

Hardship and comfort

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 22 May 2022

Preacher: Simon Dowdy

[0 : 0 0] So, the first reading today is from Psalms, and it's Psalm 46. God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.

Therefore, we will not fear, though the earth gives way, though the mountains be moved into the heart of the sea, though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble at its swelling.

There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy habitation of the Most High. God is in the midst of her. She shall not be moved.

God will help her when morning dawns. The nations rage, the kingdoms totter. He utters his voice, the earth melts.

The Lord of hosts is with us. The God of Jacob is our fortress. Come, behold the works of the Lord, how he has brought desolations on the earth.

[1 : 1 8] He makes wars seized to the end of the earth. He breaks the bow and shatters the spear. He burns the chariots with fire.

Be still and know that I am God. I will be exalted among the nations. I will be exalted in the earth. The Lord of hosts is with us.

The God of Jacob is our fortress. Our second reading is from 2 Corinthians chapter 1, verses 1 to 11 on page 1160 of the Bibles on the chairs.

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.

Grace to you and peace from God, our Father, and the Lord Jesus Christ. 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 may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.

[2 : 3 5] For as we share abundantly in Christ's sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too. If we are afflicted, it is for your comfort in salvation, and if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which you experience when you patiently endure the same sufferings that we suffer.

Our hope for you is unshaken, for we know that as you share in our sufferings, you will also share in our comfort. For we do not want you to be ignorant, brothers, of the affliction we experienced in Asia.

For we are so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt we had received the sentence of death, but that was to make us rely not on ourselves, but on God, who raises the dead.

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. 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.

Thank you. Thank you. Sarah, thanks very much indeed for reading. Morning, everyone. Lovely to see you. This is the final talk in this series on when life is hard.

[3 : 46] Let me pray for us as we begin. The song we've just sung, based on Hebrews chapter 4.

For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.

Heavenly Father, we praise you that your word, the Bible, is living and active. And we pray, therefore, please would you grant us humble hearts as we hear your voice this morning to take your words to heart that our lives and minds might be transformed.

And we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, I want to begin this morning by asking a question. How do you, how might you, expect to see God's power at work in Grace Church?

Perhaps through the preaching. Perhaps through the music. Perhaps through wonderful answers to prayer. Perhaps through lots of people coming and discovering the Lord Jesus for themselves and putting their trust in him.

[5 : 11] But let me ask, would there be a place in your answer for suffering? Would there be a place in your answer for suffering?

Because the issue of power lies at the very heart of 2 Corinthians. And in particular, the relationship between suffering and power.

That suffering is the very means that God uses to display his power. I think it's why this letter begins as it does.

I'm currently reading the Bible with someone. We're looking at 2 Corinthians together. And I think we are both rather surprised by the way in which the letter starts. But I think this explains why it starts as it does.

So verse 4, the word affliction comes twice. Verse 5, sufferings. Verse 6, you get both affliction and sufferings. Verse 7, sufferings. Verse 8, afflictions.

[6 : 12] The church in Corinth looked at the sufferings and hardship experienced by the Apostle Paul. And they thought to themselves, hmm. We're not really sure if we want this man as our Apostle.

He looks so weak. He looks so unimpressive. He's hardly the kind of powerful, influential-looking leader, Apostle, that would cut the mustard in Corinth.

Indeed, later on in the letter, we see they are attracted by so-called super-Apostles, who do look powerful, who do look impressive. Paul's response is to show that the mark of an Apostle is not impressive power, but affliction and suffering.

It's what it means to follow a crucified, rejected Savior. And by extension, it is a mark not only of an Apostle like Paul, but by extension, it is a mark of every genuine follower of Jesus.

I think it's why in verse 6, Paul moves from his own sufferings to the sufferings that the Christians in Corinth have experienced. And notice at the end of that verse, they're described as the same sufferings.

[7 : 24] In other words, the same type of sufferings. So while Paul is undoubtedly in these verses defending his apostleship, the principle that God's power is seen through affliction and through suffering applies to every Christian believer.

As such, it is incredibly counter-cultural. None of us like weakness. And I think we're going to see it speaks powerfully not only to us individually, but it also speaks extraordinarily powerfully to the sort of church we should want and aim to be.

First heading on the outline. God's power in hardship is seen as we look outwards. Have a look at verse 3.

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort. Here is a glorious promise when life is hard.

Twice notice we are reminded that the Lord Jesus, if we know the Lord Jesus, then we know God as our Heavenly Father.

[8 : 41] And as our Heavenly Father, notice he is the Father of mercies and the God of all comfort. The word comfort simply means consolation, encouragement. It's just what we heard earlier in Psalm 46.

God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. When life is hard, we can become so focused on our hardships and trials and how difficult life is, it's very easy to lose sight of our Heavenly Father, who is indeed the Father of all mercies.

The hardships so kind of dominate our line of vision, so to speak, that we can find it very difficult to see beyond those things. We can lose sight of the character of God.

I think pain does that, doesn't it? So often it makes us myopic. It narrows our focus onto the sorrow, the difficulty, in a way that seems to kind of completely take over our lives, as if nothing else really matters.

As we long for relief, it's very easy to become preoccupied with the sheer weight of the suffering we are experiencing, or the unfairness of life, or simply the desire that everything would just become normal once again.

[9 : 59] But God wants us to look beyond our circumstances and know that if we belong to the Lord Jesus, He is indeed the Father of all mercies and God of all comfort.

Well, perhaps you're asking what kind of affliction and suffering is Paul talking about. Well, interestingly, the words he uses here are used in the New Testament to describe suffering and affliction sort of generally.

So it could be physical and emotional distress, but it could also be suffering caused by opposition and persecution. And what does comfort look like? Well, it may be deliverance.

We'll come on to that in verse 10. He delivered us from such a deadly peril. Or it may simply be the comfort and grace to endure the suffering and affliction.

As in verse 6, when you patiently endure the same sufferings that we suffer. And we've seen, haven't we, throughout this series of talks over these last three weeks, some of the ways in which our Heavenly Father encourages us and comforts us to endure.

[11 : 13] But as well as not losing sight of God's character, we mustn't lose sight either of His purpose in suffering. Notice here it is so that we can comfort others.

Obviously not the only purpose. We've seen other purposes over these last few weeks. But the purpose we see here is that we can comfort others. I wonder if you spotted that. Let me read verses 4 to 6 again, because the same idea really is repeated four times.

Verse 4. The God of all comforts 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.

For as we share abundantly in Christ's sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too. 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. Did you see the repetition? Verse 4. So that we may be able to comfort those who are in affliction.

[12 : 22] Verse 5. So through Christ we may share abundantly in comfort. And verse 6. If we are comforted, it is for your comfort.

I take it where, if you like, to picture a chain of comfort. So God the Father of mercies comforts us in our suffering, and then we are in turn are better able to comfort others in their suffering.

Our lives become a source of blessing, help, and encouragement to those around us. Think for a moment of a cup and a jug of water.

As we suffer, we experience the Lord's comfort. And as I said, we've seen many ways in which he does that over the last few weeks. His comfort being poured out into our lives.

But he doesn't stop there. The chain is such that he continues to pour comfort into our lives. I'm going to stop because obviously it's going to get messy.

[13 : 29] But if I were to carry on, then the water would be overflowing. The comforts would be overflowing to others. That is the principle we see here in these verses.

Notice the pattern is the suffering of the Lord Jesus in verse 5. Have a look at verse 5 again. For as we share abundantly in Christ's sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too.

The sufferings of the Lord Jesus were for the benefit of others, to bring the forgiveness of sins to others, peace with God as we thought about earlier in our service.

Likewise, if we follow him, our sufferings are in part to bring comfort to others. They are in part to be other person directed, to flow out to others, to bring them comfort.

I guess many of us have read the book *The Pilgrim's Progress*, perhaps one of the most famous Christian books ever to be published, written by John Bunyan in the 1670s, while he was incarcerated in prison in Bedford, because he was refusing to stop preaching.

[14 : 45] And I was amazed to discover it's never been out of print in the last, what is it, 350 years, and it's been translated into 200 languages. The reason it's been such a blessing, I guess, is because the book combines both great biblical truths, and yet he combines that with an extraordinary understanding of the human heart.

What is it that gave John Bunyan such a grasp, such insight into human nature? His suffering. He was imprisoned for a total of 12 years.

His daughter Mary was born blind. He felt crushed and overwhelmed at being separated from his wife and family. And yet his Bible became his most important possession.

These are some of the words he wrote from prison. I've never had in my life so great an inlet into the word of God as now.

These scriptures that I saw nothing in before were made in this place and state to shine upon me. Jesus Christ also was never more real and apparent than now.

[15 : 59] Here I have seen and felt him indeed. Do you see the principle of 2 Corinthians working out in his life?

The blessing which he received from the Lord, the comfort which he received from the Lord over the last 350 years being poured out to comfort countless others in 200 languages.

Part of the Lord's purpose for us in suffering is that we look outwards. Secondly, God's power in hardship is seen as we look upwards.

When life is hard, one of the biggest questions we find ourselves asking inevitably is why. Perhaps not so much why me. After all, we thought three weeks ago that we live in a fallen world.

So in a sense, why not me? But I guess it's more, isn't it? It's kind of why now? Why this? Why in addition to everything else that's going on?

[17 : 09] Well, the answer comes in verses 8 and 9. For we do not want you to be ignorant, brothers, of the affliction 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. But that was to make us rely not on ourselves, but on God who raises the dead.

This looks like hardship brought by opposition to the gospel, such that Paul is brought to the limits of his own strength and power.

To what end? Verse 9, to make us rely not on ourselves, but on God who raises the dead. Hardship without purpose is very hard to bear, isn't it?

Hardship without purpose. The former South African president, Nelson Mandela, spent 18 of his 27 years in prison on Robyn Island, a few miles outside offshore from Cape Town.

[18 : 21] In his autobiography, *The Long Walk to Freedom*, he describes the hard labour each day in the heat of the summer and the cold and wet of the winter.

Breaking up rocks, quarrying rocks, breaking them up into gravel. Sometimes moving rocks one day from one location to another, and then the next day moving them back again, completely without purpose.

The physical hardship made so much worse by the meaninglessness of the task. And yet this is very different, isn't it?

It is purposeful. It's a very wonderful thing that our Heavenly Father, the Father of all mercies, the God of all comfort, uses hardship and affliction and suffering to do his work in us.

It is not meaningless. He doesn't just allow suffering in his great kindness. He uses suffering to make us less reliant on ourselves, to make us more reliant on him, the one who raises the dead.

[19 : 32] On the only one, in fact, who is truly reliable, both in this life and in the life to come. After all, self-reliance is, if you think about it, the heart of sin, isn't it?

Sin says, I know what's best for my life. I'm going to live my way and do my thing without God. And where does a life like that get you?

A life that is, I mean, I guess we can live like that, even though on the one hand we may say I believe in God, but functionally we can live like that. So where does a life like that get you?

Or perhaps disappointment that you haven't achieved what you'd hoped for in life. Perhaps frustration as your body gets frail and you begin to realise you're no longer in control.

Perhaps anger when it's clear that actually you can't rely on yourself anymore, but have to be dependent on others. Or even fear as death approaches.

[20 : 35] By contrast, where does a life in which the Father of all mercies and the God of all comfort in his great kindness has trained us not to rely on ourselves, but to rely on him and trust him, where does that get you as you get older?

Well, a certainty in his sovereign purposes, a trust in his goodness, perhaps above all, a confidence that he is indeed the God who raises the dead.

It's a very different outcome, isn't it? Now, verse 10, it's clear that Paul was delivered on this occasion, if indeed, verse 8, his life was threatened.

And yet, as we saw in verse 6, that won't always be the case. At other times, we'll have to endure. And yet, he will deliver us at the resurrection. Verse 10, on him we have set our hope that he will deliver us again.

You see, God's purpose in suffering and affliction is in part to teach us not to rely on ourselves. That is a very foolish way of living.

[21 : 53] It is a great kindness of his that he teaches us both in life and as we get older and begin to think about death, that he teaches us that ultimately he is all we need.

Not only for this life, but for all eternity. God's power in hardship is seen as we look upwards. Well, I want to spend the rest of our time together this morning thinking about some of the implications of this.

In many ways, first century Corinth was like 21st century London. I put a description on the outline. Let me read it for us. Corinth had become the envy of the Roman Empire, a city of pleasure, a tribute to human-made splendor, a place where assertiveness and pride reaped great reward.

Consequently, the Corinthians placed a high premium on social prominence and self-display, on personal power and boasting. In Corinth, people looked at personal exaltation and glory.

Does that sound familiar? Just like London, a city dominated by consumerism and self-serving individualism.

[23 : 15] It's inevitable that people in a city like that will be embarrassed by suffering. It's inevitable that churches in London, by default, if you like, won't know how to handle suffering.

We'll try and hide it away, whether as churches or as individuals. We'll want to give the impression that our lives are successful, that everything is going according to plan. So I'd love us to think through, over coffee, these three questions I put on the outline afterwards.

Can we just stick them up on the screen, Warren? Thank you. And the next one. Brilliant. Great. Thanks. Let me just give us some clues in terms of the way in which we might begin to have some of those conversations.

conversations. Firstly, how do you respond to hardship? How do you respond to hardship? We all find hardship and suffering difficult. But as we've seen throughout this series of talks, although we cannot control our circumstances, we can control our response to them.

Our natural response, I take it, will be to turn inwards, will be to hide, will be to retreat, to give the impression perhaps that life is fine when it's not, because that's what our culture does.

[24 : 41] And yet, it's okay not to be okay. In fact, we can be of enormous help and comfort to others when we're not okay.

And if we're not up to it at the time, then we can in due course. Our suffering and hardship is a wonderful way to bring comfort to others.

In fact, it's been no surprise at all to me that over the last few months or so, when I've been ill, it's been some of the people in the church family, some of you who have suffered the most, who have brought the most comfort, who have reminded me of God's sufficient grace and of his willingness to provide strength and power in the midst of adversity.

We'll just think of Rachel Garforth bless. It was lovely to see her coming back from hospital a couple of days ago. But hasn't it been brilliant, those of us who have talked to her over the last few weeks or so, as she has openly, openly explained her cancer diagnosis, and to speak to her, as I guess many of us will have done, of her confidence in the Lord Jesus, that he is in control, of how she has known his comfort, of particular Bible verses which have become precious to her, I guess in the same way that John Bunyan found that to be the case amidst adversity.

It's been wonderful to hear. It's been such a comfort to us to hear. And yet, because this is so countercultural, to be open like this in our culture, because it's so countercultural, we need to make it easier for each other to do that.

[26 : 36] And I think that depends on the next two questions which I'd love us to be talking about over coffee. Firstly, how do we view hardship as a church?

Because if we're a church where everyone looks fine all the time, then actually we're no different from the world around us. In other words, if we're to have confidence to say to each other, life's not okay, then actually as a culture, as a church culture, we need to be very different from the culture around us.

Otherwise, when life is hard, we'll put on a mask, or we'll simply stay away from each other until life is better. After all, we live in a fallen world, don't we, where every aspect of our lives has been affected by sin, a world in which Jesus himself says the world will hate him and hates his disciples.

So there will be hardship, both the natural hardships of life and also the hardships that come our way as Christians. And therefore, if we give the impression that life is always going well, if we hide away when life is hard, perhaps the same face, why we're not going with the grain of reality.

It's one of the reasons I kept coming to church in the autumn, even on days when I couldn't really face it, in part because I knew that actually the one thing I really needed to do was to hear God's word, to hear God's voice, and even if I wasn't up to conversations with people, to receive the encouragement of seeing others, but I also wanted to be counter-cultural and to encourage you to be counter-cultural when life is difficult.

[28 : 26] Likewise, it's why I've given regular health updates, and in fact, it's what's prompted me to do this series of talks, knowing that the Lord brings hardship into our own lives so that we can be of comfort to others.

But let me ask, how then can you contribute to a culture that is like that, that doesn't simply echo the culture in the world, but is distinctively Christian in the way in which we handle and think about and talk about affliction and suffering?

How might it shape the kind of conversations you have after church? How might it shape the way in which you relate to your growth group if you're in one, or if you're in JAM on Sunday evenings? But then the other question which we need to think about carefully if we are to respond to hardship in a distinctive way is the third one there on the screen.

Where do you look to see God's power? Where do you look to see God's power? It's the question we started with. In 2 Corinthians the answer is in weakness, in suffering, and in affliction.

It's not the only answer the Bible gives to where we look to see God's power, but it's pretty high up on the list. Now, I don't know about you, but I would love to see the Lord Jesus more at work in power amongst us like this.

[30 : 04] Because hardship and affliction will come. The hardships of life, the hardships that come from following Jesus, even teenagers who perhaps for some of you this whole series on hardship and sufferings has just seen a little bit remote, they will come one day.

It would be wonderful, wouldn't it, to see each other not hiding and turning inwards when life is difficult, but however tentatively looking outwards to each other, knowing that in part the Lord brings affliction into our lives to comfort others.

And it would be wonderful if we are able to say to each other, like the Apostle Paul, perhaps even that, yes, we've despaired at times, but actually the Lord has been teaching me to rely not on myself, but on him, the one who raises the dead.

But of course, if we're to do that as a church, we have to be convinced that suffering and affliction isn't something to run away from, but an opportunity to demonstrate the power of God.

Indeed, at the end of 2 Corinthians, where Paul speaks of his suffering, he says, and I've stuck it there on the bottom of the outline, he says, therefore I'll boast all the more in my weaknesses, so that I might, what would we expect him to say, so that the power of Christ might rest upon me.

[31 : 33] If we do that, we'll find ourselves personally encouraged, encouraged that the Lord uses our hardship to serve others, that it's a good thing to have to depend on him rather than to have to depend on ourselves.

But we'll also be collectively encouraged, corporately encouraged as a church, as we see our Heavenly Father, the God of all mercies, that work in each other's lives when life is hard.

And of course, as we share our weaknesses, and as we share the Lord's comfort in our weaknesses, it's going to be a powerful witness to the world around us.

A world which, as we all know, can't really cope with affliction and suffering and pain, and doesn't really know what to do with it. an extraordinarily powerful witness to friends, colleagues, neighbors, family, to the God who raises the dead.

Let's pray together. And we'll have a few moments of quiet, and then I shall lead us in prayer. Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies, and the God of all comfort.

[32 : 54] Heavenly Father, we praise you very much indeed, that you are indeed the God of all mercies, and the Father of all comfort. And we thank you that when life is difficult, you comfort us through your word and by your presence.

And we pray, Heavenly Father, having looked at your word together this morning, please would you help us to be dramatically counter-cultural in the way in which we respond to affliction and hard times.

That we would indeed be those who look outwards, not inwards. And that we would indeed be those who would look upwards, not reliant on ourselves.

And we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.