

# 1. The comforts of suffering

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[ 0 : 00 ] Well, now we come to our reading from Scripture. In fact, we're going to have two readings from the Bible this evening, and you'll see the purpose of that a little bit later on.

Can we turn first to the Acts of the Apostles, chapter 18? Acts, chapter 18, and you'll find this in the Church Bibles on page 927.

927. 927. I want this evening to start a series of sermons from the second letter of Paul to the Corinthians. And so in our second reading, we shall come to 2 Corinthians, chapter 1.

But I wanted to read this section from Acts 18, which will show us how it was that Paul first went to Corinth, and what happened to him there, and how under his preaching, God began to raise up a church there in Corinth.

So I want to read Acts, chapter 18, verses 1 to 18. After this, after Paul's adventures in Thessalonica and Berea and Athens, after this, Paul left Athens and went to Corinth.

[ 1 : 08 ] And he found a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius, the emperor, had commanded all the Jews to leave Rome.

And he went to see them. And because he was of the same trade, he stayed with them and worked, for they were tent makers by trade. And he reasoned in the synagogue every Sabbath, and tried to persuade Jews and Greeks.

When Silas and Timothy arrived from Macedonia, Paul was occupied with the word, testifying to the Jews that the Christ was Jesus.

And when they opposed and reviled him, he shook out his garments and said to them, Your blood be on your own heads. I am innocent. From now on, I will go to the Gentiles.

And he left there and went to the house of a man named Titius Justus, a worshiper of God. His house was next door to the synagogue. Crispus, the ruler of the synagogue, believed in the Lord, together with his entire household.

[ 2 : 15 ] And many of the Corinthians, hearing Paul, believed and were baptized. And the Lord said to Paul one night in a vision, Do not be afraid, but go on speaking and do not be silent, for I am with you.

And no one will attack you to harm you, for I have many in this city who are my people. And he stayed a year and six months teaching the word of God among them.

It's very interesting why the Lord should have had to appear to him and give him a vision in the night. Presumably, he was just about ready to pack up. He was afraid. But the Lord came to him and said, Don't be afraid.

Go on speaking. Don't be silent. And so he did. So verse 12. But when Gallio was proconsul of Achaia, the Jews made a united attack on Paul and brought him before the tribunal, saying, This man is persuading people to worship God contrary to the law.

But when Paul was about to open his mouth, Gallio said to the Jews, If it were a matter of wrong doing or vicious crime, O Jews, I would have reason to accept your complaint.

[ 3 : 22 ] But since it is a matter of questions about words and names and your own law, see to it yourselves. I refuse to be a judge of these things. And he drove them from the tribunal.

And they all seized Sosthenes, the ruler of the synagogue, and beat him in front of the tribunal. But Gallio paid no attention to any of this. After this, Paul stayed many days longer and then took leave of the brothers and set sail for Syria and with him Priscilla and Aquila.

Well, we'll leave that reading there and we'll turn on to 2 Corinthians now, chapter 1. And you'll find this on page 964 in our church Bibles, page 964.

And I'll read the first 11 verses of chapter 1, 2 Corinthians 1, 1 to 11. Written probably some six years after that initial visit of Paul to Corinth.

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy, our brother, to the church of God that is at Corinth, with all the saints who are in the whole of Achaia.

[ 4 : 39 ] Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. 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 as we share abundantly in Christ's sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too. If we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation.

And if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which you experience when you patiently endure the same sufferings that we suffer. Our hope for you is unshaken, for we know that as you share in our sufferings, you will also share in our comfort.

For we do not want you to be ignorant, brothers, of the affliction we experienced in Achaia. For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself.

Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death. But that was to make us rely not on ourselves, but on God who raises the dead.

[ 6 : 04 ] He delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us. On him we have set our hope that he will deliver us again. You also must help us by prayer, so that many will give thanks on our behalf, for the blessing granted us through the prayers of many.

Well, these readings are truly the word of the Lord, and may they be a blessing to us this evening. Amen. Well, friends, let's turn up our two Corinthians again, if we may, on page 964 in our Pew Bibles.

Now, I'd like to take as my title for this series of sermons, The Pastor Who Never Gives Up. Possibly, The God Who Never Gives Up could be a better title, but in calling it The Pastor Who Never Gives Up, I want to do that because it's surely an apt description of the Apostle Paul, particularly when you think of his relationship with the Corinthian Christians.

I don't think it's an exaggeration to say that the Corinthian church caused Paul as much difficulty and trouble as all the other churches that he founded put together.

One Corinthians, if you know One Corinthians, it's a pretty troubled letter. It's a strong letter and full of correction for the Corinthians. But Two Corinthians is an agonized letter.

[ 7 : 46 ] If Paul had had any hair on his head before he started to write Two Corinthians, I think he might have torn it all out before he put his pen down at the end.

And this letter is a kind of hair-tearing exercise. Now, we haven't quite felt that in the first 11 verses, but as we read it through, I think you'll discover that. And do let me encourage you to read through Two Corinthians, the whole letter, if you can, in the next week or two.

Make yourself a large cup of hot chocolate and sit down and enjoy it. You'll only partly enjoy it because it's a difficult letter. It's an agonized letter.

But Paul, the pastor, was a pastor who, thank God, never gave up on his wayward Corinthian Christians. He loved them very much. And, and this is really what the letter is all about, he was determined, no matter what it cost him, to bring them kicking and screaming to Christian maturity in the end.

He was not going to give up on them. He wasn't going to cut his ties with them or write them off like a bad debt. And as we engage with this great letter over the coming weeks, I trust that one benefit of studying it will be that we see Paul's tireless commitment to the church and to its maturity, and that we too, because we're called to imitate Paul, that we should be spurred on to a similar unending commitment to the Lord's church and its growth into maturity.

[ 9 : 13 ] Now, it happens that just a week ago in this building, I was discussing with a member of our church, somebody who's belonged here for, I think, about 12 years. I was discussing this series of sermons that I was about to start, and he said, what are you going to be preaching on next week, Edward?

And I said, two Corinthians. And he said to me, well, I'm very glad to hear that, because I can't ever remember one Corinthians or two Corinthians being preached on in this church, at least since I've been a member here, as I say, about 12 years.

Now, I'm sure that these letters have been preached on in our church in the more distant past. In fact, I have a copy of a little book on my shelves at home called Pastor and People by George Duncan.

And George Duncan was the minister here about 40 years ago, and I think this was a setting into print of a series of Bible studies that he had given at the Wednesday evening prayer meeting in about 1971.

So certainly, two Corinthians has been preached on, ones who remember it are shaking their heads in the front here. And I imagine that one or two Corinthians have been preached on more recently than that.

[10:20] But I do wonder if preachers are a little bit shy of these two letters precisely because they show us Paul in such difficulty and such perplexity, and in two Corinthians, really, in such anguish.

I mean, let's face it. We all prefer a quiet life. And we rather shrink from tangling with other people's anguish. In fact, on reading through two Corinthians, we might be tempted to say to the Lord something like this.

Lord, I don't like to give you advice, but might it not have been better if you had got Paul to write a letter to the Corinthians when he was in a serene and calm frame of mind?

I mean, you could do anything and everything. You could have arranged for him to go to a quiet cottage in Perthshire for a sabbatical. In the summer months, when Scotland is looking at its most beautiful, he could have had a housekeeper and a cook and a fresh supply of vegetables every day on his table, and anything else that could have helped him to think serenely and with a broad, peaceful, uncluttered mind.

And then he could have given the Corinthians a great theological treatise on your sovereignty and your irresistible and eternal purposes. But instead, Lord, you made him write this, this disjointed, it is rather disjointed, this disjointed, agonized outpouring.

[11:46] And we are having to read it and study it. Now, friends, you catch my drift, I'm sure. The fact is, however, that a great deal of the Bible arises out of pain and frustration and difficulty.

Many of David's Psalms were written in situations of great pressure. The book of Job, which has magnificently comforted generations of Christians in their times of suffering, was written in a situation of intense personal pain.

At one level, the whole of the Old Testament is a catalogue of spiritual disaster. And yet, it is because these great biblical books are written in the pressure cooker that they are so helpful to us. They engage with real life, with sin and suffering and misunderstanding and bad relationships and disobedience and selfishness. And those are the things, of course, which our own lives are engaging with every day.

Those are the characteristics of those we meet, and there are characteristics too. If the Bible had nothing in it but peaceful Perthshire summertime theology, I think we'd soon throw it away in disgust, because we'd know that it had little to do with us and little to say to us.

[13:06] Well, let me say a little bit more by way of introduction before we get into chapter one. Let me say a little bit about the background and Paul's relationship to the Corinthians. In Acts chapter 18, we read about Paul's initial visit to Corinth.

And that visit probably took place in the year 50 AD. And Paul reached Corinth, and you'll see this if you read through Acts 16 and 17 as well. He reached Corinth after he had been, well, he'd crossed the Aegean Sea to Philippi in northeastern Greece.

He'd spent a short time there and had been roughly treated, very roughly treated. He then went across to Thessalonica and spent a short time there, just a few weeks, and was very roughly treated.

He then went to Berea, a few miles further west, where again he was roughly treated. And he then went south to Athens, a short visit. He wasn't roughed up in quite the same way there, but I guess it was quite a difficult visit.

And then from Athens, he journeyed a mere 40 miles westwards across southern Greece to the commercially important city of Corinth. Now, Corinth was a big city.

[14:11] It was big in first century terms, certainly. In fact, it could have had as many as 750,000 inhabitants in the year 50 AD, which would make it even bigger than Glasgow is today.

A very big city. And you may have noticed in the Acts 18 record that I read that Paul spent over 18 months in Corinth. And that was a very long stay for Paul.

As you know, his lifestyle, his work, was essentially itinerant. And he would only stop a long time in a particular place if he could see that that place was evangelistically strategic.

He wouldn't have spent 18 months in a village of 300 people in the middle of nowhere, even though the inhabitants of that village are just as important as those of a big city. But Corinth, you see, was strategically very important.

It was situated on a narrow neck of land known as the Isthmus of Corinth, between two gulfs, two sea inlets in the northern Mediterranean. And it was a point of convergence for traders who were moving goods from the east to the west and also from west to east.

[15:18] So Paul realized that if commercial travelers and merchants and so on were converted to Christ at Corinth, because they were traveling here and there, they would take the gospel all over the northern Mediterranean.

So Paul stayed in Corinth from 50 AD to, we guess, sometime in the year 52, when he began to travel again. But by the time he left the church in 52 AD, there would have been numerically quite a strong church.

It could have been several hundred people in the city. And because Paul had worked so hard and because Paul had been there for such a long time, he would have built up quite a number of close personal friendships with many of those Corinthian Christians.

Friendships that he could not have built up if he'd only been there a very short time. And that means that when things began to go wrong in the church, it was all the more painful for him. He knew these men and women well, and he loved them.

But things did go badly wrong at Corinth. And it was these wrong things that caused Paul such heartache, and which caused him to write these two pained letters in which he sought to put things right.

[16:29] And let me at this stage flag up the biggest problem which 2 Corinthians deals with. As 2 Corinthians unfolds, it becomes increasingly obvious that there are other people, other leaders, who view the spiritual life very differently from Paul and who disagree with Paul.

And these leaders are there in Corinth influencing the Christians at Corinth and leading them up the garden path. In fact, it becomes clear as the letter goes on that Paul doesn't regard these people as Christians at all.

In fact, in chapter 11, he calls them false apostles, deceitful workmen who disguise themselves as apostles of Christ. So they look a bit like Christians, but they're not.

He also calls them servants of Satan, who are disguising themselves as servants of righteousness. Now, we don't quite know who these people were, whether they'd infiltrated the church from outside, or whether they were perhaps members of the church from within the ranks who were going astray.

Quite possibly, it's a mixture of the two. But they're not only teaching a false understanding of Christianity, as if that were not bad enough by itself, they're also smearing Paul and his reputation in his absence, telling the Corinthians that Paul is a very deficient apostle and should no longer be followed.

[17:54] So the issue that Paul is having to tackle is a doubly difficult issue, doubly in this sense. First, he has to uphold truth against falsehood.

But secondly, he's having to defend himself over against these false apostles. So it's not just a question of true religion versus false religion.

It's also this personal question of Paul versus the false apostles. So it's to do with personalities as well as positions. And when you think about it, you can see how similar Paul's problem was to the problem faced by Jeremiah more than 600 years earlier.

I mentioned Jeremiah because Bob is preaching through Jeremiah at other services. Jeremiah's message to the people of Jerusalem in 600 BC was, listen to me, not to the false prophets, because the false prophets are prophesying lies in the name of God.

But I'm telling you God's true message. Now, did the people of Jerusalem in 600 BC listen to Jeremiah's message? No, they did not. And that's why the judgment fell on Jerusalem.

[19:04] And the city was sacked by the Babylonians just a few years later. So the people of Jerusalem then decided to reject the true message of God in Jeremiah's mouth in favor of the false message of the false prophets.

And the rest is history, tragic history. It's a very similar issue here. Would the Corinthians in 56 AD, which is probably when this letter dates from, would they accept the true teaching of Christ's true apostle, the apostle Paul?

Or would they reject Paul in favor of the teaching infiltrated by these false teachers who were disguising themselves as apostles of Christ? Now, friends, let's fast forward 20 centuries, because this is very much a question for us today, as well as it was back in the first century.

Will we accept Paul as an authoritative apostle of Christ? It's a very current question, because there are plenty of church leaders today who are not willing to answer that question with a wholehearted yes.

I'm sure you'll have heard this kind of thing broadcast, perhaps on the radio or the television, by a church leader who says something like this, the teaching of Jesus in the four gospels is matchless. [ 20 : 24 ] That's where you find real Christianity, in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. But as for Paul, really, he's a different matter. We have to take him with a grain or two of salt. He took the pure, primitive gospel of Jesus and intellectualized it, made it difficult.

Oh, yes, we grant that he had his moments of inspiration. Nobody, for example, would wish to be without his wonderful hymn to love in 1 Corinthians 13, taken, of course, out of context.

But in general, Paul had many things to say which really we can't accept in the modern world. Aspects of his teaching are locked into a first century cultural time warp, and he no longer fits in with our more enlightened and liberated contemporary worldview.

You've heard that kind of thing, I'm sure. Now, friends, let's blow a silent collective raspberry. Silent at the back there.

At that line of thinking. The issue for us today, it's a critical issue. Do we accept Paul as a true apostle of Christ?

[ 21 : 33 ] Is his teaching true for all generations? Or was it only true for the world then, and cannot be true in our more enlightened, liberated, contemporary atmosphere?

The serpent said to Eve, Did God really say those things? The serpent says to us, Did God really speak through the apostle Paul?

Perhaps, the serpent goes on, Perhaps Paul was a fit apostle for the Gentiles back in the first century. But haven't we outgrown him today? All right, well, let's turn to 2 Corinthians chapter 1. I want to move quite quickly to verse 3. But let's first notice some important things in the very first verse. Let's see the way in which Paul identifies himself at the beginning, because this is significant. Look at verse 1. Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God. Now, that is fighting talk. It perhaps just looks like a mere statement of his identity, but it's much more than that.

[ 22 : 40 ] It's polemical. It's fighting talk. This is the headwater of the stream, which is going to develop later in the letter. Paul is saying, My opponents question my apostleship, but I assert it.

I am an apostle by the will of God. By God's will. I'm not self-appointed. God has put me into this position. You ought, therefore, to listen to me. I'm not a self-styled guru.

I'm a God-appointed apostle and messenger of Christ. And do you see how he distinguishes himself from Timothy in verse 1? Timothy was a man whom Paul greatly respected and loved. In fact, Paul said of Timothy in Philippians chapter 2, I have no other colleague like him. It's high praise from the apostle Paul. What he's really saying is, Of all my colleagues, Timothy stands head and shoulders above them.

But here, in our verse 1, Paul is quite clear that Timothy is not an apostle like himself. He is Timothy, our brother. And the fact that Paul describes Timothy in such different terms from the way he describes himself brings out even more clearly what Paul is claiming for himself.

[ 23 : 54 ] I'm an apostle of Christ by the will of God. Therefore, I'm a mouthpiece of Christ. I speak for him. You see, the apostle's role is to speak words which carry all the authority of the master who sent him.

That's why the New Testament letters, written by Christ's apostles, carry every bit as much weight as the words of Jesus himself in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Friends, have you come to see that?

Do you agree with that? Do you grasp it? A true apostle of Christ speaks with all the authority of Christ himself. Therefore, if there's a little voice inside you which is saying, but surely the words of Jesus are at least a little bit more authoritative than the words of Paul and Peter and John, take that little voice and put it on the floor in front of you and then squash it with your foot.

Squelch. Okay? All right, let's turn to verses 3 to 11. Now, this is a wonderful passage about suffering and comfort.

And I would encourage you to get to know this passage really well. It seems to be one of those gems in the Bible that is not so well known. But do get to know it well because this passage will have the power to sustain Christians in the toughest experiences of our lives.

[ 25 : 17 ] It's the kind of passage to turn to when we're seriously ill. It's the kind of passage to turn to and think about when a horrible bereavement comes to us suddenly. It's a passage to turn to when our personal circumstances become intolerable.

Paul's circumstances had become intolerable to him shortly before he wrote this letter. Just look again at verse 8. We don't want you to be ignorant, brothers, of the affliction we experienced in Asia.

For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death.

Now, those are the words of an exceptionally strong and capable individual. Much stronger and more capable, I guess, than most of us. And yet he had reached the end of his tether.

We despaired of life itself. What was this affliction that he experienced in Asia? Now, Asia, in Paul's day, was not Asia as we understand it today.

[ 26 : 24 ] It was a much smaller area. It was the Roman province of Asia Minor. And in terms of modern geography, that's roughly one-third, the western third, of modern Turkey.

It included places like Troas and Laodicea and Colossae and Sardis, which are all mentioned in the New Testament. But from Paul's point of view, by far and away, the most important place in Asia was Ephesus.

Now, Acts chapter 19 tells the story of what happened to Paul at Ephesus. He actually stayed there for two years. It was the other place where he spent a long time.

And Acts 19 ends with the account of the terrifying riot that took place in the amphitheater at Ephesus, led by a silversmith called Demetrius. Now, that riot was a fierce, vicious, anti-Christian demonstration staged in order to get Paul and his fellow missionaries out of Ephesus.

Because their mission there had been so successful and so many people from Ephesus were turning away from their idols of silver and gold and stone that the silversmiths and the other tradesmen like that were losing a great deal of business in the city because people were no longer buying their little gods and statues.

[ 27 : 40 ] So eventually, it comes to a head and this huge crowd, led by Demetrius, baying for Paul's blood, gets together and for two hours or more, they cried out, Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!

Great is Artemis of the Ephesians! That was their kind of patron goddess, Artemis. Eventually, the town clerk managed to quieten the mob and disperse them. But the first verse of Acts chapter 20, the next chapter, tells us that Paul hurriedly departed from Ephesus and went north to Macedonia. Now, it's one thing to be taken to court because of preaching the gospel and to face a magistrate and Paul had had to do that several times. But to have a crowd bellowing for your blood for two hours must have been profoundly terrifying for Paul and that's probably the experience he was writing about here in 2 Corinthians chapter 1 verse 8.

And it may not simply have been the shouting mob that was so horrible for Paul. It may be that that riot at Ephesus at a more profound level proved to be a watershed in Paul's experience.

It may be that he realized on that day in a way that he had never realized before that his life was certain to end violently. like master like servant.

[ 29 : 03 ] You and I I imagine expect to die peacefully in our beds. I rather expect to die as an old man in hospital or at home surrounded by kindness and cups of tea.

You probably do too. But at Ephesus it may be that Paul came to see clearly that he would die either at the hands of a mob or by execution under Roman law.

In the event it was execution under Roman law in the year 65. But our verse 8 here in chapter 1 leaves us in no doubt that his experience in Ephesus brought Paul to a position of unprecedented despair.

And yet and yet just a few weeks later he's able to write here in verse 3 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.

Well let me try and draw quite briefly three points out of this passage which I hope will really be of practical help to us. First Paul is teaching that our afflictions open a door for God to comfort us.

[ 30 : 18 ] Look at that little paragraph verses 3 to 7 it's only 5 verses but the verbs and nouns for the word comfort occur 10 times in those 5 verses and words for affliction and suffering occur 7 times.

Now you can't experience comfort unless you're first suffering so that means that directly or indirectly suffering is referred to 17 times in those 5 verses and yet Paul's thought is expressed in a framework of praise.

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who brings us so much comfort. I think if I'd been going through what Paul had gone through I would have been tempted to cry out woe is me poor me miserable wretched unfairly treated me.

Now the Bible does allow us to cry out to God in that kind of way. Jeremiah did it was almost what we read this morning. Job certainly cried out like that. David had many moments of tormented misery.

It's not that the Bible forbids us to cry out in pain to God when we're in great pain and surely Paul cried out that way in Ephesus but the Lord taught him to set his afflictions in a broader framework.

[ 31 : 35 ] What then does he teach us? Look at verse 3. The true God the God and Father of our Lord Jesus is the Father of Mercies and the God of all comfort.

Those are two very striking titles for God which I don't think are found anywhere else in the Bible. The pagan gods of the Greeks the gods whom some of the Corinthians used to worship were cold and heartless and quite indifferent to human pain.

But our God understands human pain. After all he had to endure the death of his only son. And Jesus understands human pain.

He is the man of sorrows who is acquainted with grief. The true God is the God of all comfort. That means that all true comfort comes from him.

And I think Paul helps us to understand how Christians experience this comfort. In verse 5 he tells the Corinthians we share abundantly in Christ's sufferings.

[ 32 : 40 ] comfort. And that is why through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too. Now what does Paul mean by that? Surely this, that he recognizes that his sufferings, the sufferings that came to their most climactic moment at Ephesus were an extension of the sufferings of Jesus himself.

Jesus suffered at the hands of persecuting people who hated him. They hated him and they hated his message. And Paul knew that he too was hated and persecuted for exactly the same reason, for the sake of Jesus and the message about him.

Paul preached Jesus, crucified for man's sin and raised from the dead. And Paul preached the necessity of repentance, which is always a sock in the eye to human pride.

And he preached forgiveness of sins through Christ. Now it was for that message, which is so humbling, it's for that message that Paul was beaten and whipped and threatened with mob lynchings.

But how does Paul regard it all? He thinks to himself, I am sharing in my master's sufferings. What an honor to be able to share in my master's sufferings.

[ 33 : 56 ] And in verse 7, he tells the Corinthians that they too share in Paul's sufferings. They too are to taste the sufferings of Christ and share in them. Now at one level, none of us can share in Christ's sufferings.

And that is the level at which he bore our sin on our behalf in our place. The honor and glory of his substitutionary death is something which is uniquely his.

But it's on the level of the persecution and hatred that he had to endure that Christians share his suffering. That's what Paul is talking about here. And Paul knows that the suffering Christ endured was followed by his resurrection to glory and honor.

And that is where the comfort lies. Whenever you and I find ourselves scorned and hatred for the sake of Christ and the gospel, the comfort comes in knowing that the hatred and persecution which is part of the suffering of Christ will be followed by glory and honor in the presence of God.

to share in Christ's suffering is by definition to share also in Christ's glory. Remember how Paul puts it in Philippians 3, that I may know him, Christ, and the power of his resurrection and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

[ 35 : 20 ] That's the shape of Paul's thinking which we're to follow and imitate. suffering and death like that of Christ and then resurrection. And if the assurance of the resurrection to eternal glory

does not bring comfort to us, we are award winning twerps.

I think we're bound to ask the question, does Paul's teaching take into account other types of suffering? Aging and illness and money worries and family problems?

Well, certainly Paul suffered in those ways like the rest of mankind. In his letters he mentions times of illness and shortage of money and shortage of food. But there's no doubt that in the New Testament the heart of Christian suffering arises out of faithfulness to Christ and commitment to the work of the gospel.

The sufferings of Christ, in which Paul and all Christians share, are not the sufferings common to all mankind, but the sufferings of holding to the gospel and the Bible in a world which is fundamentally antagonistic towards the gospel.

And yet, those other sufferings, illness and bereavement and poverty and heartache, they're surely not excluded, as though Christ is not interested in our human frailties.

[ 36 : 37 ] Of course he is. He knows everything about us. So let's learn from the apostle who had been so bruised and battered. The true God is the Father of mercies and the God of all comfort.

When we suffer, our afflictions open a door for God to comfort us. Very often we'll find that he doesn't remove the source of affliction, but he wonderfully strengthens us and enables us to endure the trouble.

Then secondly, Paul teaches us that our afflictions open a door for us to comfort one another. Look again at verse four. The God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction.

Why? 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. It seems a rather contorted sentence, but I think the logic of what Paul is saying is very simple.

Look at the beginning of the verse. Who comforts us in all our affliction. That's what we've just been looking at. In all our affliction, God brings us the sweet comfort that he alone can give.

[ 37 : 52 ] But why? Is it just for us to clutch to ourselves and keep it to ourselves and to enjoy it and be blessed by it? No. It is, as the verse goes on to say, 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.

So his comfort comes to us and blesses us and gives us strength to endure so that we are then equipped with a marvelous gift, a treasure of understanding something about God which we are then able to pass on to others for their blessing and their comfort.

So when a time of affliction comes to us, let's learn to be thankful because our afflictions, our afflictions will equip us to help others subsequently who are facing a similar affliction.

Christian. So for example, the person best equipped to help and comfort a new widow is someone who has been widowed.

The best person to help a Christian teenager who has been ridiculed at school for being a Christian is another young Christian who has been through the same experience. The experienced person can say to the one who is suddenly thrown in at the deep end, I know what it's like and I can assure you that God is able to strengthen you and comfort you in your time of trial.

[ 39 : 17 ] He's done it for me and he will do it for you. Think for a moment, friends. I can speak about him because he's absent. Think of our pastor Willie. Willie has been, I'm not exaggerating here, he's been fiercely persecuted over the last few months because of his stand for the gospel.

Willie has received no end of emails and letters in which people have sprayed him with buckshot, if I can put it like that. He has been wounded and hurt much more deeply, I suspect, than he's let on to us.

But a wonderful consequence of all that pain is that he is now able to help and strengthen other pastors who are having to face the same kind of hostility as they seek to keep their congregations true to the gospel.

Like the apostle Paul, Willie has been greatly afflicted, but he's been upheld and comforted by the father of mercies, and the God of all comfort, and he is now able, in a way that he could not have done a few years ago, he's now able to share the comfort that he has received with others who are similarly afflicted, and who feel, as Paul did in verse eight, that they are almost in terminal despair. there. So, friends, let's follow the example of Paul and be ready to comfort each other with the comfort that we ourselves receive from the Lord.

[ 40 : 44 ] Now, to do this, we need to know each other, don't we? We need to spend time together if we're to be able to comfort each other. In some churches, and I know this from experience, in

some churches, members of the congregation hardly know each other.

and you get a conversation like this. Oh, hello, you're Mr. Smith, isn't it? Smith. I've seen you on the front row of church for the last 20 years, but I've never quite caught your name.

Oh, I'm so sorry. Now, that's not going to get us very far, is it? That kind of thing. We need to get to know each other. Let's come to church morning and evening, unless prevented by old age or illness, and let's lovingly take time to talk together, to have fun together.

Have you ever heard of a ministry of fun? It's a great ministry to have. Let's have fun together. Let's visit each other in our homes, eat together, and so on. Now, of course, we have other things to do. I realize that. We've got to go out to work. If you've got a family, you've got to raise your family, look after them. We've got to tend the garden and walk the dog. But let's make one another in the Lord's family a very high priority.

[ 41 : 57 ] priority. And this means that as we really get to know each other, when a crisis comes, when an unbearable episode happens to this individual or that family in the church, we know them well enough to share the crisis with them and to be a powerful means of God's comfort to them.

In these times of crisis, we may not quite use these words directly, but what we're really saying to each other is, I love you. And I'm reminding you of the source of real comfort, which is God himself and the good news about Jesus, the unshakable truths of forgiveness and eternal life.

That's where the final comfort rests in the gospel itself. Well, friends, time has flown. I'm going to be very, very brief on my third and final point, and it's this. that Paul teaches us that our afflictions compel us to rely not on ourselves, but on the God who raises the dead.

Here's verse 9 again. Indeed, we felt that we'd received the sentence of death, but that was to make us rely not on ourselves, but on God who raises the dead.

What Paul is teaching here is the categorical opposite of our normal fallback position. Our normal fallback position is to rely on ourselves in a crisis.

[ 43 : 26 ] We rely on our strength of character or our experience or our ingenuity or our ability to cope. We say, I'm a strong man or I'm a wise woman. No, no, says Paul, no.

Look back to verse 8. Paul was beyond his strength. His tank was empty. It was beyond empty.

Paul felt that he was on death row. He felt he simply could not recover. But he seized the wonderful positive purpose of God in this gruesome experience.

It was to bring home to him unmistakably just how frail he really was so that he should learn unforgettably where power really lies, not in human ingenuity, but in the God who raises the dead. Let us pray together. Thank you.