

Victorious Suffering

by A.B. Simpson

The sermon emphasizes the importance of accepting trial as a dispensation of divine wisdom and love, and trusting in God's power to deliver us from suffering.

Scripture: 2 Corinthians 1:3

Topics: "Comfort in Trials", "Suffering"

Description

A.B. Simpson preaches on 'Victorious Suffering,' emphasizing that suffering is an integral part of the Christian experience, as exemplified by the Apostle Paul. He highlights that through trials, believers can find comfort in God, which enables them to comfort others in their tribulations. Simpson illustrates that suffering can lead to spiritual growth and deeper reliance on God, ultimately resulting in a ministry of consolation to others. He encourages the congregation to embrace their trials as opportunities for divine comfort and service, reminding them that God is always present in their suffering and will deliver them. The sermon concludes with a call to share the comfort received from God with a hurting world.

Transcript

"Blessed be God, even the Father of our Lord, Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our tribulations that we may be able to comfort them which are in any trouble by the comfort wherewith we ourselves are comforted of God. For as the sufferings of Christ abound in us so our consolation also abounds in Christ." 2 Cor.1:3-5.

The First Epistle to the Corinthians gives us a picture of the apostolic church, the second gives us the testimony of the apostle himself. It is intensely personal, and introduces us to the deepest experience of this man who stood nearest of all to the heart of the Lord Jesus Christ. His testimony in the present passage has reference to suffering, victorious suffering, suffering so borne as to bring out of it not only triumph but boundless blessing to other lives as well as his own. This passage contains several important points:

I. Trial

The word used for trial in this passage and repeated several times is the same Greek word in every instance, although it is variously translated in our version by the several terms "tribulation," "trouble" and "suffering." The word "tribulation" first used is derived from a Latin root which literally means a flail, and it describes the crushing and humiliating blows which would be caused by such a fearful club as a flail

applied to a bound and helpless human victim. The figure is not too strong to describe such sufferings as the apostle Paul tells us were his frequent, indeed, his almost constant lot. We need not go farther than his Epistle to the Corinthians to find a picture of suffering most tragic and unprecedented in human life. If we turn to 1 Corinthians 4: 9-13, we have an extraordinary array of dramatic and tragic afflictions:

"For I think that God has set forth us, the apostles, last, as it were, appointed to death, for we are made a spectacle unto the world and to the angels and to men. We are fools for Christ's sake, but you are wise in Christ; we are weak, but you are strong; you are honorable, but we are despised. Even unto the present hour we both hunger and thirst, and are naked, and are buffeted, and have no certain dwelling place, and labor, working with our own hands; being reviled, we bless; being persecuted, we suffer it; being defamed, we entreat. We are made as the filth of the world, and are the off-scouring of all things unto this day."

1. A Spectacle. The figure is exceedingly strong. The Roman emperors were accustomed at the close of the day, in the bloody amphitheater, to bring on as the last performance of the circus a battle unto the death. So Paul says that on the stage of Christian suffering "God has set forth us, the apostles, last, as it were, appointed to death, and we are made a spectacle unto the world and to angels and to men." The Greek word for spectacle means a theater. Then he describes the various humiliations and afflictions appointed to him, ending with the vivid expression, "We are made as the filth of the world and the off-scouring of all things unto this day."

If we turn to our present epistle we read in 2 Corinthians 2: 4, "Out of much affliction and anguish of heart, I wrote unto you with many tears." Again in the fourth chapter we find him thus describing his trials, even in the midst of victory: "We are troubled on every side, yet not distressed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; cast down, but not destroyed; always bearing about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus." We read on a little farther and we come to the sixth chapter, and read from the fourth to the tenth verses such phrases as these: "in afflictions," "in necessities," "in distresses," "in stripes," "in imprisonments," "in tumults," "in labors," "in watchings," "in fastings," "by honor and dishonor," "by evil report and good report," "as deceivers, and yet true," "as unknown, and yet well known," "as dying, and behold, we live," "as chastened and not killed," "as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing," "as poor, yet making many rich," "as having nothing, yet possessing all things."

2. Unrest. Again in the seventh chapter, verse 5, we find this great apostle confesses to a state of unusual unrest that many of us, no doubt, had supposed he was exempt from, and that such hours of weakness only belonged to Christians like us: "Our flesh had no rest, but we were troubled on every side; without were fightings, within were fears."

3. Sufferings. Once more we turn to 2 Corinthians 11:23-30, and the picture reaches its deepest coloring: "In stripes above measure, in deaths oft, of the Jews five times received I forty stripes save one, thrice was I beaten with rods, once was I stoned, thrice I suffered shipwreck, a night and a day have I been in the deep, in journeyings often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils of my own countrymen, in perils by the heathen, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren, in weariness and painfulness, in watchings often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness. Besides those things which are without, that which comes upon me daily, the care of all the churches. Who is weak and I am not weak? Who is offended and I burn not? If I must needs glory, I will glory in the things which concern my infirmities."

It would seem as if this heroic soul possessed the sublime ambition to surpass all other men in his sufferings for his Master, and that the only glory he sought was to have the heaviest share of the cross of Jesus and the sorrows of His church.

4. Our Lot. But "as in water face answers to face, so the heart of man to man," while his sufferings may have been preeminent, yet he was also the forerunner in that path of affliction which all the saints have trod. One of his earliest messages to the churches of Asia was "through much tribulation we must enter into the kingdom of God." Still it is indeed sadly true, as so finely expressed in the world's oldest poem, "Man that is born of a woman is of few days and full of trouble." "Although affliction comes not forth out of the dust, neither does trouble spring out of the ground, yet man is born unto trouble as the sparks fly upward."

And yet how light our sorrows seem compared with his. After the catalogue we have just read, some of us must feel ashamed that we have ever murmured or complained. But trial is always hard, and sometimes the lightest afflictions are more difficult to bear than the greater ones. Let us recognize this fact at the very outset and go forth expecting trial, and we shall not be disappointed when it comes. If, on the contrary, we go forth expecting sunny skies and paths of roses, we shall indeed be ill-fitted to meet the realities of life and defeat and disappointment will face us at every turn. God has woven the strands of sorrow into the web of human life, and they are as necessary for our discipline and our usefulness as the golden threads of gladness.

II. Comfort

How beautiful and cheering is the picture here given of God as "the Father of mercies and the God of all comfort." We cannot know Him in this blessed and benignant capacity if we do not have suffering and trial. We would never see the stars without the darkness, and we never know our Father's heart until our heart aches with sorrow. Nothing is more beautiful than some of the inspired pictures of the tenderness of God. Is an earthly father compassionate? "Like as a father pities his children, so the Lord pities them that fear Him." Is an earthly mother quick to feel the anguish of her children, and the best healer of a broken heart? "As one whom his mother comforts, so will I comfort you and you shall be comforted in Jerusalem." Do father and mother sometimes fail us? "When my father and mother forsake me, then the Lord will take me up." "Can a mother forsake her suckling child, that she should not have compassion upon the son of her womb? Yes, they may forget, yet will I not forget you, says the Lord."

1. Human Comforters. God comforts us sometimes by human instruments: "God that comforted them that are cast down, comforted us by the coming of Titus." (Cor. 7: 6) . There is a sweet ministry of human sympathy, and none of us can be indifferent to the love and fellowship of our friends in the hour of sorrow, nor should we be slow to "bear one another's burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ."

2. God Our Comforter. But the best of all consolations is the "comfort of the Holy Ghost." God has His own way of healing the broken heart and filling the soul with joy and peace when it is sinking with sorrow.

There are moments when the heavens seem to open and the heart of God touches our hearts with strange supernal rest, and even ecstatic exultation, and we wonder why we are thus visited and loved. Frequently it is in preparation for some severe blow that is about to strike us. God is forearming us by a special touch of His love. Sometimes again, when everything around us is fitted to depress and crush us, the heart is lifted up with strange joy and strength which surpasses all human explanation, and our first thought, perhaps, is: "Surely someone is praying for me just now, I feel so strengthened and comforted."

And so it comes to pass, as we have already said, that in the severest trials we are often carried most triumphantly, while in those of less weight we sometimes become irritable and lose our victory.

But the special teaching of this passage is that the comfort is always commensurate with the tribulation. "As the sufferings of Christ abound in us, so our consolation also abounds by Christ." As far as the pendulum swings downward in the stroke of agony, it rises in the rebound of consolation.

Our sufferings are the sufferings of Christ; our comfort is also His. We have a little glimpse of the source of His peace and joy in the picture of His earthly life. In that hour when His heart was crushed with the foreboding of the coming cross, we are told that He "rejoiced in spirit," and again, "for the joy set before Him, endured the cross, despising the shame."

Beloved friend, it is your privilege to claim His joy in proportion to your weight of trial. If He is pleased to test you with unusual afflictions, just turn around and test Him with unusual behests upon His grace and sympathy, for the promise is, "As you are partakers of the sufferings, so shall you also be of the consolation."

III. Service

"Whether we be afflicted, it is for your consolation and salvation or whether we be comforted, it is for your consolation and salvation." The apostle tells us here that the very object of our peculiar experiences of suffering and trial is "that we may be able to comfort them which are in any trouble with the comfort wherewith we ourselves are comforted of God." His sorrow is the school of Christ that disciplines him and equips him for the ministry of consolation.

Indeed, we shall often find that after we have passed through some special experience of trial, God will send to us someone who has been similarly afflicted and use us to lift them up and bear them through even as He has carried us. Sorrow, therefore, is not accidental, but part of the divine plan of love and education for us.

IV. A Special Emergency

He has spoken generally of trial and affliction, but now he comes to a particular experience. "We would not have you ignorant," he says, "of our trouble which came to us in Asia." And then he proceeds to describe in detail that great and mysterious blow that crushed him some time during his evangelistic campaign either in Ephesus or Asia Minor. What that trial was Bible expositors are far from agreed upon. Some regard it as a physical attack of sickness which almost took his life. Others, and the larger number, connect it with his grief on account of the sad condition of the church in Corinth, which had in great measure repudiated his apostolic authority, and even gone into the grossest and most shameless immorality. His heart was quite broken about it, and it would appear as if he had even been hindered from visiting them lest he should bring sorrow to them instead of gladness.

1. What It Was. It is very touching that this great and good man should have been so sensitive to the sins of men and the glory of his Master that it made him ill to hear of their wrongdoing. Certainly it became a physical stroke which nearly took his life, but it is delightful to think of it as having originated in a spiritual cause and having sprung from the noble unselfishness of his heart.

2. Physical. Whatever its cause, a few things are very certain about it. In the first place, it was "above measure and above strength." It was beyond what seemed possible for him to bear, and, indeed, his

strength gave way under it and he was ready to sink in physical prostration and really die. "We despaired," he says, "even of life." Not only so, "we had the sentence of death in ourselves that we should not trust in ourselves." Literally it might be translated, "We had the answer of death in ourselves." His very prayers seemed ineffectual, his faith failed to grasp deliverance, and death was written on every part of the firmament and horizon.

What a trial, dear child of God! What a comfort to you to know that if such a trial should even come to you, a trial in which outward pressure and inward depression combine to plunge you in utmost despair, still you may hope and trust and overcome.

V. A Great Deliverance

He overcame. "Who delivered us from so great a death." It would indeed have been a great death, for had it come to that, Paul would have failed, his enemies would have triumphed, the great adversary would have been pleased and God's cause would have seemed to go down in a dark and humiliating defeat. It was something like that hour in Gethsemane when the Master felt that He could not die, and yet it seemed as if He must. "With strong crying and tears," He pleaded with His Father, "Who was able to save Him from death and was heard in that He feared." He did not die but overcame and lived to offer up His life later without defeat, a voluntary sacrifice of victorious love. And so there are times when we cannot afford to sink and God will give us victory.

Not only so but he adds, "Who does deliver." The deliverance continues, the experience of God's help in the past has established a habit of trusting and triumphing in the present. And still farther it reaches on to the future and faith rises to triumphant hope as he adds, "In whom we trust that He will yet deliver us."

In this conflict, he tells us his confidence was not in himself, for all human light had failed, but "In God who raises the dead." He looked for a deliverance that required nothing less than the Almighty Power which raised Jesus Christ from the dead and set Him in the heavens. This is the divine pattern of the power that we may still claim. Ours is the God of Resurrection and we may still sing,

"Nothing is too hard for Jesus,

No man can work like Him."

Finally, he tells us that in this great conflict, he was upheld and helped by the faith of his friends. "You also helping together by prayer for us, that for the gift bestowed upon us by the means of many persons, thanks may be given by many on our behalf."

And so we come back again to the ministry of mutual help and helpful prayer. This is the special province of the Holy Spirit: to lay upon our hearts the needs of friends and lead us out in intercession for them sometimes when we do not even know the circumstances of their need. Enough for us to respond to the burden of the Spirit and hold ourselves ready to bear the sufferings of others and share in the priesthood of our blessed Master as He continually makes intercession for us.

VI. Conclusion

In conclusion, our first duty in trial is to accept it whether we understand it or not as a dispensation of divine wisdom and love. God has two hands, and the first presses us down, the second lifts us up. In a very fine metaphor, the apostle Peter bids us first, "humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God," and

then adds "that He may exalt you in due time."

1. Submission. In a deaf and dumb school a distinguished visitor was listening to the silent examination of the little ones. Not a word was spoken, but as each question was presented in the language of signs, a little one would write the answer on the blackboard. Finally the visitor was asked if he did not wish to submit some questions himself. Noticing a little shrivelled, pinched face in front of him that seemed a living embodiment of pain, he asked, "How do you explain the fact that a God of infinite power and wisdom has allowed you to be such a sufferer?" The question was translated into the language of signs and the little fellow was called to the platform. For a moment, the pinched face took on a shade of deeper pain and then it lighted up as he stepped to the blackboard and wrote the words, "Even so, Father, for so it seemed good in Your sight." The hush of silence that had rested upon that audience was broken by murmurs and sobs of deep response. Surely, that is quite as glorious as the faith that overcomes disease and pain.

2. Deliverance. But having learned the first lesson, let us not forget the second. There is a time for resignation and there is a time for aggressive faith and victorious deliverance. It came to Paul, it came to Jesus, it comes to every trusting soul. "I will be with him in trouble," is only one-half the promise. After we have learned that lesson well, there comes the rest, "I will deliver him." God has made complete provision for our victory over suffering as well as sin. Let us not miss our sorrows or lose our battles, but take the comfort He has so dearly bought and pass it on to a brokenhearted world.

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