

Good morning. I wonder if I'm the only one in here who's kind of praying Natalee Warren would go into labor immediately just so I could see John throw his guitar and start running out of here. I think that would be an epic, wonderful, beautiful moment. John is a runner, so he could run fast. I've seen him run. It's crafty.

My name is Andrew Dealy. I'm a pastoral intern here. I know a number of you in this room probably have no clue who I am, and that's okay. I thought I should probably share a little bit about myself before we jump into this. Prior to getting connected into The Village Church, my wife and I worked with a ministry called Campus Crusade for Christ. It's now called Cru, which is a whole lot easier to say. My wife still works with Cru. I actually transitioned off of staff with them.

When we worked with them, we would work on different college campuses, helping build spiritual movements on those campuses. Particularly, when we first got married we worked at Baylor, which is where I did my undergrad. Then we spent a couple of years in Thailand reaching students over there for the gospel, which was wonderful. Thailand is a phenomenal country. You should go. It's a great place to vacation and just meet people. If you can speak the Thai language it's helpful.

We transitioned back, but during that time in Thailand, we started tracking with The Village Church, particularly my wife did. She started podcasting and listening about what was going on here. God really moved in our hearts, and we had the desire to be part of what was going on. Up to that point in our marriage we had not been at a church home yet that really felt like home for both of us. Whatever church we'd go to, one of us would really like it, and the other one would kind of struggle and submit and sacrifice for the other person.

We were hoping, coming to The Village Church, we'd find a place where we both felt we would be useful, we would connect with people, we could serve, and so on and so forth. When we came back from Thailand, we asked our bosses if they would let us move into the Dallas area and continue to work with Cru and be a part of what was going on here, and they said, "Yes."

So that's how we landed here, and it has been sweet for us. We checked out the Flower Mound Campus. Then we came to the Denton Campus, and it was a no-brainer to us. Denton is a whole lot cooler. We'll keep that in this room. Denton is just special. It has its own thing. Nothing against the Flower Mound

Campus. It's great. But we came here and there was just something unique about Denton that really drew us into the area.

Since then, we've had two kiddos. Myla, who's 4 years old, has ridiculously long, blond ringlets that go down her back. She'll usually be running around somewhere in the back dancing, because that's what she does. She dances like crazy, and she loves it. My little boy is almost 16 months old, and he's teething, so he just hates all of life. He's drooling and cranky most of the time, but he's a sweet little boy.

Since I've been in Denton (I'm just kind of filling you all in on what I've done here in Denton) I got my master's in counseling from Texas Woman's University. They do let men go there. I'm evidence. It was quite the experience. I loved it. I loved the program. At one point I was in group therapy with 12 women. It was wonderful. It was educational. In counseling we're supposed to help build this comfortable and safe environment. You stick one dude in a room with 12 women, and it's not going to feel safe. It's not going to feel comfortable. But it was rich. It was rewarding. I really enjoyed my time at TWU. It's a great program.

How many of y'all went to the family picnic way back when? I think it was a few months ago. Yeah, wasn't that fun? The family picnic was great. It was such a sweet time to see all four services gather together, eat barbecue, hang out, and do what we do. Well, during the family picnic, my daughter found a ladybug. If you're a parent of younger kids, you know this is like gold. Your kid finds a little bug they love, and you have freedom for at least 15 minutes to an hour, because they're just going to sit there and play with that bug and do whatever they do, and life will be great.

She could not have cared less about the food, about the dunk tank (which was awesome), and about all of those other things. What she cared about was she had found this ladybug, and she was going to carry this ladybug around with her wherever she went. She was going to give it little ladybug finger scratches and finger hugs and stuff like that. My wife in her brilliance said, "Hey, Myla, do you want to give the ladybug a name?" Myla was like, "Yeah. Let's name it Benja," which I think is an awesome name. Her previous names included "Cinnamony" and "Sugary," so I feel like we've hit a new level of creativity for her. My daughter spent the rest of that day playing with that little ladybug.

Well, at some point, my wife's maternal instinct kicked in, and she was like, "You know, Benja is not moving as much as he used to. He seems to be responding a little slower to Myla's interaction." So my wife talked to our daughter and said, "Hey, I think it's time to let Benja go back to his little ladybug home in the ladybug grass, or wherever he's going to go." So my wife and my daughter had this sweet moment of taking the ladybug and throwing him off into the air and watching him crash. Yeah, Benja didn't make it. I hope that doesn't offend anybody in here, but Benja served a good purpose.

The following day, my wife and I were sitting on the couch laughing about how sweet it was that our daughter loved this little ladybug and had such a sweet time together. We decided to ask Myla, "Do you remember Benja? Do you remember how fun that was?" As soon as we asked our daughter, her demeanor drastically changed. She started to try and hold back the tears. Something had clicked in her. She knew Benja wasn't there anymore. She knew something wasn't quite right.

We were trying to coax it out of her. We said, "Sweetie, it's okay to cry if you're upset about something," but she refused to talk about it. She kept saying she wasn't crying, but her face gave away that it had hit a nerve with her that was deep. For that moment for my wife and me, it really sunk home for us that no matter how hard we try, no matter how much we want to protect our daughter from this reality, the truth is she's living in the same world we are. She's living in a world where things don't always work out the way you want them to, where suffering, affliction, and difficulty are the norms of life.

So this happy little 3-year-old in a moment... Don't get me wrong. Five minutes later she'd put on her little pink tutu and was running around the house going nuts. But in that moment for her, something clicked in about the reality of the world she's living in, that it's not always fun. It's not always happy. It doesn't always work out the way we want it to. Today, that's what I wanted to talk with y'all about: suffering and affliction and what God does with that, what the purposes are behind the suffering and affliction we deal with in life.

To walk through that, we're going to jump into 2 Corinthians, chapter 1. We'll be in verses 1-10. I'll give you a little background here as we walk into this. Paul wrote both 1 and 2 Corinthians, and he was addressing a church that, frankly, was a little bit messed up. They had some behavior and activities and sin going on within their church body that those outside of the church would have looked in on and said, "Wow, that's really not okay. That's unhealthy." On top of that, the church had had false teachers. They came in and started to deceive and lead the Corinthian church astray.

Paul is writing this letter to draw them back into right living, to rebuke some of their sin and lead them into righteousness, and then also to defend what God had called him to do. God had equipped and called Paul to go into this city and raise up a church, to share the gospel and mature them in their faith. That's the setting as we walk into 2 Corinthians, chapter 1. Let's start in verses 1-2: **"Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, to the church of God that is at Corinth, with all the saints who are in the whole of Achaia: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ."**

You see from the beginning Paul identifies himself. This is a traditional greeting by Paul. If you looked at most of the other letters he wrote in the New Testament, this is going to be there. It's his beginning phraseology. He identifies himself as an apostle, meaning he was one who was sent by Christ for a specific

purpose. The word *apostle* literally just means one who is sent. Paul meant it in a special and unique sense.

If you know the story of Paul, before Paul became a follower of Christ, he was actually adamantly opposed to Christianity. He was so zealously opposed to it he would chase down Christians, pull them out of their houses, and get them to blaspheme so he could condone them being killed. He could not have been more against Christianity. Yet one day, on his way to go persecute some more Christians, God blew up his world. God showed up in Paul's life, spoke to him, and said, "Hey, you used to do this, but now you're going to do this. You used to persecute me, but now I'm sending you, and you're going to go bring the message of the gospel, what Christ has done, to these people."

When Paul is talking about being an apostle by the will of God, he's saying it with an unbelievable clarity. God literally spoke to him and said, "This is what you will do. This is who you will be. This is what I've purposed for you, for you to be sent to build up these churches, to bring the good news to these people." So in some sense he's already, from the beginning, defending to these false apostles and false teachers, "Hey, this is who I am. This is my story. This is why you ought to trust and believe I'm here for your good and for your benefit."

Then look at how Paul addresses them. He calls them the "church of God," and he calls them "saints." Isn't that a little odd considering what we just talked about concerning the Corinthian church, how messed up they were with the sin that was going on in their body, with them being deceived and led astray? Yet Paul still addresses them as saints and God's church. Why is he able to do that? He's able to do that because of the following verse, verse 2. He anchors them back into the gospel. **"Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ."**

In Christ's perfect life, death, and resurrection, he has provided a grace that covers over all of our sins, all of our rebellion, all of our errors. The grace Christ has purchased through the cross covers over all of this, meaning when Christ said on the cross, "It is finished," it was finished. So although their behavior may be way in a place it shouldn't be, Paul is able to say, "But because of what Christ has done, because of his grace that purchased for you peace between you and God..."

Your sin and your rebellion separated you from God. Christ in his life, death, and resurrection has purchased a grace that gives you peace between you and God, meaning you're now adopted into his family. That's that last phrase that says "our Father." Paul is able to say, "You are now God's children if this is what you believe. If you know Jesus to be the one who did this, who died for you, who reconciled you to God, then God looks at you as he does his children." In the same way a loving father would look on his son and daughter, God looks at us that way.

He's reminding them of the one thing that's unchangeable in all of this: the immovable truth that Christ has accomplished through his life, death, and resurrection peace between us and God, a peace that cannot be shaken, a peace that cannot be changed. That's really great news. Let's take a look at verse 3 and on. We're going to cover a few more things in this passage. Then I'm going to come back around and pull out three points for us to take home. So we're going to breeze through some of this pretty quickly, and some of it a little less quickly.

In verse 3, Paul transitions into praising God for being amazing in the midst of suffering. He says, **"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God."**

Let's pause there. In verse 3, Paul identifies God as the God of all and every comfort, meaning there is no true lasting comfort outside of God. There is no comfort that will sustain, no comfort that will endure, apart from the comfort God offers. I think if we're honest with ourselves we know this to be true in life. Whenever we go through difficulty, affliction, or struggle and we seek things to comfort us, they don't seem to last very long.

Take comfort food, for instance, which is a ridiculous term. It's not comfort food; it's comfort chemicals. Be honest. When you're having a bad day and you go grab that Twinkie, that Twinkie isn't food. That Twinkie is something else. When we feel bad and we go get that food that makes us feel happy for a moment, how long does it last? Five minutes? Ten minutes? Fifteen minutes?

When we go find these comforts that are temporary, they last a little while, but then what happens after that? We usually feel worse. If you just ate a Twinkie, 30 minutes later you're probably not feeling better. You're coming off of a sugar high, and then maybe you even feel guilty because you just ingested a whole lot of calories you didn't need. The comforts we turn to in this life are temporary. They provide us a momentary comfort, but at the end of the day, they do very little to resolve the difficulties we're facing.

Paul is saying in this moment God is the God of all comfort, that outside of him there is no comfort that will last and endure through all of the circumstances you will face in life. Then in verse 4 he says, "The God of all comfort who comforts us in all our affliction." *In our affliction*. For some of us in this room, we have a tendency to think, "When this thing is done, when my affliction is removed, when my suffering is done, then I will be okay. Then life will be great."

Paul is going to say God gives you something even greater than the removal of your affliction. God says even in the midst of your pain and your suffering, in your darkest hour, God is able in that moment, as you still sit in your suffering and affliction, to provide comfort for you. If our hope is in the removal of our affliction and our difficulties, then we're going to be disappointed sometimes, because sometimes God is going to show us he is greater than our affliction, even though it stays with us, because he is able in that moment to help us endure. He's able in that moment to give us peace in the middle of our struggle, not when it's done, but right in the middle of our affliction.

The word right after that is *all*. In *all* afflictions, meaning there is no affliction and no difficulty we face in life that God is not intimately aware of and that he does not care about. He's able to comfort us right in the middle of every single affliction, which means there's no affliction that's too great for him. There's no difficulty too challenging. There's no sorrow too great, no hardship too difficult for God to be able to bring comfort and peace into that affliction.

On the other end of that, there's no affliction too small. There's no trifle and difficulty in life too small that he doesn't know about and doesn't offer in that moment to give you comfort that is lasting, comfort that is unchangeable, comfort that won't be dependent on how your circumstances go. This is who Paul is talking about, a God who's able to comfort in all circumstances. Let's move on to verse 5:

"For as we share abundantly in Christ's sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too. If we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation; and if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which you experience when you patiently endure the same sufferings that we suffer. Our hope for you is unshaken, for we know that as you share in our sufferings, you will also share in our comfort."

Paul is really just hitting on, for the believer and in life, both comfort and suffering are going to be natural parts of the program. We're to expect those realities to be part of what we get to walk through. Moving on to verse 8, Paul is going to move into giving them a very specific example that fleshes out everything he just talked about.

"For we do not want you to be unaware, brothers, of the affliction we experienced in Asia. For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death. But that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead. He delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us. On him we have set our hope that he will deliver us again."

Paul, in that moment, is talking about an experience that for him and his friends was so drastic, so dark, he believed the only answer out of that issue was for them to pass away, that it was time for them to die. What Paul found in the middle of that angst (and what was probably scary) was that God was enough. In that moment, if it meant it was time for him to die, that was okay, because God was still the deliverer. In that moment, if it was for God to deliver, that was okay, because God was still God, and he was more than enough in the middle of this affliction for Paul.

From here, what I want to do is pull out three purposes God has for us as we walk through suffering that we can find in this passage. The first one I want to talk about is in verse 5, and then verse 6. **"For as we share abundantly in Christ's sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too. If we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation; and if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which you experience when you patiently endure the same sufferings that we suffer."**

*God uses our suffering and affliction in life to bring glory to himself and to call people into the gospel. God uses our suffering, our difficulties, our hardships, our weaknesses in our lives to glorify himself and to draw people into the gospel. John Piper, in a book called *Filling Up the Afflictions of Christ* (which is a phenomenal book), talks about the purpose of suffering in a Christian's life:*

"Christ's suffering is for *propitiation*..." Meaning Christ's suffering was to pay the penalty for our sins. "...our suffering is for *propagation*. In other words, when we suffer with him in the cause of missions, we display the way Christ loved the world and in our own sufferings extend his to the world. This is what it means to fill up the afflictions of Christ. [...]"

When Paul shares in Christ's sufferings with joy and love, he delivers, as it were, those very sufferings to the ones for whom Christ died. Paul's missionary suffering is God's design to complete the sufferings of Christ by making them more visible and personal and precious to those for whom he died. So I say this very sobering word: God's plan is that his saving purpose for the nations will triumph through the suffering of his people..."

What John Piper is saying is, in some sense (and in historical reality), there's only one generation that ever actually got to physically see Jesus live and die, and of that generation there was only a small population that actually lived where Jesus was, to be able to literally see him do life and then die, to actually see the afflictions of Christ be a reality.

Since that time, what Paul and John Piper are saying is our afflictions now, the afflictions we suffer as believers, are meant to make those tangible sufferings of Christ more touchable for the people in our

lives, that as we suffer as Christians, like Christ suffered in his life, they would be reminded of what Christ had accomplished, because they have not seen it or experienced it yet.

So our suffering and affliction in life brings glory to God and helps people understand the gospel. When they see believers who are going through great difficulty in life and yet have a peace that is unshakable, it causes them to ask questions. It causes them to wonder. It harkens back to what Jesus did in his own life, that a man who was well-acquainted with suffering, yet was peaceful, was caring, was kind, and was loving, was willing to die to pay the penalty for our sins.

I want to flesh out a little bit more the ways God uses our suffering for his glory and to draw people to the gospel, so I'm going to pop up three different passages. In John, chapter 9, one of my favorite chapters in the New Testament, Jesus and his disciples are walking down the road, and they see a blind man. The disciples turn to Jesus and say, "Okay, Jesus, so who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?"

Catch their logic there. It's a logic we use commonly in our regular old life. The logic is "This is a really bad thing for this man to be blind. That is a heavy burden, and that is difficult. Therefore, he must have done something terrible in order for God to give him that punishment. So it must be either he did something horrible, or his parents did something horrible, and God is punishing him for what he has done."

Let's look at Jesus' response in John 9:3. It's remarkable. **"Jesus answered, 'It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him.'"** What Jesus says in that moment is, "It doesn't have to do with this man's sin, it doesn't have to do with his parents' sin, but rather, this man was born blind so, at this moment, as we were walking by, I would be glorified in him."

As Jesus in a moment in that chapter is about to heal him, about to restore his sight, the disciples would see Jesus for who he actually is, that he is the Son of God. Jesus would be glorified in this man's weakness. What this man is hearing for the first time is this thing he thought was a burden in his life was actually entrusted to him by God for this moment, that God would be glorified in this man's weakness.

For some of you in this room, this is what you need to hear from this passage. Your suffering and affliction and the difficulties you're facing in life are not God punishing you. They're not God rubbing your face in your sin. They're not God holding you accountable for decisions you made years ago. If you are in Christ, if you are a child of God, Romans 8 is going to say, "There is now no condemnation for you."

We remember the gospel. Jesus already paid for it anyway, so you can't keep paying for it. If he paid for it on the cross, it's done. It's finished. Instead, what we find in this passage is God will give us particular

difficulties, particular afflictions, particular sufferings, so he might use them to glorify himself and draw people into an understanding of the gospel. This man's blindness was not meant to be a punishment for him, but rather was entrusted to him, that at the right time and at the right moment God would be most honored and glorified in his life.

Let me give you another example. In Mark, chapter 5, you have a demon-possessed man who runs around naked, beats himself with stones, and is yelling a lot. As you can imagine, his neighbors didn't like that so much, so they tried to chain him up, rope him up, constrain him in any way they could. But every time they tried to do that, this man would just break the chains, run out naked again, beat himself with stones, and keep screaming.

So Jesus shows up on the scene, and as Jesus walks onto land, this man flies down the hill and falls at the feet of Jesus, because this man and the demons in him know who is there, that the Son of God is there, so they fall in submission to Jesus. As Jesus heals this man, casts the demons out and restores him and gets him some clothes (which was great), the townspeople freak out. The townspeople have no idea what to do with this.

The power they have just seen as Jesus heals this man confuses them to the point they would rather not be in Jesus' presence anymore. They beg Jesus to leave. They say, "Can you just go ahead and get out of here?" So Jesus obliges, and he starts to head out. As he's heading out, this man who used to be demon-possessed, beating himself with stones, and naked, comes to him and says, "Jesus, I want to go with you. Can I go with you?"

Jesus has a very unique response for him. Let's look at that response. Mark 5:19: "**And he did not permit him but said to him, 'Go home to your friends and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and how he has had mercy on you.'**" You're going to be hard-pressed to find another place in Scripture where a man comes to Jesus and says, "I want to be with you," and Jesus says, "No."

In this moment, Jesus says, "No, the purpose for you, what God has designed you for, is to actually go back to those people, those people who saw you naked, those people who saw you beating yourself with stones and screaming your head off, to go back to those very people who know the darkest parts of your story, and to display the glory of God in your weakness, to go back to them and show them how powerful God is even in the midst of your weakness, to use the hard part of your story and help people see the mercy and kindness of God."

I've given you two examples in Scripture of God choosing to alleviate affliction. God was glorified in that moment by choosing to alleviate the blindness, to cast out the demons, and restore this man to his right

mind. I want to give you one more example to flesh out when God chooses not to, when he chooses to allow people to stay within their affliction. For that, we're going to go back to 2 Corinthians, and we're going to be looking at chapter 12.

At this point in Corinthians, Paul has been defending himself for a couple of chapters now, saying, "Here is who I am, how I've been called, the revelations God has given me, how God has equipped me, all of my story," trying to emphasize to the Corinthian church, "Hey, you ought to trust, love, and accept my teaching." Then he gets to a point where he gets really intimate with the Corinthian church and starts to share, "God gave me all of these things and has gifted me in incredible ways, yet he left me with this one thing to ensure I would continue to trust him and remain humble." This is 2 Corinthians, chapter 12, verses 7-10:

"So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited. Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me.

But he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.' Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong."

You have Paul here, a man who is ardently following the Lord, chasing after God, begging the Lord to remove this affliction, and God's response is, "No. I'm better than that affliction. I'm more than enough. Even in the middle of that affliction, you're going to find me enough. This affliction will remain for you so that, in your weakness, people will look at you and realize, 'Paul, although you're a great man, you're still just a man.'

Your weaknesses will point people toward the God you love and worship. As you're able to live in peace with your affliction, people will look at that and say, 'Wow, the God you worship must be an incredible God, that you're able to stand firm even in the middle of affliction, even when that God tells you he's not going to remove it.'" So God uses suffering, affliction, and weakness in our lives to glorify himself and draw people to the gospel.

The second purpose God has for our suffering is this: *He uses suffering and affliction in our lives to reveal what we depend on, to help us see the things we trust in.* We're going to find that back in 2 Corinthians, chapter 1, verses 8-9: **"For we do not want you to be unaware, brothers, of the affliction we experienced in Asia. For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself. Indeed,**

we felt that we had received the sentence of death. But that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead."

In this moment of unbearable affliction for Paul, where he thinks his life is forfeit, he thinks it's the endgame, that it's time to be done, what he finds in that moment is that his faith and his trust in God is unwavering, that he's on a rock that cannot be shaken, that there's nothing in this life that can happen to him in his circumstances that is going to change the fact he is a child of God and God is the deliverer.

If God delivers him now, praise the Lord, but if God chooses to let him die in this moment, God will still be the one who delivers him after that. That is enough for Paul to remain secure and confident in God in the midst of his affliction. In Matthew, chapter 7, verses 24-27, Jesus paints this picture on why it's so important for us to understand what we trust in and what we depend on as we face difficulties in life. I want to read that quickly.

"Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock. And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell, and great was the fall of it."

You'll notice there isn't a third example here of "And then there was a man who built his house on the rock, and it was sunny and happy all the rest of his life." Jesus doesn't leave that as an option. The option given to us is, "The storms are coming. Suffering is coming. Affliction is coming." What will reveal in you? When you are pressed, when you are crushed in life, what do you turn to for comfort? Do you find yourself easily wavered off the rock of Christ, or do you find in the midst of your suffering and affliction God is right there with you and he is enough?

God will use suffering and affliction in our lives to reveal what we depend on. He'll do this in one of two ways, or for one of two reasons. First, where we will tend to move away from him, where in life we're starting to trust in other things, our finances, our careers, our families, our marriages, our kids, or whatever it might be, where we start to transition to trust in those things, God will bring affliction into our lives that we might see those things are insufficient to satisfy. They're insufficient to provide for us. They're insufficient to give us meaning in life. He'll draw us back onto the rock, the truth that we are adopted children of God.

For others of us (and hopefully we'll experience both of these in our lives), at times God will bring affliction into our lives just to show us how strong our faith is, just so in that moment we can have a tangible experience of understanding, "Okay, this is what I really believe, and not only do I believe it, but now I've seen and experienced it in the midst of my suffering. God is a Rock that is immovable. God is a Rock that isn't shaken. Because of that, I can stand firm in the midst of all persecutions, all suffering, all difficulties, all struggles in life, because he is able to sustain me." It will usually be for one of those two reasons.

To flesh this out, I want to talk about a man named John Paton. John Paton was a missionary in the 1800s. He felt very specifically called by God to go to these really remote islands in literally the middle of nowhere. As people had gone to those islands before John, what they had found was they were loaded with tribes that practiced cannibalism. So this was a very dark place to go, yet John Paton felt secure and certain, "This is where God is leading me and calling me."

He had friends who had gone before, and some had been run off the island, and some had already been killed, yet John said, "No, God has called me to go here. I have to go to bring the gospel to these people who have never heard the gospel before." As you can imagine, throughout John's life on these islands, as he got there and dedicated his whole life to being there and loving on these people, he was running for his life. He had some real interesting events and stories, and God had to show up in some incredible ways.

Well, in one of those circumstances, John had a miscommunication with one of the chiefs of the tribe. What the chief told him at the end of the conversation was, "Hey, I'm going to need you to go ahead and hide up in this tree, because the tribe is pretty angry at you, and they're planning to come and kill you tonight. So I want you to hang up here for the night, and we'll figure it out from there." Months later, John would write about the experience in his journal. I'm going to read that to us today so we can experience what it was like for him.

"Being entirely at the mercy of such doubtful and vacillating friends..." Those are the people he's trying to work with. "...I, though perplexed, felt it best to obey. I climbed into the tree and was left there alone in the bush. The hours I spent there live all before me as if it were but of yesterday. I heard the frequent discharging of muskets and the yells of the savages. Yet I sat there among the branches, as safe as in the arms of Jesus.

Never, in all my sorrows, did my Lord draw nearer to me and speak more soothingly in my soul than when the...air played on my throbbing brow as I told all my heart to Jesus. Alone, yet not alone! If it be to glorify my God, I will not grudge to spend many nights alone in such a tree, to feel again my Savior's spiritual

presence, to enjoy his consoling fellowship. If thus thrown back upon your own soul, alone, all alone, in the midnight, in the bush, in the very embrace of death itself, have you a Friend that will not fail you then?"

What John found in this moment where everything was taken away from him (it's just him, a tree, and Jesus) was that was more than enough. He felt closer to God in the middle of his affliction and suffering than he had ever felt before, because he found God would always be there. Jesus had told him he would not leave him or forsake him, and he found it to be true. In the middle of his darkest moment, he found God, and he was able to worship.

God will use suffering in our lives to reveal what we depend on: sometimes to call us back and say, "Hey, you're moving away from me and trusting in things that, in the end, are going to destroy you," and then at other times to show us, "Hey, look at the faith you have. Your trust is settled on this rock, and it is not shakable."

Finally, the third purpose God has for our suffering in life we find in verse 4 of 2 Corinthians, chapter 1. I'll go ahead and read verse 3 as well. **"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God."**

God, at times, uses suffering and affliction in our lives so we can learn what it is to walk in his comfort. In doing that, as we learn to walk in the comfort God provides, we are then able to lead others to walk and live in the same comfort. The comfort God gives us is not meant to terminate with ourselves. It's not just us being comfortable in what God has done and given us. Rather, that comfort he teaches us, that he provides for us, is meant to lead us to help others in similar affliction find that same comfort and peace.

So he'll walk us through particular sufferings and affliction so we will know his comfort, so then we will be able to help others who are struggling in life and dealing with difficulty. I want to give you all a very specific example of that. After my freshman year of Baylor, I went back home for the summer. If you're a college student or remember college, you can imagine how awkward a transition that is. You spend a whole year doing what you want, going to bed when you want, doing everything you want to do, and you go home and your parents are like, "We'd like you home by 10:00." I'm like, "Ten is usually about when I leave, so we're going to need to negotiate on that one."

It was an awkward transitional summer. There was difficulty to be walked through. I was growing into adulthood, and my parents were still reminding me I was a kid. During that summer, one of the most difficult moments was my dad came to the family and, for whatever reason, had decided it was time to

confess some things he had been doing. A lot of those things were really dark and really hurtful, and nobody in the family knew about it. Nobody in the family had a clue this stuff was going on for my dad behind closed doors, and whatever else.

In that moment as he confessed, there was this real awkward, just not knowing how to process it as a son, looking at my dad and going, "Okay, I get it. I know the gospel. Jesus paid for this just as he paid for my sins, yet you're still my father, and I look at you differently and think about you differently than I think about myself." It just made for an awkward time for a while.

Then, as my father continued to dig in with the church body and live openly in the light, it was sweet to see change happen. It was sweet to see how his demeanor changed. It was sweet to see how God was bringing some level of restoration into his life. As he walked out of darkness, as he confessed to our family all that was going on, he was changing.

So I went back for my sophomore year at Baylor. About a week into that semester, I got one of those phone calls where, as soon as the phone rings, you just know it's not going to be a good phone call. I picked up the phone, and what I'm told is that my father is missing. I have no concept of how to interpret that phrase. When that happened over the phone, I had no box to put it in. I literally was like, "Did he get lost at the grocery store? What do you mean he's missing?"

A couple of days later we got the phone call we, at that point, had kind of expected. They had found my father, and he had chosen to end his life. My father struggled with some significant mental illnesses, and in the middle of his affliction, in the middle of his suffering, it just overwhelmed him. It took me a long time to process, and to sit in, and to figure out, "Okay, God. I know what you say about yourself. How does this fit in? How am I supposed to find comfort amidst this reality?"

God surrounded me with a sweet community of believers who loved me through this situation. They were smart enough to know there was nothing they could do to fix the situation. They weren't offering trite phrases. They weren't offering anything to try and fix it. They were just sitting there and saying, "Hey, I have no idea how to walk you through this, but what I can tell you is God is able, and you need to keep pressing into him." In time, I found it to be true. Not that it didn't hurt anymore, not that I wasn't still angry and frustrated about the situation, but what I found was God was able.

He was the only answer I had. He was the only one who was able to bring comfort even in the midst of that darkness. He reminded me that even in my father's darkest moment, my God did not abandon him, that he was with him there in his affliction, that he was with him there in that moment. What would happen in the

next year would be, through the ministry I worked with, I would end up mentoring three guys who would lose their fathers, one to diabetes, one to cancer, and another to cardiac arrest.

My suffering was not arbitrary. For whatever reason, it was part of God's story and plan for me to walk through that. The men I would work with... The comfort I had received I'd be able to pass on to them. I'd be able to show them, "Hey, I don't have easy answers for you. I can't fix your difficulties, I can't make it better, but I can lead you to a God who is able in every and all circumstances, in every and all darkness, in every and all struggle, to comfort you in the middle of that moment." This is the God we serve.

So God uses suffering, affliction, and difficulty in our lives to glorify his name and to call people to himself. He uses suffering and difficulty in our lives to show us what we're depending on and what we're trusting in, and then he gives us comfort in the midst of our suffering and our trials so we would be able to give the exact same comfort to other people, the comfort God provides.

I want to wrap up reading a poem by a man named William Cowper. William Cowper was another guy who lived in the 1800s, who struggled intensely with depression. There were times when his depression was so strong, the best he could do would be to sit by his window, stare out the window for a couple of hours, and then go back to bed. That would last for weeks at a time. Yet God chose to gift and use this man to write some incredible poems, incredible hymns. Some of those hymns we still sing today. I want to read y'all one that has been very near and dear to my heart as I've dealt with suffering in life. It's called "God Moves in a Mysterious Way."

God moves in a mysterious way
His wonders to perform;
He plants his footsteps in the sea
And rides upon the storm.

Deep in unfathomable mines
Of never failing skill
He treasures up his bright designs
And works his sovereign will.

Ye fearful saints, fresh courage take;
The clouds ye so much dread
Are big with mercy and shall break
In blessings on your head.

Judge not the Lord by feeble sense,
But trust him for his grace;
Behind a frowning providence
He hides a smiling face.

His purposes will ripen fast,
Unfolding every hour;
The bud may have a bitter taste,
But sweet will be the flower.

Blind unbelief is sure to err
And scan his work in vain;
God is his own interpreter,
And he will make it plain.

This is the God we serve. If you are a follower of Christ, this is the God we walk with, the One who is able in all circumstances to comfort us, to empower us to endure all afflictions, and help us walk with him.

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