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A1326 – June 30, 2013 – 2 Corinthians 1:3-7
Suffering Qualifies Us For Ministry

We're studying the oft neglected book of 2 Corinthians and last time we said the book can be divided into three sections. The first section is 2 Cor 1-7 Explanation of Paul's Ministry, the second section is 2 Cor 8-9 Encouragement to Complete Giving to the Saints at Jerusalem and the third section is 2 Cor 10-13, Evidences of Paul's Apostleship. The uniting element of these three sections that really ties everything together and reveals the argument of the book is Paul's apostleship. Paul was an apostle and had authority, he therefore had to be obeyed or else discipline would surely follow. Since we have no apostles today but we do have the apostolic writings then the authority is vested in the canon of Scripture and if it is not obeyed then church discipline is supposed to follow in order to maintain purity in the church and a testimony to the world.

In verse 1 Paul immediately asserts his apostleship. He is an apostle of the Christ Jesus who directed his commissioning in Damascus. He therefore speaks in the authority of Christ. His apostleship was by the will of God and not by his own will since Paul would have remained a persecutor of the church if it was left up to him. He sent the letter with Timothy who served as a second witness against the minority at Corinth who remained in rebellion against Paul's apostleship and ultimately Christ's authority. He addressed the letter to the entire local church at Corinth as well as all the saints in the governing province of Achaia. In verse 2 he pronounces grace to them and peace as a reminder that God has shown them grace by providing His unique Son as a substitutionary blood atonement for our sin which when appropriated by faith results in peace with God.

Today, Paul formally begins the first of three sections of the book, chapters 1-7, Explanation of Paul's Ministry. There were many questions at Corinth

regarding Paul's ministry; why he suffered so much if he was a real apostle, why he changed his plans if he was a real apostle, what constituted his ministry, what his motives were in ministry and so forth. Paul begins to explain his ministry which to many seemed quite different than pagan leaders of the ancient world.

His first explanation in 1:3-11 regards why he suffered so much if he was a real apostle. The minority at Corinth that remained in rebellion against Paul did so in part because in their minds someone of leadership status should not suffer; it didn't seem befitting of a true apostle to suffer so much. The Jews thought the same thing about Christ; this Jesus couldn't be the true king of Israel since he suffered so much. They envisioned a king reigning in glory not suffering and dying a bitter death on a cross. And yet we know in hindsight that the way to reign in glory is to suffer and die to self. Christ suffered for the joy set before Him and if we suffer with Him we will reign with Him. There is but one path to rule and glory and that is the way of suffering.

Therefore Paul turns their reasoning on its head. He argues first, in 1:3-7 that suffering is what qualifies us to minister to others. If we don't suffer we don't know how to minister to others who are suffering because we can't identify with their sufferings. Attempts to minister to them will be superficial and unsympathetic. Yet if we have suffered like them then our ministry will be deep and empathetic because we will know firsthand what they are going through. Therefore God sent the apostles many sufferings in order to prepare them to minister to others. He argues second, in 1:8-11 that suffering is where we learn to depend upon God and not ourselves. When things are easy we tend to try and be arrogantly autonomous by depending on our flesh. But when we suffer we tend to be shocked out of our selfish autonomy and forced to realize that we are weak and incapable and therefore must turn to depend upon Him. So with two arguments Paul defeats the argument of the minority rebels who thought his apostleship was invalid. First, suffering was necessary for the apostles to be qualified to minister to others who suffered and second, suffering is how we learn to depend upon God and not ourselves, another essential to ministering to others. Thus, Paul's suffering was not a mark against Paul but a mark for Paul's apostleship. This line of reasoning furthers the main argument of the book by giving evidence that indeed Paul is an apostle.

Starting in verse 3 we find the source of mercy and all comfort in time of suffering and affliction as well as one of its purposes. **Blessed *be* the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction so that we will be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.**

First, in verse 3, Paul deviates from his conventional salutation by pronouncing a blessing rather than thanksgiving. He only deviates here and in Ephesians and in both books he pronounces a blessing. Second, in the original text Paul is not blessing God, it says in the NASB **Blessed *be* the God** and even worse in the NIV, “Praise be to the God” but those renderings are incorrect. As you can see from the word *be* in italics there is no verb in the original Greek text and so the translators supplied one. However, this is not necessary because **blessed** is an adjective modifying God and so should be translated **The blessed God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ**. He is blessed because of what He does in verse 4, he **comforts us in all our affliction**.

Now this **blessed God** has two relationships to the Lord Jesus Christ as expressed in the phrase **God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ**. First, God is God of His humanity. That may sound strange to say that the Lord Jesus Christ has a God but in His humanity beginning at the incarnation Jesus had a God and worshipped this God. Otherwise how else could He cry out on the cross, “My God, My God, why have you forsaken Me.” This did not mean that He himself wasn’t God but that as a man He had a God. So this relationship clearly refers to one established by the incarnation since Jesus’ humanity did not exist before the incarnation. Therefore God is the God of the humanity of the Lord Jesus Christ beginning at His incarnation. Second, God is **Father** in relation to Jesus as Son. There is a Father-Son relationship. This relationship is clearly one that is from all eternity since a Father and Son share an equality of being or essence. A son is not less than a father but share the same essence. Therefore, the Father and the Son are both equally God. And since God is eternal then the Father has been Father from all eternity and the Son has been the Son from all eternity. This means that the Father-Son relationship is an eternal relationship rooted in the very nature and being of God. The Father no more became the Father at the incarnation than the Son became the Son. God is Father and Son, that is who

He is, not what He became. God does not become anything, God is not in process, God never changes, even in the incarnation when the second Person of the Son assumed humanity God Himself did not change, He has forever been and will forever be Father, Son and Spirit in one essence. He is immutable. So God has two relationships to the Lord Jesus Christ in this expression, as Tom Constable says, “In His eternal being, God was always His Father; in His incarnation as the Messiah, God was His God.”ⁱ

These two relationships are then broken out at the end of verse 3 as they relate to mercy and comfort. **The blessed God is the Father of mercies and God of all comfort.** He relates the mercies to the eternal Father-Son relationship. Mercy is *oiktirmos* and means “to show pity over one’s misfortune,” “to display concern over one’s misfortune”. Certainly the Father showed pity toward His own Son at many points in His earthly career but especially on the cross since the Son was receiving something He did not deserve. He had no sin nature and no personal sin to die for so the Father showed pity on Him during those hours on the cross. Then Paul relates **all comfort** to the temporal relationship of **God** to the humanity of the Lord Jesus Christ. Comfort is *paraklesis* and means “to lift up another’s spirits, to comfort, to console.” It is the key word in this section being used 10 times in vv 3-7 as both noun and verb. “It means much more than mere sympathy. It communicates the idea of one person standing alongside another to encourage and support his friend.”ⁱⁱ

It should be noted that **comfort** is modified by the adjective **all**. He is the **God of all comfort** meaning God has a monopoly on **all** genuine **comfort**. Therefore, all comfort that has ever been expressed at any time in the entire history of the world by any person has only been expressed because of God. How can this be? First, because nothing exists unless God exists. God as the Creator is Himself existence and the source and ground of all created existence outside of Himself. So all comfort must come from Him. Second, it is of the nature of the blessed God to comfort, to support His creatures, so it must come from Him. Third, since man is made in God’s image then man’s expressions of comfort are finite analogs of God’s expression of comfort. Fourth, and by way of logical extension, all expressions of comfort from one human to another ultimately are sourced in God in whose image man is made. Therefore we can say that every man is without excuse since all expressions of comfort toward others evidence that they know God perfectly

well but are suppressing this truth in unrighteousness for if a human were to be perfectly consistent with his unbelieving worldview then he would never show comfort to anyone ever. No other worldview provides the necessary preconditions to account for comforting others. This has been observed, for example, in acts of altruism where one will give up his life or put himself in danger for another. We observe altruistic acts by both man and animals but it's entirely incompatible with evolutionary materialist philosophy of survival of the fittest. However, it's not incompatible with creation spiritual-material philosophy of a blessed God who is the Giver of all good things. Therefore if any pagan expresses comfort or consolation to another human being it reveals that he is an image-bearer of God and is acting in accordance with who He is as made in God's image. The corollary truth already alluded to is that he is not living consistently with his worldview. Paul in his apologetics appealed to these inconsistencies as evidences that they were suppressing the truth that they know to be true and that they were in big trouble with God so they should repent. So this little expression **God of all comfort**, while especially applicable to Christians, also has apologetic impact in discussion with pagans. If they show comfort to another they are acting inconsistent with their rejection of Christianity and we should call them on the carpet for it.

In any case, having related the eternal Father to **mercies** and **God to all comfort** Paul now, in verse 4, picks up with the results of God being blessed. He is **the blessed God** because He is the one **who comforts us in all our affliction**. This tells us more of the nature of God because it shows that the God of the Bible is not the God of deism. The God of deism is a god who created the world and is transcendent, outside of the created order, but not imminent within it, not at work within it, he simply leaves the creation to its own devices except in some brands of deism where at key moments of history he intervenes to correct something that's gone wrong. The God of Christian theism however, is the God who created the world and is both transcendent, outside of it, and imminent, actively involved in His creation and in our lives continually. How could He not be if He is the One **who comforts us in all our affliction**. His comfort comes from outside of the creation to us inside the creation.

Now stated bluntly is the fact that we face **affliction**. In the Greek, affliction is *thlipsis* and means tribulation inflicted from external sources,

difficulty arising from the world, not from God; troubles, trials and hard times that come ultimately from living in a fallen world. And here we have a God who cares so much about us in our hard times despite the fact that we brought these hard times upon ourselves in Adam that He still comforts us. Now that's a kind of love that humans are not accustomed to, the greatest love a human can have for another is to lay down his life for his friend, but the greatest love of all is to lay down your life for your enemies. That kind of love only comes from God and that is the kind of love Christ had for us, that while we were yet enemies, Christ died for us. So for God to comfort us in our affliction which we brought upon ourselves by rebelling against Him is to demonstrate the greatest love possible, the love that can only come from God. He comes from outside of the creation into the creation to personally comfort us. That's the kind of love that is behind this comfort.

Concerning the nature of this tribulation there are two kinds of tribulation. First, there is the time of global tribulation designated as the 70th week of Daniel due to supernatural judgments; demonic locusts, hailstones weighing 120 pounds, global darkness, etc.... This time of global tribulation, the nature of which is entirely different from anything the world has ever seen, will come upon Israel and the nations for a set period of time in order to cleanse the earth of unrighteousness in preparation for the kingdom. We are not destined for this time of tribulation as Paul wrote to the Thessalonians, "God has not destined us for wrath but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep, we will live together with Him." He will accordingly take us away from the world before the wrath comes in that 70th week. Second, however, there is a kind of tribulation that all men face due to the fact they live in a fallen world; economic distress, persecution, famine, disease, oppression, war, etc... These tribulations are faced by all men at all times and those are the kinds of sufferings referred to here by the word **affliction**. But the good news is that we have a God who comforts us through all of them.

But why do we face them? What's the purpose? What are the reasons for suffering and tribulation and affliction? There are several reasons. Before we look at the reasons pointed out here we want to review all the reasons for suffering that I can find in Scripture and then we'll come back and classify this text into the category of suffering. The reason we want to do this is because all suffering is not for the same reason. If you comb through the

Scriptures you find about 11 different reasons we suffer. No one of them one gives a total answer for why we suffer, but they do give you a tool for thinking through why you may be suffering in a particular situation and that helps because it can bring your suffering down to size and see it within the larger frame of history, that God has a purpose and a plan for your life. Now we divide these eleven reasons into two basic categories of suffering. First, those that are direct suffering. That is, they are a clear consequence of the choices we make. All suffering is not direct, all of it is not linked clearly to a choice we make; some of them are indirect and therefore not related directly to any choice we make. But you'll see as we go through these that God has a purpose for them all. So the first six are direct suffering patterns that are clearly consequences of our choices. The first category here is the "General existence of sickness and death both physical and spiritual due to the Fall." In Adam we sinned against God and therefore there are consequences on a global scale (Gen 2:17). All sickness, all pain, all emotional problems, all psychological problems, all death, both human and animal, are due to the Fall. We sinned in Adam and therefore they are direct consequences of our sin in Adam (Rom 5:12-14; 8:19-23). The second category is "General existence of "self-induced misery," that is, I did a do-do thing and therefore I'm reaping the consequences. And we've all done do-do things and when we do a do-do thing we expect there to be consequences. So this category is all too familiar, self-induced misery. The third category is "General judgment pattern on families and nations." What we mean by this is suffering because we're associated with do-do families and do-do nations that we happen to be a part of. This is also easy to see. That's what we're facing now in our country as they rip and tear at the divine institutions of marriage and family as if the courts were in any place to legislate morality. As a consequence of these decisions that are against all historic awareness we all suffer because when you rip at the creation ordinance of marriage between one man and one woman you're ripping at the nature of who we are as human beings made in the image of God and there are serious consequences to pay, these don't just go away in a few weeks, these consequences result in the fall of nations. So we suffer by association when families and nations are judged for living contrary to how we were designed to live. The fourth category is "Eternal judgment in the lake of fire." This is a direct consequence of a person's failure to respond to God's grace and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and be saved. By the way, the lake of fire wasn't created for humans, it was created for the devil and his angels, humans just end up there because they spurned God's

grace. The fifth category of suffering is “Judgment in time for believers.” That is, God’s Fatherly discipline because we as His children are rebelling against His authority. We may become weak or sick or even die because He is trying to get our attention so we’ll confess our sin and be restored to fellowship. So some of our suffering as believers is due to divine discipline. The sixth category for suffering directly because of a clear choice we made is at the “Judgment Seat of Christ.” This will be an analysis of our works, whether good or bad, good works being those done by the Spirit and bad works being those done out of the flesh. He can only reward the things done in the Spirit; the rest of it is garbage. And there can be some kind of suffering there even though we’re already in a resurrection body. For example, we can be ashamed but it’s a temporary shame and it’s the idea similar to a child not pleasing his father, it’s tempered by the family relationship that can never be lost. So those are six reasons we suffer and we refer to those as direct suffering patterns because they are directly related to a clear choice we or someone associated with us made and therefore we’re having to deal with the fallout.

The next five reasons we suffer are all indirect because they have no clear connection to a choice we or someone else makes, it just seems like it’s coming out of the clear blue and bam, we’re hit with some tremendous difficulty. There are five suffering patterns here. First, and this one is for unbelievers only. Unbelievers may suffer as an “Evangelistic wake-up call.” God may be saying, hey Mr Unbeliever, wake up; they may get sick, they may be in a car wreck, something, whatever it takes to shatter their arrogant autonomy so they’ll think about God and His provision for them in Jesus Christ. Second, and this one is for believers only. Believers may be getting “A nudge to advance spiritually,” to wake up and smell the coffee because he has become dependent upon his flesh and is arrogant and therefore to prick at his conscience and stimulate repentance so that they start depending upon God’s grace again He sends them some kind of suffering. Third, also for believers only, we may suffer for the “Evangelization of unbelievers,” that is, God may send us into a suffering situation like sickness or near death so that when we handle it by grace our unbelieving friend is watching this and he’s stimulated to ask us a question about how we handled that and it opens an opportunity for the gospel. That’s why it’s so important that we cope with our sufferings in a very different way than the pagan world. We’re not going through all the coping patterns of pagans, they can be as simple as anesthetizing themselves

by doing drugs or blasting their eardrums with music or they can be more complex along the lines of denying suffering as an illusion, but in any case, we are not supposed to cope with our suffering the way pagans do, if we do we have no testimony. If we handle it with grace and humility it becomes an opportunity to evangelize unbelievers who are watching. Tenth reason we suffer indirectly, “Resolution of the angelic conflict.” There’s a battle raging in the heavenly places between the good and evil angels and we don’t know how but somehow our sufferings and how we handle them are instrumental in resolving this conflict. It’s the kind of suffering Job was facing, it apparently came out of the blue, Job didn’t do a thing wrong, it had nothing to do with Job doing something wrong, not all suffering is due to something you do wrong, it could just be that God sends suffering your direction to solve something in the angelic conflict. And finally, the eleventh reason we suffer indirectly, “Edification of fellow believers.” When you go through something what happens is you get equipped to help someone else when they face a similar thing. That is, you become qualified as a counselor, you get equipped to minister to others in a way that not all believers are qualified to do.

Now, having reviewed the six direct and five indirect reasons we may suffer, what reason does Paul appeal to in 2 Cor 1:4, **so that we may be able to comfort those who are in affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.** Paul says we suffer so we are able to comfort others who are afflicted in similar ways. It’s the last reason we looked at here, suffering for edification of fellow believers. That doesn’t exhaust all reasons we suffer as we’ve seen, but sometimes we go through difficult things by God’s design for our lives so that we will be qualified to comfort others who are going to face the same thing later. And so we get to pass on to them what God passed on to us.

So we’re looking at a passage that says certain sufferings you face uniquely qualify you for ministry to others and we want to make several points. First, someone may say, well, what difference does it make whether we’ve been through the same thing or not? I can still give them the Scripture and the doctrine. True, you can do that, but there’s something you can’t do. A. T. Robertson put it this way, “Paul here gives the purpose of affliction in the preacher’s life, in any Christian’s life, to qualify him for ministry to others. Otherwise it will be professional and perfunctory.”ⁱⁱⁱ That is, it becomes superficial, routine, lacking closeness to the situation. So someone may know

the right answers, and that is important, or they may know the right doctrines to employ, and that is important, but if they don't know how to bridge the gap to application, it's insufficient. The Scriptures must be applied and those who have gone through it already and have thought about it and have worked through it and applied it, they have a unique qualification to minister to others in that area.

Second, this is pointing up a truth I've said many times before and that is simply that the pastor doesn't do all the ministry, all believers minister. Frankly there's some ministry I'm not really qualified to do though I can point you to Scripture and verse, principle and passage. But as far as being able to empathize with you and what you are going through, I can't always do that because I haven't been through that. That's why I never tell someone who's going through something I've never been through, "Hey, I know what you're going through." No, I don't! And you don't either, not unless you've gone through it. So don't throw that line of bull out there. That doesn't help the person. Instead say, I don't understand all that you're going through, here are some primary Scriptural passages and doctrinal principles and I'll pray for you and why don't you call so and so, they've been through something similar and I bet they can encourage you and help you get through this. We're not lone islands in the Christian life. We're a unit, a body, the church. And we're supposed to be encouraging one another, helping one another, ministering to one another. Everyone is supposed to do that.

Verse 5, For just as the sufferings of Christ are ours in abundance, so also our comfort is abundant through Christ. The apostles were called to suffer. It was part of the commissioning. Turn to Paul's commissioning again in Acts 9:15-16 and ask yourself, why were the apostles commissioned to suffer? Obviously it's connected to the gospel message they were sent to proclaim. But why? Verse 15, "Go for he is a chosen instrument of Mine, to bear My name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel;" verse 16, causal *gar*, "because I will show him how much he must suffer for My name's sake." Suffering in conjunction with bearing the gospel message was part and parcel of the territory. Why? So he would be adequately qualified to minister in many, many ways. The more you suffer the more qualified you are to minister. We're not downplaying the Scriptures here; we're saying that the life situations of suffering that require application of the Scriptures are necessary to qualify you to really minister to others. The apostles suffered

greatly for that very purpose and I'm convinced that real pastors, men who are actually called to preach and teach the word of God and care for God's flock also suffer more than the average believer. Why? Because they've got to be able to minister in many, many areas. If not they're not adequate, they can be professional and give routine help but they don't really know what you're going through and it comes out sounding kind of flaky and superficial. So I think God gives them more suffering, more difficulties and that does qualify them. But ministry is not just for pastors, it's for all believers and therefore all believers are going to suffer in certain areas and that's what qualifies them to minister to others and that's what makes the body a body, where every part is essential to every other part, I minister to you and you to me and you to you and so on and so forth.

He also juxtaposes in verse 5 the comfort, **the sufferings of Christ are ours in abundance** but also **our comfort is abundant through Christ**, a lot of comfort, even more comfort than suffering. So we don't just get suffering, we get comfort from God through Christ and yet the comfort you get is not the end, it's a means to the end which is to pass it on to others who need it later. "Personal experience of God's comfort is necessary before we can pass it on to others."^{iv} "No matter what variety of affliction we may be experiencing, and no matter what its intensity, God will provide strength and encouragement (comfort) that is adequate for our need (cf. 12:9). He will bestow more comfort than we have affliction."^v "Similar experiences enable us to sympathize with others and thus be effective encouragers and comforters. Yet we would be exaggerating to say that only those who have suffered greatly know how to comfort the afflicted."^{vi}

"note that it is a particular kind of suffering to which he referred: the sufferings of Christ. These were the sufferings Paul was experiencing because he belonged to Christ and stood up for Christ in a hostile environment."^{vii} The main topic or reason for suffering here is due to ministry situations when you get a hostile response. Paul got that a lot, he was even stoned and left for dead in Lystra. But "Paul's point in this verse was this. Regardless of how great our sufferings for Christ may be God will not only match them but exceed them with His comfort, strength, and encouragement."^{viii} And in Rom 8:17 Paul teaches that if we suffer with Christ we will reign with Him. The path of suffering with Christ is the path to reigning with Him.

In summary, the blessed God and Father shares these two relationships with our Lord Jesus Christ, one temporal, the other eternal. He is the Father of mercies and has a monopoly on comfort, as blessed God He comforts us in all our affliction, the purpose of which is our ability to be uniquely qualified to comfort those who are afflicted in like manner with the comfort that we ourselves are comforted by God. For as we fill up the sufferings of Christ in abundance so equally and greater we are comforted through Christ.

Let's stop here and draw some conclusions. First, your sufferings you face have meaning and purpose. They are not meaningless, if there were no meaning or purpose then you could get very depressed and discouraged. But we know that God sends suffering of various kinds in order to uniquely qualify you to minister to others in a way that others simply cannot do. Rejoice in this because He is equipping you. Look for opportunities. Get involved in people's lives. Get to know others. Second, your sufferings may be great but His comfort is greater. Don't ever let suffering get you down and defeat you. Christ went before you and He suffered for the joy set before Him on the other side of the cross. Suffering always comes before glory so don't get discouraged, be encouraged, the present sufferings cannot compare to the glory to follow. Third, there are many reasons we may suffer. Don't forget about the other ten reasons we may suffer, some of it is due to direct choices that we made and some of it is not. One reason is the Fall, another is self-induced misery which exacerbates the effects of the Fall, another is simply that we are engaged in the angelic conflict or being nudged to grow spiritually or to evangelize unbelievers. There are a number of reasons we suffer but don't be discouraged in any of them. Remember that the God of all comfort is bigger than all your sufferings and they all have a calculated and intentional purpose.

ⁱ Constable, T. (2003). *Tom Constable's Expository Notes on the Bible* (2 Co 1:3). Galaxie Software.

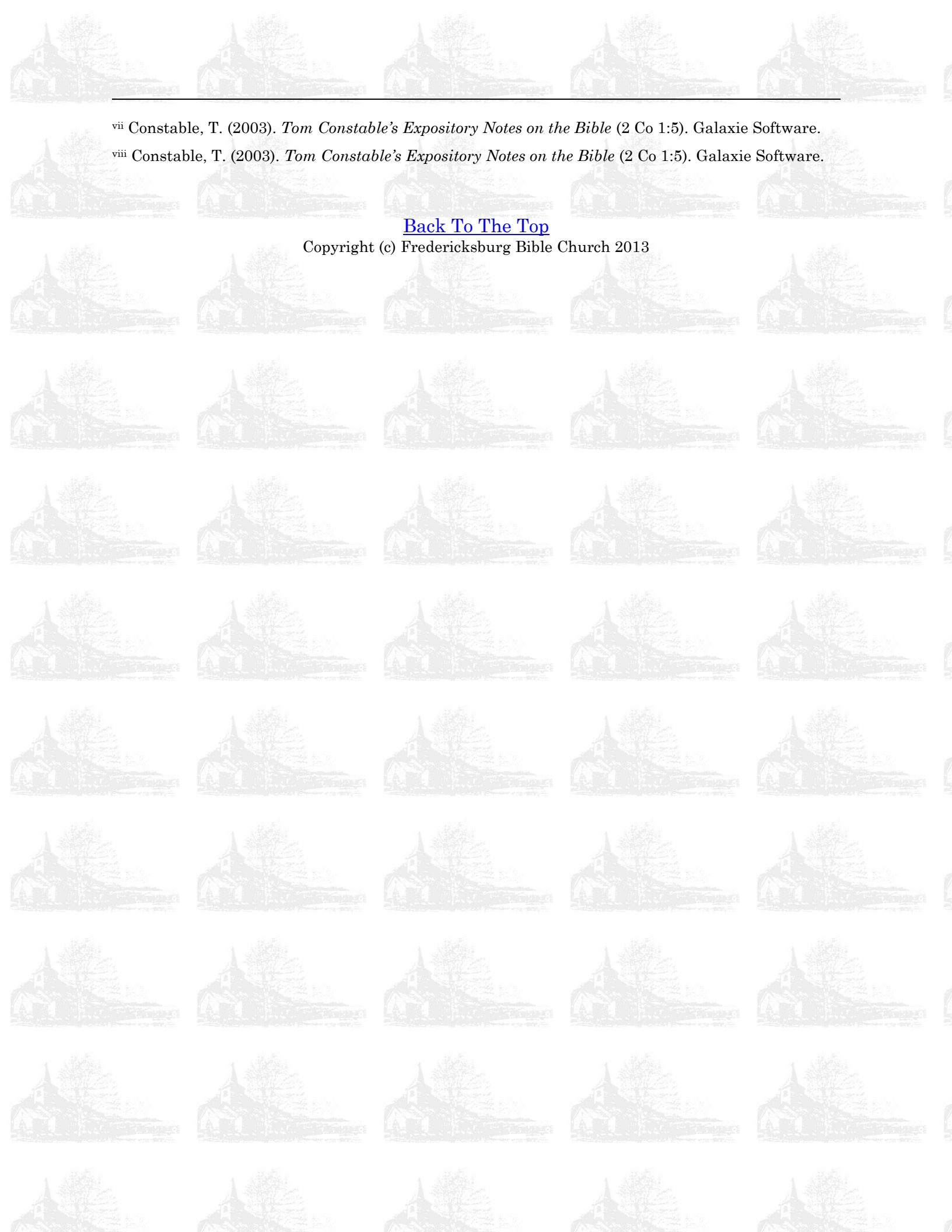
ⁱⁱ Constable, T. (2003). *Tom Constable's Expository Notes on the Bible* (2 Co 1:3). Galaxie Software.

ⁱⁱⁱ Robertson, A. (1933). *Word Pictures in the New Testament* (2 Co 1:4). Nashville, TN: Broadman Press.

^{iv} Robertson, A. (1933). *Word Pictures in the New Testament* (2 Co 1:4). Nashville, TN: Broadman Press.

^v Constable, T. (2003). *Tom Constable's Expository Notes on the Bible* (2 Co 1:4). Galaxie Software.

^{vi} Constable, T. (2003). *Tom Constable's Expository Notes on the Bible* (2 Co 1:4). Galaxie Software.



vii Constable, T. (2003). *Tom Constable's Expository Notes on the Bible* (2 Co 1:5). Galaxie Software.

viii Constable, T. (2003). *Tom Constable's Expository Notes on the Bible* (2 Co 1:5). Galaxie Software.

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