

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

You've all been through trials and difficulties. We live in a fallen and sinful world. So most if not all are going through trials right now... some fairly trivial. Some of them larger than life. Sometimes the pressure seems like it will kill us. Sometimes the trial itself could kill us. What we need in our times of trials and difficulties is God's deliverance. So let's talk about this today: Why does God allow such trials into our lives? What hope and comfort do we have at such times? Who can give us the help and support we need? Finally, who will deliver us? The answers are in today's lesson:

2 Corinthians 1:8-11 We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about the hardships we suffered in the province of Asia. We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired even of life. Indeed, in our hearts we felt the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead. He has delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us. On him we have set our hope that he will continue to deliver us, as you help us by your prayers. Then many will give thanks on our behalf for the gracious favor granted us in answer to the prayers of many.

Paul, in our reading, is telling the believers that lived in Corinth about the hardships suffered in the province of Asia. He wants them to know. And yet he doesn't provide any detail about those hardships... which leaves us wondering what he's talking about! Well, the province of Asia in the Roman Empire has the city of Ephesus as its capital. Well, before writing his second letter to the Corinthians, Paul had spent three years in Ephesus. So it's likely he's referring to something that happened during his time there.

Shortly before Paul left the city, a riot broke out. He was the cause of that riot. The mob wanted to kill him. Why? Paul worked hard in Ephesus for three years teaching the people about Jesus Christ. And he seemed to have success. The very fact that he stayed for such a very long time indicates there was lots of mission work for him to do. The Gospel was taking root in the hearts of many.

Ephesus was known for its idolatry... particularly its worship of the goddess Artemis... sometimes called the Lady of Ephesus. A massive, elaborate temple was built in Ephesus in honor of Artemis. In fact, the temple was one of the Seven Wonders of the World. Tourists and idol worshipers came from great distances to see the temple and worship there. Ephesus developed quite a tourist industry. In particular, silversmiths in the town made quite a nice living. They made silver shrines of Artemis that sold like hotcakes to the townspeople and tourists. Well, the Gospel was so taking root in the province of Asia and in Ephesus that these silversmiths were feeling the pinch. The market for silver shrines was drying up quickly as more and more people came to believe the Artemis was no goddess at all, and the salvation was found in Christ Jesus alone.

So, the men started an uproar. They stirred up a big mob in the city. They seized a couple of Paul's traveling companions and gathered in a large theatre. Paul wanted to address them, but he was convinced otherwise. You can't reason with an angry mob.

Now let's pause there. Do you see the danger Paul was in? Have you ever seen video clips of mob scenes? It's downright terrifying. When mobs of angry people get together, they do things that individuals would never do. They throw rocks, turn over cars, light fires, loot stores. And yes, even murder people. Now imagine you were Paul. He is the object of wrath of this mob! This man had stolen their livelihood. For two hours straight the mob shouts out "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!" They would have been happy to see him die. If they had found Paul at that time, he surely would have been torn apart. A time of trial, and intense pressure? Absolutely. Paul thought for sure it was a death sentence.

Have you ever felt the same? What is your intense trial that's got you under great pressure? I gave some thought to members of the church I've talked to in just the last couple weeks. I know you're under pressure. I know you're experiencing trials of many kinds. Here's just a sampling of what some of you are going through.

- Some of you struggle with shameful, horrible things from your past. You still feel guilt to this day.
- Some of you are being crushed under a financial burden. You're really backed into a corner. You're feeling the pressure.
- Some of you are facing serious health issues. Some life-changing health issues. Some life threatening health issues.
- Many of you have loved ones with severe health issues, or who are dying or maybe recently died.
- Some of you have relationship issues. Someone close has hurt you badly. Or you're not getting along with someone who is a big part of your life.
- Work pressures. In your job, have had times when you were under the gun, under pressure. You absolutely had to accomplish a certain job or task, and you were frustrated again and again. You felt your stomach tighten in knots because you just didn't know how it was all going to work out.
- Some of you fight depression. You long for joy and peace, but they are ever elusive. Your days are dark and you struggle to put on a good face before others.

Did I mention your particular trial? There are certainly more. What are we believers to make out of these trials? We feel we're in a pressure cooker... about to be crushed. Why is this happening? What hope do we have? What should we do?

Look back at the Word of God before us today, and look at what the apostle Paul said. "**But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead.**" Friends, be sure of this: God allows trials and pressures into our life, and he does so... well, for various reasons. He doesn't always let us see what the blessing is that comes from it. We don't always get a specific answer to the question "why?" But this much we can say for absolute certainty. No matter what the trial, no matter what type of pressure you are under, *one* reason for it happening is surely this: *So that you might not rely on yourself, but on God...* God who is in control, all powerful and who loves us dearly. Let's admit, we are stubborn. Especially when things are going well, we tend to think *we* are able... *we* can do it... *we* are in control... we can rely on

ourselves. Even the great apostle Paul struggled with that temptation. He needed it. And we need it. A wake up call from God that we are not in control. He is. But is this a good thing that God is in control? Listen:

“He has delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us. On him we have set our hope that he will continue to deliver us, as you help us by your prayers.”

Three times the same word repeats in that passage I just read: deliver. Rely on God, not on yourself because God has delivered you. God is delivering you. And God will deliver you.

First, let’s look at how God has delivered you. While our attention and focus tends to be on our current trials and pressures, we will only receive hope and comfort if we first focus on God’s past deliverance... which also is his greatest deliverance. Let’s be clear... reliance on self instead of God is sin. We’re telling God, “I don’t need you. I’m in control. I can handle it.” The other extreme is just as sinful. To despair of all hope in our time of trial is also to say to God: “I can’t handle it... and neither can you.” The first sins “I’m strong enough so I don’t need you.” The other is: “I’m too weak, God, and so are you.” For this rebellion, God owes us nothing. That’s not right. He does owe us something: **“The wages of sin is death.”** From sin, it’s guilt and the eternal death we deserve, we need deliverance.

And good news... God *has* delivered you. It’s a done deal. This deliverance is complete. God delivered you by sending Jesus. Can you remember Jesus’s life... how he perfectly relied upon the Heavenly Father always? Jesus was never proud and he never despaired. He always trusted. He was always confident in the Father’s plan and purpose for his life. So much so that when Jesus was in the Garden of Gethsemane, after praying, Jesus knew his enemies were coming to arrest him. Not only did he not run, but *he went to meet them*. Jesus was completely confident in the plan and purpose of the Father. He intentionally went the way of the cross. And on that cross, we find our self-reliance. On that cross we find our hopelessness and despair. On that cross is the Son of God loudly and confidently declaring to you and to me: “It is finished! The wages of sin is paid!” And he died. On the third day he rose, and that’s where you find your absolute guarantee: *you have been delivered... delivered from the penalty of sin*.

But there’s more good news... God isn’t done delivering us. He continues to deliver us today. He delivered you from the penalty of sin. He continues to deliver you from the power to sin. With the power of God at work within us, we can now say “no” to sin and live a life that gives glory to God. By God’s grace and God’s power, we fight the temptation to rely on self, and we instead rely on God. We fight the temptation to despair and instead have a sure hope in Christ. God continues to deliver us from the power of sin.

And there’s even more good news. God has delivered us from the penalty of sin. He daily delivers us from the power of sin. And he will deliver us... deliver us from this world of sorrows. This life is a series of trials and difficulties, but there is an end to it all. There is a final deliverance promised by our God. When you know better times are ahead, you can make through just about anything, can’t you? Well, the best times are ahead. Our God has promised us eternal life with him. No sadness. No pain. No tears. No suffering. No pressure. Just joy with Jesus. You will be delivered.

There is one more very important thing God wants us to learn today when it comes to the trials and pressures of this life. Paul says: **“We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about the hardships we suffered in the province of Asia.”** Paul *wanted* the Corinthians to know the

problems he faced. We modern day Americans tend to keep quiet about our problems. We pride ourselves in our independence and our ability to handle whatever comes our way. We tend not to rely on God... and we also tend not to rely on each other. This way of thinking is wrong. In fact, it's a recipe for disaster. So this final truth God would have us take home today is that not only should we rely upon God in our trials, but we should share our problems with each other. Talk to your pastor about your problems. Talk to a fellow member about your problems. Why? What can they do for you? Biggest thing: PRAY.

“You help us by your prayers.” Paul said. Your prayers for other believers *work*. In James we hear, **“The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective.”** In our prayers for others, we are helping. God says so. But we can't pray for one another unless we know what to pray for. Share your problems with each other.

And what happens when the prayer is answered? **“Then many will give thanks on our behalf for the gracious favor granted us in answer to the prayers of many.”** When you share your problems, believers pray for you, and God delivers you, one more thing happens. Now believers pray again. Giving thanks for prayers answered, God is given even more glory. Multiple believers grow in faith, God receives glory and the body of Christ is built up... all when we share our problems with one another!

Stanley Praitnath worked as an executive for Fuji Bank on the 81st floor of the South Tower, the second to be attacked. He was one of eighteen survivors from the South Tower above the impact point of the plane crash.

Stanley Praitnath started to evacuate from the South Tower when the North Tower was struck. He returned to his office when the building security told tenants it was safe to do so. Praitnath describes returning to his office, on the 81st floor. "I just happened to raise my head watching the Statue of Liberty and as I watched I saw this giant aircraft ... coming in slow motion towards me -- eye level, eye contact. And I just froze." He describes a burning wing of the plane ending up "in my office door twenty feet from where I am huddled under my desk." He has stated that the last thing he said before the aircraft struck was, "Lord, I can't do this. You take over."

Praitnath was buried in debris, but when he heard Brian Clark and some colleagues descending the only stairwell that was open, he attracted Clark's attention. Praitnath and Clark were two of only eighteen survivors from a floor above where the plane struck. Clark attributes his own survival to going to help Praitnath, as his group had been debating whether to ascend to the roof and wait for rescue by helicopter, or try to descend through lower floors, which they were told were impassable. By the time Clark got Praitnath free, the group was gone, having decided to try for the roof; they were caught in the collapse. Clark and Praitnath went down instead.

Praitnath has no doubt about why his life was spared and why he lived to see his wife and two young daughters again.

"Had it not been for God's glory and this man's goodness," he said, pointing to Clark, "I would not be here."

Rely fully on the Lord. Share your trials, pressures and burdens with one another. Know God's deliverance... past, present and future. And God gets the glory! Amen.