

SERIES: Power through Weakness

SERMON: **No Preferential Treatment**

SCRIPTURE: 2 Cor. 1:3-11

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Last Lord's Day we launched a six-month study of the book of 2 Corinthians. I don't often peddle my own tapes, but I would encourage you to listen to that message if you happened to be out of town over the holidays. You can now either listen to it or read it on our website, or you can order a tape or C.D. We provided lots of important background information for the book and talked about what we can expect to gain from this study.

This morning I would like to review just a couple of important points made last Sunday. Second Corinthians is a very personal and emotional letter that deals a lot with conflict in the church. The conflict it talks about is principally between Paul, the founder of the church, and leaders who came in after he left who decided the church needed to be more like the culture. I would like to quote one of the pastors of Peninsula Bible Church as he points out the relevance of Paul's words to us today:

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.¹

Paul was deeply disturbed by this new paradigm for church that the leaders in Corinth had adopted. In stark contrast he displays his credentials as an Apostle—suffering, weakness, self-sacrifice, humility, integrity, vulnerability. The church, you see, should be modeling its ministry, not after Wall Street or Madison Avenue or Nashville, but after Jesus and His apostles. He proclaims, "for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then am I strong" (2 Cor. 12:10).

Paul's mind-set stands in stark contrast to the culture of Corinth, as well as the culture we live in today. Pastors and churches vie with each other to put on the best show in town, to present a facade of strength and vitality and influence, in order to attract the brightest and the best and the wealthiest. At most church conferences today there are far more seminars on leadership and management and church growth than there are on theology, or spiritual disciplines, or shepherding.

At no point has the modern church bought into the culture and in the process strayed further from the truth than in its attitude toward suffering. The health/wealth theologians who dominate

the airwaves of our religious landscape have had a powerful and dangerous impact. Because of them countless professing Christians have come to believe that good health and relative wealth are part of their present inheritance as believers. They have come to believe they can expect “preferential treatment” from God, not only in respect to the spiritual blessings He has promised in Christ, but also in regard to financial, medical, relational, and physical health. They just need to “name it and claim it” or “increase their faith” or “invest more in so-and-so’s ministry.”

Let me state my thesis for you as clearly as I know how: the doctrine of preferential treatment is a false doctrine. God has not promised that his children will avoid natural disasters, serious illness, unemployment, relational struggles, poverty, persecution, or even death. As far as I know, Christians suffer from these trials to the same degree as pagans or people of other religions. Oh, there are some diseases that are brought on by immoral behavior, and believers who are serious about living holy lives may largely avoid those particular maladies, but on the whole born-again Christians suffer from trials and tribulations at just about the same rate as non-Christians. In fact, a strong biblical argument can be made that we should actually expect to suffer more, because persecution for our faith is an additional trial that unbelievers generally don’t experience.

The church today needs a philosophy of suffering that is based on truth, not wishful thinking; on solid theology, not the heresy that is being spread by so many TV preachers. If there were no other evidence that such teaching is false, the mere example of Paul as found in 2 Corinthians would reveal such a view to be a lie. I want to read just a smattering of passages from this book that reveals how this greatest missionary, theologian, and apologist of the Christian faith suffered, both physically and emotionally:

2 Cor. 4:8-10: *“We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body.”*

2 Cor. 4:16, 17: *“Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all.”*

2 Cor. 6:4-10: *“As servants of God we commend ourselves in every way: in great endurance; in troubles, hardships and distresses; in beatings, imprisonments and riots; in hard work, sleepless nights and hunger . . . Through glory and dishonor, bad report and good report; genuine, yet regarded as impostors; known, yet regarded as unknown; dying, and yet we live on; beaten, and yet not killed; sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; poor, yet making many rich; having nothing, and yet possessing everything.”*

2 Cor. 7:5: *“For when we came into Macedonia, this body of ours had no rest, but we were harassed at every turn—conflicts on the outside, fears within.”*

2 Cor. 11:23-28: *“I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again. Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false brothers. I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches.”*

2 Cor. 12:7-9: *“To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.’”*

Now you tell me, does that sound like preferential treatment to you? And if this is the experience of one of the most gifted, godly, and faithful of all of God’s servants, is there any reason we should expect better treatment ourselves?

In our passage today Paul begins to develop a biblical philosophy of suffering. In doing so he starts with what is absolutely foundational, namely the character of God. In fact, he begins with doxology—praise to God for who He is. We read it together earlier in our service: “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.”

The character of God is foundational to a biblical philosophy of suffering. (3, 4a)

If you don’t have a clear concept of who your God is, you will never develop a healthy, biblical attitude toward suffering. We have seen an enormous amount of suffering on TV in the past two weeks. I don’t want to minimize in any way what the people of Louisiana and Alabama and Mississippi are undergoing. But have you noticed the stark difference in attitude that has been exhibited by various victims? Some are angry, bitter, cursing God and man, hopeless, demanding. Others who are suffering just as much but are grateful to be alive, thankful for all the help they have received, determined to rebuild, hopeful. What makes the difference? In some cases it may reflect personality traits or levels of family support or past experience with suffering. But I can’t help but believe that in many cases you are seeing the impact of whether or not the individual knows who God is. Without that as a foundation, it is no wonder that people get bitter at the cards “Mother Nature” has dealt them.

Despite all of his own suffering Paul never saw God as his enemy or as One who neglected him, or even as One to complain to. Rather his God is to be praised: “Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.” Why?

He is the God and Father of the Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus, too, by the way, suffered

greatly, even more than the Apostle Paul, yet His principal relationship to God is that of a son to his father. Fathers don't hurt their children or even allow them to suffer needlessly. If they allow suffering in their children's lives it's because suffering is the only way to bring about a greater good.

He is the Father of compassion. Some of your translations may read “mercies.” Mercy is pity shown to a defeated foe. By its very nature it is for the undeserving. It is pardon for rebels. Paul understood God's mercy and compassion from personal experience. He was painfully aware of the wasted years he spent consumed by hatred for Christ and His followers. Yet when he was at his worst, God befriended him. And the Apostle never got over it. It is alarming when any Christian becomes blasé about his position in Christ; it is no small thing to receive compassion from the King of the universe.

He is the God of all comfort. The term “comfort” is found nine times in the next four verses. To our modern minds “comfort” sometimes induces images of soft cushions, warm baths, and luxury lodging. But originally it was a tough, invigorating word describing how God comes alongside us and gives us new perspective. Who hasn't seen a football or basketball team go into half-time looking dispirited and come out after the interval looking like a new team? The commentators are saying, “I wonder what the manager said to them during half-time?” In biblical terms, he comforted them! He came alongside them and put strength in their hearts. I suspect they may not have even enjoyed his “comfort,” but it did its job.ⁱⁱ The word “encourage” is almost a synonym for comfort.

Having drawn attention to the nature of God as Father, merciful, and encouraging, Paul now ties those character traits to God's relationship with us.

Suffering is normal and to be expected in every believer's life.

Notice the wording in verse 4: “who comforts us in all our troubles.” He doesn't say, “who comforts us *if* we happen to run into trouble.” Rather it is assumed that trouble will be part and parcel of the Christian experience. And it is. If you think you know a Christian whose life is easy and troubles never approach him, you don't know him very well. True, trouble is not evenly distributed; I would never compare my problems or my suffering with even some of the people in this church, nor with the hundreds of people who are homeless because of Hurricane Katrina. But then suffering is not easy to quantify. What is a great trial to one person may be something relatively easy for another to handle.

Trouble is an inescapable reality in this fallen, evil world. Eliphaz, one of Job's would-be counselors, declared “Man is born to trouble as sparks fly upward” (Job 5:7). Jeremiah, the weeping prophet, lamented, “Why did I ever come out of the womb to see trouble and sorrow and to end my days in shame?” (Jeremiah 20:18). That life is often filled with trouble, sorrow, pain, disappointment, disillusionment, and despair, even for God's chosen servants, is the testimony of the rest of Scripture, as well as the personal testimony of many saints.ⁱⁱⁱ Many question why bad things happen to good people. But the fact is bad things happen to all people,

because they are fallen creatures who live in a fallen, sin-cursed world.

Why does God allow it? (4-9)

In the process of answering this question, we will not only come back to this passage; we will also get a broad biblical picture of the purpose of suffering.^{iv}

1. To discipline us for disobedience. Certainly not all pain and suffering is earned in the sense that it is direct punishment for sin, but some of it is. I'm sure everyone in this room can think of many examples of trouble that we brought on ourselves. If children misbehave they face discipline. If teens refuse to study, they get bad grades or lose privileges. If a young family overspends their income, they fall under a burden of debt and perhaps even face bankruptcy. If a person drives while drinking he may well lose his license or even spend time in jail. If a Christian gets involved in sexual immorality, he will suffer guilt, broken relationship, and perhaps worse.

The Psalmist acknowledged, "Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I obey your word. . . . It was good for me to be afflicted so that I might learn your decrees" (Psalm 119:67, 71). The painful sting of suffering reminds believers that *sin has consequences*, and disobedience must be disciplined. I like the anonymous quote I read to the effect that "Pain plants the flag of reality in the fortress of a rebel heart." (That's similar to C. S. Lewis' famous quote: "Pain is the megaphone God uses to get our attention.")

2. To test the validity of our faith. In 1 Peter 1:6, 7 we read,

"In this (salvation) you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed."

God doesn't test us to see us fail but rather to see us succeed.

The paradigm example in Scripture of the testing of one's faith is, of course, the story of Job. The most faithful man of his time, he went through incredible suffering, losing his wealth, his children, and his health. Worse, those closest to him turned against him, his wife urging him to "curse God and die!" (Job 2:9). There was no sin or disobedience in Job's life that generated his suffering; instead God was testing the validity of Job's faith in the face of attacks by the evil one. And he passed! Those whose faith is genuine will pass the tests God allows in their lives, bringing them assurance, confidence, hope, and often huge blessing when the trial is over.

3. To prepare our hearts for heaven. Trials tend to strip away the worldly resources we so often depend on, leaving us completely dependent on divine provision. When suffering gets really severe it can even turn our hearts toward home. That's why believers often look forward to death when they are terminally ill, rather than using every available means to extend life. I had an amazing experience last year when I came across a book by Randy Alcorn entitled simply *Heaven*. It quickly found a place in my top ten books I have ever read. I got so interested in it

that I taught its themes for about six months in our Sunday at Six Bible study. For the first time in my life I caught a realistic glimpse of what heaven might be like.^v But the impact of Randy's book was even greater on my folks, because in all likelihood they are even closer to their heavenly home than I am. They certainly are suffering more than I; my dad turns 90 next month and mom is 87. They read the entire book, 600 pages, together. They've always been ready for heaven, but now I would say they are downright anxious for it.

4. To reveal to us what we really love. John writes, "Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For everything in the world—the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does—comes not from the Father but from the world" (1 John 2:15, 16). God uses trouble in our lives to help us grasp the extent to which the love of the world has gotten its grip on us. Do we love material possessions, power, influence, and pleasure more than God? Do we love family more than God? Sometimes we don't realize how much we are in love with other things or other people until God takes them away.

Abraham was tested in regard to what he really loved. He wanted a son, but both he and his wife were too old. Yet God miraculously gave him the desire of his heart, then came to him and said, "Take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains I will tell you about." Abraham must have been shocked at this seemingly incomprehensible command from God. All of God's promises and Abraham's hopes were bound up in Isaac. Yet when God commanded him to slay Isaac as a sacrifice, Abraham was read to obey. God, of course, stopped him and provided another sacrifice, but Abraham's willingness proved that he loved God above all else.

5. To strengthen us for greater usefulness. God allows bad things to happen to His children because the more they are tested and refined by trials, the more effective will be their service to others. James wrote, "Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything" (James 1:2, 3). This, of course, is also the principal point of our text for today, 2 Cor. 1:3-11. "God comforts us in all our troubles, *so that* we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God." So I'm going to camp here for a few moments. God's comfort is to be passed on to others. I like Eugene Peterson's paraphrase of verse 4: "He comes alongside us when we go through hard times, and before you know it, he brings us alongside someone else who is going through hard times so that we can be there for that person just as God was there for us." Anita Bengtson comes to my mind when I think about passing on comfort. Some eighteen years ago she experienced a scary bout with breast cancer. Did that cause her to become self-focused and self-pitying? No, instead she reached out to others with cancer and various kinds of suffering and passed on the comfort she received from God.

I have a book in my library entitled *Don't Waste Your Sorrows*. One of its points is that when we become depressed, allow bitterness to grow, blame God, or whatever, we waste the value that sorrow can bring to our lives in terms of helping others. Not everyone is called to preach or to

teach or to bear testimony before a crowd. But everyone can have a ministry of comfort. The only training you need is found in the school of suffering.

God's comfort is equal to the trial. Verse 5 says, "For just as the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives, so also through Christ our comfort overflows." There's a one-on-one relationship between suffering and comfort. The comfort and strengthening He provides is exactly equal to the pressure we will experience,

Paul seems to be saying here that God allows us to suffer because of our identification with Jesus Christ. If we are following Him and serving Him, we will encounter hardships, just as He did. Jesus himself told us, "If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you" (John 15:20). In Philippians 3:10 Paul describes this dynamic as "the fellowship of his sufferings." We like the idea of the fellowship of coffee and donuts; we like the fellowship of pot-luck suppers; but we resist the idea of the fellowship of suffering.

God's comfort passed on helps produce patient endurance. In verse 6 Paul claims that whether he is experiencing suffering or comfort, the result that is produced in the lives of his friends in Corinth is patient endurance. He passes on to them the comfort he receives from God, and that enables them to endure their own suffering. Paul seems quite optimistic about the ultimate outcome of the faith of the Corinthian believers. Right now they are showing a lot of immaturity and making life difficult for him, but his hope for them is firm.

6. To keep us from relying on ourselves. (2 Cor. 1:8, 9) I don't think it's any exaggeration to say that one of the greatest hindrances to living the Christian life victoriously is self-reliance. The easier life is, the more we are tempted to rely on ourselves. That's true, of course, even in human relationships. We would never go to a doctor if we didn't get sick; we would never go to a lawyer if we didn't have legal troubles; we would never go to a counselor if our relationships were all OK; and we would never look to God if troubles didn't occur.

For the first time in this letter Paul begins to speak of his own suffering in verse 8, and again I want to read it from *The Message*:

We don't want you in the dark, friends, about how hard it was when all this came down on us in Asia province. It was so bad we didn't think we were going to make it. We felt like we'd been sent to death row, that it was all over for us. As it turned out, it was the best thing that could have happened. Instead of trusting in our own strength or wits to get out of it, we were forced to trust God totally—not a bad idea since he's the god who raises the dead!

We do not know exactly what kinds of suffering Paul is talking about here; he doesn't give us specifics. But the details are not important; it is obvious from the words he uses that Paul was in great anguish. The pressure was relentless. Perhaps some of you have been where Paul is. Maybe you're there today. Maybe you're at the end of your rope. What is God trying to say to you?

Well, He has a redemptive purpose, and Paul describes it this way: "But this happened that we

might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead.” Suffering 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. And why shouldn’t we, for He is the kind of God that raises dead people—what could we need more than that?

Deliverance comes through God *and* through the prayers of Christian friends. (10, 11)

Look at verses 10 and 11:

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 favor granted us in answer to the prayers of many.

God is not only in the business of bringing (or at least allowing) trouble in our lives; He is also in the business of delivering us when trouble has done its work. Paul had great hope in God—not the kind that was presumptive but the kind that was confident. In recent years I have noticed that many Christians have been influenced, perhaps even unwittingly by the word of faith movement. When they pray they often say things like, “God, I know you have already healed me of this cancer,” when God has in fact done no such thing. For some reason they seem to think that claiming God has already done something is a sign of greater faith. It is not. It is a sign of presumption.

Paul is doing something different here. He first acknowledges that God has delivered him from whatever deadly peril he was referring to. Then he is expressing his confidence that God will deliver him in the future, for God had made it clear to Paul that He had important work for him to do. Then he further mentions his hope that God will continue to deliver him. Hoping and demanding are two different things.

If Paul is delivered, He knows who will do it—God Himself. And yet, interestingly, Paul acknowledges there is another factor at play here. “He will continue to deliver us, as you help us by your prayers.” Then in the last verse he speaks also of “the gracious favor granted us in answer to the prayers of many.” Friends, our hope is in God but our work should be on our knees. In recent months I have learned anew the critical part that prayer plays in accomplishing God’s purposes. I have seen some amazing examples of God answering the persistent prayers of His people.

Conclusion: Some of the leaders of the church at Corinth were in denial about suffering. They looked down on Paul for his and they were making unrealistic promises to their peers about theirs. What a tragic failure on their part to see God’s purposes in suffering!

In the northeastern United States, codfish are not only delectable, they are a big commercial business. The public demand for eastern cod posed a problem to the shippers. At first they froze the cod, then shipped them elsewhere, but the freeze took away much of the flavor. So they experimented with shipping them alive, in tanks of sea water, but that proved even worse. Not only was it more expensive, the cod still lost its flavor and, in addition, became soft and mushy.

The texture was seriously affected.

Finally, some creative soul solved the problem in a most innovative manner. The codfish were placed in the tank of water along with their natural enemy—the catfish. From the time the cod left the East Coast until it arrived at its westernmost destination, those ornery catfish chased the cod all over the tank! And you guessed it, when the cod arrived at the market, they were as fresh as when they were first caught, and there was no loss of flavor, nor was the texture affected. If anything, it was better than before.

Each one of us is in a “tank” of particular and inescapable circumstances. It’s painful enough to stay in the tank, but then there are those God-appointed catfish! Maybe you’re living with one of them. Or perhaps it’s someone at work whose irritating presence drives you to your knees several times a week. Every church has a few catfish as well! They’re there to keep all the cod from getting soft, mushy, and tasteless.

Prayer: Father, help us to put an end to pity parties and whine clubs and gripe gatherings. Help us not to waste our sorrows. Help us not to get bitter and angry—at You or at one another. Help us not to buy into heretical notions of preferential treatment. May we experience Your comfort and then reach out to others who are hurting the same we are. May we not rely on ourselves but on God who raises the dead.

i. Doug Goins, *The Church as a Fellowship of Suffering*, Discovery Papers, Catalog No. 4630.

ii. J. Philip Arthur, *Strength in Weakness*, 21.

iii. John MacArthur, *2 Corinthians*, 12.

iv. I am indebted to John MacArthur for some of these ideas. In his fine commentary on 2 Corinthians he takes one entire chapter to discuss the purposes of suffering.

v. I can’t even begin to teach that topic this morning, but I will share one particularly profound concept that I had never fully appreciated before—namely that our eternal home is going to be right here on earth. Just as God is going to take our present bodies and resurrect them, resulting in both continuity and change, so he is going to take this present earth and resurrect it. What is a human body like without any of the effects of sin? It must be an amazing instrument! And what will this earth be like without any of the effects of sin? Well, we can read the early chapters of Genesis and get a pretty good idea—as we find Adam at peace with the animals and at peace with God—walking in the Garden of Eden in the cool of the day, with every need met.

That gives us at least a partial picture of what heaven will be like for us. But the last chapters of Revelation indicate it will be far beyond that. I think one of the reasons we feel so attached to this earth is that we were made for it, eternally. I fully expect that the things we like most about

it—the rivers, the mountains, the great canyons, the animals, the creatures of the sea—will all still be available to us, only there will be no curse—no natural disasters, no fear, no blight, no disease, no danger, no aging, no deterioration.