

WHY DOES IT HURT SO MUCH?

by Ray C. Stedman

The second letter of Paul to the Corinthians is probably the least known of all his letters. It has sometimes been called "Paul's unknown letter." I do not know why that is. First Corinthians is very well-known among his writings, but many people feel that Second Corinthians is heavy reading. It is too bad that we are so unfamiliar with it, because it represents the most personal, the most autobiographical letter from the apostle's pen.

In First Corinthians we looked at the church at Corinth. That is a very instructive letter because the church in California today is very much like the church in Corinth was; we live in "Corinthian" conditions now. But in Second Corinthians we are looking at Paul; he is the one in focus as he lays himself open and reveals himself to the church. This, therefore, is a very personal letter from the heart of this mighty apostle. Here we see him more clearly, perhaps, than anywhere else in Scripture.

We call this Second Corinthians, but it should, perhaps, be called Fourth Corinthians, because it is the last of four letters that Paul wrote to the church there. Two of these letters have not been preserved for us -- that is why we only have First and Second Corinthians -- but they are not in the order that these titles suggest. If I can just recapitulate a little bit of the background, at least this one time, then you can refer back to this if you are confused about the chronology.

Paul began the church in Corinth somewhere around 52 or 53 A. D. He stayed there for about a year and a half; then he went to Ephesus, where he remained for a few weeks, and then he went on a quick trip to Jerusalem, returning again to Ephesus.

1. While he was at Ephesus, he wrote a letter to the church at Corinth which is lost to us. It is referred to in First Corinthians 5:9, where Paul says he wrote to warn them about following a worldly lifestyle. In response to that letter, the Corinthians wrote back to him with many questions. They sent their letter by the hands of three young men who are mentioned in First Corinthians.
2. In reply to that letter, Paul wrote what we now call First Corinthians. In it he tried to answer their questions, and we have looked at those answers. He tried to exhort them and instruct them how to walk in power and in peace; and he tried to correct many problem areas in the church. Evidently that letter did not accomplish all that Paul intended. There was a bad reaction to it, and in this second letter we learn that he made a quick trip back to Corinth. How long that took we do not know. Paul calls it a "painful" visit. He had come with a rather sharp, severe rebuke to them, but again he did not accomplish his purpose; again there was a great deal of negative reaction.
3. So when he returned to Ephesus, he sent another brief letter, in the hands of Titus, to Corinth to see if he could help them. Now Titus was gone a long time. Transportation and communication were very slow and difficult in those days. Paul, waiting in Ephesus, grew very anxious to hear what was happening in the church there. He became so troubled that he left Ephesus and went to Troas and then up into Macedonia to meet Titus. There in Macedonia, probably in the city of Philippi, he and Titus came together.
4. Titus brought him a much more encouraging word about the church, and in response to that, out of thanksgiving, Paul wrote what we now call the Second Corinthians letter, although it was really the fourth of a series of letters.

That is where we will begin today.

The opening greetings are somewhat similar to the first letter, but a little briefer and perhaps a little more brusque:

**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 in the whole of
Achaia:
Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. {2 Cor 1:1-2
RSV}**

You will notice several emphases there. Chief among them is the fact that Paul says that he is not the representative of the churches; he is the Lord's apostle. His authority does not come from the church, or any members of the church, but from the Lord himself. This was a very strong point with Paul. In these days when we are hearing a lot of teaching about how wrong Paul was in certain areas, and how he cannot be trusted in certain of his writings, and how he even said things that we must reject today, we need to understand anew that the apostle himself said that his authority came directly from the Lord. What he had learned and what he taught was taught to him by Jesus himself. "The Lord appeared to me," Paul says; "There were many visions and revelations from Christ," he says, so that he did not learn his doctrine or anything that he wrote from the other apostles. He learned it from the Lord directly. When you read Paul you are reading what Jesus said to him; therefore it comes with the full authority of the Lord Jesus himself.

In Verse 1 you will notice too that the letter is sent to more than just the church at Corinth. It is sent to "all the saints who are in the whole of Achaia." Achaia was the ancient name for Greece as we know it today (except for Macedonia in the north). All the Grecian mainland, the Peloponnesus, the islands, and so on, are part of Achaia. Therefore, there were many churches to whom this letter came, and we, even in the 20th century, can rightly be included as one of them.

As in all of Paul's letters, he offers them "grace" and "peace." Now these are important words; they are more than a mere salutation. "Grace" is a word that gathers up all that God is ready to do for us and give to us. All of God's supply comes by grace. Therefore, anything God gives you -- love, joy, peace, forgiveness, help, wisdom -- is part of the supply of grace, and the result of that supply in your life, and in mine, is to be peace. A heart that is resting, a heart that is confident that God is at work is calm within and is serene and untroubled of spirit.

Now, that is the way Christians are to live. This whole of the New Testament is addressed to that end. It is not just doctrine about how to go to heaven; it is teaching on how to handle life, how to cope with pressures and stresses, and how to face the difficulties and dangers of life. Therefore, the constant supply of God is to bring peace to our troubled hearts; we are to live at rest.

Now having said that, the apostle plunges right into his first subject -- why Christians suffer.

**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 also. If you are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation; and if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which you experience when you patiently endure the same sufferings that we suffer. Our hope for you is unshaken; for we know that as you share in our sufferings, you will also share in our comfort. {2 Cor 1:3-7
RSV}**

Two words, *affliction*, and *comfort*, stand out repeatedly in that passage; and the two always go together:

Affliction is what we today would probably call pressure, or stress. It is what many of you, perhaps, are feeling right now when you think about going to work tomorrow. It is whatever ties knots in your stomach and makes you feel anxious or troubled about what lies ahead. It is what makes for hectic days and for sleepless nights. It gnaws continually at your mind and threatens your well-being; it refuses to go away and leave you alone; it depresses you and darkens the future with forebodings of disaster. Now that is pressure, stress, and we all live in it.

But they were not any different in the 1st century. They lived under pressure and stress just as we do. Paul experienced it as well, but along with it he experienced the comfort of God.

Now, *comfort* is more than just a little cheer or friendly word of encouragement. Paul does not mean that. The word basically means "to strengthen." What Paul experienced was the strengthening of God to give him a peaceful, restful spirit to meet the pressure and the stress with which he lived. That is what Christianity is all about. "Strengthen," in the Greek, is a word that is used also for the Holy Spirit. Your Bible frequently calls him "The Comforter," but really it is "The Strengthener," the one who strengthens you. This is God's provision for affliction.

It is amazing to me how many thousands of Christians are dreading facing their daily lives because they feel pressured and stressful and tied up in knots, and yet they never avail themselves of God's provision for that kind of pressure. These words are not addressed to us merely to be used for religious problems. They are to be used for any kind of stress, any kind of problems. God's comfort, God's strengthening, is available for whatever puts you under stress.

I say that thousands do not avail themselves of it. The reason I say that is because they give every evidence that they do just like anybody else around who is not a Christian at all -- they try to escape their pressures. Or, if they are Christian, they are praying that they will be rescued from their pressures, that the problems will be taken away. You can always tell how ill-taught Christians really are when you hear their prayers. Invariably they pray to have their problems taken away, or to be completely shielded from them. All their hopes are for escape, somehow, and all their reactions are either worry or a murmuring, complaining spirit, anger and fear. Now, that is not Christianity in action.

Listen to Paul: "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ." He praises God for the circumstances of his life even though there are afflictions. He calls God the "Father of mercies and God of all comfort." He sees God's hand as having sent these very things into his life, therefore he never prays to have them removed so that he might escape from them. He sees them as opportunities for the release of the strength of God.

That suggests the first reason why Christians go through suffering.

A lady said to me a couple of weeks ago, "I know we are supposed to suffer as Christians, but why does it hurt so much?"

Well, there are four reasons in this passage to answer that question:

First, it hurts because that is the way you discover what God can do. How are you ever going to find the comfort of God, the strengthening of God, if you are not under any pressure or stress? It takes that to discover what God can do, and God will keep on sending it until you begin to understand that, and begin to count on him, and find the release from within that he provides. Do not try to run from it -- like everybody else is doing. Face up to it, and do as Paul does, by seeing these as opportunities to understand and experience anew the strengthening of God.

Notice how Paul puts it in Verse 5:

For as we share abundantly in Christ's sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too. {2 Cor 1:5 RSV}

The strengthening is exactly equal to the pressure. That is a Christian lifestyle; that is what every Christian ought to be able to experience.

"Well," you say, "I know all about that. I've tried that many times and it doesn't work for me. It works for you; it works for all the others I talk to, but it won't work for me."

I am always amazed at how many Christian exceptions go to church! I remember one minister who had a

secretary who was always cheerful no matter how much she was going through. He said to her one day, "I wish I had your faith and optimism." She replied, "Well, you would if you'd read your Bible right." "What do you mean?" he said. "I read it in Greek and in English." She said, "Well, you don't read it right, because Paul says, 'Glory in tribulation.' Now g-l-o-r-y doesn't spell *growl*," she said. "When you get tribulations you growl, you just complain all the time, but Scripture says glory in tribulations, welcome them as challenges, as opportunities, as occasions to discover the strengthening of God."

The truly Christian reaction to troubles and pressures is to see them all as sent by a loving God who is still in control, who will limit them as he promised so they will not be more than you are able to bear. He has sent them deliberately in order that you might discover the inner strengthening that can keep your heart at peace, no matter what the pressure is. That is the first reason why they are sent.

A second reason for suffering is found in Verse 4:

... 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. {2 Cor 1:4 RSV}

I think the older you grow as a Christian the more this becomes true. Your sufferings are not sent for you so much as they are for someone who is watching you, and seeing how you handle the pressure that you are going through. Older Christians easily forget that younger Christians are watching them all the time. When we give way to complaining and murmuring about our circumstances we are teaching these younger Christians, teaching them as if we sat down with them and wagged our fingers at them, that God is faithless, that the Scriptures are not true, that we can get no adequate support for what we are going through. When we have sufferings sent to us they are often sent so that others watching us will know that they can be sustained. That is what Paul says to this church. "When I suffer," he says, "it is for your comfort; it is that you might see what God can do, and, what he can take me through, he can take you through. Therefore, as you watch me, you will see how to handle this."

The lesson to learn there is set forth so clearly, in Verse 6:

If we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation; and if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which you experience when you patiently endure ... {2 Cor 1:6a RSV}

Patiently endure, trusting God that he is in charge and he is taking you through this. He is not taking it away, he is taking you through it, so you patiently wait, rejoicing that the end is in sight; this too shall pass.

Someone once said his favorite Scripture was, "And it came to pass." It did not come to stay, it came to pass.

This will pass, you will be strengthened by it, therefore, patiently endure and discover the strength that God can give.

Paul then goes on to say this is an encouragement to him, in Verse 7:

Our hope for you is unshaken; for we know that as you share in our sufferings, you will also share in our comfort. {2 Cor 1:7 RSV}

I confess that oftentimes I wish I could spare younger Christians trials and pressures. I feel this way about my children. I would love to be able to deliver them from the pressure, from the test, but I soon learned that I cannot, even as much as I want to, and it would not be good for them if I could. They need to experience the suffering so they can also experience the comfort.

So Paul says to these Corinthians, "Our hope for you is unshaken. We've heard you are going through trials and difficulties and pressures and persecutions, but we're not disturbed. We know that if you share our sufferings you will also share our comfort, and the comfort is worth the suffering always," So he encourages them to go through this.

Then notice that, in this remarkable interdependence of the Body, we are encouraged to share with one another what we have gone through. This is why Christians ought to share their problems, their struggles, their failures and their successes with each other, freely and openly -- thus we encourage one another.

I was reading an article by Chuck Colson not long ago in which he said that he often asked himself why he had to go to prison as a result of Watergate. Legally, there was no reason why he should have been put in prison. Nevertheless, he ended up there, and, for a long time, he struggled with that. Why did he have to suffer the humiliation, the shame, the disgrace, and the discontent of prison? But then the answer began to come. While he was in prison he learned what prisoners go through. He saw these forgotten men and women of American society, the awful injustices they often face, the difficulty, even the impossibility of recovering themselves, and there was born in him a great sense of compassion and a desire to help. Since he has gotten out of prison, he has devoted his whole life and ministry to going back in and helping these men. Now wonderful stories are beginning to come out from prisons all over America of dramatic changes in human lives because Chuck Colson was sent to prison.

That is why God sends us into difficulties at times. Not always for our sake, but someone else's sake. We have been brought along and matured to the point where we can take it, and rejoice in it, and handle it rightly. When we do, what a lesson we are giving to those who are following along behind.

Now, still a third reason for Christian affliction is given in Verses 8-10:

For we do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, of the affliction we experienced in Asia; for we were so utterly, unbearably crushed that we despaired of life itself. Why, 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 so deadly a peril, and he is delivering us; on him we have set our hope that he will deliver us again. {2 Cor 1:8-10 RSV}

We do not know what this was that Paul went through. Some think it was a severe illness, and perhaps it was. Others, and I am among them, link this with the record in Acts 19 in the story of the great riot that broke out in Ephesus, and the threat to the lives of all the Christians in that city. This was a time when it appeared the whole Christian cause had collapsed in Ephesus, and all that Paul had labored on for years was falling apart. He must have gone through unusual emotional stress and physical threat during this time. He tells us that he was "utterly, unbearably crushed." Now that is the lowest ebb the human spirit can come to, the uttermost sense of despair. "Why," he said, "we felt that we had received the sentence of death." It was absolutely hopeless; he had given up; there was no way out. He could see himself losing his life at this point. But then he adds, "but that was to make us rely not on ourselves."

One of the major reasons God sends us suffering is to break the stubborn spirit of self-will within us that insists on trying to work it all out by our own resources, or run to some other human resource, or in some way refuse to acknowledge that we need divine help.

I find this in myself. I struggle sometimes. I do not want to pray about a certain matter because, if I pray about it, that is admitting that I cannot handle it myself. Paul must have struggled the same way.

Here is this mighty apostle, who so plainly and clearly understood the principles of how God operates, and still he had to be put through a time of testing like this that he might again learn not to rely on himself. You read the story of Saul of Tarsus, that brilliant young Pharisee, and you see a self-reliant young man who is confident that he has got the world by the tail and there is nothing he cannot do with that brilliant mind, that ability and logic, that strong, powerful personality. He felt he could handle anything, and again and again God had to break that, to put him in circumstances he could not handle, that he might learn not to rely on himself, but "on God who raises the dead," the God for whom no cause is ever hopeless, who can bring life out of death.

That is the major reason, I think, for suffering. It is the pressure that is designed to destroy our determined stubbornness.

But do you see how Paul comes to a knowledge of the true Christian lifestyle?

- God delivered us -- in the past;
- He is delivering us -- in the present;
- He will deliver us -- in the future.

Paul has learned to trust God to take him through whatever life throws at him, no matter what it is. Now that is a Christian lifestyle. It is about time that some of us Christians quit acting like the world around us,

- constantly complaining,
- and murmuring,
- and griping

about everything that comes our way. We should see these as opportunities to display an alternative lifestyle, and release in our own lives a quiet power that will keep our hearts at peace, because we know that an adequate God is handling the situation; he will take us safely through.

Then a final reason for suffering is given in Verse 11:

You also must help us by prayer, so that many will give thanks on our behalf for the blessing granted us in answer to many prayers. {2 Cor 1:11 RSV}

Once again, suffering is sent to us to show us that we are not individuals living all alone in life. We are members of a family, we are members of a Body, and we need each other. When you have a difficulty or a trial, share it with others so that they can pray with you, for many prayers will bring great deliverance. That is what that verse says. In answer to many prayers, God will send a blessing which will awaken thanksgiving in many, many hearts. Paul says, therefore, "You must help us by prayer," so that there will be great thanksgiving for the great blessing that comes from many prayers.

That is the reason for requests for prayer, for sharing our needs with one another, and for enlisting the aid of others in praying us through times of pressure, as we ought to be ready to respond to those who are going through pressure with prayer for them ourselves.

Now that is the way the Christian community ought to respond to stress and pressure, to difficulties and trials and disasters.

God has sent them.

God has allowed them to come as opportunities that you might learn again this amazing secret of inner strength, inner comfort, inner peace that can keep your heart quiet, even though you are going through troubled times.

Prayer

Our Father, we confess to you that we often are truculent about our difficulties. We resent them, we do not want to accept them, we want them removed, we do not want to have them come to us at all, we get rebellious, and we complain. Lord, help us to stop our griping, and our grouching, and believe that you have sent these to deliberately show us a better way out, a peaceful way, so that our hearts are at rest because we are counting on a living God to do something that we cannot do. Help us to trust, and be at rest, and at peace. In the name of Jesus we ask, Amen.

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