Wednesday Class Notes

Father of Mercies & God of All Comfort

2 Corinthians 1:3-11 · English Standard Version

Second Corinthians opens with a section that at first appears to be a simple report of recent events. Paul and the Corinthian church were in a strained relationship. The letter is written to mend fences. In this opening, Paul informs them of a life-threatening affliction he had just endured in Asia, an affliction so severe that he despaired of life itself. He does so because friends share such things with one another, and because the sharing itself reinforces the bond. He also writes because the Corinthians themselves are suffering, and the comfort he has received is meant to become comfort for them. Verses 3-7 state the principle: God is the Father of mercies and the God of all comfort, and he comforts us so that we may comfort others. Verses 8-11 supply the proof in Paul's own recent experience. The section is one unit, joined by the language of affliction and the word "for" that opens verse 8.

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2 Corinthians 1:3-11

"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who 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. If we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation; and if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which you experience when you patiently endure the same sufferings that we suffer. Our hope for you is unshaken, for we know that as you share in our sufferings, you will also share in our comfort. For we do not want you to be unaware, brothers, of the affliction we experienced in Asia. For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death. But that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead. He delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us. On him we have set our hope that he will deliver us again. You also must help us by prayer, so that many will give thanks on our behalf for the blessing granted us through the prayers of many."

Why This Section Opens the Letter

Paul begins with this report for three reasons. First, he is informing them of important recent events. When a friend has passed through a situation in which death seemed certain, the first thing he does

is tell those who matter to him. Second, the act of telling reinforces the relationship. The Corinthians and Paul did not always feel like friends. By sharing what he has endured, Paul says in effect that they are important to him, that he wants them to know, and that he wants them to pray. Third, he writes to help them with their own suffering. The comfort he has received is not meant to remain with him. It is meant to become comfort for them.

The Principle and the Proof

Verses 3-7 state the principle. God is the Father of mercies and the God of all comfort. The word is plural, mercies, because the mercies of God meet different needs in different ways. He is not merely the Father of mercy in a single form. He is the Father of mercies, and he is the God of all comfort. Whatever comfort is needed, he has it. He comforts us in all our affliction so that we may comfort those who are in any affliction. The comfort he gives is not meant to stop with the one who receives it. It is meant to be passed on. This is the same pattern God uses with love and with forgiveness. He gives so that what is given can be given again. In the process, the one who receives and then gives becomes more like the God who first gave. Verses 8-11 supply the proof. Paul does not leave the principle abstract. He says, in effect, I know this is true because look what God has just done for me. The two parts belong together. The word "for" that opens verse 8 ties the personal testimony to the principle that precedes it.

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2 Corinthians 1:3-4

"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who 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."

Historical Facts and Eternal Principles

Not everything in the passage applies in the same way. Paul suffered as an apostle for the salvation and growth of the churches. He was delivered from a particular life-threatening peril in Asia. Those are historical facts. Most believers will not suffer in precisely the same way, and God does not promise deliverance from every difficulty. Death will come unless the Lord returns. There will be difficulties from which one is not delivered. The eternal principles remain. Believers will suffer. God will comfort them. The comfort received enables endurance and equips them to help other sufferers. Prayer is essential in difficulty, and gratitude follows deliverance. There are lessons that can be learned only in suffering. These things are true for every generation. The task is to read carefully enough to distinguish the historical details that do not transfer from the principles that always do.

The Kind of Family We Are Called to Be

The passage describes the church as a suffering, encouraging, comforting, comforted, praying, praising, thanking, and loving family. It is God's will that believers suffer, and it is God's will that in their suffering they encourage one another, comfort one another, pray for one another, praise God in and after the suffering, and thank him. The willingness to help should be no different from the willingness one shows toward one's own physical family. When a family member calls in the middle of the night and says they need something, the response is immediate. One does not weigh the cost or the hour. The same response belongs inside the church, because the church is that family. There should be no difference between the readiness one shows to one's own household and the readiness one shows to brothers and sisters in Christ.

Purpose in Affliction and in Comfort

Suffering is not random or meaningless. Paul says that if he is afflicted, it is for their comfort and salvation. The comfort he receives is likewise for their comfort. God does not comfort a believer so that the believer can simply relax and care for himself. He comforts so that the comfort can be passed on. The process is effective. The comfort received works in the patient endurance of the same sufferings. As the sufferings of Christ abound, so the comfort abounds through Christ. There is no measure of affliction for which God lacks the corresponding comfort. He comforts in all affliction, and he comforts abundantly. The one who has received that comfort is then able to say to another who is in the same kind of difficulty, I went through that too, and here is what helped. That is part of how the comfort is passed on.

Paul's Testimony as Proof

In verses 8-11 Paul describes the affliction in Asia in escalating terms. It was an affliction. Then it was an excessive burden. Then it was beyond their strength. Then they despaired of life itself and felt they had received the sentence of death. The purpose was to make them rely not on themselves but on God who raises the dead. God delivered them from that deadly peril, and they set their hope on him for future deliverance. The Corinthians helped by their prayers, so that many would give thanks. The testimony is not a promise that every believer will be delivered from every peril. It is proof that the God who is the Father of mercies and the God of all comfort is able to meet the extremity of need. The common saying that God will not give you more than you can handle is not what this passage teaches. The point is precisely the opposite. They were burdened beyond their strength so that they would rely on God rather than on themselves.

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2 Corinthians 1:9

"Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death. But that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead."

Concluding Thoughts

The opening of Second Corinthians is not merely a personal update. It is a declaration that the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is the Father of mercies and the God of all comfort, and that the comfort he gives is meant to be shared. Historical details of Paul's Asian affliction do not apply in every particular, but the principle does. Believers will suffer. God will comfort them. The comfort will equip them to comfort others. Prayer participates in the work, and gratitude follows. The church is called to be the family in which this happens, responding to one another in difficulty with the same readiness one shows to one's own household. The section ends with the reminder that many give thanks for the blessing granted through the prayers of many.