

# The Ministry of the Church - Part 1

by T. Austin-Sparks

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*The sermon emphasizes the importance of suffering in ministry and the necessity of fellowship in order to be effective workers together with God.*

**Duration:** 50:43

**Scripture:** 2 Corinthians 4:1

**Topics:** "Church"

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## Description

In this sermon, the speaker emphasizes the importance of understanding and embracing suffering in the service of the Lord. The apostle Paul's own experiences of suffering and reproach are highlighted as a model for believers. The speaker suggests that afflictions and attacks from others are to be expected for those who are committed to serving God. The sermon encourages listeners to react to suffering in the right way, viewing it as a necessary part of spiritual growth and relying on God's strength to endure.

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## Transcript

The keynote to our occupation at this time is in that second letter to the Corinthians in Chapter 2, the foreseeing we have this ministry, even as we obtained mercy, we faint not. This second letter to the Corinthians is all about the ministry of the Church. You notice the Apostle puts it in the plural and he is not only speaking about himself and Timothy and other fellow workers separated unto the gospel, but as we shall see, he means himself and the believers whom he is addressing.

That comes very clearly from place to place. That it is in his mind the ministry of the Lord's people, the ministry of the Church, which is just the aggregate of all born again and Holy Spirit indwelt people of God. Notice that is what he says in Chapter 1 as you have already have anointed us with you.

It is the Church's anointing unto the service of the Lord and that is what we are going to be occupied with. We will have to underline that as we go on. Let me say concerning this particular letter, the Lord has been leading me again into it more deeply than ever recently.

It is the richest and the most valuable document in the New Testament on divine service. I think there is no other book that is so rich in its content on this matter. The service of the people of God.

Probably before we are through, you will agree with that if you don't already recognize it. This letter is the testament of Christ's greatest servant as to what the service of the Lord means and did mean in his own

case. Paul was a representation of the Church in every way.

He did not only see the Church mentally, doctrinally. The Church was himself in very being, in very life. The truth of the Church came out of him as well as into him.

It proceeded from his own inner history with God. In that very real sense he was the embodiment of the Church and the truth of the Church. And therefore if the Church is the ministering vessel of Christ in this dispensation to the world and in the world, the Apostle Paul in a very full and deep way embodied the principle of service, of ministry.

Later in this letter he will speak about our being workers together with God. And if ever there was a man who was a worker together with God, it was this man. But you see, the point is that it was not just Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, in the sense of being a personal unit.

It was Paul as the compass of all the meaning of the Church's service. We know and understand that when we see the Lord Jesus, we really see him. We see God.

We see what God is like. Come to the knowledge and understanding of God in Christ. That comes into the letter as we shall see later.

But when we see his greatest servant, we see what the service of God means. We come to understand what the Church's ministry really is. And that is why I say that this letter is in a peculiar way the testament of this great or greatest of the servants of the Lord Jesus.

That is, it is not a treatise. It is not an argument on doctrine. Very little doctrine in this letter in a systematic or in a technical sense.

Any amount of doctrine, but it is not called doctrine. It is not talked about as doctrine. It is all experience.

And it was not intended to be either a letter, an epistle, or a document setting forth the doctrine of Christ and of Christianity. It was the outpouring of a man's heart from his experience as a servant of God to the Lord's people with the intent to show the Lord's people what the service of the Lord really is. You grasp that? That is the nature of this letter.

It is not a treatise at all on some theme of the gospel. It hardly deals with doctrine in that sense. It is so altogether practical from beginning to end, from the very first words, and you will see that in a moment, from the very first words right to the end, it is so practical that if we stay with it, even parts of a sentence, we are challenged.

We are challenged. We are faced up with practical issues as to the meaning of our being for Christ in this world. What it means that we, being related to the Lord Jesus, are here on this earth.

We are challenged, I say, all the way through on that question. So completely practical is this letter. Now before we can proceed into the letter, we must make another note.

You will find that this letter is probably, yes, not probably, but actually, more autobiographical than any other letter that Paul wrote. A lot of autobiography in the letter to the Galatians, but not half so much as in this letter. The man is talking about his own experiences all the way through, either by definite statement or by implication.

There are numerous things here which, if we only knew it, are related to what happened to the Apostle Paul. Of course, there are plenty of things mentioned as such. There are many others, not said exactly to be that, but so clearly, when you come to closely study, so clearly related to his own experience.

So, from the first half sentence to the end of the letter, speaking out of his own experience as a servant of the Lord, he is showing us the way of service, what we may expect, what service really is. I say, he is saying it out from his own heart, what he himself not only had gone through, but was still going through. This is clear, if you go long enough and quietly enough with it, from the very first words of the letter.

You heard them, look at them again. This is a specimen of what I am saying about the whole letter. Paul, an Apostle of Christ Jesus, through the will of God.

And Timothy, our brother, with all the saints which are in the whole of Achaia. You say, well that is his way of introducing his letter. He always had an introduction to his letter, not always in the same form, but this is the one for this particular occasion, this letter.

So, he just opens up. This is his kind of prelude to the letter. Well, it is that, but it is much more than that.

Much more than that. We have got to look at this prelude, as we may call it. Because there are two implications here, which are really the introduction to the whole letter.

That is, the whole letter is implied in these two things. There is an implication here in a two-fold way. Paul, an Apostle of Christ Jesus, through the will of God.

Now you Corinthians, hear that? Listen to that. Take that. You Corinthians have been saying, and this is what you find elsewhere, he is not a true Apostle.

He never did personally say Jesus Christ. He is a fake Apostle, making claims for himself, which cannot be supported. He never saw Jesus in them.

He was not one of the chosen twelve by the Lord Jesus. He has come into Apostleship by the back door. Paul, no, he is not a true Apostle.

Jesus never called Paul in the flesh. We know Peter, and we know John, and we know the others whom Jesus called and said, follow me. But Paul was never one of them.

Of course, we know the rest, don't we? About the Lord meeting him, and his meeting the Lord, and the way to Damascus, we know. But these Judaizers who had crept into Corinth, tried to discredit this man in every possible way, and had captured a large and influential group in Corinth, who would have Peter, who would have Apollos, but they would not have Paul. Paul, an Apostle of Christ Jesus, by the will of God.

By the will of God. You know, dear friends, that might not help you very much where the Apostle Paul is concerned, but it is a tremendous strength in principle if we know in our own hearts with true assurance that where we are, we are by the will of God. What we are in is by the will of God.

Our position is because of the will of God. That where we live is the will of God for us, for the time being at any rate. And where we meet with the Lord's people, that is the will of God for us.

And what we are doing in this life, we know to be God's will for us. You know, that is a tremendous strength. This man could not have gone through all that he had to meet, not only in Corinth, but

everywhere, if he had not that inner heart assurance and confidence and certainty.

That what he was in, what he was doing, was not of his own choice, but by the will of God. Tremendous strength, isn't it? And that was the strength of this man. We, as we go on, shall see how that was borne out.

Yes, it was of God right enough. We haven't any difficulty over Paul as to the will of God in that man's life. But here, you see, he is taking up the challenge, right at the beginning of the letter, the challenge that has got to be met right through, right through, and answering it on this ground.

I am where I am with the assurance that it is God's doing. I am what I am because God has made me this. It is God who stands behind my life, my ministry.

Now, that is the first, you see, the very first thing about workers together with God. Workers together with God. The service of the Lord's people, if we are where we are, because we know it is the will of God, we have got a great strength for testimony, for life, where we are.

They had said otherwise. This is his affirmation, which is, through many, many centuries, borne out as true. But then they had said, this man is an autocrat.

He is a liar unto himself. He is seeking to make a name for himself. He is seeking to gather people around him that he shall be their Lord.

This man is of an independent nature, disposition. They had said this. His answer? What is it? And Timothy, the brother, and all the saints which are in a cave.

No, no, I am no isolated unit. I am no independent member. I am not just seeking a name for myself, a following for myself.

Timothy, the brother, ask Timothy. All the saints in a cave. Ask them.

Here, another principle of ministry is at once introduced, because remember, all the way along, this letter is the letter of ministry, of service, the work of the Lord. And everything here is a principle of that service. And this is, you cannot, you cannot serve the Lord in isolation, in detachment, in independence.

You must be a part of the body of Christ, the church. You must be laboring in fellowship with the Lord's people. You must not be a detached law unto yourself.

This principle of fellowship is essential to effective testimony. That is why the enemy is so concerned to isolate, divide, separate, and cut us off or make us run away and isolate ourselves. This drive is always on us.

Perhaps more than once you have felt like the psalmist over the wings of a dove. I fly away and be at rest. Would you? You wouldn't if you have ever really become an organic part of the body of Christ.

You too want to fly back again. If you ask any of those servants of God who by reason of force of circumstances have been cut off, if it is not the deepest longing of their hearts to be brought back again into the fellowship, which now means more to them than it ever did when they had it. Something here in relatedness which is vital to our testimony, our ministry.

Relatedness in spirit. Relatedness in heart. For a saint one, now Jesus Christ and Timothy and all the saints, this is an answer, you see, to something, a charge laid against him being autocratic and personally, dominantly isolated from fellowship.

Well of course it was a lie. We know it. But you know at that time when things were in their infancy, these activities of the evil one and the evil people, especially these pursuers of the apostle everywhere, these activities were very real.

And this servant of God was not insensitive to these things. While he did not seek to vindicate himself, he did feel it to be incumbent upon him to state very emphatically that the opposite to these charges was the real truth. Now you see you haven't gotten to the letter.

You've only gotten to the first two statements in what you call the introduction. Ah, but that is the key to which the whole letter will be tuned. Now you see, we're going to come on this again and again in different ways, but it's all what we may expect if we are really committed to this tremendous business of being God's fellow workers.

Now Paul was suffering very keenly from the cruel reproaches, especially in Corinth, suffering intensely. And at that point, noting that, we move into the letter. And this first chapter as it is marked out, because it really shouldn't be isolated, but the first part of it, what are the words that are dominant here? Sufferings and consolation.

Aren't they? Put your mark under them. How often? Sufferings. Suffering.

Suffering. And consolation. And consolation.

You could say very rightly that this is the subject. This is really what is uppermost in his mind. Sufferings and consolation.

First thing that meets us in this letter of the ministry of God's people is that the service of the Lord has its roots in and its roots by suffering. He says here, all our afflictions, all our afflictions, the sufferings of Christ which abound unto us, are abundant in our experience. Now dear friends, if we haven't settled it, sooner or later we shall have to settle it.

And find grace to overcome our murmuring and our complaining about the sufferings which we have as Christians. It takes us a long time to do that. What we shall have to settle early in this matter, and that is why it is the beginning of the letter.

What we shall have to settle is the inevitability of afflictions if we are going to mean anything to the Lord at all. The Lord is going to have anything by us of value. That is the meaning of service and ministry.

Don't think of that word ministry as something official. Just rule that right out. Don't think of the pastor, the minister.

A ministerial class and profession, this language, this phraseology which has crept into the service of God is all so false and misleading when people say I'm going into the ministry. I remember a man who had been very much in ministry, very much in ministry, continually ministering here and everywhere, and I think used to the Lord. I think he was in that for about thirty years.

One day I was walking along at the Catholic Convention and I met him. He had a clerical collar on. I had never seen it before.

He saw my eyebrows go up. He said, you see brother, I've gone into the ministry. Well, you ought to vomit.

It's horrible, isn't it? It's horrible. I'm not talking about that sort of thing. I'm talking about what the Lord gets from our lives.

That's our ministry. That's being a worker together with God. What he is getting is that.

And let me say it again. On the authority of so many and so much, but on this representative man's authority, the authority of his whole life, for any value to the Lord, there is going to be suffering. Make no mistake about it.

And if you and I seek to avoid it, keep out of its way, refuse it, rebel against it, we are cutting the very artery of spiritual service and value. We haven't got where this man got to, and I'm not saying that I have. Don't think that for a moment.

But I trust we are moving in that direction. Where at the end, after all that is in this second letter to the Columbians, all and far and all it is, when you come to read it, about his sufferings, his sufferings, and all that came into that man's life at the end of it, at the end of it, when he is in prison. And the executioner's axe is seen, that I may know him and the fellowship of his suffering.

After all, I say we haven't got there, but why could he say that? Still at the end, to know the fellowship of his suffering. Because he had learned that all the values came along that line. All the values that he had, all that he had come to see, of his calling in Christ for time and for eternity, had come to him through the sufferings of Christ being shared.

We may shrink from even saying things like that. But what I'm saying is this, dear friends, this explains a lot, doesn't it? Explains a lot of experience. But the point for the moment is that for any value at all to the Lord, afflictions are inevitable.

Without inviting them, they'll come. Without putting ourselves in the way of them, we shall be there. Sharing the afflictions of Christ, as the Apostle calls them, here.

These things brought upon this Apostle, which caused him such acute suffering, were aimed at him, not to bring him down from a recognized, exalted position. Because they were not accepting any exalted position on his part, indeed. Quite the opposite.

But they were thrust upon him with the intention of showing what a poor man he was. They were trying to make him see what a poor, contemptible, little man he was. So hold that for a minute.

Hold that. So hold that for a minute. Hold that.

He would have agreed with them on that, thoroughly. And again and again said as much. One of the sufferings will be that people find out our faults.

And make a lot of them. Our imperfections. And you know, dear friends, there has never yet been a fruitful servant of the Lord who was faultless.

Abraham had his faults. And you're amazed that so great a man could have his faults written in the eternal record of God's ways and God's work and God's service. He did the same thing twice over.

Lied to save his own skin. He thought that after the first time of what he suffered from it, he'd never do that again. Then he went and did it again.

That's Abraham. It's in the scripture. The Bible hasn't been written to cover over these things.

Moses. Was he faultless? Great and grand things are said about him. Moses, the servant of the Lord.

But we could stay, couldn't we, and put our finger upon the faults. Grievous and glaring faults in Moses. A crowning fault.

Deprived him of his life's ambition to go over into the land. And the Lord said, don't speak to him again any more about it. Because.

Because. Moses. David.

Oh, dear, David. Not a pleasant story, is it? The faults of David. Isaiah.

Wonderful prophet. Yet a wonderful prophet and wonderfully used a prince amongst prophets. Crying, woe is me.

I am undone. I'm a man of unclean lips. So you go on through the Old Testament and into the New.

What about these called disciples? Spend a lot of time, couldn't we, on their faults. And put in the record. No.

Here are the chief of the servants of the Lord through the ages. Men of faults. Never think, or we should never think of any of them being infallible.

Not even the apostle Paul. No. These people, you see, took hold of those faults to make them the ground of discrediting the man altogether.

Where is the consolation in that? Where do we find comfort in that? The Lord, as Martin Luther says, knows a great deal more than the devil does about our faults. He knows us. He knew us before he called us.

He knew all about us and knows all about us. Yes. All our faults that other people don't even see.

And he knows all those that they do see and make such a lot of. But that does not necessarily put us out of that wonderful position of being workers together with God. It did not in the case of any of those I mentioned.

They were such. But God. As we go on into this letter, we shall see more of that very thing.

But here it is, you see. These people wanted to make the faults of this dear man the ground on which he himself should be thoroughly discouraged and should despair because of what he was in himself. And for discrediting him before all others.

And no man knew better than Paul did how faulty he was. You know, with Paul it was a continual marvel and wonder that ever the Lord looked in his direction to make him his servant. He said, who was before a persecutor, injurious, a blasphemer? And he looked on such a one and made him his servant.

The marvel, the marvel of God's grace and mercy in allowing us, nay more than that, taking action to bring us into fellowship with himself in his service. No one need be discouraged by their faults. Now, you see, I said we are challenged all the way along.

And once more, once more, the battle of usefulness to the Lord is on in this particular respect. That we are made conscious. We are conscious and we are made conscious all the way along.

And the more we seek to be of use to the Lord, the more committed to the Lord we are, the more abandoned to his interests, the more, the more we shall find discouragement in our own selves. Yes. The nearer to utter and final despair we shall get if we look at ourselves.

And we started, of course, and we started in the Lord's service. Well, I don't know what we thought about ourselves, and I can remember it's sixty years ago since I started preaching. And, well, I did it very boldly and boldly and strongly.

And as I think of it now, I don't think I had very much sense of what a poor specimen I was. I was rejoicing in the Lord's work, of course, and so on. And about myself, well, I wasn't very much bothered about myself.

But after all that time, I tell you, dear friends, that this very day I could most easily give up because of a consciousness, the overwhelming consciousness of the worthlessness of this vessel. Well, that was Paul in principle. He didn't have anything, any argument against this kind of charge.

Paul, you're no good. You're no good. You're a bad lot.

You're a worthless fellow. Look at this and that and that that you did. It shows what kind of a man you are really under me.

He doesn't stand up for himself on that ground. What he does say is, in me, that is in my flesh, dwelleth no good thing. You're perfectly right and more right than you know you are.

If you knew the whole truth, you'd have a lot more to say against me, and rightly so. But, Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus by the will of God. The will of God transcends all this other, because the will of God is the will of infinite grace, infinite mercy.

God has not chosen us for what we are in ourselves. No, who is sufficient for these things, he will cry in a minute. Our sufficiency is of God, who hath made us sufficient to be able ministers of the new covenant.

Not what we are, but what he is. Now, I have only started. I was going to speak about the sufferings of the apostle in their two realms, but time has gone.

I've been talking to you already three quarters of an hour more, and if I go on, it'll be as long again. But perhaps this helps us at the beginning. It opens a window.

It says, if we're going to be any use to the Lord, we shall meet these kind of afflictions to begin with. We shall meet the afflictions and the sufferings of those who by any means try to discredit us, take the heart

out of us by enlarging upon, magnifying, or underlining our own imperfections and faults. Who will even lay the charge at our door that we are false, we have no right to be what we are claiming to be.

And this, dear friends, is all I am going to say now. This is the way. This repeated, repeated, reiterated word, suffering, suffering, is the introduction to the service of the Lord.

And it says to us so strongly, or any value, real spiritual value to the Lord will come out of suffering. And that is how, as we shall see presently, we have got to react to our sufferings. It's a deep and hard lesson.

It is to react in the right way to our sufferings, how to view them, what to do with them, how to handle them. There's a lot, a lot of real battle in that realm to get us properly adjusted to the inevitable. Our flesh cries out for relief.

Yes, I have prayed a few times. Oh Lord, give me some respite. Give me a period of calm waters.

Let me off the fight for a bit. Well, not yet, not yet. But there is another compensation, and we haven't got that far, the consolations.

What the consolations are, and I'm going to hint at them now, what the consolations are. I will say this, that they will not always, if ever, be the Lord coming along and saying, dear man, dear woman, don't worry, be quite comforted, just go on. I'm with you.

I don't find it comes that way. Like it. I would like it.

Oh, I have often said, oh, for Daniel's experience, oh, that it might be said to me, oh man, greatly beloved, said by an archangel from heaven. Wouldn't that be grand? Well, I'd call that consolation, wouldn't you? No, it doesn't seem to come that way for us. But there are consolations, and I'll keep you guessing for the time being, because they want more time than we have.

Now, I said I opened a window. You look through, and what you will see is just this. That in real usefulness and value to the Lord, we're going to have a hard time in the flesh.

But there are going to be compensations in the spirit, and those compensations are really much more, much more to the heart. They are compensations indeed. They will make us say, well, if the suffering means this, all right, the sufferings, it's all right, it's all right, it's worth it, it's worth it.

There we must leave it. It's not very far into the letter, is it? But you see, we've got all day tomorrow, Monday, we pray.

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