

THE COMPANY OF THE AFFLICTED

By Steve Zeisler

I was discussing with a Stanford University graduate student the greatness of Professor Philip Taube, after he was awarded the Nobel Prize for chemistry. My friend made the point that in her estimation it was not Taube's ability to discover solutions to problems that set him apart, but rather his ability to ask the right questions. It struck me that this capacity to ask the right questions, to approach difficult concepts from the right direction, is key to becoming Nobel laureates in living life. This is the kind of insight we have in the Scriptures. There we learn how to face problems from the right perspective, so that we may become the kind of people who live praiseworthy lives.

Of all the dilemmas we face in life the one which the apostle Paul raises in our text from 2 Corinthians this morning, the problem of affliction, of human suffering, is perhaps the most difficult of all. In this section, verses 3 through 11 of chapter 1, Paul makes repeated use of the Greek word *thlipsis* (affliction or distress). The role of God in allowing affliction and caring for those who suffer under it is important to ascertain in order to fully trust him.

Avoiding wrong questions

We should make sure we are not approaching this issue asking the wrong questions. Let me give examples of two wrong approaches to the subject of affliction. There are many "Why?" questions clamoring to be answered. Why me? Why now? Why isn't suffering distributed more evenly? But these "Why?" questions won't get us very far.

A second wrong way to approach this subject is by asking the "How?" questions: "How can I get God to do what I want him to do? How can I manipulate circumstances so that God will respond to me my way?" People who ask this wrong question sometimes think that if they pray a certain way, with a certain group, or in a certain setting, then God will respond. They may offer to make deals with God, promising to reform their lives, in an attempt to get him to go along with their plans. These are wrong approaches, as we will see.

Affliction helps us trust God, recognize our need for each other, and it builds trust

Let us discover what our passage has to say on this subject. Second Corinthians 1:3-11:

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles [affliction] so that we can comfort those in any trouble [same word] with the comfort we ourselves have received from God. For just as the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives, so also through Christ our comfort overflows. If we are distressed [afflicted], it is for your comfort and salvation; if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which produces in you patient endurance of the same sufferings we suffer. And our hope for you is firm, because we know that just as you share in our sufferings, so also you share in our comfort.

There is a great deal of practical advice in the outlook on life which Paul shares in these verses.

Now, beginning with verse 8, the apostle introduces a personal element in the account of his own experiences.

We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about the hardships [this is that word again]

we suffered in the province of Asia. We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired even of life. Indeed, in our hearts we felt the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead. 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, as you help us by your prayers. Then many will give thanks on our behalf for the gracious favor granted us in answer to the prayers of many.

Relentless pressure

We should define this word, *thlipsis*, before we go any farther. It is not describing pain or difficulty in themselves. Pain and difficulty are not always experienced as affliction. They can be quite positive. Today is Mother's Day. Mothers hardly need reminding that the travail of childbirth, the suffering that is involved in bringing life into this world, is not to be compared to the joy that is theirs when at last their child is born. Pain and exhaustion are abundant, but there is relief and joy in the anticipation of birth. Affliction, however, has to do with pain or difficulty that is threatening-suffering in which no good outcome can be predicted. The root idea of the word before us is pressure; unrelenting pressure that, like a bulldozer, threatens to crush and sweep aside everything in its path.

Though God may not answer our questions, he is the "father of compassion" who will minister to his children. Two ideas gather up Paul's testimony here about the proper direction to look for help from God when we are under great pressure: comfort (v.4), and deliverance (v.10).

Shared comfort

First, the word "comfort." What do we mean when we refer to the comfort that comes from heaven? Notice the illustration Paul uses in verse 5 when he speaks of the sufferings and comfort of Christ overflowing into our lives. It is as if the apostle is picturing a stream of flowing water in which we are all participants, not a cistern or a well in which we are isolated from one another. Comfort comes from the God who is comfort himself. It is offered to a believer who learns this lesson and in turn is able to offer comfort to another.

Sin is an isolater. It makes us withdraw from others so that we don't ask for help because we are too proud, or we don't offer help because we are too selfish. But when the affliction becomes too hard to bear, then we find ourselves entering into the lives of one another. In that way, suffering can be regarded as one of the building blocks to community, as we see God giving life where suffering was present.

Paul is counting on this. Remember that he and the Corinthians did not get along very well. That is why the first thing he does in this letter is reach out to them on the basis of hurt, by sharing his own fear and weakness. This may help them understand and draw near to him. Affliction builds community. It helps us trust God, to recognize our need for each other, and it builds trust. So an important part of the comforting process is that we are all in this together.

Help for our hurt

A second point here is that "the comfort with which you have been comforted" is that which you can best offer to another. The areas in which you have been buffeted are the areas in which you can best help someone else. A man in our congregation shared last week that he had had a difficult surgery recently, and someone visited him in the hospital. He was so touched by this that he now is setting up a hospital visitation ministry. He is thinking exactly along the lines of this passage. A couple in this church lost a loved one to AIDS, and they are now beginning a ministry for those who are touched by this epidemic. Some will shrink from this, but one who has been touched by the death of a loved one from AIDS will be able to minister in this area. A group of women in this church who are widows or who are living alone meet together regularly to minister to each other. They know from personal experience what it means to be alone, and they are therefore qualified to help someone who suddenly finds herself in that circumstance. We comfort those with the particular comfort which we ourselves have been comforted.

Fortification

The outcome of this, says Paul, is "patient endurance" (v.6) of the same sufferings we suffer. The result of comforting is that one is made capable of enduring when the pressure increases, when the weight descends with all of its threatening qualities. That is what the word "comfort" means, by the way. When we think of being comforted, we think of being patted on the head, being given a cheerful word, etc. But this is not what Paul means by that word. The word "fortify" conveys a much clearer idea of what he is referring to. He is talking about being fortified, strengthened, given power to endure our afflictions. When you go hiking in the mountains, you will notice that your bag of potato chips (essential trail food), which has been packed at a lower altitude will bulge out almost to bursting point because there is less air pressure at the higher elevation. The reverse would also be true. If the bag was packed at altitude, it would collapse at sea level because the pressures are unequal. In spiritual terms, fortification, comforting, makes us equal to the pressure of affliction. God is supplying us with the strength to bear up under it.

One of my favorite movies is *The Magnificent Seven*. It is the story of seven men who are hired by farmers in a Mexican village to protect the villagers from the yearly raids of local bandits who rob them of their money and food. But the best work these men do among the villagers is teaching them how to protect themselves. When the bandits come on their raids the following year, they are successfully resisted. The villagers had been fortified, comforted, made strong enough to withstand the yearly raids. No longer can they be swept aside.

This illustrates what Paul is talking about here. God, the father of all compassion and mercy, comforts us by meeting our needs inwardly. Then we offer the same kind of comfort in turn to those in need, and they pass it along to others, and so on. The result is a community of people who are being strengthened. We are not answering here the "Why?" question. There may not be an answer to it. What God does offer, though, is his strengthening presence so that we can stand fast during times of affliction.

Deliverance

The second word we will look at is the word "deliverance." When Paul says in verse 8, "We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about the hardships we suffered in the province of Asia," we can only guess at what he means. He knew what he was referring to, and so did the Corinthians, but we don't. I think the best guess we can make at this reference is that it is speaking of the time in Ephesus when the silversmiths who made their living by making idols found their livelihood threatened by Christianity. In response, they a riot in the city and attacked Paul and the Christians. Whatever the occasion, it is obvious that Paul encountered a life-threatening situation: "Indeed, in our hearts we felt the sentence of death," says Paul. He despaired even of life (v.8).

I find this helpful, because Paul has just been referring to how God enables us to endure affliction. But here he says the pressure was so great he despaired. He wasn't immediately able to apply the truth he announced in verses 3-7. How many of us have felt the same way in the early stages of dealing with affliction! Our prayers seem unanswered. Our hope seems without foundation. We despair even of life itself. This is what Paul is talking about. But all of this affliction is designed to make us rely on God, not on ourselves, says the apostle. A deliverance was coming. God rescued him from the circumstances. And he was delivered inwardly. His hope returned.

God who raises the dead

But look carefully at what he says about deliverance. The Deliverer he is speaking of is the God who raises the dead. Paul is not saying that God will always deliver us in this life, that the illness we are now experiencing, the economic trial we are facing, the family dispute, will suddenly disappear and we will be delivered in our lifetime. We cannot be sure of that. What we can be sure of, however, is that the God who raises the dead will act on our behalf. It may be that our deliverance will not occur until resurrection day. But if so, then he will bring about justice for those who love him.

This is an important perspective because some people think that endurance is an end in itself. If they can harden themselves to pain so much that they no longer experience any ups or downs, they feel, then they are enduring. But that is not Christianity. We endure because we hope in a God who is going to act in our behalf.

We look forward to the day when truth will prevail, when wickedness will be put down, when there will be no more pain. Revelation 21:3,4 describes it this way, "I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away."

In spiritual terms, fortification, comforting, makes us equal to the pressure of affliction

Our hope is in our Deliverer who will comfort us as we need it. He will make things right, either in this life or in the resurrection. I have a friend who is just completing seminary. This man has a Downs syndrome child; he has recently suffered a severe financial reversal; and now his wife has contracted a crippling illness. In his desire to serve the Lord it is as if he has just run up against a wall. The "Why?" questions have no answers. The painful affliction goes on. My friend must rely on a Comforter who will meet his needs, and a Deliverer who will act to banish suffering.

Wrong reliance

"But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God who raises the dead" (verse 9). This will be a recurring theme in 2 Corinthians. We tend to rely on ourselves in ways we don't even discern at times. We distance ourselves from God and go on our way without him. Paul did not realize the degree to which he relied on his own abilities. But in Asia he learned a hard lesson. That is the way God teaches us to rely on him-by placing us in circumstances too difficult for us to handle.

There are several references to prayer in this passage. Paul is not teaching on prayer, however, but on affliction. But as he comments on prayer in passing, he ends up having a great deal to say on the subject. He begins in verse 3 with a word of praise to God: "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort." The apostle has learned through the bitter experience of expecting to die, despairing of life itself, that God is a God of comfort. Thus he begins this section with a word of praise to his God. This is instinctive, unforced, and natural for Paul because of the lessons he had learned. He goes on to talk about petitionary prayer. He mentions the Corinthians' praying for him, and how much that means to him. They were praying for his safety, for his health, for his emotional state, asking God to act on his behalf.

Finally, in verse 11, the apostle talks about thanksgiving: "Then many will give thanks on our behalf for the gracious favor granted us in answer to the prayers of many." Thankfulness to God is the only proper response for what he has done. Praise, petition, thanksgiving. Prayer is a natural part of the process of learning to face affliction, as we draw on God's comforting, fortifying power to strengthen us to endure. We count on our Deliverer to deliver us. We can rest our hope in him.

Entering the stream

There is no way to experience the life that fills this passage-the community of one with the other, the awareness of God pouring out a stream of comfort from heaven that fills us and overflows from us to others, the ability to pray realistically because our prayers are learned from life's experiences-unless we are willing participants in this process. Too often we seek to insulate ourselves from affliction. We don't want any problems. Our prayers are shallow. We don't want to know who is suffering or why they are suffering, or whether God might want us to help them. We want to insulate ourselves from affliction.

Or else we suffer alone, in isolation. We are too proud to ask for help, failing to believe that God will act anyway, so we suffer alone. Isolation and insulation are both foolish.

The challenge of this passage is to avoid both of those extremes. Let us learn the names of those who are near us and who need us. Let us begin to pray genuinely for them, to hear what God is doing in their lives, to join in the afflictions of Christ which have been poured over into their lives, to know the comfort, to see the strengthening. Then the comfort that God offers them becomes our comfort and we in turn offer it to another.

Let us be honest when we require help. We are speaking of a stream, not a cistern. I urge you, by the grace of God, to become part of it, to join in. Find a place to offer comfort. Ask for help if you need it. Learn to pray with a full heart. "Then many will give thanks on our behalf for the gracious favor granted us in answer to the prayers of many."

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