

Comfort

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- [0 : 0 0] We live in an age that is obsessed with comfort, don't we? Think about it. The default mindset of our world, the default mindset of our culture, which is portrayed and encouraged in media and movies and just through consumerism, the default mindset is to chase after and focus on and orient ourselves around what gives us the most comfort.
- And avoid at all costs what causes pain or unnecessary effort. Without thinking, that's our subconscious focus, our mindset. We work towards and strive towards and save up towards comfort.
- Comfort is the thing that we tend to chase after without thinking. To the point of spending crazy amounts of money for a phone that sits just right in your hand. And when you put it in your pocket, you don't feel it.
- Or socks made from an exotic material that rubs just right against your skin. People will spend ridiculous amounts of money on things that just improve our comfort that much more.
- Interestingly though, if you look in history, it hasn't always been this way. This obsession with comfort is a relatively new thing. Past generations valued other things over comfort and lived for other things over and above just their comfort.
- [1 : 2 0] You think of the explorers of the past, the settlers in new lands who would literally sacrifice a whole life of comfort to live in great hardship for the sake of expansion and providing for future generations.
- Comfort wasn't their first priority. In fact, did you know that the famous lazy boy chair, which is such an icon of modern comfort, that chair was originally invented for medical purposes to help invalids, pregnant women, and men with gout.
- It wasn't actually meant for able-bodied people. But now, in today's culture, people will spend insane amounts of money on lazy boy chairs complete with back massager, heater, beer fridge, and integrated hi-fi speakers.
- Because products like this, which history had never seen any equivalent of, products like this feed our modern need to be ever more comfortable. And in our day and age, with on-demand movies and Uber Eats and robotic vacuum cleaners, this generation that we live in is actually able to enjoy a level of comfort that our parents had never even dreamed of and generations before us had never seen.
- And we grow up in that, and it's normal to us to have such extravagant comforts. Now, I'm not saying that using lazy boy chairs is wrong, and other products that increase our comfort is not a sin, it's not wrong, but I do think that there is a huge danger in this modern obsession with comfort that products like this indicate, this assumption that we must live comfortable lives.
- [3 : 0 5] And the danger with that, I think, is that it has created one of the single biggest obstacles to us living the Christian life. Because the Christian life is, in fact, a call to leave our comfort zones to follow Jesus.

And the modern obsession with comfort is, I think, a great threat to Christians, even without us realizing subconsciously, it's threatening our ability and our willingness to live the life that Jesus calls us as Christians to live.

And that's really what's at the heart of this second letter to the Corinthians that Paul writes. In fact, it was actually more like his fourth letter that he wrote to the Corinthians.

But God only allowed two of the letters to be preserved for us today, first and second Corinthians. And we're going to be looking the next two terms over the second Corinthians.

But the reason why I think it's so applicable to us, this letter, especially in today's world, is that it was written to a group of Christians living in a city and a culture much like the world we live in today.

[4 : 15] As Alan said this morning, Paul may as well have been writing to Capetonians because of the similarities between Corinth and today's world.

So just to tell you some background, Corinth was a key city of trade. It sat on a spit of land, what was called an isthmus. It's a Greek word.

So you'll see a map behind me. So what that meant is that Corinth was strategically located as a hub of both sea trade between east and west Mediterranean. So ships would travel, traveling from the east to the west, from kind of Turkey, Middle East to Rome, would go through Corinth rather than go down south, the much more hazardous sea route.

So Corinth was this hub of trade both in sea and on land, the two major parts of modern day Greece. Corinth was the hub of trade between them. Corinth was the hub of trade between them, which all meant lots of money and jobs flooded into this city, Corinth.

It was also, above being a great business center, it was also the center of what we call, and I've practiced this word, the Isthmian Games. It was the Isthmian Games, one of the most popular sporting and musical events of the ancient world.

[5 : 31] They rivaled, you know, the great games of Athens. And so the culture of Corinth was basically driven by money, business, sports, and entertainment, with its citizens being given opportunities to enjoy comforts that previous generations had never dreamed of.

Sound familiar? See, it's a very applicable letter just for that reason. And it was also this surrounding wealth-oriented, entertainment-steeped culture, which caused the small Christian church in Corinth to have some serious reservations when it came to the Apostle Paul and his message.

Because this guy who came along, this Apostle, was a suffering messenger. He had been to jail a few times already, and he brought a message about a suffering Messiah, and that suffering Messiah called people to follow him into suffering.

So his message and his life was all about suffering, and that was a message that just didn't gel with a group of people living in a city that was obsessed with avoiding suffering at all costs.

So that's why this letter actually exists. Paul writes to Corinthians to defend his role as God's appointed messenger to them, and to show them something very important.

[7 : 02] Namely, how his suffering, far from being something that negated his apostleship, his suffering actually was part and parcel of what it means to be an apostle and what it means to follow Jesus.

And that's one of the main themes that runs through this letter. And so it's in his opening words that we're looking at this morning, that Gene read for us earlier, that Paul gives us a major reason, a very important reason that we've all got to hear, why suffering is so much part and parcel of following Jesus, and why therefore we as Christians need to learn to move away from this obsession we have with being comfortable all the time, if we want to live the Christian life.

So that's what we're going to be looking at this morning. And the reason, the main reason that Paul gives as to why we need to move away from this obsession with comfort, obsession with making ourselves comfortable in this life, is this.

It's that we need to learn how to find our comfort in God rather than ourselves. We need to learn how to find our comfort in God.

Because you see, without thinking, we tend to pin our hopes of comfort on ourselves, don't we? And we see our duties to God and our fellow man as something that threatens our comfort.

[8 : 25] We won't admit it, but that's what we think. Rather than contributing to our comfort, the things we are meant to do, the things we are called to do, the duties of the Christian life, we see as threats to our comfort.

And if you're not convinced of that, just look at our attitudes towards spiritual disciplines, for example. Quiet times, reading the Bible at home, fasting and praying, coming to church, giving our money to gospel work.

We tend to see all of these things as things we must do, and so we do do them, but things that are nonetheless opposed to our comfort. They're contrasted to our comfort.

We do them, but we see them as duties, and we believe that we need to sacrifice comfort to do them, don't we? Comfort is to sleep in on a Sunday, not to be here.

It's much more comfortable to be in bed. Comfort is to watch Netflix as soon as you get home instead of opening your Bible. And so while we appreciate that God is the source of our salvation, we still consider him a threat to our comfort.

[9 : 33] Here and now. And so we rely on no one but ourselves for our comfort in between the times that we have to do our duties to God and our fellow man.

We take it upon ourselves to give ourselves comfort. You know, no one else will give me comfort but me. That is underlying often how we go about life.

Now let me say, that attitude is abhorrently sinful. Because when we think that way, we actually devalue God, and we make him less than he is.

To say that he can't give me what I can give myself, that is actually at the root of idolatry and self-worship. And it's exactly the thing which caused Adam and Eve to fall into sin in the garden when the serpent came and convinced them that they could give themselves something God could not give them.

You see, the moment you think that you can get something for yourself that God is not able to give you, you dishonor God, and you replace him with yourself as the God of your life.

[10 : 45] But another reason this way of thinking is so harmful is that God's whole mission in history, the history of this universe, the reason he made it all, the reason he planned everything that has unfolded in human history, the reason he created people, his whole mission, the thing that God is and has always been and always will be focused on doing is this.

It's the revelation of his glory.

And we can't go and enjoy him for who he really is. Our primary purpose, therefore, is rooted in God displaying his character to us and us seeing that, believing it, and worshiping it, responding in praise.

We cannot be who we were called to be as people who glorify God without God's revelation to us and us taking that revelation on board, understanding and learning his characteristics.

And so one of the things we need to know and be convinced of about God in order to do that and glorify God in our lives, one of the things we need to know about him amongst other things is that he is truly, as Paul puts it in verse 3, the God of all comfort.

[12 : 32] He is the God of all comfort. If we don't see him as the God of all comfort and we think we can give comfort to ourselves that he cannot give us, we do not glorify him.

We need to see God as the God of all comfort. We need to realize that God is the source of our comfort, not ourselves.

And that's why, that's the whole thing Paul starts his letter with here. And that's why he starts his letter like this, verse 3. Have a look in your Bibles, because it's not all going to be up on the screen, but this one is.

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion, and the God of all comfort. Now what struck me the moment I read this and started to think about it, especially considering what Paul is writing this letter for, what struck me here was that Paul writes this letter to defend himself as an apostle, but he doesn't start by talking about himself.

He starts by talking about God. He starts by revealing a characteristic that God has revealed about himself, which is that he is truly the source of comfort for his people.

[13 : 53] And so Paul wants, as his role as an apostle, is actually to reveal these attributes of God to people. So that's what he starts his letter with, this idea that God is the source of our comfort, not ourselves.

But then, very importantly, he goes on to share how God has revealed this about himself to Paul. How God has revealed to Paul that he is the God of all comfort.

And if we read on, it turns out that it was through Paul's sufferings that he really came to know God as the God of all comfort. He really came to taste and appreciate the comfort that God gives him, far better than he could ever give himself.

And it was through his sufferings he came to appreciate that. And it's very important we realize that this morning. But it's often the case, isn't it, that we'll only appreciate something when we're exposed to the opposite thing.

You know what I mean? You appreciate a cold swim best on a hot day, don't you? You really appreciate a drink of water only when you're thirsty.

[14 : 57] You appreciate glasses only when you've spent some time squinting at road signs and holding a book like this in front of your face. Well, you see, Paul's saying it was in his suffering that he really came to appreciate that God is truly the God of all comfort.

And so he was able to effectively share that characteristic of God with others. So look how he puts it in verse 4. Look in your Bibles. End of verse 3.

The God of all comfort. Verse 4. Who comforts us in all our troubles so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves received from God.

You see that immediately? Paul realizes that he's been comforted not to keep it to himself. He's been comforted by God so that he can comfort others with that same comfort he's received. And so he's saying that the troubles that he and the other apostles, that's why he speaks in the plural, we.

The troubles that he and the others doing this gospel work have gone through, which is in fact what the Corinthians are criticizing him for. Those troubles have happened so that he would be able to comfort Christians like the Corinthians with the comfort that he's received from God.

[16:13] The question is, what is this comfort? That's really, we read this verse and we understand kind of what's going on. But what is the comfort Paul's talking about? In what way did God comfort him and in what way is he able to comfort others with that comfort?

You see when we read this verse out of its context, which is typically what we do in an age of Twitter and short sound bites. You know what we tend to do, we read the Bible in tiny little chunks, so we don't read it in its context.

And so we just read this verse about Paul comforting others with the comfort he received. And what do we think it says? What do we read that as? Well, it seems to be saying, well, Paul had some hard times.

And so when he comes across other people in hard times, he's able to put an arm around them and say, I know what you're going through. I've been through that, like a kind of a sympathy type of comfort. And while that is a legitimate way to comfort other people, that's not the kind of comfort he's talking about here.

He's not just referring to being able to sympathize when other people go through rubbish times in their life. Because he's been through them as well. No, he's talking about a much more profound comfort that he's found in the gospel of Jesus Christ, which he can now share with others because he's experienced it for himself.

[17:31] Which is, we see in what he says next. Have a look from verse 5. Because he explains what he means in verse 4. You see that word for? It begins with the word for.

Because of. Whenever you see the word for, that's reminding you that scripture is linked. You don't just take verses out of context because they have explanations and there's developing arguments. So Paul says he's able to comfort others with the comfort he's received.

For, just as we share abundantly in the sufferings of Christ, so also our comfort abounds through Christ. If we are distressed, it is for your comfort and salvation.

If we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which produces in you the patient endurance of the same sufferings we suffer. So, let me explain what he's saying.

He's saying that in his work of sharing the gospel as an apostle, which Jesus has called him to. Jesus appeared miraculously on the Damascus road, the risen Jesus. Paul realized who he was.

[18:30] And he commissioned Paul with the job of spending the rest of his life sacrificing to share the gospel with the Gentiles. And in that work, Paul says, the gospel has given him two things in equal measure.

It's given him suffering and comfort in equal measure. That's what the gospel of Jesus Christ that day at the Damascus road has given him.

Because as he stepped out of his comfort zone to share the gospel message, and as he sacrificed energy and money, resources to do that, and as he exposed himself to the inevitable persecution that that brings, he has suffered for the gospel.

And that's what he means here by sharing in the sufferings of Christ. Just as Jesus had to suffer in order to bring the revelation of God's salvation to the world, so Paul, as the messenger of that revelation, had to suffer.

So, the gospel brings suffering first. But he also says the same gospel message, which brought him certain suffering, also brought him a profound comfort in those sufferings.

[19 : 47] And that comfort is able to overflow to the Corinthians now. You know, the picture that I had in my mind to try and understand what he was talking about here was a cappuccino.

Now, I think all the foamy stuff on top of a cappuccino is just a waste of time. Now, if you associate, just work with me on this one, associate the actual coffee, which is what you really want, with comfort, and the foamy stuff on top with suffering.

You see, now, I want to pour this into another cup so that I can enjoy the coffee. And as I pour it, the coffee will come through, right? But with the coffee, inevitably, I'm going to get some of the foam, still.

Now, Paul uses the word when he says in verse 5, as we share abundantly in the sufferings of Christ, and our comfort abounds through Christ.

The word means overflow. Our comfort overflows. As the gospel overflows from Jesus to Paul, he gets some of the foamy stuff and some of the coffee, and then he is going to pour that into the life of others.

[20 : 56] And as he pours it, the coffee initially comes, the comfort of the gospel, but inevitably there's going to be some suffering that comes with that. And so this transmission of the gospel message brings with it the comfort of the gospel, but inevitably some sufferings as well, as it's transferred from person to person.

All the main sufferings started with Christ, but you can't help but having that Christ sufferings overflow with the message as it's being shared. Does that make sense?

It just helped me, the coffee analogy. You might like foamy stuff, in which case it won't work for you, but it worked for me. But, so he says here, the gospel and the work of sharing the gospel will bring suffering, but it also brings comfort in those sufferings.

And then he goes on to give an example of exactly how the gospel has done that in his own travels. So, so he's, he's talking about this idea of suffering and comfort from the gospel and why suffering is so part and parcel of the Christian life.

But then to just clarify it for us, he gives a concrete example from verse eight. I'm going to read that to you. He says, We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about the troubles we experienced in the province of Asia.

[22 : 18] We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt we had received the sentence of death. But, this happened, that we might not rely on ourselves, but on God who raises the dead.

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. Okay, so here Paul is talking about a time, probably in the city of Ephesus, we're not quite sure, where his gospel work caused such persecution against him that he was very nearly killed.

In fact, there was a point that he was convinced he was going to die. But he also says, that terrifying experience that he went through did something to him.

It taught him to rely fully on God to deliver him from death. It taught him to once and for all stop relying on himself and entrust what happens to him completely to God.

And he had to go through this experience to learn that lesson. It's amazing to think, isn't it, that Paul, the great apostle, still had to learn lessons in the midst of his travels and his commission and his mission.

[23 : 42] That's what he's saying to the Corinthians here. You know, I knew the gospel, but it was only in my experience in Asia just recently that I really realized the comfort of the gospel in my sufferings.

But this happened, he says, that we might not rely on ourselves, but on God who raises the dead. He has delivered us from such a deadly peril and he will, this is what Paul has learned in that experience.

He has delivered us and he will deliver us again. On him we have now set our hope that he will continue to deliver us. And that is what mobilized him and enabled him to continue his mission to the Gentiles.

So what he's saying here is that from that moment on, from that experience, Paul was convinced that no matter what he faces in the future, God would deliver him, God would rescue him from it.

And he was absolutely convinced of that. And that's what enabled him to go through the discomforts he went through. Now, not to say that he wasn't going to die, which he probably did a couple of years later in Rome under the persecution of the Emperor Nero.

[24 : 48] But, he realized that all of his suffering, in all of that, even in his eventual death, he still knew that God would rescue him. That's what this experience taught him.

That in all of his suffering he knew God would rescue him. Even in death, he knew God would rescue him. Why? Because he is the God who raises the dead. And so Paul's got nothing to fear. And that was the comfort that the gospel gave him.

How did he know God raises the dead? Because of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Because God raised Jesus from the dead. And Jesus promised that so would all who are in Christ be raised from the dead.

So that comfort he got wasn't just a kind of a wishful thinking hope, but it was a sure knowledge based on the gospel of Jesus.

That was the comfort the gospel gave him in all of his troubles, which he could then comfort the Corinthians with by telling them and reminding them of the gospel. The gospel comfort that for all who have trusted in Jesus, all who are part of God's people, no matter what they go through in this life, whether it be persecution, sickness, poverty, they can know for absolute sure God will deliver them from that.

[26 : 00] It's only a matter of time. No one else can know that. That is a unique comfort that Christians have. And in all their troubles they can go back to that knowledge to comfort them better than anything else will comfort them, even a lazy boy chair with hi-fi speakers and a beer fridge.

That's the greatest comfort we can ever have in all of our troubles, big and small, the comfort that the gospel gives us, the comfort of the knowledge of resurrection, the comfort of the knowledge of the sovereignty of God in our troubles, and that he will deliver his people from all their troubles as he always has done and he always will do.

But I want you to notice something so important in this passage. Paul says that in order to be an effective minister of that gospel of comfort, he needed to know it not just academically, he needed to experience it.

He needed to actually be trained to embrace the gospel comfort in the midst of his troubles so that he could effectively minister it to others. And we also need to be trained.

We might know the gospel. You may have been coming to church for years. You may have been a Christian for most of your life. But each of us, no matter how far along we are in our knowledge of the gospel and our understanding of scripture, we also need to be trained through suffering, not just to believe the gospel, but to actually seek our comfort in it.

[27 : 30] Those are two different things. You can believe the gospel, but still seek your comfort in yourself. You can believe the gospel and still seek your comfort in the world. We need to be trained to not just believe the gospel, but to seek our comfort in it in all of our suffering.

But that only happens through suffering, through hardships. And that's what Paul is talking about here. That God is fully revealed as the God of comfort in suffering.

You see, God's first priority, I'm sorry to say, is not for you to live a nice life on earth. God's first priority is to reveal himself and his glory, to reveal himself as the God of comfort. That will only happen in suffering.

It's only as we go through sufferings that we fully taste and appreciate the comfort of the gospel, and so we really learn to love the gospel like Paul did, and to love God above all other things.

See, because I think we will, we can say we love God, but you know what we actually love? We actually love what gives us comfort. That's what we chase after.

[28 : 36] That's what we focus on. So, in order to love God like we say we do, we need to actually learn to find our comfort in God more than any other things. And, which also means that if we actually had the life that we're chasing after, if we actually attained what we're chasing after, it would be detrimental to us and our spiritual lives, if we actually had the perfectly comfortable, trouble-free life that we all wish we had, then we'd never truly love the gospel, and we'd never truly find our comfort in God and glorify Him as our God of comfort.

And that's why God doesn't allow us to live trouble-free lives on earth, even if we're His children. We need trouble and suffering more than we think. Not that we have to actively pursue it, but we need to learn to accept it when it comes.

And so, wrapping up, what does this passage mean for how we should live our lives? Well, I think there are two main applications for us from this passage as we finish.

The first is we need to be willing to suffer for the gospel if we call ourselves Christians. We need to put our money where our mouth is. Not just our money, but our safety and our efforts and our resources and our time.

But you see, this willingness to suffer for the gospel, we've got to realize it totally rubs up against our comfort-seeking instincts and our comfort-seeking culture, which is the environment that we're in. And so we need to learn to actually put off this comfort-seeking obsession that our culture trains us in and put on a willingness to suffer for the gospel.

[30 : 20] And remember, from verse 5, how Paul talks about sharing in the sufferings of Christ. If you're going to take on more of the comfort of the gospel, it inevitably is going to come with sufferings as well.

We need to learn and be willing to share in the sufferings of Christ. And then he goes on to tell the Corinthians verse 7 that they will share in those same sufferings too. He's preparing them for that.

He's talking about the inevitable suffering and sacrifice that will come when you get involved in kingdom work. You see, because suffering is part and parcel of gospel ministry.

It just is. And you can't be involved in God's work on earth if you're not willing to suffer for it. We can't be an effective church to minister the gospel both in word and deed to our community unless you are willing to dig deep in your wallets and give towards that.

And unless you are willing to take time and effort to help those in need and to share the gospel and to be part of the machinery God has placed here in St. Mark's to share the gospel in this community.

[31 : 29] Unless you are willing to suffer, you can't effectively be part of what we're doing here. Paul couldn't bring the Corinthians the comfort of the gospel without the suffering and effort it took to get it to them.

You know, if Paul had the mindset of the modern culture that we all have pursue comfort above all else we would never have heard the gospel. It would have died out in the first generation. Well in the same way you and I can't bring the comfort of the gospel into the lives of others without being willing to take on discomfort to do that.

The discomfort of sacrificing time, money, reputation, career and even your safety for the spread of the gospel. You know, when was it? Last week we prayed for Bob and Pat Benjamin in Iraq.

They're an example of people who have taken on the discomfort and the suffering of the gospel in order to make it known to those Marsh Arabs who are being saved and who would otherwise have never heard about Jesus.

Why? Because two people were willing to suffer for the gospel. Ordinary people. You can't be involved in God's mission on earth without being willing to leave your comfort zone and make real gospel sacrifices and that's the first way I think this passage challenges us this morning.

[32 : 49] It should challenge you to ask yourself whether you are truly willing to suffer for the gospel and if not whether you have been saved by it at all. Secondly though, the second application, we need to learn to find our comfort in the gospel.

We need to learn to find our comfort in the gospel. This is not something that happens automatically. See, even Paul the great apostle had to learn this in the middle of his ministry and God had to use suffering to get him to learn it so that he could be properly qualified to minister that comfort to others.

Well, in the same way if we're going to be an effective church, if we're going to be an effective group of Christians to minister the gospel of comfort to others, we not only need to be willing to suffer for that, we need to first know and experience that gospel comfort ourselves by letting our own sufferings, whether they come in whatever form, letting those sufferings direct our hearts to find our comfort in the gospel.

We need to train that, ourselves, to respond that way to our sufferings, to look to Jesus, to look to the gospel, to meditate on what Jesus has done for us, his love for his people, that he's shown us in giving his life and suffering for us.

And meditate on what he still will do for us in delivering us from all of those troubles in his time. We need to let our sufferings grow our love for Jesus and the gospel.

[34 : 19] Is that how you respond to your sufferings? And so, when that suffering comes, and it will come, remember this sermon, remember this passage, remember how to respond to that suffering in a way that will glorify God as the God of all comfort.

To see God, not as a God who is a threat to your comfort, but to learn to see God as the only one who can truly bring any meaningful and lasting comfort in your life.

We need to let our desire for comfort drive us, not away from our Bibles and spiritual disciplines, but towards them that we'll find our comfort first and foremost in God and the gospel.

because as we'll see in the rest of this letter in the coming weeks, it's in and through the sufferings of living in this broken world, it's in and through suffering and experiencing our own weakness that God is raising up an army of people who have been trained to find their strength, their joy, and their comfort in him rather than themselves so that they can lead other people to find that gospel comfort too.

Let's pray. Yes, Lord, we admit that we want to avoid suffering at all costs, but we also see, as Paul opens this letter to the Corinthians, who are also so obsessed with avoidance of suffering, we see, Lord, that suffering is part of the life you've called us to.

[35 : 51] It's part of the gospel comfort. Lord, help us to know the comfort of the gospel in our sufferings and help us this year to be willing to suffer for the gospel so that we would be ready and able to be a powerful instrument that you use to bring the gospel comfort into the lives of needy people, both spiritually and physically.

In Jesus' name, Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.wh