

WHAT TO PRAY WHEN YOU'RE AFFLICTED
PSALM 119:73-80

Scripture is filled with exhortations and examples of suffering:

- ✓ For just as the sufferings of Christ are ours in abundance, so also our comfort is abundant through Christ. (2 Cor. 1:5)
- ✓ For to you it has been granted for Christ's sake, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake... (Phil. 1:29)
- ✓ More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish so that I may gain Christ... (Phil. 3:8)
- ✓ For indeed when we were with you, we *kept* telling you in advance that we were going to suffer affliction; and so it came to pass, as you know. (1 Th. 3:4)
- ✓ Therefore do not be ashamed of the testimony of our Lord or of me His prisoner, but join with *me* in suffering for the gospel according to the power of God... (2 Tim. 1:8)
- ✓ For this reason I also suffer these things, but I am not ashamed; for I know whom I have believed and I am convinced that He is able to guard what I have entrusted to Him until that day. (2 Tim. 1:12)
- ✓ Suffer hardship with *me*, as a good soldier of Christ Jesus. (2 Tim. 2:3)
- ✓ ...for which I suffer hardship even to imprisonment as a criminal; but the word of God is not imprisoned. (2 Tim. 2:9)
- ✓ Indeed, all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted. (2 Tim. 3:12)
- ✓ But even if you should suffer for the sake of righteousness, you are blessed. AND DO NOT FEAR THEIR INTIMIDATION, AND DO NOT BE TROUBLED... (1 Pet. 3:14)
- ✓ Therefore, those also who suffer according to the will of God shall entrust their souls to a faithful Creator in doing what is right. (1 Pet. 4:19)
- ✓ But resist him, firm in *your* faith, knowing that the same experiences of suffering are being accomplished by your brethren who are in the world. After you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who called you to His eternal glory in Christ, will Himself perfect, confirm, strengthen *and* establish you. (1 Pet. 5:9-10)

We know about suffering from the Bible. But we also know about suffering in real life. Everyone knows someone who is suffering. And everyone suffers. Sometimes the suffering is minor: a leaking faucet that soaks your carpet, not quite enough money for the last bill of the month, a nagging back ache, traffic congestion on your drive home. And sometimes the suffering is major: a house that burns down, bankruptcy, a baby with a terminal illness, or a broken marriage.

Wherever you are on that continuum, the fact is that we all know suffering. And one of the questions we must answer is, "what should we do when we suffer?" We want to honor the Lord; so what kind of response in suffering honors the Lord? The psalmist answers that question in Psalm 119:73-80.

You know that Psalm 119 is about the Word of God. Because of the importance of the Scriptures, we want to constantly remind ourselves of the power and significance of that Word. So twice each year — on the first Sunday and the middle Sunday of the year, we are looking at one of the stanzas in this psalm (we're on schedule to finish in June, 2023). We might consider this a mid-year examination of our use of the Word of God and a mid-year correction to our use of the Word of God.

The theme of this stanza (*yod*) continues the theme of affliction begun in the previous stanza. But notice how in this stanza that the writer is not just making statements about the Word, but is making requests of God about his suffering — and he is making those requests on the basis of Scripture:

- ✓ Give me understanding (v. 73)
- ✓ May those who fear You see me and be glad (v. 74)
- ✓ May Your lovingkindness comfort me (v. 76)
- ✓ May Your compassion come to me (v. 77)
- ✓ May those who fear You turn to me (v. 79)
- ✓ May my heart be blameless (v. 80)

This is a song of prayers about affliction. So we can summarize the theme of this stanza this way:

WHEN SUFFERING, PRAY BIBLICALLY.

The structure of this stanza is interesting: with parallel literary and conceptual structures, the heart of the stanza is in vv. 76-77 and then works outward in concentric circles of prayers to verses 73 and 80.

What should we pray when we are suffering unjustly? Here are four prayers to pray when we suffer and here are four prayers that we can pray when our brothers and sisters in Christ are suffering. These are prayers to pray with them and for them.

1. Pray for Spiritual **MATURITY** in Your Suffering (vv. 73, 80)
2. Pray for a Godly **INFLUENCE** on Others in Your Suffering (vv. 74, 79)
3. Pray for a Divine **PERSPECTIVE** on Your Suffering (vv. 75, 78)
4. Pray for God's **COMFORT** in Your Suffering (vv. 76-77)

Here are four prayers to pray for yourself or others when suffering (vv. 75-78 all affirm some form of trial) —

1. Pray for Spiritual MATURITY in Your Suffering (vv. 73, 80)

- When we suffer, our first prayer is almost always for removal of the suffering. We believe something has gone wrong in the universe and that the Lord should revert our world back to normal and remove the trial or affliction. But that's not what the psalmist prays.
 - ✓ As he begins this stanza, he first acknowledges God's sovereign control over his life — ***Your hands made me and fashioned me***. These are not the usual terms for God's act of creation; when the word ***fashioned*** is used of God's creative acts it refers to God making something firm — it is set in place and established. There is permanence to what is made. (In that sense it is used to refer to the establishment of Israel as God's covenant people.)
 - ✓ So as the psalmist uses this term it means something like, "by Your hands you constituted me and made me what I am..." It is an affirmation of God's sovereign authority over his physical life.
 - ✓ And because God is sovereign over his physical life, the psalmist makes his request: ***give me understanding...***
 - The word understanding refers to discernment — the psalmist can't distinguish whether his circumstances are good or evil and he wants to see with discernment and clarity so that he will be in a position to learn and obey God's commandments (even when suffering he wants to obey).
 - This request is an acknowledgment that he does not know or understand the ways of God in his affliction or God's Word and that he needs God to enlighten him. He says similar things in other places in this psalm:

- | | |
|-------|---|
| ○ 27 | Make me understand the way of Your precepts, So I will meditate on Your wonders. |
| ○ 34 | Give me understanding, that I may observe Your law And keep it with all my heart. |
| ○ 125 | I am Your servant; give me understanding, That I may know Your testimonies. |
| ○ 144 | Your testimonies are righteous forever; Give me understanding that I may live. |
| ○ 169 | Let my cry come before You, O LORD; Give me understanding according to Your word. |

- ✓ When he asks for understanding he is acknowledging that his will must be bent to conform to the will and purposes of God. He is acknowledging that there is something in his circumstances that surpasses his knowledge and he must be conformed to God's will and purpose. And when he says that, he is affirming God's goodness to him, even in the trials and troubles.
- ✓ So with this request the psalmist is asking, "you created my body, now also perfect my spirit and mind." This is the psalmist's way of acknowledging that he needs help from the Lord spiritually. More than needing relief from his circumstances, he needs growth in maturity.

- When the psalmist gets to the end of this stanza (v. 80), he will affirm this same truth, but with even greater intensity: ***May my heart be blameless in your statutes....***
 - ✓ The word ***blameless*** was used of animals that were brought for sacrifice to the Temple. There was no blemish in them; when used of people it referred to moral purity and uprightness. And notice that the psalmist doesn't just say that he wants to do the right thing, but that he wants to be right from the inside out — he is blameless before the Lord at the level of his heart, where God alone can see and evaluate him. He doesn't just want external compliance; he wants inward conformity.
 - ✓ And the reason that he wants to be blameless when he is examined by God's statutes is so that he ***will not be ashamed***. He makes similar requests in vv. 31, 116.
 - ✓ To be ashamed is to be exposed as one who disdained the grace and provision of God in His Word and leaned on one's own understanding. That is what the psalmist did not want. He didn't want to waste his life and circumstances with his own perceptions about his trouble, but he wanted to lean on God's understanding of his trials and thereby redeem the trials.
- We've already acknowledged that all of us suffer in some way. What do you want from your trial? Do you want out? Or do you want God to redeem it so that you are changed by the trial and through the trial? The psalmist wanted transformation.
 - ✓ So one soldier prayed this way:

I asked for strength that I might achieve; I was made weak that I might learn humbly to obey.
 I asked for health that I might do greater things; I was given infirmity that I might do better things.
 I asked for riches that I might be happy; I was given poverty that I might be wise.
 I asked for power that I might have the praise of men; I was given weakness that I might feel the need of God.
 I asked for all things that I might enjoy life; I was given life that I might enjoy all things.
 I got nothing that I had asked for, but everything that I had hoped for.
 Almost despite myself my unspoken prayers were answered; I am, among all men, most richly blessed.

- ✓ When you pray in your suffering, it is appropriate to pray for release from the suffering (as the psalmists did and as Paul did, e.g., 2 Cor. 12); but it is better to pray for spiritual transformation through the suffering, as this psalmist did. We will be better both now and in eternity for praying for growth and maturity in our suffering rather than release from our trials.

"...when we reach heaven, we may discover that the richest and deepest and most profitable experience we had in this world, were those which were gained in the very roads from which we shrank back with dread. The bitter cups we tried to push away contained the medicines we most needed. The hardest lessons that we learn are those which teach us the most and best fit us for service here and glory hereafter."
 [Theodore L. Cuyler, *God's Light on Dark Clouds*, 29-30.]

2. Pray for a Godly **INFLUENCE** on Others in Your Suffering (vv. 74, 79)

- When we suffer, it is easy to become isolationist and self-absorbed. Our problem is so over-whelming to us that we cannot see the sufferings of others or our opportunities to minister to others. We forget that our suffering is about more than just us.
 - ✓ The second request the psalmist makes is not directly for himself, but for those who are his friends and acquaintances and who are also followers of God — **may those who fear You...** The ones who fear God are the ones who are believers in God and are trusting in His salvation. This is the OT equivalent of the church. And the psalmist is concerned about them.
 - ✓ Specifically he wants other followers of God to **be glad**. And they are to glad because the psalmist is **waiting for Your word**. That is, the psalmist is hopeful and confident in God's Word, even while he is suffering. Cf. vv. 49, 81, 114, 147. The one thing he doesn't want to do is betray God's Word. In his trial he wants others to observe his faithfulness to God and God's Word.

"It makes such an impact to see another visible, audible, tangible human being who really thinks the written word of God is more trustworthy than the sensible (oh, so sensible!) evidence of the world. It is wonderful to see someone else who really believes God means what he says, and proves he believes it by sticking to God when there's nothing in it for him....when I see the living faith of the adversity believer, I am deeply encouraged to persevere myself." [Ash, *Bible Delight*, 105.]

- ✓ It is good to share God's answers to prayer, but sometimes it's a discouragement if we only hear, "Someone gave me a golf club I wanted," and "my daughter was homecoming queen and received a full ride scholarship" and "I got a promotion and my salary doubled" and "the car repair was \$10 instead of \$1000" and "my husband recovered from cancer six times," and... Life isn't that easy for most of us. What is better for us (me!) to see is people who suffer tremendous hardship and they cling to the Lord anyway. It's more hopeful and encouraging for us to hear, "We prayed for a child but the Lord has seen fit to answer, 'no' until now, but we are trusting that He is good and doing good and we are content and God is deepening our marriage in the process." That's hopeful! That helps others to be glad in God when we are suffering.
- And the psalmist says something similar in v. 79 — **may those who fear you turn to me...**
 - ✓ In the next line he explains who those who fear God are — they are **those who know your testimonies** — i.e., they are those who know and obey the truths and warnings of Scripture. They fear God's wrath and the honor His glory and majesty and that it has produced salvation and obedience in them.
 - ✓ And the psalmist's concern is that those who fear God will look at him and see a godly testimony for how to live in and through suffering. He wanted to be living demonstration of the blessedness of keeping the **testimonies** of God. Those testimonies were a delight to the psalmist:

- **2** How blessed are those who observe His testimonies, Who seek Him with all *their* heart.
- **14** I have rejoiced in the way of Your testimonies, As much as in all riches.
- **24** Your testimonies also are my delight; *They are* my counselors.
- **111** I have inherited Your testimonies forever, For they are the joy of my heart.
- **119** You have removed all the wicked of the earth like dross; Therefore I love Your testimonies.
- **129** Your testimonies are wonderful; Therefore my soul observes them.

- ✓ Now he wants others to know they are his delight even in his suffering. Suffering does not change God's goodness or the significance of His Word. And we do well to remember that others are watching to see whether we believe in God's Word even when life is hard.

"If sharp pruning makes fruit-bearing branches bring forth more fruit it is not a thing to be lamented when the great Vine-dresser turns his knife upon us. If I may in the end be more useful to you, and to those who come in and out among us I shall rejoice in the woes which I have endured." [Spurgeon, *Suffering Letters*.]

- Just as this psalmist has affirmed that his suffering is an opportunity to point others to the sufficiency of Christ, so our church has affirmed the value of suffering. So one of our core values says, "We Believe in the Value of Problems (and Trials) — both our own *and* others'."
- ✓ There is a benefit to our trials that goes beyond our own suffering; sometimes God uses our trials to encourage and stimulate others to walk obediently with Christ. Cf. **Job 1:8; 2:6, 10**.
- ✓ Many years ago when Raye Jeanne and I were facing what appeared to be a very large trial at the time, I took her in my arms and said, "This trial is about more than just us — it is about a church body and world that are going to see how we respond to difficulty..." And that's true of all of us, my friends. We all watch each other and observe — look how "Job" is responding in faithfulness to this significant burden and weight.
- ✓ Friend, if you are suffering, be well aware that the Lord may have you in that position as much or even more for your influence on the lives of others than even for your own transformation. When you are afflicted, suffer with gladness for your influence on the lives of other followers of God.

"What happens when Christians turn to us, for example? Do they see in us men or women who hope in the word of God, who walk his way, who in the midst of affliction have our hearts and minds filled with his testimonies rather than the lies of the world? When that happens, the effect of our lives on our fellow believers will be that they too will 'know your testimonies', that is, know how to walk in them and know that they are true." [Ash, *Bible Delight*, 109.]

3. Pray for a Divine **PERSPECTIVE** on Your Suffering (vv. 75, 78)

- When we are suffering, the hardest question to answer is “why?” The psalmist doesn’t answer that question, but with his next request he does point us to what we should think instead of asking “why?”
 - ✓ We must remember two parallel truths:
 - ***Your judgments are righteous.*** That is, every verdict rendered by God is righteous. He can never say or do anything unrighteous. He is right in all of His edicts and commands. There is nothing in God that can be attracted to sin and evil; He can only desire what is righteous. Thus, everything that He commands for His followers is also only righteous.
 - ***In faithfulness You have afflicted me.*** The first statement is the general principle for all men; this statement is the personal application of the general principle to the psalmist’s situation. Because the Lord is righteous, He has also afflicted the psalmist with truth and trustworthiness. The psalmist affirms that every trial that comes our way comes directly through the hand of the Lord. There is nothing accidental in our afflictions. Nothing has escaped the notice of God and in fact, all things are decreed by Him. And they arrive in our lives through His faithfulness to us.
 - ✓ Some commentators have suggested that what the psalmist is talking about here is that he has received the just discipline of the Lord for some unnamed sin of his. But there is nothing in this passage that indicates the psalmist has sinned; in fact, it suggests he’s been sinned against by his enemies (v. 78). He is righteous, and he is still suffering.
 - ✓ My friends, this is a reminder that suffering in the Christian life is not unusual; it’s typical. I love what Christopher Ash has written: “But let us remember that the normal Christian life is affliction. By nature we are relaxed when all is good, and surprised when things go wrong. We ought to be the reverse: when things are tough, we should say to ourselves, ‘Another normal day in the Christian life,’ but when they go well we should exclaim with surprise, ‘How odd! I am not being afflicted.’” [*Bible Delight*, 107.]
- Sometimes our suffering is the direct result of others sinning against us. That’s what the psalmist mentions in v. 78 — these are the ***arrogant*** and he prays for them to be ***ashamed***. These are presumptuous sinners who are ignorant of God’s commands and they are willful in their denial of the truth of God. And they further attempt to ***subvert*** the psalmist by their ***lies*** and deceitfulness. They have “bent” the truth just like an unjust shopkeeper might bend the bar of his scales to make them weigh in his favor. They have attacked him with slander and falsehood.
 - ✓ And this situation also requires him to think rightly — rather than be unrighteously angry or discouraged or depressed, the psalmist will ***meditate on Your precepts***. He will speak and ruminate on the instructions (precepts) of the Lord. He will focus His mind on what is true and not be despondent over his circumstances.
 - ✓ And one of the things that is true is that the unrighteous *will* be ***ashamed*** at the end. They will stand before God and experience His wrath and judgment (cf. **Rom. 12:19**).

- When you are suffering, meditate on the truth and pray for a mind to remember the truth. And the truth is that every affliction we face comes from or through the hand of God and in directing those troubles our way, He is still steadfastly faithful to us. When suffering, pray for and learn of God's perspective of your trial. And then instead of listening to your circumstances, speak the truth of God to your anxious soul.
 - ✓ What is the affliction you are facing today? Think about it. Name it in your mind. And then read v. 75 again — "in faithfulness you have afflicted me with _____." Oh friends, this is our hope — that God has sovereignly decreed hard things for us and He is still faithful both to Himself and us. He has not changed. He has not turned His back on us; He has not given up on us and is not hostile to us. He continues to love and care for us who are His children.
 - ✓ Our problem with our problems tends to be that we meditate on our troubles instead of meditating on God and His Word. When we are awakened with anxiousness and our stomachs are knotted up in tension, we must meditate on the truth that God has brought and allowed this into our lives for our good and that evil will not ultimately triumph and God's goodness and grace *will* triumph.

4. Pray for God's COMFORT in Your Suffering (vv. 76-77)

- If the hardest question to answer in our suffering is "why," then perhaps the greatest burden of our suffering is that we are alone. If we are in pain, no one can bear it for us; when we die, we must traverse that pathway alone. No one can take our place in our suffering. Our friends may be empathetic and our family may be helpful, but we *alone* must bear the weight given to us. And we are tempted in those moments to believe that we really are alone.
- So the psalmist's words in the center and heart of the psalm are so very helpful.
 - ✓ ***Oh may Your lovingkindness comfort me.*** When you read the word "lovingkindness" in the OT, you should think about the covenant that God made with the nation of Israel — a covenant that was dependent on Him and not because of anything worthy in the Israelites. It was a covenant of grace. So when you see ***lovingkindness***, think, "grace." Think of the extraordinary love and tenderness of God to His eternal people. And here the psalmist says that it is that love that comforts him. It is God's love that is an encouragement (***comfort***) to him. And combined with the previous verse it is a reminder that even when God afflicts, He still loves: "the afflicter is the comforter." [Scroggie] Just as the disciplining hand of the parent is the embracing and caressing hand of the parent after the discipline, so God is always near to comfort His people.
 - ✓ And verse 76 reminds us that the comfort is ***according to Your Word to your servant***. The psalmist is not talking about some particular word of revelation to him from God; he is simply saying that the Word which was given to Israel, and thus to the psalmist also, is his comfort.

- ✓ When you are suffering, one temptation you will have is to neglect and even turn away from the Scriptures. That is your flesh talking to you. Don't listen. The one thing you need above all else when you are in trouble and trial is the comfort of the Word. Nothing else will comfort you like this book. Only in this book will you find the truth about suffering and the character of God.
- ✓ And he says the same thing in the next verse — *may Your compassion come to me*. That's God's love and mercy — it's God moving toward us in love when He sees our pitiful condition. That compassion is life-giving and where the psalmist and we find that compassion is in His **Law** (Torah — a word that refers here to all of Scripture, not just the Pentateuch). The psalmist wants the compassion of God and affirms that the compassion will come from God's directives.
- Here is a good place to ask some questions as you reflect on the first six months of this year:
 - ✓ When you have had trouble in these months, have you sought your comfort in the Word? Two weeks ago, Keith reminded us of seeking our refuge in God (Ps. 46). This is the same principle. When you have had trials, where have you turned for comfort and refuge?
 - ✓ When you are in trials, are you meditating on the difficulty of the trials or are you meditating on the goodness and grace of God as it is revealed in His Word?
 - ✓ When you are afflicted, are you consciously aware of and trying to influence others to follow your example of dependence on God (including the children in your home)?
 - ✓ When you are suffering, are you seeking to use those trials to grow in Christ-likeness?
 - ✓ When you are suffering, are you praying for these things? When your friends are suffering are you praying these things for them?

CONCLUSION: British pastor Christopher Ash writes about a church in England that has changed the marriage vows. Believing that genuine followers of Christ could not suffer, they have changed “for better or worse” to “for better or best,” and “for richer or poorer” to “for richer or richest.” That's the kind of silliness you have to do when you don't know how to respond to suffering.

But aren't you glad that Scripture not only tells us that suffering is normal and that suffering is from the purposeful hand of God, but Scripture also tells us how to respond to suffering, and specifically how to pray when we (or our loved ones in God's family) are suffering?

My friend, in the remainder of this year, you will experience some measure of suffering that is not because of sin, and so will everyone in this room, and every follower of God. And when you suffer, pray. And when you pray, pray biblically. And see how God will use your suffering in your life — to transform you and influence others for the glory of God.

BENEDICTION: Ephesians 3:20-21