

APRIL 30, 1995

SHARING ONE ANOTHER'S PAIN

Every now and then I hear stories about identical twins who are so close to each other that if one is having trouble, the other one can sense it though he or she may be thousands of miles away. I don't think anybody really understands how that works but it is interesting. Sometimes this same phenomenon happens with close friends. Though we may not experience such extra sensory perceptions we, in the body of Christ, really ought to be close enough to each other to know when someone is having trouble or joy and be able to share in that trouble or joy. This is what self-sacrificing love leads to in the body of Christ if we will just practice it. Paul wrote about sharing both suffering and comfort in his second letter to the church at Corinth.

2 CORINTHIANS 1:1-2 Paul identify himself in the beginning of the letter as was the custom in that time. In giving his identity, he also stated the authority by which he was writing to them. The reason for this forthright statement becomes apparent later on in the letter, where he discussed the problems in this church and their tendency to ignore Paul's teaching and to follow false teachers who made a claim to being apostles. Paul not only called himself an apostle, but an apostle of Jesus Christ. This was not a self-appointed office that Paul had, but it happened because of God's direct intervention in his life. It was the will of God that Paul take the gospel message to the Gentile world of his day.

Paul was a very effective missionary and establisher of churches; however, he did not try to do everything by himself. He had other associates who could carry on the work in one area while Paul was some other place. One such person was Timothy. Apparently, Timothy was with Paul at the time he was writing this letter. This close association of an experienced Christian and a younger person was a practical outworking of the process of discipleship. This a something that is really needed in the church today.

Paul was writing this letter to more than just the church at Corinth. It was to all the Christians in the area of southern Greece. There was an expectation the letter would be passed on to others.

In the tradition of the times, Paul's greeting ended with a blessing. The blessing called for God's unmerited favor (grace) and the absence of strife and hostility in their lives. Such blessings come from close association with God and is made possible because of what Jesus accomplished for us in giving his life to redeem us from the penalty and power of sin.

2 CORINTHIANS 1:3-5 Paul was quick to acknowledge God as the Source for everything good in life. He praised God because He is the Father of the Lord Jesus, because He is the God of mercy, and because He is the Source of comfort for each of us. All of us need comfort at some time in our life. The closer we walk with God the more the world rejects us. We can find that brings on suffering or tribulation-- sometimes it is physical suffering and at other times it can be emotional suffering. We are told elsewhere in Paul's writings that "all who will live Godly in Christ Jesus will suffer tribulation." When we do, we can expect comfort from God. That's great, even if it ended there. We have trouble and God comforts us. But it doesn't have to (and should not) end there. We can learn from the experience of how important it is to receive encouragement and comfort when we are down. Knowing that, we should then be in perfect position to pass that kind of comfort on to others who are hurting.

The problems we endure can be viewed as a means to put self to death -- they can be seen as more of the suffering of Christ with which we identify when we say that we are crucified with Christ. It is part of the on going "taking up our cross daily" and following the example of Christ. As we do

this, then God's grace will flow out from us to bring encouragement, consolation, and comfort to others in the same way that we are comforted by God.

2 CORINTHIANS 1:6-7 Whether he and his fellow workers were suffering hardships or enjoying life the purpose of Paul's life toward the Christians at Corinth did not change. He was working for their consolation and salvation. "Whether we be afflicted or whether we be comforted, it is for your consolation and salvation." The example of Paul, as he dealt with trouble, could be a source of inspiration for them when they would encounter problems in life.

Paul knew they would have problems. He wanted them to be ready to deal with difficult situations in the right manner and with the right attitude. Some people have problems and refuse to be helped. They will not accept encouragement and the result is that they become embittered. They conclude that life or God is not fair and they refuse any help or comfort. He hoped that as they encountered problems that they would accept the help God would send to them to see them through the trouble.

2 CORINTHIANS 1:8-11 Many times when we hear of someone overcoming great problems it gives us encouragement to not give up when we encounter the inconveniences of life. We need to practice on the small things and be in the habit of overcoming obstacles so we can properly handle the larger problems that come along every so often. Paul could use his own life as a series of examples of having had problems that were so intense he literally did not have the strength to go on. He had been sentenced to death and could see no way to escape. In these trials he learned that even though our ability and strength have limits God knows no limit. He learned to NOT trust in himself but to trust in God. His own past experience gave witness to the fact that at the time he wrote this letter he was walking in such faith and he had confident hope that God's power would be there when he needed it in the future.

Paul gave God the glory for the deliverance he experienced; however, Paul acknowledged the importance of other people praying for him. We fail to realize how important that ministry really is. If we knew how powerful prayer is, then we would see more Christians engaged in it. Those who do pray and see their prayers answered respond in thanksgiving to God. Often we will pray for something and when it happens we sort of dismiss it as something that was going to happen anyway and, in doing so, we fail to express our appreciation to God for all the good things He has done.

2 CORINTHIANS 1:12-14 You've heard of fair-weather friends. Apparently, there are fair-weather Christians. These do OK as long as things are going their way and it doesn't cost them anything. The real test is how we conduct ourselves when we don't have to be on our best behavior. We can evaluate the character of our own Christian walk by paying attention to how we react to adversity. If we are like Christ in our behavior and motivations, then we can truly be pleased and God will also be pleased.

We should take a fresh look at troubles and view them in light of the cross of Christ and we should be always willing to accept the help that God offers to us in our problems. We need to be continually in prayer for others and try to encourage them when they are having difficulties. This may be God's ministry for you.