

We continue today in this series on *Hope for Change*. As we have begun this new year, we wanted to take a few weeks to talk about how, indeed, does the Bible instruct and teach us about how change happens in the life of a Christian, or for anyone for that matter. And the Bible does indeed give us, if you will, many different pictures into the lives of people changing---radically, suddenly, and sometimes more steadily---but indeed the Bible does provide us with the hope that change happens. And that regardless of whether you are a Christian or not, God invites all of us into his power with knowing his son Jesus Christ, that we might know what change looks like, being made more and more into the character and the image of Christ.

But for the Christian, oftentimes there is much discouragement, because it doesn't feel like much change happens at all. You feel frustrated and you begin to despair. You become discouraged, not only about your own change, [but] even perhaps about the possibility of the change of someone close to you, someone that you care about. And many people began to fear that, indeed, the gospel is just something we say on Sundays, but then try to live the best way that we can Monday through Saturday. Is there hope for change? Is there power in the midst of difficulty?

So what we're going to look at this morning is the book of 2 Corinthians, at a situation that Paul the apostle writes about in this second letter that we have recorded for us---that he is sent to a church that he became a part of when it was planted. He's had a very rocky relationship with this church. They've accused Paul of not being a real apostle. They haven't liked all of his talk about weakness. They've wondered whether or not his teaching in its weakness and its power is evidence of his not really being a full apostle. There was division in the church. Some liked Paul, others liked Apollos. There was a great degree of division, also, because of some of the practices that were happening within the church. People were leading other Christians astray and away from the Lord.

But by this second letter Paul strikes a very interesting tone. He wants to encourage them. And he begins this second letter by giving them encouragement and comfort by sharing about his own affliction. And here we hear about the first part about how change happens in people's lives. And it's this: heat happens.

What do I mean by heat? Heat is the difficulty of circumstances of various and innumerable kinds that comes into the life of a person. And by looking at this heat in Paul's life we're able to see God's view of our world. By understanding the heat that many of you may be facing this morning, we can see what God sees. How do we respond to heat and challenge? How do we respond to suffering?

This body is particularly acquainted with suffering of various kinds. I could not begin to enumerate them. But many of this week are both caught up with the celebration that was the life of Kathleen Gandy Perry, of God's grace that so mightily transformed her life---how he showed himself through her. But while we celebrate, we also grieve of her passing after her long battle with pancreatic cancer.

But Kathleen was not alone. Many of you this morning are feeling the acute power of heat. The question is, does the Gospel stand up to the heat that we face? What answer does it bring? Just good advice, optimistic thinking, or does it bring a power that can deliver us? So that's the question before us this morning. Let's look together at 2 Corinthians 1:3-12.

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 of 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. 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 of the same sufferings we suffer. And our hope for you is firm, because we know that just as you share in our sufferings, so also you share in our comfort. We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about the hardships we suffered in the province of Asia. We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired even of life. Indeed, in our hearts we felt the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead. He has delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us. On him we have set our hope that he will continue to deliver us, as you help us by your prayers. Then many will give thanks on our behalf for the gracious favor granted us in answer to the prayers of many. Now this is our boast: Our conscience testifies that we have conducted ourselves in the world, and especially in our relationships with you, in the holiness and sincerity that are from God. We have done so not according to worldly wisdom but according to God's grace.

This is the word of God. Thanks be to God. Will you pray with me. Heavenly Father, we pray now that by your Holy Spirit you would bring the comfort that only you can bring. I pray particularly for the family and extended family of Kathleen Gandy Perry and for her friends and brothers and sisters in Christ here---that you would bring comfort to our grieving. We pray, Lord, for those who continue to suffer in our midst as a part of our body. I pray this morning, oh Lord, that the powerful hope of deliverance based in the resurrection of Christ would be brought forth according to your plan. That you would equip everyone here with the hope of the gospel that meets us in the midst of the heat of our lives. Help us, we pray, in Jesus' name. Amen.

So you have laid before you this text. This morning you'll see in the outline that I've taken the text and I've split it into three. You'll see this morning we're going to look together at the heat that Paul is referencing in the entirety of this passage. Secondly, we're going to look at the two responses that are possible given the nature of heat that Paul describes here. And then finally, the gracious deliverance that Paul points us to. So, *The Heat*, the *Two Responses*, and *Gracious Deliverance*.

Let's talk about the heat that Paul describes here. This is, as I said earlier, the introduction to his second letter. And in many ways, verses 4-7 function like a benediction, a giving a good word. In fact, this benediction in 4-7 was used in the worship of God's people throughout the history of the church. It draws on also some of the Old Testament synagogue worship, now infused with the prophecy fulfilled in Jesus Christ. But Paul now brings this to bear in the opening of this second letter. And what he does is, he describes the heat---first generally and then specifically---that he is experiencing in hopes that he can describe the gospel as it meets us.

Let's look first, then, at the general means of suffering that he talks about. In verses 4-7 he uses various phrases. He says to them that God is the Father of all compassion and of all comfort, who comforts us in our troubles. And then he talks about also the sufferings in verse 5. And then he talks about, as well, the sufferings through Christ. And then he talks of, as well, about hardships. These are ways in which Paul is describing the general and---we need to say again---innumerable ways in which human beings suffer. And he keeps it general at first, because he wants us to understand it's not just his specific suffering that the hope of Christ can bring hope into and strength into, but rather the various ways that each of us face and experience affliction. Literally, in the Greek, it's used as a word that we could describe as 'pressure.' And that's the way heat of circumstances works.

Circumstances come into our lives. Let's begin with the difficult. It can be illness. It can be the loss of a job. It can be the brokenness in relationship. Sometimes it can be things that happen to us that we had absolutely nothing to do with it happening in or around us. Other times, we also suffer the ways in which the consequences of our actions bring about great difficulty. You drink too much at a party and you get stopped for DUI, or you wreck a car, or you hurt someone else. There are all kinds of

suffering that happens. We cannot take suffering and affliction and just apply it to one particular group.

But if you are familiar at all with the Scriptures, and you could just simply go to the book of Psalms, the Bible is absolutely a book that talks about very real suffering. Thanks be to God! The Bible could never be accused of being a book just about positive experience. And perhaps you've been in churches where [suffering] isn't talked about very much. Perhaps what we need to talk about is blessing and comfort, and how this is going to be a year of blessing. I'm not suggesting at all that 2014 can't be a year of blessing, but let's be careful not to put God in a box that blessing only comes by good things. Blessing can also come by very difficult things.

But I don't want to leave out of the list of general suffering without also talking about success. Have you thought about how success can be a very, very real form of suffering? How?...you might ask. Give to anyone large amounts of success, and that can be as much pressure to rely on yourself and to turn from God as any form of difficulty and challenge. Ask anyone who's ever won a lottery---which I'm sure none of you have ever bought a lottery ticket---but ask anybody---and now books have been written about people who've won lotteries---ask them whether great wealth brings only blessing and not great suffering.

You see, heat and suffering can come in many different packages, but it all does the same thing. It provides pressure when we begin to feel squeezed. And when we are squeezed, what comes out? And that's exactly what we're talking about this month. That the process of change often begins when we feel most pressured, when God allows heat to come into our lives of various forms, and we feel the pressure on.

And what we're going to look at in the coming weeks is when that pressure comes on, often times what it produces are thorns. Thorns are those things that tempt us, entangle us, from greater dependence on Christ and where we try to depend more on ourselves. Or sins that we turn to to help medicate us in the midst of suffering and difficulty. But the cross, that is, the gospel, means to bring to bear hope that will then produce fruit.

So how does change happen? Heat, thorns, cross, and fruit. But remember this, Christian, and even if you are not a Christian, there is no doubt that everyone in this room, either personally or someone who is close to you, is experiencing great pressure and heat. Begin to ask yourself, what is it producing?

Paul talks about not just the general suffering, he talks about a very specific suffering. We see that in verses 8-10 when he says the following: We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about the hardships we suffered in the province of Asia. And then listen to what an Apostle says about in the midst of that heat. He says: We were under great pressure, beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired even of life itself. Indeed, our hearts felt the sentence of death. Now that which he is referencing, he's talking about what took place in the province of Asia. The province of Asia, where Paul was ministering, is in Ephesus. We learn what many scholars believe to be the exact point or a situation to which Paul is referencing. He's referencing a situation that we learn of in the book of Acts in chapter 19.

In the book of Acts, chapter 19, we learn of the situation with a silversmith. Yes, I am so grateful for how detailed the Bible really is. So listen to the story. This is a silversmith whose money was made by making idols to the goddess Artemis, who was the goddess of the temples in Ephesus. Here is what Luke writes down in his investigation of this situation. In chapter 19:24: "A silversmith named Demetrius, who made silver shrines of Artemis, brought in no little business for the craftsman." So he was a very successful designer. "He called them together, along with the workmen in related trades,

and said..." So now he's spreading it through the entire marketplace. And he said to them, "Men, you know we receive a good income from this business. And you see and hear how this fellow Paul has convinced and led astray large numbers of people here in Ephesus and in practically the whole province of Asia. He says that man-made gods are no gods at all. There is danger not only that our trade will lose its good name," (translated: will lose our money), "but also that the temple of the great goddess Artemis will be discredited, and the goddess herself, who is worshiped throughout the province of Asia and the world, will be robbed of her divine majesty.' When they heard this, they were furious and began shouting: 'Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!' Soon the whole city was in an uproar. The people seized Gaius and Aristarchus, Paul's traveling companions from Macedonia, and rushed as one man into the theater. Paul wanted to appear before the crowd, but his disciples would not let him. Even some of the officials of the province, friends of Paul, sent him a message begging him not to venture into the theater. The assembly was in confusion: Some were shouting one thing, some another. Most of the people did not even know why they were there. The Jews pushed Alexander to the front, and some of the crowd shouted instructions to him. He motioned for silence in order to make a defense before the people. But when they realized that he was a Jew, they all shouted in unison for about two hours: 'Great is the Artemis of the Ephesians!'"

So for two hours in this theater, Paul and his companions and other converted Jews heard the riotous roar of an audience, some of whom had no idea why they were there. What we know now from Paul in his letter to the 2 Corinthians, was that he was staring death in the face.

And he describes in this letter, in these verses 8-10 in the verb tenses, that he was---it was so palpable to him that his very heart despaired of life itself. We see the incredible weakness of an apostle. We see what situation he had brought on himself. Isn't it ironic, as I mentioned last week, that this is now Paul, the one who had ordered the stoning, likely, of Stephen earlier on in the book of Acts, is now finding himself at the crush, horde, of a crowd in Ephesus.

But hear Paul writes, in the midst of this, this dire situation, we learn that it was something that absolutely changed him. It changed him. God took the pressure that he was under---the God who had promised him, the God who had transformed his life radically and miraculously in Christ appearing to him, is now the one who is preaching the name of Christ, and some silversmith starts a riot. What will Paul's response be? We now learn that he gives to them what his response was, and that's where we now turn.

There are two responses to pressure, whether it be a very specific pressure like Paul was experiencing here, or any of the various kinds that we face. Broadly speaking, there are two. One: there is a response that is according to worldly wisdom. I take that word 'worldly wisdom' from verse 12. Paul talks about in his defense to the Corinthians that he and his disciples and those around him have sought to live before them and relate to others relying not on themselves, but on the Lord, not according to worldly wisdom, but according to God's grace, God's love, God's power. So broadly speaking, Paul is saying you can respond according to worldly wisdom or according to what you'll see there in your outline, a clear-eyed trust.

Let's talk first about the worldly wisdom. And I was considering the many different ways that I could illustrate this or talk about what could we learn from worldly wisdom, as a way in which to respond to heat. I'm very grateful for a new book which I recommend for everyone to get, whether you're presently experiencing pain and suffering or someone that you love---not to give away, but to read---written by Dr. Tim Keller. The book is called, *Walking with God Through Pain and Suffering*. It's a powerful book. I've not finish reading it myself, but it's been very helpful in my own understanding of suffering in my own life, but also as I was preparing for this sermon.

We have a worldly wisdom that would tell us the following, and I picked this one. I've been reading on and off again an author who is a famous atheist. His name is Christopher Hitchens. And he has a book that is called, *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*. And I want you to know that I encourage you not to be afraid of books like this. We need to be in dialogue with atheists like Christopher Hitchens. We need to take seriously the arguments that they are putting forth. Because I believe that the gospel is big enough to be in dialogue with these things, and I would encourage you, too. But he does want to give to us one way in which we can face suffering, and this is by denying that there is even a God at all. But he has another way instead of God, instead of Christ, of dealing with suffering.

I'll let him speak for himself. Here's what he says: We, (that is, atheists), are reconciled to living only once, except through our children, for whom we are perfectly happy to notice that we must make way and room. We speculate that it is at least possible that once people accepted the fact of their short, struggling lives they might behave better toward each other and not worse. We believe with certainty that an ethical life can be lived without religion, and we know that for a fact that the corollary holds true: that religion has caused innumerable people to not just conduct themselves no better than others, but to award themselves permission to behave in ways that would make a brothel keeper or an ethnic cleanser raise an eyebrow. There is no need for us to gather every day or every seven days, or on any high or auspicious day to proclaim our rectitude or to grovel and wallow in our own unworthiness.

Now, I recognize he's being very pointed, and he's being very critical. But if you are a Christian, you must know that at the popular level, this is precisely the philosophy that holds sway. So the question that we must ask of this philosophy: Is it sufficient to provide hope? Is it sufficient to provide meaning in the face of suffering?

My question back to Hitchens, my question for all of us, is to use an example that Keller uses in his book---the unfortunate and horrible results of the shootings in Newtown, Connecticut. If we were to take Christopher Hitchens' arguments and to sit down with the parents of those who lost their children, would his words give them hope? Would it be sufficient to say to a parent who's lost a child, that you only live once. Your child---and as long as you can accept this as you as an adult, as well as for your child, live short, struggling lives. And if you can begin to embrace that truth and get on with life and learn how to serve others, work for the right policy, advocate for the right changes in culture, then you will be able to provide meaning in life. Does that sufficiently provide the comfort of those?

Were I to have sat down with the loved ones and family of Kathleen Gandy Perry, and say she died too soon, according to my understanding, but you know, you only live once, and we just need to understand that well, we have short, struggling lives. Let's work for a cure for cancer. I will tell you, we need to work for a cure for cancer. But the one truth behind the Newtown shootings, behind 9/11, and behind a celebrating family like the Perry's, is that in the midst of suffering---while the popular view of Hitchens might be that the problem of evil explains away the existence of God---our hearts scream for something else. Our hearts scream for something that is far more profound and far more gripping than 'You only live once.' That gives me hope more than just 'Work for gun law changes' or for whatever thing we might want to do. Or 'make room for our children.'

The truth is, as one writer said in the New York Times, "In the midst of suffering where are all the humanists?" Where is the hope? Christopher [Hitchens] seems very angry at times, and he wonders why you as Christians get together for one day in seven. He sees it as wallowing. He sees it as groveling. He sees it as wallowing in unworthiness. That's sadly what I want him to see. And what I hope he would see is that we are not wallowing in unworthiness. We seek to be grounded in a God who does mean to bring us hope in the face of very real suffering. The hope to a parent who has lost

a child. The hope to loved ones, and the hope to those who are the victims of horrible crimes. And even for us who are victims of our own sin, because of the consequences of our own brokenness.

What is the hope? The hope, Paul means to tell us, is a clear-eyed trust. Paul does not explain away human brokenness. He does not pretend that evil doesn't exist. He doesn't try to look at the situation and simply say, well, you only live once. Let's work harder at being better people. The truth is, the Bible is the most realistic about human nature. The truth is, even in our best actions, how often we are broken by the reality of sin. That even while difficulty and challenge on a national level can bring forth all kinds of acts of service and love, it also brings out the same actions that want to take people at great cost through credit card fraud, [pretending] to help them out after hurricane Sandy. The truth is, the Bible is very clear-eyed about the reality of the human heart and its capacity for great evil. Thanks be to God, we are not as depraved as we could be. But the truth is, that it is clear-eyed and certain, that in the face of suffering, regardless of its cause or source--- either my own actions or the actions of someone else---regardless of it and of its variation, the answer for Paul is this: there is a God who is a God of all comfort.

This is a word that he uses. The word 'comfort' appears in these verses ten times. Then, in the entire book, it appears as either a verb or noun sixteen additional times. Paul is saying that to be and to know Christ is to be in relationship with a God who gives us courage in the face of death and suffering.

What is that courage? What is that hope? Paul tells us. Verse 9, he says: "Indeed, in our hearts we felt the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God..." Why would Paul say that? It's because he knows his own heart. He knows that left to himself, in the face of suffering and death, that he doesn't have the strength to say, 'Well, you only live once. I just need to be a better person.' Because he knows that when he wants to do good, evil is right there beside him.

What is his answer? His answer is that he might rely on God. Why? Because he says, "But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead." What Paul is saying, that clear-eyed trust of the Christian is this: that in the face of suffering and death we look to God, who gives us encouragement by reminding us that the end of the story is not suffering and death, but life. And that life will be led through Christ alone, who will come again. And when he does he will judge in righteousness, with authority, and with truth, and he will make all evil untrue. He will judge it, and he will undo it. He will make things new.

This is what Paul is saying as he gets into the language of saying: For just as the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives, so through Christ our comfort overflows." He's drawing a symmetry. There's a symmetry for Paul, that just as Christ died for my sins, I face suffering because of sin. But I, through Christ, can be dead to sin, because now that Christ was raised from the dead, I, too, can be raised from the dead, for I am united to Christ. Do you see the symmetry?

So for his life, the clear-eyed trust is based not on circumstances, on his own intelligence, or his own philosophy and ability, but it is invested in a God who plans to make things right, because in the past that is what he did through his Son. Christ came, isn't this, we learn, as the comfort to Israel? (Luke 2). It is Christ who came to comfort his people and was given the name, Jesus, for he shall save his people from their sins. And on the third day he rose again from the dead and appeared to hundreds, and many were converted. This is Paul's clear-eyed trust.

So that we can sit down with a parent who has lost a child, we can grieve and celebrate along with the Perry and Gandy and House family. And say two things that are absolutely crystal clear. I hate death. I don't like it, because my Savior, in the face of Lazarus's death, was angry at it, because it is the result of sin. But while I can be angry at death, and I can grieve, I can also celebrate and know

that he will turn every cemetery into the garden of new life.

Fort isn't it true, as one writer said, who was once an atheist, whose suffering at the hands of the Nazis brought him to Christ. He said the message of the book that I believe in is that the Christian hope of the resurrection and the renewal of the world enables us to view the present power of death in the terms of its empty future and therefore in the knowledge of its sure defeat.

Do you see the clear-eyed trust of the Christian is equipped, not to pretend that suffering and death don't hurt, but rather in the midst of it, through my tears and through my anguish and through your tears and anguish---through Christ alone we can say: Come, Lord Jesus. I am tired. I am broken. Bring justice, bring renewal, and undo all evil, and undo death for eternity. Now that's a hope. That is a hope that I can live in. That is a hope that can be a fortress. That is a hope that you and I can begin to share with each other. Because it's the hope that God means to give us gracious deliverance through.

This gracious deliverance that Paul speaks, and I just have two things, or through two things in this passage. The gracious deliverance that Paul speaks about first, both of which are through Christ. One is first through deep community. What you see throughout this passage is a cycle. That Paul suffers, and he writes about that suffering so these other Christians who are suffering know that they are not alone. Then, when Paul is comforted, and he writes of that comfort, they, too, are comforted. That when they pray, and those prayers are answered, Paul writes about it, and therefore, they are encouraged to pray all the more. Then when he prays for them, God answers the prayers, and they are encouraged to pray. Do you see the cycle? So God's deliverance, gracious deliverance through the hope of the resurrected Christ happens by way, first, through---if you will---indirectly, horizontally.

That God means that the cycle of the resurrection power of Christ and the comfort and hope that comes through it, begins to take place as you and you and you and you face the pressure and the heat. And in the midst of it, as you cry out to the Lord, you begin to share those cries with other people, and they get to cry with you. And they get to tell you of how the Lord has comforted them. And then you're comforted, and then you can turn and comfort them. And that cycle is meant to then bring in the entire body of Christ, where this church can become increasingly deep wells of deep, rich, thick community where the gracious deliverance of Christ through the resurrection is being shared.

Secondly, he also talks about this, and it is this: Mind the tenses. Mind the tenses of Paul's words in this passage. This is what I mean. He's been talking about, throughout this passage, the nature of suffering, both general and acute. He's been using a verb that's talking about something that has been going on in the past and continues to be felt and experienced in the present and will likely continue on into the future. But at every point what is met with is also the comfort, the encouragement, and the deliverance of God through Christ in the resurrection that can be felt---when? and understood---when? In the past, because of what [God] did through his Son in the past, in history, can be brought very much to the present to meet in the suffering that is being felt, but that will find its ultimate terminus in the future.

Now back to that story that happened in Acts 19. Here's what happened. Paul is writing to the church, and he says to them: "...as you help us by your prayers. Then many will give thanks on our behalf for the gracious favor granted us in answer to the prayers of many." What he's talking about is that the churches had been praying for Paul. So what happened way back in the book of Acts, back in Ephesus, back to the theater---after two hours of shouting someone comes in and speaks with a loud voice and says, "Hey, timeout! Because here's the problem. If you guys don't shut up, we're going to get arrested for rioting. So here's what you need to do. If you have something against Paul, take him to court. If you have something with his companions, take them to court. But be quiet, otherwise we're going to end up in jail, y'all." Guess what happened? It stopped.

Paul was delivered after feeling the despair of life itself. After staring death in the face, he was delivered. But that was the past. And Paul is saying God has delivered in the past, which means he delivers in the present, But then he says these wonderful words: He has delivered us from such a deadly peril---pointing back to that time---and he will deliver us. On him we have set our hope that he will continue to deliver us. The resurrection is not meant for the week of Easter. We need the resurrection every day. That what stares us down in the headlines, in our own lives and our own hearts, and in the mirror needs to be greeted with the resurrection deliverance of Jesus Christ that breathes new life. That God means to bring about change in us as we stare death in the face, because we know its future is sure. Its ring is ultimately hollow and is defeated through Christ alone. This is our fortress.

And this morning we're going to end the service by singing "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God." I'm going to ask the musicians to come forward this morning, and as they do I want to remind you of these words: A mighty fortress is our God, a bulwark never failing. Our helper he amid the flood of mortal ills prevailing. For still our ancient foe doth seek to work us woe. His craft and power are great. (Do you hear the clear-eyed?) Did we in our own strength confide, our striving would be losing, were not the right man on our side, the man of God's own choosing. Dost ask who that may be? Christ Jesus, it is he. The Lord Sabaoth his name. And though this world, with devils filled, should threaten to undo us, we will not fear, for God hath willed his truth to triumph through us. The Prince of darkness grim---we tremble not for him. His rage we can endure. That Word above all earthly powers--- no thanks to them---abideth. The Spirit and the gifts are ours through him who with us sideth. Let goods and kindred go, this mortal life also; the body they may kill: God's truth abideth still. His kingdom is forever.

This is what we will sing this morning. The hope for change in the midst of heat is in the fortress of the resurrection power of Jesus alone. Let's stand together and let's sing.