

**WHERE IS GOD WHEN IT HURTS?
OVERFLOWING SUFFERING MET BY
OVERFLOWING COMFORT
2 Corinthians 1: 3-11**

Please review this week's catechism question.

Did you meet anyone new after last Sunday's worship service?

INTRODUCTION

What has been the worst physical pain you have experienced? How did you endure it? Did the experience of pain have any long lasting effect upon your life?

God tells Ananias to go and heal Saul of Tarsus of his blindness and to baptize him. This is part of what he tells him, "This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel. I will show him how much he must suffer for my name." Paul knew, from the earliest days of his conversion, that for him to follow Christ meant much suffering. During the next 30-40 years, Paul fulfilled this prophecy. Read 2 Cor. 11: 23-29 & 12:7. Make a list of all the ways that Paul suffered.

- *Worked hard, been in prison often, severely flogged, exposed to death many times.*
- *Whipped 39 times on five different occasions by the Jewish mobs*
- *Three different occasions he was beaten with rods (think nightsticks)*
- *Once he was stoned and left for dead (Acts 14:19-20)*
- *Shipwrecked three times. He even spent 24 hours floating in the open sea after one of those wrecks (Think "Jaws")*
- *He was never able to stay in one place for very long, always on the move. His longest time in one place that we know about was in Ephesus for about three years (Acts 20:31).*
- *He lived a life of risk and danger. He was in danger when crossing rivers. He often traveled through country infested with bandits. Jewish and Gentile people were regularly threatening to harm him. He was at risk of injury and death wherever he went and from all kinds of people, even those professing to be Christians.*

- *He often worked so hard between preaching the gospel and making tents to support he and his fellow workers that he didn't sleep.*
- *He was often hungry and thirsty and had no food or any way to purchase food. In other words he had no money.*
- *On some of the occasions when he was arrested he was stripped naked and so lived in prison, naked and therefore cold.*
- *Every day he worries about the survival of the churches he has helped to found. He feels pain when believers sin or experience suffering. His emotional life is regularly in turmoil because he so closely identifies with the well being of so many people.*
- *He had a chronic illness of some sort that the Lord told him he would not heal.*

How does it strike you that Paul, who did more to spread the gospel of Christ and who so obviously loved Christ, suffered so much? Does that seem odd to you in any way? Why or why not?

STUDY

1. Why does Paul use 1st person, plural pronouns (we, us, our) throughout 2 Cor. 1: 3-11? (CLUE: see v. 7)

Paul makes his experience the model of all Christian experience. He does this by using the 1st person plural pronouns, "we", "us", "our", throughout this section. He also explicitly states it in v. 7. He knows these people are Christians because they are suffering as he does and are being comforted as he is. He is not saying that every Christian endures the exact same kinds of suffering, but he does say that the sufferings of Christ overflow into the life of every Christian. C.K. Barrett makes this point so clearly, "Profoundly conscious as he is that he is an apostle, Paul does not draw an absolute distinction between himself and the ordinary Christian who is not an apostle; the special thing about an apostle is that a common Christian pattern comes in him to a particularly sharp focus."

2. Why does Paul praise God in vv. 3-4a?

He praises him for who he is and for what he has done. He is the Father of compassion (lit., “the mercies”) and the God of all comfort. He praises him for comforting him in all his trouble.

3. What do we know is true when someone praises someone or something?

No one ever praises anything or anyone out of duty. People always and only praise those things and people that they value, that they are impressed with, that are attractive to them. Paul’s heart is full of joy in God and so he naturally praises God.

4. What does Paul mean by calling God the “Father of compassion” (literally, “the mercies”)? (See Nehemiah 9: 19, 27-31, Psalm 145: 8-9, Hosea 2:19) Why does this cause him to praise him?

God is the originator of mercy. There is no mercy except that which comes from God. It means that God always delivers people from their afflictions not because he is under obligation to do so, but because he delights to be merciful, to show pity. Paul’s heart is full of joy at the thought of God’s mercy because he knows that he does not deserve mercy. He knows that he deserves destruction and hell.

5. What does it mean that God is the “God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our afflictions”?

He is the source of all comfort, not just some comfort, not just comfort in some situations. He is the one who gives comfort at all times and in every situation and in every way that is needed. But notice that Paul isn’t talking in some theoretical manner. God is the one who comforts him in all his troubles. He speaks from his experience of God’s comfort coming to him in his suffering. While Paul is being lashed with the 39 lashes, God is comforting him. While he spent those 24 hours in the open sea, God was comforting him. While he is burdened with the care of these thousands of other believers, God is comforting him. While he is naked, shivering with cold in that dark dungeon, God is comforting him. While he lies in bed, sick and too weak to move, God is comforting him.

6. What does Paul mean by his use of the word “comfort”? See 2 Timothy 4: 16-18 for an illustration from Paul’s life and consider how parents comfort sick or injured children.

In 2 Timothy, Paul is in prison in Rome and is on trial. If he is convicted he will be executed. Notice that everyone has abandoned him. In v. 17 Paul says, “the Lord stood at my side” and in v. 18 he says, “The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and will bring me safely to his heavenly kingdom.” The comfort that God gives is the assurance of his presence and that this trouble will not keep me from my heavenly home. Don’t miss that Paul expects more evil attacks! He expects more suffering. He does not expect to be kept safe from suffering but to be kept safe in suffering. He is comforted because he knows that the Lord will not permit any evil thing to keep him from his eternal home. Parents comfort sick or injured children by hugging them, assuring everything will be all right and then acting to make things OK. The greatest danger that faces me when I suffer is the danger of forsaking Christ because I cannot handle having the comforts of this life taken from me. The goal of God’s comfort then is to keep us holding fast to Christ so we make it safely to our heavenly home.

7. According to vv. 4b-6, what is one reason that God comforts Christians who suffer? (CLUE: Why does God comfort Paul?)

Paul says here that the suffering comes and the comfort comes to a particular Christian so that Christian can turn around and give the same comfort he or she has experienced to another Christian that is suffering. In v. 6 Paul says that the reason that he suffers is for their comfort and salvation and the reason he is comforted is for their comfort. Paul sees God standing behind both his suffering and his comfort. He sees that one of God’s purposes for his suffering and his comfort is to give comfort and therefore salvation to others.

8. How does God’s comforting Paul give comfort to the Corinthians? How does this work for any Christian? How does the comfort God gives to one Christian who suffers produce comfort in another suffering Christian?

Primarily the comfort that others have discovered in suffering comes to another Christian from their example of perseverance. When we see

others enduring hardship and loss, joyfully depending upon Christ in the midst of it, we are motivated to imitate their faith. The example of others convinces us that to have Christ is better than not suffering and so we hold fast to Christ. As I see others remain faithful to Christ while they suffer the loss of earthly comforts and pleasures I am strengthened to “imitate their faith”, to “join with them in suffering for the sake of Christ.”

9. Have you ever been comforted in your suffering by the comfort that another has received? How did that work?

10. To your knowledge, has your being comforted by God in some trouble ever been a source of comfort to someone else?

11. In your own words describe Paul’s experience in Asia as he reports it in vv. 8-9a)

We do not know what the affliction was. We don’t know if this was suffering due to the general misery that is in the world, like sickness and accidents or if it was suffering due to his calling as a Christian and an apostle, like being beaten or imprisoned. The only things that are certain about the trouble are first, it happened while he was living in Asia, most likely the city of Ephesus. Second, the suffering felt to Paul as if it were too great a burden to bear. It was as if a massive rock was placed upon on his back and was crushing him. Paul was sure that he was going to die. He was in a situation that was so severe that he had given up all hope of remaining physically alive. He was in a hopeless situation. He was like a man on death row, the sentence was passed and he was simply waiting for the execution. Third, while being sure he was going to die, suddenly, he was delivered from death. He was, as it were, snatched from the jaws of death.

12. According to v. 9b, why did this happen? What does the language, “this happened so that…” imply?

Paul believes that God put him in this situation. In other words, God placed him on the brink of death. God wanted Paul to despair of life, to have the sentence of death in himself. God stripped away all hope of remaining alive. The reason God did this was to shatter all of Paul’s self-confidence. Humans are by nature self-reliant, proud creatures.

Humans believe they have what it takes to gain a happy life on planet earth. Humans believe the lie of Satan that a happy life on earth is better than the eternal pleasures God offers. Therefore, we give our energy to building happiness here, rather than pursuing God and his righteousness. Therefore, God sends suffering to break us of our self-reliance. When a man or woman comes face to face with their own mortality, with the finality of death, they can no longer live under the illusion that they have what it takes to be happy. The threat of death strips away all confidence of finding happiness here. God puts us in situations where we despair of life to humble us and to cause us to depend upon him, the God who raises the dead. God did not put Paul in this situation so that he would depend upon God to deliver him from this life-threatening situation. God put the sentence of death upon Paul so that he would set his hope firmly on the God who raises the dead. He wanted Paul to fix his attention on the final resurrection, not on deliverance from the immediate trouble. God wanted to make Paul into a person who could say that to die is gain. He wanted Paul to be a person who could live in hope and joy no matter what the trouble because he knows that the deliverance that is coming is absolutely certain because the God we trust in is the God who raises the dead. The point of the suffering is to convince Paul that it is hopeless to live as if you can be happy in this world. It is foolish to act as though this world is what you were made for. This situation had its intended effect upon Paul because even when he is kept alive he sees that deliverance as simply pointing ahead to a far greater deliverance.

13. What effect did this suffering and surprising deliverance have upon Paul according to v. 10?

His hope is not firmly fixed upon God and he is absolutely certain that God will deliver him, keep him safe from apostasy, all the way to heaven. He knows that God will deliver him on the last day from destruction and hell and give him a glorified, resurrected body to enjoy God’s presence forever.

14. Has an experience of trouble or suffering ever caused you to “rely on God, who raises the dead” in greater ways?

15. Why does Paul add, “as you help us by your prayers”? What connection does he see between his final deliverance (going to heaven) and the prayers of others?

Paul knows that while it is God who will keep him safe that one of the reasons God will do so is because he is answering the prayers of God’s people on his behalf. If you were to ask Paul how does he know that God is going to keep him safe until heaven? One of his answers would be, “because so many people are asking God to keep me safe.” Paul knows that God will make the suffering he endures serve his eternal good because God’s people are praying for him and God will answer their prayers. He knows that without the prayers of God’s people on his behalf he will not make it safely to his heavenly home.

16. What is the result of God’s delivering Paul in answer to the prayers of believers?

God is praised and thanked for his answering by delivering. In other words, God is glorified and Paul is benefited. He is saved and God gets the glory.

17. Why is it important for Christians to pray for one another, especially when we are suffering?

Many wonder, if God is sovereign, if he sends the suffering and he sends the comfort, then why should we bother with prayer. Right here are two reasons. First, God gives the gift of faith and perseverance and deliverance now and forever in answer to the prayers of Christians for one another. Second, he does this for the same reason he does all that he does in the world, for the praise of his glorious name. We get the benefit. He gets the glory. We cry out for help, he gives the help and so receives the praise. When we stand around God’s glorious throne in his eternal kingdom we will not be talking about how wonderful we were or about how strong our faith was, we will be praising God for how he listened to our cries for help and then sent help to strengthen us so we would not abandon Christ.

18. Are you regularly praying for others to hold fast to Christ in the midst of suffering?

19. Do you encourage others to pray for you? Why or why not?

The Christian life is a life of overflowing suffering met by overflowing comfort so that...

- **God might be praised**
- **God’s comfort might be experienced by more people**
- **Self-confidence is destroyed and God-confidence is strengthened**
- **Prayers will lead to praise**