

INTRODUCTION

This morning we begin a verse by verse journey through the book of 2 Corinthians. The title of our study is “Hope for Cracked Pots,” and today’s message asks the question, “Are you Comfort-able?” So, let me ask you, “How do you feel today?”

A New Yorker was driving through Texas when he suffered a collision with a truck pulling a horse trailer. A few months later he was trying to collect insurance money for his injuries. The insurance company lawyer contacted him and said, “How can you claim you were injured? According to the accident report at the scene you stated that you weren’t hurt.” The New Yorker said, “Here’s what really happened. I was lying in the ditch in a great deal of pain. I heard someone say that the horse had a broken leg and I watched as the State Trooper pulled out his gun and shot the horse. Then he turned to me and asked, ‘How are you doing?’ And I smiled and said, ‘I’m doing fine. Just fine!’” That’s funny, but there are many Christians who are suffering and when you ask how they’re doing they’ll say, “I’m fine,” when they’re really in pain.

Many Christians still embrace the faulty idea that Christians should never suffer. But as we open the pages of 2 Corinthians, we’re going to discover that even committed Christians go through tough times of suffering.

You’ve probably heard of Corinth before, if it’s just from learning about Corinthian columns in school. And some of you as old as me can remember that before Ricardo Montalban was Mr. Roarke on Fantasy Island, or played the role of Khan in Star Trek, he advertised the Chrysler Cordoba by describing its “rich Corinthian leather.” Actually, the leather wasn’t even from Corinth, it was just a term used to describe leather with a thin vinyl cover.

Corinth was the third largest city in the Roman Empire behind Rome and Alexandria. It was known for its wickedness and sexual promiscuity. The Temple of Aphrodite (also called Venus) was there and temple prostitutes offered sex as an act of devotion to the goddess. Corinth was filled with sports-crazy fans who gambled on games, and it was the entertainment capital of the Roman Empire.

Sound familiar? When you compare the culture of Corinth with ours, it’s easy to see we have a “rich Corinthian culture” right here. This letter could be addressed to us because, like those early Christians, we are called upon to share a counter-cultural message of Jesus in a sex-crazed, sports-crazy, entertainment-obsessed culture.

The Apostle Paul begins his letter by writing about how God comforts us in our suffering. As we read 2 Corinthians 1:1-7, let’s count how many times the word comfort appears:

“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 (Greece): Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. 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, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God. For just as the sufferings of Christ flow

over into our lives, so also through Christ our comfort overflows. 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. 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.”

I’m calling this series “Hope for Cracked Pots” based upon what I consider the key verse found in 2 Corinthians 4:7. The Bible says, “We have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us.” The treasure we contain is Jesus Christ living His resurrected life in us. Some of us are cracked pots because we’re full of imperfections and flaws—but the treasure we contain is still precious and pure! Any power that may be seen in our lives is from God—not from us!

In our text, the word “comfort” appears nine times in just five verses. So, let me ask you, “Are you comfort-able?” I’m not asking you if you feel relaxed as you sit there in a padded pew, or if you’re sitting in a soft recliner as you watch this on TV. What I mean is: are you able to allow God to comfort you in your pain? And: are you able to comfort others when they are hurting? Let’s consider three important truths about being comfort-able.

1. BE ENCOURAGED! OUR FATHER IS THE GOD OF ALL COMFORT

In verse 3 we are given some insight into God’s nature when Paul wrote, “Praise be to the ... Father of compassion and the God of all comfort.” I’ve often said that believing God exists is only the first step in faith. You can believe God exists, but if you believe in the wrong kind of God, it can be worse than being an atheist. The Bible gives dozens of simple declarative statements describing God’s character. For instance, God is the great “I Am.” He is holy; He is love; He is Spirit; He is light. There’s many more, but here we see God is the Father of all compassion and the God of all comfort. Compassion means that God “feels” my pain, and the word “comfort” means God “fortifies” me in my pain.

I’ve been preaching since 1970 and in all these years, there is only one message I’ve prepared to preach, but never got to deliver. It was the week before Mother’s Day in 1978 and we were expecting the birth of our first child. Sure enough, Jenni was born early on Mother’s Day, and I was at the hospital so I never got to deliver that particular message.

Now, 29 years later, I’d like to share it with you. I’ve still got the notes, because I always keep hard copies of my messages, even after computers came along. If you wonder what this has to do with God’s comfort, the verse I had chosen to preach on that Mother’s Day in 1978 is from Isaiah 66:13 where God says, “As a mother comforts (“sighs over”) her child, so will I comfort you.” God is often described as a Father, but this is the only verse in the Bible that compares God’s care and compassion to that of a mother. In my notes for that message 29 years ago I was going to say that like God, mothers gives us life, they give us love, they give us their labor, and they give us their likeness. I won’t bore you with the whole message, but here’s my final poem: “They say that man is mighty/ He governs land and sea/ He wields a might scepter/ O’er lesser powers than he/ But mightier power and stronger/ God from His throne has hurled/ For the hand that rocks the cradle/ Is the hand that rules the world.” Whew, thanks for letting me get that

message out of my heart... It’s been there a long time!

It’s that a great promise? Like a tender-hearted mother, God comforts His children. The Hebrew word “comforts” literally means “sighs over.” Do you remember when you were a child and you fell and cut your knee? It was just a scratch, but the blood was trickling down your leg and you were certain it was going to require amputation. You went running in screaming, “Mommy! Mommy!” She met you at the door, and took you in her arms and washed your scratch and sighed over you and kissed you where it hurt and said, “Now, now, everything is going to be alright.”

The Bible says God comforts us just like a mother. Are you hurting? Close your eyes and picture yourself running toward God saying, “Daddy, daddy!” And like the father of the prodigal son, the Father runs to meet you and He embraces you. Then He holds you tight in His strong, everlasting arms, and He sighs over you saying, “Let me clean you up. Let me kiss you where it hurts. Now, now, everything will be alright.” Our God is the God of all comfort!

Take-away Truth: God is interested in every detail of my life.

I don’t want you to just listen and forget this truth so today I want to give you some take-away truth: God is interested in every detail of my life. God is not some impersonal Force who is neither uncaring nor unable to know you and to care about you. The gods in Greek and Roman mythology were too busy with their own lives to be concerned with lowly humans. But the God of the Bible, the God of all comfort, is interested in every detail of my life. The Bible says He has numbered the hairs on my head (which isn’t as hard as it once was). The Bible tells me God says, “See, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands.” (Isaiah 49:16) In the Bible God says, “You are precious and honored in my sight, and because I love you.” (Isaiah 43:4) Be encouraged, God is the God of all comfort!

2. BE ENCOURAGED! GOD IS WITH YOU IN ALL YOUR TROUBLES

The second most common word in this passage is “trouble” or “suffering” which appears seven times. The Bible says in verse 4 that He is the One “who comforts us in all our troubles.” My favorite word from that verse is “in.” Where is God? Well, He’s everywhere, of course. But the Bible says He is with us in all our troubles to comfort us.

Our modern use of the “comfort” has robbed it of some of its strength. To us, it’s a soft, sentimental, soothing feeling. We even use it to describe a soft, fluffy covering for a bed, a comforter. “Comfort” is such a soft, soothing, quiet word that I even hesitate to use it in church because if you’re already sleepy, the word “comfort” might push you over the threshold into a deep slumber!

But in the Bible, “comfort” is an action word. It’s the Greek word *parakaleo*, which literally means, “one who comes alongside to help.” It’s the same word Jesus used in John 14-16 to describe the Holy Spirit. Our English word “comfort” comes from a combination of two words that means “with strength.” The “fort” in comfort reminds us of the word fortify, or fortitude. To comfort means to come along someone and to give them your strength.

Let me give you a visual definition of “comfort.” Imagine an elderly man or woman is standing at the bottom of a steep set of stairs. They look up and wonder if they can make it. If you see their need and then come alongside them help them up the stairs, you are giving them comfort according to the Bible meaning of the word. If you see their need and just yell, “Use the handrail!”—that’s not comfort. Or if you yell, “Go use the elevator around the corner!” —That’s not comfort. In order to comfort them, you must come alongside them and physically give them your strength to help them.

Got that picture? Because that’s what God does when He comforts us IN our troubles. He doesn’t just call out from heaven, “Hey use the handrail!” He comes alongside to help you.

A few years ago, Bette Midler recorded a song called, “From a Distance.” It’s a theological song, because it makes statements about God. Bette Midler is a funny lady with a great voice, but her understanding about God is lousy. She sang: “God is watching us. God is watching us. God is watching us from a distance. From a distance there is harmony, and it echoes through the land (What harmony? What planet is she talking about again? Is she looking at the same news program I watch?) And it’s the hope of hope, it’s the love of loves, it’s the heart of every man.” What’s wrong with that song? Well, I agree that God IS watching us....but it’s that “from a distance” part that gives me the creeps. God isn’t just watching from a distance, the Bible teaches that God is with us. He isn’t sitting on some throne in the land of Far Far Away watching us, wringing His hands saying, “Tsk, tsk, those poor creatures.” No, the Bible says our God is the God of all comfort who walks with us through our pain and suffering.

David wrote, “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.” (Psalm 23:4) As a shepherd boy, David usually carried two sticks. One was a rod and one was a staff—and together, they gave him courage. A rod was like a club he could use against attacking animals. The staff was a long stick with a crook at the end. He used it to nudge the sheep along or to hook them back in the flock when they started to wander. Those two sticks gave Him comfort, courage, strength. That’s what God does when we walk through the valley of tough times. He is there with us. He protects us and nudges us back in line.

God’s comfort transforms our pain and suffering into something beautiful. God made this amazing promise to the Jews after they had been captured and hauled off to foreign nations. “The Lord will surely comfort Zion and will look with compassion on all her ruins; he will make her deserts like Eden, her wastelands like the garden of the Lord. Joy and gladness will be found in her, thanksgiving and the sound of singing” (Isaiah 51:3). There are those two descriptions of God again—comfort and compassion. God feels your pain and He fortifies you in the midst of your pain. That was an amazing promise of comfort. The land lay in smoldering ruins, and yet God promised that He would make their deserts like the Garden of Eden! For those of us who have traveled to Israel, we have seen the desert filled with gardens and date palm groves that resemble the Garden of Eden. God is a God who always keeps His promises.

Take-away truth: God can transform the ruins of my life into the Garden of Eden

Here’s the take-away truth: God can transform the ruins of my life into the Garden of Eden. The good news I have for you today is that no matter what a mess you’ve made of your life, the God of all comfort comes to you in your troubles. He can totally transform the garbage dump of your past into a garden of His grace. Are you struggling right now? How comfort-able are you? Are you able to surrender your pain and struggles to God so He can come alongside you and comfort you? He can change your ugly past into something as beautiful as the Garden of Eden. So, do you try to hide your pain? It’s still there. Do you try to deaden your pain? You can’t do that, either. You can’t drink away your troubles. I heard a preacher say once “Some of you think you can drown your troubles in drink. Well, I’m here to tell you that your troubles can swim!”

The best thing for you to do is to bring your pain to Jesus and let Him comfort you. I love the words to the Gaither song that says, “Something beautiful; Something good; All my confusion; He understood. All I had to offer Him was brokenness and strife; But He made something beautiful of my life.” Finally,

3. BE AN ENCOURAGER! GOD CAN USE YOU TO BE A CHANNEL OF HIS COMFORT TO OTHERS

Are you comfort-able? In other words, will you let God use you to comfort others? The Bible says in verse 4 “so that we can comfort those in trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God.” The reason God comforts us is *not* so we’ll just BE comforted. He wants us to take that strength and courage that He’s given us and use it to encourage others. Sadly, too many Christians only consider themselves a receptacle of God’s blessings rather than a channel of His blessings. Like the Dead Sea, they only receive, but never give. Then they wonder why their faith is so life-less! The primary reason we gather as Believers is not to *receive* a blessing, but to *be* a blessing to others. The Bible says, “Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching” (Hebrews 10:25). What day? The Day of the return of Jesus is closer this week than it was last Sunday. So, we should be more active in comforting and encouraging others than we ever have before.

Take-away Truth: God doesn’t comfort me to make me comfortable—but to make me a comforter!

Here’s the take-away Truth: God doesn’t comfort me to make me comfortable—but to make me a comforter! Has God comforted you? Then look around for someone to comfort. Don’t just hoard your blessings—share them.

Some Christians are so self-centered they remind me of the story about a guy named Sam who was taking a first aid class. One week, Sam said, “Last week I got to apply what I’ve learned in this first aid class.” The instructor said, “Tell us about it.” Sam said, “A few days ago I heard a terrible crash in my front yard. When I went outside I saw that a car had veered off the road and plowed head-on into a big tree in my yard. There were injured passengers hanging out the doors. And because I had taken this class I knew exactly what to do. I immediately sat down on the steps and put my head between my knees so I wouldn’t pass out!” Sadly, that’s how many Christians feel about their faith. To them, church is coming and sitting and soaking in it. Then

they leave and just use whatever they’ve learned to make themselves more comfortable. But God wants to use each of us as a comforter to others!

That’s why God allows you to go through troubles. You’ve probably heard the expression: Been there...Done that...Got the t-shirt (and as one of my friends says)...Gave it back! Don’t give the t-shirt back, hang onto it because you’re going to find someone who will be going through the same thing you went through, and they are going to need your help. Your tears can be the rain that waters someone else’s garden.

Our Women’s Ministry, under the leadership of Linda Lesniewski, is doing this very thing. They have something they call Life Experiences Inventory (they are available at the Welcome Center). This is a process through which women who have gone through the different crises of life volunteer to help other women who find themselves facing the same crisis. The list includes over 50 experiences like abortion, breast cancer, depression, eating disorders, infertility, miscarriage, prescription drug abuse, rape, sexual abuse, suicide, widowhood...and the list goes on. Women who have gone through those tough times have offered to come alongside and help other women who are facing the same crisis. As a result, hundreds of women in our church have been able to fulfill God’s role as being a channel of comfort to others. They’re comfort-able!

CONCLUSION

That’s why God allows us to go through tough times—so we can be channels of His comfort to others. So when you go through tough times, don’t get angry. Just realize God is making you stronger and smarter so you can encourage others to trust Him.

If we never struggled, we would never grow. How many of you ever work the crossword puzzles or the Sudoku puzzles in the newspaper? Is there anybody here who finishes them correctly the first time without erasing any of your answers? Actually, they aren’t very challenging for me. For instance, here’s a Sudoku puzzle from this past week’s Tyler newspaper. If you’re not familiar with Sudoku, you simply fill in the grid so that every box, and every column (vertical, horizontal, and diagonal) contain the digits 1-9. Sudoku was actually invented in America, but it became so popular in Japan, it was named Sudoku which means “the digits must appear only once.”

I brought this puzzle from Wednesday’s paper to show you I finished it in ink, with no mistakes whatsoever. It didn’t take me very long at all. Once you figure these things out, they aren’t hard at all. Want to know the secret? I just took Thursday’s newspaper which had the solution for Wednesday’s puzzle and I just copied the numbers. It’s a breeze!

Do you get the point? How much of a challenge would it be to just copy the answers into a crossword puzzle or a Sudoku puzzle that way? There would never be any stress, but there would also never be any sense of fulfillment or accomplishment. If you never struggled to finish a puzzle on your own, you would never know the joy of filling in that last word, or writing in that last number, or placing that last piece of the jigsaw puzzle in place.

That’s why God allows us to face adversity. So we can have the joy of watching Him bring us

THROUGH them. As Andre Crouch once sang, “If I’d never had a problem; I wouldn’t know that God could solve them; I wouldn’t know what faith in God could do.” Once we learn to trust Him, then we can tell others who struggle that they can trust Him too!

Here’s how it works. Billy and Johnny are brothers. Johnny is four and Billy is six. They’re both playing in a tree house eight feet off the ground. Their dad stands on the ground, holds out his arms and says, to the four year old, “Come on Johnny, jump. I’ll catch you.” But Johnny is scared, and he doesn’t want to jump. So the daddy turns to six year old Billy and says, “Jump, Billy!” Without hesitation the older brother jumps into his dad’s arms. When Johnny sees his dad is strong and able to catch his brother, Johnny realizes he can trust His daddy to catch him, too, so he jumps. That’s what we’re supposed to do. Those of us who have found God to be strong and reliable are to show others that they can trust Him and jump into His arms as well!

So where are you today? Are you comfort-able? If you’re hurting go running to God—He will comfort you. Have you *been* comforted by God? Then, start looking around for people who need you to come alongside them and help them experience God’s comfort.

OUTLINE

KEY VERSE: “We have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us.” *2 Corinthians 4:7*

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vs. 3 “Praise be to the ... Father of compassion and the God of all comfort.”

“As a mother comforts (“sighs over”) her child, so will I comfort you.” *Isaiah 66:13*

Take-away Truth: God is interested in every detail of my life.

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vs. 4 “who comforts us in all our troubles.”

“The Lord will surely comfort Zion and will look with compassion on all her ruins; he will make her deserts like Eden, her wastelands like the garden of the Lord. Joy and gladness will be found in her, thanksgiving and the sound of singing” *Isaiah 51:3*

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To put it in Texas terms, “You’re mighty welcome to use any and all of my ingredients; just make your own chili!”

For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes