

“THE CLUB NO ONE WANTS TO BELONG TO” (2 Corinthians 1:1-11)

Today we begin a brand-new study of the book of 2 Corinthians. I have preached or taught on nearly every book of the Bible at one time or another, but I’ve never taught through the book of 2 Corinthians. I’m not even sure I’ve heard a sermon series on 2 Corinthians – it tends to get overshadowed by 1 Corinthians, a book we went through a few years back. But 2 Corinthians, for some reason, seems to get neglected – but I’ve come to love the book, and I’m sure you will too.

As I was thinking over a title for the first message, a little saying keep coming to mind I heard John Walsh say one time. John Walsh was the host of America’s Most Wanted that profiled wanted criminals across the country. He had no law enforcement or TV background, but was thrust into the national spotlight when his six-year-old son was abducted and murdered back in the ‘80s, and he dedicated the rest of his life to working on behalf of parents who experienced the same tragedy. He called the parents of murdered children the “club that no one wants to belong to.”

There are a lot of clubs or groups that are born out of tragedy that no one wishes to belong to. No one wants to be a Gold Star Family whose sons or daughters were killed in war, or to be part of a cancer survivor support group. These are groups no one asks to be part of, yet there’s a special bond and power that comes when you meet others who have been through what you’ve been through and feel what you feel. You say “If they made it through this, maybe I can too.”

In our new member’s class I highlight that one of the benefits of becoming a part of a local church is the support, encouragement, and friendship of like-minded believers. We need each other because living the Christian life is not easy, especially in today’s culture. Philippians 1:29 says, “For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe in him, but also to suffer for him.” Believing in Christ is great – we become part of God’s family, our sins are forgiven, and we experience all the many blessings of our salvation – but as believers we are also called to suffer. When Jesus talked about denying yourself, taking up your cross, and following Him, many would-be followers fell away. Jesus made it clear that if you claim His name – if you publicly and unashamedly live according to the Bible – there will be blowback. 2 Timothy 3:12 says, “Everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution” (NLT). The Apostle Paul referred to this as the fellowship of suffering.

In our passage today we learn three important truths about suffering: One, suffering comes with the territory of being a Christian; two, suffering is accompanied by God’s comfort; and three, suffering is used of God to produce positive benefits.

In verses 1-2 we read... “Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, To the church of God in Corinth, together with all his holy people throughout Achaia: Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” 2 Corinthians is a letter written to a specific church with specific needs and issues, and like any letter it begins with a customary greeting.

The author of 2 Corinthians is the Apostle Paul. Few Christians suffered as much as the Paul, but before his conversion, he was the one who inflicted suffering on Christians. As a self-righteous Jew, he hated Christ-followers and did everything he could to harass, persecute, and imprison Christians. But everything changed in Acts 9 when he was on his way to a city named Damascus to persecute Christians – and a great light flashed around him and knocked him to the ground. Christ appeared to him and appointed him to be his apostle to the gentiles.

Paul was also appointed to suffer, and suffer he did. In 2 Corinthians Paul talks about how he was beaten numerous times, thrown in jail, kicked out of towns, shipwrecked, and went days without food or shelter. In 2 Corinthians, more than any of his other letters, we get to know the personal side of Paul – he exposes his feelings and sorrows – he becomes someone we can relate to – someone in the same club as we are.

The recipient of the letter is “the church of God at Corinth.” After his conversion, Paul set off on a series of missionary journeys, going west, and on his second journey he went to the city of Corinth in Greece. **SLIDE.** In the first century Greece consisted of two regions – Macedonia to the north, and Achaia to the south. In between these two regions was a narrow strip of land about four miles long that connected to two bodies of water – the Adriatic Sea to the west and the Aegean Sea to the east. If you were sailing from east to west, you had two options. You could sail 200 miles around the southern part of Greece through very treacherous waters, or you could go to Corinth and bring your ship out of the water at the eastern or western port, put it on rollers and roll it four miles from one port to the next. It was a hassle, but it saved 200 hard miles of sailing. **SLIDE.** It wasn’t until 1893 a canal was dug so that ships today can go straight through.

Corinth was located just to the south of this narrow strip of land, and because of its strategic location on the major east-west trade routes, it was a very large and influential city. With travelers from all over the world making their way through Corinth, it was an ideal place to get the gospel out. But once people were saved, it was an extremely hard place to be a Christian. Corinth was den of sin and iniquity. Corinth was so well known for its sin and wickedness that if you were an especially corrupt person would call you a “Corinthian.”

Yet in the midst of this very pagan city, Paul courageously preached the gospel and planted a church. He stayed in Corinth for a 1 ½ years, and then made his way across the Aegean Sea to Ephesus where he stayed for three years. It was in Ephesus that Paul heard reports of several problems in the Corinthian church, and he responded by writing a letter – a letter that we no longer have today and is not part of the biblical canon. Paul actually wrote four letters to the Corinthian church. The second letter he wrote – which we know as 1 Corinthians – was written as a follow-up letter to his first letter, and in 1 Corinthians Paul answers several questions that the church at Corinth asked him about marriage and divorce, the Lord’s Table, spiritual gifts, the resurrection, and other subjects.

After writing 1 Corinthians, Paul sent his protégé, Timothy, to visit the Corinthian church, and Timothy came back with disturbing news – many of the problems addressed in 1 Corinthians still persisted, and certain divisive teachers and leaders opposed Paul and threatened to undo all the work he had done in Corinth.

Paul immediately put everything aside and traveled to Corinth to try and put things right. He refers to this trip in chapter two of 2 Corinthians as the “painful visit.” It did not go well. He was treated disrespectfully by his opponents who ridiculed the way he talked, the impoverished way he lived, and claimed that he wasn’t even a true apostle. Paul didn’t stay long and left defeated and discouraged.

But a short time later he wrote the church yet another letter he refers to in 2 Corinthians 2 as the “tearful” letter. This was his third letter, a letter that is also no longer have. But we learn in 2 Corinthians that his letter included a harsh rebuke of those opposing him, and a call for the church to discipline those causing division. Paul received good news sometime later that the church had responded well to his tearful letter, which brought Paul great joy. He then writes a fourth letter – which is 2 Corinthians – to encourage the saints at Corinth and defend his apostleship.

This explains why he begins his letter by saying he is “an *apostle* of Christ Jesus by the will of God.” An apostle means “one who is sent,” and was used in the ancient world of someone who represented the king and carried the authority of the king. Jesus selected twelve apostles to carry on His work on earth once he ascended back to heaven. The original twelve were unique in that they were directly commissioned by Jesus, they were personally trained by Jesus, and were witnesses to His resurrection. Paul was not one of the twelve – but he saw the risen Christ on the road to Damascus, he was directly commissioned to be an apostle by the Lord, and he was accepted as an apostle by the other twelve.

Paul emphasizes that he was called to be an apostle “by the will of God.” He didn’t choose to be an apostle and he didn’t try to use his authority to promote himself – he was simply following the call of God on his life. As an apostle, his words carry the weight of an apostle. He is God’s spokesman, not because he appointed himself, but because he was chosen by the will of God.

In verses 3-11 Paul begins the body of his letter by talking about the suffering he, his team of missionaries, and the Corinthian church share as a result of following Christ. He writes... “Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God. For just as we share abundantly in the sufferings of Christ, so also our comfort abounds through Christ. If we are distressed, it is for your comfort and salvation; if we are comforted, 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.”

We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about the troubles we experienced in the province of Asia. We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt we had received the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead. He has delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us again. 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 answer to the prayers of many.”

Two words are repeated over and over in these verses: Suffering and comfort. Paul actually uses five different words for suffering – trouble, tribulation, distress, pressure, and suffering. Suffering comes in a variety of ways. Some suffering is the result of living in a fallen world, and everyone experiences the effects of sin. Some suffering is the result of our own sinful choices, and we suffer the natural consequences of those choices. Some suffering is the result of being persecuted for boldly living out our Christian faith in a hostile world. We rarely read about this in the news, but every day 13 Christians in the world are killed for their faith. One in eight Christians in the world suffer severe persecution for their faith, sometimes just for reading the Bible.

In America, for the most part, we are sheltered from this kind of persecution, but things are changing quickly, and if you courageously and authentically live a godly life, you will face similar persecution. Persecution separates the wheat from the tares – it exposes what we really believe and what we’re willing to stand for. Suffering comes with the territory of being a Christian. Yet in the midst of our suffering – whatever variety it may be – we are not alone.

In verse 3a Paul says, “Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles.” Paul, the man who suffered so greatly, exudes praise to the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort who comforts us in all our troubles. As a father or a mother, when your kids hurt, you hurt. As our Heavenly Father, God deeply cares about us and comforts us in our suffering.

The dictionary defines comfort as “the easing or alleviation of a person’s feelings, grief, or distress.” The Greek word for comfort – *paraklesis* – means to come alongside of and give strength. It’s the same word Jesus used when He promised to send the Holy Spirit to be our paraclete, to come alongside us and help us – He would send the Holy Spirit to be our friend and advocate, to be with us in our time of trouble and encourage us. The Holy Spirit is with us when we’re driving along a dark road at night – He’s with us when we’re at the doctor’s office awaiting the results of a test – He is with us when we’re standing beside the graveside of a family member. His continual presence gives us peace that passes understanding and confidence that everything is going to be okay.

But that’s not all... God also comforts us through His Word. Howard Rutledge spent seven years in a Vietnam prison camp, much of it in solitary confinement without Bible or anyone to talk to. The only thing that kept him going, he said, was reciting the Bible verses he memorized as a child in Sunday School. Over and over he recited the 23rd Psalm, the Lord’s Prayer, and the many promises God made in scripture, and said that one verse could make a whole day bearable.

When we’re suffering, the big question we ask is “Why? Why is this happening? What’s the purpose? What’s the reason?” The honest answer is that we’re not always told why – sometime later we may see the purpose in our suffering, but often times we will not know until we’re in heaven. What this passage tells us, as well as many other passages, is that there is a purpose for suffering – as painful as suffering it, there are positive benefits that flow from it. Here Paul highlights three such benefits and purposes.

Number one, **suffering prepares us to comfort others**. Listen to what Paul says in verse 4... “Who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God.” God not only comforts us by His Spirit and His Word, but by using other believers who have received His comfort. Once you go through a trial or tragedy, it gives you a special sympathy and compassion for those who go through the same thing. You belong to the same club, and you get it. C.S. Lewis said, “Friendship is born at that moment when one person says to another, ‘You, too? I thought I was the only one.’” When you go through something painful, you are in a unique position to help and encourage others who are going through the same thing.

Let me give you a few examples from my own life. A year after we were married, Sharla and I were excited to welcome our first child into the world, but five months into her pregnancy we were told that because of extremely low amniotic fluid our baby had no chance of survival outside the womb. There is a much, much longer story to all this, but our baby died a few months later one hour after he was born. Our doctor said the chances of this happening again were less than 1%, and again to make a long story short, lightning struck twice and our second baby died seven hours after he was born.

After our first baby died, someone suggested that we talk to an older couple in our church named Lee and Faye. Lee and Faye were core members of the church and we knew them well, but not as well as we thought. They invited us over to their place and shared their story with us. They too dreamed of having a family, and Faye wanted lots of kids. But her first pregnancy resulted in a miscarriage. Immediately we knew there was someone who understood.

They trusted God for another child, but their second child was stillborn. Now they really understood. They had a third child, a boy, and praise God, he was born healthy and well. But some months later he died in his crib of sudden infant death syndrome. They had a fourth child, which resulted in another miscarriage. Eventually God blessed them with a girl and a boy. But 12 years later tragedy struck again when their girl caught a fever and died. Out of six children, only one son lived to be an adult.

We didn't know any of this. All we knew is that Lee and Faye were joyful, godly Christians who loved the Lord and never complained. If they survived – if they made it – then maybe we can too. Lee and Faye became our heroes – despite their immense sorrow, they didn't give in or give up. They walked with us through the valley of the shadow of death and breathed life into our souls.

God did bless us with Matt and Abby through adoption, and as many of you know we had some turbulent waters in their teen years. A big part of what got us through those years was interacting with parents who were going through the same thing... “You too? I thought I was the only one.” Some parents were on the other side, and said, “There are better days ahead, hang in there.” And there was a certain point when we were in a position to comfort others and say, “There are better days ahead.” As hard as suffering is, God uses it to make us more compassionate so that we can comfort others with the same comfort we have received.

In verses 5-7 Paul says, “For just as we share abundantly in the sufferings of Christ, so also our comfort abounds through Christ. If we are distressed, it is for your comfort and salvation; if we are comforted, 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 wants the Corinthians to know that his suffering for the gospel – the beatings, the shipwrecks, the insults – have benefited them. Someone said, “God never wastes an experience.” He uses all of our experiences – good and bad – to uniquely equip us to minister to those who go through the same things. I heard a well-known pastor – I can't recall who it was – but he said that when he was just starting out as a pastor, he overheard a couple of ladies talking about his sermons. One lady said, “He gives good messages, but they will be even better once he's suffered.” Suffering makes all of us better in that we have more compassion and more understanding in relating to people and ministering to their needs.

Suffering not only prepares us to comfort others, but secondly, **it keeps us from trusting ourselves**. Paul writes in verses 8-9... “We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about the troubles we experienced in the province of Asia. We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt we had received the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead.”

Paul alludes to troubles he and his team experienced while they were ministering in Ephesus. He doesn't say exactly what troubles they encountered, but they were so severe Paul thought they would die. He might very well have been talking about the time in Acts 19 when an idol-maker named Demetrius gathered a mob together to go after Paul. This could be what Paul meant in his first letter to the Corinthians when he said that he fought wild beasts in Ephesus. By going around the world and preaching the gospel of Christ, Paul's life was constantly in danger and every day was potentially his last day on earth. But he says in verse 9 that “this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God.” Relying on God's strength and not our own strength will be a constant theme in 2 Corinthians.

It often takes suffering to break us of our pride and self-reliance. When you've come to the end of your resources – when the pressure of life is beyond your ability to endure – it drives you to depend on the Lord. As Paul will say later in chapter 12 that he delights in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties – because when he has come to the end of his ability to endure, that is when the power of God comes bursting through and enables us to persevere and overcome anything that comes against us.

The third purpose and benefit of suffering is that it **draws us closer together in Christ**. In verses 10-11 Paul writes... “He has delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us again. 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 answer to the prayers of many.”

Time after time God delivered Paul and his team from death, and Paul is confident that God will deliver them again. Paul had a great attitude about dying. He said, “As long as God wants me share the gospel, I will go all out and give it all I have with the full confidence that God will deliver me. But if God chooses to call me home to heaven, all the better for me. Whether I live or die, either way God will deliver me.” Less than ten years later Paul would die a martyr's death – according to tradition, he was beheaded in Rome. He's a hero, and inspires us to boldly live for Christ, having full confidence in His ultimate deliverance.

Paul wanted the Corinthians to know that what helped keep him alive and what gave him courage to carry on was their prayers. He knew that he was not alone – even as he fought the wild beasts in Ephesus, the support he felt from his brothers and sisters in Christ kept him going.

Whenever we face hardship, persecution, or difficulties our first response should be to look to the Lord in prayer. Our second response should be to enlist the prayer support of others. This brings us back full circle to our need for others in the body of Christ. God designed the church to be a family of believers who come as individuals, but become part of a group. The only way we can grow and mature – the only way we can comfort and encourage others – is to live in community with fellow believers.

This means two things. Number one, it means that we make it a priority to gather together with other believers, starting with church every Sunday. The more you come, the more connected you become, and it takes time. But Sunday morning alone does not make a church. To really get to know each other beyond a surface level requires getting into a small group or taking the initiative to get to know others one-on-one. We have some great coffee places here in town – what if you made it a point to think of three people in church that you don't know that well – and invite them out to coffee? It doesn't matter where you meet, but ask them about their life story and how they came to Christ. And you may find out that you belong to the same club. You have a bad back? Me too. You were in the military? Me too. Write down three people God lays on your heart and make it a goal to get together with them.

The second way we become close to others in the body is by praying for one another, and praying for one another requires that we know what is going on in each other's lives. It means that we're humble enough to know that we can't go it alone, and need the support and encouragement of others. So when something comes up, you email the church prayer chain and submit a request. If you don't feel free or comfortable to share the details just yet, then just say, “Pray for me,” and submit an unspoken request. On a more intimate level, seek a smaller circle of people with which you can share your burdens and needs, and the more we do this the stronger our church body will be.

No one ever wishes to suffer, but it's part of our calling in Christ. Yet in the midst of our suffering, we are not alone. Our Heavenly Father of compassion not only comforts us, but He uses the body of Christ to come alongside each other and say, "You're going to make it... Let's walk through this together." And with the comfort we receive, we can in turn comfort others – and our suffering is transformed into something good to the glory of God.