

This morning, I am beginning a new sermon series called Strength in Weakness, based on the New Testament book Second Corinthians, the Apostle Paul's second letter in the Bible to the church at Corinth. As we begin a new year of sermons, I want to reiterate that we believe that:

2 Timothy 3:16-17 - All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, ¹⁷ so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.

And that goes for the letters of Paul as well as the gospels or any other book of the Bible. When you read a New Testament letter like 2 Corinthians, you need to understand that these letters are not addressed to you. They weren't dropped out of the sky to 21st century America. They are letters addressed to specific people in a specific context. This means that some of what is written will be particular to the culture, while some of it will be transcultural – for all people in all circumstance and all times. And so, in order to understand what these passages meant to its listeners and what it means for us today, **you need to do some work to understand the historical and cultural context**: what the culture was like, what the Corinthian church was like, and what problems were going on in that he was addressing. This may mean consulting commentaries, Bible dictionaries, concordances, other Biblical as well as historical sources outside of the Bible. With that in mind, let's begin with the first two verses of 2 Corinthians:

2 Corinthians 1:1-2 - Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, To the church of God in Corinth, together with all the saints throughout Achaia: ² Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Paul was a Pharisee, a Jewish religious leader, who was converted in miraculous fashion by an appearance of the ascended Jesus, and as a result he became a passionate disciple of Jesus. Timothy was his protégé, best known as the pastor of the church in Ephesus. And they write to the church, the saints. We are all saints, those who are set apart for God's service. Corinth was a city in the Roman Empire in modern day Greece, located near the land bridge between Peloponnesos and mainland Greece. As a result, it was a major destination for traders, travelers and tourists, and was a fairly wealthy city. The apostle Paul started the Corinthian church around 50 AD, which you can read about in Acts 18. This is probably the fourth letter he wrote to the church, and like many of his letters, it is written in response to issues that have arisen in the church. In particular, it seems that there

are some other religious teachers who are denigrating Paul and throwing shade on his ministry.

One of the main reasons for this is that, as you will see throughout this letter, Paul has suffered a lot. In fact, God had told him this up front in Acts 9:15-16 that he would suffer greatly in his ministry:

Acts 9:15-16 *But the Lord said to Ananias, "Go! This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel. ¹⁶ I will show him how much he must suffer for my name."*

The reason this is important is because Corinth is a wealthy city, used to luxury and comfort. As other teachers come in, who Paul will sarcastically dub the “super-apostles” in chapter 11, they are externally much more impressive than Paul. They are not suffering like he is. They are more eloquent, wealthier, and probably better looking too. And so, the Corinthian church is doubting Paul’s credentials. After all, shouldn’t a man of God be protected from so much suffering? Shouldn’t he be experiencing health and wealth like the other super-apostles?

As a result of this dilemma, the letter of 2 Corinthians will have a lot to say about suffering and how it is connected to the follower of Jesus. Let’s read verses 3-11:

³ *Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, ⁴ who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God. ⁵ For just as the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives, so also through Christ our comfort overflows. ⁶ If we are distressed, it is for your comfort and salvation; if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which produces in you patient endurance of the same sufferings we suffer. ⁷ And our hope for you is firm, because we know that just as you share in our sufferings, so also **you share in our comfort.** ⁸ We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about the hardships we suffered in the province of Asia. We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired even of life. ⁹ Indeed, in our hearts we felt the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead. ¹⁰ He has delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us. On him we have set our hope that he will continue to deliver us, ¹¹ as you help us by your prayers. Then many will give thanks on our behalf for the gracious favor granted us in answer to the prayers of many.*

Paul begins his letter with a general benediction about how God, the Father of compassion and all comfort, comforts us when we are suffering so that we can then minister to others out of the comfort we have received from God. After that opening, he gets personal, sharing about specific hardships he and his missionary team endured in Asia that brought them close to the point of death, until they felt like they could not endure any longer on their own. But he says that they learned through that ordeal to rely on God, and that God delivered them from the trial.

The two main words in this passage are suffering and comfort. Paul clearly communicates to them in verse 5 and throughout this letter that the sufferings of Christ flow over into the lives of His followers, that when someone decides to follow Jesus, it does not typically mean health and wealth, as those “super-apostles” are teaching, but rather it means following in the footsteps of Jesus by loving others sacrificially, enduring spiritual opposition, and being willing to suffer and die so that others might be saved. This world is not a country club, it’s a war zone, and anyone who enlists in the Lord’s army will suffer. **Anyone who tries to tell you otherwise, and tries to teach you a message exclusively of increase, favor, prosperity, and so on, is lying to you**, teaching you something that does not line up with the life of Jesus, the life of Paul, or the rest of the Bible for that matter.

The second key word is comfort, which shows up often in this passage. It might bring up images of God saying “there, there” to people who are suffering. But that doesn’t really get across the weight of what comfort means in the original Greek. What does comfort mean?

Comfort is the Greek word “paraklesis.” As David Garland writes in his commentary on 2 Corinthians, “Comfort is not a tranquilizing dose of grace to dull the pain, but a stiffening agent that fortifies one in heart, mind, and soul... God’s comfort strengthens weakness and sustains sagging spirits so that one can face the troubles of life with unbending resolve and unending assurance. God may not always remove the afflictions that come our way, but God always comforts by giving the fortitude to face them.”

Paul wants them to recognize how God comforts us in our suffering. God’s comfort, strength, and encouragement come primarily through the gospel of Jesus’ death on the cross for our sins. How do the sufferings of Christ bring us comfort in our suffering? Four ways in particular:

1) You are not alone

This life is hard. But God did not leave us alone. He came and suffered alongside us. In response to our suffering, God did not send a map or a manual of how to survive it. He came down and entered into our suffering. He was betrayed and mistreated and discriminated against and killed. Just listen to the prophecy about him in Isaiah 53:

Isaiah 53:2-5 - He grew up before him like a tender shoot, and like a root out of dry ground. He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. ³ He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering. Like one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not. ⁴ Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted. ⁵ But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed.

If we believe the Hollywood portrayals, we may think Jesus was some Vidal Sassoon model gliding through this life, untouched by the dirt and mud, but Isaiah's passage paints a very different picture of one who experienced greater suffering than any of us will ever experience. There is no suffering you are going through that God can not say "I've been there." And because he suffered, we know that we are not alone, and that we have a God we can turn to in our suffering who understands and is with us.

Hebrews 4:14-16 - Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. ¹⁵ For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are--yet was without sin. ¹⁶ Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.

We do not go through things that God Himself has not experienced. And that brings us comfort, encouragement, and strength, knowing that God Himself has walked this earth and been through it and overcome it. God has not abandoned us, but has gone before us and will help us stand and survive our sufferings.

John 16:33 - I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world."

Remember again what Paul wrote in chapter 1:

⁸ *We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about the hardships we suffered in the province of Asia. We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired even of life. ⁹ Indeed, in our hearts we felt the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead. ¹⁰ He has delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us. On him we have set our hope that he will continue to deliver us,*

Paul says that whatever he went through, it was so bad that he had lost all strength to endure, and felt the sentence of death upon him. But he said that God was teaching him through that to rely on Him, and as he relied on God, God delivered him.

You are not alone. Secondly:

2) You are loved

Many people, when they suffer, ask God “why?” Why would you allow us to go through this kind of tragedy? The truth is that this side of heaven, we likely will not know the exact reasons why we suffer. But we do know that the reason is NOT because he doesn’t love us. Jesus’ death on the cross proves His love for us. His sufferings bring us comfort in that we know He loves us.

Romans 5:6-8 - *You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. ⁷ Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. ⁸ But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us*

In our sufferings, we are comforted by the cross in that we know that God loves us and will never act out of hatred or indifference towards us. **If our loving father has allowed something to happen in our lives, we can trust that He will have some loving plan even in our tragedy.** Which brings us to the third reason that the suffering of Christ brings us comfort:

3) Your suffering is not the end of the story

The third way that His sufferings comfort us is that we know that there is purpose in our suffering. Think about it: **God never seemed more absent or unloving than He did on the day His innocent Son hung on that cross.** Anyone there must have wondered how any good Father could let His Son die an unjust death without

intervening. But now we can look back and know that God was never more present or loving than He was that day, even though we could not see it at the time. He was there on the cross, and by Jesus' death, He was paying the penalty for our sin and making a way for us to be restored to a right relationship with Him and to have eternal life. As a result, we can know that even when God seems absent or unloving, that He is always working for our good.

Romans 8:28-29 - *And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. ²⁹ For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.*

If you will trust Him and not turn away from Him, God will always be at work to purify you through suffering so that you might be more like Jesus, people of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. **And we know that one day He will put a final end to suffering:**

Revelation 21:3-4 - *And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. ⁴ He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away."*

That is how God comforts, encourages, and strengthens us in our suffering. **Not necessarily by removing the suffering from us, but by strengthening and encouraging us through the suffering with His loving presence, and giving us hope for a future that will somehow undo the suffering we have experienced.**

And Paul declares that as God comforts us, we are equipped to minister comfort to others.

How does he comfort us? We know that we are not alone. We know that we are loved. We know that suffering is not the end of the story. Supernaturally strengthens us. He brings us to the end of ourselves so that we might rely on Him. And finally:

4) Your suffering will equip you to minister comfort to others

Listen one more time to Paul's words:

2 Corinthians 1:3-7 - Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, ⁴ who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God. ⁵ For just as the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives, so also through Christ our comfort overflows. ⁶ If we are distressed, it is for your comfort and salvation; if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which produces in you patient endurance of the same sufferings we suffer. ⁷ And our hope for you is firm, because we know that just as you share in our sufferings, so also you share in our comfort.

Our suffering is not meaningless. **One of the main reasons that God allows us to suffer is to equip us to minister to others in a way that we could not do if life was always easy.** Think about Paul in Philippians 1:

Philippians 1:20-26 - I eagerly expect and hope that I will in no way be ashamed, but will have sufficient courage so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death. ²¹ For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. ²² If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labor for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know! ²³ I am torn between the two: **I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far;** ²⁴ **but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body.** ²⁵ Convinced of this, I know that I will remain, and I will continue with all of you for your progress and joy in the faith, ²⁶ so that through my being with you again your joy in Christ Jesus will overflow on account of me.

Paul wanted to die and be with Christ. He had suffered plenty (2 Corinthians 11:23-31 talks about being in prison, being flogged, shipwrecked, sleepless nights, hunger and thirst, stress). He despaired of his own life at times. He would rather have died. Can anyone relate? But he knew that he needed to remain alive for them. For their progress and joy in the faith. His suffering was not meaningless, but was part of his love and ministry to the church.

Nowhere has this been put more beautifully than by the 19th century London preacher Charles Spurgeon in his book “The Soul Winner.”

Some years ago, I was the subject of fearful depression of spirit. Certain troublous events had happened to me; I was also unwell, and my heart sank within me. Out of the depths I was forced to cry unto the Lord. Just before I went away to Mentone for rest, I suffered greatly in body, but far more in soul, for my spirit was overwhelmed.

*Under this pressure, I preached a sermon from the words, "My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?" I was as much qualified to preach from that text as ever I expect to be; indeed, I hope that few of my brethren could have entered so deeply into those **heart-breaking words**. I felt to the full of my measure the horror of a soul forsaken of God. Now, that was not a desirable experience. I tremble at the bare idea of passing again through that eclipse of soul; I pray that I may never suffer in that fashion again unless the same result should hang upon it.*

*That night, after sermon, there came into the vestry a man who was as nearly insane as he could be to be out of an asylum. His eyes seemed ready to start from his head, and he said that he should utterly have despaired if he had not heard that discourse, which had made him feel that there was one man alive who understood his feeling, and could **describe his experience**. I talked with him, and tried to encourage him, and asked him to come again on the Monday night, when I should have a little more time to talk with him.*

*I saw the brother again, and I told him that I thought he was a hopeful patient, and I was glad that the word had been so suited to his case. Apparently, he put aside the comfort which I presented for his acceptance, and yet I had the consciousness upon me that the precious truth which he had heard was at work upon his mind, and that the storm of his soul would soon subside **into a deep calm**.*

*Now hear the sequel. Last night, of all the times in the year, when, strange to say, I was preaching from the words, "The Almighty hath vexed my soul," after the service, in walked this self-same brother who had called on me five years before. This time, he looked as different as noonday from midnight, or as life from death. I said to him, "I am glad to see you, for I have often thought about you, and wondered whether you were brought into perfect peace." I told you that I went to Mentone, and my patient also went into the country, so that we had not **met for five years**.*

To my enquiries, this brother replied, "Yes, you said I was a hopeful patient, and I am sure you will be glad to know that I have walked in the sunlight from that day till now. Everything is changed and altered with me."

Dear friends, as soon as I saw my poor despairing patient the first time, I blessed God that my fearful experience had prepared me to sympathize with him and guide him; but last night, when I saw him perfectly restored, my heart overflowed with

gratitude to God for my former sorrowful feelings. I would go into the deeps a hundred times to cheer a downcast spirit: it is good for me to have been afflicted that I might know how to speak a word in season to one that is weary.

Suppose that, by some painful operation, you could have your right arm made a little longer, I do not suppose you would care to undergo the operation; but if you foresaw that, by undergoing the pain, you would be enabled to reach and save drowning men who else would sink before your eyes, I think you would willingly bear the agony, and pay a heavy fee to the surgeon to be thus qualified for the rescue of your fellows.

Reckon, then, that to acquire soul-winning power you will have to go through fire and water, through doubt and despair, through mental torment and soul distress. It will not, of course, be the same with you all, nor perhaps with any two of you, but according to the work allotted you, will be your preparation. You must go into the fire if you are to pull others out of it, and you will have to dive into the floods if you are to draw others out of the water. You cannot work a fire-escape without feeling the scorch of the conflagration, nor man a lifeboat without being covered with the waves. If Joseph is to preserve his brethren alive, he must himself go down into Egypt; if Moses is to lead the people through the wilderness, he must first himself spend forty years there with his flock. Payson truly said, "If anyone asks to be made a successful minister, he knows not what he asks; and it becomes him to consider whether he can drink deeply of Christ's bitter cup and be baptized with His baptism."

It is natural when we suffer to ask "why, God?" Paul tells us in 2 Corinthians 1 that one of the reasons God allows us to suffer is so that we would learn to rely on Him and not to trust in ourselves. But another reason is so that we would be equipped to minister comfort, strength, and encouragement to others, as we receive comfort, strength, and encouragement from God.

No matter what suffering you go through, God's desire is to use that suffering to save others, to encourage others. Because of the sufferings of Christ, we know that our sufferings are not the end of the story, that He will use our experience to equip us to minister comfort, encouragement, and strength to others. We know that He loves us, and that He is with us. And so, we can trust in Him, and we can draw on the comfort, strength and encouragement He gives to us in order to minister to others.

Christ suffered for us, for our comfort, and in the same way we will suffer for others, for their comfort. **The abuse you suffered, when given to God, will be used to comfort others who have been abused, to let them know that they are not alone, that they are loved, and that their abuse was not the end of the story. The relational breakdown, the mental health struggles, the loss you've experienced – all of it can be used by Him to minister to others if you are willing to let Him use you.**

Consider another quote, from Brennan Manning about a play by Thornton Wilder:

There's a scene in Thornton Wilder's play "The Angel that Troubled the Waters"

The scene is a doctor comes to the pool everyday wanting to be healed of his melancholy and his gloom and his sadness. Finally the angel appears. The doctor, he's a medical doctor, goes to step into the water. The angel blocks his entrance and says, "No, step back, the healing is not for you." The doctor pleads, "But I've got to get into the water. I can't live this way." The angel says, "No, this moment is not for you." And he says, "But how can I live this way?"

The angel says to him, "Doctor, without your wounds where would your power be? It is your melancholy that makes your low voice tremble into the hearts of men and women. The very angels themselves cannot persuade the wretched and blundering children of this earth as can one human being broken on the wheels of living. In love's service, only wounded soldiers can serve."

There is a weight that comes from your suffering. There is a substance. You are not just speaking head knowledge, but from a life that has experienced suffering as well as the strength and comfort of God. In love's service, only wounded soldiers can serve.

Are you willing to believe this morning that if you would trust in God, even if there is no promise that your suffering will be removed, He has promised to strengthen you to endure beyond your natural capability? And are you willing to trust that He is able to redeem your suffering by using you to minister comfort, strength, and encouragement to others? Then pray with me:

God, I trust you with my pain. I believe that you are teaching me to rely on you and not on myself, and so right now I throw myself into your loving hands. Strengthen me by your supernatural power so that I might endure the trials I am currently facing as well as the ones that will come my way. And Lord, I am willing to be used by you to bring comfort, strength, and encouragement to others. May I be a conduit of your comfort to others, that many might be saved and strengthened, and so that you might be glorified. Amen.