

The Cross and Christian Community

The Cross and Christian Suffering

Dr. David Platt

November 3, 2013



THE CROSS AND CHRISTIAN SUFFERING **2 Corinthians 1:1-2:17; 4:7-5:10; 11:16-12:10**

If you have Bible, and I hope you do, turn with me to 2 Corinthians 1. It's a pretty humbling, overwhelming thing when I pause to think about the lives represented across this room, particularly when I think about the struggles and the hurts that many of you have gone through, and some of you are going through right now. I know that every single Sunday, some people walk into this room in the middle of physical struggles ranging from cancer to chronic pain, relational struggles spanning marriages and families, financial struggles at home or work, emotional struggles from loneliness to depression to grief, and personal struggles with sin and temptation. This is real hurt, real pain, and deep struggle that marks many of the 4 to 5,000 people who will gather here today.

And there are days when we come to a text in the Word of God that particularly and pointedly addresses that kind of pain, and this is one of those days. This is one of those days where the Word speaks directly to those of you who are walking through a valley in your life right now, for those of you who have recently come into a valley, and others of you who feel like you've been there for a long time, and you can't get out of it. And for that matter, this Word speaks directly to those of you who may feel like you're on a mountaintop right now, but you have no idea the depth of the valley that may be waiting for you right around the corner. This is the reality of life in a world of sin and suffering, and the Bible doesn't treat this reality with trite answers, but with revealed truth, and with a foundation to stand on in the middle of life's pain and hurt.

And so what I want to do today is to take the letter of 2 Corinthians, really from start to finish, in a sense, and to see what this book has to teach us about this theme: "The Cross and Christian Suffering." What you have in your notes are three primary truths that flow from the book of 2 Corinthians when we think about suffering in our lives and suffering in the world around us.

For those of you who have been here the last seven months or so, we have just finished walking through the book of 1 Corinthians. And just to remind you of the background, Paul (the author of this letter) founded the church at Corinth about 2000 years ago when he spent an initial year and a half there. But after he left Corinth, this church started experiencing some serious problems, and some serious disunity, in such a way that Paul ended up over the years writing at least four different letters to the church at Corinth to address issues there. We have two of these letters in our Bibles, and the other two are referenced here. In 1 Corinthians 5:9, Paul talks about an earlier letter he had sent to Corinth. Then we have 1 Corinthians, and then he wrote another letter that he talks in 2 Corinthians 2 after what he calls a "*painful visit*" that he made to Corinth, and it's after that letter and that visit that 2 Corinthians was written.

So Paul's got quite a history with this church. He had experienced some hard times in his life, they had experienced some hard times in the church, and all of this really forms the

background for one of the main themes we find in this letter: Comfort in the middle of hard times and strength in the middle of suffering.

There are ten different words for suffering in the Greek language (the language this letter was originally written in), and five of those Greek words for suffering are used in this letter. So you see "suffering" in all its dimensions all over this letter, but you also see comfort everywhere. Paul uses the Greek word for comfort 29 different times in 2 Corinthians, which is about half the number of times it's used in the entire rest of the New Testament combined. This theme of comfort in suffering dominates this book.

Let me show it to you. Let's start by reading just the first seven verses of this book, and I want you to circle/underline/mark somehow every time you see either the word "comfort" or "suffering" or "affliction", which is another one of the words for suffering. So as we read these verses, circle/underline/mark either "comfort" or "suffering" or "affliction" every time you see it. Follow along with me. 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: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord
Jesus Christ.*

*Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies
and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may
be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which
we ourselves are comforted by God. For as we share abundantly in Christ's
sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too. If we are
afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation; and if we are comforted, it is for
your comfort, 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.*

Do you see that? It's practically every other word, isn't it! And these opening verses just set the stage for this theme to dominate this letter in different ways and different texts that I want to show you this morning. And in it all, I want to show you that, in the middle of your life, in the middle of your suffering, in the middle of your pain and your hurt and your sorrow and your despair and your grief and your loneliness and whatever else you struggle with, I want to show you three bedrock truths, bedrock realities that I pray this morning will comfort your soul. Three realities that I pray will provide you with a rock to stand on in the middle of what sometimes feels like sinking sand all around you. And three realities that I pray God will lodge deep within your heart so that no matter what happens in your life this week or this month or this year or next year, no matter what valley lies around the bend, you will be prepared. I want, for your sake, for you to be ready to stand when suffering comes your way.

We experience suffering in God.

So, the first reality on which I want to urge you to stand is that we experience suffering in God. And I've worded this really intentionally. It can seem a bit awkward at first glance: "We experience suffering in God". But I want you to see the truth behind this. Part of why Paul is writing this letter is because some of the people who were causing trouble at Corinth were questioning Paul's apostleship, his leadership in the church, because of all the

suffering he had gone through. They were basically saying, "Paul's not blessed by God. Look at all the suffering he's experienced."

And it's the same reaction many people in the church today have to suffering. They think, we think, "Well, if someone is suffering, they are outside of God's blessing." They're not being blessed by God.

Now, I want to be really careful here, because the reality is we suffer in this world for different reasons, and one of those reasons is sin. When we sin, we suffer. When we rebel against God, when we turn from God's way to our own way, pain and hurt are sure to follow. Yes, our way may seem satisfying for a time, but it will not satisfy for all time, guaranteed. Mark this down: You turn from God's Word and His ways for your life, and you travel on a road that leads to suffering, and if you do not turn back to God, that road will lead to eternal suffering. And I want to urge every single person in this room this morning: Don't go down that road. There are men and women, students across this room this morning who are suffering as a result of sin in your life. You are experiencing the pain of choosing your own path.

So see the grace of God, the mercy of God, the love of God for you in bringing you here this morning to hear this warning: The path you are on leads to pain (eternal pain), and God desires to save you from the suffering that comes from sin. Whether you are a Christian wandering away from God, or maybe you're not a Christian and you have no regard for God, regardless of where you may be, I urge you today to see that God loves you. He has sent His Son, Jesus, to pay the price for your sin, to endure the punishment due your sin, and to suffer for your sin in your place. Jesus had died on the cross, taking the payment of our sin, death upon Himself, and then He has risen from the grave in victory over sin and death. So that you, right now, right here this morning, might be able to turn from your sin and be saved from all its effects.

Some of you who are non-Christians have been thinking about this in your life, and I want to urge you to let today be the day when you turn from your sin and yourself and you trust in Christ, not only as the One who reigns over you as Lord, but as the One who loves you as Savior. And some of you are Christians who have been wandering from God in small and big ways. Let today be the wake-up call for you to turn from a path that you know leads to suffering, to turn from a path that you know leads away from satisfaction in God, and to confess your sin to Him, and to be restored in your relationship with Him today.

Now, even in saying all of that, I want to be careful, because I don't want to give you the impression that if you do turn to God, or that when you do follow God, then you will never experience suffering again. That's a theology that's alive and well today, made popular by guys like Joel Osteen but subtly preached today by churches across even this city, who say that if you follow God, everything will go well for you. You will experience your best life now. Every day will be a Friday. You will become a better you. You will have health, and you will have possessions, and you will have prosperity when you have faith.

But this is not true, and I know it's not true because the Bible teaches it's not true. The Bible is filled with examples of godly suffering, people like Job or Jeremiah who suffered, not as a result of disobedience to God, but people who suffered as a result of obedience to God. And this is important because this is the kind of suffering that Paul's talking about here in 2 Corinthians. Paul's talking here about the kind of pain and hurt and trouble and suffering that we experience in the process of pursuing God. And we need to learn this early on in our faith so that we will not be shocked when suffering comes while we're obeying God and be thrown off by it.

I was looking at it earlier this morning. In Acts 14, Paul is talking to baby Christians, these were new Christians who had just come to Christ, and one of the first things he tells them is, "*Through many tribulations you will enter the kingdom of God.*" Don't be surprised, Christian, when you suffer, even as you obey God. Such suffering is not a sign of God's displeasure with you. Instead, it is a reminder of God's providence over you.

God is sovereign over all suffering.

And this is what I mean when I say to you this morning that we experience suffering in God. I mean for you to know that God is sovereign over all suffering. God is in control over all suffering. Suffering is never out of control. Suffering is always ultimately under sovereign control. Ladies and gentlemen, mark this down: We are not the products of fate or chance, nor are we in control of everything that will happen in our lives. And by the way, that's a good thing. It's a good thing that fallen human beings who have turned away from God are not ultimately in control. It's a good thing to know that there is a good and wise and loving and gracious and merciful and powerful God who is in heaven, and He is in control of all things, even the worst things, the most painful things, and the hardest things.

Let me show this to you over in 2 Corinthians 12. At the end of this letter, Paul starts talking about visions and revelations that God had given to him that Paul himself said, if he's not careful, would cause him to become conceited because of all he knew. But then listen to what he says in 2 Corinthians 12:7.

So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited. Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

Did you hear that? Now we don't know exactly what this thorn in the flesh was – it certainly seems like some sort of physical malady – physical pain – but we're not sure exactly. What we are sure of is that God gave it to him.

Did you see the language in verse 7? "*A thorn was given me in the flesh.*" "*A thorn was given me...*" That begs the question, "Who gave it?" And some might say Satan did, and yes, Satan is mentioned in this passage (this thorn is even described as a messenger of Satan) but look at what Paul does. He prays to God, and he says, "God, please take this away." Paul knows -- follow this, this is so key – Paul knows that Satan is not ultimately sovereign over this thorn, but God is. And Paul knows that the only way this thorn is going away is if God takes it away. And Paul knows that if it stays, it will stay because God is keeping it there for a purpose.

Don't tell Paul every day's a Friday, that this is his best life now. Osteen says to those who struggle with Alzheimers:

Maybe Alzheimer's disease runs in your family genes, but don't succumb to it. Instead, say every day, "My mind is alert. I have clarity of thought. I have a good memory. Every cell in my body is increasing and getting healthier." If you'll rise up in your authority, you can be the one to put a stop to the

negative things in your family line....Start boldly declaring, "God is restoring health unto me. I am getting better every day in every way."

That's bogus! Can you imagine saying that to Paul? "Paul, just tell yourself, 'My mind is alert. Every cell in my body increasing and getting healthier. I'm getting better every day in every way.'" No! Paul's got a thorn in his flesh, and God's the One who put it there, and He put it there by design.

Now there's a mystery behind that design. We don't always know why God in His sovereign wisdom and sovereign love ordains that we experience some of the suffering we undergo. But that doesn't mean we throw His sovereignty out the window. It means we realize something, and this applies to all suffering. Follow this in your notes: Satan intends every type of suffering to sabotage us. There is no question that Satan intended this thorn to sabotage Paul's faith.

And there is no question that Satan is intending suffering to sabotage faith all across this room. Satan is using cancer to get some of you to question the power of God. Satan is using depression to tempt some of you to lose hope in the love of God. Satan is using pain to try to steal away your pleasure in God. Mark it down: Satan intends every type of suffering to sabotage us, but God ordains every type of suffering to sanctify us. So Satan has something destructive he wants to accomplish in your suffering, but God has something glorious He wants to accomplish in your suffering.

And when you walk through suffering, you are in the middle of a spiritual battle, and I want to urge you today not to lose sight of the sovereignty of God in that battle. And it's okay, and it's right, and it's good to plead for the suffering to go away. Paul pleaded over and over and over again here for this thorn to be taken from him. So it's okay to plead for the cancer to go away, and it's okay to plead for the pain to go away, and it's good and right to plead for the hurt to go away. But we need to know in the middle of it, no matter what happens, and no matter how long the suffering stays, that God is sovereign over it, and He is working in it for your good. He is working all things together for the good of those who love Him. That's a guarantee, and the only reason it's a guarantee is because God is ultimately in control.

God is familiar with all suffering.

And not only is God sovereign over all suffering, but He is also familiar with all suffering. You go back to Chapter 1, and Paul starts this letter on suffering in verse 3 by saying, "*Blessed be the God and Father*" of who? "*Of our Lord Jesus Christ.*" Oh, don't miss this. The God who is sovereign over us is not far from us and unfamiliar with what is going on in our lives. No, this is the God who is with us. Literally, God with us. He came to the earth in human flesh, identifying with us in our weakness, in our frailty, and in our pain.

Are you hurting? He was hurt. Have you experienced loss? He experienced loss. Have you been betrayed? He was betrayed. Are you lonely? He was lonely. He was mocked and beaten and scourged and spit upon, experiencing the deepest forms of physical, relational, and emotional suffering Himself all at once at the hands of His creation. He knows what it's like to cry out on a cross, "*My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?*" Oh, hear this good news this morning. The God of the universe is familiar with your suffering. He sees your struggles, He hears your cries, and He knows how you feel. He is familiar with suffering.

God is the source of all compassion.

And He is the source of all compassion. I love that next phrase in 2 Corinthians 1:3: God is *"the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ and the Father of mercies."* Literally, the language is, "God is the originator of compassion." He is the Father of mercies, from whom all compassion flows. Compassion overflows from God toward you in suffering.

God is sufficient for all comfort.

He is the source of all compassion, and He is sufficient for all comfort. I've already mentioned that this word "comfort" is used 29 times in this book, and it's a beautiful word in the language of the New Testament. This word literally means "to come alongside and help." It's the same word used to describe the Holy Spirit in John 14-16: He is the comforter. And what I love is the way Paul stresses "all" when he talks about comfort in this text. *"All comfort...in all our affliction...in any affliction..."* Paul is stressing how God is able to provide all comfort in any and all situations.

Think about what that means. First, it means that no one else can provide what God does. If He gives all comfort, that pretty much covers it. God gives all comfort. And this also means that there is no situation – absolutely no situation – that we will face in our lives that is beyond the comfort that comes from God. It's what Paul says later in Philippians 4:19, *"God is sufficient to meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus."* God does not comfort us here or there, in this type of struggle or that type of hurt – He comforts in all struggles and all hurts at all times.

Mark it down: God's comfort always outweighs your suffering. God's comfort always, always outweighs your suffering. That's what Paul says in verses 8-9 right after this. *"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. Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death. But that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead."* This burden, this despair that we experienced, drove us to rely not on ourselves, but on God, and He is sufficient for us.

It's the exact same thing we read a moment ago in 2 Corinthians 12: *"Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, but God said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.'" How will we see and know and experience the sufficiency of God if everything always goes easy in our lives? It's in the midst of despair, it's in the face of death, it's in the caldron of hurt and pain that we discover the comfort of God and His sufficiency for every situation. This is what it means to experience suffering in God, with God, for good.*

We extend comfort from God.

Now follow this: It's when we experience suffering in God that we then experience comfort from God, but that's not the end of the story. The purpose of suffering goes far beyond ourselves. We experience suffering in God so that we can extend comfort from God. What Paul has established is that when he suffers, God comforts him. Yet the purpose of suffering is deeper than his own comfort.

God's comfort does not stop with him. *"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that..."* This is a purpose clause: "so that". Paul, why does God comfort us in our affliction? *"...so that we may be able to comfort those are in any affliction, with the comfort with*

which we ourselves are comforted by God." Verse 5: We share with others in the comfort of Christ. Verse 6, *"If we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation. And if we are comforted, it is for your comfort."* Are you hearing this? This is Paul saying, "I embrace suffering because I know that I'll experience comfort, and when I do, I'll be able to pass on that comfort to you."

We are comforted for others' sake.

This is a theme all throughout this letter, and it's in your notes: We are comforted for others' sake. Throughout this letter, Paul emphasizes how God ordained suffering in his life to overflow through his life into the lives of others. This is exactly what Jesus told Simon Peter back in the Gospels. *"Simon, Simon, behold, Satan has demanded permission to sift you like wheat; but I have prayed for you, that your faith may not fail; and you, when once you have turned again, strengthen your brothers."* (Luke 22:31-32) Jesus tells Peter, "You're going to go through it, but I've prayed that you will stay strong, and in this way, be able to strengthen others."

Oh, this is a radical way to look at suffering in our culture. It is so easy to become self-centered in our suffering. But here the Word of God is urging us to be God-centered in our suffering. What if we began to believe that whatever happens to us in our lives is, yes, ordained by God for our good, but what if we also believe that whatever happens to us in our lives is ordained by God for others' good? This is so different than the American individualistic mindset that says everything centers on us.

And we buy into that mindset even as Christians. And so much of our suffering centers around us as individuals. We ask the question, "What is God teaching me through this?" And that's not a bad question, but if we stop with that question, we'll miss the point. What if God is not just teaching you? What if He desires to use your situation and your circumstances and your suffering to teach others?

That's what Paul's saying here. Paul's saying, "The more suffering I experience, the more comfort I experience, and as a result, the more comfort I am able to give to others." What a radically God-centered, people-loving perspective on life! What if God does not comfort us merely to make us comfortable? What if God comforts us mainly but to make us comforters?

This is, after all, what it means to be the church, isn't it? We experience suffering in God and comfort from God so that we might show the love of Christ to each other in the church. Let me show you this in Chapter 7. I want you to look at 2 Corinthians 7:5-7 with me, and see how this plays out.

For even when we came into Macedonia, our bodies had no rest, but we were afflicted at every turn—fighting without and fear within. But God, who comforts the downcast, comforted us by the coming of Titus, and not only by his coming but also by the comfort with which he was comforted by you, as he told us of your longing, your mourning, your zeal for me, so that I rejoiced still more.

So follow this: Paul had sent Titus to comfort the church at Corinth. In turn, the church at Corinth comforted Titus. And as a result of that, Titus returned to Paul and comforted him when he came. You've got a whole circle of comfort going here. I'm reading 2 Corinthians 7 and expecting Michael W. Smith to come in the background and start singing "Friends are Friends Forever." If you haven't been around the church the last couple of decades, that's just something you've missed, and that's totally okay.

But it is a reality. God has designed His church to care for each other's hurts. There is not one person in this room this morning that God has designed to hurt alone. Come back to Chapter 1, and read verse 11, where Paul says to the church at Corinth, "*You must help us by prayer.*" And it's interesting, that word "help us" is one word in the Greek, but it's actually a combination of three English words: "with," "under," and "work." It's a word picture of people walking with each other, under the burdens of this life, working on a mission together.

That is a beautiful picture of the church. There are men and women across this room who have experienced the comfort of God in cancer, and that comfort was not intended for you alone. There are men and women across this room who have walked, and are walking, through all sorts of pain and hurt, and the sufficiency you have seen in the sovereignty of God is not for your eyes only. It's for you to show to others. We are comforted that we might show the love of Christ to each other in the church.

And we are comforted that we might spread the love of Christ to others in the world. I want you to turn with me over to 2 Corinthians 4. I was assigned this text to preach at a conference for The Gospel Coalition a few months ago, and I was obviously familiar with it, but I had not studied it in the way I did preparing for that sermon. And I was struck in a profound way by this picture by something I'd never seen before. Look with me at 2 Corinthians, where Paul describes his weakness in his suffering. Listen to this: 2 Corinthians 4:7:

But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. So death is at work in us, but life in you.

So Paul's describing the suffering that he's experienced just like he did in Chapter 1 – as a sharing in the sufferings of Christ. He is carrying in his body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus might be manifested in him.

And you might think, "What's that about? What does that mean?" And there's a lot that that means, and one of those things that it means is that Paul does not believe in a healthy, wealthy Savior who experienced prosperity in this world. Paul believed in a suffering, wounded Savior who experienced persecution in this world. So he doesn't equate becoming more like Christ with things getting easier in the world. He knows that becoming like Christ means things getting a lot harder in this world.

And I want you to see why things are getting harder. Things are getting harder for Paul because he's on mission in this world; he's proclaiming the gospel everywhere he goes. That's why he's being afflicted and perplexed and persecuted and struck down.

A few pages later in Chapter 11, we see a passage we read a couple of weeks ago, where Paul describes his life on mission, and he says,

I have been imprisoned and beaten, often near death. Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a

day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers, in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure.

Paul has experienced all this suffering in his life. Why? Because he is giving his life to proclaiming the gospel, and the more you do this, the harder life will get for you in this world.

So you keep reading here in Chapter 4, and listen to what he says in verse 13:

Since we have the same spirit of faith according to what has been written, "I believed, and so I spoke," we also believe, and so we also speak, knowing that he who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus and bring us with you into his presence. For it is all for your sake, so that as grace extends to more and more people it may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God.

Did you see it? There in verse 15, Paul says, "It is all for your sake..." What is for your sake? All this suffering, and all this pain, and all these trials, they're for your sake, "so that...as grace extends to more and more people, it may increase thanksgiving to the glory of God." Paul says, "I'm suffering so that the grace of God might extend to more and more and more people. That's why I'm suffering like I am. That's why it looks like I'm being given over to death, so that others might know the life of Christ.

So follow this; this is so key to understanding suffering in the Christian's life. How has God most clearly shown His love for this world? Through the suffering and death of His Son, right? He has shown the world His love by a Suffering Servant, Jesus. So then, how are you and I going to show Jesus, a Suffering Servant, most clearly to this world? Through a luxurious life filled with health, wealth, and prosperity? No. That will not show the world a clear picture of Christ.

And it will not impress those who are without Christ. The world is not impressed when they see a bunch of Christians living it up with all the pleasures and possessions this world has to offer and then going to worship God on Sundays. If that's all the world sees in the church, then the world will say, "I'll have none of that. I can have the same pleasures and possessions in this world, and I don't have to go anywhere on Sundays. I'll just play more golf or be at the lake or whatever." The world is not impressed, Christian, by healthy, wealthy people who choose to tack on Jesus to it all once a week.

No, let me tell you what gets the attention of the world. What gets the attention of the world is when people give away the possessions of this world, when people forsake the pleasures of this world, when people lose their health and lose their wealth, when pain comes, when cancer strikes, when a spouse dies, and people lose that which is most valuable in this world. And in the middle of it all, they say with joy in their hearts, "God is good. And God is sufficient. And God is sovereign. And God is merciful. And Christ is enough for me." That gets the attention of the world.

And you know what gets their attention even more? When you and I give our lives to spreading this gospel, knowing that it may mean damage to our reputation, that it may mean getting passed over for a promotion, or it may mean going to a difficult area of our city or a dangerous part of the world. But we go willingly, knowing that it's not going to be easy, and knowing that suffering is going to come. But we go anyway. Why? Because we

know that though we will be afflicted, and we will be crushed, and though we will be perplexed, we will not despair. Though we will be persecuted, we will not be forsaken. And though we will be struck down, we will not be destroyed. We will carry in our body the suffering and the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus might be clear in us. We embrace suffering, knowing that we will receive comfort, and our comfort will not just be for our sake. It will be for others' sake. That we might spread the love of Christ (the suffering Savior) to the world around us.

We are a fellowship of brothers and sisters ...

This is what it means to be the church: We are a fellowship of brothers and sisters who hurt. We have real hurt from life in general and from life on mission together in the world. But we hurt with hope. That's the whole point of all these passages in 2 Corinthians. We're a fellowship of brothers and sisters who, in our suffering, are learning to rely on God and learning to hope in God, even in the face of death, because we know this is what is most important in life.

John Piper has helped us in re-thinking the way we describe what we call "cancer survivors" in our culture. We use this term to someone who faces cancer and lives through it. And I appreciate what that means in some senses, but I, along with Piper, fear that it runs the danger of missing the point. You see, the use of this term has led to the idea that, if you get cancer and you live, you have won; you have won the battle with cancer. But if you die, you lose; you have lost the battle.

But based on what we're seeing in God's Word, I want to clearly say that this is not true, because beating cancer is not about staying alive. That's what the world believes, but it's not true. If you live through cancer and yet you are not putting all your faith and all your hope and all your trust in God, you haven't won anything. Your hope is still in the things of this world, your trust is still in yourself, and you haven't won a thing at all. In fact, I would say that cancer has won because you're still convinced you can face this life on your own.

On the other hand, though, if you face cancer and in the middle of it, you hold fast and firm to the hope of God, and the faithfulness of God, and the mercy of God, and the strength of God, that's when you win. And it doesn't matter if you live or die, because with your hope in God and your trust in God and your life in God, then you have nothing to fear. Live or die, it doesn't matter.

This is why, when I've gone to see members of this faith family facing death due to cancer, I have seen hope in the middle of suffering. And when I've asked them how they feel, they look at me and say, "I'm ready to be with God." That's what it means to be a cancer survivor. When you find out you have fluid around your lungs, and you say, "My hope is in God." When you found out you have a severe case of melanoma with a dismal prognosis, You say, "My hope is not in my odds; my hope is in my God." When hospice is brought in and you sit there in a quiet home struggling to breathe, yet when you breathe, you say, "My hope is in God." Until that moment, when breath is no more, and your last thought is, "My hope is in God." That is the win. That is the eternal win.

We exult in the glory of God.

This leads to the last reality in our suffering. We experience – maybe better to say – we embrace suffering in God (knowing that He is sovereign over it and sufficient for it), and we extend comfort from God, all to the end that we exult in the glory of God. We exult,

meaning, we rejoice. Paul says in Romans, *"Not only is this so, but we rejoice in our suffering."* How is that possible?

Some of you are thinking, "Okay, this is where things go too far. You're living in an imaginary world if you think that it's possible to rejoice in hardship, to rejoice in pain, to rejoice in loss, to rejoice in grief and to rejoice in suffering." And I want to be clear here: I'm not talking about a trite, glib, happy-go-lucky approach to pain and hurt and suffering in this world, as if it's not painful and it doesn't hurt. There is pain – real, deep pain. And there is hurt – real, deep hurt. We grieve at loss, we ache in agony, we have questions, and we struggle with sovereign mysteries.

This is not easy. Listen to Paul back in Chapter 1, verse 8: *"We were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself."* This is the apostle Paul, the greatest missionary who ever lived, who wrote much of the New Testament, saying, "I wanted it to end." He says over in Philippians 1, *"I desire to depart from this world and to be with Christ. And I have felt like I would go there at any moment."* *"Indeed,"* he says, *"we felt that we had received the sentence of death."*

But that was to make us rely not on ourselves, but on God, who raises the dead. Follow this – this is so glorious. Paul says, *"I despaired of life itself"*. And the language there is literally, "I could see no way out, no exit, and death was impending." But then I looked up and realized, "I'm following the God who raises the dead!"

He is our victory.

How do we rejoice in God when we despair of life itself? We rejoice in God because we know that He is our victory. Do you realize this, Christian? Do you realize this, hurting Christian in your pain and in your despair? The same power that raised Christ from the dead is the same power that is in you at this moment. That power has conquered the worst suffering has to bring: Death itself.

Which means there is nothing, absolutely nothing you will face that you do not have power to ultimately overcome. That's reason to exult. That's reason to rejoice. God is our victory over whatever comes our way.

He is our deliverer.

And He is our deliverer. 2 Corinthians 1:10 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."* Oh, see the picture here of temporary deliverance and ultimate deliverance. In the middle of trial in this world, to know that God has the power to deliver you. To not doubt that God has the power to deliver you, which is hard to do when the deliverance isn't coming. It's easy to forget this when the deliverance isn't coming, when cancer continues, or when the struggle in this or that relationship or this or that area continues. Don't stop believing; don't ever stop believing that God has all power to deliver, while also believing that God has all wisdom regarding how and when to bring that deliverance.

Remember that quote I've shared before from James Montgomery Boice, the famous Presbyterian pastor in Philadelphia who was diagnosed with liver cancer. After he received the diagnosis, he spoke to his church, and this is what he told them – he said:

Should you pray for a miracle? Well, you're free to do that, of course. My general impression is that the God who is able to do miracles-and he certainly can-is also able to keep you from getting the problem in the first place. So although miracles do happen, they're rare by definition. A miracle has to be

an unusual thing. Above all, I would say pray for the glory of God. If you think of God glorifying himself in history and you say, where in all of history has God most glorified himself? He did it at the cross of Jesus Christ, and it wasn't by delivering Jesus from the cross, though he could have. Jesus said, 'Don't you think I could call down from my Father ten legions of angels for my defense?' But he didn't do that. And yet that's where God is most glorified. God is in charge. When things like this come into our lives, they are not accidental. It's not as if God somehow forgot what was going on, and something bad slipped by. God is not only the one who is in charge; God is also good. Everything he does is good. If God does something in your life, would you change it? If you'd change it, you'd make it worse. It wouldn't be as good.

Boice died 8 weeks after he said this. And you say, "Well, how is that good?" It's good in the same way that it was good that God did not deliver Jesus from the cross. He died, not because God had no power, but because God had all power to raise Him from the dead. And Boice died, not because God had no power, but knowing that God had all power to raise him from the dead. Just like many brothers and sisters who once sat in this room with us – husbands and wives and moms and dads and children – have died, not because God had no power, but knowing that God had all power to raise them from the dead. Exult, O people of God, He will deliver us.

He is our hope.

He is our victory, He is our deliverer, and He is our hope. "On him," verse 10, "we have set our hope..." Oh, see how suffering comes full circle. God uses suffering for our sake. As we experience suffering in God, He shows His sovereignty, His sufficiency, His compassion, and His comfort in ways we would never see otherwise. Malcolm Muggeridge said it best:

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

God uses suffering for our sake. But not just for our sake, but God uses suffering for others' sake. For when we receive the comfort of God in our suffering, we are uniquely able to show the love of Christ to others in the church and to spread the love of Christ to others in the world. And in this way, God uses suffering for His sake. When God comforts us, and we become His conduit of comfort to others, the result is He is glorified as the Father of mercies and the God of all comfort. And we long for hurting men and women here in Birmingham and all over the world to know the comfort that is found in God, and to know the rejoicing that is possible with God in the middle of life's darkest days.

And in all these ways, suffering becomes well worth it. Turn one more time to 2 Corinthians 4, where Paul gives us some concluding words for our contemplation of suffering. 2 Corinthians 4:16-18 says,

So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.

Oh, mark this down; hold on to this as we close: All suffering for the Christian is light and temporary. All suffering for the Christian is light and temporary. Now this is not true for the non-Christian. If you are not a Christian, you do not at this moment have this guarantee. For you may have cancer, and you may undergo pain, and you may experience suffering in all kinds of ways, yet if you die apart from God in your sin, your destiny will be one of eternal, everlasting suffering. It will be an eternity given over to your sin and all the suffering that comes from it apart from God. Oh, I urge you, turn from your sin today and trust in Christ as your Savior! Be saved from eternal suffering. This is not a religious game; this is eternal reality we are talking about.

Coaching soccer yesterday, I told this team of boys and their parents that God so loved the world, that through trusting in Christ, you can have everlasting life! All this stuff here is temporary, and don't miss the eternal. And I want to say all the more today, with such a heavy topic as suffering, that eternal suffering awaits all who die without turning from sin and trusting in Christ. Turn from sin and trust in Christ today. And when you do, and for all who have, don't forget: All suffering for the Christian is light and temporary. One day, every single sorrow in this room will cease, and every single hurt in this room will stop, and every single struggle will desist, and every single disease will disappear, and every single ounce of grief will be gone. God Himself will wipe away every tear from our eyes, and death shall be no more. Neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore. Remember this. Never forget this. All suffering for the Christian is light and temporary because coming glory for the Christian is vast and eternal.

Permissions: You are permitted and encouraged to reproduce and distribute this material provided that you do not alter it in any way, use the material in its entirety, and do not charge a fee beyond the cost of reproduction. For web posting, a link to the media on our website is preferred. Any exceptions to the above must be approved by Radical.

Please include the following statement on any distributed copy: By David Platt. © David Platt & Radical. Website: Radical.net