

"The Wonderful, Strange, Mysterious, Wise, and Unguessable Ways That God Comforts Us"
2 Corinthians 1:4
24 May 2020

SUFFERING DOESN'T MEAN THAT GOD'S PLAN HAS FAILED. SUFFERING IS THE PLAN.

Paul Tripp said that. And Paul the Apostle is saying something like that here in 2 Corinthians. If you recall, the Corinthian church had been invaded by a group of false teachers that Paul calls "super-apostles." They were peddling a triumphalistic view of Christianity where suffering was not in the plans. And, because Paul suffered so much, they were trying to convince the Corinthians that Paul wasn't really an apostle called by God.

So, Paul is writing to let the Corinthians know that suffering *is* a part of discipleship. We follow Jesus in His sufferings. We take up our cross and follow Him. We share abundantly in His sufferings. And one reason we do this is so that we can comfort others who are suffering. So when we suffer, whatever it looks like, it doesn't mean that God's plan has failed, because suffering *is* the plan. God comforts us when we suffer so that we are then enabled to take that comfort and pass it on to others.

LOOK AT VERSE 4...

...who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.

Suffering is the plan, but we often lose sight of this when we are suffering, don't we? If you're like me, I often lose sight of God and how He works and all the powerful ways that He is working through all that I'm suffering. So I typically abandon what I know is God's plan in my suffering and I just move to 603 E. *Pity Party Lane*. It's so easy for me to lose sight of who God is and how He is always working in and through all the affliction that I experience. I suspect you are the same.

That's why God gave us 2 Corinthians 1:4! So that we could be reminded that suffering *is* the plan and God has all kinds of purposes for us when we suffer.

And God gave us this verse because suffering has a way of causing you to forget all of your theology. Suffering has a way of causing you to forget deep, theological truths that you normally would fall on a sword and die for. For instance, you affirm God's sovereignty. You affirm God's providence. You believe it wholeheartedly. You believe Romans 8:28 and you probably have it on a coffee mug. You would fall on the sword of divine providence found in Romans 8:28, that He is working all things together for your good and His glory.

But what happens when some kind of suffering comes unannounced into your life, and suddenly God's sovereignty seems like a fog, like a dream you can barely remember? Suddenly, Romans 8:28 might be hard to believe. Suddenly, "God working all things for good" gets foggy. Suddenly, the "so that" purpose clause of 2 Corinthians 1:4- *so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction*- suddenly that gets drowned out by what you are suffering.

You see, life can just hit you out of nowhere, right? Suffering just barges into your life unannounced and uninvited and it wants to put Romans 8:28 to the test. It might be cancer. Some other sickness. Maybe heartbreak. Unemployment. Even death. You can just fill in the blanks because suffering wears all kinds of outfits. Suffering will dress up in anything and just barge into your life unannounced.

And when this happens, whatever it is, whatever kind of suffering it is, everything that we believe, everything that we confess, all of our theology gets challenged. It's like life comes along and says, "Okay. You say you believe this or that. Alright. How 'bout a showdown: this suffering vs. your theology. Life vs. your beliefs. This problem vs. Romans 8:28."

When suffering invades our life, it's like every one of our tweets and updates on social media get challenged. Do we still believe what we said about suffering last month on *Twitter* when everything in our life was good? Do you still believe what you preached so passionately about 2 months ago, pastor? That's what suffering does, whatever kind of suffering it is. Suffering scrolls through your timeline, scrolls through your old posts on social media, and suffering messages you and says, "Do you *STILL* believe this? You posted this meme on Facebook about suffering, but I wanna know if you still believe it since I just showed up unannounced and uninvited into your life?"

Suffering comes along and says, "You put these quotes on the Facebooks and the Twitters the other day. Do you still believe it now? I wanna know if you still believe these Paul Tripp quotes that you posted? Let me read it to you in case you forgot: Troubling circumstances do not have the power to negate the glorious promises of grace that God has made to us."

* INSERT PAUL TRIPP QUOTE #1

Suffering says, *"Huh? You still believe that? Do you still believe today, like you did last week, that troubling circumstances do not have the power to negate the glorious promises of grace that God made to you? I wanna know if you still believe that in the middle of what you are experiencing right now."*

That's what suffering does. Then suffering pulls up another quote by Paul Tripp that you posted, and this one got a bunch of likes and hearts on *Facebook*, and then suffering reads that quote back to you and says, *"Times of trouble remind us that Jesus Christ really is the solid rock and that and all other ground really is sinking sand."*

* INSERT PAUL TRIPP QUOTE #2

And then suffering asks us, *"What about that? Do ya still believe that? Has this time of trouble really reminded you that Jesus really is the solid rock and all other ground really is sinking sand? Do you still believe Mr. Theological Mustache, Paul Tripp?"* And then suffering throws one more in your face and reads it back to you: *"It is moments like this that the beautiful perspectives and promises of the Gospel shine even brighter and more glorious."*

* INSERT PAUL TRIPP QUOTE #3

And suffering asks you, *"Still gonna like that pic? Still gonna 'heart' that Paul Tripp quote? Are the promises of the gospel shining even brighter and more glorious right now? Huh?"*

That's what suffering does. Suffering comes along and challenges our theology. Suffering is a "theology challenger." And it ain't fun! But guess what? Christian theology was made for suffering, Christian theology was made for hard times. We need our best theology for our darkest times. And that's what it's made for. Notice that Paul says in verse 4 that God comforts us in all our *affliction*, not in our fantasy-everything-is-hunky-dory-designer-lives. Christian theology was made for affliction, for suffering, for those times of despair.

Recall from last week, that the word that Paul uses here in verse 4 for "affliction" has both an outward and inward dimension. Outwardly you see it with things that we experience like tribulations, and trials, and pressures, and hardships, and troubles, and persecutions, and sufferings. Inwardly, it's all the distresses and anxieties that plague us. And that's where we use our theology. That's where we put our theology to work. In all those hard, difficult places. Our best theology is not just reserved for a nice, cool summer day where we lay out on a folding deck chair by the pool, wearing sunglasses, reading a good book, and drinkin' a glass of sweet tea, and eating some *Chick-fil-A*. Our best theology is made for the dark times too.

Listen, if our theology is only good for the "good" days, when things are going well, when things are hunky-dory, then we are to be pitied. Our theology, our beliefs are actually tailor-made for the "bad" days. Hardships, troubles, calamities, heartbreak, etc. That's when our theology, that's when our beliefs shine the most: *when we suffer*. When things aren't hunky-dory. When we can barely hang on, we know it's only God's sufficient grace that holds us up. When we feel like there's no hope, that's when we discover that there really is hope. That's when we discover that Jesus Christ really is the solid rock and that and all other ground really is sinking sand.

And then God gets all the glory, which is what life is all about, right? And God gets the glory because He is the one who comforts us. He is the one who enables us by His grace to endure. And then in the miraculous, wonderful, strange, mysterious, wise, and unguessable nature of His ways, He uses what we suffer and the comfort that He provides us, so that we can then go and minister that comfort to others!

LOOK AGAIN AT VERSE 4...

...who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.

God uses other people and other things, to comfort our hearts when we suffer and then we can take that same comfort and pass it on. So, part of the responsibility of being a disciple is comforting others who are suffering. We take the comfort that we have received from Jesus and we pass it on to others.

The word used here by Paul for "comfort" has the idea of coming alongside someone and consoling them and encouraging them and strengthening them and refreshing them spiritually. When we suffer, when we are afflicted within and without, our Heavenly Father tenderly cheers us on. He encourages us with renewed and repeated cheer. I love the image of our Heavenly Father cheering us on!

And God's comforts can be found and do come into our lives in very ordinary ways: a sermon, a phone call, a Bible verse, friendship, etc. Listen to how Paul describes how he was comforted by his friend, Titus. Paul was comforted by Titus, who was comforted by the Corinthian church, and then Titus passed that comfort on to Paul.

2 Corinthians 7:5-7

For even when we came into Macedonia, our bodies had no rest, but we were afflicted at every turn—fighting without and fear within. But God, who comforts the downcast, comforted us by the coming of Titus, and not only by his coming but also by the comfort with which he was comforted by you, as he told us of your longing, your mourning, your zeal for me, so that I rejoiced still more.

Paul was down in the dumps, exhausted, depleted, full of fears and what does God do? He does another one of His miraculous, wonderful, strange, mysterious, wise, and unguessable things by connecting Paul with his friend Titus. This is pre-iPhones and emails. But God saw that Paul desperately needed comfort so He sent Titus to pass on some miraculous, wonderful, strange, mysterious, wise, and unguessable comfort! What care Jesus has for His people when they are down in the dumps, exhausted, depleted, and full of fears!

And notice the context: our bodies had no rest, afflicted at every turn, fighting without and fear within. And God comforted Paul by sending his friend Titus to see him and to encourage him with good news about the church in Corinth. So, the church in Corinth comforted and encouraged Titus and then he passed on that comfort and encouragement to Paul. God can comfort us through friends, as well as the ordinary means of grace: the preaching of God's word, the Lord's Supper, baptism, and prayer.

But the phrases "God of all comforts" and "comforted by God" imply that this comfort could come from *anywhere*, according to His providence. If God is sovereign, and all things are from Him, and through Him, and to Him, and for Him (Romans 11:36), then that implies that when He comforts us, it might be in ways that leave us absolutely flabbergasted! He is God after all, right? He is the God of *all* comforts! He has the whole universe at His disposal, so when He brings comfort into our lives to cheer us on when we are suffering, that comfort might come in very surprising ways! I love that about God. He's not boring by any stretch of the imagination. He is the God of *all* comforts.

That's the great thing about our God. He doesn't just provide comfort through ordinary means. He also brings comfort in surprising ways! He also brings comfort in miraculous, wonderful, strange, mysterious, wise, and unguessable ways! He's not boring! He's not predictable. Oh, to be sure, He uses very ordinary, run of the mill stuff. He has no problem doing that. But He has all kinds of goodness stored up for us!

As Ralph Davis, commenting on Psalm 31, says-

...we should let David's opening salvo percolate in our minds: "How massive your goodness which you have stashed away for those who fear you!" Do you catch the implication? He is speaking of God's surprises. He is saying that Yahweh has secret treasures of goodness that you are not aware of, hidden away, ready to use in your behalf. Treasures, we might say, we know nothing about and have never imagined (though Jesus was well aware of them – Matthew 26:53). Hence in our troubles we can, like David, enumerate our resources, like God's covenant or His justice, but there's lots more- His secret riches waiting to be put on display...we are not impoverished even in our worst troubles. Provisions are in place.

God brings comfort and encouragement in very surprising ways. He's not dull! He's not boring in His consolations! I like to imagine Him looking at one of the angels- because as you might know, they long to look into salvation (1 Peter 1:12)- I like to imagine God looking at an angel and saying, "*See my child down there. Watch this. I could use a verse out of the Psalms to comfort them, but I'm gonna surprise them with something out of the blue today. Something wild and crazy that will totally knock their socks off.*"

Don't you just love that the God that we serve is not a boring, bland deity with the same playbook for every trial that His children go through? Aren't you glad that when you are suffering, Jesus doesn't have some formula to comfort you? Let me ask you: Can you begin to imagine that Jesus loves to surprise you and knock your socks off with His comfort? Now, let me ask you: Can you begin to pray that Jesus would surprise you and knock your socks off with His comfort?

I did that a few weeks ago. I was feeling down in the dumps. Just a case of the blahs. I should have been good. I got up and had plenty of time to pray and read my Bible before work. I was even reading from a new commentary that I had been waiting for a long time to come out, so it was all good. I also had plenty of coffee. I should have been a little more chipper. But I wasn't. I just felt *blah* in my heart. So I prayed.

I was actually walking in the church parking lot, headed in to the church office, and this is what I prayed. Almost word for word:

"Lord, I need some comfort. Some encouragement. I'm down in the dumps and I need some comfort. And not just your run-of-the-mill comfort. I need something wild, something off the top shelf, buried deep in the warehouse, that hasn't been used in awhile, kind of comfort."

And literally, 30 seconds later I walked into the church office and there were several very generous gifts waiting for me. Someone in the church dropped of some very cool gifts for our family. That was off the top shelf, not run-of-the-mill comfort and encouragement just for me. Just for me! And then a little later that morning, I received an email from someone with some very exciting news that I was not expecting. And then, the next day, I discovered a podcast that was made just for me. And I laughed a lot listening to this podcast. I needed that laughter really bad. And Jesus provided that comfort, and that laughter, for me.

And all that "stored goodness" of the Lord came into my life because of His grace, and I think, even because I prayed for it. It was very detailed and specific comfort and encouragement just for me because Jesus loves me. Let me ask you: Can you begin to pray that Jesus would surprise you and knock your socks off with His comfort? Can you begin to pray for very specific detailed comfort and encouragement from Jesus? Why not? Go for it! He just might knock your socks off!

Isn't our God amazing? Isn't He wild and crazy? This is vintage Jesus right here. He has massive goodness stashed away for you! God is full of surprises. He has secret treasures of goodness that you are not aware of, hidden away, ready to use on your behalf. Treasures that you know nothing about and have never imagined and He is so committed to you that He will surprise you with them when you desperately need them. So, what are you waiting for? Start praying some wild and detailed prayers!

Doesn't this idea make you wanna shout? Jesus uses creative and wild and imaginative ways to meet the needs of and comfort His people. I love that about Jesus! His answers to our prayers, His meeting our needs, His detailed providence is not boring! He meets our needs and comforts us and He often does it in surprising ways! Paul was down in the dumps and God sent his good friend Titus his way to refresh his heart.

Isn't God amazing? Isn't He wild and crazy? This text, if we slow down enough to think about the implications of phrases like "God of all comforts" and "comforts us," is impressing on us to expect wild and crazy things from God. This text is telling us to stick our necks out and trust Jesus, no matter what we see with our eyes. To expect the God of *all* comforts to surprise us with His goodness.

So, let's continue to do this as a church: Let's keep talking about and anticipating and expecting God to come through for us in wild, crazy ways! Why not? What's the alternative? Mope? Despair? Listen to the devil's lies and accusations? Worry? Stress? Chew our fingernails down until they bleed?

Or, we can expect Jesus to intervene with His comfort and encouragement. We can anticipate Him intervening because we believe His word and we believe that He's faithful. So, let's become a church that expects God to respond with wild and crazy answers to our prayers. Let's start talking about and anticipating and expecting God to come through for us in wild, crazy ways! That's better than fear and worry and sleepless nights, right? That's better than moping, huh?

After all, who are we dealing with here? Has Jesus ever given us reason to doubt His goodness? Imagine being a church where, instead of stressing out, we stressed the wild and crazy faithfulness of the God of all comforts.

And when we create and cultivate this kind of church culture, when we talk about what God *might do*, how *He is faithful*, how He has *all kinds of comfort and encouragement at His disposal for all kinds of affliction*, when we create a culture of *expectancy* instead of negativity, instead of fear, instead of grumbling, then we will strengthen our spiritual muscles so that we as a church family can, and you as an individual disciple, can learn to walk by faith and not by sight.

Who can understand these wild and crazy commitments that God makes to His people, especially when things get dark or seem hopeless? Ed Welch says, *"God prefers the impossible. Although He often cares for our needs before we know we have them, his mighty acts are showcased best against the backdrop of insurmountable odds."*

Some of you are right smack dab in the middle of some insurmountable odds. Things are dark. Things seem hopeless. And you need some comfort, some encouragement. Well, guess what? Jesus prefers the impossible! He's comfortable with the impossible. He's comfortable dropping His comforts down into impossible situations. Jesus does His best work in impossible situations with His reputation on the line.

And He brought you to this livestream today so that you would be assured of His power and His presence in the middle of your insurmountable odds. He brought you here so that you would be reminded that-

SUFFERING DOESN'T MEAN THAT GOD'S PLAN HAS FAILED. SUFFERING IS THE PLAN.

And we know that suffering is the plan because of Jesus. He suffered for us, for our sin, on the cross. God's eternal plan was that Jesus would suffer throughout His life, culminating in the cross. That means that the cross wasn't Plan B. It was *the plan*. From the beginning. God loved us so much that He gave up His Son Jesus for our sin. Amazing. Don't ever fail to be astonished by this good news. Renew your awe often.

Romans 8:32

He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?

He gave up His Son to suffering, just for you. Now, how will He not also, along with Jesus, graciously give you all things? Connect the dots here: If He gave up His only Son to die in your place on the cross when you were His enemy, won't He take care of you now that you are His child?

Christian, God has so much goodness and comfort stored up for you! He has miraculous, wonderful, strange, mysterious, wise, and unguessable ways that He can bless and comfort you. Trust Him as you suffer. And expect Him to graciously give you all things.

And start to believe that "amazing" really is a great adjective to describe grace. It's amazing that He saves us and it's amazing that He still cares so deeply for us. After all, all that we bring to the table is our fickleness. And He meets that with His faithfulness. That's amazing!

Let's close with something that Steve Brown said:

"God designed the gospel to be astonishing. God designed grace to be amazing. And God designed the Christian faith to be totally bewildering. If you make it less so, you change it into something that it isn't. Not only that, you rob it of its power... The gospel is this: You're forgiven— past, present, and future. You're loved and you can't be unloved, no matter what you do. And you are his."

Christian, believe this amazing good news: You're forgiven— past, present, and future. You're loved and you can't be unloved, no matter what you do. And you are His.

"The Wonderful, Strange, Mysterious, Wise, and Unguessable Ways That God Comforts Us"

2 Corinthians 1:4

Sermon Study Questions

1. Discuss the big idea of the sermon: *Suffering doesn't mean that God's plan has failed. Suffering is the plan.*

2. Discuss this thought from the sermon: *We need our best theology for our darkest times. Christian theology was made for affliction, for suffering, for those times of despair. Our best theology is not just reserved for a nice, cool summer day where we lay out on a folding deck chair by the pool, wearing sunglasses, reading a good book, and drinkin' a glass of sweet tea, and eating some Chick-fil-A. Our best theology is made for the dark times too. If our theology is only good for the "good" days, when things are going well, when things are hunky-dory, then we are to be pitied. Our theology, our beliefs are actually tailor-made for the "bad" days. Hardships, troubles, calamities, heartbreak, etc. That's when our theology, that's when our beliefs shine the most: when we suffer.*

3. Read 2 Corinthians 7:5-7. Describe what Paul was experiencing and how the visit by Titus helped him. Discuss a time in your life when a friend brought God's comfort to you.

4. Discuss what Ralph Davis said about God's goodness in Psalm 31:

...we should let David's opening salvo percolate in our minds: "How massive your goodness which you have stashed away for those who fear you!" Do you catch the implication? He is speaking of God's surprises. He is saying that Yahweh has secret treasures of goodness that you are not aware of, hidden away, ready to use in your behalf. Treasures, we might say, we know nothing about and have never imagined (though Jesus was well aware of them – Matthew 26:53). Hence in our troubles we can, like David, enumerate our resources, like God's covenant or His justice, but there's lots more- His secret

riches waiting to be put on display...we are not impoverished even in our worst troubles. Provisions are in place.

Where in your life do you need to see some of God's massive goodness that He has stored up for you? Why not stop and pray **right now** that God would indeed show you His comfort and care in some of His wonderful, strange, mysterious, wise, and unguessable ways?

5. Discuss these thoughts:

Ed Welch

"God prefers the impossible. Although He often cares for our needs before we know we have them, his mighty acts are showcased best against the backdrop of insurmountable odds."

Steve Brown

"God designed the gospel to be astonishing. God designed grace to be amazing. And God designed the Christian faith to be totally bewildering. If you make it less so, you change it into something that it isn't. Not only that, you rob it of its power... The gospel is this: You're forgiven— past, present, and future. You're loved and you can't be unloved, no matter what you do. And you are his."