

The God of All Comfort

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This message of comfort opens on a very high level and an exalted plane of praise:

Blessed be God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies, and the God of all comfort. (2 Corinthians 1:3)

The word *blessed* means “praise,” and it has to do with worship and adoration of God. And will you notice that the apostle Paul always draws us to the praise and adoration and worship of our God. Actually, this verse is a doxology. You have in this one verse the Book of Psalms, all congealed and condensed and brought together. It is “Blessed be God [praise God] even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies, and the God of all comfort.” This is about the same as saying, “Praise God from whom all mercies flow,” and I think that would be better than the word *blessings* used in the Doxology we sing on Sunday mornings. It is the same, of course, “Praise God from whom all *mercies* flow.”

Now Paul mentions in this verse two of these wonderful mercies specifically. He says first of all that God is “the Father of mercies,” and I like that. Whatever the mercy might be, God is the Father of it. I don’t care what it is, everything that you and I have – and are – is a mercy from God. And this means that goodness and mercy are never earned. You never work for it. You never deserve it. If you do, then it’s not goodness and mercy. It’s given to those who are in need, because it’s not a sugarplum of indulgence from an overindulgent parent either. It’s a mercy which is something that God gives to those who need the very thing that He offers to them. He is the Father of mercy. You and I today have received mercies from God and He’s the Father of every one of them which we have received.

He also is the God of all comfort. That is the second specific, and may I say that I’m convinced this is the most stupendous claim that can be made for God. Paul makes here the exaggerated claim that God can comfort His child in any and every circumstance of life, that He can meet every need and He can quiet every heart, that He is the God of all comfort! And, my friend, that is either true or it is not true.

It does seem to be a highly exaggerated and overly extravagant claim for God. In fact, Paul seems to have adopted the vocabulary of the politician. You would think that God is a candidate for some office. And by the way, I’ve listened very carefully over the years to candidates who run for office, and I want to tell you, they promise what only God can deliver. They claim to be able to solve all the problems of this troubled world and soothe the hurt of a disturbed people, and that just happens to be God’s department. Unfortunately, our nation right now is listening to the politicians. There’s one thing for sure, most are not listening to God. To them God seems rather unreal, certainly not as real as the politicians are. And the promises therefore that God makes – because He is way up yonder and we’re way down here – seem to be theoretical and idealistic. But the politician is flesh and blood; he’s quite real, and the crowd likes to reach out and touch him, shake his hand. I don’t know why they want to do that, but somehow they feel like it will all come true if they can only touch him. May I say to you, the politician may be real, but his promises belong in fiction, and it’s only dream stuff. They have never made them good in the past, so why do you think they will make them good in the present? It’s always the same old story. Men continue to turn their backs on God because they think He’s not real.

I wish that He could be as real to all of us today as He was to the little girl in the whimsical story I heard about. It was many years ago – I’m of the opinion some of you don’t even recall that the trains once had upper and lower berths. It was always a problem to get in that upper berth, but I became an expert at that, by the way. Now this was a family of three who were

traveling by train. The little girl in the family hadn't been on a train before. She was young and was rather frightened. So that night the father and mother climbed into an upper berth, and they put the little girl in a lower berth. The little girl, down there by herself, began to whimper. The mother reached down to shush her and said to her, "Honey, God is with you, don't be afraid." So the little one was quiet for a few moments. Then she said, "Daddy, are you up there?" And he reached out and said, "Yes, I'm up here." And in a few minutes she said, "Mommy, are you up there?" and her Mommy reached down and said, "Yes, I'm here." A very exhausted traveling man in an upper berth across the aisle said, "Little girl, we're all here. Your mama is here, your daddy is here, your brother is here, your sister is here, your aunt is here, your uncle is here, your cousins are here, we're all here. Let's go to sleep!" So it was quiet for another few moments, but the stillness was broken by the soft voice of the little girl. She said, "Mommy, was that God?"

God was very real to her. I wish He could be that real to us in these days in which we live. We need the reality of God. He is the God of all comfort.

Let's look at that again, in verses 3 and 4.

Blessed be God [praise God], even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies, and the God of all comfort; who comforteth us in all our tribulation [trouble], that we may be able to comfort them which are in any trouble, by the comfort wherewith we ourselves are comforted of God.

He is the God of all comfort. Paul tested this in the crucible of life, and the acid of suffering was poured on him. He found out it was true, but you and I today need to know whether it is authentic or counterfeit, whether it is genuine or fake.

He's "the God of all comfort." Now the popular notion of the meaning of the word *comfort* has in it a note of weakness and sentimentality. A great many people think comfort means that you come over and pat somebody on the arm, or pat them somewhere else, but it has to do with more than patting. It's sort of like saccharin and old lace. In fact, there is a whiskey named "Southern Comfort," and that just doesn't happen to be the proper name for whiskey any more than it should be for marijuana – and some think that is a comfort. One of the reasons people turn to drink and to dope today is to try to find this thing they call "comfort." But that's not really what they are looking for.

Second Corinthians 1:3 is the beginning of a section of five verses that is truly one of the most notable passages in the Scriptures. The theme, evidently, is comfort. That word or a cognate of it occurs ten times in five verses. It occurs four times in verse 4 itself. Therefore Paul is bearing down upon this word *comfort*.

We are looking for what the meaning of the word really is. The word that is used here in all ten of these instances comes from the verb *parakaleo*. *Kaleo* means "to call"; *para* means "to the side of." It means someone who is called to the side of another. In fact, the Holy Spirit is called "the Comforter." That is one of His names – in fact, that *is* His name. The Lord Jesus said to His own there in the Upper Room when they actually began to be disturbed because He had announced He was leaving them, "I will not leave you comfortless." The word is *orphanos* – "I will not leave you orphans. I'm coming to you." How is He coming? "I will send the Comforter," the *paraclete* – that's the word used here, someone to be at your side. And, my friend, it hasn't anything in the world to do with sentimentality. It means one who is a helper, a strengthener, an advocate, a lawyer, if you please.

G. Campbell Morgan and Samuel Chadwick, two great preachers of England in the past, were walking together and assessing this word *paraclete*. And the Rev. Chadwick said, “I think the best word for the Holy Spirit is *Comforter*, not *Advocate*, because an advocate is a lawyer, and my lawyer doesn’t comfort me.” But Dr. Morgan said, “I disagree with you. My knowledge of law is limited. In fact, I know nothing of law, so when a problem comes up I call my lawyer in, and he’s my comforter, he’s my helper.” May I say, that is the meaning of it.

Let me give a personal illustration. When I was to be hospitalized for cancer surgery, added to my problems was another one. Of all times, the Internal Revenue Service decided they would like to check up on me. I guess they wanted to get me before I left. My wife could not make it clear to the lady who called that I was in no condition for that. Frankly, it disturbed me a great deal, and I called my assistant, Dr. Cole. He made several well-placed calls so that they let me off the hook for a little while. May I say to you that when Dr. Cole came out to the hospital before surgery, had prayer and shook hands with me, it was comforting. But that wasn’t near the comfort it was when he helped me with the IRS when I had called on him. A comforter is one who helps you, one who comes in and helps you in your need, one who strengthens, one who relieves the loneliness in your life. A comforter comes to assuage the grief and calm the fears, to help in time of terrifying trouble. That’s the meaning of comforter.

Notice how the word is used in Psalm 30:

Hear, O LORD, and have mercy upon me: LORD, be thou my helper. (Psalm 30:10)

That’s it. That is the word comforter. That is what it means, “Lord, be thou my helper.” Now this is what Paul is talking about, nothing sentimental – you can get rid of your old lace concept and all that which has to do with sentimentality. He is talking about one who helps us in time of trouble. Paul is simply stating the fact that our God is the Father of mercies, and He is the God of all comfort.

The question therefore arises: in what areas of life do we really need help? Where is that desperate need today for the human family? I’m going to mention only two, but you probably will think of other areas – there are many other areas.

Needed: A Deliverer

First of all, let me say that we need a Savior from sin, a deliverer from the guilt and power of sin. That is our greatest and most desperate need of all. Paul could say to the Romans – in summing up the section on sin in which he was not attempting to prove anything but stating that which was evident then and even more evident today – that man is a sinner, alienated from Almighty God. Actually he is in rebellion, not only against God, but he’s in rebellion against himself and against all authority. Paul said at the end of that section,

Now we know that what things soever the law saith, it saith to them who are under the law: that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God. (Romans 3:19)

You and I live in a world that’s not on trial, not on trial at all. The sentence has already been handed in: Guilty. The day of execution hasn’t come, but it is coming.

You and I live in a world in which it is said of each individual, “You are guilty before God.” Each one of us bears that awful guilt. The mark of Cain is on every one of us, and psychologists call it the guilt complex.

A book review came out some years ago on the different approach that psychology was making in regard to guilt. The Freudian idea was to submerge or get rid of the guilt complex, that it was similar to an appendix – you could cut the thing off and so be rid of it. But this subsequent approach is to recognize it and to acknowledge that you do have a guilt complex – every individual has it. It operates in many different ways in our lives, but we all have it.

A leading psychologist who taught at the University of Southern California attended our Thursday Night Bible study for several years. One night as he was leaving, after making some cursory remarks about the subject he said to me, “McGee, you could have made it a lot stronger.” He said, holding up his arm, “The guilt complex that you and I have is as real as that arm is. And psychology can no more get rid of that guilt complex than it can get rid of that arm.” The whole world is guilty before God today, my beloved. People differ as to the way of trying to remove it, but the human family today is subject to a higher power, and we must give an account.

In the Book of Proverbs the writer asks this rhetorical question in 20:9: “Who can say, I have made my heart clean, I am pure from my sin?” In other words, God says you can’t get rid of that awareness of guilt, and neither can the psychiatrist get rid of it for you. He can move it to another area, but he cannot get rid of it.

And again in Proverbs 30:12, “There is a generation that are pure in their own eyes, and yet is not washed from their filthiness.” May I say to you, we may build up some sort of system whereby we say we are not guilty, but it does not disturb the reality that down underneath this awful thing is festering. And behind it is the thought that we must give an account of ourselves. Mankind is to be judged, and the Word of God closes on the note that everyone who has turned his back on Jesus Christ will have to come before the Great White Throne for judgment. The books are to be opened, and everyone must give an account of himself there to God.

My friend, how can I be delivered from that guilt? How can I escape the One on the throne saying to me, “You are guilty, you are a sinner and you are lost”? The Judge on the throne has already handed down the verdict. He says I am guilty and I need help. I need a public defender. This is the thing Job had in mind when that poor man cried out in his desperation,

O that one might plead for a man with God, as a man pleadeth for his neighbour! (Job 16:21)

And again he said,

If I justify myself, mine own mouth shall condemn me: if I say, I am perfect, it shall also prove me perverse. (Job 9:20)

Then he went on –

For he [God] is not a man, as I am, that I should answer him, and we should come together in judgment. Neither is there any daysman betwixt us, that might lay his hand upon us both. (Job 9:32, 33)

In other words, Job says, "In my problem that I have, if there was only someone who could take hold of the hand of God and take hold of my hand and somehow bring us together. I need help!"

Well, since the days of Job the help has come. I cry out for help and there is One at my side today. He died on the cross about 2000 years ago, a vicarious, substitutionary death. He was delivered for my offenses, He was raised for my justification, that I might stand before God. And I want to say to you today, my case has already been tried, I have already been executed. And I already stand in the person of Christ. I need a helper, and I have a Helper. He's the Savior.

Years ago, down in Alabama, this story was told: A very famous judge had a wayward son. His boy got involved in crime. The boy was arrested and, according to the normal course of the court, the boy's trial would come before the father. The regular thing and probably the ethical thing would have been for the judge to step aside and let someone else try the case. But folk were amazed when the father who was the judge said, "I intend to try the boy." Well, everyone was tremendously interested now because they felt, "This means the boy will get off!" The trial proceeded and finally it was time for the judge to render the decision. He called the boy up to stand in the prisoner's box. As the boy stood there, the court absolutely was thunderstruck when the judge said to the boy, "You are guilty, and you will have to pay to the full extent of the law for your crime." The boy was shocked, too. Then this father who was the judge got up from the bench and he started to walk around toward his son. As he did so, he said, "Also the law says that another can come forward and volunteer to pay the penalty." And he came down to where the boy was standing and said, "Move over, son," and the boy moved over. Then the judge looked up at the empty bench and said, "I accept the penalty." And he *paid* it.

Let me be personal again. When God looked down and said to Vernon McGee, "You are guilty," I thank God I had a Helper. He took my place. He paid the penalty. He is my Comforter. He is my Helper.

Needed: Assurance

Now let's consider the second desperate need of the human family. We need assurance of the presence of God in all the circumstances of life. This, I would say, is an area of great need right now. We need Someone to come into the loneliness that engulfs us during that desperate darkness of life. Friends can only touch you. Christianity today is only a theory to many people. To many professing Christians and church members it is a garment that they put on for Sunday or special occasions. They wear it lightly. It's a stagnant ritual or it is an empty vocabulary.

Someone reported to me that some time ago a group of preachers in Southern California attended a convention at Church of the Open Door where I preached. They came into the auditorium and one of the preachers, as guide for the group, pointed up at the pulpit and said, "Gentlemen, this pulpit has been the greatest pulpit in Southern California on Sunday morning for fifty years." Now I want to disagree with that. It is not true, and I'm prepared to say that I don't think it has ever been true.

Do you know where the greatest pulpit is in Southern California? It's not in operation only on Sunday morning. Rather, it's Monday morning in the home, in the office, in the workshop, in the schoolroom. It's out yonder in the shopping center. It's in suburbia. It's down here where the stockbrokers walk. That's the pulpit. My friend, if what is said from a church pulpit on a Sunday morning cannot be geared into work clothes and walk in shoe leather, it's nonsense, perfect nonsense.

Listen again to what Paul is saying, “Who comforts us in all our troubles that we may be able to comfort them who are in any trouble, by the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted of God.” This thing was not a theory with Paul and, may I say to you, he very frankly gives us his personal experience. Listen to him,

For we would not, brethren, have you ignorant of our trouble which came to us in Asia [Asia Minor], that we were pressed out of measure, above strength, insomuch that we despaired even of life: but we had the sentence of death in ourselves, that we should not trust in ourselves, but in God which raiseth the dead: who delivered us from so great a death, and doth deliver: in whom we trust that he will yet deliver us. (2 Corinthians 1:8-10)

Now Paul was sick, nigh unto death. The fact of the matter is, he said he had the sentence of death in him. The doctor told him he would die. Paul was the same flesh and blood that we are, and he was praying. Paul is speaking out of experience, and I’m not sure to what experience Paul is referring. Further on in this epistle we read that he was stoned yonder in the city of Lystra, left for dead. But I don’t think he’s referring to that here. I think he is referring to something which apparently is not recorded in the Book of Acts. He took sick, and it looked as if he would die. As Paul looked into the future, he saw nothing, and he was afraid. That’s normal. But his hope was in God. He says here, “But we had the sentence of death in ourselves, that we should not trust in ourselves, but in God which raiseth the dead.” He found himself cast right into the arms of God. And God let him see that beyond death there is the resurrection, and that brought hope to him.

That is wonderful, but we need to add something to it. A dear lady in the Indianapolis area sent me a card while I was recovering from cancer surgery, and she was very profuse in expressing her sympathy. She wrote, “Sometime in eternity, Dr. McGee, you and I will stand and look out into the vast space, and then we will look into the face of the Savior.” She meant well, but I want to tell you very candidly, that was not very comforting. I believe that, certainly, but brother, I’m not ready to look into those vast spaces of eternity! I’d like to look around here a little longer.

Paul was very pragmatic too, and notice what God did for him, and this is very precious to me:

Who delivered us from so great a death, and doth deliver: in whom we trust that he will yet deliver us. (2 Corinthians 1:10)

Paul says, “He has delivered me. I’ve been up against death before.” When he came over the wall in a basket yonder in Damascus, he was face to face with death. When he was arrested in Jerusalem, he was face to face with death. This man said he was in deaths often. He also said, “He hath delivered me.” And then he said, “He does deliver me right now.” Paul says, “I can have confidence in Him because He delivers me right now. He is my Helper: He’s the God of all comfort.”

Now pay close attention to what Paul writes because this man is an apostle who had the gift of an apostle – which no one has today: “... and I trust he will yet deliver me.” There is no arrogant and proud boasting here. He’s walking softly. He said, “He comforted me. He has delivered me. He is delivering me right now. And I trust that He’s going to deliver me in the future.” That’s the way God comforts.

Will you notice now what he says on the basis of this:

Ye also helping together by prayer for us, that for the gift bestowed upon us by the means of many persons thanks may be given by many on our behalf. (2 Corinthians 1:11)

Paul said, "I'm appealing to the church for prayer in this dark hour." And in that day the church responded, and God heard the prayer, and Paul was delivered. The church could glorify God, and no man got the glory. Isn't that wonderful?

My dear friend, you and I have scriptural ground for asking for prayer. Paul asks for prayer because he says, "God has delivered me, He does deliver me," and he adds, "I don't know that He will, but I trust He will deliver me in the future." That makes you walk very close to Him. It makes you look to Him in a new way.

All For Others

In conclusion we must come back to verse 4,

Who comforteth us in all our tribulation [trouble], that we may be able to comfort them which are in any trouble, by the comfort wherewith we ourselves are comforted of God.

This is the whole nub of the matter. It is the great principle of the Christian faith to comfort them who are in any trouble. Everything today that you and I are and that we have is for the benefit of others. God never gave you, as a child of His, anything for your selfish use. He gave it to you to share with others. I don't care what it is, you are to share it with others for His glory.

As you may know, Paul could ask the most embarrassing questions. Oh, in these past few months of teaching through the Bible I've learned a great many new things about God and about His servants. Paul had a way of probing in and asking the most personal and humbling questions. Here is just one of them:

For who maketh thee to differ from another? and what hast thou that thou didst not receive? now if thou didst receive it, why dost thou glory, as if thou hadst not received it? (1 Corinthians 4:7)

What is it you have that you did not receive? I begin to feel around in my pockets, and I say, "Well, brother Paul, I don't have anything that I didn't receive." My friend, everything you or I have today, we received it. Do you have health? He gave that to you, whether you believe it or not. Do you have a certain amount of this world's goods? Could you be called wealthy? Do you think He made you wealthy for your sake? He did not. You are to share it with others. Has He given you youth today? He has given you youth so that you might share it with others.

I was thrilled with a letter I received from a young fellow which contradicts the theory that you have to put the old senior citizen in one place and the youth in another place. This boy worked during the summer with a man who is retired, and he wrote: "You know, I didn't like it at first, being put with this old man, but he started me at noon listening to your program when we'd sit down and eat our lunch. I'd like you to know that as a result I'm entering the ministry,

and I'm starting to school this fall." May I say to you that if you have youth today it's a gift of God. "Remember now thy Creator in the days of thy youth ..." (Ecclesiastes 12:1). You have a talent. Do you think God gave you that talent for your exploitation, so that you can use it for your own glory? Do you think God has given you a gift today for you to use for yourself? He did not.

Our Lord even gives you suffering that you might share the comfort you receive from Him with somebody who is suffering! The most comforting letter I received while recovering from surgery was from a woman up in Yakima, Washington, dying of cancer. I want to tell you, she comforted me. Many others sent words of comfort and verses of Scripture, but this one coming from another individual who was going through deep waters meant a great deal to me.

He shall not be afraid of evil tidings: his heart is fixed, trusting in the LORD. His heart is established, he shall not be afraid.... (Psalm 112:7, 8)

She had suffered, and she comforted me.

I Needed the Quiet

I needed the quiet, so He drew me aside
Into the shadows where we could confide,
Away from the bustle where all the day long
I hurried and worried when active and strong.
I needed the quiet, though at first I rebelled.
But gently, so gently, my cross He upheld
And whispered so sweetly of spiritual things.
Though weakened in body, my spirit took wings
To heights never dreamed of when active and gay.
He loved me so greatly, He drew me away.

– Alice Hansche Mortenson