

How God Comforts People in Pain

Rich Nathan
September 1 & 2, 2018
When Life is Unfair
2 Corinthians 1:1-11

One of my dearest friends in the world has a rare type of cancer – cancer of the blood vessel lining – that has a very low rate of cure. David has been through multiple brutal rounds of chemo that, among other horrific side effects, left him with extremely painful sores down his throat, covering the inside of his mouth. His body was in so much pain that he couldn't sleep for weeks. He lost 30 pounds and is so pale and thin that he looks like a Holocaust survivor. In fact, his body has hurt so much that he had to take morphine just to make it through the day. David is on my heart all the time, and whenever I pray I lift him before the love of God.

A couple of weeks ago, I talked with him on the phone and he told me in passing that well-meaning Christians have said the dumbest things to him in his suffering. I was curious, and I asked, "Like what? Do you remember some of the dumb things?"

He said, "Absolutely, I remember!"

One person said,

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Isn't it great that we have the victory?

Another person, hearing of David's suffering, said to him,

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Well, Brother, rejoice in the Lord always!

Another person, who David hadn't seen in 15 years, insisted on driving to see him. And then spent three hours talking about their own accomplishments and success. David, who was in great pain trying to be cordial to this guy who was blathering on and on, said, "I have no idea why he took the time to visit. It was so strange listening to him brag about his life."

Have you ever been in a really low place and had someone say something to you that was incredibly unhelpful or insensitive? We've all done it. We feel the need to comfort others and sometimes we end up saying something really stupid.

How about some of these winners?

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It could be worse. Imagine if you broke both legs!

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Well, God must have wanted your son [daughter, husband, wife, loved one], that's why he took them to heaven so early.

Yes, God took your child because he had important work for them in heaven. Of course, there's nothing in the Bible or in the words of Jesus that would suggest that's the reason somebody died prematurely.

How about this winner?

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It's been a month and you're not over it yet? Maybe you're not grieving right!

As if there's a time limit on grief and you have gone beyond the allotted time.

When my Dad died, a number of well-meaning people told me they knew exactly how I felt.

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I know exactly how you feel. I lost my dog and it was really, really hard!

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I know exactly how you feel. Let me tell you about my loss.

And then they proceeded to talk on and on about themselves. The truth is, no one other than God knows exactly how we feel. As Proverbs 14:10 says,

Slide Proverbs 14:10

¹⁰ Each heart knows its own bitterness,
and no one else can share its joy.

In other words, each of us suffers and grieves in our own way. Each of us has unique and entirely different relationships with our parents, our spouses, our children, our brothers and sisters.

We've been doing a series over the last month called "When Life is Unfair". It's all about those times in life when we're hurting, when we or a loved one is knocked down and is suffering. Christians and non-Christians alike suffer. But how do we followers of Jesus

not lose our faith when we suffer? That's what this series is all about. How do we hold on to our faith in God who loves us when our circumstances are anything but kind or loving.

One way to continue to believe, continue to hope, continue to obey God even when we hurt is our experience of God's comfort. Unlike a lot of well-meaning human attempts at comfort, God's comfort is not inept. God's comfort is not clumsy or bumbling. And it doesn't leave us feeling worse afterwards. God's comfort hits the mark.

I want to talk about God's comfort today in a message I've titled, "How God Comforts People in Pain".

Slide 2 Corinthians 1:3-11

³ Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, ⁴ who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God. ⁵ For just as we share abundantly in the sufferings of Christ, so also our comfort abounds through Christ.

⁶ 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. ⁷ 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.

⁸ 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. ⁹ Indeed, 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. ¹⁰ He 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, ¹¹ as 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.

The word comfort is found 10 times in this short passage. The incredible number of times that comfort or comforting that shows up in this brief text is really striking in view of the fact that this word is found only 31 times in the entire New Testament, 25 times in the writing of Paul, 17 times in 2 Corinthians and 10 times in this short introduction.

One New Testament scholar put it this way:

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If Paul is the apostle of comfort within the New Testament, then 2 Corinthians is the letter of comfort, with 2 Corinthians 1:3-7 being the paragraph of comfort.

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What does God's comfort mean?

The word “comfort” sometimes suggests to us an easy life, a no-stress, hassle-free life. We’d say, “Grandpa left us with so much money that we always had enough to live in comfort.” We’re protected by our money from the typical ups and downs and stresses and worries that people without money have to suffer. The money could pay our way out of any problem. But the Bible does not, and certainly the Apostle Paul does not, promise us an easy, no-stress, hassle-free life. What it does do is promise us God’s comfort when we suffer.

The New Testament does not promise that if you’re obedient to the Lord, you are in some bubble of protection and life will always be fair. The New Testament instead speaks about affliction or troubles 45 times, but it’s mentioned by Paul more than any other writer. Afflictions or troubles are mentioned more in 2 Corinthians than any other book and troubles or afflictions are mentioned more often in this passage than anywhere else.

Here’s what we read:

Slide 2 Corinthians 1:4

⁴ who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God.

Slide 2 Corinthians 1:6

⁶ 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.

That word distressed in the original Greek is the same word that we use for afflicted or troubled.

Slide 2 Corinthians 1:8

⁸ 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.

Finally, suffering is mentioned three times in this passage.

Slide 2 Corinthians 1:5-7

⁵ For just as we share abundantly in the sufferings of Christ, so also our comfort abounds through Christ. ⁶ 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. ⁷ 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.

Seven times Paul tells followers of Jesus to expect troubles, expect affliction, expect that you will experience difficulty and suffering. Now, I know that everything in the modern world tells us that life ought to be easy and pain-free, sickness free, heartbreak free, disappointment free, trial free. If you experience a problem, just whip out your Visa and buy a whole new wardrobe when your baggage is lost in your around the world trip.

What does God's comfort mean in the midst of our trials and pain? Again, it does not mean, it cannot mean that God's comfort promises any of us an easy life or what we would call "a comfortable life". Nowhere does the Bible promise us an easy life. God's comfort may come by providing us with relief, by easing our grief or easing our pain and distress.

We can experience relief from suffering by someone putting an arm around our shoulder, giving us a hug, saying "I love you", just taking some Tylenol. But that's not comfort that God promises. I'm going to read to you a really helpful excerpt from an article by David Powlison in the *Journal of Biblical Counseling*. Here's what Dr. Powlison wrote:

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God's comfort is not a passive experience and it does not remove painful struggle. His comfort transforms the meaning of what is hard, and creates a different kind of struggle as he gives you purpose, strengthens trust, energizes caring, and teaches wisdom. God's comfort is unusual. He doesn't make life easy. He doesn't take struggle and hardship away. He even adds the pain of caring. But our Father's comfort actively strengthens you in the midst of weakness, pain, and need – so you can take heart and take action. We have very good reasons for feeling vulnerable and overwhelmed. But God's forms of comfort give better reasons to live with courage, humility, and purpose. "The Father of mercies and God of all comfort" heartens us when we feel disheartened. He encourages us so we become able to encourage others. To be truly comforted deepens your faith, anchors your hope, nourishes your love, and elicits your joy.

God strengthens us in the midst of our suffering. He doesn't necessarily take away our suffering. God's comfort encourages us when we are discouraged. He empowers us when we feel weak and ready to throw in the towel. He gives us hope when we're hopeless.

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How does God's comfort come?

How exactly does God's comfort work?

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We are comforted by who God is

Slide 2 Corinthians 1:3

³ Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort,

Society has become so soaked with a Christian view of God that these words don't shock us. Remember that the Apostle Paul was writing this letter mostly to Gentiles who were living in ancient Greece. Understand that the gods that the Greeks worshiped were completely indifferent to humans and their pain and suffering. To be a god in ancient Greece meant that you were above the cares and the woes of flesh and blood humans. You were unmoved by people's tears.

Greek philosophers taught that God always remained emotionally detached from this world. So phrases like "the Father of Compassion" and "the God of all comfort" must hit these readers in ancient Greece like a bomb. What do you mean God is a Father of Compassion and God of all comfort? What kind of God are we talking about here? A God who cares about what you and I feel? A God who is emotionally affected by our pain and suffering?

But the Bible continually asserts from beginning to end that the Triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, is in his essence, a tender, merciful comforter. Here in verse 3, God the Father is a comforter – he's the "God of all comfort". And as we follow the life of Jesus, the Son, through the gospels we find that Jesus is a comforter. We frequently read in the gospels verses like this:

Slide Matthew 14:14

¹⁴ When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them and healed their sick.

I love the tender scene in Luke 7 when Jesus encounters a widow who lost her only son. Here's what Jesus says:

Slide Luke 7:13

¹³ When the Lord saw her, his heart went out to her and he said, "Don't cry."

He doesn't say, "Woman, you lost your son, rejoice in the Lord always!" He doesn't say, "Isn't it great we have the victory?"

Of course, the Holy Spirit is a comforter. Here's what we read:

Slide John 14:16

¹⁶ And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another advocate to help you and be with you forever—

The word advocate is a translation of the Greek word “paraclete”. Paraclete is a very tough word for translators. Sometimes they translate paraclete as counselor, sometimes as helper or friend, but sometimes as comforter.

When the Triune God comes to a person in pain, he comes as a comforter. We’re comforted by who God is.

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We are comforted by what God says.

Has God ever spoken a personal word to you? A word that came into your heart like an arrow, communicating to you that your Father in Heaven loves you. The Holy Spirit often speaks through the written word of God that we call the Bible – a personal word to us. As we read the scripture, a promise will come alive.

Slide Jeremiah 29:11

¹¹ For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the LORD, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.

Those words become for you not just letters on a page, but living and active. That’s the Lord’s personal word of invitation to you. One of my dear friends named Ali is a church planter in Sudan. He became a follower of Jesus from a Muslim background as he read through the gospels the first time. He came upon the invitation of Jesus in

Slide Matthew 11:28

²⁸ “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.

It was a personal word. Energized by the Holy Spirit Jesus’ words entered Ali’s heart like an arrow. And before you read God’s Word found in scripture, pray and say, “Lord, speak a personal word to me as I meditate and think about this passage. Speak. Your servant is listening.”

How does God’s comfort come to us?

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- We are comforted by who God is
- We are comforted by what God says

Slide

We are comforted by God working through others

Slide 2 Corinthians 1:10-11

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.

God uses other people to bring us his comfort. He uses other people's prayers. He uses other people's words. He uses other people's actions. He throws us a lifeline through other people.

How about instead of those kinds of clumsy statements, how about someone shares with us their personal pain or grief, we simply say

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My heart breaks for you.

Or, how about

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I love you, dear friend.

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I will pray for you.

Or how about

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I'm so sad to hear about your loss.

How about not trying to be the answer man or woman by trying to explain away someone else's suffering or what God is up to? How about just putting an arm around someone's shoulder and being there for them? Instead of "Call me if you need help," (which no one will ever do), how about just sending someone cash anonymously who's going through a financial crisis or sending them a gift card to their favorite restaurant or grocery gift card or just showing up and helping?

I want to read to you a brief testimony of God using people to comfort someone in our church family, Missy McPeck.

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After twenty years of marriage my husband was diagnosed with Multiple Myeloma and given three to five years to live. We were devastated. We had three girls and were

very active in youth ministry at Vineyard Columbus. In just a few months we had to quit everything and focus totally on my husband's health. Our lives changed to doctor's appointments, chemo treatments, surgeries for broken bones, and radiation treatments. The community of Vineyard Columbus and the Vineyard Columbus staff members came up around us in our desperate time of need. There were no requests for help because we were in a state of chaos we did not even know what we needed. Before we knew it we had people from our church dropping off food, cutting grass, paying for services to help care for my husband while I worked, etc. A group from Vineyard Columbus even paid for and constructed a bedroom and handicap accessible bathroom to keep my husband safe. The body of Christ and our family rallied around us and my family is eternally grateful. My husband went to be with Jesus almost a year ago now (living over ten years with after diagnosis, thank you Jesus) but the love and kindness we were shown by Vineyard Columbus and our family will never be forgotten.

God comforts us through others.

Brothers and sisters, we have so much resource here at Vineyard through our Support for Life ministry to help you or someone you care about who needs to experience God's healing and God's help, God's support, God's comfort and God's deliverance in a very practical way. If you want to sit down with a trained individual who can offer you support and wisdom during a difficult season, we have Life Support Mentoring leaders who will meet with you 8-10 times – and it's totally free. All you need to do is write to Support for Life and they'll set that up.

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Vineyardcolumbus.org/care

Every Friday evening at Cooper Road at 7:00pm we have a Celebrate Recovery meeting. Everyone is welcome. Whatever your emotional or spiritual need is, come to that one meeting on Friday night and we'll help you.

We have "open prayer" every Saturday morning at Cooper Road from 9:00-11:00am. You say, "I don't want a lot of counseling, I just want some prayer." Just come and we'll pray for you. You don't need to be a member of the church.

Following this service, today at every campus there will be a representative from Support for Life ministry in the lobby to give you information for you or a loved one. Vineyard wants to be an instrument of comfort to you.

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- We are comforted by who God is
- We are comforted by what God says
- We are comforted by God working through others

Finally,

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We are comforted by God as we comfort others

Slide 2 Corinthians 1:3-4

³ Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, ⁴ who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God.

You know, God's comfort isn't meant to terminate on us. Rather, as we are comforted, we become the channels, the pipe through which God's comfort flows to other people. I want to close today by sharing with you a couple of stories.

Let me tell you a story about a woman in Chicago named Brenda Myers-Powell.

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Picture of Brenda (by herself)

Brenda grew up on the west side of Chicago. Her mother died when Brenda was six months old. Her mom was only 16. She never learned what Mom died from. Brenda went to live with her grandmother. Her grandmother was sweet, but had a drinking problem. She'd bring home men to drink with. After Grandma passed out, these men would sexually abuse Brenda. The abuse began when Brenda was four years old. Grandma didn't know anything about it.

Grandma worked as a domestic – cleaning people's houses – so Brenda was a latchkey kid and men would follow her home and molest her in her home as she returned from kindergarten and elementary school.

At the age of 14, Brenda already had two children – little girls. Her grandmother said she needed to bring money home to care for these babies because there was no food in the house. So Brenda decided to do what a number of women in the neighborhood did. She prostituted herself at age 14. She came home with \$400 after one evening. Grandma didn't ask her where she got the money from. She was just happy to get the money.

Brenda went out again, made some money and brought it back to Grandma. The third time Brenda went out on the street, two pimps approached her and said she couldn't do this without being represented by them. They beat her and threw her in the trunk of a car, drove out to a field and raped her. Brenda was broken by these men and became a prostitute for 25 years.

When she was nearly 40 years old, a customer threw her out of a moving car. Her dress got caught in the door and she was dragged six blocks. She went to the hospital beaten and battered from being dragged. While she was at the hospital, she heard the doctors and nurses laughing about her condition. They called over a police officer. He looked in and said, "Oh, I know her. She's just a hooker. She probably beat some guy and took his money and she got what was coming to her."

That evening, Brenda prayed and she said, "God, nobody in the world cares about me. Do you care about me?" A few days after that prayer, Brenda met a woman who ran a home for women who wanted to get out of prostitution. She stayed in this home and healed up, learning about God. She was there for two years.

Now, 20 years later, God uses Brenda to rescue and bring healing to girls and women...

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Picture of Brenda with woman

...in a ministry she called "Dream Catchers". Brenda goes in to local schools and talks to girls about sexual abuse and how they can find help. She rescues prostitutes.

We are comforted by God as we comfort others. God uses our healed pain to help someone else and we ourselves then are even more strengthened.

Let me finish with this story from our own congregation. This is from a woman named Angie.

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My parents divorced when I was a teenager, and it wasn't long after that I first started drinking. I was immediately addicted to the euphoric feeling and the escape that it provided. I continued to drink throughout college and by the time I graduated I was buying a case of beer a day and using marijuana to supplement my high. My addiction cost me a job and got me arrested for OMVI, yet I continued to drink.

A co-worker brought me to Vineyard on Christmas Eve in 2001. I sensed the peace of the Holy Spirit, so I kept coming back. I went most Sundays and paid my tithes, but I was a Christian with a drinking problem. I loved Jesus, but alcohol was my idol. In 2014 I took a nasty fall (while drunk of course) and severely injured my right ankle. I had surgery and therapy, yet I still could not walk on my own. I attended a healing conference and went forward for prayer. A lady I had never met before laid hands on my ankle and prayed for healing. I felt a warmth all over and a bright light within. I walked out of Vineyard that night with my crutches over my head and praising God. I had been healed! When I got home, I fixed a cocktail to celebrate my healing (Really!). As I sat down to drink it, I felt a heavy conviction. How could I continue to abuse and

poison my body when God had touched me and healed me? I had read about Celebrate Recovery in the Mix magazine and got the courage to attend my first meeting. I was scared and sat in the back, but the leaders made me feel welcomed, and even more importantly didn't make me feel judged. On December 5th, 2014, I went forward and accepted the 24 hour blue surrender chip. When I looked at the gold lettering that said, "Welcome Home-His Grace is Enough", I started to sob. Grasping that chip tight in my hand, I felt like a Child of God. I felt forgiven and loved, but most of all I felt free. Since that day, my life has been radically changed. I started a home group Bible study (thanks to the Good Life campaign) and even got my former party pals to come! I completed Vineyard's leadership training and became a Celebrate Recovery women's group leader. I currently serve as one of the coaches for the CR ministry. I've been on 3 mission trips and in October I am co-leading a trip to Palestine. Starting in September, I'll be co-leading a CR step study group. Most importantly, I'm not a Christian with a drinking problem anymore. Now I'm a Christian with a recovery story!

This week, I received about a dozen stories like Angie's from individuals in our own church family who have been comforted and healed and set free by our Support for Life ministries and are now going about helping others. I have heard from men who had long-standing sexual addictions and were set free by one of our groups – it's called 180. I heard from women who had long-standing sexual addictions and now are set free through our Integrity for Women group.

I heard from men and women who were addicted to alcohol, to drugs, and they were set free. I heard from people who lost a loved one who found support here through our Grief Share group. The people who wrote me, they tell me now they have become God's channel for healing and comfort to others.

Whatever you're going through, God's not finished with you. He's still there for you. He loves you. He will strengthen you. He will deliver you. He will use you to be a blessing to others. Let's pray.

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- I. What does God's comfort mean?
- II. How does God's comfort come?
 - A. We are comforted by who God is
 - B. We are comforted by what God says
 - C. We are comforted by God working through others
 - D. We are comforted by God as we comfort others