



Deliverance from Affliction

2 Corinthians 1:8-11

Rev. Fred Greco

I would now direct your attention to Paul's second letter to the Corinthians. We started a new series in this letter last week, and we will be continuing on now for some time. If you don't know where that is, you can find the beginning of the New Testament, go past the four gospels, and then this is the third letter of Paul that appears in order...Romans, 1 Corinthians, and then 2 Corinthians. It is the third longest letter of Paul, and it is a significant letter.

It's also, as I reminded you last week, Paul's most emotional letter. This is the place where we go to find out the most about Paul the man, about how he dealt with his ministry, how he interacted with others, how he struggled, and how he found relief. In these unsettled days, I can think of no better book for us to be in than Paul's second letter to the Corinthians.

Please give attention to the reading of God's Holy Word. We will be looking at 2 Corinthians, chapter 1, verses 8-11. The Word of the Lord is completely inerrant, the Word of the Lord is completely sufficient, and the Word of the Lord is completely authoritative:

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. 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. 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. 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.

Thus far the reading of God's Holy Word. Let's pray for his blessing upon it. Dear Lord, we ask this morning that you would open up your Word to us, that even as we read it, even as we study it, we would gain a greater understanding of your will, of the Lord Jesus Christ and his acts, the work he has accomplished, and of our Holy Spirit who interprets this Word for us, who speaks to our spirit that we might know the truth you have set forth in the Scriptures. This we ask in Christ's precious name, amen.

Last week, we began this letter from Paul to the Corinthians, the second letter in our Scriptures. You may recall that what it really is, though, is the fourth letter he has written to this church that he founded and spent so much time with. What we looked at was the comfort God gives to us in affliction, but when we think about the comfort we receive in affliction, that is an "after the fact" matter. We're already in the affliction when we think about the comfort God provides. So, a better question for us to look at today would be... *Why does affliction come in the first place?* If we understand that God will comfort us in affliction, we can be glad for that, we can be encouraged by that, but the question still remains. Why does affliction come to start with so that God needs to comfort us? If we had no affliction, we'd have no need for comfort.

Paul goes on in the introduction to this letter, and he tells us that God has a purpose. He has a purpose both in allowing affliction and in his deliverance of his people *from* affliction. So this morning, I'd like us to look at these several verses under three headings. First, Paul tells us about the *experience of affliction*. Paul was not giving theory. He had lived affliction, and he gives us his experience.

Secondly, we see the *purpose of affliction*. Paul gives us a *so that* or an *in order that* to explain why affliction comes to us, the purpose God has in affliction. Then, finally, we see Paul's *confidence in affliction*. Because he knows God's purpose, because he has experienced affliction, he has a confidence in the midst of his trials. The experience of affliction, the purpose of affliction, and confidence in affliction.

Experience of Affliction

Let's begin, then, by looking at the experience of affliction that Paul shares with the Corinthians and with you and me. Paul wants us to know that he speaks from experience. Now, one of the great criticisms we often have of teachers is that they don't have personal experience, that they seek to teach others when they don't really know the subject themselves.

Perhaps one example of this would be not *every* college business professor, but at least some. We look at a college professor of business, and we say, "Well, they're not an entrepreneur. They've never run a company. They've never had to meet budget. How can they possibly explain to us how to run a business? They just teach from a book." So we immediately discount some of what they say.

That's not the case here with Paul. Paul has just told the Corinthians and us about the suffering he experienced and the comfort God brought to him in that suffering. He wants us to know that what he's teaching us about comfort is not just some kind of good theory. He actually lived it. So, he ends verse 7 on a very confident note. He says, "Our hope for you is unshaken, for we know that as you share in our sufferings, you will also share in our comfort." Paul is bold and confident. He is hopeful.

So now *this* passage connects to that verse and that previous passage. We see it in the very first word in verse 8: *for*. Paul is going to give us the reason for his confidence in God, the reason he knows you will share in the comfort of God that he has already experienced. He tells us this as one who experiences affliction. I think, most importantly, what that means for us is that affliction is not the result of disobedience. This is what makes Paul's experience so important for you and me.

We tend to think of affliction as something that comes from disobedience. When we make a bad decision, then somehow God punishes us with affliction. I mean, after all, when we read our Bibles, we expect bad things to happen to Jonah. He disobeyed God. God told him to go in one direction, and he went in the exact opposite direction. We expect bad things to happen to David when he numbers the people after having been directly told not to by God.

But Paul here is telling us about the affliction he experienced in Asia. So, our first question should be, "What's happening there? What did Paul experience?" Now, we don't exactly know, because Paul doesn't give us a great

amount of detail. It seems obvious that the Corinthians knew what Paul was talking about. It was something he wouldn't have to give detail about.

If, for example, a year or two from now you were speaking with someone about the great uncertainty and unpleasantness of spring 2020, you wouldn't need to have a chart with COVID-19 cases. You could just say, "The difficulties in the spring" and people would know because they would have been informed about it. That's probably what's going on here between Paul and the Corinthians.

Perhaps, in a way, that's best, because if Paul gave a very specific example, it would be easier for us to say, "Well, that example doesn't apply to us. We've never done *that*. We didn't experience *that*. That happened to Paul because he did *this*, and I've never done that." Paul makes it general enough that it will apply to us in *our* lives.

Generally speaking, what we *do* know is that in Asia Paul was doing missionary work. Again, if we think back to our example of Jonah, he was the opposite of Jonah. He went exactly where God told him to go and did exactly what God told him to do. In the midst of that work, Paul was opposed. He was opposed by Jews. He was opposed by pagans.

One example of this would be in the Asian city of Ephesus. We read about this in Acts, chapter 19. Paul spent a great deal of time in Ephesus, and in Acts 19, we hear about a riot that broke out. People were accusing Paul of publishing and preaching false gods and of not giving honor to the goddess Diana, or Artemis, the goddess of Ephesus.

So they dragged some of Paul's companions into an arena, and chaos broke out. The Bible describes it in a way that's almost humorous. It says that all the crowd did for hours was shout, "Great is Diana of the Ephesians!" Could you imagine that? Listening to that over and over and over again for hours? It's chaos, but they took it very seriously. They caused a riot, and that riot made Paul think about what he would do next.

We read very shortly thereafter, in the first verse of chapter 20, that Paul decided it would be best for him and the church in Ephesus if he departed. That would relieve some of the pressure. You can imagine how discouraged Paul would have been, how much he loved that church. We read later in chapter 20 of how much he loved those elders he had trained and how he wept for them and how he wanted to protect them from attacks, and he had to leave. You could just imagine how that would have affected Paul.

Now, the point here is that Paul was doing all of the right things. This affliction, this being driven from the city, didn't occur because he was watering down his preaching or because he wasn't working hard or because he wasn't faithful to God's Word. No. He was a faithful minister seeking to build up the church of God. Affliction came to him in spite of his obedience.

What that tells us is that affliction is part of the Christian life. Don't think you can escape affliction just simply by checking all of the correct boxes, by trying to be very careful about everything you do at all times as a way of staying out of affliction. That's the wrong motivation for Christian obedience, and it also just doesn't work, because affliction is part of the Christian life.

There is no correlation between disobedience and affliction. We should not view all of our problems through the lens of God punishing us for being bad. This promotes a wrong view of affliction, but even worse, it promotes a wrong view of God, that God somehow is eager to punish his children.

When you are going through difficulties, are you tempted to plead with God that you'll do better if he just makes the affliction go away? Or even worse, perhaps, do you get mad at God because you think he has no business sending affliction your way because you've done all of the right things? You've obeyed and, therefore, you deserve a good and comfortable life. Even Paul, hard here at work for God, experienced affliction. It's a part of life on earth.

Paul then begins to share his heart with us. He tells the Corinthians and us that affliction is a great burden. You see, affliction hurts. Now, don't jump to conclusions just because Paul has told us that God comforts us in our affliction and think that means that affliction is no big deal. Affliction is real. It's a real hardship. It's real pain. Paul makes that clear by describing his own reaction. He uses some of the strongest language in any of his letters in all of the New Testament.

He says, "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." Can you just hear the emotion in Paul's words? As a brief aside, get used to that, because 2 Corinthians is full of Paul sharing his heart with us. It is a letter that is very personal. Especially when we're treating something like affliction, Paul is very personal, because we take our pain very seriously and very personally.

What Paul says is that he is so utterly burdened, and that means he's burdened beyond all measure or beyond any comparison he could come up with. You'll notice he doesn't even try to compare it to something else. He just blurts it out. It's actually the same phrase Paul uses to describe the way he persecuted the church in Galatians, chapter 1, that he was the preeminent persecutor, that he persecuted the church beyond all measure. No one could compare to him.

Maybe what you can picture in your mind is *this*. Picture a boat out on a river that's overloaded, and you watch as the boat sinks slowly deeper and deeper in the river as the top of the boat, the deck, gets closer and closer to the water's edge until eventually it goes under the water and more water floods into the boat. It becomes even worse. Or maybe you might think of a pack animal that has so much laid upon it that it falls down under the weight and can't get up.

I don't want you to think of the *straw* that broke the camel's back. I want you to think of the *anvil* that broke the camel's back. That's what Paul is talking about here. He was being crushed, he says. One commentator puts it in a very vivid way. He says it's like Paul was wearing a lead cape, and it dragged him down. This affliction, this crushing, this burden brought about despair in Paul.

You see, the burden was more than its effect on his life; it was an effect on his spirit as well. He says, "We despaired of life itself." This word *despair* that Paul uses is a unique word. It means more than simply to be down in the

dumps. Actually, it comes from a base verb that means to be in doubt, to be at a loss, to not know which way to go. We might think of it as not having an escape route.

Now, I know that some of you when you travel (when we get back to traveling again) will stay in hotels, and one of your things you do every time you get to a hotel is you look on the back of that hotel door and you find out what your escape route is in case there's a fire or in case there's a problem. You have to know which hallway to go down, which stairwell to use, how to get to safety. You don't expect to use it, but you're comforted just by knowing it's there.

Now, imagine if you went and there was actually a fire and there was no map. There was no labeled doorway. You had no way of knowing how to get out. There was no way of escape. That's what Paul is talking about here, because Paul uses this word for no escape, for despair, for doubt, and he actually uses a stronger form of it. He intensifies it. It's almost as if that word is not enough for him, that he needs to take it to the next level.

He's completely at a loss. He's so much at a loss this word has the idea of being embarrassed. He doesn't even know what to say. Have you ever felt like that? Have you ever been to a place where you can't even imagine a way out? It's not that you don't think you can accomplish an escape. You don't even *see* a way of escape. Paul did. Not just anyone...Paul.

Now, affliction can also rob you of hope, because Paul keeps piling on his emotions. I think that's perhaps because he felt piled on by this affliction. He says in verse 9, "Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death." Again, Paul is very emotional here. He says *ourselves* twice. "We ourselves thought that we had received in ourselves a sentence of death."

The idea of a sentence of death here is an official report. It's a word that would be used by a judge in a courtroom saying that a sentence had been passed down. Now, Paul didn't actually receive anything like that in Asia. We know that later on in his life he would receive a sentence of death in Rome and would be put to death by the emperor, but we don't read of that in the book of Acts. So, what could Paul be talking about here? I think what Paul is describing is his feeling after praying for relief from this affliction and getting a reply from God that deliverance wasn't coming yet.

Could you imagine that? I know how difficult it is for you if you struggle with finances or with health or with relationships to pray to the Lord over and over and over again for relief and just to hear silence or perhaps to hear what you think is God telling you to wait. Could you imagine being the apostle Paul and actually hearing from God, "You've got to wait. Deliverance isn't coming yet. You're going to stay in your affliction."

I think the only reason Paul could even talk about it now is because he experienced deliverance. So he can look back and say, "We thought we were under a sentence of death. We despaired of life." I'm not sure at the time Paul could have even spoken about it. You see, this is where affliction gets dangerous. It takes hope away. Instead of fixing our eyes on God, affliction clouds our view of God. Instead, we focus on the pain, on the despair, on the problem. That's natural, but that doesn't mean that's the best thing for us to do.

Purpose of Affliction

Paul moves on in the second place to look at the purpose of affliction. If Paul is in a place of despairing of life, where he transitions is by understanding God's purpose in giving him the affliction. The irony is that when affliction should draw us to God, who is the God of all comfort, so often affliction draws us inward instead. Paul tells us that one of the purposes of affliction is so we might not rely on ourselves, he says in verse 9. It is that inward looking that brings despair.

I know it's natural. I know it comes as a first response when something bad happens to look within yourself, to wonder, "Have I done this to myself? What's the reason for this? Oh, woe is me." But the problem is that makes the situation even worse. It's what brings about despair and hopelessness. Sometimes, the best answer we have is that affliction comes *without* a purpose, that there's no reason for it, that we're not guilty of anything.

That may make us feel better in one sense, as we examine our lives and we wonder and say, "Well, at least we're not responsible. I don't know why I'm in this situation, but it's not my fault," but it doesn't really help. It doesn't help us to look past the affliction. But God, Paul says, has a purpose *so that*... Paul wants you to understand that affliction is a part of God's purpose.

Remember, Paul is speaking here from a place of pain, loss, and discouragement. Paul is not trying to give you a pep talk. He's not coming alongside you when everything is fine and saying, "Cheer up! Come on. It's not as bad as it could be." No. Paul is coming from a place of affliction and despair. The second sentence of verse 9 makes this very clear. "But that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead."

It's interesting that our translation *that was to make* is actually only one word in the Greek. It's a Greek word that sets up what we call a *purpose clause*. We might translate it again freely, but the purpose of God doing this is *so that*. Paul actually can't make it any clearer in the way he writes. He's introducing a thought of purpose, and what comes after this one Greek word is the purpose or the reason. Our natural tendency is self-reliance. Our natural tendency is to trust in ourselves.

Once again, Paul is very emotional. He doesn't just use the normal word for *rely*. He uses the verb *to be*, and he adds it with a present participle. This gives the idea of being in a continual state. We are in the state of not relying, is what Paul is saying. This word here *to rely* actually is the word you might know better for *to trust* or *to have faith in* or *to believe in*. That's how it's translated dozens of times in the New Testament. What Paul says is that God wants us not to trust ourselves. He sends affliction so that we might not do that.

Now, this makes perfect sense. What do you do when faced with a problem or when faced with a difficulty? If you're anything like me, what you do is you try to assess how you will handle the situation, what steps you need to take. That happens whether you're a planner or whether you're impulsive. When you're faced with a problem that's immediately before you, you either make a plan or you take an action. You do what you can do.

Actually, the more competent you are, the greater this tendency is for you. This would have occurred to a great extent in Paul. Think about who Paul was: an intellectual giant, a successful church planter, a man who had been

called by the Lord Jesus Christ himself to the ministry. Paul didn't need to wonder if he was in the right calling. He had Jesus himself tell him to do it. What couldn't Paul handle with skills and providence like that?

Well, affliction breaks us of our reliance on ourselves, and that's what Paul tells us. Paul just told us previously, in the previous verses, that he couldn't handle this affliction, that he was despairing, that he felt that he was at the end of his rope, that his life was over. He has just told us, "I was insufficient." It was a burden he couldn't bear. It was beyond his strength.

If you ever think of the word in English *hyper*, like *hyperactive*, we know that means more than something or a good deal more than something. Paul uses that word twice in verse 8. He says, "We were hyper-burdened, hyper-beyond our strength." The one thing you can be sure about affliction is that it brings our helplessness into focus. That's important, because there is an alternative to self-reliance.

The last part of verse 9 gives us Paul's answer. Where we do we turn when affliction comes to us? We can't trust in ourselves, we can't have faith in ourselves, but we *can* trust in God. We *can* have faith in *him*. When Paul writes this, there's not even a new verb he uses. He uses that same verb *to trust*. Do you remember how I said it's a verb *to be* and a participle that is a continual state of being? What Paul is telling you is you must be in a continual state of being of relying on God.

This is not something you gin up at a certain time or that you work yourself into a frenzy for. No. We should always be in the state of looking to the Lord, of trusting him, of knowing our lives are in his hands, of knowing that he will deliver us from affliction; as a matter of fact, of knowing that's why affliction has come our way: so God might be glorified in the way he delivers his people. Our proper object of trust is the Lord.

But Paul doesn't just vaguely describe God. Paul won't have any of that, so neither should you. Some people are tempted to think positive thoughts, as if somehow that will get them past affliction. Other people think about a higher power that will help them in their time of need, be a resource for them. Paul looks to the God of the Bible, the Lord as he has revealed himself in his Word. He is the God, Paul says, who raises the dead.

Now, let's note two things about this. First, the description is perfect for those who are in despair because of affliction. You remember, Paul just said, "We despaired of life. We thought we were under a sentence of death. It's all over." Where would you turn to when you thought you were all but dead? How about the one who raises the dead? That's the best place to go. You might even say to yourself, "Even if I die, God can raise me from the dead." That's what God does. That's one of the characteristics of God. It's a name of God.

Do you think you have no escape? Do you think that all you have left in your troubles is to wait for death? Is everything around you unraveling? Are you without hope this morning? Well, God is the one who raises the dead. There is always hope with him. I think when Paul wrote these words he had in his mind the story of Abraham with Isaac.

You remember that God told Abraham to sacrifice his son, and Abraham went off with Isaac, and he told his servants that he *and* Isaac would return to worship with them. Then, as they're going, I wonder how long it took

Isaac to figure out, "There's me. There's Dad. There's the knife. There's no animal." And he says, "Dad, where's the sacrifice?" You remember Abraham's response is, "The Lord himself will provide himself a sacrifice."

Hebrews tells us that Abraham had such faith that he not only believed God would spare Isaac; he had such faith that even if God would have him kill his son, God would bring Isaac back from the dead, because that would be what would be required to keep his promise to Abraham, because if Isaac were dead, how could God make of Abraham the father of many nations? So Abraham said, "I trust that if God has to raise the dead, he will keep his promises."

Is that the kind of faith you have in God today? When you have that kind of faith, your problems become small...not because they're unimportant, not because they're not real, but because you understand that God is so much bigger than your affliction. He's the God who raises the dead.

The second thing I want us to see about this description of God is that Paul tells us God *raises* (present tense) the dead. I think perhaps you or I might have written, "God has *raised* the dead." He raised the Lord Jesus Christ. Or we might even have said, "God *will* raise the dead," thinking about our future resurrection, but that's not what Paul does.

He says God is one in the present. God does that *now*. He's there for you *now*. His power is on display *now* in the middle of the affliction you are experiencing. You don't need to wait. God is the God who raises the dead now. Notice how Paul reminds you that God is faithful in bringing about his deliverance. You might be tempted to ask, "Will God be there for me now? What if this situation is too big for God? Or what if I don't deserve deliverance right now? What will happen?"

Well, look at verse 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." Look at how Paul puts this. God *has* delivered us in the past, he *will* deliver us right now in the present, and our hope is set that in the future he *will* deliver us. So, we will be delivered now and we will be delivered ultimately by God.

In Jesus Christ, God will never abandon you. He is faithful to his promise, and his promise is secured by the work of Jesus. Your ultimate deliverance and affliction is secure. The promise that comes from God is all over the Bible, but it's right here in the words of a man who knew and suffered pain. We know that promise is secure because it rests on the one who was afflicted for us: Jesus who died for his people.

Confidence in Affliction

Well, the last thing I would like us to see is Paul's confidence in affliction. He does this in verse 11 by speaking about prayer, by saying that affliction spurs us on to prayer. "You must also help us by prayer, so that many will give thanks on our behalf for the blessing granted us through the prayers of many." Paul concludes this section by running to prayer, and that may seem a bit odd. He has just told us that we are insufficient and that we have to rely on the Lord, and now he turns to the Corinthians and says, "But you all need to be praying."

What's Paul doing here? I thought we weren't supposed to be self-reliant, Paul. I thought we were supposed to not look at ourselves, not try to do anything, but to go to the Lord. Why are you telling us what we have to do in the midst of this affliction? Well, the truth is we have to understand what prayer really is. It is not the work of men. It's the work of God.

When you pray, you go to God and you admit that you are insufficient, that you are not able. You're not able for others. You're not able for yourself. You acknowledge that you need God. You are going to God and telling him you rely on him and that you need him to deliver. That's what prayer is. Prayer is ultimately about God.

Now let's be clear. God does not need your prayers before he acts. It's not as if God is standing by, wringing his hands figuratively, saying, "Oh, I hope those Corinthians will pray for Paul, because if they do I can deliver him, but if they don't, Paul is stuck. My hands are tied." No, that's not how Paul is speaking of this. What he's telling us is that prayer is God's means of drawing you to the Lord so that you might see his power and his faithfulness.

Philip Hughes puts it quite well. He says, "In prayer, human impotence casts itself at the feet of divine omnipotence. Thus the duty of prayer is not a modification of God's power, but a glorification of it." You see, prayer admits that God alone delivers, and prayer delights in seeing God deliver, and prayer comes to the Lord and says, "Lord, show us your glory." That's why prayer is so important. What happens is when we pray in the midst of affliction, it leads to thanksgiving.

Prayer is about more than just getting the help we need. A part of your prayer life should be much more than petition. If your prayer life doesn't include adoration and thanksgiving, it's a truncated prayer life. Prayer is about relating to God, speaking to God, and prayer actually binds us together as the people of God. As we pray for each other, there is perhaps no better way to understand and to see the community of the church than through prayer. It reminds us that we are not alone. It reminds us that we are part of a family. This is important. It reassures us.

Now, I don't know about you, but I've gotten to the point now where I'm getting tired of seeing on my computer and television screen every three minutes a "We're all in this together" speech, especially when it comes from someone living in a mansion or someone standing in front of a \$30,000 refrigerator or someone who has every need cared for, reminding us that somehow we're all in this together. It just strikes me as disingenuous, as forced.

Prayer is different. Prayer is entering into the pain of another. Prayer is knowing that I've been there, that I will be there again, that I'm praying for you and you will be praying for me, because we *are* truly all in this together, because we are all a part of the same family. We have all been redeemed by the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. His blood was shed for every believer. There is no category of believer. There is no ranking or class of believer in the church of Jesus Christ. So, prayer reminds us that we are, indeed, the family of God.

Now, prayer leads to this thanksgiving, not just from the one who was delivered. That seems obvious. Whenever we're delivered from affliction, we're thankful to God. But no, prayer makes others thankful as well, everyone who prays around that person. Paul uses a wonderful, vivid illustration when he says, "Many will give thanks on our behalf."

What he actually says in the Greek is, "Many faces will give thanks." Of course, he's using the word for *face* as a word to stand in the place of a person, but the reason it's so beautiful is you think about people praying, lifting up their eyes to the Lord in prayer, expecting and waiting for God to deliver, and thanking him for who he is because he has delivered.

This is the true end of the Christian life. The Christian life is about dying more and more to self and living more and more to Jesus. You can and you should understand theologically that when Jesus died on the cross he took away your sins. You should know the truth that believing in Jesus means following him after you are saved. It means being formed in the image of Jesus. It means being made like him, but that includes affliction. That's the purpose of life in Christ.

If you believe in Jesus Christ, if you are saved by his blood, if you know him as your Lord and Savior, your life follows his. Jesus' life was one of affliction. It was one of downward movement and ultimately death, but it's also one of resurrection and ascension. God has a purpose for the affliction you experience. It makes you rely not on yourself but on him, just like Jesus did in the garden of Gethsemane.

It's to allow you to witness to the world that when you are insufficient, God is enough. It's to bring you together with other believers, bound in prayer for the deliverance that only God can give. Now, knowing this will not make you happy in affliction, but it *can* make you praise the one who delivers you. Focus on *him* now. He is sufficient.