

You have dealt well with your servant, O LORD, according to your word. Teach me good judgement and knowledge, for I believe in your commandments. Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I keep your word. You are good and do good; teach me your statutes. The insolent smear me with lies, but with my whole heart I keep your precepts; their heart is unfeeling like fat, but I delight in your law. It is good for me that I was afflicted, that I might learn your statutes. The law of your mouth is better to me than thousands of gold and silver pieces.

(Psalm 119:65–72)

Introduction

Recently, while scanning through a particular social media platform, the headline for a suggested article grabbed my attention. The article was titled, “The Top 10 Thankless Jobs in the US.” The tagline read:

Do you consider yourself to be a part of that faceless workforce that never gets a thank you? Common sense demands that we categorize all those who are underpaid, overworked, disrespected, unnoticed, [and] fall in that thankless job category.

A few of the thankless jobs caught my attention. At number 9, for example, was interns. The article states, “Often we don’t even know their names, we just call them ‘*coffee with two sugars*’ and if we are having a good day a ‘please’ in the end makes us feel good about ourselves.” I didn’t even know interns are supposed to bring you coffee!

Social workers made number 3 on the list. Topping the list was farmers. And sitting between farmers and social workers at number 2 was teachers.

Wikipedia defines a “school” as “an institution designed to provide learning spaces and learning environments for the teaching of students under the direction of teachers.” Being a school teacher must be one of the most thankless jobs I can think of. While a teacher envisions inspiring students like Robin Williams in *Dead Poet’s Society* or Hilary Swank in *Freedom Writers*, the dream often far exceeds the reality.

John Rodgers is a professor at Plymouth State University in the United States. For several years, he taught at a high school in South Korea. Recalling those Korean years, he writes,

Every weekday morning for well over 200 days a year the students arrived at the elite South Korean prep school where I taught English by 7:40 a.m. Teachers and supervisor students were waiting outside the entrance to check their hair (for length and style—no perms or dying allowed) and attire (uniform shirts tucked in, skirts at the knee, formal shoes).

Then they climbed the stairs to their homerooms where they mopped floors, scrubbed desks, wiped windows and cleared trash. The academic day would begin at 8, pausing for 10-minute breaks, a 50-minute lunch and an hour-long dinner at 5 p.m.

At 6 p.m. when I usually shut down my computer, the students would be settling into their seats for four more hours of self-study during which teachers would monitor them to make sure they did not surrender to sleep, chat or do anything other than study. At 10:20 p.m. classes emptied. Liberated kids headed to waiting buses for their ride home (few lived nearby). Most students wouldn’t see bed until after midnight. An old adage recommends four hours of sleep a night in order to enter a top university.

When he arrived back in the United States, a university professor asked him to give a lecture to a freshman philosophy class on his years in Asia. In contrast to his Korean experience, Professor Rodgers noticed how

bored the American students appeared. Many of them secretly or openly played with digital devices during his lecture. The older professor told him that, really, he had delivered his lecture for the five-or-so students who expressed interest and asked questions and who would go on to do great things. Those students, who “take themselves seriously” and are eager to learn, are the ones who benefit from the schooling in the long run.

As with many areas of life, it is fair to say that you get from school what you put into it.

Psalm 119:65–72 takes us to school. The word “teach” is found in vv. 66 and 68. “Learn” is found in v. 71. But this school is not set in a classroom with desks and chairs. The psalmist here writes of a different school, a school we all attend—the school of affliction.

Affliction forms a central theme of these verses. The psalmist talks in vv. 67 and 71 of being “afflicted.” But his burden was to *learn* something from affliction, to see what God wanted to *teach* him in affliction. And he writes to help us do the same.

Affliction is a reality for everyone, but as in an academic school, we will only learn from affliction if we are looking to learn. As we journey through this psalm, I want us to learn about the source of affliction (v. 65), the purpose of affliction (vv. 66–68) and some realities of affliction (vv. 69–72).

The Source of Affliction

The first thing we must note about our text is the source of affliction: God himself. The psalmist begins this section: “You have dealt well with your servant, O LORD, according to your word” (v. 65).

We are trained to think that God has “dealt well” with us when we experience prosperity. When the psalmist wrote that God had “dealt well” with him, however, he was not thinking about prosperity. He was confessing that, even in his affliction, God had “dealt well” with him. When Job was afflicted, he “fell on the ground and worshipped,” confessing, “Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked shall I return. The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away, blessed be the name of the LORD” (1:20–21). Job’s wife, like many prosperity-minded Christians today, could not understand Job’s disposition. She advised him to “curse God and die.” Job replied, “Shall we receive good from God, and shall we not receive evil?” (2:9–10). He understood that prosperity and affliction came by means of God’s kind providence.

There are some interpreters who suggest that Job’s words in the opening chapters are simply Job’s misconception of events—that God was actually *not* behind what happened to Job, but Job only (mistakenly) *thought* he was. While it is possible that the statements people make in Scripture do not reflect theological reality (like the advice given throughout the book by Job’s friends), the end of the book of Job states it clearly: Job’s family and friends “showed him sympathy and comforted him for all the evil *that the LORD had brought upon him*” (42:11). Yes, God used Satan as his instrument, but, if we take the text seriously, it was *the Lord* who was behind his unfavourable circumstances.

But to turn our attention back to our text, notice who the psalmist attributes his circumstances to: “*You* have dealt well with your servant.” We will talk below about why the psalmist considered his afflictions to be evidence of God dealing well with him, but for now notice that the source of his circumstances was *God*.

Here is the principle: *God is the source of all our circumstances—good and bad*. We are afflicted only to the degree that God allows us to be afflicted. When affliction strikes, we must recognise God as the sovereign director behind the scenes.

Affliction basically arises due to one of three reasons: It can be the consequence of your own sin, the consequence of another's sin, or the consequence of living in a sinful world. Regardless, God is the sovereign director behind the scenes of every circumstance, as the writer here acknowledges.

By the way, let that thought be a comfort to you: that *nothing* can happen in your life that God does not allow and control. Your hope in affliction is precisely that the Lord is dealing with you.

The Purpose of Affliction

But what was the purpose of the affliction that the psalmist experienced? Why did God allow his servant to be afflicted? The psalmist, in vv. 66–68, identifies at least two purposes of the affliction he experienced.

Before we get to the two purposes of affliction that the psalmist identifies, I want to issue a word of caution: We must be careful of thinking that, this side of eternity, we will always know or recognise the purpose of our affliction.

Sometimes, the purpose of an affliction will be revealed. For example, Deuteronomy 8:3: “And he humbled you and let you hunger and fed you with manna, which you did not know, nor did your fathers know, *that he might make you know that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD.*”

Sometimes, you may recognise the purpose of your affliction as obvious. For example, when Joseph revealed himself to his brothers, he said, “Do not be distressed or angry with yourselves because you sold me here, for God sent me to preserve life” (Genesis 45:5).

But there are times when we must be content to simply not know the purpose of our affliction. Job—at least insofar as the text goes—never learned the reason for his affliction. He simply learned to trust God in his affliction. Romans 8:28 tells us that “all things work together for good” for God's children, but the “good” in that text is specifically defined as conformity to the image of Christ (vv. 29–30). God may reveal a specific reason for affliction, or it may be obvious, but there are times when we may never know why we are being afflicted, and we must just trust that God is producing Christlikeness in us through our affliction.

With that said, let's consider the two purposes of affliction that the psalmist identifies in this text.

Affliction is Instructive

First, observe, in vv. 66, 68, that affliction is instructive: “Teach me good judgement and knowledge, for I believe in your commandments.... You are good and do good, teach me your statutes.” When God afflicts his people, he intends to teach them.

Specifically, affliction taught the psalmist two things. It taught him, first, “good judgement and knowledge” because it taught him to “believe in [God's] commandments” (v. 66). When our affliction drives us to the Scriptures (as it should), we learn to trust God's Word, which produces in us sound judgement and healthy knowledge. God wants us to learn about and believe him in our afflictions.

Second, it taught him that, even in the midst of affliction, God is good. And he learned this from the Word. God's Word, not his circumstances, taught him God's character.

When you are afflicted, what is your first response? Complaint? Prayer for deliverance? Perhaps we need to learn to ask God what he is trying to teach us in our affliction.

Affliction is Corrective

Second, in v. 67, observe that affliction is corrective (or, perhaps, preventative): “Before I was afflicted, I went astray, but now I keep your word.”

The word translated “went astray” is used in Leviticus 5:18 and Numbers 15:28 of a sin committed in ignorance. It is translated in Job 12:16 as “deceived.” The picture here seems to be that God used affliction to correct the psalmist, to prevent him from sinning unintentionally by relying on his Word. Affliction drove him to the Word, where he learned God’s truth, which corrected previous sinful tendencies and prevented him from falling into future unintentional sin.

Sometimes, God afflicts in order to correct, or in order to prevent his people from falling unintentionally into sin. In your affliction, ask yourself, is God allowing this in order to correct a sinful tendency, or in order to prevent a sinful temptation?

The Realities of Affliction

In the third and final broad section of our text (vv. 70–72), we see three very basic realities of affliction. Though he recognises that his affliction is providential (v. 65) and instructive (vv. 66–68), there are some base realities that he wishes to address.

Affliction is Painful

Even though he recognised that his affliction came from God (v. 65), the psalmist did not minimise the pain it brought him: “The insolent smear me with lies, but with my whole heart I keep your precepts; their heart is unfeeling like fat, but I delight in your law” (vv. 69–70).

Consistently in the Scriptures, God’s people recognise his sovereign hand over their circumstances, but they never deny that it is painful. While the psalmist recognised the sovereign direction of God over his circumstances, he was not content with pat answers when the pain he was feeling was very real. This should instruct us in two ways.

First, don’t be afraid to admit that your affliction is painful. There is nothing inherently “spiritual” about putting on a brave face and quoting Romans 8:28 when you experience the pain of affliction.

Second, be wary of offering pat, impersonal answers to the very real and painful afflictions of others. I don’t doubt that Job’s friends really were his friends and really wanted to help him, but ultimately they didn’t help. They failed him on two counts. Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar (chapters 4–31) offered answers to his suffering that ultimately weren’t even true. Elihu (chapters 32–37) offered answers that were technically true, but completely unfeeling. That is why it is so significant, in the end, that his family and friends “showed him sympathy and comforted him” (42:11). They didn’t give him answers, but they showed compassion. People who are suffering don’t always need the technically correct answer, sometimes they just need comfort. It’s not always about the nail!

Affliction is Beneficial

While affliction is painful, it can—for the believer—be beneficial. The psalmist tells us this in v. 71: “It is good for me that I was afflicted, that I might learn your statutes.”

When last, in a time of affliction, did you say, “This is good”? For the psalmist, affliction was good because it drove him to the Word. He learned about God’s Word, and therefore about God (see v. 68), best in times of affliction, because that is precisely when he went to the Word. Affliction was the school in which he learned God’s Word.

When you are afflicted, there is no better place to turn than to the Word. God’s Word—particularly, perhaps, the Psalms—run the full gamut of human emotions. The writers of Scripture knew what it was to be afflicted, and they wrote in order to teach us in our afflictions. Do you let your afflictions drive you to the Bible, so that you might learn God’s statutes?

Affliction is Transformational

Finally, in v. 72, the psalmist learned that affliction is transformational. Specifically, it transformed his entire value system: “The law of your mouth is better to me than thousands of gold and silver pieces.” As his affliction drove him to God’s statutes (v. 71), he found that those statutes became more precious to him than anything else.

How precious is God’s Word to you? It will never be as precious as it ought if you do not strive to learn it. And there is no better time to learn it than in times of affliction.

The Hope in Affliction

As I draw this study to a close, I want to just point us to one final truth, which is our hope in affliction.

There is a story in 2 Chronicles 20 that records Jehoshaphat’s response to affliction.

After this the Moabites and Ammonites, and with them some of the Meunites, came against Jehoshaphat for battle. Some men came and told Jehoshaphat, “A great multitude is coming against you from Edom, from beyond the sea; and, behold, they are in Hazazon-tamar” (that is, Engedi). Then Jehoshaphat was afraid and set his face to seek the LORD, and proclaimed a fast throughout all Judah. And Judah assembled to seek help from the LORD; from all the cities of Judah they came to seek the LORD.

And Jehoshaphat stood in the assembly of Judah and Jerusalem, in the house of the LORD, before the new court, and said, “O LORD, God of our fathers, are you not God in heaven? You rule over all the kingdoms of the nations. In your hand are power and might, so that none is able to withstand you. Did you not, our God, drive out the inhabitants of this land before your people Israel, and give it forever to the descendants of Abraham your friend? And they have lived in it and have built for you in it a sanctuary for your name, saying, ‘If disaster comes upon us, the sword, judgement, or pestilence, or famine, we will stand before this house and before you—for your name is in this house—and cry out to you in our affliction, and you will hear and save.’ And now behold, the men of Ammon and Moab and Mount Seir, whom you would not let Israel invade when they came from the land of Egypt, and whom they avoided and did not destroy—behold, they reward us by coming to drive us out of your possession, which you have given us to inherit. O our God, will you not execute judgment on them? For we are powerless against this great horde that is coming against us. We do not know what to do, but our eyes are on you.”

(2 Chronicles 20:1–12)

Notice Jehoshaphat’s prayer: “We do not know what to do, but our eyes are on you.” When he was hopeless in his affliction, he knew where to look for hope.

The book of Hebrews exhorts us in this same regard. Consider these words from Hebrews 12:

The School of Affliction

Psalm 119:65–72

Stuart Chase

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted.

(Hebrews 12:1–3)

Affliction tempts us to weariness and faintheartedness. The writer to the Hebrews exhorts us to not grow weary or fainthearted, and tells us that the only way to achieve this is to look to Christ, who endured affliction on our behalf so that we do not have to be beaten down by it. Look to Christ, and lean on him in your times of affliction.

AMEN