

The God of all COMFORT

2 Cor 1.1-11

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.

They're the words Paul's commissioned to be painted on a ten foot high billboard to go up at the church at Corinth.

Praise be to God, the God of COMPASSION and the God of all COMFORT.

That's my God Paul says. That's the God who sent me. The one you belong to. The one WE BELONG TO. The God of all comfort, who COMFORTS us in all our TROUBLES.

Paul is very clever. See, we have this tendency to think God is made out of plasticine, that you can mould him into any shape you like. We tend to make God in the image that suits us. In the Old Testament Israel wanted God to look like the gods of the other nations. So they made a golden calf and they made idols.

And we do the same, not only do we make material things our god, but do things like this. We say all God wants from me is to be nice to the cat. We say God's not judgmental, he never gets angry, he certainly doesn't have any wrath.

Or maybe for you it's just that God in your mind as it turns out wants exactly the level of devotion that you give. That's convenient isn't it. Turns out he wants EXACTLY the level of commitment and holiness that you've decided on.

Hopefully that's not the case. Hopefully, as you listen to what God says about himself. As you hear it taught, as you read it yourself. Hopefully ...your understanding of who God is, is getting clearer and clearer. And hopefully as that happens you're actually becoming more like him in the way you think and act. It's what the bible calls sanctification.

But the church at Corinth has done some of their own remodelling of their picture of God. And as Paul opens with these words of praise for God. He's already making his point. He says Praise be to the God of all COMFORT he says. Who COMFORTS US in our TROUBLES. So we can comfort each other.

Now THAT'S precisely the Corinthians point of departure.

It seems, they've moved on from thinking they NEED A GOD OF COMFORT. Which of course means you don't have to comfort each other either.

As you read through this letter you get a bit of an idea of the distorted picture of God the Corinthians have and he's not the God who comforts those having troubles.

He's more like the God who doesn't let you have any troubles. HE's the God who elevates us ABOVE our troubles. HE's a rich and glorious God who's followers are also rich and glorious, and so you can understand when they look at Paul. That's not what they see.

Paul's NOT rich. And he's certainly not glorious. According to the way they see it at least. In fact he's pretty much the opposite. As Paul himself catalogues his troubles himself in this letter, seems like he's more like a magnet for misfortune.

And as it normally happens. They're not just coming up with these ideas all on their own. There's some other spiritual advisors who've come along to Corinth. And they're weighing in, making suggestions. And they're saying about Paul – lose the loser.

So as Paul talks about the God of comfort. Who comforts us in our troubles.....he's making a point. I'm God's apostle. And this is our God.

I guess you could say it's a bit like a trip to the Chiropractor. My understanding of the philosophy of Chiropractors. As you visit them over and over again, and again. As they crack your back do their adjustments. The idea is that they're reshaping you. They're REMODELLING your spine and your nervous system back to how it was supposed to be.

And Paul's reshaping the Corinthian picture of God, and of what being God's people was meant to be. See, Paul was the one God sent to Corinth to preach the gospel, to start the church. But they're in the throws of departing from that model, and they think they're upgrading to something better. And it's dangerous.

If you want to get the image of what's happened, you could think of it like a nice shiny car.



Paul's delivered it, here it is. And as he leaves, he hands over the keys. But now it's looking more like this.



They're mangling Paul's gospel. God's gospel. And he's trying to restore it.

Now as you read these first seven verses, the NIV uses the word COMFORT 9 times.

And for me, the term comfort brings up two kinds of images. One is the sitting by the pool on a tropical island drinking a cool drink kind of comfort.

The other one is one that comes, that you need because of some kind of grief.

If I asked you who in the world most needs comfort at the moment – who do you think of?

I suggest...You think of the families of the earthquake victims. And of the Tsunami. Those who've lost someone close. You don't think of the gold lotto winners do you.

And it's that kind of comfort Paul's talking about here. He says Praise be to the God of all comfort who comforts us in all our troubles.

Paul's not trying to pretend he's living some kind of pain free, worry free, sin free Christian utopia.

If you're a Christian, yes you've been forgiven. If you're a Christian yes you've got hope for eternity. Jesus is your savior. If God is for us who can be against us Paul says. All that's true.....

But in this life. He is with us in the **MIDST OF OUR TROUBLES**.

Matt's been pointing that out in the Psalms over the last few weeks. God's king David walking through the valley of the shadow of death in psalm 23. And that's Paul too. Just jump down to verse 8 he says something similar.

8 We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about the hardships we suffered in the province of Asia. We were under a great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired even of life. Indeed, in our hearts we felt the sentence of DEATH.

Paul's not hiding his troubles. He's spelling them out...to make his point.

Point one on your sheet. God's comfort in trouble.

John Chapman, who's one of Australia's best known preachers. I think he's in his 70's now. Probably been preaching for 50 years. He's written a book which is a sort of a handbook for people starting out as Christians. It's called A foot in two worlds.....the joy and struggle of the normal Christian life. And these are his opening words.

Chappo says I have been a Christian for 60 years. That's a long time to give something a try, and it puts me in a position to strongly recommend it. Over that time, two particular aspects of

Christian living have surprised me. ONE... is that it turned out to be so GOOD.....the other is that it turned out to be so HARD.

They're his opening words to starting out Christians. He's not trying to put you off. He wants to make sure you grow into maturity. Same sort of thing Paul's doing as he writes letters to churches. Chappo goes on in his book to say that there were people who tried to tell him that if you're a Christian. You won't have troubles with sin. Or that you'll be free from diseases you'll be healthy. Or rich, or you'll have kind of experience of God's presence as when you actually get to be with him in heaven. And he says. I want to spare you the angst. It's not true.

And the problem is if you think it is true, or it should be true. As a Christian you'll be a more like the mangled wreck than what God intended you to be as one of his followers.....and worse than that... when it turns out that it's not true. That you DO get sick. That you DON'T reach the dizzy heights...you'll blame God.

God's the God of comfort Paul says who comforts us IN OUR TROUBLES.

Now of course when it comes to troubles, Paul's someone who knows what he's talking about.

Here's a little list of boasts from chapter 11. And he's directly comparing himself to his super spiritual opponents.

2 Corinthians 11:22-30 ²² Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they Abraham's descendants? So am I. ²³ Are they servants of Christ? (I am out of my mind to talk like this.) I am more. I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again. ²⁴ Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. ²⁵ Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, ²⁶ I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in

the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false brothers. ²⁷ I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. ²⁸ Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches. ²⁹ Who is weak, and I do not feel weak? Who is led into sin, and I do not inwardly burn? ³⁰ If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness.

If the Christian life is a life free from troubles. I'd suggest Paul is the worst example ever. Paul says God is the God of comfort, who comforts us in our troubles.

The comfort of seeing lots of people come to salvation. And continuing in it. The comfort that his sufferings are producing strong faith in others. Comfort of being rescued from jail time after time. Comfort of seeing God at work. Comfort of having friends who would lay their life down for you. Who suffer with Paul. Not relief from troubles necessarily Paul says...but all kinds of comfort in them.

Point 2 Paul says God's a God of comfort, so we can be a community of comfort.

Verse 4 he comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God.

Have a look around. It's the people who've suffered something that are best able to comfort those who are suffering the same thing. That's why there's all sorts of support groups.

Leukemia support groups, Rape support groups, Alcoholic and drug support groups.

Because those people are best able to comfort you.....are people who are suffering THAT PROBLEM.

You felt anxious about admitting you're a Christian? Welcome to the club. Be comforted. You been treated poorly because of your faith. Let me comfort you Paul says. So have I.

All kinds of troubles. You struggling with temptation? You don't have to struggle alone.

We're meant to be a community of comfort. Who comfort one another like a family.

And Paul says. Verse 5 This is a great little picture.....

Just as the sufferings of Christ overflow into our lives, so also through Christ our comfort overflows.

Share and share alike Paul says. We share in Christ's suffering to an extent. But we also share his comfort. And it's not just the comfort of shared suffering it's the comfort of the reminder of the truths of the gospel. We remind each other that we're forgiven. That we're loved by God, even though we're sinners. That we'll be raised, just like Jesus was raised.

Verse 6 onwards the logic gets a bit weird for me, Paul says 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 suffering we suffer.

Seems like he's saying. Distress or comfort for us – either one – God can use and does use for your comfort.

It's really easy to see how you can be comforted when someone miraculously escapes from jail or when something good happens. And Pauls says if we're comforted its for your comfort. God's at work praise the Lord. But here's the thing....he can even use our distress....for your comfort.

There's a book called foxes book of martyrs, and it's basically a record of Christians who've been killed for their faith. And somehow that book is a book of comfort to Christians.

Example – page 308 Nicholas Ridley and Hugh Latimer burned at the stake in 1555.

Comfort knowing that what you believe is so valuable

How many people do you think have died for the New Age Movement?

How many consider their lives worth giving for their spiritual crystals, or their tarot cards?

The distresses of other christians speak volumes for the value of the good news about Jesus.

Paul says if we are distressed, it is for your comfort and salvation.

When you suffer for Jesus. When you take a stand. That's a huge comfort to me.

I'll get you to jump down to verse 9. I want to add something that Paul just mentions in passing about suffering. He talks about thinking he was dead, despairing of life he says, and halfway through verse 9 he says, but this happened that we might not rely on ourselves, but on God, who raises the dead.

Now I'm convinced that we won't know everything about how God can use our sufferings for our good until God's telling us face to face in heaven.

But here's a little nugget. Paul says – when you're suffering, you're forced to trust God.

We've got some friends who have four little kids, Pete and Carolyn and Caro has cancer. She's 38. And we've been fortunate enough to watch them as they've dealt with this. And see how they've dealt with God's purposes in it all. And things started in a scary place for Caro, and at the moment I think things are looking probably as bad as they've ever looked. They've had to go to China because the doctors can't do any more for them here and there's some other procedures they'll do in China. I don't think they'd mind me sharing this bit of one of their emails with you.

Pete says.

This has been an incredibly difficult time but God has been teaching us lots, particularly where our hope lies. If its in this world then we despair, if in the promised world to come then we are secure and have peace. God built on this lesson in China where he showed us just how

incredibly privileged we really are over here, but how much we still complain and strive for more and more material things. If our hope truly is in the world to come and in this hope we have peace, then Caro and I want to spend our days living for the Kingdom, not just saying we do but in our actions building a Kingdom here.

They're saying I think exactly what Paul's saying. They actually count it something like a privilege because of the way it's forced them to trust God, who's got plans for us beyond, the God who raises the dead Paul says.

Verse 10 He has delivered us from such a deadly 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 your prayers.

God's working out his plans Paul says. Then many will give thanks on our behalf for the gracious favor granted us in answer to the prayers of many.

God gets glory, not from trouble free sin defeating world conquering super saints. But from humble ordinary people who trust in Jesus and who comfort one another as they follow him together.

You know I've got high hopes for our church. I don't think we'll ever be the world defeating super saints. But can we do that?

Can we trust in the God of all comfort who comforts in all our troubles? Can we praise him? Can we set our hope on him? Can we comfort one another? Through distress. Through comfort. Sharing our joys. Sharing our troubles.

It's actually a pretty hard thing to do. Sharing your troubles. You've actually got to admit you've got some. But I think that's an eminently worthwhile and achievable goal.

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.....

