



פ Qoph

EYES FIXED EAST

SERIES: PSALM 119—THE JOURNEY OF AN OLD SOUL

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Psalm 119:145-152
Eighth Message
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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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