

20250621 2 Corinthians 1 – Suffering Well: Dealing with the Pain in Our Lives

***All scripture is from NKJV unless noted otherwise.

Many people contacted me to tell me how much they enjoyed my sermon last week on giving. I responded saying, “thank you so much, but please realize that I preach the Bible through chapter by chapter, and some chapters are much easier to preach than others.” Today, the chapter we study will be on suffering. That is a much harder topic to handle than giving.

Suffering is hard. Suffering is pain. Pain can be mental, emotional, spiritual, and physical. It all hurts. It’s all suffering. Interestingly, I was making a home visit this week and Don and Sylvia Austin mentioned that they had just read a book called *Pain: The Gift Nobody Wants*. Author Philip Yancey leans on the experiences of Dr. Paul Brand who grew up in India and so was intimately familiar with leprosy. Shockingly, leprosy destroys peoples lives by removing the pain from injuries that they suffer. By that I mean that it so deadens tissue, that those infected with leprosy damage their limbs and destroy their bodies because their brains no longer receive pain signals when they are wounded or being damaged.

Takeaways from the book include:

- **Painlessness is dangerous** — Examples from leprosy and rare genetic conditions prove we cannot safely live without it. Brand famously said he would give his patients the "gift of pain" if he could.
- **The mind's role** — Pain is not purely physical; attitude, culture, faith, and emotions heavily influence perception and tolerance. Knowing God’s word can help us greatly to endure our suffering.
- **Practical wisdom** — Use pain as information rather than fighting it blindly. Modern medicine's success in reducing pain is a blessing but creates new challenges in coping with what's left.
- **Broader implications** — Touches on faith, human dignity, compassion (especially for the marginalized), and viewing the body as a marvel of design. It challenges the Western pursuit of comfort at all costs. Paul tells us repeatedly that pain (suffering) is part of what we must endure as believers, but God is faithful, and He will always be there to hold our hand and guide us through the pain which we experience.

Paul actually wrote 4 different letters to the Corinthian church. I have listed them below as 1-4. Only two of these letters survived; the ones I mention below as letter 2 and 4.

- 1 The first letter is just mentioned in 1 Corinthians 5:9 “I wrote in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people.” This letter has been lost.
- 2 The second letter is what we call **1 Corinthians**. It was written from Ephesus.
- 3 The third letter is referred to as a “severe letter” or a “painful letter.” Paul mentions it in 2 Corinthians 2:3-4. The letter has not survived.

- 4 The fourth letter is what we call **2 Corinthians**. He wrote it from Macedonia after he had left Ephesus. Scholars think it might be the compilation of a few short letters.

We now begin our study of 2 Corinthians. He wrote this about a year after he wrote the letter that we have just studied. This is the most personal letter that Paul wrote. Paul bears his soul in this letter. He loved the Corinthians and he was pretty affected by the church drama that had gone on there. These letters were about resolving that drama. We get into trouble when we misinterpret what people are saying or doing, and Paul had been grossly misunderstood in many ways. He couldn't run from the drama as we are prone to do, because his very life was wrapped up in the success of this church.

He had planted this church, and his heart and soul were invested in it. He had to stand against the attacks. He just couldn't admit defeat for the gospel itself. Some had apparently come along behind Paul and had bad-mouthed and attacked him. He found himself in a defense mode. It's no fun to be attacked. But Paul believed that his life and ministry were one and the same. We learned a huge amount in 1 Corinthians, but I think the one great matter of importance was learning that all that we do in our church must be done in love. If we don't do that, the wheels will come off.

We're actually reading the 4th letter. The goals of this letter were:

- 1 To strengthen and encourage those who remained faithful to him and his message.
- 2 To encourage the church to complete the collection of funds for the believers in Judea as the expression of their repentance.
- 3 To offer the small group that was still at odds with Paul one more chance to repent before he returned to confront those who had stirred up trouble.

*1 Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God, and Timothy our brother,
To the church of God which is at Corinth, with all the saints who are in all Achaia:
2 Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. (2 Corinthians 1:1-2).*

These letters were written on a scroll, so in those days, the letter began with the author, otherwise you'd have to unroll the entire scroll to see who wrote the letter. Paul restates his calling as "an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God." Remember that an apostle is one who has been sent out. It was someone sent with authority. Paul was sent by God like a person who today would have a Power of Attorney to spread the message of the gospel.

God is our Only Real Comfort – Reasons for Suffering

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 tribulation, that we may be able to **comfort** those who are in any trouble, with the **comfort** with which we ourselves are **comforted** by God. ⁵ For as the sufferings of Christ abound in us, so our consolation also abounds through Christ. ⁶ Now if we are afflicted, it is for your consolation and salvation, which is effective for enduring the same sufferings which we also suffer. Or if we are **comforted**, it is for your consolation and salvation. ⁷ And our hope for you is steadfast, because we know that as you are partakers of the sufferings, so also you will partake of the consolation. (2 Corinthians 1:3-7).

Suffering and comfort are complicated topics. Naturally, we really don't enjoy talking about suffering. I really didn't understand suffering until I went through various health problems over the last few years. Some of you in this room or reading this sermon have gone through great suffering or you're going through it right now. I wish we didn't have to go through suffering, but personally, I've grown the most as I've reached out to God through my suffering. Here are some observations that might be of help to some of you.

- 1 Jesus' Suffering - I learned to focus on the fact that Jesus suffered more than we can even imagine. Whatever we're going through, Jesus went through worse without deserving any of it, and He endured it for our benefit. I found that it helped me to meditate on the suffering of Christ.
- 2 Pain and Suffering our Momentary - Although it seemed that my suffering would never end, it was in fact temporary. Sometimes when you're in severe suffering, you need to just focus on getting through the next 3 minutes. I had to handle some of my suffering in 3-minute segments. I would put on praise music as the typical song lasts 3 minutes. That is how I endured those segments.
- 3 Benefit of Empathy - Suffering allows you to empathize with others as you never have before. You don't need to go through suffering to sympathize with someone, but you do need to go through it to empathize with them. After I went through severe suffering, Sherri Laird told me, "Oh pastor, now I know that you understand what I'm going through. It makes me feel so much closer to you to know that you've experienced some of what I have experienced." That is a biblical benefit of our suffering, and that's what Paul is talking about here. When we go through it, whatever it is, and we receive God's comfort, it enables us to relate to others and to share comfort with them.
- 4 Lessons Learned - Suffering can bring us to new spiritual realities. CS Lewis said:

"We can ignore even pleasure. But pain insists upon being attended to. God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains: it is his megaphone to rouse a deaf world." — C.S. Lewis, The Problem of Pain

- 5 Comfort Seldom is the Removal of the Pain – In our western minds with think of comfort as removal of the pain, but as Dr. Brand said, feeling the pain has its benefits. Comfort can come in all kinds of ways, EVEN in the midst of our suffering. It speaks of being encouraged to help you **GET THROUGH WHAT YOU'RE GOING THROUGH**. This Scripture doesn't mention making the difficulty go away. As we ourselves are comforted, we can then be a comfort to others.
- 6 Not all pain is the same. "Mental pain is less dramatic than physical pain, but it is more common and also [harder] to bear. The frequent attempt to conceal mental pain increases the burden: it is easier to say "My tooth is aching" than to say "My heart is broken."
— C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*
- 7 Christian Life is Not Free from Suffering – It is part of what we go through in these "earthly tents." He doesn't promise to take it away, but He promises to carry us through it.

Learning from Suffering – We Can't Handle it in our own Strength

⁸For we do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, of our trouble which came to us in Asia: that we were burdened beyond measure, above strength, so that we despaired even of life. ⁹Yes, we had the sentence of death in ourselves, that we should not trust in ourselves but in God who raises the dead, ¹⁰ who delivered us from so great a death, and does deliver us; in whom we trust that He will still deliver us, ¹¹ you also helping together in prayer for us, that thanks may be given by many persons on our behalf for the gift granted to us through many. (2 Corinthians 1:8-11).

Paul opens up that he was utterly devastated. He was sick to the core of what was going on. His very life was in danger. He relates that in Asia Minor he felt the sentence of death. This is probably the deepest and most sincere confession of suffering that Paul has ever made in any of his suffering. Paul was saying that **HE WAS ABSOLUTELY OVERWHELMED**. Paul uses a Greek word that he is confined and under pressure, pushed down and trapped with no where to go. Paul's life was a life of pain. He focuses on his pain to teach us what is the purpose of our pain and suffering. Paul helps us to see our pain from God's perspective. If we look at our pain through our own perspective, it is overwhelming.

Amid our suffering we must not trust in ourselves but in God who raises the dead! If you trust in yourself in the midst of your suffering, you'll never make sense of any of it. This reminds us that our suffering often gets to a level that frankly, we just can't handle in our own strength. It become impossible. **GOD WILL GIVE YOU MORE THAN YOU CAN BEAR, BUT HE'LL NEVER GIVE YOU MORE THAN YOU CAN BEAR BY LEANING ON HIM**. Paul and his team were made to suffer far more than they could endure and bear on their own. Why? **SO THAT THEY WOULD NOT TRUST IN THEMSELVES, BUT IN GOD**. Unfortunately, we only run to God when we come to the end of ourselves!

Paul's Sincerity – How Paul responds to Criticism by Naysayers

¹² For our boasting is this: the testimony of our conscience that we conducted ourselves in the world in simplicity and godly sincerity, not with fleshly wisdom but by the grace of God, and more abundantly toward you. ¹³ For we are not writing any other things to you than what you read or understand. Now I trust you will understand, even to the end ¹⁴ (as also you have understood us in part), that we are your boast as you also are ours, in the day of the Lord Jesus.

¹⁵ And in this confidence I intended to come to you before, that you might have a second benefit— ¹⁶ to pass by way of you to Macedonia, to come again from Macedonia to you, and be helped by you on my way to Judea. ¹⁷ Therefore, when I was planning this, did I do it lightly? Or the things I plan, do I plan according to the flesh, that with me there should be Yes, Yes, and No, No? ¹⁸ But as God is faithful, our word to you was not Yes and No. ¹⁹ For the Son of God, Jesus Christ, who was preached among you by us—by me, Silvanus, and Timothy—was not Yes and No, but in Him was Yes. ²⁰ For all the promises of God in Him are Yes, and in Him Amen, to the glory of God through us. ²¹ Now He who establishes us with you in Christ and has anointed us is God, ²² who also has sealed us and given us the Spirit in our hearts as a guarantee. ²³ Moreover I call God as witness against my soul, that to spare you I came no more to Corinth. ²⁴ Not that we have dominion over your faith, but are fellow workers for your joy; for by faith you stand. (2 Corinthians 1:12-24).

There are a few truths that I think we can render out of verses 12-24. We've all know someone who is unreliable. They say they're coming to church or something and then you never see them. It's sort of harsh to say that someone is "unreliable," but some of the Corinthians were accusing Paul of being unreliable. It all had to do with his change in travel plans. Paul told them previously that he was going to come visit them when he was going to Macedonia (1 Corinthians 16:5). Issues popped up and Paul had to change his plans twice. You'll notice that people who are intent on criticizing you, will often do so by honing in on things that don't really matter. Trouble makers will look for something insignificant and they'll try to tie something of significance to it. They'll question reliability and trustworthiness in speaking the truth. For the sake of the Gospel, Paul begins to address the issues and criticisms.

Paul is highlighting and contrasting two ways of thinking. We can either think according to the flesh or according to the Spirit. The way you and I think will be based on the values that we have. The world's values lead to worldly thinking. Having biblical values leads to biblical thinking. Paul was attacked by people. We tend to measure others WAY DIFFERENTLY THAN WE MEASURE OURSELVES.

So in summary, in this chapter we find the following truths.

1. God is the Source of All Comfort in Affliction.
 - a. He is "the Father of compassion and a God of Comfort" (v.3)
 - b. He comforts us in troubles so we can comfort and empathize with others (v.4)
 - c. This comfort comes through Christ, especially as we share suffering with Him.

Lesson: Suffering is real. It is intense. God’s comfort is abundant and purposeful.

2. Suffering has purpose – It teaches us Dependence on God.
 - a. Paul described “extreme pressure” in Asia that brought him to despair for even his own life. He felt sentenced to death. (vv.8-9)
 - b. This happened “that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead.” (v.9)
 - c. God delivers us past, present, and future hope. (v.10)

Lesson: Suffering strips away self-reliance and pushes us to trust God for deliverance. Trials refine us like gold. They make us more effective in ministry.

3. The Power of Prayer and Community
 - a. Paul credits the prayers of the Corinthians for deliverance and invites continued prayer. (v.11) Trials can be turned into testimonies.

Lesson: Believers should pray for one another. Prayer participates in God’s work and leads to collective thanksgiving.

4. Live with Integrity and Godly Sincerity
 - a. Don’t get too focused on the criticism of others. They’ll often pick out something of no significance to try to undermine your ministry. Paul has a clear conscience based on living his life by God’s wisdom, and not earthly wisdom.

Lesson: Christian leadership and daily life should be marked by transparency, honesty, and reliance on God’s grace — especially when facing criticism. Expect criticism and don’t feel you have to answer all of it.

5. God’s Promises Are Reliable (“Yes” in Christ)
 - a. Paul’s travel plans weren’t fickle. They were faith based. (vv.15-24)
 - b. God establishes us, anoints us, seals us with the Spirit as a guarantee (vv. 21–22).

Big Idea: God meets us in hardship, uses it for good, and calls us to comfort others while living with integrity and firm hope in His promises. Many commentaries highlight this as a powerful passage for “suffering well.” I am sorry we must “suffer well”, but He enables us to do just that.

Let us pray.

Union Grove is one of the oldest Baptist communities of faith in the State of Texas dating back to 1844. Pastor Faber McMullen may be reached by email at uniongrove362@gmail.com or by snail mail at: 15301 FM 362, Navasota, Texas 77868. Tel: 936-825-1227 (Edited and proofed by Amanda Neese- Webster, Texas.) All financial gifts to this ministry are tax-deductible as a 501 (c) (3) Corporation.