

2 Corinthians 1:15-22
(Isaiah 43:1-3a; John 14:1-6)
“As Surely As God Is Faithful”

Introduction

Paul is writing in defense of his ministry and in defense of the gospel itself. Traveling teachers have visited Corinth, telling them that Paul is not a very good example of the spirit-filled life. They point to all the troubles he has faced as sign of his walking in confusion and defeat rather than in victory, to his changes in itinerary as signs of his not knowing the mind of Christ, to his anxiety as proof of his lack of steadfast faith, to his various illnesses as proof that the healing power of Christ is not at work in him.

In response, Paul reminds the church that Jesus was a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief, that he was despised and rejected, that he suffered pain in order to bring us comfort, and that those who are truly his followers will experience the same things Jesus experienced so that they too can comfort the suffering. In effect, he argues that the very things that are proof to his critics of his failings as an apostle are to him the very proof that Christ is living in and through him. Paul speaks of his confidence in the integrity of his relationship with the Corinthians, because God has enabled him to act toward them, “not by earthly wisdom but by the grace of God” (1:12).

On the basis of that confidence, Paul now begins to address his changes in travel plans that have been one of the sources of criticism. The changes themselves are of little particular interest to us. Our purpose here is not to reconstruct Paul’s itinerary, but rather to look at what Paul tells us about a proper basis of confidence in a world where plans change, where people suffer, where things fall apart, where God sometimes seems far removed from the very places where we need him most.

Paul makes his point by resting his case entirely upon the faithfulness of God, centering his argument on these words: “As surely as God is faithful” (1:18). But isn’t that the very point at issue in times of crisis and suffering, the faithfulness of God? Where is God when my world is falling apart? Has he not promised never to leave me or forsake me? Here I am, crying out to him day and night, but nothing seems to change. I feel utterly abandoned by God, and the heavens seem bolted closed against the pleadings of my heart. Where is the one who said, “Ask and it will be given to you, seek and you will find, knock and the door will be opened to you”? I am asking, seeking, knocking, and still there is no answer.

In these verses of our text, Paul gives us two concrete points of reference for understanding and experiencing God’s faithfulness in times when he seems far from us. The first may seem obvious to you, although I wonder if it really is – at least in times of distress. But the second is most often forgotten and neglected and is, I believe, the deepest reason that God seems so far away when we are in trouble.

Body

1. **God's preeminent demonstration of his faithfulness to us, his people, is the life of his Son, Jesus Christ. This is the work of God's Word in our lives (v.18-20).**

Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of all of God's words to us. "For all the promises of God find their Yes in him" (1:20a).

What is the least believed promise of God when people are in crisis? I believe it is this: "I will not leave you or forsake you" (Joshua 1:5, etc.). God promised this to Abraham and the patriarchs, to Moses and the people of Israel, to Joshua as he prepared to lead the people into the Promised Land, to David and his descendants as they sought to lead the nation of Israel, and through Jesus and his apostles continues to speak it to his people down to this day.

In contrast we see the charge of God's prophets and apostles against his people, "They have forsaken the Lord" (Jeremiah 17:13). Yet, remarkably, when we are in trouble, we think that the Lord has forsaken us. We have no particular problem with God when it is other people far removed from us who suffer. But when it comes home to us, we feel abandoned and forsaken, unloved by the One who promised that he would never remove his love from us. What are we to do? *Where are we to look when our hearts are breaking and we think that we have been forsaken?*

In Jesus Christ, God has himself drawn so near as to take our flesh, our pain and suffering, even entering into death in our place to do the one thing we most need but that no other can do for us: As Paul writes later in this same letter, "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Corinthians 5:21). To do this, he alone was forsaken by God in our place so that we might never be forsaken, and cried out in his death pains, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matthew 27:46).

In this same way, if one traces all the promises of God, he will find them fulfilled or given lasting significance in Jesus Christ alone.

Jesus Christ is also the fulfillment of all of our words to God. "That is why it is through him that we utter our Amen to God for his glory" (1:20b).

Just as Jesus fulfills all God's words to us, he fulfills all of our words to God. This is why Christians even within the lifetime of those first disciples already concluded their prayers with the words, "In Jesus name. Amen." To pray in his name is to seek to know and ask for his will to be done; it is to place our

desires under his, recognizing that he loves us perfectly, that he desires what is best for us, and further that he alone knows in any given situation what is best for us. Thus we make our requests known, but submit them to him, and ask him to take our words, shape them and make sense of them.

2. Remarkably, God's preminent demonstration of his faithfulness *to the world* is supposed to be in the lives of believers like you and me. *This is the work of God's Spirit in our lives* (v.21, 22).

The Spirit establishes us in Christ (the Anointed) and anoints us for the work God has given us to do. "And it is God who establishes us with you in Christ, and has anointed us" (1:21).

The first point is that God's Spirit makes us part of Christ Jesus, who prayed the night before he died that you and I who believe in him would be caught up into the life of the Triune God, and enjoy the same kind of unity with him that he enjoys with the Father and the Spirit (see Joh17:20f). So too, Paul speaks of us as members of Christ's body, just as the hand and foot and mouth are members of the physical body. Thus we are established, confirmed as a part of Christ. His righteousness is now mine, his inheritance mine, his name mine, even his destiny mine.

The second point is that he has not just given me these rights and privileges, but he is actually doing something in me to change me from the faithless, heartless blasphemer that I am apart from him, into a person who increasingly displays the life of Christ to others. *This is the real focus of what he wants to say here: Because of the Spirit's anointing, and our being established in Christ, the world now has every reason to expect that, when they look at us, they will see something of what Jesus is like, and will actually begin to think that perhaps God really is faithful to his Word, that just maybe they might risk trusting him.*

The Spirit seals us as belonging to God alone and guarantees us that all of God's promises to us will be fulfilled. "[A]nd who has also put his seal on us and given us his Spirit in our hearts as a guarantee" (1:22).

Paul now sharpens the point with these final assertions: God seals us so that his mark is on us, and he gives us enough of his Spirit now that we have no doubt that he will finally complete all that he has begun to do in us.

Both of the terms here are from the marketplace: When a person in the ancient world purchased an item in the marketplace, he would affix his seal to it so that anyone who saw it would know that it was his and that he would soon be back to pick it up. So, too, God seals his children, and as we take on more and more of Christ's character, we know and the world around us knows that we belong to him.

And the second term is also from the marketplace: a down payment is guarantee that the rest of what was promised will be coming. God gives his people enough of a taste of the life of the Spirit that we hunger and thirst for more and know “that he who began a good work in [us] will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ” (Philippians 1:6).

Conclusion

So then, when we are most inclined to doubt God’s faithfulness, when we feel abandoned by the one who promised never to leave us or forsake us, we should first look again to the life and ministry of Jesus Christ, the supreme demonstration of God’s faithfulness to his people. But remember all the while that God has established us in Christ, not merely for our own sake, but for the sake of the world around us, a world that may yet know very little of the story of Jesus or of the promises of God, but which should see in us a demonstration of God’s faithfulness, not because we do not suffer trouble just as others do, but because we face all that comes – joy and sorrow, victory and defeat – in openness and trust that God is faithful, that this life is fleeting, that here we have no continuing city, and that the day is coming when our great God and king will bind up this broken world and make all things new. “Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears, let him hear” (Matthew 13:43).

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