

THE GOD OF ALL COMFORT



*A short series of studies by
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The God Of All Comfort - Chapter 1

"The God Of All Comfort"

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Let's read the word of God together from 2 Corinthians. I want to take a break today from the Sermon on the Mount - it's very taxing, the Sermon on the Mount, not only to preach, but I'm sure to listen to. It's very demanding for you as a believer, and I think maybe even one week taking each part of the Sermon on the Mount is nearly too much, because there's so much to try and grapple with and implement into our lives. I think many of you who are believers longer than the most of us here, the elder brethren in the assembly, would say that they have been struggling with these things all their life to try and implement them. But I do believe, it was in the prayer meeting here on Wednesday evening, that the Lord impressed upon my heart through one brother that prayed a verse of Scripture, and I felt that the Lord wanted me to bring it to you today.

Second Corinthians and chapter 1 and verse 1: "Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, unto the church of God which is at Corinth, with all the saints which are in all Achaia: Grace be to you and peace from God our Father, and from the Lord Jesus Christ". This is the verse I want you to notice specifically: "Blessed be God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies, and the God of all comfort; Who comforteth us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort them which are in any trouble, by the comfort wherewith we ourselves are comforted of God. For as the sufferings of Christ abound in us, so our consolation also aboundeth by Christ. And whether we be afflicted, it is for your consolation and salvation, which is effectual in the enduring of the same sufferings which we also suffer: or whether we be comforted, it is for your consolation and salvation. And our hope of you is stedfast, knowing, that as ye are partakers of the sufferings, so shall ye be also of the consolation. For we would not, brethren, have you ignorant of our trouble which came to us in Asia, that we were pressed out of measure, above strength, insomuch that we despaired even of life: But we had the sentence of death in ourselves, that we should not trust in ourselves, but in God which raiseth the dead: Who delivered us from so great a death, and doth deliver: in whom we trust that he will yet deliver us; Ye also helping together by prayer for us, that for the gift bestowed upon us by the means of many persons thanks may be given by many on our behalf".

We know that the Lord will bless the reading of His own truth. Let's read again just verse 3, and it's this phrase that impressed itself upon my heart: "The God of all comfort". "Blessed be God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies, and the God of all comfort".

Let's take a moments prayer: Our Father, we thank Thee for this time together. We thank Thee, as Fanny Crosby could say, here from the world we turn, Jesus to seek, here may His loving voice graciously speak. Lord, He is our dearest friend, He is the lover of our soul, He is the darling of our bosom. Lord, we pray now that as we come to His word, that He may minister to our hearts. Lord, I'm thinking of hearts that are broken, hearts that are tired, hearts that are sick, hearts that mourn, hearts that are not saved and under the burden of guilt and care. We pray, Lord, that you would be the God of all comfort to all of us here today. Fill with Thy Spirit, we pray, this gathering and preacher and people alike. To Christ's glory we pray, Amen.

If you cast your eye down to verse 8 of this chapter, I believe we have the backdrop to the words that Paul speaks when he said: 'God is the God of all comfort'. Paul, you know, is known right throughout his epistles for his great doxologies. We remember, when we were studying the book of Ephesians not so long ago on

Monday evenings, we saw that God was blessed because He has blessed us with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ. But here in 2 Corinthians we have another blessing: 'Blessed be God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies, and the God of all comfort'. But, as I said, we get the context of this in verse 8 if you look at it with me - Paul says: 'We would not, brethren, have you ignorant of our trouble which came to us in Asia, that we were pressed out of measure, above strength, insomuch that we despaired even of life: But we had the sentence of death in ourselves, that we should not trust in ourselves, but in God which raiseth the dead'.

Now Paul, in Corinthians and indeed throughout the New Testament, doesn't give us the troubles - he doesn't lineate them, or list them for us - that he had as he went into Asia. We don't know what they were specifically, but I think perhaps they may have been what he describes in chapter 11 verses 23 to 26, where he says that as a missionary for the Lord Jesus Christ he was: 'in labours more abundant, in stripes above measure, in prisons more frequent, in deaths often. Of the Jews five times he received forty stripes except one. Thrice - three times - was he beaten with rods, once he was stoned, three times he suffered shipwreck, he spent a night and a day in the perils of the deep; in journeyings he was often, in perils of waters he found himself almost drowning, theft from robbers, perils from his own countrymen the Jews, in perils of the heathen the Gentiles, in perils of the city, in perils of the wilderness, in perils of the sea, in perils among false brethren'. So you can see, at least in chapter 11 of 2 Corinthians, the many trials and tribulations that Paul had to face in his ministry.

It may have been those things that Paul speaks of in this chapter, I don't know. It may have been what Luke speaks of and records of Paul in Acts chapter 19, of the riot that happened in the city of Ephesus. Remember that a man called Demetrius was converted by the grace of God, and Demetrius' trade was making little gods of the goddess Diana, worshipping them, idols. And because this man was converted, and because other people in the city were being converted, their trade and livelihood was at stake - and the Trade Union, if you like, of Ephesus rose up in a great riot against Paul and he suffered many things in that city. It may have been that, it may be what we find in 1 Corinthians 15:32 where he said: 'I have fought with beasts at Ephesus'. I don't know what those beasts were, whether those were the false prophets, or indeed whether they were real live beasts along his missionary journeys across Asia.

But do you know something? Whatever Paul had to face, whatever his trials and tribulations were that he speaks of, he tells us that there was something that threatened him to the end of his life, and ultimately was threatening his ministry. There was something that was coming along his life's path that was bringing him near to death, and was going to finish the service that he was giving to God. You know, I think it's a good thing that we don't really know what it was, because that means you and I can look at this portion of Scripture - and I'm sure like me, and like everybody on the face of the earth, you have trials, you have tribulations, you have problems - and perhaps if Paul was more specific you would say: 'Och, well, he's not talking about my problem'. But you know the Holy Spirit is wonderfully conclusive when He leaves out this problem, so that we may say to us today, in your situation, where you are at this moment: God can be the God of all comfort to you!

A man was once called the greatest preacher in the English-speaking world. He was a man by the name of Dr John Henry Jowett, and many of you have perhaps read his books or his sermons, or heard him quoted - but I'm sure that you've never heard this quote by him. He pastored a leading church, and he preached to huge congregations, he wrote many books that were bestsellers - but listen to what this great man of God said: 'You seem to imagine that I have no ups and no downs, but just a level and lofty stretch of spiritual attainment with unbroken joy and equanimity - but by no means is this the case! I am so often perfectly wretched, and everything appears most murky much of the time'. A man who was once called the greatest preacher in the English-speaking world. Then, if you want to go to another great preacher, who was named the prince of preachers - C.H. Spurgeon - listen to what he said: 'I am the subject of depressions of spirit so

fearful that I hope none of you ever get to such extremes of wretchedness as I go to'. Great men of God who experienced great lows in their lifetime, and that tells me at least that discouragement is no respecter of persons - and sometimes in the spiritual realm the higher you go the greater is your fall.

Now, if we look at this man Paul we can see that very clearly. If you look at verse 8 for me you can see four things that he says about his situation and his trouble. The first thing is this, he says: 'I was pressed without measure' - pressed out of measure. That literally means: 'I was under great pressure. I was weighed down exceedingly'. What Paul is doing is he's using the beast of burden as an illustration, like the donkey, or the camel, weighed down with all its cargo travelling along the road. He had a heavy load, and that heavy load gave him great pressure. Have you ever felt like that? You had a heavy load, you're under great pressure, and if you could say it to God - you maybe haven't got the guts, because you think it's maybe blasphemous or sacrilegious - but if you could say it, and bring yourself to say it, you would nearly say: 'Lord, You don't know what you're doing, You're pressing me out of measure, this is too much!'.

The second thing he says is that he was pressed out of measure, above strength. Above strength! In other words, he's saying: 'The Lord came to me, and this thing that the Lord let me go through, I was thinking it was far beyond my ability to endure. It felt like it was just too much for me to bear, I couldn't handle it!'. Then thirdly, if you look at the verse, he says in verse 9 this time that he despaired even of life. He despaired of life! Now, you see that Greek word 'despair', do you know what it literally can be translated as? 'No passage, no exit' - in other words, in life he felt there was no way out! He despaired of his life. He wasn't at this moment, in this description, fearing death - but he was fearing what most people fear: life! That's why so many folk are drugged up, why so many folk find their solace in drink and tranquillisers and all sorts of vices and sins - because they're not afraid of dying, they're afraid of living! The apostle Paul went through an experience whereby he could say: 'At this moment, for me, I felt that there was no way out' - the great apostle.

Then fourthly he says in verse 9: 'in our hearts we felt the sentence of death'. 'If it wasn't enough that we couldn't live in life, we felt that death had actually come into our lives, that we were walking corpses. In our hearts we felt there was a death sentence upon us'. As J. B. Phillips translates this verse: 'We were completely overwhelmed, the burden was more than we could bear - in fact we told ourselves that this was the end!'. Have you ever felt like that? I guarantee that most of you here have felt like that at some part of your life, and if you haven't you will - that you're completely overwhelmed, that the burden is more than you can bear, in fact that you've told yourself: 'This is the end, I can't go on!'.

You could be here, and you have suffering solidarity with the great apostle. You can identify with what he is talking about: being pressed beyond strength, despairing of your life, and having death in you. Well, what I want to say to you - well, I shouldn't say it's me, because it's not me, because I couldn't say this to you. The great apostle Paul couldn't, in his life, get rid of these feelings - I certainly can't, and you can't. But I'll tell you what he could do in all of those times of despair, I'll tell you what the word of God testifies that he did do. It says in verse 3 that it is possible to praise God in the midst of pain, it is possible to praise God in the midst of pain! Now you've seen the backdrop to everything that Paul suffered, yet in this verse 3 he says: 'Blessed be God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies, and the God of all comfort'.

This is unintelligible - I mean, this is ridiculous! This does not make sense! Billy Bray, the Cornish evangelist, used to say: 'If they were to put me in a barrel I would shout glory to God through the bung-hole!'. He also said, when poverty stared him in the face: 'If the meal barrel is empty, I will put my head in the meal barrel and praise the Lord'. That wasn't just talk, he did it. I read of one occasion this week where his wife came to him and said: 'There's nothing in the meal barrel', she says, 'Now it's time for you to put your talking into action'. So the both of them went to the meal barrel, stuck their heads in, praised the Lord, took their heads out covered in flour, and they went around the house praising the Lord! Now that sounds

humorous, it maybe even sounds absolutely idiotic, but do you know something? There is a spiritual walk with God that Paul the apostle had, that Billy Bray had, and that you can have - where you're in the very midst of all sorts of trials and tribulations, yet you can say: 'Blessed be God!'

It's a great thing to be able to bless the Lord whatever your circumstances are. David was like that - I mean, as a king he had to suffer some circumstances, in his family he had to suffer some circumstances, in his marriages he suffered some circumstances, but he said with his hands high to the Lord and his knees bowed before Him: 'I will bless the Lord at all times, His praise shall continually be in my mouth'. What about that? What about Job? It's not a Sunday School story, this is a real man who lost his children, lost his houses and his outhouses, and his cattle and all his livestock, lost his land, lost his riches, lost his reputation, lost his health, lost the confidence of a wife, lost the confiding of friends - this is a man who lost everything, and is sitting in sackcloth and ashes, the dogs licking his flesh, and he says: 'The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away, blessed be the name of the Lord'.

It's fascinating, and I would say it's mind-boggling to the flesh and to carnality. You have to see it in the Spirit, you have to see that there is a God behind these men and women. If you're not saved today, that's the only explanation - it doesn't make sense! Unless there's a God, unless there's a Holy Spirit in the life of these men and these women, unless God was on their side they would perish! During the horrors of the Thirty Years War a man called Pastor Martin Rinkart served his people in the province of Saxony. I thought I was bad, but this man conducted as many as 40 funerals a day. We're told that over the space of his ministry he conducted a total of 4000 funerals in all of the Thirty Years War. A devastating experience - and anybody that preaches knows that when you preach at a funeral, and when you try and comfort those who are mourning, you take a bit of that home with you, you don't leave it there. When you're praying for them, and when you're preaching with them, you take some of that burden. This man took 40 burdens a day, 4000 over his life! Out of that devastating experience he wrote a table grace, something that you would give thanks at the table with, for his children. We have sung it already today, do you know what he wrote?

'Now thank we all our God,
With heart, and hand, and voices.
Who wondrous things hath done,
In whom His world rejoices'.

That's a man in the middle of absolute turmoil, and he can rejoice, he can bless God! Now how is that possible? Because he knew his God, that's how it's possible. Who was his God? Verse 3: 'The Father of mercies, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ' - don't miss that, whatever you do, because that's why He's the Father of mercies, because He's the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. I believe that what Paul, perhaps, has in mind at this moment is what he said in Romans chapter 8:32, this God, this Father of mercies is 'He that spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all, how shall he not with him also freely give us all things?'. Do you see what he's saying? This Father of mercies that is your God, if you're saved, listen: don't worry! This is the God that sent His Son from glory into earth, this is the God that sent the Lord Jesus Christ into human flesh and allowed Him to live the life of a pauper, and allowed Him to be pinned to a piece of wood and be rebuked and blasphemed, and be mocked and spat upon. This is the God that poured upon Him all His wrath, in order that you would be free, in order that you would be cleansed and forgiven. 'Wait till I tell you', Paul says, 'if that is what God has done for you then, what will He do for you now?'. Shall He not give you everything? In fact, I would say Paul is saying He has given you everything!

Oh, what a Father of mercies. You know, in Judaism that expression 'Father of' speaks of the originator of it, not simply just a family relationship. When the Lord Jesus talks about the devil as 'the Father of lies', He's talking about him as the author and originator of lies. What the Lord is saying here through His word is that the Father of compassions is the originator of all compassion. That's why David could say: 'Goodness and

mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever', why? Because the Lord was his shepherd, the Father of mercies.

How can you praise God in the midst of such disaster? Because He's the God of all comfort. Oh, my friend, I don't want to say anything more if you've missed this, because this is what God has impressed upon my heart. God is the God of all comfort to you. I don't care who you are, I know nothing about you, but I can say that because God's word says it! Because Paul, who went through a lot more than what you're going through at this moment in time, he could say it, he could praise God in the midst of pain because God was a God of all comfort. In verses 1 to 11, about ten times you find this word 'comfort'.

Now there are two things that the Bible speaks of God having a monopoly of. The first is that God is the God of all grace. Now we know, if we're saved, that that's wonderful. You know that, don't you? You came to a point in your life - and if you haven't, you have to - where you can't get help anywhere, or any help you can get is only fleeting for a moment. You realise that there's nothing that you can do to save your soul, you realise you can't get to heaven through going to church, through being confirmed or baptised, or through being moral or something like that. You say, as the hymnwriter:

'Nothing in my hands I bring,
Simply to Thy cross I cling.
Naked come to Thee for dress,
Weary come to Thee for rest.
Foul I to the fountain fly,
Wash me Saviour or I die'.

In other words: 'If You don't save me, there's no hope for me!' - that's the God of all grace. What does it mean? If you're to get grace you have to go to God to get it, that's the only place to get grace. He has a monopoly of grace, but here's the second thing: He has a monopoly of comfort. Do you see the parallel? God is the God of all comfort, all the comfort you need. The same way as if you're seeking to be saved you go to the God of all grace; if you're seeking to be comforted, if your heart is broken, if you're burdened down with trial, you go to only one place - the God of all comfort.

Now think of what we do, what do we do? Whenever we suffer a great loss, maybe it's a husband, or a wife, or a family member, we say to ourselves in our moments of contemplation: 'If only, if only he didn't die. If only she didn't leave me. If only the child didn't run out on the road. If only I didn't lose my job'. It's all 'if only, if only, if only' - and what that presupposes in our mind is, we're saying psychologically, subconsciously: 'If I had that person back, if I had these things back in my life, I would be comforted'. But God is saying: 'I am the God of all comfort, my child. If you are to be comforted don't be 'if onlying', come to Me for I am the place where you find comfort. Just as you can't find salvation in any other save in me, you're not going to find comfort in any other way'. You're not going to find it reminiscing, you're not going to find it wishing that God had another plan for your life, you'll only find it in the God of all comfort.

That word 'comfort' is the word 'paraklete' (sp?) that you get in John chapter 14, and it's simply a picture of one who comes alongside to help. A beautiful picture of it, I think, is the little old lady standing at the side of the road, and a big strong man comes along and takes her by the arm and helps her across. One who comes alongside to help - and it doesn't mean 'comfort' as we think of it, like the stuff you put in the washing machine and it's soft and it's easy, and it speaks to us of sympathy and luxury, that's not what the New Testament means when it talks of comfort. It's the combination of two Latin words to mean 'strength', that's what it means! A sympathetic strength, for sympathy can weaken us, can't it? Sympathy can weaken us: you get a pat on the head and told to go on, but God doesn't help you - that's not comfort is it? Comfort is when God sympathises with you, but God actually gives you the strength that you need.

Paul is saying: 'In the midst of my trials, in the midst of my burdens, God came into the middle of them and God strengthened me to such an extent that I was enabled to praise God'. Oh, that's wonderful. The disciples looked at the Lord Jesus as He sat with them in the Upper Room, and they said: 'This is it, He's telling us He's going to die. What's this all about? We thought that He would be the one that would deliver us. We thought He would be the one that would free us. We thought He would be the one who would lead us into that promised kingdom of blessing and power upon the earth, but He says He's going! Our security is going!'. Have you ever been in that experience? Where someone, or something, or some place, or some circumstance in your life was going, and you were just longing to hold onto it. 'It's going, it's going, and I can't stand it', and death comes into your heart and you despair of living. 'If that goes from me, or that person disappears, I can't go on'.

That's the way the disciples were, and do you know what the Lord Jesus said to them? 'If I go I will come again', that's wonderful, but we're still waiting on Him coming again. That's not much good for tomorrow, 'but if I go I will send another comforter'. 'I have strengthened you', He's saying, 'but if I go your strength will go, but I'll not leave you an orphan. I will come to you and I will strengthen you, I will send another comforter, the Holy Spirit'.

Now look, I want to spend just a bit of time, because this is the phrase that has gripped hold of my heart. You need the comfort of forgiveness, that's what you need. The God of all comfort is a God who can give you forgiveness. You're not saved, you've come into this gathering, I know nothing about you - who you are, or what you've done, or what you live like - but I don't care, because it doesn't matter, because we all need forgiveness. We all need the guilt of sin to be blotted out, we all need it whether a believer or an unbeliever. You can live with the guilt of sin as a believer, if you're hiding your sin and it's not confessed - but, oh what a wonder to have the God of all comfort, to have a God who we can come to. John the apostle says: 'If any man sin we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous'. Do you know what that 'advocate' means? It's the same meaning as you find in John chapter 14 when the Lord says: 'I'll send another comforter to you. I'll send another advocate. I'll send one who will strengthen you, one who will represent you'.

You know, when you read in the Gospels you read of a wee woman - for 12 years she had run to the doctor, she had run to family I'm sure, she had run maybe to the synagogue praying and fasting, asking help for she had this issue of blood and it ran like a waterfall all through her life, there was nothing that she could do to stop it. There was one day, do you know what happened to her? I'll tell you: there was no exit. She despaired of this thing! Her back was against the wall, no-one could help her. She pushed into the middle of a crowd, and Jesus Christ the Great Healer and Physician was there - and she reached out and she touched the hem of His garment. Do you know what the Lord said to her? 'Daughter, be of good comfort, thy faith hath made thee whole'.

Do you have that comfort? Do you have the comfort of sins forgiven? Do you have the comfort of peace with God, and a relationship with God as your Father, and the Lord Jesus Christ as your Saviour and your Master? Oh, I say to you today: there is nothing, nothing like the comfort of divine forgiveness - nothing to touch it! Oh, that you would taste and see that this is good! Oh, you're searching for something, your life has been empty, there's no peace, there's no joy, you can't get satisfaction in your life - and the reason is God wants you to find satisfaction in Him, because He is the God of all comfort! He is the only one in whom comfort can be found.

He said to old Israel in Isaiah chapter 40: 'Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith your God. Speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem, and cry unto her, that her warfare is accomplished, that her iniquity is pardoned: for she hath received of the Lord's hand double for all her sins'. Do you know what that means? 'Comfort ye, comfort ye Israel, for God's going to forgive you - and when He forgives you He'll give you double forgiveness for all your sin'. Oh, I love that song, that gospel song that's often sung on Sunday evenings:

'Grace, grace, God's grace,
Grace that is greater than all my sin!'

Greater! Whatever your sin is, the God of all comfort can meet your need. But you need the comfort of the indwelling presence of Christ for your trial as well as your sin. We all know that as believers, that it's not just about being forgiven - and there's this myth that once you're forgiven and become saved, that everything is going to be alright. It's not going to be alright. Oh yes, it'll be alright in eternity and you'll have a joy and a peace that you never had before, and you'll have life abundant - but let me tell you this: you'll now be on the devil's hit list! Things don't get easy when you become a Christian, your sins - oh, they're away, and they're the hardest thing to bear; for the transgression, it's hard - but, my friend, we go through trials like other human beings. And let me tell you this: some of us go through more than other human beings.

I want to leave you with a verse, and I want you to turn to it because it's so wonderful that I want your eyes to be fixed on it and your heart to get it - Isaiah 66 and verse 13. Now, before you read it: if you are hurting today, if you need comfort, grab hold of this verse - verse 13: 'As one whom his mother comforteth, so will I comfort you; and ye shall be comforted in Jerusalem'. Do you see that word 'comfort'? 'As one whom his mother comforteth, so will I comfort you', do you know what it really means? The root meaning of that that word is 'to sigh', to sigh. 'As one whom his mother sighs with, so I the Lord will sigh with you' - now that's comfort! You remember when you were a wee lad or a wee girl, you were running too quickly for the ground under you, and you tripped. You scratched your knee and the blood was trickling down, you thought it needed amputation, and you ran to your mother. Your mother lifted you up onto her knee, and she just went: 'Och, now, now, it'll be alright'. That's what this verse is saying - 'As you sigh, I'll sigh with you. As a mother sighs with her child, I the Lord will sigh with you'. Like a mother's open arms and her kisses make the knee better of a broken, bruised child; God can take you in His arms like a mother, and nurse you, and tell you it's alright! What a help! What a help!

I don't know how people believe that God is some kind of distant, untouched, indifferent spectator of life. 'From a distance God is watching us', have you ever heard such nonsense in all your life? 'From a distance everything's in harmony' - is it? It's not in harmony to God, it breaks God's heart! Your pain, God is empathising with it. Let me show you another verse, I want to take time on this and then we'll finish, and I'll carry it on next week. Isaiah 51 and verse 3: 'The Lord shall comfort Zion: he will comfort all her waste places; and he will make her wilderness like Eden, and her desert like the garden of the Lord; joy and gladness shall be found therein, thanksgiving, and the voice of melody'. How is God going to comfort Zion? He says the waste places, God will make the wilderness of your life into the garden of Eden! The garden of Eden was luscious, it was well watered in the great plain that it was in, it was sustained, it was fed, it was blessed. It had the beauty of the anointing of communion of God in it, and the fellowship, and Adam could walk with God in the garden. There they were together, and that is what God wants to give to you my friend - whether you're saved or not, God wants to come into your wilderness, into your barrenness, into your brokenness, and He wants to make Eden. Oh, He wants to hear the voice of thanksgiving in your life again, He wants to hear the voice of melody. As He says in verse 12 of this chapter, if you look down at it: 'I, even I, am he that comforteth you: who art thou, that thou shouldest be afraid of a man that shall die, and of the son of man which shall be made as grass'. What are you afraid of? What are you afraid of, man? Woman, what are you afraid of? God is your God, and He is the God who comforts!

I don't know your problem. Are you crippled with pains? Do you have an illness that you carry about in your body and it weighs down your mind? Maybe you have experienced a great loss in your life that has left a black hole in your heart, an aching void that you think nothing can replace. Child of God, listen: the Father of mercies, and the God of all compassion, is looking down today and He is sighing with you. He is saying in your affliction: 'I am afflicted', that's what He's saying. He's saying: 'Look up, for you have one in glory who

is not a High Priest who can't be touched with the feelings of your infirmities, but He, the Lord Jesus, was in all points tested like as we are apart from sin'. Now, if you're in your sin and your sin's causing you trouble, you needn't seek the comforting of God, you need repentance and you need to be done with it. But trials that you're going through now, tribulations that are apart from sin, the Lord Jesus has walked that road before you.

You see, we labour on Christ's death - and that's only right that we should do so, but let me tell you this: Christ's life was equally as important. For God sent Christ to this earth to live a life of righteousness, to go through temptation, to go through testing, to go through trials and tribulation, to come through it that we might look to Him and have the power to go through it too! Oh, my friend, you name the pain or the loss or the grief that you feel at this moment, and I will promise you that Christ endured it infinitely more than you could ever do. You even look at the Gospels, He stood at the grave of a best friend and He wept. He knew what the emptiness of desertion was, in the home His family laughed at Him, they thought that He was mad. He went through life taking on the chin the blows of abuse and ridicule from His neighbours, and from His countrymen, and His family and friends. But, oh, that I would direct your eyes to Calvary today as we close our meeting - to see the loneliness of Calvary's dark forsaken hours! There's nothing that you could go through that is like that! But He came through it, and do you know what He says to you today in verse 4? As the one who came through Calvary rose and ascended for you, listen: 'I am the one who comforts you in all your tribulation'. That word 'tribulation', do you know what it means? It means what we began our meeting with today: 'crushing pressure'. In all of Paul's life and ministry he had crushing pressure, but in all of his life he had the God of all comfort. Hallelujah, what a Saviour He is.

Let's bow our heads together. I know that with many of you there are hurts and pains that are deep wounds in your heart. But whether you're saved or not there's one thing you're going to have to do, you're going to have to let go of it. What we can do is we can make pets out of our hurts and our pains, and we find that when we go to let go of it we can't because we're that used to it. It becomes a crutch to us, or maybe even a god. My friend, whatever you're going through, even if you have to go through it the Lord wants you to let go of it and surrender it to Him - for He is the God of all comfort. Sinner, will you surrender your sin this morning and take the cleansing that is in the precious blood of Christ? Christian, will you let go and let your High Priest comfort you and carry you?

Oh, Father, thank you for the Lord Jesus, thank you for such a Saviour. We thank you that He meets all our needs. Lord, we pray that He will made every need in this place today, to His glory. Amen.

Transcribed by Andrew Watkins, Preach The Word - August 2001

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The God Of All Comfort - Chapter 2

"A Plan And Purpose In Our Pain"

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We're turning again to 2 Corinthians and chapter 1, and if you're warm - and you would have to be warm, unless you're cold-blooded, this morning - so, if you're warm take your coat off or make yourself comfortable in some way so that you can endure the next half an hour or so in reasonable comfort as we look at the word of God together! This is a two-part series, the first part was last Lord's Day morning and if you weren't here it would be of your benefit, I'm sure, to get the tape in order that you understand some of what we're not saying in this passage because we said it last week. We want to look at the passage again today, so please do get that tape.

Reading from verse 1: "Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, unto the church of God which is at Corinth, with all the saints which are in all Achaia: Grace be to you and peace from God our Father, and from the Lord Jesus Christ. Blessed be God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies, and the God of all comfort; Who comforteth us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort them which are in any trouble, by the comfort wherewith we ourselves are comforted of God. For as the sufferings of Christ abound in us, so our consolation also aboundeth by Christ. And whether we be afflicted, it is for your consolation and salvation, which is effectual in the enduring of the same sufferings which we also suffer: or whether we be comforted, it is for your consolation and salvation. And our hope of you is stedfast, knowing, that as ye are partakers of the sufferings, so shall ye be also of the consolation. For we would not, brethren, have you ignorant of our trouble which came to us in Asia, that we were pressed out of measure, above strength, insomuch that we despaired even of life: But we had the sentence of death in ourselves, that we should not trust in ourselves, but in God which raiseth the dead: Who delivered us from so great a death, and doth deliver: in whom we trust that he will yet deliver us; Ye also helping together by prayer for us, that for the gift bestowed upon us by the means of many persons thanks may be given by many on our behalf".

Let's bow in a word of prayer together: Our Father, we thank Thee for what we have gleaned already from this passage, and for how Thou hast revealed Thyself to us as the God of all comfort. We pray that we would see Thee again in that capacity. We pray that by the Spirit of God that You would reveal Christ to us, the Man of sorrows, acquainted with grief - yet who, for the joy that was set before Him, endured the cross, despising the shame. We pray that we may learn from Him how to suffer, how to endure, and how to glorify our Father which is in heaven. Father, teach us now, we pray, to do all things to the glory of God. Fill me with Thy Spirit, I pray, for Christ's sake, Amen.

Second Corinthians is one of Paul's many letters, and of all his letters - if you've read them all in the New Testament - you will see that this letter is distinctly different. For rather than laying down theology and church practice, as his other letters seem to do in a more general capacity, this book of 2 Corinthians is more like a journal or diary of the great apostle Paul. It outlines, more than any of his writings, his personal life and indeed his personal individual struggles. It shows him as a man, Paul the man. Sometimes we can deify Paul, although he is an apostle we tend to forget that these men were men of like passions as we are, sinful men. Indeed, Paul could say that he was the chief of sinners - but because he was probably the greatest of all the Apostles, we set him on a pinnacle and almost see him as sinless and perfect.

But as we look into 2 Corinthians, as if we are looking at a day-to-day journal of this man's missionary journeys and the things he experienced as he went about telling the Gospel, we see from verses 8 and 9 - as we did last week - that he testifies: 'Day one: I was pressed out of all measure'. Pressed out of measure, under a great pressure - literally: 'I was weighed down exceedingly'. Like the beast of burden, like the donkey that takes all the cargo, I felt as if I was about to buckle under the heavy load of pressure that God laid upon me. Perhaps the second day we would find, verse 8, 'above strength'. 'The trial that God gave me today was above strength, it was far above my ability to endure. I couldn't take it'. Day three: 'I was despairing today of my life, I felt there was no way out, no passage, no exit - at the end of my tether'. As one writer said, his life looked at times like a confusing array of crossroads and junctions with flashing red, green and amber lights - he didn't know whether to go, whether to wait, or whether to stop. Day four: 'In our hearts we felt the very sentence of death'. J. B. Phillips translates it like this: 'We were completely overwhelmed, the burden was more than we could bear. In fact, we told ourselves that this was the end'.

Something happened to Paul. I don't know what it is, and we looked last week at what it might have been - but the fact is we don't know what it was. But something happened to the great apostle, and he felt he couldn't go on. It was beyond bearing, he couldn't take it any more. I asked you last week: do you feel solidarity with the apostle, solidarity in his suffering? Can you identify with him? We looked last week at how we can come from all the troubles that we have, and we can bow at the feet of the God of all comfort, and we can find in Him everything that we need to help in time of need. Now that's tremendous, and that answers our emotional response. So I hope, and I believe, that many of you went away last week helped because you got a grip for at least half an hour of the God of all comfort, and you had an emotional response to the message. In other words, you felt good after the meeting.

That's good, we need that, but you know the emotional response does not satisfy the intellectual question. The intellectual question is this: 'That is all well and good, God is a God of all comfort, but why? Why does it have to be like this? Why am I going through this? Why has God chosen me? Why does God have to choose this mechanism to see, in my eyes, Himself as the God of all comfort? Is there not another way? The question we are asking today is: is there a plan and is there a purpose in my pain, in my affliction?'

You see the word 'affliction' in this passage, the word 'tribulation', ask yourself do you know this in your life. It's the Greek word 'flipsis' (sp?), it literally means actual physical pressure on the man. If you read your English history books you'll find out that those in English history who refused to confess to a crime, the judiciary got them and they laid them down and laid heavy weights upon them on their chest that pressed so hard that they were eventually crushed to death. They did this in order to get them to confess to the crime, but many of them were crushed to death by the weight. Now that is exactly this word 'trouble, affliction' that you find in this passage of Scripture - 'flipsis', a weight that is crushing me, that I cannot endure.

Now one thing that causes us to despair when we're going through trials and tribulations is misconceptions, spiritual misconceptions that we have about suffering. Now I don't know where we got them, some of us got them from preachers, some of us got them from a misinterpretation of Scripture, some of us got them through Christian paperbacks that are lining the walls of the bookshops today. I don't know where we got them, but they're misconceptions and they cause us to ask the question: Lord, why are You doing this? Now what are these misconceptions? They are many, but I want to give you two today.

The first is this: 'if you are spiritual you will never be perplexed'. In other words, if you're spiritual you'll never get in a tizzy, you'll never shed a tear, you'll never buckle under pressure. In life you will always have success. Now, I want to blow this out of the water, because this is absolute nonsense! For the greatest men in the Bible were men that at times were in great perplexion, great distress, great tribulation, some of them in great depression. We read two preachers, Charles Spurgeon and Jowett, last week we read their confessions - and they prayed that God would never put on you what God put on them in their life! Oh, I hope you don't

think that because you're going through trouble, that in some way God is punishing you - that might be the case, but it's not always the case.

The second misconception is this: 'life should always be a bed of roses', life should always be a bed of roses. Now, it's nice when it is a bed of roses - if it ever is for you - but it's not always a bed of roses. To take up your cross and follow Christ, I mean that analogy does not fit with a bed of roses, does it? The equivalent of the electric chair today, or the hangman's noose, a cross and you're carrying it - that life will never be a bed of roses. But even the people in the world, that's what they expect out of life: a bed of roses, because they have believed the Hollywood fairytale that everything ought to be money, success, career, education, talent, comfort, good looks - but in reality, life is not like that!

Now the sooner, as believers, we grab hold of that the better. For some of us live in a dream world where nothing goes wrong and we don't expect any trouble, but life is not like that! If you turn - we don't have time because we looked at it last week - to chapter 11 of 2 Corinthians, we see that life was not like that for Paul. He was beaten, he was whipped, he was put in prison, he was out on the ocean in shipwreck, he was despised, told lies about, he was chased by false prophets - men swore upon their own lives in fasting that they would kill him before they would eat. Life is not easy, there was never ever a promise that it would be so. So forget about those two things, put them to death now - one: that you're unspiritual if you suffer and if you're perplexed, and two: that life ought to be a breeze.

So then we come to this question: is there a plan and is there a purpose in suffering? We ask - you wouldn't be human if you didn't ask - why? There's not always a specific answer to that question 'Why?'. I can't give you an answer why specifically you have been chosen to go through this illness. I don't know why you have had marital problems. I can't tell you from a telegram from God why you are suffering from the children that you have, and what's going on in the home and the family. I can't give you a specific answer, but what I can do from the word of God today is give you a general answer - and I believe that's what Paul the apostle does in this biblical answer I'll give you in three points.

Look at verse 4 - 'The God of all comfort', we may not get through this today but let's try anyway - verse 4: 'He comforts us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort them which are in any trouble, by the comfort wherewith we ourselves are comforted of God'. Now let's take that first bit: 'He comforteth us in all our tribulation'. Now this is very simple, write this down if you have a pen: we suffer so that we can be comforted. Have you got that? He comforts us in all our tribulation, that is almost - as far as that goes - an end in itself. We suffer in order that God would comfort us, and we must never in our life think of the things that go wrong as accidents. They're not accidents! We mightn't like them while we're in the middle of them, but they are divine appointments that God has permitted to enter into our lives.

Now let's analyse how you are thinking in your mind about the troubles that you're having. You either believe in fate or you don't. Fate or chance, and if you believe in fate or chance you might as well just give up, for everything is out of control. You can't do anything about it - and there's some people believe in the sovereignty of God to the extent that they believe in it like a fate. But isn't it awful if you thought of it like this: 'My life is out of control, it's all to do with the roll of the dice!'. You would give up. If you believe that you're in control, we are all in control of our own lives - that's a terrible responsibility, isn't it? To be in control of your life, absolutely control - I know that if I was in control of my life I would be hopeless, maybe most of us would be! I would make a mess of it!

Now the opposite to those two things is what Paul is talking about here, and that is God in control of our lives - for if God is in control of our lives we can trust God in all our circumstances. So if bad circumstances come into our life, we don't say: 'Oh, that's chance, that's fate, I can't do anything about it', because you have God there and you know that God wants the best for you. But yet you're not walking through life saying: 'I'm

the determiner of my own fate and my own destiny, and I will make my own future', because God has your future planned - not without your responsibility. Your responsibility is to trust Him.

Can I ask you, and this is very elementary, but this is where the rubber meets the road - and this is where I fail so much in my life. One man once said to me: 'David, God loves to be trusted'. God loves to be trusted! Do you trust Him? I mean, do you really trust Him? The One who says the hairs of your head are numbered. I mean, when you read the Gospels - I was reading in George Mueller's biography in recent weeks, and one thing the writer A.T. Pierson quotes is the Gospel writers emphasis on God's care for us in our trials. He says that it speaks of the odd sparrow, do you remember the odd sparrow? If you look to Matthew 10 you will find that it records there that two sparrows are sold for a farthing, two sparrows for one farthing. Now if you go to Luke chapter 12, you find there that five sparrows are sold for two farthings. Now why is that? Well, it would appear that when the man was buying four sparrows that the man who was selling threw in an extra sparrow for nothing - have you got that? In other words that fifth sparrow, that odd sparrow, was of little value and so worthless that it was able to be given away with the other four. Yet God says through the Lord Jesus, even that one sparrow is not worth being taken into the account of that man's deal, but God cares for it! Isn't that wonderful? God cares for what the world thinks is worthless and hopeless - to Him it's priceless. Not one of them, He says, will be forgotten. Not one of them will fall to the ground without God knowing it - and what a force, when the Lord illustrates it like that, and then He comes to His children and says: 'Fear ye not therefore, for ye are of more value than many sparrows'.

What about that? We suffer to be comforted, that's the first thing. The second thing is: we are comforted so that we can comfort. Now if you look at verse 4: 'Who comforteth us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort them which are in any trouble, by the comfort wherewith we ourselves are comforted of God. For as the sufferings of Christ abound in us, so our consolation also aboundeth by Christ'. Suffering is not an end in itself, comfort from suffering is not an end in itself. It's very good if we can let ourselves be comforted by the God of all comfort, but that's not the whole story. Now here's the whole story: you go through an awful tragedy, you go through an awful experience, maybe an awful illness, and a man or a woman - perhaps you know them or you don't know them - comes down the church to you one Sunday and sits down in the seat beside you, puts their arm around you and says 'I've been through it!' That's what Paul is talking about: you suffer, then you are comforted in order that you might comfort others with the comfort with which you were comforted.

Now, how often does that happen? I've said to you before as we were going through the book of Ezekiel that it says at the very beginning chapters, as the children of Judah were exiled and taken into captivity in Babylon by the river of Chebar in that concentration camp, that the prophet of God - Ezekiel - went with them and do you know what it says about him? He sat where they sat. Why are you going through trouble? Imagine, think about it, asking: 'Why am I going through this?', and there's somebody on the other side of the church who you maybe haven't spoken to in three months and they're going through the same thing and need help. That's why you're going through it - so that we can comfort other people!

You know, this came to me as I was studying this: not everybody can preach, not everybody can stand in public and minister, not everybody can go to the outback of the earth and preach the Gospel as a missionary, but this is a ministry for everyone! This is something for everybody, and I want to say it's something for the simple folk. I'm not saying that I'm not simple, or that I'm up above you all, but you know what I'm trying to say. You're sitting here today and you think: 'What can I do for God?', and you're going through a terrible time - God says: 'I'm putting you through this in order that you can go to somebody who's going through the same thing and comfort them'.

You know, Paul said in another place: 'For ye see your calling, brethren, how that not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called: But God hath chosen the foolish things of the world

to confound the wise; and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty'. You don't need to go to Bible College for this, you don't need a degree for this, you don't need big prestige and education, you don't need a gift - all you need is suffering, and all you need is knowing comfort in suffering - you can do this! You don't have to look too far for broken hearts, do you? To men and women who are ill, men and women experiencing broken homes, shattered dreams, twisted minds, mixed up emotions, disfigured and crippled bodies - you don't have to look far!

You might think it strange, but do you know something? I was saying to someone recently, it's amazing whenever you go into somebody's home who's going through a terrible time. You sit there, maybe you've experienced this with me, and I hardly say anything - that's not like me, but I hardly say anything. The person just cries, they sob, they open their heart, they tell everything. I close the Bible, I walk out, and I think to myself: 'I did absolutely nothing there' - but to that person it meant the world. Sitting where they sat! You don't have to do anything! Some people in this world only want to know that somebody will listen to them, that somebody will hear! You don't need to have degrees to do that, and do you know something? I think we have got away from what true Christianity is - the simple folk, the simple people, not high and mighty, but going to one another as brethren and sisters and sharing with them.

One author says, his name is Barry, he tells of how his mother lost her dearest son. Do you know what he says about his mother? 'That is where my mother got her soft eyes, and why other mothers ran to her when they lost a child'. Turn with me for a moment to Hebrews chapter 2, and I'll confess to you: I try to visit who I can - and that's usually the very sick folk and folk that are bereaved. But I know that everybody here has heartaches, and everybody has trials and problems, and I can't help you all. I can't, I wish I could - but you can help each other. That's the way it's meant to be! But more than that, listen to this, Hebrews chapter 2 and verse 18 - I want to read another translation of this which I think is tremendous: 'Because he himself has gone through it, he is able to help others who are going through it'. Why not write that at the side of your Bible? I think that's tremendous: 'Because he', Christ, 'himself has gone through it, he is able to help others who are going through it'. That's what it means to have a High Priest touched with the feelings of our infirmities.

But as we finish today this is what I want you to see, and if you miss this you miss everything. The reason for our sufferings is not just to be comforted, is not just to be comforted and then comfort other people, but the ultimate reason is the ultimate reason for everything that we go through in our Christian life, and that is our sanctification and our Christlikeness. What does Paul say in verse 5: 'For as the sufferings of Christ abound in us, so our consolation also aboundeth by Christ'. He says the sufferings of Christ are in us. Now let me read Paul to you again, in chapter 4 of this book he says: 'I always bear about in my body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life also of Jesus might be made manifest in our body'. He says in Philippians 3 verse 10, listen to it: 'That I may know him, and the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of his sufferings, being made conformable unto his death'. Now here's the greatest of all, listen to this, Colossians chapter 1 verse 24: 'Who now rejoice in my sufferings for you, and fill up that which is behind of the afflictions of Christ in my flesh for his body's sake, which is the church'.

Now you can read that and say: 'That sounds as if Paul is saying he is filling up the sufferings and afflictions of Christ, were they not good enough?'. Can I say this reverently: the sufferings of Christ are able and sufficient to take all of you to heaven and this whole world to heaven. You don't need to add to it, it is finished! But I'll tell you what it is not sufficient for: 2000 years ago, and I tremble as I say this, as He died on the cross, wee Billy down the road never saw that...he never saw it! But my friend, how you can fill up those sufferings for him is to let him see it in your own flesh. That's what Paul's meaning, that is how you can fill up what is lacking - that's what it means - in the sufferings of Christ. Not that they weren't sufficient, but in order that men and women in our world today see it. You suffer, you are comforted, in your comfort you are able to comfort others for their consolation and hopefully, God willing, for their salvation.

We don't believe in a social Gospel here in the Iron Hall, but I hope we believe in the true Gospel - don't forget that the Lord made the blind to see, made the lame to walk, don't forget He fulfilled their bodily need before He spoke to them of their spiritual. Christlikeness, a personal presentation to those for whom He died through our suffering. There's a choice. You see, you can suffer and you can say: 'Why?', and you can gripe and you can moan - and that's not suffering for the Lord. But that same suffering can be turned on its head, and you can actually choose - you know Richard Wurmbrandt (sp?) that died recently, who suffered in Romania under the Communist regime? He sat with a group of preachers on one occasion, and he said this: 'Which of you would choose to have a disabled child born to you?'. Who would choose that? He says it's the same choice to suffer for Christ. It's a choice to take what is not rational, what is foolish, what just doesn't make sense, but to actually choose to suffer for Christ; that in your body others might see you suffering to the glory of God.

Now how does that correspond with the way we react to suffering? I want to go on five minutes or so, because I only started at five past 12 to be honest with you. How does that correspond with the way that we suffer? 'Why? Why me? Why me again? What about somebody else this time? Why are You always picking on me? Why do I get all the problems? Why did it have to be my family? My marriage? My body? My mind?'. Imagine a soldier from 16 years of age going through the ranks of his country, and his country one day pointed the finger and said: 'Your country needs you to do a very special job, there's only one soldier, one man is able in this country to do that job'. One day the commanding officer of the nation's military forces rings this young man up, and says: 'You are that man, we want you to be that man'. Can you hear him over the phone? 'Why me? Why me? Me again? You're looking me to take upon myself this honour? Is there not somebody else who would be willing to do it?'. That is what we are like when we're going through suffering. God is giving to us a privilege of bearing in our body, in our life, the dying of the Lord Jesus - yet we say: 'Why me?'.

Now that's intellectual - I'm not going through what you're going through, I can't sit where you're sitting - but that's the truth. It is a privilege. Now, the question is this - and I really want to say this, that's why I'm taking the time to do it - who are the highfliers in the Iron Hall? Who are the highfliers in the church? Is it Dr Such-and-such BD MTH DD, and everything else in the alphabet? Who are the privileged? Who are the called? Who are the spiritual? I'll tell you who they are: they're the ones that can't be here today, but are lying praising the Lord in their sickness. They are the ones who are praying for us, who can't come out the front door. They are the ones who God has called to suffer that they may comfort others, and in that comforting of others that the world should see the dying of the Lord Jesus and should be consoled, or perhaps even saved.

Do you know what Polycarp said, the martyr, as he was being tied to the stake? Do you know what he said? Listen: 'I thank Thee, God, that Thou hast judged me worthy of this honour'. What about that? What about the next time the phone rings, the next time you get a letter, you fall on your knees and say: 'Lord' - and you don't say it out of pretence, but from your heart - 'I thank Thee that Thou hast judged me worthy of this hour'. That's relying on God, and that's what God wants you to do.

George Matheson had a thorn in the flesh like Paul. He was born in Glasgow in 1842, he had eye trouble all his childhood and by the time he went to the ministry he was totally blind. Yet for 40 years he preached right across the whole land of Scotland, and in his journey - the book is called 'Thoughts for Life's Journey' - he tells the lessons he learns. Now I'm going to quote this to you, only a few more minutes, listen: 'My soul, reject not the place of thy prostration, it has been the robing room of royalty. Ask the great ones of the past what has been the spot of their prosperity, they will say it was the cold ground on which I was lying'. Listen to this: 'Ask Abraham, he will point you to the sacrifice of Moriah. Ask Joseph, he will direct you to his dungeon. Ask Moses, he will date his fortune from the danger of the Nile. Ask Ruth, she will bid you build her a monument in the field of her toil. Ask David, he will tell you that his songs came from the night. Ask

Job, and he will remind you that God answered him out of a whirlwind. Ask Peter, he will extol his submission of the sea. Ask John, he will give you the Psalm of Patmos. Ask Paul, he will attribute his inspiration to the light that struck him blind on the Damascus road. Ask one more, the Son of Man, ask Him whence has come His rule over the world. He will answer: 'From the cold ground on which I was lying, the Gethsemane ground, I received My sceptre there'.

Why are you suffering? Is there a purpose in your suffering? Can I finish with this short story. After conducting Beethoven's magnificent ninth Symphony, the composer and conductor Toscanini brought down his baton to a burst of applause. The audience stood to their feet and roared in approval. Toscanini and his orchestra took repeated bows and encores, and when the cheering finally subsided Toscanini turned his back to the musicians and leaned over the podium. Voicing his words in staccato whispers he said this to the men who played in the orchestra, listen: 'Gentleman, I am nothing, you are nothing, but Beethoven, Beethoven, Beethoven - he is everything, everything, everything'.

What orchestra, what musical are you playing in your life? Is it the dying of the Lord Jesus, that says: 'In my suffering I am nothing, in your sufferings you are nothing, but Christ is everything, everything, everything'. Let's bow our heads, and maybe believer you have gone through a conversion experience today. In other words, your suffering can be converted into something that is a privilege and an opportunity to trust in God, to serve God, and to show God in your life. Why not, by faith, trust Him this morning to do so? It's very hard, and don't think that by me preaching this I'll go home and have my dinner and have no worries - because I believe God tests you on these things when you preach them. In life I'll have them, and you'll have them, and we'll all have them - but it's what we do with them.

Our Father, help us to cast all our care upon Thee, for You care for us. We thank Thee that we have one in glory who has gone through it and can help all those who are going through it. May He gave them that help today, and may they step up the podium of privilege, realising that they have been chosen out of us all to suffer, that in their body they might glorify Christ. Help us Lord we pray, in Christ's name, Amen.

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Appendix A:

"Fear"

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I want you to turn with me in your Bibles to Mark's gospel - Mark's gospel and chapter 16, which you probably already know is the account of the Resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. Now, if you're familiar with the New Testament and with your Bible you'll know that often the gospel writers, when they're writing about one specific situation, often in each gospel there is a different slant put on the story. For instance, you could have an account of a work or a miracle of the Lord Jesus Christ in Matthew's gospel, and then in Mark's gospel you could have the same account but with a different emphasis. The writer, Mark, was trying to get across a different point.

Now, in this account, in Mark chapter 16, of the Resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ there is, I believe, one specific point that the writer wants to get across to those reading his words. So let's look at chapter 16 of Mark, and we will be referring and thinking of the other accounts of the Resurrection, but we're going to specifically look at Mark chapter 16.

Verse 1: "And when the sabbath was past, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome, had bought sweet spices, that they might come and anoint him. And very early in the morning the first day of the week, they came unto the sepulchre at the rising of the sun. And they said among themselves, Who shall roll us away the stone from the door of the sepulchre? And when they looked, they saw that the stone was rolled away: for it was very great. And entering into the sepulchre, they saw a young man sitting on the right side, clothed in a long white garment; and they were affrighted. And he saith unto them, Be not affrighted: Ye seek Jesus of Nazareth, which was crucified: he is risen; he is not here: behold the place where they laid him. But go your way, tell his disciples and Peter that he goeth before you into Galilee: there shall ye see him, as he said unto you. And they went out quickly, and fled from the sepulchre; for they trembled and were amazed: neither said they any thing to any man; for they were afraid. Now when Jesus was risen early the first day of the week, he appeared first to Mary Magdalene, out of whom he had cast seven devils. And she went and told them that had been with him, as they mourned and wept. And they, when they had heard that he was alive, and had been seen of her, believed not. After that he appeared in another form unto two of them, as they walked, and went into the country. And they went and told it unto the residue", the remainder, "neither believed they them. Afterward he appeared unto the eleven as they sat at meat, and upbraided them with their unbelief and hardness of heart, because they believed not them which had seen him after he was risen. And he said unto them, Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature. He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned. And these signs shall follow them that believe; In my name shall they cast out devils; they shall speak with new tongues; They shall take up serpents; and if they drink any deadly thing, it shall not hurt them; they shall lay hands on the sick, and they shall recover. So then after the Lord had spoken unto them, he was received up into heaven, and sat on the right hand of God. And they went forth, and preached every where, the Lord working with them, and confirming the word with signs following. Amen".

Ann Landers was an agony aunt in a tabloid newspaper, and she confessed that every single month that she would write in this agony aunt slot, that she would receive 10,000 letters every month. When she was asked on one occasion: 'What was the subject that predominated all of your letters? What was the problem, and the burden, and the anxiety that most people wrote to you about?', she had no hesitation in answering the

question. She said, without one second of thinking about it: 'There is one subject that predominates all: it is the subject of fear'. She said: 'Almost every letter that I receive, the root problem, the root diagnosis at the bottom of it all, is the problem of fear'.

Many doctors think that, indeed, 90% of patients, when they first come into their surgery, the first symptom of their problem or their illness was not a sore throat. It wasn't a pain in the chest, it wasn't a growth; but the first symptom that triggered all the other symptoms was the symptom of fear. If we're honest with ourselves, and if we look at the media, the television, the newspapers, even the billboards around us, we see that our society, perhaps more than any society ever in the history of time, is one that is eaten up with fear. It is one that is burdened and dominated with anxiety and the burden of even life itself, and living itself. Our world around us, and our environment around us, has been dominated, has been obsessed with fears and scares.

You only have to turn the TV on in the past week to see how many more scares there have been. The past decade, perhaps, we have been obsessed and bombarded through the television screen by scares - environmental scares. We've been told the ozone layer is going to cave in and the sun is going to burn us all up. The sea is going to come in from Newcastle and wipe us all out. We've been told about health scares. There was chickens: we had salmonella from our eggs, BSE from our cattle. Now, there's Asian flu from chickens again, and all these health scares. There are military scares. We've got more this week. Saddam Hussein has arisen his head again, making threats. More scares. In the Cold War we had the scare that someone was going to press a button in Russia and we were all going to go up in smoke. Scares!

We in our society today have developed a society, an environment of hypochondriacs of every conceivable kind: people who walk about their daily business in the world around us and they are so paranoid, depressed and conscious and worried about everything that could possibly go wrong - that probably has no probability of going wrong at all! Some people are even going about their daily life with the burden and anxiety of living life itself before them. Many of us have become like Louis XV of France. Louis XV was a man who was so paranoid, so obsessed with the subject of death that he forbade any mention of that subject in his presence. In fact, not only did he forbid the mention of the word, but he took away from his environment every reminder of the subject of death. Every grave, every memorial, every war cenotaph in the palace was taken away because it reminded him of that dreaded subject.

The great leader, dictator, Joseph Stalin, was the same. This was a man who ruled one of the superpowers of the earth, yet this was a man who had eight different bedrooms in which to sleep in. He was so afraid of someone coming one night and assassinating him, or someone poisoning his supper or something like that, that he had eight bedrooms and he would fluctuate from one bedroom to another in case someone came to take his life.

Everything that could possibly go wrong, we think will go wrong. It's alright - isn't it? - to look out at the world and say: 'Well that's the way they think', but do you know something? I believe that so often, not only the behaviour of the world can affect the church, but even in our own day and age the attitudes at times, the psyche, the mind-thoughts of the world are actually filtering in to the church of Jesus Christ. We, as Christians, whether consciously or not, have taken the word of God and have set it aside, and have started adopting the mind, thoughts and attitudes of the world around us. The Lord Jesus Christ said that there would come a time when men's hearts would fail them for fear. You know, I think this morning that, often as Christians, perhaps not literally, but in our everyday daily life our hearts are failing us for fear. It's as if people are just taking us like a wet rag and wringing us out with worry and anxiety. There are things in our life that daily, every single day, eat away at our very character.

I want you to look at this chapter of Scripture that we read together this morning: chapter 16 of Mark. I want you to think of the scene for just a moment. We have, portrayed for us in this gospel, the Easter weekend.

We have Good Friday - the death of the Lord - we have Saturday and then we have Sunday. We have here for us a record of what we call nowadays, Easter weekend. I want you to try to think of what the disciples felt like on Good Friday. Try and think about it! The Lord Jesus Christ, in the Garden of Gethsemane: soldiers come to Him. He has been praying, and they come to Him with swords and with staves and with armour; and they come to take Him away. One of His disciples, Judas, comes and kisses and betrays the Lord Jesus Christ. They take the Lord Jesus Christ, and then a prophecy is fulfilled. The great prophet said that when the Shepherd would be smitten the sheep would scatter. And the Shepherd, the Lord Jesus Christ - the Shepherd of the sheep was taken to be crucified - and what happened? It says that the disciples fled. They dispersed! They disappeared! You couldn't find them anywhere. A handful of them came to the cross to watch Christ die, and the rest deserted Him.

We all know Peter, don't we? He, if you like, is the epitome of the betrayal of the Lord Jesus Christ. We think of him around that fire. We think of the witnesses that came to him and said: 'Was not he with the Lord Jesus Christ?'. We think of the little girl who came and said: 'His speech betrayeth him. He has the speech of a Galilean' - and then he went to the extreme of betraying and denying the Lord Jesus Christ with oaths and with curses. But the rest weren't much better - they ran away. I don't know where they went, but they ran away. They were nowhere to be seen.

But I want you to try to think, just for a moment this morning, on what their feelings and what their thoughts were on Saturday morning. They arose on Saturday morning - if they could even sleep because of their guilt - and they awoke to the realisation that the Lord Jesus Christ was dead. Wherever they were, they were awoken - and can you imagine the thoughts that were coursing through their minds? Perhaps they remembered the Lord's life. Perhaps they remembered the miracles that He did; the miraculous words that fell from His lips; the great teaching that they had received at His feet, for three solid years at the feet of God Incarnate. Perhaps they were reminded of all the great things that He had promised them that He would do in the future, but now all they could think of was these words and the fact that Jesus Christ: He was dead.

Do you know what the supreme irony is? That no matter what acts the Lord Jesus Christ did that they remembered, or no matter what words He spoke that they remembered, they had forgotten some of the most critical words that the Lord Jesus Christ had stressed; especially in Mark's gospel that we have before us this morning. The irony is this: that these disciples had been told, time without number, that after three days, after the death of Christ, in three days He would rise again. But they had forgotten! Those who had heard it in their own ears, who had seen Him demonstrate it with Lazarus with their own eyes, those who had believed on Him in their hearts - the irony is they are the ones who had forgot. And the supreme irony is this: that the ones that had remembered were His enemies.

Turn with me for a moment to Matthew 27 - Matthew 27 and verse 62. Chapter 27 and verse 62; it says: 'Now the next day, that followed the day of the preparation, the chief priests and Pharisees came together unto Pilate, saying, Sir, we remember that that deceiver said, while he was yet alive, After three days I will rise again'. Now, this is the enemy of the Lord Jesus Christ. These are the people who wanted Him dead, who wanted Him six foot under, who wanted Christianity wiped off the face of the earth - and they were the ones who remembered the words that He said: that after three days, 'I will rise again'. If we had time this morning we could go right through all the gospels. We could go to Mark chapter 16, as we read this morning, and if you look at verses 1 to 3 you read that the two Mary's that came to the tomb, they brought with them sweet spices to anoint the body of Jesus. But if you look at verse 1 and verse 2 you see that they came on the third day of the week. That was the day that the Lord said He would rise again! They were coming with the mindset, the assumption, that Jesus was still dead and cold and they were coming to anoint His body. They had forgotten totally that He said: 'On the third day I will rise again'.

If you would go to John 20 you would see Mary Magdalene did not remember either: John 20 and verse 13.

You could see that Peter and John, the two disciples who were in the inner circle of the disciples of the Lord Jesus - they themselves had forgotten. The apostles, all the apostles themselves, in Luke chapter 24 we see that they all forgot. When the women came up to the room and told them: 'We have seen the Lord', they doubted. The two on the road to Emmaus, they talked with this man who they thought was a gardener. They said to Him: 'We thought this man, we thought this one was the deliverer, the Messiah of Israel. Now it is three days and he's still in the grave'. Thomas - doubting Thomas, the man who epitomises doubt for us in our own minds - what did he say? When these women came up and witnessed to the Resurrection of the Lord, he said: 'Except I see the prints in His hands and the scar in His side, and except I thrust my finger into the hands and into His side I will not believe.' They, of all people, had forgotten that Christ had risen from the dead.

If you were to go home this afternoon and look at this passage again - chapter 16 - and count how many times 'fear', or 'affrighted', is mentioned, it would astound you. What Mark is trying to get across, this morning, is the fear of the disciples - how they were so afraid because of the fact that the Lord Jesus Christ was dead, what it meant for them. This day, Saturday, when they woke up, when they realised Christ was dead; they realised suddenly that their dream was over. They realised that the deliverer who had promised to deliver them - He was now dead and gone. Suddenly, at that moment, despair, depression that they had never experienced before in their life, it came across them like a cloud. It seemed that there wasn't a glimmer of hope. It was a dark tunnel that they were thrust in, that there was no light at the end of; and that Saturday - that Saturday brought great depression that to them, at that point, they could not lift.

The Saturday after Good Friday, the next day, was a day of desolation. It was a day of shattered dreams. It was a day of gloom. It was a day of inertia. For Mary the mother of Jesus, a sword had pierced her heart as she saw her beloved son die. Would she not have thought of the angel visiting her and promising her that the seed that was in her - that one, that little embryo - would be the deliverer who would bruise the head of Satan and bring victory over sin? But now that dream was over. For Peter, perhaps, his heart welled up in guilt as he thought of the fact that his Lord was dead, and he betrayed Him and perhaps if he hadn't betrayed Him, what might have happened? He might have lived.

I wonder have you ever heard of the rhyme: 'Monday's child is fair of face, Tuesday's child is full of grace, Wednesday's child is full of woe'? Well, these were Saturday's children. Saturday's children were full of despair, full of tragedy. Their dream was shattered and their dream was over. Can I ask you this morning; have you ever experienced anything like that? Perhaps you haven't experienced anything as earth shattering as Messiah dying, but perhaps you have experienced a loved one dying. Perhaps you've experienced a shattered dream: what you thought was going to be the future and suddenly, in a split second, it was all over and you just didn't know what was going to happen. Or perhaps you just have a fear that something is going to happen, and you're taken up with anxious thoughts and worries.

Have you ever felt depression like this? You know, there are people living today in our society who live in despair and darkness - the darkness of Saturday. They walk about their daily business. They are Saturday's children. Saturday's cities in our world are teeming places of misery and gloom. People in their daily lives, living for themselves, are walking, as it were, a ritual dance to death with an illusion that they think at the end of it there will be hope; only to die and find hell. We live in a godless world; a world that is full of despair; a world where fear grips people from day to day; hopelessness and meaninglessness crush people on every side. Can I ask you believer, this morning, are you one of Saturday's children? Are you like this?

Well, if you are I want to tell you some good news. Turn with me to Romans chapter 1 for a moment - Romans chapter 1 and we'll read from verse 1. It's verse 4 I want to look at, but we'll read from verse 1 to get the context. Romans 1 verse 1: "Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, separated unto the gospel of God, (Which he had promised afore by his prophets in the holy scriptures,) concerning his Son

Jesus Christ our Lord, which was made of the seed of David according to the flesh; and declared" - now, if you ring your Bible, ring that word! "And declared to be the Son of God with power, according to the spirit of holiness, by the resurrection from the dead".

'Declared'! Now, that little word 'declared', in the Greek, is a word - this word: 'horizthentos' (sp?). 'Horizthentos' - that is the word that we get our English word 'horizon' from. Horizthentos - horizon. You can nearly read this verse like this. Verse 3: 'Concerning His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord...who was horizoned to be the Son of God with power...by the resurrection from the dead'. Jesus Christ was horizoned as the Son of God with power because of his resurrection.

What's your horizon this morning? What is a horizon? Well, a horizon is a boundary, isn't it? It's a boundary in the environment, in the landscape, that you can't see any further. It says 'thus far and no further you can't see'. It's something that stops you. It's a boundary around you, and that's what a horizon is. Can I ask you what your horizon is? What is your boundary? What is the thing that seems to stop you from getting anywhere for God? What is the thing that seems to stop you, even in your own life, getting rid of fears and getting rid of worry and anxiousness? What is that boundary? This verse says - listen to this - that Christ has been horizoned. He has been made your horizon. When Christ came out of the grave He became your boundary, He became your restriction, He became your horizon!

In the school I went to we had a swimming pool. When I went to the school I couldn't swim, but when I left the school I could swim because they just threw you in and let you get on with it! But when I was in the swimming pool I used to wear goggles (not these ones now!), swimming goggles, and they always came off when I got to the deep end. They used to plummet right to the bottom of the deep end - and I used to think: 'Here we go again!'. What I used to do was (I'm sure you know what it's like to do this) I tipped up and when right down to the bottom of the pool, further and further down. The further down you get you feel the weight of the water above you, and then you feel the pressure of the water and your ears start to feel funny, and your nose starts to feel funny. The further down you get you feel that you can go no more, and you just grab the goggles and turn up, and you feel this awesome force pushing you - and it just pushes you right out of the water until you thrust through the surface into the air. That was just like the resurrection of the Lord Jesus - only a thousand times more. Because when the Lord Jesus Christ was risen from the dead there was a spiritual law that was set in motion. It's this: His humiliation set in motion His own law of exaltation. Now, I want you to get that: His humiliation set in motion His own law of exaltation. Philippians 2 is an example of that. It says Christ humbled Himself and became obedient unto death - His humiliation - even the death of the cross. But His humiliation at the cross necessitated His exaltation. "Wherefore God also hath highly exalted him, and given him a name which is above every name".

You know, the Resurrection was exactly the same. Christ had been humbled unto death, even the death of the cross. It was if Christ was being pushed further down and down and down in His life. He could be pushed no further down than this death that He had suffered with the sins of the world upon His shoulder. As He is pushed down and down and down, there is this compulsion and this power of His exultation that, as it were, thrusts Him out of the grave! As Romans says, He becomes the horizon of everyone who trusts in Him. His humiliation set into motion His exultation. Matthew's gospel says at that moment when He thrust out of the grave, when the grave could hold Him no longer, that there was a great earthquake. It says that the guards that stood there, it says that their legs shook and they became as dead men. Think of it! The ones who were living became dead, and the one who was dead became alive! In that split second, because Christ had to be exalted for the stoop that He took, life came into those stick-like dead bones and into that cold flesh, and Christ had risen again.

But there's something that I want you to see in our passage. Chapter 16 - Mark chapter 16: because this is just beautiful. Mark chapter 16 and verse 7, and the angel said to these women after the Lord had risen again:

"But go your way, tell His disciples and Peter". Now, why did he item out Peter there? Why did he emphasise Peter there? 'Go and tell His disciples and Peter'? Can you imagine, when these two women came into the upper room and told them and said: 'Listen, he wanted me specifically to tell you, Peter, that He had risen again'? Can you imagine what that would have felt like for Peter? One who was despairing, one who was degraded, one whose mind was perplexed with fear and was twisted with the turmoil of the fact that he had betrayed the Lord of Glory; and now the Lord of Glory had sent a message to tell him, 'Peter, I've risen again!'.

Do you know what the resurrection meant for Peter? It meant this: that the Lord Jesus Christ, our Lord Jesus Christ, can overcome the greatest enemies: death and hell, by His resurrection. If He can overcome death and hell, what is there in our life that we cannot overcome by the power of His resurrection? What is there? What horizon is too heavy for the Christ to push away as He comes out of the grave? These were Saturday's children. Think of that! These were Saturday's children a few moments before. They were depressed, they were despairing, but then they became Sunday's children! The children, who, it says in the Acts of the Apostles, turned the world upside down. What a change the resurrection made to them!

Someone has said: 'Sunday's children are the arguments the world understands and the world needs'. What is your day? Are you living in the darkness, the pessimism, the hopelessness of Saturday, or are you living in the bounding life and irrepressible hope of Sunday, the Lord's Day? For the disciples it seemed that everything had ended in tragedy. Nothing else could have changed their sad hearts but life coming and coursing through the body of the Lord Jesus Christ. Do you know something believer, this morning? The resurrection, for us, is everything. Do you believe that? The resurrection means everything, and so much of the time when we preach the gospel we say: 'Don't forget the cross!' - and we should never forget the cross, but we forget the Resurrection! Paul said that 'if Christ be not risen then is our preaching vain and our faith is also vain; and we, of all men, are most miserable'. It means everything. Do you know why? Because if the cross, the blood of Christ, took our sins away and took the power out of sin, the resurrection of Christ puts God's power into us! It thrusts the life of God into a dead sinner, and we are made alive.

Do you know what Paul's request was? He said, 'above all things' - he said he counted everything in this world: ambition, achievement, status, even health, he said he counted it all but dung! Why? That he might know Him - and what else? - and the power of His resurrection! Believer, this morning, do you know the power of His resurrection? I know you know it in your head, but do you know the resurrection power of Jesus Christ in your life from day to day? Do you know that power that changed Christ from dead to living? Do you know that supernatural power in your life? Do you know that you can?

Oh, the resurrection means so much and I could go on telling you what it means to the Saviour: what it makes Him, and what it means to the sinner, and what it means for Satan, and what it means for the Sabbath, and what it means for baptism. But let me ask you in closing: are you living in Saturday, in the shadow and the dearth of Saturday? Or will you live in the shadow of the risen Lord Jesus Christ in your life? Will you let Him be your horizon? Will you let the dynamite of the resurrection explode your faith? Will you let its floods and fires cremate your anxieties? Will you let its waters come unto your dry and thirsty land in your life? Will you let the resurrection of Christ make a difference in your life, until we face the ultimate horizon that is death?

I read once about a man who was facing that horizon, and I just want to finish with this: telling you what he said, because this was a man who knew the power of the resurrection. A man called Dr W.B. Hinson (sp?) was speaking from his pulpit only a year after commencing his ministry in this specific church. He was told that week by a doctor - he said: 'This week you will go to your death'. He writes this: 'I remember a year ago when a man in this city said, 'You have got to go to your death'. I walked out to where I live, 5 miles out of this city, and I looked across at that mountain I love, and I looked at the river in which I rejoice, and I looked

at the stately trees that are always God's poetry to my soul. Then in the evening, I looked up into the great sky where God was lighting His lamps and I said, 'I may not see you many more times but, mountain, I shall be alive when you are gone. River, I shall be alive when you cease running towards the sea. Stars, I shall be alive when you have fallen from your great sockets in the great down-pulling of the material universe'.

Do you know what this man knew? He knew what Job knew. He could cry: 'I know that my Redeemer liveth!'. Do you know, and does knowing make a difference? I pray this morning to God that it will. Let's bow our head and commit ourselves to the Lord.

Our Father, we thank Thee for the Lord Jesus Christ: our risen and exalted Head, the only Head of the church, the only one whom we worship, and the only one who is risen from the dead. Lord, we thank You for what that means to us, for the life that He gives us, for the justification that He has achieved for us by His Resurrection, for the fact that as He is risen so we also will rise and meet Him one day in the air - and so we will forever be with the Lord. We - wonder of wonders - we shall be like Him for we shall see Him as He is. Lord, let us see Him now as we wait around His table. For we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.

Transcribed by Trevor Veale, Preach The Word - June 2001

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Appendix B:

"This God"

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I was seeking the Lord as to what to preach to you today - it is a day of prayer, it is the last day of our week of prayer - and it was at one of the prayer meetings that I mentioned Psalm 46, and how I've been meditating on it. I think it was Thursday, perhaps that morning, and on the way out one of our sisters here in the assembly - she knows who she is - mentioned this verse to me, and I was blessed by it. But I thought nothing more of it until I got this verse in my own daily readings, and the Lord impressed upon me to preach on it. It's found in Psalm 48, and we'll read from verse 1 - the whole of the Psalm.

"Great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised in the city of our God, in the mountain of his holiness. Beautiful for situation, the joy of the whole earth, is mount Zion, on the sides of the north, the city of the great King. God is known in her palaces for a refuge. For, lo, the kings were assembled, they passed by together. They saw it, and so they marvelled; they were troubled, and hasted away. Fear took hold upon them there, and pain, as of a woman in travail. Thou breakest the ships of Tarshish with an east wind. As we have heard, so have we seen in the city of the LORD of hosts, in the city of our God: God will establish it for ever. Selah. We have thought of thy lovingkindness, O God, in the midst of thy temple. According to thy name, O God, so is thy praise unto the ends of the earth: thy right hand is full of righteousness. Let mount Zion rejoice, let the daughters of Judah be glad, because of thy judgments. Walk about Zion, and go round about her: tell the towers thereof. Mark ye well her bulwarks, consider her palaces; that ye may tell it to the generation following. For this God is our God for ever and ever: he will be our guide even unto death".

I want to speak to you today about this God: 'This God is our God for ever and ever: he will be our guide even unto death'. In my daily readings also I've been reading through the book of 1 Samuel, and now into the book of 2 Samuel, and I've been noting the biographies of both Saul and David as kings of Israel. There is one situation that never fails to marvel me every time I read it, and it's found in 1 Samuel 30 - if you care to turn to it - 1 Samuel 30, and there are two verses that astound me.

First of all you need a little bit of background to understand the story that we are breaking into. The story is that David is residing with many of his mighty men and many of his followers in the town of Ziklag, fleeing from Saul, but also later on in the story he is found now in that town of Ziklag. As they are there they return to Ziklag from journeys, and they find that the whole city is sacked and destroyed by the Amalekites. They find worse than that: many of their homes are burnt, many of their possessions have been taken, and worse than all of that many of their family members have been kidnapped, including their wives and their children. As we read that tragic story, King David looks around him at the desolation of the town of Ziklag, and it says that together they wept until they could weep no more tears. We read in verse 6 that: 'David was greatly distressed; for the people spake of stoning him, because the soul of all the people was grieved, every man for his sons and for his daughters'.

Now can you put yourself in that position for a moment? You come home and you find that your house is burnt to the ground, you find your children have disappeared, your wife or your husband is gone. As far as these people were concerned David was the source of the problem, for it was David that brought them to the city of Ziklag. David was distressed because he thought that the people - perhaps they were even bending

down to lift up the rocks to stone their King. Look at the rest of the verse: 'but David encouraged himself in the LORD his God'. If you go to verse 19 you will find that before that he put on the ephod of God, and he asked God: 'Should we pursue after these Amalekites? And if we pursue after them, will we overtake them and will we win? Will we beat them?'. The Lord said: 'Go and pursue them, you'll win'. So David, with all his men, went. They went to that city and they took back their possessions, they routed that city and killed all their enemies. They got all their possessions, all their wives, all their children back - and they went back victorious to Ziklag. But this is what it says, look at verse 19: 'And there was nothing lacking to them, neither small nor great, neither sons nor daughters, neither spoil, nor any thing that they had taken to them: David recovered all'.

That thrills me! Now, what would you and I do? Imagine this! What would I do as the Pastor if I was trying to lead you into a certain spiritual ground, and all of a sudden as I'm opening the word of God to you one Sunday morning you grab your hymn books and stand up and throw them at me? I think my P45 would be coming shortly, and maybe even my resignation note myself, with my own hand, would be written - and I'd say: 'I've had enough of this, I'm not serving these people', and go. We would become discouraged, naturally, at such a situation - everybody turning against us. But the amazing thing about King David is this, that in the midst of a situation where everyone turned against him - many of his mighty men who were faithful to him - they all turned to stone him, he encouraged himself in the Lord! What about that?

Now, here is the secret - you can't miss that when you go to verse 19, when it says there that there was nothing lacking to them. They got everything that they had lost, and then it says: 'David recovered all' - the point of the matter is this, if I can give it to you, that if David hadn't encouraged himself in the Lord he wouldn't have gotten all those things! He would have been lacking, he wouldn't have recovered all, but the difference and the distinguishing mark of this great King was that he had the ability in the midst of all sorts of afflictions to encourage himself in the Lord.

On my holidays, as I've said to you before, I read a few books, one of which was A.T. Pierson's biography of George Mueller. There is one thing that stands out about this great man of faith, and it is this: he exhorts you and I in this book to have a daily time with God in prayer and in the study of the word of God. But what we do is we have a 'quiet time', that's not what the word of God teaches us to do - to have a 'quiet time'. But rather God teaches us to meet with Him, to have communion with Him - not just a Bible reading and a time of prayer, going down a shopping list. George Mueller put it like this, and this gripped my heart: 'The first business of every morning should be to secure happiness in God'. Secure happiness in God! He goes on to say: 'Such quietness before God should be habitually cultivated, calming the mind and freeing it from preoccupation'.

Can I define your time, your daily time, with God as that? Securing, every morning, your happiness in God? That's another statement that encapsulates what David did: he encouraged himself in the Lord. Now, that's what we need - boy, do we need it today! There is so much to discourage us, so much to pull us down, we need to encourage ourselves in the Lord. Can you imagine what would happen if you got up at the scraque of dawn every day and decided - no matter what your problems were or perplexities, no matter what you were going into work to face and you know you're going in to face it - that you got before an open Bible and got on your knees and you stayed there until you secured your happiness in God? Do you do that? I'll tell you how you know whether you do it or not - what's your disposition when you get off your knees and walk out of your closet? Is it happy?

'Happy in Jesus, my Saviour divine,
I am so happy, still He is mine'.

Turn with me to 2 Timothy chapter 1 and verse 15, till I show you this disposition as well - and we're leading up to our text, hopefully we'll get to it this morning. So we've seen this in David, we've seen it in a modern-day saint, George Mueller, and now we're going to see it in the great apostle Paul. Second Timothy chapter 1 and verse 15, and here we find that the apostle had a similar experience to King David - he says: 'All they which are in Asia be turned away from me'. All they that are in Asia be turned away from me - now please recall in your mind that these are the people that Paul was ministering to. Some of these people, perhaps, he led to Christ, and all of them in Asia turned away from him! Prophets, evangelists, pastors, teachers, preachers, turning away from the great apostle! Now turn to chapter 4 of 2 Timothy, he elaborates on this predicament that he was in and says: 'At my first answer no man stood with me, but all men forsook me: I pray God that it may not be laid to their charge. Notwithstanding' - oh, look at this - 'the Lord stood with me, and strengthened me; that by me the preaching might be fully known, and that all the Gentiles might hear: and I was delivered out of the mouth of the lion'.

Now think of this - the accumulation of trouble: 'All turned away from me in Asia, no man stood with me, but all men forsook me - but notwithstanding this...', do you know what he's saying? All that didn't matter, because the Lord stood with me and strengthened me - and it was because the Lord was with me that I was delivered out of the mouth of the lion. It's almost exactly in parallel to David's story. He wouldn't have recovered all if he didn't encourage himself in the Lord, and Paul would never have been delivered out of the mouth of the lion if he didn't realise and encourage himself - secure his happiness in God - that the Lord was with him. That is why I believe, in Philippians chapter 4 and verse 4, Paul says this: 'Rejoice in the Lord: again I say, Rejoice in the Lord. Rejoice in the Lord always: again I say, Rejoice'.

Now, why is this? Why am I labouring on this this morning? It's because today we are having a day of prayer, and today do you know what we need to do? We need to rejoice in the Lord! You see the Psalmist gives us the reason why we need to do that. He says in Psalm 22 and verse 3 that God, speaking to Him, he says: 'Thou inhabitest the praises of Israel'. In this dispensation I don't think things have changed - God still inhabits the praises of His people, the church - is that not right? There is a special sense in which, when we are taken up with praise in God - and that is in prayer, that is in song - as our hearts worship Him in spirit and in truth we find that God comes among us in a special and in a unique way. That's why we're coming today imploring God upon our knees: 'Wilt Thou not revive us again?' - why? - 'That Thy people may rejoice in Thee'.

Before we go to our text today, let me lay down this fundamental principle to you: praise is what will take hold of God. Have you got that? Our praise is what will take hold of God, and the reason being: praise is the fruit of our knowledge of God. You see, when you begin to realise who our God is, when you begin to learn all about Him, what He has done, how He loves us, how we are secure in Him, how He blesses us - we cannot but help, when we begin to learn about Him, to praise Him - and from our hearts there flows an ocean, an absolute torrent, of praise and worship. Praise is the proof that what you have learnt in your head about Him has touched your heart down deep in your soul. Here is the defining factor of whether your knowledge is only head knowledge or not. Maybe that has been perplexing you: 'Do I just know all these things in my head?' - well, here's the answer: if what you know in your head isn't fermented in your heart to the full, precious, sweet wine of praise...it's only head knowledge.

Does it touch your heart? For when we know God, my friends, we will be filled with praise. And when we are filled with praise, do you know what happens? We are filled with faith. And when we are filled with faith, what happens? Our prayers are answered. Isn't that right? Oh, today, that we would let what is in our heads about our God filter down that 16 inch journey into our hearts. Filter down into our very bosom, and bring from it a birth, a conception, and then a delivery to God Almighty of praise. And when He hears the praises of His people, He will inhabit those praises. And when He hears the prayer of faith, believing and praising the God that He is, He will answer our prayer. He will say to us today, as He said to the blind, as He

said to them who came unto Him to see: 'Believe ye that I am able to do this? Do you believe me?'. 'They said unto him, Yea, Lord. Then touched he their eyes, saying, According to your faith be it unto you'.

Here we have it. Here is the key to our prayers today. There are many aspects of prayer, but this is a fundamental one - and that is why Paul said again in Philippians: "Be careful for nothing; but by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving' - not without it - 'with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God. And the God of peace shall give you the peace which passeth all understanding, to rule in your heart and mind through Christ Jesus'. Oh, to come to God, yes, today with our petitions - but to come to Him in praise and worship from our hearts with thanksgiving! Let us not be destroyed for lack of knowledge in our prayers - and I think, do you know what I think? In the closing 10 minutes or so of our meeting, I think if we could get a glimpse and an appreciation of who our God is and who our Saviour is, we would see great answers to prayer today!

Who is He? Who is this God? Psalm 48 tells us, and as you read this Psalm it seems that David is praising two things. It seems that he's praising the Lord, and then he's praising the city of the Lord. But you know, that's a mistake if you can only see that, because it's the fact that the presence of God is dwelling in the city of Zion that David praises that city of Jerusalem. So by praising the city, he sees himself as praising the Lord God Himself - therefore the city becomes a picture, an illustration, a metaphor of God, and what a personification of God it is as you read down these verses! Look at it, He is described as His presence being a mountain of holiness, beautiful in loftiness, the joy of the whole earth, the wonder of the world, the royal city where the King resides, where processions and parades go down the street in pomp and in majesty. It says that all the kings of the earth and armies come to conquer her, but when they see her strength and her impregnability, they tremble and flee in fear. If you read down you find that even the greatest Navy in the world, of Tarshish, is not a match for this fortress - for this is an eternal city. Look at the final verses: she has towers without number, you can't count them, you can't tell them. Her bulwarks, her walls of defence, would take your breath away if you saw them. She has palaces of splendour, and the generations that come after her will reminisce about the greatness of the city of Zion.

What a representation of God this is! Now can I ask you, as you meditate upon that and as you ponder it, does it not already fill your soul with faith? Does it not fill you with praise? Look at verse 1, God is described as great: 'Great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised'. In the second half of the verse He is described as holy: 'in the mountain of his holiness' - the mountain is holy because He is holy. It is 'the joy of the whole earth', because God is the joy of the whole earth, verse 2. In verse 3 He is described as a refuge. In verses 4 to 8 He is a defence. In verse 9 He is filled with lovingkindness, unfailing love toward us. In verse 10 He is a righteous God. In verse 11 He is a God of judgement and justice. And my friends can I tell you today, listen: this God is our God! Hallelujah! This God is our God!

No wonder Martin Luther, faced with the empire of Roman Catholicism, could write these words: 'A mighty fortress is our God, a bulwark never failing', isn't that right? That is what our God is. He says in one of his verses:

'And though this world with devils filled,
Should threaten to undo us,
We will not fear for God hath willed
His truth to triumph through us'.

What faces us today? We're on our knees today, maybe you're here today and you haven't even the strength to be on your knees because of a broken heart, because of trials, because of affliction, because of maybe the enemy that has come and revealed himself to you in a way that you could never have imagined or anticipated. What faces us as a nation? Millions upon millions of children that are murdered in the wombs of

their mothers, that's what faces us. Sodomite marriages, this week broadcast on television for all to see. The possibility of human cloning in the future. Oh, well, I could go on, but let's not go on - because my friends as we see what's going on in our land, as we see children - children that the Lord said: 'Suffer to come unto me', children that He sat upon His knee - used as a propaganda stunt, whether by Republicans or by Loyalists, we can say: 'Our God is this God'.

Will you let that saturate you today? This God is our God! He is ours, we own Him! And can I bring to you: if this God is for us who can stand against us? Look to Psalm 46, look at it, and in the light of our present situation in Ulster today, and as we pray about our land today I want us to take this verse from God. This is how God is described in Psalm 46 and verse 9 and 10: 'He maketh wars to cease unto the end of the earth; he breaketh the bow, and cutteth the spear in sunder; he burneth the chariot in the fire. Be still, and know that I am God: I will be exalted among the heathen, I will be exalted in the earth'. Now, do you believe that our God is this God who maketh wars to cease? Amen? Do you believe it? Really believe it? He breaketh the spear in sunder, the weapons of warfare He breaks. He can breathe peace into the most turbulent situations. He says: 'I will be exalted among the heathen' - from the very depths of evil and distress and iniquity and all that we would find despair in, He can raise out a memorial to Himself.

Oh, that you would rejoice in the power of this God, this God that is our God. Oh, that you would see Him at the Red Sea. Do you see Him? Do you see what He can do? Can you see Him bringing a great fish to rescue Jonah? Can you see Him with Daniel in the very lion's den, shutting their mouths? Can you see Him with the three Hebrew children in the fiery furnace? Can you see Him with David and Goliath? Can you see Him in the person of Christ? Feeding the 5000, making the blind to see, making the deaf to hear, making the dumb to speak, and the lame to walk? Does that not inspire you to have faith in this great One?

Gideon, on one occasion, despaired and said: 'Lord, if you are with us, if you're really here then why has all this befallen us, and where be all the miracles which our fathers told us of? Did not the Lord bring us up out of Egypt? But now, Lord, you have forsaken us and delivered us into the hands of the Midianites'. Elijah had been taken up to heaven, and Elisha was told if you see me being taken up you'll be anointed by a double portion of the Spirit that I had. As Elisha was keeping his eyes fixed on Elijah going across the Jordan - you remember the miracle that Elijah performed with his mantle, he struck the waters and the waters parted - but then on the way back Elisha had the mantle and Elijah was gone. Elisha comes and what does he do? He strikes it just like Elijah did, and he said: 'Where is the Lord God of Elijah?'. Where is He? I'll tell you where He is: this God is our God. He's our God! He is with us today, His power is here, His promises we have. You see His power and His promises: God is our refuge, that's our protection; He's our strength, that's His power; He's a very present help, that's His presence; 'Therefore will we not fear', that's His peace. You can go through the Old Testament, go through the New Testament, and we as the church of Jesus Christ today say: 'All the promises in Him are Yea and Amen unto the glory of God by us'.

Oh, that that would thrill your heart today, and that we could look to Psalm 42 this time - and the cry comes up from heart of despair: 'Where is thy God?'. Where is He? Where is God in your life? Where is God in the Evangelical church today? Where is God in East Belfast? You look at the television and you see hate as you've never seen it before, where is God now? The word of faith to us today is this: 'Why art thou downcast, O my soul? Hope thou in God: for I shall yet praise him'. What does God want us to do? He wants us to stop looking at our boots and start hoping in Him, hoping in the power of God, standing in the promises of God, and yearning for the presence of God.

This God is our God for ever and ever: he will be our guide even unto death. In the closing moments, would you grab hold of this? You my friend, we as the church, have the presence of God as ours. What does it say about that city in Psalm 46? 'God is in the midst of her', it speaks and says: 'there is a river'. Jeremiah says that the Lord is the fountain of living waters. The Psalmist in 36 says: 'Thou shalt make them drink of the

river of thy pleasures. For with thee is the fountain of life: in thy light shall we see light'. The Lord Jesus said in John 4:14: 'But whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst; but the water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water springing up into everlasting life'. Isaiah calls to you today, calls to us upon our knees: 'Ho, every one that thirsteth, come ye to the waters, and he that hath no money; come ye, buy, and eat; yea, come, buy wine and milk without money and without price'. 'And the Spirit and the bride say, Come. And let him that heareth say, Come. And let him that is athirst come. And whosoever will, let him take the water of life freely'. Hear it? Hear it! For this God is our God, this God is your God, for ever and ever: and He will be your guide even unto death.

Samuel Rutherford was locked up in a prison in Aberdeen for his faith, for preaching the Gospel of Christ. He was writing some letters to the members of his church, and he ended one of his letters in his book of letters like this: 'Jesus Christ came into my prison cell last night, and every stone in it glowed like a ruby' - Jesus Christ came into my prison cell last night, and every stone shone, glowed, like a ruby. You see, the presence of Christ can transform the darkest, dampest, damndest prison cell into the palace of the city of our God and King. My friend, do you know all it would take? Praise, praise unto our God.

Let us bow our heads and pray. Let me just say that after this service at about one o'clock, giving time for the children and the rest of the folk to disperse, in the Upper Room all afternoon some of us will be there for prayer. If you can join us you will be made very welcome.

Our Father, we thank Thee that this God, this same God, is our God for ever and ever, and He will be our guide even unto death. Father, thrill us with our God and our King, Christ Jesus. Inspire faith within us, cause us to praise Thee in our prayers and in our thanksgiving, that we may see the will of God done in earth as it is in heaven, that You may inhabit the praises of Your people, and that we would have cause to glorify Thy name today - not just to answer our prayers, but because we have been heard in the courts of heaven, and that our prayers are answered. We thank Thee for this day, and we pray Thy blessing upon it now, and those that must leave us that You'll bless them, and bless us all now in the Saviour's name. Amen.

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