

God Of All Comfort

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[0 : 0 0] Well, if you could turn with me to 2 Corinthians chapter 1, I'll be reading from verses 1 to 11.

We're just looking at this passage in isolation. I know you hopefully will do the whole letter someday. 2 Corinthians chapter 1, reading from verse 1.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and the God of all comfort who comforts us in 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.

For as we share abundantly in Christ's suffering, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too. 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. Our hope for you is unshaken. For we know that as you share in our sufferings, you will also share in our comfort.

[1 : 2 3] 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.

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. 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. You also must help us by prayer so that many will give thanks on our behalf for the blessings granted us through the prayers of many.

Well you might think that this is a strange passage to start the New Year's Day off. You might think, well surely something triumphant might be better. Maybe that bit in Joshua chapter one where God tells him to be strong and courageous, or Philippians chapter three where Paul speaks about pressing on to the goal to win the prize.

Wouldn't something triumphant be better to start the New Year? Something that would leave us feeling good about ourselves and good about the world rather than a passage that is so full of suffering.

[2 : 3 3] And that might leave us happy, but soon the reality would kick in. Because it doesn't take prophetic powers or ability to tell the future for us all to know that over this coming year we will experience suffering.

Whether you'd call yourself a Christian or not this morning, you know as well as I do that we live in a broken world, and suffering is one of the few things that we can be certain of over the coming year.

And the question of suffering raises all kinds of questions in our minds. We all struggle to make sense of suffering. We all ask questions like why does God allow suffering?

I wouldn't be surprised if we've all asked that one time or the other whether we believe in God or not. And now some of us might ask that at a philosophical level as it were, but I imagine most of us ask it from a personal level as we're wrestling with either suffering ourselves or witnessing those we love in hardship and suffering.

We ask why is God allowing me to suffer? Why is God allowing my loved one to suffer? But most importantly, how do I get through it? All of us will face suffering in this life and we struggle to understand it.

[3 : 52] We need help to get through it. And that was no different for the Corinthians. We're a church that, among other things, struggle to make sense of how the Christian life can involve suffering.

You see, they had these wrong expectations that actually the Christian life was going to be all powerful and triumphant and full of glory and not tarnished by hardship.

And certainly that it wouldn't look weak and marked by suffering like they saw in the life of the apostle Paul. However, the apostle Paul knew otherwise from his own personal experience and from the pattern set by Jesus Christ, he knew that the cross comes before the crown, that the Christian life will contain suffering.

Suffering precedes glory. So how does he start a letter to a church that he knows will face suffering? How do we start a new year that we know will involve hardship?

What would we hold onto in the midst of affliction? Paul's answer is to introduce us to the God of all comfort and to the God who raises the dead.

[5 : 01] You see that so clearly in the first and second section, God is described as the God of all comfort and the God who raises the dead. And that's what we're going to focus on in our time together.

But first, our first point, we're going to take a brief look at the reality of suffering. Paul opens the letter with some honest realism about the Christian life.

That Christians suffer in verses three to seven. I don't know if you noticed how many times Paul mentions his own afflictions. Even in verse six, Paul mentions that the Corinthians also shared in the same afflictions and that patiently endured the same sufferings that he suffered.

Even in verse eight, he goes on to describe how bad that was, that he was utterly burdened beyond his own strength, that he despaired of life itself. He felt as if he had received the sentence of death.

While this emphasis on suffering at the start of a letter, Paul realized that the Corinthians needed to change their expectations. In Paul's own words in verse eight, he didn't want them to be ignorant of his sufferings.

[6 : 10] It was important that they understood that the authentic Christian life isn't devoid of suffering, but actually does involve suffering. That's something that we can expect.

Later in two Corinthians, Paul will talk more about what his sufferings looked like, and you could divide them into two groups. First of all, and this is also his suffering in general.

Paul talks about suffering that he faced as a result of living in a world broken by sin. Chapter 11, he'll speak of being shipwrecked three times, adrift at sea for a night and a day, facing hunger and thirst, cold and exposure.

While Paul faced the extremes, and that's for sure, what he's describing is the reality that we all face as humanity, as people living in a world that is broken by sin.

That can't be minimized. Walking through this life, whoever we are, whatever we like, walking through this life is more often than not like walking through a thicket of thorns.

[7 : 11] It's hard. However, Christians can expect another type of affliction as well. I don't know if you noticed in verse five, Paul said, for as we share abundantly in Christ's sufferings, Jesus suffered to take our punishment on the cross, and that's a unique event that can't be repeated, and we don't share in that.

But what Paul is describing is that Jesus does promise that those who follow him will suffer like him. Paul again shows that in his own life, he speaks of imprisonments, countless beatings, being stoned and left for dead, living with the constant threat of danger.

And you and I will know from looking overseas that we see those same real threats to life for Christians who live around the world. People who are ostracized by family, lose jobs, are thrown in prison, and even lose their lives because they follow Jesus.

And that's no different in many ways in the UK. Maybe it looks different. I know numerous stories in Scotland of pressure and bullying in the workplace, people being locked, ignored, left out by colleagues and friends, maybe not risk of life, but following Jesus still does involve suffering.

It might mean loss of relationships, of dreams, of material possessions, of comfort. Christians can expect to suffer because we follow a suffering savior.

[8 : 35] Now, if you're not following Jesus this morning, you might think that this is the worst sales pitch ever to being a Christian. And so it's worth me saying at this point that you are only getting half the picture.

The Corinthians were being told by some false teachers that the true Christian life was all glory and triumph. And so Paul is balancing that. Paul is correcting that by deliberately emphasizing his sufferings to combat that false teaching.

Later in two Corinthians, Paul will talk about all the blessings that flow from following Jesus. In chapter five, he'll talk about the new life and relationship that we have and we trust in him, that if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation.

The older's gone, the new has come that we're reconciled to God. In chapter three, he'll speak about the true glory that Christians enjoy, being changed to be more and more like Jesus by God's spirit.

In chapters four and five, he'll describe the glory that awaits the Christian, an eternal weight of glory of being with Christ. But Jesus does say that if we're thinking to follow Jesus, we do need to weigh up.

[9 : 45] We need to count the cost like a builder working out whether he has enough money to complete a project. If you follow Jesus, you will face suffering.

But the apostle Paul and those of us following Jesus would say that it's definitely worth it because the suffering that we face in this life is nothing compared to the glory that Jesus promised us in the life to come and even now as well.

If we're following Jesus though, we need to have right expectations as well. Jesus doesn't promise us a life free from suffering. Quite the opposite. We're not to be seeking out hardship like medieval monks whipping themselves, but we are to be ready so that suffering doesn't take us by surprise.

And I know that many of you, I don't need to say that because you know firsthand that the Christian life isn't free from suffering. I know that 2022 for many of you has been a year of grief, of affliction, of difficult relationships, of exhaustion, of heartache.

That's why as we come into 2023, we don't just need a reminder of the reality of what this world is like. We need a reminder of what our God is like. And that's why we're going to turn now to look at the God of all comfort that Paul holds out for the Corinthians to remember.

[11 : 11] So our second point, the God of all comfort. Let me read from verse three again. Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and the God of all comfort 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.

Comfort is definitely the theme of this section, isn't it? Jesus, I counted the word 10 times. I don't know whether you normally associate that word comfort with God, but I hope that by the end of this morning you will.

Notice four things about God's comfort. First of all, the extent God's comfort is completely comprehensive. He's the God of all comfort who comforts us in all our affliction so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction.

While Paul has described all different aspects of suffering, God's comfort is complete to be able to meet every single need. Paul goes out of his way to show us that there's no trial, there's no hardship, no suffering beyond the reach of God.

Paul's been through it all and he can testify that not once has God abandoned him. You might say that God's comfort is comprehensive, not like so-called comprehensive car insurance where actually there's a whole level of small print of the things that you're not helped with and if someone else hits you or if it's a tree falls on your car, actually you still have to pay for the car yourself.

[12 : 44] God's comfort is actually comprehensive. When writer says that his comfort never fails, he is always ready to console.

God's there in every situation in life. I don't know how you're doing today. Maybe 2023 didn't start with the hope of better things.

Maybe you put on a brave face and come here. Maybe it started with the same chronic pain, with the same emptiness, with the same grief, the same pain of loss that doesn't go away.

We can praise God then that as we enter this new year, he is the God of all comfort. I think sometimes that's what we need to hear. We might think, oh, what I need to hear in this new year is that God is the God who brings joy.

That's great, but what about the hard times? He is the God of all comfort and we can praise him for that. He doesn't get exasperated and tell us to pull our socks up, pull ourselves together.

[13 : 42] He doesn't assume that we're fine. He doesn't forget while we're struggling. He knows us all intimately. God's comfort is comprehensive and that's because of where the comfort comes from.

Second notice, God's comfort is fatherly. Twice we got the reminder in verse two and then twice in verse three, Paul reminds us that God is Father.

He is the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ and if we trust in Jesus, then we are adopted into his family and God becomes Father to us as well and it's as a good Father that he comforts us.

I realize we may have all had different experiences of fathers in our lives. Some of us will have had fathers who have comforted and cared for us. Others will have fathers who are very different and difficult maybe.

God is the Father that all fathers should be even if you were to just pick out the words in this passage. He's the God who gives us peace. He's the God who is gracious.

[14 : 47] He's the God of comfort who is full of mercy. He's the God who's compassionate. He's abounding instead fast love. He's gentle. He's the God we can go to that we can trust who won't belittle, who listens, who delights for us to call him father.

He can seek his comfort in any and every situation. He's never going to think that we're wimps for not trying to do ourselves as we'll see later on. What we need precisely in every situation of hardship is to not rely on ourselves but to go to God.

So God's comfort is comprehensive. It's fatherly comfort. It's also guaranteed comfort. Just as we enter through, we enter into God's comfort through Jesus Christ. So Jesus is also the guarantee of our comfort.

Look at verse five again. For as we share abundantly in Christ's sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too.

When we trust in Jesus, we're united to him. We become one with him. We belong to him. And that brings with it pain and promise. The pain is that we will suffer with Christ.

[16:01] We follow in his footsteps, the footsteps of a suffering savior. But the promise is that we will also share in his comfort. We will also share in his life.

And notice the intensity always matches. Abundant sufferings Paul talks about are matched by abundant comfort. We might think that when we face hardship, that's more than we can bear.

But God's never going to be able to be, God's never caught short. He is never going to be able to, unable to, to meet that need. God's grace is always sufficient.

His comfort is always sufficient where we need it. I hope that will lead us to pray with expectation, with hope that God will and can comfort us.

That he promises to comfort. That leads us to our fourth point. It's a comfort that we can share. In verse four, Paul speaks of the God of all comfort, who comforts us in our affliction so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort we ourselves have been comforted by God.

[17:10] It's a chain of comfort as it were. God comforts Paul, Paul comforts the Corinthians and his expectation is that they will then comfort others. It's all from God.

It all comes through Christ. But I think the amazing thing is that God is, Paul, the amazing thing is that God in his sovereignty uses our sufferings and comfort to equip and comfort others.

God's not out of control. We're not beyond God's reach when we're facing hardship. In fact, it's even in those times, God is able to use the comfort that he gives us to make us able to, in turn, comfort others.

You might say that Paul becomes a channel of comfort to others. God fills him up with comfort so that he might overflow to others. And it's wonderful both to be able to pass on that comfort that we've received and also to be able to receive it.

You might know that from situations that you've been in, where someone's able to just speak into your life in such a way that is so precious and unique because they're able to speak about the comfort that they themselves have been given by God.

[18:19] They understand your situation, they're able to speak and encourage you with the truth that they were encouraged by as well. Let me just share with you where I have experienced it.

Many of you will know that earlier this year, my wife Helen had a miscarriage and several months later I watched a video by Jonathan Gibson, a minister and seminary professor in Westminster.

And he was speaking about the background to a book he's written, a children's book called *The Moon is Always Round*. And the book comes from conversations that he had with his son after his daughter Layla was stillborn.

And he talks about questions that his son asked. His son asked, why isn't my sister coming home? Why does she want to be with Jesus rather than with us?

And later he talked to his son about the moon. And he told them there are days when we can't see the whole moon because moon goes through different phases.

[19 : 19] But even though, even when we can't see the whole moon, we always know that it's still round. And he said that's something like the goodness of God. There are days when we struggle to see the goodness of God.

But God is always good, just like the moon is always round. And I found that video really comforting and helpful, not just because it was a clear and simple reminder of the truth from the Bible, but also because it came through someone who I could relate to.

Because Jonathan was sharing the truths that God had given him to bring him comfort. And he was passing those on. And that way comfort, comfort in some ways comes best when it's second hand.

When someone's able to share how God has already comforted them. Now that doesn't mean that as we share comfort, that we suddenly have all the answers to suffering, that we can understand why things have happened.

There's always so many unknowns. We don't know the answers. We don't know why God allows things to happen. But Paul here just gives us one small thing that we can know.

[20 : 30] We can know that even in the midst of sufferings, God can and will use the comfort that he gives us to comfort others and he uses other people's comfort to comfort us.

God's not out of control. He's still sovereign even in the midst of that. And that brings us to our third point more briefly. We're looking verses eight to 11 that God is the God who raises the dead.

And at this point, you might be easy to say, look, all of this is okay for you to say, Paul, you can speak about God being sovereign in all these situations. You can speak about God being in control.

But does Paul really understand what it's like to feel bent double with hardship? God, does Paul really understand? Well, I think Paul's honesty again in verses eight to nine is helpful.

He describes, if you just look at those verses with me, he describes facing affliction in Asia. He says, we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself.

[21 : 34] Indeed, we felt like we received the sentence of death. Paul knows real suffering. Paul's not speaking from a, what is it, a glass tower or whatever the expression is.

And that's really important when we come to what Paul says next. Paul says in verse nine, indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death, but that was to make us rely not on ourselves, but on the God who raises the dead.

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. Now telling someone in the midst of suffering that God is in control and he will, and he will always work all things together for good is generally not the most helpful to set thing to say.

However, Paul is able to reflect back on the periods of suffering in his life and see that that is the case and see that God is in control, that when Paul was despairing of life itself, God wasn't absent, that God did deliver him and that God did bring good from Paul's affliction.

Now Paul's not holding that out as if he's somehow super that he's managed to, that he's seen this. He's holding this out as an encouragement to the Corinthians, that on reflection as he's able to work through and process the sufferings in his past, he's passing on this hope to them that even if they can't see that in that moment, in that time where they're facing hardship, they can trust, they can hear Paul's witness, they can hear Paul's testimony, that God does actually work things together for good, that God is sovereign.

[23 : 21] And Paul adds to that, he says that God uses the situation, used the situation for him personally to help him rely on God and not on himself.

I think we so often think maybe Paul's a super hero, but here's Paul saying that at one point I really relied on myself quite a lot. I thought I could do it all on my own and God actually used these periods of trial to bring me to the end of myself so that I would rely on him more, which I think is really helpful, so amazing thing for Paul to admit about how God has used those periods of trials in his life and learning to rely on God is a really difficult lesson, but it's a vital one.

Because if we rely on anything else, we're building our lives on something that is unstable, but God often uses the shaking, even the crumbling of those false foundations to make us reach out and hold on to him, to rely more and more on him.

That's not a one-off lesson, that's something that we learn, that we experience all through our lives. As God uses situations, small situations, larger situations to make us more and more reach out and rely on him.

Though it's hard, God uses those times to bring us when we're brought to the end of ourselves to realize that there's nothing else that we can hold on to but him.

[24 : 51] The good news is that God can be relied on. He's the God of all comfort as we've seen whatever happens, he's always there, but more than that, Paul also gives us the hope that he is the God who raises the dead.

He's the God who has the track record of raising the dead. First and foremost, what Paul is telling us here is about God's power. He's saying that not even death can conquer God.

You'll see in the Old Testament, this time when God raises the dead in the New Testament, in the life of Jesus, ultimately when Jesus himself is raised from the dead.

This is proof that no one is more powerful than God. In many ways, it's a proof again of God's sovereignty, not even death can overcome God.

God's in control in the depths of the hardest suffering, God's even in control when death seems to be winning. But he's the God who raises the dead.

[25 : 51] One of the reasons we gather on a Sunday is to help us remember that he's the God who raises the dead. We celebrate as we meet together that this is the day when Jesus rose from the dead.

We do not worship a God who is dead, who is defeated by death. We worship a risen and reigning Savior, the risen Jesus Christ, who will raise to life all who belong to him when he returns.

Paul again is giving his life as evidence of God's resurrection power. In verse 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.

In other words, God's a proven deliverer. Sometimes that means that he heals and saves and rescues his people from suffering. That's why in verse 11, Paul prays and asked the Corinthians that once again he will deliver him.

If Paul thought that couldn't happen, he wouldn't ask the Corinthians to pray. However, that said, Paul also isn't saying that deliverance in this life is guaranteed.

[26 : 57] Paul knows that at any moment God could allow him to die. There was a time when God chose not to deliver Paul in the end and Paul did die. But that doesn't mean that he had a false hope.

That doesn't mean he was holding out a false hope to the Corinthians or to us. Because while we're not guaranteed deliverance from death, God was, he is, he always will be the God who raises the dead.

The promise of the Bible is that all who die trusting in Jesus Christ will be raised to new life with him and will be raised to eternal life, to life with new creation bodies in the new creation that Christ will return to restore and to make.

We have a God who raises the dead. We have the God who is completely powerful. He not only comforts us. If God was just the God of comfort and put his arm around us in hard times, we'd say, well, that's well and good.

God comforts us, but can you do anything? Yes. He's the God who raises the dead. God can deliver. He does.

[28 : 04] But even when he doesn't, he still gives us hope that goes beyond the grave because he will raise us on that final day. Well, looking at the time, we need to draw to a close.

In this coming year, we will face suffering because we follow in the footsteps of a suffering savior. However, God doesn't leave us on our own.

He doesn't abandon us. God is our father and he is the God of all comfort. We can go to him. We can call on him. He's always ready to listen. And he's the God who raises the dead.

He's the God who's all powerful. He's sovereign in every situation, even if we can't see it. We can trust the witness of people like Paul who've looked back and seen it. And he has the power to save.

And ultimately, he promised us to raise us to new life with Christ. We have hope that goes beyond the grave. Let's pray.

[29 : 07] Heavenly Father, thank you that on this first day of 2023, we can look back and see this witness from the apostle Paul of who you are and what your character is like.

We thank you that you are the God of all comfort. We thank you that you are the God who raises the dead. Lord, we pray that you would help us to hold on to those two truths. Lord, we know that 2023.

We pray that 2023 would have loads of really good times. Many answers to prayer, much joy, much happiness, but we know that that won't always be the case.

And we pray that in the hard times, especially in the times of, in the times where we feel burdened beyond anything else when we despair even of life. Lord that you would help us to cling to you.

You'd help us to trust you, to hold on to you. Lord, thank you that you are the God of all comfort. We pray that you'd give us that comfort. You'd guard our hearts. Help us to remember that you are good, that your goodness is as sure as the moon is always round.

[30 : 16] So you are always good. Lord, we pray that you'd help us to remember these truths. They would guard our hearts. We pray all this in Jesus' name. Amen.