

Comfort

A Word Study

BY MICHAEL PRIEST

BACK “IN THE DAY,” MY DAD WALKED through the snow, uphill, to and from school every day. My mom spent 8 hours at school each day, picked cotton the next 14 hours, slept 2 hours, then did it all over again. Neither of my parents grew up in air-conditioned homes; both warmed themselves in the winter from the heat of potbelly stoves. I know all of this because my parents told these stories ad nauseam. They told these stories of the “good old days” to illustrate just

how tough their childhood was and to highlight that my brother and I were privileged to live lives of comfort. I am pretty sure my dad never walked uphill to and from school and that my mom slept more than 2 hours a night, but I am also pretty sure my brother and I had cushy lives. We had air conditioning, television, microwave ovens, and most importantly, television remotes. I did not have to juggle the demands of school and the toil of the cotton field. My parents



Courtyard of one of the palatial houses in Pompeii.

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provided me and my brother with good lives, lives of comfort.

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. In this article we will explore the origin and meaning of the word "comfort" and examine its use in 2 Corinthians 1:2-7. We will also discover the understanding Paul's first-century readers would have had when they read the word.

Etymology

In common ancient Greek, the basic meaning of the noun "comfort" (*paraklesis*) and the closely related verbal form "to comfort" (*parakaleo*) was "to call someone to oneself." While the terms shared one basic meaning, the usages varied. People used the two words to speak of calling to someone for help in general, whether the situation was urgent or not. In more dire situations, such as national emergencies, the words meant "to beseech." This was an urgent call for people's help. In this sense, the words also described a more urgent call to the gods for their assistance. In time, the word group took on a slightly different meaning. Instead of speaking exclusively of a person calling someone to come for help, the words came to describe

calling to someone in order to offer help. Thus the words were translated "to exhort" or "to encourage." A general on the battlefield might call (*parakaleo*) to his troops and encourage them to be strong in battle. From this usage, the words came to mean "to comfort," especially in times of trouble or grief.¹ The common thread of meaning that ran through all the usages was in the calling—someone called for help, or someone gave help through the calling.

Scriptural Usage

By the time the Old Testament was translated into Greek, the words' meaning developed further. While the words still had a variety of usages, in the Greek translation of the Old Testament, the words almost exclusively spoke of comfort that someone gave.² Significantly, the means of comfort was always through personal contact, whether in person or by letter.³ After Sarah died, Isaac was obviously distraught. Genesis 24:67 says, "And Isaac brought her into the tent of his mother Sarah and took Rebekah to be his wife. Isaac loved her, and he was comforted [*parakaleo*] after his mother's death."⁴ Through her presence in his life, Rebekah comforted Isaac.

The New Testament use of the word group, much like in common ancient Greek, varied. In rare cases, the words carried the most basic meaning: to call to someone without any implication of help.

Left: Ruins at ancient Jericho. As Joshua was preparing to lead the people into the land of promise, the Lord assured him, "Do not be afraid or discouraged, for the LORD your God is with you wherever you go" (Josh. 1:9, HCSB).

Right: 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.

Below: One of the Amarna Letters, dating from the 14th cent. B.C. The letter from Yapahi of Gezer includes a request for help from marauders.



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ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ DAVID ROGERS (141/15)

More commonly, the New Testament used the words to urge or exhort. Luke recorded that on the great Day of Pentecost, as Peter finished preaching the gospel, "with many other words he testified and strongly urged [*parakaleo*] them, saying, 'Be saved from this corrupt generation!'" (Acts 2:40). In similar fashion, Paul wrote, "Therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, I urge [*parakaleo*] you to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God; this is your spiritual worship" (Rom. 12:1).

Finally, the word group spoke of comforting encouragement. In Colossians 4:8, of Tychicus, Paul wrote, "I have sent him to you for this very purpose, so that you may know how we are and so that he may encourage [*parakaleo*] your hearts." When used this way, the words meant that someone provided the comfort through the personal contact—again, either in person or in writing.

In 2 Corinthians

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.⁵

The context is clear that Paul was a man who knew troubles⁶ 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.⁷ If the Corinthians had ever wondered how Paul survived troubles, now they knew: God's presence comforted, encouraged, and strengthened him.⁸ Paul's own experiences (v. 4) and his words of comfort assured the Corinthians that as they faced their own difficulties, the God who comforted and strengthened Paul would also comfort them.

As followers of Christ, we have no assurance that life will be easy and comfortable. We do, however, have full assurance that the God of all comfort will comfort us to stand strong in the midst of the troubles that are sure to come. When hard times come, we can hear God's eternal voice resounding through Paul's pen: "And our hope for you is firm, because we know that as you share in the sufferings, so you will share in the comfort" (v. 7). ❖

1. Otto Schmitz and Gustav Stahlin, "παρακαλέω, παράκλησις" (*parakaleo, paraklesis*; to comfort, comfort) in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Friedrich, trans. and ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967), 774-76.

2. *Ibid.*, 776-77.

3. *Ibid.*, 782.

4. All Scripture quotations are from the Holman Christian Standard Bible (HCSB).

5. Ralph P. Martin, 2 *Corinthians*, vol. 40 in *Word Biblical Commentary* (Waco: Word Books, 1986), 9.

6. See verse 4; 4:7-12; 6:4-10; and 11:23-29 for just a few of the troubles Paul faced.

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

8. Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, *Paul's Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962), 11.

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