

GOD AND SUFFERING

2 CORINTHIANS 01:03–11

Introduction

Suffering has always posed a problem for man. It may be disease, accident, trial, temptation, abuse, death — no matter what the suffering is, every person who suffers wonders, “Why me? Why do I have to suffer this affliction?” Suffering is the great discussion of this passage: “God and Suffering.”

- I. God is the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort (v. 3).
- II. God comforts the sufferer — so that he might be a testimony to other sufferers (v. 4).
- III. God matches the comfort to equal the sufferings (v. 5).
- IV. God uses suffering to stir other believers (vv. 6-7).
- V. God uses suffering to teach trust (vv. 8-10).
- VI. God uses suffering to teach prayer and thanksgiving (v. 11).

I. 2 Corinthians 01:03 God, the Father of Compassion and of Comfort

God is the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort.

1. The word “compassion” (oiktirmon) means pity and mercy. It means looking upon people in need and having compassion and mercy upon them.
=> Note that God is not only the God of compassion but the *Father* of all comfort. His very nature and behaviour toward us is that of a Father, not of a God. He is our Father, a Father who is compassionate, and who showers His compassion and comfort upon us.
=> Note that the word comfort refers to all comfort, God does not show comfort just once, nor just here and there. God showers His comfort upon us continuously (cp. Rom 12:1; Phil 2:1; Col 3:12; Heb 10:28).
2. The word “comfort” (parakleseos) means to be by the side of another; to relieve and support; to give solace, consolation and encouragement. But there is always an underlying meaning to the word. There is the idea of strength, an enabling, a confidence. It consoles and relieves a person, but it strengthens him at the same time. It charges a person to go out and face the world. Note the word is used ten times in 2 Cor 1:3-7.
=> Note that the word *comfort* (parakleseos) is the same word that is used for the Holy Spirit (paraklete). The Holy Spirit is given the title *The Comforter* by Christ.

John 14:15-18 “If you love me, you will obey what I command. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counsellor to be with you forever — the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you. I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you.”

3. How do we know God is like this? How do we know that God is “the Father of compassion” and the “God of all comfort”? *Because of Jesus Christ*. God is “the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.” It was God...
- who “so loved the world, that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish, but have eternal life” (Jn. 3:16).
 - who demonstrated “his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom 5:8).

A father could show no greater mercy than to give the life of his son to save others. This is exactly what God did:

He gave Christ to die for His enemies, for those who were in rebellion against Him. God has had mercy upon us, and He continues to have mercy upon us. He continues to pour out His mercy and comfort upon men. Why? Because of His nature: His very nature is that of a Father — a Father of compassion and a God of all comfort.

Eph 2:4-7 But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions — it is by grace you have been saved. And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus. In order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus.

Titus 3:5 He saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit.

Psa 103:17 But from everlasting to everlasting the LORD’s love is with those who fear him, and his righteousness with their children’s children.

Psa 108:4 For great is your love, higher than the heavens; your faithfulness reaches to the skies.

Lam 3:22 Because of the Lord’s great love we are not consumed, for his compassion never fail.

Joel 2:13 Rend your heart and not your garments. Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love, and he relents from sending calamity.

Micah 7:18 Who is a God like you, who pardons sin and forgives the transgression of the remnant of his inheritance? You do not stay angry forever but delight to show mercy.

II. 2 Corinthians 01:04 God Comforts the Sufferer — A True Testimony

God comforts the sufferer so that he might be a testimony to other sufferers.

1. The word “troubles” (thlipsei) means to be weighed down exceedingly; to be pressed and crushed. It is the picture of a beast of burden being crushed beneath a load that is just too heavy. It is the picture of a person having a heavy weight placed on his breast

and being pressed and crushed to the point that he feels he is going to die. Note the words trouble and distress are used three times in 2 Cor 1:3-7.

2. Note the words “us” and “all our troubles.” Paul is not only talking about his own trials and sufferings, but about ours as well. God comforts us all — all believers. He does not have favourites; His compassion and comfort are for everyone. And note: He comforts us in “all,” not in just a few of our trials and sufferings. We do not have to bear a single trial or moment of suffering by ourselves. Our Father — the Sovereign Majesty of the universe who controls all — is not off in the distance someplace far removed from us. His Spirit, the precious Holy Spirit, is right here with us to comfort us in all our suffering.

⇒ God’s purpose in comforting us is to make us a testimony to others.

⇒ God comforts us so that we can comfort others who are suffering.

⇒ God carries us through trials so that we can carry others through trials.

⇒ God strengthens us so that we can strengthen others.

⇒ God helps us so that we can help others.

⇒ God encourages us so that we can encourage others.

Isa 40:1 Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.

2 Cor 2:7 Now instead, you ought to forgive and comfort him, so that he will not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow.

1 Th 5:11 Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing.

1 Th 5:14 And we urge you, brothers, warn those who are idle, encourage the timid, help the weak, be patient with everyone.

III. 2 Corinthians 01:05 God Matches Suffering with Comfort

God matches the comfort to equal the sufferings. Note that the sufferings being stressed are “the sufferings of Christ,” that is, the very kind of sufferings which Christ Himself bore. What kind of sufferings did Christ bear? Very simply, Christ bore every kind of suffering imaginable, even the suffering of death. He had to experience every situation, condition and trial of man in order to become the *Perfect Sympathizer or Saviour*. For this reason, He experienced the most humiliating experiences possible. He experienced...

- being born to an unwed mother (Mt. 1:18-19).
- being born in a stable, the worst of conditions (Lk. 2:7).
- being born to poor parents (Lk. 2:24).
- having his life threatened as a baby (Mt. 2:13f).
- being the cause of unimaginable sorrow (Mt.2:16f).
- having to be moved and shifted as a baby (Mt. 2:13f).

- being reared in a despicable place, Nazareth (Lk. 2:39).
- having His father die during His youth (see note, pt. 3, Mt. 13:53-58).
- having to support His mother and brothers and sisters (see note, pt. 3, Mt. 13:53-58).
- having no home, not even a place to lay His head (Mt. 8:20; Lk. 9:58).
- being hated and opposed by religionists (Mk. 14:1-2)
- being charged with insanity (Mk. 3:21).
- being charged with demon-possession (Mk. 3:22).
- being opposed by His own family (Mk. 3:31-32).
- being rejected, hated and opposed by listeners (Mt. 13:53-58; Lk. 4:28-29).
- being betrayed by a close friend (Mk. 14:10-11, 18).
- being left alone, rejected and forsaken by all of His friends (Mk. 14:50).
- being tried before the high court of the land on the charge of treason (Jn. 18:33).
- being executed by crucifixion, the worst possible death (Jn. 19:16f).

Note that each of these experiences reaches the depth of humiliation. Christ stooped to the lowest point of human experience in every condition in order to become the *Perfect Sympathizer* (Saviour). He can now identify with and feel for any person's circumstances.

Heb 2:16-18 *For surely it is not angels he helps, but Abraham's descendants.*

Heb 2:17-18 *For this reason he had to be made like his brothers in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people. 18 Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.*

Heb 4:15-16 *For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are — yet was without sin. Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.*

The point is this: no matter what the suffering is nor how terrible it may be, God showers us with the comfort of His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. He does not just give us some strength and comfort to bear the suffering; He gives us *all the strength and comfort* necessary to handle all the suffering. There are no trials too great, no pressures too heavy, that God cannot match them with the comfort of the Lord Jesus Christ. Christ has borne every trial and suffering for us.

Luke 7:12-14 *When the Lord saw her, his heart went out to her and he said, "Don't cry."*

John 14:16-18 *"I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you."*

John 16:33 *"I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world."*

IV. 2 Corinthians 01:06-07 God Uses Suffering to Stir Up Believers

God uses suffering to stir up other believers. A person who suffers often becomes self-centred and begins to feel sorry for himself. He sometimes begins to feel self-pity and apathy and to want special attention. He may even become bitter. A believer must never let this happen. This is what these two verses are all about. Note that both the distress and the *comfort* are for the same purposes. God uses both suffering and comfort in a believer to stir four things in other believers.

1. God uses suffering to stir consolation or comfort in others who suffer (see note, *Comfort*, 2 Cor 1:3).
2. God uses suffering to stir salvation. A person cannot trust God today and not trust Him tomorrow. A person cannot bless God when things are going well and curse God when things go bad. A person who truly believes in God trusts Him no matter the circumstance. He continues with God throughout life...
 - through the good times as well as the bad,
 - through suffering as well as health,
 - through rejection as well as acceptance,
 - through persecution as well as honour.

The point is this: when a believer sees another believer being comforted through some suffering, he is stirred to continue in the faith. He is stirred to continue on in the way of salvation no matter how great the suffering he has to bear.

Mat 24:13 “*But he who stands firm to the end will be saved.*”

Rom 8:16-17 *Now if we are children, then we are heirs — heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory.*

3. God uses suffering to stir endurance. Very simply, when we suffer and allow God to comfort us, others are encouraged to endure through their sufferings.
4. God uses suffering to stir sharing among believers. Believers who suffer are not to become self-centred, bitter, discouraged, apathetic nor are they to begin complaining. They are to allow God to comfort them. This should be the hope and expectation of every believer. God expects us to suffer with the right attitude, to allow Him to share His comfort with us. We are to share the comfort of God with others, and believers should be able to expect us to bear up under suffering. They should be able to expect us to know the comfort of God so that we can share His comfort. How can a person share the comfort of God unless he has suffered and experienced the comfort of God?

=> God expects us to bear suffering and to receive His comfort.

=> Other believers expect us to bear suffering and to receive God’s comfort.

Why? Because we are to be comforting and ministering and helping each other. But how can we comfort each other unless we have experienced the comfort of God through suffering?

God uses our suffering to stir sharing with others. We are all to be busy in sharing God's comfort with each other. This is to be the hope and expectation that we have in each other.

Phil 2:1-2 Therefore if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind.

2 Cor 4:17-18 For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.

V. 2 Corinthians 01:08–10 God Uses Suffering to Teach Trust

God uses suffering to teach trust. God allows great suffering. He allowed Paul, probably the greatest missionary of all time, to experience terrible suffering time and again. (See *Paul's Sufferings*, 2 Cor 1:8-10.) What was the suffering that is referred to in these three verses? We do not know. There is no record of it any-place in Scripture. At first reading, it seems to be referring to the mob violence in Ephesus (Acts 19:23-41). However, this is unlikely, for Paul apparently escaped the particular trouble mentioned in the account of Acts.

The point to see is that God allowed Paul to suffer some terrible trouble. And note the intensity of the trouble: “we were under great pressure [weighed down, crushed by a very heavy weight]”...

- far beyond our ability to endure.
- we despaired even for our life.
- we felt the sentence of death (sensed he was going to die).

Why does God allow His dear servant to go through such suffering, especially when he is such a great servant, a servant who labours so faithfully for God? There are two primary reasons.

1. Note that God is called the “God who raises the dead.” The one thing that man must learn is that he cannot save himself; he cannot raise himself up from the dead. Only God can save man and raise him up and give him eternal life. Suffering teaches man that he is helpless to save himself. If he wishes to be saved, he must trust God. Therefore, suffering teaches man that he is not self-sufficient. He must have the presence and help of God if he wishes to conquer the sufferings of this world — the sufferings that eventually end in the suffering of death.

2. God allows suffering to teach a daily trust for deliverance. Note: Paul says that God continued to deliver him through the trials of life and that he continued to trust God to deliver him. The point is that we must trust God daily, trust Him to deliver us from daily sufferings.

1 Cor 10:13 No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it.

2 Cor 1:10 He has delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us. On him we have set our hope that he will continue to deliver us.

2 Tim 4:18 The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and will bring me safely to his heavenly kingdom. To him be glory for ever and ever. Amen.

Heb 2:15 And free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death.

2 Pet 2:9 If this is so, then the Lord knows how to rescue godly men from trials and to hold the unrighteous for the day of judgment, while continuing their punishment.

Jer 1:8 Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you and will rescue you," declares the LORD.

Dan 2:27 Daniel replied, "No wise man, enchanter, magician or diviner can explain to the king the mystery he has asked about."

2 CORINTHIANS 01:08–10 SUFFERINGS OF PAUL

Paul suffered greatly.

1. Paul's life was threatened by a huge, angry mob led by Demetrius, the silversmith (Acts 19:23-40).
2. Paul knew the trouble that awaited him in Asia. "I was severely tested by the plots of the Jews...in every city...prison and hardships are facing me" (Acts 20:18-27).
3. Paul says Priscilla and Aquila...risked their lives for him (Rom 16:3-4).
4. Paul says Andronicus and Junia...were his fellow prisoners (Rom 16:7).
5. Paul expresses the great victory experienced through terrifying trials (1 Cor 4:9-13).
6. Paul fought with beasts at Ephesus (1 Cor 15:32).
7. Paul says he was crushed by some fearful burden which made him despair of life itself. He told himself it was the sentence of death (2 Cor 1:8-10).
8. Paul expresses an extremely anxious mood while the memory of his days at Ephesus was still vivid (2 Cor 4:8-12; 6:4-11; cp. Acts 20:18-19).

9. Paul lists his terrifying trials. Clement of Rome says that Paul “was seven times in bonds,” which seems to agree with Paul’s description (2 Cor 11:23-27).
10. Paul, at some point while a prisoner in Rome, experienced some sorrow so great that it threatened to crush him into a frightening despair: he had feared lest “sorrow upon sorrow” befall him (Phil 2:27). □

VI. 2 Corinthians 01:11 *Sufferings Teach Prayer and Thanksgiving*

God uses suffering to teach prayer and thanksgiving. This is a great lesson on suffering and prayer: the prayers of believers “help” us. Paul definitely says that the prayers of others helped him. Prayer causes God to move on our behalf and to deliver us through our suffering. And when we are strengthened and delivered, everyone praises God. Intercessory prayer, prayer for others, works. God hears and answers prayer, and He hears and answers our prayers for others. This is the reason Scripture stresses intercessory prayer.

Rom 15:30-31 *I urge you, brothers, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to join me in my struggle by praying to God for me. Pray that I may be rescued from the unbelievers in Judea and that my service in Jerusalem may be acceptable to the saints there.*

Eph 6:18 *And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints.*

Phil 1:19 *For I know that through your prayers and God’s provision of the Spirit of Jesus Christ what has happened to me will turn out for my deliverance.*

Col 4:12 *Epaphras, who is one of you and a servant of Christ Jesus, sends greetings. He is always wrestling in prayer for you, that you may stand firm in all the will of God, mature and fully assured.*

James 5:15-16 *And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise him up. If he has sinned, he will be forgiven. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective. ■*