

Having indicted two purposes for affliction in verses 3-7, Paul continues with his praise to God in this section and reveals, through his own trials in Asia, two further purposes in affliction.

Paul's experience in Asia

We do not know much about the outward specifics of his affliction, but we are informed of the inward suffering it caused as reports this to the Corinthians.

1. *His affliction*

Paul shared this experience with others, perhaps Timothy, in the Roman province of Asia, not merely in Ephesus, its capital. The riot in that city (Acts 19) provides an example of the opposition he faced, which was much more than is reported in Acts. Cf. 1 Corinthians 15:32; 16:9; Romans 16:3-4; 2 Corinthians 11:24-27. His reference in this text probably included various difficulties and especially the plots and attempts against his life. On top of this was the pressure arising from his concern for the churches (2 Corinthians 11:28) and perhaps specifically from the negative reports coming out of Corinth.

2. *His suffering*

This affliction was to Paul a great burden, that was far beyond their ability to bear, a picture of an overloaded pack animal. Things had been piled on top one after another until it is just too heavy to carry. They concluded that they could not live through it. The rare technical term in verse 9, a "sentence of death", was used when an official resolution had been made to settle a matter. Since Paul's movements were unrestricted and this "sentence" was "within themselves", it was probably not a literal government decree, but the feelings as a result of the pressures that an official death sentence had been passed upon them. "So great a death" (literally, verse 10) would probably not be the physical death which Paul saw as gain (Philippians 1:21), but to die having labored for nothing. Cf. Galatians 2:2; to have run in vain; Philippians 2:16, to have labored for nothing; 1 Corinthians 9:25-27, to run and have been disqualified for the prize.

Perhaps you have felt similarly burdened until the survival seems unlikely, and the very purpose of life is challenged. We might identify with the Psalmist whose troubles brought him so low that darkness was his closest friend (Psalm 88:3, 6, 18). But Paul writes of purpose in affliction that take us beyond darkness into light.

Purposes of affliction and comfort (continued)

3. *God allows affliction in order that we trust Him.*

Our initial problem is that we tend to trust in ourselves. Thinking that we can handle things, we do not turn to God. God's solution is to allow us to get into situations beyond our ability, so that we turn to Him. By describing God as "He who raises the dead", Paul points to the power of God, gently reminds of His judgment, and answers to the extent of his own suffering, a "sentence of death". (Consider Abraham who trusted God for offspring even when his own body was as dead, and who trusted God to raise up Isaac when asked by God to sacrifice him.) When faced with humanly impossible problems, we have a God whose power reaches to raising the dead.

But our second problem is that we tend to forget, reverting to self-trust after having been delivered from the impossible. But God wants us to learn continued trust. He will deliver in all trials. God wants us to place our hope in Him, fully and without reservation. If we have set our hope on God for eternity, that we can trust Him now. (Cf. Romans 8:32.)

Without faith it is impossible to please God (Hebrews 11:6). Therefore we should broaden the areas of our lives in which we trust Him to do as He has said, and obey His commands. When we struggle in trusting (obeying) God in everyday areas, He uses affliction to teach us trust. When we come to a point where we see no help within ourselves, we turn to God. But He wants us to keep on turning to Him in every area of our lives.

4. *God allows affliction in order to deepen the community of believers and increase praise to Him.*

Affliction also brings believers together to pray for those who are afflicted. Even in individualistic cultures, affliction bring diverse believers to prayer. (Prayer is one of those mysteries in Scripture, that God who knows everything and can choose to do as He wishes, should choose to respond to prayer. But remember, too, that it is God who accomplishes things, not our prayer in itself.)

When many believers join in prayer, just as many can respond in thanksgiving to God when He answers. This returns to the thought of verse 3, that the God of all comfort is worthy of praise. (Note that prayer does not require a great number for effectiveness. God can act without prayer or respond in power and effectiveness to the prayer of a single righteous person (James 5:16). But when prayer, which is an act of worship (cf. Revelation 5:8; 8:3-4), is increased, there is greater worship of God.

This should encourage us to share our burdens with others for prayer, whereby we recognize the communion or fellowship of believers; we encourage others to show our dependency upon God; and we worship in prayer and in thanksgiving.

Affliction is not without divine purpose. We need not seek affliction, which is guaranteed to all who follow Jesus. But we do need to seek the joy which comes when we recognize what hardship is meant to produce. We endure much for great purposes, dental work, vaccinations, physical training, etc. We need to look at trials as something to endure to reach a much greater goal. Affliction is God's tool to work much greater purposes, like knowing Him, trusting Him, and worshiping Him. Even when we cannot identify what exactly God is accomplishing, we can thank and praise Him that He does have higher purposes.