

PostExilicProphets 22-03-16b

Thank you, Dan. I was saying that that is one of my favorite things to hear on that organ. It just brings out all of the beauty of its tone and its range and the various stops and so masterfully performed and a wonderfully inspiring song that we have a mission, we have a purpose, we have a reason for being here and despite what may be going on in the world, that mission does not change.

We are here to represent the Lord Jesus Christ and hopefully our study tonight will help us do that as we look for guidance and encouragement and comfort in the scriptures. If you will turn with me in that light to 2nd Corinthians chapter 1, let's see what the Word of God has to say about the troubleless times in which we live. Might not always be the first thought to go to Corinthians, but that's where we're going.

2nd Corinthians chapter 1, Paul an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God and Timothy our brother to the church of God which is at Corinth with all the saints who are in all Achaia. Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. 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 tribulation, that we may be able to comfort those who are in any trouble with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.

For as the sufferings of Christ abound in us, so our consolation also abounds through Christ. Now if we are afflicted it is for your consolation and salvation, which is effective for enduring the same sufferings which we also suffer. Or if we are comforted it is for your consolation and salvation.

And our hope for you is steadfast because we know that as you are partakers of the sufferings, so also you will partake of the consolation. For we do not want you to be ignorant brethren of our trouble which came to us in Asia, that we were burdened beyond measure, above strength, so that we despaired of life. Yes, we had the sentence of death in ourselves that we should not trust in ourselves, but in God who raises the dead, who delivered us from so great a death and does deliver us, in whom we trust that he will still deliver us.

You also helping together in prayer for us, that thanks may be given by many persons on our behalf for the gift granted to us through the many. One of the things that we observe from the beginning of the Bible to its end is that God allows bad things to happen. I would love to turn to each of these passages, but I'm going to draw upon your memory beginning in Genesis chapter 4 with Cain and Abel.

Here's my question. You've got ostensibly as far as we know four people on the earth at that time. Adam, Eve, Cain and Abel.

God allows one quarter of the earth's population to be destroyed at a stroke when Cain kills his brother Abel, out of jealousy, out of vindictiveness, out of an unreasonable rage. And I ask

myself this question, which honestly you don't hear asked enough. Why did God let Cain kill Abel? Abel is a righteous man.

Abel's sacrifice is accepted by God. Abel has done nothing wrong. Abel has a long potential life ahead of him to live.

Why did God let Cain kill Abel? Was God distracted? Three other, you know, two other people to watch. He's not watching Cain, and he's not looking out for Abel. God is in his heaven.

He's got a very small number of people to watch, and he does not stop the murder of Abel by Cain. And you can think of all of the arguments you could raise to God if it had not yet happened but you know it is about to happen. You could run into the throne room and say, Lord, do you realize that your whole command to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth here is only going to be fulfilled by Cain and his descendants if you let him kill his brother Abel? Obviously, there's going to have to be some women born into the family to get this procreation project underway, but still this is a major setback to the whole divine plan.

So it would seem the one righteous offspring is destroyed at a one fell swoop. Why did God allow that? Move on down. Skipping several potential examples.

Why does God allow Joseph the favorite of Jacob, a righteous and godly, divinely connected man, to be beaten and sold into slavery by his brothers? A tragedy in the eyes of his father, a great setback to the whole future of the nation of Israel, potentially. But God does not stop the brothers. An angel doesn't appear.

There's not a voice from heaven. There's not a sudden storm or earthquake. The earth doesn't split open and devour the brothers or they don't get a severe chastisement from some quarter.

It happens and Joseph is gone for years and years and years and he suffers. He is a slave. He is imprisoned.

He is hauled off to a land he knows not of and he spends time in the house of Potiphar. Then he is even further, wrongly accused, wrongly imprisoned. Great injustice perpetrated on his person and on his life for years.

He talks to the baker and he talks to the wine steward and he's still not released. And it is a long time before God delivers him out of that situation and he ends up being second only to Pharaoh in the land of Egypt, but that's a lot of years of hardship and injustice. Can you imagine Joseph trying to keep his calm and keep his faith and keep his objectivity in a prison cell week after week, month after month, year after year? Thinking about his brothers, trying to control his desire for imprecation and revenge against them.

The sorrow of being separated from his beloved father who is aging by the year and he's not there to see it or to comfort him or to spend time with him. The opportunity for marriage within the people of Israel, which is the norm. The great lengths that Rebecca went to to ensure

that Jacob got a wife from among the people that Abraham went to to ensure that Isaac got a wife from among his own people.

Joseph has no shot at that and never does marry an Israelite. We can just stop with those two examples, but you can move forward through the history of scripture and see that time and time again there is affliction, there is hardship, there is setback that doesn't make any sense to the victim at the time. Can't see the end from the beginning.

Can't figure out how this is a good thing. We have circumstances in the modern day. I think conditions in this country are not going to improve.

I would be thrilled if they just stay at the level that they are. But honestly, I don't have a great deal of confidence that that will be the case. And I think that it is prudent for us to look at what the scriptures portray and present.

To look at the signs of the times and to fortify our souls and prepare ourselves for a potential downturn in our circumstances. If we are prepared and it doesn't happen, praise God. If we are prepared and it does happen, praise God.

Because God has a purpose. Can you think if we had a set of blue books to pass out and a number two pencil and said, all right, propose a case for why God allowed Cain to murder Abel his brother. What would you put down? What good ever came of that? I can offer you the first thing that comes to my mind, which is in the birth of Seth and the line of Seth descending as a parallel to the line of Cain, you realize that within the first generation after Adam, you have one of the earliest pieces of Christology in the Bible.

Because you have a son that was alive, who died at the hands of an evil brother, but who in a metaphorical sense or a symbolic sense is raised in Seth to accomplish God's purpose and preserve the mission for which God created humanity. You move to the second example, closed Bible, blue book and a number two. What purpose did God have in allowing Joseph to be so cruelly used and abused by his brothers? That one's a little easier, isn't it? The Christology is even more evident that this apparent death with the bloody coat nevertheless sends Joseph to a place he could never have come to accomplish a salvation he could have never provided through enduring hardship, through experiencing pain and maintaining his love for his brothers despite their crime and delivering them despite the gross injustice that they perpetrated on his person.

And through the blood of the lamb that was spread on that coat, the nation of Israel is birthed. So, this sounds fine when we look at it in the Bible, but it is important to consider that when hardship comes into our lives, if decline and downturn happen as a result of the things that we are observing around us, a few of which we took a quick look at in the first session tonight, but if perilous times come and men become lovers of themselves, lovers of money, and begin to perpetrate violence on others in order to obtain what gratifies them and what they do not want to earn, then we should be prepared to have our faith exercised, to have our faith tested. The

testing of your faith more precious than gold redounds to the praise of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Faith that is untested is really kind of an unknown quantity. It is easy to trust when things are good. It is easy to trust when we are in a good circumstance hoping for a better.

I hope that at my good job, I will get a promotion and have an even better job with more money. I hope that my pretty good health will be restored and I'll have really good health. I hope that my family situation or my social situation or my economic situation, which is pretty good, will be even better and I'm going to trust God for improvement.

The real test of faith comes when we are living by faith and not by sight and we can't see how it makes any sense. We can't see why God would allow it. Moving to the other end of the Bible from Genesis to Revelation, as I have mentioned in recent weeks, you think about the two witnesses who prosper for a time and have God-given power to call down fire and to prophesy and to witness to God in a very dark day.

But at a certain point God allows them to be overcome and brutally slain and shamefully displayed. Their bodies are not picked up and buried. If you've seen the fate of dictators, such as in Libya, such as in earlier days, Mussolini.

They used to have Long's Wax Museum in Claremore, one of the most pathetic excuses. It was probably good in its prime, but it was in its final days. They had wax figures of the Beatles but Ringo had fallen over backwards and John Lennon only had one arm and there were two by fours hanging out of the figures.

I mean it was really it was poorly maintained. But there was an alcove and they said only bring your children in here with some warning and they had a mock-up of what Mussolini looked like after he was killed in Italy and he was gruesomely disfigured, bullet holes in his wax chest and other things. But the potential for violence and grotesque treatment on the part of people who are only out for number one, revenge, emotion, impulsive reaction is profound.

And when these two witnesses are overcome, they are going to be brutalized. They are going to be displayed on international television and internet screens all over the world and there will be celebration. People will give each other gifts like it's Christmas when these two individuals are slain.

Why would God allow that? Why don't they minister, bring down fire from heaven, prophesy, do all the things they're going to do and then rise into a cloud of glory with affirmation much as Jesus ascended. God allows them to be slain and to be destroyed. And you know, as I've said many times, the reason I think that this is the resuscitated James and John is because of that question and answer session they had with the Lord Jesus.

We'd like to sit at your right hand and at your left. Their mother had this ambition for them. And Jesus said, are you able to drink the cup that I'm about to drink? Are you able to be baptized with the baptism with which I am about to be baptized? And their famous answer was, Lord, we

are able.

My question for us tonight is, are we willing to drink a cup that has bitter dregs, that involves downturn, hardship, perhaps suffering? I can't foresee this happening anytime in the near future, but we know that in times past, in times present, and in times future, there is martyrdom for Christians. You cannot find, unless you really dig, the ongoing martyrdom of Christians in Africa. Christians are being slain for their faith every single day.

Do you hear it on the news? Are you aware of it? Is it a comfortable insulation to not think about it and not look at it, not know about it, and pretend it isn't happening? If it can happen there, it can happen here. Just give it time. Wait for the opposition to rise.

Wait for the hatred to build. And it is a very sobering thought. It can be a scary thought.

It can alarm us. But this is the faith test. Is our faith strong enough to keep us calm, to keep us focused, to keep us confident that God knows what He's doing? And if anything enters into the life of those who are seeking to walk the narrow road and enter through the straight gate, it is only because God has a profoundly important purpose in doing so.

What if the angel Gabriel had appeared to Abel the night before Cain slew him in the field and said, I'm just here to tell you, your brother is going to strike you down and take your life tomorrow. What do you think Abel's thoughts would have been? What do you think Joseph's thoughts would have been if the angel Gabriel had appeared to him the night before his brothers sold him into slavery and told him what was about to happen? Would they have shrunk in fear? Would they have sought to take measures to avoid what was in the ultimate permissive will of God to allow something that God is going to weave into his plan and purpose in ways utterly and completely unforeseen? Do you think Joseph had any notion when the caravan traders hauled him down south toward Egypt that he was going to end up being Pharaoh's right-hand man, vizier of the entire nation, deliverer of all of his people? Could he have had any possible notion then or at any time in the next dozen or so years? Not a clue, not a chance, not in the wildest imagination. He did have the promise of God's word to him in the form of dreams that the sun and the moon and the stars bowing down, sheaves bowing down.

What does it mean? It's cryptic. It's uncertain, but it's a promise from God. I have to live long enough for these sheaves to bow.

I have to live long enough for this stellar episode to come to fulfillment. He knew that God was actively involved in his life. He knew that God had a plan and purpose for him even when he didn't know what it was.

And he maintained his faith. He continued his obedience. You think about innumerable examples.

Think about Daniel and his three friends taken to Babylon and castrated. What possible purpose could God have in allowing us to be so treated? They could understand God's

judgment on the nation. The words of the prophets, I'm sure, were ringing in their ears.

And the heedlessness of the people of their generation, the heedlessness of their government, the stupidity and the callousness and the godlessness of that generation resulting in Nebuchadnezzar coming in in 605 and taking the princes of the land away and repurposing them. Never to see their homeland again in this life. Never to have a normal life with offspring.

Sobering, depressing, potentially disturbing to the point of losing their faith. But did they? Here's my new circumstance. I'm not going to eat this unclean food.

I'm going to go and get this straightened out. We're still going to follow God's law to the extent that we can in this environment and in this circumstance. And God blessed them for their obedience.

He blessed them for their faith. And he used them. We all know their names.

These 2,500 years later, 2,600 years later, we know their names. We know their given names. We know their Babylonian names.

They've got 2 names. They have a name in Babylon and they have a name in God's eternal record. We have the book of Daniel and we have the prophecies we've been looking at in Daniel chapter 9 because of them, because of their faithfulness.

Did they have any inkling when that disaster befell their nation that that's how God was going to use them? I say that to say this. Look again at 2 Corinthians. 2 Corinthians.

Now remember, Paul has suffered some horrific setback here in Asia. Look at verse 8. We did not want you to be ignorant, brethren, of our trouble which came to us in Asia. We were burdened beyond measure, above strength, so that we despaired even of life.

This is the, for crying out loud, Apostle Paul. He is the single apostle that has been given the mission of communicating Christ to the nations. The other 11 remaining apostles are all sent to Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria.

It's Paul who's got the burden of going to the nations. John is going to end up helping him before his life is over because John is going to communicate the Lord Jesus' words to the seven churches of Asia. But John is an intermediary.

John is a conduit. Luke, in his gospel and in the book of Acts, is going to provide a wonderful record that is going to be of infinite benefit directly to the Gentiles and record God's expanding of the mission beyond Israel to the Gentiles. But the apostle who is charged singularly with this mission is Paul, and he has this level of hardship, burdened beyond measure, above strength, despairing even of life.

We had the sentence of death in ourselves. In line in death row, waiting for the chair, waiting for the noose, waiting for the lions, waiting for the sword, whatever it is they're going to use to

end his life. And it seems like a certainty.

This is the Paul who says in verse 3, Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort. The same man who has been burdened beyond measure and figures his life is over doesn't lead with that. He leads with the God of all comfort, the Father of mercies, who comforts us in all our troubles that we may be able to comfort those who are in any trouble.

In order that we suffer, we experience hardship, which builds our faith and that enables us to comfort others because we know what it's like. This, I believe, is not just a mission for this life. There is going to be trouble in the millennial kingdom.

But those of us who have been supported by God's grace, God's strength, God's resources, God's comfort in this life are going to be able to oversee and to communicate that same comfort to others, both in this life and in the next. There are people who are poor and need clothing and need food and need shelter. We know this from what Jesus says, and we're going to see it in our upcoming chapters of Matthew at the sheep and goats judgment.

If you've done it to the least of these, my brethren, you have done it unto me. We have that privilege now. We have that privilege for a thousand years in the millennial kingdom.

If we qualify, if we know how to broker and transfer that comfort, we have to, first of all, experience it ourselves. And to experience it, we have to lay hold of it. We have to look for it.

We have to pray for it. We have to expect it. We have to put our faith in God, faith tried in the fire, more precious than gold.

He comforts us in all our troubles, verse 4, so that we are able to comfort those who are in any trouble, any trouble. It may not be the same kind of trouble we've been in, but I know whom I have believed. What I've committed to Him is secure against that day.

Verse 5, as the sufferings of Christ abound in us, so our consolation also abounds through Christ. Consolation in Christ comes from affliction in Christ. It's counterintuitive.

It's unexpected. I just want the prosperity gospel. I just want the good stuff.

Why do I have to have any hardship? This is where I can commend to your attention some of the points that are made in the book Letters from a Skeptic by Dr. Greg Boyd in corresponding with his atheist father at the age of 70. His father says, I don't see how you can believe in this God if He is there. Why does He allow so much suffering in the earth, both for believers and for unbelievers? How are starving children in Africa a part of God's plan? How is He going to implement and work good through that? Interesting and I think very persuasive responses to those kinds of questions.

And it ends up coming back to love and it ends up coming back to faith. Faith in the long-term

plans and purposes of God, but also that God knows what He's doing and there are certain things that are necessary and inevitable as a part of this phase of God's plan. As the sufferings of Christ abound in us, so our consolation also abounds.

And these are correlative. They correlate. The more suffering we may experience, the more hardship.

And sometimes this is material and sometimes it's immaterial. Sometimes it's visible. Sometimes it's invisible.

Sometimes we are oppressed by circumstances. Sometimes we are oppressed within. We have to fight things that almost seem demonic.

We have an inexplicable tendency toward depression or toward worry or toward fear or toward perseverating and going around and around and chewing on old bones. And that is just as real an oppression as if somebody were invading our country, taking away our environment and our way of life. It is just as real.

It is just as difficult. It's different in its presentation, but it is the same in its result. And we are challenged to meet these opposing forces with faith, with hope and with love.

The testing of our faith produces patience. Let patience have its perfect work so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing. So they correlate the sufferings of Christ as they abound in us.

So our consolation abounds. They're balanced. Verse six, if we are afflicted, it is for your consolation and salvation.

Paul says, I know why God is allowing me to suffer. Even though you could make an argument that the apostle of the Gentiles ought to be carried around on flowery beds of ease and transported from place to place and the Holy Spirit pop him into a place where he can give a week or two in that place and move on to others. And he ought to be unfettered and free of hardship and have all of his needs supplied and have good health and great eyesight and wonderful mental acuity and not be opposed and not be held back and not be receiving forty lashes minus one on three different occasions and stoned and left for dead in Lystra and shipwrecked and afflicted and opposed and badmouthed by legalistic Jewish authorities and so on.

Why doesn't God just clear his path with a giant bulldozer? Paul gives the answer right here. Why doesn't God clear your path and my path with a giant bulldozer? Verse six, if we are afflicted, it is for your consolation and deliverance. Notice the use of Soteria here, translated salvation.

We're not talking about eternal salvation through faith in Christ in his death, burial and resurrection. We're talking about deliverance, salvation in time, deliverance in time. Paul

understands that he is an example.

If Paul can do it, we can do it. You might otherwise think, well, nobody knows the trouble I've seen. Nobody's been in my tough circumstances.

Paul says, if anybody thinks they've had tribulation, I mourn. You remember that long list he gives of all of his hardships? If anybody thinks they've got it hard, take a look at my list. See if you can top it.

I think I win the round on this listing. Why? For your consolation, for your deliverance, which is effective for enduring the same sufferings which we suffer. If you can see not only our sufferings, but see the power from God by which we endure them, that's handing you the answer to the problem.

That gives you the key to not only surviving, but triumphing in that difficulty. You're afflicted the way we were afflicted. Improvise, adapt, and overcome the way we did through the power of God, through confidence in Christ Jesus, through prayer, through fellowship, through reminding oneself on a day-by-day basis of the promises of God, of the examples in Scripture of others, the Hebrews 11 roster of the heroes of faith.

Look at their lives. Moses is in there. Did Moses have it easy? Old Testament Scripture says he was the most afflicted man who ever lived in that day.

The Lord Jesus, the Son of God, was he afflicted? Pretty much. And we share in those afflictions so that we can share in the power by which they are overcome. If we are comforted, it is for your comfort, your consolation, and your deliverance.

The sufferings and the comfort are both models, examples, in the genuine sense, for us to follow. Our hope for you is steadfast because we know that just as you are partakers of the sufferings, so also you will be partakers of the comfort, the consolation, the reward, the eventual conquest and victory in Christ. We do not want you to be ignorant, brethren.

Nobody knows what this trouble was that he had in Asia. This is the only place it's mentioned. There's no other record of it that was so taxing.

But we do not trust in ourselves, verse 9, but in God who raises the dead. If God can raise the dead, God can take care of us through whatever hardship we endure. And if we lose our lives in that hardship, I'll be right back.

Remember the epitaph Johnny Carson wanted on his tombstone? I'll be right back. We can suffer unto death. Our loved ones can suffer unto death.

Our friends and fellowship can suffer even unto death. But we're all coming back. What do we come back to? Do we come back to approval, well done, good and faithful servant, faithful unto death? Or is it going to be an embarrassing comeback? Is it going to be a shameful comeback?

We didn't enter into the suffering and we didn't enter into the consolation and we didn't trust God enough to know that this momentary light affliction is working for us an eternal weight of glory.

So as we watch world events unfold, as we watch the deterioration and disintegration of everything that was once great in this country, be of good cheer. In this world you shall have tribulation, Jesus said, but cheer up. Why? I have overcome the world.

Do you believe it? Do you believe it enough to be cheerful? Jesus didn't say, be a hang dog and sturm und drang and endure to the end because I've overcome the world. What did he say? What's the second fruit of the spirit right after love? Joy. Jesus said, be cheerful.

Even if you have tribulation in this world, be cheerful. I've overcome the world. This tribulation is momentary.

My presence, my reward, my kingdom and the kingdom of the Father that follows are everlasting, life eternal, life robed in white, life living in the new Jerusalem, Lord willing. All we have to do is trust and obey. Let's close here in a word of prayer.

Father, thank you for the wonderful confidence that we have in Jesus Christ. What a unique privilege to represent him as his body on this earth. We pray that we can be as faithful as he was in representing you to the world, in shining a light in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, in offering hope and light and the gospel in the short time that we have to exercise those privileges.

We pray that God the Holy Spirit will remind us of the truth that lives in our souls, that energizes us, cleanses us, thoroughly equips us for every good work. We pray it in Jesus' name. Amen.