

Grace for the Day

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Incorporated non-profit in New Jersey, USA

2 Corinthians - Devotional (Day 1 - 7)

By Rev. Peter Eng

Day 1

Comfort in Trouble

2 Corinthians 1:1-11

"The God of comfort ... 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 amazing that in one breath, the Apostle Paul tells us the secret of finding comfort in times of trouble. Our source of comfort in times of trouble is God. He is the "God of comfort." When we feel bullied and bruised by the world around us, we have a place of refuge and repose in God. We can treat ourselves to a time of communion with God. A retreat that restores our spirit as we come into God's presence in prayer.

A well produced movie may inspire you, moving music may touch you, but nothing can replace prayer and the Word. The work of the Holy Spirit in our heart and mind, through prayer and the Word, cannot be substituted by anything the world has to offer.

The comfort we receive is not inward looking. True comfort, true spiritual recovery does not consist of focusing on self. It is outward in its direction but inward in its effect. God *"comforts us in*

all our troubles so that we can comfort those in any trouble...."

Paul went through much trouble. His trouble was different from those of the Corinthians. But that is not critical. What is essential in giving comfort is our tenderness towards those in trouble because we know what it feels like to be beset with trouble on every side.

Let it flow. The Holy Spirit is represented as blowing wind and as water poured out. The God of comfort pours his Holy Spirit into our lives to cleanse, to heal, and to comfort us. But there is one characteristic shared by wind and water. They need a through-flow. Water does its best work when it is flowing, not when it is stagnant. Wind refreshes best not in a confined space, but when it blows past us.

How should you respond to another person in trouble when you are in the midst of trouble yourself? You can say, "I have enough trouble of my own, please go and find your own solution." Or you can say, "God has sent this person into my life so that the comfort I receive may also bless him/her." God wants the best work of the Holy Spirit to work in and through us for our comfort and for those he sends into our life.

That: The channel of God's comfort, receives what the recipient of God's comfort cannot.

Day 2**Not lightly, not worldly**

2 Corinthians 1:12-2:4

“Did I do it lightly? Or do I make my plans in a worldly manner so that in the same breath I say, “Yes, yes” and “No, no”?”

Paul tells the Corinthians of his elaborate plan to visit them. He was going to sail to Corinth (in Achaia) to visit them, go north to Macedonia (to visit churches like the one in Philippi), to return to Corinth, and then to have the Corinthians send him to Judea with relief help from the Corinthians to the famine stricken Judea.

But this plan did not work out. Instead, Paul went from Troas to Macedonia and waited in Macedonia for Titus to bring him word about the situation in Corinth before venturing on to Corinth (2 Cor 2:12-13). Paul may have received some criticism from the Corinthians that he changed his plans. Whatever the motivation, we find Paul explaining his plan change. He explains that his plans were not made lightly nor in a worldly manner.

Paul compares and contrasts making decisions “lightly” and making decisions in a “worldly” manner. By lightly, Paul is suggesting that some folks can make hasty decisions, perhaps using the leading of the Holy Spirit as an excuse for their impulsiveness. By “worldly” Paul

tells us his considerations are not those of the world.

Yes, Paul did change his plans, but the reason was not what some may have speculated. He declares, *“I call God as my witness that it was in order to spare you that I did not return to Corinth”* (2 Cor 1:23). There was tension between Paul and the Corinthians, and Paul had to be very careful in how he related to them. There were fault finders among the Corinthians and Paul had to explain himself. His later elaboration tells us that he was afraid he would be too strong on the Corinthians in correcting their mistakes, and decided he would hold himself back and sent Titus in his place.

This brief passage challenges so much that can go wrong in our thinking about making and changing plans. (1) It is not always wrong to change your plans. (2) Plans must be made on the basis of spiritual motivations, and changes in the spiritual landscape justify a change of plans. These are our constants. (3) The lazy are not to use God as an excuse to make or change plans lightly. (4) The worldly are not to use worldly objectives as an excuse to make or change plans.

Thot: Refusal to change may suggest obduracy rather than spirituality.

Day 3**Sin and Forgiveness**

2 Corinthians 2:5-11

"I urge you to reaffirm your love for him. ... in order that Satan might not outwit us. For we are not unaware of his schemes."

The happenings in Corinth is repeated in churches today all across the world. A person within the Corinthian congregation was engaged in incest (with his step-mother), and was doing it openly with the church not doing anything about it. Paul wrote to reprimand the church for not taking action (1 Cor 5). The church was roused to expel this person who was living in open sin and who refused to mend his ways.

In the process, they over-compensated. "The punishment inflicted on him by the majority is sufficient for him. Now instead, you ought to forgive and comfort him, so that he will not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow." We can make certain observations here. First, Paul chose not to name the person, and his shame has disappeared into history. Next, Paul chose not to say how the church had been excessive in their action towards him, so that excess has also disappeared into history.

There is a need for righteousness in the church. Unrepented sin should be confronted. There is also a need

for love among Christians. Love "keeps no record of wrong. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth" (1 Cor 13:5-6). Love is not indulgence to sin, a lesson the Corinthian church had to learn. Love does not keep record of wrong, another lesson the Corinthians had to learn.

Many Christians are spiritually immature, just like the Corinthians. They apply the principles. First they take pride in their love and tolerance towards the unrepentant sinner. Then they apply an overkill of judgment against him, refusing to accept him even after he had repented. They just left him out in the cold to die. Paul tells them that spiritual censure towards that person was not to satisfy him (Paul). If there is anything for him to forgive, he forgives. Censure was to bring him back into fellowship. "Now instead, you ought to forgive and comfort him, ... reaffirm your love for him ... I also forgive him ... I have forgiven in the sight of Christ."

Our common enemy is Satan. He entices a brother to sin and breaks our fellowship. He entices the church to excessive action and breaks fellowship. If he succeeds in either he has outwitted us.

That: Unrepented sin and unforgiven repentance can be equally effective schemes of the devil.

Day 4**Say love, feel love, or do love?**

2 Corinthians 2:12-17

“Unlike so many, we do not peddle the word of God for profit. On the contrary, in Christ we speak before God with sincerity, like men sent from God.”

A woman and her sister were on very bad terms. She was about to go in for a long operation (which turned out to be 11 hours long), but her estranged sister would not see her to wish her well. While she was on the operating table, her sister had a car accident, and died on the spot. The dead sister was a single mom and left behind a child.

The woman came out of the operation to learn that her sister had died. Complications followed the operation, but she eventually recovered. What is most remarkable is that she adopted her niece as her own child to love and to raise as her own. We can say there was little love felt between the two sisters, but when the moment came, the surviving sister poured out her love in tangible action.

Paul did not talk about his love for the Corinthians in today’s reading, but in this text, we see Paul’s love in action. The Corinthians had many money grabbing religious teachers in the city. The ground sentiment was one of suspicion that all religious teachers teach so they can feed off

their followers. For the gospel of Jesus Christ to flow unimpeded, it was important for Paul not to be financially supported by the Corinthians. While it is perfectly right that ministers of the gospel are supported by those they bless, in the case of the Corinthians Paul said, “Unlike so many, we do not peddle the word of God for profit. On the contrary, in Christ we speak before God with sincerity, like men sent from God.”

This meant he had to work with his hands to support himself. Paul had training as a tent-maker, so when he was in Corinth, he joined the tent-making business of a Christian couple, Priscilla and Aquila (Acts 18:1-3). We can be like the Corinthians, and become blind to those who love us best. And who are these? They are the ones who do love for us. They are the ones who have nothing to gain from us, but continue to give freely. Paul’s gift to the Corinthians was both the gospel and a self-supported ministry. The Corinthian gift to Paul was to question his apostleship, and his motives.

Remember the minister of the gospel who blesses you freely. Remember family and friends who do you love. Thank God for them. Thank them with a gift.

That: If I have not learnt to bless those who bless me, I will never learn to bless those who curse me.

Day 5**Beyond Credentials**

2 Corinthians 3:1-6

“The letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.”

We are surprised to read that in Paul's day, paper qualifications, references, and credential documents were as important as they are today. Paul calls them “letters of recommendation.” When Paul moved into a new city to plant a church there, he did not carry these credentials with him. His best credentials were found in the lives of the people he helped.

The letters that kill are paper credentials. Some mistake this verse to be saying that the Word of God is the letter that kills. In place of God's Word, they rely on some subjective feeling or ecstatic manifestation and call that “the Spirit that gives life.” They have just traded the living word of God for some personal intuition which may be very unspiritual and may not even be from the Holy Spirit of God.

The real lesson from this text is not a denigration of God's Word. Paul is explaining to us that competence in spiritual work does not depend on the right credentials or letters of recommendation. The ministers of the new covenant are dynamic. Their worth as ministers should be determined by how they have transformed lives. Who is a minister

of Christ? He is the one whom God uses to transform the lives of other people. We need to look beyond credentials to see the Spirit-empowered servant.

We see an extension of this folly among us today. There is a disconnect between what we expect from a minister's past and his future. We want a minister who has never strayed from the straight and narrow, but we want one who rescues others who have strayed. We want a minister who has only theoretical sins we cannot see, but he needs to administer grace to those whose sins we can see. We want a colorless past, but a bright vivid future. We want a minister who takes no risk but makes great gain. We look among people with bureaucratic qualities (the letter that kills) and hope to find a visionary leader transformed by grace, gifted by the Holy Spirit, called to service by Christ, and dedicated to God.

We find the true minister of the new covenant in the person whom God uses to transform our life. When “the Spirit gives life” through a minister, why look for credentials that kill?

That: The Spirit of God transforms: first the minister, then those he ministers.

Day 6**Shame and Glory**

2 Corinthians 3:7-18

“If the ministry that condemns men is glorious, how much more glorious is the ministry that brings righteousness!”

Moses, the receiver of the law, absorbed God’s glory as the law was given to him on the mountain. When he came down from the mountain, his face was aglow and the people could not take that glory. The old ministry brings condemnation, but it had so much glory that sinners could not bear the light Moses reflected as the minister of the old covenant. Moses had to veil his face even though this was a glory that was fading away.

But the new ministry under the new covenant handles glory differently. First, it is the ministry of righteousness, not of condemnation, making it a far greater glory. Under Moses, the people stood condemned under the law and as sinners, they could not bear the glory that shone from Moses’ face. Under Christ, we are made righteous. We are the direct recipients of righteousness and we glow in glory as did Moses. We are standing on the other side of glory where Moses stood.

The effect of the glory we received is also different. We do not need to veil our faces because it is not a glory that brings out the shame of sin. It

is a glory that brings righteousness through forgiveness.

When Adam and Eve sinned against God, they were filled with shame and hid themselves from God. The natural reaction of the sinner is to hide from God because sin brings shame. Adam and Eve tried the ineffective. They covered themselves with fig leaves. But God, in mercy, made clothing of skin to cover their shame. In the old covenant, the grace of God covers sin and shame. In the new covenant, the Holy Spirit indwells the believer. The sinner is no longer a victim of his own sins. “Where the spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.” Through the death of Christ for us, we become righteousness and our faces now reflect God’s glory. We must no longer hide ourselves from God’s glory on account of our sin. Instead, on account of God’s righteousness in us, we must reflect God’s glory with unveiled faces.

The old covenant covers our sin and shame from God’s glory. The new unveils our righteousness in Christ and reflects God’s glory. It is amazing that so few Christians know either!

That: Our mission is not to hide our shame but to show God’s glory!

Day 7**Hoarding and Chucking**

2 Corinthians 4:1-6

"... we do not lose heart. Rather, we have renounced secret and shameful ways ... "

There is a creature in North America commonly called the "pack rat." This rat loves to store shiny objects that are of no use to the rat. The term "pack rat" is also used as a metaphor for people who are compulsive hoarders. They can be some of the nicest people around. They see an old mattress by the road, and bring it home so somebody else might use it. You will probably find 20 old mattresses in his basement which he gives out to those in need. They will store old newspaper because they didn't have time to read it, and you will find newspaper piled floor to ceiling as you walk through a labyrinth of newspapers that was once a living room. There is even a TV program about people who get experts to help them chuck out things in their home.

Like the pack rat, it is easy for a Christian to hoard his past misdeeds rather than to chuck them. Paul identifies himself with the Corinthians saying, "Therefore, since through God's mercy we have this ministry (as ministers of the new covenant), we do not lose heart. Rather we have renounced secret and sinful ways ..."

The great apostle tells us that though we have secret and sinful ways in the past, they have been renounced. The secret and sinful past is for chucking, not for hoarding! By God's mercy, he calls us to a sanctified work, a holy work to which our unclean past cannot measure up. We must not lose heart over our past. The past evils in our life are no match for the mercy of God.

It is important for us to note that the word mercy is used here. "Mercy" has a different sense than "grace." Mercy presumes a past

that includes sin deserving of punishment. God's mercy means we do not get the punishment we deserve. Grace focuses on receiving the merit we do not deserve. Here Paul contrasts what we deserve (punishment) to what we receive (mercy). Serving God as ministers of the new covenant is not possible when we hoard our past misdeeds rather than chuck them. God has forgiven. We tend to remain mean to each other and to ourselves. We hoard our past and leave no room for the freedom we have in Christ to serve him without fear.

Thot: Past sins are not for hoarding or hiding, they are for chucking.

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Rev. Peter Eng is an ordained minister from the Reformed Tradition, but he is truly global in perspective. He served the Lord in various capacities starting from his teenage years in the 70s. His undergrad studies were done in Singapore, his grad studies in the USA, and post-grad studies in the United Kingdom, with additional post-grad research in Germany.