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Order Of Worship (Liturgy)

Congregation: **First United Reformed Church**
Oak Lawn, Illinois
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(Sections from the blue Psalter unless otherwise noted):

408 - Great Is Thy Faithfulness

Title: **The God of All Comfort**
Text: [2 Corinthians 1:1-11 \(View\)](#)
Occasion: [Regular Sunday](#)
Topic: [Comfort in a World of Pain](#)

290:1-2,5 - O Lord, My Inmost Heart and Thought

337 (Red) - A Wonderful Savior Is Jesus My Lord

445 - It Is Well with My Soul

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Pastor Ted Gray
 10/03/2021

“The God of All Comfort” 2 Corinthians 1:1-11

Every life begins with tears. Tears were a part of your first moments on earth. And they were a part of mine. The first cry is necessary as the lungs take in oxygen and life outside the womb begins.

However, tears don't just mark the beginning of our lives on earth. Throughout our lives we continue to face suffering. Every life knows its share of sorrow. Every person experiences pain. Suffering, trial, tears – these are all of part of the human experience.

Why is that? Why does God allow people to suffer, to experience pain, tragedy, and tears? Job and his friends struggled with that age-old question. And Job, after losing everything he had, concluded, *“The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away; may the name of the Lord be praised”* (Job 1:21). Job's words are a reminder that God's name is to be praised regardless of the tragedies in our lives.

The disciples also wondered why there is suffering. One day, as they were walking along with Jesus, they came across a man who was born blind. They asked Jesus, *“Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?”* (John 9:2)

Jesus replied, *“Neither this man nor his parents sinned, but this happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life”* (John 9:3). And the Lord proceeded to give sight to his blind eyes. Through that healing we are reminded that we too were blind. We were spiritually blind until God in grace brought conviction of sin and the regenerating power of the Holy Spirit into our lives.

Sometimes God allows suffering just to reveal his glory; to reveal that his strength is indeed made perfect in our weakness. At other times God uses our suffering to draw us closer to him. It is often in the tragedies of our lives that we experience the greatest spiritual growth as we realize our own weakness and lean upon the Lord for his strength.

At still other times we suffer because of the conflict between good and evil, between God and Satan. Perhaps nowhere do we see that more clearly than in the suffering of Job. He was a righteous and godly man. But the devil said the only reason Job was righteous and godly is because the Lord had blessed him with many material blessings. The devil said to the Lord, *“Stretch out your hand and strike everything he has, and he will surely curse you to your face”* (Job 1:11).

The tragedies that came into Job's life were a result of the great spiritual battle that rages all around us. Satan desires to do to us what he did to Job. But in that great battle, he who is in us is much greater than he who is in the world (1 John 4:4). The intercession of Christ is far greater than the accusations of the evil one. As Jesus said to Peter, *“Simon, Simon, behold, Satan demanded to have you, that he might sift you like wheat, but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned again, strengthen your brothers”* (Luke 21:31, 32).

Other times suffering is allowed just to remind us how fragile and brief life really is. In Jesus' day there was a large tower in the town of Siloam. One day that tower fell down and 18 people lost their lives. Jesus warned his disciples of the brevity of life and the great need for repentance and faith. He said to the people, *“Repent or you too will perish”* (Luke 13:5).

Young people, it may seem as though in the prime of life you are indestructible. Yet tragedies happen to remind us that none of us are guaranteed a view of the sunrise tomorrow. All of us, no matter what age we may be, need repentance and faith in Jesus Christ so that we are ready to meet him when the brevity of this life ends.

Also, sometimes suffering is allowed just to remind us that we don't know all the answers to life, nor do we need to. When my wife was a little girl, her sister fell backward off a picnic table. She suffered brain damage and was mentally handicapped for the rest of her life. She needed constant home care and died at the age of 21.

My wife asked her dad, “Daddy, why did God allow this to happen?”

Her dad replied, “I don't know all the reasons but maybe she would have grown up to be a drug addict, a victim of crime, or even worse, a criminal herself. Who is to say that God didn't allow this to happen for her own good, that she would be cared for and loved for 21 years before going to her heavenly home?”

It was a good answer. Deuteronomy 29:29 reminds us, *“The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things revealed belong to us and our children forever, that we may follow all the words of this law.”* That verse reminds us that although we don't know the secret will of God, we know his revealed will. We don't know the reason behind every painful circumstance in our lives, but we do know how God wants us to live. Consequently, we are to live according to God's law and his word, regardless of the circumstances we face.

Some Reasons, Not All

Although we don't know all the reasons why God allows suffering in our lives, here in 2 Corinthians 1:1-11 we see some reasons why God does allow suffering. First, at times, God allows us to suffer so that we can comfort others more effectively. Verse 3 and 4 bring that out clearly. Those verses describe how *“God is the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God.”*

You have heard the saying, “Don't judge another until you have walked a mile in their shoes.” That old adage is pointing out that we really don't know what someone is going through unless we have experienced that same type of trial or sorrow. And if we have experienced trial and sorrow, then we will be able to help others because we will know what it's like to be in their shoes, to be in their situation.

Many years ago, I knew a faithful pastor whose wife left him. She had a wandering eye, her heart was not with her husband or her children. She left him for another man even though he had been a faithful husband and loving father. That pastor can counsel other men who experience the searing pain of infidelity in a way that I cannot. I can give Biblical comfort from the Scriptures. I can have empathy. I can offer prayer. But I cannot offer comfort to the degree that pastor can. The reason why is because in the heartbreak that he experienced when his wife left him, he was comforted by God and could put verse 4 into action: *“(God) comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God.”*

And that is true for every other situation in life too: Cancer, death of a close family member or dear friend, loss of employment, any number of other sufferings. God may allow you to suffer so that you will be equipped to comfort others who are going through that same difficulty with the comfort you received from the Lord.

Another reason God allows his people to suffer, is so that we more deeply appreciate the sufferings of Christ on our behalf. The first part of verse 5 refers to a principal found throughout the Scriptures as it describes how *“the sufferings of Christ flow into our lives.”* Writing to the Philippians, the apostle Paul pointed out, *“For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe in him, but also to suffer for him”* (Phil. 1:29).

1 Peter 2:19-21 points out the same truth: *“For it is commendable if someone bears up under the pain of unjust suffering because they are conscious of God. But how is it to your credit if you receive a beating for doing wrong and endure it? But if you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God. To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps.”*

And in Acts 5:41 we read that as the apostles left the Sanhedrin, after being severely flogged because they had proclaimed the gospel, they rejoiced *“because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the name”* of Jesus.

Our suffering identifies us with him who is called “*a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief*” (Isa 53:3). I know that is not a popular teaching today. Prosperity preachers often quote verses out of context to teach that God never wants you to suffer. He wants you to prosper and have good health, wealth, pleasures of life here on earth now. One of many verses that is often quoted is Jeremiah 29:11, “*For I know the plans I have for you,*” declares the Lord, “*plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.*”

The Lord’s plan to prosper Jeremiah was rooted in the eternal Messiah. The promise was not centered on material prosperity and earthly blessings, which Jeremiah did not have. Rather, his plans and his future focused on Christ and the eternal blessings that come from saving faith in him alone.

But prosperity preachers use texts like Jeremiah 29:11 to teach that if you aren’t prosperous, and if you are not blessed with good health, it’s all because you lack faith. God desires to give you prosperity and good health, but a lack of faith presents you from having it.

We understand, I trust, that the teaching of the prosperity gospel is not only a false gospel, but a cruel distortion of the one true gospel. In truth, God uses our suffering for our good, to shape us and mold us more and more after Jesus, and in the process to make us more aware of the suffering that Jesus underwent on our behalf.

In a former church, I used to visit a man who underwent an exceptionally painful operation. Afterwards he lay in excruciating pain in bed for months. And he would tell me, “As I experience this pain, I can only think of how much Jesus loves me to go through with the great pain inflicted on him.” He would say, “My pain is nothing compared to him who is the man of sorrows, and he experienced those sorrows, even crucifixion and separation from his Father’s love on the cross, out of love for me, as he bore the curse of my sin.” Whatever suffering we endure should remind us of the suffering of Christ on our behalf. And it should remind us of his great love for us, that he would leave the glory of heaven for the stench of a stable and a life of suffering on earth.

A third reason why God allows suffering, as described in these verses, is to make us rely on God and not on ourselves. Verse 8 to 10 speak of this. The apostle writes, “*We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about our hardships we suffered in the province of Asia. We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired even of life. Indeed, in our hearts we felt the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead.*”

The apostle Paul faced tremendous suffering. He faced riots, imprisonments, ridicule, and lashings for his faith; he was in a shipwreck where he despaired of life itself. On top of this he had physical problems: He had poor vision, he was small in stature, and then there was that “*thorn in the flesh*” which he speaks about in chapter 12. He writes how he had prayed – he uses the word “*pleaded*” – that God would take away that thorn.

But God did not answer the prayer the way the apostle had hoped. Instead, God answered the prayer with something better. God gave Paul – and gives us – this promise: “*My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.*” And the apostle Paul found great comfort in that answer. He went on to write in 2 Corinthians 12:9-10: “*Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses so that Christ’s power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.*”

It was through his suffering that the apostle learned to rely on the Lord alone. And the same is true in your life and in mine. It is when we are at our weakest point that we realize most acutely just how much we need the strength, comfort and guidance of our gracious and omnipotent God.

Suffering will often drive the unbeliever further from the Lord, as that person blames God for their difficulties. But suffering will drive the believer to the Lord, as we learn to rely on his strength in the weakness and suffering of our lives. It is then that we realize anew the wonderful truth that his grace is indeed sufficient to handle every thorn of life that we encounter.

We all suffer in many ways. Your life began with crying and with tears. So did mine. Tears are the universal experience of birth. The only alternative is to be stillborn. Some people suffer more than others. Some seem to have a constant cloud over their head. But man is born to trouble, Job 5:7 teaches us, as surely as sparks fly upward from a fire. We all experience trouble. Even those people whose lives seem to be perfect, have underneath the veneer that we all see and sometimes covet, a whole slew of problems, suffering, pain, and tears.

Responding to the God of All Comfort

How are we to respond to “*the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort*”? First, in whatever suffering you may be facing, seek the comfort of Christ. We have already seen in the first part of verse 5 that we share in the sufferings of Christ. But the last part of verse 5 assures us that “*so also through Christ our comfort overflows.*”

There is great comfort in the Christian life. That comfort comes from our relationship to Jesus Christ. When we believe in him, we have the assurance of the forgiveness of our sins. We have the assurance that we will be with him in paradise; and we have the assurance that he will give us the strength to face even the greatest sorrows that afflict us in the pilgrimage of life. And at the brink of death, he promises to be there so that we can echo the words of David, “*Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me*” (Psalm 23:4).

The Heidelberg Catechism addresses those promises beautifully, in the familiar words that most of us know and cherish:

Q 1. *What is your only comfort in life and in death?*

A. That I am not my own, but belong—
body and soul,
in life and in death –
to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ.

He has fully paid for all my sins with his precious blood,
and has delivered me from the tyranny of the devil.
He also watches over me in such a way that not a hair can fall from my head
without the will of my Father in heaven;
in fact, all things must work together for my salvation.

Because I belong to him,
Christ, by his Holy Spirit,
also assures me of eternal life
and makes me wholeheartedly willing and ready
from now on to live for him.

The only true comfort in this life is found through saving faith in Christ alone. All the allurements and attractions of this world, with their calls of comfort and pleasure, fall short. They all disappoint and leave those ensnared by them empty and frustrated. But through saving faith in Christ alone we have true comfort, in this life and eternally.

A second response to the Father of compassion and God of all comfort, as you face the various sufferings of life, is to take hold of God's promise to see you through – to deliver you through the trouble you face. Verse 10 declares a truth echoed by many Scriptures. The apostle writes, *“He (God) has delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us. On him we have set our hope that he will continue to deliver us.”*

God may allow you to be tried and to suffer, but God will always set the limit, just as he did with Job. Do you remember how each time that Satan came before the Lord and asked to bring suffering into Job's life, God set the limit?

In Job 1:12, when Satan wanted to tempt Job to curse God, the Lord allowed the testing of Job's faith. He said to the evil one, *“Very well, then, everything he has is in your hands, but on the man himself do not lay a finger.”*

When Job refused to curse God – even after losing everything, even the lives of his children – Satan returned to the Lord and said, *“Stretch out your hand and strike his flesh and bones, and he will surely curse you to your face”* (Job 2:5).

The Lord said to Satan, “Very well, then, he is in your hands; but you must spare his life” (Job 2:6).

Satan brought the sorrow, but the Lord always set the limit. And it is no different in the trials and temptations that we face in our lives. The Lord will always set the limit for both our trials and temptations. 1 Corinthians 10:13 gives us this promise: *“No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it.”*

Whether you face temptation or trial, no matter how hard your circumstances may be, you can be assured that God will set the limit. You might be at the place Paul describes in verse 8, *“under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure.”* But the Lord may allow you to be in that place so that you realize the truth of verse 9 where Paul writes, *“but this happened that we might not rely on ourselves, but on God who raises the dead.”* The Lord's strength is perfect in our weakness and his grace is sufficient to strengthen us as he delivers us through the trials, afflictions and difficulties of life.

A third response to the various sufferings of our lives is there in the last part of verse 10 and verse 11, as it speaks about prayer. The apostle writes: *“On him (God) we have set our hope that he will continue to deliver us, as you help us by your prayers. Then many will give thanks on our behalf for the gracious favor granted us in answer to the prayers of many.”*

No wonder in all his letters the apostle pleads, *“Pray for us...” “Keep praying for all the believers – all the saints – all the time.”* Prayer is the greatest power that we have here on earth. Prayer links us to the power of our Almighty God. It is in answer to prayer that we are given the strength to bear up under the many trials, temptations and difficulties of our lives. It is through prayer that we find God’s grace to be more than sufficient for the many varied thorns of life.

Yet, isn’t it true that most of us spend far more time on the Internet, or in front of the TV, than we do in prayer? The vain things of a fallen world draw us from the blessings of a full prayer life, and it is to our detriment. The familiar hymn is such an accurate description of so many of us:

Oh, what peace we often forfeit
 Oh, what needless pain we bear
 All because we do not carry
 Everything to God in prayer.

—

We all began life with tears. But birth is just the beginning of pain. Because we are sinners, living in a sin-saturated world, suffering, pain and sorrow is inevitable. Many of you have faced – and are now still facing – great sorrow, tragedy, and pain. (As a congregation we grieve for those with Covid and other ailments, and it is painful to be unable to meet together).

We don't always know the answer. *“The secret things belong to the Lord our God,”* Deuteronomy 29:29 reminds us, *“but the things revealed belong to us and our children forever, that we may follow all the words of this law.”*

Although we don't always know the reason for tragedy, sorrow and heartbreak we do know that it is the result of sin. It is a result of the fall. It is just as the Lord declared to Adam, *“Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you...”* (Gen. 3:17b, 18a). Yet we find that the curse of our sin is borne by Christ. Through saving faith in him alone there is forgiveness, reconciliation with our triune God, and eternal life. And it is in those truths that we find our eternal comfort.

Do you have that assurance? By God’s grace do you have saving faith in Christ alone? If so, then be assured that when you are tried and when you suffer, God will always be faithful. He will provide a way for us to withstand even the hardest trials and temptations of life, as we rest in his strength and his power, and as we realize anew that his grace is truly sufficient for every thorn. Amen.

bulletin outline:

“Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God.” - 2 Corinthians 1:3,4

“The God of All Comfort”

2 Corinthians 1:1-11

- I. The Lord allows His people to suffer at times for many reasons, some known and others unknown (Deuteronomy 29:29; John 9:1-3). In this passage we see that sometimes the Lord allows us to suffer so:
 - 1) We can comfort others as we have been comforted (3, 4)

 - 2) We focus on the sufferings of Christ (5a; 1 Peter 2:19-24)

 - 3) We rely, not on our strength, but God’s (8-10; 2 Cor. 12:7-10)

- II. The applications:
 - 1) In suffering, seek the comfort of Christ (5b)

 - 2) Take hold of God’s promise to see you through difficulties (10)

 - 3) Pray for others as well as yourself (11)

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