

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: Jesus' GLORIOUS New Way

(Studies in 2 Corinthians 1-4)

Embracing a Surprisingly Valuable Gift

(Intro to letter; 2 Corinthians 1:1-11)

Study #1

Introduction: Gifts we have known and not so much loved...

It's no secret to those who know me that fashion is not my forte. If you like what I'm wearing, thank Kathy, because the outfits I put together for myself, generally aren't very put together. (Fortunately, most everything goes with blue jeans.)

Sadly, this lack of appreciation for and lack of taste in fashion has been a source of some frustration to the two women in my life. For most of my adult life, my loving wife, Kathy, and before Kathy, my long-suffering mother.

Mom cared for me, but not as much about my wishes. So, when I was a kid, she would often supply me with clothes at Christmases and birthdays. I was mostly unappreciative.

Yes, I should have greatly appreciated what a great gift clothing was. Without clothes, school would have been even more of a challenge than it already was. And I do truly appreciate Kathy's gifts of clothing these days.

But my earlier attitude toward clothes-as-gifts highlights that some things that come our way are not appreciated in the moment as much as they are on down the road.

Kids like to get the newest toys, tech or otherwise. They may not appreciate that you just opened a 529 college fund for them - but they will later.

Maybe you can recall gifts you've received that didn't quite hit the mark. You were told, "*You'll appreciate this later...*" - but what you wanted was a bike.

If you have ever gotten a gift you knew was valuable, but didn't especially want, you will "get" what the Apostle Paul says today.

He is writing about a gift that is unappreciated, but that is surprisingly valuable.

There's no need to try to build suspense, so I'll go ahead and tell you that the gift Paul writes about today is the gift of pain, along with its cousins: crushed hopes, broken dreams, disappointment, frustration, hardships and trials.

Today, Paul exposes us to an advanced lesson in life and in Christian discipleship. We'll see that God - being God - can use our pain redemptively.

Today, too, we begin a series of studies in what became, many years ago, among my favorites of all of Paul's letters - 2 Corinthians.

Jeff and I are going to be dividing the letter into sections and the first section we're looking at consists of the first four chapters.

In these chapters, Paul highlights the surpassing power of Jesus' glorious NEW WAY over what had come before (the Moses Way).

Before we dive into the letter, let's transport ourselves from 2022 back to the first century Graeco-Roman world in which this letter was written.

We often refer to a set of verses in the Bible as a "passage."

So, it will help us a lot to understand the Bible's message if we will spend just a few short minutes traveling the *passageway* from today back to then.

Background: The Way to Corinth (Acts)

Background from Acts (the Missionary Journeys)

Journeyman Paul

We know that Paul took three extensive trips we call *missionary journeys*. You can read about all three of them in the book of Acts.

We trace the first trip in Acts 13 and 14. On that journey, Paul, with his good friend, Barnabas, spread the Gospel to four cities in Asia Minor (Modern-day Turkey): Pisidian Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, Derbe.

That first trip had nothing to do with Corinth. But the second trip did. And, in Acts 16-18, we learn about Paul's travels with Silas and Timothy to Philippi, Thessalonica, Berea, Athens, and Corinth.

Corinth was an impressive city, a world class city, an ancient equivalent of New York or Tokyo. In the first century, Corinth was a hustling, bustling, energetic place. Corinth was where the action was.

What Kind of a City was Corinth?

Geography, demographics

By the time Paul came to Corinth, there had been a city on the site for over eight hundred years.

It had great harbors that controlled sea trade on the Aegean Sea. And, with great roads, Corinth controlled the land trade route from Achaia into Macedonia. It had a very robust economy.

It was the capital city of Achaia. And it was a very diverse city made up of Greeks, Asians, Jews, immigrants from Italy, Roman government officials and businessmen of all stripes.¹

¹ In addition to the two hundred thousand free citizens in the city, there were five hundred thousand slaves.

Corinth was also a center for the performing arts and for the entertainment industry, including sports, of which the Isthmian Games (like our Olympics), were a very important part.²

When it came to many of the things cities boast about, Corinth excelled. When it came to moral and spiritual matters, not so much.

Morality, spirituality

In Roman times, the city was notorious as a place of materialistic indulgence. And, as in most major cities of the day, paganism and idolatry and sexual license were rampant.

Corinth outdid other cities in vice.³ Her reputation led to the coining of a word to describe a sexually perverted life: *to corinthianize*.

Into Corinth's darkness, Paul and his friends brought the light of Jesus' Gospel.

The Progress of the Gospel in Corinth

Paul in Corinth (Acts 18:1-17)

Traveling from Athens⁴ on the Second Missionary Journey, he joined up with fellow tentmakers, the husband/wife team of Priscilla and Aquila.

These three, along with Timothy and Silas, told the Corinthians all about Jesus.

Initially, there was really good receptivity to the message. The new believers there started meeting together to worship, to enjoy community, and to serve. In other words, a church was formed.

² The Isthmian Games were second in importance only to the Olympic Games held every four years to honor Zeus at Mt. Olympus.

³ As just one example, one thousand prostitutes served the goddess Aphrodite in her temple.

⁴ 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 that audience. As he wrote in 1 Corinthians, he came to Corinth determined to know nothing except Christ, and Him crucified (1 Cor. 2:2).

And then, as was so often the case, there was outright rejection and persecution.⁵

Paul stayed in Corinth long enough to establish the fledgling church. They had the Gospel, the Holy Spirit, and apostolic teaching. But, after a year and a half there, Paul left to serve Jesus elsewhere.

The church at Corinth - Paul's "challenging" church

About three years later, when he was in Ephesus (on the third missionary trip), Paul got troubling reports about problems in the church at Corinth.

These were serious problems. There were rumors of divisions and party spirit, immorality, lawsuits, and drunkenness 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.

Some months later, still on that third missionary trip, he again got reports of problems in the first church of Corinth.

So, he sat down and wrote another letter. We call this letter (uncreatively) 2 Corinthians.⁶

The distinctive nature of 2 Corinthians⁷

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.⁸

⁵ In this, Corinth presents a pretty typical picture of how the Gospel was received on Paul's journeys.

⁶ Many scholars believe that Paul wrote 2 Corinthians from the city of Philippi.

⁷ 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.

⁸ "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

In this letter, we get to see Paul's profound emotional depth. And, in this letter, he gives us a refreshing, inspiring, and utterly personal look at what life with Jesus is really all about.⁹

The purpose of 2 Corinthians

To defend his apostleship

Paul wrote his first letter to Corinth to address the problems I just pointed out. He wrote this second letter to address issues more directly related to himself.

Some in Corinth questioned his motives and his credentials. They thought he wasn't strong enough to be an apostle, seeming to despise him because he didn't throw his weight around. Paul wrote 2 Corinthians as a defense of his apostleship.

To define authentic Christianity

But his detractors were also contradicting what Paul had taught about the faith.

So, in addition to validating his claim to apostleship, he also wrote this letter to defend what I refer to as *authentic Christianity*.¹⁰

We listen as he greets the church in his second letter to them.

An Apostolic Greeting (1:1-2)

By whom? To whom? (v. 1)

Christian believer in whatever circumstances, whether of exaltation or of affliction, he may find himself." (Morris, p. xvi). Another writes, "Paul seems to be constantly on the brink of tears throughout this book."

⁹ If you've only known Paul from, say, Ephesians (a wonderful letter!), coming across 2 Corinthians is like having read the works of Einstein on relativity - and then coming across love letters he wrote to his wife.

¹⁰ I am indebted to the ministry of Ray Stedman for his insights into the first chapters of 2 Corinthians and for his description of this section of the letter as "Authentic Christianity."

[1] Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and our brother Timothy...¹¹

Identifying the author

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

In ancient letters, the writer would identify himself first. And here Paul self-identified and claimed to be an apostle **by God’s will**,¹² as in “My apostleship did not come from myself or from the churches. So, my message carries weight. It has teeth.”

And he identifies the letter’s recipients.

Identifying the recipients

[1] Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and our brother Timothy, to the church of God which is at Corinth with all the saints who are throughout Achaia¹³

To call someone a *saint* is not to call someone a little angel, or even exceptionally moral. The Corinthians weren’t that, nor are we Northwest-ians.

To be a *saint* is to belong to God. The term *saint* in the New Testament is code for “believer in Jesus.”

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 certain that this letter is intended for Saint Dave and Saint YOU as much as it was for the saints in Corinth.

¹¹ 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 referred to as an apostle.

¹² There is polemic here, as his God-ordained apostleship was certainly being undermined by the opponents at Corinth.

¹³ Achaia was the ancient name for what we know as Greece today.

Paul’s greeting ended with a prayer.

A Prayer That Always “Fits” (v. 2)

[2] Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.¹⁴

Grace is God’s favor, poured out on us through Jesus. *Peace* is what we experience as a result of God’s grace.

And THAT is Paul’s “Hello!” The first words of the body of the letter are joyous praises to God.

Wounded Healers (vv. 3-7)

The God of All Comfort (vv. 3-4a)

[3a] Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort...

The Bible refers to the one true God by many names. He is the Holy One, the God Who Sees, the Almighty, the Sovereign, the Judge.

Add these names to our collection of God’s names. Paul calls Him “**the Father of mercies and God of all comfort.**”¹⁵

Those names highlight a side of God that we may not dwell on all that often. A softer side. And it is a distinctively Christian understanding of who God is. God cares.¹⁶

¹⁴ 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.

¹⁵ In the Old Testament as well as in the New, God is pictured as coming alongside His people and offering comfort, encouragement, and mercy. See Psalm 103 and the comparison of a father who has compassion on his children to the Lord, who cares for His people. When Jesus was preparing His disciples for life after He was gone, He promised that the Holy Spirit would come to them and “comfort” (strengthen/encourage/exhort) them in His absence.

¹⁶ Jesus wept at the tomb of Lazarus because He entered into the suffering of those who were weeping over Lazarus’ death. (John 11)

And this softer side of God is precious to us. We especially value it at certain moments. We appreciate God's softness when we suffer.

This God of mercy and comfort, **[4a] comforts us in all our afflictions...**

When we trace through Paul's life, we read about lots of times when he needed comfort because he suffered a lot.

From the moment of his encounter with Christ on the road to Damascus, Paul suffered and faced troubles.

These troubles ranged from the normal pressures of life to severe persecution to relational strains to excruciating physical pain. And Paul received the comfort and the mercy of God **"in"** these afflictions.

Sure, there were a few times when God delivered Paul **"out of"** his pain. But mostly, God comforted Paul **"in"** his pain.

We need to understand that God's comfort doesn't necessarily involve rescue. His comfort is much more than a pat on the back and a reassuring, *"There, there."* But it doesn't mean the absence of pain.

This is something that doesn't get a lot of press, but it should.

God doesn't promise to deliver us from pain. He doesn't promise that we won't experience pain.

He does promise that He will be with us in our pain and will strengthen us to be faithful while in pain. He will equip us with what we need to keep on keeping on, even while in pain.

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

Jumping forward to 2022, there are, for each of us, those 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 good friend. It could involve a financial strain or getting pushed around at school.

As he wrote, Paul was experiencing affliction. And his testimony was that God was providing him comfort. Not comfort by removing him from his afflictions, but comfort **"in"** his affliction.

God can be extremely creative in how He doles out His comfort. It might be by...

...giving an extra measure of a sense of His presence.

...using a friend who brings encouragement.

...reminding us of truth from Scripture.

...rescue.

God knows how to bring comfort to His suffering people. And when we turn to God in our pain, we open the door for Him to give us the comfort we need at that time.

Paul knew what it was to suffer, and he knew what it was to be comforted by God. He also knew about another benefit that comes from the comfort God gives.

The Maker of All Comforters (vv. 4b-5)

[4b] so that we will 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 get 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 a very common theme in the Bible, and we will see it repeatedly as we work our way through 2 Corinthians.

We receive something from God so that we can pass that something on to others. We are blessed to be blessings to others.

In fact, this is how Paul explained his own sufferings.

An “Others-Centered” Approach to Life (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 partners in our sufferings, so also you are in our comfort.¹⁷

Sometimes it is tough to figure out what is the main theme of a passage in the Bible. Sometimes, it’s easy. Like here.

Over the space of seven verses Paul uses the word “comfort” ten times. His theme is comfort, and here is the progression of thought:

- Hard times come to us all.
- In these hard times, God comforts us in any of the ways by which that comfort might come - 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.

The process that ends with others being comforted all starts with the gift nobody wants. It is the surprisingly valuable gift of pain.

Pain, in and of itself, doesn’t produce holiness and it doesn’t necessarily produce ministry.

It is possible that pain will produce bitterness, move us to be withdrawn and to isolate from others.

But the glorious message is that when we turn to God in our pain, He will super-size our capacity to comfort and strengthen people around us who are going through tough times.

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

...only divorced people can comfort people going through a divorce.

...only those with substance abuse in their past can help drug abusers or alcoholics.

...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 Jesus’ comfort in your affliction and have a heart to comfort the afflicted, God can use you to comfort the people He sends your way. You can become a wounded healer.

Paul brings his thought about pain to a conclusion by telling us that it can bring another surprisingly valuable gift.

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

Overwhelming Hardships (vv. 8-9a)

[8] For we do not want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters, of our affliction which occurred in Asia, that we were burdened excessively, beyond our strength, so that we despaired even of life...

Paul didn’t hide from his friends in Corinth that he and his ministry partners had been going through some really tough times.

We don’t know what these tough times were - and there have been lots of guesses - and every guess is just that. Pure speculation.¹⁸

What is not in doubt, though, is the severity of the affliction, the depth of Paul’s pain.

The words picture a boat weighted down beyond its capacity. It is sinking.¹⁹

¹⁷ Hope is FIRM - (Greek, *βεβαιος*) - used of a tree root, and of a ship’s anchor. Paul’s hope for the Corinthians standing firm for Jesus is firmly grounded.

¹⁸ Suggestions have varied widely. Most believe that he was referring to something that happened during the riot in Ephesus, but it is hard to make the timing fit. 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.

What Paul was going through was so bad that he and the people he was with despaired of life. He **[9] had the sentence of death within** him.²⁰

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

If the gift of pain can equip us to comfort others, then pain also can equip us - more effectively than just about any other 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 who had the world on a string.

With his impressive abilities and his powerful personality and his keen intellect there was little that Paul would have wanted to do that he couldn't get done.

That's a pleasant place for any of us to be.

It's great to have the confidence that we have the competence to do what needs to be done.

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

It is possible, for some people, to continue in their confidence in their competence for a while, even for a loooong while. Like Paul did.

But, by God's grace, it happens to us all that we eventually see that we've been leaning our ladder against the wrong wall. There is no future in trusting in ourselves.

The day that Paul saw this was the day he went blind for a few days. Jesus spoke to him, called Paul to Himself. That was when Paul came to the end of self-reliance, understood that life could only be found in Jesus, and shifted from trusting in himself to trusting in Jesus.

It was pain - the pain of seeing how wrong he had been - that brought him to the point of trusting in Jesus. God graciously used pain to keep Him trusting in Jesus.

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

[9b]...so that we would not trust in ourselves, but in God who raises the dead; [10] who rescued us from so great a danger of death and will rescue us, He on whom we have set our hope. And He will yet deliver us...

This is another of pain's glorious purposes.

When you or I face something life-threatening or disrupting or in any way painful, it becomes obvious 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. At some point, "can-do" can't.

Throughout our study of 2 Corinthians, we'll learn about the many self-reliance props that got knocked out from underneath Paul. And what God used to knock out those props were trials and injuries and insults. Pain.

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

¹⁹ The Greek word that we translate **"burdened excessively"** is used to describe a small donkey sinking to its knees under a burden far beyond its strength.

²⁰ I suspect that this hit Paul 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. He told them about his affliction so that they would understand why he hadn't yet come to see them on this Third Missionary Journey.

Conclusion:

At various points in my life, I've received 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 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 at those times, I have seen the truth of what Paul writes here.

When I have turned to Jesus in my pain, my disappointment, my sadness, He meets me and comforts and strengthens me.

He has sometimes used the comfort I have known from Him to breathe comfort into the life of someone else.

And He has used pain to build my faith. I've found that God has few tools in His toolbox more powerful than pain to produce robust trust.

It is significant that Paul wraps up His thought about pain here with a request for prayer from his friends in Corinth.

[11]...you also join in helping us through your prayers, so that thanks may be given by many persons in our behalf for the favor granted to us through the prayers of many.

I think it's only fitting that we end up our time together in prayer to God that each of us would apply what Paul has written to our own lives.

Father,
Remind us to turn to you in our pain, eager to receive mercy and comfort in whatever way You want to give it to us.

Having been comforted, please use us to bring comfort to those who are suffering.

And, use whatever suffering we experience to draw us near to You, to grow our faith, so that we won't trust in ourselves, but in You, the God who raises the dead!

In Jesus' Name, Amen.