

HELP FOR PEOPLE IN TIGHT PLACES

2 Corinthians 1:1–11

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The Scripture for today is the first eleven verses of chapter 1. I want to begin by talking to you about a word that is central to these eleven verses, really central to the whole book. It is the word *thlipsis*. It is a Greek word. It is a word used four times in these verses. Twice it is used as the word “trouble”—verse 4: “Who comforts us in all our troubles;” and again in verse 4, “So that we can comfort those in any trouble” (NIV). It’s used again in a verb form in verse 6, “If we are distressed” (NIV). Same word. And verse 8 “We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about the hardships [*thlipsis*] we suffered in the province of Asia” (NIV).

There’s a major teaching loose in the church today which tells us that: (a) no Christian should have troubles, and (b) troubles result from sin or the lack of faith, and (c) God will automatically remove those troubles if we will exercise our faith. We all wish this were true. Paul’s teaching, however, in 2 Corinthians, yields a fatal blow to this point of view. *Thlipsis* is part of the Christian life. In fact the word occurs forty-four times in the New Testament as a noun and ten times as a verb. Fifty-four times in all. Out of those fifty-four times, the almost exclusive use for the word is to describe an experience that Christians are passing through. Jesus, for example, says in the Sermon on the Mount, in Matthew 7:14, that the Christian life is the narrow way. It is the *thlipsis* way. In ordinary Greek, this word describes physical pressure on a person. One writer has said that in England, in accordance with law, on those who fully refused to plead, they had heavy weights placed upon their chests and were so pressed and crushed that this was literally *thlipsis*, “to be crushed,” “to be hemmed in,” “to be squeezed,” “to be in trouble.”

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In the kingdom parables, in Matthew 13:21, Jesus talks about one type of soil on whom the word falls. He says when *thlipsis* or persecution comes because of the Word, he quickly falls away.

That is to say, when a person comes to the Lord on the basis that everything is going to be great and the Lord has promised us Disneyland and we find out it isn't Disneyland at times at all, then on account of *thlipsis* or hardships, that person falls away.

Jesus says in the Upper Room, in John 16:33, "In this word you will have *thlipsis* [You will be hemmed in, straightened, squeezed, buffeted against. In this world you will have this]. But take heart. I have overcome the world."

There are really two reasons for *thlipsis*, two root reasons. One is our linkage to Adam. That accounts for a lot of things, like a bald head and failing to hear and poor eyesight and all kinds of things that go wrong with us internally. It's part of the genetic effect on the human race because of the sin of Adam. That's one linkage of *thlipsis* that we have through Adam. But the other linkage is through Christ. Sometimes we suffer hardship simply because we've identified with Jesus. Think for a moment of the Christians in China who are enduring suffering for no other reason except that they are linked to Jesus. Maybe in this room some of you have taken a stand as a Christian which has brought you into disfavor with other persons. The only reason why you're in disfavor and in the out group is because you've chosen to stand with the Lord. It's not because of the way you look. It isn't because of anything in your background, other than Jesus. This *thlipsis*, this hardship, can be external or internal. It can come against us or it can be something we suffer in our own spirit.

When we look at Paul's second letter to the Corinthians, we find that his being straightened or pressed or squeezed results from two things. It results, externally, from the Corinthians themselves. Paul says in verse 4 that the Lord comforts us in all of our troubles. Certainly the

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Corinthians had been a massive source of pressure upon the heart of the apostle Paul. The church had been founded through his missionary efforts, as the Holy Spirit had enabled him to do it. But there were many in that congregation who were spiritually smug and resentful of authority. And they liked people who were super-apostles, who didn't talk about pain and suffering and hardship and loyalty to Jesus. They liked to talk about earning your standing with God rather than being justified by faith. They looked down on Paul and they resented his authority. Paul tells us, in 2 Corinthians 2:1 and 12:14, that he had to give them a painful visit. And even after that, he had to write them a severe letter (2 Corinthians 2).

The only people that have the power to cause us heartaches are the people we love. The only people that have power to make us feel squeezed are people we care about. I've said before, "It's not the guy that I honk my horn at, that cuts in front of me on the freeway, that I am upset with for long. I forget about him. He means nothing to me, in the sense that we have no relationship. The person that has the power to cause the squeeze in my life is the person I care about." That is the source of *thlipsis* for Paul, and it may be for you.

There was a second thing for Paul. That was a very dangerous situation he faced at Ephesus, where he spent three years after starting the church at Corinth. He talks, in verse 8, about his *thlipsis* in Asia. He had been under such great pressure and it seemed beyond his ability to endure. He despaired of life. He felt the sentence of death. Against that backdrop, he is writing now, having escaped a very dangerous time that seemed to threaten his very existence.

I wouldn't at all be surprised if there are persons in this congregation who feel like you have just come through a time that threatened your very existence as a person. Either physically or maybe even on a sanity level. You've gone through so much. You've marveled that you've been able to pass through that and hold together.

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What help does God have for us? I've called this message "Help for People in Tight Places."

Thlipsis describes people who are in tight places. What help does God have to offer us? These first eleven verses of 2 Corinthians tell us four things that God has to offer to us as a help when we are in a tight place.

The first thing may not seem so consequential to us, but I think it's very important. And I think you'll agree with me when we get done with it. That is simply this:

I. In our tight places, God has given an apostle to speak to us.

God has given an apostle to speak to us in our tight places. An apostle speaks as one who has direct authority from Jesus Christ. It is unfortunate that there are many in the body of Christ today that are undermining, like of old, the authority of Paul and saying, "There are certain areas, as an apostle, in which he was deficient as well." If I understand the Scriptures correctly, the meaning of apostleship implies that when an apostle takes up a pen to write, they are writing through the direct leading of the Spirit and under the authority of Jesus Christ. And what they are doing is God's gift to the church. Ephesians 4:11–12: He gave gifts to the church. And the first gift that He gave was the gift of apostleship.

Why did he do this? That we might have a sure foundation for our faith; that when an apostle spoke, we might cast our anchor into that and say, "That's bedrock. You can build upon that. That's true."

That is the case with Paul. He writes as God's gift to us. An apostle directly commissioned by the Lord. He introduces himself as he does in all of his letters, simply by the word "Paul". We know his name was simply "Saul" before he was converted. It was the Jewish name. I wonder if sometimes Saul didn't have struggles with that because, like his ancient namesake, King Saul,

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they were both from the tribe of Benjamin. But King Saul was an impressive young man without equal among the Israelites, a head taller than any other. He was a big, tall guy (1 Samuel 9:2).

But the apostle Paul, or the biblical New Testament Saul, appears to be an unimpressive-looking kind of a guy. In fact, perhaps “Paul” was his nickname, meaning “the little one.” That’s what Paul means in the Greek. It was a name he came to use. In fact, early second-century tradition described Paul as a man small in size, baldheaded, bandy-legged, well-built, with eyebrows meeting, a rather long nose, full of grace, for sometimes he looked like a man and sometimes he had the countenance of an angel. Some people are mighty but not all that impressive in looks. We’re not to look at external things, anyway, but at the heart. He writes to us as “Paul, an apostle,” through the will of God. He’d received his authority from Jesus. And we therefore receive that as coming from one who has authority.

I found it possible in my life to endure tight places when there was a confidence that I was in the will of God, in the midst of that place. Paul says he is an apostle according to the will of God. An apostle of Christ Jesus, by the will of God. How good it is to know God in that kind of intimate way, where we can say, “We are what we are by God’s will.” He introduces Timothy as his brother, not his servant. Neither does he introduce him as an apostle, for that he was not. “To the church of God, God’s called out ones.” There’s no society like the church on earth. “Grace and peace to you” (2 Corinthians 1:1). Always in that order—grace first. Not the grace that saves, but the grace that sustains us in our troubles. Not peace with God, which we have at salvation, but the peace of God which continues with us.

I can give help to anyone in a tight place because, behind me, there is an authority—the authority of an apostle. And beyond that authority is the authority of Jesus. I would have no confidence in coming before you, Sunday after Sunday, or in any kind of teaching context, to simply get up

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and give you good ideas. Stuff off the top of my head. Things that I had sort of researched out of my own experience or books. I only have confidence that behind me there is the Word of God. I believe that in our own life situations we can only have confidence if we know that behind us is the unchanging Word of God. That's an encouragement—that when we speak on tight places, we have the authority of an apostle behind us.

II. I believe the second help for people in tight places, coming out of these eleven verses, is that God brings us encouragement in our tight places.

“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 [or encourages us] in all our troubles” (2 Corinthians 1:3–4, NIV). Often when we are down, our view of God changes. We say, “Lord, why are You letting this happen to me? Are You angry with me? Why are You silent, Lord? Why this disaster?” We change, at that moment, our view of God, because the experience happening to us is a straightening, a pressurized experience. It's important, therefore, in our life, to learn to distinguish between the subjective feeling and the objective reality. Paul here points us to the objective reality of God. The thing that's true here about God, whether or not at that moment we may be feeling it, is that He is the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

I say this periodically to persons in life who have grown up with poor earthly models of fathers and have a difficult time getting a hold of the understanding of God as Father. The easiest way to think of God as Father is to think of the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. He is a wonderful Father. He's the Father of all compassion. And He's the God of all comfort.

The word “comfort” here, which the New International Version uses, is a word that in the Greek is used ten times in five verses. Between verses 3–7, this word is used ten times. It literally

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means “one called alongside to help.” The Holy Spirit himself is the comforter. Jesus is a comforter. He is one called alongside to help.

There’s a tremendous difference between one simply called alongside and one called alongside to help. If you’re stuck by the freeway and someone simply stops the car and gets out and looks at what’s wrong with your car and doesn’t do anything, they may have come alongside you, but they haven’t come alongside you to help. The comforter is not one who simply puts his hand on your shoulder and says, “I’m so sorry that that happened,” and then drives off. The comforter is one who offers assistance. In fact, the English word “comfort” comes from the Latin, which means “with bravery,” “to give one person strength to stand.”

That is what God does for us. He encourages us. He gives us strength to stand when we are in our tight places. How does He do this? I think Romans 8:18–39 presents to us four ways in which God encourages us when we’re in tight places. The Lord is telling us these four things in our tight places by which He will always bring us encouragement if we will let His Word encourage us:

A. One is that the present suffering we are going through does not compare to the glory that’s coming. No matter how heavy the current load of suffering and agony and stress is, it cannot be compared to what God is going to do for us in the age to come.

B. Secondly, in our times of tight places, the Spirit is interceding for us with words which cannot be uttered. The Spirit is praying through us according to the will of God, always praying through us, His people.

C. The third thing that’s an encouragement is that God is working everything for the good in our lives. He’s going to bring it out for the good. It may not be good of itself, but He’s going to cause it to work for good in our lives

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D. Fourthly, nothing can ever separate us from God. Least of all, trouble. The suffering of Christ, Paul says in 2 Corinthians, “overflows in our life.” But so does His comfort. The Lord encourages us. Jesus has himself sat in our place. He has suffered. He knows what it is to be abandoned. To be betrayed, to be in pain, to be helpless, to be vulnerable, to be scorned, to be isolated. He has sat where we sat. And He has been astounded. “But in the light of all this, we bless the Lord,” Paul says. “At all times praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who comforts us not in some of our troubles but in all of our troubles” (2 Corinthians 1:3-4). God is our encourager.

III. A third great help in a time of stress and a tight place is that those times in our life produce endurance.

Verse 6 says, “If we are distressed, it is for your comfort and salvation; if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which produces in you patient endurance” (NIV). That word simply means “staying power.” It is as you take Romans 5:3 and realize that adversity produces staying power. Endurance. And that makes character, and character produces hope. There’s a whole four-stage process going there—suffering, endurance, character, hope. Endurance is being produced in our life through the tough places.

I think this year, personally, was a difficult year in my life for a whole lot of internal reasons. I remember, when I got to about the last day, I commented to some family members and to some staff members that the best thing I can say about the year is that I made it. Have you ever felt that way? That you were just hanging on with all your strength and you couldn’t let go? It was like automatic nerves took over and caused you to hang ten. Someone has said that the difference between the hero and the coward is that the hero holds on five seconds longer.

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I think this is true about endurance, that we're not only holding on, but God is holding on to us.

When you come through one of those tough times in your life and you haven't moved from your faith in God. And you haven't moved from the things that make you you. And you haven't budged an inch from what you feel God is calling you to do, even though you didn't understand everything that was happening around you. That produces staying power in you. That gets character into your life.

We do get frightened sometimes in our tough places and wonder how we're going to make it.

Don't look down when you're going through tight places. Just keep looking up. What does the writer of Hebrews say to people who are in tight places? "Looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith" (Hebrews 12:2). Looking to Jesus in our tight places. That produces endurance. When we've gone through a tight place and found the Lord met us, it gives us strength in our Christian life. If I can lick a lion, I can lick a bear!

IV. The fourth thing that happens in our tight places is that we gain power to comfort others.

We must be careful not to let our tight places become cul-de-sacs, dead-end streets, that are just occurring to us. Paul says that if we have been suffering, "it is for your comfort and salvation; if we are comforted, it is for your comfort" (2 Corinthians 1:6, NIV). That is, he is letting what happens in his life be of some influence and value to someone else.

What often happens in our tight places is that we want to get into bed and pull up the covers. We want to become the center of everyone's attention. And we begin to develop grudges when we do not become the center of others' attention, or when we lack attention. Then we come inward in our sufferings and start saying, "What is everybody doing to me?"

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Paul is able to take these tight places, and instead of having this inward kind of focus, he's saying, "If this is happening in my life, there's got to be people that are going through this same thing. I can reach out and I can comfort them."

The only way we can successfully make it through tight places is if we will transform and move out to help others. "I know what it's like," we say. Let me just encourage you. Let me pray with you. The best thing we can do with people going through tight places is not give them glib answers to complex struggles they're going through. But love them and reach them and say, "God can give you comfort. He's comforted me."

In verses 10–11, Paul kind of summarizes the whole issue by saying that God has delivered us from such a deadly peril. God does deliver us in our tight places. And the King James says, "delivered us." He will deliver us. And we set our hope in Him, that He will continue to deliver us. God has now delivered us from this. He is going to deliver us. He's going to deliver us in the near future. In the last part of verse 10 it says, "He will continue to deliver us" (NIV). God has delivered, will deliver in the immediate present, and will deliver in the distant future. He will continue. In the midst of that, Paul says to the Corinthians, "You help us by your prayers" (1 Corinthians 1:11, NIV). When others are going through deep things—how we need to lift them up in prayer.

In regard to our praying for another person or for ourselves, we have one of two options. We may pray, "Lord, change the circumstances." Or, "If you do not change the circumstances, then may I come out of this more powerful and more deep in my walk than when I went into it."

How do we get help in our tight places? Paul is telling us we have the word of an apostle. We have God, who encourages us. We have endurance that develops. And we ourselves, we are

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given the power to comfort others, so that our tight place does not become a cul-de-sac, but an oasis to someone else.

Closing Prayer

Our gracious Heavenly Father, we thank You today for Your Word. We take these moments to lift up in prayer to You those who know most, in this hour today, what a tough place is like, what a tight constraining place may be. Lord, how many times in those tight places we have cried out for You to place us in a more attractive place, a wide place. We would like to get out of the dungeon and the prison of experience we are in. Lord, sometimes You send Your angel and we are brought release. Other times, You cause, from our prison cell, the word of the gospel to resound out to others. We simply, in the midst of where we are, in a tight place, acknowledge anew our faith in You. And our love for You. We pray, Lord, as we too reach out to help people in tight places, that we can do it, not from a standpoint of criticism and blame, but from a standpoint of help and hope. Lord, bring Your people strength. Strengthen us all as we face adversities, complex things that do not readily yield—spilled milk that cannot be gathered back. Losses that can never be recouped. O Lord, help us in those times. Thank You for causing us not to simply be time-bound people, thank You for giving us eternity. Thank You for the promise that, in Your time, You will make all things beautiful—in Your time. We cling to that today. We thank You that there is help and hope, only in You. We praise You today for that help and hope. In the name of Jesus our Lord. Amen.