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Are You Comfortable?

April 7, 2024
Series: Where Glory Dwells
2 Corinthians 1:1-11

**BIG IDEA – WE ARE COMFORTED NOT TO BE COMFORTABLE BUT
TO COMFORT OTHERS**

All right, Two Cities Church. Are you ready for this? We're launching a brand-new series today. We're going to be in this series until August, so buckle up. Before we talk about that, I need to celebrate Lee Strobel and Easter and the last two weekends.

You know, we got Lee Strobel, and it was amazing. He came into town. We weren't sure how many people were going to show up. In fact, at the evening service, we had a few church buses. I hadn't seen one of those in a while. A few church buses from other churches dropped people off for our evening service here. That was exciting. We had about 4,400 people here for Lee Strobel. That's pretty exciting.

Well, then for Easter... I don't know. You know, a new building. We didn't know what was going to happen, but for Easter, the next weekend, we had almost 4,800 people on campus. Incredible, I know. Now, some of you are like, "All right, Kyle. Enough with the stats. Give me some stories." Well, let me just tell you this.

After the 11:00 service, I had a guy in our church text me. He said a couple of nice things in the message. What was really neat was he said, "I just got to witness parents celebrating with their son after the service because he raised his hand to receive Christ." That's why we're doing what we're doing, guys. Just to be clear, that's the bull's-eye. That's the touchdown.

Look. Between Lee Strobel and opening a new building and Easter, we just know... By the way, it's a great time to be new here. Many of you are new. Hundreds of you are new. One of the things I want to say is we are the church for anybody, but we are

not the church for everybody, obviously. We're okay with that. Hopefully you're okay with that.

I want to invite you to the Weekender. In two weekends, we have the Weekender. It's going to be great. We have 70-plus people signed up. Basically, it's one long DTR (define the relationship). You get to hear from us, and we get to hear from you, and you get to see if this is the church for you, and we get to see if you're the person for us. We can do all that together.

Let me encourage you. Winston is a strange city. I love it. I hope to live here the rest of my life and all that, but it's a strange city. It's a very religious city. Let me just say this. This is a unique word to those of us in Winston and the larger Forsyth County area. Don't settle for showing up when it comes to church. Don't just settle for showing up, for filling seats.

Guys, God wants more for you and from you than merely attendance. So, don't settle for attendance; desire transformation. One of the ways that happens is by no longer being anonymous, taking your first step or next step to get connected. Anyway, that's all I have to say. I'm going to pray, and then we have a lot to talk about, and there's no service afterward, so get ready.

Lord, thank you for the church. There's nothing like the local church when it's functioning biblically and faithfully and fruitfully. We're thankful that disciples are being made and people are meeting Jesus and people are going public with their faith in water baptism. It's so incredibly exciting.

We're thankful for Lee Strobel equipping our church with apologetics. We're thankful to celebrate Easter together. Now we're thankful for just the day in, day out, week in, week out of what the local church does, which is together gather for worship and hear the Word of God to be strengthened and be sent out on mission. Lord, would you bless the reading and teaching of your Word? In your name I pray, amen.

All right, guys. If you can't tell, I'm excited. We're in a brand-new series. Here's the thing. I don't think in terms of Sundays or in terms of sermons, but I think in terms of series. I don't know if you've thought about this. What could God do in your life through this series? All of us love series. Right? You have your favorite Netflix series. We all love series.

Well, we think in terms of series, and we called this series *Where Glory Dwells*. Is that just because we like to start all of our series with *W*? Have you noticed that? *What's Wrong With the Church?* and *When in Doubt* and *Where Glory Dwells*. That's not why

we named it that. The idea is that God uses broken, sinful, finite people to reach people.

In fact, this is interesting to think about. They say there were three stages of Jesus' humility. There was him becoming a man. That's humbling. There was him dying on the cross. That's humbling. What's the third one? Working through the local church, limiting himself voluntarily to work through his people...the humility of God.

So, we're going to be in this series. Why are we in all types of books of the Bible? We've been in Revelation. We've been in Habakkuk. Now we're in 2 Corinthians. I mean, what are we doing? Here's the thing. We know it takes the whole Bible to make the whole Christian. What's interesting is the book we're in, 2 Corinthians... Most pastors don't preach this book (I'll tell you why in a few minutes), which means most people aren't familiar with 2 Corinthians.

Here's the interesting thing about that. Usually, what you most need to know is what you haven't yet discovered. So, we're going to discover that together, and that'll be great. Let's just get into the letter. I want to read this to you. You have to see this for yourself. We're just going to cover 11 verses, just so you know where we're going today.

01 BACKGROUND: PAUL, CHURCH, & LETTER

Verse 1: *"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..."* Here's the thing. What I'm going to talk to you about today... We're going to spend a couple minutes on verses 1-3, which I call the *flyover parts of Scripture*. These are the parts where everyone just reads and goes, "Okay. Let me get past all this, because I've got to get into the good stuff."

Have you ever heard of the flyover states...North Dakota, South Dakota, Kansas? I'm guessing most of us have never been there, but most of us have flown over them while we were going somewhere else...East Coast to West Coast, West Coast to East Coast. Do not treat these verses like the flyover verses. I want to talk to you about them.

We have to talk about Paul. Who was Paul? Paul was one of the greatest people who has ever lived, yet nobody ever talks about him. I went to public high school. I never heard about the apostle Paul. I went to Elon University. Outside of my New Testament

class, like, in history class or any other class I had to take, I never heard about the apostle Paul. How is that possible?

Wait till you find out who this guy is. He's one of the most significant figures in all of human history. I mean, come on. He wrote half of the books in your New Testament. He's the quintessential church planter of the first century. This guy is incredible, and no one ever talks about him. So, I have to talk about him for just a few minutes.

Notice he says he's an apostle. When you hear *apostle*... There's a lot I could say...saw the risen Lord, unique role of writing Scripture. Basically, what he's saying is, "I have authority," but it's bounded. He says, "I'm an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God." This is good to know about Paul, and it's true with us by implication and application. Paul had two types of authority.

He said, "I have a derivative authority." *Derivative authority* is "I have the authority to say what God has said." You have the authority... If God's Word says it, don't be ashamed to say it. I know we are sometimes. If God says, "Repent," say, "Repent." If God calls it sinful, call it sinful. If God says to forgive, you say to forgive. That's what you do. It's called a *derivative authority*. I don't have any inherent authority in me. I only have authority as much as I say what God has said.

The second type of authority he has is moral authority. That's really good to know. What you would like to have in your life is moral authority. *Moral authority* is "I'm actually doing what I'm asking you to do." This is who you admire. This is the boss you want. This is the pastor you desire. These are the politicians we would hope for. In fact, you get angry, you get resentful, you get confused, and you have cognitive dissonance if somebody has positional authority but doesn't have moral authority.

Does anyone want to go to an overweight, out-of-shape fitness instructor? You see those every once in a while. Like, "I'm having cognitive dissonance as I look at you." Do you want the financial planner whose finances are a mess? Do you want the marriage counselor whose marriage has been a 2 out of 10 for years? No!

So, here's what Paul does in this letter, and this is why most people don't preach it. It's not that the topics in here are so difficult; it's that this letter is all over the place. Paul is unbelievably emotional in this letter. See, Paul had two types of letters he wrote. Paul wrote really theological (and this letter is theological), usually very logical and very rational letters.

Think with me about Romans, if you know Romans. It's a comprehensive theological argument from chapter 1 to chapter 11, and then in chapters 12-16 he spends four or five chapters applying it. That's what's called a *rational* or *theological* letter. Then

Paul wrote letters like Philemon, like Galatians, and most importantly, like 2 Corinthians that are just very emotional. We're going to be spending the next three months in a raw, emotional journal entry of Paul, so it's going to be unique.

This is the other thing, guys. I never know what's going to happen. It's kind of an exciting part of my job. I don't know what's going to happen in this series. I don't even know all that we're going to talk about. We'll figure it out. But Paul is all over the place. In 1 Corinthians he takes questions and writes answers to their questions. Anyway, we'll get there.

The other thing I want you to know about this letter is his relationship with the Corinthians. Paul loved them, and they drove him nuts. A lot like our kids, basically. Think about this with me. This is going to be the most complex thing I'm going to say today. The rest of it is downhill from here, but I want you to know the background, because I think it's important for you to know your Bible.

Here's how this worked. How did this church start? Well, this church started when Paul, the apostle, who we're talking about here... Listen to this. He goes to Corinth and meets Priscilla and Aquila. If you know your New Testament, you've heard of them before. Basically, they're a wealthy couple that gets on his church-planting launch team and says, "We have a big enough home. Why doesn't the church start a Community Group in our home?"

By the way, that is a lot of times how churches get started. A key couple comes along. Oftentimes they're also wealthy. It's like, "Oh, wow. We have a big enough house to meet. There are enough finances to actually do something." Anyway, Priscilla and Aquila come. Paul spends 18 months in Corinth.

Now, this is where it gets confusing. So, you have the letter of 1 Corinthians, and you go, "Okay. Is 1 Corinthians the first letter Paul wrote?" No. In 1 Corinthians he references another letter, so 1 Corinthians is really 2 Corinthians. Hold on. So, is 2 Corinthians "3 Corinthians"? No. Second Corinthians is "4 Corinthians," because here's what happens.

If you read 2 Corinthians, which is really 4 Corinthians (we'll get there), he talks about a severe letter he wrote. Well, we don't have that letter. I don't know if the Holy Spirit was like, "All right. We're not using that one." I don't know. We believe the Holy Spirit both inspires and preserves Scripture.

In 2 Corinthians, Paul says he made a painful visit. Have you ever made one of those? You had to have the hard conversation, had to confront them about cohabitating, had

to call this area out, had to call them up and... I'd like to tell you those go well most of the time, but a lot of times they don't go well.

So, here's what we know. Paul is there for 18 months. He ends up writing them three letters through that time, and he ends up having a painful visit. This is the fourth and final letter we have from Paul. So, what's the purpose of these letters? Let me give you the four purposes, and then we're going to get more into the text.

Paul wrote this letter for four reasons. The first reason is it has been a long time since he's seen them, and he basically just wants to say, "Guys, I still love you. I had a change of plans, but my 'yes' is 'yes' and my 'no' is 'no.' I just haven't been able to be there." This is important, because guess what happens. People don't like to give leaders the benefit of the doubt.

Paul is like, "I'm an apostle. I have, like, 15 churches. I'm shipwrecked. I'm traveling all over the world. I'm suffering for Christ. Sorry that I'm a little late." That's what he's basically saying. This happens all the time. People expect to be ministered to by one person and get their complete attention all the time. Paul is like, "Guys, I love you, but I have a lot of responsibilities."

So, he writes about his change of plans. Secondly, he writes because they're being way too hard on somebody. Churches do this, and we'll talk about this in a few weeks. There's a guy who repented, and they're not letting him back into the church. People like to do that sometimes. We'll get into all of the reasons they like to do that.

The struggles of churches are to be too easy on sin, overlook it too easily, or to be so hard on it a guy can't get restored. Paul is like, "Stop it!" So, that's another reason he writes it. The third reason he writes it is because Paul understood something we understand, and I hope you understand: there's always more ministry and mission to be done than there is money to be given. Always.

In chapters 8 and 9, he's like... It's the largest treatise on generosity and stewardship in the entire New Testament. We'll be there in a couple of months. I won't get into all of the details, but he basically challenges the church to be generous so the mission can go forward. We'll get there.

Finally, the main reason Paul writes is to defend his ministry. This is why we're talking about this: we think Paul, though a sinner, for sure, is a model of mature Christian ministry, and we're eager to learn from him together. So, with that said, let's go back to verse 1. ***"Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus...to the church of God..."***

Here's the question: How was Paul able to love a church that drove him so crazy? The key is in that verse. He looked at the Corinthian church as God's church, the church of God. Let me just tell you. How can you make it? Because churches are goofy, and people are sinful, and a lot is going to happen if you stay around here for a long time. I don't know all that's going to happen, but stuff will happen.

Then you have to go, "How am I going to be committed to the church?" You have to be committed that the church belongs to God. Let me say it another way. The church does not belong to a pastor, but you wouldn't know that going to certain churches. A massive amount of nepotism and everything else that's being done there.

The church does not belong to the deacons. Everyone say, "Amen." Thank God. You'd better thank God. The church does not belong to the committee on committees. The church does not belong to three wealthy families. Are you kidding me? I've seen this happen and destroy churches.

I will tell you how division happens in a church. Multiple groups of people think the church belongs to them. Okay. So, Paul basically says, "Guys, look. I've not given up on you. The church belongs to God, so I'm just going to do my role. I'm going to play my part and see what happens. That'll be the adventure of my life."

02 GRACE & PEACE FLOW FROM CHRIST & THE CROSS

Then look at verse 2. Verse 2 is very important. *"Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ."* This is interesting. I'm giving you some technical stuff, but dive into it more with your Community Group. This is really interesting. Paul starts every letter the exact same way: "Grace to you and peace from God." He ends every letter the exact same way: "Grace be with you."

Now come on. Is that a coincidence or does Paul think the grace of God comes to people through the understanding of Scripture? That's exactly what he thinks. This is why we are such a Bible-soaked, Bible-saturated church. All I do is preach the Word up here, then we sing scriptural songs, then we see the Word of God enacted in baptism and the Lord's Supper, and then we pray the Word of God. That's all we do. We're just a Word-saturated church.

Anyway, he says, "Grace and peace." Here's the interesting thing. He always says, "Grace" and then "Peace." You can check me on this. Paul never says, "Peace and grace." Why? Does he just like the rhythm of how "Grace and peace" sounds to say

"Grace" first? No. Grace is the foundation of peace. That is so important to know. We live in a world that does not understand grace and does not understand peace.

When you ask most people, "What is grace?" they say, "Something you say before dinner." Wrong. Grace is not a short prayer. What is grace? "Uh, the way certain women walk and have elegance." That's not grace. The longer I do this, the more I realize the things we teach our third graders are the things we need to know again. So, let's take the acronym we teach little kids. What is the acronym for *grace*? *God's riches at Christ's expense*.

The grace of God is the opposite of karma. *Karma* is "What goes around comes around." *Grace* is "God has been so good to me even though I'm undeserving." It's unmerited favor of God. Here's the thing. God can be gracious to you because of how he treated Christ, but this is the other thing. Think about this. How does our culture view grace? Our culture assumes grace. Have you ever noticed this?

I don't know how this happened. I'll give you an example. People think they're going to heaven, and they're not. People are like, "Sin is not a big deal." It *is* a big deal! "I'm okay." You're not okay! People think, "God is just going to forgive me because it's his job. All I have to do to go to heaven is die. God grades on a curve. This is awesome. I'm better than somebody." That is not an understanding of the grace of God.

But, Christian, you do something also that theologians call *abusing the grace of God*. Have you ever said, "I'm going to do this..." You didn't say this out loud, maybe, but this was your thought pattern. "I'll do this, and God will forgive me...because of Christ, but that's also kind of his job." If you've ever viewed grace as a license or hall pass to sin, it's called *abusing or presuming upon the grace of God*.

So, we're told the grace of God leads to the peace of God. People want peace, don't they? You can tell what people want by what they're willing to pay for, and people are willing to pay for peace. What is insurance? Peace. "How good is my health insurance?" Peace. "How much life insurance do I have?" Peace. "I'm a new attending doctor. Do I have enough disability?" Peace. We pay for peace, but we have a wrong idea of what peace is.

Sometimes people think, "Peace is like everything is perfect and nothing is wrong." That's not peace; that's vacation, and usually without your kids. Right? We live in a time where there is situational peace. The thing about situational peace is it can change. We saw that with COVID. Your situational peace can change with one phone call, one revelation from your spouse, one decision from your kid. One bad meeting with your boss, and you don't have any situational peace.

Jesus gives us salvation peace. Remember? He says in John 14, "In this world you will have trouble," and then he says, "My peace I give you." Peace is the presence of God within, not the absence of difficulty without. So, he basically says, "I just want to pray over you guys, and I want to bless you with grace and peace."

03 PAUL STARTS BY PRAISING

Then I want to show you this. Verse 3: *"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort..."* Okay. This church is driving him crazy, and the first thing he does is say, "Grace to you and peace to you, and blessed be God."

By the way, that would maybe be the hope of our series. If you ask, "What is the hope of our series?" it's more grace and more peace for you this year, more grace and more peace in your marriage. If you want more peace, you're going to need more grace. Do you want more peace in your home? You're going to need a lot more grace in your home first. That's how that works.

Then he says, *"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort..."* What does *that* mean? Are you confused? Why is Paul blessing God? If you are a good Bible reader, you should be a confused Bible reader. It's like, "Wait a second, God. You're supposed to bless *me*. Why am I blessing *you*?"

The first thing God does to Adam and Eve is... "Be fruitful and multiply." It says he blessed them. The first thing God does to Abraham is bless him, make him a great nation. So, why is Paul blessing...? Am I supposed to bless God? How do I bless God? We don't understand what *blessed* means either, do we?

If you're from the North, like I am, and you came down to the South, and some lady says to you, "Bless your heart," it doesn't mean what you think it does. It means "You poor soul." That's what that means. We're told to bless God. Here's what it means. It's a joyful response. We bless God because he first blessed us. When you realize that every blessing is a blood-bought blessing from the cross, it makes you bless God.

Here's what I know about you. You will bless whatever you think is blessing you. You will talk about it out loud and praise whatever you think is blessing you. Have you ever heard that joke about the CrossFitter, the atheist, and the vegan who all went into the bar and the bartender immediately knew who they were? How did he know? Because it was the first thing they all told him.

Ever meet a vegan? The first thing they'll tell you is they're vegan. Ever meet a CrossFitter? You know where they do CrossFit pretty quickly. We talk about the things we're most excited about. We talk about the things we believe are changing our lives. It could be a boyfriend. It could be a job. It could be a show we're watching. It could be a musician we follow. It could be a podcast we're listening to.

What Paul does is he blesses God. Now, it's interesting, because when you think about it, it's a form of praise. I'm sure you've heard this before. Have you ever heard "Prayer changes things"? That sounds like a good preaching line. Right? And we believe that here. I believe that here.

We have a prayer team every service, and we have prayer nights. Our staff prays together, and our elders pray together. After the service, we're on both sides. "Bring whatever needs. We'll transfer the burden to God. We're going to believe prayer changes things." I believe that. I want to give you a new one today. Ready? *Praise* changes things.

What we see here is Paul is like, "Okay. I'm going to just start praising God." Well, where should you praise God? The answer at one level is *everywhere*. Right? Your life isn't a mountaintop experience. You wish it was, but it's not. And your life, thank God, is not a valley experience where you're always in the valleys. You're usually on the plains. You don't want to admit this out loud, but your life is pretty plain.

We wouldn't know that from your Instagram account, but your life is very, very plain. That's okay. Most of our lives are ordinary. Most of our lives are average. Most of our lives are mundane. Most of you are putting the kids to bed. You've got your morning routine. You've got your emails. You've got your workout routine. You've got your relationships. You've got your hobbies. It's so ordinary and average.

The question is...*How could you bless God when things are plain?* Okay, mom of two or three or four kids, however many kids you have. I know life feels so mundane. It's like, "I chase four people around all day and clean up after them." Fair enough. But just try this. If it doesn't work for a week, then you can stop doing it. Try to praise God in the mundane, everyday of your life and see what happens.

Basically, all praise and prayer do is make you God aware, and that'll change everything. That's why if you're ever fighting with your spouse and you're like, "We should pray," you're not going to want to. You won't want to bring God into that situation, because it'll change both of you immediately. That young mom might say, "What an opportunity I have to invest in these three little kids and be the most significant and important person in their lives for 18 years." Praise God in the plains.

Praise God in the pain. We don't need to talk about that a lot, because that was the Habakkuk series. I will tell you (and you know this) there is nothing as powerful as somebody who's praising in pain, being thankful for what they could be thankful for in spite of their pain.

But how about this? Praise God in the pleasure. Look. Some of you are the emerging affluent. You're going to have more and make more and have a better office and bigger house and nicer car and blah, blah, blah. More influence and more affluence. So, what you want to do is you want to praise God. God told us to do this in Deuteronomy 8. He warns them.

Translation (this is basically what he says to the Israelites): "You don't have a lot of money now. You're going to start following me. You're going to start having a lot of money. You're going to be tempted to forget me." So, you just thank God. You thank him publicly. You certainly thank him privately, but you thank him publicly. As awkward as it may feel sometimes, you thank God publicly for all of these things.

Also, praise helps you fight temptation. I know a guy. He's a friend of mine, an older guy, not in our church. He will just start praising God and saying attributes of God anytime he feels any type of sexual temptation. He said, "I might just be in the grocery store. 'Blessed be the Lord God Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth.'" He says, "It just does something to my heart."

Let me show you verse 3 one more time. ***"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort..."*** Have you noticed he says, "God and Father," and then he breaks up "God" and "Father"? "The God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ." Then he says, "The Father of mercies and God of all comfort."

Why focus on mercy and comfort? Because you need mercy because you sin, and you need comfort because you suffer. I mean, that's a good summary of life. We'll get here in a little bit, but suffering and sin are sisters. They always show up and hang out together. I'm going to show you how that works in a little bit.

We have to talk about comfort. For the rest of my time with you guys this morning, I have one big idea to share. I needed to introduce the book, but for the rest of our time there's one big idea, and it's that God comforts you not so you can be comfortable but so you can be a comforter to others. That's it. I'll show you it. God comforts you not to make you comfortable but so you are able to become somebody who can comfort other people.

Now, we don't understand the word *comfort*. If you Google the word *comfort*, like I did, it's going to define *comfort* as "at ease" and "without pain." I hate to break it to you. That's not what this word means. This word, by the way, is the exact same Greek word. It's used 10 times. What's interesting is this word is very close to what the word *comfort* used to mean.

Google *comfort*, define it, click on the button, go down to its Latin root, and you'll see the word *comfort* is from the Latin word *comfortis...com* meaning alongside and *fortis* meaning to strengthen. That's exactly what the Greek word means. *Comfort* means not so much to soothe. When we think of comforting, we think of soothing us. "Can you make this easier for me? Can you please make this go away?"

The biblical word for *comfort* is not so much soothe. I'm not saying the Holy Spirit can't do that. I'm saying the emphasis of this word is not on soothing but on strengthening, not on coddling you but on making you more courageous. Now, I hate to break it to me and to us, but I think that for most Americans and, sadly, most American Christians, the goal of their life has shrunk to the size of being comfortable. I'm talking about the American definition of *comfortable*.

Could you imagine trying to explain to somebody 300 years ago that you can set the exact temperature in every room you ever go in no matter how hot or how cold it is outside? Could you even imagine explaining that? Guys, we have so many creature comforts...Tempur-Pedic mattresses. That wasn't enough. We needed Tempur-Pedic pillows. That wasn't enough. We needed weighted blankets.

Look. I'm only talking about this because I'm the worst. I love mineral water, and there's only one kind I'll drink. It's true. It has to have the right amount of bubbles. What has happened to my soul? You know, our cars, our houses... Fine. God does not want us to be masochists. We're not to lie on a wooden bed and not use a pillow and suffer for no reason and make things more difficult, but I will say this.

I do think the pursuit of American comfort and following Christ are incompatible. You cannot passionately pursue American comfort and pursue Christ. I mean, is it comfortable to confess your sins? Is it comfortable to intercede for people? Is it comfortable to give a percentage of your income to the kingdom of God? Is it comfortable to open up your home and practice hospitality? None of that is comfortable.

So, here's the principle Paul is teaching us: when we suffer, God will strengthen us. It gets even better than that. That's great. We'll talk about that in a minute. That's a great promise. Then God will use both our suffering and his strengthening for us to help other people. God doesn't waste anything. Here, I'll show you.

Verse 4 now. I want you to see this. "...*who comforts...*" That word is used 10 times in five verses. "...*in all our affliction...*" I think there are seven words in the Greek for some type of suffering. Paul uses five of them throughout this letter. "...*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.*"

Affliction is the Greek word meaning pressure. We all know the feeling of pressure. Some of you right now are like, "I feel financial pressure." Some of you have never felt that, but when you feel it, it is real. Sometimes people feel relational pressure. The home is so hard. Work is so hard. People feel mental and emotional pressure. People feel physical pressure as their body is falling apart.

Paul is saying God wants to comfort us, but he says God is going to comfort us so we can comfort others. This is important, because here's the temptation. Normally, our temptation is to become more self-focused when we're suffering. The world collapses. It shrivels and shrinks to the size of what I'm currently going through and how it's affecting me. And fair enough, at one level. There is some terrible suffering out there.

What he's saying is maybe God is doing something in you... This is one of the purposes for suffering. Maybe God is doing something *in* you so God can do something *through* you. Listen. You can take this to the bank. This is so true. Suffering people want to be ministered to by people who have suffered, often in the same way.

A lot of times, people go, "Okay, fine. I'm on a serving team, Kyle. Got it. I'm an usher. I'm a greeter. I'm a parking lot person. I serve in Kids, but I want more. What else can I do in the church?" Here's one of the questions you could ask yourself: Where have you suffered? That would be a good place to start.

We'll have people... I mean, this happens fairly frequently. Someone comes up, and they've had... It's normal, but the ups and downs of marriage, maybe some more downs than ups. They'll say something like, "Oh, man! We thought our marriage was going to fall apart five years ago. God did a work, and we love each other more than ever." Then it's normally followed up by something like this: "Do you do anything for marriages here? Can we step into premarital counseling?"

Or they'll say something like this a lot of times: "If you know someone whose marriage is falling apart, send them to us." If your marriage is falling apart, do you want to meet with someone who says, "Nope. We've always been great"? You're like, "I hate you." You want someone to be like, "Yeah, we actually had the divorce lawyers. We were walking that way, and we were figuring out how we'd tell our kids. God did a work."

You want to be able to say to people, "I'll show you the way out." I've had people who have had moral failures before say something to me like, "Hey, if somebody ever..." Because that's hard to wade through, and who wants to talk about that? They say, "If you find someone who has done that, send them to me."

What you'll also find is if you've been through any type of suffering, and then you find out somebody else is suffering, you will move heaven and earth to make it happen, to meet with them. Multiple times we've had something where someone finds out their teenager or 20-year-old daughter or son is some kind of prodigal and breaking their heart.

I can immediately think of three, four, or five families in our church that have been through that, and every time you call them, they're like, "Give me their number. We'll move heaven and earth to be there. When can they meet?" Suffering people want to be ministered to by people who have suffered.

Here's what you need to know. God is going to use you as part of the way he comforts people. He's the God of all comfort. He can use a lot of things. A lot of us think, "Okay. The way God is going to comfort me is I'm going to read a passage of Scripture, and I'm going to be comforted." Maybe. "I'm going to listen to a new worship song, and then I'll be comforted. I'm going to pray about it, and then I'll be comforted."

I think you can be comforted through all that, but one of the ways God comforts us is through other Christians. To flip it a little bit, some of you need to let other Christians in this church, particularly in your Community Group, comfort you. Have you ever heard the story...? I think this was a cartoon. A guy is drowning, and he's yelling out to God, "God, save me!"

Then this boat comes by and says, "I'm here to help," and he goes, "No, I'm waiting for God to save me." Then a couple of minutes later a helicopter flies in, and they have the whole team. "We're here to save you." He goes, "I'm waiting for God to save me." Well, if you know how the story ends, he dies. He gets to heaven and goes, "God, why didn't you save me?" He goes, "I sent you a boat, and I sent you a helicopter."

"God, why aren't you doing this?" It's like, "I gave you your Community Group." You have to be vulnerable, though, and depending on who you are, that's not easy. Sometimes we'll see people are upset at the church for a need they never let us know about. "Well, you should know!" Come on. That doesn't work in marriage either.

"Well, you should read my mind. You should know by osmosis." It's like, "I don't! I'm not omnipotent. I'm not omnipresent. I don't know. You have to tell me, and then I'll stumble and fumble and mumble my way to helping you the best that I can."

04 CHOOSE ADVENTURE OVER SAFETY

So, you have to see what Paul is saying. Basically, he's like, "All right, guys." This is really important. Verse 5: ***"For as we share abundantly in Christ's sufferings..."*** Do you want to share abundantly in that? Paul says we do. You *do* want to share in *this*. Look. ***"...so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too."***

He says, "Christ's sufferings." There are an infinite number of ways people suffer, but they all fall into four categories. You either suffer because of your sin... That, I think, from my pastoral experience, is the worst type of suffering, because you're sitting there going, "I went against my conscience for so long on this. It finally caught up to me. I don't have to be here, but I'm here because of my own sin." We suffer because of our own sin, obviously.

We suffer because of others' sins. That's interesting. We'd all like to think we're some island. We're not. We're way more connected, and what your wife does or your husband does or your kids do... I mean, we're so connected our government could make a sinful decision and we suffer for it. That's how connected we are. There's a lot of connection.

Sometimes we suffer because we live in a sinful world. That's the answer to "Why do bad things happen to the best Christians?" It's really a mystery at one level. We leave it up to mystery. Whenever something happens, they always say, "He was so young" or "She was so young" or "She was the nicest, the kindest, the godliest," and it's almost always true. That's because we live in a sinful, broken, fallen world, and suffering is no respecter of persons.

But Paul is not talking about any of those. Paul is talking about Christ's sufferings. This is a suffering that I'm afraid not many of us are familiar with. It's the suffering that happens when you're living on mission for Jesus. It's not when you get cancer. It's not when you get fired. It's when you get fired because you were being public about Jesus. That's what he's talking about.

My fear is... I just don't want to play church. I'm really asking...you guys right now, out loud, and I'm asking the Lord...*How do you build a church where people are willing to actually live like this?* Well, look at what Paul says. Let me show you. Verse

6: *"If we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation; and if we are comforted, it is for your comfort..."* In other words, it doesn't matter what happens; it's going to be used for good. God doesn't waste anything. It's like, "Wow!" It hurts your head.

"...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." Okay. Let me tell you what Paul is saying here. Why is Paul telling them this? Because he wants them to live the same way he's living.

Look. I had one big idea today: God comforts you not so you can be comfortable but so you can comfort others. I have one challenge for you today. I want to ask you to genuinely choose mission and adventure for your life instead of safety and comfort. Here's how you do it.

First, you realize God built you not for safety and comfort but for mission and adventure. That's the first thing you need to realize. Secondly, you need to realize the reason you're not taking more gospel risks... We say here that we want to take personal risks to bring Christ to every relationship. Why aren't we doing it then? I can tell you why we're not doing it. Because we're trying to comfort ourselves.

We're trying to make sure we're comfortable. We're practicing self-preservation and self-protection. What if you added a "But God will comfort me" onto whatever risk you know you need to take? "I will go public for Christ in my school or my work or my neighborhood." Well, as soon as you say that you have to go, "Well, I don't know what's going to happen." I know. Isn't it exciting? I'm serious.

You don't know what's going to happen. You have no idea what's going to happen. It's so exciting. Like, what would happen? "I don't know, but God will comfort me." Wow! What a way to live. I'm sure in a room this size you have to have some tough conversations. There are always conversations people are avoiding.

Maybe you have to have a hard conversation with your spouse that you've been avoiding for a year or two. No wonder. She might get overemotional, and you might be sleeping on the couch. Maybe you start yelling and the kids hear. Maybe you get the cold shoulder for a week. What will happen if you have the hard conversation with your spouse? You don't know, but God will comfort you.

What if you gave generously to the kingdom of God? "Oh, I don't know. I've always lived on 110 percent of what I made." Well, that's a problem. "I don't know how I would live on 90 percent." That'll be an adventure, and God will comfort you. What if you said, "I'm going to be a Community Group host, and I'm going to open up my

house"? You might say, "What if crazy people come to my house?" They will, and God will comfort you.

Look. It's not easy. It's not rose petals. I'm saying, "What an adventure." What an adventure for your life. "I'm going to go obey God. I have no idea what's going to happen. All I know is that God is going to strengthen me, and then I know he's going to use any suffering I've had to help other people." It's win-win.

I mean, what's the other option? How safe do you want to be? Do you want to cover yourself in bubble wrap and order Uber Eats? Like, that's the logical conclusion. Then nothing will ever happen to you. I want you to hear, Christian, that you can have a saved soul and a wasted life. Many people have that.

Guys, listen. Let's be all in. You're going to die. I mean, it's going to happen. You don't want to come to the end of your life and be full of regret. You're not smart enough or wise enough to know everything that's going to happen. You keep thinking you know what's best for your life...more protection, more self-preservation. You don't know what's best for you.

Maybe the best thing for you is to get into a little gospel trouble. Maybe that'll change everything in your life. Maybe that'll shake your marriage up and you'll start praying together. Maybe your kids, for the first time, will see Christianity is real. Whoa! I'm just telling you you have no idea, but please don't choose safety and comfort. Choose mission and adventure.

Then we're just going to do it together. Someone here loses their job, God forbid. Guess what? "Well, good. I'll figure out how to get a new job, and then I'll be in the 'Help people get a new job' category, because then I'll know how to do that." It's so exciting.

05 PAUL'S CONFIDENCE THAT GOD WILL DELIVER

Paul gets emotional, though, as I told you. Look at what he says here. Verse 8: ***"For we do not want you to be unaware, brothers, of the affliction we experienced in Asia."*** By the way, all of the scholars have no idea what he's talking about. We don't know if this is the riot at Ephesus that's mentioned. We don't even know what he's talking about, but here's what he said.

"For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself." This is not hyperbole. This is Paul saying, "I thought I was going to die, and it was

really scary, guys." In fact, look at what he says. ***"Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death."***

Then he gives us one of the purposes of suffering. There are manifold purposes of suffering. One of the purposes of suffering is this one right here: ***"But that was to make us rely not on ourselves..."*** Part of suffering is to chip away at the self-sufficiency we have and to make us lean more into Christ. It weans us from this world and puts our hope in heaven. ***"But that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead."***

I'm not trying to be dramatic here. I'm really not. But all of us are going to have a moment like the apostle Paul has here for different reasons. Paul basically says, "I got to the place in my life where my only hope, because I thought I was going to die, was that God was going to raise my body from the dead and that there was life somewhere else."

I'm just telling you we're all going to get old. I know you don't think you are. We live in a culture where no one thinks they're ever going to get older than 40, but you will. Our church is fairly young, but I've had to do a couple of hospice visits, and I had to get ready for this. There's no training for this in seminary.

You walk in, and the wife says to you, "He has lost 50 pounds since you last saw him. I want you to be ready to see him," and you're like, "I don't know if I'm ready. I'm going to try. I'm going to try to walk in here and be composed. This guy lost 50 pounds, and he was thin last time I saw him." I'm just telling you, when you walk into those rooms with people, the only hope... If you're in that room, if that's you on the bed, your only hope is that God is raising...

I mean, we'll say that. "We're going to pray until the end. We're going to pray like charismatics here, but it looks like you're headed home." Even the godliest Christians sometimes struggle with assurance of salvation in those moments. I'm talking about godly people. You get to the point you say, "My only hope is that God raises this body from the dead." That's where Paul got.

Then he's encouraged. He says, ***"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."*** God always delivers, but it's not always in *this* life. Sometimes he delivers to heaven. We just have to know that. Think of James and Peter in Acts 12. You can read this with your Community Group.

In Acts 12, James and Peter are both arrested. Peter goes to jail. They pray. He's released. James is killed. Well, who got delivered? Yes, both of them. One was

delivered to heaven; one was delivered to ministry. But Peter is going to die eventually too. In fact, a horrible death upside down on a cross. He won't be delivered from that, but he *will* be delivered in a different way.

06 PAUL ENDS BY ASKING FOR PRAYER

All this leads Paul to say this. This is where we're going to end. This is verse 11. "***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 love this. Paul ends the letter and says, "Will you please pray for me?" He's like, "Church, you've caused me so much heartache. You don't trust me. Will you pray for me?"

Paul prays for churches. In fact, some of the New Testament is just his written prayers. You read Ephesians, and you're like, "He's praying." You get to chapter 3, and he's praying again. So, Paul prayed for churches. Paul often would share prayer requests that were answered in his letters. "*This* happened, and *this* happened."

This is interesting. Seven times Paul asked people to pray for him. The great apostle Paul says, "Guys, please help. I need prayer." What this tells me is we can ask anybody to pray for us, whether we think they're spiritually more mature than us or spiritually less mature than us. If you want to make the gospel real in your home, there are two things you can do with your kids.

First, you can actually repent of real sin in front of them. They'll be like, "What? All that stuff we were learning in TCC Kids is real." It just went from 2D to 3D to 4K. The second thing you can do is ask your kids to pray for you. You can do that when they're 3. You just say, "Dad has a business meeting today. He's going to try to share the gospel. Would you pray for me?" "Whoa, Dad! Yeah."

Years ago, my friend in high school... Her name is Allie. She said her mom was (I know several women like this) just this charismatic, prayerful lady. She said her mom would get up every day at 4:00 or 5:00 in the morning, something like that, and she would spend the first hour of her day in prayer.

Allie said, "One day I had a particularly terrible day in high school, and I came home to my mom and said, 'Mom, *this* happened and *this* happened and *this* happened and *this* happened.'" She said, "I wasn't expecting for my mom's response. My mom got all emotional. She said, 'Sorry. I slept in.'" Coincidence? The cynical mind might think so. We really believe prayer works.

Part of what Paul did when he was trying to get the church... And I'm with you guys. I'm struggling with all the same stuff. When Paul tried to get the church to begin to feel some of this lifestyle of saying, "Okay. I'm going to suffer, but God is going to strengthen," the way he kind of invited everyone in was he said, "Let's pray about it."

So, that's how we're going to close today. We're just going to pray together. I'm going to ask you this question. What risk do you need to take? Where do you need to take a risk and trust God? Where do you need to say, "I don't know what's going to happen, and that is so unbelievably exciting"?

I want you getting up for work tomorrow going, "I don't know. I'm going to take some risks for Christ today. I have no idea what's going to happen. God is going to strengthen me, and then God is going to use that to help other people. I'm just going to do that till I die." That's what I want you to feel.

I want you to look around and also think about who you can comfort. The reason we do this Community Group thing is it's too much to look around here and go, "Okay. I'm responsible to comfort all of these people." No, you're responsible to comfort your Community Group. You're responsible to carry and share the burdens with them.

Some of you might be in here, and you need some comfort. One of the things you can do is when I close, you can come forward if you want to. The elders and the prayer team will be here. We'd love to pray for you. Guys, it's going to be hard, and I'm asking you to help. We are going to be a church that takes personal risks to bring Christ to every relationship, and we're going to have to say, "I don't know what's going to happen, but God is going to comfort." Let's pray.

Lord, will you build that type of church? It's almost impossible. It goes against every sponsored ad on social media. It goes against every commercial on television. It goes against every desire of the flesh, but, Lord, would you just start with a few? There are a few. Somebody in the family can start with it and say, "I'm going to do it." Somebody on the college campus can say, "I'll model this." We need models.

Somebody in the hospital system can say, "I'm going to show what this is like. I don't know what's going to happen, but what I do know is God will comfort me and God will use it all. He doesn't waste anything." The cross of Christ tells us the greatest things can happen out of the hardest and most difficult circumstances. Would you do it by the power of your Holy Spirit who is called the *Comforter*? We ask in Jesus' name, amen.