

Two Good Things

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A SERMON DELIVERED

BY C. H. SPURGEON,

AT THE METROPOLITAN TABERNACLE, NEWINGTON.

"It is good for me that I have been afflicted; that I might learn Your statutes." [Psalm 119:71](#).

"It is good for me to draw near to God: I have put my trust in the Lord God, that I may declare all Your works." [Psalm 73:28](#).

THERE is an old proverb which says, "When a man is 40 he is either a fool or a physician," that is to say, he either does not know anything or else he begins to know what is good for him! Some of us who are beyond that age think that we know, in some measure, what is good for us. We are not inclined to be very positive as to what is good for other people, but there are one or two things in reference to ourselves of which we say very dogmatically, "They are good for me." We have undergone such a sufficient investigation, experiment and personal trial that we are not in any fear of being contradicted, or, if we should be, we put our foot down and defy the contradiction!

The two things in my two texts I am certain about and I believe there are many here who share my positiveness. The first is that whatever it may be for other people, "it is good for me to have been afflicted." And the second is that whatever it may be to other people, "it is good for me to draw near to God." We assert this, not because we have been told so, but because of personal proof!! And we assert it now, not as young beginners who are buckling on their harness and who think themselves certain, but as those who have gone some distance in the pilgrimage of life and know by actual test and matter of fact that it is so.

Beloved Brothers and Sisters, during our lives we have met with many things which we know were not good for us. Some things have been manifestly bad. Sin is always poisonous, whatever form it takes. Error is always injurious, however insidious may be its shape and however poetic may be the terms in which it is expressed. We pray God that we may have nothing to do with sin or with error, for these things cannot be good—they must be evil. We have also met with certain things which, at the time, appeared to us to be good and, under some aspects, might have been so. But we are not sure, at the present moment, whether they were good or not. We have enjoyed soft hours of ease which, perhaps, weakened us, or sunshiny times of high delight which, in a measure, turned our brain.

There have been allotted to us times of learning in which we made great acquisitions of knowledge, but "knowledge puffs up" and we fear we were puffed up. There have been calms with us when the seabirds sat upon the waters and the seas were glassy as a lake, for

the winds were hushed. But the calm was treacherous and it bred ill savor and unhealthiness within our spirit. I am not sure, my Friend, though you thought it a fine day when you grew rich—I am not sure that it was a good thing for you to be wealthy—for you have not been half as spiritually-minded or half as happy as you used to be. Yes, you did enter into a much larger sphere, and you thought it a noble thing. You almost rang the bells about it. Are you quite sure that it was good for you? Are you as good a man in the great sphere as you were in the little one?

Do you live as near to God, now, with that great business to handle, as you did when your hat covered your whole estate and you went to bed at night with no fear of robbers, for you had nothing to lose? Much that seems good is only good in the seeming. As for the two things before us in our texts, we have no question about them! We know that it is good for us that we have been afflicted. We know that it is good for us that we should draw near to God. We will talk about these undoubted jewels and may God grant that our talk may be profitable.

I. Turning to the 119th Psalm, at the 71st verse, we will talk of that good thing first—AFFLICTION HAS BEEN GOOD FOR US. "It is good for me that I have been afflicted; that I might learn Your statutes." I repeat what I said just now—every man must speak for himself—we are not sure that affliction is good for everybody. Some persons have been soured by affliction. They fell into trouble and they rebelled against God. And so the trouble did not work in them any

permanent good; it rather developed their combative tendencies and they have ever since remained with their hands against other men—compelling others to lift their hands against them.

I have known individuals in a family who seemed to have a spite against everyone they saw simply because they were disappointed in early life, or had made a venture and sustained a loss. They grew sour, they keep sour and they grow more sour every day till one wonders what strength of vinegar will yet flow through their veins! It is not good for some people to have been afflicted at all and yet it is not the fault of the affliction—it is the fault of the persons afflicted. It might have produced in them a splendid character if all had been right to begin with! But, inasmuch as all was wrong, that very process which should have ripened them into sweetness has hastened them to rottenness. That same thing which, in gracious souls, has brought forth everything that is pure and lovely, has, in others, produced everything that is malicious and envious. I hope, however, that I may say of many here present, or that they can say of themselves, "It is good for me that I have been afflicted."

The enquiry is—How has it been good? First, it has been good in connection with many other good things. It has acted as a counteractive with reference to the great blessings which God has bestowed upon us in other ways. We are so constituted that we cannot bear very much prosperity. Some men might have been rich, but God knew they could not bear it and

so He has never suffered them to be tempted above what they are able to bear. Others might have been famous, but they would have been ruined by pride and so the Lord, in tender mercy, has withheld from them an opportunity of distinguishing themselves, denying them this apparent advantage for their real good. Where God favors any man with prosperity He will send a corresponding amount of affliction to go with it and deprive it of its injurious tendencies.

I have seen men walking upon the high places of the earth till their brain turned and they fell—and there was woe in the Church of God. I have seen others whom God has placed on a lofty pinnacle but, at the same time, He has almost crushed them between the upper and the nether millstone of sharp spiritual trouble, or domestic suffering, or physical pain. Many have asked, "Why is this?" and the reason has been that their suffering was an offset to their success. God's servant would have slipped with his feet if it had not been for the secret chastening that he endured. I put it to some of you whom God has greatly favored. You have looked upon your prosperity as a gift, but you have wondered why you should be tried at the same time—it was because you could not have borne the favor if you had not received the chastening! You were glad of the sail and glad of the wind that filled it, but you could not understand why the ballast was put into your hold—you thought it hindered your progress.

My Friend, you would have been blown out of the water if it had not been for the ballast which kept you where you ought to be. I, for my part, owe more, I think, to the anvil and to the hammer, to the fire and to the file, than to anything else. I bless the Lord for the correctives of His Providence by which, if He has blessed me on the one hand with sweets, He has blessed me on the other hand with bitters. To me He has measured out a double blessing—the lamb and the bitter herbs to eat with it, seldom the one without the other. Thus, "It is good for me to have been afflicted"—good as a corrective for other goods!

It is good, dear Friends, to have been afflicted as a cure for evils existent within our nature. David says, "Before I was afflicted I went astray; but now I have kept Your Word." That is the case with many of God's servants. They were prone to one peculiar temptation and though they may not have seen it, the chastening hand of God was aimed at that special weakness of their character. We sometimes talk about phrenology and the bumps on one's head. You may make a great many mistakes over that matter, but God knows your tendencies and faculties. He knows the characteristics of His children accurately—far more accurately than any science can ever tell them—and He deals with extraordinary wisdom and prudence towards each one of His family.

I suppose that when the biographies of the saints are all read by the light of eternity, we, even we, shall be able to see why the painful career of certain Christians could not have been other than it was if they were to get to Heaven at the last. We shall see why that unusual trial was sent and sent when they seemed least able to bear it. We shall discover that God

interposed the screen of trial against the unseen fiery dart which only His eternal eyes saw—and laid the weight just where Satan was about to put the hand to overthrow—that very weight adding power to stand to the man who, in the lightness of his heart, had otherwise been tripped up. It is all well, Brothers and Sisters! It is all well!

The surgery which is cutting so deep—the knife which is cutting to the very quick—is only reaching to the point where the mischief lies. That mischief must come out, root and branch. There is a cancer of evil tendency within us and

not a rootlet of it must be left, for, if the least fiber of it is suffered to remain through tenderness, it will be an unkind tenderness, for the cancer will grow again and fill the heart with its malevolence. Therefore does the Lord, out of love, cut deep—sharp and cruel are His wounds. Most cruel do they seem when they are in greatest tenderness of Divine Grace.

We do not yet know all the mischief that is in us. I could undertake, in five minutes, to make any perfect man prove to himself that he was not perfect. Only let me set certain persons upon him, to tease him, and we shall soon see his irritation. Let the devil loose on a man who is hard by the threshold of Heaven and you will soon find that corruption dwells even in the hearts of the regenerate! The Lord would have us aware of this and, therefore, He often sends trial to reveal the hidden evil. We are often like a glass of water which has been standing still for hours and looks very clear and bright—but there is a sediment—and a little stir soon discovers it and clouds the crystal!

That sediment is the old nature. Trial comes and awakens into activity that which had been lying still and we say, "Dear me, I had no idea that such evil was in my heart." Of course you hadn't! You who live so comfortably at home among Christian friends do not know how sinful you are! You hear of people out in the world doing this and that and you say, "What naughty folks they are." They are no worse than you would be if you were put into the same position— only you are at ease and they are sorely tempted. Dogs sleep when no one enters the house, but a knock at the door will set them barking. The Lord does not wish us to boast of sham holiness and, therefore, He sends us trials that we may see the mischief which lurks in our hearts—and that we may be driven to the Holy Spirit for power to conquer our sin and to the cleansing blood of Jesus Christ for the real taking away of guilt.

He who has struggled with his inward sins must know that he has been helped both to discover and to overcome many of them by his afflictions. And so in this sense it is good that he has been afflicted. "Foolishness is bound in the heart of a child; but the rod of correction shall drive it far from him." If this is so, we may not only bear the rod, but even kiss it! Affliction is also useful to God's people as an actual producer of good things in them. Some virtues cannot be produced in us—at least I do not see how they can be, apart from affliction. One of them is patience. If a man has no trial, how is he to be patient? We all think ourselves patient when we have nothing to bear. We can all stand on the mountain tops before we

have tried those dizzy heights! We are all brave when the war is over, though things look rather different when bullets whistle about our ears!

When we are thrown into the sea, our swimming abilities are not quite so extraordinary as we thought they were. We have great notions of what we can do, but trial is the test. Patience, I think, can scarcely be said to be in a man unless he has endured tribulation, "for tribulation works patience." A veteran warrior is the child of battles and a patient Christian is the offspring of adversity! There is a very sweet Grace called sympathy, which is seldom found in persons who have had no trouble. We are told that our dear Lord and Master, Himself, learned sympathy by being tempted in all points like as we are. He had to feel our infirmities, or else He could not have been touched with a fellow feeling towards us. It is surely so with us. I have stayed, sometimes, with an admirable Brother who never had, he told me, an ache or a pain since he was born that he remembered.

He is a man of 50 and in splendid health. Well, he tries to sympathize with people and he does it to the utmost of his power, but it makes you smile. It is like an elephant picking up a pill! It is a wonderful feat for him to do. He does not understand it. You know, yourself, how hard it is to get sympathy out of those who have never endured a trial similar to your own. Someone goes to see a widow and talks to her about her grief. And she says to herself all the time, "What does he know about it? He has never lost the partner of his life." A bachelor speaks to a dear soul who has just buried her little child. Unless he is a very wise man, he is apt to say something about children which will irritate, rather than console the bereaved mother. You may try your best, but you have not much of the faculty of sympathy unless you have been in the trial. It is by passing through the fire that we know how to deal with people who are in the furnace!

So we may thank God that we have been afflicted, if we are ministers, or if we are teachers of others. We have sometimes to suffer, not for our own sake, but for the sake of others, that we may be enabled to speak a word in season to him that is weary and say to such, "I know your road. I have been that way before. I know the darkness and weariness of the way." Pilgrims who are enduring the ills of the wilderness take heart when they see a fellow traveler to whom all these are common things.

Again, it is good for me to have been afflicted because affliction is a wonderful quickener. We are very apt to go to sleep, but affliction often wakes us up. A coachman driving a pair of horses was noticed by one who sat upon the box seat

to give a cut of the whip to the off horse. The animal was going on quite regularly and properly and it seemed a needless cruelty to whip it. Another journey and he was observed to do just the same at just that place and the question was put, "I always notice that you give that horse a cut of the whip just here—why is it?" "Well, Sir, he has a nasty habit of shying just at this spot," said the driver, and I take his attention off by making him think of the

whip for a moment." There is something in that, Brothers and Sisters! Every now and then you and I are apt to stray—but an affliction takes our attention away from the temptation.

There is also another danger in a life of ease—we are far too apt to go to sleep. Like horses, we are apt to get into the way of going on at a regular trot till we move mechanically and pursue our way half asleep. I do not know whether we are all awake even now! Many ministers preach asleep. I am sure they do! Many deacons do all the Church business asleep and numbers of people come to the Prayer Meetings and pray in their sleep! I do not mean physical sleep, but I mean spiritual sleep, which is quite as serious a matter. The whole of some men's religion is a kind of sleep-walking! There is not that vigor in it; there is not that heart in it; there is not that earnestness in it that there ought to be. They need to be waked up by something startling.

Our trials and afflictions are intended to do this. They come like a clap of thunder and startle us till we ask, "Where am I? What am I doing?" And we begin to question ourselves, "Am I really what I profess to be?" Death stares us in the face. We are put into the balance and weighed and tried. We try our hopes and professions and are less likely to be self-deceived. Realities become realities and fancies become fancies when sharp trials befall us. The things of this world become dreams to us when keen affliction comes. And so it is of special benefit to us because, under the Spirit of God, it is awakening and arousing.

Again, according to our text, it is good for us to have been afflicted by way of instruction. "It is good for me to have been afflicted; that I might learn Your statutes." Trial is our school where God teaches us on the blackboard. This school house has no windows to let in the cheerful light. It is very dark and so we cannot look out and get distracted by external objectives—but God's Grace shines like a candle within and by that Light we see what we had never seen before! I stand on the level of my fellow men in the daylight and I cannot see the stars—the glare of day hides them—but if I am made to go down the deep well of affliction—I look up, and there are the stars visible above my head! I see what others cannot see!

I get the Bible and its promises seem written as men sometimes write with the juice of lemon, in invisible characters. I hold the book before the fire of affliction and the writing comes out clearly—and I see in the Bible what I never would have seen if it had not been for fiery trials! The Word of promise must be precious, for God gave it! But I get into trial, myself, and there I test it—and of its preciousness I become personally assured. We learn, I hope, something in the bright fields of joy, but I am more and more persuaded that we do not learn a 10th as much, there, as we do in the Valley of Death-Shade!

There the world loses its charms and we are obliged to look to God. There illusions and delusions pass away and we are compelled to rest on the eternal Rock. There we learn the Truth of God in such a way that we never forget or doubt it. I would to God that some young preachers were plagued all the day long and chastened every morning that they might become sound in the faith! I could wish that some of God's people were plunged into a sea of tribu-

lation that they might get rid of the modern nonsense which delights them, now, and come back to the old, substantial doctrines of the Puritans which are the only things worth having when we come to suffer or to die!

Yes, it is good for me to have been afflicted! Is it not good for you too, dear Friends, in the way of holy education, teaching you God's Word and the value and the preciousness of it?

II. I cannot, however, speak any longer upon the virtues of affliction, for I need two or three minutes to dwell upon the Truth of God that, DRAWING NEAR TO GOD HAS BEEN GOOD FOR US. Turn to the 73rd Psalm at the last verse—"It is good for me to draw near to God." Here, again, we speak with great certainty. Come, Brothers and Sisters, is it not good for you to draw near to God? But what does this drawing near to God mean? First, to feel that God is near us—to be conscious of His Presence. It means to feel, next, that we are perfectly reconciled to Him by the death of His Son and that we are permitted to speak with Him as a man speaks with his friend and, in speaking to Him, to praise Him for what we have received and to ask Him for what we need.

We draw near Him when we tell Him what we feel and assure Him of our belief in His great love. You know what it is to draw near to a friend and to have heart-to-heart talks with him. Then you and the beloved one are quite alone and have no secrets. You tell all your secrets and you learn all that your beloved has to tell. This is drawing near to God— when the secret of your heart is with God and the secret of the Lord is with you—when He speaks to you by the Word and you speak to Him by prayer! When you confess sin and He grants forgiveness! When you spread your needs before Him and He assures you of abundant supplies.

Now, is not this good? Is it not pleasant? Is it not enriching? Does it not raise the soul up above the world? Is it not a very good and profitable thing, so that we may say of it, emphatically, "It is good for me to draw near to God"? One good thing that comes out of it is mentioned in the text. Observe—"I have put my trust in the Lord God." The nearer you get to God, the more you will be able to trust Him. An unknown God is an untrusted God. "They that know Your name will put their trust in You." Those who have had the most dealings with God believe most in Him. You that begin with Him try to trust Him—but those who have dealt with Him for long feel that they do trust Him and cannot help it. What is faith in God, Brothers and Sisters, but commonsense? Though, like commonsense, it is the most unusual and most uncommon thing in all the world!

To trust in one who must be true is a commonsense proceeding. And to trust my God who cannot lie is the dictate of true reason! To make Him, who is the greatest fact and the greatest factor, to be, in my life, both the greatest factor and the greatest fact and to act as believing Him to be real—this is prudence. I pray you, draw near to God, so that faith may become to you the mainspring of your life, the new commonsense of your instructed spir-

itual nature! I rejoice in a faith that will go with me into everything. Sunday-keeping faith, meeting-going faith! If it ends there, it is a pretty piece of confectionery—but faith about my pain, my poverty, my despondency, my old age—that is faith! I want to see a more hardy, practical, workable faith abroad in the land.

Look at Abraham's faith. I know it was spiritual and so do you—but what had it to do with? It had to do with the birth of a child; with seeking a city; with cattle; with land and the events of everyday life! That is the sort of faith you and I need—Monday faith, Tuesday faith, Wednesday faith—faith that will go into the kitchen; faith that will live in the workshop with you that are book folders, when the other girls laugh at you—faith that will be with you men that are in the workshop where others use foul language! We need faith that can cheer a sailor in a storm; faith that can help a dying man in the hospital; household faith; everyday faith! This is only to be had by drawing near to God. Get right close to Him in deed and in truth—the very life of you living upon the life of God—and then faith will enter into your daily life. You will put your trust in God as your constant Helper if you constantly draw near to Him.

I desire to bear my witness in the last words of this Psalm—"I have put my trust in the Lord God, that I may declare all Your works." My first text, as far as it relates to a preacher, shows how he is taught it in private. "It is good for me that I have been afflicted; that I might learn Your statutes." My second text, so far as it relates to the preacher, shows how he is helped to preach in public—"It is good for me to draw near to God: I have put my trust in the Lord God, that I may declare all Your works." To be able to speak of God's works to others is no small gift—and you gain it by trusting in God, yourself, finding His promises true, and then bearing witness to others.

Draw near to God and have communion with Him—and then come down from the mountain and speak with the people, believing what you say—and expecting God to bless it to those who hear it! That is the way to preach and I pray that every one of us who opens his month for God may do it in this fashion. It is not merely what is in the Bible that we have to set before the people, but what we, ourselves, have tasted and felt of the good Word of Truth experimentally, declaring Jesus Christ in the power of His resurrection as we know it in our own hearts. We cannot do this except by intimate personal fellowship with God.

You, dear Friends, who are engaged in teaching, cannot learn the Truth of God without some measure of affliction. And you cannot tell it out in the right spirit without a large measure of drawing near unto God. Then you can say, "This poor man cried and the Lord heard him." You can say, "One thing I know, whereas I was blind, now I see." You can say, "I sought the Lord and He helped me." There is a convincing power about such personal testimony. Then it is not only Christ's word that God blesses, but it is your word, too. "Oh," you say, "dare you say that?" Yes, Jesus Himself said, "Neither pray I for these alone, but for them also that shall believe on Me through their word."

They themselves took the word from Christ, just as they took the bread out of Christ's hands when He fed the multitude. It was Christ's word just as it was Christ's bread, till they got it! But as when they had once received the bread it became Peter's bread, and John's bread, and James' bread and they handed it out and the people fed thereon—so did the word become, "their word," when they personally accepted it and afterwards passed it to others! It was all Christ's and yet it was theirs! And you must get the bread in your own hands. You must taste it yourself. You must break it yourself, or else you will not be likely to be blessed with living power among the sons of men.

Now, let us join in thanking God, if He has afflicted us, and if He has drawn us near to Himself. And let us go forth, not to ask for afflictions—that would be unwise—but to accept them hopefully when they come! Let us draw near to God, tonight, and let us not go to our beds till we have seen the face of the Well-Beloved. This shall be my vesper song—

"Sprinkled afresh with pardoning blood,
I lay me down to rest,
As in the embraces of my God,
Or on my Sa vior's breast."