

## BOUTS WITH THE BLUES

### 2 CORINTHIANS 1:3-4

“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 tribulation, that we may be able to comfort those who are in any trouble, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.”

On Ward 7E of a Psychiatric Hospital in Portland, Oregon, a discussion took place between a patient named, Don Baker, and a hospital counselor...

Follow along as Don recounts the conversation...

Counselor, "How do you feel?" "I don't know."

Don writes, *“Actually, I rarely felt anything, and when I did my feelings were indefinable. Slowly words came, “sad, empty, alone, hopeless, afraid, rejected...”*

"Do you sleep well?"

*If I had the energy I would've laughed. "All the time and never," I said. Sleep was no longer a nightly reviving experience. It was an escape mechanism.*

"How do you feel about your job?" "I'm a failure!"

"How do you feel about yourself?" "Inadequate!"

Again Don writes, *“My confidence had hit rock bottom. I had suffered a total loss of self-esteem.”*

"How do you feel about your family?" "Unworthy! I know they love me, but I don't deserve their love."

"How often do you and your wife have sex?"

*I couldn't remember.*

"Are you having difficulty making decisions?"

*I could hardly decide how to answer the question.*

"Do you like to be around people?" Don barked at the counselor, "Please, just leave me alone."

"Are you often angry?" Don recalls, *"And with that question I just buried my head and started to sob, "Oh, yes, and always with the ones I love the most."*

"How do you feel when you get angry?" "Guilty, unforgivably guilty" Finally the counselor asked, "Have you ever thought of suicide?" "At least once a day."

There on Ward 7E it didn't take a professional psychiatrist to identify Don Baker as deeply depressed.

But here's what I want you to notice - *that wasn't apparent from the interview...* Don isn't an alcoholic, or a drug addict. He wasn't the victim of shock or trauma. Don wasn't a soldier returning home from the war.

He hadn't lost a job, or seen his house burn - nor was he diagnosed with an incurable disease. Don hadn't been the product of poverty, or an impoverished childhood - nor was he falsely accused of a crime.

No, Don Baker was and is a pastor - and a very successful one at that... Thousands of people have come to Christ through Don's ministry. His churches have always grown numerically. The people he pastors love him dearly. God gives him vital insights into the Scriptures. Don is in great demand as a Bible teacher.

And here's my point, Don Baker is the classic example... **you can be a Christian and still get depressed.** Even Christians get discouraged.

Sometimes Christians grow deeply discouraged.

Even children of God have **bouts with the blues!**

In his day, John Henry Jowett was known as, *"the greatest preacher in the English-speaking world."*

But Dr. Jowett wrote, "You seem to imagine that I have no ups and downs, but just a level and lofty stretch of spiritual attainment with unbroken joy.

By no means! I am often perfectly wretched and everything appears most murky."

Charles Haddon Spurgeon is often called *"the prince of preachers,"* but he once confessed, "I am the subject of depressions of spirit so fearful I hope none of you ever gets to such extremes of wretchedness as I go."

A more modern example would be Cynthia Swindoll - the wife of famous Bible teacher, Charles Swindoll.

Cynthia writes, "Black as a thousand midnights in a cypress swamp, loneliness that is indescribable... The feeling that you've been abandoned... That you're worthless... It is difficult to believe my life was darkened by depression for so long - *fifteen years.*"

Even a pastor's wife can get brutally depressed.

And no less a Christian than the Apostle Paul, an ambassador for Christ and hero of the faith, writes in 2 Corinthians 1:8, "We were burdened beyond measure, above

strength, so that we despaired even of life."

JB Phillips translates it, "*We were completely overwhelmed, the burden was more than we could bear, in fact we told ourselves that this was the end.*"

Dark days were common not only for Paul, but for many biblical heroes... **Elijah** called fire from heaven.

He singlehandedly challenged the prophets of Baal to a showdown, and won a great victory for God... But when threatened by a wicked, angry, bitter old woman - Queen Jezebel - he went into the desert to sulk...

1 Kings 19:4 tells us, "(Elijah) sat down under a broom tree. And he prayed that he might die, and said, "It is enough! Now, Lord, take my life, for I am no better than my fathers." Elijah went from the spiritual mountaintop to the pit of despair in a matter of hours...

And if men like Paul and Elijah, Job and Jeremiah were among us today they'd tell us being a Christian doesn't make a person immune to *bouts with the blues*.

Jesus taught us, "*we're in the world, but not of it...*"

Certainly, don't be "*of the world!*" Don't let the world's values or philosophies shape how you think and act.

But realize, "*though you're not of it, you're still in it...*"

You're still subject to the same heartaches, and disappointments, and sorrows as everyone else. As citizens of this world we're *still in it*, and have to take its punches, *even when those punches are below the belt*.

There are all kinds of reasons Christians get down in the dumps: *Excruciating*

*circumstances... Catastrophic losses rip open our heart... The blues can move in after a long spell of emotional and spiritual depletion...*

*Even a successful season of service for God can be followed by an emotional letdown... Trust me, a pastor is especially prone to blue Mondays. I've learned to never make an important decision on a Monday...*

*Demands can stress - Satan can oppress - difficulty can depress... A root of bitterness - or an unconfessed sin - or a chronic self-pity can all rob us of our joy.*

And this doesn't even take into consideration the fact that on occasion certain physical conditions can have a bearing on our emotional and spiritual health.

Here's my point, seldom is *a bout with the blues* a result of just one cause - more often it's the compound effect of several factors impacting us simultaneously.

And this means the way to beat the blues depends on the cause and depth of our particular depression.

If your problem is self-pity you might just need a *kick in the pants*... If you're defeated, maybe your cure is a *pat on the back*... If you're under a spiritual attack you'll overcome through *prayer*... If you're suffering a medical problem perhaps God will heal you *supernaturally*, or by a *miracle of modern medicine*.

For the record, I do believe there are cases of serious depression caused by physical illness, and legitimate chemical imbalances in the brain.

Your brain, like your kidneys and heart and liver, is a bodily organ that can get sick and misfire.

Sometimes the treatment and remedy of a malfunctioning brain is medicinal. In such cases, I think it's good wisdom for a Christian to consult a competent physician,

and take appropriately prescribed drugs.

*But are mood-altering drugs often over-prescribed?*

**Absolutely!** The desire today is to avoid pain at all costs... and the easiest way around an emotional rut is to pop a pill. Even Christians are opting to chemically deaden the pain of every *heartbreak and headache*.

With the pain of *every loss* - the pressure of *every cross* - people want to lessen the load as quickly and as easily as possible... I believe this is shortsighted!

We need to reconsider God's purpose for our pain...

CS Lewis once wrote, "God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks to us in our conscience, but shouts in our pain, it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world."

There's a spiritual component to every trial and tribulation we face - which requires a spiritual solution.

That's why if you solve the problem with a pill without listening and looking for God, you'll miss the lesson...

Regardless of the cause of our suffering - in fact, regardless of its cure - there are issues that God desires to address in the midst of that hurt. Thus, the person who goes through trials without considering God's purpose for their pain will be spiritually stunted.

You don't truly beat *a bout with the blues* until prickly issues are addressed in your relationship with God.

God always uses suffering and difficulty to force us to Himself - to learn to lean on the Holy Spirit. You've missed the point if it forces you to lean elsewhere!

Our text this morning in 2 Corinthians 1 teaches us that when we fight *a battle with the blues* there are three truths we desperately need to remember...

First, **remember who God is...**

Second, **remember what God does in us...**

Third, **remember what God does through us...**

Here's what you should recall... *Who God is... What God does in us... and What God does through us...*

First, **remember who God is....**

In 2 Corinthians 1 Paul writes ominously in verse 9, "Yes, we had the sentence of death in ourselves."

Paul is rather vague with this reference. We're not exactly certain what he means. But one thing is for sure, whatever it was, it was a dangerous situation!

One commentary suggests it as, "An official verdict, perhaps an order for Paul's arrest and execution." His "*sentence of death*" was literally *a death sentence*.

If this is true, Paul's reaction is amazing. While Paul has a bounty on his head, he erupts in praise to God!

Understand, today's text is not simply a *verse of Scripture* it's the *verse of a song*. Paul opens this letter to the Corinthians with a song of blessing to God.

Verses 3-4 are a doxology of praise... "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort..."

Paul's head is on the *chopping block*, but his eyes are on the *unbreakable rock*, His Lord Jesus Christ.

During the 30 Year War of the 17th century, Martin Rinkart, faithfully served a church in Eilenburg, Saxony.

Pastor Rinkart's ministry saw many war-torn years.

There were times when he conducted forty funerals in a single day. The pastor wrote of having preached 4000 funerals over the course of his ministry.

You'd expect such a man to have a negative outlook on life, but Rinkart wrote a table grace for his children.

Today, it's sung as a hymn, "Now thank we all our God, with heart and hands and voices. Who wondrous things hath done, in whom the world rejoices!"

Even through decades of war - surrounded by untold death and dying - firsthand observer of battles and bloodshed - Martin Rinkart's delight was to glorify God.

And so it was with Paul - the apostle was in a *mess*, but his desire was to *bless* God! He sings, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ..."

And then he gives to God the most striking title!

It's profound what He calls the Almighty, the Eternal One... "the Father of mercies and God of all comfort"

If you were a first century pagan reading this passage Paul's title for God would jump off the page.

You'd be shocked. No one familiar with the Greek pantheon of gods ever thought of a God who *specialized in comfort* and *majored on mercy*.

The Greek gods threw down thunderbolts. When their capricious whims were



violated they were quick to seek retribution. They were known for their power, lust, envy, greed, vengeance - *but mercy and comfort?* These virtues were not on their list of divine attributes.

Yet Paul tells us the true God is a God of mercy and comfort. In Hebrew culture to use the expression, "**the father of**" is the same as saying, "**the originator of.**"

According to John 8:44, Satan is "**the father of lies,**" because he told the first one. He's the inventor.

Likewise, the concept of mercy originated with God.

*Remember who God is...* The God of the Bible is the first mind to ever think up the idea of extending mercy. **Our God holds the patent on mercy and comfort!**

The Bible tells us in Exodus 20:6, that God "**shows mercy to thousands...**" Numbers 14:18 tells us, "**The LORD is long suffering and abundant in mercy...**"

Psalms 136 repeats time and time again, "**His mercy endures forever.**" In other words, it never runs out. God has an unlimited supply of mercy and comfort.

And Ephesians 2:4 tells us, "**God... is rich in mercy.**"

Aren't you glad God is rich in what you need most!

When we get to heaven we won't care that God is rich in gold and silver. We'll be glad He didn't invest in the stock market, or Middle East petroleum futures.

In heaven we'll be glad God sunk all His riches in mercy. That He has enough mercy to cancel every sin that's ever been committed by every person who's ever lived - and He still has an abundance of *leftover mercy*.

Remember God is the God of mercy! Never assume God won't forgive you, He is

*“the Father of mercy!”*

It reminds me of the Middle Schooler who was asked to usher at a wedding. A veteran explained to the young fellow, "Before you escort a lady down the aisle ask her, 'guest of the bride or groom?' Put the groom's guests on one side and the bride's on the other."

But that's not exactly the way it came out of the young man's mouth. At the wedding the young usher was overheard asking, "Mam, who's side are you on?"

One thing is certain, if you're in Christ Jesus, **the Father of mercy and God of all comfort**, is on *your* side.

As Paul writes in Romans 8:31, "If God is for us, who can be against us?" The true God is a God who cares, and comforts, and shows amazing amounts of mercy.

And notice when this understanding of who God is bears down on Paul's mind? Apparently, it's in the midst of his trials that he's quickest to cry out, **Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ...**

When you encounter adversity and the depression sets in, that's when you need to remember it's in the fires of life - in the hot spots - that we get to know God.

Who can forget Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego? These were the Hebrews thrown into the furnace.

When they refused to bow to the Babylonian idol, the king tossed into the flames... But there in the belly of the furnace they were not alone - the Son of God was with them! Jesus was there in the midst of their trial...

*Just like He'll be with you when you feel the heat!*

Read the Psalms and you'll discover David's greatest revelations of God rose out of his deepest depressions.

Read the Gospels... every miracle Jesus worked on Earth initially began as someone's problem or difficulty.

It's one thing to come to church and discuss God's faithfulness... It's entirely different matter to learn of His faithfulness when your back is against the wall and you've got nowhere to turn but up. It's easy to talk about the power of God - it's another experience to draw upon that power when you're weak and down.

We can sing of God's sovereignty and superiority when all is well, but we're not really challenged to trust in Him, until He works in ways we don't understand.

The most significant lessons we learn in a trial are the lessons we learn about God Himself. *It's not what we learn from the affliction, but what we learn through the affliction about the nature of God that matters most.*

In the midst of a trial always *remember who God is!*

And second, **remember what God does in us...**

In verse 4 we're told that God **"comforts us in all our tribulation."** The English word translated **"comfort"** is from two Latin words which mean **"with strength."**

God's comfort is more than mere pity. It doesn't just commiserate with us, His **"comfort"** makes us stronger.

It reminds me of a young mother. She writes, **"It was one of the worst days of my life: the washing machine broke down, the telephone kept ringing, my head ached,**

and the mail carrier brought a bill I had no money to pay. Almost to the breaking point, I lifted my one year-old into his highchair, leaned my head against the tray, and began to cry. Without a word, my son took his pacifier out of his mouth and stuck it into mine."

*Hey, I know people who like to share pacifiers!*

They like to get together and nurse wounds - cry together over spilt milk – but this is **not** the comfort God specializes in. His comfort is more than a pacifier.

God gives you strength and power and dynamic to rise up in His Spirit and tackle the challenges you face.

There's a whiskey named, "**Southern Comfort.**" And it's manufacturers have launched a new ad campaign.

An out-of-shape fellow in a speed-o walks the beach with a whiskey in his hand. He obviously doesn't care what people think. All that matters is "**whatever's comfortable.**" The whiskey stunts his inhibitions, and any embarrassment he might feel over his appearance.

And this is the comfort that whiskey - *for that matter, this world* - offers... Rather than change you for the better, and alter your situation - the world's comfort numbs your pain, and dumbs down your shame, and lets you escape your difficulty only for a few moments.

But when you come out of the hangover your problem is still there, and now it's probably worse.

Whereas, *if the man in the ad received **God's Comfort***, he'd sober up, and probably get in better shape, and stop embarrassing himself and his family.

*Southern Comfort* masks your problems - whereas, *God's comfort* sobers, and steadies, and strengthens.

His comfort *frees us* from what *shames us*. It helps us overcome what drags us down and holds us back.

God's comfort helps us face up to life's challenges.

The Greek word translated in verse 4 as "*comfort*" is "*paracletus*" which means "*to come along side.*"

This is also the name used for the Holy Spirit, "*our Comforter.*" God's Spirit comes alongside us to prop us up and make us stronger. *Southern Comfort* is about distilled spirits. *God's Comfort* is about the Holy Spirit!

So often we're told to draw upon God's strength, but here's a mental picture of how this really works...

I have a lawn tractor I use for yard work, and the other day me and my 18 month old grandson, Quincy, went for a ride. Quincy sat in my lap and steered... *sort of...* I still had a hand on the wheel, and my feet were on the gas. But he thought he was driving the tractor.

And this is how our relationship with God rolls.

Supposedly, you're driving, but the Holy Spirit *is alongside you* - you're in His lap. He's propping you up, prodding you with instructions, handling the pedals, propelling you with His strength - and He's right there to grab the wheel if needed. This is the kind of comfort God gives to those who abide and trust in His Spirit.

Again, verse 4 tells us that God "*comforts us in all our tribulation.*" The Greek word

translated "*tribulation*" is also a word with interesting connotations.

"*Thilipsis*" means "*to narrow, or confine, or place under pressure.*" A tribulation is a set of circumstances that hem us in - that pressure us - that cramp our style.

God puts us in the dilemma, and Paul explains why in verse 9, "*we had the sentence of death in ourselves, that we should not trust in ourselves but in God.*"

I once saw a cartoon that depicted two cows grazing in a pasture. A milk truck drove by, and painted on the side of the truck were these words... "*Pasteurized, homogenized, standardized, Vitamin A added.*"

One of the cows sighed, and moaned to the other, "*That makes you feel kind of inadequate, doesn't it?*"

Well, one of the reasons God puts us through difficulties is to expose our inadequacies. Trials humble us and remind us of our need for God. If it were always smooth sailing how much do you think we'd pray?

In the midst of *your bout with the blues* remember who God is... and remember what God does in you...

He wants to remind you how much you need Him.

If your tribulation deepens your knowledge of God - and causes you to strengthen your trust in Christ - then ultimately it's worth any discomfort it may've caused!

God brings us comfort in all our tribulations. *And...*

In the trial **remember what God does through us...**

Paul tells us in 2 Corinthians 1:4 that God comforts us... "*that we may be able to comfort those who are in any trouble, with the comfort with which we ourselves are*

comforted." *He comforts us to make us comforters.*

I love Peterson's paraphrase of verse 4, "God comes alongside us when we go through hard times, and before you know it, he brings us alongside someone else who is going through hard times so that we can be there for that person just as God was there for us."

He comforts us so we can comfort other sufferers.

God wants to involve us in His work, but we have to go through necessary preparation. What kind of impact do you think you'll have on the suffering people if God saved you and then insulated you from all trouble?

*If you never got sick... or stumped a toe... or sliced a T-shot... or finished last... or got bummed out...* Do you really think people around you would listen when you talked to them about the comfort and mercies of God?

What would you say to them if you'd never experienced the hurt they're feeling... never felt the throb of their pain... *How could you help them at all?*

Sure, you could quote some verses, and pass out some sound advice, but how far would it wiggle its way into their soul... if it weren't laced with real empathy?

The late Joe Bayley in his book "*View From A Hearse,*" talks about his experiences in the aftermath of losing one of his children... "I was sitting there torn by grief. Someone came and talked of God's dealings, of why it happened, of hope beyond the grave.

He talked constantly. He said things I knew were true. I was unmoved, except to wish he would go away.

He finally did.

Another person came and sat beside me. He didn't talk. He didn't ask me leading questions. He just sat beside me for an hour and more, listened when I said something, answered briefly, prayed simply, and left. I was moved. I was comforted. I hated to see him go."

If you lose a child, or if you lose your spouse, I can visit with you, and I can spend a few hours saying the right things. I've got plenty of truth I can unload!

But I know it won't be as meaningful as a visit from someone who could say the right things bathed in the comfort they received in the midst of that same pain.

Even Jesus had to undergo this kind of preparation.

Hebrews 4 tells us, "For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin.

Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need." We can confidently approach Jesus for help, because He knows firsthand the help we need.

When my son, Zach, was 3 or 4 years old he spent the night with his grandparents. Zach and Dad were in the den playing cowboys. Their toy guns were blazing.

Villains and sheriffs were dropping like flies.

Every time Zack got shot he'd fall to the ground.

His granddaddy would race over to the wounded cowboy, open his shirt, cut the bullet out of chest, sew him back up... and then they'd start playing again.

At one point in the shootout grandma walked by... when Zack hit the deck she



jumped into the action.

She opened his shirt, cut the bullet out of his chest, and sewed him up - but rather than popping up to continue playing, Zack just laid motionless on the floor.

Finally, he looked at her and groaned, "Grandma, there's only one problem. They shot me in the leg."

And realize, this is why Jesus is such an excellent comforter... He knows exactly where it hurts!

For like you, He's plumbed the depths of depression.

Jesus knows the agony of a betrayal - and the pain of a cruel death. He's felt *our* sorrow to bring us *His* joy.

It's been accurately said, "God does not comfort us to make us comfortable, but to make us comforters."

The tendency for hurting folk is to sit on the sidelines and sulk in their own sadness - fixate on their pain.

But God allows us to suffer so we can grasp His strength, then share it with others with the same need.

A famous psychiatrist, Karl Menninger, gave a lecture on the subject of mental health. After his talk he took questions. He was asked, "What would you advise if a person was on the brink of a nervous breakdown?"

Everyone expected Menninger to say, "consult a psychiatrist." Instead he responded, "Lock up your house, go across the railroad tracks, find someone in need, and then do something to help that person."

The tendency for us when we get hurt is to shut down, and lick our own wounds, but the healing comes when we keep on caring and loving and reaching out.

God is pleased - we are blessed - people come to Christ - the Kingdom gets built - the devil is defeated - when we redeem our *hurts*, and turn them into *help!*

When you're fighting *a bout with the blues* remember three truths... **Remember who God is** - "the Father of mercies and the God of all comfort." **Remember what God does in us** - He "comforts us in all our tribulation."

And **remember what God does through us** - He comforts us "that we may be able to comfort those who are in any trouble, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted." God is for you... He comes alongside you... And He uses you to comfort others...

*Remember that and it'll cure a bout with the blues!*