



▣ *Teth*

REDEFINING THE GOOD

SERIES: PSALM 119—THE JOURNEY OF AN OLD SOUL

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Psalm 119:65-72
Fourth Message
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Having three daughters in three different schools in this new academic year has encouraged me to do a lot of thinking about the education process. My high schooler, who up to this point in her schooling has been dealing with basic math, is preparing to face new challenges in higher math classes. Algebra can be a difficult transition for a teenager, as equations and unknown variables become the order of the day. The next level is geometry, where the mind is challenged by the third dimension; though one is writing in two dimensions, one has to think in three. Trigonometry is next, and then calculus; the student learns to apply principles and laws to the known universe, in a science like physics. Some even go beyond physics, in company with the Einsteins of this world, and work in four dimensions. At this level, the old laws no longer apply, not because the old system was inadequate, but because the new has a more elevated vantage point and a broader context. At each stage in the learning process the student's mind must undergo reorientation; old concepts must be redefined by new perspectives. If the student is venture-some, this can be thrilling, exciting stuff, but if he or she is timid, and content with the status quo, it can be a very threatening change.

Perhaps we can use this illustration as a metaphor to help us learn more about the spiritual life. The author of Psalm 119, which we are studying in this series of messages, likens the believer's prayer life to a journey to the top of a majestic mountain. The climb is accomplished in stages, and every now and then the pilgrim reaches a plateau that presents him with a new vista. From the new vantage point everything seems different. He perceives a new definition of reality, not because he was unable to see it before, but because his perspective has been enlarged.

Psalm 119 was written, to continue with our metaphor, halfway up this mountain, as it were. The psalmist has arrived at a plateau. Below, he sees the shadows of Israel's earthly kingdom, with its kings and sacrifices, founded under the Old Covenant of Deuteronomy. As he looks upward, however, he sees a heavenly kingdom, radiant in its glory, presided over by a heavenly King who will inaugurate a New Covenant. Like the math student who is confronted by new dimensions in physics, the psalmist is forced by this new vision to redefine all of the concepts of the Old Covenant, truths which he had been laboring under up to this point, and give them new meaning. The pull of the old earthly kingdom is losing its power as he feels himself drawn upward toward new realities.

Today then, we come to the letter *Teth*, which is the first letter of the Hebrew word *Tov*, meaning good. *Good* is one of the most important and frequently utilized words in the Bible. It is used 741 times in the OT, and we find it in every book except the books Obadiah, Habakkuk, and Haggai. The psalmist uses this word six times in the text and

builds his entire message around his redefinition of it.

Psalm 119:65-72:

**Good You have done with Your servant,
O LORD, according to Your word.
Good discernment and knowledge teach me,
For in Your commandments I have trusted.
Before I was afflicted I went astray,
But now I keep Your word.
You are good and cause good;
Teach me Your statutes.
The arrogant have smeared a lie against me,
(But) I with all my heart observe Your precepts.
Their heart is covered with fat,
(But) I delight in Your law.
Good for me it was that I was afflicted,
That I may be taught Your statutes.
Better to me is the law of Your mouth,
Than thousands of gold and silver pieces.**

As we have already seen, this psalm is written in the form of an acrostic, with eight verses penned for each of the twenty-two letters in the Hebrew alphabet. Before we get into the psalmist's new definition of the word good, let us first see what the term meant originally, especially as it related to the Old Covenant.

I. The "good" defined: Deuteronomy

"Good" was used to describe anything that was utilitarian, useful and functional. It was used by the craftsman upon completion of his work, to demonstrate the usefulness of what his hands had fashioned. This is the word that God repeatedly exclaimed when he had completed the different stages of his creative work in Genesis: "It is *good!*" How meaningful this word becomes then, for instance, when we remember what God said, concerning man, "It is *not good* for man to be alone." Under the Old Covenant, God bestowed "good" by blessing the original creation with fertility. In fact, this term is a synonym for rain. The good Lord gave forth his rain, making the original creation fertile, and thereby blessing man with an abundance of material blessings. For man to enter into that goodness, however, he had to keep commandments. Listen to these examples, from the book of Deuteronomy: "Do what is right and *good* in the LORD's sight, so that it may go *well* with you and you may go in and take over the *good* land that the LORD promised on oath to your forefathers" (Deut.6:18, NIV). "...obey the LORD, and observe all His commandments...then the LORD your God will cause you to have an excess for *good* in all the work of your hand, in the offspring of your body and in the offspring of your cattle and in the produce of the ground" (Deut.30:8-9, NASB mod.). The Creator God bestowed the blessings of fertility in marriage, with herds and crops, and man entered in this goodness by being obedient, by keeping law.

From the vantage point of his new perspective, however, writing a thousand years after these texts in Deuteronomy were written, the psalmist redefines the word good, as we will see in the next verses.

II. The “good” redefined 119:65-68

**Good You have done with Your servant,
O LORD, according to Your word.
Good discernment and knowledge teach me,
For in Your commandments I have trusted.
Before I was afflicted I went astray,
But now I keep Your word.
You are good and cause good;
Teach me Your statutes.**

(a) The redefinition of the good: Being disciplined by God

What is the good which the psalmist seeks from God? Notice that three different times he uses the phrase, “teach me.” He wants to be disciplined by God! This is what he regards as good. He sees good, not in terms of material blessing, but in terms of being disciplined by God to become like him.

But the entryway to good is perhaps not what we might expect.

(b) The gateway to the good: Affliction

The psalmist is seeking good because it seems to him that the world is upside-down. Following the exile, the wicked, who had turned their backs on God’s ways, seemed to be blessed with material goodness (“their heart is covered with fat”), while he was burdened with affliction. The world was topsy-turvy. But though the door of earthly blessing was shut, a window of heavenly light was opened to him as God taught him, personally and directly. That “goodness of God” was better than anything the earth had to offer. What was good was to be disciplined by God.

And the gateway to this discipleship was affliction. To enter into this new good he had to lose something of the old creation. I can testify to this from my own experience. When I was 11, before I came to Christ, I prayed for each member of my family, asking God to bless them with goodness, and asking him to bless all the sick children of the world. This was my prayer structure, in effect. In high school, I felt a new freedom, and I began asking God for things. I asked him for straight A’s in my classes, that I become captain of the gymnastics team, and I asked him for a girlfriend. And I was granted these blessings of materialism and popularity. Now it was the gift of these and other physical blessings that led me to Christ. I loved the God who had so blessed me. But then, when I met Christ, like the psalmist, my world turned upside-down. My athletic career was hampered when I suffered a concussion; after my marriage, my wife and I had to subsist on very limited funds; then we lost our first child, a son. When we lost a daughter, however, I found I had reached a plateau where my theology changed radically. The OT taught me that I had to give my firstborn to God; that was keeping commandment; that was God’s right. After we lost our son, in my heart I felt God owed me and that he would never put me through a similar experience again. Then my daughter died. I was shocked and horrified. My theology crumbled. But God was birthing me out of the Old Covenant. In the New Covenant, in which I was now placed, I discovered that he can require anything of me. Now all of life is a pure gift; he is not covenanting to grant me any material blessings. The three children that we have since been blessed with were not granted me because of my obedience to God’s commandments; they are gracious gifts from a loving heavenly Father.

Seeing this radical difference between the OT, where the blessings and the kingdom are described in physical terms, and the NT, where they are described in spiritual terms, many people wonder if there are not two different programs—one for Israel, involving physical and material blessing, and, for the church, a program of affliction and suffering. Has God scrapped the first curriculum because it didn’t work and replaced it with a new education program? The psalmist answers this question in the first verse of our text. No, he says emphatically, this was God’s original intent: “Good You have done with Your servant, O LORD, *according to Your word.*” The affliction and loss of material blessings which he suffered, and the discipleship experience which he had gained as a result, he understood as God’s original program for him. There was one program, not two. Here is how John Calvin put it: “The Lord of old willed that His people direct and elevate their minds to the heavenly heritage, yet, to nourish them better in this hope, He displayed it for them to see, and so to speak, taste, under earthly benefits...we have to meditate on it [the heavenly heritage] directly.” The OT saints, living under the Old Covenant, saw this plainly. In the land of promise, Abraham was willing to live, suffering as an alien, because, as the author of Hebrews points out, he saw that the land was not the real promise; it was merely a shadow of a heavenly land “whose architect and builder is God.” In Psalm 17, David recognized that the wicked seemed to have all the material blessings of the Old Covenant—they had children, and they left all their inheritance to them—yet he said, “As for me...I will be satisfied with your likeness when I awake” (Psa. 17:15). He had discerned that the true goodness of God was becoming like him through the resurrection. That is one ultimate program. In the same way we teach our children arithmetic, seeking to lead them to higher concepts of math as they grow, so God teaches truth to his children, leading us in stages to the new heavenly realities.

These verses demonstrate the psalmist’s gratitude for his being led to this new level of theology.

(c) Appreciation for the good: A changed life

**Good discernment and knowledge teach me,
For in Your commandments I have trusted.
Before I was afflicted I went astray,
But now I keep Your word.
You are good and cause good;
Teach me Your statutes. (119:66-68)**

First, the psalmist is thankful for the permanent changes that had occurred in his life. Under the Old Covenant, his spiritual life was filled with inconsistencies, but now, through affliction and suffering, he has found himself trusting God’s commandments. Faith had been born in his heart, making him consistent in his walk. And he appreciates the sovereignty of God. “You are good and cause good,” says the writer. What insight! He saw that behind the words of the arrogant who were smearing him with their lies, lay the sovereign hand of God who was good and was causing good for him. Because God is sovereign and behind it all, the psalmist can forgive and move on to the greater things. This calls to mind the story of Joseph in the OT. Joseph’s brothers ganged up on him and sold him as a slave, yet here is Joseph’s amazing analysis, spoken to his brothers years later, of what had actually happened: “Do not be grieved or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life” (Gen. 45:5). “And as for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for *good* in order to bring about this present result to preserve many people alive” (Gen. 50:19). Many Christians find it hard to forgive their families for past abuses, yet if they learn to accept that behind these

things lay the good hand of God working for their good, then they can forgive. If we don't, like Joseph, perceive that God was behind everything that happened, then we will never be able to forgive.

Finally, the psalmist so appreciates the new spiritual appetites which suffering had awakened in his spirit that he petitions God for more good.

**Good discernment and knowledge teach me,
For in Your commandments I have trusted.
You are good and cause good;
Teach me Your statutes.** (119: 66, 68)

What is he saying here? Well, he is so appreciative for what suffering has done in his life to draw him closer to God and become like him, he prays for more of it! It is in this light that we should interpret that well known verse, Romans 8:28: "God works all things together for the good..." What is "the good"? Remember that the context of this verse is suffering. The Holy Spirit prays for the believer, and brings suffering into his life, and through it conforms the believer to his image. This is the "good" which we receive from the hand of the good Lord, and this is what we should mean when we say that God is good. A number of years ago, I wrote a poem to God in appreciation for the spiritual appetites which were awakened in my soul when I was rejected for sharing the light of the gospel with a close friend. I was so rejected and hurt I could not even speak. I wondered why it was that suffering was the gateway that leads Christians into the spiritual dimension, and I wrote these lines:

THAT STRANGE GATE

Why is it now, my soul is moved
To taste of Thy gracious love,
When all before it seemed cold and dead,
Though my eye could see so much,
Of Thy glorious grace.

Yes, now my soul drinks deeply,
The river is lively and flowing.
It tastes sweet.
But the gateway is the ache,
of rejection,
of appearing foolish,
of knowing one can't convince.

My lips wax not eloquent, but slippery,
My heart knows little of boldness,
It caves in to timidity,
My lips are silent,
But my eyes see You, your hand by mine.
O that You would keep me in such a sweet place,
Under your wings—
To know my broken ways,
This is true joy.

Don't let me go,
Pursue me deeper still.
Then I shall tell of your gracious love to the saints,
Especially those who hold you dear,
Those simple ones, whom I love.

O to be swallowed up in Thee!

So the psalmist redefines the good as a deep spiritual appetite to be disciplined by God; and this hunger is awakened by suffering and affliction.

Next, he identifies the realm where he experienced this discipleship.

III. The realm where the goodness of God is experienced (119:69-70)

**The arrogant have smeared a lie against me,
(But) I with all my heart observe Your precepts.
Their heart is covered with fat,
(But) I delight in Your law.**

Certain environments are more conducive than others to cultivate discipleship. Some believers think that an all-Christian environment, separated from the world, will intensify their discipleship process, so they send their children to Christian schools for the duration of their schooling, or try to surround themselves with nothing but Christians. I believe that a Christian ghetto can be spiritually dangerous. Your spirituality is liable to wither away and die there.

(a) Intense wickedness

In contrast, the psalmist found himself living among arrogant people—an immoral majority—who opposed his morality. They gathered together as one to smear lies against him, to cover up what was true. They slandered his reputation, at a cost to him financially (verse 70). And when he went to confront the issue, their heart was so hardened ("their heart is covered with fat"), nothing that he said could penetrate it. This speaks exactly to the situation confronting the Crisis Pregnancy Center which was slandered recently by a local newspaper. The director of the center spent two hours being interviewed by the reporter, yet not one thing she said was reported.

(b) Produces intense godliness

When the door of earthly acceptance was slammed shut in the psalmist's face, however, it was then that a heavenly window was opened up to him. This is why he expresses appreciation for the new heart he now had to observe God's precepts. This new spiritual appetite motivates him to flee to the word, where he delights in God's law. Persecution had produced in him a wholehearted love for God's commandments. Compromise is out of the question when you are in enemy territory. If you are not wholehearted in your commitment, you will die. This is what the psalmist found to be true. In John 6:68, in the midst of spreading apostasy, Peter said to Jesus, "You have the words of eternal life." The multitudes on the beach in Galilee had deserted Jesus when they discovered that he had not come to feed them bread, but to be their Messiah. Next, when Jesus said in the synagogue, "Unless you eat my body and drink my blood, you have not life in yourselves," the text says, "many of the disciples went back to the things they had left behind." When Jesus said to the twelve, "One of you will deny me," it was then, in the context of apostasy, that Peter said, "You have the words of eternal life." Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, writing about his own experience in the *Gulag Archipeligo* accounts, has a helpful word for us here:

When people express vexation, in my presence, over the West's tendency to crumble, its political shortsightedness, its divisiveness, its confusion—I recall too: 'Were we, before passing through the Archipelago, more steadfast? Firmer in our thoughts?' And that is why I turn back to the years of my imprisonment and say, sometimes to the astonishment of those about me: 'Bless you, prison!' Leo Tolstoy was right when he dreamed of being put in prison. At a certain moment that giant began to dry up. He actually needed prison as a drought needs a shower of rain! All the

writers who wrote about prison but who did not themselves serve time there considered it their duty to express sympathy for prisoners and to curse prison. I have served enough time there. I nourished my soul there, and I say without hesitation: 'Bless you, prison, for having been in my life!'

The psalmist discovered that the best arena to experience the goodness of God was in the midst of an evil world, where he was in the minority, where it cost him, and where he had no human recourse.

So, having redefined from his own experience the goodness of God, he concludes this section by praising God for this goodness.

IV. Praise for the goodness of God (119:71-72)

**Good for me it was that I was afflicted,
That I may be taught Your statutes.
Better to me is the law of Your Mouth,
Than thousands of gold and silver pieces.**

(a) The goodness of God is better than the approval of men

In verse 71 he compares the goodness of God and the approval of men. When we say, "I hope everything goes well," what we are actually hoping for is that circumstances will run smoothly, that we will be well liked and approved of by men. In other words, we pray for ease of life as far as relationships are concerned. But when the psalmist prays, "I hope everything goes well," what he is actually saying is, "I hope I am afflicted that I might be disciplined by God in order to be free from man's approval!" To him, the goodness of God is better than the approval of men.

Next, he compares the goodness of God and material success.

(b) The goodness of God is better than an easy life

Again, when we pray, "I hope everything goes well," we are praying that we be successful, that circumstances go smoothly, without heavy cost and mishaps—for an easy life, in other words. But the psalmist prays, "I will endure poverty in order to be disciplined by God to enjoy his eternal wealth." The goodness of God is better than material success.

I will make three applications for our consideration from this text.

V. Doctrinal applications

(a) Climb the mountain!

O Christian, it is time to press on beyond the ABC's of the Christian life! Let us acquaint ourselves with the true goodness of God. This theme is no minor concern in the NT. Two complete books in the NT, Galatians and Hebrews, were written to those who refused to let go of the Old Covenant, those who wanted to return to the shadows. We can't go back; God doesn't want us to. Let us press on up the mountain where we may walk with the Einsteins of the faith. "Where do I go to climb the mountain?" you ask. My reply is, Don't flee from the wicked and cloister yourselves in a monastery. Place yourself among the minority, where it costs you, where you have no one to turn to but God.

Secondly,

(b) Open your windows!

Try to imagine your soul as a house that has many doors leading to earthly blessings—your spouse, children, wealth, health, success, family approval, etc. Now remember that the psalmist discovered that heavenly blessing became his when these doors were slammed shut. As the believer makes his way up the mountain, he or she will lose all these earthly blessings. When this happens, you can respond by growing bitter and angry, or you can open a heavenly window and allow light to enter until your soul is flooded with God's radiant light and your heart catches fire for his school of discipleship. It bothers me that when they reach this critical juncture, many Christians won't let go; they become angry instead. They consult counselors who advise them to pry open the doors to these earthly gardens and force their way in to find blessing once more. When they do so, they discover that everything lies in ruins; the vines are lifeless and the fountains broken. They are looking for blessing in the wrong place, for these gardens don't have the blessing to give. When you find that a door has been shut to you, what you must do instead is open a window. Then, like Martin Luther, you can stand on the Scriptures, against the world, because you have been freed from all earthly concerns. You will be free from the old creation, free from emotional attachments to family, free from riches, free from your circumstances. This is how God wants us to live. The church today is lacking backbone. We need to climb the mountain, open the windows of heaven, and let the light of God shine through.

Thirdly, I would say, praise God!

(c) Petition and praise

Can you say, with the psalmist, "Good for me that I was afflicted, in order that I might keep your word"? Here is an exercise for you this week: Write your own psalm to demonstrate your appreciation for God's goodness to you. Can you say, "It was good for me that I lost...a wife, a daughter, a job, a promotion, my health, my wealth"? Can you say, with the apostle Paul,

"Whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ. More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but dung in order that I may gain Christ, and may be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith, that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death; in order that I may attain to the resurrection from the dead" (Philippians 3:7-11).

*Good for me it was that I was afflicted,
That I may be taught Your statutes.*

Amen.

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