

Sermon 'Victory through suffering'

2 Corinthians 2:12-3:3

Rev Dr Jos M Strengholt

One well known christian TV preacher says this:

"If you follow God's leadership, you will have peace, joy, righteousness, and you'll bear good fruit. What you won't be is confused and frustrated. God never leads us to busy ourselves so much that we're stressed out all the time and have no joy. And He won't try to confuse your mind—that's the enemy's job."

Thank you for the idea.

So maybe something is wrong with us? We do try to follow God, but we often feel down, and frustrated and stressed out. Just like the apostle Paul.

1. No peace of mind

We have seen in the previous chapters of St. Paul's 2nd letter to the Corinthians, that he was distressed, and that he even despaired of his life'; he spoke of his anguish of heart.

And in what we have read just now, Paul says that he had "no peace of mind". Why was he so disturbed?

Paul had send his friend Titus to Corinth with a letter for the church, to sort out some problems. And he was eagerly waiting for good news. Could Titus, together with the letter that Paul wrote, solve the problems between Paul and the church?

Paul had expected Titus to come back to meet with him in Troas, a harbor city on the west coast of what we now call Turkey.

But Titus never arrived. Paul had hoped for good news from Corinth, for reconciliation with those who criticized him, but there was no word. Titus had not returned.

So Paul had no peace of mind. He was restless. Or maybe depressed? In all cases, Paul was inwardly disturbed, unhappy. And this in spite of the fact that God had opened a door for ministry in Troas. "Paul, rejoice in the blessings!"

Paul decided to no longer wait for Titus in Troas, but to travel to Macedonia instead, on the other side of the sea. Probably he went to the city of Philippi. And from there he wrote the Corinthians this letter that we now have in our hands.

Think of it: Because Paul did not find Titus in Troas, he was willing to leave, even though there was an open door for the proclamation of the Gospel in that city.

This sounds so strange for many Church workers; sometimes we have so many openings and opportunities, and we work ourselves half to death because we think we cannot let these opportunities go unanswered.

Paul was not so worried about this, it seems. Or maybe he was just too depressed to be bothered, too upset because Titus had not come.

I know many Christians who think that peace of mind, a state of tranquility, is the best sign that God is nearby and that He is blessing you. Strange how Paul says that he had no peace of mind. He made it easy for his critics to say: look at this leader; look what a christian leader; he is not balanced, he has no inner calm...

Paul did not care and he moved to Macedonia, and... we read in 2 Cor 7:5:

When we arrived in Macedonia, there was no rest for us. We faced conflict from every direction, with battles on the outside and fear on the inside.

Paul admits to inner turmoil - no peace of mind, fear on the inside... As we all have those feelings every now and then, and some have them a lot. And it is nothing to be ashamed of.

Surely we pray to God that we will feel better; we pray that he gives us inner peace. And we must sometimes talk with a counselor.

But we must never think that inner turmoil is a sign that we have some sort of problem with God, or that something is spiritually wrong with us.

2. Triumph in misery

Paul does not see his unrest, his unhappiness, as a sign of God's absence. Actually - for him, these bad feelings, problems, sufferings, were a sign of God's presence.

I have often quoted from a song of Leonard Cohen... "There's a crack in everything. That's how the light gets in..." Our weakness are Gods means for working in us and through us.

Paul realizes this; he describes his life full of misery as participating in a triumphal procession. He moved from Ephesus, to Troas, to Macedonia, in what he calls "a triumphal procession".

He seems to contradict himself. He first describes his sufferings and inner unrest, and now he speaks of victory? Triumph?

The triumphal procession Paul refers to, is the spectacle people in Rome were able to watch every now and then. when the army had gained a big victory.

For instance, when the roman general Titus in 70AD conquered and destroyed Jerusalem, he was allowed a triumphal procession into the city of Rome.

Josephus, a Jewish historian, describes this procession - he was probably an eye-witness.

This is what the event looked like:

First, the booty from the temple in Jeruzalem was paraded through Rome: for instance, the seven-branched candlestick, the golden table of the show-bread and the golden trumpets from the temple in Jerusalem.

After a while, there was a white bull for the sacrifice which had to be made.

Then the captive princes, leaders and generals in chains, shortly to be thrown into prison and executed. The people along the road would hurl insults and rotten tomatoes at these captive slaves.

Then came the musicians with their lyres;

Then Roman priests, swinging their censers with the sweet-smelling incense burning in them.

After that came general Titus himself, in a chariot drawn by four horses. The people were throwing rose petals at him.

And finally the whole army - wearing all their decorations and shouting their cries of triumph.

Paul compares his life with being led in such a triumphal procession. He did not stress that he was a leader, but that he "was led". As a christian leader, he was being led. Who were the people "led" in the procession of Titus in Rome?

The only people that were "led" in the procession were the captives. Paul compares himself with a captured prince, a slave, someone that was booed by the people along the road.

Paul uses this same imagery in 1 Corinthians 4:9:

God has put us apostles on display at the end of the procession, like men condemned to die in the arena. We have been made a spectacle to the whole universe, to angels as well as to men.

Paul felt down, with no peace of mind, moving from city to city - and he thanks God for this and he calls all his troubles ... a triumphal procession. Because with his troubled life, he participated in honoring Jesus Christ, the victorious Lord.

Church father St Jerome wrote:

God's triumph is the sufferings of the martyrs undergone in Christ's battle, the shedding of their blood, and their joy in the midst of tribulation. (epistle 150)

Paul had enemies in Corinth, so-called apostles, powerful men who seemed to only suffer from inflated egos. These were people focussing on blessings, expressed in inner peace maybe, in powerful leadership, in outward appearance.

Many in the church in Corinth were looking for such leaders powerful in speech, deeds, and personal presence, radiating self-confidence. Paul did not fit the profile.

What can we learn from this? Firstly, never be impressed by Christian leaders who try to ooze an image of power and success. Do not believe them.

And do not allow this idea, that God wants to make you strong and successful in worldly terms. It is dangerous, as you will feel a failure all the time. Accept weakness, accept that there are areas where we are big failures. We live by the grace of God only.

3. Impact on life of others is our recommendation

The false apostles in the church of Corinth, those spiritual bodybuilders, are described in 2 Corinthians 11:13 and 20. Look how Paul describes them:

Such men are false apostles, deceitful workmen, masquerading as apostles of Christ. [...] You even put up with anyone who enslaves you or exploits you or takes advantage of you or pushes himself forward or slaps you in the face.

These false apostles, who portray themselves strong, successful and inwardly stable, they enslave the church members, they exploit, they take advantage, they push you, slap you in the face, they want your money. They make people suffer.

This is the opposite of how Paul describes a true apostle. A true servant of Jesus, does not make people suffer but rather, he himself suffers for their sake. He serves people, he is not served.

Paul's focus is not on his abilities to speak beautifully, or on his overwhelming presence, or on miracle works he did, he simply says: "We do not peddle the Word of God for profit, we speak before God with sincerity."

Paul focused on honestly explaining the Word of God, without aiming for financial advantages, and he stresses his sincerity. Together with his painfully sacrificial lifestyle, in which he mirrors Jesus Christ, these are the real symbols of a Christian lifestyle. Suffering, speaking the Word of God, sincerity.

And Paul's very best argument that God had truly appointed him as an apostle, is that the lives of the people in Corinth had been changed because of his preaching.

"How can you, Corinthians, even suggest that I am not an apostle. The proof is very simple. Your lives have changed because I came to Corinth, I proclaimed the Gospel, and you believed."

He argues that through the Holy Spirit the hearts of the people in Corinth were changed. All Jews knew perfectly well how God by the prophets of Ezekiel and Jeremiah and Joel had promised to do exactly this at the outset of his New Covenant.

Paul says: "My work was exactly what you would expect God to do in his New Covenant. The result of my apostolic ministry is visible. Another recommendation I do not need. The Holy Spirit himself, working in your life, is my best witness!"

Aha! So could be maybe say then, that the proof of apostleship is not power, miracles, an overwhelming presence, but the number of conversions? So there is at least this measure of success?

Should we make the successful proclamation of the Gospel the proof of true apostleship? Is someone only a true servant of God if enough people turn to Christ?

Paul would deny this, I believe. Look at his own description of his life and preaching:

We are [...] the aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing. To the one we are the smell of death; to the other, the fragrance of life.

What Paul is saying is, "For some people I smell bad, and for others the same message is like a wonderful fragrance."

But whether people think his message smells great or that his message stinks, his preaching is effective. It is irresistible. No-one can avoid smelling Paul's life and message. It always works.

Whether people smell a fragrance unto life or the stench unto death depends not on the apostle, but on the hearts of the people and on the work of the Holy Spirit.

Those who listen and obey, show that God works in them. Those who reject the Gospel, reject God and prove the darkness of their hearts. In both cases, the message does what it is supposed to do.

If we spread a fragrance of Christ, then it is fully up to how God works – some will believe, others will reject the Gospel, and both responses are a result of our proclamation. In both cases, our proclamation is effective to do what God wants it to do.

Conclusion

So in short, what do we learn?

The English writer CS Lewis said, "I did not go to religion to make me 'happy'; I always knew a bottle of Port would do that." Living the Christian life can be hard; it does not guarantee at all that we always feel good.

Being a Christian does not contain the promise that our life will be easy. In fact, we should expect our lives to reflect Jesus Christ. He is our example. Was his life easy? No of course.

But your problems and stress may actually be God's way of using you for his ends in this world. If in the midst of the problems that we share with all people, we follow Jesus Christ, then the pressure of the troubles and the stress that sometimes crush us, can bring forth the fragrance of Jesus himself.

He is with you on the journey through life and if you are crushed, He is near. If in those circumstances we hold on to the faith, and we serve Him in word and deed, then our misery is turned into victory. What seems a crushing defeat turns into a victory of spreading the fragrance of Christ.

Amen.

