

Message #4

II Corinthians 1:8-11

This year has been a major year for drought. Many parts of the country have seen very little rain. Last week a Midwest farmer was interviewed on the news and he said this is the worst drought he has ever seen in his lifetime and he hopes he never sees it again. There is a proverb that says—“All sunshine makes a desert.” If you don’t have any rain, you end up with a desert.

Typically, some person who has never had to suffer anything is a very superficial person. Generally speaking, people who don’t suffer or don’t work or have things handed to them are very shallow people. This is certainly true when it comes to spirituality.

One thing that you must see from these opening verses of II Corinthians is that God permits major trials and troubles to hit His people. God sovereignly permits pressured things to hit that can leave us very discouraged and very depressed. **But God is clear to remind us that our troubles are not by accident or by chance or by fate. Our troubles are not incidental or accidental; they are there by the sovereign hand of the Sovereign God.** Now unless you realize this and believe this, you have absolutely no hope of anything good coming from these things and you will have no power to cope.

When the Apostle Paul wrote II Corinthians, he was suffering some major affliction and threat of death. He wanted the Corinthians to know this fact. The conjunction “for” that begins **verse 8** explains to these Corinthians the reason why he suffered. In fact, in **verse 8**, he says he did not want them to be “unaware” of the reasons for the negative things that were happening to him.

Paul was no whiner or complainer, but he was being criticized for many things and he wanted these Corinthians to understand just exactly what was happening. He does not share much, but he does share enough information so they get it.

It seems to me that there are two extremes we must avoid in ministry: 1) Being a blabber mouth that spills our verbal guts to anyone who will listen; 2) Being too tight-lipped with a “none of their business” mindset. Paul had the perfect balance here.

Paul decided he wanted these Corinthians to realize life for him as an apostle wasn’t easy. He doesn’t specifically say what the hardship was, but whatever it was it caused him to be “burdened excessively” to the point that he “despaired of his own life.”

The thing that Paul came to understand and the thing he wanted the Corinthians to understand was this:

WHEN WE ARE GOING THROUGH TERRIBLE THREATS AND INTIMIDATIONS IN LIFE, INCLUDING THE THREAT AND INTIMIDATION OF DEATH, THE HOPE THAT WE HAVE IS OUR FAITH IN JESUS CHRIST AND NOT FAITH IN OURSELVES .

When Paul was first saved, the Lord Jesus Christ directed a man by the name of Ananias to take Paul in and help him. Ananias didn't want to do it, but the Lord said that Paul was His instrument to take the grace Gospel to the Gentiles, kings and sons of Israel. Then Jesus told Ananias that He was going to show Paul "how much he must suffer for My name's sake" (Acts 9:15-16).

Now I think that these verses are very practical and also very theological. There are two main observations we may make:

OBSERVATION #1 – Paul was suffering some intense affliction in Asia . **1:8-9**

The word "affliction" (θιλιψς) is a Greek word that means Paul was under great pressure. Things were pressing in on Paul and they were making life very difficult (G. Abbott-Smith, *Greek Lexicon*, pp. 207-208). Paul was getting hammered from every direction. We don't know exactly what the specific suffering or pressure was, but it was very intense for Paul.

Paul doesn't go on and on about what the trouble was. Truth is we don't know, we are speculating. Some people go on and on and on about their troubles and here was Paul under some death sentence and he doesn't even tell us what it was.

William Barclay told the story of two military leaders in war time who were meeting to discuss strategy and one of them went on and on about the fact that the train he traveled on had been bombed. He would not stop talking about it. He kept telling people how dangerous it had been and how he had escaped with his life. The other man say quietly listening and when there was finally a break in the action said, "Well let's get on with our business now, I would like to get away from this meeting as early as possible because my house was demolished by a bomb last night." That man was like Paul; he didn't talk much about his specific problems. Paul does refer to things that happened and were happening in Asia.

We do know that when Paul had been in Ephesus, the capital of Asia, and he taught the Word of God there for three years, he found himself in all sorts of trouble. God had powerfully used Paul and "the word of God was growing mightily and prevailing" (Acts 19:20). As a result, people were believing on Christ and turning away from the false religion that dominated Ephesus. His ministry caused a riot in Acts 19 and there were people who literally wanted to kill Paul for preaching grace. So Paul had to leave Asia and go to Macedonia. Life for Paul in Asia was not some picnic. He suffered great affliction.

Sometimes people get the wrong idea about ministry, especially missions. They romanticize missions as if you will go overseas and have a wonderful, joyful, happy experience. The fact is if it is a true ministry of God, you are going to war. There will be times, when doing the will of God, you will discover that you suffer and you will find yourself under great pressure. That was the way it was for Paul and that is the way it really is.

Now there are three descriptions he gives of his affliction, whatever it was. It was very severe. He was truly undergoing a major assault:

Affliction Description #1 - Paul's affliction burdened him excessively. **1:8b**

The Greek words "burdened excessively" mean that the tremendous pressure was weighing them down far beyond anything they had the power to handle. In fact this word was used for an overloaded ship that was sitting deep in the water about to sink, or an overloaded pack animal that was crushed under its load. Paul adds that this burden was way beyond their own strength to resolve.

Have you ever been so burdened that you feel as if you cannot take one more step? Have you ever been so drained that you are totally shot to the point where you think you will collapse? That is where Paul was.

Affliction Description #2 - Paul's affliction was to the point that he despaired of life. **1:8c**

Now Paul was never afraid to die. In fact, he wrote that for him to live was Christ and to die was gain. When given a choice between living and dying, Paul said he actually struggled because he wanted to go home to be with the Lord (Philippians 1:21-24). The pressure was so great that Paul despaired of life. In other words, he wasn't afraid of dying, he was afraid of living.

Sometimes God's people reach this point. Things pressure them to the point where they despair of living. Marital pressure, business pressures, health pressures, problems with children, family or friends can make you want to throw in the towel and give up. It is not the thought of dying that is so intimidating; it is the thought of living. There are things that pressure us and wear us down in life and Paul was going through one of those times.

There are phony prosperity Gospel preachers who will tell you that life will always be happy and joyful, especially if you give them your money. Paul did not believe that or teach that. If you believe in Jesus Christ and then purpose to obey Him, there are times when you will experience pressure, stress and depression. There will be times when you will get hit with things that will be like a "vice grip." There will be times when you may despair of life.

Affliction Description #3 - Paul's affliction was a death sentence. **1:9**

This is the ultimate pressure for any to face. The Greek "we ourselves" is very emphatic here. There was a death sentence on Paul himself and the others with him, of which only God could give deliverance.

Now just exactly what death sentence is Paul referring to here? Well it is certainly possible that he is referring to the fact that everywhere he went religious people wanted to kill him and many times tried to kill him. At the time Paul lived, he was probably the most targeted man for death on the face of the earth.

There may be times in your life when something will hit you and you find it utterly unbearable and you have no escape; you are utterly helpless and hopeless. There may be times in life when you literally will think you are going to die and that there is nothing you can do about it yourself. There may be moments of time in which, as one writer said, you will be in a “dark free-fall.” Paul is thinking of pressure and stress that is beyond anything he can control. In other words, the pressure or affliction was such that in and of himself, by his own capabilities, he could not escape. There was no exit way out. **It is very clear that Paul believes that the only Person who can help him and deliver him is God.**

OBSERVATION #2 – Paul’s affliction had a Divine purpose . **1:9-11**

God has a sovereign purpose for such moments in our lives. Paul’s sufferings drove him straight to God.

There is not one person in this world who can deliver himself from death. I don’t care who the person is or what the person has or what the death is. Whether it be physical death, spiritual death or eternal death, you cannot deliver yourself. The truth is we cannot deliver ourselves from any form of death.

The reason why God gives us this death sentence is for three stated purposes:

Purpose #1 - Life threatening affliction causes us not to trust in ourselves . **1:9a**

The purpose of God putting this death sentence on them was so that they would not rely upon themselves for deliverance. People who want to trust in themselves for deliverance from death are out of their minds.

This is a very important point that all believers need to learn. If you think that success depends on you, you have not learned this lesson. If you think that achievement depends on you, you have missed the point.

Purpose #2 - Life threatening affliction causes us to completely trust in God . **1:9b**

We need to get this point right here and right now. The reason why God permits us to be afflicted and go through pressured times is so that we will learn that our real hope and help is not in ourselves, but in Him. **God wants us living our lives with a God-centeredness, not a self-centeredness.**

Years ago we taught a course here on spiritual victory, and in that course we proved that in order to have spiritual victory you must realize that victory is not found in you. In fact, no real victory will ever occur until one realizes, as Paul did, that “nothing good dwells in me” (Rom. 7:18). You will never experience spiritual victory by promising God that you’ll try harder or you will try to be better. You will experience victory when you finally get to the place where you admit victory is not in you, it is in the Lord (Prov. 21:31).

That is precisely what Paul is saying is the purpose of pressure and trials. They are there to teach us we cannot trust in ourselves, we must trust in God. God wants us totally and completely dependent upon Him. There three powerful realities:

(Reality #1) - God raises the dead by resurrection power. **1:9c**

Now don't over look this key grammatical point; the participle raised is present tense, not past tense. The resurrection power of God is a continual power to God's people, not a past tense power. It seems to me the point Paul is making is that when we find ourselves in impossible circumstances we need to remember that our God has power to deliver us, because He has resurrection power at all times. In other words, God can raise us up out of anything, including the sentence of death.

No matter how dead a person is, God can raise them out of it. No matter how depressed a person is, God can raise them out of it. No matter how doomed a person is, God can raise them out of it. Turn to God, pray to God and see what He will do.

(Reality #2) - God has delivered and will deliver. **1:10a**

Now notice the emphasis on the fact of present tense deliverance, past tense deliverance and future tense deliverance. The child of God has the right and the privilege to call upon God for deliverance when he finds himself surrounded by impossible circumstances.

J. Vernon McGee said that when he got cancer his doctor didn't give him much hope. But Dr. McGee said that God kept delivering him and he kept looking to God to deliver him. That is what pressure does; it forces us to look to God for deliverance.

(Reality #3) - God is the only One in whom we hope. **1:10b**

The purpose of Paul sharing this information was not to send a missionary letter that presents a pity party, no hope message about some dental problem or flu sickness that needs prayer or financial support; it was to get people to trust in God and hope in Him.

Purpose #3 - Life threatening affliction promotes prayer. **1:11**

It is very clear from the life of Paul that one of the things we truly need when we are hurting is prayer. We need to be praying ourselves and we need other believers praying for us. Prayer is something God has built into His relationship with us.

It is not wrong to pray for God's deliverance. In fact, in the famous prayer in which the Lord taught the disciples to pray he said one of the things they should pray for is "deliverance."

Praying for God's help, praying for safety is a very right thing to do. Paul wanted God's people praying for him and his ministry.

Think about this for a moment; the Corinthians were all messed up and yet Paul wanted them to pray for him. One of the reasons God permits us to get into difficult situations is so that we will pray. **Prayer is a critical part of moving God to deliver us.**

When we are hurting we need to pray fervently and frequently. When we are under pressure we need to pray. Abraham Lincoln once said that he had often been driven to his knees in prayer because he had nowhere else to go.

People who are on the front lines of ministry need your prayers. The pastor needs your prayers, the board of elders and deacons need your prayers, the teachers need your prayers, we all need each others prayers. As one writer said “Pray, Pray, Pray.”

May we suggest that if you are going through dark times right now in your life, you get alone with God and ask Him to help you, to strengthen you and use you. Go to God and ask for His deliverance and His grace. It is there waiting for you and all you need to do is to go to God in prayer.

Here is the point—times of trouble and trial and hardship drove Paul to God and he was able to experience God’s powerful delivering grace. That is exactly what suffering and pressure should do for us. It should drive us to God, realizing our hope is in Him, not in ourselves.

But there is a big application for all of us to make here. We all are weighed down by a death penalty that is on every one of us. The wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Why would God give us the death penalty? So that we would realize that we cannot deliver ourselves so we will trust in Jesus Christ.

There is a death sentence on every one of us. It is the death penalty that we have received because we are all sinners. There is only one who can raise us up out from under this death penalty. You cannot look to yourself for everlasting life; our only hope is in Jesus Christ. Believe on Him and the sentence of death becomes a promise of life.