

September 8, 2019

The Afflictions of an Experimental Christian

Psalm 119:65-72

The war of experimental Christianity

In this series we have been unpacking what an experimental Christianity is. Pick up almost book by the Puritans and you'll find them using this term—experimental. So what does it mean? I think the most helpful analogy for experimental Christianity is that of war. And that is exactly how the NT likens the Christian life—to that of war.

Romans 7:23 "...but I see in my members another law waging *war* against the law of my mind..."

1 Timothy 1:18 "Timothy, my child...wage the good *warfare*."

2 Corinthians 10:3-4 "For though we walk in the flesh, we are not waging *war* according to the flesh. For the weapons of our *warfare* are not of the flesh..."

Many more places could be cited. The Christian life is a life of warfare. How does that help us understand experimental Christianity? As Joel Beeke has said, we must remember three things if we are to fight in a war: "...**first**, how the battle ought to go *ideally* with the tactics you have been taught; **second**, how the battle *really* is going (which is often quite different from the ideal, as wars are bloody and seldom go the way that is expected); and **third**, the ultimate goal [which is victory]."¹ So three crucial elements: **1)** How things *ought* to go. **2)** How things *do* go. **3)** How things will *ultimately* go.

¹ Joel Beeke, *Reformed Preaching*, (Wheaton, IL.,: Crossway, 2018), pg. 55

The war in Psalm 119

These three things are seen all over Psalm 119. The Psalmist began with how things will *ultimately* go. v.1 “*Blessed* are those whose way is blameless.” The Christian is objectively the only person on earth who will be everlastingly happy. Why? Because Jesus Christ has made atonement for all his sins—he is blameless before God. Therefore only the Christian possesses a blessing which neither moth nor rust cannot destroy nor can thieves break in and steal.² That is how things will *ultimately* go. Everlasting joy.

Last week we saw how things *ought* to go. Because of this priceless blessing, God ought to be our greatest treasure. v.57 “The LORD is my portion, I promise to keep your words.” We don’t have to choose between pursuing pleasure and worshipping God, God is pleasure Himself. Therefore the aim is to order your life so carefully that God will be maximally glorified and you will be maximally satisfied. That is how things *ought* to go.

The afflictions of an experimental Christian

This week we are looking at how things *do* go. Is our life full of uninterrupted pleasure in God? No. No it isn’t. But it is full of affliction. It’s full of pain, frustration, grief, distress, heartache, and loss. And to many people who look at Christian life from the outside, superficially, they may conclude: ‘Why should I be a Christian? Christians have it just as bad as everyone else does. They have miscarriages, they have cancer, they lose jobs, they have loved ones that die. They are just as afflicted as everyone else.’ How do we answer that?

The answer the Bible gives is that all our afflictions *ultimately* lead us to a greater joy, than if we had not been afflicted at all. Look at v.71 “It is *good* for me that I was afflicted, that I might learn your statutes.” Dear congregation what is the hardest thing to endure in any affliction? ‘God how is this affliction good for me? What are you doing in my life?’ It’s easy to turn to despair, because when those questions go unanswered, then our afflictions look

² Matthew 6:19

meaningless. No one can bear meaningless affliction. Women can bear the affliction of childbirth. Why? Because there is *meaning* in the pain. A child is going to be born in the world. There's a purpose. But when no purpose can be seen, when no meaning can be detected, then how do you go on? By knowing that God is working this affliction in you purposely—with the promise that this affliction is for your good. “It is good for me that I was afflicted, *that I might learn your statutes.*” That's what our afflictions are aimed at: that we might learn God's ways. Afflictions teach us things that nothing else can.

☆Lesson 1: Afflictions Teach Us Who God Is

☆Lesson 2: Afflictions Teach Us Who We Are

☆Lesson 3: Afflictions Teach Us What Christ Has Done

The Big Idea...

Afflictions are God's faithful ministers to teach us God's sovereignty, our treachery, and Christ's agony

Lesson 1: Afflictions Teach Us Who God Is

What do afflictions teach us about God?

1. God is 100% sovereign

First, afflictions teach us that God is sovereign. Please look with me at v. 65 “You have dealt well with your servant, O Lord, according to your word.” Now the focus of this section is undeniably the afflictions we face, that is seen clearly in v.67 and v.71. The Psalmist is saying “God in these afflictions, you have *dealt* well with your servant.” The Hebrew meaning behind the word *dealt* means to have accomplished, ordained, to have something brought about. The

English word *dealt* is extremely helpful to illustrate what the Psalmist mean. It is the picture of a card dealer who *distributed* cards to players in a game: “the cards were *dealt* for the last hand.”³ Or it’s the picture of resources being *distributed* to some group or person: “the funds raised were *dealt* out to the needy.”⁴ Or it’s the picture of certain measures being taken in order to correct something: the police *dealt* with the hostage crisis at the bank.

Afflictions do not happen accidentally

All of these illustrations will work for what the Psalmist is saying. God deals out all afflictions sovereignly, like a dealer dealing cards, like funds being dealt to the needy, like policing dealing with a crisis.

Afflictions do not happen accidentally. You don’t have cancer because you ‘happen’ to have bad genes. The strife in your family does not exist simply because that’s how families ‘happen’ to be. You are not poor simply because you ‘happen’ came from a poor family. You were not overlooked for that dream job because the guy who got the job ‘happens’ to know the boss. God *dealt* these things.

Lamentations 3:38 “Is it not from the mouth of the Most High that good and bad come?”

Isaiah 45:7 “I form light and create darkness; I make well-being and create calamity; I am the LORD, who does all these things.”

The Bible does not teach a Deistic God who simply created all things and then steps back to watch how all of it unfolds. He is sovereign. He exercises His authority and will over every event that unfolds on the earth. That includes afflictions. Augustine rightly said that when Job was suffering under his

³ Source: Oxford Dictionary online

⁴ *ibid*

affliction, he did not say “The LORD gave, and the devil took away,”⁵ No. “The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away” (John 1:21). That’s the first thing we must learn about God in our afflictions. Whoever or whatever brings affliction in our lives, God is the one who sent it.⁶

2. God is 100% good

Is there anything else that afflictions teach us about God? Yes. Afflictions teach us that God is good. Look at v.65 again “You have dealt *well* with your servant.” The Bible never separates God’s control of all things to from His goodness in all things. It’s easy to accept that God is good to us when good things happen, it’s very difficult to believe that God is good when we are afflicted.

So then how do we understand God’s goodness? What is it? We use the word so often that we often don’t even stop to ask what it means. Coffee is *good*. That book is *good*. He’s a *good* friend. How do will understand God’s goodness? The Psalmist speaks of two aspects God’s goodness. Please look at v.68 “You *are* good and *do* good.” We see God’s internal goodness “You *are* good” and God’s external goodness “You *do* good.”

Let’s first consider God’s *internal* goodness. What do we mean that God is internally good? We mean the Trinitarian Being of God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—is infinitely holy and infinitely happy *in Himself*. **1 Timothy 6:11** calls Him “the *blessed* and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords.” There is no greater good that could be desired than God Himself. David said “One thing have I asked of the Lord, that will I seek after: that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord and to inquire in his temple” (**Psalm 27:4**). That’s God’s internal goodness: He is the most beautiful, the most desirable Being conceivable. To possess Him is to possess all goodness.

⁵ Thomas Watson, *All Things for Good*, (Carlisle, PA.: The Banner of Truth Trust, Reprint 2017), pg. 25

⁶ *ibid*

The LORD is my shepherd

But the Psalmist's main focus in this section is God's *external* goodness. He says in v.68 "You *do* good." What does it mean to *do* good? This goodness is the generosity of God's will. William Shedd puts it like this, God's goodness is His aim "to promote the welfare and happiness of the universe."⁷ Jonathan Edwards says nearly the same thing: God's "...goodness is the exercise [of] communicating [His] happiness."⁸ Is that the way the Bible defines God's goodness? Please turn with me to Psalm 23. This is the most famous Psalm in the Bible. David here is explaining the happiness of having the Lord as His shepherd.

The Lord takes care of all His physical needs: v.1-2 "I shall not want"

The Lord takes care of all His spiritual needs: v.3 "He restores my soul"

The Lord comforts him in death: v.4 "I will fear no evil, for you are with me"

Now how does David summarize all these benefits? He calls it God's *goodness*. "Surely *goodness* and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life..." (v.6). God's external goodness is His aim to promote the welfare and happiness of humanity, but most especially for those who belong to Him by sovereign grace.

So then here is the tension in our passage. How can God be aiming at our happiness and afflicting us at the same time? That is what our remaining lessons will be aiming to answer.

⁷ W.G.T. Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology 3rd Edition*, Ed. Alan W. Gomes, (Phillipsburg, NJ,: P & R Publishing, 2003), pg. 304

⁸ Jonathan Edwards, *The Philosophy of Jonathan Edwards*, Ed. Harvey G. Townsend, (Eugene, OR,: WIPF & STOCK, 2009), pg. 194

Lesson 2: Afflictions Teach Us Who We Are

What do afflictions teach us about ourselves?

1. We have a straying nature

First, afflictions teach us that we have a straying nature. Please look with me at **v.67** “Before I was afflicted *I went astray...*” I went astray. You and I have a *straying* nature. To stray means “To wander... or go out of the way.”⁹ The picture of straying is leaving the well worn path and getting lost in the woods. Why do we do that? It’s part of our nature. **Isaiah 53:6** “All we like sheep have gone astray.” Sheep go astray. Fish swim. Birds fly. Bacon tastes good. Sheep go astray. You don’t have to teach them to do that. In fact, the sheep header’s most tiring job is to keep the sheep in his fold. This is the animal that Christians are called. The reprobate are not called sheep. They are called goats. Christians are called sheep. All Christians have a straying nature.

“Do Christians really have a straying nature?”

I imagine a well-intentioned Christian objecting right at this point. They will say ‘Yea, before I were born again I went astray, before Jesus became my treasure I went astray, but not now. That straying nature was destroyed at Calvary.’ If you believe that, you are unwittingly accepting one of the basic tenets of atheistic humanism. Listen to how the Humanist Manifesto puts it: “Humanism is the progressive philosophy of life that...affirms our ability...to lead ethical lives... without *supernaturalism*.”¹⁰ Humanists believe that we have the ability *within ourselves* to stay on the right path.

But that is not what Scripture says.¹¹ Consider King Hezekiah in the OT. He was one of the last good kings. One one occasion, Hezekiah became very sick to the point of death, and he prayed and God healed him. After his

⁹ Source: <http://webstersdictionary1828.com/Dictionary/stray> Accessed September 7, 2019

¹⁰ Humanist Manifest III

¹¹ cf. Ecclesiastes 3:16-18

recovery, some envoys came from Babylon, and Hezekiah filled with pride showed them all his kingdom, all his riches. Why after this miraculous recovery did Hezekiah so quickly go astray in his heart? **2 Chronicles 32:31** says that “God *left him to himself*, in order to test him and to know what was in his heart.”

Or consider the Apostle Paul. In **2 Corinthians 12** he tells us that he was caught up to Heaven itself. **v.4** says that “he heard things that cannot be told, which man may not utter.” What happened after that? Paul says in **v.7** “...*to keep me from become 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*.” Why was he given this thorn? He says it twice “*to keep me from becoming conceited*.” This is the Apostle Paul. He hadn’t become conceited yet. It wasn’t yet a reality. But God actively intervened to prevent Paul from going astray.

We have hearts that love to wander

Dear congregation, if the writer of the Psalm has a straying nature, if Hezekiah strayed, if Paul was predicting his own straying, what does that mean for you? Haven’t you been surprised at yourself how easy it is for you to stray? How easy it is to live just like the world? You attend church on Sunday, and then by Monday, you find yourself acting just like your atheistic co-workers, or screaming at your kids, or escaping in alcohol or Netflix or whatever. Your life experience validates the words of the song:

Prone to wander, Lord I feel it
Prone to leave the God I love¹²

That’s the **first thing** afflictions teach us about ourselves, that left to ourselves, we will go astray.

¹² Come Thou Fount

2. We always abuse our blessings

Is there anything else that afflictions teach us about ourselves? Yes. Afflictions teach us that we always abuse our blessings. Again look with me at v. 67 “*Before I was afflicted* I went astray...” *Before* I was afflicted. Meaning, he was previously in a state of peace, previously in a state of blessing. In that state, he abused and misused those things God blessed him with. In other words, the better things got the worse he lived. This is what the Scripture means when it says that “the heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it” (**Jeremiah 17:9**). Can you understand your own heart? How does this make any sense? God pours out His blessing on us, and these blessings —although they are good in themselves, although God gave them to us to enjoy—our sinful hearts are so perverse that we are worse off blessings than we are with afflictions.¹³

Afflicted David vs. Blessed David

Consider the history of David in the OT. When was he in most danger? When he was in the wilderness of affliction running from King Saul? Or when he was at peace in his palace? Think how tender his heart was in the wilderness of affliction. When he was hiding in the cave, Saul came in unawares to relieve himself. David with stealth cut off a corner of Saul’s robe. But afterward **1 Samuel 24:4-5** says “David’s heart struck him...he said to his men “The LORD forbid that I should do this thing to...the LORD’s anointed.” While afflicted his

¹³ Earlier in this series, I mentioned John Bunyan’s other famous allegory called “The Holy War” in which the city of Mansoul was under attack by Diabolos and his demonic horde. Diabolos’ last strategy before his army was finally defeated by Prince Emmanuel was brilliant. One of his commanders, Lucifer, stood up and said: “Let us withdraw our force from the town of Mansoul, let us...terrify them no more, either with summons or threats or the noise of our drum...[then] let Mansoul be taken up in much business, and let them grow full and rich...and [then] they will forget their misery, and if we shall not frighten them they may happen to fall asleep, and so... neglect their castle...as well as their watch at the gates.” [John Bunyan, *The Works of John Bunyan Vol. 3*, (Carlisle, PA.,: The Banner of Truth Trust, Reprint 2009), pg. 356] The commander then pointed out that it was this very strategy that worked with the Laodiceans. Remember what Jesus said to that church? **Revelations 3:17** “For you say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing, not realizing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked.”

heart was so tender, that even when everyone else was telling him to kill Saul, he refused

Yet years later, when he was under *God's blessing*, what did he do? He stole Urriah's wife, got her pregnant, tried to get Urriah drunk to conceal his crime, and then when all else failed plotted Urriah's death and executed the conspiracy with his own army. When David was blessed, he was a monster.¹⁴ In fact God points out all the blessing that He provided him with. He says in **2 Samuel 12:7-9** "I anointed *you* king over Israel, and I delivered *you* out of the hand of Saul. And I gave *you* your master's house and your master's wives into *your* arms and gave *you* the house of Israel and of Judah. And if this were too little, I would add to *you* as much more." It wasn't blessing that caused David's heart to be tender, it was affliction. And that is how the rest of 2 Samuel goes. The sword never leaves David's house, and he is tender almost uninterruptedly unto the end of his life.

Count your blessings?

Dear congregation, do you this about yourself? Do you know that your blessings are far more dangerous to your soul than any affliction you will ever face?¹⁵ If you don't know that about yourself, then you don't know yourself well enough yet. You are not safe with blessings. That's the **second thing** afflictions teach us about ourselves.

3. We need afflictions to keep us close to God

Is there anything else that afflictions teach us about ourselves? Yes, one last thing. Afflictions are meant to keep us close to God. Please look one more

¹⁴ Also remember that the danger that the scattered seed faced (Mark 4:18-19) and that the Apostle Paul had to learn the secret of facing plenty (Phil. 4:12).

¹⁵ "...we love ourselves more than we love God, and the ease of the body more than the welfare of the soul, and the world more than heaven, and our temporal pleasure and contentment more than our spiritual and eternal benefit." Thomas Manton, *The Complete Works of Thomas Manton Vol. 7*, (Miami, FL.,: Hardpress Publishing), pg. 229

time v.67 “Before I was afflicted I went astray, *but now I keep your word.*” But *now I keep your word.* ‘Now that you have afflicted me, I *keep your word.*’

In the OT King Manasseh was the most evil king that Judah ever had. **2 Chronicles 33:6** says “...he burned his sons as an offering in the Valley of the Son of Hinnom, and used fortune-telling and omens and sorcery, and dealt with mediums and with necromancers.” v.9 says “Manasseh led Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem astray, to do more evil than the nations whom the Lord destroyed before the people of Israel.” Manasseh wouldn’t turn back to the Lord when He sent the prophets. What happened? God afflicted him. v.11-13 says

“Therefore the Lord brought upon them the commanders of the army of the king of Assyria, who captured Manasseh with hooks and bound him with chains of bronze and brought him to Babylon. *And when he was in distress, he entreated the favor of the Lord his God and humbled himself greatly before the God of his fathers.* He prayed to him, and God was moved by his entreaty and heard his plea and brought him again to Jerusalem into his kingdom. Then Manasseh knew that the Lord was God.”

Affliction brought Manasseh to the Lord. The same thing was true of the prodigal son. It was only when his money ran out, and he found himself in the middle of a famine, forced to eat with the pigs, that he came to his senses and returned to his father (**Luke 15:14-18**). Study out any character in the Bible and you will find this same truth: God uses afflictions to draw His people close to Him.

Not affliction *in itself*

But we must insert a qualifier here. It’s not the affliction *in itself* that is effectual in keeping us close to God. We can observe that the same affliction on two different people can make one humble before God and the other continue to rebel.¹⁶ God must *work* in the affliction.

¹⁶ Thomas Manton, *The Complete Works of Thomas Manton Vol. 7*, (Miami, FL.,: Hardpress Publishing), pg. 229

And this is the very thing that He promises to do for all His children. **Hebrews 12:6** “For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives.” That’s what the whole 12th chapter of Hebrews is about – God disciplining us, chastising us, afflicting us, so that we would be drawn closer to Him.

Experimental affliction

Dear saint, isn’t this what you have experienced in your life? Think back to the way that God has afflicted you in your life. Think to those seasons where you felt most lost in the world, most abandoned by the Lord, most at the end of your rope. Trapped on every side by external forces, and internally, your own heart is just sick with anxiety and distress. What happened? Did you not call on the name of the Lord? Were you not drawn you closer to Him? Didn’t it make your prayers more heart felt and earnest? Didn’t it not make the Scripture suddenly come alive like it never did before?

This is how God can use affliction for our good. Just as the doctor has to painfully cut out the tumor in order to save his patient, so God afflicts us for our good. It is in affliction that we walk closest with Him.

Lesson 3: Afflictions Teach Us What Christ Has Done

How is it good to suffer when you’ve done nothing wrong?

Now we’ve seen that God sends affliction our way either because of our sin or to prevent us from going astray. But sometimes we are afflicted when we are innocent. We’ve done nothing wrong. Please look at **v.69-70** with me. “The insolent smear me with lies, but with my whole heart I keep your precepts; their heart is unfeeling like fat, but I delight in your law.” Here the Psalmist is suffering because the wicked are lying about him. They’re persecuting him even though he is delighting in God’s law. But look at the curious way he responds in **v.71** “It is good for me that I was afflicted, that I might learn your statutes.” It is

good for me that I was afflicted? Even under circumstances in which he is innocent? Why? How is it good for you to be afflicted when you are innocent?

Afflictions teach us the agony of redemption

I want to answer that question with a poem written in the 17th century by Robert Herrick. It's entitled "*His Savior's Words, Going to the Cross.*" It is imagined speech by Jesus as He suffered on the cross. He calls out to all who look on His afflictions:

Have...ye no regard, all ye
 Who pass this way, to pity me,
 Who am a man of misery!
 A man both bruised and broke,
 and one
 Who suffers not here for mine own,
 But for my friends' transgression!
 Ah! Sion's Daughters, do not fear
 The cross, the cords, the nails, the spear,
 The myrrh, the gall, the vinegar:
 For Christ, your loving Savior, hath
 Drunk up the wine of God's fierce wrath;
 Only, there's left a little froth,
 Less for to taste, than for to show,
 What bitter cups had been your due,
 Had He not drank them up for you.¹⁷

Did you catch that last part? Jesus drank all the wine of God's fierce wrath, *but* there's left a little froth for us. The froth is those small tiny bubbles that are left after the cut is empty. The poem is telling us that we taste only the smallest

¹⁷ Leland Ryken, *The Soul in Paraphrase: A Treasury of Classic Devotional Poems*, (Wheaton, IL.,: Crossway, 2018), pg. 114 *i*

bubbles of affliction, because Jesus already drank the full cup. In other words, our ‘small sufferings give us an insight into the supreme suffering that Jesus endured by becoming our substitute.’¹⁸

Why does God allow you to be afflicted when you’ve done nothing wrong? So that you can start to understand how much your Savior loves you.¹⁹ He never sinned. **Hebrews 4:13** says that our Great High Priest was tempted in every way as we are yet was without sin. **2 Cor. 5:21** says He knew no sin. **1 Peter 2:22** says “In him there was no deceit.” And yet Jesus was afflicted more than any other man, because He drank the cup of God’s wrath. Why? Because you and I have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. But “He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree...By his wounds you have been healed. For [we] were once straying like sheep, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of [our] souls.” (**1 Peter 2:24-25**)

Sharing in the sufferings of Christ

You see our afflictions, especially those for which we can trace not wrong help us to see Jesus more clearly. This is what Paul meant when he said that he wanted to know Christ [by] sharing in His sufferings (**Phil. 3:10**).

You can use all of your afflictions to draw closer to Jesus.

So if you are in a season of sorrows right now, remember that Jesus became a man of sorrows for you. **Isaiah 53:3** “He was despised and rejected by me; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief.”

¹⁸ *bid*, pg. 113

¹⁹ David Brainerd says here “Understanding again appears, and informs, that God designs that those whom he sanctifies in part here, and intends for immortal glory, shall tarry a while in this present evil world, that their own experience of temptation &c. may teach them how great the deliverance is, which God wright for them, that they may be swallowed up in thankfulness and admiration to eternity.” Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards Vol. 2*, (Carlisle, PA.: The Banner of Truth Trust, Reprint 2009), pg. 440

If you are in a season of loneliness, cut off from people you love, remember that Jesus was “one from whom men hide their faces, he was despised, and we esteemed him not” (**Isaiah 53:4**)

If you are in a season of extreme distress agony, remember what Jesus suffered in the garden. **Luke 22:44** “And being in an agony he prayed more earnestly; and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down to the ground.”

If you are in a season of feeling abandoned by God, remember that Jesus was completely abandoned by God. **Matthew 27:46** “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

That’s what the Psalmist *ultimately* means when He says ““It is good for me that I was afflicted, *that I might learn your statutes.*” Affliction teaches you what Christ has done. But the main difference between your afflictions and Jesus’ afflictions is this: His afflictions have saved you from the ultimate affliction. The Scripture promise is so clear. **John 5:24** “Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life.” Dear believer if you have taken hold of Christ by faith, you will never come into judgment. You will never face the ultimate affliction of the wrath of a holy God. And if you doubt that for even a moment, remember that Jesus rose from the dead. **Romans 4:24-25** “It will be counted to us who believe in him who raised from the dead Jesus our Lord, who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification.” His resurrection proves the gospel is true. That God forgives sinners. Sinners just like you.

Application

1. What kind of a world do we live in?

We live in a world in which all of us face affliction. But affliction is only redeemable, only good for God's people.²⁰ If you have not repented of your sins and trusted in the LORD Jesus Christ, you cannot say this about your affliction. In fact, the longer you live, the more your afflictions will pile upon you. You will be like the man in the Scripture who fled from a lion only to be met by a bear. Or man who leaned up against the wall only to be bitten by a serpent.²¹ All of your afflictions are merely foretastes of the greater affliction to come, when you face a holy God on the day of judgment. You must repent of your sins. Meaning you must turn away from thinking that you are god of your own life. That's how you're living right now. As if you can say what you want, do what you want, act how you want. That is wicked. But God has made a way for wicked people just like you. Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you shall be saved.

2. What kind of a Word has God given us?

God has given us a word, in which many of its treasures only opened by the key of affliction. "Luther once said that he could never rightly understand some of the Psalms, till he was in affliction."²² Dear congregation, when you are afflicted by anything: by doubt, by loss of assurance, by anxiety, abandonment, suffering, whatever, run to the Bible. Often times afflictions are the very keys that unlock the mystery of Scripture. In fact, it is often prosperity and blessing that get in the way of understanding Scripture. Notice that the last verse in our passage today read: "The law of your mouth is better to me than thousands of

²⁰ And all the prosperity of the wicked will only make them worse—Isaiah 26:10. cf. Thomas Manton, *The Complete Works of Thomas Manton Vol. 7*, (Miami, FL.,: Hardpress Publishing), pg. 224

²¹ Amos 5:19

²² Thomas Watson, *All Things for Good*, (Carlisle, PA.,: The Banner of Truth Trust, Reprint 2017), pg. 27

gold and silver pieces” (v.72). When did he say that? When he was under affliction.

3. What kind of a church should we want?

We should want the kind of church that knows how to respond to the affliction *of each other*. I *don't* mean the afflictions that each one of us have. I mean the afflictions in which we afflict on each other. This is what Dietrich Bonhoeffer said as he faced the afflictions of the church in the underground during WWII. In the church, we must come to the place where we are

“...overwhelmed by a great disillusionment with others, with Christians in general, and, if we are fortunate, with ourselves...Only that fellowship which faces such disillusionment, with all its unhappy and ugly aspects, begins to be what it should be in God's sight, begins to grasp in faith the promise that is given to it.”²³

Notice three parts to what he said, we must be overwhelmed by 1) a great disillusionment with others 2) with Christians in general and 3) with ourselves. The first one is the easiest. If you live any length of time you will become adequately disappointed and disenchanted in what the world can offer you. The second one is much more difficult. Bonhoeffer says our Christian community will only begin to be what it should be in God's sight when we are disillusioned with the Christians we are in community with. Why is that?

Because one of the last idols that a Christian has stripped away from him is his idol of church.

Meaning all of us have a fixed ideal and expectation of what the church community *should be like*. And inevitably and invincibly when that ideal is not

²³ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together: The Classic Exploration of Christian Community*, Trans. John W. Doberstein, (New York, NY.; HarperOne, 1954), pg. 23

realized, we come to a crisis. We have to make a choice either to keep our ideal and therefore be perpetually dissatisfied with church, or we to have it lay down and let the Bible inform us. What does the Bible say about church life? Well, consider most of the epistles were written to churches that had deep internal strife and struggle with each other. The Corinthians turned on the Apostle Paul and despised him. The Galatians were diving up along racial lines—Jews and Gentiles. In the Philippian church, two women—Euodia and Syntyche—were in such a dispute that Paul had to write to the whole church about it. One thing has been true over the last two thousand years, the church is good at afflicting each other. Have you been disillusioned yet?

But don't stop there, he last thing Bonhoeffer says is that we must become disillusioned with ourselves. The deciding factor on whether or not you will be perpetually dissatisfied with the church is how you view yourself. Do you view others *better* than yourself? Paul says in **Philippians 2:3** "...in humbly count others more significant than yourselves." The negative way to say that, is the way that Paul said it "I am the very least of all the saints" (**Ephesians 3:8**). Have you come to grips with that yet personally? That you are the worst member in this assembly? You see that is how we must on one level respond to the affliction of each other. "I am a worst sinner than they. Yet God in Christ has forgiven me and loved me and has been patient with me, so how can I not forgive and love and be patient with them?" The afflictions and slights and dissatisfactions we experience in the church, teach us the gospel almost better than any other affliction.

4. What kind of Savior do we need?²⁴

We need a Savior who can turn all of our afflictions into good. And that is what Christ does. Listen to how Paul says it in **2 Corinthians 1:8-10** "For we do not want you to be unaware, brothers, of the *affliction* we experienced in Asia. For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life

²⁴ With the exception of the first question, the last three are from Christopher Ash, *Job: The Wisdom of the Cross, Preaching the Word Series*, (Wheaton, IL.: Crossway, 2014), pg. 17-23

itself. Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death. But that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead.” Did you hear? The affliction was given to them so that they would not rely on themselves but on God who raises the dead.