

# Christian Grace, Encouragement and Prayer

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'Who comforteth us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort them which are in any trouble, by the comfort wherewith we ourselves are comforted of God' (2 Corinthians 1.4).

## The 'Comfort Passage'

Paul will say a good deal about comfort from the fourth verse onwards, but it is essential to know what he means by comfort. The Greek word translated comfort is a very broad term, whereas 'comfort' has become a very narrow one. Who needs comfort? A child who is in pain, or an adult in grief. Comfort soothes; whether it is the great doctrinal comfort we derive from the Bible, or whether simple friendship, comfort soothes and eases. But when Paul speaks of comfort, as the passage will show, he refers mainly to encouragement. Consolation is certainly included, but most of all, encouragement. Every time we read of comfort in this passage, encouragement is the golden word to remember.

Speaking about himself and Timothy, Paul testifies to God's comfort 'in all our tribulation'. Tribulations are literally pressures, but how can we be sure that comfort here means encouragement? Paul tells us (in verse 5) that these troubles are 'the sufferings of Christ' that abound in us. From this we learn what he is talking about, because the pressures that were upon Christ were opposition, enmity and persecution, and these were also the pressures upon Paul and his fellow preachers. Their tribulations, troubles and sufferings in this passage are chiefly those things which came because of their work for Christ.

The Lord, however, saw them through by giving them great encouragements in answer to their prayers. He intervened in their difficulties, delivered them, and provided for them, and Paul wants the Corinthians to experience the same blessings. He wants them to look for similar encouragements in their evangelistic difficulties.

Of course it is true that God will comfort us with divine sympathy and assurance in all kinds of trouble, and we will speak of these comforts to other believers so that they in turn look to God for help. But the primary application of these verses is to Christian workers under serious opposition, perhaps painful persecution like that of the apostle.

## Today's pressures

The non-violent hostility and antagonism that we have in our land today will similarly be balanced, in answer to prayer, by many deliverances, provisions and triumphs of grace. We would love to be able to knock the doors with the result that the people came readily out to the services. We would love to be able to speak through the public media, and to challenge the atheism of the day. But there are pressures against us. We are shut out, hemmed in, pushed back, belittled and scorned.

This may be so, says the apostle to us, but I want to tell you how the Lord has encouraged us, because he will similarly encourage you. This is the primary meaning of his words – 'who comforteth us [encourageth us]...that we may be able to comfort them which are in any trouble, by the comfort wherewith we ourselves are comforted of God.'

## Equal encouragements

Remarkably, Paul goes further, saying that the encouragement will be commensurate with the tribulations. Note his words – 'For as the sufferings of Christ abound in us, so our consolation [encouragement]

also aboundeth by Christ.' For every pressure against us for Christ's sake, there will be an encouragement to help us, and this is one of God's marvellous promises to his witnessing people.

What are the encouragements? Clearly, answered prayer, and Gospel success, together with inner assurance, deliverances and provisions. When the lost are won to Christ, and rebels return, we have all the comfort or encouragement we could desire to balance the pressures and the difficulties.

Consider the scale of the encouragements implicit in Paul's words: 'For as the sufferings of Christ abound in us, so our consolation also aboundeth by Christ.' These 'abounding' words are strong words in the Greek. If the pressures are numerous and heavy, so the encouragements will super-abound as we serve the Lord.

So what are these encouragements? An example will be given by Paul (from verse 8), but, as we have noted, they are deliverances, experiences of strength and assurance, great provisions, and, of course, spiritual fruit, all in answer to prayer. Paul is teaching the golden chain of blessing – pressures, prayer, encouragement, thanksgiving.

We accept the pressures and the sufferings, turn to the Lord in prayer, consequently receive the encouragement, and then give thanks and praise to God. Paul passed this procedure to his converts, and they in turn passed it on, and we are still proving it today.

### **'The Shining Hospital'**

Let me give an example of this from around 1959. I was twenty at the time, engaged in National Service, and in London on leave for a few days. I went to a missionary meeting held by a church that gave support to two wonderful ladies who only seven years previously had set up the Christian hospital and mission known as 'the Shining Hospital' in Pokhara, Nepal. I dare say many readers know the remarkable story.

The speaker at the meeting was Dr Lily O'Hanlon who with Miss Hilda Steele had founded the hospital. Of course by this time they were middle-aged, but they had met in the 1930s soon after Dr O'Hanlon qualified in medicine, Hilda having just trained for missionary service. They both felt very strongly that there ought to be a mission hospital in this particular part of Nepal. There were other hospitals in the land, but no Christian mission or hospital, and the government of the time did its utmost to clamp down on Christianity, keeping out all Westerners, apart from ambassadors and other special people.

### **Long patience**

These ladies tried hard to get into Nepal for sixteen years, labouring for the Lord in North India, praying and hoping that one day they would be able to cross the border.

After World War II, their hopes rose when the British ambassador in Katmandu invited them to have a holiday with him, with an eye to securing admission for them. Hopes were raised only to be dashed, and this happened several times over as permission was given only to be rescinded. But the ladies prayed on, until eventually in 1952 they were allowed to enter.

They trekked on foot all the way to Pokhara to begin their longed-for labour for the Lord. It became one of those glorious missionary stories of how the Lord remarkably provided even building materials for the project, notably the roofing for the buildings. Unexpectedly, local people knew about metal sheets buried in wartime by the British army to prevent them falling into the wrong hands. The ground was duly dug, and these corrugated aluminium or galvanised iron sheets were recovered, soon forming the gleaming roofs, which led to the well-known name, the Shining Hospital.

Yet another of countless testimonies to the overruling of God passed into the annals of the Christian church, recording how pressures (when all doors were shut, and everything seemed impossible) led to prayer, and this led in God's time to mighty encouragement and thanksgiving.

This was the story I heard from the intrepid missionary doctor in 1959, and this is how it affected me (along with similar testimonies) three or four years later, when my wife and I were pioneering a church in Borehamwood, north of London. We needed a site, and we had a similar problem.

### **No hope**

The London County Council owned everything. They had bought every square inch of land in that Hertfordshire district to build Borehamwood as a London overspill town, and they were adamant that there would be no land for a pioneer church. The door was slammed shut.

Now for ourselves, I freely admit, we would have said, 'Well, that's it. Officialdom has ruled that it cannot be done.' Yet we tried again, and again. What made us persist? What made us continue to knock on that firmly closed door, and to pray for change? The answer is, we had our heads full of shining hospitals. We had heard so many accounts of great encouragements experienced by Christians under pressure, all the way down from the apostle Paul. We were so deeply influenced by this powerful tradition of proving the Lord (pressures, prayer, encouragement, and thanksgiving) that we followed the same policy.

We were not naturally insistent, or characterised by unrealistic expectations. We were not filled with overwhelming self-confidence that we could take on the then mighty London County Council. But we were trained by all that we had heard to believe that the Lord is all-powerful. As events unfolded, by remarkable overruling, circumstances dramatically changed, and in due course a very large site, and then a building were secured.

Look again at the words of Paul (verse 4), speaking of God – 'who comforteth [encourageth] us in all our tribulation [pressures], that we may be able to comfort them which are in any trouble, by the comfort wherewith we ourselves are comforted of God.' As soon as we see that 'comfort' applies not only to our personal griefs, but more directly to the encouragements that come to us in the Lord's service, then we understand that Paul is saying that he passes on the principle to other labourers for Christ – pressures, prayer, encouragement, thanksgiving.

### **Missing out**

I am sometimes concerned about fine young Christians in the Tabernacle on this matter. If the Lord saves you in a large church, where the bills all seem to be paid, and everything seems to be accomplished by willing hands, it could happen that you miss out on proving the Lord by this recurring cycle of pressures, prayer, encouragement and thanksgiving. You may need to be inspired and stimulated by the apostle's experience and by the numerous accounts of answered prayer from the annals of Christian blessing.

Once these are in your heart, you have this often repeated experience yourselves. You witness, and get no hearing. You join in the contact or visitation work, and nothing happens. You staff the Saturday market bookstall, but no one comes to church as a result. You knock the doors in the community only to be rebuffed. Then you realise that personal charm, fluency or persuasiveness cannot accomplish anything. You find everyone against you in your place of work or study, and you feel really isolated, rejected and under pressure.

But now you remember Paul and all his troubles, and how, by prayer and trust, he was able to turn the Gentile world upside down. You remember also shining hospitals of many kinds in the records

of missionary endeavour, and then you call on the Lord with all your heart. Inevitably, in due time, blessing, provision and victory comes. This is 'pressures, prayer, encouragement, thanksgiving' in action, and how much we must learn it, prove it and hold to it. This is a life of faith, and the Lord will build that faith in our hearts by this procedure.

Be great readers, especially of reformers and pioneer missionaries, and be inspired by the policy of faith. We never say, 'I can do nothing, therefore I will do nothing,' expecting the Lord to bring people into the kingdom by entirely miraculous means.

We willingly accept our labour for him, but we carry it out with a profound sense of inability and emptiness, accepting that circumstances will heap themselves against us. But encouragements will eventually be given, and our hearts will rejoice before the Lord. We have this treasure, Paul will shortly say, in earthen vessels, that is in simple, useless pots, so that the power may be clearly seen to be God's and not ours.

The apostle gives a harrowing example of a near-fatal trial suffered by himself and Timothy shortly before writing *2 Corinthians*. The terrible tribulation led to prayer, and from prayer came a spectacular deliverance, leading to thanksgiving. He then asks the Corinthians to pray with him for future deliverances in the service of Christ, the cycle of faith appearing clearly in his words:

'Ye also helping together by prayer for us, that for the gift bestowed upon us [of deliverance] by the means of many persons [praying] thanks may be given by many on our behalf' (verse 11).

Young men and women, never allow the devil to lull you into a sense of comfort, isolated from all concerns, because the congregation is large and the bills are paid. Share in every pressure that comes upon a Gospel-proclaiming congregation. Feel along with others our corporate inadequacy and need, calling upon the Lord, experiencing his mighty provisions, and then swelling the praise and thanksgiving due to his name. This process is an ever-recurring cycle of wonder and adventure in the lives of the servants of Jesus Christ.

### **The Corinthian Church Nothing Like as Bad as Claimed**

*2 Corinthians* is a strikingly beautiful letter, indeed some say it is the most moving of Paul's letters, because while it contains strictures and warnings, it is deeply feelingful. Warmth and joy combine with deep concern for the people, providing an insight into the heart of the apostle, and the bond that he had with those converted through his preaching.

We read about the founding of the Corinthian church in Acts 18. Paul arrived there alone from Athens in AD 50, his fellow preachers following later. He met a Jew named Aquila, with his wife Priscilla, who had recently been expelled from Rome when Claudius purged the city of Jews in AD 49.

Luke says of Paul – 'because he was of the same craft, he abode with them, and wrought: for by their occupation they were tentmakers.' It is well known that all Jewish people, including intellectuals, were taught a trade, so that whatever life inflicted upon them, they would be able to maintain themselves.

Immediately on arrival in Corinth Paul began to interact with the Jews in the synagogue, persuading them that Jesus Christ was the Messiah. His missionary work was intensified when Silas and Timothy arrived, but before long he was forced to stop synagogue witness because Jews vehemently opposed him. From that time the evangelists concentrated all their attention on Gentiles.

It is clear that over a period of 18 months there was considerable fruit, a large congregation being built up before Paul went on to Ephesus, some 45 miles away.

## **A much-maligned church**

It has become fashionable among evangelical commentators today to denigrate the Corinthian church as carnal, divisive, heretical and immoral. All these things, it is said, were rampant in the fellowship. It is also claimed that Paul's relationship with them was extremely strained on account of their severe criticism of him.

We are sure that this is an entirely unreasonable picture of the church at Corinth, whose deficiencies are exaggerated out of all proportion. If there were any basis for this negative view, Paul would not have made the highly complimentary statement of *1 Corinthians 1.4-7*:—

‘I thank my God always on your behalf, for the grace of God which is given you by Jesus Christ; that in every thing ye are enriched by him, in all utterance, and in all knowledge; even as the testimony of Christ was confirmed in you: so that ye come behind in no gift; waiting for the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.’

There are also other high commendations of the Corinthian fellowship by the apostle.

Although there were troubles in the congregation, these should not be dramatically exaggerated. Some writers seize hold of every warning or remonstrance of Paul to build this absurd picture of an utterly disorderly people. If a handful of Corinthian church members misbehave, they see it as the majority. If one or two are immoral, they assume most of them are. If they make the sad and childish mistake of dividing over their preferences for preachers, they are seen as being at war with each other. If false doctrine comes in – even on the fringe of the fellowship – they are all viewed as apostate. If any take legal action against a fellow church member, it is assumed that all do the same.

Modern writers fail to notice how readily and tearfully the Corinthians repent of wrong, and how eagerly they submit their queries to the apostle for decisive settling. This was a wonderful church, but even such a congregation needed elements of correction.

The church imagined by weak, modern commentators was so bad that it has nothing to teach us today. We may well say to ourselves, ‘We are nothing like as bad as they were.’ The real Corinthian congregation was composed of dear, sincere souls, but the elements of wrong sound a powerful warning to sincere churches in every age.

## **The lost Corinthian letter**

Interestingly, there is a lost letter of Paul to the Corinthians referred to in *1 Corinthians 5.9* where the apostle says – ‘I wrote to you before’ not to do such and such a thing. Some people think that if this letter could be found it would have to be added to the Bible, but the inspired Word of God has been fully delivered to us. The lost letter was clearly never intended by God to be part of the Bible. Paul had written them a letter as any teacher would, and no doubt it was sound and true, but it did not happen to be one of his inspired letters to be preserved for all time. If it had been, then we may be sure that it would have been preserved by the power of God and included among the inspired books.

If this letter were to be found in a pot in some ancient cave, we would all be very excited and interested, but we would be wrong to add it to the Bible.

Corinth was a prosperous trade centre with a great history. With so much wealth there were many temptations for Christians, especially temptations to idolatry and worldliness.

Corinth was also the site of the ancient Isthmian games, more famous in those days than the Olympic

games, not least because they were held every two years. These attracted vast numbers of visitors.

To the fervent, embattled Christian congregation in this famous city, Paul teaches – among many other themes – the great principle of comfort or encouragement when in trouble.