

THE WORST THINGS WORK FOR GOOD TO THE GODLY

By Thomas Watson

Do not mistake me; I do not say that of their own nature the worst things are good, for they are a fruit of the curse; but though they are naturally evil, yet the wise overruling hand of God disposing and sanctifying them, they are morally good. As the elements, though of contrary qualities, yet God has so tempered them that they all work in a harmonious manner for the good of the universe. Or as in a watch, the wheels seem to move contrary one to another, but all carry on the motions of the watch: so things seem to move cross to the godly, yet by the wonderful providence of God work for their good.

The evil of affliction works for good to the godly.

It is one heart-quieting consideration in all the afflictions that befall us that God has a special hand in them: "*The Almighty hath afflicted me*" (Ruth 1:21). Instruments can no more stir till God gives them a commission, than the axe can cut of itself without a hand. Job eyed God in his affliction: therefore, as Augustine observes, he does not say, "The Lord gave, and the devil took away," but "*The Lord hath taken away.*" Whoever brings an affliction to us, it is God that sends it. Another heart-quieting consideration is that afflictions work for good. "*Like these good figs, so will I acknowledge them that are sent out of this place into the land of the Chaldeans, for their good*" (Jeremiah 24:5). Judah's captivity in Babylon was for their good. "*It is good for me that I have been afflicted*" (Psalm 119.7 1). This text, like Moses' tree cast into the bitter waters of affliction, may make them sweet and wholesome to drink. Afflictions to the godly are medicinal. Out of the most poisonous drugs, God extracts our salvation. Afflictions are as needful as ordinances (I Peter 1:6). No vessel can be made of gold without fire; so it is impossible that we should be made vessels of honor, unless we are melted and refined in the furnace of affliction. "*All the paths of the Lord are mercy and truth*" (Psalm 25: 10). As the painter intermixes bright colors with dark shadows, so the wise God mixes mercy with judgment. Those afflictive providences which seem to be prejudicial are beneficial. Let us take some instances in Scripture.

Joseph's brethren throw him into a pit; afterward they sell him; then he is cast into prison; yet all this worked for his good. His abasement made way for his advancement; he was made the second man in the kingdom. *"Ye thought evil against me, but God meant it for good"* (Genesis 50:20). Jacob wrestled with the angel, and the hollow of Jacob's thigh was out of joint. This was sad; but God turned it to good, for there he saw God's face, and there the Lord blessed him. *"Jacob called the name of the place Peniel, for I have seen God face to face"* (Genesis 32:30). Who would not be willing to have a bone out of joint, so that he might have a sight of God? King Manasseh was bound in chains. This was sad to see - a crown of gold exchanged for fetters; but it wrought for his good, for, *"When he was in affliction he besought the Lord, and humbled himself greatly, and the Lord was entreated of him"* (2 Chronicles 33:11-12). He was more beholden to his iron chain, than to his golden crown; the one made him proud, the other made him humble.

Job was a spectacle of misery; he lost all that ever he had; he abounded only in boils and ulcers. This was sad; but it wrought for his good, his grace was proved and improved. God gave a testimony from heaven of his integrity, and did compensate his loss by giving him twice as much as ever he had before (Job 42:10). Paul was smitten with blindness. This was uncomfortable, but it turned to his good. By that blindness, God made way for the light of grace to shine into his soul; it was the beginning of a happy conversion (Acts 9:6).

As the hard frosts in winter bring on the flowers in the spring, and as the night ushers in the morning star, so the evils of affliction produce much good to those that love God. But we are ready to question the truth of this, and say, as Mary did to the angel, "How can this be?" Therefore I shall show you several ways how affliction works for good.

(1) As it is our preacher and tutor - *"hear ye the rod"* (Micah 6:9). Luther said that he could never rightly understand some of the Psalms, till he was in affliction. Affliction teaches what sin is. In the word preached, we hear what a dreadful thing sin is, that it is both defiling and damning, but we fear it no more than a painted lion; therefore God lets loose affliction, and then we feel sin bitter in the fruit of it. A sickbed often teaches more than a sermon. We can best see the ugly visage of sin in the glass of affliction. Affliction teaches us to know ourselves. In prosperity, we are for the most part strangers to ourselves. God makes us know

affliction, that we may better know ourselves. We see that corruption in our hearts in the time of affliction, which we would not believe was there. Water in the glass looks clear, but set it on the fire, and the scum boils up. In prosperity, a man seems to be humble and thankful, the water looks clear; but set this man a little on the fire of affliction, and the scum boils up - much impatience and unbelief appear. "Oh," says a Christian, "I never thought I had such a bad heart, as now I see I have; I never thought my corruptions had been so strong, and my graces so weak."

(2) Afflictions work for good, as they are the means of making the heart more upright. In prosperity, the heart is apt to be divided (Hosea 10:2). The heart cleaves partly to God, and partly to the world. It is like a needle between two lodestones; God draws, and the world draws. Now God takes away the world that the heart may cleave more to Him in sincerity. Correction is a setting the heart right and straight. As we sometimes hold a crooked rod over the fire to straighten it; so God holds us over the fire of affliction to make us more straight and upright. Oh how good it is, when sin has bent the soul awry from God, that affliction should straighten it again!

(3) Afflictions work for good, as they conform us to Christ. God's rod is a pencil to draw Christ's image more lively upon us. It is good that there should be symmetry and proportion between the Head and the members. Would we be parts of Christ's mystical body and not be like Him? His life, as Calvin says, was a series of sufferings, "*a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief*" (Isaiah 53:3). He wept and bled. Was His heart crowned with thorns, and do we think to be crowned with roses? It is good to be like Christ, though it be sufferings. Jesus Christ drank a bitter cup; it made Him sweat drops of blood to think of it; and, though it be true He drank the poison in the cup (the wrath of God), yet there is some wormwood in the cup left, which the saints must drink. Only here is the difference between Christ's sufferings and ours; His were satisfactory, ours are only castigatory.

(4) Afflictions work for good to the godly, as they are destructive to sin. There is much corruption in the best heart; affliction does by degrees work it out, as the fire works out the dross from the gold, "*This is all the fruit, to take away his sin*" (Isaiah 27:9). What if we have more of the rough file, if we have less rust! Afflictions carry away nothing but the dross of sin. If a physician should say to a

patient, "Your body is distempered, and full of bad humors, which must be cleared out, or you die; but I will prescribe this which, though it may make you sick, yet it will carry away the dregs of your disease, and save your life;" would not this be for the good of the patient? Afflictions are the medicine which God uses to carry off our spiritual diseases; they cure the tumor of pride, the fever of lust, the dropsy of covetousness. Do they not then work for good?

(5) Afflictions work for good, as they are the means of loosening our hearts from the world. When you dig away the earth from the root of a tree, it is to loosen the tree from the earth; so God digs away our earthly comforts to loosen our hearts from the earth. A thorn grows up with every flower. God would have the world hang as a loose tooth which, being twitched away, does not much trouble us. Is it not good to be weaned? The oldest saints need it. Why does the Lord break the conduit-pipe? So that we may go to Him, in whom are "*all our fresh springs*" (Psalm 87:7).

(6) Afflictions work for good, as they make way for comfort. "*In the valley of Achor is a door of hope*" (Hosea 2:15). Achor signifies trouble. God sweetens outward pain with inward peace. "*Your sorrow shall be turned into joy;*" (John 16:20). Here is the water turned into wine. After a bitter pill, God gives sugar. Paul had his prison-song. God's rod has honey at the end of it. The saints in affliction have had such sweet raptures of joy, that they thought themselves in the borders of the heavenly Canaan.

(7) Afflictions work for good, as they are a magnifying of us. "*What is man, that thou shouldest magnify him, and that thou shouldest visit him every morning?*" (Job 7:17). God does by affliction magnify us three ways: (a) in that He will condescend so low as to take notice of us. It is an honor that God will mind dust and ashes. It is magnifying of us that God thinks us worthy to be smitten. God's not striking is a slighting; (b) Afflictions magnify us, as they are ensigns of glory, signs of sonship, "*If you endure chastening, God dealeth with you as with sons*" (Hebrews 12:7). Every print of the rod is a badge of honor; (c) Afflictions tend to the magnifying of the saints, as they make them renowned in the world. Soldiers have never been so admired for their victories, as the saints have been for their sufferings. The zeal and constancy of the martyrs in their trials have rendered them famous to posterity. How eminent was Job for his patience! God leaves his

name upon record: *"Ye have heard of the patience of Job"* (James 5:1 1). Job the sufferer was more renowned than Alexander the conqueror.

(8) Afflictions work for good, as they are the means of making us happy. *"Happy is the man whom God correcteth"* (Job 5:17). What politician or moralist ever placed happiness in the cross? Job does. *"Happy is the man whom God correcteth."*

It may be asked, How do afflictions make us happy? We reply that, being sanctified, they bring us nearer to God. The moon in the full is furthest off from the sun: so are many further off from God in the full moon of prosperity; [but] afflictions bring them nearer to God. The magnet of mercy does not draw us so near to God as the cords of affliction. When Absalom set Joab's corn on fire, then he came running to Absalom (2 Samuel 14:30). When God sets our worldly comforts on fire, then we run to Him, and make our peace with Him. When the prodigal was pinched with want, then he returned home to his father (Luke 15). When the dove could not find any rest for the sole of her foot, then she flew to the ark. When God brings a deluge of affliction upon us, then we fly to the ark of Christ. Thus affliction makes us happy, in bringing us nearer to God. Faith can make use of the waters of affliction, to swim faster to Christ.

(9) Afflictions work for good, as they put to silence the wicked. How ready are they to asperse and calumniate the godly, that they serve God only for self-interest. Therefore God will have His people endure sufferings for that He may put a padlock on the lying lips of men. When the atheists of the world see that God has a people, who serve Him not for a livery, but for love, it stops their mouths. The devil accused Job of hypocrisy, that he was a mercenary man; all his religion made up of ends of gold and silver: *"Doth Job serve for naught? Hast not thou made a hedge about him?"* *"Well,"* says God, *"put forth thy hand, touch his estate"* (Job 1:9). The devil had no sooner received a commission, but he falls a breaking down Job's hedge. Still Job worships God (Job 1:20), and professes faith in Him: *"Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him"* (Job 13:15). This silenced the devil himself, How it strikes a damp into wicked men, when they see that the godly will keep close to God in a suffering condition, and that, [even] when they lose all, they yet will bold fast their integrity.

(10) Afflictions work for good, as they make way for glory (2 Corinthians 4:17). Not that they merit glory, but they prepare for it. As ploughing prepares the earth for a crop, so afflictions prepare and make us meet for glory. The painter lays his gold upon dark colors, so God first lays the dark colors of affliction, and then He lays the gold color of glory. The vessel is first seasoned before wine is poured into it; the vessels of mercy are first seasoned with affliction, and then the wine of glory is poured in. Thus we see afflictions are not prejudicial, but beneficial, to the saints. We should not so much look at the evil affliction, as the good; not so much at the dark side of the cloud, as the light.