

2 CORINTHIANS 1:1-11
PASSING ON THE COMFORT

Today, we begin a series of sermons on 2 Corinthians. Over the next few weeks, we will take a piece of this letter each Sunday and try to discover what it is all about; what does it say to us about God? What does it say to us about Church? What does it say to us about ourselves? What does it say to us about being a Christian and having faith? Perhaps we'll do about half of the letter and then have a break; that should take us up to about Easter. It's a little while since we've done something like this in preaching, so let me explain why we do this: first of all, it allows the Bible to set the agenda for our thinking; by taking a Bible book like this, we are able to see what the Bible says and it then sets the agenda for our thinking; secondly, it saves you from hearing my pet subjects or me returning to the same passages over and over again. I have never preached through 2 Corinthians; I've only dipped into it in the past and that only occasionally, so I'm quite excited about doing this, as something new for me.

In this *Biblefresh* year, it is important to let the Bible speak to us. For some, it is an old book: 1611 is where it came from, the AV and its language and 1611 is where it belongs, they think; it is seen as a historical curiosity, but no more than that; people are happy that the language of the AV has shaped something of our language and culture, but they see it as no more than that. I believe that the Bible is the living word of God for His Church and that as we read the Bible for ourselves and as we hear it preached in Church, its teaching comes alive for us; we encounter the living God, the risen Christ in pages of this book; we see what God is like and we hear about what God has done in pages of this book. So it comes alive for us, shaping our view of God, shaping our faith, shaping our life, so that in 2011 we live as the people God wants.

Corinth was city of about 750,000 people, so it was a bit bigger than Edinburgh. It was a seaport, ideally placed to be at the centre of trade both East-West through the Mediterranean Sea and North-South from the Mediterranean inland. It was a wealthy city, as you might expect, a middle-class city, an educated city, a mixed city as people from all over the Roman Empire had come to settle in Corinth. It was also a city with a dark side to it; as a legendary place for bad behaviour, and a place where many people worshipped the old religion of Greek and Roman gods, so it was full of idols. There was a Church there, but not without its problems. Paul wrote four letters to Corinth, two we have, two are missing; from the first we have, we know that this was a Church divided at times over different leadership styles – some preferred Peter, some the more educated Apollos - and Paul was not always flavour of the month. We also know that he visited Corinth twice and that this letter was preparing for a third visit. But the second visit had been a painful one, he'd had to deal with some problems and it had not been easy and some members of the Church were left angry with Paul! There was a group of other visitors to Corinth who were telling the Church that Paul was not really an apostle at all and they couldn't trust him! All of this is going on in the background of this letter.

"What is God like?" That question was asked by a seven-year old boy in a primary school class one day. We'd been doing a lesson on Solomon and at the end this hand went up to ask a question and this was the question: "Please sir, what's God like?" The bell rang and we weren't given the chance to answer, but it's a great question. Some people will say 'don't bother to tell me deep things about God; just read the Bible passages that tell me how to live my life!' Well, the problem with that is, the Christian gospel only tells us how to live once it has told us what God is like and what God has done. "*Praise be...*" (1:3) – this is what God is like! There are

three things: 1)He is Father of Jesus Christ; 2)He is full of compassion; 3)He is the God who stands alongside us in every circumstance of life. Because God is these three things, Paul writes to Corinth to comfort them in their troubles! God is our Father because He is first of all Jesus' father; God knows us and what our life is like because Jesus has come into the world; God is able to save and deliver us because Jesus is raised. We'll come back to that later.

Do you know the story of Ernest Shackelton's trip to the Antarctic in 1914? He sailed South in a ship called *Endurance* built in 1912, and described as "perhaps the strongest wooden ship ever built." He sailed from Plymouth in August 1914 and called at Buenos Aires and South Georgia before arriving in the Antarctic in December. The ship was quickly surrounded by ice, fairly loose at first in the Weddell Sea, but then the wind made the ice pack round about ship so that eventually ship could not move except when the ice moved; the pressure on the ship just kept increasing and increasing till finally the pressure of the ice around ship made her sink in November 1915. The pressure built and built until it was too much even for the strongest hull and it cracked under pressure and the ship sank. Modern ice-breakers are specially designed to sail through the ice: they have a hull that is specially strengthened to withstand the pressure of ice and the hull also has a particular shape to rise above ice and not get caught up in it.

'*Troubles*' comes from a word meaning 'pressures'. Seventeen times in these five verses, Paul refers in one way or another to the troubles that people face, to the pressures that people, even Christians, can find themselves facing. I don't think I've ever seen a society under so many pressures as ours: parents are under time pressure to take their children to one activity after another; people at work are under pressure to get the job done or to work all kinds of long hours because the boss demands it and they don't want to run the risk of losing the job, so people struggled to get to work through the snow; people under financial pressure to make ends meet, perhaps because they're being paid less, or their salary is frozen yet the bills go up; then there are pressures that come from people being ill, caring for someone who is ill; some are part of the sandwich generation, people caring for their parents and their children; I heard of a new one recently – the club sandwich generation, people who are caring for their parents, their children and their grandchildren. There are pressures that come from being bereaved, or from suffering ill-health, or a whole host of other things. Christians come under pressure to give up our faith, or to compromise our standards and values from a society that is increasing secular. All these pressure weigh down on us. What do we do? How do we survive? The first answer that Paul gives is "by knowing what God is like!"

"*Praise be...*" (1:3f) "*Just as...*" (1:5) This is just a brilliant notion of God; take the picture of *Endurance* and think of yourself under that kind of pressure. What is God like? What does God do? Well, first of all, He feels with us – that's what compassion means! God feels our pressures! This stands in contrast to many people's notion of God, indeed, even to the Greek and Roman gods of Corinth, who were, of course, indifferent to human pain and suffering. The God and Father of the Lord Jesus knows what it is like because the Son has lived in our world and endured the pressures we face and endured death itself. So God feels with us when we are under pressure. The second thing we learn of God is that He stands beside us when we're under pressure: comfort literally means 'stand beside', so God stands beside us when we're under pressure, stands with us to encourage and strengthen us. Thirdly, God delivers us, sets us free, rescues us. This is our God; this is what God is like for us!

Paul tells us of his own experience: "*We do...*" (1:8f) We don't know what Paul faced in Asia; he doesn't tell us specifics. But we do know that it must have been serious;

he describes himself as 'under the sentence of death' and look at effect that it had on him – “we *despaired...*” This is no game that Paul is playing here; his life is threatened and in danger. But even there, God has been with him: “*this happened...*” (1:9f) God is the God of resurrection, so the sentence of death can be overcome and God has delivered Paul from whatever it was that hurt him so badly. He is confident that God will continue to deliver him, both in the immediate future and in all the days to come; God will continue to stand beside him and deliver him from the pressures he faces. He has come to rely on God.

Two things we are to do:

1. Rely on God – Abraham Lincoln is quoted as saying “I have often been driven to my knees in prayer because I had nowhere else to go.” Do life’s pressures lead us to rely on God? It is not always the case; sadly some people give up on God in the midst of life’s pressures long before God has ever given up on them; they don’t wait around long enough to see the comfort and blessing of God; the pressures seem too much and they don’t have the patience to wait on God; so they drift away. We have to make room to rely on God, room to trust God in all that life throws at us. That is so much easier said than done, but when we have a God who loves us “constantly and unfailingly, not spasmodically and intermittently” (Hughes) then our reliance on God is both justified and rewarded. God can be relied on completely; He knows what we face; He stands with us as we face it; He is able to help us overcome the pressures and troubles of life. Make room to rely on God.

2. Comfort others – What God has done for us, we are to do for others. Christians are more connected to one another than we sometimes realise. We are to feel with one another; stand beside one another; encourage one another in the pressures of life. Christian leadership is for the sake of others: “*If we...*” (1:6) Nothing about Paul’s leadership was for himself; it was all for other people; when he was blessed it was so that he could bless others; if he was under pressure, he could learn how to support others. For those of us in positions of Christian leadership, nothing of our leadership is for ourselves; it is for sake of others, so that we can bless others and be better at standing beside others in need. Every Christian is to have this God-shaped ministry of standing alongside others and encouraging others with the grace and strength that God has given us. The Christian has received; the Christian is to pass on to others what we have received; the Christian is blessed in order to be a blessing to others. We are intimately connected to one another, to rejoice with those who rejoice, to mourn with those who mourn, to pray for one another, to encourage and support one another, showing love to one another in way that God has loved, comforted, and had compassion on us.

All this begins with what God is like! He is a Father who loves us; He is the Son whose sufferings on the cross save us; He is the God who knows the pressures of life and who feels with us and stands beside us so we are delivered, we overcome, we are not crushed. The one drawback with using the Shackleton’s *Endurance* as an illustration is that the ship was crushed and sank; we are not crushed, but saved. Make space to rely on God for all of your life; stand beside others in way that God stands beside you! There is so much in our world that makes us despair, but here is hope; here is life; here is grace and peace for us all to have and to pass on to others. God is the Father of Jesus; God feels with us in the pressures of life; God stands beside us under these pressures. How good is our God!