

Why Are We Afflicted?

Affliction In A Proper Perspective

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The Russian dissident philosopher, Alexander Solzhenitsyn, observed the development of human beings under two different situations in the world of the 20th century. He concluded this:

A fact which cannot be disputed is the weakening of human personality in the West while in the East it has become firmer and stronger ... we have been through a spiritual training far in advance of Western experience. The complex and deadly crush of life has produced stronger, deeper and more interesting personalities than those generated by standardized Western well-being.

It's an interesting thought. It's not that there are any spiritual powerhouses in the East; but, in a secular setting, they have had some opportunities of character development that we haven't in the West.

This helps put into perspective the effect that affliction has had on what the world calls "the East" in modern secularism. Mr. Solzhenitsyn observed that because the East has been afflicted with hardship to a greater extent than the West, the people of the East, in general, have developed valuable character traits that otherwise would not have been developed and that are missing in the people of the West.

Affliction is understood in modern phraseology as persistent suffering or anguish. Although affliction has a negative connotation to most people, it is a necessary element of life with a positive result. It exists all around us in various forms and severity. The labors and frustrations on a farm don't seem strange to a farmer. The storm at sea is not unexpected by a sailor. Sweat doesn't surprise a construction worker. And so, to those who have chosen to live the life of devotion to God, the afflictions of this world are not unforeseen either.

So, why do we usually think that God is punishing us (or neglecting us) when we are afflicted? Affliction is very useful and profitable to the godly—to the elect, to God's church. The prodigal son had no thought of returning to his father's house until he had been humbled by adversity. Hagar was haughty under Abraham's roof and despised her mistress, but in the wilderness she was meek and lowly. Jonah slept on board ship, but

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in that great fish's belly he watched and prayed with fervency. King Manasseh lived as a libertine at Jerusalem and committed the most enormous crimes, but when he was bound in chains in prison at Babylon, his heart was turned to seek the Lord his God.

The Bible gives many analogies to illustrate the value of character building through affliction. Bodily pain and disease have been instrumental in stimulating many to seek God, when those who were in good health have had no concern about Him at all. And, of course, we realize that God has to call people. The farmland that is not tilled produces nothing but weeds. The weeds will run wild. In process of time, if they are not pruned and trimmed, they will just continue to run wild. So would our hearts be overrun with unruly spiritual weeds, if the true Vinedresser did not consistently check our growth by sanctified trials and tests, or (in another word) afflictions.

Jesus says that every branch that bears fruit He purges so it can bring forth more fruit. So there is **purpose** behind affliction. In a similar analogy, no gold or silver can be finely wrought without first being purified with fire. No elegant house can be built until the stones are chiseled with hammers and sledgehammers or machines to smooth them so that they can be formed into the whole. So WE can neither become vessels of honor in the house of God until we are melted in the furnace of affliction, nor lively stones in the walls of New Jerusalem until the hand of God has beaten off our proud outgrowths and tumors with His own spiritual hammer and chisel.

The Bible speaks of two general **types of affliction**—*judgment* and *purification*. That is, suffering that represents God's judgment on sin, and suffering that brings about our purifying as we identify with Christ. God's judgment on sinners is designed to punish them, while the second type of affliction is designed to perfect us and prepare us for greater service in God's kingdom. And our attitude through all affliction should be the same as the declaration by the apostle Paul in Romans 8:18.

Romans 8:18 For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us.

What type of suffering was he referring to? How extensive were they? When we look at Paul's afflictions, we realize to an even greater extent the real impact of his statement. The apostle Paul's six lists of affliction give a comprehensive overview of the difficulties he faced during his ministry. So very quickly I'd like to go through those **six lists of affliction**. It won't take very long, because we will just go from one scripture to the other

Romans 8:35 Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall

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tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?

I Corinthians 4:8-13 You are already full! You are already rich! You have reigned as kings without us—and indeed I could wish you did reign, that we also might reign with you! For I think that God has displayed us, the apostles, last, as men condemned to death; for we have been made a spectacle to the world, both to angels and to men. We are fools for Christ's sake, but you are wise in Christ! We are weak, but you are strong! You are distinguished, but we are dishonored! To the present hour we both hunger and thirst, and we are poorly clothed, and beaten, and homeless. And we labor, working with our own hands. Being reviled, we bless; being persecuted, we endure; being defamed, we entreat. We have been made as the filth of the world, the offscouring of all things until now.

II Corinthians 4:8-9 We are hard pressed on every side, yet not crushed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed.

II Corinthians 6:4-5 But in all things we commend ourselves as ministers of God: in much patience, in tribulations, in needs, in distresses, in stripes, in imprisonments, in tumults, in labors, in sleeplessness, in fastings.

II Corinthians 11:23-29 Are they ministers of Christ?—I speak as a fool—I am more: in labors more abundant, in stripes above measure, in prisons more frequently, in deaths often. From the Jews five times I received forty stripes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods; once I was stoned; three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I have been in the deep; in journeys often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils of my own countrymen, in perils of the Gentiles, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren; in weariness and toil, in sleeplessness often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness—besides the other things, what comes upon me daily: my deep concern for all the churches. Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to stumble, and I do not burn with indignation?

II Corinthians 12:7-10 And lest I should be exalted above measure by the abundance of the revelations, a thorn in the flesh was given to me, a messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I be exalted above measure. Concerning this thing I pleaded with the Lord three times that it might depart

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from me. And He said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness." Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ's sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

Each of these lists portrays a wide variety of physical dangers, emotional barriers, and spiritual handicaps—ranging anywhere from trouble to hunger, from persecution to imprisonment, from shipwrecks to hardships. These lists of affliction give images of the range of human affliction in the Bible. These lists give more meaning to Paul's statement that "the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us." So for him to make that statement, with all that he was afflicted with, we certainly see that he was very convinced and had confidence in what God was working out in his life.

Scriptural images of affliction fall into **three general categories**: physical, emotional and spiritual. Many of the Psalms speak of affliction—graphically portraying David's struggles with these difficulties. On the physical level, David faced affliction as illness and distress. He also feared the physical threat of his enemies.

Psalm 31:9-13 Have mercy on me, O LORD, for I am in trouble; my eye wastes away with grief, yes, my soul and my body! For my life is spent with grief, and my years with sighing; my strength fails because of my iniquity, and my bones waste away. I am a reproach among all my enemies, but especially among my neighbors, and am repulsive to my acquaintances; those who see me outside flee from me. I am forgotten like a dead man, out of mind; I am like a broken vessel. For I hear the slander of many; fear is on every side; while they take counsel together against me, they scheme to take away my life.

Here we see the nature and sources of David's trouble. He seems to have regarded his trouble in this case as the result of sin—either the sin of his heart of which he alone was conscious, or of some open act of sin that had been the means of bringing this affliction upon him (as he mentions in verse 10).

As a consequence of this, he mentions in verses 11-13 that he was subjected to the criticism of his enemies and shunned by his neighbors and his acquaintances. He was forgotten by them—like a dead man, out of mind. He was exposed to the slander of

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others, and they conspired against his life. In view of all this, he called earnestly upon God to save him from his troubles and to be his helper and friend. So he felt that he was in dire need of His mercy.

Emotionally, affliction is seen in David's contrite sinner's prayer in Psalm 25. His wrestling with sin by asserting actuality as opposed to conceptual possibility captures the emotional component of affliction. Again, the threat of his enemies' unkind words or deeds had an impact and remained on David's mind.

Psalm 25:16-18 Turn Yourself to me, and have mercy on me, for I am desolate and afflicted. The troubles of my heart have enlarged; bring me out of my distresses! Look on my affliction and my pain, and forgive all my sins.

David seems to have felt that if God would look upon him, He would have pity on him. He would see his case to be so sad that He would show him compassion—as when we see someone in distress, and the eye affects the heart. When we look at someone who is sick or infirmed or injured, our eye picks up on their anguish. From that our eye affects our heart and helps us have compassion. It is the physical tool that we receive it through.

The word rendered "desolate" in verse 16 means one alone only—or one who is alone, or who is solitary, forsaken, or wretched. There are very few things that affect us and so occupy our minds more deeply than loneliness—that we are alone in the world; that we don't have a friend; that no one cares for us; that no one is concerned about anything that might happen to us; that no one would care if we died; that no one would shed a tear over our grave. I think we all, at times in our life, have that concern—that we are that alone.

The other parts of the psalm show that the affliction that David is referring to was from the recollection of the sins of his earlier life, and from the designs and purposes of his enemies. David spoke of the troubles of his heart in verse 17, especially from his recollections of his own sin, that in his mind seemed to increase the more he reflected on the sins of his life.

During the course of our lives, we often deal with both external trouble and our inward consciousness of guilt. Present outward trouble has a tendency to remind us of past sins, and to encourage us to analyze whether the affliction is a punishment for sin or a character-building trial. For a true Christian, it is usually a character building trial rather than a punishment for sin.

When we are thinking about one source of joy, it makes us happy; and it is amazing how cheerful we are about other blessings that we have previously taken for granted. Positively dwelling on that one source of joy increases joy in other areas of our lives. The same is true when we are thinking about one great sorrow. It seems to take over our mind. We become almost obsessed by our grief. Then, all our lesser sorrows seem worse and overwhelming—to the point that we feel completely abandoned by God and by friends. But, though God seems to disregard our prayer, the faith of Christ in us does not fail, but renews our supplication, giving us confidence that He will still hear and save us.

David connected *trouble* and *sin* together. When we are afflicted, we naturally inquire whether the affliction is because of some specific sins we have committed. Even when we can't trace any direct connection with sin, affliction suggests the general fact that there is still at least **hidden sin** in our lives.

One of the benefits of affliction is to remind us of our tendency to sin, and to keep in our mind the fact that we occasionally violate the law of God. This connection between suffering and sin, in the sense that the one naturally suggests the other, was more than once illustrated in the miracles performed by Jesus. One example is when Jesus forgave and healed the paralytic.

Matthew 9:1-8 So He got into a boat, crossed over, and came to His own city. Then behold, they brought to Him a paralytic lying on a bed. When Jesus saw their faith, He said to the paralytic, "Son, be of good cheer; your sins are forgiven you." And at once some of the scribes said within themselves, "This Man blasphemes!" But Jesus, knowing their thoughts, said, "Why do you think evil in your hearts? "For which is easier, to say, 'Your sins are forgiven you,' or to say, 'Arise and walk'? "But that you may know that the Son of Man has power on earth to forgive sins"—then He said to the paralytic, "Arise, take up your bed, and go to your house." And he arose and departed to his house. Now when the multitudes saw it, they marveled and glorified God, who had given such power to men.

So we see there the connection between suffering and affliction and sin, and how God turned that around and made it glorify Jesus Christ and God the Father.

Spiritually, David sought forgiveness of his sins as relief for his afflicted condition. In Psalm 51, we see David's prayer of repentance after Nathan the prophet had gone to him because of his affair with Bathsheba. We see there the caption, "*A Prayer of*

Repentance."

Psalm 51:1-4 Have mercy upon me, O God, according to Your lovingkindness; according to the multitude of Your tender mercies, blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin. For I acknowledge my transgressions, and my sin is always before me. Against You, You only, have I sinned, and done this evil in Your sight—that You may be found just when You speak, and blameless when You judge.

When David asked for mercy from God, he was expressing himself from a heart crushed and broken by the consciousness of sin. David had been made to see his guilt, and his first act was to cry out for mercy from God; and, of course, there was repentance in his heart. He made no attempt to make excuses for his sin. He made no attempt to try to justify his conduct. He didn't complain of the righteousness of the holy law that condemned him. He knew he was guilty.

The hope of a sinner when crushed with the consciousness of sin is the mercy of God. The ground of his hope was the compassion of God. The measure of that hope was the boundless benevolence of God. David's sin was so great that his only hope was in a Being of infinite compassion.

We're going to shift gears a little bit here and take a look at the three main **purposes of affliction**. One purpose for affliction is quite obvious from what we've been going through here; and it is *discipline*. Since God is a Father, He disciplines his children when they rebel—and sometimes before they rebel. Such discipline may be preventative, as in the case of Paul who was given a "thorn in the flesh" to prevent him from pride (as we already read, in II Corinthians 12:7-10).

However, the Bible clarifies that this discipline is corrective, not vengeful. David was assured that though his son would die, his adultery and murder were forgiven. Therefore, disciplinary affliction reveals God's love for His people.

Jeremiah's sufferings were due, not as much to sin, as to his faithfulness to his prophetic vocation. So the "suffering servant" in Isaiah and Job, in spite of his many woes, was firm in the conviction of his own integrity. The sorrows of the virtuous and the prosperity of the wicked were only of brief duration. In the course of time, things would adjust themselves justly.

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Psalm 73:3-9 For I was envious of the boastful, when I saw the prosperity of the wicked. For there are no pangs in their death, but their strength is firm. They are not in trouble as other men, nor are they plagued like other men. Therefore pride serves as their necklace; violence covers them like a garment. Their eyes bulge with abundance; they have more than heart could wish. They scoff and speak wickedly concerning oppression; they speak loftily. They set their mouth against the heavens, and their tongue walks through the earth.

In verses 4-9, the psalmist gave a summary of the power and freedom of the wicked. They seem to be carefree and unconcerned about tomorrow. For them, life is now; and now seems to be forever—as if it would never end, because they are not afraid of the punishment of God for their actions. They are "doing well" as their wealth and power increase. The wicked may seem to enjoy greater freedom of movement and speech. They are, in one sense, like gods.

There are two ways that they appear to be like gods (at least, from this list that the psalmist has listed there). First, they do not seem to suffer from frailties or affliction, adversities or diseases, or toilsome labor. They seem to live above the frustrations of life. They live above the toilsome activities of making a living for one's family. Our toil of life includes frustration, adversity, and the business of making a living for our families. The wicked prosper in their wickedness. Their eyes sparkle because it seems everything is going well for them. Though their hearts are full of evil schemes, the wicked succeed and prosper. And so, for those of us in God's church who go through trials and afflictions, it makes it all the harder to see someone else doing so well and we doing so poorly; and we get down about that.

Now, the second way that they show that they are "gods," so to speak, is that the wicked do not regard God and His commandments. Instead they are puffed up with pride. Their necklace, which is sort of a token of dignity, is self-importance and pride. They leave behind a trail of violence. Whatever they have is due to scheming and a lawless way of life, disregarding the rights of others. They live at the expense of others. And all of this gives us a reminder and a description of our politicians, lawyers, corporate leaders, and those who have put money before anything else.

The wicked scoff, boast, and threaten. They know how to use their tongue as an instrument of evil, because the imaginations of their hearts are evil. The hearts of the wicked are full of imaginations, or schemes, by which they seem to succeed and prosper; and there just seems no end to it. The wicked "rule" with their tongues. By

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intimidation, they instill fear in others; and, in their imagination, they act as if they can get by without responsibility to God. They attempt to decree how things should be done on earth and even what God should do in heaven.

They revile God and beguile other human beings. This is the power, glory, and prosperity of the wicked from the mistaken vantage point of humanity in its affliction. It seems as if God lets the wicked get away with their wickedness. But we know that is only a temporary time for them.

Psalm 73:10-12 Therefore his people return here, and waters of a full cup are drained by them. And they say, "How does God know? And is there knowledge in the Most High?" Behold, these are the ungodly, who are always at ease; they increase in riches.

The wicked do not deny the existence of God many times, but they limit Him in His knowledge and wisdom—at least, in their own minds. From their perspective, God is only concerned with religion, devoutness, and good deeds and doesn't punish those who—with their own scheming and plotting—take advantage of business and political opportunities. The confidence of the wicked entices many who do not have strong convictions.

We've seen that quite often over the years when Worldwide [Church of God] was breaking up. So many of the people, whom we thought were convicted of their beliefs, were enticed by the money of others (the money they could see in starting their own businesses). And so they let it entice them away from God's truth, because they were not strongly convicted.

Psalm 73:13-17 Surely I have cleansed my heart in vain, and washed my hands in innocence. For all day long I have been plagued, and chastened every morning. If I had said, "I will speak thus," behold, I would have been untrue to the generation of Your children. When I thought how to understand this, it was too painful for me—Until I went into the sanctuary of God; then I understood their end. [That is, the end of the wicked.]

It's not always easy to react honestly to the prosperity of others while suffering hardship. The psalmist knew and confessed this problem. He confessed the turmoil of his own experiences. His emotions expressed self-doubt and envy. His being plagued and chastened most probably doesn't refer to a sickness but to the experience of mental

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turmoil—what he was going through in his mind.

In addition, he suffered affliction that took the form of punishments because he couldn't understand why he was suffering. The external afflictions and internal problems with the outworking of God's justice burned in him day and night. It was always there! But these ordeals would result in a greater spiritual maturity; and this is one of the greatest benefits of affliction. **Spiritual maturity** comes through discipline. (Not only through discipline, but that is certainly one of the teachers.)

Another purpose for affliction is *sanctification*. Afflictions are not necessarily the punishment of sins, but many times they are the trials of education. Sanctified afflictions are spiritual promotions that are part of the process of sanctification. Afflictions may help to bring about an inward transformation that is gradually taking place—resulting in purity, righteousness, spiritual thoughts expressing themselves in an outward life of goodness and godliness.

For those who are able to stand the test, suffering has a purifying effect. The thought of affliction as a form of Divine teaching and purifying is found in the book of Job, especially in the speeches of Elihu, who insisted that trials are intended as a method of instruction to save us from the pride and presumption that brings about destruction.

The same concept is found in Psalm 119, where we see David's sanctification being brought about through his affliction. David's affliction restored him to obedience.

Psalm 119:67 Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I keep Your word.

David's affliction taught him God's decrees.

Psalm 119:71 It is good for me that I have been afflicted, that I may learn Your statutes.

His affliction proved the power of Scripture.

Psalm 119:50 This is my comfort in my affliction, for Your word has given me life.

Psalm 119:92 Unless Your law had been my delight, I would then have perished in my affliction.

Finally, David's affliction demonstrated God's faithfulness.

Psalm 119:75 I know, O LORD, that Your judgments are right, and that in faithfulness You have afflicted me.

So those four aspects of David's sanctification were (1) David's affliction restored him to obedience; (2) his affliction taught him God's decrees; (3) it proved the power of Scripture; and (4) his affliction demonstrated God's faithfulness.

We suffer together, so we may also be glorified together with Christ. Our sufferings follow the pattern of Christ's and confirm that we are united with Him.

Romans 8:16-18 The Spirit Itself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him, that we may also be glorified together. For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us.

We bear afflictions as He did; are persecuted and tried for the same thing; and thereby show that we are united to Him. It does not mean that we suffer to the same extent that He did, but that our lives imitate His in similar sufferings to what He endured. We persevere through these afflictions in the same attitude He had, thereby showing that we are united to Him.

II Corinthians 1:5 For as the sufferings of Christ abound in us, so our consolation also abounds through Christ.

Afflictions cannot sanctify us, except when they are used by Christ as His sledgehammer and mold. In James 1, the caption says this covers *Profiting from Trials*.

James 1:2-5 My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience. But let patience have its perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing. If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all liberally and without reproach, and it will be given to him.

These trials are not direct inducements or enticements to sin; but they try our faith. They show whether we are willing to stick to our faith in God, or whether we will apostatize. Trials only coincide with temptations with regard to testing our faith. Trials differ from temptations in that trials are not presented for the purpose of inducing us to sin. In this sense, it is true that God never tempts us (as James 1:13-14 states).

The various kinds of trials we might experience, of course, are sickness, poverty, mourning, persecution, and so forth. We are to count it a matter of joy that our religious beliefs are subjected to anything that tries it. It's good for us to have the reality of our beliefs tested; and we should be thankful for those testings.

We can have no illusions about the intensity of the struggle with sin, but we have to realize also that sanctification does not occur merely by our own attempts to counteract our own human tendencies. There is not only a process of moral accomplishment, but there is also an inner sanctifying work within us. The Holy Spirit works through the faithful recognition of the law of truth, and we respond by love—God's way of love. The net result is **spiritual maturity** expressed in the fulfilling of the law of love to our fellow human beings, and especially to our brethren.

The third main purpose for affliction is that some affliction is simply *for God's glory*. Affliction is simply for God's glory at times. And, actually, affliction and what comes out of it is always for God's glory when it has to do with true Christians. Job's affliction is the classic illustration. When Satan accused Job of only serving God because of his human comforts, God allowed Satan to destroy those human comforts. In the end, Job got questions from God, and little or no explanation for why He allowed Satan to afflict him. Although Job learned a great deal in the experience, the affliction of Job resulted in glorifying God—and not just to glorifying God there (to Satan and to Job), but to everyone down through history.

Peter tells us (in I Peter 4) that Christ's example is to be followed, and WE must suffer for God's glory.

I Peter 4:12 Beloved, do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened to you.

We know that suffering is not something foreign to Christians, but rather as a refining test. In I Peter 1:6-7, Peter mentioned the necessity of faith being refined through suffering and testing.

I Peter 4:13 But rejoice to the extent that you partake of Christ's sufferings, that when His glory is revealed, you may also be glad with exceeding joy.

In contrast to the usual response of 'sorrow and shock' to suffering and affliction, we are to **rejoice**—because we are participating in Christ's sufferings. Christian rejoicing rests on the fact that, as Christians share in Christ's suffering, so we will share in His glory with great joy. The prospect of Christ's full manifestation in all His glory should fill us with joy and comfort because that is the end, the ultimate eternal result.

I Peter 4:14 If you are reproached for the name of Christ, blessed are you, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. On their part He is blasphemed, but on your part He is glorified.

One of God's great characteristics is His glory, and in Jesus His glory is revealed. We look forward to that glory.

I Peter 4:15 But let none of you suffer as a murderer, a thief, an evildoer, or as a busybody in other people's matters.

That has always struck me that "busybody" would be put in such company as murderer, thief, and evildoer. That just goes to show how despicable it is to God (to be a gossip).

The promise of the blessing resting on believers is NOT universal. Not all who suffer are sharing in Christ's sufferings. Much human suffering in the world is the punishment, or the consequence, of sin. We must have really gotten away from sin. If we suffer, it should be because of our union with Jesus Christ, not because of our union with evil.

I Peter 4:16 Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in this matter

To suffer as a Christian has no shame attached to it. But there are two ways that shame may manifest itself: (1) To be ashamed of God's truth, Jesus Christ, and His Church, so as to refuse to suffer on account of them. We don't want to be guilty of that. (2) The other way is to be ashamed that we are despised and maltreated. Those are the two ways that we certainly DON'T want to be ashamed.

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We are to regard our religious beliefs as honorable in every way. We're not to be ashamed to be called a Christian. We're not to be ashamed of the doctrines taught by Christ. We're not to be ashamed of the Savior whom we profess to love. We're not to be ashamed of the fellowship of those who are true Christians (poor and despised as they and we may be). We're not to be ashamed to perform any of the duties demanded by God.

We should be ashamed only of doing wrong; and we should glory in that which is right, whatever may be the consequences to ourselves. We should praise God that we are deemed worthy to suffer in such a cause. It is a matter of **thankfulness**—(1) thankfulness that we receive this evidence that we are true Christians and (2) thankfulness that we want to receive the advantages that may result from suffering as Christ did.

Turn with me to Genesis 6, as we take a slight turn in this sermon. Affliction is not a one-way street. The Bible also presents a **God who suffers**. God is in anguish when human beings sin. In one sense, He is afflicted when we sin.

Genesis 6:5-7 Then the LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. And the LORD was sorry that He had made man on the earth, and He was grieved in His heart. So the LORD said, "I will destroy man whom I have created from the face of the earth, both man and beast, creeping thing and birds of the air, for I am sorry that I have made them."

God is distressed when His people are oppressed as well.

Judges 10:16 So they put away the foreign gods from among them and served the LORD. And His soul could no longer endure the misery of Israel.

Isaiah 63 is a passage that is a psalm by Isaiah of communal lamentation. Judah was passing through a period of intense, God-given awareness that Judah's sin was going to bring devastating judgment through the Babylonians.

Isaiah 63:8-10 For He [God] said, "Surely they are My people, children who will not lie." So He became their Savior. In all their affliction He was afflicted, and the Angel of His Presence saved them; in His love and in His pity He redeemed them; and He bore them and carried them all the days of old. But

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they rebelled and grieved His Holy Spirit; so He turned Himself against them as an enemy, and He fought against them.

Isaiah presented a picture of God as a disappointed Father, facing the fact that His sons have rebelled against Him. This doesn't deny His omniscience, or even the sovereignty of His purpose, but expresses for us that Israel's rebellion should never have been; and it was an offense against love, as well as holiness.

God earlier declared Himself to be His people's "Father." He promised to save them in Egypt, declaring that He knew their afflictions. Verse 9 is one of the most moving expressions of the compassionate love of God in the entire Old Testament. You can just see how heartfelt it is there. This is a very comforting sentiment—meaning that God sympathized with them in all their trials, and that He always desired to aid them.

We won't turn there, but Isaiah 53:1-12 describes our sin-bearing Messiah. In Christ, He saves us through suffering—identifying with our brokenness, by Himself taking on affliction. We can approach Jesus confidently because He knows our weakness. Hebrews 4 describes our compassionate High Priest.

Hebrews 4:14-16 Seeing then that we have a great High Priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

Our High Priest has entered into our weakness, and so He can sympathize meaningfully with us. He has been tempted in the same way we are. Jesus was tempted just as we are—except that we sin and He did not. Even though Jesus didn't sin, we should not infer that life was easy for Him. His sinlessness was, at least in part, "an earned sinlessness" as He gained victory after victory in the constant battle with temptation that life in this world entails. The sinless Christ knows the full force of temptation in a way that those who sin do not. Most people give in before the temptation has fully spent itself; only those who do not yield know its full force. And we certainly know this as WE resist the temptations of this world, how hard it is. But someone who is not bothering to resist the temptations has no idea how hard it is to resist sin. But Christ resisted all sin, all temptations.

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Having this High Priest gives us confidence. So the author of Hebrews exhorts us to approach God with bold confidence. The word "us" (in verse 16) does away with the mediation of the earthly priests. In view of what our High Priest has done, there is no barrier. We can approach God.

The phrase "throne of grace" occurs only here in the New Testament. It points both to the sovereignty of God and to God's love to human beings. The writer goes on later to speak of receiving mercy. We need mercy because we have failed so often, and we need grace because service awaits us in which we need God's help. And **help** is what the writer says we get—the help that is appropriate to the time. And that's why, during afflictions, we don't always seem to get help. God is giving us help (1) as we need it and (2) in the way we need it—to **maximize the benefit** both of glorifying Him and also helping us to grow in character.

The Scriptures are full of words of consolation and exhortation adapted to encourage the afflicted. The thought of the beneficent sovereignty of God is encouraging and confidence building. Since the God of Love is on the throne of the universe, we may be confident that all things are meant for our good.

Romans 8:28 And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose.

What a great promise that is for us! The phrase "all things" includes all our afflictions and trials, and all the persecutions and difficulties to which we are exposed. Though they may be numerous and long-term, they are among the means that are appointed for our benefit. All things cooperate.

They mutually contribute to our good. They remove our affections from this world. They teach us the truth about our temporary and deceived condition. They lead us to look to God for support. And they produce a meek and humble spirit. This has been the experience of all saints, and at the end of life they have been able to say it was good for them to be afflicted. That is certainly the point we all would like to be able to arrive at—certainly at the end of our lives.

Those who love God manifest the characteristic of true devotedness. To us, afflictions are a blessing. To others, they often prove to be a curse. On others they are sent as punishment; and they produce complaining, instead of peace; rebellion, instead of submission; and anger, impatience, and hatred, instead of calmness, patience, and love.

We're made better by receiving afflictions in the way they should be received. And we are blessed when we want them to accomplish the purpose for which they are sent. In contrast, the sinner is made more hardened by resisting them, and refusing to submit to their obvious intention and design.

The thought that trials are of brief duration (especially in comparison with the joy that will follow) is encouraging in itself. This thought that trials are only temporary concludes in the hope of immortality.

Psalm 30:4-5 Sing praise to the LORD, you saints of His, and give thanks at the remembrance of His holy name. For His anger is but for a moment, His favor is for life; weeping may endure for a night, but joy comes in the morning.

His anger endures for only a short time, or brief period. It is referring to the troubles and sorrows through which the psalmist had passed, as compared with his subsequent happiness. Though at the time they might have seemed to be long; but—as compared with the many mercies of God, with the joy that had succeeded them, and with the hopes he now cherished—they seemed to be only for a moment.

According to the view of the psalmist, God is not a Being who takes pleasure in anger. He's not one who dwells on it. He's not one who is unwilling to show mercy and kindness. He's a Being whose nature is merciful.

In verse 5, the phrase "endure for a night" in the Hebrew is "in the evening." The word here rendered "endure" means "to lodge, or to sojourn," as one does for a short time. The idea is that weeping is like a stranger (a wayfaring person, a sojourner) who lodges for only one night. In other words, sorrow will soon pass away, to be succeeded by joy to the faithful of God.

The phrase "joy comes in the morning" in the original is "singing comes in the morning." The idea here is that there will be singing and shouting. That is, if we have the friendship of God, sorrow will always be temporary; and it will always be followed by joy. The morning will come, and it may be a morning without clouds; but it will be a morning when the sources of sorrow will disappear.

This often occurs in our present physical lives, and it will always occur to the righteous in the future. The sorrows of this life are only for a moment, and they will be succeeded by the light and the joy of the Kingdom of God. Then all the sorrows and afflictions of the

present life, no matter how long they may appear to be, will seem to have been only for a moment.

Isaiah 54 probably refers historically to the captivity at Babylon, when Judah was seemingly forsaken by God. Though to them this appeared long, yet compared with their later prosperity, it seemed only a short time.

Isaiah 54:7-8 "For a mere moment I have forsaken you, but with great mercies I will gather you. With a little wrath I hid My face from you for a moment; but with everlasting kindness I will have mercy on you," says the LORD, your Redeemer.

Though this was probably a primary reference to the captivity then, yet it is a principle that can be applied to our lives today. The important principle is that though God appears to forsake us, it will be comparatively only for a moment. He will remember His covenant. And however long our trials may seem to be, yet compared with the future mercies that will result from our afflictions, they will seem to be only short-lived sorrows. The contrast in verse 7 is not that of duration, but of magnitude. The forsaking was 'little.' The mercies would be 'great.' The mercy that would be bestowed in the increase of their numbers would be innumerable great.

Isaiah 54:9-12 "For this is like the waters of Noah to Me; for as I have sworn that the waters of Noah would no longer cover the earth, so have I sworn that I would not be angry with you, nor rebuke you. For the mountains shall depart and the hills be removed, but My kindness shall not depart from you, nor shall My covenant of peace be removed," says the LORD, who has mercy on you. "O you afflicted one, tossed with tempest, and not comforted, behold, I will lay your stones with colorful gems, and lay your foundations with sapphires. I will make your pinnacles of rubies, your gates of crystal, and all your walls of precious stones.

When I read this, I couldn't help but think of the times I've gone to the Smithsonian Institute in Washington, D.C. to the gems display. When you walk into that area of the room, there is just a breath-taking sparkling that comes. Some of the stones that are mentioned in Scripture were in there (the rubies, sapphires, and emeralds) as well as diamonds and other precious stones.

When you see those lying there with the proper light to give them their greatest

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brilliance, you are just awestruck! And you can't feel down, and you can't feel discouraged, looking at them because it's such a dazzling effect that they have. If you reflect on those as being part of God's creation and the amount of brilliance that can come from them, you can see why the very throne of God is described as having gems in a similar way. Well, here, God says that He's going to lay for the afflicted foundations of such dazzling "encouragements," so to speak.

Better yet, I remember going to the Tower of London, where the Crown Jewels are displayed. I remember walking into the vault where they are, with the perfect lighting on them. And the crowns that were there. There must have been at least four crowns. The Crown of India, the Coronation Crown...I don't remember all the correct names. But when you walk in there, the walls are painted dark black. There are so many sparkles going off the walls that it almost lights up the room itself. You find yourself losing your breath seeing it, because it's so brilliant and dazzling (even more so than at the Smithsonian Institute).

When you look what at those jewels are like when they are put together in a nice artistic design, and when it takes your breath away, you can only have an inkling of what the throne of God will be like. So this is the feeling that the afflicted will have when God does come and comfort, and supply the needs that we have in our eternal life. It will just be a feeling of uncontrolled, so to speak, exuberance!

In John 16, Jesus told His disciples that they would not only rejoice at His resurrection but even at His death, even though it was initially the object of so much grief for them. He also told them that it would be a source of unspeakable eternal joy for them. It would procure for them peace and pardon in this life, and eternal joy in the world to come.

John 16:21-22 A woman, when she is in labor, has sorrow because her hour has come; but as soon as she has given birth to the child, she no longer remembers the anguish, for joy that a human being has been born into the world. Therefore you now have sorrow; but I will see you again and your heart will rejoice, and your joy no one will take from you.

In our afflictions, if we could see the whole situation and have all the truth, we would surely rejoice. As it is, when our afflictions appear dark and unclear, we can trust in the promise of God that they will be for **our benefit**. The apparent triumphs of the wicked, though they may produce grief at present in our minds, will be eventually overruled for good. We may be cast down at times, but we are not conquered.

II Corinthians 4:7-11 But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellence of the power may be of God and not of us. We are hard pressed on every side, yet not crushed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed—always carrying about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body. For we who live are always delivered to death for Jesus' sake, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh.

II Corinthians 4:15-17 For all things are for your sakes, that grace, having spread through the many, may cause thanksgiving to abound to the glory of God. [Verse 16 begins a section that helps us to see the invisible.] Therefore we do not lose heart. Even though our outward man is perishing, yet the inward man is being renewed day by day. For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory, while we do not look at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen. For the things which are seen are temporary, but the things which are not seen are eternal.

Verse 17 contains the whole philosophy of the Christian's view of affliction. It does not deny the reality of earthly sorrow or underrate its power. After allowing affliction all its force, Paul said that affliction dwindles into insignificance when compared with the exceeding and eternal glory to which it leads. But this applies only to the true members of the church of God. Afflictions have a productive operation, provided we look at the things that are eternal. Related to this is the comfort derived from the thought of the near approaching of Christ's second coming. The Bible encourages us to be positive showing the spirit of patience and the spirit of joy in affliction.

James 5:7-11 Therefore be patient, brethren, until the coming of the Lord. See how the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, waiting patiently for it until it receives the early and latter rain. You also be patient. Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand. Do not grumble against one another, brethren, lest you be condemned. Behold, the Judge is standing at the door! My brethren, take the prophets, who spoke in the name of the Lord, as an example of suffering and patience. Indeed we count them blessed who endure. You have heard of the perseverance of Job and seen the end intended by the Lord—that the Lord is very compassionate and merciful.