Finding God in Affliction
Excerpts of Psalm 119
March 10, 2013

We are going to examine 7 Godward statements about affliction that provide insight as to how we should respond to times of adversity.

1. Psalm 119:50 ~ “This is my comfort in my affliction, that Your word has revived me.” [vs. 49-56]

Four clues for staying centered on God during times of affliction:

a. Stay grounded in the Word.

Vs. 50 reveals that it is God’s word that has revived the Psalmist during his affliction. Notice here that the reviving doesn’t come after the affliction is over but in the midst of it. During the affliction, the psalmist is comforted and revived because God’s Word gives him hope—vs. 49: “Remember the word to your servant in which you have made me hope.”

The truth of God’s Word gives us hope which guards us against disillusionment in the midst of affliction and discouragement. Neil Anderson: “If what you believe does not conform to truth, then what you feel does not conform to reality.” We must stay grounded in the ultimate truth of God’s Word.

b. Stay anchored with prayer. Vs 49 is what I call gutsy praying—holding God to the promises of His word: “Remember the word to your servant in which You have made me hope.”

Prayer is the anchor by which we tether our trust to God.

NOTE: This whole Psalm is a prayer that clings to the joy of God’s word in the midst of distress.

1 Neil Anderson, Overcoming Depression, p. 70.

2 Quoted by John Piper, “When the Darkness Will Not Lift,” p. 52.
d. Walk in **obedience** to God.

We know from verse 53 that the Psalmist was indignant with his enemies, and yet he would not let his anger betray his obedience to God. [vs. 55-56]. Affliction is not an excuse for us to sin. Affliction is an intensifier of our need for obedience so that we can walk freely in the favor of God’s grace.

2. **Psalm 119:67 ~ “Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I keep Your word.”** [vs. 65-72]

What I want us to see here is that though affliction is unpleasant and painful, it is not necessarily bad if it is brought under the good hand of God. For example, back surgery is not pleasant; it is painful. But it is not bad; it is good if you have a good surgeon.

Vs. 67 reveals that God uses affliction to accomplish good purposes in our lives. [vs. 67] In other words, God will us temporary pain to impart to us the life-long wisdom of following His Word. The psalmist is gaining discernment by leaning to walk in the fear of God (vs. 66).

So how should we respond to affliction? We should assume that in all things God is seeking to accomplish His good purposes in our lives and affirm that God is good. [vs. 68; cf. Rom 8:28] Vs. 68 should be the mantra of the discouraged. When you are struggling to believe that God is good, you must search for every trace of His grace and affirm by faith everything you know to be true of His goodness. “My circumstances may be painful but God is good, because my circumstances do not alter the character of God.” He is good and only does good even when it involves pain.

[Vs. 69a] …and yet God is using this affliction to accomplish His good purposes of training the psalmist to trust in God’s word (vs. 68). So even when affliction comes through the hands of arrogant liars, it is not void of God’s hand to accomplish greater, good purposes. Affliction is not some outside independent force apart from God’s sovereign work of grace.

You must make room for the greatness of God in your affliction. He is so wise, and good, and great, and sovereign that what man and Satan have intended for evil, God has meant for good. This was the story of Joseph’s life. He was betrayed by his brothers, sold into slavery, lied about, and imprisoned for years. But when his brothers sought his forgiveness at the end of his life, he said, “you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good” (Gen 50:20). God used Joseph’s affliction to bring him to a place of leadership in Egypt that would allow him to save thousands of people dying of hunger.

The Pharisees and Romans meant evil against Jesus by nailing him to a Roman cross, but God meant it for good to save millions from eternal damnation (Acts 2:23-24).

God is good and He has the power to accomplish greater purposes through your affliction—you must make room for God in your suffering.

So true is the goodness of God and His purposes in the midst of affliction that the psalmist could testify…[ vs. 71]

3. **Psalm 119:71 ~ “It is good for me that I was afflicted, that I may learn Your statutes.”**

It was through the school of affliction that the psalmist learned the precious value of treasuring God’s word. In vs. 70, he says, “I delight in your law” and in vs. 72 he says, “the law of Your mouth is better to me than thousands of gold and silver pieces.” And so the psalmist considers his affliction to be a blessing because it caused him to learn the truthfulness and value of God’s word—“It was good for me that I was afflicted, that I may learn your statutes” (71).
Yet, this is not an automatic response to affliction. It’s not natural for us to say, “It was good for me that I was afflicted…” We can waste the value of our sufferings by our grumbling, unbelief, and lack of trust in God. Or we can be good stewards of the affliction that God has entrusted to us for our growth in godliness and holiness which maximize our joy.

We must remain Godward in a humble and teachable spirit of surrender if we will be the beneficiaries of God’s good purposes through our afflictions.

4. Psalm 119:75 ~ “I know, O Lord, that Your judgments are righteous, and that in faithfulness You have afflicted me.”

Note: This affliction comes from God Himself: “You have afflicted me.” The psalmist acknowledges that his troubles are not merely the result of his enemies—those arrogant liars in vs. 78; God has sent this tribulation upon him. These are not words of blame; they are an acknowledgement of God’s faithfulness and righteousness [vs. 75].

God is being faithful to His own righteousness and law by bringing some kind of discipline into the psalmist’s life. Yet when the psalmist sees this affliction as coming from God, his conclusion is not that God isn’t good. He doesn’t accuse God of not being faithful or good like so many of us do. Rather he sees God’s actions as an expression of faithfulness and righteousness. Listen to the spirit of the psalmist’s response to God in the wider context. [vs. 73-80]

When affliction comes directly from the hand of God, we should not assume that His kindness and compassion are out of reach. Rather we should turn to Him in repentance and faith knowing that it is because He is good and because He loves us with perfect faithfulness that He has set upon us the severe mercy of discipline.

When God’s discipline comes upon us, whether it’s the discipline of training (to spare us from foolishness) or the discipline of correction (to spare us from rebellion), we act like an immature child if we pout that God is not good like a child under proper discipline suggesting that his parent is mean just because he doesn’t like the consequences of discipline, or because he needs to do chores around the house. But the truth of the matter is that it’s because of God’s goodness and grace that He does not leave us in the easy place of our foolishness or sinful rebellion which would ultimately end in misery.

So when God’s discipline comes, know that it is yoked to God’s goodness and faithful, covenant, love (hesed; vs. 76); turn to Him as a loving Father.

5. Psalm 119:92 ~ “If Your law had not been my delight, then I would have perished in my affliction.” [Some: Your life/joy is deteriorating because you have not delighted in God’s word]

God’s word is the one thing we can cling to when all hope seems to be lost. It’s because the psalmist delighted in God’s word—because He treasured it in his heart, that he knew where to turn in the dark. It was God’s word that provided the only strand of hope for him to cling to when all else seemed lost.

We must nurture delight in God’s word during the light of day so that it will sustain us in the dark nights of the soul.

Delighting in God’s word is like tying a rope to the barn. My father told me that when he was a boy they would take a long rope and tie one end to the barn and the other end to the house so that in the abinding blizzard they could make it from the barn back to the house in the dark.

You need to tie a rope to the barn: Walking through affliction without keeping our finger on the pulse of God’s Word is like walking in a blinding blizzard and relying on our sense of direction with no rope (Psalm 119:92).
But when we turn to God’s word with utter reliance we will discover:

- God’s promises cannot be uprooted [vs. 89]
- God’s faithfulness is unwavering [vs. 90]
- All things are subject to God’s purposes [91b]
- God’s word is the well of revival waters [93]

There’s a reason why we plead with you become men and women of the Word. If you don’t, you won’t ultimately succeed. You will be prey to disillusionment, deception, and discouragement if you don’t train your soul and your mind to love God’s Word; and through it to rejoice in Him with praise, thanksgiving, and faith.

If you are caught in the cords of discouragement and you need to rediscover the sufficiency of God but you don’t know where to start this week, let me give you 7 passages of Scripture: Isaiah 40; Ps 42 & 43; Ps 107; Ps 119; Rom 8; Eph 2; Phil 4.

6. Psalm 119:107 ~ “I am exceedingly afflicted; revive me, O Lord, according to Your word.”

“Exceedingly afflicted” means fully or completely afflicted. The idea here is that the psalmist is overwhelmed; a sense of desperation has taken over. In vs. 110 the wicked have laid a snare for him and so he says in 109 “my life is continually in my hand”; meaning, it could be snatched away any moment. The only hope could be an intervention of divine mercy and supernatural grace, which is mediated through God’s word. [vs. 105]

Everything that can be said from Ps 119 about affliction is not just adequate for light afflictions. These truths are for overwhelming afflictions.

7. Psalm 119:153 ~ “Look upon my affliction and rescue me, for I do not forget Your law.

Let me offer you this encouragement: crying out to God in desperation is still a cry of faith. But don’t miss the one thing in this verse that has been true of all seven statements on affliction. God’s word is the means to our hope in God. Muster up every ounce of strength you have left to fortify your faith in the word and then pray and preach to yourself what you know is true about God.

As we come to the Lord’s table this morning…

We must never interpret our sufferings apart from the sufferings of Christ. Our sufferings should be a window through which we peer into the sufferings of Christ and His sufferings must be the light that shines into the window of our sufferings.

Illus: When I was recovering from my back surgery I had a little set back due to some complications with the narcotics I was taking. And during that time I began to ponder why the Lord had allowed the unexpected challenges. Was it so that I could better empathize with those I had been called to minister to? If that was it, did I have to go all the way through it? Couldn’t I have just been given a taste of those circumstances and been able to imagine the rest well enough to sympathize with people? And then it suddenly occurred to me. Jesus experienced the full measure of suffering on our behalf. He did not stop short of the full measure only to imagine what the rest of our suffering might have been like under the wrath of God—and He could have imagined it more perfectly than anyone. No. He drank the full cup of our sufferings.
God has done His greatest and most glorious work through the sufferings of Christ. It was through suffering that Jesus absorbed the wrath of God, bore our sins and purchased our forgiveness. It was through suffering that Jesus gave us His own perfect righteousness. It was through suffering that Jesus defeated death, disarmed Satan, and secured ultimate healing for us. And through suffering Jesus has made a way for us back into the presence of God.

In our own afflictions we can more intimately identify with the sufferings of Christ and experience the rich presence of God that He has purchased for us.

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The Thorn
by Martha Snell Nicholson

I stood a mendicant of God before His royal throne
And begged him for one priceless gift, which I could call my own.
I took the gift from out His hand, but as I would depart
I cried, "But Lord this is a thorn and it has pierced my heart.
This is a strange, a hurtful gift, which Thou hast given me."
He said, "My child, I give good gifts and gave My best to thee."
I took it home and though at first the cruel thorn hurt sore,
As long years passed I learned at last to love it more and more.
I learned He never gives a thorn without this added grace,
He takes the thorn to pin aside the veil which hides His face.

Communion: (Isa 53:5)

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5 Adapted from John Piper,
7 Phil 2:7-8
8 Heb 2:14-15; Col 2:14-15; Isa 53:5
9 1 Pet 3:18
10 Beggar