

2 Corinthians 1:1-11

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[0 : 00] I am the subject of depressions so fearful that I hope none of you ever gets to such extremes! I am the subject of depression so fearful that I hope none of you ever gets to such extremes!

Would you want him to be put in charge of a church? Do I trust him? He's a man with problems isn't he? He's struggling? Yes he is, he's unstable. He's a man who's got great difficulties. And his name is Charles Hans Virgin who's one of the greatest preachers of all time. And it raises a question for you and I and the question is how do you define success? How do you define success? Particularly in Christian circles, in church life, in Christian ministry, in the Christian life.

In general what does success look like? We want our leaders don't we? To be strong and successful and dynamic. We want our programs to be very exciting and we want our churches to be full. And we define success in terms of numbers and size of the budget and so on.

But according to 2 Corinthians, which is a wonderful book, success in the Christian life is strength in weakness. And that is the theme of 2 Corinthians. And that is the note that is struck in these opening verses of 2 Corinthians.

Look at verse 8 of 2 Corinthians. 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.

[1 : 57] Now most ministers and elders I know would keep quiet about that. And yet Paul is open. He's open about that. He deliberately goes on of his way to draw attention to it.

To the troubles he's had. To the struggles that he's had to go through. And the reason for that is his troubles and his struggles have become a bone of contention in the church in Corinth.

They've become an issue for the Corinthian church. His apostolic, he was one of the apostles. His apostolic leadership is under attack. His leadership is being undermined by false apostles.

He calls them in this letter super apostles. It comes to some pictures of men in tights with their underpants on the outside of their trousers. And long flowing red capes.

They were super apostles. Nothing is too much of a challenge for them. There's nothing they can't do in church life. And of course these super apostles, they've done the oldest trick in the book.

[2 : 55] They pump themselves up in the estimation of the Corinthian church. And they play Paul down. Why do you want to follow a man like the apostle Paul? He says of himself out of his own mouth.

He's a loser. He's got problems. He knows nothing but trouble. Why don't you ditch him? And follow us. And that is the context of the lesson of 2 Corinthians. And that is why Paul begins right at the very beginning of verse 1.

Can you see it? Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God. Whatever they think the reason that he's been sent. He says this is the reason why he's been sent.

That is what an apostle is. An apostle of Jesus Christ has been sent by Jesus. By the will of God. And all these struggles and troubles that I've had in Asia. All these things that you've heard about me.

They're all in the will of God. They are all in the will of God. He's an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God. Ernie Shackleton was one of the great polar explorers.

[3 : 57] Start of the 20th century. Something like that. Around that time. And he put an ad in Times. For one of his polar exhibitions. You've read it. You've heard it. Men wanted a hazardous journey. Small wages.

Bitter cold. Complete darkness. Constant danger. Safe return. Doubtful. Now in a sense that's 3 Corinthians. That's what Paul says that Christian life is like.

It's not a flowery bed of ease. It's not jumping over high buildings. It's not charisma and success. But it is suffering temptations. Struggles and hardship. Persecutions and pressure. There are two words that pop up. All the way through the book. And the two words that pop up through the book. Are trouble and conflict. And they are the two words that keep cropping up. Trouble. All kinds of trouble. Physical illness. Emotional stress. Spiritual distress. And he talks about the care for all the churches.

[4 : 54] All kinds of trouble are here in 2 Corinthians. But also there's the word comfort that keeps coming up. 17 times in 2 Corinthians. The word comfort is there. And when we think of comfort.

We think about our favourite armchair at home. Or that fabric conditioner. But the word comfort is a very powerful word. Comes from the Latin. Comfort.

What's a fort? Fort. Fort is like a castle. It's like a big moat around it. And that's what he wants.

That's what he wants them to have. And comfort is to have a fortress put into you.

It's having strength put into you. It's the same as encouragement. What does that word mean? It means having courage put into you. And that is what this book is about.

Paul wants to put courage into these Christians. Strength into these people. And that is what comfort is. Not to take away their troubles. It's not there, there.

[5 : 50] Don't worry. It's not avoid what is going on in your life. Or insulate yourself from what is going on. But in this life we will have tribulation. That is the life for Christian.

That is God's will for us. Suffering. Struggles. Difficulties. Hardships. And there's no way of going away from that. But wonderfully what God promises us.

Is he promises us strength. Doesn't he? In our troubles. And he promises us courage. To go through them. So how does God do that? Four ways.

That God brings his comfort to us in our troubles. Four reasons. Why God allows you to suffer. First is from verses 3 and 4.

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. The Father of mercies. And the God of all comfort. Who comforts us in all our afflictions. So that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction.

[6 : 48] With the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. Why does God allow suffering? Because. So that we may know him. So that we may know him.

I don't know if you've said it in school. Have you written any of his building in school yet? Have you done that? They still do that? You can do it with lemon juice. Can you? Do it when you get home. We might have lemon juice in the fridge actually.

In the church fridge. And if you write in lemon juice. With a. Pen. Or something. Like that. And you can't see it.

Can you? How can you see. Invisible ink. With lemon juice. Do you know what you have to do? That's exactly right. You heat it don't you? You're either going to flame. Or you can do it with a radiator. And you can see.

You can write secret messages. And you put it to the flame. And then you can see the secret message. And the heat causes the writing to appear. Spurgeon says.

[7 : 45] There are some verses in the Bible. That are written in invisible ink as it were. Because before you can really understand them. You need the fire of adversity to make them visible.

Isn't that right? How many of you found that to be the case? Many of you know your Bible quite well. But actually when you go through the mill. When you go through adversity and trouble. When God puts you through a time of trouble and pressure.

Then the Bible comes to you. Comes to speak to you. And it comes alive. And there are verses that you've known. Maybe since you were a little boy or a little girl. And you know those verses all so well.

But in affliction. And in trouble. And in suffering. And in pressure. It's as if the writing appears. On the page. And you begin to experience God. In a way that you've never known before.

And that is one of the reasons. That God allows you to go through a time of trouble. So that we might know his comfort. Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Look at the way he's described that.

[8 : 44] He's described as the Father of mercies. And the God of all compassion. When I lived in Cardiff. I lived with five lads. In a footbed house.

None of us could cook. So when Claire refused to make me food. The only thing that we would go. We would go to the kebab house. And the kebab house was called Venus. The mother of all kebab houses.

It's just down the road. And I go there a couple of times a week. Why was it called Venus. The mother of all kebab houses. Because what they were saying. Was they were saying. That kebab house. Encapsulates. All that a kebab house is meant to be.

Isn't it? It is the mother of all kebab houses. It is. But it's a silly illustration. So look at verse three. He's the Father of mercies. He's the God of all comfort.

Not only is he the source of all comfort. But he encapsulates everything that comfort can be.

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. The Father of all comfort.

[9 : 45] The Father of all compassion. That psalm in the Old Testament. Psalm 103. The psalmist talks of him as a father who has compassion on his children. So the Lord has compassion on all those who fear him.

As a mother has compassion on her children. I'm not a great father by any means. But I have compassion on my children. They don't have to go through very much.

They only have to have a bad day at school. And your heart goes out to them. Doesn't it? You lose sleep over your children. And that is what is happening. About what is happening in their lives.

I feel them. Now every parent knows that. But here is the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. And as a father has compassion on his children. So he has compassion on you.

He is the Father of all mercies. He is the God of all comfort. And do you know how Psalm 103 goes on? He says he knows how we are formed. He remembers that we are dust.

[10 : 41] That's a profound thing. He is the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. That is why he remembers. He remembers because he's been here. He's been where you are.

He's been where I am. He has entered fully into our human condition under the fall. He has become one of us. God was in the flesh. Incarnate in Jesus Christ. He entered into this veil of tears.

He remembers what it's like to face pressure. He remembers what it's like to be let down and to be betrayed by friends. He remembers what it's like to face illness. And physical pain and suffering.

He remembers. Versace, the fashion designer. Versace was once asked about his religious convictions. And he said this, I believe in God, but I am not the kind of religious person who goes to church, who believes in the fairy tale of Jesus, born in the stable with the donkey.

No, I don't believe that. I'm not stupid. I can't believe that God, with all the power he had, had to be born in a stable. It wouldn't have been very comfortable. So says the fashion designer.

[11 : 47] But that's precisely what God did. He came into this world. He didn't come to Herod's palace. He was born in a stable with a donkey. He knows what it's like to be born into poverty.

He knows what it's like to be persecuted. No sooner is he a little toddler. No sooner was he born when he has to flee with his family to Egypt as refugees. Because his life was threatened.

He knows what it's like to grow up in a place that nobody has ever heard of. Of Nazareth. Can any good thing come out of Nazareth? He knows what it's like to come from the wrong side of the tracks. In the wrong neighbourhood.

He knows, he remembers what it's like. The God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. And we think rightly, don't we, of the sufferings that the Lord Jesus went through.

We think of the great sacrifice he made in coming to this world. Of what he had to put up with in this world of his sufferings on the cross when he cries, My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

[12 : 48] But I wonder, have you thought what sufferings the Father also went through? In the giving up of his Son to the cross. The God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

John Stott says this, I could never believe in God if it were not for the cross. The only God I believe in is the one that Nietzsche ridiculed us to God on the cross.

In a world of pain, how can anyone worship a God who was immune to it? He says, I've been to lots of Buddhist temples in Buddhist countries. I've stood respectfully before the statue of the Buddha with his legs crossed and his arms folded and eyes closed.

The ghost of a smile playing around his mouth and a remote look on his face detached from the agonies of the world. And every time, says Stott, I've had to turn away and in my imagination, I've turned to the lonely, twisted, tortured, figured monocross.

Nails through hands and feet, back lacerated, limbs wrenched, brow bleeding, mouth dry, intolerably thirsty, plunged in God for seeking darkness.

[13 : 56] This is the God for me. He laid aside his immunity to pain. He entered our world of flesh and blood and tears and death. He suffered for us. And here's the point of 2 Corinthians, as Stott would say, our suffering has become more manageable in the light of his.

Oh, there's still a question mark over whom we suffer it. But over it, we boldly stamp another mark, the cross, which symbolises divine suffering, the cross of Christ.

The garden father of our Lord Jesus, if you're a Buddhist, you deny suffering. It doesn't exist. It's something else. If you're a Muslim, you resign yourself to it.

It's the fate, isn't it? It is what it is of Allah's will. And you just resign yourself to it. If you're an atheist, well, you just immunise yourself from it, don't you?

What does our culture do? It buys ourselves little comfort toys to kind of insulate ourselves from it. That's what we do in the West. You can't actually do that in the third world, can you?

[15 : 02] But we can do it in the UK. But the Christian faces up to suffering, embraces it. Can I say that? The Christian experiences in the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ a God who knows what pain and suffering is.

And that is the first thing. Why does God allow us to suffer? Why does God allow trouble in Paul's life? Why does he allow trouble in your life? Why? Because it is through that that we come to know God.

And it is in suffering that we come to experience God's comfort on our life, not just at a theoretical level, but deep down in our hearts and our experiences.

We might come to know God on an experiential level. The second reason that he allows suffering is that we might share God's comfort with others. Look at verse 4. Who comforts us in all our affliction so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.

God allows us to go through trouble so that we can comfort others. And that is what Paul is saying. Trouble brings us together, isn't it?

[16 : 17] It's like on the tube, you know, nobody talks to each other on the tube. Apart from the train stops, the tube stops with a jolt, doesn't it? And then, over the announcement, the driver comes over the announcement and says, you know, there is a delay in White City for 45 minutes because of a broken signal or something.

And then everybody does a kind of jolt and a fall. And then people start to talk to each other. You notice that? They get their mobile phone out. And they talk about their meetings.

Or the lights go off and everybody starts complaining about their appointments, cursing, Transport for London and Boris Johnson. And people begin to make contact with each other. Trouble has that effect.

It brings us together, isn't it? We've seen that in Hanwell, actually. In this last couple of weeks, wasn't it? With Alice Gross. People have begun to talk about it, talk on the streets. People who lived through the war say that.

Some of the communities that I grew up, the mining communities, they were tight-knit. Why? Because of the suffering and troubles they've gone through. And Paul is saying that one of the reasons that God allows his people to suffer, one of the reasons that Christians sometimes have more trouble than non-Christians, is because God wants to bring us together.

[17 : 33] To bind us together. To bring us into a community. He doesn't want us to be ships passing in the night. He doesn't want us to be people who just come to a meeting.

He wants to build us into a community, is that? I've thought about talking about that but we are not only in covenant with God, aren't we? But we are in covenant with one another. That's so important. We are a body of people who are comforting one another and strengthening one another. And so Paul in verses 5 and 6 shares his story. So just as the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives, so also through Christ our comfort overflows.

If we are afflicted it is for your comfort and salvation. The super apostles, what were they saying? They were saying to Corinthians look at Paul. The first sight of trouble and he falls to pieces.

Paul says if we go to pieces it's for your comfort. If we are distressed it's because God is teaching me something so that I will be able to pass through you.

[18 : 36] That's what Paul is saying. If we are comforted it is for your comfort which you experience when we patiently endure the same sufferings that we suffer.

Let me give you an example of this. It's a shocking example. Helen Rosevear who many of you will know was a missionary for many years in the Congo. And she stayed there when many left during the rebel uprising in the 1960s.

And you might remember some of her colleagues and her were kept safe. And she too and yet one day she was captured brutally treated. She went through the most horrific ordeal. And she herself was raped by the leader of the gang.

And for years she couldn't talk about it. Her books are brilliant if you've not read them. And Helen Rosevear she wondered if God could use such an event for good. She obviously suffered a great deal as you can imagine.

Helen Rosevear she's quite a formidable woman. Years later she was giving a talk in America. And she'd spoken briefly about her terrible experiences in the Congo. And after she'd spoken to this group a girl came up to her in tears.

[19 : 46] She was broken. And the girl had been raped just a few weeks before. And Helen says that she was able to comfort her in a unique way. This is what she says.

When God could have saved me from a horror he actually trusted me to go through the ordeal with him so that he could use the experience later to help others.

Later that evening I thanked God again for letting me know in some small measure the why of that long ago night in the Congo. God didn't have to show me why he allowed the ordeal.

But now I knew that at least one girl had been helped to come to terms with the shock as I was able to come to terms with my experience. Thank you God she says.

That's powerful isn't it? And the application is this. We need to get that kind of perspective on our troubles. God allows us to suffer because he wants us to bring comfort to others who suffer and he's going to use you to do that.

[21 : 06] Sometimes comfort comes full soon. Dietrich Bonhoeffer he was executed by the Nazis within hours of the end of the Second World War. People are bringing out biographies of Dietrich Bonhoeffer like there's no tomorrow but this is a great story.

Three months before he was executed he wrote a poem which he sent to his fiancée and she was comforted by that poem. Eighteen years later a young woman lost her fiancée in a skiing accident and somebody gave her that poem of Dietrich Bonhoeffer and she became a Christian through that poem and she sent it to her fiancée's parents and they became Christians through that poem.

The father was a guy called Joe Bailey who became a Christian author and himself a poet and he wrote Christian poetry. Thirty years after Bonhoeffer wrote the original poem, Joe Bailey received a letter from a pastor who had been ministering to a terminally ill woman in Boston.

He'd shared the book of poems with her. Her name was Maria Verdemeyer. She was Bonhoeffer's fiancée. Sometimes God's conflict comes full circle doesn't it?

And we need to get this perspective. We think well why is God allowing this to happen to me? And we may never know all the reasons why God is allowing this to happen to us but one of the reasons Paul is saying so that you will be able to comfort others.

[22 : 39] And it may be years up the track quite yet but God allows something into our lives which will equip us to give us to others. The third reason why God allows trouble into our lives is that we might rely on him.

Look at verses 8 and 9. For we do not want you to know to be unaware of the affliction we experienced in Asia for we were utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself.

Indeed we felt that we had received the sentence of death. I wonder if you've ever been there. We don't admit that to one another do we? How's it going?

Good, good, good. Yeah, I'm doing alright. That's what we say. We don't admit it. Ministers are certainly not as honest as Paul. But sometimes things are so hard we don't know anything we're going to come out of it do we?

I don't know whether you ever felt like that where you just think this is a death sentence and there are pressures and there are problems and they are intractable and I don't know if I'll ever recover from what's happened to me. And we think, don't we, Christians think, I don't know whether I'll ever be able to get through this.

[23 : 44] Sometimes it's an illness, sometimes it's a depression, sometimes it's a heartbreak, and that is how Paul was and how he felt. And God allowed this to happen. Well, why did he allow it to happen? Look at verse 9.

Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death, the dead. What is the great killer of the Christian faith?

What is the great killer of the Christian faith? I wonder what you think of that, those of your teenagers here. You need to say this to our teenagers. The great killer of the Christian faith is not doubt. It really isn't.

There's nothing wrong with having doubts. In fact, I would allow it quite healthy at times, as long as you know what to do with them. Doubts won't destroy your faith.

Doubts, if you handle them properly in a biblical way, you will actually strengthen your faith. The thing that destroys faith is not doubt. So let me tell you, what destroys faith is self-reliance.

[24 : 54] And that is the problem with these super-apostles. Richard Burton, the Welsh actor, once said, the weak rely on Christ, the strong don't. It's absolutely right. He mentioned it as a criticism, but it's absolutely right.

The weak rely on Christ, the strong don't. And that is the difference between Paul and the super-apostles. Paul relied on Christ, he'd been taught through severe suffering and pressure to cast himself on Christ, to lean on Christ.

John Peter, the pioneer missionary was trying to translate the Bible and he couldn't find a word for faith. He was struggling to find the right word for faith. And somebody came into the room and said, do you mind if I lean heavily upon you?

And he said, yeah, that's exactly, feel free. That's what faith is. What is Paul doing in his trouble? He is leaning heavily upon Christ. And the super-apostles didn't need to do that.

They were self-assured. They didn't need anyone to lean and trust on Christ. I love the Westminster Shorter Catechism, which I should have learned.

[26 : 03] Where is it? Somewhere there. Question 8, 6, what is faith in Jesus Christ? Faith in Jesus Christ is a saving grace whereby we receive and rest upon him alone for salvation as he is offered to us in the gospel.

What is faith? It is resting and relying. So what is God bringing into your life so that you will rest and rely on him?

Who were the types of people that came to Jesus in the gospel? They came to him out of great trouble. The man born blind, the woman with a demon-possessed daughter, all those people came to Jesus.

They didn't come out of prosperity. They came out of adversity. They came out of trouble. I read in one of these Reader's Digest kind of things this week, of a man who went to the doctor with man flu. You know, man flu. And they haven't discovered a cure for it yet. This man went to see his doctor, because his wife is not listening to it. And he went to his doctor and he was complaining, he was saying, are you sure there's nothing that you can do, doctor?

[27 : 12] We can put a man on the moon, but you haven't found a cure for the common cold. Are you sure there's nothing we can do? Well, the doctor said, you could try running around the garden in a pair of boxer shorts first thing in the morning.

First thing in the morning, the man said, if I do that, I'll catch pneumonia. The doctor said, well, we've got a cure for pneumonia. Well, and I think that's what Paul is saying here.

These troubles and struggles, well, we've got a cure for death. God knows how to deliver us from death. And what are our troubles compared to that?

He delivered us from such a deadly peril, death, and he will deliver us, and on him we've set our hope that he will deliver us again.

you also must help us by prayer.

[28 : 28] Prayer is the proof that we're relying on God by ourselves. I'm not going to say much about this in the time. But 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.

There's a very famous sermon which is preached by an American black pastor. Somebody asked one of those black American pastors, how do you preach? First I tell them what I'm going to say, and then I say it, and then I tell them what I've said.

It's a good way of preaching. It's a very simple, very straightforward. A good preacher has only one theme. These black preachers, if you hear them, they know how to hammer it home.

There's one very famous sermon, you'll know it when I tell you the line, it's this, it's Friday but Sunday's coming. And he preached for an hour and a half. He hammered at home. Let me read

you, well I'll read you the whole thing, let me read you a bit.

It's Friday but Sunday's coming. Look it's Friday and my Jesus is dead on a tree but Sunday's coming. It's Friday, Mary's crying her eyes out and the disciples are running in every direction like sheep without a shepherd but it's Friday and Sunday's coming.

[29 : 41] He says it's Friday and you're looking at the world saying as things have been so they will always be. You can't change anything in this world but it's Friday and Sunday's coming. It's Friday and the forces that oppress the poor and keep people down, the forces that destroy people's lives and exploit them, the forces that control and rule and they think that they've won but they don't know it's only Friday and Sunday's coming.

It's Friday and people are saying darkness is going to cover the world, sadness is going to be everywhere but they don't know that it's Friday and Sunday is coming. But that is what you've got to remember isn't that?

That is what Paul is saying here. That is the message of the gospel, that is the bedrock of our lives that Jesus Christ died and was raised and he's coming back again at the end of time.

It's Friday but Sunday is coming. and that is the message. That the God who raised the dead will raise the dead on the last day and that is the God we put our trust in.

The God who raised Jesus from the dead. He will deliver us from our troubles. Don Carson wrote a lovely little book on his dad.

[30 : 54] His dad was a very ordinary Baptist minister in Canada, French speaking Canada and he struggled. He was one of those glass half empty people. And he always looked on the dark side of things.

He was about 40 or 50 years in the Christian ministry. And he saw very very little fruit. Very very little. Most of the congregations that he preached on would be much smaller than what we are tonight.

For the whole of his ministry apart from one short period, the Roman Catholic church was in the ascendancy and he suffered great persecution. The Protestants in France in the 1960s and 70s faced great French speaking part of Canada, faced great persecution.

There were silly church politics in the denomination and the Baptist group that he belonged to. And then his wife, who he'd been married to for 40 years, died. March.

She died after a period where she slipped into Alzheimer's and he died after and then she went into a nursing home and eventually she died. And this is what he wrote in his diary when his wife died.

This is Thursday the 12th of December 1991.

[32 : 00] Two years after her death. Oh Margaret, we will see each other again. And you will no longer remember the multitude of my failures that stand before me now. It's Friday but Sunday's coming.

He was one of those guys who punished himself. He had low self-esteem. He thought he was a bad husband. Nobody else did but he did. He thought he was a bad pastor, a bad parent and he beat himself up about it and he suffered depression from it.

It's Friday but Sunday's coming. Then it says this, we will see each other again but you will no longer remember the multitude of my failures that stand before me now. The failures for which I am deeply culpable, the unfaithfulness of my life as a pastor missionary.

Behold I shall make all things new and I shall see him face to face and tell the story of being saved by grace and he will wipe away every tear and the enormity of my sin.

He will remember no more for the blood of Jesus, the precious blood cleanses even me from my sins. Oh that I may never sin again and one day I shall not for I shall see him face to face and I shall be like him for I will see him as he is and I have but one supreme desire that I might be like Jesus.

[33 : 15] Margaret will see me as one who is holy good and lovable. Do you see what this man was doing in his troubles and in his depression and in his suffering when he was full of regret he was remembering it was Friday that Sunday's coming.

Let's pray.