

# Sharing in suffering and comfort

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Littlebourne - Sunday 3rd March 2024 - 2 Corinthians 1:3-11, John 16:16-33

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I'm going to look mainly at the 2 Corinthians passage today.

The second of Paul's letters that we have to the Corinthians is probably his most personal letter - it includes many details about how Paul has faced problems himself. He doesn't hold back in what he talks about, whether it's his own problems or the problems in the Corinthian church. This is a letter to a suffering church from a suffering Paul, but he starts it, he sets the scene, with words about comfort.

## v3-4

2 Corinthians 1:3-4:

*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.*

Paul starts the letter, after the formalities, with this benediction - Blessed be God, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort. The whole scene is set with this statement - that God is to be blessed. How different this is to the typical idea that many have of the relationship between God and suffering! How often have people said that they can't believe in a God that allows suffering? Yet for Paul, in light of all that he will say about the suffering he has faced, God is to be blessed first and foremost. Paul's first thought when writing to the Corinthian church is that they need to know that God is a God of comfort, the Father of mercies.

Paul goes on to say that God comforts us in 'all our afflictions' - not just some, but all. In every situation, we can find comfort from God. And this comfort does not stay isolated - we are comforted, that we might comfort others. In all things, the body of Christ is united - the comfort we receive, we are to share.

## v5

Paul goes on (2 Corinthians 1:5):

*For as we share abundantly in Christ's sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too.*

Before we suffer, we know Christ suffered. In our passage from John's gospel, Jesus talks about what will happen to Him shortly - that He will be away from the disciples. The disciples at this point are not quite sure what he's talking about - He's a little cryptic. But we know what happens - He will leave the disciples, and the disciples will almost all leave Him, as he goes to the cross.

Paul is saying that we share in Christ's suffering. I don't think this means that we face anything like what He did on the cross, or that anything we suffer adds to the completed work He did for us in dealing with our sin once and for all.

But in our union with Christ, we share our experiences with Him. The head understands what the rest of the body is going through - Christ, the head of the body is not unaware of what we go through. He has been through worse Himself, and is not unaware of what happens now, indeed Hebrews 7:25 tells us that He is always interceding for us - always making our case before the Father, the Father of all mercy and comfort.

Another way to look at this is that we share in Christ's sufferings in the sense that we, through our union with Him, are likewise dead and resurrected. We too are brought down to the grave and raised up again. Now in one sense, we are already raised, made alive seated with Christ in heavenly places as Paul says elsewhere (Ephesians 2:6), in another, we await the resurrection of the body - what is sinful in us is still painfully dying.

Paul also makes clear that as suffering abounds, comfort abounds. The more he faces suffering, the more he receives the comfort of Christ. He does not suffer more than God is able to comfort.

Paul later in the letter writes about false apostles who are seeking to discredit Paul. You can imagine that they would have made out that Paul's afflictions are a sign that God isn't really with him, that there is nothing to be gained from his moaning, but Paul doesn't see it that way.

## v6-7

He continues (2 Corinthians 1:6-7):

*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.*

Paul repeats that the comfort that he experiences, he shares with the church in Corinth. They share in his sufferings, experiencing the same kinds of ailments and persecution that he has, and they share together in comfort.

Whilst at this point, Paul and the Corinthians are far apart, they are part of one body, and even at this distance, through his letters, Paul seeks to share in comfort with them. His example, of endurance, of putting the gospel first in the face of great hardships, is an example to be followed. It can only be followed if we understand that it's not all just affliction, but also comfort and joy in what takes place.

His suffering is for their comfort and salvation - not as though it is a sacrifice for sin, but it is for promoting their salvation, for helping them to turn to Christ, their comforter. What Paul goes through, and the Corinthians share in, is purposeful, meaningful.

## v8-10

*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. 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.*

Part of the meaning of suffering for us is to help us to turn from ourselves, to God. Paul was burdened so much that he expected death imminently. Near the end of the letter, Paul recounts the various situations he's been in where he has nearly ended up dead (2 Corinthians 11:24-):

*24 Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. 25 Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; 26 on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; 27 in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. 28 And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches. 29 Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to fall, and I am not indignant?*

*30 If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness. 31 The God and Father of the Lord Jesus, he who is blessed forever, knows that I am not lying. 32 At Damascus, the governor under King Aretas was guarding the city of Damascus in order to seize me, 33 but I was let down in a basket through a window in the wall and escaped his hands.*

Paul has gone through much danger and hardship, and he says that these narrow escapes from death are to make him not rely on himself, but on the God who raises from the dead. Paul has been raised from certain death in a sense many times it sounds like, and he trusts that God will deliver him once more. These occasions had purpose, they cause Paul to put his trust in God. His suffering is not without meaning.

The comfort that God gives us is not necessarily the comfort we think we need - in this case, the comfort of God is the knowledge for Paul that he should not rely on himself, but on God. Much of our suffering occurs so that we can realize that relying on ourselves is not going to work and turn instead to rely ever more fully on God. Suffering in and for Christ is for the end of making us cry out to God and confess that He is ultimately all that we have and that our goal should be to know Him.

Another comfort that is found in God, is the knowledge that we know there is an end. We know that sorrow will turn to joy.

The same God that raises from the dead will put an end to all suffering. The same God that raised our Lord Jesus Christ will raise us. Jesus says to his disciples (John 16:20-22):

*20 Truly, truly, I say to you, you will weep and lament, but the world will rejoice. You will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will turn into joy. 21 When a woman is giving birth, she has sorrow because her hour has come, but when she has delivered the baby, she no longer remembers the anguish, for joy that a human being has been born into the world. 22 So also you have sorrow now, but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you.*

Jesus is talking about first his resurrection, when the disciples would indeed see Him again. The disciples would experience great sorrow as He suffered and died on the cross, and then experience great joy as He was raised from the dead and meets them again. But the other way we can look at this, the way that we will all see Jesus again, is when He comes again in glory. We look forward to a time of joy and an end to all sorrow, because Christ returns to Earth. All things will be made new, and as Paul says in the first of his letters to the Corinthians that we have, all will be raised and Christ will put an end to all other authorities that might oppose Him (1 Corinthians 15:22-26):

*22 For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. 23 But each in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ. 24 Then comes the end, when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power. 25 For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. 26 The last enemy to be destroyed is death.*

So the end of all suffering, the end of death, will be when Christ returns, having beaten all rivals, having conquered all opposition, having put an end to all hardships for His people. Paul says "On Him have we set our hope that He will deliver us again" (v10).

## **v11**

Lastly, verse 11:

*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.*

Lastly, we see the importance of prayer in all this. It might seem a little out of place here - that Paul asks for prayer, right after he is done saying that he has hope that God will deliver him again, and that the suffering he has faced has brought him closer to God. He tells the Corinthians that they 'must help us by prayer'.

Paul doesn't see the surety of God's comfort and rescue as a reason to neglect praying. We can be confident in Christ, but still are commanded to pray. We might even say that Paul's confidence in God's sovereignty leads to his asking for prayer - he believes that prayer petitions the only one who is truly in control of things.

Scripture teaches us that God is really sovereign over all things, that whatever God ordains comes to pass (Ephesians 1:11), nothing of his purposes can be thwarted (Job 42:4), but that also we must act ourselves - Jesus tells us that we should ask and we will receive. God, in His sovereignty, works through our actions, through our prayers.

In this instance, Paul says that the prayer should be 'so that many will give thanks'. It's not that we need to cojole God, or try to change His mind about things - we can't change the mind of the unchanging God - but rather we pray in order to be united in prayer, in relationship with God. Prayer is an opportunity to draw close to God - Paul has said that his suffering was for the purpose of turning him from himself to reliance on God. Prayer in the face of suffering is this too - a turn from reliance on ourselves, towards reliance on God, to thankfulness to God.

## **Application**

Practically, this scripture calls us to share. To share with each other and to share with God.

First, we should share our sufferings and comforts with others in the church.

Some people share nothing but the bad - they share their sufferings with people, no matter how trivial, but they never share the good, the comforting things. Other people don't ever share their sufferings - they avoid talking about things that are not going well and keep it to themselves. Some are all platitudes and comfort, but it rings hollow. Others still say very little ever.

But Paul asks us to share both our sufferings and our comforts, to share with each other, not keep things to ourselves. I don't think he's asking us to air our dirty laundry in public - we don't have to share everything with everyone, but we should be able to share things with people, and be mutually encouraging.

Secondly, we need to share our sufferings and our comforts with God. We share knowing that he understands and gives meaning to what we experience. We bring our thoughts to God, knowing that he understands and has purposes for what is happening, and we look forward with hope to the time when God brings an end to suffering, when comfort is unbounded and we reach the fullness of life in Christ.

## **Conclusion**

So in conclusion, Paul tells us that we must understand our own suffering in light of the suffering, death and resurrection of Christ.

We have a God that understands our suffering - He has been through worse Himself, and He is united to us, present in all that happens to us. As part of the body of Christ, we share with each other and with God.

We have a God that gives comfort, both as present comfort of the knowledge that He is with us, using our suffering for good purposes, and hope for the day when all suffering will cease, when death is defeated and all is made new.