

Going God's Way

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[0 : 00] Okay, thanks, Kate. Good morning, everyone. Hope you're well. If you have a Bible, come with me to 2 Corinthians. We do this every Sunday. We turn to the Bible. It's our deep conviction here at Brunfield, as is many churches throughout the city, that when we open this book, we find that it is no ordinary book, that it is the voice of the living God. And so we expect to encounter God by his spirit as we open the pages of the Bible. So please go to 2 Corinthians. If you need to use the contents page of the Bible, I always think we get ourselves in knots over that. Please feel absolutely free to do that. This is a letter that we've never been in before at Brunfield in my time here. So it's really exciting, and there's so many lessons for us to learn here. I think we're in for an absolute treat. So we're going to start it this morning. We're going to take a little break for Christmas, and then we're going to go all the way through to just before Easter next year. And hopefully that's a way of as many of us as possible getting the whole of this series, accounting for holidays and stuff, and when people are back. So this is going to be an absolute treat. But let me try and get us to the big thing that's at the heart of this letter. Here's the question, okay? What kind of person do you find impressive in life? Do you not love that face? Wish I could make that face. What kind of person do you find impressive in life? So as you're chewing on it, something I learned recently, one of you knew this. Every year the co-op funeral directors publish the top 10 songs requested at funerals list.

So I went on this week and I had a look. You've got your classics in there. You've got Bette Midler, Wind Beneath My Wings. You've got Eva Cassidy, Over the Rainbow. Ed Sheeran somehow made it in this year as well. But a timeless song that often comes in at number one, and if you trace it back, has never been dislodged from the top 10, is this song. It is My Way by Frank Sinatra. Right? Fact for you, between 1969 and 1971, that song stayed in the UK top 40 for a record 75 weeks. Now you bring those two facts together, and I think it shows that we love this song as a culture. Right? It's a pretty decent song. I'll give him that. Could hit a note in his day. But it's a very popular song in our day. Do you know the lyrics? I've lived a life that's full. I've traveled each and every highway. And more, much more than this, I did it my way. And it's a song that's all about self-confidence. And those are the people that my heart finds so naturally impressive in this life. Do you find that? The student who can stay out all night and still get straight A's in the exams? The colleague who can both work hard and play hard, who can burn the candle at both ends and somehow manage to do it? The dad from Bluey, who seems to have endless fun and boundless energy for his kids? The parent at the school gate, who has snuck in a little workout before work and dropping the kids at school, looking polished and clean at 8.50 and looking lean? The person who appears on a place in the sun, who's saved enough on their pension to comfortably retire to write their memoirs?

The person in bargain hunt, who seemed to make 15 quid on that piece of ornament that no one else wanted to look at? The family next door who go for the extension on the side of the house, hearing the story of the self-made man on Dragon's Den? All of these things, I look at it and I think, that's kind of how I want to be. I want to be impressive. I want to be self-sufficient. And I look at them and I look at my own life and I think, if only I had it more altogether. And what I do is, as I import that vision of success in life, and what I do is I just transpose it onto the Christian life and I think that's how it must work. And so my mind becomes full of words like bigger, better, faster, stronger, and the one that I think we fall for, hook, line and sinker, busier.

[4 : 24] And this letter has been gold for me and I pray that it's gold for us because through it, God has both exposed the folly of the fact that I'm way too easily impressed. And he's also reminded me of the things when it comes to the heavenly places, the things that are really impressive in this life.

And it's nothing to do with being self-sufficient. And it's reminded me of how he, the triune God, Father, Son, and Spirit has shown his power and his wisdom in the things that look like foolishness

in the eyes of the watching world. He's going to flip what we understand impressive to be. He's going to flip it on its head. You up for it? And it all centers in Jesus.

You remember those black and white movies that you sometimes still get on TV? I'll be honest, because I sometimes still read the Gospels like that, as if they were black and white film.

The people, the places, the conversations that Jesus has with people, all of them like a black and white film. Because I remember the moment it occurred to me when I was first reading the Gospels that Jesus, as he walks in on the scene, he's the only person in 3D color.

Here is a man doing more than just turning the world upside down. Here is a man actually showing the world what it is to live the right way up. A life not of self-confidence, but a life of walking, having deep communion with and full dependence on God. You look at Jesus as you read about him in the Gospels. And if you haven't done that this morning, can I suggest that be a great thing to do after the lunch this afternoon? If you want to read it to somebody, please grab me. I'd love to do that with you. You read about Jesus in the Gospels and you think to yourself, here is a man who is fully alive.

[6 : 22] And yet his life is marked by what? Unimpressiveness. From cradle to grave, unimpressiveness, right? Here is the boy from Bethlehem. Here is the man who picks 12 of the most normal ragtag guys to be his disciples. Here is the man who's hanging out with the most questionable of people, reaching its apex, that foolishness at the cross, the place of utter weakness and defeat. And yet that is the place to the glory of God, which is the place that God shows both his wisdom and his power to the watching world. Such is the life of the man from Nazareth.

That's the place in the Bible, isn't it, that people make fun of? You're from there. Could anything good come from Nazareth? Friends, Christianity will always be from Nazareth.

Following Jesus faithfully, following in his footsteps is really tough. I take it that when Paul speaks in this passage of the sufferings of Christ here, that's what he's talking about. The cost of following Jesus.

You come across that. My flatmates think I'm a space cadet. My family think I'm just going through a phase. Trying to do the faithful, next right thing, sexually, ethically. It just feels so hard.

My colleagues find my takes strange. And if I really ask them, they really feel sorry for me.

Following Jesus will always be baffling in the eyes of the watching world as we follow the crucified man from Nazareth.

[8 : 06] And that's particularly acute in a city like Corinth. This booming port city, if you find it on the map there, a little southwest of Athens.

How strategic is that city in terms of where it's located? Here is a total melting pot of peoples. Here is a place where money and pleasure and making a name for yourself are the name of the game.

Do you know where we were a few weeks ago? Or last week, rather? We drove past Benidorm.

Right? Alex and I saying to each other in the car. Here is a city that is just coming out of nowhere huge.

That is just existing for pleasure. Corinth is like that. It is like Benidorm and Manhattan rolled into one. In fact, to Corinthianize was a jokey way of saying that someone was into wild living.

Such is Corinth. One commentator, and I thought I'd give you this, describes it like this. Corinth was a city with a Roman face, a Greek heart, a large Jewish minority, and a deeply, and get this, ingrained universal desire to impress.

[9 : 12] And that's why Corinth is not the place that we'd imagine the message about a crucified and resurrected man would get any kind of traction.

Talk about a place that isn't full of low-hanging fruit. And yet God, because he is this kind of God, because he is the one who works by his spirit to draw all sorts of people to his son Jesus, from all strata of society.

Jesus has been proclaimed by Paul, and God has birthed a church in the city of Corinth. And let's never lose sight of the fact that God is this kind of God, and God is working in these kind of places and has done throughout history.

Because God is this kind of God. Dear friends, this world that we live in is full of what? Possibilities. Evangelistic possibilities. Take that in today.

If God can birth a church in a city like Corinth through the preaching of his words, then there really is no place that's out of bounds. There is no person who's out of reach, and there's no prayer that's off the table.

[10 : 26] And the amazement of it all is that he uses everyday weak people like you and me and Paul to reach people with the news about his son. D.L. Moody, the famous American evangelist, tail

end of the 18th century, who God would use to let thousands of people around the world hear about Jesus, including in this city.

What was his background? Shoe salesman. Love it. Shoe salesman. He said this, The world has yet to see what God can do through a person who is totally dedicated to him.

So, Paul arrives in Corinth, let's call it A.D. 50, just to locate it. A.D. 50. And you can read about that in Acts chapter 18, the first time that Paul rocks up in Corinth.

And all the things that God did there, typical Acts, both revival and riot. That's what you get in Acts 18. And the relationship between Paul and this church is, well, it's complicated.

So, on the one hand, they drive him absolutely nuts. And yet, on the other hand, he loves them so, so deeply. Right? He's so encouraged by their progress, I think.

[11:46] And you get this in 1 Corinthians, where you see a lot of their questions and a lot of their mistakes as young baby believers trying to work out how they do this Jesus thing in a place like Corinth.

And in between, you kind of see them making progress. But here's the thing that's going on in the background of 2 Corinthians. And it's that a group of false teachers have arrived on the scene in Paul's absence, and they're peddling a Jesus-sounding message that downplays suffering and hardship and emphasizes looking good on the outside.

And what they're trying to do is lure these young believers away from Paul and Paul's message about Jesus and his accompanying cross-shaped life.

And they say, come on. Paul looks so unimpressive. The way he talks is so unimpressive. Do you not think that God's got better things for you?

Higher experiences that you can tap into? Do you not want the world to like you? Paul means well, but surely if he had got this message right, his life would be hashtag blessed all over Instagram.

[13:07] And that's why this is one of the most raw and the most affectionate of letters that we find anywhere in the New Testament. Because Paul is all heart and all sleeve here. Unapologetically defending the message and pattern of his life.

But here's the incredible thing. I want you to tap into this because this really gets us to the heart of the letter. Here's the incredible thing. The way Paul desires to show the legitimacy of his leadership isn't by holding up his CV and holding it up against the CV of the false teachers and say, do you see how I'm better than them?

Do you see how I'm better than them? No, he does the opposite. The big thrust of this letter is that he's saying, what qualifies me to be a leader is not my brilliance.

It's my need. I always think C.S. Lewis captures this so wonderfully in his Narnia series. I'm surprised you to hear me say C.S. Lewis gets this so right.

But there's this wonderful scene in Prince Caspian, I think it is, where Aslan and Caspian, who's on the cusp of becoming king, are having this conversation. And Aslan says to Caspian, do you feel yourself sufficient to take up the kingship of Narnia?

[14:28] To which Caspian replies, I don't think so, sir. I'm only a kid. And Aslan responds, good. Do you get that?

If you felt that you were sufficient, if you felt you could do this on your own, it would be proof that you aren't ready. Dear friends, here's the thing, okay? Progress in the Christian life is not us understanding that we need Jesus less.

It's as if Jesus is some kind of stabilizers on our bike. No, progress in the Christian life is realizing that you need Jesus more. And you need his people more.

You need us someday more. Paul has tapped into the secret that we are never more useful to the Lord than when we are completely dependent on him.

Do you see how he says that in verse eight? He says, and it's really striking that he would open his letter with this, not keep it right to the end. He would front it with this.

[15:37] He's unashamed about the hardships that he goes through as a result of following Jesus. His suffering in Asia, make no mistake, it's not trivial.

In fact, do you see him right? It burdened him far beyond the limits of his, do you see it? His own strength. So much so that he despaired of life itself.

That ain't trivial. Read that to say that we were so utterly spent mentally, emotionally, and physically, our supplies were utterly gone and we just didn't know what to do or where to turn.

Paul's life is the opposite of Instagrammable. Yeah? You go on Facebook, everyone's sitting telling you about their best moments, their best photos.

Paul's game for telling you about his toughest. And here's the point. And if you want a strapline, if you remember one thing from this, I hope you take a lot. Remember one thing from this, make it this.

[16:38] Okay, here's the strapline over this letter. Weakness is the way. Yeah? Weakness is the way. That's what Paul wants these Christians in Corinth who are being sucked into this whole idea of Christianity should look impressive in the eyes of the watching world.

He's saying, no, weakness is the way. And it's really striking, isn't it? Because that's not what I would have done. It's not what I would have done. I would have kept that at least to the last page and dropped that in as a PS.

But it's really striking, isn't it? And you ask yourself, why? Why is he all heart and all sleeve about weakness being the way? Can I just pull out a couple of things in these first 11 opening verses?

You ready for this? I want us to see a one and a two. One and a two. So here's one big thing that God does in our times of trouble. Times of trouble are not a source of shame to Paul.

Do you see if verse three, ultimately they are a source of praise to God? Now how? In verses three to seven, do you see how often that word comfort crops up?

[17:48] It's always a great thing to do when you see a repeated word in the Bible to ask yourself why? It's not just that they need a thesaurus and they couldn't find one. If a word is repeated, we ask ourselves why?

How often that word comfort crops up? Dear friends, Paul wants us to know and these Christians to know that we're dealing with the God who draws near to his people in their darkest moments.

That it's when we realize that Jesus is all we have. When there's nowhere else to go, that that is when God meets us in our darkest moments. Do you see the description of him there at verse three?

And this is all tied up with who this God is. Do you see the description of him there at verse three? And I cannot think of a more sweeter description of God than this.

He is what? He is the father of mercies. That word mercy is used in the Old Testament to describe the tender way in which God showers his people with undeserved kindness.

[18:53] And he's the God of all comfort. Comfort there is an Isaiah 40 word. Isaiah 40, God saying in the future, what's he going to do to his people?

Comfort, comfort my people, says the Lord. There's coming a new day when God's comfort is going to be so much more tangibly real. I cannot think of more sweeter sounding descriptions of God's heart than this.

Our father has the finger, his finger on the pulse of every single detail of our lives as we take daily steps of faith. Dear friends, he hears our cries of distress.

And he sees our tears of despair. And one of the things that this invites us to do surely is to embrace a more honest and a more raw prayer life.

One in which we come to this God and tell him exactly how we are feeling and what it is that we are going through. We don't surprise him when we do that. What we're doing right now is fighting the temptation to believe that God by his spirit cannot offer us the perfect comfort that we so desperately need in our lowest moments.

[20:21] Jesus is the most sovereign and the most willing of saviors. In the words of Dane Ortlund in his lovely little book *Gentle and Lowly* he says, When you come to Christ for mercy and love and help in your anguish and perplexity and sinfulness you are going with the flow of his deepest wishes not against them.

Truly in Jesus we have one a bruised reed he will not break and a smoldering wick he will not put out.

And flowing from that one big thing that God does in our times of trouble says Paul here are two great ways that God uses our times of trouble that God uses our times of trouble.

Now even with that do you see how we are swimming against the stream of our culture? Friends, you and I are breathing in the air every day just like osmosis of our highly individualistic culture that is saying to us the thing to really get in life is happiness and comfort.

Everything in our world is set up to provide you and I with as much cotton wool insurance around our lives as we can with the goal of being the avoidance of what? Discomfort. Do you see Paul right

after telling them about his troubles he keeps using that phrase do you see it?

[21 : 59] It is for. Do you see that in the text? It is for. Verse 6 It is for. Which tells you what? That Paul perceives that even in the hardest of moments even in our darkest of times God has not dropped the ball that more than that God is at work somehow and it tells us that our times of trouble are not purposeless and we don't think like that do we?

We think tough times are times to be avoided. I mean think about it what's your instinctive reaction when something in our lives doesn't go to plan? When you hit times of trouble what is our instinctive reaction?

Tell me what mine is mine is to go total Bob the Builder and try and fix it yes I can all the time all the time I can do this I can fix it some of us play the blame game that's another one I love to play it's other people's faults many of us turn to the bottle we drown our sorrows some of us turn to the packet and we comfort eat some of us turn for the TV remote and we binge watch some of us grab for our phone and we doom scroll on social media looking for that next dopamine hit to escape our world is offering us plenty of ways to try and cope with difficult times and yet Paul says would you perceive when times of trouble come when you follow Jesus it is not purposeless because God because he loves us because he loves us because he loves us do you not love that done nothing to deserve the grace of God the love of God means I can do nothing to lose the love of God because he loves us because he loves us because he loves us he so often does the deepest work in our hearts during some of the toughest moments of our lives and the two ways that God uses our hardships says Paul do you see the first at verse 9 so that we might become less self-reliant and come to trust in Jesus more

I remember chatting to my good friend Dave Hampton who works for Christians in Sport chatting to him one day about parenting we've got kids the same age he's got three and at the time I had three as well and we're talking about how tired we are as parents it's a game that we often play as parents who's tired and how do we cope when it gets really tough and I'm starting I'm telling him about all our tactics as parents right I'm telling him about sticker charts on fridges and I'm telling him about limiting TV time to an hour there's nothing wrong with those things but I kind of tag him in at this point and said Dave what do you do and he said listen when Joe and I are at wits end we don't know where to go see instead of just trying harder we've been convicted just to pray together and that's the point and Dave's one of these guys who is just straight back I remember hearing it and thinking ouch he's bang on the money isn't he friends no experience is wasted in

God's flawless economy as he teaches us not to just try harder when tough times come to think that we can get ourselves through it but as he weans us off takes us to the end weans us off our own resources and just faces our minds towards him helping us understand more that he is the God who raises the dead you see that there Paul just drops that in which I take it means regardless how scary this world becomes we can know that this God of power absolutely holds our lives that's the first thing God does he weans us off self-reliance and the second comes at the end of verse three and I love this so that we can share that same comfort that God gave us with others think of this as a bit like a suffering and comfort chain so as Paul experiences God's comfort through his spirit he becomes perfectly equipped to pass on that same comfort to the Corinthians when they suffer and it's always great you may be thinking well

[26 : 34] I'm not suffering right now I'm not going through a hard time right now but the thing is we need to put this in the tank of our lives because one day that we will suffer and find times difficult as Paul suffers and experiences God's comfort he wants to pass that on to others and I love the phrase and I only noticed it about an hour before coming out this morning verse 4 who comforts us in all our troubles so that we can comfort those in any trouble and it's the word any there I've never seen it before any trouble and here's what I think I so often do I look at my brothers and sisters who are going through really hard times and I think because I've not gone through that specific thing that I've got nothing to offer if you ever feel like that in our church life that we've got nothing to offer because we haven't been through that now listen God might bring you into someone's path you have gone through what they're going through and you can speak specifically into a situation as we'll come on to see in a moment but just to fight the temptation that we have got nothing to offer each other when it comes to comfort this would tell us that that isn't true you know there's something wonderful about us drawing alongside each other and saying to each other listen I love you

I don't know how you feel what you're going through but I'm here to listen and I want to learn and if nothing else I want to be those who pray with you do you see that in verse 11 friends that we really have something wonderful let's not underestimate God's spirit and what he can do as we draw alongside each other trying to offer comfort you know for making this place a community of comfort that we really do walk side by side through all the ups and downs of life but here's some quick fire questions as we begin to work this towards a close as we think about passing that comfort on to other people what are the biggest things that God has taught you during the course of your life what are the hardest things that he's brought you through what scripture in those times became so precious to you that perhaps that you can share with someone going through a difficult time you know I've got mates like that in my life who just text me random verses now and again one of them sitting over there just text me random verses he's got no idea what's going on in my life at the time but boy I tell you see when I read it I think that is just the verse I needed this morning let's not underestimate the Holy

Spirit what he does is we take this word and apply it to each other's lives friends who could you get alongside with the express purpose of sharing that who is God the Holy Spirit putting on your heart and who is he putting in your path again let's not underestimate his sovereignty when it comes to the people that appear in our past the amount of great conversations I've just had with people at the door dear friends have we stopped to consider the possibility that we might be the perfect way that God brings this comfort to one of his own people you know our time is gone I'm so excited to journey through this letter together and see everything that God is going to teach us weakness weakness is the way but our time is gone here's what I want to do just as we close I want to tell you about to bring us back to the big thing why I love

WD-40 this little magical bottled substance that you use to grease the hinges of your door you use it to make the hinges in your gate work you do it to change the gears on your bike there are many signs in life that you're hitting middle age and here's one of them when you get excited about things like this but do you know why it's called WD-40 I thought it was a band at first but that's WB-40 isn't it WD-40 because the people who designed this formula they got it right on the 40th attempt in other words it took 39 failed attempts of learning to get this right do you know why I love that I love it because no one needed to know that yeah we should be up here waxing lyrical about WD-1 but they chose to call it

WD-40 here's a brand that is wearing and gladly telling the world the story of its weakness and its need and that is the backing track of this letter that we're going to keep hearing again and again and again wearing it that weakness is the way Paul's letter as it holds to us God's gospel is an invitation to embrace a fully dependent life as we rest on a fully sufficient Jesus just as we close in the words of Charles Spurgeon really simply I have a great need for Christ and I have a great Christ for my need 1 Peter chapter 5 in it verse 6 humble yourselves therefore under God's mighty hand that he may lift you up in due time cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you and Lord we just thank you simply this morning Father for that wonderful description and we don't take it for granted that we have it in our own language that you are the father of mercies and the

[32 : 47] God of all comfort truly our only plea is that you are the kind of God that you are and so Father we thank you just for this time that we've had in this letter thank you Lord that is Kate prayed at the beginning truly your word is alive and active sharper than a double edged sword and I pray Lord as we spend a bit more time together now as we close and then as we have lunch together Lord that you would be working in our conversations Father that you would be moving in ways to encourage and to strengthen and equip thank you Lord for your grace and we just commit this time to you as we close in Jesus name Amen