

God of Comfort

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[0 : 0 0] All right. Thank you, Elliot. I appreciate that. Good morning, everybody. How's everyone doing today? Yeah? Tracey all had a good week. It's been a beautiful week so far. And I'm one of the elders here and just have the privilege of serving along some just solid other elders in this church, Alan and Elliot, and an amazing deacon team who just, they just show sacrificial, loving leadership so well. And it's just an honor to be doing this with them, to be doing this with you too. Man, I just look around this room and I see some just amazing, beautiful faces, some newer ones that I've yet to know, but some that, man, we've been walking together for the long haul.

And it's just a joy. It just brings an absolute joy to my heart and a reminder of how wonderful church community is. We are actually in a new series and it is going through, we're going to be going through the book of 2 Corinthians, which is a letter written to a church. And the title of the series is Strength in Weakness. And the title captures the overarching theme of this letter to this church, which is arguably one of the most personal letters that the Apostle Paul ever wrote to a church. And if you're new to the Bible, Paul is one of the guys that wrote a lot of the New Testament. He wrote a lot of letters to churches, many of them that he actually started as God sent him out to spread the gospel to the world that didn't know anything about Jesus in that time.

And so this letter is very personal as he's writing to 2 Corinthians, because if you know the history, you see that he came and he just poured himself out for this church. He was the first to preach the gospel in the city of Corinth, which is a city in Greece in the area of Achaia. And he stayed in that city for one and a half years doing that work, that gospel work, establishing that church, raising up leaders, pouring himself out for those disciples. And you would think a church started by an apostle would be like set, ready to go rocking. But that's not what we find out about the church in Corinth, actually in the Bible at all. It had a ton of problems. Life in this church was messy.

There was a lot of toxic relationships. There was petty jealousy. There was selfishness. There was arrogance. There was unholy ambition. There was a lot of sexual sin in that church as well. And so what we see is Paul had to write a few letters to this church addressing these issues. Now, keep in mind that Corinth was a lot like what I would say the Silicon Valley of today. It's the Greek version of that. It was new money. Athens was old money. Corinth was new money. Lots of wealth. They were a port.

They were situated in a great place. And so because of that, man, it just became a place of influence in the world of that day. And so what you see is in this new money, this new experience wealth, there's this clamoring for power and possession and prominence. That was the culture of Corinth.

[3 : 1 4] It celebrated sexual license and freedom of expression. In fact, the god of Corinth, the patron god that they worshipped, you worshipped her by basically sleeping with prostitutes, right?

Which I'm guessing a guy came up with for that religion. That's just my guess. But you just see, it was this libertinism that was so rampant in their society. And they were so good at it that there was a phrase used in that day called to Corinthianize, which meant to live a life of licentiousness and debauchery. That's where this church is living in. That's the culture where it's living in. That's what Paul is writing into. And he's fighting for this church because what they had started to do, they had started to mingle the gospel of Jesus with the gospel of Corinth.

The message of the good news of Christ with the message coming from the culture surrounding them. And they were starting to confuse those two things. And 2 Corinthians is Paul's appeal to this church that he loves to trust his gospel and forsake all others. And also, it's an appeal to his authority as an apostle of Jesus. And that relationship that he had with them as a father of this church, he loved them, but also as an apostle of Jesus, it had been strained because of these strong letters he had to write to them and dealing with the sin issues that plagued this church. And

so, we come to now this letter. And I want to ask before we get into it, man, if you're a leader like Paul, and this is what you've done, you've known this church. I mean, you have been in the pains of loving it and birthing it and crying out for them and praying for them to hold on to their faith. What would you do to try to get them back in line? What would you think is the best method? And I think for many of us, we would say like, shoot, he's an authority. He should appeal to his authority. He should flex his muscles over them. Maybe be loud, come on strong, give them threats, kind of like what we do with the kids in the back seat as we're driving on long trips. Like, don't make me turn this car around. Don't make me pull the car over to the side.

But that's not what Paul does. Look what he does. This is what's amazing. This is what's amazing. Second Corinthians chapter one, we're going to read the first 11 verses. 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 the K.I., grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. And so before we continue on, let's just pause there. What is Paul doing? He's opening up this letter. And what he's doing is he is establishing the tone. He is establishing the form of this letter that he's going to take. He is going after them in a unique way.

[6:09] And he sets a great example for all of us, not just for being a good leader, but what it means to follow Jesus for any of us. And it's leaning into God's grace for both you and for others. See, Paul's understanding of God's grace is very personal to him. He doesn't call himself the Apostle Paul. He's Paul, an apostle of Jesus. Apostle, that word literally means a messenger, one who is sent off. And they were meant to go and they were meant to carry good news. They were an emissary. They were an ambassador that was going to proclaim something, a herald. And Paul is saying, look, I'm not authority unto myself. I am under authority and I'm under Jesus's authority sent out by him to carry his good news, his message of hope that is in him, not in me. He, no doubt, is an apostle of Jesus because he says, it's not because I willed it, but because God willed it to be so. Paul didn't choose his job. It was chosen for him by God. And he did, as God addressed him to do. And this was in the midst of like, he didn't get paid well for it, you know? And there was stonings and shipwrecks and whippings and rejection and betrayal.

That was part of the job. And Paul recognizes still God's grace over his life, despite all those things. And he leans into it. He leans into God's grace. Then what he does, he pivots and then he leans into God's grace for the church in Corinth. He doesn't flex his apostle muscles and say, because I'm an apostle, now I'm going to come at you hard. You better listen or I'm going to call down some plagues on your hand.

I'm going to go Old Testament style on you. He's not doing that at all. What does he want for them? He wants God's grace. He wants them to know God's grace. Not just know it, he wants them to experience it. He wants them to know God's peace. And not just know it, he wants them to live. He wants it to be a reality in their life. And when you love God and you love people, it doesn't matter how they act towards you. This is what you want for them. And before he dives into the issues, he starts very differently. He blesses them with that sincere prayer. And you know, this isn't just Paul's like one-time thing he does in this letter. You know that he's praying for them this way all the time. Man, God, may your peace and your grace come to that church in Corinth. It's not just filler words because he's a polite guy. He's leaning into God's grace for himself and for them. And here's the thing, grace by nature implies you and I don't got this on our own. And Paul gets that. We need God's help.

We depend on him. So living by grace and leading by grace doesn't, isn't a life where we're trying to impress others to get them to follow us or control them and impose ourselves on them or use strength to force them into anything. Grace recognizes and embraces our weakness. And then what it does, it leans into God's strength. Okay? That's what grace does. Grace recognizes and embraces our weakness. It leans into God's strength. And so verse three, it says this, blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, 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. For as we share abundantly in Christ's suffering, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too. 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. Our hope for you is unshaken. For we know that as you, church, as you share in our sufferings, we also share in, you will also share in our comfort. 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. Indeed, we felt that we had received a sentence of death, but that was to make us rely not on ourselves, but on God who raises the dead. He delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us.

[10 : 45] On him we have set our hope that he will deliver us again. 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.

This is God's word. Now there is a lot. There's a lot here to unpack, but the overarching consistent theme here is it points to our weakness in God's power.

And I'm going to start with kind of the big idea and then drill down to a couple of specifics, but the big idea here is that God's grace doesn't keep us from affliction, but it brings us through affliction.

See the difference there? God is more concerned about your holiness than your happiness.

But he knows better than us that our happiness is tied to our holiness, which means he will use the best means at his disposal to make us more like him, which is what holiness is. Holiness is that condition of which we're becoming more and more like Jesus. We're starting to look more and more like him and love more and more like him and our passions, our desires are being changed to be more and more like his. And that, and so God's going to use whatever is at his disposal to do that. And that includes bringing us into suffering. Suffering is not counter to God's blessings. Man, oftentimes it is the pathway to them. And I'm not suggesting that if we suffer, what we're going to reap is a harvest of beauties, a beauty or Bentleys or big boats. That's not the kind of blessing that we're going after, nor is it a little suffering going to guarantee that your kids are going to start to behave and turn out exactly how you want. When God brings you into suffering and brings you through suffering, he is doing something good in you. That's what's happening. So you need to be present to God in that suffering. And don't spend all your time in the suffering. Man, what's that blessing? What is God doing in this? Now, I'm not saying it's wrong to think about those things. And we're going to get there later on in the sermon, but don't spend all your time in the suffering wondering what's waiting for you on the other side. Remember this, in your affliction, know that God is in it with you.

Verse 3, it says, blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction. Paul blessed God for the fact that he is in his affliction with them. And we need to take that far. Man, God is in our affliction with us. And what do we often believe when we suffer? Man, oftentimes we feel isolated and we feel alone. We feel like nobody cares. We feel like God doesn't care. We're like Donkey and Shrek singing that song, I'm all alone.

[13 : 52] There's no one here beside me. That was pretty good. Didn't start off so great, but I got there. I got there.

But we, guys, we can often feel that way. In our suffering, we often feel that kind of isolation. We often feel alone, but it's just not true. No matter what you're facing, even if it's your fault because of sin, when you lean into God's grace, you realize that he is in it with you.

He's not just there passively. He's there to comfort you. Now, the way we think of comfort and we listen to that word, it's different to what it means in that context.

Paul doesn't use that word to describe God's fuzzy hugs. And we have to sit back and say, like, okay, when the Corinthian church receive this letter and they hear that he is the God of all comfort, what are they getting?

What are they understanding? Because the Greek word that he uses here has way more than just, like, lovey-dovey stuff in mind, right? So, this guy, David E. Garland, he's a New Testament professor at Baylor University, he puts it this way.

[15 : 05] The comfort that Paul has in mind has nothing to do with a longorous feeling of contentment. That's a big word, right? It is not just some, like, passive, blasé, lackadaisical feeling of contentment.

It is, it's not some tranquilizing dose of grace that only dulls pain, but a stiffening agent that fortifies one in heart, mind and soul.

We need that. Comfort relates to encouragement, help, exhortation. God's comfort strengthens weak knees and sustains sagging spirits so that one faces the troubles of life with unbending resolve and unending assurance.

Man, isn't that a better idea of comfort for us and God's comfort? I remember my high school geometry class. The first quarter of that year was hell, at least at my age, and I was failing.

I was failing geometry very badly, and my dad didn't stay on the sideline cheering me on or just giving me hugs to make me feel better about the fact that I was flunking.

[16:29] He jumped into my suffering. He said, Hey, Jess, you're failing. I'm going to help you. He encouraged, but he also stepped in and he started to tutor me.

And he strengthened me in that subject. And so geometry went from this afflicting F to my little teenage heart to an affirming A. Now, no doubt, it was hard work throughout the school year, but my dad, what he did, he was joining in it with me.

And I suffered with joy and grew to appreciate geometry and all that it taught me. I really did. But that is, it's a lot like what God is talking about, what Paul's talking about here about God's comfort. That is what God is doing by comforting us in our afflictions. He's joining us in it. He's with us in it. He's teaching us. He's encouraging us. He's transforming us.

And Paul saw all this at work in his own affliction too, right? He says, blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, Father of mercies, God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction.

[17:35] Why? Why does God do that? 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.

Here's what Paul is getting at here. God's purpose for your affliction, God's purpose for my affliction is to kill our sinful independence. It's the big idea of this passage.

You need God and you need community. When you have those two things, any affliction is bearable, but also any affliction has a better perspective and a higher purpose.

John Piper, he's an American pastor that I really love and appreciate, but he wrote an article titled, Don't Waste Your Cancer. And he wrote that because he had cancer and the next day he was going in to have surgery to get his cancer out.

And he's writing this article to his church to help them. And he believed that God was with him in it. With him in his cancer in that moment and that God could actually be glorified in his cancer, that God could be glorified in his weakness.

[18:56] Because he had a theology that God is at work in every affliction, no matter what he was facing. And he wanted to pass the comfort that he was receiving, believing this and knowing God was with him, comforting and encouraging him in the most dire of circumstances.

And he wanted to pass that comfort on to the people in his church. And you and I have to believe that God creates drama and brings us into our own personal drama so that we can turn around and help others and theirs.

That's what Paul's getting at in these verses. He spells it out in verse six. If we are afflicted, Paul is being afflicted. And he's telling the church, if we are afflicted, guess what?

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.

Here's the thing. Your suffering isn't all about you. My suffering isn't all about me. There is, I've got to think about you guys as well, but you and I will miss out on the full work and purpose of suffering if we aren't committed and connected into Christian community.

[20:18] We can't truly be a blessing to others if we just live on the periphery disconnected and detached, isolated unto ourselves. We need each other. Because church community is a means of grace for many things.

And as these verses point out, God dispenses his comfort to one another through one another. Let me say that again. God dispenses his comfort, that grace.

He dispenses it to one another through one another. Which is, man, we haven't built this church just around a great Sunday morning meeting. That is not who we are.

We are a church of small groups, of community groups. We are not just a church that has community groups. We aren't just a Sunday church like I said, which is, I am not saying, hey, just forsake that, that is no big deal.

This is important too. But our partners, when you become a One Harbor partner, one of the things we say is, hey, you need to be in a community group. If we are really partnering together, if we are on the same page, if we are moving together and advancing the gospel on mission, growing deep as disciples and also trying to create more disciples, man, we have to be in rich, committed, meaningful, present community.

[21 : 39] There is no other way around that. And we don't do that because we are power tripping and we are like, you better do as we say. We got some spiritual hoops for you to jump through. We just look at the Bible and what it says to follow Jesus and we just don't see any other way.

We don't see any other way to do this. And so we see, man, we need the small expressions of community. We need the big expressions of community like today where we can exercise the Bible's one anothering.

The Bible is full of the one anothering, right? Provoke one another. Stir one another up in the faith. Care for one another. Pray for one another. Encourage one another.

Sharpen one another. Teach one another. Comfort one another. That's why we need to be in church but not just be a body and a seat.

We need to be the church. It's not about you and me just finding better friends. I need to trade in those old ones that cuss too much and they don't listen to the music and they don't listen to 105.1.

[22 : 45] And there's a lot of people that have faithful friends that don't go to church and don't love Jesus. I mean, there's a whole TV show about friends, right? For sure, we need others.

For sure. But man, the difference is in church community and what we're doing is that we're all recognizing together is that you and me, we also need God.

Right? We need each other and we also need God. That's not an either or thing. That is a both and. God uses affliction. He will use it in your life to make you more dependent on Him.

Paul gets out this in verse 8. 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.

Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death. I don't know how much greater an affliction you could experience, but that's a pretty big one, right? And what does he say about that?

[23 : 54] How does Paul process that pain and that suffering that he went through? And Paul always did it in team. He always had guys around him. That's why he speaks in plural.

He doesn't use I, he uses us. But that was to make us rely not on ourselves, but on God who raises the dead.

Paul's telling you and me through the Holy Spirit God is willing to do whatever it takes to make you realize, to make me realize that we don't got this.

Recovering addicts, I think, get this better than anyone else. They have to go through a process where they realize how helpless they truly are. That's actually how you start it. You're just like, man, I have a problem and I can't solve this myself.

They acknowledge their weakness and they acknowledge their need for God's help. I mean, the 12-step program was originally built around that. It was both community and acknowledging their need for God's power in their life.

[25 : 01] Now it's changed to a higher power but originally it wasn't like that. You need both. We are all sin addicts of some kind. I am a recovering porn addict.

I am a recovering success addict and both of those are sin and they are destructive in their own ways. That is a reality.

And one thing I know about myself is that I don't got what it takes to manage those sins in my life. I don't. I need a community and I need God to help me kill my sin and without that I will fail.

I have failed and I will fail. Jesus didn't die so we could live the comfortable life. He didn't die so we could lead an independent life.

He died so we would follow him into the cruciform life, the cross-shaped life. But this isn't without hope. Verse 5 it says this, For as we share abundantly in Christ's sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too.

[26 : 22] Jesus' suffering is what it's talking about here. Jesus' suffering gives us assurance and hope for ours. Following Jesus means a life of dying to ourselves.

That's what it looks like to follow Jesus. We are constantly dying to ourselves. It doesn't say in this verse that we'll occasionally share in Christ's sufferings.

It says we share abundantly in them. It's like, man, Paul, could you have used a different adjective or adverb, sorry, that would have been really nice. We're going to share abundantly in Christ's sufferings.

Doesn't that sound absolutely terrifying? You should all be saying, yes it does. It's impossible.

That's why grace is reminding us, no, you don't got this. you need God's help and you need his hope which is why we have to look beyond our suffering to see what awaits us on the other side of it.

[27 : 35] We don't have to wonder because Jesus went first and showed us. Through death he defeated sin. Through the shame of the cross he won the victory over sin and is now crowned king over all.

he paved the path. He paved the path and we follow him on his road. See the way of Jesus, the cruciform life is before he got the crown he had to endure the cross.

That is what it means to follow Jesus. We must endure suffering and learn to die to ourselves, our passions, our will, our desires, our dreams.

We come and we lay them down at his feet and we say, man, you know what, not my will but yours be done. I'm gonna follow you. And that's how we go into death and back up into resurrection life. we have to endure the cross before we get the crown. The way of Jesus is strength through weakness but in that promise, but in that is the promise that God is always with us in it, giving us the strength that we need.

[28 : 56] This isn't us going out and saying like, okay, man, I'm just gonna white knuckle this thing. I got this in my own strength. It's pressing into him. It's pressing into his grace and realizing that he is transforming us.

He is doing that work, becoming more like him and your job and my job is simply just to surrender. That's what we do.

As the band comes up, let's figure out how to respond here. And I wanna say to those in the room, if you're here and you're not yet a Christian and I am so thankful that you are here to see the weakness that comes, the strength that comes through weakness, to see the way that Paul doesn't hide the affliction, but he's so honest about it.

In fact, he goes on to say in 2 Corinthians and we'll get into that, he often talks about boasting in weakness and the message of the gospel is you realizing that that is true about you.

It isn't do better and try harder. It's that you don't got this. You don't need better skills or better tech to save you and get you through suffering. You need Jesus.

[30 : 10] He alone is the only way by which any of us have access to the Father of mercies and the God of comfort. And so my appeal to you today is please put your faith in Jesus.

He is inviting you today to put your faith in him to repent of your independence and to depend on him. And if you're here and a Christian, man, that's us too.

We need to depend more on Jesus. You and I need Jesus. We need each other. We still don't got this no matter how long you've been following Jesus.

You still don't got this on your own and you never will. And as we take communion, we're going to do that right now. If you want to pull those out and get ready for it.

This is a reminder as we take this of Christ's suffering. This is literally points to his suffering. We're stopping to remember that and to give thanks for it.

[31 : 15] and as we take it, we're not only being reminded of a suffering, but it is confessing this truth that he calls us to share in his sufferings.

We are eating, we are saying like, yes, Lord, we are continuing as your disciples to not only acknowledge that you suffered for us, but you call us to share in those sufferings and that's what we're doing and remembering and confessing by our participation in this.

Will he comfort us in our sufferings? Absolutely. Will he use the one and others of the local church? In abundance. And communion reminds us of that other side of this is that we belong to each other as well.

As we take communion, man, let's give thanks for God's goodness and grace of affliction and comfort and let's give thanks for the way he puts us into community and as we do that, this is a bit of a commitment ceremony and not only that, we're declaring that, yes, Jesus, I'm going to follow you no matter what, but it's also a recommitment to the body of Christ.

It's recommitting to the one and others and saying that I'm not going to live for myself. I'm going to live for the person to my right. I'm going to live for the person to my left in front of me and behind me.

[32 : 40] So, Jesus, we thank you. We thank you, your body broken and your blood shed that we could, that your grace would abundantly flow to us in these ways.

Let's eat of the bread together and let's drink of the cup together.