

The Source of True Comfort

Isaiah 61:1–7, Acts 20:1–12

The other day, as I sat in a waiting room, reading, I overheard a conversation between an aging patient in his fifties and the middle-aged receptionist hidden behind the counter. The two of them began to talk about their respective record collections and discovered that they had a shared interest in pop music from the '70s, '80s and '90s. Both had old albums they refuse to part with: CDs, cassettes, 8-track tapes and vinyls. They just love getting out those old albums, cranking up the volume and reliving the great performances of their favorite musicians back in their heyday. The man admitted that he buys up whole collections of old albums at garage sales; he has so many stacks of records in his dining room that he hardly has room to walk!

What is it about music that is so attractive? God has given man the creature a love for beauty. The world God created is not only functional but beautiful. The trees in the Garden were not only “good for food” but “pleasant to the eyes.” The beauty of the creation reflects the beauty of the Creator. The Creator is beautiful! The Psalmist urges, “Let the *beauty* of the Lord our God be upon us.”¹ God has put within the heart of man a natural love for music, art, literature, poetry and design. There is a noble use for each of these pursuits, yet the ever-present temptation is to “[worship] and [serve] the creature more than the Creator, who is blessed for ever. Amen”²—a temptation we all must continually resist.

Sadly, even worship music can become an idol. Many people choose a church based solely on its music. I have seen reviews of churches where people say, “It’s nice to go to church and hear *my* music.” Such a statement reveals a preoccupation with *self*—the idea that church exists to satisfy the sovereign consumer. But the purpose of church is to glorify Christ!

One Christian brother confesses, “In my teenage years, I was a diehard fan of little-known rock bands whose music was rarely played on the radio. I believed my tastes were edgier and more exclusive than my peers’. I attended concerts, posted lyrics in my school locker, and wore obscure T-shirts to signal my personal uniqueness. I still feel the temptation today ... to find my identity in my music library. But God has often rescued me from this kind of musical self-idolatry through congregational singing.”³ May God rescue us from idolatry and enable us to glorify him in Christ-centered worship!

Now we will come back to the topic of music later in this message, but for now, let me explain the title “The Source of True Comfort.” Though it is not

¹ Ps. 90:17

² Rom. 1:25

³ Matt Merker, <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/sacrifice-your-preferences-on-sundays> accessed 12-5-22

immediately apparent in the English translations, our Acts text is bookended with references to *comfort*. In verse 2 we read that Paul ministered in Macedonia and “encouraged”—literally *comforted*—the disciples with many words. Then in verse 12 we read of his sermon in Troas, where a young man named Eutychus, who fell out of a third-story window and was taken up dead but was miraculously restored to life, after which the congregation was “not a little *comforted*.” In both cases the same word is used—*παρακαλέω*, the verbal form of the the word *παράκλητος* (Paraclete, Comforter), a title for the Holy Spirit. As we will see, true comfort comes not from focusing on self, but by focusing on *Christ* and his worship. I have three points, first,

1. Comfort through the preaching of Christ

There is an emphasis on preaching in the book of Acts. Peter preached a powerful sermon on the day of Pentecost, which resulted in the salvation of 3,000 souls. Philip went to Samaria and “preached Christ.” After the conversion of Saul of Tarsus we read that “straightway he preached Christ in the synagogues, that he is the Son of God.” Later, Paul preached in Cyprus, Antioch of Pisidia, Iconium, Perga, the cities of Asia Minor, Philippi, Athens, Corinth, Ephesus and many other places. Wherever he went, he preached, and his message was Christ.

So it is in our text today. We read in verse 2 that as Paul went through Macedonia, he “encouraged [comforted] them with many words”—that is, through the preaching of the Word of God. In verse 7 we read that “on the first day of the week, when the disciples came together to break bread, Paul, ready to depart the next day, spoke to them and continued his message until midnight.” His sermon was suddenly interrupted by the fall of young Eutychus, whose name ironically means “Lucky”!⁴ After running down the stairs and out the door to check on the young man, and heal him, Paul eventually comes back to the meeting room—and what does he do? He continues preaching! Here is a sermon that lasts for hours!

Now some people get impatient when a sermon gets too long. I know of a church that asked its pastor to leave, in part, because his sermons were too long and he would not shorten them. But I’ve not heard of any church that regularly has sermons that last eight to ten *hours*! Consider some of the liberal churches. A neighbor of ours sent me a link to a sermon from her church; it lasted barely eight minutes!

What is to be the subject of the sermon? It should be Christ and his saving work: “Christ Jesus came into the world to *save* sinners” (1 Tim. 1:15). That is a large topic, covering all of Scripture. There is a lot of material for a preacher to develop, and doing so properly takes years. In the Great Commission Christ commanded his church: “Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every

⁴ *The New Bible Dictionary*, “Eutychus” (Logos Bible Software)

creature.”⁵ The preacher is to preach the *Gospel*, that is, the good news about Christ. A good sermon, therefore, is to be *biblical*, that is, derived from the Bible—an exposition of a biblical text or biblical theme. It should be *Gospel-centered* and focus on *Christ* and his saving work. Here is a message that every person in the world needs to hear! Now it is evident that those who are dead in trespasses and sins—spiritually dead—don’t want to hear it, but shouldn’t *Christians* want to hear it? To the Christian, the Bible is a love-letter from God. If you’ve ever been in love, and you get a letter from your beloved, then you surely want to read it! It would be the piece of mail you would read first. You would never tire of its message.

For the Christian, the preaching of Christ gives comfort. The English word *comfort* means “to give strength and hope to.”⁶ It comes from a Latin word meaning *to strengthen, restore strength to*. The second syllable—“fort”—means *strong*, like a fort or fortress—a stronghold. Luther rightly said, “A mighty *fortress* is our God.” Like it or not, the world we live in is a place of battles. We are told to “fight the good fight of faith.”⁷ How do we do it? We must “be *strong* in the Lord, and in the power of his might. Put on the whole armor of God, that ye may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places. Wherefore take unto you the whole armor of God, that ye may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand.”⁸ Churches need to teach our people to be strong for the day of battle. Fathers and mothers need to teach their children to be strong for the day of battle. We all face temptations in this world, and there are men, women and young people all around us who have made spiritual shipwreck of their lives. We face a deadly foe: Satan (his name means *adversary*); and the only way to survive is to be strong “*in the Lord*.” Christ is the mighty champion who has defeated Satan. The preaching of Christ gives us strength to face the foe: the world, the flesh and the devil. How we need Christ! An ancient Irish prayer put it this way: “Be thou my *battle-shield, sword* for my fight; be thou my dignity, thou my delight, thou my soul’s *shelter*, thou my high *tower*: raise thou me heavenward, O *Power* of my power.”⁹ The preaching of Christ brings comfort, strengthening us to face the battles we will encounter in this world. Second, we see

2. Comfort through the sacraments ordained by Christ

⁵ Mark 16:15

⁶ <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/comfort> accessed 11-6-22

⁷ 1 Tim. 6:12

⁸ Eph. 6:10–13 (spelling modernized)

⁹ <https://www.trinitypsalterhymnal.org/hymns/be-thou-my-vision/>

Take a look again at verse 7, “Now on the first day of the week, when the disciples came together to break bread.” What does it mean, “to break bread”? In the book of Acts, “to break bread” is to observe the Lord’s supper. We saw this back in chapter 2, which records that those who were converted on the Day of Pentecost “continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, in the *breaking of bread*, and in prayers.” Paul later clarifies this by asking, “The bread which we *break*, is it not the communion of the body of Christ?” (1 Cor. 10:16). So the breaking of bread is communion—holy communion, the Lord’s supper.

In other contexts the expression “to break bread” can refer to a common meal. In Luke 24, when the risen Lord appeared to the two men who were walking down the road to Emmaus, and they invited him to have supper with them, we read, “Now it came to pass, as He sat at the table with them, that *He took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them*. Then their eyes were opened and they knew Him; and He vanished from their sight. And they said to one another, ‘Did not our heart burn within us while He talked with us on the road, and while He opened the Scriptures to us?’ So they rose up that very hour and returned to Jerusalem, and found the eleven and those who were with them gathered together, saying, ‘The Lord is risen indeed, and has appeared to Simon!’ And they told about the things that had happened on the road, and how He was known to them in *the breaking of bread*.”

Clearly, the language “breaking of bread” was special to the early Christians. The disciples who traveled with Jesus during his earthly ministry had often seen the Lord—as the acknowledged head of the spiritual household—breaking bread and distributing it to his spiritual children, making sure that each one got enough. Christ, as the head of the church, “*nourishes and cherishes*” his people, he gives us “our daily bread.” Spiritually, he gives us *himself*. As the annotators of the 1599 Geneva Bible put it, “The bread and wine are changed, not in nature, but in quality, for they become undoubted tokens of the body and blood of Christ.... the faithful do receive Christ indeed with all his gifts (though by a spiritual means) and become one with him.”¹⁰

When did the early church observe the Lord’s supper? Our text tells us: “Now on the first day of the week, when the disciples came together to break bread.” The phrase “when the disciples came together to break bread” describes what the disciples did on the first day of the week: they came together to break bread—that is, to observe the Lord’s supper. They did this on the first day of the week. It is evident from this text that the apostolic church met on the first day of the week. They no longer observed the Jewish, seventh-day sabbath; they kept the first day of the week. What did they do on the first day of the week? They gathered together.

¹⁰ 1599 Geneva Bible (Tolle Lege Press, 2006–2022), note at Matt. 26:26

And what did they do when they gathered together? They heard sermons, and they observed the Lord's supper. This is the very essence of Christian worship: when we gather together to worship God we sing his praises, we offer prayer, we read the Holy Scriptures, we listen to a sermon, and we observe the Lord's supper.

How does God comfort—strengthen—his people? Does he say, “Hey, you all, get together to listen to your favorite music, get in the groove, and enjoy yourselves”? No! He says, “Gather together as the church to sing my praises, hear the preaching of my word, and observe the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's supper.” These are the basics—the ordinary means of grace. Our second point, then, is “comfort through the sacraments ordained by Christ.” Thirdly, we see

3. Comfort through the body of Christ

Notice how the disciples of Christ play a large role in the story. Verse 1 begins: “After the uproar had ceased.” Consider the context. There was a riot in Ephesus. The silversmiths vehemently opposed the gospel message because it was bad for business: people were no longer buying their silver images of the goddess Diana because they had given up their idolatry and were worshiping the true God. For two hours the mob cried out, “Great is Diana of the Ephesians.” As we saw last week, this was an appeal to patriotism in their cry—something like, “If you are a loyal citizen of Ephesus, then you have a duty to worship our local patron deity; if you don't, then you are an enemy of our social order, and we will treat you as such!” But Paul was undeterred; he wanted to go in and address the assembly, but the disciples would not let him; it was too dangerous. It is in that context that we read the words, “After the uproar had ceased, Paul called the disciples to himself, embraced them, and departed to go to Macedonia.” The disciples must have been shell-shocked. They had been enjoying mutual love, gathering together to worship; everything was sweet. But now they learned that they were marked men. The townspeople had turned against them. Paul realized that his presence was like a lightning rod, inviting an altercation. It was time to commend the disciples to the grace of God and move on. Yet the rioting and opposition had taught the church how much believers need the body. Paul was leaving town, but he needed to say a proper Goodbye. He called the disciples to himself, embraced them, and said Goodbye. The King James and New King James Versions in this instance translate the verb ἀπαζομαι as “embrace.” Its general meaning is *greet* or *welcome*. But there are more intimate instances as well. In Luke 1:40, Mary, who would soon bear the infant Jesus, having traveled to the hill country of Judea, “entered the house of Zacharias and *greeted* Elizabeth.” Elizabeth was Mary's cousin, almost a long-lost sister. We can be pretty sure that she didn't stand at a respectable distance and curtsy politely and say, “Hail, cousin, how do ye fare?” No! Elizabeth and Mary were blood relatives. They loved one another, and cared for one another.

More than that, they were sisters in the faith. Meeting one another was like a drink of water in a thirsty land. It was welcome and longed-for.

Four times in the epistles the Paul tells the believers, “Greet one another with an holy kiss.” This refers to the Middle-Eastern practice of embracing a person and kissing him on both cheeks. Please note: the apostle doesn’t say, “*Avoid* one another,” he says, “*Greet* one another.” In our Acts text Paul was about to take his leave from Ephesus. He would likely never return. He had been meeting daily with these dear believers for over two years. He was their father in the faith. His spiritual sons and daughters were dear to him. He would continue to pray for them. He would long for spiritual fellowship with them—fellowship that in the age to come will be unending, as the church gathers around Christ the Lamb of God for all eternity. This is the purpose for which we are made. This is our “chief end”—the purpose for which we were created: “To love God and enjoy him forever” in the company of our spiritual sisters and brothers.

Referencing Matthew 5:47 (“If you *greet* your brethren only, what do you do more than others?”) the Bauer, Arndt and Gingrich lexicon says that this usage of the word “certainly means more than ‘greet’; *be fond of, cherish, be devoted to, like* are better.”¹¹ Here are the ways that Christians ought to relate to one another. We should be fond of one another, cherish one another, be devoted to each other, even “like” one another. Sometimes I tell my wife that I like her, and she will reply, “Don’t you love me?” I will answer, “Of course I do, but I also *like* you; I like being with you. You are my pleasant companion.”

Notice the esteem that Paul had for the saints in our text. He mentions several: Sopater, Aristarchus, Secundus, Gaius, Timothy, Tychicus, Trophimus. These were people for whom he prayed by name. Also Eutyclus. When this young man fell into a deep sleep while Paul was preaching, and fell from the third floor, Paul didn’t say, “He got what he deserved; that was very disrespectful of him to fall asleep during my sermon”! No! He interrupted his sermon, ran down the stairs and embraced his lifeless body—put his arms around him, drew him to himself and no doubt prayed for him. Truly, the other saints were very special to Paul.

We have seen, then, (1) comfort through the preaching of Christ, (2) comfort through the sacraments ordained by Christ and (3) comfort through the body of Christ; or more simply, preaching, the sacraments, and Christian fellowship.

Here are references to the ordinary means of grace—the word, the sacraments, prayer. The only one not specifically mentioned in our text is prayer, but surely the preaching of Christ was bathed in prayer, the sacraments were administered with prayer, and the miracle of the raising of Eutyclus was attended with prayer. Without a doubt the apostle James commands us to “pray for one another.”¹²

¹¹ Bauer, Arndt and Gingrich lexicon, ἀσπάζομαι (Logos Bible Software)

¹² Jas. 5:16

Christ is the only source of true comfort. The Heidelberg Catechism begins with the question, “What is your only *comfort* in life and in death?” The answer: “That I am not my own, but belong—body and soul, in life and in death—to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ . . .” These words are true, for they faithfully reflect the teaching of Scripture. We live in a world that is so often hostile to the Christian faith. For that reason, earthly comforts cannot fully satisfy. The comforts of this world are shallow and transitory, but the comfort Christ gives is deep and abiding—eternal.

Christ is our salvation. It is he who as the second Person of the Holy Trinity became incarnate, was born of the Virgin Mary, lived among men, went to the cross, died and rose again for our salvation. This is the gospel, and it is the only way for lost sinners to be saved.

What is our source of true comfort? It is *Christ*, ministered to us in the ordinary means of grace: the Word, the sacraments, prayer. God doesn’t say, “Go to a special conference where you can hear a really dynamic speaker” or “Stay home and get some great teaching over the internet” or “Go to a great Christian concert where you can groove to the music.” He says, “Come unto *me*, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.”

Truly Reformed churches don’t have worship bands, they don’t have entertainment. They worship in response to the word. They hear from God in the reading and preaching of the word, and they respond in prayer and praise. In the music of the church *Christ*—not a performer, not the beat—ought to predominate. “He is the head of the body, the church . . . that in all things *he* might have the preeminence” (Col. 1:18). At the end of a worship service our thoughts should not be on the preacher, on the musician or on our feelings, but on Christ. We ought not to leave, saying, “What great musicians!” or “What a great feeling!” but “What a glorious Savior!” Amen.