

God of All Comfort

II Corinthians 1:1-11

Don't we all want a life that's free from trouble and pain? And let's face it – isn't that a big part of the appeal of following Jesus? When we respond to the call of Christ and submit to Him as our King, don't we expect Him to protect us, to somehow shield us from sorrow and suffering? So, how does this passage make sense? If Paul was so faithful to God, why didn't God take care of him, as we just sang a moment ago?

Well, make no mistake. Paul did experience the deliverance of God, as he says in verse 10. And he kept on trusting that God would continue to deliver him. Moreover, as he says in verse 11, he was relying on the Corinthians to pray for him during his times of trial. So we know there's nothing wrong with praying for one another, that we might find relief from our sicknesses and struggles. And we should expect God to answer our prayers.

But even while we pray for others in the midst of their afflictions, even as we pray for ourselves as David did in our responsive reading this morning, even as we look to God to be our hiding place in our times of trouble, our high rock upon which our enemies cannot reach us, we cannot deny that times of suffering still come into all of our lives. And sometimes, as in Paul's case, these difficulties can be quite serious indeed.

In verses 8 and 9, Paul alludes to the troubles which he had recently experienced in Asia – that's the place we now know as the western part of Turkey. Now, the book of Acts tells us that Paul's ministry there, and particularly in the city of Ephesus, had been quite successful, and even included miraculous signs of God's power. Acts 19:12 says that "even handkerchiefs or aprons" which had touched Paul had the power to heal when they came into contact with sick or demon-possessed people. It's no wonder that the chapter goes on to say that "The word of the Lord grew mightily and prevailed."

But along with great success went great opposition. You see, because so many people in the region were becoming Christians, the number of visitors to the Temple of Diana in Ephesus was, of course, going down. So those who made their living by selling souvenirs at the temple started a riot. In fact, they made things so dangerous for Paul that he had to leave for Macedonia, from where it seems he wrote this letter. Paul had to have been disappointed that pagan opposition had brought an end to a very fruitful season of ministry.

But that wasn't the only time that Paul had suffered at the hands of his opponents. Back in Acts chapter 14, we read that when Paul went to Lystra, a town in southern Turkey, the pagan people first worshipped him and Barnabas as gods, because they had brought healing to a lame man. But when it became obvious he wasn't a god, the people turned on him, throwing large stones at him and leaving him for dead. The emotional roller-coaster, not to mention the physical abuse had to have been exhausting, so it's no wonder that Paul found himself in the place of deep despair that verse 8 describes.

But Paul wasn't the only follower of the Lord to experience the whipsaw of triumph and tragedy. From the Old Testament book of First Kings, you may remember the time when Elijah challenged the prophets of Baal to demonstrate the power of their false god. He challenged them to present an offering to Baal, while he presented an offering to God. And whichever deity answered their prayers by sending fire from Heaven, well, that would be the true God.

During the contest, Baal of course did not answer the prayers of his priests. But the true God made Himself known in no uncertain terms. He poured out so much fire on Elijah's offering that the whole stone altar was also burned up. It's hard to imagine a greater triumph. But even after such an unmistakable revelation of the truth, Queen Jezebel would not turn away from her devotion to Baal. Instead, she redoubled her efforts to have Elijah killed. So in deep despair, he took off into the desert, walking away from his ministry, and wanting only to die.

And because this kind of unrelenting opposition from the unbelieving world continues today, Christians continue to suffer. Just last week, more than 100 Christians were arrested by the Chinese government for attending an unregistered church. And of course we all remember the 2 years that Pastor Andrew Brunson spent in a Turkish jail, falsely condemned of treason.

But opposition to Christ and His teachings isn't just happening overseas. In this country we've seen United States Senators question the fitness of judicial nominees who oppose abortion because they follow Christ. We've seen Christian bakers fined by state governments because they refused to prepare cakes for same-sex weddings. Vice President Pence's wife has been roundly criticized just for teaching in a Christian school. No, Paul wasn't the only one, then or now, who could say in verse 5 that "the sufferings of Christ abound in us."

So, why does God let His people suffer like this? Why does God allow us to get into situations where we pray along with David in Psalm 27: "Hear O Lord, when I cry aloud. Be gracious to me and answer me!"

Paul gives us one important reason in verses 9 and 10. He says that he was threatened even with death so that he might not trust in himself. In other words, one of the great blessings that comes along with suffering is that it brings us to the end of our own strength and resources.

And we've all experienced this, haven't we? When you or a loved one gets sick, when someone you love dies – you just feel so helpless, don't you? Such painful situations make it clear that self-confidence is a delusion, that our grandiose notions of autonomy and independence are just dreams. But if suffering simply made us feel helpless, we would remain in the worst sort of despair and bitterness – the way Elijah felt when he fled into the wilderness, the way Paul says he felt in verse 8.

But suffering doesn't have leave us in the depths. Instead, God can use all our sufferings to get us to do what David did in Psalm 27 – to pray to Him, to look to Him to do for us what we cannot do for ourselves. Paul says in verse 9 that his sufferings led him away from self-confidence to trust in God, Who is not only able to protect us from our enemies in this world, but able to raise us from the dead after this life is over. Suffering of any kind thus has the power to bring us to the exact place in which all Christians need remain – a place of surrender, of awareness of our complete dependence on God.

Of course, because God is the Father of mercies and the God of all comfort, as Paul says in verse 3, He often answers our prayers and relieves our suffering. And can't we all give testimony to the many ways God has answered our prayers, and brought us out of even our worst distress? To give just one example, people throughout the EPC prayed faithfully for Andrew Brunson all during the time he was in jail in Turkey. And God heard our prayers. God answered our prayers and brought him home. Just so, as David says in Psalm 27, we can have confidence that we will see the goodness of the Lord, not just in the life to come, but in the land of the living – right here and right now.

And it turns out that, if suffering in the life of a Christian can be good for us, drawing us closer to God, it can be just as good for us when God takes away our suffering. For as we pray to God in an attitude of complete surrender, we draw closer to God. And when those prayers are answered we draw closer still, giving Him all the credit and all the glory for our relief. Simply put, the greater our understanding of our helplessness, the greater our thanks and praise will be, and the greater our confidence will be in God's love for us.

But this isn't limited to our prayers for ourselves. No, we can also give thanks for the way God answers our prayers for our loved ones. Our love for God can grow when we see how He relieves their suffering as well. Paul reminds the Corinthians in verse 11 that because they have prayed for him during his difficulties, they can share in giving thanks to God for his deliverance. So, regardless of whose suffering is relieved, every answered prayer becomes fuel for our faith, a greater reason for our love.

So, suffering can help us surrender more completely to God, and suffering can help us be more thankful to God. But if it's true that when God relieves our suffering the faith of those who have prayed for us can be increased, there's another way our suffering can bless others. In verse 4, Paul blesses God for comforting him in his time of trouble. And why? So that he could, in turn, comfort others who found themselves in the same sort of situation. And the same thing can be true for us. It turns out that our scars can give comfort to others who experience the same kind of wounds.

For example, my mom and dad split up when I was a kid. So I spent 17 years at Chamberlain-Hunt working with kids, many of whom who found themselves in the same situation. I don't know how much good I was able to do them, but I did have a deeper understanding of what they were going through, and I like to think that helped me relate to them in a more powerful way. And the same thing can be true for you. Whatever suffering God has brought you through – opposition or sickness or grief – will equip you to help others going through the same thing.

But as we try to encourage those who share our experiences, it isn't just our survival that brings them the greatest comfort. We shouldn't just reassure them that if we got through it, they can too. No, as our sufferings bring us closer to God in dependence, and as our deliverance brings us closer to God in thanksgiving and praise, it is this closeness to God that is the greatest comfort we can offer to others who suffer. Our own journey from helplessness to deliverance to praise can point them to the only One Who can see them safely through as they walk the same road.

So it turns out that, in every way, our greatest comfort comes from closeness to Christ. Even the Greek word translated here as "comfort" conveys this meaning, for at root, it means to call to someone, or to call someone to you. And that's so true, isn't it? In our suffering, Christ calls us out of our self-confidence and into Himself, where we find strength and consolation. And because of our suffering, Christ enables us to call out to Him, first in prayer and then in praise. And because of our suffering, Christ enables us to call others into a closer relationship with Him.

No, no one likes to suffer. But if suffering can help us surrender more fully to God, if relief from it can make us more thankful to God, and if our experience of it can be a blessing to others, drawing them closer to God in faith and thanksgiving, I suppose it can't be all bad. So, while we pray for relief from suffering for ourselves and others, maybe we should also pray that God would use all of our sufferings to draw us and others to Himself, helping us to abide in Him as He abides in us.