

*The Ministry of Suffering*  
*II Corinthians 1:3-11*

The question about suffering come up in every generation, Ever since the book of Job was written, men have been crying out "Why?" when hard times come, Only a fool would pretend that the answers are simple, They are not, Thinking people struggle with the mystery that surrounds suffering in the world.

However, some things are obvious, It is obvious that much of the suffering in the world in caused by the folly of man. Man misuses his God-given freedom to his own hurt, He tries to defy the laws that govern health and safety, and in the end he pays the price. He tries to ignore the laws that govern personal relationships, and in the end he pays the price, I must admit that most of the experiences of suffering that I have known in life could be traced to acts of folly on my part.

It is also obvious that some suffering is the result of the faithfulness of man. The experience of suffering in the life of Paul in our text was caused by this, His steadfast pursuit of the will of God for his life just created circumstances in which suffered at the hand of others. Those who would live godly must know that there is often a price to be paid in a fallen world like ours. This is the world that crucified the best man who ever lived! The basic attitude of the world toward God has not changed one bit. The world is still controlled by a hostile attitude toward God. When you become identified with God in your walk, they will become hostile toward you. Whatever the nature or cause of the suffering, God intends that the suffering have a ministry in the life of His people. He does not permit anything to come into their lives that cannot be ultimately made a minister for good. In our text, we get some helpful insights into the ministry of suffering when the suffering is the result of our faithfulness. However, I believe the three insights I want to share with you ran safely be applied to all suffering whatever the source, Consider them with me.

***I. SUFFERING IS A MINISTRY OF REVELATION***

This is in the background of this passage. We have already considered it in the part in an earlier message. The experience of suffering that had come to the life of Paul had brought some new revelations of the nature of God to him. In the experience of suffering, he had personally discovered that God is "the Father of Mercies, and the God of All Comfort." He may have known this theoretically before this experience of suffering, but now he knew it in the depths of his being. God had been revealed to Him in his experience as the Father of mercy, and as the God of all comfort.

Every experience of suffering is a new opportunity to know God. Do you remember the beatitude of Jesus, "Blessed are they that mourn, for they shall be comforted," The difficulties of life have a way of bringing to life mourning, The roars that come with the experiences of suffering clear the eyes so that we can

see the reality of God. Seeing God as He really is becomes the comfort in such an experience.

The experience of Job demonstrates this, He was a man who knew God before the ordeal of suffering ever began, but when it was over he knew God better, He knew things about the greatness of God that he had never imagined, He himself declared, "My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you." His knowledge of God had been greatly increased by the experience of suffering, It can be so in your life. If you are in the midst of a time of trouble, God wants to reveal Himself in the midst of these troubles. If you will turn to Him, and not away from Him or against Him, you will find Him in the midst or the darkness. This is basic. Suffering can become the occasion of knowing God better. Surely anything that brings me into a deeper knowledge of the Lord God in my life is a thing for which I should give praise to God.

## ***II. SUFFERING HAS A MINISTRY OF PREPARATION***

This is a truth that is clearly stated in this experience. Paul says of God that He is the God "who comforts us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort those who are in any trouble, by the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted of God." The experience of suffering leads to an experience of God's comfort which prepares a person to cooperate with God in bringing comfort to those who suffer. If the person had not suffered, they would not have known personally this comfort of God. If they had known the comfort of God, they would not be in a position to help the person who is in the midst of great suffering.

Have you found this to be true? There is a world of difference between trying to encourage people on the basis of what you have read in a book, and on the basis of what you have experienced of God in the difficulties of life. I remember reading an autobiographical statement by the great Spurgeon in one of his sermons. He had been through a time of deep depression, which was not uncommon in his life. In the midst of the depression by the Lord, a man came to him for pastoral counsel. The man was in the dark experience of depression. Because of his recent experience, the pastor was able to offer good counsel and help. It was Spurgeon's observation that unknown to him, God had been preparing him for a ministry all the while. It is my conviction that there is something of this in every experience of suffering.

A friend of mine, Dr. Oscar Thompson of Southwestern Seminary, has experienced this in a bout with cancer. What appeared at first to be the worst of things has opened up to him whole new avenues of ministry. He has become the counselor of cancer patients from all over the nation. From what her friends tell me, the same was true of Mrs. Nancy Higgins right here in this church.

Now we need to be clear about what is involved in this. It is not that your experience of suffering becomes the basis of ministry. May the Lord deliver us from those who never tire of telling us about all of the difficulties in life. Rather it is what you have experienced of God in the midst of the suffering that becomes the basis of your ministry. You are better able to help people not because of what you have gone through, but because of what you have learned about God through what you have gone through.

This makes it important that you let God reveal everything He can to you through the experience of life. What you learn will be important at some later date as you meet suffering souls along the way.

### ***III. SUFFERING HAS A MINISTRY OF DESTRUCTION***

You cannot help but wonder about the nature of the Apostles' sufferings that prompted the writing of this passage. Actually, it was not the suffering that prompted the offering of this praise to God, but what he learned about God and himself in the experience. For this he would always be grateful.

Whatever the experience was, it was extremely severe. "For we do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, of our trouble which came to us in Asia: that we were burdened beyond measure, above strength, so that we despaired of life." Whatever the situation was, Paul thought that it would mean death for him. All of the evidence seemed to indicate that he was going to lose his life. He adds, "But we had the sentence of death in ourselves, that we should not trust in ourselves but in God who raises from the dead."

This statement of Paul contains a great principle. The principle is that before a man can rely upon God with the kind of trust that he ought, he must quit relying upon himself. Sinful nature being what it is, it is hard for us to come to the place that we rely upon the Lord God alone in faith. Paul's experience was that the sufferings that befell him destroyed his trust in himself, made him fully aware of his own human limitations, and this brought him to the place that he could trust in God as the One who raises men from the dead. So our sufferings have a ministry of destruction. What raises our sufferings destroy in us needs to be destroyed. Any time we are relying upon anyone or anything except the God of life, we are cheating ourselves and sinning against God. He so constructed life that it should be lived in reliance upon Him day by day.

Do you have difficulty at this point? I do. I have difficulty maintaining this type of life. God will allow an experience of difficulty to come my way, and I will be aware that I am limited, and that I cannot do everything; that God alone is my hope. Out of this experience, I will turn to the Lord as my only hope, and He will prove to be faithful and adequate. But if I am not careful, I will soon

slip back into the same old pattern, and God will have to repeat the process. I want to learn this truth well, so I will not have to learn it again.

If we are not careful, though, we will miss this ministry of suffering. It is so easy for us to refuse to learn our limitations, to resist coming to the end of ourselves. We may determine to prove that we are not finite beings like others. We can just conquer in our own strength whatever comes our way. So we miss out of the joy of learning the adequacy and the delivering power of our God.

### ***Conclusion***

The application of this text can be made to us as a church. This church has gone through some difficult times. Has God been trying to reveal Himself to us in a greater way? Has God been trying to prepare us for a greater ministry? Has God been trying to destroy some things in us that have been a hindrance? I would suspect that He has. If we will respond to the things that have happened to us as we ought, we should be better prepared to do the work of God than ever before.

There is a special application to be made in your life. Do you dare make it?