**God who comforts in suffering** 29/8/21 dkm

Read: Isaiah 40:1-23, 2Corinthians 1

Text: 2Corinthians 1:3-7

Psalms: 138:1-5, 119:49-56, 23, 117

‘Health, wealth and happiness’- is this what you expected when you became a Christian? This is what is taught in many churches today, but is it what is taught in the Bible? Jesus told his disciples that the world hated him, and it would hate them also (John 15:18). The world hated Jesus because it is a sinful world, because people love darkness rather than light (John 3:19). Anyone who follows Jesus expects opposition and hatred from the world, not prosperity or praise. The apostle Paul certainly knew about suffering as a Christian, as a minister of the gospel of Jesus Christ. The Jews chased him out of various towns, and just before writing this letter called 2Corinthians the Gentiles chased him out of Ephesus.

The Bible condemns idolatry and immorality, so individuals and societies engaged in such practices will oppose the gospel by teaching lies or by violence. The gospel of course, is the power of God to change sinful hearts and to gather together a people who love the Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus said, ‘In this world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world’ (John 16:33).

After introducing himself and naming the intended recipients of his letter, the apostle Paul greets them as usual with the words, ‘Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ’ (1:2). He usually goes on to thank God for the faith or love or prayers of the recipients, but in this his second letter to this church he simply thanks God for his mercies and comfort; he does mention their prayers in verse 11 but more by way of exhortation than thanksgiving (1:3). In his first letter he thanked God for the grace he gave to these people. In the meantime he had seen little grace exercised in their attitude towards him. Remember the ‘painful visit’ and the ‘tearful letter’ (2:1-4).

Paul was accustomed to opposition from Jews and Gentile unbelievers but was deeply hurt and distressed when men and women in the church, in a church he established, turned against him. After waiting anxiously for Titus to bring news from this church, Paul received some good news which made him thankful to God for this comfort and encouragement. Our first point is, ‘Christ’s suffering’, our second, ‘Comfort from God’, and our third, ‘Comfort shared’.

**1. Christ’s suffering**

As believers we are in the world but not of the world. ‘If you were of the world the world would love you’ said Jesus (John 15:19). So if the world loves you, and you love the world, you need to ask if you are truly following Christ. Many in the church at Corinth had become worldly or carnal Christians (1Cor 3:1). Envy, strife and divisions, not to mention sexual immorality and idolatry were evidence of worldliness. If they were following Christ, and imitating Paul as he imitated Christ, they would face opposition from the world like Paul, and indeed like Christ. Christ was Paul’s saviour and Lord, and his example when it came to living in this world. Just as Christ suffered, so he expected to suffer: ‘For as the sufferings of Christ abound in us’ or ‘overflow into our lives’ (1:5).

Believers not only suffer like Christ, they suffer in Christ or Christ suffers in them, in us. If Christ is in us then he will suffer when we suffer. Have you thought about this? The apostle Paul did because of what he heard when confronted by the risen Jesus on the Damascus road. He was persecuting Christians but Jesus said to him, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?’ (Acts 9:4). Paul was now a Christian himself so when he faced opposition or persecution he knew Jesus was suffering with him and in him. Peter similarly writes of being reproached for the name of Christ as ‘partaking of Christ’s sufferings’, and, like Paul, says that such suffering is cause for rejoicing, ‘for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you’ (1Peter 4:13, 14).

Paul speaks of the comfort of God being extended to him in his troubles and distress. Paul suffered poverty, poor health and hardships like any human being. Such suffering may be the result of our sin, or as in the case of Paul, the result of preaching the gospel. Moreover, he suffered distress, even mental anguish, again in the cause of the gospel- the word ‘trouble ‘or ‘tribulation’ means ‘pressured’ (1:4). He felt the pressure of ministry because of the church at Corinth. Most ministers who leave their calling do so because of the church not persecution from the world. How would the apostle Paul respond to the pressure being put on him by the church at Corinth?

**2. Comfort from God**

The word ‘comfort ‘occurs ten times in this opening paragraph- sometimes translated ‘consolation’ in our version. In fact, we find the word ‘comfort’ more in this letter than in any other book of the Bible- and this is a book that focusses on Paul’s suffering in the gospel! What other writer uses this word comfort a lot? The prophet Isaiah, the prophet who preached gloom and doom to Israel. His words, ‘Comfort, yes, comfort my people’ are most memorable (Isa 40:1). Isaiah spoke of exile because of sin, but then of restoration and comfort coming from the Lord. We could of course, go back to David and Psalm 23: ‘Your rod and your staff, they comfort me’.

The word ‘comfort’ translates the Greek word ‘*parakale-o*’, which means ‘to call alongside’. It is the word used of the Holy Spirit, the Paraclete (John 14:16). Paul does speak of the Holy Spirit in this letter (1:22, 5:5), but here in verse 3 he speaks of ‘the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ’ as ‘the God of all comfort’. Note that is verse 2 he writes, ‘God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ’. Jesus spoke of he and the Father coming to dwell in the heart of those who love him and obey his word (John 14:23).

The ‘God of all comfort comforts us in all our troubles’ (1:4). The ‘us’ is the royal ‘we’ meaning Paul himself. Paul was getting little or no comfort from the brethren in this church but he had another source of comfort in the Lord himself. Do you know the ‘God of all comfort’, ‘*Theos pase-s parakle-sews*’? Here is a message unlike that preached in many churches, the ‘health, wealth, and happiness gospel’. Those who hear and believe that gospel are devastated when ‘things go wrong’. And those who preach that gospel have no answer for them because they failed to preach the truth about suffering, and about the God of all comfort.

Paul was seriously stressed and had few brothers to comfort him. Jesus, of course, had no brothers to comfort him as he faced the curse of the cross. Paul turned to the Lord in the midst of psychological pressure or distress, and he found the comfort of the Lord (1:6, 2:13, 7:5, 6). He knew the presence of the Spirit of Christ in his heart, the Spirit of comfort and consolation. As I just asked, do you know the presence of the Spirit of Christ in your heart, and do you find comfort in Him? Do you know that even though your mother may leave you, Christ will never leave you (Isa 49:15)? Remember that as a child of God you can never be alone; your divine counsellor and comforter is always near. You can call on him at any time, day or night, and he will hear (Ps 1:2, 119:55).

**3. Comfort shared**

We can and should be comforted in the Lord himself but this does not mean there is no place and no need to be sharing this comfort with others. In fact, it is those who know the comfort of the Lord who are best able to share such comfort. Paul writes of being ‘able to comfort those who are in any trouble with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God’ (1:4). Paul was comforted by the coming of Titus, who in turn had been comforted by the church in Corinth (7:6, 7). Paul was now writing to comfort those in the church, so the comfort had gone full circle.

We might compare the love of Christ which we are also told to share with others. If you know the love of God in Jesus Christ, you can and you should be sharing this love with those around you. Jesus said, ‘Love one another as I have loved you’ (John 13:34). Paul is saying, ‘I can comfort others in their trouble because I have been comforted by God’, and we might say the same thing to ourselves. He is not specifying the kind of trouble. We do not agree that we have to have experienced the exact same trouble before we can comfort others; we do not have to experience a divorce before we can comfort someone in a divorce, for example. We are called to share the comfort of God, not a specific experience.

This is what Christian fellowship is all about, sharing the love of God and the comfort of God? The church is the body of Christ, so if one member suffers all the members suffer with it (1Cor 12:26, Rom 12:15). Let there be no gloating or pride in giving or receiving comfort within the fellowship. Let us be as ready to comfort others as we are to condemn them. If there is sin then discipline may be necessary, as with the case of the sinner at Corinth. But following repentance there should be comfort.

Actually, the Christians at Corinth needed comfort because the whole church was troubled by the sin of this one man. Some supported him and while others refused to do so. Division entered the church, even families in the church. Division in the church often ends up with division in families, just like division in a marriage affects the wider family. Some churches divide over minor issues but in Corinth the issue was serious- a man was living in incest. But Paul had just received news that he had been disciplined by the majority. He wrote that it was now time to forgive and comfort this man (2:6, 7).

‘If we are afflicted it is for your consolation and salvation’ (1:6). The apostle’s ultimate concern was for the salvation of souls. His affliction could not save a soul of course, but he was ready to suffer that others might be comforted, and indeed might persevere in and through their suffering. To see their leader persevering in the face of suffering and finding comfort in the Lord would have encouraged the believers at Corinth to press on in their salvation. Being saved means being reconciled with God in Christ (5:18), and those in Christ are reconciled to one another in Him. Any breaking of relationships within the body of Christ affects our relationship with the Lord.

Being without God means being without hope (Eph 2:12). The great hope we have in Christ is the hope of the resurrection. Paul never lost hope for these rebels at Corinth (1:7). He understood that suffering produces perseverance; and perseverance, character; and character, hope (Rom 5:4). God comforts us by coming alongside, by lifting us up and giving us hope. Did you see the Olympic runner yelling at his friend, telling him to keep on and cross the finish line? This is the picture of Christian comfort. The race of course, is the race of life. The apostle knew the comfort and encouragement of the Lord and he stood with the brethren in Corinth to comfort and encourage them in the Lord.

The Christian life is one of power in weakness. ‘When I am weak then I am strong’ is a major lesson of this letter, a lesson learned by the once proud Pharisee who became the apostle Paul, the man who knew what it was to suffer for the cause of the gospel. I hope this is a lesson that you and I have learned, or will learn soon.