

2 Corinthians 7:6

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 24 November 2013

Preacher: David MacPherson

[0 : 00] Good evening. Maybe hoping to sing some happy, upbeat songs, you'll have been very disappointed.

The psalm that we've sung, and indeed all three psalms that we've sung, have had a bit of a melancholy feel to it. My bed is drenched with tears always. It's very vivid, and it describes honestly the emotion, the circumstances of the psalmist as he writes. And while we may not warm to considering that reality, I think all of us, if we're honest with ourselves, will recognize that we know something of what it is like to be down, to be downcast. Now, the intensity of the experience of being downcast will vary greatly from person to person, and perhaps crucially, from experience to experience. The circumstances that would lead us to be downcast, depending on what they are, will impinge very obviously in great measure on how downcast, how down we are. But the reality is that being downcast, certainly on occasion, is part and parcel of the human condition, part of what it is to be men and women. And no one is immune. Believers and unbelievers, those who are struggling in the faith and those who are strong in faith, all can experience being downcast. And this evening, I want us to consider an occasion when Paul was downcast, or in any case, an occasion that he speaks about.

As he speaks, as he writes, he has come through that. He's no longer downcast, but he describes, in a measure, the circumstances that led him to be downcast, and how God helped him. And this experience that he relates to the believers in Corinth is what we want to spend a little time considering this evening, and I trust, draw some lessons for ourselves. Now, our thoughts will revolve around verse 6 of 2 Corinthians 7. But God, who comforts the downcast, comforted us. And then Paul goes on.

So, we want to spend a little time thinking about these words of Paul. And we'll begin by getting an understanding of the circumstances that lead to Paul being downcast. Having done that, we'll consider what God does, how God intervenes, the manner in which God brings comfort to Paul, and some other matters as we go along. But let's begin by having some notion, some idea of the circumstances that led to Paul being downcast. I think it is worth stressing that Paul was, at some point, downcast.

You read the chapter, we've read the chapter, and though he speaks of the experience, he's actually writing at a point when he is far from being downcast. And you might even wonder, well, this doesn't sound like somebody who knows much about being downcast. But Paul, if there was any doubt, it makes it very explicit that he had been in that place. In the verse that we are focusing our attention on, we read, but God, who comforts the downcast, comforted us. The implication is so clear.

[4 : 02] We who were downcast, God comforted us. And that in itself really just confirms what we said as we introduced the subject. Being downcast is the experience of all. No one is immune. The great apostle Paul, a giant of the faith, and yet he experienced what it was to be downcast. Indeed, on different, we might even say numerous occasions. In verse 5, Paul describes his circumstances on arriving in Macedonia. And in so doing, we get an understanding of why it is he was downcast. And the picture that he paints is not a pretty one at all. And we can just go through what he says there in verse 5. It's really rich in descriptive quality as Paul describes his circumstances. Notice there in verse 5. We can just go through the verse and see what he says. He says,

For when we came into Macedonia, what's the first thing he says? This body of ours had no rest. This body of ours had no rest. And here it would seem that the word body that he's using, he's using in the sense of his whole person. This apostle, this man, this body of ours, we had no rest.

I wonder if that's something that you can relate to, even just that description of no rest, exhausted, exhausted, everything going on at the same time. Not a moment to just sit down and just take stock. This body of ours had no rest. So many commitments, so many responsibilities, so many things to do, and so little time to do it. Well, this is the experience of Paul that he describes, that he remembers and describes in this verse. When I came into Macedonia, this body of ours, this body of mine had no rest. But he goes on. But, he says, we were harassed at every turn.

Again, the capacity of Paul to describe so vividly his circumstances is very helpful because I don't know about you, but I read that and I think, well, I know what he's talking about. Harassed at every turn.

Do you know something about that? Harassed at every turn. You just want a bit of peace, but there's always trouble. Trouble, trouble, nothing but trouble. Everything seems to be going wrong. Everything seems to be coming together. And if it's not one thing, it's another. Harassed at every turn. The people round about you instead of helping, are making things worse by what they say, or by what they don't say, by what they do, or by what they don't do. Or in any case, that's the way it seems to you. Well, Paul has experience of this. Harassed at every turn. What else does he go on to say here in this verse? Well, he says, conflicts. He's really describing. He goes on to describe what he means by harassed at every turn.

[7 : 13] And he says, conflicts on the outside, fears within. An interesting couplet there that together really speak volumes. First of all, conflicts on the outside. Now, I wonder what he was referring to.

To what conflicts does he point by speaking of these conflicts on the outside that he was facing, that were surrounding him? It could be a reference to the persecution that the Macedonians would experience. He speaks of having come to Macedonia. And you'll notice in the following chapter, rather, at the beginning of the chapter, he speaks of the extreme trial that the Macedonian churches were undergoing there in verse 2 of chapter 8. And Paul would come to minister to them. Well, he too would have been party to that, subject to these extreme trials that the churches in Macedonia were experiencing. Perhaps the conflicts he speaks of refer to those who were opposing the gospel message that he brought. And so, as he went to proclaim the good news concerning Jesus, there would have been those, as there always were, who would have opposed him, perhaps very aggressively and vehemently.

And so, he finds himself in conflict, conflicts on the outside. But he doesn't just say that. He also adds to that this very revealing following description of his circumstances. He says, conflicts on the outside, fears within. And that little phrase is, is it not very telling? Is it not the case? Is this not the case in your own experience of life that conflicts on the outside, even if they're very intense, are manageable when we are secure within? You know, if we're secure in ourselves, then even when we're thrown things that are very difficult, we can handle it up to a point. You know, we can confront those difficulties, those conflicts, when there is security within. But when fear takes hold, then the situation becomes so much more difficult. And Paul here very honestly recognizes that in the face of these conflicts without. He also experienced fears within. Again, we might ask, well, what fears is he speaking about?

It could be a reference to the persecution that the Macedonians were subject to and that he also was subject to, just of anecdotal interest. It's interesting to remember that when Paul first went to Corinth, to the very city that he now is writing to, he found himself afraid as the opposition to him grew in its intensity. And you will remember the occasion when he was afraid even to speak.

And the Lord came to him and spoke to him and said, fear not, do not be afraid, speak. Paul was afraid. He was afraid of the consequences of declaring the good news, fears within. Or possibly these fears within, and we don't need to really choose between one or the other. There could have been a cocktail of fears within Paul. But perhaps his fears also relate to his fears on behalf of the very people he's writing to, fears concerning their spiritual welfare and their own spiritual condition. Indeed, in this very verse, sorry, not in this very verse, in this very letter, Paul speaks of that. We move to chapter 11 of this letter. He also speaks of his fear on behalf of others. There in verse 3 of chapter 11, but I am afraid that just as Eve was deceived by the serpent's cunning, your minds may somehow be led astray from your sincere and pure devotion to Christ. Now, this is a very healthy fear, and yet a fear nonetheless on behalf of others. So, in these few words in verse 5 of chapter 7, Paul paints quite a picture, and it's no surprise that he was downcast as a result of all these things. But there's another another element that makes the situation so much more difficult, and what makes the situation so much more difficult for Paul, as he remembers it and describes it, is that he did not enjoy the support that he hoped for and perhaps expected from his friends. And hence, the call with which he begins this part of the letter in verse 2, make room for us in your hearts. Now, if we read that in isolation, we might say, well, what's that about? What really is behind that? And what gives us an insight to what is behind this call to the

[12 : 17] Corinthians is what we read in the previous chapter, in chapter 6 from verse 11, where he uses the same language. And notice what he says there, we have spoken freely to you, Corinthians, and open wide our hearts to you. We are not withholding our affection from you, but you are withholding yours from us.

As a faith exchange, I speak as to my children, open wide your hearts also. And then he repeats this in verse 2 of chapter 7, make room for us in your hearts. What is Paul recognizing, or what is he describing with pain, that in his troubles, when he was downcast, when he had opened his heart to them, they had not reciprocated in the measure that he would have wanted, in the measure that he had hoped for. And so, this, of course, intensifies his experience of being downcast. And the failure of the Corinthians to support him as they ought to have done is all the more painful given how he had treated them, which is precisely what he goes on to speak of there in verse 2, make room for us in your hearts.

We have wronged no one. We have corrupted no one. We have exploited no one. And yet, how did you repay me, even though this was how I acted towards you? So, these are the circumstances that led to Paul being downcast. But let's move on and move to what happens next, as it were. And what does Paul recognize that happens next? Well, there's the intervention of God in favor of Paul. There in the verse that we're particularly considering in verse 6, how does it begin, but God? This will be a very brief point that we want to make. And we just want to highlight the appearance, not for the first time, of these words, pregnant with promise and hope, but God. In the midst of the darkness, in the midst of the trouble, harassed at every turn, conflicts without, fears within, but God. But God. And in these two words, we have summed up so much truth. God is not indifferent to Paul's plight. God intervenes on behalf of His downcast servant. And we have declared very dramatically in these words, the intervention of

God. And of course, God. And of course, this remains true for us as God's children. God continues to be the God who knows our circumstances, who knows our condition, who knows when we are downcast, and who is not indifferent, and who intervenes in our behalf. But we can immediately go on to notice that that intervention of God is grounded in who God is in the very nature of God that guarantees His intervention.

Continuing there with verse 6, what do we read? But God who comforts the downcast. Paul is describing God, and he describes God as the one who comforts the downcast. In these words, he's not describing his own experience. He's going to do that in a moment, his own experience of God's comfort. He's simply stating something that he knows to be true, that God is a God who comforts the downcast. This is who God is. He is the God who comforts. This is a truth that runs through this letter. Indeed, notice how the letter begins in the very first chapter, and the language that Paul uses there to describe God.

[16 : 05] In 2 Corinthians 1, we read from verse 3, Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion, and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God. For just as the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives, so also through Christ our comfort overflows. And he goes on. So, the very beginning of the letter is he begins his letter to the Christians in Corinth. There is this treatment, this celebration of God as the God of all comfort. It is in the very nature of God to comfort His people. That is what guarantees that He will intervene on our behalf, because that is who He is. That is what He is like, the God of all comfort. What a beautiful name, what a beautiful description of our

God, the God of all comfort. So, God intervenes, and He does so because that flows from who He is, the very nature of God. But then in this verse 6, Paul also moves on to speak of the action of God on His behalf and the means that God employs. Then in verse 6, but God, who comforts the downcast, comforted us. He comforted us. So, it's not just theory. It's not just, well, yes, I know that what God is like. That's what I've been taught. He says, no, that's my experience. He comforted us.

This is the action of God on behalf of Paul. But notice how God comforts Paul. What are the means that He uses? Well, we're told, comforted us by the coming of Titus. The language that Paul uses makes it very clear that he considers the comfort that he receives something that God is doing. It is God who comforts him. And yet, he sees no contradiction in recognizing that, in also recognizing that the means by which God does so is Titus. Titus is the man that God uses to bring comfort to Paul.

And is that not God's usual way of bringing comfort to us? It's not His usual way of bringing comfort in some solitary or mystical way in an intimate experience with God that brings comfort to us without precluding God's prerogative of bringing comfort in that kind of way. But His usual way of helping us, of coming alongside us, of bringing comfort to us, is through others who He sends to us for this purpose. In the case of Paul, that one is identified as Titus. And of course, that reality, if indeed that is, if it's true to say that that is God's usual way of operating, well, that presents us with a challenge. Are we willing to be God's instruments to bring comfort to the downcast?

When we are downcast, it will be our hope and expectation that God will send those who would help us and bring a word of encouragement. But when the occasion affords, we can be that person on behalf of another. But notice what Paul goes on to say that reveals what we might call a chain of comfort.

[19 : 43] See, in verse 7, having recognized that God comforts him by means of Titus, what does he then go on to say? And not only by His coming, that is, by the coming of Titus, but also by the comfort you, the Corinthians, had given him. You see the chain there. Titus was comforted by the Corinthians, and then Titus is able, in turn, to comfort Paul, a chain of comfort described there.

But what was the comfort experienced by Titus and communicated to Paul? Well, the interesting thing is, it wasn't warm, encouraging words necessarily, important though they might be, but the encouragement or the comfort that Titus received that he was able to communicate to Paul was the obedient and repentant response of the Corinthians to Paul's letter of correction.

See, behind this chapter, the underlying theme is this letter that Paul had sent them. In verse 8, even if I caused you sorrow by my letter, I do not regret it. He's referring to this letter. Now, this is a letter that we don't have. We generally understand that it's a letter that he wrote between 1 Corinthians and 2 Corinthians. And if we called it 2 Corinthians, it would all get very confusing because then we have a 2 Corinthians. This would be 3 Corinthians. In God's providence, this letter that Paul speaks of has not been preserved. But apparently, it was a letter where he had to speak very, I wouldn't say perhaps harshly is not the right word, but he had to rebuke the Corinthians. And he himself speaks of how it was such a struggle for him even to write it. And he wondered, oh, maybe I shouldn't have written it, and maybe this will hurt them, and maybe they'll be upset. And he had all this crisis as he considered the impact of the letter. But then he sees that in God's providence, the letter proved very useful in bringing them to repentance. The point is that the repentance that the letter produced is the comfort that Titus received. Because when Titus was sent by Paul, there was this great concern, you know, how will they have responded to the letter? Will they want to see me? Will they want to see somebody sent by Paul? But of course, they did receive him because they had listened, and they'd repented of their sin. And so, that was the comfort Titus received that he could then communicate to Paul.

So, what brings comfort to Paul on this occasion are not sympathetic words, important though they can be at times. I'm not minimizing the place and the importance of words of sympathy. But in this case, what ultimately and profoundly brought comfort to Paul was fruit worthy of repentance in the lives of the Corinthians, the action of God and the means employed. But then as we draw things to a close, notice also the effectiveness of God's comfort of Paul. As we continue reading there in verse 7, he describes the means that God employed, and we continue reading in the second half of the verse, he told us, that is Titus told us about your longing for me, your deep sorrow, your ardent concern for me.

And then what does Paul say? So that my joy was greater than ever. My joy was greater than ever. Now, let's just pause for a moment and think of how significant what Paul is saying, and what we can draw from that, I think, legitimately. He's saying, my joy was greater than ever. Now, what does that mean?

[23 : 20] Well, I think it means that had he not endured that experience of being downcast, had he not experienced all that he described, and having experienced these things in the midst of it, being granted the comfort that he was granted, then this is a level of joy he would not have experienced. The depth of joy that he experienced required the experience of being downcast, if that doesn't all sound very convoluted. He's saying, I've never been so joyful before.

And so, in God's purposes, being downcast was a means that God used to help him experience a depth of joy that even Paul had never experienced before. That's what he says, my joy was greater than ever. Indeed, the language that he uses throughout this passage is always employing superlatives as he describes his joy and the depth of his joy at the comfort that he has received. Notice also in verse 4, in verse 4 and in the second half where we have this description of Paul of him being, I am encouraged, I am greatly encouraged. Now, there I think it would be so much better had the NIV chosen to just translate literally what Paul says, because literally what he says there is, I am filled with comfort. And given that the whole theme, or one of the themes is the comfort of God that he experiences, this language is so much more vivid. I am filled with comfort.

That is what Paul says. And so, we can enthusiastically commend the effectiveness of God's comfort for his people. His joy was greater than ever. He was filled with comfort. And again, Paul excels himself, even with the beauty of the language that he employs to describe his emotions and circumstances, the effectiveness of God's comfort. But as we draw to a close, I've said that already, but now I really am, a word of caution, or perhaps a word of clarification. The comfort that Paul experiences does not dispel or remove the trouble that he has to face. And Paul is very clear on this reality in the language that he employs there in verse 4 in the second half.

I am greatly encouraged, or literally, I am filled with comfort. In all our troubles, my joy knows no bounds. Especially that phrase, in all our troubles, my joy knows no bounds. They coexist. The joy, the comfort coexists with the troubles that he experiences. He's not even saying, despite my troubles, my joy knows no bounds. He's saying, in the midst of my troubles, my joy knows no bounds. And I think there is a clear difference there between those two ways of expressing it. And that's something that's important for us to be clear on. The comfort that God brings doesn't ordinarily involve removing the troubles that we face or solving the problems that we have, much as we might welcome God acting in that fashion. And of course, He can if He wishes, and He does on occasion. But ordinarily, the comfort that He brings is in the midst of the troubles that we face. This is God's usual way. And so, as we conclude, there is a word here for those of us who are downcast. If we're downcast today, or if in the course of this week we experience being downcast, or as life unfolds before us, there are circumstances where we are downcast, then we can be, if we are believers in Jesus Christ, if we, like Paul, are trusting in Him as our Savior and are part of God's family, we have reason to be encouraged. Because our God, our Father in heaven knows us, He knows our circumstances, and He acts on our behalf. And so, let us be on the lookout when we are downcast for the manner in which God intervenes and brings comfort, very possibly by sending somebody into our life and into our experience to bring the comfort that we need.

But also a word for those God would use to bring comfort. And that's all of us. All of us could be that man or that woman, that Titus, that God sends to bring comfort to the downcasts, that believer, and perhaps even somebody who's not a believer, who God might help us to be the means of coming into their lives and bringing them the comfort that they seek. Are you willing to be that person?

[28 : 36] Well, let's pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank You that You are indeed the God of all comfort. We thank You that that very truth is a source and a very legitimate source of comfort for us as we face life with all its uncertainty and all its difficulties and all the harassment that maybe life can throw at us, the conflicts and the troubles and the fears and all of the things that Paul speaks of and that we can identify with. That in the midst of it all, we can be confident of this, that our God is the God of all comfort. Our God is the God who intervenes on our behalf. And we pray that You would give us the spiritual discernment to see and to hear and to understand the manner in which You are helping us and intervening on our behalf. And we pray also that You would help us to be willing to be Your instruments in bringing comfort to others. And these things we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

Well, we'll close our service by singing verses 1 to 4 of Psalm 40 in the Scottish Psalter on page 259.

Psalm 40 verses 1 to 4 will sing to the tune, Martyrdom. I waited for the Lord my God and patiently did bear. At length to me He did incline my voice and cry to hear. Psalm 40 verses 1 to 4 will stand to sing.

Psalm 40 verses 1 to 5 of Psalm 40 in the Scottish Psalter on page 259. I waited for the Lord my God and patiently did bear. At length to me He did incline my voice and cry to hear.

He And on the road he set my feet, establishing my way.

[31 : 29] The youth and youth song in my heart are brought to my life.

Many shall see it and shall fear, and on the road we lie.

Blessed is the man who's just upon the Lord.

We stand in awe, the proud Lord's search, that's turned aside to us.

In the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all now and always. Amen.