

Teaching Plan EXPLORE THE BIBLE

Date: April 29, 2018

Lesson Title: "Enjoying God's Comfort"

Lesson Passage: 2 Corinthians 1:3-11

ABOUT THIS LESSON

The theme of this lesson, pinpointed in 2 Cor. 1:3-4, is that God comforts us in times of trouble in order to equip us to comfort others. But the biblical word "comfort" goes beyond the meanings we usually assign to it. Rather than "soothe" or "sympathize," it means "give courage" and "strengthen." To make his point, Paul recalls some of his own perilous experiences in the hope that his confrontations with hardship will give the Corinthians courage when they face similar troubles.

TEACHING/LEARNING GOALS

(1) Explain the meanings of the Greek words that are usually translated "affliction" and "comfort" in Paul's letter to Corinth. (2) Identify at least one positive outcome of painful experiences.

BEGINNING THE LESSON

In ancient England, one form of execution was death by "pressing," an operation in which a person lying prostrate on the ground had heavy stones piled on him until the accumulated weight crushed the life out of him. That gives us a vivid picture of the meaning of a word used by Paul in 2 Cor. 1:4. The Greek word *thlipsis* (usually translated "affliction," "trouble" or "distress") originally referred to actual physical pressure on a person, like the weight of those stones. So, if we take Paul literally, in 2 Cor. 1:4, he is referring to "all our pressures." We understand that kind of language, for we know what it means to be "under pressure," whether it comes from a flat tire in rush-hour traffic on a rainy day, or a deluge of unpaid bills, or having all our children come down with chicken pox at the same time. We experience pressures growing out of family life, business affairs and--dare we say it?--church life. In bookstores we find titles like How to Manage Pressure Before it Manages You. But the good news is this: "The God of all comfort comforts us in all our pressures."

TEACHING PROCEDURES

1. *Ask class members to count the number of times the word "comfort" appears, as a verb or a noun, in 1 Cor. 1:3-7. (Paul uses the word ten times in these five verses.) Then comment on the meaning of the verb, parakaleo, the Greek word for "comfort."* Though this word is translated "comfort," it doesn't mean "console" or "express sympathy," the meaning we usually associate with "comfort." Rather, the term *parakaleo*, is a strong word, a vigorous word that means "strengthen, embolden, stir up." (It comes from the same root as "fortify.") It denotes the kind of comfort that comes not from easing the pressure, but from encouraging a person to stand the pressure. The Greeks used the word to describe the act of kindling a fire by blowing on live coals. ILLUSTRATION: On the Bayeux tapestry, which chronicles the Norman conquest of England, one panel shows William the Conqueror prodding some soldiers with the point of his spear. The caption reads, "William comforts his troops."

2. *Highlight two significant ideas in verses 3 and 4:*

First, the Lord is the "God of all comfort," who fortifies us with strength to cope with the pressures that beset us. The channel of God's comfort is the Holy Spirit, described by Jesus as the *parakle-*

tos (“comforter, strengthener”) in John 14:16. ILLUSTRATION: A patriot in an eastern European country, who had been imprisoned by the Communists, told a seminary audience that one day at dawn he found himself facing a firing squad in a prison courtyard. At the last moment, as rifles were leveled at him, the execution was called off. “Not until that moment,” he said, “did I fully know the truth of our Lord’s words, ‘Lo, I am with you always’.” Then he added, “We will never know the fullness of his comfort until we stand with our backs to the wall.”

Second, when we find the comfort of God through our own painful experiences, this heightens our ability to comfort others (“so that we may be able to comfort those who are in affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God,” v. 4). APPLICATION: Only those who themselves have lost a companion can truly say to a grieving widow, “I understand.” Walking through dark valleys authenticates our attempts to comfort those who walk those paths.

3. *Observe that, in verses 6 and 7, Paul is personalizing the truth that when we experience God’s comfort in the midst of troubles, this equips us to extend comfort (encouragement) to fellow Christians when they themselves are distressed.* EXPLANATION: (1) In v. 6, he is saying, “Whenever we (i.e., Paul and his companions) suffer, and experience God’s help, it encourages you when you suffer similar experiences. (2) And in v. 7, “So we are confident about you, because we know that when you experience the same kinds of pressures we have endured, you will be helped by the same kind of divine comfort that we have received.”

4. *Comment on 2 Cor. 1:8-11:* (1) To further illustrate his point, Paul refers to an exceptionally painful experience he suffered in Asia, when he came so close to dying that he gave up all hope of staying alive (vv. 8b and 9a). (2) But this painful experience taught him a great lesson; namely, that we should rely on God, not ourselves (v. 9b). God had saved him and his associates from death in the past, and He would continue to save them in the future (v. 10) as the Corinthians remained faithful in their prayers for them (v. 11).

CLOSING THE LESSON

Read the following stanza from the hymn, “Be Still My Soul”:

"Be still, my soul: the Lord is on thy side;
Bear patiently the cross of grief or pain;
Leave to thy God to order and provide;
In every change He faithful will remain."

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