

Sermon on 2 Corinthians 1:3-7 prepared by Jonathan Shradar

Followers of Jesus face affliction with the unshakeable hope found in the mercy of God and share that comfort with others.

This morning I want us to begin by thinking about how we define success. What does it mean to arrive, to achieve? We have, I think, a natural inclination toward what we see as successful as most meaningful. And perhaps we spend a lot of our lives longing for that.

Compare these two stories:

Sarah has experienced a perfect childhood. Two loving parents that nurtured her and encouraged her to have and chase dreams. She did well in school, found the profession that was her passion and was routinely promoted and honored for the work she did. Relationships were stable and her outlook was only for more of the same. A life essentially of no drama, economic security with money to spare, and overall happiness as she would define it.

Steve had it a little differently. While he didn't have parents that were attentive and loving he still had three squares a day and a grandmother that showed him great kindness. Life was rough, he worked hard in school but never felt like he could get ahead. Eventually in adulthood providing became a burden and work was full of failures and a seeming dependency on others. Relationships were hard and while he found someone to partner in life with, even that was fraught with difficulty. A life essentially of lots of drama, felt insecurity and only occasional happiness.

Of these two, which one is "winning?" We might have a gut reaction to this question, a sense of which is best and most desirable. But when we filter the question through a lens of biblical truth, or a Christo-centric worldview, the answer might be different, and for good reason.

This "different" is what Paul puts before the church in our text today. That something more significant than circumstance, or background, or picket fence

actually defines success. And we want to get in on it, to rightly view our lives and live into them fully as we were meant to.

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2 Corinthians 1:3-7

The context of the letter is important for us to remember as we unpack Paul's words. There had been an increasing movement within the church, stoked by traveling ministers looking for followers, to question Paul's credentials calling into question his whole ministry and influence in the church.

No one would like this - suggestions that he was not skilled enough, a boring preacher always repeating the same things - He did not have a big enough platform, and really was not as influential as people gave him credit for. He really shouldn't be followed or listened to because he experienced too much trouble which surely meant he was doing something wrong. Fascinatingly, rather than reject these things outright, Paul sort of embraces them.

Remember, 2 Corinthians gives us the counter-cultural reality that strength is found in weakness and reliance on Christ - which is Paul's answer - and he doesn't want the church to miss it for a second.

He gives a reflection on his very real experience of ministry, and God's help and the Corinthians benefit in that. But this is a universal Christian reality, not just for those leading or in "ministry" but for all of us.

1) Finding Comfort

The basis of the Christian life is who God is and what he has done, rightly, this is where Paul begins.

"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort." v. 3.

This is a pretty amazing description of God. The perfectly holy God, extending mercy (forgiveness) and comforting like a mother would. We heard the promise of it in Isaiah.

Isaiah 40:1 “Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.” (ESV)

Isaiah 66:13 “As one whom his mother comforts, so I will comfort you; you shall be comforted in Jerusalem.” (ESV)

That is what develops from who God is and what he has done - comfort. That is exactly what Paul is on about. Ten times in these verses he writes “comfort.”

What it conveys. The idea of comfort is “to strengthen much,” to encourage - to stand by another and encourage them as they endure testing. It is bolstering, building up. This is what he receives from the God of all comfort.

This is the fuel of Paul’s ministry. The gospel, **1 Corinthians 15:1–4** “Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, [2] and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you—unless you believed in vain. [3] For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, [4] that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures,” (ESV)

And it is what the Father of mercies comforts his people with, in all affliction. We want it, comfort, solving the situations we experience, the saving, the radical reversal of destiny that happens through the cross of Christ.

Here is the brutal truth faced with unshakeable hope - affliction will come. Your behavior is not necessarily an ignition for it, and the calls in the New Testament are not to avoid difficulty, but to expect it.

Matthew 24:9 “Then they will deliver you up to tribulation and put you to death, and you will be hated by all nations for my name's sake.” (ESV)

Philippians 1:29 “For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake”, (ESV)

Matthew 16:24 “Then Jesus told his disciples, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.” (ESV)

“The messianic age began with the coming of Jesus; but it is an age marked by sufferings - his own and those of his people.” *Paul Barnett*. The call to follow Jesus is really a call to come and die... And oh boy would Paul experience this.

Paul is acquainted with pain and comfort. “Every one of Paul’s epic miseries was attended by God’s comfort. His repeated imprisonments in Asia Minor, in Greece, and in Rome’s dank prison were venues of God’s comfort. Through each of the forty lashes administered on five separate occasions, with the final lashes meant to bring him to the point of death, and through the torturous days of healing that followed each of the five beatings, he experienced the comfort of God. Adrift like flotsam on the high seas (for the third time!) he knew the comfort of God again. When he was in danger from rivers - God’s comfort, danger from robbers - God’s comfort, danger from his own people - God’s comfort, danger in the city - God’s comfort, danger from false brothers - God’s comfort. “In toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure” (11:27), Paul always experienced God’s comfort. Never once was he without the comfort of God.” Hughes

Rather than a sign of fruitlessness, these were signs of apostolic authenticity. Affliction as a necessity in ministry and the Christian life...

We, thankfully, probably won’t experience the lashings but can recount and right now very much feel affliction. “all our affliction” and “any affliction” point to human troubles without specifying any details. Affliction (thlipsis) is a catch-all. So 2 Corinthians 1:4 invites you to read into it whatever presses you or distresses you, tests you or troubles you, hurts you or burdens you.’

Paul doesn’t use the word sin in this description either. So these are things of life that afflict us just because we trust Jesus and are living in a broken world.

So affliction is expected but so is, more importantly, comfort. Paul doesn't mean an easy life. "God's comfort is not a passive experience and it does not remove painful struggle. His comfort transforms the meaning of what is hard, and creates a different kind of struggle as he gives you purpose, strengthens trust, energizes caring, and teaches wisdom... God's comfort is unusual. He doesn't make life easy. He doesn't take struggle and hardship away. He even adds the pain of caring. But our Father's comfort actively strengthens you in the midst of weakness, pain, and need—so you can take heart and take action. We have very good reasons for feeling vulnerable and overwhelmed. But God's forms of comfort give better reasons to live with courage, humility, and purpose." David Powlison

My friend Seth just had surgery this week, as we talked about healing he reflected that his medications were intended to cover his pain, but the best thing for him in recovery is to actually experience his pain and gradually work through it, so he would know how far he could go etc. That is a picture of the unusual comfort of God.

It was and is through Christ that the comfort of God the Father comes.

Eight ways God comforts us (Powlison):

God comforts us by how he communicates his care in words. In essence, he says "I love you" in many different ways. You hear it in his word and see it in the work of Jesus for you. That you are the beloved of God.

God comforts us by what he does. He demonstrates "I love you" by actions: what he did, what he is doing, what he will do. He kept, keeps, and will keep his promises. His love is not a sentiment, an idea, a good intention, or a theological theory, it is backed by action.

God comforts us by his loving presence. The one who says he loves you, the one who shows his love by actions, the one who best loves you—he sticks with you. Your Savior never leaves your side. He will never abandon you. Never. He remains up close, personal, involved, on task.

God comforts us by how other people communicate their care in words. This entire letter is premised on the reality that our words can affect each other for good. In various ways, we are heartened when another person says and demonstrates “I love you,” and “You matter to me,” and “I’m proud of you and confident about you.” God does not comfort us with a bare message about something Jesus did 2000 years ago alone. Comfort also comes embodied in the personal care and concern of others who are in Christ.

God comforts us by what other people do for us. Like God, people show their love not only by their words but by their actions.

God comforts us by the loving presence of other people. All the mercies of God are intended to bring the Lord near to enjoy peace with his people. All the mercies of God are intended to bring his people near to enjoy peace with each other.

God comforts us when we witness how other people respond to him. Seeing someone else’s responsiveness nourishes our joy.

God comforts us as we see a growing stability of faith in ourselves. God has made us in his image to be self-reflective and self-aware. He anchors our hope, in part, because we see ourselves growing. Your faith becomes more durable—and you know it.

This is our lives as we patiently endure. It might take time, but it comes. God’s comfort always exceeds our afflictions.

It was why Paul had hope for the church in Corinth. It is why he could press on in ministry. And it is why we can keep going come what may.

And it has a purpose, maybe you noticed it, comfort certainly spotlights the grace and mercy of God but it also is meant to be extended to others.

2) Extending Comfort

When we live through affliction comforted by the God of all comfort, our questioning of “why am I experiencing this?” becomes “who am I experiencing this for?!”

The comfort we find in Christ actually makes us less concerned about ourselves. God “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.” v. 4.

“If we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation; and if we are comforted, it is for your comfort...” v. 6.

Sharing abundantly in Christ’s sufferings, so we share abundantly in comfort too.

“The comfort we receive from God through Christ we are both to give and receive from one another. God’s comfort, therefore, is not to terminate on the one who receives it. God comforted Paul by the coming of Titus to Macedonia (7:6), just as Titus has previously been comforted by the Corinthians (7:7). Paul in turn will comfort the Corinthians (verse 6), God’s comfort thus having come full circle, from the Corinthians, through Titus to Paul, back to the Corinthians.” PB

That is the cycle we experience as well. One is comforted in affliction and extends it to another in any affliction and that turns back when needed on the other and further to others.

So we are not just united with Christ in faith but we are united to each other as we share comfort. The church then is a comforting community. This is why we preach the gospel of Jesus, it provides the ultimate of comfort. And it is why we don’t shy away from affliction. The church is to be a safe place, we are to be trauma-aware people that find in our vulnerability we are not taken advantage of but cared for.

Two key realities at play with the sharing of comfort:

Establishes the vital importance of the church. Belonging, participating, sharing in the unshakeable hope we have in Jesus. This comfort is not found any place

else, true comfort. So we put our stake in the ground with a body of believers and live this out.

“The idea of the isolated individual, living his or her own life in a sealed-off compartment away from the rest of the world, is totally foreign to Paul.” N.T. Wright

Also, establishes that our spiritual formation sends us outward, to bring comfort as a redemptive influence - a creative minority bringing Shalom to a chaotic world. The very peace of Christ for the comfort and salvation of those in affliction, captivity, and hopelessness. And we do it by telling of how we have been comforted. Profoundly simple, eternally significant.

Both inside and without the church does this with face-to-face reminders of the gospel, bearing with each others burdens, worshiping, praying and living together.

“How are we to comfort others? Clearly we need to care about others and to be sensitive to their feelings and emotions, to ‘rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn’... stress the importance of paying serious attention, with full eye-contact, as people speak to us... If we would be used by God to comfort and encourage, we must be prepared to listen without interruption so as to allow others to express to us their deepest feelings.” PB

This is the great hope of the church, not that it would be big and influential, but that it will share in the comfort found in Christ and extend it to the ends of the earth.

And finding our comfort in the glory of Christ, we can't help but keep going, and responding to who God is and what he has done.

3) Responding with Praise

The solid bedrock here, for Paul's ministry, for the life of the Christian, is God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort.

Paul begins and continues with praise, “Blessed be” Praise to God.

So we do the same.

It is how we face affliction. Staring at the mercy and glory of God.

This week I had occasion to be in Oceanside and saw the new condo developments near the pier. Tragic if you owned a condo in building just a couple blocks off the beach because what was once a view of the ocean is now a view of walls and windows. The ocean is still there with all its power and glory, but you can't see it.

Affliction tries to block the view but God draws us to our feet, to come closer, to see his power and glory again. The God of all comfort carries us through, so we send back the breath he gives.

We know the one who helps us stand and we sing it back to him.

Austin Stone Worship - All Because of Christ

“Who could stand amidst the wind and waves except the One who made
them to obey Who could sing in the midst of
suffering but those He has redeemed and called by name
If I stand and see it through
If I stay the course and make it home
If my heart is overwhelmed with peace in the storm
It's all, it's all because of Christ
Only You would reach down to such an end to
leave heaven and befriend the ones You made
And only You will endure me through it all
though the things of earth may fall You will remain

Yes it's all, it's all because of Christ
Because of Christ I'm not forsaken
Because of Christ I'm not alone

Because of Christ I have a confidence and hope
It's all, it's all because of Christ
Because of Christ I'm not forsaken
Because of Christ I'm not alone
Because of Christ I have a confidence and hope

It's all, it's all because of Christ
So I will stand and see it through
I will stay the course and make it home
Oh my heart is overwhelmed with peace in the storm
It's all, it's all because of Christ
So I will stand and see it through
I will stay the course and make it home
Oh my heart is overwhelmed with peace in the storm
It's all, it's all because of Christ”

Living with unshakeable hope in Christ, comforted in all afflictions, to comfort others in any affliction, living lives of praise to the Father.

Don't Settle. Don't face affliction by numbing it, ignoring it or even letting it crush you. Don't despair, don't be destroyed, you are not forsaken. Grab ahold of the mercy of God in Christ. Trust that Jesus lived a life of obedience in your place and took the death you deserved on the cross, accomplishing for you forgiveness, righteousness, identity and new life in him.

Be Comforted. God will comfort you. Remember the ways he has comforted you in the past and trust in him to carry you through now.

Share What You Find. Extend comfort, latch onto community and take the overwhelming comfort of Christ outside the walls.

Praise the God of all Comfort. Be continually reminded of who you are in him and lift your life to him for his glory. Surrender anew to his grace and purpose in your life. It really is good.

Winning here looks different. It is desperate and dependent on Christ for help and hope. But it is an unshakeable hope founded in the comfort we have in Jesus. The unshakeable church offering nothing but unshakeable, unending hope. Right where we want to be.