

THE CHURCH AS A FELLOWSHIP OF SUFFERING

SERIES: THE CHURCH AS A COMMUNITY OF GRACE AND PEACE

By Doug Goins

In preparation for January 1, 2000, we will spend the next three weeks with the apostle Paul in 2 Corinthians examining our common life together as the Church and challenging our community lifestyle of faith. Perhaps a place to begin is by asking what kind of church God is calling us to be as we enter the new millennium. We need to ask ourselves if we are more informed by the expectations and standards of our society, or if we are listening to the Lord and him alone in terms of being salt and light in our community? Are we impacting the community, or does the community infiltrate and impact us in greater measure?

The challenges the apostle Paul faced in the church at Corinth are similar to patterns we see in evangelical churches today. I want to raise these issues to begin the series, not to point fingers at other congregations, but to encourage us all to community self-examination. In Corinth, as in the church today, there was an emphasis on individualism: a focus on externals, the expression of narcissistic values and attitudes, the need to be the best at everything. This mentality is rooted in a spiritual arrogance that emphasizes the showier gifts of the Spirit, and a materialism that expresses itself in judging other people in the body by how they look and what they have rather than by who they are in Jesus Christ. This thinking perverts our understanding of the Christian life as one of good health, easy living and prosperity. It also manifests itself in a performance mentality in worship services. Arrogance and materialism drive the belief that bigger is better, so success is measured by how many members the church has, and by its programs, committees, activities, and buildings. Spiritual arrogance and materialism also demand power, so "power evangelism" and "power spirituality" and "power worship" and "power preaching" are required. The goal is a church life that will be impressive and attractive to the world, a church life that projects sophistication, power, wealth, and knowledge.

In contrast to this, Paul calls the church to a lifestyle of weakness, to a ministry of self-sacrifice. In three key statements from the second Corinthian letter, Paul reveals himself and challenges the church as well to live as he does. He writes in 2 Corinthians 4:5, "For we do not preach ourselves but Christ Jesus as Lord, and ourselves as your bond-servants for Jesus' sake." In 12:10 he writes, "Therefore I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ's sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong." Finally from chapter 13:4, speaking of Jesus Christ, he says, "For indeed He was crucified because of weakness, yet He lives because of the power of God. For we also are weak in Him, yet we shall live with Him because of the power of God directed toward you." The *New International Version* translates verse 4b as, "...yet by God's power we will live with him to serve you."

This first chapter and a half of 2 Corinthians will allow us to examine ourselves together as a body. It does not define a church by its sophistication or power or wealth or knowledge, but instead it defines it as a fellowship of suffering. We find that God generously blesses us by providing his grace, peace, and mercy. Next week we will focus on the fact that we are defined as a fellowship of transparency, of vulnerability and openness. The third week, we will be defined as a fellowship of unconditional forgiveness extended to one another because of our forgiveness in Jesus Christ. These are the three hallmarks that we will explore as we enter the new millennium together as the body of Christ.

In 2 Corinthians 1, Paul begins with a very personal greeting to his Corinthian brothers and sisters.

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, to the church of God which is at Corinth with all the saints who are throughout Achaia: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

In our study of the letter of 1 Corinthians ([Discovery Papers #4508-4541](#)), we saw that Paul had a difficult relationship with the church in Corinth. In a sense, this letter culminates a seven-year history that had been marked by continuous challenge to his apostolic authority, personal spirituality, pastoral credentials, and even criticism of his personal appearance and speaking ability. Remember that Paul was the spiritual father of these people. He planted the church, and had invested more time and energy in them than any other church he served in his ministry. Yet these people gave him more grief than any other church.

In addition to those difficulties, the Corinthian church had on-going problems among themselves. They struggled with unity in the body, and competition among the leaders of the church; there were issues of sexual immorality, idolatry, and dissension over the expression of spiritual gifts. This required Paul to write 1 Corinthians as well as two other letters that we no longer have. Additionally, Paul met with a group of leaders from the church who visited him in Turkey because they were overwhelmed with the problems in the church. He also made a hasty visit back to Corinth when he found out that a faction in the church had rejected the first Corinthian letter. It was a difficult relationship.

God's sovereignty and resources

Second Corinthians is the most poignantly personal of all of Paul's New Testament letters. It has been called "theology wrapped in autobiography." Paul defends his personal lifestyle and his relationship to the church, and finally answers accusations that have swirled around him for seven years. The greeting in the first two verses emphasizes three important things. First of all, God is sovereign in his authority over his apostolic servants. Paul is not the representative of Corinth or the other churches in the province of Achaia. He and Timothy, who he calls his brother, are fellow ministers under the Lord's authority. Ultimately, Paul says that he is accountable to God and not to the Corinthians. It frustrated the Corinthians because they wanted to control him and define his priorities for ministry.

The second emphasis is on God's ownership of his church. Just as God is sovereign over Paul, the opening phrase indicates that it is "the church of God which is at Corinth." It is not the Corinthians' church because God is the sovereign leader of that body of believers. Paul wants them to understand their family identity, that they are a community, because unity is a struggle for them. He uses the language of family to describe their relationship. He says that Timothy is "our brother" and they are together with all the other saints in the churches of Achaia. In verse 2, he says that God is our Father. Corinth saw itself as somehow very special and unique among the churches, but Paul says no, we are a family. In this very personal greeting, Paul reminds them that they are the family of God whether they understand it or not, and whether they are acting like it or not.

The third point Paul makes in verse 2 is that God as their Father and Jesus Christ as their Lord are providing them the incredible spiritual resources of his grace and peace. The grace of God includes everything that God wants to give us as his people. It is his grace that sustains us as a community of faith. In light of that reality, the writer of Hebrews says, "Let us therefore draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and may find grace to help in time of need" (Hebrews 4:16). God wants to grace us as his church with all the love that we need, and all the joy, forgiveness, wisdom, and strong help that we need. The grace of God can be expressed here and now in the body of Christ in very practical ways: the ministry decisions with which we all struggle; conflict resolution and relationships; theological disputes or misunderstandings; financial struggles that we face as a body. The point is that the supply of God's grace is inexhaustible, and the result of that supply of grace at work in the church is peace. God wants to give us his peace as well-peace in relationships, peace that frees us from any sense of community anxiety or apprehension or worry. Paul wrote to the church in Philippi, "Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God"

(Phil 4:6).

The kind of peace Paul describes was evident in our most recent congregational meeting at Peninsula Bible Church. We gathered together because we as elders feel led to raise a significant amount of money to build a new center for adult education and training. What encouraged me was the fact that God's peace and grace was at work in the meeting as he spoke through various elders and people in the body. There was a wonderful sense of unity and confidence that we can trust God's resources as we enter into what seems like a frightening prospect of raising money for the building.

As Paul greets his brothers and sisters in Christ, he is concerned that they experience the grace and peace of God. We need to see that all of us as believers are folded into the greeting as well. It is not only to the church in Corinth but to all the other saints, including other believers in the province of Achaia. We are included in the wonderful greeting from the apostle.

In the verses immediately following, the church is not defined as sophisticated, powerful, or influential, but as a fellowship of suffering. That is one of the hallmarks of who we are as the body of Christ. In verses 3 through 7 of this section, Paul praises God for his comfort in times of suffering, and he starts with doxology. Most of us, when we are thinking about our suffering, do not start with praise and worship, but Paul does:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort; 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. For just as the sufferings of Christ are ours in abundance, so also our comfort is abundant through Christ. But if we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation; or if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which is effective in the patient enduring of the same sufferings which we also suffer; and our hope for you is firmly grounded, knowing that as you are sharers of our sufferings, so also you are sharers of our comfort.

The two words intertwined throughout the paragraph are comfort and affliction. These two ideas always go together in the Bible. Affliction is what we would call hard times, difficult times, stressful times. Synonymous with the word affliction is another word that appears in the paragraph, suffering. It is our universal experience. Affliction comes to all of us in the body of Christ, whether it is physical, mental, emotional, or spiritual. The prayer request section in our bulletin each week reminds us of our brothers and sisters who struggle in life, and how we can enter into it by praying for them. Public sharing in our worship services reveal people who are suffering among us, but who also are experiencing the comfort of God. These things go together. Comfort is a strong biblical word. Our merciful, compassionate, heavenly Father is the source of comfort. The word really means strengthening, literally to come alongside and help. So comfort goes beyond empathy or sympathy by putting strength into our hearts. Because the apostle Paul personally experienced this kind of spiritual encouragement in his own affliction, he opens this section with a doxology of praise and thanksgiving to his Father God, who supplies all the resources we need in our common experience of suffering. "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort; who comforts us in all our affliction" The next words in the text, "so that," is a purpose phrase that Paul uses to unfold several of God's sovereign purposes behind our suffering as a Christian community.

Our suffering allows us to comfort others

The first purpose is detailed at the end of verse 4. God allows our suffering so that we might be able to enter into others' suffering and offer comfort to them. We are comforted "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." This statement would be a tremendous challenge to the Corinthian church because of their self-centered Christianity. Unfortunately, we are not that much different than they, with our own pride in individualism, our self-ism. Paul's point is that this provision of comfort from God in our suffering is not self-serving, but it is intended to equip us to serve one another and to serve the church. God uses his comforted people to enter the lives of suffering people so as to bring comfort to them. Our suffering and comfort is training ground for ministry in the body of Christ.

Another important observation in verse 4 is that God's provision for comfort does not always result in deliverance from affliction. In verse 4, Paul uses the phrase "in all our affliction," and then "those who are in any affliction." Later in the letter, Paul will talk about what he called a thorn in the flesh that bedeviled him. Although God never chose to remove it from his life, he was with Paul through the chronic struggle. In the last verse in this passage, Paul does talk about an experience of God's faithful deliverance from an overwhelming difficulty. Here we are not promised release from the trouble, but we are promised divine help and support through the suffering.

We suffer because Jesus suffered

Another dynamic of suffering comes from our relationship to the Lord Jesus. God allows our suffering because of our identification with Jesus Christ. Again, verse 5 says, "For just as the sufferings of Christ are ours in abundance, so also our comfort is abundant through Christ." Remember that even the Lord Jesus had to suffer, and if we are following and serving him, then we will encounter hardships. In Philippians 3:10, Paul describes this dynamic of living for Christ as "the fellowship of his sufferings," the hard times that come from following Jesus as our Savior. The apostle Peter described it as suffering "for the sake of righteousness" (1 Peter 3:14). If we choose to live in the fellowship of his sufferings, the good news is that the comfort and strengthening of Jesus Christ is exactly equal to the pressure which we experience in life. Paul makes that point later in 2 Corinthians 4:8-10 : "...we are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not despairing; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body." We are comforted through suffering because we are identified with Jesus Christ.

Suffering leads to spiritual maturity

Paul takes the themes he has developed in verses 3 through 5 and applies them directly to his relationship to the Corinthian church in verses 6 and 7. Suffering and comfort go together in God's plan to bring us all to spiritual maturity: "But if we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation; or if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which is effective in the patient enduring of the same sufferings which we also suffer; and our hope for you is firmly grounded, knowing that as you are sharers of our sufferings, so also you are sharers of our comfort."

What struck me initially in this passage is the optimistic view Paul has of the Corinthian Christians. They have treated him horribly and rejected his ministry among them, but he can still say, in verse 7, "Our hope for you is firmly grounded." It is consistent with his hopeful greeting in 1 Corinthians 1:4, when he wrote, "I thank my God always concerning you, for the grace of God which was given you in Christ Jesus...." I was humbled by the loving leadership on the part of this pastor who sees with God's perspective that these people are in the process of salvation. He says that is why he suffers, and that is why he is comforted. His hope for them is fixed on the God who is at work in them.

Paul knows the Corinthians will not always be the way they are now. They will not always be narcissistic or arrogant or competitive or superficial or materialistic. He understands, too, that suffering is part of God's plan to bring them to spiritual maturity. It is true for each one of us as well. Without suffering in our lives, and without God's accompanying comfort, how proud, how unconcerned, how rebellious, how unfinished we would be. I read an anonymous quote years ago, "Pain plants the flag of reality in the fortress of a rebel heart." Suffering is part of God's plan to grow us up.

There is another emphasis in verses 6 and 7. In spite of the tensions between Paul and the believers in Corinth, their lives are inescapably intertwined. Paul says they are "sharers of our sufferings" and "sharers of our comfort." What impacts Paul in suffering and comfort impacts the Corinthians; and what impacts the Corinthians in suffering and comfort impacts the apostle Paul. The point would be that our lives are inseparably bound together because we are the body of Christ.

As I thought about this reality in our own church, many people I have observed through the years came to mind. Out of their own affliction and comfort-whether it has been catastrophic illness, or injury, the loss of a child, clinical depression, an auto accident, financial crisis, maybe unfair criticism like the apostle Paul suffered-God has given them the capacity to understand and to comfort their brothers and sisters in the body of Christ. As members of one another, we are able to bear one another's burdens with special sensitivity that comes from having borne the same burden of suffering.

To summarize the apostle's opening words, God supplies all the resources we need in our common experience of suffering. God allows our suffering so that we might be able to enter into others' suffering and comfort them. God allows our suffering because of our identification with Jesus Christ. And finally our suffering and comfort go together in God's plan to bring us all to spiritual maturity.

Suffering forces us to depend on God

In the next section, Paul shares personally how God delivered him from an overwhelming experience of suffering. In verses 8 through the middle of verse 10, Paul makes the point that God allows suffering so that we can learn what it means to depend on him and not depend on our own strength and resources:

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 strength, 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.

In his commentary, William Barclay titled this section *Driven Back to God*. Nobody knows what Paul experienced in Asia. Bible scholars have conjectured mightily as to what Paul's near-death experience might have been. Suggestions have included a serious illness that almost killed him while he was traveling; mob violence, perhaps, in Ephesus; even, the psychological or emotional devastation of being rejected by this church, his own spiritual family; perhaps a severe beating or imprisonment; maybe demonic onslaught on Paul's life. But in God's sovereignty over these Scriptures, Paul does not tell us or the Corinthians the gory details, although the Corinthians may have known something of the circumstances. For us, I don't think the details are important. What really ought to touch us is Paul's anguish which is evident in the vocabulary he uses.

Parenthetically, I believe that if we knew the exact details, we would either discount it and say, "That does not relate to me. I have never been through that." Or if we had the same experience, we would identify to the extent that it would be difficult for us to step back and learn what God is revealing through Paul's struggle. That may be why Paul was a bit vague when he talks about the suffering.

Paul is incredibly honest as to how he was affected by the situation. The phrases in verses 8 and 9 are "burdened excessively," "beyond our strength," "we despaired even of life," "we had the sentence of death within ourselves." For Paul, the pressure was relentless. The futility of his suffering was probably paralyzing for him. He says he was in despair. In reality, he takes a tremendous risk with the Corinthians because a despairing apostle to them was a contradiction in terms. They wanted a powerful apostle, not an apostle who confesses weakness, struggle and fear of his own life.

As I was reviewing these phrases, it brought me back to the most difficult year of my life almost 25 years ago. It was a year of tremendous affliction, but also of comfort from God. Following the failure of my first marriage after ten years, I went through a painful divorce and a difficult year of being a single parent of a scared and confused little boy. I remember thinking at times that the pain would never go away, that I would never live out of hope again. Twice I thought about suicide, but it was my responsibility for my son that God used to keep me going. God comforted me through required course work in seminary and several faithful friends who invaded my life, including a fellow student who had experienced divorce several years before.

Like the apostle Paul in Asia, God had a redemptive purpose at work during that year for me. In verse 9, there is another purpose phrase, "in order that," and it speaks of another purpose in our suffering: "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." God allows our suffering so that we can learn what it means to depend on him and not our own strength and resources. Doesn't suffering do that? It breaks the stubborn spirit of self-will inside of us that insists on working things out on our own. Suffering forces us to lean on the Lord absolutely. Over and over again in the Bible, God warns us about the danger of self-sufficiency, but it seems to take suffering in our lives to make the lessons stick. For Paul, his suffering and deliverance taught him to trust God through the process.

Suffering strengthens the church's prayer life

Paul offers a final, divine purpose in our suffering. In verse 11, there is another purpose phrase, "that thanks may be given." God allows our suffering so that the praise life and the prayer life of our church can be increased and strengthened. Beginning at the end of verse 10:

And He will yet deliver us, you also joining in 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.

There are prayers of individuals and also people praying together, and then thanksgiving is enjoyed collectively as the community of faith. Suffering unites us as members of the body of Christ. Prayer for one another offers us the tremendous privilege of entering into God's saving purposes and activities in the lives of other people. Throughout Paul's correspondence to the different churches, he asks them to pray for him, and he is not shy about specifics, whether it is physical, emotional, or spiritual. Paul offers them the tremendous privilege of partnering with him in his ministry through their prayers.

Recently many in our church had the privilege to pray for one of our missionary couples in Italy. The wife became violently ill suddenly and almost died. Through e-mail and phone calls, many people were part of the process, praying for the woman's life and health. There was a real sense of participation in the life and ministry of that family, and great rejoicing as God answered our prayers to restore her health.

I am grateful for those who regularly assure me that they are praying for our church as a whole, and for my ministry in particular. I confess that I am so forgetful about prayer myself. So often when I should be "helping through prayer," to use Paul's language, I am busy doing other things. If there is any power or effectiveness in what happens in the ministry of our church, I know it is because of the fervent prayer life of many. It is tremendously encouraging.

There is a divine progression in verse 10. There is personal struggle, which leads to everyone entering into the struggle by praying together as a body. That leads to God's blessing of answered prayer, which leads to community encouragement, strengthening and focusing on God's greatness and his power. And that leads to thanksgiving and praise. The result is that the worship life of the body of believers is strengthened.

As we enter into the new millennium, we are not called to be a church of sophistication and power and wealth and knowledge. We are called to be a fellowship of suffering. We suffer in the knowledge that God supplies all the resources we need in our common experience of suffering; knowing that God allows our suffering so that we are able to enter into others' suffering and offer comfort; knowing that God allows our suffering because of our identification with Jesus Christ. Our suffering and comfort go together in God's plan to bring us all to spiritual maturity, so that we can learn what it means to depend on him and not our own strength and resources. Finally, God allows our suffering so that the praise and prayer life of the church can be increased and strengthened.

That is why Paul begins the discussion with praise and worship, a doxology. His heart's desire is that the Corinthian Christians and the Achaian Christians and the Christians in every church enter with him in this great

doxology, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort; who comforts us in all our affliction...."

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