

MOVEMENT

Our sermon series, **MOVEMENT**, is an exploration of 2 Corinthians. The focus of the series is on the church. The church is not a building. The church is not even a conglomeration of people. The church is a movement, a group of people 'called out' (ekklesia) to meet and glorify God, and to represent His Kingdom to a broken world. The church doesn't sit still; it moves and grows. To be a Christian is to be on the move! Throughout this series we will explore what it means to be a part of this **Movement** of God.

COMFORT TO THE AFFLICTED • 2 Corinthians 1:1-7 • Tim McConnell • January 8, 2017

I love to be comfortable. Don't you? Heated seats were once reserved for limousines in New York City. Now I've had two cars with them. And you know what, I like them! I like to be comfortable—especially during that cold snap before Christmas. I have my favorite chair, my favorite shoes, my favorite sweater. I like comfortable things. But I'm not sure comfort is all that good for me. Some of my favorite memories come from times I was supremely uncomfortable, like skiing with my son Jack in Steamboat a few years ago when the temperature was negative six! Or reaching the top of my only Fourteener, Mt. Humboldt, a few years ago. My whole body hurt! But I was happy. Or standing in a river of glacier runoff waters in Alaska catching fish with my Dad for his 70th birthday this summer. Not exactly comfortable, but worth it. Comfort isn't the only goal, is it? Life isn't always about making myself comfortable. It's about reaching for better, for greater.

Christianity is a movement. That's what we are going to be talking about for the next several weeks. This is a movement. It's not about finding the most comfortable place and sitting there. It's not about finding the most defensible place and setting up battlements. It's about bringing the gifts of God to a world that needs them. It's about striving for better. Suffering for others. Loving for Jesus. Becoming and changing and growing. It's about movement. Jesus didn't say, "Sit still." He said, "Go and make disciples of all peoples." When Paul wrote to churches telling them to stand strong in the faith, he used a verb Greeks used to call soldiers into formation. Stand together. It gives the image of a phalanx. If you don't move, I can't move. But if you move, I'll move with you and we will stand together. Don't think of it as a static thing. The Christian life is about being part of a movement.

It is easy to get focused on ourselves. Is that an understatement? It is more than easy to get focused on ourselves. Actually it takes a lot to get us out of our own heads. We naturally want our own comfort, our own security, our own success. Even as Christians we can get stuck in our own heads. I read a book about breaking away from selfishness only to come to the end and realize the author never really got out of his own head. It's like if there were a self-help book called, "How I Conquered My Narcissism." Did you though? It is actually a

real challenge in our spiritual walk to get out of our own heads sometimes, to escape our own gravity. It happens when we accept the mission. When we realize, this is not about me. When we realize God has a purpose for us. When we genuinely come into contact with the needs of another and we find that God has equipped us to meet them. That's when the spell and selfish gravity of narcissism finally breaks, and we see that we are not here so much to find our own comfortable Christian chair, but to bring comfort to the afflicted.

Scholars will say 'comfort' is the theme of 2 Corinthians, and that makes sense. It was not uncommon in ancient letters to make the theme of the correspondence clear in the first paragraph or two. Paul uses the word 'comfort' and its variations ten times in the opening paragraph! Paul had been through a lot with these people in a few years, and comfort was called for. Paul planted the church with the help of a ministry couple, Aquila and Priscilla, and his faithful disciples Timothy and Silas. You can read about it in Acts 18. But from the time the church began in Corinth, there was big trouble. The culture in Corinth was not like the culture of a Judeo-Christian mindset. First and Second Corinthians are full of the most difficult pastoral and moral and ethical issues you could imagine. Corinthian culture was thick with all kinds of unrestrained pleasures. It was a party 'til you drop kind of place, and it was hard to get people to see there's a better life in Jesus. And once the better life in Jesus was established and there was a little community pursuing it together, it was hard to protect that little community because the values of the world around them crept in with every new believer. We all carry a little of the world's values with us when we enter the community of Christ, and if we're not careful we let our worldly patterns influence the body instead of letting the health of the body correct our hearts. Paul was forced to say some direct and corrective things to this little community of faith in Corinth, but they had responded well and addressed the problems, and now it was time to offer comfort and renew their strength for the mission they were on to reach their city for Christ. And we see that even as they receive comfort, they are not just to receive that comfort but to carry that comfort to those around them—this is a movement.

So then, a few things to say about comfort from

this opening paragraph of 2 Corinthians: **(1) Comfort comes from God.** "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." (2 Corinthians 1:3-4) We do not know or pursue or seek to please a heartless God. We are not, I must say, like those who drive trucks into markets or strap bombs to children in some perverse attempt to please a bloodthirsty, angry deity. There is a difference. We know God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. God who sends His Son to end suffering, not impose it; to take suffering onto Himself, not inflict it on others. This God we know in Jesus is the source of all comfort. He comforts us in all our troubles. Note that. Not "some" of our troubles, but "all" our troubles. Comfort pours out from God into our hearts. Our word "comfort" means "with strength;" the Greek word "paraklesis" means to come alongside and help. There is not a trouble or trial or affliction you face alone. God is with you, alongside you, to bring strength to help. Warren Wiersbe says, "We must not think of *comfort* in terms of 'sympathy,' because sympathy can weaken us instead of strengthen us. God does not pat us on the head and give us a piece of candy or a toy to distract our attention from our troubles. No, He puts strength into our hearts so we can face our trials and triumph over them." God is a God of comfort

(2) Our suffering has purpose. Paul says to give thanks to God the Father of compassion, "who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God. For just as we share abundantly in the sufferings of Christ, so also our comfort abounds through Christ." (2 Corinthians 1:4-5) When Paul talks about troubles, he's not just waxing philosophical. Paul knows trouble. Paul knows affliction. Here's a guy who had everything going for him. Top education, noble family, ticket to success, then he got knocked off his high horse by Jesus and everything changed. Paul was beaten, chased out of cities, the subject of riots, shipwrecked, stoned, lied about—I mean, this guy knew suffering. Paul was one of the most afflicted men in all of history; but he testifies as well that he was among the most comforted. Paul always believed his suffering had a purpose. He saw his suffering as personally beneficial, but also beneficial for those around him, because to experience God's comfort in suffering is to be equipped to communi-

cate that same divine comfort to others in all their afflictions or distress.

There is a difference here. The Bible never says we will avoid suffering by following Christ. In fact, it says the opposite. We share in the sufferings of Christ. Just as the world hated Jesus, so it will hate those who represent Jesus. But our suffering has purpose. Jerry Bridges wrote, "There is no such thing as pain without a purpose in the life of a believer." (*Discipline of Grace*, p. 233). A life without God comes into suffering and asks, "Why me?" If it's all up to fate and chance and random chaos, why should I suffer this? Why me? But a life with God, a life walking with Jesus knows there is purpose in suffering. A life with God comes into a season of suffering and is able to ask, "What for?" I wonder what purpose this all might have. I wonder how God might use this suffering of mine one day, to shape me, to make be able to bless those around me, to bring glory to His own name. What for? The Bible doesn't say we will avoid suffering. What it says is this: the deeper the suffering the deeper the divine comfort you receive; the deeper the comfort from God, the deeper the faith. Meaningless suffering is not a part of it.

One of my good friends, a pastor mentor, was diagnosed with prostate cancer in his late fifties. He said to me as we talked, "Tim, it really is kind of a blessing. It's hard, but it's kind of a blessing." "How do you mean?" I asked. "Well," he said, "for almost thirty years I have been coming to hospitals and clinics to sit and pray with friends fighting cancer. Finally, for the first time, I understand what they were going through."

And that brings us to the last thought, **(3) Comfort does not end with us.** God's comfort poured out never terminates with the one comforted, not if we are faithful in God's economy. God's comfort pours through us. We are not reservoirs, but channels of the comforts we receive from Jesus. "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." (2 Corinthians 1:6-7). None of God's comforts terminate with us. If we are comforted in distress, that's so we can communicate God's comfort to those in similar distress. If

we are comforted while comfortable, that only gives us more comfort to give to those who are afflicted. This passage doesn't see comfort ending with the one receiving comfort. It seems to say that the comfort we receive, which of course comforts us and helps us and changes our lives—there is no comfort like that strength that comes with the presence of God in our lives—that comfort is meant to flow on through to someone else.

We are on a mission here. We are a movement. This is a "bring it to you" kind of operation. I know you need comfort. I need comfort too. But this isn't about getting to the most comfortable spot and camping there. This is about seeking and finding comfort in Jesus Christ, then feeling that comfort flow through us into those who need it even more than we. When the comforts of God have ceased to flow into your life, maybe check to see if you're connected with someone else in need of the comforts of God. Maybe your pipeline has become a termination point, and the flow has stopped. Maybe the comfort you need is contact with affliction. Just maybe. One of the greatest comforts we receive, oddly, is when God enables us to be used to bring comfort to another. Later in the letter, Paul will explain that we are "ambassadors" for Christ. Tomorrow, Abigail and I will join our missions team in Egypt. We go as ambassadors of First Pres. All of us who are in Christ are ambassadors, representing a Kingdom in Heaven – a very real Kingdom of which we are really citizens. If this is a movement, we need to move. Carry with you the message of comfort. Go with God's comfort, and find a way—maybe it's not so far—to take that comfort where it needs to go. It is a great challenge. It is a worthy mission. It is the kind of movement of which it's worth being part.

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STUDY GUIDE "Comfort to the Afflicted" 2 Corinthians 1:1-7

Start It

- We all love comfort. In some ways, we are pursuing comfort all the time, often without being conscious that we are making decisions to support, defend, or provide for future comfort for us or our family. But maybe we need to ask whether comfort is good for us. Maybe we need to think of comfort more as something we are to carry from God to others.

Study It

- Read 2 Corinthians 1:1-2. This may sound rote, but review the greeting of this epistle. Who is the letter from? Who is it for? What is the source of Paul's title as "apostle"? What does apostle mean? Why is it important to greet one another with "grace and peace"; and where do these come from?
- Read 2 Corinthians 1:3-7. Count how many times the word "comfort" is used in this opening paragraph. Do you think comfort might be the theme of this letter?
- How does comfort flow TO us? How does comfort flow THROUGH us? Which seems more important in this passage?
- Do you see yourself as a conveyance of the comforts of God to those around you? Do you see your church as a conveyance of the comforts of God to your city and world? Why or why not?

Pray It

Praise be to You, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, Who does comfort us in all afflictions and makes us vehicles of Your comforts for those around us. Strengthen us to become a movement, carrying comfort from You to those who need it most. In this be glorified, God our Father, Jesus our Savior, Holy Spirit our Comforter, now and forever. Amen.

Live It

This passage may be calling us to convey God's comfort to others more than to enjoy God's comfort for ourselves. Think of one tangible act this week you could undertake to convey comfort to a neighbor or friend.