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This past Monday our nation observed Martin Luther King Jr. day. A few years ago I made copies of his [Letter from Birmingham Jail](#) available to you. I have done so again today and left copies on the table in the foyer. This past week I happened upon a poem of his that I had never read, titled *Loving Your Enemies*.<sup>1</sup> Before I read this, let me explain this scene. The photos below are from a peaceful demonstration in Birmingham, Alabama in 1963 which happened one month after King wrote Letter from Birmingham jail. These photos exemplify the words of this poem.



To our most bitter opponents we say:

“We shall match your capacity to inflict suffering by our capacity to endure suffering.

We shall meet your physical force with soul force.

Do to us what you will, and we shall continue to love you.

We cannot in all good conscience obey your unjust laws because noncooperation with evil is as much a moral obligation as is cooperation with good.

Throw us in jail and we shall still love you.

Bomb our homes and threaten our children, and we shall still love you.

Send your hooded perpetrators of violence into our community at the midnight hour and beat us and leave us half dead, and we shall still love you.

But be ye assured that we will wear you down by our capacity to suffer.

One day we shall win freedom but not only for ourselves. We shall so appeal to your heart and conscience that we shall win you in the process and our victory will be a double victory.”

Is it even possible to live a life of suffering like this? Is this merely poetic line or is it the possibility of a powerful life? We return to the subject of suffering that I introduced last week when I promised you that it would be a major theme in this 2 letter to the church in Corinth. Let's read the first section of this letter again.

*<sup>3</sup> Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, <sup>4</sup> who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God. <sup>5</sup> For just as the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives, so also through Christ our comfort overflows. <sup>6</sup> If we are distressed, it is for your comfort and salvation; if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which produces in you patient endurance of the same sufferings we suffer. <sup>7</sup> And our hope for you is firm, because we know that just as you share in our sufferings, so also you share in our comfort.*

Paul's main point in this first section is this—there are benefits that come with suffering. I have divided them into four main benefits.

Number one—We experience comfort from God.

*<sup>3</sup> 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...*

If you recall from last week I told you that Paul is describing a surplus of suffering. In verse five he said that he had an abundant supply. This is a business economics kind of term which means a surplus. He was not lacking in suffering, in fact, he had a surplus of suffering. Let's be honest as we study Paul's life and words—Paul suffered more than most of us ever will. He did not suffer more than any other human being, but his suffering was great—greater than mine will probably ever be and greater than most of us. Therefore, in all of these things, Paul's argument flows from the greater to the lesser. In other words, if his suffering is greater than ours and he received a corresponding comfort from God, then we can be assured that we will be comforted in our smaller surplus of suffering. Stated again, if God can handle Paul's suffering then he can most certainly handle ours.

The words affliction and suffering are used six times in the first seven verses. However, in all of his talk about suffering Paul is more concerned about letting his readers know of God's comfort. The word comfort or consolation is used 59 times in the entire New Testament. 29 out of 59 are in 2 Corinthians and ten of those 29 are in the first seven verses. Paul admits that we have a surplus of suffering but more importantly he wants us to know that this surplus of suffering leads to a surplus of comfort. Verse five again. *For just as the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives, so also through Christ our comfort overflows.* Our level of suffering is directly proportional to our level of comfort from the Lord.

Pliny the elder, a first century Roman Stoic disagreed with this notion when he wrote "that a supreme being, whatever it be, pays heed to human affairs is a ridiculous notion."<sup>2</sup> The Greeks and Stoics had their pantheon of gods but these gods were malicious and capricious and certainly did not care about comforting lowly creatures in their suffering. But in sharp contrast to these fickle gods, Paul has two wonderful names for the Lord—the *Father of compassion and the God of all comfort*. Aren't those great titles? It's not just Greek Stoics who are unfamiliar with this kind of God, but every other religion on the face of the earth throughout all human history have had gods who are not compassionate and who do not comfort those in need. And this is true because what they worship is no god at all. Every false religion is a form of Satan worship, whether or not the devotee is aware of it or not. Satan is not compassionate and comforting—just the opposite! He may grant power to his followers to make them feel good but he is incapable of expressing compassion and comfort. But the God we worship is the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort.

But some may wonder if God is the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, why do I so often not feel this comfort? One reason is because we do not understand the meaning of the word comfort. The word for comfort can also be translated as *encourage* or *exhort*. Comfort is not sympathy or pity. God's comfort is not meant to make you feel comfortable. I have a hunch that Paul's readers would never have understood comfort to mean comfortable, but in our westernized version of Christianity this point needs to be emphasized. To be comforted by God is to be encouraged by God, and how are we encouraged by God? Certainly he can do it directly by the Holy Spirit. The Spirit can speak to our hearts and give us peace and comfort, but God primarily encourages us by his word. The more we know the word of God the more we know the God of his word. As we learn about God's faithfulness throughout all history, we are encouraged. As we understand more deeply the security of our salvation through faith in Christ, we are encouraged. Comfort and encouragement are emotions but they are emotions that are based in facts and biblical truth. God's comfort and compassion is not something that grabs you while you are in a passive state. When we actively trust God in our trials and troubles, his comfort and encouragement is granted to us. If we say to God, "I don't feel good, make me feel better," that would be asking for what we want. But God desires to give us what we need, and what we need is a bigger vision of God. As our notion of God increases our problems decrease.

The second benefit of suffering is that we can comfort others in their day of trouble. Previously I cut off the middle of verse five. <sup>3</sup> *Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort,* <sup>4</sup> *who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God.*

The compassion and comfort of God is most often mediated through a living, breathing fellow Christian. Someone has wisely said, “God does not comfort us to make us comfortable but to make us comforters.”<sup>3</sup> The end goal of being comforted is to pass along this comfort to others. And do not forget that the word comfort can mean both encouragement and exhortation. Sometimes people need to be exhorted and spurred on toward love and good deeds. As you come alongside of them and put your arm around them—whether in reality or figuratively—not everyone needs a pat on the back and a warm embrace. Many of us need a kick in the pants. Actually, all of us need a kick in the pants sometimes and a warm embrace other times.

Neil Anderson tells the story of the enormous differences between the way he and his wife parented their children. If one of their children fell down, his wife would kneel down and say, “Oh, poor baby.” If Neil watched one of his children fall down he would simply say, “Get up.” They realized that he had a great absence of compassion and his wife tended to baby the kids a little too much, so they blended their styles together somewhat, but not totally. After a while the wife would say to her fallen child, “Oh, poor baby. Get up.” And he would say, “Get up poor baby.” Do you see the difference? His wife was more encouraging than exhorting and Neil was more exhorting than encouraging. Comfort is a balance of encouragement and exhortation.

The third benefit of suffering comes in the next few verses.

*<sup>8</sup> We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about the hardships we suffered in the province of Asia. We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired even of life. <sup>9</sup> Indeed, in our hearts we felt the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead.*

The third benefit of suffering, as Paul said in verse nine, is so that we might not rely on ourselves, but on God. Paul started the letter with the general topic of suffering and in verse eight he raised the issue of a specific instance of suffering. I find it very interesting that he clearly wanted them to know about what happened. I don’t want you to be ignorant...about the hardships we suffered. He wants them to know what happened but then he doesn’t tell them what happened. This arouses my curiosity all the more. It makes me think of his long list in chapter ten.

I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again. <sup>24</sup> Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. <sup>25</sup> Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, <sup>26</sup> I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false brothers. <sup>27</sup> 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 (2 Co 10:23-27).

Was one of these instances of suffering what he was referring to in our text? What happened in Asia was probably not a shipwreck as he seems to imply it did not happen in the open water. It was probably not one of the times that he was beaten, whipped or stoned because in verse nine

he is anticipating death, not necessarily recovering from a beating. Whether it is in this list or not, the key thing to note is that he was certain that he was going to die. *Indeed, in our hearts we felt the sentence of death.* He uses the pronoun we throughout this section so we can assume that he meant him as his companions.

Compare this sentence of death to the famous shipwreck on his way to Rome recorded in Acts 27.

<sup>21</sup> After the men had gone a long time without food, Paul stood up before them and said: “Men, you should have taken my advice not to sail from Crete; then you would have spared yourselves this damage and loss. <sup>22</sup> But now I urge you to keep up your courage, because not one of you will be lost; only the ship will be destroyed. <sup>23</sup> Last night an angel of the God whose I am and whom I serve stood beside me <sup>24</sup> and said, ‘Do not be afraid, Paul. You must stand trial before Caesar; and God has graciously given you the lives of all who sail with you.’ <sup>25</sup> So keep up your courage, men, for I have faith in God that it will happen just as he told me.

That was a great gift that the Lord gave him on that journey. Before this assurance was given the whole crew thought they were going to die but instead, God granted safety for every last person on board ship. But there was no such assurance given in what he is describing in our text. *We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired even of life.* My best guess is that it was some form or arrest or mob scene which from all appearances and in the absence of God’s deliverance would have killed Paul and the others. As Paul looked back on this near death experience, he could only draw one conclusion—*this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead.* Here is a deep confession from the heart of the apostle Paul. He was too self-reliant. There were times when he worked in his own strength and in his own power instead of through the Spirit. Can you relate to this? Is self-reliance a sin? It is, isn’t it? Anything not done in faith, by definition is a sin.

Paul did not want to rely on himself, but rather on God—*who raises the dead.* Figuratively speaking, Paul felt as if he had been raised from the dead. He had been certain that the sentence of death was set in stone, so to have survived such an incident was like being raised from the dead. But I think Paul is hinting at more than actual resurrections from the dead. The number of people that have been raised from the dead in the Bible is really quite small. Lazarus is always a good example to use. Mary and Martha were very glad to have him back from the grave, but what did he have to say about it? John is the only gospel writer who included Lazarus’ resurrection and you would have thought that John would have included some of his words. Not only was Lazarus brought from the presence of the Lord back to the land of the living—which by itself must have been somewhat depressing—but he entered back into his old body. If he walked with a limp before he died, chances are he had a limp after he was raised. If he had a weak heart before he died chances are it was still weak after his resurrection. I don’t mean to detract from these amazing miracles in the slightest, but resurrections were very uncommon, people got their old bodies back and today no one lives their life expecting to be raised from the dead. However, every believer will one day be raised to new life when Christ returns in glory. Resurrections in this life are extremely rare but resurrection into an immortal body is guaranteed. The God who will raise you to an everlasting life is the God who wants us to depend upon him for ministry, for the trials and sufferings of life and for the everyday, mundane tasks of living.

There is one final benefit to suffering which comes at the end of this passage.

<sup>10</sup> *He has delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us. On him we have set our hope that he will continue to deliver us, <sup>11</sup> as you help us by your prayers. Then many will give thanks on our behalf for the gracious favor granted us in answer to the prayers of many.*

This short little statement is one of the greatest proofs for the importance of prayer in all of Scripture. Notice Paul's train of thought here. He had just confessed that the Lord had delivered him from certain death. God is the kind of God who raises people from the dead. Next, he shared his certain hope that the God who raises people from the dead would continue to deliver him in the future. We know that this was absolutely true because Paul lived and ministered for another ten years after he wrote this letter. He expressed all of this confidence in God and rejected his temptation toward self-reliance and at the end of it all, he made this amazing statement about the prayers of the believers in Corinth—*he will continue to deliver us, as you help us by your prayers*. The clear belief is that God will do all of this great deliverance through the prayers of the church in Corinth. First of all I want you to outright reject the notion that Paul as merely using evangelical jargon like you and I do. He is not mouthing empty, pious platitudes about prayer, like you and I do.

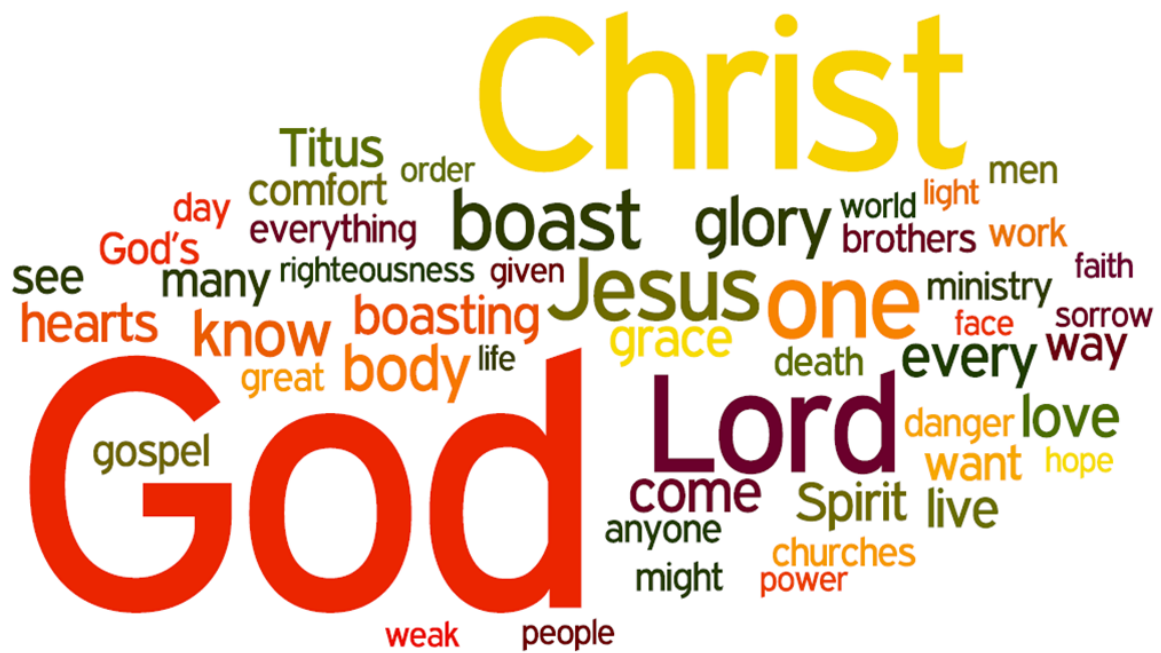
Many years ago I saw a cartoon about prayer that I have never forgotten. One man is standing and sees his friend Bob approaching. He suddenly recalls that he had promised Bob that he would pray for him, so throws up a quick prayer to the Lord, "Dear God, please help Bob." Then as soon as Bob reaches him he throws out his hand to greet him and confidently says, "Hey Bob, I've been prayin' for you." This is not the kind of prayer reality that Paul meant. He means to directly link the prayers of the people with his deliverance. But how is that possible? Doesn't God do all of the work? God rescues people, not my prayer? The God who raises the dead delivers people from trouble, not my measly, wimpy prayer. Right? Wrong. I can't fully explain it, but God has ordained that he will act through and according to our prayers. This does not mean that God is dependent upon our prayers in the sense that we will thwart his will if we don't pray. But it does mean that the prayers of righteous believers are powerful and effective.

Here is a quick review of the benefits of suffering.

1. We receive comfort from God
2. We comfort others
3. We rely on God and not ourselves
4. We develop a prayerful dependency.

I want to close with a video of a man from Columbia who lived out every one of these benefits through his own great suffering. The [first video](#) describes the extent of his suffering and the [second video](#) shows how he used his suffering for God's glory.

Rich Maurer  
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<sup>1</sup> Delivered on November 17, 1957, at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama

<sup>2</sup> Garland, p. 61.

<sup>3</sup> John Henry Jowett (1817-1893), exact source unknown.