

# The Art Of Comforting

2 Corinthians 1:3-4

*“... the God of all comfort,  
comforts us in our troubles,  
so that we can comfort others  
with the comfort we have received from God ...”*

## What Exactly Is Comforting?

What is comforting?

I want to understand comforting.

How can I be someone who brings real comfort to the hurting?

What works?

One thing I do know is that comfort is a deep mystery.

Those who have really suffered know that sometimes the most comforting things are not what you expect.

Often people's expressions of concern become painful and draining for us.

Especially when over and over people say stupid things like “I know how you feel”

When they obviously do not know how we feel!

But genuine comfort can come when you least expected it.

If you hadn't noticed, today's Bible reading is all about comforting!

2 Corinthians 1:3-4

*... the God of all comfort,*

*comforts us in our troubles,*

*so that we can comfort others*

*with the comfort we have received from God ...*

It's almost like a tongue twister. How fast can you say it?

It's like the writer (Paul) has tried to jam the word “comfort” in as many times into one sentence.

This is the opening sentence of Paul's second to the church in a place called Corinth.

So that's why it got the complicated name “Second Corinthians”.

It's a letter to Corinth,

And in this letter, Paul will mention comfort at least 17 times,

This letter mentions 'comfort' more than any other part of the Bible,

And in this letter Paul talks a lot about suffering too,

Because Paul understood something very important...

## The Best Comforting Is Simply Sharing Suffering

I will never forget the first time I visited what pastors call a “death bed”.

At the age of 26 I had just arrived as a brand new pastor.

Very late at night I was called to go and pray for a dying man in hospital.

So I got dressed in my best black suit and got up there very quickly.

When I arrived at the hospital room I discovered that a whole crowd of his family were outside and inside his room.

There would have been about twenty family members there and they were Aboriginal people from Hope Vale.

I was a bit shy and unsure about the right way to relate to them.

They were talking to each other in “language” and none of them seemed interested in English at all!

Just before I arrived to pray 'with' this man he had died.

So as I got there I wasn't greeted by a concerned family but by a mourning family.

Someone ushered me through the crowd into the hospital room,

And it was crowded full of the dead man's family – his wife, children, grandchildren, nieces, nephews, and sisters.

As I entered I felt like they all kind of all made way for me as I entered as if I was alien.

There they were, dressed thongs and t-shirts, talking in another language,

And I was the only white person in the room and dressed in my best suit.

They all went quiet as they parted around me and stared at me hard.

I felt a bit out of place.

So I stood beside the old man's bed.

I asked if I could touch him and bless him.

Everything I said was translated into language by one of the younger ones who eyed me suspiciously.

They thought that was OK, so I asked if the family would place a hand on him too to pray with me.

I placed a hand on his head and began to pray,

But as I did his wife started wailing and weeping incredibly loud.

And then his children and his sister and the grandchildren all started to cry.

So we all stood there around this man's body,

But I couldn't lead the prayer because they all just cried and wailed and cried,

And not only did they cry, but they all stoked his arms and legs as they cried.

And this went on, as I stood there just waiting with my hand on the dead man's head,

Everyone crowded in around me and they just stroked him and stroked him and wept.

So I just stayed there – I was stuck anyway so I didn't have much choice.

And I stood there with my hand on his head

As they all cried and cried and cried and called out things in language that I couldn't understand.

And then it happened.

It all got to me,

At first I just shed a quiet tear,

But they kept on weeping for their loved one they pressed in on me and wept frantically.

And then it just took over - I cried too – I cried hard –

I was weeping with a crowd of total strangers!

Finally, after what seemed like hours (but was probably only 15 minutes) we all stopped crying.

And in the silence that followed, I led that large family in a prayer of thanks for their father.

I went home that night feeling like an idiot.

I told my wife Karryn that I was sure I had "stuffed it".

I was embarrassed that I hadn't been able to control my emotions.

For a couple weeks I nursed my embarrassment and didn't tell anyone.

Then I got a call from a pastor from Cairns who had been helping these people from Hope Vale.

And he said,

"Matt I just want to thank you for your amazing care for those people from Hope Vale.

They said you were the best pastor they have ever seen and that God's Spirit was in you in a great way."

I said to Pastor Andrew,

"What on earth are you talking about? I thought I really stuffed up!"

And he said,

"They wanted me to tell you that they were so touched that you joined them in their grieving.

Your tears showed how you cared for them and that you truly respected their ways.

Your tears showed them God's love."

In his letter about suffering and comfort Paul says:

### ***2 Corinthians 1:7***

***...we know that just as you share in our sufferings, so also you share in our comfort...***

The best comforting is just sharing in the suffering.

Jesus shows us that God is a fellow sufferer.  
In the person of Jesus, God came down to suffer with us,  
To cry our tears and suffer our finite existence.  
Jesus helps God make sense,  
Because in Jesus Christ, God is a fellow sufferer who cries with us,  
And when he does that, he is a GOD OF COMFORT!

### **The Best Comfort Comes From Those Who Have Felt “The Sentence Of Death”.**

Have you ever felt like you would die yourself?  
Have you ever faced something so big that you thought it was the end for you?  
Have you ever been so broken that you thought you couldn't cope?  
If you have then you share that with the writer of this part of the Bible,  
Paul, in his second letter to Corinth has suffered and thought he would die,  
And he shares some of his battle...

#### **2 Corinthians 1:8-9**

***I want you to know... I was under great pressure, far beyond my ability to endure, so that I despaired even of life. I my heart I even felt the sentence of death. But this happened that I might not rely on myself but on God, who raises the dead...***

He says he felt “the sentence of death”  
And then Paul says, this happened so that he would learn to rely not on himself, but on God.  
Because sometimes you have to be nearly dead before you will “let go”,  
And you can't get “raised” unless you are dead!

See how this is about Jesus Christ?  
Jesus felt “the sentence of death” for us.  
He did that to win the greatest comfort, the greatest hope, the greatest joy for us.  
The greatest comfort comes from the One who has “felt the sentence of death”.

Our church has a team of people called Elders and Lay Assistants – people like Brian, Ruth, Frank and David.  
Their role is to do with caring for the congregation and setting the direction of our church.  
And I realize that our Elders are all people who have “felt the sentence of death” at some time,  
And it has made them deeper, wiser, and given them power to care.

So what in your life right now feels like a “sentence of death”?  
What hurts the most?

These areas might become places where God's love and comfort can flow to others.

And it's not just the Elders of our church,  
If you have been baptized you have felt the “sentence of death” that enables you to bring life to others too.  
It says in Romans 6 that when we were baptized – when the water covered us,  
It was like the old died with Christ on the cross so we could rise brand new – as a comfort to others.

*The Best Comforter Has Felt The Sentence Of Death*

### **Comforting Is Just “Coming Alongside”**

Remember today's Bible verse which is full of the word ‘comfort’?

#### **2 Corinthians 1:3-4**

***... the God of all comfort,  
comforts us in our troubles,  
so that we can comfort others  
with the comfort we have received from God ...***

COMFORT = PARAKLESIS PARA: alongside + KLESIS: Called

The ancient word in the original language here is 'paraklesis' which means 'called alongside'.  
So real comfort is when someone simply is called alongside us.

About ten years ago when our first child was born I needed help.  
My new son had been born with multiple problems,  
He was close to death and anything could happen.  
And in that situation one of my best friends just got in his car and drove 400 kilometres.  
He just turned up there at the hospital to hang around with me,  
He just 'came alongside' me.

That's why I love the new vision statement of our congregation:

***"Uniting generations and cultures,  
Pursuing fully alive relationships,  
Free in fearless faith,  
Reaching out, walking with, and serving,  
As Christ serves us!"***

This is our vision of how God is calling us to be as a church.  
Notice the second-to-last line? It says we believe God is calling us to reach out and "walk with" people.  
We are being called to do some 'paraklesis' – coming alongside people who are suffering.

The first time my Son was in hospital it was for months.  
And another good mate turned up and said, "Hey let's go test driving cars."  
So he just walked me out of that hospital and took me test driving fancy cars.  
He didn't have profound words of comfort, but he just came alongside me.  
That was the most comforting thing anyone could have done.

Paraklesis is 'coming alongside' people.  
And God is a God of paraklesis too.  
In my suffering and losses God has "come alongside" me in powerful ways.  
One of the names for the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of God is 'comforter' and it comes from the ancient word 'comfort'.

PARAKLESIS = COMFORT  
PARAKLETOS = COMFORTER  
PARAKLETE = HOLY SPIRIT (THE COMFORTER)

***John 14:16-17***

***Jesus said, "And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another comforter to help you and be with you forever - the Spirit of truth..."***

Just like my mate who got in a car instantly and drove 400 kilometres just to be with me,  
God comes alongside us.  
That's who the Holy Spirit is –  
God coming alongside us when we suffer.

As you remember those you love,  
May God's Holy Spirit be with you,  
May God come alongside you,  
To cry with you,  
To suffer with you,  
To walk with you,  
And to lift you up.  
Amen.

### **FIRST READING: Revelation 7:9-17**

<sup>9</sup>After this, I saw a large crowd with more people than could be counted. They were from every race, tribe, nation, and language, and they stood before the throne and before the Lamb. They wore white robes and held palm branches in their hands, <sup>10</sup>as they shouted,

"Our God, who sits upon the throne, has the power to save his people, and so does the Lamb."

<sup>11</sup>The angels who stood around the throne knelt in front of it with their faces to the ground. The elders and the four living creatures knelt there with them. Then they all worshiped God <sup>12</sup>and said,

"Amen! Praise, glory, wisdom, thanks, honor, power,  
and strength belong to our God forever and ever! Amen!"

<sup>13</sup>One of the elders asked me, "Do you know who these people are that are dressed in white robes? Do you know where they come from?"

<sup>14</sup>"Sir," I answered, "you must know."

Then he told me: "These are the ones who have gone through the great suffering. They have washed their robes in the blood of the Lamb and have made them white. <sup>15</sup>And so they stand before the throne of God and worship him in his temple day and night. The one who sits on the throne will spread his tent over them. <sup>16</sup>They will never hunger or thirst again, and they won't be troubled by the sun or any scorching heat. <sup>17</sup>The Lamb in the center of the throne will be their shepherd. He will lead them to streams of life-giving water, and God will wipe all tears from their eyes."

### **SECOND READING: 2 Corinthians 1:3-9**

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, 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. For just as the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives, so also through Christ our comfort overflows. 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. 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. 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.

### **GOSPEL: Matthew 5:1-10 THIS READING IS READ RESPONSIVELY WITH CONGREGATION READING SECOND PARTS!**

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up on the side of a mountain and sat down. Jesus' disciples gathered around him, <sup>2</sup>and he taught them:

Blessed are the poor in spirit,

***for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.***

Blessed are those who mourn,

***for they will be comforted.***

Blessed are the meek,

***for they will inherit the earth.***

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,

***for they will be filled.***

Blessed are the merciful,

***for they will be shown mercy.***

Blessed are the pure in heart,

***for they will see God.***

Blessed are the peacemakers,

***for they will be called children of God.***

Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness,

***for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.***

Blessed are you when people insult you,

persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me.

***Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven,***

for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

This is the Word of the Lord: ***Thanks be to God!***