

The Tough Aren't Surprised

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Preacher: Steve Jeffrey

[0 : 0 0] Good morning everyone, it's great to have you here. I'm glad that the kids were sitting there otherwise it would seem like you're in great fear of me all sitting towards the back of the building. In a previous life I used to work for the National Parks and Wildlife Service and one of my jobs that I used to do was to build walking tracks and I always wanted to go the easy option and so what we, I managed to convince our boss to buy this little bulldozer which was quite powerful but small and I would build walking tracks by driving that through the bush and then effectively going back over it and putting a hard surface anywhere there was a bit of a dip in the track with gullies or creeks we would build bridges across it. Effectively by the end of it you could walk along it in an evening gown with high heels shoes on. It was almost a five lane highway, it was fantastic in the middle of nowhere. It used to cost a bit of money but it was a good product at the end and that was my idea of hiking. My idea was you would make it as easy as possible for everyone who would walk along that road and so a number of years later, in fact only just a few years ago, I was in Canada and a friend of mine suggested we go on a hike and I thought, hike? That sounds fantastic. Long stroll through the bush? Sounds like a great idea. Anyway, on the way to Glacier

National Park I picked up a newspaper which talked about Glacier National Park and we would flick through this paper and sort of work out where we were going to go until we got to the middle and we opened up this double page spread in the middle of the newspaper which said warnings about walking in Glacier National Park. It mentioned things like black bears.

That was a surprise to me that black bears apparently are generally fairly timid but if they attack you are meant to stand up against them and fight them back. That seemed logical. I was okay with that. Then it mentioned grizzly bears. Apparently grizzly bears if they attack you don't fight them back. You actually lay down as if you're dead and you let them attack you for two minutes.

So and then apparently if it goes longer than two minutes then it's serious. So if it's chewing off your arm, you got your arm, you got two minutes here dude and then we get serious. So that didn't seem terribly logical to me. I figured that I would attack if a grizzly was going to attack me. I couldn't imagine just calmly laying down and allowing it to have its way for two minutes. And then there were cougars. Now cougars, they would stalk you and then they would jump on you from behind. So you can imagine a 10 kilometer hike consistently looking over your back waiting for a cougar and up in the trees and on the rocks and just waiting for a cougar. And apparently then there were wolverines. Now wolverines were quite shy but if they got nasty they were nastiest of all of them. They were even worse than the grizzly bears. And so I'm thinking this is not a great idea to go for this hike.

Friend convinced that it was a great idea so we got there and he said look what's the chances of this happening? What's the chances? Of course then I went and googled grizzly bear attacks in Glacier National Park and got a long list of the history of grizzly attacks and I figured it's been a while since the last one so maybe it might be time now. But apparently the best thing to do was make lots of noise and carry a big stick which was really basically useless and or to buy some bear spray.

[3 : 30] Yeah yeah that's what I thought, bear spray. I thought go figure. And so we went around looking for bear spray. We couldn't find any bear spray. All the shops were closed. It was a public holiday. And so the best thing we came up with was my friend's wife had a can of hair spray.

And we figured that would do. At the very least after it finishes a tack on me it's going to look good. So we figured we'd turn it into a flame thrower. We had some matches and we flicked these matches and tried to get this hair spray to light up. We discovered it was non-flammable hair spray.

And so at the end of four attempts I said to my friend, oh we're dead. We're dead. And he said, no no it's fine. It's okay. We got to the beginning of the trail and there was this big sign.

Grizzly bear with two cubs seen in vicinity yesterday. Caution! We have time to turn back. We do not have to do this walk. We did and we never saw a grizzly which sort of was sort of bittersweet kind of thing. I would have liked to have seen one a long long way away. But in the end it was a great walk. But at the time I remember thinking that it was very different than my experience of strolls in the Australian countryside.

And I was reminded as we're walking along the old saying, when the going gets tough the tough get going. We know that when things get tough a person's true character come to the fore it's then that you see what they are made of. This morning we are beginning on a couple of month journey through the book of 2 Corinthians. It's one of those books which effectively you see the Apostle Paul's character coming to the fore as things are fairly tough. And we need to, it's one of those books where you need to jump to the end to sort of check out the end of the story to give you perspective on the early bits. It's like reading a good thriller or one of those thriller movies you know where the last little bits sort of, you know, sort of hit the, makes everything make sense. You know up until that point you're sort of a bit confused.

[5 : 38] I'm one of those people who ruin movies for people. When I get it I make sure everyone knows it. We were watching The Sixth Sense one day with a bunch of people and I went about a third of the way through them. Oh get this, he's dead. And everyone just ruined it for everyone at that point.

So we're going to do that. We're going to jump to the end of the book and we're going to have a look. We're going to discover here that the Apostle Paul, the founder of this church of Corinth, has been sidelined by the church of Corinth by these new, what he calls, super apostles which have come in. So in chapter 11 at the end of the book he says, but I do not think that I'm at least inferior to those super apostles. I may not be well trained but I do have knowledge. We have made this perfectly clear in every way. So what is happening here in this book is that Paul's authority and leadership are being challenged by these bunch of guys that he calls the super apostles. That's who he calls them. I think he uses the term quite sarcastically. The main issue of Hurt is that this church has been so ready to believe the criticisms against him. Things like he's a moral coward or that he lacks sort of inner strength and he's actually an imposter and some people actually saying that he's a fool and even that he's mad. And so what is happening is that this Apostle Paul here is forced to defend his teaching and his ministry and his character. So we need to have that in the back of the mind as we look at these early chapters that what is happening here is that this Apostle is on a fight for his life against these false apostles and not just his life, the life of this church of Corinth. And so with that in mind let's have a look at the beginning. So grab, there's some Bibles in your pews in the front of your pews there or if you brought your own, the ones in the pews is page 1109. Actually 1119 would be better, 1119. Grab a Bible and flick open.

So knowing the end of the story it makes perfect sense why he would begin this letter with Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God.

The key words there is when he says by the will of God. You could miss those words so easily if you didn't understand what was happening in this letter. The very first words as he sets out, he wants to make it clear, he wants to make it straight, I'm an apostle appointed by the will of God. I didn't choose one to be one, God chose me to be one. And what he's doing there is referring to his Damascus Road experience. You see once upon a time Paul was actually a persecutor of the church.

He was a religious, religious, religious guy. Super religious, more religious than any of us here. He would be this kind of guy that would be at church each week, he'd own his very own prayer book, he would be the kind of guy who'd, you know, just everything was rules and regulations, he would pray, he would give plenty of money and make sure that he gave the right amount of money, all that sort of stuff. And he was on his way to persecute Jesus, even though he was so religious, he hated Jesus and those who followed Jesus. He was a rebel. And so he was on his way to persecute Jesus and to persecute the followers of Jesus. And Jesus appeared to him and said, man, what are you doing? That's my paraphrase. Well, what are you doing? What are you persecuting me for? And Paul's life turned inside out and upside down. He went from someone who hated Jesus to loving Jesus.

[9 : 04] And at that moment, Jesus set him on course to be his apostle, to be his sent one to the world. One of the really interesting things is that even though he could point to this Damascus Road experience as the basis of his apostleship, the actual hardcore evidence that he was an apostle was actually in his lifestyle. While the source of his authority was Jesus, the evidence that he had authority as an apostle was not from some spectacular deeds. It wasn't that he was particularly gifted and that he did amazing miracles. It wasn't any of that sort of stuff. It wasn't those things, interestingly enough. It wasn't some spectacular power that he had. It was actually a pattern of hardship, of weakness, of sacrifice, and self-giving. Those are the things that he consistently looks back to as evidence of his apostleship. And it was his lifestyle that the super apostles ridiculed more than anything else. And so being under siege and in great distress for his church, he gets to the point in verse three, praise be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion, the God of all comfort. In those short paragraphs there and a few verses afterwards, the word comfort is used ten times. The word trouble, suffering, is used three times. Directly or indirectly, suffering is referred to 17 times. And the suffering that he has in mind here is particularly the pressure that he's under, the difficulties under because of his ministry. The burden that Paul carried because of his challenge to idolatry in Ephesus, you guys, you're worshipping created items rather than the created God. He challenged them and they really hated him for it. And he was under so much pressure that he even expected to die from the pressure. His concern that people know Jesus and that his passion for the church, they continue to honour Jesus. His faithfulness to Jesus himself were the cause of his suffering and pressure. And so what Paul experiences from God the Father is that he is the God of compassion, the God of comfort, which means he is a compassionate God and he's also the source of all compassion and comfort. God is the source of mercy and compassion and they come to us via the Lord Jesus.

Paul says in the following verses that with all that he's been through, with all that he knows of God, he knows this thing to be true, that he's a merciful and he's a compassionate God in times of trouble.

But it's often quite difficult for us to see that though. I mean, if you're in the midst of it, it's very difficult for to see that. If you're in the midst of trouble and hardship and distress, frankly, in those times we feel so powerless. I remember a number of years ago, a friend of mine had a child and the child was born with a hole in its heart and they had to have a surgery to fix the hole in the heart. The baby was about six months old and they were told it was a routine operation. I was down there with the family at the hospital when the doctors came out and said, we've got some bad news, it didn't go as well as we thought. And to sit in a room with the doctors, a team of specialists with this family and for them to say, your child has got a 50, 50% chance of living. When I hear someone say that, I hear a flick of a coin. I hear that. We don't know and it can go either way. To feel so, at that moment, it was so powerless. And I remember, I've got no words of comfort for you. I can say a few things. I can say that I know that God is the great God of compassion and mercy. And I prayed with them, the God who's got everything in his sovereign hand and in his control. I prayed with them. But I remember hopping in my car and driving out of this car park.

And as soon as I exited the car park, just bursting into tears with the weight of the burden that this family must be feeling right now at this time. And needing God to intervene because I am completely powerless. They are completely powerless. And even the doctors acknowledge that they were powerless.

And so we have to turn to the all-powerful God. And it's great when you come to a passage like this and realize that times like that, that suffering is never purposeless. Verse 4 says, who comforts us in our troubles, that is God, comforts us in our troubles so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort that we ourselves have received from God.

[14 : 00] Comfort, it says here, God comforts us in our trials so that, here it is, so that we can comfort those in any troubles with the comfort that we ourselves receive from God.

What the Bible says here is saying that it is only in suffering and going through that process and being comforted that we ourselves can comfort others. We don't often think of it in those sort of terms though. We often think, I'm going through some stuff here, God. You sort it out for me.

You comfort me. Yeah, I will if you pass it on to others. Suffering isn't purposeless. The comfort that we receive as we persevere through the suffering, we are able to pass it on to others. We are able to comfort others and only comfort others if we ourselves have received comfort from God ourselves. Have a look at verse 5. A great verse, one of the keys, I think, to Paul's defense of his apostleship.

For just as the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives, so also through Christ our comfort comfort overflows. The comfort that we receive from God through Jesus is never for just for me and for us to use for ourselves. And the difficulty in our society though is we often shrink back in those moments. We shrink back from relationships when we are going through difficulties.

When we're feeling particularly vulnerable, we move away from people. And yet what it says here is that when we go through the difficulties, we go through the struggles and the sufferings and God, comfort overflows into us. We actually should be drawing closer to other people and expressing comfort to others.

[15 : 38] It's one of the most, I think, the most difficult things about ministry, pastoral ministry. It's not the workload. It's actually the fact that I've got to get up week after week after week and day after day after day, a moment after moment after moment, and do ministry to broken people with a broken heart myself. As God comforts me and I pour that comfort out to other people.

The comfort that we receive from God through Jesus is never just for me. And therefore it means that for us as a community, we need to, as a church community, to listen to each other and care for each other and know each other and pour our lives into each other and comfort each other and pray for each other. But the main kind of suffering that is referred to here is the result of those who follow Jesus. That is, suffering comes because you follow Jesus. You see, I think most people have this view. The most view of Jesus in this society is that Jesus is either a good bloke or he's a lunatic. One of those sort of views. Let me say that neither of those views is actually Christian. Jesus wasn't a good bloke. I don't know why we get the idea that Jesus was a good bloke.

You don't crucify a good bloke. You know, first century Palestine, Jesus is a good bloke. Let's kill him. They killed him because they hated him. They hated what he stood for. They hate the fact that he challenged him. They hate the fact that he went in amongst their religious meetings with a whip and pushed them out. That he turned over their tables. They hated him for that. They hated the fact that he challenged the conventions of religious people. They hated him for that. They hated the fact that he walked along and said, guys, if you, that I am God and I'm here in your midst and I'm going to come and deal with your sin, that he exposed the sin of people. They hated him for that. He was not a good bloke.

And the fact is, if you want to align yourself to this Jesus, this true Jesus, this true message about Jesus, Paul himself has done, then we too will suffer as a result of it. Because the fact that Jesus is God is not a message which is well received in our culture. When Jesus says, I am the way, the truth and the life, and no one comes to God except through me, that's an offensive message.

And you either have to put Jesus in the category of being offensive, being a lunatic, or being who he says he is. And if you say he is who he is, then you'll suffer. Without exception, just as Jesus said, to follow him is not into a nice comfortable existence, but to pick up your cross as Jesus did and walk to the place of execution. Ministry as the Bible describes it, the Christian life as the Bible describes it, is one of pain and suffering and sacrifice. But the comfort flows over to us without exception as well. I think the super apostles are saying basically that suffering and true Christianity don't mix. Paul is saying they do. Because why? Because I'm following in the footsteps of Jesus. In verse 6 and following, Paul answers the question, the purpose of suffering again.

[18 : 58] If we are distressed, it is for your comfort and salvation. If we are comfort, it is for your comfort, which produces in you patient endurance of the same sufferings we suffer. And our hope for you is firm, because we know that just as you share in our sufferings, so also you share in our comfort.

Paul is saying here that even when suffering comes and we don't understand it, and there seems no logic to it, it's still not purposeless. God will bring an evil thing and turn it around for good. And the good that he wants out of it, according to another part of the Bible, in Romans chapter 8, is that we might become more and more like Jesus, more and more dependent upon God. He says here two reasons.

It is both for our comfort and for our salvation. God is keen for every person to know Jesus and to continue to follow Jesus right to the end, till we enter his glory forever. And that the process that he uses to effectively put on our faith muscles and to train us for that ultimate goal is suffering, difficulties. When we go through suffering, it produces in us patient endurance. We keep going because we know that God is the God of all comfort. He's the God of all salvation.

And being with God in perfect harmony is the goal. And so in verse 8, Paul wants to remind us sometimes how hard it can get and certainly how hard it got for him. We don't want you to be uninformed, brothers, about the hardship we suffered in the province of Asia. You know, in other words, what he's saying is I don't want you to downplay my hardships that I went through. I don't want you to think it was just a matter of lost the keys to the donkey or, you know, I've stubbed my toe in the shower or something like that.

You know, we were, he says, we were under great, great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure so that we despaired even of life. Indeed, in our hearts, we felt the sentence of death.

[20 : 53] The word ability there means power. He's saying here that he was beyond his own power. To paraphrase it, what he's saying is that we were indescribably beyond our limits, our limits of power, and we were brought down to the very depths in despair. In other words, what he's saying is our resources had run out and I needed to draw upon God's power. It was not, it was beyond my power to endure, but it wasn't beyond God's power to endure. And it got so black for him that he even despaired of life. He despaired of life. He despaired that he was alive. He, he wakes up in the morning and wished that he hadn't. And maybe some of you have experienced that.

But he remembered that God is the God of all comfort. But he makes a significant point here. God's comfort is always partial in this life.

We may recover from an illness. We may, the suffering that we go through, may be temporary and may pass on. But there is no way that we will ever sidestep our last and greatest enemy, death. We are intimately entangled in the sorrow and suffering of a world.

And the only way of hope is life after death with Jesus. Which is why we should always rely upon God. Verse nine, but this happened that we might not rely upon ourselves, but on God who raises the dead. He has delivered us from such a deadly peril and he will deliver us. On him, we have set our hope that he will continue to deliver us as you help us by your prayers. Then many will give thanks on our behalf for the gracious favor granted us in answers to the prayers of many. Through this experience of utter helplessness, Paul came to this new appreciation of the power of God who gives life to spiritually dead people. And if we're going to make it in the Christian life, then we need to rely upon God. If things are good, then we don't need God. Only in suffering will we ever develop the character of Christ. You see, I think Paul is having a bit of a dig at these super apostles and this church of Corinth. You see, I reckon they're like me. You know, I prefer, be honest about this, I prefer the no suffering option in life. That's my general preference. And I imagine that you're the same. But we cannot know that he is the God of comfort unless we need comforting.

We cannot know it unless we need it. And so maybe it's a hard prayer to pray, but maybe it might be working back. I want to be there in the end. I want to endure. And so God, train me to endure.

[23 : 44] Train me to endure. May I know that you're the God of all comfort. It's a tough prayer to pray. It's a tough prayer to pray because frankly, in our country, we are relief seeking missiles, is what I'd call it. When difficulties come, we just change. Difficulties at work, I get a new one.

Difficulties in marriage, I get a new one of those as well. Whatever it might be, we, in our own particular ways, for some of us, it's, you know, we hit a bar of chocolate with a certain amount of vengeance. If it's a really difficult time, we hit the bar of chocolate directly from the fridge, scooping out the ice cream for the freezer at the same time. Or it's the TV. We hit the TV. We just want to blow our mind with just random mindlessness. So we just keep chicken flicking through the channels. For some of us, we try and find, blow our mind away from the struggles and the difficulties and sufferings of life that drive us to the edge by jumping out of aeroplanes or over cliffs and hopefully somehow in finding the meaning of life and purpose by having an almost near-death experience.

Or it might be through incessant travel, trying to find somewhere else in the world where I feel like I can fit in. Or it just might be just down at Chatswood Chase or Westfield, shop to shop, buying up things that will hopefully fulfill that hole in my heart.

You see, these verses challenge our view of what happiness is. That happiness is actually not the ultimate goal in life. The ultimate goal in life is to be with God and to know that He is the God of all comfort and compassion. The ultimate goal in life is to know Jesus, the source of comfort, compassion and salvation. That my happiness and my comfort is not the ultimate goal, but to be more like Jesus. And so friends, some of us here have learned things that other of us of here are yet to learn. And some of us here are going through sufferings now that other of us are here have already been through. And so any comfort that we've received from Christ, any lessons that we've learned, any encouragement that we've obtained and comfort we've experienced is meant to be shared together.

It's meant to be shared. We are to be a church that upholds each other in prayer, that rejoices with those who rejoice and to mourn with those who mourn. The reality of our own powerlessness is often the precondition in discovering God's power and our own suffering, the precondition of discovering God's comfort and compassion.

[26 : 25] The difficult times should not drive us away from God or his people, but bring us closer to him. Paul's helplessness in the face of strong forces led him to experience of God's power to deliver him.

And so friends, we're in it together. So let's pray for each other, help each other follow the Lord Jesus, the God of comfort, the God of compassion, the God of salvation. It may be a rough and difficult track, but when you've got God on your side, you've got everything. Amen.