



Dr. Robert A. Cook

The Ministry of Comfort

Each of us cries out for
"the comfort of God."
And each of us may
also be instruments in
God's hands to help
others through...



“The Ministry of Comfort”

By Dr. Robert A. Cook



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Can you remember a time when, as a young child, you stubbed your toe or skinned your knee or otherwise injured yourself in the course of your playing?

If your mother was nearby you no doubt ran to her, crying bitterly all the way. And what did she do?

In all probability she took you in her arms and quieted your sobbing. She dried your tears and perhaps put a Band-Aid on the place that hurt. Above all, she gave you comfort—that indescribably sweet emotion that makes any difficulty bearable.

You are older now. Tell me, are there not times when you long for the warm touch of one skilled in comfort-giving?

That tender-hearted preacher P. W. Philpott, at one time pastor of the Moody Church in Chicago, repeatedly used to receive this advice from his perceptive helpmeet: “Preach about God’s comfort, Peter. There are so many people who are hurting.”

I would like, if I may, to follow that advice with you as it has come down through the years.

The word “comfort,” the dictionary tells us, carries with it the meaning of assistance ... support ... consolation in trouble or worry ... relief ... encouragement.

Whenever you are hurting, God wants you to sense His nearness and to care for you, especially if you are His child by faith in Jesus Christ.

Hear His yearning voice through His prophet Isaiah, *“Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith the Lord.” (Isa. 40:1)*

Catch a glimpse of the method He uses: *“As one whom his mother comforteth, so will I comfort you.” (Isa. 66:13)*

See the relation between comfort RECEIVED and comfort PASSED ON, as Paul makes this clear. He writes:

“Blessed be God ... the Father of mercies, and the God of all comfort, who comforteth US in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort THEM WHO ARE IN ANY TROUBLE, by the comfort wherewith we ourselves are comforted of God.” (2 Cor. 1:3,4)

The point is clear, isn't it? We are given comfort, not merely for our own enjoyment of peace of heart (though we do receive that, blessedly), but also for enablement in extending comfort to others.

Who can teach us more about this blessed relationship?

The Apostle Paul can. In the latter part of his letter to the Colossians he named several individuals who, he said, were the actual embodiment of divine comfort! He declared, "THEY [themselves] have been a COMFORT unto me." (Col. 4:11) Who are these persons and what can they teach us?

ONESIMUS: The Comfort of Being Accepted (v. 9)

ARIST ARCHUS: The Comfort of Shared Suffering (v. 10)

JOHN MARK: The Comfort of a New Start (v. 10)

JUSTUS: The Comfort of Togetherness (v. 11)

EPAPHRAS: The Comfort of Continuing Prayer (v. 12)

Let us look at these friends of long ago to learn what they may have for our modern daily living.

The Comfort Of Being Accepted

"Onesimus, a faithful and beloved brother" ... (Col. 4:9)

Joined with Tychicus to become what we might call a "gospel team," Onesimus is the better-known one of these two outstanding believers.

Together they were the bearers of this epistle to the saints in Colosse.

Onesimus was a slave owned by Philemon. More of his history is in the little book of that name, although even there the full story is not told.

Our guess is that this young man ran away, perhaps absconding with money or goods that belonged to his master.

In Rome he met up with Paul, the ever-alert soul winner. It is not surprising that the apostle's first concern was to lead the young wanderer to saving faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Immediately, Onesimus was accepted by Paul as a fellow believer,

“my son, whom I have begotten in my bonds.” (Philemon 10) What unspeakable comfort those words must have brought to the young vagabond!

Here, too, is a beautiful picture of redemption. Onesimus, a guilty slave, had nothing to commend him to Philemon, whom he had wronged. But he now had a great friend, one well able to plead his case, one even ready to pay himself for the misdeeds of his “son.”

You and I likewise have no merit of our own to claim before the righteous Judge. We have run away in disobedience and rebellion—we and every other child of Adam. But there is a Friend, able and willing to intercede for us.

“God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.” (Rom. 5:8)

He paid the penalty for our sin nature and all its consequences. He died, the just for the unjust, that He might bring us to God.

When we own up to our total sinfulness, when we admit our complete inability to help ourselves, when we receive Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, we are” ACCEPTED in the Beloved.”

My friend, has that been your experience? It is the only way to the enjoyment of everlasting comfort and peace of heart under every circumstance.

For Onesimus it was necessary that he be accepted also by Philemon. The slave had to return to the place from which he had gone astray. Paul is sending a born-again Onesimus back to Colosse with a loving letter introducing its bearer, not as a run-away slave but as a returning brother. We are not told what Philemon’s response was. (But who could withstand Paul’s gentle persuasion?)

Who is there, I wonder, whom I should accept as a “beloved brother [or sister] in Christ?” That person may not be of my social standing or blessed with education and opportunities as I have been or free of misdeeds. But that one truly loves Jesus Christ as I do. Help me to know that that person may be for me, as Onesimus was for Paul, the embodiment of the Lord’s own COMFORT. Lord, let me embrace such a one with joy!

The Comfort Of Shared Suffering

“Aristarchus, my fellow prisoner” ... (Col. 4:10) What do we know about this man? The first New Testament reference to him is in Acts 19. At that time Paul was in Ephesus, preaching and teaching; a tremendous revival was going on.

“Many of those that believed ... openly confessed their evil deeds. A number who had practiced sorcery brought their scrolls and burned them publicly In this way the word of the Lord spread widely and grew in power.” (Acts 19:18-20 NIV)

This revolutionary action stirred the whole community. A central figure in the uproar was Demetrius, a silversmith who crafted shrines of Artemis (Diana) which were in turn sold to other craftsmen. Together they enjoyed a thriving business. Demetrius spoke his mind:

“He [Paul] says that man-made gods are no gods at all. There is danger not only that our trade will lose its good name, but also that the temple of the goddess Artemis will be discredited, and the goddess herself, who is worshipped throughout ... the world, will be robbed of her divine majesty.” (Acts 19:26,27)

Furious rioting ensued. Some were shouting one thing and some another. Most of the people did not even know why they were there. Aristarchus and Gaius, Paul’s traveling companions, became objects of the crowd’s rage. But they did not demur, even when they were roughly seized and pushed into the amphitheater where, presumably, “appropriate” punishment awaited them.

What does this account say to us? It tells us that we ought to be prepared to be singled out (as Aristarchus was) from and by the unbelieving crowd that demands to know just how serious our relationship to Jesus Christ really is.

It is impossible to remain comfortably anonymous when great issues are involved.

Anyone who has a real experience with the Lord Jesus is bound to be identifiably Christian in relation to issues he or she must face. Sometimes this Christian stance involves accepting trouble and loss; sometimes God chooses to use a courageous testimony for His greater glory.

I have a friend, retired now, who was for many years a banker in New York City in a position of marked distinction. He told me that on one occasion his superior officer asked him to do something that appeared dishonorable to the banker as a Christian.

Without hesitation my friend said to his boss, "Sir, I am a Christian. I cannot do what you ask of me because, in my view, it would be dishonorable to do so."

The man's face grew red with rage. He pounded his desk. "Get out of here!" he shouted. My friend thought for sure he would be dismissed. He began to clean out his desk preparing to leave.

Sure enough, after a little while there came a buzz on the intercom and a request for the outspoken employee to present himself in his superior's office.

The Christian thought, "Here it comes! I'm finished. I'm going to be fired."

The official looked at his fellow worker, smiled and called him by name. "Sit down," he said, with a cordiality he had lacked a short time before.

He went on to tell my friend, "I disagree with what you said to me a little while ago. But I respect you for being a person of integrity. In fact, I respect you so much that I have a request to make of you: when I die, I want you to speak at my funeral."

Instead of losing a means of livelihood (as he feared he would), God's man received continued employment-with added responsibility.

In the course of time the senior officer did die, and my Christian friend fulfilled his promise to speak at the banker's memorial service. Knowing him, I am sure his brief message exalted Christ.

Sometimes it is the shared suffering that God wants to use.

Our friend Aristarchus is next heard from in the book of Acts. Paul is now a prisoner, en route to Rome.

"Entering into a ship [Paul wrote] we ... set sail by the coasts of Asia, one ARISTARCHUS being with us." (Acts 27:2)

Aristarchus is still on the job, still sharing with Paul in suffering for the sake of the gospel.

I think we have to admit that most of us are what we might call spectator Christians. We look on, declining to be a part of the action. We are not "there" for some dear Christian leaders who need us.

Wherever you live there is somebody in a situation similar to Paul's, and you are near enough to be a source of help, if you choose to be. I urge you, beloved, get with your pastor or an evangelist you know ... or a missionary or a Christian radio broadcaster. Really stick by that individual by prayer, by giving, by loving encouragement.

A final reference to Aristarchus is in Philemon 24. Paul is in prison-but his dear fellow traveler is there! As was always his custom, the great apostle used his forced restrictions as a background for his giving forth the gospel. Proof of this fact is found in the book of Philippians where reference is made to the "household of Caesar" - persons who came to Christ through Paul's ministry in prison. Aristarchus was there!

I think that when Paul chanced to look up and see his fellow sufferer near by, he must have felt like saying, "O my brother, the sight of you lifts my spirits! You have suffered, right alongside me, right up to this hour. You are truly the COMFORT of God to my heart."

I want to be like Aristarchus, don't you? I want to be able to "be there" for my fellow Christian, to share suffering in order to experience comfort, and to pass it on.

Paul speaks of another person who, for him, embodied the actual comfort of God Himself.

The Comfort Of A New Start

"Marcus, sister's son to Barnabas ... a comfort unto me" ... (Col 4:10, 11). There is a great deal about John Mark with which you and I can easily identify. He was a young man who started out well. But he faltered. And he actually quit on the job. If such a person can be rehabilitated and made useful, there is hope for us, isn't there?

John Mark grew up in a Christian home. His mother was a praying woman and other people found it natural to gather there to join in prayer. Some remarkable victories had their roots in those prayer meetings, such as the miraculous freeing of Peter from prison.

John Mark also must have been present when a group in the church in Antioch: *"Ministered to the Lord, and fasted, and the Holy Ghost said, Separate me Barnabas and Saul for the work whereunto I have called them."* (Acts 13:2)

Three verses farther on we read, *"They had also John as their minister (helper)."* He was to do such things as carry the baggage, give out the song books and be generally useful.

We ought to remind ourselves that one of the powerfully stabilizing influences in the Christian life is that we know God has called and appointed us, and that we have made the choice to respond to that call. Without that personal enablement, the pressures of life can be overwhelming.

Opposition soon faced the little missionary band. In Cypress they came up against demonic power in the person of Elymas, the sorcerer who sought to tum away the deputy from the faith. Paul, in the power of the Holy Spirit, attacked the situation head on. The pressure of this incident upset John Mark-as it might have done to many of us. It is a sobering thing to encounter the unleashed power of the evil one, as any missionary to foreign lands will attest.

John Mark drew back from the hardships. Maybe he was disillusioned also about the traveling; it was far more rugged than he had supposed it would be. In all probability he missed his home and his mother-her praying, her loving, her cooking.

In a word, he quit!

Back to Jerusalem he went, off the scene for a while, so far as the record shows.

Paul and Barnabas went on with their journey to Antioch, Pisidia, Iconium, Lystra and Derbe. Returning home, they reported all that the Lord had done on their first missionary journey. Then a new plan presented itself.

Paul said unto Barnabas, Let us go again and visit our brethren in every city where we have preached the word of the Lord, and see how they do. (Acts 15:36)

Barnabas determined to take John Mark along, to give him a second chance, but Paul would not hear of it.

"The contention was so sharp between them [Paul and Barnabas] that they departed asunder one from the other: and so Barnabas took Mark and sailed unto Cypress; Paul chose Silas, and departed [to] Syria and Cilicia." (Acts 15:39-41)

The question arises: what is to be done when Christians disagree? Well, I think the first thing is to recognize that differences of opinion are to be expected. There are doctrinal issues, of course, on which there can be no equivocation. But procedural matters present choices.

Why must John Mark return to Cypress? It was the scene of his failure. The only way to get victory is to face the past squarely. As long as we dodge our weaknesses and blame somebody else for our mistakes, we will evade success.

To face up to failure means, first, to confess it honestly, no quibbling: "I did it. I said it. I flunked. I quit." Second, you must depend on the complete forgiveness promised by our blessed Lord: *"If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."* (1 John 1 :9) Third, you must trust God to make you strong where you have been weak. Of his own experience Paul said:

"Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me For when I am weak, then am I strong." (2 Cor. 12:9,10)

We ought not to overlook that Barnabas was a key factor in the restoration of John Mark to service for Christ. This gentle "son of consolation," this paragon of patience and persistence, was willing actually to forfeit all acclaim for the sake of the one he determined to help. (Barnabas was not heard from again, in any position of leadership.) I ask myself, "Is there some 'John Mark' I ought to stand by and encourage?" Is there someone you could aid, using those methods?

When this kind of selfless behavior takes place, one Christian toward another, the benefits are wide-ranging. For example, Paul's outspoken opposition to one he considered a slacker was followed later by intercession on John Mark's behalf. Fearing the young man might get the cold shoulder from leaders in Jerusalem who had heard tales of his instability, Paul went out of his way to commend him.

The apostle said in effect, "You heard me talk about John Mark. Now listen to me again. If he comes your way, I want you to receive him as a brother. I'm telling you, in ministry you will find him profitable."

Now imprisoned in Rome, Paul is counting some of the sources of the profound comfort he is receiving from God. John Mark is one of them.

He has come full circle: from running from hardship he has come to share it. From being a houseboy he has become a "minister" in the highest sense, a sharer of the grace of God. He has experienced a new beginning indeed.

The Apostle Paul witnessed this transformation. "O, Mark, my boy," I hear him say, "you have come a long way! Keep on! Whatever you do, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God and the Father by him."

Paul speaks of still other individuals who were a COMFORT to him.

The Comfort Of Togetherness

“Justus [among] the fellow workers unto the kingdom of God who have been a comfort unto me.” (Col. 4:11) Justus was a work-with kind of person. You know the type.

Let us say you have to change a tire and the job is not going well. Along comes this burly individual who sings out, “Hey, let me help you!”

You don’t ask any questions. Gratefully you just accept his assistance and in no time the two of you have the task done. Justus was that kind of helper.

As to background, he had been a follower of the Jewish faith (*“the circumcision,” v. 11*). Like Paul he must have found in the Lord Jesus Christ the Messiah long promised. Here he was, devoting his energies to the Christian cause.

Justus and Paul must have enjoyed warm comraderie. Have you noticed that often persons vastly different from each other in personality or background or achievements are drawn together in a strong bond because of their mutual love of the Savior?

To the Apostle Paul, “work” meant helping others, and he did this all the time and in a variety of ways. Since Justus was his fellow worker, we can assume that he, too, had a heart for people and their needs.

I took a course years ago called Human Engineering. It was a business course intended to show supervisors how to manage employees effectively. The studies went on for several months and were valuable to me then and have been ever since.

The thing I remember best about this course is that in every session the teacher would find reason to hammer away at one point. He would pound the desk and say: “Learn this-go cheerfully out of your way to help others without being asked.”

In our day, I am sorry to say, “management” is often a synonym for manipulation. The idea is: we will do this, and you will do that, and the end result will be what we want. The problem is that when people find out you are manipulating them, you lose credibility with them. The sound working principle repeated in the Bible many times is this: giving help to another always pays.

We do not know precisely what kind of work Justus did for and with Paul. Since the apostle

declared him to be a “comfort” to him, it will do us good to look a little more deeply into the meaning of that word.

Initially, “comfort” meant “to talk to.” It has taken on the further meaning of solace, relief, consolation, etc. I think Justus talked to Paul. I imagine that on days when the apostle was weary and discouraged, his fellow worker would come by with an encouraging word. “Cheer up, Brother Paul. We are with you and God is still in control of things!”

Have you realized that you can “serve” by means of even casual speech? We ought to learn to turn our words-and the thoughts that trigger them-over to our blessed Lord, so that when we say something God can use it.

I saw a sign on a man’s desk recently that was highly meaningful:
BE SURE BRAIN IS ENGAGED BEFORE PUTTING MOUTH IN GEAR.

We could add something else-be sure heart is under the control of the Holy Spirit before putting mouth into operation.

What we say can be a source of comfort, of help. It can lift a burden.

I want to be a person like Justus, don’t you? I want it to be true of me that when I just “talk to” somebody, the COMFORT of God comes through.

Paul speaks of the contribution of another one of his fellow workers.

The Comfort Of Continuing Prayer

“Epaphras, who is one of you, a servant of Christ ... always laboring fervently for you in prayers, that ye may stand perfect and complete in all the will of God.” (Col.4:12)

In his comments about this beloved fellow worker Paul gives us some suggestions for effective praying.

Effective Praying Begins At Home

Paul makes a point of Epaphras’s origin-“one of you.” That meant he came from Colosse. He was a hometown boy.

Have you given thought to the influence you exert on the people who know you well? These individuals have seen your failures, faults and inconsistencies at close range.

In his hometown relationships Epaphras must have endured this kind of mass scrutiny.

What was the verdict? *"One of us [you], a servant of Jesus Christ."*

You see, the only way any imperfect human being (such as all of us are) can be credible to unbelieving peers is to be absolutely committed to Jesus Christ. Such a person has already admitted he has no personal excellence, that he deserves nothing but judgment. He extols the grace of God that gives him right standing with God, something he never could have by his own efforts.

Do you want to be believed by your family and people who ridicule you for your testimony? Just get to be known as one who is absolutely sold out to Jesus Christ! That is what made Epaphras believable.

How do you learn to pray effectively? The best place to begin is with people and needs that you know about. Of course this man's praying, and ours, may extend to distant places. But the point of beginning may very well be on the homefront.

Paul says Epaphras was "laboring fervently" in his praying. That expression is one word in the Greek New Testament. The English equivalent is "agonize." Does that mean that one should get himself worked into a frenzy of emotion? I think not.

The seriousness of the situation being prayed for will determine the intensity of the praying.

In this matter of fervency, yes, I do believe strongly in being "comfortable" in the presence of God when we speak to Him. And we can be comfortable with Him if our hearts are right, our sins have been forgiven, our motives are pure and the Holy Spirit is directing our daily course. But when it comes to praying responsibly about people and needs beyond any human ability to supply, our praying takes on a level of intensity that admits of no daydreaming.

I wonder whether I am addressing someone today who is up against a very special problem. You know it is more than you can handle. Beloved, now comes this word to you, "laboring fervently." Get on your knees (if you can) and pray with earnestness. Tell God about the situation in detail. Out of that "laboring" will surely come God's solution. He may not change the circumstances. But I can guarantee He will make a difference in your relationship to them.

Effective Praying Is Specific

Epaphras prayed not only for the home folk but also for others he had not seen. His burning

desire for them was not simply “God bless so-and-so.” He prayed, in the first place, that they would “stand perfect and complete in all the will of God.”

That word “perfect,” if applied to a person, means mature or full grown. If applied to a plan it means fully accomplished. If you are “mature” in a spiritual sense, you are spiritually grown up and God is working out His perfect plan for you in your life. Epaphras was concerned about his friends. He wanted them to be grown up in the things of God.

In the second place, he also wanted these friends of his to be “complete.” That word literally means “to overflow,” among other things. He wanted the ones he prayed for to be so closely in touch with the will of God that their lives would “spill over” with evidence of His will. Notice this further example of the specific praying of Epaphras. Paul says, *“For I bear him record that he hath great zeal for you [in Colosse], and them that are in Laodicea, and them in Hierapolis.” (Col. 4:13)*

We know the condition in Laodicea from the record in the book of Revelation: *“I know thy works, that thou art neither cold nor hot: I would thou wert cold or hot.” (Rev. 3:15)*

Epaphras probably knew that these people were well off, that they were self-satisfied and desperately in need of revival. Epaphras prayed for them. I wonder if we pray for rich people—for their own soul’s sake.

Epaphras prayed also for the people of Hierapolis. That place is mentioned only once in the whole New Testament. We do not know the name of anybody who ever lived there. But Epaphras was burdened for believers in that city and he prayed earnestly for their quickened awareness of the will of God.

For Paul and for all of us, Epaphras embodies the COMFORT that informed, sustained, impassioned intercession provides.

I ask myself, “Am I allowing God today to furnish, through me, the divine comfort somebody sorely needs?” I invite you to face the same question for yourself.

Though we have not had time to speak of every one on the list, we have learned lessons from a significant number of Paul’s fellow workers:

Onesimus and Tychichus--on acceptance Aristarchus--on shared suffering

John Mark--on starting over

Justus--on cooperation

Epaphras--on continuing prayer

I want my name added to that list of fellow workers, don’t you? I want to experience “the COMFORT of God” - to have it and to share it.

