
Mutual Comfort in Ministry Suffering

2 Corinthians 1:3-11

Introduction:

A jilted lover who confronts the betrayer and then writes a letter...

Kent Hughes writes, "If you have ever invested your life in that of another, so that one turns to Christ (perhaps a child or a friend or a coworker or a relative) and then have had others lead that one astray, 2 Corinthians is for you. This book is about the nature of the gospel and authentic ministry. Those who really care about the gospel and the care of souls will find 2 Corinthians captivating. For those who don't care, this is about what your heart ought to be—and about what you ought to be about!" (Hughes, p. 15)

Think about Paul's history with Corinth

He established the church and left it in good order...

It was seduced into error heading towards apostasy by the false apostles and Judaizers from Jerusalem. It was also failing to stand against the false wisdoms of the world becoming more and more like the pagan life and worship around it.

The faithful wrote a letter to Paul asking questions about many issues and challenging what he had taught them...

He responded with the letter we know as 1 Corinthians. He exposed their divisions and defections from the truth. He answered their questions. He asserted his authority as an Apostle. He challenged their fruitless pursuits, fake practices and false self-promotion.

Timothy reported that they had not responded well which led to a painful and disheartening visit by Paul. His presence, rather than bringing resolution seemingly simply amplified the determination of those rebelling against the principles and practice of the gospel Paul had taught them. As these things often can, it became personal, nasty and vicious.

Determined to comfort the faithful, confirm the repentant and confront the false, he wrote this letter. It is passionate, powerful, and poignant.

The false leaders in the church employed a familiar tactic. If you do not want people to follow someone, then undermine the respect and standing they deserve. Begin to attack their authority, their character or question their practice. So the church had begun to question Paul's qualifications as an apostle.

The apostle's authority, even his apostleship, was called into question. If Paul was for real, why was there so much suffering in his life? they asked. Also, why was his ministry so lackluster when compared with the ministry of others? Why was his preaching so dull? And why did he change his travel plans if God was actually directing his life? Moreover, what lay behind his refusal to accept payment for his services, as most preachers did? Was he really collecting money for the poor? Why didn't Paul have letters of recommendation like the others? Why didn't he regale them with stories about God's power in his ministry? Was it because there were none? Tragically, this attack on Paul's ministry and person had led many of his Corinthian converts to reject him and his preaching for "a different gospel" (cf. 11:4). (Hughes, p. 14-15).

This in the opening of the letter, Paul asserts two things:

He is an Apostle called, commissioned and authorized by God for the church. Since he is an Apostle, they are to submit to his authority.

They are the church. They are local in Corinth yet part of a wider body of Christians. Since they are the church, they are to hear and heed his writing.

This book is also a powerful treatise on New Covenant ministry. What has gone wrong in Corinth is the rejection of the kind of ministry that the New Covenant was to produce. Since the New Covenant rises out of the death and resurrection of Christ, then the presence of the Spirit and power of the Word among God's people is most clearly manifest in suffering, affliction and a cross-like life.

In a surprising turn, Paul takes what they had used to question his apostleship and offers it as the badge, the authentication of his apostleship. In the upside down world of the Christian, *power is manifest in weakness, authority affirmed by serving*.

One commentator writes, "The evidence he[Paul] gives in support relates to his lifestyle—a lifestyle characterized by the sacrifice of Christ expressed in apostolic ministry. Although he could point to the existence of the Corinthian church as a 'letter of recommendation' and refer minimally to mystical and miraculous elements in his ministry, his chief self-characterization was in a life of hardship, conflict and weakness as the bearer of the word of God focused on the death and resurrection of Jesus. While the source of Paul's authority was Christ, his authority was attested not by marvels or mysteries but, as Barrett helpfully puts it, 'in the pattern of death and resurrection stamped upon his own life and work'. Sacrifice and self-giving were for Paul, as they remain for us, indispensable evidence of genuineness as Christian believers." (Barnett, p. 24-25)

The Big Picture (v. 3-7)

Paul begins by explaining a theology of ministry suffering.

³ Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, ⁴ who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. ⁵ For as we share abundantly in Christ's sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too. ⁶ If we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation; and if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which you experience when you patiently endure the same sufferings that we suffer. ⁷ Our hope for you is unshaken, for we know that as you share in our sufferings, you will also share in our comfort.

Our God in our Afflictions (v. 3)

The church at Corinth was born in the Jewish synagogue. Forced out, it met next door. One of its early leaders was the converted synagogue rabbi. Now the church is being misled back into Judaism. This opening in verse 3 is the Christian form of one of the standard synagogue benedictions or call to worship. But it has been changed, transformed by the coming of Christ. The Lord Jesus Christ is one to whom the Father as God is related. Blessed be the God and Father of the Lord Jesus Christ. The merciful Yahweh is now the Father of mercies. The consolation of Israel is now the God of all kinds and all experiences of comfort. While we as Gentiles revel in the sweet words, the Jews sitting in the Christian

church would have heard and hopefully begin to wonder, "How has Christ and the New Covenant changed it all?"

In the Bible and in Paul's thinking, afflictions are primarily two things.

Afflictions are the suffering that comes from living in a fallen world. These are our weaknesses in our body. They may be the sicknesses and frailties that come with disease and age.

Afflictions are the suffering that comes from being sinned against by others. This may be the persecutions by government or agencies of the devil seeking us harm because we are Christians. This may be the offenses and wounds and abuses from sinners against us just because they are wicked. And it can be the many wounds and words that come from Christians who say and do things that hurt and harm us.

Paul has experienced both. His pattern of New Covenant ministry is marked by painful physical afflictions and personal wounds and hurts...

In the Bible and in Paul's thinking, comfort means to stand alongside and to enter another's suffering in such a way as to help them endure well.

There is a *Person* of suffering:

God suffered the great sin and sins of humanity against Him.

God suffered through the sacrificial death of Jesus at the cross.

There is a *principle* of suffering:

Suffering has purifying, training and equipping purposes.

Suffering is redemptive, restorative and relational.

There is a *pattern* of suffering:

Because of Jesus' example, we are to primarily seek to endure by grace the afflictions we suffer.

There is a *participation* in suffering:

Because of the cross, suffering affliction is normal for Christians.

There is a *partnership* in suffering:

Sufferers (remember we are all partakers?) stand beside one another, share with one another and sustain one another. This is called, counsel.

Comfort then is not about relieving a person of their suffering. Comfort is about helping a person in their afflictions.

The Principles for our Sufferings (v. 4-5)

⁴ who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.

⁵ For as we share abundantly in Christ's sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too.

We go through afflictions and suffering so that God may comfort us. He designs both the hardship and the help. Normally the suffering comes at the hands of others though it come through afflictions of the body. God brings others in our lives to be able to who help us in a way that is comfort. In this way, God comforts us in our sufferings.

We are comforted by God so that we may be able to comfort others. The comfort that we receive in our troubles is for others. What people did for us to help us, we learn also to do for others. No one owns their own suffering. No one owns their own comforts. They are both given as a stewardship. What we have received, we are to share. This ripple of comfort is to flow through the river of the hardships of the church.

We are experiencing Christ in both our suffering and our comfort. We know what His suffering was like. We learn what His comforts are. We experience them through Christ's work in others to us and in us to others.

The Purpose for our Comforts (v. 6-7)

Besides the mutual sharing of suffering and comforts, there are other purposes as well.

⁶ If we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation; and if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which you experience when you patiently endure the same sufferings that we suffer. ⁷ Our hope for you is unshaken, for we know that as you share in our sufferings, you will also share in our comfort.

God is developing endurance in afflictions. Being comforted by others who have gone through deep afflictions helps us to endure. Christians can and will endure. But they do so through the means that God has established. So your afflictions and hardships are designed to build endurance by giving you the opportunity to endure.

God is equipping us for ministry to others. We have this already. But Paul also sees affliction and comfort as building a bridge for ministry. It is establishing a shared platform for serving and sharing with one another. This is why Paul is even discussing this. The church at Corinth was looking for leaders who were powerful, elegant, eloquent – the telegenic, charismatic leader who was successful in everything. Paul comes as both an Apostle and as a sufferer. His Apostleship give him authority. His suffering should give him credibility. Sadly, the church was uninterested in the God ordained bridge suffering was supposed to have built.

God is building an unshakable assurance in the process. This is what was happening everywhere else. Why has it gone so wrong in Corinth? But the weak, the afflicted, the sufferers at Corinth will recognize and receive the Apostle. They will have confidence in the process. So, Paul's assurance in them, the true believers, remains unshaken.

Therefore, we have our shared afflictions, suffering and comforts.

God comforts you. He helps you. He encourages you. He gives the strength to endure. He gives you the particular Scriptures to lean on. He gives you people who stand with you and uphold you.

You comfort others. You have an ear and eye out for others going through afflictions, hard times, sorrows and suffering. You share what you have learned. You give hope. You speak out of your own life into the hardness they are enduring. You encourage. You help them endure. You comfort and confront.

In this way God's program and purposes for the suffering of His people is carried out. And keeps on going... And keeps on going.

The Personal Reality (v. 8-10)

Now that we have a theology of ministry suffering, what about Paul's own experience of it?

⁸ For we do not want you to be unaware, brothers, of the affliction we experienced in Asia. For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself. ⁹ Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death. But that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead. ¹⁰ He delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us. On him we have set our hope that he will deliver us again. ¹¹ You also must help us by prayer, so that many will give thanks on our behalf for the blessing granted us through the prayers of many.

Its Deep Pain (v. 8-9a)

What kind of afflictions and troubles did Paul have? They were persecutions. They were painful afflictions. They were emotional hardships. The care of the churches and particularly the church at Corinth weighed. But these were not simple easy troubles. They were so severe that Paul wondered if he was going to die. He felt like he was under a sentence of death.

Its Transforming Purpose (v. 9b)

Why does God work this way? Why does God put His choicest servants through afflictions and sufferings? So that we might rely on God and not ourselves.

This is a rebuke of the church at Corinth. They were relying on themselves. They were full of themselves. The world's wisdom and techniques for life and ministry and infested the church and corrupted her purity. They were craving the rich, the important, the super-apostles to lead their faltering and failing church.

This is a rebuke of modern Christianity. The church is deeply infected with the disease of power, prestige, process, programs. The weak and wounded are tended to but usually not listened to. The Christian life has become all about success and little about sacrifice.

This may speak into our own lives as well. Who should we be caring for and comforting? Who has gone through much suffering and now, greatly humbled, is able to serve best? Who is willing to sacrifice their place, position, money just to serve and lead well? Have we succumbed to the alluring dazzle of the world to live and serve our God?

Its Delivering Provision (v. 10)

He was delivered from deadly peril of afflictions, persecution and hardships. Some were thrust upon Paul. They came to him because of the life and ministry he lived and God's sovereign providences in his life. Some choices Paul made. He chose the harder path. He eschewed the easy way of comfort. And so his life reflected a cross-kind of life, a cross-bearing discipleship. He truly followed Christ and left for us an example to follow.

He was delivered through other's prayers. The interconnection between believers is often through prayer. That care and comfort from God, that deliverance through suffering and hardship and sometimes even death-like sacrifice comes through our prayers for one another.

What God had done and will do should be for the giving of thanks. So what he relates in his sufferings and comforts is not to bring admiration to him, but acclaim to God.

Reflect and Respond

The cycle of sufferings and affliction: (Hughes, pp. 21-22)

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was one of a handful of German theologians to stand up to the Nazification of the German church. He was prominent in writing the famous Barmen Declaration, which rejected the infamous Aryan clauses imposed by Nazi ideology. Bonhoeffer's courage thrust him into the leadership of the Confessing Church along with other stalwarts like Martin Niemöller. Bonhoeffer went so far as to found an underground seminary in Finkenwald, Bavaria, which was closed by Gestapo chief Heinrich Himmler. This led to Bonhoeffer's joining the resistance movement and his being imprisoned by the Gestapo in April 1943. Bonhoeffer's Letters from Prison became a best seller after the war.

Among the letters is a beautiful poem written to his fiancé Maria von Wedemeyer entitled "New Year 1945." Stanza 3 is famous:

Should it be ours to drain the cup of grieving
Even to the dregs of pain,
At thy command, we will not falter,
Thankfully receiving all that is given
By thy loving hand.

Poignant words that became more so when, three months later, just as the war was ending, Bonhoeffer was hung in Flossenbürg prison.

...some eighteen years later, across the Atlantic in America, [when] another bride-to-be was grieving the death of her fiancé and found much comfort in Bonhoeffer's poem. Her fiancé, who died from injuries in a sledding accident, was the son of author Joseph Bayly and his wife Mary Lou. When she mailed Bonhoeffer's poem to them, Joe and Mary Lou also found comfort in "New Year 1945."

Twelve years after this (thirty years after Bonhoeffer's death), Joe Bayly received a letter from a pastor-friend in Massachusetts relating that he had visited a terminally ill woman in a Boston hospital for some period of time and had given her Joe's book of poems, *Heaven*, as comfort for her soul. The pastor said that the dying woman had stayed awake late the previous night to read it and told him of the comfort and help she had received from it. A few hours later she died. The woman, the pastor revealed, was Maria von Wedemeyer-Weller, Bonhoeffer's fiancé three decades earlier!

God's comfort circulates among his children – and sometimes it comes full circle, as it did from Dietrich Bonhoeffer to Maria von Wedemeyer in her grief to Joseph Bayly, Jr.'s grieving fiancé to Joe and Mary Lou Bayly in their grief and then back to Bonhoeffer's one-time fiancé as comfort in her dying hours.

Such is the cycle of how God comforts His people: He takes others through affliction who are comforted by others who had gone through affliction... all the way to our Lord Jesus Christ.