



“JOIN THE MINISTRY, SEE THE WORLD!”?

A WEIGHING OF MINISTERIAL MOTIVATION¹

Tim J. R. Trumper

¹ Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, unto the church of God which is at Corinth, with all the saints which are in all Achaia: ² grace be to you and peace from God our Father, and from the Lord Jesus Christ. ³ Blessed be God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies, and the God of all comfort; ⁴ who comforteth us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort them which are in any trouble, by the comfort wherewith we ourselves are comforted of God. ⁵ For as the sufferings of Christ abound in us, so our consolation also aboundeth by Christ. ⁶ And whether we be afflicted, it is for your consolation and salvation, which is effectual in the enduring of the same sufferings which we also suffer: or whether we be comforted, it is for your consolation and salvation. ⁷ And our hope of you is stedfast, knowing, that as ye are partakers of the sufferings, so shall ye be also of the consolation. ⁸ For we would not, brethren, have you ignorant of our trouble which came to us in Asia, that we were pressed out of measure, above strength, insomuch that we despaired even of life: ⁹ but we had the sentence of death in ourselves, that we should not trust in ourselves, but in God which raiseth the dead: ¹⁰ who delivered us from so great a

Rev. Tim J. R. Trumper, PhD (University of Edinburgh), is President of From His Fullness Ministries and Minister of St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

¹ The following article is based on a sermon first preached in chapel at Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary, Grand Rapids, Michigan, U.S.A. on January 26, 2022, and later published in *Puritan Reformed Journal* (15:1, January 2023, 131-149). Here it has undergone several instances of light editing.

death, and doth deliver: in whom we trust that he will yet deliver us; ¹¹ye also helping together by prayer for us, that for the gift bestowed upon us by the means of many persons thanks may be given by many on our behalf. (2 Cor 1:1-11 [KJV])

Growing up in mainland Britain, I walked the high (main) streets, drawn to the slogan blazoned across local army recruitment offices: "Join the army, see the world!" Although too young at the time to do so, the thought of payment to crisscross the globe sounded most attractive. The Second World War was history, the Falklands War (1982) had yet to break out, and the troubles across the Irish Channel seemed far away.

Yet, my brother, four years my senior, did sign up. He was won over, it ought to be said, not by the slogan but by our family's history of military service. Over the course of nine years, he learned that the army had told the truth. His exercises in Norway, Canada, and Belize, with a third of his enlistment spent in Osnabrück, Germany, attested to this, as did his postcards: skiing above the fjords of Scandinavia, visiting the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics, and living in the heart of Europe.

Along the way, though, I learned that seeing the world was not the whole truth. Recruits had been left to guess the rest, hoping for the best. For Andy, the rest included a ten-week emergency stint in Northern Ireland, stationed in the Maze Prison during a particularly dangerous time. The Irish Republican Army had already held its vile "dirty campaign." Next came their deathly hunger strikes—a protest against Mrs. Thatcher's treatment of the terrorists as criminals rather than as political prisoners. Thus, my brother got to see, feel, and smell firsthand the darkness of "the Northern Ireland troubles." There were no postcards from "the Maze." All we could do was wait, praying that he would exit Northern Ireland alive. It did not help that the Territorial Army building wherein our local church met in Wales housed a plaque to the memory of the two hundredth soldier killed in the conflict. Andy, however, survived, leaving the army with haunted memories God graciously used to bring him to Christ.

Those days are long gone, but the army slogan has remained with me. When, later, I pondered the call to the Ministry of Word and Sacrament, it became a means of attesting my motivation for entering and remaining in ordained ministry. "Am I," I have asked myself, "in the ministry just to 'see the world?' so to speak, or am I inspired by a divine call, purer motives, and a higher aspiration?" The self-examination the slogan spawned, has, to be clear, not been obsessively introspective, but a healthy, periodic probing, which I have welcomed, promoting it among those weighing a call to ministry whom I have been privileged to counsel. The self-examination is tantamount to a pit stop to check that preoccupation with God's glory and the service of God's people is still paramount; that personal ambition remains holy. Is it prominence, gaining a platform, conference-hopping, free travel, or knowing the business of others that gets our juices flowing, or the extolling of God, the preaching of Christ, and the self-sacrificial shepherding and ingathering of his sheep? In an authentic call of God, carnal, erring, and inordinate ambition is generally absent, being mortified, or is ready for radical chastening; for God permits none of his servants to glory in his presence.

A balanced view of ordained ministry is, then, helpful in this regard. Lopsided portrayals of the perks of public ministry, however well-meant, can pander to the flesh. Martyn-Lloyd-Jones's oft-quoted estimate of pulpit ministry, for example, leaves me thrilled and hesitant in equal measure: "To me, the work of preaching is the highest and the greatest and the most glorious calling to which anyone can be called."² While this is a wonderful truth, one which rightly and courageously went against the diminution of preaching in the twentieth century, when abstracted from other considerations, it has its drawbacks. Preaching, for a start, cannot be divorced from the remainder of ministry. Lloyd-Jones doubtless included private prayer and study as well as the delivery in his reference to "the work of preaching," and would surely not sanction an approach to ministry that evades the messiness of pastoral care and the inevitable share of organizational leadership. Yet, even supposing candidates for ministry factor in the context of preaching, they still need to appreciate that, to one degree or another, its height, greatness, and glory are felt through suffering. That fact inevitably sifts levels of interest in ministry and encourages congregants, who,

² D. M. Lloyd-Jones, *Preaching and Preachers* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1972), 9.

otherwise supportive, feel that (lopsided or insensitive) espousals of the excellence of the minister's calling disparage somewhat their own, contrary to the Reformation emphasis on the vocation of every believer.³

We step back, then, from any whiff of elitism to balance the glory and suffering of the ministerial call. Enthralled with the romanticism of preaching, we nevertheless need to inject more realism into expectations of ordained ministry. Realism shoots an arrow across the bow of those viewing God's call through rose-colored spectacles; it affirms those whose call is informed, weighed, and genuine; and it reminds those of us already in harness of the need to be ready to suffer.

Our readiness is not guaranteed. In the western world, we have long enjoyed the halcyon victory of the Judeo-Christian worldview. Could it be that this has lulled us into an easy acceptance of lopsided depictions of ministry? While pastors have always faced the rigors of congregational life and of denominational strife (especially since the rationalist- and romanticist-driven revolution of the nineteenth century), we have rarely experienced the ratcheting up of societal animosity against Christianity being witnessed today. The arrest for hate speech of dignified street preachers in the United Kingdom, and of Canadian pastors for keeping their church doors open during the COVID pandemic are just a few of the increasing hostilities.

For a counterbalanced view of ministry we could turn to the Lord Jesus, recalling how, upon being raised from the dead, he reminded his foolish disciples that he had to suffer before entering his glory (Luke 24:25-26). We draw instead from the Pauline corpus. Not only was the apostle ministering in the sort of heathen context to which the West is returning, he teaches us that ministry is more grace than glory. This comes out very clearly in Ephesians 3:8: "Unto me, who am less than the least of all saints, is this grace given, that I should preach among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ." In Galatians 1:15, Paul writes of God's pleasure in separating him unto Himself by His grace. This "grace and apostleship" made him "a servant of Jesus Christ" (Rom 1:1, 5).⁴ This emphasis he unpacks

³ Prov 27:2; Jer 9:23-24; 1 Cor 1:31; 2 Cor 10:12-18.

⁴ See also, for example, 1 Cor 2:10; 9:16.

in 1 Timothy 1:12-16. "Ah, but that's Paul's brutal past speaking!" No, it is the sentiment of every converted minister. Thus, the idea of glory, at least in 2 Corinthians, Paul reserves for God (1:20; 3:18; 4:6, 15; 8:19), for Christ (8:23), for the gospel (4:4), and for heaven (4:17). The closest he comes to labeling his calling as glorious is in chapter three, but there it is the divine ministration of the old and new covenant that was glorious rather than his calling *in se* (3:7-11). Even, later, when he says that no one will stop him from boasting, it is chiefly of the saints in Achaia he writes. When he "boast[s] myself a little" (11:16) he acknowledges that he speaks foolishly, doing so only to put false apostles in their place. That done, he states, "If I must needs glory, I will glory of the things which concern mine infirmities" (11:30; cf., 12:5). For, after all, he was "nothing" (12:11).

The retrieval of ministry as a grace better positions us to process the sufferings that come along with it. When we factor them in we are able to speak forth a high view of ordained ministry without leaving others feeling that their callings have been slapped down. Notice how in 2 Corinthians—incidentally, Paul's most personal letter—the apostle combines a grace-laden view of ministry with a sharing of some of his sufferings. He bares his soul, yet without playing the victim, enabling us to draw out from 1:1-11 six features of ministry we do well to ponder. The Holy Spirit, working through the apostle, asks us in effect whether we would enter the ministry and remain in it were we to encounter what Paul endured two millennia ago.

FIRST FEATURE: ORDAINED MINISTRY IS CALL-DEPENDENT

Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God, and Timothy our brother,
unto the church of God which is at Corinth, with all the saints which are in all
Achaia: (v. 1)

It was Paul's tremendous sense of God's calling on his life that instilled in him the grace of perseverance. He opens this latest letter to the Corinthians and all the saints in Achaia declaring that his apostleship was by the will of God. Paul seeks not simply to introduce himself—after all, he was known to his readers—but to declare that God had both ordained and sustained his apostleship. We might take this for granted, trotting out the truism: "Of course he did, for God sustains those whom he calls!". Yet, Paul's experience of ministry left

no room for flippancy. His survival of many and varied escapades could only be explained by God's grace. In the backdrop of 2 Corinthians are but two of the threats to his apostleship.

Severe disappointment.

The apostle had founded the church in Corinth. It began in the house of Justus during his second missionary journey. Acts 18:8 tells us, "Crispus the chief ruler of the synagogue believed on the Lord with all his house; and many of the Corinthians hearing believed and were baptized." This promising start gave rise to much follow-up. Paul, thus, remained in Corinth for eighteen months, teaching God's people God's truth, seeking their transformation from new converts into holy and hardy disciples.

Six or seven years have now passed. It is ca. A.D. 55. Some of the Corinthian believers, having previously forsaken the world for Christ, were now in danger of sullyng their testimony by admitting the renowned immorality of Corinth into the church. To head this off, Paul wrote the letter mentioned in 1 Corinthians 5:9 now lost to history. Therein, he urged the Corinthians not to keep company with fornicators. This was followed by a second letter, known to us as 1 Corinthians, exhorting with Sosthenes the believers in Corinth not to keep company either with the covetous, idolaters, railers, drunkards, or extortioners (1 Cor 5:11). Thereafter, Paul made a second visit (2 Cor 13:1). He had been ministering in Ephesus at the time, but had received a dim report from across the Aegean Sea. The visit proved to be heavy or painful (2 Cor 2:1). Worse was to come. After he left, there occurred in the church a significant but unknown act of indiscipline. In response, Paul wrote another letter to the church, doing so with much "affliction and anguish," watering it "with many tears" (2 Cor 2:4). God was being dishonored, the witness of Christ's church was marred, and his own investment of time and energy was under threat. Yet, God blessed the communique, producing in the Corinthians godly sorrow.⁵

⁵ For this rehearsing of the sequence of contacts with the Corinthian church, I am indebted to Margaret E. Thrall, *The First and Second Letters of Paul to the Corinthians* (Cambridge: University Press, 1965), 119–121.

The high maintenance of the Corinthian church was disappointing enough. Consider, though, that this episode was but one the apostle faced during his ministry. Other wounding disappointments included the desertion of John Mark (Acts 13:13); Demas's, too, due to his love of this present world (cf., Phlm v. 24, Col. 4:14, and 2 Tim 4:10); and what Paul described as the turning away of "all they which are in Asia" including Phygellus and Hermogenes (2 Tim 1:15). Had it not been for his robust sense of divine calling, Paul would either have "faint[ed] in the day of adversity" (Prov 24:10), or allowed his call to be eaten up by cynicism or apathy. He permitted neither, keeping to the fore its origin in divine grace.

This is very instructive, for if we contemplate ministry and pursue it solely as something glorious then significant reversals are likely to rock our commitment. Could this be in part why, given today's cultural cravings for success, there are many deserting the ministry? Observed Thomas Watson, "Despair cuts the sinews of endeavor." Yet, when it comes to ministry, we are more likely to do so when the call is mistaken or success in ministry is considered an entitlement. Paul could have exclaimed, "What's the point? Eighteen months of work down the drain!" But we read nothing of that, for he knew not to think more of himself than he ought to think. Knowing how to be abased, he waded out his discouragements, waiting on God who had called him.⁶ Since Paul was a driven character, the waiting was likely difficult. Nevertheless, it rendered his call to apostleship unquestionable. The same holds for our ministries.

Harsh opposition.

With worldliness in the Corinthian church, factions soon appeared. From Paul's letters to Corinth (lost and extant) and his visits to the city (whether in person or via his apostolic delegates Timothy and Titus), we learn of a group of Jews in the church who were set on undermining him. They claimed he was cowardly (1 Cor 4:18), not a genuine apostle (1 Cor 9:1-7), that he could not be trusted (2 Cor 4:1-2; 7:2; 11:6-9), was weak and inarticulate (2 Cor 10:10), and did not care about the Corinthians (2 Cor 6:11; 8:24; 9:8; 11:2; 12:13-16, 19). Yet Paul, refusing to be cowed or shamed by them, opens this latest letter to the

⁶ Cf., Rom 12:3; Phil 4:11.

Corinthians without flinching. He declares himself "an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God," later denouncing his critics as "false apostles, deceitful workers, transforming themselves into the apostles of Christ" (11:13). Utterly convinced of his call, he says in effect, "Who cares what the false apostles claim about me!"

Paul understood that whereas the professing church had a role in recognizing his call to the apostleship, it was God who granted and sustained it. Likewise, in ministering apostolic doctrine, we must appreciate this distinction. If a congregation or denomination unjustly questions our call to ministry, it is the fact that the call comes from God, is sustained by God, and vindicated by God which enables the called to press on (cf., Gal 1:15-16). Yet, in doing so, Paul did not become hardened, rejecting all the Corinthian believers and the presence of a church in Corinth. Rather, he writes with decorum, "unto the church of God which is at Corinth, with all the saints which are in all Achaia." He, thus, teaches us that the stronger our sense of calling, the more we are sustained in ministry and can maintain within it a healthy spiritual equilibrium.

SECOND FEATURE: ORDAINED MINISTRY IS GOD-CONSCIOUS

Grace be to you and peace from God our Father, and from the Lord Jesus Christ. (v. 2)

Ministry is not only *from* God, it is *about* God! Notice that by the end of verse two, Paul and Timothy mention God (*theos*) three times. It is this profound consciousness of God that explains two prominent hallmarks of their ministry.

First hallmark: confidence.

When read in context, the salutation is much more than an epistolary nicety or a mere formality. Bombarded and smothered by accusations of the false apostles, Paul, in particular, is doubtless reminding himself even as he reminds the Corinthians that their confidence before God and man lay in the grace and peace of the Father and of the Son. This, he subtly testifies, was his refuge and buttress in ministry and the foundation of his perseverance.

Paul's salutation brings to mind the late, twentieth-century mantra of practical theologian John C. (Jack) Miller (1928–1996). In applying the gospel to life, he articulated "four radically transforming concepts":

- (i) "Cheer up! You are worse than you think;"
- (ii) "Cheer up! God's grace is much greater than you can imagine;"
- (iii) "Cheer up! God's plan is much bigger than you think;" and
- (iv) "Cheer up! God's grace is perfected in weakness."⁷

The apostle Paul, so very consciousness of God, could likewise rebuff his discouragers and detractors. Indeed, I surmise that in writing the salutation to the Corinthians he inhaled as much of its encouragement as he could, for, aware of his own sin, he was nevertheless innocent of the charges of the false apostles.

This surmising is rooted in neither guesswork nor clairvoyance. It takes but a modicum of ministry experience to know that while ministering to others, we, at our best, inwardly apply the gospel to ourselves. Audibly we speak to our hearers, but inaudibly we preach to self. This is especially so when we find ourselves enshrouded in animosity and accusations. God-consciousness sustains our confidence. "When all around my soul gives way," wrote British pastor and hymn writer, Edward Mote (1797–1874), "He then is all my hope and stay."⁸

Second hallmark: heart.

God-consciousness not only soothed the ministerial wounds of Paul and Timothy, it governed the spirit in which they ministered. By siphoning off gospel comfort for themselves they were able, amid the storms of ministry, to comfort those who had caused them pain. In effect, the grace and peace of the Father and of the Son granted them, Paul especially, skins thick enough to roll with the punches, yet thin enough to feel for those to whom they ministered.

⁷ *Sonship: Discovering Liberty in the Gospel as Sons and Daughters of God* (Jenkintown, Pa.: World Harvest Mission), iv–v. For my take on the debate around the turn of the millennium over Miller's Sonship discipleship Course, see Tim J. R. Trumper, *When History Teaches Us Nothing: The Reformed Sonship Debate in Context* (Eugene, Oreg.: Wipf and Stock, 2008 [second edition, 2022]).

⁸ Edward Mote, hymn *The Solid Rock* (first line, "My hope is built on nothing less").

The salutation is, thus, sincere and reader-oriented. For all its benefit to Paul and Timothy, they had written it for the Corinthians. Indeed, now that word has come through of their repentance, Paul's "anguish of heart" has given way to a strong yearning that they, too, would recall and experience the grace and peace of the Father and the Son. The salutation, then, paves the way for the guarantee in 2:1 that Paul "would not come again to [the Corinthians] in heaviness." His directness and forthrightness is now replaced by a tender longing that God's people would know God's best.

Likewise, there will be times in our ministries when tough love is required. Indeed, without it, a minister becomes, to some degree, culpable in the ill-discipline of the people under his care. That said, the dispensing of tough love is always to be guided by an overall desire that those receiving it experience the grace and peace of the Father and the Son. We reason that if God has sufficient measures of these gifts for us, then he has also for those saints requiring our greatest patience. Such reasoning is God-consciousness in action and the means whereby Paul and Timothy open 2 Corinthians.

THIRD FEATURE: ORDAINED MINISTRY IS EXPERIENCE-SHAPED

³ Blessed be God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies, and the God of all comfort; ⁴Who comforteth us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort them which are in any trouble, by the comfort wherewith we ourselves are comforted of God. ⁵ For as the sufferings of Christ abound in us, so our consolation also aboundeth by Christ.

God's grace and peace helped Paul not only to process the accusations he faced and to respond to the Corinthians in the spirit of the gospel, but to come to terms with what had happened to him. From the outset of his ministry he had been promised that he would suffer in the cause of Christ (Acts 9:15-16), yet now, having done so, he reflects on how God had used his humiliations to fulfill his divine purposes. He and Timothy, thus, bless God, doing so on four counts.

First, they bless God for what he is.

God is a merciful Father: "Blessed be God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies, and the God of all comfort" (v. 3). He grants neither the apostle, his delegate, the Corinthians, nor the saints in Achaia what they deserve. Rather, he pities them.

This idea was not new. It was carried over from the Hebrew Scriptures: "Like as a father pitieth his children, so the Lord pitieth them that fear him" (Ps 103:13). There David speaks of God by means of a simile. A simile is denoted by the use of "like" or "as." It is a weaker figure of speech appropriate to the degree to which God had revealed his Fatherhood prior to the coming of Christ.⁹ Yet, now that Christ has come, references to God's Fatherhood are strengthened. Paul thus states that God *is* Father to his sons. The simile is gone, having been replaced by what we call a supramodel (the Fatherhood of God). The supramodel is a robust model standing over and above such subsidiary models (strong figures of speech) as the new birth (found in the Johannine and Petrine corpora) and adoption (exclusive to Paul).¹⁰ Revealed by Christ and inscripturated under the Spirit's inspiration, the supramodel enables us to refer to God *directly* as our Father.¹¹ Hence, Paul's use of the verb "to be": "Blessed *be* God." This directness marks a significant advance on God's old covenant revelation. Paul goes beyond David, declaring that God *is* a merciful Father! Through Jesus Christ, God has shown himself to be such. Moreover, God's self-, embodied-revelation under the new covenant radically set him apart from the mythic gods of Corinth, notably Corinthos (regarded as the founder of the city) and Venus (the goddess of lust).

Paul impresses on his readers this wonderfully endearing portrayal of God's Fatherhood by means of the verb *parakaléō*. It occurs in various moods ten times in this opening pericope, starting here in verse three.¹² The apostle teaches us thereby that it is not a fleshly

⁹ John 1:18.

¹⁰ On the new birth, see John 1:12-13, 3:1-8; 1 John 2:29-3:3; Rev 21:7 and 1 Pet 1:3, 2:2. On adoption, see Rom 8:12-25, 9:1-5; Gal 3:23-4:7; Eph 1:3-6.

¹¹ For more on the supramodel and how it functions *vis-à-vis* the filial or familial models of the New Testament, see Tim J. R. Trumper, *Adoption: A Road to Retrieval* (Grand Rapids: From His Fullness Ministries, 2022), 199-205.

¹² Verse 3, verse 4 (4x), verse 5, verse 6 (3x), verse 7.

machismo that is to sustain us in ministry but the compassion of God the Father. While strong characters may simply bruise their way forward in ministry, reliant on stoicism or the proverbial "stiff upper lip" (yet losing their tenderness of heart), Paul has in mind a very different kind of endurance. Indeed, he blesses God precisely because his ministerial upkeep depends not on himself. Instead, he leans all his weight on the tender mercies of his heavenly Father. In them he finds comfort to console even those most difficult to serve.

Second, they bless God for what he does.

God is ever transcendent, exalted far above our earthly circumstances, and yet he is immanent, "comfort[ing] us in all our tribulation [*thlipsei*]" (v. 4a). Paul's and Timothy's use of *thlipsis* refers not only to the challenges God's servants face, but to the stress or pressure such challenges impose. From what follows in verses eight through eleven, they have in mind the ministerial pressures they had experienced. (for Timothy's, see Acts 16:1–17:15). Yet, they may well include within the orbit of their concern the pressures felt by the saints in Corinth and all Achaia as well, for, as they have just noted (v.3), God is the God of "all comfort."

This comfort, as is evident from the use of the present active participle *parakalōn*, comes flowing continuously toward those troubled. In effect, it oozes out of God toward his servants and keeps doing so. Yet, as wondrous as that is, Paul indicates something even more astonishing, namely, that it is God himself who is the comfort. His love, being of his essence, is displayed in compassion. As our Father, God comes, literally, alongside us to comfort and encourage us continually. However, since *parakalōn* is made up of the verb *kaleō* (to call) and the preposition *para* (alongside), Paul and Timothy likely imply the Father's response to the prayers they made from the depths of their tribulation, as also the prayers of others on their behalf.

Third, they bless God for what he purposes.

Paul and Timothy would have us know that the consolation we receive from the God of all comfort is not to terminate on ourselves. We are granted heavenly comfort in all our

tribulation, "that we may be able to comfort them which are in any trouble, by the comfort wherewith we ourselves are comforted of God" (v. 4b).

Now such a theology of comfort differs markedly from talk of comfort today. Western individualism, impacting both church and society, tends to see personal comfort as an end in itself. The obtaining or safeguarding of comfort is one, if not the major criterion determining what many do or say. Comfort is king! Self-sacrificing sufferers are in short supply and are typically deemed unwise, for personal comfort has become an idol behind which many hide. This we can understand in a world profoundly insecure outside of Christ, yet, for those in Christ, personal comfort is neither the be-all nor end-all of life. Our faith, we stress, differs from Epicureanism or Hedonism, for we embrace the costs of our convictions, and when receiving comfort enlist it in the service of others. Our interest in comfort does not wane simply because we have received ours.

Under the present *Zeitgeist*, caution is needed, then, that we do not erroneously coopt the Heidelberg Catechism (1563). When HC 1 asks, "What is thy only comfort in life and death?" the catechism asks not of the believer's comfortableness but of our consolation in Christ. The answer was sorely needed amid the sufferings of the Reformation era, and has brought much solace to saints across history and the world facing similar tribulations in the cause of Christ:

That I with body and soul, both in life and death, am not my own, but belong unto my faithful Savior Jesus Christ; who, with His precious blood, hath fully satisfied for all my sins, and delivered me from all the power of the devil; and so preserves me that without the will of my heavenly Father, not a hair can fall from my head; yea, that all things must be subservient to my salvation, and therefore, by His Holy Spirit, He also assures me of eternal life, and makes me sincerely willing and ready, henceforth, to live unto Him.

We need today not less consolation from the gospel, but, against the flow of cravings for self-centered comfort, a retrieval of the balance of individual and communal consolation. God, the Father of all comfort, truly comforts us but would have us use the consolation we receive to come alongside others for their comfort. We do so, not by glib, clichéd, or

erroneous remarks born of sentiment rather than biblical truth—Job’s comforters come to mind—but by sharing the wealth and depth of inscripturated revelation about the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Fourth, they bless God for what he accomplishes.

When we minister God’s inscripturated revelation we do so not with bare propositional declarations of the gospel, but by means of the gospel clothed in our experience of Christ and of service in his name. Hence, Paul’s and Timothy’s further reference to tribulation. They refer not to those common to man—marital problems, rebellious children, unemployment, bankruptcy, bereavements, and the like—but specifically to “the sufferings of Christ” (v. 5).

Clearly, they do not mean that their *thlipsis* repeated or added to our Lord’s atoning sacrifice. Our Lord declared from the cross his atonement to be accomplished and its attendant sufferings finished.¹³ Once he died, there was no more atoning to be done nor need for more suffering. Rather, Paul refers to those sufferings that he, Timothy, and the Corinthian believers experienced on account of their union or identification with Christ (“the sufferings of Christ . . . in us”). Christ’s sufferings signified his identification and union with us as our sin-bearer, but we, united to Christ through faith, experience his sufferings in us in the course of representing him in the world. Christ’s sufferings in history, then, procured our salvation, but Christ’s sufferings in us are felt amid the proclamation of the salvation he has already accomplished.

Given the zeal Paul demonstrated for gospel proclamation from the outset of his Christian life, we are unsurprised that he testifies that, “the sufferings of Christ abound in us.”¹⁴ Yet, despite the setbacks in Corinth, the sufferings were neither in vain nor his whole experience of ministry. Paul and Timothy continue, “so our consolation also aboundeth by Christ” (v. 5). In other words, God, a debtor to no one, compensates the sufferings of Christ amid ministry with abundant comfort (*paraklesis*). Thus, our sufferings with and for Christ are no more in vain than are our labors.

¹³ John 19:30

¹⁴ Acts 9:19-31

In reviewing what Paul and Timothy have written here, my mind and heart inevitably go out to countless servants of the Lord encountered across the world. There are those in places like Liberia and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, who, literally, get nothing out of the ministry for themselves: no security, wage, or perks. They serve solely out of the conviction that they are called to do so. Moreover, I recall conversations with servants of our Lord in Ethiopia and Pakistan whose churches have been attacked whether by Machetes, guns, or bombs, but who have nevertheless pressed on undeterred. Having recently accepted a call to Malaysia, the fiftieth most dangerous country in the world for Christians, I am moved by the plight of Pastor Raymond Koh. Already persecuted, on February 13, 2017, in broad daylight, he was abducted in forty seconds from off a highway outside Kuala Lumpur and has not been seen to this day. His crime: seeking to bring Muslims to the knowledge of Christ. Evidently, what Paul and Timothy discuss here is a live issue for many of God's servants around the world. Undoubtedly, without the intervention of God's Spirit in revival, suffering will become increasingly a live issue for ministers in the West, too. Paul and Timothy lead us, then, to probe whether, in the event of the stripping of our comforts, our call to ministry would hold firm.

That said, we take courage from God's faithfulness. Paul and Timothy, speaking from experience, balance the sufferings of ministry with the Father's comforts abounding toward them through Christ. Thus, God's servants today, suffering first-century-like hardships, follow these brothers in neither deserting their callings nor taking their lives. Rather they triumph, trusting the God of all comfort to come alongside them, causing comfort to abound in them by Christ their Savior and Lord. Shall we in the West do so, too, when we are denuded of the perks of ministry, when a livable wage, tax cuts, opportunities to see the world, and social prestige are all substituted for poverty, bodily harm, and imprisonment? Will we count the calling to be glorious then, pressing on, trusting that the promised presence and comfort of God will be enough for us?

FOURTH FEATURE: ORDAINED MINISTRY IS PEOPLE-TOUCHING

⁶ And whether we be afflicted, it is for your consolation and salvation, which is effectual in the enduring of the same sufferings which we also suffer: or

whether we be comforted, it is for your consolation and salvation.⁷ And our hope of you is steadfast, knowing, that as ye are partakers of the sufferings, so shall ye be also of the consolation.

Despite the challenges in their relationship with the brothers and sisters in Corinth, Paul and Timothy continue to look out for them. Whether afflicted or comforted, their selfless concern is the consolation and salvation of the saints in Corinth and Achaia.

In the first scenario, Paul and Timothy appreciate that their afflictions have a divine purpose (v. 6a). Thus, hurt, ashamed, and frustrated by the false apostles, Paul would neither give up his apostleship nor shrunk back from fulfilling it. Rather, he pressed on, trusting in God's overruling, thankful for Timothy at his side, and looking to God to use the trouble to encourage the saints of Achaia along the road to the consummation. While, then, Paul and Timothy neither boast of what they had gone through nor play the victim card, they remind those oblivious to the cost of ministry and in danger of taking its blessing for granted that there is suffering attending the calling. But suffering, they warn us, can only be for the comfort and salvation of those we serve if we are actually comforted by God and, with hindsight, draw from our preceding troubles relevant consolations for those whom we serve.

In the second scenario, Paul and Timothy note that the comfort received from God becomes a blessing to the Corinthians (v. 6b). Specifically, they want them to know that their comfort, in the good hand of God, frees them to serve the Corinthian needs without distraction. Moreover, it develops their confidence in the mercies of God, which confidence is essential for the effective preaching and application of the gospel.

Thus, Paul and Timothy impress on us how wonderfully applicable is God's sovereignty to our ministries. Far from despairing over the Corinthians, they declare that their hope for them is steadfast. While such confidence would doubtless have cheered the Corinthians, Paul and Timothy aim also to reach over the obstructive presence of the false apostles (ministers of Satan, 11:15) to secure for God the loyalty of the saints in Corinth and Achaia. Although their pastoral bond was rooted in a shared union with Christ, issuing in a felt communion with each other, the suffering and comfort of Paul and Timothy in the service

of the Corinthians offered the pastoral bond an opportunity to bloom. Regardless of the extent to which it did, Paul and Timothy proffer a view of it surpassing anything paper contracts can convey.

FIFTH FEATURE: ORDAINED MINISTRY IS HUMILITY-INSTILLING

⁸For we would not, brethren, have you ignorant of our trouble which came to us in Asia, that we were pressed out of measure, above strength, insomuch that we despaired even of life: ⁹ But we had the sentence of death in ourselves, that we should not trust in ourselves, but in God which raiseth the dead: ¹⁰ Who delivered us from so great a death, and doth deliver: in whom we trust that he will yet deliver us;

As if to assure the Corinthians that their trouble (again, *thlipsis*) not only came from Corinth, Paul and Timothy now mention what they experienced in Asia. We cannot be certain what it was, but it is likely included in the litany of episodes in 6:4-10. There, they mention they had proven themselves to be ministers of God,

in much patience, in affliction, in necessities, in distresses, in stripes, in imprisonments, in tumults, in labours, in watchings, in fastings; by pureness, by knowledge, by longsuffering, by kindness, by the Holy Ghost, by love unfeigned, by the word of truth, by the power of God, by the armour of righteousness on the right hand and on the left, by honour and dishonour, by evil report and good report: as deceivers, and yet true; as unknown, and yet well known; as dying, and, behold, we live; as chastened, and not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing all things.

Here in 1:8-10, by contrast, Paul and Timothy focus not on *what* they suffered but on *how* affliction had pressed them to the limits of their endurance. It was all very humbling.

First, there were *emotional* effects (v. 8). Paul and Timothy were pressed out of measure (literally, hyperbolically) and above their strength, such that they despaired of life. They do not mean that they became suicidal, but that, as a matter of fact, they had no resources left

to press on. They were running on empty, so to speak. The modern-day descriptives "drained" and "burned out" come to mind.

Second, there were *spiritual* effects (vv. 9-10). The trouble in Asia was so severe as to inflict on them "the sentence of death."¹⁵ It deepened, though, their trust in God. Such contraries, lowering confidence in self but heightening dependence on God, are familiar to those who have some acquaintance with the ways of God. Nearer to our time, John Newton (1725–1807) expressed them very well:

I asked the Lord that I might grow,
In faith, and love, and every grace;
Might more of His salvation know,
And seek, more earnestly, His face.

'Twas He who taught me thus to pray
And He, I trust, has answered prayer!
But it has been in such a way,
As almost drove me to despair.

I hoped that in some favoured hour,
At once He'd answer my request;
And by His love's constraining pow'r,
Subdue my sins, and give me rest.

Instead of this, He made me feel
The hidden evils of my heart;
And let the angry pow'rs of hell
Assault my soul in every part.

Yea more, with His own hand
He seemed intent to aggravate my woe;
Crossed all the fair designs I schemed,
Blasted my gourds, and laid me low.

¹⁵ This was not the first time that Paul had spoken in this manner. Cf., 1 Cor 4:9.

Lord, why is this, I trembling cried,
Wilt thou pursue thy worm to death?
"Tis in this way," the Lord replied,
"I answer prayer for grace and faith."

"These inward trials I employ,
From self, and pride, to set thee free;
And break thy schemes of earthly joy,
That thou may'st find thy all in Me."

Newton's near despair was Paul's and Timothy's "sentence of death." As hopeless as things seemed, God was nevertheless at work. Their trust in God grew, for they reasoned that if God could raise the dead he could help them overcome their trouble. The resurrection, then, was not to Paul and Timothy simply a random historical event nor a mere doctrinal proposition. It shaped their view of God, their lives, and their ministries both theologically and spiritually. It ensured that no matter how dark things got, there was always hope.

How, though, could Paul and Timothy put such stock in a bodily resurrection they never witnessed, to shore up trust in God whom no man has ever seen? They could have drawn from the reports of Lazarus's resurrection for a start, but uppermost in their minds, as is clear from Paul (e.g., Acts 17:31; Rom 1:4), was the resurrection of Christ. After all, he had heard the exalted (i.e., resurrected and ascended) Christ speak to him on the Damascus road (Acts 9:1-8; 22:1-11; 26:1-18). The experience had brought him from death to life. Indeed, Paul had witnessed resurrection played out during his first missionary journey. Stoned in Lystra, thrown out of the city, and left for dead (Acts 14:19), he had nevertheless lived to complete his mission. Referring to himself as "chastened, and not killed" (2 Cor 6:9), he had clearly not forgotten the experience. It played a significant role in fortifying their resolve to minister the gospel, for as humbling as was the "sentence of death" it afforded them much confidence for the future.

SIXTH FEATURE: ORDAINED MINISTRY IS PRAYER-REQUESTING

¹¹ Ye also helping together by prayer for us, that for the gift bestowed upon us by the means of many persons thanks may be given by many on our behalf.

Given their humbling, it is unsurprising that Paul and Timothy complete their identification of relevant features of ministry with their felt need of prayer. Both their theology and their experience yearned for it. They epitomize, in the words of Philip Edgecombe Hughes, "human impotence cast[ing] itself at the feet of divine omnipotence."¹⁶ Thus, although Paul, at a distance of two millennia is known to us as "the great apostle," we find no airs and graces about him, or Timothy his delegate. Quite the opposite. How open and vulnerable they are in 2 Corinthians about their need for intercession to God on their behalf.¹⁷ There is no sense here, that because Paul is the apostle, he must pray for all but none may pray for him (or for Timothy either). That level of secrecy and pride are not found here. Rather, they end their introduction to the letter by mentioning just how much they needed the Corinthians to praise and petition God on their behalf.

This is all very endearing given the backdrop of relations with the church in Corinth. Instead of marginalizing the Corinthian believers from their ministry, Paul and Timothy tell those who will listen that they have an important role to play. They may begin by petitioning God for the needs of the ministry (v. 11a). Paul and Timothy thereby indicate both their high estimate of prayer and their belief that therein lies a real fellowship among God's people. Prayer to God is, they remark, a "helping together". Those upheld by it are encouraged as if by gifts heaped upon them, while those engaged in the upholding gain a vital niche in the ministry.

It follows that those invested in petitioning God on behalf of Paul and Timothy also got to thank God on their behalf. It seems that, despite the false apostles, many were participating prayerfully in the ministry. Thus, in pouring out their hearts to God for Paul and Timothy, they stood ready to thank him for the spiritual fruit graciously granted their labors. All the

¹⁶ Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, *Paul's Second Epistle to the Corinthians: The English Text with Introduction, Exposition and Notes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962), 23.

¹⁷ Cf., Eph 6:18-19.

more so, because of the many and varied ways in which they had been spared while undertaking them. There was, accordingly, something both precious and redemptive about the prayers of the Corinthians.

How lacking this "helping together" has become in the West. Has not the chant often heard in American culture, "We can do it, yes we can!" infiltrated the thinking of the church? It would seem so where congregational prayer gatherings are sparsely populated or nonexistent. Could it be that, as ministers, we do not feel sufficiently our impotence, or have so lost our spiritual edge that we are untroubled by what it means for countless saints and sinners? Meanwhile, there are ministers, deeply lamenting their inability apart from God to impart spiritual good, who call year upon year for their people to gather to intercede on their behalf, only to witness the calls fall on mistaken minds ("Private prayers are enough!"), unfeeling hearts (it is easier to criticize than to pray), or deaf ears (I have more important things to do than to assemble to pray for my pastor).

Unsurprisingly, then, ministers fear opening up to those rarely if ever heard to pray for them. To admit to feeling "the sentence of death" in contractual rather than spiritual contexts would not augur well for the future, nor would it play well where the ministry has become a rat race or "dog eat dog." If we believe colleagues in presbytery or synod to be competitors rather than brothers, we will not lay bare, as Paul and Timothy do here, our vulnerabilities. Rather, in the worst-case scenarios, ministers plug away, hiding behind their names, connections, branding, and social platforms, privately contemplating deserting their callings, or even, dare I say it, checking out of life. Yet, for all the sin in that, is there any less in church cultures wherein ministers would prefer to evade vulnerability at all costs than to admit feeling the sentence of death?

Paul and Timothy show us a better way forward. By viewing ministry as a grace, they tread a path between a lopsided enthrallment with the glory of ministry and a hope-less preoccupation with its sufferings. Grace precludes us from glorying in God's presence and enables us to ride the waves of suffering that accompany faithful ministry. Their expectation and promotion of prayer for their ministry comports with this grace-suffused understanding of ministry and points to the much-needed reform of prayer in the life of the

church. I propose within our congregations not a reduction of maintenance prayer (for the sick, pregnant, unemployed, and the like), but an elevation of the importance, earnestness, and togetherness in frontline prayer. Maintenance prayer without frontline prayer is self-centered, sometimes trite, and, without corporate prayer, turns ministers into priests. Frontline prayer keeps before the church family the priority of God's plan, the pastor's exposure in tackling the prince of the power of the air through the ministration of the Word, and the privilege of the saints in "helping together" by praying for the coming of the kingdom.¹⁸

CONCLUSION

This mediating view of the ministerial call, it is worth repeating, sifts the aspirations of those wishing to enter the ordained ministry, and, as our days of pampered ministry in the West draw to a close, prepares us for what could be more difficult days ahead. After all, charmed ministry contexts have, through the centuries, been the exception rather than the norm. Wannabe ministers and, indeed, those of us in harness would do well to include in our periodic self-examination the six features of ministry which Paul and Timothy touch on in 2 Corinthians 1:1-11.

Those intoxicated with American culture will likely find the realism of this epistle altogether too dour. If we have breathed in the air of pragmatism, America's sole home-grown philosophy, we shall likely fear the realism will empty seminaries and leave the church with a shortfall of ministers. However, the Bible indicates that quality beats quantity every time. The Bible is not alone. Recall explorer Ernest Shackleton's reputed advertisement for his "Imperial Trans Antarctic Expedition" (1914-1917): "Men wanted for hazardous journey to the South Pole. Small wages, bitter cold, long months of complete darkness, constant danger. Safe return doubtful. Honor and recognition in case of success." Shackleton was said to comment, "so overwhelming was the response to his appeal that it seemed as though all the men of Great Britain were determined to accompany him."¹⁹

¹⁸ Cf., Matt 6:10.

¹⁹ Joshua Horn, "Shackleton's Ad—Men Wanted for Hazardous Journey," <http://discerninghistory.com/2013/05/shackletons-ad-men-wanted-for-hazardous-journey/>, accessed July 6, 2022.

*Tim J. R. Trumper, "Join the Ministry, See the World!": A Weighing of Ministerial Motivation
(Puritan Reformed Journal 15:1 [Jan. 2023], 131-149).*

Whether original to Shackleton or not, the source understood that glory comes through suffering, and that the best of men are inspired by a high bar, not a low one. Likewise, the Christian ministry needs stronger but not harder brothers (an unfortunate confusion), who press forward no matter the cost, knowing that their sufferings and their heaven-sent consolations, in God's good hand, abound toward many and glorify his holy name. To this, the duly called offer a resounding, "Amen!".

~~~~~