**Rely on the God of All Comfort**

November 2, 2014

2 Corinthians 1:1-24
Key verse 1:9 “Indeed, in our hearts, we felt the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead.”

While 1 Corinthians is very widely studied, 2 Corinthians is widely neglected. Since this is a very personal letter coming from the heart, it is not easy to understand. St. Paul was anxious to find out how the Corinthians reacted to his letter of 1 Corinthians, especially to chapter 5 concerning the discipline of the sinning member who had his father’s concubine. When Titus came back from Corinth, he brought both good and bad news. The good news was that Corinthians disciplined the sinner, and this discipline resulted in the spiritual recovery. The bad news was that divisions and other problems were still present. Also they never sent the offering to the needy saints at Jerusalem as they had intended to do. Titus also reported that false teachers were active at Corinth, undermining Paul’s authority as a servant of Christ. Paul made a quick visit to Corinth but left rather quickly because some members of the church refused to change and questioned his authority as an apostle of God. (2:1-4) It was a painful visit. Rather than making another visit, he decided to write a letter. Paul felt sorry for the pain he caused. So in this letter, Paul prayed that God of all comfort may comfort them. He also defended his change of plans. This is the background of 2 Corinthians. In this very personal letter, we hear the heartbeat of one who really loved the people of God and gave himself for their welfare.

I. God of all comfort

Look at verse 3. “Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort.” It is very important for us to know that God is the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort in our practical lives. We face many small and big troubles while we are living on earth. Job said, “Man is born to trouble as surely as sparks fly upward” (Job 5:7). To live in this world is a continuation of troubles. Since the Fall, man toils and sweats and labors to get three meals a day. People suffer from broken relationships with others. People suffer from disease, wars, floods, and earthquakes and so on. People suffer most from their sinful desires. When we meet all these troubles and sufferings, we need comfort.

People turn to all sorts of things for comfort. There is so-called comfort food. But they make you fat. Others turn to drugs for comfort, but there is no comfort there. Some husbands want to be comforted by their wives. But the wives seek comfort from their husbands. When they cannot find comfort, they find discomfort through verbal fencing. Many young people want to be comforted by their peers and the members of their community. Often, however, they are hurt instead. People seek someone who can understand them, recognize them, and support them unconditionally. However, human beings cannot really comfort other human beings.

The Greek word for “comfort” is parakaleo, which means “to call alongside of.” The Holy Spirit is called the Paraclete, the Comforter. He is called to our side. When the Lord Jesus promised to send the Holy Spirit, he said, “I will not leave you as orphans.” (John 14:18); “Unless I go away, the Comforter will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you.” (John 16:7) The Holy Spirit is not someone who simply pays a lip service, saying, “Everything will be OK.” He is a helper, a strengthener, an advocate. He is the One who is called to help us and to strengthen us, to relieve the loneliness and the grief and calm the fears.

There is an authentic comfort, and there is a counterfeit one. I don’t like to hear people sigh and say, “God has permitted this to come to me and I accept it,” when in fact they don’t accept it but rebel against it. We need to be honest with God. Tell him how you feel. Tell him you don’t like what is happening to you. He knows all about it anyway. He wants you to talk frankly with him. “Hear, O LORD, and be merciful to me: LORD, be my help.” (Ps. 30:10). That is the cry of the soul that needs the Comforter. Comfort can be genuine or fake. But our God gives the real comfort, not just lip service.

Look at verse 4. “…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.” It is a very wonderful thing that we have a God who can comfort us in all our troubles. It is one thing to have comfort when the sun is shining and with someone patting us on the back. But what we really need is comfort in the time of trouble. We will see that Paul experienced that kind of comfort in his time of trouble. We need the assurance of the presence of God in all the circumstances of life -- in the area of our greatest need, in our loneliness, in the desperate hour of life.

If we try to receive comfort from others we only feel miserable and empty. But when we come to God, God welcomes us and understands us deeply. The compassionate God comforts us. Then we are truly comforted and fully satisfied. Furthermore, we can comfort others who are in trouble. There is a famous story of Dr. Coddington who worked in Korea as a medical missionary very sacrificially. One day his youngest son drowned while swimming. No one could comfort Dr. Coddington. But he went to God, who is the God of all comfort, and overcame his deep sorrow. At the funeral service he sang a hymn and praised God. Then he said, “There is no accident in God.” He comforted those who attended the funeral service.

Look at verses 8-10. “We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about the hardships we suffered in the province of Asia. We were under 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. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead. 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.” Paul here says that he had “the sentence of death” in him. Perhaps he was so ill that I think the doctor told him he would die. There are others who think he is referring to the time the mob tried to kill him in Ephesus. We might paraphrase it as “At that time we were completely overwhelmed; the burden was more than we can bear. In fact, we told ourselves that this was the end.” Have you ever felt that way?

But Paul says that God who raises the dead “delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us.” That is quite wonderful, and it ought to be practical for us today. God permits Christians to suffer. He has a good reason, a very wonderful purpose in it. He intends for it to work out for the good of these believers. He intended for it to serve a good purpose so they can comfort someone else. Only the one who lost a son like Dr. Coddington can comfort those who lost sons. Only the one who suffered depression can comfort those who are suffering from depression. Paul said with great assurance, “He has delivered me from death.” And he can say, “Right at the present, he is delivering me.” And then, without any boasting, he says, “We have set our hope that he will continue to deliver us.” Paul didn’t know that he would, but he believed that he would. Therefore, on the basis of that, Paul could rejoice that God was helping him to preach the gospel.

II. Paul’s defense about his change of plans

In verses 12-24, Paul defends his change of plans. According to verses 15-16, his original plan was to leave Ephesus and go directly to Corinth on his way to Macedonia. On his return from Macedonia, he would visit Corinth again before going on to Judea with their offering. But Paul changed his plan. When he visited Corinth first, it was a painful visit. Some members refused to accept Paul’s rebuke and publicly challenged Paul’s apostleship. Paul did not want another such confrontation. So he cancelled his plan. Then some of his enemies began to criticize Paul as an unreliable man who could not be trusted. They began to doubt Paul’s integrity, and even his apostleship. This could erode their confidence in the gospel message. For the sake of their faith, Paul defended his integrity by explaining why he changed his plan.

The enemies of Paul were saying that he didn’t mean what he said. They accused him of being insincere. Now Paul is telling them that he certainly was sincere. He says that when he says yes, he means yes, and when he says no, he means no. Look at verse 12. “Now this is our boast: Our conscience testifies that we have conducted ourselves in the world, and especially in our relations with you, in the holiness and sincerity that are from God. We have done so not according to worldly wisdom but according to God’s grace.”

Paul made some plans he couldn’t keep. But he was sincere when he made plans. He never made plans which he never intended to keep. Likewise, we should be careful not to make promises we can’t keep. We should never make promises which we don’t intend to keep. We should not make appointments and arrangements lightly in the business world and in our daily lives. We need Christian men and women who will stand by the things that they have said. Verse 18 says, “But as surely as God is faithful, our message to you is not ‘Yes’ and ‘No.’”

All of us have heard promises that were broken. When you hear a person say, “I promise,” take it with a grain of salt. In this life you’ll hear empty promises like, “this will only take a moment of your time;” “I’m not trying to sell you anything;” “this won’t hurt a bit;” or “If I’m elected I will....” As much as we like to keep our promises, sometimes we fail. But all of God’s promises are in Christ and they are rock solid. He says, “Yes! I love you unconditionally - I promise in Christ. Yes! I can forgive all your sins - I promise in Christ. Yes! I have a wonderful plan for your life - I promise in Christ!”

We can stand firm on God’s promises. His promises never fail. How many promises do think God has made? Someone wrote a book entitled, “All the Promises in the Bible,” in which there are 7,457 promises of God found in the Bible! And our text tells us that Jesus is the “yes” to every single promise of God. That’s 7,457 times the Bible says, “Yes!” Because Jesus is the “YES!” to every promise of God, we respond by saying “amen” to the glory of God. “Amen” literally means, “so be it,” or “truly.” At the international summer Bible conference, we hear many people say “Amen” in many different languages: In English, it is Amen (a-i-men); In Chinese, it is A-mun; In Korean, it is A-men; In Russian, it is A-min. It reflects our prayers and hope for God’s promises to be fulfilled.

God’s favorite word is “Yes!” One of the most beautiful words in the human language is the word “yes.” Whenever a young man summons enough courage to ask a young lady to be his bride, there is only one word he wants to hear: “yes!” When you apply for a job, you want to hear, “yes, you’re hired.” I think one of the reasons why “yes” is God’s favorite word is because he loves to hear us say that same word to him. Think about how God used people in the Bible who said “yes” to him. Noah said, “Yes” to build the ark because God told him that he would destroy the earth with the flood even though it was complete nonsense. Abraham said, “Yes” to God’s call even though he did not know where he was going. Then he said, “Yes” when God told him to sacrifice his son, Isaac. When the angel Gabriel came to Mary and told her she had been chosen by God to give birth to the Son of God, she humbly said, “Yes, Lord, may it be to me as you have said.” And when Jesus asked Peter, “Do you love me?” He said, “Yes, Lord.”

When he calls you to salvation, he wants you to say, “Yes, Lord, I will trust you.” When he calls you to discipleship, he wants to hear you say, “Yes, Lord I will follow you.” When God calls you for service, he wants to hear you say, “Yes, Lord I will serve you!” And when we say, “Yes!” to God’s call, I think he says, “Amen!” What is God calling you to do today? Is he calling you to attempt something so great that without his power it is doomed to failure? Don’t be afraid, just say, “Yes, Lord!” His favorite word is: YES! Amen!

Look at verses 21-22. “Now it is God who makes both us and you stand firm in Christ. He anointed us, set his seal of ownership on us, and put his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come.” God has put his Holy Spirit, the Comforter into every believer. He has come into the life of the believer to bring the comfort we need. Do you need power? Do you need joy? Do you need wisdom? Do you need help? These are comforts -- He is the God of all comfort. Let’s rely on him, the God of all comfort.