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LAST LONGINGS

SERIES: PSALM 119—THE JOURNEY OF AN OLD SOUL

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Psalm 119:169-176
Ninth Message
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The speaker at our annual Men's Retreat at Mount Hermon a few years ago was David Roper, a former member of Peninsula Bible Church's pastoral staff. On the first evening of the retreat he shared from his background as a Christian. He liked to think of his spiritual life as a three-stage process, he said. As a young man, he longed to be righteous. He wanted to make his father proud of him, to please his Heavenly Father, and to be accepted by people. Then, when he entered the ministry, he told us, he longed to be effective in that calling by living by righteous principles. Later in life, he became pastor of Cole Community Church in Boise. In that new setting he experienced a level of suffering he had never gone through before, especially rejection. Yet through the suffering that resulted from this rejection, he realized what he really longed for. "Now all I want in life is just to know God," he said. His reading began to change. Though he loved biblical exegesis and commentary, he started to read the Christian poets (like George MacDonald) and some of the medieval mystics. His addresses to the men that weekend were so gracious and fragrant that one of them said of him, "His spirit was so refreshing he could have read from the yellow pages in the phone book and he would have ministered to me!"

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

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

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

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

(a) His longing

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

(b) His demeanor

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

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

Now we come to his request.

(c) His request:

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

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

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

Finally, note his confidence.

(d) His confidence

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

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

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

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

II. Longing to praise the Lord for instruction

(119:171-172)

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

(a) The reason for praise

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

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

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

And note how the psalmist expresses his praise.

(b) The expression of praise

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Next, he moves to petition God for deliverance.

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

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

He grounds his petitions on two things.

(a) Based on his singular hope

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

Now the second ground of his petitions.

(b) Based on his commitment and affections

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

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

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

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

IV. Longings to praise the Lord for deliverance

(119:175-176)

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

(a) The purpose of deliverance: Praise to God

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

(b) The need for deliverance: His paradoxical nature

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

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

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

Valjean responds:

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

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

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

V. Implications in the New Covenant

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

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

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

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

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

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

What should our response be therefore?

(b) Our praise should be greater

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

Lastly,

(c) Our humility should be greater

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

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

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

Amen.

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