

God's Comfort in Sickness

I. Introduction

This is a very personal message; forged through years of trying to understand why God would allow my wife, Vickie, to endure decades of disease that has kept her from doing things that she once loved to do. At times, it has appeared to us that God was sidelining her and keeping her from fully using the very spiritual gifts that He gave to her. By the end of these two messages, I desire that you will have joined us in our journey to draw close to the God of our comfort and have the hope you need to rejoice in the midst of long-term suffering.

I want to begin by sharing our story. This is OUR story; not just Vickie's. She has had to suffer long with the physical, emotional and mental pain associated with her rheumatoid arthritis. I have suffered alongside of her for most of it, wanting desperately to ease her pain or help her get rid of it.

In 1984, she was diagnosed with rheumatoid arthritis. Since then, she has undergone more than 30 surgeries (we've lost count) and many different treatments to try to control it. We were married in 1988 as the disease was beginning to limit her activities. A little more than a year afterwards, she was undergoing the first of multiple spinal fusion surgeries. For the next fifteen to twenty years while she was undergoing almost annual surgeries and numerous treatments for her RA, we continued to minister together through hosting homegroups and serving in other ministries. Much of the time we were doing this, she was in pain that would have had me curled up on the floor in a fetal position, but she didn't let it stop her nor did she complain about it. It was during this time that most of you came to know her.

In the past ten years, her situation has been much different. The surgeries have taken longer for her to recover from and created extended periods of extreme fatigue. At times, it is all that she can do to get out of bed. She used to love to create beautiful writings using calligraphy, but now it is difficult to write or type letters or emails. It can be exhausting to carry on a phone conversation for more than a short time.

From my perspective, I have struggled at times to find the right words to help encourage her. Mostly, I try too hard to find the perfect words and forget to bring in the simple truths that God reminds us to keep remembering and repeating. I struggle to keep my priorities straight as it relates to caring for Vickie versus serving others or feeling like I have to keep everything going at the same level. As the days of illness or surgery recovery stretch into weeks and months and years, at times, I have argued with God about the value of prayer and what are the right things to pray.

Early on in our journey, when she would be having another surgery, we would have the church praying for a good outcome and good recovery. When a very difficult surgery resulted in an even more difficult surgery the following year, we realized that the most critical thing to pray for was for our faith; that it would grow strong through the trial and that we would honor God even if the outcome was not what we'd hoped or prayed for.

Maybe you're asking the question that I've often asked, "How is she/am I/are we going to maintain a viable faith in God in the midst of such long term pain and isolation?" Hopefully, I can point you in the right direction so that you can begin to search the Scriptures and plead with Him for answers to that question. This message isn't just for those who are dealing with long-term or chronic situations, but also those dealing with short term situations or less debilitating, but lengthy scenarios.

During these messages, I want to help you understand that 1) God IS the God of all comfort and 2) He wants you to glorify Him by reflecting that reality in your life and the lives of those around you. This foundational truth and its application is so clearly articulated by the Holy Spirit through Paul in 2 Corinthians 1:3-7 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction so that we will be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. For just as the sufferings of Christ are ours in abundance, so also our comfort is abundant through Christ. But if we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation; or if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which is effective in the patient enduring of the same sufferings which we also suffer; and our hope for you is firmly grounded, knowing that as you are sharers of our sufferings, so also you are sharers of our comfort.

This will form the framework that will be expanded throughout our time together.

A few years ago, we discovered a short book titled, "A Book Of Comfort for Those In Sickness" by P.B. Power which clearly expressed many of the things that Vickie and I have learned through the years both from her perspective enduring the sickness, as well as my struggles to understand and help as a husband and caregiver. It also brought us many rich insights that have helped us. Power was a pastor in Great Britain in the 1800s, who's health entirely broke down after nineteen years of ministry. He was bed-ridden for his final 34 years and is best remembered for this book. I have patterned these messages after the book and can tell you how to get a copy if you would like through The Banner of Truth Trust.

II. The God of all comfort – We must begin at the beginning with who God is.

You will not pursue God to find comfort from Him, unless you believe that He is the God who delights to give you comfort. (Hebrews 11:6 And without faith it is impossible to please [God], for he who comes to God must believe that He is and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him.)

A. God's testimony about Himself (Just a few quotations; most of it relates to God's final reckoning of the centuries of Israel's suffering as His people. They had been exiled and to them it appeared that they had been abandoned, but God wanted to assure them that He was not done with them and He was there to strengthen and comfort them. He was giving them hope to endure to the end and rejoice in His right judgments and punishments for their disobedience. Ultimately, it is to glorify His mercy and goodness and holiness. These are the principles that relate.)

Isaiah 51:3, 12-13 Indeed, the Lord will comfort Zion; He will comfort all her waste places. And her wilderness He will make like Eden, And her desert like the garden of the Lord; Joy and gladness will be found in her, Thanksgiving and sound of a melody.

"I, even I, am He who comforts you. Who are you that you are afraid of man who dies And of the son of man who is made like grass, That you have forgotten the Lord your Maker, Who stretched out the heavens And laid the foundations of the earth, ...

At the climax of God's promise to restore Israel forever after all of their rebellion, God says this through the prophet Isaiah. Isaiah 66:13 "As one whom his mother comforts, so I will comfort you; And you will be comforted in Jerusalem."

Jeremiah 31:13 “Then the virgin will rejoice in the dance, And the young men and the old, together, For I will turn their mourning into joy And will comfort them and give them joy for their sorrow.

John 14:1 [Jesus Comforts His Disciples] “Do not let your heart be troubled; believe in God, believe also in Me.

John 14:6 [Role of the Spirit] I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Helper/Comforter, that He may be with you forever; The Holy Spirit is named, “the Comforter...” by Jesus.

B.The testimony of the saints about God will give you the confidence that God can make His comforts a reality in the real world.

These give insights into the circumstances in which and how God brings us comfort. This is a small sampling of those in the Bible who testify to God's comfort, but hopefully helpful.

David – The man after God's own heart ,whom God took through the highest of highs and the lowest of lows, testifies to God's comfort in the most famous and often quoted Psalm of them all.

Psalm 23:4 Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, for You are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me.

Psalm 86:17 Show me a sign for good, That those who hate me may see it and be ashamed, Because You, O Lord, have helped me and comforted me.

Psalm 94:19 When my anxious thoughts multiply within me, Your consolations delight my soul. David found genuine rest in his heart from his communion with God.

Psalmist of Psalm 119: A psalm obviously written under severe trials and stress. Afflicted or affliction used 7 times.

:50 This is my comfort in my affliction, That Your word [utterance] has revived me. -

:76 O may Your lovingkindness comfort me, According to Your word [utterance] to Your servant.

The Psalmist was so near to God in his affliction that he felt that he could hear the Scriptures as though spoken verbally to him by God Himself. Have you known this type of closeness to God in the Spirit where you have sensed that a specific verse came to you at a very specific time of need and you could almost hear it spoken in your head? Just what you needed to hear to put you at ease or bring peace in the trial.

:52 I have remembered Your ordinances from of old, O Lord, And comfort myself. - Order in the midst of chaos and confusion, when all else seems to be shifting sand and not make sense. God's law brings stability.

Psalmist of 71 Prayer of an Old Man – Someone with lots of life experiences! This is a trustworthy witness.

:20-21 You who have shown me many troubles and distresses Will revive me again, And will bring me up again from the depths of the earth. May You increase my greatness And turn to comfort me. - Like so many of the saints of God

Jeremiah in Lamentations 3 – This chapter is our “lifeline” for finding comfort from God. Like the author of Psalm 71, Jeremiah acknowledges the sovereignty of God in all of his circumstances, both those that bring ease and those that bring distresses.

3:1-6 I am the man who has seen affliction Because of the rod of His wrath. He has driven me and made me walk In darkness and not in light. Surely against me He has turned His hand Repeatedly all the day. He has caused my flesh and my skin to waste away, He has broken my bones. He has besieged and encompassed me with bitterness and hardship. In dark places He has made me dwell, Like those who have long been dead.

Then Jeremiah shifts gears and praises God because he knows that God is a God who shows mercy and kindness.

3:21-25 This I recall to my mind, Therefore I have hope. The Lord’s lovingkindness [f]indeed never cease, For His compassions never fail. They are new every morning; Great is Your faithfulness. “The Lord is my portion,” says my soul, “Therefore I have hope in Him.” The Lord is good to those who wait for Him, To the person who seeks Him.

3:31-33 For the Lord will not reject forever, For if He causes grief, Then He will have compassion According to His abundant lovingkindness. For He does not afflict willingly Or grieve the sons of men.

I ask you, what is the extent or limit of God's mercy for us? Look at the cross as Paul did – He who did not spare His own Son, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things?! If there has been any one thing in particular that has helped us to find comfort and strength through our long-term trials, it is this one thing: our God is the Author of all of our circumstances, He is in control of all of them, Jesus understands our frailty and weakness, and God has the compassionate heart of a father for his children.

Paul: Just to make sure that you don't think I've forgotten about God being a God of Comfort in the New Testament, let's look at a couple of quotations from someone who endured lots of hardship and distresses as a result of following Jesus and by the design of God. Here are the words of Paul.

2 Thessalonians 2:16-17 Now may our Lord Jesus Christ Himself and God our Father, who has loved us and given us eternal comfort and good hope by grace, comfort and strengthen your hearts in every good work and word.

Let's return to the Scripture from 2 Corinthians which I started with. 2 Co 1:3-4 coupled with verse 9-10 “... so that we would not trust in ourselves, but in God who raises the dead...” Although, as He makes clear in vss. 6-7, that His comfort may come through others, He wants you to come to Him first for comfort; before friends or family.

III. Faith to believe in the God of All Comfort

The reality that He is a God of all comfort won't have an impact in your life unless the truth is ignited by faith that results in peace that comes from that comfort in the midst of the trials. If it's so obvious from God's words about Himself and the testimony of so many saints that have gone before us, then why do we struggle to believe it? Most of these, Vickie and I have talked about at some point or another regarding one or both of us.

A. Reasons we Struggle to Believe

Sometimes, when the trials come one after another and there seems to be no end in sight, you begin to wonder "what is the next trial around the corner". It is easy to think that God is never going to give you true relief.

Like Adam and Eve in the garden – our base, depraved nature gets deceived by lies to make us think that maybe He is keeping good from us. But the truth is that He is always protecting us for our best.

God is not double-minded: His "yes" means "yes" and he has told us that He is a God who supplies comfort.

We need to expect good from God, even in our disobedience, and remember that He is always waiting for our return like He did with Israel:

Deuteronomy 4:25-31 "When you become the father of children and children's children and have remained long in the land, and act corruptly, and make an idol in the form of anything, and do that which is evil in the sight of the Lord your God so as to provoke Him to anger, I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that you will surely perish quickly from the land where you are going over the Jordan to possess it. You shall not live long on it, but will be utterly destroyed. The Lord will scatter you among the peoples, and you will be left few in number among the nations where the Lord drives you. There you will serve gods, the work of man's hands, wood and stone, which neither see nor hear nor eat nor smell. But from there you will seek the Lord your God, and you will find Him if you search for Him with all your heart and all your soul. When you are in distress and all these things have come upon you, in the latter days you will return to the Lord your God and listen to His voice. For the Lord your God is a compassionate God; He will not fail you nor destroy you nor forget the covenant with your fathers which He swore to them.

Long term difficulties have a natural tendency to create discouragement. They can wear down our endurance and resilience.

Power p. 14-15 - "I have no doubt, my friend, that you have a great many discouragements. Was ever anything great and abiding brought about without them? They are the very atmosphere in which what is great, and good, and enduring, is perfected. Draw courage from discouragement. Say, 'Satan sees I am on the right road now, and is trying to hinder me all he can. Strait is my gate, and narrow is my way; and that is a good sign

that the end of that way is right.' He continues on the next page.
 "Moreover, you must not give up in this matter of comfort, or in any point of the divine life, because you do not seem to get on. Often we are getting on, when we do not know that we are. God never changes, nor are His mercies dependent upon our 'getting on.' This is a measuring of ourselves by ourselves, and such is not the measure of the Lord.

Don't be deceived into thinking that you need to experience spiritual highs in order to experience the comfort of God. God does not change and He provides us with an inner calm and peace that allows us to endure our difficulties. He fills us with the Fruit of the Holy Spirit as described in Galatians 5:23-24.

B.Reasons to have Strength to Believe

The primary way to overcome struggles to believe that God is a God of comfort is to meditate on His character as He describes it to us. You must have a list of verses that you can quickly go to that reminds you about the truth of God's character. Pastor Steve Hogan has often times offered his "ABCs" of God's character and similar sets of verses are on our website.

God is generous - "Open wide your mouth and I will fill it." "...their sins and iniquities I will remember no more. Is 42" James 1:5 "But if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him." Ps 34:8 O Taste and see that the Lord is good; How blessed is the man who takes refuge in Him!

Ps 34:17 The righteous cry, and the LORD hears And delivers them out of all their troubles.

Ps 103:6 & 8 The LORD performs righteous deeds and judgments for all who are oppressed. ... The LORD is compassionate and gracious, Slow to anger and abounding in lovingkindness.

Remember that God is a good father to us. He gives us what is best for us, not always just what we want.

Hebrews 12:7-11 It is for discipline that you endure; God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom his father does not discipline? But if you are without discipline, of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. Furthermore, we had earthly fathers to discipline us, and we respected them; shall we not much rather be subject to the Father of spirits, and live? For they disciplined us for a short time as seemed best to them, but He disciplines us for our good, so that we may share His holiness. All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful; yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness.

Look to the testimony of those who have gone before you.

- 1) Biblical examples like those mentioned earlier. 2) The examples of men and women you know or have read about in biographies. - Robert Murray McCheyne, Joni Eareckson-Tada, C.H. Spurgeon,

And always, always, always remember Jesus – a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. God suffering as man every day of His life; tempted as we are yet without sin.

Next week we will identify various discomforts and how to help point yourself and others towards God's character and attributes in order to gain strength from Him.

We will look at some of the potential emotional/spiritual trials associated with enduring long-term illness and how to combat them. For example, how do you deal with feeling helpless or useless or envious of others whom God does not have enduring these types of debilitating trials.

As we look at those trials, we will also weave together ways that you can be an encouraging conduit of God's comfort to those enduring sickness and how it relates to other types of long standing trials.

If you are not able to return next week, we plan to post the audio message and notes on Sermon Audio so that you can complete this short series through that resource.

I will close with this before we pray:

Hebrews 12:1-3

Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

For consider Him who has endured such hostility by sinners against Himself, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.