



FATHER OF MERCIES,
GOD OF ALL COMFORT
2 CORINTHIANS 1:1-7

STUDY GUIDE
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Who was Saul of Tarsus, also known as the apostle Paul? What made him tick? Why did he make the painful choices we read about in the New Testament? People who have tracked with his missionary journeys and struggled to comprehend his many letters long to get inside his head and peer into his heart. What were his motives? How did he persevere in the face of unending hardship and excruciating persecution? What accounts for his unyielding commitment to Christ and his love for the many churches he established? What empowered him to endure the slander of those he served and to sacrifice himself for people who repaid his devotion with disdain and contempt?

It's important to know the answer to these questions because Paul often exhorted Christians to imitate him even as he strives to imitate Christ Jesus.

2 Corinthians is unique among all Paul's letters as it provides us with a vivid portrayal of the courage, honesty, and vulnerability of this remarkable man. Unlike any of his other letters, in 2 Corinthians we hear his heartbeat, we feel his passions, we are put in touch with his deepest fears and longings and loves.

If you've never studied this book before, you're in for a treat and a challenge. But don't think for a moment that this letter to the church in Corinth is primarily about Paul, or even the Corinthians themselves. *It's about Jesus.* Paul summed it up perfectly in chapter four, verse five: ***"For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake."*** There it is. Jesus alone and always is Lord. He is supreme, central, and all satisfying. He is the center and circumference of the gospel we proclaim. And we, says Paul, are simply here to proclaim that truth and serve you in such a way that you find in him complete joy and satisfaction for your souls, for his eternal glory.

COMING TO CORINTH

In the summer of 1991 I was given the incredible opportunity of participating in a trip that traced the missionary journeys of Paul. Athens, Thessalonica, Ephesus, and eventually Rome, were included in our tour. So, too, was Corinth. As I stood among the ruins of that ancient city, I couldn't help but think about its storied history and the critical role it played in the early years of the Christian church.

The history of ancient Corinth is the story of two cities. Perhaps the first event of importance occurred in 146 b.c. when it was invaded by a Roman army that destroyed the city and killed or enslaved virtually the entire population. Corinth lay in ruins for more than a century until 44 b.c. when Julius Caesar saw its great potential and gave orders that it be rebuilt as a Roman colony.

Not only did Corinth soon prosper because of its position as a port city, it also became one of Rome's most notable centers for banking and finance. Its political significance should also be noted. In 27 b.c. it became the seat of the region's proconsul and the capital of the senatorial province of Achaia until a.d. 15, when it became an imperial province. Corinth was also widely known for its hosting of the Isthmian games, a biennial athletic competition second only to the Olympic games in importance. ***Corinth soon was regarded as the third most important city of the empire after Rome and Alexandria.*** Corinth was eventually destroyed by an earthquake in a.d. 521, never to be rebuilt.

THE "CHARACTER" OF CORINTH

The city of Corinth in the first century, with a population estimated to be as high as two hundred thousand, has been described as "a wide-open boomtown" comparable to San Francisco of the gold rush days. It boasted two harbors and was strategically located, thus enhancing its reputation as one of the leading commercial centers of southern Greece. Sailors and merchants from every city and province, and therefore from every race and religion, passed through Corinth. It was truly cosmopolitan in nature.

Not unexpectedly, Corinth became notorious for luxurious and debauched living. Virtually every pagan deity had a cult following in Corinth. Archaeologists have discovered temples devoted to Neptune, Apollo, Venus, Octavia, Asclepius,

Demeter, Core, and Poseidon, among others. But its chief shrine was *the temple of Aphrodite* (the Greek goddess of love and life), where as many as 1,000 temple prostitutes were reported to have conducted their business. Sexual perversion and immorality of every conceivable (and some inconceivable) sort was rampant. Largely because of the immorality of Corinth the word 'corinthianize' became synonymous with the word to fornicate.

It was, however, in just such a place that the grace of God appeared. For here Paul spent a year and a half preaching the gospel. The church in Corinth was composed largely of Gentiles, the majority of whom were at the lower end of the socio-economic ladder (although there were a few wealthy families).

THE CHURCH IN CORINTH AND ITS RELATIONSHIP TO PAUL

Paul's relationship to the Corinthians was a long and tempestuous one. From several statements in both his first and second epistles to the church in that city, we are able to reconstruct the sequence of events. One thing that will surprise many of you is that ***Paul actually wrote 4 letters to the church in Corinth, only two of which are included in our bibles.***

1. Paul first preaches the gospel in Corinth during his second missionary journey, probably in late 50 or early 51 a.d. He worked with Priscilla and Aquila as a tentmaker and probably lived with them. The results of Paul's initial ministry in Corinth are recorded in Acts 18:1-11. While there he regularly went to the synagogue and reasoned with both Jews and God-fearing Greeks, seeking to demonstrate, as was his custom, that Jesus was indeed the Messiah prophesied by the Old Testament Scriptures.

2. After 1 1/2 years of ministry in Corinth, in the spring of 52 a.d., Paul made his way with Priscilla and Aquila to the city of Ephesus. After only a brief stay, he left them there and departed for Jerusalem. From there he went to Antioch, eventually returning to Ephesus where he remained for the next 2 1/2 years (from the fall of 52 to the spring of 55 a.d.). It was during this 2 1/2 year period of ministry in Ephesus that the Corinthian letters were composed.

3. Sometime in late 54 a.d. Paul wrote a letter to the Corinthians that is now lost (cf. I Cor. 5:9-11). We will call this "Corinthian Letter A". He wrote this letter in response to news (either by personal report or a letter from the Corinthians) that some in Corinth had failed to separate from people within the church who had engaged in repeated sexual immorality. Evidently the Corinthians misinterpreted Paul, thinking that he was recommending they separate entirely from the wider Corinthian society.

4. Subsequent to this, Paul received reports from certain people in Chloe's house (I Cor. 1:11) that there were problems in the Corinthian church, in particular the breaking up of the believing community into factions. Also, according to 1 Corinthians 16:17, three men (Stephanus, Fortunatus, and Achaicus) from Corinth came to him, evidently with a letter from the church asking Paul numerous questions about Christian behavior and belief (cf. I Cor. 7:1). In response to the report from Chloe's house and the questions asked of him, Paul wrote what we know as First Corinthians. We will call this "Corinthian Letter B" (probably written in late 54 a.d.).

5. In "Corinthian Letter B" (our canonical First Corinthians), Paul revealed his travel plans. He hoped first to go to Macedonia and then make his way south to Corinth. However, after sending Timothy to Corinth bearing the letter, he changed his plans slightly. Now he proposed to visit Corinth twice: first, on his way to Macedonia, and second, on his way back from Macedonia (of. 2 Cor. 1:15-16).

6. All of this changed yet again, however, when Timothy arrived in Corinth and discovered how bad the situation was. Timothy, or perhaps someone else, informed Paul concerning the distressing circumstances in Corinth and how the church had not responded to his letter (our First Corinthians).

7. Paul immediately put aside everything else and made an urgent visit to Corinth to try to put things right (probably in the spring of 55 a.d.). This direct confrontation with the Corinthians turned out to be a bitter and humiliating experience for the Apostle. He refers to it in 2 Corinthians 2:1 as a "painful visit" or one that caused "sorrow." Apparently, the Corinthians not only ignored the instruction of First Corinthians (i.e., "Corinthian Letter B"), but also had given their allegiance to one or two men who opposed Paul, who treated him with disrespect, and ridiculed his apostleship. Paul was deeply hurt and offended (cf. 2 Cor. 2:5-8,10; 7:12).

8. Because of this distressing experience, Paul did not stay long in Corinth. He returned to Ephesus and determined not to make another painful visit to Corinth. Therefore, he called off the double stop he had earlier planned to make at Corinth on his way to and from Macedonia (of. 2 Cor. 1:15-16). All this did was to give his enemies

an excuse to charge him with being fickle, a man who vacillated and really cared very little for the Corinthian believers and their feelings (2 Cor. 1:17).

9. Paul obviously could not leave matters unsettled. He feared that his enemies would destroy the work of the gospel in Corinth. Therefore, he wrote yet another letter to them (in the summer of 55). This one he describes in 2 Corinthians 2:4,9 as the "severe" or "tearful" letter. We will call it "Corinthian Letter C". In this letter he harshly rebuked the Corinthians and demanded the punishment of the man who had opposed and ridiculed him so maliciously (cf. 2 Cor. 2:3,4,6,9; 7:8-12). Titus was given the unenviable responsibility of carrying this letter to Corinth. Like "Corinthian Letter A," this piece of correspondence is also lost.

10. Paul remained in Ephesus, where he faced some of the worst opposition to the gospel he had yet encountered. He refers to this in 2 Corinthians 1:8-10. In late 55 a.d. he left Ephesus and went to Troas, hoping to meet Titus there with news of how the Corinthians had responded to the "severe/tearful" letter. Much to his chagrin, Titus was not there (cf. 2 Cor. 2:13). Evidently he and Titus had planned to meet in Macedonia should the meeting in Troas not occur. Hence, Paul made his way to Macedonia, anxiously awaiting the arrival of Titus from Corinth. While in Macedonia he ministered to the churches there and began collecting money to send to the Christians in Jerusalem who were suffering from famine (cf. 2 Cor. 8:1-2). Titus finally arrived from Corinth with the good news for which Paul had prayed (the apostle's response is described in 2 Cor. 7:5ff.). However, not all the news from Corinth was encouraging. For example,

- some had become critical of Paul for what they perceived to be vacillation in his travel plans; as far as they were concerned, this proved him to be a fleshly or carnal man who made self-serving decisions according to earthly standards of conduct (2 Cor. 1:12,17);
- the collection begun by Titus for the church in Jerusalem had stalled (8:6,10; 9:2);
- despite what he had written in 1 Corinthians, some in the church had kept up involvement in the cultic and immoral life of the city (6:14-7:1; 12:2-13:2);
- Paul was still receiving criticism for his policy of not taking money from them but choosing rather to support himself;
- worst of all, the church in Corinth had been infiltrated by a group of false apostles who seriously undermined his authenticity as an apostle and thus his authority in the lives of the believers there.

11. It is now, in late 55 or early 56 a.d., that in view of these developments Paul sits down to write his fourth letter to the Corinthians. This letter is what we know as Second Corinthians. We will call it "Corinthian Letter D", a letter Paul hoped would prepare them for his third and final visit (2:2-3; 9:4; 10:2; 11:9; 12:14,20,21; 13:1,2,7,10).

12. In the summer or fall of 56, Paul makes his third visit to Corinth, where all is well. It is from Corinth at this time that he writes the Epistle to the Romans.

That, in a dozen easy steps, was the scenario of events in the up and down relationship between Paul and the church at Corinth. In all, Paul wrote them four letters, only two of which God providentially preserved for us in the New Testament.¹

- "Corinthian Letter A" - written in 54 a.d.; now lost (1 Cor. 5:9-11)
- "Corinthian Letter B" - written in late 54 a.d.; our First Corinthians
- "Corinthian Letter C" - written in the summer of 55 a.d.; it is commonly called the "severe" or "tearful" letter (2 Cor. 2:4,9); now lost
- Corinthian Letter D" written in late 55 or early 56 a.d.; our Second Corinthians.

Thus we see that Second Corinthians was written by Paul after he received the good news of how the Corinthians had responded to the severe letter (2 Cor. 7:5ff.). Paul is ecstatic that the church had repented and had even taken disciplinary action against the man who had opposed him. He must still on occasion explain his travel plans, the nature of his apostolic authority, and even issue a few warnings and rebukes. But even all this is couched in joy and confidence that the church in Corinth is growing and maturing in Christ.

¹

These two lost letters of Paul to the Corinthians were not the only ones he wrote that are nowhere to be found. In Colossians 4:16 Paul writes:

"And when this letter [Colossians] has been read among you, have it also read in the church of the Laodiceans; and see that you also read the letter from Laodicea."

Were these "lost" letters as inspired and infallible as those which were included in the canon? Yes, I believe so, especially given the fact that Paul's instructions in Colossians 4:16 envision the church hearing and heeding the content of both letters. Likewise, there's no indication in 1 Corinthians 5:9-11 and 2 Corinthians 2:4,9 that he viewed these "lost" documents as possessing a lesser moral authority than the canonical Corinthian correspondence. I can only conclude that the Colossian Christians (and Corinthians, as well as all others who had access to these "lost" epistles) were as morally obligated to believe and obey what Paul wrote in them as they were what he wrote in the epistles that eventually made their way into the biblical canon.

Why, then, didn't God preserve these and other apostolic writings for the church of subsequent generations? Evidently once these letters served their divinely designed function for the early church, God sovereignly arranged for their disappearance or destruction. In his infinite and gracious wisdom he determined that the content of those epistles was not essential for the life and faith of the church beyond the first century. Ultimately we must trust in divine providence and believe that God has preserved for us everything that is necessary for a life of truth and godliness.

Finally, if these so-called "lost" letters were suddenly found, perhaps similar to the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, should they be included in our canon of Scripture? It's a moot point, for I'm convinced they won't be found. If God deemed them essential for the life of the church in the twenty-first century (indeed, for the life of the church in the entire post-apostolic period), he would certainly have preserved them and providentially orchestrated their inclusion in the canon along with those documents that now constitute what we regard as Scripture. Therefore, I'll leave it to others to speculate on what the universal body of Christ should/would do if I happen to be proven wrong.

WHEN GOD'S PEOPLE SUFFER

We've witnessed several horrific disasters in recent weeks. I'm thinking of the devastating flood in Nepal, the earthquake in Haiti, the wildfires in the western U.S. and the on-going conflict in Ukraine and Iran. Nagging questions are often heard: "Where was God? Who is God?"

There are any number of answers to my initial question. Some need to know that not so much as a sparrow falls to the ground apart from our Father in heaven (Matthew 10:29). They, therefore, being "of more value than many sparrows" (v. 31) may rest assured that these events did not catch God by surprise.

Others need to be gently and lovingly reminded that none of us knows "what tomorrow will bring" (James 4:14a). Indeed, "what is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes" (v. 14b). Instead, they and we "ought to say, 'If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that'" (v. 15).

And certainly everyone should stand with confidence and unshakable assurance on this glorious truth, that God orchestrates all things, both blessing and blight, both triumph and tragedy, for the ultimate spiritual good of those who love him and "are called according to his purpose" (Romans 8:28).

But perhaps most important of all, Christians everywhere need to know what Paul believed the church "in Corinth" together "with all the saints" who were "in the whole of Achaia" needed to know (2 Corinthians 1:1), namely, that "the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ", who is most worthy of the affirmation and proclamation "blessed", is "**the Father of mercies**" and the "**God of all comfort**" (2 Cor. 1:3) "who comforts us in all our affliction" (2 Cor. 1:4a).

Paul didn't write this in some isolated and insulated ivory tower or from the perspective of a detached and out-of-touch theologian who himself never encountered pain and suffering and the confusion that tragedy so often elicits. He knew what it was like to endure "affliction" (2 Cor. 1:8) and to be "so utterly burdened" beyond one's strength that the only option left seemed to be death (v. 9a). He had tasted the bitter dregs of "deadly peril" (v. 10) and was well acquainted with the darkness of depression (2 Cor. 7:5-6).

This is a man who had suffered the physical horror of being stoned by an angry mob (Acts 14:19) and had felt the relentless emotional pressure of responsibility for the welfare of others (2 Cor. 11:28). This was a man who had endured "far more imprisonments" and "countless beatings" and was "often near death" (2 Cor. 11:23). Five times he had been thrashed with thirty-nine blows, three times was beaten with rods, not to mention having endured shipwreck and countless other dangers from both friend and foe (2 Cor. 11:25-26). He knew "toil and hardship" and sleepless nights, even hunger and exposure to the elements (2 Cor. 11:27).

So, when Paul describes our heavenly Father as one who is the source of mercy and the fount of all comfort, we need to take heed, for he knows whereof he speaks.

I suppose some who suffered greatly from these events might be inclined to curse God for what transpired. But as counter intuitive as it seems, Paul declares him "blessed" (2 Cor. 1:3), as one to be thanked and adored and praised! One would almost think Paul had read the book of Job: "Then Job arose and tore his robe and shaved his head and fell on the ground and worshiped. And he said, 'Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return. The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; *blessed* be the name of the Lord'" (Job 1:20-21).

There are two things in particular on which we need to focus in this passage. First, when Paul says that God is the "Father **of** mercies" and "God **of** all comfort", he means more than simply that mercy and comfort come from God. Yes, God most assuredly dispenses these wonderful blessings, but Paul is more concerned to tell us something about God's character, his personality, the disposition and inclination of his heart. In other words, we should read this passage something along the lines of: "the Father *who is characterized by* mercy" and "the God *whose heart delights in* giving comfort."

Yes, of course Paul is describing what God does. But even more foundational is what he says concerning *who God is* or *what he is like*. This is his nature, says Paul, his personality, not simply his performance. What he does is a reflection of who he is, and he is above all else characterized by tender-hearted compassion and gentleness and love and a passionate desire to encourage and strengthen those who are suffering hardship and hurt.

The second thing to note is the comprehensive scope of God's merciful and compassionate nature, for he is the "God of *all* comfort, who comforts us in *all* our affliction" (2 Cor. 1:3b-4a). The former phrase points to the fact that comfort of *every kind* comes from the heart of our Father. Whatever *sort* of comfort is needed, whatever its *nature*, you can trust God to be in plentiful supply. In accordance with his limitless compassion (cf. Ps. 145:9; Mic. 7:19), God provides his people with never-failing comfort of every variety (cf. Isa. 40:1; 51:3,12; 66:13)" (142-43).

And just how does God do this? What could he possibly say to us that would have this effect? Perhaps he brings to mind David's declaration: "I say to the Lord, 'You are my Lord; *I have no good apart from you*'" (Ps. 16:2). Or maybe Asaph's affirmation: "Whom have I in heaven but you? And *there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you*" (Ps. 73:25). Or Paul's promise: "*Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?* Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword, [or collapsing bridges]? . . . *No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us*" (Rom. 8:35,37).

I can't begin to know what so many people around the world and right here in our own city have suffered. But this I do know and can say with all confidence: "The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases; *his mercies never come to an end*; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. 'The Lord is my portion [not physical life or health or wealth],' says my soul, 'therefore I will hope in him'" (Lamentations 3:22-24).

CONDUITS OF DIVINE COMFORT

One thing that I've never heard said is that people profit the most from those who suffer the least. The most profound and lasting encouragement typically emanates from people who've experienced the deepest trials and greatest loss. When I'm hurting or wallowing in self-pity, I don't instinctively turn to those who've been insulated from pain or who've never tasted the bitter dregs of disappointment and heartache. People who've walked through "the valley of the shadow of death" and bear its scars are a greater inspiration to me than all the collective wisdom of those who remain safely isolated on the mountain top of spiritual triumph.

This isn't something widely embraced in our day. All too often we look on the healthy and wealthy and conclude they must be walking in lockstep with the Lord, while those who struggle and suffer and endure an endless succession of heartaches are deficient in faith and therefore disqualified from any meaningful ministry to others.

Two of my heroes are a standing rebuke to such unbiblical thinking. Few have had a greater impact on my life than the late Soviet dissident author Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn and quadriplegic Joni Eareckson Tada. The former endured the injustice of Stalin's gulag and the persecution of an atheist communist regime while the latter has spent the last sixty or so years paralyzed in a wheelchair. Yet their endurance and joy and resolute commitment to Christ have inspired millions, myself included.

Let's not be naïve. Solzhenitsyn and Tada, again like Paul, have each undoubtedly felt the pressure to yield to self-pity and bitterness. After all, few things have the power to turn us in upon ourselves as do affliction and inexplicable suffering. When we hurt, we rarely think of others. We expect them to think of us.

Both Solzhenitsyn and Tada openly confessed to their initial, indeed recurring, struggles with suffering. There have been times when they both prayed for death, wanting only to be delivered from an anguish that at times seemed senseless and unjust. I suppose some today would consider them failures, decidedly lacking in faith. How else, after all, does one explain their pain and constant battles? Surely this couldn't be "God's will", or could it?

Reflect for a moment on your own seasons of suffering and consider the two most likely questions that came to mind: **"Why me?"** and **"Does anyone care?"** The first is directed at God and implicitly accuses him of injustice. The second is aimed at others and explicitly charges them with insensitivity. But as I read this paragraph in 2 Corinthians 1, I hear Paul saying that there are two quite different questions that ought immediately to cross our lips: "Who else?" and "What for?"

I want to highlight two remarkable truths in vv. 3-7.

First, Paul clearly affirms that there is, what can only be called, a qualitative and quantitative *correspondence* between the intensity of human suffering and the availability of divine comfort. If there is an abundance of suffering, so too there is a supply of comfort that is more than adequate to sustain the hurting soul (see esp. v. 5).

No amount of human suffering can outstrip or exceed the resources in God's heart to bring comfort and sustenance and grace to see us through. You need never doubt whether God is up to the task of providing what your soul most needs to survive, even thrive, in the midst of the worst imaginable heartache and hardship. It was only because Paul was confident that God's comfort matched and exceeded his suffering that he was able to mediate that comfort to others when they faced similar, perhaps even more severe, trials.

Second, Paul also discerned a *divine design* in his hardship. What might appear haphazard and serendipitous to the human eye comes wrapped in the package of God's eternal purpose. Look closely at Paul's statement in v. 4 where he asserts that when God comforts us "in all our affliction" it is ***"so that*** we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God." Pain threatens to anesthetize us to any observable "so that". It seems so senseless, so random, so utterly lacking in good and devoid of a goal. But Paul won't hear of it. Whatever degree of suffering I've endured, says the apostle, it was ***to equip me to serve you*** who likewise endure affliction of body and anguish of soul.

This doesn't immediately resonate with many of us. We struggle to envision how our pain and hardship could possibly have any relevance for or bearing upon anyone else. If nothing else, Paul's confession "calls into question the individualism of modern Christianity and the sense of remoteness within and among many contemporary churches" (Barnett, 73).

But there's a vital lesson for us to learn in this truth. When afflicted, whatever its nature or source or perceived cause, stop and do two things: first, avail yourself of the corresponding comforts of Christ and, second, lift up your head, look around, and ask: "Who else, Lord?"

Here's how Paul put it in terms of his relationship to the Corinthians. "If we are afflicted, it is **for your** comfort and salvation; and if we are comforted, it is **for your** comfort, which you experience when you patiently endure the same sufferings that we suffer. Our hope **for you** is unshaken, for we know that as you share in our sufferings, you will also share in our comfort." Nothing in Paul's life was interpreted as existing or occurring solely for himself. It was **for them!**

What about Paul's use of the word "salvation" in v. 6? Certainly he is not claiming that his sufferings are redemptive, as if he accomplished in his body and soul what only Christ achieved at the cross. The word "salvation" may simply

refer more to their general well-being; i.e., spiritual safety and health, as well as joy and victory over sin (i.e., sanctification) rather than any notion of deliverance from divine wrath.

I'll be honest: I've never found obedience to this passage an easy thing. To look up and away from my own discomfort to take note of others for whose sake God is equipping me, runs counter to my instinctive fixation with self. That's why I must constantly be reminded: God's comfort is more than adequate to meet my needs so that he may meet the needs of others through me.

So, I hope the next time I hurt or am confused or perhaps am put upon unjustly, I'll not ask, "Why me, Lord?" but rather, "Who else?" Then, from the deep reservoir of abundant and wholly adequate strength that God supplies, I'll become a conduit for the life-giving, refreshing waters of divine comfort for which others so desperately thirst.

HOW DOES GOD COMFORT US IN OUR AFFLICTION?

The word "comfort" is found *ten times* in chapter 2 Corinthians 1:3–7. It's found a total of twenty-nine times in the letter, both in the noun and verb form.

But God does not comfort us the way we comfort one another. We try to comfort others by simply being physically present; a warm hug; doing tasks for someone who can't do it for themselves; speaking words of assurance; paying overdue bills; speaking truth, etc.

When I hear the word "comfort" I immediately think of my recliner, that large chair that allows me to rest while I watch OU or the KC Chiefs win their ballgames on TV. I would add to that a small table beside the chair on which are a Diet Coke and any number of pastries and chips. Of course, in this season of life, given the unbearable heat we've experienced, I would include a functioning AC system as essential to my comfort. The knowledge of having sufficient funds in my bank account would also go a long way to comfort me.

But that's not how God comforts us in our affliction and pain. He comforts us with reminders of his unfailing love; his assurance that our hope will never disappoint or put us to shame; he alerts us to the incredible reality of the forgiveness of our sins and the presence of Holy Spirit. He awakens us to the glorious truth of our adoption as God's children. He assures us of his abiding presence when we feel persecuted and all alone.

And he does all of this not only that we may find comfort in our distress and pain but also so that we may be equipped to comfort others with the same truths with which we have been comforted.

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