

“God of All Comfort,” 2 Corinthians 1:1-11 (Third Sunday of Easter, May 5, 2019)

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother,  
To the church of God that is at Corinth, with all the saints who are in the whole of Achaia:

<sup>2</sup> Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

<sup>3</sup> Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, <sup>4</sup> who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. <sup>5</sup> For as we share abundantly in Christ’s sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too.

<sup>6</sup> If we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation; and if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which you experience when you patiently endure the same sufferings that we suffer.

<sup>7</sup> Our hope for you is unshaken, for we know that as you share in our sufferings, you will also share in our comfort.

<sup>8</sup> For we do not want you to be unaware, brothers, of the affliction we experienced in Asia. For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself. <sup>9</sup> Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death. But that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead. <sup>10</sup> He delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us. On him we have set our hope that he will deliver us again. <sup>11</sup> You also must help us by prayer, so that many will give thanks on our behalf for the blessing granted us through the prayers of many.

## PRAY

We begin a new series today in 2 Corinthians that, Lord willing, we’ll be in all summer until the middle of August. We won’t go verse-by-verse in our study of 2 Corinthians, but we will cover most of it. And today will be a briefer sermon than usual because we will take the Lord’s Supper today but also because at the end of today’s service I plan to give a presentation on a particular piece of land the elders hope the church will buy. In two weeks we’ll have a church vote to approve the purchase and, Lord willing, we can one day build our own church building there.

The book we call 2 Corinthians was most likely the fourth letter Paul wrote to the church at Corinth, a city in what is now southern Greece. We know there was a letter Paul wrote prior to what we call 1 Corinthians. We can read about it in 1 Corinthians 5:9. So what we call 1 Corinthians is, actually, Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians, a follow up to his first letter.

Most scholars today think that Paul wrote a third letter to Corinth after 1 Corinthians, but before 2 Corinthians. They call it Paul’s “tearful” letter, and base that on 2 Corinthians 2:4, where we read that Paul wrote the Corinthians “out of much affliction and anguish of heart and with many tears,” and he knows that letter caused them much pain. Paul in 1 Corinthians, while clear and direct at points, isn’t nearly so harsh or severe as 2:4 seems to indicate, so the consensus is there is another, missing letter.

Paul wrote that third letter because the church in Corinth was in turmoil and broke out into open rebellion against his leadership. Paul actually visited Corinth to try and calm things down, but

that only made things worse, so Paul withdrew to Macedonia in what is now northern Greece, from which Paul wrote the “tearful letter” warning of God’s judgment if the Corinthian church continued in their revolt. Thankfully, the majority in Corinth repented, disciplined the leaders of the revolt, and peace returned. Then Paul wrote what we call 2 Corinthians, which is at least the fourth letter Paul wrote to Corinth.

We need to know all that background because it helps us understand why this book is written the way it is. As one New Testament scholar put it, “2 Corinthians seems to have been dragged out of Paul in bits and pieces. It stops and starts and changes gears abruptly ...” That’s a good description of the book. You can almost feel how conflicted Paul is as you read it.

Why does it feel so disjointed? Because Paul wrote 2 Corinthians just as he was coming out of time of intense suffering. You could say Paul’s theme in 2 Corinthians is finding God’s strength in times of suffering.

And that’s what I want us see this morning under two headings: first, we must see that suffering will come. Second, we must know the comfort for our suffering.

First, suffering will come. As we’ve seen, part of Paul’s suffering was because he felt betrayed and rejected by people he loved, people close to him. We’ll talk about that more as we go along in our study of 2 Corinthians this summer.

But then we read this: “For we do not want you to be unaware, brothers, of the affliction we experienced in Asia. For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself. <sup>9</sup>Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death.” 2 Corinthians 1:8-9a.

What incident is he talking about? We don’t know for sure. Paul never says exactly what happened, and the book of Acts doesn’t record what it might have been. But most scholars today, and I agree with them, say Paul was imprisoned at some point during his three years in Ephesus, which was in what they then called Asia. It had to be some kind of severe trial to get Paul to write like that.

This is what I think happened: Paul preaches the gospel in Ephesus, and it stirs people up. Riots break out. We can read about one of them in Acts 19. Eventually, Paul is thrown into prison.

Paul, however, thinks, “No big deal. I’ve been to prison before.” And he has, in Philippi. You can read about it in Acts 16. Many of you know this story. Paul and Silas are arrested, flogged, and thrown in prison. But around midnight, as they were singing hymns, there was a violent earthquake. Their chains fell off, the prison doors flew open, and they could have walked away. The jailer, in a panic, drew his sword to kill himself. In antiquity if the prisoners you were guarding escaped, your life was forfeit. But before he could take his own life, Paul shouted, “Don’t harm yourself! We are all here!”

Then the Philippian jailer is converted, he washes their wounds, and Paul and Silas go free the next day.

So when Paul is arrested in Ephesus four or five years later just maybe it went like this. Paul goes to jail and says, “God sent an earthquake on my first night in prison in Philippi. Maybe this time he’ll send a tornado, or maybe lightning. Maybe he’ll send some killer bees from Africa that will drive the guards out. I can’t wait to see what he’ll do.”

His first night in jail Paul sings the same hymns in sang in Philippi, but this time no sign of rescue from the Lord. Then the second night passes, then the third. Then a week passes, then a month. Perhaps they drag Paul out of his cell a couple of times a week to “interrogate” him, which really just means more beatings. Plus, in the ancient world no effort was made by the authorities to look after prisoners. If they wanted to eat their friends had to bring them food. But Paul’s friends may not have known where Paul was being held, or, if they did, were too frightened of being associated with him to help.

It would not take long with little food and water, with regular beatings and no hope of getting out, for even the apostle Paul to despair of life itself and to think he’d received a death sentence.

Friends, Paul suffered and you and I will, too. Suffering will come for everyone. No matter what you do or how hard you work in this life *you will suffer*.

All the diligence in the world can’t prevent cancer, or car accidents, or broken-hearts. All the money in the world can’t stop your kids from making self-destructive decisions or protect you from being betrayed by those closest to you. In fact, money might make it worse. And all the control in the world can’t guarantee you won’t tear your life apart with your own bare hands.

This world is broken (see Genesis 3, the fall of man and the introduction of sin into the world). Romans 8 tells us that the whole world has been “subjected to futility” by sin and is in “bondage to corruption.” Romans 8:20-21. ***Because of this brokenness suffering will come.***

Now if that bothers you, if that doesn’t sit well with you, you’re not alone. Many people never give Christianity a chance or have left the faith because of the problem of suffering. The problem, simply stated, is that Christianity says that God is all good and all powerful. However, the world is full of suffering and pain. Therefore, God is either good but not powerful, because he’s unable to stop suffering. Or, or God is powerful but not good, because he allows suffering to continue. Either way, the argument goes, the Christian conception of God can’t be true.

What’s the Christian response? That’s gets us to the second point: the comfort in our suffering.

If you are here this morning and in the midst of suffering, if you’re here and you’re hurting for whatever reason, no one can tell you exactly why, in specifics, an all-powerful and all-loving God is allowing this to happen. No one can tell you and it would be cruel for someone to try.

But in general I can tell you this. As Tim Keller puts it, “If you have a God big enough to be mad at because he hasn’t stopped the suffering in your life or in the world, then you have (at the same moment) a God big enough to have good reasons for allowing it to continue that you can’t know.” You can’t have it both ways.

And while you can't tell someone else why they suffer, God does give insight to those who suffer. This passage tells us three reasons why we suffer. *First, we suffer because we will only learn certain things through it.* I think that's the point of the last part of verse 9: "But [our suffering] was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead." There are certain realities about who God is, who I am, and what the purpose of life is that I would have never known without suffering. I would have never relied on God and just trusted my own understanding. I have lost count of the number of people I've heard say, "It was the hardest time of my life. I wouldn't wish it on my worst enemy. But I thank God for it because of what I learned through it." If you were at the men's retreat you heard the speaker say that over a seven-year period he went through two bouts of cancer, a professional betrayal, and his middle school daughter was the victim of a violent crime. He said it was all awful. But he also said that he's thankful, because God taught him things through that time he would not have learned otherwise.

*Second, we suffer so we can comfort others when they suffer.* Verses 3-4: "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, <sup>4</sup> who comforts us in all our affliction, ***so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.***"

Few things bring comfort like talking to someone who has gone through suffering before us, and yet find by God's grace they are still standing. If you're going through an illness, or a hard time in your marriage, or you're out of work and struggling, nothing helps like talking with someone who has walked that path before. You think, "OK, they've been through the same thing, but God didn't let their suffering didn't take them down. Maybe he won't let it take me down, either."

When our kids were young I was extremely self-conscious about how we were raising our children. It's hard to be a parent and I constantly felt like a failure. It was so close to my heart. I still often feel that way, but it was worse back then.

You know what did not help me at all back then? Parenting talks about what I could be doing better as a parent. All the right things to do around a Christian home. Those talks just reinforced my sense of being a failure, because I tried to implement a lot of those good ideas and they just didn't work out the way the speaker acted like they did in his family. The talks didn't encourage me to work harder as a dad. Instead, they crushed me.

But then I heard one of my favorite pastors talk about parenting, and he talked about how he felt like a failure when his kids were young. He talked about how his kids fought all the time, how they misbehaved, how family devotions around their house were a disaster because his children would just run around and scream instead of listen to dad read the Bible. He talked about how his mother-in-law nicknamed his kids "the hellions" and that didn't help.

But now he's older, and his kids are all adults, all walking with the Lord, some have children of their own now, and it gave me hope. His talks comforted me. I saw that it wasn't over for me. And through that comfort the Lord encouraged me to be faithful and keep trying to love and raise my children in his nurture and admonition because, even though I'm going to blow it over and over again, God is faithful and he loves my children more than I do.

You don't help suffering people by showing off your successes or by acting like you've got it all together. You help them by sharing your afflictions. You help people see it's just part of living in a broken world, but God is faithful and he will complete the good work he has begun.

It's not as though you can only help people who go through the exact same suffering you've been through. "If we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation; and if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which you experience when you patiently endure the same sufferings that we suffer." 2 Corinthians 1:6. When Paul writes "the same sufferings that we suffer" he doesn't mean that everyone in Corinth had gone to prison in Ephesus like he had.

He simply means that any suffering endured for the glory of God will comfort other Christians. I have never suffered, and hope I never do suffer, the way Joni Eareckson Tada has. On July 30, 1967, she became a quadriplegic after diving into some shallow water in the Chesapeake Bay. Over fifty years later (fifty years!), she's still in a wheelchair. She's also now has scoliosis because her spine has been so weakened from sitting in a chair all those years. She's had breast cancer, and she's had severe chronic pain that the doctors can't seem to resolve.

Yet on the fiftieth anniversary of her diving accident, July 30, 2017, she wrote these words: "It is incredible, but I really would rather be in this wheelchair knowing Jesus as I do than be on my feet without him ... It has everything to do with God and his grace – not just grace over the long haul, but grace in tiny moments, like breathing in and out ... The beauty of such grace is that it eclipses the suffering until one July morning, you look back and see five decades of God working in a mighty way. Grace softens the edges of past pains, helping to highlight the eternal. What you are left with is peace that's profound, joy that's unshakable, faith that's ironclad."

I read those words and even though I have not suffered at all like Joni has through her words *God comforts me*. I'm reminded that no matter what happens God will never leave me nor forsake me. "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 ..."

But then, *third, we receive comfort from God himself*. "For as we share abundantly in Christ's sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too." 2 Corinthians 1:5.

You know what this verse tells us? It tells us, as we've already seen, we will suffer. But it also tells us that in Jesus Christ God himself suffers with us. The good news of Christianity is not that if you're good, then when you die you go to heaven. The good news isn't that there is a God, and he wishes you well, but in this life you're on your own.

The good news of Christianity is that even though we are all sinners in rebellion against God and therefore deserve the harshest possible penalty, God loves us anyway. He loves us more than we could possibly imagine. He loves us in ways we cannot now understand, because he is all-powerful, all-wise, and all-knowing. But mainly he loves us so much that he sent his one and only Son Jesus Christ to live the life we should have lived and on the cross to suffer the punishment we deserve for our sins. And because Jesus did that, we can confidently look to God and know that all we will ever receive from him forever is comfort.

John Stott, *The Cross of Christ*, "I could never myself believe in God if it were not for the cross ... In the real world of pain, how could one worship a God who was immune to it? I have entered many Buddhist temples in different Asian countries and stood respectfully before the statue of Buddha - - his legs crossed, arms folded, eyes closed, the ghost of a smile playing round his mouth, a remote look on his face, detached from the agony of the world. But each time, after a while, I have had to turn away. And in my imagination, I have turned instead to that lonely, twisted, tortured figure on the cross -- nails through his hands and feet, back lacerated, limbs wrenched, brow bleeding from thorn pricks, mouth dry and intolerably thirsty, plunged in God-forsaken darkness. That is the God for me!"

No one can tell you precisely why you suffer. But you can look at the cross and see God in Jesus Christ suffering for you and you can say, "Whatever else is going on in my life, God is not indifferent to my pain. God is not punishing me with this. God has not abandoned me to my suffering. I can trust him." And you can say, like Job, "Though he slay me, I will hope in him." Job 13:15a. PRAY