

I. Introduction

- A. We live in perilous times.
- B. I am not going stand up here and list all of the upheavals and distressing events of just the last few years, because there are too many, and because it's too depressing.
- C. I am just going to acknowledge that we live in perilous time. Above all else, this is because of spiritual warfare.
 - 1. The devil is playing for keeps. He does not relent. He does not moderate. He does not compromise. And he never surrenders.
 - 2. He walks about as a roaring lion seeking whom he may devour, and he is out to steal, kill, and destroy... all the time. The pressure never lets up. Our society shows it.
 - 3. The chaos, the turmoil, the stress of our culture today is an irrational society drunk on the devil's brew.
- D. So the question for you and me as believers in Jesus Christ is simple.
 - 1. Where do we turn for comfort and peace?
 - 2. Where do we go when it's just too much? When we're worn out and broken down?
- E. If you have Jesus Christ, you have a place to turn that the world can never know. You have an omnipotent, omnipresent, compassionate, supernatural, and transcendent source of comfort and peace far beyond the reach the ragings of earth and the powers of hell.
 - 1. You are held in the palm of God's hand. Shielded. Encapsulated. Provided for. Cared for. Loved.
- F. There is a kind of comfort you can get from God that you can't get anywhere else.
 - 1. Not from politics. Not from relationships. Not from therapy or counseling. Not from money. Not from anything.
 - 2. You certainly can find no existential comfort in atheism.
 - 3. But if you have Jesus Christ, you have a God who is the God of All Comfort and the Father of mercies, and only he can still the raging storms of our times.
- G. My message today is part one in a new series.
 - 1. The series is called **Comfort from Above**
- H. We are going hear from God as he speaks to us through the book of Psalms. Over the coming weeks, I plan to talk about the God of comfort, the Promise of comfort, the Conditions of comfort, the Mission of comfort, and the Eternity of comfort.
- I. So today, **The God of Comfort**

II. Text

A. Psalm 103:8-14

- 1. *The LORD is merciful and gracious, Slow to anger, and abounding in mercy. He will not always strive with us, Nor will He keep His anger forever. He has not dealt with us according to our sins, Nor punished us according to our iniquities. For as the heavens are high above the earth, So great is His mercy toward those who fear Him; As far as the east is from the west, So far has He removed our transgressions from us. As a father pities his children, So the LORD pities those who fear Him. For He knows our frame; He remembers that we are dust.*

- B. This 103rd Psalm is one of the most beautiful and comforting places in all the Bible. Along with Romans 8, Psalm 103 is one of my happy places.
- C. I want to focus on verse 8, where David piles up some important vocabulary about God.
- D. In verse 8 he makes four statements about the character of God. The Lord is...
 - 1. Merciful and (racham), Gracious, (hanun), Slow to anger, and Abounding in mercy. (Hesed)
- E. Let's take those one at a time.

III. The Lord Is...

A. Merciful

- 1. **God has a special love for people who hurt.**
- 2. The Hebrew word is racham (verb), rachum (adjective).
- 3. This means God's tender mercies. It means that God feels compassion for your pain in gut.
- 4. This is the tender-heartedness of God.
- 5. God does not watch you like a bug under a microscope. He feels for you. He aches with you. In whatever emotion is proper for infinite deity, God feels deep compassion for the struggles of your life and your world.
 - a) He's not ignoring you. He's not abandoning you. He's not messing with you. God draws near to you with a compassion that knows no bounds.
- 6. The mercies of God toward the pathetic, wretched, and miserable. You can't go far in the Bible without bumping into the tender mercies of God.

B. Gracious

- 1. **God has a special love for people who deserve the opposite.**
- 2. Hebrew words... hanan (verb), hanun (adjective), hen (noun "hayn").
- 3. This word conveys the feeling of having compassion on a beggar. It means to show kindness to someone who deserves unkindness.
- 4. When you dig beneath all the layers of the universe—look into all the galaxies of the cosmos, look beneath the planets and the stars, peer deeply into the tiniest life forms at the bottom of the sea, look through the eons of human existence, and map out the human heart—when you look hard enough and dig deep enough, you will find a God whose heart beats with goodness, love, and grace, upholding and sustaining all things.
- 5. This is the great comfort that is the blood-bought privilege of every believer in Christ.
- 6. Your life isn't random, and your sufferings are not random either.

7. And even though you might fail a thousand times a day, and even if you shake your fist in God's face, and curse him for your pain, God remembers your tears, and he sees your fight of faith, and he promises he will make it worth it all.

C. Slow to Anger

1. **God has a special love that can never be exhausted.**
2. We are quick to sin, but God is slow to judgment. He pauses. He restrains his vengeance. The weight of his goodness is greater than the weight of our guilt.
3. This is the long-suffering of God.
4. The phrase means that God has a long fuse. He never flies off the handle. Never fails to give a sinner a chance. Mercy always precedes judgment and grace always is offered before wrath.
5. Let's just mark it down that when Judgment Day comes, it is long overdue.
 - a) He says, for his own name's sake, he will postpone his anger (Isaiah 48:9)
 - b) He says, all day long I have stretched out my hand toward a disobedient and rebellious people (Isaiah 65:2, Romans 8:36).
 - (1) All day long.
6. There is no rush to judgment with God. There doesn't need to be. He has all the time in the world.
7. Had God not been slow of anger, he would have blasted sinners to hell long ago. But he waits and waits and waits and waits, giving us every opportunity to turn to his grace. With God, you get three strikes, and then three more, and three more, and three more... seventy times seven... and only then are you out.
8. The basis of this longsuffering heart of God is the work of Christ on Calvary.
9. What better comfort for a guilty conscience? What can the world offer to heal guilt and shame? Nothing. The world can never cleanse the conscience. It can only numb it, or ignore it, or erase it away.
10. You can try a thousand times a day, but you will never exhaust the riches of God's love for you.

D. Abounding in Mercy [Grace = *Hesed*]

1. **God has a special love for the undeserving.**
2. This is my favorite Bible word for God's grace. It is the Hebrew word, *hesed*.
3. *Hesed* emphasizes God's love for the underserving.
 - a) We deserve nothing, God gives us everything. We earn nothing, God pays for everything. We merit nothing and worse, but God supplies blessings beyond description.
4. The grace of God is an infinite storehouse. He abounds in mercy.
5. *Hesed* means...
 - a) God doesn't love you because you've been good this week.
 - b) He doesn't love you because you've improved your life.
 - c) God loves you because of who and what he is, not because of who and what you are.
6. This word for grace is such a rich and all-encompassing word, that the translators of Scripture had to invent a new word to translate it.
 - a) They call it the "lovingkindness" of God.
7. What is grace?
 - a) It's hard to define because it's so comprehensive. In grace, God adapts his provision to suit the vast panorama of human need.
 - (1) Grace is God doing for you what you can't do for yourself. It is all that God is free to do for you on the basis of the Cross. Grace is you not earning, not deserving, not meriting, not winning, not working.
 - (2) Grace is God taking care of you in every conceivable way.
 - (a) If you need it, grace supplies it. If you break it, grace fixes it. If you lose it, grace finds it. If you spoil it, grace restores it. If you regret it, grace forgives it. If you're sick, grace heals. If you're dirty, grace cleanses. Where you hurt, grace relieves. Where you fear, grace strengthens. Where you doubt, grace convinces. Where you can't, grace can. For the deluded, grace brings truth. For the addicted, grace brings freedom. For the dysfunctional, grace brings wholeness. For the lonely, grace brings love. For the lost, grace brings a salvation so exhaustive words can't do it justice.
 - (3) Grace is the work of God, doing the thing you need, exactly when you need it done, on the basis of the finished work of Christ, not on the basis of what you've earned or deserved.
 - b) If God's grace doesn't bring you comfort, nothing will. Yes, this fallen world is a morally broken pain machine.
 - c) But let the pain machine hurl out streams of tragedies and dramas and frightful prophecies, the Grace of God is greater than them all.

IV. What do you have if you don't have God?

A. What do you have if you don't have God?

1. While I was preparing for this message, I learned a new word. I had never heard it before. I actually think it's a newly minted word.
 - a) You've heard of an **Atheist** — a person who says there is no God.
 - b) You've heard of an **Agnostic** — a person who says we can't know whether or not there is a God.
2. Now it's time to meet a third one, and I'm not sure how to say it.
 - a) Meet the **Apatheist** — it's a mashup of apathy and theist. **This is a person who says, I just don't care about God.**
 - (1) The apatheist says, "At some point something happened and somehow something or someone was created and somehow I, a bunch of other people, and a lot of other animals got here. I can live with that."
 - b) It's the perfect title for a large and growing group.

3. Here are findings from a survey done by the Cultural Research Center of Arizona Christian University
 - a) Among Boomers and Builders, 28% do not know, believe, or care if God exists.
 - b) Among Gen X adults, it's 31%. Millennial Millennials, it's 43%.
 - (1) That's a lot of people. Here we are arguing logic, history, science, in our apologetics, when a large and increasing swath of people just don't care about a syllable of it.
 - c) In an August 2018 article in Public Discourse, reached this conclusion:
 - (1) "The greatest threat to Christianity is found not in the arguments of the atheist but in the assumptions of the apathetic. The danger is not a hostile reception of belief in God but an incurious indifference to the idea."
 4. The problem is that when you make God trivial, you make everything else, trivial too.
 5. And that includes yourself.
- V. We are trivial...
- A. Atheistic philosopher Alex Rosenberg wrote a book titled *The Atheist's Guide to Reality: Enjoying Life Without Illusions*
 1. "This book aims to provide the correct answers to most of the persistent questions.... Given what we know from the sciences, the answers are all pretty obvious...."
 - a) Is there a God? No. What is the nature of reality? What physics says it is. What is the purpose of the Universe? There is none. What is the meaning of life? Ditto. Why am I here? Just dumb luck. Does prayer work? Of course not. Is there a soul? Are you kidding? Is there free will? Not a chance! What happens when we die? Everything pretty much goes on as before, except us. What is the difference between right and wrong, good and bad? There is no moral difference between them. Does history have any meaning or purpose? It's full of sound and fury, but signifies nothing."
 - (1) [Alex Rosenberg (2011), Op cit (New York: W.W. Norton), p. 3]
 - B. French atheist, Voltaire, agreed in a poem asking for a verdict on who and what we are:
 1. "What is the verdict of the vastest mind? [Humans are...] Tormented atoms in a bed of mud, devoured by death, a mockery of fate."
 - C. We are "tormented atoms in a bed of mud."
 - D. The founder of the American Atheist Association, Madelyn Murray O'Hair, spent a lifetime rebelling against God and attacking Christians. She was the one who brought the lawsuit that ended up banning prayer in public schools. At the end of her life, when her belongings were auctioned, they found six places in her journals where she had written the same tormented cry:
 - a) "Somebody, somewhere, love me!"
 2. No one to turn to. No comfort to be found.
 - E. When you strip meaning out of existence, when you strip sacredness out of life, when you strip God out of everything, there is nothing to comfort, no one to wipe your tears, and no place left but an abyss of despair.
- VI. Comfort
- A. *The world might offer the comfort of a friend, but we have the comfort of a Savior who sticks closer than a brother.* (Hebrews 4:15)
 1. Scripture reveals that God did not stand aloof from human suffering; he became human without ceasing to be God, and submerged himself in the depths of pain like no other human before or since.
 2. So the Bible says
 - a) For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tested as we are, yet without sin. (Hebrews 4:15, NKJV).
 - B. *The world might offer the comfort that our troubles will end, but we have the comfort that no suffering is meaningless.* (2 Corinthians 4:17)
 1. Only Christianity offers a system in which pain means something.
 - a) For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory, (2 Corinthians 4:17, NKJV).
 2. The most amazing part of Paul's statement is that our afflictions produce something: "a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory."
 3. This offers a hope that no other system promises: that suffering isn't wasted. No tear is wasted. God keeps track, and it all means something.
 - C. *The world might offer the comfort of medication and therapy, but we have the comfort of a Redemption too deep for words.* (Matthew 5:4)
 1. Jesus said, "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted" (Matthew 5:4).
 2. When Jesus visited the tomb of his friend, Lazarus, he got emotional. He was sad, and he was mad. He comforted their sisters, and wept with them.
 3. But that's not all.
 4. Jesus refused to accept the cosmic status quo. He knew that things are not the way they're supposed to be. Death is an abnormal cruelty; an intruder that God did not create, and Jesus hates it.
 5. So he died that death may die, and rose again to trample death's grave, and he lives forever to grace the world with a comfort never before seen.
 - D. *The world might offer the comfort of improved society and improved living conditions, but we have all of that PLUS an eternity that makes even the most difficult life worth it all.* (1 Peter 2:11, Hebrews 11:13)
 1. You were made for heaven. This world is not your home. You're just passing through. God calls you a sojourner and a pilgrim (1 Peter 2:11). We are strangers and pilgrims on the earth (Hebrews 11:13).
 - a) Without heaven, the difficulties, the heartaches, the tears, the griefs, the damage of the devil and the perplexities of the pain machine are the soundings of an off-key chord that never resolves.

2. We serve to make this world a better place, yes we should and we do. But we can never make it the best place, and we can never make it make sense, until we set our short, uncertain life within the vast context of a pilgrimage to heaven.
3. All those discordant notes finally resolve in heaven.
4. The more brightly heaven shines in my heart, the more comfort I can find in my sufferings on my journey there.
- E. *The world might offer the comfort of temporal justice, but we have the comfort of a Just Universe with final justice for evil-doers who caused our world's wounds.* (Romans 12:19)
 1. "Vengeance is mine; I will repay," says the Lord." (Romans 12:19)
 2. Without God, the bad guys just get away with it. Without God, we live in a universe with no justice, no moral law, and no moral accountability. The people who hurt you or your children, the abusers who violated your sacred boundaries, the thieves who trampled the realm of your dominion, the thugs who curtailed your freedoms... without God they all get away with it.
 3. Without God in the equation, in the great scheme of things, crime pays.
 4. But we have a God in heaven who satisfies our heart's cry to right every wrong and balance the scales of cosmic justice.
 5. There is a judgment day coming. For believers in Jesus, there is nothing to fear.
 - a) Our judgment day already happened two thousand years ago when Jesus died, and God punished him for all our sins.
 6. But for those who reject God, or just turn the back to him in apathy and incurious indifference, there will be a reckoning.
 7. And one way or another, the people who hurt you or hurt your loved ones... God promises he will repay... so we leave it in his hands and take comfort in him.
- F. *The world might offer the comfort of numbing or reducing or escaping your pain, but we have the comfort of a coming world that abolishes suffering altogether.* (Revelation 21:4)
 1. "And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away." (Revelation 21:4, NKJV).
 2. Suffering and pain and heartbreak and loss... these are not part of God's original creation. They are alien invaders. And one day, they will all be abolished, and for that great day and every day and eons and epochs and ages of days, the badness of life will stay gone forever.
 3. In our darkest days, when we can't make sense of anything, and the pain seems too much to bear, we can take comfort in this:
 - a) **Christianity offers a God who felt the fullest measure of human suffering, a Savior who comforts us in our suffering, a salvation that cuts off the root of suffering, a global mission to alleviate suffering, final justice for perpetrators who cause suffering, and a coming world that abolishes suffering...**
 - (1) **What does your system offer?**
- G. No other system or religion or philosophy even comes close.
- H. If you want to deny that, if you want to be apathetic toward that, if you want to endlessly probe all that and poke holes in it while you go your merry way, have at it.
- I. As for me and my house, we will serve the merciful, gracious, slow to anger, abounding in mercy God of all comfort.
- VII. Do you Want Comfort?
 - A. "Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. (Matthew 11:28, NKJV).
 - B. I would love to have been there when He said to the disciples, "Suffer these little children to come unto Me, and forbid them not; for of such is the kingdom of heaven," and He took them in His arms, and blessed them [Mark 10:14, 16]. I'd love to have seen that, Jesus blessing little children.
 - C. You know, I'd love to have been there that day when the the gospel says, "And, behold, a leper walked up to Jesus" [Matthew 8:2]. He was surrounded by a crowd and nobody could get to him. But then how did a leper just walk up to Jesus?
 1. By law he had to cover his mouth and to cry, "Unclean, unclean!" [Leviticus 13:44-45]. And wherever he walked, the crowd would part and move away.
 2. And as the leper came, the crowd fell back and he walked right up to the Lord.
 3. Why didn't Jesus fall back? That's Jesus.
 4. The Bible says, "And the Lord touched him" [Matthew 8:3].
 5. I can just hear the crowd gasp. That leper hadn't felt the touch of a human hand in memory; it was half the cure, just the warmth of the Master's hand when He touched him. And he was healed.
 - D. I'd love to have been there when the Lord Jesus spoke to that weeping widow, and gave her back her son [Luke 7:11-15].
 - E. I'd love to have been there when blind Bartimaeus cried out, and the crowd said, "Hush, the Master is busy, no time for a wretched blind man." The Lord stopped and said, "Bring him here to Me" [Mark 10:46-52]
 1. This is the kindness of our Lord.
 - F. He was no less so in death; up there on the cross, dying, He said to John, "John, behold thy mother; and He said to His mother, Behold your son" [John 19:26-27]. And John took her away and took care of her; that's the Lord! [John 19:27].
 - G. And when the throngs railed on Him and blasphemed Him, and the thief on one side dying reviled Him [Luke 23:39], He prayed, "Father, forgive them; they know not what they do" [Luke 23:34].
 - H. The Great Comforter, the Lord Jesus. And up there in glory, He is still the same. So we are told, Let us come boldly to the throne of grace, and find mercy and grace to help in time of need. [Hebrews 4:15-16]
 - I. He is still as dear and as tenderhearted; He is touched with the feeling of our infirmities, now, as He was in the days of His flesh; the kindness of our Lord.
 - J. Yes, we live in perilous times.
 - K. But I am here to tell you that perilous times are no match for our precious Savior. May his comfort be in and around and all over you in these darkening days.