

2 Corinthians 1 v 1 - 11

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[0 : 0 0] 1,158 in the Church Bible, 2 Corinthians and chapter 1. We're going to read from verse 1 through to verse 11.

2 Corinthians chapter 1, beginning at verse 1. Here is God's faithful and wonderful word to us today. Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God and Timothy, our brother.

To the Church of God in Corinth, together with all the saints throughout Achaia. Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God.

For just as the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives, so also through Christ our comfort overflows. If we are distressed, it is for your comfort and salvation.

[1 : 1 4] If we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which produces in you patient endurance of the same sufferings we suffer. And our hope for you is firm, because we know that just as you share in our sufferings, so also you share in our comfort.

We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about the hardships we suffered in the province of Asia. We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired even of life.

Indeed, in our hearts we felt the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves, but on God who raises the dead. He has delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us.

On him we have set our hope, that he will continue to deliver us, as you help us by your prayers. Then many will give thanks on our behalf, for the gracious favour granted us, in answer to the prayers of many.

We thank God for his faithful word. Look for it.

[2 : 5 2] of all the letters that the Apostle Paul wrote. And behind this letter, as often in the old churches of the New Testament, there were a bunch of false teachers who had infiltrated the church at Corinth.

Now, the Corinthians, of course, didn't regard them as false, but Paul, the Apostle, could see the kind of people they really were. Now, their particular line was this, and you've probably come across it from time to time as well.

Paul, if you're such a great crack-shot apostle, then you should be living a triumphant, trouble-free life.

They were arguing, you see, that Christians should be free of suffering and problems and illness and so on and so forth.

Now, I don't know whether you, have you folks got Sky Television up here? You have, haven't you, I think? In fact, where I'm staying, they've got Sky. Yes, we watched it last night. It went wrong, didn't it? But, I mean, it's not worth much, really, except for the cricket, actually, Sky Television.

[3 : 56] But you can get this dreadful thing called the God Channel. Now, I say it's dreadful. I mean, 95% is dreadful. There's about 5% that's really quite good. And you get some really decent people there, like John MacArthur and so on.

But most of it's rubbish. You get these American evangelists, people like Benny Hinn and so on, and they preach this kind of health and wealth and prosperity gospel. Have you come across this?

And they say, if you've got enough faith, you know, and you give me enough money, you'll be healthy and wealthy forevermore. I don't know what kind of Bible they're reading. It's not the one I've got in front of me. But, so this kind of problem that was in the church at Corinth, you know, it's here today, you see.

There's nothing nearer than the sun, is there? Here today. And Paul is tackling this problem head on. And he wants to refute the claims of these false teachers.

And at the same time, he wants to vindicate his own true apostleship. Because they were saying, look, you're not a real apostle because you've got problems, you see. And you can't be a real apostle if you've got problems.

[4 : 56] By the way, sometimes people say to us as Christians, don't they, we should never ever defend ourselves. Have you heard that? Well, that's kind of mostly true.

Mostly true. But there are one or two odd occasions when we should defend ourselves, like Paul is doing here. Why? Because the very gospel itself is being undermined and discredited by what people are saying.

So there are those occasions when we should actually defend ourselves. When we do so, we're not campaigning for our own personal self-esteem, you know. Nothing like that. But what we are concerned about is that the truth of the gospel is not being undermined and damaged and discredited by what people are saying about us.

Okay? So let's get that one straight. Now, I spent rather too long on the children's talk, so let's try and make this a bit less long. Let's look at the first verse.

Always good to look at the first verse, isn't it? Significant opening words. Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God. Now, sometimes the word apostle is used in the New Testament in a very general sense, simply meaning somebody who has been sent.

[6 : 13] But, usually, primarily, it has a very special significance. It refers to the twelve and to Paul who were personally called and commissioned by Jesus himself and given a unique, unrepeatable authority to proclaim the infallible word of God to the infant church.

Now, why do I emphasize that? Because there is an idea that circulates around some Christian circles these days which says that you could have apostles today in the church with similar authority to people like Peter and Paul.

Now, that is sheer nonsense, my friends. That is not true at all. There are no apostles like Peter and Paul around today in the church. Nobody today dare proclaim the infallible word of God.

The infallible word of God has been sealed up once and for all within the pages of this book. Okay? Now, nobody can add to it or take away from it. So, be careful about people who claim to be apostles today having new revelations and so on and so forth.

We don't want to have anything to do with that. Okay. Well, after Paul's customary opening greeting, rather unusually, he starts to talk about himself.

[7 : 38] He starts to talk about his own personal sufferings and he does that because he wants to say this. Look, suffering, suffering actually, far from discrediting my claim to be an apostle, which is what the false teachers were saying, suffering actually is one of the hallmarks of the true apostle.

Now, that's pretty amazing, isn't it? Suffering is one of the true marks of the real apostle. Now, there's one key word here in these opening verses. Now, in my translation, it's translated affliction.

I think it's probably troubles, isn't it? Maybe in your translation, the NIV, or sufferings. Whatever you've got, it occurs four times in verses four, six, and eight, and it literally means pressure.

Pressure. Okay? And that's a relevant word for today, isn't it? Because everybody tells us we're under pressure. Do you feel under pressure today? A lot of people are nodding. Okay. I've just jotted down here a few of the pressures that many people are under and maybe some of the pressures that you're under today.

Some are peculiar to Christians and some are for everybody, really. First of all, here's a pressure. The pressure to conform. You notice that? The curse of political correctness.

[9 : 04] Do you get that up here in Yorkshire? It's a pain in the neck, isn't it, really? The pressure to conform. You know, the world wants to squeeze us into its mould.

The world doesn't like non-conformists. And by the way, I don't mean free churchmen rather than Anglicans. What I mean is people that won't conform to their ways and their attitudes.

The world is irritated by Christians who stand up for the truth of Jesus and the Bible. And so we get this tremendous pressure, don't we, from the media and so on and from the opinions of other people.

And it's a burden to us, isn't it? And then, of course, the sheer pressure of life itself. Don't you find this illness, sorrows, bereavements, unemployment, poverty, disappointments, frustrations, wars, broken relationships, hopes and dreams unfulfilled, and so on.

Now, of course, you're going to suffer those things whether you're a Christian or whether you're not a Christian. These things are the common lot of living in a fallen world. Then, of course, there is the pressure upon us as Christians of living in a world that is largely without Jesus or ignoring Jesus, of course.

[10 : 26] The sheer size of the task of evangelism. So many, so many people all around us who don't know about Jesus. It's a big burden, isn't it?

the blindness of our friends, the worship of materialism, the moral chaos in which we find ourselves at the present time, especially in this country.

Then, of course, there's the pressure of false teaching, which is one of Paul's greatest problems, not least here in Corinth, and we see much of that around us today in the world, don't we?

In the world, and also, sadly, my friends, sometimes, you know, even within the life of the professing church, you get false teaching, don't you? In the world, of course, all kinds of false teachers.

They call themselves Jehovah's Witnesses sometimes, don't they? Or Mormons, or whoever, spiritualists. Even one has to say, and this is not popular either, Muslims.

[11 : 26] Now, you can say that sometimes and you get arrested in this country now, can't you? You dare to say that a Muslim is a false teacher? But he is. He is. My friends, there'll be no Muslims in heaven, I can tell you that.

We're talking about heaven before, won't we? There won't be. And then, of course, even within the church, you've got false teaching, haven't you? I mean, we've got people in the church who deny the things that we read about in the Bible.

They deny the virgin birth, they deny the resurrection, they deny the authority of Scripture, and, of course, the latest thing now is that same-sex marriage is okay. And you've got even some Christians saying that, haven't you?

Ridiculous. Even the church of Scotland is saying, it's all right now if you're a minister and you're in a same-sex relationship with somebody else, that's okay. Well, that's disgraceful, isn't it?

False teaching even within the Christian church. And then, of course, that the pressure, which we've already kind of mentioned, that the attacks upon us for our faith, being persecuted, people are still persecuted, even in England, aren't they?

[12 : 35] You know, it may not be physical torture like it is in some parts of the world, but there's persecution, people laugh at you, don't they? If you're a Christian, you get cold-shouldered by some of your friends and it really hurts, especially when it comes from people close to you, like members of your own family.

So this word, pressure, affliction, trouble, is a relevant word and you could add, no doubt, to my list, things that you could think about. But as you, as you ponder this word, realise how much the Lord Jesus Christ himself felt such pressure.

Look at verse 5 here, okay, very interesting verse, just as the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives.

Isn't that interesting? To be a follower of Jesus means that we must expect to receive the same kind of treatment that he received. Somebody has wisely said the badge of Christian service is not a cushion but a cross.

That's true, isn't it? Absolutely. Well, it would be quite natural, wouldn't it, for us to moan and groan about our sufferings because suffering is never pleasant and we'd all like to be without it.

[13 : 52] In fact, of course, the false teachers said we should be without it. Do you know what one of the flaws is in that kind of thinking? I'll tell you what it is. It wants heaven now.

My friends, you can't get heaven now, all right? It's just not possible. We're never going to be free from suffering and illness and problems until we get to the next world. But there's another approach, which is the one that you and I should adopt as Christians and it's the one that Paul outlines for us here.

Now, there's another key word here and it's the word translated comfort, okay? And you can see this word, it comes no less than nine times actually in five verses.

Let me just read to you a few of these verses. Verse three and four. Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion, the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God.

Now, I don't want to blind you with science here, but I'll tell you a bit of Greek, shall I? The Greek word for this word comfort is the word paraklesis. Now, some of you Bible scholars remember the word paraklete, you remember?

[15 : 09] John 14 and 15, the Holy Spirit is referred to as the paraklete, all right? Now, this word paraklesis, let me explain to you, there's two Greek words here. There's one called para, which means alongside, coming alongside us, and there's the cleat bit, which is being called, all right?

So paraklete means the one who is called alongside to help us, which basically means this, God coming alongside us to support us in our suffering, all right?

Doesn't mean necessarily altering the pressure, doesn't mean taking the problems away, though it can mean that sometimes, but it does mean that God is with you in the problem.

You see, God does not promise anywhere in the Bible that he is necessarily going to remove your problems and remove your suffering. Now, sometimes he does do that, but he doesn't always do it.

But what he does always do is he promises you the strength in the problem to cope with it, okay? I came across a prayer the other day which went like this, Lord, either lighten the load or strengthen my back.

[16:27] Think about that. My experience, having been a Christian for, oh, I don't know, 50 years maybe, is that it's usually the strengthening of the back that's the answer of the prayer rather than the lightening of the load, okay?

Sometimes it's the lightening of the load. I'm not saying it never is, but usually it's God strengthening you to cope with the problem. That's been the testimony of Christians down through the ages, hasn't it?

And maybe even your testimony this morning. You say, oh, God was so wonderfully close to me in that situation. I felt so wonderfully upheld and supported by the Lord in that situation of crisis and so on.

Because, you know, it is through the trials and tribulations of life that we learn to depend more upon the Lord and less upon ourselves.

You see, when everything is going well for you, and there's nothing wrong with that, but when everything is going well for you, the temptation even for you as a Christian is to be rather self-sufficient.

[17:35] I can cope. You know, I'm doing all right. Thank you very much indeed. I don't need God. I'm okay. And sometimes it needs, it takes a really dark experience to bring us down to our knees before the Lord to ask for him to help us.

So suffering, you know, can be a good thing. There are people who think that suffering always has to be a bad thing, but suffering can be a good thing. Now, I don't want to enter this great debate that's going on at the moment with George Carey and assisted dying and all that kind of stuff, you know, but the people who are in favour of this assisted dying business seem to be under the impression that suffering is the one thing we have to be without, and we must at all costs relieve people in their suffering because suffering is the most terrible thing in the whole wide world.

Well, that's not what the Bible says, my friends. It's not what the Bible says. The Bible says suffering can be good for you. I know that sounds very harsh, doesn't it? It's not meant to be harsh, and I'm not trying to be unsympathetic to anybody here this morning who's going through a really bad, dark, and difficult time.

I'm not trying to be unsympathetic. Don't get me wrong here, but I have to say in the light of Scripture, the Bible affirms suffering can be good for you, and this was Paul's experience here.

You look at verses 8 through to 11, he describes a terrible experience he had in Asia. We don't know exactly what was going on, actually, but it was about as bad as it could possibly be. He says here in verse 8, we don't want you to be uninformed, brothers, about the hardships we suffered in the province of Asia.

[19:10] We were under great pressure, is that word pressure again, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired even of life itself. Verse 9, J.B. Phillips translates, we told ourselves this was the end.

So what happens? Does Paul curse God? Does he say, Lord, this must not happen to me, this suffering is disgraceful, I must be without it.

No, he doesn't. He sees that such a terrible, terrible experience has a purpose. Verse 9, look at verse 9, you see, this is the purpose of suffering.

This happened that we might not rely on ourselves, but on God who raised the dead, you see. Amidst this tidal wave of trouble and suffering, Paul doesn't give up like many people do, he throws himself wholly upon the Lord.

He sees this suffering as actually beneficial, even though it was terrible, but it was beneficial because through this suffering he learned to trust more in the Lord, you see.

[20 : 25] This is really important biblical teaching that we don't hear enough about these days. Suffering can be a beneficial experience. This is further illustrated by what Paul says earlier on in verses 4 through to 6.

Have a look at that. Now this is very interesting. He makes the point there that because he experiences the comfort of God, he is then able to comfort other people who are in trouble.

That's an important point to make, isn't it? I mean, isn't it the case? You think about your own experience. Isn't it the case when you've been through a particular problem or difficulty yourself, you are in a much, much better position to understand and sympathize with somebody else who's going through a similar problem.

Isn't that true? It's true, isn't it? Absolutely. And of course, if you've experienced the grace of God in your situation, then you can point other people to that same grace of God which you have experienced.

You know, is this one of the reasons why we suffer? Why God, people have a big problem with suffering. Why does God allow suffering? Makes no sense. It's one of the reasons so that we can be more understanding and more sympathetic to other people when they're going through suffering.

[21 : 42] Think about it. Now I'm going to make a sweeping generalization here which is not 100% true but I believe it's mostly true. I've been in the Christian ministry for nearly 40 years and this is my experience.

Those people who are most sympathetic, most sensitive, most understanding are those people who have experienced in their lives the most trouble.

those people who are least sensitive, least sympathetic and least understanding are generally those people who have lived a relatively trouble-free life.

Now I know there are exceptions to that particular rule but I believe it's substantially true and it gives us a clue, doesn't it, as to one of the reasons why God allows us to go through difficulties.

Of course it does help if the particular difficulty that you've faced is the same one that somebody else is going through. So you can say, well yeah, I had a miscarriage 10 years ago. I realise what you're going through.

[22 : 49] I know what it is to have lost a child in a road accident. That happened to me. Now of course, in order to help people you don't have to have experienced exactly what they've experienced.

Paul says here in verse 4, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, doesn't it, any affliction. So the principles and the experience of comfort that we learn through suffering can help us to comfort other people in all kinds of situations.

Which means that as Christians we have a responsibility to observe and remember what has really helped us so we can pass that on to other people.

So for example, you may be devastated by the loss, by the death of a wife or a husband. And you know what that's all about. I'm sure some of you are here in this building this morning.

But as you draw on the comfort and the strength of God in that situation, take note of that so that you at some stage in the future can help somebody else who is going through a similar problem.

[24 : 04] Of course, sometimes the comfort of God is very down to earth and very practical. Like the cake and the jar of water.

Remember that for the depressed Elijah? I think last time I was with you I preached about Elijah, didn't I? Do you remember Elijah in the Old Testament? What does God do when Elijah gets depressed and suicidal?

He doesn't bash him over the head with the Bible and says, Elijah, you're rotten old sansa, what are you doing here? No, he sends an angel to touch him, to reassure him of his love and his grace.

Then he gives him something to eat and something to drink. Our God is a very sympathetic, tender, understanding, practical God, isn't he? Sometimes comfort comes in the form of the quiet presence of a friend who just sits with us in the situation saying very, very little at all.

I've been amazed sometimes, I'm sure Peter you've experienced this, you know, as a minister of the gospel, you have somebody comes to see you in your study and they pour out all their troubles and you sit there for half an hour and you listen to all this stuff and say very little and perhaps you have a prayer with them at the end and they say to you, oh, you know, thank you so much for that, that's been so helpful to me and I think, hang on a minute, what have I said?

[25 : 27] I've said nothing, I've just listened. But the mere act of listening to somebody in trouble is a tremendous blessing, you know. Trouble is, we Christians are great talkers but we're not great listeners.

We think we know all the answers, don't we? We Bible-believing Christians and we come in here with all our Bible verses, you know, this is what you need to hear, brother, hang on, sometimes it is what we need to hear but not always at the beginning of a problem.

The first thing to do is to listen, isn't it? What does the Apostle James say? Be swift to hear and slow to speak. God has given us, my friends, two ears and one mouth so we listen twice as much as we speak and most of us and I include myself in this as a preacher, most of us preach twice as much as we listen.

My wife says to me, I can hear you in the study, John, again preaching at that poor person you're saying. You know, it's easy to do it. You know, Job's comforters get a pretty bad press and justifiably so for most of the rubbish they said but there was one thing that they did which was absolutely and utterly fantastic and I couldn't do it.

The Bible says they sat with Job seven days and seven nights and said absolutely nothing at all. Could you do that?

[26 : 58] I'm not sure I could. I'd be tempted to say something, wouldn't you? You see, the importance of listening. suffering. See, suffering can be a good thing.

That's why the Apostle James says, count it all joy my brethren when you meet various trials. Those false teachers in Corinth had got it absolutely wrong when they denigrated Paul for his sufferings.

Suffering can be a blessing provided we react to it in the right way. And so Paul says here, look at Paul's response in verse 3. Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of all mercies, the God of all comfort.

No trace of self-pity there is there, but rather a spirit of praise and thanksgiving. And he ends the passage in verse 11 by encouraging the Corinthians to pray for him and as their prayers are answered they too will join together in giving thanks and praise to God.

And one translation goes like this, I quote, so that there may be a sea of upturned faces as a widespread thanksgiving goes up to God on our behalf.

[28 : 15] So not only was this experience of suffering a blessing for Paul, it was also or it could be a blessing for those who prayed for Paul because when they see how the Lord supports Paul in response to their prayers they will be moved to praise and thanksgiving.

And that's a lesson for us to learn isn't it actually as well as we pray for those of our fellowship who are in various difficulties when we see the Lord answering our prayers as they experience the comfort of Christ so we will want to praise and thank God on their behalf.

Well no, I think it's time I came to a close because we want our lunch, don't we? Never forget, if you commit yourself to the service of Jesus you will also be committing yourself to the school of suffering.

But as Paul says in another of his great letters, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. All these afflictions far from being a cause of dismay and despair they are the very setting, the very context in which Christians can experience the glorious victory of Jesus Christ because my friends and this is the major point I want to make this morning the trials and tribulations of life force us to depend more upon the Lord and less upon ourselves and that is why very often times of trouble and difficulty have been times of the greatest possible blessing.

I'm sure that you folks have read the biography of Johnny Erickson I'm sure you have going back many years now isn't this if you don't know about Johnny Erickson she was a young girl teenager many years ago who had this terrible diving accident as a result of which she was paralyzed she became a paraplegic now of course at the time she prayed and other people prayed that she would be healed and that's a fair thing to do but God did not heal her God does not always heal people so she must be now in her 70s mustn't she possibly Johnny Erickson I would imagine so she's still alive in America and looking back over those many many years of suffering as a paraplegic do you know what she says today she says I thank God that he didn't heal me isn't that incredible could I honestly say that if I was in her situation I thank God that all those years ago

[31 : 03] God did not heal me why because if God had healed me I would not have learned all the incredible lessons I've learned over these years about life about God about myself about other people all those lessons could only be learned she says in the school of suffering wow I pray that that would be my testimony if God ever caused me to suffer as it was the incredible testimony of Johnny Erickson well now friends we're going to sing a great hymn which is a hymn written many years ago by a fellow called John Newton and of course he was a slave trader got converted and do you know when he got converted he got converted crossing the Atlantic Ocean in a storm isn't that interesting so he got converted when he was in trouble and wasn't it the case that many people first came to Jesus even in the days of his flesh when they were in trouble you see suffering can be a great blessing not only to

Christians but it can bring people to Christ in the first place as it did John Newton in that storm across the Atlantic all those years ago and he's written this fantastic hymn which I hope you'll enjoy singing and benefit from it it's number 744 Begone unbelief my saviour is near let's sing it together and for my relief will surely and hear and hear thy credit he wrestled and he will perform with Christ in the castle I smile at the stone same soul as I need shall work for my year the bitter is sweet the messiah is pure the painful and present will cease before all and they all have pleasant the glorious soul love

Lord it's easy to sing those words in the comfortable surroundings of a Christian meeting but when we go out into the world and we hit trouble then it doesn't seem to be quite so easy so we pray Lord that you would take our faith and our confidence in your word into every aspect of our life especially in the coming days when we hit trials and tribulations may we not use them as opportunities for self pity and despair but rather for trusting in you and depending upon you and as a consequence may our faith really grow and be refined in the process and may we experience what you promise in your word which is that precious peace of God which passes all understanding so that when non-Christians look at us going through troubles with that measure of equanimity they may be mystified and amazed and wonder how it is that we can respond so positively and please God they will recognize it's because we know Jesus so may the peace of God which passes all understanding keep our hearts and our minds at rest in Christ Jesus and the blessing of God Almighty the Father the Son and the Holy Spirit be upon us and remain with us this day and indeed forevermore amen thank you