

REMINDER #4 REGARDING EVIL AND SUFFERING—  
GOD'S PRIORITY IN OUR SUFFERING IS NOT JUST US

**INTRODUCTION**

For the good part of 3 months, we have been looking at the age-old question of “Why a loving, all-knowing and all-powerful God allows evil and suffering in the world.” Why it occurs generally in the world is one thing; but why it occurs **in our life—and to us**—is a whole different matter. Sometimes we know why we suffer—and sometimes we don't. **Paul** knew from God that his “thorn in the flesh” was to keep him humble. **Joseph** also knew why God allowed him to be sold by his brothers. Genesis 50:20 says, “But as for you, ye thought evil against me; but God meant it unto good, to bring to pass, as it is this day, to save much people alive.”

Job didn't know why he suffered, though, did he? Job was absent from the conversation between God and Satan and did not know that God pointed him out to Satan as a “perfect and upright man, one that feareth God, and escheweth evil.” Job, of course, was not sin-free—we see an attitude of arrogance creep in when he demanded answers from God—but God said Job was so upright “that there is none like him in all the earth.” When did Job find out why he suffered so? We don't know for sure—but it was obviously well after the fact.

Much can be learned from the book of Job and I believe it would be nearly impossible to suggest “Here is The Most Important Lesson” we can learn from what Job went through. One takeaway we should have, however, is the fact that being comforted by God in **our** suffering enables us to be a comforter **to others**. It is almost impossible to imagine how many of God's people throughout the years have been comforted during their suffering by gleaning from the book of Job. We're not going to talk about Job, though. Instead, we are going to look at what God said **through Paul** about comforting others. Please take your Bibles and turn to II Corinthians, chapter 1 and follow along as I read verses 3-8.

**1. The Person of Comfort—God**

Notice verse 3—“Blessed be God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies, and the **God of all comfort**.” Where do people turn to when they need comfort? Many turn to a person—a friend, a relative, a spouse, or a mentor. Others turn to a habit for comfort—like eating or smoking or watching TV. Still others turn to a vice—like alcohol or drugs or gambling or pornography—in an effort to find comfort.

Paul turned to God because God is “the God of all comfort.”

--Only God is endless in strength and can help us when we are powerless.

--Only God is endless in knowledge and can give us wisdom when we are confused and at our wit's end

--Only God is endless in mercy and can forgive us when others won't and we have a hard time forgiving ourselves

--And only God is endless in His ability to give peace that passeth all understanding whereby we can rest confidently in the fact that “He is good—and does good”—and that all things work together for our good!

Where do you turn for comfort? We know who we **should** turn to—but who, in reality, **do** you turn to? We should have friends we can talk to and we should have family members that we trust and we should have spiritual counselors we can go to, but at the end of the day our comfort needs to come **from God!**

**2. The Power of God's Comfort**

How powerful is God's ability to comfort? Are there limits to it? Is there a situation that is too great for a person to be comforted by God? Can God comfort a child who has been abused—or a mother who has lost a child—or a spouse who has been cheated on—or a 26-yr-old confined to a wheel chair the rest of his life?

Paul answers those types of questions for us in verse 4. First,

**A. The Declaration of God's comfort**—"Who comforteth us in *all* our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort them which are in *any* trouble..."

Paul plainly declares that in all his tribulations—and he had many—that God comforted him in all of them. We aren't going to turn there, but in chapter 11, verses 23-28, Paul gives a list of at least 24 different situations that he had been in. It is difficult to find a good way to categorize them, but here is one way:

- i. **Hardship**—hungry, thirsty, cold, naked, shipwrecked 3 times, spent a day and a night in the sea, and was in prison multiple times
- ii. **Hurt/Pain**—Whipped multiple times, beaten with rods, stoned once
- iii. **Heart-ache**—His own people hated him, false brethren hated him, the heathen hated him, robbers chased him, and on top of all this, the burden he had for the churches and the people in them that were being persecuted for following Christ

In spite of all of this—and in light of all of this—Paul declares that because he had been comforted by God in *every tribulation* that he had been in, he could assure them that God would comfort them in any trouble they found themselves in.

Paul not only declares the power of God's comfort, he also demonstrates it.

#### **B. The Demonstration of God's comfort**

Verse 8—"For we would not, brethren, have you ignorant of our trouble which came to us in Asia, that we were pressed out of measure, above strength, insomuch that we despaired even of life."

We are not sure exactly which instance Paul is referring to here, but it seems to have been something fairly recent because the Corinthians had not heard about it yet—thus the reason for Paul saying that he didn't want them to be ignorant—uninformed—about it.

What we are sure of, however, was that it was so intense that although Paul had feared for his life at different times in the past, he thought for sure he was a "goner" this time because he "despaired even of life."

Notice verse 10—He was delivered once again—just as he had been in the past—and anticipated he would be delivered from similar situations should they arise in the future.

Is that true of us? Like Paul, we should look back on past situations—and the comfort and deliverance God had brought—and allow them to be an encouragement to us for a trial we may be in now and the unknown ones that are yet ahead.

**II Timothy 3:10-11** "But thou hast fully known my doctrine, manner of life, purpose, faith, longsuffering, charity, patience, <sup>11</sup>Persecutions, afflictions, which came unto me at Antioch, at Iconium, at Lystra; what persecutions I endured: but *out of them all* the Lord delivered me."

### **3. The Proportion of God's Comfort**

Notice verse 5—"For as the sufferings of Christ abound in us, so our consolation also aboundeth by Christ." Paul is saying that although *sufferings* abound, so does our *consolation*; our comfort. In other words, God's comfort is *equivalent* to our sufferings and trials.

F.B.Meyer wrote: "God holds a pair of scales. This on the right, called AS, is for thine afflictions; this on the left, called SO, is for thy comforts. And the beam is always level."

I can't help but think of **I Corinthians 10:13** "There hath no temptation taken you but such as is common to man: but God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it."

#### 4. *The Purpose of God's Comfort*

Notice again verse 4—"Who comforteth us in all our tribulation, that we may be able **to comfort them** which are in any trouble..."

There is a purpose—there is a reason—that the "God of all comfort" comforted Paul and those with him in their tribulation. What was the purpose? "That we may be able to **comfort them** which are in any trouble!" It was "not about Paul" and what he received from God—it was what Paul received from God that he, in turn, could **share with others**. It's not "rocket science" to imagine that...

--the best person to come alongside someone who has lost a child is someone who was comforted by God after they themselves lost a child.

--Or the best person to come alongside someone whose spouse has dementia is someone who has been comforted by God when they themselves have a spouse with dementia

--Or the best person to come alongside someone whose loved one has taken their own life is someone who has been comforted by God after their loved one took their own life

--The list could go on, but I believe you get the point—God **allows** suffering in our life so we can assist fellow sufferers. In other words, it is not all about us—it is about **others!**

It is noteworthy that the Greek word from which "comfort" and "consolation" are translated from in this passage is *parakaleo* which means "call to one's side." Is that not a good picture of what comfort should look like?

Although a bit more difficult to understand and explain, I believe verse 6 carries the same idea—that suffering and comfort is about others—not about us (or in this case, Paul).

"Whether we be **afflicted**, it is for your consolation and salvation"

End of verse: "Or whether we be **comforted**, it is for your consolation and salvation"

Paul says whether we are afflicted or comforted, it is a benefit to you; it is for your consolation and salvation. "Consolation" is comfort or encouragement. Paul's **affliction** would be an encouragement to them because they would see how effective God's comfort was in helping them "endure the same sufferings which they were suffering." Paul being **comforted** would, of course, encourage them because they knew that they too could be comforted.

But what does affliction and comfort have to do with **salvation**?

Most often times when we see the word "salvation" in the NT, it refers to being saved from the penalty of our sins—the sin-debt that we owe. We were saved—past tense—from the penalty of our sins when we trusted Jesus' shed blood as the payment for our sins. We are currently—present tense—being saved from the power of sin in our lives as we yield ourselves to God. And we will be—future tense—saved someday from the presence of sin—praise the Lord—because "there shall be no more curse" we are told in Revelation 22:3.

I believe in this instance "salvation" refers to not just being forgiven, but also in the growing, sanctifying aspect of it. Paul's affliction and comfort did not impact whether or not they would go to heaven—he called them brethren in verse 8—but it would help them in their Christian **growth**. If they saw Paul comforted by God in his affliction—even if it was intense persecution—it would help them remain faithful in their walk with God.

I wonder how often we consider that we can be a help—or hindrance—to fellow believer's walk with God? I fear too often times we are so focused on **us** and being free from the trial we are in that we neglect to seek from God how we can be a blessing to others while in it or as a result of it.

E. Stanley Jones, a Christian missionary and theologian who died in 1973, wrote: “Don’t bear trouble, **use** it. Take whatever happens—justice and injustice, pleasure and pain, compliment and criticism—take it up into the purpose of your life and make something out of it. Turn it into testimony” (Alcorn, 438).

Easier said than does, isn’t it? How do we go about focusing on others in the midst of our suffering?

### **5. The Perspective While Waiting for God’s Comfort**

What was Paul’s perspective—his mindset—in the midst of this intense trial? And how did that help him have a focus on others during troubles and after it was past?

Verse 9 “But we had the **sentence of death** in ourselves, that we should not trust in ourselves, but in God which raiseth the dead”

In the immediate context, the meaning seems to be this—“we were as good as dead and could do absolutely nothing about it.” Another suggestion, though, is that Paul was not just surrendering himself to a possible **physical** death; rather, it seems to be a reference to the attitude of him **dying to self**.

**Romans 6:11** “Likewise reckon ye also yourselves to be **dead** indeed unto sin, but alive unto God through Jesus Christ our Lord.”

**Romans 6:20** “But now being made **free** from sin, and become servants to God, ye have your fruit unto holiness, and the end everlasting life.”

**I Corinthians 15:31** “I protest by your rejoicing which I have in Christ Jesus our Lord, I **die** daily.”

**Galatians 2:20** “I am **crucified** with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me.”

**I Peter 2:24** “Who his own self bare our sins in his own body on the tree, that we, being **dead** to sins, should live unto righteousness: by whose stripes ye were healed.”

“Dying to self,” then, is the attitude that “I am not my own anymore; I belong to God and want Him to be the decision-maker of my life.” When we have that attitude—that we are not our own because we have been bought with a price—it is much easier to have an other’s-oriented perspective.

Instead of “God, I don’t like this—make it stop;” we ought to say “God, comfort and strengthen me at this time so I can be an encouragement to others.” Isn’t that what our Supreme Example prayed? “O my Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me: nevertheless not as I will, but as thou wilt” (Mt 26:39).

Lastly, notice Paul’s....

### **6. Praise as a Result of God’s Comfort**

In many of your Bibles, you will notice that this paragraph begins at verse 3 and ends in verse 11. Verse 3 begins with “Blessed be God” which means “Praise be unto God.” Paul was praising God for who He was—the Father of mercies and the God of all comfort—as well as for what He does—“comforteth us in all our tribulation.” Paul was thankful to be alive based on this close brush with death—and He was praising God because He knew it was God’s doing that he was still alive.

Verse 11—the last sentence of the paragraph—also contains the idea of praise. ‘You helped by praying for us—and God granted the gift of our life being spared—now you ought to praise with us and for us.’

Barnes writes: “The idea is, that as he had been delivered from great peril by the prayers of many persons, it was proper also that thanksgiving should be offered by as many in his behalf, or on account of his deliverance.” “Mercies that have been obtained by prayer should be acknowledged by praise” – Doddridge

Here are some things I believe God would have us consider:

1. Do you seek comfort from God—or are you too dependent upon people or things to bring you comfort? It is going to be difficult to be a comfort to others if you are not comforted yourself.
2. What is your perspective on trials? Do you thank God for them—and ask Him to use you to be a blessing to others—or are you too preoccupied about trying to get the trial over with?
3. Are you saved? God has reasons for “attention getters” in our life. If you are not a child of God, God wants to show you that your greatest need is to be saved. Please don’t keep putting Him off!