

Affliction our teacher

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[0 : 00] Luke of Sam, Psalm 119, let me find our text for this evening in verse 71. Verse 71 of Psalm 119.

It is good for me that I have been afflicted, that I might learn thy statutes. We know that in the case of our Lord himself, afflictions were a very important part of his ministry and his experiences while he was in this world.

Indeed, we learn from Hebrews chapter 5 and verse 8 that though he were a son, yet he learned obedience by the things which he suffered.

And being made perfect, he became the author of eternal salvation to them that obey him. Though he were a son, yet he learned obedience by the things which he suffered.

Our Lord benefited in terms of his own obedience, which was never imperfect and yet increased.

[1 : 25] He benefited to that end from his own afflictions. And there is no other example in scripture where afflictions are put to their proper use in a perfect manner, in the way that you find that in the case of the Lord Jesus Christ himself.

But the Bible reveals to us in many places that in the union that God's people have with himself in Jesus Christ, they are also united together with him in their sufferings.

And not only are they united together with him in their sufferings, but they are together united in their sufferings to his sufferings.

And indeed there are many aspects of that which are difficult, if not impossible, to explain or to put across or to understand. Paul writing to the Colossians said that he was himself in his own afflictions and suffering, filling up that which was behind of the afflictions of Christ.

He was indeed seeing the whole of the church's afflictions and the afflictions of Christ, as it were, as one great body of afflictions, looking at the whole concept of Jesus and his church as one whole, indivisible whole of Christ the head and his people the body.

[2 : 59] And he says, there is a completeness, a complete set, if you like, of afflictions that belong to that whole thing. And I am filling up my own portion of it.

Remember that he wrote in Romans chapter 8 and verses 17 and 18, these wonderful verses that deal with the spirit of adoption that we have received.

That when we receive the spirit of God, it is as the spirit of adoption, that we have therefore led by him as the sons of God. And what does that make us? It makes us, he says, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ.

If so be that we suffer together with him, that we may be also glorified together. Together with him again, is what he means. That's, you see, the whole emphasis.

It's saying, if we suffer together with him, that we may also be glorified together with him. The apostle never regards his sufferings as isolated from the sufferings of Christ himself.

[4 : 09] And there are, of course, the words we read in 1 Peter chapter 4, where the apostle Peter was writing to these suffering Christians, persecuted for their faith.

And what is he saying to them? He says, rejoice in their sufferings. Don't be ashamed of your sufferings, knowing that you are partakers of the sufferings of Christ.

And then, of course, there's the wonderful words of Philippians 3.10, where the apostle is saying that he's put us back to various things. We mentioned it this morning.

It comes up so often in our studies. But he's saying, all of this I count, he says, as done that I may win Christ, that I may be found in him, that I may know him, and the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of his sufferings, being made conformable unto his death.

He wants more and more to be identified with the Lord, even to such an extent, as his life will conform unto the image of his death, so that he will go forward to his own death in making use of

his sufferings, as he knows his Lord did.

[5 : 22] So that his sufferings, the apostle's own sufferings, will in that sense be the same as his Lord's, in that he will have the sufferings that he has improve his whole relation to God until the day he dies.

And you remember in Revelation chapter 3 and verse 21, that verse that concludes these letters to the churches, a whole series of conclusions of this kind, to him that overcomes will I give.

What is the last one? It sums up, we believe, all the rest, what he says, to him that overcomes will I grant, to sit with me in my throne, even as I overcame, and am set down with my Father in his throne.

You see what Jesus is saying there is, even as I overcame, I will also grant to him that overcomes. There shall affinity, there shall likeness, there shall correspondence, there shall very intimate tie between the overcoming of Jesus and the overcoming of his people.

Not only do we overcome because of his overcoming, but we overcome in the manner in which he overcame. That is to say, we too, from affliction, learn the statutes of God.

[6 : 49] In other words, all of these passages in association with our text tonight reminds us that afflictions are a necessary accompaniment to God's grace.

That is to say, the things of grace such as faith, love, hope, prayer, all of these things that we mean by grace, that's what we mean by grace in this instance, there must be a company necessarily these afflictions that he brings to us in his providence.

Because the afflictions themselves, as we find in our text, are means that are used in order to learn the statutes of God. When we read the writings of Samuel Rutherford, when we read his letters, we can see how that man who was exiled to Aberdeen and cut off from that which he says in his letters was the dearest thing to him in this world to preach Christ.

I had one great love, he says, and they have taken it from me to preach, ever to preach Christ. And in these letters he tells us a lot that is applicable to the subject we're looking at this evening, which is affliction as our teacher.

Rutherford in one letter says, grace tried is better than grace, and it is more than grace, it is glory in its infancy.

[8 : 33] In another letter he says this, I find it to be most true that the greatest temptation out of hell is to live without temptations.

If my water should stand, they would rot. Faith is the better of the free air and of the sharp winter storm in its face.

Grace withereth without adversity. If my water should stand, he said, they should rot. What he means is water that's never stirred, that's never at all running, is soon stagnant, filled with disease. He says, that is how it would be if my water should ever stand still. they will rot. They need, he says, to be stirred. And faith is the better of it, and grace withers without adversity.

We'll hear in our text then, the psalmist is saying that he has benefited from affliction, and he names the benefit as that he has learned the statutes of God.

[9 : 52] In verse 67, he has told us something else that's closely related to that, that we'll mention later on in our study. Before I was afflicted, I went astray, but now have I kept, or I keep, thy word.

Afflictions as our teacher. Afflictions as they accompany grace. Afflictions as they stir, as it were, in Rutherford's language, the waters of our grace in the soul.

They teach us the statutes of God. And we can say two things as our headings this evening that arise out of the text.

First of all, we see that afflictions are necessary. And then secondly, we'll see that afflictions for God's people are designed to be profitable.

That afflictions are necessary, that afflictions rightly used are profitable. Afflictions are necessary, first of all. It is good for me that I have been afflicted.

[11 : 03] Martin Luther at one time said, I had not known the meaning of the word of God until I came into afflictions. I have always counted them amongst my best schoolmasters.

There was that great reformer saying, he had not truly understood the meaning of the word of God until he had been brought by God into afflictions. It is then that these afflictions became his teacher under the hand of God to understand the meaning of the word itself much more than he ever did.

And you remember Peter on the mountain of Transfiguration. There are so many lessons in that wonderful incident recorded in the Gospels. But you remember what he said when he was caught

up with that wonderful glory that came upon Jesus, that came through Jesus more accurately to put it, and where he was transfigured before them.

Lord, he said, it is good for us to be here. Let us make three tabernacles, one for thee and one for Moses and one for Elias. We can understand something of the man's desire.

We can understand something of his thinking there. Because you see, here is Peter saying, Lord, it is good for us to be here. He is thinking of good. He is defining what is good as far as he himself is able to define it at that point.

[12 : 38] He is saying, Lord, this is good. It is good to be here. Let us not go back down into afflictions. Let us not go back down to the testing and to the chant of the people. Let us not go back to these strivings with those things that lie down in the valley.

Let us stay. Let us stay where we are. Let us remain here. This is good, Lord. not knowing what he was saying.

Even Peter needed to understand that his needs required more than transfiguration experiences. That his needs as a sinner and his sins as a sinner needed something along with the comforts of this world that his needs as a sinner even though he was to be a great apostle still required the afflictions that God would send him for him to accomplish through Peter the things that would be accomplished. Affliction was to be a teacher even of Peter that's why he was so well able to write his first epistle. He was a man who had been through it all he was a man who had understood himself the essence of the teaching that he was setting out for these people. He knew what it meant in the psalmist it is good for me that I have been afflicted that I might learn thy statutes and so it is for ourselves. We tend to think of what is good in terms of what is comfortable in terms of what is easy with us in terms of that which does not give us pain and against which we do not have to struggle but the Lord is telling us we need our share of afflictions to be our teacher. Our grace with us without these teachers.

In verse 67 he has told us something as we said of what had happened before the Lord brought these afflictions upon them whatever they were. Before I was afflicted I went astray. The Bible is full of people who had who were themselves people of God people who exercised faith people who genuinely loved the Lord but yet went astray.

[15 : 17] Even people like Abraham made mistakes seeking to pass his wife off as his sister. David himself of course we know went astray he was a man who could speak very intimately about afflictions and the Lord's rod being wielded against. Hezekiah King Solomon Peter himself. So many instances of afflictions and how these people came to see them as necessary in their own lives from the hand of God. And you remember that the Lord himself when he was describing the word of God going forth that he described as illustrating it in the parable of the the parable of the different soils. And you remember what he said about one kind of soil that was full of thorns but the thorns choked the seed as it began to grow and he said so it is with hearing the word. There are things which choke the word of God in our souls but he didn't leave us to guess what these things were.

He said quite pointedly the cares of this life and the deceitfulness of riches.

That was Jesus estimation of knowledge of what he knew perfectly well was liable to in our souls choke the very world of God within us.

Afflictions from God are designed to counteract that. To counteract our own natural tendencies to let the cares of this life and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word of God in us.

When was there a generation that you and I needed to guard against as much as the generation in which we live where the cares of this life and the deceitfulness of riches are so abundantly obvious in the world in which we live.

[17 : 39] In the things that we handle and must have contact with from day to day. Oh the word says keep yourself from these things and above all things do not let them choke the word of God in your souls even to make it unprofitable in your experience.

Let the afflictions God sends you be a counteraction to the cares of this life. Spurgeon put it this way.

Often our trials act like a thorn hedge to keep us in the good pasture but our prosperity is a gap through which we go astray.

Why is it that a little ease works in us so much disease. A little ease he says but it works in us so much disease, spiritual disease.

God sends the psalmist says these afflictions. The afflictions that are thorn hedge as Spurgeon illustrated it.

[18 : 51] The cares of this life are the little holes which if we allow ourselves we can go through and as soon as we are through we are astray. Before I was afflicted I went astray but now I keep thy word.

It is good for me that I have been afflicted that I might learn thy statutes. The necessary afflictions of the people of God.

The necessary afflictions that become in their case a teacher. That keep them so that they learn the statutes of God. In 1st Peter chapter 1 he began by reminding these people of how necessary their afflictions were.

You have an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled he said reserved in heaven for you who are kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation ready to be revealed in the last time though now if.

need be ye are in heaviness through manifold temptation. Though now if need be that's to say though now it is necessary for you to be in heaviness through manifold temptations.

[20 : 11] It is good for me that I have been afflicted that I might learn thy statutes. James chapter 1 verse 2 the same emphasis where he says that we are to count it a rejoicing.

Count it all joy when you enter into various temptations. Knowing it is that the trial of your faith worketh patience.

You see the equation? The testings, the trials. What does he say it is? The trial of your faith.

The purifying of it. The refining of it. It brings the fruit of patience and perseverance.

It is good for me that I have been afflicted. What a strange scent of paradoxes the people of God know in their lives. They can say even out of this text that they are cured by their sickness.

[21 : 19] That they are strengthened by their weakness. That all of these things that in themselves might be regarded as bad are in the use of God's hand made good in their experience.

It is good for me that I have been afflicted that I might learn thy statutes. Somebody put it this way. What do we imagine are our best friends spiritually?

Of the things that God gives us? Well he says, we imagine that our best friends are the comforts that God sends to us.

The times of ease. But he said, while these are necessary and precious, our best friends are actually their afflictions.

Our afflictions, even he says, are their most craved. Your craved afflictions are just as good for you if not better than your comforts that speak peace to you.

[22 : 36] Because they stir you water. And they make you learn the statutes of God. Praise the Lord then.

When he sends afflictions with this word to accompany it. What a precious thing it is that the people of God when they have trials in their lives can turn to such a text as this.

As I know it's very difficult in the midst of afflictions sometimes to focus upon these things. Bodily pain, mental discouragement, all of these things have their own effect upon us.

And sometimes make it very difficult to need to spiritually focus our mind on the promises, on the truthfulness, on the veracity, on the certainty of the word of God.

But what a blessing friends it is when we are in afflictions and know ourselves to be tried. That we can come and find such a text as this that says it is good for us.

[23 : 37] So that we might learn the statutes of God. They are therefore necessary afflictions.

Afflictions secondly which are profitable. Whatever the psalmist knew of the statutes of God before this, he's undoubtedly telling us that from his afflictions he has graduated to a much higher understanding of them.

We could say that whatever he had before these afflictions were really equivalent to the primary school of his experiences. But through these afflictions he has graduated into the college where he has learned the statutes of God in a far greater fashion.

He has now as it were a degree in his experience of the statutes of God. He has a degree in his understanding of them. He has qualified, at least to this extent, that he is saying it is good for me so that I might learn thy statutes.

It's amazing how God teaches us in so many different ways. Sometimes God sends his word to cause us pain.

[24 : 55] To hurt us in conscience. To open up spiritual wounds in our hearts. So that he gives us when we see our own vileness and our sin and our guilt and our wretchedness.

He gives us to taste of that in such a manner as is truly afflicted under. Why is that? So that he will draw us then into the band that is in Christ.

So that Christ Jesus and his love and his sufficiency will be poured into the wounds that the word has opened. But then you see there are other times when it is the providential dealings of God that open wounds in our experience.

And then God uses the word so as we come to understand itself more and therefore understand God himself more.

And the ways that he deals with us and the purposes for which he is dealing with us in those ways. And we come more and more, don't we, to say it is good for me that I have been afflicted that I might learn thy statutes.

[26 : 06] It's wonderful to come to the promises of the word of God that are addressed to the afflicted. But it's even more wonderful to experience them in the very circumstances to which they are addressed.

And indeed that is the only way that we can experience the fulfilment of all of these wonderful promises that are given to the afflicted people of God. How else are we going to appreciate them, to relish them, to taste them, to bring them home to our hearts and to love them.

But when we are actually in the afflictions to which the promises are addressed. You know that great text in Philippians chapter 4 and verse 19 where the apostle says, My God shall supply all you need according to his riches and glory by Christ Jesus.

We very often quote that text from outside the context of the need of which it speaks. It's a precious promise at any time that God will supply all our need.

But when you are plumbing the depths of adversity and when your need is brought home to you in the pits of despondency and afflictions that this world has to hold.

[27 : 34] When God breaks over our heads waves of adversity and when you know the sufficiency of Christ in them. Then you can say, as you have never been able to say before, My God shall supply all my need according to his riches and glory.

Let's not seek adversity deliberately. But when we have adversity from God, Let us regard it as that situation of need where the statutes of God are to be learned.

Where we learn of himself and find him most truly to be our faithful friend.

What then do we learn of the statutes of God or from them? Well two things very briefly. First of all we learn, as he says here, what is good for us truly.

Because very often we learn that by looking at it as the opposite of what we ourselves naturally incline to. We've said already that we naturally incline to that which is comfortable, makes little demands on us.

[28 : 57] And we say that is what is good for us, that is what is best for us. No, the psalmist is saying it is good for me that I have been afflicted. What is good for us is what God sends us.

It's what God sends as opposed to our own tendencies. Going back again to Samuel Rutherford, we go back to him because he says so much really on this subject of afflictions and love for Christ and all of these things in his afflictions.

There was a time when he was being advised by some of his own friends to leave Scotland and to go to the continent. They knew very well that he would have found work to his liking in the great universities of the continent such as in Holland, France.

We formed chairs of divinity that Rutherford would have graced abundantly by his abilities. But in answering them, in one of his letters he said, this is what he said, he said, I have rather be in Scotland with angry Jesus Christ than in any Eden or paradise in this world.

The Lord at that time had a controversy with Scotland. Rutherford let us speak of Christ's displeasure directed against the land.

[30 : 34] Oh, but he said, I have rather be in Scotland with angry Jesus Christ than in any paradise or Eden in this world.

Even an angry Jesus Christ for Rutherford was the Christ that would bring him to the glory he had prepared for him.

And he would do it through afflictions, his anger and displeasure just as much as through his comfort. It was necessary for him and it was profitable for him to have been afflicted.

That he might learn the statutes of his Lord. That he might learn what was good for him. And secondly, it teaches us to know of what is maybe in itself something bad but used by God comes to be for our good.

The old theologians used to speak of evil as used by God, by which they didn't just mean acts of great atrocity. By evil they meant things like disease and adversities and providence.

[31 : 45] All of these things went under the general name of evil. God's use of evil in the benefit of his people and the way that his people were required to profit from their afflictions.

Apparently, when they brought large trees into England, they came from the southern part of Europe first of all.

And the gardener who was told about them was told that they had come from the south of Europe and that they were to be planted out in England to see if they would take.

And when he heard that they had come from the south of Europe, the first thing he did with them was put them into a hothouse or a greenhouse. And to his astonishment he found that the more he tended to them in the conditions of the greenhouse, the more they withered away.

They were actually dying in the greenhouse. What he hadn't realized is that though they had come from the south of Europe, they had come from a mountainside. They had come from a situation that was used to cold and even to frost.

[32 : 54] And the gardener was so fed up trying to cultivate them in his greenhouse, eventually he gave up on them. And he took them and he threw them out onto his compost heap.

And then he suddenly realized after a few days that they were beginning to revive. That they were beginning to show signs of growth and greatness. And he realized then that what they needed to grow was not the conditions of the greenhouse, but the frost of the night air.

Now that's what the psalmist is drawing our attention to here in our text. The Christian cannot progress by being all the time in greenhouse conditions.

The faith, the grace that Brotherford spoke of as needing to be stirred requires the frosts of the night just as surely as the balmy air of the summer evenings.

Put it this way, we need more than the balmy air of God's comforts. We need the sharp frosts of God's afflictions so that we learn his statutes under them.

[34 : 11] Progress is very much made through these afflictions. Isn't that what the apostle Paul himself was saying in that wonderful passage in 2 Corinthians 4 and verse 16 following.

Our light affliction, he says, which are but for a moment, worketh for us, are working for us. A far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory.

Why we look not at the things which are seen, which are temporal, but the things which are unseen, which are eternal. What a wonderful emphasis. What a wonderful experience to come to know this. What a wonderful thing it was that he himself had come under the hand of the Lord to be taught and to learn. It's exactly the same as verse 71 in Psalm 119.

It is good that I have been afflicted, that I might learn my statutes. What a poor person learned. He learned that affliction was working for him. A far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory than anything he would have in this life.

[35 : 14] Romans 8 says the same. Just following on from the text we quoted earlier on. If so be that we suffered with him, that we may also be glorified together. For I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared to the glory which shall be revealed in us.

And that glory is not without its share of afflictions in the road that leads to it.

There are few of any in the presence of God tonight. Just as there will be few of any in the presence of God when the whole church of God is redeemed and glorified, who will not say thankfully, it was good for me.

And I was afflicted that I might learn thy statutes. And it's so important to realise that we must indeed profit from our afflictions.

It doesn't work automatically. We're reminded of that great chapter in Hebrews 12. I was afraid to bring it up because there's so much in it that we could get carried away in.

[36 : 35] It's to do with the chastening of the Lord and the profitableness of it. And the fruit of righteousness that it brings forth. But it is to those who have exercised thereby.

It does not work necessarily of itself. It does not work automatically. It is something we need to have an application of our minds to consider, to apply to ourselves, to live in faith under, to seek God under, so that we can say that it has been good for us.

If we don't have that profit, that progress, that advance, that fruitfulness and consequence of afflictions, we will never be able to say, It is good for me that I have been afflicted. This is a man who has progressed spiritually by afflictions. This is not one who has stood still or gone backwards.

Charles Bridges who has a great commentary on Psalm 119. I commend it to you because it's a very worthwhile book even if you're interested in daily readings, as I hope you are.

[37 : 56] Because he comments on each verse of this great psalm in such a way as to comment on it in maybe about two pages or three pages usually at the most on each verse.

And they form the most wonderful readings that you could use them very easily for daily readings. Wonderful wisdom from this wonderful psalm.

What he says in commenting on this verse is, May the good Lord keep us from the greatest of all afflictions, which is an affliction lost.

An affliction from which we have not profited is what he meant. The greatest of all affliction, an affliction lost. May the Lord keep us from it, said Bridges, may he indeed. May we as a church learn from our afflictions. May we as individuals learn the statutes of God from our afflictions, in our afflictions, by them.

As a church we are facing difficult times. As a church we are facing difficult times. As a church we have been brought under afflictions. As a church we are in adversity.

[39 : 13] But our greatest danger is not the danger of divisions. Great and tragic though that would be. Our greatest danger is that in our afflictions we do not turn to him whose afflictions we are as sent from his hand.

Our greatest danger is that we lose sight of the faith of God. It is that we are so taken up with ourselves and the immediacy of our afflictions and our circumstances.

That we fail to profit from the afflictions. Our greatest affliction of the church in this present day will be that we lose our afflictions.

That we don't make the use of them that God intends. In Isaiah chapter 9 we find the prophet speaking to the people wonderful things about the Lord that was going to come as the Prince of Peace and so on.

But in verse 13 he goes on to say this. For all this he says in verse 12, the Syrians are coming, the Philistines behind. They shall devour Israel with open mouth.

[40 : 37] For all this his anger is not turned away but his hand is stretched out still. For the people turneth not unto him that smiteth them. Neither do they seek the Lord of hosts.

Therefore the Lord will cut off from Israel head and tail, branch and rush. In one day the ancient and honorable he is the head and the prophet that teaches lies he is the tail.

But a terrible catastrophe is coming on the people of God, on the covenant people of Israel. The Lord he says is going to cut off from them the head and their tail, the branch and the rush, their spiritual leadership.

Why? Because they have not turned unto him that smiteth them. Because they have been sent afflictions and they have not profited from them.

And if we turn from our afflictions away from God, we can be sure that something is going to be cut off from us.

[41 : 47] The afflictions God sends are to be our teachers. And so tonight as we come to consider together that afflictions rightly used are the teacher that the Lord's people require in their needs.

So may we see them as necessary and may we profit under them. So that we too will be able to say, It has been good for me that I have been afflicted, that I might learn thy stuff.

Whatever the affliction is, major or minor, if it is an affliction at all, for the people of God, it must be regarded as a messenger to teach them.

The cup that Jesus places in the hands of his people, sometimes it is a cup of great sorrow.

It varies of course as the Lord pleases from one person to another. Some people's lives are one sorrow after another. Others have much less, at least on the outside.

[43 : 10] But supposing the Lord were to give you the greatest cup of suffering that any individual believer in this world ever had to bear, Be assured of this.

But while it is a cup of affliction, there is not a drop of poison in it. The very worst that he gives his people is infinitely better than the best that he gives to the world.

Where will your sin be mortified by the best things that the Lord has pleased to providentially give to the world that knows enough?

Where will your deadness be dealt with in the manner in which it is dealt with by affliction from his hand? Where will you say of the best that he gives to the world, It has been good for me to have it, when you compare it with the afflictions he gives, the benefits and the profit that we must have earned?

Oh, it is there, friends, there in these afflictions, that he prunes his own beloved plants, so that they bring forth more fruit.

[44 : 38] We began with Rutherford, I will close with him as well. Our afflictions, he said, are the puffs of wind that fill our sails, that carry us onwards in our voyage to heaven.

Our afflictions will bring us to heaven, but they will not follow us into heaven.

The afflictions that God uses to bring you there will not enter in with you when you enter into his presence.

You will bless the Lord for them, for the experience you had of them, but they cannot follow us. With the difference there shall be there in the sea