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## The Healing Power of Afflictions

**By David Wilkerson**

March 31, 2008 All of us know what afflictions are. They're those times of trouble and stress that keep us up at night. They can be so painful and debilitating that we lose sleep because of the anguish and anxiety.

Yet, as painful as afflictions are, God uses them to achieve his purposes in our lives. David writes, "Many are the afflictions of the righteous" (Psalm 34:19). Moreover, Scripture makes clear God can use afflictions to heal sinners as well as saints.

I think of Manasseh, the wickedest king in Israel's history. Manasseh turned from the Lord and became a vile, murderous man. Consider all the evil this man did: He raised idols to the pagan god Baal, even in the court of the Temple. He built altars for worshipping the sun, moon and stars. He sacrificed his own children, casting them into fiery pits of demonic Baal idols. He scorned the words of righteous prophets and instead sought the counsel of fortune-tellers. He condoned witchcraft, familiar spirits and devil worship. He was a brutal, bloodthirsty tyrant who delighted in murdering innocents. Scripture says Manasseh sinned worse than all the heathen surrounding Israel.

What happened to this wicked king? God sent great affliction upon Manasseh, through the Assyrian army. The dreaded Assyrians invaded Jerusalem and took the people captive, including Manasseh, binding him in chains and wrapping his body in painful thorns. They forced the Israelites into deathly long marches, giving them little to eat or drink. According to historians, these marches were atrocious.

It was during this time of awful affliction that Manasseh began to pray: "When he was in affliction, he besought the Lord his God, and humbled himself greatly" (2 Chronicles 33:12). How did God respond to Manasseh's prayer? He heard the king's cries and restored him to his throne. Manasseh then became a fighter for righteousness, tearing down the idols and altars he had built in the land.

The lessons we draw from Manasseh's story are clear. First, how was this man restored? *It happened through afflictions.* Wicked Manasseh had shut the mouths of all the prophets in the land, leaving God one option to get through to him: *affliction.* That's when the Lord raised up the Assyrians, using them as his rod of correction. A second lesson is, *we can never give up on anyone,* even the most vile, evil person. God has ways of bringing even the wickedest sinners to himself, through affliction.

King David said his afflictions came from God's hand. David wrote, "Before I was afflicted I went astray: but now have I kept thy word.... It is good for me that I have been afflicted; that I might learn thy statutes" (Psalm 119:67, 71). These two verses explain to us how God's Word become a lamp to David's feet ...how David came to testify to the world, "Thy Word is my delight, my great love"...how he developed such a sweet prayer life...how he became a man after God's own heart. According to his own testimony, it came about *through afflictions.*

Consider: "Unless thy law had been my delights, I should then have perished in mine affliction" (119:92). This incredible revelation came to David through his suffering. He states, "It was the Lord himself who afflicted me. And, in his faithfulness, he used my afflictions to show me all my compromises. While I was in pain, he opened his Word to me and I began to see clearly."

In so many words David says, "I know now the Lord allowed it, in order to heal me of all the dross, foolishness and flesh in me. If he had not put his fear in my heart — if I hadn't had to deal with these

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issues — I wouldn't be here today. I would have gone astray. God knew what was in my heart, and he knew exactly how to get my attention."

You may think, "This is hard to accept. How could a loving God allow David's horrible troubles? Likewise, if the Lord loves me, how could he possibly allow the awful afflictions I'm facing?" In reality, what David says here is life-giving truth. He's telling us, in essence: "If we don't see the Lord working in our circumstances — if we don't believe the steps of the righteous are ordered by his hand, including our dire situations — our faith will end up crashing. We'll be totally shipwrecked."

Here is God's Word on the subject: "Thou, O God, hast proved us: thou hast tried us, as silver is tried. *Thou broughtest us into the net; thou laidst affliction upon our loins.* Thou hast caused men to ride over our heads; we went through fire and through water: but thou broughtest us out into a wealthy place" (Psalm 66:10–12). "The angel of the Lord encamps all around those that fear him, and delivers them" (34:7).

Once David came through his afflictions, he no longer cried out with anguished questions: "God, why did you let me go through such hard times? Why did you allow such deep pain?" Instead, he saw the Lord's hand in all his circumstances, especially the painful ones. He knew God was doing something eternal in him. Indeed, he realized that the afflictions we face are meant to heal us and refine us. They're to bring forth the lasting fruit of the Spirit in us: patience, kindness, longsuffering, gentleness.

"Though he cause grief, yet will he have compassion according to the multitude of his mercies. For he doth not afflict willingly nor grieve the children of men" (Lamentations 3:32–33). God has no pleasure in afflicting anyone, saint or sinner. Jeremiah is telling us, "God may chasten us, and it is grievous to us. But he doesn't bring suffering willingly. He does it with pain of heart." The Hebrew here means, literally, "His heart is not in it." His heart is not in the chastening but in the healing it brings.

Picture a surgeon and his medical team as they prepare to operate on a child who has cancer. That surgeon knows if the tumor is not removed, the child will die. For that reason, he'll use every measure to get the cancer out of that child's body, no matter the pain it causes. He knows his surgical work is going to bring deep hurt. And now, as he prepares to cut, a tear forms in his eye. It is an especially painful moment for him, because the child is his.

This is the merciful love behind every chastening of our Father. When I was a boy, my parents took God's Word literally, and when I did wrong I got spanked. (Today, this is called child abuse.) Every time my father put the belt to my backside, it was grievous to me, though he never did it hard or in anger. As he prepared to spank me, he always said, "This hurts me more than it does you." I never believed him. Then, afterward, he would say, "Come here, David, let me hug you."

I am convinced my dad's loving, consistent discipline is one of the reasons I am preaching the gospel sixty years later. Likewise, our heavenly Father knows everything in our hearts that can destroy us. And when he allows afflictions in our lives, it is to remove the deadly cancer. He doesn't want to inflict pain; that's the last thing he wants. He desires only to remove the disease that threatens his beloved children.

When afflictions come, we are quick to blame Satan. Many believers who face affliction immediately think they're under unsanctioned satanic attack. Their thoughts turn to Job, who was brutally assaulted by the devil. Or, they think of Paul, who spoke of a "messenger of Satan" sent to buffet him. They recall the passages where Paul said he was "hindered" by the devil.

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And so, when we face afflictions, we talk about Satan coming at us “like a flood.” We think of him attacking us as a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour. We can’t imagine that God may be involved.

Yet, the fact is, Satan can’t lift a finger against any child of God unless the Lord allows it. Yes, it is God who must allow our afflictions. If Satan desires to attack us, God has to first let down his wall of protection from around us. Consider what the Lord said of David: “I have found David my servant; with my holy oil have I anointed him: with whom my hand shall be established: mine arm also shall strengthen him. *The enemy shall not exact upon him; nor the son of wickedness afflict him*” (Psalm 89:20–22 italics mine).

God is telling us, in effect: “It doesn’t matter what trials David faces. Through them all, he will be delivered in God’s time. I’m declaring to the world that the devil can’t afflict anyone without my permission.” The Assyrians may have been God’s corrective rod with Manasseh — satanic forces may be the rod — but God is still in control.

Scripture tells us, “As the mountains are round about Jerusalem, so the Lord is round about his people from henceforth even for ever. For the rod of the wicked shall not rest upon the lot of the righteous; lest the righteous put forth their hands unto iniquity” (Psalm 125:2–3). We are never to fear harm from the devil. He has power only over the wicked. God places limitations on him, to go only so far with his afflictions, as he did with Job.

The devil was allowed to go only so far in buffeting the apostle Paul. As God’s people, each of us will suffer attacks from the enemy. But our Lord has promised us weapons of defense, including the shield of faith, by which “ye shall be able to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked” (Ephesians 6:16).

Paul realized that though he was under attack from Satan, the Lord had allowed it. He prayed three times to be released from his affliction, but God wouldn’t permit it. Afterward, Paul saw that without the enemy’s buffeting he might well have been destroyed by pride. After all, this man had received heavenly revelations given to no other human. Without God’s restraining afflictions, he may have crashed from vanity.

There is another common response to afflictions. When our affliction doesn’t subside, we’re tempted to think, “God must be mad at me. I’m suffering now for the sins I committed in the past.” We begin replaying all those past sins and become convinced, “I must have crossed a line there. Otherwise, why won’t my affliction end? Why doesn’t God answer my prayer for deliverance? I thought all sins were under Christ’s blood. What I did must be so awful I have to pay for it now.”

That is how Asaph the Psalmist responded to a great affliction in his life. This godly man was the Temple music director under Kings David and Solomon. In Psalm 77, Asaph describes the severe effects of his affliction: “Thou holdest mine eyes waking: I am so troubled that I cannot speak” (Psalm 77:4). We don’t know exactly what afflicted Asaph, but it was so overwhelming he couldn’t sleep at night. Although he prayed diligently, no answer was forthcoming. Heaven seemed shut to him.

In his affliction, Asaph said, “Truly God is good to Israel, even to such as are of a clean heart. But as for me, my feet were almost gone; my steps had well nigh slipped” (73:1–2). He was saying, in essence, “You have to be good in order to avoid afflictions.” What wrong doctrine, spoken by a minister of God! Why would Asaph say this?

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It was because of a painful confusion he endured. You see, in the midst of his affliction, Asaph saw that the wicked didn't suffer as he did but instead were prospering. He said, "They are corrupt, and speak wickedly concerning oppression: they speak loftily.... Their eyes stand out with fatness: they have more than heart could wish" (Psalm 73:8, 7).

Asaph was saying, in effect, "I have kept my heart pure and my hands clean. Yet I suffer while the wicked go about being blessed." He concluded, "I have cleansed my heart in vain, and washed my hands in innocence. For all the day long have I been plagued, and chastened every morning" (73:13-14). In other words: "It doesn't matter that I've been so devout. It has all been in vain." He was evidently focused on past sins.

Now we get to the source of Asaph's problem. He reveals, "When I thought to know this, it was too painful for me" (73:16). He declared, "I can't understand it. The wicked prosper, while the godly suffer. How could this be? It pains me to ponder it."

This dear man had gone about God's work — worshiping, composing hymns, leading choirs in singing God's praises — yet his heart was full of envy. When Asaph said, "My steps had well nigh slipped" (73:2), he was saying, "I struggled to walk in purity before the Lord. But all I got in return was affliction. I was so jealous of the wicked who were prospering that my faith almost crashed."

Asaph was experiencing what is called "trial by the Word." As he looked back at the miracles God had done for his people — the parting of the Red Sea, the manna from heaven, the water out of a rock — he was "tried" by God's faithfulness. Simply put, as he looked at his own life and the lack of deliverance, he became troubled.

If David's testimony is trustworthy — that God allows the afflictions of the righteous — we can know it was the Lord who troubled Asaph's spirit. In his great, loving kindness and faithfulness, he would not let Asaph go on with his crippling sin of envy. He wouldn't let him continue thinking, "God is repaying me for all my sins."

The Lord eventually brought Asaph through that dark night. But never for a moment was this man's affliction a judgment for any past sin. Asaph's salvation was never in doubt. Rather, as the author of Hebrews tells us, "Whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth" (Hebrews 12:6).

Asaph demonstrates that how we respond to our afflictions is a life-or-death matter. If we don't see the Lord at work in our afflictions, we can harden our hearts and end up shipwrecked. Our faith cannot rest on the good things God has done in the past, but on knowing him who performed those acts in faithfulness. He is with his people in all their trials, and he will not let them go.

There is a proper response for God's people in any time of affliction. The right response in any affliction is an inquiring heart. This is a heart that asks, "Lord, are you saying something to me in this? Have I been blinded to something you want to say to me?" Through the years, I have learned that when afflictions come, I am to run to the Lord with an open heart, asking, "What is this all about, Lord? What do you want to show me? I will do whatever you ask of me."

The Holy Spirit never fails to show me. Sometimes he'll say, "This is a snare of Satan, David. Beware." Or, without condemnation, he will reveal an area of compromise, saying, "Obey, and the heavens will open to you. All will become clear."

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Our salvation is not in jeopardy. Yet, though we are saved, we still are not fully sanctified. We have many issues that hinder God's fullness in us, issues of the heart we are blinded to: secret lusts, covetousness, laziness about the things of God. If we're willing to hear him, the Lord will always reveal them to us. Most important of all, if we are enduring the fires of affliction, God will reveal to us his tender, loving mercies and compassion.

When God shows us what is in our hearts — the impatience, the besetting sin, the "small" but deadening compromises — these things become grievous to us in our time of affliction. It is why David prayed: "Let, I pray thee, thy merciful kindness be for my comfort, according to thy word unto thy servant. Let thy tender mercies come unto me, that I may live: for thy law is my delight" (Psalm 119:76–77).

David cried out from his affliction, "Send me your word of comfort, Lord. Show me your tenderness. Show me your loving, everlasting mercy." David was actually claiming a promise God had given him earlier: "The Lord is gracious, and full of compassion; slow to anger, and of great mercy. The Lord is good to all: and *his tender mercies are over all his works*" (Psalm 145:8–9, italics mine ).

No matter what we're going through, God's mercy is there for us. As David says, his mercy is "over all his works" in all of his people. God isn't out to condemn or punish us. Like any loving Father, he tells his children, "Let me love you through this. I want you to know me in the midst of it. I'm using it to show you the depths of my love."

No matter how grievous our affliction may be, God is doing something special and good in us. I have a confession to make. The message I'm writing here was born out of deep wounds from friends who turned on me. Sometimes the worst afflictions come from those who are closest to you. Their words and accusations cut the deepest, because they seem to know you best.

I'm thinking of one friend especially whom I had mentored. He came to me making awful false accusations, a torrent of hurtful words that wounded me deeply. I went home from our meeting crushed. I fell on my face, pleading with the Lord: "How could my friend say those hurtful things to me? I've never felt so wounded. This is an attack from the enemy. I know in my heart the things he said aren't true."

I forgave my friend for hurting me, and I prayed for him. But something still nagged at me. There was a churning in my spirit that wouldn't stop. I went back to prayer, this time asking, "Lord, are you in this somewhere? Did you allow this? Are you trying to say something to me?"

The Lord answered me with much-needed correction to a particular area in my life. The churning in me over my friend's accusations was actually a wake-up call over an issue that could have destroyed me. It caused me to stop, take a look inside my heart, and ask Jesus to reveal to me anything that was hindering me from moving on in him.

When we humble ourselves in the midst of affliction, God is faithful to give us marvelous revelations of his mercy. He did just that for me. As I received his loving correction, the Holy Spirit whispered to me, "David, go to my Word. Do a search on my mercy, my loving kindness, my readiness to forgive."

The truth is, whenever God has done a major work in my life, it has been during my darkest hours. I have learned my most lasting life lessons in my times of deepest pain. That is when his mercy came — when I finally stopped trying to figure things out and instead just held on, trusting him to deliver me

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and work his way in me.

I have read numerous books on apologetics by wonderful men of God. They try to explain the suffering of saints whose trials continue day after day, year after year, sometimes for a lifetime. But most answers never satisfy me. I simply can't explain theologically why some of the godliest people seem to suffer the most and the longest.

Instead, I have drawn faith from humble people who have witnessed God's faithfulness to them in their unthinkable afflictions. I think of Sam, an elder in our church, who has lived with excruciating pain for fifteen years. He has had surgery after surgery and yet still walks with a cane. Every time I see Sam, he has God's Word on his lips and Christ's sweetness on his face. He prays daily for me and for our pastoral staff. To me, Sam is a hero of the faith who belongs with those listed in Hebrews 11.

I think also of Jimmie, the husband of my longtime secretary. Since childhood, Jimmie has suffered cluster migraine headaches that even the most potent medication can't relieve. Over the years he has lost most of his eyesight and hearing. Yet I know few people who are as kind and generous as Jimmie. I call him Mr. Fantastic. This man lives with excruciating pain, yet each time I ask how he's doing, he answers, "Fantastic."

Finally, I think of my wife, Gwen, who has endured more than twenty-five surgeries, several to remove cancer. She has lost much of her eyesight to macular degeneration. Over the course of fifty years, Gwen has known intense physical pain, with very few of those years pain free. Yet she doesn't complain. As I look at her, and at Sam and Jimmie, I see witnesses of whom I have to say, "God is faithful."

Many are the afflictions of the righteous, as David says — but God, in his time and way, delivers us from them all. And his is a lasting deliverance, one the devil can't hinder. Why? He resurrects us not just from suffering but from doubt and fear. We are enabled to face any pain, any problem, because we know he is with us in the midst of it.

Here are more of God's promises for the afflicted:

"Our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory" (2 Corinthians 4:17).

"The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and plenteous in mercy. He will not always chide: neither will he keep his anger for ever. He hath not dealt with us after our sins; nor rewarded us according to our iniquities. For as the heaven is high above the earth, so great is his mercy toward them that fear him. As far as the east is from the west, so far hath he removed our transgressions from us. Like as a father pitieth his children, so the Lord pitieth them that fear him. For he knoweth our frame; he remembereth that we are dust" (Psalm 103:8–14).