

The Christians' Sufferings And Afflictions And Their Purpose.

Text: 2 Cor 11:19 - 12:9

Suggested Hymns:
413, 267, 408, 210, 404

- 1) What Are The Christians' Sufferings And Afflictions?
- 2) What Is The Purpose Of These Sufferings And Afflictions?

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is 2 Corinthians 11:19–12:9, ¹⁹ *For you put up with fools gladly, since you yourselves are wise!* ²⁰ *For you put up with it if one brings you into bondage, if one devours you, if one takes from you, if one exalts himself, if one strikes you on the face.* ²¹ *To our shame I say that we were too weak for that! But in whatever anyone is bold — I speak foolishly — I am bold also.* ²² *Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they the seed of Abraham? So am I.*

²³ *Are they ministers of Christ? — I speak as a fool — I am more: in labors more abundant, in stripes above measure, in prisons more frequently, in deaths often.* ²⁴ *From the Jews five times I received forty stripes minus one.* ²⁵ *Three times I was beaten with rods; once I was stoned; three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I have been in the deep;*

²⁶ *in journeys often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils of my own countrymen, in perils of the Gentiles, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren;*

²⁷ *in weariness and toil, in sleeplessness often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness —* ²⁸ *besides the other things, what comes upon me daily: my deep concern for all the churches.*

²⁹ *Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to stumble, and I do not burn with indignation?* ³⁰ *If I must boast, I will boast in the things which concern my infirmity.* ³¹ *The God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who is blessed forever, knows that I am not lying.*

³² *In Damascus the governor, under Aretas the king, was guarding the city of the Damascenes with a garrison, desiring to arrest me; ³³ but I was let down in a basket through a window in the wall, and escaped from his hands.*

¹ It is doubtless not profitable for me to boast. I will come to visions and revelations of the Lord: ² I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago — whether in the body I do not know, or whether out of the body I do not know, God knows — such a one was caught up to the third heaven. ³ And I know such a man — whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows — ⁴ how he was caught up into Paradise and heard inexpressible words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter.

⁵ Of such a one I will boast; yet of myself I will not boast, except in my infirmities. ⁶ For though I might desire to boast, I will not be a fool; for I will speak the truth. But I refrain, lest anyone should think of me above what he sees me to be or hears from me. ⁷ And lest I should be exalted above measure by the abundance of the revelations, a thorn in the flesh was given to me, a messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I be exalted above measure.

⁸ Concerning this thing I pleaded with the Lord three times that it might depart from me. ⁹ And He said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. (NKJV)

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

In this Epistle Paul has a great deal to say about his sufferings and afflictions. We would think that Paul would have had a smooth path before him when God made him His chosen vessel to proclaim His precious Gospel in different parts of the world.

But what a hard lot Paul had in life ever since his wonderful conversion on the way from Jerusalem to Damascus! His life was a continuous chain of sufferings and afflictions, and church history informs us that finally he was beheaded in the city of Rome.

Still, how patiently this Apostle endured everything, never swerving, never murmuring, never suggesting or hinting in the slightest way that he was ill repaid for his labours in Christ, or that he had to bear and suffer too much.

He even glories in his sufferings and praises the Lord for these sufferings and afflictions. He sees that all things are done under the ruling of divine Providence, and that all things must work together for good to those who love God.

How unreservedly Paul puts to shame those Christians who are found ready to give up everything, even their faith, and their hope, and their trust in God, as soon as affliction is at hand and the time has come for them to suffer!

There are many who believe for a while, but in time of temptation fall away. As long as all things go well with them, they are model Christians, they believe in Christ with all sincerity, they find comfort against their sin in God's grace in Christ, they joyfully confess their Saviour before men, they praise and thank God with their lips and with their lives, and they abound in all good works.

But let evil times come, let afflictions beset them, let sufferings fall to their lot, and how quickly these Christians change, how despondent they grow, how soon they begin to doubt and to despair, fearing lest the Word of God may not be true and lest their faith be but a delusion.

And if in such trying times, which may come to the best of Christians, they need only to hold fast to the Word of God, and come to church, and read their Bible, they would certainly be restored again and not lose faith altogether.

But how many cast away the only anchor which holds in the storm of suffering and affliction and make a shipwreck concerning faith! But blessed are those who hear the Word of God and keep it when sufferings and afflictions come!

For the Word of God will not only assure them of the fact that Christians must endure sufferings and afflictions, but will uphold them also in their trials and let them see that there is a divine purpose to these trials.

Let us consider *The Christians' Sufferings And Afflictions And Their Purpose*. May the Lord bless our meditation.

1. What Are The Christians' Sufferings And Afflictions?

What are the Christians' sufferings and afflictions? Today we do not want to know what troubles fall to the lot of all people whether they be Christians or unbelievers. We do not inquire about the common ills of mankind.

But what we want to know is, what are the sufferings and afflictions that come to the Christians alone? Paul's example teaches us that. From our text we see that he was attacked by the world, assailed by the devil, and tempted of his own flesh.

He was attacked by the world, and the world caused him suffering which he could have escaped had he not confessed Christ before men. He was hated everywhere for Christ's sake. The Jews hated him. The Gentiles hated him. The false teachers hated him.

Hear how he answers those false teachers in Corinth who worked against him in the congregation! He says: "²² *Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they the seed of Abraham? So am I.*

²³ *Are they ministers of Christ? — I speak as a fool — I am more: in labors more abundant, in stripes above measure, in prisons more frequently, in deaths often.* ²⁴ *From the Jews five times I received forty stripes minus one.* ²⁵ *Three times I was beaten with rods; once I was stoned; three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I have been in the deep;*

²⁶ *in journeys often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils of my own countrymen, in perils of the Gentiles, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren;*

²⁷ *in weariness and toil, in sleeplessness often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness"*

What a long list of sufferings! And to these the Apostle adds an incident to which he swears because, as it seems, the false prophets in Corinth denied it. He says, "³¹ *The God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who is blessed forever, knows that I am not lying.*

³² *In Damascus the governor, under Aretas the king, was guarding the city of the Damascenes with a garrison, desiring to arrest me; ³³ but I was let down in a basket through a window in the wall, and escaped from his hands."*

This was Paul's first experience in the Lord's vineyard after his wonderful conversion. Scarcely had he begun to preach Christ in the synagogue at Damascus when the world turned against him. They watched for him at all the gates, and sought to kill him as we are told in the book of the Acts.

He could have led a life of ease had he remained a Pharisee in Jerusalem, but the confession of Christ brought him numerous hardships and sufferings and persecutions on the part of the world.

And are not these the sufferings of the Christians to this day? Does not the world hate us and persecute us and speak all manner of evil against us falsely for Christ's sake? Do not be surprised if you are held in contempt, if you are sneered at because you refuse to go inappropriate venues, if you are made to suffer because you keep yourself separate from the children of this world, if you are injured in your profession or trade, if you are held up to ridicule and scorn, or if otherwise you must suffer for the name of Christ.

Do not be surprised if people point at you in your distress and say: "*See what good it does him, to pray and to go to church.*" This is what you must expect as a Christian, to be attacked by the world, to bear sufferings caused by the children of this world as was the case with St. Paul.

Paul was assailed by the devil also. He says, "*7 And lest I should be exalted above measure by the abundance of the revelations, a thorn in the flesh was given to me, a messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I be exalted above measure.*"

Paul was suffering from some physical ailment which the devil caused, an ailment which was very annoying. We do not know what this ailment was which he calls a thorn in the flesh. But it must have been painful, trying, and annoying, and he recognised therein the hand of Satan who sought thereby to interfere with his work and to fill his soul with doubt, misbelief, and despair.

He was assailed by the devil, and that caused suffering. And if you are a Christian, you can depend on it that the devil will assail you likewise, though God may not permit him to smite you bodily as in the case of Paul and Job.

Where do those evil thoughts come from which suddenly enter into your mind and urge you to distrust God, or to despair of your salvation, to doubt the forgiveness of your sins, or to surrender to the temptations of sin? Are they not suggested by the devil, who as a roaring lion, walks about, seeking whom he may devour?

And what suffering is caused to the Christian when in the least thing he gives way to Satan and finds afterwards how he was ensnared and what a great wrong

he did! What pain of the soul and bitter remorse! In fact, is not the devil at the bottom of every evil afflicting us, injuring us in body and soul wherever he can, so that daily we must pray to God to let His holy angels be with us that the wicked foe may have no power over us ?

Besides the devil and the world, there is our own flesh to cause us sufferings and afflictions. Paul, the great Apostle, was not free from weakness of the flesh. He says, “²⁹ *Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to stumble, and I do not burn with indignation?*”

Repeatedly he speaks of his infirmities in this Epistle. He says, ³⁰ *If I must boast, I will boast in the things which concern my infirmity, and of myself I will not boast, except in my infirmities.*

In the Epistle to the Romans he says, ¹⁸ *For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) nothing good dwells; for to will is present with me, but how to perform what is good I do not find.*¹

Paul realised that he had to blame himself for many of those sufferings and afflictions which he had to endure. And must we not often blame ourselves when we have to suffer? Must we not admit that our sufferings have been caused by nothing else but our weakness, our indifference, our carelessness, our lack of prudence and foresight, our natural sinful disposition, and our own heart which is evil and averse to that which is good?

Note, then, that these are the sufferings and afflictions which us Christians must endure in this world. We are attacked by the world, assailed by the devil, and tempted of our own flesh.

2. What Is The Purpose Of These Sufferings And Afflictions?

Let us consider in the second place what the purpose of these sufferings and afflictions are.

All things are done under the ruling of divine Providence. Not a sparrow falls to the ground, and not a hair drops from our head without the will of God.² There is a divine purpose in everything, and when sufferings and afflictions come, they are always for a certain purpose. And why does God often afflict His dear children and let those suffer whom He loves?

In the first place, that they might learn humility and remain in the narrow way that leads to eternal life. Nothing is more apt to cause the eternal ruin of a Christian than pride, arrogance, self-assertion; and the greater the grace which God bestows on him, the greater the danger to fall into this very sin.

What an amount of grace did God bestow on St. Paul! Speaking of himself, he says, “² *I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago — whether in the body I do not know, or whether out of the body I do not know, God knows — such a one was caught up to the third heaven.*” ³ *And I know such a man — whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows —* ⁴ *how he was caught up into Paradise and heard inexpressible words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter.”*

What a wonderful vision must Paul have had! What a wonderful revelation was made to him! But what was done that Paul should not exalt himself and should not think more of himself than he ought to think on account of these revelations? He says, “⁷ *And lest I should be exalted above measure by the abundance of the revelations, a thorn in the flesh was given to me, a messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I be exalted above measure.*”

God sends His dear children whom He loves, with whom He means well always, various sufferings and afflictions to keep them from pride, to make them humble, to make them aware of the fact that they are but damnable sinners before their God, so that they should remain in the narrow way that leads to eternal life, and not exalt themselves and come to eternal ruin. The Apostle therefore says in 1 Corinthians 11:32, that *when we are judged, we are chastened by the Lord, that we may not be condemned with the world.* This is the first purpose which our sufferings and afflictions serve.

A second purpose is, that we should not seek our own glory in what we have done for Christ, but glorify God alone and cling to His grace. Paul was forced by the actions of the false prophets in Corinth to speak of himself, and to tell all what he did and suffered for Christ. But how reluctant he feels to do so!

Paul intersperses his account with such exclamations as, *I speak foolishly; I speak as a fool; ³⁰ *If I must boast, I will boast in the things which concern my infirmity.*”³ And then he says, ⁶ *For though I might desire to boast, I will not**

be a fool; for I will speak the truth. But I refrain, lest anyone should think of me above what he sees me to be or hears from me.

And he concludes *“Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me.”* What kept the holy Apostle from boasting, and induced him to glorify God alone and to cling to His grace? The very sufferings and afflictions which he had to endure. Behind of these sufferings and afflictions he saw his own infirmities which partly caused them. And what was there to boast of when he saw his own infirmities, and the sufferings which they caused?

See, then, this is a third purpose for which God sends us sufferings and afflictions. They reveal to us that we are but frail creatures, that we are nothing before God and that He is everything. How can you boast of your deeds in the kingdom of God when your sufferings and afflictions testify to your own infirmities and to your weakness?

The Apostle says, *And what do you have that you did not receive?*⁴ And how graciously our God comforts us in our sufferings and afflictions! Paul suffered from a physical ailment and prayed to be relieved. Three times he prayed to the Lord that it might depart from him. And what was the response?

God said *“My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness.”* And so you, my dear Christian friends, may have an ailment from which you desire to be relieved, but God deems it best for you to keep it. *“My grace is sufficient for you”* He says. God is saying to you, *“Do not be troubled about your bodily ailment. Do not think that I do not mean well with you because you must suffer. You are my dear child in spite of all the harm which Satan does to you. My grace is sufficient for you.”*

God says in Isaiah 43:1, *“Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by your name; You are Mine.* I had my beloved Son suffer and die on the cross in whom you believe, and for my dear Son’s sake, I have forgiven you all your sins. And do not be afraid that your sufferings might become unbearable *“for My strength is made perfect in weakness.”*

Nothing more will be imposed on you than what you are able to bear, and the more your sufferings increase, the more strength will I put into you that with

patience you can bear everything, until all your trials are ended and you obtain the victory.

May the Lord grant us all, His grace that with Christian fortitude we hold out and endure in our sufferings and afflictions, and when all our trials and cares are ended, we shall perceive that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which is revealed in us. Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep our hearts and minds, in Christ Jesus. Amen.

¹ Romans 7:18

² Matthew 10:29-31

³ 2 Corinthians 11:30

⁴ 1 Corinthians 4:7