

## GET INTO THE STUDY



5 minutes

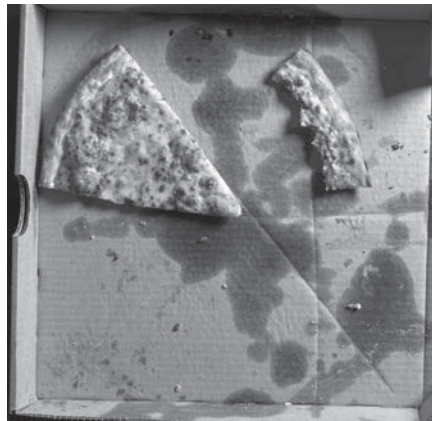
**SAY:** “In our last session, we looked at how God’s grace helps us overcome difficulties. Today we look specifically at how He uses us to bring comfort to others.” Invite members to turn to **page 3** in the **Personal Study Guide (PSG)** and review session titles.

**DISCUSS:** Draw attention to the picture (**PSG, p. 124**) as you introduce **Question #1: Where do you turn when you need comfort?**

**OPTION: IN ADVANCE,** print a copy of the news story about the death of Stephen Curtis Chapman’s youngest daughter, Maria. A link to this story can be found at **BibleStudiesForLife.com/AdultExtra**. Read aloud and discuss reactions to the story. **Ask:** How did the Chapmans experience God’s comforting grace?

## SESSION 4

# A CHANNEL OF COMFORT



### ***The Point***

I can be a channel of God’s comfort to others

### ***The Bible Meets Life***

No one is immune from trouble. No one wants to go through hardships, but sometimes life rains on us. Thankfully, God never abandons His children, and we can know the

power of His presence in the challenges we face. When we’ve walked through a hard season of life with God’s comforting grace, we can walk with others undergoing the same difficulties. We can encourage them with the love, grace, and comfort of Christ, who they see in us.

### ***The Passage***

2 Corinthians 1:2-7

### ***The Setting***

Paul wrote 2 Corinthians from Macedonia in about A.D. 56. He wrote to the church in Corinth in response to false teachers who had infiltrated the church. In the process of promoting themselves, these false apostles had sought to discredit Paul in the eyes of the Corinthian believers and questioned his position as an apostle. In writing 2 Corinthians, Paul sought to both defend his apostleship and expose his accusers as false teachers.

## 2 Corinthians 1:2-3

2 Grace be to you and peace from God our Father, and from the Lord Jesus Christ.

3 Blessed be God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies, and the God of all comfort;

*God is the source of comfort.*

**Verse 2.** As was the custom in correspondence at that time, Paul began his letter by identifying himself as the sender and “the church of God which is at Corinth” as the recipient (2 Cor. 1:1). Corinth was a city of about half a million people or more. Situated between Europe and Asia, the city was the cultural and economic hub of the province of Achaia, a crossroads for both travel and commerce. Paul also addressed the “saints”—believers in Christ—in that region in his letter.

**1**▶ Ancient letter writers typically began their epistles by mentioning their desire for the health and welfare of the recipients. In Paul’s case, his letters included a blessing for those to whom he wrote. Paul followed this pattern when he mentioned **grace ... and peace** as a part of his blessing.

Since Paul usually wrote to people from Jewish as well as Gentile backgrounds, it was common for him to include this dual greeting in his letters. *Grace* was a variation on the typical Gentile greeting while *peace* was a typically Jewish greeting. In Paul’s background and usage, however, these were more than just ordinary words shared in a greeting. They represent all it means to have a relationship with God through faith in Jesus Christ. *Grace* refers to the undeserved kindness and forgiveness we receive from God that save us from sin and allow us to become part of God’s family. But the word also includes the ongoing strength we must have from God to enable us to live out our faith—to live for Christ on this earth.

*Shalom* is the Hebrew word for *peace*; the term has a much richer meaning than our English word. While we typically equate peace with an absence of conflict, for the Jews it referred to wholeness and prosperity, especially in a spiritual sense. In the New Testament, peace with God is the greatest peace—what we experience in Christ when, as a result of His grace, we are no longer enemies of God. This peace is a result of both Christ’s work of salvation on our behalf and the presence of the Holy Spirit living in us, who brings an inner assurance no matter what is happening around us (Phil. 4:7).

**GUIDE:** Direct attention to **The Bible Meets Life (PSG, p. 125)**. Highlight the author’s story of how his niece’s death impacted his view of bringing comfort to others.

Reinforce the importance of bringing comfort to others by reading **The Point (PSG, p. 125): I can be a channel of God’s comfort to others.**

**PRAY:** Begin the Bible study with prayer. Ask God to help us see others’ needs and be willing to walk with them through their troubles. Thank Him for the comfort He gives to us that we may share with others.

### STUDY THE BIBLE 2 Corinthians 1:2-3



10 minutes

**GUIDE:** Before reading the passage, set the context by summarizing the information in **The Setting** on page 128.

**READ:** Ask a volunteer to read 2 Corinthians 1:2-3.

**LEADER PACK:** Point to **Item 11: Comfort.** Ask a volunteer to read the author's quote.



**GUIDE:** Use **Bible**

**Commentary 1** on page 129 and this page as well as **DIGGING DEEPER** on **PSG page 127** to explain Paul's greeting of "grace and peace."

**SUMMARIZE:** For further background on Paul's greeting, ask a volunteer to read the explanations of grace and peace (**PSG, pp. 126**).

1. **Grace.** *The common Jewish prayer combined mercy and peace, but Paul used grace instead of mercy. Mercy is certainly encompassed by God's grace, and grace is the foundation for all we have in Christ. Grace expresses what Christ did for us in giving us salvation.*

(Continued on next page.)

Paul noted that both grace and peace come **from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ.** Unfortunately, some people picture God as a vengeful, tyrannical being scowling down from heaven just waiting for opportunities to strike down people who do wrong; Paul, however, presented a very different view. Jesus emphasized God as our "heavenly Father" (Matt. 6:14,26,32; 15:13; 18:35; Luke 11:13) who longs to forgive, which is the picture Paul incorporated into his writings to help us understand this unseen God. Paul experienced and emphasized God as a forgiving and merciful God who gives grace so we can experience abundant and eternal life. We experience this life when we accept the salvation freely offered to us because of the death and resurrection of God's Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. ◀

**Verse 3.** Unlike the opening of almost all of Paul's other letters, 2 Corinthians does not include a word of thanksgiving for how the believers were growing in their faith. Nor does this letter include a prayer for the believers' continued growth. Similar to his letter to the Galatians, Paul apparently knew that little was worthy of note about how these Christians were developing as disciples.

Part of his change in style, however, could relate to the emphasis of this letter. Instead of focusing on the situation of his readers, Paul wanted to turn their attention to him. This was not from a selfish or egotistical motive. Rather, his intention was to remind the Corinthian believers of who he was and what he had done as an apostle of Christ. Tension still remained between the Corinthian believers and Paul because of his words to them in an earlier letter. Because of outside influences, some, perhaps many, of the Corinthians questioned his apostolic credentials and even his integrity. This despite the fact that just a few years earlier he led them to Christ and "continued there a year and six months teaching the word of God among them" (Acts 18:11).

Later in this letter Paul reminded the Corinthians of the hardships he had experienced because of his commitment to Christ (2 Cor. 11:23-27). Those physical and emotional trials would be enough to cause anyone experiencing them to give up. The difficulties were such that anyone who heard about them would have wondered how a person could even survive the trials. But Paul not only survived, he actually thrived despite the difficulties. This happened because of the **mercies** he received from God, his **Father**.

*Mercies*, or compassion, comes from a Greek word that means “pity.” It refers to a deep concern or empathy for someone who is experiencing misery and difficulty. It pictures an emotional connection with a suffering person; someone who is hurting because another person is hurting. The Greek word for *mercies* itself means to relieve one’s sorrows and/or meet their needs.

Paul presented our Heavenly Father as **the God of all comfort** who gives us what we need to continue our journey through this life when we think it’s impossible. *Comfort* in the New Testament is an action word. It refers to the actions of one who stands beside another who is going through pain or trouble. This partnership brings encouragement and especially strength to keep going regardless of the hardship. Comfort does not end the difficulty; rather, it gives a person the necessary strength to endure it. Solomon wrote in Ecclesiastes 4:10-12: “For if they fall, the one will lift up his fellow: but woe to him that is alone when he falleth; for he hath not another to help him up. Again, if two lie together, then they have heat: but how can one be warm alone? And if one prevail against him, two shall withstand him; and a threefold cord is not quickly broken.” Of course, while any person can show comfort to another, it is most perfectly seen in the actions of God.

Paul **blessed** God because of the Lord’s continuing mercies and comfort. A word of blessing or praise to God was common for Paul and others with a Jewish background (see Ps. 41:13). But the ultimate reason Paul praised God was that **Jesus Christ** was his **Lord**. God the **Father** sent Jesus Christ His Son to earth to bring about salvation for all who will repent and believe, placing their faith in Jesus. It was through his relationship with Christ that Paul could experience the fullness of mercy and comfort that comes from God.

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## 2 Corinthians 1:4-5

**4** Who comforteth us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort them which are in any trouble, by the comfort wherewith we ourselves are comforted of God.

**5** For as the sufferings of Christ abound in us, so our consolation also aboundeth by Christ.

**2. Peace.** Paul wrote to the Corinthians in Greek, but as a Jew, he was surely familiar with the Hebrew word for peace: shalom. Shalom was the common greeting, expressing a wish for health, completeness, and wholeness in a person’s life, both physically and spiritually. Paul intended an even deeper meaning for the word: the effect of God’s work in our lives through Christ. We have completeness and wholeness in Christ.

**SUMMARIZE:** God can use even the smallest of things to speak comfort into our lives (PSG, pp. 127-128).

- If you’re heartbroken over a relationship and experience a curious sense of comfort and peace from the warmth of the sun as you’re out for a morning walk, thank God for His comfort.
- If you’re grieving the loss of a loved one, and something you see reminds you of them and you laugh for the first time in weeks, thank God for that comforting memory.

A major way God speaks comfort to us is through His Word.

**DISCUSS:** Question #2 (PSG, p. 128): How specifically does God comfort you in your troubles?

(Alternate: What do these verses teach us about the character of God?)

**TRANSITION:** "In the next verses, Paul shared how comfort is most perfectly seen in the actions of God."

## STUDY THE BIBLE

### 2 Corinthians 1:4-5



15 minutes

**READ:** Ask a volunteer to read 2 Corinthians 1:4-5

**GUIDE:** Use **Bible Commentary 2** to describe the kinds of tribulation and hardships that we often face.

**SUMMARIZE:** Ask a volunteer to read some other things Jesus said that should bring us comfort (PSG, p. 129):

(Continued on next page.)

### KEY WORD

**consolation** (v. 5)—Occurring 10 times in verses 3-7 as *consolation* or forms of the word *comfort*, the Greek term means to stand alongside someone encouraging the person as he or she undergoes severe trials.

*We are called to be channels of God's comfort.*

**2** ▶ **Verse 4.** Continuing a major emphasis of his letter, Paul examined one of God's purposes in providing comfort for us. Because He is a good Father, God cares about us, His children, especially when we experience **tribulation**. The Greek term from which this word is translated pictures great pressure being exerted on something or someone. It is inward pressure resulting from outward circumstances. The *tribulation* could be either physical illness or difficulty or emotional stress (such as stress, anxiety, or oppression). Certainly Paul had suffered both aspects of *tribulation*, which he would mention later (in chapter 11).

Though believers will experience such struggles, we don't go through them alone. God is with us, to encourage and strengthen us, so we can continue even in the midst of these troubles. This is a blessing we receive from God. ◀

We can look at God's blessings in two ways. We can see them as ours alone to enjoy however we see fit. This is the "container" mind-set, where we picture ourselves like a bucket being filled with blessings for our own use. Or we can see God's blessings as given for us to share with others. This is the "conduit" mind-set, where we are channels through which His blessings can flow.

The conduit mind-set was what Paul had in mind in this verse. He emphasized that God **comforteth us ... that we may be able to comfort** others who experience **any trouble**. This receiving and giving concept is found elsewhere in Scripture. Abram experienced God's blessing and in turn would be a blessing to others (Gen. 12:2-3). Jesus told His disciples, "freely ye have received, freely give" (Matt. 10:8).

Notice this comfort we give to others doesn't come from ourselves—it comes from God. We don't have to provide the strength or encouragement others need in times of distress. We only need to receive it from God and then be available so that He can provide His comfort through us to others.

In our culture, comfort is often thought of as being freed from pain, suffering, and anxiety, accompanied by an emotional sense of relief and well-being. But this is not the comfort Paul wrote of in his letter. One commentator

describes the comfort that comes from God as “a stiffening agent that fortifies one in heart, mind, and soul. . . . God’s comfort strengthens weak knees and sustains sagging spirits so that one faces the troubles of life with unbending resolve and unending assurance.”<sup>1</sup>

**Verse 5.** Different people define *hardship* differently. Some would consider it a hardship to have the Internet go out at home, while others would reserve this term for major illness, job loss, and so forth. While such confusion is most likely a modern issue, Paul clarified for the Corinthians what he meant when he referred to “tribulation” (2 Cor. 11:4).

Commentators have had differing views on exactly what Paul meant when he referred to **the sufferings of Christ**. One possible explanation is that they refer to the difficulties believers face because of their commitment to follow Christ. While we may think we are being persecuted when the boss won’t allow us extra time off for a lunchtime Bible study, this is not really suffering. To gain a better perspective we should consider the believer in South Asia who loses his job because he is a follower of Christ; the Middle Eastern Christian whose home is burned because of words she spoke for Christ; or the African believer who is tortured because he was publicly baptized into the faith. Of course Christians suffer in other ways and believers are oppressed in other areas (including in the USA) because of their faith.

Some believers are surprised when they experience suffering. They have been led to believe those with enough faith will not have troubles. But nothing could be further from the truth! Christ suffered both physically and emotionally to bring about the salvation of humanity. Followers of Christ will share His sufferings. Jesus said it clearly: “If they have persecuted me, they will also persecute you” (John 15:20). He also promised, “In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world” (16:33).

**3** ▶ Paul emphasized that **the sufferings of Christ** will **abound in us**; that is, we will have an abundance or surplus of them. This is not an encouraging thought for anyone. Yet, Paul went on to explain that these sufferings will be balanced out by the **consolation** that **also aboundeth by Christ**; thus we receive a surplus of His encouragement, strength, and motivation. For Paul, the surplus of consolation or comfort far outweighed that of the sufferings. Part of that comfort was the final, future promise and hope of God in Christ. “For I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us.” (Rom. 8:18). Because of this abundance we receive, we, like Paul, are able to be channels of God’s comfort to others. ◀

- “Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest” (Matt. 11:28).
- “Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you: not as the world giveth, give I unto you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid” (John 14:27).

**DISCUSS: Question #3**  
(PSG, p. 129): **What are some ways you prefer to be comforted by others?**

**GUIDE:** Use **Bible Commentary 3** as well as the **KEY WORD** on page 132 (PSG, p. 128) to describe the sufferings of Christ and the *consolation* that we have through Him.

**DISCUSS: Question #4**  
(PSG, p. 130): **When have you had the privilege of comforting someone?**

(Alternate: *What emotions do you experience at the thought of comforting others?*)

**TRANSITION:** “The next verses demonstrate how we can be a comfort to others.”

## STUDY THE BIBLE

### 2 Corinthians 1:6-7



10 minutes

**READ:** Read or ask a volunteer to read 2 Corinthians 1:6-7.

**GUIDE:** Use **Bible**

**Commentary 4** to explain the purpose God has in our suffering as well as the endurance that He gives us through it.

**SUMMARIZE:** Share the example of Nelson Mandela and then emphasize the following (**PSG, pp. 131-132**):

*Suffering and comfort both are shared experiences for all believers in Christ.*

*We do not need to hide our pain as if we've got our act together. We suffer, but we also find comfort in Christ, and through His people who have endured similar struggles.*

*We then have a great opportunity for God to use us as our own journeys prepare us to comfort others facing similar affliction.*

## 2 Corinthians 1:6-7

**6** And whether we be afflicted, it is for your consolation and salvation, which is effectual in the enduring of the same sufferings which we also suffer: or whether we be comforted, it is for your consolation and salvation.

**7** And our hope of you is stedfast, knowing, that as ye are partakers of the sufferings, so shall ye be also of the consolation.

*We can use our difficulties to comfort others.*

**Verse 6.** The Corinthians may have been among those who thought suffering was inconsistent with the Christian life. Apparently they had questioned Paul's claim to apostleship because of his sufferings.

**4** ► Paul sought to correct this wrong thinking by emphasizing God had a purpose for his suffering. He pointed out that when he was **afflicted**, it was for the Corinthians' **consolation and salvation**. Paul was willing to endure pain and hardship to fulfill God's mission for his life. He had experienced great difficulties—including imprisonments, beatings, and shipwrecks—because of his commitment to sharing the gospel where others had not done so. The believers in Corinth had been among the many who came to know Christ because of Paul's commitment and his sufferings. In other words, they had benefited from Paul's sufferings, in that through those sufferings they had heard the gospel of Jesus Christ and received salvation. But rather than being grateful for the part Paul played in their salvation, they had turned away from him and embraced the false teachings of others who were leading them astray.

Because the Corinthians had seen and heard of Paul's faithfulness throughout his sufferings, they could learn from his example and remain faithful when they suffered. Often we forget that others are watching us when we go through difficulties. They may be unbelievers who want to know if there's any benefit to the Christian faith, or they may be immature Christians who wonder if God's promises are true for them. When we trust God is with us in our sufferings and

believe He will work in them for our good (Rom. 8:28), we can have a powerful impact on those who are watching us.

The **enduring** Paul mentioned does not refer to a reliance on some type of self-determination to get through a difficult situation. That is the mind-set of a coach who challenges athletes to “dig deep” or the human potential advocates who maintain we can get through any situation on our own, without the help of others, simply by calling up our own dormant power within. In the pagan world, the Greek term had such a meaning. It was used of a type of courage that was dependent solely upon oneself, that faced trouble without expecting to receiving help from anyone else. However, in Scripture the Greek term translated *enduring* has a very different meaning. The term refers to an unwavering confidence (usually directed toward God) that help is coming from someone else. Especially here it means trust in God—patiently waiting on His promised strength and help. This divine empowerment is what the Corinthians would need as they followed Christ, because as they lived for Him they would undergo **the same sufferings** Paul had experienced. ◀

**Verse 7.** The question remains, however, whether the Corinthians were really living for Christ. From Paul’s words in 1 Corinthians it often seems their lives showed little contrast to the lives of pagans (non-Christians) in Corinth. Unlike the believers in Thessalonica, who suffered because of their faith (1 Thess. 2:14), it doesn’t appear the Corinthian believers were actually experiencing any significant difficulty or opposition from unbelievers as a result of following Christ.

Even so, Paul’s **hope** for them was **steadfast**. This was not merely optimism that they would eventually do what was right. Paul’s hope for them was based on God’s work in them. Just as he emphasized to the Philippian believers (Phil. 1:6), Paul was certain God would finish what He had begun in the Corinthian believers—the completion of their salvation. This would certainly include **the sufferings** of Christ.

With the closing words of this section Paul again emphasized the connection between *sufferings* and **consolation** or comfort. Only when believers experience the sufferings of Christ can they likewise experience the comfort of Christ. It is through these sufferings and the comfort God provides that believers are conformed into the image of Christ (Rom. 8:28-39; Jas. 1:2-4). And when believers receive comfort from Christ, we not only have strength and endurance to keep going through our difficulties, trials, and tribulations, but also are able to comfort others who suffer as well and serve as examples to a watching world.

1. David E. Garland, *2 Corinthians*, vol. 29 in *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1999), 60.

**OPTION: IN ADVANCE**, play a clip of Nelson Mandela’s speech from *Invictus* in which he takes his previous suffering and uses it to bring about a positive outcome for others. A link to this video clip can be found at **BibleStudiesForLife.com/AdultExtra**.

**DISCUSS: Question #5** (PSG, p. 132): **How can these verses influence the way we serve one another?**

(Alternate: What obstacles prevent us from serving as channels of comfort?)

**DO:** Invite volunteers to share responses to the activity on **PSG page 132: “Experiencing Comfort.”**



**LIVE IT OUT****5 minutes**

**GUIDE:** Emphasize **The Point:**  
**I can be a channel of God's  
comfort to others.**

**REVIEW:** Review **Live It Out**  
(PSG, p. 133; see text to the  
right). Encourage each group  
member to follow through  
this week with at least one of  
the applications.

**WRAP IT UP**

**GUIDE:** Emphasize that God  
uses our difficult experiences  
to help us grow and to be a  
blessing to others.

**PRAY:** "Father, thank You for  
comfort through our difficult  
seasons. Thank You for using  
us to help others."

**NOTE:** Remind group  
members that **PSG pages 6-9**  
are there to journal one  
another's prayer requests.

**LIVE IT OUT**

God wants to use you to share His comfort with others.  
Choose one of the following applications:

- ▶ **Memorize James 1:2-4.** Pray this passage when you are experiencing suffering and affliction. Praise God and consider it a great joy the next time you experience hardship.
- ▶ **Pray.** Pray for the persecuted church in the world. Ask God to protect His bride, the church, to sustain and strengthen her. Ask Him to show you how you can share in the sufferings of the persecuted so that you can also share in their comfort.
- ▶ **Stay in touch.** The next time a friend, family member, neighbor, coworker, or loved one is sick or hurting, call him or her. Begin to pray with those who are struggling, instead of just praying for them. Listen to them and love them.

The comfort of Christ and the comfort of others are better than any comfort food. Even better than ice cream or pizza. Will you take advantage of this amazing gift?

BIBLICAL  
**ILLUSTRATOR**



*Cenotaphs* at the cave of Machpelah at Hebron honoring Rebekah on left and Isaac on right. The *cenotaph* is not the actual tomb, but a structure marking the site of the subterranean burial cave. Rebekah comforted Isaac after the death of his mother Sarah.

Today, when we think of a life of comfort we think of a life of ease, free from demanding work and filled with creature comforts. Sadly, our contemporary definition of comfort may skew our understanding of passages like 2 Corinthians 1 that speak of God's comfort.

The numerous occurrences of "comfort" (*paraklesis*) and "to comfort" (*parakaleo*) in 2 Corinthians highlight that

comfort is a major theme in the book. The word group appears 29 times in 21 verses in 2 Corinthians. Furthermore, Paul used the words 10 times in the first 7 verses of chapter 1. With so many occurrences of the word group within the book, context must determine the translation and meaning.

The context is clear that Paul was a man who knew troubles and who was writing to believers facing troubles of their own. In 2 Corinthians 1:3-4, Paul could say, "the God of all comfort . . . comforts us in all our affliction." Paul spoke not of a comfort that eases the affliction, but rather encourages and strengthens to endure the affliction. If the Corinthians had ever wondered how Paul survived troubles, now they knew: God's presence comforted, encouraged, and strengthened him.

The excerpt above is from the article "Comfort: A Word Study" (Fall 2014), which relates to this session. More *Biblical Illustrator* articles are available that relate to this session. See page 7 about *Biblical Illustrator*.

## SHARING THE GOOD NEWS

***Grace expresses what Christ did for us in giving us salvation. Peace is the effect of God's work in Christ. We have completeness and wholeness in Christ.***

Each week, make yourself available either before or after the session to speak privately with anyone in your group who wants to know more about becoming a Christian. See the article, "Leading Someone to the Greatest Decision of All," on page 2 for guidance in leading a person to Christ.

Remind group members that **page 2** in the **PSG** offers guidance in how to become a Christian. Encourage believers to consider using this article as they have opportunities to lead others to Christ.



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