

# The Sustaining Comfort of Jesus Christ

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2 Corinthians 1:3–6  
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This evening’s text is one of the most quoted passages of Scripture for those needing comfort. It doesn’t matter what we’re going through, whether sorrow, loss, need or death. It reminds us that our God is the *God of all comfort*, who promises to comfort us *in all our tribulation*.

It also has an interesting history. Paul didn’t just make it up. He borrowed it from a common synagogue blessing of the first century and changed it to fit the new covenant era in which he lived. The synagogue blessing began with these words: “Blessed art thou, O Lord our God and God of our fathers, God of Abraham, God of Isaac, and God of Jacob....” Paul replaced “the God of our fathers” with *the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ*, a phrase he also used in Ephesians 1:3. Likewise, the synagogue blessing described God as “the Father of mercies.” Paul added, *And the God of all comfort*.

These two things — adding Jesus’ name to the blessing and affirming God’s comfort to his people — were enormous changes that would have driven the Jews crazy. They knew that the Old Testament connected God’s comfort with the coming of the Messiah. Do you remember how Isaiah began his prophecy of the Messiah in chapter 40? He wrote, *Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith your God. Speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem, and cry unto her, that her warfare is accomplished, that her iniquity is pardoned* (vv. 1–2). In fact, comfort was so closely tied to the promise of the Messiah that Luke 2:25 says *there was a man in Jerusalem, whose name was Simeon; and the same man was just and devout, waiting for the consolation [or comfort] of Israel*. And in today’s text, Paul announced that the comfort of God the Father had finally come in the person and work of our Lord Jesus Christ.

## Paul’s Comfort

We all know what comfort is. It’s what strengthens, consoles and encourages us. It gives us hope in times of trouble. But what Paul says in verse 3 is that our heavenly Father is the source of *all* possible comfort. There’s no comfort that doesn’t start with him. No comfort exists apart from the work he did through his Son, Jesus Christ. It just isn’t possible.

Our Heidelberg Catechism captures this idea perfectly in its first question and answer. It asks, “What is thy only comfort in life and in death?” Note the word *only*: what is your *only* comfort? It doesn’t say, “What’s the best comfort?” or “What’s the most common comfort?” but “What is our

only comfort?” And the catechism’s answer is the same as Paul’s. The only thing that can comfort us in life and death is the certain knowledge that we belong to our faithful Savior Jesus Christ, who did everything necessary to secure the Father’s favor toward us, and because of this we will remain in the Father’s favor for all eternity. What could comfort us more than this? Why would we need anything else?

But most people reading today’s text probably assume that it’s talking about the comfort God gives every believer. This is sort of true. After all, verse 4 says that God comforts us so that we can comfort others. And we’ll get to that in a minute. But what Paul wrote at the beginning of this verse is that God comforts us. Who does the pronoun *us* refer to? Does it include the Corinthians, along with Paul and Timothy, and by extension believers of every age? Or was it limited to Paul and Timothy? Who was it that God comforted?

I believe that Paul primarily had himself and Timothy in view. Here’s why. In the verses that follow, he clearly distinguished *we* from *you*. Verse 6 says, *And whether we be afflicted, it is for your consolation; and, Whether we be comforted, it is for your consolation and salvation*. Before Paul wrote this letter to the church at Corinth, he and Timothy had gone through trials and struggles of their own, during which they turned to the Lord for comfort and found it. So, Paul began his letter by blessing God for that comfort.

If you’re wondering what trials Paul and Timothy endured, there were at least two of them. One is that they had just escaped death in Asia. We’ll have more to say about this next week when we cover verses 7 through 11. But here we’ll note that this trial was so severe that they nearly gave up, yet they kept trusting their heavenly Father. The Lord delivered them by the power of Jesus’ resurrection. But this wasn’t the only time Paul’s life was in jeopardy. Listen to what he wrote in chapter 11, *Are they ministers of Christ? (I speak as a fool) I am more; in labours more abundant, in stripes above measure, in prisons more frequent, in deaths oft. Of the Jews five times received I forty stripes save one. Thrice was I beaten with rods, once was I stoned, thrice I suffered shipwreck, a day and a night have I been in the deep; in journeyings often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils by mine own countrymen, in perils by the heathen, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren; and weariness and painfulness, in watchings often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness (vv. 23–27)*. In each of these, Paul took comfort in the finished work of Jesus Christ.

But Paul and Timothy also needed God’s comfort for another reason. They were concerned about the church at Corinth because of the matters Paul had to address in 1 Corinthians. They wanted an update to learn how the saints were doing. God supplied this when Titus arrived. In chapter 7, Paul wrote, *Nevertheless God, that comforteth those that are cast down, comforted us by*

*the coming of Titus; and not by his coming only, but by the consolation wherewith he was comforted in you, when he told us your earnest desire, your mourning, your fervent mind toward me; so that I rejoiced the more* (vv. 6–7). The apostle rejoiced to hear that the church was doing better.

That Paul and Timothy needed comfort reminds us that discouragement can afflict any believer. So, we shouldn't be surprised when it hits us. But like him, we have to keep looking to the Lord; and when he gives us the comfort and encouragement we need, we should bless him for it.

And let me remind you again that the kind of trials we endure isn't the issue. We may think we're going to die. We may be concerned about our children, church or society, but it doesn't matter. Why? Because God is *the God of all comfort* and he comforts us *in all our tribulation*. He's not just the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ; he's also our Father because Jesus died for our sins on the cross. Being our Father, he'll never abandon us. He's interested and involved in every detail of our lives.

## Comfort for Others

God comforted Paul and Timothy because they needed comfort. But he also comforted them for another reason. Verse 4 says, *That we may be able to comfort them which are in any trouble, by the comfort wherewith we ourselves are comforted of God*. God comforted his servants so that they, in turn, could minister the same comfort to others.

What we see here has been described by some as a 'circle of comfort,' i.e., a comfort that never rests and usually returns to where it started. Look what happened. The Corinthians comforted Titus by turning to the Lord and recommitting themselves to the gospel. Titus then carried that news to Paul and Timothy and thus comforted them. And then Paul wrote to the Corinthians to comfort them concerning his own trials and his concern for their welfare.

Isn't this how it should be? As Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians, *And whether one member suffer, all the members suffer with it; or one member be honoured, all the members rejoice with it* (ch. 12:26). We suffer when others suffer, and when we suffer, they suffer with us. We rejoice when others rejoice, and when we rejoice, they rejoice with us. We should never be alone. We should invest ourselves in the lives of everyone else.

Verse 5 explains why it works this way. It's because it's all about Jesus. Paul wrote, *For as the sufferings of Christ abound in us, so our consolation also aboundeth by Christ*. Note the phrase, *the sufferings of Christ*. This doesn't mean that we endure the same sufferings Jesus endured on the cross or that we suffer in the same way. Our suffering can never atone for our sins or the sins of others. Only Jesus' suffering and death can do that. Rather, it refers to the fact that Jesus has

appointed a certain amount of suffering for his people, and we have to bear it until there's no more to bear. In the first chapter of Colossians, Paul wrote, *Who now rejoice in my sufferings for you, and fill up that which is behind of the afflictions of Christ in my flesh for his body's sake, which is the church* (v. 24). And not only does Jesus appoint these sufferings for the church, but he's also with us when we suffer for him. When he met Saul on the Damascus road, he said, *Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me?* (Acts 9:4). Saul was persecuting Jesus because he was persecuting the church for which he died. Being Christians doesn't suspend or erase our trials. On the contrary, it often makes them heavier because our love for Jesus, his kingdom and his people is so much greater. But the Lord promises to be with us in every trial, even when we pass through the valley of the shadow of death.

The Lord brings suffering into our lives to remind us that our lives are not our own. They're not ours to do with as we please. In fact, we have little control over them. I'd love to be free from sore throats and laryngitis. I'd love to have the energy I had when I was twenty-five. It would be far more useful now that I've learned a few things along the way. Even unbelievers have no control over their lives despite the lies of abortionist advocates who say that a woman's right to do whatever she wants with her own body is paramount. Any of them who violates speed limits, neglects her children, doesn't show up for work on time, and so forth, will soon learn otherwise. But our suffering teaches us that we belong to Jesus Christ. He holds onto us long after we've lost our grasp of him. He intercedes for us when we can't pray for ourselves. Hebrews 7:25 says, *Wherefore he is able to save them to the uttermost that come unto God by him, seeing he ever liveth to make intercession for them.* That's what a sympathetic and great high priest does for his people.

According to verse 5, both our suffering and the comfort we receive in it from Jesus abound. Here the word translated *abound* literally means to overflow like a flood.

We know how it feels when troubles come upon us like a flood. Sometimes our problems can be so bad that the only thing we can do is cry out for help as David did in Psalm 69: *Let not the waterflood overflow me, neither let the deep swallow me up, and let not the pit shut her mouth upon me* (v. 15). But let's remember that God is stronger than any flood. Psalm 93 says, *The LORD on high is mightier than the noise of many waters, yea, than the mighty waves of the sea* (v. 4). He's so strong, in fact, that he not only stops the flood of suffering when he pleases, but he replaces it with a flood of comfort through his Son. And his comfort assures us that nothing can ever separate us from his love. We belong to Jesus now and forever.

How then do our trials help others? Paul explained this in verse 6. The first part of this verse says, *And whether we be afflicted, it is for your consolation and salvation, which is effectual in the enduring of the same sufferings which we also suffer.* Paul's affliction comforted the Corinthians by

example. That is, if God's grace sustained him during trials that most of us can't even imagine, the same grace will guard and keep us during our light afflictions.

Paul's comfort also comforted the Corinthians. How? By reminding them and us that God is not only with us in our trials, but he also delivers us from them when they've accomplished their purpose. He wrote, *Or whether we be comforted, it is for your consolation and salvation.* The valley of the shadow of death is never our destination; it's only the road we travel to get there. Our destination is endless joy in the presence of our God and Savior, Jesus Christ. So, when we see others passing through trials and tribulations, and coming out with a stronger faith in Jesus Christ, it encourages us to remain true to the end.

To the apostle Paul, Jesus Christ was the only source of comfort for his people. He and Timothy had experienced that comfort in their own trials, and then they assured the Corinthians that the Lord would be just as faithful to them. The comfort they received only strengthened their faith and equipped them to share it with others.

This shows that God calls those who receive his comfort to look beyond themselves to console others. As members of Christ, we're connected in such a way that our experiences inescapably give hope and encouragement to each other. And as we comfort others, we show the love and compassion of our Savior.

We have to trust God to be what he says he is, viz., the God of all comfort. No matter how severe our trials may be or what they may involve, our comfort is God the Father working through his Son for our complete redemption. By Jesus' suffering, death and resurrection, he's overcome our sin and secured our salvation. In every situation, we can turn to him for strength with the confidence that he'll never leave us. And let's not forget to bless him for his love and faithfulness at all times. Amen.