

Afflictions

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[0 : 0 0] Why are you downcast, O my soul? Why so disturbed within me?! These Sunday afternoons we've been looking at Psalm 42 and Psalm 43, that refrain that we see three times in that psalm.

And the psalmist is downcast, he's disturbed, he's not at rest, his heart is like the ocean. He says, the waves and the breakers have crashed over my soul.

And we've all been there. We're talking to our brother John this afternoon. They live a very different kind of life in Arizona.

But people get discouraged and downcast no matter where you live, no matter how hot it gets or how cold it gets. We've all been there. And maybe it happens all of a sudden, a sudden jolt, sudden tragedy, and we're downcast.

Or maybe it's a slow build. It's one thing after another, after another. Each in their turn wouldn't be so bad.

[1 : 1 8] But yet when you build them on top of each other, when you stack them on top of each other, it becomes very discouraging. Or maybe it's just the same thing again and again and again. And we're downcast.

We're discouraged. Now, we've seen several reasons for discouragement. Seen those. And today we want to talk about one more.

One more door into this gloomy room of downcast discouragement. And today we want to talk about afflictions. Afflictions.

And I use that word rather than trial or difficulty or obstacle. Not because those are bad words, but because affliction carries with it the idea of pain.

Pain. So Paul had a thorn in his flesh. It was a trial. It was a difficulty. But he doesn't talk about obstacles. He doesn't talk about trials.

[2 : 1 8] He talks about a thorn. And a thorn means a sharp pain. Pain. We know what a thorn feels like.

It's a sharp pain. And I don't only use that word because it carries the idea of pain. I use affliction because very often the idea carries, or that word carries the idea of an afflictor.

Someone is afflicting us. It's not just something we ran into. It is now something that is done to us. In Paul's case, it was a messenger of Satan.

Yes, it was under the Lord's control, but it was a messenger from Satan. But oftentimes, and I think ultimately we have to say, it's God himself.

He allows it. He actively brings it into our life, or he merely allows it to happen. But it's God himself. Amos, the prophet said, when disaster comes to a city, has not the Lord caused it?

[3 : 3 0] Yes, there could be enemies. There could be other nations that we could say. Yes, they did this. But Amos says, no, no, we have to draw up our attention and we have to realize that the Lord has done it.

Psalm 42. It's all your waves and all your breakers have swept over me. The Lord had done something to the psalmist.

That's the book of Lamentations. Jerusalem is the city afflicted. He says, look, O Lord, on my affliction. But it was the Lord who did it.

The Lord who had done it. How the Lord has covered the daughter of Zion with a cloud of his anger. In his wrath, he has torn down the strongholds of the daughter of Judah.

The city was in agony. It was in pain. And it was the Lord who had done it. We remember Hebrews. The Lord disciplines his sons.

[4 : 31] He afflicts, punishes his sons. And maybe you say, see, the Lord has afflicted me. He's brought this pain into my life and it hurts.

And the Lord has done it. Shouldn't I be discouraged? That's why I'm discouraged. That's why I'm downcast. And shouldn't I be? My life hurts.

I'm walking through life and I'm getting smacked on one side. And I'm getting smacked on the other. And my very heart is hurting. My heart is bleeding. And so shouldn't I be discouraged?

It's not just my soul. It's my body. It's in pain. And it seems like it will never get better. I'm afflicted. Shouldn't I be discouraged? The pain.

Well, shouldn't I be discouraged? The answer is no. No. No one likes pain. And yes.

[5 : 37] Yes, yes, yes. I know that that hurts. And I know that there are all sorts of things in this world to tempt us to be discouraged. That tempt us.

That invite us to be downcast. And I hate hurting. I hate affliction. I don't like being sick. And many of you know greater pain than I've ever experienced.

I know that. But even then, I would say, no. There's no reason to be discouraged. And why do I say that?

Why do I say there's no reason yet to be discouraged and despair? Well, I want to give you just four reasons. And the first is I want you to consider the source of your afflictions. The source of your afflictions.

It is one of the difficult things that the Lord that is often the one who is disciplining us. The Lord who is afflicting us. The Lord who is allowing this pain into our lives.

[6 : 38] And yet, we know that that comes from God's love. It's God's love that is the source. Your afflictions are painful, but why have they come to you?

Why have they come to you? We can name all sorts of sub-reasons. What good they do you? We can name all sorts of reasons why the Lord has brought them in.

But over it all, sort of on the title page, on the first line, is the Lord saying, I love you. I love you. Listen to Charles Spurgeon here.

It would be a very sharp and trying experience to me to think that I have an affliction which God never sent me. It would be bad.

It's bad to have to be afflicted. But he's saying what would be worse is to think that it doesn't come from him. That the bitter cup was never filled by his hand.

[7 : 39] That my trials were never measured out by him, nor sent to me by his arrangement of their weight and quantity. See, over all of our afflictions, over all of our pain, they're all measured.

They're all weighed by God's heart, by God's love. And so why shouldn't you be discouraged? Because where do your afflictions come from? They come from his love.

He has plans for you. He's preparing for you an eternal weight of glory. And on the other hand, he is preparing you for an eternal weight of glory.

And he's preparing that eternal weight of glory for you. He has plans for you. And so you must be ready for them. Now, no bride likes to be pinched and prodded and poked and squeezed to get into her wedding dress.

I don't think they do. But she's happy when she's in it. No bride likes to work out really hard and watch your diet really close so that you look really good on your wedding day.

[8 : 46] No bride enjoys that kind of pain. And yet, when she is walking down the aisle, when she is ready for her groom, she's happy. The pain did what it was supposed to do.

And so our trials get us ready to be the bride of Christ. We have to think that our God in love is preparing us to be the bride of Christ forever and ever.

And he's preparing us for his son. And so he isn't. He isn't out to hurt you. He isn't out to hurt you. It's painful. It's painful. But he promises it won't do you any harm. It hurts. But it will not do you any harm.

It's sort of like getting a vaccine. I remember. I remember how I hated getting vaccines.

[9 : 52] I hated it. I didn't like getting the shot. But my parents took me anyway. Why? Why? Well, because those shots could save my life.

Measles, mumps, polio, rubella, whatever else. Those things could kill me. The shot only hurt. The shot only hurt a little bit.

God loves you. And so you know very well Hebrews 12.5. The Lord disciplines the sons he loves. And he punishes everyone he accepts as a son. Now, my mom was not such a glutton for

punishment that she was taking other children that didn't belong to her to the doctor to get the shot. She took me. And she spanked me. And the reason that she took me and spanked me and put up with my crying and my complaining was because she cared about me.

She loved me. I was hers. And so she punished me. And I didn't like that either. I didn't like shots. I didn't like spankings. But it was good. And I see that now. There was no harm.

[11:02] There was no harm in the shots. There was no harm in the spankings. There was pain. But no harm. So love brought the pain in order to save me from the harm.

Love brings the pain to spare us from the harm. That's our afflictions. And so if our father, if us, if our father's being evil and our mother's being evil, know how to do good to their children, know how to discipline and punish their children.

And Hebrews says our father's. Our father's disciplined us for a little while in the way that they thought best. It wasn't perfect, but they were trying. But our God doesn't merely try.

He is a God of infinite wisdom, infinite love. And his heart is poured out upon us and he will do us good so that we can share in his holiness. And so is there any reason to be discouraged?

Well, if we detached our afflictions from God's loving heart, yeah, there would be a reason to be discouraged. But the Bible everywhere tells us, no, the Lord is at it, in it, and he loves us. So there's no reason to be discouraged.

[12:08] So look at the source. It's the father's love. It's a parent's affection. We have to. There's such a art. There's such a wisdom that we need to gain of looking past the surface of things and reading God's heart.

Of looking past the surface of things and looking at our trials through the cross. A God who would not spare his own son, but gave him up for us all.

He's not going to harm us, no matter how painful the affliction is. We need to not look at the immediate and then judge and calculate God's heart based on that.

We sing that song, don't judge the Lord by feeble sense. And everything, everything he does to us is controlled by his love.

It's controlled by his love, measured by his love, and his love guides. And so God might be disciplining you, but you're his child. So trust him.

[13:16] It's so hard sometimes for children to trust their parents. But I think so often our parents prove to be trustworthy. Not always, but on the whole, I think they prove to be trustworthy.

And yet our God is of so much greater heart and love and wisdom than they are. So we need to trust him. Now, secondly, why shouldn't you be downcast or discouraged?

Well, second, I want you to consider the alternative. Consider the alternative. Because there is an alternative to having no, there is an alternative to the pain, to the punishment, to the affliction, to the discipline.

There is an alternative. Hebrews says we would be illegitimate children if he didn't punish us. The alternative is to be illegitimate.

Or turn in your Bibles to 1 Corinthians 11. 1 Corinthians 11.32. And I want you to see what Paul says here. Because he clearly lays out the alternatives.

[14:26] And I think we need to understand and see our afflictions from God's perspective. And Paul is showing us how that is and what that looks like. So 1 Corinthians 11.32.

And Paul says there, When we are judged by the Lord, we are being disciplined so that we will not be condemned with the world.

So what is the alternative to discipline? What is the alternative to affliction? Well, it's being judged, condemned, with the world.

I know this might not seem supremely comforting, but I think this gives us perspective. Because it's either pain now for a little time, or pain forever.

Yes, it hurts. But it saves us from a greater pain. I just read this week of a young man growing up in inner city Baltimore.

[15:43] He was six, and he ran away from his parents on the playground one time, as children do.

And his father pulled out his belt and spanked his kid really hard, spanked him really hard. And he said, It's either me or the police.

It's either me or the police. There was this fear in that father's mind of, I want to do everything I can to spare my son from something worse.

And I think there's something of God's own heart in that, that he will afflict us now to spare us later. So judgment begins with the family of God.

Judgment fell on our elder brother. It fell on the cross. That last day, the last day of gloom and darkness, of separation, of judgment, the day of wrath came to the cross.

[16:51] Judgment began with the family of God, but so judgment also now begins with us. The Lord judges and disciplines us. And he was making some of the Corinthians to get sick and some of them to even die.

And Paul says, Now let me explain what God is doing. He was killing them for their sin. Some of them had fallen asleep.

And what was going on? Well, God was judging them, afflicting them, but it was so they wouldn't be judged and condemned with the world. Listen to William Bridge, the Puritan.

The truth is, the day of affliction and tribulation is a godly man's day of judgment. It is his only judgment day.

He shall never be judged again so as to be condemned at the day of judgment. And when the godly man's affliction day comes, he may say, Now is my judgment day and I shall never be judged again.

[18:02] Now, I hope you understand what he's saying. He's not saying we're never going to appear, we're never going to give account. He's not saying that. He's saying judgment in the sense of condemnation, the sense of dealing with our sin.

And so, if today is your day of tribulation, now is your judgment so that you might be spared from the fire. And so, should you be discouraged?

Well, it is tough love. It's severe mercy. It's severe grace. But it will all seem so light and fleeting when that day comes.

And you will say, I got off easy. Jesus Christ took my sin on the cross. And even when I was being disciplined, it was so that he would not have to condemn me.

And so, whatever happened to me in that brief little life is nothing compared to what has now befallen all of these people. And so, don't be discouraged.

[19:10] God is afflicting you, yes. But it's so that he will not condemn you later. So, that's the source and the alternative. Now, third, consider the new calling.

The new calling. Why is it so difficult? Why are days of affliction so painful?

Well, one reason is they feel, we can feel so useless. We can feel like these things are hampering us. These things are stopping us.

And now I'm washed up. And I'm used up. And is God done with me? Because I can't do the things that I used to do. Because now I'm afflicted. Now I'm in pain. And the pain keeps me from doing what I want to do or doing what I'm accustomed to doing.

And so, shouldn't I be discouraged? And the answer is no. No. We think, because I am suffering, I can't do what I would like.

[20:12] But that doesn't mean that we can't do what God wants us to do in that moment. When God leads you into affliction, when He leads you into pain, He isn't putting you on the shelf.

He isn't, He isn't putting you on the shelf like some sort of empty, used up laundry soap or something like that. Like, no good here. He's putting you on, He's calling you, rather, He's calling you, He's leading you to another work.

There's other ways of obeying God's will than doing. Let me repeat that. There are other ways of God's will, of obeying God's will than doing.

We do God's will sometimes, and sometimes we bear God's will. We suffer God's will. We sing a song occasionally that says, there is something still to do or bear.

Sometimes the Lord has a clear agenda for us to do. But other times, He says, now I want you to suffer this. I want you to bear this.

[21:34] And so in your health, you leave your house, you go to work, and you serve the Lord that way. But now you're sick and you can't go. And does that mean that there's nothing to do?

There's no way to serve God. There's no way to please Him. Are you all washed up? And the answer is no. God is now giving you a different calling. He's telling you to do something else, a new calling.

He says, now be patient. Be quiet. Submit. And that is the harder. That is the harder work sometimes.

That is the harder work. Self can easily get into the doing. Self has a hard time getting into the suffering and in the being patient and being quiet.

But it's still God's calling. It's still a way to serve Him. And so God doesn't blame you because you can't do the things that you used to do. He doesn't expect you to do them.

[22 : 35] He doesn't want you to do them right now. Now He has something else for you to do. So there's no reason to be discouraged. If a master tells a servant to stop doing the dishes and go outside and weed the garden.

Or if a mom or dad tells a child stop doing the dishes and take out the garbage. Are mom and dad upset because you walked away from the sink and went outside?

No. No. God has something else for you to do and so there's no reason to be discouraged. He'll glorify Himself through your suffering.

Not just your doing but your suffering. And so we also need to learn to not be so inflexible. The Lord doesn't lead us in straight lines.

And so we follow Him. We follow Him when His will takes us around the corner and away from what we used to do and away into something else. And if He just sits us in a chair and says now suffer here for a while that is still doing His will and we can still please Him in that way.

[23 : 47] And so don't be discouraged. So we've seen the source. We've seen the alternative. We've seen the new calling now forth. You don't need to be discouraged because of the companion.

Of the companion. We sang it this morning. When you go through the waters God says I will be with you. I will be with you.

So who is with us in our affliction? Who is with us in our affliction? And this makes all the difference. Our afflictions aren't only sent down from heaven. It's not like our afflictions are put into an envelope and sent from Wyoming to us.

No. God puts our afflictions in the envelope and He delivers them and then He is there while we open it up and as we endure it. He never sends us afflictions without coming near to us Himself. So He's like the father or He's like the mother that puts the child on his or her lap while the child is getting the shot. And so when Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were in the furnace Nebuchadnezzar had to rub his eyes and says, you know, I'm not good at counting, but wasn't there three of them?

[25 : 03] But now there's a fourth. And if we had those kind of eyes, we would see in all of our affliction there is someone beside us. Nothing draws God close to us like affliction.

He said to Saul of Tarsus, why are you persecuting me? Every painful thing that Saul was doing to the church, that painful thing was felt by God's people, but yet Jesus is saying, I felt it all.

In all their afflictions, He was afflicted. And Peter says, are you insulted and persecuted? Then the Spirit of glory in God rests on you.

Pain draws God to us. Our affliction draws the Father. Our affliction draws the Son.

Our affliction draws the Holy Spirit to our side. And we're always afraid that we're going to come to a place, we're going to come to a time, we're going to come to a space where we are facing our afflictions and we're going to lean upon Him or we're going to reach out for Him and He's going to be gone.

[26 : 16] And yet He says, even if you feel like I'm gone, I am there. I'll never leave you. I will never forsake you. Now you know as a parent that your child's pain pulls you towards them.

It's this magnet, isn't it? You would do anything to spare them and you yourself feel in their pain.

And if that's true for teaspoon-sized hearts like ours, how much more true is that of God who says, I am love.

So should you be discouraged? No, God is with you. God is close to you. God loves you. You have a friend that sticks closer than a brother.

And David said it here in Psalm 42. He says, In the night, in the night, all alone, with the darkness pressing in upon my eyes, he says, By day the Lord directs His love and at night His song is with me.

And so the Lord is near. He's near at the night. He's near in the loneliness. And His love is doing you good. And in all of this, He is preparing for you an eternal weight of glory.

[27 : 52] But He's also preparing you for that eternal weight of glory. He's preparing you. He's sanctifying you. He's up to good.

He's praying for you. He's praying for you. We began this day with, I know the plans I have for you. And that's where we'll end. Yes, His plans sometimes have pain written in them, but they all end up with this, this eternal weight of glory that far outweighs all of our little afflictions for this day. And so don't be discouraged. Hold on. Look at Jesus. Trust in Him. Don't be discouraged. Let's pray. Our God, these things are easier to say than to do. These things are easier to say, yes, I believe when you're sitting in a comfortable church pew.

They're much more difficult when you're at home and alone. They're much more difficult when you are in pain. Holy Spirit, thank you that you work patience and self-control and love and joy into believers.

[29 : 15] And so for my suffering brothers and sisters, I pray, Holy Spirit, come and pour out your love and your grace and your fruitfulness into their lives that they might bear fruit to the honor of God.

Thank you that we not only can glorify you in doing, but we can also glorify you in bearing and suffering. Well, please give us that bigger perspective.

It's so easy for us to attach ourselves to joy and pleasure and not know what to do with pain. Please give us that wisdom. And Lord Jesus, I pray that you would draw close to all of us that as we do walk through this veil of tears, this veil of crying and death and pain, please Lord Jesus, keep lifting up our chins and showing us that there is coming a day when there will be no more death or crying or mourning or pain or suffering or any of those things for the old order has passed away.

Thank you that you are leading us to an eternal day where there is no more night. Please help us to hold on until that day. Glorify yourself in us.

I ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.