

The Blessings of Affliction

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[0 : 00] We turn now to God's Word and to the book of Psalms and to Psalm 119. Edward is continuing his series through this psalm. We're in verses 65 to 72 this evening, page 513.

Psalm 119 and reading from verse 65. Psalm 119.

Psalm 119. Teach me your statutes. The insolent smear me with lies. But with my whole heart I keep your precepts.

Their heart is unfeeling, like fat. But I delight in your law. It is good for me that I was afflicted, that I might learn your statutes.

The law of your mouth is better to me than thousands of gold and silver pieces. Amen. May the Lord bless to us his word this evening.

[1 : 43] Well friends, let's turn in our psalm to verses 65 to 72.

Psalm 119. And you'll find that on page 513 in our hardback Bibles. My title for this evening is The Blessings of Affliction.

Now you'll be aware that this great psalm falls into 22 sections and each section has eight verses in it. And while there are various themes which are touched on many times throughout the psalm, in most of the sections there is not one dominant theme.

But in our section for tonight there is a dominant theme and it's this theme of affliction. And throughout these eight verses, 65 to 72, our psalmist's main point is that it's good for him, and good therefore for any believer, to suffer affliction.

Because affliction drives us to study the Bible and to value it deeply. Now this is not a theme that the man or woman of the world wants to engage with.

[3 : 02] Human beings naturally put a great deal of effort into avoiding affliction. In fact, we devise all kinds of barriers and buffers to keep affliction far from us.

If we're given the choice between comfort and affliction, we naturally go for comfort. The deck chair is more attractive than the gymnasium. But the Bible, in its length and breadth, teaches us that believers will suffer.

It shows us that people who belong to the world to come will be put under pressure by people who belong to this world. To become a Christian is to join the ranks of people who prepare to suffer.

Just think for a moment of the most prominent people in the Bible. Think of Moses who led the people through the wilderness. He suffered. David, the king, was hounded by enemies.

Daniel suffered. Job suffered. In the New Testament, the apostles suffered. And supremely, Jesus himself suffered.

[4 : 08] He was on earth a man of sorrows, acquainted with grief. And in the New Testament, the ordinary Christians suffer as well and are taught to expect it. For example, this is what Paul wrote to the Philippians in chapter 1, verse 29 of that letter.

He says, It has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ, you should not only believe in him, but also suffer for his sake, engaged in the same conflict that you saw I had and now hear that I still have.

Now think of that verb there. It has been granted to you, gifted to you, that you should not only believe in Christ, but also suffer for his sake. Suffering for the sake of Christ is part of the package that we receive when we start to follow the Lord Jesus.

Now, you might be sitting there thinking, I do not want to listen to this. Thank you. It's too difficult. Can I leave now and go to the pub? Friend, don't leave.

Because our psalmist, as I think we'll see in a moment, is going to make the point that to be afflicted because of our allegiance to the Lord is a blessing. And it's the very thing that transforms us from men and women of the world into men and women of God.

[5 : 29] It is right at the heart of true Bible Christianity. A church that has no place in its understanding or its teaching for suffering and affliction can never be a true church of Jesus Christ.

I have an excellent short exposition of Psalm 119 by Christopher Ashe, who used to be the director of the Cornhill Training Course in London. And I'd like to read you a short excerpt from his comments on this particular section of the psalm.

He writes this, We now reach a most important section of the psalm, verses 65 to 72. We will call this section the Adversity Gospel, which is the antidote to the so-called prosperity gospel, which is no gospel.

The prosperity gospel is endemic in Christianity all around the world. In one form or another, it teaches that if you become a Christian, God wants to bless you, and therefore your bank statement will become fatter, your house will get bigger, your car will get faster, your wife will get prettier, or your husband more handsome, your children will get cleverer, your health will get better, and all will be for the best in this best of all possible religions.

That is to say, things will necessarily get better in this life. Now that is the teaching of the so-called prosperity gospel, but it is not the teaching of the Bible.

[6 : 59] It leads people astray, and we need to resist it. Our psalmist is teaching us that affliction is a necessary part of true Bible faith.

Now just to give a bit of bigger context to all this, let me just add this before we grapple with the text. The Lord does bless us with great joy, with many joys.

Affliction is not the whole story. Just think of it. The Lord gives us the joys of creation. Food, for example, and laughter and friendship, and the hobbies that we enjoy, like growing vegetables in the garden.

He showers us with pleasures, sport, music, the arts, architecture, the sciences, the loveliness of hill and valley and springtime and birdsong, and the joys of belonging to his people as well.

We had a touch of that from what Andrew was saying a few minutes ago. The joys of belonging to a group of people like this. Sometimes when I think of our church here at the Tron, I feel so glad and so blessed I could pick up the dog and dance a hide and fling on the kitchen floor.

[8 : 10] I could, and it's a big dog. There are great joys in being a Christian. Great joys. Our psalmist as well. is full of joy as well as affliction.

Look at verse 35, for example. Lead me in the path of your commandments for I delight in it. Delight is a strong and visceral word.

Or look at verse 64. The earth, O Lord, is full of your steadfast love. The whole globe, all its teeming life, speaks of the rock-solid assurance of the loving promises of the God of Israel.

And even this section on affliction, you have a joyful outburst here in verse 72. The law of your mouth is better to me than thousands of gold and silver pieces.

In other words, you can keep your bank full of money. I don't want it. I want the Bible because I value the Bible so much. So do bear all that in mind.

[9 : 10] That's the bigger context. The Lord blesses us with so many things, and he gives us real joys. But let's now turn to our passage so as to consider the blessings of affliction.

I want to draw two main ideas from the passage. The first will be much longer and the second much shorter. First then, affliction is our personal trainer.

Verse 71, it is good for me that I was afflicted, that I might learn your statutes. Affliction has been a source of learning for me.

What is it that I learn through affliction? Your statutes. In other words, affliction has opened up my understanding of the Bible. Now let's see what lies behind this important verse 71.

Let's go back to verse 65 to see how our psalmist begins. He says to the Lord, you have dealt well with your servant. Now he's not saying you have dealt well with me, your servant, by protecting me from trouble.

[10 : 18] What he's saying is you have dealt well with me by allowing affliction to come to me. That's the point he's working towards. Verse 65, you have dealt well with me.

And then look at verse 71, it is good for me that I was afflicted. But our friend, the psalmist, is a bit more specific in verse 65. You have dealt well with your servant, O Lord, according to your word.

So the Lord's goodness is shown in his keeping of his word or keeping his promises. He has promised to deal well with his servants. Throughout the Bible, he's promised again and again to be with his people, to bless his people, to be their very possession, their portion, as he puts it in verse

57.

Their eternal inheritance. And all his promises come to their fulfillment in the coming of Jesus to rescue his people for eternal life. The Lord has dealt well with the psalmist and the Lord has dealt well with the church.

He has dealt well, he is dealing well with the church, and he will ultimately deal well with his people. And the psalmist, knowing that the Lord has been utterly faithful to him, dares now to voice a request in verse 66.

[11:40] Teach me, he says, good judgment and knowledge, for I believe in your commandments. Now that phrase, good judgment, literally means taste.

He's saying to the Lord, please develop my taste for true knowledge and for moral goodness. Now you know how with some foods, you have to develop an acquired taste.

And it may be that by nature, we don't naturally have a taste for moral goodness. But think of this in terms of the things we eat. A 13-year-old who doesn't like to eat fish may well learn to enjoy fish by the time he's 20.

He acquires the taste for it. And the Christian may not initially have much of a taste for moral goodness, but God in his grace develops in us a longing to be able to live in such a way as to please him.

How then does the Lord sharpen a believer's desire for good judgment and knowledge? How does he whet our appetite for these things? The answer is by allowing us to be afflicted.

[12:45] This is the line of thinking that takes us from verse 66 to 67. Teach me good judgment and knowledge for I believe in your commandments. And how is it verse 67 that I'm now keeping your word?

It is through affliction. I was off the right path. I was astray before I was afflicted. But now he's saying following my time of affliction I'm keeping your word.

And he puts it even more clearly in verse 71. It is good for me that I was afflicted that I might learn your statutes. So our afflictions school us and train us in learning what the Bible really means. Without them we would never really deeply understand the scriptures. To follow Jesus is going to follow in the same pattern that he has set for us. We mark his footsteps and in them plant our own as the old hymn puts it.

And what are his footsteps? Well, his pattern is that he's a man of sorrows acquainted with grief and we learn to be like him. Christians are being conformed, reshaped to the image of God's son.

[14:01] And in Jesus' own experience there had to be death before there could be resurrection. And it's the same with us. The Bible teaches us to look at our sorrows and afflictions not as the world looks at them.

The world regards these things as 100% hateful and 100% to be avoided. But that is not the Bible's way. Just think of how the New Testament deals with this subject.

Think of the Apostle James writing in the first chapter of his letter. He says, Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds.

But he goes on to give the reason for these trials. For he says, you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect that you may be mature and complete lacking in nothing.

Our trials are like an arduous form of training. They develop our ability to endure, to persevere. Or think of the Apostle Paul who writes this in Romans chapter 5.

[15:08] We rejoice in our sufferings. Isn't that a way to start a sentence? We rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character.

The letter to the Hebrews picks up the same line of teaching in its 12th chapter. The author writes, It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons, in other words, his real genuine sons.

For what son is there whom his father has not disciplined? Then the author goes on, For the moment, all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later, it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.

Now, these Bible authors are not telling us to laugh when we're struck with trauma and affliction. Certainly not. Our afflictions will make us weep. We will feel numbed by them, initially perhaps deeply discouraged by them, and sometimes quite overwhelmed by them.

When James the Apostle says, Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet various kinds of trials, he's asking us to think of our lives as being like a great ledger, a great account book, where on one side you record your losses, and on the other side you record your assets and your profits.

[16:34] And he's saying to us, Consider your trials, account your trials as assets and profits, not as losses. The world will see them as losses, but you, my brothers, James is saying, you must learn to consider your sufferings as great assets in the end.

Count them as joy. They're not enjoyable, but regard them as experiences of great benefit to your life as a Christian. These New Testament authors are showing us that afflictions develop our powers of endurance.

And our psalm focuses that endurance even more sharply by showing us that affliction enables us to endure in keeping God's word. Look again at verse 67.

Before I was afflicted, I went astray, but now I keep your word. And how does the psalmist speak of God's part in all this?

Well, look at verse 65 again. You have dealt well with your servant. And verse 68. You are good and you do good. In other words, the afflictions he's been suffering are an expression of God's love and God's goodness towards him.

[17:53] They're not a sign that God hates him or that God has abandoned him. On the contrary, they're a sign that God loves him and has his best interests at heart. Let me ask this question.

Did God love Jesus when he gave him up to death on the cross? Was that a loving thing for a father to cause his son to do?

Of course he was loving Jesus at that point. The cross is the highest expression of God's love not only for us but also for Jesus. The suffering of the cross was inescapable.

God's love was not suddenly withdrawn from his son when Jesus went onto the cross. It was the sin of man, our sin, that caused the death of Jesus and made it necessary and it was the loving suffering of Jesus backed by the loving sending of God the Father.

It was that that brought about our salvation. And in the same way, it's the love of God that lies behind our afflictions. We would never have understood that without the Bible's teaching.

[19:01] Without the Bible's teaching, we would rail against our sufferings. We'd cry out, it's cruel, it's unfair. But with the Bible to instruct us, we can learn to say in the words of verse 71, it is good for me that I was afflicted.

Now the Lord will allow afflictions to come to us in many different forms. There'll be bereavements, there'll be severe illnesses, unexpected unemployment, and lack of funds, financial crash, family problems, and broken relationships, for some people, exhaustion and overwork.

Then there'll be the inevitable decline in health and vigor that old age brings on. But the Lord lovingly allows these things to come to us so that, in the words of verse 71, we might learn the Lord's statutes, that we might come to him and cling to him in our difficulties.

Do you remember the example of Job? Think of what his sufferings did to him. Well, let me remind you of his sufferings first. In one day, in a single day, this godly, fine, upright man lost all his livestock, all his servants, bar the one or two who brought the message of his losses to him, and all ten of his ten children, all of them, as the house collapsed on them.

And then very soon afterwards, the Lord allowed Satan to take Job's health away and he was afflicted from head to foot with painful sores and he had to sit outside in the garden on the ash heap, scraping these painful sores with a piece of broken pot to try and give him some relief.

[20:45] Now, you might have expected Job at that point to curse God and turn away from him and never want to speak to him again. But no, Job turned to the Lord and clung to him and talked with him and argued with him and was finally blessed by him enormously.

One of the great lessons of the book of Job is to teach us to turn to the Lord and not away from the Lord when affliction comes to us, to cling to him for better or for worse.

Now, our psalmist here reacts to his afflictions in just the same way. He prays, he opens his Bible and he begins to study his Bible as he has never studied it before.

It is good for me that I was afflicted, verse 71. Why? That I might learn your statutes. Now, friends, to illustrate this, if you've been with us at the Tron for less than the last seven years or so, you may not know much about what happened to our church back in 2012 and the years that led up to it.

But it was in that year that we left the Church of Scotland, the national church to which our congregation had belonged for a very long time. We left the denomination.

[22 : 04] It was a time of real affliction and real difficulty for us. Now, as most of you will know, the issue on the surface was the fact that the Church of Scotland was failing to hold to the Bible's teaching on human sexuality.

It was beginning to say very clearly that homosexual relationships could be actively engaged in by Christians, including Christian ministers and church leaders. That was the surface issue. But underlying that issue, the more important issue, was the question, is the Bible really authoritative? We know that the Bible's teaching on sex and marriage and sexuality is absolutely clear.

Sex is for marriage and marriage is for one man and one woman. So we realized that the Church of Scotland was having to decide whether its practice was going to be determined by the Bible or by the agenda of the modern world.

And the Church of Scotland at that point decided to abandon the Bible's teaching and to opt for the way of the world. Now for us at the time it was obvious that if we wanted to honor the Lord and honor the Bible we had to leave the denomination.

[23 : 16] But it was not easy. It brought real affliction. There were tears. There was anger. There was frustration. There was a great deal of pain. But that crisis, that affliction had the effect of forcing our noses back into the Scriptures.

We had to ask ourselves at that time, well, what does the Bible teach about these things? So the denomination, without doing so knowingly, was challenging the Tron Church on what it really believed about the Bible.

But those of us who were there at the time, as we look back on that painful period, we would all echo the words of verse 71. It is good for us that we were afflicted, that we might learn the Lord's statutes.

Our conviction that the Bible is true and authoritative and decisive in these ethical matters has been greatly strengthened by our affliction. We had to study the Bible afresh, and our convictions were greatly strengthened by our study.

Now think of how this might work out on the individual level, on the individual Christian life level. Many in the church, many in our church here, are young adults. There are students, young workers, perhaps you're married and you're raising a young family, in which case you may not feel like a young adult anymore.

[24 : 38] You may be feeling a bit like a harassed adult with middle age fast encroaching. But I'm thinking particularly of those of you who are in your 20s and 30s. There was a time, perhaps, when you sat rather loose to the Bible.

You were spreading your wings. You were enjoying the thrills and spills of youth, and not bothering your minds much with the Bible. And even if you profess to being a Christian, you weren't very serious about the Bible.

But time has moved on, and you've seen some rough patches in life. Your little ship has encountered choppy waters. And here you are now, you're in the congregation.

You've begun to take the Bible much more seriously. And you know how people begin to challenge you. Colleagues at work, if you're out at work, or fellow students at the university.

And you get questions like this fired at you. How can you folk believe that the Bible is relevant after all these centuries? It was written 3,000 years ago. Or how can Jesus be the only way to God?

[25 : 43] This is a cosmopolitan world. We have to accept everything, don't we? How can Jesus be the only way? So questions of this kind get fired at you, and they are painful.

They bring you affliction. Not perhaps major affliction, but real affliction. But, in the face of these questions, as you take a stand for the Bible, and for the Christian faith, the very fact that you're standing up and taking the criticism, fortifies you to be brave in the future.

Every time you say, well, I do believe that the Bible is true, or I do believe that Jesus is unique and is the only way to God, or I do believe in the ethical teaching of the Bible, every time you take courage and stand firm on the Bible's teaching, you set yourself a personal precedent.

You strengthen your own spine. Look back to verse 67. Before I was afflicted, before suffering came my way, I was careless.

I was all over the place. I was going astray. But now, since I've begun to taste affliction, I keep your word. My character, as a believer, is being formed and strengthened.

[27 : 01] Now, verses 69 and 70 paint a rather chilling picture of one particular source of affliction. And that source is people who are clearly anti-God and anti-the psalmist.

Let me read those two verses. 69. The insolent smear me with lies, but with my whole heart I keep your precepts. Their heart is unfeeling like fat, but I delight in your law.

Verse 69 speaks of what we would call a smear campaign, where a person's reputation is dishonored by lies being told about them. Now, this is a pretty common experience for Christian leaders in prominent positions.

Somebody hates their work, hates their gospel, hates the influence that they're having for the gospel, and accuses them without justification of some kind of misbehavior. Well, it's a comfort to know that this happened to Jesus.

Think of some of the things that were said against him. He casts out demons by Beelzebub, the prince of demons. He was called a deceiver, a blasphemer, a Sabbath breaker, a man who is leading the people astray.

[28 : 14] He was smeared with lies, but the truth was, verse 69, that he kept the Lord's precepts with his whole heart. What happens to these people who oppose those who stand for the truth?

Well, look at verse 70. Their hearts become like a bowl of fat. In other words, they lose all sensitivity. Their consciences are dulled. But the psalmist, by contrast, delights in the law of God. So, friends, that's the first thing, and let's rejoice at it. Affliction is our personal trainer. It's very painful, but when affliction comes, it drives us not away from the Bible, but into the Bible.

It is good for me that I was afflicted, says the psalmist, that I might learn your statutes. Well, now, secondly, and much more briefly, affliction causes us to value God's words immensely.

Let's look together at verse 72. It's a very joyful verse. The law of your mouth is better to me, more valuable to me, than thousands of gold and silver pieces.

[29 : 27] Now, the strength of this verse hangs upon the fact that the human heart naturally craves money. The psalmist knows this. And it's that craving that gives force to this verse.

He imagines opening a strong box that is full of money, or perhaps going into some kind of Aladdin's cave that is crammed full of glittering pieces of silver and gold. And as he looks at all this shiny metal or all these banknotes, he says, poof, what a load of trash that is.

There is only one thing that I want, and that is the words of God, because the words of God teach me how to live, teach me how to make sense of my life with all its afflictions.

Money can never do that. Money can only coarsen me and corrupt me and make my heart like fat, become a lifeless idol. That's what money does. But God's words teach me how to live, how to die, and what to value.

And they teach me about him and how much he loves me. verse 72 teaches us the real value of the Bible. And look at the delightful way that the psalmist describes the Bible in verse 72, not as the Bible, but as the law of your mouth.

[30 : 41] Isn't that personal? These are not cold words inscribed on marble tablets. This is the father instructing his child gently and lovingly.

He speaks to his child mouth to ear. And why is the teaching of God's mouth so precious? Because the psalmist has been afflicted and the Lord is reassuring him that it is good to be afflicted.

For me personally, I've known very little real affliction in my life, but there was a time when I was in my late 30s when I was suddenly struck down with what the doctors called chronic fatigue syndrome.

I'm sure there are others who have had a similar thing. In my late 30s, as I say. Now, I don't know why this came to me. I have never been a workaholic. But I was suddenly reduced to a shadow of my former self.

And for months, I could barely do anything. I could just manage one or two little tasks per day. Write a short letter. Pick up a bucket of chicken feed and feed the chicken. I could do that.

[31 : 43] Just a few small things. Anyway, one particular day, I'd managed to write a short letter to somebody and I had to go and post it. So I walked, I tottered, slowly to the post box, which was about 200 or 300 yards away from where we lived.

This involved crossing a little bridge over a very pretty little stream that ran underneath. And as I approached the bridge, I noticed a man that I knew looking over it into the water.

I don't mean he was thinking of diving off the edge, not like that, but he was just looking at it. He was an Irishman called Paddy Ryan. He was about 30 years older than I was.

And he'd recently had a leg amputated. He was a heavy smoker. I think he was still smoking as he looked over the bridge. You know, he'd had vascular trouble. Anyway, he wasn't at all well, but I knew him a little bit.

So I stopped and I said, hello Paddy and how are you? At the top of the morning to you, Vicar, he said. I could be worse. I could be worse. I'm still on the green side of the turf. Anyway, we had a little chat together.

[32 : 46] But the point I'm making is this. As we leaned over the bridge and looked at the water together, I suddenly realized that physically I was on exactly the same level as this man who didn't really have very long to live.

I felt that we were two little old men tottering and pottering. I was 38 and I felt like Methuselah. Now, it was a minor affliction as it turned out.

It lasted just a year or so and they got better. But it made me realize that we're attached to this world by a fragile thread. A very small pair of scissors can snip it.

Affliction brings home to us our powerlessness. When we're well and happy and confident, we surge through life like a bull in a china shop. But when we're reduced to fragility, we realize that it's the Bible, Bible, it's the words of God's mouth that bind us to the world to come.

It's when we're really up against it that we value the glorious gospel, these promises of eternal life, the promise that we shall be with the Lord and the Lord's people forever in that realm where tears, pain, mourning, and death have vanished.

[34 : 01] So when afflictions come to us, let's not rail against them. They may be desperately painful, but these afflictions will train us to value the Lord and his words.

And we shall be able to say with the psalmist, it is good for me that I was afflicted, that I might learn your statutes. And does affliction teach me the Bible just for my own benefit?

No. It teaches me the Bible so that I can then share the wonderful gospel with the needy world outside who so much need to hear it too. Let's bow our heads and we'll pray.

Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes forth from the mouth of God. How we thank you, our dear Heavenly Father, for loving us and for leaning over and speaking into our ears from your own wonderful mouth, the words that you want us to hear, the words that assure us that you are for us, not against us, and that when you allow afflictions to come to us, it is ultimately for our benefit.

Give us the grace, we pray, to understand this and to stick with you, to turn with you every time some sharp affliction comes to us, not to take offense at it, but to learn to consider it as an asset and a profit, not as a loss, so that we might know you better, cling to you more, and understand this great and glorious gospel of eternal life.

[35 : 44] And we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.