

How God uses suffering for His glory (The purpose of suffering for a Christian)

2 Corinthians 1:3-11

3) Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort,

4) who comforts us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort those who are in any trouble, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.

5) For as the sufferings of Christ abound in us, so our consolation also abounds through Christ.

6) Now if we are afflicted, it is for your consolation and salvation, which is effective for enduring the same sufferings which we also suffer. Or if we are comforted, it is for your consolation and salvation.

7) And our hope for you is steadfast, because we know that as you are partakers of the sufferings, so also you will partake of the consolation.

8) For we do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, of our trouble which came to us in Asia: that we were burdened beyond measure, above strength, so that we despaired even of life.

9) Yes, we had the sentence of death in ourselves, that we should not trust in ourselves but in God, who raises the dead,

10) who delivered us from so great a death, and does deliver us; in whom we trust that He will still deliver us,

11) you also helping together in prayer for us, that thanks may be given by many persons on our behalf for the gift granted to us through many. (II Corinthians 1:3-11 NKJV).

Introduction

Suffering is a human phenomenon. There hasn't been a human being that has lived that hasn't experienced suffering of some kind, be it physical, emotional, psychological or spiritual. If we look at the news headlines everyday, we know that we live in a fallen world. Even in religions like Buddhism, it is one of the "noble truths." All humans are suffering and will experience suffering. However, we don't all react to

suffering in the same way, do we? Some people get angry with God because of the suffering they experience. Some people become atheists or agnostics because they cannot reconcile a good God with all the suffering that He allows in this world.

One of the most important things to understand about our world is that it is fallen and broken because of the fall of man. The fall of mankind in the garden of Eden affected the world we live in. Sickness, suffering, sins and death are consequences of the sin of Adam and Eve. We are not living in a perfect world. We are living in a world where many people of the human race have turned their backs on God. The Bible also says: "For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it in hope; because the creation itself also will be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation **groans** and **labors** with birth pangs together until now" (Romans 8:20-22 NKJV). It is true, all people are suffering to different extents, but the primary cause for suffering in this world was the fall of mankind in the garden of Eden (Genesis 3:1-15). Since then each human has contributed to the suffering because all have sinned (Romans 3:23) except one, Jesus Christ. However, God has a purpose in suffering for His people. And that is why this text of 2 Corinthians 1:3-11 in the Bible is so awesome! God has not left us in our suffering but has become one of us in our suffering, in the incarnation of Jesus Christ. And in a real sense, Jesus Christ had suffered the most of any man, because he bore the wrath of God for sin on the cross when He died on Golgotha about 2000 years ago. He was forsaken by God so that we can be reconciled to God.

But we live in the real world. We live on earth now. We know that God has a purpose for this earth. He is on a journey with the human race to a destination. The Bible is clear that God has promised new heavens and new earth (Isaiah 65:17; Revelation 21:1) for those who belong to Him, where there will be no more death, sickness, suffering and sin (Revelation 21:4)! But we are not there yet! And all people are not going there! For people who don't belong to Jesus Christ, suffering makes no sense. In fact, they are without hope and God in this world. Their suffering will also increase in the next dispensation (Revelation 20:15). But what is the hope and comfort for Christians in this world?

Let's turn to our text! If we examine this text and others, we see that there is a divine cycle for the Christian in suffering for Christ.

This is the divine cycle of suffering for a Christian:

The glorification of God -- we suffer and experience tribulation -- we are comforted and encouraged by God -- We comfort others who experience suffering with the Comfort of God (The Holy Spirit) -- It results in the edification and salvation of the recipients -- We trust in God because God delivers us (it's not of ourselves) -- God is glorified and thanked!

1) All Christians suffer

As we said in the beginning, all human beings are suffering, yet Christians suffer differently because we suffer for the sake of Christ. We suffer as children of God. There are also different types of suffering. We can suffer because of our own personal sins which are not honorable at all. In the first letter of Peter, the following is written: "But let none of you suffer as a murderer, a thief, an evildoer, or as a busybody in other people's matters. If anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in this matter" (I Peter 4:15-16 NKJV). There is a suffering for the sake of Christ which has a great reward. Jesus said: "Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake. Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you" (Matthew 5:11-12 NKJV)? And in 1 Peter 4 it is written: "...but rejoice to the extent that you partake of Christ's sufferings, that when His glory is revealed, you may also be glad with exceeding joy. If you are reproached for the name of Christ, blessed are you, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. On their part, He is blasphemed, but on your part, He is glorified" (I Peter 4:13-14 NKJV). Paul, the apostle, probably suffered the most of all the apostles. It is also not surprising that God used him more than the other apostles. We will see later that this is not coincidental! Paul mentions in verse 9-11 that they had the sentence of death upon them. What did Paul refer to?

Later in the same letter to the Corinthians Paul described what he went through: "I say again, let no one think me a fool. If otherwise, at least

receive me as a fool, that I also may boast a little. What I speak, I speak not according to the Lord, but as it were, foolishly, in this confidence of boasting. Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they the seed of Abraham? So am I. Are they ministers of Christ?— I speak as a fool—I am more: in labors more abundant, in stripes above measure, in prisons more frequently, in deaths often. From the Jews five times I received forty stripes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods; once I was stoned; three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I have been in the deep; in journeys often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils of my own countrymen, in perils of the Gentiles, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren; in weariness and toil, in sleeplessness often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness— besides the other things, what comes upon me daily: my deep concern for all the churches. Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to stumble, and I do not burn with indignation? If I must boast, I will boast in the things which concern my infirmity” (II Corinthians 11:16-17, 22-30 NKJV).

Paul knew what it meant to suffer for the sake of Jesus Christ. In history, we also have such examples, like Richard Wurmbrand, who was tortured for 14 years in prison or Brother Yun in China who went through tremendous suffering. But they are not isolated cases. In fact, there are millions of Christians who have suffered and died for the Name of Christ in past centuries. Some Christians suffer more than others but what we cannot deny is that all will suffer for the sake of the Name of Christ. Jesus Christ promised that to us in John 16:33 "These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you **will** have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world.” (John 16:33 NKJV). And in John 15:22 Jesus said: "Remember the word that I said to you, ‘A servant is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted Me, they **will** also persecute you. If they kept My word, they will keep yours also” (John 15:20 NKJV).

And in Matthew 16:24 Jesus promised His disciples: “If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross (endure suffering), and follow Me” (Matthew 16:24 NKJV). Suffering for the Christian is unavoidable. Period. Expect it. It is coming! 2 Timothy 3:12 says: "Yes, and all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus **will**

suffer persecution” (II Timothy 3:12 NKJV). So if it's unavoidable how do we prepare for suffering? Well in a certain sense you can't prepare for it! But God prepares us for His purposes in it!

2) We get comforted by God

Because Christians are united to God through the Holy Spirit by faith, we are in a privileged position. Our text says that God is blessed because He comforts us in all our afflictions and tribulations! How does He do that? He does it through the presence of the Holy Spirit within, through the word and promises of God and through His people. The Holy Spirit indwells all believers (Romans 8:9) and therefore God uses them to comfort us. But God is the chief agent in comforting us. The Greek word here for comfort is: "paraklesis." We get the word Parakletos from this word which is connected to the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is called the “Parakletos” or Comforter in the gospel of John (John 14:15). This word: “Paraklesis” could be translated as: “consolation or comfort or encouragement.” It literally means to stand next to and help. When we suffer as Christians, we suffer not in vain because God is always with the Christian. Jesus also said before He went to heaven that: "He will be with us to the end of the world" (Matthew 28:20). This of course means that the Spirit of Christ, the Holy Spirit, will be with us until the consummation (the end of the world). Nothing that happens in a Christians life is not ordained by God. And nothing that happens, how horrific it might be, God doesn't work for the good for those who believe. That is what Romans 8:28 teaches us: "God works **ALL** things for the good for those who love God and are called according to His purpose."

You might say to me: "but you don't know what I've been through!" You might say: "I've been abused"; "my parents have been raped"; "I've lost everything in an earthquake" etc. My friend, it doesn't matter what happened to you. What matters is how your view of God. What matters is your revelation of God. What matters is how you react to what happened to you. This text tells us that "God is the Father of all mercies and all comfort." Not only was and is Jesus the Merciful and Compassionate, healing people of many diseases, delivering them from demons, etc. Not only is the Holy Spirit called the Comforter, but the Father is called the God of all Comfort. Do you have this revelation in

your spirit, friend? Have you experienced this fact in your life? The first reason why you experience suffering and tribulation is to know God as your Comforter. God allows you to experience suffering so that you might know Him better, as the God of all Comfort. As verse 5 says: "as the sufferings of Christ abound so does the consolation through Christ! Have you experienced this, friend?

3) God uses our suffering for effective service

Why was God able to use Paul in such a tremendous way? Is it because of his great intellect? Was it because of His natural gifts? Or was it because he suffered so much for Jesus Christ? Maybe it was a combination of all of these and more. However, I believe the main reason God could use him in such a tremendous way is because of the sufferings he experienced as a Christian. Just after Paul's conversion on the Damascus road, Jesus said the following to Cornelius, a fellow disciple, about Paul: "Go, for he is a chosen vessel of Mine to bear My name before Gentiles, kings, and the children of Israel. For I will show him how many things he **must suffer** for My name's sake." (Acts 9:15-16 NKJV). From the start, Paul was set aside for a life of suffering. When Paul describes his life as a disciple, he says to God: "For Your sake, we are killed all day long; We are accounted as sheep for the slaughter" (Romans 8:36 NKJV). Paul was so effective in service for God because he suffered so much for Christ!

Our text says the following: "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our tribulation, *that we may be able to comfort those who are in any trouble, with the comfort with which we are comforted by God*". God can use us as much in proportion as we have suffered for His Name sake! Have you ever realized this my friend? The more you suffer for Christ, the more God can use you in His service! The comfort and encouragement you experience from the Holy Spirit while suffering equips you to comfort others and encourage others! God equips the sufferers, the disciples, with His Holy Spirit! He calls His children to salvation and then in the fire of affliction they learn more and more about Christ, so that God can use them in the future. Our text says with the comfort that God comforts us we are able to comfort those

in **ANY** trouble! In other words: Extreme suffering equips you for every good work in the kingdom of God!

Paul goes on to say: "Now if we are afflicted, it is for your consolation and salvation, which is effective for enduring the same sufferings which we also suffer. Or if we are comforted, it is for your consolation and salvation. And our hope for you is steadfast because we know that as you are partakers of the sufferings, so also you will partake of the consolation" (verse 6,7).

The Scriptures and the promises of God comfort us as well. God uses the promises and the Scriptures to comfort us. In fact, it is by the Scriptures and the promises of Scripture that the Holy Spirit comforts us! And with that consolation we run to others and tell them of the great God of mercy and comfort. We share with them the gospel of grace and truth and hope because through the gospel and the Holy Spirit God gives us hope. This is what Romans 15 teaches: "For whatever things were written before were written for our learning, that we through the patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope. Now may the God of patience and comfort grant you to be like-minded toward one another, according to Christ Jesus" (Romans 15:4-5 NKJV).

It is not a surprise that those people who have suffered the most for their faith, God uses the most for His glory e.g. Richard Wurmbrand. Those people whom God delivered from drugs and alcohol abuse God uses to minister to drugs and alcohol abusers. Those women who have been through an abortion or a miscarriage are often the women who can minister the most effectively to those who have undergone these things. Those who have been through cancer and have been helped are the ones God uses to minister to cancer-sufferers. Those who have been healed and restored by God after sexual abuse can minister to those who have undergone these injustices (e.g. Hettie Brittz). The comfort and encouragement Christians experience from God in the midst of suffering, God uses as a means and as a tool by His children to be effective ministers of the gospel. This truth gives us a whole new view on suffering, doesn't it? If you have God's perspective on the reason and purposes for suffering, it changes the way you see your own suffering! To suffer is not something to run away from, but to be embraced as a school of ministry training from God! Suffering is an

opportunity for God to show Himself strong! That is why Paul said in the same letter: "And God said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness." Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ's sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong" (II Corinthians 12:9-10 NKJV). My friend, do you see your suffering as an opportunity for God? God specializes in making weak people strong! God specializes in making broken people whole! God specializes in comforting those undergoing suffering of any kind!

4) God strips us away of pride and self-sufficiency

Another thing that suffering and tribulation does in a Christian's life is to strip them of all pride, self-sufficiency and trusting in people. This is exactly what the effect was in Paul's life. We read that in verse 8-9: "For we do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, of our trouble which came to us in Asia: that we were burdened beyond measure, above strength so that we despaired even of life. Yes, we had the sentence of death in ourselves, *that we should not trust in ourselves but in God who raises the dead.*" You see the closer we get to death the more we realize our own frailty. That is what Paul realized. He went to the jaws of death. Many times. Danger and tribulation made him trust in God alone! Difficulties in our lives and circumstances that cause distress and suffering are designed to strip us from trusting in man and our own abilities. Paul said his trust was in God who raises the dead! You see Paul's trust was in the resurrection of the dead! His trust was in the gospel! Jesus was the one who conquered death! And because He conquered death, his trust was in God's supernatural power. Not even death could separate Paul from God! If God is for us, who can be against us? (Romans 8:31). As Paul said later in the same letter: "Therefore we do not lose heart. Even though our outward man is perishing, yet the inward man is being renewed day by day. For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory" (II Corinthians 4:16-17 NKJV). My friend, what are you trusting in? In the stock exchange? In your investments? In technology? In science? In your pension fund? In social grants? In money (Mammon)? In academic accomplishments?

In social standing? In your education? Or in God who raises the dead? Is your hope in the gospel of Jesus Christ? Or in the accomplishments of man? My friend when you die, your computer and your investments are not going to help you!

Paul goes on to say: "God...who delivered us from so great a death, and does deliver us; in whom we trust that He will still deliver us" (verse 10). God delivered Paul from physical danger, but more importantly from the damnation of sin. God was delivering Paul from the dominion of sin from day to day, and God did deliver Paul in the future when he died from the pangs of death. *Salvation for Paul had past, present and future dimensions and it is the same for every believer in Christ.* God delivered us from the wrath of God and the punishment of sin in the past. When we trusted in Christ as our Substitute, God delivered us from the penalty of sin. But He also saves us from the power of sin and the bondage of sin in the present, and He will deliver us from the presence of sin and the wrath of God to come and the punishment of hell that unbelievers will experience. Friend, is your trust in the finished work of Jesus Christ that has past, present, and future dimensions? As Paul said in Romans 8:31: "if God is for us who can be against us!" And as Paul said in Romans 8:37-39: "Yet in all these things (sufferings and tribulations) we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us. For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:37-39 NKJV).

5) God uses our suffering for His glory

Paul ends this portion by saying: "you also helping together in prayer for us, that thanks may be given by many persons on our behalf for the gift granted" (verse 11).

In this process of getting help and comfort from God by the Holy Spirit, God works through the church and specifically through the prayers of the church. God incorporates His redemptive plans and purposes by using the means of grace, by using the prayers of His people. The ultimate goal? So that thanks may abound towards God! That is why verse 3 starts with: "**Blessed** be the God and Father of all comfort and

all mercies..." Suffering makes no sense in the absence of God! God is in control, my friend! He has a purpose in our suffering, and that is that He gets the glory when He uses His people in the administration and proclamation of the gospel and the work of prayer through His church and in the ministry of comfort and encouragement through His church! As Paul also says in Romans 11:36: "of Him and through Him and to Him are all things, to **HIM** be the glory forever and ever! Can you see that the design of God in our suffering is His glory? Can you see that in your suffering God wants to draw you away from the comfort of the world to the comfort that only He can give? Can you see that God wants to satisfy you with His consolation and presence in the midst of suffering so that you may know God better and better in order to share His comfort with others for their salvation?

The purpose of suffering for the Christian is, therefore:

-- It is to know the God of comfort and the comfort of God

-- It is to be effective in God's service

-- It is so that we can administer the comfort of God through the comfort we experienced from God

-- it is for the edification and salvation of the church

-- It is to strip us from our dependence and trust in man, our own pride, and our self-sufficiency

-- It is to establish our hope in the gospel and the resurrection of the dead

-- It is to glorify God and thank Him as the King of Kings as we see people come into a saving relationship with God