

Thank God, it's going to be okay

2 Corinthians 1:1-11

The world is not the same place today as it was even half a week ago. The spread of COVID-19 (Coronavirus) is now pandemic at many levels - officially, at the level of world health. There's a pervasive spread of the virus itself, but also of the fear it is breeding, the dominance it has over the public imagination, and the space it takes in people's news feeds, minds, motivations and choices.

The bad news is that suffering is increasing, and it's going to increase more. More people will suffer a virus, and for many that will be a brief inconvenience, although for some it will be much more serious than that. Public services will be stretched. For those of you working in the NHS, as well as many in other sectors, there is a burden and pressure you will suffer.

But the good news is that comfort is increasing too, and it's going to increase more. That's the good news that Christians have and need to hear again right now. And that we need to live out and share right now. In 2 Corinthians 1:1-11, God tells us not, 'I'm going to stop you suffering.' Instead He tells us what good things He is bringing about, and going to bring about, through such a season.

In v.2, at the heading of his letter, Paul writes what he almost always wrote to the churches - 'Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.' This is what God, the One who wants you to know Him as Father, wants to give you through Jesus Christ. Grace - that is, a free, unmerited gift. And peace - a wholeness of being in relationship to God, those around you, and your circumstances.

So let's have a look at what grace - what gifts - God means to give to you and through you as the world goes through a time of increasing suffering. First of all, God wants to pour out increasing comfort to you. In vv.3-7, Paul uses the word 'comfort' nine times! No need, I suspect, to work very hard to dig out what the key word is here in your Life Groups this week.

To suffering people, God wants to give comfort. Not sparingly, either. v.3 says He is 'the Father of compassion, and the God of *all* comfort.' v.4, He 'comforts us in *all* our troubles.' There's a matching of suffering with comfort from God. As suffering *increases*, so too God's comfort to us *increases*.

Whether it is the impact of COVID-19 on your health, work, family or plans; or whether what's bigger in your mind is the pain of your grief, the drag of your chronic condition, the sharp break in your relationship, the traumatic experience you've just gone through - God is He who wants to, and can, pour out all comfort on your suffering.

And it's in understanding God as Father that this comfort comes. It's God's Fatherhood that's expressed three times in vv.2-3. He's the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. And because of Jesus, He adopts those with faith in Jesus to become our Father too. And as Father - the very best kind of Dad, whatever your experience of a Dad is - He's someone to run to with the pain and suffering.

A Dad to experience the embrace of as you pray. A Dad to weep with. A Father to tell how frightened you are, and to look to hopefully for some reassuring word or action. A Father to hide in the folds of His arms from the scary thing in front of you. A Dad whose love for you, whose warmth and presence, powerfully dissolves fear and pain.

That's absolutely my experience. Is it yours? That when I come to be in the presence of God my Daddy, just being present *with* Him changes the whole outlook on the situation before me. Fears are stilled, strivings cease. I am truly filled with comfort when I come to God as Father. I've no idea how people who aren't Christians manage their fears and sufferings. I wish, I pray, I long, especially now, for them to know what we know. The God of *all* comfort.

But the comfort is not just for you. vv.4-6 talk about comfort flowing to us, with this very purpose, that it might *overflow* out to others around us who are suffering too. At this time of suffering for many, whether now or on the horizon, God means to bring an overflow of comfort, through His suffering people, to each another, and to a world that needs to become familiar with God-comfort.

The sense of hope, perspective, joy... the peace that we walk with at work or school or in the family in these days... that real, experienced, consoling comfort of God needs to be apparent to those around us.

We will have resources to comfort others - sick, seriously sick, fearful or faint hearted - only when we take time in God's presence to claim the comfort He wants to give us there. To still us, settle us, set our feet on solid rock. So for your sake, but also the sake of those God's placed you with in such a time as

this, receive God's full comfort that you may pour some out from that infinite resource.

And not only is our comfort given to us *for the benefit of those around us* - actually, the very things we're suffering that we need comforted for are given to us *for the benefit of those around us too*. In v.6, Paul says, 'If we are distressed, it is for your comfort and salvation; if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which produces in you patient endurance of the same suffering we suffer.'

It's seeing *you* going through the mill, and what a game changing difference God makes to that, that brings hope to those around you. And more than that - even possibly salvation. Could it be that in this season, when you suffer in health or workload or in whatever way God allows to happen, the gift of that is that some around you will come to trust in the same God that you do?

None of this will be wasted. Nothing of the suffering or the comfort that you experience will be wasted - it will all be shared with others (as v.7 says) - the suffering and the comfort - so that others may be comforted in their pain, and may even, through seeing yours and how God gives you nine times more comfort (and yet more), that perhaps even now many will turn to God. Now is the time to lean on Him as Father, and learn to speak of that to others who find themselves asking us.

How does it change your suffering to think of it as God's gift to others?

How can you pass on the comfort God has given you to others around you?

In v.8, Paul says, 'We don't want you to be uninformed about the hardships we suffered...' He wants his readers to know what's been happening, and to know what that's been like for them.

This week, I've been learning about what's been happening for some of you in the wake of COVID-19, and what it's been like for you. Some of you working for the NHS are under huge pressure, like that described in v.8 - '... far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired...'

Things are moving fast, and decisions are having to be made very quickly. There are, and will be more, ethical dilemmas about how to allocate resources in an increasingly burdened hospital. GPs are on standby to have their holidays cancelled, and overwhelmed by patient enquiries. Although right now, where we are, things are not yet as they are further south, that

could change very quickly, and the scale of what is before our healthcare workers is daunting to say the least.

Care home managers have tough decisions to make about visiting, and the balance to be struck between physical risk and the scourge of isolation and loneliness for their residents. The self employed in some walks of life will have real worries about income in the coming weeks. The unemployed are not going to see their opportunities increase during this time.

School teachers and Head Teachers have much to manage around children's and families' interactions with one another, and helping to balance good hygiene with good education and battling unhelpful fears.

There are those who have big enough wallets and big enough store cupboards to stockpile soap, pasta and toilet roll. And that's great for those of us who can. But there are plenty who don't have big enough wallets or store cupboards to do that. And we need to look out for them - those we know, and those we don't.

I don't know if you think that COVID-19 is a storm in a teacup and you're wondering why I've changed the sermon to go on about all this; or whether you think we're not taking things seriously enough by even being here today. But whatever your perspective, we should know as a church that it's already real, today, that people amongst our church family, and near to us, are (v.8) 'under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired.'

Paul's despair and sufferings were such that he 'despaired even of life. Indeed, in our hearts we felt the sentence of death.' That's how rock bottom his suffering, his great pressure, had taken him and his companions.

But there's good news here, too. This, too, is not without purpose. v.9 tells us about the grace - the God-gift - that comes to us in this intense, unbearable pressure. '*But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God...*'

There is a tremendous need for our community to turn to God. To truly *turn* to Him, rely on Him. That's been an unmet need for years. Decades, even. But a comfortable, self-sufficient, affluent town and nation has been able to bumble along in a reasonable self-reliance assuming that all is probably fine and that things are about as good as they can be.

But self-reliance is going out the window. Some of you can't cope at work. That's not a reflection on you; that's the inhuman pressure that you're under, or you might be soon. Some of you won't stay well enough to keep calm and carry on in that British way. There's a fragility to us human beings that's just enough to help us realise sometimes that we are mortal, and we're not in control of being okay.

How much more prayer is going to go up in these days! How many more will cry, 'Help, God!' How many of you who are already God's people, and who are already under pressure beyond bearing, need to come to a place of complete, total dependence on God. A cry of 'Right! That's it! I'm completely helpless here, God! I'm on my knees - metaphorically, and literally! I need you! We need you!'

When we do, there's going to be much that we gain from that. Many lives could be made safe forever if people will cry out to God, 'We need you! Only you can help!' Many burdens and pressures and feelings of huge responsibility will be met when they are put into God's sovereign hands and He's given it to shoulder.

We will not cope. Not by ourselves. Not even by relying on each other, as important as learning that lesson of interdependence is going to be both in the church and in the world. But to be pushed so far in our circumstances that there is no option left but to cry out to God for the first time, or in a meaningful, deep way instead of the shallow lip service we've paid it, is going to be truly liberating and life saving in these days.

In v.10, we read, 'God has delivered us from such a deadly peril.' Now, right now, we read, 'Deadly peril,' we hear, 'Coronavirus.' But that's not the deadly peril Paul means. Nor is any of the suffering that he's mentioned. He's referring to what he has just spoken about - self-reliance. Self-reliance is the deadly peril that God has delivered us from!

It's so important that we're delivered from relying on ourselves to be brought to dependence on God, that it's actually worth God putting us through pressure that we don't have the strength to endure, if only we will finally cry out to Him in prayer. For Paul, that's *life-saving*. It lifts him from that death-place he felt he was in. Where life felt 'deathly.' And it sets him free for life forever, not just now.

Will you cry out to God now?

Will you rely on Him, because there is nowhere else to go now but there?

Thank God, it's going to be okay. Paul's deeply, wonderfully confident about that at the end of our passage. vv.10-11. He *has* delivered us... He *will* deliver us... we set our hope on Him *continuing* to deliver us...' He's delivered us from self-reliance, from the depths of death-feeling to freedom of soul, from the fear and finality of death to the firm, sure hope of untouchably gifted eternal life. All this God has already done, and will continue to do.

Our experience of God has been, He has delivered, He will deliver, He will continue to deliver. Consistently faithful, He will bring us through everything we need to come through. And even if should we face that final enemy called death, He will bring us through that too. The end of the story is *always*, God delivers us!

One of the ways that Paul expects God to come through for him and his friends and deliver them is through the prayers of others for them. Have a look at vv.10-11. 'On Him we have set our hope that He will continue to deliver us, *as you help us by your prayers.*' Paul who suffers, Paul who is under unbearable pressure, expects God to deliver him as others pray for him.

I'm sure many of us are crying out in prayer for ourselves. 'God, help me. Help me to cope. Protect me. Protect my family.' There's nothing wrong in that, all of this is good as we learn to rely on the immortal, invincible God instead of ourselves.

But we must move now towards prayers for one another, in abundance. So, ask others to pray for you and yours. Tell them about what you're going through, and have many people know how to pray for you in it.

And as for you, add an outwardness to your prayers: 'God, help my colleague. Help him to cope. Help her to keep going today. Protect my neighbours. Protect my friends in church and their family. Keep safe these families from school, please God. Make yourself known and more than enough for the people next door.'

Paul speaks with true courage and confidence about the outcome of this shared prayer life in v.11. There's expectation about '...as you help us by your prayers, then many will give thanks on our/your behalf for the gracious favour in answer to the prayers of many.'

There's a hope here. No, more than that... an *expectation*. An *anticipation*. 'Gracious favour' - that word 'grace' in there again - Paul senses something around the corner, something on the mist-obscured shore, some abundant gift of God that's coming. Something he can't name or describe, and he doesn't dare speculate about that. But he sees the day coming that 'many will give thanks' for what God gives 'in answer to the prayers of many.'

As many more pray, many more will give thanks. And in between that will come some unseen, yet-to-be-experienced gift of God. As we go through the season of the wave of coronavirus crashing, there will be suffering, and pressure, and comfort with it. There will be waves more prayer, too. And through it, God willing, some great gift of God to us all that we can't yet name. And on the other side of this, when the waves still and the waters grow calm, there will be 'many giving thanks.' Many more, I pray, than give God thanks today.

In this whole passage, we have not read that God will prevent suffering. We have not read Paul ask for that, either. We have read of his hope that God's comfort will produce patient endurance of suffering. We're going to need that kind of deliverance. We have read of real hope that there is purpose and plan in the suffering that God will use for good.

The grace - the gifts that God gives - at this time are *real comfort*, for us and through us to others. *Renewed dependence* on Him in prayer in us, and new dependence on Him in prayer in others. And something to be *revealed later* that many will thank Him for after many pray.

Thank God, it's going to be okay. You can know grace and peace, comfort and confidence, from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Set free from fear. Set free from crushing expectation. Set free from self-reliance. Set free from despair. Come to our Father, and don't let go. And truly - one way or another - it's going to be okay.