

Comfort Through Weakness

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[0 : 00] So this evening we're cracking on to 2 Corinthians, which is a fabulous book. A little bit of background is probably helpful. So this is a Roman colony, and it had grown very wealthy because it was on this, probably mostly because it was on this really important trade route.

So if you think of kind of like the Mediterranean, Asia, Italy, you know, the boot, and this other kind of bit that sticks out here, it kind of comes in, it comes to a point, and then a bit roundy bit here, at that point there, that's where Corinth is.

So it had north-south land trade, east-west sea trade. And as a result, very multicultural, very wealthy, very pluralist, melting pot of subcultures and religions and lifestyles and philosophies. Archaeologists have dug up about 34 different deities amongst the ruins. Now the people seemed pretty cool with it. It was quite a tolerant place. Stressed individualism, big middle class. That was very upwardly mobile. They had a lot of pride in, there was a lot of pride attached to particular neighbourhoods that you might have lived in. A lot of intellectual pride, big on status.

[1 : 13] Wealth was something that you displayed. Big on achieving goals. Big on power, personal power, you know. And loved sports.

They hosted the Greek games there. It was a city filled with grand buildings, massive sporting arenas. One of them held 18,000 people. So in many ways, Corinth, which is the place where the church was that Paul was running to, this was an ancient version of San Francisco, or Boston, or of course, Vancouver.

So into this milieu, Paul planted a church. And he planted it and he stuck around for a while and then he took off.

He left it to the local leaders and then took off to do more church planting, as was his way. So whilst Paul was away, these guys, these kind of new leaders, kind of rode into town and put themselves into this church.

And these new leaders called themselves super apostles. We find out later, super apostles. Which is actually when Jordan applied for the job. That's what he wrote at the top of the CV. I thought it was a red flag, to be honest.

[2 : 25] But anyway, he's worked out pretty good. So these guys ride into town and they try and undermine the leadership of Paul.

We'll hear more about this as we carry on in 2 Corinthians. But in summary, these guys were proponents of a real health and wealth gospel. They said that Christians shouldn't suffer. That, you know, they were all about just sort of steady stream of kind of having spiritual experiences. And it was a gospel people really wanted to hear. They loved hearing this message from these new leaders, these super apostles. Because instead of being called to a life of endurance and love in the midst of adversity, these leaders promised a life of personal power and religion as a way to achieve their goals.

And a life free from pain. And they loved it. The people lapped it up. It hit the sweet spot for them. So these dodgy new leaders knew that in order to get this gospel some traction, this new gospel, this anti-gospel, for it to gain real traction, they needed to undermine Paul's character and ministry. And again, we'll hear more about this as we go into the book in more detail. But they said things like this. They said, Paul, he's just not a great speaker. He's not physically very impressive.

[3 : 46] He's weak. They had problems with the fact that he was a tent maker. So Paul was bivocational, right? So to support his ministry, he'd make tents. Literally, he'd make tents.

And they just thought that was a sign of weakness. Paul didn't accept money when he spoke, and they thought that was off. Whereas these guys, the super apostles, I mean, they charged big fees.

They were big people, rhetorically, physically. I really love American politics. And I'm married to an American.

I love America. I really like America. And I really like American politics. I find it very, very interesting. The rise of Donald Trump, I've been following with great interest.

And just let me just say something here. So people find it very shocking, right, the rise of Donald Trump. What's going on there? How can that happen? Bill Clinton, years ago, I think he explained this current phenomenon very well.

[4 : 49] Let me quote Bill Clinton. I'm not advocating any particular party or anything here, but let me quote Bill Clinton. He says this, When people feel uncertain, they'd rather have somebody that's strong and wrong than somebody who's weak and right.

See, I think that's what's happening here in Corinth. And I think that's what's maybe to explain partly the rise of Donald Trump. But I think that's what's happening here in Corinth, right? Is you've got this congregation that's a bit shaky in their faith.

And so somebody with a veneer of strength comes into town, makes a whole lot of promises they can't really keep, and keeps and stares them in totally the wrong direction. So Paul, he hears what's going on.

So he's not in Corinth. He parks himself in Macedonia and writes this letter. And this letter is to Corinthians. Corinthians. So, imagine now, you're Paul and you're writing this letter.

It would be very tempting to start the letter with all the amazing things you've done, right? Like he's, you know, it'd be very tempting to think, I need to reestablish my authority. Authority. You know, I'd be very tempted for him to think, right, I'm going to, my first line is going to be, I was planning churches while you guys were still in nappies.

[6 : 03] I've written books that people will be studying for thousands of years. You know, the remarkable thing about 2 Corinthians is, if you've heard, read, when you know the backstory, the remarkable thing about how this book starts, is that's not where he goes.

He doesn't talk about all the cool stuff he's done. And he could really talk himself up here. No, he says things like this in verse 8. For we do not want you to be unaware, brothers. That's brothers and sisters.

Brothers and sisters. Of the affliction we experience in Asia. For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself. That's the royal we.

He's talking about himself here. We despaired of life itself. We don't know what happened in Asia. But it was so severe that Paul, I mean, it sounds like he had suicidal ideations. It sounds like the water rose above, it was up to here.

It was like, this is just, I cannot cope. I can't do this anymore. I cannot, I cannot cope anymore. I think this is remarkable. The very thing he's accused of is what?

[7 : 10] Being weak. That's the very thing he leads his response with. He says, yes. Yes, weak. Eleven times in a passage he talks about suffering, affliction, and peril, and death.

Why is that? Why would he do that? And it's because Paul, as we see, has seen God work most powerfully in his life through his despair and through his suffering. This is where he was schooled in his faith.

So he's telling his old congregation, God is not going to build this church on some flashy new ministry. He's going to build it through my weakness. He's going to build it through your weakness. Now let's get into the passage and see how he talks about that. I've got three sections here. Section one, you and suffering. Section two, you're suffering in the church. And section three, comfort. So one, you and suffering. Two, you're suffering in the church. And three, comfort. So one, you're suffering. I want you to notice that in amongst all these references to suffering and affliction and peril and weakness, at no point does he say that suffering is a lack of faith, or that pain is a lack of faith.

[8 : 29] In fact, the passage says it's a given. Like it's, you know, it's going to, whether you're a super apostle or not, it's going to happen. Verse five, For as we share abundantly in Christ's sufferings, if you're in Christ, if you walk with him, you will suffer.

This will be what will happen to you. In fact, you know, walking with Christ is actually probably going to add to your problems in life, to be honest. For one reason, you're out of step with many of the cultural values, many of the values of the world around you.

And some of you know this, and it's a bit of a trite example. But you know what it's like to be the weird Christian in your family. The odd person at your workplace. The person who people think is, just because you're a Christian, well, you're automatically homophobic, ignorant, anti-science, or whatever else they can make up.

And you know that's not true. That's a small example. Later on, Paul gives us some very visceral examples, some very big examples of how walking with Christ is, well, that's meant for him. It's meant beatings.

It's meant being publicly whipped. It's meant prison. It's meant shipwrecks. It's meant betrayal and desertion. And it all sounds a bit dramatic to us. But, you know, we actually have people at St. John's, in our congregation, who have physically been tortured for their faith and in prison.

[9 : 48] Back to our point here. Suffering is not a lack of faith. It's a given. It's probably going to increase because you're a Christian. And neither is weakness. Weakness is not a lack of faith either.

We've talked about it in verse 8 already. Paul was so overwhelmed by his life, he wanted to die. The second part of verse 8. Again, we don't know what happened, but he was clearly pushed beyond his emotional and physical limits.

It had enough. I don't know what you think about when you think about the Apostle Paul. Some of you probably may have had this picture in your head like he's this big, macho, kind of Spartan gladiator, bronzed guy that walks around shouting at people.

You know, Sparta! Like, ah, all day, you know. Clearly not. Clearly this is not Paul. I mean, just a reminder, Paul's detractors have accused them of being weak.

They say he's weak, therefore he's unfit for leadership, and Paul's like, yeah, I am so weak. I was completely overwhelmed. Life was just too hard. There is a, I think there's a lesson here in terms of expectations, a side lesson, expectations of church leaders, that there must be people who are super types, that never get sad or overwhelmed, that Christian leaders are people that never show any kind of vulnerability.

[11 : 17] Of course, that's nonsense. But if you believe that, I'd invite you to just drive home with me and my children after the church tonight, and just hear the most ludicrous insecurities come out of my mouth as I ask my wife literally 50 times, now seriously, did I preach okay?

Seriously, what do you think? Was it, did I say anything stupid? But, did this shirt make me look fat? I think it makes me look fat. Look, pain, suffering, anxiety, affliction.

These are, this is normal Christian stuff. This is normal Christian life. Don't beat yourself up. If this is your experience, you're not immune to suffering because you're a person of faith, in fact.

In fact, as you continue in the life of discipleship, I think you should probably be more aware of your weaknesses. You should feel more pain. Folks, this is actually God's plan.

And why would it be God's plan? Why would God want this in our life? Well, I think the passage gives us two main reasons. Reason one, we cannot know God's strength without knowing our weaknesses.

[12 : 31] And this is verse nine. Indeed, we felt that we'd receive the sentence of death. But that was to make us rely not on ourselves, but on God who raises the dead. Self-sufficiency is the essence, is the heart of all sin.

And this idea of being completely self-sufficient must be driven from our hearts. I mean, first of all, it's just a myth. It's a nonsense. You are reliant on God for everything you have.

Breath in your lungs. And secondly, if you're not going to... You're not going to place your trust and hope in your heavenly father when you think you've got it all under control.

We want to be people like Paul, who's in verse 10 who says, I've set my hope on God. Now, of course, there is some...

We're not talking about self-reliance. I'm talking self-reliance of the heart. There's some things you should be self-reliant on. Hygiene. Do you know what I mean? Just stuff like that. I think you have the wisdom to work out what I'm talking about here.

[13 : 35] The real heart stuff, though. The treasures of your heart. Where is your trust? Is it in you or in your heavenly father?

Now, how does God change our hearts to trust him? You know, often it's through our despair because it's in this place. In this place of despair in our hearts, and confusion and anxiety, that's where we experience the progressive weakening of our instinctive self-reliance.

And that's a good thing. As it winds down, that's good. Because then, all you have is confidence in God. That's the place you want to be. That's where you want to be. That's the sweet spot. So, summary so far. Suffering and weakness are not signs that you lack faith. This is just Christian life. You'll only know God's power in your life as suffering drives you to give up the belief that you're in charge.

It drives us from our self-reliance. And self-reliance is the heart of sin. It's a big problem. We need a big solution. And God can use despair and great times of despair to bring us to that place.

[14 : 47] And that's a good thing. Two qualifiers. One qualifier. Let me just wait one qualifier here. Of course, suffering and pain is not a good thing just in itself, right? Suffering and pain is not a virtue.

Because suffering and pain can actually drive you, of course, to bitterness. It can drive you in the opposite direction. You can become bitter and self-centered. Or you can turn your heart to the father of comfort.

I mean, we could end the sermon here and just sort of talk to each other about that, but we're going to keep going. So reason one, Paul wants us to recognize our weakness is because it's the training ground for faith.

The other reason, the other reason is my second point, suffering in the church. Let me explain all this. Our weakness and suffering is not just, it's not just that it helps us in our faith journey by trusting in God more.

It helps others around us. Verses three to six, if you just sort of slide your eyes over that, I want you to just, just a couple of passages will jump out at you, I hope.

[15 : 54] Just the end of verse four there, who comforts us in all our affliction so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction. In verse six, if we're afflicted, it's for your comfort and salvation.

Do you see, as we suffer and are strengthened by God, as we receive comfort from the Father, that comfort you receive, that should not terminate with you.

That comfort should be passed on. The encouragement we receive should be passed on. Folks, are you doing that? Are you doing it? It requires vulnerability on your part and a safe environment, like a small group.

But we're called to do it. This is such a radical thing for Paul to say here. Because when you think about, when you think about serving God, right, you probably think, I want to serve God, I want to help the church, I want to bless the church, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera.

You probably think, maybe you think this, okay, I have some talents, I have some strengths, I have some abilities, I can serve the church in that. I'm great with administrative things.

[17 : 02] I'm great with numbers. I could be, I could help with managing the finances. I'm a really fantastic business person. I could be a trustee. I'm a very gifted musician.

I can help with music. Absolutely, serve the church in those capacities. You should be doing that. But here is Paul, Paul is saying something as well.

He's saying, you serve the church and you bless the church, not only in things you're good at, you bless the church through your suffering, how you suffer, how you walk with God in your pain.

Here's how it's supposed to work. You're in the midst of a drama in your life. It's overwhelming. Yet you experience God's comfort and strengthening. But you stay the course in your despair.

And in your despair, you let people know what's going on. And what does that do? One of the things it does, it shows the worthiness of God. Now, we were given a great example of that a few weeks ago when we talked to Malcolm about his cancer diagnosis and it was incredible vulnerability.

[18 : 09] But the commitment to glorifying God in this journey that he's on was just a wonderful encouragement and a wonderful model for us all.

Now, I had this idea affirmed in a very unlikely place a couple of days ago. There's an article in GQ magazine, and it's an interview with Stephen Colbert. So Stephen Colbert has had the Colbert report and now he's taking over from David Letterman.

So he's quite a devout Catholic as it turns out. And in this article, he speaks very candidly about his faith and about trauma in his life. It's really interesting.

The backstory is his father and two brothers were killed in a plane crash when he was 12. And so let me just read an excerpt from the article which is partly him saying things and partly the writer commenting on what he's saying.

But what comes out of it is this idea of pain and walking in faith and that being passed on and giving faith to somebody else. So here he goes. This is Stephen Colbert at the start saying this.

[19 : 17] I was left alone a lot after Dad and the boys died and it was just me and Mum for a long time, he said. And by her example, I'm not bitter. By her example, she was not.

Broken, yes. Bitter, no. Maybe he said she had to be that for him. He said this before that even in those days of unremitting grief, she drew on her faith that the only way to not be swallowed up by sorrow, to in fact recognize that our sorrow is inseparable from our joy, is to always understand our suffering ourselves in the light of eternity.

What is this in the light of eternity? Imagine being a parent so filled with your own pain and yet still being able to pass that on to your son. So she didn't hide her pain.

It didn't drive her to bitterness. She was comforted by God and that example God used to give faith to her son. Folks, we're a church family. We are a family.

And this whole thing, this whole thing that we're kind of doing Sundays and during the week and stuff, it doesn't work when we hide our pain from each other. And for many reasons, but the big one here we're talking about is my faith grows when I see other people walking faithfully in the midst of suffering.

[20 : 36] We live in such a private culture. We live in such a private culture. But you need to know that our community is impoverished when we don't talk, we don't walk with each other in vulnerability.

Our community is impoverished when we hide our pain from each other for whatever reason that is, whether it's pride or shame. Now we're going to talk a lot more about this in Corinthians.

I'm going to move on. But there's one more thing I want to talk about in this passage. But a summary so far. Pain, suffering, does not equal lack of faith. In fact, it's the breeding ground for faith.

And walking with a limp, walking with pain, publicly, faithfully, this is one of the main ways God grows His church.

Okay, section three. So I've had you in suffering, the church in suffering, and the last thing here. More than suffering, the passage talks about God's comfort. That's wonderful. Comfort.

[21 : 48] As sure as we're promised pain, we're promised God's comfort very quickly. Ten times in verses seven, three to seven, it talks about God's comfort.

So what does it mean? In verse three, it says that God is the God of comfort. It says He will comfort you. What do you think when you think comfort? What comes to mind? In New Zealand, I don't want to put my hand up.

In New Zealand, there was a famous fabric softener called comfort. Do you have that here? Very, very good fabric softener. And, you know, I had like the floppy dog.

Well, that was a toilet one, wasn't it? Do you have the toilet paper that's comfort or something? You know, like the, you think of comfort food, comfort blankets, there's examples. Comfort food, comfort blankets. So you think of like something comforting.

Comfort is like, something to dull the pain. Something to take our mind off stuff. Like a little, you know, you feed a baby and the baby's just kind of like a little drunk person.

[22 : 48] After being fair, it's kind of like, oh, that's what I want. I want to be like that. I've got pain. I want to be like this little drunk infant that's just kind of like dull to everything.

Is that the comfort that God is talking about here, do you think? Probably not, are you? God does not put you in a happy daze so you don't have to deal with your suffering and pain.

The Greek word is paraklesis. That's two words, para and klesis. Para meaning alongside, klesis meaning called out. It's the same root as the word church, klesia actually.

So, the comfort word here is, it's the promise that God will join you in your pain.

God will walk with you in your pain. This is what God promises. This is what he will do. So God, it seems like, biblically, God has two ways of dealing with our troubles. One, he can take them from us.

[23 : 51] This is why we pray when people are sick. We pray that the sickness will be driven from their body. But it's not the only way God deals with our pain. Instead of taking it away, often, it stays with us.

But, the comfort is that God will walk with us in our pain. And that's the place that faith is built. This is the promise of the passage. It's not necessarily like the emotional peace or freedom from pain.

But it's the presence of God, the very real spiritual presence of the Father with you that strengthens you so that you can keep walking in faith.

Now, our time is up, more than up here. So, let me finish. So, Paul is writing to this church. Okay. This church has just been, has bought into the ideas of all the cultural values of the day surrounding it.

And you hear what those values are at the staff. And so, these powerhouse preachers are coming in and they said that the life of faith is a life that's free. Free from pain. Free from suffering.

[24 : 58] Get on board. Live the victorious life. Folks, my first church was a little bit prosperity, a bit of prosperity church. We used to sing a song called, Born Again, Born to Win. What an expectation, eh?

You go to church and you're feeling like I'm a winner and then just get smacked in the face by Monday. Paul says, no. That's not, that's not the promise of the gospel.

If you follow Christ, who knew more pain, who knew, who knew this more than anyone else, the promise of pain and delivering.

If you are to follow Christ, if we're to grow in our faith and love him, we must wean ourselves from the addiction of self-reliance and the matters of the heart and also from the promise that we think we deserve an easy, comfortable and pain-free life.

We don't. It's not going to happen in this life. Paul says, if we're going to grow, if you're going to grow individually, if we're going to grow as a community, folks, we must follow the way of weakness.

[26 : 10] We must be vulnerable. We must admit that weakness because it's only when we come to the end of ourselves that we're actually going to know the real power of God in our life. This is what Paul commenced to us in the first 14 verses of Corinthians.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.