

## **Prepared to Suffer**

### **2 Corinthians 1:1-11**

This is week #2 in our series on 2 Corinthians, and the passage we're going to look at this morning is going to teach us some things about suffering in the Christian life. After being a pastor for over 20 years I've seen a lot of people go through suffering and I've seen how difficult it can be – difficult not just because of the suffering itself, but because of the confusion that comes with it. We struggle to understand where God is when we're suffering. Why does he let us go through these trials and not answer our prayers to remove them? Suffering can trip up a lot of people in their relationship with God.

I had a list of projects I wanted to do at our hunting property this spring and things were going fine, but one day I went out to do some spraying with our side-by-side and when I drove it out to where I was going to spray, the motor didn't slow down and I had to hold my foot on the brake to keep it from going forward. I couldn't get it out of gear so I shut it off, put it in neutral and started it again. When I did, I heard some popping and banging noises in the engine and it died, and I couldn't get it started again. It turned out to be a mouse nest that got sucked into the engine and left me without the side-by-side for about a month, and it threw me off for what I was planning to do.

Suffering can have a similar effect in our lives, but on a much deeper level. We're going along and things are going fine. Then something happens we weren't expecting – something that causes pain – an accident, a disease, a death in the family... and it really throws us off. It causes confusion and leads us to question God. It can leave us disillusioned and not sure what to think or do. Some people just barely make it through, others end up abandoning their faith.

How prepared are you to go through suffering as a Christian? Do you have a clear understanding of Christian suffering to give you solid ground to stand on when it comes?

As we dive into 2 Corinthians this morning, we are going to see how Paul was doing after coming through one of the most intense seasons of suffering in his life. We don't know many details, but we know that things got so bad that he

despaired of life itself and thought he was going to die, and for Paul, that's really saying something.

How would Paul think about God after being through such an intense season of suffering? Would it throw him off? Would he barely make it through? Would he be confused and disoriented and think about abandoning the faith? Paul is an expert in Christian suffering and my hope is that his teaching will help us formulate an accurate understanding of suffering that will prepare us to face it and endure it as he did.

Read 2 Corinthians 1:1-2.

*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:*

*<sup>2</sup> Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.*

This is just a typical greeting that was common in Paul's letters. We see that Paul is the one writing this letter, along with Timothy, and he's writing to the church in Corinth and the surrounding area associated with it. We looked at the historical background to this letter last week, which is vitally important in understanding what's going on, so I encourage you to go back and listen if you haven't already.

Here's how Paul felt and thought about God after coming through a time of terrible suffering...

Read 2 Corinthians 1:3-7.

*<sup>3</sup> Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, <sup>4</sup> who comforts us in all our affliction, 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. <sup>5</sup> For as we share abundantly in Christ's sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too. <sup>6</sup> If we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation; and if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which you experience when you patiently endure the same sufferings that we suffer. <sup>7</sup> Our hope for you is unshaken, for we know that as you share in our sufferings, you will also share in our comfort.*

I want you to notice the theme in these verses. He talks about affliction and suffering, but the overwhelming theme is comfort. Paul uses the word “comfort” 10 times in these verses. (Show underlined) He was overcome, not by the suffering he went through, but by the comfort he received while going through it. So as he begins, he praises God – not as the Father of confusion and God of all uncertainty – but as the “Father of mercies and God of all comfort.” That’s who he knew God to be after his intense period of suffering. And I believe he was able to think and feel that way because he was armed with a biblical understanding of suffering when he went through it – an understanding that he describes in these verses.

In Paul’s understanding, when it came to Christian suffering, there were two guarantees. First, going through suffering was a guarantee. He writes about it as an expectation. It wasn’t a surprise at all. It didn’t take him off guard. It was expected. Christ suffered, therefore Christians will suffer. In fact, he says in verse 5 that we will share abundantly in Christ’s sufferings. Paul didn’t expect or assume that just because someone was a Christian they wouldn’t go through suffering. I think that’s a reality that we American Christians need to see. If you were a Christian in 1<sup>st</sup> century Israel or Rome, you expected to suffer. It was part of becoming a Christian in that culture. I think it’s much the same today for many Christians around the world who live in Communist countries or predominantly Muslim countries. Becoming a Christian means you’re going to suffer.

But here in America, we don’t have that same way of thinking. We generally don’t have to suffer for being a Christian and that has become our expectation. So when suffering comes, it seems out of place. We have a faulty mentality that God’s primary ministry to us in the face of suffering should be to remove it. That’s what’s being taught by some preachers today. But that’s not a biblical mentality. That’s not what the Bible teaches. The Bible teaches that Christians will continue to suffer in various ways and may even suffer more because of persecution. Yes, God can do miracles and remove suffering like we see at times in the New Testament, but those are miracles, out-of-the-ordinary occurrences. The normal experience for Christians is that we are going to go through seasons of suffering.

So that's the first guarantee in what Paul writes, and I know many of us already know that. But I also want us to see the second guarantee – a guarantee that I think those of us who expect to suffer as Christians really need to see. Because it's not all about suffering. There's another guarantee that gets most of the attention in these verses and enabled Paul to endure his suffering and be able to write these things. He didn't persevere just because he knew he was going to suffer. He didn't just lower his head try to make it through. He also believed that in every suffering he went through he would receive comfort from God.

The second guarantee is comfort in suffering. Verse 5: *“For as we share abundantly in Christ's sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too.”* Verse 7: *“Our hope for you is unshaken, for we know that as you share in our sufferings, you will also share in our comfort.”*

What an amazing guarantee! Yeah, you're going to go through suffering if you're a Christian, but along with that suffering there will always be comfort from the Father of mercy and God of all comfort. He will always be there in your suffering to bring you comfort. God “comforts us in all our affliction.” This is a critical promise and truth that we need to arm ourselves with so that we are ready when we go through suffering. Rather than wandering around like we're dazed and confused and have no idea what's going on, we can be looking for the ways in which God is going to bring us comfort.

How does God do that? What should we be looking for? I want to share several examples, so you know what it looks like. One of the ways he comforts us is by solving the problem and alleviating the suffering. This is probably the most obvious and the comfort we probably want the most. I'm reminded of Epaphroditus – a dear friend of Paul's who became very sick when he was with him and if he had died, Paul said he would have had sorrow upon sorrow. But God healed him and brought great comfort to Paul.

Sometimes God removes the problem and the suffering. But most often, based on what I've seen in biblical examples and in my own life and in the lives of others, God will bring comfort in other ways, and we can be comforted in the midst of our suffering. It might be through a friend who shows up at just the right time or a song on the radio that's just perfect for your situation. It

might be a gift that shows up unexpectedly that no one could have known you needed at that exact time. One of the ways God comforted Paul leading up to 2 Corinthians was when Titus showed up and brought a good report about what was happening in Corinth. That was very comforting to Paul. God can also bring comfort by giving supernatural peace in your spirit that doesn't make any sense but it's just there and you know that it's God.

These are all ways that God brings comfort in the midst of suffering. But there are a couple things Paul brings up in our passage that brought comfort to him that we need to see as well. The first shows up in verse 4: *“who comforts us in all our affliction, 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.”*

Paul knew that God would use him to bring comfort to others because of the comfort he received from God. Having already experienced God's comfort in suffering, Paul would be able to spread God's comfort to others who were going through the same kind of suffering. So Paul knew that his sufferings would be purposeful and those of us who have gone through suffering have found that to be true as well. God puts people in our path who are going through something like we went through and we are able to empathize with them and encourage them because of how God helped us when we were going through the same thing.

Paul talks about how it applied to him and the Corinthians a little more in verse 6: *“If we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation; and if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which you experience when you patiently endure the same sufferings that we suffer.”* Paul could see that God used both his afflictions and his comfort in afflictions to bring comfort to the Corinthians and help them persevere when they went through the same kind of suffering he was going through. And that was one of the ways God comforted him. If you knew that God was going to use your suffering and your testimony of God's comfort to you in it to help your kids endure suffering in the future, would that bring you comfort? I think that's why Paul wrote what he did.

But there's one more thing I want us to see in what he writes in verses 8-11. This is where he talks about the intense suffering he just went through and how God brought comfort in the midst of it.

Read 2 Corinthians 1:8-11.

*For we do not want you to be unaware, brothers, of the affliction we experienced in Asia. For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself. <sup>9</sup>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. <sup>10</sup>He delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us. On him we have set our hope that he will deliver us again. <sup>11</sup>You also must help us by prayer, so that many will give thanks on our behalf for the blessing granted us through the prayers of many.*

You can see that Paul learned a critical lesson through his intense time of suffering – God used it to teach him and his companions to rely on God, not themselves. To put their hope in him to deliver them. It was a life-changing experience for Paul and he learned it through suffering.

When I look at this, I see that God comforted him by giving him a deeper revelation of truth that Paul realized could only come through suffering. Suffering revealed the hidden sin of self-reliance and his need to rely on God instead. There are things we can only see by going through suffering – deep rooted sins, aspects of God's character, or treasures of biblical wisdom. God uses suffering to bring deeper revelation and spiritual growth and when you see him doing that, you can experience more of his comfort in suffering.

My boys are going to Dell's house a couple nights a week so he can put them through various forms of suffering. They are flipping tractor tires, carrying telephone poles, dragging tires strapped to their backs, swinging sledge hammers, pulling heavy objects... Their lungs and muscles are burning and sore, they're getting blisters, they're sweating profusely, I think someone may have even thrown up... But they keep going. Why? Because they know that Dell is using suffering to make them stronger, faster, tougher – all the things they need to reach their goals in sports – and the only way that can happen is through suffering. God uses suffering to make us stronger in Christ. He breaks

us down so he can build us up. He opens our eyes to things we wouldn't otherwise see so that we grow and become more like Jesus.

So suffering is a guarantee, and we don't like to hear that, but God's comfort is a guarantee as well, and we've seen all kinds of ways we can experience that. But we have to be looking. I encourage you to arm yourselves with this way of thinking so that you will be prepared for the seasons of suffering that are sure to come. You don't have to be dazed and confused. You don't have to be overwhelmed and only focus on your pain. You can look for God's comfort in the midst of it – comfort that he guarantees will come – so that you can endure and encourage others who are going through the same thing.

I'll close with a story about one of my friends. As I was studying this week I was reminded of a friend who has gone through all kinds of suffering in the past year and a half – major health problems for both he and his wife, over 150 doctor appointments, deaths in the family, major problems in business, and so on. So I called him to see how he was doing. I was expecting to hear heaviness, discouragement, bad news, but all I got was praise to God. For 30 minutes he kept talking about all the things God had done for them in the midst of their suffering. He comforted them through worship music, deeper insight into Scripture, revelations and dreams, lessons learned, stronger faith, peace, confidence in God for the future. My friend was experiencing the promises in this passage and by God's grace we can experience them as well.