

How to Understand Your Troubles

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[0 : 0 0] This is the morning service at Holy Trinity on the 27th of June 2004. The preacher is Paul Dudley.

His sermon is entitled, How to Understand Your Troubles, and is based on 2 Corinthians, chapter 1, verses 1 to 11.

Please be seated. In our family, it is a great excitement when we hear the postman come riding up on his little motorbike to our mailbox.

For then we know, if he stops, that there are letters in the mailbox. I love receiving letters. And it's great nowadays, because when you receive your letters in the mailbox, you are very quickly able to ascertain what is actually inside.

So if you see those lovely envelopes that have that little clear window, you know very quickly that they're wanting money. Those ones go into one set of piles. Of course, then there'll be those other ones that say, You've won!

[1 : 1 5] They go quickly into the bin. Then there are those that come from the Anglican Diocese for me. They very quickly get put into my bottom drawer. But then the ones that you fear are those ones that come from the police department.

The infringement notice. That you've just gone that little bit too quickly. Of course, the ones that I love the most were the ones that I received during university. Usually, they came in brightly coloured envelopes and had a very distinctive writing on the front of them.

And when you first looked at them, you would notice that they would be quite thick. Which was always a great pleasure for me, because I know that my girlfriend, then Michelle, had sent me a lovely letter, and there was lots to it.

Which was fantastic. Of course, it's not until you actually tear open the letter and have a look inside as you find out the content of that letter. And what the letter is actually asking of you, or what the letter is telling you.

I guess as we come to this book of 2 Corinthians, to me, there is a great deal of excitement as we open this letter. There's a great deal of excitement for me. But I'm not sure for the original recipients, those in Corinth, that when they saw, not the postman arrive, but when they saw the personal person bringing the letter, this scroll, which would have had on it the letter to the Corinthians.

[2 : 3 6] I'm not sure they would have shared my excitement, particularly as they opened that letter and read through it. As they would have read through it that very first time, back in the year AD 55, I'm sure they would have seen a letter that was written with Paul's blood, sweat and tears.

They would have recognised this letter of 2 Corinthians as one that is of one of Paul's most personal nature, where he shows his pastoral heart for the people that he loves.

It is a deeply passionate letter, one that is driven to ensure that God's people are pure. It's a letter where Paul fights hard to defend his apostolic authority.

He fights hard for it all the way, as we see through this letter, defending hard, defending his authority, defending his lifestyle. But as you read through it, you can't help but see between the lines that eternity is tucked in there.

That to ignore Paul's authority is actually to ignore the gospel, to ignore life forever. We see here that Paul bears his heart to the Corinthians.

[3 : 44] He opens wide his heart, both in joy and fear, over what might be the future for the Corinthian church and the surrounding churches. C.K. Barrett, who is a commentator of the last century, he wrote these words, Writing 2 Corinthians must have come near to breaking Paul, and a church that is prepared to read it with him and understand it may find itself broken too.

Are you ready for us to tear open this letter and walk through it, plumb the depths of what Paul is saying, not just to the Corinthian church, but us here in 2004 at Holy Trinity.

But I pray that we will indeed be ready. Father, we thank you for this letter of 2 Corinthians. We pray for us as we start to read this letter and try to come to an understanding of what Paul has to say.

We pray that you'll be changing us and shaping us, that we may come to understand you better and your will for our lives. Give us open hearts and minds and ears that we may hear clearly and give us the will to put these things into practice.

We pray this in your son's name. Amen. Well, why don't you tear open the letter of 2 Corinthians by opening it up to page 937. Don't literally tear the pages in.

[5 : 02] I don't think the wardens would be very happy about that. But if you open up to page 937, let's begin by looking at this letter to 2 Corinthians. Well, just like we have protocols for writing letters nowadays, back then Paul had protocols for writing letters in that ancient period.

I remember clearly being in school, being taught how to write a letter, how you would have, you would put dear, whoever you were addressing it to, that you would have up the top corner, you know, or one of the corners.

That's how well I remember. You know, the date and the address of who you were sending it to. And down the bottom, of course, the very important part is you put sincerely or yours faithfully, depending on how well you knew this person.

And then you'd write your name. There's this standard protocol for writing a letter. Well, Paul follows the standard protocol at the beginning here for writing a letter to the Corinthians. A standard protocol would look something like this.

The sender would put his name first. Then you would put the recipient's name. Who is it going to? Then you would give some type of greeting. Well, Paul has done that for us here in verses 1 and 2.

[6 : 08] He gives the sender. Well, the sender, as we see there, is Paul himself, but also Timothy. They are co-senders of this letter. We see there that who it is addressed to. It is addressed to the church in Corinth, but not just the church in Corinth, but also the surrounding area, those churches just around Corinth.

And then we see this beautiful little greeting. Instead of a hello or how are you going, we see here Paul saying, grace to you and peace from God, our Father, and our Lord Jesus Christ.

His greeting is, may God grant you grace, this gracious God. May he grant you grace that you may know his peace. Not just, you know, a sense of peace from war and things like that, but peace that is shalom.

That Hebrew word that talks about peace, of well-being, and a deep satisfaction found in the relationship with God. Of course, the God who reveals himself through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Well, Paul, in all his letters, actually uses this standard greeting, but then he expands certain sections. He gives extra information to give clues about what he is actually going to be speaking about in the rest of the letter.

[7 : 18] So as you look at this greeting here, what is the element that is expanded for us? What is the thing that gives us the clue as to what this letter will be driving at? Well, look there in the very first couple of words.

Paul, look how he describes himself. An apostle of Christ Jesus. Paul describes himself as an apostle. That is, he has the authority of an apostle.

Now, an apostle back then was a person who carried with that, was an ambassador for someone else. They would come from that person with their authority with a message or some type of task to do.

So Christ is the one who has sent Paul. Paul claims that, that he has been sent by Christ. But because he's an apostle, an ambassador of Christ, it means that he is actually speaking as Christ.

He comes with his authority. He comes, he comes from the one who sends him, but he is himself representative of that person. Paul is saying, he comes from Christ.

[8 : 19] There's his authority. But not only that, we see there that it has the stamp of approval from God. It is God's will that Paul should be an apostle, that Paul should have this authority.

So right at the very beginning, we get an inkling of one of the key issues that we're going to be looking at in this book. Paul's authority. As the Corinthians tore open this letter and they read that, undoubtedly there were those who looked at that and said, Paul, an apostle?

I don't think so. I don't think Paul's an apostle. But back in that culture, Paul's authority and the way they viewed Paul was that of weakness. In the culture of two Corinthians, it was a bustling city.

A city that was a city of boasting. You could go there and make your fortunes. It was a city where people would flock into. It was a city where the great trade routes would come through. And so it was a great place to make your name.

And that's what people would do. People who could boast eloquently, who were confident, who were high achievers, who were strong worded. These are the people that thrived in Corinthians.

[9 : 22] It was the people that they admired. That was the type of leader that the Corinthian church was seeking also. It looked as a part of its culture for someone who was impressive. Not only that, there were false teachers in the church at that point.

False teachers who claimed to have impressive letters. They claimed to be impressive people, that they had a triumphalistic ministry, that theirs wasn't a ministry of weakness, but of power.

But the Corinthian people, when they looked at Paul, they saw weakness. But Paul doesn't hide from that. Paul boasts in his weakness. Look at what Paul says in chapter 11 about his weaknesses.

Chapter 11, verse 24. Chapter 11, verse 23. They are ministers of Christ. I am talking like a madman. I am a better one with far greater labours, more imprisonments, more flogging, countless floggings and often near death.

Five times I received from the Jews the 40 lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I received a stoning. This doesn't appear to be a particularly strong person.

[10 : 28] He's been beaten and whipped. Let me keep on going here. Once I received a stoning. Three times I was shipwrecked. For a night and a day I was adrift on the sea for frequent journeys in danger of rivers, danger from bandits, danger from my own people, danger from the Gentiles.

If he had a triumphalistic ministry, an impressive ministry, surely these things wouldn't be happening to him. These are weaknesses. His ministry is not strong but weak. Let me keep on reading here.

In toil and hardship through many sleepless nights, hunger and thirsty, surely if he is a minister of Christ, he wouldn't go hungry. Surely not.

Without food, cold and naked. And besides other things, I'm under daily pressure because of my anxiety for all the churches. Paul didn't shy away from his weaknesses but boasted in them.

And we'll see why later on. But for the Corinthian church, these weaknesses, for them, had dismissed his authority. But Paul says, no, I come from Christ.

[11 : 31] I am an ambassador of Christ. I have his authority. And I have the backing from God. After the opening of a letter, the next part of a letter would be that of some type of thanksgiving to a deity.

It'd be a section where you might give thanks to Zeus for the great blessings you had enjoyed or some other great God that you might give thanksgiving to. But Paul doesn't give thanks to any of those gods.

No, he gives thanks, as we see there in verse 3, to the God, Father of our Lord, Jesus Christ. But when he actually speaks here, he doesn't say, I thank God.

He says, blessed be God. Here we even get a clue as to the thankfulness that Paul has, the deep gratitude that Paul has to his great God.

Why? Look at the way that Paul describes this great God. The Father of mercies and the God of all consolation. Here is a God of compassion and mercy.

[12 : 31] A God, as we see in verse 4, a God who has comforted Paul in all his afflictions. Verse 4, who consoles us in all our afflictions.

You see there. The word that Paul uses here of affliction in verse 4 and later on in verse 5 and 6 he uses the word suffering. These two Greek words give a general picture of suffering.

It's not just suffering for the sake of persecution. But Paul has in here in mind it's a general term signifying both physical and emotional distress as well as suffering caused by persecution.

You see, when people look at a weak ministry, they look at sufferings. People think that that is a weak ministry not a triumphal and strict ministry. So Paul, it wasn't just his whippings for the sake of the gospel.

It was also his hunger and all these other things. These other afflictions and sufferings for Paul. But Paul knows that God is a God of comfort and that God has met him in his need in the midst of these.

[13 : 32] God has consoled him. That God has given him that state of peace. Or, God has delivered him from these great perils, these great sufferings. God is a God who is comforted and God who has consoled him.

As I reflect on my own self and the picture that I have in my own mind at the times where I have been through great difficulties, at times of great sufferings, the sufferings that I have gone through and distress that I have gone through may not have been that of losing a wife or losing a child or whatever it may be.

But there have been times in my life where I have looked around and I have felt as though there have been no supports. There is nothing else I can cling to but in the midst of that there has been great peace, a great sense that God has held me in his hand, a great sense that when I could cling to nothing else I knew I could cling to Christ and that he was hanging on to me.

This is the consolation that Paul is talking about. Well, in verse 4, Paul, the second part of verse 4, Paul gives a reason why, one of the reasons why Paul is consoled.

Look there, who consoles us in all our afflictions so that we may be able to console those who are in any affliction with consolation with which we ourselves are consoled by God.

[14 : 52] Paul is consoled that he might console others. Paul continues this and helps us to understand this a bit better in verse 5. For just as the sufferings of Christ are abundant for us, that is, just as he suffers like Christ.

Paul says there is a link here between his sufferings and Christ's sufferings. Just like Christ's sufferings were abundant and his sufferings that he has are abundant, just like Christ suffered, he was also comforted.

So we see there, also our consolation is abundant through Christ. Christ was consoled. Christ was raised from the dead. because of this, through this risen Lord, there is great comfort for Paul.

It's because of this risen Lord that he is able to be consoled through Christ. It goes on further in verse 6, if we have been afflicted, it is for your consolation and salvation. That is, when they look at Paul's afflictions, they see their weakness.

But it is this weakness that reflects the weakness of Christ dying on the cross. It speaks powerfully of a God who rescues in the midst of great weakness. A God who brings about his great plan of salvation.

[16 : 06] It goes on, if we are being consoled, it is for your consolation. So if Paul is consoled, then it's also for their consolation that they might be consoled in the afflictions that he's going through.

We see here that Paul is saying that in his weakness he is strong. Now this theme, while only just hinted at here, is going to be expanded throughout the rest of this letter and we'll see a greater picture and a greater understanding of what sufferings are like and how we are to understand them.

But Paul just gives us a little glimpse here. He then says in the rest of verse 6, the way that this consolation will be shown is the way that you patiently endure to the end.

It is for your consolation which you experience when you patiently endure the same sufferings that we also suffer. Paul finishes this section here, this prayer, this great prayer that he prays to God, this prayer of praise, that the reason why he is confident they will get to the end is because of this great God.

It is built upon the rock of God. His hope is unshaken. Our hope for you is unshaken for we know that just as you share in our sufferings so also you share in our consolation.

[17 : 17] Well Paul then goes on to give an example of how this is actually worked out in his life. He goes on to give a pattern of his suffering, a suffering that he actually suffered in Asia prior to these events of writing this letter.

We do not want you to be unaware brothers and sisters of the affliction we experienced in Asia for we were so utterly, unbearably crushed that we despaired of life itself.

Note here the way that he describes his affliction in Asia. so utterly and unbearably crushed that he despised of life itself.

Here is a man who is in the midst of great sufferings to despair of life itself. Some have tried to sort of have a guess at what Paul went through.

I'm not even going to try to begin to understand what it was or try and have a guess at what the afflictions that he suffered in Asia but only that we should feel the full depth here of the suffering and the pain that Paul went through that he utterly despaired of life that there is nothing else that he can cling to that all his supports have been taken away and he says why?

[18 : 29] Indeed we felt that we received the sentence of death so that we would not rely on ourselves but on God who raises the dead. Stripped of everything stripped bare in the midst of his affliction so that he might trust in God the one who brings consolation and comfort.

Notice here the way he describes God is the God who raises the dead. There's his hope there's his understanding that helps him in the midst of that. He understands that there is a God who raises the dead.

Paul goes on in verse 10 He who rescued us from such a deadly peril will continue to rescue us. On him we have set our hope that he will rescue us again. In light of the fact that Paul has been consoled in light of the fact that he has a sure and certain hope of the resurrection of the dead because of these two things he knows that in the midst of his present suffering whatever it may be or whatever the suffering that others may be going through we know that we have a God who will console in the midst of this.

A God who will bring comfort. At the end in verse 11 he says that the reason why God does this is that he might be praised.

Picking up a guess again that verses 3 to 7 where Paul indeed praises God in the midst of his affliction. Verse 11 and as you also join in helping us by your prayers so that many will give thanks on our behalf for the blessings granted us through the prayers of many.

[20 : 02] Through the praying praying that God would console that many will see and glorify in this great God a God of comfort. Here is Paul's pattern that he lays before them.

Here is Paul giving a little glimmer into his life and his weakness. Many of you know and have met Tim Patrick. Tim Patrick is our Ridley student that is working in the evening service.

Many have asked occasionally that they haven't seen his wife at different functions. The answer to this is that over two years ago his wife died. Tim is a great guy.

He had come down to Ridley to study to be a minister for God. His wife was down here as well working. They were a great couple. Anna, Tim's wife was pregnant and in the process of giving birth to their first child Poppy Anna died.

She had a hemorrhage that could not be stopped and she died. Tim is a person who went through something that I cannot imagine losing your wife in the midst of giving a child.

[21 : 13] Tim has raised Poppy over these last two years. He's a person that has gone through great despair and yet it's interesting talking to him last night.

He's a man who speaks of the fact that in the midst of this great despair in the midst when you would think that he should give up on God surely God if he was a triumphalistic God surely if this was a ministry that was going to be a great and mighty ministry that God wouldn't allow this to happen to Tim.

Surely he should just give up on God in the midst of that. But he didn't. Through the prayers of many Tim was upheld. He waited patiently.

He endured. He remembers when all that he could do was cling to Christ that is what he did. In the midst of great suffering there was a sense of God's peace.

Now he's a person who is giving great consolation and great comfort to many others. who are suffering. People in the midst of great suffering.

[22 : 19] Tim's is not the only example. There are many that I've spoken with over the last couple of weeks who have spoken of great suffering that they've been through. Yet in the midst of they praise God because they recognise that God is the one who has been there with them.

Well let me quickly bring three points together. The first is that Paul has a view of God's character here before us. Paul wants to be helping us to understand the great God that he follows.

He is a God of mercy and comfort. A mercy and comfort that comes through Jesus Christ. He is a God that is worthy of our praise. How often do we sit down and write down of God's goodness and remember his goodness to us?

I read a book recently that encouraged families to write down the times that God has been good where they felt God's comfort and write it down so that they might recall the times that God has indeed been there in the midst of their hardship.

We praise God not because things are so bad. We praise God because of his character and who he is. We recognise that God is sovereign in all things.

[23 : 31] He is the one who is able to deliver us but if not able to deliver us from a particular suffering, he is the one who enables us to get through it, to endure. For Paul, there is no such a thing as luck or accident but a God who is in control.

It raises the question how can God allow such things, such terrible incidents to happen? This passage doesn't speak on this issue but as we look through the Bible there is an element in which God does allow terrible things to happen but he does it in such a way not as that he is responsible for it.

We live in a world that is wracked by sin, of broken relationships, of things that are wrong. Then in the midst of this, God uses these things that we might trust and lean on him more.

God is one who is creating a people that will honour him even in the midst of great hardship. Paul here is very theocentric. He keeps on pointing and looking to God not to the humans and human-centred world.

That's my first point that I want to make. The second point is that Paul's view of suffering. This is not a complete and utter thesis on suffering in this book or in this passage even.

[24 : 45] He will develop more the understanding of suffering and how we are to understand it but we see here that Paul does not glorify in suffering. It's not something to be held up and say, now that's what we want.

We want to suffer. Paul is not saying that at all. There is no evidence or encouragement for others to find suffering. Ignatius, back in AD 115, desired to be devoured by the wild beasts in Rome.

He wanted to be ground up in the lion's mouth that he might truly be a disciple of Jesus Christ. Paul says, no, no, no. We're not to go out and seek martyrdom. There is nothing intrinsically good about suffering.

It is not a Christian virtue but God uses these terrible things that we might learn to trust in him, that we might endure, that we might learn patient endurance.

Not a patient endurance, that's this stoic self-discipline where we just push things aside emotionally, that we can deal with it. It's not a positive thinking or a willpower.

[25 : 47] It's not even this new age sense of getting in touch with the God within. This is a patient endurance that is based upon God's power in our life, that God will not give up on us, that God will indeed be there for us.

When suffering strikes us, we can be sure that God will either deliver us from that suffering, but he may not always. He may deliver us from it and show himself powerful and teach us faith, like he did in Asia for Paul.

Or he may give us the strength to endure those things that will not be removed from us. Again, showing that he is powerful. The promise in the Bible is that in either case, God will not let us suffer beyond what we can handle.

I reflect now on a friend of ours that we had at college. A daughter was born to them. She looked perfectly normal to start with, but it was found out quickly that she had Angelman's Syndrome.

She will never properly speak. She will probably know six words totally. She is only just learning to walk and she is seven or eight years old. She is just a complete and utter handful.

[26 : 56] And I see in this couple a great trust in God and a great desire that they look forward to when they will see Bethany restored to full health when Christ returns.

This side of glory, God does not show himself primarily by performing miracles. God shows himself powerful by enabling us to persevere and to trust in him in the midst of great suffering.

The third issue is, I guess, Paul's big issue of this book and that of ministry. The big issue here for Paul is that of Paul's apostolic authority.

For the people of Corinth, they saw Paul as weak. But Paul shows that his weakness actually is God's means of strength. We see there that while they had a picture of someone who is to be strong, Paul shows that it is his weakness that he shows that he shows that God is strong.

Just to reflect just a moment on our church, think of the difficulty that we are in the midst of. Esther, for the fourth time, for the, I don't know how many times, you know, finding this lump is such a blow not just to her but to the congregation.

[28 : 19] Reflect, I guess, on just the many other sufferings that we see in this church. People going through personally great difficulties. Are we a people who are relying on ourselves?

Are we a self-sufficient? Are we trusting in God and recognising that God is the one who brings comfort in the midst of great difficulty? Last night, Caitlin woke up around midnight.

We're trying to wean her, trying to help her not to feed in the middle of the night and I held her in my arms and I reflected on this beautiful little baby, completely and utterly helpless without us, completely and utterly trusting in us and she just lay in my arms as I cuddled her off to sleep, bringing her comfort.

We are people that allow ourselves to be in God's hands and rely on His comfort that He brings us. Amen.