



Affliction – Friend or Foe?

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One of the common experiences of all the people of God is this matter of affliction. And I want to speak to you tonight from 2 Corinthians 1:3-11 under the general theme of "Affliction – Friend or Foe?". It's obvious that the theme of this passage which we read earlier in the service is the subject of affliction, for the very thing which triggered this eulogy, this blessing of God the Father is that the Apostle and his companion Timothy have experienced a peculiar measure of the consolation and comfort of God in the midst of affliction. And so the Apostle begins with those words "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort; who comforteth us in all our affliction...." And then it opens up the whole subject of affliction in which there are given to us some very helpful perspectives concerning this that is the experience of all the people of God.

Now in introducing our study of the passage, it's necessary to understand several things about affliction. First of all, the meaning of the word as it is found here in the passage before us. The word itself literally means "that which is pressing" or "pressure". Hence it is come to speak of oppression, affliction, or tribulation. It refers to distress brought upon men and women particularly by outward circumstances which in turn create this inward distress. It's translated numerous ways in the New Testament. Some places it's translated "tribulation"; other places, as here, "affliction"; sometimes "persecution"; other times "trouble". But it's that which God reveals is the portion of all of His people. This pressure, this oppression, this tribulation, this inward distress brought about by outward circumstances, our Lord says will be the portion of all of His people. John 16:33: "In the world ye have tribulation [affliction--and this the same word in the original]: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world."

One of the very elementary messages that the apostles used to give on their missionary follow-up tours concerned the whole subject of affliction. In acts 14:21-22, we read: "And when they had preached the Gospel to that city, and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra, and to Iconium, and to Antioch, confirming the souls of the disciples, exhorting them to continue in the faith, and that through many tribulations [same word in the original] we must enter into the kingdom of God."

The apostles were very, very concerned that believers understand early in their Christian lives that affliction and tribulation were part and parcel of normal Christian experience. It is for this reason our Lord in His parting words spoke the words previously quoted, "In the world ye have tribulation." He had given them some tremendously encouraging promises about the coming of the Holy Spirit, some promises concerning His ministry of comfort and consolation and illumination and the impartation of gifts and graces and power. But lest they should misunderstand this to think that they would come to some level of experiencing the Holy Spirit that would either immunize them from or totally lift them out of the realm of tribulation and affliction, our Lord says toward the conclusion of those wonderful words of John 14, 15, and 16, "In the world ye shall have tribulation."

John was so confident that tribulation was as much a part of the Christian life as faith in Christ that when he addresses the believers of Asia Minor in Revelation 1, this is how he addresses them (verse 9): "I John, your brother and partaker with you in the tribulation and kingdom and patience which are in Jesus..." He looks upon all believers as fellow partakers not only of the kingdom and the steadfastness that are in Christ, but also the tribulation, the affliction, the persecution that are in Christ. And so it is not surprising that our Lord tells us in the parable of the sower that some apparent converts are caused to wither in their profession when they come into contact with their first real affliction. In Matthew 13:21, Jesus said, "When tribulation [affliction] or persecution ariseth because of the word, straightway he stumbleth."

It was affliction that caused the consternation of the psalmist in Psalm 73. He was afflicted, and he saw the people of God afflicted, and it didn't make sense to Him because the people who were not committed to the worship of Jehovah and to the law of God seemed to be wonderfully insulated from affliction. And this he could not understand.

So in the light of the fact that the Scripture teaches that affliction is one of the common denominators of the people of God and that affliction can be the occasion of stumbling and consternation, it is necessary for every Christian to learn how to confront affliction. And one of the great problems we face, as in many other areas, we carry over into the Christian life worldly carnal views of affliction. You see, the worldling looks upon affliction as his greatest enemy. Every affliction that comes into his life is a roadblock in the pursuit of his carnal and temporal goals. And therefore, affliction is always his enemy. He can never hug affliction to his breast and say, "Welcome my God-sent friend." He looks upon him and says, "Who are you, O my enemy?" And he does all that is in his power to get him out of the way. But now for the child of God, there should be a totally different perspective concerning the subject of affliction. The worldling looks upon it as enemy, all enemy, nothing but enemy. And yet, sad to say, many children of God, to some degree, have absorbed that mentality and do not understand the purpose of God in affliction.

Now what I want to do tonight in turning to this passage in 2 Corinthians is seek to lay out before you in a very sketchy way the divine purpose of

God in affliction, which when understood by the child of God will help him to embrace his afflictions rather than to run from them as an unwanted enemy.

Let me illustrate the difference this perspective will make. Try to picture a little child who's been involved in a very serious accident. He's been knocked unconscious, and he has a compound fracture. He's got a bone sticking right through the skin that's going to demand not only the resetting of the bone but some suturing and patching up. And the first time he awakes out of his unconsciousness, he looks up and there's a man with a mask on his face and a skullcap on his head, a big needle in one hand and a scalpel in his other hand. And the poor child coming to consciousness thinks he's awakened in the midst of a Frankenstein horror movie. He's scared to death, and he screams out. And he begins to try to fight himself off that table until he's quieted down long enough. And his mom or dad or the nurse or the doctor explains to him that the person standing there with the needle is going to put the needle in there so that he won't feel any pain when he takes his little knife and he begins to patch him up here and put the arm back in place. And once the child understands that that which in his first reflex response looked so foreboding; something to be resisted, when he understands the purpose of all that, then if he's old enough to be rational and think through the issue, he will welcome that which upon first sight he would utterly reject.

In the same way, to the same degree, the child of God many times when he wakes up, as it were, and sees affliction standing before him with his long needle and with his scalpel, his reaction is one of wanting to run. And it's at that point that he needs to be still and hear the voice of God saying, "This is the purpose I have in this affliction." And then the heart of the child of God is stilled to submit to that affliction.

What then in 2 Corinthians 1:3-11 is the divine purpose in affliction? I would suggest that in the Apostle's description there are at least five divine purposes in affliction, and I'm limiting our observations just to this passage. We could range far and wide in many other portions of Scripture, but I want to stick with this portion and lay before you these aspects of the divine purpose in affliction. Now my purpose, I trust you remember, is that you as a child of God may recognize this so that when affliction comes (and it will come), you may be able to confront it Biblically and not look upon affliction as your foe but as your friend.

What then is the first purpose of God in affliction? Well, it's set before us in verse 3: "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort." As the Apostle Paul breaks out in praise to God, he praises God with specific reference to the revelation of God's character that has come to him in the context of affliction. Therefore, the first purpose of God in affliction is to give us a fuller revelation of the character of God. In this text, God is called three things. He is called the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ; secondly, the Father of mercies, and third, the God of all comfort.

Now when the Apostle addresses Him as the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, he is indicating that God has been revealed to him in the saving revelation made in and through Jesus Christ the Lord. In other words, when the Apostles think of God, he thinks of Him not only as the God of creation, not only as the God of providence, but he thinks of Him particularly as the God and Father of the Lord Jesus Christ. He thinks of Him as the God who has revealed Himself in His way of salvation in the person and work of the Lord Jesus. Therefore, whatever follows in this text, whatever other revelation is made of God, it is made in the context of that fundamental revelation of God as a saving God in Jesus Christ the Lord. That's the starting point.

If you do not stand in a saving relationship to God through the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ, this message is not for you. This is children's bread, and it is not to be given to the dogs. This is God's word to believers who know God as the God and Father of the Lord Jesus Christ, as the Apostle further says in verse 5, "For as the sufferings of Christ abound unto us, even so our comfort also aboundeth through Christ." All of the consolation of God to His suffering saints is in terms of their vital union with Jesus Christ.

But now notice, the Apostle not only knows Him as the God and Father of the Lord Jesus, but he calls him in this place (and it's the only place I know of in the New Testament where God is addressed in these terms) "the Father of mercies" or literally "the Father of the mercies" or "the compassions and the God of all comforting". Now let's look at those two ascriptions of God for a moment.

"The Father of all mercies [or compassions]." The word "mercy" means "pity to those who are in distress". You remember in the life of our Lord and His ministry, needy people would encounter our Lord and would cry out, "Son of David, have mercy upon me. Look upon me with pity." In Psalm 103:13: "Like as a father pitieth his children, so Jehovah pitieth them that fear Him." He addresses God in terms of God's inward disposition in the face of the afflictions of His people. When God beholds the afflictions of His people ordered by His own divine providence, how does He behold them? He doesn't behold them with a stoical indifference saying, "I've decreed it, and now it's for their good. Let them work it out." No, no, "In all of their afflictions," the Scripture says, "He was afflicted." He not only is the God of our Lord Jesus Christ who's revealed a way of forgiveness and acceptance through the Lord Jesus, but He's the God who having brought us into His family and given us the spirit of adoption is to us the Father of mercies.

And He says, "The God of all comforting." Where the reference to mercy focuses on the disposition of God's heart, this reference of comforting points out the activity of God. He not only has an attitude of pity and compassion, but He puts forth that attitude in positive comfort of His people. In the midst of the pressure of their distress, He is the God who comforts them.

Now let me ask a question. How did the Apostle Paul come to know God as the God and Father of the Lord Jesus Christ? Well, you see, that revelation was made to him in the way that is made to all sinful men. He must, first of all, be brought to a sight of his sin. He must be brought to a sight of the mercy that God extends in the Lord Jesus. You read the first part of that in Romans 7: "I had not known sin, except through the law: for I had not known coveting, except the law had said, Thou shalt not covet." And he details how God dealt with him to show him that in spite of all his external morality and religiosity, he was lost and undone.

Then he came to know God as the God and Father of the Lord Jesus Christ. You see, just as no one knows God as the God and Father of the Lord Jesus apart from the experimental knowledge of sin and of grace, so you cannot really know God as the Father of mercies and the God of all comfort unless you're in the experimental crucible of affliction. You see, you don't have pity upon those who are well off. You don't need to extend comfort to those who are completely at ease. Pity is for the afflicted. Comfort is for the distressed. And the Apostle tells us, then, in this passage that the first purpose of God in affliction with reference to His children is to give them this further unfolding of His own character, to bring them into an experimental awareness of the God that He is.

So if you pray as a Christian (and I trust you do pray), "O God, help me to know You better." Perhaps you find yourself in the words of Philippians 3: "That I may know Him." Would you have further revelation of the character of God, not in the abstract, but in the real stuff of human experience? Then, dear child of God, don't look upon affliction as your enemy. It's in the context of affliction that you will come to know Him as the God of all mercies and the God of all comfort. And if you're going to be so self-sparing that you say, "O God, don't touch me with affliction", what you're saying is, "I want no further revelation experimentally of the depth and breadth, the height and the length of Your infinite character. And so the first purpose of God, then, in affliction is to give us a fuller revelation of His character.

Now the second purpose is laid out in verses 4 to 7:

"who comforteth us in all our affliction, that we may be able to comfort them that are in any affliction, through the comfort wherewith we ourselves are comforted of God. For as the sufferings of Christ abound unto us, even so our comfort also aboundeth through Christ. But whether we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation; or whether we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which worketh in the patient enduring of the same sufferings which we also suffer: and our hope for you is steadfast; knowing that, as ye are partakers of the sufferings, so also are ye of the comfort."

Do you see what the Apostle is saying? He's saying that the second divine purpose of affliction for the child of God is to equip us for a more useful ministry to the people of God. Notice that thread of thought: God comforts us that we may be able to comfort others. "Suffering abounds in us. Comfort abounds through us. If we are afflicted for your sakes, if we

are comforted for your sakes." And you can reduce the basic thought of verses 4 to 7 in this simple little equation: "All that happens to us happens for your sakes. All that comes to us issues in blessings to you."

Now in the context, the primary reference to this, of course, is to the Apostle and to his companion Timothy. Whatever particular trials they were passing through by virtue of the problems at the church at Corinth and in the light of their overall ministry, the Apostle wants the Corinthians to know that what is happening to them is for their sakes. But in the light of passages like Romans 15:14 in which the Apostle speaks in such broad terms of the ministry that believers have one to another, we cannot give this an exclusive reference to the Apostle. He said, "And I myself also am persuaded of you, my brethren, that ye yourselves are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge, able also to admonish one another." He said of the Romans, "I am confident that as brethren you have come to sufficient experimental knowledge that you're able to admonish one another." And so I would lay before you as the people of God this second aspect of the divine purpose in affliction.

How is God going to equip you for a more useful ministry to others? Well, I'll tell you what He's going to do. He's going to put you in the fires of affliction, that in those fires of affliction, as you experimentally become acquainted with the comfort of God, you in turn may be an instrument of consolation and comfort to others. You see, you do not exist in the body of Christ for your own sake. God has placed you in the body of Christ that you might be an instrument of maturity and development in the lives of the other members of that body.

1 Corinthians 12 deals with this so clearly: when one member suffers, all the members suffer with it. When one member is comforted, all are comforted with it. Ephesians 4: "...all the body fitly framed and knit together through that which every joint supplieth, according to the working in due measure of each several part, maketh the increase of the body unto the building up of itself in love."

Now how are you going to be made more useful in your ministry to others? Well, it's going to be in the midst of affliction. If affliction is the common experience of the people of God in all ages, then one of the great needs that they have is for people to be able to console them and comfort them in their affliction. Who's going to be able to do it? Those who have themselves proven the consolation of God in the midst of affliction; those who have experimentally learned how to face the needle and scalpel. And instead of screaming and running and ranting and raving to get off the operating table, they'll say, "Lord, put in the needle; do Your work with the scalpel. May I prove You to be the God of all comfort, the Father of all mercies to the end that I might have a more useful ministry unto others.

Perhaps there are a few things which reveal the depth of our selfhood more clearly than the quickness with which we reject affliction. "Lord, this is doing this and that and the other to me." Instead of saying, "O God, if this is the price that I'm must pay to be an instrument in Your hands to be

a blessing to others, Lord, I'm willing to submit to anything that I might be an instrument of consolation to my fellow believers." And isn't that the true mark of divine love? "Love seeketh not her own."

Isn't that our big problem? The moment affliction comes, all we think about is, "This is doing this to me, to my name, my comforts, my plans--my, my, my!" The Apostle Paul didn't look upon it this way. When affliction came tumbling in upon him, he said, "Well, halleluia! There are a lot more people out there who are going to be helped." Isn't that what he said? "As the afflictions abound," he says, "so the consolations abound." And he welcomed the affliction knowing that it was going to equip him for a more useful ministry to the people of God.

So let me encourage you, dear child of God, some who this very night may be in the midst of an unusual discipline of affliction and tribulation, and you found it perhaps so difficult. You cried out, "Lord, is there something in me? Is this some chastisement? Is there some sin?" And you've been open before God, and you've drawn a blank. Perhaps this is the perspective that you need to bring into the total picture: "Lord, there are no accidents with you. You know every single person to whom I must be an instrument and a means of grace all along the way from here to glory. Lord, I embrace all of your disciplines to me that I might be a source of blessing to others."

Well, the Apostle goes on to give us a third purpose in affliction to help him look upon affliction not as a foe but as a friend. And it's found in verses 8 and 9:

"For we would not have you ignorant, brethren, concerning our affliction which befell us in Asia, that we were weighed down exceedingly, beyond our power, insomuch that we despaired even of life: yea, we ourselves have had the sentence of death within ourselves, that we should not trust in ourselves, but in God who raiseth the dead."

What was the third divine purpose in affliction according to the Apostle? Well, it was simply this: simply to shut him up more fully to the power of God. Notice his words: "I don't want you to be ignorant, you Corinthians, concerning this tremendous affliction which came to us in Asia." What he was referring to, nobody knows for certain. The commentators offer their guesses, and most of them disagree. So I'd be foolish to try to arbitrate that problem. But whatever it was--and here's the important thing: not what the trial was but what the purpose of God was. And notice, he said, "Here was God's purpose: we had this affliction upon us that brought us to the place where we despaired even of life." He said, "Yes, we had the very sentence of death within ourselves. We were as good as dead." To what purpose? "That we should not trust in ourselves, but in God who raiseth the dead." In other words, the Apostle Paul says, "We were brought to a place where the only way out of that circumstance of affliction was a manifestation, an operation of divine power equal to the power that raises dead men to life."

Now you see, in any other exercise of divine power, there may be great divine assistance, but there may be already something there to work with. If a lame man came to the Lord Jesus, the Lord straightened out a leg that was already there. If a blind man came, the Lord gave sight to eyes that were already there. But when the Lord Jesus called Lazarus out of the tomb, there was nothing there. There was a direct intrusion of light from without. And Paul said, "We were brought to the place where our confidence was such an exertion of divine power that was equal to the power that raises men from the dead." And therefore, he said, "This affliction was not our foe but our friend because it shut us up more fully than ever to confidence in the mighty power of the living God."

Now you see, we can have a very romantic view of the Apostle Paul as though he didn't have to wrestle with indwelling sin and corruption. Yet Romans 7 is an eloquent testimony to the fact that this was not true. You look at 2 Corinthians 12, Paul had a tendency to be proud. And God seeing that tendency, said, "Lest you be tempted to be puffed up beyond measure because of the revelations given to you, I'm going to allow this messenger of Satan to buffet you." And Paul said, "Lord, I can't complete my ministry with this thing. It hinders me, it cripples me, it weakens me." The Lord said, "No, if I took it away, your pride would weaken and cripple you. Therefore, I'm going to allow this affliction so that in the midst of your physical weakness, you'll be conscious of where your dependence is. And in the midst of your weakness, the power of Christ will be manifested." And so the Apostle needed, as we do, to be constantly pushed away from the subtle temptation to self-confidence, to creature confidence; to looking more upon God's work as the work of Him assisting us in the exercise of our own cleverness and our own abilities. And so when this affliction came, he said, "This was the divine purpose: that we should not trust in ourselves but in God."

And O, dear child of God, if the Apostle Paul needed affliction to shut him up more fully to confidence in the power of God, who are you and whom am I to think we'll be shut up by any lesser means? And affliction, that which God brings upon us and makes us constantly embrace our weakness and comes like scissors to cut the cords and the nerves of creature confidence and carnal confidence, these things the Apostle says are the divine purpose in affliction.

Sometimes the Lord has to do it with regard to monetary things. It's pretty hard for some of us to pray, "Lord, give us this day our daily bread" and really mean it. We've collected our check week in, week in, month out, month out until suddenly we're laid off and affliction comes. Then you begin to know what it is as you never knew before to look to God to supply your daily bread. And suddenly those words are no longer pretty words in a prayer that you memorized as a child. They become the experimental petition of your own heart: "Loving Father, look down upon us and our need; give us this day our daily bread." And what happens with that affliction? It shuts you up to the power of God and the intervention of God.

Sometimes it comes with health. Some of us know weeks and months and years of getting out of bed with two sound feet and a sound mind and a body that can carry us to our work. And though we do sort of half-heartedly say, "Now Lord, give me strength for this day" and at the end of the day thank the Lord, it really doesn't come from our heart. We pretty well think we can run on our own steam until God just allows that strength to be shriveled. And we know what it is to lay there on a bed of weakness or sickness and say, "O God, if I'm to even get through half this day, You must sustain me; You must strengthen me. And we're shut up to the exercise of divine power for our daily strength in a way that we never were before. How did this come about? Affliction was God's means to shut us more fully to His power.

So it is with the matter of wisdom; so it is with the matter of patience. God puts us in situations where all of our natural resources are utterly depleted. And we say, "As far as that duty is concerned and what I must have to perform it, I'm as good as a dead man. The sentence of death is upon me." And God says, "Halleluia! It's about time. I told you right along, 'Without Me you can do nothing', but you didn't believe Me. I told you right along, 'Cursed be he that trusts in man and makes flesh his arm', but you didn't believe Me." And now affliction has come, and what has been its effect? To shut us up to the exercise of divine power. O child of God, don't look upon affliction as your enemy. That which shuts you up more fully to the exercise of divine power is your friend.

Well, we move on to see the fourth divine purpose in affliction, and we find it in verse 10. Having spoken of this trust in God who raiseth the dead, the Apostle goes on to say, "who delivered us out of so great a death, and [now he makes a prophecy] will deliver: on whom we have set our hope that He will also still deliver us." You see what he's doing? He's left the realm of testimony, and now he's making an affirmation of faith. Looking back upon this circumstance, whatever it was, that shut him up to the exercise of divine power, he says that the fourth function of this affliction was to increase his faith in the promises of God.

Way back when God called the Apostle Paul, He made a promise to him. We read that promise in Acts 26:16:

"But arise, and stand upon thy feet: for to this end have I appeared unto thee, to appoint thee a minister and a witness both of the things wherein thou hast seen Me, and of the things wherein I will appear unto thee; delivering thee from the people, and from the Gentiles, unto whom I send thee, to open their eyes...."

Here was the promise of God: "Paul, I am commissioning you with this Gospel commission. And in the accomplishment of it, I will deliver you from every opposition until my purpose for you is accomplished." And again and again the Apostle Paul was brought into circumstances where it seemed his life was going to be snuffed out. One time stones were heaped upon him. Other times plots were made to take his life. But again and again when these afflictions came and God fulfilled His promise, what did it do? Well, it increased his faith in the promises of God, for faith is

strengthened in two ways. It's strengthened by looking to the greatness of the God who made the promise, and secondly, by experiencing the reality of the fulfillment of that promise. And faith is strengthened in those two ways.

Beholding the God who makes the promise. That's the emphasis of Paul in Romans 4. "[Abraham] waxed strong through faith." How? "being fully assured that what [God] had promised, He was able also to perform." As he conceived in his mind of the character and the might and power of God, he could look at his own body as good as a dead body and say, "This body will yet father a child because the God who made the promise ("In Isaac shall thy seed be called") is able to father a child through the dead body of Abraham. He's able to do something to this body to make it able to father a child.

But the Apostle in this passage is focusing on the second way in which his faith is strengthened. It's strengthened by the experiencing and the reality and the fulfillment of those promises. And so the Apostle says, "When we had the sentence of death in ourselves, we despaired of even living unless God puts forth the mighty arm of resurrection power." Once He did, he said, "Why, we have confidence that the God who has delivered will still deliver and continue to deliver until His purposes for us are accomplished."

Notice how that faith became even stronger as he's about to lay down his life. In 2 Timothy 4:15, he makes a similar reference to the delivering power of God:

"At my first defence no one took my part, but all forsook me: may it not be laid to their account. But the Lord stood by me, and strengthened me; that through me the message might be fully proclaimed, and that all the Gentiles might hear: and I was delivered out of the mouth of the lion. The Lord will deliver me from every evil work...."

You see what he is saying? "This past deliverance strengthens my faith to believe the Lord will yet deliver me from every evil work and will save me unto His heavenly kingdom to whom be glory forever and forever."

You see, dear child of God, your faith is not strengthened by pulling your promises out of the promise box. Your faith is strengthened when that promise in the promise box goes with you into the fires of affliction. And you prove God in the terms of His promise in the midst of affliction. Then you're able to come forth with that ringing affirmation: the Lord has delivered; He shall deliver from every evil work. So again, it's quite easy to pray, "Lord, increase my faith." But when God begins to put you in the context of affliction, you say, "Lord, this doesn't have anything to do with my prayer." Well, that's the very answer to your prayer. It's by affliction that our faith in the promises of God and the God of the promises is strengthened.

And then the fifth function, the fifth divine purpose in affliction is found in verse 11: "ye also helping together on our behalf by your supplication;

that, for the gift bestowed upon us by means of many, thanks may be given by many persons on our behalf." Now whether the Apostle is referring to the past prayers of the people of God (there's a problem in the grammar in the original--it's uncertain), or whether he's saying, "In the light of what I've told you, you will now have a renewed prayer involvement with Timothy and myself in our ministries." Whether, then, he's looking to a past deliverance or future deliverances in which their prayers will have a part, this thing is clear, that the end result will be this: "thanks may be given by many persons on our behalf." In other words, as Paul is delivered from affliction, preserved in the midst of affliction, the divine purpose at this point will be to provoke corporate praise and thanksgiving to God for the deliverance wrought for His servant.

One of the great delights of being a child of God and Scripturally identifying one's self with a visible community of God's people, the visible church, is that when we enter that affliction, we do not enter it alone. We have not only the presence of the Lord Jesus by the Spirit, but we have the presence of the Lord Jesus in the members of His body. And Christ and His union with His body is not a mere theological concept. So vital is that union that Paul says if you sin against a weak brother, you sin against Christ. He's a member of His body. And if you touch my finger, you touch me. That's a part of my body. You don't just say, "I hammered your finger." You hammered me when you hammered that finger.

The Lord Jesus said to Saul, "Saul, Saul, why persecuteth thou Me?" And this concept of this organic life-union between Christ and His people was so real in the mind of the Apostle Paul that he said, "When we're afflicted, and in answer to your prayers deliverance is wrought and we are preserved, then the end result will be corporate praise to God for the comfort and consolation ministered unto us."

I know that one of the great delights I have as a pastor is to hear the testimony of the people of God that have entered into unusual periods of affliction and to have them share that among other things (and this is almost always at the top of the list), they've said this: "The concept, the Biblical principle of the unity of the body of Christ has become precious to me in my affliction in a way I never experience it before that affliction came.

One of these days I hope to read, if not all, great segments of a precious letter which we received from Roz and Erv Mollet when we were over in Wales shortly after the death of little Lori. And again, this concept came through so clearly. The sense that when they passed through this trial of their faith, this affliction, they did not pass through it alone. There was not only the Lord Jesus ministering His own grace directly by the Spirit to their hearts, but there was the Lord Jesus ministering to His body that supportive role of love, intercession, sympathy, and understanding. I know that this has been Mr. Clarke's testimony concerning the physical affliction through which he's passed in recent weeks and months.

The realization that the body of Christ is not just a theological term. It's not just that we meet under the same roof to hear the same sermon, sing the

same hymns. There is a bond of identification of love and compassion, which when God is pleased to undertake, results not just in the person who was afflicted and has received comfort rendering praise to God. But as the whole body of God's people enter into that affliction by their supplications, so now they enter into praise and rejoicing. And God is magnified not by the one but by the many. And notice how that's the clear emphasis of the text: "ye also helping together on our behalf by your supplication; that, for the gift bestowed upon us by means of many, thanks may be given by many persons on our behalf." The Scripture says, "Whoso offered praise glorifieth Me." And if God is glorified by the praise of one of His saints, He's glorified more intensely by the whole body of His saints rendering praise unto Him.

So I would assert from this passage that there are at least five distinct divine purposes in your afflictions and in mine. And let me ask a question in the light of these. Can that which gives you a fuller revelation of the character of God be your enemy, or is it your friend? Can that which equips you for a more useful ministry to God's people be your enemy, or is it your friend? Can that which shuts you up more fully to the power of God be your enemy, or is it your friend? Can that which increases your faith in the promises of God be your enemy, or is it your friend? Can that which provokes corporate praise and thanksgiving to God be your enemy, or is it your friend? O child of God, be done with carnal views of affliction, looking upon affliction as a dreaded enemy.

Look beyond the temporal, beyond the immediate and oftentimes flesh-withering disciplines of affliction. And realize that through affliction you will come to know God experimentally in a way that you could not otherwise know Him, that through affliction you will be made a more fit instrument of blessing to God's people, that through affliction your faith will be strengthened, your sense of the certainty of the promises of God. And then your involvement with the people of God will be increased. This is the divine purpose in affliction.

So if you are presently in the midst of affliction, may God help you to view that affliction Scripturally. And if you aren't presently in the midst of it, don't breathe too easy, for "in the world ye shall have affliction...that through many afflictions we must enter the kingdom of God." And if you're a child of God, as sure as you sit on that bench tonight, you're going to pass through affliction. May God help you, and may God help me thus to view our afflictions in the light of divine revelation.

But then there are some of you here who do not know God as the God and Father of the Lord Jesus Christ. If not, you cannot know Him as the God of comfort; you cannot know Him as the Father of mercies. It will not do in the next affliction to go whimpering to God and say, "O God, whoever you are, wherever you are, comfort me." No, no, if you're indifferent to God's demands with reference to your sins, that you repent and believe the Gospel, that you acknowledge yourself to be undone and standing in need of His mercy. If you live in impenitence and unbelief and despise the Gospel and trample underfoot the blood of the covenant, do not think that you can come whimpering to God and somehow snatch to

yourself the comfort that He has pledged to His children. No, no, if you would know Him as the Father of mercies, the God of all comfort, I entreat you first of all to know Him as the God and Father of the Lord Jesus Christ. Repent of your sin; believe the Gospel. Embrace His gracious promise: "Come unto Me all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest."

But thank God, if in grace He has brought us to know Him as the God and Father of the Lord Jesus Christ, He is the Father of mercies and the God of all comfort to us. May we prove Him to be that in our experience. And all of the theory that perhaps we have of these things, God will make real to us in the crucible of affliction.

Frankly I have great fears, humanly speaking in the flesh, whenever I preach along these lines because I know the only way I can have an increased ministry of comfort to the saints is to be dipped more deeply into that crucible of affliction. Maybe some of you will need to remind me of some of the things I've preached to you. May God help you to do so, that we may encourage one another when we begin to scream and holler and try to jump off the table because we see the syringe and the knife. May God help us to quiet one another down and remind one another of the principles of this passage, the divine purposes in affliction, that we might know that affliction is not our foe but our friend in the purpose of Almighty God.

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