

Affliction

Pray

This is going to be a tough sermon to swallow and before I start I want to say that I love you all very much. I want us all to understand affliction and the simple fact that from time to time we are each one of us - afflicted. Turn with me today to Ephesians 3:1-13

Ephesians 3:1-13

New International Version (NIV)

God's Marvelous Plan for the Gentiles

3 *For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles—*

² Surely you have heard about the administration of God's grace that was given to me for you, ³ that is, the mystery made known to me by revelation, as I have already written briefly. ⁴ In reading this, then, you will be able to understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, ⁵ which was not made known to people in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God's holy apostles and prophets. ⁶ This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus.

⁷ I became a servant of this gospel by the gift of God's grace given me through the working of his power. ⁸ Although I am less than the least of all the Lord's people, this grace was given me: to preach to the Gentiles the boundless riches of Christ, ⁹ and to make plain to everyone the administration of this mystery, which for ages past was kept hidden in God, who created all things. ¹⁰ His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, ¹¹ according to his eternal purpose that he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord. ¹² In him and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence. ¹³ I ask you, therefore, not to be discouraged because of my sufferings for you, which are your glory.

As a pastor I often hear about the suffering of people. I may hear "Pastor Ray, my dad just died" or "Pastor Ray, I have just been diagnosed with cancer" or "Pastor Ray, I have lost my job, how will I make the payments on my trailer" or maybe "Pastor Ray, my husband just ran off with another woman. He provided for us how will I feed my three kids" perhaps I may even hear "Pastor Ray, we have been trying and trying and we just miscarried again, why does God hate us?" These people are afflicted. They are suffering. They are afflicted.

How many of you appreciate that the Bible is the most honest book ever written and that sometimes it says things that we might not want to hear?

The bible takes suffering and affliction head-on and not just in one or two chapters but in many chapters and many different books. Today with these verses, I want to

use the Apostle Paul for illustration. We are going to take a close look at his suffering, his affliction and the hardships he endured.

Have you ever been afflicted by somebody else? Have you ever afflicted anybody? If you are honest with yourself you will see that you have been afflicted. Whether or not you have afflicted somebody else, my opinion is you probably have, but we will leave that one to the Holy Spirit.

Stephen

For now let's join Paul in Acts 7 where we see him overseeing the murder of Stephen. Stephen was a deacon of the early church and a strong believer in the faith. But what I want to clearly illustrate here is that he afflicted others, Christians and in this case Stephen. Now Stephen was a man who was full of faith and the Holy Spirit. He was one of seven deacons who were appointed by the group in Jerusalem to oversee sharing of food and other everyday matters. Stephen performed miracles among the people of Jerusalem and this sparked controversy with some of the Jews of the outer provinces and they started to argue with him. The Holy Spirit gave him wisdom and the right words to say so because they couldn't win their argument they started to plot against him. They created lies about him blaspheming against God and Moses which in those days required the death penalty. They brought him to the Sanhedrin where Stephen eloquently defended himself. He detailed the history of the Jewish people from the time of Abraham right through the prophets, concluding with the fact that it was the Sanhedrin that had murdered Jesus. As you might guess this ticked them off...

(note here that under Roman Law the death penalty was not within the powers of the Sanhedrin)

Stephen looked up toward heaven and said (Acts 2:56 NIV) "I see heaven open and the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of God" They dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. They laid their cloaks at the feet of Paul. Yet despite the affliction that is forced upon him Stephen prays to God asking that he receive his spirit and that God not hold their sin against them.

The cloaks at Paul's Feet

To answer why the coats at Paul's feet we must look at the cultural practices of the day and specifically the practices of the Sanhedrin. To do this I look at the Jewish Talmud which presents a very interesting account.

"When the trial was over, they take him [the condemned person] out to be stoned. The place of stoning was at a distance from the court, as it is said, 'Take out the one who has cursed.'^[i] A man stands at the entrance of the court; in his hand is a signaling flag [Hebrew *sudarin* = *sudar*, 'scarf,

sweater’]. A horseman was stationed far away but within sight of him. If one [of the judges] says, ‘I have something [more] to say in his favor,’ he [the signaler] waves the *sudarin*, and the horseman runs and stops them [from stoning him]. Even if [the condemned person] himself says, ‘I have something to say in my favor,’ they bring him back, even four or five times, only provided that there is some substance to what he is saying.”^[ii]

“When the trial was over, they take him [the condemned person] out to be stoned. The place of stoning was at a distance from the court, as it is said, ‘Take out the one who has cursed.’^[i] A man stands at the entrance of the court; in his hand is a signaling flag [Hebrew *sudarin* = *sudar*, ‘scarf, sweater’]. A horseman was stationed far away but within sight of him. If one [of the judges] says, ‘I have something [more] to say in his favor,’ he [the signaler] waves the *sudarin*, and the horseman runs and stops them [from stoning him]. Even if [the condemned person] himself says, ‘I have something to say in my favor,’ they bring him back, even four or five times, only provided that there is some substance to what he is saying.”^[ii]

The Jewish New Testament Commentary by David H. Stern has an interesting comment about the above quote from the Talmud.

And David H. Stern, a Jewish New Testament theologian said this about the writings in the Talmud: “. . . Joseph Shulam thinks *sudar* in later Hebrew can also mean ‘coat.’ Thus, he conjectures, the Greek translator of Acts from a presumed original Hebrew text didn’t understand the Jewish context and therefore wrote of laying coats at Sha’ul’s feet, whereas actually Shu’ul was a member of the *Sanhedrin*, specifically, the one who held the *sudar*.”^[iii]

^[i] Leviticus 24:14

^[ii] Sanhedrin 42b

In Short, Paul was the man in Charge. He was the agent of the Sanhedrin.

Paul in Prison

So here is Saul of Tarsus (Paul) a man who has afflicted many Christians including the example I provided of Stephen. He persecutes Christians. Then he has a theophany (encounter with God) on the road, talks with Jesus and begins to follow him. Now Paul is the one afflicted because of his love for Jesus.

In our scripture, we see that Paul is in Jail yet he says that he is a prisoner of Jesus Christ. He talks about what it means to be afflicted, but notice his attitude toward the affliction. He is not being clinical or bitter; rather he is using his experiences as a teaching tool. Here is Paul in Jail, separated from his church in Ephesus. He is

almost desperate to get his church to learn from what he is experiencing through his affliction.

This is not Just Paul... Ever read the book of Lamentations? Perhaps you might have noticed that about 1/3 of the book of Psalms are laments. Each one of these people, like you may be, is hurting and crying out to God in the midst of their suffering, pain, trauma, grief and sorrow. Every single one of the books of the prophets except one, have laments in them. What do we see when we read them? We see real people suffering and calling out to their God because they are hurt.

Now you may remember that I said that this was a tough sermon? Remember that I said the bible was honest? Many people don't want to swallow this, but here is the truth... Many people today will try to sell you a Christianity that is pain free. They will tell you that if you love Jesus you won't suffer at all. They may through statements at you like it is finished; Christ has borne it all and so on... Wouldn't that be cool! But here is the reality. Christ suffered and died, he suffered horrifically, he took our place for our sin, he made us right with God but he suffered to do it. Christ suffered unjustly and he suffered righteously. He even asked God the Father to forgive those who were causing him to suffer.

Here is the good news... He rose again, and he is coming back and will judge, he will rule and reign and he will put an end to suffering. He will end our affliction. I wouldn't want to serve a God who distanced himself from his people. I wouldn't want to serve a God who was immune or unresponsive to the pain of his people. And I don't. Jesus does not distance himself, he does not separate himself, he does not shy away. When he saw the suffering of the death of Lazarus he wept, not because he couldn't raise the dead, not because he was afraid or in remorse for the loss of a friend but because of the suffering of those around him who were hurting and grieving over their loss. Jesus enters into our suffering, he experiences it and he identifies with us in the midst of it. He comforts us, he reaches out to us; he works to restore us. He loves us.

Now I have heard a lot of sermons on affliction and suffering, but what I noticed was that there are different kinds of suffering and affliction.

The best list I have found was in a sermon by Pastor Mark Driscoll wherein he describes a list of 14 different types of affliction that I have listed for you here today. I will expound on each item in the list.

Adamic Affliction

Adam and Eve disobeyed God and as a result sin entered into the world. We all know what sin is, there is no one among us who hasn't experienced it. The original sin is why there is death in the world today. It's why we can get sick, its why we

have to say goodbye to loved ones, its why our bodies get old. In short, it is the general result of sin entering into the world.

Punishment Affliction

For those who do not belong to Christ, sometimes their affliction is a punishment with the end God of bringing a person to a realization that what they are doing is wrong and that they need God or it will end in eternal hell fire. People who don't turn from their sin and embrace Jesus and trust in him will experience eternal affliction.

Consequential Affliction

This is the affliction that comes because of something we have done. The bible tells us that what you sow you shall reap. When you don't take care of yourself and you drink too much alcohol, you may wind up with alcoholism, degenerative conditions of the liver and so on. You don't study for your drivers test, you fail. Don't show up to work for a few days with no legitimate excuse and your fired. In short, when you make your bed, you have to lie in it. As I said, this type of affliction is directly related to the consequences of your own actions.

Demonic Affliction

This the affliction where Satan or one of his minions are tormenting or harming one of Gods people. Christians cannot be possessed, but they can be afflicted by evil spirits. This can exhibit itself as nightmares, hearing voices, physical supernatural phenomenon, or even condemnation or accusation inside your own head. We look to Ephesians 6 during these times. The blood of Jesus covers, but many people don't know who they are or what their rights are as sons and daughters of God.

Victim Affliction

This type of affliction occurs when somebody has done something to hurt you. This includes abusive relationships, verbal and physical. Step fathers sexually assaulting their step children. In short, situations wherein you have been wronged by another and you did not deserve it.

Collective Affliction

A group of people suffer and misery loves company so you suffer along with them. A nation goes to war and you suffer the losses of the fallen. A hurricane strikes and ruins lives and you suffer with the injured. The people of the Ephesian church are suffering without Paul as he is in prison. In short, this comes into play when someone you are connected with suffers and you suffer with them.

Disciplinary Affliction

In this type of affliction God has allowed it, not for punishment but to aid in maturing or developing them. Goes with the old saying that maybe God isn't removing that problem from your life because the problem is there to solve you. This type of affliction is directional and if you look you will see that God has provided a way of escape. He will not discipline you more than you can bear. This type of affliction usually has some motivational component attached to it.

Vicarious Affliction

This is the type of affliction that we experience when we let our light shine and Jesus is seen in us and people hate it. It may look like we are despised, but it is really not us at all, but the spirit in us that they despise. Another way to look at this is by taking a look at social media. How often are Christians ridiculed, how often are we portrayed by Hollywood as a bunch of red neck potato farmers who don't know what end of the truck is the front. How often are we cast as intolerant bigots? How often are we shown as those who steal the freedom and fun out of life. People in this case it isn't personal affliction against you, but rather they hate Jesus and you get caught in the crossfire for what you believe. Ever had friends, family or coworkers that shun you just because you're Christian?

Empathetic Affliction

If someone we love is hurting then we hurt right along-side them. When we consider the Ephesians in the scriptures today we know that the church at Ephesus is hurting because Paul is afflicted. Speaking to you parents out there today, Have you ever had a sick child. Not runny nose kind of sick but that limp rag doll kind of sick that scares parents. If you have that is empathetic affliction.

Testimonial Affliction

Consider Paul, he is in prison falsely accused and being afflicted yet he has done nothing wrong. All he has done is preach and teach about Jesus Christ. Yet as it says in Romans 8:28 – All things work together for Good... and as a result of his affliction he has an avenue to expand and expound on having faith in Jesus. His affliction is a testimony to the Ephesians. Can you see that sometimes affliction can have a bigger purpose than just our suffering. Would you run into a burning building to save a trapped child? Okay Why? If you would be willing to go through all that risk, possible burns and so on to save a life... How is that any different from saving a life through the testimony of your affliction? Is your pain worth it if it will save someone's life in the future?

Sometimes affliction needs to be put into a heavenly perspective.

Providential Affliction

This type of affliction often results in an increase in the worship of God. It is true though that how you face the affliction matters. It is not just testimony but also how you endure it. Your attitudes and behaviours during your affliction can be an example to others. Through your suffering perhaps you may show another the way to really get a rock solid faith established. You have shown that you actually trust God. Your actions now in addition to your words, show that you are not concerned because you really trust and believe that God has your back. We see Paul afflicted in Jail and yet he praises God and thanks him for his deliverance in faith. One way or another, he knows God has him in his hand.

Preventative Affliction

Sometimes God will allow us to be afflicted. The reasons for this vary. Sometimes he may be using the affliction as a warning of greater peril. Let's say you got the flu this morning before church and could not come. Do you curse God for allowing you to get the flu, do you ask him for his healing? Why would God allow this? Consider, that God knows everything... What if you were going to be t-boned by a semi this morning and God saved you from that fate by allowing you to become ill. God might not be finished with you yet and so wanted you around for a while... It comes back once again to perspective and trust. How about if God allows you to feel pain... what a mean God eh? Yet, what if that pain leads the doctors to do some tests and they find out that you have a tumor; that if left untreated could paralyze you. Ever consider that God had your back? What if you are getting headaches? Man how could God ever allow me to suffer like this? Yet you get a brain scan and find that you have a subdural hematoma (a bleeding brain) if they had not detected it, your brain would have been destroyed and you would have lived out the rest of your life in a mental institution. Is there pain in drilling a hole in your head to let out the pressure? Do that suck? Sure, but what has God saved you from? Why do we only blame God? Why don't we recognize the little miracles that happen in our lives? Because, we don't trust that he has our back, we are not all knowing, we may never know what we have been saved from. One more point, I need to make here... sometimes God takes us home to be with him, from his perspective and the one who moves on, they are healed. It is only those left behind grieving that don't see the healing. I have often asked God, Lord why have you allowed that child to die? Consider that God knows everything, what if that child grows up and suffers horrible abuse, let's say it's a little girl who is kidnapped and kept in a guy's basement as a sexual slave for 20 years, have you ever considered that God in his compassion may be being merciful?

Mysterious Affliction

Sometimes we just don't know why... God is sovereign. Maybe we just need to delay our questions and ask him when he comes back, cause we just don't know... consider with me:

1 Corinthians 13:9-12
New International Version (NIV)

⁹ For we know in part and we prophesy in part, ¹⁰ but when completeness comes, what is in part disappears. ¹¹ When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put the ways of childhood behind me. ¹² For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.

Apocalyptic Affliction

As we get closer to Christ's return we as Christians are experiencing more and more affliction and opposition towards Godly principles, ideals and practice. It's not going to get better, as the day approaches it will get worse.

So here is my next question... When a person is hurting or even when you are hurting have you ever heard them ask the question: Why?

I hear it all the time... and so do other pastors, well, the ones with ears anyway.

But let's ask ourselves another question... Are we asking the right question? Has our perspective and conditioning become so absolute that we don't question why we ask why? Is the why really the most important question?

I would assert that a better question might be who?

That sounds crazy doesn't it? Well, let me put some context around it...

Who are you in Jesus? Who is Jesus?

If we were still of the Adamic nature, I could see where we might have identity issues, but as Christians we are no longer of an Adamic nature but a Christ nature. So you see, your identity is not established by your affliction. Now hear me really well here. Your identity is not established by your affliction but your identity can get you through your affliction.

We may never answer all the "why" questions but the "who" is Jesus and who you are in him.

More news sure to empty seats...

Paul is teaching us here about suffering and affliction. Yet his perspective is solid, he knows who Christ is and he knows who he is. He comes out with this statement in scripture that sums it all up: Paul says in Philippians 4:11 "I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances." How about his assertion in Romans 8:28 "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose."

I ask this question now... What is the Holy Spirit trying to tell us through Paul via the scriptures in Ephesians?

Well... he tells us some uncomfortable truths

Consider:

- **We may be afflicted for the good of others**
 - We become inward focused
 - We lose sight of others
 - Paul focused on the others needs when he was afflicted
 - Paul didn't do anything wrong he just talked about Jesus
 - Paul believed that affliction has a purpose
 - Paul believed in Jesus enough to believe that he had a purpose for being in Jail and that purpose was for the good of others
 - Paul wanted to get out the message of Jesus and saw his affliction as an opportunity
 - Ever thought that our victory over a certain affliction puts us in a prime position to help others who are suffering the same thing
- **We may be afflicted for our own growth**
 - Paul said that he ministers by God's grace – we see humility and growth
 - Paul said that everything he does is all by God's power. He recognizes his limitations in that he is a sinner saved by grace. In this we see his self-awareness growing
 - Paul said I am the least of the saints, he is comparing himself to Jesus and starts to desire to be like him.
 - Paul speaks of preaching to the Gentiles and he is amazed that he gets to tell people about Jesus and his good news.
 - Many of you are hurting. Self-talk doesn't help nor does self-help. It is once again perspective we need God, as we want to be more like Jesus we learn the unfortunate truth that without him we are nothing, but with him we are a royal priesthood, worthy sons and daughters.
 - Mankind hurt and abandoned Jesus, we abused him, we betrayed him, we murdered him, yet what does he do when he is afflicted? Jesus is our model remember. He is our lord and saviour so what did he do? He loves us, He reconciled us, He purchased us, He justified us, he sings over us and he embraces us. When we are afflicted do we show love?
- **We may be afflicted for the glory of God**
 - Ephesians 3:10-13 ¹⁰ His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, ¹¹ according to his eternal purpose that he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord. ¹² In him and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence. ¹³ I ask you, therefore, not to be discouraged because of my sufferings for you, which are your glory.
 - Be Bold, Be Strong, Be Faithful, Be Saved.
 - Don't give up... Reach up!
 - It is okay to say "I am hurting or I am suffering"
 - Talking about your hurt with others who have a Christian heart helps. It doesn't matter if it's a support group a deliverance class the pastor a friend or God himself, but you need to talk about it.

- If you are a listener, trust me I have been married for 19 years. You don't have to fix what's broken, just listen...
- Paul tells us his suffering is a glory.

Since glory means to reflect, I ask you to reflect on this... You can be afflicted for God's Glory, for your growth and for others good. Do you care? You see the church at Ephesus was watching Paul and they saw his faith. Who may be watching you?

Enemies, friends, coworkers, kids, wife, husband, social group etc...

But always remember... God is watching, and he is with you always, he will never leave you nor forsake you. He is your comfort in times of trouble. He will pick you up when you fall down.

Did you notice that Paul in the scripture wasn't looking for the answer to his suffering but was more concerned with the Ephesians learning from his circumstance?

Have you considered that there may be a lesson in that? We all say that we love God, but do we really trust him? It's easy on the top of the mountain, but in the valley... When I focus on the needs of others, my needs just seem to go away...

prayer