

Intro

Let's be honest. Life can be hard at times. Life ebbs and flows. There's "a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance" (Eccl 3:4)." Times of joy. Times of suffering. Sometimes life overwhelms us. We discover how weak and fragile we are.

When overwhelmed by suffering, who or what do you rely on? Where do you turn in times of despair? Where do you seek comfort?

So much has been said or written about suffering. The problem of evil. How can evil exist if God is all-powerful and all-good? Philosophers make charges. Apologists craft defenses. The Bible doesn't raise the question. The Bible doesn't seek to defend God. Skeptics are troubled and demand answers. God answers the questions they fail to ask.

How should we process suffering? What is God's stance toward sufferers? Is there a divine purpose behind suffering? How can we help the afflicted?

This morning we ask this question:

CRUCIAL QUESTION: what does the Bible say about affliction?

READ PASSAGE

PRAY

Body

Passage Focus

FCF: affliction and suffering

Circumstance of the letter

Paul is writing to the Corinthian church with whom he has a strained relationship (7:2-4). As he writes he's defending his apostleship (12:11-13) against charges from false apostles (10:7-12; 11:1-6, 12-15) while seeking to win the hearts of the Corinthians.

Point 1: Affliction is painful (1:8-9)

Explanation

Paul speaks of "*all our affliction*" (1:4); "*the affliction we experienced in Asia*" (1:8);

affliction = trouble that inflicts distress...external and internal...usually persecution like violence, imprisonment, threats...also used for punishment in hell, poverty, and the internal distress gospel ministers wished to inflict on Paul by preaching for competitive purposes

affliction is used interchangeably with suffering: "*we share abundantly in Christ's sufferings*" (1:5); "*as you share in our sufferings*" (1:7)

suffering = experiences that produce pain...used of Jesus' suffering on the cross, all suffering related to the fall (sickness, handicaps, natural disasters, consequences of our sins, being sinned against, death),

general persecution, and specific instances of persecution that involved stoning, being driven out of town, opponents inciting opposition

- sharing in Christ's sufferings = enduring opposition for the gospel of the kingdom like Jesus did

Paul doesn't reveal a specific incident that happened in Asia. Some speculate it's the riot in Ephesus found in Acts 19. 1 Corinthians 15:32 speaks of fighting with beasts at Ephesus. Whatever the case, Paul explains the extent of this affliction:

For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself. – 1:8

The opposition was so great that Paul feared his life would be taken, and he realized he didn't have the strength within himself to endure. Paul continues:

Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death. – 1:9

Even though a judge hadn't actually sentenced Paul to death, the inner turmoil he experienced felt like that was the case. He feared for his life in despair. Have you ever reached a point where the burdens of life were too much to bear? Your hope was crushed. You were broken. Anxious. Fearful. Helpless. This is where Paul was at. Let's consider some OT examples where God's people suffered under the same despair:

Moses

In Numbers 11 we see Moses in despair. The people of Israel are weeping because all they have to eat is manna and they desire meat (Num 11:4-13). They fondly remember the fish, cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions, and garlic in Egypt. Moses can't provide the meat they request and wonders why God put the burden of leading this people on him, saying:

Numbers 11:14-15 I am not able to carry all this people alone; **the burden is too heavy for me.** ¹⁵ If you will treat me like this, **kill me at once**, if I find favor in your sight, that I may not see my wretchedness."

Elijah

We also see Elijah in despair. Shortly after the dramatic confrontation with the prophets of Baal, where the fire of the Lord fell on a wet altar and God gave rain after a drought of three years and six months (1 Kgs 18:20-46; Jas 5:17-18), Elijah is discouraged. King Ahab's wife is livid that Elijah had put the prophets of Baal to death, and she sends a message telling Elijah that she will have him dead by tomorrow (1 Kgs 19:1-2). Afraid, Elijah ran for his life and sat under a tree (1 Kgs 19:3):

1 Kings 19:4 And he asked that he might die, saying, "It is enough; now, O LORD, **take away my life**, for I am no better than my fathers."

Application

My point isn't that Paul wished he was dead. Paul feared his life would be taken. He wanted to stay alive. My point is that we, God's people, can be so overwhelmed by our circumstances that we break to a point of despair. We reach the end of ourselves, the end of our own strength. Moses and Elijah, God's prophets who saw God's mighty works, were both so weighed down by their circumstances that they asked God to kill them. If these prophets of God can despair like this, is it not possible for us?

External pressures weighed so heavily on Paul that he despaired. He was too weak to endure. He needed divine aid. Moses and Elijah were so weighed down by external pressures that they desired death. They were at the end of their own strength. They needed divine aid.

My point is this: we need divine aid. We are not strong enough to bear life's burdens on our own. It's okay to admit the pain. We don't need to pretend all is great when it isn't. Godliness ≠ feigning strength or pretending all is good. Don't be self-sufficient. We need divine aid because **affliction is painful**.

Unbeliever

What do you do when life is unbearable? Where do you turn?

Point 2: God comforts his afflicted (1:3-5)

Explanation

God the Father comforts his afflicted people because of who he is:

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 affliction, – 1:3-4

Mercies = sympathy, mercy, compassion...concern over another's misfortune = God's heart towards us when we're afflicted

Comfort = lifting someone's spirit, consoling or comforting the downcast = God's action towards us when we're afflicted

When you think of God, think of one who sympathizes with your affliction and one who comforts your soul when you're overburdened and despairing. If we see God this way we'll trust him. If we see God this way we'll turn to him during affliction instead of turning away from him. If we see God in this way we won't turn to God-substitutes (substances, food, entertainment, leisure, etc.)

When does comfort come? When we're experiencing affliction:

who comforts us in all our affliction, – 1:4

How does comfort come? Through Christ:

For as we share abundantly in Christ's sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too. – 1:5

It's through Christ that we're abundantly comforted. It's believers who receive comfort in affliction, because only believers are in Christ. We're positionally in Christ in that his righteousness is credited to us and we are declared not guilty. Through faith we're counted righteous in Christ. Being in Christ, all the blessings associated with salvation are ours: forgiveness, adoption, reconciliation, sanctification, glorification, regeneration. We are experientially in Christ in that the Spirit of Christ, the Holy Spirit, dwells in us. One way we experience God's comfort is by the internal comfort of the Spirit.

This assurance of God's comfort isn't limited to just persecution. God comforts Paul and Timothy "in all our affliction" (1:4). In 6:4-10 and 11:23-28 we have a broad list of Paul's afflictions:

Hardships, calamities, beatings (lashes, rods, stoning), imprisonments, riots, exhausting labors, sleepless nights, hunger, shipwreck, dangers (robbers, Jews, Gentiles, false brothers), cold and exposure, anxiety for all the churches (the burden of God's people). My point: God sympathizes with the variety of afflictions we face. Not just persecution.

Application

Moses was crushed by the burden of leading the people of Israel. Their complaining overwhelmed him. He couldn't carry the burden of those people by himself. So he asked God to kill him. God answered Moses' plea by raising up 70 male leaders to share Moses' burden so that he wouldn't have to bear it alone (Num 11:16-17).

Elijah was crushed by the fear of death. God answered Elijah by sending an angel who provided food and water, which gave Elijah strength to travel (1 Kgs 19:5-8). When Elijah expressed concern that he was all alone and people were seeking to kill him (1 Kgs 19:9-14), God assured Elijah that he had 7,000 in Israel that hadn't bowed to Baal (1 Kgs 19:18).

In both cases, God's people were discouraged and wanted out. In both cases, God came to their aid. He sent help in the form of 70 leaders and an angel. He assured Elijah he wasn't alone. Because his heart is moved by the suffering of his people.

Unbeliever

How do you view God? If you saw God as sympathetic to sufferers, as a God who comforts his afflicted people, might you trust him? Isn't it a good thing that he comforts afflicted people? Shouldn't you want his comfort when you're despairing? God is praiseworthy ("blessed") because of his nature and his deeds.

Point 3: Affliction serves a purpose

Explanation

First, God has us experience affliction so that we will rely on God rather than ourselves:

Paul's affliction in Asia, where he feared death was overwhelmed with despair, "*was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead (1:9).*"

One of the reasons God orchestrates affliction in our lives is so that we won't trust in ourselves. In our despair we see our weakness. We see we don't have the strength within ourselves. We see our need for divine help. God wants us to depend on him, not on ourselves. God will bring circumstances into our lives to teach us this lesson! He did this with Paul. The God who raises the dead is able to provide comfort in times of despair.

Second, God has us experience affliction to shape us for comforting others:

God "*comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God (1:4).*"

Experiencing affliction and divine comfort makes us able to comfort those who are afflicted. We comfort those who are afflicted with the same comfort God has extended to us. Maybe practical help to alleviate distress or encouraging words or wise counsel.

This is why I encourage small groups: a great opportunity to share our affliction with others and a great opportunity to comfort the afflicted. Caution: I'm not saying the only time we can comfort others is small groups. I'm just saying small groups are a good place for that to happen. We need a place to share our despair. If we don't share our despair, we miss out on the comfort of God's people. If the apostle Paul can admit despair surely we can as well. I bet the apostle Paul wouldn't jump on those despairing because of affliction with a stream of rebuke! God's stance towards the afflicted is mercy.

Note it's those who've experienced God's comfort that are competent to comfort. If you see someone suffering, don't worry if you haven't experienced the same exact scenario. If you've experienced God's comfort, you're equipped to provide comfort.

Note also the condition for experiencing God's comfort:

*If we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation; and if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which you experience **when you patiently endure** the same sufferings that we suffer. – 1:6*

- sufferers experience divine comfort when they endure affliction = cling to God when affliction comes and you'll be comforted; turning from God during affliction = no comfort

Paul's affliction was purposeful, not accidental or merely allowed. No, God intended the affliction for his wise and good reasons. God orchestrates affliction for a purpose! How should we view affliction? According to this passage, one way to view affliction is as an opportunity to experience God's comfort and the comfort of his people. Thus, in experiencing affliction, we draw closer to God and his people.

Paul understands affliction is painful – it brought him to despair, but he also sees affliction positively – it teaches us to rely on God and shapes us to comfort one another. The NT perspective is communal, not just individual.

Unbeliever

God wants us to trust in him, not in ourselves. This is a picture of the gospel. In the gospel, we rely on what Christ accomplished, not on ourselves. We recognize our failure to keep God's holy law. We recognize our rebellion. So we cast ourselves on the mercy of God, trusting in the finished work of Christ. That Jesus died as a substitute for your sins. That he took the punishment you deserved. Relying on what Jesus did, not what you do, rest in God's mercy.

The way we begin the Christian life is the way we live the Christian life!

Point 4: Help the afflicted through prayer (1:11)

Explanation

The afflicted Paul asks for help in the form of prayer:

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. – 1:11

The apostle Paul is not above admitting despair. The apostle Paul is not above requesting prayer. Because he trusts that the prayers of God's people will help him in the midst of affliction. The Corinthians should pray for Paul because many will give thanks when Paul is blessed through their prayers. Paul assumes blessing will come his way through their prayers. And he assumes many will give thanks when Paul is blessed. If Paul is delivered from "deadly peril" once again (1:10) he will continue to minister to the churches, and for that, many will give thanks for Paul's rescue. Prayers answered will result in thanksgiving. This is confidence in the tangible effects of prayer.

Application

One way we serve our afflicted brothers and sisters is by praying for them. One way we rely on God rather than ourselves is requesting the prayers of our brothers and sisters.

Conclusion

What does the Bible say about affliction?

Affliction is painful. It's okay and right to admit despair and seek help.

God comforts his afflicted. Turn to God during affliction and you can be sure that you will be comforted.

Affliction serves a purpose. God sends affliction so that we'll rely on him instead of ourselves, and so we can be shaped to comfort others.

Help the afflicted through prayer. We help our brothers and sisters by praying for them during seasons of affliction.