



POWER IN WEAKNESS | THE WOUNDED HEALER

September 7, 2025

Today we begin a new sermon series focused on the Apostle Paul's second letter to the Corinthians. And without a doubt this is the most personal, the most painful, and the most passionate of all of Paul's letters. Here Paul openly reveals his personal struggles, his insecurities, his deep emotional concern for the people that he serves, and he doesn't hide his feelings or even his wounds. No, he shares his heart with raw, unfiltered transparency. So for those who think that the Apostle Paul was all head and no heart, this letter reveals that Paul was a flesh-and-blood person who experienced the full range of human emotion — so much so that at times you might even struggle to keep up with the almost wild swings from confidence and joy one moment to anguish and pain the next. One minute he's tender and sincere, and the next he's joking and almost sarcastic. But through it all, the central theme is this: God's power is made perfect in human weakness, and for that very reason, I would suggest that 2 Corinthians is the letter for our times.

I think it's fair to say that the church in America is experiencing something of a credibility crisis for a number of different reasons. The church and its leaders are no longer viewed as credible. And let me give you five potential contributing factors.

Number one, there's a general loss of trust in institutions, and that includes government, media, education, and the church is no exception. And this erosion of trust leads to pervasive cynicism toward all leaders. Our gut instinct is that no leader is really what they appear to be, and that if you give them enough time, they're all going to let us down.

So there's this erosion of trust, but secondly, there are church scandals — and that includes financial misconduct and moral failures as well as, of course, sexual abuse scandals — all of which have significantly undermined the Church's witness in the world today. And as a result of that, many people see the church no longer as the source of the world's healing, but rather they see the church as the source of the world's harm.

A third contributing factor is partisan politics. The credibility of the church has been damaged by the entanglement of Christian leaders with politics on both the right and the left. Some have adopted an embattled culture war mentality, or they've embraced identity politics rather than solely committing oneself to the gospel of Jesus, which transcends our political divides.

A fourth factor is celebrity culture. In other cases, Christians have succumbed to the excesses of celebrity, where the highest value is placed on charisma rather than character. It's all show and no substance, and it seems as if all certain people care about is their image or their influence.

And then there's cultural irrelevance. The fifth factor is the perception, especially among younger generations of people, that the church is irrelevant to contemporary concerns. Most Christians are perceived to be slow to listen but quick to judge, and they callously refuse to address the issues, the questions, the concerns of the day with compassion or care or generosity.

So when we consider the current landscape, it's not surprising that so many people are dropping out. Many people in the pews and many pastors are looking out at the scene and saying, "Who needs this? I'm out." And so the question is, can the church dig itself out of this hole, or is the church simply doomed to die a slow death by a thousand cuts? Personally, I remain ever hopeful, because Christianity carries within itself its own engine for reform and renewal, and that engine is the gospel of Jesus. And that's what makes 2 Corinthians the letter for our times.

You may not have realized it before, but in his own way, the Apostle Paul faced a credibility crisis of his own. His situation was different, the world was different at that time, but he faced a credibility crisis of his own, specifically as it related to the church that he founded in Corinth, located on that narrow little isthmus that separated northern Greece from southern Greece. And it's true in this letter that Paul defends his ministry in Corinth, but he doesn't do it by insisting on power or position; rather, he insists on vulnerability and suffering.

So Paul here presents a vision for the church's leadership, a vision for the church's message, a vision for the church's mission, but all of it is shaped by the cross of Jesus. And as a result, through it all, he provides us with an antidote to all those factors that I believe are contributing to the credibility crisis of our day, because he impresses upon us the importance of authenticity, integrity, sincerity, humility, and generosity. In contrast to that erosion of trust toward leaders, he insists on authenticity. In contrast to church scandals, he insists on integrity in ministry. In contrast to partisan politics, he insists on sincerity in one's wholly devoted commitment to Jesus, first and foremost. In contrast to celebrity culture, he insists on humility in service. And in contrast to cultural irrelevance, he insists on generosity of spirit.

So now that I've introduced you to the letter as a whole, let's jump into the opening section. Right from the opening prayer, Paul introduces the central theme of the entire letter, which is the call that God places on each and every one of us to become wounded healers. We're called to become wounded healers like Jesus himself. So during our time together, I'd like us to consider three things: 1) *The distressing experience of suffering*, 2) *The transformative power of the gospel*, and 3) *The life-giving ministry of comfort*.

¹Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother,

To the church of God that is at Corinth, with all the saints who are in the whole of Achaia:

²Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

³Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, ⁴who 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. ⁵For as we share abundantly in Christ's sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too. ⁶If we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation; and if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which you experience when you patiently endure the same sufferings that we suffer. ⁷Our hope for you is unshaken, for we know that as you share in our sufferings, you will also share in our comfort.

⁸For 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. ⁹Indeed, 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. ¹⁰He 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. ¹¹You 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.

2 Corinthians 1:1-11

The Distressing Experience of Suffering

First, let's consider the distressing experience of suffering. Throughout 2 Corinthians, Paul will explore how God not only comforts us but transforms us and our personal experience of suffering through the suffering, the death, and the resurrection life of Jesus. So Paul begins by sharing *his* distressing experience of suffering with us in ways that we might even consider to be shocking coming from an apostle.

Now, Paul doesn't give us all the details, and so we're going to have to fill in a few of the gaps as we make our way through this letter. But here's what you need to know today. Sometime between the years 50 and 52 AD, Paul spent a year and a half in Corinth before crossing the Aegean Sea and leaving for Ephesus, located in Asia or what we now call the western coast of modern day Turkey. Now, Paul made a second "painful" visit, as he calls it, to Corinth in 55 or 56 AD in order to deal with an emergency discipline problem in the church. But then he wrote this letter, 2 Corinthians, from Northern Greece in preparation for his third and final visit to Corinth around 56 or 57 AD.

Beginning here in verse 8, Paul reveals that while he was living in Asia — while he was living in Ephesus on that western coast of Turkey — he endured such an extreme form of affliction that he says in verse 8 that he despaired of life itself, and that he and his companions felt like they had received the very sentence of death. Now we don't exactly know what happened, but based on Acts 19, he's most likely referring to the riot that erupted in the theater in Ephesus because there was such a strong negative reaction to Paul's preaching of the gospel. It's also possible that Paul might have ended up in prison in Ephesus, but we don't know. He doesn't say. What we do know is that when this riot began, two of Paul's companions were in the theater when it first started, and he wanted to rush into the theater to help his friends to bring them

out, but Paul's own friends refused to allow him to enter the theater because it was too dangerous. Now I have seen this theater with my own eyes. It is still in tact, and it is massive. And I remember standing there, imagining what it would have been like to be Paul, knowing that the whole city had now turned against him. It would've been absolutely terrifying.

And so based on his experience in Ephesus, Paul realized around this time that there was a very, very good chance that he was going to be killed for his faith. Because what happened in Ephesus is that the preaching of the gospel was actually affecting the local economy. Local businesses were affected, because when people started completely reorienting their lives around Jesus, they were no longer supporting some of the industries that fed the idolatry of the ancient world. And Paul was no dummy. He realized that once you start messing with people's money, you're going to get it. So he feared for his life, and that's why he despaired of life itself. But this is not the kind of thing you expect to hear from an apostle. This sounds like a nervous breakdown. This sounds like Paul had a complete total mental collapse. But what that shows us is that if Paul can express his raw emotional pain, then so can we, no matter what our circumstances may be.

So let me share one especially poignant story that expresses the depth of human pain. In the middle of his life, the novelist Peter DeVries wrote a book entitled "The Blood of the Lamb." Now, DeVries was a prolific author. He was best known for his comedy. He spent most of his career as an editor and writer for the New Yorker. But "The Blood of the Lamb" is perhaps his most autobiographical novel because it's based on his young daughter's battle with leukemia — his daughter, whom he nicknamed his little lamb.

So the main character, based on himself, struggles with faith. And his name, appropriately enough, is Don Wanderhope. He's wandering, looking for hope in the midst of his crisis. His daughter, Carol, is treated right around the corner from here at New York Presbyterian. And on his way to the hospital, he would often stop at St. Catherine's Church on First Avenue and 68th Street. He would enter the church, sometimes to gather his thoughts, sometimes to offer a prayer. But he never prayed that everything would be all right again, because he knew that that was impossible. All he ever prayed for was just one more year — just a little more time with his daughter, Carol.

At last, he receives good news. The bone marrow report comes back 6% — almost normal. Carol is in remission. So the next day, he buys a cake with Carol's name written on it in blue icing. And on his way to the hospital that morning, he stops at St. Catherine's Church, he puts the cake down on the pew, and he's about to offer a prayer of thanks, but then he runs into the night nurse. He hasn't heard, and she informs him that an infection has now ripped through the ward of immunocompromised kids. He rushes to the hospital, and with one look, he knows that it's time to say goodbye. The infection began where the IV and the catheter had been placed, but now this infection has ravaged her whole body.

In his mind's eye, he pictures Carol riding her bicycle around the yard for the very first time — the sunlight in her hair, twinkling on her spokes. Or he sees her playing

the piano, practicing a piece with a smile of satisfaction on her face as she gets it just right. And in that moment, he realizes none of these things will ever be again. So the nurse leaves, giving them a moment alone.

I moved quickly from the foot of the bed around to the side, whispering rapidly in our moment alone: “The Lord bless thee, and keep thee: the Lord make his face shine upon thee, and be gracious unto thee. The Lord lift up his countenance upon thee, and give thee peace.” Then I touched the stigmata one by one: the prints of the needles, the wound in the breast that had for so many months now scarcely ever closed. I caressed the perfectly shaped head. I bent to kiss the cheeks... “Oh, my lamb.” She went her way in the middle of the afternoon...

Three o'clock: The very same hour as Jesus' death.

Now, Paul felt like he had received the sentence of death, but what about Peter DeVries? What about the rest of us when we actually receive the sentence of death? See, the question is what are we supposed to do with the seemingly bottomless experience of suffering and death in our lives that we can't escape? And to answer that, we have to turn from the distressing experience of suffering to the transformative power of the gospel.

The Transformative Power of the Gospel

Paul candidly admits that he experienced a dark night of the soul — even as an apostle, all this darkness. There was no light. But Paul refuses to offer pious platitudes. Instead, he tells us that he was so utterly burdened and crushed that even he despaired of life itself. But in the midst of his deepest darkness, Paul sensed that somehow God was using it, as verse 9 states, “to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead.” See, Paul shows us that we can't escape suffering, and we really only have two options. At the end of the day, suffering will either drive you away from God or it will push you into the hands of Jesus. Oftentimes God uses suffering to push us to the very end of ourselves, because it's only then that we actually find God. We can't escape suffering. Those are the two options that we have.

But Paul's profound experience of suffering takes even him deeper into the gospel. This is one of those places where Paul alludes to the gospel. He sums it up in just the smallest of phrases. But the gospel is the life-changing message that Jesus lived the perfect life we should have lived, and Jesus died the guilty death that we deserved to die, and he was raised to new life so that he might share his new life with us. At the heart of the gospel is this principle of interchange, and the idea is that if you're united to Jesus by faith, it means that everything that is true of Jesus is now true of you.

Paul will come back to this principle of interchange again and again and again throughout this letter. But the basic idea is this: If Jesus died in your place as your substitute on the cross, then you have already died to your old life. All the guilt, all the shame, it's gone — removed forever. And if you're united to Jesus by faith and he's been raised to new life, then you are already sharing in that new life. And that means that death will never ever get the last word, because God has promised to do for you and me at the end of history what he did for Jesus in the middle of history — to

raise us up with new physical bodies to enjoy life with him in a new physical world. And that is why God is uniquely able to comfort us, even in the midst of our deepest, darkest despair.

Notice that God doesn't merely console us. He doesn't just try to cheer us up and make us feel a little better while our situation remains the same. No, God is able to comfort us because he fundamentally changes our situation for the better forever. And that brings me to my third and final point, which is the life-giving ministry of comfort.

The Life-Giving Ministry of Comfort

The word comfort in one way or another shows up 10 times in 11 verses. Do you realize that? It's almost awkward to read it. So in case you can't quite figure out what this passage is all about, it's about comfort. Paul introduces God the Father as the God of all comfort. But what does it mean to truly comfort another person? We're all familiar with cold comfort — comfort that doesn't do any good, when someone offers false promises or empty words but they do nothing to actually help lift the burden. It feels like nothing more than a pat on the shoulder, devoid of feeling or any real empathy.

But when do we really feel comforted? We feel comforted when someone actually enters into our pain and seems to be able to feel that pain themselves. But more than that, they enter into our pain in such a way that the emotional weight shifts from our shoulders to theirs. There's a sense in which they actually bear that emotional pain with us and even for us. And then from that position of solidarity, they can speak a fresh word that offers new hope, new direction, new possibilities, even in the midst of our darkness. You see, that's what God did for Paul. In the midst of his deepest darkness, God picks Paul up and turns him around. Paul sees everything now in light of the transformative power of the gospel. But Paul realizes here that God has not comforted him merely for his own benefit but so that he might be a source of comfort to others. That's what it's all about.

You don't have to live the Christian life for very long, you don't have to engage in Christian ministry for very long before you start taking some hard knocks. The Christian life is not for the faint of heart, and oftentimes when we experience these disappointments and these afflictions, we wonder to ourselves, "Where is God in the midst of all of this?" But as a very wise mentor once told me, whatever the situation is, the Lord knew it was going to happen, the Lord let it happen, and therefore the Lord must have let it happen for a reason. And oftentimes the reason is not only so that we might be comforted by God but also so that we in turn might be able to comfort others because we know how to enter into their suffering.

You see, the principle of interchange shows up here again. When you're united to Jesus by faith, it's not only that you belong to Jesus but also that we belong to one another. If one rejoices, we all rejoice. If one suffers, we all suffer. We suffer together. And so in verse 6, Paul realizes now in a fresh way, "If I suffer, it's so that you might be comforted. And if I'm comforted by God, it's so that I might share that comfort with you." In verse 4, Paul explains that the reason why God comforts us in all of our affliction is so that we may be able to comfort others with the same comfort we have

received. We belong to one another, and we are called to be wounded healers. We're all called to be wounded healers like Jesus himself.

This phrase, "a wounded healer," was popularized by the Dutch Catholic priest and psychologist Henri Nouwen, and he wrote a book years ago entitled "The Wounded Healer." I remember a family friend and pastor gave it to me my senior year of college when I was just beginning to explore the possibility of entering the ministry. In that book, Nouwen argues that if you want to bring healing and wholeness into the lives of others, there's absolutely no point in pretending to be perfect, as if you're immune to suffering and pain yourself. Instead, true healing and comfort come not from hiding your wounds but from sharing your wounds.

Paul is showing us the exact same thing here in 2 Corinthians. Paul reveals this profound insight: It is impossible to take away suffering without entering into it. You can't lead someone out of the desert unless you've been there. You can't save someone from a fire without the risk of being scorched by the flames yourself. It's impossible to take away suffering without entering it.

So as we begin this new ministry year, and as our Community Groups start up, this is my charge to all of our Community Group leaders: Your job is not to pretend to be perfect. Your job is not to pretend as if you are immune to suffering and pain. Instead, your job is to share your weakness rather than your strength. This is how Nouwen puts it. He says,

Nobody escapes being wounded. We are all wounded people, whether physically, emotionally, mentally, or spiritually. The main question is not "How can we hide our wounds?" so we don't have to be embarrassed, but "How can we put our woundedness in the service of others?" When our wounds cease to be a source of shame and become a source of healing, we have become wounded healers.

And the wounded healer par excellence, of course, is Jesus. Have you ever stopped to think about this? Isn't it amazing that after Jesus has conquered death itself, after he has been raised to new life, he still bears the marks of his wounds? He carries the marks of where the nails have been driven into his wrists and his legs. He carries the mark of the wound where the spear pierced his side, all of which shows us that true healing comes not from presenting false strength but rather by offering shared vulnerability. And that's what Paul models for us. Even though he was an apostle, he wasn't afraid. He wasn't afraid to let the Corinthians know that even he had despaired of life itself, but God used it to help him rely not on himself, but on the God who raises the dead.

Do you realize what this shows us? Even Paul, even the apostle, had to learn something more, something deeper, something more profound about the suffering and death and resurrection of Jesus. Peter DeVries learned something more about the suffering, the death, and the resurrection of Jesus through his experience of losing his daughter. That's how he also became a wounded healer. And that's why he wrote this novel, "The Blood of the Lamb": to share his comfort with us.

You see, coming back to the novel, after Carol has died, Don Wanderhope remembers the cake. He left the cake at St. Catherine's. So he goes back to the church, he finds it on the pew, and he takes it outside. Then he just sits down on the steps in front of the

church, right in the middle, underneath the massive crucifix of Jesus that's carved into the stone on the facade. Now, I told you that DeVries was known for his comedy. Well, this is where tragedy meets comedy, because this is how he dealt with his anguish and his pain over the death of his daughter. Don Wanderhope takes the cake out of the box, and then he hurls it at Jesus. Given the height of the crucifix above the sidewalk, it's a miracle that the projectile hits the target at all, but the cake lands square on Jesus' face, just below the crown of thorns.

But then in his imagination, Wanderhope pictures those stone arms of Jesus freeing themselves from the nails and then very slowly and deliberately removing the icing from his eyes and the cake from his cheeks. And then he gently hears Jesus say to him — in the deepest, darkest moment of his life — “Suffer the little children to come to me, for to such belongs the kingdom of God.” And then with that, he just crumples into a pile on the sidewalk. DeVries concludes by saying, “Thus Wanderhope was found at that place which...was said to be the only alternative to the muzzle of a pistol: the foot of the Cross.” DeVries became a wounded healer.

We can't escape suffering, and suffering really will drive us in one of two directions: It'll either drive you away from God, or it will lead you into the very arms of Jesus. Because our God is not immune to suffering and pain. And this is what separates Christianity from every other religion, every other philosophy, every other worldview. What other God knows what it's like to suffer? What other God knows what it's like to lose a child? What other God knows what it's like to die? Our God was wounded, and therefore he is uniquely qualified to bring healing into our lives. By his wounds, we are healed, so that we might become wounded healers to one another. May it be so, in your life and in mine, in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.