

GET INTO THE STUDY



5 minutes

DISCUSS: Draw attention to the picture on **PSG, page 124** as you introduce **Question #1:**

What's your favorite comfort food?

GUIDE: Direct attention to **The Bible Meets Life, on PSG page 125**. Highlight the author's list of sources of comfort and ask group members to add other examples. Then share the author's experience with discovering the importance of being comforted in grief.

SAY: "We are to comfort others in their time of need."

Stress that when we receive God's comfort in the hard seasons of life, we come to understand **The Point (PSG, p. 125): I can be a channel of God's comfort to others.**

PRAY: Begin the Bible study with prayer. Ask for God to open the eyes of our heart to discover our need for comfort and how to comfort others.

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 to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

3 Blessed be the God and 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 for correspondence in his time, Paul began his letter by identifying himself as the sender and the church at Corinth as the recipient. 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 (2 Cor. 1:1).

1▶ Ancient letter writers typically began their letters 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—grace and peace—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 saves us from sin and allows 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.

The Hebrew word for **peace** (*shalom*) 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, the greatest peace is peace with God—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 regardless of what is happening around us (Phil. 4:7).

STUDY THE BIBLE 2 Corinthians 1:2-3



10 minutes

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

READ: Read or summarize **The Bible Meets Life** on page 128 to introduce this session. When we go through hard times, we need to know that God is with us. When we have experienced God’s comfort, we can offer that same comfort to others who are in distress.

READ: Read or ask a volunteer to read 2 Corinthians 1:2-3.

GUIDE: Refer members to **PSG page 126** to the definitions of grace and peace.

1. *Grace expresses what Christ did for us in giving us salvation.*
2. *The Hebrew word for peace, shalom was a common greeting, expressing a wish for health, completeness, and wholeness in a person’s life. Paul intended an even deeper meaning for the word: we have completeness and wholeness in Christ.*

SUMMARIZE: Use **Bible Commentary 1** on page 129 and this page to give further explanation of the terms *grace* and *peace*.

- *Grace—undeserved kindness and forgiveness we receive from God*
- *Peace—wholeness and prosperity, especially in a spiritual sense.*

SUMMARIZE: Use **Bible Commentary 2** on this page and page 131 to give explanation to the terms *mercy* and *comfort*.

- *Mercy—compassion, deep concern for someone who is experiencing misery, to relieve someone's sorrow.*
- *Comfort—encouragement, to stand beside another who is going through pain or trouble.*

DISCUSS: Question #2
(PSG, p. 127): **How specifically does God comfort you in your troubles?**

(Alternate: When have you been comforted by God?)

Paul noted that both grace and peace come from **God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ**. While some people picture God as a vengeful, unloving being looking down from heaven just waiting to punish people who do wrong, Paul presented a very different view. Jesus emphasized God as our Heavenly Father, 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 had little that was noteworthy to mention 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. There was still tension between the Corinthian believers and Paul because of his words to them in an earlier letter. Because of outside influences, some (if not 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 spent 18 months teaching them God's Word (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**.

2 ▶ *Mercy*, or compassion, comes from a Greek word that means "pity." It refers to a deep concern 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 *mercy* 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. While any person can show comfort, it is most perfectly seen in the actions of God.

Paul blessed God because of the Lord's continuing mercy 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. ◀

2 Corinthians 1:4-5

4 He comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any kind of affliction, through the comfort we ourselves receive from God.

5 For just as the sufferings of Christ overflow to us, so also through Christ our comfort overflows.

KEY WORD: Comfort (v. 5)—Occurring 10 times in verses 3-7 (including "receive" in v. 4), 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.

3 ▶ 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 **affliction**. The Greek term from which this word is translated pictures great

GUIDE: Refer group members to **PSG page 127** to the bullet points that give examples of how God brings comfort to us:

- *If you're heartbroken over a relationship . . .*
- *If you're grieving the loss of a loved one . . .*

TRANSITION: "In the next verses we will discover that when God comforts us, He desires for us to then comfort others."

STUDY THE BIBLE 2 Corinthians 1:4-5



10 minutes

READ: Read or ask a volunteer to read 2 Corinthians 1:4-5.

GUIDE: Refer members to **Key Words** on this page and on **PSG page 128: Comfort**. For more information on the term *comfort*, refer group members to **PSG page 129 to Digging Deeper: "Comfort: A Word Study."**

SUMMARIZE: Use **Bible Commentary 3** on page 131 and this page to define the word *affliction*:

- *affliction—great pressure being exerted on something or someone. Inward pressure resulting from outward circumstances, such as stress, anxiety, oppression or distress.*

SAY: "Though believers will experience struggles, we don't go through them alone. God is with us to encourage and strengthen us."

SUMMARIZE: Use **Bible Commentary 4** to explain the difference between being a container that is only being filled compared to a conduit that distributes and shares what is flowing in.

DISCUSS: **Question #3 (PSG, p. 128):** What are some ways you prefer to be comforted by others?

pressure being exerted on something or someone. It is inward pressure resulting from outward circumstances. The affliction could be either physical or emotional difficulty (such as stress, anxiety, oppression, or distress). Certainly Paul had suffered both aspects of affliction, 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 afflictions. This is a blessing we receive from God. ◀

4 ▶ There are two ways we can look at God's blessings. We can see them as ours alone to enjoy however we see fit. This is the container mindset, where we are like a bucket that is being filled. Or we can see God's blessings as given for us to share with others. This is the conduit mindset, where we are channels through which His blessings can flow.

The conduit mindset was what Paul had in mind in this verse. He emphasized that God comforts us **so that we may be able to comfort** others who experience **any kind of affliction**. This receiving and giving concept is found elsewhere in Scripture. Abram experienced God's blessing and in turn was to be a blessing to others (Gen. 12:2-3). Jesus noted that His disciples had freely received; thus they were to freely give (Matt. 10:8).

Notice that this comfort we give to others doesn't come from ourselves. Rather, it comes from God. We don't have to provide the strength or encouragement others need in their times of distress. We only need to **receive** it from God and then be available so 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. The comfort that comes from God is "a stiffening agent that fortifies one in heart, mind, and soul. Comfort relates to encouragement, help, exhortation. God's comfort strengthens weak knees and sustains sagging spirits so that one faces the troubles of life with unbending resolve and unending assurance."¹ ◀

5 ▶ Verse 5. Different people have different definitions of hardship. For some, having the Internet go out at home is considered a hardship, while others would reserve this term for a major illness, the loss of a job, and so forth. While this confusion is more likely a modern issue, Paul clarified for the

Corinthians what he meant when he referred to afflictions.

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 our company or 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 there are other ways Christians suffer because they proclaim the name of Christ and there are other areas (including in the USA) where believers are oppressed because of their faith.

Some believers are surprised when they experience suffering. They have been led to believe that those with enough faith will not have troubles or difficulties. 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 persecuted me, they will also persecute you" (John 15:20). He also promised that His followers would experience suffering in this world (16:33). Many of the apostles echoed this truth in their own writings (2 Tim. 3:12; Heb. 10:32-34; Jas. 1:2-4; 1 Pet. 2:21; 4:12-16). ◀

Paul emphasized that Christ's sufferings will **overflow to 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 **comfort** we receive **through Christ**. It also **overflows** to us through Christ, thus we receive a surplus of His encouragement, strength, and motivation. For Paul, the surplus of comfort far outweighed that of the sufferings. Part of that comfort was the final, future promise and hope of God in Christ. "For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is going to be revealed to us" (Rom. 8:18). Because of this abundance we receive, we, like Paul, are able to be channels of God's comfort to others.

SUMMARIZE: Use **Bible Commentary 5** on page

132 and on this page to demonstrate that *hardships* and *afflictions* mean different things to different people. Compare and contrast the hardship of a bad traffic day to someone being persecuted for their faith. Point out that the sufferings of Christ is balanced by the comfort we receive through Christ.

SAY: "Because of the abundance of comfort we receive, we are able to be channels of God's comfort to others."

DISCUSS: Question #4
(PSG, p. 130): **When has God used you to comfort someone?**

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

TRANSITION: "Paul realized that through his hardships he could be an example to others. God is faithful to provide abundant comfort to all who suffer."

STUDY THE BIBLE

2 Corinthians 1:6-7



15 minutes

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

SUMMARIZE: Use **Bible Commentary 6** to explain how Paul's experience of enduring affliction and hardship was beneficial to the church at Corinth.

LEADER PACK: Point to **Item 11: Comfort.**



Read the following quote from

PSG page 130:

“Since you have comfort in Christ, you can and should be a comfort to others—a broken vessel bringing comfort to other broken vessels.”

2 Corinthians 1:6-7

6 If we are afflicted, 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 that we suffer.

7 And our hope for you is firm, because we know that as you share in the sufferings, so you will also share in the comfort.

We can use our difficulties to comfort others.

Verse 6. The Corinthians could 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.

6 ▶ Paul sought to correct this wrong thinking as he emphasized God had a purpose for his suffering. He noted that his afflictions were for the Corinthians' **comfort 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 Corinthian believers had been among the many who came to know Christ because of Paul's commitment and his sufferings. The Corinthians 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 they had seen and heard of Paul's faithfulness despite 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 **patient endurance** Paul mentioned does not refer to a reliance on some type of self-determination to get through a hard task or difficult situation. That is the mindset of a coach who challenges athletes to “dig deep” or the human potential advocates who proclaim 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 the expectation of receiving help from anyone else. However, in Scripture the Greek term translated *patient endurance* 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 **firm**. 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 **comfort** and **sufferings**. 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.

DISCUSS: Question #5

(PSG, p. 132): How can these verses influence the way we care for one another?

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

DO: Complete the activity “The God of All Comfort” on PSG page 132.

OPTIONAL ACTIVITY:

When Comforting Others

Create two lists. Use the following list for prompts:

What Not to Say or Do

- “I know how you feel.”
- “This will turn out for good.”
- “You shouldn’t feel that way.”
- Don’t offer advice.
- Don’t be condemning or judgmental.

What to Say and Do.

- “I love you.”
- “I’m so sorry.”
- “I’m here for you.”
- “You are not alone.”
- Be silent
- Be present.
- Listen
- Pray

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 we
have all gone through seasons
of heart-ache and grief when
we needed to be comforted
by the God of all comfort. Most
of us have been ministered
to by brothers and sisters in
Christ who have comforted us
with the same comfort they
received from God when they
went through a similar time.

PRAY: "Father, thank you for
Your comfort in our times of
grief. Help us to comfort others
in their times of grief."

LIVE IT OUT

God wants to use you to share His comfort with others.

- ▶ **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, sustain her, and strengthen her. Ask God to show you how you can live out 2 Corinthians 1:7 for the persecuted church: to share in their sufferings 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.



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.