

The Work of God in the Believer's Suffering

2 Corinthians 1:8–11

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Introduction

We return again this morning to our study in the letter of 2 Corinthians. And in our opening studies of 2 Corinthians, we've learned that the Apostle Paul is writing this letter in the midst of a severe controversy. The Corinthian church is under attack. False teachers have come from Jerusalem, claiming to be apostles of Christ, and they have infiltrated the church at Corinth. And in effort to undermine the Gospel that Paul preached in order to make room for their own false teaching, they launched a full-scale assault on the character of the Apostle Paul.

And they just lobbed accusation after accusation against him. They accused him of harboring secret sin; they accused him of “purposing according to the flesh;” they accused him of embezzling the money he collected as church offerings; they accused him of lacking true apostolic credentials since he wasn't an original apostle from the original Jerusalem church. The list just went on and on.

But chief among the accusations that the false apostles leveled against Paul was that he suffered *far* too much to be a legitimate minister of the Gospel. Paul's life was a tale of one crushing conflict after another crushing conflict. Paul himself delineates the afflictions he had experienced throughout his missionary labors in 2 Corinthians 11:23 to 29. He says he was “beaten times without number, often in danger of death. Five times I received from the Jews thirty-nine lashes. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, a night and a day I have spent in the deep. . . . in labor and hardship, through many sleepless nights, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure—” And apart from all of those external things, he says he feels the daily pressure of concern for the spiritual maturity and progress of all the churches. And the false apostles point to all that and say, “*This* is a man with God's blessing?! He might as well be a pin-cushion, as much as he's suffering! This is not a man who has been commissioned by the authority of a sovereign Lord! If he was truly an apostle of Christ, he wouldn't suffer like *that*! Can't you see? God is punishing him for his secret sins! Don't listen to Paul; listen to *us*!”

You see, as we discussed last time, these false apostles were what Martin Luther called “theologians of glory.” The theology of glory taught that following Jesus makes one's life easier—that personal shame and suffering were contrary to the will of God for the believer, and so those who were truly favored by God were to “live in victory” over their circumstances. They taught that conflict and difficulty were signs of faithlessness. And so they sought lives of ease, of

reputation and recognition, and they vilified those who endured affliction as being subject to God's chastening.

In contrast to the theology of glory, Luther spoke of the "theology of the cross," which pointed people to the suffering and shame that Christ Himself endured at the very pinnacle of the revelation of His glory: on the cross. Jesus was the most *God-blessed* Person to have ever lived, and His life was marked by suffering, by repeated affliction, and by humiliation. And Luther said that the theologian of the cross understands that if that's the way God deals with His beloved Son in whom He is well-pleased, then it should be no surprise if He deals that way with those who are united to Christ by faith.

You see, what the cross teaches us, friends, is that Christianity is not a religion of worldly triumph. Oh, there is massive triumph in the Christian life—triumph over sin, triumph over the flesh, triumph over Satan our great enemy and accuser. And there *will* be triumph over all things in this world—both physical *and* spiritual. But that triumph awaits the return of Christ. As Jesus Himself taught us: the cross precedes the crown. And so the Christian ministry is not made up of the high-powered, put-together, well-respected, perfectly-polished, cultural elite! Paul says in 1 Corinthians 4:13 that we are the scum of the world, the dregs of all things! He'll say in 2 Corinthians 4:7 that we are just earthen vessels—just clay pots. Why? Because God displays the sufficiency of His power through human weakness. 2 Corinthians 4:7 says, "we have this treasure in earthen vessels, so that the surpassing greatness of the power will be of God, and not from ourselves." And if God can be shown to be powerful against the backdrop of human weakness, Paul says in chapter 12 verses 9 and 10, that's a reason for rejoicing in weaknesses.

And so at the very outset of the letter, Paul confronts the false apostles' theology of glory with the theology of the cross. He begins this vehement vindication of his own apostleship by passionately praising God for the very thing his opponents say discredits him: his suffering. So far from discrediting his genuineness as an Apostle, Paul's suffering for Christ's sake is a badge of his authenticity, and thus a cause for praise. Because it is these very afflictions that become the means through which God reveals the abundance of His divine power.

And God does this, in particular, by visiting the Apostle Paul in the midst of his afflictions for the sake of Christ, and by ministering divine comfort to him in those trials. And so he launches into a benediction of praise to the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts him in all his affliction. And in fact, verse 4, those afflictions served to prepare Paul for even greater usefulness *as* a servant of Christ, because as Paul experienced suffering and then experienced the corresponding consolation through fellowship with God, he was all the more equipped to minister comfort to the Corinthians, as they faced their own afflictions. Paul says in verse 6, "If we are afflicted, it is for your comfort." "You are the very beneficiaries of those afflictions which the false apostles say disqualify me as an apostle. How can I be disqualified as a minister of

Christ because of that which only equips me to be a more effective servant to all of you?” “Don’t you see, dear Corinthians, suffering on behalf of the people of God in the cause of Gospel ministry, that’s exactly what Jesus did, and so that’s exactly what His true servants must be all about.”

But as the benediction continues, Paul moves from these more generalized comments about experiencing divine comfort in the midst of his affliction in verses 3 through 7, to a concrete example of his affliction, and how God worked through it, in verses 8 through 11. Follow along with me in your Bibles as I read our passage for this morning. 2 Corinthians chapter 1, verses 8 to 11. “For we do not want you to be unaware, brethren, of our affliction which came to us in Asia, that we were burdened excessively, beyond our strength, so that we despaired even of life; ⁹indeed, we had the sentence of death within ourselves so that we would not trust in ourselves, but in God who raises the dead; ¹⁰who delivered us from so great a peril of death, and will deliver us, He on whom we have set our hope. And He will yet deliver us, ¹¹you also joining in helping us through your prayers, so that thanks may be given by many persons on our behalf for the favor bestowed on us through the prayers of many.”

This is a passage that teaches us much about suffering in the cause of Gospel ministry. And though you and I are not apostles, like Paul was; and though the great majority of you will never find yourselves in full-time vocational ministry, as a pastor or professor or missionary; this passage speaks to you as well. Because, as I’ve said to you numerous times already in our opening studies of 2 Corinthians: if you belong to Christ here this morning, you are *all* in ministry. All of you are called to be ministers of the New Covenant (2 Cor 3:6)—servants of one another in the body of Christ, called to encourage one another, exhort one another, admonish one another, to pray for one another, to bear one another’s burdens. *All* of you are called to be a kingdom of *priests* (1 Pet 2:9; cf. Rev 1:6), consecrated by God to bless the world through the preaching of the Gospel.

And GraceLife, if you are faithful in that ministry—if you have devoted your life to following Christ in the sacrificial service of His church and of His Gospel—you *will* be experimentally acquainted with what Paul calls “the sufferings of Christ” in verse 5. You *will* experience affliction from a hostile world as you seek to remain faithful to Christ in your personal ministry. And this passage meets you in your suffering and offers an abundance of comfort to your soul in the midst of your affliction for Christ’s sake.

And to benefit from that comfort we’re going to observe in this text **four aspects of affliction for Christ’s sake**—four features of Christian suffering, which, if we understand them as the Holy Spirit intends, will equip us for joyful, enduring ministry in the midst of affliction.

I. The Severity of Affliction (vv. 8–9)

The first of those is the **severity of affliction**. And in particular, we want to look at the severity of *Paul's* affliction as he records for us in this text. This is an intensely personal account of Paul's own suffering. And he is especially insistent that the Corinthians be made aware of these events. He says in verse 8, "For we do not want you to be unaware, brethren, of our affliction which came to us in Asia, that we were burdened excessively, beyond our strength, so that we despaired even of life; ⁹indeed, we had the sentence of death within ourselves...."

This is further evidence that Paul is not at all ashamed of his sufferings, but recognizes them to be the way of the cross. Paul's opponents are accusing him of being disqualified for ministry on account of his excessive sufferings, and the first chance he gets he calls attention to the most severe trial that he had ever endured! And he insists that the Corinthians not be ignorant of it. He uses that phrase, "For we do not want you to be unaware." That phrase appears just five other times throughout Paul's writings, and it seems to show up when Paul is really talking about something important that he doesn't want his readers to miss. In Romans 11:25 he says he doesn't want his readers to be unaware about the future salvation of Israel. In 1 Corinthians 12:1 he tells the Corinthians he doesn't want them to be ignorant of the proper use of spiritual gifts. And he tells the Thessalonians in 1 Thess 4:13 that he doesn't want them to be unaware of the events concerning the rapture of the church. Those are some weighty matters that Paul reserves this phrase for! Well, Paul views this account of his affliction in Asia in the same category of theological importance as those things. We really need to pay attention to what he's saying here.

But what's interesting is that he doesn't share many details about the actual circumstances of the affliction. That probably means the Corinthians already knew those details. But it also means that we can only speculate about them. And in the interest of time, I won't offer any extended comment on what we cannot know for certain. But what we do know is that this was a severe affliction that resulted from Paul's ministry of the Gospel, which he suffered fairly recently, sometime between the writing of First and Second Corinthians.

Like I said, the Corinthians would have known the particular trial he was speaking about. What they didn't know, judging by Paul's focus in this text, was the **severity** of the affliction, and how God was at work in Paul's life through it. He says in verse 8: "we were burdened excessively, beyond our strength...." These phrases are an extremely emphatic pair of descriptors for the intensity of Paul's suffering. The Revised Standard Version translates it, "We were utterly, unbearably crushed." Pastor John paraphrases it: "...unbearably crushed to the point of depression" (26). In secular Greek, these words were used to describe a ship that was so overloaded with cargo that it would ride low in the water and even begin to sink. They were also used to describe a pack animal that was bearing a load so much heavier than it could bear that it collapsed under the weight, despaired of rising again, and resigned to die where it lay.

Paul says he knew exactly how that animal felt. “We were burdened excessively, beyond our strength, [such] that we *despaired even of life*....” I was just like an overburdened pack animal, collapsed under the weight of an unbearable burden, convinced that I’d have to die where I lay. “We despaired even of life”—lost all hope that we would survive. He uses a fascinating word here: *exaporéomai*. The root word is *poros*, which means a “passage” or an “exit.” The *a-* is the alpha privative which negates it, so: “no passage.” And the preposition *ex-* affixed to the beginning intensifies the whole thing, giving it the sense of the “total unavailability of an exit.” Paul says he was so excessively burdened beyond his strength that he saw no way out—no way of escape from that desperate situation. He gave up all hope of survival. “Indeed,” he says, moving into verse 9, “we had the sentence of death within ourselves.” That is to say, when he stopped and asked himself whether he would live or die, everything in him led him to believe he was going to die. It was as if he was a prisoner on death row, condemned to die, and awaiting execution. Paul was going through it, friends!

And he says, “I don’t want you to be unaware of this, Corinthians! I want to make sure you grasp the severity and the intensity of suffering for Christ’s sake! This is what ministry *is*, my dear friends! It is not the theology of glory that the false apostles are peddling. It is not a life of rose beds and fluffy clouds and bright blue skies! And it is certainly not a life of pomp and circumstance, of riches and prestige and reputation! No, the Bible’s theology is the theology of the *cross*. It is denying yourself, picking up your cross, and following Christ to *Golgotha*.” “Just as it is written,” Romans 8:36, “For your sake we are being put to death all day long; we were considered as sheep to be slaughtered.” He told the Corinthians themselves in 1 Corinthians 15:31: “I die *daily*!” And GraceLife, if you want to call yourself a follower of Christ, you’ve got to be willing to go here—to die daily to yourself and to your own fleshly desires, and to lay your life down upon the sacrifice and service of the faith of your brothers and sisters in Christ. This may very well be where following Christ takes you: to excessive burdens beyond your strength, to despairing of life, and to having the sentence of death within yourself!

II. The Purpose of Affliction (v. 9)

But then Paul tells us why. We’ve seen the severity of affliction for the faithful servant of God. I want you notice the **second aspect of affliction for Christ’s sake**; namely, **the purpose of affliction**. Paul says, “We were burdened excessively, beyond our strength, [such] that we despaired even of life; ⁹indeed, we had the sentence of death within ourselves *so that* we would not trust in ourselves, but in God who raises the dead.” Paul says, “My affliction in the cause of Christ was so terribly severe that I thought I was going to die! And do you know why God ordained for that to happen? Do you know what His **purpose** was? So that all my self-confidence and self-reliance would be entirely drained out of me, and—thinking for sure that I was going to die—so that I would put all my trust in my God who *raises* the dead!” Glorious!

Now, before we look more into that twofold **purpose for suffering**, I need to step back and make the observation that this text is plainly teaching that there *is* a **purpose** for suffering! Look again with me at verse 9: “Indeed, we had the sentence of death within ourselves, *so that*.” We suffered so intensely, *so that*. Dear friends, there is an *entire worldview* in those two words! They leave absolutely no room for random chance! Evolutionists and existentialist philosophers will tell you that there *is* no God—no spiritual or immaterial realm, no Satan, no fate, no nothing. And in doing so, they implicitly declare that suffering cannot have a purpose. In the naturalistic, materialistic worldview, suffering is meaningless. *Life* is meaningless. But when Paul utters these precious two words, he declares that suffering is not meaningless. He declares that life is not meaningless by declaring that these great afflictions have a **purpose**!

But the question naturally follows: Who or what is the purposer? If there is a “so that” to our suffering—if there is a **purpose** for our affliction—who or what is the purposer? Many people—even many people who would call themselves Christians—believe that the purposer in suffering is Satan. He is the accuser of the brethren; he is our great adversary and enemy; he prowls around like a roaring lion seeking someone to devour (1 Pet 5:8). But Satan is not the purposer of our suffering. You say, “How do you know that?” Well look again at the **purpose**! The stated purpose of our suffering in this text is so that we would abandon all reliance upon ourselves and trust only in our all-powerful God! Does that sound like the work of *Satan* to you?! No indeed! Satan is not the purposer of our sufferings.

What about fate? A lot of people believe fate is the origin of our suffering. One of the most popular quips of our day is, “Everything happens for a reason.” And I hate that phrase, because it’s just so trite and empty. There’s zero substance to it. And I don’t know about you, but when I’m in the middle of suffering and looking around asking why, I’m looking for substance! I’m looking for something I can hold on to! Not some paper-thin, thoughtless cliché with no basis in reality! But tons of people *are* content to leave that there. Plenty of people believe there’s a purpose in suffering—and a purpose for the rest of life—but they’re content to say that it’s an impersonal, unknowable force. The problem is: impersonal forces don’t do things *on purpose*. Intentionality is the mark of *personality*.

No, the purposer of our suffering is not Satan, and it’s not blind fate. Who is it? It’s God! Who else would design Paul’s suffering with the intention of destroying his own self-reliance and strengthening his trust in God? It is only God Himself who has both the power *and* the inclination to do that! I love what one writer says about this. He says, “The explicit [‘so that’] of verse 9...ought to forever silence those who doubt whether God is sovereign over the troubles and afflictions of life. There is always design in our distress” (Storms, 33). Paul’s entire argument in this passage is founded upon the rock-solid conviction that God is *absolutely* sovereign over all circumstances—that as the Confession states, “God, from all eternity, did, by

the most wise and holy counsel of His own will, freely, and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass” (WCF III.1).

God ordains our suffering, friends! I don’t ever want to hear you say, “Oh, well, everything happens for a reason,” as if the universe is governed by no more than an impersonal force like fate. I want you to say, “God has a purpose for this affliction in my life! He has purposefully, wisely, lovingly ordained this for me, and I am committed to glorifying Him in my response to it!”

And like I said last week, dear friends, this doctrine of the absolute sovereignty of God in suffering is precious to us! Because when we’re in the midst of trials and difficulties—when we feel like we are being burdened excessively, beyond our strength, such that we see absolutely no way out—the most common question we ask is Why? “Lord, why am I going through this?” It all just seems so senseless! The storm of our circumstances and the pain of the affliction can *blind* us to seeing any recognizable reason. And so we ask, “Why?!” And imagine if in the midst of that despair of the loss of a child—of painful cancer, of frightening depression—imagine you got the response, “No reason.” “You mean I’m going through this *for nothing*?!” Or imagine if God said, “Hey listen, I’m doing my best. But Satan really one-upped me this time and my hands are tied.” Or, “Yeah, I’d really like to do something about it, but, ya know, free will, and all that.” None of that offers one *ounce* of comfort!!

But to cry out to God from the storm, “O Lord, why is this happening? Please show me why I’m suffering like this?” and to get the response, “Take heart, dear child. Remember the Lord Jesus Christ and His sacrifice for you, and be reminded of My love and concern for you. None of this has taken Me off guard; indeed, I’ve sent it along to you as a gift of My good providence to humble you, to refine you, to drive you more to myself, and to conform you more into the image of Christ,” oh, *there* is a hope sure and steadfast! *There* is an *anchor* for the soul! (Heb 6:19)

And so, dear friends, these two precious words, “**so that**,” teach us that God has a sovereign **purpose** in our sufferings, and His sovereign ordination of our sufferings is the ground of all our comfort. We should not try to save God from His sovereignty by attributing our suffering to Satan, or to some bare permission in God. That would be to cut the very legs out from under the solid, robust theology of God’s sovereign grace that we depend on and cherish so deeply in those very times of suffering.

So we’ve seen that suffering *has* a purpose, and the comfort that that reality brings. Let’s turn now to what Paul says that purpose *is*. Paul says, “We were burdened excessively, beyond our strength, [such] that we despaired even of life; ⁹indeed, we had the sentence of death within ourselves so that we would *not trust in ourselves, but in God who raises the dead.*” God will bring into your lives the kind of crushing, unbearable suffering that you simply cannot handle on

your own so that you would be drained of every drop of self-reliance, and put all your confidence in Him.

Friends, we are so prideful. Self-reliance and self-trust are so native to our souls that it is among the most difficult sin to purge from our being. How prone we all are to trust in our own abilities, our own reasoning, our own ingenuity, our own schemes and machinations! How easily are we puffed up by our accomplishments—things that God Himself has granted to us as gifts but which we, in an act of grand larceny, take credit for! Our love of self—our being impressed with ourselves such that we rely on our own strength—is one of the most hideous and deceitful sins of the human heart! It must be! Look to what great lengths God is willing to go to purify us from it! He will put us in a position *so* impossible, *so* beyond our own native strength, that we have no choice but to come face to face with our own utter helplessness, abandon all hope in ourselves, and flee entirely to Him.

You say, “All that for self-reliance? Isn’t God overreacting a bit?” No indeed, dear friends. As I said, self-reliance is among the most hideous and disgusting sins of the heart. It is brazen and arrogant idolatry—a preference of our own selves rather than God. One commentator captures it well. He says this is how self-reliance speaks. It says, “God, I’m more capable than you are of accomplishing this task. God, I’m wiser than you are in figuring out how this should be done. God, I’m more adept than you are at sorting through options and discerning the proper path to follow. God, I’m more deserving than you are of the credit and praise for fulfilling this ministry form which so many stand to profit” (Storms, 32). No wonder God pronounces a curse upon the sin of self-reliance. Jeremiah 17:5: “Thus says Yahweh, ‘*Cursed* is the man who trusts in mankind and makes flesh his strength, and whose heart turns away from Yahweh.’”

There may be some of you this morning who feel that Paul’s words of unbearable, crushing burdens describe your life to a “t” right now. Spurgeon has a word for you. He says, “Perhaps our heavenly Father is, at this present time, afflicting some of you, denying you your heart’s desire, or taking from you the delight of your eyes. Perhaps He is placing you in circumstances where you are puzzled and bewildered and do not know what to do—and all for this reason—that you may become sick of yourself and fond of Christ.” God’s purpose in your affliction very well may be to wean your affections off of anything you’ve trusted and hoped in, and to drive you to seek all your deliverance from the God who raises the dead. For it is then, against the backdrop of *your* insufficiency and helplessness, that He magnifies the glory of His *perfect* sufficiency and almighty power. What does Christ say to Paul, in 2 Corinthians 12:9? “My power is perfected in weakness.”

And so if you are trusting in yourself, as if you were strong, you are stealing God’s glory. And He is so lovingly jealous to display His own glory to His people, that He will subject us to the most crippling trials so that we would abandon our suicidal self-confidence, and magnify His

strength as glorious. So now when you face trials, you don't have to say, "God, we don't know what You're doing, but we know You're in control." No! You do know what He's doing! He's bringing you to the end of yourself so that you would no longer trust in yourself but in Him who is absolutely sovereign and powerful, because this brings Him glory.

III. The God of Affliction (vv. 9–10)

And that brings us to the **third aspect of affliction** that Paul emphasizes in this text, number three: **the God of affliction**. Now I call Him "the God of affliction" precisely because of what we've just studied—because He sovereignly ordains His children's sufferings for the praise of His glory. But Paul doesn't stop with just God's sovereignty. He fixes his confidence and trust upon three specific characteristics of God that sustain him in the midst of his sufferings. Look at verses 9 and 10. Paul says the purpose of our affliction is "so that we would not trust in ourselves, but in God (a) who raises the dead; (b) ¹⁰who delivered us from so great a peril of death, and will deliver us, (c) He on whom we have set our hope." We are to fix our hope and trust upon our God who is a **resurrector**, a **rescuer**, and **reliable**. God is a **resurrector**; He is a **rescuer**; and He is **reliable**.

First, God is a **resurrector**; He is the "God who raises the dead." This is a present participle; God is not merely the one who *has* raised the dead, merely in the past; He is the God who, present tense, *raises* the dead. This is characteristic action. God is the kind of God who raises the dead. In Romans 4:17, Paul gives the account of Abraham's receiving the promise that his heir will be born to him. Even though, as the text says, his body was "as good as dead" (4:19), Abraham believed God, "who gives life to the dead and calls into being that which does not exist." And then after God gave life to that "as good as dead" body and brought forth the heir from Abraham's own loins, God called upon Abraham to *sacrifice* that only son. And Abraham went up to Mount Moriah, trusting in the Lord to provide the sacrifice. And he raised that knife, fully intending to slay his only begotten son, *because*, Hebrews 11:19 says, "he considered that God is able to raise people even from the dead, from which he also received him back as a type." You see, God is a **resurrector**; He is the God who raises the dead. Paul was convinced that his sufferings on behalf of the Gospel were to end in his death. Inwardly Paul was speaking to himself, "Dead man walking." But he says that God took him to such a place of despair precisely so that he would know that when deliverance came, it came not from himself or his own resources, but from the God who *raises* the dead.

And this is just like God—to empty His people of every bit of reliance or trust in themselves by bringing us into situations we cannot possibly handle on our own, pushing us to the brink of despair until we have no place to turn but Him, and then showing up to manifest the glory of His power. I want you to see one particular example of this; turn to Judges chapter 7. In Judges 7, God has raised up Gideon to deliver Israel from the oppression of the Midianites. And the

Midianites and the Amalekites and the sons of the east had assembled their armies against Israel, and Judges 7:12 says they were “as numerous as locusts; and their camels were without number, as numerous as the sand on the seashore.” And so Gideon assembled all the men he could find to fight for Israel, a number amounting to 32,000 (7:3). But then God instructed him to announce to the army that anyone who was afraid and trembling was to leave. And so 22,000 men left, leaving only 10,000. And then God said to Gideon, in Judges chapter 7 verse 2: “The people who are with you are too many for Me to give Midian into their hands, for Israel would become boastful, saying, ‘My own power has delivered me.’” And from the *ten thousand* men, God chose *three hundred* to go and fight against the Midianites, who were as numerous as locusts and whose camels were like the sand on the seashore! Why? Because he wants every last soldier in Israel to know that it was by *His* power that they were delivered, and *not* their own.

And that is just one example. We could spend the rest of the morning showing how God does this all throughout redemptive history. He waits until Abraham and Sarah are in their 90s to promise that they would conceive an heir (Gen 17:17). He waits until the people of Israel are trapped by Pharaoh’s army to show up and part the Red Sea (Exod 14). He waits until Israel is in the middle of the *desert*, with no food anywhere, to provide the manna from heaven (Exod 16). When a 9-foot tall warrior defies the armies of Israel, God sends a 15 year-old shepherd boy with a slingshot (1 Sam 17). And when the mighty devil himself is to be defeated, a Lamb goes to the slaughter (John 1:29) (adapted from John Piper).

Friends, our God will take you through the fire—through the great burdensome weight of affliction—in order that He would lovingly purge you of all confidence in yourself, and to reveal to you and all those around you the glory of His power to raise even the dead.

God is a resurrector. Secondly, God is a **rescuer**. Look at verse 10: “...who delivered us from so great a peril of death, and will deliver us, He on whom we have set our hope. And He will yet deliver us.” You see this threefold repetition of the word “deliver.” God is a deliverer, a **rescuer**. He has delivered Paul from his affliction in Asia in the past: “who delivered us,” past tense, “from so great a peril of death.” And He will go on delivering Paul from the afflictions that marked his apostolic ministry in the immediate future: “and *will* deliver us.” And the force of the original there is, “He will *continue* to deliver us as we *continue* to face trials beyond our strength for the Gospel’s sake.” You see, Paul was getting back up for more. After all this turmoil, and excessive burden, and despairing even for his life, Paul was getting back up for more. The severest storms couldn’t snuff him out, because he trusted entirely in his God who is by nature a **rescuer**. And after God would deliver him from further afflictions in the ministry, He would ultimately and finally deliver him from physical death, by raising him from the dead to be with Christ forever: end of verse 10: “And He will *yet* deliver us.”

God is a resurrector, He is a rescuer, and third He is **reliable**. He is, verse 10, “He on whom we have set our hope.” God is entirely trustworthy. He is to be *hoped* in. The language that Paul uses here is so reminiscent of the Greek translation of Psalm 22 that I believe Paul is alluding to that Scripture as he pens this letter. Psalm 22:4 and 5—David says, “In You [O God] our fathers trusted [or “hoped;” same word in Greek]; They trusted and You delivered them. To You they cried out and were delivered; In You they trusted and were not disappointed.” Indeed not. For we know, Romans 5:3, that tribulation brings about perseverance; and perseverance, proven character; and proven character, *hope*; and hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us.

IV. The Response to Affliction (v. 11)

Well, we’ve seen the severity of affliction, the purpose of affliction, and just now the sovereign God of affliction. The **final aspect** of affliction for Christ’s sake is, **number four: the response to affliction**. Verse 11: “And He will yet deliver us, ¹¹you also joining in helping us through your prayers, so that thanks may be given by many persons on our behalf for the favor bestowed on us through the prayers of many.”

The **response to affliction** that we are to have is to enlist the faithful support of fellow-believers to pray for us. It is through the means of prayer that God’s deliverance from affliction comes. The phrase, “you also joining in helping us” is a participle of means. “And He will yet deliver us.” How will He deliver you, Paul? By what means will this deliverance come? “...you also joining in helping us through your prayers.”

And I love this. Paul has just extolled and celebrated God’s absolute sovereignty in our suffering—particularly by highlighting that God has an explicit purpose for our suffering, and then also as He demonstrates that sovereignty by continuing to deliver His people. But even though Paul is confident in God’s sovereign power to orchestrate his deliverance, he doesn’t presume on that deliverance. Paul was not a hyper-Calvinist. He was not a fatalist. He *was* a sold-out adherent to the absolute sovereignty of God in all things, and no sooner does he articulate that conviction that he also requests prayer. You see, Paul understood that the God who has ordained the ends has also ordained the means to those ends. And one of the principal means that He uses to accomplish all His good pleasure (cf. Isa 46:10) is prayer (cf. Phil 1:19; Phm 1:22).

Some people ask, “If God is sovereign, and He’s determined everything already, why pray? If God has an eternal decree, prayer won’t change anything.” That’s like saying, while you’re driving 65 miles-per-hour on the 5 Freeway on your way home from church today, “I believe God is absolutely sovereign. And if He wants me to be at home, He’ll make sure I get home,” and then relaxing in your seat and taking your hands off the steering wheel. “If God is sovereign,

why steer?" Because we understand that God's absolute control over whether or not you make it back to your house this afternoon does not at all negate the *means* of a car and a functioning steering wheel to accomplish those ends. And God has ordained that the good gifts He delights to give to His children be received through the means of asking for them. Indeed, I ask: If God is *not* sovereign, why pray? If He can't do anything about it, what are you asking Him for?

But you say, "Why does everything have to be so complicated? Why does there have to be this complex system of 'ends and means' and 'sovereignty and prayer'? Why not just do what You're going to do, God?" Paul tells us. Look again at the middle of verse 11: "...so that thanks may be given by many persons on our behalf for the favor bestowed on us through the prayers of many." The purpose for prayer in **response to affliction** is the glory and praise of God.

Prayer is the expression of the reality we spoke about in verse 9—it is the reflex of the believer who has abandoned all hope and reliance upon himself, and has placed all his confidence in the sovereign power of God. By its very nature, prayer is a confession of weakness, of need, and of dependence (Zaspel, *The Theology of B. B. Warfield*, 503). It is a cry for help in which we look away from ourselves and our own resources and depend upon the all-sufficiency of God to provide what we cannot accomplish on our own. As Philip Edgcumbe Hughes famously said, "In prayer, human impotence casts itself at the feet of divine omnipotence" (23). And so God is glorified in prayer, because prayer magnifies the believer's own insufficiency, and becomes the occasion for tasting God's *infinite* sufficiency as He mercifully gives grace to those who ask Him. John Piper writes, simply, "Prayer glorifies God because it puts us in the position of the thirsty and God in the position of the all-supplying fountain" (*What Jesus Demands from the World*, 106).

And that is Paul's goal. "Pray with me, brothers and sisters, that God would continue to deliver me from my afflictions. Get *everyone* to pray for me!" Why, Paul? Because more people praying equals more voices that can twist God's arm into giving us what we want? "No! Because the more people that pray for my deliverance will be that many more people who have their prayers answered. And the more people who have their prayers answered graciously by God, the more people will be standing to praise and thank Him for answered prayer!"

Conclusion

And so this opening benediction ends where it began: with the glory and praise of God. For the Apostle Paul, God's glory is the beginning and the end, the first and the last, the supreme goal of all of life and ministry. May God grant that it would be so for us as well.

Well, let me close with three brief words of exhortation. First, if you're not going through it now, it likely won't be very long before you find yourself in the middle of an affliction that you would

describe as being burdened excessively, beyond your strength, such that there looks to be no way of escape. In the midst of that suffering, as you cry out to God and ask Him why, remember our text. Take comfort in the reality that your suffering is *not* meaningless, but that it comes as a gracious gift from your sovereign, loving, wise, and merciful God. Remember that He has purposefully brought this affliction into your life in order to humble you—to destroy whatever vestiges of self-confidence remain in your heart, to cause you to abandon all trust in yourself, and to drive you to trust in Him as the resurrecting, rescuing, and reliable God who delights to magnify the glory of His sufficiency by giving good gifts to His children.

And pray. Pray about everything. Acknowledge your own impotence and cast yourself at the feet of divine omnipotence. Humble yourself to recognize your insufficiency, and call out to the One who is perfectly sufficient to provide even when you seem to have the sentence of death within yourself. And when He is faithful to deliver you through that affliction—to bring you through that fire so that your dross is burned away and your faith stands refined as precious gold—give thanks to God. Praise Him and thank Him. Bless His name as the One who provides. In so doing—when you can joyfully bless God’s name in the midst of your suffering, when you can experience loss for the sake of the Gospel and call it gain—you will display to the world the surpassing worth of Christ.

And finally, follow the Apostle Paul and follow the Lord Jesus Christ in laying down your lives in sacrificial ministry. For the sake of serving one another, and for the sake of loving the lost who need to hear the Gospel, be willing to lay down your lives in the cause of Christ, even in the face of suffering. If your ministry as a minister of the New Covenant should require you to enter the storms of affliction for the sake of those you’re serving, don’t shrink back from it! Remember that your future is in the hands of an all-powerful, all-knowing, all-wise God, who promises to work all things for your good. Even if they were to kill you, you serve a God who raises the dead. And in the strength of that promise, live in the freedom to make any sacrifice that love demands, no matter how big or how small.