The God of All Comfort

2 Corinthians 1:1-11

Key Verse: 1;3 “Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort.”

I really thank God who richly blessed ISBC 2023 in many ways. It is too early to evaluate the success of the conference, still I experienced God’s tender mercy and presence personally while I was serving Interest Group and Midwest Tour program. I believe that you also experienced the work of God during the conference and have good and bad memories. I will share my testimony about God’s presence later while I deliver this message.

2 Corinthians was written by apostle Paul at Macedonia around AD 55, not long after he sent his first letter to the Corinthians. At Macedonia Paul met Titus who brought the news of the Corinthian church and was greatly encouraged by their repentant life after they received Paul’s first letter. Now in his second letter Paul encourages them even more by asking them to participate in the sufferings of Christ. Today's passage teaches us the reason why Paul asks them to join the sufferings of Christ. He also plants in their hearts hope and confidence behind their sufferings.

First, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God (1-2) Paul starts with the Jewish traditional letter style by introducing himself first as the author. He called himself ‘***an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God.***” He wrote this in his first letter, too. (1 Co 1:1) Why did he repeat introducing his apostleship by the will of God? At that time there was a division in the Corinthian church. Some followed Apollos. Others followed Paul, Still, others followed Peter. They underestimated Paul’s leadership even though the church was established by Paul. This was because Paul was not one of the Twelve, known as ‘the Great Apostles.’ But Paul claimed that his apostleship came from Jesus Christ directly by the will of God. When Paul met the Risen Jesus on the way to Damascus, the Lord Jesus said to Ananias about Paul, “*Go! This man (Paul) is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel. I will show him how much he must suffer for my name*.” (Ac 9:15:16) Paul had confidence and assurance about his apostleship and God’s calling. We also need such a confidence and assurance about God’s calling as missionaries and Bible teachers. When we receive any challenge about our identity, we lose our heart and confidence. Especially when we don’t have any visible fruit or result, we doubt about God’s calling. But we must repent of our unbelief and despair. This is because we did not choose God, but God chose us and sent us here to bear fruit, the fruit of eternal life. (Jn 15:16) It is Satan’s work that makes us despair or doubtful. God did not give us the spirit of timidity, but the spirit of power, of love, and of self-discipline. (2 Ti 1:7) We are doing the work of God and serving the Lord by the will of God, not by my own will or other’s will. Therefore, we must learn Paul’s confidence written in his first letter, “*Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters. Stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain*.” (1 Co 15:58) Amen!

Second, the God of all comfort (3-7) After his brief greeting to the church, Paul immediately praised the God of comfort. Look at verse 3. “***Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort***.” Why did he mention the God of comfort first in the beginning of his letter? This was because the church people were suffering inwardly and outwardly for the sake of Christ. As we studied in his first letter, the church was struggling with its division, lawsuit among the believers, sexual immorality, worship order and other problems. They received challenges from in and out and suffered much in obeying Paul’s direction for the unity of the church. It is not easy for them and us to live a godly life among the godless people. Paul said in 2 Timothy 3:13, “*In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ will be persecuted.*” This is the reason why some Christians are afraid of identifying themselves as Christians in public and avoid ungodly meetings. As for us, even attending Sunday worship service and joining Bible study meeting requires our struggling. We must deny ourselves and take our cross daily and follow Jesus. While we are following Jesus, we are often hurt, broken and our hearts are wounded. Some of us participated in the meal service for ISBC 2023 as managers or volunteers. They had to stand several hours without eating to guide the hungry crowd and serve them. Their reward was exhaustion and to someone, COVID. It is not easy to follow Jesus and serve the Lord. It was the same as the believers in the Corinth Church. They were also exhausted and afraid in participating in the sufferings of Christ.

How did Paul encourage them? He taught the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort. Look at verses 3-4. “***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, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God.***” What is needed for those who suffer is comfort. What is necessary for those who are discouraged and broken is God’s comfort. When Abraham was discouraged by no child, he needed comfort. Our God is the Father of compassion. He knew the broken heart of Abraham who had no children for 10 years since he had obeyed God. How did God comfort Abraham? In Genesis 15:1 God appeared to Abraham in a vision and said, “*Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward.*” God did not create a son for Abraham right away. He did not promise to give a son, either. He just said that He himself is Abraham’s shield and his very great reward. God said that God himself is Abraham’s reward, not a son or a success. Indeed, God himself is our comfort. God himself is our shield, our security and safety. God himself is our great reward, not children’s success, our secure job or retirement plan. Their success and our good condition comfort us for a while, but not forever. Personally, I was comforted by Jesus’ promise from Revelation during the conference, from Revelation 1:18, “*I am the Living One; I was dead, and now look, I am alive for ever and ever!*” All men are like grass and all their glory of this earth are like flowers of the field. The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord stands forever. (Is 40:6-8) All comforts from this world last short. But the comfort from the eternal God lasts forever because our God is the Living God. Last Sunday morning Dr. Joseph Chung, a senior missionary in Chicago UBF and my dear coworker whom I worked for the last 10 years in Chicago, passed away. He had suffered from bladder cancer for years. But he had suffered mainly from loneliness and sorrow after he sent his wife missionary Esther Chung two years ago. Who could comfort Dr. Joseph Chung who had lost his lovely wife? He is Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort who died for our sins and rose again from the dead. Only Jesus who brought resurrection and eternal life can comfort us and Dr. Joseph!

After losing his wife, Dr. Josheph did not stay home or lie down in his bed in sorrow. But he went to the church to pray daily and taught the Bible to his students to the last day of his life. He had a resurrection faith and heavenly comfort. So, with the comfort which he received from God comforted others through the Bible study. When I visited him two weeks ago, he did not forget his hope for God’s kingdom and God’s calling as a missionary. I visited to comfort him, but I rather was comforted by his faith. Look at verse 5. “***For just as we share abundantly in the sufferings of Christ, so also our comfort abounding through Christ***.” This word means the more we suffer for Christ, the more we receive comfort from God. This is the reason why Paul wanted to know Christ more and even to participate in his suffering, becoming like him in his death. (Php 3:10) Don’t be sad or discouraged when you suffer for Christ. The more you suffer, the more you will receive heavenly rewards. Amen!

Third, he will continue to deliver us (8-11) In verses 6-7 Paul said that God’s comfort produces in them patient endurance of the same sufferings Paul suffered. Paul wanted them to share God’s comfort as they share sufferings for Christ. Now he testifies how he himself suffered for Christ and how he overcame all those sufferings. Look at verses 8-9a. “***We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about the troubles we experienced in the province of Asia. We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt we had received the sentence of death.***” During his second missionary journey, Paul visited Lystra and Derby, the province of Asia. In Lystra Paul met a man who had been crippled at birth. Paul saw that the man had faith to be healed and he called out, “Stand up on your feet!” The man jumped up and began to walk. The city people thought that the gods appeared as men and visited them. So, they began to worship Paul and Barnabas. Then, Paul rebuked their foolishness and taught them the good news of Jesus Christ. But some Jews who came from Antioch and Iconium won the crowd over. They stoned Paul and dragged him outside the city, thinking he was dead. But after the disciples had gathered around him, he got up and went back into the city. (Ac 14:8-20) In Philippi Paul healed a demon-possessed slave girl and gave her new life. Her master stirred up the crowd to send Paul and Silas to prison. Paul and Silas had to stay in a dark dungeon. In 2 Corinthians 11:16-33 Paul boasted about his sufferings in this, “*I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again. Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was pelted with stones, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my fellow Jews, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false believers. I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches...”* (Ac 11:23-28) Paul was not sorrowful about all these sufferings. Rather, he boasted about his sufferings for Christ. How did he do so? Look at verse 9b. “***But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves, but on God, who raises the dead***.” Paul said that all these things happened to him so that he might not reply on himself, but on God who raised the dead. Paul accepted God’s divine and good purpose in his sufferings. There are reasons in our sufferings behind the scenes. God wants us not to rely on ourselves, but on God himself. Thomas A Campus said in his book, “The Imitation of Christ”, “There are two reasons why God gave us sufferings. The first reason is that through sufferings God wants us to depend on God, not on ourselves. The second reason is that through sufferings God wants us to put our hope in his kingdom, not on this earth. Indeed, God strengthen our faith through sufferings. Suffering makes us strong and faithful. Paul said, “*suffering produces perseverance, perseverance, character; and character, hope*.” (Ro 5;3-4) We must not despair or lose heart when we suffer for Christ. This is because there is God’s good and divine purpose in our sufferings and because it is time for us to completely depend on God, not on ourselves. Our sufferings will pass away, and they will remain as our wonderful and beautiful testimonies when we overcome them. Our God is the Father of compassion and God of all comfort. He will help us and raise us up as he raised Jesus from the dead. Amen!

Look at verse 10. “***He has delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us again. On him we have set our hope that he will continue to deliver us***.” After his third missionary journey Paul returned to Jerusalem where he was arrested by the Sanhedrin. Paul testified to his faith before them. Then the forty Jewish mob had a plot to kill Paul on the way to the Roman commander. But Paul’s nephew overheard their plot and told this to Paul, who asked the centurion to escort him on his way for his defense. In this way God frustrated his enemy’s plot and delivered Paul from their hands. God delivered Paul from such dangerous situation again and again during his mission trip. Paul had assurance for God’s unceasing deliverance. He said that God delivered him, delivers him again and will continue to deliver him. Hebrews 13:8 says, “*Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.*” Jesus who has delivered us from sin and death, delivers us again, and will continue to deliver us. How long? He will deliver us until we meet Jesus Christ face to face and until we reach to the heavenly harbor safely. He is the Alpha and Omega. He is the Living One. I had a chance to share my life testimony with one guest from Korea during our Midwest Tour. At that time, I remembered how God delivered me from such life-threatening danger. When I was in elementary school, I drowned in a river. At that time God sent a young man to rescue me from the river. Twenty years ago, I was hit by a car whose driver was drunken. I should be killed on spot if another car didn’t stop that car before it hit my car. Four years ago, I got a cardiac arrest. But God delivered me again through my family and a medical team. God had delivered me once, delivered me again, and will continue to deliver me. This is not only my story, but your story, too. Remember how God has delivered you from the deadly peril and dangerous moment. God who delivered you will deliver you again. He will continue to deliver you whenever you are in need and wherever you are in danger. We are greatly comforted when we believe this and when we set our hope on this.

In conclusion we need comfort in this stressful and difficult generation. We find true comfort in God’s compassion and his faithfulness. We are comforted when we realize that our sufferings have meaning in Christ Jesus. We are comforted when we believe God’s faithfulness and his deliverance. May God richly bless you with God’s comfort and your hope for eternal life.