

The Power of Example in Times of Affliction

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Preacher: Edward Lobb

[0 : 00] Well, we're going to turn to our Bibles now to read together in the Word of God. And you'll find our reading in the Psalms, in Psalm 119, the long psalm.

And Edward is leading us through some portions of this, and we come to verse 73, the section entitled Yod.

And these titles at the top of each section are the letters of the Hebrew alphabet. I know you know your Hebrew alphabet, but just in case, one or two of you don't.

The letter Yod is one of them, and we're going to read there, beginning at verse 73. Your hands have made and fashioned me.

Give me understanding that I may learn your commandments. Those who fear you shall see me and rejoice, because I have hoped in your word.

[1 : 05] I know, O Lord, that your rules are righteous, and that in faithfulness you have afflicted me. Let your steadfast love comfort me, according to your promise to your servant.

Let your mercy come to me, that I may live, for your law is my delight. Let the insolent be put to shame, because they have wronged me with falsehood.

As for me, I will meditate on your precepts. Let those who fear you turn to me, that they may know your testimonies. May my heart be blameless in your statutes, that I may not be put to shame.

Amen. And may God bless to us his word. Good evening, friends.

Good to see you. Now, we're in Psalm 119, as you know, so perhaps you'd turn with me to our section beginning at verse 73, on page 513 in the Hardback Bibles.

[2 : 19] So our section is verses 73 to 80. And my title tonight is The Power of Example in Times of Affliction. A couple of weeks ago, I was sitting in our kitchen at home with my wife, Catherine, and I must have been looking a bit like an old grizzly bear that is being sent to bed without his supper.

Because Catherine looked at me and she said, What's up with you? Are you looking a bit sad about something? Are you okay? So I said to her, Well, if I am looking sad, I think it's because increasingly I feel as if we Christians are living in an alien culture these days.

It's so different from when we were young. Back in the 1960s or even the 1970s, the church was largely respected. The Bible was perhaps not more widely read then than it is now.

But there was a sense in British society that it contained important truth. And that it was good to have it taught in schools. And schools were required by law to hold acts of Christian worship regularly in school assembly.

But here we are today, half a century later, and there's a sense that Christianity, at least real Bible Christianity, is simply not acceptable.

[3 : 40] Almost as though it's immoral. It seems that evangelical Christians now occupy the low moral ground. I think, for example, of this attempt being made to gag Franklin Graham, the American evangelist, from speaking in Britain.

Why? Why? Because it's on record that he has spoken against Islam and that he has upheld the Bible's teaching on sex and marriage.

And our culture, committed as it is to what it calls inclusivity, can't tolerate the idea that a major world faith should be criticized, or the idea that some types of sexual behavior should be called wrong.

So what we're experiencing today is a kind of cultural Marxism, where anybody who steps out of line and refuses to tick all the boxes is in danger of being publicly denounced.

The old church denominations, the Church of England or Church of Scotland, are expected to fall in line with these cultural trends, and expected to repeat all the shibboleths.

[4 : 46] For example, the Church of England General Synod, which was meeting just a week or two ago, had as one of the main items on its agenda, one of the main items, the question of how the church should be responding to climate change.

I thought to myself, come on, you Anglicans. Where are you going? What you need to be talking about is how to get the gospel out into the highways and byways of England, where people are perishing.

What England needs is salvation, not a two-inch drop in the level of the oceans. Now friends, don't worry. This sermon is not going to be a rant against modern culture.

Psalms 119 will prevent that. But I just mention these depressing aspects of the modern world, because they help us to feel something of what the author of Psalm 119 was feeling in his culture some 3,000 years ago.

If we feel under pressure from the juggernaut of modern political correctness, our psalmist felt the painful force of opposition, fierce opposition, in his own day.

[5 : 51] Look at our verse 78, for example. Let the insolent be put to shame. Why? Because they have wronged me with falsehood.

In other words, they have been talking about me. They've been denouncing me. They've been saying wrong things. Look back to verse 69. The insolent smear me with lies.

So the psalmist is clearly something of a public figure in Israel, probably known as a teacher of the Old Testament law. He wishes to uphold the law and teach it so as to strengthen the lives of godly people.

But his opponents are wanting to discredit him in the way that Franklin Graham's opponents want to discredit him today. But we really shouldn't be downcast by this, because what we're beginning to experience in Western society is what the Lord's people, at most times in history, have had to put up with all across the world.

We've had this rather strange and long period of protection and peace for some hundreds of years now. But the Bible-believing church is rapidly becoming, like its master, despised and rejected by men.

[7 : 03] If a church or a denomination wants to be acceptable to secular society, it takes on board secular society's values and becomes effectively a branch of secular society.

It proclaims loudly how it espouses inclusivity and anxiety about climate change and so many other things of that sort. And it doesn't preach the gospel, because the gospel is always divisive.

Let me give another example of secular values. Christmas was not so very long ago. When you listen to Christmas carols on the radio, Classic FM or Radio 3, in the weeks leading up to Christmas, the radio presenters are very enthusiastic about the carols.

They broadcast them by the hundreds. They love them. They rejoice in the beautiful melodies. They compare new CDs put out by famous choirs. They even organize competitions for budding composers to set some brand new carol to music.

Someone like the Poet Laureate writes a new carol, and it's broadcast around the country, and everyone writes their own set of music to it and sends it in for a competition. But what the radio presenters will never engage with is the message of the carols.

[8 : 21] You know that so many of the carols preach the gospel clearly and beautifully, but the message of the gospel is never opened up. The message of the carols is the elephant in the room.

It's the thing that no one dares to acknowledge. Think of that wonderful carol service that's broadcast every year on Christmas Eve at 3pm from King's College, Cambridge. We always listen to it at home.

It's so popular, it's repeated on Christmas Day. But you listen in vain for a sermon. The music is delicious, but the message is conspicuous by its absence.

I know it's there in the carols and in the Bible readings, but it needs to be brought out, otherwise people don't feel it and hear it. What modern society admires about the church is the trimmings of the church and the trappings, the lovely music and the stunning architecture of so many cathedrals and churches.

But the message, so humbling, so divisive, so countercultural, is considered untouchable. And thus we see the gagging, the attempted gagging of an evangelist like Franklin Graham in the country where his father Billy Graham was so warmly welcomed many years ago.

[9 : 34] So it's a comfort to find that the author of Psalm 119 is facing similar challenges and is feeling the force of the opposition as we do today. So let's learn from him.

Well, what is his situation as he writes this psalm? He's not on his own. There are other people here. This psalm is not written by a hermit sitting on the bass rock.

He has opponents, as we've seen in verse 78. In fact, his opponents have been emerging right throughout the psalm. They first appear way back in verse 21, as insolent, accursed ones who wander from the Lord's commandments.

And then in verse 23, there are even princes who sit plotting against our friend the psalmist. And that suggests that he's well known and sufficiently influential to attract the attention of national leaders.

Opponents appear again in many places. Verse 42, verse 51, 53, 61. They're lurking throughout the psalm, which shows just how much the psalmist was feeling their hostility.

[10 : 45] But enemies there are, but he's not without friends. We met them first in verse 63. I am a companion of all who fear you.

All who fear you. That word all suggests that there were plenty of them. And then in our section for today, they appear twice. First in verse 74, those who fear you shall see me and rejoice.

And again in verse 79, let those who fear you turn to me. Why? That they may know your testimonies. And that suggests that our author is a Bible teacher, whose job is to help others to understand the words of God.

So there are ungodly enemies who hate this teacher of the Bible, but there are also godly friends. And in addition to that, there is affliction, which he mentions in verse 75.

In faithfulness you have afflicted me. Now we spent some time last week on the blessings of affliction in verse 71, where we saw our psalmist being positively glad to be afflicted.

[11 : 51] Look back to verse 71. It is good for me, he says, good for me, that I was afflicted so that I might learn your statutes. But look again at verse 75, because he says something there about his afflictions, which he didn't quite say in verse 71.

In verse 71 and in verse 67, he writes, I was afflicted. Passive. Source of affliction not named. But in verse 75, he names the source.

And it may surprise us. In faithfulness he says to God, you have afflicted me. And why has God sent him affliction? Well, he's told us back in verse 71, that I might learn your statutes.

Affliction is sent by a loving father, so as to train the believer, to school him or her, in what it means to walk with God. But the psalmist has a clear and balanced view of God's ways.

He knows that the God who afflicts him in order to train him is also the God who comforts him in his affliction. So he writes in the next verse, in verse 76, he's just written, in faithfulness you've afflicted me, and he goes straight on, let your steadfast love comfort me, according to your promise to your servant.

[13 : 11] So God has sent him affliction, but he's also promised him comfort. God then is the afflictor, and God is the comforter.

He's both of these things. Paul the Apostle understood this combination of affliction and comfort so very well. Let me read you a little passage from the beginning of his second letter to the Corinthians.

He's clearly just been through some very difficult experience. So he says to the Corinthians, blessed be, in other words, thanks and praise be, to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies, and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.

Now do you see what he's saying there? He's saying we are afflicted, and God comforts us in our affliction, and that is why we are now able to comfort others in their times of affliction.

We know what it is to be comforted by him, so we pass on that comfort to others. Let me try and illustrate this. Imagine an older man, a Christian man, who is suddenly widowed.

[14 : 29] There he is, traumatized, bereft of his wife of 40 or 50 years. How can that man be comforted? A young person, a young member of the congregation, can certainly help him to some extent.

Perhaps can go to him and say, Uncle Jack, I'm so sorry you've lost Josephine. Look, I've made you some cookies, chocolate chip cookies. Have these. I'll be praying for you as well. Now that's

really kind, and that's helpful.

But the person who can really bring comfort to the man is another older widower who has been through the same experience, and has been truly comforted by the Bible and by Christian friends. He is the person who can go to the new widower and he can say to him, Jack, I know what it's like. I've been there. Let's get together a number of times over the coming weeks and I'll share with you some of the Bible passages that have really helped me since I lost my wife.

You see, he has been comforted in his affliction and now he is able to pass on the same comfort to his newly afflicted friend. And that's the sort of thing which is going on in our psalm.

[15:36] Look at verse 74. Those who fear you shall see me in my afflictions, shall see me and rejoice because I have hoped in your word.

I know, O Lord, that your rules are righteous and that in faithfulness you have afflicted me. So the psalmist is afflicted, but in his affliction, he has put his hope, his trust in God's word, in God's promises.

And his godly friends see him behaving like this and they rejoice. They rejoice as they see an afflicted man putting his hope in God's words. It teaches them how to behave in their own times of affliction when those times should come.

Now I must tell you, just to take this illustration a bit further, I must tell you about a man that I met very briefly many years ago. His name was Sir Norman Anderson and he came to the church that I was working at in Manchester where I was a young minister.

He came to spend a weekend with us to give us a weekend of teaching. It was a Saturday teaching day followed by preaching in church on the Sunday. He would have been 70 plus at the time and until his retirement he'd been the professor of Islamic law at London University.

[16:52] Strange thing that an evangelical Christian should be a professor of Islamic law but he was. Anyway, on the Saturday afternoon there was an hour or two of break and I was detailed as the young assistant minister to look after him during that time and I took him back to my house and had a cup of tea with him and we chatted together and I wasn't quite sure what to say to him.

He was a very senior man and I was very junior and I asked him a question if not always the best question to ask, I've learnt, but I said to him tell me about your family Sir Norman. Do you have children? He looked at me and very gently he said to me, well my wife and I we did have three children but they've all died as adults.

Well I was silenced. I was dumbfounded. What could I say? I was at least 40 years younger than he was and yet here was this man travelling around the country preaching, teaching, lecturing, helping the churches and he was the sweetest, gentlest, most joyful man that you could hope to meet.

He had known and experienced comfort in his affliction and I felt like the people in verse 74 here. I was seeing him and rejoicing because I could see that he had put his hope in God's word.

He had been comforted in his affliction and the consequence was that I and many other people rejoiced to see him. Now if he'd been a worldly man I imagine he would have railed against his lot and become angry and depressed perhaps even seeking comfort in alcohol but no, he understood in the words of verse 75 that the one who was, who had afflicted him was the one who was faithful to him and it brought joy to others to see this.

[18:40] Now by contrast, just imagine the leader of a prosperity gospel church talking to his congregation one day and telling them about his prosperity and how it's happened to him.

He might say this kind of thing. This is a little spoof sermon just for a moment, okay? So he might say this. I want to tell you folks now about how the Lord has blessed me.

Yes, even me. Yet when I came to this city 20 years ago, I was poor. Oh, I was poor as a church mouse. And of every variety of mouse, the poorest is the church.

But I prayed. I prayed. And guess what? My bank balance began to fill right up. My bank manager, he could not believe that a church pastor's income could build up like mine.

Do we say praise God for that? Do we? Amen. Hallelujah. But I wasn't only poor. I was sick. I was so thin and listless and worn out.

[19:40] I really thought I was going to die. But I prayed. And guess what happened? My health was completely restored. I mean, look at me now. Ha!

Fit, muscular. I am 49 years old and I'm at the top of the church squash ladder. I can beat all you young guys. You know I can. But that's not all.

I was lonely. I was so lonely. I said to the Lord, Lord, if I can't have a wife, I shall D-I-E. That means die. I prayed.

And guess what? Here she is sitting in the front row. Stand up, sweetheart. Stand up. Look at them. Isn't she a puppet? Ha! Isn't she ooh-la-la? That's the end of the pastor's speech, okay?

Now, I know I'm exaggerating, but not much. I'm sure you've seen just that kind of thing on television, maybe in the flesh. Not much exaggerating.

[20 : 39] That is not the faith of those who are being fashioned into the image of the man of sorrows. You know that's not real Christianity. Our friend, the psalmist, is teaching us the gospel of affliction, not the gospel of prosperity.

The gospel of affliction is a better and a truer gospel because it addresses reality. It explains what it really is like to live as believers in a society that is not friendly to the lordship of Jesus.

That prosperity gospel is simply fantasy. Anybody who takes the road to prosperity takes the road to disillusionment. Now, let's fill the picture out a little bit by looking back to verse 73 at the beginning of our stanza.

Verse 73, Your hands have made and fashioned me. Give me understanding that I may learn your commandments. Now, why does he start the section like that?

Is he thinking, I must remind my readers now of the doctrine of creation. In this day and age, it's easy to forget Genesis chapter 1. No, of course not. He's leading into verses 74 and 75.

[21 : 49] He's saying to the Lord, Lord, you have fashioned and made me for a purpose. You have designed me to be your servant. I have a role to play. I have a purpose to fulfill. And that's why I so much need to understand your teaching properly.

I can't fulfill the requirements of your commandments unless you give me understanding. And then, verse 74, when I understand your commandments and begin to live them out, my godly friends, those who fear you, will see me and rejoice because they will see that in my times of affliction, I've put my hope in your word, your promise.

You've fashioned me for this purpose, that I should be an example to your people. They need to see by looking at me that my anchor is not in this life or in this world, but rather in your word of promise about the world to come.

That's why I'm able to survive affliction now, because I'm a citizen of the world to come. I'm secured to it by your word of promise. This realm that I'm living in now with all its hostility to the gospel is not the world that I'm investing in.

The Lord has made this psalmist, has fashioned him to be an example to others in his affliction so that they too will know how to endure the worst things that human life can throw at them.

[23 : 15] Now, the psalmist is very conscious that he's an example to other people, and he's showing us that we too can be an example to others, especially when we go through times of affliction.

The fact is that Christian people do notice how other Christians live, don't we? We look at each other, we look at each other's lives, and we don't always realize how powerful our example can be. When you're a 17-year-old, you don't always realize how a 14-year-old looks up to you and regards you as a wonderful being, and the 14-year-old notices how you live.

Or think at the other end of life. When you're 80 or 80-plus, you might be tempted to feel, I'm so old now, and elderly people become gradually invisible.

I'm just a shadow of my former self. Nobody's really going to notice me. It is not true, brother or sister, it's not true. The example of elderly Christians is very powerful, and not least in this matter of affliction.

[24 : 21] The elderly Christian who bears the afflictions of old age graciously is teaching the younger Christians how to grow old, how to live with pain and discomfort, and how to prepare to step from this world into the world to come.

Your example is powerful, older ones. Don't underestimate it. Now when you're, I'm thinking about this, learning about the example we can be to others.

When you're first a Christian, you first join a church, you naturally think, what is this church going to give to me? Teaching, support, friendship, love?

Well hopefully, it will give you all of these things and plenty of it. But you soon realize that it's more important to ask, what can I give to this church?

It's a moving of the tectonic plates when you stop asking, what can I receive? And you start asking, what can I give? Our psalmist, as he thinks of his friends in verse 74, is not asking, what can my friends give to me in my affliction?

[25 : 26] He's thinking about how his afflictions can help them to rejoice. His tectonic plates have moved. What he's concerned about is that they should see him holding onto the Lord's words of promise and rejoice because his faith is an example to them.

And there's another facet of this in verse 79. Let those who fear you turn to me that they may know your testimonies. And he's still thinking here about his believing friends.

And what does he say? Does he say, let the godly ones turn to me so as to support me and to help me and shore me up and make me feel better? No. Again, his concern is to help rather than to be helped.

He wants his believing friends to turn to him so that they may know and understand the Lord's teaching. Yes, he's suffering but he wants them to understand the Lord's teaching. Now this man, our psalmist, almost certainly is a trained teacher and a very skillful writer.

He couldn't have produced a psalm like this if he were not. And he sees his role in verse 79 as someone who helps others to read and to live by the Bible.

[26 : 39] But there's a message for all of us here. Even if we have no formal training in Bible teaching, all of us can help others to understand the basics of the Christian faith.

Any of us can say to our friends, trust the Lord Jesus because he is the way to eternal life. He's the only way. But if you can get a bit of training, it's really useful.

This is why we encourage student members of the church and young adults to come to our Release the Word program on Thursday evenings. Now think of the group Bible study time that you have at Release the Word.

As you sit around the table for three quarters of an hour or whatever it is, you learn the teaching of the Bible and you learn how to discuss it. You learn how to talk about it.

Your tongue begins to be loosened. That's a very valuable thing. Your tongue begins to be loosened and you start asking questions. And eventually, you probably get asked to lead a Bible study discussion.

[27 : 37] And you feel pretty nervous about that. You say, I can't do this. But you can. You learn over time how to speak. You learn how to release the Word.

It comes out of your mouth into somebody else's ears. It helps them. And in the phrase of verse 79, people begin to turn to you.

As they start to fear the Lord and grow in faith, they start to ask questions. Now you may be only young. You might be 23 or something like that. But you can begin to help other people to understand the Bible.

Somebody asks you, for example, how can we know what God is really like? Or what did Jesus really come to the earth to do? Or it could be questions about ethics.

What do Christians believe about euthanasia? Or does the Bible have anything to say about transgenderism? You are now, you're still young, but you're a student of the Bible. And you're beginning to understand how the Bible answers questions of that sort and many other questions too.

[28 : 41] And you yourself are able to begin to answer these questions. Well, let me finish by pointing out the key thing, really the most distinctive feature in the landscape of our psalmist life here.

The thing that enables him to live with affliction and to be an example to his believing friends. And it's there in verse 77. Let your mercy come to me that I may live for your law is my delight.

Now you'll see it's a prayer there for mercy. Let your mercy come to me and a prayer for life that I may live. And how does he have the confidence to ask the Lord for mercy and for life?

It's because the law of the Lord has become his delight. Now this, when you ask what was the law of the Lord that he had, this psalmist didn't have as much of the Bible as we have.

He would have been able to read the law of Moses, the first five books of the Bible. He would probably have known the books of Joshua, Judges, 1 and 2 Samuel, 1 and 2 Kings, perhaps some of the Psalms, perhaps Proverbs, the book of Job.

[29 : 49] But even from his rather limited Bible, he knew that the Lord would give him mercy and life. He had assurance that the Lord was the giver of mercy and life to those who trust him.

And how had he become so sure? The answer is because the Bible had become his delight. He had learned to feast on it. He knew that Moses had taught him man shall not, cannot live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord. It was feasting on the Bible and delighting in the Bible that enabled the psalmist to be sure that God would be merciful to him and would give him life. That's the same for us. As we learn to delight in the Bible, our sense of assurance that the gospel is true will be immeasurably strengthened. The words of the Bible are like no other words. Shakespeare was a bright lad, but his words are a will-o'-the-wisp compared to the Bible. As we learn to delight in the Bible, we realize not only that it's true on the surface of the text, but that it's true right down.

[31 : 01] It's stronger than the mountains. It will outlast the Himalayas. As Jesus said, heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away. And God opens our hearts to delight in his words so that eventually the force of them sinks into every fiber of our being and we come to know and trust and be deeply assured that the gospel of the forgiveness of our sins and the promise of eternal life is true.

Now for many a young Christian, this was certainly true of me as a teenage Christian at about the age of 16, reading the Bible could feel like a chore.

It felt like a chore to me. This was me at school, aged about 16, at boarding school. Things were a bit hurried in the morning. You get the Bible down off your shelf, you turn up the passage you're supposed to be reading for the day because the Scripture Union notes tell you that that's your passage for the day.

I used to read it through quickly, then read the Scripture Union notes through very quickly, shut the Bible, stick it back on the shelf, go and brush my teeth and then rush off to the classroom to be taught mathematics by Mr. Dry as Dust.

That was my early experience of reading the Bible. It really was like that. Now, let me encourage you. It is wonderfully possible for that chore mentality to turn into a feasting mentality.

[32 : 25] You sit down with your Bible, you open the passage, you don't rush, you ask the Lord to be with you and to help you. So you read your passage and then slowly you re-read it.

And as you re-read it, it makes you begin to open a conversation with its author. So for example, you might be reading this very passage.

And as you read it and you begin to think about the implications of verse 75, in faithfulness, you have afflicted me, you then start to speak to the Lord about it.

And you might say, this is not autobiographical, but you might say something like this, Lord, this psalmist says that you have afflicted him in faithfulness. might that mean that you might afflict me in faithfulness someday or even now?

I guess it might. So Lord, that illness that I had, could that have been a faithful affliction? And that terrible time when I lost my job and I was unemployed for two years, was that a faithful affliction?

[33 : 30] And then when my mother died and I was so sad and I could hardly come to terms with it, could that have been you training me and making me more like the Lord Jesus through personal suffering?

And were you allowing these things to happen to me so that I might depend upon you more and learn not to confide in the things of this world? Yes, Lord, that must have been the reason.

So I do thank you, Lord, what nourishment to the soul your words bring to me. As we delight in the Bible, we really come to believe it.

There's a link between learning to delight in it and being assured of the truth of it. And it gives us strength in our afflictions so that we can encourage other people in their afflictions.

And even though we feel like aliens in a hostile world, we are indeed and always will be aliens and strangers in this difficult world. The Bible enables us to throw out an anchor into the world to come, assuring us in the words of verse 77, that the Lord gives us mercy and he will give us life.

[34 : 46] Let's bow our heads and we'll pray together. Man shall not live on bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord.

our dear loving Father, we thank you that you love us. You love us so deeply, more deeply than we can appreciate. And you speak to us.

Your own mouth speaks into our ears and into our hearts. And we thank you for the great reassurance that you give us, especially in times of suffering and affliction. and we thank you too,

dear Father, for the power of example.

And we, as we thank you for others who've been such an example to us, we pray that in our own times of trouble and difficulty, you will enable us to set a wonderful example of trusting in your words and rejoicing in you, even when things in life are very tough and difficult.

So we pray, dear Father, that you will strengthen us and give us an ever-deepening assurance that what you have said to us in the Bible is true. And we ask it in Jesus' name.

[36 : 00] Amen.