

The Comfort of God

SCOTT HOEZEE

If while sitting in an airport, you overhear a conversation between two people you don't know, it can be pretty hard to make sense of what you hear. There would just be a lot of references to people you don't know named Bill and Georgette, and to events in some town in Iowa you have never heard of. Overheard conversations are hard to understand. Well, reading letters in the New Testament can be like that. Today on Groundwork, we begin a series on Paul's second letter to the Corinthians; but Paul and those Corinthians lived a long time ago, and most of us have never been to Corinth. II Corinthians is also known to contain quite a few curious and even odd sounding passages that we need to work a bit to understand; but we read it because we know the Holy Spirit inspired these words for our benefit as believers. Today we will begin with words of great comfort from the letter's opening verses. Stay tuned.

DAVE BAST

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is Groundwork, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee; and Dave, we are beginning today a six-part series on II Corinthians, and as we do so probably it will be good for all of us to review a little bit what is often called the Corinthian correspondence in the New Testament.

DAVE BAST

Yes; you used the analogy in the opening of overhearing a conversation, like somebody is talking on the phone and you just get one side of it, and that is very much what it is like to read I and II Corinthians. Incidentally, I would say if you are overhearing somebody talking on the phone, you shouldn't listen, probably, that is not polite; but here in this case we are invited to listen in to Paul's end of the conversation; and we have to do some filling in and back-tracking to try to figure out exactly what it all says, because Paul had planted the church in Corinth. That story is told in the 18th chapter of Acts. Then he had moved on and was settled in the city of Ephesus for three years; and while he was there, apparently a letter came from Corinth to Paul with a long laundry list of questions and issues, and the letters started flying back and forth between those two cities.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; and we think there were at least four letters, and we only have two of them that have survived. So we don't have that original letter from Corinth to Paul, but we do believe that what we now call I Corinthians was Paul's answer. You can almost... if you look at I Corinthians, it is like Paul is just ticking off the list of all of their questions: Now, about spiritual gifts... now about law suits... now about the matter of marriage you asked about... now about the Lord's Supper... now about the resurrection. So, they had a really long list of controversies, and also questions. I Corinthians is Paul's answer to that; and after that there seems to be even more correspondence.

DAVE BAST

Right; but wouldn't it be great if you could write a letter to Paul, or even better maybe, to Jesus, and ask Him about issues in your church or in your life, and get an answer back? Well, maybe someday we can do that,

but anyway... back to Paul and Corinth.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Well, but it could also be a two-edged sword if you could write to Paul because he was quite direct with the Corinthians, too, a little bit in I Corinthians, and then in between I Corinthians and what we call II Corinthians, there is another letter Paul wrote, which we don't have; we have lost it; and Paul refers to that as the "hard letter I sent you;" so it sounds like maybe they didn't take his advice completely after the first letter. He got wind of it, so then he sent them a much sterner, in-your-face kind of a letter. We don't have *that* letter anymore, but they may have then responded to that; and somewhere in all of that what we now call II Corinthians was also written by Paul and Timothy to the people of Corinth.

DAVE BAST

You can picture the situation... and again, remember this is the ancient world, where nothing and no one moved faster than a walking pace, either on foot or by horse, or by sailing ship. It was slow going, and to get a message back and forth, you had to send a messenger... no postal service. So, this must have spanned several months or years even, going back and forth; and it had to have been frustrating knowing that there were serious problems and Paul is trying to sort it out long distance simply by writing.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And one of the serious problems that we deduce was going on in Corinth... So, I Corinthians is Paul's answering a very long letter of questions that they had. II Corinthians deals a lot with something that Paul may have gotten a letter about or he may have heard a report about, and that is that this group of people – false teachers who called themselves the super apostles – had infiltrated Corinth and they were doing a whole lot of damage to Paul's reputation. They were undermining Paul's character, and they were undermining to a degree the very Gospel he preached; and this about killed Paul's spirit to hear that these sisters and brothers whom he really, really loved were being seduced by these super apostles who were undercutting Paul in every way; and so, there are a lot of parts in this II Corinthians letter – and we will see that in this series – where Paul is... it is almost painful to read because he is so wounded by what he hears he is being accused of by these false teachers.

DAVE BAST

Interesting you should use that word because "painful" is the word that was in my mind as you were speaking just now, Scott. How difficult Paul's life and work really were as an apostle. We just kind of look back at him and think: Wow, the mighty Apostle Paul, writer of the New Testament; 13 of the 27 New Testament books come from the pen of Paul. We learn more about Paul's personal life and experience in II Corinthians than probably anywhere else...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes.

DAVE BAST

He is quite self-revelatory of the things that he experienced; the problems, the pain, the troubles that he went through; not just from outsiders – not just from non-Christians who attacked him and beat him up and stoned him and all the rest. He says consistently, over and over: The worst thing is what I experienced from people *inside* the Church.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, you are right, Dave. We look back and Paul is kind of a stained glass figure for us now, right? He is kind of frozen in time as the great apostle and the author of half the New Testament; but isn't it interesting that maybe there is some left-handed comfort for us to take here, I suppose, that, you know, we suffer today, too, in the Church. Pastors often come in for criticism, but ordinary church members do, too. Sometimes we hurt each other in the Church, and congregations have struggles; and we tend to think: Well, for Paul, being

an apostle, that would have just bounced off him, or that would never happen to him; but it did happen to him...

DAVE BAST

And he felt it... it hurt him.

SCOTT HOEZEE

He felt it very, very deeply; so there is something oddly enough comforting or something to know that this has kind of been going on from the beginning, and even one of the most significant, chosen servants of God in the history of the Christianity and of the written word of God... he came in for those same kinds of criticisms.

DAVE BAST

He didn't have it easy...

SCOTT HOEZEE

He wasn't immune.

DAVE BAST

Not by a long shot. Comfort is the word, really, that we want to pick up on because that is Paul's theme in the opening chapter of his second letter to the Corinthians. It is all about comfort; the comfort that he has received in trouble and pain and sorrow and suffering, and the comfort that he wants to share with others; and that is where we will look next.

Segment 2

SCOTT HOEZEE

I am Scott Hoezee, along with Dave Bast, and you are listening to Groundwork, and this first program in a new, six-part series on Paul's second letter to the Corinthians; and Dave, we have looked at the wider context now. We have reviewed a little bit the Corinthian correspondence – the letters that went back and forth; but now let's get right into the text of Chapter 1.

DAVE BAST

Right; so it starts out: ¹Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, to the church of God in Corinth, together with all His holy people throughout Achaia (that is, northern Greece); ² grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

SCOTT HOEZEE

³Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, ⁴who comforts us in all our troubles so that we comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God. ⁵For just as we share abundantly in the sufferings of Christ, so also our comfort abounds through Christ. ⁶If we are distressed, it is for your comfort and salvation. If we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which produces a new patient endurance of the same sufferings we suffer; ⁷and our hope for you is firm because we know that just as you share in our sufferings, so also you share in our comfort.

DAVE BAST

So, right away Paul introduces himself, as was his normal practice, and he has a co-worker that he also mentions; young Timothy, who was his assistant in Ephesus. Later on, according to early Christian tradition, Timothy took over the church in Ephesus, but here he is standing side by side with Paul and assisting him somehow; perhaps in the writing of the letter, even.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And so Paul opens, as he often does, with a doxology: Praise to God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ; and then after that, the word *comfort* starts popping up about every third word, as Paul really piles on this idea of

comfort; that they have received comfort; they have been comforted by God and they have comforted others with the comfort of Christ... it is in there all over the place. Now, I don't know what you think of, Dave, when you hear the word, *comfort*, but you know, it might just be... Sometimes we talk about comfort food, you know, mashed potatoes and pot roast, or sometimes a certain kind of blanket is called a comforter; on a cold winter night it is a warm blanket to put around your shoulders; and so we might think of warm, fuzzy images of comfort, but Paul is making clear here that the comfort he is talking about comes to him, and is necessitated by something that is decidedly not comfortable or warm and fuzzy at all. We are not talking about a cold winter's chill or something to fill an empty belly. This is in the context of grave suffering for Jesus.

DAVE BAST

He comforts us, Paul says speaking of God, in all our troubles – trials – tribulations – *thlipsis* is the Greek word for that kind of suffering, the kind of bad stuff that happens in your life. Maybe it is something somebody else has done to you; maybe it is just worry and anxiety; maybe it is a bad turn of affairs in your life; maybe it is sickness or death of somebody close to you; but trouble – trouble comes – and Paul says that the comfort comes in the context of that trouble; so, I think it is really important to understand exactly what comfort is in the biblical sense – in the sense that Paul wants to use it here; and as you said, we often think of comfort as being comfortable; you know, everything is kind of going good, so I have a lot of comfort in my life; or we might think of it as sort of a sympathy. You know, you put your arm around somebody to try to comfort them: Cheer up. It's not so bad. Don't cry. You know, as if to a child; but that is not really what Paul is getting at.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, he is talking about sort of the promise of Jesus at the end of Matthew's Gospel: The Great Commission: 28:20b Surely I am with you always, even to the end of the age; and Jesus comes and stands with us when we are afflicted with some of the same types of things He was afflicted with, particularly, of course, at the end of His life when He was crucified, but really, all through His life. When you stand with Jesus you are going to suffer with Jesus, but the good news is that because Jesus has overcome death through the resurrection, He also now stands with you and comforts you that you are not alone. This suffering is not the end of the story, and I am with you. That is a profound source of comfort, not just for Paul, though. So, in preaching class at seminary, we say to students: If you are going to use a personal example in your sermon, don't do it just to call attention to yourself. The only reason to tell a personal story is because it becomes a doorway through which everybody can identify with their own stories; and that is what Paul does here. He kind of says: I am not just talking about myself. You, too, are receiving the comfort with which we have been comforted because you have suffered, too, and God is also with you. So this becomes not just about Paul, but it becomes about the Corinthians and God's faithfulness also to them.

DAVE BAST

Yes; at the root of that word, comfort, is the word *fortis*, really, in Latin, which means strength: Fortitude, courage we get that word from, even a fort – you know, a fortress – a strong point, a stronghold; and I think when Paul talks about the comfort that he receives from the knowledge that God is with him even though he is facing trouble, again so often we tend to think: Well, if God is on my side, everything ought to be going great for me, right? No, Paul says, when things are adverse – when they are against you – nevertheless, God is with you and that is the reason that you can derive strength. Somehow, in a way... You know, he talks elsewhere about the peace that passes understanding, the comfort that comes from God's very presence. It is not an emotional thing; it is not just human sympathy, putting your arm around somebody else; but it comes from God and it is the strength that enables us to get through, really.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; and we still need this today. I mean, there are many Christians in the world today who face active persecution for being a Christian; and others who face more passive forms, but there is also other suffering; terrible events happen to us that test our faith, that make us wonder: Is it true? Can there really be a loving

God when my grandchild died at such a young age; or my husband lost his job two years before retirement and now what? So, there are lots of tests and lots of trials and lots of suffering that can test our faith and test our commitment to staying with God; and so here Paul says, reminding us: God will comfort you, God will stay with you. This is not a word to speak too quickly to people in suffering because sometimes the comfort tarries – it delays a little bit; so this isn't meant to be a band-aid on people we know who are going through a hard time...

DAVE BAST

Yes; we don't say it glibly.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, chin up... but we do bear witness to the hope that we have that, indeed, where the suffering comes... and especially, as Paul says here, especially when the suffering comes on account of Christ Himself or your identification with Christ in His crucifixion; especially when that is the kind of suffering we are talking about; the comfort of that same Jesus is going to be right there, too. God will come through.

DAVE BAST

Right; Paul is going to talk about that experience that he has had, in and through which he has received comfort from God; and we will look at that in just a bit.

Segment 3

SCOTT HOEZEE

You are listening to Groundwork, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast, and we have just been talking about how God comforts us in the sufferings that come our way with His very presence, so that we in turn can comfort others. We want to talk about that a little bit; but also we want to listen to what Paul says next concerning his experiences, in which he had so much trouble.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, now we are still in II Corinthians Chapter 1, but now we are up to verse 8, where Paul says: We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about the troubles we experienced in the province of Asia. We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired of life itself. ⁹Indeed, we felt we had received the sentence of death, but this happened that we might not rely on ourselves, but on God who raises the dead. ¹⁰He has delivered us from such a deadly peril and He will deliver us again. On Him we have set our hope that He will continue to deliver us ¹¹as you help us by your prayers. Then many will give thanks on our behalf for the gracious favor granted us in answer to the prayers of many.

DAVE BAST

So here Paul is saying: I don't want you to think I am some kind of wimp here, or that I am crying wolf about a relatively minor affair. We don't know exactly what he is referring to, but he must have gone through hell, really, in what he experienced – what he faced. In fact, he says at one point: I just despaired of life. I was sure I was going to die.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes.

DAVE BAST

Yes; what was that; illness, persecution, some kind of an attack? I don't know.

SCOTT HOEZEE

All of the above: Deadly peril – that makes it sound like persecution. Yes, we don't know exactly, and I don't think anybody has ever quite tracked down this reference to anything narrated in the book of Acts, either, where we read about Paul's missionary journeys; but what Paul is basically saying is... Those first seven verses we read he is talking about suffering, and now he is saying this wasn't a spiritual hangnail: We were about dead. We were at the edge of the cliff and there was nowhere to go, and we thought that God was going to take us home. We were facing a sentence of death; but even so, Paul says, there was nothing left to hang on to. We had no resources left. Humanly speaking, there was nothing we could do except die. There was no escape hatch. If they were going to be rescued, it was going to be a hundred percent God and a hundred percent grace, and Paul says: And it was.

DAVE BAST

Yes; so, how did that happen? What did that feel like? Again, it would be nice if we could neatly diagnose this whole affair and just reduce it to a series of principles or steps. Look, okay, if you are in trouble, here is what you do: You do this, that, and the other thing, and then God will come through and deliver you; but it is never quite that way. It is not so neat. It is not so orderly. It often is a mystery. You get to the end of your rope and you find suddenly that God is there – the same God who went to the cross, really, and didn't experience deliverance Himself. He saved others; Himself He cannot save... they mocked Him, while they knew more than they were saying there, really. That was the truth. But because that has happened; because that is who God is – the God who went through death and defeated it and rose again – He can be present with us even when we stare death in the face, and comfort us – give us strength – to endure that.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And of course, we know that the day will come, and how long after this letter from II Corinthians this happened we don't know precisely, but we do know that the day will come when Paul will face the sentence of death and he will die. He will be martyred by the Roman Empire. So, the day will come when God won't swoop in to rescue, but God will take Paul to Himself, and Paul will write elsewhere that that is okay, too. Death is not the end for him either. God will stand with you even in that, but for the time being, Paul is able to testify to God's goodness, and I think this was something from my teacher, Neal Plantinga, in a lecture or something years ago, but kind of the picture you get of Paul here is somebody who, you know... this looks like somebody who didn't quite survive a prizefight or something, you know...

DAVE BAST

Yes, right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

His nose is broken and crooked, he has an eye half swollen shut, he is limping on a sore leg, he just looks like a car wreck of a human being; and yet, he stands up and lifts his hands to heaven and says: Thanks be to God. So, from this nearly crushed shell of a human being you get this wonderful doxology and you get these marvelous words about God's goodness even in times of peril; which only, if you picture Paul that way, testifying to these things, that only enhances the drama, the beauty, but also the authenticity of Paul's witness. This is not a Hallmark card. This is not just somebody who has gone through a mild disappointment and then says: Oh, but you know, God helped me through it. Oh, no! This is somebody who, as you said, hell on earth – despaired of life – deadly peril – and yet, he knew God was with him.

DAVE BAST

Yes. I have a close friend for many years who experienced unspeakable loss in his life. It was not easy; and like Paul, he kind of reeled, battered and bruised by it psychologically – spiritually – emotionally, but endured and has been for many thousands of people a source of comfort himself in his ability to testify to God's grace there; and that is, I think, what we need to come back to and really focus on and emphasize as we near the end of this program. God comforts us in our trouble so that we may, in turn, comfort others; and it is sort of comfort in/comfort out is the theory behind this whole deal. God will be there for us, and then He

wants us to be there for others.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right. It is interesting, isn't it, that the role... that all through Church history the role that testimony has played. It has always been a vital part of the Church in its witness and its conversation. The testimony of those who have been *in extremis*; they have been to the edge of the cliff...

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And God rescued them; and they are... those testimonies are a tremendous source of comfort for us. Again, as we said in the previous segment, this is not just a band-aid just lightly to apply to someone's hurt just to sort of say: Well, you know; sure, you are going through a hard time, honey; but you know, God will pick you up. He always does.

You don't want to speak that lightly or glibly...

DAVE BAST

No, and you know, here is something else: You don't want to give explanations either. I think one of the biggest temptations Christians face when they try to comfort a friend or a family member is to explain it: Well, this is what God is doing. This is why God is... No; stay away from explanations. Just be there with your presence; but then ultimately, those who have been through the wringer and have emerged, to testify to: Yes, I found God there. Yes, God came. Somehow I was given strength that I didn't understand. I had a peace that I couldn't explain. That is what provides comfort to others.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right. So that what happens is, you don't testify to somebody who is in pain; you don't even preach to them, *per se*; but rather, you testify with them and you bring your own authentic witness to bear, and stand with them until that day, which you hope and pray will come. You stand with them until that time when God intervenes in their life, too. For a couple of thousand years in the Church that kind of testimony has kept Gospel hope alive. Paul knew it in II Corinthians 1, and we can still know it today.

DAVE BAST

Well, thanks for joining our Groundwork conversation. I am Dave Bast, with Scott Hoezee, and we would like to know how we can help you continue digging deeper into scripture. So visit groundworkonline.com to tell us what passages you would like to dig into next on Groundwork.

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