

St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church

"Suffering and Consolation"

Scripture: 2 Corinthians 1:1-11

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June 7, 2020

Trinity Sunday

Songs/Hymns: Immortal, invisible, God only wise #290, Eternal Father strong to save #325, Praise the Father, Praise the Son (Tomlin)

It wasn't something I had expected.

I thought he wanted to meet for social,
Not for pastoral reasons.

But then he dropped the bomb:

"Steve, I'm no longer a Christian."ⁱ

This floored me.

My mouth was hanging open...

I mean, he was devoted.

He took Jesus seriously.

If someone needed a coat,

There was a good chance that
He'd hand over his jacket.

We spent the next couple hours

Talking about this new decision.

Ultimately it was less about denying

the person and presence of Jesus

And more about the cost of following.

“It’s just too much to ask of anyone.” He told me.

“It’s just too much to ask.”

PAUSE

Following Jesus is becoming more and more difficult.

While few of us face violence or overt discrimination,
We live in a culture that disdains Christianity.

Our faith is characterized as oppressive.
Our values are dismissed as bigoted.
Those who follow Jesus are ignored or mocked.

This pressure on the outside
Compounds those perennial inner challenges.

It is a struggle to commit
and recommit ourselves to Jesus’ lordship.

We need to make conscious repeated decisions
To let Jesus reign over our time,
our talents,
and our treasures.

Following Jesus could be characterized as a battle,
a battle that involves suffering.

So is there any value in that suffering we endure?
Or should we be content to know that following Jesus is right?

Today's Bible passage is taken Second Corinthians.

If you listened in last week,

You may recall that Paul planted a church in Corinth.

After spending a year and a half with the fledging community

he then moved on to Ephesus

to continue his missionary work.

But while he left Corinth

He still kept in touch with the community

That he had established.

While the letter in which we find today's reading

Is called Second Corinthians

It is likely the "fourth [piece of correspondence] he had written
to the Corinthian church".ⁱⁱ

Among Paul's letter's

Second Corinthians is personal and revealing.

In this letter he responds to detractors who questioned

His leadership and his authority.

"[While they contend] that he had suffered too much

to be a Spirit-filled apostle of the risen Christ...

[Paul argues] that his suffering

is the means God uses to reveal his glory (1:3–4, 11, 20).ⁱⁱⁱ

That Paul has suffered much
Is something his detractors got right.

Later in this letter Paul lists his experiences of persecution.
When it comes to suffering
he is a persecution expert:

“Five times I received from the Jews
the forty lashes minus one.
Three times I was beaten with rods,
once I was pelted with stones,

three times I was shipwrecked,
I spent a night and a day in the open sea,

I have been constantly on the move.
I have been in danger from rivers,
in danger from bandits,
in danger from my fellow Jews,
in danger from Gentiles;

in danger in the city, in danger in the country,
in danger at sea; and in danger from false believers.

I have labored and toiled
and have often gone without sleep;
I have known hunger and thirst
and have often gone without food;
I have been cold and naked...”^{iv}

Paul is of an expert when it comes to experiencing suffering.

But don't think he was superhuman,
That he endured all stoically, heroically.

In today's passage he confides
that one experience almost crushed him:

"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."^v

The Apostle Paul suffered lots in his ministry.
In today's letter he shares
That he had been so beaten down
He almost gave up.

But even while Paul acknowledges this,
He doesn't think it disqualifies him as an apostle.

On the contrary
Paul sees God's activity in the middle of his pain.

First of all, he notes that God is kind,
And has renewed him in the midst of his troubles.

Paul uses the word 'comfort' nine times in five verses:

“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...”^{vi}

Theologian NT Wright notes that “when you ‘console’ someone
you simply bring them back from utter despair
to ordinary happiness.

[But the] word Paul uses here, over and over again,
does more than that.

[‘Comfort’] meets people where they are,
and brings them right on to the point
where they are strong enough to see new hope,
new possibilities, new ways forward.”^{vii}

How many of you have experienced this in Christian service?
You were fed up, done with that project
You had been volunteering for.

You had your resignation letter in your back pocket.

But then God shows up
and reframes your attitude.
The challenges still remain
But your hope has been renewed.

Paul sees that God has met his troubles with comfort.
But more than that, Paul sees that God allows him
To be a source of comfort for others.

Let me reread the passage and follow it further, this time
Reading from Peterson's *The Message*:

"All praise to the God and Father of our Master,
Jesus the Messiah! Father of all mercy!
God of all healing counsel!

He comes alongside us when we go through hard times,
and before you know it,
he brings us alongside someone else
who is going through hard times

so that we can be there for that person
just as God was there for us."^{viii}

Paul tells says to those very people
Who had been complaining
That he was always in trouble...

That the troubles he had endured were for their benefit.
Because he had been consoled in the midst of his struggles,
He is now capable of giving them the consolation they need.

Maybe you can identify with this experience too.

You battled many years with addiction.
Then thanks be to God,
God delivered you from it.

Now you have the street-credit to talk to addicts,
And a real-life experience
to testify to God's transforming power.

Paul suffered greatly
And was comforted in his trials.
And the experience of life's pain and God's presence
Enabled him to bless others.

But this isn't the only way that God redeems suffering.

Paul mentioned that 'dark night of the soul'
Where he was despairing of life itself,
Where he was fantasizing about taking a long walk
Off a short pier.

In retrospect he sees that this time in the crucible
Taught him a needed dependence.

Again, let me quote Peterson:

"It was so bad we didn't think we were going to make it.
We felt like we'd been sent to death row,
that it was all over for us.

[But as] it turned out, it was the best thing that could have happened.
Instead of trusting in our own strength
or wits to get out of it,
we were forced to trust God totally"^{ix}

Elsewhere Peterson translates one of Jesus' Beatitudes in this way:

“You're blessed when you're at the end of your rope.

With less of you there is more of God and his rule.”^x

Maybe you can also identify with this experience.

Following Jesus has put you in a position,

Where there seems no way forward.

You've run out of money.

You've run out of ideas.

You've already asked all your friends and family for help.

You are at the end of your rope.

You've expended all of your own resources.

You are forced to depend on God...

And God comes through.

But Paul says his suffering has been met by God's comfort.

Paul says his suffering allows him to comfort others.

Paul says his suffering has made him reliant on God.

PAUSE

Some time ago I was having a conversation with my mentoring group.

We were talking about working in God's power

versus working in our own.

We recognized that sometimes
we seemed to be exhausting ourselves in ministry,
frantically spinning our tires with little impact.

And we recognized that at other times
We were more effective with less energy,
Drawing inspiration from a deeper place.
So how could we work more consistently in God's power?

Our leader commented that the people he's seen
To be consistently working in God's power
Are people who have been through the wringer,
People who have been broken by suffering

Suffering, it seems, has a way of bringing us closer to God.

None of us in our mentoring group
Were excited to hear this answer.
None of us liked that answer but Paul,
I think Paul would agree with it.

As we share in Christ's sufferings, we share in Christ's comfort.
As we share in Christ's comfort we bless those around us.
And as we get to the end of ourselves, we grow closer to God.

ⁱⁱ In addition to 1 Corinthians, see the letters mentioned in 1 Cor. 5:9 and 2 Cor. 2:3–4.

ⁱⁱⁱ "Introduction to 2 Corinthians" <https://www.esv.org/resources/esv-global-study-bible/introduction-to-2-corinthians/>

^{iv} 2 Corinthians 11:24-27 NIV

^v 2 Corinthians 1:8 NIV

^{vi} 2 Corinthians 1:3-4 NIV

^{vii} NT Wright *Paul for Everyone: 2 Corinthians 4*

^{viii} 2 Corinthians 1:3-5 MSG

^{ix} 2 Corinthians 1:8-9 MSG

^x Matthew 5:3 MSG