



This Sunday at Magdalen Road Church we started our autumn series looking at 2 Corinthians. Paul is writing to the church at Corinth, defending himself and his ministry from a group who have criticised and attacked him.

We're not exactly sure who these people are but we can glean something of what they were saying from words and phrases that he uses throughout the letter.

For example he seems to sarcastically refer to them as '*super* apostles' (11v5) and describing himself as 'unimpressive' (10v10) or as a 'fool' (11v16). It seems that these leaders were defining leadership more like the spirit of the world than the spirit of Christ. The Hellenistic world at the time went in for hero worship-whether you are a soldier an athlete or an actor or an orator what you needed to advance or float to the top was to be remarkable, confident, persuasive or extraordinary (or at least to project that kind of image).

One of the big questions that this letter addresses for them (and for us) is where does our model of church leadership come from? Even if we're not in leadership though this letter speaks to us because the gospel redefines not just *leadership* but also *life*, we are all part of this counter-cultural world Paul speaks of.

The big idea in these verses is that Jesus is a model for leadership and life. Paul then works this out in two different ways:

### 1. Authentic ministers share in Christ's sufferings and comfort (v3-7)

The comfort word is the drumbeat of this first section occurring nine times in five verses. It means support and encouragement Paul is saying that in the midst of the *trouble* of this life the God of all comfort is not distant from us. How does comfort come? Later on we will see it comes to Paul through Titus, but here it comes directly from the Lord. Why do we need comforting? Because of 'troubles' that word is a rich theme through the letter<sup>1</sup>. It partly means the *trouble* of living in a world of suffering that's been corrupted by sin, but it's also partly living in a world that opposes Jesus. For *Paul* it's particularly the pain of ministering for Jesus and some of the suffering that he has undergone as part of the calling.

He develops this idea of comfort in verse five when we see that our comfort comes through Christ as we are sharing in his sufferings. To share in Christ's suffering is largely to continue his mission as his body which goes part and parcel with us living as his.

That *comfort* though is worked out in different ways in the chapter:

- In v4 We see that the comfort we receive this to be passed on to others. We are comforted so that we will comfort.
- In v6 the Comfort that is received is that others might patiently endure. As Paul is comforted so they will persevere.

As the passage continues then we say it's more than simply suffering but actually death and Resurrection is to be the daily shape of gospel ministry.

### 2. Authentic ministers experience an 'Easter-Shaped' ministry (v8-11)

Paul begins to outline his autobiography and some of the troubles he went through - as he describes it the language is shot through with images of death and Resurrection. In one sense they were specific to Paul as his story, but in another sense they also ours because discipleship means following the pattern of Christ as we walk after his example but also because of v9 where we see that these troubles had a deliberate purpose that we might not rely on ourselves but on God.

As humans we naturally rely on ourselves and so God needs to keep reminding us that it is not about us. Our faith is not meant to be hypothetical but rather real and lived out, so the Lord again and again brings us to real sense of our own helplessness we have no choice but to look to him.

Because we are very *Corinthian* so we find this very uncomfortable; we like to think we've got it sorted and that our lives are all together. This is worked out in all kinds of ways in the Christian life whether individual or corporate but again and again God reminds us to look to him.

Paul ends up modelling that he needs the prayers of others in v11. The danger can be that we respond to hardships by kind of Stoic isolation rather than community or that we trust in ourselves rather than trusting in him - Paul though knows he needs the prayers of others because he knows he needs the Lord.

And when we have a God who works like this so life is never hopeless because ours is the God of Easter which means v10 we can set our *hope* on him rather than somewhere else.

### Some questions to help your group begin to get to grips with some of the ideas from this passage

- Where do you think our predominant model of leadership comes from? How much are we influenced by the world and how much is it shaped by Christ?
- Why are we so reluctant to talk about our failures and our weakness? Why was Paul so happy to talk about them?
- What troubles are you currently wrestling with? Are we currently wrestling without others?
- How is God able to comfort us in these troubles?
- What are we to do with this comfort? Have you known comfort from the Lord through others?
- Why do you think Paul explains his experiences using the language of death and life?
- What does it mean that we do not 'rely on ourselves but on God'?
- Why does Paul look for their prayers?
- What does it mean to set our hope on him? What other things are we tempted to hope in?

<sup>1</sup> 1v4, v8, 2v4, 4v17, 6v4, 7v4, 8v2 also 1v6, 4v8 and 7v5