



‡ *Gimel*

MY ENEMY, MY FRIEND!

SERIES: PSALM 119—THE JOURNEY OF AN OLD SOUL

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Psalm 119:17-24
Second Message
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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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