

Spiritual Maturity through Affliction: *Insights from Psalm 119*

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The 119th Psalm makes reference to affliction seven times, using either the verb *ʿānâ* or its cognate noun, *ʿōnî* (see Texts and Key Words for details). When these references are examined as a group, they reveal a systematic process through which affliction contributes to the process of spiritual maturation.

Texts (ESV)

- 50 This is my comfort in my affliction, that your promise gives me life.
67 Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I keep your word.
71 It is good for me that I was afflicted, that I might learn your statutes.
75 I know, O LORD, that your rules are righteous, and that in faithfulness you have afflicted me.
92 If your law had not been my delight, I would have perished in my affliction.
107 I am severely afflicted; give me life, O LORD, according to your word!
153 Look on my affliction and deliver me, for I do not forget your law.

Key Words

“Afflicted” (Hebrew *ʿānâ*)

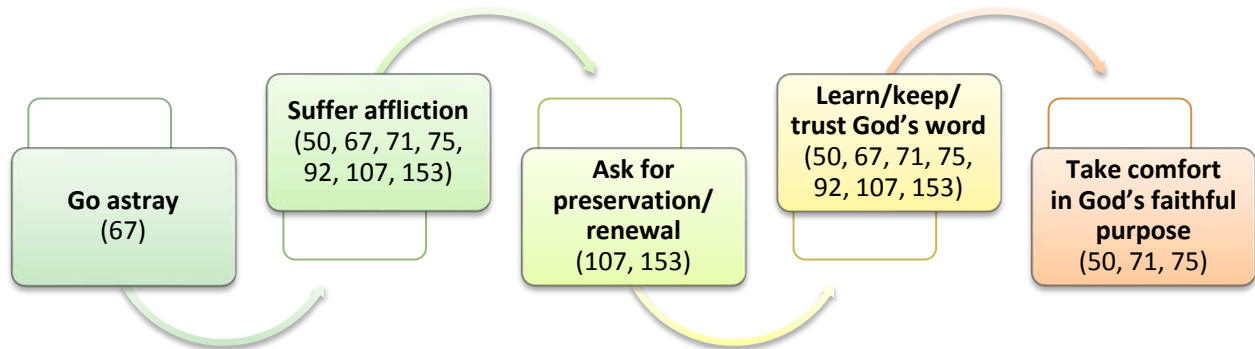
- Part of Speech
Verb
- Occurrences in Psalm 119
67, 71, 75, 107
- Meaning
 - “The primary meaning of *ʿānâ* III is ‘to force,’ or ‘to try to force submission,’ and ‘to punish or inflict pain upon,’ mostly in the Piel. . . . The Bible attests this root over two hundred times” (Coppes 682).
 - The verb occurs in four forms in Psalm 119, as shown below. Definitions are from Brown, Driver, and Briggs (776).
 - Niphal [simple passive]: 107
“be afflicted”
 - Piel [intensive active]: 75
“afflict as a discipline (God agent)”
 - Pual [intensive passive]: 71
“be afflicted, in discipline by God”
 - Hiphil [causative active]: 67
“be afflicted”

- Lexical Numbers
 - Strong's: 6031
 - TWOT: 1652

“Affliction” (Hebrew *’ōnî*)

- Part of Speech
Noun
- Occurrences in Psalm 119
50, 92, 153
- Meaning
 - The essential idea is that of affliction or poverty (Coppes 682; Brown, Driver, and Briggs 777).
 - “This word expresses the state of pain or punishment resulting from affliction” (Coppes 684).
- Lexical Numbers
 - Strong's: 6040
 - TWOT: 1652e

Graphical Model



Analysis of the Maturation Process

Go astray

The maturation process begins with the believer going astray; this is said to precede suffering affliction (67). Whether the relationship between wandering and suffering is causal or merely sequential is not overtly stated. Certainly, going astray and being afflicted are universal experiences for believers. What the psalmist emphasizes is the contrast in his life before and after affliction. The process that begins with error leads to suffering and somehow culminates in obedience.

Suffer affliction

All of the verses under consideration in this study refer to affliction, whether in the form of a verb (67, 71, 75, 107) or a noun (50, 92, 153). While it is a natural human tendency to view suffering as evil, the psalmist strikingly claims that his affliction originates with God; yet this does not compromise his goodness (75).

There is also a sense in which the affliction is self-inflicted: “Another theological theme frequently connected with this word is self-inflicted inner pain expressing contrition and often accompanied by fasting. . . . The Niphal uses of the word are reflexive, emphasizing self-affliction (Ps 119:107; Isa 58:10)” (Coppes 682).

The affliction that is in view is not some minor humbling; in fact, it can be severe (107). The Piel form of the verb, which occurs in 75, carries an intensive sense (Coppes 682). It may be associated with the sense that one will perish (92). Indeed it requires divine intervention, whether in the form of deliverance (153) or comfort (50).

Ask for preservation/renewal

The intense pressure of affliction mobilizes the believer to call out to God in prayer. It drives him or her to seek “life”—preservation or renewal—from the Lord (107). The psalmist expresses this in terms of asking God to notice his affliction and then carry out a rescue mission (153).

Learn/keep/trust God’s word

Affliction induces the believer to depend more fully on God’s word. All seven of the verses in Psalm 119 that mention affliction also make reference to divine revelation:

- “your promise” (50)
- “your word” (67, 107)
- “your statutes” (71)
- “your rules” (75)
- “your law” (92, 153)

Through affliction the believer comes to learn that God’s word is essential to life (50, 107). Suffering opens the believer’s heart to pay attention to God’s revelation. The process of affliction aids in learning God’s statutes (71) and obeying his word (67). The believer does not forget God’s law (153), but rather comes to delight in it (92). In the process he or she learns to affirm that God’s rules are righteous (75).

“According to Your Word”

The psalmist cries out for divine intervention “according to your word” (107). God’s word is the channel by which he mediates many blessings to the believer. Elsewhere in Psalm 119 the psalmist claims the following blessings according to God’s word/promise:

- Guarding one’s way to keep it pure (9)
 - Receiving “life” in a desperate situation (25, 116, 154)
 - Receiving strength in time of sorrow (28)
 - Deliverance in the face of opposition or trouble (41, 170)
 - Receiving gracious favor (58)
 - Experiencing God’s goodness (65)
 - Receiving comfort (76)
 - Gaining insight in time of trouble (169)
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Take comfort in God’s faithful purpose

Affliction, though painful, is ultimately beneficial (71). There is a purpose in affliction, and when the believer discovers it, he/she can see the value of the process. The believer comes to affirm that affliction is neither random—it comes from God—nor cruel—he is faithful (75). Through the process of affliction the believer learns to appreciate the goodness of God’s character and actions. Therefore, being afflicted leads the believer to greater intimacy with God. Empowered with this assurance, the psalmist can lay hold of comfort in time of affliction (50).

Texts (Other Versions)

Psalms 119:50

- NASB This is my comfort in my affliction, That Your word has revived me.
 NRSV This is my comfort in my distress, that your promise gives me life.
 NKJV This is my comfort in my affliction, For Your word has given me life.
 NIV My comfort in my suffering is this: Your promise preserves my life.
 BBE This is my comfort in my trouble; that your sayings have given me life.
 NET This is what comforts me in my trouble, for your promise revives me.
 NLT Your promise revives me; it comforts me in all my troubles.
 MSG These words hold me up in bad times; yes, your promises rejuvenate me.

Psalms 119:67

- NASB Before I was afflicted I went astray, But now I keep Your word.
 NRSV Before I was humbled I went astray, but now I keep your word.
 NKJV Before I was afflicted I went astray, But now I keep Your word.
 NIV Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I obey your word.
 BBE Before I was in trouble I went out of the way; but now I keep your word.
 NET Before I was afflicted I used to stray off, but now I keep your instructions.
 NLT I used to wander off until you disciplined me; but now I closely follow your word.
 MSG Before I learned to answer you, I wandered all over the place, but now I’m in step with your Word.

Psalms 119:71

- NASB It is good for me that I was afflicted, That I may learn Your statutes.
- NRSV It is good for me that I was humbled, so that I might learn your statutes.
- NKJV It is good for me that I have been afflicted, That I may learn Your statutes.
- NIV It was good for me to be afflicted so that I might learn your decrees.
- BBE It is good for me to have been through trouble; so that I might come to the knowledge of your rules.
- NET It was good for me to suffer, so that I might learn your statutes.
- NLT My suffering was good for me, for it taught me to pay attention to your decrees.
- MSG My troubles turned out all for the best-they forced me to learn from your textbook.

Psalms 119:75

- NASB I know, O LORD, that Your judgments are righteous, And that in faithfulness You have afflicted me.
- NRSV I know, O LORD, that your judgments are right, and that in faithfulness you have humbled me.
- NKJV I know, O LORD, that Your judgments are right, And that in faithfulness You have afflicted me.
- NIV I know, O LORD, that your laws are righteous, and in faithfulness you have afflicted me.
- BBE I have seen, O Lord, that your decisions are right, and that in unchanging faith you have sent trouble on me.
- NET I know, Lord, that your regulations are just. You disciplined me because of your faithful devotion to me.
- NLT I know, O Lord, that your regulations are fair; you disciplined me because I needed it.
- MSG I can see now, God, that your decisions are right; your testing has taught me what's true and right.

Psalms 119:92

- NASB If Your law had not been my delight, Then I would have perished in my affliction.
- NRSV If your law had not been my delight, I would have perished in my misery.
- NKJV Unless Your law had been my delight, I would then have perished in my affliction.
- NIV If your law had not been my delight, I would have perished in my affliction.
- BBE If your law had not been my delight, my troubles would have put an end to me.
- NET If I had not found encouragement in your law, I would have died in my sorrow.
- NLT If your instructions hadn't sustained me with joy, I would have died in my misery.
- MSG If your revelation hadn't delighted me so, I would have given up when the hard times came.

Psalms 119:107

- NASB I am exceedingly afflicted; Revive me, O LORD, according to Your word.
- NRSV I am severely afflicted; give me life, O LORD, according to your word.
- NKJV I am afflicted very much; Revive me, O LORD, according to Your word.
- NIV I have suffered much; preserve my life, O LORD, according to your word.
- BBE I am greatly troubled, O Lord, give me life in keeping with your word.
- NET I am suffering terribly. O Lord, revive me with your word!

NLT I have suffered much, O Lord; restore my life again as you promised.
MSG Everything's falling apart on me, God; put me together again with your Word.

Psalm 119:153

NASB Look upon my affliction and rescue me, For I do not forget Your law.
NRSV Look on my misery and rescue me, for I do not forget your law.
NKJV Consider my affliction and deliver me, For I do not forget Your law.
NIV Look upon my suffering and deliver me, for I have not forgotten your law.
BBE O see my trouble, and be my saviour; for I keep your law in my mind,
NET See my pain and rescue me! For I do not forget your law.
NLT Look upon my suffering and rescue me, for I have not forgotten your instructions.
MSG Take a good look at my trouble, and help me-I haven't forgotten your revelation.

Sources

Brown, Francis, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, eds. *The New Brown, Driver, and Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*. 1907. Lafayette, IN: Associated Publishers and Authors, 1981.

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