

## **Comfort in Trouble**

Scripture: 2 Corinthians 1:8–11

Code: 47-4

What a joy it is this morning to turn to the Word of God and allow the Spirit of God to speak to us. This morning we return again to 2 Corinthians chapter 1. And we're examining verses 3 through 11, a section we've entitled "Comfort in Trouble." One of the constant preoccupations of our culture is to ask the question, "Why do bad things happen to good people?" If you are at all a reader or if you browse at all in bookstores or if you read newspapers and magazines you know that this question is seemingly addressed in every month and every week as we march our way through these current years.

Somebody is writing a new article or a new book, having a new discussion on this matter. It has to do with the fact that people aren't willing to recognize, first of all, that they're sinful and secondly, that they live in a sin-cursed, sin-stained fallen world. They have such an elevated opinion of themselves, such a lofty view of who they really are that it's somehow inconceivable to them that something bad might happen. After all, they would imagine themselves to be the good people.

Even among Christians there are new books coming out almost monthly, a very popular new book recently having been written on this subject, addressing the same issue. W, why is it that bad things happen to good people. Or where is God in the midst of my trouble? Or how am I supposed to figure out God when everything I would assume to be characteristic of his treatment of His people is not happening? You would think – you would think that the answer to the question was obscure. You would think that trying to solve the problem was very difficult when, in fact, it isn't.

In fact, it would seem that you wouldn't even need a whole book to answer the question, it could be answered rather summarily and rather briefly. Bad things happen to good people because of sin. We live in a sinful world and we, ourselves, are sinful people. And while that is an answer, it is not a satisfactory one because it doesn't give us enough information to sort out some other things that certainly come into play in comprehending this issue. So let me see if I can't help you with that.

Bad things do happen to good people. Let's put it another way, bad things do happen to God's people. Let's even go further. God allows bad things to happen to His people. And the question is why. I don't think any of us is questioning that this indeed is true. All of us have experienced to one degree or another difficulties and trials and troubles. We know they happen. The question is why. Why does God allow bad things, devastating things to happen to His people? Let me see if I can't give you a list of answers to that question that will sum it up.

Number one. God allows bad things to happen to His people to test the validity of their faith, to test the validity of their faith. That is to say, to determine if their faith is a lasting faith. To put it another way, to determine if it is a destructible faith. Because if it is a destructible faith, it is not a saving faith. Because saving faith is indestructible, saving faith endures to the end. Saving faith perseveres. Hezekiah was being tested in 2 Chronicles 32:31 and it says, "God left him to test him that he might know all that was in his heart." In other words, God abandoned Hezekiah so that Hezekiah could see

what he was really like when left to himself. It wasn't that God needed to know what he was like, God knows that. A true saving faith will pass that test.

Job was tested beyond imagination. All of his children were killed. Everything he owned, and he was an extremely wealthy man, was lost. He became smitten with a serious and perhaps fatal disease. His whole world caved in. It was a test. In the middle of it all while his wife was saying, "Curse God and die," indicating she had flunked the test, Job said, "Though He slay me, yet will I trust Him," indicating that he had passed the test. You see, for Job it was only a manifestation that his faith was real. And Job's response was, "I heard about God and I knew Him to some degree, but through this I have seen Him clearly."

Habakkuk had a dilemma that was beyond him. Terrible things were happening to the people of God, Israel. Indescribable things were happening. And the prophet Habakkuk was crying and crying to God and saying, "Stop this, turn it around, redeem Your people, show Your power, make them a righteous people. How long will I cry? How long will I cry?" And God gave him an answer that was just the opposite. God not only said I'm not going to bring a revival, I'm going to bring the Chaldeans who are worse than the Israelites and they're going to act as the executioners of the Jews.

And now his problem was infinitely more complex. Problem number one: why doesn't God revive His people? Problem number two: if God's not going to revive His people, how in the world can He use a worse people to be their judge? And when it was all in the midst of his mind and the chaos was overpowering him, he was reminded of a simple principle, "The just shall live by faith." Trust Me. And at the end of that little prophecy of Habakkuk he says, "If everything in the world goes in reverse direction, if everything goes according to what everyone understands and comprehends as reasonable and normal," he says, "yet will I trust in the Lord." He passed the test. His faith endured.

And one of the things that God is doing in bringing these trials into life is testing faith. You say, "Why does He want to do that?" Not for His sake. I say it again for your sake. Don't you want to know whether your faith is saving faith? Don't you want to know whether your faith is enduring faith? God is giving you the gift of security. He's giving you the gift of confidence. He's solidifying your hope by testing your faith. And when you pass the test, you have an objective affirmation that you are truly saved. It becomes for you assurance because true faith cannot die, no matter how severe the trial may be. So if your faith endures, you have a saving faith. What a gift from God it is to know you have a saving faith.

Secondly, God allows bad things to happen to His people to wean them from the world, to wean them from the world. to help us break our attachments to the world. Because we tend, you see, to trust in all of the worldly things, all of the worldly resources, human reason and money and power and prestige and influence and friendships and whatever else. And the Lord brings us to trials in order that we might be weaned away from confidence in worldly things.

In John chapter 6, for illustration, there was a multitude gathering around the disciples. And Philip was very concerned because they were going to be hungry and how were they going to be fed? And Jesus put Philip through a little test. In verse 6 of John 6 – well, verse 5, actually, Jesus said, "Philip, where are we going to buy bread to feed these people?" Now immediately Philip did a worldly inventory. "Well, we have 200 denarii, that's not going to cut it. That's not going to buy enough food for this crowd."

In other words, Philip was given the opportunity to say to Jesus, "O Lord, You are the God of creation. What's the problem? You want to feed them, feed them." He had a perfect opportunity to demonstrate that he had been weaned from worldly confidences. But he hadn't been. He says it can't be done. And verse 6 says, "Jesus asked him the question to test him," to see if he was still trusting in what he could see and feel. And the Lord brings us to extreme situations where we don't have any capability in ourselves, where there aren't any human resources, where there's nowhere to turn but to Him, and to wean us away from confidence in worldly things, to pull us off of that trust in things that pass away.

Moses exercised that. In Hebrews chapter 11, Moses, you remember, by faith refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter. He was willing to say no to being in the elite culture at the highest level of Egyptian society and take up the cause of slave Jews. You remember he went out there and actually fought for the Jews and took the life of an Egyptian. And, of course, spent the next 40 years running. He said no to everything to say yes to the reproach of Christ, it says in Hebrews 11. Because, it says, he looked to an eternal reward, Hebrews 11:26. He saw beyond the world, beyond the mundane.

Trials will do that for you. They will wean you away from worldly things. People kept telling Paul in Acts 20 that he was going to be imprisoned when he got to Jerusalem, that he was going to be put in chains, perhaps even lose his life. And Paul's response was, "None of these things move me," Acts 20:24. What do I care? I only want to finish the work that Christ gave me to do. He had a completely otherworldly perspective. Trials wean us from worldly attachments and perspectives.

Thirdly, the Lord allows bad things to happen to His people to call them to heavenly hope, to call them to heavenly hope, to fill our hearts with anticipation for the glories to come so that we will live in hope. Romans 5:3 says, "Tribulation brings perseverance, perseverance brings proven character, proven character brings hope and hope never disappoints." You want to never be disappointed in life? I mean, absolutely never disappointed in life? Then live in the hope of heaven. And no matter how bad it gets here won't matter. You couldn't be disappointed because you're not putting any stock here anyway.

The way to never be disappointed in this life is to make sure that your preoccupation is in the life to come. And trials do that. Trials produce patience or endurance. Endurance accumulates until you have proven character. Proven character then lives in hope. And then you can say with the apostle Paul, "The sufferings of this world, they're not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be ours in heaven." You can say with Paul over in the fourth chapter of 2 Corinthians, "We do not lose heart. Even though our outer man is decaying, our inner man is being renewed day by day, for momentary light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison."

In other words, suffer, fine. Suffer in this world, fine. I'll take all the suffering that they want to give me for Christ's sake because I maybe being beaten down in this life but I am accumulating an eternal reward in the life to come. Every blow, every stripe on his body, every scar left by a stone or a whip or a stick or a stock or whatever, was gaining for him an eternal weight of glory.

And he says it's very simple, verse 16 – verse 18 rather. Verse 18, "We look not at the things which are seen but at the things which are not seen, the things which are seen are temporal, the things

which are not seen are eternal.” I live in the light of heaven. That’s why he could say, “For me to live is Christ, to die is gain. Far better to depart and be with Christ.” You see, trials tend to call us to heavenly hope. First, they test our faith, then they wean us from worldly things, and they attach us to heaven. Heaven becomes all the more sweeter the longer you live and bear the burden of trials in this life.

Fourthly, the Lord allows bad things to happen to good people to show us what we really love, to show us what we really love. It’s all part of our sanctification. You see, trials will reveal what is most precious to you. If proven character is most precious, if enjoying the sufferings of Christ for the sake of being a fellow sufferer with Him is most precious, then you’ll endure anything. If bearing the cross and the reproach of Christ is most precious, then you’ll suffer the loss of anything for that.

But if your bank account is most precious, when stock market goes down or when the savings and loan where you had your money folds or when a depression hits, you’re going to be in big-time despair. You’re not going to be able to back up and say, “Well the Lord I love supremely must have in mind to do some wonderful work of molding and shaping my character after the image of Jesus Christ, so I praise Him for this.” It all depends on what you love most. If you – if you love your possessions most, when you lose your job and can’t make your mortgage payment, then you’re going to be in despair. And you might even shake your fist at God and – and you might even begin to question God’s integrity and God’s love.

You see, it’s kind of like Abraham and Isaac. Abraham loved Isaac, probably loved Isaac certainly to the level that any father would love his son and maybe beyond. After all, he was an old man when this child was born and he must have waited for all of those years with a heart loaded with anticipation for the great moment when he would have a son. And here the son came, a legitimate son, Isaac, the only legitimate son. I wasn’t enough that just that he was a son, on top of that he was the son of the covenant. God had promised that out of Abraham’s loins and through his son would come a whole generation of people as – as could be numbered like the sands of the sea and the stars of the heaven. All of God’s promise and all of Abraham’s hope was bound up in this child.

So it wasn’t just the love of a father for the son but the love of the father for all that the son meant. And yet, when God said put him on an altar on Mount Moriah, take a knife and plunge it into his heart, Abraham took him, put him on the altar, lifted up the knife and was about to stick him in the heart with it and take away the life of the son he loved. Why? Because he loved God more than he loved his son. That was the test and he passed. God spared the son, you remember, and provided another sacrifice.

Trials, extremities, difficulties in life will always reveal what you love most. If it’s your physical health and wholeness, if you’re into that kind of thing and that’s what’s most important to you, disease will crush you. If you love God’s purposes of sanctifying and molding you to the image of Christ most of all, you may accept what God brings into your life by way of physical malady and illness as something that He has in His own purpose for the glory of Christ and your own sanctification. But you will find through the trials of life the revelation of what is most precious to you.

Fifthly, trials also allow God to teach us obedience. Trials also allow God to teach us obedience. The – the point is, folks, while it is – it is right to say that God allows trouble to test the strength of our faith, to wean us from worldly things, to call us to a heavenly hope, to help us to see what we really love, most all of those trials could come to us as chastening because we’re sinful, right? And through

those trials we learn that sin has painful consequences. Trials are God's chastenings. Hebrews chapter 12 has such a magnificent lesson to teach us about that. "My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord nor faint when you are reprov'd by Him, for those whom the Lord loves He disciplines and He scourges every son whom He receives."

Why does He do that? He does it, verse 10, "that we may share His holiness." He does it, verse 11, that we might produce "the peaceful fruit of righteousness." He's trying to discipline the sin out of us. He's trying to teach us that sin has consequence. He's trying to show us the value of obedience. It's a great lesson. We bring on ourselves many of our trials by our iniquities. We have to see them as God's chastening. And every son that He loves He chastens in order that He might bring that son to holiness and righteousness.

Number six. God allows bad things to happen to His people in order that He might reveal His compassion in our misery. God is ever and always concerned to manifest Himself. It is God's desire that we understand who He is, we know His nature and that we see His nature displayed to us. And if God is a God of compassion and if He's a God of mercy, if He's a God of grace, if He's a God of pity, if He is the Father of mercies and the God of all comfort, as verse 3 in our chapter says, then He needs an opportunity to demonstrate that. No calamity, no comfort. No loss, no need for loving kindness. No pain, no need for pity.

Psalms 63:3 says it so magnificently. The psalmist says, "Because Thy loving kindness is better than life, my lips shall praise Thee." He says better than anything in life is Your lovingkindness. What does that mean? Tender mercy. What does that mean? Compassion on people who suffer, who are in pain, who are in trouble. The psalmist says, "Better than anything else I have ever experienced in all of life is to experience Your lovingkindness, which means I have to go through pain or I'll not know that."

This is exactly what Job said when he said, "I heard of You with the hearing of mine ear, now my eye sees You." God is never more intimately known to us than when He comes to us in the midst of our pain, is He? Never. I know in my own life those most extreme circumstances of my life, the greatest amount of earthly trouble have always been the times of purest intimacy with God in which I have seen Him manifest His compassion, His mercy, His pity, and His loving-kindness. And I can say with the psalmist, His loving-kindness is better than anything else in life and to know that you have to know the trouble to which His loving-kindness responds.

Number seven. God does allow bad things to happen to His people to develop their spiritual strength for greater usefulness, to develop their spiritual strength for greater usefulness. You have to have a tested person in the really difficult ministries. The more you are tested and refined by trials and trouble, the more useful you become.

James says that, chapter 1 verse 2, "Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials." – Why joy? – "Because the testing of your faith produces endurance and let endurance have its perfect result" – What is it? – "that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing." Wow. The Lord is going to use trials to make you perfect, mature, complete, lacking nothing, to make you the strongest, most formidable Christian. Greater usefulness comes through the path of suffering.

Number eight. The Lord allows bad things to happen to good people to enable them to help others in

their trials, to enable them to help others in their trials. One of the reasons that I have difficulty is so God can come to me in my difficulty and strengthen me and then I can come to you with the strength He's given to me.

Isn't that what Paul said back in verse 4? Didn't we go through that in verses 4, 5 and 6, where he says, "who comforts us in all our afflictions 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." What the Lord is doing is allowing trials in our life, pouring comfort in on top of those trials to strengthen us to do the very same for others. As He said to Peter in Luke 22:31, "After you have turned around from this trial, strengthen the brethren."

Now with all of that, there is yet one further purpose for pain, one further reason for trouble. And it is the reason which is the focal point of our text for this morning. It is this. God allows His people to experience trouble and trials in order to display His astounding power, in order to display His astounding power.

Let's look at our text, verse 8. "For we do not want you to be unaware, brethren, of our affliction which came to us in Asia that we were burdened excessively beyond our strengths so that we despaired even of life. Indeed, we had the sentence of death within ourselves in order that we should not trust in ourselves but in God who raises the dead, who delivered us from so great a peril of death and will deliver us, He on whom we have set our hope, and He will yet deliver us. You also joining and helping us through your prayers that thanks may be given by many persons on our behalf for the favor bestowed upon us through the prayers of many."

These verses wrap up the opening paragraph of this letter which we've been studying now for the last few weeks. Now remember, in this letter, Paul is defending the integrity of his character and ministry against the attacks of false teachers in Corinth. They've assaulted him every way conceivable in order to destroy his credibility so they can undermine his doctrine and teach error. Apparently one of the assaults on his virtue was to say that he was suffering all the time because of sin. And he was getting put in prison and being beaten and whatever else was happening to him and having endless difficulty in his life because God was punishing him, God was chastening him.

Paul answers that accusation here in verses 3 through 11. He says, "God is coming to him but not to chasten, but to comfort." And that's why he begins in verse 3 by saying, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort." Even though this letter is written with a lot of heartache and a lot of pathos because he know – knows what's going on in the Corinthian church to undermine his work, at the same time there is joy in his heart because God is coming to him. Not chastening him for sin but comforting him because he is suffering for righteousness sake.

So he opens defending his sufferings by thanking God for comfort which God has faithfully been giving to him in all his pain. And as he thanks God for his comfort in this section, he gives us a marvelous look at the reality of spiritual comfort. First of all, we saw the promise of comfort in verse 4, how that the God of all comfort comforts us in all our affliction. And then we saw the purpose of comfort, also in verse 4, in order that we might be able to comfort others. And then we saw the parameters of comfort in verse 5. The comfort of God extends as far as we are suffering for Christ's sake. That's the boundary. Then we saw the partnership of comfort in verses 6 and 7, how that there is mutual comfort going back and forth between Paul and other believers in Corinth, a wonderful

sharing as he uses the word several times in verse 7.

So the promise, the purpose, the parameters and the partnership of comfort have already been discussed. And now, in coming to verse 8 we come to the power of comfort, the power of it. To show how powerful God's comforting work can be, Paul speaks very personally of a situation in his life that was the worst life-threatening experience he ever had. Verse 8, he says, "We do not want you to be unaware, brethren, of our affliction which came to us in Asia." Now, beloved, we don't know what this was. The Corinthians must have known because he doesn't give them any details. And surely whatever was going on in his life by way of persecution was passed along the "grace vine" to these people.

The Corinthians were not ignorant of the nature of this affliction. They were ignorant of the extremity of it. They were ignorant of how severe it was, the intensity of it. And they were ignorant of what was – what God was doing in it. But they – they must have known about what it was. Maybe it was stoning. Maybe it was a combination of being whipped and maybe it was a combination of being beaten with rods and put in stocks and deprived of food and water, imprisoned, wild beasts. Who knows? Who knows what was threatening his life? It happened after the writing of 1 Corinthians or he would have told them. So it's rather recent.

It occurs, he says in verse 8, in Asia Minor, prior to his coming to Philippi in Macedonia to meet Titus. So it was in and around the area of Asia Minor where the primary city was Ephesus. In chapter 16 of 1 Corinthians, back one chapter in verse 9, he makes the statement that there is a wide door for effective service in Ephesus where he is and he's going to stay there, but also there are many adversaries. It is conceivable that one of these adversaries or one or more of these adversaries has come near to taking his life.

In Romans chapter 16 verse 3 it says, "Greet Prisca, or Priscilla and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus" – verse 4 – "who for my life risked their own necks." This would have been written soon after 2 Corinthians. Maybe he is there referring to some involvement that those two people had in this life-threatening event. We just don't know what it was. He doesn't tell them the details of it. They were not ignorant that it was happening, they were ignorant of its severity. So that's what he tells them. Verse 8, "We don't want you to be unaware, brethren, of the affliction which came to us in Asia, not what it was but that we were burdened excessively beyond our strength so that we despaired even of life."

We want you to know the severity of it. Paul uses that phrase, "We do not want you to be ignorant," six times. He used it when something concerned him greatly and didn't – he did not want people to have inadequate information. They must have known about the affliction which came to him in Asia, but they didn't know how absolutely severe it was. So deadly, so overpowering, a form of persecution that had no escape. He says, "We were burdened excessively." That's what it says here in the NAS. It actually means we were unbearably crushed to the point of depression. He adds, "beyond our strength," in verse 8.

In other words, it was so terrible there was no possibility of human survival. Whatever kind of physical capability Paul had, this was beyond it. A man can endure a lot. And certainly a man as formidable as the apostle Paul could endure a lot. He must have been a – a strong physical man to some extent, given the rigors of life which he endured in just a normal day's living and moving and walking. Whatever his body could sustain, whatever his body could survive, this was too much. Not

only that, he had an indefatigable spirit. He had a unconquerable soul. And you would imagine that when his body gave out, his mind would pick up his limp body and carry it beyond what could even be imagined. But that's gone too.

And at the end of verse 8, he says, "We despaired, even of life." We lost the battle, the will to live was gone. The word "despaired," a very interesting Greek word, a rather long word, I won't pronounce it for you, but in the middle of it which is the substantial component of the word is the word poros from which we get the word "passage," passage. And this word basically says "no passage." Or to put it another way, "no exit." We despaired. What does that mean? We found no way out. Literally, the total absence of an exit. There was no escape hatch. There was no way out of this thing; it was over. Mentally we were done in, physically we were overwhelmed. No hope for life at all. That was it.

He experienced some very dire circumstances that express a similar attitude. Second Timothy 4:6, "I am already being poured out as a drink offering and the time of my departure has come," but that time it led to his death. But here he is and he's at the end. Verse 9 he adds this, this is amazing, "Indeed, we had the sentence of death within ourselves." In other words, what he is saying is in our own minds – and there's a plural pronoun here which means somebody else was in this with him, perhaps. He could be using the plural in – in just a humble and meek way. But perhaps there was someone else in this. But in his own mind he says he passed the death sentence on himself. He was to be killed for the gospel's sake. This was it. It was done. It was over.

And that was frightening to him at the time. And it was despairing at the time whereas in 2 Timothy it wasn't. The reason is because here the work was not done and he knew it. He knew it. In 2 Timothy when he reached the point where he was being poured out like a drink offering and the time of his departure was hand – was at hand and he knew he was facing the axe that would chop his head off, there was no sense of despair because he said, "I have finished the course." Remember that? I'm done. But here, he knew he wasn't finished.

By the way, "we had the sentence of death in ourselves," is a fascinating Greek word, apokrima. It's used only here. It means – basically, it's a technical word for passing an official resolution. And he uses a legal term for passing the official death sentence. He says, "I pass the official death sentence on myself." Confident, absolutely assured that it was over. He got to that point. Then it says, verse 10, "In order that we should not trust in ourselves." That was the purpose of God in it.

Why did God take him to that kind of horrible extremity? Why did God put him through who knows what kind of physical flagellation and agony and pain? Well, we couldn't even imagine what kind of torture was being exacted on his body. What kind of mental and emotional chaos and despair in this very situation facing death and knowing the Corinthian church was a mess and so much else was not yet done? In the middle of all of this agonizing pain, physically and emotionally and mentally, why was God putting him through this, "In order that we should not trust in ourselves." God was taking us to the place where we had no escape. We had no human resource intellectually, physically, emotionally. We couldn't call on anything, nothing.

That's just exactly where God wanted them. Just in the perfect place because, as Paul will tell us later in 2 Corinthians 12, in his weakness God's power is perfected, right? God had this as the very purpose. And I'm telling you, folks, that's one of His great purposes in our trials is to take us to the limit and beyond the limit where we have no power to fix it. We can't do anything. All we can do –



and I love this – is trust not in ourselves, verse 9, but in God who what? Raises the dead. I mean it was to that degree. The only way out was going to be in the hands of God because He's the only one who could raise the dead. It was that far gone.

By the way, that is a title for God, "God who raises the dead" is used in the eighteen synagogue benedictions that we commented on in our study back in verse 3. "God who raises the dead" was a Jewish term, descriptive term for God. They say if you're ever called upon to rescue someone who is drowning – some of you may have had this experience – that if you're really thoughtful about it, you won't try to rescue them until they go down for the last time.

Because if you try to intervene at any point prior to that when they still have the strength to kick and fight, they're liable to drown you. But when they come to the very end of their strength and there's no confidence left in their own deliverance, and they are weakened and still, it is then that they can be picked up and brought to safety. And that's exactly where the Lord wants to take us, to the place where we've given it our last shot and we're sinking for the last time and there's nothing in us that can save us and there's no human resource.

And that's exactly where God's power intervenes. Physical illness, whatever it is, emotional distress, financial disaster, death, being forsaken and left alone, whatever shatters your confidence in your own abilities, your own strength becomes your extremity and that is God's opportunity. A progressive weakening of your instinctive self-confidence that leads you all the way to self-despair is exactly where God wants you. Because at that point the only thing that's going to hold you together is a radical confidence in God. And that's where Paul was. And then, in verse 10 he says it. God came riding to the rescue, "who delivered us from so great a peril of death."

Are you like me? Don't you wish you knew what this was? Don't you wish you knew all the details of this? That's kind of our morbid curiosity. All we need to know is that he was at the end. And, boy, he had endured a lot. But God came and rescued him. Hmmm. The Lord proved powerful. And in the midst of that power put Himself on display. There is no extremity beyond the power of God's strength and comfort.

A workman was employed on a building project. One of those high-rise deals. It was necessary because of some deadlines and bad weather for them to work at night. While busy on the edge of the wall, he slipped, lost his balance, fell over the edge, grabbed the edge of the wall with both hands and hung on desperately. He began to scream and cry and call for someone to rescue him. It was pitch black, riveting machines were going, metal hammers were beating and pounding, mechanical motors were running and nobody could hear a word.

Gradually his arms grew numb as he hung suspended over the street below and his fingers began to slip. And against every effort of his own will to hold on, at last he lost his hold and he fell – about three inches to a scaffold that had been there all the time. The darkness prevented him from seeing it. And all through his anxiety he was completely safe. We are so often terrified by our predicaments while all the time there's the scaffold of God's care beneath us. Our ignorance doesn't change the certainty but it does destroy the peace, doesn't it? We need to remember that underneath are the everlasting arms and you don't know that until your fingers slip and you drop.

The promise, the purpose, the parameters, the partnership, and the power of comfort. Let's look

briefly at the perpetuity of comfort in verse 10. Perpetuity means continuity, continuance. And he says – simply says this. “God delivered us from so great a peril of death and will deliver us.” The first one is past. This is present. And the end of the verse, “And He will yet deliver us,” that’s future. He says God’s going to do this right on out to the end because it is He on whom we have set our hope. Well, God delivered you in the past, Paul, but what about the present? He’ll deliver me in the present. What about the future? He’ll deliver me in the future. God will always be so faithful, always.

Again, 2 Timothy chapter 4 in verse 16 he says, “At my first defense no one supported me.” But verse 17, “But the Lord stood with me.” And verse 18, “The Lord will deliver me from every evil deed and bring me safely to His heavenly kingdom. To Him be the glory, forever and ever. Amen.” God will bring me through every situation until it’s time to take me to the Kingdom. Peter knew the same thing in 2 Peter 2:9, “The Lord knows how to rescue the godly. He on whom we have set our hope.” That’s another descriptive term of God. “He on whom we have set our hope, the one in whom we hope.” God our Savior, Christ Jesus. Paul said to Timothy, “Who is our hope.”

The psalmist over and over again said, “My hope is in the Lord,” and we still sing songs to that effect. The perpetuity of comfort is, God says I’ll be there, I’ll be there to comfort you, to strengthen you as the God of all comfort and the Father of mercies right on out to the end until I take you into My Kingdom at the appointed moment. Paul’s enemies were certainly relentless. One deliverance wasn’t going to be enough. There were going to need to be more and more and more and more. And God would always be faithful.

Then the last element of comfort that Paul discusses is what we’ll call the participation of comfort, the participation of comfort. Look at verse 11. This is such a magnificent statement, he knows that among the Corinthians there have been many faithful ones. In spite of the unfaithful who joined the mutiny against him, there have been many faithful ones. And many of them knew about his extremity. Many of them knew of them knew about his situation, though they didn’t know the details. And they upheld him in prayer. And so he says, “The Lord delivered me, He will deliver me in the future, you also joining in helping is through your prayers that thanks may be given by many persons on our behalf for the favor bestowed upon us through the prayers of many.”

He just says God’s going to do what He’s going to do but He’s going to do it in concert with your prayers. He doesn’t want them for a moment to think that he doesn’t need them. He wants them to know that he does need them. That as James 5 says in verse 16, “The effective righteous – the effective fervent prayer of a righteous man is powerful.” God moves through the prayers of His people. He wanted to ensure them that in his future ministry, he wanted to make sure that down the path they were there with him interceding and praying. In Ephesians 6:18 you remember, he – he asked the Ephesians and all those in the area of Asia Minor who had received that letter to pray for him that the Word which he preached would be given free course and go forth with power.

He continually pleaded with people to pray on his behalf. Intercessory prayer is critical to the expression of God’s great power and God’s sovereign purpose. In prayer, human impotence casts itself at the feet of divine omnipotence. Thus the duty of prayer is not to modify God’s power but to glorify it. We’re not trying to change God’s plan, we’re just trying to get in line with it. Why? So that we can give thanks. That’s what he says. You join in helping us through your prayers so that thanks can be given by many people, that is all those who prayed. And that redounds to the glory of God. When everyone is united in intercessory prayer on behalf of God’s servant, then when God delivers him everybody is going to be united in thanksgiving. And that is going to be to the praise of God.

Many prayers bring many thanks. And God works through those prayers. Paul always has this marvelous balance. He never questions the sovereign purpose of God and he never questions the participation of believers in that sovereign work. And so the partnership or the participation is a participation of prayer as we pray for one another in all our trials. That's what Paul meant when he talked about bearing one another's burdens and so fulfilling the law of Christ. We pray for each other faithfully.

Well, tremendous comfort is given to us in this text. Can anything be more wonderful than to realize that God is a God of tender mercy and a God of all comfort who comforts us in all our afflictions? Who comforts us so that we can comfort others? God, who will comfort us to the extremity, whatever it might be, of our sufferings on behalf of Christ? God, who will bring alongside us mutual sufferers who can share the same comfort and the same strength no matter how severe the trial might be. Even if we despair of life, the God who raises the dead can step in and He will until the day He takes us to glory. And then that last great truth. He does it through the prayers of His people.

And when you pray you get involved in the thanks. Sometimes you go to a Bible study and somebody says, "Well, my friend So-and-so was saved." Ten people sit there indifferent and three people say, "Praise the Lord. Isn't that wonderful." And you know who was praying, right? You – you're not trying to change the mind of God, you're just trying to put yourself in a position to express gratitude. That's what prayer does. And all of this comfort coming from God becomes something that we can use to strengthen others that the body might be built up.

This must have been in the heart of Paul when he said to the Thessalonian Christians in this magnificent benediction. "Now may our Lord Jesus Christ Himself and God our Father who has loved us and given us eternal comfort and good hope by grace, comfort and strengthen your hearts in every good work and word."

Do you remember these words from the great hymn? Be still, my soul/the Lord is on thy side/Bear patiently the cross of grief or pain/Leave to thy God to order and provide/In every change he faithful will remain/Be still, my soul; thy best, thy heavenly Friend/Through thorny ways leads to a joyful end/Be still, my soul/thy God doeth undertake/to guide the future as he has the past/They hope, thy confidence let nothing shake/All now mysterious shall be bright at last/Be still, my soul; the waves and wind still know/His voice who ruled them while he dwelt below/Be still, my soul; the hour is hastening on/ when we shall be forever with the Lord/When disappointment, grief, and fear are gone/Sorrows forgot, love's purest joys restored/Be still, my soul; when change and tears are past/All safe and blessed we shall meet at last.

Father, again we thank You for the great treasure of Your Word. We thank You for how it speaks to life in every dimension. We thank You that You are the Father of mercies and the God of all comfort that we can trust that in all the trials of life.

We thank You that You have such abundant purpose in our trials, to give us assurance, to wean us from the world, to call us to heavenly hope, to show us what we love, to teach us obedience, to demonstrate Your mercy and compassion, to make us more useful to You and to others and to display Your great power.

So we, like Paul, rejoice in our trouble for in our weakness Your strength is perfected. And like our Savior who found the path of glory was through suffering, may we follow in His footsteps. We ask these things in His dear name. Amen.

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