Pressure, Comfort, Purpose
2 Corinthians 1:1-11

We're starting our new series on Paul's second letter to the church at Corinth. And I'm sure you've heard of the Second Child Syndrome. The first child in a family *is* the first child, so they get all the privileges and responsibilities of being the oldest. And the third child, they're the baby in the family, and everyone loves them so they get all the free passes, all the indulgences that go with being the youngest. But the second child is the second child - left out, neglected, forgotten! Anyone here a second child?

And everyone knows First Corinthians - because it's got that love passage in it, and it's about spiritual gifts and head-coverings and sex - but 2nd Corinthians, or 2nd Peter, or 2nd John? They're the neglected second child. So we're going to put that right. A few months back we did first Corinthians and now - in honour of second children everywhere - we're doing second Corinthians.

And it's probably the most emotional of all Paul's letters, because you get to see into his heart and his inner turmoil, as he experiences and expressed the whole range of emotions - from the heights of joy and confidence, down into the valleys of deep hurt.

And Paul is hurt for a reason. There are people in the church who have been attacking and undermining him: 'He's not a leader. He's not got the qualities, or the vision, to be a leader. He's too simple, he can't make his mind up about stuff, in fact, he can't even string his words together properly; and he's theologically weak, to say nothing of being physically unattractive. It should be us leading you, not him.' And tragically, some in the church were listening to them.

As one commentator says, Corinth was Paul's most-demanding of church plants.

And he planted it around 52AD, spending about a year and a half there. Two years later, from Ephesus, he wrote 1 Corinthians to them. And shortly after that, he visited them again, hoping to sort out a disciplinary issue in the church. But that visit was pretty much disastrous, in fact, in 2 Corinthians 2:1 he calls it a 'painful visit', with the church in open rebellion against him. So, back in Ephesus, Paul wrote another letter to them, warning them they needed to repent and it was a heavy letter. Paul says he wrote it in anguish and tears, and sent it back to Corinth with Titus. Sadly, that letter has been lost, but it seems that the majority of the church heard it and repented.

But not everyone. And so now, from Macedonia, Paul writes Second Corinthians.

And it's because conflict is the background that Paul talks about Christian character and Christian leadership - and that God works, not through men's power, or grandiose visions, or charismatic leaders, but though human weakness.

And that was no less counter-cultural then than it is today, because Corinth was *the* place to be. If Athens was the sleepy university city, Corinth was this vibrant, grab-hold-of-life, entrepreneurial centre of east-west, north-south international trade. And if Lausanne is home to the International Olympic Committee, Corinth was home to the Bi-annual Isthmian Games. So the city hummed with wealth, and competition and self-promotion. Because if you wanted to make it in life, you went to Corinth,

The thing is, if you swim in that kind of a culture, Monday to Saturday, you're going to bring it into a church on a Sunday. You're going to think the Christian life should be marked by success and prosperity. And Christian leadership should be entrepreneurial and self-promoting.

Paul knew the reality is very different.

The Reality of Suffering
Just look at the number of times in this opening passage that Paul mentions affliction and suffering. It's 'affliction… affliction…. sufferings… afflicted… sufferings… sufferings… affliction… utterly burdened… despair… sentence of death…'

And the word Paul uses for affliction is a word meaning pressure, a burden, stress pressing down on you. And you don't have to be the apostle Paul to have experienced that, do you? This week I received an email from a friend describing just how tired and weary she is from her work, and how the constant demands and pressures weigh heavy on her. And as a result, she's leaving.

And work pressure can do that, can't it? And you can lie in bed at night, with your thoughts and mind spinning.

Or think of having a family and kids, and you're trying to be a good parent and do things right, but it's hard and you feel the weight of it. Or there's the inner burden of relationships - because that's part of what Paul's experiencing. Someone you care about has or is making bad choices, and it hurts you, and it weighs heavy. Or maybe you face the pressure and the consequences of choosing to live a life of integrity - and you lose your job; or your friends.

James and John, two of Jesus' disciples, once asked Jesus if they could sit at his right and his left when he came into his kingdom. Basically, they wanted the top jobs, the best seats; they wanted to be 'up there', because they conceived of leadership like that. And Jesus' response? 'Are you able to drink the cup that I drink?" (Mk 10:38) The cup of suffering? 'Sure', they go. And Jesus says, "The cup that I drink *you will drink*." Why? Because suffering is just a normal part of being a Christian. Paul wrote to Timothy, 'Indeed, *all* who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted' (2 Tim 3:12) - because there's just going to be this clash of cultures and allegiances. The king you serve is different.

And so when, like Paul, the pressure you're under, the inner burden you feel, the affliction you're facing is because you're a Christian, because you're identifying with Christ in a culture, or a workplace, or a family, or a friendship group that doesn't, Paul says in v5, 'We share abundantly in Christ's sufferings.'

But Paul doesn't want us to get all romantic about that. As he looks back on his time at Ephesus he says, v8, 'We do not want you to be unaware, brothers, of the affliction we experienced in Asia. For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt we had received the sentence of death.'

Ever felt burdened to the point of breaking? Sometimes, when you're in pain, a nurse might ask you, 'on a scale of 1 to 10, how bad is it?' And you go, it's a 7. Well, if you'd asked Paul, 'on a scale of 1 to 10 how bad's the pressure? A 7?' He'd have said, '7? How about 14.' Because he felt burdened beyond breaking point. Because at Ephesus he'd faced individuals *and mobs* attacking him verbally, legally, and physically. And that took an emotional, mental toll. Because being constantly attacked does, doesn't it?

And Paul felt like he'd received the death sentence, that this time he wasn't going to come through. Have you ever experienced that? You feel so broken, so empty, that you just can't see a way out, and despair comes in?

You see, this kind of affliction is like an assault on our inner sense of, "I can do this", isn't it? Soul-crushing pressure and stress is exactly that - soul-crushing. And Ephesus had pushed Paul to breaking point and beyond. And now he has to deal with Corinth and the attacks, and his concern for the church there.

How are you supposed to deal with this kind of pressure? How are you supposed to keep standing, keep serving, keep loving, keep giving, when you feel emotionally spent?

Well, look how Paul does it.

The God You Can Know

Verse 1, 'Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God.' And that's not a throw away line, because what an apostle looked like, and whether or not Paul *was even* an apostle, were some of the key issues in the church.

And an apostle simply means one who is sent as an official representative. So when Paul writes, 'Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus', he's saying, 'I'm writing to you as one sent by Christ Jesus as his official representative.' And then he adds, 'by the will of God.'

You see, Paul knows that his life and ministry - his identity - do not ultimately depend on his abilities, or others' opinion. When he was attacked and hurt and feeling the weight of it all pressing down on him, the thing that gave him the strength to keep standing and not buckle was: God has chosen me and called me to do this. It's God who's put me here. And his will is sovereign over everything, because he's sovereign over everything.

Now, you may or may not have a sense that God's called you to the role or the place you're in now. But you can be certain that you are where you are because that's where God has put you. And when the circumstances of your life, or the behaviour of other people, call into question your work, or your value, or even your identity, if you're a Christian you can know that you've been chosen and called by God - not as an apostle, but as his child, and not because you're so gifted, but because God is so gracious. And you can face the pressure of what you're facing now, not because you're so strong, but because he is so sovereign.

Look at v3, 'Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies.' Now, Paul has been through one of the most difficult, testing, trying periods of his life, a period when he felt totally overwhelmed. And what does he do? He blesses God! How can he do that? Because he's God focused. Because his God is simply bigger than anyone or anything else. And that's how sorrow becomes joy, and despair becomes hope, and giving up becomes holding fast.

Ok, but it's not just that he's sovereign, he's also a Father. He's the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, Paul says. And it's because the Lord Jesus was and is the Son of God, and the Son who gave his life to save us, that His Father becomes our Father, the Father of all mercies. The Father who Paul, and you and I, can know holds us in his loving, merciful hands, whatever the pressure we're under.

And when you have a Father you also have a family. Go back to v1, 'Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, *and Timothy our brother*.' Paul was no Lone-Ranger Christian, was he?

Not for him the 'I'm not into church' thing, 'I can meet with God out in nature, or on my own.' Paul keeps going when he feels like he can go no longer, because he's got community, he's got family, he's got a Christian brother in Timothy standing beside him.

And if we're to stand when we're feeling crushed, we need that too.

The problem is, at the time, you can feel like you need the opposite can't you? You can feel broken to the point of just wanting to withdraw. And you go to church, or home group, and someone says something clumsy, or the sermon or study's uninspiring, and you just want to be alone.

But look how Paul describes the church in Corinth: v1, 'To the church *of God* that is at Corinth, with all *the saints* who are in the whole of Achaia.' And this church was about as messed up as a church could get, and they'd hurt Paul about as much as a church can. But despite all their faults Paul knew these people were God's people. They were saints - not 'oh, she's such a saint! She's practically perfect!', but saints as in 'set-apart by God for himself'. And so he never gave up on them.

And the dangers are real if you do. I mean, in those nature documentaries, which is the antelope that gets taken down by the lions? It's the one who gets separated from the rest, isn't it? And we're just easier picking if we get separated from the flock. So, especially when you're down, don't withdraw, surround yourself with brothers and sisters who'll help you stand.

So, God is Sovereign and he's our Father, but v3 again, he is also the 'God of all comfort.'

Now, when a child's young they'll often have a comforter, won't they? Something you give them to cuddle when they're upset or that'll help them sleep. Our girls' had Wakey Rabbit - a stuffed rabbit, BababbabaA - a stuffed dog, Little Ted, a stuffed ted, and Vomit Cloth - which was a vomit cloth. And if they needed comforting, you'd go get them their comforter.

That's not the kind of comfort Paul's talking about here. When he says, v3-4 that God is the 'God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction' he uses the word for encouragement. It's the same word Jesus uses of the Holy Spirit when he says I'll send you another comforter, another counsellor, another one to come and stand by you. So, God's comfort is not a sedative, it's not a blanket, it's not a spiritual benzodiazepine, it's something that stiffens your resolve, that makes you feel strength coming back in, that even though you're bloodied and bruised you get back up and back into the fight. It's encouragement that gives you courage.

I heard an interview with an American last week as the situation in Afghanistan was deteriorating, and President Biden had yet to make a statement. And the person interviewed said, 'I just want to hear from the commander-in-chief; I just want to know that he's got this covered.' Well, God is the God of all comfort because he's the comforter, the courage-giver-in-chief and he has got your situation covered. And Paul knew that by deep personal experience: v5, 'For as we share abundantly in Christ's sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too.'

You know, if you're not yet a Christian, you can view God as distant, even withdrawn. But that's not the God of the Bible. The God Paul knew, the God you and I can know, is the God who matches every affliction and every suffering with an overflow of his comfort.

But how can you experience that and know that?

Well, look what he says there in v5, 'So *through Christ* we share abundantly in comfort.' You see, through his affliction and his suffering at the cross he has born our greatest burden, the weight of our sin, and he's opened the way to the Father of all mercies and God of all comfort. And when you know that Christ loves you so much he'd die for you, even though you could never deserve it, it tells you, he's got you safe. However bad things are at the moment.

And as you grasp that, affliction can begin to do something incredibly positive in your life.

The God You Can Trust
You see, when you know that God's sovereign, and your Father, and the Comforter-in-Chief, you can trust him that he has a purpose for the pressure you're under. A purpose for others and a purpose for you.

Look at v4, He 'comforts us in all our affliction, *so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction,* with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.'

Now, when you're going through something heavy, you can struggle to understand what God's wanting to achieve *in* your life through it all. But you *can* know what he's wanting to achieve *through* your life in the lives of others. Because as you experience God's comfort and courage to stay in the fight, you're going to have this well to draw from to comfort and encourage others when they go through it.

When Naomi went off to serve at the refugee camp, as Su and I hugged her goodbye we said, 'Blessed to be a blessing'. And I know that's a cliché, but it's also true. You and I have been hugely blessed, and entrusted with much. Why? To live lives of leisure. No. To be a blessing to others. But that is still true even when life is not leisured and you're going through times of serious pressure. Because we're comforted to be a comforter. We suffer for the suffering. Because that's what Jesus did for us. That through us, Christ's comfort might overflow to others as it did through, Paul. Verse 6, 'If we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation; and if we are comforted, it is for your comfort.'

If you think about it, why are support groups - for patients, or the bereaved, or the abused, so often manned by those who've been through those things themselves? Because, when you've suffered you have sympathy for those who are suffering. And wisdom. And those who are suffering know that sympathy and wisdom's not theoretical. They know they've walked the path.

And if I were to ask you, 'have you ever been inspired or encouraged by the example of someone who's gone through something, but gone through it with dignity and poise and faith?', most of us, if not all of us, would say 'sure'.

So the qualification for Christian service is not that you go from one triumph to another. It's that you've suffered and experienced God's comfort. It's why Paul can say to these Corinthians, v7, 'Our hope for you is unshaken, for we know that as you share in our sufferings, you will also share in our comfort.' Because if true Christianity is marked by suffering, it's also marked by unshakeable hope - that God has a purpose in pressure.

And not just for those you help in the future, but for you now in the midst of it. Verses 8-9, 'For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired even of life itself. Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death. *But that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead*.'

You see, God allows you to feel physically or emotionally weak, so you can grow spiritually strong. Because it's when you feel helpless that you turn to the One who can help. It's when you feel unable that you turn to the One who's able. It's when you're brought to the end of yourself that you find the One beyond yourself. And it was staring death in the face that taught Paul to rely on the One who brings life out of death.

The writer, Dorothy Sayers, spoke about living through the Second World War and how a superficial faith is fine in the good times, but when you're sat in a bomb shelter, with your gas mask in your hand, Fear comes in 'and sits down beside you. "What" he demands rather disagreeably, "do you make of all this? What do you believe? Is your faith a comfort to you under the present circumstances?"[1]

And Paul would say 'Yes! Because our faith is in the God of resurrection power.' And you and I can say, 'yes!' Because we're relying on the God who through all history has been making the impossible possible, and barren women give birth, and a boy slays a giant, and men escape the flames, and lions' mouths are shut. Because God is always bringing life out of death. Because he's the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, raised from the dead. As John Chrysostom, the 4th century Church Father said, 'Resurrection… happens every day.'

So, when you're embattled and everything seems lost, trust him. He has a purpose for others in what you're going through, so you can encourage them when they're going through it. But he also has a purpose for you. As Paul says in v10, 'On him we have set our hope.'

[1] Guthrie