



§ *Aleph*

## THE IDEAL AND THE REAL

SERIES: PSALM 119—THE JOURNEY OF AN OLD SOUL

Catalog No. 800

Psalm 119:1-8

First Message

Brian Morgan

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Prayer is one aspect of my spiritual life I long to grow in. The apostle Paul, writing in his first epistle to Timothy, refers to the importance of encouraging men to pray: "First of all, then, I urge that entreaties and prayers, petitions and thanksgivings, be made on behalf of all men...Therefore I want the men in every place to pray, lifting up holy hands, without wrath and dissension" (1 Tim. 2:1, 8).

So prayer is of first importance. But how can we enter into a lifestyle of prayer, especially in this fast-paced, high-tech world of Silicon Valley? I spent some time studying recently with a Romanian friend, Mihai Costeche. He told me he found it harder spiritually to live here in California than in Romania. There he had to pray about everything—even the most basic things like food, milk, aspirin and gasoline. Every day, he told me, he found that God did miraculous things to provide for him. He felt his relationship with the Lord had been damaged during his stay in the United States because everything he needed was available at his fingertips. Christians here are spiritually poorer as a result, and he felt sorry for us.

Perhaps we should begin by seeking someone who can teach us how to pray. Now I am not referring to the mechanics of prayer. Rather can we find someone older and wiser who knows God intimately and can share with us the different stages and perspectives of his spiritual journey? Last year, I discovered that just such a spiritual journey is unveiled in Psalm 119, the poetic masterpiece of prayer of the OT. This poem is structured in the form of an acrostic (eight verses for each letter of the Hebrew alphabet). While I was on vacation last summer I decided to translate one letter (eight verses) each day, and to meditate on that aspect of the psalmist's prayer. This exercise did great things for my soul, and it whet my appetite to go deeper into the text. Shortly after returning home from vacation, I met David Eckman, the Academic Dean of Western Seminary for Northern California. I was astonished to discover that David had spent seven years studying this very psalm at Oxford University in London! Since then we have become good friends, and he shared with me the fruit of all his labor on the text. Later, I taught the psalm to a men's Bible study. Each week one of the men was assigned one letter of the alphabet. He prayed that prayer every day for a week, memorizing the verses in the process, and then the following week he shared with the group the dialogue which he had had with God during that seven-day period.

I would like to share with you the results of this year-long journey. Two things about Psalm 119 were especially instructive to me during my studies of the text. First, the historical context in which the psalm is set parallels in many respects our own times; and second, I was impressed by the vulnerability of the psalmist. The writer was living in the land, after the time of the exile. Though he had righteous longings he was not sure he could live up to the Law. To compound things, his longings were not popular. The people in power

wanted little to do with righteousness, yet they seemed to be blessed with material prosperity. Paradoxically, the psalmist finds his own heart to be wayward also, and this produces great turmoil in his soul. Many of you find yourselves in similar circumstances. Your home, your job, your neighborhood, your school leave much to be desired. The circumstances in which you find yourself fall far short of the righteous longings of your heart, and this produces turmoil in your soul.

Now in the midst of his distressing times the psalmist writes with utter vulnerability. He is brutally honest about his own soul, his relationship with God, his doubts, his uneasiness about whether he can keep God's statutes, and his fears concerning the enemy. His vulnerability, however, produces in him a freedom to think of new ways to approach God and to understand eternal life. The Old Covenant formula, "*Do this, and you shall live,*" did not work for this saint. There had to be a new way, he felt. Taking the book of Deuteronomy as the starting point for his vocabulary and theology he invests with new meaning the old expressions of law and life, anticipating the New Covenant in the process. This is why I have entitled this series "*The Journey Of An Old Soul.*" This psalm is the vulnerable expression of a man whose soul has gone through a long journey to arrive at a new and exciting understanding of his relationship with the living God. I shared my studies with a Romanian friend, and here is what he said in a letter to me: "The dialogue between God and the human soul enhances new and brilliant faces [of Jesus]. And the power emanating from this source of grace is beyond imagination. I read daily 'one letter' contribution and feel deeply comforted" (Ioan Ciocmareanu). I pray that the Lord will bless us as a congregation as we make this journey together, learning what prayer is and how we should pray.

The first letter in the Hebrew alphabet is *aleph*, and each line of the eight verses which we will be looking at this morning begins with this letter. The literary structure is unique. The psalmist repeats certain words, and builds on them for his theme. For example, the last word of verse 4, *diligently*, is the same as the closing word, *utterly*, in verse 8. Similarly, the words *blessed*, *heart*, *his ways*, *my ways*, *keep*, *diligently*, and *statutes*, are repeated. The first three verses give a description of the ideal man. Then, looking to God, in verse 4 the psalmist says, "You." Verses 5, 6, 7 and 8a describe the real man; then in verse 8b the psalmist looks to God again.

Let's begin by reading the psalmist's description of the ideal man.

### I. The description of the ideal man (119:1-4)

**How blessed are those whose way is blameless,  
Who walk in the law of the LORD.  
How blessed are those who observe His testimonies,  
Who seek Him with all their heart.  
They also do no unrighteousness;  
They walk in His ways.  
You have ordained Your precepts,**

**That we should keep them diligently.** (NASB, modified)

**(a) His state: Blessed 119:1a**

The ideal man is “blessed.” This is the very first word in the Psalter:

**How blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked...**

**He will be like a tree firmly planted by streams of water,**

**Which yields its fruit in its season,**

**And its leaf does not wither;**

**And in whatever he does, he prospers.** (Psalm 1:1a, 3)

Bruce Waltke says that this word blessed “denotes realizing life to its fullest optimum as the Creator intended it to be experienced prior to the fall.” The psalmist sees that there is an ideal state in which man was made to walk with God in the intimacy of a garden. His life would resemble a fruitful tree whose leaf does not wither, where relationships are harmonious, where the wolf lies down with the lamb. So there is a blessed heavenly state, a higher life, and the psalmist knows about it. In the OT this state is referred to as material prosperity; in the NT it is deepened and expanded (Matt. 5:3-12) to the eternal and spiritual dimensions of life in the new heavens and new earth. Enoch had such a relationship with God. When his time on earth was over, he left the earth and walked home with God. This is the dimension that the psalmist saw.

Now what is it that makes a man or woman blessed?

**(b) His character: Righteous 119:1b-3**

His way is “*blameless*.” This does not mean that he is without sin; rather it refers to completeness. He has completed a task; the job has been done in its entirety. His life is a completed highway, a legacy for all to see with “no loose ends.” And he is humble. He does not want to live independent of God. He chooses the right teacher, and places his heart under God’s word. He ingests the word deeply and allows it to speak to him to bear its own weighty testimony about life and living. This makes him spiritually perceptive. As he studies, he refrains from legalism. He does not regard the Scriptures as merely an external code to be obeyed. Rather they are a window which enable him to gaze into heaven so that he might have a relationship with God. The God who is behind the Scriptures is the source of his deepest yearnings. And he has integrity. He seeks God with his whole heart. He is not like Solomon, who loved God but also loved himself, and left behind a divided kingdom as a result. It is this integrity which gives him uncanny wisdom. He chooses all the right ways and avoids the wrong ones. Such is the character of the blameless man.

And what was his motivation?

**(c) His motivation: The fear of God 119:4**

**You have ordained Your precepts,  
That we should keep them diligently.**

It is the fear of God that motivates the ideal man to a life of exceptional obedience. He is fearful of sinning lest he offend God. God is concerned that this man diligently complete the task he has set for him. There is a seriousness about the ideal man’s life that gives him a liberating focus. He is not distracted by all the other voices that beg for his attention. He is not like Saul, who was commanded to kill the Amalekites, lock, stock and barrel (1 Samuel 15). Saul spared the king, however, and the best of the livestock—probably because he was a donkey broker and he knew a good animal when he saw one. There was no fear of God in Saul’s heart. He did what was

right in his own eyes. But this is not how the blameless man lives.

As I thought about this blameless man, I wondered what thoughts would occupy his mind as he studied God’s commandments. When he came to the commandment “You shall have no other gods in preference to Me,” he would have been keenly aware, I feel, of the things that sought to steal his affections away from God. He would deal ruthlessly with money, possessions, television programs, whatever it was that would draw his affections away from God. When he read “You shall give honor to your parents,” he knew that this meant they should be given social weight in the community, especially by being cared for in their old age. He would take them into his home and care for them, feed them and wash them, giving them honor and dignity until the day of their death. In the commandment “You shall not murder,” he would see beyond the criminal taking of life, to things like negligent failure to take steps to protect life. For instance, he would not leave an open pit in his front yard. He would point out dangers in the work place. He would make sure that he had good brakes on his car. He would perhaps work in the local Crisis Pregnancy Center, seeking to enhance life as he had opportunity to protect the unborn. He would regard the commandment “You shall not commit adultery,” as more than a cold commandment to righteous behavior. He would discern the spirit of these words and do everything he could to cultivate his affections for his spouse. He would deal ruthlessly with lust and with romantic fantasies. He would do everything to enhance his neighbor’s home, encouraging their loyal love. The commandment “You shall not steal” would mean that he could not work the angles to become rich at the expense of the community; rather he would see this as a command to work hard in order that he might make a contribution to the community; to spread God’s love, to open his home and invite the stranger or the poor to his table because God had said this was how he should live. This is how I feel the blameless man or woman would act when he or she read the Ten Commandments.

Notice that the psalmist is a man of great moral vision who feeds his vision with revelation from the word of God. He has a keen understanding of the very essence of what man was created for, and how he enters into it through a pure relationship with God.

I like to read books that feed my own moral vision. This summer I was praying for a book that would minister to me this way during my vacation. A couple of days later a friend came to my door and gave me a copy of the biography of James Hudson Taylor, the founder of the China Inland Mission. When I read it I was transported into heavenly visions. I saw what life was like in the blessed state when someone gives his full heart to God. Here was a man who saw thousands come to Christ in a foreign land, who knew the joy of God meeting his needs through prayer alone, and who conquered devils by faith. O the depth of joy he discovered! There is a blessed state out there waiting to be revealed. Also during the summer I visited our gifted evangelist missionary in Paris, Dudley Weiner. As I walked the streets of Paris, I saw a people living in darkness, having no evangelical witness and no exposition of the Scriptures in the city. I dreamed a dream and saw a “PBC Paris,” with pastors, teachers and theologians—even a Discovery Publishing ministry in French. I dreamed that perhaps a new John Calvin would be raised up to expound the Scriptures in the French language. Let us be like the psalmist and feed our moral vision with God’s heavenly realities.

Having described the ideal man, the psalmist now goes on

to give a description of the real man.

## II. The description of the real man (119:5)

**Oh that my ways may be established  
To keep your statutes!**

### (a) His state: Inadequate! 119:5

As he contemplates the state of the blessed man he confesses that he himself feels inadequate. The opening word of verse 5, “*Oh*,” carries with it the thought, “Oh that it was so with me, but it is not.” How different is the psalmist’s response from the response of his fellow-countrymen of the past. Israel had heavenly visions of the commandments and the blessed state, but she did not respond as this man did. When Moses descended from the mountain, his face shining from his encounter with the glorious God, here is what the people said, “All that the LORD has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient” (Exod. 24:7). They were saying, in effect, “God said it. I believe it. That settles it.” Or take the incident when Joshua said to them, “Fear the LORD and serve Him in sincerity and truth; and put away the gods which your fathers served...” (Josh. 24:14). They responded optimistically, “Far be it from us that we should forsake the LORD to serve other gods...We also will serve the LORD, for He is our God” (Josh. 24:16, 18). Why doesn’t this man respond in like manner? Well, a thousand years have passed, and the psalmist is an excellent student of history. The people who assured Moses that they would obey the commandments all perished, unbelieving and disobedient, in the wilderness. And the generation that assured Joshua they would put away their idols instead chose incipient idolatry. The book of Joshua is followed by the book of Judges in the OT, and the appendix in Judges describes the moral climate of Israel as having descended to the level of Sodom and Gomorrah. So much for the generation that promised, “All that the LORD has spoken we will do.” The psalmist, however, has a more realistic appraisal of himself. He is humble. He is not self-righteous. He does not point his finger at his predecessors and claim to be different from them. As he studies the evil things they involved themselves in, he discerns that his own heart is no different. This is why he responds, “I wish it was so, but it is not.” He is a realist.

Alan Paton wrote the poignant classic, *Cry the Beloved Country*, describing the journey of a Zulu pastor in South Africa who must travel to Johannesburg to rescue his wayward son. It is story of a man with a broken heart. This man’s dreams are shattered as he discovers his sister has become a prostitute, his son has made a young woman pregnant, and accidentally killed a white man (who, ironically, was working for reform for blacks) during a robbery. The book traces the journey of this pastor’s broken heart and how the pain of reality gave him a transcendent humility.

We too must be idealists, but we also must be realists. This, of course, produces tension in our souls. The psalmist lives between the tension within his own soul of what is real and what ought to be. Most of us don’t like this feeling and we try to remove it by compromising the ideal or covering up the real. This is what the Pharisees did by externalizing the law and never coming to terms with the spirit of it and the depth of their own depravity. The psalmist refuses to do that. He discovers that by allowing the tension to remain, righteous longings are birthed in his soul. What follows in the text is the poetic expression of these righteous longings.

### (b) His longings for righteous character 119:6-8a

**Oh that my ways may be established  
To keep your statutes!  
Then I shall not be ashamed**

**When I look upon all Your commandments.  
(Then) I shall give thanks to You with uprightness of  
heart,  
When I learn Your righteous judgments.  
(Then) I shall keep Your statutes;**

He is longing for the time when he will be able to study and meditate on the Torah without the shame of his past failure clouding his mind. Now he feels God’s penetrating gaze probing deep into his heart, observing his lustful thoughts, his slanderous tongue, his never-ending greed and discontent, his insensitivity to the poor, his prideful independence. How he longs for the day when he will be delivered from these things; then he will be able to meditate in peace.

And he longs for the day when he will worship without feeling he is a hypocrite, when his worship of God among the congregation will be genuine expressions of thanksgiving for actual changes which God will have accomplished in his soul. Much worship today falls into the category of what I call “Sauline” worship. Saul was disobedient to God’s command and God sent a demon to harass him. Meanwhile, David was playing his harp to soothe the king’s spirit. David’s music moved Saul to tears, but his emotional response was merely sentiment, because in the next scene we find him hurling his spear at David. There was no ethical change on Saul’s part in response to the worship he entered into. Christians at times weep with emotion and appreciation during worship, but they undergo no ethical change. In private they act like Saul, hurling hard words at family members and at employees in the workplace. No ethical change has come about. Thus, like the psalmist, we long for the day when we will be able to worship without hypocrisy, but we first need to be changed by God.

Thirdly, the psalmist longs to obey without constantly drifting away. “Then I would keep Your statutes,” he says. “Statutes” here refers to that aspect of the law that speaks of the deep, eternal things that are permanent and abiding, things that should be engraved on the heart. He longs to keep the law at that level, but he finds he is forever drifting away from it; there is no consistency in his walk. Do you find that happening in your experience? You come to church and are excited and challenged about something you hear. Then, as soon as you step outside after the service, you find yourself already drifting away from what you had just resolved to do. I returned from my summer vacation having fed on Hudson Taylor’s biography, filled with dreams concerning a church in Paris, a seminary in Romania, and other things. Shortly after I stepped out of the plane, however, I came face to face with my own inadequacies. My dreams began to cloud over. For example, my three daughters have just begun the fall quarter attending three different schools, but I’m not sure I know how to lead them spiritually in those environments with all the demands and pressures they will face. Then among our own leadership at church, I have been faced with some of the chaos I have caused by my impulsiveness. So, like the psalmist, I must live with the dream of the ideal, coupled with my own depravity, resulting in the tension which I have already described.

As I pondered these things while on vacation this summer, I took a bike ride one afternoon by Lake Almanor. There is an airport by the lake, and the tree-lined runway goes straight out toward the lake. It’s a beautiful, narrow corridor, an upright, smooth highway. Beyond lay the mountains, with the white clouds drifting lazily overhead. Lord, I thought, this is how I want my life to be—to have integrity like this highway so that I can fly in your visions around the world. I got off my bike and placed six stones on the runway, one for each person

of the Trinity, and one for each member of my family. There at that altar I poured out to God all my yearnings and all my feelings of inadequacy.

This is the platform from which we come to the first petition of the psalm. The psalmist has described the ideal man, and has come to terms with the reality of his own life. (By the way, notice that he is unashamed to share his feelings about himself in worship.) Finally, we come to his first petition in the psalm.

### III. The petition of the broken man (119:8b)

**“Do not forsake me utterly” 119:8b**

Here we have the petition of a broken, humble man. The word “forsake,” used in Deuteronomy, was part of the covenant language of love between God and Israel: “Be strong and courageous...[for] the LORD is the one who goes ahead of you; He will be with you. He will not fail you or forsake you” (Deut. 31:6, 8). This was God’s promise to not forsake his people. So in one sense this is not a new petition. In another sense, however, it is brand new. Deuteronomy goes on to say: “this people will arise and play the harlot with the strange gods of the land...and will forsake Me and break My covenant...then...I will forsake them and hide My face from them, and they shall be consumed” (31:16-17). “And all the nations shall say, ‘Why has the LORD done thus to this land? Why this great outburst of anger?’ Then men shall say, ‘Because they forsook the covenant of the LORD’” (29:24-25a). With that background in mind we can see how the psalmist is asking for a new level of grace. He is admitting that he is just like Israel of old who forsook the Lord and thus fell into captivity. Yet, he longs to be faithful, to have his heart sealed by grace, therefore he prays, in effect, “You ask me to keep your commandments *diligently*, then I need your *diligent* supervision.” The hymn writer put it this way,

*Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it,  
Prone to leave the God I love.*

The psalmist is asking God to impart to him a new level of grace that will keep him from forsaking the Lord as he is so prone to do.

### IV. Implications for our journey in prayer

#### (a) Be an idealist: Feed the heavenly vision

There is a Garden of Eden out there, a heavenly reality where men and women are blessed. Let us daily feed this heavenly vision through the Scriptures; and, I would add, supplement it with the Christian classics. Let your mind soar into these heavenly realities.

Then, when you come back down to earth,

#### (b) Be a realist: Be brutally honest about your inadequacies

We are woefully inadequate and wicked of heart. Be honest about these things. Our hearts are often cold and divided because we harbor little idols in our souls. Let us be as honest as the psalmist about our struggles.

#### (c) This tension gives birth to righteous longings

Long for heaven to come to earth in your life. “Oh that they had such a heart in them, that they would fear Me, and keep all My commandments always, that it may be well with them and with their sons forever!” (Deut. 5:29). Give expression in prayer to all your righteous yearnings.

Finally, having done that,

#### (d) Petition for a new level of grace

What must God do for you so that you may live righteously in your marriage, in your school, in your place of work, in your community? Have you ever asked him to do that for you? This coming week write down a petition to God asking him to do something for you which you have never asked him before. If it is God’s ideal vision for us to be righteous, then we shall be righteous indeed.

My Romanian friend Mihai Costeche shared with a group of us this summer a dream that he had ten years ago when he came to Christ. At the height of the Romanian dictator’s powers, Mihai dreamed that one day he would teach the Bible in English. When he first had the dream, he thought it would never be fulfilled, but ten years later there was a revolution. Last week he said to us, “Today my dream has been fulfilled.” I thought to myself, “God must descend to us, to do what we can’t do for ourselves.” He sent that heavenly man, Jesus Christ, who was blameless and who did keep covenant, who fulfilled the law, doing for us what we could not do for ourselves. God sealed that covenant by placing you in Christ, and he has you ascend to heaven with him. This is God’s grace. Make these first eight verses of Psalm 119 your own prayer this week. Write down your dreams, your inadequacies, your internal longings, and write one petition which you have never made before; then share this with someone who is close to you.

*“For what the Law could not do, weak as it was through the flesh, God did: sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and as an offering for sin, He condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the requirement of the Law might be fulfilled in us, who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit” (Rom. 8:3-4).*

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‡ *Gimel*

## MY ENEMY, MY FRIEND!

SERIES: PSALM 119—THE JOURNEY OF AN OLD SOUL

Catalog No. 801  
Psalm 119:17-24  
Second Message  
Brian Morgan  
September 15, 1991

*What does a boy desire?*

*Affection, touch*

*a Man to speak with*

*to hug and to hold*

*Even to weep with,*

*Ah, a Papa!*

I wrote these lines a few days ago to my wife's stepfather, Sid. During the past twenty years, Sid has taken on the role of Papa in my life. He is everything I ever dreamed a Papa would be. He's a little overweight, so he's good for hugging. He's affectionate, utterly sentimental, and he takes an interest in everything I do. His eyes convey unconditional acceptance. Sid calls us on the telephone now and then to say he's coming to visit. After he arrives, he always follows the same routine: he goes to the produce store and buys everything that looks good, then he spends most of the afternoon preparing a salad. As he prepares the ingredients, I sit by him and we talk. It's a miracle, really, that we have become so close. Twenty years ago, there was a chasm between us. We come from very different roots. He is a Jew, from the tribe of Levi. His grandfather was a rabbi whose family came from Romania, and they suffered persecution by Gentiles. I am a Gentile, born into the only Gentile family that lived in a Jewish neighborhood in Los Angeles. And we have different economic backgrounds. Sid, a welder by trade, lived in a working class neighborhood in Bakersfield. But though he was poor, he had a big heart and was always adopting orphans. I, the son of a surgeon, was raised among the upper class in more exclusive environments. But we did have one thing in common: we both sought answers to life's questions. Although he was raised a Jew, he became an agnostic and began to dabble in politics. He even became a member of the Communist Party at one time. I was raised to be an agnostic, and my politics were staunchly conservative. I became dissatisfied with both, and in time turned to the one Jew who became a Son, and through adoption I became a son of Abraham.

How did two people from such diverse backgrounds grow so close? I suppose many of you have asked yourselves that question with regard to your relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ. The Bible says that God wants to have a love relationship with us, that he wants to be our Papa, and that we can be free and relaxed in our relationship with him. But we feel uneasy with that notion, don't we? We feel distant from God because he seems so different from us. Our origins are different. He is of heaven; we are of earth. Our capabilities are different. He is strong, majestic, powerful. We are weak, failing, inadequate. Our values are different. There is a chasm, greater than the distance between heaven and earth, says the Bible, between our value systems (Isaiah 55:9). Our concerns are different. We want to ascend the social, political or economic ladder so that we can establish a reputation and exert influence. God secretly descends from heaven to adopt the orphan, the widow and the alien, doing his work of grace far from the public eye. No wonder we feel tense and uncomfortable when we are in God's presence. We don't feel like being open and vulnerable with him; we don't feel like petitioning

him for things because we sense there is a chasm between us.

We discussed this tension last week in our opening study of Psalm 119. This psalm, we discovered, is written in the form of an acrostic, with eight verses for each letter of the Hebrew alphabet. In the opening verses we saw that the psalmist was truly a man of moral vision. He saw what God required of him—that he was to be a blameless man, one who hid God's word in his heart—but he knew he fell far short of these standards. He was honest about himself; he was not blameless. Worse, when he looked into God's word he felt like a hypocrite in worship because he knew that deep changes needed to be made in his heart. This then was the source of the tension he felt in his relationship to God. And this is why he prayed to God (verse 8b): "*Do not forsake me utterly!*" Help me be intimate with you, God, he was asking; place your word in my heart.

Today we will see that God answers his prayer in a very mysterious way: He introduces an enemy into the man's life. We will learn this as we come to verses 17-24 of the psalm, the phrases introduced by the letter *Gimel*. My Papa Sid and I also became close through the introduction of a common enemy into our experience—the enemy of death. Five times this enemy touched us, in the death of my two children, Sid's wife (my wife Emily's mother), and Emily's father and sister. Over the space of fourteen years, first as acquaintances, and later as intimate friends, death has caused us to weep together until we could weep no more. Our tears flowed into one stream, and the Jew adopted the goy and became his Papa. This then is what we discover in our text today: an enemy is introduced in response to the psalmist's request for intimacy with God. But God not only fails to remove the tension, he introduces even more tension into the psalmist's life.

Let us begin by reading our text.

**Deal bountifully with Your servant,  
That I may live and keep Your word.  
Open my eyes, that I may behold  
Wonderful things from Your law.  
I am a stranger in the earth;  
Do not hide Your commandments from me.  
My soul is crushed with longing  
After Your judgments at all times.  
You rebuke the arrogant, the cursed,  
Who wander from Your commandments.  
Take away reproach and contempt from me,  
For I observe Your testimonies.  
Even though princes sit and talk against me,  
Your Servant meditates on Your statutes.  
Ever so Your testimonies are my delight;  
They are my counselors.** (Psa. 119:17-24, NASB, modified)

### I. A new enemy in the land

#### (a) The new enemy

As we have already seen, Psalm 119 was written after the exile of Israel to Babylon. The exile, of course, came about be-

cause Israel broke covenant with God, with the result that the judgments of Deuteronomy fell upon the nation. In his grace, however, God chose a tiny remnant of Jews and placed them back in the land of Israel. Now although he feels tension in his soul, the psalmist has righteous longings, but he discovers that when he expresses these longings in the community, they are not the majority point of view. The rich and influential have no fear of God in their hearts. In fact, the powerful respond to this man's raising of the banner of righteousness by gathering together as one to slander him and plot his downfall. This then is the new enemy which the psalmist discovers.

### (b) The new suffering

He responds by crying, "*I am a stranger in the earth*" (19a). He feels alienated. Alienation, of course, was nothing new to the Jews. They were aliens in Egypt. They were made to be aliens in their own land when the Philistines invaded. They were alienated among the Assyrians and the Babylonians. But this is a new form of alienation which the psalmist feels. He is at home, in his own land, among his own people, and yet he feels a sense of alienation. In a place where he expected to find acceptance he discovers instead resistance and oppression. This is why he feels deeply pained. He is experiencing a new form of suffering—alienation in his own home. He had petitioned God by saying, "*Do not abandon me utterly,*" and this was how God had responded. I am reminded of Tevya, the hero in *Fiddler on the Roof*. He sang "If I Were A Rich Man," saying that a little fortune would be the answer to all his problems. Not only did he not inherit a fortune, his one milk cow went lame. Mournfully, he looked up to the sky and said, "I'm poor enough as it is, and now you send this." Have you ever felt like this when God answered your prayers?

Now the psalmist goes on to share what this new enemy of alienation has done to his soul. He describes it as a four-stage process, beginning with verses 19 and 20.

## II. New appetites in the soul (119:19-20)

### (a) A new longing for revelation

**I am a stranger in the earth;  
Do not *hide* Your commandments from me. (19)**

Here the psalmist is dealing with a truth that has become new in his experience, but which has already happened in history. As he composes this psalm he is always looking back to the Torah, to Genesis through Deuteronomy, and in these verses he is picking up imagery that comes right out of the Garden of Eden. When Adam disobeyed God, he hid himself because he had become alienated from God. Here the psalmist feels the same kind of alienation and separation. But there is another factor at work also. This new enemy has done something to the soul of the psalmist, and this is what motivates him to seek reconciliation with God. Unlike Adam, whom God had to seek out in the garden, this new enemy has motivated the psalmist to seek passionately after God's commandments. For the first time in his life he feels a new appetite for God's word. Unlike Adam, who hid from God, the psalmist comes out of the darkness to run after God. A profound change has occurred in his soul. He is taking the initiative for the first time. I have seen this happen to Christians over and over again. Everything seems to be going well in their lives, they have no reason to fear, and then a new enemy rises up to confront them. Suddenly they begin to take the initiative: they chase after God. So the psalmist has a new appetite for revelation.

And second, he has a deeper longing for salvation.

### (b) A deeper longing for salvation

**My soul is *crushed* with longing  
After your judgments *at all times.* (20)**

The word *crushed* is a word-play in Hebrew. It is used with this other word "*thrust out, drive out,*" the term used when Adam was driven out of the garden (Gen. 3:24) and expelled from the presence of God. Now the psalmist feels his appetite for God not only intensified, it is more consistent than ever before. Now he longs for God's ordinances "at all times." Rather than destroying him, this new form of suffering has created a new and deeper appetite for God deep within his soul. Spirituality that is purely external is no spirituality at all. The inner life must be changed. We must have an appetite to grow spiritually. We must *feel* our Christianity. This is what the Puritans called renewal, and this is what has happened with the psalmist.

A brother shared with us last week that a recent court case has changed his spiritual life. His wife suffered a severe back injury in an automobile accident, and she had to undergo surgery. The insurance company refused to pay the damages, however, and in the resulting court case a jury of nine people held that this couple were frauds and ruled against them. Instead of causing him new stresses, however, he told me that for the first time in his life he felt the Holy Spirit prodding him and creating in him new appetites for God. His prayer request was that God would sustain these new appetites.

The new appetites which the psalmist feels now become a platform for new petitions which he makes to God, as we will see in the following verses.

## III. A new freedom with the God of grace (119:17-18)

**Deal bountifully with Your servant,  
That I may live and keep Your word.  
Open my eyes, that I may behold  
Wonderful things from Your law.**

### (a) The basis of freedom: A new identity

The psalmist now feels free to ask for things which he never requested before. Notice that twice in these verses, as he addresses God, he refers to himself as "Your servant." The basis for his new sense of freedom is that he senses he has a new identity. Psychologists have correctly pointed out that the major crisis facing people today is a crisis of identity. But here the psalmist has found his identity: he is a servant. This gives him new freedom to petition God.

I will try to illustrate. Imagine you are a member of the United States military. You know General Norman Schwarzkopf, but you have had problems in your relationship with him. You are harboring some resentments against him; there is a wall between you. Then one day he calls you on the telephone to say he has selected you to be his servant. He is appointing you to lead the armies in the Gulf War. This raises the stakes considerably, doesn't it? The things that used to separate you now seem petty by comparison. The crisis has succeeded in establishing a new relationship. This is what happens to us in our relationship with God. We harbor petty little idols which enslave us and build walls between God and us. Then God reveals to us that there is a war going on. The stakes are high, we are told, and the repercussions of this war will extend into eternity. "Will you be my servant?" he asks. Now this new relationship you enjoy with God will give you liberty to ask for things you never dreamed of before. "*Deal bountifully with Your servant,*" says the psalmist. In other words, give me the full measure of your grace. This word is

used in Scripture of children who have been weaned. They are free to venture out because they have had the full measure of their mother's grace, at her breast.

The seriousness of the situation thrusts the psalmist into a privileged new relationship, and removes from him all the old struggles he had to deal with up to this point. "*Deal bountifully*" means, give out the full measure of something, especially kindness. The psalmist looks intently into the face of God, and boldly asks for more grace!

#### **(b) The expression of freedom: New petitions**

And here is his first petition: he asks for life itself. While Deuteronomy says, "Listen to (obey) the statutes in order that you may live" (Deut. 4:1), here the psalmist asks, "Give me life that I might keep your word" (Psalm 119:17). He recognizes that his will is depraved, that he cannot respond to the love of God no matter how hard he tries. This is why he first asks that God grant him life as a gift, then he will be able to keep the commandments.

Next, he asks for insight. Verse 18: "Open my eyes that I may behold wonderful things from Your law." This petition really flies in the face of Deuteronomy, as the following verses demonstrate that God had already revealed his wonders in the Law: "The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our sons forever, that we may observe all the words of this law" (Deut. 29:29). "I am not speaking with your sons who have not known and who have not seen the discipline of the LORD your God—His greatness, His mighty hand, and His outstretched arm, and His signs...which He did in the midst of Egypt...and what He did to you in the wilderness...but your own eyes have seen all the great work of the LORD which He did" (Deut. 11:2-7). Because God had revealed his wonders before the eyes of the Israelites eyes already, it was their responsibility to keep them in full view at all times. Thus God says, "You shall bind them (these words) as frontlet bands between your eyes" (Deut. 6:8).

But the psalmist confesses that he is spiritually blind, so he prays for more grace: "Open my eyes, that I might behold wonderful things from your law." The word "open" here was used of uncovering the organs of the eye and the ear, so that understanding might be gained; it also means to "to remove, to go into exile." The psalmist is saying, in effect, "I am still in exile in terms of my understanding. Like that first generation of people who, although they saw the Exodus, were spiritually blind, I have no spiritual understanding. I'm like Balaam, who was so blind even his donkey saw more than him" (Num. 22:31). The man is without spiritual insight, so he asks God to open the eyes of his heart that he might gain it.

Do you think he has the right to ask for more grace, thereby inferring that he has not yet received the full measure of grace? When God has been so gracious for so long, when we have seen him do wonderful things in our lives, do we still have the right to ask for more? I watched a television documentary about runaway children last week, and the clear message was that these kids had run out of grace at home. Their parents could no longer cope with them, so they were out on the streets. One 19-year-old boy walks to the hill at the end of his street each evening and stares at his home. Asked why he does this, he replied, "I want to go home, but I can't." For him, grace had run out. Some of you may feel that you have abused the kindness and the grace of God. You may have entered the door this morning, but you're not sure the Father will welcome you home because you fear grace has run out. If this describes you, just think of the man whom Jesus healed of blindness in John 9, and the man he raised from the dead in John 11. What was Jesus trying to point out to the

Israelites in these miracles? The blind man epitomized Israel, who had seen God's wonderful works for centuries, but was still spiritually blind. Lazarus also epitomized Israel—unable to respond to the love of God because of paralysis of the will. Just as the miracles of Jesus enabled the blind man to see, and the dead man to respond to his call to arise, so he will answer us when we pray, "Deal bountifully with Your servant."

Let me illustrate. Do you find that Bible study at times can be hard going? The text seems lifeless. Unless God does something miraculous, you feel, the words will remain just that—words—and you won't marvel at the inspired text. When God does descend to open our eyes, however, we are awestruck by what we behold in his word. In the same way, we feel we can't respond to his love at times. Now this is when we must petition him to do for us spiritually what Jesus did for Lazarus physically, "O God, raise me from the dead!" so that we might receive all that he has for us. It's marvelous to remember that the psalmist is writing this centuries before the birth of Christ, yet he anticipates the most important ramifications of the new covenant. This is why I have called this series *The Journey Of An Old Soul*.

Thus the pain which this enemy brought to the psalmist not only created new spiritual appetites in his soul, it also gave him new insight concerning his depraved will and darkened mind; this in turn emboldened him to ask for a measure of God's grace greater than he ever dared ask for in the past.

Now in verses 21-22, the psalmist gets a new vision of God's justice.

#### **IV. A new confidence in the God of justice (119:21-22)**

**Thou dost rebuke the arrogant, the cursed,  
Who wander from Your commandments.  
Take away reproach and contempt from me,  
For I observe Your testimonies.**

##### **(a) New confidence that God will judge the wicked**

The psalmist has discovered that as he is reading about events in the past—the Exodus—for example, that the God of the Exodus is with him and will do for him what he did for the Israelites during that time in history. For instance, he uses the word "rebuke," the same word used in Psalm 106, to describe God's action with regard to the Red Sea during the Exodus:

**Thus He rebuked the Red Sea and it dried up;  
And He led them through the deeps, as through the wilderness,  
So He saved them from the hand of the one who hated them,  
And redeemed them from the hand of the enemy.**  
(Psalm 106:9-10)

He knows that the God of justice will take care of his enemies. This is why he makes no petition regarding the enemy. He can rest assured that God will take care of this problem.

##### **(b) New confidence that God will vindicate the righteous**

And, since he is being slandered for righteousness, the psalmist has confidence to petition the God of righteousness to vindicate him.

**Take away reproach and contempt from me,  
For I observe Your testimonies.**

But note the basis of his confidence. It is not that he is sinless. It is because, as he says, "I observe your testimonies." This word "testimonies" refers to that aspect of the Scriptures

that enters deep into the heart, then the Spirit begins to testify to the believer concerning it. God's word testifies to you and prods you to take some moral action. This is what has happened to the psalmist. He has obeyed what he has read, and he finds it delightful. On that basis he now petitions God, "vindicate me."

So the psalmist began with a feeling of tension in his soul. Further tension created new appetites, which we can call renewal, leading him into freedom to make new petitions. Then he enters this quiet rest in his soul, secure in the knowledge that there is a God of justice.

But that is not all. There is another stage to ecstasy in the soul.

## V. A new internal joy: Victory over the enemy (119:23-24)

**Even though princes sit and talk against me,  
Your servant meditates on Your statutes.  
Even so Your testimonies are my *delight*  
They are the *men* of my counsel.**

### (a) The enemy's arsenal

The enemies have position and power, they are in consensus, and they are resolved to destroy the servant. It is the *many* against the *one*.

What kind of arsenal does the psalmist have?

### (b) The psalmist's arsenal

On a human level, he has not one ally. It is *one* against the *many*. He can't even speak against them. But this is what makes him fly to the Scriptures—the *one* seeks meditation in the *many* statutes. As he reads the Scriptures out loud, this helps him place them in his heart, in a deeper form of meditation than he ever experienced before. Meditating in this way gives him delight. This rare word "delight" speaks of the intense pleasure in the soul that causes one to let loose with exuberance, like a child does in play. We find this word in Isaiah, describing the Messianic age:

**The nursing child will *play* by the hole of the cobra,  
And the weaned child will put his hand on the viper's den.  
They will not hurt or destroy in all My holy mountain,  
For the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD  
As the waters cover the sea. (Isaiah 11:8-9)**

Evil will have been dealt with by the Messiah to the degree that a nursing child will play exuberantly by the viper's den.

Thus *one* sought mediation in the *many* statutes, and the *many* statues counsel the *one* (counsel has the idea of more than to advise, but rather to set forth wisdom which guarantees success), and enable him to overcome the *many* enemies.

This past summer I read a book by Richard Wurmbrand, a Romanian pastor who spent 14 years in prison for his faith. I think the following quote from the book illustrates the delight the psalmist experienced in meditation following the victory over his enemies:

I spent 14 years in Communist prisons. We were hungry, beaten, tortured. For years we were individually isolated in solitary cells, where we heard nothing, not even a whisper. We had no books or writing materials, much less a Bible. We never saw a child, and seldom a woman. We saw no colors: our

world was gray. The walls were gray, our uniforms were gray, even our faces were an ashen gray. We soon forgot that blue, green, red, violet exist. There I thought about God and the Bible, about its words, its letters, even the blank spaces between the letters. At times, I saw these shapes more vividly than the black letters. Perhaps because I am Jewish, and thus basically Oriental, I think much in images, not in propositions. With me in my cell were the Bible characters of old, as well as the saints of all ages—that "cloud of witnesses" mentioned by Paul. From childhood I have possessed a fantastic memory, which, with much exercise, expanded even more in prison...Between beatings I did not waste time thinking about how badly I had been beaten or fearing that I would be beaten again. Instead, I recited verses of Scripture, Shakespeare, and other poetry. I even composed poems. "All places that the eye of heaven visits are to a wise man ports and happy havens" (*Richard II*). This even includes Communist prison cells. Atheists believe they put me in jail. I believe God sent me there, to allow me to delve more deeply into the truths concealed within His words. The outward circumstances, the complete silence, the situation of not being distracted by either sight or sound—all were highly favorable to deep thought. Imprisoned Christians mocked gnawing sorrow. In chains, sometimes in straitjackets and gagged, awaiting the specter of death as often as the cell door was opened, we thought about God's Word. Christians in the free world also contemplate His Word. But because thoughts given by God in those extreme circumstances might resound with a deeper harmony, I publish them...reflections conceived in silence and nurtured in pain.

What did the psalmist desire? He felt tension in his soul because the word of God was not firmly anchored in his heart. Although he wanted this word to be placed there, it still remained, as it were, external to him. God responded to his plea by introducing a new source of tension in his life, a new enemy who did for his soul everything he ever dreamed. As he faced this new enemy, suddenly he felt a sense of harmony in his soul. The word of God began to move in his heart, changing his appetites, bearing testimony to him, bringing him delight, and victory over the enemy. The Spirit poured forth like a holy river, bubbling forth with eternal life, giving joy which no man could give.

*What does a boy desire?  
Affection, touch  
a Man to speak with  
to hug and to hold  
Even to weep with,  
Ah, a Papa!*

My friends, there is a Jewish Papa out there, and he wants to adopt you, with tenderness, affection and love, and the joy you have always wanted. He will adopt you by inviting you to share in the fellowship of his sufferings. Wake up, O child of God. Don't curse God in your pain, for the enemy in your life may in fact be your best friend.

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## WINGS OF VULNERABILITY

SERIES: PSALM 119—THE JOURNEY OF AN OLD SOUL

Catalog No. 802  
Psalm 119:33-40  
Third Message  
Brian Morgan  
September 22, 1991

The purpose of this series of messages in Psalm 119 is to help us overcome some of the difficulties we experience when we pray. If I were to ask you today to go into a room and get down on your knees, next to this Person whom you can't see, and who, because he is an awesomely holy being, is so very different from you that you feel uncomfortable being in his presence, you would probably have difficulty coming up with something to say. To compound the difficulty, God doesn't answer audibly, so it's hard to keep the monologue going.

How can we have that freedom in our prayers that we so desire? Two things in this psalm will help us. First, we need a form, a structure to assist us to establish boundaries. All prayer in the Old Testament is written in poetic form. Poetry, of course, is form by definition, so we need to consider carefully what we say and how we say it. Now Psalm 119 is very helpful to us here. We have already seen that it has a distinct literary structure. First, it is written in the form of an acrostic, with eight verses for each letter in the Hebrew alphabet. Second, in each verse the psalmist has a different term for the word law, and each term has a different emphasis (law, word, commandment, testimonies, etc.). And third, he uses the initial and repeated vocabulary to build his themes. I think prayer books can be helpful to teach us how to pray, although structure by itself can be overdone, of course; our prayers can degenerate into sheer repetition so that they are not very meaningful. We need freedom within form. Now in this psalm the psalmist has marvelously accomplished these two goals: there is form, certainly, but there is also freedom, variation within the form. He demonstrates this, first, with a new sense of freedom in his theology.

Psalm 119 is, in a way, the centerpoint between the Old Covenant and the New Covenant in Christ. While the psalm looks back to the theology of the Old Covenant, from the book of Deuteronomy, as he gazes through the prism of this psalm the writer anticipates the New Covenant. Thus he is in a different place spiritually from his ancestors. He has new thoughts about his relationship with God, and so he feels free to ask God to do new things in his life. Just as many of you now feel free to ask new things of God, things which you did not feel free to ask for in your early Christian experience, so also the psalmist makes new petitions to God. And second, he demonstrates a freedom of expression. As he composes his structure, every letter has a different mood about it, and that mood is determined by the number of petitions represented by each letter. The first letter has one petition, the second two, then four, then six, etc. Today we find that the letter *He* has ten petitions. Ten petitions in eight verses! It's as if every breath he breathes is a petition to God. In summer, I climbed a 14,000-foot mountain in Colorado so that I could enjoy the magnificent view from the summit. At about 12,000 feet the air got thinner and the oxygen scarcer. I felt very inadequate. In fact, I was terrified every step I took. My head felt light, there was danger on all sides, but yet the view was magnificent. This is what we will discover this morning in the letter *He*. The psalmist is ascending, as it were, but each step he takes he feels inadequate, therefore he breathes out multiple

petitions as he climbs.

Let us look then at these petitions of the psalmist.

### I. Petitions for discipleship in learning: "Teach me!" (119:33-35)

**Teach me, O LORD, the way of Your statutes,  
And I shall observe it to the end.  
Give me understanding, that I may observe Your law,  
And keep it with all my heart.  
Cause me to walk in the path of Your commandments,  
For I delight in it. (NASB, mod.)**

#### (a) His goals for discipleship

Let us look at the psalmist's goals. First, he desires to be faithful in obedience: "I shall observe it *to the end*." He doesn't just want to look good at the start, having a pure confession at his initiation into the faith and then some years later be found in an adulterous relationship, or compromising his children financially by leaving a legacy of debt. No, this man wants to begin and end his life in faithfulness. He wants to go to the grave having seen his children and grandchildren enjoying their spiritual heritage. He wants to taste that sweet wine of loyalty and faithfulness that has aged over the years.

Secondly, he desires to be wholehearted in obedience: "That I may observe your law, And keep it with *all* my heart." He not only wants to be faithful, but wholehearted in his obedience. He knows what it is like to hold back, to obey halfheartedly. This is disgusting to him. Abel gave to God from a whole heart, from the first and the best of his produce. Cain, on the other hand, did not give from the best of what he owned. He gave God what amounted to a tip, in essence, and this was a stench in God's nostrils. The psalmist does not want to act this way. He wants to be faithful and wholehearted in his obedience.

Next, he moves from his goals for discipleship, to his needs, and here he makes three petitions: "teach me," "give me," and "cause me."

#### (b) His needs for discipleship

"Teach me, O LORD, the way of Your statutes." In order to become a disciple, he needs a teacher. The verb "to teach" comes from the noun from which we get the word "Torah," and is causative in form. In fact, every one of these verbs is given in the causative (in Hebrew grammar it is called the Hiphil form), which is formed by using this letter *He* at the beginning of the verb; so that when one says, "I teach," it becomes, when this letter is placed in front of it, "cause me to be taught," "cause me to understand," "cause me to walk," etc. The psalmist sees God as the first cause of everything, so he wants God to be the first cause of his teaching. The verb "teach" is used in archery to convey the notion of shooting an arrow directly at a target. When one teaches this way, it means pointing out something in a direct, pointed way, so that there is no misunderstanding. It speaks, in other words, of direct, pointed instruction on how to live life. This is how

God wants to teach us. We have just come through a period, however, when our educators recommended and practiced non-directive teaching. Guide the student passively, we were told, and he will discover truth for himself. But we are paying the price for that, aren't we? I have been taking my daughter to a girls' club for dads and their daughters, and occasionally as the host, I have to think up a craft for the girls to work on. Dads are advised to teach the girls in a very direct way. They must first build the craft themselves, then they must lay out step by step everything the child must do to create the finished craft. But the dad is not finished yet. He must then direct the child through each step to completion. In the same way, the psalmist is asking God to teach him directly in his quest for discipleship.

Now in the OT this task was given to the priesthood (Deut. 17:10-11; 33:10). They were to teach the people, then the people in turn were to teach their children. But now, after the exile, following the destruction of the religious institutions, the psalmist pleads for Yahweh to take up this role directly in his life, without intermediaries. Suffering accomplishes this for us at times. We bypass the intermediaries and bring our petitions directly to God, asking to be taught in a personal and direct way.

So the psalmist needs a teacher. But that's not enough. He needs discernment, too. He has a learning disability, thus he asks God to give him understanding in his mind. I wonder if he was not reading Deuteronomy 32, where the Lord indicts Israel, saying,

**“For they are a nation perishing in counsel,  
And there is no understanding in them.  
Would that they were wise, that they understood this,  
That they would discern their latter end!  
How could one chase a thousand...  
Unless their Rock had sold them...  
For their vine is from the vine of Sodom,  
And from the fields of Gomorrah.”** (Deut. 32:28-32)

Israel would be carried away to Babylon, all the curses would fall on her, but she would not be able to discern that all this would happen because of her sins. Furthermore, “their Rock sold them”—their own Lord sent them there as a consequence of their sins. The psalmist knows he suffers from the same learning disability. Even when God spells it out, he still goes through life, his mind dulled and lacking understanding. This is why he cries out for discernment.

But he doesn't stop there. He asks not only for a teacher and for discernment in his mind, but constant supervision over his choices: “Cause me to walk in the path of Your commandments.” He is saying, “You can tell me what to do. You can give me deep understanding as to why it is true, but then I probably won't do it. I have a natural tendency to drift away from you. I need constant supervision. Cause me to walk in your ways.”

Next, we come to what motivates him to seek discipleship.

### **(c) His motivation for discipleship**

“For I delight in it,” he says. He has righteous longings. He has tasted the sweetness of God's law, but he longs to taste it more fully. This is why he asks God to teach him, to enlighten him, and to supervise him continually.

Notice the tremendous freedom the psalmist demonstrates in these petitions. I always know when my daughter is going to ask me for something by the way she addresses me. When she calls me “Daddy,” the term of endearment, I know she

wants something from me. What I find interesting, however, is that children hardly ever ask for more than one thing at a time. But here the psalmist is asking for ten things! Imagine if your child came to you and said, “I have a request to make. As a matter of fact, I have ten requests!” Wouldn't that demonstrate his feelings of absolute freedom?

Where did the psalmist's freedom spring from? When we read on, we will see that he is free in his petitions because he is vulnerable about his sin. Vulnerability is what brings freedom in petitioning God. A petition, by definition, is an admission of inadequacy. Just as every breath I breathed on that mountain in Colorado was for me a plea for help, a confession of inadequacy, notice in what follows the psalmist's openness about his life.

## **II. Petitions to survive life's dangers: “Revive me!” (119:36-40)**

**Incline my heart to Your testimonies,  
And not to dishonest gain.  
Turn away my eyes from looking at vanity,  
And in Your ways revive me .  
Establish Your word to Your servant,  
As that which produces reverence for You.  
Turn away my reproach which I dread,  
For Your judgments are good.  
Behold, I long for Your precepts;  
Through Your righteousness revive me.**

We have seen that in the first three stanzas the psalmist petitions God to teach him; now here in the last five he prays, “Give me life.” He makes these five requests because he sees that there are many dangers confronting him. Thus, his requests, by their very nature, are an admission of weakness and confession on his part.

Now what do you think is the greatest threat to his love relationship with the Lord? Well, it is not, as we might imagine, the devil; nor is it the world. It is himself. He himself poses the greatest danger to this Teacher/disciple relationship. We are our own greatest enemy. Notice now in these five petitions which follow how honest the psalmist is about his propensity toward sin. First, his naturally greedy heart.

### **(a) Protect me from greed (119:36)**

**Incline my heart to Your testimonies,  
And not to dishonest gain.**

Here he admits that he has a natural drift toward greed, which compromises his study; therefore he asks God to do a miracle in his heart to create in him a spiritual appetite for the word. He recognizes that his sensual appetites are greater than his spiritual appetites. He probably identified with Solomon, who had trouble with a sensual heart. Solomon spent 13 years building his own house, gathering exotic building materials from around the world. His action only served to create lust and greed in the hearts of his royal court, so that they too sought to build themselves fine homes. When those appetites are stirred up, it is the poor who will finally be presented with the bill to pay for the costs of luxury and finery. Giving in to sensual appetites will result in our breaking God's testimonies. The psalmist includes himself in this category of people, and this is why he prays that God would “incline his heart to Your testimonies, and not to dishonest gain.”

Second, he asks to be delivered from lust of the eyes.

### **(b) Protect me from lust (119:37)**

**Turn away my eyes from looking at vanity,**

### **And in Your ways revive me.**

This word vanity is often used in the OT as a euphemism for idolatry. The psalmist is confessing that he struggles with wandering, lustful eyes. He likes to gaze upon the idols of the world when they are presented before him, thus he asks God to intervene directly and give him blinders for his eyes because he is attracted by what he sees. The law says to him, "If you keep commandment, you will have life," but he responds, "I find I struggle so much here. Would you give me eternal life as a gift, and let me have your ways as a result?"

Third, he confesses he has a callous heart.

#### **(c) Protect me from a callous heart (119:38)**

**Establish Your word to Your servant,  
As that which produces reverence for You.**

"The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom," says Proverbs 9:10. In other words, to enter into the school of life, the first thing that is necessary is to fear God. This is what opens the gate to wisdom, discipleship and moral living. But the psalmist has discovered that deep in his heart he has no fear. Deep down he finds a callousness, and this frightens him. This is why he asks God here to fulfill his promises to him in a personal way. He is saying, in effect, "I know that I am to live in faith, and I know that many great men, Joseph and Moses and others, died without receiving the promises. But I'm not like them. I need to experience your direct intervention in my life, so that I might fear you. Please grant me this."

Fourth, he asks that his reputation be protected.

#### **(d) Protect my reputation (119:39)**

**Turn away my reproach which I dread,  
For Your judgments are good.**

He lives in dread of being dealt the full measure of God's wrath for his sin. He has seen how God punished Israel for her sin—the seventy years of exile, the dismemberment of the nation. Now he is back in the land, but he realizes that if he is left to himself he will go the same way as Israel went, and in turn suffer the same consequences of God's wrath. Thus he appeals to the sheer goodness of God to directly intervene and save his reputation. Isn't it true that when you lose your reputation, you have lost everything? "Do not deal with me according to my sin," says the psalmist, "turn away your wrath."

Finally, he petitions for life itself.

#### **(e) Petition for life on a new basis (119:40)**

**Behold, I long for Your precepts;  
Through Your righteousness revive me.**

We have already seen, in verse 35, that the psalmist's motivation for all of these petitions to be taught sprang from the fact that he had righteous longings. "I delight in Your law," he said, "therefore teach me, guide me, protect me." Now here once more he prays, "I long for Your precepts. I do have righteous longings, but those longings in themselves do not provide sufficient motivation to keep me on track. Eternal life must come as a gift of grace through Your character, not mine!" He knows this will never come through his own righteousness, but only as a result, as a gift, of God's righteousness can he be revived, i.e. receive eternal life.

As I studied these petitions, I confess I was astonished at what this man was asking for. What went through his mind that allowed him to be so vulnerable and free with God? Then

I found a startling text in Deuteronomy 4, where God predicts the exile of the nation. (We have already seen that this man found his theology in the book of Deuteronomy.)

**"The LORD will scatter you among the peoples...But from there you will seek the LORD your God, and you will find Him if you search for Him with all your heart and all your soul. When you are in distress and all these things have come upon you, in the latter days, you will return to the LORD your God and listen to His voice. For the LORD your God is a compassionate God; He will not fail you nor destroy you nor forget the covenant with your fathers which He swore to them."** (Deut. 4:27-31)

The psalmist foresaw that it was God's compassion, his acceptance of sinners, not his justice, that would change lives. This is what motivated him to be so open and vulnerable in his petitions: "For the LORD your God is a *compassionate* God." Thus he prays that God would disciple him and protect him from life's dangers.

What then are the doctrinal implications of the psalmist's petitions for believers living in this twentieth century day? There are three things, I believe.

### **III. Doctrinal implications regarding prayer**

#### **(a) The characteristic of our prayers is to be freedom**

Freedom should be the dominant characteristic of our prayers, I believe. We should feel free to ask God for everything. This is what the psalmist does. He prays, "Teach me, cause me to understand, cause me to walk, protect me," etc. He discovered that God must be the first cause of everything in discipleship. It is no different today. Let us ask God to be that to us, too. It is truly amazing that the psalmist discovered this new freedom, which is nothing less than the New Covenant, some 400 years before the birth of this covenant in Jesus Christ. He had already entered into this New Covenant before it came into being in history. I wonder if this man realized exactly what he was asking of God. Did he realize, for example, that when he asked God to teach him, to grant him understanding, to make him walk in his ways, that God had to descend in the form of his Son, taking on human flesh, in order to accomplish this? God descended from heaven to teach his people directly. And, as the gospels declare, Jesus "taught as no man ever taught." He taught his apostles and disciples without intermediaries, directly, causing them to understand, and repeating what he had already taught them when they didn't understand the first time. Then, following his death, burial and resurrection, he sent forth the Holy Spirit to accomplish in the hearts of the apostles what he had already taught them in the flesh. Thus John would write, "And as for you, the anointing which you received from Him abides in you, and you have no need for anyone to teach you; but as His anointing teaches you about all things, and is true and is not a lie, and just as it has taught you, you abide in Him" (1 John 2:27).

So we see that the psalmist anticipated the New Covenant, and petitioned God to grant him life on that basis, far ahead of the coming of that covenant in history. Isn't it tragic then to see so many Christians today acting as if they still were living under the Old Covenant? They have no freedom in their petitions to God because they feel they must still try to earn his acceptance, and they try to live up to the responsibilities of the law to diligently obey it. How sad, how tragic this is!

Now, once more, how do we enter into this new freedom?

#### **(b) The path to freedom is vulnerability**

The answer is, be as vulnerable as the psalmist in your prayers. Be open with God. Do not try to hide your sin. This man understood that the greatest danger to him was not the enemy, not those wicked princes who discounted God's law (119:23); it was himself. I feel there is too much emphasis today on the world and the devil as the great threats facing Christian disciples, and insufficient emphasis on the dangers of the flesh. As we learned last week, the external enemy was the very thing that placed God's law in the psalmist's heart. The enemy that really concerns this man is himself.

What then is the greatest threat to our ability to disciple our children today? Some Christians tell us that our political leaders in Washington pose the biggest danger to them. Our nation has lost its moral moorings and we are headed for disaster, we hear. This is where the war is to be fought, we are told; it's a political battle. Now it's not wrong for the church to take on the role of John the Baptist—to point out sin and to be the nation's conscience. But, having said that, the greatest threat to our children is not the wicked world. I think the psalmist would say that the most dangerous enemy facing children is their own parents. This is what Jesus said in Matthew 18. "Unless you become as one of these," he said, taking a little child onto center stage to illustrate his teaching, "you cannot enter the kingdom of God." "As you teach this child," he said, "it's inevitable that stumbling blocks will come and destroy his faith. But woe to the one through whom they come. It would be better for him that he commit suicide than cause this little one to stumble." This is how valuable children were to Jesus. Now what does he say the parent must do? "If your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out. If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off." The greatest danger to the child, he is saying, is the parents. Dealing with the sin in our own life is far more important than trying to ward off the stumbling blocks which will inevitably come in the world. Every generation has had to raise its children in a wicked world. That's the way it is. There are no Christian nations, nor will there ever be any. God is calling a people out of the nations to be his own. What we need in our prayers is to be less combative and more open to confession, humbly admitting our weaknesses. Our prayers lack confession and honesty!

Now how do we do this? Well, we should not come to church on Sunday and bring out all our dirty laundry in worship. Some Christians, under the influence of emotional conviction of sin, are eager to make their sins public. But there is a danger here. There may be an emotional release in public confession, but often it is a release that does not result in any change in ethical behavior. Let us do what David suggests, as we read in Psalm 4,

**Tremble and stop sinning,  
Meditate in your heart upon your bed and be still.  
Then offer the sacrifices of righteousness,  
And trust in the LORD.** (Psalm 4:4-5)

On your bed tonight, when you are off stage, confess your sin to God alone. Let him talk to you about your wayward will, your lustful mind, your greedy heart, your discontented

spirit. Then, as the Bible says, "confess your sins to one another that you might be healed." But, confess your sin to the one who is most important to you, or to the one you have offended. Then three know about your sin—God, your spouse or your child, whoever, and yourself, and once three people know, it's no longer a secret. Just last week a brother shared with me the sense of release and freedom he and his wife now enjoyed because he had confessed to her certain things he had done in the past, before they were married. I think we need to be open with each other, and confession must be part of our prayers.

So, if the path to freedom is vulnerability, what is the path to vulnerability? It is acceptance.

### **C. The impetus to vulnerability is acceptance**

The psalmist says that when he came to God with his petitions, what he found was compassion and acceptance. And he believed God. He took him at his word and became vulnerable. So he petitioned God, "Turn away my reproach which I dread." My friends, the psalmist had the promise of Scripture that God would be compassionate, but we have a better word: we have the fulfillment of the promise in Jesus! God laid his wrath on the Son so as to extend mercy to us, turning away his wrath from us, as the psalmist prayed, and looking upon us instead with compassion. Thus, in answer to his prayer, "grant me life as a gift through your righteousness" God became both the just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus Christ. This is what Paul wrote in Romans: "...those who believe in Him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead, He who was delivered up because of our transgressions, and was raised because of our justification" (Romans 4:24-25). God is satisfied with what his Son accomplished by his death. And he demonstrated his satisfaction by raising him from the dead. So when we pray we come not to a judge, but to the God of compassion who will grant us what we ask for through his riches in Christ Jesus our Lord.

The writer to the Hebrews put it this way: "Since therefore, brethren, we have confidence to enter the holy place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way which He inaugurated for us through the veil, that is, His flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water" (Hebrews 10:19-22).

Knowing this, we can sing with Charles Wesley,

*No condemnation now I dread;  
Jesus, and all in Him, is mine!  
Alive in Him, my living Head,  
And clothed in righteousness divine.  
Bold I approach the eternal throne,  
And claim the crown, through Christ my own.*

Amen.

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▮ *Teth*

## REDEFINING THE GOOD

SERIES: PSALM 119—THE JOURNEY OF AN OLD SOUL

Catalog No. 803  
Psalm 119:65-72  
Fourth Message  
Brian Morgan  
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Having three daughters in three different schools in this new academic year has encouraged me to do a lot of thinking about the education process. My high schooler, who up to this point in her schooling has been dealing with basic math, is preparing to face new challenges in higher math classes. Algebra can be a difficult transition for a teenager, as equations and unknown variables become the order of the day. The next level is geometry, where the mind is challenged by the third dimension; though one is writing in two dimensions, one has to think in three. Trigonometry is next, and then calculus; the student learns to apply principles and laws to the known universe, in a science like physics. Some even go beyond physics, in company with the Einsteins of this world, and work in four dimensions. At this level, the old laws no longer apply, not because the old system was inadequate, but because the new has a more elevated vantage point and a broader context. At each stage in the learning process the student's mind must undergo reorientation; old concepts must be redefined by new perspectives. If the student is venture-some, this can be thrilling, exciting stuff, but if he or she is timid, and content with the status quo, it can be a very threatening change.

Perhaps we can use this illustration as a metaphor to help us learn more about the spiritual life. The author of Psalm 119, which we are studying in this series of messages, likens the believer's prayer life to a journey to the top of a majestic mountain. The climb is accomplished in stages, and every now and then the pilgrim reaches a plateau that presents him with a new vista. From the new vantage point everything seems different. He perceives a new definition of reality, not because he was unable to see it before, but because his perspective has been enlarged.

Psalm 119 was written, to continue with our metaphor, halfway up this mountain, as it were. The psalmist has arrived at a plateau. Below, he sees the shadows of Israel's earthly kingdom, with its kings and sacrifices, founded under the Old Covenant of Deuteronomy. As he looks upward, however, he sees a heavenly kingdom, radiant in its glory, presided over by a heavenly King who will inaugurate a New Covenant. Like the math student who is confronted by new dimensions in physics, the psalmist is forced by this new vision to redefine all of the concepts of the Old Covenant, truths which he had been laboring under up to this point, and give them new meaning. The pull of the old earthly kingdom is losing its power as he feels himself drawn upward toward new realities.

Today then, we come to the letter *Teth*, which is the first letter of the Hebrew word *Tov*, meaning good. *Good* is one of the most important and frequently utilized words in the Bible. It is used 741 times in the OT, and we find it in every book except the books Obadiah, Habakkuk, and Haggai. The psalmist uses this word six times in the text and

builds his entire message around his redefinition of it.

Psalm 119:65-72:

**Good You have done with Your servant,  
O LORD, according to Your word.  
Good discernment and knowledge teach me,  
For in Your commandments I have trusted.  
Before I was afflicted I went astray,  
But now I keep Your word.  
You are good and cause good;  
Teach me Your statutes.  
The arrogant have smeared a lie against me,  
(But) I with all my heart observe Your precepts.  
Their heart is covered with fat,  
(But) I delight in Your law.  
Good for me it was that I was afflicted,  
That I may be taught Your statutes.  
Better to me is the law of Your mouth,  
Than thousands of gold and silver pieces.**

As we have already seen, this psalm is written in the form of an acrostic, with eight verses penned for each of the twenty-two letters in the Hebrew alphabet. Before we get into the psalmist's new definition of the word good, let us first see what the term meant originally, especially as it related to the Old Covenant.

### I. The "good" defined: Deuteronomy

"Good" was used to describe anything that was utilitarian, useful and functional. It was used by the craftsman upon completion of his work, to demonstrate the usefulness of what his hands had fashioned. This is the word that God repeatedly exclaimed when he had completed the different stages of his creative work in Genesis: "It is *good!*" How meaningful this word becomes then, for instance, when we remember what God said, concerning man, "It is *not good* for man to be alone." Under the Old Covenant, God bestowed "good" by blessing the original creation with fertility. In fact, this term is a synonym for rain. The good Lord gave forth his rain, making the original creation fertile, and thereby blessing man with an abundance of material blessings. For man to enter into that goodness, however, he had to keep commandments. Listen to these examples, from the book of Deuteronomy: "Do what is right and *good* in the LORD's sight, so that it may go *well* with you and you may go in and take over the *good* land that the LORD promised on oath to your forefathers" (Deut.6:18, NIV). "...obey the LORD, and observe all His commandments...then the LORD your God will cause you to have an excess for *good* in all the work of your hand, in the offspring of your body and in the offspring of your cattle and in the produce of the ground" (Deut.30:8-9, NASB mod.). The Creator God bestowed the blessings of fertility in marriage, with herds and crops, and man entered in this goodness by being obedient, by keeping law.

From the vantage point of his new perspective, however, writing a thousand years after these texts in Deuteronomy were written, the psalmist redefines the word good, as we will see in the next verses.

## II. The “good” redefined 119:65-68

**Good You have done with Your servant,  
O LORD, according to Your word.  
Good discernment and knowledge teach me,  
For in Your commandments I have trusted.  
Before I was afflicted I went astray,  
But now I keep Your word.  
You are good and cause good;  
Teach me Your statutes.**

### (a) The redefinition of the good: Being disciplined by God

What is the good which the psalmist seeks from God? Notice that three different times he uses the phrase, “teach me.” He wants to be disciplined by God! This is what he regards as good. He sees good, not in terms of material blessing, but in terms of being disciplined by God to become like him.

But the entryway to good is perhaps not what we might expect.

### (b) The gateway to the good: Affliction

The psalmist is seeking good because it seems to him that the world is upside-down. Following the exile, the wicked, who had turned their backs on God’s ways, seemed to be blessed with material goodness (“their heart is covered with fat”), while he was burdened with affliction. The world was topsy-turvy. But though the door of earthly blessing was shut, a window of heavenly light was opened to him as God taught him, personally and directly. That “goodness of God” was better than anything the earth had to offer. What was good was to be disciplined by God.

And the gateway to this discipleship was affliction. To enter into this new good he had to lose something of the old creation. I can testify to this from my own experience. When I was 11, before I came to Christ, I prayed for each member of my family, asking God to bless them with goodness, and asking him to bless all the sick children of the world. This was my prayer structure, in effect. In high school, I felt a new freedom, and I began asking God for things. I asked him for straight A’s in my classes, that I become captain of the gymnastics team, and I asked him for a girlfriend. And I was granted these blessings of materialism and popularity. Now it was the gift of these and other physical blessings that led me to Christ. I loved the God who had so blessed me. But then, when I met Christ, like the psalmist, my world turned upside-down. My athletic career was hampered when I suffered a concussion; after my marriage, my wife and I had to subsist on very limited funds; then we lost our first child, a son. When we lost a daughter, however, I found I had reached a plateau where my theology changed radically. The OT taught me that I had to give my firstborn to God; that was keeping commandment; that was God’s right. After we lost our son, in my heart I felt God owed me and that he would never put me through a similar experience again. Then my daughter died. I was shocked and horrified. My theology crumbled. But God was birthing me out of the Old Covenant. In the New Covenant, in which I was now placed, I discovered that he can require anything of me. Now all of life is a pure gift; he is not covenanting to grant me any material blessings. The three children that we have since been blessed with were not granted me because of my obedience to God’s commandments; they are gracious gifts from a loving heavenly Father.

Seeing this radical difference between the OT, where the blessings and the kingdom are described in physical terms, and the NT, where they are described in spiritual terms, many people wonder if there are not two different programs—one for Israel, involving physical and material blessing, and, for the church, a program of affliction and suffering. Has God scrapped the first curriculum because it didn’t work and replaced it with a new education program? The psalmist answers this question in the first verse of our text. No, he says emphatically, this was God’s original intent: “Good You have done with Your servant, O LORD, *according to Your word.*” The affliction and loss of material blessings which he suffered, and the discipleship experience which he had gained as a result, he understood as God’s original program for him. There was one program, not two. Here is how John Calvin put it: “The Lord of old willed that His people direct and elevate their minds to the heavenly heritage, yet, to nourish them better in this hope, He displayed it for them to see, and so to speak, taste, under earthly benefits...we have to meditate on it [the heavenly heritage] directly.” The OT saints, living under the Old Covenant, saw this plainly. In the land of promise, Abraham was willing to live, suffering as an alien, because, as the author of Hebrews points out, he saw that the land was not the real promise; it was merely a shadow of a heavenly land “whose architect and builder is God.” In Psalm 17, David recognized that the wicked seemed to have all the material blessings of the Old Covenant—they had children, and they left all their inheritance to them—yet he said, “As for me...I will be satisfied with your likeness when I awake” (Psa. 17:15). He had discerned that the true goodness of God was becoming like him through the resurrection. That is one ultimate program. In the same way we teach our children arithmetic, seeking to lead them to higher concepts of math as they grow, so God teaches truth to his children, leading us in stages to the new heavenly realities.

These verses demonstrate the psalmist’s gratitude for his being led to this new level of theology.

### (c) Appreciation for the good: A changed life

**Good discernment and knowledge teach me,  
For in Your commandments I have trusted.  
Before I was afflicted I went astray,  
But now I keep Your word.  
You are good and cause good;  
Teach me Your statutes. (119:66-68)**

First, the psalmist is thankful for the permanent changes that had occurred in his life. Under the Old Covenant, his spiritual life was filled with inconsistencies, but now, through affliction and suffering, he has found himself trusting God’s commandments. Faith had been born in his heart, making him consistent in his walk. And he appreciates the sovereignty of God. “You are good and cause good,” says the writer. What insight! He saw that behind the words of the arrogant who were smearing him with their lies, lay the sovereign hand of God who was good and was causing good for him. Because God is sovereign and behind it all, the psalmist can forgive and move on to the greater things. This calls to mind the story of Joseph in the OT. Joseph’s brothers ganged up on him and sold him as a slave, yet here is Joseph’s amazing analysis, spoken to his brothers years later, of what had actually happened: “Do not be grieved or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life” (Gen. 45:5). “And as for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for *good* in order to bring about this present result to preserve many people alive” (Gen. 50:19). Many Christians find it hard to forgive their families for past abuses, yet if they learn to accept that behind these

things lay the good hand of God working for their good, then they can forgive. If we don't, like Joseph, perceive that God was behind everything that happened, then we will never be able to forgive.

Finally, the psalmist so appreciates the new spiritual appetites which suffering had awakened in his spirit that he petitions God for more good.

**Good discernment and knowledge teach me,  
For in Your commandments I have trusted.  
You are good and cause good;  
Teach me Your statutes.** (119: 66, 68)

What is he saying here? Well, he is so appreciative for what suffering has done in his life to draw him closer to God and become like him, he prays for more of it! It is in this light that we should interpret that well known verse, Romans 8:28: "God works all things together for the good..." What is "the good"? Remember that the context of this verse is suffering. The Holy Spirit prays for the believer, and brings suffering into his life, and through it conforms the believer to his image. This is the "good" which we receive from the hand of the good Lord, and this is what we should mean when we say that God is good. A number of years ago, I wrote a poem to God in appreciation for the spiritual appetites which were awakened in my soul when I was rejected for sharing the light of the gospel with a close friend. I was so rejected and hurt I could not even speak. I wondered why it was that suffering was the gateway that leads Christians into the spiritual dimension, and I wrote these lines:

#### *THAT STRANGE GATE*

Why is it now, my soul is moved  
To taste of Thy gracious love,  
When all before it seemed cold and dead,  
Though my eye could see so much,  
Of Thy glorious grace.

Yes, now my soul drinks deeply,  
The river is lively and flowing.  
It tastes sweet.  
But the gateway is the ache,  
of rejection,  
of appearing foolish,  
of knowing one can't convince.

My lips wax not eloquent, but slippery,  
My heart knows little of boldness,  
It caves in to timidity,  
My lips are silent,  
But my eyes see You, your hand by mine.  
O that You would keep me in such a sweet place,  
Under your wings—  
To know my broken ways,  
This is true joy.

Don't let me go,  
Pursue me deeper still.  
Then I shall tell of your gracious love to the saints,  
Especially those who hold you dear,  
Those simple ones, whom I love.

O to be swallowed up in Thee!

So the psalmist redefines the good as a deep spiritual appetite to be disciplined by God; and this hunger is awakened by suffering and affliction.

Next, he identifies the realm where he experienced this discipleship.

### **III. The realm where the goodness of God is experienced (119:69-70)**

**The arrogant have smeared a lie against me,  
(But) I with all my heart observe Your precepts.  
Their heart is covered with fat,  
(But) I delight in Your law.**

Certain environments are more conducive than others to cultivate discipleship. Some believers think that an all-Christian environment, separated from the world, will intensify their discipleship process, so they send their children to Christian schools for the duration of their schooling, or try to surround themselves with nothing but Christians. I believe that a Christian ghetto can be spiritually dangerous. Your spirituality is liable to wither away and die there.

#### **(a) Intense wickedness**

In contrast, the psalmist found himself living among arrogant people—an immoral majority—who opposed his morality. They gathered together as one to smear lies against him, to cover up what was true. They slandered his reputation, at a cost to him financially (verse 70). And when he went to confront the issue, their heart was so hardened ("their heart is covered with fat"), nothing that he said could penetrate it. This speaks exactly to the situation confronting the Crisis Pregnancy Center which was slandered recently by a local newspaper. The director of the center spent two hours being interviewed by the reporter, yet not one thing she said was reported.

#### **(b) Produces intense godliness**

When the door of earthly acceptance was slammed shut in the psalmist's face, however, it was then that a heavenly window was opened up to him. This is why he expresses appreciation for the new heart he now had to observe God's precepts. This new spiritual appetite motivates him to flee to the word, where he delights in God's law. Persecution had produced in him a wholehearted love for God's commandments. Compromise is out of the question when you are in enemy territory. If you are not wholehearted in your commitment, you will die. This is what the psalmist found to be true. In John 6:68, in the midst of spreading apostasy, Peter said to Jesus, "You have the words of eternal life." The multitudes on the beach in Galilee had deserted Jesus when they discovered that he had not come to feed them bread, but to be their Messiah. Next, when Jesus said in the synagogue, "Unless you eat my body and drink my blood, you have not life in yourselves," the text says, "many of the disciples went back to the things they had left behind." When Jesus said to the twelve, "One of you will deny me," it was then, in the context of apostasy, that Peter said, "You have the words of eternal life." Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, writing about his own experience in the *Gulag Archipeligo* accounts, has a helpful word for us here:

When people express vexation, in my presence, over the West's tendency to crumble, its political shortsightedness, its divisiveness, its confusion—I recall too: 'Were we, before passing through the Archipelago, more steadfast? Firmer in our thoughts?' And that is why I turn back to the years of my imprisonment and say, sometimes to the astonishment of those about me: 'Bless you, prison!' Leo Tolstoy was right when he dreamed of being put in prison. At a certain moment that giant began to dry up. He actually needed prison as a drought needs a shower of rain! All the

writers who wrote about prison but who did not themselves serve time there considered it their duty to express sympathy for prisoners and to curse prison. I have served enough time there. I nourished my soul there, and I say without hesitation: 'Bless you, prison, for having been in my life!'

The psalmist discovered that the best arena to experience the goodness of God was in the midst of an evil world, where he was in the minority, where it cost him, and where he had no human recourse.

So, having redefined from his own experience the goodness of God, he concludes this section by praising God for this goodness.

#### **IV. Praise for the goodness of God (119:71-72)**

**Good for me it was that I was afflicted,  
That I may be taught Your statutes.  
Better to me is the law of Your Mouth,  
Than thousands of gold and silver pieces.**

##### **(a) The goodness of God is better than the approval of men**

In verse 71 he compares the goodness of God and the approval of men. When we say, "I hope everything goes well," what we are actually hoping for is that circumstances will run smoothly, that we will be well liked and approved of by men. In other words, we pray for ease of life as far as relationships are concerned. But when the psalmist prays, "I hope everything goes well," what he is actually saying is, "I hope I am afflicted that I might be disciplined by God in order to be free from man's approval!" To him, the goodness of God is better than the approval of men.

Next, he compares the goodness of God and material success.

##### **(b) The goodness of God is better than an easy life**

Again, when we pray, "I hope everything goes well," we are praying that we be successful, that circumstances go smoothly, without heavy cost and mishaps—for an easy life, in other words. But the psalmist prays, "I will endure poverty in order to be disciplined by God to enjoy his eternal wealth." The goodness of God is better than material success.

I will make three applications for our consideration from this text.

#### **V. Doctrinal applications**

##### **(a) Climb the mountain!**

O Christian, it is time to press on beyond the ABC's of the Christian life! Let us acquaint ourselves with the true goodness of God. This theme is no minor concern in the NT. Two complete books in the NT, Galatians and Hebrews, were written to those who refused to let go of the Old Covenant, those who wanted to return to the shadows. We can't go back; God doesn't want us to. Let us press on up the mountain where we may walk with the Einsteins of the faith. "Where do I go to climb the mountain?" you ask. My reply is, Don't flee from the wicked and cloister yourselves in a monastery. Place yourself among the minority, where it costs you, where you have no one to turn to but God.

Secondly,

##### **(b) Open your windows!**

Try to imagine your soul as a house that has many doors leading to earthly blessings—your spouse, children, wealth, health, success, family approval, etc. Now remember that the psalmist discovered that heavenly blessing became his when these doors were slammed shut. As the believer makes his way up the mountain, he or she will lose all these earthly blessings. When this happens, you can respond by growing bitter and angry, or you can open a heavenly window and allow light to enter until your soul is flooded with God's radiant light and your heart catches fire for his school of discipleship. It bothers me that when they reach this critical juncture, many Christians won't let go; they become angry instead. They consult counselors who advise them to pry open the doors to these earthly gardens and force their way in to find blessing once more. When they do so, they discover that everything lies in ruins; the vines are lifeless and the fountains broken. They are looking for blessing in the wrong place, for these gardens don't have the blessing to give. When you find that a door has been shut to you, what you must do instead is open a window. Then, like Martin Luther, you can stand on the Scriptures, against the world, because you have been freed from all earthly concerns. You will be free from the old creation, free from emotional attachments to family, free from riches, free from your circumstances. This is how God wants us to live. The church today is lacking backbone. We need to climb the mountain, open the windows of heaven, and let the light of God shine through.

Thirdly, I would say, praise God!

##### **(c) Petition and praise**

Can you say, with the psalmist, "Good for me that I was afflicted, in order that I might keep your word"? Here is an exercise for you this week: Write your own psalm to demonstrate your appreciation for God's goodness to you. Can you say, "It was good for me that I lost...a wife, a daughter, a job, a promotion, my health, my wealth"? Can you say, with the apostle Paul,

"Whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ. More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but dung in order that I may gain Christ, and may be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith, that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death; in order that I may attain to the resurrection from the dead" (Philippians 3:7-11).

*Good for me it was that I was afflicted,  
That I may be taught Your statutes.*

Amen.

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▷ *Kaph*

## LIFE AT ONE'S END

SERIES: PSALM 119—THE JOURNEY OF AN OLD SOUL

Catalog No. 804

Psalm 119:81-88

Fifth Message

Brian Morgan

October 6, 1991

The television show *Rescue 911* is popular these days. The theme of the show—the saving of human life—tugs on the heartstrings. Each story portrays a sudden disaster which invariably brings the victim face to face with death. But then, anonymous volunteer servants, who just happen to come on the scene, appear. Demonstrating skill and raw courage, they sacrifice themselves wholeheartedly, caring for the victim while help is summoned. Then comes the call for help, 911, followed by the interminable wait for the rescuers to arrive. Minutes drag into hours as time seems to stand still. While they wait, everyone's priorities seem to become reoriented. Following the arrival of the professionals, as often as not the victim is brought back from the brink of death. For me, the most dramatic and touching part of the drama comes when the victim, now recovered, at last meets with the heroic volunteer who saved his life. There are tears of joy, usually followed by the testimony of the victim that his ordeal had permanently etched these new priorities in his heart.

At times we come to a similar reorientation of priorities in our spiritual life. In this series of messages on Psalm 119, I have used the metaphor of climbing a mountain to ascend to the heavenly Zion to describe the believer's spiritual life. Every now and then we reach a plateau from which we view breathtaking vistas and our soul is flooded with life and feeling. At other times the trail becomes so steep our only option is to do what the Swiss do in the Alps, and that is, tunnel straight up! We enter the tunnel in total darkness; we cannot see anything. At times the ascent is so steep, the journey so long, we reach the point of total exhaustion. Our resources become so depleted we come right to the edge of death itself; we have reached the end. We call out for help: "Save me," and then the interminable wait begins. "How long, O Lord?" we ask. As our anxiety intensifies, we find a reordering of priorities and values taking place within our soul.

We have already seen that Psalm 119 is written in the form of an acrostic, with eight verses for each letter of the Hebrew alphabet. Today we come to verses 81-88, the letter *Kaph* in Hebrew. The psalmist builds his meditation around the word *kalah*, which is used three times in these verses, to denote the idea of completion, of coming to the end, of being completely spent, wasted away and exhausted. "My soul is at an end, my vision is at an end, and my life is at an end," says the psalmist. What is life like when you are at your end?

Let us look first at the psalmist's description of his life-threatening situation.

### I. The makers of my end: My persecutors (119:85-87)

**The arrogant have dug pits for me,  
Contrary to Your law.  
All Your commandments are faithful.  
They have persecuted me with a lie: help me!  
They almost destroyed me on the earth,  
But as for me, I did not forsake Your precepts.**

"The arrogant have dug pits for me," says the psalmist; that is to say, "they are persecuting me." This particular expression for *pit* is used only three times in the OT, once in the book of Jeremiah. I think the psalmist is saying he suffered the same fate as Jeremiah when the prophet confronted the religious establishment of the nation of Israel, prophets, priests and kings, with their idolatry and adultery. His confrontation resulted in a plot being hatched against him, as we see in Jeremiah 18:18:

**"Come let us devise plans against Jeremiah. Surely the law is not going to be lost to the priest, nor counsel to the sage, nor the divine word to the prophet! Come on and let us strike at him with our tongue, and let us give no heed to any of his words."**

When Jeremiah hears about this, he complains to the Lord:

**"Should good be repaid with evil?  
For they have dug a pit for me.  
Remember how I stood before Thee  
To speak good on their behalf,  
So as to turn Thy wrath from them...  
For they have dug a *pit* to capture me,  
and hidden snares for my feet." (Jer 18:20, 22)**

Like the days of Jeremiah, the psalmist is saying that some aspect of covenant loyalty is being broken; the wicked are in flagrant violation of God's laws. And he confronted the issue, but rather than encouraging repentance, his words caused their sin to escalate. This led to a conspiracy of the many against the one, as the wicked used their influence and power to destroy his reputation, setting such a subtle and well thought-out trap for his life that he feels his days are numbered. I have a Christian friend who is a man of integrity and courage. He works for the United States government as a purchasing agent, and has saved the government hundreds of thousands of dollars through his reorganizing of the division where he works. But he has a supervisor who doesn't like him, and this person began to slander him. My friend sensed the danger he faced, so as a safeguard he began to document and keep records

of everything he had done in his work. Last week, he received notice that his position has been terminated. Like the psalmist, he has reached his end.

Following the psalmist's description of his life-threatening circumstances, he goes on to describe the effects that being at his end had upon his soul.

## II. The effects of being at one's end: A paradoxical life (119:81-84)

**My soul languishes for your salvation;  
I wait for Your word.**

**My eyes fail with longing for your promise,  
Saying, "When will you comfort me?"**

**Though I have become like a wineskin in the smoke,  
I do not forget Your statutes.**

**How many are the days of Your servant?**

**When will You execute judgment on those who persecute me?**

### (a) Internal anxiety (119:81-82a)

First, he says that his soul is undergoing a fierce anxiety attack. His inner life has become dry and parched; he has no feelings left. He is at his end, uncertain as to whether he can go on. He has even lost his vision; his eyes are strained by looking for relief, and exhausted by weeping. The darkness has gone on so long he has forgotten what the grace of God feels like when it moves within his soul.

Second, his body has suffered, too.

### (b) Bodily deterioration (119:83)

"I have become like a wine-skin in the smoke" says the psalmist. The Jewish commentator, Dr. A. Cohen, has written: "In the East, bottles are made of skin and, when not in use, are hung up in a room which has no chimney for the escape of smoke; they become shrivelled in consequence. The Psalmist declares himself to be so affected by his trials that he is similarly shrivelled." Waiting for God to act on his behalf has wrought havoc on his body. A doctor friend told me last week that AIDS research has now uncovered the fact that stress and guilt impede the immune system from working, and that doctors can now measure the body's immune system to discover how well it can fight off disease. It is remarkable that here the psalmist is admitting the stress which he feels in his soul has caused his body to deteriorate.

Third, his suffering raises questions in his soul.

### (c) Inner questionings: "How long, O Lord!" (119:82b, 84)

**My eyes fail with longing for your promise,  
Saying, "When will you comfort me?"**

**How many are the days of Your servant?**

**When will You execute judgment on those who persecute me?"**

Here are the questions that plague him: "When will you come to comfort the righteous and judge the wicked? When will you comfort my soul and heal my body? How long, O Lord? I see the end. I am right at the edge. I can count the days." Have you ever cried out like this to the

Lord?

How long, O Lord, will this illness overtake my health?

How long, O Lord, will you allow this estrangement with my spouse to continue?

How long, O Lord, will I feel the pain of my son's rejection of you?

How long, O Lord, will these debts crush me?

How long, O Lord, will this oppression go on at work?

How long, O Lord, will I live in loneliness?

How long, O Lord, will these habits enslave my flesh?  
Will it be unto death?

How long, O Lord?

Yet, despite the psalmist's internal anxieties, bodily deterioration and inner questioning, a strange, paradoxical kind of life, which he describes in three movements, begins to enter his soul. Notice how he balances these statements, in verse 81:

### (d) Paradoxical life

**My soul languishes for your salvation;  
I wait for your word. (81)**

As his inner life deteriorates, hope is anchored in his soul. Paradoxically, rather than damaging his hope, the waiting has anchored hope in God and in his Word. Waiting purges his faith!

And, as his body deteriorates, his faith is strengthened:

**Though I have become like a wineskin in the smoke,  
I do not forget Your statutes.  
They almost destroyed me on earth,  
But as for me I did not forsake your precepts. (83, 86)**

Rather than damaging his love relationship with God, again, paradoxically, his bodily deterioration has intensified it. He hasn't changed sides to join the wicked. He hasn't abandoned the Word. On the contrary, affliction has engraved the Word in his heart as with a branding iron. He has not abandoned God; he is clinging all the more to him.

When we bask in God's mercies, we sometimes focus on the gifts and tend to forget the Giver. But then, God begins to take away those mercies, those earthly benefits, and we are left with him alone; God plus nothing.

And finally, as the end draws near, paradoxically, the psalmist sees, not death, but God:

**How many are the days of Your servant?  
When will You execute judgment on those who persecute me? (84)**

Though his anxiety is intensified, his vision of God becomes bigger than his vision of death. He remains ever secure in his own personal identity: he is the servant of God, and God is in his rightful position as Savior and Judge. Sitting at death's door he may be spared, or he may pass through it. His questioning only involves when: will it be in this life, or through death in the resurrection? That is his only question.

A few weeks ago Michael Buchanan, a member of our congregation, passed through the door of death. At the age of 40, he had come through a successful bone marrow transplant, but the radiation treatments destroyed his immune system, leaving him open to all kinds of infections. We watched as he battled one disease after another, and we watched him as he came to his end. I will read some lines I wrote in honor of him, as I compared his life to the life of Job:

O Michael, my friend,  
You were a brother like us,  
Unashamed to be weak,  
You found the true strength.

Your spirit knew the quiet streams  
Where water gushed from the Rock.  
Your eyes radiated peace,  
Your hands service,  
“Who is a God, like your God?”

Then the serpent slandered you,  
And you became our Job.  
He struck your daughter, Lindsey.  
Enveloped in darkness,  
You laid her in the dust.

You cried in grief,  
“No hand to give the suitor,  
No wedding feast to enjoy!”  
Tears fogged your vision.

In all this you did not sin,  
But your eyes sought paradise.  
You worshipped your God,  
Found no reason to blame.

But the deceiver came again  
Demanding, “Skin for skin!”  
All that a man has  
He will give for his life.”

For 145 days and nights,  
You were subjected to the cruel one.  
Your vexation could not be weighed,  
It was heavier than the sands of the sea.

We heard all that came upon you,  
And came to comfort you.  
And when we saw you,  
We did not recognize you.

We raised our voices and wept.  
Then we sat down next to you.  
We did not know how to speak,  
Because your pain was very great.

Because of you, our souls wrestled in the dark,  
Waves of doubt crushed our feeble thoughts.  
“Where is this God, your God?” we cried,

“Can we not speak with Him?”  
Then we heard you say,  
“Though He slay me, yet I will trust in Him.  
Even after my skin is destroyed,

Yet from my flesh I shall see God.”

This, too, was where the psalmist came out. His hope was anchored in God alone. While the victim in the television program I mentioned suffers through the waiting period for help to arrive, he drastically reorganizes his priorities; the only thing that matters is his loved ones. So too, the psalmist enters a paradoxical sort of life while he waits; all he has is God, and his faith is purged of all impurities.

Now, how do you pray when you are at the end? If you are facing an emergency where your life is threatened, all you have to do today is dial 911. Our modern telecommunications have simplified these matters for us; even a child can dial 911. Now God, too, has made matters uncomplicated for believers when they face their end.

### III. Petitions when you are at the end (119:85-88)

**The arrogant have dug pits for me,  
Contrary to Your Law.  
All Your commandments are faithful;  
They have persecuted me with a lie; help me!  
They almost destroyed me on the earth,  
But as for me, I did not forsake Your precepts.  
Revive me according to your Loyal-love,  
So that I may keep the testimony of Your mouth.**

#### (a) Help me!

Two simple petitions here: “Help me,” and, “Revive me!” The psalmist sees that the traps of the wicked violate God’s commandments which are based on covenantal love. God will uphold his law when it has been violated, and this is what gives those who are in the right the freedom to ask for help. So the motivation for help is not the psalmist’s vindication, but God’s! We are free to ask God’s help when we are being persecuted because God’s name is at stake, and he has to uphold his name. I talked to a Vietnamese woman last week who escaped Vietnam with the boat people. I asked her what she learned on the boat, and she replied, “I learned how to pray.” Then she asked me to pray for her. She was at her end, she said, because her husband had just lost his job, and they were suffering financially.

#### (b) Revive me!

Here he is not asking merely to be resuscitated so that he can live on a survival level. Rather, he is asking for the full measure of God’s life (and this word “revive” is referring to eternal life) to be planted within his soul that he might be useful again, bearing testimony to God’s name.

Our highest privilege as Christians is to bear testimony to God’s name. The most thrilling moments in the Christian life occur when God builds a stage and calls on an individual to take the stand and give testimony about him. I watched Dave Dravecky, the San Francisco Giants baseball pitcher, give a pure, raw testimony to Jesus Christ on television a couple of nights ago. This man had the major muscle in his pitching arm removed in cancer surgery, but he went through rehabilitation and came back to pitch a

memorable game. In the next game, however, he broke the arm while throwing a pitch, and he was left to face the prospect of more rehabilitation. But the cancer recurred, and a few weeks ago, surgeons amputated his arm and shoulder to arrest the disease. During the interview, his wife confessed that caring for her husband during that time had brought her to her end. There followed a two-month period when she could do nothing except rest. When the interviewer asked Dave what were his feelings when he first heard he had cancer, he replied that his priorities changed. "I wanted time to stand still," he said. "I went into my children's bedroom and watched them as they slept." Then came the amputation. Afterwards, he was shocked to discover that he had lost not only his arm, but his shoulder also. But, he said, he was free from baseball, free to do greater things, to bear testimony to God's name.

These then were the prayers of the psalmist when he came to his end: "Help me, that you might be vindicated; and revive me, that I might be useful."

#### **IV. Implications for those at the end**

##### **(a) Expect to be at your end**

Some Christians think they should never expect to find themselves at an end. On their spiritual journey up the mountain to the heavenly Zion, they expect to see only wonderful vistas, with no pain, no toil, and no tears. But there are no chair-lift rides up this mountain. We must expect times when the trail is steep, the air thin, the visibility shortened. These will be exhausting times; times when evil seems to have the upper hand; times when the end is in sight. Every trail is designed to bring us to the end at some point, so expect it. This is the treacherous territory when our faith is purged. Here is how Charles Haddon Spurgeon described this testing process:

God does not give faith, love, hope, or any grace without meaning to test it. If a man builds a railway bridge, it is that engines may go over it and prove its carrying power. If he only makes a needle, it must be tested by the work it can do. So when God made you to be strong in the Lord, He meant to try every ounce of your strength. Whatever God makes has a purpose, and he will test it to see if it is equal to its design. I do not think that a single grain of faith will be kept out of the fire—all the golden ore must go into the crucible to be tested.

So expect to be at your end, and secondly, cry out at your end.

##### **(b) Cry out at your end**

When your soul goes into anxious turmoil, don't cover up your feelings with simplistic theology. Give expression to your inner questionings. Cry out, "How long, O Lord? Help me, revive me." The book of Job is dedicated to this end. And make no mistake, Job is not the exception. At some point in your life you will go through something of

what Job went through. Then, when you cry out, God will reorganize your priorities and purge your faith.

##### **(c) Remember He is there at the end**

There is no road, no trail God will ask you to travel that he has not already traveled. At 19, I climbed the Matterhorn in Switzerland. I was accompanied by a guide who had climbed that mountain 366 times. I was tired, out of breath and frightened on occasion, but I would do anything my guide told me to do. Likewise, God knows the way that is best for you. Remember the story of Abraham, when God told the patriarch, "Take now your son, your only son, the one you love, Isaac, and go to Mount Moriah..." When Abraham obeyed, and took his beloved son up the mountain, what kind of anxious thoughts and longings do you think he felt? God knew. He had the same feelings himself once. He knew what it was like to take his Son to Mount Moriah. This was familiar territory to him. A friend told me last week how painful it was for her when her son came home from high school several times having been beaten up. She told me that she cried out to God in anguish, "O Lord, it is so hard to send a son into the world!" Then, echoing from heaven into her soul, she heard the words, "I know." That brought great comfort to her. Abraham believed that because God was there with him even death would not have the last word. God would! He would provide a substitute, and if not, he would raise Isaac from the dead to give forth a heavenly seed and thus fulfill the promise God had made to him.

##### **(d) Remember there is an end you will never see**

Abraham went right to the end, but there he found a substitute to sacrifice, and his son was spared. It was not so with God. While his Son was hanging on that tree, he cried, "Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani" ("My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me?"). For three hours, God turned his back on his beloved Son, and the Son felt the weight of the wrath of the Father. We ask, "When?" but the Son asked, "Why?" How comforting it is to know that we will never have to ask that question because we will never be forsaken. We must look ahead and contemplate the greatest moment of our lives—our tearful reunion with that Servant volunteer who in our emergency gave everything to buy us back from death. On that day we will bear testimony to his name and say, with Job,

*"I have heard of Thee by the hearing of the ear;  
But now my eye sees Thee."* (Job 42:5)

Amen.

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Mem

## YOUR LAW, MY FIRST LOVE!

SERIES: PSALM 119—THE JOURNEY OF AN OLD SOUL

Catalog No. 805  
 Psalm 119:97-104  
 Sixth Message  
 Brian Morgan  
 October 13, 1991

The father of one of our elders died suddenly last week during open heart surgery. He was 63 years old and had just retired and moved into a beautiful home overlooking the ocean in the northern part of the state. Harry Rosing was a wonderful, gentle man whose Jewish roots went back to Russia and Romania. Later in life he came to faith in Christ and became a completed Jew. At the memorial service, I wondered what I could do to help assuage the pain which the family and friends were obviously feeling, so I gave people an opportunity to share a word of appreciation about this man. Both of his sons gave a moving testimony of the glory of their father; how he had always been with them in the small things of life, and so forth. The treasured memories that were shared evoked a powerful sense of love that overcame everyone in the room. This man was the delight of everyone's affections, family and community alike. As I listened to the tributes, I reflected that appreciation does much for the human soul. I sensed clearly what are the best gifts in life, and for this family, the best gift to them was their father, this gentle man.

In Psalm 119, the psalmist likewise takes time to reflect on the things that his soul appreciates. In these studies I have likened the Christian's spiritual journey through life to an ascent up a mountain to the heavenly Zion. At times, the terrain is undemanding, and the pilgrim stops to take in the beautiful vista on all sides. At other times, the trail becomes so steep he reaches his end; he must tunnel straight up and ascend for a while in total darkness. Today, we come to a place on the mountain where the psalmist stops and looks back on the trail he has traveled. Here, in the cleft of the rock as it were, under the wings of God's protection, all is still. He has an opportunity to reflect on his journey, and the deepest emotion he feels is a profound sense of appreciation to God for his Word. God had been with him on his journey, every step of the way, through thick and thin, mediating his life to the psalmist through the gift of his own Word. This is what gives him wisdom, life and protection. In our text today then, verses 97 through 104, introduced by the Hebrew letter *Mem*, the psalmist makes no petitions. These verses are pure meditation as he expresses appreciation for where he finds himself by the grace of God. He gives thanks for the ultimate gift that has mediated the life of God to his soul: the Word of God itself.

He begins with a statement about his affections for this Word and how it has benefited his mind.

### I. Unrivaled insight: His mind (119:99-100)

**How I love Your Law!**  
**All the day it is my meditation.**  
**Your commandments make me wiser than my enemies,**  
**For they are ever mine.**

**I have more insight than all my teachers,  
 For Your testimonies are my meditation.  
 I understand more than the elders,  
 For I have observed Your precepts.**

#### (a) More understanding than his elders: *Discernment without the pain of experience*

The psalmist loves the law for what it does to his mind; like nothing else in life, God's law enhances his mind. It makes him wiser than his enemies, grants him more insight than his teachers, and more understanding than his elders.

I want to take these three things in reverse order because there is a spiritual progression to them. The elders were those men who sat in the city gate, deciding on political and economic matters. Despite all their experience, however, the psalmist has even more understanding. "I understand" means "[I] pay careful attention in order to understand, to discern between." In music, the untrained ear that lacks discernment hears only the melody line when the orchestra plays, but the trained ear hears the harmony, the individual instruments, whether they are playing on key, on tempo, etc. "Understanding" means knowing right from wrong; what to do, when and how to do it. We have an example of the usage of this word from the days of Solomon, on the occasion when two women claimed to be the mother of the same baby. One of the women said, "...when I rose in the morning to nurse my son, behold he was dead; but when I *looked* at him *carefully* [this word 'understanding' in our text] in the morning, behold, he was not my son, whom I had borne." (1 Kings 3:21.) That is deep discernment. The discernment which the believer acquires through the Scriptures is as powerful as the insight a mother has with regard to her own child; she does not need scientific help to discern whether or not the child is hers. This is the kind of discernment that the Bible imparts concerning matters of morality. The psalmist didn't have to go through the pain of experience to acquire understanding. He knew certain things to be true because his discernment came through the revelation of Scripture.

He had more understanding than his elders, but he had a second thing.

#### (b) More insight than his teachers: *Confidence unhampered by tradition*

He is writing during the time period that is referred to as the four hundred silent years. But these actually were four hundred years of prolific writing by the rabbis. They produced commentaries on the Scriptures, and then commentaries on the commentaries, implying that the truth could not be found other than by wading through the insights of these great human thinkers. This is why Jesus once said, "You treat the traditions of men equal to the word of God." But he had insight and discernment into the

nature of things without having to consult the traditions of men. He received it through revelation! Now this word insight means to have so deep an understanding into the nature of things that when you are faced with great difficulties, you are imparted skill and shrewdness to think your way through them, to act prudently, with the result that you will be successful. Abigail, “a woman of good understanding” (1 Sam. 25:3), is a good illustration of this kind of wisdom. She was married to a fool, Nabal. David had been protecting her husband’s flocks, and when he sent his men to ask for food and supplies in payment, rather than being thankful for their services, Nabal insulted and humiliated them. When David heard of this he became enraged, and he vowed to wipe out Nabal and his men. Abigail was caught between her wicked fool of a husband, and David, who was acting unrighteously. What did she do? With great insight and wisdom she said to David, “On me alone, my lord, be the blame.” She confessed she wasn’t aware that the men whom David had sent had need of food. She admitted the wrongdoing of her husband, and gave David the gift he had originally sought. By her wise response she disarmed David’s emotional outburst. And then she raised the stakes. She indicated that God had used her to restrain David from shedding innocent blood. The Lord is the one who takes vengeance, she pointed out. David should have been off fighting the Lord’s battles, not involving himself in these little disputes. His desire for vengeance had distracted him from a higher calling. Finally, she said to David, “the lives of your enemies He will sling out as from the hollow of a sling”—reminding him of his victory over Goliath. Abigail had used her insight to solve an extremely complex situation.

As I watched the Senate Judiciary Committee hearings over the weekend, the debate over who was telling the truth and who was lying went back and forth. I listened as politicians made speeches to advance their own causes instead of getting to the heart of the serious issue before them. Deuteronomy warns that we not receive or even entertain testimony by one witness. If we followed this insight we would be saved from the debacle we are now going through. Today we are holding court in our own living rooms, and reputations are being attacked and destroyed in the process. While I have no personal judgment into the matters under investigation, I feel that if we applied Biblical procedures we would save ourselves the spectacle of politicians sidestepping issues and serving their own agendas rather than getting the truth. More important, we would save people’s reputations because we would only receive the testimony of two eyewitnesses.

The psalmist has a third attribute.

**(c) Wiser than his enemies: *Security without status or position***

The psalmist’s enemies (the princes he refers to in verse 23) may have come from the political community. They slandered him at a cost to him financially. Lacking any other resources, he was forced to flee to God and to his Word, and there he found refuge. The Word equipped him with discernment, followed by insight, concluding in wisdom—the moral skill for living life. Though the storm of slander beat against his boat he did not veer off course. He could go to sleep each night without apprehension, knowing God was his trust. This is what wisdom brings—security without status or position. David is a good illus-

tration for us here. Saul, the king, had everything he needed to destroy David—political clout, the priesthood, the military, the budget, etc. David, an outcast, was forced to sleep in caves in the wilderness. All he had was the prophetic word that he was God’s chosen king. Yet Saul did not succeed in destroying David. Once, when Saul sought to relieve himself and unknowingly entered into one of the caves where David and his men were hiding, David’s men saw this as a great opportunity to kill Saul. But David wouldn’t have it. He would not raise his hand against the Lord’s anointed. The prophetic word told him that he was king, and that word alone, not apparently fortuitous circumstances, would make him king. He refused to fight fire with fire; he did not compromise his integrity.

There is nothing like the Word of God to enhance our understanding. Do we, like the psalmist, love that Word like nothing else? It made him more understanding than his elders, gave him more insight than his teachers, and made him wiser than his enemies.

God’s Word granted the psalmist yet another thing.

**II. Unparalleled versatility (119:98-100)**

Notice the arenas where he can function because of the insight he receives from God’s Word. The enemies he speaks of represent the political world, the princes who used their position of power to try and destroy his godly reputation. But God’s Word made him wiser; he could function in their realm because he had security without position or status. And he had more insight than his religious teachers. We could apply this to the world of higher learning today. Like the psalmist, we need not be intimidated by degrees or credentials because the Word gives us even more insight. And he had more understanding than his elders, the men who gathered at the city gate to discuss the economic and legal issues of the day, pronouncing legal judgments and settling disputes. He could function in their realm.

In every realm therefore the psalmist’s understanding was deeper, his insights as to a plan of action superior, and his integrity, purer. Believers should never feel intimidated to function in any realm of life. If you know the Scriptures you can function anywhere, in any realm.

So there we have the value of God’s Word to the mind of the psalmist, and its versatility.

Next, he goes on to refer to another benefit.

**III. Unequaled protection: His feet (119:101-104)**

**From every evil way I have restrained my feet,  
In order that I may keep Your word.  
From your judgments I have not turned aside,  
For You Yourself have taught me.  
How sweet are Your words to my taste!  
Yes, sweeter than honey to my mouth!  
From Your precepts I get understanding;  
Therefore I hate every false way.**

Having set out what the Word of God does for his mind, the psalmist now details what it does with his feet, which is a metaphor for the path he has decided to take in life. To begin with, it enlightens his choices.

### (a) Consistently right choices

**From every evil way I have restrained my feet,  
From your judgments I have not turned aside.**

First, negatively, he has a consistent aversion to the wrong path; and second, positively, he has a steady walk in the right path. Now there are two sides to this. It is never enough to merely abstain from what is wrong; there is an imperative to do what is right. Abstaining from adultery is proper behavior, but husbands need to cultivate romance with their wives, too. Not only are we to not steal, we must give to the needy. We are not to merely endure our enemy, we are to love him.

This man made consistently right choices. How did they come about?

### (b) Prompted by internal changes

**How sweet are Your words to my taste!  
Yes, sweeter than honey to my mouth!  
From Your precepts I get understanding;  
Therefore I hate every false way.**

Righteous behavior cannot be imposed from without; change must first be internal, in the heart. The psalmist acts righteously because a change has occurred in his nature. He took the word internally and it tasted sweet to him. Morality cannot be imposed on cultures or on individuals; it must come from within. Children will not make right moral choices unless they have a strong spiritual life. Righteous moral choices spring from a love relationship with God and for his Word. This is what changes the very nature of the believer. Jonathan Edwards, in his classic book *Religious Affections*, put it this way:

God gives life, not just something additional. Christ lives in the soul. So grace in the soul is as much from Christ as the light in a prism is from the sun. The glass remains as it was; its nature does not change, and yet the light is received. This only partially represents the communication of grace to the soul. But the true Christian receives light from the Son of Righteousness in such a way that his nature is changed, and becomes like the light received. God's people become like little suns. To change the metaphor, they not only drink of the water of life flowing from the original fountain, but this water becomes a fountain within them, springing and flowing out of them.

The psalmist learned to make right choices because the Word of God had changed his nature. Now what motivated this change?

### (c) Motivated by love

**From every evil way I have restrained my feet,  
In order that I may keep Your word.  
From your judgments I have not turned aside,  
For You Yourself have taught me.**

If you are here today because you are motivated by duty, I can tell you from my own experience that that will not carry you very far. Nor will feelings of duty help your children. Neither will fear of hell or fear of consequences carry you far. Love is what will do it. Love is the ultimate motivation for life. It was love that motivated the psalmist. He had an aversion to sin because God himself had personally taught him these commandments. This is why he regards sin not as an ethical mistake, but as a breach of

trust. Some today say it doesn't matter what anyone does so long as it doesn't hurt people ethically. Adam did not hurt Eve ethically. He did not sexually harass her. Eve did not hurt Adam ethically either. Their sin was a breach of trust. They made an illicit reach for something that God had warned them against and said would kill them. They focused on what they could not have as being life itself, and in their independence grasped it. They committed a breach of trust. When God begins to personally instruct you from his Word, then, when temptation comes, you will be able to look past the fleeting pleasure of sin and see the eyes of the loving Father, and your love relationship with him will help you not to succumb. This is what changed the psalmist too—the love relationship he had with the God who taught him personally. Peter denied Jesus three times, and then he looked straight into the eyes of his Lord. He broke down and wept bitterly because he knew at that moment that he had broken his trust. And this is the true nature of sin—it is a breach of trust. But the Scripture builds bonds of love from within. This is not accomplished by applying an external code from without, a code that is void of love, unable to effect change, and unable to motivate.

The psalmist appreciates God's law for what it has done to his mind, and because it protects him on his path.

How did he respond to this?

## IV. Wholehearted devotion (119:97-100, 103)

**O how I love Your Law!  
It is my meditation all the day,  
Thy commandments make me wiser than my enemies,  
For they are ever mine.  
I have more insight than all my teachers,  
For Your testimonies are my meditation.  
I understand more than the aged,  
Because I have observed Your precepts...  
How sweet are Your words to my taste!  
Yes, sweeter than honey to my mouth!**

Because he appreciates the law and has affection for it, the psalmist describes his devotion to it in three activities. First, he memorized it.

### (a) Love possesses: *Memorization*

"For they are ever with me." Wherever he goes, he takes the word with him. When I was courting Emily, we communicated by letter for more than four years. She wrote to me every day, and I kept all those letters and even numbered them because wherever I went I wanted her words to go with me. I think the psalmist is saying that he memorized God's Word. He put it in his heart so that he could take it with him. We should read this Word whenever we can and memorize it as we are able. Even hearing it read cleanses the soul. Because I am not good at memorization, I seek the literary structure in the text as I find this helps me memorize what it is saying. I recommend this.

Second, says the psalmist, he meditated on the word.

### (b) Love considers: *Meditation*

**All the day it is my meditation.  
How sweet are Your words to my taste!  
Yes, sweeter than honey to my mouth!**

The basic idea of the verbal root of "meditation" is to re-

hearse or go over a matter continually in one's mind. This was often done audibly, thus it can also be a synonym for prayer. Memorization of the Scriptures therefore is a helpful prerequisite to true Biblical meditation. Oswald Chambers writes, "Meditation is an intense spiritual activity. It means bringing every bit of the mind into harness and concentrate its powers; it includes both deliberation and reflection. Deliberation means being able to weigh well what we think, conscious all the time that we are deliberating and meditating." Here is what Charles Haddon Spurgeon said about meditation, "To believe a thing is to see the cool crystal water sparkling in the cup. But to meditate on it is to drink of it. Reading gathers the clusters; contemplation squeezes forth their generous juice." Once when I was a student I meditated for an entire day on John 14. I was on a boat going from Italy to Greece, and as I sat on the deck meditating, other students and professors kept coming by and I had opportunity to share the gospel. But life is much busier today now that I am the father of three daughters. How do I meditate when I spend so much time ferrying my children all over the place, especially on weekends? Well, now I have made my car my sanctuary. As I drive, I play tapes of Bible readings, hymns and theological teachings, and I have fellowship with Christ as I travel from one place to another.

And third, the psalmist observed the word.

**(c) Love acts: *Observing***

**For I have observed Your precepts.**

"Observed" means much more than obedience, It means to guard, protect, keep. He is referring to a careful protection of the truth in his heart, knowing it would come under attack. And he knew that the word would also come under attack in the public sphere, thus he was willing to contend publicly for the truth so that God's name would be honored. Henry Martin was Charles Simeon's assistant pastor at Holy Trinity Church in Cambridge. He was a gifted mathematician who gave up an academic career to be an evangelist. When he heard the name of Christ blasphemed, he said, "I could not endure existence if Jesus were not glorified. It would be hell to me if He were to be thus always dishonored." Any insult to Christ was an insult to himself, and so he would contend for the truth.

So there we have the psalmist's wholehearted devotion to the Word of God, manifested in these three things: memorization, meditation, and observation. I would say our weakest area today is meditation. We have Bible translations and commentaries by the dozens, and we make valiant efforts at obedience, but we don't take time to contemplate, thus our obedience is shallow. We must recover a love for God's Word, and that will result in deeper meditation. You cannot say you love God if you are not devoted to his word. Carry it with you, place it within your heart, meditate on it, and guard it! Then we can say, with the psalmist, "How I love Your Law, All the day it is my meditation."

Now all of this raises a question:

## V. How can God's law be life for me?

### (a) The experience of the apostle Paul

The apostle Paul took an entirely different view of the law than the psalmist. Our psalmist says he loves the law because it brought him life, but Paul says it did not bring him life, but death: "I was once alive apart from the Law; but when the commandment came, sin became alive, and I died; and this commandment, which was to result in life proved to result in death for me; for sin, taking opportunity though the commandment, deceived me, and through it killed me" (Rom 7:9-11).

### (b) Which way is your mirror turned?

How can we reconcile the psalmist's view of the law with Paul's? Is the law meant for death or life? Let me illustrate. A few years ago, our family took a vacation in Oregon. Following a rainstorm one day, the puddles of water everywhere reflected the beautiful sky, the sparkling blue broken here and there by rain clouds. I asked my daughter to look into a puddle and tell me what she saw. Looking straight down into the puddle, she replied, "Mud! All I see is mud!" Then I asked her to step back and look again. "Oh, now I see the pretty heavens, the sky and the clouds," she said. Puddles of water gave two different reflections, depending on one's perspective. Now let us imagine that that puddle is the law, and the law is meant to do both things, depending on your perspective. On the one hand if you look straight into it, it is like a mirror which reveals all of our inadequacies. It reveals, provokes and condemns sin; it kills us. But if you gaze with a converted heart and you reflect it up into the heavens, what do you see? Not mere commands addressed to your weak flesh, but a description of the heavenly Man, Christ, who can fulfil the law. If you adopt that perspective with regard to this text, then you will see a Christ who loved the law. It was his meditation all the day; it made him wiser than his enemies. Did Judas succeed? Did the Romans succeed? Did Israel succeed? No. Jesus was wiser than his enemies. And he had more understanding than the elders of Israel. He rebuked them for making the traditions of men superior to the revelation of God. He had more insight than the teachers of Israel. He rebuked Nicodemus, the teacher of Israel, saying to him, "You must be born again." He knew how to act in the midst of the complexities of life and be successful. And he restrained his foot from every evil path. He clung to God because he loved God. As you contemplate the law in this way, you will see the heavenly Christ on the page. So reflect on God's best gift to you, his Word, and appreciate it! Christ made this Word incarnate. If you have received him, he resides in you. Christ, that gentle Man who gives us everything we need, is God's best gift to us. The law is meant first, to lead us to Christ, and second, to impart Christ's life to us once we have been converted. If he does indeed dwell in you, then you can say wholeheartedly, with the psalmist,

*O how I love Thy law,  
It is my meditation all the day!*

Amen.

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◊ Samek

## REFLECTIONS ON THE WICKED

SERIES: PSALM 119—THE JOURNEY OF AN OLD SOUL

Catalog No. 806  
Psalm 119:113-120  
Seventh Message  
Brian Morgan  
October 20, 1991

It has been a painful week for our nation. For days, the entire country has been glued to their televisions watching the grueling cross-examination of Judge Clarence Thomas and Professor Anita Hill by the Senate Judiciary Committee. We heard the grim accusations of sexual harassment, the painful descriptions of deviant sexual perversions, the pornographic innuendo, paraded before a watching nation. To compound the evil, we saw some of the Senators serve their private political objectives at the expense of the reputations of others, rather than using the proceedings to seek the truth. One man from the PBC North congregation was so saddened by this national prime time debacle that he wrote a letter to the local newspaper decrying what he had seen on television. Here is part of what he wrote:

After just a few hours of watching the recent Thomas hearing, my zeal for the proceedings melted away into grief. The biggest lies of all were not from the lips of either Clarence Thomas or Anita Hill, but from the men to whom we have entrusted the running of our government. In the name of “the process,” Republicans, Democrats, conservatives and liberals urged us to throw away our deepest convictions about decency and grace. Before the cameras of a watching nation they have led us step by step to relinquish the personal respect we must always have for one another if we are to grow together through the difficulties that face us. The tragic result of such indecency is the slow desensitization of all of us to principles we once held dear.

I certainly did not enjoy the proceedings either. They brought home to me once more the fact that we live in a fallen world, where none, not even our national leaders, are immune from evil.

There are times in our spiritual journey to the heavenly Zion when God forces Christians to reflect on the nature and the extent of evil. We think of the Holocaust in Nazi Germany, the Killing Fields of Cambodia, the oppression of the Kurds in Iraq, our drug-infested cities, and so on. Even more personally and painful, some of you have memories of growing up in an abusive home. Now our first response when we are faced with the fact of evil is to run from it. But God wants us to reflect and meditate on these things for our good. And today we come to a section in Psalm 119 where the psalmist does just that: he reflects on his evil world and the impact that living in this world has upon his soul.

Psalm 119, of course, is written in the form of an acrostic, and the letter which the psalmist builds his text on in this section, verses 113 through 120, is *Samek*. In this instance, however, rather than using word repetition to build his structure, the psalmist builds on five synonyms to describe the wicked: one word speaks about their heart and attitude, three words refer to their character, and one word speaks about their end. In the first part of this section the psalmist meditates on his own character and life in the midst of evil; and in the second part he meditates on God’s response to evil.

### I. Meditation on his character in the midst of evil (119:113-114)

**The *double-minded* ones I hate,  
But Your law I love .  
Thou art my hiding place and my shield;  
For Your promise I wait.**

#### (a) A strong aversion to evil (119:113)

“Double-minded” is the key word in this text. This is a rare word in the OT. As a matter of fact, its root is found in only one other instance. When you come across a rare word usage like this, it is usually a reference to an incident that has occurred previously. Now the only other usage of this word double-minded is found in 1 Kings 18:21, in the account of Elijah’s confrontation with King Ahab and his wife Jezebel. This wicked couple had imported Baal worship into Israel and instituted it as the state religion of the nation, but all the while they held on to the name of Yahweh in a charade that they were actually worshippers of the Lord. Here is what this text says, from 1 Kings 18:

**So Ahab went to meet Elijah. And it came about, when Ahab saw Elijah, that Ahab said to him, ‘Is this you, you troubler of Israel?’ And he said, ‘I have not troubled Israel, but you and your father’s house have, because you have forsaken the commandments of the LORD and you have followed the Baals. Now then send and gather to me all Israel at Mount Carmel, with 450 prophets of Baal and 400 prophets of Ashera, who eat at Jezebel’s table... And Elijah came near to all the people and said, ‘How long are you limping on two *divided* [there is our word] opinions? If the LORD is God, follow Him; but if Baal, follow him.’ (1 Kings 18:16-21)**

The people wanted to serve both God and Baal, and they were limping along, paralyzed between two opinions. Elijah found this to be revolting. This is what the Laodicean church was doing too, according to Jesus. He castigated this church in the book of Revelation because they too were limping along, divided between two opinions. Here is what he said of them: “Because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of My mouth” (Revelation 3:16).

So the psalmist felt a strong aversion to evil, brought on by the evil environment around him.

But evil had another effect upon him.

#### (b) An intensified love for God and His Word (119:113b-114)

**But Your law I love.  
Thou art my hiding place and my shield;  
For Your promise I wait.**

The only words which he repeats in these eight verses are the words love, and statutes. Living in an evil environment has caused his love for God’s statutes to increase and intensify. He has fled to God for security, has found him in the cleft of the rock, and now he is quietly waiting for God to do what

he promised.

King David is a wonderful illustration for us here. He had to live in an evil court with Saul, a man struggling between two divided opinions. To save his life, David escaped the evil circumstances of the court and fled to the cave of Adullam. There, hidden in the cleft of the rock, he wrote the beautiful words of Psalm 57:

**Be gracious to me, O God, be gracious to me,  
For my soul takes refuge in Thee;  
And in the shadow of Thy wings I will take refuge,  
Until destruction passes by.  
My soul is among lions...  
But My heart is steadfast, O God, my heart is steadfast;  
I will sing, yes, I will sing praises!  
Awake, my glory;  
Awake harp and lyre,  
I will awaken the dawn!** (Psalm 57:1,4a,7,8)

In that protected spot, the cave of Adullam, David's love for God so intensified that he composed this psalm of praise to God. He who waits for God's promise will assuredly be answered—and the answer came to David, as we read in 1 Samuel: "And everyone who was in distress, and everyone who was in debt, and everyone who was bitter of soul, gathered to him; and he became captain over them" (1 Sam 22:1-2). This is exactly what happened to our Lord Jesus Christ. He came to a divided Israel which was limping along on two opinions, and he felt repulsed by that evil environment. Like David, he too was an outcast, but everyone who was in debt to sin, everyone who was bitter of soul and in distress gathered to him, and God answered his prayer.

So it is with the psalmist. Living in a world surrounded by evil actually caused spiritual appetites to be awakened and intensified in his soul. He found himself hating evil, but loving and clinging to God and waiting for him to act on his behalf. The apostle Paul picks up this theme in the NT in his admonition in Romans, "Let love be without hypocrisy, abhorring what is evil; cleaving to what is good" (Rom 12:9).

Now what kind of petitions does the psalmist make in the midst of an evil world? We find three of them in the following verses.

## **II. Requests in the midst of evil** (119:115-117)

**Depart from me, evildoers,  
That I may observe the commandments of my God.  
Sustain me according to Your word, that I may live;  
And do not let me be ashamed of my hope.  
Uphold me that I may be safe,  
That I may have regard for Your statutes continually.**

His aversion to evil, coupled with his intensified love for God, give him courage to confront the evildoers. And what is his word to them? Basically, it is, get lost!

### **(a) Depart from me!** (119:115)

**Depart from me, evildoers,  
That I may observe the commandment of my God.**

This is the only occasion where the psalmist directly addresses the wicked in this psalm. It's important to remember that he is not addressing his remarks here to the unbelieving world. If this was what he was doing he would have no place to go. The people he is calling on to depart from him are those who claim to be believers in the Lord, yet they persist in evil. They are a distraction to his own obedience, thus he is saying, "Leave me that I may wholeheartedly obey my Lord, without distraction." Christians today should act no differently. God

wants us to be bold to confront evil within his church. Thus there may be times when we have to say "Leave!" to someone who has been sitting on the fence too long, who claims to be a believer yet is enslaved to idols. Unqualified growth in the numbers attending a church is not a good barometer of spiritual life; pruning and cleansing from within rather, resulting in purification, is a much better sign. As a pastor, I don't like confronting evil within the church. Yet there have been times when I have had to tell people hard things about their behavior and they have left as a result. This is the point to which the psalmist has come: "Depart from me, evildoers, that I may observe the commandments of my God."

He addresses his next petition to God himself.

### **(b) Sustain me!** (119:116)

**Sustain me according to Your word, that I may live;  
And do not let me be ashamed of my hope.**

He asks that he may live long enough to see the promise of God fulfilled. He has put his life on the line and does not want to be ashamed.

Caleb is a great OT example of the two requests which the psalmist makes in these verses. When he and Joshua were forty years old, they returned from the spy mission to the Promised Land with a glowing account of what they had seen. But then came the majority report, from the ten who focused on the giants in the land. As a result, the people became immobilized by fear and denied their faith in the Lord. For forty years they went limping around in circles in the wilderness, going nowhere and dying in the process—and Caleb and Joshua had to endure going nowhere with them. When at last they came to the borders of the Promised Land, and Reuben and Gad and the half tribe of Manasseh, the sheep herders, saw this well-watered region that seemed so good to them, they asked, "Why would we cross the Jordan to go into a land that we can't see, when what we can see is so good?" They took their proposal to Moses, who just about had a fit. "Haven't we limped along long enough?" he demanded, in effect. "You want to stay here? Then stay." These men ended up having to fight battles, and they became the first tribes to fall into idolatry, apostasy and deportation. Finally, when at last Israel entered the land, and the inheritance was divided, Caleb spoke up and said,

**"So Moses swore on that day, saying, 'Surely the land on which your foot has trodden shall be an inheritance to you and to your children forever, because you have followed the LORD my God fully.' And now behold, the LORD has let me live, just as He spoke, these forty-five years, from the time that the LORD spoke this word to Moses, when Israel walked in the wilderness; and now behold, I am eighty-five years old today. I am still as strong today as I was in the day Moses sent me; as my strength was then, so my strength is now, for war and for going out and coming in. Now then, give me this hill country...with the Anakim (and their) great fortified cities; perhaps the LORD will be with me, and I shall drive them out as the LORD has spoken."** (Joshua 14:9-12)

This is what the psalmist is saying here: "Depart from me, evildoers, you who want to limp along. I'm tired of this distraction. I'm going after the hill country, and may God sustain me."

And now his third request.

### **(c) Uphold me!** (119:117)

**Uphold me that I may be safe,  
That I may have regard for Your statutes continually.**

The phrase “have regard for” (gaze) means “that I might be safe and in that state gaze steadily at your statutes, undistracted and continually.” More than anything else the psalmist wants to be taken out of the heat of battle, away from the double-minded evildoers, and transferred to a place of walled protection where he can contemplate on God without distraction. There is a beautiful play on words here in the Hebrew. The word *salvation* (Yeshua) comes from the word *safe*, and this word looks almost exactly like the word *regard*. If I were asked to paraphrase this in English, I would translate it this way: “*Deliver me, that I might deliberate on you.*” There is a prophetic oracle about this word *regard*. Israel always had a problem with idols. Instead of regarding the Lord they made a practice of regarding idols, seeking life from them, not their covenant God. But Isaiah predicted a day when God would so judge Israel that the prophet said,

**In that day man will have regard for his Maker,  
And his eyes will look to the Holy One of Israel.  
And he will not have regard for the altars, the work of his hands.** (Isaiah 17:7,8a)

The psalmist has seen the exile and the judgment of his nation. Now he no longer has regard for the work of human hands; he has regard only for God and for his statutes. Living with the wicked has not only intensified his spiritual appetite, it has strengthened him to confront people with their choices. He is like an Elijah or a Joshua, calling men and women to account and then moving on to fully trust God, with or without human support. This is what God wants to do with us too. He wants us to have that kind of pure, bold faith that is ready to confront evil, regardless of whether we have anyone on our side.

Thus we learn of the psalmist’s meditation on his own character in the midst of evil.

Now he goes on to meditate on God’s perspective.

### **III. Meditation on God’s judgment of the wicked** (119:118-119a)

**You have rejected all those wandering from Your statutes,  
For their deceitfulness is useless.  
[Like] dross You have removed all the wicked of the earth;**

He says two things here about God’s judgment.

#### **(a) It is based on the truth of revelation**

Judgment is never based on ignorance, but on revealed truth—the truth we know and knowingly suppress. These people were judged because they wandered from God’s statutes. This is what Adam did. So did Israel. They were given God’s statutes and in every generation they were given prophets to warn them, before the judgment came, that they were wandering. This is true of the world also. The book of Romans says that the world has the light of creation, but they are judged because they “suppress the truth in unrighteousness.” The word wanderer, by the way, is the term used in Proverbs to describe the drunken one who is constantly swerving off the right course, causing great damage to his life and to the lives of others.

There is a second factor in God’s judgment.

#### **(b) It is progressive**

God’s judgment begins with rejection in this life: “You have rejected all those wandering from Your statutes.” If you don’t want to do things God’s way, in other words, he will let

you go your way. If you choose to serve an idol, you will become like your idol. This is what rejection means in this context. “For their deceitfulness is useless.” “Deceitfulness” is the term used for what Jacob did to Esau—he planned deceit to rob him of his birthright. But the treacherous deceit of those who choose to serve idols will be the means of their own deception; they themselves will be deceived in the process. Thus, speech or deeds which are false will never bear up under examination because there is no weight or life in them. This is exactly what Paul says in Romans about the ongoing wrath of God. “God gave them over,” says the apostle, repeating this phrase several times for emphasis. If you serve vain idols, you will become like the idols you serve—without breath, worthless—and your work will be a mockery. You become enslaved to things made with hands. This then is the wrath of God; this is how God rejects those who wander from his statutes.

So the wrath of God is based on the truth, and it begins with rejection. Finally, it ends with death.

“Like dross You have removed all the wicked of the earth,” says our text. Because they removed themselves from God’s statutes they will be finally removed from the earth; they will have no significance. There is nothing pure in them; they will make no lasting contribution; thus they will be completely removed in the coming fire.

Now how does the psalmist know this to be true? Well, he knows it to be true because he is student of history and the Scriptures. He is aware that this word *dross* comes from Ezekiel’s prophecy where God predicted the destruction of Jerusalem. He said he would *gather* all the wicked of Israel. This word is normally used to refer to salvation, but in this prophecy God declares that he is going to gather them into the temple, which they think is their salvation, but it is actually a furnace. Listen to these words:

**“Son of man, the house of Israel has become dross to Me; all of them are bronze and tin and iron and lead in the furnace; they are the dross of silver. “Therefore, thus says the LORD God, ‘Because all of you have become dross, therefore, behold, I am going to gather you into the midst of Jerusalem.’ As they gather silver and bronze and iron and lead and tin into the furnace to blow fire on it in order to melt it, so I shall gather you in My anger and in My wrath, and I shall lay you there and melt you. And I shall gather you and blow on you with the fire of My wrath, and you will be melted in the midst of it. As silver is melted in the furnace, so you will be melted in the midst of it; and you will know that I, the LORD, have poured out My wrath on you.”** (Ezekiel 22:18-22)

The psalmist is reporting historical fact as he writes these lines; he had seen this judgment occur in history in the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 B.C. But judgments like this are not one-time events; rather they are types of the ultimate judgment which is yet to come, when God will gather all the wicked, and what they anticipate will be their salvation and protection will in fact be a consuming fire which will destroy them and the entire heavens and the earth.

Though the psalmist is in the minority he is not swayed by those who wander from God’s statutes because he knows their end—they are like dross. Thus while his world is tossed to and fro by every wind of doctrine, the Scriptures give him an anchor for his soul, and he remains steadfast.

Finally, he gives his response to this judgment.

## IV. Response to God's judgment of the wicked

(119:119b-120)

**Therefore I love Thy testimonies,  
From dread of You my flesh trembles,  
And from Your judgments I am in awe.**

### (a) Looking to the past: A love for God who keeps his word (119:119b)

We have already seen that the psalmist has a two-fold response to the wicked world: hatred of evil, and love for God. Now, as he meditates on the judgment of God, he feels that same dual response welling up in his soul: he loves God's testimonies—he is confident that when God speaks, his word will stand forever—but as he looks ahead to the ultimate judgment that is yet to come he feels an aversion to it because he has seen God's wrath manifest in the past.

### (b) Looking to the future: Awe and dread (119:120)

**From dread of You my flesh trembles,  
And from Your judgments I am in awe.**

Meditation on God's judgment, rather than causing him to gloat in self-righteousness, gives him a deep sense of humility. He sees the events of his day as a microcosm of his own sin, and he has no guarantee that he will survive the coming judgment himself. During the trial of Adolf Eichmann, the Nazi war criminal, a survivor of the Holocaust had to confront his former persecutor in the courtroom. The Jew looked at him and collapsed. Afterwards, the man was asked why he fainted. He said, "When I came face to face with Adolf Eichmann, I expected to see a monster, but instead I saw a human being (adding poignantly) like *me!*" He went on to say that at that moment he learned that he, too, was capable of such atrocities. Who among us would like to be grilled by the Senate Judiciary Committee for what we did and said during the past 15 years? These hearings were a microcosm of my sin and your sin. But God's judgment will probe far deeper than anything we merely said and did. His video tape includes our thought life also—the things we harbored and played with and thought about. Everyone was throwing stones at one Senator who sat in judgment but may have been guilty of worse offenses, but if we took time to think about it, how often have we ourselves been in his position, perhaps when warning our children of certain evils, but our words lacked weight because we ourselves were guilty of the same things? "Let him who is without sin cast the first stone," said Jesus. Can there be any doubt that our psalmist agrees with these weighty words? The end result of our reflecting on the judgment of God on the wicked therefore should not be self-righteousness, but humility and dread.

## V. Application in the New Covenant age

As we have already pointed out in this series, we will be helped in our understanding of Psalm 119 if we have the picture in our minds that these words were written by a man who has reached the midpoint in his ascent up the mountain to the heavenly Zion. He is leaving behind the Old Covenant and looking ahead to the New Covenant, anticipating the heavenly kingdom in Jesus Christ. Now here we need to ask, What new thing will happen with regard to the words of the psalmist when we enter completely into the New Covenant? I will make three points of application.

### (a) Love replaces hatred for enemies

This section begins with the psalmist's statement, "The double-minded ones I hate." In the New Covenant, of course, love replaces hatred for our enemies. Jesus was born into a sin-filled world. Even the religious establishment of his day were, in his words, hypocrites and double-minded ones who gave the appearance of righteousness but were in fact white-washed tombs. He was repulsed by this and by every kind of evil, yet he said, "Love your enemies."

Now the reason why he could say this is my second point.

### (b) The real enemies are identified and defeated

The Romans, the Pharisees, the Sadducees, etc., were not the real enemies of life. They were merely the earthly masks for the invisible enemies who lurked behind the scenes, namely the world, the flesh and the devil. Thus we must regard our fellow-men not as enemies to be hated and avoided, but as victims who need to be liberated. Jesus never once said "Depart from me" to the wicked whom he came across every day during his ministry. On the contrary, he welcomed all and exhorted them to come to him. The only time he addressed the words "Depart from me" was to the devil himself: "Get behind me, Satan!" Even to the lukewarm church at Laodicia, to whom he said, "I will spit you out of my mouth," to that church he also said, "Behold I stand at the door and knock; if any one hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him, and will dine with him, and he with Me." He will never say "Depart from me, I never knew you" (Matt 25:41) until the last day, the great day of judgment.

This brings me to my third point.

### (c) Assurance of salvation is coupled with the awe of judgment

The psalmist looks ahead and says, "From dread of You my flesh trembles," wondering whether he will be able to survive the coming judgment. But I want you to know this: As a Christian, you do not have to live in fear of that awful judgment. It has already been carried out. And it fell, not upon you, but upon the Innocent One. I am sure that when Jesus meditated on this text, he too trembled. Can't you hear him saying in the Garden of Gethsemane, "My flesh trembles for dread of Thee"? Because the Father's judgment was carried out on him, you and I will not have to undergo this examination which the psalmist dreaded. Assurance of salvation, not fear, is the portion of the believer now. But let our joy be tempered with awe. As we gaze intently at the horror of the cross, his wounded head, his pierced side, let us be in awe for what God has done through Jesus Christ. Let us gaze at the crucifixion scene until our heart breaks, then we will be filled with the unqualified love that reaches out to liberate the captives, the wicked all around us, from the real enemy. Then we will sing, with the psalmist,

*Thou art my hiding place and my shield,  
I am in awe of Thy judgments.*

Amen.

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## EYES FIXED EAST

SERIES: PSALM 119—THE JOURNEY OF AN OLD SOUL

Catalog No. 807  
Psalm 119:145-152  
Eighth Message  
Brian Morgan  
October 27, 1991

One of the delights I shared with my family during our vacation in Northern California this past summer was gazing at the stars in the night sky. We were vacationing by a lake in an unpopulated area, and each night I sat with one of my children, in total darkness, observing the constellations. We counted the number of shooting stars, and marveled at the work of God's hand. One night while I sat alone watching, a falling star split the heavens in two. It seemed so close I felt I could hear the hiss it made as it rent the sky. Frankly, the sight terrified me somewhat. As I went back inside I thought how odd it was that this same light show happens every night in Northern California, while here in Silicon Valley we never see anything like this. The reason, of course, is, we have created so much artificial light that the light from the heavens is dimmed, and our eyes are unable to penetrate the skies. There is another reason too: we are probably too busy to look up into the night sky and observe a world beyond our own.

We could say the same thing about our spiritual life. A Romanian pastor who studied with us during the summer pointed out that to him it seemed our American churches have little sense of awe and wonder of the Lord. In Romania, their world is black as night, and they are forced to look for life in another dimension—to heaven itself. Thus they have trained themselves to fix their eyes upon heaven, and they have learned to observe God in that new creation. When they come back to this earth they are fired with a sense of amazement. In a sense they are like the modern astronomers who look through their telescopes and exclaim, "I've seen another world!" But our riches and toys have dulled our senses with an artificial life that keeps us so busy we miss the glory of heaven.

How can we enter that other world? Our psalmist will assist us greatly here. We have come now to the letter *Qoph* in our studies in Psalm 119, that wonderful acrostic of Hebrew prayer, and here the writer shares with us in four steps the secret to spiritual vision. He builds his meditation around the key word *qadam*, which is used three times in the text. The noun that comes from this root word means "the East," the place where life was said to stem from in the culture of the Ancient Near East. The sun rises in the East; God planted a garden in the East; temples were built facing East to meet the rising sun, etc. So the psalmist uses this word *qadam* to build a meditation on how to find life. He uses the verb form of the word in verse 147: "I *rise* before the morning twilight," meaning, he rises early, before sunrise, to meet God. *Qadam* is used again in verse 48, this time in the word "*anticipate*": he longs for that life so he fixes his gaze into the heavens. Finally, *qadam* is used again in verse 52, in the phrase "*of old*," to say that true life comes not from the present but from of old, from another time. "Go West, young man," has long been the advice offered to us, but our psalmist disagrees. Life is to be found in the East (i.e. heaven), says this sage.

Let's look then at the four steps to enter into spiritual life as it is found in the East, outlined by the psalmist in verses 145 through 152 of Psalm 119. First, in verses 145, 146, we have the call of the psalmist.

### I. The Call (119:145-146)

**"I called with all my heart, "Answer me, O LORD!"  
I will observe Your statutes.  
I called to You, "Save me,  
That I might keep Your testimonies."**

#### (a) The intensity of his call: "The whole heart"

We have already used the metaphor of climbing a mountain to the heavenly Zion to describe the psalmist's spiritual journey in this psalm. In this section we could say that he has reached the midpoint in his climb, and as he looks down, he sees his enemy advancing up the trail which he has just traversed: "Near are those pursuing wickedness" (verse 150). Facing this evil adversary is what impels him to the top of the mountain to meet with God, and there he petitions the Lord with his whole heart. We can learn a lesson on prayer here. To enter that other, spiritual world we must be honest in our prayers; we must learn to put everything out on the table. There is an honesty in Jewish prayers that we lack in the West. Our prayers are formal and polite, but we should read some of the brutally honest examples of prayer in the OT. For example, listen to this prayer of Moses in the wilderness when the people of Israel were complaining about their diet of manna:

**"Now Moses heard the people weeping throughout their families... So Moses said to the LORD, "Why have You been so hard on Your servant? And why have I not found favor in Your sight, that You have laid the burden of all this people on me? Was it I who conceived all this people? Was it I who brought them forth, that You should say to me, 'Carry them in your bosom as a nurse carries a nursing infant, to the land which You swore to their fathers'? Where am I to get meat to give to all this people? For they weep before me, saying, 'Give us meat that we may eat!' I alone am not able to carry all this people, because it is too burdensome for me. So if You are going to deal thus with me, please kill me at once, if I have found favor in Your sight, and do not let me see my wretchedness." (Numbers 11:10-15)**

Have you ever prayed like that? Do you place everything on the table when you pray? We should petition God with the same honesty and intensity that Moses displayed here.

Notice, secondly, the need that the psalmist expresses.

#### (b) The need of his call:

He petitions, "Answer me, O LORD, save me!" He is not asking for material things—a little of this, a little of that. He needs a person, someone who will be attentive to his needs, someone who will act with power to save him in his desperate plight. This need cannot be met by anyone but God the Father. And we must go to the mountain alone, without props. Our congregation is going through a time of stress these days. A number of people are unemployed, and some of those who are working have to put in long hours on the job. We have had a death a week amongst us during the past four weeks—an infant, a 34-year-old woman, and two husbands. No one in the Valley we live in can meet the needs we feel as a result of these things. We must go to the mountain alone and there share our hearts with a caring, loving Father. This is what we must do when we reach the end, when we have nothing to contribute to the situation.

Now we come to the goal of the psalmist's call.

### (c) The goal of his call: Obedience

**"I will observe Your statutes,  
That I might keep Your testimonies."**

He is saying, "I want what you want. I want to obey you. I want to treasure and guard your word in my heart, then when you prod me I will obey it and defend it. But I can't do that without an act of salvation and grace initiated by you." When I feel under stress, I have my own mountain right here in the area where I go to pray and meditate. I ride my mountain bike to this spot, up in the foothills, and there I face East. Below lies a vineyard, with a magnificent view of the valley, and the San Francisco Bay lying beyond. There I pour out my heart to God. Once when the doctors thought my wife might have breast cancer, I went there to pray. I remembered that Emily's mother had died from this form of cancer, and I wondered if that was going to happen to my wife. Thankfully, the lump in her breast turned out to be benign. But I will never forget that intense time of petition I made to God that day, doing what the psalmist did—calling out with my whole heart to the only one who could save us.

So we see that the psalmist's first need is to call with the whole heart. Then once he calls, he waits and watches.

## II. I anticipate the answer to my call (119:147-148)

**I rise before the morning twilight and cry for help;  
I wait for Your words.  
My eyes anticipate the night watches,  
That I may meditate on Your word.**

### (a) He waits by dawn: Penetrates the heavens

He rises before dawn, cries out intensely, and then waits and watches in quiet yet eager anticipation. Why does he do this? He believes that when he appeals to God from that mountaintop, God is going to take him seriously and set things in motion in heaven and he doesn't want to miss what God will do. He wants to watch God at work! What do we do in similar circumstances? As likely as not, we call out to God, then we return to the fray and try to manipulate our own deliverance. We don't want to watch and wait, like the psalmist. During our visits to Romania we were impressed with how the Romanian Christians prayed. One of our group, Bill Kiefer, entered the following record in his journal after he observed some of the brethren there in prayer: "At each meal and before and after each teaching, one of the group would be asked to pray. As each one prayed there first issued a profusion of words followed by a more and more intense prayer sometimes accompanied by weeping. (They wept because they understood the depth of their sin and the greatness of God's grace). One day out in the woods we observed them during a prayer time, praying privately. We could see lonely figures standing like sentinels against the sky speaking with God. Each one was totally focused, not moving from that position for an hour or more, even as the winds and rain began to spring forth. How humbled I felt in their presence." At our last Men's Retreat we reaped a marvelous harvest of spiritual life, partly due, I believe, to the prayer life of our speaker Michael Green. Michael and I roomed together at that retreat, and one morning in my haste to get to the shower I discovered I had leaped over his prostrate form as he lay praying on the floor of the cabin! I felt humbled.

So the psalmist waits by dawn, his eyes straining through binoculars, as it were, to penetrate the new creation in the heavens.

And second, he meditates by dusk, using his magnifying glass to study the word. He wants to penetrate the heavens in the morning; at dusk he wants the heavens to penetrate him.

### (b) He meditates by dusk: Allows the heavens to penetrate him

**My eyes anticipate the night watches,  
That I may meditate on Your word.**

He looks forward to the night watches with intense longing so that he can meditate on the word of God. God is preparing something for us in the heavens, but he must prepare us and change us to receive it. This is why we must meditate by night. And the longer the wait, the greater the joy when the dawn comes at last. In John 14, Jesus said to his disciples, "I go away to prepare heaven for you, so watch. But while you are waiting I am going to send the Holy Spirit to you because you're not ready for heaven. He will come to you to make you ready."

I never had to stand and partake in a night watch for my life until I traveled to Romania. On the second visit the secret police were waiting for us. They came to get me one Friday morning, but before they arrived I was whisked away to an apartment on a hillside. I couldn't sleep that night, so I turned to my daily Scripture reading, which happened to be Psalm 27 that day. As I read these words I had the most precious meditation I ever had in my life:

**The LORD is my light and my salvation;  
Whom shall I fear?  
The LORD is the defense of my life;  
Whom shall I dread?  
When evildoers came upon me to devour my flesh,  
My adversaries and my enemies, they stumbled and fell.  
In the day of trouble He will conceal me in His tent;  
In the secret place of His tent He will hide me;  
He will lift me up on a rock.  
And now my head will be lifted up above my enemies  
around me;  
And I will offer in His tent sacrifices with shouts of joy;  
I will sing, yes, I will sing praise to the LORD. (Psalm 27:1,2,  
5,6)**

As I read this text, the living Christ came into my room, and God did for me what he did for David. All I could do was weep. Little did I know that what I had read was prophetic of the following days when a number of us were hidden in a tent to escape the police. There in that tent we held all our meetings, and I heard shouts of praise and love like I had never heard before in worship. All of this came through meditation—because God did something in me. Each year just before we left Romania, we gathered as a team by a lake, and on each occasion a lightning storm passed over the lake. We stood like sentinels and watched the marvelous heavenly display of God's grace to us. We saw this as God saying he loved us, and he was sealing the work we had done.

So the psalmist knows that if life is going to come, it will not come from this earth, but from some other place. Life is to be found in heaven, thus he learned to keep his eyes fixed in the heavens. Let us also do as he did: Let us take our telescope at dawn to penetrate the heavens, and our magnifying glass at night so that the heavens can penetrate us.

This brings us to the third step which the psalmist took.

## III. I repeat my call with renewed confidence (119:149)

**Hear my voice according to Your loyal-love;  
Revive me, O LORD, according to Your judgments.**

### (a) The need of his call:

He has focused on God at dawn, and meditated on his word through the night. Morning comes, but there has been no answer to his petition. What does he do? He repeats his call! He has the same needs, thus he cries, "Hear me, revive me." He needs an attentive Lord who will bless him with eternal life. Notice too that he prays with the same intensity.

But there is a difference this time.

### (b) The basis of his call: Not obedience, but love

The call is the same, but it is made on a different basis. Obedi-

ence was the basis of his first call: "I will observe your statutes, I will keep your testimonies," said the psalmist. His nightly meditation, however, has given him a different perspective on God. Now he is asking for deliverance on the basis of God's love for him, not his own vow to obey God. He is asking for vindication because of God's love for him, not for what he will do for God. This new and stronger basis for his call for deliverance gives him renewed confidence, so much so that his petition is only half as long as the previous one. Now his cry to God is made solely on the basis of God's loyal-love. He does not have to say another word. This is what meditation has done for him.

There is no stronger motivation in the Christian life than God's love. When my children get into difficulty, I don't vindicate them so that they will obey me. I rescue them because I love them. Of course, that love will encourage and help them obey me, but this is not why I help them. So it is with God and us. He loves us! He loves us for no reason. And he saves us for no reason—not because he wants something, not because we will obey him in return, but because he loves us. Jacob in the OT is a good example of this love. Like us, he too wanted all the right things in life, but he went about it all the wrong way. He schemed to get God's blessing, destroying lives in the process. To show that he loved him, God sent him to work for an even better schemer than himself, Laban. After years of working for Uncle Laban Jacob was at last free to leave with his two wives and his herds. But the deck was stacked against him, so he embarked on a most elaborate scheme to make sure his herds were prolific. And his scheme worked. His herds multiplied, while Laban's dwindled. Then he had a dream, and in the dream God told him that *he* was the one who had multiplied his herds. It was not due to Jacob's great plan. The herds were a gift from God himself. Who knows, the psalmist might even have meditated during his night watch on this story of God's love for the schemer Jacob. And he was a new man when he faced heaven in the morning. He was ready to take God at his word—he believed that God loved him.

When at last we begin to comprehend the depth of God's unconditional love for us, it is then that we gain the same spiritual insight the psalmist gained which he explains here in the closing lines of this section.

#### IV. My eyes of faith see the answer to my call

(119:150-152)

**Near are those pursuing wickedness;  
They are far from Your law.  
Near are You, O LORD,  
And all Your commandments are truth.  
Of old I have known from your testimonies,  
That You have founded them forever.**

The writer sees three things here.

##### (a) That evil is near:

The approach of the evildoers intensifies his call. They are approaching, but as he is waiting by faith for God to answer he sees that his adversaries have no weight or stability; they are far from God's law. But God will answer his call. Senator Kennedy told his constituents last week how hard it was for him to participate in the Judge Thomas hearings because he knew that his private life had nullified any weight he had. Though he has seniority in the Senate, his words bear little weight because he has been living far from God's law in his own life. For the same reason the psalmist recognizes that the wicked have no power over him.

But not only are the wicked near, someone else is near.

##### (b) That God is near:

As he gazes East he sees that the answer to his call is coming. But it is more than an answer. It is a Person, the Lord himself, coming to meet him on the horizon. Notice that these words *East*

and *Lord* are repeated three times in the text. This is the whole point in this section: Life comes from the East (heaven) because that is where God lives. The psalmist sees the wicked coming up the mountain, but as he looks East he sees God coming at the same time. This gives him stability. Unlike the words of the wicked, what the Lord says has weight. All his commandments are true; this is where the weight lies. Like a glacier that presses down from above, dwarfing whoever dares to ascend it, so God's word presses down with irresistible weight and influence upon the evildoers who dare to try and ascend his mountain.

The incident in the Garden of Gethsemane is a good illustration of this. There, Jesus told his disciples, "Wait and watch." The end was coming; already the rabble were on their way up the mountain looking for him. Our Lord prayed and watched, but Peter slept. We pick up the story in John 18:

**Judas then, having received the Roman cohort [600 men], and officers from the chief priest and Pharisees, came there with lanterns and torches and weapons [a SWAT team with camouflage gear, helmets, boots and guns]. Jesus therefore, knowing all the things that were coming upon Him, went forth, and said to them, 'Whom do you seek?' They answered Him, 'Jesus the Nazarene.' He said to them, 'I am He.' And Judas also who was betraying Him, was standing with them. When therefore He said to them, 'I am He,' they drew back, and fell to the ground. (John 18:3-6)**

When the rabble arrived in the garden, rigged for battle and ready to take Jesus prisoner, he confronted them, dressed in only a robe. He asked them, "Whom do you seek?" and they replied, "Jesus." He responded with just two words in the Greek, "*ego eimi*"—"I am," the OT word, *Yahweh*. At the sound of his words, the entire cohort fell flat on the ground. His words were so weighty that 600 armed men collapsed to the earth at the sound of them!

So the psalmist saw that near were those who wanted to do him evil, but near also to him was God in his time of need.

He saw a third thing.

##### (c) That life comes from another time for all time

**Of old I have known from your testimonies,  
That you have founded them forever.**

Life comes from another place, not earth, but heaven; and it comes from another time. You will not find it in the present age; it was established long ago, in another time. And nothing new can overthrow it, thus it will remain for all time, into the new heavens and the new earth. Astronomers who gaze into the heavens today can at times see the birth of a star. Though the birth they are viewing occurred millions of light years ago, we are only now able to receive light from it. So it is with salvation. When you gaze into the heavens, an event that happened two thousand years ago—the cross and the resurrection of Jesus—impacts your life today. And what went on in the heavenlies ages ago cannot be thwarted; it will stand forever. Here the psalmist says that this has been his experience for a long time. He has known from of old that when his enemies attack him, God arrives at the same time and his foes have no influence over him. He has been through this cycle many times already. In like manner, we also must learn this over and over until our death. Someday perhaps the enemy of cancer, an accident, whatever, will overtake you. But as you see it coming, you will have learned not to gaze down the valley, but to gaze upwards into heaven. Perhaps like Jesus, you will know that your time is near. You will see that chariot coming to take you on your last chariot ride. But you will have fixed your hope upon God; you will have no fear of death.

In these verses therefore the psalmist teaches that through suffering he has learned the secret to prayer. Four steps are involved: 1) He calls out with his whole heart; 2) he waits in eager anticipation; 3) he calls again with renewed confidence; and 4) he

sees his answer. And it is more than an answer, it is a Person, the Lord himself, coming to meet him on the horizon.

Why is it so hard for us in the West to enter into this frame of mind? As I thought about this, I came up with three reasons. These come out of my own life, so if you are convicted by them, don't imagine that I observed them in you; these things come from within my own life.

## **V. Impediments from the West**

### **(a) The psalmist calls, we complain**

When we see the enemy ascending up the trail, we stay in the valley and complain in the darkness. Then we multiply our grumbling through that ugly little device called the telephone. We are forever looking for help in the wrong places. Last week the firestorm in the Oakland hills took place in conditions that were perfect for a 2,000-degree conflagration. People complained about the fire fighters, how the fire was fought, etc., but I think no human help, no matter how well organized, could have prevented that disaster. One woman shared in an interview that she found life in her swimming pool where she remained for the duration of the fire in her neighborhood. The reporter asked her what she thought about during all those hours, and her one-word reply was, "God." She thought about God. You won't find any help in the valley. Hang up the phone, go climb the mountain alone, and call out to God.

### **(b) The psalmist rises, we sleep**

Once we call out to God, we don't rise to focus our vision in the heavens. We're asleep, thus we fail to see what God is preparing. Be still, stay focused, and watch! I'm not referring only to physical sleep, as when Peter slept in the garden and was unprepared to face the enemy, but also spiritual sleep from over-activity. We are like Israel when God was preparing the greatest work ever for that nation. They were going to all their meetings, they were deeply involved in religious activity—they might even have had a lobbyist in Rome protesting the new tax—but they missed the Messiah. They failed to see what was happening in the heavens. But the Magi did not. They gazed into the Eastern heavens and saw a star, and that star brought them to Bethlehem. There they saw the most amazing miracle of history, and they stood in awe and wonder and praise of that Babe. Today we live in a culture that throws away their babies so that their parents can return to their idols. The true Christian, however, looks into the heavens and sees the Christchild, the greatest wonder of all.

### **(c) The psalmist anticipates we manipulate**

The psalmist anticipates the night, when the heavens can penetrate him, but we with our scientific minds focus not on the heavens, but only on what we can see on earth—the circumstance. Then as engineers, with our technological expertise, we arrogantly presume we have the know-how to fix what is wrong, so we take our great American anxious resolve and apply all our energies to repair what we perceive to be the problem. The word meditate is not even in our vocabulary. God needs to change us! How can he answer us when more often than not we're not ready to receive his answer? Following the resurrection of Jesus, when the new kingdom was ready to be introduced upon earth, our Lord did not tell the apostles to go and make it happen. No, he told them to wait: "And gathering them together, He commanded them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait for what the Father had promised" (Acts 1:4.) While they waited for the gift of the Holy Spirit therefore, they gathered together and with one mind devoted themselves to prayer. During this time they discovered their foundations were inadequate and they appointed the twelfth apostle to take the place of Judas. Then, once the founda-

tion was complete, the Spirit was given and they were ready to go out among the nations with the good news of the gospel. I think it is the same with us. We may feel ready to do a new work in our community, but we ourselves need our foundations strengthened, in our own lives, in our homes and in our churches, before God can do a new thing. That deep insight which we need in order to be changed is found through meditation on the word, as we allow the heavens to penetrate us.

Where is life found? In another time and another place, in the heavens from long ago and established for all time. So stop whatever you're doing this week and go climb that mountain and watch. As you do this, may you be filled with that same wonder and amazement that filled these saints of old.

*"If then you have been raised up with Christ, keep seeking the things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your mind on the things above, not on the things that are on earth. For you have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is our life, is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory." Amen. (Colossians 3:1-4)*

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## LAST LONGINGS

SERIES: PSALM 119—THE JOURNEY OF AN OLD SOUL

Catalog No. 808  
Psalm 119:169-176  
Ninth Message  
Brian Morgan  
November 3, 1991

The speaker at our annual Men's Retreat at Mount Hermon a few years ago was David Roper, a former member of Peninsula Bible Church's pastoral staff. On the first evening of the retreat he shared from his background as a Christian. He liked to think of his spiritual life as a three-stage process, he said. As a young man, he longed to be righteous. He wanted to make his father proud of him, to please his Heavenly Father, and to be accepted by people. Then, when he entered the ministry, he told us, he longed to be effective in that calling by living by righteous principles. Later in life, he became pastor of Cole Community Church in Boise. In that new setting he experienced a level of suffering he had never gone through before, especially rejection. Yet through the suffering that resulted from this rejection, he realized what he really longed for. "Now all I want in life is just to know God," he said. His reading began to change. Though he loved biblical exegesis and commentary, he started to read the Christian poets (like George MacDonald) and some of the medieval mystics. His addresses to the men that weekend were so gracious and fragrant that one of them said of him, "His spirit was so refreshing he could have read from the yellow pages in the phone book and he would have ministered to me!"

In a way, this describes the spirit of our psalmist now as we come to the end of our studies in Psalm 119. We have reached the letter *Tav*, the last letter in the Hebrew alphabet, around which, as we have already seen, the psalmist has built this acrostic of praise, petition and meditation. We have seen the writer undergo different perspectives and moods on his spiritual journey up the mountain to meet with God. Now, at the end, he reveals his last longings. I feel this would be a good spiritual exercise for us, too. What kind of longings will we have as we approach the end of our spiritual journey? How will we approach God? What kind of requests will we make of him? And how will we view ourselves in relation to a Holy God? Today we will learn the psalmist's final longings.

These verses covering this final letter break down into two sections: First, the psalmist longs to enter into the presence of the Lord that he might (a) be instructed, and (b) delivered; and secondly, he longs to praise God for this instruction and deliverance.

### I. Petitions to approach the Lord (119:169-170)

**Let my cry come before You, O LORD;  
According to Your word, give me understanding.  
Let my supplication come before You;  
According to Your promise, deliver me**

#### (a) His longing

Here the writer shares his last longings. He utters them, as we see in verse 169, "Before you"—literally, before the face of God. As he approaches the end of life, as he sees his world become dominated by economic oppression, political chaos and religious hypocrisy, his only desire is to be before God, in the presence of God himself.

#### (b) His demeanor

Next, his demeanor. As he utters the first two of the ten petitions he makes in this section it is obvious that he feels a deep sense of his own inadequacy as he approaches the end. In the OT, a "ringing cry" was usually used of a jubilant shout of praise to describe God's awe-inspiring acts of salvation. The only thing comparable in our culture would be the resounding shout from a stadium after someone has achieved excellence in sports. Here, the writer uses that same word to describe his intense cry of personal inadequacy. He is in deep trouble. Age does not make us mature or adequate; it merely increases our knowledge of our failings. But it also intensifies our prayer life.

Although his demeanor is intense, however, it is under the control of grace, as we see in verse 70: "Let my supplication come before You." "Supplication" comes from the Hebrew root which means grace, thus he is making an appeal for grace. There is no semblance of a demand being made here. We see this in the verb tense he uses. In Hebrew, when the letter "t" is placed before an imperative, it turns the imperative into what is called a jussive. Rather than saying, "Teach me!" he is saying, "May I be taught?" He acts with grace and politeness, not making demands. These things come with age. It is beautiful to watch a man like this in prayer. He still feels the same inadequacies he wrestled with when he was younger, his prayers still ring with intense cries, but now they are seasoned with beauty and grace. Why? It is because he has seen the King. He has been in the King's throne room often. He has seen his sovereignty in action, thus he knows that things are not out of control. When such a one bows down and pours out his heart to the Lord, he knows that one act from the sovereign God will turn his cry of distress into a shout of praise. This is the demeanor of the one who is mature in grace.

Now we come to his request.

#### (c) His request:

There are only two things he wants from God in life: "instruct me" and "deliver me." "Instruct me": cause me to understand, in other words. This request is made six times in the psalm, and it is uttered with more frequency as it draws to a close (see vs. 27, 34, 73, 125, 144, 169). As his journey draws to an end it is not accoutrements, but instruction that he most desires. Why is this? As he looks backwards, down the mountain which he has been ascending all his life, the thing that most satisfies him was not the journey, but coming to know God along the way.

And then the second part of his request: "deliver me." This verb "to deliver, strip away, snatch" was used by someone whose life was in extreme danger; someone who was facing an enemy he was no match for—he was almost in his enemy's clutches, ready to be eaten alive. This was the word David used in his conversation with Saul about his coming confrontation with the Philistine. First Samuel 17:35,37: "When a lion or a bear came and took a lamb from the flock, I went out af-

ter him and attacked him, and *snatched* it from his mouth...The LORD who *delivered* me from the paw of the lion and from the paw of the bear, He will *deliver* me from the hand of this Philistine." As we near the end of our spiritual life, like the psalmist, we will still need deliverance; the enemy will still be trying to snatch us and devour us. This is what the psalmist is concerned with.

Finally, note his confidence.

#### (d) His confidence

The petitions that he makes are "according to Your word" and "according to Your promise." God had promised deliverance. The psalmist was in the throne room, as it were, on God's invitation, and he had God's concerns in mind. This is what gives him confidence. As we journey up the mountain, experience helps us sort out which of our requests were petty and fleshly, and which were authentic—the majestic things God desires for each of us. The psalmist has studied God's word. He has seen what God wanted, and he wants the same. This is why he can pray with confidence.

Age brings with it a desire to live simply. The young are overly concerned with the things of earth, with doing everything just right—adjusting their circumstances, choosing the right schools, the right mate, the right business, etc. But when we begin our ascent up the mountain with God, our point of view changes radically. These petty things don't seem to matter very much anymore. The questions that most occupy our minds now are, Was God with me in everything I did? and, Did he teach me his statutes?

And age brings with it a calm, quiet confidence that replaces our youthful, hurried, anxious spirit. The psalmist is quietly confident, not because he feels adequate in himself—he still utters a ringing cry to God to aid him in all things—but because he is under the control of grace. He has seen the King, so he is able to pray with clearer understanding.

Next, he moves from petition to praise, from his request for instruction to praise for instruction.

## II. Longing to praise the Lord for instruction

(119:171-172)

**Let my lips overflow with praise;  
For You teach me Your statutes.  
Let my tongue sing of Your word;  
For all Your commandments are righteousness.**

#### (a) The reason for praise

First, he praises God for his faithfulness to instruct him: "For you teach me Your statutes." For the first time in the psalm he uses the indicative, not the imperative, indicating that the Lord had answered his prayer and had indeed instructed him. God had personally walked with him and spoken with him about his word. Now he desires to experience this again.

Second, he praises God for the righteous nature of his instruction: "All your commandments are righteousness." They are pure, in other words. This is an interesting way to put this; it is not what we would expect. We would have thought he would say, "All your commandments are *righteous*," but what he actually says is, "All your commandments are *righteousness*." He is not merely referring to what the right ways are, but to the even deeper issue of how to become righteous—how to choose the right One. He is talking about a Person, not a path. This is what we should teach our children—not merely what is the right thing to do, but how to appropriate the right One. How do we become righteous? It is by our

failure through weakness. When we pray with these sentiments in mind, the God of heaven will come down to earth and fill us with his life. He will take us down the right path. This is the way of righteousness.

And note how the psalmist expresses his praise.

#### (b) The expression of praise

First, it is spontaneous: "Let my lips overflow with praise." Like a spring that bubbles up to overflowing, the psalmist's praise cannot be contained. Praise is not imposed from without; rather it is something that bubbles forth from within when you realize that the all-powerful God has heard your prayer and has acted in your behalf. You cannot contain yourself; your lips overflow with praise for his graciousness and mercy.

And second, his praise is thoughtful: "Let my tongue sing of Your word." It is informed by the word of God. He gives expression to his praise in thoughtful songs that he sings to God. There is nothing more important to the human soul than to praise the Creator God. The soul knows no greater yearning. The psalmist's praise is informed by Scripture, and intensified by his personal experience, thus his praise is theology and history in song.

The highest mood of Hebrew religion was ecstatic joy. Hannah could not speak because of the pain of barrenness, but God heard her prayer and blessed her with a son, Samuel, who became the first prophet. She was so filled with joy that she wrote a song in praise of God, a song of creation, redemption and eschatology. She learned all of this through the birth of a baby. She foresaw that the Messianic King, the Judge of the whole world, would come from the line of Samuel. This was why she sang in praise of the God who had taught her these things:

**"Those who contend with the LORD will be shattered;  
Against them He will thunder in the heavens,  
The LORD will judge the ends of the earth;  
But He will give strength to His king,  
And will exalt the horn of His Messiah." (1 Samuel 2:10)**

We can't exist without praising God! Isn't this the element—true praise to God—that is missing in the church in America? This text from Psalm 119 identifies our dire need. Eugene Peterson wrote recently:

The churches and church leaders of America have run off to communicate and motivate. The communication conveys much accurate information, and the motivation enlists many in good causes. So why aren't things any better? Why isn't the Truth well known? Why isn't Righteousness flourishing? Why is the American church such an embarrassment? Why are its pastors so demoralized?...We have failed to read the last book of the Bible, worship. "I was in the Spirit on the Lord's Day." On the last page, we see John, momentarily distracted by the angel, commanded back to the center: "Worship God," he is told. Between that first and last page we have scene after scene of robust worship—the sights and sounds pulling together everything in heaven and earth, in creation and Cross, in history and salvation—all involving us in worship.

What an indictment of the evangelical movement today! We are so busy communicating and motivating, there is no time left to sing praises to God and worship him with awe for his majesty and splendor.

So the psalmist petitions God for instruction so that he can return praise to him, thus fulfilling the great longing of his soul.

Next, he moves to petition God for deliverance.

### III. Petitions for deliverance (119:173-174)

**Let Your hand be ready to help me;  
For Your precepts I have chosen.  
I long for Your salvation, O LORD:  
And Your law is my delight.**

He grounds his petitions on two things.

#### (a) Based on his singular hope

He is looking to God alone to be attentive to his plea, to offer his right hand of help. This language was usually used by the Davidic king who was promised by God to always have access to his right hand to help him. But when this psalm was written there was no king in Israel. Here it seems the psalmist is anticipating a day when another King will come to earth to make us all kings, giving us access to the right hand of God for help. In fact, the Hebrew text says: "I long for your Yeshua, O Lord." The ultimate longing of the psalmist is fulfilled in Jesus who was Lord!

Now the second ground of his petitions.

#### (b) Based on his commitment and affections

**For your precepts I have chosen.  
For your Law is my delight.**

He has chosen to select God's precepts over all others. And the result is, not only has his choice changed his thinking, it has even changed his affections: he "delights" in God's law. As a father I know from experience that it doesn't take much prompting for me to come to the aid of my children who love me. So the psalmist is saying, "I love you, O Lord. Please save me."

He has reached the end of his journey. He is on his knees, petitioning God to save him.

He concludes now with a hymn of praise to the God whom he loves and serves.

### IV. Longings to praise the Lord for deliverance

(119:175-176)

**Let my soul live that I may praise You;  
And let Your judgments help me.  
I have gone astray like a lost sheep, seek Your servant;  
For Your commandments I have not forgotten.**

#### (a) The purpose of deliverance: Praise to God

He prays that God will save him, not for his own sake, but that he might praise God.

I have often felt what a marvelous blessing it would be to have been present at the great moments in salvation history. Take the Exodus, for example. The nation of Israel was beside the Red Sea, with the Egyptian armies hard on their heels. But then God did for Moses and his people what he did in Genesis: He separated the waters so that Israel crossed on dry land, while the Egyptians were judged and drowned by the same waters. When they reached the safety of the other side, the Jews sang a song of praise to God (Exodus 15). And they sang of new theology, of something that had never happened before in salvation history: God was a Warrior who fought for his people! This deliverance at the Red Sea was the beginning of holy war in history, and this is why Moses sang, "The Lord is a warrior."

Here is another instance of salvation history. Remember the duet that was sung by Deborah and Barak following the

defeat of Sisera? Here was the great ruler of the Canaanites who oppressed Israel with his iron chariots, but to defeat him God chose a woman of faith to lead his army. And God fought for them. They cried out to heaven, and "the earth quaked, the heavens dripped." God answered. A flash flood roared down the Kishon Valley and the chariots of Sisera bogged down. The Canaanites were defeated and humiliated in the mud of the river Kishon. Later, Deborah and Barak broke into a song of praise to the God who had delivered them. I would love to have been present to hear that duet!

Also, I would have enjoyed the privilege of seeing David, alone in the cave of Adullam, singing his praise to God. He had acted foolishly when he sought the help of a pagan king, not God, to protect him. But this king sought to kill him, and David was forced to act like a madman in order to escape. Later, sitting in that cave, filled with remorse and shame for what he had done, David was delivered by God anyway, and he responded by writing the beautiful Psalm 34: "They looked to him and were radiant, this poor man cried and the Lord heard him, the angel of the Lord encamps around those who fear Him."

But the scene in salvation history I would love to see more than any other is the scene when another Son of Man ascended from the grave after the Father heard that poor man's cry. When he entered the heavenly Jerusalem there were tears in the Son's eyes as he sang to his Father, "I love you." I would love to see the eyes of this One, to watch his face and hands in worship, to hear his voice singing praise. I would love to see the Father rise from his throne and give it to his Son to rule the whole universe; to see him present to the Son all the saints from all time, from every tribe and tongue.

Our worship as Christians ought to be times of entering into such scenes as these in salvation history, for the chief end of man is to praise the Living God.

#### (b) The need for deliverance: His paradoxical nature

**I have gone astray like a lost sheep, seek Your servant;  
For Your commandments I have not forgotten.**

Have you ever thought of how you would make your final presentation to God concerning yourself at the end of your spiritual journey? The psalmist builds on the previous one hundred and seventy-five verses to say this one final thing to God: "I am a lost sheep!" He takes the most condemning verse addressed to Israel in the OT, Jeremiah 50:6, and applies it to himself: "My people have become lost sheep; their shepherds have led them astray. They have made them turn aside on the mountains; they have gone along from mountain to hill and have forgotten their resting place." Furthermore, he doesn't blame false teachers for leading him astray. "I have gone astray," he says, "I led myself astray. Please seek your servant." So his life ends in this tension: "I have a continual propensity to wander from you with my will, but I do have righteous longings. Would you seek me on that basis alone, on the basis that I have righteous longings? I can't do it. If I'm left to myself, I will act just as wickedly as Israel ever did in the past." The entire weight of the psalm is saying that praise is not praise unless it is coupled with humility! This is why I have not been able to enter into much of what is regarded as praise in this country. True praise must be tempered with true confession in order for it to be honorable to the Holy God. Most Christians repent for what they *do*, but this saint repents for who he *is*. The heavenly scene in the stage version of Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables* is an example of true praise, I believe. Fantine, who was loved and cared for by the hero, Jean Valjean, beckons to the old man to enter heaven. She sings:

*Come with me,  
Where chains will never bind you,  
All your grief, at last, behind you,  
Lord in Heaven  
Look down on him in mercy.*

Valjean responds:

*Forgive me all my trespasses,  
And take me to your glory.*

What a beautiful thing to see: The mature saint singing his praises to God, but clothed in humility with regard to himself. Such a one realizes that his worst enemy is not the world, the devil and the nations; it is himself.

So the psalmist ends his meditation of eight verses for every letter of the Hebrew alphabet by petitioning God for these two things: instruction and deliverance. And he is not seeking these for his own benefit, but that he might praise God. This is his deepest longing: Praise informed by God's word, and intensified by God's deeds.

## V. Implications in the New Covenant

### (a) All the psalmist's petitions are answered in Christ

The first thing we must realize is that every longing the psalmist expressed is fulfilled in Jesus Christ. His deepest longing is to be in the presence of God, and this prayer was answered in the cross of Christ, on that day when the veil in the temple was torn in two, with the Father beckoning us to enter. The writer to the Hebrews says: "We have confidence to enter the holy place by the blood of Jesus, so let us draw near with full assurance." This was how God answered the psalmist's prayer—and ours too. Jesus does not merely take us to the outer court, where we may petition from a distance to come before the throne. No, he takes us into the inner court, into the Holy of Holies itself. Do you long to be in the presence of God? Then enter through the Lord Jesus! You don't have to climb the mountain. The heavenly Jerusalem will descend "wherever two or three of you are gathered in My name," says Jesus.

Secondly, the psalmist sought instruction. God responded by sending not just a prophet, sage or king, but his Son. Jesus took on all of those roles and walked among his disciples in the flesh, teaching them everything he knew. And later, following his ascension, he sent his Holy Spirit to guide the apostles into all truth. Now his Spirit is poured out on the church to teach us from within. The word "overflow" in verse 171 is translated by the Greek word *rheo* in the Septuagint. This word is used only once in the NT, to refer to the Holy Spirit who overflows within those who believe in Jesus, guiding us to all truth. Remember the words of Jesus in John 7:38: "From his innermost being shall flow rivers of living water. But He spoke of the Spirit..."

Finally, describing himself as "a lost sheep, gone astray," the psalmist sought deliverance. And this is what God sent Jesus to do: To seek "the lost sheep of the house of Israel." This was what brought joy to the heart of the Shepherd, as Jesus said in the parable: "Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Does he not leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.'" (Luke 15:6.)

God has sought us in Christ. He has secured our redemp-

tion, and sealed us with the Spirit. He has pledged both Son and Spirit; there is nothing more to pledge. What more do we need? All of the psalmist's petitions, and all of our petitions, are answered in Christ.

What should our response be therefore?

### (b) Our praise should be greater

When Christians grasp these principles, they should sing out from hearts filled with wonder and praise at what God has wrought! Charles Wesley wrote a hymn "Where Shall My Wandering Soul Begin?" when he first came to faith. He followed this by writing seven thousand two hundred and seventy more hymns—songs that covered theology from creation to redemption so that even the newest believer could sing praises to God for the work of Christ. But I am sad to see that we have a mere sixteen of those hymns in our hymnal. I have spoken often of Traian Dorz, who wrote ten thousand hymns to Christ while he was in prison in Romania. Today the denomination that he led praises God through the hymns that this saint composed. What is the missing element in the church in America? Worship, says A.W. Tozer. Here is what he wrote: "Jean-Paul Sartre describes his turning to philosophy and hopelessness as a turning away from a secularized church. He says, 'I did not recognize in the fashionable God who was taught me, Him who was waiting for my soul. I needed a Creator; I was given a big businessman.'" Rather than issuing forth in praise and adoration of Christ, we market Christianity in the streets of America. This is blasphemous. The psalmist has shown us the way. Let us sing out in psalms and spiritual hymns, making melody in our hearts unto God for what he has done in Christ.

Lastly,

### (c) Our humility should be greater

The psalmist's last word is a confession that he is his own worst enemy: He is a wandering sheep. He has righteous longings, but he needs God's constant supervision or he will wander away. What humility he demonstrates! But we need to be humbler still, don't we? Jesus answered that prayer. He sought us and sealed us. But now our humility must come from the fact that we do not appropriate what he has done.

I would like to end this series by making a pastoral confession to you. These words of Martyn Lloyd-Jones express my sense of shame about my own life:

When I read the NT and think of the things that have been experienced by God's people in the past, I feel ashamed. It is all there for us in all its wealth and fullness and yet my life seems so weak and poor and barren. I have undergone considerable searching of spirit along that very line during the past few months. I praise God for the fact that I have had a clearer view than ever before of my own unworthiness and utter inadequacy. But still I rely over-much on myself. How foolish does sin make us. What utter fools we are.

Amen.

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