



▷ *Kaph*

LIFE AT ONE'S END

SERIES: PSALM 119—THE JOURNEY OF AN OLD SOUL

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Psalm 119:81-88

Fifth Message

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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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