul is encouraging the Corinthians to partner with him and be in fellowship with him through their prayers.

So because we have a loving Heavenly Father who comforts us, then we can bring that comfort to others by praying with and for them. It's often surprising the number of people who don't usually have time for God are happy when you offer to pray for them. Maybe there are a few people you know who you can be bringing God's comfort to through prayer.

This comfort we have from God and the comfort we can give to others both starts and ends with him.

So let's now pray to this God. Please pray with me.

Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, we thank you for the comfort that we have in the Lord Jesus Christ. Please help us to trust in you and not ourselves.

We pray in the name of Jesus, our Saviour and deliverer. Amen.