

Communion

The Comfort of the Cross

(edited transcript)

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Today, I want to ask the question, 'What is our comfort?'. In his second letter to the Christians at Corinth, the apostle Paul identified the comfort we receive from God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit as the comfort, or consolation, of the cross of Christ - a comfort that we receive from Him and can then minister to others.

Comforted by God

Paul wrote:

"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, 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 Corinthians 1:3-4)

Being comforted by God is important. When people are troubled, they look for comfort. Some run from their trouble. Others try to immerse themselves in experiences that distract or compensate. Many take up the fight against the apparent cause of their trouble, attempting to motivate social change to remove the things they think are causing

themselves or others to suffer. But seeking comfort by avoiding suffering and persecution renders no true comfort, nor does it find the comfort of God. It only hastens the very trouble that those who live this way are seeking to escape.

Persecution is going to come. We *will* be hated by all men. Where, then, are we to find comfort in our distress? True consolation is in the cross of Christ. This statement of Paul's to the Corinthians is a condensed statement about the nature of the cross:

"For as the sufferings of Christ abound in us, so our consolation also abounds through Christ."
(2 Corinthians 1:5)

As a church, the Corinthians were very slow to understand what Paul meant, and we, likewise, have been slow to understand.

Many of the Bible's New Testament letters were addressed to people who had been born again of the Spirit of God (John 3:3-7) and who had begun their Christian walk in the Spirit but who had then become carnal because they did not understand the truth of the cross. In many ways, this one statement of Paul's about the sufferings and consolation of Christ abounding in us sums up *everything* he wrote to the Corinthians. It encapsulates the Gospel of Jesus Christ that Paul and the apostolic company were ministering.

Christ died for us so that we could join the fellowship of His offering, sufferings, death and resurrection then minister the fellowship of His

resurrection life to the whole world. The cross is not merely a concept or an historical fact. It is a living reality in Christ and in those who are in Him - those who demonstrate the life of Christ because they walk in the death of Christ and know His consolation. They are living letters, written with the Spirit of the living God, known and read by all (2 Corinthians 3:3).

When Paul joined himself to Christ's sufferings, he found and ministered the consolation of the living God.

Worthless doctrines

To avail ourselves of the consolation of God, we need to let go of our worthless doctrines and beliefs. Some of these have come from our traditions, others from our own ways of thinking, and even some from our own Christian testimony.

The prophet Jeremiah gives us a helpful illustration. Jeremiah was sent by God to call the people of Judah to repent (Jeremiah 1:4-10), but they would not listen. As soon as Jeremiah began preaching and proclaiming the word of God his persecution and suffering also began, and the comfort God gave him was to remind him that he was joined to the One whose word had become Jeremiah's own when he declared it.

The point is, we have the choice of joining the Lord's dying and living or holding to ourselves. If we choose ourselves, we will only ever suffer alone, never understanding the enduring work of the cross that yesterday, today, and forever, ministers the comfort of God to those who abide in Him. If we limit our view of the cross to an event in history, or to a transaction of God that substituted Christ's death for our own, we will be holding to a gospel that is far from the truth, and we will never know the living wonder and power of the cross!

As Paul knew, the sufferings of Christ are a reality for us *today* (Colossians 1:24). As the sufferings of Christ abound in us, and as we are joined to Christ's fellowship, we increasingly understand and comprehend the length, breadth, depth and height of what God, in His merciful love, is doing in our lives, and we have something of His life to give to others - not bland platitudes but *living* words that are true in us.

When Paul was with the Corinthian Christians, he sought to know nothing except Christ and Him crucified, and he exhorted the Corinthians to follow believers like Stephanus in whom this faith was substantially true (1 Corinthians 2:2; 16:15-16). The Corinthians, however, preferred other doctrines and other teachers, super-apostles that led them away from the truth and robbed them of the fatherhood of God (1 Corinthians 4:15).

Like the Corinthians, whether we know it or not, we *all* have our own private understandings and doctrines that are completely unhelpful and potentially very dangerous. The prophet Jeremiah, addressing the King of the nations and wisdom of the world, shows us just how dangerous these private doctrines can become:

"Who would not fear You, O King of the nations? For this is Your rightful due. For among all the wise men of the nations, and in all their kingdoms, there is none like You. But they are altogether dull-hearted and foolish in their discipline of delusion - their idol is wood!"
(Jeremiah 10:7-8)

When God confronts us with our foolishness and blind perspective that we think is so wise, He tells us we're not wise at all but dull-hearted and deluded. If the veil that is blinding our sight is to be taken away, we need to turn to Christ (2 Corinthians 3:16). Otherwise, as Jeremiah warned, our delusion becomes an idol to us.

We have all hung onto and sought comfort in worthless doctrines we mistakenly believed ministered life to us and through us. We can *still* hang onto these deceptions in vain hope. Even the way we pray can be deceived if we are praying to ease our own anxiety, begging God to deliver the outcomes we see as good. But this is not praying as God wants us to pray, by His grace and in His Spirit. *Our* prayers and *our* faith do not and cannot minister the life of God, for faith is received *from* God. It is *His* faith that we are to join, not our own that we are to hang onto.

We have all inherited a very strong tradition of expressing and holding valiantly to our own faith, testimony, and view, but we need deliverance from this self-righteous condition! We remain unreachable while ever we hold to our worthless doctrines instead of receiving the Spirit of God who is coming to us.

His word written on our heart

We need to learn how to make room in our hearts to have the Lord's word *written* there. Why? Because if we filter His word through our minds, by the time it gets to our hearts it will have been severely if not completely robbed of the life He ministered in it when He spoke it. His ways are higher than our ways! How can we possibly understand, fully and completely, the word that God is trying to bring to us today? How could we possibly encompass His word and apply it across the whole of our life? It's *not* possible! We have no idea either now, today or tomorrow what God wants to do with us physically, emotionally or psychologically in relation to ourselves or the people we relate with.

We need to humble ourselves and recognise that we *have* held to some worthless doctrines. The belief that Jesus died in our place so He

could take away all our pain and give us all the good gain is one such worthless doctrine.

Faith versus belief

Of course, believing in the cross of Christ is essential, but belief in a historical event or outcome is not faith. Faith is receiving what God is bringing to us so that we believe what *He* believes - for us, about us, about our family, about our life. We need to believe *that*, and to receive His faith for *that* we need to meet the Lord daily.

Paul wrote:

"...I believed and therefore I spoke." (2 Corinthians 4:13)

Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God (Romans 10:17). Faith, in its fundamental essence, is of God, and His faith is very specific in application to our lives. What we need to believe, and what the Holy Spirit is prioritising towards us each day, can *only* come from the Holy Spirit. Sometimes, finding out what the priorities of God are for us takes diligence and activity on our part, seeking Him in prayer and study of His word.

When someone shares testimony or reflection of the Lord's work in their life, faith is bearing witness. They are standing up in the grace that God has given them, and it's tremendously encouraging for those who hear it. As they bear witness, we bear witness to their testimony, and in the process, we are built up too. The comfort God has given them overflows to us.

Sufferings belonging to Christ

Paul testified that his consolation abounded through Christ as Christ's sufferings abounded in him (2 Corinthians 1:5). For the sufferings of Christ to abound in us, we need to acknowledge and accept that they are not our

own sufferings and that we are not walking through them alone or by any capacity of our own. Rather, knowing that in His offering Christ embodied and carried *all* suffering (Isaiah 53:3-12), making it His, we can join Him in His suffering as we suffer, and He gives us His grace and life to live. The love of God casts out our fears, and we know His consolation and peace instead of our worry and tension.

The comfort and consolation of the cross is a *complete* comfort that you will find as the sufferings of Christ abound in you and as you then offer that comfort to others. There will be no hint of religious pride in your testimony, for you will give all glory to the Lord knowing that it was not your faith at work in you but His. You will know you are not standing because *you* did well but because God led you, enabled you to walk with Him, and gave you understanding of your circumstances and His purpose for you in them. You will be growing in maturity that is gained through suffering.

True comfort is ministered in the same way to others who are suffering. We can share with them God's comfort - the comfort we received from Him. We will become those who are spiritual, able to see others restored because we know that the whole work belongs with God and does not come from anyone's good ideas or perspectives.

Each person is unique, special, and precious in God's sight, and His work in each person is unique. As we submit ourselves to Him, we can confidently ask Him to teach us. Jesus exhorted us:

"Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls." (Matthew 11:28-29).

He will teach us, and we will learn from Him, when we are in His yoke, with Him.

Praying for the Lord's help

I'm sure most of us do not want worthless doctrines, but we easily hang onto our own 'good' or 'wise' understandings, ideas and opinions gleaned from our upbringing, education, religious experiences and things we've read, seen or heard. If they are not the Lord's faith, however we acquired them and from wherever or whomever they came, they deceive us and are idolatrous, as Jeremiah declared (Jeremiah 10:7-8). If we allow them to remain, they will cause great harm, hindering even our prayers for they will be before us when we pray. That is a frightening prospect that surely none of us wants.

We can be genuinely thankful today for the Lord's precious word to us and fellowship with us. As He writes His word upon our hearts so that we can see and understand what we could never have seen or understood before He illuminated our hearts by His word, *His* faith arises in us.

You can ask the Lord to lay His hand upon you, minister to your mind and address the deceived beliefs that have confounded you. Perhaps you've held a negative or jaundiced view of yourself, your life, or your difficult or troubled circumstances. He will enable you to turn in repentance from your own view to His. As you turn to Him and set your eyes upon Him, He will help you see, understand and accept without demand that your life is from His hand and you are secure in His love.

We need to turn away from demanding any specific outcome from Him that verifies, to our satisfaction, His love for us, and we need to turn to Him, accepting His love and His provision, just as it is. As we turn and look to

Him, He will help us recognise, understand, and find His deliverance from the fears that still underlie the pulse of our life.

As we accept by the faith of God what God is doing in our lives, and the sufferings of Christ abound in us, we will find true consolation - the consolation of God and the deep comfort of knowing Him. We will not only know He is with us, we will also know with deep assurance that He is delivering us from our fears and from the loveless ways that have sprung from them.

As we begin to embrace the Lord and His cross, and receive what He is saying to us, we can stop resisting Him, stop the commentary in our own minds and on our lips, and by the faith and love He ministers to us, accept without complaint what He is doing with us, including the suffering He justly brings to us for our healing.

This is our faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.
