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Down—But Not Out!

2 Corinthians 1:1-11

"You seem to imagine that I have no ups and downs, but just a level and lofty stretch of spiritual attainment with unbroken joy and equanimity. By no means! I am often perfectly wretched and everything appears most murky."

So wrote the man who was called in his day "The Greatest Preacher in the English-speaking World,"—Dr. John Henry Jowett. He pastored leading churches, preached to huge congregations, and wrote books that were best-sellers.

"I am the subject of depressions of spirit so fearful that I hope none of you ever get to such extremes of wretchedness as I go to."

Those words were spoken in a sermon by Charles Haddon Spurgeon whose marvelous ministry in London made him undoubtedly the greatest preacher England ever produced.

Discouragement is no respecter of persons. In fact, discouragement seems to attack the successful far more than the unsuccessful; for the higher we climb, the farther down we can fall. We are not surprised then when we read that the

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great Apostle Paul was "pressed out of measure" and "despaired even of life" (2 Cor. 1:8). Great as he was in character and ministry, Paul was human just like the rest of us.

Paul could have escaped these burdens except that he had a call from God (1:1) and a concern to help people. He had founded the church at Corinth and had ministered there for a year and a half (Acts 18:1-18). When serious problems arose in the church after his departure, he sent Timothy to deal with them (1 Cor. 4:17) and then wrote the letter that we call First Corinthians.

Unfortunately, matters grew worse and Paul had to make a "painful visit" to Corinth to confront the troublemakers (2 Cor. 2:1 ff). Still, no solution. He then wrote "a severe letter" which was delivered by his associate, Titus (2:4-9; 7:8-12). After a great deal of distress, Paul finally met Titus and got the good report that the problem had been solved. It was then that he wrote the letter we call Second Corinthians.

He wrote the letter for several reasons. First, he wanted to encourage the church to forgive and restore the member who had caused all the trouble (2:6-11). He also wanted to explain his change in plans (1:15-22) and enforce his authority as an apostle (4:1-2; chaps. 10—12). Finally, he wanted to encourage the church to share in the special "relief offering" he was taking up for the needy saints in Judea (chaps. 8—9).

One of the key words in this letter is *comfort* or *encouragement*. The Greek word means "called to one's side to help." The verb is used 18 times in this letter, and the noun 11 times. In spite of all the trials he experienced, Paul was able (by the grace of God) to write a letter saturated with encouragement.

What was Paul's secret of victory when he was experiencing pressures and trials? His secret was *God*. When you find yourself discouraged and ready to quit, get your attention off of yourself and focus it on God. Out of his own difficult

experience, Paul tells us how we can find encouragement in God. He gives us three simple reminders.

Remember What God Is to You (2 Cor. 1:3)

Paul began his letter with a doxology. He certainly could not sing about his circumstances, but he could sing about the God who is in control of all circumstances. Paul had learned that praise is an important factor in achieving victory over discouragement and depression. "Praise changes things" just as much as "Prayer changes things."

Praise Him because He is God! You find this phrase "blessed be God" in two other places in the New Testament, in Ephesians 1:3 and 1 Peter 1:3. In Ephesians 1:3 Paul praised God for what He did *in the past*, when He "chose us in [Christ]" (v. 4) and blessed us "with all spiritual blessings" (NASB). In 1 Peter 1:3 Peter praised God for *future* blessings and "a living hope" (NASB). But in 2 Corinthians Paul praised God for *present* blessings, for what God was accomplishing then and there.

During the horrors of the Thirty Years' War, Pastor Martin Rinkart faithfully served the people in Eilenburg, Saxony. He conducted as many as 40 funerals a day, a total of over 4,000 during his ministry. Yet out of this devastating experience, he wrote a "table grace" for his children which today we use as a hymn of thanksgiving:

Now thank we all our God,
With heart and hands and voices,
Who wondrous things hath done,
In whom His world rejoices!

Praise Him because He is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! It is because of Jesus Christ that we can call God "Father" and even approach Him as His children. God sees us in His Son and loves us as He loves His Son (John 17:26). We are "beloved

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of God" (Rom. 1:7) because we are "accepted in the beloved" (Eph. 1:6).

Whatever the Father did for Jesus when He was ministering on earth, He is able to do for us today. We are dear to the Father because His Son is dear to Him and we are citizens of "the kingdom of His dear Son [the Son of His love]" (Col. 1:13). We are precious to the Father, and He will see to it that the pressures of life will not destroy us.

Praise Him because He is the Father of mercies! To the Jewish people, the *phrase father of means* "originator of." Satan is the father of lies (John 8:44) because lies originated with him. According to Genesis 4:21, Jubal was the father of musical instruments, because he originated the pipe and the harp. God is the Father of mercies because all mercy originates with Him and can be secured only from Him.

God in His grace gives us what we do not deserve, and in His mercy He does not give us what we do deserve. "It is of the Lord's mercies that we are not consumed" (Lam. 3:22). God's mercy is *manifold* (Neh. 9:19), *tender* (Ps. 25:6), and *great* (Num. 14:19). The Bible frequently speaks of the "*multitude of God's mercies*" so inexhaustible is the supply (Pss. 5:7; 51:1; 69:13, 16; 106:7, 45; Lam. 3:32).

Praise Him because He is the God of all comfort! The words *comfort* or *consolation* (same root word in the Greek) are repeated 10 times in verses 1-11. We must not think of *comfort* in terms of "sympathy," because sympathy can weaken us instead of strengthen us. God does not pat us on the head and give us a piece of candy or a toy to distract our attention from our troubles. No, He puts strength into our hearts so we can face our trials and triumph over them. Our English word *comfort* comes from two Latin words meaning "with strength." The Greek word means "to come alongside and help." It is the same word used for the Holy Spirit ("the

Comforter") in John 14—16.

God can encourage us by His Word and through His Spirit, but sometimes He uses other believers to give us the encouragement we need (2 Cor. 2:7-8; 7:6-7). How wonderful it would be if all of us had the nickname "Barnabas—son of encouragement"! (Acts 4:36)

When you find yourself discouraged because of difficult circumstances, it is easy to look at yourself and your feelings, or to focus on the problems around you. But the first step we must take is to look by faith to the Lord and realize all that God is to us. "I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my help. My help cometh from the Lord, which made heaven and earth" (Ps. 121:1-2).

Remember What God Does for You (2 Cor. 1:4a, 8-11)

To begin with, *He permits the trials to come*. There are ten basic words for suffering in the Greek language, and Paul used five of them in this letter. The most frequently used word is *thlipsis*, which means "narrow, confined, under pressure," and in this letter is translated *affliction* (2:4; 4:17), *tribulation* (1:4), and *trouble* (1:4, 8). Paul felt hemmed in by difficult circumstances, and the only way he could look was up.

In verses 5 and 6, Paul used the word *pathema*, "suffering," which was also used for the sufferings of our Saviour (1 Peter 1:11; 5:1). There are some sufferings that we endure simply because we are human and subject to pain; but there are other sufferings that come because we are God's people and want to serve Him.

We must never think that trouble is an accident. For the believer, everything is a divine appointment. There are only three possible outlooks a person can take when it comes to the trials of life. If our trials are the products of "fate" or "chance," then our only recourse is to give up. Nobody can

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control fate or chance. If *we* have to control everything ourselves, then the situation is equally as hopeless. But *if God* is in control, and we trust Him, then we can overcome circumstances with His help.

God encourages us in all our tribulations by teaching us from His Word that it is He who permits trials to come. He encourages us further by reminding us that *He is in control of trials* (1:8). "We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired even of life" (NIV). Paul was weighed down like a beast of burden with a load too heavy to bear. But God knew just how much Paul could take and He kept the situation in control.

We do not know what the specific "trouble" was, but it was great enough to make Paul think he was going to die. Whether it was peril from his many enemies (see 1 Cor. 15:30-32; Acts 19:21ff), serious illness, or special satanic attack, we do not know; but we do know that God controlled the circumstances and protected His servant. When God puts His children into the furnace, He keeps His hand on the thermostat and His eye on the thermometer (1 Cor. 10:13; 1 Peter 1:6-7). Paul may have despaired of life, but God did not despair of Paul.

God enables us to bear our trials (2 Cor. 1:9). The first thing He must do is show us how weak we are in ourselves. Paul was a gifted and experienced servant of God, who had been through many different kinds of trials (see 4:8-12; 11:23ff). Surely all of this experience would be sufficient for him to face these new difficulties and overcome them.

But God wants us to trust *Him*—not our gifts or abilities, our experience, or our "spiritual reserves." Just about the time we feel self-confident and able to meet the enemy, we fail miserably. "For when I am weak, then am I strong" (12:10).

When you and I die to self, then God's resurrection power can go to work. It was when Abraham and Sarah were as

good as dead physically that God's resurrection power enabled them to have the promised son (Rom. 4:16-25). However, "dying to self does not mean idle complacency, doing nothing and expecting God to do everything. You can be sure that Paul prayed, searched the Scriptures, consulted with his associates, and trusted God to work. The God who raises the dead is sufficient for *any* difficulty of life! He is able, but we must be available.

Paul did not deny the way he felt, nor does God want us to deny our emotions. "We were troubled on every side; without were fightings, within were fears" (2 Cor. 7:5). The phrase "sentence of death" in 1:9 could refer to an official verdict, perhaps an order for Paul's arrest and execution. Keep in mind that the unbelieving Jews hounded Paul's trail and wanted to eliminate him (Acts 20:19). "Perils by my own countrymen" must not be overlooked in the list of dangers (2 Cor. 11:26).

God delivers us from our trials (2 Cor. 1:10). Paul saw God's hand of deliverance whether he looked back, around, or ahead. The word Paul used means "to help out of distress, to save and protect." God does not always deliver us immediately, nor does He deliver each of His children in the same way. James was beheaded, yet Peter was delivered from prison (Acts 12). *Both* were delivered, but in different ways. Sometimes God delivers *us from* our trials, and at other times He delivers us *in* our trials.

God's deliverance was in response to Paul's faith, as well as to the faith of praying people in Corinth (2 Cor. 1:11). "This poor man cried, and the Lord heard him, and saved him out of all his troubles" (Ps. 34:6).

Finally, *God is glorified through our trials* (2 Cor. 1:11). When Paul reported what God had done for him, a great chorus of praise and thanksgiving went up from the saints to

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the throne of God. The highest service you and I can render on earth is to bring glory to God, and sometimes that service involves suffering. "The gift bestowed" refers to Paul's deliverance from death, *a* wonderful gift indeed!

Paul was never ashamed to ask Christians to pray for him. In at least seven of his letters, he mentioned his great need for prayer support (Rom. 15:30-32; Eph. 6:18-19; Phil. 1:19; Col. 4:3; 1 Thes. 5:25; 2 Thes. 3:1; Phile. 22). Paul and the believers in Corinth were helping each other (2 Cor. 1:11, 24).

Just recently, a missionary friend told me about the miraculous deliverance of his daughter from what was diagnosed as a fatal disease. At the very time the girl was so ill, several friends in the United States were praying for the family; and God answered prayer and healed the girl. The greatest help we can give to God's servants is "helping together by prayer."

The word *sunupourgeo* translated "helping together" is used only here in the Greek New Testament and is composed of three words: with, under, work. It is a picture of laborers under the burden, working together to get the job accomplished. It is encouraging to know that the Holy Spirit also assists us in our praying and helps to carry the load (Rom. 8:26).

God works out His purposes in the trials of life, if we yield to Him, trust Him, and obey what He tells us to do. Difficulties can increase our faith and strengthen our prayer lives. Difficulties can draw us closer to other Christians as they share the burdens with us. Difficulties can be used to glorify God. So, when you find yourself in the trials of life, remember what God is to you and what God does for you.

Remember What God Does through You (2 Cor. 1:4b-7)

In times of suffering, most of us are prone to think only of ourselves and to forget others. We become cisterns instead of

channels. Yet one reason for trials is so that you and I might learn to be channels of blessing to comfort and encourage others. Because God has encouraged us, we can encourage them.

One of my favorite preachers is Dr. George W. Truett, who pastored the First Baptist Church of Dallas, Texas for nearly 50 years. In one of his sermons, he told about an unbelieving couple whose baby died suddenly. Dr. Truett conducted the funeral and later had the joy of seeing them both trust Jesus Christ.

Many months later, a young mother lost her baby; and again, Dr. Truett was called to bring her comfort. But nothing he shared with her seemed to help her. But at the funeral service, the newly converted mother stepped to the girl's side and said, "I passed through this, and I know what you are passing through. God called me, and through the darkness I came to Him. He has comforted me, and He will comfort you!"

Dr. Truett said, "The first mother did more for the second mother than I could have done, maybe in days and months; for the first young mother had traveled the road of suffering herself."

However, Paul made it clear that we do not need to experience *exactly* the same trials in order to be able to share God's encouragement. If we have experienced God's comfort, then we can "comfort them which are in any trouble" (2 Cor. 1:4b). Of course, if we have experienced similar tribulations, they can help us identify better with others and know better how they feel; but our experiences cannot alter the comfort of God. That remains sufficient and efficient no matter what our own experiences may have been.

Later in 2 Corinthians 12, Paul will give us an example of this principle. He was given a thorn in the flesh—some kind of

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physical suffering that constantly buffeted him. We do not know what this "thorn in the flesh" was, nor do we need to know. What we do know is that Paul experienced the grace of God and then shared that encouragement with us. No matter what your trial may be, "My grace is sufficient for thee" (12:9) is a promise you can claim. We would not have that promise if Paul had not suffered.

The subject of human suffering is not easy to understand, for there are mysteries to the working of God that we will never grasp until we get to heaven. Sometimes we suffer because of our own sin and rebellion, as did Jonah. Sometimes we suffer to keep us from sinning, as was the case with Paul (2 Cor. 12:7). Suffering can perfect our character (Rom. 5:1-5) and help us to share the character of God (Heb. 12:1-11).

But suffering can also help us to minister to others. In every church, there are mature saints of God who have suffered and experienced God's grace, and they are the great "encouragers" in the congregation. Paul experienced trouble, not as punishment for something he had done, but as preparation for something he was yet *going to do*—minister to others in need. Just think of the trials that King David had to endure in order to give us the great encouragement that we find in the Psalms.

Second Corinthians 1:7 makes it clear that there was always the possibility that the situation might be reversed: the Corinthian believers might go through trials and receive God's grace so that they might encourage others. God sometimes calls a church family to experience special trials in order that He might bestow on them special abundant grace.

God's gracious encouragement helps us *if we learn to endure*. "Patient endurance" is an evidence of faith. If we become bitter or critical of God, if we rebel instead of submit, then our trials will work *against* us instead of *for* us. The

ability to endure difficulties patiently, without giving up, is a mark of spiritual maturity (Heb. 12:1-7).

God has to work *in* us before He can work *through* us. It is much easier for us to grow in knowledge than to grow in grace (2 Peter 3:18). Learning God's truth and getting it into our heads is one thing, but living God's truth and getting it into our character is quite something else. God put young Joseph through 13 years of tribulation before He made him second ruler of Egypt, and what a great man Joseph turned out to be! God always prepares us for what He is preparing for us, and a part of that preparation is suffering.

In this light, 2 Corinthians 1:5 is very important: even our Lord Jesus Christ had to suffer! When we suffer in the will of God, we are sharing the sufferings of the Saviour. This does not refer to His "vicarious sufferings" on the cross, for only He could die as a sinless substitute for us (1 Peter 2:21-25). Paul was referring here to "the fellowship of His sufferings" (Phil. 3:10), the trials that we endure because, like Christ, we are faithfully doing the Father's will. This is suffering "for righteousness' sake" (Matt. 5:10-12).

But as the sufferings increase, so does the supply of God's grace. The word *abound* suggests the picture of a river overflowing. "But He giveth more grace" (James 4:6). This is an important principle to grasp: God has ample grace for our every need, *but He will not bestow it in advance*. We come by faith to the throne of grace "that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need" (Heb. 4:16). The Greek word means "help when you need it, timely help."

I read about a devoted believer who was arrested for his faith and condemned to be burned at the stake. The night before the execution, he wondered if he would have enough grace to become a human torch; so he tested his courage by putting his finger into the flame of the candle. Of course, it

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burned him and he pulled his hand back in pain. He was certain that he would never be able to face martyrdom without failing. But the next day, God gave him the grace he needed, and he had a joyful and triumphant witness before his enemies.

Now we can better understand 2 Corinthians 1:9; for, if we could store up God's grace for emergency use, we would be prone to trust ourselves and not "the God of all grace" (1 Peter 5:10). All the resources God gives us may be kept for future use—money, food, knowledge, etc.—but the grace of God cannot be stored away.

Rather, as we experience the grace of God in our daily lives, it is *invested into our lives as godly character*. (See Rom. 5:1-5.) This investment pays dividends when new troubles come our way, for godly character enables us to endure tribulation to the glory of God.

There is a "companionship" to suffering: it can draw us closer to Christ and to His people. But if we start to wallow in self-pity, suffering will create isolation instead of involvement. We will build walls and not bridges.

The important thing is to fix your attention on God and not on yourself. Remember *what God is to you*—"the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies, and the God of all comfort" (2 Cor. 1:3). Remember *what God does for you*—that He is able to handle your trials and make them work out for your good and His glory. Finally, remember *what God does through you*—and let Him use you to be an encouragement to others.