

I. INTRODUCE SELF / SERIES

As the reformation swept France in the 1500s, the gospel produced committed Christians called Huguenots. The RC Church persecuted them viciously. Pastors and their families were targets. One pastor who lost his life (1732) was Pierre Durand. Pierre's little sister Marie {1} was held in the Tour de Constance {2} as a teen. To be released she simply needed to recant and reject Jesus' gospel. Instead she resisted and carved her protest "resist" {3} in the prison stone. For 38 yrs she patiently endured without comfort. One biographer says {4}:

"She was the spiritual leader of the prisoners. She nursed the ailing, wrote letters for those who could not write, and read psalms aloud each evening."

She led prisoners in song, taught Christ to antagonistic non-Christians, and wrote to officials seeking improved prison conditions. // When we hear of past Christians suffering even unto martyrdom we can elevate them as superheroes. They are to be respected but we must remember we are like them. They too had aspirations, families, jobs, etc. Rather than putting them on pedestals, we should allow their lives to instruct us as we face trials of various kinds. Why? B/C affliction is normal. God glorifies himself and spreads His gospel thru affliction. The prophets sawn in 2, apostles killed, saints martyred, and Christians in 2019 are called to endure suffering.// I think this has great bearing on how **we** love and serve the world and reach out with the gospel. I think this helps understand that evangelism is not a duty. Ev+ is about grace and God's grace often flows in affliction; as He comforts us we also convey grace to the lost. If you are trying to make sense of present affliction, this is a message for you. If not, this is message will prepare you for the inevitable suffering to come. God uses our affliction. He intends to comfort us and transmit *the grace of comfort*. The mn pt of today is {5}: **Our afflictions are avenues for abundant comfort for the lost.** R/P

II. PREAMBLE – DEFINING COMFORT

This text focuses on comfort so we should start with a right definition. We tend to think of comfort as emotional support or consolation in difficulty, pain, or grief. As a noun comfort is thought to be a state of freedom from suffering and pain. Cambridge Dictionary's first entry is {6}:

The pleasant and satisfying feeling of being physically or mentally free from pain and suffering, or something that provides this feeling

We have co-opted the idea that comfort is primarily related to emotions. While it is not less than that, the word means more, biblically. Original readers understood comfort as action; coming alongside, encouraging, urging forward as in the way one cheers on a runner. The noun form means being emboldened to persevere; strengthened to move forward. Paul puts comfort in the context of urging into salvation under God's care; being confident in salvation. To rightly understand this text we cannot marginalize comfort to mere emotional support or amelioration of pain. It may include these things, but they are a fruit, not the root of comfort. Comfort is always tied to our salvation: Jesus' work on our behalf; being called, urged into, strengthened by, and joined to God's care. In our affluent, easy, success-oriented culture we are allergic to suffering. Comfort is reduced to feeling good. Anything that makes us feel good is good. Anything that makes us feel bad is bad. This is NOT Scripture's view. Q1 of the HC helps us {7}:

Q: What is Thy only comfort in life and death?

Q: What is my only comfort in life and death?

A: That I with body and soul, both in life and death, am not my own, but belong unto my faithful Savior Jesus Christ; who, with his precious blood, hath fully satisfied for all my sins, and delivered me from all the power of the devil; and so preserves me that without the will of my heavenly Father, not a hair can fall from my head; yea, that all things must be subservient to my salvation, and therefore, by his Holy Spirit, he also assures me of eternal life, and makes me sincerely willing and ready, henceforth, to live unto him.

We will not gain the robust comforts of God salvation if we minimize life into a playground of enjoyments. With that understanding of comfort let's look at the text's meaning.

III. THE TEXT'S MEANING – COMFORT FOR AFFLICTION

This text says 3 important things about "why" God comforts us {8}.

1 – God Comforts us Because it is inherent in His **Character**

Look at v3 {9}:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort.

Inherent in who God is, is His commitment to show mercy and comfort. The fact that Paul says "Father of mercies" implies that we need His mercy. Mercy is closely connected to grace and salvation. Mercy is not giving us what we do deserve. {My friend Jim who has gotten pulled over for speeding 7 times without getting a single ticket. He deserves to pay a penalty. Apparently every officer of the law sees to fit to give him mercy.} Grace is us getting what we do not deserve. {In my imaginary world when I have been pulled over, I hope for mercy and grace; like the officer giving me a high-speed chaperone to my destination... no such luck.} In salvation, we receive grace and mercy because they are tied up in God's character and His plan is salvation. In His saving plan He extends comfort to us. He is (v3) the God of all-encompassing comfort. There is no situation in which His gracious, merciful salvation is not connected. His intent to comfort us is rooted in His commitment to save us, which is inextricable with who He is.

{10} 2 – God Comforts us Because we are **Connected to Him**

Paul's verbiage is intentional. By His decree and covenantal promise, we are connected to God. He is **OUR** Lord. He comforts us because He is in relationship, BY HIS CHOICE, with us. He is committed to us, by His covenant purpose to save us. He has made us His own. He is OUR FATHER through Jesus. {Kids skinning their knees while playing in the neighborhood... what do they do? Run to their parents. Why? Moms and dads love so deeply. The best comfort a child should know is from his/her parent}. So too with us. God intensely loves us as His children. He intends to keep us close to His comfort because He is committed to us. Be sure of this. As a Christian there is nothing that can separate you from His love. He is committed to comfort you (saving, sustaining, and strengthening you!) That is not in doubt because of Christ!

{11} 3 – God Comforts us Because it is part of His **Commission for Us**

Most relevant to this series, is what v4 highlights. God's comfort is intertwined with our commission. We are comforted for the purpose of extending comfort (v4). God's intention in comforting us is first our salvation (v6). And He intends for us to extend the comfort of salvation to others. Note what sort of comfort is in view. It is comfort for ALL of our affliction (not some, but all... every way). The God of ALL comfort (v3) comforts us in ALL of our affliction (v4). No suffering or trial is beyond the grasp of God to comfort and use for His saving purposes. Again this is not mere emotional support, circumstantial ease, or goodness as we define it. It is eternal, indissoluble salvation through Jesus. Dare we say: **victory**

It is eternal, indissoluble salvation through Jesus. Dare we say: **victory** over that which threatens us and tempts us to fear destruction. Our sin, loneliness, death and sickness, finances, pressures, and anxieties – all bow to His saving comfort. ALL affliction. Why? So we can comfort others in ANY of their afflictions. The call of the gospel that we received as gracious comfort is ALSO the power, tool, and way we extend comfort!

And the comfort we receive is *abundant* (v5) provided we understand suffering is abundant. In other words, the more the suffering ramps up, the greater the comforts of God rise to swallow up affliction. Salvation is not a thin-stream, drizzling just enough grace to get us through. It is a rushing torrent, a vast ocean of grace to sustain us far beyond what suffering can threaten. While suffering is real, even abundant, it is not greater than comforting-grace.

Yet suffering and affliction are the normal course of life. Our biggest stutter is: how can God be GOOD and allow such terrible suffering? We might even think that suffering is something a Christian should by right avoid or miss out on. There is heretical teaching that says if you have enough faith you won't suffer. You will have health, wealth, and prosperity. Suffering provides an opportunity to see God's comforts. And God's comforts, says this text, are not a pathway around suffering; God's comfort is the carriage in which we ride straight through the heart of affliction and suffering; just as did OUR LORD Jesus Christ. God's plan is not circumventing, but persevering. Not avoidance but endurance. As we do by His grace we receive comfort in this life that points to eternal comforts. As we endure, with patience, the same sort of trials that Christians through the ages have faced and Jesus himself faced: comfort (true comfort) and salvation is made known. Our afflictions become road signs marking the entranceway to the avenue of God's salvation. Paul reinforces this throughout 2 Cor; in 5:20 {**12**} he says our role is to be "ambassadors of Christ" through who God makes his saving appeal. The Spirit (*the* Comforter) empowers us to patiently endure and persevere in suffering such that the lost might be served. Our lives speak the message that ultimate comfort is not found in life, feelings, experiences, or emotions; but in the saving work of Jesus.

III. APPLICATION – PATIENTLY ENDURE!

So how can we apply this as we seek to love and serve the world? A simple phrase encompassing application might be: *patiently endure*. Wherever you are, whoever God has put you alongside, whatever situations you are confronting – Patiently endure and expect the comfort of God, by the power of the Spirit, to work more deeply than you can accomplish by your efforts. Let me give 3 specific categories of patient endurance for us, as ministers of grace:

{**13**} 1 – *Grant mercy and grace*

As Christians our lives should be most marked by mercy and grace. We have received grace and mercy. God has not treated us as our sins deserve. He did not spare His son but gave Him up for us. We have received grace upon grace upon grace. We have no right or reason to be harsh, critical, angry, and self-righteous in this earth. The church has a bad name in the world because of God's children being self-righteous. We expect the world to live up to our standards. When the world operates in her brokenness, we take to social media, or gather around the water cooler, and blast unbelieving people for their unbelieving views. We act holier than they. We distance ourselves from the broken and hurting and critique them for their poor choices as though sinners can miraculously

“know better” and make godly choices when they are not filled with God’s Spirit. Our message to the world is often, evilly, stay out until you clean up and fit in with our club. How unlike how God has treated us!! Perhaps worse, look at the display we put on for the world – we bite and devour one another... Saints for whom the Saviour died, who we call brother, sister, and should cover in love... we divide and quarrel and make a joke of the grace and mercy we have received. The starting point of loving and serving the world is a humble recognition of the grace and mercy of God toward us in Jesus. We deserve hell. We get heaven. How then can we justify acting like the unmerciful steward without falling in repentance and beseeching the Lord to touch us and fill us with an attitude of gracious, mercy toward others? Who in your life are you holding at a distance or criticizing? Where are you dividing yourself from others? If you see this: turn toward His grace. To love and serve others must start with recognizing the love and servanthood of Jesus toward us. It must make us more gracious and merciful in our actions and attitudes.

2 – Persevere in your own suffering

Loving and serving the world is not a call to strength. Do you see that in this text? It is a call into weakness; to embrace the suffering seasons in which we find ourselves, and to see the ultimate purposes of God. In your suffering, God is working. In her prison cell, Marie Durand had great effect on the hearts and minds of France and all of history. The apostle Paul spent more of his Christian years confined to a prison cell than preaching in metropolitan courtyards. He was afflicted yet he persevered. In His affliction God used Him. Christian, your affliction is not an accident, it is an avenue. If you yield, God will use your suffering for His glory. In your trials, where you have been seeking release or maybe have complained that God isn’t moving fast enough, look up. Endure. Others are watching. As you endure, God is crafting in you a specific sort of compassion that will enable you to comfort others in a unique way – others God will bring to you. Are you willing to suffer such that the soul of another is forever changed? God is able to use you: endure with patience.

3 – Persevere with others in their suffering

In a same way, suffering is not something any of us are meant to go through alone. God has crafted us to be relational. When we suffer, we feel alone. Are you pursuing those in your life who suffer? Or are you avoiding them because it is awkward or creates suffering for you? We have a tendency to avoid “ugly” {starbucks dude, my schedule, his smell}. Why? Because we feel like our “right” is ease. We have enough on our plate; we have other priorities; we have tried and they have resisted; etc. etc. The list of excuses goes on. Christian – those who are lost and are suffering will not respond favorably to one or two or maybe even more tries to extend comfort. It is like the old story of the Lion with a thorn in its paw. As people tried to help, the lion reacted with fear and distrust and roared and swiped. It wasn’t until a mere mouse gently drew near, won the lion’s trust, and removed the thorn that the Lion was helped. At times we face the reaction of lions when we try to extend comfort. But God shuts the mouths of even hungry lions. Who in your life is difficult, snarling even? Maybe they are even the source of your affliction – a boss, coworker, spouse, or child. Draw near in grace, mercy, and kindness to extend comfort. Their beef is not ultimately with you but with God. And as you extend comfort like God has shown you: His glory will be known.

As we close, I want to pray for those who are in the midst of affliction. Perhaps that is in your home, with a friend, or at work. Or maybe you are under the press of physical or financial weakness. God's plan is to use you and your situation. So if that describes you, I want to pray that you'd have the strength of the Spirit's comfort flowing in you – not just for you, but for those God is calling you to reach. (Identify/pray) **Let's pray.**
Our afflictions are avenues for abundant comfort for the lost. 6