

Keeping the Heart in Adversity

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[0 : 00] Well, for this two weeks, last week and this week, we're studying two seasons in the life of a believer that require more than an ordinary keeping of the heart. And we're using John Flavel's book, *Keeping the Heart*, as our instruction.

Last week, we looked at the season of prosperity and we saw something of its peculiar dangers and some of the helps how to keep our hearts in prosperity. This week, today, we're looking at the season of adversity and we can move from one season to the next in one moment, can't we? Even as Diane and the family did Monday morning. It's not hard to know which season the psalmist was in when he wrote our memory verse.

It was clearly the season of adversity. And we know what the adversity was, at least he tells us he's being persecuted. And we've seen that that is the lot of the righteous in this world.

But we also see that sometimes adversity is not a short valley that we pass through quickly and then we're back on our feet and on our ways. But this verse reminds us that sometimes the seasons of adversity are so long that it causes the saint to grow weary and to just cry out in desperation.

[1 : 23] How long, Lord? How long must I wait? And that's where he's at here. When we feel this, it's good for us to do as the psalmist did and to pour our hearts out to the Lord.

That's where he's at. He's bringing his impatient heart to the Lord. And by doing so, he's remembering that even the persecutors can do nothing but what his Lord in heaven allows.

So it reminds him of that important truth of the sovereignty of God over all the providences of his life. And that he will indeed punish those that persecute us.

It's the teaching of Old and New Testament alike. It's not an if. It's just a when. When? That's his question, isn't it? When will you punish my persecutors? And he comes to the Lord in such a way that reminds both himself and God that he is his servant.

How long must your servant wait? Lord, I am your servant. You delight in the well-being of your servant. And he remembers his identity and fashions his petition accordingly.

[2 : 33] So we come then to Flavel's season of adversity. He described the season of prosperity as a parent dandling the child on the knee.

The providence of God smiling upon us. And everything's going well. Now, the season of adversity, he says, when providence frowns upon you and blasts your outward comforts.

So, you did so well last week in identifying some of the dangers of the season of prosperity and why we need to guard our hearts.

Now, let's shift into the season of adversity. What are some of the dangers, the peculiar dangers of this season that we need to guard the heart from?

Somebody start us off. Bitterness. Bitterness. Thinking along with it that God is not out to do the good.

[3 : 36] He's a life and a need. Right. Jonah was basically a good man. He was a prophet of God, but he grew bitter, didn't he?

He was angry with God for the way he was treating him in his providence and didn't see the goodness of God. A couple things there then. So we doubt the goodness of God.

We grow bitter against God for the circumstances that he's put us in. Good. Yes, Becky. I think of unbelief, not believing God's promises.

Good. Yes. Pardon? Complaining. Somebody else over here.

Sinful fear. Hmm. Worry, anxiety, sinful fear. Adversity.

[4 : 36] What comes to the top when the heat is turned up? The heat of adversity. What tends to... What's the scum that comes to the top? What's that?

Discontentment. Anger. Anger. Self-pity. Comparison with others. I'm sorry?

Comparison with others. Comparing ourselves with others. And what does that usually lead to? Envy. Envy. Remember anybody in Psalms that had that problem? What's his name? Jesus. Okay. We've heard a lot about Asaph in the last couple years. And that's there just to teach that very thing. We're very prone to start envying the wicked when they're prospering and we're not.

We're under adversity. What else? Is there another hand? Max? One question I was asked is why you?

[5 : 36] Why everybody else is healthy? Everybody else has a lot of money. Okay. There can be a lot of things behind that question.

It could be the self-pity. It could be the envy of others. Many things. Yes. Was it Paul? Or Steve? Paul. I tend to get pretty grouchy.

Hmm. Hmm. Hmm. Hmm. Hmm. Yes, Jim. Depression. Hmm.

Good. Depression. Roberta. Okay. Exactly. Yep. We can deny.

Live in denial of our adversity. Not accepting it for what it is. Anything else come to mind? Rejection from witnesses.

[6 : 34] Okay. We're not the best witnesses often when we're grouchy and complaining and angry and short. And with people. And all that you've been describing. And what kind of witnesses are we?

We're not ready to tell of the goodness of God when we're not convinced of it ourselves. So. Good. Good. I think if we counted, we'd probably have more dangers of adversity than we did prosperity. We said that adversity has killed her thousands, but prosperity has killed her tens of thousands. But that's not to say that adversity is an easy thing to guard our hearts through.

You've shown there's all sorts of pitfalls and troubles that could ensnare us in the midst of adversity. So it's full of its own dangers. And that calls us to especially guard our hearts during such seasons in our lives. And Flavel gives nine helps.

[7 : 39] I've combined two of them into one. And so we've got eight helps to keep your heart from complaining or from desponding. We can go to either end. Complaining on the one hand or just totally losing heart on the other.

Help number one. Consider that by these afflictions, God is pursuing some loving design upon his child. A loving design upon his child.

That afflictions are his instruments to bring to pass his loving plans for his child. Now, does he have such plans for us?

Ephesians 1 assures us of that, as does many, many other texts. In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will.

There is a plan that God has set in place from all of eternity that is from his will, from his decision, what he's decided to do.

[8 : 46] And those decrees have been purposed for you, child of God, from eternity. And for you who are in Christ, you can know that those plans were loving and good.

Ephesians 1 goes on to say in the next verse, in verse 14, he's making you for the praise of his glory. That's the highest good, to be made like him.

He's destined you for glory, his glory, and you sharing in his glory. That's what's behind his plan.

Romans 8, 28, he says he's working all things together for our good.

And the next verse tells us what the highest good is. It's to be conformed to the image of his son. So he's all about good for us. Hebrews 12, 10, he disciplines us for our profit, for our good, that we might share in his holiness.

So his designs in these afflictions are loving designs, loving plans. And now he's working that plan out in your life to match his blueprint, what he's had planned for you from before time began.

[9 : 55] And he's using affliction as his tool to accomplish it. Even things that in and of themselves are not only painful, but bad and evil, he is using to fulfill his good plans for you.

So that means our afflictions are really blessings in disguise, aren't they? It's our God moving toward us to do us good. For his everlasting covenant, according to Jeremiah 32, 40, is to never stop doing us good.

And not reluctantly, but that he does it and rejoices to do us good. He delights to do us good. So that's his plan.

It's a loving plan. And so the psalmist is able to say in Psalm 119, 71, it was good for me to be afflicted that I might learn your decrees. There are passages in the Bible you'll never understand very well without affliction.

Martin Luther called affliction one of the three indispensable things for a minister of the gospel. If he's to learn the word of God, he needs affliction. And there are passages that just open up in the midst of our affliction.

[11 : 10] I'm sure you found that. The word of God, the comforts that you didn't realize were in there until you were hard pressed. And suddenly you just find it oozing with encouragement to your heart.

That's what David found. He was good for me to be afflicted that I might learn your decrees. And he says in 67 of that psalm, before I was afflicted, I went astray. But now I obey your word.

Is that not the high blessing of God's design that we might bring our lives into line with his word? That's the good life. And he uses affliction to do that.

So, Flavel says, should this not make us admire God that he so concerns himself with our good that he will use anything to accomplish it? Wow. He's got you on his heart for good.

And that's why James tells us to consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds. It's because not the things in and of themselves are joyful or are good.

[12 : 13] But it's because of what they are producing under the hand of God. He's producing those good designs, namely perseverance, strengthening of our faith. We've got to persevere to the end.

We're going to need perseverance. And oh, what a blessing if God is building that through affliction. So, God is about some grand plan of love for my soul.

And will I complain or be angry or despair? He says, oh, it is our ignorance of God's design that makes us quarrel with him. I love the hymns of William Cowper.

They sometimes call him Cooper. He says in that hymn, God moves in a mysterious way his wonders to perform. That he treasures up his bright designs and works his sovereign will.

Behind a frowning providence, he hides a smiling face. And the picture Cowper has of God is of a God who behind the dark clouds that he cannot see is smiling.

[13 : 21] A smiling face. And why smiling? Because he's treasuring up the bright designs, those plans. And he's saying, okay, just the right time. I'm going to do him good.

I'm going to bring her this blessing. And he's smiling. He rejoices to do us good. Do we see God as smiling to do us good? That's the privilege of the child of God.

Cowper himself learned these lessons in deep, deep affliction. Well, if we knew the good things he was working through our trials, we rejoice in them.

Some of our highest praise in heaven will be for the very things that caused us the most pain on earth. As we see the tapestry from the top side. And we see what he was doing.

What he was weaving. Even with the dark threads. What beauty he was building in to our lives.

Making something beautiful of our lives for his glory. So Jesus has as much reason to say to us in our adversity as he said to Peter when he was about to wash his feet.

[14 : 28] You do not realize now what I am doing, but later you will understand. So let us remember that. We may not understand, but he is doing us good.

He's got bright designs for us. Help number two. Though God has reserved the right to afflict his people, he has tied up his own hands by promising never to take away his loving kindness from them.

He's reserved the right to afflict his people. He's a father. And he doesn't give up the right to discipline his people and to afflict them. So he has that right. But then he follows that up by saying, but he has tied his own hands by promising never to take away his loving kindness from them.

From everlasting to everlasting. The Lord's love is with those who fear him. And it's his unflinching love, his unchanging love, his eternal self-kindled love.

That he promises he will never take away from us. So in the furnace, God may prove thee, thence to bring thee forth more bright, but can never cease to love thee.

[15 : 41] Thou art precious in his sight. So he reserves the right to put you in the furnace, but he can never stop loving you. So Flavel says, the Christian has two kinds of good.

There are the goods of the throne and the goods of the footstool. There are the immovables and the movables. And if God has secured the former, then let not your heart be moved at the loss of the latter.

If he's quit loving me, I would have reason to complain. I would have reason to be cast down. I would have reason to be worrying and fearful of the future.

All those things that we mentioned. If he quit loving me, but he hasn't. He won't. He can't. He can't. It's an interesting word to use of God, isn't it? He can't. He cannot stop loving you. There are some things God cannot do.

[16:43] What else can God not do? He can't lie. Isn't that what Hebrews 6 tells us? It's impossible for God to lie. He gives his word of promise and he even swears an oath so that by two impossible things, he can't go back on us.

So he's tied his hands. When God makes a promise, he ties his own hands up. He's not now free to stop doing what he said he would do.

What condescension. What a stoop of God to give us one promise in which he, from that point on, has bound himself. And he can no more not do what he said than to un-God himself.

A beautiful expression that Flavel uses. May we remember that. Every time we see a promise, what is that promise? God has just tied his own hands. He cannot but keep what he has now said he would do.

May that make his love more and more our soul's chief treasure as we sing. The thing that sweetens every trial and that soothes every pain. Nothing in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

[17:55] That's the climax of Romans 8. What a mountain is Romans 8 for the afflicted? Those in adversity. And where does Paul, where is he going in it all?

He's going to this bottomless ocean of God's love for us. And that's the pinnacle. That's the climax that we who are in this season of affliction need to lay hold of.

In affliction, he's loving me. Well, help number three. Would you keep your heart from sinking under affliction? Call to mind that your own father has the control over it.

Again, this is, I just met a man that I hadn't seen for 20, 25 years. And he just shared with me last week something of the affliction that he's been under for the last eight years of his life.

It's enough to sink anyone. And he's persevering. He says, my salvation has been the sovereignty of God. God, that all this that's happened to me is ugly and evil and wicked and perverted and twisted as it is, has been under his sovereign control, his providence, his governance.

[19:13] And to do me good. And it's that sovereignty of God that has been an anchor, has been a rock under the feet of God's afflicted children. He says, not a creature moves hand or tongue against you, but by his permission.

Suppose the cup is a bitter cup, yet it is the cup which your father has given you to drink. And can you suspect poison to be in that cup which he delivers to you?

He's borrowing from Jesus, isn't he? He's building on Jesus' question and his teaching. That if even we fathers who are evil know how to give good gifts to our children, how much more does he give good gifts?

He cannot. If we can't find it in our hearts to give our children that which would truly harm them, but rather gifts that would do them good. How much more, your father in heaven, to give good gifts?

Even the Holy Spirit to you. He loves you too much to harm you. That's the lesson Jesus is teaching. Nothing grieves him more than your groundless and unworthy suspicions of his designs.

[20:28] So, parents, doesn't it grieve you when your children think that you're against them? You're out to harm them? You're withholding some good from them?

Maybe you've got to hold the line on some house rule? Some discipline? And why are you doing that? Because you love them. And you don't want to see them going down the road to destruction. And God has told you to discipline your children. And so, out of that love and love for them. But doesn't it just cut your heart out when they think you hate them?

They think that you're doing this because you don't love them? And Flavel's saying, remember you've got a father in heaven. Remember what he feels like. Think what he has to deal with when you think that the cup that he's given you is something harmful.

When you need an egg, he gives you a scorpion or something to harm you. We have a father in heaven who appoints every cup he puts into our hands.

[21:32] Don't let me grieve him by misjudging his heart toward me simply because of what's in the cup. Well, that's the third help. Help number four.

God thinks no less of you in a low condition as in a high one. Last week we saw one of the helps for those who are prospering is to remember that though the world really is impressed with those who are in prosperity, remember that God doesn't think any more highly of you because of your prosperity.

And now we're looking at the person in a low condition. Remember that the Lord doesn't think any less of you. The world might despise the lowly, but not the Lord. He manifests more of his love, grace and tenderness in the time of your affliction than in the time of your prosperity.

Isn't that true, parents, that when your child is sick, that you put more attention and love and concern into them, not less. And Flavel says, if an older child has lost all at sea and should come home to you in rags, would his low condition put you off or not rather make you more full of pity to help him?

Then let us not think such low thoughts of God to think him any less kind than we are. So he says to his people, why do you complain, O Israel? And say, my cause is disregarded by my God.

[23 : 02] Or why do you say as Jesus disciples in the storm on the Sea of Galilee, don't you care that we're perishing? Or with Martha, don't you care that my sister's not helping me?

As if the Lord has forsaken us and forgotten us, doesn't care about us in our affliction. His answer to Israel is, can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has born?

Though she may forget, I will not forget you. See, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands. Your walls are ever before me. My eye is always on you.

I can't forget you. I can't leave you out of my sight. I can't get my eyes off of you. You're precious to me. Beautiful account of this in the Gospels where Jesus has just fed the 5,000 and sends the disciples on into the boat to cross the Sea of Galilee.

And he dismisses the crowd. And then he goes up on the mountainside to pray. And he's praying to his father. Night comes on and they're halfway across the Sea of Galilee.

[24 : 18] And he saw them straining at the oars, buffeted by the waves because the wind was against them.

So he sees them in their affliction. And the question comes, does Jesus care when you're buffeted by the waves and knocked around by the storms of life?

Does he care that you're straining under the burden just to make it through another day? Oh, yes, he cares. I know he cares. His heart is touched with my grief.

He sees us straining at the oars. And what did Jesus do? He went out to them, didn't he? They were petrified to see this man walking on the water. And he calms them.

Fear not. It is I. It is I. What a precious thing to have Jesus draw near in the storms, assuring us. We're not in this storm alone. He's with us. And he's for us.

[25 : 21] And there's no reason to fear. He pities us, especially when we're in a low condition and comes to help us. So don't think he despises us when we're in a low condition or thinks less because of it.

Help number five. What if by this adversity God is sparing your soul from the ruinous power of prosperity? What if by this adversity that has us complaining, despairing, worrying?

What if by this adversity God is actually sparing your soul from the ruining power of prosperity?

Now, that's not a far out. What if is it? As we saw last week, you shared a whole bunch of problems that we can get ensnared in in the midst of good times.

And what if God's sending a bad time in order to save you from all those things that we looked at last week? We saw the rich young ruler and he's walking away sorrowful from Christ and eternal life.

Why? Because he had great riches. Well, what if God would take away those riches that he might see that they're not something he can put his faith in, his trust in?

[26 : 33] That he might abandon that trust and put his trust in the only one that is trustworthy. What if God's design in your adversity is to keep you from ruining your own soul and in the prosperity that ruins the majority of people who go through prosperity?

For it's easier to get a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven and so on. And then Flavel uses some beautiful metaphors.

He says, we've read of sailors. Remember, this is back in the 350 years ago. You don't cross the ocean in jet airplanes. Maybe you've seen some of those ships they used to cross the ocean in.

Amazing. And he says, we've read of sailors in a storm throwing overboard rich bales of silk and food and other precious things in order to save the one thing more precious, their own lives. And everyone that sees it says they were wise in doing so. Nobody says, what fools for throwing over such riches? And he speaks again of soldiers and says it's usual for soldiers in a besieged city to shoot flaming arrows, to burn down even the nicest of houses and buildings that are outside of the wall, so that they won't give the enemy some shelter during the siege while the enemy is encamped around them, and those buildings would become places for them to take refuge. [28 : 12] And so they'll burn those beautiful buildings down. And he says, everyone will say that they acted wisely in doing so. And then he says, there have been many with gangrened legs or arms who willingly stretched them out to be cut off.

Now, this is 350 years ago. And not only thank, but even pay the surgeon for doing so. And must God alone be criticized and complained about for throwing overboard what would sink you in the storm of life, for burning down what would give the enemy of your soul an advantage in the siege of temptation, or for cutting off what would endanger your everlasting life. Oh, inconsiderate, ungrateful man, are not the things for which you grieve the very things that have ruined souls by the tens of thousands. You do not realize now what I am doing. But later on, you may. Wednesday night, we heard testimonies from our young people from the ski retreat.

Jessica Bala was with us from, and Toby were with us from Phoenix. And I gave her a swift charge to email her testimony so we could read it.

[29 : 37] And bless her heart, she was faithful and sent me that email. And I printed it off, and I left it at home on Wednesday night. So I had an email to send Thursday morning and confess my broken word to her.

And she forgave me. And I said, well, we'll send it to the high school class this morning. And I'd like to just share one of the things that Jessica said in her email that she profited from, from that ski retreat.

It was great to hear all the kids. She said, one of Mark Webb's last points of the last message, where I was pinching myself to not fall asleep, was to say how our lives are spent trying to find satisfaction.

Some in relationships, some in sports, some in money, and so on. These are finite things. Yet the satisfaction we long for can only be filled with something infinite. Jesus Christ.

He alone can complete the void that we search and try to fill, but endlessly fail. Endlessly fail. Most of the people that live around us are trying to fill the void of not having Christ.

[30 : 52] Not being one with the God that made them. That's what they were made for, to know him and enjoy him. They don't have that, so they're filling, they're filling, they're filling. And endlessly failing. And the sad thing is, is that most people only wake up too late, a half second after that massive heart attack, to find they live for the wrong world.

They live for all the wrong things. Maybe they've been to the top of ten mountains, only to find it doesn't satisfy. But they're always climbing a new one, until death comes and takes them away. So what if God uses adversity to frustrate your desire for satisfaction early, and catches you halfway up some mountain, and says, John, this will not satisfy you.

You were made for more than this. Is he to be complained about? Is he not to be loved and adored, that in your adversity, it just could be that he is sparing your soul from the ruinous power of prosperity?

That's number five. Number six. For your time of affliction, consider that by your affliction, God may be accomplishing the very thing for which you've long prayed and waited for.

[32 : 07] So, not only to save you from some ruinous sin, but perhaps to give you the very thing you're asking for. Have you not laid up many prayers before the Lord that he would keep you from sin?

And have you ever prayed that God would keep you from sin? Lead us not into temptation, he teaches us to pray. To keep us from pride.

To keep us from evil desire. And so, lo and behold, he takes away some food that feeds our pride. He's answering our prayer.

You've asked him to show you the preciousness of Christ. The emptiness of this world. And so he pulls from under your head that soft pillow of some creature comfort.

He's answering your prayer. This world can't satisfy. Jesus can't. He's answering your prayer. You pray to be taught greater dependence on the Lord. Lord, I need to depend on you.

[33 : 11] And then he throws you into an affliction where you have nowhere to look but to him. And you have more heart in that four-letter word help than a half hour of prayer without him.

Affliction. He's answering your prayer. Making you more dependent upon him. You pray that you grow in Christ-like graces. And the affliction shows you your need of such.

It shows you your weakness. It shows you you get angry and bitter and short. And all these things that he's answering your prayer. Or maybe you've prayed to save a lost family member.

And he could even be using this affliction to move them closer to conversion. So God may be answering the very things that we've asked for, long prayed for, waited for. But not in the way that we expected him to answer.

But rather by the very hardships that we might be complaining or losing heart under. Flavel finishes this point by saying, oh, if God should be so gracious as to give you what you asked for, will you yet demand that he only do it in the way which you prescribe?

[34 : 21] Just bless him that he's heard your cry and he's answering you. He knows best how to answer our prayers. And then number seven, consider that by fretting and discontent, you do yourselves more injury than all the afflictions could ever do.

So afflictions hurt. But you can hurt yourself more than the affliction hurts by your response to them. And I love his metaphor. Affliction is a pill.

Which, with quiet submission, may be easily swallowed. But discontent chews the pill. And so embitters the soul.

And it's in that way that we can become our own worst enemies. Increasing our suffering by chewing the pill. By discontent. By chafing under the yoke. The poor ox, if he'd just plow the row and go with it, he'd be all right.

But no, he's chafing under that yoke. He doesn't like where he's being led by his master. And so he does more harm to himself by chafing than the plowing would do to him.

[35 : 30] And isn't that us? Often chafing against what God's doing. And we have more suffering than what the trial itself would be. There is needless pain in life.

The pain that God sends is needful. It's necessary. 1 Peter 1.6 talks about there's a needs be to our present trials. There's a necessity to it.

It's needful pain. And but need needful pain is enough pain. We don't want to add to it needless pain. And that's what we do when we chafe against.

The affliction. Don't we sing? Oh, what peace we often forfeit. Oh, what needless pain we bear. All because we do not carry everything to God in prayer.

And fret and complain and chafe instead of praying and casting our burden upon the Lord. And then lastly, compare the condition you're now in with what you deserve to be in.

[36 : 39] Again, that was last week's as well. We come back to it. If you'd not let your affliction cause you to be angry at God or to despair under it, compare the condition you're now in with that which you deserve to be in.

Flagle says, oh, my soul. Is this hell? Is my condition as bad as that of the damned? Oh, what would thousands now in hell get to change conditions with me?

Remember. That's Lamentations 3.39. Why should any man living complain when punished for his sins? The living can yet examine their ways and turn to the Lord and find forgiveness and find help as the very next verse urges.

So remember what we deserve and we'll see that our troubles, whatever they are, are light and momentary in the light of the eternity that we deserve in hell and the eternity to which he's bringing us in heaven.

Any comments before we close? There's eight. Eight helps. So whether in prosperity or adversity, God's word doesn't leave us without stepping stones to make our way through on the journey to heaven.

[38 : 04] Let's pray then and just commit ourselves to the Lord. We're thankful, Lord, that you're the God that orders all of our steps and fills each one of our cups.

Give us faith to believe these things that we have seen are true of you in your word. And thank you for your steadfast love that you cannot take from us.

Give us to drink of it more deeply this day together as your people and to encourage one another in it. We ask for your praise and for our good. In Jesus' name. Amen. We're dismissed.