

Title: A Word of Comfort pt.3
Text: 2 Corinthians 4-5
Theme: Adversity brings comfort
Series: Occasion of Patrick's death (message #3)
Prop Stmt: The assurance of our comfort is rooted in God himself.

Read Text:

How do you respond when you have experienced a deep disappointment? I cannot cite any formal studies on this, but my personal observation is that people tend to respond to deep disappointment with either self-indulgence or self-protection. And I would argue that the self-indulgence is actually a form of self-protection. For example, people who think that their salvation is found in clothes or toys are very capable of going on a major spending spree in an effort to make themselves feel better. Others will eat everything in sight, while others will try to drink themselves under the table or make very reckless decisions because they are hoping (irrationally so) that their extreme behavior will somehow dull the pain of their soul. The thinking is like this: If I don't get what I think I deserve, then I am going to take whatever I can get and let the chips fall where they may. Or, in some cases, when we are struck with how fleeting life is, how random and unpredictable accidents and weird diseases are, we want to hurry up and do everything that we thought would bring us happiness before randomness happens to us.

The other response is self-protection. This person does not explode outward, but inward. They take their pain and try to hide it from everyone else, which means that they are trying to hide from everyone else. They are convinced that they have been robbed, cheated and swindled from the life they deserved. No one can possibly understand what they live with, so they will run away and live in seclusion. Or, in some cases, when struck with how fleeting life is, how random and unpredictable accidents and weird diseases are, this person attempts to build their life like a bomb-shelter, being protected from everything and anyone that could possibly bring them harm. Both are driven by fear. The self-indulgent response is irresponsible and brings enormous regret and guilt. It does not solve anything but only compounds problems immensely. The self-protection response is lonely and often too late discovers that misery makes for a really lousy friend.

When Paul writes 2 Corinthians, he has experienced deep disappointment at the hands of these people. They have returned his mercy with accusations, and his sacrifice with rejection and cruel jokes. In spite of his vulnerabilities being exposed, he did not pursue either self-indulgence or self-protection. In fact, by God's grace he pursued a third road. This way is not followed by many. It is, in reality the way of the cross. Paul was convinced that his adversity was a tool that God was using to bring about comfort for others. He was convinced that his affliction was the means that God was using to help these believers become more and more like Christ. Paul was so committed to helping these believers look more and more like Christ, that he considered his affliction, (even their treatment of him) to be worth it, if it would

result in them looking like Christ. He weighed their sanctification against his relief and he considered their sanctification to be more important. Therefore, his adversity became a source of comfort because he knew that his adversity was bringing about growth for them. These people who were quick to argue with his words, could not argue with his example.

1. **Our confidence in adversity comes from loving others and treasuring God's glory.** (4.7-15)

There is an unwritten rule for major league broadcasters. If the pitcher on your team is pitching a no-hitter, you do not use the term "no-hitter." It is considered a jinx, as if saying the term in a radio booth affects the velocity or movement of the ball that is pitched or the skill of the batter who is swinging. Regardless of the logic (or lack thereof), broadcasters simply do not say it. Similar logic is employed when talking about adversity. Perhaps you have heard people say that you should not pray for patience because the Bible says that suffering produces patience (endurance ESV). So, if you pray for patience, then God will send suffering, and of course, nobody wants that. Well, hold the phone! First of all, patience is a fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5.22). Should we not desire that the evidence of the Spirit of God be put on display in our lives? Secondly, Paul says in Romans 5.3 that "we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance (patience). Many of you fear adversity so much that you are paralyzed by its possibility and when it does come your way, which it will, you are so focused on getting it over with, and getting through it, that you waste it.

You are in adversity. This world is cursed by sin. Your body has the seeds of death in it and will die. Adversity is here. There is no hiding from it. You can live in fear of it, or you can live in the midst of it with faith in God, knowing that adversity is a servant of God's to carry out his plan. For the past year, our brother Patrick endured adversity. His struggle with it is over, but not for his family. Your struggle with adversity is not over either. I am addressing this issue because it is so fresh and raw for us. And before you get back to the many distractions of life, I did not want for us as a church family to waste this opportunity to be informed, and/or reminded, and/or motivated to think of and be prepared to respond well to the adversity that is either in our lives or is coming our way.

Apart from the Scriptures, we tend to think that we do not deserve adversity, we do not have time for adversity, that adversity gets in our way, so, the sooner we can get this over with – the better. However, God informs us that we should expect adversity. Peter said, "*Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed.*" (2 Peter 4.12-13) God has a purpose in adversity that goes beyond reminding us that we live, for now, in a sin-cursed world, in bodies subject to disease and prone to weakness. All of that is true. We cannot cure that. It makes us

long for the day when this is no longer the case, but there is more. God uses our adversity for eternal purposes. That is how the book of 2 Cor. Begins.

A. God aims to use your adversity to comfort others. (1.3-11)

In our affliction, we receive comfort in order to comfort others. (4) Others are comforted because they are going to experience affliction. God uses fresh examples of grace under fire to encourage believers who are under fire. Some of you are familiar with and frequent the website, www.persecution.com which is the home of the ministry: Voice of the Martyrs. When you read the stories of faithfulness and patience through suffering that many of our brothers and sisters are experiencing right now in the world, you are ministered to because you see the grace of God at work in these believers. You are humbled. You are comforted in knowing that you are not alone in struggle and that God has not abandoned you. Job had no idea of the millions of people who for centuries would be ministered to by his endurance. You have no idea who is watching you. Paul was able to realize that about his own adversity. He writes with an infectious hope in the midst of adversity because he was absolutely convinced that God was working through this for a greater purpose and Paul loved the greater purpose more than he disliked the adversity.

God has greater purposes for your adversity than what you can know and see at this moment. In order to glorify God in adversity we must accept that by faith. By his grace, we can do that. We bless God in adversity when we choose to treasure God's greater purpose through adversity MORE than we desire relief from adversity. If God is using adversity in my life to bring comfort to others, and if I love others more than myself, then I can accept adversity as my friend because of what it does for others. We do not do that automatically. Thinking and responding like that comes from long nights of the soul thrown upon the mercy of God. Now, we are ready to pick up chapter 4 again.

B. God aims to use your adversity to magnify Christ. (4.7-14)

I concluded with this last Sunday morning and touched on this last night, but it needs more attention. Life is not about the jar, it is about the treasure in the jar.

a. We accept adversity that Christ may be seen in us. (7-11)

Notice the things that Paul endures: affliction (in every way), being perplexed, persecuted, struck down, and always carrying in the body the death of Jesus. When he says that he is enduring affliction in every way without being crushed, being perplexed but not driven to despair, being persecuted without being forsaken and being struck down without being destroyed, it is evident that he is talking about physical, mental, emotional, social, and relational adversity. That last phrase, "always carrying in the body the death of Jesus" I take to mean that since Christ died, not simply a painful death, but an utterly humiliating death, that Paul is speaking of the fact that he is relentlessly being reminded of the humiliation of Christ because

he himself is subjected daily to humiliation because of Christ. Rather than scream in utter frustration of how unfair this is, he sees that his humiliation is a picture of Christ. He gets to point people to Christ. In fact (v.11) he seems stoked about the fact that in his mortal flesh (jar of clay) the immortal Christ is seen! So, if adversity is going to put Christ on display better than anything else, then can I accept adversity? I can, only if I treasure Christ more than myself.

b. We accept adversity that Christ may be seen in others. (12)

But there is more. When Christ is seen in us through adversity, God uses that to help others know how to endure adversity. The death that is at work in us becomes the means that God uses to produce life in others.

I got to this point in preparing this message on Friday afternoon, when I stopped and asked myself if I really believed this to be true. I cannot stand up here and say things because you expect me to say them in order that I might keep my job and we all continue the illusion. How do I know that what I am telling you is true? How do I know that I am not spouting some thought-control designed to calm people down, and give them a sense of comfort, albeit a false one at the expense of truth? Didn't Karl Marx accuse religion of being "the opium of the people"? Is that what I am doing? Am I guilty of injecting people with opium masquerading as theology giving a false sense of meaning and purpose when there is none? The fact that I want it to be true does not make it true. Even the fact that I believe it does not make it true. So, what makes it true?

c. We accept adversity because adversity will not win. (13-14)

The resurrection of Christ seals the deal. This is the game-changer! The adversity that Christ experienced secured comfort for his followers ONLY because the adversity did not win. How do we know that? Because the body of Christ is not in the ground but in glory! And what happened to him is the pattern of what is going to happen to each one who follows him. Adversity is now, but not then. It is here, not there. It is temporary; glory is eternal. That is why...

C. God aims to use your adversity to receive glory. (4.15)

a. God receives glory as grace extends to more and more people.

b. God receives glory as more and more people are giving thanks.

Am I willing to be an instrument of grace in the lives others, that they, by means of my adversity might be comforted and conformed more to the image of Christ? Am I willing to love others and serve them in this way more than I love relief from my adversity? Am I willing to embrace my adversity with thanksgiving because I care so much about others and the glory of God, that I consider the spiritual growth of others to be of greater value than my life? Am I willing to thank God for my

weakness because in my weakness He demonstrates His strength in such a way that He is put on display and not my gifts? I bring glory to God when I display His attributes. God is merciful to the humble, gracious to the broken, forgiving to the one who repents, saving to the believer, and exalting to the lowly.

This is incredible motivation to be patient in tribulation, to be hopeful in trial, to be confident in adversity. So, let's take this to the next step. How do I know that all of these things are indeed going to happen?

2. **Our confidence in adversity is secured by our confidence in God.** (5.1-9)

Perhaps if I expressed this thought in opposite terms it will help you understand the point of these verses. Our insecurity and fear in adversity is exacerbated by our attempts at trusting in ourselves. Trusting in ourselves is our instinctive response. It is also the reason why we tend to be ruled by adversity instead of seeing adversity as the instrument of grace in the hand of God. We do not have to surrender to the discouragement of adversity, and in fact will not, when we are considering what God is doing. So, what is God doing? He has, in fact told us what he has already done.

A. **God has told us what he has done.** (1-5)

a. He has already prepared a new body for us. (1-5a)

There is a great contrast in these verses. Currently we live in a tent. Our body is a tent. What is a tent? It is a temporary shelter. God has prepared for us a building, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. It is not on earth, it is in heaven. It is not temporary; it is eternal. It is not capable of being destroyed, it is eternal.

Do you get the point? Three years ago, next Sunday, a massive earthquake shook the island nation of Haiti. Since that time, many people have lived in tents, having lost their homes. The tents are shabby, leaky, drafty, and insecure places for people to dwell. They rot in the sun, break down from the wind and do not last. Let's say that for the last 3 years you and your family have been living in one of those tents and this week, you were given a house made out of block walls reinforced with re-rod and concrete floors. What would you do with your tent? Seriously, would you care?

What if you lived in this tent for 47 years and after all of this time, you were finally given a house? Are you with me? That is the point of this. We live in a body, like a tent that, on the day, it finally falls apart, we move up. And, so we don't forget it...

b. He has guaranteed this by His Spirit. (5b)

The Spirit is the engagement ring from God who reminds us of whose we are, and what is going to happen. That is why, "we are always of good courage." He has told us what he has done and ...

B. God has told us where we will be. (5.6-10)

a. At home with the Lord (6-8)

Walking by faith means that we embrace the promises of God before they are completely fulfilled. There are plenty of promises that are fulfilled and some that are partially fulfilled. All of these are evidence that God keeps his word. So, even though we are not yet home, he says that we will be. This drives courage. This tent will not last, the house will. That means, if God uses adversity as a means to destroy this tent, I get home sooner than I thought.

b. Which informs our goal (9)

If we are at home (in this tent) or away (in our house) we make it our aim to please him. Either one is fine with us. The certainty of the house, gives us security in the present. Present insecurities with this tent remind us of future security with our house.

c. Which motivates our faith-driven obedience. (10)

So, what can we do that is good? Hebrews 11 is so necessary and so helpful in answering this. Without faith, it is impossible to please God. God is not looking for dutiful, ritualistic, forced behavior. God is pleased with Christ. God is delighted with Christ. God is satisfied with Christ. As we look to Christ and rely upon Him as Savior and Keeper, he strengthens us and motivates us to live in a way that pleases him.

That is what Living the Cross-centered life is about. It is daily living in view of the finished work of Christ. It is seeking to reflect Christ, not in order to satisfy God's demands but as a response to the fact that God's demands have been satisfied in Christ who has made me free! This is not a response driven by terror, but one that is driven by faith and love and deep majestic reverence.

Do you understand v.10? God does not stand in our court defending or excusing his actions as God. We stand in his. We stand beholden to him, accountable to him, answering to him, for what He has by grace and mercy given us. Your life matters. Everything you do matters. Live confidently in Christ, not in yourself. You are a jar. He is the treasure. It's worth it now, but THEN, the intensity of our joy and complete delight and satisfaction in Christ will be beyond all compare. Live now, for THAT day.