
**"The Purpose of Our Affliction"
(Psalm 119:65-72)
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⁶⁵ Do good to your servant
according to your word, LORD.
⁶⁶ Teach me knowledge and good judgment,
for I trust your commands.
⁶⁷ Before I was afflicted I went astray,
but now I obey your word.
⁶⁸ You are good, and what you do is good;
teach me your decrees.
⁶⁹ Though the arrogant have smeared me with lies,
I keep your precepts with all my heart.
⁷⁰ Their hearts are callous and unfeeling,
but I delight in your law.
⁷¹ It was good for me to be afflicted
so that I might learn your decrees.
⁷² The law from your mouth is more precious to me
than thousands of pieces of silver and gold.

We are almost half way through this psalm. And you might have noticed that the theme of suffering has come up quite a bit. In fact, five or six of the nine sections that we've looked at so far, including this section, the theme of suffering has come up. So, half way through this psalm, half of the sections deal with suffering. And I'm sure it won't be the last time either. Now, you might hear that and roll your eyes, but you shouldn't. I think the reason suffering is mentioned so often is because suffering is one of the most difficult things we can experience and requires the most careful explanation. That's why it needs to be talked about and discussed. When we look at the difficult subject of suffering from different angles it keeps us from ignoring difficult subjects. It keeps us from intellectual laziness. Intellectually lazy people aren't able to give reasonable and satisfactory and comforting answers to suffering people. It also forces us to face, and not hide from, the reality that life will give us a fair amount of suffering.

I mean, in a very real sense we can look at the bible as a book that addresses in each of its 66 books, the problem of evil and human suffering. The book of Job is one long poetically-written, incredibly personal account, theological account on human suffering. The book of Ecclesiastes is a book that addresses another form of suffering—a person agonizing over the meaning of life.

One of the most famous words that are spoken during times of suffering is Psalm 23. As a pastor I've read it at hospital bedsides and I've read it at funerals. One of the lines of that psalm goes like this.

Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me. (**Psalm 23:4**)

It's that first part that says, "Even though." The psalmist is not surprised that he's suffering. No, he assumes that the world he lives in and even his own life includes suffering. And we're no different. It doesn't take long to understand that suffering is a part of life. No one's immune from it, no one can escape it. Because it's so common, people have wondered in all generations the big 'why' question. Why is this happening? and Why is this happening to me? Different worldviews and different religions have different perspectives on that question. We don't have the time to look at all the different worldviews. But let me mention just a few that are common in our culture.

Fatalism. Fatalism says that we are pawns in the universe and have no control over our destinies. What's going to happen is going to happen, so deal with it. How would a person who believes in fatalism live their lives in the face of suffering? Probably one of two ways. Resignation. You give into the greater powers that be. You have no control over these things, so resign yourself to it. It's a posture of passivity. Or you shake your fist at the universe and fight against it.

Karma. Karma is basically the Buddhist doctrine of cause and effect. Good things happen to good people and bad things happen to bad people. Do a good action so that good will be done to you. Be nice so that others will be nice to you. Be bad and bad will be done to you. The idea of reincarnation is based on Karma. The idea of "pay it forward" is based on Karma.

Now, I don't know if this is an actual documented worldview, but let's call it the Silver Lining position. The whole phrase in English goes like this. Every cloud has a silver lining. I'm not sure where that comes from, but what it means is that there's a positive in every negative. There's a bright side to that tragedy you're going through. So in the midst of the suffering, you believe something good will come from it.

You might have noticed that none of these three worldviews have any reference to God, but upon closer inspection they look like mutations of the Christian worldview toward suffering. Take fatalism for example. Fatalism believes that things happened because they were pre-determined to happen and we have no choice in the matter. The Christian on the other hand believes that a personal God pre-determines things, even suffering for the benefit and ultimate good of those that God loves.

Christians also believe in a much superior form of Karma, of cause and effect. We know that the bible teaches that a man reaps what he sows. We know there are serious temporal and even more serious eternal results of our actions as moral beings. But we believe in grace, that overrules karma.

And Christians more than any other person believes in the ultimate silver lining during our suffering. We believe that in all things God works for the good of those that love him.

So when you remove God from the picture, you end up with Fatalism, Karma, or the Silver Lining. But when you look at suffering or experience suffering with God, that is, from a Christian worldview, I think it will be intellectually helpful. What I mean by that is what we've been talking about. Whenever we go through serious sufferings, we ask the intellectual "Why" questions. Those "why" questions are better answered from a Christian worldview.

A Christian understanding of suffering will really provide the emotional and spiritual healing that we're looking for in our suffering, not by merely adopting a Christian worldview, but by God himself. In Christianity, we have a God who suffers not only with his people, but for his people.

The passage of Scripture we are looking at today shows us how we can deal with our suffering. And it's by understanding some very vital truths about God and the world that we live in.

First, that reality of evil and suffering.

Second, the nature of God.

Finally, the purpose of God.

These three things are what we need to understand to get through our suffering.

Let's look at the first one. Evil and suffering are real things. Several times in this passage reference is made to suffering. In verse 67 he says, "Before I was afflicted I went astray. In verse 69 it says the arrogant have smeared me with lies. In verse 71 he says "It was good for me to be afflicted." Affliction can mean experiencing a form of oppression or it can mean to be humiliated. We know that suffering can take on many different forms. The one mentioned in this chapter seems to have come from an enemy. Often times it's the same for us. Our suffering comes from the attacks of another, it can be in the form of ridicule, or being ostracized, or slandered, or physically assaulted, or being unjustly and unfairly treated.

Another form of suffering comes from natural causes, things like natural disasters, sicknesses, physical disabilities just to name a few and then sometimes our suffering is self-inflicted and the suffering comes as the result of our sin and poor choices and I don't need to give you examples. Each of us could fill pages of personal examples of self-inflicted suffering.

We also learn from scripture that all the suffering and evil in the world came from a single source or a single event, and that's from the very first sin of Adam and Eve. It was their sin, which at first appeared to be like a small pebble thrown into a glassy lake, but those tiny ripples soon became a tsunami of destruction. Human beings became alienated from their loving creator; they began to act rebelliously toward God. They became alienated from one another. The first thing Adam and Eve did was to blame each other, to look out for themselves, rather than for the other. They became alienated from the earth, from creation. So you can see that from this one sin, a tidal wave of suffering was unleashed. Pain and death entered the world to which no one is immune.

It's important for us to understand and adopt this worldview regarding suffering. We mustn't ignore it or just wish it away. I really do believe that having the correct, biblical understanding on evil and human suffering does help the Christian person deal with the suffering they are going through. If we don't have a correct understanding of the problem, we will not find the correct solution. If we think that the problem is merely emotional, then all we'll look for is therapy. If we think the problem is education, then we'll try to fix it with better education. If we think the problem is lack of science, then we'll only address suffering medically. Do you see? But, if you see suffering as primarily theological, as primarily relational, ahhh, then your approach will be completely different. And for a Christian person, that is how we must approach it. We must ask, what does God have to say about it? What do the Scriptures tell us about human suffering? It tells us that suffering exists because human beings have sinned against God. That's why suffering is a relational problem. Suffering is real, suffering exists because God is just, because God is moral, because humans are wicked, because the devil is real, because Adam and Eve sinned.

What is the cause of wars? Human sin. Why is there starvation in the world? Because there's not enough food? No, it's because of human sin. Why is human trafficking and modern day slavery on the rise? Because of sin. Why is there so much injustice and people literally and figuratively getting away with murder? Because of human sin. Why is there so much politicking at work, in my relationships, even at times in the church? Because of our sin. Why are there so many broken families and children of divorce? Because of human sin. Why does every business have cameras and security systems? Because of sin. Why do we have government, law enforcement, judicial systems, and prisons? Because of sin. Don't white wash it. Don't just say it's because of a lack of education or lack of good government. Call it like it is. Human sin is the ultimate cause of our suffering.

Well, let's move on to the next point. **The psalmist has a certain understanding of who God is.** There are two things that he says about God that we need to know. First that God is good and second that God is just.

In verse 65 it says, "Do good to your servant." In the New American Standard version it goes like this, "You have dealt well with your servant." The NIV makes it into a request, the NASB makes it a confession. The general meaning is the same. The author is saying that God is good, meaning that he is morally good. It means that God is beneficial, and favorable toward us. Then in verse 66, he asks God to teach him knowledge and good judgment. Same word. The assumption is this, that only a God who is good can teach me what good judgment is. Look next to verse 68. He says it as clear as day. "You are good, and what you do is good." So God's goodness is not merely an inward quality that never gets expressed, but rather, God's goodness results in good actions, in Him doing good, especially to those that are in a relationship with God.

When the bible teaches that God is good, it means that he can do no evil. It means that there is no sin or unholiness when it comes to God. He is utterly, completely, always good. He will always act consistently with his perfect nature. He will always act for the good of his people.

But, the goodness of God also has to be seen alongside the justice of God. There are phrases in this passage that speak of God's justice. "According to your word" (65), "Good judgment" (66). Look at verse 69. "He speaks to God about the arrogant who have smeared him with lies." Now why would you say that to God, why would you bring that up to God, unless you knew he was just? It's because he's confident of God's justice that he brings his complaints to God. And then lastly, just the fact that every verse in this section, and the entire psalm has a reference to the Law of God implies that God is a just God. An unjust person has no law or disregards the law. But God is the perfect moral being who gives us his perfect law. If God's laws were arbitrary and changed from day to day, how could we even appeal to such a God?

Many people have a hard time with God's justice.

Okay, let's bring this all back to human suffering. Much of human suffering lacks explanation. Isn't that true? When you see an innocent teenager shot and killed over a gang war. Or when a young mother of three dies of cancer. Or a father killed by drunk driver. Or innocent victims in Bagdad blown up by a suicide bomber. Yes, of course there's a reason. The teenager got shot because he lived in a violent neighborhood...and the neighborhood became violent because of absentee fathers...and so on and so on. Those might be the sociological reasons for why he died, but why did he have to die? Why was he taken away? The reality in many of these incidences is that we just don't know, we're not God. And sometimes we're not privy to know, it's not in our place to know. And even if we did know, would that help us? I'm not so sure it would.

For the Christian, especially in our suffering, especially when we don't have the answers, we go to these two things about God: that He is good and will always do good. And He is just. No one will ever receive injustice from God.

Years ago, when I was just a young seminarian, my mentor was going through a marriage separation. Now I know that there are two sides to every story, but in his case, it really did seem like he was the innocent victim, as his wife just said, I don't love you and I no longer want to live with you. I want a divorce. So he did everything he could to save his marriage. Fasting and praying. Seeing a counselor. Temporary time away from each other. Moving to another country. Changing careers. But despite all his efforts the divorce happened. And I remember sitting with him and I don't know anything about these things. I'm just a seminary student, and he says to me. Peter, even though this is happening to me, I don't doubt God's love for me. That he proved to me on the cross.

Friends, you see, when Jesus died on the cross, that event is the pinnacle event that perfectly displays God's goodness for sinners and his justice toward all the sins that were committed against him. Jesus, in dying on the cross, received the full measure of God's justice, and we who believe in Jesus, receive the full measure of his goodness.

So, for us too, every suffering has to be seen in light of the suffering of Jesus Christ. Everything must be seen under the knowledge that God is good and God is just.

Finally, we need to understand the purpose of God in our suffering. Look with me to verse 67 and verse 71. These are the two verses that explicitly mention the purpose for affliction that the psalmist experienced.

Verse 67 says "Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I obey your word." Or another way to look at it is like this. Before I experienced suffering, I didn't obey your word (which is what it means to go astray), but because of the suffering, I now obey your word. So it seems to imply that the purpose of the suffering, was to bring him back to God, which is the same as obeying God. You following? Quick example. *Our friend Christopher Yuan, was immersed in a homosexual life style and was a drug dealer, while trying to stay in dental school. When his mother Angela became a Christian she prayed that God would save Christopher and prayed for God to do whatever was necessarily to bring her son to God. Well, he went through a TON of suffering. He got arrested for selling drugs and he went to prison. He found out he was HIV positive. He went through some serious self-inflicted suffering. But through that affliction, he read the bible, met some other Christians in prison and he himself became a Christian.* Now, I know for certain that Christopher would read this verse and say, "Yup, that's exactly what happened to me." I think he would also say, "If it wasn't for the affliction, I don't know if I would have ever come to God."

Okay, let's look at verse 71. Now he says, "It was good for me to be afflicted so that I might learn your decrees." Wow! In this verse he's saying that the affliction he went through was good. Why? Because it came from a good God who does good things. Most people, even Christians, think that to experience suffering is always bad, and it means that God doesn't have your best interest in mind. In fact there are some false versions of Christianity like the prosperity gospel that teach that very thing. How do we make sense of this? Like this. This verse and verse 67 is saying this. The most important thing in life is to live life in relationship with God and that means in obedience to God's commands and his law.

Case in point, the Westminster Shorter Catechism:

Q1. What is the chief end of man?

A2. Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.

Q2: What rule hath God given to direct us how we may glorify and enjoy Him?

A2: The Word of God, which is contained in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, is the only rule to direct us how we may glorify and enjoy Him.

Q3: What do the Scriptures principally teach?

A3: The Scriptures principally teach what man is to believe concerning God, and what duty God requires of man.

The verse is also saying that being in a relationship with God that's characterized by obedience to his laws, is so important, that it's worth going through suffering for it. If that suffering brings me to know God and obey God, it's good suffering.

If you understand that God is good and God is just, how will that affect your understanding of suffering? Wrestle with me just a little longer. How would you pray for a suffering friend? Usually, we pray only for the alleviation or removal of the suffering, isn't that true? With this new information, how might our prayers be different? Lord, allow this season of suffering produce in her, in him, more obedience, more trust, and a deeper intimacy with you. Lord, reaffirm the truths that you are good and you are just.

If you're going through suffering during this season, don't run away from it, don't ignore, don't just grin and bear it with a stiff upper lip. Understand that we live in a fallen world plagued by sin. Know that God is good and just, demonstrated at the cross, and know that God is refining you, making you holy, helping you trust, refining your character, preparing you for even greater usefulness.

Let's pray.