

Pk's Perspectives... Our Great Comforter

Paul wrote the letter we know as 2 Corinthians right on the tail end of an experience of severe suffering. Here's how he described it: "We do not want you to be unaware, brothers, of the affliction we experienced in Asia. For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death." (2 Corinthians 1:8-9)

Paul doesn't specify what his affliction was. He didn't need to, since the letter's carrier would have briefed the Corinthian believers on the painful details. From the surrounding context (2 Corinthians 1:3-11), it sounds like he suffered persecution nearly to the point of execution. But in the merciful wisdom of the Holy Spirit, we don't know for sure. And this is a mercy because it encourages us to apply what Paul says in this section to "any affliction" (2 Corinthians 1:4).

But it's important that we note the degree of Paul's suffering. This great saint, who seems to have had a much higher-than-average capacity to endure affliction, felt "so utterly burdened beyond [his] strength." He thought this affliction would kill him.

It didn't kill him (his lethal affliction was still eight to ten years in the future). But it did accomplish something else: "Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death. But that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead." (2 Corinthians 1:9) Paul's suffering brought him to the end of himself: not just to the end of his bodily strength, but to the end of his earthly hopes and plans. He was staring death in the face. What could he trust at the end that would give him hope? The God who raises the dead.

That's actually one of the most important outcomes that God intends for "all our affliction" to produce: "to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead" (2 Corinthians 1:9). It's not the only outcome. As John Piper says, "God is always doing 10,000 things in your life, and you may be aware of three of them." But when it comes to our ultimate joy and comfort, few are more important than weaning our trust off ourselves and placing it onto God. In fact, that's why sometimes our afflictions come as God's unexpected answers to our prayers, and therefore at first unrecognized. When we ask God to increase our desire for him and our faith in him and our love for him and our joy in him, we imagine how wonderful the answers would be to experience. But we don't always anticipate what the process of transforming our desires and trusts and affections and joys will require. Sometimes, it requires afflictions to reveal ways we rely on ourselves or idols or false hopes instead of God.

This is why Paul, who during his affliction had been "so utterly burdened beyond [his] strength that [he] despaired of life," ended up exulting in his heavenly Father as the "God of *all* comfort." As a result of his suffering, he experienced a more profound reliance on the God who raises the dead, which brought him a comfort that nothing else in the world affords. Whatever it takes to help us experience this comfort, to help us set our real, ultimate hope on God, is worth it. It really is. I don't say this lightly. I know some of the painful process of such transformation. I've received some of the unexpected answers of God to my prayers. But the comfort God brings infuses all temporal comforts with profound hope. And when all earthly comforts finally fail, it is the one comfort that will remain. (*good stuff from Jon Bloom @ desiringgod.org*)

Easter celebration on Facebook Live; cyber Communion, too! Grace & peace, PK