

Christian Retirement

Part 55

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ON AFFLICTION

All the ways of God are good; yes, all the paths of the Lord are mercy and truth, unto such as love him and keep his commandments. Should any one ask: why, then, does the Lord afflict his people? We answer, because he loves them. "As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten." This will appear from a few reflections on the nature, design, and end of affliction.

Its nature is indeed unpleasant to the children of men— Paul declares it to be "not joyous, but grievous." The cup of affliction is composed of bitter ingredients, at which our nature revolts. But should we commend the physician, who prescribed only luscious medicines for a distempered stomach! His skill would rather appear in administering a bitter, yet salutary draught. And so it is with our heavenly Physician. He knows our inward malady, and he has medicine to heal our sickness. Affliction is one of his medicinal dealings which is more or less bitter, according to the spiritual malady of his people. But our heavenly Father, who does not willingly afflict or grieve the children of men, never infuses more wormwood and gall than is needful to correct our vitiated souls.

Hence we plainly see what is the design of affliction. It is to do us good. The tender-hearted physician for the body aims at nothing but his patient's recovery. He calls every day. He watches every term of the complaint; and is our heavenly Physician less attentive to his dear afflicted children? Ah! no. He calls not merely once a day. He is always near them. His eye is always upon them. His ears are always open to their prayers. When he sees a favorable change in their spiritual state, he administers the cordials of his promises to strengthen and restore them to that peace and comfort and joy, which, before the afflictive dispensation, they were not in a proper frame of spirit to receive.

Thus we see the gracious end of affliction. Before the trial came, they were perhaps growing lukewarm, or insensibly gliding into a sinful compliance with the customs of the world; or, they were settling upon the lees; and feeling quite at ease in Zion. Surrounded with earthly comforts, they were forsaking the fountain of living water, and idolizing some created good in the bosom of domestic life. But now, they return unto the Lord, and find their happiness in their God.

Our heavenly Father, in perfect accordance with his covenant of life and peace, sends the needful trial: "If your children forsake my law, and walk not in my covenant, then will I visit their transgressions with the rod, and their iniquity with stripes." Thus for a season, if need be, we are in heaviness through manifold temptations.

The Lord deals graciously with his people. Though he puts them into the furnace, yet he will not allow it to be heated one degree more than is needful to consume the dross and purify their souls. He presides over it himself. His wisdom and love regulate its strength. Thus, in the midst of all their trials, he never leaves them nor forsakes them.

In this way, the Holy Spirit carries on the great work of sanctification in their souls, manifesting their sonship by these fatherly corrections, and fitting them for that pure region where nothing can enter that defiles or makes a lie.

And is it thus with God's dear children? Then, Oh my soul, receive the cup of affliction with humble resignation and adoring love. Kiss the hand that smites. Bless the rod which chastises.

While the bramble is allowed to grow wild, the vine is pruned; while God says of the wicked, "Let them alone," he scourges every son whom he receives. And truly his "loving correction" shall make you great.

How consoling, then, to the true believer, is this sweet assurance of the royal Psalmist! "All the paths of the Lord are mercy and truth unto such as keep his covenant and his testimonies." David was a tried saint. He had often been made to pass through the furnace of affliction, and always found himself the better for his trials. In the 119th Psalm he says, "It is good for me that I have been afflicted, that I might learn your statutes. Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now have I kept your word." And then he adds, "You are good and do good: teach me your statutes." Thus acknowledging the goodness of his heavenly Father, in not leaving him to follow the devices and desires of his own deceitful heart.

It is delightful to consider that the sufferings which believers are now called to endure, are the only sufferings which they shall ever experience. In heaven there is neither sighing nor sorrow. None of its inhabitants say I am sick; for the former things are passed away. What an animating thought! It should make the children of God exclaim with the apostle, "I am full of comfort, I am exceeding joyful in all my tribulation."

If we read the word of God with due attention, we shall find that the most eminent saints have been the most tried. The faith of Abraham, the patience of Job, the meekness of Moses, the purity of Joseph, the devotion of Daniel, would not have

been so conspicuous, had not these peculiar graces been brought into exercise by trials remarkably adapted to each.

God is Sovereign, wise and good. He can overrule the sorest temptations of Satan, to the establishing of his people. "Who is he that will harm you, if you be followers of that which is good?" is a question full of comfort to the tempted believer. Suffering he may endure; but real injury he shall not sustain since eternal truth has declared, that "all things shall work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to his purpose." "Wherefore, let those who suffer according to the will of God, commit the keeping of their souls to him in well-doing, as unto a faithful Creator."

The happiness of man consists, not in an exemption from trials, but in having his will swallowed up in the will of God. For this we are taught to pray: "Your will be done in earth, as it is in heaven." Just in proportion as we approximate to the unreserved obedience of the heavenly host, we shall be happy. Our trials are sent for this very purpose—to mold our will into the divine will, and consequently to make us holy and happy.

From these few reflections, it is evident, that the advantages which believers derive from sanctified afflictions are many and great. In affliction, we often detect the sin which most easily besets us. This is the most difficult sin to find out, though the most in operation, on account of its blinding and deceiving nature. We have therefore cause to bless God for showing to us the accursed thing, and wherefore he contends with us.

In affliction, we obtain clear views of the insufficiency of all earthly things. A dark shadow is thrown over the smiling scenes of busy life. We discover the little value of those possessions, the attainment of which once appeared so desirable.

In affliction, we learn to estimate, above all treasures, an assured interest in Jesus Christ. The blessedness of the believer is then felt and acknowledged. His peace of mind, and hope of glory, the fruits of saving faith, are esteemed more precious than rubies.

In affliction, the promises of God's holy word are sweeter than honey and the honey-comb. They are sacred cordials administered by infinite love, to revive and strengthen the drooping saint.

Thus, while the prosperous worldling in the midst of his abundance despises the "hidden manna;" the contrite believer in his heaviest trial can extract sweetness "from the wormwood and the gall." A Savior's love, experienced in the soul, renders all palatable, however distasteful to our nature.

If man had never sinned, suffering would have been unknown; but, having lost the divine image, Infinite Wisdom is pleased to appoint sundry trials, as means in

his hands for restoring us to that filial spirit which we lost through the fall. Sanctified affliction can bend the stubborn will, and bring us to the frame and temper of little children.

Hence we find in Scripture much to this effect: "And have you entirely forgotten the encouraging words God spoke to you, his children? He said, 'My child, don't ignore it when the Lord disciplines you, and don't be discouraged when he corrects you. For the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes those he accepts as his children.' As you endure this divine discipline, remember that God is treating you as his own children. Whoever heard of a child who was never disciplined? If God doesn't discipline you as he does all of his children, it means that you are illegitimate and are not really his children after all. Since we respect our earthly fathers who disciplined us, should we not all the more cheerfully submit to the discipline of our heavenly Father and live forever? For our earthly fathers disciplined us for a few years, doing the best they knew how. But God's discipline is always right and good for us because it means we will share in his holiness. No discipline is enjoyable while it is happening—it is painful! But afterward there will be a quiet harvest of right living for those who are trained in this way." Hebrews 12:5-12.

Under affliction, the believer is like a city set on a hill. His faith and patience, his meekness and resignation, cannot be hidden. They manifest the reality of his religion, and prove to an unbelieving world the blessedness of serving God. His mind is kept in perfect peace. His heart is full of holy joy. He lies as clay in the hands of the potter; and with his suffering Savior he can say, "Father, not my will, but yours be done." If doubts and fears are permitted to overshadow his soul, they only resemble the dark clouds which pass athwart a summer's sky. The manifestation of a Savior's love soon dispels the gloom.

The afflicted believer is stirred up to closer communion with God. He girds his loins. He trims his lamp. He waits for the coming of his Lord in the daily exercise of faith and prayer. When his trials are heavy, his prayers are more fervent and frequent; for the same wind which extinguishes a less fire, causes the greater to burn with increased intenseness. What says our divine Master? "Because iniquity shall abound, the love of many will wax cold;" but, "he that endures unto the end, the same shall be saved."

In seasons of deep distress, Satan is sometimes very busy in suggesting hard thoughts of God, exciting doubts, and creating murmurings. Many battles are then fought, and the faith and love of the believer are tried to the uttermost. But he who is in him, is greater than he who is in the world. Jesus, who vanquished Satan in our nature, by his Spirit, destroys the power of the adversary in the hearts of his people. Thus, he enables them to rise superior to all their trials, through his grace which is sufficient for them.

In tribulation, the child of God experiences many sweet tokens of his heavenly Father's care. His sick chamber is the abode of grace, mercy, and peace. The bright beams of hope dispel the gloom which gathers round the grave, and raises his enraptured soul far above a sorrowing world. At such a season of unspeakable delight, his heart is loosened from every earthly tie; and in the language of the exalting apostle, he can say, "Oh death, where is your sting? Oh grave, where is your victory?"

Thus affliction has a two-fold effect. Like the wintry blast, it kills the noxious weeds of lust, pride, and covetousness; while, like the genial warmth of summer, it cherishes all the kindly graces of the Spirit, humility, purity, and love.

Many people are apt to imagine that if they are not deeply afflicted, in some way or other, they cannot be the children of God. We see instances, however, of excellent characters passing through life with comparatively few trials; and yet maintaining a peculiar spirituality of mind. There is certainly no necessary connection between affliction and resignation, or prosperity and gratitude.

When adversity meets a man destitute of grace, it stirs up within him a rebellious spirit against the moral government of God; or, at least, it calls forth his natural corruption into more active operation.

When prosperity pours its profusion upon an unconverted person, it tends to foster all the evils of pride, insolence, and independence; so that the man almost forgets that he is mortal, a being accountable to his Maker. It is grace alone which makes all the real difference between one man and another. "By the grace of God," said Paul, "I am what I am." And to the Corinthians he adduced this argument as a ground for humility: "Who makes you to differ from another? And what have you, that you did not receive? Now if you did receive it, why do you glory as if you had not received it?"

We may therefore conclude, that when affliction renders a man humble, and resigned to the will of God; when it tends to wean him from the world, and produces a change in his whole spirit and conduct; it is because the God of all grace is employing it as a means whereby to lead him to deep consideration; and, through the accompanying power of the Spirit, to true repentance, faith, and holiness.

So, when in prosperity the heart expands with benevolence; when a man is cheerfully employed in diffusing a portion of that comfort around him which he himself enjoys; when he is laboring to glorify his Redeemer, by aiding those institutions which have for their object the dissemination of divine truth; when he is led to consider himself as a steward of the manifold gifts of God; and when all this is accompanied with true humility, unostentatiousness, and self-denial; then we may safely conclude that God has blessed his basket and his store; that all

his fruitfulness is the effect of grace alone, and not the natural consequence of mere worldly abundance.

How precious, then, is the grace of God! Natural evils are converted into spiritual blessings, when thus sanctified by divine grace; and, without this grace, natural blessings, such as health, plenty, friends, and influence, become snares and excitements to sin and rebellion. Oh, then, let me ever pray for grace to use both affliction and prosperity aright. Lord, impart unto me this inestimable treasure. When you give grace, you give yourself: "Yourself, of all your gifts the crown."

Be still, my soul, and know the Lord,
In meek submission wait his will;
His presence can true peace afford,
His power can shield from every ill.

Your path is strewed with piercing thorns;
Each step is gained by arduous fight
Yet wait, until hope's bright morning dawns,
Until darkness changes into light.

Soon shall the painful conflict cease;
Soon shall the raging storm be o'er;
Soon shall you reach the realm of peace,
Where suffering shall be known no more.

There shall your joy forever flow
In one unbroken stream of bliss;
There shall you God the Savior know,
And feel him yours as you are his.

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