

The God who Raises the Dead
2 Corinthians 1:3-11

Turn to 2 Corinthians 1 please. Last Sunday was Easter Sunday, and today's message is a sequel to that. To the first generation of Christians, those few hundred men and women from Galilee who had followed Jesus and trusted him, the resurrection meant two things, in this order:

First, the resurrection meant that Jesus really was the One, they were right to trust and follow him, he was telling the truth. They knew because after people humiliated and killed Jesus, God raised him from the dead. The resurrection put God's unmistakeable stamp on Jesus: "This man is the One I have appointed!" Our faith rests on the resurrection of Jesus more than anything else. If God raised Jesus, our worship and faith and obedience are right.

Second, the resurrection of Jesus means that his followers will also rise from the dead. We also will leave empty tombs behind, our bodies also will be renewed and restored with eternal life. The single biggest human problem is death, and everybody knows it. We fight the fear and the problem in every way we can think of, which includes avoiding the topic entirely.

But it's not going away, death pursues us all, it is indeed the last enemy. And the resurrection of Jesus has taken away the sting and the victory of death. It feels like the last word, but it is not. The empty tomb and the living body are the last word, as for Jesus, so also us. Paul had his own story coming to terms with that, which we'll get to in the second half of this sermon.

In the first half of this sermon I'm going to review 2 Corinthians 1:3-7 again. I have preached on this at least twice before in the last five years, and I love this paragraph, so we'll cover it again.

What is God like? (1:3)

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassions and the God of all comfort. God is compassionate and comforting, but this is far stronger than that. God is not just compassionate, he is the Father of compassions. It's like a name: the Father of compassions.

He is not just comforting, he is the God of all comfort. No one on this earth ever receives any comfort without it originating with God himself. He is the God of all comfort. Picture the God you pray to and think about. Is your God the Father of compassions and God of all comfort?

Perhaps, with this line, God is trying to reintroduce himself to you. The serpent came to Adam and Eve, and twisted what God had done and what God had said. The lie made God seem small and selfish and dishonest. They believed the lie. Let's believe God.

What does our God and Father do? (1:4a)

*Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassions and the God of all comfort, **who comforts us in all our troubles.***

God sends comfort toward each one of us in every single one of our troubles. Life includes painful times, discouraging and exhausting times, frightening times. God knows that, and brings comfort to us in all kinds of troubles and every trouble. Which troubles? All our troubles, period.

Why does our God and Father comfort us? (1:4b)

*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.***

God certainly has compassion on you and me when we're in trouble, and wants us to experience comfort. But our Father also intends that we will pass this comfort on.

Comfort is not just for me in my troubles. When God brings comfort to me, he has other people in mind who at some time will need me to bring them what God brought me. God brings us comfort so that we will pass this on.

Everyone of us can be good to those with troubles, but those who have seen severe distress themselves usually give more sensitive comfort and encouragement. This is what God wants.

If you've had sorrow and fear and disappointment and pain, and God has seen you through it, God saw you through it so you could comfort others. That's why God took you through this. To which troubles do we bring comfort? Any trouble. Not ambiguous: any trouble.

How will God bring Comfort to Us?

It will be through others. That's very strong through this whole paragraph. Life together in this paragraph is a body of believers who have all kinds of troubles and are always passing back and forth the comfort that they have received from God. Troubles should not separate us from God or from each other, they should bind us to God and to each other.

Some Christians, when they are in distress, they isolate themselves from other believers. They withdraw, go away to be alone. I've seen this happen. When we do that, we cut ourselves off from a big part of the comfort and healing that God has available to us, because the comfort and healing happens through the body.

Sometimes we're not capable of meeting with others, and that's just how it is. But I cannot begin to tell you how many times I've attended some church gathering out of raw duty, and by the end was I so glad I had been there. That's not everyone's story, but it is mine, and not only mine.

Be slow to deflect encouragement. Sometimes a kind believer encourages a troubled believer, but the troubled believer turns away the encouragement, dismisses it, will not take it to heart. That encouragement was probably comfort from God. You just threw it out!

The Sufferings of Christ are All Our Troubles (1:5)

For just as we share abundantly in the sufferings of Christ, so also our comfort abounds through Christ. What are the sufferings of Christ? In my opinion, when preachers and scholars get going on the sufferings of Christ, they get too righteous by far. They say the sufferings of Christ are persecution or troubles that happen because of ministry, but *not* all troubles.

Don't believe that. Paul has said that God comforts us in ALL our troubles so that we can comfort those in ANY trouble with that comfort. He's writing to the Corinthians, and in the next line he tells them that they are patiently enduring the same sufferings he has. Paul wrote two long letters to the Corinthian church, and nothing in either letter hints at any persecution, and nothing hints that the Corinthians were actively involved in ministry out there.

A few weeks ago we talked about 1 Corinthians 6, where Paul told the Corinthians that their physical bodies were members of Christ. Their bodies, and our bodies, are Christ's body parts. You body and my body are his hands and feet and ears and heart and lungs. Whenever a believer's body is in distress, for any reason, it is certainly the suffering of Christ.

Jesus described his sufferings: *I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.*

Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?' 'The King will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.' Matthew 25.

All our troubles are the sufferings of Christ. But, as Paul adds if our troubles are the sufferings of Christ, then through Christ there will also be great comfort: *For just as we share abundantly in the sufferings of Christ, so also our comfort abounds through Christ.* Christ comforts us.

Shared Comfort Produces Patient Endurance (1:6)

If we are troubled, 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.

Patient endurance means we are able, a week at a time, to keep living faithfully to God and in fellowship with one other. In spite of our trouble and suffering, we carry on and don't quit. That endurance comes from troubled and suffering believers sharing their comfort with each other. Sharing our comfort with others produces faithful endurance in them.

What happens when believers get impatient with each other, and stop comforting each other? We get impatient with how long it is taking the troubled person to get better, to get fixed. We preach at them so they can get fixed, but no more comfort. How will they patiently endure their troubles? We have cut off their lifeline to God. Lord, save us from this. Comfort each other produces patient endurance in each other.

A Different Kind of Comfort – the God who Raises the Dead (vv8-9)

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.

Something terrible happened to Paul, and he seems to be speaking of something recent. It may be connected to the thorn in the flesh in chapter 12. Paul uses stronger language here by far than anywhere else in his writing: “*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.*”

What actually happened to him in the Roman province of Asia? Paul is deliberately silent on what happened, it does not matter, and we will not waste time guessing. What it did to him is brief, but could not be worded more intensely. It was horrible, and Paul was no wimp.

I despaired of life itself. Indeed, I felt I had received the sentence of death. (Scholars are agreed that Paul is speaking of himself here, even though he uses “we” instead of “I,” so let's go with that.)

The doctor says to you, “I am sorry to tell you this, but we cannot operate on your problem. You will certainly die, and probably within one week.” “I despaired of life itself,” says Paul, “I felt I'd received a death sentence.”

Paul was not ready for this. When other Christians died, Paul could tell them confidently that we do not grieve as those who have no hope, for the dead in Christ will rise first. Paul knew this was true, but he never thought it would be true of him.

The first generation of Christians, including Paul, had no idea that the Lord's return would take this long. Paul had always been sure that the Lord would return before he died. On this terrible occasion, he realized that that was not true. He had the sentence of death, and his mind and soul were not ready for this.

He was in terrible despair, like nothing he'd ever felt before. Until this time, he was always sure that death would not happen to him. In the province of Asia he found out that he would die.

Why Did This Happen to Paul?

This happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead. God wanted to offer Paul a different kind of comfort, a different kind of compassion. God deliberately put Paul in a place where his only comfort was that his God raises the dead. 2x.

We are all willing to offer that hope and comfort and compassion to others, as Paul was willing. But taking comfort from it ourselves is a different matter, is it not?

"So we would not rely on ourselves." Paul had always been sure that he had the resources, one way or another, to get through his trouble, and now he found out that he did not. Several translations add the word "learn" here, and that's good. "So I could learn not to rely on my own resources but on the God who raises the dead." Paul had to learn this.

Paul was prepared to meet God, but he was not prepared to meet death. And God backed Paul into a corner, so that the only way out was that Paul had to look at God and say, "you're the God that raises the dead, and that's my only way out of this."

As it turned out, God rescued Paul. God can show up at any moment, and do what he wants. On the other hand, Paul did eventually die. The sentence of death that Paul felt was in fact a message from God that Paul would die before the Lord returned.

Paul has two wonderfully encouraging Scriptures about death. One is in Php 1, where he says, "to live is Christ and to die is gain, for to depart and be with Christ is better by far." The other is 2 Cor 5, where he says that "to be present in the body is to be absent from the Lord, we prefer to be absent from the body and present with the Lord."

Both of those Paul wrote after his trouble in Asia. I myself am afraid to die, and I have taken hold of both those texts many times. I love them. I myself have gotten comfort from those texts, as have many of you. God needed Paul to be in a place where Paul could offer others that kind of comfort. Let's prepare ourselves to rely on the God who raises the dead.

God took Paul through something really awful so that Paul could offer that kind of hope to all the readers of his letters over the ages. Paul's mind and soul were in huge despair, so we could drink from that hope and optimism in the face of death.

If we are troubled, 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. Amen.

Our Scripture began with praise. Let's turn that into our prayer:

PRAYER: God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, you are indeed the Father of compassions and the God of all comfort. You comfort us in all our troubles, so we can comfort each other. And you are the God who raises the dead! These words also describe our life together, and we ask that this would happen more and more. May your comfort overflow to us and among us, and may we trust the God who raises the dead. We're so relieved you are that God. Amen.

BENEDICTION: May the Lord direct your hearts into God's love and into Christ's perseverance. May the Lord of peace give you peace at all times and in every way. The Lord be with all of you. Amen. Go in God's peace to love and serve the Lord.