

Sermon Series:

GREEN LEAF IN DROUGHT-TIME

God's sustaining grace in times of trouble



HE'S GOT YOU!

2 Corinthians 1:3-11; Psalm 40 (Becky Douglass)

"You've Got This!" This is a popular saying at the moment. It is meant to give people confidence that they can do something difficult they are facing. Sometimes all you need is to know people believe in you to encourage you to do something which is hard.

Scott and I have been watching some of the Olympic competitions this week and on Tuesday night we were watching the women's gymnastics team competition. I think I love watching this because there is no way that I could ever do what they do! These athletes are surrounded by a supportive team who encourage them and constantly tell them, "You've Got This!". In the first round of the competition, the USA and Russian team were doing their vaults. The announcers were very excited because the USA team includes Simone Biles who is probably the best female gymnast in the world – possibly of all time. However, when we saw her vault, it was immediately obvious that something was wrong. She didn't do the number of rotations she was supposed to do, and she struggled to do even that well. Hers was the lowest scoring vault of the two teams. The announcers were obviously shocked and puzzled as to what was happening. They looked at the vault repeatedly trying to see if she had injured herself or stumbled somehow. But there were no obvious reasons for her poor performance. Then as the teams moved on to their next apparatus, it was announced that Simone had retired from competition and wouldn't participate any more. The rest of the team filled in for her admirably but instead of the expected gold medal, they came in second to the Russians.

What had happened to Simone? The next day, she spoke out and said that the pressure to perform and the high expectations placed on her to get gold medals in every event had simply overwhelmed her. She was no longer confident she could do what had become second nature to her for so many years. She was afraid she would make mistakes and let down the team or even injure herself. She had reached the point where no amount of her coaches and team members saying "You've Got This!" would help. She had to admit that she didn't have what it took any more.

Have you ever felt like that? I'll admit that sometimes, in spite of all the encouragement in the world, I don't have what it takes. This may be from lack of skills or experience, but sometimes it is just that dealing with multiple issues over time has worn me and pushed me beyond my ability to do what I need to do.

And you know what? Both David and Paul had times when they felt like that as well. We don't know exactly what situations they were facing, but we know that at some point they hit bottom and didn't know how to keep going – until God stepped into the situation and changed everything.

1. God's comfort

As Paul tells his story, he starts by reminding his readers of the character of God.

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, ... (v.3)

There are two words which Paul uses to describe God – compassion and comfort. As we have seen before, compassion describes how God feels towards us – that gut-wrenching mother love which God has for His people. David also describes God in this way:

*Do not withhold your mercy (or compassion) from me, LORD;
may your love and faithfulness always protect me. (Ps 40:11)*

Compassion tell us how God **feels about us**, which is the motivation for what God **does for us** which is described by Paul using the word 'comfort'. If you're like me, you tend to have a picture of comfort as someone patting you on the shoulder going "There, there, don't cry. It will be OK." But that is definitely not what the original Greek word - 'parakeleo' - means. It has the idea of come along side to help, encourage, exhort, challenge, enable. I think of the Olympic road cycling race we watched this week. Every so often, as the racers were peddling along, a car would drive up next to them and hand them something to eat or drink. They talk with the rider about the race conditions and strategy, and once we even saw the person in the car reach out and make an adjustment to the bike! They were coming alongside the rider to 'comfort' the rider by giving them the help they needed to keep going. To do this, they need to know the course and the rider and respond to the needs which arise. The rider could not complete the race without their support team – no matter how good a rider they are.

This is what God does for us. When He comforts us, he is coming alongside us to give us what we need to keep going. He knows exactly the situation in which we find ourselves and he has exactly what we need. But God takes this 'comfort' a step further. The support team for the rider comes and goes. They can't be next to their rider all the time. And they can't actually peddle the bike for the rider! But listen to what Jesus said to His disciples before He left to go back to heaven:

And I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Helper (Comforter, Advocate, Intercessor—Counsellor, Strengtheners, Standby), to be with you forever—the Spirit of Truth, whom the world cannot receive [and take to its heart] because it does not see Him or know Him, but you know Him because He (the Holy Spirit) remains with you continually and will be in you. (John 14:16,17 AMP)

The word which Jesus uses here to describe the Holy Spirit is 'paraklete' which is from the same root as 'parakeleo' or 'comfort'. Here, the Amplified translation uses several words to try to capture what the word means – Helper, Comforter, Advocate Intercessor, Counsellor, Strengtheners, Standby. All of these are trying to capture all that the Holy Spirit does in our lives. And the wonderful thing is that Jesus said that he will "*be with you forever ... He remains with you continually and will be in you.*" The Holy Spirit fills us with God Himself, and God in us is all we could ever need to face any situation.

Paul affirms that there is no limit to God's comfort, for He "... comforts us in all our troubles... (v.4) The words Paul uses to describe his difficulties – *troubles, suffering, great pressure, deadly peril, sentence of death* – convey an intense and overwhelming situation. And these troubles affected him deeply. He says he was *distressed*, and he *despaired*. This event affected him deeply – he didn't just shrug it off as no big deal. David, in Psalm 40, felt the same way.

*For troubles without number surround me;
my sins have overtaken me, and I cannot see.*

*They are more than the hairs of my head,
and my heart fails within me. (v. 12)*

I find this very reassuring. If these Biblical writers felt this way, then it is not wrong for me to feel this way at times! There are times when life is overwhelming, and we don't need to be ashamed to admit it. Yes, God is with us, and we trust in Him. But life still hurts us at times.

The hope is that this is not the end of the story. Paul goes on to say:

*For just as we share abundantly in the sufferings of Christ,
so also our comfort abounds through Christ. (v.5)*

Yes, we face some difficult things. But we have two things to hang on to. Firstly, Paul says that we are a part of what God is doing to redeem this world and as such we suffer at times as Christ did. We are targets of Satan because we are God's people and every time God enables us to walk through difficulties, Satan is defeated again. Our suffering and how we deal with it matter in what God is doing in this world. And no matter how much we might suffer, God's abundant comfort is more than enough to enable us to handle what we are facing. Nothing is greater than the compassion and comfort of God which flows to us through our relationship with Christ.

2. Our Response

And through this suffering, we learn more about God and our relationship with Him is strengthened.

... this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead. He has delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us again. On him we have set our hope that he will continue to deliver us, ... (v.9,10)

When life is going well, it is easy to rely on ourselves. It is easy to think "I've Got This!" I can do it on my own. But when difficult things happen, when the pressure mounts, we see clearly that this is not so; that we need God. And as we turn to God, we see Him there ready and waiting for us to allow Him to do what would be impossible on our own. Paul came to the point when he thought he would die, but in that moment, he remembered that God could raise even the dead! This gave him hope because he knew He could safely leave his very life in God's hands and know that God was able to do whatever was necessary. This hope can take the fear out of our suffering.

As David faced his darkest moment, he also affirms that God has a plan to deal with our situation and He won't stop until the job is finished:

*I waited patiently for the LORD;
- I relied completely on Him
he turned to me and heard my cry.
- He responded to me and my particular need
He lifted me out of the slimy pit, out of the mud and mire;
- He saved me from the situation - and my feelings about it
he set my feet on a rock and gave me a firm place to stand.
- He set me up to survive and to even to succeed!*

This is the hope we need when things look impossible. This is the hope "... which produces in you patient endurance of the same sufferings we suffer." (v.6) I was interested to read, when I looked up the meaning behind 'patient endurance', that one of its uses is to describe the ability of a plant to live under hard and unfavourable circumstances. This takes us back to our theme of "Green Leaf in Drought-time"! God's comfort enables us to continue to grow and even thrive even in the midst of difficulties. This doesn't mean that we don't feel the difficulties, but it does mean that God will make it possible for us to walk through those times with Him.

3. Helping each other

One of the unique things about a cycling road race is that although it is an individual event, and only one person will get a gold medal, there is a lot of teamwork involved among the riders from a particular country. Team members take turns riding at the front, making a way through the air, and through the pack of cyclists. They talk about strategies on when to make a break and when to conserve energy. They are in constant contact with each other. A cyclist who is racing alone is at a disadvantage.

So it is with us. There is so much we can do to help each other through difficult times. Paul says:

... we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God ... just as you share in our sufferings, so also you share in our comfort. (v.4,7)

As we see someone else struggling, we can think back to times when we have struggled ourselves and what was helpful to us. What did God teach us? What did others do which was helpful? Paul's message about God's comfort is so much stronger because he is talking about it from a position of weakness, acknowledging his own suffering but also his own comfort. It is not about us having all the answers, but a chance for us to walk with someone and share the comfort we have received in our own times of struggle.

I think one of the difficult things about our current lockdown is that we are not able to be with people as we would like to help them through difficult times. But Paul has an answer for that as well. He values their involvement "... as you help us by your prayers." (v.11) We often undervalue the power of prayer. As we pray for people, and let them know we are praying for them, we become a channel for God's comfort to strengthen them. Sometimes we do not know exactly what to pray for people but bringing their situation before God and asking for His intervention in their lives – whatever that might involve – is always a powerful way to bring God's comfort to people.

Life can be difficult at times, for many different reasons. No two people's situations are alike. But God knows exactly how to comfort each one of us. And He gives us the privilege of joining with Him in His work of comfort as we share with others how God has comforted us. And where does this leave us?

In the words of Paul: *Then many will give thanks on our behalf for the gracious favour granted us in answer to the prayers of many. (v.11)*

In the words of David: *He put a new song in my mouth, a hymn of praise to our God. Many will see and fear the LORD and put their trust in him. (Ps 40:3)*

How we handle those difficult situations is important to more than just ourselves. As God comforts us, and we are able to be that 'Green Leaf in Drought-time', others see this and are pointed to God. We never know what impact we may be having on others. Not because we are strong in ourselves, but because we have worked together and allowed God to be strong in us.

Sometimes we haven't "got this" – but He's always "got us". I think that should be the Christian response when we want to encourage one another. Let's remind each other that "He's Got You!"