

LifeWay Explore the Bible Series for August 1: Relationships: The integrity factor

July 20, 2010

The Corinthians readily accept the gospel message from their founding pastor Paul. 1 and 2 Corinthians reveal what happens after evangelism.

These letters are Paul's attempts to help the Corinthian Christians mature as believers. Although we know his relationship with them was frayed, Paul was a man of integrity. He did not hold a grudge against them, instead he longed for them to have the comfort he experienced in Christ.

This lesson is about how Paul lived with integrity in the midst of difficult circumstances. Through this lesson, adults are encouraged to stand firm in the face of difficulty and live with integrity.

Paul faced significant trouble because of the gospel. We know from other passages of Scripture that Paul was falsely accused, imprisoned, shipwrecked, chased out of town, hungry and at least once was nearly stoned.

In this passage, he does not explain exactly what kind of hardship he is facing. The NIV uses the word "trouble" to describe his suffering, elsewhere in his writing Paul uses this word to "mean external distress and inner torment" (2 Corinthians 1:4). It is possible he is dealing with both internal conflict and external trials.

Although, we cannot be sure what kind of suffering he is referring to, we

can deduce his suffering is severe. In fact, it is so severe that at one point, he believes death is imminent. This passage reveals what Paul has learned from all this hardship.

Surely, the most difficult lesson Paul learned was that serving God sometimes leads to suffering. Most of us secretly believe our service to God will prosper us in some way, but as Paul finds out, sometimes just the opposite is true. Following God actually can lead to suffering. Paul's suffering is a result of his response to God's leading in life. Yet he chooses to continue to follow Christ.

Paul also now is certain that all comfort comes from God. He begins this passage by praising the "God of all comfort ..." (2 Corinthians 1:3). God is the very source of our strength and comfort. When we think of comfort, we often envision receiving emotional relief or freedom from the pain and anxiety we feel due to difficult circumstances. While it is true that sometimes God relieves our pain by removing the affliction, more often God comforts us by giving us the ability to endure.

As David Garland points out, "God's comfort strengthens weak knees and sustains sagging spirits so that one faces the troubles of life with unbending resolve and unending assurance." God gave Paul the courage to continue spreading the gospel although he knew it might lead to suffering. If we learn to lean on him, Christ also will give us the resolve to face difficult times.

Paul discovered the trouble he faced deepened his faith. In Asia, Paul experienced so much difficulty he expected to die, but through that experience, instead of giving up, Paul learned to rely on the Lord even more. Thankfully, the Spirit of Christ filled Paul's heart and eased his burden. So much so, the suffering not only became bearable, but it also became fuel for Paul's life.

We see examples of this kind of transformation today, like a woman who loses a spouse and then goes on to lead grief support groups for other widows. Christ has the power to use our suffering for good and to turn pain into purpose.

Paul understood that God comforted him so he could comfort others. Paul wrote, “For just as the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives, so also through Christ our comfort overflows” (2 Corinthians 1:5). The more Paul suffered for Christ, the more God gave him a surplus of comfort. He then passed that surplus on to others.

In the Christian community, we are blessed to have people to share in our suffering. In his book *Church: Why Bother*, Philip Yancey recounts the story of a man who began traveling around to visit terminally ill children in hospital wards. He wanted to cheer them up and maybe make them laugh a little. He began wearing a red rubber nose and slowly added makeup and wing tipped shoes until he finally had a complete clown costume.

In the beginning, he admits that it was hard to face these children who were hurting. Then, he started traveling with popcorn. When a child began to cry, he wiped their tears with the popcorn and then, pops it into his mouth. Together, they sat around and ate tears.

Like this man, Paul understood what it means to eat another person’s tears, to share in their suffering.

Although Paul and the Corinthians had a tumultuous relationship, Paul never gave up on them. He continued to write to them and encourage them. And despite his suffering, he continued to serve the Lord.

Paul wrote, “For we are to God the aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing” (2 Corinthians 2:15). This image reminds us that wherever we go, we take Christ with us. Like Paul, may we be willing to take Christ’s presence into the dark places in this world, the

places of suffering.