

Comforting by Walking Alongside

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LEE’S SUMMIT, Mo.—Many preachers espouse a type of prosperity gospel, promising physical health and prosperity by a process of obedience combined with a “naming and claiming” promise of blessings. In essence it teaches that if we obey God, we will be blessed financially.

Focusing on material prosperity

The website “The Gospel Coalition” makes the following observation.

“In his book *Spreading the Flame* (Zondervan, 1992), Edward Pousson stated the prosperity view on the application of the Abrahamic covenant: ‘Christians are Abraham’s spiritual children and heirs to the blessings of faith . . . This Abrahamic inheritance is unpacked primarily in terms of material entitlements.’

“In other words, the prosperity gospel teaches that the primary purpose of the Abrahamic covenant was for God to bless Abraham materially. Since believers are now Abraham’s spiritual children, we have inherited these financial blessings.

“As Kenneth Copeland wrote in his 1974 book *The Laws of Prosperity*, ‘Since God’s covenant has been established and prosperity is a provision of this covenant, you need to realize that prosperity belongs to you now!’ ”

Ignoring the tribulations

The article goes on to state that Galatians 3:14 is often used as a proof text, which in part says “that the blessing of Abraham might come upon the Gentiles in Christ Jesus,” while failing to grasp the rest of the verse that defines the blessing as “the promise of the Spirit through faith.”

The preachers who promote the prosperity gospel also ignore the promise of Jesus in John 16:33: “In the world you will have tribulation.”

If we are looking for scriptural promises, that one has been proven true for 2,100 years.

Encouraging the brethren

Paul wrote to the Thessalonians about this.

1 Thessalonians 3:2-4—“We sent Timothy, who is our brother and co-worker in God’s service in spreading the gospel of Christ, to strengthen and encour-

age you in your faith, so that no one would be unsettled by these trials. For you know quite well that we are destined for them. In fact, when we were with you, we kept telling you that we would be persecuted. And it turned out that way, as you well know.”

Trials in Corinth

Paul wrote 2 Corinthians during a time of great personal trial to the point that he and his companions were despairing of life (2 Corinthians 1:8-10). He made repeated references in this letter to the trials they had faced.

- 2 Corinthians 4:7-12
- 2 Corinthians 4:16–5:1
- 2 Corinthians 6:3-10
- 2 Corinthians 7:4-7
- 2 Corinthians 12:7-9

While we do not know what those trials were, the letter does offer some encouragement on dealing with our tribulations, and also gives three reasons of the hundreds of possible reasons for our suffering.

Opportunity to encourage

In the midst of his trials, Paul does not dwell unduly on his sufferings even though those sufferings are evidently severe. Instead he uses those sufferings as a springboard to encourage the Corinthians.

2 Corinthians 5:1-5 is an example of that.

2 Corinthians 5:1-5—“For we know that if the tent that is our earthly home is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. For in this tent we groan, longing to put on our heavenly dwelling, if indeed by putting it on we may not be found naked. For while we are still in this tent, we groan, being burdened—not that we would be unclothed, but that we would be further clothed, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life. He who has prepared us for this very thing is God, who has given us the Spirit as a guarantee” (English Standard Version).

Three helpful principles

In the first chapter of this letter, he tells us about three things we can learn from our suffering. Notice the three “that” statements from verses 4, 9 and 11.

- Verse 4: We suffer “that we may be able to comfort those who are in any trouble with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.”

If we have suffered through a trial, we are better equipped to comfort others who face similar trials.

- Verse 9: We suffer “that we should not trust in ourselves but in God who raises the dead.”

Our trials can sometimes seem unbearable, and it is in those times that we learn of our own insufficiencies and our need for our God of all comfort and deliverance, even when all earthly hope is lost.

■ Verse 11: We suffer “that thanks may be given by many persons on our behalf for the gift granted us through many.”

Suffering brings us together in unity of prayer and compassion.

Importance of comfort

Though trials and tribulations are an unpleasant part of life, they are to be expected, they are promised, and they will come for many inscrutable reasons.

But there is an encouraging word that Paul uses several times in 2 Corinthians. In Greek it is *parakaleo*, translated “comfort” in our English Bibles. It’s a word derived from the Greek *para* (“alongside”) and *kaleo* (“called”).

Think of that word picture. It shows us what our role should be in this world of suffering.

We’re called to walk alongside those in trouble. That’s an entirely different calling from that promised by the health-and-wealth preachers of our day, but it is one that is sorely in a world thirsty for compassion.