ROUTE 66

Destination: 2nd Corinthians

We’re driving through the 66 books of the Bible.
We’ve titled this series – Route 66.
Tonight our destination is 2nd Corinthians.
So wherever you might be in this room, or online, open your Bibles to 2nd Corinthians.

2nd Corinthians is the 3rd of a collection of 21 letters in the New Testament called the Epistles.
The Epistles – letters written to churches or individuals.
They were inspired by the Holy Spirit to unpack the Gospel for us.
And they’re the means by which the Holy Spirit –

explains Jesus to us,
explains what Jesus accomplished for us by way of –

His sinless life,
His sacrificial death,
and His bodily resurrection.

The Epistles show us –

how new life in Jesus is expressed in and through the believer,
how it shapes the way the Christian walks and talks and thinks.

The Epistles are so important for us. And as we learned last week, many of those letters were written to address doctrinal, moral, relational problems within churches. And so we can expect them to contain –

exhortation,
correction,
and even rebuke.

Last week we learned that 1st Corinthians dealt with five problems in this church in the city of Corinth.
1. The first that Paul addressed was division in the church –

   people saying - “I’m of Paul”;
   others saying – “No, I’m of Apollos”;
   others saying – “No, I’m of Peter.”

And Paul very clearly labeled that as symptomatic of a deeper more significant problem. And we’re going to talk about that in a little bit – the problem of spiritual immaturity.

2. And then he addressed the problem of sexual sin.
3. And then he addressed the problem concerning questions and offence of behavior concerning food sacrificed to idols.

And, again, there’s no time to go into depth in our review. I would encourage you to get the resources from online for last week’s study in 1st Corinthians. But we’re just going to review just a bit to keep it all fresh in our minds, because these letters are related to each other.

4. And then there were problems and questions that were related to corporate worship and spiritual gifts – legitimate spiritual gifts were being tainted by illegitimate motives.

Paul defined each problem;
And he provided the remedy.

This is so important for us, guys.

Every aberrant behavior;
   Every aberrant belief –
      is corrected by the truth of the Gospel –

Who Jesus is,
And what Jesus did –
was then,
is today,
and until we’re in the not yet, in eternity –

Who Jesus is,
And what Jesus did –

is always the remedy – always!

2nd Corinthians is the sequel to this previous letter written by Paul to a church planted there in the city of Corinth. I call it a sequel because it was not literally the second letter that Paul wrote to them.

A guy named D. A. Carson, who, by the way, is really well worth reading if you get your hands on any of his stuff; he’s always really –

some of it’s incredibly challenging;
and yet some of it’s incredibly devotional.

He wrote a book on just four chapters of the letter that we’re studying tonight. And in that book he points out that Paul actually wrote four letters to the Christians in Corinth. Paul wrote more to the Christians in Corinth than any other church or individual. Think about that.

We have 1st Thessalonians, 2nd Thessalonians.
We have 1st Timothy, 2nd Timothy.
Peter has two General Epistles.
John wrote three General Epistles.
But to a specific church, and those Christians within it,
he wrote to them more than any other one.

D. A. Carson referred to those letters as –

Corinthians A,
Corinthians B,
And then he points out that –

our 1\textsuperscript{st} Corinthians is actually the Corinthians B –
its the second of the four letters that Paul wrote,
while 2\textsuperscript{nd} Corinthians in our Bible is actually Corinthians D –
it’s the last, the fourth letter that Paul wrote to them.

Now we only have two of the four letters included in what is called the Canon of Scripture, okay? We only have two of those four letters in the Bible. Why is that? I mean, after all, they were written by Paul. They were written to churches to deal with problems. The answer is that just because Paul wrote something didn’t mean that it was inspired by the Holy Spirit. You know, it’s not like he would scribble on a napkin in a restaurant, and that was inspired. Paul wrote things that weren’t inspired. The Holy Spirit only inspired Paul to write Corinthians B and Corinthians D – or for us – 1\textsuperscript{st} and 2\textsuperscript{nd} Corinthians. And had the Holy Spirit inspired Corinthians A and Corinthians C, the Holy Spirit would have preserved them, just as He preserved the two letters that we have. The church never recognized Corinthians A and Corinthians C -

as inspired,
and as worthy of inclusion in the Canon of Scripture.

The Holy Spirit only saw fit to inspire Paul to make a reference to them.
And if you’re interested, you want to write them down –

1\textsuperscript{st} Corinthians 5:9-11,
and 2\textsuperscript{nd} Corinthians 2:4 –
they reference those letters that are not included in Scripture.

Now a really quick review, because it’s very relevant to where we’re going tonight –
Corinth is a city in Greece, located on a very narrow isthmus that connected Peloponnese to mainland Greece. And that made it a very major port in the ancient world. Corinth was not only a geographical and commercial center within Greece; it was the center of pagan idolatry and moral and spiritual darkness that flows from idolatry. In a polytheistic pagan culture, Corinth was infamous, even in a pagan culture, infamous for its immorality.

Guys, Paul wrote his letter to the Romans from the city of Corinth. And just in the margins of your Bible you can write – Romans 1:21-32. And in those verses Paul describes the spiritual, the moral, the decay within mankind resulting from man’s rejection of God. I’m going to read them to you.

Romans 1: “21 For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. 22 Claiming to be wise, they became fools, 23 and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles. 24 Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, 25 because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen. 26 For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions. For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature; 27 and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in themselves the due penalty for their error. 28 And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done. 29 They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. 32 Though they know God’s righteous decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them.”

Guys, Paul was essentially describing to the Romans what he saw out his window in Corinth. Paul was describing an average day in that city. And yet Paul was moved to proclaim the Gospel in that city. And, again, we find his ministry there in Acts 18. And in Acts 18:8 we’re told that many of the Corinthians believed. But ministry there was daunting; it was hard – so much so that the great apostle –

suffered from fear,

and at one point was tempted to leave Corinth.
And in Acts 18:9-11 –

“9 And the Lord said to Paul one night in a vision,  
   “Do not be afraid, but go on speaking and do not be silent,””

God doesn’t say, “Don’t be afraid”, unless you’re afraid, okay?

“10 for I am with you, and no one will attack you to harm you,  
   for I have many in this city who are my people.”

And it says -

“11 And he stayed a year and six months, teaching the word of God among them.”

At the close of those 18 months – now we’re really progressing towards what we’re going to study tonight – he travelled across the Aegean Sea to Asia Minor. He was in the city of Ephesus, which is in modern day Turkey. And he did all of that because he was on his way home to his home church in Antioch. And then he was going to make a visit to Jerusalem. And after a period of time Paul decided he wanted to set out on his third missionary journey. So he departed from his home church in Antioch. And the first place that he went to was the region of Galatia, where he strengthened the local churches that had been planted there previously by him and his team. And, of course, in our New Testament we know that there is a letter addressed to the church in Galatia, to the Galatians, right? And from there he made his way to Ephesus. Now remember, Paul traveled through Ephesus, going home from his second missionary journey.

And in Acts 18:20 it says – “When they asked him to stay for a longer period, he declined. 21 But on taking leave of them he said, “I will return to you if God wills,””

And the LORD was willing. So on this third missionary journey he goes back to Ephesus. Paul stayed in Ephesus longer than he stayed in any other place that he visited and ministered to. He stayed there two and a half years preaching the Gospel, pastoring the church there. And it was there in Ephesus that he wrote 1st Corinthians. Then Paul sailed back across the Aegean. And he went to the city of Philippi. And we know that church well because we have a letter
written to Philippians, right? And it was there in Philippi that Paul wrote the letter that we’re looking at tonight. It was there that he wrote 2nd Corinthians.

Now as he’s writing to them this second letter in our Bibles, the third of four that he wrote to them, the church there in Corinth seems to have dealt with some of the issues that Paul addressed last week in 1st Corinthians. They seemed to have reigned in the lack of order in their corporate worship because he says nothing about it. Paul didn’t have to revisit the matter of meat sacrificed to idols. He says nothing about it. And concerning sexual immorality, they had even removed the man guilty of committing adultery with his step-mother. And in 2nd Corinthians Paul is exhorting them now to reach out to the man, because it had become clear that he had repented.

But – and this is key to all the stuff that Paul has to be writing about here – they failed to deal with the root cause of the divisions within the church. And in that – and we cannot afford to miss this, guys – in that –

they were not just disregarding the words of Paul in his first epistle;
they actually failed to receive and respond to the very Word of God.

Think about it. They’re just getting a letter from Paul, right? We know that 1st Corinthians was inspired by God. And in that letter Paul addressed divisions. He got to the root cause of it. He says this division amongst you – it has a root cause to it. And he addressed it head on. And they kind of blew it off. They blew off the very Word of God written to them. The letter that they failed to receive and respond to, Paul had penned it; but –

it was God telling them the truth about them and what was going on behind these divisions;
it was God wanting to rescue them from themselves.

I have to tell you - that ministers to me so much. And maybe it speaks to a number of you. I can’t count the times that I have shared with people over the years, and really just poured my heart out to them as they’re going through stuff, they’re walking through stuff. And you pour your heart out. And they just blew me off. And I found myself kind of amazed at it. And I’m
thinking, that’s just me talking to these people, and me sharing chapters and verses with them. But it’s not like my advice is divinely inspired. I feel like God wanted me to say things to them.

But the Corinthians blew off the very words of God. Paul sat to write to them. And the Holy Spirit moved him to correct the issue of division. And they never paid attention to it. By inspiration of the Holy Spirit Paul identified the reason they had such a powerful propensity to rally around personalities and abilities.

Look – this is 1st Corinthians 3: “1 But I, brothers, could not address you as spiritual people, but as people of the flesh,…”

The old King James Version calls it – “carnal”.

“1 … people of the flesh, as infants (a state of spiritual immaturity) in Christ.”

“3 for you are still of the flesh. For while there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not of the flesh and behaving only in a human way? 4 For when one says, “I follow Paul,” and another, “I follow Apollos,” are you not being merely human?”

In other words, you’re acting the way the world acts. This is crucial.

Guys, there are only two categories of human beings -

There’s the natural man – the unsaved man or woman.
And then there’s the spiritual person – the saved man, the saved woman.

But within the category of saved there are two categories – there are -

mature,
and immature,
or as Paul called them – carnal.

A Christian matures –

by allowing the Holy Spirit –
to teach them,
to direct them,

by feeding on the Scriptures,
feeding on the Word of God.

By contrast, the immature Christian is influenced –

by fallen culture,
more than by the Word of God.

Let me repeat that – the immature Christian is influenced –

by fallen culture,
more than by the Word of God.

They base their decisions on the things of the flesh.
That word “carnal” in the King James Version – it means – flesh, ‘sarp’ – is the word.
The thinking of the Corinthian church was shaped –

more by pagan culture around them,
than by the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Hellenistic culture was rooted in and influenced by –

philosophy,
not theology.

People actually had their favorite philosophers. And they rallied around them, just like we rally around our favorite athletes, our favorite teams. There were these guys called ‘sophists’. Sophists were men that were paid to teach philosophy and rhetoric. Self-commendation, insistence on payment – these were the trademarks of the sophists. The more accomplished the sophist, the more he would boast of himself, and the greater charge he could levy on anybody to be their teacher, to speak to them. In the fallen culture of Corinth, boasting was a virtue. Self-admiration was considered to be a strength, not a weakness. In fact, that’s why in
Chapters 10-13 in 2nd Corinthians we find the word boasting repeated time and time and time again. Guys -

The value system of fallen culture became the filter through which the Corinthian church processed life in Christ and living on mission with Christ and for Christ.

I’m going to repeat that again, because it’s at the bottom of all of this.

The value system of fallen culture became the filter through which the Corinthian church processed life and mission in Christ.

And that literally paved the way for a new problem that actually threatened the Gospel. A group of men came into the church. And they paraded letters of introduction and commendation. They spoke highly of themselves. And they demanded to be paid for speaking and for teaching.

   Everything about those men went against the grain of the Gospel.
   Everything about those guys clashed with the very nature of Jesus.

But, you see, the Gospel was not the grid through which the Corinthian church processed these men or their message. Instead they saw in those men everything the fallen world around them valued – eloquence, self-promotion. And Paul was nothing like that. In fact, Paul made it clear when he wrote to the Corinthians – he said –

“When I came to you, I did not come to you with eloquent words. I determined not to know anything among you but Christ crucified.”

And remember – Paul would make the declaration that Christ crucified was foolishness to the Greeks. It made no sense. And because the Christians in Corinth valued what the world valued, they embraced these men. They actually gave them positions of authority, and a platform to proclaim a false gospel. Don’t miss this, guys – Paul did not write 2nd Corinthians because he was deeply hurt, though for sure his feelings would have been hurt. And I’m going to mention a little bit more about that. Paul was inspired by the Holy Spirit to write this 2nd Corinthians because –

   the Gospel itself was at stake;
   the eternal well-being of the Corinthians was at stake.
That’s why Paul went so far to say to them,

“Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourself.”

Isn’t that confrontational? Wouldn’t you be offended if I went up to you - you’re sitting there tonight – most of you, some of you, maybe one or two or three might not be because maybe one or two or three of you, you don’t claim to be Christian. But if I went up to the rest of you guys in this room tonight, and I said, “You better examine yourself to see whether you’re in the faith; test yourself” – you’d probably be offended, like, “Whoa, wait a minute! What are you talking about? I’m here. I’m here week after week.”

Paul spent 18 months with these people. I’m sure he had faces and names in mind.

2nd Corinthians was written to defend –

the authenticity of Paul’s apostleship,
and the authenticity of Paul’s message.

Paul would probably not have even bothered to answer the charges leveled at him by these false teachers, except the Gospel itself was at stake.

They were, according to Paul, preaching a false Gospel.
They were, according to Paul, preaching a different Jesus.

The Holy Spirit inspired Paul to define them like this –

2nd Corinthians 11:13-15 – “13 For such men are false apostles, deceitful workmen, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ. 14 And no wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. 15 So it is no surprise if his servants (that would be Satan’s servants), also, disguise themselves as servants of righteousness. Their end will correspond to their deeds.”

Guys, that makes what Paul wrote to the Corinthians in this 2nd Corinthians really relevant to us today as Christians, and as a church in the 21st century.

 Listen to what D. A. Carson says –
“May we not be similarly deceived?  
What perspectives will preserve us from this danger?”

Guys, that’s so stunning!

“May we not be similarly deceived?  
What perspectives will preserve us from this danger?”

Guys, 2nd Corinthians is an incredibly important stretch along Route 66!  
All of that backdrop makes 2nd Corinthians so radically relevant to us in the 21st century!  
And I haven’t prayed yet. So here’s where I’m going to pray.

Father, as we look at the backdrop against which Paul wrote this letter I pray –

that you would visit us,  
that you would search us,  
that you would inform us,  
that you would define us,  
that you would direct us.

Lord, where the world has become more influential in the way we process life and mission than the Word of God, correct us.  
Lord, I pray that you would make us very sensitive to the state of the church -

and that we would not be arrogant or condemning;  
but we would be humbled and prayerful.

May we stand in the light of your Word individually.  
May Metro stand before the light of your Word.

Search us out. Lord, we give you absolute permission to search our hearts, so that –

the church might be edified,  
and the church might be purified,
bringing glory to the name of Jesus.

For it’s in His name we pray, amen.

When I consider that backdrop, when I consider that very stinging challenge of D. A. Carson, it would be very easy to just roll back, and just go, ‘Wait! This is Placer County! Like there are so many churches here, so many people going to church. How does that backdrop relate to us?’ Well, 21st century church in America is by and large immature. In the words of Paul – the people of the flesh, infants in Christ are behaving only in a human way. I say that because for a long, long time the church in America has failed to place an emphasis on the systematic teaching and study of the Bible. And as a result local churches are made up of men and women who are influenced by the value system of fallen culture rather than the Gospel.

Personality and ability are valued over anointing and humility.
Performance and emotion overshadow Jesus and trump truth.
Genuine Gospel content has become mostly irrelevant.
And Gospel influence character takes a back seat to personality.

Now I’m going to say something that some or maybe many of you are going to think is –

wrong,
or at least exaggerated,
or critical.

In a very real and in a very unsettling way the same thing is happening in broad sections of modern church culture that happened in Corinth. Churches are actually advancing –

a false Gospel,
and a different Jesus.

Now you might be thinking, ‘I think he’s really lost his mind.’
Or you might be thinking, ‘He is so dead wrong. I’m going to throw something at him.’
And you might be thinking those things, because you think when I say, “... false gospel”, “... different Jesus”, that there are churches called Christian that are preaching against Jesus, or preaching something like a new form of Mormonism, or some false message. Listen –

the great danger today is not so much in what is being said;
the great danger today is what’s not being said.

You can proclaim a false Gospel by not saying certain things.
You might never deny the core doctrines of the Gospel.
But if you just don’t proclaim them;
   Or you don’t proclaim them enough to make the Gospel clear,
       People are being left with a false Gospel;
       They have a wrong view about what the Gospel is.

You don’t have to preach a false Jesus.
You just have to pick and choose what you want to say about Jesus;
   And people will be left with a false Jesus.

We are living in desperate times!
And some people don’t think they’re living in desperate times because –

   They look at the stock market;
   And they look at housing values;
   And they look at construction;
   And they look at building;
   And they look at all these different things.

But we are living in desperate times;
   Because I think the church is perilously looking like the church in Corinth.

So the **overview**, the **background** – those things impress on us its relevance to today.

Here’s a quick **outline** of the book. You can –

   write these things down,
use it as you read through and study the book on your own.

**Chapters 1-5** – Paul gives an **explanation of his ministry**.

**Chapters 6-9** – He gives an **exhortation to the Corinthian church**.

And then in **Chapters 10-13** – He gives a **vindication of his apostolic authority**.

It could be argued that Paul’s **2nd** letter to the **Corinthians** contains –

- the most spiritually and emotionally intense portions in all of his writings,
  * especially **Chapters 10, 11, 12 and 13**;
  * the most spiritually and emotionally intense portions of all of his writings.

In this letter Paul bares his soul. He tells about his abiding love for the Corinthians. And he reveals how he was so deeply wounded by how fickle they were in their love for him. This is heavy stuff! How many times do you sit down and get that deep with one person. But by inspiration of the Holy Spirit, God the Holy Spirit is going, “Paul, I want you to write these things. I want you to just share what’s going on in your heart. And I’m going to preserve it for a bunch of men and women meeting at 9089 Foothills Blvd in Roseville in the 21st century.”

He professes his abiding love.

He professes how deeply wounded he was by the fickleness of that church’s love for him.

In this letter the Holy Spirit reveals to us so much of Paul the man –

- his sufferings,
- his values,
- his motives.

And what we discover – and I think what makes this so important for us that the Holy Spirit would have inspired it and preserved it – is we discover that Paul was a real man who faced the same struggles that you and I face. And in the face of those things we discover that the great apostle, the church planter, the New Testament author, experienced the same kind of personal pain that you and I experience when our motives or our methods or our authority comes under attack. The wrestlings, the struggles, the pain that we feel when somebody personally attacks
us - Paul experienced that. He experienced the same kind of deep personal pain that we experience when those that we poured into and suffered long with would buy into accusations and take sides with people who actually attack us. Maybe some of you are going through something like that right now.

We also gain invaluable insight into –

- his style of leadership,
- and the way in which he exercised his divine calling as an apostle.

He says, “I’m an apostle by the will of God, not by the will of man. I didn’t sign up for it. I didn’t fill out a resume. God called me to be this.” And we see how he led, the way he exercised that authority, when that authority was being challenged. And that’s a very big deal! That is no easy bit of road to navigate when you have authority that God has given to you; and people challenge that authority.

How do you use it?
How do you respond?

That’s a hard stretch of road to navigate!
That’s why 2nd Corinthians is so important that the Holy Spirit inspired it and preserved it for us.

In this book we find a side of Paul who can threaten, but also explain –

In 2nd Corinthians 13:2 he lays out some threats.
But he gives explanation in Chapter 12, verse 10.

In this book we find a side of Paul who can love, but also rebuke.
He loves in Chapter 11, verse 11.
But he rebukes in Chapter 12, verse 11.

And it should be noted when you read this,
you’ll see that Paul is sometimes angry with the Christians in Corinth;
but he constantly grieves over them;
he constantly loves them.
And Paul never diminishes their personal responsibility for the mess that the church of Corinth had become.

But he recognizes that they've been duped.
He recognized that they had been deceived by essentially servants of Satan.

And for that reason he never handles them as harshly,
as he does those who had deceived them.

And it's in the context of –

everything that Paul encountered,
and everything that he experienced,

that we find in 2nd Corinthians –

some of the most precious promises,
and some of the most doctrinal teaching –

In 2nd Peter we’re told that God has granted to us His precious and very great promises.
Isn't that awesome?  God has granted to us His precious and very great promises!

And on this side of Heaven I know that we have read and we held fast to many of those promises found in 2nd Corinthians.  But, guys - I want to tell you - those promises become even more precious when we understand –

the pit from which they were mined,
the pressure that gave birth to them.

It was in the context of Paul wading through the muck and the mire of this horribly messy church, and all of the personal pain and spiritual challenges that arose from it, that Paul wrote this.
Look at 2nd Corinthians 1: “20 For all the promises of God find their Yes in him.”

And that “him” is Jesus.

“All the promises of God find their Yes in Jesus.” That is why it is through him (through Him being Jesus) that we utter our Amen to God for his glory.”

Keeping in mind the backdrop that we just set up, the truth of that verse was the solid ground that Paul held tightly, stood firmly on, in the maelstrom of spiritual and emotional chaos involving the church in Corinth. When the lives and the ministry he had invested in there at Corinth were like shifting sand, Paul was able to hold his ground because he knew that God’s promises were unchanging and unfailing.

Number 23:
“19 God is not man, that he should lie, or a son of man, that he should change his mind. Has he said, and will he not do it? Or has he spoken, and will he not fulfill it?”

Guys, the most solid thing in the universe is the Word of God. When our emotions cause us to question the Word of God, we need to cling to –

the Word of God,
not our emotions.

Think of Paul.

And, again, I’m going to tell you, of late - and not to the exclusion of all the other ground we’ve covered in our Route 66 series - but of late, as I’ve been preparing for these nights, it’s like –

Can’t we just stop and study the whole book?
Can’t we just look at every verse of it, and just –

tear it apart,
chew on it,
think on it,
and meditate on it,
and put it to use in our lives?

2nd Corinthians - like, by inspiration of the Holy Spirit, Paul just goes –

‘Here’s my wrecked heart.
Here’s how conflicted I am.’

He was emotionally charged.
And yet, in a moment, when he was so wrecked, and so hurt, he held onto –

the Word of God,
not his emotions.

When circumstances cause us to question the Word of God we need to cling to –

the Word of God,
not our circumstances.

Here’s another one that’s so huge when we think of the situation Paul was in when he wrote it.

Look at Chapter 3, beginning at verse 4 – this is such a great one!

“4 Such is the confidence that we have through Christ toward God. 5 Not that we are sufficient in ourselves to claim anything as coming from us, but our sufficiency is from God, 6 who has made us competent to be ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit. For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.”

Think of Paul.
Think of his circumstances.
Think of the challenges that were set before him –

identifying these problems,
addressing these problems,
bringing the Gospel to bear upon these problems -

the weightiness of his care for them,
and the weightiness of the responsibility he felt for them.

Guys –

Ministry is not simply a matter of man doing God’s work.
Ministry is God doing His work through a man or through a woman.

The men and women in the church in Corinth had pretty much decided that Paul wasn’t competent to be a minister because –

he had no credentials;
he had no letters of recommendation.

Some of you might remember, or think of this verse, where Paul says,

“You are our living letter;
You’re my living epistles –

not written on paper;
but written on the tablets of your heart for all men to see”, right?

Well, that was an answer to these false apostles who were saying,

“Where are his credentials?
Where are his letters?
We’ve got these great letters written from these big important people.
They tell you –

how great we are,
and how much you need us.”

The people that Paul had loved so much and had ministered to so passionately had come to decide that Paul wasn’t competent to minister, because he had no credentials. Paul stood on this great truth - No credentials or training is sufficient to make one a minister. Gospel work is
simply beyond the scope of human capacity. It is the gifts and the power of the Holy Spirit alone that make a man or a woman able, or competent ministers of the Gospel.

I cannot tell you how many times I’ve sat in my office before a Sunday morning or a Monday night, and I thought to myself, ‘LORD, if that passage in 2nd Corinthians isn’t true, there is no reason for me to walk out of this room and stand on that platform.’ And that sentiment has been even stronger in the midst of a trial or on the heels of my failures; or sometimes I can tell you more on Mondays than Sundays the intensity of spiritual warfare, just in my head, is so intense; and I’m being bombarded with a thought of, ‘Who do you think you are that you could teach anyone anything about God and His Word?’ The words of Paul are the things that get me out of my office. You see, God’s Word is true. And because what Paul says there about God in this second letter and about who makes who competent, what makes a man able, that means that I can walk out of my office and teach the Bible, knowing that God is the one who -

 qualifies me,
 and enables me.

And that goes for anything we are in his economy –

 husband or wife,
 parent or child,
 neighbor, co-worker,
 employer, employee,
 student, teacher.

Look at Chapter 5, verse 17- here’s another great one –

“17 Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation.
   The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.”

What an incredible eternity-shattering promise!

 The past is washed away!
 And we are given a whole new beginning in Jesus!
If that wasn’t true, Paul would have never even been writing this letter, or any letter in the New Testament, because Paul had a horrible past, right? He had murdered Christians. Based on his past he would have never been able to serve Jesus. In fact, Paul’s letters were read by men and women whose relatives and friends would have been persecuted by Paul. Paul was in charge of the murder of Stephen, the first martyr of the church. That took place in the city of Jerusalem. And the book of Acts tells us that Godly men wept over Stephen’s death and buried him. But because 2nd Corinthians 5:17 is true the leaders of the church in Jerusalem actually received Paul after his conversion. And they embraced him –

as a brother in Christ,
and as a minister of the Gospel.

That’s what the Gospel promises!
How radical is that!

We are something new in Jesus!
We are something new because of Jesus!

And that’s literal!
It’s not figurative!

We begin to experience new desires!
We actually want to please God!

When Paul wrote to the Philippians, he says,

“God is at work in you, both to will and to do of His good pleasure.”

We begin to love things we never loved!

We begin to love holiness!
We begin to love the church!
We begin to love the Bible!
And we begin to hate things we used to love -

- sin,
- pride,
- selfishness.

Here’s another one – and this one is perhaps the key verse for the entire book –

12: “9 And he said to me,…”

And, by the way, the tense of that verb there in verse 9 – it means –

“and he (God) has once and for all said to me.”

This is serious stuff!

God wanted it settled once and for all in Paul’s life.

12: “9 But he said to me, once and for all, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. 10 For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.”

Here’s the problem – We hate those circumstances that show our weaknesses.

Paul Tripp calls those moments, those circumstances – “uncomfortable grace”.

As Paul prayed about his problem;
As Paul prayed about this “thorn in the flesh”,

God gave Paul –

- a promise,
- and a truth.

Both the promise and the truth are –

- totally counterintuitive,
- totally against every natural inclination and desire.
“My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.”

Paul was desperate in his desire to find relief from this “thorn in the flesh”. Well, there are two ways of relief. It can come –

by removing the load,
or by strengthening the shoulder that bears the load.

Instead of taking away the “thorn” –

God strengthened Paul;
And God would show His strength through Paul’s apparent weakness.

You see, guys –

we really don’t believe God’s grace is sufficient,
until we believe that we are insufficient.

For many of us, especially in American culture, that’s a big obstacle. You see, we are the people who idolize the self-made man. The fallen culture that’s trying to inform us says rely on yourself. And we also happen to idolize comfort, right? – the lack of pain. But, you see –

we can never receive God’s strength,
until we know our weakness;
we can’t receive the sufficiency of God’s grace,
until we know our own insufficiency.

Warren Wiersbe said this –

“Strength that knows itself to be strength is actually weakness.
But weakness that knows itself to be weakness is actually strength.”

Paul says, “My grace is sufficient for you.”
You can read that statement with the emphasis on different words in that sentence.
“My GRACE is sufficient for you.”

Grace is the unmerited favor and love of God in action in our lives.
God says the love and favor that you don’t deserve from me is enough for you.
Is God’s grace;
    Is His unmerited love and favor for you –

            everything that He has done for you that you don’t deserve,
            everything that He’s done for you that you could never earn –

            Is that enough for you?
            Is it sufficient?

Or he says, “MY grace is sufficient for you.”

Well, whose grace is it? It’s the grace of Jesus! It was Jesus speaking to him.
Now let me ask you a question – What will Jesus fail at?
And remember, too, as Paul is praying about this thorn in the flesh, Jesus knew something about thorns, didn’t he? He had a crown of thorns shoved into his head.

        Jesus cares.
        Jesus knows.

He says, “My grace IS sufficient for you.”

Not – was!
    Not – will be!
        It is – It is right now!

It’s not that it will be sufficient for you someday;
    But right now at this moment His grace is sufficient.

I believe that’s a word for –
somebody here tonight,
or somebody(s) here tonight –

that right now,
in the now,

God’s grace is sufficient for you –

whatever you walked in with,
whatever you’re going through.

Or how about - “My grace is sufficient for YOU.”

I’m so glad that Jesus didn’t say, “My grace is sufficient for Paul the apostle”.
You see, the “you” can be you. God’s grace is sufficient for you.

Are you beyond the grace of God?
Are you so different from Paul or anybody else?
Is your thorn in the flesh worse than Paul’s, or worse than others?

God’s grace is sufficient for you.

12: “But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore…”

In other words, because of what Jesus says -

“I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.”

I’m gutted there.

“I’m content with weaknesses” – no I’m not – I’m not.

In fact, when we were singing the song – and I can’t remember the exact lyrics – I’ll paraphrase it, where he says, “I’m going to just deny myself. I totally turn my back on my desires.” – Really? I couldn’t sing that honestly tonight.
“I’m content with insults” – I am not content with insults.

“I’m content with hardships” – Oh I run from hardships – I want to have easy ships.

“I’m content with persecutions” – not!

“I’m content with calamities”, things being out of control – I hate when I’m out of control.

But here’s the deal – “**For when I am weak, then I am strong**” –

Because that’s when God’s strength is going to be made most clear.

Paul’s personal suffering at that time,

was the very thing by which God’s power would have its most perfect demonstration.

God’s power doesn’t get better because Paul’s weak.

It’s just that in Paul’s weaknesses God’s power is seen more clearly.

Christians – We treasure the very thing that will mute and obscure and diminish and distort the display of God’s strength - We treasure comfort.

But we’re not to live on explanations, like - God, why is this happening to me?

We live on promises, because –

our feelings change;

God’s promises never change.

God’s promises generate faith.  **“Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God.”**

Promises generate faith.

Faith strengthens hope.

I’m going to close with this one - **2nd Corinthians 1:3** –

Actually I’m not – there’s two.

But we’re going to get through – we will.

**2nd Corinthians 1:** “**3** Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, **4** 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.”

J. Sidlow Baxter said this of the letter – he says - “It was written with a quill dipped in tears from the apostle’s anguish of heart, and contains more of human pathos than any other of his letters. Yet there is a lovely rainbow shining through it all. For in his dire distress and deep disappointment he is discovering more than ever before that the Father of mercies is the God of all comfort.”

“the Father of mercies” – one translation reads it as – “The all-merciful Father”.

“the God of all comfort” – again, remember the background, the real life context in which Paul wrote these words. This is theology being experienced in real time. Paul used –

this word as a verb or a noun ten times in verses 3-7 –
that word “comfort” - several times in Chapters 2, 7 and 13.

And that word that Paul used - this word “comfort” - carries the idea of –

consoling someone in trouble or sorrow,
or giving active help or encouragement.

In fact, the word that he uses here for “comfort”, it comes from the same root as the name given to the Holy Spirit by Jesus in John’s Gospel. It’s the “Comforter”. And it refers to someone who was called into help in time of trouble or time of need.

Guys, this is so huge.

Paul experienced that comfort.
And the Holy Spirit inspired Paul to talk about it.

All comfort comes from God.
When we’re uncomfortable we should come to Him.

1: “who comforts us” – that word there, that form of the word means –
He invites us;
He calls for us,
so that He can –
urge us,
and appeal to us

That’s what happens in those moments.

“4 who comforts us in all our affliction,...”

God comforts us no matter what the problem is.

That word “affliction” - in the New King James Version it reads – “tribulation”.

It’s the word ‘thlipsis’.
It literally means – a pressing pressure.

Think of one of those big table vices, you know, on the end of a workbench. It’s got that little thing that you ratchet up on it, and you put it in there. You just start turning it. And that vice starts closing in, creates this giant pressure.

In all circumstances that seem to be squeezing and crushing us, God comforts us.
And, again, please remember the background, the real life context from which he was writing.

Paul uses this word 8 times in 2nd Corinthians.
He uses it to speak of –

opposition and the press of persecution,
the soul-crushing pressure of those things.

And, by the way, Paul even uses this word – “affliction” or “tribulation” – in his first letter to speak of the troubles we face in the married life. Think about that. Some of you men are thinking, ‘Gosh, why does marriage squeeze me so much?’ – because God said it would. 1st Corinthians 7: “28 those who marry will have worldly troubles” – and that word “troubles” is the word “affliction” - the pressing pressure.
Guys, this is so awesome! And remember that Paul is speaking from real experience -

1: “... 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.”

Our consolation abounds through Christ! We are given such a supply of comfort that we have more than enough comfort for ourselves, we receive enough comfort to pass it on to others.

Now how very out of place these concepts seem to be within modern church culture? The average church-goer looks at Jesus for a life free from affliction and tribulation. And the thought of following Jesus involving suffering, because Paul says “we share abundantly in Christ’s sufferings”, all of that is foreign to such a giant section of modern church culture. And should the average church-goer need comfort from Jesus in the day-in, day-out realities of life in a broken world, they generally aren’t thinking beyond their own suffering.

I love this 4th verse there in 1st Corinthians 1, because it tells us how the economy of Divine comfort works. Follow me here, guys – We’re troubled. And it can be any form of trouble, any form of pressing pressure. And in that trouble we receive comfort from the LORD. And then we’re to look to others who are struggling, and seek to provide the same comfort we’ve received from Christ. You see, God has a plan for us in our affliction and in our tribulation. And that includes us going to Him and receiving comfort from Him. But God doesn’t stop there. All along in the midst of that He’s had something in mind. He wants to make us vessels of His comfort to other men and women who are being crushed under the weight of a broken world. And Paul knew this as a reality out of his total experience as a Christian, because he had gone through a whole lot of stuff before he met the Corinthians.

But here’s what’s radical – Paul shared his experience of God’s comfort with the very people whose actions and attitudes towards him were soul-crushing. Doesn’t that blow your mind? He wants them to be comforted by God when in reality they are crushing him. But, you see, he’s experienced the reality of God’s comfort before they ever crushed his soul.

How does this comfort come to us?
1. Well, it comes from the Holy Spirit.

Five times in John’s Gospel Jesus refers to the Holy Spirit as the Comforter, the Holy Spirit –

actively comforting us,
actively calling, urging.

2. It also comes through the Scriptures.

Romans 15: “For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement (or it’s that same word there - comfort) of the Scriptures we might have hope.”

3. Thirdly – It comes through the prayers of God’s people.

2nd Corinthians 1: “You also must help us by prayer, so that many will give thanks on our behalf for the blessing granted us through the prayers of many.”

4. And lastly – It comes through the ministry of others.

2nd Corinthians 7: “But God, who comforts the downcast, comforted us by the coming of Titus, and not only by his coming but also by the comfort with which he was comforted by you, as he told us of your longing, your mourning, your zeal for me, so that I rejoiced still more.”

Guys, as the Holy Spirit inspired Paul to pen this letter, it seems as the though the Holy Spirit was anticipating our response to 2nd Corinthians 1:3-4. When somebody begins to tell you about the comfort of God, kind of a reflex-default reaction is something like this – even among solid Christians – because I’ve responded like this – when somebody says, “Well, God comforts us in all of our affliction so that we can comfort others with the same comfort we’ve received ourselves”, we say, “But you don’t know what I’m going through.

You don’t know what I’m going through.
You don’t know how I’m suffering.
You don’t understand.”

Have you ever heard that one?
You don’t understand.
You don’t know how great my affliction is.

2nd Corinthians 1: “8 For we do not want you to be ignorant, brothers, of the affliction we experienced in Asia. For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself.”

There’s the caveat. The Holy Spirit goes, “I’m anticipating you’re going to tell me, “Yeah, Yeah, I don’t understand your troubles. Nobody has suffered like me.”” And so the Holy Spirit inspires Paul to dig up this recollection of his sufferings there –

“utterly burdened beyond our strength”;
“we despaired of life itself.”

That word “despair” – this is Paul the apostle - it means –

to be utterly lost,
to be utterly destitute of measures or resources,
and to renounce all hope.

Anybody suffered past that?
Paul thought he wasn’t going to make it.
The only thing that kept him going was the promises of God.

2nd Corinthians 1: “9 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. 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.”

And then Paul would go on in the letter to describe the conditions he faced when he received such comfort from God.

2nd Corinthians 4: “8 We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; 9 persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; 10 always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies.”
He says – I’m hard-pressed, but not crushed. I’ve been in a vice, but not crushed, perplexed, but not in despair. I’ve been without resources, yet not left without resources. I’ve had no resources. But then suddenly God provided resources; persecuted, but not forsaken. In other words, to be chased after, but not left alone; struck down, yet not destroyed. It literally means to be thrown down under the ground, but not dead. And he explains that the LORD permitted him to go through all of that so that the life that is in Christ could become evident to the world around him.

Then in 2\textsuperscript{nd} Corinthians 7: \textit{“5 For even when we came into Macedonia, our bodies had no rest, but we were afflicted at every turn—fighting without and fear within. 6 But God, who comforts the downcast, comforted us…”} \textit{“

Outside were the conflicts he faced because of life and ministry in a world that’s at war with God. But inside – this is Paul the apostle – and I so love that the Holy Spirit let us see this – Paul says, “fears within”. There were fears in Paul that threatened his ability to press on in Christ. Guys, life is filled with reasons to be afraid.

We’re afraid of what might happen.
We’re afraid of what might not happen.

God wants to comfort us.
God wants to comfort you tonight.

And this is the one last passage –

2\textsuperscript{nd} Corinthians 11: \textit{“23 Are they servants of Christ? I am a better one—I am talking like a madman—with far greater labors, far more imprisonments, with countless beatings, and often near death. 24 Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. 25 Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked;”} \textit{“

Now think about that.

Like after the first shipwreck, would you get on a boat?
After the second one, surely you’d be going, ‘What am I doing?’}
“25 ... Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; 26 on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; 27 in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. 28 And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches.”

And Paul received comfort from the LORD in the midst of all of that.

Where are you tonight that you can’t find the comfort of the LORD?

What a wonderful amazing letter!