



7 He

WINGS OF VULNERABILITY

SERIES: PSALM 119—THE JOURNEY OF AN OLD SOUL

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Psalm 119:33-40
Third Message
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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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