

## 2. Comforting others with our comfort

2/17/2005

Delightful sun rays warms everybody's shoulders as they leave the church after a powerful and heartfelt pastor's sermon. The worship was great, because you were so drawn to the Throne of God, that you could feel His presence in the sanctuary. The rest of the week should go as this morning. As a matter of fact, it would. People would come to you and ask you how they can be saved and you lead them to Christ on the street, in the stores and workplaces. Everybody smiles at you and your children obeys you at your first request, never an ounce of disobedience in their hearts. On top of that, they do their homework before you ask them and keep their rooms clean and they even do the laundry and dishes without being asked. Your spouse is absolutely adores you and loves you. You have a plenty of money to do anything you want. There is not a single problem on this earth. Yes, that would be a picture-perfect story-book Christianity.

But the reality is far from this picture-perfect Christianity. Illness, even untimely death of the loved ones, marital struggles, worry over children or money, abuse, domestic violence... The list goes on. These things have people's souls tied in knots.

There is uneasy feelings in the hearts of those who suffer. They want to believe that God can heal their sorrow. But it feels like there are more questions than answers. So it is not that difficult for people to wonder and ask God: "Why God? Why this? Why me? Why now?"

One thing weaves us all together into the same tapestry is SUFFERING. From our earthly perspective, all we see is the back of the canvas, and life often looks like nothing more than snarled threads and missed stitches. We know suffering is inevitable, but in the midst of it we long to see some rhyme or reason, some purposeful pattern, or a design in the making. There is a pattern, and that's what this chapter is about. Making sense of suffering.

### A. AN APOSTLE BY THE WILL OF GOD, NOT MEN'S

*2 Corinthians 1:1-2 Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, To the church of God which is at Corinth, with all the saints who are in all Achaia: 2 Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.*

Apostle Paul opens his epistle to the people of Corinth with his standard salutation.

Paul called himself "an apostle of Christ Jesus." The Greek word 'apostolos' literally means 'one sent forth.' Paul was an apostle, not because he inherited the role, not because he was selected by the people or appointed by some committee, and not because he appointed himself. He was "an apostle the will of God." In contrast, Paul described Timothy affectionally as a brother. The young pastor was not an apostle but rather an apostolic delegate.

The letter is addressed to the church at Corinth and was meant to be forwarded from that commercial center to the concentric circle of believers in the region of Achaia which was the Roman province comprising all the territory of Greece south of Macedonia.

Although many in the Corinthian congregation attacked Paul rather mercilessly, he greets them with grace and peace. In so doing, he sets a wonderful example as one who is a peacemaker even in the midst of difficulty.

David modeled this as well, for no matter how many times Saul threw the spear at him, he didn't fire back in 1 Samuel 18 & 19. I have found that I can gauge my own spiritual state by the priority I give to defending my position, motives, or reputation and by how quick I am to throw the spiritual spear back at those who threw it at me.

## **B. PRAISE TO THE GOD OF ALL COMFORT**

*2 Corinthians 1:3-4 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, 4 who comforts us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort those who are in any trouble, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.*

Here was a man, apostle Paul, who never knew if he might be dead the next day, because his enemies were many, and cruel, and mighty. Yet he spent a great part of his time in praising and blessing God.

One great purpose of God in comforting us is so that we can bring comfort to others. In other words, we become channels to distribute God's comfort to those who suffer.

We need to know our suffering has some purpose.

*Romans 8:28 And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose.*

In 2 Corinthians 1:4-11, Paul tells us three of the ways that suffering brings about good in our Lives.

### **1) Suffering prepares us to comfort others.**

It's a chain reaction. Spiritual comforts are not given us for our use alone, but to help others.

The word 'comfort' almost leaps off the page. It is key to Paul's explanation. In these verses and the three 'consolation' that follow, the same root word is used ten times. It comes from the Greek word 'parakletos', which is formed from the prefix 'para', meaning 'alongside,' and the root 'kareo', meaning 'to call.' Interestingly, our English word 'comfort' comes from two Latin words meaning "with strength."

Comfort is given by someone called alongside to help – like a nurse called to a patient's bedside. It's the same word John 14:16 uses for the Holy Spirit.

*John 14:16 And I will pray the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may abide with you forever--*

We must not think of comfort in terms of 'sympathy.' Because sympathy can weaken us instead of strengthen us. God does not pat us on the head and give us a piece of candy or a toy to distract our attention from our sufferings. No, He puts strength into our hearts, so that we can face our trials and triumph over them.

*2 Corinthians 1:5-7 For as the sufferings of Christ abound in us, so our consolation also abounds through Christ. 6 Now if we are afflicted, it is for your consolation and salvation, which is effective for enduring the same sufferings which we also suffer. Or if we are comforted, it is for your consolation and salvation. 7 And our hope for you is steadfast, because we know that as you are partakers of the sufferings, so also you will partake of the consolation.*

God may allow situations in our life where our only comfort is found through Christ. Sometimes we think the only comfort is found in a change of circumstances, but God wants to comfort us right in our difficult circumstances, and to do it through Christ.

This is the same idea Jesus expressed in John 16:33

*John 16:33 These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world.*

We get to learn to get closer to God through difficult life lessons, not just classroom lesson. Because the classroom lesson remains in our heads and soon to be forgotten. But the life lesson remains with us as long as we live.

Paul used the Greek word 'pathema' for 'suffering,' which was also used for the sufferings of our Saviour.

We must never think that trouble is an accident. For the believer, everything is a divine appointment. There are only three possible outlooks a person can take when it comes to the trials of life. If our trials are the products of 'fate' or 'chance,' then our only recourse is to give up. No human can control fate or chance. If we have to control everything ourselves, then the situation is equally as hopeless. But if God is in control, and we trust Him, then we can overcome circumstances with His help.

God was bringing comfort and salvation to others through Paul's sufferings. How could God bring comfort and salvation to others through Paul's suffering? As suffering brought Paul closer to God, and made him rely more and more on God alone, Paul was a more effective minister. He was more "usable" by God to bring comfort and salvation to God's people.

Whenever we have prayed, "Lord, just use me. I just want to be used by You to touch the lives of others," we had not realized we were praying a dangerous prayer. We were inviting God to bring suffering into our lives, if that was the proper tool to make us more able to bring comfort and salvation to the lives of others.

*2 Corinthians 1:8 For we do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, of our trouble which came to us in Asia: that we were burdened beyond measure, above strength, so that we despaired even of life.*

We don't know what 'affliction' Paul faced in Asia, but it was obviously extreme. The Greek word for 'despaired' means 'no way out.' Apparently, Paul viewed himself as being on the brink of death.

"I am the subject of depressions of spirit so fearful that I hope none of you ever get to such extremes of wretchedness as I go to."

Those words were spoken in a sermon by Charles H. Spurgeon whose marvelous ministry in London made him perhaps the greatest preacher England ever produced.

Discouragement is no respecter of persons. In fact, discouragement seems to attack the successful people far more than the unsuccessful. Because the higher we climb, the farther down we can fall. We are not surprised then when we read that the great apostle Paul was 'beyond measure' and 'despaired even of life.' Great as he was in character and ministry, Paul was human just like the rest of us.

## 2) Suffering keeps us from trusting in ourselves.

*2 Corinthians 1:9* Yes, we had the sentence of death in ourselves, that we should not trust in ourselves but in God who raises the dead,

Intense suffering is designed to remind us of our utter helplessness. Because it is when we are most helpless that we are most dependent. Proverbs 3:5-6 tells us:

*Proverbs 3:5-6* Trust in the Lord with all your heart, And lean not on your own understanding; In all your ways acknowledge Him, And He shall direct your paths.

It is one thing to memorize Prov 3:5-6, but it is another thing to live the life of Prov 3:5-6. But that is what God wants us to do.

The world's advice, however, is diametrically opposed to this wisdom. We're encouraged to 'stand tall' and urged to believe that we can handle anything. The truth is, there are many things in life that knock us flat, any number of situations we can't handle. Our hearts can deceive us, and our brains are capable of error. But when things are running smoothly, it's easy to forget our weaknesses. Suffering reorients us to the truth.

It's a great day when a man finally comes to the end of himself and realizes, "I don't need to go to another seminar or call another counselor. I don't need to enroll in another program or come up with another creative idea. All I need is You, Lord."

Maybe your marriage seems dead. Maybe you are facing enormous amount of bills that you cannot possibly pay and your financial capability seems dead. Maybe your joy or love or peace or ministry seems dead. Quit trying to figure it out and fight it in your own energy. Instead, seek the Lord. Trust the God who specializes in raising the dead.

Thankfully, suffering is not God's final plan for His children. Through the impassioned pen of the weeping prophet, Jeremiah – who was also well acquainted with grief – God gave us one of the grandest promises in the Bible.

*Jeremiah 29:11* For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, says the Lord, thoughts of peace and not of evil, to give you a future and a hope.

## 3) Suffering teaches us to give thanks in everything.

*2 Corinthians 1:10-11* who delivered us from so great a death, and does deliver us; in whom we trust that He will still deliver us, 11 you also helping together in prayer for us, that thanks may be given by many persons on our behalf for the gift granted to us through many.

In everything? Even suffering? Even those back-against-the-wall situations that promise nothing more than certain dooms?

Yes, even in those. Why? Because even in those circumstances, God is leading us toward His perfect plan, toward the future He has prepared for us.

The highest service you and I can render on earth is to bring glory to God, and sometimes that service involves suffering.

God works out His purposes in the trials of life, if we yield to Him, trust Him, and obey what He tells us to do. Difficulties can increase our faith and strengthen our prayer lives. Difficulties can draw us closer to other Christians as they share the burdens with us. Difficulties can be used to glorify God. So, when we find ourselves in the trials of life, remember what God is to us and what God does for us.

### **C. APPLICATIONS**

1) **Instead of focusing only on ourselves now, think of how we can help others later.**

This will give a note of hope.

2) **Rather than fighting, surrender to God. Rather than resisting, release to Him.**

This will produce a note of faith.

3) **Although getting even seems to come more naturally, try giving thanks.**

This will bring a note of peace.