

Special Messages – Wonderful Affliction

2 Corinthians 1:1-11 | Sunday, May 19, 2019 | By Brian Brookins

Wonderful Affliction

2 Corinthians 1:1-11

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: 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 unaware, 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. But that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead. 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.

I had a chance this week to visit the factory for Sofibella. Sofibella is a brand name for some tennis clothing, and they are branching out into golf and some workout clothes. The owners of this brand, Franco and Karina Forcella, are a CEDAR family. Their kids participate in CEDAR; their children go here. Their brand name "Sofibella" is a combination of their kids' names. Beth and I had a chance this week to visit their factory. It was fascinating. It's a small business, somewhere just under 50 employees here in the States and a factory overseas. Fantastic clothing.

I was fascinated and asked Franco how he got into the business. He said, "Well, one day when I was young, my sister came home with a swimsuit. When she told me what she paid for it, and when I saw how little fabric was involved in the

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swimsuit, I said, ‘Wow, there’s got to be an amazing markup on this.’ This is genius, right? So little fabric, so much money; and he got into the clothing business.

They sponsor some tennis players. I made a business offer to Franco. I said, “Listen, why sponsor tennis players when you could sponsor pastors?” Right? “I mean, you could just get your brand out there by sponsoring a good-looking, athletic pastor.” Next thing you know, he made this proposal. Actually, he laughed at my business plan and dared me to wear it on this platform, so don’t ever dare me.

What was funny about the whole interchange for me, is that not only does it not fit in any way for what he does, but it doesn’t fit in any way for what I do. Right? He’s helping me here. Sweetheart, how do I look? **Christian leaders are not celebrities. They are servants.** This message is going to come so strong in 2 Corinthians, and we begin a study today through the book of 2 Corinthians. But more than that, though we all wear various brands (and you may be directly associated with a brand in your business, which is fine), ultimately we have one brand, right? **Jesus is our brand.**

Today’s message is on affliction – wonderful affliction, wonderful difficulties, wonderful trials -- because something happens when we have trouble. When we have difficulties you know what happens? Our brand is seen brightly. When everything is going great for you, when everything is going great for me, sometimes people see more me and less Jesus. **God uses affliction. Affliction is God’s UPS. It’s his delivery system.**

Friday night Beth and I were coming to the Serve banquet. We were on our way, we had David with us, and we got in a car accident on the way, a little fender bender. I texted my good friend Eddie, and Eddie knew that I had had quite a week or two, with a lot going on. I’ll spare you the details. It was one of those moments, like, “What next?” So I texted Eddie, looking for a little sympathy. His return text was fantastic. Eddie goes, “Brother, this is great! Riverside is going to double!”

I thought, “That’s it, right? **Trouble means double.**” That’s my little pastoral paraphrase. You can use that freely. Double means trouble. Wait -- trouble means double. Now I know, starting this message, that no one wants trouble. No one wants affliction. In fact, if you want suffering, you need pastoral help. The message is not that God uses only affliction. God uses everything. Everything. We have to understand that includes (and sometimes it includes in a very pronounced way) trial and difficulty and trouble.

Here’s the takeaway I’m hoping for you today. When you find yourself in the middle of difficult times, affliction, you immediately say, “God is about to do something amazing. There is a God package on the way. I am going to experience God. I’m going to know God. I’m going to receive from God. God is about to personally inject himself into my life and into my world. Trouble means double.

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Let's get started. The first observation is this:

1. Don't be surprised by difficulty.

The Corinthians were a unique group of people. Paul had gone there at the end of his second missionary journey. Paul's life is amazing, right? If you know anything about the Apostle Paul, he was a rabbi, he was a teacher, he was a leader in the Jewish community, he was persecuting the church. One day Jesus appeared to him and he got radically saved. Then he spent 13 years in preparation. 13 years!

This is a man who already had the entire Old Testament memorized. He knew the word of God, yet he spent over a decade in preparation, knowing Christ and preparing his life. He's in Antioch. Antioch was this incredible church. It was the location of great diversity, a multicultural local church, and they became his sending place. I just want to say, Riverside: you're an Antioch. You are a collection of all kinds of people that God has brought together to prepare and equip people and send them out.

So Paul is there and he gets sent out. He goes on this missionary journey and it takes years. He comes back to Antioch, gets revived a little bit and goes out again. Toward the end of the second time he went out, he spent 18 months in Corinth. Now, the church at Corinth was a problem child, and you know the problem child gets the most attention. So 1 and 2 Corinthians are long letters, and we know he wrote at least one more letter that we don't have, maybe more.

When I say that it was a problem church, let me give you a highlight reel. They were suing one another. They had gross immorality going on, really terrible immorality. They were getting drunk at the Lord's Supper. We've got problems, but no one is getting drunk at the Lord's Supper. Their worship services were times of confusion, with misuse of the spiritual gifts. They were all chopped up in factions because they were following individuals and individual Christian leaders rather than in unity following Christ.

Paul is writing these letters to bring correction to all of this mess. And in the midst of it, there is a group of false leaders, so-called "super apostles" who were claiming they were really the apostles, that they were the real leaders. The accusation against Paul was this: "You know, Paul, isn't really powerful. Paul's preaching is not all that impressive. It's boring. He's not eloquent. Paul isn't wealthy. Paul is not a powerful leader." Paul is bringing a correction to say: "You are revealing that not only do you not understand how God works, your whole understanding of Christianity is just off."

The path to power is nothing like what you are describing. **The path to power is the path to the exaltation of Jesus Christ in your life, not of your own personal influence and power.** If you want real power, if you want to know God and if you

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want to really bear the name of Jesus Christ in this world, that pathway is so much more glorious. He is really after something much more profound and so deep.

Just look at verse 5. He says, “For as we share abundantly in Christ’s sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too.” This is what he is saying. Paul starts this whole book so uniquely, talking about affliction and trouble. He is trying to get at this whole foundation, that the way to have a great life and the way to follow God is to have everything go perfectly, and for your wisdom, your power, your money – for it to be all about you. He says that’s just nonsense.

He’s undermining all of that, and he’s delivering this message that God uses affliction. But it’s deeper than that. He is saying, “Listen, when you go through trouble, Jesus is there with you. You are intimately sharing in his sufferings. You are connecting to Jesus in a beautiful, amazing, profound, personal way. You are being invited into the cross life. And as you die, Jesus lives within you. There is a vibrancy, and an exuberance, and a power to bring transformation to you and to everything around you.”

Don’t be surprised by trouble. Don’t be shocked when difficulty comes. Don’t be surprised when a child rebels. Don’t be shocked by illness. Don’t be overwhelmed with challenges in your marriage. Don’t be undone when there is conflict. Don’t be undone when there is financial trouble. Don’t be undone when people don’t readily embrace your faith and don’t understand what it means when you talk about following Jesus. Don’t be crushed when Christian leaders disappoint you.

We live in a broken world. The message of redemption is this: God is right there in the middle of it with you, bringing something glorious, and everything...listen, Christian, hear me...**Everything going on in your life right now God is using to draw you into Jesus.** The things you think are keeping you from the life are the very things that God is using to get you to the life. He is in it! I want to just proclaim over your life: **He is in it.**

So, failure isn’t failure, right? That’s true even in the natural. That’s just a principle of life. Just look at these examples, these so-called failures:

- Einstein, considered by many to be the smartest man in the last century, didn’t begin to speak until he was 4-years-old. I’m sure I was speaking at 3 and a half.
- Isaac Newton, great scientist, discoverer of gravity. He did poorly in school. His teachers told him that he had an unpromising future.
- Beethoven, one of history’s greatest musical composers was once told by his music teacher that as a composer he was hopeless.

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- Thomas Edison, arguably the greatest inventor of all time, was told by his teacher that he was too stupid to learn. His teacher told him, “Listen, when you get older, find a job where you can rely on your pleasant personality.” “Find a job that won’t need much smarts,” he was told. Everyone laughed at him. Even in his inventions, he failed, he failed, he failed, he failed. He just kept trying. Failure doesn’t mean failure.
- F. W. Woolworth, great retail frontrunner – when he was 21-years-old he worked at a dry goods store and the owner wouldn’t let him work with customers because he was told he couldn’t close the sale.
- This is my favorite. Michael Jordan got cut from his high school basketball team. That’s crazy!
- Walt Disney got fired by a newspaper editor. He was told that he lacked imagination.
- Winston Churchill, great statesman, maybe the individual most responsible for stopping Hitler, had to repeat sixth grade. He couldn’t finish his exams.
- Babe Ruth – for years and years and years a great homerun hitter. He held the record for major league strikeouts.

Failure doesn’t mean failure. It doesn’t mean failure even in the natural. And when it comes to following Christ, it’s an avenue for knowing Christ. It’s an avenue for deeper intimacy. God meets you in a way that you can’t imagine. So here’s the takeaway from this first point: **Don’t fear tomorrow. Don’t fear this truth. Don’t fear this message. Don’t run from the topic. When you get into affliction, God is going to give you grace. He’s going to meet you.** What he won’t do is give you grace to worry about the affliction you might get into. So trust him. Whatever comes your way, he’s going to be with you. He’s going to walk through it with you. I’m not insinuating it will be easy, but don’t be surprised by difficulty.

2. God will help you.

He will help you. Sometimes God will deliver you. Sometimes God will delay an answer, and then deliver you. Sometimes God will give you grace to endure the trial without visibly delivering you, but he will always help you. He will more than help you. He will comfort you. He is called here the Father of mercies, the God of all comfort. He comforts us in our affliction.

The word “comfort” is a really strong biblical word that talks about help. It’s a word that’s related to the word that Jesus uses in John to describe the Holy Spirit as the Helper, the Comforter. God comes to us in the Holy Spirit in these times, revealing Christ, bringing us deeper into our experience of our union with Christ. We experience his help, his

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encouragement, his promises, his edification. He builds us up. He strengthens us. He empowers us. God will help you. He will encourage you. He will strengthen you.

So what do you do when difficulty comes? Paul is pretty clear here. You know what he says? He says, “I despaired of life. I was sure it was over and I was in the darkest place.” This is the Apostle Paul! Remember, he is being told, “You’re not a real apostle. What kind of man are you? You don’t even get paid! You’re a tentmaker! I go to sleep in your sermons.” That’s offensive, right? His response is: “You don’t know the half of it. I was in such a dark place I despaired of life itself.”

I want to speak to the parents here for a second, to use this illustration. This is like your child becoming an adult and telling you that you’re not a great parent. And your response is: “You don’t know the half of it. There were times I was clueless. I had no idea what I was doing.”

You say, “What’s the logic of that?” It’s because Paul is the real deal. He is leading them to Jesus. The parent who naturally gets caught up in that moment of wanting to defend really needs the sole objective of leading that person to Christ, that adult child to Christ.

When Beth and I were newlyweds, in the first five or six years of our marriage we were wanting to have kids and we had a slight delay. It was one of those things where we were like “Okay, when we want kids we’ll announce it and then we’ll just have kids.” But it didn’t happen like that. There was a slight delay. We learned that God is in control. It wasn’t a big deal, but it felt like a big deal at the time.

So I did what any great husband would do. I got a dog. We got a puppy. This will fix it. Problem over, right? It didn’t fix it. God was doing something. Then Beth got pregnant and the dog was driving us crazy, so we got rid of the dog. Sometimes we just need to wait on God. That’s the point. All our efforts to fix it. Then I gave the dog to some friends that were in trouble in their marriage. Didn’t fix it. Dogs don’t fix marriages. **God will help you.**

The prophet Isaiah gave this warning. He said, “Beware of those who create artificial light.” Wait for God to light the fire, because your artificial light will bring the resistance of God himself. God will help you. God will not fail you. You will not be the first person in all of history to call on the name of God and he will not hear you. God will help you, and when he helps you, he comes himself. He’s right there with you. Trust in him. He wants to help you. And if you’re not careful, when you pray God really answers your prayer, then you’ve got six kids.

So, don’t be surprised by trouble. God will help you.

3. Go and help others.

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It's so clear in this passage, isn't it? God comforts you so that you can comfort others. "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..." That theme runs throughout. God will use the difficulty you are going through to equip you, to help you, to comfort you. You'll experience God. You'll grow in your relationship with Christ. It's like God is saying, "Listen, I've got all this help. You need some help? I'm just going to give you some help." "Now listen, receive it and go help other people." **Go help other people.**

Verse 9 is maybe at the heart of everything that's being said here and at the heart of the message of the book. Paul, giving a little biographical moment, says, "Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death, but that was to make us rely not on ourselves, but on God (listen to this) *who raises the dead.*" That's glorious. You are never down and out when you belong to God. He raises the dead, like the dead dead. It's so powerful.

When you go to Ephesians 1 (it's one of my favorite passages of scripture) the Apostle Paul is praying for the Ephesians. He is saying, "Listen, guys, come on. I'm praying for God to illumine your heart, to open the eyes of your heart. You don't need anything you don't already have. What you need is to see you already have God's power, your inheritance in God, the hope that is yours, and the power of God that is working in you, that is toward you, that is yours in Jesus Christ."

When he gets to this passage and he is praying, "God, open their eyes; let them see your power," he starts like an assault of words of power and might and energy. He is describing the massive, unlimited power of God. And when he comes to illustrate it, he chooses one illustration. You know what it is? The resurrection of Jesus Christ. This is where he goes with it. It is genius.

Listen, the resurrection was obviously an amazing miracle, right? Yes. Creation out of nothing? That's impressive. There are a lot of things you could use to illustrate God's power. But Paul says this power we see in the resurrection is yours. Then he marches forward to show that when Jesus Christ was raised from the dead, he was seated at the right hand of God, and that he took you with him! **All of humanity that's redeemed and in Christ is seated with Jesus Christ at the right hand of God, the Father! That is the power of God to redeem you 2000 years later so that you, by faith in Christ, are seated with him! You do not lack power.** But you lack the ability to see it. So sometimes God orchestrates events in your life so that you will rely not on your own power, but on him.

Sin is not a word we use a lot or that we are always comfortable with, but it's a very biblical word and one we should be comfortable with. When you look at the spread of sin in Genesis 1-11, it's just eating up God's world. You come to the Tower of Babel – it's like a final nail in the coffin. There's this event where mankind says, "You know what? We're going to build a tower to the heavens. My power, my ideas, my ingenuity, my name – we're going to erect this tower." It's like the epitome of the spread of sin and the denial of God. 2 Corinthians is really an invitation for you to say, "No, no, no, no,

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no. That's not the tower I want to be a part of. That's not the building project I want to give myself to. I want to be part of God's restoration."

Friday night as we celebrated all of our Serve team volunteers, it was a glorious time. The team did an incredible job putting on a great celebration. I shared a simple little devotional message and talked briefly about a professor who helped me with some academic challenges. He was really just a guidance counselor, but he walked me through all four years of my college experience, tutoring me, helping me, and encouraging me.

There was this little phrase that God quickened in my heart. What he did was *he owned my need*. He said, "Listen, Brian, I'm going to do a lot more for you than just tell you what classes to take, to tell you to go see this person or do this. I'm going to take you by the hand and I'm going to walk you through your college career. I never took a class with this guy. Never. He was my advisor only one year. But the impact, because he owned the need.

When I say go and help others, there is a place where we are receiving God's comfort, because Jesus owned our need. He took it on himself. He is inviting us to do that. Something amazing happens when we do that together, when as a people we say we're going to own the need of the community. We're going to say: "God, use us to own the need." We're going to say, "Lord, there's someone here this morning who is broken, they're just devastated. They are in this place of despair that Paul talks about. They feel completely alone. We want to do more than just give them a pat on the back. We want to own the need. Don't hear in that an insinuated handout. Oh, that it would be that easy, right? We have to do it together.

This is an amazing place where Paul ends. He says, "You've got to pray for me. You've got to participate. Come on in. Come all the way in. Forget about those super apostles. Come into my world. Be a part of it. Pray for me, then we'll all give thanks together.

He will occasionally wear a hat, and anytime you do something different, someone is going to notice, right? I like the hat. I think you pull it off, but I'm aware occasionally someone might take a shot at you for wearing a hat. So I just want to say that if you shoot at him, you've got to shoot at me. We are in this together. I promise you, the enemy wants to separate your marriage. He wants to separate you from your parents, from your kids. He wants to separate you from the person sitting next to you. He wants to bring division, but Jesus is saying, "No, no, no, listen. Everything is yours in Christ. Come together and watch what happens when you go and help with the comfort that I give you." Amen? Let's pray.

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