

2Cor 26-10-11a

Good morning, welcome to the Sunday morning services at Grace & Truth Bible Church. We continue our study this morning in 2 Corinthians, picking up toward the close of chapter 1. Let's ask God's blessing on our time of fellowship and study, and we'll begin. Father, we are so grateful for our fellowship, for the encouragement, the prayers, the interest and support that we enjoy across, in some cases, great distances.

We know that it is of your provision that we are able to assemble in this way, and we're grateful for it. We thank you for the passage that is before us and the truth that it contains. We pray that as we investigate it together, God the Holy Spirit will minister to our hearts in an effective way, that it will be meaningful, that it will make a difference, that the stewardship of our time and coming together to engage in the celebration of the Lord Jesus and the study of your word will result in genuine power in our thought life, our spoken conversations and interactions, and our deeds and works as we endeavor to use the time wisely that remains to us before the return of the Lord Jesus.

We thank you for the opportunity, and we pray your blessing on us in this endeavor, in Jesus' name. Amen. 1 Corinthians we have studied.

2 Corinthians is before us. We know that there were three or four letters that were written by Paul in order to encourage and to instruct the Corinthians. Some time has passed since the first letter, and in this one, Paul meets a different kind of challenge.

In 1 Corinthians, you will recall one of the major problems was that of division. I am of Paul. I am of Apollos.

I am of Cephas. I am of Christ. Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? And so on.

And as you move through that book, you end up seeing that there was also a division in terms of their unity, care, and concern for one another. And the passage that is commonly understood to be talking about the celebration of communion is actually talking about not respecting the body of the Lord Jesus, fellow believers, at fellowship meals in general. And Paul uses the words of the Lord Jesus on the night before he was crucified to illustrate the problem and to address it.

But in 2 Corinthians, we saw last time that the apostleship of Paul is being questioned. There are assaults from outside the group and from factions that aren't divided by which apostle or which messenger do we follow, or are we in a sort of class insensitivity? The rich aren't paying attention to the poor. As in earlier days, time has passed, and now there are those who are sowing a different kind of division, the seeds of conflict, by disparaging the source of their initial understanding of Christ and coming to salvation as Gentiles in Corinth and in the surrounding region of Achaia, and those who want to try to follow Paul's teaching.

So, if you can't get people to divide one way, you try to divide them another. Let no crisis be wasted. We'll find something and use it to cause a stumbling block.

This is a satanic, demonic effort, and we see it in our own lives. You can count on there being a formal kind of opposition, a strategic opposition to our lives when we begin to be active and pursue our spiritual identity, our spiritual function. The most effective people are the ones you go after.

You see this in sports team activities. You look at football, and they will double team an effective player because he's the one that is gaining yardage and getting touchdowns, for example. And we shouldn't dread this.

If we find that we are experiencing friction and opposition, especially from outside, it's one thing to have internal problems. We wrestle with our own nature. We wrestle with fellow believers who are near at hand as we are tenderhearted and forgive one another for failures.

But society, culture, more so now with the internet and the ability to interact with people you've never met and don't know. Should you post a comment, someone writes something scurrilous about scripture or about the Lord Jesus, and you interact with them in some way. Some of us do this just to keep our wits and our attention and our focus sharp.

You get pushback, and it is in the public arena. People hope by squashing traditional conservative Christianity in the public forum that it can be banished away and will no longer be a factor in people's thinking. What are we saying? If you are a growing Christian, you will experience not just testing from the flesh, our own flesh, or testing from the interactions we have as we tend to fail and need to find forgiveness with one another.

But the world and the devil are also going to dogpile. They're going to endeavor to suppress us. Anyone who is being effective, if you are a wonderful prayer warrior, if you are working through testing and pressure and hardship, and in some cases the prospect of death that has now become real and feels near at hand, this is a challenge for the mature.

This is an opportunity to sprint to the finish and not to be deterred, not to be discouraged, but to be encouraged by the words of the apostles, which bring the message of Christ in our New Testament in particular, and the comfort from the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, as we saw last time. These are not abstractions. They're not just flowery language to get the letter started.

Paul is appealing to our need for God's comfort, because as we grow in grace and knowledge, we are going to be skylined. We are going to become targets, and this is nothing to fear. This is something to welcome, because it is the presence of God and His power and His grace that will be manifest.

Greater is He that is in you than he that is in the world, and what an opportunity to have a front-row seat to see the defeat of satanic and demonically inspired thinking, to see the defeat of the stratagems of the world, and those who want to take down the reputation of Christianity and of Christians, who want to denigrate it, who want to discredit it. And in us, it is verified. It is shown.

It is demonstrated. And what a privilege to, in that way, share in the sufferings of Christ. This is what Paul has talked about in the section we've already covered, so as we read through it, we saw the greeting in the first three verses.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father. 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 tribulation, so that there is a purpose. We are allowed to experience difficulty.

God regulates, God mediates and moderates how much we face. We are not overwhelmed. We know this from other passages.

We are not tested in a way that is beyond what we can bear. And in it, God comforts us in those tribulations, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any trouble, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. In Paul's case, this is a specific apostolic function.

He uniquely enters into the sufferings of Christ in being opposed by large groups, targeted by formal opposition, and in that way, fulfilling, filling up the sufferings of Christ. But the principle, as we've seen so many times in recent studies, applies to more than just the apostles. He is an example, and we experience our own difficulties.

We experience the comfort and the deliverance, the strengthening, the power of God that comes into those situations, so that in our personal weakness, God's strength is made manifest, just as it was in Paul's thorn in the flesh, which we will see later in this book. And it uniquely qualifies us to speak to those who know us, younger family members as we get older, see a unique peace and a unique strength. It is quiet.

It isn't written on billboards or advertised in videos on the internet, but God will use the steadiness, the rock-solid foundation on which our life is built. As that becomes evident in hardship, there are repercussions. It is a demonstration in real time to others who are in the periphery.

People often say that for evangelism to be effective, people need to give their testimony. Our life will be our witness. We have a hymn that makes that clear.

Our life will be our witness, and scripture shows the way. These scriptures were delivered to us through faithful messengers, the apostles, the apostolic witness, and in particular, the apostle Paul, who is uniquely the steward of mysteries that were heretofore unrevealed, even by the Lord Jesus Christ in his earthly ministry. So, how important is it to understand what it means when we

appeal to our Father, the Father of mercies and the God of all comfort? This is one of the primary ways in which our life takes on meaning and purpose and has effect, has impact, bears fruit that benefits others.

Is God sustaining us through hardship? Some of them seem minor. Especially, we can look at someone else and say, you don't know anything about suffering, let me tell you about mine. Nobody knows the trouble I've seen, but I am always reminded of the weight bench.

If you're not gifted with excessive masculine musculature and you're not natively and genetically engineered for heavy lifting, 120 pounds for a bench press is as much as you can move. To do 10 repetitions with a lightweight, someone can walk along and say 120 pounds? I bench 300 pounds. You're built for it.

What is it that takes us to our maximum capacity and then a little beyond, so that we are drawn toward our Father, who will grant us strength beyond our own ability, beyond the arm of flesh, which as Martin Luther says in a mighty fortress, the arm of flesh will fail you. Actually, that's a different hymn. You get the idea.

The arm of flesh will fail you. You dare not trust your own. Put on the gospel armor.

Pray. When duty calls or danger, you'll never be wanting there. Stand up, stand up for Jesus.

But we are assailed, as a mighty fortress says, by forces dark and grim, and it is the power of God that sustains us. If we could do everything in our own strength, our Christianity would be just a formality, a badge, a piece of identity, rather than something effective and purposeful. So that is how Paul opens this letter, because the Corinthians, Christians in Corinth and surrounding region, have a new kind of challenge.

Paul has worked, Timothy has worked, Titus has worked, Apollos has worked in this region to cement their faith, to unite them and to give them a sense of identity as a group and as representatives of the faith. Now they're being attacked in a similar way that the apostles are attacked. Even the apostles suffered internal division.

You remember the controversy where Paul and his companion part ways because someone is thought not faithful, not ready. But they overcame that by the grace of God. And in the same way, there is tribulation.

And as the sufferings of Christ abound in us, Paul says in verse 5, so our consolation also abounds through Christ. If we are afflicted, it is for your consolation and salvation, which is effective for enduring the same sufferings which we also suffer. We can look for an analog, for a similarity in the scriptural record of the suffering of God's emissaries, God's witnesses, God's messengers.

And as they were opposed and attacked, we can be opposed and attacked. Not always in the

same way, but the strength of God that came into their lives and sustained them and made them effective as witnesses to Jesus Christ, that is available to you and to me as messengers and witnesses, those who can give a reason for the hope that is in us when a situation may look hopeless to others. So this is a part of our purpose.

Our hope for you, verse 7, is steadfast. We know that as you are partakers of sufferings, so also you will be partakers of the consolation. We do not need to dread fear or have a weird part of our brain say, well, maybe I ought to stop studying the Word of God.

I should stop assembling myself with believers because that's going to skyline me for spiritual opposition and persecution. And the devil's going to see me and come after me if I start growing. Maybe I should be in the rear with the gear and hide behind a tree until the battle is over.

Paul says, don't be misled. Entering into the conflict is where we are comforted, encouraged, strengthened, enabled, and empowered and receive the consolation. The reward is greater than the hardship.

The future is wonderful compared to our momentary light affliction, which is working for us an eternal weight of glory, Paul tells the Romans. So now in verse 8, we pick up, we do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, of our trouble which came to us in Asia. Asia, this is a different area than Achaia.

Paul is a traveling missionary. And there's a bit of a smile inducing situation here because Paul says, I don't want you to be ignorant of the hardship we experienced in Asia. But we at this distance are ignorant of the hardship he experienced in Asia.

We don't know exactly what this was. So when he says, as in chapter 11, verse 28 of this book, not only the hardships that he is about to talk about in Asia, he has already got grave concerns and pressures and the weight of responsibility for all of the churches. So in 11, 28, he is going to say all of the other hardships besides the other things which come to me, my deep concern for all the churches.

There is a burden on an apostle to the Gentiles, Paul and his companions, to accomplish their mission. Do we feel a burden to accomplish our mission? If we are here, if we are breathing air, young, early middle age, middle age, later middle age, early elderly, middle elderly, elderly, elderly, if we are here, breathing air, waking up as if a resurrection every morning and God's mercies are renewed. If we are here, God has a purpose for our life.

How interested are we in fulfilling it? In a great majority of our life, we have things that must be done. There is a task list. There are deadlines.

There are things that will go awry and astray if we do not take action to organize them, to accomplish them, to maintain them. This seems to define our life. Our life should be defined by

why has God put me here? The question is not going to be answered by saying there is no good reason.

This would be bordering on blasphemy. God does not know what he is doing. I am still here.

It is an oversight. I am just a face in the crowd because I have a job, and I have bills, and the sun rises, and the sun sets, and I just go through my day. I look at the calendar, do what needs to be done.

I do not see a real purpose in it. I am not a shining beacon of gospel wisdom to anyone. That is faulty thinking.

It is dangerous thinking. What does God say? You have been bought with a price. You are valuable.

You are as valuable as the price that was paid, which is the precious blood of Christ, and we as the redeemed, and particularly as redeemed people who are aware. You would not be here listening to the Word of God if you did not recognize that our life has a purpose beyond what any ordinary, secularized, materialistic American would envision. There is a special purpose for your life and for my life, and as we begin to fulfill that purpose, that is anathema to the enemy.

That is anathema to those who are anti-Christ, who are opponents of God, those who are the last half of Romans 1, who suppress the truth of God in unrighteousness, who, as Jesus says in the Beatitudes, will want to make you suffer for his namesake. Blessed are you when men persecute you for my namesake. Rejoice and be glad.

That is what they did to the prophets. That is what they did to the apostles who are to come. It is helpful always to stop and remember that this life is about the invisible conflict.

We wrestle not against flesh and blood. We are not materialists, and we do not accept materialist answers or materialist viewpoints or secular human ideas of what constitutes success or meaning in our lives. It is the recourse of Scripture, and it comes from messengers who know what they are talking about, such as the Apostle Paul.

So, we do not want you to be ignorant, brethren. This is a great phrase, by the way. Paul uses this quite often, and it is a phrase that is a double negative in English.

In Greek, it is *ou*, which is a negative, and then *gnosis*. *Gnosis* is to know or knowledge, and to put the *a* in front of it, that is where we get the word agnostic. So, we do not want you to be agnostic.

We do not want you to be unaware, which is a kind of a double negative. We are going to see this again in chapter 8, verse 1. Moreover, brethren, we make known to you the grace of God bestowed on the churches of Macedonia. Hidden in that is this same phrase.

We do not want you to be ignorant of the grace of God bestowed on the churches of Macedonia. Paul uses this frequently, Romans 1.13. Now, we are looking at these for a reason. It is not just a list.

I do not want you to be unaware, brethren, that I often planned to come to you, to come to Rome, Romans 1.13. Romans 11.25, I do not desire, brethren, that you should be ignorant of this mystery. Why? I do not want you to be ignorant, in this particular passage, Romans 11.25, I do not want you to be ignorant, lest you should be wise in your own opinion. We need certain kinds of information, so that we do not have a confident, mistaken view.

The purpose for it, Paul is going to encourage these Corinthians and the Achaean by talking about what God has done in Macedonia, as an example. He is going to explain to the Romans why he has been hindered. There are those who are suppressing the truth of God in unrighteousness, and the opposition to Paul is throwing up roadblocks to what he would love to do, to spend time in fellowship, in encouragement, in mutual support, in Romans 1.13. I would not have you ignorant, brethren, in Romans 11.25, otherwise you might be wise in your own opinion.

1 Corinthians 10.1 Moreover, brethren, I do not want you to be unaware that all our fathers were under the cloud, all passed through the sea, and so on. 1 Corinthians 12.1 Concerning spiritual gifts, brethren, I do not want you to be ignorant. That is why we are a Bible church.

There are things that we must know, that we have to know, that we need to know. So, as we face hardship, as we work through affliction, opposition, the daily pressures that face us, what is the antidote? Don't be ignorant. We should know the truth.

Jesus said, when you know it, it will liberate you. We will be released from the kind of entrapment and circumstances that can neutralize us. 1 Thessalonians 4.13 I do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning those who have fallen asleep, lest you sorrow as others who have no hope.

We have hope even in bereavement. 1 Thessalonians 4.14 So here, I do not want you to be ignorant of the hardships, Paul says, that he has experienced in Asia. We were burdened beyond measure, above strength, so that we despaired even of life.

Many of us have had dark periods. Some of us are working through them in real time, in the present moment. It's hard, not easy.

Paul says, don't think you're alone in that. He says in verse 9, we had the sentence of death in ourselves. In order that, I would not have you ignorant, brethren, in order that you will have the kind of knowledge that will help you to rely on the grace of God, to look to the word of God.

What do we do when we're coming to the end of our rope? Stop relying on our rope and look to the infinite grace and mercy and strength available to us from the Father. We had the sentence of death in ourselves so that we should not trust in ourselves, but in God who raises the dead. Don't

have time to review it, but how many times does scripture emphasize, if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved, you will be delivered.

I deliver to you as a first importance that which we also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures, that He was buried and that He rose again the third day according to the scriptures. This is the gospel we preached. This is the gospel you believed, Paul says.

Why such an emphasis on the resurrection? It is the maximum demonstration of the power of God. If God can raise the dead, God can sustain me through the valley of the shadow of death, through the sentence of death, through the discouragement and the darkness that can attend death of our loved ones or our own impending death. This is the real deal.

And if we have lesser challenges, we're just having a bad time in the context of our daily endeavors. Neighbors can be mad at us. Politically opposite people can be mad at us.

The world can be mad at us. We are not pressed to the point of shedding blood. Death is often represented as the shedding of blood.

If God comforts us when we have the sentence of death, then anything short of that is certainly going to be covered by the grace and the presence of God. So how should we live our lives? Looking for opportunities to be sustained by God's grace, not dreading the hardships or focusing on the concomitant suffering, but looking for the ways that God is going to fulfill his promise of comfort, of strength, of abiding presence. So Paul gives himself as an example.

I don't want you to be ignorant. Otherwise, you won't think right. You need to know this.

We were given the sentence of death in Asia. We were burdened beyond measure, above strength, and we despaired even of life. Anyone that has battled serious depression recognizes this description.

There is a kind of darkness. When I was a happy-go-lucky kid, I used to think if my life went horribly wrong, I would just check out. I would go hop a freight.

I would get on a bus. I would go to a new place, get a fresh start, leave it all behind. Why wouldn't I just start over? There is a kind of depression that says, there is no point in doing anything.

I can't escape the demons that are in my soul. I can't escape the sense of futility or the sense of failure or the pain or the loss, guilt, shame, disappointment, the negativity of association and memory, whether it's people or circumstance, and you can just despair of life. There is no point in going on.

This is why we have a significant suicide rate among young people in this country. It is higher than it has ever been, and supposedly we are enlightened and we have counseling and we have

psychology and we have helpful medications that are designed to alleviate this, yet the suicide rate among young people has never been higher. What robs people of hope, of belief that there is a brighter day, just change my circumstances, do something different, become something different, but the attack on everything from the notion of the American dream that this is a land of possibility, that has been heavily attacked, derided, scorned.

The people who pride themselves on being pessimistic and negative refuse to take responsibility for the inevitable depression, discouragement, and checking out attitude of so many in the upcoming generation. We thrive on hope, and as believers, it is the motivation to wake up and face another day. God's grace is sufficient for every need.

I cast my cares on Him because He cares for me. There is grace and opportunity in the present. There is blessing and reward and opportunity in the future.

Why would I not be excited about the upcoming return of the Lord Jesus to spend the eternal future with Him and with those who love Him? We cannot let the world or circumstance or the flesh or the devil rob us of that. So Paul says, we are an example. We have the sentence of death in ourselves that we should not trust in ourselves but in God who raises the dead.

We think, is there a God who cares about me? Does God really know what I'm facing? God seems distant. God seems far away. What specifically about God should we think of in times of dire stress and hardship, disappointment, discouragement, depression? This is the God who raises the dead.

My Heavenly Father raises the dead. Jesus Christ was raised. It was demonstrated in the resuscitation of others.

Old Testament and new. God has the power of life and death. And if I'm alive, it is by God's power.

And God will sustain me to and through my physical death and He will raise me to new life, new hope, new opportunity. If God be for us, who can be against us? Why should I fear what man can do unto me? I belong to my Father in heaven. Verse 11, you also helping together in prayer for us.

This word helping is work type helping, working together. How many times does Paul talk about fellow laborers and you labor with us in prayer? All recognizing the power of God to raise the dead. This goes back to the Old Testament, Deuteronomy 32, 29, Deuteronomy 32, 39.

This is God speaking to Israel. Now see that I, even I am he, and there is no God besides me. I kill and I make alive.

I wound and I heal, nor is there any who can deliver from my hand. First Samuel chapter two, verse six, the Lord kills and makes alive. He brings down to the grave and brings up.

People who say there was no understanding of resurrection in the Old Testament haven't read it. So God's deliverance is going to lift Paul from this so great a death, this sentence of death. He's going to elaborate this a few chapters hence.

When we get to chapter five, verses one through 10, you can put that out in the margin, this sentence of death, he's going to return to this. He is starting to sow the seeds of the subjects he's going to cover in this letter. And this is one of them.

If you want a preview of coming attractions, read that. We know that if our earthly house, this tent is destroyed, we have a building from God, and so on. What do we plow into today's depressing circumstances? What do we counter and meet those sufferings and those hardships and those tribulations with? What's our ammunition? What is the part of the armor of God that enables us to resist the devil so that he flees from us and resist the kind of negative thinking that neutralizes us? It begins with the recognition that our Father has the power of life and death.

And if we are alive, it is by his grace and power, and it is for his purpose. We are here for a reason. And part of that is that in our weakness, God's strength is made manifest.

Manifest means angels see it and people see it. We may not always be aware of who is watching or how they are watching or why they're watching. But if we are here, our life is a demonstration of God's power.

And we need not wonder why we're here. We know why we're here. We are here to be exemplars, to be an exhibit of what the grace and the power of God can do in a wide variety of circumstances.

Whether we are young and vigorous, whether we are middle-aged and fading, whether we are old and feeble, we are a proving ground where the grace of God and the strength of God and the power of God are manifest as a witness. That is what to concentrate on. Where do I get that power of God to come in so that I am an example? This is what Paul is talking about in this first chapter, and we'll return to it after the break.