

4. Psalm 119: The Grace and Goodness of Affliction

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[0 : 00] We're continuing our studies in Psalm 119 this evening, and our title for tonight is The Grace and Goodness of Affliction. The Grace and Goodness of Affliction.

Now last week, you may remember, we were looking particularly at the way that this psalm handles the subject of persecution, and we saw how the faithful, believing man who wrote this psalm was being persecuted by, well, by a number of folk, but particularly by the authorities, and it was no fun for him. We could see that. We noticed how this persecution and opposition filled him with grief and frustration and real pain. But we also saw how it developed in him the ability to endure, to persevere. And that ability to keep on going, to keep persevering as a believer, is one of the hallmarks of biblical faith. Do you remember how Jesus says, he who endures to the end will be saved? By which he does not mean that our endurance will win our salvation, but rather that our endurance to the end is evidence of our salvation. In other words, it's the salvation that produces the endurance, not vice versa. Now here in Psalm 119, we have a study of affliction from the inside, if you like, from worm's eye view, from the point of view of the sufferer himself. So here is our psalmist. He's persecuted. He's under pressure. He's scorned.

He's opposed by people who haven't a good word to say about him. And yet, because of the words of the Lord, and that is the key element, because of the words of the Lord, he's able to endure his afflictions and even to see his afflictions as a means of God's grace and goodness towards him. And thus my title, The Grace and Goodness of Affliction. Now friends, don't we need to learn endurance? I know that we're not being significantly persecuted. Christians aren't being significantly persecuted in this country at the moment. But we shall all face affliction of some kind, sooner or later. It'll either come to us in short, sharp bouts or episodes. It may come to some in prolonged tribulations. So how are we going to survive with a faith that is intact? Is it possible for the afflicted Christian to finish the marathon of the Christian life and breast the tape at the end of the track, still running and still rejoicing? Now over the last few weeks, we've been jumping around the psalm and we've been looking at verses from here and there. But tonight, for a change, I want more or less to confine myself to just one section of the psalm and that is verses 65 to 72 on page 513.

Verses 65 to 72. I've got three headings and they're all to do with the relationship between affliction and the words of God. So that's the territory we're looking at tonight. How do God's words, in our case the Bible, how do God's words help believers in times of affliction?

[3 : 21] Well, here's our first heading. Affliction drives us to the words of God. Just see how our psalmist puts it in verse 67. Before I was afflicted, I went astray, but now I keep your word. And you see how there's a before and an after in that verse. It's a little bit like those advertisements that you see in the newspapers sometimes which advertise treatments for boldness. Before and after. You know those pictures. So here's a photograph of Mr. J.D. We never told his full name, are we? But Mr. J.D. from Motherwell. And before the treatment, he's looking a bit grim. His mouth is turned down. And there's his head. It's as bold as the Sahara Desert. There isn't a green plant in sight. But afterwards, here's the other picture with his mouth smiling. He's like Sherwood Forest. There's everything sprouting in all directions and he looks very happy. And the point is that it's the treatment that brings the transformation. Now, much more seriously, here in verse 67, it's the affliction that brings the transformation. Before the affliction, where was I? I was astray, he says. But after the affliction,

I'm keeping your word. Why is it then? Why is it that affliction drives our psalmist to keep God's word?

After all, you might expect affliction to have quite the opposite effect. I've met people, and I'm sure you will have done as well, who have become bitter against God because they've been through times of affliction. Why has God allowed my child to die, for example? Or why has God allowed me to be seriously ill? How can I trust a God and follow a God who allows these things to happen? Now, you can understand that reaction, can't you? But our psalmist is teaching us a better way of responding to affliction. In the end, it's the unbelieving heart which rejects God in times of trouble. It's the believing heart which is propelled towards him in the time of trial. You think of Jesus himself, who must be the supreme example of this, as the opposition of his enemies, those who persecuted him, hardened towards him, it didn't weaken his absolute trust in the plan and purposes of his father. Quite the opposite. Just think of those final minutes when he was hanging upon the cross. Although he felt God forsaken, and although he was indeed temporarily God forsaken, he clung to his father's purpose. And his final words on the cross were, Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.

Not, Father, I give up on you because you've let me down. But I commit my spirit into your hands. Now, his affliction was greater than any other human suffering could ever be. And yet it drove him to his father and not away from his father. Now, verse 67 here has a further twist to it, a further implication. In verse 67, affliction drives the psalmist not only to renewed trust in the Lord, but also to obedience. There's the before and the after. The position before is that he's a stray, but after the affliction, he is obedient, he's keeping God's word. So how does this work out in a believer's actual experience? Well, I think it is something like this. Here I am, this would apply to many of you, here I am a Christian, and my life is full of roses and sunshine, milk and honey, strawberries and cream. [7:11] Wherever I look around my life, I'm blessed. There's home life, there's family life. God's blessing is upon all these things. My work, my financial position, my church life, it's all in very good nick. I'm the life and soul of every party. I'm the enviable Mr. So-and-so. And life deals me such a good hand that after a while, I become complacent. I think to myself, this is terrific. Everything that I turn to is fruitful and happy. I seem somehow to have put my finger on the secret of a happy and secure life.

I've somehow cracked the code. Don't know how it's happened, but I've done it. But why should things ever be different for me? If I keep on in this direction, I'm assured of a radiant future. Watch out world. Here I come. Nothing can stop me. Have you ever felt like that? Now the problem, of course, is that I cease to depend on God in that frame of mind. I delude myself into thinking that the secret of my success in life is something in me, something in my personality, something in my psychology. And I become self-sufficient, pleased with myself. And without realizing that it's happening, my prayer life soon runs out of steam and any urgent sense of dependence on God simply vanishes. I've become a self-sufficient man.

But suddenly, there's a blast from the Arctic. I'm afflicted. Something happens to me that is so painful, so difficult, that I realize I just cannot cope with it. I can't begin to cope with it. I'm reduced to desperation. I'm powerless to deal with this overwhelming threat and problem. So for the first time in a long time, I begin to pray. I plead with God to help me.

[9:09] Lord, I'm reduced to this state. I'm paralyzed. I'm as weak as water. I'm desperate. Please, Lord, help me. Now the Lord answers those desperate cries for help that Christians bring to him.

Occasionally, his answer is to remove the source of pain. Occasionally. But much more often, the experience of Christians is that the Lord doesn't remove the source of pain. Rather, he gives us the ability to endure it and to go on enduring it. Why? Because he's interested in our growth and the deepening of our relationship with him. He's not content just to relieve us of the problem so that we should turn straight back to self-sufficiency. He wants us to understand reality.

And reality is that we cannot move one muscle or take one breath without him. And as we begin to see our need for him, our need to depend upon him daily for everything, we then begin to read his words.

Because we want to know more about our God and what it means to belong to him. We begin to see the old days of self-sufficiency as shallow and immature. The affliction forces us to take him seriously because it shows us our utter frailty and powerlessness. And it's very humbling. It means that we can no longer throw out our chests and flex our muscles and pretend that we can master life by our own strength or cleverness. We're reduced. We're brought low. And we begin to read God's word with real appetite.

Now that we've been humbled, we want to know him. We want to understand what it's going to mean to live and perhaps to go on living in weakness and frailty. For a biblical example, you remember Jacob back in the book of Genesis. Now Jacob for many years, decades as a younger man, he'd got his way in life by using all his natural deceit and trickery and cunning. His resource was his own cleverness. But later on in life, when he was journeying back to the land of Canaan, he suddenly found himself in great danger. He was there with his large family, his many children and his wives and so on. And he heard news that his brother Esau was coming towards him with 400 men with him.

[11:44] And his quarrel with Esau, of course, had never been resolved. So suddenly disaster was staring him in the face. And in great fear and great turmoil, he wrestled all night with God who came to him in human form. And do you remember how God, as they wrestled, God touched the socket of his hip and disabled him to weaken him. And the Lord said to him, as they wrestled and as morning came, the Lord said, you must let me go now. But Jacob replied, I will not let you go unless you bless me. So in his weakness and fear and pain and disability, he wanted to know God's blessing as he had never known it before.

Now that was a profoundly painful episode for Jacob. It humbled him. But afterward, he wanted God. And he came to know him in a way that he had not wanted to know him before. The affliction was supremely painful. But it was very good for him. Now isn't that the force of our verse 67 here in the psalm?

Before the affliction came, our psalmist was all over the place, straying. But now he says, since the affliction, I keep your word. I'm taking you seriously now, Lord. The affliction, the dreadful pain, is forcing me at last to listen to you. Now let's notice how our psalmist now regards his affliction in verse 71. Does he see it as he looks back as something dreadful and awful?

You see, it's in the past, isn't it, in verse 71. No. What he says is, it is good for me that I was afflicted. Why? That I might learn your statutes. In other words, affliction has forced him into the Bible.

He can no longer skim read the Bible or just read it as a very occasional hobby. Affliction has made him to learn it and to take it seriously. He's realized that if he doesn't really come to terms with the Bible, he will never understand reality, and particularly the reality of suffering. So just notice the progression here. Verse 67, affliction has brought him to keep God's word. And then verse 71, he expresses the fact that affliction is good. The worldly man will hardly ever say that affliction is good.

[14:19] But our psalmist comes to see that in the awful pain, there is a good divine purpose. But for a further development, just look on over the page to verse 75.

I know, O Lord, that your rules are righteous, and that in faithfulness you have afflicted me. You have afflicted me. Do you see who's done the afflicting? You.

So our friend the writer has come to see that this almost unbearable affliction is not some random and purposeless happening. These things are sent by God. How? Cruelly? No. Look at verse 75. In faithfulness you have afflicted me. God sends the affliction because he is faithful to his servant. Faithful to his loving and good purpose, which is that we should come really to know him.

We cannot know him in proud self-sufficiency. Affliction drives us to the words of God, and we begin to read them seriously in our trouble because we want desperately to know who he is and what it means to belong to him.

[15:34] I know a Christian minister down in England. He'd be a man now of about 52, I would think. But he and his wife had three children. There was a boy and two little girls.

And it must be 15 years or more ago when the boy was, I think, about 13, and the little girls would have been about seven and nine. This boy was knocked down in the street by a car.

He had very serious head injuries, and a few days later he died. And the father, the minister, said that during those dreadful, dreadful days following the boy's death, it was as though everything in his life was off its hinges.

Everything was unhinged. All the usual fixed points of reference disappeared. He didn't know where he was in the world. But he said the one thing that remained, rock solid and firm, was the Bible.

It was the only thing. But it provided him with the security that he needed as he went through that very bleak period. Now, interestingly, we find exactly the same thing in the experience of Job.

[16:43] Job, you remember, in chapter 1 of the book of Job, he lost everything. And he lost it all on one day. His children, ten children, were all killed. His possessions, his servants.

Everything was taken from him. And Job, this innocent and godly sufferer, in page after page, as the book of Job develops, he wrestles with God as he tries to understand why these calamities have come upon him.

And in one of his darkest moments, in the 23rd chapter, he's lamenting the fact that God seems to be unavailable. He looks for him here and there, but he can't find him.

Job is casting around like a lost hound, looking for him. God is nowhere to be seen. And yet, despite this awful darkness and suffering and apparent absence of God, Job says these astonishing words.

He says, I have not departed from the commandments of his lips. I have treasured the words of God's mouth more than my daily food.

[17 : 46] I've treasured the words of God's mouth more than my daily food. So Job's experience was the same as that of my friend who lost his son. In the darkest time, it's the words of God's mouth that prove to be the priceless treasure.

Now, friends, if that is the case with both Job and with the writer of Psalm 119, let's be prepared ourselves to follow their example in the future, because their example is here for our instruction. Now, you may be a young person, and possibly your worst and most afflicting experience so far in life has been to fail your driving test. But bear in mind that when real affliction comes, and it will come sooner or later, the place to turn is the scriptures, to the very words of God himself.

To whom else could we turn in times of real trouble? Why not put that in the back of your mind as something that you may not need to call upon for many years, but you will in the end.

And then when the darkest part of the affliction is over, we'll be able to say with our psalmist in verse 71, it is good for me that I was afflicted, that I might learn your statutes.

[19 : 08] So it's the time of affliction that really teaches us what the Bible means. So there's our first point. Affliction drives us to the words of God. Now second, the word of God answers our enemies.

The word of God answers our enemies. In verses 67 and 71 that we've just been looking at, our psalmist has been talking about affliction and its effects. But if you look at verses 69 and 70, you'll see he speaks there about the actual people who are making his life so miserable.

Let's take verse 69 first. The insolent, he says, smear me with lies, but with my whole heart I keep your precepts.

The authorised version translates it as the proud have forged a lie against me. Now that translation suggests that these proud persecutors are rather like a group of blacksmiths who are working together and they're fashioning and hammering their lie into shape.

They're working on it. They're perfecting it. They're forging it until it comes out of the fire. And it's as though they can say, now we can use this. We've hardened it into just the right shape for our purposes.

[20 : 20] It's forged. It's ready for service in our crusade against the godly people. And the English standard version that we have here has a rather contemporary feel to it.

They smear me with lies. They're conducting a smear campaign so as to make me look absurd and ridiculous. But whichever version you prefer, the essence of the attack is the same, and it's the lie. Now how do we distinguish the lie from the truth? Well, the lie will always contradict the teaching of the Bible at heart, whereas the truth will always accord with the Bible.

The Bible teaches that behind every lie is the father of lies, the devil, who is always told lies from Genesis chapter 3 onwards. So the lies in verse 69 come not only from the persecutor, but also from the devil who has blinded the persecutor's mind.

Now let's just fast forward this into our own century and ask what kind of lies are being disseminated in our society today about Christians and about the Christian faith.

[21 : 28] What lies are told about the Bible and Christianity? Well there are many and I just really want almost at random to pick out a couple of them so that I can illustrate this point.

First of all, there's the lie that teaching the Bible and teaching the faith to children and to young people is indoctrination. You Christians, people say, you're perpetuating all this stuff about Jesus by teaching it to your children from the age of two onwards.

Look at the way you behave. You have Sunday schools in your churches, don't you? And you have teachers in the Sunday schools who are trained to brainwash the poor innocents. You're determined to make Christians of them before they've had a chance to open their eyes and look

around the world and form their own conclusions.

And it's not enough for you simply to teach the children, you teach the young parents as well to carry on this teaching at home. So you aren't satisfied for the children to have Christianity on Sundays, you're getting the parents to teach them through the week as well.

Indoctrination. To which our reply is, what you call indoctrination, we call teaching the most important truth in the world.

[22 : 43] the truth that shows our children what human life is all about, what it means to live in a universe made and ordered by a good and loving creator, and how our humanity is only rightly discovered when it's lived with Christ as Lord.

So what you're dismissing as indoctrination, we call the most glorious, liberating, joy-bringing, and by the way, intellectually satisfying, account of human life and its place in the universe.

Then second, second common lie is that Christianity is morally stifling and negative. I think we should particularly watch out for two giveaway adjectives, puritanical and Victorian.

Now when you hear either of those adjectives in a discussion about Christianity, start smelling a rat because there's a lie just under the surface. This lie says that modern man in his wisdom and coming of age maturity has thrown off the shackles, has thrown off the repressive down drag of that kind of outdated morality.

Have we not learned by now, friends, that life is a party? Unbutton your shirt, man. Loosen up. The way to be free is sex, drugs, and thumbing your nose at authority.

[24 : 03] Now these are big, big lies, aren't they? And they have hoodwinked so many people in the last two generations in our country. I don't know whether any of you happened to hear an interview which took place on the radio just over a week ago, Sunday late afternoon.

Johnny Walker was interviewing Eric Clapton, the rock guitarist, on Radio 2. I just happened to be driving down to church last Sunday evening. I switched on the radio and this interview was taking place. So I listened with some interest.

And it was really heartbreaking. This wonderfully gifted musician, Eric Clapton, was talking quite candidly and openly about his many years of addiction, both to alcohol and heroin, and how these things had almost destroyed his life.

And he talked as well about his inability to sustain a marriage relationship, his string of affairs and grief relationships with many different women, all of them coming to grief. This sex and drugs and rebellion thing is a sordid lie.

The truth is that it destroys people. But for Christian people to live with the ethics of the Bible, that is where real liberty is to be found. Only the ethics of the Bible, the ones that are dismissed as Victorian, can bring peace and joy and a framework in which human life is lived with integrity and purposefulness.

[25 : 26] So back to verse 69 here. I want us to notice the relationship between the smear campaign and the Bible. Just notice how this verse hangs together.

The insolent smear me with lies, but with my whole heart I keep your precepts. Now that isn't quite what I would have expected the psalmist to say.

I would have expected the insolent smear me with lies, but I show their lies up for the falsehoods they really are. But that isn't what he says. His response to the smear campaign is not to engage in verbal battle with the smearers, but rather to turn to God's words and to live by them with his whole heart.

In other words, it is his holy, obedient life that acts as the real answer to the smear campaign. So he doesn't engage here in a kind of a prime minister's question time knockabout debate with his opponents.

Take that, Mr Cameron. Take that, Mr Brown. I've got you by the jugular there, my right honourable friend. I've defeated you in my arguments. No, it isn't like that. It's his life.

[26 : 36] It's the quality of his life. His life of love, joy, peace, patience, gentleness, goodness, faithfulness, self-control. That's what's going to show up the lies in their true colours.

So the psalmist's answer to the lies is not to argue with men but to obey God. Now, don't get me wrong. I'm not suggesting that our able Christian intellectuals should not argue the case for Christianity in public with atheists and agnostics.

There's certainly a place for that kind of thing, particularly in our universities and in literature. C.S. Lewis did it brilliantly in his own day and men like John Blanchard, do you remember John

Blanchard who came and spoke to our church a couple of years ago?

He does it very ably today and there are others like him. And that kind of public debate is part of our evangelism. It's sometimes called apologetics. And our brothers and sisters who have lots of brains serve the cause very well as they engage the opposition in that kind of way.

But most of us are not big brains of that kind, are we? And that's why verse 69 is so helpful to us.

Very few of us could engage with an atheistic intellectual on the subject of the gospel.

[27 : 53] But all Christians can follow our psalmist and wholeheartedly live out the teaching of the Bible. It's living the word of God in verse 69 which is the answer to our enemies.

And let's spend a moment together on verse 70 as well because it tells us more about a certain type of persecuting unbeliever. Here's verse 70 again.

Their heart is unfeeling like fat but I delight in your law. They have become insensitive and unfeeling half dead but I by contrast find that God's law brings to life all my capacity for delight.

Now just look at that phrase unfeeling like fat. The authorised version translates it their heart is as fat as grease. It's worth just thinking about that for a moment.

In our fridge back at home I sometimes find little pots of fat or grease you know the sort of thing. Do you have the same phenomenon some of you in your fridge at home? I've never quite understood this grease pot phenomenon but I suspect that somebody who's probably a female person of some influence in our kitchen I suspect what happens is that the roasting tin is picked up after the joint of meat has been roasted and the residual liquid is poured out into this little pot.

[29 : 19] Now what it's used for subsequently I simply haven't a clue. Maybe it's rubbed on the hinges of the doors to stop them squeaking. Maybe when the children get a cough in the winter they need to have a bit of it rubbed on their chests.

I think also it breathes in our fridge because sometimes there are two little pots of grease there and I look the next day and there are three or four that don't know what's going on. But one thing I can tell you for certain about these pots of grease and that is that grease is very insensitive.

It has no feeling at all. I can squeeze it I can shout at it I can throw it on the floor but there is no reaction. That pot of grease is heartless.

Now that's what our psalmist is saying here in verse 70. These proud arrogant persecutors have lost their ability to feel. They've become desensitized to the glorious truth about God and the world and therefore the Bible is nothing to them.

Now this is a wake up call isn't it to those who are not Christians. This might apply to some who are here this evening. If a person closes his ears to God's gospel and God's truth eventually his heart will lose its sensitivity to the things of God and he will turn not only against God but even against God's people but by contrast look at the second half of verse 70.

[30 : 45] The believer delights in God's law. He feasts upon the Bible and then he says this is wonderful this is what the man says who delights give me more he says he's like Oliver Twist he needs more because the words of God delight him they are his joy.

So in both verse 69 and verse 70 it's the word of God that answers the believer's enemies. In verse 69 the lies of the persecutor drive the believer to respond with wholehearted obedience and in verse 70 the blocked arteries spiritually speaking and the fatty degeneration of the heart of these persecutors is contrasted with the psalmist's delight in God's law.

His heart is alive sensitive pliant ready to obey the gentlest whisper of the Lord he loves. He doesn't just accept God's law he delights in God's law.

Well now thirdly and briefly affliction and opposition compel us to praise God and his words. They compel us to praise God and his words.

Let's observe this phenomenon for our instruction because this is a phenomenal thing. The psalmist says in the course of this psalm about his sufferings I'll just read you a few of the quotations about his sufferings.

[32 : 13] He says princes sit plotting against me verse 23 my soul clings to the dust in other words it partakes of the very nature of death he's so low verse 25 my soul melts away for sorrow verse 28 the insolent utterly deride me verse 51 the cords of the wicked ensnare me verse 61 the insolent have dug pitfalls for me in verse 85 they have almost made an end of me on earth verse 87 the wicked lie in wait to destroy me verse 95 I am severely afflicted verse 107 trouble and anguish have found me out verse 143 and yet in the midst of all that suffering which he feels so keenly in the midst of it all he's able to say in verse 65 you have dealt well with your servant oh lord according to your word now don't you think that is phenomenal the suffering believer keenly suffering believer

looks up to god and says you have dealt well with me it's remarkable that god should deal with him at all but the lord has not merely dealt with him he has dealt well with him so what is the lord showing to us in verse 65 he's showing us this man as an example this believer in the midst of his trials acknowledges how good the lord god is to him now to see life like that is simply to have it transformed our temptation when the severe trials come is to be self pitying and self centred and to see only the trials now this man sees his trials but beyond them he also sees how very good the lord is he sees how graciously the lord has dealt with him what has happened is that the lord has given him a much bigger view of life than the view of the man who is embittered and self centred and only sees his sufferings our psalmist is suffering but as he sees his sufferings and feels his pain he sees so much more in addition he looks at the whole course of his life all its phases and episodes and details and he sees how much and how well god has dealt with him so friends let's allow this verse 65 to give us a true and right perspective on our life we may be suffering there may be some here at the moment who are quite afflicted but it's also true that if we are christians god has dealt and is dealing wonderfully with us think of what he has done if you are a believer he has brought you already to the only safe haven which is the lord jesus he has written your name indelibly in the book of life he has forgiven every last sin even the most monstrous and horrible sins that we have committed he has set us amongst the glorious brotherhood and sisterhood of the christian church he has made us heirs of eternal life we are the beloved children of the heavenly father we have a bible as well which in the words of verse 72 is more precious than a bank full of money he has given to us delights and joys that the man of the world has never tasted the truth is that if we're christians we are loved so there may be afflictions there will be afflictions but all of us who trust in christ can say with our psalmist you have dealt well with your

servant oh lord according to your word let's pray together dear god our father we do want to thank you for this man who so faithfully recorded for us his life and his perceptions and the way in which you had so mercifully dealt with him we felt a little bit of his affliction but we see also his overarching song of praise to you which this psalm indeed is you dealt well with him despite these sufferings and even these sufferings he was able to see were good for him that he might learn your statutes we pray dear father that you'll help us to be people of this kind who trust you through everything and that even when the sharp affliction comes we turn to your words and learn from them and we pray that you'll fill our hearts in the days ahead with a great sense of joy that we're able to worship and belong to a god like you and we ask it in Jesus name amen amen amen oh ay amen
Ultimately our flow our Guillermin and help us to believe K the Shang