

Engage

Small Groups: Engage in Care

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SMALL GROUPS: ENGAGE IN CARE 2 Corinthians 1:3-11

I'm going to invite you to open with me to 2 Corinthians 1. If you need to, feel free to use your Table of Contents. Find 2 Corinthians.

A church made up of 4,000-plus people on campus today can be overwhelming. If we're really honest, it can be overwhelming. I got a letter recently from a gentleman who has been bringing his family to worship at Brook Hills, and he was talking about in the letter, the whole point was, basically, to say, "I never wanted anything to do with a mega church, and now, it seems like God is leading my family to join Brook Hills." I don't know if you've ever thought that before, but if you have, I never wanted anything to do with a mega church either, all right? So, we're just on the same plain there, and we'll just kind of get that out in the open. Four thousand plus people gathered together on this campus together, I mean you can get drowned out in the crowd, even in a crowd like this tonight. It can be overwhelming sometimes.

You begin to think, "Does...am I really needed and do people, this church, can I really be cared for with the needs that are so real in my life?" This is why I'm convinced that the mission of the church must be central; that making disciples of all nations must be at the center of the church because, if it's not, then we can get lost regardless of what size of church we're in. There's an assumption out there that says, "Well, in a church of 4,000, can you really develop...I can't really develop close relationships. However, in a much smaller church, I can develop close relationships." I think both are misled.

I think it's possible to develop very close relationships in a large church and not develop those kinds of relationships in a small church, or vice versa. It's possible to do it in a small church and not have those kind of relationships in a large church. I think it's all dependent on the mission of the church. That's why we're talking about small groups as they relate to the mission of making disciples of all nations, because when we are walking together with other people in the mission of the church, the mission of our lives, sharing life together and impacting the world together for the glory of Christ, then we have the privilege of sharing life with each other where everybody counts, where no one is left out, no one is crowded out; where every single one of the needs that are represented in our lives are cared for.

I mean, just think about it, even the way we structure things on Sunday in our corporate worship. You look across these windows from the three times that we've gathered together, you see Post-It Notes everywhere. Is what I say tonight really going to hit on every single one of those needs and every single one of those struggles and every single one of those hurts? I'll be honest: I'm just not that good. However, what happens when we begin to gather together in small groups that know those needs and know those hurts and know those cares and can actually be a part of helping in the middle of that?

Small Groups and Suffering...

This is the picture that we're looking at, and especially tonight, as we think about small groups and suffering, and suffering representing the trials and the hurts and the struggles and the pain that we walk through in this life. How do small groups fit into that context? I want us to look at the book of 2 Corinthians because it's a pretty important book. We're going to read here in 1 Corinthians 1 kind of the introduction, but basically, a little background that's huge for understanding this text. Paul had founded the Church at Corinth. He'd stayed there for a year and a half preaching the Word there, teaching the Word, building up that body, and then he left, and soon after he left, they started to experience some real problems and real disunity came about in the church.

So, what he did is he sent Timothy there to see what was up. Timothy comes back and says, "Things are really bad." So, Paul makes what he calls "a painful visit to Corinth." He goes there, and then he comes back, and he writes what he calls, "a severe letter." This is a letter that we don't have, but he writes another letter to them in between First and Second Corinthians basically talking about the disunity and the struggles that they're going through.

Then, after he sent that letter through Titus...he had sent his associate, Titus, to take that letter...Titus comes back and reports to Paul, "Hey, things are going better. Things are good." So, things are looking a little more up, and he writes this letter called 2 Corinthians. There's still some strain between Paul and the Church at Corinth, and the deal is Paul had gone through some really, really hard times, very difficult times and the Church at Corinth had gone through some really hard, really difficult times. As a result, the predominant theme throughout this letter is comfort, encouragement...God's comfort and God's encouragement that comes in the middle of hard times.

There are sixty different times in the New Testament where you see the word in the original language, the New Testament for comfort...sixty times in the whole New Testament. Thirty of them are right here in this book. So, half of the emphasis on comfort is all loaded into this one letter. In fact, we're going to read verses 3 through 11. I want you to circle every time, especially verses 3-7...I want you to circle every time you see the word "comfort" because you're going to see it over and over and over again. In these first five verses that we're going to read, you're going to see it ten times.

Look at it with me. In verse 3, Paul says, *"Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all..."* Here it is; circle it, *"...the God of all comfort who..."* Here it goes, *"...who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God."* Just a side note there at the end of verse 4, that *"have received from God."* That's actually, in the original language of the New Testament, that's another instance of comfort, and actually, literally, says, "We ourselves have been comforted from God," but I guess the translators just got tired of putting it in there, but it's there.

So, there's another instance, verse 5. *"[For] just as the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives, so also through Christ our comfort overflows. If we are distressed, it is for your comfort and salvation; if we are comforted, it is for your comfort..."* We get the point Paul, comfort. *"...comfort, which produces in you patient endurance of the same sufferings we suffer. And our hope for you is firm, because we know that just as you share in our sufferings, so also you share in our..."* Guess what, *"...comfort."*

Verse 8 says,

We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about the hardships we suffered in the province of Asia. We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired even of life. Indeed, in our hearts we felt the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead. He has delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us. On him we have set our hope that he will continue to deliver us, as you help us by your prayers. Then many will give thanks on our behalf for the gracious favor granted us in answer to the prayers of many.

So, what is this picture that Paul introduces to the Church at Corinth that had to do with small groups and struggles and hurts and needs in our lives? What I want you to see is a few truths that are foundational that Paul is laying here that lay the foundation for everything else to come in this letter.

We experience suffering in God.

First truth is this: Paul's saying we experience suffering in God. We experience suffering in God. What's interesting is, I know you've seen comfort mentioned over and over and over again, but Paul also places just as much of an emphasis on this first part on suffering. It's kind of parallel. You've got this balance that's weighing the two. You have comfort and suffering back and forth, back and forth.

I encouraged you to circle every time you saw comfort. Let's go back and let me show you some instances of suffering, distress, despair that are mentioned over and over again. You might underline these or put a square around these or something just to show the contrast between the two. Look in verse 4, *"...who comforts us in all our..."* What? *"...in all our troubles..."* Might put a square or underline that. *"...so that we can comfort those in any trouble..."* Seeing comfort and trouble back and forth. Then, it says in verse 5, *"Just as the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives, so also through Christ our comfort overflows."*

Then, you get down to the end of the next verse, end of 6, what does it say? It says, *"...which produces in you patient endurance of the same sufferings that we suffer. And our hope for you is firm, because we know that just as you share in our sufferings..."* There it is again, *"...so also you share in our comfort."* You get to verse 8, he says, *"We don't want you to be uninformed, brothers, about the hardships we suffered..."* There it is again, *"...in the province of Asia."* He says, *"We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired even of life."* That word right there literally means, "didn't see a way out." It's almost just depression to the point of no exit. We despaired even of life. *"Indeed, in our hearts we felt the sentence of death."* Later on he mentions in verse 10, *"Deadly peril."*

So, what we see is this contrast between suffering and comfort, trouble and comfort, distress, despair and comfort. There are ten words that really mean suffering in the Greek language, and Paul uses five of them over and over and over again throughout this book. So, here's the picture. Paul is expressing that he has experienced suffering. The Church at Corinth has experienced suffering. Suffering is a reality for those who follow God. That's the testimony of all Scripture.

You look at Job, you look at Jeremiah, you look at David, men and women throughout the Bible all came to the point in their lives where they would ask questions like, "Why am I suffering like this? Why is this happening, God?" Jeremiah, basically, comes to the point where he says, "I wish I'd never been born."

The Bible doesn't play around with the fact that in the fallen world of sin, that suffering is a reality. Despair is a reality. Trouble, distress, these are realities. The Bible never tries to gloss over that. It's very clear. There are all kinds of reasons why we suffer. Ultimately, the reason for suffering in the world is a result of sin, and we know that when we sin, when we disobey God, that there is suffering that goes along with that because we're missing out on God's design for our lives.

However, that's actually not the kind of suffering that Paul's talking about here because he says the sufferings of Christ flow over to our lives, and Christ never sinned. What he's talking about is the suffering that we experience, not when we disobey God, but the suffering that we experience when we obey God. Ever thought about that? In God's design, we experience suffering, not only when we disobey Him, but we experience suffering when we obey Him.

Yes, it's a result of sin on a whole, but even when we're pursuing God, we're going to experience suffering. Now, this is key. Now, I want to...just as a side note here, it's key that we get our arms around this, because when Paul talks about suffering, he's talking about suffering that happens when we obey God, and we're going to talk in just a little bit about how God uses our suffering for the benefit of others.

However, I don't want you to get the idea that this is Paul saying that, "The more I sin and suffer as a result, the better it is for other people." I say that because there is a theology out there and I've heard it. I've heard it a lot. There's a theology out there that says that, "The person who can best help me in my struggles with a particular sin are people who have also struggled and given into that sin." I want to remind you tonight that that is grossly unbiblical, because if that were the case, you'd take that to its logical conclusion that we would be best equipped to help each other with sin by doing, what? By sinning. If that were the case, then Jesus Christ would be absolutely no help to us in our sin because He never sinned once. So, we know that's not true.

That's not the picture that we're getting here. We're talking about here suffering that happens when we are pursuing God. It's at this point we've got to remember...and we've talked about this some. We've got to remember the role of suffering in the strategy and the plan of God. Think about it with me. I've asked this question before. How has God shown His love most clearly to the world? Through His Suffering Servant. Through the self-sacrifice of His only Son. That was His strategy. Suffering was central in His strategy for showing His love most clear to the world, and I don't believe His strategy has changed.

This is why Paul said in Philippians 3, "I want to share in the sufferings of Christ." That's a weird statement. Why would anybody want to share in the sufferings of Christ? When Paul says, "I want to share in His sufferings because when I do, then I show the world that there is nothing, no one in this world that can compare to the treasure that Christ is, and you take anyone or anything away from me in this world and, as long as I have Christ, I have joy. I have my treasure." He said, "Suffering I embrace because my treasure is Christ, and I don't need anyone or anything else in this world to bring satisfaction to my heart."

That's the picture that we've got of suffering all throughout Scripture. So, the reality is that, as God draws each of us individually in us as a faith family at Brook Hills, as He draws us closer to Himself, and as we give ourselves more deeply to this mission, suffering will be inevitable. Some of you are thinking, "That's not good news, Dave." However, it is. It is good news when you realize the truths that are here in 2 Corinthians 1.

I want you to see how Paul shows us a picture of God from the very beginning, God in light of our suffering. Look at the characteristics of God that are highlighted here. First of all, God is sovereign over all suffering. "*Praise be to the God and Father...*" It's a picture of the One who is in control, the One who has all power, who is infinitely powerful and infinitely loving and infinitely wise, and He is our Father with infinite mercy. This is the God who is over all suffering. Nothing happens outside of Him.

We are not controlled by blind fate or chance. Neither are we controlled...neither are we controlling everything that goes on in our lives. There is a sovereign God who is in control, and no matter what happens in our lives, no matter how confusing it gets, no matter how deep the hurt is, we can always look up and see that our Father is still on the throne. He is not surprised by anything that happens. He is sovereign over all suffering.

Heather and I rented a movie the other night, and a little background leading up to watching this movie together. We had been traveling somewhere, and we were talking about a mission trip that I'm taking soon and talking about some of the risk involved in that, and we got into this discussion that I'm guessing every married couple has, I think. I'm just going to go out on a limb here, okay? If not, just humor me, but I think every married couple has this discussion every once in awhile.

When we started having this discussion of, "What would you do if something happened to me?" She's, basically, saying, "What would I do if something happened to you, David, and you weren't here anymore?" She started asking me, "What would you do, David, if I wasn't here anymore?" I hate that conversation. Have you had that conversation? We don't have it, like, every night or anything, but when we have this conversation, I hate that conversation. "Let's move on. Let's talk about something exciting. Let's go to a happy place here, okay? Let's not talk about that anymore."

So, that was the background. We rented this movie, which, by the way, the movie was her choice. We sat down, and we watched this movie, and it's this love story about a husband and a wife, and at the end of the movie, everything was going great between them, and all of a sudden, the husband dies. The movie ends with him leaving his wife and two children, and the last frame shows the wife pregnant after her husband had died. So, I look over at my pregnant wife on the couch, and she is bawling. What a horrible movie.

This was not a good date night. It was a horrible movie. Here's why it was a horrible movie. It was a horrible movie because it was godless. The whole point of the movie was that we're controlled by fate or chance, and the only hope we have is to hope in something greater than us out there, whatever that might be, and it's not true. Ladies and gentlemen, it's not true. There is a God who is our Father who is sovereign, and He is in control and, no matter what happens in our lives, no matter what loss there is in our lives, we can always look up and know that He cares for us, and He is in control. He is sovereign over all suffering. Just don't watch that movie. It's horrible; it's godless.

Anyway, He's sovereign over all suffering. He's familiar with all suffering. Here's the beauty: He's the God and Father of who? He's the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. We do not have a God who is off in the distance in the universe somewhere that is unfamiliar with what we go through. We have a God who is with us, literally with us. He took on a robe of human flesh, and He came to this earth, and He suffered with us. He was mocked, and He was beaten; He was scourged, He was spit upon, He was nailed to a cross. He is familiar with our suffering. There's not one Post-It Note on these windows that He does not know something about. He knows loneliness. He knows heaviness. He knows the burden, the sin of the world. He knows physical pain beyond what you and I could even begin to fathom.

You have a God who sees your struggles, and He hears your cries and, more than that, He knows how you feel. You do not have a God in heaven that is unable to sympathize with your weaknesses. He is familiar with our struggles and our hurts and our needs. He's familiar with all suffering.

Sovereign, familiar with all suffering, He's the source of all compassion. I love this phrase. He is the Father of compassion, literally, means the "originator of compassion." All compassion flows from Him. That's the picture we've got. It overflows from Him into our lives in our deepest point of need. Our Associate Pastor, Donny Errant, this last week saw his dad pass away and was there at the funeral, and I was reminded of those emotions and those hurts and the pain in my own life three years ago that, just in a sense, seems completely fresh today. I sat there and was reminded also of the great sustenance and the great grace and the great strength that God provides in those moments for every emotion and every hurt and every sharp pain that goes through your heart. He is the originator of all compassion, and He flows it out into our lives at our deepest point of need.

He is sufficient for all comfort. He's sufficient for all comfort. I mentioned he uses...Paul uses this word thirty times in 2 Corinthians, and the word literally means... "comfort" literally means to come alongside and help. It's the same word that is used by Jesus in John 14-16 to describe the Holy Spirit. He is the Comforter, the One who comes alongside and helps.

However, what I love is this picture here that Paul gives, and he stresses how God's comfort is sufficient for anything and everything. What does he say? He says, "*The God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles so that we can comfort those in any trouble.*" The point Paul is making is that all comfort comes from God, and there's nothing...there's absolutely nothing that is beyond His comfort. It's always sufficient.

Your suffering will never outweigh the comfort of God. Isn't that good news? Your suffering will never outweigh the comfort that God can give. This is the picture. When we experience suffering, we experience suffering in God, in the arms of the One who is sovereign, the One who is familiar with all suffering, the One who is the source of all compassion and sufficient for all comfort. I'm not saying that makes it just easy, and we walk through suffering like it's nothing, but there is a Rock that we can stand on in the middle of suffering, an absolute Rock that makes a revolutionary difference in how we view suffering in God.

We extend comfort from God.

We experience suffering in God, and as a result, Paul is saying all throughout this passage that when he experiences suffering, he experiences the comfort of God in ways that he never could have any other way. So, suffering is a good thing, because it enables us to experience the comfort of God in ways we never could have before. However, the purpose of suffering goes deeper than even that. You see we experience suffering in God so that...and here's the purpose of suffering going a step deeper...so that we can extend comfort from God. We experience suffering in God and when we experience suffering, we experience His comfort, and the result is now we're enabled, equipped to extend the comfort that we have received from God into others' lives.

That's what he's saying over and over again here. Paul is saying the purpose of suffering does not just center on him. The purpose of God's comfort does not just center on him. It's intended for others. He's saying, "We're comforted for each others' sake." Let me show you this. We're comforted for each others' sake. Look in verses 4, 5, and 6, back to back to back, and this is the reminder, this is the crux of disciple-making. We no longer live for ourselves. We live for each others' sake.

Listen to what he says in verse 4. He says, "[God] comforts us in all our troubles, so that..." Here's the purpose clause, "Why does God comfort you Paul?" "...so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God." The purpose of God's comfort is to enable us to comfort others. Verse 5, "Just as the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives, so also through Christ our comfort overflows." Overflows to whom? To those around us, others' sake.

Then, he says in verse 6...this is strong. He says, "If we are distressed it is for your comfort and salvation..." Did you catch that? If I go through difficult times and hurt and pain and distress, the reason is for your comfort and for your salvation. If we are comforted, it's for your comfort, which produces in you patient endurance of the same sufferings we suffer.

Paul says this over and over and over again throughout this book, he says, "When I experience suffering..." You go to 2 Corinthians 11:22-28, and Paul talks about all the hardships and all the pain and all the trials he'd been through. Whenever you think you're having a bad day, go read that passage. It'll make you feel a lot better.

He's been through all kinds of this stuff, but what he says over and over and over again is, "This happens to me for the sake of the church. I embrace suffering," Paul says, "for the sake of others." What a radically different way to live in our culture, to embrace suffering. Remember, not suffering because we're sinning; suffering because we're following God to embrace suffering, because it enables us to be a greater channel of God's comfort to others.

This is exactly what Jesus said. Remember when He was having that conversation with Peter in Luke 22? Listen what He said. He said, "Simon, Simon, behold, Satan has demanded permission to sift you like wheat; but I have prayed for you, that your faith may not fail..." Listen to this: "When once you've turned again, strengthen your brothers." Jesus says to Peter, "I've given Satan permission to sift you like wheat, so that you can walk through trials, and your faith will not fail, and as a result, you will be able to strengthen your brothers in ways you never could have imagined."

What a picture that goes right in the face of American individualism, right in the face of it. It's the kind of individualism that creeps into the church that I'm convinced we bought into. It says, "Everything centers on me. Suffering, suffer alone, comfort, it's for me." Even in the church, when we experience suffering, the question we always ask is, "What is God teaching me through this? What is God showing me through this?" That's not a bad question to ask at all. That's a question we need to ask, but it's not the only question we need to ask. What if we began to ask, "What is God doing through this to enable me to teach others more effectively about who He is? What is God doing in my life that He wants to demonstrate to those around me as I walk through this suffering?" That's a radically different way to live to embrace suffering, because it makes you a channel of His comfort.

What if...what if God comforts us, not to make us comfortable, but to make us comforters? You think about it. What if God comforts us, not to make us comfortable? That's not the end game, but He comforts us to make us comforters to His people. This is the picture that we're seeing here in 2 Corinthians 1.

We are comforted for each others' sake, so that we might care for each others' hurts. We might care for each others' hurts. That's the picture. Paul is saying, "I'm able to care for you at Corinth better because I've been through horrible times." That's what he said. Look, let me show you this; look in 2 Corinthians 7; look at 2 Corinthians 7. Just turn a few pages to the right there, and you'll come to verse 5. 2 Corinthians 7:5. Paul...we're going to come in

on the middle of him talking about some of the sufferings that he experienced. Now, I want you to see this picture. It's a great picture.

Listen to 2 Corinthians 7:5. He's talking about his suffering. He says, *"For when we came into Macedonia, this body of ours had no rest, but we were harassed at every turn – conflicts on the outside, fears within."* So, he's struggling. Listen to this, *"But God, who comforts the downcast, comforted us by the coming of Titus, and not only by his coming but also by the comfort you had given him. He told us about your longing for me, your deep sorrow, your ardent concern for me, so that my joy was greater than ever."*

Did you catch that? Remember, Paul sent Titus to bring comfort to the Church at Corinth. "The Church at Corinth comforted Titus," Paul says. Comforted Titus so that Paul, in the middle of his great distress, would be comforted by Titus. It comes full circle. You have this circle of comfort going on here. It's almost like you're ready for Michael W. Smith to chime in the background. You got, "Friends are friends forever" going on here. This is the picture. However, it's intended to be the reality of the church, that God would work in my sufferings to overflow His comfort into your life, so that your comfort would overflow into my life. This is the picture of the church here; we care for each others' hurts.

You look at these Post-It Notes around this room, and I remind you that God has designed...God has designed for no one in this room to walk through these hurts alone. There's not one hurt on these windows that He's intended for anyone in this faith family to walk through alone. He has designed this thing so that we will care for each others' hurts. Not just care for each others' hurts, but literally, God has designed it so that we will carry each others' burdens; we'll carry each others' burdens.

Listen to verse 11. Come back to 2 Corinthians 1:11. This is a great word. It says...Paul's talking about how God will deliver them, and he says, *"As you help us..."* Now that word "help", four letter word that completely misses the beauty of the word it's translating. In the original language of the New Testament, just come aside to Greek class for a second. It's not just for the fun of it. This is a great word. It's a one long word in the Greek that's made up of three smaller Greek words. Now just follow me here, okay? Three smaller Greek words that come together in this one word, and the three smaller Greek words are...the first one is "with", the second one is "under" and the third one is "work". So, what you've got is one word that combines "with" and "under" and "work" here.

I think it's an incredible picture of the church. Follow me here. What it's talking about in the "help", is it's talking about people who walk with you under the burdens of this life working together on a mission. Is that not a great picture of the church? Walking with each other under the burdens of this life; working together on a mission. That is the picture here. It's why Galatians 6:2, Paul said, "Carry each others' burdens." That's a command. We carry each others' burdens in this way. You will fulfill the law of Christ. We carry each others' burdens.

God has intended for not one of these hurts, burdens, cares, struggles to be carried alone. We have the divine responsibility to take up these burdens that we share all across this room. This is God's design in suffering and in His comfort, and it's a reminder, when it comes to the church, we are a fellowship of the broken. We're a fellowship of the broken. This is the picture here.

You get to verse 7 in 2 Corinthians 1, it says, *"We know that just as you share in our sufferings, you share in our comfort."* The word there for "sharing" is the word...we've talked about it before... "koinonea". Literally, it is translated "fellowship" back in different

parts of Acts and other points in Scripture, but it's talking about how we have these things in common. We have sufferings in common. There's not one of us...we may like to put a front like everything is always okay, but there's not one of us who doesn't have needs and hurts and struggles in our lives. It's represented across this room.

So, we share in our sufferings, but the beauty of it is God's designed it so we share in our comfort. So, we share life together. This is why we're talking about small groups so much, because we're intended to share our lives with each other, and that can't happen with 4,000 other people. It can't happen with 100 other people or 50 other people to share that kind of suffering and share that kind of comfort together. How do we get to the point where we realize what the New Testament church realized, that we carry each others' burdens and that we have deep sacrificial care for each other?

We don't just sit next to each other in a room once a week. We don't just go to worship together or Bible class together. We walk together through this life, and we experience all this life has to offer us together, and we share in suffering in the middle of that, and as a result, we share in comfort. When one part of the body suffers, what does Paul say in 1 Corinthians 12:24-26? When one part of the body suffers every part suffers with it, and when one part rejoices, every part rejoices with it. This is the design of the church. Christianity is not the alone communing with the alone. Christianity is a fellowship of the broken where God's love penetrates each of our lives and overflows into each others' lives. We've got to guard this. We've got to guard this with how we do church.

On a side note...on a side note, this is also why we at The Church of Brook Hills will be passionately involved in supporting the persecuted church around the world. Shame be upon the church if our brothers and sisters who are suffering in chains and prison cells today are not receiving comfort overflowing from us. God has intended for His comfort in our lives to overflow into them, not to stay in nice cushioned chairs. The beauty of it is, don't miss this, they've experienced great suffering. As a result, they've experienced great comfort, and God has intended for their comfort to overflow into our lives. Doesn't take long walking through the war-torn villages in Sudan and to hear them saying, "God is greater," over and over and over again, that it brings radical comfort to you in the trials and struggles you're facing. This is the picture of the church, and we need to embrace it with everything we've got.

We exult in the glory of God.

We experience suffering in God so that we can extend comfort from God to each other. We're comforted for each others' sake. It all comes around to this last truth. We exult in the glory of God. When these two truths are reality, they lead us to see and experience and savor the glory of God in ways that we never could have before. This is why it's designed this way.

When Paul gets to verses 8 through 11, he begins to talk about...says, "*We don't want to be uninformed, brothers, about the hardships we suffered in the province of Asia.*" We don't know exactly what hardships Paul's referring to there, which is kind of ironic, because he said he didn't want us to be uninformed, but then he didn't inform us, but he's walking through some...but it's divinely inspired by the Holy Spirit, and so we're just going to take that. He's walking through some very difficult times in Asia and, based on 2 Corinthians 11:23-28, we know that it probably involved physical pain, being beaten, probably involved imprisonment. He got to the point...this is the Apostle Paul saying, "I despaired of life itself." He was at the low of all lows.

However, I want you to see how this picture of suffering and comfort that he has displayed up to this point what it all leads to. Listen to his conclusion. He says in the middle of verse 9, *"But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead."* What a great sentence. "I experienced beatings and imprisonment so that I would no longer rely on myself, but on God, who raises the dead."

What Paul is saying here...that sounds very unusual in our culture. What Paul is saying here is in the middle of his deepest point of suffering, he knew that God was his victory, that the power that raised Christ from the dead is the power that was comforting him in the middle of his despair. That's the picture. "God is our victory," Paul says. Not only our victory, He is our deliverer. He goes on, and he says, "He has delivered us from such a deadly peril, and He will deliver us." Paul expresses some major confidence here, even in the middle of despair, that God delivers. God always delivers. "Always, Dave?" Yes, always.

This is where I go back...take us back to Acts 12. You remember Peter and James both in prison. Peter miraculously escapes from prison through an angel helping him get out. James beheaded in prison. What's that about? Did Peter get delivered and James not delivered? Absolutely not. When James was beheaded, that is not when his life ended. That is when his life began, because there's a God who raises the dead, who has conquered death and sin and the grave. No big deal for James. He had an eternity with the glory of God ahead of him.

Sometimes God delivers us from trials. Sometimes God delivers us in the middle of trials, but God always delivers. He's our victory, He's our deliverer and He is our hope. Our hope...listen to what he says. He says, *"On him we have set our hope that he will continue to deliver us..."* This wasn't just a wish that maybe things are going to work out in the end. Paul had a steadfast hope that God had a purpose in suffering even in the most difficult things this life would bring him, and this is the picture from cover to cover in Scripture.

Genesis 50, "What the world intended for evil, God used for..." What? He used it for good. His hope was the fact that God has a purpose even in the middle of the darkest times in our lives, and this is where this whole passage sums up. What's the hope? The hope is this: The hope is that God uses suffering for our sake, that God uses suffering in His infinite wisdom to show Himself to us in ways that we never could see any other way.

I won't say that's an easy truth to embrace, but it's biblical, all over Scripture. Malcolm Muggeridge said it best. He said,

Contrary to what might be expected, I look back on experiences that at the time seemed especially desolating and painful. I look back on those experiences with particular satisfaction. Indeed, I can say with complete truthfulness, that everything I have learned in my 75 years in this world, everything that has truly enhanced and enlightened my existence, has been through affliction and not through happiness.

Aren't you thankful that we have a God who takes the most difficult things in our lives, and He turns them into things we most treasure about Him and about who He's created us to be?

God uses suffering for our sake and His comfort overflows into us. Not just for our sake though, He uses suffering for others' sake. His purpose in suffering is to enable us to comfort others, that when we share in suffering, we also share in comfort, and that is why we are doing small groups, and we're going to give ourselves to small groups, because every single one of these needs and every single one of these hurts and every single one of

these struggles is important. There are families that need care and support and there are marriages that need support, and there are people who need help and support. All of us have burdens that were not intended by God...never intended by God to be carried alone. We've got to watch this.

I think we have a tendency in the church to miss this on one to two extremes. On one extreme, we have a tendency, when we go through difficult times and struggles and trials, we have a tendency to close up. I want to say this as sensitively as possible. We have a tendency to begin to wallow in self pity and this isolated individualism that God never intended for us. I'm in no way trying to minimize the hurt, but I am saying this: If we try to walk through suffering alone, we miss the whole point of God's design in our circumstances.

The other extreme we go to as many times in the church...and now I realize...I fully realize that across this room there are many of us who have shared our sufferings and our hurts in the church, and the result has been we've been hurt more than we were before. I'm guessing there are stories like that across this room. I, in no way, want to minimize the hurt of that, but at the same time, I do want to say that we can't take that and retreat into the isolated individualism over here. We've got to come together and see this picture of the church sharing in suffering and sharing in comfort with each other. That's what we're going for when we talk about small groups, because this is the kind of community God intends for all of us to have.

We suffer for each others' sake. God uses suffering for others' sake, and then finally, God uses suffering for His sake. This is Paul's hope, that when God comforts us in our suffering, and He's able to pour out that comfort into somebody else's life, the result is that person finds great comfort in God and gives great glory to God. This is why I will do small groups. This is why we'll share life together like 2 Corinthians 1 pictures, because we want people all throughout Birmingham and in all nations to know that God's comfort is great, and we want it to flow into our lives, so that they see His great glory. I'm not in any way saying that these truths are easy to get our minds and our hearts or arms around, but I want you to think with me about how cross exemplifies this picture; highlights, demonstrates this picture.

Jesus, the Son of God, God in the flesh who sinned not one time, experienced suffering on a cross so that, praise His name, He could extend to all of us the external comfort of God. He suffered for our sake so that, 2,000 years later, we would sit in a room tonight, and we would give Him great glory for the comfort He's given to our lives. The cross is the picture where all of this comes together, so by the cross, let's rise up as the church and be the church to each other and with each other. Make us a community, God, that cares deeply for each others' needs, cares deeply for the needs in Birmingham and all nations and does it in such a way that you get great glory from the great comfort that overflows from our lives.

We cannot settle for sitting in a worship service and calling that church anymore. We can't even settle for doing that and going to a Bible class and checking off a box. This is not the point of the New Testament. The point is we are a community of faith, and we share life together. We walk through these burdens and these hurts and these struggles together, and we care for each other, and we carry each others' burdens, and as a result, God gets great glory in His church.

So What Now?

I want to challenge us; I want to challenge you. My challenge for every attender that comes to worship in this room, unless you are plugged into another faith family, and if you are, then get involved with walking and sharing life with the small group of believers there. However, unless that's the case, my challenge for every single person who attends worship here is to make, this Fall, an eight-week commitment to walk together with a small group; just eight weeks. The plan is September 9, we're going to launch a whole host of new small groups. We're going to relaunch existing small groups and from September 9 to the end of October, eight weeks, we're going to walk together in small groups doing disciple making together. We're going to learn what that looks like together, and we're going to walk through life together.

My challenge is for every single one of us to make just a commitment, and after eight weeks, you have all kinds of options. You can stay, continue walking together with that small group or you can say, "You know, this is not working out. Maybe there's a better way to get a picture of this in my life or my family's life." You'll have that option, but it's just an eight-week commitment.

I want to encourage you to take out your worship guide one more time, and in your worship guide, there's a card in there that says in the front, "Connect to Community", connect to community. Tonight and the next two weeks, my challenge for you, based on what I just said, and my challenge for you is to fill this card out, to turn it in and say, "All right, I want to be part of a small group for eight weeks. I'm going to walk with a small group in context of disciple making." There's information on here that I want to challenge you, and you might be able to fill all this out tonight, and if that's so, go for it.

You've got the next three weeks to do this, but the sooner the better. It's going to take a lot of work to coordinate all of this picture. It's worth it, but the sooner the better, and what you've got on this card, let me just walk you through it real quick. The first half is mainly just demographic information, pretty basic, and then you get down and look at the card, it says, "What kind of small group are you interested in?"

Now, at this point, I want to say this. If you're in a small group right now with The Church at Brook Hills, and you are enjoying that small group; if you're happy, and you know it in that small group, then you don't need to fill out one of these cards. That's not necessary. However, if you're not in a small group, which is about two-thirds of the people who gather together here for worship, or if you're in a small group, and you really would kind of like a change of pace or something a little different, then that's great. Then, you fill out this card, and you get down, it says, "What kind of small group you interested in?" There's all kinds of options there. I want you to know that there are childcare options that are available for every single weeknight small group, every single Sunday morning small group, and every single Wednesday morning small group.

There's childcare options that are available for that, so if you think about family, kids, that is available for all of these small groups; weeknight small groups as well as Sunday morning and Wednesday morning. However, then you get down, there's a place that says, "Specific groups/leader: I'd prefer a group with..." Then, it's got a blank there. If you know somebody who's leading a small group, and you'd like to be a part of their small group, then just put that in there. That's great. Or, if you know, if you have a friend or another family that you'd like to be in a small group with, maybe they're not leading, but you'd like to be in

a small group with them, then you just put that on there as well in that blank right there, and we're going to be working together to line all that up.

Also, on the back of here, there's what we call "Affinity Small Groups" that are kind of unique, life-situation type deals, whether it's an adoptive parent small group or a biker small group...leather jackets are optional...those kind of small groups. Then, if you want to be a part of one of those, then you put that in that blank right there. Then, you get to the end, and it says, "Place that completed form in the offering basket or drop it by the connect display that's in the lobby." Tonight, we're going to begin taking these up, and next week, we're going to take them up, and the next week we're going to take them up. This is our response to the Word that we're going to say to each other, all right? We're going to take seriously biblical community.

So, what I want to do is I want to invite these folks to come and to lead us in song as we close out our time in the Word, and I want to invite you across this room to begin filling this thing out. If you're able to fill out the whole deal, then that's great. You can put it in the offering basket we take that up tonight. If you're not able to, and you have to talk with your wife or your husband or think through some things, then that's great. You just fill out as much as you can and have it ready for when you make that call.

Regardless of whether or not you're filling out a card tonight, as these guys sing over us, I want us to just pray across this room; to pray that God would make us a community that cares deeply for one another. I want you to reflect on the number of needs and hurts and struggles that are represented on these Post-It Notes on these windows across this room, and I want us to reflect on the fact that God has designed each of us to carry these things with other people. This is God's design for relationships in church, and as they sing over us, I want us to pray that God would make us a 2 Corinthians 1 kind of community, where we share and suffer together, and as a result, we share in His comfort together. Then, we'll close out our time together.

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