

Tidings of Comfort and Joy, Part 1

2 Corinthians 7:5–16

by Mike Riccardi

Introduction

One of the recurring themes of our series through 2 Corinthians is that every Christian is called to ministry. We've said it a number of times before: If you are a *partaker* of the New Covenant, you are a *minister* of the New Covenant, 2 Corinthians 3:6. If you have been *reconciled* to God through Christ, you have been entrusted with the *ministry* of reconciliation, 2 Corinthians 5:18. It is not just pastors, and missionaries, and seminary professors who are called to ministry in the church of God. All who have been called to salvation have been called to ministry. There is no such thing as a faithful Christian who is not in some way using his spiritual gifts to serve the body of Christ. There is no such thing as a faithful Christian who is not preaching the Gospel to unbelievers the Lord has brought into his life. We have all been called to ministry.

And neither is there any such thing as a Christian who is faithfully fulfilling his ministry who is unacquainted with affliction. Outside the church, we live and minister behind enemy lines. “The whole world lies in the power of the evil one,” says the Apostle John, and is therefore what Paul calls “the domain of darkness” (Col 1:13). And because the darkness hates the light and is radically opposed to the light, we who are the sons of light bringing the message of Christ who is the Light of the world, are promised by the Christ who sent us that “In the world you [will] have tribulation (John 16:33)” And we are promised by Christ’s Apostle that all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted (2 Tim 3:12). And so if we are faithful to bring the message of the Gospel to the world around us—the message of salvation by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone—we know what it is to deal with affliction. And that affliction is never pleasant. We don’t revel in that affliction. But there’s something about the persecution that we receive from the world that seems reasonable. We expect that kind of response from the enemies of the Gospel.

But that is not the only kind of affliction we experience in ministry. The faithful Christian does not only proclaim the Gospel to those *outside* the church; he also ministers the Gospel to his brothers and sisters in the body of Christ, *within* the church. And sadly, because none of us has achieved perfect sanctification—because sin still remains in the flesh of all those who have not yet seen Christ face to face—the faithful minister experiences affliction even from those within the visible church. As we seek to bring the Gospel to bear on the lives of fellow brothers and sisters, to help one another become aware of remaining sin, and to aid one another in the fight against that sin, those who are giving in to the desires of their flesh can buck against correction, can cling to their sin, and can pridefully lash out against the one bringing it. And that results in a

strained relationship. Relationships can be strained in other ways as well. I recently sat with a sweet lady who was seeking counsel on how to be reconciled to another sister at our church who had become upset with her because of a misunderstanding exacerbated by gossip and a refusal to discuss the matter with one another face to face.

And the affliction that exists within the church always seems to sting worse, doesn't it? I mean, as I said, we expect the opposition from unbelievers. "But," we think, "isn't it supposed to be different within the church?" We expect that the body of Christ to be a safe haven from the conflicts and strife and gossip and betrayal that the world has to face, because it's precisely from these deeds of the flesh that Christ has saved us from! And when we discover—in a practical sense—that, though free from the penalty and power of sin, Christ's people have not yet been delivered from the *presence* of all sin, we're surprised at the amount of damage the body of Christ can do to one another! And so, insofar as we are faithful to be in each other's lives and minister to one another, we know what it is to minister in the midst of affliction.

And the Apostle Paul knew what it was, as well, to minister in the midst of affliction. Paul catalogs his afflictions throughout 2 Corinthians. He says in chapter 4 verse 8 that he is in all things afflicted, perplexed, persecuted, and struck down. In chapter 6 he speaks of afflictions, hardships, distresses, beatings, imprisonments, and more. In chapter 11 he speaks of living in constant danger from everyone around him, experiencing many sleepless nights, hunger, and thirst, and being exposed to the harshness of the elements, having no place to lay his head. But through all of these afflictions, there is a constant note of triumph. He says, "We are in all things afflicted, but not crushed; perplexed, but not despairing; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed." He says that God comforts him in *all* his afflictions (1:4) and *always* leads him in triumph in Christ (2:14). Paul knew that these afflictions were to be expected from a world that killed the Lord Jesus Himself and was hostile to His Gospel

But Paul also knew what it was to experience affliction from those within the church as well. And it always seems the tensions with other believers were more grievous to him than the afflictions from outsiders. He says in 2 Corinthians 11:28: "Apart from such external things, there is the daily pressure on me of concern for all the churches. Who is weak without my being weak? Who is led into sin without my intense concern?" The external things he could bear; he knew those afflictions were sure to come. But when it came to sin in the body of Christ, he speaks of daily pressures and intense concern. In Galatians 4:19, he said of the believers in danger of deception from the Judaizers that he was in the anguish of childbirth until Christ was fully formed in them. And in Philippians 3:18, the only record we have of Paul actually weeping as he writes his letters, he weeps for those who had once made a profession of faith and had joined themselves outwardly to the church, but who had fallen away and become enemies of the cross. For Paul, the afflictions suffered at the hands of those within the church cut more deeply and stung more intensely than even the more severe physical afflictions from those outside the

church. Pastor John writes, “The most painful aspect of ministry involves difficult relationships between the sheep and the shepherds. All pastors know the hurt that comes when those in whom they have invested the most return the least” (260).

And if there was a church in whom Paul had invested the most, you could make a case that it was the Corinthians. Eighteen months of night-and-day instruction on the visit in which he founded the church in Corinth; a return visit not long after; what would eventually be two inspired letters which, if you take them together, constitute Paul’s most extensive correspondence to any single church in the New Testament; add to that at least two other letters he wrote to them which he makes reference to but which have not survived the years of history: yes, Paul invested much in these saints whom he calls in 1 Corinthians 4:14 his beloved spiritual children. And if there was a church that caused Paul more grief, and discouragement, and heartache above all the others, it was the Corinthians.

And I hope by now you remember the scene. False teachers claiming to be apostles infiltrated the church at Corinth, and aimed to discredit Paul’s apostolic legitimacy in order to peddle their false gospel of legalism to the Corinthians. The ensuing controversy led Paul to change his original plans and visit the Corinthians ahead of schedule, as he hoped he could put the matter to rest by being there personally. But when Paul arrived there, one of the men in the church openly flouted Paul’s authority and insulted him before the whole church. To make matters worse, rather than coming to Paul’s defense and defending the Gospel that Paul preached, the Corinthians were taken in by this false teaching, and allowed this man’s sin to go unchecked.

After this, what-Paul-calls his “sorrowful visit,” he returned immediately to Ephesus and wrote the Corinthians a severe letter, sternly rebuking them for failing to deal with sin in the church properly, and for straying from his apostolic teaching and message. He sent the letter with his dear brother and fellow-laborer in the Gospel, Titus, and arranged for Titus to travel from Corinth to Troas, where he would meet up with Paul and report to him how the Corinthians received the letter and responded to his instruction. But we learn that Titus never made it to Troas. In 2 Corinthians 2:12–13, Paul wrote, “Now when I came to Troas for the gospel of Christ and when a door was opened for me in the Lord, I had no rest for my spirit, not finding Titus my brother.”

And at that point in the letter, Paul shifted from narrating and responding to the events concerning the conflict with the Corinthians to a prolonged defense of his apostolic ministry. And so really what you have from chapter 2 verse 14 all the way to chapter 7 verse 4, is an extended digression in which Paul (a) defines the nature of New Covenant, apostolic Gospel ministry, and (b) defends himself as a legitimate Apostle and minister of the New Covenant, a preacher of the one true Gospel of Christ. But as we come to our text this morning, that extended digression is brought to a close, and Paul picks back up where he left off in chapter 2 verses 12

and 13, and begins commenting on meeting back up with Titus to hear about how his interaction with the Corinthians had gone. Let's read our text for this morning, 2 Corinthians 7, verses 5 to 16. "For even when we came into Macedonia our flesh had no rest, but we were afflicted on every side: conflicts without, fears within. ⁶But God, who comforts the depressed, comforted us by the coming of Titus; ⁷and not only by his coming, but also by the comfort with which he was comforted in you, as he reported to us your longing, your mourning, your zeal for me; so that I rejoiced even more. ⁸For though I caused you sorrow by my letter, I do not regret it; though I did regret it—for I see that that letter caused you sorrow, though only for a while—⁹I now rejoice, not that you were made sorrowful, but that you were made sorrowful to the point of repentance; for you were made sorrowful according to the will of God, so that you might not suffer loss in anything through us. ¹⁰For the sorrow that is according to the will of God produces a repentance without regret, leading to salvation, but the sorrow of the world produces death. ¹¹For behold what earnestness this very thing, this godly sorrow, has produced in you: what vindication of yourselves, what indignation, what fear, what longing, what zeal, what avenging of wrong! In everything you demonstrated yourselves to be innocent in the matter. ¹²So although I wrote to you, it was not for the sake of the offender nor for the sake of the one offended, but that your earnestness on our behalf might be made known to you in the sight of God. ¹³For this reason we have been comforted. And besides our comfort, we rejoiced even much more for the joy of Titus, because his spirit has been refreshed by you all. ¹⁴For if in anything I have boasted to him about you, I was not put to shame; but as we spoke all things to you in truth, so also our boasting before Titus proved to be the truth. ¹⁵His affection abounds all the more toward you, as he remembers the obedience of you all, how you received him with fear and trembling. ¹⁶I rejoice that in everything I have confidence in you."

What we have in this text is Paul's report about how God sovereignly worked through the letter he wrote, and through Titus's ministry, and in the lives of the Corinthians so as to minister comfort and joy to Paul's heart in the midst of his ministerial affliction. This text is about how God comforts the downcast minister, and it is an encouragement to all those who experience affliction in the path of faithful Christian ministry. And because uses the term "comfort" six times in these verses, and the words "joy" or "rejoice" five times, I've entitled this sermon, "Tidings of Comfort and Joy." Because that's really what it is: it's Paul's report of the comfort and joy he received by hearing from Titus the news of the Corinthians' repentance.

And we're going to devote two sermons to examining this passage, and we'll do so as follows. First, I'll seek to unfold the meaning of this text by observing **three reasons for Paul's present comfort and joy**. Then, once we've understood the meaning of the text in its own context, I'll seek to apply this text to us by observing several **lessons** concerning the restoration of relationships in the context of ministerial conflict.

Explanation

First, let us give ourselves to the task of understanding the meaning of this text in its context by outlining it across **the three reasons** Paul gives for his present comfort and joy.

I. Titus's Arrival (vv. 5–7a)

That **first reason** that Paul is comforted is **the arrival of Titus** in Macedonia. Number one: **Titus's Arrival**. Now, remember the scene. Paul had sent Titus to Corinth with the severe letter, and planned to meet him in Troas afterward. Well, Paul got to Troas and Titus wasn't there. And that left Paul distressed. He says back in chapter 2 verse 13, "I had no rest for my spirit, not finding Titus my brother." Well, evidently, the plan was that if they didn't meet up in Troas, Paul would sail to Macedonia and meet Titus there, likely in Philippi. But here in chapter 7 verse 5, he says that even his journey over to Macedonia brought him no relief from the restlessness that he experienced in Troas. "For even when we came into Macedonia our flesh had no rest, but we were afflicted on every side: conflicts without, fears within."

In 2:13 he said his *spirit* had no rest. Here he says his *flesh* had no rest. Outside and inside, externally and internally, Paul afflicted on every side. He speaks of "conflicts without." The word "conflicts" refers to quarrels (2 Tim 2:23), to disputes (Titus 3:9), to the controversies that he faced as a matter of custom as he brought the Gospel from city to city. Those struggles with the enemies of the Gospel were not absent even on this brief trip to Macedonia.

But as we mentioned before, more painful than the conflicts without were the "fears within." "I wonder what's taking Titus so long. Oh, I hope he's well, and that his delay isn't due to some serious conflict that he had in Corinth. What if they didn't receive him well? What if the false apostles' deception has only grown stronger, and now their antipathy for me has spread to Titus? How will they respond to my letter? I hope I wasn't too sharp or overly harsh. I hope they're able to see that my stern tone and strong words only mean to provoke them to repentance, and that it doesn't cause any unnecessary pain. Oh, what if that letter only plays into the lies of the false apostles, and only confirms their misapprehension of me as a hard-hearted authoritarian? If they finally reject my apostleship and my Gospel, what will become of that church? My spiritual children! At least, so I thought! And what will become of the witness to Christ in Corinth?" Paul was a mess! His spirit was so disquieted that he had no rest, and even describes himself in verse 6 as depressed! The Greek word, *tapeinos*, in this context has the sense of "downcast," or "downhearted," or "dejected."

"But," verse 6, "But God, who comforts the depressed, comforted us by the coming of Titus." As Paul called Him in 2 Corinthians 1:3 and 4, "the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction," providentially ministered comfort to the downcast Paul by sovereignly orchestrating that he and Titus be reunited in Macedonia. In the midst of his fears

and anxieties about Titus's well-being, his reception at Corinth, and the fate of the ministry in that church, the God of all comfort brings these dear brothers together, and refreshes their souls.

And then, more than Titus's arrival and presence with him, Paul was comforted by the report that Titus brought concerning Corinth. Lest the Corinthians misunderstand, and suppose that Paul's comfort and joy had only to do with reuniting with his friend and nothing to do with *them*, Paul clarifies in verse 7: "And not only by his coming, but also by the comfort with which he was comforted in you, as he reported to us your longing, your mourning, your zeal for me; so that I rejoiced even more." Things had gone well in Corinth! The Lord had used Paul's severe letter to bring the Corinthians to repentance! Rather than deepening the rift in their relationship, God had sovereignly worked to restore their relationship! Titus received so much comfort from their response to his visit, that Paul was comforted by *Titus's* comfort!

II. The Corinthians' Repentance (vv. 7b–13a)

And that brings us to a **second reason** for Paul's comfort and joy. He's comforted not only by Titus's arrival, but, number two, by **the Corinthians' repentance**. Titus's report of the Corinthians' repentance was threefold; they responded with mourning, with zeal and with longing. First, in response to the reproof contained in Paul's letter, the Corinthians came to their senses, and they saw their distrust and suspicion of Paul for the folly that it was. They recognized that they had been deceived by the false apostles, and they realized that Paul deserved their trust as their spiritual father, the one through whom they had come to salvation in Christ. And they didn't only acknowledge their sin; they *mourned* over it. They were grieved over their own disloyalty to Paul. They remembered their refusal to discipline the man who openly defied Paul before the whole church during his painful visit, and they mourned in repentance.

Second, they expressed zeal for Paul. This word refers to "eagerness" or enthusiasm," and speaks to the fact that they not only acknowledged their sin and grieved over it, but that they *acted* to change course. In this case, we learn from chapter 2 verse 6 that they exercised the appropriate church discipline on the factious man and put him out of the church. In fact, they were so zealous to amend their behavior that Paul had to exhort them not to be too severe on the offender, but rather to forgive him once he had repented as well. And third, Titus reported the Corinthians' longing to see Paul. The Corinthians hadn't just made some dispassionate transaction in their minds. After they had mourned in grief over their sin, and after they had acted in zeal to change their course, they experienced the genuine longing for restoration of fellowship with the man they had loved so dearly, but had wronged so bitterly.

And then Paul turns to address his severe letter that was so instrumental in bringing about the Corinthians' repentance. Let's look at verses 8 and 9: "For though I caused you sorrow by my letter, I do not regret it; though I did regret it—for I see that that letter caused you sorrow, though

only for a while—I now rejoice, not that you were made sorrowful, but that you were made sorrowful to the point of repentance; for you were made sorrowful according to the will of God, so that you might not suffer loss in anything through us.” So Paul acknowledges that, because of the sharpness of its tone and the severity of its content, he knows his letter caused them great sorrow. And so he explains that he takes no delight in their sorrow, and that he even initially regretted sending the letter because of the pain that it brought them. But that regret was only temporary, and it gave way to comfort and joy given as gifts from God Himself. And that was because he’d learned from Titus that the sorrow his letter caused had only led them to repentance. That kind of sorrow isn’t to be regretted, but to be celebrated—to be rejoiced in! Because it’s the sorrow that is according to the will of God. Look at verse 10: “For the sorrow that is according to the will of God produces a repentance without regret, leading to salvation, but the sorrow of the world produces death.” This wasn’t the worldly sorrow that is focused on self and centered in the personal consequences that one experiences for sin. This was a godly sorrow that brought about genuine repentance and led to the vindication of the Corinthians’ salvation.

Then in verse 11, Paul speaks in detail of just what the Corinthians’ repentance consisted in, listing seven characteristics of their genuine repentance. He says, “For behold what earnestness this very thing, this godly sorrow, has produced in you!” “Earnestness” refers once again to their eagerness to change their course and to restore their relationship with Paul. Whereas before they were apathetic and indifferent concerning their sin, now they beheld it for the offense that was—both against Paul and against the Christ who sent Paul—and so they were earnest about dealing with sin biblically. He goes on: “What vindication of yourselves!” Rather than that apathy and indifference that had characterized them before, the Corinthians were eager to clear their name—to give an account of their actions, and to make the proper restitution that would restore their relationship with Paul. A third characteristic is indignation, which speaks of their righteous anger over the offense committed by the factious man, but even more so of their indignation toward themselves for having followed in his error. And that is the response of those who have been possessed of the fear of God. Then Paul repeats the words he used in verse 7: “What longing, what zeal,” and then adds, “what avenging of wrong!” That is, the longing for a restored relationship with Paul, and zeal to set things right and see that justice is done in the case of the factious man. “In everything,” he says, “you demonstrated yourselves to be innocent in the matter.” Which means, not that they had never been guilty of sin, but that they had borne such fruit in keeping with repentance that they had made things right, and could no longer be held to blame for the sin they had forsaken.

And Paul closes this section by saying that it was this repentance—this return to an earnest longing for Paul, evidenced by a zealous avenging of wrong—this is why he wrote his letter. Verse 12: “So although I wrote to you, it was not for the sake of the offender nor for the sake of the one offended, but that your earnestness on our behalf might be made known to you in the

sight of God.” And it’s important to realize that Paul is not saying that the issue between the factious man—whom he calls the offender—and himself—whom he calls the offended—Paul’s not saying that his letter had nothing to do with that. He uses a Hebrew literary device to stress the primacy of what he considers to be the most important motive. So he’s saying, “My letter had as its most ultimate goal, not the punishment of the offender, nor the vindication of myself, but the goal of making you remember your love for me. At bottom, I wasn’t after scoring points in this battle between me and the false apostles. I was after you! And the false apostles had deceived you into thinking and feeling about me in ways that I knew wasn’t what was in your heart. I wanted to lift the cloud of their deception, and I’m so glad that the letter served to remind you of your earnest affection for me, even as my earnest affection for you had never wavered. “For *this* reason,” he says in verse 13, “we have been comforted.”

III. Titus’s Joy (vv. 13b–16)

So: Paul has been comforted by Titus’s arrival, and by the Corinthians’ repentance. A **third reason** for Paul’s comfort and joy that we see outlined in this text is, **number three**, because of **Titus’s joy**. Look at the second half of verse 13: “And besides our comfort, we rejoiced even much more for the joy of Titus, because his spirit has been refreshed by you all.” And we’ll talk more about it when we get to the application part, but I just love how Paul’s joy is so bound up in his brother’s joy. He is happy because his dear brother Titus is happy. He is refreshed because his fellow-laborer in the Gospel is refreshed. And that *was* a special blessing, because I’m sure Titus had not a few misgivings and anxieties about delivering this severe letter from Paul to the Corinthians. If Paul was distressed about having *written* the letter, imagine how Titus felt about *delivering* it in person! But—praise God—the Corinthians had received Titus well. Verse 15 says, “His affection abounds all the more toward you, as he remembers the obedience of you all, how you received him with fear and trembling.” They received him with the reverence due to a genuine minister of the Gospel, and even as Titus recounted it to Paul now in Macedonia, his love and affection for the Corinthians grew stronger. And seeing Titus blessed by their obedience blesses the dear Apostle’s heart.

And Paul mentions that he’s always had this confidence that the Corinthians would repent and make the right decision. He says in verse 14 that he boasted about the Corinthians to Titus—he expressed confidence that God *had* done a work of grace in their hearts, and that they would come to their senses and receive him well. And he says that their obedience proved that confidence to be warranted. And so therefore, verse 16, he continues to rejoice that he has reason to be confident that God’s grace will be at work within them even as they move forward in their relationship.

Application

Well, so much, then, for the **three reasons** for Paul's comfort and joy concerning his relationship with the Corinthians. Now, having understood the meaning of this passage in its original context, let's turn now to consider what significance these verses have for us, especially as it concerns the restoration of relationships in the midst of conflict in the ministry. And I believe that we can glean from this passage at least **nine lessons** concerning faithfulness in ministry and the nature of repentance. And we'll get to **three** of those today, and save the rest for next time.

I. Faithful Servants Suffer (vv. 5–6)

The **first lesson** that we can learn from this text is that **faithful servants suffer**. Paul speaks of having no rest in his flesh or his spirit, of being afflicted on every side, of daily experiencing intense pressure and concern for the well-being of the churches, of experiencing conflicts externally, of being assaulted by fears internally, and even of being dejected, downcast, and depressed. Paul was going through it, friends! And he was no stoic! As durable as he was—as indomitable as he could be—he was no man of steel, impervious to the pains and anxieties that are sure to accompany a life of sacrificial ministry to sinners! Even professing *Christian* sinners! He was deeply affected by the trials in his ministry!

And remember, it was the warped worldview of the *false apostles* that supposed that such intense suffering was mutually exclusive with the blessing and favor of God! Paul was not being unfaithful! His trials were not the result of harboring secret sin or forfeiting the blessing of God on his ministry. They were the result of serving fallen people in a fallen world.

This is instructive for us, brothers and sisters. Because we have the tendency—the moment we experience relational conflict in the context of our ministry to one another in the church—we have the tendency to assume that God must be chastising us for some secret, unknown sin. We conclude that there must be something that we've done that the Lord is punishing us for! Now, that may be the case. It could be that the Lord uses conflicts and trials to cause us to examine our hearts and repent of unconfessed sin. But if we have searched our hearts and we do discover a clean conscience, we ought not to conclude that our experience of conflict or affliction is a necessary indicator of unfaithfulness. It could simply be the inevitable result of aiming to serve people who—like us—still do battle with remaining sin in their flesh.

One commentator wrote, “These words ought to be deeply encouraging to those involved in ministry today. As we consider Paul's circumstances, and especially his emotional state as he entered Macedonia, we again are reminded that sincere, committed, Spirit-enabled ministry does not provide immunity from fear and discouragement” (Guthrie, 372). The great Prince of Preachers, Charles Spurgeon—the man used of God to preach to tens of thousands of people and to bring so many to salvation—wrote this: “I am the subject of depressions of spirit so fearful that I hope none of you ever gets to such extremes of wretchedness as I go to” (R.K. Hughes,

147). **Faithful servants suffer**, friends. And that ought to encourage us, when we experience the dejection that often accompanies ministry, to press on, to endure, and to flee to the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction.

II. God Comforts the Suffering (vv. 6–7)

And that brings us to our **second lesson**. First: faithful servants suffer. Second: **God comforts the suffering**. Verse 6: “But God, who comforts the depressed, comforted us by the coming of Titus.” Notice the way Paul describes God here. He uses what’s called an articular present participle, which expresses characteristic action. Our God is the God who is characterized as the comforter of the downcast! This is who He *is*: the One who is ever ready to comfort and console! He is, as Paul says in the opening verses of this letter, “the Father of mercies and the *God* of all comfort, who comforts us His people in all our affliction, so that we will be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the very same comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God!”

To say He is “the Father of mercies” is to say that He is our heavenly Father who is characterized, in His very essence, as compassionate and merciful. He is “Yahweh God, *merciful* and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth,” Exodus 34:6. And Psalm 103:13: “Just as a father has compassion on his children, So Yahweh has compassion on those who fear Him.” And He is the God of all comfort. In Isaiah 49:13, God entreats His people to celebrate His comfort. He says, “Shout for joy, O heavens! And rejoice, O earth! Break forth into joyful shouting, O mountains! For Yahweh has *comforted* His people and will have compassion on His afflicted.” And just as God is as a father who has compassion on His children, He also compares Himself as a mother who comforts her child. Isaiah 66:13: “As one whom his mother comforts, so I will comfort you; And you will be comforted in Jerusalem.” This is who God *is*.

And so when we do come face to face with the sufferings and afflictions that befall a minister of the Gospel in a fallen world and in a yet-unglorified church—when we are afflicted on every side, and have conflicts without and fears within—let us take refuge in the bosom of our Heavenly Father, whose nature it is to comfort the downcast, and testify as the psalmist in Psalm 94:19, “When my anxious thoughts multiply within me, Your consolations delight my soul.” Let us call to God in prayer in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, and cast all our cares on Him because He cares for us (1 Pet 5:7). Let us flee to communion with the Holy Spirit of God, who is so often named in Scripture as *the Comforter*, and thus find in the Triune God the refreshment and the strength to press on in joyful, enduring ministry even in the midst of affliction.

III. God Comforts through the Church (vv. 6–7)

And the **last lesson** that we'll have time for this morning is that **God comforts through the church**. Faithful servants suffer, God comforts the suffering, and, number **three**, **God comforts through the church**. Look at the way that God ministered comfort to the Apostle Paul, verses 6 and 7: "But God, who comforts the depressed, comforted us *by the coming of Titus*." The God of all comfort is the agent and source of Paul's comfort. But the instrument which God sovereignly employs to minister His comfort to His downcast servant is the arrival and company of Titus. And not only that, but Paul continues in verse 7: "and not only by his coming, but also by the comfort with which he was comforted in you, as he reported to us your longing, your mourning, your zeal for me; so that I rejoiced even more." The Corinthians themselves—though they were in many ways the cause and substance of his affliction—they themselves were instruments of comfort, wielded by the sovereign hand of the God who orders all things after the working of His good providence.

And this, dear friends, teaches us about the essential importance of fellowship in the church of God. Paul could never have been so comforted by the coming of Titus if he and Titus hadn't forged a bond of brotherhood through fellowship and through ministry to Christ's people. The reason Paul was so blessed by Titus's arrival and company in Macedonia is because the strength of their friendship was forged in the furnace of common affliction suffered in the path of laboring for the Gospel. Paul and Titus were brothers in arms! Fellow-workers in the ministry of the Gospel. Paul calls his companions "fellow soldiers" in the battle of Christian ministry. And that imagery is so apt, because the bond that's forged between fellow soldiers is virtually unbreakable. When you're fighting in combat together, living your lives together, risking your lives together, struggling together, encouraging one another after defeat, rejoicing with one another after a victory—that knits your hearts together! Fellow-soldiers become family—a band of brothers.

Paul could never have drawn comfort from the presence of Titus if he had not invested in that relationship with Titus as a brother in Christ, and if he had not served alongside Titus as a fellow brother in arms for the sake of the Gospel. And similarly, with the Corinthians, Paul could never have been so comforted, and so filled with joy, at the news of their repentance, if his heart wasn't wide open to them—if he had kept his guard up and had never let them get close enough to his heart to the degree that they could bring him the grief and the pain that he experienced in Ephesus and Troas and Macedonia. "For out of much affliction and anguish of heart I wrote to you with many tears" (2 Cor 2:4). It is only those brothers and sisters who we open up to, who we let in, who can bring us much affliction, anguish of heart, and many tears, who can be the instrument of supernatural divine comfort and joy in the midst of trials.

Dear friend, are you experiencing affliction? Are you seeking the divine comfort that comes only from the God of all comfort—the God whose nature it is to comfort the downcast? Dear people, **God** provides that **comfort through the church**—through the instrumentality of His people! So

invest in those relationships! Build into people! Let them build into you! Deepen relationships! If you're not yet in a home Bible study, get into a home Bible study! And get into the lives of the saints there! If you're in a home Bible study, ask yourself how you can deepen and strengthen your relationships with your brothers and sisters, so that in times of trial nothing more than their presence is a source of comfort from God Himself, so that their comfort is your comfort, and their joy is your joy! Serve people, friends. Get down on your hands and knees and army-crawl through the trenches of sanctification with your brothers and sisters! Labor with them to see sin put to death in your lives! Have the hard talks and the uncomfortable confrontations! Ask one another's forgiveness! And rejoice in one another's repentance!

Whatever you do, don't complain to God that you're not experiencing any comfort in the midst of your affliction while at the same time cutting yourself off from the very means by which He ministers that comfort—namely, genuine relationships in the local church! That would be like squeezing the nozzle on the hose, complaining that you're not getting any water, while the whole time you're standing on the hose so that no water can get through! **God comforts through the church**, friends. So invest yourselves in genuine discipleship relationships with your brothers and sisters in the body of Christ, so that they might be a source of comfort in the midst of affliction.

Conclusion

And it cannot go without saying that the only way to have that union with the members of the body of Christ is to be a member of the body of Christ yourself. There is a kind of comfort that is only experienced in genuine fellowship with the church. But the only way in to genuine fellowship with the church isn't through the front door! It is through the Lord Jesus Christ—through a saving relationship with Him through faith alone. And if you lack that saving relationship this morning, I would call you to confess your sins before the Holy God who created you, and look to Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who lived the perfectly righteous human life that you were commanded to live but which you failed to live, died as a substitute under the penalty of the wrath of God which you deserve, rose on the third day victorious over sin and death, and now promises that by a gift of His grace alone, you can have the forgiveness of sins and the sure hope of eternal life through faith in Him alone. Turn from your sin, and trust in Christ alone for righteousness, and be welcomed into the comforting fellowship of His church.