

The Holy Spirit Comforts the Church

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What means does the Holy Spirit use to give us his comfort? What is the content of the comfort of the Spirit? These questions will be answered in the first part of this essay. From the first chapters of the Bible I will then point to the origin of some of the circumstances of life to which all people are subject and because of which we need comfort from the Lord. Finally, with a few examples, I will show how the Holy Spirit comforts us in different situations.

Four basic truths show what means the Holy Spirit uses to comfort the Church and the content of his comfort.

The Holy Spirit speaks to us in a language we understand.

The human soul is created with the ability to hear and understand the meaning of God's Word. The language is called "the human language" because it is a human ability. But language didn't originate with man. God spoke before the first human being was created. Through his Word he created the heavens and the earth. In Psalm 33:8-9 we read: "Let all the earth fear the LORD; let all the people of the world revere him. For he spoke, and it came to be; he commanded, and it stood firm."

From the first two chapters of Genesis we understand that both God and man spoke the same language, what is now called "the human language." When God speaks his words are full of divine power and truth and God's Word accomplishes what it says (Ge 1:3, etc.). God gave man divine truth through his Word (Ge 1:28-29, 2:16-17) and man answered with words that were expressions of the godliness, obedience, love and gratitude of his soul (Ge 2:20,23).

After the fall into sin we notice a dramatic change within man. The linguistic and rational abilities are still there but righteousness and love are lost. No longer did Adam express love for God with his words. Instead his words were full of fear, foolishness, excuses and accusations (Ge 3:10,12). One state of things didn't change though by the fall into sin. Just as before the fall God also after the fall continued to communicate divine truth to man through the spoken word in a language he understood (Ge 3:14-19). God spoke directly to the first human beings and later he gave his word through his prophets and apostles.

In Genesis 2 we see that God and Adam communicated in a language common to them even before the woman was created. The linguistic ability in man therefore had a function and a purpose before there was another human being to speak with. Man first used his linguistic ability to communicate with God, listen to God's Word and also to express his godliness, obedience and love. We too use the human linguistic ability in this way when we read a chapter from the Bible and pray the Lord's Prayer. Some contend that the linguistic ability originates with man and is a result of evolution. And some hold that the human language can't communicate divine truth. I claim the opposite. From the first two chapters we can see both the origin of language and how the linguistic ability was used and from this use we can understand something about the purpose. God gave linguistic ability to man so that God and man could communicate.

God is the giver of both linguistic ability and of divine truth, which he communicates by speaking words in a human language. We find this for example in Exodus 4:11,12. The Lord spoke to Moses: "Who gave man his mouth? Who makes him deaf or mute? Who gives him sight or makes him blind? Is it not I, the LORD? Now go; I will help you speak and will teach you what to say." It is God's will that we should always meditate on the words he has given us. This fact is expressed in Psalm 1. It is also God's will that we should answer him with words expressing our gratefulness and love for God. This is made clear in David's prayer: "O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise" (Ps 51:15).

The Holy Spirit has spoken to us through the prophets and the apostles.

The Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit cooperate in this work of speaking to us humans and giving us his word, but this work is nonetheless ascribed chiefly to the Holy Spirit. We confess in the Nicene Creed: "I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, and giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son, who in unity with the Father and Son is worshiped and glorified, who has spoken through the prophets." The words of the prophets in the Old Testament are ascribed to the Holy Spirit (Zec 7:12, 2 Pe 1:21). The words Jesus received from the Father and spoke to the apostles are ascribed to the Holy Spirit (Ac 1:2, Jn 16:12-15). Saint Paul claims to proclaim spiritual matters with words he has received from the Holy Spirit (1 Co 2:13). Also, when the divine inspiration of Scripture is described as a direct dictation by the glorified Christ to his apostle John as his penman, these words are ascribed to the Spirit. In the letters to the seven churches in the book of Revelation we read what is said about the words Christ dictated to John: "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches" (Rev 2:7,11,17).

Scripture is God's Word and Scripture is exclusive. There is no spiritual or divine truth or revelation from God beside the words of Scripture. In Isaiah 8:19,20 we read: "When men tell you to consult mediums and spiritists, who whisper and mutter, should not a people inquire of their God? Why consult the dead on behalf of the living? To the law and to the testimony!"

We have now begun to zoom in and focus on our object. If we are to seek comfort from the Spirit, we should seek it in the words of Scripture and in no other place.

The Holy Spirit works only through the Word and sacraments.

God has divided Scripture into two parts—the law and the gospel. Both these doctrines have divine effects. The law gives knowledge about sin (Ro 3:20) and the gospel works faith, salvation and a new birth (Ro 1:16,17; 1 Pe 1:23). The work performed by the words of Scripture is identical to the work of the Spirit. In the passage where Jesus gives the promise of a Comforter, the Holy Spirit, he also says that the work of the Spirit not only is to comfort. He will also convict the world of guilt in regard to sin (John 16:8). But the foremost work of the Holy Spirit is to comfort. The Holy Spirit works faith, salvation and a new birth (1 Co 12:3; Jn 3:6). This does not imply two separate causes for contrition and faith, Scripture and the Spirit. No, the work of Scripture and the Spirit are indivisible. The Scriptures have divine effects and the work performed by the Word is identical to the work performed by the Spirit. We can make only one distinction: the Holy Spirit works through the word of Scripture as his instrument.

In Scripture God has instituted two sacraments for his New Testament church, where he has united his word, or more precisely his gospel promise, with earthly elements: Baptism and the Lord's Supper. The Holy Spirit works new birth, faith and salvation also through these sacraments. (I will later on mention one of the functions of the Lord's Supper). Baptism in water gives and works rebirth. Jesus said to Nicodemus: "I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit" (Jn 3:5). What is true about the words of Scripture is also true about the sacraments. The work of the sacraments is identical to the work of the Holy Spirit. Only one distinction can be made: the Spirit works through the sacraments as his instruments.

We have now completely zoomed in and focused on the object of this lecture. Finding the comfort of the Holy Spirit is a matter of separating law and gospel, because we find the comfort of the Spirit in the gospel in word and sacraments only and nowhere else. Thus we confess in the Smalcald Articles (VIII:10): "Therefore we ought and must constantly maintain this point, that God does not wish to deal with us otherwise than through the spoken Word and the Sacraments. It is the devil himself whatsoever is extolled as Spirit without the Word and Sacraments."

The biblical doctrine of the means of grace is a great comfort to us Christians. It teaches us where to go to find comfort and help against sin and all of its consequences. We are to turn to the gospel in Word and sacrament where God the Holy Spirit deals with us and gives us saving faith. This doctrine brings us great comfort, because it teaches us that we cannot be saved by our own

works, only by the work of the Holy Spirit, not by our merit but by grace for Christ's sake. We read about this in the Augsburg Confession article V: "That we may obtain this faith, the Ministry of Teaching the Gospel and administering the Sacraments was instituted. For through the Word and Sacraments, as through instruments, the Holy Ghost is given, who works faith, where and when it pleases God, in them that hear the Gospel, to wit, that God, not for our own merits, but for Christ's sake, justifies those who believe that they are received into grace for Christ's sake."

Since God has made sure the presence of the gospel word here on earth until the last day, this doctrine gives even greater comfort to the Church on earth. We read in Isaiah 59:21: "'As for me, this is my covenant with them,' says the LORD. 'My Spirit, who is on you, and my words that I have put in your mouth will not depart from your mouth, or from the mouths of your children, or from the mouths of their descendants from this time on and forever,' says the LORD." This is a divine promise that the ministry of preaching the gospel and administering the sacraments will be upheld among the human race until the end of time. God's covenant with his people, which is extended throughout history, implies that the church of God will exist until the last day, that this church exists where the gospel is preached and that the Holy Spirit will work through the preaching of the gospel until the last day. The enemies of God will never succeed in destroying the Church or silencing the saving Word of God.

The Holy Spirit comforts the Church with the gospel of Jesus Christ.

As we look more closely at the picture emerging as we focus on the gospel in Word and sacrament we clearly see who appears in the center: Jesus Christ our Savior. In Revelation 19:10b we read: "The testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy." This verse implies that prophecy is centered in Jesus. The Holy Spirit comforts the Church with the testimony of Jesus. Jesus Christ is God and man in one person and the "reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil's work" (1 Jn 3:8). He completed the requirements of the law by his perfect obedience for us and in his suffering and death he bore the punishment for our sin. His resurrection on the third day confirms that God counts us as righteous for Christ's sake. Christ's resurrection is also proof that we have eternal life for his sake and will be glorified with him. We find comfort against sin and all its consequences in Christ and his work.

The comfort of the Holy Spirit is the gospel of Jesus Christ. But not only does the Holy Spirit show us Jesus Christ as our Savior; he also gives us faith in him through the gospel, and in this way he brings comfort all the way into our hearts, as we also confess in Martin Luther's Large Catechism: "For neither you nor I could ever know anything of Christ, or believe on Him, and obtain him for our Lord, unless it were offered to us and granted to our hearts by the Holy Ghost through the preaching of the Gospel" (The Large Catechism, The Creed, Art III, 38).

Our need for comfort by the Holy Spirit

From the first chapters of the Bible we will now study some general circumstances of life which show that we need something more than comfort and support from other people who have ability to show empathy. Because of the consequences of the fall we need divine help and comfort from the Holy Spirit.

The first promise created the Church

The Holy Spirit is the creator of saving faith in people's hearts through the gospel of Jesus Christ and his saving work. The Church is made up of those people who believe in Jesus Christ as their Savior from sin and its consequences. The birthday of the Church, therefore, is that day when God proclaimed the first promise of a Savior to Adam and Eve and created faith in their hearts.

The events directly before and after the proclamation of the first promise show us some general circumstances of life which do not change during the course of history until the end of time and due to which the Church needs comfort from the Holy Spirit.

The fall resulted in disastrous consequences for our first parents and also for their descendants. Adam and Eve were created in the image of God. The image of God in man was holiness, and

righteousness, true knowledge about God and perfect love for God (Eph 5:9, Col 3:10). But when our first parents broke God's commandment, they also lost their righteousness and became sinners. They lost their true knowledge of God and lost their love for God. Instead they were filled with fright and a fearful expectation of judgement. They ended up under the judgement of the law. They died a spiritual death, which, without interference from God, inevitably would lead to physical and eternal death as God has said: "When you eat of it you will surely die." All descendants of Adam are in the same hopeless situation as he put himself into. Human beings are not born in the image of God, but in the image of their parents, that is, as spiritually dead sinners, as we read about Seth: "When Adam had lived 130 years, he had a son in his own likeness, in his own image; and he named him Seth." King David confesses in Psalm 51 that he was formed as a sinner in his mother's womb, he is a sinner by nature and therefore he does what is evil in God's sight (Ps 51:4-6). And Paul says about all people: "We were by nature objects of wrath" (Eph 2:3).

Adam's actions after the fall show that he still was an intelligent creature who to some degree could understand connections between cause and effect and was able to act deliberately to gain a certain result. At the same time his actions, and the reasons he gave for them, revealed a mind totally without reason in his relationship to God and a heart lacking confidence in God and love for him. Adam lacked true knowledge about God and thought he could hide from him who is present everywhere and knows everything. He was filled with terror of God and strove to get as far away as possible from God. Also, he had lost his understanding of God's creation and how to use it in the right way. No longer did he know why God had given him a wife and how he ought to treat her. Instead he blamed his own sin on her. Adam's actions could be viewed as an attempt to solve the problems his sin had brought on him. But none of these attempts could take away the fear of God and his punishment and the damage of sin. In his hopeless situation man himself could not find any real and lasting comfort.

The attempts to solve the problem that we see Adam try are repeated in different ways by unbelievers throughout history without success. In his spiritual blindness after the fall man does not even realize how hopeless his situation is and therefore tries to find solutions such as "hiding," "denial," or "blaming someone else." For this reason comfort is not the only work of the Spirit. God reproached and exposed Adam when he said: "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree that I commanded you not to eat from?" (Ge 3:11). This is the preaching of the law, which exposes sin, reproaches, threatens and frightens. The Holy Spirit continues to carry out this work throughout history. The Spirit exposes sin. Jesus said: "When he comes, he will convict the world of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgment" (Jn 16:8). This is called the "foreign" work of the Spirit and he performs it in order to do his proper work—to comfort through the gospel of Christ.

To our first parents God gave the promise of a Savior who would crush the serpent's head. This message is by nature pure comfort. It does not contain any demands or threats and it says nothing whatsoever about us or about our works. The promise deals with Christ and his work for us. It did not depend on our first parents and it does not depend on us to free ourselves from the power of the devil and the harm sin has brought on us. The promised Hero would alone do this. He would crush the serpent's head, that is the power and dominion of the devil, consisting of captivity under sin and death. He would do this at a very high price. It would cost our Savior suffering to crush the dominion of the devil: He would be stricken in his heel (Ge 3:15).

Throughout the history of salvation God continues to speak to humanity through the prophets and the first promise is thereby further explained and clarified. Gradually, as we read on in Scripture, we understand that the promise points to Jesus Christ and his work for our salvation. We come to know the incarnate Son of God, Jesus Christ, who is the fulfillment of God's promises of a Savior. We also get to know the person in the Trinity who gives us these promises of a Savior—the Holy Spirit. God's Word to us as a whole is ascribed to the Holy Spirit. The main point in this Word is the message about Christ and the chief work of the Holy Spirit is to comfort us with the promise of Christ. Thus he is also called the Comforter.

After the church was born through the first promise, God does not treat his believers in accordance with what the reason of fallen man believes is reasonable or desirable. As a consequence of sin suffering entered our lives. The woman was to bear and raise her children with pain (Ge 3:16). Adam had worked and taken care of the garden also before the fall, but now hardship and suffering became part of that work. The work to provide for the necessities of life would mean toil all the days of their lives, and in the end they would be worn out and die the physical death (Ge 3:17-19). Furthermore, God drove them out of the garden and put the cherubim and a flaming sword to guard the way to the tree of life (Ge 3:22-24). In Genesis 4 the believers had another new experience. They would have to suffer hatred from the unbelievers: the unbelieving Cain killed the believing Abel (Ge 4:8; 1 Jn 3:12).

From then on many things have happened in the history of humankind. However, from one point of view nothing at all has happened concerning the circumstances of life for people, their relationship to God, and God's way of dealing with them. When Adam and Eve were banished from Eden, they had only a word from God to hold on to. The first man and woman had to hold on to this promise of a Savior alone against sin and all of its consequences in their lives. This was the Spirit's comfort in their lives. Their senses and reason could not confirm the truthfulness of this promise. Rather their mind and reason experienced quite the opposite. If Adam and Eve had judged the matter according to their reason, they would have been able to draw conclusions only from what they saw, felt and experienced. If they were to draw any conclusions from the pain, toil and perishableness they felt in their bodies and from what they saw and experienced when God banished them from the garden of Eden, it would rather be the assumption that God's wrath was dwelling on them. They had only a promise from God to cling to, a promise that assured them of grace from God and a Savior. They had to believe God's promise without anything else confirming or guaranteeing it than the fact that God said so. They believed without seeing. This is the nature of saving faith. We read in Hebrews 11:1: "Faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see." The way of salvation appointed by God is not by seeing, understanding and experiencing but by faith in God's promises. Saving faith believes God's word because God says so, without any further affirmation from what can be understood with our reason and be seen or experienced with our senses, yes in opposition to what these our abilities tell us. God's dealings with us find no support in our understanding so that the grace promised to us can be affirmed by what we experience with our senses. It was only by faith that our first parents could make their own the comfort given to them through the promise, and the fact that they did so was the work of the Spirit. The same is true about us. The comfort given to us by the Spirit is by nature such that it cannot be affirmed with our reason or senses. It is faith that believes the gospel promises and it is the Holy Spirit himself who awakens this faith in our hearts and in this way he himself brings his comfort into our hearts.

The Comfort of the Holy Spirit in specific situations

Now let us turn to how the Holy Spirit comforts the Church in some specific situations. These were introduced in our study of circumstances of life common to all humans presented in the first chapters of Genesis. The different types of difficulties we all must face or constantly experience because of the fall could be titled: "Our sin," "Our spiritual blindness," "Our disturbed line of communication with God," "The toil and suffering in our daily life," "Death in our bodies", and "Enmity from unbelievers." The basis for how the Holy Spirit comforts the Church is the fact that "God does not wish to deal with us otherwise than through the spoken Word and the Sacraments. It is the devil himself whatsoever is extolled as Spirit without the Word and Sacraments." The comfort given to us in word and sacrament and the comfort from the Spirit are indivisible. Studying how the Spirit comforts the Church in specific situations is the same as studying how apostles and prophets divided the law and the gospel and gave the promises of the gospel to God's people in such situations. Generally speaking then, the Holy Spirit comforts us with the doctrines of objective justification, the authority of God, and the means of grace when we are tortured by sin; the doctrine of Christ's resurrection when we are troubled by death; and the doctrine of election against suffering, affliction and against the enemies of Christ and his Church.

In preparation to make us more ready to believe the gospel promises in these difficult times of life the Holy Spirit regularly trains our faith in the sacrament of the Lord's Supper.

Jesus instituted the sacrament of the Lord's Supper for his New Testament Church. This sacrament is to be celebrated often in the congregation. In the Lord's Supper we receive assurance that we belong to the new covenant which means that God forgives our wickedness (Jer 31:34; Lk 22:20, Ex 24:8). The body of Christ is present under the bread and is given us to eat in this sacrament and the same blood by which the new covenant was established before God, Jesus' blood, is present in the wine and is given us to drink. This sacrament gives us forgiveness of our sins and strengthens our faith in Christ. We believe that the true body and blood of Christ are present in this sacrament, in, with, and under the bread and wine, because God says so in the words of institution. Every Sunday and on other festivals, when this sacrament is celebrated, we are trained by the Holy Spirit to believe what we cannot see, only because God says so in his Word, in order that we on other occasions also will believe what we cannot see, and again only because the Holy Spirit says so in the Word.

Our sin

Since the Holy Spirit works through the outward Word it is of great importance that every Christian, and especially the pastors, know just what gives comfort from the Holy Spirit to people who are afflicted by sin. Every day we see and experience sin in our bodies and lives and hear the accusations from our conscience. When we listen to God's law these accusations can become very persistent and sharp. The apostles comforted the Christians who were troubled by sin by pointing to objective justification and the authority of God. This is the Holy Spirit's comfort against sin. When we are troubled by sin we should seek comfort in this and we should give these same words to our fellow Christians in the same situation.

St. John writes in 1 John 2:1,2: "My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have one who speaks to the Father in our defense—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world." This passage and other similar Bible passages assure us that Jesus has taken away our sins, too. Because he is the reconciliation for the sins of the world he is surely also so for ours. If our heart still condemns us we should remember that our heart is not the highest authority. "God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything" are words of comfort written by the apostle John to those who were accused by their hearts. God knows he has pronounced another verdict than does our condemning heart—he has declared us righteous for Christ's sake (Ro 3:24). God is the highest authority and he has the last word—not our heart.

It is characteristic of the Spirit's comfort that it cannot be confirmed by our senses. In this way there is room for the way of salvation God has ordained—salvation through faith. In the gospel the Spirit assures us of things we cannot see. We see and experience sin in our bodies and lives every day. Every day the Holy Spirit comforts us through the gospel of Christ, provided we use the Word, meditate on it and live in it. In this gospel the Holy Spirit assures us that sin does not exist where it can be seen and felt—it exists where it cannot be seen. In the Word the Holy Spirit assures us: "As far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us" (Ps 103:12), and "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Co 5:21). Scripture certifies that sin is where it cannot be seen—sin is in Christ who himself was without sin: "He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree" (1 Pe 2:24). And now, after his resurrection our sins are not in him either—in him is only splendor and glory. So where are they now? Well, the Holy Spirit assures us that God has hurled all our sins into the depths of the sea (Mic 7:19) and we are included in a covenant where God no longer remembers our sins (Jer 31:34). The Holy Spirit does not only set before us this comfort as an object of faith. He also gives us faith in our hearts and in this way he brings divine comfort into our hearts. God the Holy Spirit works this faith in our hearts that we regard God's Word and promises to be more sure and true than what we see with our eyes and experience with our senses.

Our spiritual blindness

We see in Genesis 3 how foolishly Adam acted and spoke after the fall. This the most gifted human being could not perform better. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 2:14: "The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned." Human reason is spiritually blind after the fall and does not understand anything. Because of this we can assume that everything we and other people conceive regarding spiritual matters is wrong. It is a great suffering to know that we don't have any points of orientation in spiritual matters within ourselves. But knowing that the Holy Spirit gives us lost people a sure guide and basis for our existence is a great comfort. In Psalm 119:105 we read: "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path." We should hold the words of the apostles and prophets as being more certain than our reason and senses, just as Peter writes in 2 Peter 1:19: "And we have the word of the prophets made more certain, and you will do well to pay attention to it, as to a light shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts." Where Paul speaks about our having "put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator" (Colossians 3:10), he also urges us to "let the word of Christ dwell in [us] richly as [we] teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as [we] sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in [our] hearts to God" (v. 16). Paul also writes: "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work" (2 Ti 3:16,17). For this reason we ought not to despair at the sight of the consequences Adam's fall brought on all of his descendants. We are not left to spiritual darkness and blindness. Through his Word the Holy Spirit gives us true knowledge of God. And just like the apostles we also are to have greater confidence in the words of Scripture than in our own senses and understanding. God's Word is truth.

Our disturbed line of communication with God

In the fall Adam lost his ability to communicate with God. God continued to speak to man but man could not answer in a way that pleased God. We have to depend totally on the Holy Spirit in order to pray to God according to his will. A prerequisite for all prayer is the spiritual condition of the person praying. God does not hear the prayers of unbelievers but prayers from believers go up before God (Pr 15:8; Rev 8:4). God the Holy Spirit makes us into the right kind of people to pray by granting us saving faith through the gospel in word and sacrament.

God wants us to pray to him in all trouble and to praise him (Ps 50:15). The Holy Spirit renews us and gives us a correct knowledge of God and opens our lips so that we can declare his praises (Col 3:10; Ps 51:17). The Holy Spirit helps us to pray by showing us what we need and what God's gifts are in his word, yes, he gives the very words to use in our prayers to God, when we ask him for help, thank him and praise him. The book of Psalms is such a collection of prayers where the Holy Spirit himself has given us prayers for different occasions in life. In addition to these acts of mercy the Holy Spirit himself also intercedes for us. The Spirit knows better than we what our needs are and he helps us by praying in harmony with God's will. We learn this from Romans 8:26,27: "In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God's will." So, therefore we have this confidence in him.

Death in our bodies

Through the gospel the Holy Spirit teaches us the same thing about death as about the cause of death, namely sin. We who have come to faith in Jesus as our Savior from sin through the work of the Holy Spirit are to firmly believe that death is not where it can be seen and experienced. With our senses we can feel and see that our bodies deteriorate and die. What we cannot see, but still believe because of God's promise, is the fact that we have eternal life through faith in Christ. In John 5:24 Jesus says: "I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life." And in John 11:25,26: "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" The Holy Spirit keeps on focusing on the invisible and when we experience decay in our bodies the

Holy Spirit renews our inner self with the assurance of the glory awaiting us—we will be raised with Christ. St. Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 4:16-18: “Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.”

The toil of everyday life and suffering for Christ

We believe we have a merciful God for Christ's sake because God says and promises this in his Word. But God's dealings with us do not find approval in our reason in such a way that the grace offered in the promise can be confirmed by what we experience with our senses. Contrary to what reason would find reasonable God sends suffering upon us. But in the midst of suffering, the Spirit gives us another kind of comfort compared to what the world would give and our reason desire. As believers in Christ we can even rejoice in our sufferings since we know that they carry a spiritual good (Romans 5:1-5). “Also, as Paul in a very consolatory way treats this, Rom. 8, 28. 29. 35. 38. 39, that ‘God in His purpose has ordained before the time of the world’ by what crosses and sufferings He would conform every one of His elect to the image of his Son, and that to every one His cross shall and must work together for good, because they are all called according to the purpose, whence Paul has concluded that it is certain and indubitable that ‘neither tribulation nor distress, nor death, nor life,’ etc., ‘shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus, our Lord’” (SD XI:49).

Enmity from unbelievers

When we meet enmity from unbelievers and see how the evil in this world obstructs the gospel and threatens the church, the Holy Spirit guides us to the invisible. There is a special book written for that purpose. In the book of Revelation the Spirit directs us to Christ who is the victorious one and who has authority to judge. The judgement, where the enemies of God are ultimately defeated and Christ triumphs surrounded by a people he has saved from the great tribulation, is described in picture after picture. Reality is not only what we see and experience, reality is also what the Spirit reveals in his word. His word is more sure and certain than our senses. For our reason it is hard to understand how God can be almighty and good when the wickedness is so great. Through faith we understand that God has everything under control and that the total number of the elect most certainly will be saved. Christ is protecting his church “and the gates of [hell] will not overcome it” (Matthew 16:18). Even if it would come to the point where the enemies of Christ would kill us, they will not overcome us: Nothing will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

The doctrine of election is the ultimate comfort □to the struggling and suffering church on earth.

Having been brought to faith in our Savior Jesus Christ through the gospel, we meet suffering and affliction in our new lives as Christians because of our sins and we see the activities of the enemies of God. It is then that the Holy Spirit gives us the ultimate comfort in passages speaking about God's gracious election. These passages show that we were not reached by the gospel by accident. Neither did the Holy Spirit decide to make us believers only at the moment we heard the gospel. No, God has elected from eternity every one of those who will be saved and he has ordained to save us through the gospel of Jesus Christ. And therefore he has awakened faith in our hearts through the preaching of the gospel. The reason for our salvation is God's eternal decision, which cannot be revoked or aborted. That is why we who believe can be absolutely sure of our salvation. Neither sin, nor the devil nor the wickedness in this world can deprive us of our salvation. Because of God's decision our salvation lies safely in the almighty hands of our Savior Jesus Christ, and he assures us: “My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand” (John 10:27,28).