

# AFFLICTION, FRIEND OR FOE?

## THE DIVINE PURPOSE OF GOD IN AFFLICTION

a sermon by Albert N. Martin

One of the common experiences of all the people of God is this matter of affliction. In this study we will look at Second Corinthians 1: 3– 11 under the general theme of affliction, friend or foe?

**2nd Corinthians 1:1** *Paul, an Apostle of Christ Jesus through the will of God, and Timothy our brother, unto the church of God which is at Corinth, with all the saints that are in the whole of Achaia: 2 Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. 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 affliction, that we may be able to comfort them that are in any affliction, through the comfort wherewith we ourselves are comforted of God. 5 For as the sufferings of Christ abound unto us, even so our comfort also abounds through Christ. 6 But whether we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation; or whether we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which works in the patient enduring of the same sufferings which we also suffer: 7 and our hope for you is steadfast; knowing that, as you are partakers of the sufferings, so also are you of the comfort. 8 For we would not have you ignorant, brethren, concerning our affliction which befell us in Asia, that we were weighed down exceedingly, beyond our power, insomuch that we despaired even of life: 9 yea, we ourselves have had the sentence of death within ourselves, that we should not trust in ourselves, but in God Who raises the dead: 10 Who delivered us out of so great a death, and will deliver: on Whom we have set our hope that He will also still deliver us; 11 you also helping together on our behalf by your supplication; that, for the gift bestowed upon us by means of many, thanks may be given by many persons on our behalf.*

It is obvious that the theme of this passage is the subject of affliction. For the very thing which triggers this eulogy, this blessing of God the Father, is that the Apostle and his companion, Timothy, have experienced a peculiar measure of the consolation and comfort of God in the midst of affliction. So the Apostle begins with those words, “*Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, The Father of mercies, The God of all comfort, Who comforts us in all our affliction.*” It opens up the whole subject of affliction in which there are given to us some very helpful perspectives concerning the experience of all the people of God.

### INTRODUCTION

In introducing our study of the passage, it is necessary to understand several things about affliction.

First of all, the meaning of the word affliction, as it is found here in the passage before us. The word itself literally means, that which is pressing or pressure. Hence it is come to speak of oppression, affliction or tribulation. It refers to distress brought upon men and women, particularly by outward circumstances which in turn create this inward distress. It’s translated numerous ways in the New Testament. In some places it’s translated tribulation, in others, as it is here, affliction; sometimes persecution; other times trouble; but it is that which God reveals is the portion of all of His people. This pressure, this oppression, this tribulation, this **inward distress brought about by outward circumstances**, our Lord says, will be the portion of all of His people. **John 16:33** “*In the world you shall have [and this is the same word in the original] affliction. You shall have tribulation, but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world.*” One of the very elementary messages that the Apostles used to give on their missionary follow up tours, concern the whole subject of affliction. We read in **Acts 14:21** “*And when they had preached the gospel to that city, and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra, and to Iconium, and to Antioch, 22 confirming the souls of the disciples, exhorting them to continue in the faith, and that through many tribulations [afflictions same word in the original] we must enter into the kingdom of God.*”

### **AFFLICTION IS ONE OF THE COMMON DENOMINATOR’S OF THE PEOPLE OF GOD**

The Apostles were very, very concerned that believers understand, early in their Christian lives, that **affliction and tribulation were part and parcel of normal Christian experience**. It is for this reason that our Lord in His parting words spoke the words previously quoted, in the world you shall have tribulation. He had given them some tremendously encouraging promises about the coming of the Holy Spirit. Some promises concerning His ministry of comfort and consolation and illumination; and the impartation of gifts and graces in power,

but **less they misunderstand this, to think that they would come to some level of experience in the Holy Spirit that would either immunize them from, or totally lift them out of the realm of tribulation and affliction**, our Lord says, toward the conclusion of those wonderful words of John 14, 15, and 16, In the world you shall have tribulation. John was so confident that tribulation was as much a part of the Christian life as faith in Christ, that when he addresses the believers of Asia Minor in Revelation 1 this is how he addresses them: **Revelation 1:9** *“I John your brother and partaker with you in the **tribulation** and kingdom and **patience** which are in Jesus.”* He looks upon all believers as fellow partakers, not only of the kingdom and the steadfastness that are in Christ, but also of the tribulation, the affliction, the persecution, that are in Christ. So it is not surprising that our Lord tells us in the parable of the sower that some apparent converts are caused to wither in their profession, when they come into contact with their first real affliction. In **Matthew 13:21** Jesus said, when tribulation, and persecution, when affliction and persecution arise because of the Word, they stumble. It was affliction that caused the consternation of the Psalmist in Psalm 73. He was afflicted and he saw the people of God afflicted, and it didn't make sense to him, because the people who were not committed to the worship of Jehovah and to the law of God seem to be wonderfully insulated from affliction, and this he could not understand.

And so in the light of the fact that the Scripture teaches, that **affliction is one of the common denominator's of the people of God**, and that affliction can be the occasion of stumbling and consternation, it is necessary for every Christian, to learn how to confront affliction.

One of the great problems that we face, as in many other areas, **we carry over into the Christian life worldly, carnal views** of affliction. You see the unbeliever looks upon affliction as his or her greatest enemy. Every affliction that comes into their life is a roadblock in the pursuit of their carnal and temporal goals, and therefore affliction is always their enemy. They can never hug affliction to themselves and say welcome, my God-sent friend. He looks upon affliction says, “Who are you? My enemy!” They do all within their power to get affliction, out of the way. The unbeliever looks upon it as enemy, all enemy, and nothing but enemy and yet sad to say, many children of God, to some degree or another, have absorbed that mentality and do not understand the purpose of God in affliction. But now, for the child of God, there should be a totally different perspective concerning the subject of affliction.

In this study as we consider this passage in second Corinthians we will seek to layout **THE DIVINE PURPOSE OF GOD IN AFFLICTION** which, when understood by the child of God, will help them to embrace their afflictions rather than to run from them as an unwanted enemy.

### **ILLUSTRATION**

Let me illustrate the difference that this perspective will make. Try to picture a little child who's been involved in a serious accident. He's been knocked unconscious and has a compound fracture. He's got a bone sticking right through the skin which will demand not only the setting of the bone, but also some sutures, and the first time that he awakes out of his unconsciousness he looks up, and there is a man with a mask on his face, and a skullcap on his head, a big needle in his hand and a scalpel in his other hand, and the poor child coming to consciousness thinks he's awoken in the midst of a horror movie. He's scared and he screams out and begins to fight to get himself off that table until he is quieted down. His mom or dad, with a nurse or the doctor, explains to him that the person standing there with the needle is going to put the needle in so that he won't feel any pain when he takes the scalpel and begins to patch him up and put the arm back in place. Once the child understands, that which in his first reflex looked so foreboding, something to be resisted, then he will welcome that which upon first sight he utterly rejected. In the same way, the child of God many times –when they wake up as it were and see afflictions standing before them with his long needle and with his scalpel– their reaction is one of wanting to run. It's at that point that they need to be still and to understand what God is saying, “This is the purpose that I have in this affliction for you.” Then the heart of the child of God is stilled to submit to that affliction.

### **FIVE DIVINE PURPOSES IN AFFLICTION**

What then, according to **2 Corinthians 1: 3 – 11** is the divine purpose in affliction?

I would suggest that the Apostle indicates that there are at least five divine purposes in affliction, and we're limiting our observations just to this passage. We could range far and wide in many other portions of Scripture, but we want to stick with this portion and lay out these aspects of the divine purpose in affliction. Our purpose is that you, as a child of God, may recognize this, so that when affliction comes, and it will come, you may be able to confront it biblically, and not look upon affliction as your foe, but as your friend.

What is the first purpose of God in affliction? It's set before us in verse **1:3**

*“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies*

*and the God of all comfort;*” As the Apostle Paul breaks out in praise to God, he praises God with specific reference to the revelation of God’s character that has come to him in the context of affliction, therefore:

### **THE FIRST PURPOSE OF GOD IN AFFLICTION IS TO GIVE US A FULLER REVELATION OF THE CHARACTER OF GOD.**

In this text God is called three things: first, He is called the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, secondly, the Father of mercies and thirdly, He is called the God of all comfort.

When the Apostle addresses Him as the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, he is indicating that God has been revealed to him in the saving revelation made, in and through, Jesus Christ the Lord.

In other words, when the Apostle thinks of God, he not only thinks of Him as the God of creation, not only as the God of Providence, but he thinks of Him particularly, as the God and Father of the Lord Jesus Christ. He thinks of Him as the God Who has revealed Himself and His way of salvation in the Person and Work of the Lord Jesus. Therefore, whatever follows in this text, whatever other revelation is made of God, it’s made in the context of that fundamental revelation of God as a saving God, in Jesus Christ, the Lord. That’s the starting point. If you do not stand in a saving relationship to God, through the Person and Work of the Lord Jesus Christ, this message is not for you. This is God’s Word to believers who know God as (i) **The God and Father of the Lord Jesus Christ**, and the Apostle further says in verse five, as the sufferings of Christ abound unto us even, even so our comfort abounds through Christ. All of the consolation of God to His suffering saints is in terms of their vital union with Jesus Christ. But now notice, the Apostle not only knows Him as the God and Father of the Lord Jesus, but he calls Him, in this place, and it’s the only place that I know of in the New Testament where God is addressed in these terms, the Father of mercies, or literally the Father of the mercies, or the compassions and the God of all comforting. Let’s look at those two ascriptions of God for a moment.

#### **(ii) The Father of all compassions or mercies.**

The word mercy, means pity to those who are in distress. Remember in the life of our Lord and in His ministry needy people would encounter Him and cry out, ‘Son of David, have mercy upon me. Look upon me with Pity.’ In **Psalm 103:13**, like as a father pities his children, so the Lord pities those that fear Him. The Psalmist addresses God in terms of **God’s inward disposition in the face of the afflictions of His people**. When God beholds the afflictions of His people, ordered by His own divine providence, how does He behold them? He

doesn’t behold them with a stoical indifference saying, ‘Well I’ve decreed it, and it’s for their good. Let them work it out.’ No. In all their afflictions, the Scripture says, He was afflicted. He is not only the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, Who’s revealed a way of forgiveness and acceptance through the Lord Jesus, but He’s the God Who, having brought us into His family and given us the Spirit of adoption, is to us the Father of mercies and the God of all comforting. Where the reference to mercy focuses upon the disposition of God’s heart, the reference to comforting points out the activity of God. He not only has an attitude of pity and compassion, but He puts forth that attitude in positive comfort of His people. In the midst of the pressure of their distress, He is the God Who comforts them.

How did the Apostle Paul come to know God as the God and Father of the Lord Jesus Christ? That revelation was made to him in the way that it’s made to all sinful people. He must first of all be brought to a sight of his sin. He must be brought to a sight of the mercy that God extends in the Lord Jesus. You can see that in Romans 7. I had not known sin unless the law said you shall not covet and he details how God dealt with him to show him that in spite of all his external morality and religiosity, he was lost and undone. Then he came to know God as the God and Father of the Lord Jesus Christ. You see, just as no one knows God as the God and Father of the Lord Jesus, apart from the experimental knowledge of sin and of grace [inward moral transformation] so you cannot really know God as the Father of mercies and the God of all comfort, unless you are in the experimental crucible of affliction. You don’t have pity upon those who are well off. You don’t need to extend comfort to those who are completely at ease. Pity, is for the afflicted. Comfort, is for the distressed, and the Apostle tells us in this passage, that the first purpose of God in affliction, with reference to His children, is to give them this further unfolding of His Own character. To bring them into an experimental awareness, of the God that He is, and so if you pray as a Christian, ‘O God, help me to know You better.’ Perhaps you find yourself praying in the words of Philippians 3, ‘that I may know Him’. Would you have further revelation of the character of God? Not in the abstract, but in the real stuff of human experience? Then child of God don’t look upon affliction as your enemy. It’s in the context of affliction that you will come to know Him as the God of all mercies and the God of all comfort, and if you’re going to be so self-sparing that you say, God, don’t touch me with affliction what you’re saying is, I want no further revelation, experimentally, of the depth and the breadth, the height and the length of Your Infinite Character. So the first purpose of God in affliction is to give us a fuller revelation of His Character.

The second purpose is laid out in verses four through seven of 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians. **1:4** *“Who comforts us in all our affliction, that [here’s the purpose] we may be able to comfort them that are in any affliction, through the comfort wherewith we ourselves are comforted of God. 5 For as the sufferings of Christ abound unto us, even so our comfort also abounds through Christ. 6 But whether we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation; or whether we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which works in the patient enduring of the same sufferings which we also suffer: 7 and our hope for you is steadfast; knowing that, as you are partakers of the sufferings, so also are you of the comfort.”* The Apostle is saying that:

### **THE SECOND DIVINE PURPOSE IN AFFLICTION, FOR THE CHILD OF GOD, IS TO EQUIP US FOR A MORE USEFUL MINISTRY TO THE PEOPLE OF GOD.**

Notice that thread of thought, God comforts us, that we may be able to comfort others. Sufferings abound in us, comfort abounds through us. If we are afflicted for your sake, if we are comforted for your sake, and you can reduce the basic thought of verses four through seven to this simple equation, **all that happens to us happens for your sakes. All that comes to us, issues in blessing to you.** In the context, the primary reference to this is to the Apostle and his companion Timothy. Whatever particular trials they were passing through by virtue of the problems at the church at Corinth and in the light of their overall ministry, the Apostle wants the Corinthians to know that what is happening to them is for their sake, but in the light of passages like Romans 15:14, in which the Apostle speaks in such broad terms of the ministry that believers have one to another, we cannot give this an exclusive reference to the Apostle. He said, **Romans 15:14** *“And I myself also am persuaded of you, my brethren, that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge, able also to admonish one another.”* He says of the Romans, I’m confident that as brethren, you’ve come to sufficient experimental knowledge, that you are able to admonish one another, and so we see the second aspect of the divine purpose in affliction. How is God going to equip you for a more useful ministry to others? I’ll tell you what He is going to do. He’s going to put you into the fires of affliction that in those fires of affliction, as you experimentally become acquainted with the comfort of God, you in turn, may be an instrument of consolation and comfort to others. We do not exist in the body of Christ for our own sake. God has placed us in the body of Christ that we might be an instrument of maturity and development in the lives of the other members of that body. 1 Corinthians 12 deals with this very

clearly. When one member suffers, all the members suffer with it. When one member is comforted all are comforted with it. Ephesians 4, the body is built up by that which every joint supplies. It makes increase of itself in love. How are we going to be made more useful in our ministry to others? It’s going to be in the midst of affliction. **If affliction is the common experience of all the people of God, in all ages**, then one of the great needs that they have, is for people to be able to console them and comfort them in their affliction. Who is going to be able to do it? Those who themselves have proven the consolation of God in the midst of affliction. Those who have experimentally learned how to face the needle and the scalpel, and instead of screaming and ranting and raving to get off the operating table, say instead, Lord, put in the needle and do your work with the scalpel. May I prove you to be the God of all comfort, the Father of all mercies, to the end that I may have a more useful ministry unto others. There are few things which reveal the depth of our selfhood more clearly than the quickness with which we reject affliction. We complain, ‘Lord, this is doing this, and that, and the other to me.’ Instead of just saying, ‘O God, if this is the price that I must pay to be an instrument in Your hands, to be a blessing to others, I am willing to submit to anything that I might be an instrument of consolation to my fellow believers.’ Isn’t that the true mark of divine love? Love seeks not her own. Isn’t that our big problem? The moment affliction comes all we think about is what it’s doing to me, to my name, my comforts, my plans. The Apostle Paul didn’t look upon it this way. When afflictions came tumbling in upon him he said, ‘Well hallelujah, there’s a lot more people out there that are going to be helped!’ As the afflictions abound so the consolations abound and he welcomed affliction knowing that it was going to equip him for a more useful ministry to the people of God. **(1)**

So let me encourage you, Child of God, some who may, this very instant, be in the midst of an unusual discipline of affliction and tribulation, and you found it so difficult, you’ve cried out, ‘Lord is there something in me? Is it some chastisement? Is it some sin?’ You’ve been open and honest before God and you’ve drawn a blank. Perhaps this is the perspective that you need to bring into the total picture, ‘Lord there are no accidents with you. You know every single person to whom I must be an instrument and means of grace all along the way from here to glory. Lord I embrace all of your disciplines to me that I might be a source of blessing to others.’

The Apostle goes on to give us a third purpose in affliction that helped him to look upon affliction, not as a foe, but as a friend. **2 Corinthians 1:8** *“For we would not have you ignorant, brethren, concerning our affliction which befell us*

*in Asia, that we were weighed down exceedingly, beyond our power, insomuch that we despaired even of life: 9 yea, we ourselves have had the sentence of death within ourselves, that we should not trust in ourselves, but in God Who raises the dead:*” What was the third divine purpose in affliction according to the Apostle?

### **THE THIRD DIVINE PURPOSE IN AFFLICTION IS TO SHUT US UP MORE FULLY TO THE POWER OF GOD.**

Notice his words; ‘I don’t want you to be ignorant, you Corinthians, concerning this tremendous affliction which came to us in Asia.’ What he’s referring to nobody knows for certain. The commentators all make their guesses and most of them disagree, but whatever it was, it’s not important **what the trial was, but what the purpose of God was.** Notice, he says here what was God’s purpose. We had this affliction come upon us that brought us to the place where we despaired even of life. He said yes, we had the very sentence of death within ourselves. We were as good as dead. To what purpose? That we should not trust in ourselves, but in God Who raises the dead. In other words, the Apostle Paul says, we were brought to a place, where the only way out of that circumstance of affliction was a manifestation of divine power equal to the power that raises dead men to life. In any other kind of exercise of divine power there may be great divine assistance, but there may be already something there to work with. If a lame man came to the Lord Jesus, He straightened out a leg that was already there. If a blind man came, the Lord gave sight to eyes that were already there. But when the Lord Jesus called Lazarus out of the tomb there was nothing there. There was a direct intrusion of life from without, and Paul said we were brought to the place where our confidence was in an exertion of divine power that was equal to the power that raises men from the dead. Therefore, he says, this affliction was not our foe, but our friend, because it shut us up more fully than ever to confidence in the mighty power of the living God.

We can have a very romantic view of the Apostle Paul as though he didn’t have to wrestle with indwelling sin and corruption, yet Romans 7 is an eloquent testimony to the fact that this was not true. Look at 2 Corinthians 12. Paul had a tendency to be proud and God, seeing that tendency to be proud, said lest you be puffed up beyond measure because the revelations given to you I’m going to allow this messenger of Satan to buffet you. And Paul says, ‘Lord, I can’t complete my ministry with this thing. It hinders me, it cripples me, it weakens me.’ The Lord said, ‘No. If I take it away your pride would weaken and cripple you, therefore, I’m going to allow this affliction so that in the midst of your

physical weakness you’ll be conscious of where your dependence is; and in the midst of your weakness the power of Christ will be manifested.’ So the Apostle needed, as we do, to be constantly pushed away from the subtle temptation of self-confidence and to look more upon God’s work as the work of Him assisting us in the exercise of our own cleverness and our own abilities; so when this affliction came, Paul said this was the divine purpose: that we should not trust in ourselves but in God.

If the Apostle Paul needed affliction to shut him up more fully to confidence in the power of God, who are you and who am I to think that we will be shut up by any lesser means? That which God brings upon us that makes us consciously embrace our weakness and comes like scissors to cut the cords and the nerves of creature confidence and carnal confidence, these things, the Apostle says, are the divine purpose in affliction.

Sometimes the Lord has to do it with regards to **monetary things.** It is pretty hard for some of us to pray ‘Lord give us this day our daily bread’ and really mean it. We’ve collected our check week in and week out, month in month out, until suddenly we are laid off. Affliction comes. And then we begin to know what it is, as we never knew before, to look to God to supply our daily bread. Suddenly those words are no longer pretty words in a prayer that you memorized as a child; they become the experimental petition of our own hearts. ‘Loving Father, look down upon us and our family in our need; give us this day our daily bread.’ And what happens with that affliction? It shuts you up to the power of God and the intervention of God.

Sometimes it comes with **health.** Some of us know weeks and months and years of getting out of bed with two sound feet and a sound mind and a body that can carry us to our work. Though we halfheartedly say, ‘Lord give me strength for this day’ and at the end of the day thank the Lord, it really doesn’t come from the heart. We pretty well think we can get along on our own steam until God allows that strength to be shriveled. Then we know what it is to lay there on a bed of weakness or sickness and say, ‘Oh God, if I’m to even get through half this day, You must sustain me. You must strengthen me.’ Then we are shut up to the exercise of divine power for our daily strength in a way that we never were before. How did this come about? Affliction was Gods means to shut us up more fully to His power.

So it is with the matter of **wisdom** or with the matter of **patience.** God puts us in situations where all of our natural resources are utterly depleted and we say –as

far as that duty is concerned and what I must have to perform it— I'm as good as a dead man. The sentence of death is upon me. And God says, 'It's about time that you understand what I've said. All along, without Me, you can do nothing, but you didn't believe Me. I told you right along, cursed be he that trust in man and makes flesh his arm but you didn't believe Me.' Now affliction has come and what has been its effect? To shut us up to the exercise of divine power. Christian, don't look upon affliction as your enemy. That which shuts you up more fully to the exercise of divine power is your friend.

The fourth divine purpose of affliction is found in 2 Corinthians 1:10. Having spoken of this trust in God Who raises the dead, he goes on to say, **1:10** *“Who delivered us out of so great a death, and [now he makes a prophecy] will deliver: on Whom we have set our hope that He will also still deliver us.”* Do you see what Paul is doing? He's left the realm of testimony and now he's making an affirmation of faith. Looking back upon this circumstance, whatever it was, that shut him up to the exercise of divine power, he says:

#### **THE FOURTH FUNCTION OF AFFLICTION WAS TO INCREASE HIS FAITH IN THE PROMISES OF GOD.**

Way back when God called the Apostle Paul, He made a promise to him and we read that promise in **Acts 26:16** *“Arise and stand on your feet for to this end have I appeared to you, to appoint you a minister and a witness, both of the things wherein you have seen Me and of the things wherein I will appear unto you, **delivering you from the people and from the Gentiles unto whom I send you, to open their eyes...**”* Here was the promise of God: 'Paul I'm commissioning you with this gospel commission, and in the accomplishment of it I will deliver you from every opposition until my purpose for you is accomplished.' And again and again the Apostle Paul was brought into circumstances where it seemed his life was going to be snuffed out. One time he was stoned, other times plots were laid to take his life, but again and again when these afflictions came and God fulfilled His promise, what did it do? It increased his faith in the promises of God, for faith is strengthened in two ways: **1<sup>st</sup> - IT'S STRENGTHENED BY LOOKING TO THE GREATNESS OF THE GOD WHO MADE THE PROMISE,** and **2<sup>nd</sup> - IT'S STRENGTHENED BY EXPERIENCING THE REALITY OF THE FULFILLMENT OF THAT PROMISE.**

Faith is strengthened in those two ways. **Beholding the God Who makes the promise.** That's the emphasis of Paul in Romans 4. Abraham waxed strong in

faith. How? Being fully persuaded that what God had promised He was able to perform. As he conceived in his mind the character and might and power of God, he could look at his own body that was as good as a dead body and say, this body will yet father a child because the God Who made the promise (in Isaac shall your seed be called). God is able to father a child through the dead body of Abraham. And He's able to do something with Abraham's body to make it able to father a child.

But the Apostle in this passage is focusing upon the second way in which faith is strengthened. Faith is also strengthened by **the experiencing of the reality and the fulfillment of those promises.** So the Apostle says, 'When we had the sentence of death in ourselves, we despaired of living unless God put forth the mighty arm of resurrection power. Once He did, Paul said, 'We have confidence that the God Who has delivered, will still deliver, and continue to deliver, until His purposes for us are accomplished.' Notice how that faith became even stronger when, as he's about to lay down his life in 2 Timothy 4, he makes a similar reference to the delivering power of God. **2 Timothy 4:16** *“At my first defense no one took my part, but all forsook me: may it not be laid to their account. 17 But the Lord stood by me, and strengthened me; that through me the message might be fully proclaimed, and that all the Gentiles might hear: and I was delivered out of the mouth of the lion. 18 The Lord will deliver me from every evil work, and will save me unto His heavenly kingdom: to Whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen.”*

Paul said, 'This past deliverance strengthens my faith to believe the Lord will yet deliver me from every evil work and will save me unto His heavenly kingdom to Whom be glory forever and forever.' Your faith is not strengthened by pulling your promises out of a promise box. Your faith is strengthened when that promise in the promised box goes with you into the fires of affliction. That's when your faith is strengthened. You prove God in terms of His promise in the midst of affliction. Then you're able to come forth with that ringing affirmation, the Lord has delivered, He will deliver, He shall deliver from every evil work. It's quite easy to pray, 'Lord increase my faith.' Then when God begins to put you in the context of affliction you say, 'Lord this doesn't have anything to do with my prayer.' But that's the very answer to your prayer. It's by affliction that our faith in the promises of God and the God of the promises is strengthened.

The fifth divine purpose in affliction is found in **2 Corinthians 1:11** *“You also helping together on our behalf by your supplication; that, for the gift bestowed upon us by means of many, thanks may be given by many persons on our*

*behalf.*” Now, whether the Apostle is referring to the past prayers of the people of God [the grammar in the original is uncertain] or whether he is saying, ‘In the light of what I’ve told you, you will now have a renewed prayer involvement with Timothy and myself in our ministries ’– whether he’s looking to a past deliverance or thinking of future deliverances in which their prayers will have a part– the end result will be this: Thanks may be given by many persons on our behalf. In other words, as Paul is delivered from affliction, preserved in the midst of affliction:

**THE 5<sup>TH</sup> DIVINE PURPOSE OF AFFLICTION IS TO PROVOKE CORPORATE PRAISE AND THANKSGIVING TO GOD FOR THE DELIVERANCE WROUGHT FOR HIS SERVANTS.**

One of the great delights of being a child of God and scripturally identifying oneself with a visible community of God’s people (the visible church) is that when we enter that affliction we do not enter it alone. We have not only the presence of our Lord Jesus by the Spirit, but we have the presence of the Lord Jesus in the members of His body and Christ and His union with His body is not a mere theological concept. That union is so vital that Paul says, if you sin against the weak brother, you sin against Christ. The weak brother is a member of His body like a finger is a member, and Christ is saying, ‘If you touch My finger you touch Me. That’s a part of Me. When you hammered that finger, you hammered Me.’ The Lord Jesus said, to Saul, ‘Saul, why do you persecute Me?’ when Saul was persecuting the church. When he touched the church he was touching the Lord. The concept of this organic life union between Christ and His people was so real in the mind of the Apostle Paul that he says, when we are afflicted and in answer to our prayers deliverance is wrought and we are preserved, then the end result will be corporate praise to God for the comfort and consolation ministered unto us.

The testimony of the people of God who have entered into unusual periods of affliction is almost always at the top of the list. They’ve said this: The concept, the biblical principle of the unity of the body of Christ, has become precious to me in my affliction in a way I’ve never experienced it before that affliction came.

With a couple who lost their little girl, this concept came through so clearly, the sense that when they passed through this trial of their faith, this affliction, they did not pass through alone. There was not only the Lord Jesus ministering His own grace directly by the Spirit to their heart, but there was the Lord Jesus

ministering through His body that supportive role of love and intercession and sympathy and understanding. There’s a realization that the body of Christ is not just a theological term. It’s not just that we meet under the same roof to hear the same sermons and sing the same hymns. There is a bond of identification of love and compassion which when God is pleased to undertake, results not just in the person who was afflicted and has received comfort rendering praise to God, but as the whole body of God’s people entered into that affliction, by their supplications. So, now they enter into praise and rejoicing and God is magnified not by just the one, but by the many. Notice how that is the clear emphasis of the text, *“You helping together on our behalf by your supplications to this end, that thanks may be given by many persons on our behalf.”* This scripture says, ‘Whosoever offers praise glorifies Me, and if God is glorified by the praise of one of His people, He’s glorified more intensely by the whole body of His saints rendering praise onto Him.’

So we learn from this passage that there are at least five distinct divine purposes in our afflictions. In light of these, can that which gives you a fuller revelation of the character of God be your enemy? or is it your friend? Can that which equips you for a more useful ministry to God’s people, can that be your enemy? or is that your friend? Can that which shuts you up more fully to the power of God be your enemy? or your friend? Can that which increases your faith in the promises of God ever be conceived of as your enemy? or your friend? Can that which provokes corporate praise and thanksgiving to God be your enemy? or is it your friend?

Child of God, be done with carnal views of affliction, looking upon affliction as a dreaded enemy. Look beyond the temporal, beyond the immediate and oft times flesh weathering disciplines of affliction, and realize that through affliction you will come to know God experimentally in a way that you could not otherwise know Him. That through affliction you will be made a more fit instrument of blessing to God’s people. That through affliction your faith will be strengthened by your sense of the certainty of the promises of God. Then your involvement with the people of God in praise will be increased. This is the divine purpose in affliction. So, if you are presently in the midst of affliction, may God help you to view that affliction scripturally. If you aren’t presently in the midst of it, don’t breathe too easy, for in the world you shall have affliction that through many afflictions we must enter the kingdom of God. If you’re a child of God, as sure as you sit here, you’re going to pass through affliction. May God help you and may God help me to view our afflictions in the light of divine revelation.

To those who do not know God as the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, then you cannot know Him as the God of comfort. You cannot know Him as the Father of mercies. It will not do in the next affliction to go whimpering to God and say, 'Oh God, Whoever you are, wherever you are, comfort me!' No. If you're indifferent to God's demands with reference to your sin, to repent and believe the gospel, that you acknowledge yourself to be undone and standing in need of His mercy; if you live in impenitence and unbelief and despise the gospel, do not think you can come crying to God and somehow snatch to yourself the comfort that He has pledged to His children. No. If you would know Him as the Father of mercies, the God of all comfort, I entreat you first of all, to know Him as the God and Father of the Lord Jesus Christ. Repent of your sin. Believe the gospel. Embrace His gracious promise, "Come unto Me all you that labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest."

But thank God if, in grace, He has brought us to know Him as the God and Father of the Lord Jesus Christ. He is the God of all mercies and the Father of all comfort to us. May we prove Him to be that in our experience and all of the theory that we have of these things God will make real to us in the crucible of affection.

When we begin to scream and holler and jump off the table when we see the syringe and the knife, may God help us to quiet one another down and remind one another of the principles of this passage, the divine purposes in affliction that we might know that affliction is not our foe, but our friend in the purpose of Almighty God.

(1) Let's not confuse this with a fatalistic pessimism that makes us passive and lean towards a pacifist-like mentality. If illness comes it doesn't mean we don't seek out help. If injustice comes it doesn't mean we never resist it. However, there are those times and circumstances in which we are thrust, where we have no answers, or the cards are so stacked against us that we must pray and hope in Him to exert change. Sometimes the change will come through others, sometimes He will deliver our enemies into our hands, sometimes we are given grace to persevere because it won't change or won't change quickly. Many times He will make changes in us, and when He is done or when we pass the test, then there is not only a change in us, but in the external circumstances.

Whether it is the death of a loved one, having an unsaved child, marital issues, loss of a job, etc. It's all made to increase our awareness of the frailty of life and press us further into Him so that when these same things hit others we can understand and help them through with a real compassion and understanding.