

“Affliction and Comfort”

Isaiah 51:1-8 • 2 Corinthians 1:1-11

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One of the things we talk about a good bit around here is what it means to *be* the church. As I'm sure you know, the Christian Church in our country has been declining for a number of years now. In fact, the last year that overall church membership increased in the US was 1965. That doesn't mean that all churches are smaller than they were. Some churches have grown quite large. The result is that American Christianity looks very different today than they did 56 years ago when the Christian Church was at the center of our society.

One of the trends we have seen in the last 30 years or so is the rise of megachurches. A church is considered a megachurch if it has an average of over 2,000 people attending worship each week. But worship attendance alone doesn't describe megachurches. These churches are almost all organized in the same way and carry out their ministry in similar ways. And in nearly every case, at the center of the megachurch is the most interesting phenomenon – the celebrity pastor. This model has attracted so much attention that many smaller churches have been started by pastors trying to imitate the way the megachurches do things, often hoping to become celebrity pastors themselves.

The thing that many of these megachurches have in common is that they preach a form of what's called the “prosperity gospel.” The idea behind their message (and often out in front of their message) is that more than anything God wants you to bless you with money and happiness. According to their message, if you are following Jesus and giving enough money to the church, you will never experience any kind of pain or affliction. That's a popular message and who wouldn't want to receive that kind of blessing. But it's not biblical. And it's also not new. In fact, we find the same thing in one of the earliest books of the New Testament.

Today we are starting a new sermon series

studying together Second Corinthians. The Apostle Paul, with help from his disciples Timothy and Silas and the missionary couple Aquila and Priscilla who were also tentmakers like Paul, started the church in Corinth around 50 A.D. At the time Corinth was one of the most modern, cosmopolitan cities in the world. It was considered the third most important city in the Roman empire, behind Rome and Alexandria. The city had been destroyed by the Romans in 146 B.C. and wasn't rebuilt until 44 B.C. by Julius Caesar.

One of the reasons we want to study the books of First and Second Corinthians is because our society is very similar to theirs. Corinth was a sports and entertainment culture. The city's arena held up to 18,000 people and the concert hall around 3,000. It was a place where people went to seek their fortune and there was plenty to be found. Modern American culture is so similar to that of ancient Corinth that one well-known pastor frequently referred to Paul's Corinthian letters as “First and Second Californians.”

Because of these similarities we will not have much trouble applying what God says in this book to our lives today. The temptations and frustrations that we face are much the same as those the Corinthian Christians faced. This is the most emotional and raw of all of Paul's letters. A big reason for his frustration is that the Corinthian believers kept slipping back into worldly ways. They were influenced by the culture around them. They began to ask why Paul wasn't more like the celebrity pastors of the day. Why weren't his sermons more exciting. Why didn't he have letters of recommendation like the other preachers. And most of all, if being a Christian meant not having problems anymore, why did Paul suffer so much? Was he really a legitimate apostle?

As we study this book we will find that as Paul defends his ministry and calls the

Corinthian church to believe the true gospel there are two primary themes that he keeps coming back to. Both these themes are counter cultural. They are the opposite what we would expect. First, weakness is the source of real strength. And second, suffering is the vehicle for God's power and glory.

This morning we want to look at the first section of Second Corinthians. The first two verses are basically a standard letter salutation from that time. But even here he begins to answer the accusations of what he will call the "super-apostles." The word apostle means "one who is sent out." Paul says that he is a sent one of Christ Jesus by the will of God.

He then begins, as he often does, with this wonderful theological statement. "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." Today when we think about comfort many of us think about wearing really soft sweatpants and laying on the sofa watching TV. That's not the kind of comfort he means. The word comfort here means consolation. It is the kind of comfort or consolation we need when a loved one has died or when we are going through something very difficult. It literally means "to strengthen much."

Paul uses the word comfort ten times in this short passage. That's a third of all the occurrences of that word in the New Testament. In a number of places in the Bible God is referred to as the comforter or consoler of Israel. Our reading from Isaiah 51 says, For the Lord comforts Zion; he comforts all her waste places and makes her wilderness like Eden, her desert like the garden of the Lord; joy and gladness will be found in her, thanksgiving and the voice of song." In fact much of Isaiah chapters 40-66 is about God comforting his chosen people. In the New Testament, when the baby Jesus is presented at

the Temple, Simeon was described as a righteous and devout man who was "waiting for the consolation of Israel." When he saw Jesus Luke 2 says Simeon took Jesus in his arms and blessed God, saying, "my eyes have seen your salvation...a light to the Gentiles...and glory to your people, Israel."

That's Paul's point here. He certainly knew about affliction. He had been beaten, stoned, shipwrecked, imprisoned, and abandoned. Many times he was convinced that he wouldn't live through it. But no matter what, Jesus comforted him. He is the "God of *all* comfort." No matter what you are going through God is able to comfort you as well. Isaiah 53 says, "He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief." This is clearly a description of Jesus the Messiah, even though it was written hundreds of years before Jesus was born. Jesus is able to comfort us because He has already experienced suffering. In fact He's already experienced death and resurrection.

One of the faith issues that people often struggle with is why a loving God would allow us to suffer. As we learn here in Second Corinthians, God allows us to suffer because that's where we truly learn to trust Him. Affliction and suffering and loss are difficult for us because we feel like we don't have control. Getting through it is beyond our abilities. All that's left is to rely on God, which is what He wants from us all the time. It's in the painful times that we are able to experience God's comfort. You will never experience this aspect of God's love for you when things are going great.

I think it's important to point out the *way* you and I experience God's comfort during affliction. Listen to it again. "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." This brings us back to the question of what it means to be the church. Although we

certainly can experience God's comfort directly, the primary way God comforts us is through His people who have also experienced that comfort. Paul describes the church as a body. When one of us is suffering the whole body suffers. This is also what it means for the church to be a family. We are able to be the presence of Jesus to one another during difficult times. As followers of Jesus, as members of His body, we are expected to provide that kind of comforting care to each other.

Finally, Paul says that we help provide that kind of comfort for others through prayer. Verse 11 says, "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." Prayer changes things. Prayer changes us. As the body of Christ we should be praying for one another, for our church and our ministries, for our community, and for the good news of Jesus to spread. I hope you will consider joining us in that kind of prayer and in the ministry of comforting one another.

Amen.