

## **Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church**

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Sermon manuscript

### **Series: Authentic**

(studies in 2 Corinthians)

### **Pain's Gracious Gifts**

(Intro, 2 Corinthians 1:1-11)

Study #1

#### **Introduction: Gifts we have known and loved...**

As a child, I was often the recipient of under-appreciated gifts from my parents. Gifts like clothing.

One of the great understatements of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century would include my own, *"I'm not exactly a clothes horse."*

You know that. It's no secret to anybody who knows me that I've never been all that interested in fashion. It's also been a constant source of some irritation to the women in my life, for the last thirty years, my loving wife; and before that, my long-suffering mother. My mother, caring for me but not caring as much about my wishes, would frequently supply me with clothes at Christmases and birthdays.

I should have appreciated at the time what a great gift clothing was. After all, to not have had clothes would have made school quite a challenge.

But my earlier negative attitude toward clothing-as-gifts highlights the reality that certain things that come our way are not appreciated in the moment as they are on down the road.

Kids like to get basketballs and video games. An investment in a Roth IRA might not elicit a giggle from your typical five year old on Christmas morning.

Maybe you can recall gifts you've received that didn't quite hit the mark. Oh sure, *"You'll appreciate this later..."* and all that. But what you wanted was a bicycle.

Well, today we are thinking about one of life's many gifts. It is a gift not often asked for. But it's a good one. In fact, the Bible tells us that when properly received, this gift is worth its weight in gold.

And to eliminate any suspense right here at the front end of our time together, I'll go ahead and tell you. The good gift we're considering today is the gift of pain, along with its kin - disappointment, frustration, dashed dreams and hopes, hardships and trials.

Today we learn that God is able to take our pain and use it redemptively. He takes pain and uses it to mold us into the people He wants us to become, the people, in fact, that we long to become.

Today, too, we begin a series of studies in what has become, in recent years, my favorite of the letters written by the Apostle Paul. We're launching a study of Paul's second letter to the church at Corinth.

#### **Background: The Way to Corinth (Acts)**

##### **Background from Acts**

###### *Journeyman Paul*

We know that Paul took three extensive trips referred to as *missionary journeys*. Details of these trips are all recorded for us in the book of Acts.

The first one is traced in Acts 13 and 14, and describes his church-planting activities in four cities of Asia Minor.

The third journey is described in Acts 18:23-21:16, but doesn't figure much in to Paul's time in Corinth. The second journey, however, does.

We read about this second trip in Acts 16-18 (18:22, to be exact). Paul went traveling with Silas and Timothy and others to Philippi, Thessalonica, Berea, Athens and Corinth.

Corinth was an impressive city. It was a world class city, a first century equivalent of New York, Sao Paulo, Tokyo, or Moscow. In the first century, it was a hustling, bustling, energetic place right smack in the middle of whatever action there was.

### What Kind of a City was Corinth?

#### *Geography*

Part of the reason for its influence had to do with where it was place.

Located about two miles from the Gulf of Corinth, the city enjoyed good harbors on both sides of the Isthmus of Corinth. It controlled the land trade route from Achaia into Macedonia as well as the sea trade route from the Ionian to the Aegean Sea.

Her strategic geographic location positioned Corinth to be a major player in the world scene, and contributed to a robust economy in the first century.

#### *Culture, demographics and politics*

By the time Paul came to Corinth, there had been a city on the site for over eight hundred years. (However, the Corinth we read about in the New Testament had been rebuilt only about one hundred years earlier by Julius Caesar.)

- **Politically** - Corinth played a central role as the capital city of the province of Achaia.
- **Demographically** - Corinth's population consisted of Greeks, Orientals, Jews, immigrants from Italy, Roman government officials and businessmen. And, in addition to the 200,000 free citizens in the city, there were 500,000 slaves!

- **Culturally** - Corinth was a center for the performing arts and for the entertainment industry, of which the Isthmian Games (held to honor Poseidon) were a VERY important part.<sup>1</sup>

So, Corinth was a prosperous, influential and powerful place. Spiritually speaking, it was a very dark place.

#### *Morality, spirituality*

In Roman times the city was notorious as a place of materialistic indulgence. As in most major cities, paganism and idolatry were rampant. And Corinth outdid other cities in gross immorality.

As just one example, one thousand prostitutes served the goddess Aphrodite. Overall, Corinth's reputation was such that a word was coined to describe a sexually sinful life, "*to corinthianize*."

Into this dark world the Apostle Paul brought the light of the Gospel of Jesus.

### The Progress of the Gospel in Corinth

#### *Paul in Corinth (Acts 18:1-17)*

Traveling from Athens<sup>2</sup> on the Second Missionary Journey, he made himself at home with fellow tent-makers, the husband/wife team of Priscilla and Aquila. These three, along with Timothy and Silas, told Corinth all about Jesus.

Corinth presents a pretty typical picture of how the Gospel was received on Paul's journeys.

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<sup>1</sup> The Isthmian Games were second in importance only to the Olympic Games held every four years to honor Zeus at Mt. Olympus.

<sup>2</sup> Paul's experience in Athens left him sobered. As effectively as he had dealt with the intellectuals and philosophers on Mars Hill, there was little response to the Gospel among those erudite intellectuals. As he wrote in 1 Corinthians, he came to Corinth determined to know nothing except Christ, and Him crucified (1 Cor. 2:2).

There was good receptivity from some at first. Then, there was the establishment of a fledgling church. And then there was outright rejection and persecution.

Persecution hit after Paul had spent a solid eighteen months in the city, and that was the point at which he said goodbye to Corinth to engage in ministry elsewhere.

### *Corinth - Paul's "challenging" church*

About three years later, when Paul later traveled to Ephesus (on the Third Missionary Journey), he received reports about problems in the church he had founded in Corinth.

The evangelical grapevine/rumor-mill worked as well in the first century as it does in the twenty-first and it told of divisions, immorality, lawsuits and problems at the Lord's Table. There was contention over the exercise of spiritual gifts, confusion over marriage, and even disbelief in the resurrection.

Well, Paul responded by writing a letter that addressed all of these and other problems. We know that letter as 1 Corinthians. But that letter didn't put out the fires raging in this troubled church.

Some months later (as he continued on the Third Missionary Journey) he again received news about problems in Corinth. These tales prompted him to write another letter to them, this time mailed from the city of Philippi.

And THIS is the letter we call 2 Corinthians. And 2 Corinthians is a very different kind of letter than 1 Corinthians.

### *The distinctive nature of 2 Corinthians<sup>3</sup>*

Of all of his writings, this is Paul at his most autobiographical. Nowhere else do we find him opening up his heart like he does here.<sup>4</sup>

While never abandoning his trademark logic and reasonableness, these thirteen chapters add a layer of emotional depth to our understanding of Paul and of the Christian life that is refreshing, shocking, energizing!

If you've only known Paul from Romans or Ephesians (both GREAT books, by the way!), coming across 2 Corinthians is like having read the works of Einstein on relativity - and then coming across love letters he had written to his wife.

### *The purpose of 2 Corinthians*

#### To defend his apostleship

Paul wrote his first letter to address some of the problems I alluded to earlier. But he wrote this second letter to address issues more directly related to himself. Some in Corinth impugned his motives and questioned his credentials. They denied that he had the right to act so "apostolically."

So, from one vantage point, 2 Corinthians is a defense of Paul's genuine apostleship.

#### To define authentic Christianity

But these detractors were also calling into question the truth of the Gospel itself and were contradicting what Paul had taught about the Christian faith.

So, in addition to validating his claim to apostleship, this letter is also intended to defend what we're going to call authentic Christianity.

This theme of authenticity rings out from the first words of the letter.

<sup>3</sup> As for the date of 2 Corinthians, we have little data that allows a firm conclusion. Most likely, the letter was written in the summer of 56 A.D.

<sup>4</sup> "There is no other letter of Paul that sustains with such intensity the heights of the transcendental victory of grace in and through the everyday experience of the

Christian believer in whatever circumstances, whether of exaltation or of affliction, he may find himself." (Morris, p. xvi).

## Paul's Greetings (1:1-2)

### Paul - to the Corinthians (v. 1)

*[1] Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother,<sup>5</sup> to the church of God which is at Corinth with all the saints who are throughout Achaia<sup>6</sup>*

#### *Identifying the author*

In letters you and I write, our first words are usually, “Dear so and so...” Our letters begin with the recipient.

But here (as was actually the case in most ancient letters) Paul identifies himself first. And here Paul claimed to be an apostle **by divine appointment**.<sup>7</sup>

*“My apostleship did not come from myself or from the churches. It came direct from God!”* (Implication: what he writes carries weight; it has teeth!)

Paul says that he has written to “saints.”

#### *Identifying the recipients*

To call someone a “saint” doesn’t at all mean that they are always well-behaved or that they are little angels (the Corinthians certainly weren’t!). It means that he or she belongs to God.

The term “saint” in the New Testament is “code” for “believer in Jesus.”

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<sup>5</sup> Timothy, who is also mentioned in this first verse, would have been well-known in Corinth as Paul’s co-worker and friend, having been with Paul on the Second Missionary Journey when the Corinthian church was established. It is likely that Timothy served as Paul’s secretary, taking this letter by dictation. Note, too, that Timothy is “our brother” not an apostle.

<sup>6</sup> Achaia was the ancient name for what we know as Greece today.

<sup>7</sup> There is polemic here, as his God-ordained apostleship was certainly being undermined by the opponents at Corinth.

So, if you are a believer this morning YOU are a saint! And, since this letter was to have been broadly circulated (“*throughout Achaia*”), we can be assured that this letter is intended for Saint Dave and Saint YOU as much as it was for the saints in Corinth.

Paul’s greeting continues with a prayer.

### Grace and Peace to You! (v. 2)

*[2] Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.*<sup>8</sup>

Grace is God’s initiative-taking favor to men, while peace is what we experience as a result of God’s initiative. The words cause us to think about all of the many blessings we have in Jesus. And now, having said “Hello!” Paul launches the body of his letter.

The first words are ringing, singing, joyous praises to God.

## Wounded Healers (vv. 3-7)

### The God of All Comfort - and the Maker of All Comforters! (vv. 3-5)

*Praise God for His comfort! (v. 3-4a)*

*[3a] Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort [4a] who comforts us in all our affliction...*

In the Bible we get to know the one true God by many names. He is the Holy One. He is the God Who Sees. He is the Almighty. He is the Sovereign One. He is the Judge.

And we can add one more name to our collection of the names of God. Paul calls Him “*the Father of mercies and God of all comfort.*”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> It is worth noting that Paul places the two Persons (Father and Son) side by side, without any suggestion that one belongs to a different order of being from the other.

<sup>9</sup> In the Old Testament as well as in the New God is often pictured coming alongside His people and offering comfort, encouragement, mercy, and compassion. The psalmist tells us that in the same way a human father has

Paul knew that God's people needed God's comfort from time to time, and that when they needed it, He would give it.

Trace through Paul's life and you'll discover lots of times when he needed comfort and strength.

From the moment of his encounter with Christ on the road to Damascus forward, Paul experienced an array of sufferings and troubles. These troubles ranged from the normal pressures of life to outright persecution to relational strains to excruciating physical pain. In these troubles, Paul experienced the comfort of God.

And rarely did God deliver comfort to Paul OUT OF his pain. God comforted Paul IN his pain. To "comfort" is not necessarily to rescue. To comfort is not to pat someone on the back with a reassuring "there, there."

To comfort is to strengthen.<sup>10</sup> It is to enable someone to keep on keeping on. God's comfort equips the Christian to continue living faithfully while in pain.

Jumping forward to 2010, there are, for each of us, lots and lots of times when we need comfort, too.

It might be the car that breaks down or a marriage that breaks down. It can be a scary diagnosis from the doctor, or a tense conversation with a supervisor at work. It could be a financial strain, a stressful exchange with a good friend, or being made fun of at school for taking a stand for Jesus.

As he wrote, Paul was experiencing some measure of affliction. And his testimony was that God was providing him comfort. Not comfort by way of removing him from his afflictions, but comfort IN his affliction.

God was standing beside him, strengthening him with truth and equipping him to keep on trusting and loving and hoping and obeying.

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compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear Him (Psalm 103). And when Jesus was preparing His disciples for what life was going to be like after He left, He promised that the Holy Spirit would come to them and "comfort" (strengthen/encourage/exhort) them in His absence.

<sup>10</sup> Latin: "com" = with; "forte" = strength; Greek - the word is parakalew, meaning "to come alongside" for the purpose of helping.

But Paul mentions having been comforted by God on the way to telling us WHY God comforted him.

*Comforted so as to comfort (vv. 4b-5)*

***[4b] 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. [5] For just as the sufferings of Christ are ours in abundance, so also our comfort is abundant through Christ.***

The comfort I receive from God is not solely intended to bless ME. God gives comfort to me to equip me to give comfort to you. He gives you comfort to that you can "pass it on" to someone else.

This is not an unusual theme. We receive something from God so as to be able to pay that that something forward to others. We are blessed to be blessings to others.

In fact, this is how he "spins" his own experiences.

**An "Others-Centered" Approach to Both Trials and Blessings (vv. 6-7)**

***[6] But if we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation; or if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which is effective in the patient enduring of the same sufferings which we also suffer; [7] and our hope for you is firmly grounded, knowing that as you are sharers of our sufferings, so also you are sharers of our comfort.***<sup>11</sup>

Sometimes it is tough to figure out what is the main theme of a passage in the Bible. Sometimes, though, it's pretty easy.

Here, Paul uses the word "comfort" ten times in seven verses. Hmm... His theme is comfort, and here is the progression of thought:

- Hard times come to us all.

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<sup>11</sup> Hope is FIRM - (Greek, *βεβαιος*) - used of a tree root, and of a ship's anchor. Paul's hope for the Corinthians is firmly grounded. OK, but what does he hope for them?

- In the middle of these hard times, God comforts/strengthens us by reminding us of His presence, His promises, His love, His good plans for us.
- Now, having been comforted by God, we are equipped to offer comfort to those around us who need comforting.

It all starts with the gift nobody wants: Pain. But the fruit of your pain can be a super-sized capacity to strengthen people around you who are going through tough times.

To be honest, it doesn't always work this way. One possible response to pain is that you would become bitter. Another is that you would become isolated and withdrawn. Christians sometimes do respond to pain this way.

But God's plan and purpose for you and me is that we would accept His comfort and turn right around and comfort those we meet who are in pain with the same comfort with which we ourselves have been comforted by God!

And I'll say this, too. It is not necessary for you to have experienced exactly what another is going through if you would be a comfort to them.

It is not true that only divorced people can comfort people going through a divorce or that former drug abusers are the only people who can help drug abusers or alcoholics or that people who have lost loved ones are the only people who can comfort people grieving the loss of a loved one.

No!

If you have experienced the comfort of Christ in your affliction and have a heart to comfort the afflicted, God can use you to do exactly that with the people He sends your way.

So, there is a community blessing that comes via the gift of pain. One of pain's greatest benefits is that equips us with the tools we need to comfort others.

And Paul goes on to tell us that the gift of pain brings with it another uber-gracious gift.

## Faith Comes by - Pain (?) (vv. 8-10a)

### Grave Hardships (vv. 8-9a)

*[8] For we do not want you to be unaware, brethren, of our affliction which came to us in Asia, that we were burdened excessively, beyond our strength, so that we despaired even of life [9a] indeed, we had the sentence of death within ourselves...<sup>12</sup>*

Paul wanted his friends in Corinth to know that he had been going through some really tough times. Now we don't know for certain these tough times were - and there have been lots and lots of guesses. But every guess is just that - pure speculation.<sup>13</sup>

What is not in doubt is the severity of the affliction, the depth of his pain.

The word picture he paints is of a boat weighted down beyond its capacity. It is sinking. The word we translate "*burdened excessively*" is used to describe a small donkey sinking to its knees in despair beneath a burden far beyond its strength.

What Paul was going through was so bad that he and the people he was with despaired of life. Apart from divine intervention, Paul had lost hope of surviving.

But, there was a God-sized purpose in Paul's pain.

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<sup>12</sup> In fact, it probably happened as he was on his way from Asia to visit Corinth. The hardship caused him to not come to Corinth, though, and to change his itinerary, a fact that had caused some in Corinth to accuse him of vacillation. This charge is answered in the second part of the first chapter which we will explore next Sunday. But, a large piece of the reason for telling them about his affliction was certainly so that they would understand why he hadn't yet come to see them on this Third Missionary Journey.

<sup>13</sup> Suggestions have varied widely. Some believe that he was referring to fighting wild beasts in Ephesus; others that it has to do with the riot stirred up by Demetrius the silversmith in Ephesus. (but the timing is wrong). Some associate this affliction with the thorn in the flesh of chapter 12, still others with general sufferings and persecutions or some unnamed deadly illness.

If pain is a gift that can teach us how to comfort others, then pain also teaches us - and more effectively than just about any other teaching tool out there - to trust God.

### **Where Else to Turn but God? (vv. 9b-10)**

*The lure of self-reliance (v. 9b)*

***[9b]...so that would not trust in ourselves...***

The life story of Saul of Tarsus - pre-Jesus - is the story of a brilliant, self-reliant young Pharisee. He had the world on a string. With his impressive abilities and his powerful personality there was little that he wanted to do that he couldn't do.

And that's a nice place to be. When we are filled with the confidence that we've got what it takes to make it all happen, life is pleasant. We're energized.

We think, "*My plans + my skills + my stick-to-it-ive-ness + my "can-do" attitude = success.*"

And it is possible to continue in that confidence for a while, even for a good looong while. Paul did.

But one day, on the road to Damascus his trust for eternal salvation shifted to Jesus. And for the rest of his life his trust for life itself increasingly shifted from himself to God.

*Pain CAN drive us to God (vv. 9c-10a)*

***[9c]...but in God who raises the dead; [10] who delivered us from so great a peril of death and will deliver us, He on whom we have set our hope. And He will yet deliver us...***

At some point, we face life-threatening trials or world-shattering events.

When these things come our way we are forced to reckon with the fact that life is bigger than we are. Our most significant challenges are way beyond us. When it comes to the stuff that really matters, "can-do" simply won't do.

When this realization hits us we are left with an enormous decision:

- Will I continue on as before, digging deeper into the well of my own resources to get me through?

Or

- Will I turn away from self-reliance, admit that if God doesn't do something I'm doomed, there's no hope, it'll never happen - and rely on Him to do whatever He deems best?

Throughout our weeks in 2 Corinthians we'll learn about the many self-reliance props that got knocked out from underneath Paul. And what did God use to knock out those props?

Trials, injuries, rejection, disease, hardships, humiliations, disappointments, and discouragements - in short, pain.

Pain was the gift that turned Paul from reliance on self to reliance on Jesus - and THAT is what made all the difference. It was what transformed him into a powerful man who loved God and loved people.

## Conclusion:

At various points in my life I've received really valuable gifts that I didn't value, among them clothes - and pain.

I haven't known pain the way some have known it. But nobody lives long without tasting disappointments and setbacks and pain and I've had close to my share.

I'm sad to say that I haven't always allowed the pain to turn my heart to God. I haven't always been willing to turn from my pain to Jesus.

But, there have been times when I have. And I've discovered that Paul's experience rings completely true. When I have turned to Jesus in my pain, my disappointment, my sadness, He meets me and comforts and strengthens me. And He uses that pain to build my faith.

I've found that nothing builds faith in God, robust trust in Jesus, Christ-reliance like pain.

Paul gives us a snapshot to his own approach to life - the life to which you and I are also invited!

- One, know that in your pain, you can always find God's comfort (His strength, His presence, His perspective).
- Two, know that finding that comfort frees you and equips you to comfort others who are in pain.
- Three, know that when you turn to Jesus in your pain He will use the pain as a tool to deepen and purify your trust.

Now, will you pray for your friends who are experiencing pain?

And will you pray that God will use you to comfort your friends in pain by reminding them of Jesus?

*[11] you also joining in helping us through your prayers so that thanks may be given by many persons on our behalf for the favor bestowed on us through the prayers of many.*