

God of all Comfort
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Bible Text: 2 Corinthians 1:1-11
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Good morning. If you could please turn in your Bibles to the book of 2 Corinthians, that's the book of 2 Corinthians in the first chapter, and if you're able to, if you could please stand as we read this.

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: 2 Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. 3 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, 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. 5 For as we share abundantly in Christ's sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too. 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. 7 Our hope for you is unshaken, for we know that as you share in our sufferings, you will also share in our comfort. 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. 9 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. 10 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. 11 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.

Thank you. You may be seated.

On this day, for this week that is to come, for the trials, Father, the tribulations, the joys that are to come, Father, we ask that you would open up this passage of scripture to our understanding, Father, that you'd enlighten us, Lord, that you truly would speak to us. And Father, we promise to give you all the glory, all the honor, and all the praise because you alone are worthy. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, we pray. Thank you. Amen.

I had my wife and sister Mary Jo here giving me signals while we sang "All Hail the Power of Jesus' Name" because this past week we celebrated 26 years of marriage and that was actually one of the songs that we had that was sung at our wedding instead of some of the traditional ones. You know, that's just something we wanted to acknowledge that truly was that God would receive the glory and he's kept us together for 26 years and we thank him for that.

As we look at this second epistle to the Corinthians, it's a challenging letter to read. It's not that this is a boring letter to read or that it's especially hard to understand, but we see Paul open up his heart to this church. It's essentially a man of God that's pushed the very edge of integrity. I mean, integrity in the sense of it almost sounds at times like Paul is ready to fall apart. How does he continue to go on? How is he able to hold himself together? And we see that the answer is that he holds himself together by almost literally dying in the arms of the Lord.

In the commentary on 2 Corinthians by Charles Hodge, J. I. Packer in the introduction says, "2 Corinthians is the most poignant of all Paul's letters for we meet him as an almost heartbroken pastor voicing the agonies of his unrequited love. Emotionally overwrought, it seems, to the combine pressures of illness, persecutions, the Corinthians' coolness towards him, his anxiety about the Judaizing Pied Pipers who are stealing Corinthian hearts, Paul speaks with unrestrained passion. His memory of recently being near death, his unrelenting battle with his painful and unhealed thorn in the flesh and his knowledge that the Corinthians despised him because he did not throw his weight around, evidently make him feel acutely weak and impotent. Weakness is a key word of this epistle. This sense of weakness, which as an utterly transparent man he does not try to hide, puts an emotional edge on his thinking, just as it drives him to uniquely heavy emphasis on the enabling of God in his life."

And then in a sermon by John Piper, it reads, "Everyone faces adversity and must find ways to persevere through oppressing moments of life. Everyone must get up and make breakfast and wash clothes and go to work, and pay bills and discipline children, and generally keep life going when the heart is breaking. But it's different with pastors, not totally different, but different because the heart is the instrument of our vocation.

Charles Spurgeon said, "Ours is more than mental work. It is heart work, the labor of our soul." So when our heart is breaking, we must labor with a broken instrument. Preaching is our work and preaching is heart work, not just mental work. So the question for us is not just how do I keep on living when the marriage is blank, when a child has run away, when the finances don't reach, when the pews are bare, and friends have forsaken me, the question for us is much more than how do I keep on living, it is how do I keep on preaching. It's one thing to survive adversity, it's something very different to keep on preaching Sunday after Sunday, month after month when the heart is overwhelmed. Spurgeon said to the students of his pastor's college, "One crushing stroke has sometimes laid the minister very low. The brother most relied upon becomes a traitor. Ten years of toil do not take so much life out of us as we lose in a few hours by Ahithophel the traitor,

or Demas the apostate. The question for the pastor is not merely how do you live through unremitting criticism, distrust, accusation and abandonment, for pastors the question is also how do you preach through it? How does a preacher do heart work when the heart is under siege and ready to fail?"

As we look at this, you know, we see truly the heart of Paul. In the greeting we have from Paul, an apostle, and Timothy, our brother, or actually more literally, Timothy, the brother. In other words, he's saying, "You know him. You know Timothy, the one that knows my heart better than anybody." And this may actually have been the third or the fourth letter that Paul had written to this church. Only two evidently were inspired. But it seems that at one point he may have lashed out at this church in frustration and we can imagine the state of his heart and his mind as he dealt with the issues in this church and with the other churches.

And he acknowledges to them that he's an apostle, not of his own choosing, but by the will of God. This was not his choice. It truly was God's will. He was a messenger of the Lord Jesus Christ. And Timothy's mentioned not as a fellow apostle, but as a brother. And you might think, "Well, what was Timothy thinking as he was with Paul?" And if Paul was thinking that this is it, you can imagine what Timothy was thinking.

And so who does he write it to? The church of God that's at Corinth. In spite of all of their troubles, he was still able to call them the church of God. And not only just this one city, but with all the saints of the whole of Achaia he's saying to them.

Now, as we look at the city of Corinth, this was an important city. It was at a crossroads and was well placed to spread the gospel but because of this, it was also well placed to spread heresy and dissension to the church. And Corinth was not an easy city to be a Christian. It was a wicked city and was a difficult place for a Christian to live. There was also the Judaizers who wanted Paul to be discredited and were, in fact, infecting the church.

So what does Paul say? He says, "Grace and peace from God, our Father, and the Lord Jesus Christ," almost a traditional synagogue blessing but that he adds "in the Lord Jesus Christ." The blessings of redemption he speaks to this church, acknowledging to them that God is their Father and that indeed that Jesus is their Lord.

As we look further on, we see that Paul is filled with praise for God as he realizes the depth of God's consolation. He says that he is the God and the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. In other words, this God is the one who has withheld nothing from us, even his only Son. And he is the Father of all mercies. This God is not a God that is far apart, that is not at all moved with our difficulties, but he's a God that is moved with compassion. Psalm 103:13 reads, "As a father shows compassion to his children, so the LORD shows compassion to those who fear him." In Lamentations in 3:31 and 32, we read, "For the Lord will not cast off forever, but, though he cause grief, he will have compassion according to the abundance of his steadfast love." And in Hosea 11:8, "How can I give you up, O Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel? How can I make you like

Admah? How can I treat you like Zeboiim? My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender." And then finally from Luke 7:13, "And when the Lord saw her, he had compassion on her and said to her, 'Do not weep.'" He was literally moved to compassion for her.

He's a father of mercies, he's moved with compassion, he's a God of all comfort. And again, as we speak of this word comfort, you know, we're not talking about this white fluffy thing that you throw on top of your bed but we talk of the strength, we talk of someone coming alongside of you to uphold you, to stand with you. It says that God is the author of all, basically saying that he's the author of all possible comfort, of all possible strength, and this God came alongside Paul to strengthen him in the difficulties that he was facing. Now why did God do that? Because God comforted Paul and strengthened him that he might in turn comfort others.

Many years ago, when I was an associate pastor at a church across town, I was filling in the pulpit for the pastor and it happened one of those years when Christmas was on a Sunday and I had received a call just very early that morning about someone that I loved. Now this was my cousin who was younger than I was and he'd been adopted by my aunt and my uncle when he was quite young. I remember the first time that I met him as I walked out to the playground and I saw him sitting on a swing, and he was just sitting there, tears were just pouring out of his eyes. As you can imagine what it's like for a child to be taken out of as bad a home as he was, to be taken from there and placed in the home of a stranger, and from that point on my heart was just knit together with his.

Now as time went on, he had a lot of difficulties in school and ended up being addicted to drugs and being in and out of jail and prison, and I remember one time picking him up from behind a Circle K where he had called me and I picked him up and, you know, put him in the back of my car as he was just shaking and just in the throes of detox and I took him to a program. And that straightened him out for a little while. I didn't know much about programs at that time and that wasn't a real good one, but it was all we had.

So there came a time where he was finally out of prison and he was pulling things together in his life, and it happened that on this Christmas Eve, he and his wife and another cousin of mine and his wife, were just having a nice quiet dinner at home but down the street there was a household where they weren't having a nice quiet dinner, but they were having a wild party. And all of a sudden at the door they heard someone banging on the door and saying, "Let me in, they're gonna kill me!" And so, of course, they opened the door and one of my cousins went outside and immediately they stabbed him several times, and then my cousin, as he stood in front of the plate glass window, somebody shot through the window and hit him between his eyes. And as I received that news that morning, I didn't see how I was going to be able to preach that day, but God granted me the strength and I preached and to be honest with you, I didn't feel any comfort in doing that. And I was able to speak at his funeral and able to speak words to my aunt but I don't know that I could define that as comfort. I spoke good words and I hadn't, I just to be honest with you, I don't know what I preached that day, I don't know what I said and I just, I pushed that to the back of my mind until not too long ago as I received a call from a mother that said, "Could you please go check on my son?" And she

said, "He's been injured and he's at this place and I think he's in bad shape. Could you please go check on him?" So, so I dropped everything and I went there to that motel and she was right. There was nothing in that motel but this man lying on the bed with his foot all full of blood and the bed was all full of blood, and there was a bottle of urine on one side and there was a vodka bottle on the other, and there's food thrown all over the floor. And I literally picked up that man and put him into the van, took him to the hospital, and within an hour I was able to call that mother and say, "I have him in a good place now." And as I thought about it, God has allowed me to comfort others because I can answer that phone and I can say, "Yes, I'll do what I can." And so I wasn't able to go to my aunt and give her back her son but through the grace of God, I've been able to give other parents and other sisters and other brothers and other cousins and aunts and uncles, their sons.

So sometimes the comfort that we look for is not somebody wrapping us up in a warm blanket and patting us on the back. As Pastor Steele was talking last week about us being in a battle, indeed we are but we are a people that don't need to be wrapped up like that but we need to be strengthened to go on. And as Paul speaks to this church, he says, as they patiently endure these sufferings and these trials, he says, I guarantee you, you will also experience this strength, this comfort. And Paul says in spite of all of your problems, and it's very easy for us to read the letters to the Corinthians and as you know, many pastors, you can hear them preach and they'll be able to just tear that church apart, but we have to be careful in saying that because this is part of the bride of Christ with all of their problems. And Paul says that, "I have steadfast hope for you that as you've experienced affliction, you will also experience the comfort that comes from God." Now, Paul is not in any way minimizing the depth of the afflictions that he experienced and the people with him. He tells them, "I don't want you to be ignorant, brothers, of the affliction we experienced in Asia," and we're not sure exactly what he's referring to. You know, we can't say for sure what affliction he was referring to that happened in Asia. There's lots of things that we might have some evidence for, but we don't know for sure. But he was able to speak to this church in honesty and say, "I want you to know some of the things that we went through."

A week ago, I was at a retreat and the couple that runs this retreat, they were both missionaries in Columbia for over 16 years. They were in the deep jungles of Columbia and they told us a story about one day that the guerrillas in the area were upset with them because some of the people that were working with them had lied and told them that they basically were stealing from the people of Columbia and that they were cheating them and that they were becoming rich, and so the guerrillas one night came to their house and they took the father out at gunpoint and then they came into the house. You know, there was just the wife and their children in there and so the guerrilla came in and started talking to the wife and she said that she'd never in her life felt so strongly, so tangibly the presence of God as she stood there with those guerrillas and not knowing if her husband was alive or dead and the husband in turn not knowing what they were doing to his wife. But she said her 14 year old woke up and started praying and she said that the other two children stayed asleep, that they never even woke up through all of this. And so these guerrillas went through their camp and they tore everything apart and you know, they yelled at them and threatened them but there came a point where the leader of the

guerrillas said to her, "You know what? You have the face of a guerrilla." Now, you know, she was taken aback and not understanding what he was saying. And she said, "What do you mean by that? You know, am I ugly and I look like you or what are you saying?" He said, "No, you know what, you need to leave that gringo and come with us because you would make a good guerrilla." And then she realized that through all of that, instead of falling apart and screaming and crying and everything else, that she was able to face him in the strength of God, in the comfort of God. And he just turned around, he left her and they turned around and they left the encampment, all the guerrillas, and within a few days, the people of Columbia were able to sneak them out of there because they were definitely coming back for them.

But Paul is saying we experienced problems, real problems, real difficulties, real troubles. There were external afflictions. There was a persecution. There was different types of trials. It was dealing with nature. There was danger from robbers and so on. But Paul was also dealing in here with the cares and anxieties for the church. We also can't put aside the fact that Paul is a human. He wasn't some kind of super Christian. And you can imagine that as he went through these different trials that just God strengthened him, but you can't say that there was never a point in his life that he didn't feel like giving up or think that God had abandoned him. And for Paul and for all of us, there was also the satanic afflictions, the afflictions that come from the adversary. He said there was a messenger from Satan that he dealt with.

He says, we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength. The picture there is that of a pack mule that they've just overloaded and his feet are just sticking out and he's just barely able to go on. And then he goes on to say, we felt that we'd received the sentence of death. What he's saying there was that we were questioning within ourselves, praying and asking how is this going to turn out? And the answer that they received back was death. There was no assurance that anything was going to turn out any better than death but he knew that there was a reason that he was going through these things and what was the reason? To see that God had proved himself faithful and that God will continue to deliver his people, but I think the reason above all things was that he would learn not to be self-reliant, but to be completely reliant on God. When God takes out all the props, when the rug is pulled out from under your feet, and there's nothing else that you can do, when the answer is death, what do you learn? That truly and ultimately, you can't rely on yourself.

Now he's not saying that we don't need people, that we don't need prayers of others, because he goes on to say that you must also help us by prayer. You know, Pastor Steele knows that I take that literally because very often I will call him and say, "You have to pray for me. Please ask the elders to pray for me." Now I'm not indiscriminate in asking for prayer because I know that there's lots of people that they won't pray for you, and I don't mean to be harsh or flippant in that, but there are honestly people that I know will pray for me. And so for those, I call, I come to them and I ask for help, because as they lift up their prayers to God for me, and as I lift up my prayers, I know he will answer.

So in God's purpose for us to learn how to be reliant on him, as we consider that, is that a comforting place to be in the hands of God? I'd like to read you something from the

Belgic Confession. This is one of my favorite Confessions and many times I'll just carry it with me in my car, it'll be on my desk, and I'll just pull it out and read through it. This is one of the doctrinal standards of the Christian Reformed Church, and the man that authored this died a martyr to the faith not too long after he wrote this. This is Article 13, The Doctrine of God's Providence.

We believe that this good God, after he created all things, did not abandon them to chance or fortune but leads and governs them according to his holy will, in such a way that nothing happens in this world without his orderly arrangement. Yet God is not the author of, nor can he be charged with, the sin that occurs. For his power and goodness are so great and incomprehensible that he arranges and does his work very well and justly even when the devils and wicked men act unjustly. We do not wish to inquire with undue curiosity into what he does that surpasses human understanding and is beyond our ability to comprehend. But in all humility and reverence we adore the just judgments of God, which are hidden from us, being content to be Christ's disciples, so as to learn only what he shows us in his Word, without going beyond those limits. This doctrine gives us unspeakable comfort since it teaches us that nothing can happen to us by chance but only by the arrangement of our gracious heavenly Father. He watches over us with fatherly care, keeping all creatures under his control, so that not one of the hairs on our heads (for they are all numbered) nor even a little bird can fall to the ground without the will of our Father. In this thought we rest, knowing that he holds in check the devils and all our enemies, who cannot hurt us without his permission and will.

Let's pray.

Indeed, Father, in that thought we rest, that we can trust you with our lives. We can trust you in the difficulties of life, Father, because we know that they are not without reason and that you will work out your good will within our lives. And we thank you, Father, that you are indeed a good God and that your judgments are right and just. I do pray for my brothers and sisters in this congregation, Lord, that indeed if, Father, as they suffer afflictions, and as your afflictions abound towards us, Father, also your comfort, the comfort of Jesus Christ would abound in us also. So, Father, we ask that you would help us to look up in the midst of our trials and afflictions, that you grant us eyes to look up, Father, not be caught up within ourselves, but understanding your will, Father, and trusting in you and being able, along with Paul, to say, blessed be God. And so, Father, now walk with us, strengthen us for this day and for this week, and we promise to give you honor, glory, and praise. In Jesus' name. Amen. Thank you.