

Psalm 119:65-72 (TETH)

The Goodness of God in Our Afflictions *It is good for me that I have been afflicted v. 71*

The words of our text demonstrate the presence of grace in the heart of the Psalmist. This is not a confession that the natural man will make. The natural man instead will make afflictions his excuse to denigrate God. We find an example of this in Rev. 16:9 Where we read: *And men were scorched with great heat, and blasphemed the name of God, which hath power over these plagues: and they repented not to give him glory.* Sinful men will not only blaspheme God but they'll go so far as to challenge the very existence of God if God doesn't enable them to sail through life in nothing but fair weather and calm seas while they indulge in sin and live to fulfill every fleshly lust.

Perhaps you've heard the argument that is sometimes applied to God when it comes to the matter of afflictions. The argument goes something like this: If God exists at all he must either be all powerful but not all loving or he must be all loving but not all powerful but he couldn't possibly be all loving and all powerful. If he was all loving and all powerful why wouldn't he, in love use his power to make my life easier and keep me from afflictions? This kind of rationale is tantamount to saying *why doesn't God serve me? Why doesn't he exist to cater to the way I think my life ought to be lived? Since he won't bow to me, I issue my almighty decree that he henceforth ceases to exist and this decree is retroactive to the beginning of time.*

It's no wonder the Psalmist says on another occasion that *the fool hath said in his heart that there is no God. Corrupt are they, and have done abominable iniquity* (Ps. 53:1). What a contrast to the thinking of the natural man do we find in the words of our text *It is good for me that I have been afflicted.* Not only is it allowable in the mind of the Psalmist that a sovereign God can do what he pleases with his own, but beyond that it's beneficial. There is, therefore, no incompatibility with the goodness of God in the afflictions he ministers. *Thou art good and doest good* the Psalmist says in v. 69. These are the words of a man who has gained accurate knowledge of God, the proper perspective of God's providence as well as accurate knowledge of himself.

It is good for me that I have been afflicted. Now I'm not suggesting that such a confession is always easy to make or easy to maintain. Job started out well when he bowed and worshipped and said in Job 1:21 *The LORD gave, and the LORD hath taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD.* Before Job's trial ended, however, Job would become righteous in his own eyes and he would justify himself rather than God.

In the end, however, Job would confess his sin, repent of his sin and would come to see what ensuing generations have been able to see by reading the book of Job that *the Lord is very pitiful, and of tender mercy* (James 5:11). And though we don't find the Psalmist's exact words found in Job I think we could nevertheless conclude that Job would confess *It is good for me that I have been afflicted.*

If it's good for a man of the spiritual caliber of Job and if it's good for a man of the spiritual caliber of David (if we take David to be the author of this Psalm) then the truth of the text would certainly apply to the rest of us that it is good for us that we have been afflicted.

The question that may naturally arise in our minds is *why?* Why is it good for the followers of Christ to be afflicted? Why shouldn't it be only the rebels against Christ that are afflicted? The complaint that Asaph would make in Psalm 73 would be the complaint that Christians are afflicted and the ungodly seem to have life easy. *For I was envious at the foolish, when I saw the prosperity of the wicked. For there are no bands in their death: but their strength is firm. They are not in trouble as other men; neither are they plagued like other men. Therefore pride compasseth them about as a chain; violence covereth them as a garment. Their eyes stand out with fatness: they have more than heart could wish* (Ps. 73:3-7).

By way of contrast the Psalmist goes on to say in v. 14 *For all the day long have I been plagued, and chastened every morning.* We certainly don't find the Psalmist saying in this section of the Psalm that it was good for him that he was afflicted. He would eventually come to express that sentiment if not the words once he recognized his infirmities and went into the sanctuary of the Lord and regained an eternal perspective on things.

The point I'm making, then, is that this is not a confession that is easily made even by the Christian. And let's face it – the rod of God smarts. It is not a pleasant experience to come under the chastening rod of God. The author of Hebrews says as much when he writes in Heb. 12:11 *Now no chastening for the present seemeth to be joyous, but grievous.*

One of the things, however, that will enable you to say with the Psalmist that *it is good for me that I have been afflicted* will be your ability to answer the question – why? – why is it good? If you can answer that question then you'll be able to make the Psalmist's confession your own. And so that is the question that I want to endeavor to answer for you this morning. My theme is: The Goodness of God in Our Afflictions.

It is Good for Me that I Have Been Afflicted.

And in order for you to affirm the truth of this text in your own lives, the question that I want to ask and answer is why? Why is it good for me that I have been afflicted? Consider with me first of all:

I. The Correcting Power of Afflictions

Notice what the Psalmist says in v. 67: *Before I was afflicted I went astray. But now have I kept thy word.* What happens, then, if we're not afflicted? The answer is that we'll go astray and we won't keep God's word. The Psalmist is stating it as a matter of fact. *I went astray* he says. Notice that he doesn't say *I almost went astray* or *I was tempted to go astray*. No – he simply states it point blank – *I went astray*. Now if we take David to be the author of this Psalm (as many commentators do) then we have an example of a man who is

called *a man after God's own heart* who nevertheless went astray. We find a number of examples in the narrative that covers the life of David in 1st and 2nd Samuel of David going astray. He goes astray, for example, from the Lord's people when he takes refuge from Saul in the land of the Philistines. His time in the city of Ziklag could be viewed as the time when his faith collapsed. He strays from marital fidelity when he takes another man's wife and then secretly arranges to have that man killed in battle. Even near the end of his life when he would have been at his highest level of maturity and growth in grace we find him lured astray by his pride which leads to his numbering of the people.

In each of these instances you also find the Lord's chastening hand being utilized by God to bring David back into the ways of the Lord. And what is true of David is true of every eminent saint – they have periods where they go astray, where they turn aside from the Lord's ways. We considered a few weeks ago now, in our prayer meeting studies of Isaiah 53 that this tendency to go astray is a universal tendency – i.e. it is true of all Christians.

So long as we continue to fight against sinful natures within, the words of Isaiah 53:6 will apply to us even as Christians where we read that *all we like sheep have gone astray*. It doesn't say a few of us or some of us or most of us but all we like sheep have gone astray. And in the words that follow Isaiah tells us what it means to go astray. It doesn't necessarily mean that we immediately fall into deep sin. No – all that's necessary for going astray is that *we have turned every one to his own way*.

Here, then, is the very essence of going astray. We insist on having our own way. This is why I say the words can have ready application even to Christians. How many church splits have taken place in our day because competing factions insist on having their own way? Why is divorce found sadly and tragically even among Christian husbands and wives? Part of the cause may be traceable to one or the other or both spouses not being truly saved. But a contributing factor could also be that each has turned to his own way.

Selfishness is the very thing that is bound up in the heart of a child the moment he's born. He must have his own way. The world must revolve around him. Selfishness is certainly an element of the foolishness that we read of in Prov. 22:15 *Foolishness is bound in the heart of a child; but the rod of correction shall drive it far from him*. We could wish that as adults we would have had foolishness driven out of our hearts. But alas, just as children needs the rod of correction from their parents so do Christians in general need the corrective power of God's afflictions.

And the good news is that God does correct us and if we're spiritually minded we recognize that it's a good thing to be corrected by God – for apart from such correction we go astray and stay astray and turn to our own way.

I think it's worth noting here (for this is very applicable to our day) that another key factor that contributes to our waywardness is affluence and ease. What becomes of a generation that has all the food and drink they could wish and have all the toys to play with that can be had. Listen to these words from Deut. 32:12-15 which contain the song of Moses: *So the LORD alone did lead him, and there was no strange god with him. He*

made him ride on the high places of the earth, that he might eat the increase of the fields; and he made him to suck honey out of the rock, and oil out of the flinty rock; Butter of kine, and milk of sheep, with fat of lambs, and rams of the breed of Bashan, and goats, with the fat of kidneys of wheat; and thou didst drink the pure blood of the grape. It sounds like quite a time of prosperity, doesn't it? – not altogether different from what has characterized our nation for many generations. Now listen to the rest of the statement: *But Jeshurun waxed fat, and kicked: thou art waxen fat, thou art grown thick, thou art covered with fatness; then he forsook God which made him, and lightly esteemed the Rock of his salvation.*

It certainly seems that when you study church history the church tends to flourish when life is hard and it tends to go astray when life becomes easy. Thankfully God knows this and he administers afflictions accordingly – and that makes it a good thing when God afflicts his children. Don't you know it to be the case? Think about it for a moment – what true follower of Christ truly desires to stray from Christ? Even though it happens, no true child of God wants to stray from his Redeemer and if he strays he doesn't desire to stay away from his Redeemer.

The straying comes about subtly and it usually begins with the notion that you can have Christ and the world too. We stray when we lose sight of what it means to use the world without being of the world. Fortunately God does not let us stray too long or too far before the rod of correction brings us back to where we ultimately desire to be. And when God applies affliction and we are brought back to our senses then we say with the Psalmist *Before I was afflicted I went astray: but now have I kept thy word.*

So it is good to be afflicted because of the corrective power of affliction. Would you consider with me next that it is good for me that I have been afflicted:

II. Because of the Learning Experience of Afflictions

Note now the words of v. 71 *It is good for me that I have been afflicted; that I might learn thy statutes.*

The Lord has seen fit to determine that his will and his ways are not to be learned so much in the academic atmosphere of the seminary classroom, or simply through the assigned readings of homeschooling parents to their children, or through a Sunday School class or even through church. All of these things are important. I don't downplay any and every opportunity for parents to expose their children to the means of grace or for parents themselves to be exposed to the means of grace. And being Presbyterians we do believe in an educated ministry in which men called of God to preach receive good and sound academic and theological training.

We believe in all these things but what I'm suggesting now is that these things do not and cannot completely make the Christian. The Lord has seen fit to have his children learn his will and his ways through the hard knocks of experience – the experience of not only learning the faith but practicing the faith – being placed in circumstances that lead you to

have to prove the Lord. It's interesting to note the connection between the word *disciple* and the word *discipline*. A disciple of Christ, you might say, is one who learns the will and ways of God through discipline which is tantamount to saying that he learns through affliction.

So the author of Hebrews writes in Heb. 5:13,14 *For every one that useth milk is unskilful in the word of righteousness: for he is a babe. But strong meat belongeth to them that are of full age, even those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil.*

Do you see how spiritual experience comes to play in these verses? Senses are exercised. It takes time for senses to be exercised in such a way that the right lessons of life are learned through such exercise. This is why elders are not to be novices. It doesn't matter that they may be brilliant. It doesn't matter that they may be well read and may surpass many others in academia. The necessary qualification according to Paul in 1Tim. 3 is that they have such experience in life that will enable them to know and understand what others under their care are going through. This is why they must be those that have been able to rule their own houses well.

I think it's for good reasons that some churches and some denominations hold a view that says a man who's never been married should not be an elder. Some would take the standard a step further by saying that those who are married but have not yet had children should not be elders. I don't know that I'm in complete agreement with such a standard but I certainly understand the reasoning behind it. Experience is needed – spiritual experience that enables a Pastor or an Elder to counsel and sympathize with those under his care that are undergoing the same trials that he himself has experienced.

Spurgeon makes an insightful comment in this regard. He notes that:

Affliction is also useful to God's people as an actual producer of good things in them. Some virtues cannot be produced in us — at least, I do not see how they can be apart from affliction. One of them is patience. If a man has no trial, how is he to be patient? We all think ourselves patient when we have nothing to bear... and we are all brave when the war is over though things look rather different when bullets whistle about our ears.

Spurgeon notes again that: *There is a very sweet grace called sympathy, which is seldom found in persons who have had no trouble. We are told that our dear Lord and Master himself learned sympathy by being tempted in all points like as we are. He had to feel our infirmities, or else he could not have been touched with a fellow feeling towards us. It is surely so with us.*

And it might be worth mentioning here that one of the key ingredients, if you will, that enables a seasoned Christian to counsel and sympathize with others is that ingredient of failure. I want to make a remark here that I don't want to be misunderstood and I don't want to come across as if I'm being disrespectful toward our Fathers who have gone before us in their Christian lives and have sealed their testimonies by their lives – but there's a sense in which failure can be even more painful than a martyr's death. Don't

misunderstand me – Martyrs died very cruel and very painful deaths. It takes nothing short of God given courage to be true when facing death – but in a sense that’s precisely my point. Those that died martyred deaths received that God-given courage which enabled them to leave this world triumphantly and leave an impressive legacy to their successors.

There is no triumph in failure. There is no perceived courage in failure. There is only painful disappointment and embarrassment and despair that would lead one to cry like Elijah did that the Lord would take his life.

When I look at my own experience since the days of my seminary training I think I can honestly say that the most valuable lessons I’ve learned have come as a result of failure – one glaring failure in particular when I attempted to plant a church and I did not succeed. For years that was a scourge that I felt to be a huge reproach and it brought me to the edge of bitterness.

There’s a stanza in a hymn that reads like this: *Since the way is straight and narrow, All I claimed was swept away; My ambitions, plans, and wishes, At my feet in ashes lay.* You wouldn’t think that could be the case when your ambitions, plans, and wishes are aligned with serving Christ and extending his kingdom and having a part in building his church, but it is indeed the case. I remember John Greer once making the comment that the Lord never uses a vessel that he doesn’t first break. After that stanza in the hymn that makes reference to the ash heap of ambitions, plans and wishes, the hymn writes goes on to the refrain: *I will praise Him! I will praise Him! Praise the Lamb for sinners slain; Give Him glory, all ye people, For His blood can wash away each stain.*

Today I can and do praise him and rather than feel the reproach of failure, I glory in it and I thank God for opportunities that have since come my way that couldn’t have come to me any other way but through afflictions. I can say *it is good for me that I have been afflicted; that I might learn thy statutes.* So the goodness of God in our afflictions is apparent by the corrective power of those afflictions and by the learning experience of afflictions. Would you consider finally that the goodness of God is seen in our afflictions:

III. Because of The Sanctifying Benefit of Afflictions

Jump down to the next section of the Psalm and look at v. 75. *I know, O LORD, that thy judgments [are] right, and [that] thou in faithfulness hast afflicted me.* Do you see how the Psalmist recognizes God’s faithfulness in his afflictions? This is certainly a sanctifying benefit to our afflictions.

Isn’t it interesting that in the section of the Psalm we’re studying this morning we find that statement on affliction in v. 67 sandwiched, as it were, between two statements that confess the goodness of God. Verse 65 *Thou hast dealt well with thy servant, O LORD, according unto thy word.* Then we have the statement in v. 67 *Before I was afflicted I went astray: but now have I kept thy word.* This is immediately followed by the confession of v. 68 *Thou art good, and doest good; teach me thy statutes.* When God applies the rod to his children the sanctifying effect of that rod becomes evident in the Christian’s recognition

that God has treated him well – that God is good and does good – and that God has been faithful, faithful in his love to his children.

You've heard me say it in various sermons that the gospel of Christ gives us the liberty to interpret every circumstance of life, even the harsh providences of God, as being dealt to us not from a judge who condemns us, but from our heavenly Father who loves us. This is why the author of Hebrews can say in Heb. 12:11 *Now no chastening for the present seemeth to be joyous, but grievous: nevertheless afterward it yieldeth the peaceable fruit of righteousness unto them which are exercised thereby.* The peaceable fruit of righteousness is the sanctified benefit of realizing that God has been true and faithful and is good and does good whose love for his children is constant.

You see, in our afflictions we not only gain increased insight into the faithful character of God but we also get increased insight into our own hearts. When we studied the book of Job a number of years ago I had occasion to make the point often that in the course of his affliction Job's corruption came to the surface, so to speak and he was able to see, even though it was painful, that in spite of being one who feared God and eschewed evil he was also one who could blame God and justify himself.

That's the sanctifying benefit of affliction – it works in us that necessary humility that enables us to do justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with our God. This humility also increases our appreciation for God's grace because it magnifies before us our need for Christ's atoning death. Another part of the sanctifying effect of our afflictions becomes our ability to identify with Christ in his death. There is a fellowship of his sufferings, Paul writes in Phil. 3:10 and a part of our sanctification is being made conformable unto his death. Listen to these words from Job 16 spoken by Job himself and ask yourself if they remind you of anyone:

Job 16:9-11 *He teareth me in his wrath, who hateth me: he gnasheth upon me with his teeth; mine enemy sharpeneth his eyes upon me. They have gaped upon me with their mouth; they have smitten me upon the cheek reproachfully; they have gathered themselves together against me. God hath delivered me to the ungodly, and turned me over into the hands of the wicked.* Is there not much Christ-likeness in Job through these words?

It is good for me that I have been afflicted, our text reads. It is good because of affliction's correcting power for before I was afflicted I went astray. It is good for the learning experiences that afflictions minister - *It is good for me that I have been afflicted; that I might learn thy statutes.* And afflictions are good for the sanctifying benefits they convey. Thus we can confess with the Psalmist *Thou in faithfulness hast afflicted me.* When we see our afflictions thus in the light of God's word it makes sense how James in his epistle would call on us to something highly unusual and unnatural to the flesh when he calls on us to *count it all joy when ye fall into divers temptations (trials).* The reason we can count it all joy is because we know that our trials don't separate us from Christ's love – on the contrary they're ministered to us on account of Christ's love. May the Lord so stamp the truth of his love on our hearts that when our afflictions come we will be able like the Psalmist to say *It is good for me that I have been afflicted.*