

Turn with me in your Bibles please to 2 Corinthians chapter 1.

All Christians suffer... Either you *have* suffered, you *are* suffering, or you *will* suffer. It's a fact of life for every true believer.

The Apostle Paul was no stranger to suffering. He was preaching the Gospel in Lystra, when the Jews, enraged by his teaching, tried to kill him. They left him for dead... but by the grace of God Paul was able to rise up and continue preaching the Gospel. And Acts 14 tells us that he was **strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith... and [declaring] that *through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God.***¹

I've been thinking a lot about this subject of suffering lately... **Through many tribulations,** says Paul... **we must enter the kingdom of God.**

Not only does Scripture tell us that we **will** suffer, but it also tells us how we should **think** about suffering. Good theology is essential if we're going to suffer well. It helps us persevere during the long dark night of our trials, and it gives us hope. Not a blind hope, or a foolish hope, but a hope anchored on God and His unchanging love for us.

There are people in our congregation who have gone through unthinkable suffering. End of life suffering. The loss of a spouse, the loss of children. Divorce. Financial devastation. Unemployment, sickness, chronic pain. Depression. Degenerative diseases. Apostate children. The list goes on. And we wonder, *where is God in all this? Why does He allow it?..... Why me?* I think even the best of us have our moments of darkness... when we challenge God's goodness.

Let's look at what Paul has to say about God's purpose for suffering, as he writes to the Corinthian believers about the suffering **he** has experienced.

2 Corinthians 1:3ff

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. For as we share abundantly in Christ's sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too..... If we are afflicted, it's for your comfort and salvation; and if we are comforted, it's for **your** comfort, which you experience when you patiently endure the**

¹ Acts 14:22

same sufferings that we suffer. Our hope for you is unshaken, for we know that as you share in our sufferings, you'll also share in our comfort.

For we do not want you to be unaware, brothers, of the affliction we experienced in Asia. For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death..... But that was to make us rely not on ourselves... but on God who *raises* the dead..... He delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he *will* deliver us. On him we have set our hope that he will deliver us again.

My friends, I want to note from the outset that suffering is suffering, regardless of the form it takes. Our trials may look different, one from the other, but they're all painful. But when done rightly, they conform us into the image and likeness of our Lord. That's true, regardless of the nature of our suffering.

But when verse 4 says *God comforts us in **all** our affliction*, the question must be asked... does that actually include ***all*** affliction?

Does *all affliction* include when a loved one is involved in drug or alcohol abuse? Does *all include* when your child is diagnosed with a mental illness? In verse 8 Paul despaired of life itself... does *all affliction* include when your child tries to commit suicide?

Paul felt *utterly burdened... beyond [his] strength* (verse 8). Does *all affliction* include those times when we feel that we're unable to even function? That we're burdened beyond our strength? Does *all* include when you feel like your affliction is a death sentence, like in verse 9, or that life can't continue? Does *all* include when a child dies horribly. What about if someone you love is murdered? Does *all affliction* in verse 4 really cover *all*? And is God's comfort really sufficient for *all*?

These are hard questions. Theologically, we may know the correct answer, but do our hearts respond the same way? Most of you know the Plaxton family – Tim and Melody. They gave me permission to share some of the trials they went through with their daughter, Traci. They endured some of those same questions I just shared with you. And I wrestled and prayed about what I should share with you, if anything. But I know that the Plaxtons want God to use their experience, and their pain, to help others, and I want to honor their transparency.

The Plaxtons have experienced God's comfort in *all* afflictions, as stated by Paul. Even in the worst suffering I just described. And like verse 4 says, they want to be able to comfort others in *any* affliction with the comfort *they've* received from God. Your affliction may be different, but the comfort that was sufficient for them *will* be sufficient for *you*, too.

Traci confessed a faith in Christ in her teens, but she later dropped into mental illness. There was a lot of pain, a lot of conflict... many ups and downs in the Plaxton home, and life was hard. But even when Traci was a patient in a mental health hospital, the Lord's love was still evident in her life as Traci would pray and minister to others... read scripture, and sing to them. Many of you know that a few years ago Traci died tragically, by murder; and the murderer was never found.

The Plaxtons were in for a difficult ride. But even as they were swallowed by waves of pain, they clung to their Lord, sought solace from their brothers and sisters and Christ; and they kept returning to the theology that they love. To the God that they love.

Good theology will help us understand suffering; to see sense in the pain. For some, your suffering is just for a season, while for others, the suffering doesn't go away. God won't give the Plaxtons their daughter back. For them, the suffering continues, although the *nature* of the suffering changes over the years, and the pain may diminish some.

The Plaxtons will tell you that theology won't take the pain away... but God works it out for our good. For that reason, we should be prepared in advance for the suffering that *will* come.

From our text today, I've identified four characteristics of suffering. First, our suffering is from God. Second, our support is from God. Third, our sanctification is from God. And fourth, our strength is from God.

1. OUR SUFFERING IS FROM GOD.

Here's a difficult truth: God *causes* or *allows* our suffering to occur.

If we believe in a sovereign God, if we're going to be consistent, then we must accept that He plays a part in our suffering. Ultimately suffering comes to us from the hand of God. That can be a hard truth, but the fact is, we suffer because God has willed us to suffer. Either directly or indirectly, God is involved in it.

God has a *purpose* in our suffering. Look at verse 8 again... **we don't want you to be unaware, brothers, of the affliction we experienced... we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death..... But that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead.** There was *purpose* in their suffering.

Joseph suffered at the hands of his brothers, but he recognized God's hand in his life. When the brothers were finally reunited, he proclaimed to them that *what they meant for evil, God meant for good.*²

And is there any doubt that God was instrumental in putting Joseph into that pit in which his brothers threw him?³ Is there any doubt that God was instrumental in having Joseph thrown into prison?⁴ Joseph had to suffer in order for God's plans to take effect.

Jesus suffered greatly at the hands of evil men. Yet He was innocent, and undeserving of suffering.⁵ Weren't Christ's sufferings willed by the Father? God used the sufferings of our Lord for a great and glorious purpose.⁶

While God uses suffering sinlessly, the world hates the very thought of suffering... it can't imagine how a loving God would allow it. That's a common refrain amongst unbelievers – *a loving God wouldn't cause cancer... a loving God wouldn't allow pain... a loving God wouldn't let an innocent child die... I'm sure you've heard something like that before... A loving God... wouldn't send someone to hell.* Even as Christians we spend much of our time doing whatever it takes to avoid suffering. But God *uses* suffering in His divine plan.

As incredible as the suffering may seem to us... as terrible as it may be... the Lord **has made everything for its purpose**, (Prov. 16:4) **even the wicked**. And Scripture announces that the Judge of all the earth will always do what is right⁷..... Moses declared that God is **the Rock... His works are perfect... and all His ways are just.**⁸

Paul declares that God in Christ **works all things according to the counsel of His will.**⁹ That doesn't mean He's wrestling with suffering that He has no control over... no, Christ brings about *all things* in accordance with His will.¹⁰

Solomon said in Ecclesiastes 7:14, **In the day of prosperity be joyful... [but when times are hard, consider this...] God has made the one as well as the other...** He's made the joyful times, but He's in the hard times, too.

² Gen. 50

³ Gen. 37:18-24

⁴ Gen. 39:20

⁵ 1 Peter 2:18-25

⁶ 1 Peter 2:22-25

⁷ Gen. 18:25

⁸ Deut. 32:4

⁹ Ephesians 1:11

¹⁰ Heb. 12:2-11; James 1:2-4

God declares through the prophet Isaiah: **I form light and I create darkness... I make well-being and I create calamity... I am the Lord, who does all these things.**¹¹

Scripture also tells us that God permits others to do evil. Job is the obvious example; God clearly had a purpose in his suffering... which was to show that even in perilous times, Job would not curse God.¹²

But consider another example... Jesus allowed Lazarus to die; in doing so He purposefully subjected numerous people to great suffering. Not just Lazarus, but Mary and Martha as well. And He did so, so that His glory would be evident. When Martha doubted His ability to save Lazarus, Jesus said, **Did I not tell you that if you believed you would see the glory of God?**¹³

There was *purpose* in the suffering surrounding the death of Lazarus.

Let's make it clear... God hates evil. And He's incapable of *doing* evil. But Scripture tells us that He ordains evil. He has purposed, planned, and willed it from the creation of the world.

Don't you think that He planned to have His Son brutally beaten and killed by evil men? Of course He did; the crucifixion wasn't a "plan B, didn't expect that to happen" situation!

Before the foundation of the world, God determined that the redemption of man would have to take place through the death of His Son. He ordained that evil. He allowed that evil for His greater purposes.

When God ordains something, it means that He has determined that it will take place. God has determined that evil will take place. But it doesn't mean that He does evil. And that's an important distinction. No one suffers without God having ordained it to be so.

That's a hard truth, but it's why theology is so important in our understanding of suffering.

And really, would you want it any other way? Christian, the incredible promise of God is that He's causing ALL things – including our suffering – to work together for good!¹⁴

¹¹ Isaiah 45:7

¹² Job 1:6-12

¹³ John 11:40

¹⁴ Rom. 8:28

Would you want your suffering to be out of God's control? I wouldn't... I can't think of anything worse. Yet, when we're enduring dark times, we tend to leap to the conclusion that God isn't in it... that He has somehow distanced Himself from us.

I can't pretend to know how God can use the death of a child for good. Or financially devastating circumstances. But I know Christians who have gone through terrible suffering, and they've found it to be a gift from God. Not right away, but over time, as they've grown in their understanding.

I also know people who have allowed that experience to make them bitter, and angry. One lady said to me, *If there was a God, I wouldn't have been cursed with this disabled child.*

We won't always have the answers, but we can be sure that in glory the answers will be clear! And we'll see Jesus face to face, and we'll see how these things worked out for our good. Until then, we need to trust in His promises – because sometimes there's nothing else to hold on to.

In glory we'll see that God has done all the He pleased, and He did it perfectly for His glory and for our good. We'll see that through our sufferings, our loving Father has been conforming us to the likeness of His Son.

In the Beatitudes, Jesus said **blessed are the poor in spirit... He said, blessed are those who mourn... blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake... for theirs is the kingdom of heaven... Blessed are you when others revile you... and persecute you... and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice... and be glad... for your reward is great in heaven.**

So, what *are* God's purposes in suffering? The Bible gives us some answers...

First, suffering makes our cup increase...

Paul's afflictions brought him closer to God. He was imprisoned multiple times, suffered many beatings, endured terrible physical pain, and he went hungry. He suffered emotionally as well. His wisdom, his homiletical skills, and his apostolic authority were challenged and even mocked. And he was accused of being unqualified to shepherd his flock.

But these afflictions, said Paul, prepared him for **an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison**.¹⁵ Paul recognized that the future glory he would experience with the Lord far outweighed any suffering he experienced in this world.

Second, our suffering makes others bold...

When Paul was imprisoned in Rome, he wrote to the Philippian church, saying, **most of the brothers, having become confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, are *much more bold* to speak the word without fear.**

Chet Bitterman was a 28-year old Wycliffe missionary serving in Colombia. A husband, and father of two little girls. He was captured by guerrillas, who wanted the Wycliffe organization out of Colombia. He was held for seven weeks while his wife Brenda, and his two little daughters – Anna and Esther – prayed for his return home.

Finally, seven weeks after his abduction, on a bus near Bogota, Chet's body was found, having been shot with a single bullet to the chest. I'm told he looked peaceful.

According to Wycliffe, in the year following Chet's death, applications for overseas service with Wycliffe Bible Translators doubled.

We wouldn't choose this path. Certainly Brenda and their little girls wanted Chet home with them, but God has greater purposes than we can ever comprehend. If God needs a great mobilization of missionaries, then He has the right to choose His way.

As John Piper put it, God will use the suffering of his devoted emissaries to make a sleeping church wake up and take risks for God!

Third, our suffering magnifies the power and the sufficiency of Christ in a way that nothing else can.

One of the reasons we suffer is so that God can come to us in our suffering and strengthen us. Comfort us. And the purpose, according to verse 10, is so that we won't rely on ourselves, but on God. God put Paul through terrible suffering so that he wouldn't trust in himself; he brought Paul to the place where he had no escape... he had no human resource intellectually, physically, or emotionally. He couldn't call on himself or anyone else. And that's exactly where God wanted him to be.

¹⁵ 2 Corinthians 4:17

Look at verses 8 again... **we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself.... we felt that we'd received the sentence of death. But that was to make us rely *not on ourselves..... but on God...***

One of God's great purposes in our trials is to take us to our limit and beyond, such that we have no power to fix the problem. When we can't do anything; when we can't trust in ourselves; we can know that we can trust in God.

They say if you're ever called upon to rescue someone who's drowning, that if you're really thoughtful about it, you won't try to rescue them until they go down for the last time... because if you try to intervene at any point prior to that, when they still have the strength to kick and fight, they're liable to take **you** down with them...

But when they come to the very end of their strength... and there's no confidence left in their own deliverance, and they're weakened and still... it's then that they can be picked up and brought to safety.

And that's exactly where the Lord wants to take us; to the place where we've given it our last shot, and we're sinking for the last time, and there's ***nothing in us*** that can save us... and there's no human resource left. And that's exactly where God's power intervenes.

Fourth, God ordains suffering to help us release our hold on worldly things, and put our hope on God alone.

Trials reveal what is most precious to you. If proven character is most precious to you; if enjoying the sufferings of Christ for the sake of being a fellow sufferer with Him is most precious; then you'll endure anything. If bearing the cross of Christ is most precious, then you'll suffer the loss of anything.

But if your bank account is most precious, then when times get lean, you're not going to be able to declare that you love the Lord supremely, and acknowledge that He must be doing some wonderful work in your life... shaping your character after the image of our Lord.

It all comes down to what you love most. If you love anything more than Christ, then you'll shake your fist at God. You're going to despair... and you'll even question God's integrity and love for you.

When Abraham was asked by God to sacrifice his beloved son - the promised heir, the son of the covenant - Abraham was willing to do so. Despite a thousand questions that were probably swirling around in his head, Abraham took his son up on Mount Moriah, put him

on the altar, took a knife, and prepared to sacrifice his only son. And there's only one possible explanation for that – Abraham loved God more than he loved his son.

Trials will always reveal your idols

Our suffering brings us to meet Jesus on *His* terms. Joni Erickson Tada knows suffering. She's a quadriplegic herself, and her ministry reaches out to the disabled. She wrote that *desperation is part of a quadriplegic's life... she said, "for me, suffering is still that jackhammer breaking apart my rocks of resistance every day.*

It's still the chisel that God uses to chip away at my self-sufficiency and my self-motivation, and my self-consumption. Suffering is still that sheepdog snapping and barking at my heels, driving me down the road to Calvary, where otherwise I do not want to go."

She goes on to say, *"My flesh doesn't want to endure hardship like a good soldier, or follow Christ's example, or welcome a trial as friend. No... my flesh does not want to rejoice in suffering, or be holy as He is holy. But it's at Calvary, at the cross, where I meet suffering on God's terms."*¹⁶

Fifth, God uses suffering for *discipline*...

Suffering isn't always a consequence for sin, but trials do come to us as a form of discipline. Through our trials we learn that sin has painful consequences. The writer of Hebrews says in chapter 12 **...do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor be weary when reproved by him. For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives.**¹⁷

Sixth, God uses suffering to demonstrate His power...

In John 9 we meet a blind man... a beggar outside the temple. Day after day that poor, blind beggar sat outside the temple begging for morsels to stay alive. And the disciples wondered, *whose sin caused his condition?* Jesus explained that his blindness had nothing to do with sin; his affliction was given *so that the works of God might be displayed in his life.*

Talk about being used by God! He spent his entire life up to that point blind and destitute for this teaching moment with Jesus.

God has a purpose in our suffering.

¹⁶ Suffering and the Sovereignty of God – John Piper, Ed. Chapter 9 – Joni Erickson Tada.

¹⁷ Heb. 12:5-6

Finally, seventh, suffering builds perseverance and strength of character.

James said, **Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect..... that you may be perfect and complete... lacking in nothing.**¹⁸

God allows bad things to happen to His people to test the validity of their faith. Hezekiah was tested in 2 Chronicles chapter 32. It says, **God left him to himself, in order to test him and to know all that was in his heart.** In other words, God abandoned Hezekiah so that Hezekiah could see what he was really like when left to his own devices. God didn't need to know what Hezekiah was made of... *Hezekiah* needed to know.

Martha Snell Nicholson was a Christian poet who knew suffering better than most. She was bedridden for much of her life, her body racked by diseases and terrible pain. But through all her pain and suffering came some beautiful poetry, including this poem, entitled "The Thorn".

She wrote,

I stood a mendicant of God before His royal throne
And begged him for one priceless gift, which I could call my own.
I took the gift from out His hand, but as I would depart
I cried, "But Lord this is a thorn and it has pierced my heart.
This is a strange, a hurtful gift, which Thou hast given me."
He said, "My child, I give good gifts and gave My best to thee."
I took it home and though at first the cruel thorn hurt sore,
As long years passed I learned at last to love it more and more.
I learned He never gives a thorn without this added grace,
He takes the thorn to pin aside the veil which hides His face.

God allows suffering... for many reasons. ***That's point #1 - our suffering is from God.*** But we can know that God will comfort us in our suffering.

2. OUR SUPPORT IS FROM GOD.

Look at our text, verse 3... **"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.....***

¹⁸ James 1:2-4

This concept of “comfort” often suggests softness, but in this context it isn’t about having an easy life. It’s more than just a little cheer or friendly word of encouragement... and it’s not about *living your best life now*. The word means to strengthen, or to fortify. What Paul experienced was the strengthening of God so that he could meet the pressures in his life.

God came to Paul in the midst of his sufferings and troubles to strengthen him, and give him courage, and boldness. The provision of comfort is not about having the trials go away, but rather about having the strength to withstand them.

Look at verse 4 – God comforts us in all our affliction – so that we’ll be qualified and able to comfort others. We’re suspicious of people who have lived easy lives. Suffering people want people who have suffered to tell them there’s hope.

When we’re left to our own grief, sometimes we can’t see a light at the end of the tunnel. In fact, at times we can’t even recognize that there is a light at the end of the tunnel. We come to believe that there is no hope.

One Pastor¹⁹ recalled an event a number of years ago when a baby died very suddenly. The baby’s parents weren’t believers, but they came to the pastor and asked him to conduct the funeral, and so he did. Later, he had the joy of seeing them both come to faith in the Lord.

Many months later, he said, another young mother lost her baby and, again, the pastor was called to bring her comfort. But this time, nothing that he shared with her seemed to help. She was inconsolable. At the funeral service, the first mother who had lost her child stepped forward, went to the young girl’s side and she said, *I passed through this and I know what you’re passing through. God called me and through the darkness I came to him. He’s comforted me, and He’ll comfort you.*

The first mother did more for the second mother than the Pastor ever could have done because the first mother had traveled a similar road of suffering. And that’s what Paul is talking about. The experiences of life are designed to equip us to help others who are going through similar experiences.

We’ll share abundantly in suffering, says Paul... but when we suffer for the sake of Christ, we can also expect to share abundantly in comfort. God uses our suffering to fortify us. That we may be able to face the pressures of the world to suffer righteously, so that we can be a beacon in this dark place.

¹⁹ cited in S Lewis Johnson, *Divine Comfort, Its Source And Purpose*

When we don't suffer righteously... when we worry about what tomorrow will bring... we're saying that we can't rely on God. That we don't believe His promises.

Do you believe in Him? Do you know, trust, and believe in His Word? That His Word is truth? His Word tells us that God will provide for all our needs. You can trust in Him. But our perception of our needs is not always the same as God's perception of our needs... He won't always provide for us in the way we expect. He may not give us the money we want... He may not give us the health that we want... the success that we want... but He gives us exactly what we need, and exactly when we need it.

God's provision for us may not be as we expect. *How* He provides may not be satisfying to you, but it's God's best for you. Consider this... if you're unemployed, and your savings are running out, and you're anxiously calling on the promises of God to provide; remember that His provision may be through this church's benevolence fund.

That's a humbling thing. God could even be working on the heart of the girl at the utility company, when you call them because you can't pay your bill... perhaps He's working on *her* heart through *your* pain. God's purposes are bigger than just us; and we don't often see the big picture, or get an adequate explanation for them.

One theologian said, "the sufferer who feels that his sufferings equip him as a missionary of comfort to others will feel that they are well-explained." He'll feel like his sufferings have purpose.

The exact circumstances of our suffering aren't as important as our resulting growth in holiness. Suffering produces an empathy that transcends circumstances. It's unlikely that any of the Corinthian Christians suffered in the same way Paul did, yet Paul was able to say that they are the same sufferings, because the exact circumstances of suffering are not as important as what God is doing, and wants to do through the suffering.

But we face a staggering array of "what if" questions that torment us. What if the worst happens? What if my child dies? What if I get cancer? What if my spouse leaves me? What if I lose my job? Any of these things could happen. All of these things could happen. None of us are free from tragedy or pain. There are no guarantees for an easy life.

When the dreaded "*what if*" questions come to pass, we're brought to our knees... we question if God is enough. If my health spirals downward and I end up incapacitated, will God be enough? If my children rebel and never walk with the Lord... *will God be enough?*

Since the death of their daughter, the Plaxtons – who are Godly people – have struggled to survive. They’ve struggled to breathe. But through it all, they’ve tried to rest their hopes in Jesus, and in His faithfulness, and in their faith that they’ll one day be with Him. And one day they’ll get to see their daughter again... and she’ll be free of mental illness... free of pain.

As the end of verse 9 says, they **don't rely on themselves but on the God who raises the dead**. And until the last day they’ll cling to the knowledge that God’s grace is sufficient for them, and they’ve experienced the comfort of verse 3.

But the pain for them has been unexpected and unpredictable... it would come in waves for no particular reason. Something would spark a memory, and they’d be left overwhelmed, numbed, and sickened to their stomach.

God doesn’t promise us that those dreaded “*what ifs*” won’t come to pass. Even when we’re walking closely with Him, we can expect trials. But we have something far better than a reassurance that our dreaded “*what ifs*” won’t happen. Even if they *do* happen, He’ll be there in the midst of them. He’ll *carry* us... He’ll *comfort* us... He’ll tenderly *care* for us.

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were not guaranteed deliverance. Just before Nebuchadnezzar delivered them to the fire, they offered some of the most courageous words ever spoken. **If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to deliver us from it... But *even if he does not*, we want you to know that we will not serve your gods.**²⁰

Even if.

Even if the worst happens, God’s grace is sufficient. Those three young men could face the fire without fear because they knew that whatever the outcome, it would ultimately be for their good and for God’s glory. They were satisfied knowing that “even if” the worst happened, God would take care of them.

3. OUR SANCTIFICATION IS FROM GOD.

Paul was certain his suffering would lead to death. His situation was hopeless, humanly speaking. But that’s the way God wanted it to be... in hopeless situations, there’s only one Thing we can rely on, and that’s God. Since he was certain he was to die, there was nothing Paul could do *but* to trust in Him. And it’s that depth of trust that enables us to know God as we would never otherwise know Him.

²⁰ Daniel 3:17–18

If it weren't for our sin, we'd never know the grace of God... and if it weren't for our suffering, we wouldn't know God's mercy, His compassion, and His comfort. Suffering, painful as it is, is a divinely appointed means of knowing God intimately.

In his short book, *Don't Waste Your Cancer*, David Powlison wrote that in our suffering, the blessing comes in what God does for us, with us, and through us. He brings His great and merciful redemption onto the stage of the curse. Your cancer is one of those 10,000 "shadows of death"²¹ that come upon each of us.

But in his beloved children, our Father works a most kind good through our most grievous losses: sometimes healing and restoring the body... always sustaining and teaching us that we might know and love him more simply. In the testing ground of evils, your faith becomes deep, and real... and your love becomes purposeful, and wise.²²

Turn with me to 2 Corinthians 4:18... we can respond to suffering by reacting with bitter resentment, cursing God. But Paul shows us how we can react in a Christ-like manner. He writes in verse 18 that **we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond *all* comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen.**

But in 2 Corinthians 1:8, Paul says, **"we don't want you to be unaware, brothers, of the affliction we experienced... For we were *so... utterly... burdened beyond our strength... that we despaired of life itself*..... we felt that we had received the sentence of death."**

Perhaps Paul is confused. In chapter 4 Paul refers to his suffering as a **light momentary affliction**, but here in chapter 2 he talks about being **burdened beyond strength... despairing of life itself.**

He wasn't confused! Paul's letter to the Philippians will help... turn to Philippians 3:8... Here Paul explains *how* he can see his trials as light, momentary afflictions. He says, **I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For His sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish in order that I may gain Christ.**

Paul's suffering was significant, but it was just as a **momentary affliction** when compared to the weight of eternal glory that he looked forward to. He had a great hope! It's only

²¹ Ps. 23:4

²² James 1:2-5; 1 Pet. 1:3-9; Rom. 5:1-5; 8:18-39

through the power of Christ that a person can respond positively to suffering; everything is rubbish, when compared to our Lord and His promise of redemption.

4. OUR STRENGTH IS FROM GOD.

Paul says that his afflictions were there to make him rely not on *himself*, but on God. Look at verse 8... he said, **Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death. But that was to make us rely *not on ourselves* but on *God* who raises the dead. He delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he *will* deliver us.**

And Paul encouraged us to not despair... **we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons... the redemption of our bodies.**²³

But knowing that the “end” of suffering is adoption by God, and redemption, is not always enough to ease the pain.

- Moses faced the dark night of the soul when he cried out to God: **If You treat me like this... please... kill me here and now...**²⁴
- Job cursed the day of his birth.²⁵
- Jeremiah expressed the same sentiment: **Cursed be the day in which I was born! Let the day not be blessed in which my mother bore me! Let the man be cursed who brought news to my father, saying, “A male child has been born to you!” ... Why did I come forth from the womb to see labor and sorrow, that my days should be consumed with shame?**²⁶

The writer of Psalm 88 cried out to God... **O Lord, God of my salvation; I cry out day and night before you... he *begged* God to hear him... O Lord, I cry to you; in the morning my prayer comes before you.... **why do you cast my soul away?** Why do you hide your face from me?**

He didn't feel heard. His soul was filled with suffering, and God was silent. Many of us can endure the worst kinds of suffering if God is filling our hearts with comfort, but when we cry out for comfort and we receive nothing, our pain is magnified tremendously.

²³ Rom. 8:22-23

²⁴ Num. 11:15

²⁵ Job 3:11-13

²⁶ Jer. 20:14-15, 18

You're troubled, so you pray. You're distressed, so you cry for God to bring you relief. But all you hear in reply is silence; a silence so deafening it drowns out every thought but this... God isn't listening.

Is that how you feel? Other believers have felt the same way. Oswald Chambers... Charles Spurgeon... Martyn Lloyd-Jones... they knew well the agony you're experiencing. In response to the death of his wife, a devastated C.S. Lewis sought after God, but found silence in His place. Confused, he asked the question, *why is He so present a commander in our time of prosperity, but so very absent a help in time of trouble?*

Many of the Psalmists felt the notable absence of God. David cried out, **"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me from the words of my groaning? O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer, and by night but I find no rest."**²⁷

The truth we must cling to is God cares about us, even in the midst of our pain. Our goal in pain and suffering is relief, but God's goal isn't just to relieve us of our pain. He also wants us to see that He's there for us *in* our pain. He gives us the strength to endure.

Psalm 30:5 says, **Weeping may tarry for the night, but joy comes with the morning.** God is with us in the morning, but He's also with us during the long, dark night! Those long nights when there's nothing but weeping... when the pit is the darkest, and that darkness weighs down on our souls. When God feels so absent that we wonder if He's even real... even then, He's with us!

God alone can bring us through our trials. That's what He wants you to know! Yes, the night is long, and the weeping intense... but the morning is coming!

Melody kept a journal during those difficult years after her daughter's death. Here's the entry from November 27, 2010, about 20 months after Traci's death. Again, I have permission to share...

In order for you to see a rainbow, she wrote, the rain has to be in front of you and the sun behind you. You can't see the beauty of the colors of a rainbow without TWO elements: rain and sun. And the sun has to be behind you to see the colors. In other words, you have to be facing the storm – but with the sun at your back... it's projecting a miraculous painting of beauty on the screen of rain before you.

²⁷ Psalm 22:1-2

So... sun at your back; storm in your face; but the beauty of a rainbow before you.

So today, almost two years later, the storm in my life is not gone. It's still "in my face" in many ways, but I've become aware of the Son at my back, shining on me and showing me the beauty He will give me for the ashes I have tasted; that He will give me the "garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness"... that He is in control.

I am (thank His wonderful name) drawn back into that place of complete trust in His direction and for His leading and healing in my life. No great revelations, no trumpets, no dancing. But the peace is a blessed change.

So often our initial reaction to suffering is, *Why me? Why this? Why now? Why, God?* But the honest answer is, *why not me? Why not now?* We don't seek out suffering, but as Christians there's a tremendous amount of growth that comes out of our suffering. It's a growth that we would never see, *but* for the suffering.

It's one of the great dichotomies of the Christian faith... the thing we spend so much of our time trying to avoid is the very thing God has ordained for our sanctification.

If my suffering might serve as a 3-watt light bulb in a very dark world, then why not me? If my suffering shows forth the Savior of the world, then, why *not* me?

And if I have the privilege of filling up the sufferings of Christ... if He sanctifies me in my deepest distress... if He bears me along through the suffering in His arms... if my weakness demonstrates the power of God to save even me... and if my life becomes a source of hope for others, then why not me?

We don't want to suffer, but we should be willing. Like Christ, we might pray, *if possible, let this cup pass from me... but not My will, but Yours.*

Like Christ, you'll learn obedience through what you suffer. Like Christ, you'll sympathize with the weakness of others. And like Christ, you'll be able to display faith to a faithless, dark, and cold world.

For the Plaxtons, the pain goes on. It doesn't get easier – it just gets "different", as the years go by. The pain ebbs and flows. I think they'd tell you that they are still – in some profound way – *broken*. But they can proclaim with joy that *God is at the helm of the ship of their life... He's a captain who can be trusted in all weather: fair, foul, or the lengthy times of stillness and sameness in between the extremes. Breathe deeply and trust in Him, no matter the weather. Change will come... and He is with you in the change. Always!*