

June 9, 2013
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LIVING WITH THE BIRDWATCHER
2 Corinthians 1:3-9

INTRODUCTION

Anna had one of those classic Sunday School moments last week. One of the kids in her Sunday school class, who shall remain anonymous, informed her, “my dad is 95 years old. He’s older than Jesus, but he can still beat people up.” I don’t even know where to begin to talk about all the issues that comment raises. So I won’t. I’ll just enjoy the good laugh I got out of it.

But I do want you to think about that kid. Do you think he’s ever afraid when he’s in the company of his aged, 95-year-old father? Perhaps there are some scary people around but his older than Jesus dad can take care of them. I suspect that helps that boy feel both very safe and quite proud of his daddy.

Wouldn’t it be great if we could go through life with that kind of security and confidence? I believe we can. We are going to look at a passage of Scripture that in fact says we can. The passage is 2 Corinthians 1:3-9, a passage that speaks directly to those times when we must walk through life’s dark allies. It is a passage written by a man who went through far more ominous and painful times than any of us will likely ever experience, so he speaks from firsthand knowledge.

This sermon is the first in a series I am calling *Antifragile*, a title I have stolen from the best selling book by Nassim Taleb. I doubt he’ll care if I co-opt his copyrighted title. I wrote about this in a couple of blogs recently. His thesis is that there is a quality that is the true opposite of fragility that we have no name for, so he coined the term antifragility. We tend to think of the opposite of fragile as sturdy, resilient or strong, something able to withstand rough treatment. But he took the concept a step further and said, “what if something not only can withstand chaos or stress or rough treatment, but actually become stronger or better from such things?” To be antifragile is to actually improve through the stress and chaos.

Imagine a box marked “fragile.” You know that what usually accompanies that word is “handle with care.” If that box is treated roughly you know that it is likely that the contents will break. Taleb invites us to envision a box with the word “antifragile” on it. More than the context of that box being able to not break if stressed, that box might also have the words, “please treat roughly” on it also, for its contents will only improve if it is shaken or tossed around.

There are antifragile things in this world. Our own bodies have a somewhat antifragile quality to them, for when our muscles and bones are subjected to stress they actually grow stronger. We have all heard about post traumatic stress and the difficulties those who suffer from it face. What you may not know is that there is also something called post traumatic growth. Studies show that many people who suffer traumatic events, including military veterans returning from combat, actually become healthier and stronger as a result. In fact research indicates that more people experience post traumatic growth than post traumatic stress. There is even a post traumatic growth research group and the University of North Carolina. Political movements often have an antifragile quality, for when they are opposed by the powers that be it often just makes them stronger. How different would you be if you saw yourself as an antifragile person? Would it change you if you could actually *welcome* chaos, upheaval, stress and difficulty because you know that you will only grow better and stronger when you go through them? It seems to me that if I truly thought that I would be far less concerned about life becoming difficult.

I submit to you that God actually intends his people to be antifragile. But how can we become less fragile? I have found in the book of 2 Corinthians a number of things God does for us or has given us that if we put them to work in our lives will cause us to be more antifragile. We will not be looking at every verse in this letter from Paul, just looking at some sections which address this matter. So let's begin today and see what God does that can make us antifragile.

WE WILL HAVE TROUBLE

Take a moment to look through this passage and observe the words that are used and repeated. In verse 4 the word "trouble" is used twice. In verse 5 note the word "sufferings." In verse 6 we see the word "distressed" and again "sufferings." Once again "sufferings" shows up in verse 7. In verse 8 Paul wrote of "the hardships we suffered." He also wrote of "great pressure" and said he "despaired." Do you get the idea? Suffering, trouble, hardship, despair, distress all tell us the message is that we should not be surprised if life seems difficult. Paul wrote as though we would expect that life would include suffering and hardship. We should not be surprised by this.

Jesus said in John 16:33, "I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart. I have overcome the world." There are words from the mouth of the Lord Himself. In this world you will have trouble. Peter, one of Jesus' closest friends, got the message. In the letter he wrote that we call 1 Peter in chapter 4 verse 12 he wrote to Christians who were

dealing with great difficulties and said, “Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering as though something strange were happening to you.” In other words, why are you surprised? This is what you should expect in this world.

Why should we expect to have trouble in this world? Because it is a broken world. In Romans 8:22-23 Paul wrote, “We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.” All of creation is groaning as in the pains of childbirth. I have been through birth of 3 children. Yes, I know you could say it is Laurie who went through the birth of those kids and suffered the pain of them. But I submit that I am the one who can better understand what Paul means about the groaning of it because I observed it first hand. Laurie was the one doing the groaning and didn’t have to listen to it.

Well, either way, you get the point. There was some serious groaning involved in the birth process because it hurt. It hurt bad. Why do you suppose Paul chose the image of childbirth? I believe that at least part of the reason is that it is one of the most intense pains that human beings can ever experience. Paul’s inspired words here tell us that all of creation is hurting that badly. It is in serious pain. So the question is, since you are part of creation, does it make sense to you that though the entire universe is in such terrible pain your life ought to be a bed of roses?

We have this weird idea that at some point all these strange things are going to stop happening to us and life will finally settle down and become the gentle, comfortable thing it’s supposed to be. There are even supposedly Christian preachers who will tell you that God wants your life to be great. It should be your best life now. God is going to solve all your problems and you’re going to be a winner who is strong, healthy and rich. They don’t get that from the Bible. It says you live in a broken world full of hardship and suffering, and if you are human you are going to experience your fair share of it. We should not be surprised by the tumult and pain of life. If you find that life seems to be full of obstacles, disappointments and hardships, you should realize that this is *normal*. It is what we should expect. To expect anything else is like going on a roller coaster then asking why there are all this drastic drops and turns and why is this thing going so fast? That’s what a roller coaster does. And that’s what life does!

If that’s not enough for you we should remember that the spiritual component of following Christ is going to add to the degree of difficulty. We have this sense that

if we do what God wants then he will make everything easier for us. The truth is that it works just the opposite way. If you really want life to get easier, in a way, then just go with the flow of the world and don't follow Christ. There are two related reasons for this. The first is that as a follower of Christ you are going to be targeted by the enemy of the human race, Satan. In Ephesians 6:12 Paul wrote, "Our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms." In 6:16 he wrote of the "flaming arrows of the evil one." Read the book of Job and you will see that one of Satan's favorite tactics is to target those who are loyal to God and to batter them with hardship and loss. You are what military people call a high value target in the spiritual war, so you are going to get lots of attention from the enemy. In other words, you're going to get his best shot.

The Bible also says that Satan is the god of this age. In other words, the prevailing thinking and tenor of this world is shaped by Satan. If that's true, how do you think the world is going to relate to you if you follow Jesus? Well, the world put Jesus on a cross. Do you suppose it will treat his followers any better? Jesus said in John 15:18-19, "If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you." Did you hear those last words? That is why the world hates you. Have you ever felt that life seems to be against you? This is why. It is. That's your lot in life. In the first *Star Wars* movie at one point C3PO says to R2D2, "It's our lot in life. We were made to suffer." Here's the bad news: if you're a follower of Jesus that is true of you!

This all sounds grim until we think about the concept of antifragility. What happens to something that is antifragile when it is exposed to stress, hardship and chaos? It improves! It becomes better and stronger! If we as followers of Christ are antifragile then all of the hardship, all of the distress of this world is actually just making us better!

This understanding that the hardships and disappointments and troubles are the normal course of life can help us become antifragile. If we say I want my life to be normal and placid I don't want to have to deal with all these stresses and disappointments, that's like saying I want to play football but I don't want all that running into people. That's what the game is. And life is made of all those ups, downs, twists and turns. It can help us be antifragile if we accept the way life is and see it is the challenge before us to accept the challenges of those rough patches

that make up the bulk of life with courage and confidence in God. But what else can help us become more antifragile? We'll see a big factor in it in this passage.

GOD COMFORTS

The other obvious emphasis in this passage is that of comfort. The word is used 8 times in these verses. Add to that the word “compassion” and you get powerful emphasis on the idea of comfort. Look at the way God is described in verse 3. He is the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort. The Bible claims to be God's revelation of himself. It is his way of communicating to us what he is like, what he wants us to know about him. This description of God is powerful. It says he is the Father of compassion. This is kind of like saying that Thomas Jefferson, George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, John Adams, Alexander Hamilton, James Madison and the others were the fathers of our country. They were the originators, the source of it. When Paul wrote that God is the Father of compassion he meant God is the originator of it and the source of compassion. He is where compassion comes from.

The Greek word translated “compassion” meant sympathy, but in their definition the Greeks didn't just see sympathy as meaning only a feeling. The Greek “compassion” meant not just to feel sympathy but to be moved to help. Isn't this what a father should be? When he sees the plight of his child he feels sympathy, but he doesn't just feel, he acts. He does something to help the situation. This is what God is like.

Paul says he is the God of all comfort. We think of comforting as meaning patting on the back, more like consoling. But note the word comfort. Even its root meaning is stronger than that. The “fort” part of the word means “strength.” This shows up in words like fortress and fortitude. The first part of the word means “with.” So it really means “with strength.” There is no English word that is an exact equivalent of the Greek word translated “comfort” in this passage. The original sense of comfort comes closest. The Greek word is *parakalesis*. Para means “by” or “alongside,” and kalesis comes from the verb that means to call. So it means to call alongside. It includes the idea of consoling, but also means to be with, to fortify, to strengthen, to encourage.

God will comfort us in all our troubles. He is not distant. He is not disinterested. He is not capricious or devious, constantly playing tricks on us. He is the perfect Father who is not just interested in what is happening in his kids' lives, he is almost obsessed with it. He notices every detail and cares about every hurt, every disappointment, every triumph, every joy. He not only cares about them but he

enters in. Note that Paul says he comforts us in **all** our troubles. Not just the big ones, but even the little ones.

Laurie teaches music to kids that range in age from 7 to...well to some people who have kids in college. Last week she had a recital for her students. They had all worked hard so they had their performance pieces down. I kind of felt sorry for the kids that day. Some of them were so nervous they looked like they were about to dissolve. There were less than 30 people at the event, all of them family members of the students. This was not a packed arena or a concert hall. It was a little thing. But it was a big thing to the students. One dad is an airline pilot. He flew all night from Japan to Los Angeles. Then he jumped in his car and drove like a mad man so he could arrive just a few minutes late. He was exhausted, he'd worked all night, but this was a big deal to his kids, so he had to be here. He's a compassionate dad who cares about his kids.

Do you understand this is what God is like? In her biography of world renowned physicist Stephen Hawking titled *An Unfettered Mind*, Kitty Ferguson quoted the scientist saying, "We are such insignificant creatures on a minor planet of a very average star on the outer suburbs of one of a hundred thousand million galaxies. So it is difficult to believe in a God that would care about us or even notice our existence."

It's easy to understand why Mr. Hawking would feel that way. Did you know that just last week I had a new ebook published on Amazon? It's a novel called *One More Tomorrow*. I checked this week and on the Amazon best seller list it was ranked number 170,652. It's also on Barnes and Noble, but it's not ranked as high there. Do you know how many books Amazon has on its site? They list 1,748,000. Now the glass half full tribe will look at that and think, "Hey, your book was almost in the top 10%." The glass half empty folks and the realists will say, "uh, there are 170,000 books ahead of it. More to the point there are 1.7 million books on Amazon. How in the world is anyone going to notice your book?"

Here's the answer: they're not. One book out of 1.7 million is too insignificant to garner any notice. Imagine if the Amazon site were, say, comparable to the universe. So I have no trouble seeing why Mr. Hawking would conclude that you and I are way too insignificant to attract any attention from God. It seems quite reasonable to think that. There are times in life when it feels like God most certainly has no interest in me and my life.

Mr. Hawking is immeasurably more intelligent than I. But with all due respect, I beg to differ with him. He's right that it is difficult to believe that the Creator of all that exists could actually be aware of and care about one insignificant creature. It is difficult, but not impossible. I believe that is true not because it is intrinsically obvious that God cares about one measly little creature on this insignificant planet, but because he has told me he does. And when I think about it that doesn't seem quite so impossible. Finite humans have created an information system that tells Amazon exactly what is happening to my insignificant novel. They know how many copies of it they have sold and where it ranks compared to the other 1.7 million books they have listed at every moment of every day and night. They are able to do that for every single one of those 1.7 million books. If human beings can do that is it really too much to believe that an infinite God, who created a limitless universe, can do the same for his creatures?

In Luke 12:6 Jesus said, "Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? Yet not one of them is forgotten by God." God knows even the little sparrows that flit about our yards. In Matthew 10:29 Jesus said the Father knows them so well that not one of them falls to the ground without his knowing about it. Recently I was sitting in our living room working one afternoon when I heard a bang above me. A small daredevil bird had tried to fly through what he thought was a hole in a wall only to run head on into a window. I looked out and saw him flailing around on the patio. Then he got up, shook himself and flew away. Jesus said God knew it when that bird hit that window. **God is the best bird watcher ever.** He knows where every single one of them is at every moment and he actually cares about what happens to them all. Jesus went on to say that if God is that tuned into little birds don't you think he can also keep track of you? In Luke 12:7 Jesus said that God even knows the number of hairs on your head. That means that God is more tuned into you and knows you better than you know yourself! I don't know the number of hairs on my head. I know the number is a lot lower than it ought to be, but I don't know what it is.

So God knows about you and me. He cares about us. He doesn't just feel sympathy for us, he actually desires to enter into our lives and comfort us, mean console, encourage and strengthen us as we deal with the trials that will inevitably beset us. But how does he do that? How does God comfort us? How do we experience that in our daily lives? Paul doesn't specify how that happens, but a little reflection will remind us of how God comforts and encourages us.

With his love

The thing we need most, by far, is to know that we are loved. If we feel like we aren't loved no matter what else may happen in our lives it will feel empty and painful. But knowing that we are loved is the thing that sustains us and enables us to keep going when life is at its hardest and worst.

God tells us in Romans 8:38-39 that not only does he love us, but that nothing can ever separate us from his love. This is the thing that can make all the difference in our lowest moments. The lowest point in Laurie's and my life came when our son, Joel died. In two weeks it will be 29 years since that day, and I still don't like to think too much about it because it hurts too much. There was nothing anyone could do or say to stop it from being excruciating.

But I noticed a curious thing. One thing seemed to help a little. It was when others were grieved and wept with us. To the world the death of one sick child was sad, but it happens every day and the world just goes on. That just felt wrong to me. It felt so important that the whole world should stop the way our lives did. It helped a little when people, mostly by their actions, said, "this is not just one more sad event in a sad world. It's bigger than that. This is important." In other words when they said it mattered to them it helped us. When God says, "what happens to you is important to me. It is not just one more sad event in a sad world. I hurt with you" it helps us. It comforts us. It is, in fact, crucial to know that it matters to him.

With his Spirit and strength

Later in this chapter at 2 Corinthians 1:21 Paul wrote, "Now it is God who makes both us and you stand firm in Christ." When the testing gets hard it is important to remember that part of God's "comforting" is to come alongside us and give us the strength to stay faithful and keep on. Peter wrote in 1 Peter 5:10, "The God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast."

Ephesians 3:16 says he will strengthen us with power through his Spirit in our inner being.

If we will turn to him God says he will give us strength when we feel like all is lost and we want to just give up. A very large part of that comes from being rooted in the truth that he loves us unconditionally and infinitely. But there is a part of that we cannot define in human terms. God mysteriously, mystically, divinely, will be with you and will strengthen you as you look to him in tough times. That doesn't mean you will suddenly feel superhuman and feel like you are faster than a speeding bullet. It just means that you will sense God's love, his strength and you

will be able to keep going another day and maybe even get beyond your woes to care about others.

I have experienced this at a number of times. There was a point a number of years ago when Laurie and I were under a lot of pressure in our ministry. We were discouraged and weary. We both wondered if it was time to just quit. We had a vacation that came at just the right time. We went on this trip with the intention of seeking what God wanted next for us because we were pretty sure we were done where we were. We'd had enough. As we read God's word together and prayed during that trip a strange thing happened. We both got a powerful sense that God was saying, "Stay where you are. Be faithful. Don't be discouraged." Somehow, even though as we came back nothing had changed and things were as tough as ever, we were different. Our whole outlook had changed. God had comforted us and strengthened our hearts. Nothing changed in our circumstances, but something changed in us. God enabled us to stand firm with joy.

With his truth

Ephesians 6:14 says "Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist." God's truth is essential to our being able to stand firm when it is hard. God brings his truth to bear on our situation. He reminds us that he loves us. He reminds us that he is with us. He tells us that hardship has a purpose in our lives. He reminds us of the truth that he is sovereign over this world, that he is using all that happens for our good. He reminds us that he is in control of all that happens. Psalm 139:16 says that all the days written for us are written in God's book. He says our pain and our faithfulness in hard times have meaning. These truths are crucial to enabling us to stand. They comfort and strengthen us.

With hope

God brings hope to our souls, hope that somehow this mysterious and painful thing has a point. Hope that he will use it. Hope that in the end when we are confused but not destroyed by it, when we stand firm, it is storing up for us an eternal weight of glory. In other words, he reminds us that we have the hope that this will be worth the pain. Hope is essential. If we don't have hope, we will give up.

With his people

On many occasions I have heard from many of you saying you don't know what you would have done when going through terrible trials had it not been for brothers and sisters in Christ who were there to support you and help you get through. This is how God expresses himself. It is why he refers to the church as his body. We are God's tangible, physical expression of his love and presence on earth.

GOD'S COMFORT MAKES A DIFFERENCE

So how does God comforting us make us more antifragile?

It enables us to comfort others

There is an important principle that we can see in this passage. It is a principle that applies in nearly every way. The principle is that God doesn't want you to be a dead sea, he wants you to be a river. You can still get a glimpse of a dead sea out in the desert. Go to the Salton Sea and you see what happens when water instead of flowing freely just gets stopped up. It becomes brackish and is no longer life giving. Compare that with a stream flowing down from the mountains. The water is fresh and clear and gives life to plants and animals.

We have a tendency to think that when God blesses us with some good thing it is simply for our own good. It stops with us. That is almost never true. God loves us, but asks us to become pipelines of his love to other people. God gives us spiritual gifts and asks us to use them to benefit others. God blesses us with financial abundance and asks us to use it to help others, to be generous with it.

You see this principle in 2 Corinthians 1:4. God “comforts us in all our troubles ***so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God.***” God comforts us to make us better. He wants us to derive benefit from the chaos and stress of this world. One of the main benefits is he was to equip us to comfort and encourage people who are going through hard times.

One of the most important components of effective comfort and consolation is suffering. We all know it. Have you ever been in a tough or painful situation and had someone who has never been where you are come along and try to cheer you up and give you advice on how to handle it? How did that feel? It's not helpful. In fact, it's galling and irritating at best.

Recently I was talking to a guy who was expressing some theories about playing baseball. He wants to be a sort of baseball guru. But as I asked him about his playing experience I learned he hadn't played beyond youth baseball. He hadn't coached beyond youth baseball. He's never played or coached at a higher level. So why would anyone be interested in what he has to say? His advice seems hollow to me. If you haven't lived through it do you really know what you're talking about?

We simply cannot truly help other people in their suffering, in the hardships they face, until we ourselves have suffered and endured hardship. No one can give the

same kind of encouragement and hope as someone who has been through just what you are undergoing, who has felt the full weight of the pain and has survived it. That person can empathize and can give insight, wisdom and hope that you can also make it through.

It causes us to depend more on God

In verse 8 Paul referred to hardships he faced in the province of Asia. It was so bad he felt it was “far beyond our ability to endure.” Have you ever felt like that? He thought he’d reached the end. He said, “we despaired even of life.” This was the guy who was repeatedly beaten, at one time stoned by a mob and left for dead. He was thrown in jail unjustly on repeated occasions. He suffered shipwreck. This was one tough dude. For the situation to be beyond his ability to endure it must have been horrific.

We don’t know the specifics of what happened to him, but whatever it was he says in verse 9, “this happened so that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead.” God allows some of these situations in our lives specifically so that we will come to the end of ourselves and depend on him. If you are Daniel thrown into a pit full of hungry lions you become very clear that you’re not going to be able to survive the situation by outwitting or fighting off those lions. God is your only hope.

But how does learning to depend on God make us antifragile? You learn that God is faithful and can be depended on in every situation. Have you ever imagined what it was like for Daniel that night he spent rooming with a pride of lions? That must have been one long night. Every time a lion got up and stretched he probably thought, “this is it. Now I’m done for.” Every time a lion looked his way it must have made him nervous. Every time a lion licked his chops Daniel probably thought, “Uh oh, he looks way too hungry.” I suspect that Daniel wasn’t afraid of dying. But he had to be afraid of the process that was staring him in the face. He surely had to fear those sharp claws ripping his flesh and those awesome teeth clamping down on his body tearing him apart. What a terrible way to go. Yet that whole night not a paw was laid on him. Do you think after that anything ever frightened him very much? If someone threatened him or tried to intimidate him I suspect he would just calmly reply, “Really? What are you going to do, throw me in a lions’ den? Oh, wait. That’s already been done.”

We go through trials and suffering, and as we do God is there to console, encourage and strengthen us, to give us hope. We learn that we can depend on him. As a result we become more secure, more at peace, knowing that God is with us.

2 Corinthians 1:3-9

We are able to handle such things with more confidence and more joy even. We become less fragile, or more antifragile.