

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, September 21, 2008**

COMFORT IN SUFFERING

2 Corinthians 1:1-11

In his book *The Life God Blesses*, Gordon MacDonald writes that one of the tools God uses to bring blessing into the lives of His people is what he calls “disruptive moments.” Disruptive moments, he says, are those unanticipated events we experience in life, most of which we would have chosen to avoid had it been possible.

Have you had any “disruptive moments” in your life recently? I have. I’ve had a number of them in the last year or so. Today is the first Sunday I have spoken from this pulpit in seven months. The last time I preached from this pulpit on a Sunday morning was way back on February 24. So I hope you’ll be patient with me if I stumble or flounder in my words this morning. I hope you will bear with me, too, if I take some time this morning to tell you about some of the things God has allowed me to experience in the last several months.

I had a disruptive moment last November when, at a routine appointment with my primary care physician, I casually mentioned that I had experienced some hearing loss in my left ear. After examining me, the doctor referred me to an ENT – an Ear, Nose, and Throat doctor – who gave me a hearing test and then sent me to have an MRI of my brain. The ENT doctor already suspected what was going on, but he wanted the MRI for confirmation.

One of the results of this disruptive moment was that my vocabulary has grown. I learned a new term: “acoustic neuroma.” That is what showed up in the MRI of my brain. An acoustic neuroma (or vestibular schwannoma, which is another term that was new to me) is a tumor, usually benign, that grows on the 8th cranial nerve going from the inner ear to the brain. It typically affects a person’s hearing and sense of balance, and sometimes it affects the nerve controlling facial expression, resulting in a partial paralysis on one side of the face, which may be temporary or permanent. In my case, the facial nerve was not affected, for which I am tremendously grateful. But my hearing in my left ear was significantly affected. And I was beginning to have occasional moments of dizziness and loss of balance.

In the midst of this disruptive moment, Mary Sue and I explored the options for treating the tumor and sought the Lord’s leading. We came to the conclusion that surgery to remove the tumor was the right course of action. The Lord led us to an expert neurosurgeon at Johns Hopkins University Hospital in Baltimore, who had done several hundred acoustic neuroma surgeries.

I underwent surgery at Johns Hopkins on February 28. The surgery itself was fairly routine (if you can call brain surgery routine). Since the doctors at Johns Hopkins had told me there was a 50-50 chance of preserving the remaining hearing in my left ear. I

was hopeful I would not lose it. But it was not a big surprise when my hearing in the left ear was gone after the surgery.

My recovery after surgery was fairly normal for the first few weeks. I was in the hospital for a week and then continued my recovery at home. I have to tell you, those were some really hard days. There are some days I would rather forget. And there are some days I simply don't remember. I had no energy. I had monster headaches. And I had to have Mary Sue or one of the kids hold on to me even to take a few steps, because my sense of balance was so out of whack.

About a month after my surgery, as many of you know, I had another disruptive moment. In the middle of the night on April 1, I had a seizure, fell and hit my head, resulting in what is called a TBI – a traumatic brain injury – with bleeding in two lobes of my brain. I spent four days at Fairfax Hospital, three of them in the ICU – I remember almost nothing from those three days – and then I was transferred back to Johns Hopkins, so my neurosurgeon could oversee my recovery. I spent the next two weeks at Hopkins before finally getting home on April 18.

It has been a long and winding road for me, for Mary Sue and for our family, with unexpected twists and turns, since that disruptive moment last November. My recovery has been slow, even with the aid of a tremendous outpatient rehab program at Mount Vernon Hospital, the care of some exceptional physicians, the extraordinary love and sacrifices of my wife, the patient love and care of our children, and the support of a wonderful church family and other Christian friends.

As I have already indicated, I have completely lost the hearing in my left ear. I am happy to say that my right ear works just fine. I praise the Lord for that. But if you want to be sure I can hear you when you are speaking to me, make sure you talk into my right ear!

Another result of the surgery was that my balance nerve was severely affected. I basically had to learn to walk all over again. It has been a long relearning process for my brain to regain my sense of balance. And I am still adapting. I don't know how obvious it is to you, but I still have moments of being wobbly on my feet.

By the grace of God, I was finally able to return to work on a very limited basis – just 2 or 3 hours a day, 2 or 3 days a week – beginning the last week of June. Since that time, my endurance has slowly but steadily increased, to the point that I am now working 5 days a week, averaging 6 hours of work a day (or more). By God's grace I was able to attend my daughter Lindsay's college graduation in May, at a time when there were still a lot of question marks about my recovery. By God's grace I was able to be here every morning during VBS back in July. By God's grace I was able to participate in the wedding of the daughter of dear friends in Pennsylvania near the end of July. And, by God's grace, I was able to preach at the memorial service for George Aldridge here at Faith just 9 days ago.

My recovery is not yet complete. My brain is not fully healed from the trauma of the brain injury suffered back in April. My memory is not as sharp as it was prior to my surgery. I find myself at times forgetting things I know I should know. I hope that is not too obvious to you!

In addition, as a result of the seizure on April 1, my driving privileges have been put on hold for a minimum of 6 months, as required by Virginia state law. I am hoping to get doctor's permission to resume driving as soon as this 6-month period is up – which is October 1. I have been so blessed by the members of my family, as each of them has helped me get where I needed to go ever since my surgery, and by the men from Faith who have served as my chauffeurs in the last several weeks. But I have to tell you, I am eager to get back behind the wheel. And I hope it will be soon, the Lord willing.

So here I am, grateful to be able to stand before you and to bear witness to the sufficiency of our sovereign God. I am grateful to be able to tell you how great and gracious the Lord is. Even when we go through disruptive moments and experience suffering of one kind or another in our lives.

The apostle Paul was a man who experienced afflictions and suffering of different kinds in his life. He describes some of his experiences in 2 Corinthians 11, where he says, in response to some of his critics: “I have worked much harder, I have been jailed more often, I have been beaten up more times than I can count, I have been at death's door time after time. I have been flogged five times with the Jews' 39 lashes. I have been beaten by Roman rods three times. I have been pummeled with stones once. I have been shipwrecked three times. I spent a night and a day in the open sea. I have constantly been on the move. I've had to ford rivers, fend off robbers, struggle with friends, struggle with foes. I have been at risk in the city, at risk in the country, endangered by desert sun and sea storm, and betrayed by those I thought were my brothers. I have known drudgery and hard labor, many a long and lonely night without sleep, many a missed meal, blasted by the cold, naked to the weather. And that's not the half of it,” he continues, “when you throw in the daily pressures and anxieties of my concern for all the churches. When someone gets to the end of his rope, I feel the desperation in my bones. When someone is led into sin, an angry fire burns in my gut” (11:23-29, adapted from *The Message*).

This is not the only place where Paul speaks of the hardships he experienced as a follower of Christ. In 2 Corinthians 4, he says: “We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that His life may be revealed in our mortal body” (4:8-11, NIV).

Suffering is a fact of life. Afflictions and trials come in all kinds of shapes and sizes. And they come to us all. None of us is immune. It is an unavoidable fact of life. Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 12 about some kind of physical handicap he described as a “thorn

in the flesh” (12:7). He doesn’t tell us what it is. Down through the centuries, there has been speculation that his thorn was some kind of eye disease or vision problem, some form of malaria or epileptic seizures. Some have suggested it might be leprosy or depression or perhaps even migraine headaches. We don’t know for sure what it was. And it doesn’t matter. The most important thing is not what his particular thorn was, nor even the fact that the Lord chose not to remove it from his life. The most important thing is that, while enduring the pain and discomfort and inconvenience of his ailment, regardless of how annoying or painful or debilitating it may have been, God’s grace was sufficient for Paul (12:9). And His grace is sufficient for you and me.

I may not know exactly what form or shape the suffering in your life has taken or will take. It may be any number of things.

- It may be cancer or some other serious illness that knocks you to the ground.
- It may be the death of a child. Or the death of a parent.
- It may be the death of your husband or wife. Or the death of a beloved friend.
- It may be a divorce you never expected or never wanted.
- It may be a financial crisis in volatile times like these. Or the loss of your home through foreclosure.
- Maybe you grew up, or are growing up, without a dad or without a mom in your life.
- It may be chronic pain that just won’t go away.
- Maybe you struggle with depression. Did you know that Charles Spurgeon, known as the “prince of preachers,” probably the greatest British preacher of the 19th century, battled depression for much of his life?
- Maybe it is a hurricane, or a tornado, or a flood that has disrupted your life.
- It may be a fire that has burned you out of your home.
- Maybe you have come under fire and felt the heat and sting of criticism.
- Maybe, like followers of Christ in many parts of the world, you have experienced some form of persecution. Or prejudice. Or discrimination.
- Maybe, like columnist Robert Novak and Senator Edward Kennedy, you have had to deal with a malignant brain tumor. Or maybe it was someone you love.
- Maybe it involved an all-expenses paid trip to Iraq or Afghanistan.

Suffering of one kind or another comes into every life. And we should not be surprised when it comes. “Our whole life on earth involves trouble,” said Augustine, “and through the troubles of our earthly pilgrimage we find God.” For me, it has come in the form of an acoustic neuroma and a traumatic brain injury in this season of my life. And, as some of you know, chronic daily headaches which have been a part of my life for the last ten years. I don’t know exactly why God has allowed these things to come into my life. I cannot fully grasp or explain the purposes of God. But I find encouragement and strength in His Word. I find hope and inspiration for my life in His Word. And there are a number of things I want us to notice in our text from 2 Corinthians 1.

1. THE GOD OF COMFORT

First, notice in verse 3 that Paul lifts his voice in praise to God, whom he calls “the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort” (1:3). God is described in a wide variety of ways in the Bible. He is “the Maker of heaven and earth” (Psalm 121:2). He is “the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth” (Isaiah 40:28). As David says in Psalm 23:1, the Lord is our shepherd, the One who watches over us and protects us and provides for us. As Psalm 46 tells us, He is “our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble” (46:1). As it says in *The Message*, He is “a safe place to hide.” He is our rock, our fortress, our salvation (Psalm 62:2). He is “a shield for all who take refuge in Him” (Psalm 18:30). He is El Shaddai, the Lord God Almighty. He is Jehovah-Jireh, the Lord our provider. He is the giver of every good and perfect gift (James 1:17). He is our Creator, our Savior, and our Sustainer. He is the giver of life and the lover of our souls. He is Lord over life and death. He is the Lord of heaven and earth. There is not a single inch of the universe which is not His and over which He is not Lord.

Here Paul says that He is “the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort.” He is the Father of mercies, as some translations have it. In a similar way, Paul says in Romans 15:5 that He is “the God who gives endurance and encouragement.” David says in Psalm 103 that “the Lord is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love” (103:8). During a period of national crisis and suffering for the people of Judah, Jeremiah said of God in Lamentations 3 that “His compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is (His) faithfulness” (3:22-23).

So, Paul tells us, it is right to praise Him even in our disruptive moments, even in our suffering, whether it is cancer or some other debilitating disease, a financial setback, separation from a loved one, or whatever the Lord may allow into our lives. We praise Him, for He is “the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort.” He is the God “who comforts us in all our troubles” (2 Corinthians 1:4).

Notice what he is saying here. He comforts us in all our troubles. Whatever they may be.

And notice this: Who are the recipients or beneficiaries of His comfort? Who is it that God comforts? Us. Each of us. All of us. We are the recipients of His mercies and comfort. The “us” of verse 4 includes you and me, no matter how major or how minor our affliction or trouble may be.

The word “comfort” in the Greek has the sense of standing beside a person to encourage him or to strengthen her in a time of suffering or severe testing. The Bible says that this is what God does. And I am here to bear witness that it is true in my life. The Lord has comforted me in my troubles and afflictions, and He continues to do so. He has comforted me through the assurance of His presence with me (even if I didn’t feel it). He has comforted me through the assurance of His sovereign goodness (even if I couldn’t see it). He has comforted me through the truth and promises of the Bible, which is His

unerring and infallible Word. He has comforted me through the privilege of prayer, and the many prayers which have been lifted up to heaven on my behalf. He has comforted me through the extraordinary love in action of my wife, who has done a simply amazing job of caring for me and protecting me and ministering to my needs over the last seven months. As I said to you a few months ago, when I was just starting to come back to worship on Sunday mornings, I have come to realize that I am more blessed than I ever knew. I have always felt the goodness and grace of God in my life. But the Lord has been showing me just how rich in His grace I am, and what a treasure Mary Sue truly is. He has comforted me, too, through the love in action of our children, who have had to adapt to my limitations in significant ways. And He has comforted me through a multitude of loving acts of service and expressions of kindness from so many of you.

The God we worship truly is “the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort.” And He is worthy of our praise, even when He allows trouble to intrude or suffering to come into our lives. Receive His comfort in your encounters with suffering or trouble. In your life, let Him be to you what He is: the God of all comfort.

2. THE PURPOSE OF GOD’S COMFORT

But the comfort of God is not an end in itself. This is the second thing I want you to see in this passage. Paul says that God “comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God” (1:4).

God comforts us so that we can comfort others. God wants us – you and me – to come along side and give strength and encouragement to others with the comfort we have received from Him. The comfort we receive from God in our suffering enables us not only to endure it but even to rejoice in the midst of it. And His comfort prepares us, it makes us fit for the ministry of coming along side others – our sisters and brothers in Christ, family members or friends or neighbors or co-workers – to comfort and encourage them in the midst of their suffering or trouble.

God comforts us because He loves us. He comforts us because He cares for us. He does not spare us from suffering in this life, but He comforts us in the midst of it because He is gracious and compassionate, and He holds us in His heart. But that does not exhaust the purpose of His comfort in our lives.

He comforts us, too, so that we can be His instruments or agents of comfort in the lives of others. God can use you and me for that purpose. And He wants to.

Through my disruptive moments and experience of suffering in the last year, not only have I been blessed in ways large and small by the comfort of God, but I think the Lord has given me a greater sensitivity to and compassion for the suffering of others. And I desire to be an agent of His comfort and compassion in whatever ways He chooses to use me.

We are not finished with this passage, but it is time for me to bring this message to a close. Wise persons who care about me – and about you – have counseled me not to preach a long sermon, not to try to do too much until I get back in the routine of preaching and preparing to preach. It is too late to heed their advice, but I will wrap it up with this.

Many of you, I know, have read Rick Warren's mega-bestseller, *The Purpose Driven Life*. We went through it as a church family back in 2003 during the "40 Days of Purpose" campaign. I wonder if you remember the very first sentence of the very first chapter of the book. It is simply this: "It's not about you." Do you remember that?

The point is that there is a purpose in life that is greater than you or me. It's not about you. It's not about us. It's not about me. It's about God. It's about giving God the honor and glory that are rightly His. It's about discovering and serving His purposes with our lives.

So, even though I've talked a lot this morning about my disruptive moments and the road I've been traveling in the last year, this message is not really about me. If it's just about me, then there is no lasting value in what I've said today. It's not about me. It's about the greatness and sufficiency of God. It's about the power of His love and the wonder of His grace. It's because of Him that I am able to stand here today. It's because of His healing power and sustaining grace. It's because He is the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort. It's because He is sovereign. It's because He is in control of all things, including the smallest details of my life. And yours. What could be better than that?

Not to us, O Lord, not to us – not to me or to any of us –
But to You be the glory, because of Your love and faithfulness.
(Psalm 115:1)

May it be so in us, to the praise and glory of God. Amen.