

Downward and Outward

II Corinthians on Walking in the Way of Jesus

Part One: 1.3-11: Comforted by the Presence of Jesus

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We have just wrapped up an amazing summer series, haven't we? Those of you who shared – the rest of us want to thank you so much for the chance to get to know you, for your vulnerability and honesty, for the example of your lives opened up before the Lord, for the way you have pointed us to him, for reminding us of the gift God gives us in his word and in each other. Wow.

If you haven't heard them all, please go back to our website and take a listen. You won't want to miss a single one of them!

Series Intro

This morning we begin a new fall sermon series on II Corinthians. To which some of you are saying: "Oh – great."

Many consider II Corinthians to be Paul's most bewildering and uninviting letter. You may feel the same way.

Other letters of Paul's are challenging because they are thick with theology; this one is challenging not only because the issues Paul is addressing are confusing but because the way Paul chooses to address those issues is also confusing.

In order to get the most out of this series, here are four things I think are worth saying.

First, what we need to know about Corinth.



Here's where Corinth was located. We're looking at present day Greece on the left and Turkey on the right. On the right, in what was then Asia Minor, you can see Colossae and also Ephesus, where Paul spent a lot of time. Up on the top, Philippi and Thessalonica and Berea, where he planted churches. And down on the left are Athens and then Corinth.



Corinth was a beautiful and booming city when Paul was there, at the height of its glory.

It was located at the intersection of a harbor on the Aegean Sea and a harbor on the Adriatic Sea, so a ton of wealth passed through the city, making it a regional center for commerce and banking.

It was also a huge religious center, with temples and shrines and altars to dozens of different gods, and the religion of the people and their wealth and success was all tied together, as they saw the gods primarily as the path to get the sort of life they wanted.

The city was known for its pride, its wealth, its success, its boasting. It was also known in the ancient world as a city of beautiful people. The Corinthians placed a premium on physical appearance and on impressive and commanding speech.

Listen to how one scholar describes the city:

“Of all the cities in the Greco-Roman world, none engendered an atmosphere of self-centeredness more striking than Corinth. Status was an obsession and self-boasting a daily ritual, and arrogance and haughtiness were commonplace.” (Savage, 78)

“In Corinth, perhaps more than anywhere else, social ascent was the goal, boasting and self-display were the means, and personal power and glory were the reward.” (Savage, 41)

“It was a time when everybody yearned for an admiring public. The pursuit of upward mobility turned into a quest for applause and esteem. Personal glory became an ideal.” (Savage, 23)

When we think of ancient Corinth, we might think of Houston during the oil boom era or Silicon Valley today.

Second, what we need to know about the church in Corinth.

More than any other church in the Paul's ministry circle, this was a church that had allowed the values and perspective of the surrounding culture to seep into it and define its outlook on pretty much everything.

So within the church we find rampant pride, self-centeredness, preoccupation with achievement, strength, and success, and a posture of self-sufficiency and self-promotion. They see God as the way to get the life of success and power and glory that they want, and they have become consumed with exalting themselves instead of exalting God.

Third, what we need to know about this letter to the church in Corinth.

Every letter in the New Testament is sparked by some specific event or circumstance that triggers the need for a response of instruction or perspective or encouragement.

In this case, the thing that sparked II Corinthians was that the legitimacy of Paul's ministry was being called into question by some of the believers at the church because Paul didn't have the sort of ministry they thought he should.

They criticize his physical appearance, which they believe lacks sufficient force of personality and charisma.

They complain that his speech is unprofessional and unimpressive, that he lacks power in his speaking, that he doesn't go on the attack and mock and revile his opponent and tear them apart with his words like other Christian leaders do.

They complain that he does not boast about himself or promote himself enough. He is always pointing past himself.

And they complain that he doesn't present himself as a success. Instead, his life is marked by struggle and suffering and sacrifice that they believe casts them in a bad light, and his ministry is marked by humility and gentleness and other-centeredness that they find shameful and distasteful.

Clearly, they are using secular values to evaluate the legitimacy of his ministry, using worldly measures of his success instead of biblical ones.

In this letter Paul says there's only one point of reference that means anything to him when it comes to evaluating his ministry, and that is the life and ministry and character of Jesus. The shape of his life and ministry doesn't conform to secular standards of success at all. It is conformed to the example of Jesus.

Last, what you need to know about why we picked this letter to the church in Corinth as our focus for the fall

Not because Covenant church and the Corinthian church resemble each other. Not at all.

What I and Covenant's other leaders see as we look at this church is a family marked by love and thoughtfulness and generosity and grace and unity and humility..

The reason we picked this book isn't because of what we see in the Corinthian church but because of what we see in Paul, and because of how starkly that contrasts with the upside down values of the world that surrounds Paul.

We live in a world today in which Corinth would be right at home. Our surrounding culture is marked by pride, competition, self-seeking ambition, concern for success and appearances, with everyone yearning for an admiring public.

"Up and to the right" is the catchy way the business community speaks of success. That captures the direction of the arrow on a chart showing rising sales or profits. As time goes by, success grows, profits grow, market share grows, so the arrow goes up and to the right.

Jesus – through both his teaching and his example – calls us to something radically different. By contrast to a culture of success, it seems like the life he lived and the life he calls us to is a down and out life. And it is. He calls us to pursue a downward life of humility and an outward life of love.

We've picked this book as our fall focus in response to God's invitation for us to continue to learn what it means to walk in the costly way of love.

In a world that is swept up with itself, Paul models a life that is concerned first and most with Jesus.

In a world that is consumed with getting, with what we have, Paul teaches us how to turn our lives out toward others in love.

In a world that wants comfort and ease for ourselves, Paul teaches us how to be generous and sacrificial toward others.

In a world that is divided and comes at each other with words that revile and tear down, Paul gives us an example of humility and love and grace in the face of differences.

As we walk through this book this fall, we'll focus on one part of each chapter each Sunday morning. I want to encourage you in the next week or two to do three things. Read the book through at one sitting, which will only take about forty five minutes. Pick a passage that speaks to you and begin to commit it to memory. And pray that God would use this book to continue to teach us together what it means to live a life of love.

The Text

So let's look at our first passage, from chapter one, verses 3 through 11.

This passage comes in two sections. Both deal with the presence of troubles and suffering in our lives. The first part deals with how God brings comfort in our troubles, the second with how God brings deliverance from our troubles.

Listen in this first section to the two themes of suffering and trouble on the one hand, and comfort on the other.

II Corinthians 1.3-5

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, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God. For just as we share abundantly in the sufferings of Christ, so also our comfort abounds through Christ.

II Corinthians 1.6-7

If we are distressed, it is for your comfort and salvation; if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which produces in you patient endurance of the same sufferings we suffer. And our hope for you is firm, because we know that just as you share in our sufferings, so also you share in our comfort.

II Corinthians 1.3-5

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, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God. For just as we share abundantly in the sufferings of Christ, so also our comfort abounds through Christ.

Praise

It's so interesting to see where Paul begins. Paul wants to start off his letter very intentionally by focusing on the theme of suffering, but look where he actually begins: with a celebration of who God is.

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort.

It's the *berakah* prayer formula that some of the Jewish rabbis taught their disciples to pray all through the day. "Praise be to you, O Lord our God, the king of the universe, because . . ." and then you fill in the rest, thanking God for good food or good news, for

thunder and lightning or rainbows, for a glimpse of the mountains or the ocean – whatever moves you to gratitude. It's a great pattern for prayer throughout the day.

About nine months ago as I woke up one day I found myself saying, "What a day of joy, Lord, because . . ." I wasn't thinking it was going to be a day of joy. I wasn't thinking about the day at all. I felt like God just put those words in my mouth. So I followed his lead and finished the sentence. "Because . . . because I get to walk through the day with you, and I'm surrounded by people I love, and you have given me the privilege of serving you, and so on."

That night the same thing happened again. Just as I was falling asleep, there were those words that God put in my mouth again, "What a day of joy, Lord, because . . ." So I finished the sentence: "Because I got to encourage this person and serve you in this way and experience you in this challenge and be welcomed home by a loving wife" and so on.

Every time hardship comes, we can praise God that he will meet us with his compassion and comfort.

In Isaiah 51.12, God says,

I, yes I, am the God who comforts you.

Now then, about those hardships . . . Paul uses two words.

II Corinthians 1.3-5

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, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God. For just as we share abundantly in the sufferings of Christ, so also our comfort abounds through Christ.

Trouble

The first word is the word translated "troubles." Literally it is a word that means squeeze. Anything that presses in on you. Anything on the outside of you or the inside of you that causes you to feel pressure,

Suffering

The other word is the related word "suffering," which means just what our word in English means. Anything that causes you pain or anguish. It can refer to emotional suffering or physical suffering.

Paul doesn't explain troubles and suffering. He doesn't give a defense of it. But he does insist that, whatever the Corinthians may think to the contrary, God is sovereign over the hardship and suffering in our lives. He allows it, and he has purposes for it. Troubles

and suffering, pressure and pain, are an inescapable part of the Christian life. Jesus suffered, and as Paul assures us, we will share abundantly in his sufferings.

If we think God's agenda is to make us happy and keep us comfortable in this life, we will inevitably think that suffering in a person's life is a sign of God's disfavor. That was the view the Corinthians had toward Paul.

Or we may our suffering as a sigh not that we have failed but that God has failed.

But Jesus tells us we will have troubles. John 16.33

Here on earth you will have many trials and sorrows. But take heart, because I have overcome the world.

And Paul reminds us that we will have troubles. I Thessalonians 3.2-3

We sent Timothy to strengthen you, to encourage you in your faith, and to keep you from being shaken by the troubles you were going through. But you know that we are destined for such troubles.

When God calls Paul to gospel ministry he assures Paul that he will experience suffering in conjunction with his ministry. Far from being a mark of his failure. His suffering will be a sign of his faithfulness. Acts 9.15-16

This man is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel. I will show him how much he must suffer for my name.

This trouble and suffering is of two sorts. There is trouble that we will experience as a result of life in a fallen world – the universal experience of death and mourning and crying and pain that Revelation 21.4 tells us are part of this world but won't be part of the next.

There is also the trouble we experience specifically as a result of being a follower of Christ in this fallen world – the troubles, hardships, distresses and persecution that Paul describes in II Corinthians 6.4 that are a direct result of his commitment to Christ.

Whichever sort of trouble it is that we face, God will meet us in it.

That brings us to the word **Comfort**, which as we saw is repeated nine or ten times in these five verses.

Behind this word is the wonderfully intimate picture of someone calling someone else over to their side and speaking a personal word of comfort or encouragement that is just for them.

"Comfort" might be a bit of a misleading translation, because we tend to think of comfort in terms of our circumstances being comfortable, our being without pain or discomfort.

But this word is actually getting at the consolation and solace we can receive from God right in the midst of our painful losses and disappointments.

It is a strength and a peace, a wellbeing, that we experience as God meets us in the midst of our trouble. It's the sort of comfort that Julian of Norwich expresses in her famous line: 'All shall be well, and all shall be well and all manner of things shall be well.' It comes of knowing to the depth of our beings that God is with us, and God is for us, and God is enough.

II Corinthians 1.3-5

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, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God. For just as we share abundantly in the sufferings of Christ, so also our comfort abounds through Christ.

In verse 5 Paul makes the remarkable claim that "just as we share abundantly in the sufferings of Christ, so also our comfort abounds through Christ." Our comfort abounds through Christ.

Jesus who suffered, Jesus who died, Jesus who rose from the dead, is now alive and present and available to us in all things. He draws near to us, and he draws us near to him, and his loving presence changes everything. We don't have to cling to a certain outcome because his loving presence matters more than any particular circumstance.

Psalm 23.4:

Even though I walk
through the valley of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil,
for you are with me;

So when we find ourselves pressed and pained, squeezed and bruised by circumstances, we can be confident that the loving comfort of Jesus will abound to us.

But here's a wonder: the comfort of God doesn't just come directly from God, it also comes through you and me to each other.

II Corinthians 1.3-5

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, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God. For just as we share abundantly in the sufferings of Christ, so also our comfort abounds through Christ.

Look again at verse 4:

The God of all comfort . . . comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God.

This is one of the amazing dynamics of the Kingdom over which Jesus rules. God's design is that comfort would come to each of us . . . but not stop with any of us. God intends whatever comfort we experience to spill over, to overflow into the lives of others. Meeting us in our pain, God equips us to be a significant part of the way He intends to meet others in their pain.

I remember vividly what it was like when my mom and dad died when I was twenty. For good reason, most people didn't really know what to say or how to respond.

But some people knew exactly what to say and how to be with us. At the memorial service, a middle aged man I didn't recognize patiently waiting for the hundreds of people to go through the receiving line. Then he came up and briefly said hello.

Turns out he was a neighbor who lived down at the end of the street that none of us really knew. In his gentle and shy way he shared that his wife had just died a few months before and he just wanted to come be with us in our loss. He handed us a letter he wrote, said a few just-right words, and left. And it turns out those words he spoke and the ones he wrote in his letter brought more comfort than anybody else's on that day. He was incredible, in his words, his sensitivity, his presence, utterly at ease in our grief because he had been there too.

The God of all comfort . . . comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God. (4)

As I was working on this section of my message I started thinking about all of the stories I'm aware of – and I know there are many, many others I'm not aware of – of how God has brought comfort to some of you in our church family through others of you who have faced the same troubles and hardships. I started a list and it immediately got too long to read. It is so deeply moving to me to think of it.

This is a congregation that loves well, and loves deeply, and loves in beautiful and costly ways. Think of the comfort others have brought you as you have been ...

Facing widowhood, or divorce, or struggles with singleness or in marriage

Dealing with trauma, or adoption, or miscarriage.

Dealing with depression or anxiety.

Getting out from under drinking or drugs or pornography.

Walking through the loss of a child, or caring for a child with intellectual or developmental disabilities, or walking a parent through Alzheimer's.

Rebuilding your life after jail or prison time

Facing chronic health issues, navigating bankruptcy, struggling to find work,

Dealing with a difficult boss, moving to a new community, living in a new culture, learning a new language

Can you think of someone in the church family who God has used as an embodiment of his comfort for you because they've walked through something similar to what you've walked through?

Thank God for them right now. You might consider calling them or jotting them a note of thanks. And then take a moment to offer to be that sort of person in the life of someone else. . .

Now let's just take a brief look at the second part of this passage.

There are two ways God can meet us in our troubles and suffering. One is to comfort us in the middle of them. The other is to deliver us out of them.

That's what the second half of this verse is about. Let's listen for that theme.

II Corinthians 1.8-9

We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about the troubles we experienced in the province of Asia. We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt we had received the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead.

II Corinthians 1.10-11

He has delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us again. 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.

II Corinthians 1.8-9

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Pressure far beyond our ability to endure

Paul speaks in verse 8 of facing pressure beyond anything he was able to endure.

Many people think the Bible teaches that God will not allow us to experience more than we can handle, but that's not true. Paul in I Corinthians 10 says we will not be *tempted* beyond what we can handle.

I Corinthians 10.13

The temptations in your life are no different from what others experience. And God is faithful. He will not allow the temptation to be more than you can stand. When you are tempted, he will show you a way out so that you can endure.

But God does allow us to experience circumstances that are more than we can handle – all the time. Here he spells out why. It's so we can learn to rely not on ourselves but on him, learning to trust in and rest in the one for whom *nothing* is more than he can handle.

II Corinthians 1.10-11

He has delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us again. 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.

Deliver

Several times in these verses Paul speaks of deliverance from our troubles and suffering.

As we look at the wider witness of the New Testament, there are three ways we can be delivered when we are in troubles.

First, we can be delivered from our difficult circumstance. That's what Paul describes here and in several other places in this letter where he describes finding himself in an incredibly difficult circumstance and then being rescued from it and brought out into a place of safety and freedom.

Second, we can be delivered from our need to be delivered from our difficult circumstances. That's what Paul was talking about in verses 3 through 7, describing the transforming power of God's comfort.

It's a theme he'll return to chapter 12, where he talks about his thorn in the flesh and how God's grace is sufficient (12.9). God lets me stay in my troubles and suffering, but he brings comfort to me in a way that delivers me from my need to be delivered. It's okay. Really. Even if nothing changes, even if it gets worse, I'll be okay, because I have him, and he really is enough.

And third, there is the deliverance that we as followers of Jesus will experience with we die and go to be with the Lord. Paul speaks of this deliverance in chapter 4 when he says "our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far

outweighs them all,” and in chapter 5 when he writes that “what is mortal will be swallowed up by life.”

Teresa of Avila says, “Let nothing disturb you. Let nothing frighten you. All things pass. God alone never changes. Patience attains everything in the end. If you have God you lack nothing. God alone is enough.”

God will deliver us eventually – deliver us from all pain and crying and mourning and tears. Eventually.

But God’s greatest concern is not with our ease or comfort in this life. His greatest concern is with our relationship with him for eternity.

That explains why God may choose to delay his deliverance for days or months or years or even for a lifetime.

Meanwhile, he invites us as brothers and sisters of the one who is struggling, as ones alongside the one who feels the squeeze of difficulty and the pain of suffering, he invites us to pray to God for deliver her, deliver him.

God is sovereign over our suffering, using it for his good and loving purposes, using it to draw us closer to himself, and, at the same time, he tells us to pray to him to deliver the brother or sister we love.

What a beautiful picture of what of the gift that God intends the church to be. When we are troubled, God engages our sisters and brothers in both our comfort and our deliverance.

And he tells us why.

II Corinthians 1.10-11

He has delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us again. 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.

Then many will give thanks on our behalf for the gracious favor granted us in answer to the prayers of many.

God invites us to pray for our sisters and brothers so when we see God work to deliver them, whenever he chooses to bring deliverance, and in whichever sort of deliverance he chooses to bring, we can return to the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, with our gratitude and our praise.

Life is full of challenges. It's tough for everyone. It's especially tough for those who seek to faithfully follow Jesus in a world that rejects him.

What a friend we have in the middle of all those challenges.

What a friend we have in Jesus
All our sins and griefs to bear
What a privilege to carry
Everything to God in prayer

O what peace we often forfeit
O what needless pain we bear
All because we do not carry
Everything to God in prayer

Have we trials and temptations?
Is there trouble anywhere?
We should never be discouraged
Take it to the Lord in prayer