

In this passage Paul states certain purposes for affliction and suffering. Understanding the purpose(s) behind affliction and suffering will help us through those times. But we must begin by understanding a bit about affliction and suffering as well as about comfort.

### **Affliction and suffering that warrant God's comfort**

The terms "affliction" ("troubles", etc. in the NIV) and "suffering" to express two different groups of words in the text, the latter looks more at what we experience, the former at what brings that experience. No all affliction and suffering warrants God's comfort. In this passage Paul restricts it to the "sufferings of Christ" which we share. That does not refer to His suffering for sin on the cross. It excludes suffering that results from our own sin. Cf. 1 Peter 2:19-20. There are two general categories when affliction and suffering do warrant God's comfort.

1. *Comfort is warranted when believers suffer affliction through identification with Christ.*

Jesus warned his disciples that they would be treated as he was treated (John 15:18-21). Paul experienced this and wrote as well that those who would live godly lives in Christ would be persecuted (2 Timothy 3:12). To take up one's cross to follow Jesus and to lose one's life for His sake requires voluntary loss that can bring further hardship. In all such sufferings Paul rightly expected the comfort of Christ – as can we.

2. *Comfort is also warranted when believers suffer affliction as the general result of the curse upon fallen mankind.*

When we consider how all Christ suffered, there is more to it than just identification with Him. Sickness, death, hunger, and the like, results of the fall, moved Jesus to compassion and caused Him anguish. Jesus also suffered temptation, though without yielding to that temptation (Hebrews 4:15). He prayed and submitted to God and "learned obedience from what he suffered" (Hebrews 5:7-8). All creation groans because of its bondage to decay (Romans 8:21-22). All such things afflict us and bring suffering.

Therefore, affliction and suffering of some sort is guaranteed, but it not without purpose. They come from the faithful hand of God (Psalm 119:75).

### **The nature of the comfort from God**

The affliction and suffering, which we have been looking at, is matched by the comfort of God.

1. *Comfort grows out of the very character of God.* He is the Father of compassion or mercy (v 3). Hence comfort is grounded in that which cannot change, the very character of God.
2. *Comfort is offered to all those with a proper relationship to God.* God is their Father (v 3) and thereby share alike in both afflictions and comfort (v 7).
3. *Comfort is exclusively God's provision,* because He is the God of all comfort (v 3).
4. *Comfort comes in affliction and is not a way out of affliction,* since it gives endurance (v 6). Cf. 1 Cor 10:13.
5. *Comfort is in accord with God's character* and therefore excludes comfort in sin.
6. *Comfort does not simply appear of itself* but God uses means to bring comfort to us such as other believers and knowledge of Himself through His Word (Psalm 119:76).

### **Purposes of affliction and comfort**

1. *God allows affliction and gives comfort in order to bring praise to Him through experiencing Him as the God of all comfort (1:3).*

This is perhaps the greatest purpose for affliction and comfort. It is at the heart of God's purposes in creation, that we bring glory to Him. This does not exclude benefit to us since it achieves "for us an eternal glory" (4:17). God is worthy of praise (Rev 5:13) but graciously gives us an eternal glory as well.

This offers then a first step in gaining perspective on affliction and suffering. Remember that righteous suffering serves a great purpose, allowing us to know God in a way which we could not otherwise know Him and it therefore allowing us to praise Him in a way which we could otherwise not do.

2. *God allows affliction and gives comfort in order to equip us to minister to others (1:4, 6).*

God's purpose in comforting goes beyond the individual to comforting others. The comfort received equips us to comfort in all other situations, i.e., "in any trouble", since the "sufferings of Christ" share sufficiently in nature that the comfort we receive can be used for all others who so suffer.

Paul views his actual experience of afflictions (v 6, "distressed" = "afflicted"), as equipping him to help the Corinthians in the daily process of becoming more like Christ (their "salvation", i.e., sanctification). The believer suffers affliction in this world in order to help other believers become more like Jesus. This can be done by example or by sharing what has been learned.

Affliction and suffering is common to all believers. The degree may be different and the manner in which it comes may differ. But we all suffer in a fallen world and everyone who seeks to live godly lives will suffer persecution. But there is comfort in affliction and suffering and there is purpose to it all.

Are we suffering for the right reasons? Have I received the comfort of God in my suffering? Have I recognized that there are greater purposes for my affliction and comfort, to know God and bring glory to Him and to equip me to serve others? Pray that God would open our hearts and eyes to see and receive His work in us through suffering and comfort.