

Comfort In Affliction

2Corinthians 1:3-11

Richard Wurmbrand was an evangelical minister in Romania when the Communists seized control of the country in 1945.

If you know the history of communism in Eastern Europe then you know that system of government is strongly opposed to Biblical Christianity.

The reason for that is very simple.

Biblical Christianity says, "Human beings belong to God; therefore, the LORD is the ultimate authority in the lives of people rather than the government."

Communism says, "Human beings belong to the state; therefore, the government must have authority over the lives of all people."

The two worldviews are completely opposed to one another and because of that communist governments have historically persecuted the church.

That was the case in Romania.

The church there was forced underground and Pastor Wurmbrand and his wife Sabina did all they could to support and encourage believers.

By God's grace their efforts were effective and they were able to minister the gospel to many people.

This of course was exactly what the communist government hated and so in an effort to stop the ministry they imprisoned the Wurmbrands.

Sabina was in prison for three years and even after being set free had an incredibly challenging time getting the basic necessities of life.

Richard was put in solitary confinement for three years, after that he was moved to a group cell where he spent five years and endured torture on top of prison.

After that he was released and immediately went back to ministering the gospel which after two years led to his re-arrest and a 25 year prison sentence.

Thankfully, he was released after about five years and once again returned to ministry.

By this time Pastor Wurmbrand had become fairly well known in Christian circles even outside of Romania.

A group of Christians in Norway were able to get the pastor out of the country and keep him from being imprisoned for a third time.

The Wurmbrands used their freedom to serve the persecuted church throughout the world starting an organization called "Voice of the Martyrs".

According to their website the message of the Wurmbrands to their brothers and sisters in Christ has been, "Hate the evil systems, but love your persecutors. Love their souls, and try to win them for Christ."

[When I think about the idea of being imprisoned and tortured I am amazed at the attitude behind that statement. These were people who knew what it was to suffer for Christ and at the same time they were people who truly knew the comfort of their LORD and Saviour. That is the subject of our text

this morning in **2Corinthians 1:3-11** “Comfort in Affliction”. Trials and hardships show up in a variety of ways in the lives of God’s people. Our society of abundance and comfort has led to a distorted view of suffering as though it is something that never happens to Christians, but the Bible tells us a different story. It tells us that we will have trouble in this world, but it also tells us that God will care for everyone who belongs to. More than that, hardship is often a means by which believers mature in their faith. The apostle Paul knows that to be true from firsthand experience and he wants the church to learn some important lessons about God’s comfort in affliction. Lesson number one is this...]

Point #1 – God is the comfort of His people in affliction. (Verse 3)

The Christian finds relief in hardship in Who God is, even when their difficulty persists over a long period of time.

It is understandable that most of us would think that relief from hardship equals comfort in hardship.

When we are sick or in pain (whether physical or emotional) we want it to be over.

No right thinking person is upset or disappointed when their pain goes away.

There is good reason for that. We know from the Bible that there is sickness, pain, and death in the world because the world has been broken by sin and we know that sin is bad and we also know that the new creation will be free from all those things.

So to hope for the end of those things is good.

Where we can make a mistake is in thinking that the only possible comfort for us is the end of those things.

Paul shows us something different here beginning in **verse 3**.

He does not begin with talking to the Corinthians about his situation or theirs.

He does not begin with the kind of affliction or how long it will last.

He begins with worship. He begins by praising the LORD for Who He is.

He is the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies.

That is such an important statement for building a good theology of suffering.

When we are in pain we can very easily become blind to God’s mercies.

How can God be merciful if this is happening?

We need to be reminded of what mercy is. Mercy means being spared from a punishment that is deserved.

If we fail to see how utterly wretched our sin makes us in the sight of God, then we will fail to appreciate the mercy that has been shown to us in Christ.

The only thing we deserve from God is eternity in hell.

Despite that fact He gave His Son Jesus to die for us to pay the penalty of our sin so that through faith alone in Him the LORD refrains from giving us eternity in hell and instead gives us the gift of eternal life.

In addition to being the ‘Father of mercies’ Paul writes that God is the “God of **all** comfort.”

By putting the word ‘all’ there Paul likely means that any comfort that is truly genuine comfort must come from God.

The word ‘comfort’ here has the sense of being given encouragement and/or strength.

Paul is saying that God is the source of true encouragement and strength.

Before he says anything about affliction he tells us about Who God is.

[God does that with Job. How many of you remember Job’s suffering? That dude went through a great deal. He lost everything he owned, his children all died, and he was afflicted with a disease that cause him physical agony. His friends show up and provide no comfort. Job repeatedly asks for an audience with God, he wants an explanation for his suffering. Do you know what God does? Rather than explaining the situation to Job, He shows Job Who He is!]

More than anything else that is what we need as believers.

It would be nice to understand the why, but our greatest need is to know Who God is.

It would be nice to skip over everything bad in life, but what we need more is the capacity to see the greatness of God in our darkest hour.

We are talking about something far better than trite phrases or wishful thinking.

We are talking about the supernatural work of the Holy Spirit making the infinite and incomprehensible God of the universe the highest treasure of our hearts.

That is what we need.

[I believe the point of this verse is to say more to us than simply that God is the giver of all comfort. I believe the point of this verse is to say that God Himself is our comfort. I believe that is what makes what is written next possible. In the next verse the apostle tells us about God comforting us in our afflictions and one of the effects that comfort has. From that we learn this second lesson...]

Point #2 – God’s comfort for His people points others to Him. (Verse 4-6)

When the LORD does the miracle of granting us rest in suffering that often gives us opportunity to be a witness for Jesus to others.

Now that Paul has told us Who God is, he proceeds to tell us what He does on account of Who He is. (Verse 4)

That is a bold claim.

Paul is saying something more than God can comfort us, he is saying that God does comfort us in ‘*all* our affliction’.

Paul is not saying this is true for everyone. The word ‘us’ here is referring to Christians.

Also notice this is comfort ‘in’ affliction meaning we need to keep in mind the lesson from verse 3.

This comfort is experienced when we love and trust God for Who He is.

That's a miracle!

How can people find comfort in Who God is when they are imprisoned and tortured?

How can that happen when a child dies?

How can that happen when from an earthly perspective everything is lost?

Answer, God is doing a miracle.

That miracle is a gift to us no doubt, but the LORD's aim goes beyond us.

What does he say here? He says God comforts us "so that we may be able" to comfort others.

We need to be careful here. Some people offer shallow comfort with Christian language.

They throw out a verse or two and a pat on the back and expect the person to get over their affliction and move on with life.

Paul is talking about something much more than that.

He is speaking from personal experience with real affliction. (**Verse 5-6**).

What does he mean by "sharing in Christ's sufferings"?

We know for sure he doesn't mean suffering to pay the penalty of our sins.

Only Jesus does that.

Some commentators suggest that he is speaking of the suffering of the church generally speaking.

That makes sense given that the church is called the 'body of Christ' in the Bible (1 Corinthians 12, Ephesians 5, Colossians 1).

While I agree with that I also think he is saying something here about how believers suffer.

If we look at Jesus suffering and death we should ask two questions.

One, who is in control of all that happens to Jesus?

Two, what was Jesus' goal in all His suffering?

Who is in control? God! What is Jesus' goal? The glory of God!

Listen carefully to this, *to share in Christ's suffering means to recognize suffering as being from the hand of God for the glory of God.*

That is Paul's vision of his hardships and he sees that as accomplishing something more than his own comfort.

He says, "that affliction, that is for you (meaning other believers)...Our comfort, that is for you."

It was God working in us to show you His goodness so that you might treasure Him more.

[In the church I first attended there was an elderly gentleman name Mel. He was about as kind and gentle a man as I have ever known. When I was an intern at the church he was in a nursing home and I went to see him. He was quite weak and in quite a bit of pain. As I was leaving I asked if I could pray for him. He summoned every ounce of strength he had and despite the pain sat up to bow his head

before his Lord. Not because he was a legalist, but because he loved Jesus. He was a man that knew the comfort of Christ in affliction. I'll tell you that pointed me to Christ.]

That is what happens when we go through affliction understanding that is it from the hand of God for the glory of God.

It points others to Him.

Commentator Colin Kruse writes regarding this verse, "One human being cannot effect divine deliverance from affliction for another, but it is possible to share with another sufferer the encouragement received in the midst of one's own afflictions."

I don't have to tell you that this world is full of evil and because of that it is full of suffering.

In the face of that we need to find our comfort in the LORD for Who He is and while that will certainly be for our own greatest good it may also, by God's grace, introduce others to the God of all comfort.

[Someone might say, "Isn't there an easier way? Couldn't God point people to how great He is by how great He makes things for His people?" There is some truth to that. The fact is that living of life according to God's Word isn't all pain and suffering. There is much good fruit that comes out of pursuing a holy life. That said, a life of sunshine and rainbows rarely if ever reveals much about the true affections of our hearts. We are prone to be satisfied with things rather than God. Affliction tends to reveal that. That is our third lesson from this text, that...]

Point #3 – Finding comfort in God reveals genuine salvation. (Verse 7-10)

When believers persist in their love for Jesus despite every earthly reason to turn their backs on Him, it is a powerful display of a heart changed by the Holy Spirit.

One thing that we have to understand about the Apostle Paul is that he is saying these things to the church having walked through a great deal of personal affliction.

This is more than good classroom theology for Paul. It is that, but it is also lived experience.

He gives us a taste of that in these next few verses.

Before he tells the church about his own experience he says this about them in **verse 7**.

He leaves the specifics of their 'sufferings' unsaid.

Though we don't know the details of the situation, he does say 'you share in our sufferings' and we know that in verse five he said 'we share abundantly in Christ's sufferings'.

Meaning they are going through whatever they are going through as though it is from the hand of God for the glory of God.

It is because they are going through this kind of hardship that his hope for them is 'unshaken'.

In other words he is confident they are holding fast in their faith.

Why does their affliction give him such confidence? Because he knows what it has done in his life and that of his fellow servants. (Verse 8-10)

Again he avoids giving us specific details about what exactly was going on, but he does say that it was so bad that he and his fellow ministers “despaired of life itself.”

Things were tough enough that they would rather have been dead.

This is coming from a guy who was beaten, whipped, stoned, put in jail, shipwrecked, etc.

It had to be bad right.

Why would God do that in Paul’s life?

It says here it was to “make them rely not on themselves but on God who raises the dead.”

How did Paul and his fellow ministers make it through that?

Their own strength? Not a chance in the world.

They endured it with their faith intact because God carried them through.

God puts His people in impossible situations to show that He is the one at work in their lives.

[Remember one of the most famous miracles in the bible, the parting of the Red Sea? Why did the Israelites end up there with nowhere to go? Because that is where God told them to go. Why? So that they would be in an impossible situation where only God could save them.]

That is what God does in the hearts of genuine believers.

He keeps them through every trial, even ones where it seems utterly impossible.

How is it that people sing hymns on their way to be executed?

How is it believers can forgive those that harm them?

How is it that people go on loving Jesus when it makes no sense to do so?

That is what God does for His people! He keeps us by means of His comfort in affliction.

Of course not all believers go through the same kind of trial.

Some of us here have had it pretty easy, but even so the only reason we have made it this far is because God is keeping us according to His mercy.

If things should continue to trend towards godlessness in our society you can be sure that persecution will increase.

Our hope in the face of that will be is the same as Paul and Timothy and all believers, it will be that our God is the God of all comfort.

[That is always our hope whether we live in relative peace or we live under the rule of tyrants. Paul knows this because he has lived it. Because of that he asks the believers in Corinth for something in verse 11. It is an important means by which believers are sustained in difficult times. That is the fourth lesson of these verses, that...]

Point #4 – Believers who find comfort in God are helped by prayer. (Verse 11)

The LORD responds to the prayers of His people and one of the best things we can pray for is that God would sustain followers of Jesus for the glory of His name.

Look with me at what he writes in verse 11.

The ESV gives the impression that the plea for prayer here is a command.

The NIV translates it “as you help us by your prayers”.

It is less of a command and more of an assumed expectation.

It is given in the mind of the apostle that the believers will be praying for him and his fellow ministers of the gospel.

The fact that he assumes it is happening tells us something important about the prayers of believers, particularly how they relate to persecuted Christians being comforted by God.

It tells us that Paul sees the prayers of God’s people as a need.

He knows he will fail in his own strength and he believes that God responds to the prayers of his people.

Does this mean that God is bound by people if they just say the right words?

Not at all, God acts as He pleases according to His will.

It is also true, however, that God delights in His people being of one in heart and mind desiring His glory to be displayed in His people.

To say it another way, God has said that He listens to His people and we should believe that.

That is what Paul is seeing here. That he and his companions will be sustained by the prayers of God’s people and when that happens people will give thanks to the LORD because of it.

Listen brothers and sisters, as long as the Christian has any sort of mental capacity left he/she is never helpless in any circumstance, we can pray.

It can be easy to fall into the trap of doubt in this regard.

Many times I have heard people mock prayer as though it accomplishes nothing.

That is a lie the devil wants us to believe.

He wants us to think we can do it on our own.

He wants us to think our prayers for other believers accomplish nothing.

He wants us to think like that so that people will remain ignorant of the glory of God.

The truth is the almighty King of the universe does listen to the prayers of His people and we are sustained by them.

The reason why we are sustained by prayer is because the very act of prayer acknowledges our need of God to act on our behalf.

[How many people have ever seen someone hanging off a cliff? I think about that every time I fail to do a chin up. I know if I ever end up in that circumstance I am not going to make it. Imagine if I was in that situation and someone who has plenty of strength to pull me up was standing right above me

hand reaching down and I said, “No thanks!” What would you think? You would think that was pretty foolish and you would be right to think it.]

How often do I do that with prayer?

The all-powerful present everywhere creator of all things says He will exercise His power in response to the prayers of His people for the sake of His glory and I neglect that.

Does He need my prayer to help another believer in affliction? No!

Does He delight in responding to such prayers? Absolutely!

Because that is true we can be sure that our prayers for the comfort of God’s people enduring affliction help them.

For Paul as he writes to the church of Corinth this is clearly an important matter for him.

He knows full well that hardship is something that believers should expect.

It is true that so far we have avoided the kind of persecution that is at the forefront of the apostle’s mind, but no matter what kind of trial we might face there we can learn some valuable lessons from what we are told here.

We need to learn that God is our comfort.

We need to learn that when God is our comfort it can point others to Him.

We need to learn that finding comfort in God reveals genuine salvation.

And we need to know that prayer is a great help to the people of God.

Learning these lessons is crucial to growing up in Christ because the LORD often uses affliction to grow us up in our faith and how we go through these things says a great deal about how much we have already matured.

Of course we may ask why, the psalms are full of lament.

Even here Paul talks about despairing of life itself!

Of course we will not enjoy the afflictions themselves.

But by God’s grace as He grows us up in Christ we may find comfort in all things through the miracle of the LORD becoming our greatest treasure.

This is the Christian’s comfort in affliction.

May God do this miracle in us to the eternal praise of His Name.

Let’s pray together towards that end.