

## 2 Corinthians 1:1-11

### Notes from a Sermon Preached at Christ Church Liverpool

From "Welcome to Corinth" leaflet:

Welcome to Corinth, one of the world's truly great cities.

If you have arrived by sea you will have come to one of our two nearby ports – Lechaemum or Cenchrea – both conveniently situated within five miles of the city centre.

The superior Roman paved road between these two ports, passing through the heart of our city, enables both passengers and cargo to avoid the long and dangerous journey around the Peloponnese when travelling from Europe to Asia.

Although its origins go back to ancient times Corinth lay desolate for over 100 years, following the invasion of the Roman consul Lucius Mummius.

But the immense possibilities of this strategic location were realised by Julius Caesar, who reestablished a colony here some 90 years ago.

Today our city combines the advantages of a Greek history with everything modern and imperial. Architecturally and culturally we are a Roman city, boasting their fine legal system, political structures and institutions. Latin, the official language of the Empire, is predominant.

We have not forgotten our proud heritage however and many old traditions live on, especially in the Isthmian festival and games.

On arriving in our city you will have immediately noticed the domination of the Acrocorinth, a 1886 foot hill rising above the town.

At the top of the hill is our premiere attraction for visitors – the Temple of Aphrodite, goddess of love.

Our city welcomes all, having an ethnically diverse population, and being the ideal place for the acquisition of slaves and other luxury purchases.

In the last decades we have experienced a building renaissance, with fine new shops, residential areas and business opportunities giving visitors unparalleled opportunities for leisure and business.

All of this, combined with our official status as the

third city of the Imperial Roman Empire makes Corinth the ideal destination for the discerning first century traveler, whether you are here for a weekend, a holiday or a lifetime.

---

This, is the city into which the apostle Paul was trying to plant and then nurture a Christian church.

As a city with, in many ways, comparatively little history and yet of great wealth and importance, it was place full of new money. Wealth and ostentation became the hallmark of Corinth – a city of unrivalled opportunity with far fewer stuffy aristocrats of many generations than those other great cities of the Empire – Rome and Alexandria.

It was the Moscow, the Shanghai of the Roman world – a place where the display of wealth was not only socially acceptable, but positively desirable and a city of relatively easy social advancement.

Not surprisingly, given its importance as a city of political significance and a great trading centre, Paul spend considerable time in Corinth establishing and building up a Christian church; perhaps as long as two years.

After Paul left, however, others tried to fill the gap as leaders of the church – but many were unqualified – some because of a failure to love a Christian lifestyle and others who seemed to be on a power or status trip.

Resolving all of this took lots of time, prayer and heartache for Paul – and at least four letters; the last of which that we know of is the book we'll be studying through this year – 2 Corinthians.

2 Corinthians is a remarkable NT letter and it teaches us much about a range of important topics.

It talks about God's faithfulness to OT promises in inaugurating a new covenant with his people. It tells us that the word of God, the gospel, has a definable content which no-one is at liberty to add to or subtract from. It treats the subject of Christian giving more comprehensively than any other part of the NT and, vitally, it contains one of Paul's most comprehensive statements about the significance of the death of Christ.

But in addition to all these things there is one golden thread that runs through the book. In 2 Corinthians we see Paul, the man who wrote a third of the New Testament and planted churches all over the known world, explain in greater depth and clarity than anywhere else, what it means for him to do Christian ministry.

For the most part what we will see in 2 Corinthians is the apostle Paul defending and justifying his methods of working amongst people and the way he brought the message of Jesus to people.

Now perhaps there are some people here this morning who think that defending Paul's ministry might be a good idea. For Paul has become associated with what the Archbishop of Canterbury recently, somewhat sniffily, called, "muscular Christianity".

And some of you might think that the apostle Paul and his methods – and his association in our world with supposed sexism, homophobia and a whole range of other unpardonable sins of intolerance – is frankly indefensible.

If that's you I think you're going to be surprised by 2 Corinthians. Because the accusations leveled against Paul that he needed to defend himself against were not that he was overbearing, arrogant and rigid. Remarkably, to our modern ears, they were quite the opposite. For seems that many in the Corinthian church thought that Paul was weak, flawed and unimpressive.

And Paul is forced to defend himself against such accusations. Not because he wasn't weak, flawed and unimpressive – but because weakness, flaws and unimpressiveness are, for Paul, the very essence of qualification for being a Christian leader.

Nor does Paul defend himself in this letter in such strong terms primarily because he wants the Corinthian Christians to think well of him. No his main concern is that if they do not understand the nature of his ministry they cannot truly grasp the nature of his message either. Because for Paul, as we will see again and again in this letter, the character and experience of the Christian leader is inextricably linked to the character of the message they proclaim and the Lord they follow.

And if we do not understand the suffering and weakness of the Christian minister then we cannot truly understand the message and meaning of the Christian gospel.

Now of course you may be sitting there at this point thinking this means the 14 weeks we're going to spend studying 2 Corinthians are therefore going to be a bit of a waste of time if you're not one of the leaders of the church here.

Well that's your initial reaction I'd urge you to think again – for three reasons:

Firstly because I suspect that if in our church, on other churches we know of or in Christian organizations we are part of, we have any problems with leadership, then it is likely that the problem is as much with the attitudes and expectations of those who are led as it is with the leaders themselves.

Secondly, of course, what should be true of Christian leaders is almost all applicable to all Christians, leaders or not.

And thirdly, in the end we are almost all leaders. You might not be an elder of the church. But leadership is, at its most fundamental, being in a position where what you say or do influences other people. And how many of us are not in such a role? Whether it's a place of influence over your partner, your children, your younger siblings, your home group or your friends.

All of us need the corrective of 2 Corinthians – for the tendency of our culture, just like that in Corinth, is to look for all the wrong things in Christian leaders...

### **1 Only through suffering can we give Christ's comfort (1:3-7)**

Some people seem to be untouchable by the normal fates that afflict men and women. They aren't of course – as the universality of death certificates testifies – but they seem to be.

And although we might admire such people; may envy them even as they appear to stroll through life with impeccable cobbled shoes barely touching the ground.

Although we might admire such people we never really feel solidarity with them do we? We won't generally go to weep with someone we've never seen weeping. We won't go to confess our weakness to someone who only ever appears to be strong. Those who we anticipate will act towards us with compassion are those who we believe have experienced compassion – literally "suffering with."

The Corinthian church was visited by – we might say afflicted with – super-apostles (a term Paul himself uses for them in chapter 12). They were men, it

seems, for whom weakness and failure were equivalent to falsity and sin.

They might look impressive. But there is no way they can really help the Christians at Corinth – because to do that requires suffering.

You see for Paul there are two sides to the scale of his Christian life. There is a side marked “suffering”.

And it has a heavy weight in it. A very heavy weight indeed. Paul had probably never suffered much as a Jew. It’s possible that as part of his life as a Pharisee he had needed to learn the trade of tentmaking – a demanding task but not the worst thing in the world. And on the plus side he was a highly respectable member of the Jewish community – so esteemed by his own people – and a Roman citizen – so having status in the Empire.

But as a Christian everything changed. Now he was viewed as a traitor by the Jews and a subversive element by the Romans. And God had given him a commission – to take a message of reconciliation with the God of the Jews to all peoples. That commission would again and again put him on a collision course with Jews, pagans, authorities and just about anyone else you can think of. Add to that the physical and material dangers and deprivations of extensive travel in the ancient world and you have a situation where Paul has moved from comfort and prestige to hardship and pretty much being despised wherever he went.

Paul’s sufferings are, v4, an affliction. In fact, v5, they are so severe that he sees in them signs of the afflictions of Jesus Christ himself. People discuss what Paul might mean by this. But I think the most obvious meaning must be the correct one. Because, by faith, Paul is joined to Jesus, some measure of the sufferings which Christ himself experienced flow over into Paul’s life – and, by implication, into the life of every Christian who is joined to Jesus by faith. Jesus himself taught, in fact, that suffering, trial, tribulation would be a fundamental part of the experience of God’s people as they lived in the overlap between the coming of God’s reign when Jesus walked the earth and his being made visible and undisputed king when he returns. Joined to Jesus we share, in some measure, in his sufferings. And living in the age of his dawning kingdom we share, in some measure, in the trials of that age.

Paul has a suffering side on the scales of his life – and it is heavily weighted down!

But Paul also has another side to those scales. A “comfort” side. That’s not an index for the level of suppleness of a leather sofa. It’s not about the supportive effect of his Slumberland bed. Throughout the Bible **comfort** refers to God’s concrete intervention in the lives of his people. In the famous passage in Isaiah 40 where Isaiah proclaims on God’s behalf “comfort, comfort my people” the point is that God intends to intervene and deliver his people out of their affliction. When God comforts Paul he is encouraging him, helping him, exhorting him.

In contrast to the Greek gods of the pantheon who most of the Corinthian Christians would have worshipped before they trusted Jesus, who were quite unconcerned about human beings, the God of the Bible, the Father of the Lord Jesus Christ, is, v3 the Father of mercies and the God of all comfort.

The suffering weight is a heavy one. But so is the comfort. So much so, in fact, that God’s comfort – his help, encouragement and deliverance – more than cancels out the weight of the suffering.

And Paul makes good use of the surplus. As one commentator puts it God’s comfort was not given to Paul in a bucket for selfish enjoyment. It was given to him in a pipe so that he could pass it on to other people.

All of which helps to answer one of the great and mysterious questions of the universe: why has this happened to me? It’s a question we all ask when things go wrong. I can remember asking it when I was just 4 or 5 years old to myself in a moment when life appeared particularly harsh and unfair. The Bible never gives us a complete philosophical answer to that question – I suspect there is no answer to it that we could comprehend or understand.

But here is one absolutely vital part of the answer for the Christian: Why has this happened to me? If we are afflicted it is for your comfort and salvation; and if we are comforted it is for your comfort. Why has this happened to me? So that I can be a blessing to other people.

That works in two ways.

Firstly it works because the message about Jesus would never have reached you in the first place if people had not been willing to suffer for it. The suffering people endured so that you could hear the gospel has varied massively from person to person. But for many generations of people it has meant sacrifice, on some scale or another, for them so that

you could benefit. From the early Christians who were thrown to the lions and kept the Christian faith alive in the first centuries of the church. To the protestant martyrs who were willing to be burned alive so you would have the right to the Bible in your own language. To the Sunday school teacher who gave up her Saturday nights to prepare lessons that taught you about Jesus Christ. The suffering and sacrifice of Christians brings salvation to others.

But secondly it works because as we live the Christian life it is those who have suffered along the way who can best help us to keep going – who can comfort us. I'm not saying that you have to have been bereaved to help another Christian who has lost a loved one. I'm not saying you have to be divorced to help a friend going through a marriage break-up. Not at all.

But if you have never been broken. If you are not painfully aware of your failure, your weakness and your vulnerability. If you are a superman or woman or, given that there are no supermen or women, if you project the image that you are one, then with what can you comfort people? If you have never desperately felt the need of God's mercy and aid and assurance then what have you to share with others apart from your own wonderfulness?

That has two key implications for us I think.

The first is that when we are suffering we mustn't feel useless. Whether it's despression, physical illness, persecution or any other form of hardship it won't make us useless to God. We are not failing to be productive for the gospel when we are suffering. Quite the opposite in fact. For our experience of suffering and keeping going with God in suffering will be inspirational to many. If we survive it we will encourage others as we share how God has brought us through affliction. If we die God will raise up others to tell our story for us. Some of those stories will be heard by millions. Some, perhaps, by just a handful. But we are not of no use to God when we suffer.

The second implication is that that only works if we talk about our affliction. For there are many secret hurts that others will never discover unless we share what comfort God is bringing in our pain. And there are many more obvious sufferings – like a physical illness – which we can talk about in the simplest terms but never really let others in to our real understanding of the way in which we are struggling but not abandoned and crushed, but not despairing.

If I may be personal just for a minute I have found that sharing with others my hurt at the fact that my own

parents and siblings do not trust Jesus and my experience over the years of God's assurance that, whatever happens to them, his goodness and justice are the rocks on which the whole universe is founded and will not be found wanting. I have found that one of the most helpful things to talk through with people facing hard situations in evangelism.

And I have found that an episode of depression and anxiety a while back has given me insight I have never known before into frailty, fear and God's invisible but profoundly real help and hope – insight that God in his grace has used to encourage and help others.

My sufferings are small – so far. And my sharing of them is inadequate. Nevertheless I know from experience, and much more from Paul's testimony here in Corinthians, that only suffering ministers can give Christ's comfort – the superhero who projects invincibility cannot channel God's mercies to his people.

## **2 Only through suffering can we appreciate God's power and Christian's prayers (1:8-11)**

By far the most poignant book I've read in preparing this material is one by a church pastor who brilliantly explains and applies the passage and shows how weakness and vulnerability – in acknowledging failure and sharing struggles with others – is at the heart of Paul's ministry, and needs to be at the heart of any genuinely gospel centered ministry – because suffering and the appearance of weakness, failure and defeat are at the heart of the gospel of Christ in the cross.

That minister then had a spectacular moral failure himself, and, ended up renouncing much of what he had previously stood for. I couldn't help wondering, as I read his book, published years before that happened, whether even at the time, the hints of what was to come were present as his brilliant and powerful exposition really contained nothing of himself – no personal reflections on his own struggles and difficulties as a follower of Jesus and as someone trying to bring the message of Christ to others.

Now it may be that I'm being overly sensitive because I know the story. But it's striking that Paul doesn't just leave his treatment of this issue at the level of theory. Having talked about his distress and God's comfort he fills out those terms by telling the Corinthians specifically about his own struggles.

It seems that they already know the bare facts about what happened since Paul doesn't elaborate on them.

We don't of course. All we can tell is that Paul experienced "hardships", "in the province of Asia" which he felt were utterly overwhelming.

The most likely possibilities are that Paul was facing intense persecution – which might be why he refers to a "sentence of death" in v9 – actually anticipating that he really might be executed at this moment.

Or that there was some terrible illness that made him despair of life itself – which might be why he says "in our hearts we felt the sentence of death" – actually inside himself something was so wrong he thought he was going to die. We simply don't know.

But we do know that for Paul what matters is not that the Corinthians know every detail of his excruciating pain, but that they learn about the theological impact that Paul's experiences had on him. What was this? What did this suffering teach Paul?

Well it's great to know that it taught him the same thing that hardship should teach any Christian – that he needed to solely upon God and not on himself.

John Calvin commented on this verse how striking it is that Paul says that. For in being tempted to do rely on himself Paul shows that he, proud man, was just like everybody else – just like you and just like me!

Paul's brush with death led him to a deeper trust in God. Relying on someone else is, of course, the ultimate weakness. The strong person relies on himself. But Paul sees such a weakness not as failure but as a badge of honour. For the thing that Paul in his weakness most needs – deliverance from death – is something that can be provided only by God who alone raises the dead.

It seems that Paul was particularly thankful for his deliverance from immediate death – whether by sickness or the sword – because he was desperate to continue his mission to the Gentiles and complete the commission God had given him. God has, v10, now delivered him.

But Paul is not stupid. He knows that the final verdict of death has not been removed. Although he trusts that God will continue to deliver him – to spare his life as long as his mission continues – he recognises that what he really needs is a final rescue – one that comes through death and out the other side.

Paul trust the God who raises the dead. That is a continuous attribute of God. The God of the Bible has always been the God who raises the dead. But Paul

believes it specifically because God is the God who has raised the Lord Jesus Christ from the dead, and just as the sufferings of Christ have flowed over into Paul's life so will his resurrection.

But it is only in his weakness that Paul has truly come to appreciate this truth.

For many people here in our church the reality of your own death has hardly dawned. But one of the things that will begin to make it most real to you in the years to come, unless God takes you suddenly before then, is the suffering you will experience if you only live long enough.

Because Paul's testimony, and that of Christians throughout history, is that it is only when everything else is taken away from you that the power of God becomes most obvious.

When you have incurable cancer and the best the doctors can do it treat the pain and slow things down a bit the power of God who can raise the dead becomes clear doesn't it?

When you are being persecuted for your faith, even to the point of execution, the total uselessness of anything else you might possess or know is completely obvious isn't it?

The comfort of God is clearest only when nothing else is of any comfort. But even here Paul's main concern is not simply for himself. Because he finishes by coming back to the Corinthians – v11. I'm not sure whether Paul assumes they have been faithfully praying for him up to this point. Or whether he puts this in to encourage them to start praying in a way that they haven't up to now. It doesn't really matter too much though.

Because his point is that whenever they do pray about Paul's afflictions and God answers – either by delivering Paul for more gospel ministry or by delivering him into the arms of Christ through death – there will be thanksgiving and praise offered by many people for God's grace and mercy.

Paul envisages a kind of multiplication of the actors on the stage of the drama of Paul's life. It's not just Paul up there bravely playing out his part to try and glorify God as he takes the message of Jesus to the Gentiles.

No it's a whole host of people glorifying God by praying to him for Paul's deliverance – and thus testifying to where the real power lies in the universe

– and praising God when it happens – so witnessing to where the real goodness is found in the universe.

So what about us?

Well I suspect that one of the reasons we neither pray as much as we should, individually and, especially, corporately and why we have a low expectation of God's power for deliverance, in this life and into eternity, is that we just don't have enough problems.

For most of the time, let's be honest, though we may genuinely and sincerely want our housegroup to pray about our mostly minor health issues we're confident the medics can sort them out. Though we really do want people to pray for our job hunting we're pretty certain that with a bit more work on my CV and my interview practice I'll get there.

Though we have asked the folk in our home church to pray that we'll make friends as we come to a new university we are actually more or less sure that our natural charm and talent will mean we get on OK with the other folk in our flat or corridor.

Because it's only when we're really at an end of ourselves. When we are absolutely clear that there is nothing whatsoever we can do to make a situation work out without the powerful intervention of God to deliver us. It is only then that we come to rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead.

It is only then that, like Paul, we realise how desperately we need the prayers of other people as well as our own prayers.

The reality, of course, is that every situation in life we face is like that. There is nothing at all in our existence that works out without God's astonishing and gracious intervention.

But profound suffering, hardship and persecution brings the reality home to us. What does that mean? It means we mustn't despise trouble.

The Corinthians saw Paul's hardships as, at best, an embarrassment for a leader and herald of a supposedly powerful religious message. At worst they probably thought it was a negative reflection on Paul's spirituality.

But we must not be so afraid of weakness. Because suffering and weakness are not the signs of Christian failure – as much as some churches with their promises of financial security, good health and

personal confidence for those with enough "faith" would like you to think that they are.

Instead suffering and weakness for a Christian are the signs that Christ's cross is flowing over into your life. And if that is happening so will Christ's comfort. And, as you look forward to sharing too in his resurrection you will be empowered to share that comfort with other people and that, in the end, is the very heart of Christian life and ministry.

*Andrew Evans*  
*October 2008*