

## SESSION 5: GOD'S ENCOURAGING COMFORT, PART ONE

2 Corinthians 1:3-5

May 4, 2025

### **PREFACE**

As we saw in our previous session, although it is not terribly obvious on the surface, Paul from the outset sets the theme and tone of this letter.

In his greeting in v1 he addresses the Corinthians by immediately establishing his qualifications. He is “an apostle of Christ Jesus,” not by his own acclimation, but *God's* acclimation: by “the will of God.”

This is especially important in this moment with the Corinth church. We have no evidence that the Corinthians questioned his claim to apostleship—as did the Galatians—but they also were not obeying his counsel. In stressing his calling “by the will of God” (as he also did in 1 Corinthians 1:1) his claim is that he speaks on God's authority. If they reject him, they are rejecting God's word. Along with this, the evidence does seem to reveal that in Corinth at this time were so-called apostolic pretenders to which the church was listening.

So with this and other subtle references in the first two verses, Paul begins this letter in a specific, pointed way that is rather different from other openings to his letters.

### **v3**

In the next extended passage, from v3 to v7, two words are prominent: “comfort” (*paraklesis*) and “affliction”—or “troubles” (NIVs) or tribulation (KJVs)—all of which translate the Greek *thlipsis*.

Once again, as with the first two verses, we in the twenty-first century might read v3 as boilerplate, just standard preliminary remarks to an apostle's letter. Interestingly, even though it sounds like it, in this instance it is not. It is not typical for Paul to open with a blessing upon God; he normally opens with an expression of thanksgiving either for the church, or for what God is doing in or for the church—as he did in his first letter to Corinth.

**Read 1 Corinthians 1:3-6.**

Except for the Galatians and Ephesians letters, in his letters to churches he typically begins with an expression of thanksgiving for them, or for what is happening in their midst. ➡ Here, as in the letter to the Ephesians, he begins, instead, with a blessing (*eulogetos*; yoo-low-gay-TOS).

In his letter to Ephesus he does express this, but later, in vv15-16 of Chapter One.

### Read 2 Corinthians 1:3-5.

There are two reason why the apostle, in this instance might have veered from his standard expression of thanks—and it is quite possible that both are true.

First, the more cynical interpretation ➡ would be that Paul offers no thanksgiving to the Corinthians because he is *not thankful for them*. In fact, after referencing the many afflictions and sufferings he and his fellows have recently endured, his first mention of “thanks” is down in v11, asking the church to give thanks to God in their prayers for *them*—in other words, a *reversal* of the typical form. Look at v9.

e.g., by David Garland

**Indeed, we had the sentence of death within ourselves so that we would not have confidence in ourselves, but in God who raises the dead; who rescued us from so great a peril of death, and will rescue us, He on whom we have set our hope. And He will yet rescue us, you also joining in helping us through your prayers on our behalf, so that thanks may be given on our behalf by many persons for the gracious gift bestowed on us through the prayers of many. (2 Corinthians 1:9–11)**

I would say this first interpretation is certainly possible, and can even coexist with the second, more optimistic interpretation.

➡ That is, that Paul in this instance is so overwhelmed with thanksgiving *to God* for saving them out of their recent trials, that this emotional benediction in v3 is uppermost in his mind, superseding all else. Verse 3 then serves as a fitting prelude to vv4-7—even down to v11, where he then invites the Corinthians to join in this thanksgiving and praise to God for His rescue of the apostle and his fellows, and for “the gracious gift bestowed on [them] through the prayers of many.”

e.g., by Paul Barnett

Both interpretations can coexist, but I believe the latter fits better the context and flow of the apostle’s thoughts.

Here in the first three verses especially, but also continuing down through the paragraph, we see how Paul's life and writings reflect his cultural and religious history—how his background in Judaism, Hellenistic Greek, Roman Latin, and now Christianity weaves itself throughout the thoughts from which come his words. In v1- 2, he “‘christianizes’ the standard form of address used in Greco-Roman and Jewish letters” (Barnett); in vv3-7 he reshapes a traditional synagogue benediction along Christian lines. For example, in place of the Jewish “Blessed art thou, O Lord our God and God of **our fathers**, God of Abraham, God of Isaac...” Paul makes it “Blessed be the God and Father of **our Lord Jesus Christ...**” (emphasis added).

And perhaps it was his knowledge of the Jewish Scriptures that influenced his dwelling on one particular aspect of God's condescension to His people; perhaps in his present state of mind he was reminded of Isaiah's words to Israel:

**“Comfort, O comfort My people,” says your God.  
“Speak to the heart of Jerusalem;  
And call out to her, that her warfare has been fulfilled,  
That her iniquity has been removed,  
That she has received from the hand of Yahweh  
Double for all her sins.” (Isaiah 40:1–2)**

Our God is a God of comfort and compassion, as Isaiah states later in Chapter Sixty-one.

### **Read Isaiah 61:1-3.**

As a writer it grates on my ears to read someone repeating one word as many times as Paul does here (four times in v4 alone!). But that is just mechanics; of far more importance is what this says about Paul's sensitive heart and his grateful state of mind as he praises his God—who is, “the God of all comfort.” From this tail-end of v3 and down through the paragraph, Paul reveals how this comfort from God is woven throughout, person-to-person, those who call upon His name.

#### **v4**

*...who comforts us in all our affliction...*

We need to spend a moment on this word Paul uses so many times.

George Guthrie translates the noun *paraklesis* “encouragement,” which also fits, but doesn’t say quite the same thing as what comes to our mind with the word “comfort.” The word is also translated “consolation,” “exhortation” and means “a calling to one’s aid” (*para* = near, alongside). All our common versions have “comfort.” David Garland, who translates it “comfort” as well, nonetheless offers us good insight into why the word “encouragement” just might be the more appropriate term for us today.

*Garland:* The verb form (*parakalein*) appears four times and has a variety of usages in the NT. It was used for making an earnest appeal, for consoling or comforting someone who is distraught, for admonishing another, and for making amends. For English speakers, the word comfort may connote emotional relief and a sense of well-being, physical ease, satisfaction, and freedom from pain and anxiety. Many in our culture worship at the cult of comfort in a self-centered search for ease, but it lasts for only a moment and never fully satisfies. Watson comments that the word “comfort...has gone soft” in modern English. In the time of Wycliffe, it was “closely connected with its root, the Latin *fortis*, which means brave, strong, courageous.” The comfort Paul has in mind has nothing to do with a languorous feeling of contentment. It is not some tranquilizing dose of grace that only dulls pains but a stiffening agent that fortifies one in heart, mind, and soul. Comfort relates to encouragement, help, and exhortation. God’s comfort strengthens weak knees and sustains sagging spirits so that one faces the troubles of life with unbending resolve and unending assurance.

*Guthrie:* Therefore, here we opt to translate the word with the sense of “encouragement,” which communicates “the lifting of one’s spirits” (as does the English word “comfort”) but also hints at effecting a forward-looking, strengthening sense of hope for what lies down the road.

The ultimate source, the beginning point for all this comfort is no less, and no lower, than God Himself.

Just as He is the root of all holiness, and righteousness, all wisdom and power, He is the root of all comfort. If I happen to behave in a righteous manner, for example, that righteousness did not spring forth innately from me; I was not *born* with that righteousness, but was instilled with it and learned it from above.

And the point Paul is making in v4 is that the comfort of which he speaks take a circuitous and effective route from God, to and through the apostle and his fellows, then to those to whom they minister.

*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.*

Thus is the core benefit of the church described.

Note the theme here, that Paul will re-use in Chapter Nine. The point being made here at the beginning of the letter is that (stripped down to its essentials) *God gives to us so that we can give to others*. Here it is all about receiving and passing along *paraklesis*, “comfort.” God comforts individuals so that they are then equipped to comfort other individuals. In Chapter Nine the principle is identical, but the application pertains to receiving and sharing wealth.

### **Read 2 Corinthians 9:8-11.**

Same principle, different application.

Paul also sets up here *the reason for* this comfort, why it is necessary or desired in the first place: **afflictions**—(*thlipsis*; tribulation, distress, persecution, trouble) and, in vv5-7, **sufferings** (*pathematon*; that which befalls one, good or bad). Fascinating word, this *pathematon*, the root *pathema* from which we get our words pathos and passion. Verses 4 and 5 work together to paint an accurate, sometimes painful but ultimately beautiful picture of the church members in fellowship with each other, and all in fellowship with their head, Christ Jesus.

**v5**

**For just as the sufferings of Christ abound to us, so also our comfort abounds through Christ.**

To get a clear sense of this, let's start the sentence in v4 as a declarative sentence, reading it in the ESV:

**[God] comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. For as we share abundantly in Christ's sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too.**

When Paul mixes into this the idea of each of us “shar[ing] abundantly in Christ’s sufferings,” the mind reels; here is deep theology—and it begins with the realization of something that may not occur to us in our self-centered culture, where we are born with the proclivity to place ourselves first. We might miss it in the NASB, LSB, or KJVs, which are more literal translations, but the ESV and NIVs reveal it more clearly to our modern ears.

Here is the hard truth: God does not *just* come alongside to encourage and comfort in our times of affliction; *our relationship to and in Christ Jesus often puts us there in the first place*. George Guthrie succinctly captures this in his heading for this section: “Purposeful Affliction.”

In secular Greek the word translated “affliction” (*thlipsis*) meant pressure of any sort, but in the NT the term invariably refers to persecution received for the faith—faith in Jesus the Christ—a persecution which the Lord foretold clearly in John’s gospel.

### **Read John 15:18-21.**

One reason this passage fits the description of those I refer to as causing one to lean back in one’s chair in contemplative thought, is that it fascinates not just because of its circular nature, *but circular from two seemingly diametrically opposed directions—and all intertwined!*

Let’s consider the circle of “comfort” first:

You may recall from our first session on Paul’s history with the Corinth church, that during a time of dejection and sorrow, the apostle was comforted by the arrival of Titus with good news from Corinth, who, had himself been comforted by the Corinthians. This comfort received by Paul gave him the words in this letter with which to comfort the Corinthians with the comfort of God. Some of them had suffered pain from Paul’s “severe letter,” and now he comforts them. The comfort, originally from God, thus comes full circle—all made possible and facilitated by Paul and Titus and the church in Corinth being in Christ.

So even that apt phrase from Guthrie, “Purposeful Affliction,” takes on a double meaning; as to comfort, God *purposely*, intentionally and specifically, comforts the apostle through his disciple Titus, but then there is also a specific *purpose* within that comfort: it equips Paul to comfort others.

Because of time restraints, I must, unfortunately, pause here. In our next session we will complete this thought about comfort and affliction as we continue deeper into the paragraph.