The Mark of a Christian

2 Corinthians

1:3-11; 7:5-16

Comforted By God

“But God, . . . comforted us by the coming of Titus” (7:6).

One of the great themes throughout the Bible is the good news that Jesus offers us release from the burdens of life. The New Testament seems to resound with the message that Christians have found “rest for their souls” (cf. Matthew 11:28-50); Those who “tie up heavy loads” (cf. Matthew 23:4) which no one can bear are the legalists who make demands no one can keep. Others are under the oppressive weight of slavery to their impulses, but the Christian has been liberated from his worst instincts. This lifting of the burden is the good news of Christianity.

Another side of the story often comes to the Christian as a surprise. Active discipleship can also be extremely burdensome. From my earliest memory, I recall being present when many burdens of church life were being discussed. One tense moment was followed by another. Many of those moments resulted in disappointing consequences. In other instances, there were the burdens of nurturing those whose commitment never seemed to grow. I have spoken to many active Christians who expressed a disappointment and anguish that a heavy weight was pressing on them.

We often exaggerate the burdens when we picture ourselves as holding up the church as the Greeks used to picture Atlas holding up the world. We never stand alone in holding up the church, even if we think we do. But church life does include heavy burdens. One of the most frustrating aspects is that they offer no relief. Problems come from every side, often with little warning. They may include tensions over honest differences of opinion. They may involve assisting in the personal problems of dear friends. The experiences leave us exhausted, knowing that we cannot simply walk away. Thus, the burdens of church life are often increased because we see no end to our struggle and no retirement from service. This is often disillusioning to those who expect the Christian life to be a release from burdens.

According to 2 Corinthians, the true disciple is not disillusioned by the disappointments of service. He understands that these burdens are a part of the total “job description” of the servant of Christ. When Paul was challenged to prove that he was “of Christ” (10:7), or “a Christian,” he told of his labors. He experienced “no rest” for his spirit (2:13); a troublesome church had given him sleepless nights. He experienced grief caused by rebellious people (2:1-4). In addition, he experienced the problem of going on in the presence of ill health (12:7), exhaustion, and persecution. In one particularly vivid statement, Paul tells of persecution so severe that he was “burdened excessively, beyond our strength” and “despaired even of life” (1:8). It was as if a weight were about to crush him. Paul’s ministry
had brought nothing but burdens. No end to the struggle seemed to be in view.

The opening section of 2 Corinthians (1:3-11) is filled with this theme. Paul customarily opens his letters with a thanksgiving which includes references to the major subjects of the book (cf. Romans 1:8-17; 1 Corinthians 1:4). The “thanksgiving” section of 2 Corinthians refers to affliction, a theme which is pursued throughout the book (1:4, 6, 8; 2:4; 4:17; 6:4; 7:4; 8:2, 13). A reference to the sufferings of Christians is also made (1:5, 6). In addition, he mentions a time when he thought that he had received the “sentence of death” (1:9). We do not know any details about this incident, for Paul includes it here only to remind us of the burdens involved in being Christ’s servant. He sets the tone of the Epistles by drawing our attention to the various burdens of the Christian life.

Why must the service to Christ be “crushing”? In 1:5, Paul seems to assume that his readers understand. “For as we share abundantly in Christ’s sufferings” suggests a basic fact about the Christian life: Jesus did not “bear the cross alone.” The NEB renders the verse appropriately: “As Christ’s cup of sufferings overflows, and we suffer with him. . . .” The “sufferings of Christ” did not end with the crucifixion. They extended into the life of His people. Jesus had once told His disciples that they would have to “take up the cross” in order to follow Him (Mark 8:34). On numerous occasions, Paul speaks in graphic terms of the “fellowship” (or “participation”) in Christ’s sufferings (Philippians 3:10). To the Galatians, he wrote, “. . . I bear on my body the brandmarks of Jesus” (Galatians 6:17). To the Colossians, he wrote, “. . . filling up that which is lacking in Christ’s afflictions” (Colossians 1:24). The service to Christ is burdensome, therefore, because Christ’s sufferings continue in the church. When we are burdened by the pain of others, we are participating in the suffering which Christ began.

Those of us who find the burdens of church life disillusioning can find a healthy realism in Paul’s acceptance of his anguish for the sake of Christ. The burdens of his activity are never described as unfortunate interruptions in a blissful Christian life. The oppressive weight of the “concern for all the churches” (11:28) was a necessary part of the Christian life which contained exhausting burdens. This fact causes us to ask. Where is the good news about the Christian life?

**The God of All Comfort (1:3)**

The remarkable fact about Paul’s references to the afflictions and burdens of the Christian life is that he recalls these moments of desperation in 1:3-11 in the context of a thanksgiving! He did not recall these moments to inform us that Christianity can be burdensome, for he begins the section with words of praise: “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort.” The emphasis is on God’s power and mercy. “Blessed be the God,” which is used in two other instances in the New Testament at the beginning of a letter (Ephesians 1:3; 1 Peter 1:3), is a traditional Jewish way of responding in gratitude to God (cf. 11:31; Luke 1:68; Romans 1:25; 9:5). Just as Job responded to pain with the words, “. . . Blessed be the name of the Lord” (Job 1:21), Paul opens his account of his burdens with words of thanksgiving.

If we wonder how Paul was capable of enduring the burdens which his faith brought him, the answer is found in his view of God, who is the “God of all comfort” (1:3). The word “comfort” appears more often in 2 Corinthians than in all of Paul’s other epistles combined. In 1:3-8, the word appears no less than ten times. It is no accident that the words about divine comfort appear most often in the one letter where Paul speaks in the most detail about his afflictions for Christ’s sake. Paul can withstand affliction because God “comforts us in all our affliction” (1:4). His burdens were never carried alone.

An old theme of the Bible is that God “comforts us in all our affliction.” The Bible never suggests that faith involves the absence of pain. When Paul became a Christian, the Lord said to Ananias, “I will show him how much he must suffer for My name’s sake” (Acts 9:16). In the Old Testament, the people of God often experienced the desolation which made them fear that God was absent or in hiding. There was a moment when Israel had been defeated, and her cities were left in ruins. “. . . She has none to comfort her. . . . She has no comforter” (Lamentations 1:2, 9). She says, “For these things I weep; my eyes run down with water; because far from me is a comforter, one who restores my soul; . . .” (Lamentations 1:16).

In a tragic moment, only God Himself can bring comfort. The psalmist says, “Thy rod and Thy staff, they comfort me” (Psalms 23:4). In one
of the most beautiful passages of Scripture, God speaks to His desolate people, saying, "'Comfort, O comfort My people,' says your God. 'Speak kindly to Jerusalem; and call out to her, that her warfare has ended, that her iniquity has been removed, that she has received of the Lord’s hand double for all her sins'" (Isaiah 40:1, 2).

When Isaiah surveys a desolate people, he anticipates the day when one comes to "comfort all who mourn" (Isaiah 61:2). When Paul describes God as the "God of all comfort," he is recalling the history of his people. God had not prevented pain, but He had been the God of comfort.

The word "comfort" has been so weakened and cheapened that we are likely to miss the triumphant spirit of Paul’s description of God as the one "who comforts us in all our affliction." Comfort may suggest to us our attempts to say a consoling word to one who is grieving. We speak also of a "comfortable income" and a "comfortable home." In the Bible, "comfort" is far more than a kind word or a perfect tranquilizer. God’s comfort is His power to strengthen and save.

This meaning is suggested when the prophet addresses a despairing people with the words, "O afflicted one, storm-tossed, and not comforted,..." (Isaiah 54:11). Then he says, "...I will lead him and restore comfort to him,..." (Isaiah 57:18). God’s comfort, therefore, is His power to rescue and heal.

A VIVID MEMORY (1:8-11)

Paul has a vivid memory of a moment when God came to his aid. It was when he experienced affliction in Asia (1:8). He was "burdened excessively," and he "despaired even of life." The image suggests a cargo ship that has been overloaded. The "despair" indicated his recognition that he could not calculate a way out of his dilemma. On his own resources, no solution could not be found. All of the burdens of ministry were overflowing his capacities to carry them. He had in mind both the physical and emotional ordeals of ministry: sickness, pain, and the anxiety for the churches (cf. 5:4; 11:28). There was no way that he could carry the load. It was sure to crush him.

That experience gave Paul the perspective which led him to describe God as the One "who comforts us in all our affliction" (1:4). Paul had previously failed to calculate the strengthening presence of God. But in the moment of despair, Paul learned to rely on God’s resurrection power, and not on himself (1:9). God’s comfort was not limited to kind words. It was the power which rescued him from a deadly peril and gave him the strength to continue his ministry. From that moment on, Paul discovered that “He will yet deliver us” (1:10).

Authentic Christianity consists in our opening ourselves to various troubles for the sake of God’s cause. But, as Paul reminds us, we do not rely on ourselves. Our faith tells about one who comes to our side when we believe that we are "burdened excessively." As Paul says later, “...when I am weak, then I am strong” (12:10).

Our ministries often fail because we have been unwilling to have a faith similar to Paul’s in the one who "comforts us in our affliction." In some instances, we have conducted our ministries by our own resources and ingenuity, leaving no place for God’s comforting power. Authentic ministry experiences both the burdens and the divine comfort. The absence of either of these will make our work ineffective.

SHARING COMFORT WITH OTHERS (1:4-7)

God’s comfort comes in many ways. It came to Paul in his deliverance from a desperate situation. But God’s comfort comes also through other people. Indeed, Paul’s major point at the opening of 2 Corinthians (1:3-7) is that he has become the agent of God’s comforting presence. He has been comforted by God for the very purpose of comforting others: “So that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction” (1:4). He knows that he is not the only one who has been desperate; others share “the same sufferings” (1:6) as he has suffered—emotional, physical, and spiritual. Surely others would benefit from a sharing of the strength which he has received from God. They could find it easier to endure their own trials if another was there to pass on the comfort which he has already received.

Paul knew that God had a purpose for his recent trials. He was to comfort others with the comfort which he had received (1:4). In a striking expression in 1:5, Paul describes the “overflowing” (NIV) of both Christ’s sufferings and his comfort. The image of “overflowing” suggests that the church is a community where “no man is an island.” Our burdens overflow from one to another. In the same way, there is a “sharing” (1:7) and an “overflowing” of comfort. If we
stood alone with our burdens, we might easily be crushed. But we are strengthened by others in the church whose past experience gives us hope.

Our ministries fail if we allow our private experience of frustration and anxiety to preoccupy our minds. God’s comfort comes to us through others. If we, like Paul, have discovered God’s power at a time of weakness, this news is to be shared. If we see ourselves “crushed,” we need those who can share with us the comfort which they have received from God. The burden of one may finally serve a useful purpose to the whole community. As Paul said, “If we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation” (1:6).

**ANOTHER PERSONAL EXPERIENCE**  
(7:5-16)

Paul was not only the source of comfort to others; sometimes he needed the comfort which only another Christian could provide. There was the time when he was “afflicted on every side; conflicts without, fears within” (7:5). The situation of a troubled church had apparently left him with sleepless nights and severe emotional exhaustion: “I had no rest for my spirit, not finding Titus my brother [in Troas]” (2:13). A troublesome church had left Paul exhausted. Its history of discontent and rebellion had made it appear that his labors would result in nothing.

Church troubles are not new. Behind Paul’s own struggle was the open rebellion at Corinth which had brought him considerable grief (2:5). The persistent troubles at Corinth had left him in despair. He had not given up, for he held out hope that Titus might bring him good news from the Corinthians.

The news from Titus was a source of extraordinary joy. The Corinthians had been grieved into repenting (7:6). Their grief had not resulted in hostility and abandonment of the faith, for it had been “godly grief” (7:10). Paul does not often speak of the repentance of Christians. This passage is a rare reminder of Paul’s conviction that our failures can lead us to the “godly grief” which produces repentance. Those who are the source of immense difficulty can change.

The coming of Titus was the source of new comfort for Paul: “But God, who comforts the depressed, comforted us by the coming of Titus” (7:6). This incident is an example of the way in which God’s people mediate comfort to each other. Paul is comforted when Titus is comforted by the Corinthians’ change of heart. The Corinthians are able to comfort Titus, who is able to comfort Paul. The passage resounds with relief and joy. There is more to the Christian life than heavy burdens. “I now rejoice,” says Paul, “. . . that you were made sorrowful to the point of repentance” (7:9). He speaks of the joy of Titus, whose mind has also been set to rest (7:13).

He concludes the section with the words, “I rejoice that in everything I have confidence in you” (7:16). The anxiety over troubled churches may lead to the hopeless feeling that church life involves one painful struggle after another. But church life involves infinitely more. The ties of affection provide memories of joy and strength. These ties are often strong enough to make us forget the unpleasant moments. Titus reported the “longing,” “mourning,” and “zeal” of the Corinthians for Paul (7:7). While the unpleasant aspects of the past were forgotten, they would never forget that their Christian commitment had produced the kind of affection that came from being fellow strugglers. Even Titus, who had known the Corinthians briefly, was moved by the new bonds of fellowship. Paul says, “And his affection abounds all the more to you, as he remembers the obedience of you all, how you received him with fear and trembling” (7:15).

**CONCLUSION**

If my experience is at all like that of most active Christians, we may conclude that an active commitment to Christ will lead us into tense moments of disagreement, periods when leaders are subject to constant criticism, and times when the load is crushing. I recall times of honest disagreements with other Christians and my work with others resulting in disappointment. But fellow Christians were always a source of courage. Some of those whom we had tried to encourage finally encouraged us! If Paul could see nothing less than God’s comfort in the coming of Titus, undoubtedly, we can see God at work in those who bring us good news.

God may not offer a tranquilizer to remove from us the anxiety of ministry, but He sends comfort to us in many ways. He sends it through good friends, good news, and the strength which prevents us from giving in to despair.

—James Thompson