

Divine Comfort in the Midst of Affliction

2 Corinthians 1:3–7

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Introduction

In April of 1518, six months after Martin Luther infamously nailed his *95 Theses* to the Wittenberg Castle Church door—kick-starting the Protestant Reformation—Luther appeared at a formal disputation in the German city of Heidelberg to examine the practice of selling indulgences in light of Scripture.

It was at the Heidelberg Disputation that Luther first publicly articulated his famous teaching on the “theology of glory” and the “theology of the cross.” Usually, we would think of a theology of *glory* as a good thing. But Luther used the term to describe an approach to Christianity that stumbled over the shame of Christ’s cross—a theology that expected the life submitted to Jesus to be filled with personal glory, and to be emptied of shame and suffering. It was a theology that expected all of the *spiritual* blessings promised to faithful believers upon entrance into *heaven* to be manifested in *physical* fashion *here and now*. Jesus was a conqueror of sin and death, the believer is said to have overcome the world through Him, and so suffering and difficulty were viewed as pure, unmixed evils. There is no reason for faithful Christians to experience suffering, they reasoned, and so those who did were looked down upon. In Luther’s own words, he said that the theologian of glory “does not know God hidden in suffering. Therefore he prefers works to suffering, ‘glory’ to the cross, strength to weakness, wisdom to folly, and, in general, good to evil.”

In contrast, the theology of the cross sees God’s revelation of Himself supremely manifested in the cross of Christ. It sees that the greatest reward comes only as a fruit of the greatest suffering. In other words, it sees plainly that the cross precedes the crown. A theology of the cross observes that the life of Jesus Christ—the most God-blessed Person to have ever walked this earth—was one marked by humiliation, by shame, and by suffering—and that it was precisely through His suffering and death that His glory was revealed. The theologian of the cross understands that if that’s the way God deals with His beloved Son in whom He is well-pleased, those who are united to Him by faith should expect nothing less (cf. Trueman).

Unfortunately, the theology of glory did not die out with the Roman Catholic Church in the 16th century. 21st-century Western Christendom is plagued with a theology of glory, most notably in the form of that doctrine of demons that is called the “health, wealth, and prosperity gospel.” Men who profess to be preachers of the Gospel like Creflo Dollar, Benny Hinn, and Joel Osteen teach that, as children of the King, Christians should be living like princes. God’s will for His

children, they say, is to live in victory over their circumstances—to be free from sickness and emotional distress, to be financially wealthy, and to prosper in every way, as judged by carnal reasoning. And so, according to these false teachers, if you *are* experiencing suffering and difficulty as you seek to follow Jesus, well then you must have deficient faith, or you must be harboring secret sin. And they promise that the way out of that spiritual quagmire is to express your faith by sending them your money. These heretical charlatans are *every* bit as devoid of truth and the Gospel as were the peddlers of indulgences in Luther’s day.

But they can trace their spiritual ancestry even farther back than the 16th century. It was this very “theology of glory” that characterized the false teachers that were troubling the Corinthian church in Paul’s day. In our opening studies of the book of 2 Corinthians, we learned that false teachers from Jerusalem, claiming to be apostles of Christ, infiltrated the church at Corinth. And like any false teacher, their goal was to spread their message—to propagate their heresy. But of course they knew that if they were going to get the Corinthians to believe their *false* gospel, they were going to have to discredit *Paul’s* Gospel. But because you can’t discredit the truth, the next best thing is to discredit the messenger. And so the first thing they did was to launch a full-scale assault against the legitimacy of Paul’s apostleship.

They employed every slanderous lie and deceitful accusation they could think of to undermine Paul’s relationship with the Corinthians. They accused him of being a phony apostle, because he hadn’t been one of the original twelve, sent from the church in Jerusalem. They accused him of being a man of flesh—not led by the Spirit of God—because he had been forced to change his plans to visit the Corinthians a number of times. He was vacillating, they said—being tossed to and fro by his circumstances. It was obvious he was harboring some sin and so was out of tune with the Spirit’s guidance. They pointed to his plain speech and to the fact that so few were believing his message, and said God must not be blessing his ministry because of hidden sin. “If he really had God’s blessing and favor, he’d have more people at his church!”

And the more that the Corinthians had been hearing these lies, the more they believed them, until there was a full-scale mutiny against Paul. And so Paul sent them that “severe letter” that he speaks about in 2 Corinthians chapter 2, rebuking them for being deluded by the false apostles and calling them to repent and to return to faithfulness to the true Gospel. Well the good news was God had worked through that severe letter, and the majority of the church repented! They mourned over the way they had treated Paul and reaffirmed their love and loyalty to him.

That was the majority. But the report was there was still a minority who were buying into the lies of the false apostles. And so Paul writes 2 Corinthians to reaffirm his love and affection for the repentant majority, while at the same time aiming to decisively refute the accusations of the false apostles and fully vindicate his apostolic authority. He wants to put this mutiny to rest for good.

And so what you have in 2 Corinthians is the most thorough definition and defense of the true nature of apostolic Christian ministry in all the New Testament.

Now, you need to understand that among all the accusations of the false teachers against Paul's apostleship, chief among them was that Paul simply suffered too much to have divine approval. They reasoned, "True servants of Christ—people whose ministries God is blessing—sure they may have a few tough times, but they surely won't endure the kind of non-stop conflict that Paul goes through! I mean, everywhere this man goes he is beaten, he is stoned, he is thrown into prison—it's obvious that God is disciplining him for his sin!" You see, just like the peddlers of indulgences in 16th-century Catholicism, and just like the hucksters of the prosperity gospel of 21st-century Charismaticism, these false apostles were theologians of glory. They had stumbled over the foolishness of Christ's cross—to Jews a stumbling block and to Gentiles foolishness, but to those being saved the power of God (1 Cor 1:18, 23–24).

And so at the very outset of 2 Corinthians—in a way that sets the tone for the rest of the letter—Paul confronts their theology of glory with the theology of the cross. He begins the letter—this vigorous vindication of his own apostolic legitimacy—by passionately praising God for the very thing his opponents say discredits him: his suffering. So far from *discrediting* his genuineness as an Apostle, Paul's suffering for Christ's sake is a badge of his *authenticity*, and thus a cause for praise. Because it is these very afflictions that become the means through which God reveals the abundance of His divine power. Human weakness is the black backdrop for the brilliant display of the Spirit's power. Human dishonor is the dark sky in which the dazzling stars of God's glory shines forth. And it is in the shadowy gloom of Golgotha—of the suffering and shame of the cross—that makes the gleaming sun of Resurrection Sunday shine all the more brightly. And so true Christian ministry is not marked by the "glory" of worldly power and eloquence, by prestige and reputation, by financial success and freedom from conflict, but by the weakness and suffering of the cross. And so Paul summarizes his ministry in chapter 4 verse 10 when he says, we're "always carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may be manifested in our body."

And one way that the life of Jesus is manifested in his body is through **the divine comfort** that God Himself ministers to Paul's soul in the sweet communion and fellowship of Christ's sufferings. "Dear Corinthians, how do I know that all my difficulties aren't God chastening me for my unrepentant sin? Because in the midst of all these afflictions, God visits me with comfort and consolation, and through His sovereign providence ministers His mercy to me."

Let's read our text for this morning. 2 Corinthians chapter 1, verses 3 through 7. "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, ⁴who comforts us in all our affliction so that we will be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. ⁵For just as the sufferings of

Christ are ours in abundance, so also our comfort is abundant through Christ. ⁶But if we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation; or if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which is effective in the patient enduring of the same sufferings which we also suffer; ⁷and our hope for you is firmly grounded, knowing that as you are sharers of our sufferings, so also you are sharers of our comfort.”

And as you hear that text read, it’s plain just from the vocabulary that the theme of this passage is God’s divine comfort ministered to the soul in the midst of affliction. In this opening benediction of praise to God, Paul uses *three* different words *seven* different times to describe his affliction and sufferings. But interspersed throughout the same five short verses, he mentions the divine *comfort* he receives *ten* times. One commentator calls this “the most eloquent passage on comfort in the entire New Testament” (Kistemaker, 41).

And so in our time together this morning, I want to mine out of this treasure chest of a passage **four facets of divine comfort in the midst of our affliction**. And my prayer for you as we examine these four aspects together is that we would grow in our capacity to recognize and receive God’s comfort in the midst of trying and difficult times in our lives, and that we would be emboldened for joyful, enduring ministry in the midst of affliction.

(And I would be remiss if I didn’t take a moment here at the outset to acknowledge my indebtedness to Pastor John for the titles of a number of these main points. I’m not preaching his sermon, but this one of those weeks when, once I saw his outline, I just couldn’t see the breakdown of the text any other way.)

I. The Person of Comfort (vv. 3–4a)

Well with that disclaimer out of the way, let us look to the **first facet** concerning divine comfort in the midst of our affliction. Number one: **the Person of comfort**. Look with me again at verse 3: “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, ⁴who comforts us in all our affliction....”

Paul begins his letter by erupting in praise and worship to the **Person of comfort**: to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Despite all the troubles and afflictions that Paul had experienced—indeed, all the troubles and afflictions he was experiencing *at that moment*—the eyes of his heart are so fixed on his God that all he can do is overflow in worship. “Blessed is God,” literally.

The Greek word for “blessed” is *eulogētos*, from which we get the word *eulogy*; it means “to speak well of.” The great theologian Charles Hodge wrote that such a benediction “expresses at once gratitude and adoration. ‘Adored be God!’ is the expression of the highest veneration and

thankfulness” (380). This is the word used in the Greek translation of the Old Testament to translate all of those instances in the Psalms where we see the phrase, “*Baruk Yahweh,*” or “Blessed be the LORD.” This was the phrase used at the beginning of the Eighteen Benedictions of the Jewish synagogue service, which each begin with the words: “Blessed art thou, O Lord our God and God of our fathers. . . .” But now that the fullness of time has come, the God of Israel is no longer blessed merely as “the God of our fathers,” but as “the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.” Now, in the time of the revelation of the Messiah, this great God receives worship only through His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ.

And so Paul begins his letter by praising God for the very sufferings that were the cause of the Corinthians’ suspicion of him. He is, as he says in 2 Corinthians 7:4, “overflowing with joy in all [my] affliction,” and so he blesses God, because God is the **Person of comfort**.

And there are two components to his praise of God. He praises God, first, for who He is, in His essence or character. He describes Him here as “the Father of mercies.” That is to say, He is our heavenly Father who is characterized, in His very *essence*, as compassionate and merciful. God Himself testifies of the centrality of these attributes in His own character in Exodus 34, when Moses begged Him, “Show me Your glory!” the ineffable God descended in a cloud, passed by in front of him and proclaimed, “Yahweh, Yahweh God, *merciful* and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth.” The Apostle Peter says it was according to His *great mercy* that He has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus (1 Pet 1:3). And David may have captured it best in Psalm 103 verse 13 when he said, “Just as a father has compassion on his children, So Yahweh has compassion on those who fear Him.” God our Father is the Father of mercies; it is His nature to exercise a gracious and gentle compassion for His children. And that being so, He is the progenitor and fountain of every mercy we receive in the midst of the affliction.

But notice: He is also the God of all comfort. After 39 chapters of prophesying destruction upon disobedient Israel, the prophet Isaiah opens the next section of 27 chapters in Isaiah 40 verse 1 by saying, “Comfort, O comfort My people,’ says your God.” In Isaiah 49:13, God Himself 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.” Interestingly, 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.” And Paul himself puts it so simply in 2 Corinthians 7:6 when he describes God as the “God who comforts the depressed.”

Even in His own Trinitarian nature—the essence of the character of the Godhead, our God is a Triune comforter. This passage speaks of the Father as a comforter. 1 John 2:1 speaks of Jesus

the Son as our great *Advocate* with the Father, and that word “advocate” is *paráklētos*—the same word used here in 2 Corinthians for “comfort.” And in the Upper Room Discourse, as Jesus is preparing His disciples for life without His physical presence, He says to them in John 14:16 to 18, “I will not leave you as orphans.” “I will ask the Father, and He will give you another *paráklētos*, another *Comforter*, that He may be with you forever.” And so God is, by nature, a comforter.

But not only does Paul praise God for who He is in His essence. He also blesses God for what He does as He cares for His children. Look again at the text: “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, *who comforts us in all our affliction.*” This is not merely a theoretical character quality in God; God is the God of comfort because He actually does comfort His people in all their affliction.

Now, when we speak of this divine comfort, we’re not talking about a relaxing day at the beach, or a nice cool pillow, or a big fluffy recliner in front of the TV. Neither are we speaking about a mere expression of sympathy or some sort of psychological support. The coming of divine comfort does not mean the elimination of all conflict in one’s life and deliverance over to perpetual ease. No. It’s interesting that even in English the word *comfort* derives from the Latin verb *confortare*. *Con-* means “with,” and *fortis* means “strong.” So to *comfort* someone means to bring strength to them—to come alongside them and strengthen them. And so mark this: divine comfort in affliction is not necessarily the *elimination* of the affliction; it is not deliverance *out of* the suffering. Rather it is the ministration of divine strength, courage, and fortitude to equip you to endure the affliction in a way that glorifies God.

And how does God minister this comfort to our souls in the midst of affliction? Answer: He floods our minds with divine truth. In the midst of our affliction, God, through the person of the Holy Spirit, brings to our minds the truth of His own revelation. And then we, having our minds properly informed by divine truth, believe that God is who He says He is and will do what He says He’ll do. And that belief that informs our affections, bringing us that consolation and strength to endure our present trial with faithfulness. That’s why the Psalmist says in Psalm 119:92, “If Your law had not been my delight, Then I would have perished in my affliction.” “If I hadn’t delighted in Your Word, I would have never gotten through my affliction!” Or David in Psalm 27:13: “I would have despaired unless I had believed that I would see the goodness of the LORD In the land of the living.” What’s he saying? He’s saying that in the midst of his affliction, he fixed his mind on the divine truth of the resurrection—that, whatever his present circumstances, he would one day see the goodness of Yahweh in the land of the living. And he says that hope rescued him from despair. You see, God comforts us, in the midst of all our affliction, by focusing our minds upon divine truth, such that, believing that truth, we are strengthened to fulfill our ministry with endurance and with joy —“joyful, enduring ministry in the midst of affliction.”

One commentator writes, “No suffering, however severe, can separate the believer from the tender care and compassion of his Heavenly Father. On the contrary, it is precisely in the extremity of the believer’s weakness that the supreme power and grace of Almighty God are magnified” (Hughes, 11).

Isn’t that glorious? Isn’t our God *glorious*, GraceLife? No wonder Paul erupts in praise of the Father of mercies and God of all comfort. Suffering for Christ’s sake is no cause for shame. Affliction in the path of obedient Gospel ministry is no blight on Paul’s apostolic legitimacy. Quite the opposite: these sufferings are a mark of Paul’s authenticity. For it is through these sufferings that Paul communes more intimately with our God: **the Person of comfort**.

II. The Purpose of Comfort (vv. 4b, 6a)

There’s a **second facet** of divine comfort in the midst of our affliction that we learn about in this text. And that is, **number two: the purpose of comfort**. Look with me at verse 4: God “comforts us in all our affliction *so that* we will be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.”

Here we learn that, as sweet as God’s comfort is, that comfort does not come to us merely so that we can enjoy His consolation. No, God comforts His children in all our affliction for a specific **purpose**: namely, that we might be adequately equipped to effectively minister to others as they endure affliction. You see, when God comforts you in your various experiences of suffering, that comfort is not designed to terminate upon you. No, the one who is comforted by God immediately becomes a steward of that comfort. That comfort becomes a divine stewardship, entrusted into your care, so that you might pass it on to others to whom you’re ministering. Charles Hodge puts it this way, “The design...of God in afflicting and in consoling [is] to qualify him for the office of a consoler of the afflicted” (381). And Pastor John explains it succinctly: “This purpose of comfort is to equip the comforted to be comforters” (22).

We understand the principle that those who have suffered much are often the most suited to comfort others in their affliction. Think about it. When you’re suffering through a trial, you don’t instinctively turn to your friends who’ve been insulated from any real struggle in their lives (cf. Storms, 27). No, you turn to the people who have been in the bog—who know what it’s like to wade through the Slough of Despond, and to claw their way out of it by the help of God’s countenance. Spurgeon said, “He who has taken a certain medicine and proved the benefit of it, [he] is the man to recommend it to another.”

Now, there is a *mountain* of comfort for us here. *Oceans* of encouragement are wrapped up in those two little words, “so that.” Why? Because the fact that there is a **purpose** in our comfort

also means that there is a **purpose** in our affliction. Follow me: If God comforts us in our affliction in order that we might be equipped to minister comfort to others in affliction, that implies that there is **purpose** in our sufferings. And I don't know about you, but when I'm in the midst of trials and difficulties, the most common question that I ask is, "Lord, why am I going through this?" Indeed, depending on the kind of suffering we're experiencing at the time, the trials we go through can seem so unbelievably senseless—devoid of any recognizable good purpose or any redemptive qualities at all. And whether it's from a submissive heart inquiring of the Lord as to how we are to grow from this situation, or whether it's from an arrogant heart, demanding that the Lord explain Himself to us, we want to know *why*. We derive no comfort from purposeless suffering, and yet the pain of our circumstances seems to anesthetize us to any observable "so that" (cf. Storms, 27). But it's precisely in that sense of bewilderment that our text comes rushing alongside our hearts and comforts our souls, by giving us a "so that" for our sufferings.

God ordains our afflictions with an explicitly-stated purpose—and it is so that when we receive the divine comfort that is sure to follow our affliction, having benefited from the lessons that our sufferings and our comforts have taught us, we might be able to comfort our brothers and sisters in Christ when they experience trials of various kinds. Friends, it is enormously strengthening, when you're in the midst of a distressing trial and can't seem to make sense of it, to be able to stop and remember that at least one specific reason why you're going through that suffering is so that God can equip you to be you useful in the future, as you comfort others in that same affliction with the same comfort that you received when you were going through that trial. And so in the midst of those distressing trials, you can derive strength to patiently endure that trial by reminding yourself, "God is using this to equip me for greater usefulness in my ministry to the body of Christ. God, open my eyes to see the lessons I need to learn to maximize my effectiveness for service to Your people."

And so Paul tells the Corinthians, verse 6: "Brothers and sisters, if we are afflicted, it is for *your* comfort and salvation; or if we are comforted, it is for *your* comfort!" "So far from being ashamed of my sufferings that come as a result of my ministry, I boast in these weaknesses! Not only because they are the means by which I enjoy the sweet fellowship of divine comfort, but also because it's precisely these sufferings which equip me to be a better servant to all of you!"

And GraceLife, if that kind of example doesn't entice you to be willing to endure whatever affliction God calls you to for the sake of your Gospel ministry, you need to wake up! When I can see that kind of purpose in my suffering—the glory of God in the edification of His saints, because of *my* feeble efforts?—oh, it makes me feel like there's nothing I can't endure for the sake of Christ! There's no risk for the Gospel's sake that's too big! For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain! Oh, and I pray that there is something of that spirit animating you this morning. I pray that you *all* see yourselves in ministry—both to one another in the church, and to the lost

who need the Gospel. And I pray that whatever inconveniences and afflictions that would keep you from fulfilling your ministry would look *so* small to you in comparison to the surpassing worth of magnifying Christ through serving His people and preaching the Gospel of peace to His enemies.

Hodge said, “A life of ease is commonly stagnant. It is those who suffer much, and who experience much of the comfort of the Holy Ghost, who live much” (381). May the glory of Christ woo you to live much—to eschew a stagnant life of ease and to embrace an active life of ministry, even if it means suffering and affliction.

III. The Proportion of Comfort (vv. 5, 7b)

There’s a **third facet** of divine comfort in the midst of our affliction. Not only the Person of comfort, and the purpose of comfort. But also, **number three: the proportion of comfort**. Verse 5: “For *just as* the sufferings of Christ are ours in abundance, *so also* our comfort is abundant through Christ.” And then again in the second half of verse 7: “...knowing that *as* you are sharers of our sufferings, *so also* you are sharers of our comfort.”

There is a directly **proportional** relationship here between suffering for Christ’s sake and benefiting from God’s comfort. And I love the way Spurgeon explains this. He says, “Here is a blessed proportion. God always keeps a pair of scales—in this side, He puts His people’s trials, and in that He puts their consolations. When the scale of trial is nearly empty, you will always find the scale of consolation in nearly the same condition. And when the scale of trials is full, you will find the scale of consolation just as heavy.” “A blessed proportion,” indeed. Do you know what this means? This means that our sovereign God will never bring you through an affliction that He does not match—and more than match—with the sweetness of His own comfort. He will never allow the burden of your suffering to outweigh the fullness and sufficiency of His sovereign consolation. Oh, and when the fellowship with God is *that* sweet, and *that* pleasant, the bitterness of the suffering seems well worth it, doesn’t it? The bitterness of the medicine is a small price to pay for the great relief of being healed of a sickness. The sting of the surgeon’s scalpel is even a welcome injury for the relief of chronic pain.

I grew up in New Jersey, where it is not sunny every day like it is in Southern California. It always seemed to me like it was sunny for a few days each week, but then overcast and rainy for the other few days. And I never enjoyed the rain. When we moved out to L.A. five years ago, I noticed a decided improvement in my mood. It was sunny all the time! The clouds and the rain are depressing! And so I’ve enjoyed that Southern California doesn’t have a lot of rain. But you know what else Southern California doesn’t have a lot of? Green. Oh, there are pockets of green grass here and there, where someone’s installed a sprinkler system. But as sunny as Southern California is, it doesn’t compare to the lush greenery that you see in the spring, and even the

summer, in the Northeast. And I noticed it even more in my most recent trip back just a couple months ago. Every highway just lined with rows of beautiful green trees and rolling grassy hills. It rained a few days on our trip back to the East Coast. And I probably would have preferred the sun. But it was a small price to pay to be refreshed by the *life* in those green surroundings. In fact, knowing that I would soon enjoy that beautiful scenery once again even made the experience of the rain enjoyable.

Friends, our passage is teaching us that where the rains of suffering fall most, the greenest pastures of consolation come most abundantly. Spurgeon said again, “I suppose the fogs and mists of Ireland make it ‘the Emerald Isle.’ And wherever you find great fogs of trouble and mists of sorrow, you always find emerald green hearts—full of the beautiful verdure of the comfort and love of God.” And so I entreat you, don’t despise your suffering. If the ministry God would place you in leads you into affliction for Christ’s sake, don’t do everything you can to insulate yourself from it, such that you would even sacrifice that ministry for the sake of ease. Be bold to enter the storms of Christian suffering—no matter the cost—by the strength that comes from the glorious promise that Christ will meet you in that suffering with His abundant consolations.

But I must be careful to point out: this blessed **proportion** does not work with *all* suffering. Notice the language of verse 5: “For just as the sufferings *of Christ* are ours in abundance, so also our comfort is abundant through Christ.” Our comfort in affliction is promised inasmuch as we suffer *for Christ’s sake*. And this is absolutely foundational to our whole discussion here. The sufferings that bring this glorious comfort are the sufferings that we experience along the path of obedience in following Jesus—the afflictions we face as we are engaged in the *ministry* of the Gospel to a world that is hostile to our Lord and to His Word.

Turn with me to 1 Peter chapter 4. We’ve looked at this passage a number of times together as a cross-reference to our study of Philippians. The churches under Peter’s care were undergoing the intense persecution of the Emperor Nero. And in 1 Peter 4:12–16, Peter instructs them as to how they should respond in their trials. He says, “Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing, as though some strange thing were happening to you; but to the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing.” Why? Because to the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, to that degree you will be comforted *by* Christ. Verse 14: “If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you.” That is a picture of the divine comfort that comes upon the one who shares Christ’s reproach. But notice, he says it twice: the sufferings *of Christ*, reviled for the name *of Christ*.

And then he makes it explicit, verse 15: “Make sure that none of you suffers as a murderer, or thief, or evildoer, or a troublesome meddler; but if anyone suffers as a Christian, he is not to be

ashamed, but is to glorify God in this name.” So the point is: you can lay no claim to this promise of divine comfort if you’re suffering because of sin. If you’re suffering because you’ve brought upon yourself the consequences of your own sinful actions, you have no right to trick yourself into believing that whatever respite from that suffering is the comfort of God. That would be self-deception, and it would inoculate you against the divine correction and reproof through which God is trying to lead you to repentance. You see, there is nothing magical—nothing inherently virtuous in suffering itself. Some people believe that their experiences of suffering even have *atonement* value! I hear people say things like, “With all the hell on earth I’ve experienced, I’m sure I’m going to heaven!” As if suffering was some kind of currency by which you paid God back for your sin!

No, suffering for disobedience, suffering for selfishness, suffering because of laziness—even the everyday headaches and heartaches that characterize life in a fallen world—these are not the sufferings of Christ that Paul is speaking about. The sufferings of Christ are the sufferings associated *with* Christ—the afflictions suffered because of our *relationship* with Christ. And I emphasize that because my goal is not to present to you a Christianity that is some sort of bare sentimentalism—just a psychological crutch, as if Jesus was just another way among many for you to have your emotional felt needs met! I emphasize that these are the sufferings of Christ because I want to galvanize you for ministry!—to strengthen you to endure the heavy burdens that will come upon you because of your faithfulness to Christ and His Gospel in a hostile society! To cry out with Paul in Philippians 3, “I want to know Him! I want to know the power of His resurrection! And if it means greater fellowship with Him I even want to know the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death, in order that I might attain to the resurrection of the dead!” I want you to be strengthened to leave the security and comforts of the camp—Hebrews 13:13—and to go out to Christ, who suffered outside the camp, and *bear His reproach*, as we minister in a world that is no less hostile to Him and His people than the Jews and the Romans were.

“Ashamed of my sufferings?” “Not an apostle because I suffer *too much*?” “Far from it, my dear Corinthians.” As he said in Galatians 6:17, “I bear in my body the brand-marks of Jesus.” And Colossians 1:24: “Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I do my share on behalf of His body, which is the church, in filling up what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions.” My sufferings are the sufferings of Christ. My sufferings are the sufferings of Christ’s Church. Jesus Himself said, “A slave is not greater than his master. If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you” (John 15:20). Dear Corinthians, my sufferings don’t *disqualify* me; they *authenticate* me. The scars on my back, and the scars in my heart—they are the way of the cross.

IV. The Partnership of Comfort (vv. 6–7)

Well, we've seen the Person of comfort, the purpose of comfort, and the proportion of comfort. The **final facet** of divine comfort in the midst of our affliction that this text teaches us is, **number four: the partnership of comfort**. Verses 6 and 7: "But if we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation; or if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which is effective in the patient enduring of the same sufferings which we also suffer; ⁷and our hope for you is firmly grounded, knowing that as you are sharers of our sufferings, so also you are sharers of our comfort."

Paul begins by speaking about the personal effect that his sufferings had had on the Corinthians themselves. He says, "If we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation." "If, in the course of my ministry of the Gospel, the Lord sovereignly leads me into suffering and affliction, for the express purpose of equipping me to minister the comfort I experience to my dear spiritual children such as you are, how can that be counted as evidence *against* my apostleship? If I am afflicted, it is only so that I can minister comfort to you in your affliction, and thereby serve you in your pursuit of increasing Christlikeness. How can the very thing of which you yourselves are beneficiaries be the cause of your distrust of me? And besides that, you remember how at the very founding of your church, when you first turned from your sins and trusted in Christ for righteousness, you remember the great number of afflictions I suffered on my journey to you. You have received the very Gospel itself in the context of my own afflictions! How can it be that you despise in me the very thing which brought you life?"

And friends, we can ask ourselves that very same question. How can we despise and flee the sufferings associated with being a follower of Christ, when the very Gospel message that we believed has been preserved through history only through having sailed down to us on a river of blood? It was the faithfulness of the martyrs, others willing to suffer reproach for the sake of Christ, that preserved the Gospel in its purity through the centuries. Justin Martyr, Polycarp of Smyrna, Ignatius of Antioch, Wycliffe, Hus, Tyndale, John Rogers, Hugh Latimer and Nicholas Ridley—these men were afflicted for our comfort and salvation! Indeed, the very Gospel itself is the Gospel of Christ *crucified*. And that crucified and risen Messiah Himself said, "If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his *cross* daily and follow Me." Part of the **partnership of affliction and comfort** is recognizing that just as others in the body of Christ have suffered for the sake of our comfort and salvation, so also must we suffer for the sake of our ministry to our brothers and sisters in Christ.

But what's amazing is this passage teaches us that the Corinthians were well aware of that, because they were suffering for Christ too! Note the language of **partnership** in suffering in verses 6 and 7. Paul says their comfort is effective in the patient enduring of the *same sufferings* that he also suffers! And in verse 7 he says that they are *sharers* of his sufferings! And so Paul's praising God for his afflictions—his theology of the cross that he's putting on display—is absolutely brilliant here!

He's telling the Corinthians, "Don't be deceived by these health-and-wealth, theology-of-glory-type phony apostles! They're trying to convince you that the true, God-blessed Christian life is one in which you are delivered from all suffering. And that sounds attractive to you, not the least because you do endure the sufferings of Christ. You *are* facing the opposition of a pagan culture that is hostile to your Lord and to His Word. And freedom from the suffering that comes with that sounds enticing to you. You think, 'Hmm. Maybe that *is* the true, victorious Christian life. I know that I haven't been perfect in my progress of holiness; I still sin quite a bit more than I'd like to admit. Maybe that's why I'm suffering so much. Maybe I've missed something. Maybe these guys have found the secret to a hassle-free Christian life that, if only I was more mature, I would have figured out for myself.'"

But Paul is saying, "Friends! Recognize what's happening! They're trying to discredit me because I suffer. But *you're* suffering too! You face the same kinds of afflictions and persecution for the sake of Christ that I do! And so far from discrediting you, and discrediting me, our willingness to suffer for the sake of Christ and for the advance of His Gospel in this perverse and crooked generation *certifies* our genuineness as followers of Christ." "The Spirit Himself testifies with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, heirs also, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, *if indeed we suffer with Him* so that we may also be glorified with Him" (Rom 8:16–17). We are heirs with Christ of His resurrection, *if we share with Him in His suffering and shame*, as we bear His reproach in the world for the sake of His Gospel and His Church.

Conclusion

Well such is the Person, the purpose, the proportion, and the partnership of divine comfort in the midst of our affliction. And I trust that you who belong to Christ would be strengthened by the glorious promises of the comfort of God for **joyful, enduring ministry in the midst of affliction**.

We began our sermon this morning with Martin Luther in Heidelberg, and I want to end there as well. 45 years after the Heidelberg Disputation, in 1563 Protestant theologians following in Luther's footsteps composed a catechism to counteract the heretical teachings of Roman Catholicism. Today, the Heidelberg Catechism is one of the most influential Reformed confessions in all of Protestantism.

And, very apposite to our study this morning, the very first question of the Heidelberg Catechism asks this: "What is your only comfort in life and death?" What would be your answer? The confession's answer is this: "That I am not my own, but belong with body and soul, both in life and in death, to my faithful Savior Jesus Christ. He has fully paid for all my sins with His

precious blood, and has set me free from all the power of the devil. He also preserves me in such a way that without the will of my heavenly Father not a hair can fall from my head; indeed, all things must work together for my salvation. Therefore, by His Holy Spirit He also assures me of eternal life and makes me heartily willing and ready from now on to live for Him.”

Is that your answer, GraceLife? Can you add your loud “Amen!” to that paragraph? That by the saving power of Jesus Christ, all your sins are paid for, not a hair on your head can perish, and therefore you are ready and willing to *lay down your life* in service to Him in ministry—no matter how great the affliction?

If you can’t, dear friend, you are without Christ this morning, and are therefore without comfort this morning. You have no hope in this world—no purpose in your suffering. You are dead in your sins, and stand condemned before a holy God with no payment to offer. But God, being rich in *mercy* (cf. Eph 2:4), has sent His Son to rescue sinners like you. And that Messiah, crucified for your sins and raised from the dead for your righteousness, calls to you this morning to come to Him and die—to die to yourself, to your hopes and your dreams, to your ambitions and your schemes, and most of all to your sin and self-righteousness—to lay your life down and to pick up your cross, in service of His ministry. Will you come?

And to those who say, “Yes!”—to those who have *said* yes and who have taken Christ’s name upon your lips—be strengthened, dear friends, to take Christ’s cross upon your shoulders—and to go out to Him, outside the camp, bearing His reproach (Heb 13:13)—in the glorious hope of the fellowship of divine comfort in the midst of your affliction for Christ’s sake.