

Some brief thoughts on 2 Corinthians 1:3-11

1. In this passage, Paul speaks about afflictions and comfort, but mentions comfort twice as many times as he does afflictions. For Paul, receiving comfort from God was not a trivial matter, but something necessary. The comfort he received was like spiritual oxygen to breathe when evil and persecution threatened to suffocate him. Our need is no different, even though we may not encounter the same difficulties that Paul had to face.
2. Paul makes it clear that God comforts us *in* our afflictions, and not just in some of them but all of them. The kind of comfort that God provides in this context is not the removal of those afflictions. Paul mentions in v8-9 how great some of his afflictions were, and we get a taste of them from 2 Cor 6:5-6. Paul and his companions were beyond their strength and expected to die. Yet, within this apparently hopeless and desperate moment, God provided comfort.
3. We can learn from this that there is no circumstance that we might face that can separate us from the loving comfort of God. Paul's testimony is proof of that. He has been to a place of despair and hopelessness (at least for this life) and known the comfort of God. When we seek comfort we will find it, just as Paul did.
4. This comfort given to Paul was not for him alone (v4,6-7). The kind of comfort that God provides is something that we can treasure and benefit from. But we must use that comfort to comfort others. When we do so, we don't rob ourselves of its benefit. It is not something that evaporates once we benefit from it, nor do we lose it when we give it away.
5. When Paul speaks of "comfort" he does not have in mind the kind of comfort some might seek from drugs, chocolate, alcohol or Netflix binges. Rather, the word translated as "comfort" could refer to an appeal made or an exhortation given. It is 'reasonable' in the sense that the comfort we receive is caused by knowing the truth or being reminded to hold on to the truth. The kind of comfort Paul has in mind is like the comfort a distressed mother would experience after hearing her lost child has been found safe and sound, or the experience of hearing our cancer biopsy is clear, or our reaction when being told our job is safe. This comfort is not merely *feeling* better about things. Rather this comfort is being able to see that things are, in actual fact, better than (or different to) how we feel. It is knowing that our afflictions and hardship are not the whole story, nor even the main story. The comfort of God rearranges our thinking and redirects our attention, not simply make us feel better.
6. When God comforts us, we will be reminded about the truth of who he is: his compassion, his everlasting lovingkindness, his authority and sovereignty over all circumstances. We will remember our righteousness in Christ, our acceptance and adoption as sons, the forgiveness of all of our sins. We will learn about our hope of eternity in the presence of God the Father and Jesus the Son. And many other things, most relevant to the trial we are facing. The comfort we receive will make us into theologians of the best sort. The comfort we receive will not be so much about the hardship itself, but much more about the God of comfort: what he has said, done and purposed in the Word of God. This, I think, is why Paul mentions the comfort he received much more than the hardship.

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7. So, when we find ourselves in a difficult place, our first resort is to seek comfort from the God of all comfort. Based on what Paul has taught us, God most often comforts us through other people who have received comfort from Him. This is why genuine and authentic fellowship is necessary. To neglect fellowship is to neglect God, as God normally speaks to us through other members of the body of Christ. Therefore, the comfort of God we seek will normally come through our brothers and sisters in Christ who have been comforted, as it came to the Corinthians through Paul.
8. What do we seek most? The removal of affliction or comfort in that affliction? It's not always an either/or choice. After all, Paul declares that God "delivered us from such a deadly peril and he will deliver us." However, Paul does say in v6 that "if we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation". Paul would not choose beatings and calamities for their own sake, but understands that these were often the inevitable result of his labour for the gospel. When hardship is necessary in order to gain something of great importance we don't ask for the hardship to end. But, we seek for comfort to help us gain what is most important.
9. Finally, let us follow Paul's example and not "rely on ourselves but on God who raises the dead". For "on him we have set our hope that he will deliver us again."

Blessings to all at Kings Covenant Fellowship, from the Hobson family!