

Comfort in the Cross when Suffering because of Christians

There is a profound sense in which the *saddest* of all evils are those which are committed by Christians against Christians.

When enemies arose against David, he could rejoice in the justice of God. He knew that whatever enemies came against him, no matter what they did, they would have their evil returned upon their heads. They would pay for their crimes. He could delight that since he was the leader of God's people, if someone arose against him, they had really arisen against God. David's cause was just; the cause of his enemies was not. There was a black and white, a good and a bad, a right and a wrong.

When Christians sin against Christians, how can we find comfort? In just about every Christian-Christian conflict, there is no clear right and wrong. It is rare that one party is 100% right and the other absolutely wrong. Who can claim perfectly pure motives when the Spirit of the Lord searches hearts? Where, then, is justice that vindicates the innocent and condemns the guilty?

More than that, when a brother or a sister sins against me, even the justice of God becomes sad. Every sin will be paid for. If it is an unbeliever who unjustly attacks, we know they will be called to give an account for their actions. If, however, it is a Christian who sins against me, how can I rejoice in that justice? Now the sin which they have committed not only hurts me, not only grieves the Spirit as sin against grace, but even (in some sense) adds to the wounds of my beloved Saviour. It is sad.

Where, then, is comfort to be found?

I know that there is comfort nowhere if not in the cross, so my hope must somehow be fixed there. But how can I genuinely find comfort in knowing that I've been sinned against, hurt, alienated, distanced from those I love, and that Christ is the one who must suffer as a result?

I suppose there is comfort here in at least a few ways.

1. My debt is paid.

For every time I have been sinned against as a Christian, I'm sure there are at least a hundred occasions when I've sinned against another Christian. My debt is greater than that owed me by the offender in this case; yet I've been forgiven.

2. It pleased God.

I don't understand the dispensations of providence. Sometimes I think I don't even want to. But yet, here is comfort. Somehow, it has pleased my Lord both to crush Christ on my behalf (and on the behalf of the offending brother or sister) and also bring these circumstances into my life at just this moment in time in just this way so that he might further conform me to the image of his Son. I don't understand that, but if it pleased God, then there is comfort in it for me.

3. It might just give me insight into the Father's heart.

I don't know this to be fact in any sense, but I might offer this conjecture as well. There is a sense in which the Father is satisfied with the dispensing of his righteous wrath. There is another sense in which he absolutely delights to display the wonders of his mercy. While the cross is the perfect solution, bring-

ing free grace to me, there is another sense in which it must have been profoundly sad for the Father. While he delighted to accomplish his purposes, there is another sense in which the crushing of his own Son—the pure and innocent one—must have grieved him. In my situation, I can rejoice that there is grace to freely give, even though the circumstances bringing about both the offence and the reconciliation bring sadness, yet the end result is joy and peace. Maybe now, through this grievous, yet joyous, experience of offence and reconciliation, I can identify a little more with the heart of my Father.

4. Jesus identifies.

Jesus, my elder brother, has gone before me. He perfectly endured unjust suffering. He perfectly endured shameful back-stabbing and betrayal far worse than I could ever know in this life. Every single one of those closest to him abandoned him in his most pressing moment of need. Where I fall short and am tempted to despair, he endured. He is worthy of my faith because he endured where I cannot. He is worthy of having my hope placed in him because he knows; he can identify; he is a faithful high priest who will continue to love me, show patience to me, and pray for me as I struggle through.

5. I'm not Jesus.

In my rejection and suffering, I must recognize that while the temptation is to sometimes to lash out in anger, at other times the temptation is to think that I'm going through what Jesus went through. I need to remember that what I'm going through is nothing like what Jesus went through. There are similarities from which I can draw comfort, but I must be aware of temptation to self-pity and the glorification of hardship and suffering. There is a strange reality to the human heart that we find joy and self-righteousness *in* melancholy. In our suffering we have not yet resisted sin to the point of shedding

blood. Jesus has. Our suffering is nothing compared to his—and when he suffered, he neither lashed out nor pitied himself, but persevered for the *joy* that was before him.

6. Better than I deserve.

Carl F.H. Henry is quoted as asking, 'How can anyone be arrogant when he stands beside the cross?' When I stand beside the cross I see my sin and I see its end. I see what I deserve at the hand of God. I see that I deserve to have not only people, but even God the Father himself turn his back on me. I deserve wounds and mocking, betrayal and abuse, scorn and shameful exposure. What I've tasted in the hurts caused by my friends are only the slightest hint of the beginnings of what I deserve—not from men, but from God—for my sin. What I deserve is to have the Father turn his back; I should be the one crying out, forsaken by God. In light of what I deserve, even the bad things I've known in this life pale in comparison.

7. It's not my identity.

My worth and my value are not tied up in what others think of me. Paul was glad to be called a fool for the sake of the cross. He understood that the life he once lived and the goals of man-pleasing he once had were crucified in the cross of Christ. The life that he then lived was in Christ. If I am trusting in the cross-work of Jesus then my life, my death, my identity, my sense of worth, my feelings of being loved, my joy, and my hope are all tied up in this reality: while I was still a sinner and a rebel, hating him and rejecting him, God showed me his love when he sent his Son to die for me. That matters infinitely more than what someone else thinks of me.

8. Learning patience.

For thousands of years God endured the sins of men and women. For thousands of years he loved and held a longingly outstretched hand to sinners who

hated him. Humans universally rejected him, denied him, told lies about him, believed wrong things about him, and at times, just flat-out ignored him. Yet he loved. He was willing to forgive. One might rightly ask, 'But how could this be *just*?' What would come as a result of all those wicked things which had taken place? He waited; he endured. He was patient for generation after generation, knowing that the cross would accomplish all his just purposes. I must learn to trust the cross in the same way. I must have patience when offended, trusting in the reconciling power of the cross, lovingly and longingly seeking reconciliation, all the while acknowledging God's *greater* justice in the cross.

9. God is more just than me.

My sense of justice, together with the affections of my heart, are skewed and perverted. What I think justice *looks* like and what I think justice *feels* like are not necessarily representative of true justice at all. But here, in the cross, where God becomes the justifier of the unjust while proving himself completely just, I see that his justice is greater than anything I could imagine. In what looks like injustice—the righteous dying while the guilty go free—God vindicates himself as ultimately just. His ways are not mine, his thoughts are not mine. There is comfort here in knowing that he *will* accomplish justice in a way that is greater than I ever could if I were in control. This scenario may not play out as I think it should; but that's a good thing. God is more just than me. Whatever he does.

10. I might serve.

The church—and indeed, the whole world—is full of people who have been hurt. Why should I think for a second that I should be any different? Why should I think for a moment that I would be able to minister to a world of people who are hurting without ever having gone through hurt myself? Christ endured what we must endure so that he might faithfully minister to us. Christ took on death before us, that he might bring us through it. Am I better than Christ? I only pray that somehow God will use the circumstances of my present suffering to enable and equip me to serve others who are hurting.

For the Christian, the cross is a place of forgiveness of sins and reconciliation with God. It is the place where we are justified and made right with God. But that right standing with God is the foundation of so much more.

For the Christian, the cross must become a place of refuge in any and every situation in life. We must learn to be intentional to interpret all of life through the cross. Life-changing truth and reality are displayed at the cross as nowhere else.

The cross is the most ultimately-applicable reality ever, in all of human history. Are you being faithful to remember it in your circumstances? Are you being changed by it?

