

Rely on God * 2 Corinthians 1:8-11

April 21, 2020 * Langford Community Church * Graham Gladstone

As you can imagine, I've spent a lot of time on the phone these last few weeks. And no fewer than three times, I've had people from our congregation tell me – 'you know, this is a tough time, but I think God is going to do something good in the midst of it.' Three different people. God is doing something good.

And you know what? They're right. God is doing something good in the midst of this trial. He is causing us as a society to think hard about what we value in life, He is drawing new people to faith in Him and He is teaching us to rely more and more on Him.

That was certainly Paul's experience as he travelled through the ancient Mediterranean world, telling people about Jesus. Paul went through some really tough times and yet he knew that God was at work. In fact, Paul's experience led him to the big idea for today – tough times teach us to rely on God.

Look at 2 Corinthians 1, starting in verse 8 and I'll show you what I mean.

If you think back to Sunday, Paul opens his letter by telling the Corinthians about God's *comfort* in trying times; here, Paul tells us about God's *purpose* in trying times. He writes:

8 We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about the hardships we suffered in the province of Asia. (He doesn't expand on these hardships here, but we'll hear about them more as we go).

We were under great pressure, (so great in fact that it went) far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired even of life. 9 Indeed, in our hearts we felt the sentence of death.

Paul is making it clear that they were in grave danger, isn't he? Each clause ratchets up the tension so that we can feel here that Paul's not just talking in theoretical terms; he truly did fear for his life.

Now some people would take that experience and say 'well, where is God in this? If I'm in danger, God must be sleeping or something' and just walk away. But Paul doesn't do that, does he?

Paul says 'we were in grave danger, far beyond our ability to endure; we feared for our lives...'

And yet (he continues) ~~but~~ this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead.

Paul understands that trials are not evidence that God's not there. Instead, trials teach us to look beyond our own limited ability to trust in God's endless power.

Paul is honest enough to admit that he cannot do this alone. He's a smart guy – legendary scholar and capable person – you don't travel around the Mediterranean sea on foot unless you've got some strength to you – but Paul says even that is not enough. By the grace of God though, these trials point him beyond himself to the God who is abundantly capable of carrying him through.

These trials, they force us to consider our own insufficiencies, don't they? I've thought at various points, 'boy, how are we ever going to get through COVID-19? This pandemic is way beyond my ability to

control.' And yet it is here, as I recognize and acknowledge my insufficiencies, that I am most able to cling on to God's all-sufficiency. As Martin Luther wrote in a different context –

Did we in our own strength confide, Our striving would be losing; Were not the right Man on our side, The Man of God's own choosing.

But we don't trust in our own strength, do we? We trust in the Man who is on our side. We trust in God and it is tough times that teach us to rely on Him. And when we do, Paul says, our trust is well placed.

He says 'we felt the sentence of death in our hearts, but this happened so that we would rely not on ourselves but on God and wouldn't you know it...'

10 He has delivered us from such a deadly peril (as this), and he will deliver us (again). On him we have set our hope that he will continue to deliver us,
11 as you help us by your prayers...- (2Co 1:8-11 NIV).

God is faithful. He can be counted on because He is a faithful deliverer. And Paul says 'when God delivers us, we gain confidence to trust God again and again and again.'

And even if we were to die, Paul says, we still have confidence that God deliver because who is our God? Verse 9 - the God who raises the dead. God raised Jesus to life again; because of that, we have confidence that even if in God's sovereignty we die in this life, we will rise again in the next. Tough times teach us to rely on God.

What does this mean for us? Well, two ideas.

First, what are these trying times teaching you to do? Some will take it and say 'I'm suffering so much, there must not be a god.' If that's you, let me very gently say to you – 'you're learning the wrong lesson from these trials.' The God who raises the dead, the God who delivers sinners, the God who loves and created you is using these trials to draw you to Him. Let Him draw you nearer. Don't let COVID-19 drive you away from God; let it drive you to Him, because He is faithful and strong and compassionate. Let this trial teach you to rely on God.

And second, rely on God and not yourself. I think that a lot of us are problem solvers and 'get-er-doners' and we don't like things that we don't have control over. We try to do our best and we make good decisions and take responsible actions, but there comes a point where we realize – this goes far beyond our ability to cope. What do you do in that moment?

If we are relying on ourselves, I think we fear, we worry, we despair. And I'm not sure that those are inherently sin; I mean Paul was clearly emotionally affected by his sufferings. But the question is - what do we do with those feeling of fear? Give in to them? Turn to other things for comfort? Become so preoccupied with our own well-being that we forget our God-given mandate to care for each other?

Paul says at this point – take those fears to the fearless God and rely entirely on Him. Trust that He knows what He is doing. Remind yourself that this is GOD we're talking about here, who delivers nations and resurrects the dead, this is GOD who loves you more than a good parent loves their child. Your welfare through COVID-19 does not rely on you; God is taking care of it. Rely on Him. Let these tough times drive you to God and while you're there, rely on Him.