

## Suffering: Our Resources

Solomon wrote the Book of Ecclesiastes toward the end of his life. It's a tough, no-nonsense look at human existence. Solomon had experienced everything his world could offer: achievement, education, power, celebrity status, riches, pleasure. His assessment? Nothing tastes. Life on its own terms is essentially empty. There are things to enjoy but no thing merely earthly satisfies our soul's deepest hunger or quenches its most demanding thirst.

Ecclesiastes could be called something of a sustained philosophical lament. Solomon teases out the notion that there's something wrong with everything. And among the pressing evils he witnessed, he saw this: "I saw the tears of the oppressed—and they have no comforter; power was on the side of their oppressors—and they have no comforter. And I declared that the dead, who had already died, are happier than the living, who are still alive. But better than both is he who has not yet been, who has not seen the evil that is done under the sun" (Eccl. 4:1-3).

Solomon describes the impact of what we call systemic evil—evil in the systems of government and power. The oppressed are victims suffering from the abuse of privilege and authority. For instance, the cyclone victims in Myanmar are suffering cruelly because of systemic evil in their government. The reclusive military dictatorship won't let aid workers into the country to help. Caryl Stern, who heads the United Nations Children's Fund in the United States, said, "Our biggest fear is that the aftermath could be more lethal than the storm itself."

Solomon declares that it's better never to have been born than to suffer like that without someone to comfort us.

Children instinctively know that God created mothers for comfort. Our granddaughter loves to be with grandma and grandpa, but if she falls and hurts herself, she doesn't want us. She wants her mommy! What does a child do who has no mom to comfort her?

What do we do when we're all grown up and we hurt? For instance, what do mothers do on Mother's Day who have lost children, or who are alienated from their children? Today's Hallmark holiday is an annual reminder of loss and pain.

As those who have come to follow Jesus, what resources do we have when we encounter suffering? Who comforts us?

We're in church so the answer has to be God, right? Absolutely. James says: "The Lord is full of compassion and mercy" (James 5:11). And listen to Paul: "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..." (2 Cor. 1:3-4a).

God's comfort is not merely "religious" truth. It's "what is" truth—authentic; genuine! God really is "the Father of compassion and God of all comfort."

Sometimes, when we suffer, it is enough for us to know that we are in God's presence. God is there in the privacy of our prayers. We're with him and we know.

And sometimes, God moves powerfully to envelop us. It's not something we can explain, but we sense God touching our hearts. It's kind of like being a kid and getting a hug from mom, but it's much bigger and God touches something far deeper.

Moments like that are what we might call samples of heaven. It's not heaven until it's heaven—we know that. But the Bible describes God's Spirit in our hearts as "...a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance..." (Eph. 1:14). Sometimes, now, we get to enjoy the deposit—the down-payment. God shows up with personal immediacy and he comforts us directly.

When God does that, it's on his schedule, not ours. Miracle moments are rare. That's frustrating to us for the simple reason that when we're in pain, what's our goal? To get out of pain. We can become demanding and angry when God doesn't arrive on our schedule, or when he doesn't do for us what we think we need done on our terms.

King David cautions us: "Be still before the LORD and wait patiently for him... Refrain from anger and turn from wrath; do not fret—it leads only to evil" (Psalm 37:7-8).

Lament and prayer, two of the responses we looked at last week, give full voice to our grief. Their expression enables us to quiet our hearts before the Father and wait for him. If we get stuck in anxiety and anger, "...it leads only to evil." We'll never experience God's comfort.

In those moments when God touches our hearts personally—dramatically—we experience the comfort we crave in the mystical encounter between our soul and God. However, it is much more usual for God to mediate his comfort through one of two other means: his Word and his people.

### *God's Word*

"For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and *the encouragement of the Scriptures* we might have hope" (Romans 15:4).

Insensitive people can make this sound like a lie. When we are in pain and someone thoughtlessly quotes Scripture at us, it can feel like they're throwing rocks! The words don't land. Their scriptures *don't* encourage. They bounce off our bruised souls.

Those who suffer have their own struggles even wanting to read their Bibles. Our inability to absorb God's truth fuels secret fears that God is the source of our problems. Throwing God-talk at them does more harm than good.

And yet, God's words encourage.

In one of the darkest periods of my life, there were long stretches when I found it almost impossible to focus on Scripture. The noise of pain threatened to drown God's voice. One passage became a lifeline for me—Psalm 25. I lived there for weeks on end. I memorized it. It became an anchor for my soul in the furious storm around me.

We know Psalm 119 as a Psalm celebrating God's Word: "I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you" (Ps. 119:11). We are less familiar with the strains of lament woven throughout. Again and again, the young poet declares the comfort he finds in God's Word:

- "My soul is weary with sorrow;  
strengthen me according to your word" (Psalm 119:28).
- "My comfort in my suffering is this:  
Your promise preserves my life" (Psalm 119:50).
- "Your word, O LORD, is eternal;  
it stands firm in the heavens.  
Your faithfulness continues through all generations;  
you established the earth, and it endures.  
Your laws endure to this day,  
for all things serve you.  
If your law had not been my delight,  
I would have perished in my affliction.  
I will never forget your precepts,  
for by them you have preserved my life" (Psalm 119:89-93).

And by the way, we will recognize God's voice in his Word with greater clarity when we have accustomed our hearts to hear it. The writer of Hebrews encourages training our souls in God's truth "by constant use." If we never read our Bibles when times are good—if we never train our hearts to move with its rhythms or acclimate our souls to its message—we won't know where to turn in crisis. We'll grab our Bibles able only to stare at the cover.

God uses the Bible to mediate his comfort. His Spirit unpacks for us the significance of the words. God fully intends that through "... *the encouragement of the Scriptures* we might have hope." We enlarge our capacity to hear God's voice then by reading and listening regularly now. We habituate our hearts to God's words.

### *God's People*

Along with his word, God uses his people to mediate his comfort. Paul writes: "For when we came into Macedonia, this body of ours had no rest, but we were harassed at every turn—conflicts on the outside, fears within. But God, who comforts the downcast, comforted us by the coming of Titus..." (2 Cor. 7:5-6).

When Paul needed encouragement, God sent Titus. God sends comforters to us also. And the very best are those who have endured what we're experiencing.

"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, *so that* we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God" (2 Cor. 1:3-6).

Those whom God comforts become God's comforters. God doesn't waste pain. We'll talk about this more next Sunday when we look at God's purposes—how God uses suffering in our lives. People who have gone before us on our path of suffering and have walked with God have earned credibility. They can empathize, stepping into our pain with us.

God's people mediate God's comfort in many ways. One of them is what we might call the ministry of presence. They show up and quietly grieve with us. They wait for us to lead, listening when we want to talk; not feeling the need to fill the heavy silence with words.

Sometimes the best part of being a comforter is just being there—and knowing when to leave.

And, sometimes we need words. "A word aptly spoken is like apples of gold in settings of silver" (Proverbs 25:11). The aptly spoken word usually comes cautiously, with gentle reticence. Solomon observes that even a soft tongue can break a bone.

Kurt and Annette were members in our first church. They had a little boy born with Downs Syndrome. When I visited them in the hospital, a wet-behind-the-ears young preacher, they were still reeling with the news. The only thing I knew to say was something like this: "I have no idea what you're feeling right now and I have no idea what to say. I just want you to know we love you and we're here for you." Annette told me later that admitting my own confusion was the most comforting thing anyone said to her during that time.

Suffering people need to sort out a new normal defined by their pain. They want to know that things will get better, and that they're OK in the middle of their mess. If we haven't experienced anything similar to what they're experiencing, we can mourn with them, but humility cautions us to withhold much counsel. They are more open to wisdom that has been tested.

Those gifted in the arts, especially music, can sometimes touch us in ways that plain speech cannot. Music wraps beauty and passion around words.

Frank Chandler owned a garage and muffler shop in Island City, a very small town in Eastern Oregon. He attended our church and I used to hang out with him, his brother Rudy and their junkyard dog, Ben. Frank was rough as an old cob. He loved driving his wrecker, being a volunteer fireman, and racing motorcycles and snowmobiles. We got close to his entire family.

Frank was killed one night in an accident with his wrecker. We grieved as much as anyone. I remember driving out across our valley one day with Jeannette, listening to the Gaither Vocal Band singing a song about heaven. We both had tears streaming down our faces as God used their music to wash our hearts with hope and comfort. The music of God's people can have that power.

And sometimes God mediates his comfort through the service God's people offer. They bring meals; they take over chores; they watch our kids to give us space for our own thoughts. Without words, they give us their hands to help.

Around here we talk about Bethel's family values. We say for instance, "It's not about us." "We're better together." "People matter to God." When some one of us suffers, that all kicks into overdrive. None of us suffers alone. God uses his people, his church to mediate his comfort.

That's why, by the way, the Bible urges us to show up at church. The writer of Hebrews wrote: "Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us *encourage* one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching" (Heb. 10:23-25).

Church isn't all about us. When people suffer, God wants us to be his hands to serve, his voice to comfort and encourage, his arms to hug, his ears to listen, his very presence which says even without words: "I'm here. I care." We really do need each other.

Think back to a time when your hurt ran deep. What helped? What Scripture spoke with unusual clarity and touched your heart? What did people do that made a significant difference? Whose presence soothed your soul? Whose didn't?

If you resonate with faces and words and acts of kindness that got you through your hardest times, then you know how to comfort someone else. You can be God's channel of blessing through whom he mediates his peace.

God never leaves us without resources. May the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort mediate his comfort to us and through us this morning. May we be channels of his peace and blessing in a hurting world.