

Encouragement in Tribulation

2 Corinthians 11:16-29

Turn to 2 Corinthians 11. We won't get there for a while. This will be a short sermon with a long introduction. Today I hope to bring God's encouragement to you in your troubles. In particular, we'll go after this persistent conviction we have, when our troubles do not go away, that God has rejected us or is too offended to help us. In this long introduction I will jump around in the Bible.

Then we have two troubles. First we have whatever trouble that causes our distress. The second is that we also now have a God problem, God is not on our side anymore, and why not? Today will be about the God problem. When I am discouraged I certainly feel forgotten or rejected by God. I know what that feels like. But the Scripture says many things to help us get rid of that.

Here's verse Mike read to us last week: *I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.* This is John 16:33, the last words Jesus says to the disciples before his arrest.

The word "trouble" is the Greek word that older English called "tribulation." *In this world you will have tribulation. But take heart! I have overcome the world.*

Jesus said, *in this world you will have tribulation.* There will be tribulations, make no mistake. Is there a God problem? No. Jesus hopes we will not be alarmed, that we'll remember that he said this, that we'll be encouraged even though we are having tribulations.

[At the end of their first missionary journey, Paul and Barnabas] returned to Lystra, Iconium and Antioch, ²² strengthening the disciples and encouraging them to remain true to the faith. "We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God," they said. Acts 14:21-22

That paragraph near the end of Acts 14 describes several things Paul and Barnabas did on their return trip. But only one line of their actual words. The Scripture only gives us one short sentence as direct speech. It is a way of making this part particularly clear and direct.

"We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God," they said. This is that tribulation word again: "We must go through many tribulations to enter the kingdom of God," they said. This world is the porch to God's kingdom. The porch is full of tribulations, then we enter the kingdom of God. We must go through many tribulations to enter the kingdom of God."

What did Jesus say? *In this world, you will have tribulation.*

Here's something Judi read here a few Sundays ago: Revelation 7:9 *After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and*

language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands.¹⁰ And they cried out in a loud voice: “Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb” ...¹³ Then one of the elders asked me, “These in white robes—who are they, and where did they come from?”¹⁴ I answered, “Sir, you know.” And he said, “These are they who have come out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.

The Spirit takes John into the future, and he sees this great future crowd from every nation and people and language, praising God and the Lamb. This takes place after the Lord has returned and taken us all to himself. If you could zoom in on the right part of this crowd, you would see your own face there. You and I are in that crowd, praising God and the Lamb. That’s us!

Who are these people? One of the 24 elders tells John: These have come through the great tribulation. WE have come out of the great tribulation. That’s this life. This is the same Greek word as when Jesus said, *in this world you will have tribulation*. It’s the same word that Paul and Barnabas used, *through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of heaven*.

The NIV translates it “tribulation” this time to keep the dispensationalists happy, who think the great tribulation has not yet begun. Don’t you believe that. Those seven churches that John wrote to in the first century, Revelation was written to encourage them, they were in tribulation.

“The great tribulation” of Rev 7:14 lasts from Jesus going up to his Father (Ac1), until he returns for us. We are all in it right now. This life, the porch of God’s kingdom, is the great tribulation.

We are reading these words from God to put away this fear in our troubles that God has rejected us, or forgotten us. It is normal to feel like that. It is common in the Psalms. We read Psalms 42-43 at our home a couple Wednesdays ago. *I say to God my Rock, “Why have you forgotten me?” “You are God my stronghold. Why have you rejected me?”*

Jesus did not have weak faith, but even Jesus felt like that at the end. *Why have you forsaken me?* God had not forgotten Jesus, or rejected him or forsaken him, not for one moment! But he was in much distress, and in his experience God had left him.

The church that received the letter to the Hebrews was having troubles, and were discouraged, and not far from leaving Christ. Heb 12 *Have you completely forgotten this word of encouragement that speaks to you as a father speaks to his children?*

“The Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastens everyone he accepts.” He goes on to show that hardships are a mark of being an honored part of God’s family, even though it is always painful at the time. And nothing in Hebrews 12 suggests that they are sinning, or that they need to repent of something. No, it is training. It happens with those God loves and accepts.

Even Jesus, it says in Hebrews 2, was perfected by what he suffered. Jesus was sinless, he did not need to correct anything. But the Father could build something into Jesus, by taking him through suffering, that the Father could not do any other way. Jesus perfected through suffering.

God does this with children that he loves and accepts, he did it with the Eternal Son himself.

One last Scripture, and then the introduction is done. At the end of John, Jesus took Peter aside and made some kind of prophecy about how Peter would die when Peter was old. Jesus did not speak clearly, and it is not easy to know what the words mean exactly. But they do mean that when Peter is old, he will be executed, he will die because of Christ.

The beloved disciple followed behind Jesus and Peter. Peter did not like the prophecy Jesus had just spoken about him. When Peter saw John, he said, “Lord, what about him?” I love that bit. It is not a happy moment for Peter, but that line is so much like all of us.

Jesus said, “If I want him to have less trouble, what is that to you? You follow me.” We all know something about difficulty and tribulation that no one else knows. It is ours and ours alone. There is something personal there between the Lord and us. “*If I want someone else to have less tribulation, or more tribulation, or different tribulation, what is that to you? You follow me.*”

Well, that’s it for the introduction. Now let’s read 2 Corinthians 11, beginning v16. Paul Warns them. He’s going to do a foolish thing, not the kind of thing the Lord would do, though many others do this. He’s going to boast about his qualifications, and build himself up in their eyes. In other words, he will be a total fool.

2 Cor 11:16 *I repeat: Let no one take me for a fool. But if you do, then tolerate me just as you would a fool, so that I may do a little boasting.* ¹⁷ *In this self-confident boasting I am not talking as the Lord would, but as a fool.* ¹⁸ *Since many are boasting in the way the world does, I too will boast.* ¹⁹ *You gladly put up with fools since you are so wise!* ²⁰ *In fact, you even put up with anyone who enslaves you, or exploits you, or takes advantage of you, or puts on airs, or slaps you in the face.* ²¹ *To my shame I admit that we were too weak for that!*

In v22 Paul will begin what he calls his fool’s speech. He hates to do this. But the Corinthians don’t think he has anything useful to say to them, they have dismissed him, because he has too many troubles and weaknesses. They have new leaders who preach success and victory.

In following these new leaders, the Corinthian believers are moving away from both Paul and Christ. They have become a bride leaving the groom. To bring them back to *Christ*, Paul has to say something about *himself* so that they’ll listen to him again. He hates to build up himself. But it is the only way he can bring them back to Christ.

So he will do what is foolish. He will talk about his credentials and qualifications. But while he does this, he does two things the false apostles, the super apostles, will never do.

One, he says this is totally foolish, he knows that, which means he's not actually a fool. And two, he only boasts about his weaknesses, his troubles, all the ways the Lord does NOT protect him. False apostles never do that.

V20 - *In fact, you even put up with anyone who enslaves you, or exploits you, or takes advantage of you, or puts on airs, or slaps you in the face.* Preachers with a success and victory message are terrible shepherds of God's people. Their message abuses the weak and troubled. It's that simple.

Jesus: *a battered reed he will not crush, a flickering wick he will not quench* (Mt 12:20). The success and victory message crushes and quenches. The Corinthian false apostles are an extreme example of success and victory preachers, but more subtle versions are in our circles, and they are very hard on believers with troubles, and some of you know what I am talking about.

Paul was sarcastic about this. *You gladly put up with fools since you are so wise!* What he means is, *You are fools yourself to put up with those foolish fakes!* Then he says, *To my shame, I admit we were too weak for that.* What he means is the exact opposite: *To my credit, we love Christ and love you far too much to enslave you or exploit you, or put on airs before you.*

Now, let's read the first half of the speech, which begins at v22. It goes to 12:10. We'll do the first half today, and the second half next Sunday. But the punch line of the fool's speech is at the end, and we will consider that today. This speech needs the ending to make sense.

Fool's Speech, Part 1: 11:22-29 *Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they Abraham's descendants? So am I.* ²³ *Are they servants of Christ? (I am out of my mind to talk like this.) I am more. I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again.* ²⁴ *Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one.* ²⁵ *Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was pelted with stones, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea,* ²⁶ *I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my fellow Jews, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false believers.* ²⁷ *I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked.* ²⁸ *Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches.* ²⁹ *Who is weak, and I do not feel weak? Who is led into sin, and I do not inwardly burn?*

More a Servant of Christ – v23. I am only going to focus on one verse of this, v23. Paul argues that he's more a servant of Christ than the Corinthian false apostles. What is the evidence?

Are they servants of Christ? (I am out of my mind to talk like this.) I am more. I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again.

“I am more a servant of Christ, and I can’t believe I say such a foolish thing, I am more a servant of Christ than they are *because* the Lord has left me unprotected in far more troubles than them.” That’s his logic. “I am more a servant of the Lord because he has left me more unprotected, and I still trust him and serve him as I am able.” Has that logic ever occurred to you? Take hold.

God would like to encourage you today, and give you comfort. God has compassion for you, for the things you carry that others know about and the things you carry that no one knows about. God has affection for you, and his heart goes out to you, offers you some comfort and hopes you will take this and find some peace in it.

I will expand on one part of v23, then we’ll go to end of Paul’s fool’s speech: *I have worked much harder*. Paul decided not to take money from his audience when he preached, that was misunderstood in too many ways. He made tents to support himself. How well did that work?

He tells us in v27: *I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked*. Paul survived, but not much more. This scares us, we want God to be a better provider, scares me, too.

Here’s the point: does Paul know hunger and thirst because he lacks faith? No! Does it happen because he is not living obediently? No! Does it happen because he’s not praying properly to be blessed? No! The Lord told Peter, “This is what’s going to happen to you, Peter. Follow me.”

The Lord told Paul, “this is what is going to happen to you, Paul. Follow me.” The Lord has done the same for every one of us. “Here’s what will happen to you. Follow me.”

Christ’s Power in Our Weakness 12:7-10 Now let’s go to the end of the Fool’s Speech. I will pick it up in the middle of v7. *I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me.* ⁸*Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me.* ⁹*But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me.* ¹⁰*That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.*

These are remarkable lines, we’ll go over them carefully next week. The main thing (imagine you have this talk with Christ) Christ to you: “My grace is enough to get you through this, and my power is made perfect in your weakness.” You: “So my weaknesses are my strong point, that’s when your power rests on me, Lord. So, when I am weak, that’s when I’m strong.”

This paragraph assumes we want to serve Christ, we want the Lord to use us, for his sake not our sake. We want him to do what he wants with us. These “power in weakness” lines are so clear that we are more use to the Lord if he does not rescue us. There’s no other way to take this.

I am not saying, quit praying for deliverance. By all means, keep praying for deliverance. God did not rescue Paul from the thorn, but in 2 Cor 1 Paul experienced a big rescue from God. Don't quit praying for deliverance. But when the answer clearly is "no" or at least "not now," hear what the Lord is saying to us.

Christ wants to get things done. He has the power to get things done. His power works most freely in us when we are weak and troubled. I don't know how this works. Could Paul not have served the Lord better if he did not have to spend so much energy just making tents?

To our way of thinking, Paul would have been a more effective evangelist if God had miraculously provided for Paul. No, the Lord said, that's not how this works. How does it work? I don't know. The Lord fights battles of which we know nothing. Leave it in his hands.

Paul did not get any experience of power here, no sense of God's Spirit surging through his body. He just had that same thorn that would not go away. But he got understanding, that Christ's power rested on him, like the cloud of God's Presence rested on the tabernacle in Exodus, and the pillar of fire at night. When we are weak, Christ's power rests on us.

How does the Lord's power work better when I am not rescued? I don't know. We don't have to know. This is his business. We will keep trusting him and we will serve him as we are able. We will fight the fight and run the race and keep the faith. That's our business.

The Lord will use his power in us, to get done what he wants done through us, and how he wants it done, and that's his business. Amen.