

God of All Comfort

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[0 : 0 0] Let's turn back to 2 Corinthians chapter 1 and we'll read from verse 8 again. 2 Corinthians chapter 1 at verse 8. 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 and so on to the end of verse 11.

I wonder this morning as we gather together if there's anyone here who has reached or is close to being at rock bottom.

You have reached the end of the road. And you can hide that, as I said in the prayer, you can hide that from everybody around you.

But you cannot hide that from the God of heaven because he sees everything. Perhaps there are circumstances in your workplace. Perhaps there are circumstances in your home.

[1 : 1 1] Perhaps there are circumstances in a relationship with a loved one. Perhaps there are circumstances relating to your relationship with God.

The one fact about life is that it is hard. There are good days and there are bad days. For every one of us. And the truth is that when the bad days come, quite often we will find ourselves spiralling downwards.

And it will feel as if we are entirely on our own until we hit the very bottom. Now, for those of us who are Christians here this morning, it might be that there are people who would say, Christians don't go through these difficulties.

Christians shouldn't feel this way. Christians shouldn't feel negative. I completely disagree with that thinking. We are just ordinary people.

And there's ample evidence right through the scriptures, from the beginning to the end, that would point us to the truth that even those who are closest to the Lord go through difficult days.

[2 : 2 9] Let me just give you a few examples. Sarai, Abraham's wife, before her name was changed. How do you think she felt when she realised that she wasn't going to be able to give Abraham the child that he needed because God had made a promise?

How do you think she felt? Hopeless, devastated, downward went the spiral. What about David? Another great example there. The king, who was in the very presence of Saul, and then cast out of his presence, left standing in a cave.

Now, albeit his friends came to him there, in Adullam. How do you think he felt? Devastated? Despair? Hopelessness?

Elijah? Another great example, the victory at Mount Carmel. How can you not bask in such a victory? But that's not what happened. We find him under the broom tree in a hopeless state.

Then there's Jeremiah. A wonderful example of faithfulness to God. There he is pouring out his heart in faithfulness, doing what God has asked him to do, delivering a message to the rebellious nation of Judah.

[3 : 54] And all he gets for his good work is persecution. And eventually we find him sitting on the ruins of Jerusalem, weeping. All of these people were great servants of God.

And every one of them knew difficult days. God's people face difficult days. We're just ordinary people. Well, here in Paul's second letter to the Corinthians, he touches on the subject of suffering, of despair, of hopelessness.

And if we have eyes to see it, we will see it. This is the third study I've done in 2 Corinthians in chapter 1. The other two have been in different churches.

And I have taken the introduction to the letter. So often we bypass these introductions, the greetings, verses 1 and 2. And as we bypass them because they're so familiar to us, we miss so much.

We miss the fact that Paul did not choose to serve God. He was compelled to serve God. That's important. We miss the fact that Timothy was obedient in submitting himself to Paul as a student, so to speak.

[5 : 15] We miss in the introduction the fact, if we just read it over quickly, that the church at Corinth had a really important job. They had to shine out into the darkness around them and that darkness was great in that city but no greater than the darkness in Barbas.

and your job is to shine out into that darkness just the same way. And in the next section from verse 3 down to the beginning of the verses we're going to look at today, 3 to 7, Paul speaks about the comfort of God.

He speaks in verse 4 and tells us that God is the source of true comfort for his people. In verse 5 he says that Jesus is the means of this comfort that God's people enjoy.

And then in verses 5 to 7 he explains why we need this comfort. Why do you, if you're a Christian this morning, why do I need the comfort of God?

Well it's because walking with him is extremely difficult. It doesn't matter where you are in the world, you know our ministry serves persecuted Christians, but it's just as difficult to walk for Christ here.

[6 : 32] We need the comfort of the God of heaven just to endure. Well this morning I want to continue this study and I want to look at what Paul, just to continue looking at what Paul has to say about suffering and I want to do it under three headings.

And they're very simple. The first heading is giving up. The second heading is giving in. And then the third heading is giving out. So let's look at these together.

The giving up first of all in verse 8. The very best teachers you can have in life today, it doesn't matter what sphere we're talking about, are people with experience.

It would be no use for me to take one of the youngsters that was here just a short time ago and try and teach them how to fix cars. It would be pointless for me to teach them how to build a house because I'm not a time served mechanic, I wish I was, or a time served joiner, I wish I was.

If I was, I could take them and teach them lots. Now the same applies in the sphere of Christian living, in the sphere of counselling, in the sphere of helping others.

[7 : 48] Paul is able to help others because he has gone through serious situations of hardship himself.

He has endured suffering so we can listen to him, what he has to say because he's a great teacher. And as he continues then in verse 8 to teach this young church of Corinth how to cope with suffering, with the suffering that comes with walking with Jesus, we learn something incredible in verse 8.

There were times when Paul, the great apostle, this probably without any debate, the best missionary ever in the history of the church, there were days when Paul almost gave up.

That should encourage us. Paul almost gave up the fight. Verse 8 tells us that the pressure was so great for him that he almost buckled under the weight.

And in fact, it was so bad for him that he thought he was facing death. And as we read the verse, we don't even get the fullness of what he's saying here. In the original Greek, what he is saying is that the weight was so heavy on him, it felt as if he was being crushed.

[9 : 13] crushed. Can you imagine that? Being in a situation where your arms are pinned to your side, you feel the weight falling on your chest, you have nowhere to turn, you can't even flex your arms, you feel utterly, utterly crushed.

Can you imagine that? That's how bad Paul was feeling. And he reminds the church at Corinth of one particularly bad episode.

Now, we can't be sure what he's talking about here, but there's a pretty good, as a pretty good guess, we can suspect, we can suggest that he's speaking about what happened in Ephesus, because he speaks about Asia, and this incident in Asia and Ephesus is one of the incidents he records for us, or that is recorded for us in the book of Acts.

From Corinth after starting this church that he's now writing to, he went to Ephesus and he spent three years there ministering. It was a fruitful ministry, but fruitfulness always comes at a great price.

Paul had to do battle in Ephesus. Do you know where he had to do the battle first? In the church. church. In the church of the day, in the synagogue, with those who were stubborn in their hearts.

[10 : 45] They wouldn't listen to him. So he shook the dust from out of his garment and went out onto the street. Not only was he battling in the church, in the synagogue, he was battling the occult.

You need to read that for yourself in the book of Acts. Paul writes that in the first letter of the church of Corinth, he spoke that he was battling beasts. Might that be the occult?

Might it be, remember in the episode in the book of Acts, those who were practicing magic, the sorcerers, all coming to faith in Jesus and coming with this multitude of books and building this big pile of books worth, I can't remember how many, 50,000 I think, pieces of silver and burning them because they had been set free from the occult.

But it came at a price. Paul waged war there. Things came to a head, the riot broke out and it led to Paul leaving.

Now we have no idea just to how bad his suffering was. We don't know, was he physically harmed? We can read it in Acts for ourselves, there's no suggestion that he was. But whatever happened to him, it was bad enough for him to use it as an example for the church here in this letter and he speaks, as I said, of being utterly crushed.

[12 : 09] There's a point of application here. I've already touched, I've suggested it already to you. If we are going to stand boldly for the Lord Jesus Christ, we are going to pay a price for it.

Now, does that mean we just keep our mouths shut? Shame on us if it does. Shame on us. No. No. We will continue speaking about the good news of the Lord Jesus Christ, whatever the cost.

Whatever the cost. That has to be the way we live our lives. The message of the cross is utterly offensive. And you can just take a walk down Cromwell Street.

do it. Take a walk down Cromwell Street and graciously, not with an air of superiority, bring up the subject of the gospel.

Bring up the subject of Jesus and you'll see how difficult it is and what an offence it is to people. But it was an offence to me until my eyes were opened.

[13 : 19] And it was an offence, I'm sure, to every man in the box here and every believer in this church until by the grace of God our eyes were opened. We must keep sharing the gospel of Christ.

We must. But with that comes pain and suffering. Why on earth does God allow suffering? Why does God allow suffering? Now let me tell you, I have seen my fair share of suffering, not first hand, not first hand.

I haven't personally experienced it, but I have met so many people who have across the face of the earth. Why does God allow suffering? It's a question every one of us asks every so often.

Well I would say rather than blame God, rather than blame God for the suffering that's going on, let's look to ourselves. The reason that there is suffering in the world is because of me.

it's because of my heart, my darkness, my sin, and yours. The heart of man is desperately wicked.

[14 : 31] Suffering was a part of life and you've heard it, if you've come to church, you've heard it again and again and again and again. The minute the skin was broken on the fruit in the garden of Eden as Adam bit into it, suffering started.

So the way it is. So maybe the better question is not why does God cause suffering, but what does God do in response to suffering? Well that takes us to our second point in verses, the end of verse 9 and verse 10 where we read about Paul giving in.

What does God do as a response to suffering? Three things. We see three things in this verse and a half. First of all, God uses suffering in a positive way to remind his people that they are not to rely on themselves.

This is what Paul says, he's learned not to rely on himself. That was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God. He was forced by his circumstances to give in and to depend on God in his situation.

And those of us who truly know the Lord today, we understand this for ourselves. We know that when the hard days come, when the difficulties arise, that the safest place for us to be is in the very shadow of the high tower.

[16 : 05] The name of the Lord is a high tower. the righteous run to it and they are safe. You know, the hymn writers, I love quoting this hymn, haven't done it for so long, but it came to me so just thundering into my mind as I was thinking about giving in and relying on God.

From every stormy wind that blows, from every swelling tide of woes, there is a calm, a sure retreat, tis found beneath the mercy seat.

I can't remember the name of the hymn, but I remember those lines so well. From every stormy wind that blows, from every swelling tide of woes, there is a calm, a sure retreat, tis found beneath the mercy seat.

God's people find grace and peace and endurance as they rely on him. And we see that so often in our work with the suffering church. This year, one very clear example of that for us, for me, has been in northern Iraq.

Twice this year, we've made visits out there to help Christians who have been displaced by Islamic State. You know, one of the amazing contrasts among the refugees there, it wasn't just Christians who have been displaced or persecuted.

[17 : 29] The Yazidi and other small minority faith group have suffered terribly as well. But here's the difference. I met many Yazidi people last May and I met Christians as well.

And there was an incredible difference between the two groups. Yazidi who have their own faith and are wonderful people, let me tell you that, they need the gospel but they are spiritual people, albeit they're following a false god, they have no hope.

They have no hope in the midst of their suffering. The Christians we met, those who truly know Jesus, their lives are marked with hope. And did I see it, even joy in the midst of their suffering.

God uses suffering to remind us that our help comes from him, the maker of heaven and earth. Secondly, God uses suffering in a positive way to remind us of his power to resurrect.

You see, Paul is speaking here in verse 9, of God as being the one who raises the dead. He's speaking metaphorically. He is saying, my situation was so bad that it felt as if I was under a death sentence.

[18 : 42] I was going to die. But God delivered me. It was like God raised me from the dead. But it's only a metaphor because God doesn't really do that, does he?

He doesn't do that. He doesn't raise people from the dead. How weak our faith is. Of course he does. He does again and again. And the record is there in scripture for us.

He's done it so many times. We've lost count of the times he has done it. He did it to the widow of Zarephath. Christ called Lazarus out. We can't move the stone.

He's been in the grave now for so long. His body is decomposing. Lazarus come forth. God raises the dead. I remember being in Ethiopia a number of years ago and a funeral procession it was dark.

It was like that kind of dark half light. It was dark but it wasn't. And we were sitting in the car waiting just for somebody.

[19 : 43] And this eerie funeral procession came walking past. They don't have coffins. The body has been carried on a board. And it was just covered with a sheet. And as the body walked past in the silence as the people walked past with the body the text in Luke's gospel came to me.

The widow's son as Jesus walked forward and raised that son to life. God raises the dead. None of these resurrections matter.

They don't matter to me. They speak of God's powers but they don't matter to me. But there's one that does. The resurrection of Jesus because that's the one that truly matters to every one of us here.

God demonstrated his power in raising Christ from the grave. And Paul knew that. Paul knew it. What other God do you know that raises anything from the dead?

There is none. There is none. Paul's God does. My God does. And your God does if your faith is in him this morning.

[21 : 04] You know in this trial that crushed Paul he knew that the one thing that mattered was fixing his eye on Christ.

keeping his eye fixed on God who was able to carry him through. And the lesson that he learned in this episode followed through into his later writing.

Remember when he wrote to the church at Philippi he said it doesn't matter to me now whether I live or die. All that matters is that Christ would be glorified through my life.

Whether by living or dying all I'm interested in now is the exaltation of the Lord Jesus Christ. God uses suffering to remind us of his power to resurrect.

The third thing. God uses suffering to remind us of his power to deliver. We see that in verse 10. He delivered us from such a deadly peril and he will deliver us.

[22 : 08] He delivered us and he will deliver us. On him we have set our hope that he will deliver us again. Paul is speaking about a past event.

It's in the past because God has delivered him from it. And his confidence now, his hope, has transformed his whole outlook.

He was in the depths of despair. He was frightened for his life. But now everything's changed. He's discovered the victory of God.

And as God's people, we have to continually remind ourselves of that as well. We are more than conquerors. I wonder is that just an empty statement to you here this morning?

This afternoon. We are more than conquerors. Are you a conqueror through Christ? Do you even think about this? Do we live our lives knowing the fullness of the power that is at work in us through the shed blood of Christ Jesus?

[23 : 18] In him we are more than conquerors. Now, that doesn't mean to say that we walk about with this inflated ego and this air of superiority. Certainly not.

That's not befitting God's people. But it does mean that we walk and conduct ourselves with boldness because of the hope and the power that is at work in us.

you know, in verse 10 then, what we see is that this very difficult episode actually had the opposite effect on what Satan was hoping to achieve.

Instead of breaking Paul, his hardship and his suffering made him stronger and God was glorified. That's the way it is for God's people. Satan tried everything in his power in this episode in Asia to break this man's ministry.

he turned the synagogue, infiltrated and turned them. He went out then and raised up the people into this frenzy that developed into a riot.

[24 : 23] Did he succeed? No, he didn't. The power of God cannot be thwarted. And in so many of our lives today, the same thing will happen. He will try his best to undermine, erode our faith.

But if our eyes fixed on Jesus, if we are giving in, he will not prevail. God uses suffering to remind us of his power to deliver it.

But moving on then, Paul isn't just reminding the Corinthian church in these verses that God can bring comfort. He's not just reminding them that he will deliver them.

he's not just reminding them that God can be relied on. He is also saying to them, you have a responsibility as well. And that leads us to the third point, giving out briefly.

This congregation of God's people have a duty to help the wider church. They have to. Paul wants him to support his work in prayer.

[25 : 33] Verse 11, you also must help us by prayer. You must help us. That's your responsibility. And it wasn't just the church at Cullen.

I have no difficulty whatsoever. And pointing is rude, so I won't point. I'll show you both my hands and I will say to you, you have a responsibility to help the weaker church.

You have a responsibility to pray for them. You have a responsibility to pray for your minister. You have a responsibility to pray for your leadership.

You have a responsibility to pray for your youngsters. Decision makers of tomorrow, a generation arose that knew not the Lord or what he had done for Israel, don't let that be said of our children.

We have a responsibility to pray for them and we have a responsibility to pray for the wider church as well. The work of the church wherever it is going on. It's a key to success in every single area of the life of the church and the reason we are seeing such a mess across the land today is because instead of God's people praying, now this is my personal opinion and please allow me just to say this one thing as a criticism, the reason the church is in such a mess today is because God's people don't pray anymore.

[27 : 03] They criticise. They criticise. They don't pray. We need to pray and then we will see change. I wonder is Paul envisioning here in his mind, we don't know, perhaps it's what came into my mind, this day when the children of Israel were battling Amalek, the Amalekites prevailed and as Moses kept his arms up, Israel prevailed but it's heavy, you know, and the arms started to fall and the Amalekites prevailed and every time his arms came up again, Israel prevailed and Aaron and her came alongside and kept his arms up and the battle was won.

I wonder is this what Paul imagines for the church at Corinth you hold up our arms and we'll win a victory and you'll rejoice with us because that's what he's saying.

You also must help us by prayer so that many will give thanks on our behalf for the blessing granted to us through the prayers of many. It's a wonderful fact that the rejoicing is not just Paul's, it's the entire church's blessing and joy.

Now we again, see that in our ministry. We are supported by so many folk and we, certainly me, I have the wonderful privilege and it's no hardship for me, I have to say that, to travel to meet Christians who are suffering.

The circumstances might be hard but underneath that it's a huge privilege for me to go. I delight to go and then we share what we're there for and we come home and then I share with churches and the blessing becomes yours as well because we share together in what God is doing.

[29 : 02] It's wonderful. Well, we're closing then and we need to think, I've been trying to apply as we've been going along but in conclusion I just want to make a very clear point of application and I want to go right back to the very beginning.

I asked, is there anyone here who feels they're at the end of the road? Who feels they're at rock bottom? Who feels that they don't know where to turn?

You're only a small number of people but I think there's probably someone and I hope that you're encouraged. I hope that you have seen even in this tiny little section of scripture from verse 8 down to verse 11 tiny.

Look at the size of the Bible. And in this little section Paul has taught us today God working through his Holy Spirit through the words of Paul he's taught you, if it's you, that you're not alone.

That your suffering is not just your own. It's common to so many others. It's common to Paul. Don't rely on yourself.

[30 : 19] Rely on the God of heaven who is able to raise from the dead. Rely on God. Trust in him. Give in to God. He is our sure defence.

He is our rock. He is our shield. He is our portion. He is our defender. All of those things. We must believe that. And then even in the midst of your difficulty like Paul as you rely on God then give out.

Give out. In the midst of your suffering shine like a light. Can you imagine the impact you will have on the people around you if you take your difficult circumstances and for the glory of God shine forth for him.

that changes people. It changes lives. But what about those of you then who have nowhere to turn?

Who really have nowhere to turn? And now I'm talking to those of you, if there are any of you, that don't know Jesus. So who do you turn to?

[31 : 35] Because you know, often times at funerals I say it myself in prayers. Man is a poor comforter. Man is a poor comforter.

So in your sorrow and in your hardship and in your difficulty, you'll only draw slight comfort from your husband or your wife or your brother or your sister or your friend or whomever.

The true comfort is from the God of all comfort that Paul is sharing here with the church at Corinth. And God is presenting here to you this morning, this afternoon.

Do you know the God of all comfort? And is he your God this morning? Let's pray. Father in heaven, hallowed be your name.

And all glory belongs to you, Lord, because yet again you lead us into your truth and you teach us from it and you encourage us through it. And Lord, today we just pray that your word would be effective.

[32 : 49] Your word would be seared onto our hearts. For those things that were said that shouldn't be said, just blot them out, Lord. But for the words that can change hearts and minds and lives, let them linger and smoulder and then burst into flame and bring life where there is death and bring hope where there is despair, bring joy where there is sadness, we pray.

All for your glory and in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, we close by singing from Psalm 121 that I quoted from in this Scottish Psalter, page 416.

I to the hills will lift mine eyes from where does my, well let me just do this in a different way, I will lift my eyes to the hills, where does my health come from? My health comes from the Lord, the maker of heaven and earth.

Let's sing together these verses, the whole psalm to God's praise. psalms will perfect on my b███ because I se hijo go and Debbie h s psalm to word Where the hell thou mayst Thy food will always sign your will If summer that it is The holy life he did

And his heart was on the sea The Lord came, the Lord I shed All night I shall not stay The world I love Be found on site For ever the sun I be The Lord shall be Thy soul be found Reservedly from all the earth

[36 : 01] And all my own Bet she if hTIP For ever and ever for King forever in our world let's pray now may the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ the love of God the Father and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit rest upon and remain with us all now and always Amen