

AFFLICTION

Affliction is understood in modern parlance as persistent suffering or anguish. So defined, it provides helpful insight into the varied biblical images of affliction. In the most fundamental sense, affliction is the mirror of fallenness within the [creation](#). Although God created the world good ([Gen 1–2](#)), sin intruded after [the Fall](#) ([Gen 3](#); [Rom 8:20](#)). Through [Adam](#) and [Eve's](#) rebellion ([Rom 5:12, 19](#)) humanity inherited a permanent state of affliction-sin-which is the cause of recurring suffering and sorrow. The general human condition is thus one of affliction. In addition the Bible contains more pointed images of affliction, specific manifestations of a fallen condition.

Scriptural images of affliction fall into three categories-physical, emotional and spiritual. While the Bible abounds in stories and pictures of affliction, we can get to the heart of the idea by examining the experience of two familiar characters': [David](#) in the OT and Paul in the NT.

While many of the psalms ([9](#); [36](#); [72](#); [107](#)) speak of affliction, David's laments in [Psalms 25](#) and [51](#) graphically portray his struggles with these difficulties. On the physical level the psalmist faces affliction as illness and distress ([25:16–18, 20](#)). He also fears the physical threat of his enemies ([25:2](#)). Emotionally, affliction is seen in David's contrite sinner's prayer in [Psalm 51](#). His existential wrestling with sin captures the emotional component of affliction. Again the threat of enemies' unkind words or deeds have an impact and remain on David's mind ([25:19](#)). Spiritually, the psalmist seeks forgiveness of his sins ([Ps 25:7, 11, 18](#)) as relief for his afflicted condition ([25:16–18](#); [51:1–4](#)).

In the NT six Pauline "catalogs of affliction" ([Rom 8:35](#); [1 Co 4:9–13](#); [2 Co 4:8–9](#); [6:4–5](#); [11:23–29](#); [12:10](#)) give a comprehensive overview of the difficulties the apostle faced. Each of these catalogs portrays a wide variety of physical dangers, emotional barriers and spiritual handicaps, ranging from "trouble" ([Rom 8:35](#)) to "hunger" ([1 Co 4:11](#)), "persecution" ([2 Co 4:8](#)) to "imprisonment" ([2 Co 6:5](#)) and "shipwrecks" ([2 Co 11:25](#)) to "hardships" ([2 Co 12:10](#)). These catalogs of afflic-

tion give images of the range of human affliction in the Bible.

The Bible relates three purposes for affliction. One is discipline. Since God is a Father, he disciplines his children when they rebel ([Prov 3](#); [Heb 12](#)). Such discipline may be preventive, as in the case of Paul who was given a "thorn in the flesh" to prevent him from pride ([2 Co 12](#)). However, the Bible clarifies that this discipline is not punitive. David was assured that though his son would die, David's adultery was forgiven ([2 Sam 12:13–14](#); cf. [2 Co 12:9–10](#)). Therefore, disciplinary affliction reveals God's love for his people.

Another purpose for affliction is sanctification. David's affliction restored him to obedience ([Ps 119:67](#)), taught him God's decrees ([Ps 119:71](#)), proved the power of Scripture ([Ps 119:50, 92](#)) and demonstrated God's faithfulness ([Ps 119:75](#)). The Christian's sufferings follow the pattern of Christ's and thus confirm that one is united with him ([Mk 10:39](#); [Rom 8:17](#); [2 Co 1:5](#); [Phil 1:29](#); [3:10](#); [1 Pet 1:6–7](#); [4:1–2, 13](#)). Paul indicates that suffering is necessary in the life of the Christian ([Col 1:24](#)). Affliction also increases a Christian's capacity to know and enjoy Christ ([Phil 4:12–13](#); [Jas 1:2–5](#)).

Some affliction is simply for God's glory. Job's affliction is the classic illustration. When Satan accused Job of only serving God because of his creature comforts, God allowed Satan to destroy them ([Job 1:6–12](#)). In the end Job got only questions from God, no explanation for why he allowed Satan to afflict him ([Job 38–41](#)). It was purely for God's glory.

Affliction is not a one way street, for the Bible also presents a God who suffers. God is in anguish when his people sin ([Gen 6:6–7](#); [Jer 9:1–2](#)). He is distressed when his people are oppressed ([Judg 10:16](#); [Is 63:9](#); [Acts 9:4–5](#)). In Christ he saved his people through suffering, identifying with their brokenness by himself taking on affliction ([Is 53:1–4](#); [Heb 4:14–16](#)) and intercepting God's wrath against their sin ([Is 53:5–12](#)).

To summarize, the Bible speaks of humans suffering affliction because of their iniquities ([Ps 107:17](#)). However, God "does not ignore the cry of the afflicted" ([Ps 9:12](#)); "he will defend the afflicted" ([Ps 72:4](#)). Ultimately, it is a privilege to

suffer affliction ([Phil 1:29](#)) because the afflicted can take confidence in God's promise that his "power is made perfect in [our] weakness" ([2 Cor 12:9](#)).

See also [OPPRESSION](#); [PERSECUTION](#); [SUFFERING](#).