

II. The God of Comfort and Deliverance

September 16/17/18, 2014

2 Corinthians 1:3-11

Aim: To see affliction as an opportunity to rely on God for comfort and deliverance, and to use our experiences as an opportunity to comfort and encourage other Christians who are struggling.

It is important to notice that Paul begins the body of his letter with an expression of praise to God. He praises God for the way in which He has turned hard and difficult experiences to good use. Afflictions are a common feature of life (v. 4) for Christians and non-Christians alike. The words Paul uses – ‘affliction’ (vv. 4, 8), ‘sufferings’ (vv. 5-7), ‘(burdens) beyond our strength’ (v. 8), ‘despair’ (v. 8), ‘the sentence of death’ (v. 9), and ‘deadly peril’ (v. 11) – remind us of the variety of difficulties we may meet.

It is important for Christians to cultivate the habit of praise, and it is best fostered when we give our minds to Christ and to all He has done for us. An atheist who became a Christian was asked what difference his conversion had made to him. He said one major difference was that now at last he had Somebody to thank.

Paul quickly moves on to describe his sufferings, but these in no way modify his praise. In fact, he takes them up fully into his life of worship, for through them he had come to experience the grace of God in new ways, and he wanted to praise Him for this.

The major theme in this epistle is Paul’s defense of his apostleship against the many and varied attacks of the false teachers at Corinth. In this opening section of 2 Corinthians, Paul defended himself against the false charge that his trials were God’s punishment for his sin and unfaithfulness. The apostle made the point that God was comforting him in his suffering, not chastening him. In so doing, he penned what is undoubtedly the most significant passage on comfort anywhere in Scripture.

A. Comfort in Affliction (2 Corinthians 1:3-7)

In this short paragraph the verbs and nouns for ‘comfort’ (which presupposes suffering) occur ten times, for ‘trouble’ three times, and for ‘suffer(ing)’ four times. Directly or indirectly, suffering is referred to seventeen times in five verses!

By any estimation 2 Corinthians 1:3-7 frames the Bible’s greatest text on comfort. The word ‘comfort’ occurs no less than ten times in its noun and verb forms in this brief paragraph—essentially one-third of all thirty-one occurrences in the New Testament. Paul says more about suffering, and more about comfort, than any other writer in the Bible. And it is here that he says the most about it. There is a reason for this, and it was to answer critics who held that the sufferings that characterized Paul’s life were evidence that he was not an apostle, because if he was the real thing he wouldn’t be experiencing so much trouble. Paul’s answer was that abundant suffering and abundant comfort are in fact signs of apostolic authenticity.

1. The God of Comfort (1:3)

³Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort...

2 Corinthians – Lesson 2

After the salutation Paul began the body of his epistle with the affirmation that God is to be ‘blessed.’ *Eulogētos* (‘blessed’) is the root of the English word ‘eulogy’ and literally means ‘to speak well of.’

In the midst of acute suffering (1:8-9) Paul had experienced the comfort of God, and for this he devoutly declared his blessing. He was also locked in a fierce debate with the Judaizing ‘apostles’ who proclaimed what Paul calls ‘another Jesus’ (11:4-6).

Essential to the conviction that God comforts us in our affliction is the understanding Paul has, and the teaching he gives, about three aspects of God’s character.

a) Father of Our Lord

First, God is the ‘God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.’ It was important for him to establish at the outset that God, the God of the Old Testament and of the Jews, was ‘the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.’ Let those Corinthians who were succumbing to the Judaizing influence understand that God is able to be known as ‘Father’ only as they acknowledge Jesus to be God’s Son and their ‘Lord.’ To reject Jesus as Lord would be to repudiate God as Father.

Paul carefully crafts his words as he recasts the traditional opening words of the synagogue blessing in Christian terminology so as to celebrate God as the God of all comfort. The first of the nineteen synagogue benedictions then in use began, ‘Blessed art thou, O Lord our God and God of our fathers, God of Abraham, God of Isaac, and God of Jacob.’ This Christianized Jewish blessing is original here in 2 Corinthians and appears also verbatim in Romans, Ephesians, and 1 Peter. In restating the synagogue blessing in Christian terms, Paul was evidently having a go at his Judaizing enemies, the fallen apostles in Corinth (cp. 11:22, 31). It was of the utmost importance for the apostle to establish in no uncertain terms that the God of Israel’s patriarchs was the God and Father of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Some may wonder why, since they are fully equal, the Father is referred to as ‘the God... of our Lord Jesus Christ’ (cp. Mk. 15:34; Jn. 20:17). In His deity Jesus is fully equal to the Father, but in His humanity He submitted to Him. Paul’s statement reflects Jesus’ submission to the Father during the Incarnation (cp. Jn. 14:28). The title ‘Lord Jesus Christ’ summarizes all of His redemptive work. ‘Lord’ describes His sovereign deity; ‘Jesus’ (the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew name Yeshua: ‘God saves’) describes His saving death and resurrection; ‘Christ’ (‘anointed one’) describes Him as the King who will defeat God’s enemies and rule over the redeemed earth and the eternal state.

The relationship between the Father and the Son is unique: the Lord Jesus is the Father’s only Son, the supreme object of His pleasure and delight. It is in His Son that the Father provides the perfect revelation of Himself. Every view we have of the Father therefore needs to be totally influenced by the understanding we have of God’s character in His self-revelation in His Son.

b) Father of Mercies

Second, God is the ‘Father of mercies,’ which means He is a compassionate Father as well as the source of all compassion. Mercy (or compassion) is an essential part of His character and of His self-revelation in both the Old and New Testaments (Ps. 116:5; James 5:11). It expresses God’s sympathy with us in our troubles, difficulties, and grief. It was wonderfully displayed in the life and character of our Lord Jesus, and it always led to appropriate action (Mt. 9:36; 15:32). God’s compassion arises naturally from His fatherhood (Ps. 103:13). Any father – like any mother – cares compassionately for his children, particularly when they go through pain and suffering.

2 Corinthians – Lesson 2

Paul further described God using two Old Testament titles. He is ‘the Father of mercies’ to those who seek Him (cp. 2 Sam. 24:14; Ps. 86:15; Ps. 103:8; Micah 7:18-19). The Old Testament also reveals God to be the ‘God of all comfort’ (cp. Is. 40:1; 49:13; 51:3).

c) God of All Comfort

Third, he is the ‘God of all comfort’ (cp. Is. 40:1; 66:13). As the perfect and compassionate Father, He knows and understands everything that comes to us and is able to send us the comfort we need, whatever our trouble.

The synagogue prayer of Paul’s day described God as ‘The Father of Mercies,’ but here Paul enlarges it to include ‘and God of all comfort.’ Chapters 40-66 of Isaiah repeatedly speak of the comfort or consolation of the Messianic age (e.g., Is. 40:13). It was and is through Christ that the comfort of God the Father comes.

The god of the Greeks, by contrast, was quite indifferent to human pain. This deity, which merely existed, possessed no knowable qualities and exerted no influence in the world. The God who is revealed in the Bible, however, has knowable qualities (‘the God of all comfort’) and is active in His creation (He ‘comforts us’).

In our passage the idea of comfort is ‘to strengthen much,’ to encourage—to stand by another and encourage him as he endures testing. Paul wanted his hearers to understand that the merciful Father is the author of *all* possible comfort and consolation. There is no enduring comfort apart from Him. The explanation of God’s comfort thus began with the celebration of God’s comfort.

Paul had experienced much pain, suffering, and heartbreak, particularly because of the false teachers at Corinth. They slandered his character to discredit him in the minds of the people and, even more painful to the apostle, sought to deceive the Corinthian church with lies about the gospel. But in God’s merciful comforting of him he received the strength he needed to carry on. For that Paul was deeply grateful and blessed God.

2. The Purpose of Comfort (1:4-5)

As we consider what Paul says in verses 4 and 5, we must understand that Paul is referring to his own experience alone—that the plural ‘we’ and ‘us’ is what is sometimes called the ‘apostolic we.’ So here in verse 4 Paul describes his own experience of comfort and how it graced the Corinthians.

a) The Comforted Are Comforted by God (1:4a, c)

⁴...*who comforts us in all our affliction, ... we ourselves are comforted by God.*

Comfort is something we receive from God. God’s comfort is significantly present tense. It is not simply that He has comforted in the past, but that He *comforts*. Every one of Paul’s epic miseries was attended by God’s comfort (cp. 11:27).

God comforts His people not only because He is by nature a merciful comforter, but also because He has promised to comfort them. The apostle Paul knew this blessed truth not only by divine revelation, but also from his experience (cp. Rom. 8:31-39). Paul always experienced God’s comfort. Never once was he without the comfort of God.

‘Affliction’ translates the Greek word *thlipsis*, which literally means, ‘pressure.’ Throughout all the stress, persecution, and trials he experienced in his turbulent life, Paul experienced God’s

2 Corinthians – Lesson 2

comforting, strengthening presence. The apostle's life was thus an amazing juxtaposition of affliction and comfort, a seeming paradox he expressed later in this letter (4:7-11).

b) The Comforted Can Comfort Others (1:4b)

... 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.

The comfort we receive from God we may later use to comfort others. Sometimes we may help others only as we ourselves have trodden the path they have to tread. For example, often we may effectively sympathize with the bereaved only when we have known bereavement ourselves. The comfort we seek to give to others that we have received from God in our personal times of trouble has a uniquely genuine ring.

Paul viewed God's comforting of him not only as an end in itself to express His care and fulfill His promise, but also as the means to an end. Suffering believers receive God's comfort so that they 'will be able to comfort those who are in any affliction.' Believers receive comfort as a trust or stewardship to be passed on to others. This purpose of comfort is to equip the comforted to be comforters. Paul viewed himself as a conduit through which God's comfort could flow to the Corinthians—a conduit widened by all the suffering he had endured. Those who experience the most suffering will receive the most comfort. And those who receive the most comfort are thereby most richly equipped to comfort others.

The result of Paul's comfort from God was that he was able to comfort those 'in any affliction' (imaging, *any* affliction)—and he did so with the comfort with which he himself had been comforted by God. How did Paul comfort others with the comfort with which he had been comforted by God? Overall by his example—as they observed his attitude and deportment in and through and after his sufferings. And then there were his prayers. And of course there were his gentle words of comfort, graced with authenticity and power, so that God's comfort was administered through him.

Christ's ministry to us in our afflictions enables us to exercise a ministry of comfort to others. This means then that, as God's servants, our service to others may not only widen but deepen.

What we conclude here is that affliction was the key to Paul's effectiveness in ministry, and affliction is the key to effective ministry. How countercultural this is. It even runs counter to so much 'Christian' thinking that regards affliction as evidence of personal sin or deficient faith, and sleekness and ease as palpable evidence of divine blessing.

c) The Comforted Share in Christ's Sufferings (1:5)

⁵For as we share abundantly in Christ's sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too.

Paul lifts our sufferings to the highest level by referring to our sharing the sufferings of Christ. We can never share in the redemptive sufferings of our Lord Jesus Christ, since they are utterly unique. He alone could die in our place. However, in the bringing of individuals to faith in Him, and in their spiritual care and nurturing, the Lord Jesus uses His disciples. We cannot fulfill these privileged functions without costly distress of different kinds. The sufferings of the Lord Jesus in this respect may flow over into our lives, but this never happens without our comfort also overflowing!

2 Corinthians – Lesson 2

Christ's sufferings and ours differ immensely, for His were atoning sufferings, breaking down the barrier of sin between God and ourselves, breaking down the barrier of sin between God and ourselves, and doing so on God's gracious initiative. This we can never do for ourselves, and thankfully never need to do, as Christ has done this once and for all by carrying our sins and bearing their penalty. Nevertheless there are some real comparisons between those sufferings Christ actually did endure and those that Christians ought to be willing to experience, and most basic of all is a commitment to the will of God even if this involves suffering.

So there at the cross we discover that suffering, so evil and apparently meaningless in itself, can have eternal significance, for God gives it His own meaning. It was endured for us, for our blessing. This imparts to the Christian faith a realism sadly lacking in many other faiths. It does not deny suffering nor attempt to sideline it, but faces it fairly and squarely, for its central event, the crucifixion of Jesus, was an experience of the profoundest suffering.

Verse 5 supplies the reason why suffering equipped Paul to pass on God's comfort. Here the 'sufferings' of Christ does not refer to the atoning sufferings of Christ but to the sufferings that come to those involved in the service of Christ (cp. 4:11, 12). There are Christ's sufferings because He is *in* His people (cp. Acts 9:4-5). The emphasis of verse 5 is upon Paul's experience of overflowing comfort—a flood of consolation. Note that Christ is the center and source of all comfort. Just as Paul's union with Christ was the source of his suffering, so also Christ was the source of his overflowing comfort.

Though God is the God of comfort who comforts His children, there is an important condition for receiving that comfort. God does not promise comfort to those who suffer for their unrepentant sin, but to those who suffer for Christ. Thus, God's comfort extends as far as believers' suffering is for the sake of Christ.

If God is the source of mercy and comfort, Christ is the channel through whom these things come to us. It is *through* Christ that 'our comfort overflows.' This means, as in all our relationships with God, we seek comfort and compassion in the name of Jesus, that is, as Christian believers.

Verses 4&5 teach us that Christian believers are united both with Christ and with one another. On the one hand, both troubles and comfort come to us through Christ; on the other, we can comfort those in trouble. The comfort we receive from God through Christ we are both to give to and receive from one another. God's comfort, therefore, is not to terminate on the one who receives it. God comforted Paul by the coming of Titus to Macedonia (7:6), just as Titus had previously been comforted by the Corinthians (7:6). Paul in turn will comfort the Corinthians (1:6), God's comfort thus having come full circle, from the Corinthians, through Titus to Paul, back to the Corinthians.

3. The Experience of Comfort (1:6-7)

⁶If 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.

⁷Our hope for you is unshaken, for we know that as you share in our sufferings, you will also share in our comfort.

Paul's philosophy emerges helpfully here. Paul was eager to share all this with the Corinthians. Paul freely admitted that they had known great distress. At the same time, he rejoiced because he was certain that the Corinthians and others would ultimately benefit. They would share the

2 Corinthians – Lesson 2

spiritual fruits of that distress. The experience of Paul and his friends would encourage the Corinthians to endure similar sufferings patiently as they witnessed the triumph of God's comfort.

Perhaps no other church caused Paul more pain and grief than the Corinthian assembly. Even after the apostle had invested at least eighteen precious months of his life ministering in Corinth, the church remained divisive, worldly, and rebellious. But God comforted Paul in his affliction, enabling him to better comfort the very people who had caused part of his suffering.

Not all the Corinthians, of course, were suffering for their sins. Some were, like Paul, suffering for righteousness' sake. Believers are in a partnership with each other and must never view their suffering in isolation. When they suffer for Christ, God comforts them and equips them to comfort others. Because righteous suffering for Christ is a mark of true believers (2 Tim. 3:12), Paul was able to say confidently to the faithful believers in Corinth, 'Our hope for you is firmly grounded, knowing that as you are sharers of our sufferings, so also you are sharers of our comfort.' They demonstrated the reality of their faith by their willingness to share Paul's and Timothy's sufferings for the gospel.

The overflowing nature of God's comfort anticipates its abundant application. Paul views both his experience of afflictions and his experience of comfort as contributing to the Corinthians comfort. This is a dynamic way of looking at life because it endows all Christian living with elevated importance. The hard things we undergo as well as the comforts are all graces that together authenticate and empower ministry, so that those who truly desire to minister will patiently accept their lot from God and work on. Are you suffering afflictions because of your commitment to Christ? Do not run. Do not curse your circumstances. Instead patiently endure, and your comfort will overflow.

The overflow of Christ's sufferings into our lives becomes in turn an overflow from us to others. Paul is saying he has come to realize that, through Christ, his own sufferings may lead to comfort for his Corinthian readers. What does he mean? Simply that difficult experiences in which he has received strengthening comfort from God enable him in his turn to minister comfort to other Christians.

Sometimes God answers prayer in a situation of affliction by removing the problem but more often by graciously giving strength to endure it. It is because Paul had such personal experience of the grace of God that he can write so confidently of the firm hope he has that his Corinthian readers will experience God's comforting grace too.

Despite the Corinthians' disappointing history, their shameful questioning of Paul's apostleship, their infatuation with more attractive ministries and accommodating theologies, their temporary rejection of his authority—despite all this, Paul viewed the Corinthian church with unshakable confidence. Paul's confidence was embedded in the Corinthians' sharing in fellowship with him in both his sufferings and his comfort—because all believers have fellowship with Christ. Despite the Corinthians' checkered past, Paul was sure they would rise to their divine fellowship, ultimately experiencing the full comfort of God.

4. Summary on Comfort

Paul is clearly suggesting to the Corinthians that God has a very high aim in our experiences of suffering. This must have comforted him when he was himself enduring the trials he lists for us in 11:23-29. He knew that through trial God seeks nothing less than to reproduce His own

2 Corinthians – Lesson 2

character in us. This is not the only passage where he says this kind of thing (cp. Rom. 5:3). This means we should never assume that personal difficulties and afflictions mean we are out of God's will. It would in fact be easier to argue for the opposite! Suffering is a frequent accompaniment of genuine service for Christ, although it would be foolish to invite it when it is completely unnecessary.

Power and weakness, which together represent the unifying theme of this letter, are hinted at in this opening paragraph. All believers, like Paul and the Corinthians, suffer the weakness of 'troubles' through their Christian service. Nevertheless, the power of God in His mercies and 'comfort' meets us at our point of need. Great though our sense of weakness may be, the power of God is always greater. Some ministers today unhelpfully raise the hopes of their people by promising them immediate health and prosperity, as their due portion from God. These promises appear to be tailor-made for a society whose need for instant gratification is unprecedented in history. Paul, by contrast, soberly refers to his readers' 'sufferings,' and he promises, not immediate healing and success, but God's 'comfort' which they will experience as they 'patiently endure.'

For those who are afflicted and suffer for following Christ, this passage promises surpassing comfort. The truth is that God's comfort always exceeds our afflictions. Those who follow Christ know the greatest affliction—and the greatest comfort, a flood of comfort.

B. Deliverance from Affliction (2 Corinthians 1:8-11)

The 'sufferings' and 'troubles' of the previous paragraph are now to be expanded upon. He relates to the Corinthians the terrible ordeal he had experienced back in Ephesus and explains how God had delivered him. Although Paul did not find God removing suffering from his experience, he did find Him acting in deliverance.

As an apostle, Paul had been allotted an extraordinary amount of suffering, as God had commanded his messenger Ananias to tell Paul after Paul's conversion on the Damascus road (Acts 9:15-16). The apostles were foundational to the church, and their sufferings were essential to that foundation. There are no parallels to the founding apostles today. The application of *apostle* to church-founding missionaries (as is sometimes done) is a misuse of the term.

There are also other mistakes or misconceptions we must avoid. One is that if you follow hard after Christ you will encounter immense afflictions, and if you're not afflicted, it's because you're not following as you ought. Not so! We must remember that our individual afflictions are sovereignly bestowed by God's loving hand, as were Paul's. Some committed Christians lead far more tranquil and healthy lives than other believers with like commitments. We must also never make the foolish mistake of imagining that those who suffer more than others are more spiritual. Paul never glorified suffering as such. The Bible nowhere encourages people to seek suffering. For Paul, suffering is not intrinsically good, nor is it a Christian virtue. Rather, suffering is a page in the textbook used in God's school of faith.

1. An Example of Affliction (1:8-9a)

a) Experienced in Asia (1:8a)

⁸*For we do not want you to be unaware, brothers, of the affliction we experienced in Asia.*

2 Corinthians – Lesson 2

Paul writes about particular trials he had endured in the province of Asia. Did these arise from persecution or from natural factors such as illness? The former is the more likely, but we shall probably never know for certain. Again, though, it does not greatly matter, and the lack of precision may even be of value to us. Its very vagueness means that Christians facing various forms of trial may well feel able to identify with Paul and be helped by what he says.

To show the Corinthians the power of God's comfort, Paul reminded them of a serious, life-threatening situation from which God had delivered him. The situation that produced the affliction which came to Paul in the province of Asia is unknown. It may have involved Paul's being beaten (cp. 11:23-25), imprisoned (cp. 11:23), or both. Since he gave them no details, the incident must have been well-known to the Corinthians. But though they were aware of the situation, they did not know its severity or how God had worked in it. It had evidently happened recently, after Paul wrote 1 Corinthians, since he did not mention it in that letter. Since it happened in Asia, before he came to Macedonia (2:13), it is likely that it took place in Ephesus, the chief city of Asia. In 1 Corinthians 16:9, Paul wrote to the Corinthians that he planned to remain in Ephesus, 'for a wide door for effective service has opened to me, and there are many adversaries.' Possibly, one or more of those adversaries had come close to taking the apostle's life.

With the resounding comfort of God still sounding, Paul now relates a dramatic personal example of God's care for which he continues to bless God. The exact nature of what befell Paul in Asia remains a mystery. Some believe that it happened during the famous riots in Ephesus during the intense confrontation between Paul and a lynch mob under the sway of Demetrius the silversmith (cp. Acts 19:23ff.). Certainly the potential for violence was there, but Ephesus is unlikely. If it was in Ephesus, Paul would have said so, as that was the capital city of Asia. Also, the account in Acts 19 mentions no physical violence coming to Paul.

Some of the early church fathers thought this referred to Paul's fighting hand-to-hand with wild beasts in Ephesus, because they (wrongly) interpreted 1 Corinthians 15:32 literally instead of figuratively. Others imagine the affliction in Asia to be a life-threatening illness or an attack from his 'thorn,' his unknown ailment. But the language suggests a life-threatening event. Paul's graphic repetitions suggest a recent explosive instance of such intensity that it had death written all over it.

b) Despaired of Life (1:8b)

For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself.

Paul's experience of pressure on this occasion had been particularly severe and he thought death was near (cp. Mt. 26:38). The apostle was brought right to the ultimate limit of his inner resources.

Paul calls what occurred in Ephesus as having been 'under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure.' Here the picture is of a ship being weighed down as by the ballast, or of being 'crushed.' Two qualify phrases add to the severity of the description. The first, 'great' (*kath' hyperbolēn*) means, by implication, 'that which exceeds' or 'surpasses' description. The second, 'far beyond our ability to endure' (*hyper dynamin*) is literally 'beyond (our) power.' The whole phrase could be paraphrased as: 'We were indescribably, beyond the limits of our power, brought down into the depths.'

2 Corinthians – Lesson 2

The Greek words translated ‘For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength’ were also used to describe an overloaded ship riding low in the water or a pack animal that pitifully falls in despair under its load so that it cannot rise. Paul was so ‘utterly, unbearably crushed’ (RSV) that he couldn’t get up, as if he wore a leaden cape. Inertia gripped his being so much that he ‘despaired of life itself.’

The Greek word translated ‘despaired’ literally means ‘no passage,’ ‘no way out,’ or ‘no exit.’ Paul saw no escape from the desperate situation that threatened his life. His despair was so deep that he was literally ‘without a way’ of escape. There was no exit. Paul conceded that he was done for, that it was over—he was being so utterly crushed under an unbearable weight, helplessly awaiting death. Think of it! Paul had multiple life-threatening experiences—the stoning, five beatings that each took him to within an inch of his life, multiplied dangers and shipwrecks. But this affliction in Asia was the most damaging and debilitating. An inexorable, paralyzing weight had fallen on him in Asia, and there was no exit.

Paul will use the three key ideas (‘power,’ ‘weight,’ ‘indescribable’) in important later passages, where, however, he will turn them upside down so as to indicate the surpassing ‘power’ of God (4:7), the ‘indescribable’ glory (4:17), and the ‘power’ of Christ perfected in weakness (12:9).

c) Sentence of Death (1:9a)

⁹*Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death.*

Paul and his companions came to a complete end of themselves. In their hearts they ‘felt ... the sentence of death.’ In other words, they felt that there was no hope for them. They were at the end of their tether. It may have been so on the spiritual level. On the other hand, it may have been on the physical level that they were in desperate straits.

The verb ‘felt’ translates the Greek perfect tense, suggesting that the death sentence had already been passed but was not yet executed. *Apokrima* (‘sentence’) appears only here in the New Testament. It refers to an official judgment, a legal decision, or resolution. In his own mind, Paul had passed the ‘sentence of death’ on himself; he believed he would die for the gospel’s sake. Various ‘death sentences’ have been suggested; for example, serious illness, an Ephesian imprisonment, and the riot in Ephesus (Acts 19:32-34). The latter appears the most likely.

2. The Purpose of Affliction (1:9b)

But that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead.

The purpose of this affliction was to enable him to learn the total reliability of God. Perhaps in this way his conviction, expressed later in this epistle, ‘When I am weak, then I am strong’ (12:10), was forged for him in the furnace of affliction. For Christians, an experience that reveals our weakness is often a blessing in disguise, for not only do we learn something about ourselves through it but we often learn too the need for a deeper trust in God and discover in experience how utterly reliable He is. This enables us to give praise to Him for so many experiences that in themselves are anything but pleasant.

God had a purpose for allowing Paul’s suffering: to teach him not to trust in himself. God took him to the extremity from which no human resources could deliver him because, as He said to Paul later in this epistle, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness’ (12:9).

2 Corinthians – Lesson 2

However, what Paul has already testified to in the previous verses proved true! God gave them the necessary strength to endure. God allowed it all to happen so that they might not rely on themselves, but on God, who raises the dead. Self-reliance is perilous, and can be our downfall. God sometimes has to teach us through hard experiences not to rely on ourselves but on Him. Having learnt the lesson, we may sometimes need to relearn it.

But there was a purpose in all of this, to which Paul gives a simple explanation. Suddenly the power of Christ's resurrection was brought to bear on Paul's deathly despair. There in Asia Paul's affliction (tantamount to death) was followed by a wondrous experience (tantamount to resurrection). Notice that God's resurrection power is not described in the past tense ('God who *raised* the dead') but in the present ('God who *raises* the dead') because God continues to display that resurrection power in His delivering His children from impossible circumstances.

So when we find ourselves in impossible circumstances as we follow Christ, remember that God by nature, is a raiser of the dead (cp. Rom. 4:17). Here the cycle of Christ's experience becomes the pattern for Paul and all serious Christians: affliction—death—resurrection. This is the central law of life and ministry as afflictions draw you down to the end of yourself ('death') and then you look to Christ, finding yourself thrust upward in resurrection for further ministry. As C. S. Lewis said, 'Nothing that has not died will be resurrected.' But death sets in motion the unstoppable process of resurrection.

Through the experience of utter helplessness Paul had come to a new appreciation of the power of God 'who raises the dead,' referring, that is, to God's recent deliverance of Paul. The bottom-line purpose of Paul's deathly affliction was to make him rely not on himself but on God who raises the dead. Who would have imagined that Paul would ever depend upon himself in light of the epic miseries and deliverances he had experienced. But apparently he was still tempted to practice self-reliance, and his experience in Asia helped him steel against this (cp. 4:7). The apostle had come to live in utter dependence upon God.

We must learn to put the truth of the resurrection up against, or alongside, every trouble and difficulty we face. In doing so, we fix our eyes upon God – and that is the first step to finding the answer we need in comfort, strength, endurance, and victory!

3. The God of Deliverance (1:10)

¹⁰He 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.

a) Hope

Looking back on all the difficult experiences he has catalogued and hinted at, Paul bears testimony to God's deliverance. Paul deliberately set his hope on God's deliverance. To 'set one's hope' suggests disciplined determination and single-mindedness. It implies critical choice. Paul knew that the help he and his friends needed could come only from God, and to Him alone therefore they looked. At the same time Paul knew that God gives a strategic place to the intercessory prayers of His people for deliverance.

Paul was confident that God not only had delivered him in the past, but would also deliver him in the future. Because God is faithful, He is always ready to comfort and deliver His children. Experience encourages hope. A hope already given grows in the context of difficult experiences (cp. Rom. 5:2-5), for in them the Holy Spirit makes us aware of the greatness of God's love and

2 Corinthians – Lesson 2

therefore of the greatness of our hope in Christ. So we may have an ever-deepening experience of a God who does not change.

If Paul had received ‘the sentence of death’ (v. 8), he had also come to ‘rely on God’ (v. 9) and to set his ‘hope’ on God. The Greek verbs are in the perfect tense, indicating events in the past with continuing consequences. Thus the ordeal in Asia, whatever it was, still impinged on Paul while also stimulating ongoing reliance and hope in God. We may say that the new, deep awareness of death was accompanied by a new, deep trust in God.

b) Deliverance

The replay of Christ’s death and resurrection in Paul’s experience in Asia endowed him with immense certainty, as Paul emphasized in verse 10 with three repetitions of the word ‘deliver’—the first being *past* (‘He delivered us from such deadly peril’), the second being in the *near future* (‘and he will deliver us’), and the third in the *ultimate future* (‘on him we have set our hope that he will deliver us again’). This is the endless refrain that comes to all committed believers—God by nature is the Deliverer, Redeemer, and Savior who raises from the dead.

Paul’s confidence that God ‘has delivered us’ and that ‘He will deliver us’ again refers both to God’s ultimate deliverance in the great resurrection and also to God’s interim deliverance from day-to-day problems. Paul did not separate the God of the creeds from the God on whom he depended each day. Intellectually inclined Christians tend to emphasize the former, and experience-oriented Christians the latter; but for Paul there was no contradiction. The interim deliverance has caused Paul to trust God more deeply for the final deliverance when He will raise His people from the dead.

Paul looked towards the future, and his hope of deliverance at a later time was based on, or at least strengthened by, his experience that God had delivered him already.

The one thing that you can be sure of as a child of God is that He will deliver you in the midst of your affliction as you call upon Him. True, He will not deliver us from all death situations in the near future of this life, but He will ultimately do so because He raises the dead.

We should remember, however, that God’s ‘deliverances’ in this life are always partial. We may recover from an illness, but there is no way to sidestep our last enemy, death. We are inextricably tangled in the sorrow and suffering of the world, whose form is passing away. Only in the resurrection of the dead is there perfect deliverance.

4. The Prayer for Deliverance (1:11)

¹¹You 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.

Yet another dimension of Christian fellowship now emerges. Paul seeks the prayers of his readers for his personal safety in the ministry God has given him. In verse 8 he says that he does not want them to be uninformed about the hardships he and Timothy had suffered. Why? Perhaps chiefly to enable them to pray for them in an intelligent way. Even such an outstanding Christian as Paul could not do without the prayer support of other Christians in his work for Christ. How we fail if we belong to a local church and benefit from its ministry, and yet never pray for those who minister to us!

Paul was confident in deliverance, but his confidence did not rest on God’s past faithfulness alone, but on the prayers of believers, especially the Corinthians with whom he had shared so

2 Corinthians – Lesson 2

much. It is true that it is *God* who delivers, and that God stands in no need of human prayers before He can act on behalf of His afflicted servants. Yet there is the manward as well as the Godward aspect of such deliverance, and the manward side is summed up in the duty of Christians to intercede in prayer for their fellow-believers who are enduring affliction. In prayer, human impotence casts itself at the feet of divine omnipotence. Thus, the duty of prayer is not a modification of God's power, but a glorification of it.

Although the apostle was confident that God would continue to comfort him in the future, he urged the Corinthians to participate in that gracious work of God by 'joining in helping' him through their prayers. He viewed the prayers of the saints as crucial to his ministry. In prayer, human impotence casts itself at the feet of divine omnipotence. When God's people intercede for each other, His power and sovereign purposes are realized. Thus, the purpose of prayer is not to manipulate God but to exalt His power and submit to His will.

Paul fully understood the human side of deliverance and resurrection power—and that is why his letters bear repeated requests for prayer (cp. Eph. 6:19; Phil. 1:19; Col. 4:3; 2 Th. 3:1). 'Many' in the phrase 'so that many will give thanks' is literally 'the faces' (the faces of many), thus picturing the upturned faces of the Corinthians to God as they offer thanks to Him.

As the Corinthians are united in prayer for Paul they are said to be 'helping' or 'working together' with God, though there is no suggestion that God is dependent upon human help or prayers. The words 'in answer to the prayers of many' stand in the original, literally, as 'out of many faces,' which may perhaps be understood as the beautiful picture of many faces upturned to God in thanksgiving.

Part of Christian fellowship is praying for one another. This is often more important than we appreciate. When our friends are going through times of trouble, they may find it hard to pray or to know for what to pray. God the Holy Spirit frequently places upon the hearts of others the requests to be made to God for them. Those for whom we pray experience God's gracious favor – His blessing – as we intercede for them. Intercessory prayer is fundamental to the corporate life of God's people. Our prayers are part of God's rescue plan in His scheme of deliverance.

This brief sentence refers to both 'prayer' and to giving 'thanks,' indicating the important and close connection between them. Prayer to God for specific needs is rightly followed by thanksgiving; indeed, the one is incomplete without the other.

Answered prayers prompt thanksgiving to God, and thanksgiving honors and glorifies Him (Ps. 50:23). Looking back, Paul saw how the deliverance God afforded him and his companions through answered prayer brought praise to God. In this he glimpsed another of God's purposes in our troubles and sufferings: He uses them to bring praise to His name.

5. Summary on Deliverance

Our difficulties are God-given opportunities to prove His compassion (v. 3), comfort (vv. 3, 5, 7), power (v. 9), deliverance (v. 10), blessing (v. 11), and willingness to hear the prayers of His people (v. 11). How incredibly poor our experience of God's character as our glorious Father would be if we did not know trouble! How insubstantial would be the testimony we would be able to give to Him! How little would be the praise and glory we would daily ascribe to Him.

What are we to make of all this? Essentially the following: The function of afflictions in the lives of those who aspire to be disciples of Christ is 'to make us rely not on ourselves but on God

2 Corinthians – Lesson 2

who raises the dead' (v. 9). The apostolic burden was immense, and Paul was the most afflicted of men. Through the centuries and today, those called to lead the church in mission to the nations and cultures of the world have borne their share of affliction. And though we may not want to hear it, the suffering of pastors and missionaries is essential to mediating the gospel to God's people. The pattern of such lives is the same as that of Christ: *affliction* and downward trajectory, *death* at the bottom, and then *resurrection* and arching ascent in greater effectiveness for the gospel. Such lives have greater reliance upon God and, ironically, greater confidence in deliverance.

First of all, there is the striking contrast between the opening of this letter and the start of the Epistle to the Galatians. In Galatians there is no thanksgiving, but a very sharp rebuke. At the beginning of Second Corinthians, Paul does not give thanks for his readers as he does in so many of his letters, including First Corinthians (1 Cor. 1:4), but the tone of it is quite different, much gentler in fact, than his letter to the Galatians. Second Corinthians and Galatians are the two letters in which he has to defend his apostleship, but however for different reasons. In Galatia, opponents were seeking to undermine his apostleship to subvert his gospel, and he was deeply concerned that many of the Galatian Christians seemed to be accepting what these men were saying. At Corinth, the issue was much more the lifestyle and attitudes appropriate for apostles because of their role as Christian leaders.

Secondly, we see that Paul is not simply writing about himself and his sufferings here. He uses the first person plural throughout the whole passage. Whatever the trials he faced, Timothy experienced them too. No doubt this joint experience will have given them a spiritual unity in their work which would in turn bear spiritual fruit – in depth of prayer together, for example.

Thirdly, we note that Paul has made it very clear that the God of Christ is the Source of every blessing for His people. It is not only the grace and peace of verse 2 but also the comfort and strength of verses 3 to 7 and the deliverance of verses 8 to 11 which come to him and his readers from God's good hand. As we view this aspect of the passage comprehensively, we begin to see we are being encouraged to make the Lord our trust in every department of life.

Finally, we see that here Paul has outlined for us a movement in which blessing comes from God and praises return to Him. God's grace meets us at the cross of Christ, where He suffered for us. As we too experience suffering for Christ's sake, so we are comforted and enabled to bring comfort to other Christians in their afflictions. So this outward movement of grace from God is complemented by the returning prayers and praises of God's people.

Today the church needs pastors and missionary leaders who share the afflictions of Christ. Such an assertion may seem 2000 years out-of-date or from another planet. Today's pastors are regularly taught to be CEO's and managers—anything but the above. Let us pray fervently and frequently for God's ends, so that many upturned faces will give thanks for all the blessings granted us through the prayers of many.

For next time: Read 2 Corinthians 1:12-2:4.