

Our Comfort in Christ

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I do not have a traditional exposition for you this evening. I just want to share some Scriptures tonight for a broad range of comfort, and it's my pastoral sense that this is a timely detour from our exposition in Matthew that we can return to next week if the Lord wills. It is a time of very deep adversity for many in our circles, not simply within the body of Truth Community Church, but with friends in like-minded churches, within family circles, and these things have been on my mind, and the longer I go in ministry and the more things like this I see, I just realize my utter weakness and impotence to do anything of consequence to help people in those circumstances. I can't heal the sick. I can't restore sight to those who are losing it. I can't raise the dead. I can't help the lame to walk. All of those powers would come in handy just about now and that's not even to mention the spiritual afflictions and broken relationships and heart longings after the salvation of people that we care about and push us away in different manners. So I can't do any of those things. I can't change the human heart. I can't fix relationships. I can't fix marriages. But there is something that I can do and I can actually give you something better than all of those things, I can give you full comfort in a great Christ.

Tonight's message is titled, "Our Comfort in Christ," and that's what I want to point you to here this evening. Our comfort in Christ, and it's my sense that tonight the Good Shepherd would have us lie down in green pastures of his kindness. It's my perception that the Good Shepherd would refresh us with quiet waters of his grace, and I just want to share three elements of our comfort in Christ tonight that are taken from different portions of Scripture that I don't intend to take very long, and so we'll just take this as the Lord gives it to us and trust the Holy Spirit to genuinely help us and encourage us tonight in the various adversities that so many of us are going through, and if not us, the people that we love are going through.

First of all, I want to tell you and remind you that there is rest in the adversity. This is part of our comfort in Christ is that when deep, prolonged, chronic adversity comes to us, there is rest in the adversity, even if the circumstances do not change. Scripture often, Jesus Christ himself often, points to Christ himself as the answer to the great needs that we encounter in this life and it's so much different, beloved, than what our natural affections and inclinations cause us to long for; we just want a quick dismissal of the physical affliction so we can get back onto, you know, whatever it is that we want to do. Entire systems of religion are based upon promising people and taking advantage of vulnerable people in their adversity, making them promises of earthly, external, tangible

relief that they have no power to deliver either. It's not just that I can't heal the sick or restore sight to the blind or raise the dead, none of them can either but they pretend to in order to take advantage of vulnerable people who are desperate for any kind of relief from the affliction that they are suffering or their dearest loved ones are suffering. That is not the approach of the Bible. The Bible points to Jesus Christ himself as the answer to great need and if you'll turn to a familiar passage in Matthew chapter 11, which I've expounded at length in different places at different times, including here, but to bypass the person of Christ in the search of transitory earthly relief that is destined to pass away eventually anyway, is to miss the entire point of the Bible.

Jesus, speaking to a broad audience here, to, you could say, to saved and unsaved alike, if we were to put this current dispensation, interpret it through the lens of this current dispensation, Jesus says,

28 Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. 29 Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. 30 For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.

Somewhere in the Proverbs it says that a man's sickness his spirit can endure, but who can endure a broken heart? And when we are heavy-laden, it is a wonderful rest to know that Jesus Christ, the Lord of creation, the Savior of the world, receives the bruised and the broken who don't know what to do, who have nowhere else to turn, who can't fix anything. Often in those conditions, you know, we all know that when people are down and out, they are easily and quickly despised by those who are in better states. It's such a wonderful rest and such a wonderful thing to know that Jesus Christ receives those who have nothing to offer to him, nothing to offer to others, who simply come with their broken lives, their burdened hearts, and who do not know what to do, and this is just such a blessed aspect of our blessed Lord to know that he receives us in kindness. Jesus Christ does not scold you when you come to him with your burdens. He will comfort you. He will help you. That is the nature of the Good Shepherd that we know and serve.

So I asked this question a few months ago, I preached a message, "What if Suffering is a Gift?" I'm not going to repeat that here. I couldn't repeat it here because I don't remember the points as I stand here. But consider this, beloved, what if your adversity could actually just simply be something that has turned to a means to know Christ better, to know him better in this sense of the one who receives the weary, who receives the heavy laden, the one who actually gives and imparts rest to the soul? After all, you know, if you're a man or a woman of sorrow these days, isn't it pertinent to the discussion? Is it not pertinent to the occasion to remember that Jesus Christ was a man of sorrows? Jesus Christ was acquainted with grief? I love that about him. I find comfort in that. And beloved, whatever else your adversity does to you, don't let it turn you away from Christ in bitterness, in resentment that he doesn't give you immediate relief. Turn your attention to other aspects of who he is, of the wonder of his great and gracious person.

Turn over to the book of Hebrews chapter 4 with me. Hebrews chapter 4. In Hebrews chapter 4, verse 14, we see a reinforcement of this theme. The inspired writer expresses the same thought about the rest that is available in Christ and how he is approachable in our affliction and in our weakness. He expresses the exact same theme, Hebrews chapter 4 verse 14,

14 Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. 15 For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. 16 Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

We do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with us. Stated positively, we have a high priest who does sympathize with us in our weaknesses, who does know what it's like to walk on this sod and to be rejected by men, to suffer thirst and hunger and pain, and who wept at the tomb of Lazarus, and who wept at other times as he looked on the spiritual affliction and the rejection and rebellion of the city of Jerusalem. He said, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, how many times I wanted to spread my wings over you and you would not have it." Why was he weeping? Why his response like that to Jerusalem? It's because he has a great heart of compassion, a far greater heart of compassion than any man, woman, or child that's ever walked on the face of the earth.

He is the highest exemplar of compassion. It's embedded in his very nature to be like that and so it's out of his compassion, out of his mercy, out of his grace that he saved us in the first place, and, beloved, turn to Romans chapter 8 along these lines as well. If Scripture makes the argument, if Christ did this for us, if he went to the cross and redeemed us with his shed blood and has covered us with his own righteousness because of his love for sinners like us and he's already done the greater thing, and he had mercy on us in our sins, then how much more will he have mercy and grace and compassion upon us now that we are children of God? Romans chapter 8 verse 31, Paul says,

31 What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? 32 He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? ... 35 Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword?

That pretty much covers a lot of affliction and adversity, doesn't it? The obvious implication being that in the midst of that, the love of Christ is right there with us, it is joined to us in a way that can never be separated from us. So that he says in verse 38,

38 ... I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, 39 nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Beloved, this love, this grace, this sympathy of which Scripture speaks, all of that informs our perspective when Christ says, "Come to me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." What a blessed assurance indeed that we have a sympathetic Savior and, beloved, that mercy and grace is sure to you that are in Christ; it is a promise from Christ and he never breaks his promise. And what I want you to see, beloved, is that we're talking about more than a theological doctrine here, we're talking about the very refuge and rest of your soul in the midst of your adversity.

Now I realize, and I want to say this, I usually don't say things I don't want to say when I'm in the pulpit, but I really want to say this here. There are certain circles, certain kinds of Christians where I myself would not begin to share with anyone the travails and troubles of my soul, because they're not received with sympathy even in a Christian environment, because the projection that is given is that everybody has everything under control. Everything is great with everybody, and if it's not great with you, then it's obviously because of some spiritual defect in you, because after all it's great with all of the rest of us, and there is a condescension that is on the very surface of things and you don't feel the liberty and you keep your mouth quiet in the presence of such people because you know that it won't be received sympathetically. Well, whatever we think about everybody that we could think of that has that impact on us, what I want you to see here tonight is that Christ himself is not like that. Christ himself receives us sympathetically, in grace, in mercy. He bids you to come and promises rest for your soul if you do and so whatever perhaps well-intentioned Christians who get sucked into the environment in which they exist, whatever image they may project, don't project that onto Christ, because with Christ we have something else, with Christ we have a Savior that knows how to give us rest in our adversity, and our rest is himself. God himself, Christ himself, is the rest that we need as we come to know him in the fullness of his great and glorious character.

So there is rest in the adversity. Now secondly, there is purpose to the adversity as well. There is purpose to the adversity. It is sad to live in a fallen world. It is difficult to live in a fallen world. Sooner or later all of us will, unless the Lord comes first, all of us will find the weakness of our flesh overtaking us and we will exit this earthly life. And that's true for everyone. It's appointed for men to die once and after this comes judgment. That's true for everyone. Christians don't avoid this. Charismatic faith healers don't avoid this and it's one of the most obvious refutations of their whole system of philosophy. You ever wonder why charismatic faith healers sometimes wear glasses? If they can heal, why don't they heal their own eyesight so that they don't have to wear contacts or glasses? Why do they call doctors when they get cancer? You know, I mean, these things are self-refuting. My greater point here is that in this fallen world, the shadows fall onto Christians as well. Financial reversal comes. Chronic illness comes. Broken relationships come and come, sometimes it seems. Illness, death, accidents, so called. This all falls upon all of us. Not every Christian has an outstanding marriage. And the point for this evening that I'm laboring to make, I guess, is that we cannot simply wish away the hardship. It is real and it hurts. It's okay to acknowledge that. I encourage you to be discerning in who you share your hurts with and not to just, you know, promiscuously

share them with everybody that you encounter; sooner or later, pretty quickly that will boomerang against you.

But we can't wish it away. We can't talk it away. And I would also just say the purpose of our adversities is not to simply put ourselves on display in the hardship and have everyone circle around us and our affliction and make ourselves the center of attention as a result of our affliction. That has its own difficulties and, you know, I realize you can produce popular YouTube videos if you do that with yourself and show yourself crying or whatever, but that's not a godly response to affliction. But there is a godly response, there is a godly aspect to affliction that we need to consider and it's this, that the hurricane of affliction may lash against your flickering faith, and the candle of your faith may be about to be blown out by the heavy winds of affliction that come alongside you, and the question is, is there an anchor to hold you through the storm? Is there something that can keep the light burning? Is there a solid place to stand when you are in the middle of the quicksand? Is there a refuge? Is there a fortress to flee to in the midst of the attacking enemy? Well, of course there is but just to say it one more time, beloved, it is not the promise of earthly relief, because the earthly relief may not come, but there is a greater transcendent purpose.

If you would turn to 2 Corinthians chapter 4, I often point people to this passage beginning in verse 16. 2 Corinthians chapter 4 verse 16, the Apostle Paul says,

16 ... we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. 17 For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, 18 as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.

Beloved, here is the purpose, in some ways the ultimate purpose of your adversity as a Christian. I understand deeply from prior personal experience how the question "why" so easily comes from our human hearts. Why do I have this medical condition? Why did this happen to my loved one? Why did this person turn against me? Why? Why? Why? I get that and, you know, in an earthly sense, you know, those "why" questions generally don't have answers but what we need to see and what we need to grow in, perhaps, is that God sends to us transitory trials, or better stated, trials in this transitory life, he sends us trials in this transitory life to accomplish eternal goals. He rewards his children in glory for their perseverance through these afflictions below, and if we could only pull back the veil for a moment to see it, all of this would become much easier for us to endure, but we are to take this promise and believe God on the sheer fact that he says it without having any exposure to the reward before we receive it. Today's trials that you are going through, my Christian friend, are preparing you for an incalculable reward in heaven. That's the way that God does it. He tests us in this life with the preordained purpose of rewarding us in the life to come and Scripture makes this point repeatedly. The Apostle Paul in Romans 8 verse 18 says,

18 ... I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.

And so there is a purpose in the affliction that we do not have the sight or the mind or the understanding to begin to grasp and comprehend. It was Romans 8:18, if you didn't get it in your notes.

God is bringing us through afflictions and adversities and trials and troubles and sorrows in this life, but not for arbitrary reasons. We don't know the reasons, we don't see or understand the ultimate outcome, but Scripture has shone enough light on the path ahead for us to find purpose in the adversity. We can say I don't know why this is happening from an earthly perspective, but I know, and I've said this many, many times, I know that I have the life that God has given to me because God numbers the hairs on my head, he knows when a sparrow falls, and I can reason from that that he has established all the details of my life in a way that nothing has missed his attention. He has structured this for my good and while I may not be able to trace the earthly causation that led from point A to the point in which I am now standing, I have all I need in Scripture to help me see that there is an appointed outcome to my adversities. There is a purpose in my adversity that God intends for great incalculable good to bless me and to bestow glory on me throughout all of eternity, and when I am in that eternal glory and I have been glorified in the Lord Jesus Christ, there is no possible way that I will look back with regret on the adversity of this earth which was the very vehicle that God used to prepare me for that glory to come.

Let that sink in, beloved. These are high and lofty truths that we are contemplating tonight from God's word, and yet these are the very things that fuel our perseverance and give us hope and confidence as we go through adversities that we do not understand and that we see no possible relief on the horizon coming to us. Those are the hardest kind. Those are the hardest kind. If you're facing surgery, for example, people get nervous before surgery, and that's okay, as far as I'm concerned, but you know that on the other side of the surgery, there's relief that's going to come. It's not the same challenge, it's not the same spiritual burden to having conditions, let's say, where you don't know if there's ever going to be any relief from them in this life, that you have no promise that the prodigal son is ever going to come back on the path home, you have no promise that that dear friend will come to Christ, that that wayward child will come to Christ. You don't know those things. There is no promise of those things and so we must have then, we must have something that we can grab hold of for our souls that can enable us to have a perspective that enables us to live with it. Christ doesn't give us the promise of the things we want in this earthly life. Instead, he comforts us with the promise of his eternal purpose. This all comes out great and glorious in the end and so, as it were, we stretch our hand through the veil of time and into eternity, and we bring back a small portion of that blessing and let it rest and reside in our heart. "There's purpose here. I just don't see it. I don't know the outcome, but I have the promise that it will be far greater than anything that I could conceive of in this life."

And so we have rest in Christ in our adversity, we have an eternal purpose that we know in our adversity, thirdly and finally for tonight, there is protection in the adversity. There is protection in the adversity. What I mean by that is there is protection in the midst of the adversity. God has measured your trials to you, having weighed them in his scale, on his scale, so that they would not possibly overflow into something that is beyond what he gives you the grace and strength to handle. Period. Full stop. And before I turn to Scripture on this, I just want to say this. When I see a Christian going through great affliction that would be crushing to me, and I see them going through and persevering through it, I know that I'm looking upon a person of great faith, even if they don't feel that way, even if they don't sense it, because what we read in 1 Corinthians 10:13, 1 Corinthians 10:13 is this,

13 No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it.

If you see somebody with great affliction, the prevailing attitude in many Christian circles is they don't have any faith or they wouldn't be having that affliction. Beloved, the truth of the matter is the exact opposite. It is the exact reversal of that. It is because they have such pressing affliction that shows the depth of the faith because God would not bestow such difficulties upon them if it was beyond their ability. You see someone living a long life of ease, perhaps flourishing in Christian ministry and marveled at by the conference crowds, I just want you to know that you should not assume that that's a man of great faith that you're looking at because God tests his servants with trials and if a man has not received many trials from God, maybe it's because he doesn't have such a great ability to deal with them. Whereas, you see, you know, a lonely Christian woman walking the path of faith on her own without much support, maybe with a hostile spouse or something like that, no earthly thing about her to attract Christian attention and Christian applause as it's commonly understood in the megachurches, but you need to view things differently and see with spiritual eyes and say, "Perhaps I'm looking at a woman of great faith and even she herself doesn't know it."

The point applied personally, beloved, is that God protects you in your trials. Whatever we think about others, and we don't need to get into assessing all of those things with any kind of final clarity, I just want you to have that perspective in it. Now I want to bring it home to your heart. Somehow, in his wisdom, even if it seems like far more than you can bear, God has been certain in his providence, certain in his wisdom, that whatever affliction has come to you is not beyond your ability. We have the indwelling Holy Spirit. We have the Scriptures that make us sufficient for all things. But even beyond all of that, even beyond all of that, we have a wise, loving God concerned for our good who has looked upon us by name, in person, and says, "This will be good for you in the long run. This is not more than you can handle. I can sustain you and I will sustain you through this. There is a way for you to endure it." And so before the trial ever came, God had already determined that it was not beyond your capacity to endure it and so, beloved, as difficult as your trials are and may be, and nothing, let me just say this in a short

parenthesis here, nothing I'm saying this evening is diminishing at all the heart-wrenching nature of the trials that you are going through, nothing diminishes that. It presupposes it. Everything I'm saying presupposes that it's more difficult than you ever thought life could be. But as difficult as those trials are, beloved, you have it on the authority of God's word that those trials cannot ultimately harm you. They cannot ultimately harm you. That's a bold statement, I know. I'm conscious of the grave threats and unbearable loss that many have recently suffered when I say it, believe me. But I'm simply telling you the plain teaching of the word of God. I'm laying before you nothing less than the promises of God to his own people.

If you would, turn to 1 Peter chapter 1. 1 Peter chapter 1, just at the end of verse 2 for fun and edification. At the end of verse 2, 1 Peter chapter 1, we read,

2 ... May grace and peace be multiplied to you.

And then we read this in verse 3,

3 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead,

Now notice, he alludes to the purpose that we were just talking about in the prior point, the prior thing, "to an inheritance," he has caused you to be born again to a living hope,

4 to an inheritance [to an eternal purpose] that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you,

This is written broadly to all Christians, that we have this inheritance waiting for us. And then he goes on and says in verse 5 lest there be some fear that we might not attain to it, that we might not reach it in the end because of the afflictions and the difficulties Peter wrote to, people suffering greatly who were in the middle of grave battles of their own, and he says there is this eternal purpose in your adversity that you will most certainly obtain to, and in the meantime, verse 5,

5 who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.

By God's power, you are being guarded, my Christian friend. He is guarding you actively through the operation of the Spirit-given faith in your soul so that you will certainly reach to and obtain the salvation that will be revealed to you in the last time.

Peter points us to the glory that we were just considering, but he goes further. Think about it this way. Think that you're standing at the beginning of a path and, you know, it winds down through narrow valleys and precipitous falls and there's a lot of danger there and you look and you see the natural beauty of the place that you want to go to, but there's a dangerous path to walk through beforehand. You say, "Boy, I'd like to be there,

but this is a dangerous path that intervenes." That's a picture of us looking to the glories of heaven and saying, "But there's all of this affliction between me and the goal." And the point of what Peter is saying is that God not only has appointed the purpose of the eternal glory, but that he will safely guard us, lead us, guide us, and keep us, Christ as our Good Shepherd, leading us through the valley of the shadow of death so particularly, so personally, so greatly, that we know that we will pass through it safely in the end and we will reach that destination that he has appointed for us without fail so that in Psalm 23, in the language of Psalm 23 to which I was alluding, we can step back and say, "Well surely then, if God is protecting me, if the Good Shepherd is leading me, then surely goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever."

Beloved, that is your protection in the adversity. The protection is not the absence of adversity. That is not the protection at all. It's a promise of adversity, frankly. Scripture says it is through many tribulations that we must enter the kingdom of heaven, Acts chapter 14. The promise is something better. The promise is Christ with us, the hope of glory. "I fear no evil, for you are with me," the psalmist says, so that we conclude, based on the presence of Christ with us, this Christ who promises rest, who promises sympathy, who gives us protection, because he is with us we can say with serenity and confidence, "Surely goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever."

Beloved, do you see how many times we see in Scripture the reality of adversity, the promise and the purpose of eternal glory, and yet this promise of God's protection being with us along the way. The wisdom of your Savior, the power of your Lord, the love of your Good Shepherd all mean that the outcome is assured. Paul says in Philippians 1 verse 6,

6 ... I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.

If God has started a work in you, if you have been born again by the Spirit of God, God is working out eternal purposes for you that are hidden from your sight and perception but revealed clearly in the word of God that give you all of the sense of rest, purpose, and protection you need even if the adversity, the cloud of adversity, does not lift in the foreseeable future. And so, beloved, there is full comfort in a great Christ for you in your sorrow. You have rest in him now. He purposes glory for you in the future and he will be by your side, and he is by your side, now and until you arrive at his side in heaven. May God give you the full comfort his word describes in our great Christ.

Let's pray together.

Precious Lord, take our hands lead us on, help us to stand. We feel the weight of affliction, it presses upon us, our spiritual enemies call us to doubt and distrust you and for what alternative they never quite get around to telling us but, Lord, you are our Good Shepherd. Help each one, under the sound of my voice now and in days to come, to know

that there is no need to fear evil, no need to fear affliction, for you are with us, your rod and your staff, they comfort us. You protect us, you drive away our enemies, and in due time you bring the relief for which our souls long. While we wait for the outward manifestation of that promise, grant us the grace in our inner man that we might, dear Lord, that we might not lose heart in our afflictions, but rather look to the things that are unseen and eternal and know that you will most certainly turn all of this to our good in the end. May it be true for each one, as we've prayed in Jesus' name. Amen.

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