THE GOD OF ALL COMFORT

2 Corinthians 1:1-24

Key Verse: 1:3

“Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God all comfort.”

Paul established the church at Corinth on his 2nd missionary journey, staying there for one-and-a-half years. Paul had written a letter before 1 Corinthians as indicated in 1 Corinthians 5:9, “I have written you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people.” In the very first letter, he rebuked the Corinthians for their immorality. We do not have this letter. After the first letter, Paul had received reports about them (1:11; 5:1), and had received questions from them (7:1, 25; 8:1; 12:1). In 1 Corinthians, he responded in detail to bring them back to the gospel of Jesus. And Paul wrote 1 Corinthians probably around AD 55 while he was in Ephesus (1 Cor 16:8). In the letter, he mentioned that he was sending Timothy, not knowing whether Timothy would get there before or after the letter (4:16,17; 16:10). This letter was generally well received, but there were some who were still undermining God’s ministry. Paul was insulted and attacked, and he was grieved. The Corinthians needed to be rebuked for their disloyalty to God’s servant and God’s truth. And the money for the poor saints in Jerusalem needed to be collected. So, Paul decided to write a letter and send it with Titus. He wrote it probably around one year after 1 Corinthians. This letter is lost. Commentators call it a severe letter with a strong rebuke. Titus took the letter to the Corinthians and returned with a report (chapter 7) which was of great comfort to Paul. In this last letter of 2 Corinthians, which Paul wrote most probably in Macedonia, he expressed his mixed emotion, gratitude for the majority who responded appropriately with repentance and a broken heart for some who were still sympathetic to the false apostles, being victims of sin.

One ringing theme in this epistle is Paul’s defense of his integrity and apostolic authority. It is not for his own gain, popularity or prominence, but for the protection of the church and the truth. What prompted this letter was a strong and growing assault on the apostle Paul in Corinth, an effort to destroy his credibility so that his message would be undermined.

2 Corinthians is the most personal, the most open-hearted of all his letters, through which we can look into the soul of Paul. The approach of the letter is not historical, or theological, not even ecclesiological; the approach is biographical. Unlike so many of his other letters, it doesn’t present systematic, ordered arguments. It doesn’t even present doctrine, although it alludes to it everywhere. But it gives us passion, the heart of Apostle Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus.

Thank God for leading us to begin the study of 2 Corinthians. In our study of 1 Corinthians, the primary teaching was “Go back to the gospel, the gospel of Christ’s death and resurrection.” In 2 Corinthians, the key lesson can be the ministry of reconciliation through the gospel. In chapter 1, we can think of the God of comfort and faithfulness.

**First, the God of comfort (1-11).** Verse 1 says, “Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, To the church of God in Corinth, together with all the saints throughout Achaia.” Like 1 Corinthians, which began with the words, “Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and our brother Sosthenes…”, here also had to defend his apostleship for the sake of God’s flock there. It was by the will of God that he became an apostle of Christ Jesus. Paul greets in verse 2, “Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.”

Paul started 1 Corinthians with a negative connotation, talking about divisions in the church. But he starts 2 Corinthians on a positive note, by blessing God with a heart of thanksgiving. Paul says in verse 3, “Praise be to/blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort.” In the Old Testament, God is identified as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Ex 3:6, 15, 16; 4:5; 1 Kings 18:36; 2 Ch 30:6) . In the New Testament, God is identified as the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ (Ro 15:6; Eph 1:3; 1 Pe 1:3). Jesus is God the Son in his deity, but submissive to God the Father in his humanity. When he obeyed God unto death, God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should blow…and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is the Lord (Isa 45:23). He is our Lord Jesus Christ, which is the full title of him: our Saviour, God’s Anointed One, and the Sovereign One as the Lord. In John 20:17 after his resurrection, Jesus met Mary Magdalen and said, “I am returning to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.” (John 20:17) What a grace it is that the God and Father of Jesus Christ is now our God and Father through Christ’s death and resurrection. After rendering blessing and praise to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, Paul says, “The Father of compassion and the God of all comfort”, assuring that he is our God and Father in Christ.

“God is the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort.” This is a unique expression in the Bible. The word “comfort” appears first in Genesis 5:29: Lamech names his son Noah saying, “He will comfort us in the labour and painful toil of our hands caused by the ground the LORD has cursed.” When God’s flood judgment was imminent because of man’s sin which had reached its climax, God prepared one man Noah to comfort his father and certainly comfort all those who called on the name of the Lord, for God preserved human race through him. We began the study of Nahum; the name means “The LORD comforts.” According to Deuteronomy 10:18, God is the one who defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the alien, giving him food and clothing. God says in Isaiah 40:1-2, “Comfort, comfort my people…Speak tenderly to Jerusalem…her sin has been paid for…” which is followed by the descriptions of Christ’s suffering and the Lord’s reigning as the 2nd part of the book of Isaiah. At the time of the presentation of Jesus there was a righteous and devout man, Simeon, who was waiting for the consolation of Israel, that is Jesus, who is a light for the Gentiles as well as the glory to Israel. The ultimate expression of God’s compassion and mercy and comfort is sending his one and only Son Jesus into this world to save eternally perishing sinners. Luke described this Jesus as the rising sun to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death” (Lk 1:79). As we studied in 2 Thessalonians, God our Father loved us and by his grace gave us eternal encouragement and good hope. Here, encouragement means comfort, the same Greek word, *paraklésis* meaning “one who comes alongside to help.” The eternal comfort is the coming of our Lord Jesus, who died for our sins and was raised from the dead and will return to take his bride into the eternal kingdom of God. Notably, God is the God of comfort, and Jesus is the Comforter and the Holy Spirit, anther comforter. The triune God is the God of comfort. We should always remember that God is the God of all comfort as our Father in heaven.

When we hear the word comfort, it gives the nuance of ease. But it is connected to a Latin root, *fortis*, which means “brave”. It is not a synonym for ease, softness, a settled feeling. It is a synonym for courage, bravery, strength. The words “compassion” and “comfort” both begin with the prefix “com,” which means “together,” “with,” or “jointly.” In verses 3-11, the word “comfort” is written 9 times and we see the words, “trouble” “troubles” “sufferings”, “hardships.” Job said in Job 5:7, “Man is born to trouble as surely as sparks fly upward.” God’s comfort is not to give us a cushy life. He comes to us in the middle of our troubles and sufferings and hardships to give us strength and courage and bravery and make us fortified and firm at any circumstance. We are to know that God is the source of all comfort. At each time of trouble, he can comfort us as we seek his comfort.

Then how does God comfort us? To the little children the presence of their parents is a great comfort. In the same token, the presence of our Lord Jesus and God our Father is our great comfort amid our sufferings and hardships. Our God is willing to show his presence when we come to him. James 4:8 says, “Come near to God and he will come near to you.” God also comforts us through his words. Psalm 119:50 says, “My comfort in my suffering is this: Your promise preserves my life.” God also comforts us through hearing our prayers. Jesus said in Luke 18:7,8, “Will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off? I tell you, he will see that they get justice, and quickly…” God also comforts us through his work in God’s flock of sheep and our children. Paul was greatly encouraged and comforted in all his distress and persecution, when he came to know that God’s flock in Thessalonica were standing firm in the Lord (1 Thess. 3:7-8). Paul said in 2 Corinthians 7:6-7, “But God, who comforts the downcast, comforted us b the coming of Titus, and not only by his coming but also by the comfort you had given him. He told us about your longing for me, your deep sorrow, your ardent concern for me, so that my joy was greater than ever.” John said in 3 John 4, “I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth.”

Now verse 4 says, “who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God.” It is true that when we receive comfort from God, we can comfort others with the comfort of God, not with human comfort. Paul continues in verse 5, “For just as the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives, so also through Christ our comfort overflows.” The more we participate in the sufferings of Christ, the more we can receive God’s comfort. And in verse 6, “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.” In ESV, “…if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which you experience when you patiently endure the same sufferings that we suffer.” And in verse 7 Paul says, “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.” Christian life is to share in sufferings and in comfort.

Now Paul shares how God comforted him. He says in verse 8, “We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about the hardships we suffered in the province of Asia. We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired even of life.” While Paul was preaching the good news of Christ Jesus in Lystra, some Jews from Antioch and Iconium came and stoned him and dragged him outside the city, thinking he was dead (Acts 14:19). Here, Paul continues in verse 9, “Indeed, in our hearts we felt the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead.” This is really a big teaching of the Bible. Those who rely on themselves cannot go over their human limitation beyond their ability and give up. If they do something by their own strength, they become self-righteous and useless, even becoming a hindrance to God’s work. Self-reliance is very strong. But through unbearable hardships God leads us to really despair of ourselves and deeply learn to rely on him, who raise the dead. In 2 Corinthians 12:10, he confessed, “When I am weak, then I am strong.” And he said in Philippians 4:13, “I can do everything through him who gives me strength” (Phil 4:13). This may be true to us. And then Paul says continually, “He has delivered us from such a deathly peril, and he will deliver us. On him we have set our hope that he will continue to deliver us, as you help us by prayers. Then many will give thanks on our behalf for the gracious favour granted on us in answer to the prayers of many.” God’s deliverance is true in the past, in the present and in the future. Paul could be certain that God who delivered him would continue to deliver him. At this he was thankful for the prayer support of his coworkers.

**Second, Jesus, Yes and Amen (12-24).** In verse 12, Paul says, “Now this is our boast: Our conscience testified that we have conducted ourselves in the world, and especially in our relations with you, in the holiness and sincerity that are from God. We have done so not according to worldly wisdom but according to God’s grace.” Paul’s relationship with the Thessalonians was on the basis of the holiness and sincerity that come from God. It was not according to worldly/fleshly wisdom like many others in Corinth under the influence of Greek philosophy, but according to God’s grace. This was his bold testimony of his clear conscience in regard to his personal behavior. And then Paul says, “For we do not write you anything you cannot read or understand.” It means, “You know what we wrote was always clear, straightforward, consistent, and genuine. It was always transparent with no ambiguities, no matter what the critics said.

Paul continued, “And I hope that, as you have understood us in part, you will come to understand fully that you can boast of us just as we will boast of you in the day of the Lord Jesus.” To begin to understand something or someone is good. But if that understanding stops at a certain point, understating in part, that can cause misunderstanding and a broken relationship. Our understanding should go from the beginning, through understanding in part, and to understanding fully, undergoing many difficulties. Here, Paul was so confident of his relationship with the Lord that he was looking forward to the day of the Lord Jesus, hoping to be there before the Lord together with the saints in Corinth each being proud of the other.

And then Paul says in verses 15-16, “Because I was confident of this, I planned to visit you first so that you might benefit twice. I planned to visit you on my way to Macedonia and to come back to you from Macedonia, and then to have you send me on my way to Judea.” When Paul made this plan, he just wanted to give them double blessing, double grace, out of his blessing heart and loyalty to them. It was the only reason for planning the visits in the first place, no matter what the plans might be and no matter how they might be altered. Paul says continually, “When I planned this, did I do it lightly? Or do I make my plans in a worldly manner so that it the same breath I say, ‘Yes, yes’ and ‘No, no’?” implying, “Why can’t you trust my loyalty and my honesty?”

We see in verse 23 that Paul did not return Corinth and his original plan was changed. He said that it was to spare them, for their sake. When we read further, the delay was to give them time to repent. He wanted to spare rod when we refer to 1 Corinthians 4:21, “What do you prefer? Shall I come to you with a whip, or in love and with a gentle spirit?” He delayed to give them time to deal with the sin in their lives. He was waiting for a report back from Titus before he did anything. The report came and it’s recorded in chapter 7, and it was a good report and he was so thrilled. His plan changed, but his blessing heart and loyalty toward them did not. It seems that the Corinthians made a trivial matter into a serious big issue influenced by the critics of the false prophets, concluding that he was not a reliable, trustworthy person. This was undermining Paul’s integrity and his message in order to destroy God’s work. So noticing the seriousness of the matter, Paul goes into a fundamental and deep argument.

Paul said, “As surely as God is faithful, our message to you is not ‘Yes’ and ‘No.’” Paul talks about the message he preached. Through the message they were saved, because the message was true and it was yes to them. They were not vacillating between ‘yes’ and ‘no.’ Even now the message is yes. Paul continued in verse 19, “For the Son of God, Jesus Christ, who was preached among you by me and Silas and Timothy, was not ‘Yes’ and ‘No,’ but in him it has always been ‘Yes.’” The key point of the message Paul preached was the Son of God, Jesus Christ. It was full of truth and they accepted Jesus Christ as their Saviour and Lord. This work of God in them was undeniable and undisputable. And the Son of God, Jesus Christ, was not preached by Paul alone, but Silas and Timothy as well. They all preached the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ. It was the unwavering truth. In saying this, the implication is that “despite of this great precious work of God, how can you doubt my integrity and loyalty and motive because of such a trivial matter? Are the false teachers reliable to you?” It was unthinkable that the full message of the Son of God, Jesus Christ, was under attack because of such a petty matter of changing plans about his visiting. Travel plans are the easy part. Getting the message right is the hard part. If Paul and his gospel coworkers were reliable in the difficult and the eternal and the spiritual and the essential which comes from God, how could the Corinthians think that they would be unreliable in the least? This is Paul’s point.

Yet, here Paul’s argument seems to go deeper. He said, “The Son of God, Jesus Christ, who was preached among you by me and Silas and Timothy, was not ‘Yes’ and ‘No,’ but in him it has always been ‘Yes.’” How can a person be yes or no? In our understanding a person cannot be “yes” or “no.” What a person says can be responded with “yes” or “no”, not the very person. Interestingly, Revelation 3:14 says, “…These are the words of Amen, the faithful and true witness.” Here we see clearly that Jesus, the person, is Amen, that has the meaning of “truly.” Jesus is Amen; he is yes to God, always yes to God his Father. Jesus said in John 8:29, “…I always do what pleases him.” We remember Jesus’ prayer at Gethsemane, “Not my will but yours be done” (Lk 22:42). Jesus denied himself to obey the will of God the Father. In this way, Jesus was a ‘yes’ man to God. Verse 19b says, “but in him it has been always ‘Yes.’” In other translations, “in him was ‘yes’” or “in him has been ‘yes’.” Jesus is yes, and in him is always yes.

Verse 20 says, “For no matter how many promises God has made, they are ‘Yes’ in Christ. And so through him the ‘Amen’ is spoken by us to the glory of God.” When the LORD gave all the twelve tribes of Israel rest on every side in the promised land, Joshua could see the fulfillment of God’s promises and said, “Not one of all the LORD’s good promises to the house of Israel failed; every one was fulfilled” (Joshua 21:45). Ultimately all the promises of God has been fulfilled and will be fulfilled in Christ Jesus. For example, God said to Abraham, “…all peoples on earth will be blessed through you” (Genesis 12:3). This promise given to Abraham has been fulfilled in Christ Jesus, for all believers in Jesus are called the children of Abraham, as Galatians 3:7 says, “Understand, then, that those who believe are children of Abraham.” Also the words in Nahum in 1:15, “Look, there on the mountains, the feet of one who brings good news, who proclaims peace!...No more will the wicked invade you; they will be completely destroyed” was fulfilled in Christ Jesus and will be completely fulfilled at his returning to the earth and establishing his kingdom of righteousness and peace. The life of Jesus itself is the fulfillment of God’s promises, beginning with his birth in Bethlehem, and his death on the cross and being raised on the third day. All the promises of God will be fulfilled at his second coming. The risen Jesus said to his disciples in Luke 24:44, “This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms.” So, all the promises of God is ‘yes’ in Christ, and we respond with “Amen” whenever we hear the words of God. Amen is a Hebrew expression of ‘yes.” This word is used around 25 times in the Old Testament (in Deuteronomy 7 - 12 times), and around 30 times in the New Testament. Jesus also used this word “Amen.” Interestingly the Bible ends with the word ‘Amen.’ And Amen is a spiritual term. Sometimes we can say “Amen”, although we cannot understand what we hear at that time. After saying, “Amen”, understanding can come later. It does not mean that we say “Amen” thoughtlessly. We speak “Amen” with faith and prayerful heart. “Amen” is opening a path in our hearts for the word of God to come in. Paul says in verse 20, “…through him the ‘Amen’ is spoken by us to the glory of God.” (Our Amen ascends to God for his glory) When we through Christ say “Amen” before the words of God, God is glorified.

Then Paul says in verses 21-22, “Now it is God who makes both us and you stand firm in Christ. He anointed us, set his seal of ownership on us, and put his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come.” This work of God makes us both assured and humble. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 10:12, “If you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don’t fall.” We are to rely on God, who makes us stand firm in Christ, anointing us, set his seal of ownership on and putting his Spirit in our hearts. We are to always acknowledge his ownership upon our lives and to live by the Spirit following the guidance of the Spirit at each moment sensitively.

Then finally, Paul says in verse 23 and 24, “I call God as my witness that it was in order to spare you that I did not return to Corinth. Not that we lord it over your faith, but we work with you for your joy, because it is by faith you stand firm.” Paul’s desire is very clear, not to lord it over their faith, but to work together with them helping them to continually standing firm by faith in the right path. We see that Paul was also a yes man to God, although he was misunderstood and discredited for a certain time. May we also be men and women of yes, relying on God and acknowledge his ownership and following the guidance of the Holy Spirit sensitively despite misunderstandings and discredits of people.

We thank and praise God that he is our God and Father of comfort. He is a faithful God and all his promises are yes in Christ. Our Lord Jesus himself is always yes to God. May we seek and receive comfort from God our Father as we strive more and more to participate in the sufferings of Christ, being people of yes and Amen to God for his glory.