

I want to start by asking a very relevant question to our current moment in time: Where do you turn for comfort when you experience loss, pain, troubles, or suffering?

These past six months have been full of all these things. We've experienced a pandemic that's dramatically impacted our lives. We've seen our society torn apart by racial injustice. We've seen wildfires ravage our state, wipe out homes, and ruin our air quality. It's been one thing after another. Like the ten plagues, we can't help but wonder, what's next? Things we took for granted, so many things taken from us—school, sports, travel, birthday parties, weddings, funerals, graduations, not to mention health and safety.

So, where have you turned for comfort? Some of us have turned to food. Isn't it interesting that certain foods are called comfort food—macaroni and cheese, spaghetti and meatballs, fried chicken and mashed potatoes, or grilled cheese and tomato soup. These foods make us feel better; they comfort us. Some people turn to harder stuff. Why do you think they call it Southern Comfort?

Where do you turn for comfort? There are those who isolate. They turn inward. Maybe they turn on the TV and turn off their minds. Maybe they listen to music. There's actually a genre of music now called Comfort Music. One advertisement says,

Want to make decisions easily? Flow with creative ideas? Be filled with endless patience? Listen to Comfort Music! Soothing, sensual guitars weave throughout this superb collection of great music by prominent musicians. Add an exquisitely arranged Beatles song, and you can be sure that everything's going to be all right.

Where do you turn for comfort? Some people get busy. They put their head down and grind it out. They socialize, volunteer, clean the garage, organize old photos, or visit friends. Perhaps they believe if they just keep busy, eventually, things will change, and everything will be all right.

I suppose any one of these might offer some measure of comfort in a time of trouble, but are they really enough? Mac and cheese might make me feel better after a hard day at home with the kids, but what if something really bad happens? Or what if it's just one thing after another like we've endured recently? In those times, we need something better than that.

That's what the apostle Paul writes about in the first chapter of his letter called 2 Corinthians. Last week, Dan introduced this letter, and we saw how Paul began with a meaningful greeting; we'll pick up where we left off and look at chapter 1:3-11.

What we'll see is after these greetings, Paul immediately breaks out into praise. It wasn't unusual for Paul to offer praise to God, but what stands out here is he does this in a time of great distress. This entire letter is peppered with references to a variety of troubles and trials Paul experienced. He says he endured "*conflicts on the outside, fears within*" (7:5). He says things got so bad he wondered if he'd be better off dead. But, somehow, when he was at his very lowest, he found comfort and strength. This was more than a quick fix, and it's for that reason he can offer heartfelt praise. This is how he describes it:

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God. For just as we share abundantly in the sufferings of Christ, so also our comfort abounds through Christ. If we are distressed, it is for your comfort and salvation; if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which produces in you patient endurance of the same sufferings we suffer. And our hope for you is firm, because we know that just as you share in our sufferings, so also you share in our comfort. vv. 3-7

The last thing I want to do is give you some cheap answer to the mystery of suffering. There are no easy answers. We can't make sense out of everything that happens in this world. I can't tell you ten reasons God allows this or that. But I can tell you somehow, in all the troubles, pain, and losses we endure, there's a purpose, and it's a good purpose. That's why Paul can set his description of it in the context of praise to God, the Father, and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Suffering Allows Us to Experience the God of All Comfort

One of the purposes that jumps out here is suffering allows us to experience the one Paul calls "*the God of all comfort.*" Paul calls him "the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort." What image comes to your mind when you think of a father? Some of us ran to our mother for comfort instead of our father. Mothers often have a softer touch. But Paul tells us God is "*the Father of compassion.*" He's not called the Father of righteousness

or holiness. He IS righteous and holy, but when we're hurting, we can count on him to be full of compassion.

And he's *"the God of all comfort who comforts us in all our troubles."* That word comfort shows up ten times in this passage. When Paul says something ten times in one paragraph, he's making a point. We tend to think of comfort as something that makes us feel better. Comfort soothes us, numbs our pain, and relieves our distress. When we call something comforting, we usually mean it makes us feel better. That's not what Paul has in mind here. The word he uses is the Greek word *paraklesis*. It means "one called alongside to help." Not only does he comfort us, but he comes alongside us to help and encourage us. He doesn't just provide sympathy; he provides strength. One writer says, "God's comfort strengthens weak knees and sustains sagging spirits so that one faces the troubles of life with unbending resolve and unending assurance" (David Garland).

One of my favorite authors is Frederick Buechner. In his book, *The Wizard's Tide*, he writes about a boy named Teddy and what he felt growing up in an alcoholic home. In one scene, Teddy's father decides his son is old enough to swim out to some barrels anchored offshore. Halfway to the barrels, Teddy starts getting nervous. Buechner writes,

Teddy thought the barriers still looked a long way off, and the beach was so far behind he could hardly recognize his mother and sister sitting on it. His arms were beginning to ache, and he was feeling out of breath. What if he started to drown, he thought? What if he called for help, and his father, who was a little ahead of him, didn't hear? What if a giant octopus swam up from below and wrapped him in slimy green tentacles? But just as he was thinking these things, his father turned around and treaded water, waiting for him. "How about a lift the rest of the way?" his father asked. So Teddy paddled over and put his arms around his father's neck from behind, and that was the best part of the day for him, and the part he remembered for many years afterward.

Paraklesis—one called alongside to help. Comfort isn't something you find; it has to find you. Someone has to bring it to you. Even before we cry out, our Father finds us and says, "How about a lift the rest of the way?" We can throw our arms around his neck and hang on.

How does that happen? How does this compassionate Father come alongside us and give us comfort and strengthen us in the midst of our troubles? Remember, Jesus called the Holy Spirit our "comforter" (John 14:26). He sent the Holy Spirit to comfort, encourage, and strengthen us. The Spirit can comfort us in many ways. He can use a friend. It can happen through a promise given in scripture. It can happen through some act of providence that allows you to see God is still in control. One thing is for sure; you

can't experience it without first experiencing pain, heartache, and loss. Paul calls these *"the sufferings of Christ"* because we're united with Him and sharing in His suffering. And just as we're united with Him in his suffering, so does our comfort abound in Him. When have you known the comfort and help of God most in your life? It's when you're in most in need.

But far too many of us fail to avail ourselves of this comfort. We try to escape our pressures. We pray that the problems will be taken away. We act and pray as if all our hopes are for escape. We react with worry, anger, fear, or just grumbling.

As parents, we try to spare our kids from trials and stresses. We'd love to protect them from any suffering, but we can't, and it wouldn't be good for them if we could. They need to experience the suffering so they can also experience the comfort. Psalm 34:18 says, *"The Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit."* You can't experience that without suffering.

Suffering Prepares us to Comfort Others

But that's not all. Another purpose for suffering emerges immediately in Paul's next breath. He says, *"...the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God"* (vv. 3b-4). Bryan Wilkerson put it this way, "When God gives you comfort, he doesn't just give enough to get you through; he gives you enough to give away." In other words, he gives you an abundance of comfort that overflows to others.

What if your sufferings aren't sent just for you but also for someone who's watching how you handle it? Maybe it's your kids watching. When we just grumble about our circumstances, what are we teaching them? That God is faithless? That his promises aren't true? When we have sufferings sent to us, they're often sent so others who watch us will know they can be sustained.

That's what Paul means in v. 5-7,

For just as we share abundantly in the sufferings of Christ, so also our comfort abounds through Christ. If we are distressed, it is for your comfort and salvation; if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which produces in you patient endurance of the same sufferings we suffer. And our hope for you is firm, because we know that just as you share in our sufferings, so also you share in our comfort.

No matter how great our sufferings, God counterbalances them with strong comfort and encouragement. And the result is we're able to comfort and encourage others. So the sufferings you experience aren't just for you; they're for others. This is true in a couple of ways.

First, those who've passed through suffering can relate better to others going through the same thing. Who do you want to talk with when you're hurting? Someone who's been there. I

think of someone like Joni Ericsson Tada. Why can she minister so effectively to those who are disabled? Because she's been cemented to her own wheelchair for decades. Think about your own suffering. Maybe you've been through a painful divorce. Maybe you've lost a child. Maybe you've been let go at work. And maybe you've not only been through something like that, but you've also come out the other side. You're stronger. You've seen God shows up in your darkest moments. Have you considered God wants to use you to comfort others going through the same thing? And not just to comfort them, but as Paul says here to *"produce in them patient endurance of the same sufferings we suffer."* Again, God gave you enough comfort not just to get you through, but enough to give away. That's why it's so important you're open to how God wants to use what you've been through to help others. Don't be private about your suffering or the comfort you've received.

Not only that, sometimes the reason we suffer is so someone else might benefit from something they couldn't have if we didn't suffer. That's what Paul means when he says, *"If we're distressed, it's for your comfort and salvation."* Paul suffered to bring them the gospel, and through that, they received salvation. They heard the good news and came to faith because he was willing to endure hardship to get them the message. Sometimes suffering is necessary for the salvation of others.

Have you heard of William Carey? He was a shoemaker from England. He and his wife Dorothy volunteered to go to India as missionaries. It didn't go very well. First, the man who volunteered to go with him stole his money. Then two of Carey's children died. Then his wife went through a severe depression. To make matters worse, after seven years, he'd only seen one person come to Christ. He died in 1834 without seeing much fruit at all. But during his time in India, Carey translated the New Testament into 24 of India's native languages, laying a foundation for thousands of future missionaries. Today, he's called "The father of modern missions."

Why did he do it? Why endure so much? He did it for someone else's comfort and salvation. That's why many of you parents do what you do. You sacrifice for your kids; you work hard, you stay up late, you worry, pray, and work until you're bone tired. Why do you do it? For their comfort and salvation. And the great thing is, it'll pay off. Look what Paul says, *"And our hope for you is firm, because we know that just as you share in our sufferings, so also you share in our comfort"* (v. 7). Paul's hope isn't wishful thinking. He's confident of this. His hope is firm.

Suffering Teaches us to Depend on God and Not Ourselves

This brings us to another purpose of our suffering: suffering teaches us to depend on God and not ourselves.

We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about the troubles we experienced in the province of Asia. We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt we had received the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead. He has delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us again. On him we have set our hope that he will continue to deliver us, as you help us by your prayers. vv. 8-11a

Here Paul gives a first-hand account of how he learned this lesson. He describes something that happened in Asia. He says he and his friends were *"under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure."* Think of a ship so weighted down it begins to sink. Paul didn't have the strength to carry the load placed on his back. He says, *"we'd received the sentence of death."* There was no way out. He was sure he was a dead man. There was nothing he could do to remedy the situation or control the outcome. Paul went through so much; we can't say exactly what happened. It might have been persecution, an illness, a rejection, or even some form of emotional distress.

By the way, don't let anyone ever tell you that God won't give you more than you can handle, because he will. That's the whole point! Paul says the purpose of all this was *"that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead."* When God gives you more than you can handle, you turn to him. Paul says, when he did that, God delivered him. And it was like a resurrection because he was like a dead man.

You may or may not have to face a life-threatening situation, but God is still working out this process in your life. He'll bring you into situations where you're forced to let go of control, where your resources aren't enough, where unless God acts, all will be lost. Maybe it's in your marriage, your career, or something you're going through with one of your kids. Maybe it's a crippling addiction. You reach the point where you don't have the resources to get through. Guess what? You're right where God wants you. It's only when we come to the end of our resources; we can discover His.

Recently I've experienced that in my own life. I see how God is using some areas of struggle and even failure in my life. I've tried to fix things myself and failed miserably. I'm coming to see through all this how broken and weak I am. I'm a sinner in need of grace, just like anyone else. There are things I can't fix. The more I try, the more I mess it up. There are things I'm utterly dependent on God for. I should know that, right? But so often I try to fix it or cover it up. I'm learning it's not until I come to that place of complete surrender and dependence on God that I'll experience any semblance of victory. There's an old hymn called, *Rock of Ages* that says it so well in the second and third stanzas:

Not the labor of my hands

Can fulfill Thy law's demands;
Could my zeal no respite know,
Could my tears forever flow,
All for sin could not atone;
Thou must save, and Thou alone.
Nothing in my hand I bring,
Simply to Thy cross I cling;
Naked, come to Thee for dress;
Helpless, look to Thee for grace;
Foul, I to the fountain fly;
Wash me, Savior, or I die.

That's where God wants us. "Nothing in my hand I bring, only to the cross I cling." But to get to that place, we must be broken of our self-reliance. We're all born with a stubborn streak of independence. We're determined to do it ourselves. And we grow up in a world where we're constantly told, "You can do it. Believe in yourself. You have what it takes." But then reality hits, and you find you don't have what it takes. Like the great theologian, Mike Tyson said, "Everyone has a plan until they get punched in the mouth." God wants to bring all of us to the end of ourselves, and most often, the only way he can do that is to put us in situations where we're out of options.

The great thing is after you've been through something like that, and you see God come through, there's a new kind of confidence in God. That's what Paul means when he says, "*On him we've set our hope that he will continue to deliver us...*" Paul is confident, not in himself, but in God.

Suffering Unites Us in Prayer and Thanksgiving

There's one more thing I want you to see here about suffering and its purpose: Suffering unites us in prayer and thanksgiving. Look at the last sentence of the paragraph. He says God will continue to deliver us "*as you help us by your prayers. Then many will give thanks on our behalf for the gracious favor granted us in answer to the prayers of many*" (v. 11). As you read this letter, it's clear there was relational discord between Paul and the church in Corinth. Paul wants to mend that relationship. He wants them to see how their lives are intertwined with his. Earlier, he stressed this when he said, "*If we are distressed, it is for your comfort... If we're comforted, it is for your comfort...*" (v. 6). Their lives are intertwined through mutual suffering and comfort. But they're also intertwined through prayer and thanksgiving. He says, "Yes, God delivers us, but he often does it in response to your prayers."

Suffering is sent to us to show us we're not individuals living all alone in life. We're members of a body; we need each other. We're not in this alone. Our suffering creates a dependence on others to pray for us. When we're struggling, it's right to go to others in the body of Christ and say, "Please pray for me. I'm struggling. I need your prayers." As you do that, unity is created, not only in prayer but also in thanksgiving when God answers our prayers.

Two weeks ago, my daughter Kimberly gave birth to her third child, a little girl named Olivia. It was a hard pregnancy, made even harder by COVID-19. We prayed a lot for her, and many of you did as well. But when that little baby girl was born on Sept. 15, we were united not just in prayer but in thanksgiving. And that brought us all closer together.

Paul says God answers our joint prayers, so "*many will give thanks on our behalf for the gracious favor granted to us in answer to the prayers of many.*" These are prayers for deliverance. You see, sometimes God comforts us in our affliction, and sometimes he delivers us out of our affliction. And when he does, we give thanks together.

So Paul began this paragraph with praise, and he ends with thanksgiving! He begins and ends with worship. There's a mysterious and almost paradoxical connection between suffering and worship. When God meets us in our suffering, we can't help but worship.

My prayer for us is this will be a community that celebrates not just our successes, but our sufferings. Why? Because our suffering allows us to experience the God of all comfort. Can we be a community that can be real with each other? Can we share our sufferings with each other? Can we comfort each other, pray for each other, and celebrate God's deliverances together? Many of us are hurting in different ways. Paul reminds us of a simple truth, and it's this: When we suffer, God comforts and strengthens us. He doesn't just give enough to get us through; he gives us enough to give away.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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