

Comfort Through Weakness

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[0 : 00] 2 Corinthians, 2 Corinthians chapter 1 verses 1 and 2, if you would take a Bible and open to page 964, you'll find it helpful.

2 Corinthians chapter 1, 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.

2 Corinthians chapter 1, Paul had had a lot to do with the church in Corinth. He had planted it, he had been there for 18 months, he'd already written one letter to it, and this is his second letter.

And you can pick up some of the flavour of this letter by the way he starts. By the way, would you turn my microphone? I'm echoing a little bit. We've turned it up because at the first service, the back two thirds of the congregation didn't hear a word I said.

Which I didn't like. So, can everyone hear? Is my voice foggy and muffled? Okay. Paul starts, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, because between the first letter and the second letter, a nest of false teachers had taken up residence in Corinth, who called themselves super apostles.

[1 : 43] T-shirt, S-A. That's not what we usually call ourselves. Some people call Dan super pastor. But they called themselves super apostles, and they were very impressive externally.

They were flashy. They had money. They were handsome. They were tall, attractive, and unafraid to say so to anyone who asked.

And they had all the answers. And they knew how to draw a crowd, and how to hold a crowd, and how to dominate a crowd. And they brought with them letters of recommendation CVs that listed their successes.

And the church in Corinth had started to take off. People were coming. And people were coming because the style of the false teachers hit the sweet spot in Corinth.

Because the false teachers perfectly mirrored the culture of Corinth. Way better than Paul did.

There was only one problem. They preached a different Jesus.

[2 : 52] They preached a different gospel. But the Corinthian church loved them. The Corinthian church said, yeah, the message is a bit hinky. It's a bit different. But hey, it's working.

And we go to church, and they make us feel so much better. Especially about ourselves. Corinth was a city that worshipped wealth, money, beauty, outward beauty, entertainment.

They boasted. We found this, you can see this in inscriptions, and not just in letters. They boasted about their religious tolerance and their sexual freedom. Completely unlike Vancouver.

They were a boom town. A new city. Without the constraints of any aristocracy or rules. They had two harbors, which controlled the Isthmus, and all trade coming east and west and north and south. They were mostly made up of freed slaves who managed large properties, who went there to make their fortune. And if you sailed into the harbour, you had every entertainment available to you.

[4 : 03] They had an amphitheatre, the biggest one in Greece, 18,000 seats. You can see it today. And two other theatres in the city. They hosted the Greek games.

And there was a lot of skin that you could see. Not just as you sailed into the port, as the thousands of prostitutes plied their trade.

Or in the temple of Aphrodite on the top of the hill, where there were a thousand prostitutes, including children. Nor just the athletes who competed without clothing.

There are public baths, mixed public baths, that were full of beautiful people. That's what the visitors say. It was materialistic. It was individualistic, in a way.

And they were enormously proud of themselves. We'll talk about this next week. That's why when Paul says, the church of God in Corinth, it's a bit of a come down.

[5 : 01] He's saying to them, you're not self-made. You're created by God. You're owned by God. And then he says, with all the holy people of Jesus Christ and the whole of Achaia. That's a big blow to their ego.

Do you know the Emperor Nero never went to Athens? He never went to Sparta. But he was regularly in Corinth. Spent a lot of time there. Corinth was the center of entertainment, of finance, of sport, of all of Greece.

And Paul simply says, not true spiritually. You're not the only show in town. If you're a Christian, if you're part of a church, you're not an island on your own.

You're connected with all God's people. Just so in Vancouver, God has his holy people in places we least expect. And then Paul plunges immediately into a very strange prayer in verse 3.

His normal practice, you know, if you've read his letters, is to begin by praying for his converts and friends. He doesn't do that here. He prays about himself. And he speaks about his suffering.

[6 : 07] A very odd thing to do, don't you think? This is one of the key themes in this letter of 2 Corinthians. Remember, he's writing to a church that worships power and appearance and strength and health and wealth.

These people felt entitled to the good life. They were making fortunes greater than those in Rome with the exception of the emperor. They expected God to deliver.

All the other religions in Corinth offered salvation, this worldly salvation. Health and wealth. And they groan suspicious of Paul.

He just seemed so humble and he wasn't wealthy and he was a bit weak. And he had health issues, even mental health issues, the kiss of death.

Paul was just not very healthy. And the church in Corinth wanted an apostle they could be proud of and boast about and who could draw the crowds. And what does the Christian faith say to those who are wealthy and successful and full of confidence and committed to their own pleasure?

[7 : 13] And what do you say to people who have no interest in the afterlife because you have it all now? What possible relevance could 2 Corinthians have for us today?

And the answer that the apostle Paul comes to again and again and again, and this is really the theme of the letter, is the cross of Jesus Christ. He says, That's why I've called the series simply Upside Down.

Because this is the way God brings actual change into our lives and the lives of others. Actual transformation. And through the letter, what the apostle does is he brings the cross to bear on every aspect of our lives.

And I think one of our dangers is to think about the cross as just something we go to when we're sinful. It's much, much more than that. Just listen, I'll tell you some verses.

The Corinthians wanted wealth and status and admiration. And Paul says, By the way, if you hear those little notes of music, we discovered in the last service that they're coming through the cross at the back.

[9 : 04] You see the cross there? It's got little slats of wood. And they move around with the wind. Which is a very nice accompaniment for a sermon on the cross of Christ, don't you think?

It's like that should become the music of our lives. Corinthians wanted health and power and control. Paul said he was crucified in weakness.

They wanted life with a capital L. And Paul says, Death is at work in us, but life in you. They wanted to be happy, happy and enjoy their luxuries.

And Paul says, Godly grief produces repentance that leads to salvation with no regret. So what do you say to a superficial, shallow culture that wants to stay on the surface?

Paul goes to suffering because it's very exposing. See, what does our current culture do with suffering? What do we say about suffering? You throw money at it. There's a new mechanistic view of us as humans.

[10 : 06] We're machines again. We're computers again. We just throw money. We sequence everyone's genome and we fix it and we don't fix it. I'm going to choose the time when I die. Thank you very much. But this letter is full of suffering and full of weakness.

It is the most personal and the most painful of all of the apostles' letters as he takes the cross of Jesus Christ and shows how it transforms us in the daily circumstances of our lives.

It becomes the place and power for experiencing God. But the focus is not just on weakness and suffering. It's suffering in the service of Christ.

It is our suffering that shows his strength. It is our humility and humiliation that show his glory. It's in dying to ourselves a thousand times a day where the resurrection power of Jesus flows into our life and through us to others.

And in these first verses, verses 3 to 11, the apostle makes two very simple points and I just want to commend these to you. And the first one is that God gives strength to us in our suffering.

[11:18] And my second point will be that God gives strength to others through us in our suffering. Firstly then, God gives strength to us in our suffering. Look down please at verses 3 and 4.

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of all mercies, God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction.

It's very important to know, and we say this many times from the pulpit here, if you are a Christian, you will suffer. Is that okay? Okay? You're not immune to suffering if you become a Christian.

What's more important here is that God strengthens and comforts you in your suffering. Paul uses seven words to describe difficulties, afflictions and suffering, but ten times in this passage he refers to God's comfort.

And that's because as Christians we're not masochists. We don't like suffering and difficulty. Don't get the idea that we do.

[12:26] Suffering and pain and difficulty are not good by themselves. They do not automatically make us better people. They don't make us stronger necessarily or more godly.

You sometimes hear people say, what doesn't kill you makes you stronger. That's nonsense. I think it's Nietzsche who said it. I've seen people, suffering makes them much more bitter, self-obsessed and arrogant.

I say it again, suffering and affliction in themselves are awful. You sink under that sense of inadequacy and helplessness and there's no exit. You're failing and you're falling short and you're just in pain.

And Paul says right here in verse 3, here's the thing you need to know about God. God is the father of mercy. Every single mercy comes from him.

He is the God of all comfort, all different kinds, any sort of suffering. Not just missionary suffering. Because his mercy and his tender compassion is limitless.

[13:31] But I need to say this also. Comfort, comfort's not a toilet brand. The word comfort we use is, you know, a fabric softener, nice shoes, comfort food.

That's not what it means here. The word literally means strength. Strength. So, Paul is saying God strengthens us in every affliction.

He's speaking about receiving spiritual refreshment from God. It's not just an encouraging word.

You know, buck up, you'll be okay. God doesn't offer us an ear and say, well, I'll listen to you while you complain about your difficulties.

I'll be sympathetic. He's talking about actual strength, real benefit in the midst of suffering. God intervening in our lives with strength. And the question is, how does he do that?

How does he possibly, how does that work? And amazingly, Paul gives us a personal illustration from his own life here in verses 8 and 9. Just look down, please.

[14:35] He says, we don't want you to be ignorant, brothers and sisters, of the affliction we experienced in Asia. We were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself.

Indeed, we felt that we had received in ourselves the sentence of death. That was to make us rely not on ourselves, but on God who raises the dead.

This is amazing personal openness. I mean, I think some of the power of it is because he doesn't give us all the external details, but he tells us about the devastating inward emotional impact it had on him.

In the original, the word beyond comes twice. This experience that Paul suffered in Asia was beyond measure, and it was beyond the apostle's ability to endure.

It was utterly and unbearably beyond his strength. He saw no way out, and he despaired of life itself. Isn't that a stunning line?

[15:45] Paul is a guy who faced death constantly. He'd already been stoned and left for dead once in Lystra. But this experience in Asia took him beyond the edge of his own sanity, and I think he's contemplating suicide in this situation.

What happened to him was unique in its intensity and its anxiety. In his anguish, he lost hope. You've got to see how amazing this is.

I mean, this is the same apostle who writes in Philippians, I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me. Or who says, just in chapter 4 in this very letter, we are perplexed but not driven to despair.

But here he says, I did despair. And this experience was a watershed for him. And how did God strengthen him?

It's in that phrase, verse 9, it was to make us rely on, not ourselves, but on God who raises the dead. That's a passive where God is the actor.

[16:53] He says, God directly made me rely on him. This is an actual change in the interior of Paul's life. Because until now, self-reliance and self-confidence had marked Paul's experience.

Perhaps it was because of his amazing gifts and learning. Or maybe it was precisely because he had escaped death many times and he saw God work so powerfully through him. But through this devastating experience, God made him aware, Paul aware, that he was self-reliant and self-confident and God completely undermined it and took Paul to a place where he had nothing in himself to rely on anymore.

It was beyond him. And it was only there that Paul could understand that God alone could be reliable. And what God does in that situation is he gives us himself.

He gives us himself as the full and true reliable one. As the ultimate good thing. He gave himself to Paul as the one who raises the dead.

That is, whose comfort and strength and goodness goes beyond all possible human suffering. He gives himself to us. Now, I need to stop and say, the good things in life, you know, health and wealth and money and success, they're all good.

[18:16] And we pray for those in measure. But every pleasure and every joy in this life are just a pale reflection of God himself. And what happens is we become, we're so ungrateful is that we take one of those things, we begin to replace God with that thing.

But only in God do we have the ultimate good thing. Calvin says, Though all things fail us, yet God will never forsake us, who cannot disappoint since all good things are contained in him.

So what do you do when you face weakness or suffering? Some of us, some of us whine a bit. Let's be honest. We whine a bit and we drop hints to people who we think need to know and need to give us sympathy.

I think that's more a male thing than a female thing, actually. For me, I, there's some amens from the front here. Amongst the women.

I confess, I feel when I confront weakness in myself, I need to fix it before I take it to God. You know, I need to just show him I'm trying in this area.

[19:31] But instead of whining or working on it, what Paul does is he turns his weakness to God as a way for, he brings it to God as the way in which God will come to him.

It's like a bridge between him and God. He takes his weakness to God. He didn't have any other choice in this situation. And God comes to him with strength. And as Paul turns from his self-reliance, God floods his heart with goodness, comfort, strength, and his own presence.

And it becomes a moment of deep change for Paul. His life motto becomes, as we'll see in the following chapters, my sufficiency is from God.

Now, again, self-reliance is a very good thing in all sorts of areas. You know, we hope our children will learn self-reliance in hygiene and work ethic. But not to the exclusion of God.

And then if it comes at the exclusion of God, then self-reliance is just a way to replace God. But here, this is important for us, particularly if you're suffering right now.

[20:39] The experience of suffering just seems very random, but it's not. God has a precious purpose for you in your suffering, and that changes everything.

It doesn't make the suffering easier. But it means that God has not abandoned you. He has not left you. It means that God is drawing you closer to himself and drawing closer to you so that you will rely on him.

And that's how it works. And that's the first point. God gives strength to us in suffering. And I need to move quickly to the second point. I think if the first point is amazing and wonderful, the second point is even more so.

And that is that God gives strength to others through us in our suffering. See, in verse 4, Paul says there's another purpose in our suffering other than just relying on God.

If you look at verse 4 again, God comforts us in all our afflictions so that, here's the second purpose, 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.

[21 : 52] Here is a purpose for your suffering and for my suffering that's beyond you and me. It's one of the highest themes of this letter. I think if we'd begun to get a hold of this theme, it could change us as a church particularly.

But God wants to include us in what he is doing. God loves to work through you and me in the lives of others.

That's very different from individualism. God is the source of power and goodness and transformation. Here are the people who are transformed and affected.

And in between them, we suffer under his power. And the very real strength that Paul has received from God in his trouble enables him to become a channel of blessing to others in any kind of suffering, not just his suffering.

This is different from the way we usually think. We usually think, oh, God will use me in my strength. Here are my strengths. God used me. He does use our strengths a little bit. But he uses our suffering much.

[23 : 03] We become agents of God's action. And how does this happen? How does it work? Why does it happen? It has to do with the way grace works. And grace, you see, the nature of grace is that it overflows.

And this is one of the themes in Corinthians 2, the overflow of God's grace. Just look at verse 5 for a moment. As we share, here it is, overflowing in Christ's sufferings.

So through Christ, we share overflowing in comfort too. It's a finance word overflow. God's economy is different from our marketplace.

In our world, our marketplace, there's a limited supply of goods and services. But with God, there is no limit to the supply of goodness and mercy and strength and blessing.

They are beyond measure. And through Christ, they overflow to us. Through Christ's cross, they overflow to us more and more.

[24 : 07] So this is how it works, you see. When Paul is comforted by God, it's not Paul keeps 80% and gives 20% away. It's that grace floods his life. And as he receives it, it's multiplied and overflows to others.

This is the way that God's grace works. Our problem is we think that God's grace has a limit to it. You know, God's grace, it's this good. It's not this good.

It's not limitless. And when we limit God's grace and then things become difficult, the only thing I can do is become selfish. I don't have enough to draw on.

I only have enough for myself. You know, there's barely enough kindness and goodness for me. I can't possibly love and care for anyone else in this. I don't have enough comfort, care and concern. I can't give away anything. And if your strength is just what you have naturally, then it is just a cupful and it makes sense to keep it for yourself. But if your strength is a vast ocean, which is more than enough for you to drown in, by accessing it, you dig a channel for yourself and that channel opens up for other people as well.

[25 : 20] And the great thing about this is that you don't have to suffer perfectly. You don't have to get it right. It's grace. There's only one who suffered perfectly and that was Jesus and he did it for us.

And through his death and through the cross, the miracle of his grace overflows through us to others. You remember when Paul said, when Paul met Jesus on the Damascus road and Jesus said to him, Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?

And Saul thought, I'm not persecuting you, I'm persecuting Christians. So close is the identification between Christ and his body and his people that when one of us suffers, Christ himself suffers somehow with us.

And we suffer in the sufferings of each other. Our sufferings, the sufferings of Christ overflow to us and also the strength overflows to us.

This is hard for us, isn't it, in a culture that's dominated by psychology. This is not psychology. This is not, oh, you know, I've suffered and therefore I become more sympathetic to you generally.

[26 : 31] That's not true. No, it doesn't always happen. Nor is it I've suffered exactly what you've suffered and therefore I can sympathize. Nor is it that I've suffered worse than you and therefore somehow I can bring comfort into your life.

No, no, Paul is talking about actual overflowing grace. The gift of strength and power that God works in other people through us as we suffer. It's what the cross of Jesus looks like in our lives. For Paul, it meant that relying on God was more important than his physical health and comfort. And in verse 6, for Paul it meant that the salvation and spiritual health of the people in Corinth was more important than his physical health and comfort.

And in the life of a congregation like this, usually there are some who are going through the deep water of suffering. And sometimes there seem to be seasons where a number of us do.

And if we make our suffering completely private, out of pride or shame, it means the rest of the body misses out. I just want to express how thankful I am for the way in which those of you who are in deep water right now are living out your faith.

[27 : 46] It's such a strength to see you living under the shadow of the cross. I imagine you could be at St. John's for 20 years and never really open your heart to someone like Paul does here in verses 8 and 9.

But you see, real change is only going to come in real community, real openness and vulnerability of others in small groups where they can ask and pray.

And that's where it finishes. Verse 11, Paul asks for prayer. He's not parading his suffering. He's asking for prayer because that's the first sign of someone who's begun to rely on God and not himself.

He's including others in the work of blessing. In fact, you can tell how much self-reliance you have by how much you pray. And this is how God comforts us.

This is how God brings strength into our lives. It's the upside-down principle of the cross. It is the gospel, brothers and sisters. Do you remember in the Old Testament, in the book of Isaiah, when God preached the gospel to his people?

[28 : 54] Remember the first two words? He said, comfort. Comfort my people, says your God. Comfort my people, says your God.

And they say,thy... They show you how much You're waiting for your generation. They show you, who's going to be with State forazar. You've got to be a better way than it will say. But, with a good look, let's twist it. We love God.

We will take direction. And then remember, let's wait.