

Relationships: The Integrity Factor **2 Corinthians 1:3-12; 2:14-17**

I. The Reality of Suffering. 2 Cor. 1:8-9

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 Strengtheners," the one who strengthens you. This is God's provision for affliction.

It is amazing 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.

The reason 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.

II. Our Resource in the Midst of Suffering. 2 Cor. 1:3

Divorce One wonders what will become of a society in which certain forms of suffering are avoided gratuitously, in keeping with middle-class ideals. I have in mind a society in which a marriage that is perceived as unbearable, quickly and smoothly ends in divorce; after divorce no scars remain; relations between generations are dissolved as quickly as possible, without a struggle, without a trace; periods of mourning are 'sensibly' short; with haste the handicapped and sick are removed from the house and the dead from the mind. If changing marriage partners happens as readily as trading in an old car on a new one, then the experiences that one had in the unsuccessful relationships remain unproductive. From such suffering nothing is learned and nothing is to be learned. —Dorothy Soelle in *Suffering* See: Acts 26:22-23; 2 Corinthians 1:5-7; Philippians 1:29; Hebrews 12:11-16; 1 Peter 4:12-16

III. The Result of our Suffering. 2 Cor. 1:4-7, 11-12

She Cried—Then I Did Prema limped into the South India room where I waited to counsel teenage girls, her brown eyes full of tears. I learned that when her devout Hindu family heard that she'd become a Christian, they beat her severely and forbade her to attend after-school Bible club meetings. Still, the 13-year-old studied the Scripture whenever possible. "Should I obey my parents and continue to wear the vermilion dot on my forehead [symbolizing allegiance to the god Shiva]?" she asked. "Or should I refuse and risk another beating?" She raised her sari and exposed a leg badly swollen from beating. I was stunned. I wanted "living for Jesus" to mean

goodness, wholeness and laughter. I fumbled through some answer emphasizing the Lord's knowledge of her heart. Then I went back to my Indian host family and cried. On a short-term mission, I had to wrestle with the realities of being a Christian and an Indian. I still wanted to share Jesus, but I now knew I'd have to take off my own culture-tinted glasses and put on a different shade of lenses. —Linda Olson, quoted in *Men of Integrity*, Vol. 3, no. 5. See: 2 Corinthians 1:3-11; 1 Peter 1:6-7; 4:12-14

IV. The Responsibility of our Suffering. 2 Cor. 2:14-17

Adoniram Judson's Scars Adoniram Judson, the renowned missionary to Burma, endured untold hardships trying to reach the lost for Christ. For 7 heartbreaking years he suffered hunger and privation. During this time he was thrown into Ava Prison, and for 17 months was subjected to almost incredible mistreatment. As a result, for the rest of his life he carried the ugly marks made by the chains and iron shackles which had cruelly bound him. Undaunted, upon his release he asked for permission to enter another province where he might resume preaching the Gospel. The godless ruler indignantly denied his request, saying "My people are not fools enough to listen to anything a missionary might SAY, but I fear they might be impressed by your SCARS and turn to your religion!" See: Romans 8:16-18; 2 Corinthians 1:6-11; 2 Timothy 2:9-10