

3. Suffering and encouragement

July 5, 2007

I don't like pain, any type of pain. Some people can endure a lot of pain before they express uncomfortableness. But when I get hurt, I want all the world to know that I am hurting and have a pity for me.

But as I am getting older in the Lord, I realize that in some ways, pain can be good. It can be God's warning device that something is wrong – like a red light on the dashboard that alerts us to the fact that something ain't right under the hood. Pain can also be a signal of something very, very right that's just in transition. Pain signals change, growth, development – the birth of something new.

A. PAIN OFTEN SEEMS POINTLESS, BUT PURPOSEFUL

Pain often seems pointless, but God assures us that it is always purposeful. Pain is a part of life. In God's curriculum, it is a course we can neither drop, nor simply skip, nor just take someone else's painful experience as ours. With regard to pain, God has at least five objectives He may want to accomplish in our lives.

1) God can use pain to develop our faith.

As the saying goes, "No pain, no gain." just as endurance is developed in a long distance runner through strenuous exercise, so faith grows through testing.

James 1:2-4 My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, 3 knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience. 4 But let patience have its perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing.

2) God can expose error through pain.

Heat has a way of bringing impurities to the surface, whether they are in our theological understanding or our ethics.

1 Corinthians 3:13-15 each one's work will become clear; for the Day will declare it, because it will be revealed by fire; and the fire will test each one's work, of what sort it is. 14 If anyone's work which he has built on it endures, he will receive a reward. 15 If anyone's work is burned, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire.

3) Our relationship with God grows through pain as we learn obedience.

It is by falling and scraping our spiritual knees that we learn to walk obediently as the Lord directs us.

Hebrews 5:8 though He was a Son, yet He learned obedience by the things which He suffered.

4) God can use pain to create humility in how we relate to others.

Our thorns in the flesh have a way of piercing pride and deflating an overgrown estimation of ourselves.

2 Corinthians 12:7 And lest I should be exalted above measure by the abundance of the revelations, a thorn in the flesh was given to me, a messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I be exalted above measure.

5) Our suffering can bring glory to God as we respond with grace.

1 Peter 4:16 Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in this matter.

B. FOUR WAYS TO ENCOURAGE OTHERS

Last week we found out that the Thessalonians were disturbed by some false information, were being deceived, and were forgetting some of the teaching Paul had given them earlier. False teaching easily confuse and even destroy one's faith unless he or she takes serious and urgent counter measures with sound doctrines and encouragements.

Apostle Paul brings four ways to encourage these believers of Thessalonica to bring their faith back to Jesus Christ. I believe that we can use his methods to minister to others who are discouraged and losing faith in God.

1) Offering Compassion

2 Thessalonians 2:13 But we are bound to give thanks to God always for you, brethren beloved by the Lord, because God from the beginning chose you for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth,

To truly help hurting people, we must first "enter into" their pain. We must look beyond the circumstances to the heart of the person. Often it's not the pain of the wound but the accompanying loss of dignity that hurts the most.

Many times people go through a spectrum of emotions during their difficult time. Whether it is a betrayal from spouse or friends, a physical sickness or a combination of several situations, their integrity and dignity get invaded, they become devastated, confused and disoriented.

What do they need most of all? They needed someone to affirm their dignity as a person and encourage them. They long for someone to be thankful for them, for someone to show them love. This is the sort of first aid that we must give to others and the kind that Paul administered to the beaten-down Thessalonians.

By giving thanks to God for the Thessalonian believers, Paul upheld their dignity. By referring to them as "brethren beloved by the Lord," he affirmed the Lord's love for them and their security within the family of God.

If you are enduring pain and suffering yourself, remember this: In spite of how others treat you, you are "beloved by the Lord." If you're in His family, He'll never slam the door in your face.

2) Offering Instruction

2 Thessalonians 2:13-14 But we are bound to give thanks to God always for you, brethren beloved by the Lord, because God from the beginning chose you for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth, to which He called you by our gospel, for the obtaining of the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Suffering frequently causes disorientation and disillusionment. Suffering believers need instruction to reassure and reorient them, to bring God's promises back into focus.

In these two verses we can find the truck load of theologies – such as Predestination, Election, Sanctification and Glorification – that could drawn any theologian. At the same time, these two verses can comfort and stabilize the person who is suffering.

You may wonder how that is possible. What is more assuring than the promises of God? Through the stylus of apostle Paul, the Lord is telling us that the believers of Jesus Christ have been called by names and they are saved by the power and promise of God Almighty.

We are predestined before the foundation of the creation. To make the matter more affirming, the Holy Spirit sanctified us when we received Jesus into our hearts and continuously sanctifies us as we live for Him.

Having a good theology has a steadying effect on suffering people who can't see God's hand in the fierce storm. It lifts their focus from the present predicament to the overarching purpose of God which had its beginnings "in the eternity of the past" and will lead to the "eternity of the future."

3) Offering Exhortation

2 Thessalonians 2:15 Therefore, brethren, (1) stand fast and (2) hold the traditions which you were taught, whether by word or our epistle.

Besides compassion and instruction, hurting people need exhortation. To exhort means "to give warnings or advice."

Two commands formed Paul's exhortation: "stand firm" and "hold to the traditions." Picture a person planting his or her feet in a secure spot with knees bent and shoulders squared in a determined, defensive stance. Then that person stabilizes further by clinging to something fixed. Feet on the ground, hands gripping something solid – the "traditions," as Paul mentioned. These are the teachings of Jesus Christ that had been handed down by the apostles. The key to withstanding the onslaught of false teaching was for the Thessalonians to hang on to true teaching.

For us, the command is the same. In times of suffering, nothing is more stabilizing than the truth of Scripture – nothing. Trials pressure us to try something new. We might be drawn toward a new belief, the latest doctrinal twist, or perhaps a self-help program that "guarantees" to make us feel better, but Paul's exhortation for us is to remain stubbornly loyal to the tried-and-true doctrines of the faith. Like Paul, we are to encourage those who suffer by pointing them toward the truth of God's Word.

God works in this world through the truth of His Word, and Satan opposes this truth by substituting his lies. Human nature is prone to believe a lie and resist the truth. Satan accomplishes his best work through people in so-called Christian institutions – churches, schools, etc. – who do not believe God's truth. They have "a form of godliness" but have never experienced the power of God's saving truth.

4) Offering Intercession

2 Thessalonians 2:16-17 Now may our Lord Jesus Christ Himself, and our God and Father, who has loved us and given us everlasting consolation and good hope by grace, 17 comfort your hearts and establish you in every good word and work.

Notice what Paul does and doesn't pray for. He prays for God to comfort them, not to circumvent the storms for them. He prays for God to strengthen them, not for Him to spare them. Actually, it sounds much like Jesus' prayer in John 17:15:

John 17:15 I do not pray that You should take them out of the world, but that You should keep them from the evil one.

When the storms of life come sweeping over us, we, like the disciples, want peace. We want to avoid the storms at all costs. But in most cases, the most direct route to maturity is through the storms, not around them.

Isaiah 43:2 When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; And through the rivers, they shall not overflow you. When you walk through the fire, you shall not be burned, Nor shall the flame scorch you.

Notice that the word "through" is used three times in the passage. God does not guarantee us a life full of sunshine and free from storms. What He does guarantee, however, is His loving care over us as we go through those times.

Isaiah 43:4 Since you were precious in My sight, You have been honored, And I have loved you

The calm in the storm is God's watchful eye. If you are suffering today, are you focusing on the wind and the waves, or are you making eye contact with the One who considers you precious in His sight? Your focus will determine whether you sink in your circumstances or walk above them. If someone you know is suffering, offer prayerful intercession for them and remind them of these truths.

If we keep our eyes on Jesus and get to know His heart through His Word, He will guide us with His eye.

Psalm 32:8 I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will guide you with My eye.

C. THREE BENEFITS FROM SUFFERING

One of the devout missionaries in Philippine area during the middle part of WWII was captured by Japanese soldiers. They tortured her, humiliated her, raped her and starved her just for fun. One day in her filthy dirty prison cell, God spoke to her heart, "Can you thank me for trusting you with this experience even if I don't tell you why?" She did and the Lord brought her through the horrible ordeal.

Why does God allow pain in our lives? That's a question we have all asked at one time or another. As much as we yearn to make sense of our suffering, God doesn't always give us the answers we want to hear. Often silence is the only response we get, despite our desperate pleadings. Part of the faith-building process of trials is learning to let go of the need to know why and focusing on the good that difficult experiences can produce in us.

In 2 Corinthians 1, Paul lists three benefits reserved for those who make it through suffering's collision course.

1) The ability to comfort others

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.

2) A dependence on God

2 Corinthians 1:8-9 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. 9 Yes, we had the sentence of death in ourselves, that we should not trust in ourselves but in God who raises the dead,

3) Learning 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.*

D. APPLICATIONS

1) To truly help hurting people, we must first “enter into” their pain. We must look beyond the circumstances to the heart of the person.

2) If we keep our eyes on Jesus and get to know His heart through His Word, He will guide us with His eye.