

Pastoral and Theological Reflections on Paul's Multi-faceted Response to "Afflictions" (Θλιψοι)

In the letters that bear his name, Paul uses the verb θλιβω six times and the noun θλιψις twenty-two times. What Paul means by these terms is not always evident because translators do not translate them consistently. The following chart shows the various ways three different English versions render these Greek words.

Translation	KJV	NRSV	NIV
Verb θλιβω	Afflict Narrow Throng Trouble	Afflict Persecute	Distress Harass Hard press Persecute Trouble
Noun θλιψις	Affliction Anguish Burdened Persecution Tribulation Trouble	Affliction Anguish Distress Hardship Persecution Pressure Suffering	Affliction Distress Hard pressed Persecution Suffering Trial Trouble

At root θλιψις that which crushes.¹ For the sake of consistency this paper will use "afflict/affliction" for θλιβω/θλιψις.

¹ See Heinrich Schlier, θλιβω, θλιψις, in *The Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Ed. Gerhard Kittel, Vol. 3, p, 139-148. In a literal sense the verb meant to press, squash, hem in, crush, or press together. The idea is that of pressure being applied. Mark 3:9 preserves this sense:

A greater difficulty, perhaps, is an apparent contradiction in Paul's thought about affliction. On the one hand, he can speak as if *θλιψις* as part of a positive progression of growth as he asserts that Christians boast in their *θλιψεις*, because they produce endurance, which in turn produces character, which produces hope. On the other hand, he can speak of *θλιψοι* he endured in Asia that left him "so utterly, unbearably crushed that we despaired of life itself." (2 Corinthians 1:8, NRSV)

This study sets forth the thesis that in his general instruction, where Paul writes to teach the worshipping congregation, Paul presents the theological teaching of the resurrection of Jesus as hope that transcends affliction and calls on Christians to boast or rejoice in affliction. In more autobiographical passages, however, where Paul recalls his own afflictions, he admits that afflictions can be crushing and shows how comfort comes not only from theological conviction but through human interaction.

General Teaching Material

Even though I am convinced that Paul's message in Romans is primarily an ethical message aimed at the Romans' need to "welcome each other as Christ has welcomed you" (paraphrased from 15:7), Paul does prepare for this message by laying out a clear exposition of his theological foundation about how Christ welcomed and saved us. Within this theological foundation Paul argues that Christian faith transcends affliction. Christians now live in a new atmosphere of grace in which they have peace with God and a hope in which they can boast. Paul shows how this hope transcends the afflictions Christian face in Romans 5:2b-5.

We boast in the hope of God's glory, but that is not all, we even boast in our afflictions, knowing that affliction produces endurance, and endurance character, and character hope. And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us. (Romans 5:2b-5)

How can Christians confidently trust such an audacious hope? We need to look directly before and after this passage. Before Paul concludes his discussion of Abraham with the assurance in Romans 4:22-23 that we worship the God who raised Jesus from the

"He [Jesus] told his disciples to have a boat ready for him because of the crowd, so that they would not *crush* him" (NRSV).

θλιψις is that which crushes. In the figurative sense it is that which applies pressure and crushes in on a person creating anguish, affliction, tribulation, and suffering. The term is used this way in classical Greek as well as in writers more contemporary with the New Testament such as Epictetus.

dead. Immediately after Paul emphasizes in Romans 5:6-10 that Christ died for the ungodly, while we were sinners, and reconciled us to God. The death and resurrection of Jesus becomes the template through which Paul understands Christian life, including his own life and his afflictions. As Christ's death led to resurrection, so Paul's afflictions are overshadowed by transcending hope.²

Even though Paul lays the theological foundation for hope in Romans, the letter is not purely theoretical. Remember that it is read aloud to a worshiping congregation. Hints of worship, including doxologies and poetic elements occur throughout the letter. The passage we have already reviewed in Romans 5 has a rhythmic quality to it. We see it even more in another passage where Paul speaks of *θλιψις*. It appears in Romans 12 after Paul has made the transition with his "therefore" at 12:1 and moves to more explicit ethical instruction. But the passage in which *θλιψις* occurs is more than ethical instruction, although you would never know this from most English translations. For example, here is how the NRSV translates Romans 12:10-13:

[L]ove one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.

This translation gives the impression that Paul is giving a series of imperatives. But the original is quite different. It rings with the rhythm of worship. There is a cadence to these verses along with a striking parallelism. Each phrase begins with a definite article in the dative (or locative if you prefer an eight-case system), followed by a noun in the dative, and then a participle, or in a couple cases an adjective. This is hard to capture in English, but here is my feeble attempt:

In brotherly love for each other, devoting,

² The difficult passage in Colossians 1:24 should be understood in this context.

I am now rejoicing in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am completing what is lacking in Christ's afflictions (*θλιψεων*) for the sake of his body, that is, the church.

Literally the text reads, "I fill up the things lacking with reference to (genitive case) Christ's afflictions." Paul is not suggesting that Christ's afflictions were inadequate. Rather he places the template of Christ's death and resurrection over his own and recognizes that Jesus said his followers would bear his cross and suffer as he did. Although Paul never speaks of "following" Christ, he can speak of being crucified with Christ (Galatians 2:20) and of carrying the marks of Jesus branded in his body (Galatians 6:17). Both the ministry and the suffering of Christ are carried on in the faithful. Paul stands in that line of those who share in Christ's suffering, a line that continues until the Parousia. Paul is not completing something Jesus did inadequately, but following in the flow of faithfully carrying Jesus' cross.

In honor for each other, leading,
 In zeal, not hesitating,
 In the spirit, boiling,
 In the Lord, serving,
 In hope, rejoicing,
 In affliction (θλιψει), enduring,
 In prayer, persevering,
 In the needs of the saints, sharing.

The original hearers must have sensed this rhythm and parallelism that served to embed theological conviction in the experience of worship. Enduring affliction is more than a command; it is part of the lived experience of the worshipping community. Paul's theology of a hope that endures affliction is not only theoretical. It comes alive and is internalized in the experience of communal worship. In theology and worship Paul teaches that faith in the Risen Jesus gives hope that transcends affliction.

Autobiographical Material

A reader might conclude from the above that Paul is minimizing afflictions, but in his autobiographical material he seems to maximize them. Of the twenty-eight occurrences of the root in either noun or verb form, eleven are found in 2 Corinthians. This letter (or collection of letters depending on your viewpoint) contains more autobiographical material than any other. It is here that Paul lists the tortures he has endured over the years (11:23-29), discusses his vision in heaven and his "thorn in the flesh" (12:1-10), and describes his ministry in terms of a jar of clay (4:7-12). These autobiographical references begin immediately in the very first chapter, right after the traditional introduction.

In 2 Corinthians 1:3-9 Paul uses the θλιβω/θλιψις four times and uses the verb πασχω or the noun παθημα (to suffer, suffering) as a synonym three times. In addition, he uses the verb παρακαλεω or the noun παρακλητος (to encourage or comfort, encouragement or comfort) ten times. Here is a translation of the passage that translates the Greek words consistently with the same English words, using "afflict/affliction" for θλιβω/θλιψις, "suffer/suffering" for πασχω/παθημα, and "comfort" for παρακαλεω/παρακλητος.

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all **comfort**, who **comforts** us in all our afflictions, so that we can **comfort** those in any affliction with the **comfort** with which we are **comforted** by God. For just as we share abundantly in the sufferings of Christ, so also our **comfort** abounds through Christ. If we are afflicted, it is for your **comfort** and salvation; if we are **comforted**, it is for your **comfort**, which produces in you patient endurance of the same sufferings we suffer. And our hope for you is firm, because we know that just as you share in our sufferings, so also you share in our **comfort**.

For we do not want you to be ignorant, brothers and sisters, about our affliction that we experienced in Asia, because we were crushed with such a totally, overwhelming burden that we despaired even of life itself, but we had received in ourselves the sentence of death, so that we might not trust in ourselves but in the God who raises the dead.

No one knows for sure what Paul is talking about when he speaks of this Asian affliction.³ The major riot in Ephesus that we read about in Acts 19 had probably not yet occurred. Whatever this experience was, it was devastating for Paul producing excruciating pain that crushed him to the point of despairing of life.

Yet the focus of the passage is not on affliction and suffering but on comfort. Ten times Paul repeats the noun or verb παρακαλεω/παρακλητος. Here are several items to notice about this passage.

First, the context of the passage is praise and worship. Here the letter differs from most of Paul's letters. We would expect the standard thanksgiving section where Paul thanks God for the recipients of the letter. (See 1 Corinthians 1:4) But here Paul begins with blessing or praise to God, creating a context of worship. Even as he looks back on this horrible affliction, he embeds the discussion in worship.

Second, Paul does not spell out how he received God's comfort in this excruciating affliction. He speaks of the intensity of both the affliction and the comfort, but we have no idea *how* God comforted him.

³ For the speculative view, held by several scholars, that Paul had been imprisoned in Ephesus and sentenced to death see N.T. Wright, *Paul: A Biography* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2018) chapters 10 and 11, pages 235-302. Wright says: "The best guess—it remains a guess, but it's the best one—is that Paul was imprisoned in Ephesus and put on trial for his life. And that made a "perfect storm," because it followed hard on the heels of a nasty shock from Corinth" (page 239).

Third, Paul gives the purpose of the comfort. God comforts him so he can comfort others.

Fourth, there is very little theological foundation given for the movement from affliction to comfort. Paul only makes a passing reference to “the God who raises the dead.” Resurrection is at the core, but this is not explicated in any detail.

Fifth, Paul certainly doesn’t minimize the pain of affliction here.

Paul, however, does indicate *how* this God who raises the dead brought comfort to a crushing affliction in another passage with similar language. The passage is found in chapter 7. Again, we find the word “affliction” (a participle form of θλιβω) and multiple occurrences of the words “comfort.” Here is a translation that highlights these words:

For even when we came into Macedonia our body had no rest, rather we had afflictions in every way. Quarrels outside and fears inside. But the God who **comforts** the lowly **comforted** us through the arrival of Titus, but not only through his arrival but also through the **comfort** with which he was **comforted** by you, reporting to us about your longing, your mourning, your zeal for me, so that I rejoiced all the more. (2 Corinthians 7:5-7)

We don’t know whether Paul is referring back to the situation of chapter one or is now speaking of another crushing blow.⁴ I suspect they are the same.

Here, however, Paul reports on *how* God gave him comfort. It was through the arrival of his friend and faithful co-worker Titus. God’s comfort also comes in the reporting that Titus brings. The Corinthians care about Paul. There is a whole community that appreciates his ministry and cares about him personally. A supportive community gives comfort. God reaches through the despair and gives Paul the comfort that then enables him to comfort others through human comfort and a supportive community. God’s comfort comes through the agency of human companionship.

Notice also that Paul’s affliction is twofold. It comes from both within and without. Persecution, the lack of companionship, anxiety about his people, and his own personal

⁴ Some would argue that part of another letter has been inserted within the text, and that this suggests chapters one and seven are referring to the same incident. They posit that if 2:14 to 7:4 was removed, the text would flow naturally from 2:13-7:5. It would read as follows:

When I came to Troas to proclaim the good news of Christ, a door was opened for me in the Lord, but my mind could not rest because I did not find my brother Titus there. So I said farewell to them and went on to Macedonia. (2:12-13, NRSV) For even when we came into Macedonia our body had no rest, rather we had afflictions in every way. Quarrels outside and fears inside. But the God who **comforts** the lowly **comforted** us through the arrival of Titus. (7:5-6, NRSV)

anxiety all contribute to his θλίψις. These afflictions are real, and not to be minimized. They are real enough to cause unbearable despair. But they seem to be flooded by comfort. There is a theological basis for the comfort—the God who raises the dead. There is, however, a human face to the comfort that comes through the supportive presence of his friend Titus and a caring community.

We find a similar situation in 1 Thessalonians. In 3:4 Paul tells his hearers that he warned them in advance that he was about to be afflicted.⁵ Again, comfort comes with the arrival of a colleague with news about the community. In Corinthians it was the arrival of Titus, here it is the arrival of Timothy. Paul is comforted by the personal presence of his friend and, according to verse 7, by learning of the Thessalonians faith.⁶

Similarly, in Philippians 4, Paul assures hearers that he has learned to be content in all situations, but he thanks the Philippians for sharing in his affliction by sending him aid repeatedly. (Philippians 4:14-16)

Reflections

Paul recognizes affliction as part of the Christian experience, not only on a theological or theoretical level, but on a deeply personal one. He experiences it at times with such intensity that it almost causes him to despair of life itself. This affliction can come from external persecution and from internal anxieties, especially when he is separated from communities and individuals about whom he cares deeply.

He also finds comfort in these afflictions. The comfort is embedded in a Christology and eschatology of hope where he finds in the suffering and resurrection of Christ a template for his own experience, convincing him that the afflictions are temporary compared to a promised eternity and that neither afflictions nor even death can void. (See Romans 8:35 where Paul includes θλίψις along with death among those items that cannot separate us from Christ.)

Yet in actual life, it seems that God's comfort is mediated through human interaction. Paul is comforted when beloved coworkers like Titus and Timothy come to him after being absent. He is especially comforted when he hears good news about

⁵ Here the NRSV translates θλιβεσθαι as persecuted, indicating that the affliction is from without. This is only partially true, however. In the context Paul is not only persecuted from without but is plagued with concern and anxiety about the Thessalonians' endurance and continuing faith.

⁶ In 2 Thessalonians the Paul uses θλιβω/θλίψις with a clear emphasis on persecution from without when he claims that it is just for God to afflict the people who have caused them affliction.

communities of believers whom he loves and whose continuing faith strengthens his own. These Christian communities share in his affliction by watching out for his needs and sending aid. This comfort he receives motivates him and enables him to be a comfort to others.

How might this serve as a model for ministry, especially ministry to the afflicted?

First, it suggests that theology is important. Understanding the meaning of the death and resurrection of Jesus and the hope that this message provides is the vital foundation for ministry. If the teaching and preaching of the church give a steady diet of positive biblical and theological content people will be prepared to find hope in affliction. Theology and ministry are inseparable.

Second, Paul's teaching and experience also suggest that worship is an important element in ministry to those experiencing affliction. As Paul recounts his most crushing affliction, he sets it in a context of praise and worship.

Third, when people are in the middle of the affliction, when they are being crushed with the traumas of life, whether through disease, death in the family, broken relationships, or any form of loss, as important as the theological foundation is, human interaction and supportive communities come to the forefront. It can be cruel to expect the faithful to endure affliction simply on the basis of their faith or to shame them for their trauma.

As we see in Paul's letters, our toolbox for the hurting includes much more than theology. That is sometimes hard for those of us who devote our lives to studying theology to realize. I have heard didactic funeral sermons on theological doctrine that would have reached the afflicted much better if they had been metaphorical hugs of God's love. In times of affliction, we crave comfort with a human face. Food, flowers, cards, and visits are the tools that God so often uses to bring comfort. Human interaction is what comforted Paul in his personal moments of affliction, and I suspect we are no different.

In her delightful book, *Everything Happens for a Reason and Other Lies I've Loved*, Kate Bowler, a church history professor at Duke University shares her experience of going through cancer as a young wife and mother. At the end of the book she has two lists. One is what to do and say to hurting people and the other is what NOT to do and say to hurting people. The latter list includes items such as:

"Everything happens for a reason

It's going to get better, I promise

Well at least..."

The former list includes items such as:

“Can I give you a hug?

I’d love to bring you a meal this week.

O my friend that sounds so hard.⁷

If I understand these passages in Paul’s letters correctly, pastoral work must include serious theological preaching and teaching that lay the foundations for comfort in the face of trauma. It must also include creating the worship experiences that allow us to sense the rhythm of praise. And it must also mobilize supportive communities that embrace those in the throes of crushing trauma with life-giving care through personal presence and caring communities.

Finally, a personal note. When I turned in the proposal for this paper, I had no idea what would transpire between proposal and presentation. I turned in the proposal in March. On April 30 my wife of 61 years went into the hospital with renal failure. For the next three months we lived on a roller coaster going back and forth between several optimistic prognoses and several life-threatening complications. The complications won, and on July 23 she died. During that ordeal comfort came to her from a combination of caring visitors and singing hymns. When anyone came to visit (and during those many weeks over forty did she asked them to join in singing hymns. I can testify that since her death the greatest comfort has come through so many people reaching out with gifts of food, flowers, cards, visits, invitations, and phone calls just to see how I am doing. Several of you here have provided that comfort. From the bottom of my heart, thank you.

⁷ Bowler, Kate. *Everything Happens for a Reason: And Other Lies I've Loved* (New York: Random House, 2018), p. 169-176.