

SESSION 7: RESCUED BY A GRACIOUS GOD

2 Corinthians 1:8-11

May 18, 2025

PREFACE

In the passage before us, the apostle Paul makes a number of statements—dramatic, emotional, dire—that leave us wondering, “What does Paul mean by that? What’s he talking about?” For example,

- our affliction which came to us in Asia
- we were burdened excessively
- beyond our strength
- we despaired even to live
- we had the sentence of death within ourselves

That last one is doubly curious: It’s dramatic enough that he mentions “the sentence of death” (was he on trial and condemned to death? was he going to be stoned?), but then he adds to this, “within ourselves.” (What does he mean by *that*? Is it that he felt like he was going to die? or is he referring to some internal disease?) Let’s begin by reading the passage.

Read 2 Corinthians 1:8-11.

vv8-9

There is much in this paragraph that requires explanation, which we will get to in due time. But the very nature of this text means that we must roll back to recent events—*Paul’s* recent events. And we begin in, probably, AD 54, when Paul is in Ephesus and preparing to write the very letter of our study. ➡

Corinth is not the only place where there is turmoil causing challenges and outright threats for the apostle. In Acts 19:23 Luke tells us that “Now about that time there occurred no small disturbance concerning the Way.” While in Ephesus Paul had expected to meet up with Titus, who was on his way back from delivering the aforementioned painful letter. But he didn’t show, which certainly must have added to Paul’s apprehension.

That having been said, we will see that the real point of all this—the lesson from this paragraph and the letter as a whole—is not the specific trials and afflictions suffered by the apostle, but how these experiences and his reaction to them are to be understood by the Corinthians (and us) as an acceptable, even expected part of life in Christ—for His glory.

There was more going on in that city, and it can be frustrating for us in this time of X, and Facebook, and other digital communities where individuals daily disgorge every boring and gory detail of their insignificant lives, that neither Luke in his Acts of the Apostles nor Paul offer us specific details. The biblical accounts seem to talk *around* the details; in fact, reading Acts 19, one is left thinking that nothing much happened to Paul at all, but mostly to others.

Read Acts 19: 22-32. 📖

Richard N. Longenecker, in his commentary on Acts gives us a reasonable summary of what Paul refers to in our passage. And in it the commentator suggests a pretty good reason why details remain sketchy.

Longenecker: Before Paul left Ephesus, a riot threatened his life and could have put an end to the outreach of the gospel in Asia. **The situation was undoubtedly more dangerous than Luke's account taken alone suggests.** For in what may well be allusions to this riot, Paul said later that he had “fought wild beasts in Ephesus” (1 Cor 15:32) 📖, had “despaired even of life” in the face of “a deadly peril” in Asia (2 Cor 1:8-11), and that Priscilla and Aquila had “risked their lives” for him (Rom 16:4). Luke's purpose in presenting this vignette is clearly apologetic [i.e., a defense], in line with his argument for the *religio licita* status of Christianity [in the Roman Empire]...

By the absolute use of “the Way” [Luke] wanted them to understand that what happened was not simply against Paul personally, but that it was primarily a threat to the continued outreach of the gospel...

Luke's description of the Ephesian riot makes the point that “in the final analysis the only thing heathenism can do against Paul is to shout itself hoarse” (Haenchen, *Acts of the Apostles*, p. 578). 📖

Paul himself includes a catalogue of sufferings later in this letter, in Chapter Eleven: imprisoned, beaten, lashed, danger of death, stoned, shipwrecked, etc. Yet specific evidence behind his remarks in vv8-11 remain scarce, and are difficult even to place in an accurate timeline.

“Asiarchs” = political or religious officials of the province.

“Asia” was a Roman senatorial province that took in most of western Asia Minor, along with islands such as Rhodes and Patmos off the coast in the Aegean Sea, with Ephesus as the provincial capital (Guthrie).

(Probably metaphorical)

I include that last paragraph because it is a prophetic truism. Still today, those in opposition to the gospel, to Christianity, to conservatism, to goodness, cannot and do not even try to combat it with logic and reason; all they do is shout and swing their fists and burn down buildings and expensive cars and only make fools of themselves.

I believe Paul and Luke (or Luke at the behest of Paul) downplay his *personal* harm and danger, leaving out most of the fine details of this traumatic period, because they want the emphasis to be on Christ, and upon thanksgiving to God for His protection: these people are not fighting against Paul personally, but against the gospel he preaches—in this specific instance, a gospel that speaks against “Artemis of the Ephesians.”

After that, Paul is using this—as he did in v7, and will again in v11—as a means to express and encourage fellowship between himself and the church.

In the final analysis, as Garland expresses it, “We cannot know precisely what affliction Paul had in mind because he does not tell us. He only describes its severity. The string of superlatives conveys the intensity of his suffering.” This passage is essentially kin to his famous “thorn in the flesh” reference later in this letter (12:7-10); we simply do not know to what he refers. But we can safely assume that, in general, these afflictions and sufferings are associated with various forms of persecution for the faith. As to that “thorn in the flesh,” the apostle even uses much the same language here as he does in Chapter Twelve.

Read 2 Corinthians 12:8-9.

v1:9

Indeed, we had the sentence of death within ourselves so that we would not have confidence in ourselves, but in God who raises the dead;

Both passages speak of a dependence upon God, rather than on ourselves. And now we can see where Paul is going with this—why he opens this paragraph about his “affliction,” and why he doesn’t go into greater detail *about* that affliction: his purpose is not to whine about the pains of ministry, but to contrast that with the “God who raises the dead.”

Don’t miss the verb tense; he could have said, “God who *raised* the dead,” referring only to God’s raising of Jesus, but instead he speaks of God to whom this supreme quality of divine power—resurrection—is a permanent attribute.

And here Paul broadens the definition of resurrection to include “the deliverance of his servants from impossible circumstances” (Barnett), such as he does in Chapter Four.

Read 2 Corinthians 4:8-11.

But of course he also refers to the future, eschatological resurrection of *all* the physical dead a few verses later.

Read 2 Corinthians 4:14. ➡

It is a biblical pattern—in both OT and NT—that whatever the situation, humans call upon God by that aspect of Him that best applies.

- When we need God to fight for us with His supernatural strength, we call upon the omnipotent *El Shaddai*, God Almighty.
- When we need a fair hearing before the court of justice, we call upon God the righteous Judge.
- When we are badly in need of comfort and encouragement we cry out for the Comforter, *Paracletos*, the one called alongside.
- And when persecution or even imminent death overwhelm us, when “burdened excessively, beyond our strength, so that we despair even to live” (v8), we seek, as does the apostle, the God who raises the dead.

v10

The God Paul called upon, the One who raises the dead, answered his need; He is the One, Paul says in v10,

who rescued us from so great a peril of death, and will rescue us, He on whom we have set our hope. And He will yet rescue us,

The LSB and NASB come close to the literal translation—the ESV and NIVs are weak with “deadly peril”—but the KJVs are best with the literal, “so great a death.” The word is *thanatos*—death, singular noun. Clearly Paul here refers to the *danger* of death, the *threat* of death, with which he suffers regularly, if not daily. ➡

As we learned in our study of the *Last Things*, everyone in their graves will be resurrected (Revelation 20:11-15), the difference being that some will be raised to eternal living, and others raised to eternal dying.


In all this let's not forget another of Paul's “afflictions,” to wit, the Corinth church's reaction to them. The commentator C. K. Barrett writes, “It follows that Paul's sufferings should be a source of strength to his converts.” But the truth is it *diminished* him in their eyes. Like the Jews' estimation of Jesus as the promised Messiah, the Corinthians expected and wanted a strong, virile, charismatic apostle—not a “suffering servant.” His various trials and burdens lowered him—and their respect for him—in their estimation.

From this death God rescued Paul; the word is *rhyomai* (ROO-oh-meye), a beautiful picture of God's tender care for His own. The word means, literally, to drag, to draw to oneself—a picture of a merciful and gracious God pulling us not just *from* danger or death, but from it *to* Himself, just as He will do in the latter days of the Eschaton, when the church is raised from the grave to life *with* the Father and Son.

And now, in v11, Paul makes more explicit his desire for them to join in his afflictions, at least by means of their prayers.

v11

you also joining in helping us through your prayers on our behalf, so that thanks may be given on our behalf by many persons for the gracious gift bestowed on us through the prayers of many.

I am reminded of a small paperback written by D. A. Carson entitled *Praying with Paul: A Call to Spiritual Reformation*.  In this small volume Carson attempts to lead us away from the superficiality that often attends our prayers—"Please take away my cold." "Please help me pass my math test tomorrow."—to follow Paul's lead in improving the focus of our prayers.

(Baker Academic: 1992, 2014)

Carson: When it comes to knowing God, many of us constitute a culture of the spiritually stunted. So much of our religion is packaged to address our felt needs—and these are almost uniformly anchored in our pursuit of happiness and fulfillment, without rightly understanding where true happiness and fulfillment lie. God becomes the Great Being who, potentially at least, meets our needs and fulfills our aspirations. We think too little of what he is like, of his wisdom, knowledge, power, love, transcendence, mystery, and glory. We are not intoxicated by his holiness and his love; his thoughts and words capture too little of our imagination, too little of our discourse, too few of our priorities. Many of our religious exercises and verbal expressions feel painfully unreal, inauthentic, merely formulaic.

Before we look at what Paul here asks from the Corinthians, let's consider what he does not.

- He does not ask them to pray that God will call a halt to his trials. He has already, in v9, stated God's reason for his afflictions: "so that we would not have confidence in ourselves, but in God."

- He also does not ask them to pray to mend their ways and be more kind to him.

No, even though he does not state it explicitly, Paul's intended purpose is God-oriented: he wants the content of the church's prayers to be thanksgiving and praise lifted up to God, the true source of "the gracious gift bestowed on us."

Beyond that primary purpose, a secondary purpose is also important. Already in these early passages of the letter Paul is doing everything he can to draw the church into fellowship with him and his situation. The church is badly in need of healing of its own, and that healing will only be accomplished by reestablishing its communion with the apostle—the true, authentic apostle of Christ.

This means that the first reason for the prayers is praise and thanksgiving offered up to God, and the second reason for these prayers is the benefit and edification of the church—both of which he states more explicitly in Chapter Four.

Read 2 Corinthians 4:15.

Let me close by sharing some thoughts on what Paul is saying in this passage, some reflective insight and a contemporary illustration by the commentator George Guthrie.

Guthrie: In 2 Cor. 1:8-11 Paul calls on the Corinthians to take seriously the exceptional affliction experienced by him and his coworkers in Asia. Pointing to the effect of that experience, he testifies that God used the deep despair to bring the apostle and company to a place beyond their own limited resources. Indeed, they thought they were going to die. Yet, in facing death they were also driven to a deeper level of trust in God and his resurrection life.

As I write these words, my wife and I have a friend, an aid worker in Asia, who has been kidnapped and suspected dead for the past three months. I have prayed for her and thought about her often during these days. What must she feel, or have felt, in her captivity? What waves of despair must have come over her at times. Certainly she has been pushed beyond the limits of her own resources. Yet, knowing her, I suspect that she was pushed right into the arms of the God who raises the dead.

N. T. Wright states, “We are not to be surprised if living as Christians brings us to the place where we find we are at the end of our own resources, and that we are called to rely on the God who raises the dead.” This is normal Christianity, and this—despite the horrors that at times lurk along the way as we journey toward resurrection—is the most blessed place in the world to be. A. W. Tozer (1961: 53) writes, “How completely satisfying to turn from our limitations to a God who has none.”

Even with all the problems he has weathered in serving the Lord, this is uppermost in the apostle Paul’s mind: he earnestly wants the Corinthians to understand and acquire the spiritual mindset that finds encouragement, comfort, and peace of mind found in the arms of the gracious God who rescues us.