

Sermon on 2 Corinthians 1:8-11 prepared by Jonathan Shrader

Followers of Jesus move from despair to hope as we persevere in prayer.

Most of us are well-versed in the independent nature of society. Striking out on our own, making our mark. Swimming against the current; being your own captain... There can be a lot of good that comes from this rogue independence that makes our nation so great. But there can also be some dangerous side-effects.

“Living your truth” drowns out the truth. “Only God can judge me” voices actual contempt for God. And too often, instead of ascending the hill we were meant to conquer, people are left lonely, anxious, and at the end of their rope.

Reflecting on this had me thinking about some of the counseling sessions I have been in over the years I have been a pastor. A common refrain in those conversations can be “I just have to do this for myself,” or “figure it out myself.” And every time I hear it I imagine Gollum in the cave alone, wrecked by his idols and wasting away.

And I get it. I have spoken words about proving myself plenty of times in life. But when the hits keep rolling we can end up suffering alone. Trapped, incapable.

But what if there is a better way? Survival not of the fittest but the connected. Those tied to each other and something or rather someone far greater than them.

This is Christianity. Where the weak not only survive but thrive. And it is lived out in the church who declares into a world full of suffering and affliction:

“To all who are weary and need rest;
To all who mourn and long for comfort;
To all who feel worthless and wonder if God even cares;
To all who are weak and fail and desire strength;
To all who sin and need a Savior —
This church opens wide her doors with a welcome from Jesus,
the mighty friend of sinners,

the ally of his enemies,
the defender of the indefensible,
the justifier of those who have no excuses left...”

We exist to give hope and that is exactly what we find in our text for today. Steady hope in the experience of great difficulty.

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2 Corinthians 1:8-11

Just ten verses or so into this letter to the church in Corinth and Paul is steadily building the case for dependency on Christ. Being a people anchored, tied to our savior come heck or high water.

The Apostle is familiar with affliction and he relays the promise of comfort and mission - that believers are comforted in all our affliction that we may be able to comfort others in any affliction. And here he recounts the very real experience of coming to the end of himself and what keeps him afloat.

This provides then for us tremendous hope. Wherever you find yourself emotionally or situationally, there is a deliverer who cares for you and will rescue you.

Paul wants the church to be aware that affliction is real, not merely a theological concept, but in it, not only will comfort come but redefining hope will be found.

Like Paul, and generations of believers before us, when difficulties come, either we can “die” or we can be transformed. That is what is offered here.

Hope comes through perseverance and prayer.

1) Perseverance

I know this is a loaded term - can be the keeping of the saints for eternity which is helpful - but here, related to that, it is what it means to just keep going in life.

Paul has experienced legit affliction and he invites the church into the depths of it.

2 Corinthians 1:8–9a “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. [9] Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death...”

We don’t know the exact circumstances of this affliction, maybe something happened in Ephesus Acts doesn’t describe, or something along the way; but it isn’t good. And in his words maybe you can relate to this kind of despair.

For Paul it is humbling. Elsewhere Paul says we put no confidence in the flesh, but if anyone could it’s him. **Philippians 3:4b–6** “If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: [5] circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; [6] as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.” (ESV)

If anyone can handle religious challenge and hardship. Even trials and accusations, it is Paul, and yet he says he got to the point where he can’t deal. And that is probably why he can say that his resume is all loss, rubbish compared to the surpassing worth of knowing Jesus.

Here he says ‘We were indescribably, beyond the limits of our power, brought down into the depths.’ “his description sounds much like what we would call a nervous breakdown. The load had become too heavy; all his natural human resources of energy and strength were worn down to nothing. It’s bad enough to hear a magistrate declare that you are sentenced to death; it’s far worse when a voice deep inside yourself tells you that you might as well give up and die. That is the point Paul had reached, the point where the night had become totally dark and all hope of dawn had disappeared.” Wright

Desperate - overwhelmed - burdened beyond our strength. What a statement to make in a culture where the weak are useless - hard to say then and hard to say now. The elites or resounding voices of culture want you to conquer in your own strength, pull yourself up by your bootstraps. Keep a stiff upper lip... But that's not the way of Christ.

While false teachers might say otherwise, desperation and dependency are exactly what we are invited into when we believe in Jesus.

And it is good - this humbling affliction produces help and hope in the believer.

We were brought low... **9b** “But that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God **who raises the dead.**” (ESV)

It is so bad that it feels like a death sentence, yet we get to rely on the God who raises the dead! Where we can't avoid volume after volume teaching “self-help” here is the ultimate of self-help where the self doesn't help!

This is Paul who learns to labor not by his own strength but by Christ's energy in him. God working in you as you rely on him.

Paul is giving up on self; he is still active, working, taking the next best step but he was brought low to learn to rely on God. He learns a patient perseverance and finds his strength renewed in the waiting.

“If I am my only hope, my condition is hopeless. Taking matters into my own hands was the way out of the garden... the way out of the cursed exile is Christ himself.” Jared C. Wilson

We all know what it means to take matters into our own hands because we have spent a lot of life living this way. We strategize our way out of trouble, or at the highest level, our way to justification before God. If we are good enough, tough enough, at the right place at the right time, it will work out. We put our hope in our ability, our security, our bankroll or beauty. And we end up closing ourselves

off. We don't want people to see the spiritual or practical struggles we are fighting, and we don't want to release control to Christ.

Like Paul, the believer can rely on God because God has proven himself.

2 Corinthians 1:10 "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." (ESV)

The God who works resurrection can be trusted to carry us through.

God's resurrection power is not described in the past tense (raised the dead) but in the present (God who raises the dead) because God continues to display that resurrection power in his delivering his children from impossible circumstances, from affliction, from difficulty and hopelessness.

"There is nothing whimsical about resurrection. Some have left fingernail scratches on the word because they've clung tight to it all these years." Evan Welcher

"... the certitude of deliverance from crushing circumstances gently freshened their souls. This is the endless refrain that comes to all committed believers - God by nature is the Deliverer, Redeemer, and Savior who raises the dead." Hughes

And that means he can be relied upon. For all of life. In affliction and out. Under the weight of life we can have hope.

You all know I music is my poetry of choice...

"Sing it from the shackles
Sing it from the chains
Sing it from the trenches
Sing it through the pain
There's a song rising up
Can you hear the freedom sound
Sing it from the shackles
We're gonna sing it loud, loud, loud

You're my deliverer
You tear down the prison walls
When my heart needs a miracle
You will come through
You're my deliverer
My anthem throughout it all
When my strength and my fight is gone
I know You will come through

You're breaking off rejection
You're breaking off the shame
You're breaking off addictions
In the power of Your Name
There's a song rising up
Can you hear that freedom sound
Sing it from the shackles
We're gonna sing it loud, loud, loud” Rend Collective

Reliance upon God rather than upon one's own native ability is fundamental in the Christian life, yet it does not come naturally. Very often suffering is needed to make us rely upon God. That is Paul's experience, and it might just be ours.

I am a fellow traveler here... leaning into this truth.

If you can learn it without affliction, praise God. But if you do feel familiar with despair there is resurrection, deliverance for you in Jesus.

This is Paul's description of the Christian life. To survive, rely. To thrive, rely. To actually have life, rely. To stand with courage and hope, rely. To persevere, rely.

On him we have set our hope, that he will deliver us again. God's word can be trusted.

Hebrews 6:17–20a “So when God desired to show more convincingly to the heirs of the promise the unchangeable character of his purpose, he guaranteed it

with an oath, [18] so that by two unchangeable things, in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled for refuge might have strong encouragement to hold fast to the hope set before us. [19] We have this as a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters into the inner place behind the curtain, [20] where Jesus has gone as a forerunner on our behalf..." (ESV)

Affliction can wreck us, but that is to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead. We stay active in reliance then in prayer.

2) Prayer

Did you see what Paul said after he confesses reliance on God? He reveals the tether to the anchor. He wants the church to be in on his reliance.

2 Corinthians 1:11 "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." (ESV)

Paul sees the prayers of the saints as help because they are. The God who raises from the dead and who delivered Paul from such a deadly peril is responsive to prayer.

"Prayer is indeed a mystery, but it is stressed over and over again in the New Testament as a vital prerequisite for the release and experience of God's power. It is true that it is God who delivers, and that God stands in no need of human prayers before He can act on behalf of His afflicted servants. Yet there is the manward as well as the Godward aspect of such deliverance, and the manward side is summed up in the duty of Christians to intercede in prayer for their fellow-believers who are enduring affliction... In prayer, human impotence casts itself at the feet of divine omnipotence. Thus the duty of prayer is not a modification of God's power, but a glorification of it." Philip Hughes

We have lost our way when we neglect or refuse to pray.

Living in reliance on the resurrecting God is done through petition and partnership with others. And it is where we find strength.

Ephesians 6:10–18 “Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. [11] Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil. [12] For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. [13] Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand firm. [14] Stand therefore, having fastened on the belt of truth, and having put on the breastplate of righteousness, [15] and, as shoes for your feet, having put on the readiness given by the gospel of peace. [16] In all circumstances take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming darts of the evil one; [17] and take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God, [18] praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication. To that end, keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints,” (ESV)

Praying in and for the community of believers, individuals united in Christ for victory.

“Notice how each piece represents not a work of ours, but a work of God’s:

The armor is the “armor of God” (v. 13)

The belt is God’s truth (v. 14a)

The righteousness that can protect us is God’s (v. 14b)

The sandals are the efficacy of the good news of Jesus (v. 15)

The shield is the faith God has gifted to us (v. 16)

The sword is God’s Word (v. 17b)

None of these things originate in us or are anything we can do. From head to toe, we are shod in the powerful work of God. This is why Paul begins this treatise on spiritual warfare with the admonition to “be strengthened by the Lord and by his vast strength.” Jared C. Wilson

In the community of believers then we keep going in prayer... killing pride that keeps us from asking for help, humbled by the grace of Christ and his resurrecting power, setting our hope on him alone.

If you do nothing else when you are together with brothers and sisters in Christ, pray. It changes things... it is where we feel tangible support from one another and often it is where God moves to give us a sense of his presence and peace.

There have been so many refreshing times of prayer for me as part of Reservoir. The faithful few gathered on a week night to seek renewal can carry me through for days... Small group times of prayer, as hectic as they can be at the end of a small group night, are a reminder that we are in this together.

And I think of one meeting where God moved in power... we went to Bill's house to pray for his back but while we were there felt like we needed to pray for Nathan who had been homebound for at least a year... and God answered our prayers (Bill had to wait a while for his back to heal but Nathan was at church worshipping with the Saints the next morning and has never looked back.)

A super practical step we all can take in this arena is to determine rather than saying "I will pray for you... or that" Stop what you're doing and pray right away... In conversation...

Keep praying, Paul says, "that many will give thanks" Can be translated "so that many faces will be lifted." Many people will look to Christ.

"Humans thanking the creator for his goodness are a symptom of the way the world was meant to be, a sign that one day it really will be like that. And such signs are themselves powerful in helping forward the work of the gospel through which the great day will come." Wright

God answers our desperate prayers as we rely on him and gives us renewing hope in him. His deliverance, through prayer is evidence then of his grace and saving power to a watching world. We move from the depths to the heights in Christ and others join in as God moves.

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"The reason for our afflictions is to "make us rely not on ourselves but on God" (v. 9). This reliance translates into a life of patience (v.6) and prayer (v. 11). As we experience the deep comforts of the gospel, which transcend circumstance and self-centeredness, we become comforters of the afflicted."

Surrender the Self - Turn to Jesus for forgiveness, justification, transformation and the power to keep your head up. He took on your despair in order to give you freedom and life.

Be Anchored in Christ - Set your hope on him. In affliction, in comfort, in despair, and in joy. Persevere in trust and patient hope.

Isaiah 40:31 "they who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint." (ESV)

Help Each Other in Prayer - This is how renewal comes, as Paul says, it helps. So be about it; interceding and asking for prayer. You don't even have to know how to ask - overwhelmed and desperate we just ask for Jesus. Because we rely on Christ we can trust the family/church he has given us. We have all seen "trust fall" fails, and maybe that is one reason we have a hard time embracing community, but it is for our good and the glory of Christ, that others may lift their faces to him.

In Christ we don't face affliction alone - we lock arms in reliance on our Deliverer with great hope.

The weary finding rest;

Those who mourn experiencing comfort;

Those who feel worthless and wonder if God even cares learn their value and are held in community;

The weak given strength strength;

Sinners meeting their Savior —