

How to Pray When in Difficulties (Or How to Pray in Bad Times to a Good God)

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Psalm 119:65-72 (NASB95) ⁶⁵ You have dealt well with Your servant, O LORD, according to Your word. ⁶⁶ Teach me good discernment and knowledge, For I believe in Your commandments. ⁶⁷ Before I was afflicted I went astray, But now I keep Your word. ⁶⁸ You are good and do good; Teach me Your statutes. ⁶⁹ The arrogant have forged a lie against me; With all *my* heart I will observe Your precepts. ⁷⁰ Their heart is covered with fat, *But* I delight in Your law. ⁷¹ It is good for me that I was afflicted, That I may learn Your statutes. ⁷² The law of Your mouth is better to me Than thousands of gold and silver *pieces*.

Suffering and bad times and affliction and trials drive a true believer to his or her knees more than most other times, but *how* should we then pray? What we pray for, and the content of our prayer requests and personal prayers, says something about our heart and trust and spiritual maturity. Psalm 119:65-72 gives us a God-inspired pattern for how to pray in life's difficulties

Praying biblically, with a passage of Scripture open, is one of the best ways to pray. Our prayer requests and prayer life will be so much more informed and conformed to *God's will* if they come out of *God's Word*. As I interact with hurting people lately, I've been trying to apply praying these truths to be true in their lives and in mine.

This passage reveals for us at least 4 ways to pray in difficulties:

1. Lord, you are so good, though I'm so undeserving (v. 65)

Notice this God-centered humble first line – the focus of this undeserving servant is clearly on the Lord: 4 references in 1 verse:

⁶⁵ **You** have dealt well with **Your** servant, **O LORD**, according to **Your** word.

He begins with the Lord, which is always a good place to start, and here he starts with the goodness of the Lord. Actually the first word in the Hebrew text is “good” not only in this verse, but in five of the verses in this brief section. The literal Heb word order is

v. 65 “GOOD you do / have done to your servant” i.e., *well*

v. 66 “GOOD discernment and knowledge, teach me”

v. 68 “GOOD you are, and are doing GOOD”

v. 71 “GOOD for me it is to be afflicted”

v. 72 “GOOD is the law of your mouth to me” i.e., *better*

The word “affliction” appears 2x in this passage (v. 67, 71) but it's not the theme of this section. The focus is really on the word “good” and how to pray to our “good” God in affliction.

The Hebrew root word for “good” actually appears 3x more than the word for “affliction,” a total of 6x in 8 vss (Hebrew *tov / tob*). So both exegetically and experientially, both statistically and practically, affliction is over-powered by the Lord's goodness.

The NIV translates it as a request for God to do good in v. 65, but I think it's better to go with the other translations which look back on what God has done, doing good or well to us, and of course the most familiar Psalm closes with forward looking future-grace trust *surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life...*

Here he begins by acknowledging what we do not always see when in difficulty, how **good** God is and has been to us – when we think rightly and understand what we actually deserve (God’s wrath) it should actually be remarkable to us that we haven’t had *more difficulty*! God has treated us so well even though we are so undeserving. We can become so focused on how we think things should be different in our life that we lose the focus of God’s goodness and we lose the perspective of who God is and who we are, undeserving servants.

Spurgeon pointed out the connection in context to the prior verse: ‘From the universal goodness of God in nature, in Ps 119:64, it is an easy and pleasant step to a confession of the Lord’s uniform goodness to ourselves personally. It is something [amazing] that God has dealt *at all* with such insignificant and undeserving beings as we are, and it is far more that he has dealt *well* with us, and *so* well, so *wondrously* well ... He is the best of Masters; [it’s to] a very unworthy and incapable servant that he has acted [so] blessedly: doesn’t this cause us to delight in his service more and more? *We* can’t say that *we have dealt well* with our Master; for when we have done all, we are unprofitable servants; but as for our Lord, he has given us light work, large maintenance, loving encouragement, and liberal wages.’¹

Biblical Counselor Jay Adams said it this way: ‘Proofs of God’s goodness are everywhere. The problem is that “Christless eyes” do not see them. Even Christians see far too little. That is because they don’t think rightly; they don’t look for evidence of God’s mercy ... That God doesn’t eliminate every wicked person when he commits sin is a mercy to him, giving him space for repentance ... Christians who learn to see God’s hand of goodness and mercy all around them every day and hour are rarely those who get depressed, rarely those who complain, rarely those who are a sucker for some false belief ... The last line [Ps 119:64] is significant. It tells you what to say when the counselee tells you, “Well, I just have a hard time seeing such things.” Your reply? [read end of v. 64] “Ask God to **teach you His statutes** so that by means of them you may be able to have your eyes opened.’²

And ‘if a counselee reads this verse, and ‘they can’t give the same witness to their God – that [God] does as He said He would in the Bible [doing good to him] – one of at least two things is wrong. Either the counselee hasn’t the eyes to see, or he isn’t eligible for that goodness (i.e., he isn’t a genuine **servant** of God).’³

There’s the great promise of Romans 8:28 (“God works all things together for good”) but the promise does not apply to unbelievers – it is only for “those who love God, those who are called according to His purpose.”

As a modern song says it, for those in relationship with God: *God is so good, God is so good, God is so good, He’s so good to me*. This goodness to God’s true children is what Psalms often appeal to in praying to their heavenly Father:

Psalms 25:7 (NASB95) ⁷ Do not remember the sins of my youth or my transgressions; According to Your lovingkindness remember me, **For Your goodness’ sake, O LORD.**

Psalms 86:5 (NASB95) ⁵ For You, Lord, are **good**, and ready to forgive, And abundant in lovingkindness to all who call upon You.

In Psalm 119:17, he prayed *Deal bountifully with Your servant that I may live and keep your Word*, and now in our text in verse 65 it is answered: *You have dealt well with Your servant, O LORD, according to Your word*. God deals bountifully well with His lowly servants according to His Word; so that we can exclaim (like Psalm 115:1) “not to us but to Your name be glory!”

We should pray, Lord you are so good to me, though I’m so undeserving. God is good, all the time, God is good; but we need to take our eyes off ourselves to see that, to perceive it and then to praise God for it. We need to look back on what God has done, we need to quit looking down at the dirt around us and look up and see the glorious goodness of God. Verse 68 says *God is good and doing good*. That’s His very character, His visible glory and essence.

Exodus 33:18-34:6 Then Moses said, “I pray You, **show me Your glory!**”¹⁹ And He said, “I Myself will make all **My goodness** pass before you, and will proclaim the name of the LORD before you; and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show compassion on whom I will show compassion.”²⁰ But He said, “You cannot see My face, for no man can see Me and live!”²¹ Then the LORD said, “Behold, there is a place by Me, and you shall stand *there* on the rock;²² and it will come about, **while My glory is passing by**, that I will put you in the cleft of the rock and cover you with My hand until I have passed ... **34:6** Then the LORD passed by in front of him and proclaimed, “The LORD, the LORD God, **compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness** ...

God’s goodness is His very glorious nature; compassionate, loving, gracious. The very goodness of God and His dealings is seen in the very beginning of the Bible: As God creates the world and all its creatures, He repeatedly pronounces it good, and finally *very good*.

It is God’s very nature to be good and do good, and it should be the very nature of someone saved by His good grace to pray thankfully “*Lord, you are so good though I am so undeserving.*” Thank you, Lord.

Let’s not be like the Israelites who received so much goodness from God, and were complainers and grumblers. Bridges wrote: ‘What! shall I, who am “called out of darkness into marvellous light”—shall I, who am rescued from slavery and death, and brought to a glorious state of liberty and life, complain? Shall I, who have been redeemed at so great a price, and who have a right to “all the promises of God in Christ Jesus” (2 Cor 1:20), and who am now an “heir of God, and joint heir with Christ” (Rom 8:17), murmur at my Father’s will? ... that my heart should prove so foolish, so weak, so ungrateful! Lord! I would acknowledge with thankfulness, and yet with humiliation, *You have dealt well with Your servant, according unto Your word.*’ But how sinfully do we neglect these honourable and cheering acknowledgments!”⁴

We should pray #1 Lord you’re so good though I’m so undeserving. Secondly ...
2. Lord, give me wisdom to apply Your Word in this situation (v. 66-67)

⁶⁶ Teach me good discernment and knowledge, For I believe in Your commandments.

In some ways this verse is parallel to James 1:5 which says on the heels of talking about trials and the good work God produces in them, James says “If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God.” Our typical prayer request is for God to remove the trial, but it says we should pray for wisdom to apply God’s Word *in the trial!* God sends trials our way to test us, James also tells us, and God has good purposes in them as we’ll see later, and there’s something He wants to teach us in them.

But we short-change what God desires to teach us if we are only focused on getting out and not learning what God wants us to learn. We need to pray *teach me* like this verse, and we need to pray with an open Bible, studying hard and seeking hard after good judgment and knowledge or wisdom to find principles that apply, and to personally apply them.

This is an important prayer. We need to study to know the specific commands and principles in God's Word that apply to our daily decision-making, and believe in them, and we also need the discernment, knowledge, wisdom to know *how to obey and apply* those truths to our specific situation. It's not merely praying for information, it's praying for God's insight for application.

⁶⁷ **Before I was afflicted I went astray, But now I keep Your word.**

Affliction may not be our preferred method for God to teach us, but it is often the one we need. I believe it was C.S. Lewis who said pain is God's megaphone to get the attention of sinners. Notice this prayer is not for a life free of affliction; his focus is on keeping God's word *in affliction*, and he recognizes in fact he keeps it *because of affliction*, which he strayed without.

The going astray is a participle in the grammar, suggesting he viewed his prior experience of wandering as his characteristic pattern. Verse 176: *I have gone astray like a lost sheep; seek Your servant* ...

We all like sheep go astray continually, each of us turn to our own way repeatedly, unless and until the Suffering Messiah of Isaiah 53 takes away our sin onto Himself, and until the Good Shepherd of Psalm 23 applies the rod and the staff that comforts us straying sheep. His afflictions comfort us even as we walk through dark valleys, because we know they are ultimately for our good if we are truly His sheep.

It's when believers are in the fiery furnace that they see most vividly that the Lord is with them, as even Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were able to go through the flames heated 7x, protected by a fourth One who looked like a Son of Man, the Lord Himself. He didn't in that case protect them *from* the fire, He protected them *through* the fire, as He often does.

It took affliction before the straying prodigal son returned. The season of trial is often the sanctified season of revival. When we feel all at ease, we don't realize our spiritual disease of sin. Spiritual rest can lead to spiritual rust. It sometimes takes affliction to get our attention and bring conviction so we'll obey God's Word

The Puritan writer Octavius Winslow wrote: 'why the many peculiar and heavy afflictions that we sometimes see overtaking the child of God, if not for the production of effects like these? Think not that our Heavenly Father takes pleasure in chastening us; think not that it delights Him to behold the writhings, the throes, and the anguish of a wounded spirit; think not that He loves to see our tears, and hear our sighs and our groans, under the pressure of keen and crushing trial. No; He is a tender, loving Father; so tender and so loving that not one stroke, nor one cross, nor one trial more does He lay upon us than is absolutely needful for our good. He does not put a single ingredient in our bitter cup that is not essential to the perfection of the remedy. It is for our *profit* that He chastens, not for His *pleasure*. It is often to rouse us from our spiritual sleep, to recover us from our deep declension, and to impart new vigor, healthiness, and growth to His own life'⁵

Or in more modern words: ‘Affliction is the erring Christian as an alarm clock is to one who is apt to oversleep ... in addition to awakening us to our sinful ways, it often stops us and provides time for thought. When one is engaged in the hustle-bustle of life, he may take little time to think about his life. When he is stopped in his tracks by the loss of a job, by the onset of a debilitating illness, and the like, it can be a blessing to give him time to think seriously about his ways.

There are many ways in which afflictions of all sorts may become a blessing by returning a counselee to the **Word**. This is, therefore, a key verse in the Psalms ... remember it and use it often. It is the answer to much of the whining ... “What have you learned from God’s Word during this time of trouble?” is a first class question for you to ask of those who complain.’⁶

We need to pray for God’s wisdom to apply God’s Word in trials...

3. Lord, teach me in this trial how to glorify You (v. 68-69)

⁶⁸ You are good and do good; Teach me Your statutes. ⁶⁹ The arrogant have forged a lie against me; With all *my* heart I will observe Your precepts.

Verse 68 says God is good and does good. His actions flow out of His attributes, which as we saw in Exodus; God’s glory that Moses requested to see was manifested in God’s goodness passing before him. This is a glory-driven, Godward, God-centered prayer.

Look at the text: It begins with God (“YOU” comes first in v. 68) before it comes to the secondary actors (“me” later in v. 68) and others (including enemies in next verse). The focus of my prayer in my difficulty can’t be me, and it can’t be on others (a sinner who did or said something against me like v. 69), the focus must be on God’s goodness and God’s glory, that God would teach me (v. 68b) and help me to obey His principles (v. 69b).

He’s praying God help me to know how to obey Your Word and glorify You *in this trial* for however long You choose to keep me in it. Lord, you know I want to be out of this difficulty, but teach me Lord not to make that my focus that dominates my whole heart, help me like the end of v. 69 says to be able to devote my whole heart to obeying You. Not my will, but Thine be done. Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done, for Thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever, Amen! Help me to glorify You.

Glorifying God is the chief reason we exist and pray (or should be)

Psalm 50:15 (NKJV) ¹⁵ Call upon Me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you shall glorify Me.”

Suffering is not always due to our sin (and we cannot always know *why* God gives certain afflictions, and do not need to figure out God’s sovereign purposes to obey Him) but one thing we can know is that ultimately the purpose is that God would be glorified

John 9:1-3 (NASB95) ¹ As He passed by, He saw a man blind from birth. ² And His disciples asked Him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he would be born blind?” ³ Jesus answered, “*It was neither that* this man sinned, nor his parents; but *it was* so that the works of God might be displayed in him.

Even when our sin is involved (often the case), one thing we always can know for sure is that God’s purpose is for us to glorify Him in every circumstance (1 Cor. 10:31).

So he prays that his good God would teach him how in this circumstance. Verse 68 essentially prays: “Lord be good and do good to me so that I can obey what Your good book teaches me” (even if my circumstance doesn’t change right away, or ever).

Someone may object, but what if sinners mistreat me, and revile me and say all manner of evil against me falsely? Our Lord knows that from personal experience, and he says if you receive that while striving to follow Him, you will receive His blessing. And you’ll join the club of many believers through the years, including here.

Verse 69 says that prideful or arrogant sinners are forging lies against him, or smearing him and his reputation falsely. This is a smear campaign, the word can mean plaster or it can refer to sticking or glue – they’re trying to make false allegations stick.

If this was most of us writing, the second half of the verse would say “with all my heart I will go after those guys, set the record straight, etc.” But the man of God here says “with all my heart *I will observe Your precepts.*” He pours his energies not into responding to them, but responding to God’s Word. He doesn’t sink down to the level of the world, he’s all the more determined to rise above it and be God-centered, and Bible-focused. The more the ungodly disobey God, the more determined the godly man or woman is to obey God and to glorify God.

He doesn’t sue for defamation of character; he sanctifies himself to devotion to God’s character, not for our sake, but for God’s glory; for His reputation, not mine.

So we pray, #3 in our outline, Lord, teach me (it’s not “teach me how to avoid all trials) teach me how to glorify You in the trial.

4. Lord, help me to delight in You and Your Word no matter what happens (v. 70-72)

⁷⁰Their heart is covered with fat, *But* I delight in Your law. ⁷¹It is good for me that I was afflicted, That I may learn Your statutes. ⁷²The law of Your mouth is better to me Than thousands of gold and silver *pieces.*

The word “thousands” was the highest number in Heb. at that time. He is saying:

- No matter what I have or don’t have, Your Word is all my delight
- No matter what the ungodly have (v. 70, “fat” often refers to prosperity or abundance) I find my abundance in God’s truth.
- No matter what afflictions God brings my way (v. 71) I know God is good and has a good purpose and so I will thank Him for whatever draws me closer and causes me to value His Word more.

Verse 70 contrasts true delight with where the world finds its fleshly delights, similar to Phil. 3:19 which speaks of those “whose god is their belly ... who set their minds on earthly things.”

To ancient society (unlike modern time) “fat” refers to the best (ex: bring out the fatted calf). The best part of the sacrifice, the fat, was to be given to God. *The Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* says “fat” in the OT is used to ‘represent prosperity, blessing, abundance, and bounty ... images of God-given or ill-gotten prosperity ... Fat and fatness, then, can be used either to show God’s blessings showered in abundance upon the earth, or the misuse of these same blessings by the complacent, greedy and wicked’⁷ (as it is in Ps 119:70).

Fat may taste good, but it's bad for their spiritual health. This heart obesity limits their movement, or the image could be the heart has so much thickness around it, that it can't feel. It's a flabby fatty layer of spiritual cellulite due to spiritual inactivity and lack of exercise of the heart towards God. It's a gross, even greasy image (KJV "fat like grease").

Spurgeon called it picturesquely 'fatty degeneration of the heart ... The fat in such men is killing the life in them ... In this condition men have no heart except for luxury, their very being seems to swim and stew in the fat of cookery and banqueting. Living on the fat of the land, their nature is subdued to that which they have fed upon; the muscle of their nature has gone to softness and grease ... carnal pleasure clogs the intellect and degrades the affections.'⁸

Prosperous sinners, because they live in luxury where every desire is gratified, have lost all **feeling** for those who don't. One Bible footnote (NAB) says the literal phrase "gross and fat [is] a Hebrew idiom for, 'Their mind has become dull and insensitive.'

"the prosperity of fools shall destroy them." (Prov 1:32)

Whatever God needs to do to wean us off loving this world is good

⁷¹ It is good for me that I was afflicted, That I may learn Your statutes.

When Francis I of France was defeated and taken prisoner at the disastrous battle of Pavia, A.D. 1525 ... The choir at the time was chanting part of this psalm, and when they came to the 71st verse, the captive monarch preceded them in a loud voice, "It is good for me that I have been afflicted: that I might learn thy statutes."⁹

Eyes wet with tears are sometimes better cleared to read the Word.

Martin Luther confessed, "I never knew the meaning of God's word, until I came into affliction. I have always found it one of the best schoolmasters." Luther already understood God's Word; he had been teaching it. But he came to understand it more deeply when God led him through the waters of affliction ... suffering is good when it flows from God's unvarying goodness toward us. Affliction is not good in itself and does not usually seem good to us when we are enduring it, but it has a good purpose when God sends it, as he frequently does in the case of his cherished children.¹⁰

Some of God's purposes in afflictions:

- To dispense good through His dealings (v. 65).
- To give discernment and knowledge (v. 66).
- To recover from straying (v. 67).
- To make God Himself the best end; He Himself is good (68)
- To bring about wholehearted obedience (v. 69).
- To cause delight in His Word (v. 70).
- To cause the learning of His Word (v. 71).
- To cause the prizing of God's Word (v. 72).

⁷² The law of Your mouth is better to me Than thousands of gold and silver *pieces*.

Notice he calls it the law of God's mouth – a vivid visual metaphor to emphasize this is God's very Word, this is God-breathed, God-inspired, as powerful as if God spoke it audibly and newly, and as we read elsewhere it's more desirable than gold, even fine gold.

The true story is told about 'the largest Bible in the world, a Hebrew manuscript weighing 320 pounds ... Long ago a group of Italian Jews asked to see this Bible and when they had seen it they told their friends in Venice about it. As a result a syndicate of Russian Jews tried to buy it, offering the church the weight of the book in gold ... [he] refused the offer, even though the value of such a large amount of gold was enormous ... "Thousands of gold and silver pieces are nothing in comparison with the inestimably precious Word of God." Today we pay little to possess multiple copies of God's Word. But do we value it? In many cases, I am afraid not.'¹¹

This psalm-writer would rather have the Lord and His Word than anything. I can't help but think of another song-writer in more modern times. In 1933, our nation was trying to recover from the Great Depression. Business curves were still heading downward and there was rumor of a salary cut at the New York insurance office where a twenty-two-year-old man was employed as a clerk. With his deep melodious voice, he was offered a radio contract with NBC and immediately saw opportunities for fame and possible riches in his regular appearance on a secular program.

He had been pondering the matter for several days when he sat down to the piano early one Sunday morning to rehearse a hymn he was to sing in church that morning. As he played and sang his eyes fell on a piece of paper. It was a poem by Mrs. Rhea Miller, that had been placed there by his mom. As his eyes raced over the words, the sentences struck his heart. His fingers unconsciously left the tune he was rehearsing and began to set this poem to music in a melody which is today known to millions. George Beverly Shea, devoted his life to Christian ministry instead, travelling with worldwide evangelistic ministries (maybe you've heard of Billy Graham)? Maybe you've heard the song that was on the piano that day¹²

*I'd rather have Jesus than silver or gold;
I'd rather be His than have riches untold;
I'd rather have Jesus than houses or lands,
I'd rather be led by His nail pierced hand.
Than to be a king of a vast domain
Or be held in sin's dread sway,
I'd rather have Jesus than anything
This world affords today.*

Praying Scripturally for ourselves or others in difficulty (using this text as an example):

- Lord, you are so gracious and deal so mercifully. Help him/her to see that rather than focus on this one difficulty (v. 65)
- Help him/her to trust in what you say and to have the wisdom to apply it (v. 66)
- If this affliction can keep him/her from straying or disobeying you, I pray he/she will not miss Your intended heart-work (v. 67)
- Remind him/her of Your good character and good purposes, and teach him/her your good will through this (v. 68)
- Help him/her to obey Scripture wholeheartedly despite opposing sin and sinners (v. 69)

- Cause his/her delight in Scripture to grow and exceed the pleasure or prosperity of the world (v. 70)
- Enable him/her to learn Your Word and recognize Your good purpose in affliction (v. 71)
- Make Your Word be supremely satisfying and superior to any earthly value in his/her heart (v. 72)

Lord, I pray for myself in each of these areas as well, in good times or bad, in the name of Jesus and for His glory. Amen.

¹ Spurgeon, *Treasury of David*, 3:270. Italics and punctuation updates mine.

² Jay Adams, *Counsel from Psalm 119*, p. 56-57.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Charles Bridges, *Psalm 119*, Banner of Truth, p. 164.

⁵ Octavius Winslow, *Morning Thoughts*, 473-74.

⁶ Adams, 59.

⁷ Ryken, L., Wilhoit, J., Longman, T., Duriez, C., Penney, D., & Reid, D. G., editors. *Dictionary of biblical imagery*. Downers Grove, IL, 1998: InterVarsity Press, p. 273.

⁸ Spurgeon, 3:273.

⁹ John Ker, *The Psalms in History and Biography*, 147.

¹⁰ James Boice, *Psalms*, 3:1006.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 1007.

¹² http://www.tanbible.com/tol_sng/ldratherhavejesus.htm