

Truth Talk Truth Talk

Psalm 119 – The Word for Life!

God is Great . . . God is Good!

Stanza 9– Verses 65-72

You have dealt well with Your servant, O LORD, according to Your word. ⁶⁶ Teach me good judgment and knowledge, For I believe Your commandments. ⁶⁷ Before I was afflicted I went astray, But now I keep Your word. ⁶⁸ You are good, and do good; Teach me Your statutes. ⁶⁹ The proud have forged a lie against me, But I will keep Your precepts with my whole heart. ⁷⁰ Their heart is as fat as grease, But I delight in Your law. ⁷¹ It is good for me that I have been afflicted, That I may learn Your statutes. ⁷² The law of Your mouth is better to me Than thousands of coins of gold and silver.

From childhood on we have known the familiar words of the meal-time prayer, “God is great, God is good, now we thank Him for this food.” Uttering those words over our food is one thing . . . believing those truths away from the table is quite another thing entirely. Especially when God puts the food of affliction and tribulation before us. At that point it seems impossible to be thankful. But, our difficulty goes much deeper than just our inability to thank God for the hard things in life. During such times, often we find ourselves questioning whether God is good.

For sixty-four verses we have followed the steps of the Psalmists as he walks the way of the Word. And we know where those steps have led him. He has given us access to the innermost parts of his life and made us privy to his private thoughts along the way. We watched him bear the burden of affliction and oppression. We found him in the dust of personal failure. We joined him in the house of pain while he ate the bread of sorrows and washed it down with the bitter wine of affliction. And in all of this he clung tenaciously to his vow to walk obediently in the way of God’s Word (vv. 5-8). Like Job, he has not charged God foolishly nor has he sinned with his lips.

By the ninth stanza, the Psalmist is well along the path – almost halfway through the testimony of his journey. And here is the substance of that testimony – “*You have dealt well with Your servant!*” This is the perspective of a seasoned pilgrim well acquainted with the difficulty of the path as well as its delights. And when he pauses to tell those who are considering starting down the path, he testifies that he has experienced “good” from the hand of a good God!

But how can this be true? Are these just brave words uttered from a heart of a plucky pilgrim who knows that God is good even though he has not personally experienced that goodness? Does he say this in an effort to avoid discouraging those pilgrims who are following him on the path? Or has he truly experienced “good” from God? The eight verses in this stanza are his personal testimony that God is not just great, He is good and does good things to His servants who choose the way of His Word!

I. His Praise and Petition (vv. 65-66)

You have dealt well with Your servant, O LORD, according to Your word. ⁶⁶ Teach me good judgment and knowledge, For I believe Your commandments.

As the Psalmist pauses in the journey, he looks back over the path he has trod and exclaims, “Good you have done with your servant, Lord!” This might be awkward phrasing to our Gentile ear

but it was a powerful affirmation of how the Psalmist viewed his journey. In this single word, the Psalmist not only affirms the truth he observed about those who walk in God's way (vv 1-4), he praises the God who brings blessing on such men. And by his praise, he confirms that he has personally experienced such blessing from God.

Praise to the Lord. *You have dealt well with Your servant, O LORD, according to Your word (v. 65).* In the opening statement of the stanza the Psalmist brings one word forward – “good!” He searched for a word to adequately describe the sum total of his experience from God in Whose way he walked and the word he came up with was “good.” This is the same word that God used when He looked back on all that He had done in six literal days in which the universe was created – “*Then God saw everything that He had made, and indeed it was very good. So the evening and the morning were the sixth day.*” (Gen 1:31)

The Psalmist testifies that God has done “good” to him and not evil (v. 65). He asks God to teach him “good” judgment or discernment (v. 66). He observes that it was “good” for him to be afflicted (v. 71). And he proclaims that God's Law is “good” and desirable (v. 72). And sandwiched between these four observations, the Psalmist places the key to seeing life as “good.” God is good and all that He does is good (v. 68). So in light of what he knows about God, the Psalmist looks at all that he has experienced from the hand of God and declares, “God has been good with me.”

And, we should not miss an important part of his praise – “according to Thy Word!” This is how the Psalmist measures what is “good.” As we have seen, the majority of the stanzas thus far have included more than a little suffering and affliction. One might wonder how this pilgrim can call such events and circumstances “good.” But the psalmist is measuring his life and its circumstances by a different standard – God's Word. And by that standard, he has come to view his life as “good.” In other words, when He measures his circumstances by the Word of God and evaluates them in that light, what appears to be misfortune to our eye is seen quite differently by his eye. How different our perspective of life and all its circumstances would be if we would view it through the lens of God's Word.

We should also note that the Psalmist does not qualify his statement in any way. He looks at his life, in all of its circumstances and through all of its experiences, and exclaims – “You have been good to Your Servant!” How did the psalmist develop such a powerful perspective about life? And more importantly, how can we who follow after him in the path develop such a perspective? The answer lies in his petition to the Lord.

Petition of the Lord. *Teach me good judgment and knowledge, For I believe Your commandments (v. 66).* The Psalmist is not making a new request. He has consistently requested instruction from the Lord throughout his journey. But there is an interesting development to his request in this verse. Normally his request for instruction is followed by a statement that indicates what he desires to be instructed in by the Lord. Usually he asks the Lord to teach him His statutes (v.11, 26, 64, 68, 124, 135, 17), judgments (v. 108), or ways (v. 33). In other words, normally the Psalmists is asking God for knowledge and insight about His Word. However here the Psalmist asks God to teach him good judgment and knowledge. The term judgment refers to discernment and knowledge speaks to perspective or perception. In other words, the Psalmist is asking God to teach him how to use the knowledge he has gained from God's word in daily living. In other words, he wants God to do more than just give him understanding. He wants more than just mere information however accurate, important, and necessary that information about God's Word might be. He wants the Lord to teach him to apply all of the information He has taught the psalmist (in response to his prayers) to every situation and circumstance that arises on the journey. And he has strong reason to make this appeal.

His appeal is based on a life that has consistently demonstrated a strong trust in the Lord's statements. The term “commandments” is the term for “sayings” or “statements.” And the psalmist has put his confidence in those statements from Yahweh's mouth. Moreover, his confidence has been

exhibited in a life spent in an attempt to obey those statements. In other words, his belief was not merely creedal in nature. It was at least creedal in that he believed what God said but it was more than that. He actually acted according to his creed! What he believed about God in creed established and directed the deeds of his life. And so, based on a life of committed obedience to God's statements, he came before God asking for more instruction. He asked what every pilgrim must ask – that God would develop in him moral discernment by continuing to cultivate a deeper confidence in and obedience to His statements.

II. His Personal Testimony (vv. 67-68)

Before I was afflicted I went astray, But now I keep Your word. ⁶⁸ You are good, and do good; Teach me Your statutes.

The Psalmist has testified that God's dealings with him have been good. And he has requested that God would increase his discernment and perception of life according to His Word. But how did God answer that prayer for the Psalmist? The answer comes in the next two verses where the Psalmist continues to amplify his personal testimony about the goodness of God in all things.

About His Life. *Before I was afflicted I went astray, But now I keep Your word (v. 67).* In light of his past tendency to “stray” or “err” from the boundaries of the path set by God's Word, he considers how God corrected his discernment and adjusted his perception so that he no longer strayed from the path. And the tool God used to make this adjustment was affliction. Here in his own words is the testimony regarding his past pattern – he consistently strayed. The term “astray” does not refer to “high-handed sins” or to overt, angry rebellion. Rather the term refers to the constant straying and missteps of a sheep that is attempting to follow the Shepherd. How did God break this pattern in the Psalmist? Through affliction – by bringing him low. Remember the Psalmist expressed his desire to walk in the way of the Word in most strenuous terms back in the first stanza of the psalm. He also gave ample testimony to the difficulty he had in consistently walking in that way. How did God graciously deal with this tendency in order to grant the Psalmist his original desire – to walk in the way of the Word? By bringing him low and humbling him in the school of affliction. And from that low place – in the dust to which his soul cleaved – he learned to obey the Word he had come to love! In other words, in God's goodness He acted “goodly” toward His servant by humbling him so he would learn to do “good.”

About His Lord. *You are good, and do good; Teach me Your statutes (v.68).*

The Psalmist's testimony regarding God (You have done good to Your servant) was grounded in his affirmation about God. He was completely and thoroughly convinced of God's goodness. All of God's actions flow out of His attributes. When a man has an unshakable conviction that God is good, this conviction shapes his understanding of all that God brings into his life. This is how the Psalmist can look at all his affliction and see it all as good. And he can count it all good because it is coming from the hand of a God Who is good. And in light of this firm conviction, the Psalmist turns to His good God and requests even more instruction in His statutes.

Affliction was the school in which he learned discernment and developed spiritual perspective and looking back on the assignments in the course called affliction, the psalmist testified that God had been doing good all the while. But what about his present circumstances?

III. His Present Circumstances (vv. 69-70)

The proud have forged a lie against me, But I will keep Your precepts with my whole heart. ⁷⁰ Their heart is as fat as grease, But I delight in Your law.

It is one thing to look back on trials that are past and rejoice in the providential goodness of God during difficult days that have come and gone. But what about the here and now? How well will the lessons he learned yesterday serve him today? To this our Pilgrim now turns. His old enemies

from stanza three have resurfaced. The arrogant and insolent men have once again come against him. How will he respond? What has affliction taught him?

The Attitude of His Enemies. Immediately we are informed that these enemies have not changed. They are as arrogant and insolent as they were earlier in the psalm. They are obstinate and hard hearted. Literally, their hearts are fat with “fat.” They are impervious to God’s Word and hardened against God’s way. One might inquire as to the reason for their hardness and the text gives a subtle clue. What has hardened their heart is “fatness.” In Old Testament language, fatness had reference to wealth or material possessions. Their material possessions and their commitment to live for materialism had hardened them against God, His Word, and His ways. In contrast to this the Psalmist has found satisfaction in God’s Word. If the prosperity of the wicked hardened them and drew them away from God, the promises of God softened the heart of the Psalmist and drew him irresistibly to the way of the Word! He found ultimate satisfaction in this life in the very thing these insolent men rejected – the Law of the Lord.

The Activity of His Enemies. These men were not passive in their opposition. They smeared him with lies and falsehood. They plastered over his life with false statements about his character. Centuries later Christ would tell his followers to count such affliction as occasion for great joy (Matthew 5:11). Peter would confirm the Lord’s advice to his own readers (1 Peter 4:14-16). How has the psalmist learned to respond to such opposition? In the third stanza he was cast down and almost thrown from the path. However, in the school of affliction he has learned to stand and rejoice.

The Affirmation of the Psalmist. *But I will keep Your precepts with my whole heart. . . But I delight in Your law.* Note the strong contrast the Psalmist makes here. They are insolent and arrogant BUT I will keep your precepts. They are hardened and impervious to your laws BUT I delight in that law! Rather than respond defensively or react dejectedly, our Pilgrim firmly and joyfully declares his resolve to give himself to an unreserved obedience to God’s Word and will!

IV. His Powerful Perception (vv. 71-72)

*It is good for me that I have been afflicted, That I may learn Your statutes.*⁷² *The law of Your mouth is better to me Than thousands of coins of gold and silver.*

Our Pilgrim has learned his lessons well in God’s school of affliction. In every verse of this stanza he makes reference to some term for the Word of God and he observes that God’s words are the source of all the “good” that God conveys to His servants. How does God convey that goodness? Through His character and His Word. And the context in which that goodness is delivered is often one of affliction and difficulty. The Psalmist has learned that such blessing on the path he has chosen comes as a result of confidence in God’s words and obedience to the will of God expressed in and by those words. And so he comes full circle and concludes the stanza where he began – testifying that it is good that he has been afflicted!

His Statement. *It is good for me that I have been afflicted.* He looks back and affirms again the value and spiritual benefit of affliction in the life of a believer who desires to walk the way of God’s Word. He began with this observation and he has not changed his mind. He recalled the past circumstances of personal affliction and said, “It is good to be afflicted.” He recounts his present circumstances in which his old enemies have resurfaced and with even greater resolution declares, “It is good for me that I have been afflicted!” But now he offers a fuller explanation for his perspective on what has happened to him thus far on the journey.

His Explanation. *That I may learn Your statutes.* As a consequence of affliction, God has given him what he initially desired. In order to be like those men he observed who were unusually blessed of God he discovered that he would need to know and obey God’s Word. This is the divine instrument by which a young man might cleanse His ways. It is the light that God has given to direct his feet on the path to blessing. And he desired this . . . with all his heart! In fact, he cried out to God, “Oh that my ways were directed to keep your statutes (v. 5). And, God Who is good heard his prayer

and granted his desire. But the answer to his prayer came through the school of affliction. So, has it happened? Did God change the Psalmist's heart? Remember that the Psalmist asked God to teach him the way of His statutes (v. 33). He requested that God would make him walk in the path He had commanded (v. 34)? Now he is doing so!

But the Psalmist didn't just ask for instruction and external conformity. He asked the Lord to change the way his heart functioned. He asked God to incline his heart toward God's testimonies and away from covetousness (v. 36). He asked the Lord to turn his eyes away from worthless things (v. 37). Did God answer that part of the Psalmist's prayer?

His Application. *The law of your mouth is better than thousands of coins of gold and silver.* This is the full explanation for why the Psalmist can say that affliction has been good for him! It is good because it gave to him the true desire of his heart. What he has come to desire supremely in life is God's Word. What men value most on earth is gold and silver. The Psalmist testifies that he desires something even more than thousands of gold or silver coins – the Word of God! And he has asked the Lord to instruct him in this word and he desires to be able to use this word to develop discernment and perspective on all of life. God responded to that desire and his prayer by sending affliction to humble him so that he might be made more dependent on the Word he so desired. And when there was nothing else to cling to but the Word, he discovered that it was more sufficient and secure than any security on earth. When there was nothing left to him but God's Word, he discovered it to be a treasure richer than anything else on earth.

And this perspective, that God's Word is better than gold or silver, is itself evidence that through affliction, God has graciously answered the psalmist's prayer and granted him both discernment and perspective so that now he sees all things in life as good because they come from the hand of a God Whose character is good and whose purpose for His people is good. Paul would restate this perspective in the familiar words of his letter to the Romans, "*all things work together for good to them who love the Lord and are called according to His purpose*" (Rom 8:28).

And so all that remains is for those of us who have chosen the same path as the Psalmist to examine our hearts to see how far we have progressed on the path. Have we come to the place in our journey where we can honestly affirm what the Psalmist has unreservedly affirmed? His testimony is intended to challenge us to consider both his way and his God!

How do we define "good" from God? Many believers define "good" from God in terms of possessions and provision – thousands of gold and silver. But those who have passed through God's school of affliction have come to see "good" from a different perspective. These pilgrims define "good" from God not in terms of provision but rather in terms of position and perspective. The good they delight in is God bringing them to the position where they are no longer straying from the path or wandering from His precepts. In fact, they would rather have a life absent of provisions and possessions if it was the way they could live a life that was consistently obedient to God's Word and stable in God's way!

So here is the test for us. If we had the opportunity to have either possessions /provisions from God (thousands of gold and silver) or spiritual perspective and consistent obedience to God's Word – which would we chose? And what if the way to get spiritual consistency before the Lord involved not just the lack of possessions/provisions but affliction and suffering? Which would we chose? Our answer is a good indicator of where we are on the path we claim to want to walk as pilgrims on the way of the Word!