



Roanoke, Virginia

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“God’s Consolation”

II Corinthians 1:3-7

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Well, I’m going to talk about Andy Root again today. I’ve read six of his books—not just because he’s giving the Edmunds Lectures this November, but because he is a vital voice for helping pastors navigate ministry in a secular age. His insights are so needed, that eighteen ministers from around the country will travel here to Roanoke to meet with him during the day before he lectures at night.

That’s not to say you should rush home and order one of his books. Someone let me know recently that she uses my sermons for book recommendations—so let me give this warning: Andy Root is academic, and his books are long. I’m happy to be the guy Paul describes when he says the gift of tongues needs an interpreter. I’ll do the reading and pass along what’s helpful.

A theme Root returns to often is this: *God’s consolation*. That theme has felt especially timely. We’ve had several deaths in our extended church family recently, and this sanctuary has hosted a number of memorial services— three of them with near-capacity crowds. Some of you were present in-person or online for at least one of them.

Memorial services are among the clearest times when God’s grace shines through the church’s witness-

- the kindness of the ushers,
- the food prepared by our Second Family Ministry,
- the support of a gathered community,
- those meetings with family members where
 - stories are shared,
 - tears are shed,



- prayers are offered,
- and the presence of God is quietly felt...
- and then the service where prayers, music and reflections do their work of comfort and healing.

I remember having a conversation with a minister at Chautauqua. In some ways, it was a sad conversation. He was retired after serving a large church as a Senior Minister for many years, and he was using me as his confessor. He was candid: he'd stayed in ministry too long. He had burned out.

- He didn't miss preaching or teaching.
- He didn't miss meetings.
- He didn't miss worrying about budget or attendance.
- He didn't *even miss weddings and baptisms*.

But he missed *funerals*.

He missed being the one invited into the family's conversation of loss and memory. He *missed receiving consolation* by offering it to others—especially now that his wife was living with cancer that could not be treated.

That's what Root means when he says that one of the critical gifts the church offers a weary, secular world is *God's consolation*.

I'll say more about that—but first, let's hear Paul's ancient words..., words not written from a place of ease, but from affliction. Not from control, but from grace.

³ Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and the God of all consolation, ⁴ who consoles us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to console those who are in any affliction with the consolation with which we ourselves are consoled by God. ⁵ For just as the sufferings of Christ are abundant for us, so also our consolation is abundant through Christ. ⁶ If we are being afflicted, it is for your consolation and salvation; if we are being consoled, it is for your consolation, which you experience when you patiently endure the same sufferings that we are also suffering. ⁷ Our hope for you is unshaken, for we know that as you share in our sufferings, so also you share in our consolation.

Paul doesn't waste time with small talk. Just a few verses into his letter and he's already knee-deep in **affliction and grace**. The distance between Paul's letters and today's emails is about the same as between a quill pen and autocorrect. No working your way to the serious point you want to make. No "Hope you're well"—just the meaty stuff.

It makes sense. Why waste parchment which is expensive and in limited supply. Why not get right to what matters: being broken and being consoled. And finding in that consolation—not weakness, but blessing.

"Isn't it something," Paul says,



“That we have a suffering God? That in Jesus, God meets us not in our strength but at the point of our need. That our ability to be any good to our friends in trouble begins with the grace we’ve experienced when God met us in ours.”

This is a long way from the Prosperity Gospel. If you’re unfamiliar, that’s the theology that says if you

- pray right,
- live right,
- believe right,

then God will reward you with

- health,
- wealth,
- and happiness.

But it’s

- bad theology,
- bad pastoral care,
- and bad reading of the Bible.

Because if wealth and health are the signs of God’s favor, what do you say

- to the faithful widow who struggles to get by on a fixed income,
- or the devout believer who struggles with chronic pain?

Jesus, the one in whom God’s love was fully present, lived a life with laughter, friendships, and joy. But that is not why we honor his story, is it?

- He struggled,
- he gave of himself in helping others,
- and ultimately he died a brutal and unjust death.

Paul explains.

Paul was a man of accomplishment and means, but he doesn’t write from a place of ease but from the depths of trouble. He does so because he came to know that Jesus who suffers, suffers with him. The Jesus whose life’s journey included grief, loss, temptation, sacrifice and ultimately death is with Paul on his life’s journey when he has to go through the same. That’s God’s consolation. Christ’s presence is most real when our strength is gone.

That’s the Gospel.

- Not a promise of **protection**,
but the presence of Christ.
- Not **ease**,
but grace.



- Not **certainty**,
but salvation.

Can we today find the same consolation in Jesus as Paul did? I mean, Paul's theology can be a hard sell with Americans who live in the world we live in today.

I mean, there are many reasons to celebrate our not living in Paul's day. We don't live in a day when

- lepers were abandoned,
- childbirth was dangerous,
- cities stank,
- and the average lifespan was in the early 30s.

I thank God my father, raised in poverty, had opportunities his parents never had. His opportunity became my opportunity in that I had options in my life. I had the chance to focus on what I was going to do with my life—focus on vocation, not on survival.

I had the chance to focus on myself.

That's what most of us are free to do—encouraged to do—in this world we live in

- where science and medication have increased health and life spans,
- where countries are not constantly at war,
- and where government programs and economic opportunity have decreased poverty.

We can focus on the self:

- the self that we hope to fulfill.
- the self that needs to be expressed.
- the self that can decide what it wants to believe and what it will become.

I want you to hear me. I am not talking about being selfish. I am talking about how much easier it is these days to take care of, and be responsible for, my own self. As much as we are able to do that, it's to be celebrated.

But maybe that should not mean trading the *self* for the *soul*. The shadow-side of modern progress is a modern culture that centers everything around the self—and then quietly punishes those who can't keep up. If your happiness, your identity, your worth depends on your performance, appearance, or success—what happens when those things fade?

Social scientists are noticing an uncomfortable pattern.

- Jean Twenge has documented rising narcissism and declining empathy among young adults—along with increased anxiety and depression.
- Susan David warns about “toxic positivity,” which suppresses honest grief and struggle, and rewards growth and maturity.



- Studies keep linking social media use to rising teen depression—because everyone’s comparing their backstage life to someone else’s highlight reel.

I’m not a social scientist, but I see it too. When we shrink life down to the size of the self, we’re left with a crushing burden—and no consolation when the self cannot help itself. I mean, what happens

- when the athlete slows?
- when the helper can no longer help?
- when the mind dims,
 - the body fails,
 - and all the selves we worked so hard to build begin to fall apart?

Where is the self’s worth then? Where is salvation when we can’t save ourselves?

Maybe that’s when the soul should speak up.

Root puts it like this: God doesn’t meet us in our successes, but in our losses.

- It is in the breaking
 - that the soul is remembered.
- It’s in the silence
 - that the Voice is heard.
- It’s in the dying
 - that life breaks in.

That’s why I think Paul was speaking as much to our day as he was to his when he centered his theology in the cross.

I know there are modern voices, even faithful ones, who would rather the cross lose its front and center place. Why couldn’t the Lord’s Table, for instance, be our central symbol? The Table is about life, community, abundance, grace. I love the Table.

But for me, what must remain central is what is spoken of at the table—

- the body broken for us,
- the blood shed,
- our proclaiming the Lord’s death until he comes.

The cross remains central—

- not as a magical formula, but as a revelation;
- not as divine abuse, but as divine solidarity.

The cross says: God has gone there, too.



And God will go with you.

- You are not alone when your body fails.
- You are not alone when the grief crashes in.
- You are not alone when the self-collapses,
- You will not be alone when you forget who you are.

That is God's consolation. And it is no small thing.

Because in that consolation, we find what Paul found: that when we release what we've lost, we become able to *receive what we didn't know we needed*.

The next time I preach, I want to talk about how grace can be given in our letting go. I think what I say will be real, practical, helpful, good news.

But here is the good news I hope you hear today, especially those of you who are weary, in grief, or bear a burden no one sees.

Your self is a good gift.

It helps you dream, build, grow, and relate,
live your life.

But it's *a perishable item*.

Thank God you are not just a self with a shelf-life.

You are a soul—
named, known, and beloved,
not because of what you do,
but because of who God is.

And when the self is lost
the soul remains.

That—is God's consolation.

Let's join Paul in blessing the God who gives it.



Benediction

Go now in the strength of the One who meets us in our weakness.

May the God of all consolation guard your soul,
hold you in sorrow,
and carry you with grace.

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—Amen.

