

Sharing in Suffering and Comfort

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Date: 20 February 2022

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[0 : 00] Well, good morning. I'd like to welcome you here to worship this morning. My name's Jeff. I'm one of the pastors here at Church of the Advent.

And if this is your first time worshipping with us this morning, you've picked a good Sunday to come. Later in the service, we're going to be celebrating some baptisms, which is going to be great.

And this morning, we are also beginning a new sermon series, which I'm excited about. This morning, we are starting a series in the book of 2 Corinthians. And we thought that 2 Corinthians would be a good book to study together right now in the life of our church, because the central theme of 2 Corinthians is God's power and our weakness.

That's the title of the sermon series this spring that we're going to be going through, Power and Weakness. Two years ago, almost coming up on two years ago, that the world changed completely as we know it.

And I don't know about you, but the past two years have given me lots of opportunities to confront my own weaknesses and my own limitations. I felt my weakness and my lack of control over my circumstances and just life in general.

[1 : 21] I have felt my weaknesses in facing the limitations of my own body and my mortality. I felt my weaknesses in facing my own insecurities and fears time and again. And I'm sure if we had time this morning, I'm sure we could share all kinds of examples about ways in the past couple years that we've been forced to confront our weaknesses and our limitations.

And I don't know about you, but I think when it comes to thinking about experiencing the power of God, the presence of God in my life, my weaknesses aren't normally at the top of my list for like how to do that.

I would say that probably my weaknesses are more of an obstacle or more of a hurdle to experiencing the power of God at work in my life. But one of the main things that we see when we study the second Corinthians, this letter from Paul, is that instead of being obstacles or hurdles to God's power in our life and to God's work in the world, we actually see that very often our weaknesses are the very vehicle that God chooses to use.

We see the apostle Paul come back to this again and again in second Corinthians, perhaps the clearest and most memorable instance of this is in chapter 12, verses 8 and 9, when he asked the Lord to take away the thorn in his flesh.

And he says, Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. But the Lord said to me, My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.

[2 : 57] Therefore, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses that the power of Christ may rest on me. God's power and our weakness. That's what the book of second Corinthians is about.

And that's really what the Christian life is about. And so to kind of orient us to our study of second Corinthians, I just want to give us two main pieces of background information.

Kind of two mental hooks, if you will, that are necessary to frame our study of this book. And the first is this. Reading second Corinthians is pretty complex.

Because reading this letter is sort of like reading a pastor's email inbox. As you begin to read this letter, where you suddenly realize that you're in the middle of this ongoing correspondence between Paul and this church that has been taking place over multiple years.

And so you suddenly realize that you're in the middle of this, you know, several years long communication, and you kind of have to put together the pieces. So back in Acts chapter 18, Paul, in his second missionary journey, he comes to Corinth and he preaches the gospel.

[4 : 11] And people come to faith and he plants the first church there in Corinth. And Acts 18 tells us that he stays there for about one and a half years. But then he moves on to Ephesus.

And when he moves on to Ephesus, he hears a report about the church in Corinth that there was some conflict going on. That some in the church were rejecting his teaching and challenging his authority.

And so in response, he sends Timothy back to Corinth to address some of these problems. And that's when he writes the book of 1 Corinthians. That's where we get 1 Corinthians. And what we find out is that in between writing 1 Corinthians and 2 Corinthians, it appears that the situation didn't get better.

In fact, it got worse. And so when Paul heard about this, he decides to change his travel plans and to make an emergency visit back to Corinth. But this visit for Paul ended up being a very painful visit.

Evidently, he was publicly attacked. He was humiliated by some in the church. And so rather than defend himself in the middle of being publicly attacked, he decides to actually just embrace the humiliation and to leave, not wishing to cause further pain.

[5 : 28] So he leaves and returns back to Ephesus. And afterwards, he writes another letter. It's a letter that he describes in 2 Corinthians 2 as a letter that he writes out of much affliction, anguish, and tears.

Scholars normally refer to this letter as the sorrowful letter or the severe letter. Paul references this letter multiple times throughout the book of 2 Corinthians. And from what we can gather, it seems that overall the church responded well to this letter.

Many had a change of heart, but there was still a minority who remained resistant. And so to summarize, we have Paul's initial founding of the church in Acts 18. We have conflict.

We have correspondence in response to this conflict, which includes the 1 Corinthians letter. We have Paul's painful visit. And then in response to that visit, we have more correspondence, which involves 2 Corinthians.

And so this is kind of the backdrop. This is kind of the backdrop to what's going on in Paul's email inbox. And this is important to understand some of Paul's main goals, his main purposes in writing this letter.

[6 : 36] And so this is the second kind of mental hook I want to give us as we think about 2 Corinthians. And it's that broadly speaking, broadly speaking, Paul has 4 main goals in this letter.

And this covers 3 main sections of this letter. So in chapters 1 through 7, in chapters 1 through 7, Paul seeks to restore his relationship with the church to kind of do some relational repair and restoration and to defend the authenticity of his ministry.

So he's going to affirm his love for them and his commitment to them. He's also going to answer some of those who challenge his authority. And then in chapter 8 and 9, he transitions to encouraging their partnership in the gospel through generosity.

And so he's going to remind them of a previous commitment they had to give generously to other churches who are in need. That's chapters 8 and 9. And then in chapters 10 through 13, he's going to conclude his letter by addressing and challenging the minority in the church who are still resistant.

So he's going to lovingly confront those who still need to repent. And so that's kind of an overview. That's a bird's eye view of the flow of the book of 2 Corinthians.

[7 : 51] And so with that background in mind, with those kind of mental hooks in mind, let's turn our attention to chapter 1 as Paul begins his letter. In chapter 1, we see a couple of things. We see the central theme of God's power in our weakness. And we see kind of two of his main goals start to come out. We see him seek to restore his relationship with the church and to defend his ministry.

And Paul does this primarily by talking about suffering. He does it by talking about suffering. The first half of chapter 1 that Brianna read earlier shows us that one of the primary ways that we experience God's power in our weakness is through suffering.

All of us eventually face suffering in this life. It's an inevitable part of being a human being. And when we face suffering, all of us go looking for comfort.

We all go looking for comfort in all kinds of places. Some more healthier than others. And Paul shows us here in 2 Corinthians 1 that our greatest comfort, he shows us the greatest comfort that we can find in our suffering.

[9 : 07] And he also shows us the greatest comfort that we can offer others in their suffering. So that's what we're going to look at this morning. We're going to look at the comfort that we receive from God and the comfort that we share with others.

The comfort we receive from God and the comfort that we share with others. So first, the comfort that we receive from God. Paul begins the body of his letter in verse 3.

And he says, Blessed be the God and the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction. Paul begins his letter by praising God for something that we see all throughout Scripture, starting in the Old Testament, that God is a God of comfort, that he comforts people in their suffering.

Isaiah 51 says, For the Lord comforts Zion. He makes her wilderness like Eden, her desert like the garden of the Lord. Famous Psalm, Psalm 23, about the Lord being our shepherd.

It says, Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me. Your rod and your staff, they comfort me. And this is different from the pantheon of Greek and Roman gods that those in Corinth would have been familiar with, who are more or less aloof to human pain and suffering.

[10 : 30] The first century Stoic philosopher, Pliny the Elder, said the idea that a supreme being pays heed to human affairs is a ridiculous notion.

The idea that a God up there would pay attention to human suffering is ridiculous. But the God of the Bible has revealed himself as someone who is just the opposite.

He hears the cries of his people. He is intimately acquainted with their suffering. God is a good father. He is a good shepherd who comforts his people.

And the word that Paul uses for comfort here in this chapter shows us that the comfort that God provides isn't simply just to put us at ease or to make us feel better, but it's a comfort that encourages us and strengthens us in the midst of our suffering.

The 2 Corinthians scholar David Garland says this. He says, The comfort that Paul has in mind is not some tranquilizing dose of grace that only dulls the pain, but a stiffening agent that fortifies one in heart, mind, and soul.

[11 : 44] God's comfort strengthens weak knees and sustains sagging spirits so that one faces the troubles of life with unbending resolve and unending assurance.

If you're here this morning and you feel like you have weak knees, if you feel like you have a sagging spirit, the comfort of God is available to you.

The comfort of God is available to you to strengthen you and to encourage you. Paul also points out in verse 4 that God comforts us in all our affliction, in all our affliction.

There is no suffering too big or too small for the God of all comfort. Whether your suffering comes from your circumstances or from a relationship or from your own mind and body, God's comfort is available for all of it.

Whatever it is, He sees, He knows, He cares, He loves you, He's with you.

[12 : 56] So how does, how does the comfort of God flow into our lives? How do we experience God's comfort? Paul tells us in verse 5, as he continues, he says in verse 5, for as we share abundantly in Christ's sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too.

What does it mean to share in Christ's sufferings? This is kind of an interesting phrase. What does it mean to share in Christ's sufferings?

Does it mean that somehow we contribute to Christ's sacrifice on the cross for our sins? Know that the rest of the Bible is clear on that, that Christ suffered once and for all for sin, that His work on the cross is finished and complete.

Does it mean that Christ somehow continues to suffer in His resurrected body, in His glory, in His ascension? I don't think we can say that either.

Christ conquered suffering and death in His resurrection. So what does it mean? It means that for believers in Christ, all suffering is a way to experience communion with God because God Himself has suffered.

[14 : 09] This is an important aspect of our union with Christ. In a little bit, we're going to celebrate baptism. And baptism is all about union with Christ, that by faith, we're united to Jesus in His life, in His death, in His resurrection, such that all that is His becomes ours.

We see this language of union with Christ all over the New Testament. You were, you died, you were buried, you were raised, you're hidden with Him, you're seeded with Him, you have His righteousness, you have His inheritance.

Union with Christ means sharing in the privileges and benefits and status of Jesus. And it also means that we share in His suffering. In another place in Romans chapter 8, Paul says this, that the Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are fellow heirs with Christ.

That's union with Christ's language. But then he says this, provided we suffer with Him in order that we may also be glorified with Him.

Union with Christ means both glory and suffering. And this is important as we think back to what we said earlier about the background of what's going on in the 2 Corinthians church, about the conflict that's taking place, that there were some people who sought to discredit Paul's authority in his teaching by pointing to all the trials and difficulties that he faced, like being put on trial, being put in prison, being persecuted, all the suffering that he faced.

[15 : 46] They said that, he said, well, that invalidates Paul's ministry. That discredits his ministry. How could an apostle from God experience what looks like weakness, what looks like failure?

And so to answer these critics, he actually says, no, it's just the complete opposite. He says that his suffering authenticates his ministry. His suffering validates his ministry because it confirms his closeness with Jesus.

And this is something that he comes back to again and again throughout the letter. What's true of the apostle Paul is true of all Christians, that anyone who seeks to follow Jesus will suffer.

As we follow in his footsteps, just as Christ's sufferings brought healing and redemption to the world, as we follow him and continue his life in his ministry by the power of the Spirit, his sufferings will flow into our lives.

But the good news, Paul says here in 2 Corinthians 1, that as we share in his sufferings, we also share in his comfort. The great comfort that we have in Jesus is this, that all suffering, whether big or small, is an opportunity for deeper intimacy, for deeper communion with Christ.

[17 : 05] This is because he knows firsthand what it's like to go through it. Isaiah 53 says that he was despised and rejected by men, that he was a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief.

For a Christian, all suffering is fellowship with a man of sorrows. All suffering is fellowship with the one who was acquainted with grief. Have you ever experienced physical pain?

So has Jesus. Have you ever experienced deep agony in your soul? So has Jesus. Have you ever been wounded by other people?

So has Jesus. Have you ever experienced injustice? Have you ever been betrayed? Have you ever been lonely? So has Jesus. Have you ever been overwhelmed with sadness and grief?

So is Jesus. All suffering is fellowship with a man of sorrows. John Lennox, who's a professor of mathematics at the University of Oxford, tells the story of when he was traveling in Eastern Europe and one time he decided to do some sightseeing and visit an old synagogue.

[18 : 27] He joined a tour of the synagogue with some other visitors there and he struck up a conversation with a woman who said that she was there to find out more about her family who had lived in Eastern Europe during World War II and during the Holocaust.

And eventually the tour came to the place in the synagogue that had pictures from World War II and from the Holocaust and one of the pictures of the main gate one of the pictures was of the main gate of the concentration camp in Auschwitz.

And John says that his new friend pointed to the gate and said and what does your religion make of this? And Lennox said at first that he was speechless.

What was he to say? What could he say? What do you say in that moment when you're asked a question like that? But he says still she stood in the doorway patiently waiting for an answer.

And this is what he eventually said. He said I would not insult the memory of your parents by offering simplistic answers to your question. I have no easy answers.

[19 : 38] But what I do have for me at least is a doorway into an answer. She said well what is it? And Lennox responded well you know that I'm a Christian which means that I believe that Jesus is the Messiah.

I also believe that he was God incarnate come into our world as a savior. Now I know that you don't agree with me on this but think about this question. If Jesus really was God what was God doing on a cross?

If Jesus really was God what was God doing on a cross? And the woman was silent. She stood there motionless. And after a moment with tears in her eyes she said quietly but audibly why has no one ever told me this about the Messiah before?

The cross of Jesus shows us something really important even though this side of heaven suffering often remains a great mystery to us. We may never get an answer to why God doesn't stop this or that from happening.

but in the cross we can still find great comfort in knowing what the answer is not. It's not because God is angry with us for sin.

[20 : 55] Look at the cross. The cross is the objective evidence that all of God's anger and wrath for sin has been poured out on Jesus and there's none left for you and I. It's not because God has abandoned us.

Look at the cross. on the cross Jesus was forsaken by the father so that you and I can know that we would never be forsaken. It's not because God doesn't love us.

Look at the cross. The cross is the objective evidence. It's the greatest demonstration of God's love for us. And it's not because suffering will one day win because for Jesus the cross wasn't the end of the story.

The resurrection is. And union with him means the same as true for us that no matter what your story is headed towards resurrection. Suffering and sadness and grief doesn't get the last word in your story.

Jesus does. Anxiety and depression don't get the last word in your story. Jesus does. Cancer doesn't get the last word. Death doesn't get the last word in your story.

[22 : 06] Jesus does and he is making all things new. And what that means is that no matter what your story is headed towards resurrection. If we share in his sufferings, we share with him, we share in his glory.

And this is the comfort that strengthens our weak needs and sustains our sagging spirits. The weakness of our suffering is not an obstacle, it's not a hurdle to experiencing the power and presence of God in our life.

It may, in fact, be the vehicle. Because we have a God who is present and powerful on the cross. And if God was present and powerful on the cross, then he can be present and powerful in your suffering and in your weakness.

So that's the comfort that we receive from God. Secondly, the comfort that we share with others. In the next few verses, Paul shows us that this comfort that we receive by sharing in the fellowship, the sufferings of Christ, isn't meant to stop with us.

In verse 6, he says, if we are comforted, it is for your comfort. Verse 7, if you share in our sufferings, you will also share in our comfort.

[23 : 28] Because we're united to Jesus and because we're united to one another by his spirit, not only do we share in his suffering and comfort, but we share in one another's suffering and comfort.

In the next few verses, Paul actually puts this on display for us. He actually shows what this looks like. He models what he teaches by giving us an example from his own life that he hopes will be a source of comfort to the Corinthians.

In verse 8, he says, for we do not want you to be unaware, brothers, of the affliction that we experienced in Asia. For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself.

Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death. We don't know specifically the circumstances that Paul is referring to, but whatever they were, they were dire.

He despaired even of life. For Paul, it was a place of extreme weakness. But then he says in verse 9, but that was to make us rely not on ourselves, but on God who raises the dead.

[24 : 34] 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. Paul says it was in a place of extreme weakness that I experienced the power of God.

As an apostle, I'm tempted to rely on my own strength, my own giftings, my own ingenuity, but that's not where true power lies. It lies in the God who raises the dead.

In a place of great weakness, Paul experienced deep trust and confidence in the Lord. And just like Paul here in 2 Corinthians 1, God often uses the difficult things in our lives to be a place of ministry for others.

He often uses the difficulty in our lives to be a means of ministry for other people. I love the way my friend Victor Sheldon puts it.

He says that God's purpose in our lives, in all of our lives, is that we would become wounded healers. God's purpose in our lives is that we would become wounded healers.

[25 : 48] You know, one of the hallmarks of the Healthy Church is that it's a place where people who are suffering can come and experience comfort and healing. Because people in that church have learned what it is to be a wounded healer.

How do you become a wounded healer? How do you allow the difficulty in your life to be a place of ministry for others? How do you do that?

There's a lot that we could say in our time this morning, but I want to offer, I want to suggest a few reflections here from this text in 2 Corinthians 1 about what it looks like to be a wounded healer.

And the first is this. The first is that you can't give what you haven't received. You can't give what you haven't received. If this morning, if you're in the place of experiencing some difficulty in your life, your primary job is probably just to receive.

Just to receive. Before your suffering can become a place of ministry, you must first receive the ministry of the church for however long it takes. God knows the timeline of your healing process, and he's not expecting you to rush it.

[27 : 06] He's not expecting you to skip steps. Maybe your job is to simply just receive the ministry of the church. And if you're here this morning, and you are in a place of difficulty, you're suffering, I want you to know that your suffering is not a burden.

It's not a burden. I know that in times of difficulty in my life, sometimes I feel like the hardship that I'm going through is somehow a burden to other people, but it's not. There are people here who would love to walk alongside you and pray with you.

They would consider it a privilege to sit with you and listen to you and hear your story. And it's not just because people here are nice, although we have some nice people in our church. It goes deeper than that.

This is true because what we've seen here in this text is that our suffering brings us in fellowship with Christ and it brings us in fellowship with one another. For those of us who maybe are more in a position to offer comfort, I think there's a temptation that we sometimes face when we seek to comfort others and their suffering.

And the temptation is that we would offer a kind of comfort that isn't based in our experience. purpose. I cringe when I think back to ways that I did this early on in my ministry as a 22 year old campus intern when I was trying to figure out ministry.

[28 : 24] And I remember being eager to help students who were going through a hard time, maybe they were going through a breakup. I remember wanting to help people but not really knowing what help meant.

Maybe you can resonate with this. I was quick to speak and slow to listen. I was quick to give answers and explanations. But this is exactly the mistake that Job's friends made being miserable counselors.

They offered to Job lots of explanations when what Job probably needed most was their presence and their questions and perhaps even their tears.

I'm still a work in progress but hopefully by God's grace I have become a grown to become less of a miserable counselor partially by receiving counseling myself but also through experience.

Knowing what has comforted me in my suffering has equipped me to offer comfort to others in their suffering. So first you can't give what you haven't first received but secondly we learn to offer comfort first just by being present.

[29 : 35] Just by being present. The most important thing that you have to offer somebody is your presence. And that's because offering comfort is first and foremost about sitting together with someone and sharing in the sufferings of Christ.

And the only way to do that is to learn how to be present. There's a reason why Paul says a few times in this letter that he is eager to come see the Corinthians again because he knows that that comfort is presence and presence is comfort.

most often the best thing that you can do is just sit with somebody and listen and hear their story and ask questions and listen some more and pray with them.

And if you get to the place where you have absolutely no idea what to say next chances are you're probably doing it right. If Job's friends would have listened they just they would have been far more useful.

And I think if you're here this morning and I think there's a lot of us who maybe look at people who might be going through a hard time and we think that that we have nothing to offer them.

[30 : 41] It's not true. You already have the most important thing. You already have your presence to offer people and that's the most important thing. So you can't give what you haven't received but what you can give is your presence.

Is your presence. Third and finally as you learn to be present ask the Lord for opportunities to share your story of his power at work in your weakness.

Paul gives us a great model here for this in verses 8 to 10 of what it looks like to share our story as a means of offering comfort to other people. In verses 8 through 10 he shares what he went through.

He shares his own weakness and what it felt like to go through it. And he shares how despite all of that that the power of God was present in his life. God is the hero of Paul's story not him.

What story do you have in your life that can be a source of comfort to other people? What story of difficulty in your story can be a way to help bring comfort to somebody as they're walking through their own journey?

[31 : 55] I would encourage you and invite you to ask the Lord to give you an opportunity to share that, to open a door for that. And if you pray for that, I would say get ready because he loves to answer that prayer request.

And so as we close, I just want to acknowledge that all of us are probably in very different places as we come into talking about suffering as a heavy topic.

And we're probably in all kinds of different places all across this room. And so the first thing that I want to say as we close is that the truth is that all of us have something in our lives that we're bringing in to this morning that's hard.

It could be big. It could be small. But no matter how big or small that thing is, the invitation for us this morning is to see that thing as an opportunity to experience fellowship with Christ, as an opportunity to experience fellowship with a man of sorrows.

Some of us today may especially be in the place of just needing to receive comfort. And if that's you, that's a great place to be. There's people here who would love to pray with you, who would love to listen to you and walk alongside you.

[33 : 10] Maybe one place to start is the prayer ministers who are available during the Eucharist. During the Eucharist, there'll be prayer ministers outside those doors who would love to just pray with you.

So as you take the Eucharist, you can head back out there and there'll be someone who would love to just pray with you and be with you. Others of us may need to just continue to learn what it means to be present with other people.

Maybe we feel like we want to offer comfort to others in their suffering, but we're like, we don't know how. And maybe we just need to learn what it means to sit next to someone who's going through a hard time and to learn and to experience what it feels like to listen and to have no clue what to say.

And I would put myself in that category. I need to continue to learn what it means to be present in other people's lives. And if that's you, that's also a great place to be. And maybe for others of us, maybe you're thinking about something in your life that God has brought to mind.

And maybe for you, it's a matter of asking the Lord for opportunities to share that part of your story. How is he calling you to offer comfort to others through your story of his power at work and your weakness?

[34 : 22] But regardless of where we're at, regardless of how we're coming in to worship this morning, none of us can do any of this without first realizing that whatever that we have to receive and whatever we have to offer, it all flows out of our relationship with the ultimate wounded healer.

All suffering is fellowship with a man of sorrows. All ministry is partnership with a man of sorrows. It's by his wounds that we're healed.

It is by his wounds that we're comforted. And as Paul says in verses 9 and 10, he is the one who has the power to raise the dead. He is the one on whom we set our hope.

And he is the one who is making all things new. Let's pray together. God of all comfort, we come to you this morning.

We praise you and thank you that whatever we're going through this morning, we thank you that it is partnership with you or that it is fellowship with you. What I pray for all of those who are going through a difficult time this morning, we pray that you would be the God of all comfort to them.

[35 : 34] They would experience your love, your comfort in their life. Lord, I pray that you would equip us to be a church of wounded healers, a church that is able to offer comfort to other people based on Jesus, what you have done in our lives.

Lord, thank you so much, Lord, for you revealing yourself to be this God, to be this God who is not allude from our pain, but a God who dwells in it.

I pray this in Christ's name. Amen.