

Appointed for Afflictions

Genesis 41:46–52, 1 Thessalonians 3:1–5

Normal people don't relish pain. We tend to avoid pain and seek happiness and comfort. That is fine as far as it goes. Of course we want to be happy! But we should never make the acquisition of happiness all-important. If we do, we make it into a god, and that is idolatry. The Lord who created us and calls us into fellowship with himself through Christ his Son must always have first place. "Seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you" (Matt. 6:33).

If we seek God and his glory—if we make that our first and highest priority—then happiness will be the byproduct. But if we make happiness our highest priority, we will never attain it. We may experience pleasure in this world, but in the world to come without Christ there will be weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth.

Our Shorter Catechism begins with the words, "What is the chief end of man?" The answer is very insightful and true to Scripture: "Man's chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever." If we truly seek to glorify God, then we will achieve happiness. We will even learn how to glory in suffering.

The title of the message today is "Appointed for Afflictions." That sounds very discouraging. We might even be thinking: *appointed for afflictions? What kind of a religion is that? It sounds so morose, so cheerless. Can't we talk about something more positive? Tell me pleasant things, for heaven's sake!*

Yet listen to our text: ". . . that no one should be shaken by . . . afflictions; for you yourselves know that we are appointed to this." Clearly, what the text is saying is that we—followers of Jesus Christ—are appointed for afflictions. Now on the face of it this is discouraging, but I submit to you this morning that it is actually an encouragement, for *who is it that appoints us for afflictions?* It is none other than our wise and merciful heavenly Father! "We know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to his purpose"—*all things, even affliction!*

If you belong to Christ, then knowing that you are appointed for afflictions is a comfort, for it is our loving heavenly Father in his infinite wisdom who appoints us for affliction and uses those afflictions for his glory and our good—*every time!* But if you do not know the Lord Jesus, then knowing that afflictions are surely coming is going to be a great discouragement for you. Let's dive a little deeper into this important subject. I have three points this morning: (1) The problem: afflictions, (2) The remedy: to be established in the faith, and (3) The means of grace. First, **1. The problem: afflictions**

As we saw last week, the apostle Paul had great affection and tender love for the members of the church in Thessalonica. He had to flee from Thessalonica

because the enemies of the gospel plotted to kill him. His fellow church members sent him out of the city for his safety. Paul shows the intensity of his love for the Christians there by using a striking word that literally means “orphaned from you.” We could translate it “But we, brethren, having been *orphaned from you* . . . in presence, not in heart . . .” The Thessalonian congregation was firmly planted in Paul’s heart. Theirs was not a cold, business relationship; the Thessalonians were his spiritual family. He would never say, “I have no need of thee.”¹ He valued the men and women of Thessalonica as fellow members of Christ.

Our text states that we are *appointed* for afflictions.² The word for *afflictions* can also mean *tribulations*. When Jesus said, “then there will be great tribulation” (Matt. 24:21), this is the word that he used. The “great tribulation” would refer to the dreadful and unspeakable devastation that would befall the unbelieving Jews in the siege and destruction of Jerusalem. Forty years before, they had knowingly and deliberately rejected God’s Messiah, shouting out, “Crucify, crucify him; his blood be on us and on our children.” Exactly forty years later—one biblical generation—those who killed Christ would themselves be killed in brutal bloodshed at the hands of the Roman forces. The bloodshed and devastation would be such as had never happened from the beginning of the world, nor would ever happen again.

But afflictions don’t need to be of epic proportions to hurt. Christians struggle with illness, depression, poverty and pain. We live in a world where there is crime, war, natural disasters, and famine. When Paul in Romans 5:3 teaches us to “rejoice in our *sufferings*, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope,”³ one author helpfully observes that “affliction does not have the final word; hope does!”⁴

In our Old Testament reading this morning Joseph is 30 years old. He was the favorite son of his father, Jacob. His brothers were insanely jealous of him and sold him into slavery in Egypt. There, he was imprisoned on false charges and finally summoned to stand before Pharaoh. When he interpreted Pharaoh’s dream, Pharaoh made him second-in-command over all Egypt. When the seven years of famine came, and Joseph’s father and brothers came down to Egypt to buy grain, Joseph was able to save his father and his household—the entire visible church at the time—and keep them from dying of hunger. Joseph is a type of Christ who serves his church and brings them to heaven.

But the years have been hard on Joseph. He had to endure the contempt and ridicule of his brothers. When he went out to take them food, they laid hands on

¹ 1 Cor. 12:21

² The word for “appointed,” κείμαι, literally *lie, recline*; “can serve as passive of τίθημι . . . fig.—a. be appointed, set, destined εἰς τι for someth. εἰς πτώσιν καὶ ἀνάστασιν *for the fall and rising* Lk 2:34. εἰς ἀπολογία τοῦ εὐαγγελίου Phil 1:16. εἰς τοῦτο 1 Th 3:3.” Bauer, Arndt and Gingrich lexicon, κείμαι (Logos Bible Software)

³ Rom. 5:3 ESV

⁴ <https://www.catholicapostolatecenter.org/blog/scripture-to-life-enduring-afflictions> accessed 2-10-24

him and threw him into a dry well. They spoke of killing him, but when Midianite traders came along, they sold their own brother into slavery! Put up for bids at a slave auction in Egypt, he was purchased by the captain of Pharaoh's guard. Though he was a valuable servant, when he was double-crossed by his master's wife, he was thrown into prison. There he rotted for two full years, wondering if anyone remembered him. At the same time, his father grieved, believing that his beloved son had been torn apart by wild animals and died alone in the desert.

Our Old Testament text records that "to Joseph were born two sons before the years of famine came, whom Asenath, the daughter of Poti-Pherah priest of On, bore to him. Joseph called the name of the firstborn Manasseh: 'For God has made me forget all my toil and all my father's house.' And the name of the second he called Ephraim: 'For God has caused me to be fruitful in the land of my affliction.'"

Here was a dark time in Joseph's life. On the one hand, his life had taken a turn for the better: he had advanced to second-in-command in all of Egypt with Pharaoh's encouragement. But on the other hand, he longed for home and wondered what had happened to his family. Now he was married and had two sons who had never known their grandpa. Egypt was for him the land of his affliction.

All Christians endure affliction to one degree or another. The Moody Bible Institute alumni magazine came in the mail yesterday. One of my classmates in the class of 1970 was recently honored as Moody's alumnus of the year. He and I used to sing together in one of the touring choirs, and we graduated together. I was fascinated as I read his story. He served as president of a large Christian relief agency, fighting poverty and abuse. Having experienced affliction himself in childhood, he wanted to help vulnerable children experience the love of the Christ who said, "I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me."

God did not put us here on this earth to have an easy life. As Christ's followers, all of us, to one degree or another, will experience affliction. And as we experience affliction ourselves, we will have more compassion and be better equipped to help others who also are afflicted. So there are *benefits* to affliction! We live in a world of sin and misery that are the result of the fall. But the God we serve is the God of all comfort. Jesus was the man of sorrows and acquainted with grief, and in his great wisdom he allows us to experience affliction so we can experience his comfort, so that we in turn can comfort others with the comfort that we ourselves have experienced in Christ.

Dear saint of God, our wise and loving heavenly Father will never abandon you in affliction. He will comfort you and hold you up. He will intercede for you to

give you strength, so that you can rejoice in hope. He will never leave you, nor forsake you.

Yes, afflictions are a vexing problem, but they are not the end of the story.

Second, consider

2. The remedy: to be established in the faith

Paul writes: “Therefore, when we could no longer endure it, we thought it good to be left in Athens alone, and sent Timothy, our brother and minister of God, and our fellow laborer in the gospel of Christ, to establish you and encourage you concerning your faith, that no one should be shaken by these afflictions; for you yourselves know that we are appointed to this. For, in fact, we told you before when we were with you that we would suffer tribulation.”

When we experience afflictions, we are likely to say, “Why me? I’m serving the Lord; why is he letting this happen to me? Why can’t I enjoy an easy life?” Obviously, none of us likes trouble. At best, we consider afflictions a distraction. We figure we don’t deserve them. But remember that the saints of God have always experienced afflictions. Jacob wrestled with the angel of the Lord, who struck him in the hollow of his thigh and left him with a permanent limp, inflicting pain and impacting his mobility. Sarah, Rebekah, Hannah and Elizabeth all experienced the deep disappointment and anguish of childlessness. David was on the run from Saul—and sometimes from his own children. The beggar Lazarus—lame, full of sores, on the verge of starvation, dependent on others to carry him around—was laid at the rich man’s gate, desiring to be fed with the crumbs that fell from the rich man’s table; he had to ward off dogs that encircled him and licked his sores. Paul experienced his “thorn in the flesh”; three times he begged the Lord to take it away, but each time the Lord replied, “My strength is made perfect in weakness.” John was imprisoned unjustly on the Isle of Patmos. And so it goes. Jesus promised, “In this world ye shall have tribulation.” Our Shorter Catechism says in few words, “The fall brought mankind into an estate of sin and *misery*.” Yes, in this world we have tribulation, but when we look to Christ in faith we learn that he has overcome the world. Moreover, he has promised us a better future when we shall be with him in glory, experiencing rich fellowship and basking in the Savior’s presence eternally.

Paul didn’t like being in Athens without the rest of his team, but he was willing to endure this if he could be reassured about the nascent church in Thessalonica. Was it still in existence? Were the believers still meeting together, or had they grown discouraged? Paul had been with them such a short time. Were they still strong in faith? Paul had lots of questions, and with the limited methods of communication available in that day, the only way he could get answers was to send someone to check. The journey was over 300 miles, and much of it was on foot. The logistics were not easy. Timothy would have to have money. He would

need to take along food. We are not sure if he traveled alone or not. We don't know what time of year he would be making the trip, and what hazards, if any, he would have to endure; those details are lost to history. But we do know that God was with him and would give him wisdom and strength, and enable him to be an overcomer.

Look at the kind of man Paul sent. He didn't simply hire a courier or a traveling businessman. Being a courier or businessman is honest work, and there's no dishonor in being such, but Paul needed to send a man with spiritual perception, who could bring a competent report of the heart-condition of the saints in Thessalonica. In short, Paul wanted to send a trained minister and preacher with a competent understanding of Scripture, who could minister to God's people and evaluate the health of their body. He chose Timothy, a "brother and minister of God, and . . . fellow laborer in the gospel of Christ," a man qualified to minister God's Word and establish the saints and encourage them in the faith. These saints were experiencing afflictions, and what they needed was to be established in the faith. How so? "Faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God." The saints in Thessalonica needed to hear the gospel preached by a qualified minister of the gospel—something that every Christian needs to hear every Lord's day. In far too many places there is a famine of hearing the words of the Lord. Some falsely preach salvation by works—they don't preach Christ but another gospel. Though all of us need to encourage and exhort one another—and so much the more as we see the Day approaching—it is God's perfect will that his people be taught by qualified men, ordained into the ministerial office after careful testing. As Paul would later write to Timothy, "Neglect not the gift that is in thee, which was given thee by prophecy, with the laying on of the hands of the presbytery." The believers in Thessalonica were experiencing afflictions, and they needed a strong faith to persevere. The most important thing—for them and for us—is faith.

How are we established in the faith? By a competent understanding of the Word. Every Christian needs both biblical knowledge (familiarity with the contents, themes and organization of the Bible) and theological knowledge (knowledge of the Bible's teachings concerning the Holy Trinity, the Father, the Son, the Holy Spirit, man, the fall, sin, salvation, the church, last things, etc.). Though God has written his law on men's consciences, nonetheless, humans are not born with knowledge of the way of salvation. Biblical and theological knowledge must be acquired. It is something that one gains over time. All of us should make it the highest priority to be established in the faith. This brings me to point three,

3. The means of grace

All believers need what the Westminster Standards call the ordinary means of grace: "the outward and ordinary means whereby Christ [communicates] to us the benefits of redemption." What are they? "The Word, sacraments, and prayer; all

which are made effectual to the elect for salvation.”⁵ Here is the staple spiritual diet of the church: the Word, the sacraments and prayer—the Word preached and applied, the regular ministry of baptism and the Lord’s Supper, and earnest and regular and effectual calling upon God to pour out his promised blessings on his people.

Paul didn’t send a motivational speaker who would urge the people to draw on a vast treasury of inner resources and keep a stiff upper lip. He didn’t send an academic with his facts and charts and theories. He didn’t send a performer who could sweep the people off their feet with dazzling musical talents. He didn’t send an organizer with his flow charts and procedures. Rather, he sent an ordinary minister of the Word—a man who could articulate the truths of Scripture and apply them to the hearts and consciences of his hearers, a man who could competently preach the message of the cross and show people their fundamental need of Christ.

This is the divinely-appointed spiritual diet that every church so desperately needs but so few churches have—not the clever ideas of men, but the proclamation of the Word, a ministry based not on the oratorical skills of the preacher, but on the power of the Gospel itself. Good preaching doesn’t exalt the preacher but the Christ of Scripture who is every person’s greatest need. We are all sinners with no hope of salvation apart from him who died for us and rose again and pours out his blessed Holy Spirit to bring us into a relationship with himself.

What is needed is the ordinary means of grace: the word, the sacraments, prayer. There is a place for institutions of higher learning, lectures, conferences, seminars, courses, Bible search programs, and so forth. But God intended that his people would be fed the *Word*, Lord’s day by Lord’s day, through the ordinary means of grace: namely, gathering with his people in organized congregations under the directions and oversight of pastors and elders. Those who teach the Word ought to be called to that office and examined to see whether they meet the standards the Bible sets for ministers. Podcasts, recorded sermons, conference messages—all these have their place as adjuncts, but God’s people need to be taught that modern technology makes it easy for almost anyone to publish articles and sermons which may not in fact be biblically sound. Every teaching must be true to Scripture. The church has no authority to preach or teach anything that is not taught in the word of God. God gave us the institution of the church to protect us. God set shepherds and overseers over his flock—men who are responsible to feed the flock of God and take the oversight thereof, and not to do it for the purpose of gaining an income. Yes, God’s ministers ought to be paid; the laborer is worthy of his hire. But pastoring a church is not a job, it’s a calling. Ministers are to devote themselves to the word of God and prayer, preparing sermons for the

⁵ Shorter Catechism 88, <https://opc.org/sc.html>

improvement of God's people—sermons that are born in the crucible of affliction, as the minister learns to apply the Scriptures first to his own life, and then to the lives of his hearers.

It is tempting to listen to podcasts and audio recordings of gifted speakers and elevate them above the ordinary ministers of the word. God's people should listen to the preaching of the word by the ordained ministers of the church and appreciate that this is God's plan to build them up in the faith. Paul sent Timothy, a young minister, to minister the word of God in Thessalonica. People could well have said, "Hey, why should I listen to this guy? He's Paul's understudy. I would rather listen to the apostle himself." But then, Paul's own ministry was criticized as well. He was criticized for not having a compelling pulpit presence: "'his letters,' they say, 'are weighty and powerful, but his bodily presence is weak, and his speech contemptible'" (2 Cor. 10:10).

But people have never been saved by the preacher's oratorical skill; rather, men are saved by Christ, working faith in their hearts through his Spirit—faith that looks expectantly to God, enabling us to persevere through afflictions and lay hold on eternal life. Amen.