

Difficulties

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The anxiety and spiritual stress in the lives of many Christians stem from their secret image of God. In spite of all they know from Scripture and the love they see demonstrated around them daily, they unconsciously cling to their notions of God as a stern and distant Judge. In their minds He sits behind a courtly edifice, furrows His brow at their slightest faults, and demonstrates His displeasure by withholding His goodness from their lives.

If you asked them, they would most likely say this is not true, that they really believe God is a loving God who nurtures them in His care. Yet their lives and daily attitudes continually indicate otherwise. When the rainstorms of negative circumstances pelt their experience, they feel hopelessness and discouragement. They are anxious about the future, from how the bills will be paid to where they should live. What causes the greatest gnawing in their souls, however, is that ever-present worry that God is not concerned with their petty problems and that they are on their own to muddle through as best they can.

At one time or another, this "vision problem" threatens every believer. Doubts and feelings of inadequacy crowd our heads and make us feel distant from the Lord who ever seeks to draw us closer. Why won't we let Him? We run away and accuse Him of growing dim in our eyes; we mourn as though we do not have the unfading inheritance of a child of the King.

The psalmist David, Job, the prophet Jeremiah, and countless other Bible characters felt the pain of emotions of abandonment during turbulent times. The truth is, it is in those moments especially that they came to know God as their Comforter in a meaningful way. A soothing drink of water is delicious to the person who is desperately thirsty, and the same is true of God's comfort.

Jeremiah cried out: "O my Comforter in sorrow, my heart is faint within me" - Jeremiah 8:18. In the middle of great pain, he acknowledged his sadness and the ability of God to comfort him. The recognition of God's power to heal your hurts is a key component to experiencing His tender love.

King David moaned: "Reproach has broken my heart, and I am so sick. And I looked for sympathy, but there was none, and for comforters, but I found none" - Psalm 69:20. In the people around him he could find no solace, but by the end of his song, his tune had changed: "You who seek God, let your heart revive. For the Lord hears the needy, and does not despise His who are prisoners" - v. 33. David turns his eyes from earth to heaven and finds soul satisfaction.

Where do you look for comfort? If you have formerly relied on human remedies, you know how their effectiveness wanes over time. Some try food or alcohol or chemical substances or escape into fantasy—anything to attempt to outrun the pain. But when the artificial glow wears off, when the dream ends, the ache remains.

You must learn how to turn to God and rely on His promises to aid you.

Isaiah 40 contains beautiful imagery of God coming to His people and answering their pleas. (One piece in Handel's Messiah, in fact, is drawn from the beginning of this passage.) "'Comfort, O comfort My people, says your God. Speak kindly to Jerusalem... Like a shepherd He will tend His flock, in his arm He will gather the lambs, and carry them in His bosom; He will gently lead the nursing ewes" - vs. 1, 2a, 11.

Can you picture yourself as a tiny lamb in the arms of your Savior? He reaches down with His firm and calming hand to stroke your small head, nestled carefully under His chin. The Lord wants you to see Him in this way; He desires your love and dependence and hunger for His care. That is why through many stories in the Bible, He allows you to see how He responds to people on a one-on-one basis.

When the woman caught in adultery was cast into the midst of an angry mob and brought before Jesus, He caused her accusers to melt away in shame over their own sins. Then He granted her full forgiveness and restored her vision for life. - John 8:1-11. Jesus talked to the Samaritan woman at the well, in a social circumstance so awkward no other Jew would have dared it. Even as He put His finger on sinful places in her heart, He revealed Himself as the Messiah, and her life was never the same again.

Wherever Jesus went, He was followed by crowds desperate for a glimpse or a word from this Teacher who was different from all others. Yet even through the masses pushing around Him, Jesus felt the faint touch on His cloak of a woman who had been bleeding for twelve years. An outcast, a nobody, a hurting woman who had no hope for a future, she did not even expect Jesus to notice she was alive. When Jesus sensed healing power flow out from Him, He turned immediately and asked: "Who is the one who touched me?" - Luke 8:45. The woman realized she could not simply slip away and fell trembling before Him. She told everyone why she had touched His cloak. In this moment of great public attention, Jesus touched the soul of a humble woman: "Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace" - v. 48. Jesus could have addressed her in any way, and He selected the term of intimacy and endearment, daughter.

In her classic book *The God Of All Comfort*, Hannah Whitall Smith explains what the Lord gives: "Is [comfort] a sort of pious grace, that may perhaps fit us for Heaven, but that is somehow unfit to bear the brunt of our everyday life with its trials and its pains? Or is it an honest and genuine comfort, as we understand comfort, that enfolds life's trials in an all-embracing peace? With all my heart I believe it is the latter.

"Comfort, whether human or divine, is pure and simple comfort, and is nothing else. We none of us care for pious phrases, we want realities; and the reality of being comforted and comfortable seems to me almost more delightful than any other thing in life...

"Over and over again He declares this. 'I, even I, am he that comforteth you,' He says to the poor, frightened children of Israel. And then He reproaches them for not being comforted. 'Why,' He says, 'should you

let anything make you afraid when here is the Lord, your Maker, ready and longing to comfort you. You have feared continually every day the "fury of the oppressor," and have forgotten me who have stretched forth the heavens and laid the foundations of the earth? Where is the fury of the oppressor when I am by?"

There is no such thing as the life without pain and trial, and therefore no such thing as the person not in need of comfort. Don't let anyone deceive you into thinking that the key to leading a joy-filled Christian life is avoiding pain—that is not possible in this sinful world. And that is not profitable for us either. The God who could choose to insulate you from hurt wants you to experience the pricks that draw you closer to Him.

Verses 3 and 4 of 2 Corinthians make the connection between your suffering and the purpose of your existence:

"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort; who comforts us in our affliction so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God."

Out of your pain comes a need for God. As He ministers to you, and you accept it with thanksgiving and a mindset of learning, you are then equipped to minister similarly to those He places within your reach. In the eyes of another hurting individual, there is no substitute for experience.

You can reach for God's comfort right now, ask Him to give you solace, and be wrapped in the love that will not let you go.



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