

Sermon Text and Title - 2 Corinthians 1:3-11: What's the God of Mercy Doing at Sojourners?

Sermon Points:

Introduction: What's the Greatest Danger of a Church?

1. The God of Mercy has Brought Broken-Hearted Despair (vv.8-9)
2. The God of Mercy has Brought Bold Dependence (vv.8-9)
3. The God of Mercy has Brought Broken-Hearted Hope in His Deliverance (v.10)

Application: Sharers in Suffering, Comfort, and Prayer (vv.4-5, 11)

Prayer Points:

1. Adore Christ for his suffering on our behalf and his care for us as a faithful and merciful high priest.
2. Confess our desire to keep the mask of self-sufficiency on to others and the silliness of self-reliance in ourselves.
3. Thank God for his kindness in keeping us from self-reliance through suffering and in keep us trusting him in dependence.
4. Ask God to make us fellow sharers in the sufferings of Christ, fellow sharers in the comforts of Christ to one another, and persevering in prayer for our church and the neighborhoods and nations around us.

Introduction: What's the Greatest Danger of a Church?

As I was considering this sermon, one of the things that came to mind is this reality of the greatest danger of a church. I think the greatest danger that could live in a church is self-reliance. Here's why:

A church that is self-reliant is practicing the very antithesis of the gospel. A church that is self-reliant begins to trust in it's own planning and wisdom for spiritual growth, instead of depend on the word of God and the Spirit of God for it's direction and spiritual growth. It becomes a prayerless church that trusts it's planning instead of a church whose planning is saturated with prayer. It becomes a group of people that also becomes self-reliant and who then like the church at Corinth begin to make power plays and lift themselves up as having the best ideas and the best gifts instead of being committed to gospel love for one another.

Therefore, one of the greatest prayers of our hearts for Sojourners should be, "Lord, keep us from self-reliance." And I think God has been merciful to do that.

The God of Mercy has Brought Broken-Hearted Despair (vv.8-9)

Before we get to what God has done, let's remember who God is from verses 3-5:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. For as we share abundantly in Christ's sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too.

So, Paul's main point and my main point this morning will be to point to this Father of mercies and God of all comfort and say, "Blessed be God!" So, what do we see about our God in these verses?

First, let's define the mercies and comfort of God. The idea of the word used for mercies is that God has within his very nature, within his very character has a heart that moves toward his children with mercy. The

idea of “comfort” here has the idea of “strengthening help.” When we think of comfort perhaps we think of a couch, or comfort food, or yoga pants. But, main idea of comfort in this passage is that God will give strengthening help to his people. It’s the same word used to describe the Holy Spirit as our “helper.”

And this mercy and this strengthening help come, it says at the end of verse 5, “through Christ.” That’s the only way we get the mercy and comfort talked about here, in the gospel, in the finish work of Jesus on our behalf.

So, the first thing we should know is that God’s very nature is to move toward his people with mercy and strengthening help for all those who have been made his children by the blood of Christ.

Second, we must realize that this is not simply a theory. This is the Father of mercies and God of all comfort who, in verse 4, comforts US in ALL of our affliction. God is unbelievably powerful, but for those in Christ he is also intimately personal. God is with us in the nitty-gritty of life, and he means to move toward us in compassion and in strengthening help in our afflictions so that we move toward others.

With this God in mind, let’s move toward verses 8-9:

For we do not want you to be unaware, brothers, of the affliction we experienced in Asia. For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death. But that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead.

The first thing we notice in these verses is the purpose of affliction; to make them rely on the God who raises the dead. That’s not a purpose of the devil. That’s not a motivation for our flesh. There is only one logical option for who would be responsible for something that leads to deeper dependence on God: God.

So, this passage teaches us that sometimes the Father of mercies brings broken-hearted despair to his people. How bad was it? Paul says this affliction caused him to be “utterly burdened beyond his strength.”

In other words, this apostle who preached the gospel with power and healed with power said, “this trial took us beyond our strength. We were out of gas. We had nothing left.” How much beyond his strength?

Paul says, “We despaired of life itself.” Meaning...they didn’t want to go on. The pain, whether physical, emotional, or spiritual just felt like too much. They had nothing left to give. The darkness was closing in. The pain was going up. And they just despaired of life itself. They just didn’t want to go on anymore.

And the Father of mercies has brought this kind of despair to our doorstep at Sojourners in a multitude of ways. There has been the reality of wayward children, hurting parents with unknowns, hard adoption, danger, chronic, ongoing, debilitating pain, miscarriages, financial struggles, relationships ending that were hoped to continue, spiritual struggles, marriage struggles, disability, uncertain future plans, scary hospitalizations, sinful addictions, and many more.

Even the elder team, with all of the hard relational realities and pains in the past 5 years has often felt like, “It’s just too much. It would be easier to give up.”

And I’ve sat with you while some of you have said, “I just don’t want to go on anymore. It’s too hard. I can’t bear it. I have nothing left to give.”

And perhaps one of the hardest things about many of the struggles going on at Sojourners is that so much of it seems so chronic. Unless God breaks in with miracles, which we plead for often, these things are not going away. In other words, these things have marked us as a body. That’s how Paul felt too, he said:

Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death.

The verb form Paul uses is the perfect tense, which means this was something that marked them in the past with continuing effects into the present time he’s writing. In other words, in this trial, God has marked them in an ongoing way with this reality, this taste of death. A little later on this book Paul says they are “always

carrying around the death of Christ.”

Paul knows what it means to have chronic hardship that marks him brought to his doorstep by the Father of Mercies. And so do we.

The God of Mercy has Brought Bold Dependence (vv.8-9)

Now, if the story simply ended at the suffering, it wouldn't be much of a story in Paul's life or in the life of our church. But, there is a deeper level to see in and through the suffering in order to see what God is up to among us.

In the first point I showed you that the logic of these verses meant that it was God who had brought this deep affliction to Paul. But, now I want you to see how this relates to God as a Father of mercies who will give us strengthening help.

Remember, in the introduction where I said one of the great dangers in a church would be self-reliance. Why is that? Because the gospel that says we are needy, broken, foolish sinners who were saved by the grace of God at the cross of Christ while we were yet sinners. We did nothing to earn our salvation. Jesus took our shame. Jesus bore our wrath. And we simply stand provided for, forgiven, and having our shame removed at the cross. All we know is grace.

Yet, how often, are we tempted after receiving that kind of salvation to then go on in life trying to pull ourselves up by our own perseverance and our own effort? How often do we grade ourselves on our spiritual performance? How often do we try to keep the spiritual and emotional mirage of “doing well” going because of how ashamed we would feel if we ever admitted to others we weren't ok?

When someone asks you how you're doing or when you ask someone else, what is the immediate answer? “I'm good.” We live in a society that prizes individuals who pull themselves up by their own bootstraps. We can so easily spend our conversations with people and our posts on Facebook trying to disguise our pain and camouflage our insecurity, suffering, and brokenness.

We are conditioned to be self-reliant and to shout that picture of ourselves to the world.

But, the reality that we all live in all the time is that we are completely dependent on God. Listen to me when I say this; suffering does not create dependence, suffering highlights dependence. We are always utterly dependent on God and yet we live these lives that try to prove to ourselves and others that our own strength can we trusted. And it can't.

We end up full of pride when we do well for a while or full of shame when we fail, and we slowly wear ourselves out. We hide behind false pretenses because we are terrified to let others see our brokenness and so we slowly alienate ourselves from real relationships. And we slowly but surely teach ourselves a mode of life that is the complete opposite of the gospel that saved us, a gospel that says we are totally reliant on God and his mercy.

God has been merciful at Sojourners to not let us forget that we are always completely dependent on his mercy and his help. So, let's look at the logic of verses 8-9 again to see what God was doing in bringing these afflictions to Paul and here at Sojourners.

For we do not want you to be unaware, brothers, of the affliction we experienced in Asia. For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death. But that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead.

What happened for Paul and what has happened here in so many people is to have the American, self-sufficient, perfect Pinterest and Instagram picture of life absolutely crushed through affliction. **And that is because we have a Father of mercies in Christ.**

We have a God who looks at his blood-bought children and sees them floundering in vain attempts at

self-sufficiency and sees them suffocating in self-alienation and hiding from others and from him in order to maintain their image, and *he mercifully brings deep affliction to the doorsteps of our lives to painfully set us free from dead-end hopes like promotions, money, easy lives, and worldly comfort, popularity, and self-sufficiency.*

We are a stubborn people and if there was any hope of our own ability to make a situation right, we would rely on that. So, God brings things to us that feel like an ongoing “sentence of death” so that the only place we can turn for hope is to the God who raises the dead.

God brings suffering to us because he is merciful and will not let us settle for any hope or any pleasure less than him through the gospel of Christ. And God meets us in our suffering with strengthening help that helps us not rely on ourselves more, but helps us rely on God who raises the dead.

And this merciful affliction and this help in the midst of the affliction creates a different kind of people that those hoping in things on this earth.

It creates a people who do NOT rely on themselves. They are dependent on Christ and on the help of the Spirit. They are “well pleased” with suffering because it reminds them of their dependence on grace in the day to day just as they were dependent in salvation. They know they belong to God and that he is merciful to wean them from self-trust and self-sufficiency and is faithful to bring them the help they need in the midst of it.

And this merciful affliction creates a bold people that no longer try to hide behind false walls of strength. But instead, look at what Paul says in verse 8, “I don’t want you to be ignorant of this affliction.” In other words, “I want you to know about this!” This mercy of God to bring affliction creates a people who want to, as Paul says in 2 Corinthians 12, “Boast in their weakness” so that the power of God is highlighted in their lives. Oh, how easy it would be to do church and do programs and rely on ourselves and boast in our planning and our great ideas. But, God has instead brought us to our knees in prayer for each other. He has led us out of self-sufficiency and is creating a blood-bought family that admits its weakness and begs God for help while we move toward each other in love. This is rare. It is a gift. Oh, that God would keep pressing us this way.

Yesterday morning I was weeping in gratitude over the mercy of God to bring our church to and through many afflictions so that we would not rely on ourselves. It is a privilege to watch God mercifully break all of our self-reliance and watch him faithfully helps our hearts cling to him in new, deep, and real ways.

The God of Mercy has Brought Broken-Hearted Hope in His Deliverance (v.10)

He delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us. On him we have set our hope that he will deliver us again.

Paul gives this three-step hope in the deliverance of God. Notice again that we have a “God who raises the dead” and that is not just a theory, but a reality that purchased salvation for all those in Christ through the resurrection of Christ, and that trickles down into everyday life of those who have the Spirit dwelling in them because of the blood of Christ.

Now, remember, Paul says he still carries this death sentence around in his heart. So, the affliction isn’t forgotten or gone in his mind. But, Paul says, “in the midst of the pain that was too much to bear and that made us despair even of life, God met us and delivered us out of that.”

So God brought the affliction to create a dependent, bold people, and God gives the grace to deliver them from it. Now, the lesson here is not that God eventually takes away every problem in this life, but rather, that God gives enough grace for those in Christ to carry them through it, whatever it is. He will not leave your side. He will not break a bruised reed or put out a smoldering wick. He will never leave you or forsake you. He will be with you to the end. He will deliver your faith and raise it up again each morning even when it feels dead in the water the night before.

As you join Paul in afflictions and “carrying around the death of Christ” in your lives, God will keep pouring out his resurrection power in your hearts by the power of the Spirit to sustain you. And in this broken-hearted hope, the world will see a picture of death through suffering and life through sustaining grace that will point them to the picture of death and resurrection of the gospel. They will see a God who raises the dead at work in you to raise you up from sin that seems like it will consume you, broken hopes that seem like they should break you, financial difficulties that seem like they should overcome you, and pain and suffering that seems like it should cause you to leave your God.

And every time God meets and sustains you with his resurrection power, you will gain confidence with Paul that “he will deliver you.” You will begin to grow more confident in the delivering power of God as you grow more and more dependent on his grace. You will begin to be more and more comfortable boasting in your weakness as you see more and more instances of God’s sustaining power in that weakness. God, through the mercies of affliction that wean us from self-reliance, begins to create a kind of people that are bold for his name, even in their weakness, because they know his grace is right around the corner and will come at just the right time as long as he has work for them to do.

And eventually, it becomes a people who set their ultimate hope on his ultimate resurrection power. In other words, it creates a people who have become so dependent on his resurrection power in their day to day lives that they know one day, when they face death, they can be confident that of course he will deliver them again there, and so as they become more dependent, they become more fearless because they finally have someone they can trust with their deepest fears.

You see, when a people is weaned from self-reliance, when a people is weaned from finding it’s ultimate joy in good circumstances, worldly comforts, a perfect family, a perfect job, the next vacation, the next house project, the perfect image, and enjoying their little slice of heaven on earth, they begin to long for the ultimate resurrection to happen. In other words, it creates a people who so intimately know and walk with God and by the grace of God as the Holy Spirit leads them through life, that their deepest desire is to be face to face with God!

It creates a people free from the fear of death because death is just a servant to get them where they want to be. It creates a people whose hope is so set on Jesus that they simply cannot be shaken even when it hurts like crazy. It creates a people set free to use all their time, energy, and resources for the sake of Christ on earth until they see him face to face in heaven instead of using them for the sake of a slice of heaven on earth.

These afflictions create a bold people who boast in their weakness, realize their dependence, and trust in the resurrection power of God in their day-to-day lives and forever.

It has been sweet and encouraging to watch God creating these kinds of people through merciful afflictions these last few years and then sustaining them and teaching them about his resurrection power as he moves toward them with strengthening help.

Application: Sharers in Suffering, Comfort, and Prayer (vv.4-5, 11)

So, I’ve tried to show how God has been working in his mercy and by his strengthening help at Sojourners and so the question remains, where is he leading?

Now, you’ll remember verses 4-5 we said that this Father of mercies and God of strengthening help is strengthening us in our afflictions so we can strengthen others. So, at least one of the applications of this text is that God is creating a blood-bought family here who share in suffering and share in comfort.

In other words, we are meant to suffer together. We are meant to strengthen each other. God’s people, God’s church is often God’s means of providing his very strength. He provides his encouragement through all those in the body of Christ.

So, one encouragement I have for you right now is this, let people in your lives and be in others lives. Lean in with your time, energy, and resources. Feel yourself dependent on the body of Christ to receive the comfort

