

Comfort Through Weakness

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Preacher: Rev. James Wagner

[0 : 00] Well, now, today kind of marks the beginning of a new season here at St. John's. It's kind of the pastoral beginning of the new year, as it were.

There are lots of new years that I think that we tend to celebrate, but this is one of them in some sorts, and we do so by launching this sermon series called Upside Down.

You'll see that on the front of your bulletin, and it's a series in 2 Corinthians. And the 2 Corinthians is a magnificent letter written by Paul. It's probably one of four letters that he had written, and we have two of them, by name 1 and 2 Corinthians.

There were probably two others. Paul made three visits to this church, which is in what we know as Greece today, which is a troubled country at the moment, isn't it?

And it was a bit of a troubled city there, Corinth, in the days that Paul visited it as well, though it probably wouldn't have described itself as so.

[1 : 02] But this letter of Paul, 2 Corinthians, is a really tender letter of his. He'd written some more difficult and demanding letters to them. I wouldn't say this one isn't difficult and demanding in some ways, but has this real tenderness and expressive of who Paul is.

So it makes for a terrific letter to a very troubled church. Well, there are some really important themes, and I just kind of want to highlight about five of them here, but two of them we'll look at actually today in this letter.

And we're not going to go through the whole letter in this sermon series, but only up through verse, or sorry, chapter 8. And the important themes, though, in this letter include these. And that is about who raises the dead, and that is Christ, who's God's agent for salvation or deliverance.

Another great theme is the spirit of the living God. Another one is the ministry and community of the new covenant. And then there's this kind of paradox of the gospel that Paul expresses in a couple of forms.

One is a power that is perfected in weakness. Paul expresses that through his own ministry. And then comfort, which is highlighted through affliction.

[2 : 15] Well, 2 Corinthians actually has an expression of one of the most concise renderings of the gospel, and we'll get to that later, but it's in the latter half of chapter 4 and the beginning of chapter 5.

It's just a really marvelous expression of the gospel, maybe one of the greatest in all of scripture. I was privileged to use it at a funeral this past year and thought, man, this is a great funeral text.

And all in all, 2 Corinthians is a really encouraging letter, but as the title of this series suggests, it's kind of about an upside-down gospel. It's kind of inside out.

It's somewhat kind of inverted from what actually the Corinthians thought the gospel was. And so here we have that to look at today. But today we're going to look at a couple of things. One is the comfort and affliction, and also right embedded in this, as you heard the reading, had to do with Jesus, our sorry God, who raises the dead.

And I might succinctly stay in terms of this sermon that is that the Christians who face affliction or weakness or suffering or even death, as Paul expressed, we can rest assured in the comfort that comes from God because he raises the dead.

[3 : 24] So let's look at this. I'm not going to spend much time in verses 1 and 2, or in the latter part, 12 through 14, but mostly 3 through 11. So Paul begins his letter with a magnificent exaltation.

After this initial and important salutation, when he says, Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God and Timothy, our brother, he goes on from there to exalt the Lord in verses 3.

An exaltation is like a joy and a delight and a jubilation. And Paul expresses himself in this way, and he's not addressing the Corinthians initially.

His initial address is expressed in exaltation towards God, who he praises in benediction when he says these words, Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of all mercies, the God of all comfort.

It's an unrestricted blessing and praise of the Lord, just what you would want to hear from a minister, wouldn't you? And why does he do this? He does this blessing, as it starts out in verse 3, in the following line, which is because God is the Father of all mercies, and he is the God of all comfort.

[4 : 37] That's not the way he always kind of acknowledges who God is and is addressed to other churches when he writes a letter. But in this one, he's bringing their attention to these two things, that God is merciful and God is very comforting.

And so right from the beginning, Paul wants to relate this to the church, to get this to cross, to remind them that God is merciful and comforting. Well, as he no more gets this point across that God is merciful and gives us actually what we don't deserve, and that is punishment, God withholds that, he's expressing that God is a God of comfort.

And he says that five times in a verse and a half here, and in the three verses that follow, he'll use that word comforting again. And it may not actually be what we think that is when we think of the word comforting, but I'll just say for now and come back to it later, that it means that God is a God of consolation and kindness and courage.

Hippocrates once said, you know who Hippocrates is with the Hippocratic Oath, cure sometimes, treat often, comfort always. Well, Paul knew the Lord was the only one who could give comfort always, in all comfort.

The good physicians know also that they can rarely cure, well, they can't cure all the time, but sometimes they will treat as often as they can. But even good physicians can't always comfort.

[5 : 55] But Paul's saying, look, the God of all comfort can always comfort. Well, not only is the Lord the God of all comfort, but Paul makes a shocking claim then as he follows after that, that God comforts us in all our afflictions.

And I don't know if you believe that, but our aim in this series is that you would know that God is the God of all comfort. He comforts us in our afflictions, our sufferings, our trials, our troubles, our weaknesses.

That's the God of all comfort. And so, Paul doesn't actually dwell initially on the definition of this word comfort, but he's keen to give a purpose then of that comfort for affliction.

And look and see what he says after that. He wants us to know that the comfort of God isn't for just the sake of experiencing God's comfort, but the purpose is that our comfort is so that we will be able to comfort others.

Paul certainly has experienced this comfort through all the affliction and the weakness and the suffering that he's experienced. But he's showing us, telling us, that that is used by God then so that we might be a comfort to others as we are in Christ, the one who suffered in our place and for our sake.

[7 : 02] So that's the first thing. He starts with this great exaltation. After that, though, Paul pulsates with praise. After he pulsates with praise and benediction of the Lord, he turns towards explanation of this comfort and affliction.

Verses 5 through 10 are quite pastoral and theological. They're purposeful. They're somewhat general. But Paul pursues this subject of affliction and suffering and trouble and hardship.

In fact, it's more than just a kind of a casual kind of hardship with passion and a laser beam in sight. Paul sees this affliction for Christians because of the gospel as something that we are to expect. It's given. It's a reality. Sometimes it actually seems maybe a little bit random. But nevertheless, there it is. And so Paul gives a uniquely Christian understanding of this affliction.

It's not just a kind of a grin and bear this affliction. It's not kind of a give me liberty or give me death in the face of suffering. It's more of a suffering for the sake of salvation through the gospel.

[8 : 05] And so Paul writes this. For as we share abundantly in Christ's sufferings, this is a suffering that we share in Christ because of who Christ is as followers of him. So through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too.

If we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation. Paul anchors his and Christian suffering in that of Christ's. Suffering is the wind and storms and waves of life in this Christian discipleship that we have.

And Christ is the anchor and we are the chain attached to a ship of faith and truth of our Lord. Now notice the parallel between suffering and comfort. We share in Christ's suffering in order that we share in his comfort.

Suffering, comfort. Comfort, suffering. They go together linked one to another. Well, I gather the Corinthians were interested in knowing this kind of comfort.

They may not have wanted the suffering. In fact, we're pretty sure that they actually didn't. And they were somewhat uncertain. Now they even accused Paul because they didn't think he was actually an apostle because of the suffering that he experienced, because of the weakness that he actually expressed.

[9 : 12] There were some other apostles that will, well, false apostles that we'll learn about actually later who they thought were more true to be an apostle because they didn't suffer. Or didn't experience afflictions or didn't have weaknesses, but not Paul.

No, actually, he understands the integral relationship between suffering and comfort. And so the depth of comfort and courage and compassion and kindness of the Lord is forged and forms in the depth of affliction and suffering and trials and troubles.

But this word now, let me look at this with you. Comfort is a really big and a beautiful and a bold word. It isn't just a kind of a cold theory or it's not just kind of a warm sympathy, but it's a fiery, hot strength.

And the word comfort in 2 Corinthians is actually the same word in the verbal form of the noun form. Are you following me? It's actually in John chapter 14, verse 4, when Jesus says this, But the helper, the Holy Spirit whom the Father will send in my name.

That word is actually sometimes translated advocate, friend, others stand by, the one who stands by, and also we know as comfort. In the ESV, it's translated as helper.

[10 : 27] But it's the same noun there that's then used as a verb in the following in 2 Corinthians, these 10 times. And in these three verses, 5, 6, and 7, we are given these assuring words for Christians, both then and now, who face affliction and suffering.

And it's hard to live the Christian life, I know, but it's the best way, this bringing together of comfort and affliction. I don't know about you, but I want a comfortable Christian life sometimes.

But that's not the life that Paul's talking about here when he talks about God giving us his comfort in the face of affliction. And this flies in the face of a faith that tries to prevent or protect or preserve ourselves from suffering and affliction.

And the Corinthians wanted that kind of Christian life. And as far as they were concerned, there was no value in suffering and trouble and affliction. And for some reason to them, that looked really weak, even embarrassing and undesirable.

Well, after that, Paul then turns in verses 8 through 10 to an example of his own suffering, drawing their attention to that, not embarrassed by it at all.

[11 : 45] And actually showing them that actually through that, Christ would comfort him and comfort others so that they might be a comfort to one another. I won't spend time in those three verses, but I want to draw to your attention to the last verse then, verse 11.

When Paul says, You also must help us by prayer so that many will be given thanks on your behalf for the blessing granted us through the prayers of many.

Paul begins in prayer with the benediction and he ends with a exhortation to pray as well. The staff at St. John's right now are reading through a book called A Life of Prayer by Paul Miller.

So he links this subject of prayer and suffering and comfort together. And he says this about suffering and prayer. So suffering is God's gift to make us aware of our contingent existence. It creates an environment where we see the true nature of our existence that is dependent on the living God. Paul knows that he's reliable on the Lord.

[12 : 51] It's absolutely critical in this idea of comfort and suffering that comes together. And it shows us just how dependent we are on God and we can't live our life independent of him.

And so in the end, Paul calls. He almost commands. He says, You also must help us in prayer. Naming these kind of three times of prayer. One is which is petition. The one that falls, which is thanksgiving.

And then the one at the end that has to do with blessing. Those three ways of praying is actually what ushers us as it were or ushers the Lord actually into our life. When we're living a life that's fraught with suffering and affliction at times.

But through that, we actually know the comfort and the reality of our Lord in our lives. So let me just end with this one maybe commendation to you.

And Paul is writing this tender and terrific letter to this church of Corinth. This fourth one that he would have written to them. And in these verses, we actually just see how much together Paul is kind of calling the church into the presence of the Lord.

[13 : 56] So that they'll know his comfort. This, as I said, this fiery hot comfort that is like that of God. Not only bringing us that comfort, but bringing himself actually into our life.

So that we will know him and know his comfort in our life. But not only that in an end of itself, but that we might actually be comfort to others. And I think that that's glorious. I think that that's lovely. The Lord affords us that privilege, that power, that opportunity that he in our life through bringing himself into our life. That we might actually be comfort to others.

So let us do that. We speak to you in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit.