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Psalm 119:67, 71, 75 "God's Word on Affliction"
September 16, 2018

All right. Let's open our Bibles this morning to Psalm 119, verse 67. And I just want to look with you at three verses this morning. They all go together. And I think there's a good lesson for us that we would like to have you take away from being here this morning.

Verse 67 of Psalm 119 says this: "Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I keep Your word." Verse 71 says, "It is good for me that I've been afflicted, that I might learn Your statutes." And verse 75 says, "I know, O Lord, that Your judgments are right, and in faithfulness that You have afflicted me." Three verses about affliction. One before I was afflicted, one in affliction, and one after the fact, after being afflicted, and the benefits and God's purposes for them.

I am sure that all of you are suffering from some affliction this morning. By biblical definition, it is a physical or emotional or spiritual suffering that brings a discomfort and hurt to your life. I guess if I could sum up the word affliction from the Bible, it is everything you don't want in your life: The hardship, the headaches, the opposition, the struggles. Everything that just afflicts you.

When the children of Israel were enslaved in Egypt and the Lord sent Moses to be His mouthpiece and His deliverer, He said to Moses in Exodus Chapter 3, "I have seen the affliction of My people." And He uses this same word. The crushing oppression, the slavery, the years of mistreatment and hard labor that they faced in their captivity was listed as an affliction. When Moses was sent by the Lord and finally led the people out of the land of Egypt into the wilderness, the people would often in anger turn against him, complain and gripe and blame him personally. It was hateful and hurtful. It was oftentimes filled with lies and misrepresentations. And in Numbers Chapter 11 Moses went to pray to the Lord and he said, "Why have You afflicted me with this people?" He even asked the Lord to just -- if you love me, kill me. But he described the treatment that he suffered at

the hands of these 2 or 3 million as being an affliction, and he used again this same word.

In the book of Ruth Chapter 1, when Naomi speaks about the loss of her husband and then of her two sons, she said that this was a bitter affliction that the Lord had laid upon her. In fact, she came home and she said to the people, "Don't call me pleasant anymore. I'm changing my name to bitter," and spoke of the loss of husband and children as the affliction that she was suffering.

When Hannah, the mother of Samuel, for years couldn't have a child, and continually struggled with her barrenness, she described it to the Lord as a great affliction that God had allowed in her life.

When Jehoshaphat, the king, had to face a million man army, far too large to certainly fight, and to even think of having a chance to win, he remembered the promises of God and in his prayer to the Lord he said, "Lord, You said if any evil comes upon us, any judgment, any sword or any pestilence, any famine, that we should stand before this house, in Your presence, and cry out to You in our affliction and You would help us." And here he referred to those things that they were facing as affliction.

Nehemiah, hearing about the plight of the people in Jerusalem, that he had never been to, in Chapter 1 verse 3 prays to the Lord for the affliction of God's people, without any walls to protect them, gates burned with fire, and the people sitting ducks to the enemy.

Jesus in His parable in Mark Chapter 4, the parable of the sower, said that when affliction would come into a life that had a heart that was stony towards God, it would reveal the lack of depth and the lack of personal relationship with Him.

All of those words are the same work, the same word, the same description. It takes many forms. And it is that word that is used by the Psalmist this morning to talk about the influence of it in your life. So with that as a definition, I think we all suffer affliction; things that we don't want, things that we hate to face, things that hurt us and harm us and has us struggling and concerned.

In affliction, after affliction, three verses.

What are the sources of affliction? According to the Bible, sometimes affliction comes from your enemies. David in leaving Jerusalem as an older man, his son having led a revolt, a coup against his father, Absalom had caused David to leave the palace, not because he didn't and couldn't fight back, but he didn't want any bloodshed. He figured the Lord could handle it. So he headed out to the wilderness, and there was an old man name Shimei who lived outside the city. He was a distant relative of Saul's. He saw this defeat, or what looked like a defeat for David, as just victory for the house of Saul. He cursed David as he went with great joy, and David's men, to their credit, offered to just go cut his head off. And David said no. You know, "Maybe the Lord will look upon my affliction and will requite me good for cursing this day. No, no. Let him live."

In II Chronicles 33 there is a man whose name is Manasseh, and if you have read through the kings, Manasseh I think is quite likely the most vile and most wicked man in the Old Testament. There's probably no one as bad as him in the pages of the narrative. When he is taken captive by the Assyrians in war, and they abuse him, and they put a nose ring through him, and they shackle him, and they drag him off towards Babylon, in all of the affliction that he faces, he cries out to the Lord for forgiveness. And a man that we probably would argue whether it needed to be forgiveness -- forgiven at all, God gives him forgiveness, and He offers to him forgiveness, but it is the affliction of his enemies upon his life that turn this wicked heart around, brought him to his knees.

Isaiah wrote of Jesus that He was afflicted by the enemy for our sin, but it was by His enemies. Surely, He has borne our grief, carried our sorrow. We esteemed Him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted. Same word. He bore our -- He was wounded for our transgressions, and you know how those scriptures go. He was oppressed, He was afflicted. As a sheep before his shearers is dumb, He didn't open His mouth. But it was the enemies of God who afflicted Our Savior.

Sometimes the source of our affliction is us. Not from others, but to ourselves. The Bible talks about, for

example, fasting, that you afflict your soul with fasting. Isaiah 58, there's a whole chapter there on fasting. And fasting is a practice of a spiritual kind of hunger for God that allows you to repent, to admit the seriousness of sin, deny your flesh; all good things. Unless, like in Isaiah 58, you fasted as the children of Israel did. It was a ploy to gain favor with God, sympathy with God. It was self-affliction. It really wasn't done with a heart for repentance, but simply kind of a self-induced penance, to -- whether God would accept it or not, and God doesn't accept that, and He said so.

I grew up in a Catholic family, went to Catholic parochial school all the way through 12th grade, and I remember being with my parents in Mexico City watching droves, thousands of people on their knees, crawling to the shrine to the Virgin of Guadalupe in repentance or in penance. Self-denial, self-punishment. When we were in the Philippines -- and we have a couple of churches that we helped start there and support -- there are men on Easter that have themselves crucified just simply as a sign of self-affliction, humility. It's not in our subject this morning, but let me just say this since we're on the subject, sort of: The Bible does not teach penance anywhere. It isn't necessary. God doesn't look for penance from you. Jesus died and paid the price completely. There's nothing you can do. So penance is sought after and practiced by people because of the guilt of sin. It is practiced so that we could make up with God or to God what we feel that somehow we could pay the cost, which is why, at least when you get to the Bible, the verse that says "The wages of sin is death," that is all that you need to know. It is the gift of God, eternal life through His Son, that matters. So repentance is absolutely necessary. Penance is worthless. You can't afflict yourself or turn to yourself to somehow balance the books. God balanced the books for you, and penance is never part of His equation. So while self-affliction has lots of causes, I would say that from a biblical standpoint, most all of them are misguided. It may be sincere, just not very helpful.

So sometimes it's the enemy that afflicts us, brings us difficulty. Sometimes we lay it upon ourselves, for whatever reason. And then there are times that God goes out of His way to afflict our life. We read here in verse 75, "That in faithfulness You have afflicted me."

So God was angry with Israel there in II Kings 17, and He removed -- He said, "I'm going to remove you out of My sight." And He rejected them, and it says "He afflicted them and He delivered them into the hands of the spoiler, until He cast them out of His sight." Those are God's people. And yet it is the same word that's applied there as well. God afflicted men due to their sin. But always when you read of God's affliction upon His people, you and I, it is always with only one specific intention: To bring you back to where He wants you to be, because He's a good Father, and He doesn't just leave you to blow in the wind.

From our verses we can ask what the purpose of affliction might be, and go back over those same three causes. When people afflict us, it is usually done so out of bitterness or harm or desire for hate or envy. It is a sinful motive. It is designed to lash out. People that hurt us are not interested in improving their own life; they're interested in making yours worse. Retribution. And I would say this to you because of the verses that are in front of us: Even when that happens, that God can use others who are spiteful to teach you to walk with Him. Psalm 76 says, "Surely the wrath of man will praise you." And God will take you through when these afflictions come from people, and they will -- they will seem angry and mad and hurtful, and you'll say Lord, what's going on? But God, if He allows it, allows it for good. When Joseph met with his brothers who had sold him down the river, they thought they were dead. Joseph said, "What? You meant this for evil. God meant this for good, to save a people as it is this day." So even when the source is wicked, the purposes of God are good. This kind of affliction, when it comes from others, demands that you deny yourself and you die yourself and look to the Lord to save you, to deliver you, to defend you.

When the affliction comes from yourself, it is usually driven by the idea of punishment or justice. Self-affliction is usually a form of self-punishment. It's a useless practice, but we think, and a lot of people do, that they can obtain mercy or forgiveness from God. What they don't believe and what they should know is that forgiveness from God comes not only through self-denial and a turning to His Son by faith.

It is good to see yourself as weak. It is biblically

correct to see yourself as sinful, even unable to deliver yourself. It is futile, though, to correct that problem through self-affliction. Oh, I'm horrible. That's why this is happening to me. I'm the worst. I'm a worm. Okay. Great. Now that we got that straight, now what are we going to do about it? And you will find in the Bible people using that tact to believe that they can gain sympathy from God or somehow notice from others.

Talking about that fasting as a way of self-affliction in a good sense. Jesus in the other sense said in the Sermon on the Mount, "Look, when you are fasting, don't look like these hypocrites who walk around with sad faces and they just disfigure them and --" I'm really hungry. Why, I've been fasting, man. The Lord said, "They have their reward. If you want to fast, then do it in secret where your Father looks, where He sees. Don't do it to be seen of men. And you'll have -- your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly."

When God afflicts us, it is for our benefit. He wants to keep you close. Indirectly it is also for benefit of those who know you and watch you and see what God is doing with you. Isaiah would write of the Lord's work, I've been -- He said, "I've refined you, but not with silver. I've chosen you out of the furnaces of affliction." God has a way of purifying, of tempering, of bringing you to that place where you are all-in with Him, to burn off the impurities in your life that the world piles on, that the enemies wants to lay upon you, that the flesh does.

When Paul wrote his second letter to the Corinthians, he said to them in Chapter 1 verse 4, "God has comforted me in all my affliction and tribulation so that I can comfort those who are now going through any trouble with the same comfort God has given me." Sometimes when God afflicts you, He's only preparing you for a ministry of helping others. There's nothing better when you're in trouble than having someone say, "I went through that exact same thing. Here's what the Lord did for me. Here's what God can do for you." And God prepares us for the work. Paul stood on the steps of the Antonia Fortress in Jerusalem when he was there and the riot had broken out and he was being arrested, and it broke his heart, and yet the Lord stood by him that night clearly, and words of comfort and encouragement. Paul was so sad over his own people. The Lord wanted him to know He was

sad over it too. When Paul years later as a prisoner on his way to Rome was on a boat that looked like it was going to sink in the storm, even seasoned sailors were distraught, thinking they were going to die. Yet Paul talked to the Lord and the Lord appeared to Paul, and he took that comfort, he went up on board, and he said to the people, "God has stood by my side and this is what He said." So the purposes of affliction may be different depending on where they come from, but God's intentions are always good.

Notice in verse 67 that it said "before." "Before I was afflicted, I went astray, but now I have kept Your word." Here's a benefit of affliction: An easy walk provides an easy way to fall. An easy life is not driven to its knees. And the Psalmist is well to admit that. Before I was afflicted, before I faced those things, I had no intention or desire to walk with God.

It's interesting to me that these afflictions could have been avoided altogether if we had simply stayed on the path, but that doesn't really describe us most of the time. I usually see people in church and I'll go, "Man, I haven't seen you in a long time." They go, "Man, I'm really going through it." And I immediately think verse 67. God is afflicting you and welcome home. I think you can call those afflictions optional. They're optional because they are usually applied for through disobedience and rebellion. That old southern song years ago, "God won't make you go, if you don't want to go, but God can sure make you want to go." And I think that's the way it fits into the scenario. Affliction will allow me to realize that God wants me back on track. It's easy when things are going well. It is far more difficult for me to stay on point when life is easy. So God allows, as a natural course of your care, difficulties to face that drive you to your knees. And rather than complain about them, you ought to at least be able to consider that God is at work. Yeah, but my boss is such a jerk. Yeah, and the Lord wants you to pray. Well, I'm sure praying now. Ta-da, verse 67. A living example of the scriptures fulfilled. It's almost that tough love that will bring you back to a place where you begin to keep His word. It's amazing how a few unplanned disasters kind of straighten out your spiritual life. The sad thing is for some of us, we don't straighten out until the disaster hits. Affliction will keep you from straying, will get you back to a life of obedience. And maybe that's why.

But that's a purpose, that's a benefit of being afflicted. God wants you where He can care for you and bless you.

We read in verse 71, "It is good then that I've been afflicted, because in that I learned your statutes." In the process of affliction I find that God's word begins to make sense and have meaning. I think that you can read the Bible, fill your head with scriptures, quote them on a regular basis, and not know them at all. And then you need to apply them to your life, because now you're in trouble, and all of a sudden, this word that just laid in your lap becomes powerful and meaningful, and you learn them not in your head; in your heart. "It's good that I've been afflicted," the Psalmist writes, "because in that affliction I have learned your Word." I have learned it in a way that it can stay with me. It's become a part of my life. It's almost like being force fed, right? To learn that God means what He says and He says what He means. We say to people all the time, go to church, read your Bible, and they just smile at you like you're an idiot. Whatever, Pastor. That's what you're supposed to say. That's your job. Until the Lord begins to not give them all that they want and life isn't so easy, and all of a sudden, I'm going to go to church, man. I'm going get my Bible out. Well, yeah, you will. And in the process, you'll learn that there's not a bunch of rules here, there's a bunch of life here.

God afflicts me for my own good. I should say this to you in the process of this: Affliction is never God's first course of action. In fact, it is usually one that He has to take because we don't learn anything easily. You can just read these verses this morning, grab hold of them, and walk off and be fine, or you can hear them and let them out the other ear, you forgot 20 minutes from now. Lamentations Chapter 3 verse 33 says of the Lord, "He does not afflict willingly, nor grieve the children of men." God's -- that's not His first step. We read in Psalm 32 a couple of months ago, "Let me instruct you in the way that you should go. Let Me guide you with My eye." I don't want to put a bridle in your mouth like a horse, or a mule, which doesn't have any understanding, who'll come near you unless you can pull and provide pain and it moves. The Lord says this: I'd rather give you a look, and we'll make eye contact, and I'll do like this and you'll go there.

My father had a look when I was a kid. He didn't have to say a word. Across the table, it was the "I'm going to kill you when I get you home" look, and I believed him. I sat up straight and I ate the carrots and did whatever I was supposed to do, because he'll kill me. And he wasn't kidding around. He had that look. Well, in a much kinder sense, the Lord would rather just give you some direction kindly and mercifully. And if you'll follow it, you can avoid some of these afflictions, but usually we're not really good at following them.

If as a parent you have kids old enough to begin to run around the yard, and you need to teach them that running into the street's a really bad idea, you might sit down and tell them that cars are real and they could die, and sit on the stoop with them and point out to them how fast they go by, but if they decide to run out after the ball anyway, you might have to resort to more severe measures. Nothing that you enjoy necessarily or relish, but let's face it, not running into the street is a matter of life and death for these little kids, and so whatever it is you've got to do to get them beyond the danger and thinking correctly, you're going to do. And so is the Lord with you and I.

"It's a good thing I was afflicted, because in that affliction I learned your statutes." I realized the rules were the rules. We're a nation of law breakers, aren't we? Law interpreters. Well, it says don't park on the street. Yeah, that's not for me. Don't walk on the grass. I'm on the grass. Everybody's got -- I got killed -- almost got killed this -- well, I didn't almost get killed. That's an exaggeration. Some guy went flying through the red light right in front me. I usually look now. Honestly, it was three seconds and there he goes. He's a law interpreter. Red is good for everyone else, but apparently not for him. I think that's the way we do with the Lord. We read the Bible, we apply it to each other. The Bible says -- until it comes at me, and then, well, that's not what he means for me. It's a good thing I've been afflicted. I can learn your statutes.

And then we are told in verse 75 that we learn in affliction that God is faithful. Paul, when he wrote to the Corinthians in Chapter 4 of the second letter, said that -- he talked about his life. He described how he'd been shipwrecked and beaten and was left for dead and --

he's not a guy you'd want to hang around with. Paul was a troublesome man, in a good sense. And yet all of his suffering and all that he faced serving the Lord, he writes to the Corinthians, he said, "I think that that was just a light affliction, which are just for a moment." But he said, "It will work in my life an exceedingly eternal weight of glory." Or if you want, Paul said I can take the broad perspective of life and see that these little difficulties that are facing me are all designed to get me where He is. In other words, God deals with us in the eternal, with that in mind first. He's not adverse to providing temporal discomfort to bring you eternal life and keep you close. I mean, Jesus faced temporal affliction from man to save us. God always works with eternity in view.

And the Psalmist writes, I've learned through the afflictions that I go through that you're a faithful God. You're not quitting on me now. You're going to finish what you started. You're going to present me faultless before the throne of the Father with great glory, with great joy. Greg Laurie says, "with Greg Laurie." No, it says "great glory." I know he steals the verse.

God wants to keep you close. It's a matter of eternal life. It'll keep you from straying. It will convince you that He's for you. It will teach you His word. Affliction isn't something you should react to immediately as much as we do. I think we need to see them from God's perspective.

Debbie and I spent the last two weeks on an island in the middle of nowhere, four and a half hours from New Zealand in the South Pacific. There were 1100 people on the island. You could go around on a scooter in about six minutes. There was no internet, there was no phone. If I slowed down anymore, I was going to fall over. And I learned a couple of things: My wife and I get along just fine after 40 years, because after two weeks you would know, and that we're way too busy. Way too busy. I came back yesterday afternoon and had four hours of emails to respond to. "Four hours? Really? What do these people want in my life anyway?" It was good to just do nothing. It's not necessarily the way you have to live your life, but I learned that I probably should spend more time valuing the important things and not get so sidetracked.

While I was stranded, I read an old issue of Decision

Magazine that Billy Graham used to put out, and he had a story in there, and I thought it was appropriate, of a man who was shipwrecked on an uninhabited island, and to protect himself -- it was a true story -- he had built this crude kind of a hut. He had a couple of possessions that he had salvaged. And he just prayerfully every day would just walk the shores looking for boats to come by, and no one ever did. One night as he went out to find some food, he came around the corner of the island to realize that that little smoldering fire that he had left in his hut had caught fire to his hut, and the thing was just burned to the ground. And he was heartbroken. Fell on his face, began to cry, "God, why this too? The one thing I had." He fell asleep in the sand and he awoke the next morning to find a boat anchored on the island and a captain coming out saying, "We came as soon as we saw the smoke signals." And the man realized that everything he had had to be destroyed so he could be rescued. And I think that's how affliction works. God will take away everything that doesn't matter so that you can come to what does.

It's a good thing that I've been afflicted. Before I was, I walked astray. It's a good thing I'm in affliction, because I learn your word. I mean, I really learn it. And in the process, I learned that you're faithful to me. You're a good God. You're a good Father. You teach me about the danger of being -- in running out into traffic. You hold me. You guide me.

See your afflictions that way, and I think you'll do better. And you'll be able to handle whoever they might come from and however they may come, that you see God's eternal purposes being fulfilled.