

Psalm 119:65-72

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[0 : 0 0] There is a great deal of stuff in the Bible that is difficult to get your head around. Sometimes it's difficult to understand the meaning of a text or passage, and then on other occasions the meaning is clear enough, but it just doesn't seem to make sense. And this evening I want us to think of one such text, particularly one that we might say in a measure is easy enough to understand what is being said, but very difficult to understand why it is being said. I wonder what do you make of the following statement of the psalmist? And we'll read in a moment the passage in which this statement is found, but what do you make of this statement? It was good for me to be afflicted. It was good for me to be afflicted. It was good for me to suffer. Isn't that a strange thing for anybody to say?

Before we even give any thought to it or any initial impressions that it causes for us, let's just read the passage in question. Turn with me to Psalm 119. Psalm 119, and we'll read from verse 65 through to the end of that section. Psalm 119 from verse 65, page 619, if you are making use of the Bible. 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 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. 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. It was good for me to be afflicted.

What do we make of what the psalmist says? Has he completely lost the place? Is he some kind of religious nut into self-flagellation, as if somehow suffering and pain bring some kind of merit to those who so suffer? Does he enjoy pain? Perhaps more seriously, could this sentiment that he expresses be evidence of some form of mental illness? Well, I want us to explore this matter of what the psalmist declares, it was good for me to be afflicted. I want to explore it and the theme that it touches on with the help of a few questions. And the first one that we want to pose and seek to give an answer to is, what did the affliction involve? What is it that he's talking about when he speaks of his affliction or his suffering? What was it? What were its causes? Now, before we even suggest what the cause might have been, nor a number of possible causes, it's only right to state at the outset that we don't know for sure what affliction he is speaking of. He doesn't definitively or explicitly tell us what the affliction was that he is grateful for, of which he can say, it was good for me to be afflicted. But though we don't have a definitive statement by the psalmist himself concerning what the affliction was, the passage, the verses that we've read, certainly do point us in possible directions, as we would seek to identify the cause of his affliction. I want to mention four possibilities, some of which are very clearly referred to in the verses, and others less so. And I'll mention what the four things are, and then we can think of them each in turn. And at this point, we are considering this first question, what did the affliction involve? What were the causes of it? And four possible causes. Bad sin, bad decisions, bad stuff, and bad people. Bad sin. Notice what the psalmist says there in verse 67, before I was afflicted, I went astray. It's very clear that the psalmist is making a connection between his affliction and his going astray. And it is the case that suffering often follows sin as surely as night follows day. In fact, we might say that suffering always follows sin. Now, it isn't immediate, and it's not always clearly evident, but we can be very confident in asserting that suffering follows sin. It's in the nature of sin to produce a suffering, both in the one who is committing the sin and often in surrounding innocent victims. We don't know in what way the psalmist went astray. Clearly, he did. He recognizes it. He confesses it. Before I was afflicted, I went astray.

But though we don't know the manner in which he went astray, what is clear is that he himself recognizes this connection, this causal link between his going astray and his subsequent affliction.

[6 : 09] So, sin can be a reason for our suffering. But not only bad sin, if we can use that term, but also bad decisions. And the reason that we speak of bad decisions is that the language that the psalmist uses, that very phrase that we've been just touching on briefly, before I was afflicted, I went astray. That very language or that phrase that he uses doesn't suggest what we might think of as crass rebellion or wanton sin of a believer who throws himself in in a very vulgar way into a lifestyle of depravity and sin. Rather, the language speaks of somebody who maybe continues to give all the impression of living a respectable Christian life, and yet who begins to go astray, begins to take decisions that are not wise decisions, decisions that are not grounded in seeking to do what God would have us do, but perhaps what we want to do. Might it be that for the psalmist, this is the cause of his affliction, that he became careless in his Christian walk, still participating in corporate worship, still serving God perhaps in different ways, but just beginning to veer off the path that he had been placed on to the right or to the left. He went astray. Of course, that can be true of us. We can be Christians, and we thank God for it. We can be Christians who participate in a congregation like we do here at Bon Accord. We maybe serve in different ways, and yet we begin to take bad decisions. We maybe enter into a relationship that isn't pleasing to God, nothing dramatic, nothing too scandalous. We maybe begin to have an unhealthy fascination with money and with success and with our careers, not things that are bad in themselves, but they begin to take precedence over those things that ought to be at the forefront of our concern.

Bad decisions. We begin to go astray, and that can in due course result in suffering for us. Bad sin, bad decisions. But then we have, of course, what we're calling simply bad stuff. What's bad stuff?

Well, there's those things that we can be afflicted with, illness, bereavement. When we think of the psalmist in the age in which he lived, an age when agriculture dominated, the well-being of all, maybe a bad harvest. Nobody's fault. Nobody that you could point the finger to and say, well, it's his fault or it's his sin, just bad stuff that happens in this fallen world. People get sick. People die.

People die suddenly in tragic circumstances. People lose their jobs. Nobody's fault, or often, not clear if it's anybody's fault, and often nobody's fault. Just bad stuff that happens, happens. And it happens to us all. Bad stuff makes no distinction between good people or bad people, even if we want to use that language. Bad sin, bad decisions, bad stuff. But then affliction can be caused by bad people. In the psalm, there is explicit reference to that there in verse 69, though the arrogant have smeared me with lies. I keep your precepts with all my heart.

Bad people who can cause suffering for others. Bad people who can celebrate the pain of others. So, there's a number of possibilities, but even as we think of these possible causes of his affliction, it remains a mystery why the psalmist would consider his affliction a good thing.

[10:17] Any of the possible causes that we've suggested all look pretty bad. There doesn't seem to be many redeeming features in any of them. And as we think of this matter of suffering and affliction, what about you? Are you suffering? In what way are you suffering? What is the cause of your suffering?

Have you ever paused for a moment and taken a step back, as it were? I know this is a difficult thing, to do. And in the midst of suffering, and ask, well, why is this happening? What is the cause of this?

Though it would be very cruel to precipitately point the finger to others and say, ah, it's probably because of some sin in your life. Nonetheless, for ourselves, as we examine ourselves, it is right that we should consider that possibility. Maybe bad decisions that we've taken. Maybe it is just bad stuff that is happening to us. And maybe, sadly, it may be bad people who, in the behavior that they have shown, in the words that they have spoken, have caused suffering for you. Maybe it's a potent cocktail of all of the above. Well, as you experience and endure suffering, can you say, could anybody in their right mind say with the psalmist, it was good for me to be afflicted? It continues to appear a very strange thing to say. I think we need to, given that we still don't really understand why he could say such a thing, we need to explore a little deeper. And we do so with the help of another question.

It's seemingly very similar to the first. The first question that we posed was, what did the affliction involve, or what were its causes? The second question is, who is behind the affliction of the psalmist? And as I've just said, you might say, well, haven't we just dealt with that, or at least attempted to give an answer to that? Well, yes, but not fully. The key verse in this section, certainly the one that we're focusing on, is verse 71, it was good for me to be afflicted. And that verse doesn't explicitly identify the source or the author of the psalmist's affliction, but it is very clear that the psalmist sees the hand of God in his affliction. The dominant theme of the section is the goodness of God. The word good appears prominently and repeatedly throughout this small section. This is the great theme that the psalmist is celebrating, how good God is and the good that he does. God is clearly and explicitly identified both as good and the doer of good.

It couldn't be clearer than the words that we have in verse 68. You are good, and what you do is good. No room for confusion or misunderstanding there. Now, having recognized that this is the great theme of the psalmist, the goodness of God, then it seems entirely reasonable that when the psalmist goes on to speak of his affliction as being a good thing, that the only reasonable conclusion we can come to is that he considers his affliction as being part of God's good purpose and plan for his life. It was God's plan and purpose that he suffer this affliction. It was God's good plan and purpose that he suffer.

[14 : 08] Now, this is difficult. It's easy enough to state it, but it's difficult to grapple with what is being stated. We maybe recoil from such a notion. We maybe even rebel against such a suggestion.

And I'm sure the psalmist did not always see things in this way. The psalmist speaks very clearly of having come to this conclusion. We'll notice just in a moment how in the psalm very clearly there's a before and an after. He hadn't always understood this in the manner that he does as he pens these words. No doubt in the eye of the storm, in the dark valley, in the very experience of pain or grief or rejection, he could see nothing but darkness. The tender hand of God would have seemed very distant.

The all things worked together for good lying, just didn't wash with him. I don't know if there is a Hebrew equivalent to suffering sucks, but if there is, I'm sure the psalmist would have been quick to declare it in the midst of his affliction. How could God be behind his affliction?

And I'm sure also that in that dark place, God understood his disbelief, as he does ours when we are in that place, and God was sensitive to it. It's not that we are justifying our unbelief or our lack of faith or trust, but it is to declare that God is sensitive to it, and we might even say understanding of it. But I wonder if for the psalmist, and here we are in a sense in the realm of speculation, but I wonder if in the midst of his suffering, would it not have been the case that the psalmist was able to cling on to one simple truth that didn't explain everything, but somehow offered a glimmer of light and hope? And it is this truth, that God is good. This is what we find repeatedly in this section. God is good. And so I would say to you also, cling to this simple but rock-solid truth. You know, at times when everything is confused and difficult to understand, we need something simple, don't we? We're maybe not able to work out all the complicated whys and wherefores, but something that's rock-solid and simple. We can cling to. And did the psalmist not cling to this truth? God is good. God is good. I don't know why all this is happening, but God is good.

No doubt, I'm sure he was able to cling to that. And whatever you're going through, whatever affliction is your portion, remember this, God is good. Now, I don't pretend that this explains everything or answers all the questions, but we can, as his people very especially, rest in this assurance.

[17 : 15] As the psalmist says, 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. God doesn't do bad. He is good, and the doer of good.

So, who is behind the affliction of the psalmist? To return to our question, the second question, who is behind the affliction of the psalmist? Well, the psalmist's own testimony, I think, is clear. God.

Now, there is a problem, and the answer is given to the two questions posed. They seem to be contradictory. At the end of the day, who is responsible? Does God's involvement absolve the psalmist or others of the guilt of their sin that was the immediate cause of his suffering?

No, it does not. Is God then morally responsible for bad things? Most assuredly not. And this is difficult to understand and reconcile, but we share the psalmist's conviction that God is good, and the doer of good. God is not morally culpable for the sin of the psalmist or the sins of the enemies of the psalmist, and yet he is able to use these things, and also what we might call the morally neutral bad stuff, to afflict the psalmist for a good purpose. But then that brings us to a final question that I want us just to pose and consider for a moment. Why was it good for him?

We thought a little of some of the, if you wish, immediate causes or possible causes of his affliction. We recognize that the psalmist himself identifies God as being ultimately behind these things for his good. But why was it good? Why was it good for him to suffer in the manner that he testifies? Now, the psalmist gives a clear answer to that. Very explicitly in verse 67, he states, before I was afflicted, I went astray, but now I obey your word. He's making it very clear that there was something good that came out of it. He was able to obey God in a manner that he had not been obeying God before. In verse 70, their hearts are callous and unfeeling, but I delight in your law. These are things that I have learned and discovered. These are good things that have come out of my suffering.

[19 : 44] But I think the answer to this question, why was it good for him, isn't to be found only in specific things that he states in these verses, but this whole section of the psalm is an answer to this question of why it was good for him to be afflicted. And we can maybe summarize some of what is being said, or some of this answer to the question, why was it good for him, in the following way, with three things, three reasons for which the psalmist could declare it was good for me to be afflicted? The first thing we can say is this, that through suffering, he got to know himself and to appreciate his need for help. What affliction does, perhaps among other things, is deal a severe blow to our core and most pernicious sin, the sin of pride. All sin can be traced to this root sin. Pride deceives us into thinking that we can live without God. Pride persuades us that we are the captains of our own destiny, that we can handle life and all that life throws at us. We don't need to submit to or be taught by God. But suffering shakes the foundations of our self-sufficiency. We realize that there are things that we can't handle. We see ourselves 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. It is a good thing for us to see ourselves as we really are. As the psalmist recognizes, it was only following the affliction that he begins to obey God's Word. Before the affliction, he was assured that he had no need for the Word of God. Oh, I'm sure he paid lip service to how important it was and how inspired and how his life should be built upon it, but it wasn't something that he really believed.

But after the affliction, he begins to obey in a manner that he had never obeyed before. So, through suffering, he is enabled to know himself and to appreciate his condition and his need for help. There's a second reason we can give that we find in these words of the psalmist that would explain this surprising statement, it was good for me to be afflicted. And the second reason is this, that through suffering, he got to know God and his willingness to help. You see, he got to know himself and his great need of help, but he also was enabled to get to know God and his willingness to help. Suffering broke his pride and self-sufficiency and drove him to seek help. He needed help, he needed direction, he needed somebody to answer his call. And who is it that provides the help he needs?

Well, it is God who answers his call. The help he receives allows him to appreciate the goodness of God that he celebrates in this psalm. It allows him to appreciate the goodness of God in a new and a fresh way. His relationship with God is now a deeper and a richer one. He now delights in God and his law in a manner that he had not done before. The affliction and the suffering, though real and intense and raw and painful, was good for him. And so he declares, it was good for me to be afflicted.

It was good for him because through suffering he got to know himself and his need for help. He got to know God in a deeper and in a richer way and experienced God's goodness and help to him.

[23 : 25] But we can say finally that it is through suffering that he was given the opportunity for a fresh start. There is in the psalm, or this section of the psalm, a very clear sense of before and after, before affliction and after affliction. There in verse 67 it's so explicit, before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I obey your word. A before and after. There was for the psalmist as a result of his affliction the opportunity for a fresh start in his walk with God, in his spiritual life. And this fresh start involves a renewed spiritual experience with a number of features and characteristics that the passage touches on. There was for the psalmist a new attitude of humility and teachableness. Beginning of the section, do good to your servant according to your word, O Lord, teach me knowledge and good judgment. I wonder how often he had prayed that before his affliction, teach me. Perhaps before his affliction his thought was, I don't need to be taught,

I know plenty already. But now this fresh start is characterized by humility and teachableness, new behavior, a new lifestyle that is pleasing to God. Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I obey your word. New resolve in the face of new challenges and possibly new afflictions.

In verse 69, though the arrogant have smeared me with lies, I keep your precepts with all my heart. There's a new resolve. They can say what they want, they can do what they wish to me, but I, I will keep your precepts with all my heart. New delights. Verse 70, their hearts are callous and unfeeling, but I delight in your law. Not simply a recognition that it's true and that it's trustworthy, but a delight in God's law. What previously had captivated and had obsessed him has now lost its glitter and now his delight in God and his word? New priorities. At the end of the section, the law from your mouth is more precious to me than thousands of pieces of silver and gold.

Might it be that this was the area in which the psalmist had gone astray, as he gathered wealth and possessions and stuff and became so enthralled by them, and that led to bad decisions. And now, as a result of his affliction, he's able to look back and say, well, that was foolish. That was foolish. No longer. No longer will this be that which dominates my life.

Now I will seek rather those things that last and are of greater value. A fresh start that he has given thanks to the affliction that he had endured. You see, this fresh start with these various characteristics can be traced to one thing, his affliction.

[26 : 40] So perhaps now, if only in a measure, for these are matters where we only ever understand in a measure, perhaps now in a measure we can better understand these words that seem so strange.

It was good for me that I was afflicted. Perhaps we can now better understand our own afflictions, many and varied and different, though they are for each of us, for we are all different, and our circumstances are different. But also, would we, with the psalmist, in the midst of our afflictions, grasp the opportunity of knowing ourselves better, of knowing God more intimately, of starting afresh?

You see, we don't always do that. We don't always respond in the manner the psalmist did. He took the opportunity of discovering himself better, of relying on God more, of beginning anew and afresh, but we don't always do that. Sometimes what affliction does is simply embitter us and drive us away from God. But rather, would we, with the psalmist, know what it is, in the midst of our own afflictions, to know ourselves better, to know God more intimately, and to begin afresh in our service of Him. Let us pray.