

THE BENEFITS OF AFFLICTION

Preached at Rehoboth, Swindon,
Thursday 22nd, May 1958.

Before I was afflicted I went astray: but now have I kept Thy Word.

Psalm cxix. 67.

This psalm is remarkable, not only for its length, but for the variety and richness of the expressions of prayer, of confession, of praise, and of hope. I suppose there is hardly a place into which a child of God may come in his experience where it is not possible for the Lord to apply this truth profitably to their souls.

In the section from which I have read the text David opens by saying, "Thou hast dealt well with Thy servant, O Lord, according to Thy word." What David said of himself is true of all the Lord's people; the Lord has dealt well with them. There may be times when we may harbour discontent in our bosoms, but the truth remains; God *has* dealt well with His people; and let the Lord shine, let Him smile into our hearts, and we shall be able to say and to confess that the Lord has dealt well with us, unworthy though we have been. He says the Lord's gracious dealings with him were "according to Thy word." That is always true. The Lord, in what He has done for His people, has limited Himself, but He never comes short of what He has declared in the Scriptures of truth. In His revealed will He is pleased to bless His people though He may appear to deal hardly with them; for the word is according to wisdom and according to truth. Although we may be tried, although we may be tempted, although affrighted, yet, it is according to His word.

Is there anything in our path, in our experience, which is not according to His word? I mean, anything of what the Lord does for us and in us, what He appoints and what He permits? To get a sight of this by faith, and to receive it into our hearts will endear the Lord God of truth and of salvation to our souls.

That the Lord dealt well with the psalmist is evident from his desire, "Teach me good judgment and knowledge: for I have believed Thy commandments." Good knowledge is necessary to good experience; and good knowledge must be taught, and

taught by the Spirit of God in the school of experience in which He teaches His people a knowledge of themselves, and thereby a knowledge of their dear Redeemer.

He prayed, not only for good knowledge, but for good judgment, that he might rightly use the knowledge that God gives; not to presume upon it but to be exercised in it, and to trust in Him as He is pleased to reveal His will.

In the text the psalmist shows again God's gracious dealings: "Before I was afflicted I went astray: but now have I kept thy word." Sanctified affliction, or chastisement, or discipline, makes us see what otherwise we should pass over with indifference. It gives us much cause for confession and prayer. That is the saddest of all afflictions when the heart is unaffected and when the soul is not touched graciously by the hand of God. But afflictions, as sanctified, are a blessing in disguise and they bring open blessings with them. Luther somewhere says that he never knew the meaning of Scripture until he came into affliction. Another author said that he learnt more of the will of God in ten days of affliction than he had learnt in fifty years of health; to which testimony many of the people of God can set their approval.

In attempting to ask your attention to this passage, I want, if enabled, to notice the need-be for affliction. David confessed, or admitted, that he had gone astray. Later in this section he said, "It is good for me that I have been afflicted: that I might learn Thy statutes." Implying that there had been indifference to them, or inability to receive them. That is closely connected with our going astray. For the want of clear, definite teaching in our souls we have often gone astray, for it is the fruitful source of many wanderings and much forgetfulness of the God of all our mercies. A child of God, when he reflects upon his former state as an unregenerate sinner, cannot say anything better of himself than, "I went astray." This is the testimony of the word of God from Genesis to Revelation. We go astray from birth, speaking lies, and resting in them. We go astray after the things of the world, sinful pleasures, carnal ambitions. We go astray from God, from His word, fulfilling that word of Isaiah, "All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to His own way." And the Lord never lets His people forget for long that

they were as those going astray. And after their call by grace and their entrance into the path of godliness, can they say anything that is better than this? Can they deny the truth of what David had so painfully to confess, "I went astray"?

Of course, the child of God does not go astray as he went astray in the days when the fear of God was not in his heart. Immortal principles forbid a child of God to sin. He can say with David in another place, "For I have kept the ways of the Lord; and have not wickedly departed from Him." He does not say he had not departed, but he said that he had not wickedly departed; that is, His people do not go astray pleasurably or persistently, or deliberately; but through the power of sin within, the power of temptation, and the prevalence of unbelief, it is often their sad confession, "I went astray."

'Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it;
Prone to leave the God I love.'

If I speak of some other ways in which the Lord's people go astray I should say in the first place, we often go astray by giving more attention to to our carnal natural thoughts and sentiments about religion than the testimony of God in His word. As sure as ever we lean upon that which is natural, that which is sentimental, we shall go astray from the straight path of truth. There is no stability in nature. The Saviour assures us (and He knows what is in man) "That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit." Beware then, of mingling that which is natural, fleshly, and carnal with those things which belong to the Spirit of God.

We go astray practically in various ways; not only by acts of disobedience to the admonitions of the Spirit, and the word of His grace; but in the neglect of prayer, self-examination, confession of sin. How ready we are to disbelieve and distrust! How formal and indifferent we become in the things of God! And when apathy settles upon us we are sure to go astray, if not openly to the eyes of others, certainly in the eyes of God; and we cannot hope to escape being observed by others, because if there is deathliness in our experience there will be, in our conversation and in our spirit, the evidence that we have gone

astray.

We go astray by leaning upon our judgments in matters which call for waiting upon God. We are not to be as the horse or mule which have no understanding. That does not mean we are not to be dependent upon the Lord, that we are not to acknowledge Him in all our ways. In the simplest step in life we may go astray. The path of duty may seem to reason perfectly clear, and if we follow that it may well prove that we have gone astray. There is no matter that affects us but what we are under necessity to seek wisdom and guidance from the God of all grace.

Some of the Lord's people (and I do not except myself) have gone astray by making other people's experience and their opinions the standard by which they measure themselves. I need hardly say that the word of truth is the only safe criterion, and that criterion can be understood and recognised and followed only by the illumination and assistance of God. But as sure as we look to the experience of another and conclude, either that we have not attained to theirs, or have gone beyond them. We shall go astray if we follow the opinions of men, even of good men, with respect to the word of truth, there will be a wandering from the standard of truth. How important it is in this matter of true religion to look to the Lord and not to men. My pastor told me of a case he was familiar with; a man who feared God and who had every evidence of being a child of God, had not in his early experience realised the solemnities and terrors of the law as some others had; comparing their experience with his, he came to the conclusion that he must be wrong. He wanted to be right, and therefore begged the Lord to give him a law experience as He had given to others that he had in mind. The Lord answered his prayer, but it was in such a way as almost drove him to despair. He was never known to smile again. He told my pastor that the Lord pardoned his sin, his folly, and had shown him how greatly he had sinned against the Lord in questioning His kindness in the way He brought him to a saving knowledge of Christ.

Then, too, we may go astray frequently by undue care for time things. the Lord might often say to us, as He said to Martha, "Thou art careful and troubled about many things." We

have our natural duties to attend to; it is incumbent upon us to discharge them all the more diligently because of our profession. The word of God requires industry, and that we should live honestly in the sight of men; but how frequently those things engage more of our attention, more of our minds and more of our hearts than they ought! And we sadly find we have gone astray. David, after all the confessions and professions of the Lord's goodness to him, finished this psalm as no other man would have finished it if it had been a human composition: "I have gone astray like a lost sheep; seek Thy servant; for I do not forget Thy commandments."

I will notice in the second place how David acknowledged the means the Lord took to correct him. "Before I was afflicted I went astray." The Lord afflicted him after he went astray. We may little think when we are at ease that afflictions may be near at hand; and when they come, as they sometimes come upon us, suddenly, unexpectedly, we are thrown into confusion, into distress; we know not where we are. Yet the Lord has told us by His servant Peter, "Think it not strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened unto you." But the word of God is full of warnings, and also of admonitions as to the necessity of those afflictions or chastisements, or discipline. Sometimes the Lord does kindly prepare His people for what is coming, though they may not know what it is; some word of truth, some truth expressed by a line of a hymn, some deep impression upon their minds, so that when the chastisement comes they are in measure prepared for it.

Affliction in Scripture usage means to be troubled and to be humbled; and that affliction is not affliction, rightly considered, that does not trouble us, that does not humble us. That will be the effect of affliction as sanctified, to trouble or minds rightly as to the cause wherefore the Lord dealeth thus with us; and our trouble is that our sins have exposed us to it, and humbled us because it is necessary. I have said this according to His word. The Saviour said, in His last discourse with His disciples, "I am the true vine, and My Father is the husbandman. Every branch in Me that beareth not fruit He taketh away; and every branch that beareth fruit, He purgeth it, that it may bring forth more

fruit." So the Lord sends affliction various ways. He sometimes afflicts His people in their persons, for affliction is not easy to bear to nature, or to our souls, unless grace is given. It has a limiting effect upon us; it is a weight upon our spirits, and would seem to us to be a hindrance. The Lord may afflict us relatively in our families or among our friends, and where there is love and sympathy, their affliction is ours, and they doubly afflict us and try us as if they were our own.

The Lord afflicts His people at times in their responsibilities. For a time the Lord seems to prosper them and they can see His hand going before them and making a way for them; but for no reason that they can see adversity, difficulties, arise, perplexities distress, and they are hard put to it to discharge the responsibility that devolves upon them in the way they feel is proper in His sight. And the Lord afflicts in our connections. Friends may grow cold, shy; misunderstandings arise where there has been communion and friendship. That is affliction.

The Lord afflicts His people in their minds, and that is a sad affliction when He permits the powers of unbelief and of fear and of doubt to take such a possession of their minds that they sink in dejection and can call nothing theirs. They know the things of God are right and they recall the times when they thought they had a very real interest in them; but now it is different; their minds are full of anxious fears. But does not the Lord afflict His people even more painfully when He withholds the comforts and consolations of His truth from their souls? when those sacred mysteries of godliness that have fed their souls, nourished their faith, inflamed their hearts, are hidden from them and the enemy may suggest, Is there truth in them? Is it possible that we have been mistaken? And a suggested doubt can cause distress. When He withholds from us the Spirit of grace and of prayer, that is a chastisement. We may pray formally, verbally, or groan and cry and shout, but He shutteth out our prayer; and to the child of God that *is* trouble. The comforts of God's salvation seem no longer to be ours. No nearness to Him at a throne of grace. The ministry affords no breasts of consolation. We are in a sad, dark, and pained state and condition. Paul has told us, as we have read, (Hebrews xxii.) that afflictions are grievous. Well, that is indeed a mercy

to have the testimony of God as to this. The very fact that they are grievous, (we know they are, and God says they are) this shows that there is some correspondence between our own experience and God's testimony. But in the grievousness of affliction or discipline we come into the case of Ephraim: "I have surely heard Ephraim bemoaning himself thus: Thou hast chastised me, and I was chastised, as a bullock unaccustomed to the yoke." We do not know of bullocks having yokes placed upon them now; we read of it, of course; we hear of horses being broken in with a collar, but we know from the past how they fret and fume and resist, yet it accomplished nothing but their own pain. So in affliction, until the Lord smiles we kick and we fret and we fume; but we don't soften the blow, we don't alter the affliction, but rather make it worse. What a mercy it is, when in affliction we are brought to cry, "Turn thou me, and I shall be turned." For the afflicted soul knows that there is no turning that he is capable of, but he does know that the Lord can turn, and turn a rebellious heart such as his, and the Lord will answer prayer. Nor ought we to think that chastisements are punishments. It is true that they are to the unbeliever, but not to the child of God. To say that affliction is a punishment is a reflection upon Christ's work of substitution. he suffered punishment in the room and stead of His people, and

"Payment God cannot twice demand,
First at my bleeding Surety's hand,
And then again at mine."

No; afflictions, chastisements, discipline, are not punishments. They are the corrections of the God of love, not sent to cause us unnecessary distress, but to promote our health spiritually, and to bring us to self-examination, to the trying of our ways, and to bring us to beg of the Lord to give us life to do so; to lead us to confess our faults and our mistakes and our presumption and our unbelief, to implore His mercy, and to wait upon Him until mercy comes. And mercy does come to afflicted people. They *shall* know the smilings of His face. He *will* lift upon them the light of His countenance, and take the bitterness out of the trial, the fire out of the furnace. The Lord knows how to do it.

Then we notice in the next place how David confesses to the benefits of sanctified affliction: "But now have I kept Thy word." In what may be called the corresponding passage in the 71st verse he says, "It is good for me that I have been afflicted: that I might learn Thy statutes." Learning comes before keeping. To keep a thing we must learn it. And what is it that we learn by experience? the experience of His sanctifying grace! To judge nothing before the time. That's what we are prone to. We are prone to come to conclusions about trials before the design that God has in them is made manifest. You remember the word of the Saviour when He washed the feet of the disciples, "What I do thou knowest not now, but thou shalt know hereafter." That is often taken to mean that eternity will make everything plain. That is true, but it is also true to say that even in this life what the Lord does in affliction or trial or adversity, though we cannot see the reason for it now, it is afterwards discovered to us; and when we learn the wisdom of judging nothing before the time we are then enabled to keep His truth in faith and love. "Now have I kept His word."

David said in this psalm, "Thy word have I hid in my heart, that I might not sin against Thee." It is our mercy to keep His word when the Lord has returned and smiled away our fears, to keep the word of reconciliation and of pardon in our hearts. Though the enemy may accuse, though fears may again arise, yet to keep, to hold fast, the word of His grace by which He delivered and comforted and blessed our souls, this is obedience to the word of His precept.

But let us turn David's confession into a question. He says, "Now have I kept Thy word." Can you that have been in affliction, or you that are not in affliction, say, "I have kept Thy word." ? "Forsake not the assembling of yourselves together, as the manner of some is." "Come ye out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing."

How stands the case with us, then? The word of God which He puts in our hearts and with which He troubles our minds, or with which He exercises our minds; have we kept it obediently? Not to earn His favour, but because He has given us His favour. May He add His blessing, for His Name's sake. AMEN.