

**“Connected in Suffering”**

2 Corinthians 1:3-11

August 27, 2017

This morning we begin our fall series on the book of 2 Corinthians, and we are calling it Connected to Serve. As we will see in this letter, one of Paul’s themes is that we no longer belong to ourselves; we belong to the Lord. Since that is true it shapes how we live as a connected people, to Him and to one another, but also we therefore pursue his mission and priority, which is to serve the world. We are Connected to Serve.

Corinth in Paul’s day had been an old city made new. It had been destroyed, lay in ruins and by Paul’s day, rebuilt from rubble left scattered for years.

What that meant is that the settlement and growth in Corinth was new. There was no aristocracy to hold land; there was no generational settlement for power to be consolidated. Corinth grew as a new city, filled with new money, and a “pull yourself up by your bootstraps” attitude with an independent and upwardly mobile middle class. It was a bit like an ancient Las Vegas: lots of new homes, new money, new settlement and anything goes as long as you flash what you got!

What aspiration to the good life meant to these people was wealth, a prestigious neighborhood, social standing to prove you’ve climbed up and some sort of spirituality as a cherry on top. Are we talking about ancient Corinth, or St Louis County? Sounds familiar, doesn’t it?

Paul’s word to the church in Corinth is just as relevant to us as it was to them: We are connected, but for a purpose larger than ourselves. God is building his kingdom in and through us...including using our suffering.

<sup>3</sup> Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, <sup>4</sup> 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. <sup>5</sup> For as we share abundantly in Christ’s sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too. <sup>6</sup> 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. <sup>7</sup> Our hope for you is unshaken, for we know that as you share in our sufferings, you will also share in our comfort.

<sup>8</sup> 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. <sup>9</sup> 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. <sup>10</sup> 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. <sup>11</sup> 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.

What do you have that you are passing on?

On a vacation last year, Missy and I had the opportunity to visit with a man who ran a bead shop. This Roman man had a shop tucked away in a narrow alleyway, and when we walked in his face lit up. He had things he wanted to show us.

The place was full of glass that he had produced. There were ornaments, beautifully blown glass balls for hanging on the Christmas tree; there were row after row of beads. And there was his work bench, which he happily sat down behind to give us a demonstration of just how he makes all these beautiful things.

While was working his craft, Missy and I asked questions. What we learned was he was a 5<sup>th</sup> generation glass producer—5<sup>th</sup> generation! And he had a shop where he was teaching the 6<sup>th</sup> generation as we speak. This man had something to pass on, something to instill in others, and his entire life was arranged around passing on his craft.

What do you have that you are passing on? As the Apostle Paul wrote to this church in Corinth, a church and a city not all that different from ours, he wrote at the beginning of this letter of passing on two significant yet surprising things: affliction and comfort. **More specifically he was passing onto them the expectation of affliction, and an experience of comfort.** This is what a growing Christian life looks like, Paul suggests. Not that we all will alike experience the *same kinds* of suffering and affliction, but we all will struggle to some degree because of living in a fallen world. As God’s people connected to him, we have something to share with one another and with the world. **What do we share?**

### 1. The character of God in the theater of affliction.

Look at v. 3. Paul labels God's character, his nature, for us by calling God **the Father of mercies and the God of all comfort**. More than simply a label, he is describing something true of God. He is the God of all comfort. That comfort of which he speaks is not a mere psychological help; it is that, but more. It is more than a feeling; it is that, but it is more.

The comfort, or consolation, Paul speaks of is more a state of peace experienced in the middle of difficulty, challenge and affliction, based on confidence in God's ACTION: his commitment to deliver and save his people. That is real comfort. Our subjective feeling of being comforted comes not from inside us, but rather, rests on God's powerful ACTION: an unyielding commitment to save us, to deliver his children, come what may.

But that experience of God's character has a context. It is sensed, and given from God when we experience "affliction," v. 4, a word used for pain we feel from either outward circumstances OR inner, mental anguish. It also is used for the pain of physical misfortune or torture, even death. When we feel in the grip of despair or death, God comes to us.

Yet, Paul goes even further in v. 9, to suggest that all of this has a **purpose**, that they would not rely on themselves but on God who raises the dead. Their affliction has a "so that" attached to it.

He argues that our suffering and affliction serves a purpose in our sanctification, in our growth to be more like Jesus. It is in our affliction that we experience the grace of learning to trust God. It is almost that Paul is saying as one commentator suggested, we are introduced to a sort of affliction, which can, in turn, lead us to a greater understanding of God himself.<sup>1</sup> We not only read about but EXPERIENCE the character of the God of comfort when we are in the furnace of affliction, not outside it. Paul is subtly changing our understanding of what comfort is! It is in the theater of affliction and suffering that we see God as a God of consolation, not outside it. But how counter-intuitive that is.

We may be tempted in our world to think of comfort as having a cosmic do over, wielding a giant eraser to remove things we find undesirable. Comfort is the ability to avoid or erase trials, difficulties, suffering, to smooth things over so we are at ease. Comfort equals no difficulty, or as one commentator put it, a "tranquilizing dose of grace".<sup>2</sup> But that is not God's perspective.

God's perspective is that suffering and pain are real, and it is in that context of suffering and pain that he is seen and experienced powerfully and personally. Samuel Rutherford, a 17<sup>th</sup> century Scotsman and participant in the Westminster Assembly, wrote, "The High King of Heaven keeps his choicest wine in the cellar of affliction." He is right. Growth doesn't come in ignoring the suffering or pretending like it isn't there, or avoiding any and all difficulty. Nor does it come by hiding it from the community and people within which God has placed us! Rather, growth comes by facing it with courage and expecting that God will be present and strengthen us inside the challenges.

Paul writes us that he felt like he had received the sentence of death, v. 8-9. He was SURE he was going to die, to be destroyed. But he wasn't. **The only thing that God destroyed in him through this trial was Paul's sense of self-reliance.** He could only trust God, and in learning that, God made him more like Jesus. It wasn't avoiding the struggle that produced this in Paul. It wasn't wielding a cosmic eraser. It was knowing the Lord's presence in the middle of the difficulty. There is a purpose, a "so that" of God *in* the struggle. Where is God destroying self-reliance in your life, SO THAT you might learn his heart of love and comfort for you?

There is a second purpose, "so that" of God in your struggles and afflictions. **God comforts us, v. 3, SO THAT, v. 4, we may be able to comfort others in affliction.** His comfort in part comes THROUGH one another! Our growth together as a body of Christ where we genuinely experience a sense of connection is directly proportional to our willingness to tell our stories of how God has comforted us and receive comfort from one another. Growth to become more connected requires a sense of vulnerability before one another, trusting one another with our stories of affliction AND God's comfort in the middle of it.

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<sup>1</sup> George Guthrie, *2 Corinthians*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015), p. 87.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, 67.

The Apostle Paul made himself VERY vulnerable in v. 8, <sup>8</sup>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. It is hard, no, it feels incredibly risky for a pastor or leader to admit what the mighty Apostle Paul admits here: I'm was afraid. I was despairing. I was depressed! We may feel the weight of omni-competence that is expected, and telling another that you just might be cracking under the weight seems like you are giving someone information with which they can harm you.

But friends, let me tell you, that it is much more often through the vehicle of our weakness, our limits shared, our struggles that God builds a real and lasting connection among people.

Earlier this summer in our series on prayer, we talked about the incredibly fruitful and continuing ministry of Charles Spurgeon. His congregation was praying, pleading for the Holy Spirit to bring renewal and revival. I also mentioned to you that although a powerful preacher, Spurgeon was a broken man, missing nearly half of his Sundays at London Metropolitan Tabernacle. He could not preach nearly half of the Sundays because he was depressed!

That weakness changed the way Spurgeon preached. One Sunday he preached from the text, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" He wrote:

I heard my own dark chains clank while I tried to preach to my fellow-prisoners in the dark.; but I could not tell why I was brought into such an awful horror of darkness, for which I condemned myself. On the following Monday, a man came to see me who bore all the marks of despair upon his countenance...He said to me,..."I never before, in all my life, heard any man speak who seemed to know my heart. Mine is a terrible case; but on Sunday morning you pointed me to the life, and preached as if you had been inside my soul."

He continued in his telling that this man was saved from suicide and came to know a bit of the light of Jesus in his struggles. But, he further wrote:

I know I could not have [helped that man] had I not myself been confined in the dungeon in which he lay. I tell you the story, brethren, because you may sometimes not understand your own experience, and the perfect people may condemn you for having it; but what know they of the suffering of God's servants? <sup>3</sup>

You, as God's servant may have suffered, and may BE suffering, and yet it is in the sharing of how God is bringing you through it that may be the healing balm of the person seated in the pew next to you, or in the house next to yours in your neighborhood, or in the cubicle next to you at work. Where might we experience God's comfort and confidence in him in the midst of affliction that you can give away?

As I was typing this very paragraph, an email popped up on my screen that essentially said, "my friend is in the midst of deep marital distress and doesn't know what to do. I know you experienced that pain, too. Would you be willing to talk to him?" OF COURSE...to offer the comfort of the steadfast character of God to another in need! We are connected to serve! Often our scars that remain tender offer the best context for empathy.

As we grow to be known as a community of people where a person can be honest with real struggles, a place where a broken person can take off the mask of having my life together, a safe place to admit "my marriage is broken", and be met with the comforting character of God instead of judgment or mere perfectionism, THEN we will offer a tremendous service to our community. My sense is we have a ways to go. But what a tremendous gift we've been given. Where have you struggled and experienced God in the midst of it? In your friendships? Marriage? Workplace? With kids? In illness? In loss? In Heartbreak? In fighting a battle with sin? And how might you offer to others at Central, or in your neighborhood what God has given to you?

## 2. The way to endure.

What else to we have to share? We are told that God is the God of comfort. But how do we endure trials NOW? Paul shows us here and will elaborate more as the book goes. Here is the principle: **Remembering God's work in the past, Plus knowing what he has promised for the future, brings confidence and peace in the present.**

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 70.

Look again at v. 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. There is a progression? From the circumstances where Paul was sure he would die (the past) he goes the surety that in the day of resurrection he will deliver. Our God is the one who will triumph in the end on the last day, and will raise the dead. He will bring all our suffering and affliction, all injustice and abuse, all sickness and disease to an end when he returns with resurrection and renewing power. God delivered in the past, and promises a certain triumph of life in the future.

This is certain because of Jesus's work to take upon himself Paul's judgement and our judgement on the cross. We are recipients of the promises of redemption because Jesus has conquered our sin on the cross, giving his life in exchange for ours, and in his triumphant resurrection. Sin is defeated. Life is promised for eternity.

And it is those twin truths that give Paul and us hope in the present. Did you notice v. 9? The Lord is the God who raises (present) the dead. On him we set our hope, v. 10, that he will deliver us again, a hope for that resurrection power of Christ to be present now, in our current struggles, and affliction. Because we've experienced his work in the past—his work of taking our shame on the cross and delivering us in affliction in days gone by, and look forward to his complete work of renewal, of removing all touch of sin and death on the last day, we can trust him in the present by that same resurrection power to rescue us from impossible circumstances and trials. And if not rescue, he will give us aid to stand up within those afflictions, suffering and trial. He will steel our spines to stand today.

How can we endure in hope? Hang onto God's work in the past for you on the cross and in you; also, solidly cling to his promise of restoration and renewal on the last day. Those twin truths crash into the present to birth hope today in the God who raises the dead, does the impossible for his people. Today.

The question is this. Can anyone tell what you believe about your future by the way you deal with trouble in the present?

But you know, you can't give away what you do not have. Do you personally know the comfort and joy of the confidence that your sin has been crucified, punished, finished in Jesus in your place? And what remains is the joy of renewing work of the eternal presence of God?

We are called to live, love, and serve in such a way that the only way our lives makes sense is that we live for another horizon—another kingdom of a God who renews broken people and broken places.

What are you passing on? What will people learn from your life? We are connected, to serve the world with a powerful, life-giving Christ.