

“The God of All Comfort”

2 Corinthians 1:1-11

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Introduction:

There is no doubt that all of us here this morning have experienced some level of pain up to this point in our lives. I have watched the births of both of my children, and besides the obvious pain in that room, it could not have been very pleasant for the children. When little children enter this world, usually the first thing they do is cry. And we know that the pain only gets worse from there. As we grow up, sometimes our lives are defined by the pain that we experience along the way. At some points, the pain is emotional. At some points, the pain is spiritual. At other points, the pain is physical.

Most of us here this morning probably have scars that tell some very interesting stories. We have scars from chicken pox. We have scars from various surgeries and accidents. I have a scar over each eye—one from running into a wrought iron aquarium stand when I was only 2 or 3 years old—8 stitches, I believe. And the other from the school parking lot in junior high school, and this one required six stitches. I vividly remember laying there in the ER as I watched them put in each one of those stitches—up close and personal. The needle looks a lot bigger when it is right there in front of your eye! But most of us have scars, and we could spend all day talking about the various forms of pain that we have experienced in this life.

For most of us, the scars that cause us the most pain are those scars that are not seen—perhaps choices that we have made that led us away from God—choices that hurt the ones we love—choices that kept us from fulfilling a personal goal or dream. Whether those scars are physical or emotional or spiritual, we understand that pain is something that all of us have in common.

This morning, I have a rather unusual handout, and I'd like to ask several of our men to make sure that everyone gets one of these Band Aids—not only the adults, but all of the children as well. I am not expecting a mass casualty here this morning, but I'd like for us to tuck it away for a few moments, and we will get back to it toward the end of the lesson. My kids picked these out this morning on the way to worship—that explains the Scooby Doo, Barbie, and Dora!

This morning, as we work our way through various forms of pain, I would like for us to look together at a passage of scripture in **2 Corinthians 1**—at some inspired comments that were made by the apostle Paul. Certainly Paul was an expert in pain. In fact, in **Galatians 6:17**, Paul said, ***“From now on let no one cause trouble for me, for I bear on my body the brand-marks of Jesus.”*** In other words, when

you looked at the apostle Paul, it was obvious that he had been beat up. When you looked at Paul, you knew that he had been through some very rough situations. Paul was a man with some serious scars. And this morning I would like for us to look very carefully at a paragraph of scripture that gives us some insight into what Paul had learned from the pain that he had experienced in his life. ****PPT****

If you will, please look with me at the opening eleven verses of the book of **2 Corinthians—2 Corinthians 1:1-11...**

¹ 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: ² Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. ³ Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, ⁴ who comforts us in all our affliction so that we will be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. ⁵ For just as the sufferings of Christ are ours in abundance, so also our comfort is abundant through Christ. ⁶ 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; ⁷ 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. ⁸ For we do not want you to be unaware, brethren, of our affliction which came to us in Asia, that we were burdened excessively, beyond our strength, so that we despaired even of life; ⁹ indeed, we had the sentence of death within ourselves so that we would not trust in ourselves, but in God who raises the dead; ¹⁰ who delivered us from so great a peril of death, and will deliver us, He on whom we have set our hope. And He will yet deliver us, ¹¹ you also joining in helping us through your prayers, so that thanks may be given by many persons on our behalf for the favor bestowed on us through the prayers of many.

And again, as we look back over these eleven verses, I would like for us to think together about some very basic lessons on the pain that we experience.

I. One of the first things we notice is the very basic reminder that THIS LIFE CAN BE OVERWHELMING. **PPT******

For most of us, this is rather obvious, because we can all remember times in our lives when we were stressed out almost to the point of losing it. We have all been in those situations where we are not quite sure if we can bear up under the pressure. And down in **verses 8-9**, Paul told about a similar time in his own life. In **verse 8**, he refers to his "***affliction.***" Affliction can be physical, emotional, or spiritual. We only need to look at the prayer concerns in our bulletin each week, and we are reminded that all of us face struggles on a daily basis.

Later in **verse 8**, he refers to being **"...burdened excessively, beyond our strength, so that we despaired even of life."** And again, many of us have been **"burdened excessively."** Maybe we are deep in debt. Maybe we have lost a job. Maybe we are dealing with a troubled child—trouble at school or trouble at home. Maybe we are coping with the death of a loved one. Pain and pressure come from many different directions.

In **verse 9**, Paul refers to, **"...the sentence of death within ourselves."** We may not be sure exactly what situation Paul was referring to here, but we know from other passages that Paul had some serious struggles. Later in this book, for example, we come to **chapter 11**, and in **2 Corinthians 11:22-28**, Paul gives us a brief outline. Paul says, **"Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they descendants of Abraham? So am I. Are they servants of Christ?—I speak as if insane—I more so; in far more labors, in far more imprisonments, beaten times without number, often in danger of death. Five times I received from the Jews thirty-nine lashes. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, a night and a day I have spent in the deep. I have been on frequent journeys, in dangers from rivers, dangers from robbers, dangers from my countrymen, dangers from the Gentiles, dangers in the city, dangers in the wilderness, dangers on the sea, dangers among false brethren; I have been in labor and hardship, through many sleepless nights, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. Apart from such external things, there is the daily pressure on me of concern for all the churches."** Paul, then, had some experience with suffering, and on top of all of those external concerns, Paul was worried about the Lord's church. Paul was concerned.

Paul reminds us, then, that this life can be overwhelming. We are surrounded by pressure and stress. Maybe some of us are feeling it right now, as we think about going back to school or to work tomorrow morning. Stress can keep us from getting a good night's sleep. It can keep us from doing our jobs as we should. Perhaps all of this is just a reminder that we are not in heaven yet.

We think about our own children, and we would love to shield them so that they never experience pressure or suffering. And we do the best we can, but we realize that life itself can be overwhelming. And yet the pressures of life give us something to look forward to. The Bible tells us in **1 Peter 2** that Jesus suffered and left us an example so that we could follow in His steps. Jesus did not avoid suffering altogether, but He worked through it.

Someone has described suffering as being on the outside of a house looking in through various windows. We may get little parts of the picture from here and there, but we will never have the full picture until we step inside. In the same way, we will never fully understand what we are going through until this life is over. But in the meantime, this life can be overwhelming. So Paul starts out by letting us know that the struggle is normal.

II. As we look back to 2 Corinthians 1, I would like for us to notice that in the middle of all of these struggles, GOD IS FAITHFUL. In fact, in verse 3 Paul describes God as "...the Father of mercies and God of all comfort." ****PPT****

"**Comfort**" is quite a strong Biblical word. It is used a number of times in this paragraph. Literally, it refers to the process of calling someone to our side to help us through a difficult time. We talked about this word several weeks ago in a different context, but it is the idea of someone putting their arm around us and giving us strength. And so as Paul thinks about his own difficulties, he remembers those times when he was strengthened by God—when God stood by his side, **"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort!"**

In verse 4, it is important to notice that God was comforting Paul, **"...in all [of his] affliction."** God was not removing the affliction, but God stepped into it and gave Paul the support that he needed. We are not promised release from the trouble, but we are promised help to get us through it. We remember God's words to Joshua at a very difficult time in Joshua 1. Moses had just died, and Joshua was taking over. The people of Israel were on the banks of the Jordan River, getting ready to go across for the very first time. At that very difficult transition, God came to Joshua and said in Joshua 1:9, **"Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous! Do not tremble or be dismayed, for the LORD your God is with you wherever you go."**

So many times, we simply ask God to take away the problem, but sometimes God simply promises to be with us through the problem. I am reminded of a mother who overheard one of her children praying before bed, and the child said, **"Dear God, please make Quezon City the capital of the Philippines. Amen."** And the mother was really confused by that, so she talked to her son and said, "Why did you pray that Quezon City would be the capital of the Philippines?" And the son replied, **"Well mom, because that is what I put on the test at school today."** And so here was a young man who wanted God to change the truth—to simply make the problem go away. But God does not always just take away the trouble. Sometimes he walks with us through the trouble.

Over and over in the Scriptures, we read about God's compassion. In Psalms 116:5, for example, the Bible says, **"Gracious is the LORD, and righteous; Yes, our God is compassionate."** We remember the words of King David in Psalms 34:18, **"The LORD is near to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit."** We remember the words of the Lord's brother in James 5:11, **"We count those blessed who endured. You have heard of the endurance of Job and have seen the outcome of the Lord's dealings, that the Lord is full of compassion and is merciful."** So even in Job's very painful situation, God was there!

God knows what we are going through. God has known sorrow. God has experienced the pain of losing a child. God has suffered physical pain. As the Bible

reminds us in **Hebrews 4:14-16**, "***Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin. Therefore let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.***" That is so encouraging! And because the comfort comes from God, it will always be there.

First of all, then, life can be overwhelming. But secondly, even in those difficult times, God is faithful and has promised to be there with us.

III. As we look back at 2 Corinthians 1, we see the purpose of all of this as WE AS CHRISTIANS ARE CALLED UPON TO COMFORT OTHERS. ****PPT****

In **verse 4**, Paul says that God, "***...comforts us in all our affliction so that we will be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.***" What a challenge this would have been for the church in Corinth. We know from the previous letter that they were a rather selfish group. As they were partaking of the Lord's Supper, some were filling up and others were going away without anything. They had abused the memorial by confusing it with a common meal, and some were going hungry. And so it was going to be a challenge, but Paul reminds them almost right away in this letter that they need to focus on comforting one another.

One thing I notice here is that these comments were not addressed to the elders of the congregation. The role of comforter was not limited to the preacher or the deacons. But these words about comforting are addressed (according to **verse 1**) to the "***church of God***" and to "***all the saints.***"

So many times, Paul was comforted by a fellow Christian. I am thinking of a man by the name of Onesiphorus in **2 Timothy 1:16-18**, where Paul said, "***The Lord grant mercy to the house of Onesiphorus, for he often refreshed me and was not ashamed of my chains; but when he was in Rome, he eagerly searched for me and found me—the Lord grant to him to find mercy from the Lord on that day—and you know very well what services he rendered at Ephesus.***" God was working through Onesiphorus to comfort the apostle Paul in prison.

And so as we apply Paul's comments to our own congregation, we realize that all of us are uniquely qualified to offer comfort in many different ways. Some have suffered through having teenagers—others are not quite there yet. Those of you who have been there are in a unique position to give encouragement to those who are in the middle of it. Some of you probably feel like you are changing a diaper almost every hour. Those of us who have been there are in a unique position to offer support and an encouraging word. The same goes for mental illness, or financial

trouble, or major surgery. Even with a group as small as ours, somebody has probably already been through what we are now going through ourselves.

The comfort that God gives to us is a gift that is meant to be shared. Just as God comes to our side, so also we can go to the sides of our Christian brothers and sisters. We can pray for one another, we can get involved where it may be appropriate. God's comfort is not just for our own private consumption. It is something that has to be shared. We have been comforted by God so that we can go out and be comforters.

As Peter wrote in **1 Peter 4:10**, ***"As each one has received a special gift, employ it in serving one another as good stewards of the manifold grace of God."*** When God gives us comfort, we are to turn around and share that comfort with others. We can channel it through prayer or maybe through practical service in some way, but we are to share the comfort that God has given to us.

In Booker T. Washington's autobiography, he tells about the comfort given to him by an older brother. He said that the shirts worn by the slaves on the plantation were made of very rough and inexpensive flax. As a young boy, the shirts were so abrasive and his skin was so tender that it caused him a great deal of pain. And so Mr. Washington says that his older brother saw that suffering and stepped in and would wear Booker's new shirts until they were broken in and easier to wear. I think we would have to agree that that is an example of showing love in a very practical way. As Paul wrote in **Galatians 6:2**, we are to, ***"Bear one another's burdens, and thereby fulfill the law of Christ."***

Sometimes comfort can be shown in less obvious ways. In Paul's letters to various churches and individuals, he wants them to pray for him, and he willingly gives the specifics—he wants them to join together in his ministry. In **verse 11**, Paul refers to, ***"...joining in helping us through your prayers, so that thanks may be given by many persons on our behalf for the favor bestowed on us through the prayers of many."*** Paul knew that prayer was a partnership. Today, whenever we get together as a Christian family, we share our concerns, and we take those concerns to God in prayer. This past Friday evening, we went around the room and shared our joys and our sorrows and our struggles, and then a Christian brother took those concerns directly to God on our behalf.

Paul, then, knows the value of prayer, he knows the importance of comfort, and so he starts his letter with a statement of praise, ***"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 will be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God."***

Conclusion & Invitation:

This morning, we started our lesson by thinking about our scars. As I see it (based on this passage), God wants us to use our scars to tell a story to others. God wants

us to share our concerns. God wants us to lean on each other. God wants us to work together like a family.

As we apply the Bible to our lives this morning, I wonder if we could recommit ourselves to sharing our concerns and needs with our Christian family. If you have anything that we need to remember in our public prayers, I would suggest that we take advantage of the welcome cards in the back of each pew. Each card has a place to indicate a prayer request. We put that there for a reason. We want to hear from our members and our visitors. Drop it in the collection basket, or give it directly to me either immediately after the lesson or after the service this morning, and we will take those concerns directly to God in prayer.

Under the "Contact" page, our newly redesigned website also has a place to send in a prayer request. We put that there for a reason. There are many ways we can comfort one another, but the first step is knowing that there is a problem. And I certainly hope that we can fulfill Paul's instruction by sharing our concerns with one another.

To help us remember the importance of our Christian family, I would like for us take what we were given earlier and take it with us during the week as a reminder—not as a reminder of our pain, but as a reminder that we need to share our concerns with our brothers and sisters in the family of God. If we struggle, let us lean on a brother or sister. And if we get that phone call, let us reach out as we should. Let this be a reminder that...

- Life can be overwhelming at times.
- But God is faithful.
- And when we are comforted by the Lord, we are to turn around and offer that comfort to others.

There are some here this morning who are not yet a part of God's family. Every Sunday we make a special effort to explain God's plan to those who may be visiting with us. God offered His only Son as a sacrifice for our sins. Jesus died on the cross, He was buried, and He was raised up on the first day of the week. The Bible tells us that we are to react to that sacrifice with faithful obedience. We are to turn away from our sins, and we are to allow ourselves to be immersed in water for the forgiveness of those sins. If you are ready to make that commitment, you can let us know as we sing the next song. Let's stand and sing...

To comment on this lesson: church@fourlakescoc.org