

A Sermon  
Rev. W. Kevin Holder  
Grace Baptist Church  
Bryans Road, Maryland  
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## **God's Power on Display**

2 Corinthians 1:1-11

Plans were underway for a major church growth conference to be held in Corinth. The planning committee was composed of representatives from churches throughout the Mediterranean region. When some folks suggested that Paul be invited as one of the primary speakers, there was widespread agreement. But you could also sense some discomfort and awkwardness among the representatives from the congregations in the host city.

Finally, one of them, a key layperson and prominent leader, spoke up. "Don't get me wrong," he said. "Most people in the houses churches of Corinth are enthusiastic about Paul and supportive of his ministry. But there's still a vocal minority that has trouble with Paul's gospel and the way he presents it."

"Could you elaborate?" asked the chair of the planning committee. "Well," said the gentleman, "it's just that Paul's understanding of the gospel, and the way he communicates it, is so bound up with suffering and weakness and afflictions. Some of our church members, along with a few traveling missionaries, think we should present the message of Christ in a way that's more positive, upbeat, and appealing to an upwardly mobile congregation, and to a local population that's aiming for success in life."

"So if I'm hearing you correctly," said a representative from Ephesus, "some in the Corinthian fellowship don't find Paul's message very attractive to their ears, and don't think it will connect with the local culture, right?" "Yeah, that's a big part of it. Plus—and this may sound sort of trivial—Paul's not exactly the most glamorous image to have on our billboards and posters, or on the home page of our conference website. Some of our folks in Corinth would prefer someone who's not only a more polished speaker, but who's also taller, has more hair, whiter teeth. You know, someone who radiates a sense of Christian happiness."

Clearly, there were some influential members of the church in Corinth who didn't think that Paul made a good ambassador for victorious Christian living. The way they saw it, neither the man nor the message fit the bill. No doubt, statements like those we hear in this morning's Scripture passage fed into their perception of Paul as a weak and unimpressive representative of the Christian life. Note that just three verses into his letter, Paul is already describing God as "the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort" (v. 3), which could only mean that Paul is once again facing trials and enduring troubles. This seems to be a way of life for him.

The terms Paul chooses have to do with physical and emotional hardship, as well as the suffering caused by persecution. He talks about the overflowing sufferings of Christ, and his own personal distress as a messenger of Christ. Paul even cites one situation in particular where he and some of his coworkers faced a severe, life-threatening affliction in Asia. He doesn't spell it out in detail, but he does want the Corinthians to know that it was about as bad as things can get. In fact, he and his companions were convinced that they were going to die.

Now we know from his writings that Paul encountered and endured a whole range of troubles and dangers during his mission and ministry. At several points in this particular letter, Paul lists some of the hardships and tribulations that he has survived. So I guess we shouldn't be surprised that here in the opening chapter, right off the bat, Paul refers in passing to a situation where he had basically concluded that he wouldn't live to see another day.

And yet, what he thought was the end turned out not to be. Paul survived this ordeal. Not because of his own strength, willpower, and determination. Rather, because of the life-giving power of God. Paul writes, "Indeed, in our hearts we felt the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead." (v. 9). Notice how Paul speaks of God using resurrection terminology. The God who brought Paul and his fellow workers out of this peril is the God "who raises the dead." In other words, Paul reflects on his situation in Asia, and interprets that experience, through the lens of Easter. What happened to him was a case of being rescued from death. God's resurrection power was at work, delivering Paul from the grave.

That whole experience not only gave Paul encouragement for the present but also hope for the future. "He has delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us. On him we have set our hope that he will continue to deliver us, as you help us by your prayers" (vv. 10-11a). So just as Christ's resurrection points forward to the future consummation of God's saving purposes, Paul sees his experience of being at death's door as pointing toward God's future faithfulness. If God delivered Paul in that situation, then God can be counted on to deliver Paul in the future.

It's remarkable how Paul looks at so many events, situations, and circumstances in his life and ministry, and sees the death and resurrection of Jesus being replayed. When he looks back on what happened in Asia, Paul sees the same saving power at work there that was at work in the cross and resurrection. This means that Good Friday and Easter set the pattern for how Paul lives his life and spreads his message.

And what's the outcome of all this? What happens when life and ministry and church are conformed to the pattern of Jesus' death and resurrection? According to Paul, the glory of God is revealed. The power and presence of God are displayed. Thanksgiving and praise are given to God, and not to ourselves.

Paul restates this message in a different way later in the letter. In chapter 4, he talks about his ministry as a great treasure, something incredibly precious. And yet, this treasure is stored in human vessels, with all their weakness and brokenness. Paul has in mind particularly his own life of suffering. He acknowledges to the Corinthians that he may not look like much on the outside, but his unimpressive ministry and his unpolished message are the vehicle through which the saving power of God, who gives life to the dead, is revealed and mediated to them. "But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us" (v. 7).

Marva Dawn tells about being on a choir tour that made a stop in India. While there she learned that at the train stations, there are people selling tea in little clay cups. Once you start drinking your tea, the train is already underway, so when you finish drinking your tea you just throw your cup out the window. Not surprisingly, a certain distance from the train station is a pile of shards from all the tea cups that have been tossed out. All those pieces are then gathered up and eventually reshaped to make more tea vessels. What matters most isn't the vessel itself but the tea inside.

This doesn't mean that you and I as human beings, in our life in Christ and our ministry of the gospel, are worthless and disposable. But it does mean that what matters most is the glory of God, the presence of God, in Christ. And the presence of Christ in us. In one respect, that sounds very attractive and exciting. After all, what could be more energizing than having the very life of Christ in us? What follower of Jesus wouldn't want that? As Christians, our desire is for the resurrection power of God to indwell us, to animate us, to shape us, and to be conveyed through us to others.

But as Paul reminds us, the life of Christ is inseparable from the death of Christ. He tells the Corinthians that yes, through Christ our comfort and hope overflow. But this only happens to the extent that the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives as well. This can happen in the form of physical, emotional, and psychological distress and afflictions that we experience, as well as troubles that we face by being faithful to Christ in a world that's resistant to the reign of God. Whatever form the suffering takes, our primary response shouldn't be, "Well, this kind of thing shouldn't happen to someone who has the Spirit of God in them." Or, "How can I avoid this or escape from it?" Or, "Lord, get me out of this as quickly and as painlessly as possible." Rather, our primary response should be, "God, how can I be more connected and conformed to the death and resurrection of Jesus through this?" "How can you work in this to teach me a deeper faith?" "How can you use this to display your life-giving power?"

I recently received an email updating a prayer request from a fellow pastor who serves one of our churches in the Potomac Baptist Association. In addition to a recent bout of his own with cancer, his wife has been battling the disease for some time now as well. In his prayer request, he said that she "has been moved from curative care to palliative care. This means they are no longer focusing on the cancer but on pain management and quality of life. It does not mean we are on our last leg yet! In the midst of the suffering we feel more alive and more connected to God than ever before!" I was especially struck by that last statement, and the testimony it provides to how God can use suffering to draw us deeper into the death and resurrection of Christ.

Now don't get me wrong. I'm not trying to glorify suffering per se. I'm not saying that we should seek out trials, hardships, and afflictions as signs or evidence of a higher level of spirituality. I'm simply saying, with Paul, that God's ability to deliver us is usually disclosed in the midst of our own despair. In other words, it's through our human weakness that God's saving power and strength are revealed. That's the way God likes to work.

That's why some people in the church at Corinth had trouble with Paul, both as a person and as a proclaimer of the gospel. They struggled to understand how Paul's life of suffering and the victorious power of God could coexist. They couldn't take the reality of Paul's weakness and the reality of Spirit-filled ministry, and hold them together. In their minds, it just didn't seem to fit. But in God's way of doing things, the two fit perfectly. God's way is reflected in the words of Hudson Taylor, a pioneer missionary to nineteenth-century China, who wrote: "God chose me because I was weak enough. God does not do his great works by large committees. He trains somebody to be quiet enough, and little enough, and then he uses *him*."<sup>1</sup>

My desire and prayer is that God will take you and me, and our congregation, in all our weakness, our sufferings, our insufficiency, and our struggles, and through these things display his power and presence. May God's glory be revealed among us and through us to the world, so that praise and thanks will be given to him.

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Michael P. Knowles, *We Preach Not Ourselves: Paul on Proclamation* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2008) 54.