

# Suffering: Or, Why Me, Lord?

by Ron R. Ritchie

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I think most of us prefer not to think or talk about the fact that all of us at one time or another have been, are, or will be, suffering mentally, physically, or spiritually. Suffering is something we never plan on. We are shocked when it comes and many times, unless we really understand the Word of God, we cry out in our spirit, "Why me, God, and why now? Your timing is off. If you check the IBM cards, you'll find you probably have the wrong person!"

All of us suffer physically, mentally, and spiritually. Physically, in my own family, life seems like one long series of trips to the doctor's office and to the emergency ward. If we're not getting one of the boys' braces fixed, then we're getting the other a shot for his asthma so he can breathe again, or running to the emergency ward because my wife has collapsed with food poisoning. Or I am riding past my house in an ambulance because I just had a head-on collision on Highway 92. I know every doctor in the area and we're so friendly they write me every month.

Then there is the mental suffering we all go through. We worry about the neutron bomb. We're concerned about the environment. Every time I see a new house going up in our neighborhood, I get a knot in my stomach. I love open spaces, and I think you do, too. We get what I call millennium fever. We'd like to get into the millennium early, and let the rest of the world work it out.

So we all have this struggle within our hearts and minds. Our cities- San Francisco, especially-- are teaching us that all our morals are wrong and that their morals are right. After all, if you can have 200,000 people marching for a cause, it must be right. We are finding that the very moral foundation we believe in is being chipped away. We struggle within our emotions because of what we're offering our children for the future. Sometimes we want to pull them out of school saying we'll teach them ourselves, only to realize that we are not all that qualified.

Then there is spiritual suffering. You are concerned about children who have run away, and you are constantly praying that God in his grace and mercy will bring these prodigal children home. And some of us are struggling with the spiritual life of our neighbors and those in our families who do not know Christ. We look into the Word of God and we see the character of Jesus Christ, and we sense that even our lives are not up to what we want them to be. We sense this internal struggle and process of God maturing us, bringing us to this great goal of being like Jesus.

The apostle Paul went through similar things and in 2 Corinthians he writes of the beautiful deliverance he received from God. And as we read, we will discover the purpose of suffering as Paul lays down for us seven reasons for this suffering. Now I don't mind suffering if I can see that in God's plan for me suffering helps other people. But many times we suffer and we're not sure what's going on. That's why we cry out, "Why me?" And God always replies, "Why not? I thought you were my child, that we were going through this life together. I told you in the Gospel of John that a servant is not greater than his master, and if they persecute me, they must persecute you."

God promised Paul that he would suffer many things and God states all through the Scriptures that suffering is part of his program for all of humanity.

So let's look at 2 Corinthians and see what we can learn from Paul's own life and his deliverance from an incredible trial which took him to the point of death, in Asia (chapter 1, verse 1):

## **Paul Is Attacked By False Teachers**

**Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, to the church of God which is at Corinth with all the Saints who are throughout southern Achaia:**

Paul is writing to a church he developed during his second missionary journey. From Turkey he went westward to Philippi, stepped into Greece, had that wonderful ministry there, and went down to Thessalonica, where he had a revival and then a riot. From there Paul went to Berea where his listeners Checked out the Scriptures to see if what he said was true. He then went south to Athens where he stood on a his and argued with: the Greeks. After that experience Paul determined that he would no longer try an intellectual approach. Henceforth he would preach Jesus Christ and him crucified. In 52 A.D. Paul went to Corinth and, because he was a tentmaker, he went to the marketplace and took a job making tents. He met a husband and wife team, Aquila and Priscilla, and together they began teaching in the city synagogue. Paul was soon chased out of there, so he turned to the Gentiles and in two years he developed a church strong enough so that he could leave and go back to Ephesus which is in modern Turkey

While Paul was in Ephesus some brothers came from this Corinthian church to tell him of problems in the church. Now these problems were to do with competition and sexual immorality and these men hoped Paul would go back to Corinth to straighten them out. But for some reason Paul did not go. He sent Titus with a letter which we now call I Corinthians. And when he sent Titus to Corinth, Paul told him, "I want to meet you at troas. When you come back, tell me how they received my letter."

So Titus delivered the letter, but when he did not show up at Troas, Paul went to Philippi and waited there to meet him. Titus came back and said, "Paul, there's good news and bad news. The good news is that the majority of Christians have repented with a godly sorrow. But there is a minority being influenced by false prophets. They are preaching another Jesus and another gospel and another spirit and they are also attacking your apostleship." (Paul was an apostle by the will of God. He did not become an apostle because he wanted to, for he was going an entirely different way by persecuting the church.) So Titus told him, "Paul, your apostleship is on the line and your message is on the line. The false teachers are saying to the Corinthian leaders, "Why doesn't Paul come? If he's your spiritual father, if he loves you, why isn't he here? He says he's going to come, but he never shows Up!"

So Paul takes the first seven chapters of 2 Corinthians and lines up the reasons for his apostleship, for his message, and for his itinerary. He is about to describe why he could not come when he said he would. Paul says he is an apostle "by the will of God." Then he says (verses 2-4):

## **We Suffer So We Can Comfort Others**

**Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort; who 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.**

Paul now gives us the first reason for suffering. He opens by saying, "Grace and peace from God our Father." In his own life he had experienced the favor of God, he had been chosen by God, and he recognized that that was the grace of God toward him, because he was God's enemy. Paul hated God, the Father of Jesus Christ. He worshiped only Jehovah and it took him a long time to understand that Jesus was the Son of God, the Anointed One. So his heart cries out, "Grace and peace to you. It came to me, and now I want it for you." When grace came, Paul saw who Jesus Christ was and accepted him as his Savior. In so doing he made peace with God, and therefore experienced the peace of God, and Paul wants the Corinthians to have that same grace and peace.

The apostle calls God "our Father, the God of the universe, the God who created everything we see around us; the God who created us with all our characteristics, with all our uniqueness and diversity and yet our sameness"-- Paul calls that God "our Father. "

Now a father is one who provides and guides and loves. Until I had my own children I never quite understood God the Father because I can't remember my own father. That always bothered me a little bit, but then God in his grace and mercy allowed me to have two sons so now I understand what a father is all about.

I love my sons and I love to bless them. I love to honor them, I love to give to them. And yet, they know (because they tell me) it's not because they're perfect. They say, "Dad, this isn't because we're perfect, is it?" I say, "No. If it was based on good or bad behavior, you'd lose." It's not good or bad behavior, it is a relationship with my sons that is so precious to me. I want to provide for them and I want to guide them, love them and give to them, not because they are good or bad, but because they are my sons. And that's what God wanes for us. He knows we're in the process of growing into maturity and he knows who we are.

In fact, verse three begins, "Blessed by the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ . . ." Paul cries out in praise because of his deliverance in Asia. All he can think of is this incredible God who is his Father, and his Son Jesus Christ, whom he now sees as the Anointed One- this Jesus who is the Christ and is now his Lord-- and Paul wants to praise him. Then the apostle says of this God, "He is the Father of mercies and God of all comfort." That is, God is the source of mercy and mercy is the expression of love that goes toward those who deserve nothing. It is the kind of love that the Good Samaritan displayed. It is love toward those who are in distress, who are hurting and can't help themselves. This God is the father of all that and he is the source of that kind of mercy.

Psalm 103 says (verse 13-14):

**Just as a father has compassion on his children  
So the Lord has compassion on those who fear him.  
For he himself knows our frame;  
He is mindful that we are but dust.**

It is from this God that Paul experiences love; he understood his relationship with God. Paul said in 1 Timothy 1:12-13:

**. . . He considered me faithful, putting me into service; even though I was formerly a  
blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent aggressor. And yet I was shown mercy . . .**

Paul wrote in Ephesians that all of us were in our sin, but God, being rich in mercy, because of his great love with which he loved us even while we were yet dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ. That's the kind of God we have. We who were his enemies are now his sons and daughters. He is our Father, "tine rather of mercies."

Now Paul starts to develop the purpose behind suffering. This God "comforts us in all our affliction." This word "comfort" means "upholding, encouraging, walking alongside of." It is the same word that means "the Comforter," the Holy Spirit. So he is the God of all comfort, and the way he comforts us is by sending the Holy Spirit, who moves in alongside us, and when we have groanings too deep to be uttered, he moves in to pray for us. He teaches us who God really is in the midst of suffering, and teaches us who we are and what it's all about. He is the God who bears witness in our hearts, when we are suffering, that we are The children of God when at times we find it hard to believe that we are God's children.

This affliction is what we would today describe as "heavy." It's strong pressure. It's like laying a man down and piling stones on his chest until he is crushed to death. It is that kind of pressure, and yet this God is able to move into our lives with the comfort we need, even under these pressures.

We are forever struggling in one area or another. There are situations in our lives when we say, "I cannot take any more!" And then the God of comfort, through the Holy Spirit, moves alongside us and says, "Yes, you can; I'm with you." In my own life, I remember being alone on a beach about four years ago, feeling that I could take no more. I had reached the point where there was no hope, there was nothing left to live for. It was the first time I had really thought of suicide. Did you ever think of suicide? It was that heavy, that complex. A short time later while I was walking on the beach, a brother came and walked alongside me. He didn't

condemn me, he didn't rebuke me; he just stayed with me. All of a sudden my life came together again. This brother said he loved me, and asked if he could pray for me. Now that's the comfort we are talking about. Not only does the comfort come from God, but it comes horizontally, from his Body, "In all our afflictions."

What are all these afflictions about? Paul says they are so "we that may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God." I am thoroughly convinced that the man who comforted me on the beach that day had already received comfort from the Spirit in another situation. All he was doing was passing on what somebody else had done for him. That is why we suffer, so that we understand the pressure, so that we don't walk into people's lives with a self-righteousness that says, "Dummy, why did you do that?" We don't put people down and add more weight to their problem. We lift them up, we take the rocks off their chest, we encourage them through the Word and through prayer and by telling them that the Holy Spirit is with us, and that he also is working.

Then Paul moves on to give us three more reasons why we suffer (verses 5-7):

### **We Suffer Because Of Christ**

**For just as the sufferings of Christ are ours In abundant dance, so also our comfort is abundant through Christ But If we are afflicted [that heavy weight], it is for your comfort and salvation; or, if we are comforted, It is for your comfort, which Is effective In the patient enduring of the same sufferings which we also suffer; and our hope for you la firmly grounded, knowing that as you are sharers of our sufferings, so also you are sharers of our comfort.**

So the second reason we suffer is because the Lord Jesus Christ promised us that we would suffer. Through his apostles and through the Word of God, he shared with us that suffering was part of his life. He died on the cross to save us from our sins, and when he rose again from the grave, we were placed by the Holy Spirit into his resurrected body. We have what is now called the "Body of Christ," and because we are all part of that body, we identify with the same sufferings that he had in this world. Why did he endure these sufferings? Because he came to bring us the good news, he came to share his life, so that all might live. And yet he was persecuted for this. He was persecuted mentally for "when he came unto his own, his own received him not." Isaiah said he would be a man of sorrows, acquainted with grief and despised of men. And at the very end, all those who had joined him forsook him.

He suffered physically. There were times when he was tired and weary. People always touched him and he would feel power going from him. There were times when he ministered so extensively that when the disciples came to get him, he would say, "I can't go with you now." They asked him if he'd had lunch, and he said, "I have no time to eat. I'm working at the ministry that my Father gave me"-- and they thought he was crazy.

He cared about people and for this he suffered spiritually. When he came to Jerusalem he said, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, the way a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were unwilling." (Matt. 23:37) When he went into Gethsemane, in loneliness he said, "O Father, let this cup pass from me. Nevertheless, not my will but yours be done." Then when he died on that cross, "Father, why have you forsaken me?" He experienced all of that in life, and he says we are to enter into those sufferings. Now those are the sufferings of Jesus Christ. All of us have sufferings, and when we preach the good news, when we're caring about our neighbors, when we're reaching out, we can expect to be persecuted.

Occasionally I go down the street to a little doughnut shop, and one morning as I came out of the shop, a girl drove through a red light, hit two cars and spun around in the street in front of me. I asked her, "Are you okay?" She said, "Yes could you get me out of the car?" I got her out of the car and she was really shaking She asked me to help her to the phone, and as we walked to it, she said, "Could I have a drink of coffee?" Then she asked for some change for the phone. I was seeking to help her in any way I could. I got her back to the car, and she sat there drinking the coffee. I told her I thought she ought to go to a hospital to be checked out--no police had arrived yet- but she said, "Why don't we just wait?" So we waited.

An officer came up and said, "Hi. Are you okay, young lady?" She said, "Yes. This man told me he'd take me to the hospital and I'll be okay." He said, "Well, we can get an ambulance." She said, "No, it's okay. I'll go with him." Then he said to me, "Okay. What do you do?" I said, "I'm a pastor." Immediately the girl said, "Get me the ambulance."

I was rejected because of Jesus Christ, not because of me. To tell you the truth, it hurt. I was really confused. Apparently, any Gospel I was going to share with her would have interfered with her life, and she wanted nothing to do with it. That's what Paul is talking about. Whenever we reach out in our neighborhood, we're going to be rejected and despised. And we're going to be confused, because we can't figure out what we did wrong. From God's point of view, we did everything right, but from the world's, we did everything wrong. Paul says we enter into the sufferings of Jesus Christ, and they are always in abundance, overflowing into our lives. But, he says, "so also our comfort is abundant through Christ."

But, when sufferings are abundant, how can Christ comfort us so abundantly? I think the first reason he can do so is because he lived like we live, and he felt all the pain, the sorrow and the joy that we feel. He died, and we die daily. But he rose again, and that's where our hope lies, because this isn't all there is. This is but Sesame Street, preparing us for eternity. This is where we learn how to minister in eternity. This is where we learn how to love and trust him. That's what this is all about. Jesus said to his disciples, "You'll be with me one day. Let not your hearts be troubled." This is how we are comforted.

In chapter 4 of 2 Corinthians (verses 7- 11), Paul says,

**But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the surpassing greatness of the power may be of God and not from ourselves; we are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but nor despairing; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body. For we who live are constantly being delivered over to death for Jesus' sake, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh.**

The way God comforts us is to allow people to see our lives under all kinds of pressure, and yet they see within our lives a peace they can't understand. They are to see this to such an extent that when they are with us, they are amazed that though everything is crumbling, we are not. We can admit we're perplexed, but we are not despairing. We are not men and women who live without a hope. And this molding process that God is bringing us through will cause people to say, "You know, I know your name is Paul, but I think I've been with Jesus," or "I know your name is Mary, but I've got the strangest sense that I've been with Jesus." This is what God is doing through our sufferings, bringing us into the very image of his Son, so that all may come to know him.

But Paul gives us two more reasons why we suffer (verse 6):

### **We Suffer For Your Comfort And Salvation**

**But if we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation . . .**

Paul now comes to the third and fourth reasons why we suffer. He suffered in Corinth, he was thrown out of the synagogue and ridiculed in the streets. But because of this, the Corinthians came to know Jesus as their Lord and Savior, and a church was formed. Paul paid quite a mental and physical price on their behalf so that they could be comforted. Did you realize that when you suffered, people were coming to know the Lord?

One night at a Body Life service a girl shared, "I'm out of hospital now, but there's a girl named Patty there and she's interested in Jesus Christ. But I was discharged before I could finish sharing my life with her. Pray that a Christian will be in that hospital bed as soon as possible." So we prayed.

The next day I got a call from my wife from that hospital. She said, "Honey, could you come down? I'm in the hospital." I said, "I know; you went there to get a shot." But she said, "No. They want me to stay. They gave

me the shot, and I dropped dead, technically, three times. Ten of them have been working on me for two hours!" So I drove to the hospital and ran to my wife to comfort her. I kissed her- I was so glad to see her! She said, " Honey, I want you to meet my roommate, Patty! " Do you know that Patty came to know Jesus Christ? She went to San Jose Bible College, and married a Christian!! That's why we suffer.

Paul says (verse 6):

**But if we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation; or if we are comforted, it is for your comfort [either way], which is effective in the patient enduring of the same sufferings which we also suffer.**

In other words, when one suffers, we all suffer. When one member rejoices, we all rejoice. "Our hope for you is firmly grounded," Paul says. "We know about your lack of love for us at this point and we know that these false prophets are in town But we are confident that God who began a good work in you will complete it."

Paul then comes to another form of suffering, and this is his explanation to the Corinthians for not showing up when he wanted to (verses 8-10):

### **We Suffer So We Will No Longer Trust Ourselves**

**For we do not want you to be unaware, brethren, of our affliction which came to us in Asia that we were burdened excessively beyond our strength so that we despaired even of life; Indeed, we had the sentence of death within ourselves in order that we should not trust in ourselves, but in God who raises the dead; who delivered us from a great peril of death, and will deliver us, he in whom we have set our hope. And he will yet deliver us, . . .**

Paul says there was a time in Asia when he had no strength left. "To be totally honest," he said, "I despaired of life itself. I know that I taught you that although we are perplexed, we do not despair. But I came to the point when ever, that truth was not real to me and I couldn't get it into my heart or mind." Why did this experience happen to Paul? "in order that we should not trust in ourselves," he says. God has designed us to totally trust in him. We are to fight that philosophy of self- sufficiency that we have been trained in from birth.

There 's a new book called "Taking Care of Number One Pull yourself up by your own bootstraps, it advises, you can do it! And the Lord cries out through his Spirit into our spirit, "No you can't, and you know it. When everybody leaves and you're standing all alone, you know who you are and you know you can't make it. You were never designed to make it on your own. You were designed to contain the living God in your heart."

Yet we are so proud that many of us have bought that old philosophy. It is such a struggle to believe God. And yet Jesus [Christ taught his disciples that he did not say anything, do anything or go anywhere without checking with his Father. Now if the Son of God lived that way we should model ourselves on him. We are not to do anything without checking in, because he is our power base and that's where we get all the wisdom patience and love to handle all these afflictions we have.

Paul didn't just say, "trust God." He said, "Trust in God who raises the dead." Paul was in a situation where he was about to die but God raised him up. There are times in our lives when afflictions are so bad that we have nothing left within ourselves, we are without hope. And yet the God of comfort moves in alongside us. He on whom we set our hope will deliver us for the rest of our lives. That's why we suffer: so we won't trust ourselves anymore.

Paul now gives us the last two reasons for suffering (verse 11):

### **We Suffer So We Can Pray And Give Thanks**

**You also are joining in helping us through your prayers, that thanks may be given by many persons on our behalf for the favor bestowed on us through the prayers of many.**

When people are suffering, we all stop and pray for one another. A couple of our pastors lost their children last year, and everybody just stopped what they were doing and dropped to their knees and prayed, "Oh, God, please be with them." And as God was with these families, we were also with them, and God comforted them, and we comforted them. And because of that, we see some of the joy that has come, and that is what Paul is saying here. Because of the answer to prayer, we all break forth with thanksgiving. That's why we suffer -- so that we can pray for one another, and so that we can rejoice with one another.

Why do we suffer? This is by no means an exhaustive list;

- (1) We suffer so that we can join in the afflictions of others.
- (2) We suffer because we enter into the sufferings of Christ.
- (3) We suffer for the comfort of others.
- (4) We suffer for the salvation of others.
- (5) We suffer and are afflicted so that we will no longer trust ourselves, but the God who raises the dead.
- (6) We suffer so that we can pray for each other.
- (7) We suffer so we can rejoice together.

That's why we suffer. Would you want it any other way? God is behind all of it. He is bringing us to maturity. Now that I understand what he is doing in the universe and in my life I don't want it any other way. Remember, whatever suffering comes our way, be it physical, mental or spiritual, the God of all comfort will comfort us.

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Catalog No. 3100  
2 Corinthians 1:1-11  
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July 24, 1977

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