

When Providence Stings

Building a Christian Mind

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We have been, for several months, in the midst of a series called "Building a Christian Mind," and in my judgment, it's the most important series that I've ever preached, even though I'm approaching it and doing things in a slightly different way than some are accustomed to. There is no question that we need a Christian mind in order to face the world that is disintegrating around us and as we face many difficulties in our personal lives. We've come to a point after looking at how to know that God exists, how to know that the Bible is true, how to know that Jesus is Lord, and having preached some 30 or 40 messages on those matters, in addition to what we're studying now, we've come to the topic of divine providence. We've looked at the matter of the Divine Decree that God established before the world began, everything that would happen, he appointed how his creation would unfold, he created things, set it all in motion, and now he is governing things in his power by what is known as his divine providence. And we've defined this as follows if you haven't had this definition written down, you need this definition: God continually upholds his entire creation and sovereignly works in absolutely everything that happens, and thus directs all creatures and events to accomplish his will. God continually upholds his entire creation and sovereignly works in absolutely everything that happens, and thus directs all creatures and events to accomplish his will. God established his will before time began. That will has never changed and it never will change because God himself never changes. God created the universe, set things in motion, and then he did not step back, as the deists say, he did not step back and turn his back and have no interest in what followed after that, actually he's been actively working out his will ever since. We've established that in our recent messages, and I won't review it any further than that, except to say this, that God's providence is infinitely broad, it is infinitely detailed, and it is infinitely personal. However many people are in this room, Scripture says, God knows the number of hairs on your head, which by stating things at the lesser level, everything greater is included in that. If he cares about the number of hairs on your head, then everything else is equally the subject of his divine concern and his divine direction. And beloved, that means that everything that happens to you and me throughout the course of our lives has been divinely planned. Whether it seems comfortable or not, whether it seems good to us in the moment or not, it's all been divinely planned. It's all working according to a plan and a timetable that cannot deviate and which cannot be wrong.

Now, with that in mind, when life is pleasant, we think that providence is favorable to us. And we like that. In fact, when life is favorable, we tend not to think about divine providence and we just live in the ease of favorable circumstances and we're content there and that's a vulnerable place to be spiritually because when we're content with circumstances then we tend to let our foot off the spiritual accelerator and that's when bad things start to happen as the Lord disciplines us and corrects us. But, you know, when life is pleasant we think that providence is favorable. Here's the question for today: what about when life is difficult? What about when life is challenging and painful and all of those things? Over the years, some have called such times a frowning providence. Providence is frowning upon you. I have no problem with that term, but I want to change the picture slightly to make it hopefully a little bit more helpful. What do we do when providence stings, when it hurts, when it's difficult? For any thinking Christian, for any serious minded person, sooner or later you're going to have to come and deal with this question. If God is in control, as we have seen, and if he genuinely loves us, then why is life hard? Why is it often so difficult? If Christ has saved us and we're reconciled to God in his Son, in his beloved Son, why does providence sting us as Christians? Why is that? And it's precisely at this point, my friends, that having a Christian mind is so necessary, so vital, and so practical. And it takes, beloved, to develop a Christian mind takes more than just going verse by verse through an individual passage. It takes a comprehensive absorption and assimilation of the entirety of revelation in order to be in a position where you are strong and able to respond to these things, be able to understand them for yourselves, and being able to help others in them as well.

Now what I want to do today, I have intensely pastoral goals here this morning. I am here entirely and exclusively on a human level to help you, each one of you today. I'm here because what Scripture says is designed to help you. Indeed, in Romans chapter 15 verse 4, the Apostle Paul said that whatever was written in former times was written for our instruction so that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope. So what we're wanting to do is we're wanting to take the fullness of what the word of God says here and present it in a way that genuinely helps you in life. So I want to ask you a question for you to contemplate in your own mind and to frame the way that you hear everything else that is said here this morning. What is it that's making life difficult for you today? What's been difficult over the past several days, few weeks, few months, even over the past few years? What is it that makes life sad for you or difficult for you today? Frame that in your mind and say that's the issue that I'd like help on, and understand that God brought you here today in his providence, every one of us is here by divine appointment from God, God brought you here in his providence in order to minister his grace and mercy to you today through his word. And I want you to understand that to the best of my ability, I realize this is a little bit of a construct in what I'm about to say, but it is my intention, and with the help of the Holy Spirit, it is my intention to speak to you personally today, as though we're talking to each other one-on-one and we're having a private conversation to encourage you in Christ, even though it's in this public format, the intention and the way that I would hope that the Lord would help you receive this is as though it's a private conversation, one where we're able to interact one-on-one together and you have, as it were, have laid out the concerns of your heart and now we have the opportunity one-on-one together to open the word of God and

see what it says and how it will help you. And so today, without apology, I tell you that this is not a traditional expositional message and that's totally okay because I know that this will help many people and that we are giving you truth from God's word in the form that we're giving it, and so I am not concerned about outward form today as I explain Scripture, I simply am here to, by the grace of God I trust, to be a help to the people of God.

Now, there are two sections to this sermon as we think about the stinging providence in your life, and I want to break those down for you here at the start. I want to talk about the context of a stinging providence and then, secondly, to talk about the goals of a stinging providence. The context and the goals. What is the spiritual context of that stinging providence that you've identified in your mind? What's the big picture of that? And there's a few points that I want to make under that heading, and then I want to talk to you about the goals of a stinging providence. If we understand the context and why it is that we have a stinging, frowning providence in our lives, that goes a long way to helping us accept it and to respond rightly to it, and if we know what the goals of God are in that stinging providence, then we are really conditioned and in a position to be able to respond rightly to it.

Now let me just say one other thing by way of the whole context of this so-called megaseries on building a Christian mind. The things that I am about to explain to you are only going to be stable and enduring in your mind if somehow you have given yourself to the study and the application of those prior 30 or 40 messages. If that seems overwhelming to you, too bad. I don't mean that to be flippant or dismissive, but you cannot hear a single message like this without context, without reference to the whole fullness of biblical truth that informs it and that's what we've been trying to lay the foundation for. And so if you're coming in late, that's okay, just go back and review those messages. If you've been in and out of truth for whatever reason and have kind of fallen behind, go back and catch up because these things are essential for life and they are essential for the world that is now here and is going to come and get worse. We need the full context of a Christian mind and we evade these things and we avoid these things and we ignore them at our peril. You avoid them at your peril, that's all I can say and warn and help and caution and beckon you to come to the word of God for these things that we've been giving ourselves to for this entire calendar year.

So let's consider the context of that stinging providence, okay, the context of that stinging providence that you've identified in your mind, and now we're interacting one-on-one together to consider it. When you are a Christian, if you are a Christian, you always need to step back from the individual challenge that you're facing, that particular adversity you're thinking, you need to step back from that, pick it up as it were, and set it aside for a time so that you can do something spiritually profitable. You need to be able to step back and consider the big picture that is at stake in your stinging providence and so let's ask and answer this question: what is the big picture of the life challenges that you're facing here today, and what is the big picture that will always apply as the challenges evolve and morph into different things over the course of time? What is the big picture for any and every stinging providence that we go through under the hand of God? I'm

only going to touch on these briefly and you need to meditate on these things in the days to come. You cannot walk out of here having heard this once and then setting aside and never coming back to it again and think that matters have been solved for you. These things require, they demand repeated rehearsal in your mind. We need to be transformed by the renewing, the continual renewing of our minds in these things and so, at one point, there's a limit to what any pastor can do. The pastor can lay out the banquet before you, invite you to come and eat of the things that God has given in his word, "Thy words were found and I ate them, and thy words became for me a delight and the joy of my heart, for I've been called by thy name, O Lord God of hosts," the prophet Jeremiah said. We have to come and eat and chew on these things again and again and again. And so I can only fulfill my responsibility by laying it out, what I want you to understand is that you have your own personal responsibility to take these things in and rehearse them in your mind and you're accountable to God for that, and a proper mental context will help you assess these things well.

So what's the context? Here's the first one for you. Here's the first principle of context for that stinging providence. 1. We live in a fallen world. We live in a fallen world. As I've said earlier, I'm just going to touch on these ever so briefly. Each one of these 10 points this morning could be the subject of an individual sermon itself, and so this is highly concentrated, highly condensed. But we live in a fallen world. Beloved, ever since Adam fell in Genesis 3, this earth has been under a curse and this earth has been operating under the wrath and judgment of God. That's the environment in which we live. We live in an environment that suffers under the wrath and judgment of God, and the best that I can do, if you have any question about that whatsoever, is to point you to Romans 1:18 through 3:20. Scripture says in Romans 1:18 that the wrath of God is revealed against all ungodliness and all unrighteousness of man. Creation itself is under a curse and we are alienated from God and the world is alienated from God, and if you have any question about that, beloved, you can reference 1 John 5:20. 1 John chapter 5:20, which we'll come to this point again in a few moments, but in chapter 5, verse 19, actually, I misspoke, the Bible says that the whole world lies in the power of the evil one. We live in an environment over which Satan has sway. It's a fallen world and Scripture says that groaning is part of life in this environment. In Romans 8:22 and 23. Romans 8:22, and 23, we read this, "For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies." There is groaning in this life, there is groaning in this creation, and becoming a Christian does not lift you out of that environment and exempt you from the consequences of it.

We live in a fallen world and a fallen world is going to be groaning, and it's going to give us things that cause us to groan. Fallen things will happen to us. Fallen people will sin against us just as you in your fallenness have sinned against others. And beloved, this is a reality check. It does no one any good whatsoever to wish that it was different. It does no one any good to say, "I don't want to think about that. I just want to think about happy things. I want to go and find a church that tells me that Jesus wants me to be healthy, wealthy, and prosperous." You can go look and find a church like that, they are a dime a

dozen, but beloved, they're not telling you the truth when they teach you to view life through that prism. It's a fallen world and false theology doesn't evade the consequences of it. It's appointed for man to die once and after this comes judgment and so we have to be realistic and realize that groaning, a stinging providence is going to be part of living in this fallen world. If we're not going to be realistic, we're wasting our time because to be realistic is to live and to think according to truth.

So we live in a fallen world. Now secondly, another aspect of the context of that stinging providence is that we live in light of our past sins, don't we? We live in light of our past sins. We live in a fallen world. We live with our own past sins and this is something that's humbling, this is something that in and of itself stings to acknowledge and to admit, but we live with our past sins. Now let me quickly hasten to say that not all suffering is directly related to personal sins that we have done. People get sick, people get cancer without it being tied directly to anything that they've done. In that sense, it's a broader sense of living in a fallen world. The patriarch Job suffered greatly, suffered many great personal losses, suffered the loss of his personal health in a most painful, gruesome, enduring way, even though he was blameless before God, and so not all suffering can be traced directly to personal sin and that's where the faith word movement, you know, if you just have enough faith and you speak your reality into existence and everything can be good, if you just have enough faith, total lie, total hypocrisy, total dismissal of everything that Scripture says about these things. Sometimes suffering comes and you haven't done anything to deserve it. That's what Jesus said about the blind man in John 9. The disciples said, "Look at that blind guy! Who sinned, him or his parents?" As if it was a closed system and those were the only alternatives, you know, there was a binary choice there, either that man sinned or his parents sinned to produce that condition of suffering that he was under. Jesus said it's not because either one of them sinned. This is a suffering for the glory of God. And so not all suffering is directly related to personal sins that we have committed.

Having said that, beloved, the truth of the matter is that you and I bring a lot of sorrow onto ourselves, don't we? Let me just give you some examples to show you what I mean. The woman who loses her family because she committed infidelity is suffering due to our own sin. Sooner or later that catches up and you regret it, but then it's too late. Life moves on. You've established yourself as an adulteress. Or, give you another example, the man who has wet brain from years of drunkenness suffers as a result of patterns of his sin. The continual absorption and consumption of alcohol has a physiological change in his brain that he now suffers the consequences with and sometimes that's irreversible. You bear responsibility for that and it does nobody any good to say, "Oh, it's a sickness and he's an alcoholic." Scripture doesn't talk about it that way. Scripture recognizes, yes, there's an enslavement to sin, to drugs, to alcohol when that comes, but there was a morally accountable choice that stepped first into that direction and sin takes so many people places where they never intended to go. That's not God's responsibility. It's in God's providence, but we need to step up and recognize that, you know what, I made decisions and broken relationships and different things that have come from that are a result of my own decisions, and the first starting point of entering successfully into the healing nature

of God's providence is to say, "I'm responsible for that. I did that. I made those choices. I sinned against God." And to stop blaming other people for sins that you committed.

Another example. I know nothing about the financial condition of anyone in this church, so I'm just stating principles here, but a young family, a middle-aged family that has lived beyond their means on credit for many years suddenly finds that the bills come due and it stings, and the adversity of that and the pressure of that and the phone calls and the letters and the continual inability to repay those things, we've got to admit I'm in that condition because I lived beyond my means. Now we're stating things in general, maybe there's extenuating circumstances from time to time, but beloved, don't miss the broader point for the sake of trying to explain things away that exculpate us from any personal accountability.

Those are just brief examples to make this point: God – this is so important, beloved, and only the person that's willing to humble themselves under what I'm about to say can benefit from anything else to follow – God has ordered the moral universe according to this principle, what a man sows, he will reap, Galatians 6:7. What a man sows, he will reap. Now sometimes God graciously allows us to evade some of the natural consequences of our sins and choices. Sometimes he doesn't. Sometimes he lets us feel the full weight of it. And if that's the context of your stinging providence, all I can encourage you to do is to humble yourself before God and make the honest admission and confession, "Lord, my marriage is a mess because of things that I did. My finances are a mess because I was greedy, covetous, and I wanted what this world had to offer more than being content and satisfied in what you gave me. My physical health has suffered as a result of bad choices that I have made." We have to start there, beloved. That's the context of the stinging providence and if we're not willing to do that, then we're kind of wasting our time. If that's the kind of stinging providence that we have, we need to just humble ourselves and without qualification say, "I'm the one to blame here. God, be merciful to me, the sinner. Don't depart from me. Don't leave me here. But God, I am responsible and I accept full responsibility. I'm done blaming my spouse. I'm done blaming my boss. I'm done blaming climate change. I'm done blaming everything, Lord. It's me. It's me." And we recognize in the context of that stinging providence this important principle, and these things can be true of Christians, and they are true of Christians, and I'm assuming that they're true of many of you, whether I know about it personally or not. Salvation in Jesus Christ saves us from the guilt of sin for which we give him eternal thanks but it does not necessarily enable us to evade the natural consequences of our prior sin, and so what providence does, and why providence sometimes stings, is that God disciplines us through the natural consequences of our sinful decisions. When you feel the sting of that, if you put your hand on the stove and it's been burned, you know not to do that again, and sometimes we need to feel deeply the sting of sin so that we say deep in our hearts, "I'm never going there again."

God orders that to help us and so sometimes providence stings because God disciplines us through the natural consequences of our sinful decisions. I've visited men in prison, dear men that come to my mind by name and by face, that I would gladly hug again when I see them again, but they're in prison because of desperately sinful choices that they

made. The relief for men like that is not getting out of prison. The relief for men is making an honest acknowledgment of that and receiving the freedom that comes from Christ, of having your sins forgiven, not necessarily the freedom of living beyond the walls of the consequences of those choices that you make. You wouldn't have reason to know this, we have, I think, dozens of men that receive our prison transcripts each week and, you know, just as the transcripts come to them, they can know I was thinking about them as I said these things in love for their benefit as well as for yours.

So why does providence sting? We live in a fallen world. Fallen people sin against us. We live with the consequences of our own past sins. Thirdly, and here's one that we should not overlook, I alluded to it earlier, we have a supernatural adversary. We have an evil supernatural adversary that is bent on our destruction and seeking the destruction of the kingdom of God if it were possible for him to do so. You see, beloved, as we look at life, as we go through things, we must always, if we're going to have a Christian mind operating continually about us, we must realize that there is more to life than what we see about us. There is more to life, there is more to our environment than what we perceive and touch with our physical senses. Scripture tells us that there is an invisible spiritual world in which great conflict is taking place. Scripture tells us that we have an adversary, the devil, who hinders us. He confuses us with false religion and false philosophy. He stirs up opposition to us and makes things difficult. He hinders our circumstances. He stirs up doubt within our souls. He sends fiery darts and blasphemous thoughts pop into our minds seemingly out of nowhere. All of those things and a thousand others. Beloved, let me be very careful and very precise here: you should not try to link specific difficulties that you have directly to Satan or to a demon. You shouldn't do that. You shouldn't think that way and say, "Oh, my car broke down because Satan messed with the ignition." Don't think that way. That's foolish and you can't establish that. There's no way to falsify that and it's thinking at far too carnal and physical a level to realize what's going on. It's enough for you and me to know that as 1 Peter 5:8 says, we have an adversary who prowls about like a roaring lion seeking someone to devour. Someone that we cannot see, someone that is immensely evil and hostile with no restraint whatsoever by any goodness or kindness or sympathy whatsoever, the more he can destroy, the happier he is, if you can use the word happy to describe a devil that's doomed to be in the lake of fire and sulfur forever and ever. There's a spiritual reality to this. Ephesians 6 goes into great detail about this.

And so beloved, what is the context of the stinging providence in your life? Understand that you live in the flesh in a fallen world with a spiritual adversary that has his sights trained on you. Do you know what that is? That is a recipe for difficulty. To be in a fallen world, being fallen yourself, living in light of your own sins, sins of others, spiritual adversaries, it's no wonder, beloved, it is no wonder whatsoever that the Bible says this, and I quote, from Acts 14:22, "through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God." Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God. The way to life is narrow, Jesus said in Matthew 7. In fact, it would be good for us to just look there real quickly. Matthew 7. Matthew 7:13 and 14. And there comes a point where you have to make a decision, you have to make a choice. Which way do I want? Which way will I walk in? Jesus said in Matthew 7:13, "Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and

the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few." Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God. The entrance into the heavenly kingdom is guarded, so to speak, by a narrow way that's fraught with difficulties in this life. And if you're expecting something different, then you need to conform your expectations to what God's word actually says. If, beloved, and I say this with all the compassion that I can muster up in my shriveled little heart, if in times past, you thought you were coming to Christ based on what you were told were his promises that he'll make life good for you, that because he loves you, he'll fix every problem right away, and he never wants you to suffer or anything because he's supposedly loving like that, then, beloved, you were brought to Christ under false pretenses and God is graciously clearing away the muddy windshield so that you can see through it clearly to know where you're now going.

Obviously, obviously, beloved, the teachers of health and wealth have peddled many, many lies for many, many decades and we are soaking and drowning in the church of Christ under that prior influence. It's one of the reasons why we're doing this series. You can't counteract decades and decades of that kind of false teaching that has permeated the attitude of the church, that has permeated the whole mindset of expectations for millions of people, you can't counteract that with a single message, you can't counteract it with a lighthearted, joking 15-minute sermon and set people on the right path to help them discern the error and to move on the truth. This is a long-term project that long will outlive my own lifetime. The correction of this takes decades unless the Spirit of God is pleased to send an incredible revival unlike anything we've seen for 300 years. We have hard work to do here and the fact that it's hard, the fact that it takes time, the fact that it may seem like we're bringing up unpleasant things, you know, the fact that we live in an environment where you're not supposed to say anything is true or false, that that's wrong, that that person is a false teacher, you're not supposed to say any of those things, it just makes it all the more difficult for what we're trying to accomplish in building a Christian mind. But beloved, the fact that it's difficult is no reason not to do it. That's all the more reason to do it.

Years and years ago, I had a friend back in my college days, my law school days, who actually was an Olympic gold medalist in wrestling, 1960 in Rome. I think it was in Rome. He won a gold medal. He showed me his gold medal. It was really cool. He went through so much training, so much difficulty, persevered through key prior defeats in his earlier career as he lost at championship levels, matches that he was expected to win, then he gets to the Olympics and he wins. Unbelievable. So, so cool for him to have done that. But beloved, the victory of the gold medal was preceded by all kinds of adversity, by all kinds of hard training, by years and years of training in private with sweat and blood and tears, but the victory was worth it. But you don't get a victory like that without embracing and going through the adversity that precedes it.

Beloved, every one of you that is in Christ should want the spiritual victory of hearing him say, "Well done, thou good and faithful servant." Every one of you should want that. Every one of you should understand that that is the ultimate goal in life. That's the gold

medal for all of us. It does not come in this life when we stand before him and he affirms us, "Well done, thou good and faithful servant. Enter into the joy of your Master." He places the gold medal, as it were, around our neck. But beloved, the path to that is through the training and the discipline and the adversity that comes and so we don't follow Christ looking for a problem-free life. We don't use Jesus like that. We don't use him in a way that just makes it easy for us when he himself said, "Take up your cross and follow me." When he himself went to Calvary, he himself suffered. What is the mindset? What is the dark genius behind the evil spirit that would make people think you could follow a crucified Christ in order to have a successful, prosperous, pain-free life? That's ridiculous. If we follow our Master, we expect to share in his sufferings. And so, beloved, do not come to Christ looking for a problem-free life because that approach inevitably collapses on you when disappointment and grief and illness and your deathbed inevitably come. It's inevitable. I'm being your friend, I'm helping you by emphasizing that point. We need a faith that is grounded upon an understanding of God's purpose when he sends a stinging providence to us, whether it stings a little or it stings a lot. "Lord, this hurts!" Yes, it does.

Now what? We've seen the context, let's consider the goals of a stinging providence. We'll see if I can get through these six points in the time remaining. What are the goals of a stinging providence? What is God doing and intending when adversity comes to us? What I'm about to describe to you is not at all intended to be comprehensive or exhaustive, but it's more than enough to give your mind things to consider and to help you find some footing in the midst of a slippery slope. Here are some of the designs that God has for you in your sufferings. First of all, he is testing you. He is testing you. Adversity exposes the true nature of men. It exposes the true nature of men. The test, beloved, of your Christianity, the test of your sanctification, the test of your maturity in Christ is never what is happening and how you respond to prosperity and a favorable providence. That's never the real test of it, any more than a soldier is tested by marching through a Fourth of July parade, you know, with adoring crowds and confetti falling around them. That's not the test. A soldier's tested in battle. A soldier is tested under fire. That's where courage is manifested. That's where honor, that's where all of the training comes to bear for that soldier is under fire and in like manner.

Beloved, your Christian character is tested and even revealed by what happens and how you respond to the storm. Does the house stand when the winds blow or does it collapse? Do you affirm you're trusting God even though there are no outward circumstances to reinforce that for you, or do you turn to grumbling and questioning and discontent? That's a series of its own, the whole matter of discontentment. But in a stinging providence, God is testing you, not because he needs to know what's there, he already knows, so that you would see what's there and the Apostle Peter speaks of the exposing nature of this affliction. If you would turn to 1 Peter 1, 1 Peter 1 after the book of Hebrews and after James. 1 Peter 1, beginning in verse 3, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. In this

you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials." You've been grieved by it. What's the point of that? Verse 7, "so that the tested genuineness of your faith--more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire--may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ." In part, God sends trials to you to refine the gold of your faith. It is not because he's opposed to you. If you've been reconciled in Christ, that's impossible. That's no way to think. But God sends trials to test us, to purify us. As gold is purified by fire, the impurities rise to the top and are skimmed off and there's a pure version of the gold left behind after the heat has been applied. So it is when really long-term serious trials come, God is testing you, refining you, purifying you. He is teaching you to trust in him alone even when there are no outward promptings for any confidence.

Have you ever been in a situation like that where everything, where there seemed no way forward? There was no human relief to be found? Maybe even the people around you were not even helpful in their counsel to you and it's so dark, so difficult, so, so plodding. It's precisely in those moments where you're being tested. Will you trust in God alone? Will you trust Christ alone, even if there is no outward support for that faith? You're being tested and when all of the self-trust, all of the hope and trust in man is purged out, and you still can affirm your trust and your faith in Christ, then that results in praise and glory and honor to him. Just like with Job, Job repented in chapter 42 after all of his sufferings he said, "I had heard about you before, but now my eye sees you. I repent in dust and ashes." And thereby it was shown that the purpose of the trial, the purpose that we're to understand is not why did Job suffer, because Job never knew that himself, the purpose of the book of Job is to teach us and to ask and answer the question why does Job serve? Why do we follow Christ? We follow him not for what he can do for us. We follow him because he is implicitly, intrinsically, entirely, and exclusively worthy of that devotion, come what may. That's part of what your trials are designed to bring out to you face-to-face with the question, why are you professing Christ? Why do you serve him? Why do you confess him? The answer is because he's worthy of it. Period. Full stop. I don't need anything else to justify it. That results in praise and glory to God.

So he tests us. Secondly, he exposes your sin. He exposes your sin and I suppose I could write an autobiography just around this point that I'm making here. You and I, we tend to think well of ourselves when things are going well. It's easy to be polite and supportive to others when things are going our way but then suffering or then something contrary comes to us and shows us what the truth actually is, and the ugly stuff comes out, the anger, the discontent, the retaliation, and what Scripture teaches us is that God uses that to show us our prior sin so that we would not continue in it. Look at Psalm 73, and as you're getting to Psalm 73, put your finger there, and with another finger, put it to Psalm 119 because there's a couple of passages in Psalms that I want to call your attention to. In Psalm 73, the psalmist had been discouraged by the prosperity of the wicked while he was in affliction, and he resented it. He resented it and in verse 21 of Psalm 73, he says, "When my soul was embittered, when I was pricked in heart, I was brutish and ignorant; I was like a beast toward you." He looks back after the trial has been relieved and he says, "My mind was dark. I was in sin. My heart was hostile to God himself. I was like a beast. I was like an unreasoning animal. My mind was not working right. If only someone had

built a Christian mind in me beforehand but my mind wasn't operating right, and I was like an animal before you, God, with my resentment and my unthinking reactions."

Verse 23, "Nevertheless, I am continually with you; you hold my right hand. You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will receive me to glory." Now he's speaking from a position of faith. He says, "I'm always with you because you're faithful. I'll live this life, I'll die, and then you'll receive me into glory. God, that should have been governing my perspective all along, but before you taught me that in the midst of my affliction, I was like an unreasoning animal. I was a beast before you."

Look at Psalm 119 in verse 67. Psalm 119:67, "Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I keep your word." Verse 71, "It is good for me that I was afflicted, that I might learn your statutes." Before I was afflicted, before this stinging providence came, I was spinning out of control. Your stinging providence brought me back to a place of obedience.

Beloved, in both Psalm 73 and in Psalm 119, the psalmist is looking back on adversity, looking back on mental or physical affliction, and in hindsight, he recognizes previously existing sin in his life that had been brought to the surface. The stinging providence exposed that sin, led him to repentance, and then he was moved on in restored, strengthened, and yet chastened faith. God exposes our sin in the midst of adversity. In the midst of your present adversity, you remember we framed the discussion around this? In your present adversity, is it pointing out things? Do you look back and say, "Look at what I used to be like. Look what I am like. I've got to get out of this. God, be merciful to me. Help me."

Thirdly, third goal of the stinging providence. God tests you. He exposes your sin. Thirdly, he builds your character. He builds your character and this is a more positive design in a stinging providence. Look at Romans 5, Romans 5 remembering that all we can do is point these things out and then you're left to meditate on them. You're responsible to meditate on them. In Romans 5:1, "Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God. Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces," okay, there's the key for us, there's the pivot for today, suffering is doing something to us. It brings something out and puts something in. "Suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us." Paul says we're not grumbling our way through a stinging providence. We're not simply keeping a stiff upper lip, folding our arms across our chest and say, "I'll be a rock here. I won't like it, but I won't bend." And those are sub-Christian attitudes. Paul says we rejoice in our sufferings because we understand what it produces. It does something to our character over the course of time. And so God builds character into us by sending difficulties that we persevere through and come out better on the other side. Suffering presses you. I get that. It presses me. Has pressed me in the past, I should say. Sometimes it crushes us, and it's crushed me in the past. I

understand. I get that, and so I'm on your side here, but that suffering is producing a good long-term result. God sends that adversity to build character in you over the long haul.

Those of you that have walked for any length of time at all in Christ, maybe you haven't thought about it this way, but on the basis of prior adversity that God has brought you through, you should find, if you reflect upon it, that you've got a greater patience for adversity now than you did beforehand because you've been trained by it, you've been conditioned by it. You can look at a trial completely different in form, say, "I've been here before. I know what it's like to suffer. I know what it's like to not get the immediate resolution I want. I've done that in the past. I remember times and episodes in life," and so you draw upon that and say, "I can be stronger. I can be better here because of what God put into me in my prior affliction."

Fourthly. 1. He tests us, he exposes our sin. Thirdly, he builds character. Fourthly, he draws us closer to himself. He draws us closer to himself. The Savior who suffered appoints affliction for you, knowing that you will suffer under it because he knows that thereby you and he will have more in common. There will be more to share together. You read his sufferings in Gethsemane with a greater sense of sympathy, saying, "I know what it's like to suffer, and Christ was suffering even more greatly there." Christ, because he took on human flesh, knows what human suffering is like himself, and Scripture says he sympathizes with us in our suffering. There's a mutuality here. And beloved, for the one who genuinely loves Christ, for the one who wants Christ, not simply what Christ can do for her, what Christ can do for him, but wants Christ himself, then this is actually appealing. Paul says, "You know, I want to share in his sufferings. I want to know the fellowship of his sufferings," Philippians 3.

I alluded to Job earlier. You can turn back to Job 42, just before the Psalms, Job 42, and since I've already alluded to this, we don't need to spend much time here. Job was a blameless man. God sent deep affliction upon him. And at the end of the affliction, but before it had been removed, Job knew that he had come to know God better. In Job 42:5 and 6, he said, "I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you." God, my knowledge of you is more direct than it was before this adversity hit. Say that again, God, my knowledge of you is more direct, more personal, it's by experience in a way that was not true before this adversity hit. "I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you; therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes." God used the affliction, drew Job closer to himself. When the spiritual result had been achieved, he restored him, as you read in the rest of chapter 42. He draws us closer to himself.

Fifthly, and this is going to be very convicting, okay? Can't be any other way. He prepares us to love others. He prepares us to love others. When God sends a stinging providence, we tend to get self-centered. "I've got this problem. Let me tell you about my problem. Have I told you about my problem? Oh, I have. I'll tell someone else." And we just become so self-preoccupied with it all. Beloved, that's part of what he's purging away. In the long run, what God is doing with those stinging providences, is he's preparing you to love others more effectively, and as Christian people, we need to

embrace that and not resent it, not turn away from it. Look at 2 Corinthians 1. 2 Corinthians 1. You see, beloved, there's more at stake than you and me in the midst of our stinging providences. There's a whole host of other people to think about that need help and blessing from God that God will bring across our paths in time to come. 2 Corinthians 1:3, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that," there's a purpose to it. It's not meant to be a cul-de-sac that ends it with you. You're not the end goal of the comfort of God that he gives to you in your stinging providence. He's preparing you for something else, "so that," verse 4, "we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God."

He comforts us in affliction so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. Here you are suffering in your stinging providence, God comforts you, not so that you can return to living selfishly, but so that you say, "Oh, I see how comfort works. I know the principles that helped me. I need to share these with others. I need to come alongside those that are discouraged and say, here's how God comforted me, let me help you with what God used to comfort me." And we don't speak down, we don't speak theoretically, we speak experientially saying, "I know it hurts. Here's what helps." Do you know what helps, beloved? Knowing the context and the goals of our stinging providences. He stings us, heals us, and then sends us out to be vessels of his grace. It's hard for young men, especially those that are theologically inclined in the early days of their experience, it's hard for young men to understand that. So, so often God will bruise them deeply before he sends them into ministry or sends them out in whatever capacity so that the edge of academic theory is softened into the comforting hand of God.

Now finally, sufferings prepare us for glory. Sufferings prepare us for glory. Let's just go back to Psalm 73 and wrap it up with this. Psalm 73, what a blessing and a comfort this is. Throughout all of our stinging providences, God by his providence is directing it all, determining the limits, the depth, the duration of it, he's guiding all of it to accomplish a goal with an eternally glorious outcome. The psalmist said, I read it earlier, Psalm 73:24, "You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will receive me to glory." Beloved, when earthly comfort fails you, when circumstances cannot, will not change, God teaches you in those times to find your greatest blessing in God himself. That's what Habakkuk learned at the end of chapter 3, "Nevertheless, I will exalt in the Lord. I will rejoice in the God of my salvation." "Let nothing change, God. I'm content in you. I rejoice in you. I celebrate, I exalt, I sing exuberantly to you because you have become the all-sufficient portion of my soul."

Beloved, even within the so-called church, I'm leaving you with a final exhortation, challenge, aspiration here as I close, most people are far more eager to get rid of their problems than they are to find the purpose of God in them. They're far more eager to have tranquil circumstances restored than to know the God who's behind all of our circumstances. Beloved, settle it in your heart in the midst of your presently stinging providence, say, "Whatever anybody else does, I'm going to be different. I want the

purpose of God. I want to be satisfied in Christ. I want to be content in him, whether this thing changes or not." And so our prayer becomes less, "God, change this and take it away," and our prayer becomes more, "God, sanctify this affliction to the good of my soul. God, what is it that you have for my soul here?" Martyn Lloyd-Jones says when we ask that question, we're on the high road to the blessing of God. "What is it that God would have for my soul in this affliction?" That orients us rightly and properly. And you know, beloved, if God's going to send affliction to us, we might as well get the benefit of it, right?

Let's pray together.

Father, I know that we've covered so much so quickly. I pray for the work of your Holy Spirit in each heart in the aftermath of what we've heard. And Father, I pray that for each one here, for each believer in Christ here, that you would sanctify each affliction to your eternal glory and to their eternal good and help by your Spirit each one of us to sort through the chaos of broken lives and find your sure purpose and presence in the midst of it. For others, Father, not in Christ, at least not yet, I pray that your Spirit would use this affliction to reorient them away from a preoccupation with this world, that they might be consumed by the thought and the urgency, "I must find Christ in this. I must be reconciled to him." And then, Father, as your Spirit works that desire, lead them safely to the crucified and risen Savior, who made a blood atonement for the souls of all who would believe in him. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

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