

## THE RIGHTEOUSNESS OF GOD IN AFFLICTION

In 2014, a Christian-based film production company by the name of *Pure Flix* released the movie “God’s Not Dead.” A saying used throughout that film, as well as in “God’s Not Dead #2,” goes like this:

“God is good, all the time; and all the time, God is good.”

That’s a true statement, isn’t it? We know that to be true in our *minds*, but I daresay that most of us—at one time or another—have gone through things where we have not necessarily *felt* that that was true. If we are honest, there have been times that we have questioned God’s fairness and goodness and righteousness. How can I make such statement? Because God’s Word says as much!

**Ezekiel 18:25** “Yet ye say, The way of the Lord is not equal. Hear now, O house of Israel; Is not my way equal? are not your ways unequal?” Their assertion was that God’s way was not “equal”—it was not balanced; it was not fair. God was doing them wrong—not right!

God’s people at the time of Malachi were even bolder in their complaints against God and basically said it doesn’t pay to serve God.

**Malachi 3:13-14** “Your words have been stout against me, saith the Lord. Yet ye say, What have we spoken so much against thee? <sup>14</sup>Ye have said, It is vain to serve God: and what profit is it that we have kept His ordinance, and that we have walked mournfully before the Lord of hosts?”

Asaph seems to take it even a step further and states that doing right not only is vain—meaning fruitless and worthless—it actually “backfires” because we end up being “plagued” and “chastened!”

**Psalms 73:13-14** “Verily I have cleansed my heart in vain, and washed my hands in innocency. <sup>14</sup>For all the day long have I been plagued, and chastened every morning.”

As we go on in this series on Biblical terms and the concept of “righteousness,” this morning I want us to consider the righteousness of God in affliction. “God is good all the time; and all the time, God is good.” Does that mean God is good when He afflicts us; when He chastens us? It certainly does!

Please take your Bibles and turn to Lamentations 1. In the way of a quick background, the year was approximately 586 B.C., the place was Jerusalem, the author—although not named—was almost certainly the prophet Jeremiah, and the occasion was the capture of Jerusalem by King Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians. Jeremiah, the weeping prophet, laments what is happening to God’s people. Notice verse 18 where he speaks as if he himself were the city of Jerusalem.

Now to Chapter 3. Consider first...

### **1. The pain of affliction (3:1-18)**

#### A. Produced by God

--v 1 “by the rod of **His** wrath”

--v 2 “**He** hath led me, and brought me”

--v 3 “Surely against me is He turned; **He turneth** His hand against me all the day”

--v 4 “My flesh and my skin hath **He** made old...”

If we were to take the time and read through verse 18, we would see Jeremiah referring to his affliction as being from God **23** times!

#### B. Personal; it was happening to him (3:1-18)

This affliction is not something that was happening to someone else—it was happening personally to Jeremiah

--v 1 “I am the man that hath seen affliction”

--v 5 "He hath builded against **me**, and compassed **me**..."

--v 6 "He hath set me..."

--v 7 "He hath hedged **me** about...he hath made **my** chain heavy"

--v 9 "He hath inclosed **my** ways with a hewn stone..."

Again, if we were to count every instance through verse 18 where Jeremiah referred to himself, we would see roughly **30 times** where he states that this affliction is personally coming upon **him**.

It was affliction that was produced by God, it was personally directed to him, and thirdly, it was...

### C. Puzzling; why wasn't God helping him (3:7-14)

--v 7 "He that hedged me about, that I cannot get out:"

Instead of a way out, I'm hedged in and cannot escape

--v 8 "Also when I cry and shout, He shutteth out my prayer."

Instead of answering prayer, He shuts it out

--v 9b "...He hath made my paths crooked"

Instead of making my way easy, He is making it hard

--v 10 "He was unto me as a bear lying in wait, and as a lion in secret places."

Instead of protecting me, He is hunting me down and making me afraid.

--v 12-13 "He hath bent His bow, and set me as a mark for the arrow. He hath caused the arrows of His quiver to enter into my reins" (my kidneys; my innermost being).

Instead of helping me, He has made me His target and is shooting at me!

--14 "I was a derision to all my people; and their song all the day."

And instead of sticking up for me, God allows me to be mocked when I was warning them on His behalf!

We feel like that sometimes, don't we? We feel God is against us and is hunting us and hurting us and ignoring us. Affliction is hard—it is painful and personal and puzzling. So, what are we to do in times like these? Where do we look for help and hope?

Notice verses 18-21. Jeremiah is helpless and hopeless when he remembers his affliction and misery, but a transition takes place in verse 21. There is once again hope because he turns his focus from his misery to his Maker. He remembers and looks to and thinks about....

## **2. The person of God in affliction**

Although Jeremiah is well aware that God brought on the affliction, he also knows that God is the One he must look to **during** the affliction. He does not give up on God and look elsewhere for relief; instead he encourages himself in the person—the character—of God. First, Jeremiah has hope because...

### A. God's compassion fails not (vs 22-23, 31-33)

--v 22-23 "It is of the Lord's mercies we are not consumed, because **His compassions fail not**. They (His compassions) are new every morning: great is thy faithfulness."

Jeremiah was convinced that the compassion of God would not fail and that the affliction would end. That thought continues in verse 31.

--v 31 "For the Lord will not cast off for ever:"

Although it felt like God had forsaken him and was not listening to him and seemed to be hunting and hurting instead of helping him, Jeremiah was confident that God would not cast off forever.

--v 32 "But though He cause grief, **yet will He have compassion** according to the multitude of His mercies." As certain as God is behind the grief, He promises to have compassion.

--v 33 "For He doth not afflict willingly nor grieve the children of men." Because He delights in blessing and compassion—and not afflicting or grieving—Jeremiah was confident that the time of trial will end.

**Psalm 30:5** "For His anger endureth but a moment; in His favour is life: weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning."

Jeremiah has hope because God is compassionate. He also has hope because He knows that God will deliver him. Just as God's **compassion** fails not,

B. God's deliverance fails not (vs 24-26)

--v 24 "The LORD is my portion, saith my soul; therefore will I hope in Him."

Think about the word "portion" for a moment. The prodigal son said to his father, "Father, give me the **portion** of goods that falleth to me" (Luke 15:12). How long did that portion last? We don't know for sure because we aren't told, but we do know this—it did not last forever; it ran out.

Jeremiah had hope because the LORD—Jehovah God—was his portion.

--His portion, the everlasting, ever-living God would always be—He would never die or cease to exist.

--His portion, the all-powerful God, would never run out of ability or strength

--His portion, the all-knowing God, would never be at a loss as to what to do

--v 25-26 "The Lord **is good** unto them that wait for Him, to the soul that seeketh Him. It is good that a man should both hope and quietly wait for the salvation of the Lord." "Salvation"—in this case deliverance from affliction—will come. Jeremiah had that confidence and so he trusted...and waited.

We will come back to these verses in a little bit, but for now consider this: Who do you look to in times of affliction? Where do you go? What do you do? Jeremiah went to the LORD. Do you?

Next, let's consider....

**3. The purposes of God in affliction**

God has reasons for affliction, doesn't He? God is deliberate in what He does, not random. He has a purpose for bringing affliction into our lives. There are primarily two reasons God brings affliction/trials into our life.

A. As a punishment for our sins

Notice verse 39—"Wherefore doth a living man complain, a man for the punishment of his sins?" God brought chastening to the **nation** because of their sin.

**Lamentations 1:8** says "Jerusalem hath grievously sinned..."

**Lamentations 1:18**—the verse we started with—says "The LORD is righteous; for I have rebelled against His commandment..."

**Lamentations 4:6** "For the punishment of the iniquity of the daughter of my people is greater than the punishment of the sin of Sodom..."

Notice Chapter 3, verse 42—"We have transgressed and have rebelled: thou hast not pardoned."

God brought chastening to the nation because of their sin and brings chastening upon us because He loves us and wants to show us that what we are doing displeases Him. Would we ever repent if there were no consequences for sin?

A second reason God brings affliction is...

B. As a preventer of sin

Why was Paul given a thorn in the flesh? The answer is found in...

**II Corinthians 12:7** "And lest I should be exalted above measure through the abundance of the revelations, there was given to me a thorn in the flesh to buffet me, lest I should be exalted above measure." Twice in the same verse we see Paul was not given a thorn in the flesh because he **had** sinned—he was given the thorn in the flesh to **prevent** him from sinning.

Why was Jeremiah being afflicted? We don't know for sure so we can't say for sure, but I would argue that although the nation sinned grievously against God, Jeremiah as an individual had not. His affliction, then, was more like Paul's—to mold his character and keep him dependent upon God.

#### 4. The plan to take in light of affliction

Afflictions will come whether we want them to or not—and whether we are *ready* for them or not. Whether they are sent our way **because** of sin or sent our way to **keep** us from sin, the fact is that if you aren't in a trial now, one is on its way! What are you going to do when that happens? God through Jeremiah tells us what we should do.

##### A. Response if affliction comes our way **because** of sin (vs 39-41)

###### **i. Reflect on your ways** (v 40a)

Notice verse 39. Don't complain for being punished for your sins; reflect on **why** you are being punished—search and try your ways" (v 40). I believe a good approach we all should have when trials come into our lives is to ask ourselves whether or not God is trying to get our attention regarding a particular sin in our life. Sadly, we are so quick to declare ourselves innocent that we often times aren't honest when we evaluate our lives.

###### **ii. Repent of your ways** (v 40b)

Don't just reflect on your sin and agree with God about it—"turn again to the LORD." Repenting does not just mean turning back to God—it also means turning your back on your sin!

Vs 41 is a fascinating verse: "Let us lift up our heart with our hands unto God in the heavens." What does that mean? It certainly does **not** mean we take our literal heart out with our bare hands and give it to God!

I won't be overly dogmatic, but it sure seems to be saying this: God wants us to give Him **both** our heart and our hands. Our heart is our affection; our hands are our actions. He doesn't just want our affection—our affection for Him should impact our actions.

It also may go along with the concept of repentance. Don't just turn back to me in heart—cleanse your hands. James makes this same connection between the hands and heart in **James 4:8** "Draw nigh to God, and He will draw nigh to you. Cleanse your hands, ye sinners; and purify your hearts, ye double minded."

##### B. Response if affliction comes our way **without** known sin (vs 24-26)

###### **i. Hope in God** (v 24)

###### **ii. Wait for Him and seek Him** (v 25)

###### **iii. Hope and quietly wait** (v 26)

Seems pretty simple when you see it in an outline. Three verses with three things to do: hope, seek, and wait. It is anything but simple, though, when you feel alone...and confused...and forsaken by God...and that your prayers aren't being heard...and you are being misunderstood...and doubts creep in...and you wonder if it will ever end.

My wife and I went through such a time with one of our daughters during her senior year of high school. The other kids were out of the house and it was just the 3 of us. No one knows the anguish of heart Louise and I went through as we watched her fall deeper and deeper into the depths of depression. The best way I can describe it is watching someone hanging on—by only their fingers—a piece of driftwood in the middle of an ocean and expecting any moment their grip to fail.

There was a phrase from a verse that we clung to and prayed over; it is found in II Chronicles 20:12 "...for we have no might against this great company that cometh against us; neither know we what to do: but our eyes are upon thee."

That's how we felt. We had no might—and we were at our wit's end—but we hoped in God and sought God and waited for God. And He heard...and helped...and healed...

Am I equipped to help you go through such a trial? As much as I'd like to, I *can't* and if you think I can, you are missing the point of verse 26: "It is good that a man should both hope and quietly wait for the salvation of the LORD."

God is good all the time; and all the time, God is good—even when He afflicts us.

## **CONCLUDING THOUGHTS—AND QUESTIONS TO ASK OURSELVES:**

1. Why do trials come? Is it because God hates us and wants us to be miserable? No, it is because God loves us and wants us to turn from sin and come to Him.
2. How do you look at sin? We look at sin differently than God does and we can get into trouble trying to categorize sins, but there is one sin that is greater than all the rest: trying to get to heaven by your own works. God is holy; God hates sin and God provided a payment for your sin—His name is Jesus. If you reject Jesus and insist on trying to work your way to heaven, there awaits an eternal punishment for your sins.
3. What do you do when trials come? Do you turn away from God—or to Him? Why would you turn away from the only One who can help you?