

**Afflictions & God's Comfort**

2 Corinthians 1 1-11

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Today is Mother's Day. I have shared with you in years past the challenge for me in bringing a Mother's Day message. I am not nor will I ever be a mother. So I do not know what you go through as mothers. But one thing I have observed about mothers. They live an on-call life. When their kids cry out, especially when they're little, they often call for their mama. Moms are called on to solve everything from scraped elbows to resolving disputes about sharing. But things can get much more serious than that. An infant can get a high fever that threatens its life. A child can have a seizure that terrifies the parents. A new Mom can experience postpartum depression. A Mom can get run down trying to care for sick kids and herself through a flu season. Single moms face the additional pressure of providing for their kids. Sometimes, the pressures of being a Mom can become so great that they may wonder if they will make it.

Mom's experience a unique kind of pressure. Yet all of us can go through times of intense pressure or trouble. During those times, questions may arise in our minds. Where is God when we are going through trouble? What is He doing? Is there anything good that can come out of this?

Well today, we start a new series of messages based on a letter written by someone in deep trouble. It is Paul's second letter to the Corinthians. It contains his reflection and direction to Christians in the ancient city of Corinth. Someone has said 2 Corinthians is a difficult letter written to a difficult congregation at a difficult time in Paul's life. As we go through the collective difficulty caused by this pandemic, I could not think of a better place to go for perspective.

Paul will talk about the troubles he experienced. He will describe ways in which God helped him through these troubles. But he will also take on some of the trouble that exists between him and the Corinthians. He had a deep relationship with them. Many Bible scholars think that 2 Corinthians is actually the fourth letter written to them. He planted the church there maybe in the spring of the year 50. In the fall of the year 51, he departs for ministry elsewhere. Then he writes them a letter referred to in 1 Corinthians 5:9 – the previous letter. Next he receives further news about the church and writes what we now know as 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians. Then he sends Timothy to find out how the church is doing. Timothy discovers a church in disarray and chaos. When Paul hears this, he changes his plans and makes a sorrowful visit to bring order and correction. But when he leaves, more trouble happens in the church. So he writes a third letter, the sorrowful letter referred to in 2 Corinthians 2:3-4. Finally he writes 2 Corinthians to further address the problems in the church.

But by this time Paul is quite worn and discouraged. Some prominent and powerful people in the church opposed him. They influenced others in their opinion. They criticized him especially for his suffering. In that culture, successful people and leaders did not suffer. So Paul has to write to explain his sufferings. It starts right at the beginning of this letter. So today, we are going to get answers to 3 questions. I pray there answers will help mothers and anyone else when we go through trouble.

1 - What is God doing when we go through trouble? 2 - What are God's good purposes for us and others through our troubles? 3 - How can we respond to this news?

## **2 Corinthians 1:1-11 (ESV)**

**1** Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother,  
To the church of God that is at Corinth, with all the saints who are in the whole of Achaia:

**2** Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

**3** Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, **4** 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. **5** For as we share abundantly in Christ's sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too. **6** 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. **7** Our hope for you is unshaken, for we know that as you share in our sufferings, you will also share in our comfort.

**8** For we do not want you to be unaware, brothers, of the affliction we experienced in Asia. For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself. **9** 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. **10** 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. **11** 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.

Paul and Timothy address this letter to the church at Corinth and surrounding regions. They wish grace and peace upon the congregation from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Then Paul immediately plunges into the topic of affliction. What kind of affliction is he talking about? One commentator defines the word used here as "troubling circumstances that bring about intense distress or the inward emotion of anguish."

It is most likely that Paul refers to affliction suffered for the cause of Christ or as he conducted Christian ministry. Suffering is what happens when you preach Christ to the world. But I think we have good grounds to extend affliction to include the afflictions of life. Paul does write that God comforts us in "all our afflictions" in verse 4. We can choose to glorify Christ through whatever affliction we face. When we do that, it is a form of

Christian ministry. We may draw others to Christ when we face our afflictions with Christ. So with this in mind, let's go to our questions.

**What is God doing when we go through affliction?** One action we see repeatedly here is **He comforts us to see us through affliction (2 Cor. 1:3-7)**. Paul refers to God as the God of all comfort. He comforts us in all our afflictions.

What is the nature of God's comfort? Does God come along and put our head on a pillow so we can be a little more comfortable? No. It's much deeper than that. When you think about people comforting a bereaved person at their loved one's funeral, what do the comforters do? Well they go up to the person. They wait until that person can fix their attention on them. Then, the comforters face changes into an expression of sympathy or empathy. The comforter may reach out a hand to touch that person or put an arm on their shoulder. The comforter may listen to the grief of the bereaved person. Even though it's not a happy time, the bereaved experiences strength and encouragement because someone else took time to comfort them.

Yet human comfort is only a shadow of God's comfort. Paul seems to think that God is the source of all comfort according to verse 4. The God of all comfort, comforts in all affliction. That means every affliction we suffer is met by the comforting ministry of God, but what must this might really look like in the middle of the night when we can't sleep or when a Mom is trying to look after a crying baby while she is exhausted. Well sometimes in those times, a song may come to mind or a verse from the Bible. Maybe we are reminded of a conversation or words of encouragement brought to us. That could be the Holy Spirit ministering to us. Or maybe we experience a strengthening because God has brought us to the mind of another person. So they begin to pray. That happens in my life. Someone comes to my mind so I start praying. Then I may reach out and find out that they were in particular need that day.

God comforts and encourages us to see us through our afflictions. Notice what else Paul accomplishes with these early verses. He shows that suffering is an expected reality for any Christian. Remember how his opponents looked down on him because he suffered? They thought that true leaders didn't suffer. But God is a Father of mercies and God of all comfort. Comfort is part of His character for His suffering people.

Another action of God when we go through affliction later in this text. What is God doing when we go through affliction? Sometimes, **He delivers us to release us from affliction (2 Cor. 1:8-10)**. In verses 8-10, Paul wants to impress upon the Corinthians the life-threatening situation he had just survived. Just after our passage in verse

12, we will see Paul explain his change in travel plans. He does this because some accused him of changing his plans to visit them because he was a wishy washy character. They may have even heard about this trouble he faced in Asia but concluded it wasn't that bad.

Look at how he describes his trouble starting in verse 8. "We do not want you to be unaware brothers and sisters of the affliction we experienced in Asia. For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself. So it wasn't like they endured a bit of pressure and worried for half an hour. They experienced such intense pressure that they knew they could not endure it. In fact they were so burdened, they despaired about their lives. They were at the point of saying things like "we're not going to make it. This is the end."

Now we don't specifically know what he refers to. It could be psychological strain because of his difficulties with the Corinthians. He thought the stress might kill him. It could have been a near fatal illness that he thought he would not recover from. But the strongest case can be made for some mob violence against him or an imprisonment that he thought he would not survive. He goes on in verse 9 to say, "Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death." So this was not a formal sentence of death in a court. You don't feel that you get that verdict in court. You know one way or the other. But here they felt so pressured that they concluded "we're going to die."

But look what happens in verse 10. "God 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." This is the other major action God takes when we suffer. He sometimes delivers us from that suffering. Paul experienced deliverance from a situation where he thought he would surely die. You and I can maybe think of trouble in our lives where there was no way out. But suddenly we were saved or released. That's God's delivering work.

These are two primary actions of God when we go through affliction. He comforts us to see us through them or delivers us to release us from them. Remember Jesus' prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane? He asked for deliverance. But the Father said no. Instead He provided Jesus comfort by sending angels to minister to him. So we've seen what God does while we are afflicted.

Next question – **What are God's good purposes for us and others through affliction?** What good can God accomplish as we go through trouble? We discover 2 in this passage. **His comfort enables us to comfort others with God's comfort.** Verse 4 – "God comforts us in all our afflictions, so that we may be able to comfort

those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves have received from God.” So do you see how that works? We go through some affliction and God comforts us through it. Then someone else goes through an affliction – maybe one that we’ve experienced. So we comfort them with the comfort we received from God. Notice we don’t have to come up with our own comfort. We can pass on God’s comfort. We can share how God comforted us as we went through that time. Then they can receive His comfort through us.

Verse 6 – “If we are afflicted it is for your comfort and salvation.” Well how does this work? Well I think Paul refers to how the Corinthians received salvation in the first place. He endured suffering and affliction to bring the message to them. Yet he was comforted by God to persevere in this. It resulted in many receiving salvation from God. So whether Paul faced opposition to the preaching of the Gospel or suffered in some other way, God used that affliction to bring comfort and salvation to the Corinthians. Maybe Paul shares about the affliction suffered and how God brought Him through that. This might spark that interest that led some of them to Christ.

Think about powerful testimonies that impacted you for Christ. I sincerely doubt the testimony focused on all their personal successes and triumphs. It more likely focused on some deep trial or affliction they faced that the Lord brought them through OR the Lord delivered them from. Through their testimony maybe you came to Christ. Through our afflictions we can comfort others with the comfort we have received from God.

But there’s something else God accomplishes through our afflictions. **He teaches us to not rely on ourselves but on Him who can raise the dead.** Look at verse 9 again. “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.” If you’re facing death, the only person who can see you through it is one who has the power to raise the dead. When we face trouble like the kind described here, we almost have nowhere else to turn except to rely on God. For most of us, it takes something severe to expose our need for God. If we never had any trials or never faced any trouble, why would we need God? We could handle life pretty much on our own. But when your under such intense pressure that blows past your own resources, you can either sink by trying to handle everything yourself. Or you can swim by relying on God. We do that by turning to Him often in prayer asking for His help and wisdom.

So we’ve seen what God does when we’re going through affliction. He either comforts us to see us through them or delivers us from them. We’ve also seen 2 good purpose of God through affliction for us and others. One – we can comfort others with the comfort we have received from God. Two – we learn to rely less on ourselves and more on God.

## **How can we respond today with this news about God's involvement and purpose through our afflictions?**

**First, we must receive His comfort or deliverance (v.4-5).** Some people get stubborn when they suffer. They think they can tough it out on their own. Or they might refuse to believe that God actually wants to comfort. They may believe they God is punishing them for something. But God is the God of all comfort. Sometimes, to receive comfort we actually have to admit we need comfort which can be painful. But if you refuse to admit need and receive God's comfort, you will either spiral down into a dark place or blow up and cause massive damage to relationships. Don't keep doing that. Receive the comfort, encouragement and deliverance from God.

**Second, we must comfort others with the comfort we've received from God. (v.4,6)** When others experience affliction, offer them the comfort you yourself have received from the Lord. Share how God comforted you; how He saw you through what you went through. In my own life, I can share my experiences and comfort that God gave me through some of my sufferings - difficult ministry situations; personal health struggles; the birth of a child and the helplessness one feels as a father at that moment; death of both parents and other loved ones; persevering through the multiple pressures of life. God has comforted me in each of these afflictions. God has sometimes delivered me from stupid driving decisions or other foolish decisions or the spiritual assaults of the enemy. Comfort others with the comfort you yourself have received from God.

**Third, we must keep learning to rely on God. (v.9)** Travel the road from self-reliance to God-reliance. I shared this in my post this past Thursday. But I think this journey goes something like this. Stage 1 – Self-reliance. Life is going along fine and we mistakenly think we have everything under control. Stage 2 – Some difficult situation or suffering comes into our lives. We didn't plan for it. We can't solve it. It overwhelms us. Stage 3 – Despair. We mourn our inability to figure everything out on our own. We try to keep on top of things but fail again and again. Stage 4 – We finally turn to rely on God. We ask for His help. We ask Him to intervene or to see us through this. Stage 5 – Hope to keep going through the affliction or joy because of deliverance from it. That's how we can respond. All of this adds up to this statement:

**God's involvement in our afflictions accomplish His good purposes in us and others.** So let us stop relying on ourselves right now and bring our afflictions to Him. Then let's rely on Him to help us.

## **Communion Intro**

We invite anyone who has received Jesus as Lord and Savior into their lives to participate in the Lord Supper today. We remember that Jesus suffered the greatest affliction to deal with our greatest affliction – our own sin and the damage it caused. So we are going to spend a couple of minutes reflecting on this as we hear the song “Nothing but the blood.” Then we will return to partake of the Lord’s Supper.”