2 Corinthians 1:1-11

To begin our six-week series we need an overview of of Paul's Second letter to the Corinthians. It can be difficult to decipher as its tone swings widely, from expressing deep love to angry rebuke. For the contemporary reader, it does not seem to proceed in a logical fashion. Many interpreters believe it to be a composite of several of Paul's letters, as many as four. Yet the letter expresses profound ideas that have had a tremendous influence not only on the history of theology but on much of western thought.

This letter says a lot about apostolic ministry: what it is about, how the gospel gets communicated, and what constitutes authentic Christian community. Paul deals with these themes while addressing some very practical tasks, such as defending his ministry while seeking reconciliation, raising funds for the poor, and countering competitors who are challenging his ministry and, in his view, abusing the Corinthians and leading them astray.

Throughout his letter, Paul illustrates how his own experience, with all its variations, becomes the locations where Christ's overflowing sufferings and consolation interpret the gospel to others in such a way that authentic community might be formed.

As Paul develops these themes amid challenges to his apostolic leadership, two questions arise: is Paul's gospel merely an "ideology" imposed on the Corinthians to keep them in line but lacks true spiritual power? And secondly: Is all his pathos and apparent weakness merely a disguise for his own "will to power?

God had sent Paul to Corinth to preach the gospel and win people to faith in Christ. After about 18 months of work, a church was established in the city of Corinth, a strategic location for a church. It was one of the largest cities in the ancient world, with a seaport and a population of 700,000. Hundreds of thousands of people passed through every year. This church had a great opportunity to spread the gospel. To plant a church in a pagan city, known for its immorality and swirl of cults and religions was especially challenging. After two years, in 52 AD, Paul left Corinth. But in his absence, the church had experienced rampant immorality and deep divisions. Paul's reputation as a faithful apostle had been trashed by enemies trying to destroy his authority so they could garner power for themselves.

Paul continued to carry out his ministry in Ephesus from where he wrote a letter to the Corinthians and sent Timothy to deal with the church's problems. In 55 AD, he wrote a longer letter that became known as First Corinthians. This letter addressed their many internal problems, especially disagreements over which leader to follow.

In the meantime, Paul was going through one of the most difficult periods of his life, trying to deal with physical threats, a severe depression, as well as his deep concern for the troubled Corinthian Church. In the midst of threats to his life, Paul was encouraged by God in a vision: "Don't be afraid! Speak out! Don't be silent! For I am with you, and no one will harm you because many people here in this city belong to me."

It is now 56 AD, and Paul is in Macedonia, having just received encouraging news about the church in Corinth from his co-worker Titus. He writes yet another letter, seeking to

repair this rift between the founding apostle and this rancorous church that has broken his heart. Paul's second letter was written to comfort and encourage the Corinthian believers and to offer them consolation. Evidently they were troubled and suffering from some form of persecution

Instead of beginning the letter with a thanksgiving, which he does in other letters, Paul begins with a blessing that calls on God, "the Father of all mercies and the God of all consolation," who consoles us in all our afflictions so that we may be able to console others in any affliction with the same consolation. This blessing is a reminder of a central theme in the Old Testament – God saves and liberates us from whatever is oppressing us so that we can be of service to others; in the words of the Hebrew Bible scholar, Jon Levenson, "the chosen are called to serve."

In this blessing we find a practical understanding of God's response to evil, sin, and suffering. And it gives us a description of what God's salvation is all about: it is not just a "comfort" that now immunizes us from others' suffering or worse becomes an ideology that we use to control or manipulate them. Rather, it creates a basis for a distinct kind of overflow or reciprocity.

At the centre of all this are the sufferings and consolations of Christ, which overflow within and through us. Christ's sufferings for all, not only becomes a means of abundant consolation and grace amid our own suffering, but they so unite us with Christ – that we too share in both his suffering for others and in the abundant overflow of his consolation that spills over through him and within us, and now on to others.

In Christ, we now have a different way of interpreting all that happens to us: all our affliction now becomes the means for others' consolation and affliction; and all the consolation we receive is such that it not only consoles us but also consoles others as they go through the same pain and suffering.

Paul wrote: "You can be sure that the more we suffer for Christ, the more God will shower us with his comfort through Christ." Notice how Paul links our sufferings with the "sufferings of Christ." Often, we suffer the same heartache and trouble that is common to all humankind. But sometimes, we suffer for our stand for Christ and our commitment to a lifestyle congruent with that of Christ.

The common experience of suffering and God's comfort unites God's people. As hard as life is, we can count on the resources of God himself. Consider all of life's struggles and pain faced by those who live a life without God and God's ultimate hope. We have a comfort and hope well worth passing on.

Paul writes: "We are confident that as you share in suffering, you will also share God's comfort." If we look at the Greek verb, translated as "share" - it implies "one who takes part in something with someone, companion, partner, friend or neighbour."
Even though people may be hundreds or thousands of miles away from us, there is a spiritual sense in which we are one with them and can feel both their pain and their comfort.

Paul shares some of his own pain with this church that he loves so much. Since the goal of this letter is to effect a reconciliation with the Corinthian church and re-establish his authority as founder and apostle, his strategy is to open up to them personally and with transparency so they can begin to understand what he's been going through. Second Corinthians is by far the most revealing of any of Paul's letters about the depth of his suffering for the gospel.

"I think you ought to know, dear brothers and sisters, about the trouble we went through in the province of Asia. We were crushed and completely overwhelmed, and we thought we would never live through it." We're not told the exact situations that Paul was facing. But twice more in this letter he alludes to the types of sufferings he has experienced.

A recent situation involved the threat of death. It could have been a fatal illness, but it seems more likely to be some kind of external threat, especially if he is remembering the uprising in Thessalonica. This traumatic experience had a profound effect on Paul: "Paul had expected to die, and as a result, we learn not to rely on ourselves, but on God who "can raise the dead."

When things are going well we tend to trust in our own resources. This event caused Paul to rely on God in a new way and to refocus his hope on God's deliverance, rather than his own ingenuity and survival skills. Notice how Paul is eager for the prayers of the saints as they call out to God on his behalf: "he will continue to deliver us, He will rescue us because you are helping by praying for us. As a result, many will give thanks to God because so many people's prayers for our safety have been answered." How prayer works is a mystery. It's natural, of course, to call out to God for help when we're in trouble, just like a child would call for a parent. We see again and again in Paul's writings a reliance on the prayers of others to call on God for him.

Yet, far too often, we will rely on our own resources – our own goals. An unspoken assumption for many is that the main goal of life is to maximize happiness. That's normal. When people plan for the future, they often talk about all the good times and good experiences they hope to have. We live in a culture awash in talk about happiness. In one three-month period, more than 1,000 books were released on Amazon on the subject or happiness.

This brings to light, an interesting phenomenon. When people remember the past, they don't only talk about happiness. It is often the ordeals that seem most significant. People shoot for happiness but feel formed through suffering. Yet, there is nothing intrinsically ennobling about suffering. Just as failure is sometimes just failure, suffering is sometimes just simply destructive, to be exited as quickly as possible.

But some people are clearly ennobled by it. Consider the way Franklin Roosevelt came back, deeper and more empathetic after being struck with polio. Often, physical or social suffering can give people an outsider's perspective, an attuned awareness of what other outsiders are enduring.

But the big thing that suffering does is it takes you outside of precisely that logic that the happiness mentality encourages. Happiness wants you to think about maximizing your

benefits. Difficulty and suffering sends you on a different course.

First, suffering drags you deeper into yourself. The theologian Paul Tillich wrote that people who endure suffering are taken beneath the routines of life and find they are not who they believed themselves to be. The agony involved in, for example, composing a great piece of music or the grief of having lost a loved one smashes through what they thought was the bottom floor of their personality, revealing an area below, and then it smashes through that floor revealing yet another area.

Following this experience, suffering gives people a more accurate sense of their own limitations, what they can control and cannot control. When people are thrust down into these deeper zones, they are forced to confront the fact they can't determine what goes on there. Try as they might, they just can't tell themselves to stop feeling pain, or to stop missing the one who has died or is gone. And even when tranquillity begins to come back, or in those moments when grief eases, it is not clear where the relief will come from. The healing process, too, feels as though it's part of some natural or divine process beyond individual control.

People in this situation often have the sense that they are swept up in some larger providence. Abraham Lincoln suffered through the pain of conducting a civil war, and he came out of that with the Second Inauguration. He emerged with this sense that there were deep currents of agony and redemption sweeping not just through him but through the nation as a whole, and that he was just an instrument for transcendent tasks.

It's at this point that people in the midst of difficulty begin to realize that they are not masters of the situation, but neither are they helpless. They can't determine the course of their pain, but they can participate in responding to it. They often feel an overwhelming moral responsibility to respond well to it. People who seek this proper comeback to ordeal – sense that they are at a deeper level than the level of happiness and individual utility. They don't say, "Well, I'm feeling a lot of pain over the loss of my child. I should try to balance my hedonic account by going to a lot of parties and whooping it up."

The right response to this sort of pain is not pleasure. It's holiness – but not in a purely religious sense. It means seeing life as a moral drama, placing the hard experiences in a moral context and trying to redeem something bad by turning it into something sacred. Parents who've lost a child start foundations. Lincoln sacrificed himself for the Union. Prisoners in the concentration camp with psychologist Viktor Frankl rededicated themselves to living up to the hopes and expectations of their loved ones, even though those loved ones might themselves already be dead.

Recovering from suffering is not like recovering from a bad cold or some sort of disease. Many people don't come out healed; they come out different. They crash through the logic of individual utility and contradictory behaviour. Instead of recoiling from the sorts of loving commitments that almost always involve suffering, they throw themselves more deeply into them. Even while experiencing the worst and most lacerating consequences, some people double down on vulnerability. They hurl themselves deeper and gratefully into their art, loved ones and commitments. The suffering involved in their tasks becomes a fearful gift.

Paul's hope for the Corinthians remains unshaken; their overflow of Christ's sufferings and consolation is the very basis for an authentic sharing or communion, not only between him and them, but also among them – where they share in one another's sufferings and joy.