

Good afternoon, it's good to see each of y'all this afternoon. As David said, my title today is When You're Overwhelmed, and I'm not talking about being overwhelmed with ham and potato salad, as we all probably were over the weekend, or overwhelmed with Easter candy, but overwhelmed with problems. What do we do when life throws at us more than we believe we can handle? I think we get great insight and help from the Apostle Paul's own experience as he relays it to us in the first chapter of 2 Corinthians. So let's turn there and I'll begin reading just to give us a running start back in verse 3 of chapter 1 and read through our passage that we'll focus on today. This is where Paul writes, blessed be the God and father of our lord Jesus Christ, the father of mercies and God of all comfort who comforts us in all our affliction so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. For as we share abundantly in Christ's sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too. If we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation. And if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which you experience when you patiently endure the same sufferings that we suffer. Our hope for you is unshaken, for we know that as you share in our sufferings, you will also share in our comfort. For we do not want you to be ignorant, brothers, of the affliction we experienced in Asia, for we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death But that was to make us rely not on ourselves, but on God who raises the dead. He delivered us from such a deadly peril and He will deliver us. On Him, we have set our hope that He will deliver us again. You also must help us by prayer so that many will give thanks on our behalf for the blessing granted us through the prayers of many. This is God's holy and inerrant word. Will God put on you more than you can handle? Many times people have told me that he absolutely will not do that, and how could he, they reason. Wouldn't it be cruel for God to do so? And since God is obviously not cruel, then surely he would never burden us beyond our capacity to bear it. So goes the logic. Well, Abraham Lincoln. as he felt the burden of the presidency, and especially as he felt the even greater burden of being the commander-in-chief during the war between the states, famously said, many times, I have been driven upon my knees by the overwhelming conviction that I had nowhere else to go. My own wisdom and that about me seemed insufficient for the needs of the day. Well, the Apostle Paul, in the letter that we know as 2 Corinthians, which is actually his fourth letter to this church, the other two have been lost. has a similar instinct to President Lincoln. He starts this letter talking about the suffering that is part and parcel of the Christian life

and especially of Christian ministry and service. But he reminds us of how good the father of mercies is to give us more than abundant comfort, to fortify us through that suffering. And I believe fortify is the right idea. because the word comfort has the meaning of strengthening together with. Paul's not talking about God fluffing our pillows and so that we can have an easy breezy life or so that we can live luxurious lifestyles. What he's talking about is about

bolstering us through trials with his very own presence. so that through extreme pressure, we can keep putting one foot in front of the other and doing our duty, even when we think we can't go another step. And not only that, but so that we can then become the agent to help strengthen others who are in the same pressure cooker that we're in. And as exhibit A of this, Paul talks about his own experience in the Roman province of Asia. He knows of this comfort that

he speaks of, not in an academic sense, not in a theoretical sense, but in real life. He's lived it. In fact, it's given him the opportunity to experience three things. Resurrection power, divine deliverance, and the effectiveness of prayer.

And I believe that being overwhelmed, having that experience of bearing more than we're capable of bearing can give us opportunities to experience the same thing. Not that we should ever relish suffering. We are not masochists. and not

that we should ever, God forbid, seek out suffering. But when it comes, as it inevitably will in a fallen world, God can teach us things through our sufferings and through our unbearable burdens that we cannot learn otherwise. As Matthew Henry puts it, our extremity becomes God's opportunity. So first of all, being overwhelmed gives Paul the opportunity to experience resurrection power. Paul is known the strengthening

of the Lord in the midst of the bloodiest of battles. And quite literally, Paul had some bloody battles that he had to fight.

One of my very favorite verses is when Paul tells Timothy that he was utterly lonely. that everyone had deserted him, that not one solitary soul had remained loyal to him. You ever felt that way? It may or may not be accurate

at the time, but you sure feel like even your best friends have abandoned you. But Paul goes on to say, but

the Lord Jesus stood by my side and strengthened me so that through me the message might still be proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it. See, Paul wasn't looking for

an escape hatch to be delivered from his problems. He needed the strength to continue to do what God had called him to do and God gave it to him. But Paul experiences all sorts

of trials, the whole gamut, because he speaks of it in various ways in this passage. In verse 4, he speaks of affliction.

In verse 5, he speaks of suffering. Verse 10, he speaks of peril.

And he goes on to speak otherwise in vivid color later on in the book of 2 Corinthians. hardships, calamities, beatings,

imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights. I mean, Paul and his apostolic friends have been through the meat grinder of life. And the word picture here is of a boat that is overloaded with more cargo than it was meant to carry. And it's about to sink down to Davy Jones' locker. And Paul is saying, I was absolutely overburdened with too much cargo. Verse eight, could he keep going forward? No, he could hardly stay afloat at all. He was about to go down. Mayday, mayday, the ship is sinking. So Paul is staggering under the unbearable weight of ministry, of service, of life. Have you ever been there? What did that feel like? Well, Paul goes on to share with us what it felt like to him. Paul tells us it felt like the sentence of death, verse nine. He's asked himself about it in the darkness of the night. What is the likely outcome of my current predicament? And his own verdict has come back to him. The likely outcome is Paul's death. In Paul's estimation, it is curtains for him. The show is over. Turn the lights off. Paul is going home. I had a nightmare recently. I'd been convicted of a crime, and I'd been sentenced to death. And I was all alone, and I was shackled by the guilt of that crime, and the weight of my own mortality was just crashing down on me. And the dread that I was about to be marched to the gallows, was sinking in, and it was a heavy, heavy feeling. It must have been set 150 years in the past, but you know, you don't question the reality of your dreams, you just accept it. And so I was waiting for that rope to be around my neck, and the panic was beginning to set in. But then I woke up, and the relief was indescribable. I couldn't put into words how relieved I was. I was sweating, and I was thanking God that it was not real. When I realized I'm okay, it's just a nightmare, the weight off my shoulders was a tangible relief. Suddenly, all my mundane frustrations about life were put into their proper perspective, and I felt lighter than air all day long. Nothing was gonna break my stride. Nothing was gonna hold me down. I've got to keep on moving. I had that song on replay in my head. The death sentence was gone. You know, what problems could possibly weigh me down now? And I realized, and I was telling my daughter about this later, that is what Christ has done for us. We were under a death sentence. The soul that sins shall die. The wages of sin is death. The death sentence was justly put upon each of us. The precious gift of God is eternal life through Christ Jesus our Lord. But it's not because we woke up from a nightmare and found out that it wasn't real. No, it was all too real. We had it coming. And I believe the angst of that, the burden of that, the restlessness of heart that comes from that realization is what leads people, sadly, to do all sorts of self-destructive things, trying to answer that

emptiness within them. But the Lord graciously switched places with us. He takes the death sentence so that we can walk off of death row. He goes to the gallows, as it were, so that we can walk free. And what an amazing weight off that is. May I never lose the wonder of that freedom. It's the bliss that caused Charles Wesley to write these wonderful words. My chains fell off. My heart was free. I rose, went forth, and followed thee. But before he's relieved of this unbearable weight of a death sentence, Paul is trembling with anxiety under the unbearable weight of his impending death, verse nine. He's crushed under this feeling that he is as good as dead. Have you ever been that low? Have you ever been that despondent that you thought to yourself, that's it, I'm done? You aren't suicidal, you wouldn't do anything to harm yourself, but you're a bit indifferent whether you live or die. That seems to be where Paul was. There's a dreadful resignation about his words here. Now, why in the world would a loving and omnipotent God allow Paul to get to this point? I mean, doesn't God want his people to be happy, especially his servants? Doesn't he want them to be successful and prosperous? Well, Paul gained some valuable insight through this experience. He doesn't presume to know what's happening every time God's people suffer. Sometimes it's mysterious. We remember the apostles asking Jesus, Master, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind? Remember Jesus' answer, neither this man nor his parents sinned, but that God's power, God's work might be displayed in his life. Sometimes it remains mysterious. Sometimes it's just about the glory of God. But Paul does understand here why he had to suffer in the province of Asia. He was being taught, verse nine, something by God that he could not have learned any other way other than this suffering. So God is the teacher, Paul is the student. These unbearable burdens were the curriculum through which Paul learned this lesson. Now that God had Paul's attention, as it were, through the megaphone of pain that he had woken Paul up from his slumber, He says to Paul, don't trust yourself, verse nine. Your wisdom is insufficient. Your strength is insufficient. Your righteousness is insufficient. Don't rely on you. I think it's important to grasp both sides of this coin. Paul could not, you see, trust the one who raises the dead until and unless he first renounced all confidence in his own abilities, in his own resources. As Doug Kelly put it, there is no such thing as an implicit trust in the Lord. Either we are driven to our knees by the overwhelming conviction that we have nowhere else in the universe to go, or we aren't really trusting him at all. We're just giving him lip service. We may be aware of the data about

God. We may even assent to the data, but until we put all our weight and all our trust in Him and therefore off of ourselves, we're simply relying on the scraps of our own self-righteousness. We're trying to get by on our own steam. We're not really following Jesus until we watch other people walk away, and we're standing there alone, and we're asking ourselves, is it really worth it to renounce all that I have to be his disciple? And he says to us, you don't wanna leave too, do you? And we answer, Lord, to whom else shall we go? You, you alone have the words of eternal life. So Paul first dies to his own self-reliance before he knows the resurrection power of trusting Jesus, of really trusting Jesus. So Jesus says to him, don't trust yourself, trust me because I raised the dead. Now there was an ancient Jewish prayer that Paul may have had in his mind when he wrote this about God's power to raise the dead. Paul may have been thinking about Abraham. How does a man sacrifice his own son, the son of promise, upon the altar before God? Well, Hebrews 11 tells us he considered that God was able to do what? To raise the dead. But what Paul was most certainly thinking here was of his own life-changing experience on the road to Damascus. where the God-man who had been crucified appeared to him in a light so bright that it physically blinded him, and at the same time spiritually enlightened him. And the Shekinah glory of God shone in his presence, and from that light says this question, Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? Who are you, Lord? I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom you are persecuting. So Paul knows this power that raises the dead because he's come literally face-to-face with it, with the person, the God-man, who actually walked out of his tomb. So Paul identified with those despondent apostles who cowered in fear on that Saturday behind closed doors with their worlds caving in around them. or the next morning, Easter morning, resurrection day, would change everything. It would make even these confused, craven cowards into world-changing evangelists who needed only the Holy Spirit's power to come upon them before they were able to go out and turn the world upside down. As Paul writes, If Jesus did not physically rise from the dead, we are still in our sins and our faith is in vain. But if Jesus Christ came out of his tomb physically, then nothing is impossible. And Paul's problems were no match for the resurrection power of Christ, and neither are yours. Unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, remains only a single seed, but if it dies, it produces many seeds. So Paul's overwhelming problems caused him to experience the resurrection power of the Lord. Secondly, it helped him to experience divine deliverance. The second thing Paul's burdens allow him to know in an experiential sense is that the deliverer actually delivers. That's what he does. Verse 10.

Paul knows where his deliverance comes from and he doesn't hesitate for a minute to say so. Paul didn't get lucky. Paul did not cheat death. Paul was delivered. He was passive in the process. The Lord was the active agent in delivering Paul. So God pulled Paul out of a deep pit from which he could never have climbed out himself. I remember being caught in a riptide when I was a teenager at North Myrtle Beach. I've told this story before. But I was absolutely at the mercy of the currents. I could not do anything to save myself, and I was very quickly running out of energy. And I was a goner, but for the grace of God. He reached down, as it were, and he delivered me from drowning. Again, it's a picture of salvation, and I continue to go back to that picture. I didn't save myself, I was saved monergistically, unilaterally, by a gracious God. And that's become one of my Ebenezers. Thus far has the Lord helped me. Unless the Lord had helped me, I would not be here. I hope that you erect some Ebenezers in your life that you take note of and make a record of ways in which the Lord has delivered you. If for no other reason that you go back in 20 years when you're fighting a different battle and under the weight of a different burden and you realize a new and a fresh, you know, God delivered me then. Based on that, don't I have every reason, every hope to believe that he'll deliver me now from my present burden? That's the logic that Paul uses here, and it reminds me of that great gospel logic. If God did not withhold from us his son, his only son, but freely gave him up for us, how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? So if God took care of the ultimate problem that we had, being sinners who were therefore alienated from a holy God, reconciling those by the blood of his precious son, Jesus Christ. Won't he also take care of the mundane frustrations that I deal with day in and day out? The obvious answer is that of course he will. So Paul is saying, I have every confidence, in verse 10, that God will deliver us from the dangers we face now. And we might say, why, Paul? What's the basis for your confidence? And he replies, because look at what he's already delivered us from in the past, verse 11. Has God begun a good work in you? Don't you see the evidence of his work in your life? Haven't you seen things change in your life, in your heart, that you knew were not your doing? They were a result of the resurrection power of God conquering death in you. If so, take it to the bank. He will continue to deliver you. The deliver delivers. So, Paul's overwhelming burdens caused him to experience the resurrection power of God, and secondly, the divine deliverance of God. Thirdly, and finally, the third thing unbearable burdens taught Paul, they can also teach us, and that is the effectiveness of prayer, verse 11. If God completes

what he begins, then I can go on cruise control, right? I can put my feet up and just count on God to do his thing. I can let go and let God, so to speak, right? No, Paul actually gives the Corinthians something to do here, and he doesn't suggest it, he commands it. He says, you must help us in prayer, verse 11. It's imperative that you do your part to pray for us. We are dependent on your prayers. Yes, Jesus's resurrection power is at work in the world. Yes, the deliverer will deliver. But often the way that God chooses to employ his resurrection power in the world, and often the way he chooses to unleash that deliverance in specific ways, is by answering the real request that his people make to him in real time. Paul's not being patronizing here. He really is dependent, in a human sense, on the prayers of the people to whom he ministers. Now he's of course completely and ultimately dependent on the Lord for everything. But you see, God employs both the ends and the means to get to those ends. He uses both primary means and secondary means. He knows that God works in response to the prayers of his people. We often have not, why? Because we ask not. A positive corollary to that is we enjoy many blessings in life because we ask for those blessings. And our Heavenly Father knows that we need them and he delights to give them to us. And as a result, the picture he paints here in verse 11 is that many will give thanks. Literally, it says something like, there will be many faces uplifted to God in prayer, pouring out their thanks to Him. As one of your ministers, I have the great perspective of being in a position on Sunday mornings on the rostrum where I can see many of your faces uplifted to God in prayer. Sometimes your eyes are filled with tears. Sometimes you break out in beautiful, radiant smiles. But as we praise God together by singing his hymns, we get to see those upturned faces giving praise and thanksgiving to God. And it is a beautiful, encouraging thing. One of the sad effects of the fall of mankind's rebellion against God is that people do not give thanks to God as they should. Paul talks about this in Romans chapter one, verse 21. For although they knew God, he said, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking and their foolish hearts were darkened. But Christ, in all His resurrection power and glory, came to make His blessings flow as far as the curse is found. So that part of that flow of blessing is that God's people will erupt in spontaneous gratitude and outbursts of thanksgiving to him with upturned faces. A thankful heart is a continual feast. A church in which the spirit of God is at work is a thankful church that cannot help but pour out its praise and thanksgiving to God for what he's doing. If you wanna be counter-cultural, in 2024 in the United States

of America. Be thankful. There's a gentleman in this room that encourages me every time I ask him how he's doing. His response is grateful. And he really means it. He's sincere. He has problems, he has burdens, he has difficulties like the rest of us, but he is grateful. He has many more reasons to be thankful and grateful than he does to complain. And that is his response. So against the dark backdrop of a spoiled and entitled and self-centered and covetous culture, stand out like what Paul says is a star in the universe. Be thankful, be grateful to God. My life, I don't know about you, but my life is going far better than I deserve for it to be going. I have every reason to be thankful. So based on Paul's experience, to answer my question I posed at the beginning, and more importantly, based on, well that is the most important reason, but also I think we all experience this, we would say that God not only will, but does in fact often put more on us than we can bear, and that is a severe mercy to us that he does that. What does the psalmist say in Psalm 119? Before I was afflicted, I went astray, but now I keep your word. Affliction thankfully doesn't last, but the state of having been afflicted and having benefited from what God does in us through that affliction thankfully does last for the rest of our lives. He goes on to sing, it was good for me that I was afflicted. Doesn't say affliction was good, but it was good for me that I was afflicted, that I might learn your statutes. The idea is that unless he had been afflicted, he would never have learned God's statutes in that way. And so in a world that tells us believe in yourself, you have what it takes. Pick yourself up by the bootstraps. And with a sin nature that's all too keen to agree with that and to say, yes, I am the captain of my own ship. I am the master of my own destiny. God, I'm afraid, must, in mercy and grace, humble us from time to time and cause us to be overwhelmed so that, like Lincoln, We go to our knees because we have nowhere else to go. We are just jars of clay after all. The surpassing glory and greatness is his and not ours. Elizabeth Elliot famously said, imagine a world without suffering. Men would become intolerable and unbearable in their arrogance and in their self-sufficient pride. Suffering uniquely has the ability to show us the cold, stark reality that we are in fact dependent on God for everything. So to be reminded of that is quite a blessing, even though from time to time it hurts. But may it give us hope that the one who once delivered us will also deliver us again. And may that make us people who are committed to helping others by our prayers so that many upturned faces will give thanks to God. In a world that says, give me, give me, give me, it's mine, I deserve it. The people of God say, thank you. It was good for me to have been afflicted so that I might learn your statutes. Let's pray together. Heavenly Father,



Lord, thank  
you for preserving us in such a way that without your will,  
not a hair can fall from our heads. Thank you that all things  
must, in fact, work together for our salvation and for your  
glory. Thank you that our only comfort  
is that we are not our own, but we belong, body and soul, both  
in life and death, to our faithful Savior, Jesus Christ. In His  
name we pray. Amen.