



The Word: Knowledge of God's Goodness Psalm 119:65-72

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August 8, 2010 — Trinity 10

Sometimes the things that are good for us don't feel very good. This past week a new guy joined my lap-swimming group. He's fast. At least quite a bit faster than the rest of us and on Friday I wore myself out not quite keeping up with him. I was out of breath. My shoulders and my legs were sore when the workout was over. But it was good. The problem is that most of us there are all about the same speed. We're prone to settling into a pace that's comfortable, and we don't really push ourselves. But since the goal is to fit, being comfortable isn't where we should be. When you're exercising, challenge and discomfort—even a little pain—are good.

When I was in elementary school my mom and her friends got into the 1970s health food craze. From what I'm told, health food is supposed to be good for you, but all I remember was that most of it tasted awful. The *good* stuff tasted like cardboard. The really bad stuff was just plain awful. I would have much rather guzzled root beer and ice cream, but the fact is that the stuff that doesn't taste as good is better for you. What's good for you is often not nearly as fun as the stuff that's bad for you, and in a lot of cases, doing what's good for you is just plain unpleasant or painful.

With that in mind, let's look at Psalm 119—specifically verses 65-72. David writes:

**You have dealt well with your servant,
O LORD, according to your word.**

“You have dealt well with your servant, O LORD.” That's an acclamation of praise. But we need to ask, “What did that well dealing look like?” Let's go back a few verses. In verse 8 David cried out, “Do not utterly forsake me!” In verse 19 he wrote, “I am a sojourner on the earth.” In verse 25 he looked at his own sinful life and lamented, “My soul clings to the dust.” A few verses later, in verse 28, he wrote about his spiritual condition, saying, “My soul melts away for sorrow.” He pleaded with God in verse 39, “Turn away the reproach that I dread.” When he did do what was right, he was persecuted for it. In verse 51 he writes, “The insolent utterly deride me.” If we were to look at

the books of Samuel, we could see how miserable David's existence was for many years. And in light of all those things—things and situation that so often caused him sorrow and misery—he makes this acclamation of praise: “You have dealt well with your servant, O LORD.”

How often are we ready to praise God, when by all accounts our lives look grim? Face, most of us probably whine more than we praise. But St. Paul told the Christians in Thessalonica, “Give thanks in *all* circumstances” (1 Thessalonians 5:18), even the “bad” ones. Or consider Job. He was experiencing misery greater than any of us likely ever will, and yet he could tell his friends, “Though he [God] slay me, yet will I hope in him” (Job 13:15). We're prone to doing the opposite. We complain about hard times and bad situations. Worse, sometimes Christians blame God, get angry with him, or curse him. Thanks and praise are the last things on our mind. So what was the difference in David's life? It's in the second half of the verse: “according to your Word.”

David knew God's Word. That's where God has chosen to reveal himself to us, and as he knew the Word, David knew, first and foremost, God's character. He knew that God was holy, righteous, and just. And because he knew the Word, he knew the history of God's dealings with his people. He knew that God *always* keeps his promises. He knew that God doesn't break his covenants. And he knew that God wants to grow us—that he doesn't just want to save us and leave as we are, but wants to make us into holy people who will give him glory and be his witness in the world. David could look at Scripture and see that God challenges his people—not to be sadistic or because he takes pleasure in bring misery and misfortune on us, but because through hard times and difficult situations, he teaches us to trust him, he teaches us to love, and he teaches us to set aside our sinful ways and turn to holiness. To put it in terms of my earlier illustrations: those hard situations are like the coach who pushes you harder than your comfortable so that you'll be more fit and perform better; those situations are the cardboard health food that might not taste great today, but will lead to a healthier tomorrow. The key is to trust in God through the hard times, resting on his promises and knowing that, as St. Paul writes in Romans, “for those who love God all things work together for good.” But not just in our earthly or worldly understand of what's good but specifically, as he goes on to say, that we might “be conformed to the image of his Son” (Romans 8:28, 29).

Much of David's perspective came from his understanding that he was a sinner. He knew that he could never earn or deserve

God's love—that, in fact, he was an enemy of God. And yet despite being his enemy, God loved him and had chosen to show him grace and mercy. David acknowledges that he's God's servant—and an unworthy one at that. But because of the continuing graciousness of God, his desire was always more and more to be a better servant. That's what grace does. People who trust in themselves and people who think they're good enough to merit God's love and favour will never experience grace, and having never experienced grace, they will never grow. From their perspective God owes them and when bad things happen, their first reaction is to blame God or to get angry with him instead of remembering that God is gracious and that he uses everything in our lives to conform us to the image of Jesus.

David goes on in verse 66:

**Teach me good judgment and
knowledge, for I believe in your
commandments.**

That should be the prayer of every believer. God often uses hard times and difficult situations to teach us, because we refuse to let him teach us in easier ways. Often times our pride gets in the way and we lose the teachable spirit that we should have. Sometimes dealing with the hard things of life is the only way to learn, but many times we'd make life easier if we simply trusted God when he tells us something in Scripture and then obeyed. After all the hard times, this may be where David's at now. He prays that God will teach him and that means that David had developed a humble and teachable spirit. John Ryland wrote that “The beauty of holiness shines forth resplendently in the word of God, in the divine character, in the law, in the gospel, in the cross of Christ, in the example of Christ, and in the conduct of all his true followers...”

That's very true, but so often we miss seeing the beauty of holiness. Ryland goes on and points out that seeing it is conditioned and that God's saints will only see it “so far as they are conformed to the lovely image.” That's why David prays for knowledge and wisdom. Knowledge is the understanding of God's truth. Without it we have no anchor. Without it we're “tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes.” But we need more than bare truth. We also need judgement. Judgement is what allows us to apply God's truth and live it out. David had grown to love God's commandments—and so should we—but none of us can live out his commandments on our own. We need the Holy Spirit to teach us. He does that through his Word and as he indwells us, giving us wisdom and strength.

David didn't start out with this teachable spirit and desire to follow God. He says in verse 67:

Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I keep your word.

I hope you all can see yourselves in this verse as much as I see myself. How many times have we all had to learn from our mistakes? When I was in high school I worked as a draughtsman for an architect. One day I arrived after school and was immediately pulled into the office manager's office. She informed me that I had made a mistake on a set of plans. One of our clients was building a large 6,500 square foot house and I had drawn the plans. I'd made a mistake when I was dimensioning the foundation plan, and instead of specifying a 6" foundational wall, I had accidentally written 16". It was a mistake I should have caught when I checked over my work. The office manager informed me that the homeowner had been in the office that morning and was furious, because his concrete contractor had followed the plans, not asking any questions, and had poured over \$15,000 in unnecessary concrete—and it was my fault. I was told to go up to my desk and think about what the best solution would be and that when I had come up with something, I was to go in and explain it to the Boss. I was sweating bricks and was pretty sure I'd be fired. When I did eventually go down to see the Boss, he heard me out and then explained that the concrete contractor hadn't actually poured the 16" foundation wall, but had called them that morning to confirm. He had wanted me to learn not to make that mistake again. I was relieved. I also never made that mistake again!

I didn't deliberately make that mistake. It was an honest one, even if it was stupid and sloppy. Similarly, David didn't go out so much to deliberately stray from God's ways either. He desired to follow God. We know that from all the psalms he wrote. But he still made some big mistakes in life, because his flesh was sometimes weak, because temptation was strong, and because he wasn't guarding himself against sin the way he should have been. Consider that when he had his affair with Bathsheba and arranged for her husband to be killed in battle, based on what the story tells us, he didn't clue in that he was really doing wrong until he was confronted by Nathan. On some level he must have known, but through it all he was being careless in living his life. It took a spiritual two-by-four between the eyes to knock him out of his spiritual stupor. God has to do the same with us often. He has to let us fall to rock bottom before we finally wake up and start following him. Spurgeon wrote that, "Our trials act as a thorn hedge to keep us in the

good pasture." It's no fun to run into a thorn hedge, but once you have, you're not likely to do it again. David had wandered, but his God-permitted trials brought him back to the pasture and tethered him there where the good feed was.

It's a humble man who says in verse 68:

You are good and do good; teach me your statutes.

That's more praise. God's discipline, as hard as it may be, is always good. I was reading Charles Bridges sermon on this passage. He points out that we often rush to judgement. We find ourselves in a difficult situation, and, as he puts it, we imagine God sitting in heaven frowning or glaring down at us in anger or laughing at us sadistically, when, in fact, if we'd just stop and consider the situation through the eyes of faith and remember who God is, we'd realise that no matter what, God is always dealing graciously with us and smiling down on us as he works to conform us to the image of Jesus.

And with that understanding—that God is always doing us good—our prayer should be, with David, that he would teach us his statutes. David longed to know more because he'd been in trouble for a lack of godly knowledge and judgement, but even still, the more we know and the more we conform, the more our desires will always be for even more of God's teaching. If there's ever a time that you don't feel like you want or need God to teach you anymore, there's something wrong.

And remember, David prayed that God would teach him, but he knew that the Scriptures are God's curriculum. I've talked about this before. "Let go and let God" is not the biblical answer to growing in godliness. Lots of Christians somehow have the idea that all they have to do is pray that God will make them victorious over sin or that he will teach them his way. It doesn't work that way. The Holy Spirit gives us wisdom to understand the Word and he gives us strength to overcome sin, but if we don't apply ourselves to studying the Word, the Spirit's wisdom is wasted, and if we don't apply ourselves to taking positive steps toward holiness, the Spirit's strength is going to go largely wasted. God may give us the ability to follow him—an ability we don't have in and of ourselves—but he still expects us to cooperate with that grace and be proactive in following him. Praying for knowledge or praying for holiness while avoiding God's Word is like praying that you'll pass an exam and then never cracking open the textbook or attending the lectures.

God is good. And as the song we often sing says, he's good "all the time." Even when his discipline doesn't feel good—when his workout brings us pain or when we feel like we're eating cardboard—we can trust that it is for our good. Look at verses 69 and 70:

The insolent smear me with lies, but with my whole heart I keep your precepts; their heart is unfeeling like fat, but I delight in your law.

The proud and insolent defrauded him, as we saw in verse 51; they defamed him in verse 61; and now they slander him with lies because he's lived in such a way that they can't find anything scandalous to expose. That tends to be how things work. The world doesn't like holiness. If you live a holy life, you show up everyone around you. You break the curve, and nobody likes a curve breaker. We can be much more comfortable in our sin, when we can compare ourselves to all the people below us. It makes us uncomfortable when we're confronted by the life of someone who is truly following Christ. Remember, our natural state is to believe that we can save ourselves—that we can merit or earn God's favour if we're only good enough. We think hell is for people like Hitler or Stalin, not for us. The problem is that when someone comes along who exhibits true godliness, he upsets the balance. He shows us that we're not as good as we thought. And instead of acknowledging that we can only be saved by the perfect righteousness of Christ, the world instead gets angry and retaliates. But Jesus warned us this is what would happen: "If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you" (John 15:18).

David gets right at the heart of the problem—literally. The hearts of those who persecute him are "unfeeling like fat." A heart clogged with fat—today we call it cholesterol—eventually stops working. In the Hebrew mind the heart was the seat of our feelings and emotions. When you feel something, it affects your heart rate and that's where you "feel" it. That's the problem. The unregenerate have hearts clogged with spiritual cholesterol. God speaks, but because their hearts are so clogged, they feel nothing.

David, on the other hand has been put through God's spiritual training camp. His heart is healthy and when the Word speaks, he hears it, he recognises it, he does it, and he delights in it. God's training isn't always easy, but the end results are always good. As he says in verse 71:

It is good for me that I was afflicted, that I might learn your statutes.

It was good for me that Friday our coach at the pool had us doing 1000 metre “pyramids”—that’s 40 lengths where you build up your speed until you’re giving it your all and then gradually back off to an easier pace...and then do it again. It was good for me, but at the time it hurt. When I used to bike commute between Vancouver and Portland for a summer job, I can remember a lot of days when I was riding home up the I-205 bridge. It’s a steep uphill grade, it was hot—35 or 40 degrees—and there was a 50 or 60 kph headwind, and as my legs pumped up and down, my mantra was “I’m gonna die, I’m gonna die, I’m gonna die.” But I made it up the bridge and it was good for me.

Some days David cried out to God: “My soul cleaves to the dust!” “I’m gonna die!” It hurt. But when it was over he could see that God’s spiritual training camp had purged the spiritual fat from his heart and made him fit for doing God’s kingdom work. Through the hard times, God had taught David his commandments and his statutes. And the more David trained, the more his perspective on life changed. We see that in the final verse of the stanza:

The law of your mouth is better to me than thousands of gold and silver pieces.

One thing I’ve learned in being around people who regularly eat health food is that they don’t think it tastes like cardboard. In fact, they really like it. And that happens because our tastes adjust. Giving up worldliness for the sake of following God is not an easy thing for most of us. We usually do it because we know we should and because the Holy Spirit convicts us when we don’t—but it’s not easy. And yet, the more we make it our practice to follow God’s hard and narrow path, the more our tastes—the desires of our hearts—change and the more we actually *want* to keep following God. David teaches us that the key is to take the first steps. Once we start walking with God, our worldly treasures will dim in comparison to the life-giving Word of God, which not only teaches us how to walk more closely with him, but truly introduces us to our loving Creator.

Please pray with me: Heavenly Father, even though it’s often difficult, let us learn to see your hand at work in all the situations of our lives, that as we trust in your Word, we might give thanks in all things. Teach us your ways, we pray, even when it means running into a thorn hedge, that we might be tethered to feed on the grace you provide in your pasture. Change our hearts and put in them a desire for you above all the things the world holds before us. We ask this in the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.