

TRIALS AND THE GOODNESS OF GOD

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Psalm 119:71 - "It is good for me that I was afflicted, that I might learn your statutes."

I heard Kenneth Copeland lately emphatically declaring that whenever Christians experience sickness, pain, persecution, or poverty we must never attribute these things to our good God. Not ever. They are always the work of Satan because our good God never does any of these evil things. Satan does.

Now, while this whole issue isn't the subject of this sermon, there are some clear verses of Scripture that make it difficult to always rule out God's hand in times of affliction:

Exodus 4:10-12 - "But Moses said to the LORD, "Oh, my Lord, I am not eloquent, either in the past or since you have spoken to your servant, but I am slow of speech and of tongue." [11] Then the LORD said to him, "Who has made man's mouth? Who makes him mute, or deaf, or seeing, or blind? Is it not I, the LORD?" [12] Now therefore go, and I will be with your mouth and teach you what you shall speak."

The Bible doesn't always yield its truth to our *tastes*. And sometimes, not even to our *theology*. Yet there is still no denying the Scriptures teach God *is* good. This very Psalm we're studying today makes this point with stark simplicity:

Psalm 119:68 - "You are good and do good..."

So there is no denying God *is* good. And there is no denying that what God *does* is good. The problem is the Psalmist goes on to say, three verses later, that it was *good* that he was afflicted. How can this be? How can affliction be good?

This is more than an issue of theological curiosity. This is not just philosophical meat grinding. It has to do with *how you keep your heart in times of trial*. It has to do with *what ideas of God sweep over your soul when life brings pain*. And it has to do with whether or not you have to *play spiritual make-believe and try to confess your way out of situations that you know aren't going away*. There are thousands of Christians who have built a doctrine of God that forces them to pretend their afflictions don't exist. That is a very cruel use of the Scriptures.

There's a lot riding on what we do with this little verse from Psalm 119. I can't think of a verse of Scripture that flies more in the face of what many Christians, and many churches, believe and teach than our text. We try to *avoid* afflictions. Most of the time we look at afflictions as things that are *evil*, not *good* - coming from *Satan*, not *God*.

And many times that is true. Jesus said the Devil came to kill, steal and destroy. In contrast, Jesus didn't go around making people *sick*. He made them *whole*.

But it's too simplistic to make this the whole story. Like in any large picture puzzle there are other pieces of truth that must be blended into the picture if we are to receive the benefit of the *whole* counsel of Scripture and the *whole* work of God in our present circumstances.

Let's look at our verse carefully: **Psalm 119:71 - "It is good for me that I was afflicted, that I might learn your statutes."**

I think it's easy to see the two big ideas in these words:

- a) ***David says his afflictions, while painful, were good, not bad - "It is good for me that I was afflicted..."***
- b) ***David says his afflictions taught him God's statutes in a way pleasure never did - "...that I may learn your statutes."***

Those are the key ideas of this verse. It is *not* God's plan to *remove* all the trials and afflictions from your life. He graciously removes *some*. But He loves us too much to remove them *all*. The key is to learn God's purpose in the afflictions He doesn't remove. This is the key to understanding and growth. Because once we *know, really know*, the truth of this verse, afflictions can create a faith and confidence in God that can stand up and grow through what appear to be dark, empty, and confusing times of struggle. You will begin to see more of the goodness of the Lord than you ever imagined - yes - even in the middle of your affliction.

Here are the principles I try to cling to. And they *always* require the exercise of faith:

1) **THE GOOD GOD IS WORKING FOR IN MY LIFE IS NOT MY COMFORT BUT MY CONFORMATION TO CHRIST**

Whenever someone is involved in the shaping of your life it's important you understand their *goal* in the things they do. If you don't understand the *goal* of their actions you will misread their intentions.

When you were a small child you thought every teacher was mean who gave you homework. You thought your parents were cruel when they refused your requests or established a curfew. But that's only because you were too young and too foolish to have a clear picture of *what their goal was for your life*. You only saw the *action* and couldn't really have a deep understanding of the *goal behind the action*.

So, what is God's goal in everything He does in my life? What is He trying to do when He involves Himself in the circumstances of my day and my week?

Fortunately, we don't have to guess at the answer. The Bible is resoundingly clear:

Romans 8:28-29 - "And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. [29] For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers."

Verse 29 is amazing. Note the brotherhood Father God desires to create with His Son. There is a spiritual linkage to be created with the Son who found more suffering in the Father's will than anyone else.

So we see this is why God saved you. He didn't just save you because He thought you were in a jam and He had nothing else to do. He saved you as a *work project*. Forgiving you wasn't the *end* of the project. It was just the *beginning*. Now, from the moment of my new birth, God uses everything at His disposal to make me less like I was in my fallen self and more like Jesus Christ.

The only reason God leaves us here on earth instead of taking us all immediately to heaven at the moment of our conversion is to *make us so totally different from the world around us and so much like Jesus Christ that our witness will bring others to heaven with us later on*.

We *know* that's His purpose because He said if we ever *lose* that distinguishing Spiritual life in our heart, if people don't *see* the difference in our words and actions and affections, if the *salt loses it's savor*, Jesus says it's virtually useless.

So God, by the inward work of the Holy Spirit, labors to conform us to the likeness of Jesus Christ. And here's the really important point in all of this - *God will sacrifice anything else about us to bring this goal about*. If I forget that key idea I will never understand much of what God does in my life day by day. He has only *one primary goal* and will sacrifice anything else about me to get that goal accomplished, including my comfort.

In other words, God, in His wise love, will do whatever it takes to make me less worldly. He will do whatever it takes to make me more patient, self-sacrificing, and trusting. He will do whatever it takes to make me less materialistic. He will do whatever it takes to help me call upon His Name in prayer with greater earnestness and passion.

This is the understanding that must frame the rest of our discussion. This is the *good* God is dedicated to bringing about in my life and this is the *good* that David said his affliction helped accomplish.

2) **GOD IS SO LOVING AND SO WISE AND SO POWERFUL THAT HE CAN ACCOMPLISH THIS GOOD THROUGH TIMES OF AFFLICTION - REGARDLESS OF THE SOURCE OF THE AFFLICTION**

Can I offer you some humble advice? Unless God makes this vividly clear to you, and you can confirm it with other wise believers and the backing of the Scriptures, don't spend a lot of time *tracking the source of your trials and afflictions*. You can wear yourself out second guessing whether your situation is the work of the Devil, or the chastening of the Lord, or just

the thoughtlessness of fallen human beings. Many times it's very hard to tell the *source* of your trial right at the moment you are *in the middle* of the trial.

Let me give you something much more important to think about when you are afflicted: Whatever the source, God can bring good out of it if you will patiently and meekly draw close to Him and turn it over to Him.

I know this is true from the clear teaching of the Scriptures:

- a) God can work good in our lives when other people are thoughtless or downright wicked to us - **Genesis 50:20** - **"As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today."**

This is a wonderful verse. It tells me God can override the evil deeds of others toward me if I keep my heart right toward Him. In other words, you can't lose, whatever others do to you, if you respond in a Christ-like fashion. That's an incredible promise. I will short-circuit God's blessing if I take revenge into my own hands.

- b) God can work good in our lives when the Devil tempts and attacks - **2 Corinthians 12:7-9** - **"So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited. [8] Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. [9] But he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.' Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me."**

This is a fascinating verse. Both parties - God and Satan - are involved in Paul's "thorn in the flesh." But they do not have *equal say or roles*. Satan's work is *allowed* by God. And, in ways we probably can't fully understand right now, Satan's work is *used* by God for Paul's good. Not for Paul's *comfort* (remember our first point), but for Paul's ultimate *good*.

Not only do we not need to *fear* the Devil, but God is actually able to bring growth though anything He sees fit to allow to transpire in our lives. If my heart is pure, God will always do one of two things with the Devil's attack on my life:

- i) Most of the time He will *prevent* it - **1 John 5:18** - **"We know that everyone who has been born of God does not keep on sinning, but he who was born of God protects him, and the evil one does not touch him."**
- ii) Sometimes God will actually *use* the tactics of the Devil to sharpen and deepen my spiritual life - **2 Corinthians 12:7** - **"So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited."**

You have to wonder which of these is more frustrating to the Devil - to be disallowed any possibility of direct contact with Christians or, just when some opening is granted, finding the Spirit of God is actually deepening our commitment to the cause of Christ through something the Devil is allowed to do. Behold the greatness and wisdom of God!

- c) God can work in our lives through His own times of direct discipline and chastening - **Hebrews 12:7-8** - **"It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline? [8] If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons."**

Yes - there is clear teaching from the Scriptures that God, at times, intentionally brings pain into our lives. Kenneth Copeland is wrong on that point. There is, as the Psalmist said in our text, a kind of affliction that helps us *learn God's statutes* - that teaches us to *listen* to God in a deeper, more careful way.

The important point here is this: **Wherever the affliction comes from, and however long it lasts, the important**

factor for you and for me is not the *source* of the affliction, but our *response* to the affliction.

Remember, God is so loving and so wise He can truly make ***all things***, pleasant and unpleasant, painful and pleasurable, difficult and easy - ***all things*** - work together for good. And that good is the forming of the likeness of Jesus in center our lives.

Learn to ***expect*** to see God's hand in all the circumstances of your life, not just ***delivering*** you, but in ***maturing*** and ***transforming*** you. God has a goal for your life you might not even be thinking about now. He's working on more than just your ***comfort***. He's making you Christ-like. He's not just granting all your desires. He awakening you to a new set of desires you may not even be aware of yet.

So consider these wise words from the Psalmist David. It ***can*** be good to be afflicted.