

Women's Bible Study – Spring 2008

## SHARED LIVES

*Shared Comfort*

January 16, 2008 – 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians 1:1-11

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A couple of years ago we heard author Jane Rubietta speak at an Autumn Ridge women's retreat. Afterwards, a friend bought one of her books and lent it to me. The other day my husband John caught sight of it lying on my bedside table. "Awwww," he said, "I'm really touched! And after all these years!" The name of the book, if you can't see it onscreen, is *How to Keep the Pastor You Love*. Once I stopped choking with laughter I pointed out to him that the book isn't about pastoral marriages, but about the relationship between pastors and their churches. I'd also like to go on record that Autumn Ridge could have written that book – they're already doing all the great things you're supposed to do!

Now I realize that the relationship between pastors and their churches may be a topic of much more immediate interest to me than to you. But don't give up. There are two reasons to look deep into 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians. The first is that we get a true, unvarnished look at the internal life of faith of someone really admirable – the apostle Paul. And in watching how he struggles with setbacks and criticism, we can learn something about ourselves. So this book is about **REALITY**.

This is also a book about **COMMUNITY**, which is a second reason to study it. It's about the relationship between a pastor and his people, but that just serves as a template for how *all* of us are to treat each other. In 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians we learn something about the intricately balanced organism that is Jesus' bride – the church. This book shows us how much we need each other. It is a very real, warts and all picture of what it's like to grow more Christlike not just **IN** community, but **THROUGH** community. It's a book about relationships.

This news about community is important if you're an introvert. Or if you're just self sufficient. Or if you think of church as a place you show up once and are entertained. It's also important to you if you're an extrovert and are always talking. You see, community fits all. And community is like conversation. It only happens when there is back and forth. If one person monopolizes all the attention, that's not community. But if everyone looks out for each other, that is community. In true community, you can both know and be known. You give, and receive.

Many of us women are lonely and isolated. Some of you may have come here because you want to make friendships with other women. You've come to the right place, if we put into practice what we learn in 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians. Each week as we study this book we'll be looking at

a different aspect of community, through the lens of Paul's relationship with the church. We begin today with shared comfort.

So please turn with me to the book of 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians, chapter 1, where we look at:

## **I. The Context of the Letter (2<sup>nd</sup> Cor. 1:1-2)**

Corinth itself.

I'm going to begin with some broad brush strokes to give you the context of this letter to the Corinthian church. Next week, our resident historian and geography expert Jann Wright will fill in more of the details. For example, today I'm going to tell you that Corinth is located along a narrow isthmus at the bottom of Greece – but next week Jann will actually SHOW you on the map. Actually, Corinth's location is important because it was at a crossroads for north to south trade, as well as an east to west. . Almost all goods and merchandise that flowed into Greece by land or by sea passed through the city of Corinth at some point.

Corinth was located near the narrowest point of the isthmus, a narrow strip of land sticking into the Mediterranean Sea. Many times merchant ships found it easier to offload their cargo, drag the ship on rollers ten miles across the peninsula, and reload it on the other coast. Doing so saved them about 240 miles around the most dangerous cape in the Mediterranean Sea – Cape Matapan.

So Corinth had lots of traffic. It was also the combined Hollywood and Las Vegas of its day – a center for vice, gambling, casual sex and so on. Corinth contained the great temple of Aphrodite, who boasted 1,000 sexual prostitutes plying their trade. In fact it became a proverb - "to live like a Corinthian" meant that you were totally immoral.

The Corinthian Church.

When Paul wrote this letter, it was part of series of four letters and three visits. Because the Corinthian church was composed of converts from various low life occupations, it was the N.T. church with, apparently, the liveliest sin problem. Paul was in Corinth for 18 months during AD 50-52 (Acts 18:1-12) – longer than any church other than Ephesus – so these were people that he deeply loved. In AD 55 or 56 he made "a painful visit" to them, or so it's called in 2 Cor. 2:1. In AD 56 or 57 he made a third visit to them (2<sup>nd</sup> Cor. 13:1) and stayed for three months. Paul also wrote two letters that we no longer have, one that preceded 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians, and one, known as the "severe letter", which fell between 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians and 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians. (*The Message of Corinthians*, Paul Barnett, pg. 14)

We need this background because we are picking up in the middle of a relationship and correspondence between people who were well known and deeply loved, despite their problems. Just as we rejoice to see men and women with changed lives coming out of Rochester Network for Re-Entry, so Paul would have rejoiced over the changed lives in the Corinthian church. But they caused Paul to weep as often as they caused him to rejoice. As he wrote 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians, there was some dissension because of false teachers. So Paul begins by establishing his credentials.

Look at 2<sup>nd</sup> Cor. 1:1 and 2:

**“Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother. To the church of God in Corinth, together with all the saints throughout Achaia: Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” (2<sup>nd</sup> Cor. 1:1-2)**

Let’s read between the lines a bit. Paul is stating his authority by calling himself “an apostle”, which means “one who has seen Christ”. Paul gained that title by meeting the risen Christ on the Damascus Road during his conversion. It gave him authority, as much as that of the disciples.

He reminds his readers that they are “the church of God”, or ‘ecclesia’. He’s not referring to the physical structure, but rather, means that they are the community of God in the city of Corinth. He greets them with grace and peace. There has been some bad blood, but Paul is anxious to share both reality and community with his friends in Corinth.

So that’s the context. The verses that follow are about shared comfort. But comfort is preceded by suffering, and the passage explains how to be comforted as well as why we suffer. If suffering has a purpose, then the pain becomes worthwhile. Almost any degree of pain is worth going through if the goal is valuable enough. How many of us limp around in high heels for the sake of beauty? How many of us whimper our way through childbirth because of the joyful outcome? Or, perhaps more realistically, whimper our way through parenting, because we believe it will be worth it? So these next nine verses give us good and worthwhile outcomes to suffering, reasons that make it easier to understand why a loving God permits suffering in our lives.

So let’s look next at

## **II. The Causes of Suffering - Why Do We Suffer? (2<sup>nd</sup> Cor. 1:3-11)**

The first is in verses 3-4: we suffer

### **A. So that we can comfort others (v. 3-4)**

**“Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God.”**

This isn’t just about feeling better. The comfort of the Holy Spirit is far, far more than that. He makes suffering purposeful by teaching us to comfort others from what we’ve learned.

When we are anxious about our future, we naturally gravitate to others who have been through the same experience. We want somebody to tell us “It’s horrible now, but you’ll be feeling great in a couple of days.” Our daughter Emily had her wisdom teeth out over the Christmas break. By the third day she looked like a chipmunk storing Christmas dinner in her swollen cheeks. But her brother Nick, who’d had the identical operation two years ago, assured her that her face

would eventually deflate and she would be able to chew again someday. Best of all, he assured her that she wouldn't have to go back to college looking like a hamster. And he was right. You want to hear from someone who's been through it. That's why we need to encourage and comfort each other in dire situations.

The best sort of comfort we can give doesn't just refer to our own experience, though, but points others to the merciful nature of God, who provides true comfort. Now how can we provide that kind of comfort unless we know God well enough to recognize his hand? We can't. This is why I must put in a plug for reading your Bible. If you are becoming a woman of the Book, spiritual truth will come to mind when you need it. Those verses provide a handhold of objective truth when everything else in your world is slipping. That's the very time when the supernatural comforter whispers in your ear **“For I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for good and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope.” (Jeremiah 29:11).**

By “supernatural comforter” I mean the Holy Spirit. I discovered this firsthand many years ago, at our previous church. At that time, we had a pastor on staff whose three year old daughter was dying of a heart condition. She was waiting for a transplant. I, too, had a young daughter, and I remember praying and weeping together with her mother as it looked like Andria would die soon without a donor heart. I came away from that prayer meeting extremely distressed, thinking, “How can her mother be so calm? How can she bear the fact that her child might die?” Yet three weeks later it was my daughter who was unexpectedly dead, and within a year little Andria was flourishing after a heart transplant.

There was a curious shift in our roles at the time of my daughter Kirstie's death. My friend was now overcome with sorrow while it was almost as if we'd been kicked into a high octane realm of supernatural comfort, a bubble of serenity that surrounded us during those terrible days at the hospital and beyond. Everyone around us was falling apart with grief. But we had the supernatural comfort known only to the central characters, if they are believers, in the midst of the crisis. Ever since then, when I pray for someone in tragedy, I pray specifically for the supernatural comfort of the Holy Spirit. There is something inexplicable that happens when a Christian suffers. They receive comfort that is beyond words, if they are able to turn to God.

So if you know what it is like to experience that supernatural comfort, then turn around and extend it to someone who needs it now. That is one reason that we suffer: *so that we can comfort others.*

A second reason:

**B. So that we can share Christ's sufferings (v. 5)**

**“For just as the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives, so also through Christ our comfort overflows.” (2<sup>nd</sup> Cor. 1:5)**

Why would anyone want to share Christ's suffering? Didn't he die to take suffering away from us?

Well, he died to take the penalty of sin away from us, but the Bible tells us that we will begin to understand Christ's sufferings by suffering ourselves. That's how we develop empathy – by entering into someone else's experience. And Paul tells us that there is value in sharing Christ's suffering. He wrote about his life's goal in Philippians: **“I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection of the dead.” (Phil. 3:10-11).** You won't truly know the power of the resurrection until you have the fellowship of suffering with Christ.

Some of you know that I had surgery just before Christmas. The first night, when I was still feeling pretty terrible, they moved a roommate into the next bed. Of course we were separated by a curtain so we couldn't see each other, but you can hear everything that the other person is doing. For that reason I was extremely thankful that she was a quiet and considerate roommate. I was feeling so wretched that I certainly had no desire to be sociable. But eventually she said through the curtain, “We should probably introduce ourselves since we are sharing a room. My name is So and So.” I said, “My name is Gretchen Steer.” There was a slight pause, and she said sort of nervously, “From Autumn Ridge Church? As in, the pastor's wife?” It turns out, of course, that she goes to this church. Now I was having a fairly unmentionable operation and frankly, everybody on this floor was probably having something in the lower half of their body operated on, so I had a pretty good idea that she was miserable too. And suddenly there was a bond between us...the bond of shared suffering, and, more importantly, of being two Christians thrown together in unusual circumstances. It was very funny, actually; I didn't know her before, but now when I see her at church I hug her. Because we shared a particular type of suffering together, and she was a great roommate.

So if you want to create a bond with someone, a bond that goes deeper than mere politeness, you have to drop the veneer that we often wear and reveal who we truly are. In this hospital room, there wasn't much veneer to be had! We were wearing the traditional flapping hospital gowns, dragging tubes around, sharing a bathroom, and recovering from painful surgeries. So you develop camaraderie quickly.

If you want to develop camaraderie, you will find that women respond to honesty. This is crucial in a small group in order for it to get beyond small talk. Otherwise women will never dare speak about what truly concerns them. There was a woman in my small group last year, who had the amazing ability to always kick the group into the best discussions by making just one comment. She was not afraid to say if she was struggling with something or didn't understand the question. She was refreshingly honest...not that the rest of us aren't, but it's really difficult to speak what's close to our hearts when we don't know people very well. But if you do, you will be amazed at the conversations you have. And community begins to develop, often around the theme of shared suffering.

The same is true of our relationship with Christ. How can we truly know him if we have nothing in common? If we want to be like him, then we will come to know and experience something of what he suffered on our behalf. That's what Paul means when he talks about “Christ's sufferings overflowing into our lives...” if they are not overflowing in our lives, ever,

then we won't really know Christ. And if we do not understand what our relationship cost him, in terms of suffering, then we will never value it as something precious.

So how can we enter into Christ's suffering? Here are three ways:

### **1. By Suffering in the Body.**

Some of us know what it is like to suffer physical pain, and some of us don't. I don't. My physical pain has all been short and medicated. I have never known what it is like to live with chronic pain, as some of you do day in and day out. I don't know what it's like to face a future where the pain is likely to get worse, not better. But Christ DOES know that. In his journey to the cross, he went through the maximum that a human body can bear. You could say that he died of pain, because he was tortured to death.

In the fairly recent past, the point of criminal punishment was to prolong suffering. In 17<sup>th</sup> century Europe a favorite torture for traitors was flaying their skin off, or impaling them so they died over a period of two to three days. Our generation is not used to facing physical pain and that may make it much, much harder to bear when you have chronic pain that cannot be alleviated. But your physical suffering right now may be giving you a firsthand look at what Christ suffered on our behalf, in his body. Peter tells us **"Rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed."** (1 Peter 4:13). That may seem like cold comfort. But verse 5 tells us **"For just as the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives, so also through Christ our comfort overflows."** (2<sup>nd</sup> Cor. 1:5). It is a promise, not just for pain, but for relief, as our comfort overflows from Christ. So some share Christ's sufferings by suffering in the body.

Others are

### **2. Suffering in the spirit.**

We also hurt from the emotional or mental pain that comes from relationships broken by death, divorce or estrangement. You may have suffered betrayal in a marriage or a close friendship. You may have been rejected by someone you love. Jesus knew this sort of suffering. He was betrayed by Judas...disowned by Peter...his family thought he was crazy. However we are misunderstood, Christ was before us. Hebrews tells us **"For this reason he had to be made like his brothers in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest."** (Hebrews 2:17)

Christ is able to intercede for us, because he was one of us for a time. So suffering in the spirit is another way to share in the sufferings of Christ.

A third way is

### **3. Suffering in the soul**

Maybe you haven't had a lot of pain in body or spirit. But perhaps you know what it is like to weep over someone's rejection of God. Maybe you have pleaded with God over a sibling or a child or a spouse who continues to willfully reject belief. When you do that you are entering into the suffering of Christ, who was **"despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and familiar with suffering."** (Isaiah 53:3) It is deeply painful to have someone we love reject

the faith which is so important to us, yet imagine how it is for Christ to be rejected by someone for whom he is willing to lay down his life.

So a second reason that suffering is worthwhile is that we can enter in to the suffering of Christ – body, spirit and soul.

A third reason that suffering is valuable:

### C. So that we can have community (6-7)

**“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 sufferings we suffer. And our hope for you is firm, because we know that just as you share in our sufferings, so also you share in our comfort.” (2<sup>nd</sup> Cor. 1:6-7)**

There it is again – this idea that what we share will increase our involvement in each other’s lives. When we share suffering, we grow close. When we share comfort, we grow closer. But this verse also points out that suffering has another byproduct – patient endurance. Romans tells us **“We also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope.” (Romans 5:4)** Patient endurance is a good synonym for “perseverance.” And perseverance helps us support each other over the long haul. In community we balance each other. We share suffering, we share comfort. We share our hope in Christ. And by our patient endurance we help others to hang on.

A fourth reason that we suffer:

### D. So that we will rely on God (8-10)

**“We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about the hardships we suffered in the province of Asia. We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired even of life. Indeed, in our hearts we felt the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead. He has delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us.” (2<sup>nd</sup> Cor. 1:8-10)**

We don’t really know what incident Paul is referring to here. It might have related to being run out of Ephesus after a riot began in Acts 19. But Paul escaped with his life and, apparently, his skin. So why would that be any worse than other experiences he’d had? It may have been despair or depression, that caused him to speak this way. The Greek word he uses for “great pressure”, “thlipsos”, refers to a crushing weight on the chest. Paul says that he was so crushed by his circumstances that he thought about dying. But in that extremity, instead of giving up, he discovered that he could only rely on God – and God delivered him.

Dillon Wallace wrote a first person account of an attempt to explore and map the region of Labrador, in northeastern Canada, which was completely uncharted at that time. He and two

other men set off in 1903 equipped very lightly for an expedition which should have taken a couple of months. Instead they found themselves stranded and lost as winter began. Finally they agreed to part and make separately for help, leaving the weakest one to wait for rescue. By the time the searchers found Dillon Wallace, he had been living on bits of reindeer skin and a moldy lump of flour for almost a month. It was October and snowing. He wrote, “The spectacle I presented certainly must have been an unusual one – a man all skin and bones, standing in drawers and stocking feet, with the remnants of a pair of trousers about his hips, there in the midst of the snow-covered forest. They were heavily clad and had their caps pulled down far over their ears to protect them from the biting wind, while I did not even have my cap on.” (*The Lure of the Labrador Wild*, by Dillon Wallace, pg. 181) The touching thing about this story is the way that the men turned for comfort to the Bible and to each other in the midst of such terrible circumstances. Before they parted they read John 14 and 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 13 to each other, to strengthen them for the parting and for possible death. Like Paul, they took comfort from Christ.

Paul was suffering from despair. We don't know if the problem was physical, or because of a broken spirit, or whether he was simply worn out. **“But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead.”** When you feel as though you wish you were dead, you discover that God is the one who raises the dead, and he will raise us from despair. But, of course, we only find that out when we are truly at our wits' end. In that condition we understand, maybe for the first time, that we cannot make it on our own. We HAVE to rely on God. So suffering causes us to rely on God.

Finally, we sometimes suffer

#### **E. So that God will be praised (11)**

**“On him we have set our hope that he will continue to deliver us, as you help us by your prayers. Then many will give thanks on our behalf for the gracious favor granted us in answer to the prayers of many.” (2<sup>nd</sup> Cor. 1:10b-11)**

This verse gets us back to community. One of the very most important things we can do for each other is to pray. Prayer becomes even more important when a person is too sad, too ill, or too despairing to pray effectively for themselves. We don't understand how our prayers affect the outcome – but verse 11 tells us that they do. So suffering forces us to pray, and when our prayers are answered we can praise God for answering them.

Finally, let's look at

#### **III. The Comfort Principle - Some Questions to Ask Ourselves**

**“The God of all comfort...comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God.” (2<sup>nd</sup> Cor. 1:4)**

It seems clear that if there is to be any purpose in suffering, it is best carried out in community. How can God be glorified if we do not speak of what he is teaching us in suffering? How can others know about the supernatural comfort of the Holy Spirit unless we are praying for them?

So let's think for a moment about three questions:

**1. What am I learning about comfort from suffering?**

Am I just whimpering, or am I learning something about God? Am I angry, or am I acquiescing to what he is trying to teach me through this?

The second question...

**2. What unique experience do I have that can be shared with others?**

Maybe you're struggling with the aftermath of abortion, or of a bitter divorce. Maybe you're in despair about your parenting, or your marriage. Maybe you've learned something about how God has carried you. I bet there is someone here who needs to hear what you have to say. This is how community operates – as we use what we've learned to help others and learn more ourselves. And the ministry of suffering is often carried out one to one, as God leads us to the people who will be most helped by what we have to say. If we don't speak of it, we are missing the chance of truly affecting another person.

Third,

**3. Am I using my own suffering, past or present, to glorify God?**

Suffering needs to be redeemed once it is endured. Suffering is redeemed by giving glory to God for what has been learned or experienced. I'm not talking about self help here. I'm talking about recognizing what God intends for us through suffering. Our specific experience gives us a unique ministry to others. We can talk with authority about Jesus' comfort in our lives only because we have first suffered in some way.

At the beginning I talked about getting a glimpse of Paul's life. There is a price to what he teaches us. This passage about shared comfort explains that it's not just empathy...it's about becoming the agent of the Holy Spirit in ministering to another. You can't be that unless you relinquish the desire to do it by yourself. We have to acknowledge that God is the one who comforts, and helps us bear the unbearable. It is a spiritual ministry and the minute we start trying to do it without the Holy Spirit we'll discover that we're offering cold comfort – we may even be making things worse. Remember, we are striving for both reality and community.

What will we see in our small groups in the coming months? I pray that we will hear reality from each other, and that we will begin to understand that community means giving and receiving in the grace and comfort of God.