

# GOD

*and all our troubles*

**Sunday 24 October 2021**

SERMON TRANSCRIPT

*Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all **comfort**, who **comforts us in all our troubles**, so that we can **comfort** those in any trouble with the **comfort** we ourselves receive from God. For just as we share abundantly in the sufferings of Christ, so also our comfort abounds through Christ. If we are distressed, it is for your **comfort** and salvation; if we are **comforted**, it is for your **comfort**, which produces in you patient endurance of the same sufferings we suffer. And our hope for you is firm, because we know that just as you share in our sufferings, so also you share in our comfort. We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about the troubles we experienced in the province of Asia. We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt we had received the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead. He has delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us again. On him we have set our hope that he will continue to deliver us, as you help us by your prayers. Then many will give thanks on our behalf for the gracious favour granted us in answer to the prayers of many.*  
(2 Corinthians 1: 3-7)

Last week we looked at the way God is with us in all our trouble – drawing out faith in the waiting, weeping as He fully identifies with us in our grief, working to bring forth life from death. If you missed it, check it out. This is deeply reassuring to know, but I know it doesn't translate into making trouble go away. It's like knowing all about the holiday destination but you still have to take the long journey to get there. As Tim Keller says, 'we buy into the modern assumption that we all deserve a comfortable or easy life.' But that's not biblical – so be careful whenever someone wants to marry the Bible to prosperity or being a winner because the good life that Scripture points to is nothing glamorous or romantic or comfortable.

Rather, the good life is a life lived by ordinary people loving God; and, in a New Testament

context, people practicing the way of Jesus – which, in case you missed it, is a narrow road of service, suffering and sacrifice. It is also a life where obedience to Jesus just might get you into even more trouble. Actually, I'm underplaying this: Jesus in John 16:33 said to His disciples, *"In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world."* Well, whether it's trouble that comes in obedience to the gospel, or simply trouble that comes from life in a broken world, a basic way that God is with us in our troubles is by being amongst US.

The Father of compassion, the God of all comfort, is active in and mediated through one another. Remember: although we may find personal applications, the Bible is not written to individual persons, but to the community of God. Notice in just these few verses, it's all about we, us, our – 20 times!

Paul's whole framework to all his churches is that they are a new kind of kingdom community; and not only that, but a community well accustomed to trouble. It's all OUR troubles that we need each other to stand up in the storms of life. And, more than that, there is a sense in which 'community' means we share in each other troubles – that it's not just my problem, it's our problem. We are a community of shared trouble and suffering. And on the flipside Paul understood that we are a community of shared comfort: *"For just as we share abundantly in the sufferings of Christ, so also our **comfort** abounds through Christ. If we are distressed, it is for your **comfort** and salvation; if we are **comforted**, it is for your **comfort**, which produces in you patient endurance of the same sufferings we suffer."* (2 Corinthians 1:5-6)

Notice the repetition of the word 'comfort' (paraklesis) here 9 times. Now, before I race ahead, I have to say when I think about the word 'comfort' it sounds a little too nice – it sounds empathic and gentle, in soft tones and active listening skills and emotionally intelligent – and all that is definitely something we should excel at – but that would not do this word justice because 'comfort' here means to come along side, to encourage, to strengthen, to champion, to build up. It's what the Holy Spirit does and it's what we are to do through the same Holy Spirit power who is both counsellor and coach.

There is a scene in Rocky 5 where Rocky's life is in turmoil in and out of the ring and he returns to the old gym, now derelict, where he remembers his coach Mickey: this cantankerous, raspy old man who was like a father, yet most of the time he speaks in the role it's more of a snarl and there is usually a bit of spit flying out. Rocky remembers that moment, years before, when they were alone in the gym together before the big fight. With this tender strength, words of comfort, and courage, Mickey gives him a gift of a cuff link from the great Rocky Marciano – the most precious thing he owned in the world – and says, "If you ever get hurt and you feel like you are going down, this little angle is going to whisper in your ear. It's going to say, 'get up ... cause Micky loves you.'" I always feel the paraklesis of the Holy Spirit in that scene. I get a lump in my throat and feel like Jesus is

talking to me. And that, too, is comfort. Maybe not so delicate, but to be so full of tender love that you will give the most precious treasure you have and tell the other to get up, keep going, you can do this, you are not alone. Paul said comfort produces in you a patient endurance, which I think is another way of saying 'motivation' to go on.

We are to be a community of a kind of comfort that strengthens one another in all our troubles and results in patient endurance – to stay standing, to patiently endure all the storms.

One of the most magnificent sights to witness in life is a sequoia forest on the West Coast of the United States. Sequoia trees are amongst the tallest trees on earth, towering more than 100 meters high. And when you stand next to one it's a kind of humbling experience: this gigantic living thing, sometimes 2000 years old. But they also have the shallowest of root systems, only a few meters deep: 100 meters high, 500 tonnes heavy, 3 meters deep. In an open field, they don't stand a chance against the wind and the elements, even if their roots run wide – but they were not designed to stand alone and, indeed, they can't. These trees live in communities or groves; they live in the embrace of others, their root systems intertwine and literally fuse together to provide essential strength and support to each other. They can't stand alone, but they can stand together.

And I wonder how well we really stay standing if we are not in the strengthening embrace of others, fused together? I wonder how often people fall over because they are not in the embrace of others, and others in their embrace? I wonder how often we miss the comfort and reassurance of God, because God was intending on showing up through His people.

But Paul knows how good it is to be comforted by God's people when he experienced his own suffering while in Asia. Paul says in 2 Corinthians 1:8, "*We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about the troubles we experienced in the province of Asia. We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired of life itself.*" And he picks this up later in the letter in chapter 7 where he says, "*For even when we came into Macedonia, our bodies had no rest, but we were afflicted at every turn – fighting without and fear within...*" (interesting turn of phrase isn't it – both external trouble but also internal mental and emotional turmoil) "*...But God, who comforts the downcast, comforted us by the coming of Titus, and not only by his coming but also by the comfort with which he was comforted by you, as he told us of your longing, your mourning, your zeal for me, so that I rejoiced still more.*" (2 Corinthians 7:5-7)

And this is one of those moments where you can sense Paul's joy at what he has witnessed – saying, "YES! This is what it looks like to be the church!" The context here is that Paul had to confront the Corinthians about their behaviour; but when they responded well, the Corinthians brought Titus comfort and encouragement, who then brought it to Paul. And when the Corinthians received this letter, surely they were comforted by Paul's joy. So, the

news of the Corinthians' repentance came full circle, comforting all who encountered it - Corinthians to Titus to Paul to Corinthians. Which got me thinking: that strengthening comfort is not an event, but a chain reaction from one person to the next. God, who comforts the downcast, did it through His people - each one paying it forward till the gospel came full circle. A community of comfort are people who both receive it and give it. This is why we need testimonies because that's when we say, "YES! That's what the church can be!"

Some people are comfort givers, but can't receive it. Some people are receivers, but never give it. Some people are very private and prefer to stand alone in their troubles. But some desperately do want community and comfort, and if it doesn't happen the way they imagine their disappointment is all consuming. Giving and receiving comfort is a really complex dynamic and we are all really imperfect at it - as are we together as a church. But this is central to being the church: not only for one another, but for the way we look outward to the people and community around us.

I know we need trained Pastors and a team of people who would make that their mission - but I want you to also know that a culture of strengthening comfort is grown by us all, not just a few 'extra nice' people. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 12:25-26, *"there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honoured, every part rejoices with it."*

There are different roles and gifts and parts in the body; but Paul says that all its parts should have equal concern for each other! That we all are an instrument of comfort and encouragement - of getting to that hospital bed, cooking that meal, mowing that lawn, making the phone call, or writing that card saying, "get up cause Jesus and we love you!"

How can we be the body of Christ to one another better as we emerge from the past few years? Instead of thinking about how you can be more comfortable, think how can you be more comfort-able? Here are 4 simple ways:

**1. Draw near to the comforter.** Paul's life was framed by God's comfort in all his troubles - the fellowship of God in suffering. Let trouble lead you toward the God of all comfort so you have a personal experience of Him. That way you can comfort others with the comfort you received. David does this constantly in the Psalms, remembering how in the midst of strife, God was present, saving him. Maybe it's obvious, but you cannot give away what you do not have and what we have is a person to know - the Father of all compassion and comfort. This is the Holy Spirit in you and through you.

**2. Draw near to people.** It's hard to encourage people if you live your life apart from people - or at least you just keep to your own family or special friends. You have to get involved, be present, make an effort, spend some time. Like those sequoia trees, to live in

the embrace of people and let them embrace you. One of the reasons we've experimented with Practice Sundays is exactly this - make some margin in your life to be present, and draw near to your neighbours, your work colleagues, parents from your kids soccer team, refugees and isolated people. Show up in their lives. The thing is, you only have to scratch just below the surface of someone's life to find out they are fighting a hard battle and they desperately need someone to show up and come along side of them to strengthen or encourage them. How do they experience the God of all comfort if you are too busy to even notice them? John 13:34-35 says, *"A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."* Jesus said we would be known as disciples by our love - but truth is, we are also known by our lack of it. Our "rush rush rush, I have no time for people" lifestyles are an affront to the gospel.

**3. Point to the true comforter.** Church, it's vital we reflect God - not replace God. We are mediators of His strengthening comfort, not originators of it. He works in us to will and act. It is God who is the God of all comfort, and we comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God. That means not assuming the role of rescuer, or psychologist, or the counselor, or channelling Brene Brown, Tony Robins or some other expert or guru you follow on Instagram. Our only authority is in pointing people to Jesus, and the hope that is in Jesus. Paul said, *"But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead. He has delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us again. On him we have set our hope that he will continue to deliver us."* (2 Corinthians 1:9-10)

There is absolutely a place for the psychologist and counselor - and we probably all need a few sessions. But for almost all of us, we aren't one - and that's ok because, most of the time, what people need is simply you to show up, be present, listen as closely as you can, say as little as possible, not try and fix it, invite them to trust the One who delivered us before and will again, to set our hope on Jesus, and, if appropriate, say "get up, cause Jesus loves you!"

**4. Pray.** And lastly, note Paul concludes by saying that their prayers matter: *"As you help us by your prayers. Then many will give thanks on our behalf for the gracious favor granted us in answer to the prayers of many."* (2 Corinthians 1:11)

As we all draw near to the true comforter, as we together show up in people's lives, as Jesus shows up in ours, as we together point people back to Jesus with words and actions and prayers that bring hope, strength and encouragement - then we will all say, "YES! That's what it means to be the church, a community of comfort and the world will know we are disciples!" May you resolve today, to not live apart from God or His people anymore. Next week we are regathering in-person for the first time in a long while to pray. Let me ask you: not if you are returning, but how are you returning on the other side of this lockdown - to serve or be served, to encourage or critique, to comfort or to consume?