Thomas Hawkes story

Real Suffering: v. 8-11; ch. 4; ch. 6; ch. 11-12

* “burdened excessively, beyond our strength” => despaired even of life (gave up hope)

Real Comfort for Us: who God is (Father of mercies and God of all comfort)

* His heart vs. just sovereign strategy
* Comfort is a Person (Christ thru the Holy Spirit), not a false comfort found in fixing circumstances

Real Ministry of Comfort to Others: our ability AND desire to comfort others as a result of His work in us

Ultimately, v. 7, the hope / heart of missions, that others would share in the depth of the same experience of the reality of Christ that we ourselves have experienced

Nobody struggles to make sense of success. But suffering gets down to the meaning of life. If God is who Paul says He is in v. 3, it gives life a whole new meaning, and a firm anchor

MEANING of “COMFORT” is key, as it is used 10 times in 5 verses!!!

* More than what we call ‘comfort’ – e.g. soothing
* It certainly includes that, and often begins with that. But it definitely means much more than that.
* Maybe not a sufficient English word. Latin root of comfort comes closer: “with” plus “fortis” (i.e. strengthens to go on? Fortitude, etc.)
  + Compare with v. 6 word: comfort leads to “enduring” – like a marathon runner, the word used in Hebrews 12 (wouldn’t run alongside a marathon runner and stroke their hair and say, “It’s OK.”)
  + That is why the word is often translated as “exhortation” or similar words, because it is more than just making someone feel better, it is spurring them on to action
  + Calling alongside – either pleading for help, but in this case calling us alongside Himself. Not to His lap to just feel better, but to walk with Him (“follow Me”) as He gives us His strength (“I am with you always”)

It means more than tenderness: it is strength in tenderness, and it is tenderness in strength. It is not a mere palliative but a curative. It not merely soothes, but heals. Its ministry is not only consolation but restoration. “Comfort” is “mercy” at work

MEANING of “SUFFERING” is key, too, as one form or another is used 7 times (affliction – 3 times; suffering – 4 times)

ANY suffering (v. 4)

HOLY SPIRIT: “another Comforter” (another “Alongside One”). Not to make you feel better, but to remind you of the truth of Christ (might be the simple reality of who we are in Him (Romans 8), might be the bringing to mind the truth of His calling, the truth of who He is, etc. He will guide into all truth, take what is from Jesus and tell it to us. In other words, thru the Holy Spirit, Christ walks with us and continues to lead us and teach us. The Holy Spirit comes alongside of us so that we can obey the call to “follow Me.”

The COMFORT throughout 2 Corinthians:

* Ch. 4:
  + *God’s work in us* (life of Jesus, inner man renewed)
  + *God’s work in others* (v. 15 – spread of gospel; v. 10 - witness of Christ; v. 12 – His life in others);
  + This is *temporary* (v. 17-18)
* Ch. 5:
  + The Love of Christ (v. 14). “This is what is really pressing on me!”
* Ch. 6:
  + Undergirded by the *victorious presence of Christ* that *doesn’t let evil and suffering have the last word* (v.3-10), giving themselves as servants of God in the midst of it all, a strange mix of suffering and joy
  + Spurgeon quote
* Ch. 7:
  + Through *people* (v. 5 - afflictions in and out, but v. 6 – comforted by God thru coming of Titus AND on hearing of the comfort Titus had received thru the Corinthians)
* Ch. 8:
  + The *joy of Christ* in people (Macedonians, so poor and suffering but overflowing with joy and begging to be able to give)
* Ch. 12:
  + *“My grace is sufficient”* (the *PRESENCE of God* is what He is talking about here, the simple but powerful “I will be with you” that He has promised throughout the Scriptures). Not a soothing presence, but a strengthening, empowering presence (“I am with you always” was promised in the context of moving forward with the Great Commission)

The GOAL: a fellowship of those who “set their hope” on Christ! “Sharers” of His comfort.

No, trials don’t make me stronger. They beat the crap out of me and show me how weak I really am. They are good because they make me run to HIM.

Trust in suffering => Jesus above all else (the call demonstrated vs. cheap Christianity)

KEY PHRASE in v. 10: “He on whom we have set our hope”

* He has delivered us….He will deliver us…He will yet deliver us
* And the result will be a community of thanks and praise (v. 11)

J. Oswald Sanders told a story of the time he first began to preach. He was speaking at a very small church, and after he had finished preaching, he left the platform and went into a small room just outside of the sanctuary. As he sat in the room, he couldn’t help but overhear a couple of older ladies discussing his preaching.

“What did you think of the preacher?” one of them said to the other.

“Not bad,” she replied, “but he’ll be better after he has suffered.”

We tend to think that suffering makes it harder to preach the gospel. The truth is just the opposite, because in suffering God makes Himself more real than ever before.

Hope from WITHIN flames that are still raging, not AFTER the flames have been extinguished

Response to “Hope”: The atheist: “God doesn’t exist. There is no hope. We live, and then we die. Period.” The deist: “God is there, but He doesn’t care. He started this world spinning, and then went on vacation.” The humanist: “God is irrelevant. The only hope in this world is for us to all come together and fix it ourselves, to create a better world for our children to live in.” The typical Christian can’t do anything more than to assault the world with a barrage of Christian bumper sticker slogans: “Well, when God closes a door, He always opens a window.” “God has a plan.” “Just let go, and let God.” “God changes caterpillars into butterflies, sand into pearls, and coal into diamonds, using time and pressure. He is working on YOU, too.”

* Truth in the Christian response, but write it on a plaque and hang it on the wall. But don’t try to use it to comfort me when…..

God is not an impersonal military strategist who is playing a divine game of Risk with our lives, unaware or uncaring that the game pieces He is using are real people…

* He is a FATHER, and the Father of “mercies,” the

Comforter: the “coming alongside One”

* “I will not leave you alone” (“I am with you always”) => another Comforter (not different, but Jesus thru the presence of the Holy Spirit)

\*\* Some teaching talks of suffering as an academic subject, with the unaffected detachment of a news anchor describing the carnage of a terrorist bombing

* That is NOT what Paul is doing here. This is not a theological treatise on suffering, the results of his doctoral dissertation on suffering. This is a REAL person, testifying to the REALITY of the presence of a REAL God in the midst of REAL life!!!

One commentator says that we should “think less and less of our sufferings” and more and more of the positives God will bring about (but the way that He uses it is thru us, precisely because we HAVE thought about our sufferings, and because we have seen and experienced the truth of His presence in the midst of it. This is not a positive thinking coping mechanism, consoling ourselves with the thought that God will use this somehow to bless somebody else, a kind of consolation prize.

Paul is motivated to bring comfort to others. Not that God ordained his suffering just for the purpose of using it, but that God comforts him and strengthens him in his suffering and then, like Christ (“the sufferings of Christ”), Paul walks in the comfort he receives from the Father and lays down his life to give it to others.

Verse 7: “sharers” is root of koinonia! A fellowship of sufferings! Nga Romans 8, Philippians 3

“so that” in v. 4: not that comforting others is the only reason…our comfort is real and personal. But it doesn’t end there. God is on mission, a multiplying mission. Blessed to be a blessing. Etc.

* If it was only utilitarian comfort, then NOBODY would get real comfort, because Paul says that the comfort the Corinthians receive is the SAME comfort as he received, and so on and so on!!

\*\* Jen: unable to do anything, but He is faithful to meet her (the Comforter is a Person!)

To a world that doesn’t know what to do with suffering except to try to avoid it or cast bitter blame at God or anyone else, we have a message to preach, about an all-sufficient God whose presence and grace is more than enough, etc.