

2 Cor 1.1-7 – God’s comfort in our troubles

Clint Le Page

Main Point – God comforts us in our troubles so we can comfort others

Nick Vujicic(SLIDE) was born in Melbourne 42 yrs ago, without arms and legs.

I struggle to imagine what that was like, and how hard that would have been.---

His parents understandably struggled with grief and confusion too.

Nick was severely bullied at school, experienced deep depression, and contemplated suicide at age 10.

After years of questioning God and seeking purpose, he put his faith in Jesus at 17.

Since then, Nick has been a motivational speaker and evangelist.

Nick knows what suffering is, and yet he has said,(**SLIDE**)

If you’re praying and ‘God doesn’t give you the miracle, you will be the miracle for someone else’.-----

It really takes faith to believe that; it takes a deep trust that God is at work.

And the truth behind what Nick says, comes from our passage today.

God comforts us in our suffering, so that we can comfort others.

I think we all need to hear this.

For serving others in weakness, is something Jesus are calls all his followers to.

Before first, it’s important I give some **Background** to 2 Cor.(**SLIDE**)

Corinth had become a flourishing and wealthy city under Julius Caesar in 44 BC.

As writer and preacher, **Gary Millar,(SLIDE)** from the Queensland Theol College says, ‘When Paul shows up in Corinth for the first time, he found a city with a Roman face, a Greek heart, a large Jewish minority, and a deeply ingrained desire to impress. It’s hardly surprising then that when Paul preached the Gospel and a church was born [as we read in Acts 18], that life got pretty complicated. What else would we expect from a bunch of people who are mostly Greek, following a suffering and dying Jewish Messiah, in the middle of a Roman province that always prides itself on always coming out on top. Welcome to the mess of Corinth.’

After the church was initially planted things went downhill quite quickly(**SLIDE**).

As you can see from **this table**, Paul likely wrote 4 letters to the church in Corinth.

Only 2 were preserved in God’s providence, which we call 1 and 2 Cor.

1 Cor covered lots of practical and theological issues, but clearly didn’t fix things.

Paul’s apprentice Timothy visits and finds things in a total mess, and Paul makes his ‘painful visit’.

He was left unsure if the church would get back on track. His relationship with them was near breaking point, and their grip on the Gospel was weakening.

So he sent Titus with what is called in 2 Cor 2.4, a ‘tearful’ letter.

This seems to have had some positive effect, and so Paul writes again - our 2 Cor.---

It’s important for us to appreciate that it’s been a difficult relationship.

Paul loved the Corinthians but they also drove him nuts.

The church was full of issues, and whether it would flourish & grow, or crash & burn was still uncertain.

This explains why 2 Cor is the most passionate, honest, vulnerable and heartfelt letter in the Bible.

When it comes to ministry in the **messiness of church** and complexity in our world, this letter is the place to start.

In the challenges of Christian leadership, or battle to live for the Gospel in a messy life, this book is the place to start.

For many of us, the troubles n’ pressures of our lives make us feel our weakness, and 2 Cor calls us to serve Christ in that.

It helps us have realistic expectations in life and ministry; and not just survive, but thrive in life and ministry. I pray 2 Cor will encourage you to see and serve Christ.-----

Please turn to **v1,(SLIDE)** as we finish this section on the background.-----

Paul begins by saying the letter is from he and Timothy, and he reminds them of his authority. He's an apostle – Christ has commissioned and sent Paul, to speak for him, by the will of God. Paul is making clear that the Father and LJ determine how the church should be run, how Christians should live; and it's communicated through the apostles.

So they, and we, need to listen.

What he wrote was for Corinth, for the believers throughout southern Greece, and it's God's apostolic word to us too.-----

See Paul's care and desire to seek their good in **v2** - hoping and praying that they will know **grace**, undeserved kindness, and **peace**, from God the Father and L JC.

'Peace' is that shalom – flourishing & well-being that will only come in relationship with God through Jesus.-----

And grace and peace should also describe the church, and how the believers in it relate.

Then Paul is prompted to bless God; that is praise God, speak well of God.

V3, 'Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ'.

He's the Father of 'mercies', which speaks of the tender ways God shows his children kindness and compassion.

Which we just remembered last weekend, was shown above all in Jesus, dying and rising for our forgiveness, fellowship with God and life forever. Mercies!

With that background and intro, let's consider our **first main point for today, God comforts us.**

God, the Father of mercies, comforts us in all our affliction, **v4**.

It's a word describing pressure, or 'troubles'.

Paul has felt many pressures in his life and ministry, as can we.

And it's when we're under pressure and facing hardships that we need comfort.

Maybe you're experiencing such a challenge right now?-----

But when you hear the word '**comfort**', I wonder what comes to mind?-----

Maybe the laundry fabric softener, Comfort,(**SLIDE**) bringing to mind images of fluffy towels gently touching perfect skin, or labrador puppies frolicking in soft toilet paper?

Do you think of being comfy on the couch,(**SLIDE**) or snuggled in your oodie?----

Maybe you think of the comfortable life you want – pain free, full of happiness & peace?-----

The word, 'comfort' in our passage doesn't quite mean that.

For Paul and the rest of the NT, the word is not about warm fuzzies.

The word could include everything from an arm around the shoulder to a kick in the pants.

It literally speaks of someone who comes alongside and speaks words that exhort, or encourage, give consolation or comfort.

God's comfort strengthens the weak and sustains sagging spirits, so you can face the troubles of life with unbending resolve, and unending assurance.-----

And John's Gospel calls the Holy Spirit, whom the risen Jesus sends to all who trust in him, the Comforter.(**SLIDE**)

Or the counsellor, the advocate **Jn 14 v16**.

The HS comes to us and convicts us of sin n' assures of forgiveness. He strengthens us, emboldens and transforms us. And, the HS comforts and encourages us in our troubles.

Even when you don't feel the presence of the Spirit, every believer in Jesus has God's Spirit.(Eph 1.13)

And in **John 14.26(SLIDE)** the Spirit's role is particularly to bring to mind Jesus' teaching.

So the Spirit comforts us particularly by pointing us to the Word, and reminding us of God's promises.

So open your Bible to hear words of comfort.-----

For example, in **Isaiah 40** God says, speaking of the time of John the Baptist & Jesus,(**SLIDE**) "Comfort, comfort my people," says your God.

²"Speak tenderly to^[a] Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her hard service is over, her sin has been paid for.

You can experience comfort when you remember that the Father of mercies, sent his Son into the world to die for you, to forgive and pardon your sins.

So as a forgiven child-of-God by-faith-in Jesus, God can speak tenderly to you; God can welcome you.

We can call the holy God, our Father – how blessed are we.-----

Let those realities sink in and comfort you, even when you're in trouble.-----

Life in this world is hard. Living for Jesus is hard.

And the great news is that God, Father, Son and HS – is committed to supplying what we need to keep trusting and living for him.

For example, if you've just lost one you loved, the **Grief** can be overwhelming.(**SLIDE**)

But pastor and writer **Philip Jensen** says, don't go looking to the modern secular eulogy to bring comfort.

Many eulogies from a non-Christian bring little comfort. Often they only talk about the deceased in a positive light. And silly things are said about where the dead person is and what they've doing – 'Kicking goals in heaven' or whatever.

Jensen says, 'comfort comes to us when we lift our eyes off the coffin and turn our attention to the Lord Jesus;

 facing death in the light of the resurrection;

 seeing that death is not the victor, because Christ has conquered it.

 Comfort comes when we see that death will not have the last word on us, for God is still in control.-----

And God comforts us not just in grief but in all our troubles, with the Gospel, with His Word and promises.----

By His Spirit He gives us strength to keep going, keep trusting; hang-in there.-----

No suffering, however severe can separate the believer from the care and compassion, of our Heavenly Father.

If you're not sensing God's comfort in your suffering, please turn your mind to Jesus, and what he died to give you.

And I hope you can also look back to past afflictions, and see times that God has been present and working and sustaining you. He cares, and in control.-----

Yet God's comfort of us isn't the end-goal(**SLIDE**) – God comforts us **so we can comfort others**.

God comforts and encourages us in our affliction so that we can comfort others in their affliction, in any kind of affliction, **v4**.-----

The Christian life is one of ups and downs; suffering and strengthening;
 setbacks and encouragements, struggle and joys.

That's what we can expect for ourselves and for other people.

Do you need to adjust your expectations of this life?-----

The reality is, in life and ministry we face difficulties, some more than others.

God encourages us. Then out of that we can and should encourage others.

 Then it's repeated.

And as Gary Millar says, welcome to the rest of your life.

 Suffering, we get comforted, we give comfort, and on it goes.

Paul elaborates on this in **vv5-6**.

And specifically mentions the 'sufferings of Christ' overflowing to us.

That's suffering for being associated with Jesus. Suffering for speaking about Jesus, or sacrificially serving his people.-----

This was hard for the Greek churches to hear – for everything in them screamed that life was about climbing the ladder of honour; seeking my status, financial success & security. And our society's like that too.

However, life in this world and life following Jesus is hard.

Yet, comfort through Christ then flows to us.

Notice that Christ is the channel the comfort flows through.-----

Paul and Timothy were afflicted, but it was for the Corinthians' comfort, salvation, spiritual health.

And produces patient endurance in their suffering.---
 So the result of being comforted by others, is that they, we, can patiently endure suffering;
 be energized to persevere in trusting the Lord through pain.
 Paul is confident this will happen, **v7**, he's praying for this.
 That as they suffer for following Jesus, they'll be comforted by him too.----
 Even the words he writes would encourage them.

Let's come back to the **big idea** in v4, God comforts us in our affliction so that we can comfort others.

The Christian who experiences God's comfort is especially suitable to minister to others who need comfort.

We receive so that we can give.

We are to be channels of comfort to others.

We're to pass on this comfort **like the Flu.(SLIDE)**

Like the flu virus gets passed on between people in close contact, comfort is to be passed on.-----

A man called Craig writes this,

I was once a prisoner of chronic illness, housebound with the black dog (depression) as my companion. As Groundhog Days became years, my plans for the future vaporized. When I asked medical specialists if I would ever recover, most just shrugged their shoulders. My physicality, which once fashioned my identity, was now a distant memory. I'd lost who I was. No energy, no car, no job, and dependent on relatives for accommodation. My dear wife had married one version of me and suddenly woke up next to another. Our relationship was buckling under the strain.

One day I undertook the challenge of shuffling to and from the letterbox. The effort drained me, but with a letter in hand I struggled back and wilted on the couch. "I just can't do this anymore," I thought. "I can't live the rest of my life like this. People will understand. God knows my heart." I opened the letter anyway.

Dear Craig,

My name is John. Our mutual friend Mike told me about your long struggle with illness. He asked me to write and encourage you to persevere in Christ in spite of what you are going through. My family and I have endured significant physical suffering over many years. I hope you don't mind me sharing our story.

John had my attention. He proceeded to document a life of unfathomable physical and emotional pain.

At birth John's devoted Christian parents were told he wouldn't walk and probably wouldn't live long. He had operations on his cleft palate, measles, hearing loss; and multiple operations through primary school for a rare genetic disorder, where all the cartilage in his joints crumbled. He spent most of his adult life confined to a wheelchair, housebound, and in pain. John found 3 of his 4 kids had the same disorder, and all had disabilities.

The depth and complexity of such physical suffering made normal Christian community and friendships difficult. When John was able to attend church with his family, the staring and the thoughtless words of other Christians often cut he and Kathy deeply: "Why do you think God is punishing your family?"

John confessed that after decades of relentless suffering he nearly took his own life. But, having passed through that period, he continued to persevere.

Through the power of the Spirit, John had learned to trust God at his word. To him **Romans 8:28**—"for those who love God all things work together for good"—was no Christian cliché. He clung to it despite what felt like evidence to contrary. And he longed for the glorious day to come when God would "wipe every tear from their eyes" (**Rev 21:4**). On that day John will finally be given the resurrection body he craves.

As I finished John's letter I burst into tears. God in his sovereignty had orchestrated my reading of that letter to perfection. Through unfathomable sorrow he had sustained John and kept him in the palm of his hand. He could do the same for me.

I doubt John thought of it in these terms, but he was being a disciple-maker. He was comforting me in my affliction with the comfort he himself had received (2Cor1:4). I later learned that the pain of typing was so great for John that, even with the strongest of painkillers, his powdery joints could only handle ten minutes of typing per day. He had squeezed from whatever capacity he had that week to write a letter of encouragement to an unknown brother.

Craig says, I have often reflected on the way God used John's letter to help renew my trust in him. Over the years, smaller, simpler notes of others (emails, Facebook messages, texts) have served the same purpose. Each one inched me forward. Most of us are capable of doing the same for others.-----

Could you do the same for another?-----

Your suffering is not wasted. If you can't see a purpose in it, trust God will, even if it be the blessing and encouragement of others.

As Nick Vejucic said, you might be the miracle for another.-----

The challenge and call is to trust God now, even if you can't see how that might be.

Yet even without suffering comfort is something we can all give to others.

Particularly by being **good listeners**. (SLIDE)

You don't have to have gone through something another person has, to sit with and encourage them.

There's many people who shrink from those relationships through which the God's comfort could flow.

So many of you, women and men at Bundy, do have, or can have, a ministry of comforting others through your listening.

Active listening, paying full attention, identifying emotions.

We need to be prepared to listen without interruption, to allow others to express their deepest feelings.

Acknowledge their pain. Remember Jesus.

Tell them you're praying for them, and do it.

And please avoid statements like: "I know how you feel ..." or "Don't worry ..." or "At least ..." or "You are young, you could try again" or "You'll get over it". They're never helpful.

We can comfort when we are present, when we listen, when we love.

Does God want you to comfort someone with your presence or encouraging words?---- Who might that be?-----

Yet, to truly comfort others in trials, we need to have received God's comfort ourselves.

And if we're going to serve Christ, or keep serving him, then the comfort of the Gospel needs to refresh and be real for us.

As we walk the path of troubles in this life, with it's mix of struggle and encouragement, we need to remember the mercies God has shown us in Jesus.

We need to keep reading the Bible on our own and together, and be carefully speaking Gospel truth in love to one another. We need each other!

You need to keep gathering with your church to hear the comfort of God spoken to you, for your encouragement, and so you can encourage others.

It's why online church is not good enough.

I know some because of age and health cannot attend in person, but if you're at home when you could be here in person, you should be.

Gather with your church family, and at growth group; and hear and speak words of comfort and encouragement to one another.-----

Grace always comes before service.
And God gives us his grace and comfort in Christ, so we can pass it on.
Let's pray.