

2 Corinthians 1:1-11

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Date: 19 January 2020

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[0 : 00] Our most gracious Heavenly Father, we thank you that we have the freedom to worship you this morning.

! We thank you for the gift of your Holy Spirit present here with us to be our teacher and our guide. We now pray that you will be with us and that you will glorify our Lord Jesus Christ in our midst. We pray this in his name. Amen. I'd like to thank you very much for hosting us this weekend and to thank your dear minister for his very kind invitation.

For the Boneless Fund to be here both last night and this morning. I want to address the theme or the subject of suffering.

In particular as it's the essential aspect of the work of the Boneless Fund. But not only that, we cannot separate suffering from the Christian life and from our faith.

[1 : 10] So I thought, if you would allow me, I combined both those two areas this morning. And I'd like to base what I have to say on the passage which was read to us earlier from 2 Corinthians chapter 1 and verses 1 to 11.

Paul writes in verse 8, For we do not want you to be unaware, brothers, of the affliction we experienced in Asia.

Another version says, we do not want you to be uninformed. What is saying simply this? I'm writing to you because I want to let you know of the sufferings which we have been experiencing in Asia. It's as similar as that. And then he goes on to say, For we are so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despair of life itself.

So I want to inform you that we are serving the Lord in Asia, I and my colleagues, and the problems we have are so great that we despair even of life itself.

[2 : 31] Then he goes further and says, indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death. So great were the difficulties.

He wondered whether life was worth living, whether death would not be preferable. I met an Egyptian doctor who is a Christian.

He said this to me with reference to what is happening in the Middle East. He says, when I look at the Middle East now and I look at the plight of Christians, then I am filled with despair.

I lose all sense of hope. But then he says, when I reflect on the past of how God has dealt with his people, then I am filled with hope.

Because I can see a future. So what he is saying simply is this. There is despair when you look at the present situation.

[3 : 35] But there is hope. When you put that situation in its context. Historically, in terms of how God has dealt with his people. And eschatologically, looking at the future.

Because we know our hope is certain. And nothing will be able to defeat our Lord Jesus Christ. Nor ultimately to destroy his people.

So, in this passage I want to look at four very simple areas. The first is the pressure that comes from suffering. The second is the privilege that we have in being able to suffer for Christ.

And then thirdly to look at the purpose of the suffering. Why does it exist? What is it there for? And then fourthly to look at the relationship between prayer and suffering.

Because the two are interlinked. If we start with the issue of pressure. When Paul writes about the affliction which we experienced in Asia.

[4 : 46] We were so utterly burdened beyond our strength. We despaired of life itself. There is a Greek word there. Thlipsis. Which means pressure. And this pressure has to do with this.

Imagine a person is lying here on this podium. And you take great weight. And you gradually put weight upon weight upon the chest.

What will happen after a while? The breath of that individual is literally forced out of his body. And his lungs collapse. That's the meaning of this passage here.

And very interesting. In old English law the word was used for a person who is called to be a witness. As said in a court case.

And he says to himself I don't want to go. Well the punishment that was meted out to him. Is that he was actually laying on the ground. And great weights were placed upon his chest.

[5 : 51] Until he was crushed to death. So Paul is actually saying. We are being crushed to death. So great is the pressure upon us.

We fear for life itself. Now you may well say. Can anyone get to that point. When they are filled with despair.

And they wonder whether life is worth living. When Islamic State took over northern Iraq. I was there shortly after.

They took over. Many Christians fled to Urbill in Karnasar. There was a lady. She was in a church. Where the refugees were. She was on a mat. And all she was doing was crying. Endlessly. Every hour. Every day. And she was crying for her little daughter.

[6 : 55] The story was very simple. She was in Mosul. The terrorists were coming. Her husband was blind. And she had a little baby daughter.

So she said to herself. Everyone is fleeing. Where can I go with a blind husband and a little daughter? Perhaps they will be merciful to me. They were not. They killed her husband.

And then they took the little girl. Now you may well say. Why did terrorists want the little girl? Well the little girl was sold in Saudi Arabia.

You see. The ladies who were captured with the girls. There was a price. If you were over 40. If you were over 40. You had one price. If you were in your 20's. You had another price.

But the most valuable. If I use the word commodity. You'd understand it. Was little girl children. And little girl babies. For a three year old. Carried the highest price.

[7 : 56] And of course they were sold to Saudi. Which is our ally. In the Middle East. And so this lady. Is crying over her child. If the child had died.

She could cope with that. And I'm sure if you were a mother. Or a grandmother. You could understand this. But to know that your child is alive. And have been sold as a slave.

In Saudi Arabia. To which shape. How do you cope with it? That's despair. That's that sense. Of utter hopelessness.

That you feel that nothing can change. Your situation. And in many senses. You don't know where to go. You do not want to know what to do. You are seemingly devoid.

Of all hope. And this is why now. Many Christians. Around the world. In places where they're suffering. Is almost speaking of hopelessness.

[8 : 57] Now. When I used to preach about suffering. Many Christians would say. Is it really as bad as this? But last July. Mr. Hunt.

The then foreign secretary. Having commissioned. A report. On the worldwide suffering. Of the church. Concluded. And it's concluded. In that report.

That Christians. Are the most persecuted. Religious group. In the world today. That comes from the British government report. So I do not need to make that point.

Now. Since. That report was published. In July. If you take that. And today. There is a massive. Increase. An intensification. Of suffering. If you look.

And our minister prayed. In his prayer. He mentioned. The southern countries. And West Africa. If you look. At North East. Nigeria. My degree. And areas. At Mali.

[9 : 53] Cameroon. Chad. Niger. Burkina Faso. You have one recurring scene.

Slaughter. You have got whole villages. Being descended upon. By Islamic terrorists. And they kill everyone. They start with the pastor. Then they kill off the man.

The women are taken away. The children as well. The village is destroyed. The world is destroyed. destroy, the wells are poisoned. We're not thinking of one or two. Almost every week a new slaughter comes in. And it's not just now in West Africa. If you look last week, three Christian teachers that were murdered in Gavisia stayed in North Kenya. You have the same pattern now unfolding. So what happened in northern Iraq? What happened in Syria? What is happening in the Sinai in Egypt? What is happening in Libya in Tripoli is now extending into Africa south of the Sahara. And the same issue now is to be found in Southeast Asia, particularly in places like

Indonesia and Malaysia, where it's not whole-scale violence but increasing levels of persecution. And it's not just Islamic, it's also Hindu, what is happening in India. It is also Buddhist, what is happening in Sri Lanka. We have a new ideological battle being in the West, such as countries like ourselves, we have a different battle to fight. One of a secular humanist things like that is a political agenda, which is determined not just to push Christianity to the margins, but effectively to destroy it. And what is happening in our schools, and particularly coming this first, coming September, with the introduction of the new syllabus of the LGBT agenda being taught, we may well see the loss of a generation or more generations in terms of the future of the Church.

So looking at this issue of pressure, it comes in a variety of forms. But that pressure, when applied, can lead to despair, can lead to despair. And this despair can lead to hopelessness. And this is what Paul is describing.

[12:48] This intensity of suffering. So as you read this short passage, he uses words like afflictions, words like suffering. Again and again he comes back to this theme of pressure in a variety of forms.

Now, given this is the reality of the Church today, I would want to argue that it has been the reality of the Church from its very inception. My latest book is on the history of persecution. And what I try to do is to look from the time of our Lord Jesus Christ as to where we are today, how the Church has experienced persecution. It has been part of her very existence.

And so my second point is exactly this. Suffering is a privilege. It is a privilege for us to suffer for Christ.

And Paul addresses this issue. Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. He goes on to speak about suffering. Then verse 5 he says, For as we abundantly share in Christ's sufferings, so through Christ we abundantly share in comfort also.

In that act of suffering we identify with our blessed Lord. The Lord Jesus Christ said in Matthew 16, If you would be my disciple, you must deny yourself. The word deny means to give up all rights to yourself.

[14:40] You must take up your cross. It means you must identify yourself with me. And you must follow me. In obedience you must follow my pathway.

In other words, your life will be a life of sacrifice. There can be no love without sacrifice. There can be no obedience without sacrifice. There can be no discipleship without sacrifice.

And the sacrifice that I speak of. There can be no sacrifice of our Lord Jesus Christ for us.

And this is why it is such an immense privilege. Soon we will come to the communion table and we will take the bread and we will take the wine.

What is the bread? What is the bread? Is it not the body of Christ? What is the cup? Is it not the cup of salvation? But is it not also the cup of suffering?

[15:52] And when we drink the cup of the cup? Are we not drinking of the cup of the cup? Are we not drinking of the blood of our Lord Jesus Christ? No. So here on this table. So here on this table we see the sacrifice of love. The sacrifice of Jesus for us. In the bread and the wine. His body broken. His blood shed.

But is it just a past event? Are we just looking back into the history and commemorating an act that took place 2,000 years ago?

Or is it, brothers and sisters, a present reality? If it is a present reality, then the bread that we take is the body of Christ. That Christ who was incarnate and who is now with the Father and comes to us so that we are the body of Christ.

The blood, the wine that we take, is it not the blood of Christ? Does not His blood run through our veins? So you and I, as the elect of God, those chosen out of the world, we are His body, we are that bread. In our veins, flowing His blood.

We are Christ incarnate and all. But let me take it further. For if the body is not broken today, if the blood is being shed today, if our brothers are being slaughtered and killed, if they're being tortured and maled, is it not Jesus our Lord again being crucified, again being sacrificed for us?

[17:54] And if that be the case, when we take of the bread and we drink of the wine, are we not acknowledging that we are part of a body which is being broken?

And when that blood is being shed, it is our blood that is being shed. Would the Apostle Paul not argue this in Corinthians? If one part of the body hurts, the whole body hurts.

How can we separate ourselves from Christ our Lord? For we are His body, my God. And as He was sacrificed, so we must be sacrificed.

And so as His people worldwide are being sacrificed, so we are apart with them. For we too are being sacrificed.

And this is the privilege that is ours. But let me take it further. How do we describe ourselves as Christians?

[18 : 56] We are brothers and sisters. Are we not? The Muslims have a word for the Muslim community. It's the word Ummah. And the word Ummah means mother and it means womb. For the Muslim comes out of the womb of a mother. That's why they are so close.

Now you may as well say, do Christians have a similar word? We do. At Delphos, Delphi, mother, womb.

We Christians come out of our mother, our Lord Jesus Christ. And therefore we are one with each other. We are not black, brown, white, grey, whatever it is. African, Asian, English.

Once we enter into the Christian faith. Blackboard. We are now brothers and sisters, one with each other. Part of the communion of saints.

And that takes a higher loyalty than any national loyalty. Any racial background or any family background. I learned that from the moment of conversion. I learned that from the moment of conversion. I was a young student. I became a Christian.

[20 : 16] And I went home and told my mother, I become a follower of Jesus. And my mother looked at me and she burst out in tears. And said, son, you now have a choice to make. If you want to remain my son and a part of the Spanish, then you have to reject.

If you want to remain my son. If you want to remain my son and you can no longer be his follower. If however you continue with this faith you have taken on, you cease to be my son and you cease to be a member of this family.

For a short while I was a tramp in London. In East London, if you know, Old Street, Aldous Gate. This is the 1960s. I was sleeping in a bombed out building. I became a tramp. And ultimately arrested by the police.

And I learned from the moment I became a Christian that I had to choose. Identity, family, all had to be replaced.

Now I didn't know all of that at the beginning. There was no consciousness of what I had become. But I knew that so long as I belonged to Jesus, there could be no other.

[21 : 36] And so this privilege that we have is an immense privilege. To be able to suffer, not just for him, as Paul says, but with him.

It's as if we are laid on that cross with him. We go through the trials as he was tried. As he was tortured, so are we tortured.

So Paul speaks of carrying the marks on his body. The marks of Jesus Christ. Brothers and sisters, whatever comes our way, whatever the difficulties we face, and none of us are immune from suffering.

The older we get, we face old age with all his problems. We face bereavement and loss. We face ill health. We watch children growing up with the difficulties. We look at our relationships. We look at money. Life itself is a trial.

Peter speaks of the manifold trials that we have in life. There is no magic bullet to get us out of it. There is no prosperity doctrine. There is no doctrine which says Christians will never suffer. The reality is this.

[22 : 51] So long as we have Jesus, and we are identified with him, then we will carry his marks. We will share in his life and his death. And so it is an immense privilege, counted all joy, when we suffer.

And the greater the suffering, the greater the glory. The greater that knowledge of God himself. The greater that reality of experience, of knowing that living reality of one who is within us, and one who lives with us, and who will carry us through all our life's journeys until the promised end.

This is our hope, and this is our joy, and this is the divine presence and the divine reality that is ever with us. But what is the purpose of it?

The Apostle Paul says, we go through all of this so that we rely not on ourselves in verse 9, but to rely on God who raises the dead.

In other words, we are there to trust God. The sufferings that we have brings us closer to God. It draws us closer to him.

[24 : 17] And day by day we learn to trust him, and to know that he is always there. In these verses, there are three elements that comes out in terms of the nature of God.

You see, I have been focusing on suffering. But the heart of this passage is actually God. And Paul speaks of God in three ways. That God is the God of all compassion.

The word actually, Father of mercies. It should be the Father of compassion. That compassion is the almighty love of God unfolding in our lives and encasing us.

Bringing us up to God himself. It is his love revealed in Jesus. But it is that love that is full of mercy and full of unending love.

That love which can never be broken. That covenant love. That love that will never give up on us. So great is that love. Without love we cannot with human language describe it.

[25 : 30] We turn instead to the hymns. The hymns, O love that will not let me go. I give my real self to thee.

Love divine. You know those hymns. One of my favourite hymns is an old Welsh one. Which speaks of, O the deep, deep love of Jesus.

Vast, unmeasured, boundless thee. Rolling as a mighty ocean in its fullness over me.

Underneath me, all around me, is the current of thy love. Reading onwards. Reading homewards. To thy glorious rest above.

The God of all compassion. But he is also the God of all comfort. And the word comfort here, interestingly enough, in the Hebrew, when you read in Isaiah 40, Comfort ye, comfort ye my people.

[26 : 34] We sing it in the Messiah, for example. It means actually to cause to breathe out. If the pressure is killing us, God's comfort causes us to breathe out.

In the Greek though, it has a further meaning. It comes from, we take the Latin word fortis, which means like a fortress. Strength and courage. So God's comfort is there to give us strength and to give us courage to face every trial in mind.

And every difficulty. He is there to cause us to breathe out. And then, not just compassion, not just comfort, but he's a God who is in control.

Paul speaks of this in verse 10, when he says, He delivered us from such a deadly peril. The pressures come. The afflictions come.

The sufferings come. And they are great. But where is God? God is there. He understands. He knows the end from the beginning. And he is there to deliver us.

[27 : 44] Whether it be in the death or in life. The question is, do we allow the despair that leads to depression, that leads to death?

Last week, there was a funeral. There was a man who was a Christian. So great was the despair in his life and the depression that he committed suicide.

He decided that he could not bear it any longer. And he had to choose that as a way out. And he threw himself in front of a train.

Now what happened there? Did he lose sight of divine providence? That there is God in the midst of all our trials.

And in despair there is still God. Moses in that mountain, enshrouded in darkness, was God.

Remember this.

[28 : 49] God is in the darkness. Not just in the light. He is in the centre of the storm. Not just in the calm. And Paul realises this.

He says, great is the despair. That we despair even of life itself. For God to live with us. God was there.

He knew. He saw. For our great God is the omnipotent God. Our great God is the omniscient God who sees and knows all things.

Our great God is the omnipresent God. The God who is with us. Today, tomorrow, and throughout the end of days.

Until we are with him. And finally, there is a link between prayer and suffering. In this prayer and suffering, Paul writes, indeed we felt we had received the sentence of death.

[29 : 55] But that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the death. 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.

You also must help us by prayer. So that many will give thanks on our behalf of the blessings granted us through the prayers of many.

He says, well, what can you do? He says, you can help us. And how do you help us? By prayer. You see, when we pray, we identify with those whom we are praying with and for.

As Jesus prayed for his disciples, so they became one for him and he became one for them. And so as we look at our brothers and sisters who suffer around the world today, what can I leave you with?

I can leave you with this, which is what Paul writes. In the midst of suffering, pray. Because when you pray for them, you will want to bring comfort to them.

[31 : 09] And Paul speaks of us bringing comfort to those who suffer. But the heart of it comes from this act of prayer.

Because then they become real. They are a part of your life and they are part of your family. Of all the materials which we in the book on the Sun produce, it is our prayer diary.

And Caroline Kerslake, who will be speaking to you soon, she actually creates that every two months. It is one of the highest hearts to do. But every day there is a prayer for the day.

That takes a situation or a country, you make sense of it and you pray. I hope that you will all take that. And whatever you do, whatever you think of what I have said this to you, that you will go away saying that I will pray for my brothers and sisters, those who are suffering.

And as I pray for them, so I will pray for my brothers and sisters here in the church, who are suffering. And together we will pray for each other, for the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.

[32 : 28] Amen.