

It was good for me to be afflicted

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Preacher: David MacPherson

[0 : 00] I want you to try and think of something that was good for you spiritually in your experience.

As you look back on your life in the recent past or in the more distant past, perhaps an experience in life, something that happened to you, some experience that you went through, that you can look back and say, maybe at the time it wasn't evident, but you look back and you can say, that was good for me.

That helped me to grow as a Christian. It helped me to get closer to God, to walk a closer walk with God. So, try and think of something that answers to that general description.

I'll give you a couple of seconds to do so. You have to do some work this evening as well. So, I hope that you've been able to think of something. I haven't given you very long, but I would hope that there would be different and perhaps many examples that would come to mind.

And if you've even thought of one, then that's a starting point for our purposes. I might add that I'd be very interested to know the answers to that question.

[1 : 21] And if I would leave it closer, I might ask you to share some with me, but we'll leave that for another occasion. But something then that you can identify and look back in your life and in your experience and say, yes, that was good for me.

I grew as a Christian because of that. I was able to come closer to God because of that experience. For those of you who have been able to identify perhaps one such occasion, I wonder if what you have brought to mind or identified as being helpful or formative for you as a Christian, I wonder if it was a painful experience.

And each one can respond to that individually, depending on what you had considered. Maybe a time when you suffered very intensely.

Maybe a time when in the midst of that experience and suffering, there appeared to be no possible benefit or profit from it.

But as you look back, you're able to say, yes, that was good for me. Maybe the very suggestion sounds quite bizarre. How can suffering be good in any way?

[2 : 45] What possible profit can be had from pain? To suggest that there is a purpose in pain may have a profound ring to it.

But it can also come across as gratingly trite or maybe even perverse. Well, I want us to listen to what the psalmist has to say in Psalm 119.

We're going to read Psalm 119 in verses 65 to 72. And in these verses, and this isn't the only occasion when the psalmist expresses himself in this way.

But perhaps in this particular section of the psalm and on this particular occasion, the manner in which he expresses himself is very explicit.

And I want us to consider it. His conclusion concerning affliction and suffering and the impact it had on his life.

[3 : 53] So let's read the section and then identify the key statement that we want to consider this evening. So Psalm 119 from verses 65 to 72 on page 619 in our Bibles.

And we read as follows. Do good to your servant according to your word, O Lord. Teach me knowledge and good judgment, for I believe in your commands.

Before I was afflicted, I went astray. But now I obey your word. You are good, and what you do is good. Teach me your decrees.

Though the arrogant has smeared me with lies, I keep your precepts with all my heart. Their hearts are callous and unfeeling, but I delight in your law.

It was good for me to be afflicted so that I might learn your decrees. The law from your mouth is more precious to me than thousands of pieces of silver and gold.

[4 : 59] The word of God. It was good for me to be afflicted. Testifies the psalmist.

It was good for me to be afflicted. What are we to make of this statement, of this testimony? What we read here isn't a chapter from a discourse in theology.

This is the personal testimony of the one who writes. He is describing his experience. He is thinking back on a period in his life.

And this is his conclusion. It was good for me to be afflicted. What are we to make then, I repeat, of this testimony? Has the man lost the place completely?

Is he some kind of religious nut who's into self-flagellation and who somehow sees suffering as good and worthy in and of itself?

[6 : 02] Well, let's try and explore this. And I trust wisely and sensitively because these are difficult matters and we're conscious of the need to deal with them with great sensitivity.

And we trust that God will help us in that regard. Well, perhaps we can pose three questions that could help us explore this statement of the psalmist.

It was good for me to be afflicted. And I'll mention what the three questions are and then we can just think of each of them in turn. First of all, what did it involve?

What affliction is being referred to here? He talks of being afflicted, but it rather begs the question, in what way was he afflicted? In what did his suffering consist?

So that's the first thing we want to consider. And perhaps not come to a definitive answer because quite possibly there isn't a definitive answer. But explore in any case some of the possibilities concerning this suffering that he speaks of.

[7 : 08] What did it involve? What were its causes? That's the first thing we want to do. Then a second question we want to ask. And it's very connected with the first, but I hope we'll develop it somewhat.

And the second question is this. Who is behind the affliction of the psalmist? As we answer the questions, I hope it will be clear that in a sense, in a measure, that question will be answered in the first part.

But we will develop it a little further in a second stage, as it were. Who is behind the affliction of the psalmist? And then finally, why was it good for him?

This is what he says. He affirms. He testifies. It was good for me to be afflicted. And the question we want to ask, well, why was it good for him? In what way was it good for him?

How is it that he's able to make such a seemingly incoherent and certainly surprising affirmation? So, these are the three questions we want to consider this evening.

[8 : 09] First of all then, what did it involve, this affliction, that he speaks of in this section of the psalm? What were its causes? Now, as I already suggested, I think, just a moment ago, we don't know for sure the answer to that question.

But I think there are one or two clues in the passage that might point us in the right direction. And I'll just mention, at this point, four things that we could identify as possible causes.

I'm not suggesting that all four are present on this occasion. What I'm saying is I don't actually know what the ultimate cause was on this occasion.

But four things that may have been causes of his suffering. And of those, certainly two or three that are hinted at in the passage.

And I'll say what they are and then we'll just consider each of them in turn. First of all, bad sin. That may be a funny way or a strange way of describing sin. But it's really just to, when I go on and mention the other things, you'll understand why I describe it in that way.

[9 : 20] Bad sin, bad decisions, bad stuff, and bad people. Four possible causes of his suffering. Let's just notice each in turn.

First of all, sin. Bad sin. Well, sin by definition is bad. But where is it, in the passage we're considering, where does that possibility emerge?

Well, I think in verse 67, this possibility emerges as a possible cause of his affliction. There we read, it's the psalmist himself who is giving testimony to his experience.

And he says, Before I was afflicted, I went astray. But now I obey your word. There's very clearly, and this is something we'll develop a little bit further on, there's very clearly a before and after feel to this psalm.

And here it's very explicit. Before I was afflicted, before this suffering that I am speaking of, and I have considered and come to conclusions about, before I was afflicted, I went astray.

[10 : 23] But now I obey your word. We don't know in what way the psalmist went astray. But he certainly seems to suggest, perhaps more than suggest, that there is a connection between his going astray and his subsequent affliction.

And it is certainly true, whether this was the case for the psalmist on this occasion, it would seem to have been. But whether it was or not, it is certainly true that suffering follows sin, as surely as night follows day.

I'm sure many of us here can give bitter personal testimony to that truth. When we go astray, when we ignore God's commands, when we do things as we see fit, then we so often discover, sooner or later, that suffering follows in the wake of our going astray, of our sin, of the sin that we commit.

So this is one possible cause of his affliction that the psalmist himself seems to hint at in what he says there in verse 67.

But another cause of his affliction, certainly of suffering generally, that we can notice is bad decisions. When I speak of bad sin, I'm really thinking of those occasions when we knowingly do that which is wrong.

[11 : 55] When we sin against knowledge, we know that we ought not to do, but we do it anyway. Where there is real crass rebellion, wanton sin, bad decisions are different.

It may be that those bad decisions have at their heart a sinful pride, a sinful carelessness in not considering what God commands us, but nonetheless, they're not decisions that are taken expressly as an act of rebellion against God.

We simply make bad decisions. We do things or we take a decision that subsequently turns out to be a bad decision and brings suffering in its wake. It's possible that even the language the psalmist use here points to that kind of situation where what has happened isn't wanton, in-your-face rebellion, but simply foolish decisions, bad decisions.

The verb that we've already noted there in verse 67, before I was afflicted, I went astray. Again, those who understand the original languages suggest that maybe the word here does have that idea of bad decisions, not of deliberate and conscious rebellion, but bad decisions, foolish decisions, that subsequently carry with them a bitter harvest of affliction and suffering.

So, sin can be the cause of our affliction. Bad decisions that we make can also lead to suffering and affliction. But we could maybe mention another cause, one that I don't think is, in any explicit way, referred to in the passage, but we mention it all the same as we consider more generally causes of suffering and affliction.

[13 : 50] What I've described in short term as bad stuff. What do I mean by bad stuff? I'm talking about stuff that happens to all of us that we can't really attribute a moral cause to.

Illness and bereavement. We think of the psalmist and those who lived in days, and indeed today, so many who live and their life is a function of the harvest, and a good harvest or a bad harvest.

And you say, well, why was there a bad harvest? Why was there bad weather? Why has my father died young? Why is my son ill? Why do these things happen?

Bad stuff happens to Christians and it happens to those who aren't Christians. We all have to confront. It's part of our life experience. Bad stuff.

It's not my fault. It's not his fault. It's not your fault. It just happens. Nobody to blame, it would seem, but painful all the same.

[14 : 54] It's another cause of affliction and suffering in our lives. But one further cause that is, I think, explicitly suggested or mentioned in the passage is bad people.

The psalmist speaks of such. There in verse 69, Though the arrogant have smeared me with lies, I keep your precepts with all my heart. Their hearts are callous and unfeeling, but I delight in your law.

Bad people, perhaps, were the cause of the psalmist's suffering, be it those who had deliberately done something to him that produced suffering, or maybe as they reveled or delighted in his suffering.

The cause of the suffering was another, maybe his own sin, or maybe bad stuff. But when they see that he's in this predicament, then they celebrate his pain, they celebrate his suffering, they taunt him at the point of his great need.

Rather than being sensitive and rather than seeking to help him, they wallow in his suffering. And that intensifies his suffering. Bad people can be the cause of suffering and pain.

[16 : 06] And when we speak about bad people, we're not speaking just about people out there. But we ourselves can often be legitimately described in this way. We do bad things that cause suffering for other people and not just for ourselves.

So in answer to the question, what did it involve? This affliction that the psalmist speaks of, this suffering that he was a victim of or that he experienced?

What were the causes? Well, we've suggested a few possibilities, a couple of which certainly are suggested in the passage. But so far, in what we've said, I don't think there is much that would help us to understand how the psalmist concludes that it was a good thing.

All the things we've mentioned are bad things. How can the psalmist then conclude and testify, it was good for me to be afflicted?

And as we maybe turn from simply considering and exploring this life experience of one who lived many years ago, and as we bring these things closer to home to our own experience, and we ask ourselves, well, what is afflicting me?

[17 : 27] And I ask you, what is afflicting you? What suffering are you going through and enduring? Why are you suffering? Are you able to consider and identify causes?

Is it sin? Is it bad decisions that you have made? Is it bad stuff that we endure and experience? And we're not responsible for it.

It's simply what has come in our way. are bad people who have brought to you measure and a portion of suffering.

Maybe it's a potent cocktail of all of the above. And can you say, could anybody in their right mind say, it was good for me to be afflicted?

I think clearly we need to explore a little further or a little deeper in order to understand what the psalmist is saying. And that brings us on to the second question that I'd already highlighted that we would be exploring or seeking to answer, and it is this.

[18 : 31] Who is behind the affliction of the psalmist? Now, I imagine that as you listen to that question, especially given what we've just said, you might say, well, we've already answered that.

That's what we've been considering. Well, yes and no. Not fully. I think there is a verse, a key verse, one that we've repeated on more than one occasion that helps us to further consider and identify or answer this question, who is behind the affliction of the psalmist?

In verse 71, we read, it was good for me to be afflicted so that I might learn your decrees. This verse doesn't explicitly identify the source or the author of the psalmist's affliction.

But it does seem very clear in the light of all that is said in this section that the psalmist does identify and see the hand of God in his affliction.

The dominant theme of this section is the goodness of God. The manner in which we are approaching it, we're not highlighting that, but this is the dominant theme.

[19 : 44] Even poetically in the original language, five of the verses begin with the word good. Deliberately, artistically, prominently placed at the beginning of five of the verses.

Good, good, good. Indeed, the verse we're considering, verse 71, begins in the original with the word good. Good it was that I was afflicted. The goodness of God is the theme of this section of the psalm.

Given that that is the dominant theme, given that this is what the psalmist is celebrating as he looks back on his experience, it seems altogether reasonable to conclude that the psalmist also considers that his affliction that has had a good purpose in his life is an affliction in which God has participated, in which God in some way is responsible for.

His affliction he understands as being part of God's good purpose and plan for his life. It was God's plan and purpose that he be afflicted.

It was God's good plan and purpose that he be afflicted. Now this is difficult and we don't try and pretend otherwise.

[21 : 12] And we may understandably want to rebel against such a suggestion. Certainly the psalmist did not always, I am sure, see things in this way.

I am sure in the eye of the storm, in the dark valley, in the very experience of pain or grief or rejection, I am sure he, like many of us, could see nothing but darkness.

The tender hand that he on other occasions recognizes and celebrates seemed very distant. The all things work together for good line just didn't wash in the very heart of his trouble.

I don't know if there's a Hebrew equivalent to suffering sucks, but if there is, I am sure the psalmist would have echoed that sentiment. How could God be behind his affliction?

Well, if there was in the psalmist a measure of disbelief as there may be for us, we can be sure that God is sensitive to that and understands that.

[22 : 20] But I wonder if the psalmist, even in the midst of his suffering, as he writes here, his conclusions that he shares with us here are as he looks back.

And he looks back and he concludes, it was good for me that I was afflicted. But if we just ponder on the actual experience of pain and suffering that he had endured, that he is now able to look back on having passed through it.

I wonder if in the midst of it, though he wouldn't have been able to express himself in this way, I wonder if he was able to cling on to one simple truth that didn't explain everything, but that somehow offered a glimmer of light and hope.

And it is the hope, or the truth rather, that he highlights and celebrates in this section that God is good. This is what he is emphasizing in this section.

God is good. He states it very simply but powerfully in verse 68. You are good. Very simple language. You are good.

[23 : 26] And what you do is good. And would it not have been the case for the psalmist that even in the dark valley, even in the experience of pain, when he wasn't able to say it was good for me to be afflicted, or it's good for me to suffer in this way, he was able, I wonder, was he not able to cling on to this?

Well, I don't understand why. I don't see the purpose in this, but I hold firmly to this truth, that God is good, and what he does is good.

And even what I'm going through doesn't change that fundamental, absolute truth upon which I stand firm. God is good. And when we are in trouble, and when we do suffer, and when it's difficult to analyze, and to apply our theology to our situation, salvation, aren't simple truths, very helpful for us.

Simple truths, but powerful ones, and here is one for us to cling on to. Here is one for you to cling on to in the midst of trouble, and suffering, and affliction.

Christian friend, cling to this truth, God is good. And I don't pretend that that will explain everything, but it is something, it is a truth that we can rest on.

[24 : 53] It is an assurance that can help us. He is good, and what He does is good. What He is doing in your life is good. He can do no other.

God doesn't do bad. He doesn't do bad. God is good, and what He does is good. In answer to the question then that we're posing, the second question, who is behind the affliction of the psalmist?

Well, while there are, and we've suggested possible immediate causes, his own sin, the sin of others, bad stuff, bad decisions, bad people, we also recognize, we simply take at face value what the psalmist himself would seem very clearly to be recognizing, that behind all of these things, God was involved and operating and ordering these things.

for the good of the psalmist. So, we've answered two questions and we've generated, perhaps, a problem because the answer given to the two questions posed would seem at face value to be contradictory.

At the end of the day, who is responsible? Does God's involvement absolve the psalmist, if indeed he had strayed from the way? Does it absolve the guilt of the bad people who perhaps were the cause of his suffering?

[26 : 20] Are they somehow absolved because we can say, well, it was God who was behind it ultimately? No, they are not absolved.

And the other side of the coin, as it were, is God then morally responsible for the bad things that were happening to the psalmist. And they were bad things. Well, again, we answer that no, he is not morally responsible.

And we do recognize that there is a mystery here that is difficult to understand and reconcile. But while we recognize the difficulty, we also share the psalmist's conviction that God is good.

And he is the doer of good. And God is not morally responsible for the sin of the psalmist or the sins of others. And yet, he is able to use these things.

And also, what we might describe as the morally neutral bad stuff, he is able to use these things to afflict the psalmist for a good purpose. Which brings us to the final question that we want to pose and attempt an answer to.

[27 : 31] And it is this, why was it good for him? It was good for me to be afflicted. Why does the psalmist come to that conclusion? Well, there is a clear answer given.

The psalmist himself gives us, I think, certainly on two occasions in this psalm very explicitly, an answer to that question. In verse 67, we read, Before I was afflicted, I went astray, but now I obey your word.

There is very clearly a connection being established there by the psalmist. He is saying that thanks to the affliction, I am now obedient in a way that I wasn't previously.

And in verse 70, sorry, in verse 71, it was good for me to be afflicted so that, there very clearly there is a purpose identified by the psalmist, it was good for me to be afflicted so that I might learn your decrees.

So, two very clear answers to the question, why was it good for him? But what I want to do just briefly is not simply focus in on these two very clear and explicit things that are said, valuable, as they are.

[28 : 38] Perhaps in a more general way, answer this question, why was it good for him as we consider the totality of this section? Because I think the totality of the section is answering the question, why was it good for him to be afflicted?

And I think there are three things we can say. The first is this, that it was through suffering that he got to know himself and appreciate his need of help.

It was affliction and suffering that helped the psalmist get to know himself. Affliction deals a severe blow to our core and most pernicious sin, which is the sin of pride.

We are all proud. And I think all sin can be traced ultimately to this root sin, the sin of pride. Pride deceives us into thinking that we can live without God.

Pride persuades us that we are the captains of our own destiny and that we can handle life. We don't need to submit to or be taught by God. But suffering and affliction shakes the foundations of our self-sufficiency.

[29 : 50] We realize that there are things that we can't handle. We see ourselves, maybe for the first time, as we really are, weak and fragile and vulnerable. And it may not be, indeed, it is not a pleasant experience, but it is a good thing to be brought to that place of seeing ourselves as we really are in all our weakness and vulnerability and indeed sinfulness.

As the psalmist himself recognizes, it was only following the affliction that he begins to obey God's Word. Or in any case, obeys it in a more coherent and in a more faithful way.

Before I was afflicted, I went astray. But now, having been afflicted, now I obey your Word. Before the affliction, the psalmist felt that he had no need for the Word of God, no need for God to tell him how he should live or what he should believe.

So through suffering, he got to know himself. He was able to appreciate in a fuller way his great need of help. But secondly, and related theme, it was through suffering, through affliction that he got to know God and God's willingness to help.

Suffering broke his pride and self-sufficiency and drove him to seek help. He needed help. He couldn't handle it himself. He needed help and direction. And who answers his cry for help?

[31 : 19] Who provides the help he needs? Well, it is God who answers the call. And the help he received allows him to appreciate the goodness of God, which is what he celebrates and highlights.

Here, God is good. And what you do is good. How had he discovered this? How had he experienced this in an intimate and in a very meaningful way? It was as he cried out for help.

In the midst of his suffering and affliction, he cries out for help and God answers him. God extends his hand to help him. And he discovers that God is good.

That God is willing to help. The help he receives allows him to appreciate the goodness of God in a new and fresh way.

His relationship with God is now a deeper and a richer one. He now delights in God and his law as he himself expresses it there in verse 70. But I delight in your law.

[32 : 21] Something he hadn't done in the same measure, certainly, before his affliction. The affliction and suffering, though intense and painful, was good for him. And so he declares, it was good for me that I was afflicted.

But one final thing that we can say in answer to the question, why was it good for him? It allowed him to get to know himself and appreciate his need for help.

It enabled him to get to know God better and to appreciate and understand God's willingness to help. But also through the affliction that he endured, whatever it was, through the suffering that he had to bear.

And as he came through it, he was given the opportunity for a fresh start. There is, as I think we've already commented, a clear presentation or reference to the before and after in the language of the psalmist.

Before affliction and after affliction. These two time frames, as it were. Before I was afflicted, I went astray, but now I obey your word.

[33 : 31] There is a fresh start. Now, as he writes, he's already living in this fresh start. With this fresh start that suffering has given him the opportunity to experience, involved for the psalmist a renewed spiritual experience with a number of characteristics that are evident in the section.

And we can just notice them briefly. This new start involved a new attitude of humility and teachableness, if indeed that is a word. Lord, verses 65 and 66, do good to your servant according to your word, O Lord.

Teach me knowledge and good judgment, for I believe in your commands. Here there is humility. Here there is a recognition that he needs to be taught. Here there is a recognition that he doesn't have all the answers.

That he's not the one who can handle life in the way that he previously thought he could. There's a new attitude. This fresh start involves a new attitude of humility.

Of being willing to be taught. This new start involves new behavior and lifestyle that is pleasing to God. The psalm continues, or this section of the psalm, indeed in verse 66 and verse 67, these things kind of overlap.

[34 : 51] Teach me knowledge and good judgment. Why? That I would behave properly. That my life would be a life that is pleasing to you, for I believe in your commands. Before I was afflicted, I went astray, but now I obey your word.

My behavior is different. My lifestyle is different. It is now pleasing to God in a way that previously it was not. There is in this fresh start a new resolve in the face of new challenges.

And let's recognize it. New afflictions that no doubt he would have to endure and experience. Verse 69, though the arrogant has smeared me with lies, I keep your precepts with all my heart.

There is a new resolve. Others may mock and others may scoff and others may treat me in a terrible way, smear me with lies, but I now know a new resolve in the face of these things.

There is a fresh start for the psalmist. New delights. Their hearts are callous and unfeeling, but I delight in your law. I delight in your law. We can be sure that before his affliction, what had captivated him were other things.

[36 : 01] And those other things, whatever they may have been, had lost their glitter. As he has gone through the valley of affliction and suffering, he has seen them for the shallow things that they are.

And now there are new delights. He delights in God and in his word. And new priorities. The section finishes, the law from your mouth is more precious to me than thousands of pieces of silver and gold.

Having gone through suffering, he realizes that all the gold in the world is of no value to him. Can't reduce his suffering in any way. Was of no help to him when he was suffering and afflicted.

And so as he comes through the experience, he sees these things for what they are. of no significance in comparison to the law that proceeds from the mouth of God.

That is so much more precious to him than all the gold and silver that could be at his disposal. New priorities.

[37 : 04] So in many ways, and we simply noted them very much in passing, many characteristics of a new start for the sons. And this new start, this fresh start can be traced to one thing.

It can be traced to the affliction that he had endured. That then, as he came through it, crying out to God for help and receiving the help that God was willing to give.

So the opportunity was afforded for this fresh start. Why was it good for him to be afflicted? Well, we've suggested some possible answers, I trust, on the basis of what the psalmist himself testifies in this psalm.

And perhaps, though there remain, and we've mentioned this and we have no embarrassment in repeating this statement, there are many things that we don't understand and we don't fully comprehend.

But I would hope that in a measure, we can now better understand the words that we highlighted at the beginning and that we have been considering this evening.

[38 : 16] It was good for me to be afflicted. Let us pray. okay, so that we'll show you's soon.

Erik, we're existential. So, let us go, mister. Okay. End ■ eben