

THE WORD OF GOD
Notes from a Series of
Bible Studies on
Psalm 119

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THE WORD OF GOD

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INTRODUCTION

This series of devotional studies in *Psalms 119* brings out key points from each stanza. There are points of encouragement, warning, comfort and direction. These should be devotional studies that build up our Christian lives.

The overall theme of *Psalms 119* is the Psalmist's love, respect and admiration for the Word of the Lord. There is something very special about being a Word-based church. This is a key issue for the Church today.

'You have given a banner to those who fear You, that it may be displayed because of the truth. Selah' Psalm 60.4.

While there is no actual name given to the writer of this psalm, traditionally it has been attributed to David. This is the position of historic commentators, including C H Spurgeon.

Bibliographical notes

I have quoted extensively from C H Spurgeon's helpful three-volume work, *The Treasury of David: Classic Reflections on the Wisdom of the Psalms* published by Evangelical Press. The quotes from Puritan writers are also from this source.

Other quotations are from Matthew Henry's *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, widely available; and John Calvin's *Commentary on the Psalms* published by Banner of Truth.

1. THE PATHWAY TO SPIRITUAL BLESSING

Psalm 119.1-8

David starts the first stanza by making a categorical statement that sets the tone for the remainder of the psalm:

‘Blessed are the undefiled in the way, who walk in the law of the Lord! Blessed are those who keep His testimonies, who seek Him with the whole heart. They also do no iniquity; they walk in His ways’ verses 1-3.

Here David is writing about believers whose whole being – mind, heart and will – are submitted to God’s Word. He describes such as being blessed. ‘Blessed’ means more than being happy; it means being ‘divinely favoured’. To be blessed is to be living our lives under the favour of God, so even the deepest trial works for our good. When we experience the discipline of God, the Word assures us that those He loves He chastens for blessing (*Hebrews 12.6*). Even in bereavement, walking in His Word is the surest way to find comfort and consolation for blessing. The Christian who loves, respects and follows the Word of the Lord will know spiritual blessing, whatever.

Standard

At the outset David says that spiritual blessing from the Lord comes through adherence to His Word. He teaches that walking in the law of the Lord is the greatest help towards leading an undefiled godly life. It is not about reading ‘How to’ self-help books; it simply means by faith obeying the Word of the Lord. This is the standard.

To stand undefiled in the presence of God is to be before Him clothed in the imputed righteousness of Christ. To live undefiled in the way is to walk according to the imparted righteousness of Christ

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in the new nature. The evidence of this is a life walked out according to the law of the Lord in wholeheartedness. His commandments then become our happy choice.¹ We understand godliness is the key to spiritual blessing. To walk outwardly as undefiled and in sincerity must mean our inner being embraces His testimonies.

'I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will keep My judgments and do them' Ezekiel 36.27.

God's testimonies refers to His Word of divine instruction for our lives and for our blessing.

'Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path' Psalm 119.105.

It is through the Word that we are guided to Christ, walking in the law of Christ – His testimonies, His way. David would still teach the same today because He looked by faith to Christ. We have the full revelation. For us to follow this teaching is to follow the example of Christ, the living Word of God.

'And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us' John 1.14.

In the fuller revelation of both Old and New Testaments, we find all we need to know spiritually about Christ.

'Jesus answered and said to him, "If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word; and My Father will love him, and We will come to him and make Our home with him"' John 14.23.

It is a sin-avoidance lifestyle, by obeying the Word of the Lord wholeheartedly for the fruit of spiritual blessing.

Maybe we read these verses and feel overwhelmed, especially if this week has proved difficult for witness. Nevertheless the standard of holiness remains the same, unaltered from the day David wrote these

¹ See hymn by Joseph Swain (1761-96) 'Come, ye souls, by sin afflicted'

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words. While there is no such thing as sinless perfection this side of the grave, there remain God's pure standard. To be undefiled is to exercise ourselves unto godliness (*1 Timothy 4.7*). It means to decide for Christ's sake and His Word. So, for example, it affects our choice of DVDs, song and music downloads, and the books we read. If we knowingly and wilfully sit down and watch immoral films or 'soaps', we defile ourselves and lose our blessedness.

C H Spurgeon, in his *Treasury of David*, helpfully links this verse in *Psalms 119* with the instruction of James to keep ourselves unspotted from the world (*James 1.27*).

'David speaks of a high degree of blessedness here. (He sets a high standard for us.) Doubtless the more complete our sanctification the more intense our spiritual blessedness! Christ is our way, and we are not only alive in Christ, but we are to live in Christ. The sorrow is that we bespatter His holy way with our selfishness, self-exaltation, wilfulness, and carnality. So we miss a great measure of the blessedness which is in Him as our way. A believer who errs is still saved, but the joy of their salvation is not experienced by them. They are rescued but not enriched; greatly borne with but not greatly blessed.'

The sad effect of worldly Christianity is spiritual stagnation of the soul. We lose out on the blessing. The lovers of God's Word and way are blessed spiritually. This is the main principle David teaches us here.

But now we come to the reality of our own experience and find words for our comfort and encouragement.

Supplication

'You have commanded us to keep Your precepts diligently. Oh, that my ways were directed to keep Your statutes! Then I would not be ashamed, when I look into all Your commandments. I will

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praise You with uprightness of heart, when I learn Your righteous judgments' verses 4-7.

Here we have the heartfelt cry of David. He sees the standard and he examines his own life against it and then prays.

It is a cry of faith and worship to the sovereign lordship of God over his life: 'Give me a deeper love for Your Word.'

It is a cry of heartfelt dependence upon the Lord: 'Direct my life to Your Word, Lord.'

This is about obedience to and faith in God's way and Word. It is about respecting God's wisdom as right for us. Note '*Your precepts*', '*Your statutes*', '*Your commandments*', '*Your righteous judgment*.' David is saying: 'Lord, You have set Your standard for blessing, but I cannot reach it without Your help! Lord, help me to live my life according to the direction of Your Word. My life is hopeless without you.'

This is to live according to the new nature directed by the Word, not the old nature directed by the world. 'Oh that I might live according to your Word in sincerity, as an open book, with a clear conscience – reaching Your standard; that I might look in the mirror of all Your commandments and not be ashamed because I am living in Christ.'

When my life is directed by the Lord I will see and understand more about the righteous providences of God. Instead of quarrelling with God about His providences we praise Him and say, 'Your will be done. God is good.' Sincerity and uprightness of heart release us to praise the Lord wholeheartedly. There is no greater blessing on earth.

This is the motive of David's supplication: 'Let me live right, and praise right, and enter into richer blessing.'

Submission

'I will keep your statutes; Oh, do not forsake me utterly' verse 8.

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Here David makes his life objective statement. He makes a consecration statement by faith: ‘This is the watchword of my life. I will live in submission to God’s Word.’ He lives in obedience by faith, but he does so conscious of his own weakness. ‘If God should leave me to myself, I am done for.’

It is evident that David writes as a man who has had problems with his own lifestyle and has learned from it. He knows what is right; he sees the standard; he sees the blessing of the Word; and he knows the pathway to blessing. At the same time he realises his utter dependence upon the Lord. Resolution is good – God’s help is vital.

We conclude with a quote from John Owen. In his work *The Glory of Christ*² he deals with this subject.

‘Those who are aware of a weakening of their experience of grace and blessing must themselves redouble their efforts in the duties of mortification and spiritual obedience. But take care that what you do is what God has appointed, and that how you do it is guided and directed by Scripture. Examples of such duties are the reading and hearing of the Word, fervent prayer and diligently guarding against all temptations to sin.

‘There should be a special effort to keep the mind spiritual and heavenly. This will demand holy earnestness and a strong resistance to any other attitude of mind. But do not try these things in your own strength. The Holy Spirit rejects self-confidence and self-sufficiency. Self-confidence and self-sufficiency ignore Christ Who alone is the Lord Who heals us.

‘Another evil arises from self-confidence when we do religious duties to build up merit or favour with God. No: what we do must be done by faith. Faith must seek Christ’s help and His grace both for mortification and obedience.’

² *The Glory of Christ: His Office and Grace*, John Owen, Christian Focus Publications, 2015

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Conclusion

There are three points from the first stanza:

- the standard of God's Word;
- supplication to follow God's Word; and
- submission to obey God's Word.

2. CHARACTERISTICS OF CHRISTIAN CONSISTENCY

Psalm 119.9-16

‘How can a young man cleanse his way? By taking heed according to Your word’ verse 9.

In this verse David provides for us a vital question answered with a clear reply. There is no greater or better question for a young person to ask themselves than this one. The immediate answer given confirms to us the vital importance of the role of the Word of God in our lives. Jesus said, *‘You are already clean because of the word which I have spoken to you’ (John 15.3).*

Here David remembers when he was awakened to his unclean condition by nature as a young man. In the original, the word was used to describe being stuck in the deep, embedded track of a cartwheel. David has in mind this idea of being stuck in a rut. How can I get out of this rut I am embedded in? How did he, as a young man, cleanse his way? What was done about his defiled condition? It is the same today. A young man under conviction of sin, aware of his condition by nature, looks to the future. He desires a different lifestyle to that he has been used to, but how to achieve this? He asks the most important question a man can ask himself. David gives the perfect answer.

His first priority is to take the Word of the Lord seriously, to take heed of what God is saying to him in it. The answer to the cleansing is found in Christ and in His way. It is through the Word that we find Christ. It is through the Word that we find that Christ provides for us the one and only way of cleansing. So one of the first signs of true conversion is a hunger for the Word, a desire to read it, to heed it and live by it.

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Here we are encouraged by the Psalmist to remember the importance of encouraging the young in the Word. There is a key New Testament reference for us to consider found in *2 Timothy 3.14-17* written to Timothy, a young man:

‘But you must continue in the things which you have learned and been assured of, knowing from whom you have learned them, and that from childhood you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work.’

The first characteristic of Christian consistency is **a sincere desire to be purified**, and that sincere desire must lead us to the serious and committed heeding to God’s Word.

‘With my whole heart I have sought You; Oh, let me not wander from Your commandments!’ verse 10.

In this verse we have an encouraging testimony. With an undivided heart David has sought the Lord. Notice how David is very definite about his statement. Not ‘with my whole heart I would’ – but ‘I have’. This undivided heart leads him to desire an undivided walk. David fears having his heart in two camps. His great desire and ambition is to follow in the commandments of God, and this he knows requires direction. The way of the Lord is narrow; it is up and down; it is sometimes strewn with obstacles, but it is straight! David fears wandering from the narrow way. He knows every wandering step hinders him from the way.

Spurgeon said: ‘He had neither time nor will to be a wanderer.’ Satan is always trying to get us to wander about. He did it successfully with Children of Israel.

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‘Thus says the Lord to this people: “Thus they have loved to wander; they have not restrained their feet. Therefore the Lord does not accept them; He will remember their iniquity now, and punish their sins”’ Jeremiah 14.10.

Satan does it today when he distracts churches to focus on anything but the Gospel – to become a wandering church.

The second characteristic of Christian consistency is **an undivided heart** leading to an undivided walk.

‘Your word I have hidden in my heart, that I might not sin against You’ verse 11.

In this verse we are shown where the best abiding place of the Word really is – from the mind to the heart. The world has its treasure without, like the lady who once brought her huge and beautiful family Bible for me to look at. She admired it as a book but had not read it. The believer has his treasure within, engraved on the heart. When the Word becomes part of our inner being, our whole life is moulded by it. The Word in the heart is the most effective resistance to sin.

‘Do not withhold Your tender mercies from me, O Lord; let Your lovingkindness and Your truth continually preserve me’ Psalm 40.11.

Note the teaching of Paul on this:

‘To them God willed to make known what are the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles: which is Christ in you, the hope of glory’ Colossians 1.27.

‘Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord’ Colossians 3.16.

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and that of Peter:

‘Wives, likewise, be submissive to your own husbands, that even if some do not obey the word, they, without a word, may be won by the conduct of their wives, when they observe your chaste conduct accompanied by fear. Do not let your adornment be merely outward—arranging the hair, wearing gold, or putting on fine apparel—rather let it be the hidden person of the heart, with the incorruptible beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is very precious in the sight of God’ 1 Peter 3.1-4.

and of Jeremiah:

‘O Lord, You know; remember me and visit me, and take vengeance for me on my persecutors. In Your enduring patience, do not take me away. Know that for Your sake I have suffered rebuke. Your words were found, and I ate them, and Your word was to me the joy and rejoicing of my heart; for I am called by Your name, O Lord God of hosts’ Jeremiah 15.15-16.

When the Word becomes part of our inner being we carry with us a resource given to us from God, a resource that can be used when we are in the most difficult and most unlikely places.

The third characteristic of Christian consistency is **the Word abiding in the heart**, resisting sin.

‘Blessed are You, O Lord! Teach me Your statutes’ verse 12.

Adoration of the Lord leads to a greater appetite to know more about the Lord – there is a link. The more we admire the Lord, the more we want to learn about the Lord, and the more we will be praising the Lord. David seems as if he is overwhelmed with the wonder of the Word and breaks forth in praise to the Lord. As he praises, he comes before the Lord as a student – *‘Teach me Your statutes’*. He has a constant desire to grow. Even Paul, the greatest theological mind the

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world has ever known apart from Christ, said: *'That I may know Him'* (Philippians 3.10).

Notice the relationship of David with the Lord, and the submissive characteristic of his testimony. Primarily the text is about directing his mind, his will and his actions towards the Lord. It is mainly about the Lord.

David understands where the source of his knowledge is – the Lord as revealed in His Word to David. When you purchase a piece of equipment it should come with a manual. Here is a very important point to remember. The Word of the Lord is the teaching Manual of our lives.

Notice David's dependence upon it. 'Teach me Your statutes. I want Your blessedness, Lord.'

The fourth characteristic is **adoration of the Lord**, which leads to an appetite to know more about the Lord.

'With my lips I have declared all the judgments of Your mouth'
verse 13.

In this verse we are given the characteristic of an unashamed, undiluted ministry. David considers his own personal ministry and is able to declare he has held nothing back from the people. He has declared the judgments of the Lord that are revealed in His Word. There are hidden judgments that cannot be declared:

'Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and His ways past finding out!' Romans 11.33.

But there are revealed judgments than can be declared. There is to be a commitment not to skip over the difficult verses revealing God's judgments.

'For we cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard' Acts 4.20.

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The fifth characteristic of Christian consistency is **an unashamed, undiluted ministry**.

'I have rejoiced in the way of Your testimonies, as much as in all riches' verse 14.

This is truly an amazing testimony of commitment to the way and Word of the Lord. Sometimes it is reported that someone has won over £100,000,000.00 on the lottery. David would say, 'So what?' Here the Psalmist is rejoicing in the way of the Lord's testimonies, rejoicing in the living out of the Word.

It is thought that David wrote this psalm towards the end of his life in readiness for the reign of Solomon. If this is so David, inspired by the Spirit, wrote this at a time when he was extremely wealthy materially. He considered this reality, then considered the Lord's dealings with him in His way according to His Word. Despite all the various experiences of life in prosperity or adversity David said – 'I rejoice most of all in what I have been taught in the way of the Lord's testimonies. David said, 'When all is done and said, my spiritual growth is more important than material things.'

The sixth characteristic of Christian consistency is **rejoicing in the way of the Lord's testimonies**, understanding that the value of the Lord's dealings with us through His Word is priceless.

'I will meditate on Your precepts, and contemplate Your ways. I will delight myself in Your statutes; I will not forget Your word' verses 15-16.

The stanza finishes with four statements of Christian consistency in the mind. There are many distractions now so that the exercise of using the mind to consider the Word is at a low ebb. Here David, probably in older years, writing as King of Israel, takes time out to think about the Lord and His Word. Note he has been declaring what he has done – 'I have sought You', 'Your Word I have hidden in my heart',

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'I have declared all the judgments of Your mouth', 'I have rejoiced in the way of Your testimonies'. Now he commits to the ministry of the mind – *'meditate', 'contemplate', 'delight myself', and 'I will not forget'*.

From this we learn the importance of drinking in before we can pour out.

'Open my eyes, that I may see wondrous things from Your law'
Psalm 119.18.

The seventh and eighth characteristics of Christian consistency are **meditating and delighting in the Word of God.**

3. PRAYING AS A PILGRIM AND A STRANGER IN THE EARTH

Psalm 119.17-24

‘Deal bountifully with Your servant, that I may live and keep Your word’ verse 17.

The Psalmist has a high view of both the generosity and the ability of the Lord’s bountiful provision. The expression of faith in this prayer is directed to the One Who alone has the divine resource to provide. For a New Testament believer this prayer means to ask the Lord to deal with them according to their standing in Christ: ‘Deal with me according to grace. Bestow upon me sufficient grace to serve You according to Your Word.’

This prayer of faith has a pure and God-glorifying objective – that I might live and serve in obedience. Only through divine grace can we live faithfully and show consistent obedience to His commandments. We can only serve Him aright as He gives us grace to serve Him so. We work because He first works in us. Have the highest respect for God’s wise and understanding provision for His people. It is a provision for service.

I would like to draw your attention to what the Word says about the bountiful, abundant provision of the Lord.

a. Abundant attributes of God

‘And the Lord passed before him and proclaimed, “The Lord, the Lord God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abounding in goodness and truth”’ Exodus 34.6.

b. Abundant satisfaction from the Lord

‘They are abundantly satisfied with the fullness of Your house, and You give them drink from the river of Your pleasures’ Psalm 36.8.

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c. Abundant life in Christ

'The thief does not come except to steal, and to kill, and to destroy. I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly' John 10.10.

d. Abundant riches in Christ

'For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, that you through His poverty might become rich' 2 Corinthians 8.9.

e. Abundant power in Christ

'Now to Him who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us' Ephesians 3.20.

f. Abundant mercy in Christ

'Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His abundant mercy has begotten us again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead' 1 Peter 1.3.

g. Abundant provision in Christ

'And my God shall supply all your need according to His riches in glory by Christ Jesus' Philippians 4.19.

h. Abundant entrance into Glory

'...for so an entrance will be supplied to you abundantly into the everlasting kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ' 2 Peter 1.11.

We need to respect and be encouraged regarding the bountiful riches of the Lord. Such assurance in them will enable us to pray by faith to receive of them from the Lord and to serve Him.

Praying as a Pilgrim and a Stranger in the Earth

*‘Open my eyes, that I may see wondrous things from Your law’
verse 18.*

By nature we are blind to the beauty of God’s Word. A famous man once visited a well-known art gallery showing some beautiful pictures of creation. Afterwards he said to the manager, ‘I don’t think much of your pictures; I couldn’t see anything in them.’ ‘Sir,’ he replied; ‘It was not the pictures which were on trial, but your ability to appreciate them.’

The Psalmist believes there are wonderful truths to be found, but he needs the Holy Spirit to help him find them. What he is actually asking is that the Holy Spirit work through his faculties to enable him to see for himself. C H Spurgeon puts it in *The Treasury of David* – ‘The Spirit strengthens our faculties to receive more truth.’

This raises an important point in our understanding of how we grow spiritually. The Holy Spirit works through our human faculties, enabling us to understand. We are not mindless robots. ‘*Open my eyes*’ is another way of saying, ‘Lord, may the Holy Spirit so work in me to enable me to understand.’ The Holy Spirit works through the mind by giving us the ability to understand truth and receive it by faith in our heart.

Notice also how David is not asking for extra revelation but a deeper understanding of God’s revelation. Today many are claiming extra revelation, a word from the Lord or seeking a sign, but they neglect God’s Word. We already have God’s final revelation in His Word; we need to behold and appreciate what is already there. Spurgeon said: ‘The Bible is a wonderland, a wonderland of wisdom and guidance, a treasury of truth.’

Seeing truth in a clearer light, we realise it has not been added to, adapted or changed for us – we are changed by truth. Our spiritual eyes are opened to wondrous truth that is already there waiting to be discovered. It is not new truth! Rather like the Hubble Telescope,

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which is taking in information which is new to us, but is in fact discovering what is already there but which had not been seen to date.

We have more of the Word than David had in his day, and yet what he did have he believed was wonderful. But this prayer of David implies a conscious darkness spiritually. He realised his spiritual life could be better; he understood that for his spiritual life to improve it must be through the Spirit and the Word. He understood that as a believer, the law of God contained in the Word had vital spiritual truths for the heart which were to be understood with the help of the Spirit. Note how in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus taught the law (*Matthew 5-7*).

'I am a stranger in the earth; do not hide Your commandments from me' verse 19.

We are either a stranger in the world and a friend of God, or a stranger to God and a friend of the world. Our problem at times is that we fear being both a stranger to the world and to God and try to be friendly with both. Yet believers are described as pilgrims and strangers in this world with different interests and tastes (*Hebrews 11.13*). We may feel to be a stranger in the workplace; we do not know who are the 'movers and the shakers' in the world, eg. famous actors, song-writers, pop stars or comedians. We are not worldly wise and cannot join in the 'chit chat'.

*'We've no abiding city here;'
This may distress the worldling's mind;
But should not cost the saint a tear,
Who hopes a better rest to find.*

Thomas Kelly, 1769-1855

We are living our life according to a different Manual. Here David is seeking the Word as a guide.

'Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path' Psalm 119.105.

Praying as a Pilgrim and a Stranger in the Earth

David does not want to be stuck in no man's land. He is now as a stranger to the way of the world. He does not want to be a stranger to the way of the Word, so he prays to the One Who knows the way. It is rather like stepping off a train and losing our bearings. We need to ask someone who knows the way to our destination. There is no point asking a stranger to the area.

'My soul breaks with longing for Your judgments at all times'
verse 20.

Spurgeon has a very profound comment on this verse. He says, 'Longing is the soul of praying.' Here we have an expression of real depth indicating a constant, exhausting, intense desire to know more. This is one of the examples of a man who knew there was much, much more to find out. His intense longing to learn brought forth fruitful, amazing, Christ-centred writings, the ultimate fruit of longing. In a way there is continual longing to know more in the Christian life. Remember even Paul said, *'That I may know Him'* (Philippians 3.10).

'You rebuke the proud—the cursed, who stray from Your commandments' verse 21.

David is worshipping God for the manner in which He maintains His justice. Maybe here David has in mind God's judgments that He had been longing for in the context of His justice. David considered the proud actions of the wicked, and assured himself that God was dealing in His way.

There is a solemn warning couched in this verse. Pride is a curse. Pride always means departure from Lord. David looked back over history, reminding himself of the way that God deals with pride – with the fallen angels, the Children of Israel in the wilderness, and even the Lord's dealing with him when he had wandered.

Pride is probably the greatest problem that we have to battle with. It manifests itself in so many ways. Whenever we walk in the pathway

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of pride we directly stray from the commandments of the Lord. Even when we are serving the Lord, if that service is motivated by pride then it cannot be well-pleasing to God.

'Remove from me reproach and contempt, for I have kept Your testimonies' verse 22.

Here David was struggling with rejection in his life. He was feeling low spiritually and consumed with sorrow. Rejection for Christ's sake can be a very painful experience. To be despised for Christ's sake hurts. But the question for us in the here-and-now is, how should we respond to this experience? How can the pain of inevitable reproach or rejection by the world be removed, freeing us from its bondage?

'You have heard that it was said, "You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy." But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you' Matthew 5.43-44.

'For to this you were called, because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that you should follow His steps: who committed no sin, nor was deceit found in His mouth; who, when He was reviled, did not revile in return; when He suffered, He did not threaten, but committed Himself to Him who judges righteously' 1 Peter 2.21-23.

The answer to the problem of reproach is to commit it to the Lord; pray for your persecutors; press on in the way.

'Princes also sit and speak against me, but Your servant meditates on Your statutes. Your testimonies also are my delight and my counsellors' verses 23-24.

David at one time had Saul and his princes pursuing him. At another his son Absalom and his princes attacked him. What was David's greatest comfort and consolation? Sympathy? The support of friends? No; the Word of God. Listening to his friends and advisors obviously

Praying as a Pilgrim and a Stranger in the Earth

helped, but the greatest consolation was when he was on his own with the Word. It is much safer to delight in the Word than to delight in sympathy. Respect the Word as your personal counselling Manual of Life.

4. DOWNCAST DAVID LIFTED UP BY THE DIVINE WORD

Psalm 119.25-32

'My soul clings to the dust; revive me according to Your Word'
verse 25.

The cause of David's grief was a deep sense of being earthbound in his natural leaning and thinking. This had brought him into a state of felt spiritual deadness. He was a saved person but he did not feel like it. He was struggling in his soul. It is an inner battle we all face. We have a tendency to gravitate towards worldliness. With so many media distractions today Christians spend a lot of time clinging to the dust. We must take care what we listen to, read or watch.

'My soul clings' expresses an experience in which David felt to be joined to, adhered to or stuck to the earth; he was earthbound. David felt clogged up with earthly distractions. If we give in to earthbound desires, our spiritual lives clog up like a blocked shower head; no water is getting through because our mind is clogged up with worldly thoughts. Maybe you are tired and so relax, watch a film and then find when you go to bed you cannot pray. The reason may be because of what you have filled your mind with.

David expresses his situation as 'clinging to the dust', another way of saying he was clinging to the flesh. The flesh has its power source in the father of lies, the prince of the dust, Satan. God's curse upon Satan, depicted as a serpent, was to crawl through the dust of the earth – dust bound. David understood the dangerous nature of gravitating towards the flesh. The result is felt deadness of soul. Note that David was not content to drift along or away in such a condition. He mourned his state. C H Spurgeon explains: 'To kill these tendencies of ours to become earthbound, God makes us mourn them.'

The Word of God

‘And seeing the multitudes, He went up on a mountain, and when He was seated His disciples came to Him. Then He opened His mouth and taught them, saying: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth”’ Matthew 5.1-5.

Notice how David desired the age-old medicine, the proven method of Word-and-Spirit revival. He could have asked for comfort and sympathy, but he knew that would just confirm him in his condition. No; what he needed was nothing less than a divine intervention of God in and through His Word and Spirit. David begged the Lord to act according to His regular method, according to His time-honoured way. He knew all spiritual blessing stems from the quickening root. In other words the Spirit must give life.

Just a word here about the nature of revival. David wanted a Word-inspired revival in his heart.

*Make the Book live to me, O Lord,
Show me Yourself within Your Word,
Show me myself and show me my Saviour
And make the Book live to me.*

R Hudson Pope, 1879-1967

To illustrate what I mean, a newsletter from India described a time of reawakening like this: ‘We are having a re-Bible here!’ Note also the revival in Nehemiah’s day was through the preaching of the Word under the influence of the Holy Spirit (see *Nehemiah* 8).

‘I have declared my ways and You answered me; teach me Your statutes’ verse 26.

Here we have David’s testimony of confession. He had confessed his ways before the Lord.

Downcast David Lifted up by the Divine Word

I acknowledged my sin to You, and my iniquity I have not hidden. I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the Lord," and You forgave the iniquity of my sin. Selah' Psalm 32.5.

'For I will declare my iniquity; I will be in anguish over my sin' Psalm 38.18.

'For I acknowledge my transgressions, and my sin is always before me' Psalm 51.3.

'He who covers his sins will not prosper, but whoever confesses and forsakes them will have mercy' Proverbs 28.13.

He has told the Lord about the battle with the world, his felt weakness and deadness, and his longing to be different. He has poured out to the Lord about the enemy of his soul, Satan; he has recounted to the Lord his pathway. Note that confession is not in order to let the Lord know our sins – He already knows! But it is that we may sincerely know them.

But notice how it was that David by faith made confession of his sin and the battle he had with it. Then the Lord answered him. How was David so sure the Lord answered him? Because he prayed by faith to no one else but the Lord. David knew the Lord must be faithful to His Word. He was the God Who could not lie.

Secondly, David felt liberated in his heart by confession. He had cast all his burden upon the Lord. Notice how sincere confession before the Lord brings with it a teachable spirit – *'Teach me your statutes'*. Here is a great test of our spiritual state – how teachable are we?

'Good and upright is the Lord; therefore He teaches sinners in the way. The humble He guides in justice, and the humble He teaches His way' Psalm 25.8-9.

The Word of God

'Make me understand the way of Your precepts; so shall I meditate on Your wonderful works' verse 27.

Here David is praying that his knowledge of God's statutes would have a practical fruit in his walk. Once again we see the humble spirit of this man of God – 'revive me', 'teach me', 'make me'. 'Make me understand the way; give me a sight of the practical meaning of God's Word.' Spurgeon said: 'God would have us follow Him with our eyes open to His way.'

David had confessed his way; now he desired to know no other way but the Lord's. The revival of his heart had the fruit of admiration of the Lord, His Word and His way. Only the Lord could revive him – only the Lord had the power and the wisdom to deal with his case. In a way this attitude is very similar to that of the Psalmist in *Psalm 107*. We meditate on the Lord's work with amazement.

'Oh, that men would give thanks to the Lord for His goodness, and for His wonderful works to the children of men!' Psalm 107.8.

Note also the wisdom in the Lord's wonderful works.

'My soul melts from heaviness; strengthen me according to Your Word' verse 28.

Here again David was speaking very honestly about the way ahead. 'Am I going to make the same errors? How can I cope with the pressure and stress of the daily battle with the flesh?' David was melted with a fresh sense of heaviness as he contemplated the future. This expression means he is dropping away through weariness. It is better to be melted by our own felt weakness than to go forward in an independent spirit of self-confidence. Read *Mark 14.32-42* for our Lord's remarkable example in a perfect manner of felt heaviness when contemplating the future.

Once again David comes back to the medicine, support and therapy of the Word and Spirit. The strength David desired is undoubtedly

Downcast David Lifted up by the Divine Word

spiritual. Here is a salutary lesson for us today. We live in a day when churches resort to other measures in worship and counselling to be lifted up. David looked to the Word for wisdom and strength.

'Remove from me the way of lying, and grant me Your law graciously' verse 29.

Every believer has a besetting sin against which they must daily do battle. David's problem was lying! David had practised deceit for his own preservation when parading himself as a madman before the Phillistines (*1 Samuel 21.10-15*). He had also practised lying and deceit in his dealings with Uriah the husband of Bathsheba (*2 Samuel 11*).

We sometimes limit lying to a false word or statement, but the problem of lying is much broader than this. It involves the lifestyle of hypocrisy, self-righteousness, formalism and a judgmental spirit.

Here David's prayer is to understand, receive and know God's law graciously. Understanding the law in a legalistic spirit had brought him into the way of hypocrisy and lying. It had brought with it hardness of heart, a deadness of spirit and horizontal rather than vertical thinking.

This was the heart of the problem with his fall. His life was a lie, yet outwardly he maintained uprightness. When Nathan told him the parable of the rich man taking the poor man's lamb, David said, 'This man shall surely die!' David went straight into legalistic judgment. Nathan had to tell him, 'You are the man, David!' (See *2 Samuel 12*.)

Here David prayed that the law would enter his heart and be applied graciously in his witness and experience. He now understood that legalism goes with hypocrisy; grace goes with sincerity. This is the right approach to law.

The Word of God

'I have chosen the way of truth; Your judgments I have laid before me' verse 30.

To make the right choice we need to weigh things up in the judgment of the Lord. What is God's verdict on the matter? Here David committed himself by faith to the way of truth. It was a decision for his spiritual wellbeing.

'And if it seems evil to you to serve the Lord, choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods which your fathers served that were on the other side of the River, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you dwell. But as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord' Joshua 24.15.

David is set on making life's decisions by weighing up the issues seriously, governed by the Word of truth. It is so easy for us to make decisions in our life without serious recourse to the Word of God as our guide. We are inclined to make our decisions, and then ask for the Lord's blessing upon them afterwards as an afterthought.

'I cling to Your testimonies; O Lord, do not put me to shame' verse 31.

Here we have a totally different attitude and aim. At the beginning David was clinging to the dust. Now he is clinging to the Word. Instead of adherence to the world there is now adherence to the Word. One of the great motivations for this transformation was that David did not want to bring shame upon God's name. 'Do not leave me, Lord, to my own natural devices, but protect me from bringing shame upon Your name.' Shame is the dread of a believer because shame not only affects the person, but also the Church – God's name. When I clung to the dust and lived by the flesh there was shame. I need to cling to the Word that may I be kept.

Downcast David Lifted up by the Divine Word

'I will run the course of Your commandments, for You shall enlarge my heart' verse 32.

Now as David looked to the future he had hope. Before him was a life of perseverance on the road laid out by God.

'Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us' Hebrews 12.1.

At the beginning of the stanza David was making no headway, clinging to the dust. At the end of the stanza David was on the move again, running along the road and making progress again. David shows us the reason for his new-found spiritual energy – an enlarged awareness of the Lord. Spurgeon comments: 'The Lord must change, unite, encourage, strengthen and enlarge the heart.'

David was now obeying with a heart of love, a heart of admiration, a heart of respect and a heart of worship. The reality of David's revival was evidenced in a new-found zeal for the Lord, His Word and His way.

Conclusion

In this stanza we have looked at the example of downcast David lifted up by the divine Word and Spirit. As we study the Word of the Lord three thousand years later, the medicine we need remains the same.

5. HOW TO PRAY FOR A WHOLEHEARTED WALK WITH THE LORD

Psalm 119.33-40

The previous stanza focused on David's conviction leading to confession, in turn leading to a Word-Spirit-based revival. Now David's realisation as a mature believer was that his walk with the Lord must be with his whole being.

In these verses David writes about the walk with mind, heart and eyes in devotion to the fear of the Lord – *'Incline my heart to Your testimonies, and not to covetousness'* verse 36. Evidence of this desire for wholeheartedness is the fact that each verse is a dependent request to the Lord: *'Teach me'*, *'Give me understanding'*, *'Make me walk'*, *'Incline my heart'*, *'Turn away my eyes'*, *'Revive me'*, *'Establish Your Word'* and *'Turn away my reproach.'*

'Teach me, O Lord, the way of Your statutes, and I shall keep it to the end' verse 33.

Notice how David, writing as a mature believer, was still praying to be taught. The believer is always learning! David was not content just to know the Lord's statutes, but desired also to know about the way of the statutes.

The word 'statutes' has to do with God's way marked out and ordained for us to walk according to His Word. Remember how in the previous stanza David had prayed that he might know God's law graciously. Here he goes deeper, in the sense that he desired to know the way of the Lord's statutes: knowing and doing. One sign that we are true believers is a teachable spirit before the Lord, having a humble approach to His Word.

The Word of God

Even as a mature believer David understood the Lord was still his teacher and the Word was still his guide. Here is the first step towards a revived, wholehearted walk with the Lord – teach me! David's prayer, *'Teach me, O Lord, the way of Your statutes'* is also a reminder that God's Word will also reveal the way to benefit from its teaching. There is always a spiritual and a practical application to God's Word for us – the Word and the way.

It was in this prayerful teachable spirit that David could say sincerely, 'I will follow thoroughly.' The Hebrew meaning of 'keep it to the end' is to keep it quite thoroughly, from head to foot or wholeheartedly. David's commitment then develops to mean 'to the end of my days', a life consecrated to the Lord. Spurgeon says: 'As Christ loves us to the end, so we must serve Him to the end,' and 'The end of divine teaching is that we persevere to the end.' There is a blessed partnership between God's sovereign, eternal keeping and the believer's commitment. One of the hymnwriters in *Gadsby's Collection* summed it up beautifully:

*Ye pilgrims of Zion, and chosen of God,
Whose spirits are filled with dismay;
Since ye have eternal redemption through blood,
Ye cannot but hold on your way.
As Jesus, in covenant love, did engage
A fulness of grace to display,
The powers of darkness in malice may rage,
The righteous shall hold on his way.
This truth, like its Author, eternal shall stand,
Though all things in nature decay,
Upheld by Jehovah's omnipotent hand,
The righteous shall hold on his way.*

H Fowler, 1779-1838

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‘Give me understanding, and I shall keep Your law; indeed, I shall observe it with my whole heart’ verse 34.

Here David is not praying for intellectual understanding of the law but spiritual discernment of it. David was praying for this discernment that he might use it wisely in keeping God’s law in a gracious manner.

Again, David reminds us of the uniqueness of the work of the Holy Spirit in a believer’s life. Without the Spirit we lack the ability to understand spiritual truths, but with it we have wisdom from on high. This is one of the wonders of the local church. Our spiritual maturity is not measured by intellect, but by grace!

Notice here the order of David’s prayer. He does not put the keeping of the law first. Rather he needs the gift of God’s grace to give him understanding that he might keep the law of the Lord. This understanding gives deepening love for the Lord and His law so that we follow it wholeheartedly. Here we enter into the heart of what it means to be New Testament Christ-centred believer. Note *1 John 5.1-5, 20.*

‘Whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God, and everyone who loves Him who begot also loves him who is begotten of Him. By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and keep His commandments. For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments. And His commandments are not burdensome. For whatever is born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith. Who is he who overcomes the world, but he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?...And we know that the Son of God has come and has given us an understanding, that we may know Him who is true; and we are in Him who is true, in His Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God and eternal life.’

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'Make me to walk in the path of Your commandments, for I delight in it' verse 35.

David's understanding of grace as a mature believer is seen in an absolute dependence upon and submission to God. Naturally speaking, this position is viewed today as being oppressive, weak and to be simply a servant! But the secret to this prayer is found in what David knew of himself, and how he viewed his Master and His way. When David prayed, *'Make me'*, he did so knowing that the ways of the Lord were right for him. He delighted in the Lord's way as wise, spiritual, enriching and maturing. The secret for us is this same enhanced view. He had such a high view of his Master and His way that he wanted to be moulded accordingly. But only grace could make David view obedience to the Lord as an experience of delight in the law of the Lord.

The Puritan Thomas Manton makes a very profound statement on this verse. He writes:

'We can be worldly of ourselves but we cannot be holy and heavenly of ourselves, that must be asked of Him who is the Father of lights from whom comes down every good and perfect gift.'

When David thinks of himself, he knows he cannot follow what he delights in without grace to help. Spurgeon said,

'We will not walk in the narrow path till we are made to do so by the Maker's own power. If practical godliness is a jewel to your soul and your path, however rough, is clean, then your soul will rise.'

Remember we are considering these verses under the theme of 'praying for a wholehearted walk with the Lord': *'teach me'*, *'give me'*; *'make me'*. We need to understand that David's prayer is a deepening cry for grace. David is teaching us how to pray for a wholehearted walk with the Lord – what we need to ask for.

How to Pray for a Wholehearted Walk with the Lord

'Incline my heart to Your testimonies, and not to covetousness'
verse 36.

How honest God's servant David is here. Even the rich king fears the sinful vice-like grip of covetousness. Here David is praying for the prevailing influence of the Holy Spirit to be known in his inner being. The word 'incline' means he wants his inner being to extend itself towards God's Word, a heart stretched out towards God's way as Paul meant when he said that he pressed towards the goal (*Philippians 3.14*). This is like the attitude of a chariot rider!

Above all David wanted his new nature to rule his heart and mind. By nature David was a man of war. He looked around as an expert warrior for opportunities to capture. Here the word 'covetousness' is a strong Hebrew warlike word for 'plunder', to gain by attack and warfare. It is a gain achieved through aggression, to get, whatever the consequences, even if one cannot afford it. A modern illustration would be of the shops filled with aggressive people whose hearts are inclined to covetousness, willing to extend their credit to get the latest things.

David saw the issue of life clearly here. He understood there is no middle ground with the heart; it is either inclined one way or the other. Incline my heart to the wise way.

'The law of the Lord is perfect, converting the soul; the testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple; the statutes of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the Lord is pure, enlightening the eyes; the fear of the Lord is clean, enduring for ever; the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether. More to be desired are they than gold, yea, than much fine gold; sweeter also than honey and the honeycomb. Moreover by them Your servant is warned, and in keeping them there is great reward' Psalm 19.7-11.

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'Turn away my eyes from looking at worthless things, and revive me in Your way' verse 37.

While David prayed in a personal way, he also prayed as a prophet. What a relevant prayer for us today! There are so many worthless things to while away and waste our time. As Christians we are called to redeem the time. So many Christians remain babes in Christ and never get out of their cot, not wanting to part with their toys. Are we prepared to pray this prayer? Are we in love with our idols like Ephraim (*Hosea 4.17*)? Are we using time wisely?

So much time is spent on Facebook, watching 'soaps', playing computer games and surfing the Net. This must grieve the Spirit! If these things have got a grip on us as idols of our time, they will be like Marah to our soul (*Exodus 15.23*). Time is so precious to us. We all regret having wasted time. Entertainment opportunities which take up precious time have undoubtedly become a tool of Satan to hinder us. This is not God's way for us. *'Vanity of vanities, all is vanity'*, Solomon wrote in *Ecclesiastes 1.2*.

How can anyone say the Bible is irrelevant? It is as though David was facing the same temptations! Yet here again David was praying for the Lord to influence his life. For sure this is prayer for a Spirit-filled life. We do not know what worthless things David had been looking at. Probably it was to do with the entertainment of the day. It may also have been a time when David had given time to bettering himself materially, possibly upgrading his palace. His vision had become materialistic, but like the waters of Marah things had become a bitter disappointment. This would fit in with the previous verse – a period in his life when he had given himself over to the god of gain.

There are many blessings we can enjoy in this world in a wholesome manner as gifts from God – and we should be thankful. However, there are many things in this world that man has invented or wrongly used that are worthless to us. He could not hold both worthless and

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wise things in his heart, and still remain spiritually alive and useful. What we do know is the deadening effect that the worthless things had on David spiritually. He needed a revival in his whole being. The revival must be in the Lord's way. It would be good if each one of us were where the hymnwriter was when he wrote:

*Compared with Christ in all beside
No comeliness I see;
The one thing needful, dearest Lord,
Is to be one with Thee.*

Augustus M Toplady, 1740-78 (Gadsby's version)

'Establish Your word to Your servant, who is devoted to fearing You' verse 38.

We have here a real matter of the heart. David needed the assurance of God's Word applied to him. This is an example of the chief manner in which the Lord chooses to grant assurance. Primarily the Lord applies His Word to His people with power. This is of more importance than feelings. Feelings are part of assurance, but not the foundation of it – that is the Word which endures for ever.

Here David's prayer harmonises with his wholehearted devotion to respect the Lord, to fear Him and follow Him. He understood that faith in God's Word and obedience to God's Word brought about assurance. Spurgeon describes this truth like this: 'Full assurance is the reward of total obedience to the Lord.' David teaches us here that devotion does not mean over-familiarity with the Lord. 'Devoted' means having respect for the Lord.

'Turn away my reproach which I dread, for Your judgments are good' verse 39.

This is closely linked to the previous verse. David had a dread about his responsibility for bringing reproach upon the name of the Lord. He understood the great danger here – see also verse 22. It was

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distressing him that the world spoke against the good judgments of God because of his past failures. Are not God's ways perfect and holy, His judgments right? As Abraham said, *'Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?'* (Genesis 18.25).

Note that David had known the discipline of the Lord, but he still termed the Lord's judgments as good. David could say they were good by faith, knowing the loving purpose of them.

'Behold, I long for Your precepts; revive me in Your righteousness'
verse 40.

This is the final part of David's prayer for a wholehearted walk with the Lord. Remember this stanza when you feel the need of revival in your soul. It is a perfect pattern for us.

Finally David asked the Lord to behold his longing to walk properly in the way of the Lord. Here we are reminded it is as important to long after God's precepts as to long after His promises. One of the tests for us is that a revival according to the Lord's righteousness is truly our desire. Remember David sought a revival according to the Word; now he seeks a revival according to the way of righteousness, godliness and holiness.

Here we undoubtedly see David's Messianic longing. He looked forward by faith to the perfect Messiah. How profound is this prayer for revival. David teaches us more of the nature of revival; it must be Word-based and way-based. In other words, it must be a revival of the Word in the heart which affects our way.

Prayer for reviving is an ongoing exercise of the soul. It is always part of our spiritual exercise and renewing. We long to be revived, but then if we have been revived, we long for that revival to continue.

6. LIVING ON THE WORD OF GOD

Psalm 119.41-48

The Psalmist understood that all spiritual blessing came to him according to the Word of God. Therefore his relationship to the Word was of paramount importance to him; his spiritual life depended on it. It is good for us to remind ourselves by the Psalmist's testimony of the significance of the Word of God to us. If we think we can mature and develop spiritually by neglecting the Word of God, then we are sadly mistaken.

Consider the Psalmist. His whole life was captivated, dependent and immersed in the Word of God; he respected God's Word, valued it, and understood his life was to be moulded by it; he lived on God's Word – the Word of God was his spiritual meat and drink; he believed in the sufficiency of the Word of God for him.

'Let Your mercies come also to me, O Lord—Your salvation according to Your Word' verse 41.

Through the Word of God the Psalmist understood the importance of the salvation mercies of God. C H Spurgeon said: 'What a great mass of mercies are heaped together in the one salvation of the Lord.'

It is through the Word we learn of calling mercy, regenerating mercy, converting mercy, justifying mercy, pardoning mercy, sanctifying mercy, keeping mercy, longsuffering mercy and delivering mercy.

The Psalmist knew the Word – he believed what it taught regarding these amazing mercies of God in salvation. According to that Word he wanted to experience in a vital, living way the Lord's continual mercies in salvation. It is as though the Lord's servant presented himself by faith before the Lord as a vessel to be constantly filled.

In a way this is how we come before the Lord to worship. This is a wonderful prayer for worship. We come to praise and to pray, but

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spiritual blessing must come to us according to the Word through preaching. So it is that the Lord is pleased to come to us with His mercies in salvation, according to His Word in Christ. It would be good if we prayed this prayer for our souls as we come to worship the Lord in spirit and truth.

'So shall I have an answer for him who reproaches me, for I trust in Your Word' verse 42.

Once again we are reminded of the importance of the Word of God in our spiritual lives. Here the Psalmist's desire is to use the Word of God as his main weapon of defence against his enemies. It is this method that the Lord is most pleased to see His children use. We have a great example of this in *Luke 4.1-13* when the Lord Jesus dealt with Satan who was tempting Him.

Let us consider this a little further, how it is in practice that we have an answer to him who reproaches us.

- When Satan reminds us of past sins, God's Word says: *'For I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more'* (*Jeremiah 31.34*);
- When Satan tempts us to give up and call no more on Jesus' name, God's Word says: *'I will never leave you nor forsake you'* (*Hebrews 13.5*);
- When Satan does overcome us at times, God's Word says: *'I will heal their backsliding, I will love them freely'* (*Hosea 14.4*);
- When we feel weak and vulnerable to the enemy's attacks, God's Word says: *'My strength is made perfect in weakness'* (*2 Corinthians 12.9*).

For every 'stinging nettle' of Satan's attack, there is a 'dock leaf' promise of defence from God's Word. This verse calls us to have the utmost confidence in the Word of God. The Psalmist trusts in God's Word.

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Note: There is a place for apologetics in a pagan society as a support for the truth of God's Word, but never as a replacement for it.

'And take not the word of truth utterly out of my mouth; for I have hoped in Your ordinances' verse 43.

Here we are reminded again of the vital necessity of the Word of God in our lives. Can we live without it? On the radio programme *Desert Island Discs* participants were asked what they would most want to take with them if marooned on an island. Would the Word be an item you would take?

See how Job viewed the Word of God in his life. This remained his testimony even in the deepest trial.

'I have treasured the words of His mouth more than my necessary food' Job 23.12.

He understood his ministry must be only through the Word of truth in the power of the Holy Spirit. This earnest prayer also reminds us of the need to be ready with the Word in our own personal testimony so that we are not left to conversations in our ministry that lack the vital ingredient of the Word of truth.

Verse 43 is a good prayer for outreach, that our word for the Lord harmonises with our hope in the Lord. Matthew Henry says on this verse:

'Lord, let the word of truth be always in my mouth; let me have the wisdom and courage which are necessary to enable me both to use my knowledge for the instruction of others, and, like the good householder, to bring out of my treasury things new and old, and to make profession of my faith whenever I am called to it.'

'I have hoped in Your ordinances' means the Psalmist must go about his witness with hope and confidence. Even in those times when he feels out of season spiritually, he must never give up hope.

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'And now abide faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love' 1 Corinthians 13.13.

Hope is one of the vital abiding graces to be in exercise. There is always hope for the Christian, whatever the circumstances.

'So shall I keep your law continually, forever and ever' verse 44.

The Psalmist, for sure, knew that salvation was all of grace, as he had said in verse 41: *'Let Your mercies come also to me, O Lord—Your salvation according to Your word.'* Inspired by such blessed truth he made this wonderful statement of commitment by faith in verse 44 in a spirit of love. The Psalmist would have no time for those who claim the law is no longer the believer's rule of life in Christ. This would make a nonsense of his commitment to keep the law of the Lord for ever.

Heaven will be the place where we will be able to keep the moral law of the Lord in Christ perfectly. It will be like Adam and Eve before the Fall, but without the possibility of sinning. In Heaven the law will be known perfectly as the law of love. Note again what Paul said in *1 Corinthians 13.13.*

Here on earth, with the help of the Lord, the Psalmist was simply seeking to do what he had been told. Spurgeon comments:

'God's grace alone can enable us to keep His commandments without break and without end; eternal love must grant eternal life, and out of this will come everlasting obedience. There is no other way to ensure our perseverance in holiness but by the Word of Truth abiding in us, as David prayed it might abide in him.'

The Psalmist is here making a vow of commitment by faith, inspired by his love and wonder for the Lord.

'And I will walk at liberty, for I seek Your precepts' verse 45.

Please take good note of this verse. The law as a rule of life for the

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believer is not bondage. Viewed in Christ, no longer under its condemnation, the believer walks in liberty desiring to keep God's way. Again a quote from Spurgeon:

'The way of holiness is not a track for slaves but the King's highway for freemen, who are joyfully journeying from the Egypt of bondage to the Canaan of rest.'

The law of liberty for the Christian is the desire and freedom to obey God's precepts with a willing heart. I seek to grow in my understanding of the them, and to grow in my obedience to them.

This verse is a very helpful guide in opposition to the spirit of antinomianism prevalent in today's churches. The antinomian says: 'I've been saved by grace and am no longer under the law's condemnation; therefore I can live as I like.' Calvin said, 'This is true, but the question is what do you like?' James says our faith is known and evidenced by our works, by how we live our lives (*James 2.14-26*).

A brother pointed out to me something he had recently read about the early New Testament Church. Written just a few years after the apostolic era, it was a most accurate account of how they kept the Lord's Day. In this report it stated that the Christians met both morning and evening on the first day of the week. Their liberty was to worship on the Lord's Day morning and evening, respecting the law of the Lord.

The point for us is to see that liberty for the Christian is the liberty to obey God's Word. The highest form of liberty is to seek to know the mind of the Lord in His Word, and then to be conformed to it.

'And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free' John 8.32.

'I will speak of Your testimonies also before kings, and will not be ashamed' verse 46.

When we look at this verse our minds go to such men as Joseph (*Genesis 41.16*), Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego

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(Daniel 2.27-28; 3.16-18). God is no respecter of persons. His Word is applicable to rich and poor, weak and mighty. It is a test of our loyalty to the Lord as to whether we can say with the Psalmist, 'I am not ashamed'!

I read recently that Hugh Latimer gave Henry VIII a New Year's Day gift of a New Testament wrapped up in a napkin with this written on it: *'Fornicators and adulterers God will judge'* (Hebrews 13.4). But we can also see an example of boldness in the New Testament with Paul before King Agrippa in Acts 26.

The boldness spoken of by the Psalmist is a supreme confidence in the Word of God, wherever.

We do not know what lies ahead of us and to whom we will have to give testimony, but it is good for us to give testimony in any case to ordinary folk so that we will be better prepared to speak to a more important person. It is unlikely we will have such an opportunity given to us by the Lord if we neglect the ordinary folk first.

The Psalmist gives us a lead inasmuch as he spoke to the poor and rich, the weak and the mighty. Ultimately he is telling us that whoever it is, I will not be ashamed of the Lord's testimonies, even before kings. It is interesting to read the account of William Wilberforce after his conversion for an example of this in the UK.

'And I will delight myself in Your commandments, which I love'
verse 47.

Again we are given such a positive approach to the commandments of the Lord. Note the Psalmist's love for them. Here is the secret to obedience – the law of love that inspires the law of willingness to the law of the Lord. We will not only have love, but also delight. This is speaking about the time when we meditate on the Word.

In the *Song of Solomon* we are given a beautiful picture of this taking delight in the Word of the Lord.

Living on the Word of God

'Like an apple tree among the trees of the woods, so is my beloved among the sons. I sat down in his shade with great delight, and his fruit was sweet to my taste' Song of Solomon 2.3.

The Shulamite delights herself in contemplation upon her Bridegroom. It is a picture of delighting in Christ. What do we really delight in? It is wonderful if we can call the Sabbath and the Word a delight (*Isaiah 58.13*).

'Delight yourself also in the Lord, and He shall give you the desires of your heart' Psalm 37.4.

'In the multitude of my anxieties within me, Your comforts delight my soul' Psalm 94.19.

'Unless Your law had been my delight, I would then have perished in my affliction' Psalm 119.92.

'For I delight in the law of God according to the inward man' Romans 7.22.

We need the help of the Lord to delight in what is going to be good for our souls, for our spiritual wellbeing. As we make our lifestyle decisions, let us remember to have the Word and way of the Lord in its right place.

How can we be encouraged in the important exercise of delighting in the commandments of the Lord? It is helpful to consider first of all Who God is as revealed in His Word, then to consider who we are, and then to consider God's provisions for us in Christ. In this way we will magnify the Lord in our thoughts and there will be a growing appreciation of God's Word and ways, a recognition of His supreme authority.

'My hands also I will lift up to Your commandments, which I love, and I will meditate on Your statutes' verse 48.

This final verse is a reaffirmation of what has been stated in the

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previous verse. To 'lift up my hands' means to stretch forth my mind spiritually towards the Word of the Lord. It is to encourage oneself in the Word of the Lord.

'Therefore strengthen the hands which hang down, and the feeble knees' Hebrews 12.12.

When mercy comes down to us in Christ, our hands will be lifted up in faith and obedience. When our children receive presents, they know that the best one comes from their parents. So they reach out their hands for that present above any other, knowing that it has thought behind it. Not only has it thought behind it, but love, kindness and pleasure. So it is that we appreciate the gift of God's Word as God's thoughtful gift to us of what we need for our souls. It is a useful, wise present which never grows old and we never grow out of! So spiritually we reach out our hands to it, to use it seriously, thoughtfully and wisely.

Conclusion

What effect does the Word have on our lives? Do we live on it like the Psalmist who said:

- I will walk in liberty;
- I will speak of Your testimonies before kings;
- I will delight myself in Your commandments;
- I will lift up my hands to Your commandments;
- I will meditate on Your statutes.

7. THE ASSURING COMFORT OF GOD'S WORD

Psalm 119.49-56

Assuring comfort in trial and affliction

'Remember the word to Your servant, upon which You have caused me to hope. This is my comfort in my affliction. For Your Word has given me life' verses 49-50.

The opening verses of this stanza remind us of a deep and very significant truth for our Christian life. Although the Psalmist had many experiences of God's dealings in his life and in answered prayers, his assurance, comfort and hope rested upon the Word of God applied to his soul in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Here we have the foundation stone of all true assurance; it must be founded upon God's Word. You will find in your growth in grace that experiences are vital and helpful, but they are not a replacement for the Word.

This is a quote from *Fearless Pilgrim* by Faith Cook on the life of John Bunyan.³ It is clear that when it came to his search for assurance the Word applied was paramount to him. An example of this is at a time when Bunyan was being assaulted in his mind with blasphemous thoughts:

'I remember that one day I was travelling into the country and musing on the wickedness and blasphemy of my heart that Scripture came into my mind: "He hath made peace through the blood of His cross" Colossians 1.20. By which I was made to see, again and again that day that God and my soul were made friends by this blood; yea I saw how the justice of God and my sinful soul could embrace and kiss each other through this

³ *Fearless Pilgrim*, Faith Cook, Evangelical Press, 2008

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blood. This was a good day to me; I hope I shall never forget it.’

Faith Cook then says,

‘Soon afterwards we read he was sitting by his fireside reading verses from *Hebrews 2* [verses 14-15]. The words brought such consolation and deliverance to this beleaguered Christian that he almost fainted, not with grief and trouble, but with solid joy and peace. Here he learnt in *Hebrews 2* of one who could destroy him that had the power of death, that is the devil, and deliver them “*who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage*”, even Christ Himself.’

Bunyan, like the Psalmist, found the surest foundation to comfort and assurance was the Word of God. It is the Word of God which gives us spiritual life, and therefore we need to value its great worth for our souls. In the end it is the Word in the power of the Holy Spirit which revives and comforts the soul. As Christians the Word of God should be our greatest comfort in affliction. This is God’s strongest medicine. Having given us the Word in which to hope and upon which to rest, He will never disappoint that hope! It is a blessing above many to believe in the Word of God by faith and say, ‘This is my comfort.’ The world at their Christmas parties lift up their glasses and toast each other saying, ‘Here is my hope.’ The Christian lifts up their Bible and says, ‘This is my hope, my comfort. I may drown my sorrows in the Word.’

Thomas Brooks, the Puritan, points out that: ‘The Hebrew word rendered to comfort signifies first to repent and then to comfort.’ How this resonates with our experience. We have to repent of our sin, independence, waywardness and folly. We have to come back to the worthy, faithful, unchanging Word of God for our assurance and comfort.

The comfort of God’s Word in persecution

‘The proud have me in great derision, yet I do not turn aside

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from Your law. I remembered your judgments of old, O Lord, and have comforted myself' verses 51-52.

Sadly, sometimes professing Christians bring derision upon themselves through foolish practices. For example, many of the Charismatic excesses shown on 'The God Channel' demean the precious name of Christ. Recently I saw one charlatan selling green handkerchiefs for an extortionate price. He promised he would pray over each one posted and they would carry the spirit of blessing into your home. Of course, the more you offered for the handkerchief the more blessing was guaranteed to you and your family.

In contrast to this self-inflicted mockery, there is a derision from the proud who despise what Christians stand for. The Word of God is despised, the law of God is despised and the testimony of the believer is despised. For a number of years C H Spurgeon had to endure cartoon figures of himself each week in the national newspapers. We all know it is a very painful experience to be derided, to be considered as foolish, to be rejected by men. Remember Paul was despised in Athens as a babbler – meaning a retailer of other people's foolish ideas (*Acts 17.18*).

The term 'great derision' has the meaning of the opposition being of a continual sense with no let-up. The test for the Christian is how he reacts to such opposition. Here we are given a very wise example. Whatever is happening, remain faithful and loyal to the Word! Do not be blown off course by the wind of opposition. Rather let the wind of opposition motivate a deeper digging, dependence and adherence to the Word of God.

Then there is a positive exercise of the mind in which to be engaged that will indeed help us in opposition. The Psalmist said this exercise, the thought that God is in control, would provide comfort for his soul. Look back, as the Psalmist did, and examine the history of God's dealings with the proud unbeliever. Remember how Asaph dealt with

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such a time in his own life when tempted even to envy the proud in *Psalm 73*. When the godly man is unjustly treated by the unbeliever he finds comfort in the fact that God is the Judge of all the earth and will avenge His elect. Meanwhile, following the teaching of our Lord, we should pray for our enemies who really are opposing God. This thought brings us into the spirit of the next verse.

‘Indignation has taken hold of me because of the wicked, who forsake your law’ verse 53.

The word ‘indignation’ is rendered ‘horror’ in the *Authorised Version*, and this more accurately describes the meaning here. As the Psalmist considers the arrogance, pride, rebellion, blasphemy and evil intent of the wicked, he is moved to consider the awful and solemn end of such an unrepentant lifestyle. The horror was not only of the rebellion but the outcome of rebellion. The horror of hell should motivate the Gospel in us.

It is not kindness to cover a terrible truth. The kindest action is to do what Jesus did and warn about it. I was reminded recently of a faithful book entitled *Whatever Happened to Hell?*⁴ Is it not really loveless and cruel in our day and age to preach another ‘gospel’ that excludes the doctrine of hell? Do we have a horror of hell and a holy indignation of evil? Or are we becoming desensitised to it? For the Psalmist such a consideration was a nightmare in his mind. ‘Indignation’ means a storm of horror.

The comfort of singing about the truth of God’s Word

*‘Your statutes have been my songs in the house of my pilgrimage’
verse 54.*

Here horror is exchanged for harmony. Praise is an essential part of our spiritual wellbeing. Piercing through the black clouds of evil

⁴ *Whatever Happened to Hell?*, John Blanchard, first published 1995 Crossways Books

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is the glorious, perfect truth of God's righteous and holy ways. It is always good to find something to sing about. There is always a right time to praise the Lord.

Here the Psalmist is not writing so much about songs in the house of the Lord, but songs in his own house. It has been said that what we are at home is what we truly are. So for example, if you want to verify the testimony of a young person, you ask their parents. To verify the testimony of a married man for service, then it is best to ask his wife what she honestly thinks. Here the Psalmist says, 'In my house you will hear praise. This' he says, 'is the tone of my family home.' He is getting in practice in his earthly home for his heavenly home, when he will join the heavenly choir.

Notice here the doctrine behind his songs. The Psalmist was a very heartfelt person who had strong emotions, yet his songs were not based only on sentiment, feeling or emotion, but primarily upon doctrine. While some modern Christian hymns are sound doctrinally, many sadly do not follow Psalmist's pattern. This is because the writers have not been brought up in Bible-teaching churches. Doctrine is despised. Recent worship lyrics express a post-modernist spirituality that emphasises the individual over the Church, felt needs over God's requirements and power over truth.

For us today the quality of a Christian hymn should be measured by its doctrinal content, not its age. It must have a tune to accompany it that reflects the requirement to worship God in the beauty of holiness. A Christian hymn is not to be centred all upon self, but upon God. It is about God and our relationship to Him.

In relation to this verse, be encouraged to memorise sound hymns and make melody in your heart with them. You can sing a song in your heart to the Lord even in the midst of the most difficult situations. When being threatened by his adversaries Martin Luther said to his friends, 'Lift up your voice. Let us sing *Psalm 46*!'

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Consider the remarkable effect of singing God's Word.

'Now when they began to sing and to praise, the Lord set ambushes against the people of Ammon, Moab, and Mount Seir, who had come against Judah; and they were defeated'
2 Chronicles 20.22.

Just a point a final point on this verse: it is good to meet in our homes to sing praises to God.

The comfort of being alone with God and His Word

'I remember your name in the night, O Lord, and I keep Your law. This has become mine because I kept Your precepts' verses 55-56.

Here the Psalmist is expressing his personal relationship to the Lord and the fruit of faith and obedience. From this we understand that comfort and assurance from God's Word is derived in harmony with obedience. Matthew Henry rendered it: 'I have remembered Thy name in the night, therefore I have kept it in the day.'

Our relationship to the law either as condemnation or blessing depends upon our relationship with the Lord. John Gill said:

*'I have kept the law though imperfectly yet spiritually, sincerely, heartily and from a principle of love and gratitude and with a view to the glory of God and without mercenary or sinister ends.'*⁵

Here the Psalmist teaches us the benefit of particularly considering the glorious attributes of the Lord. This will lead us to Christ and in our sleeplessness we can direct our minds to His Person and work. All our hope is in Him – He is our righteousness and redemption. He is our example and our guide! We are reminded of the wonderful and inestimable value of the answer of a good conscience before the Lord.

Conclusion

Never let us underestimate the inestimable value of God's Word for our soul's wellbeing.

⁵ John Gill's Exposition of the Whole Bible, Psalm 119 verse 55

8. CONFIRMATIONS OF CONVERSION

Psalm 119.57-64

Here we are given no less than eight characteristics of true conversion, marks of a new creature. I trust there will be some which we can identify with and to which we can add our own 'amen'.

As a point of interest, you will notice in this stanza the words 'precepts', 'testimonies' and 'statutes'. Precepts are God's commands, testimonies refers to God's Word, and statutes to God's decrees, and to following the Lord.

1. Dedication

'You are my portion, O Lord; I have said that I would keep Your words' verse 57.

The greatest blessing in life for the Psalmist is his relationship with the Lord. He could say by faith the glorious Lord was his own, his portion. By faith, like Mary in the New Testament, he had chosen that good part which would not be taken away from him (*Luke 10 .42*).

The world around him made sin their portion. The Psalmist turned his back on the world in dedication to the Lord. By God's grace and his God-given faith, he now enjoyed spiritual blessings the world cannot provide. He respected the wonderful blessing of being one of the Lord's, laying hold of Him by faith.

'Bless the Lord, O my soul; and all that is within me, bless His holy name!' Psalm 103.1.

You can see in this verse the harmonious partnership between receiving and responding. By faith he trusted in God, by faith received Him as Lord of his life, and by faith committed himself to obedience. He made a solemn promise that was the fruit of his wholehearted

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dedication to the Lord and His Word. He understood that the way of God's Word was the best way for him to pursue. He was privileged to share in the gracious blessing that God bestows upon those who trust and obey. He was by faith dedicating his life to the Lord. The evidence is his testimony: *'You are my portion.'*

Luther counselled every believer to answer all temptations with this short saying: 'I am a Christian.' Here the Psalmist counsels us to answer all temptations with this short saying: 'The Lord is my portion.' When he faces temptation to lust, pride, idolatry, materialism or laziness, he says: 'The Lord is my portion.'

2. Desire

'I entreated Your favour with my whole heart; be merciful to me according to Your word' verse 58.

Here we see the Psalmist understood the nature of his relationship with the Lord was all of God's favour and grace. He prayed on the basis of grace and grace alone. It was the Lord's favour he sought, not the world's favour. When we come to God on the basis of grace we need have no fear to come wholeheartedly, totally. We see the need of sincerity and wholeheartedness in prayer.

'If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all liberally and without reproach, and it will be given to him. But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for he who doubts is like a wave of the sea driven and tossed by the wind. For let not that man suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways' James 1.5-8.

To entreat the Lord wholeheartedly means to make supplication in humility on the foundation stone of grace. His desire is for God to deal with Him in mercy, and not to give him what he knows he deserves. This is a powerful way in which to pray, being in accordance to God's Word.

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Spurgeon makes a profound comment in this verse when he says:

‘He asks nothing beyond the promise, he only begs for such mercy as the Word reveals. And what more could he want or wish for? God has revealed such an infinity of mercy in His Word that it would be impossible to conceive of more.’

What sort of word of promise would the Psalmist have in mind? Probably God’s word to Moses.

‘And the Lord passed before him and proclaimed, “The Lord, the Lord God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abounding in goodness and truth”’ Exodus 34.6.

In the last sermon of Moses before entering Glory he reminded the people of God’s promises.

‘Showing mercy to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments’ Deuteronomy 5.10.

Notice here how the Psalmist pleaded for mercy, not on the basis of signs and wonders but of the Word. His confidence in the Lord was such that His Word was sufficient. This was better than a sign of mercy. He understood that God’s Word was His bond – His Word was as strong as God Himself and therefore unbreakable. How different to the recent appeal by the Archbishop of Canterbury for people to read the *King James Bible* ‘to make sense of their lives’. He said it helps to have a strongly-defined story in the background that tells us that we all matter. The Archbishop did not say this is God’s authoritative Word to us to which we are respond in humility; rather that it simply helps us to get a view on the bigger picture in a big society, to make up your own truth!

Here the Psalmist’s desire for mercy from the Lord is in keeping with his respect for the authority of God’s Word.

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3. Direction

I thought about my ways, and turned my feet to Your testimonies' verse 59.

Studying the Word of God will lead inevitably to our hearts being softened to the study of our own life. It takes great courage to think upon our ways. If we did this more we would be less prone to wandering off. To stop and assess our ways requires a willingness to accept we may be going in the wrong direction. There is not a lot of point assessing our ways if we have already made up our mind we are not for turning!

Here the Psalmist made his assessment under the influence of the Holy Spirit and the Word of God. His ways were assessed and found to be going in the wrong direction. A turning was required. Consideration of his ways led to the conversion of his ways and direction. The criterion for the decision was how his ways were conforming to the Word of the Lord.

Any direction we take which is not directed by the Word of God leaves us in the wilderness. The only way out of the wilderness of self, sin, worldliness, materialism and temptation is to be led by the Word. Repentance means to change direction and turn our feet to God's way according to God's Word.

4. Obedience

I made haste, and did not delay to keep Your commandments' verse 60.

Prevarication in obedience has the effect of grieving the Holy Spirit. It is His promptings being neglected. It is the Holy Spirit's ministry to apply God's Word to the conscience. Our response shows our respect.

There is also an inherent danger in delaying to follow the way of the Lord in His Word. In the news recently was the case of the ambulance driver who delayed to respond to an emergency 999 call because he

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was on his tea break, although he was located only 800 yards down the road. The delay led to a very sad outcome for the woman who had suffered a heart attack.

The word for delay used in this verse corresponds to the word used to describe Lot lingering in Sodom (*Genesis 19.16*). In the end the angel took hold of Lot's hand and led him out of Sodom, the Lord being merciful unto him.

There is sin in delaying to follow the Lord in repentance when our wrong has been revealed to us. There is always a danger to think that our timing supercedes God's – we will respond in our own time. The Psalmist reminds us not to prevaricate with God but to obey by faith promptly.

5. Persecution

'The cords of the wicked have bound me, but I have not forgotten Your law' verse 61.

Here the Psalmist gives us the comforting antidote, the strengthening medicine when being persecuted. He was surrounded by the enemies of the Lord. They intimidated him, robbed him, harassed him and despised what he stood for. On one occasion the Psalmist cried, *'Bring my soul out of prison'*, as if imprisoned by the enemy of souls (*Psalm 142.7*).

His comfort, as he turned wholeheartedly to the Lord's testimonies, was the wisdom of the Lord in His law. There is a danger when being persecuted by Satan to succumb to his design and react against the Lord. Here in persecution the Psalmist does the opposite and finds strength, solace and assurance in God's law. Because of the law of the Lord he is assured in his soul even in the midst of the enemy camp. In the midst of an unbelieving workplace, or when an employer who makes life doubly difficult because of your faith, never forget the law of the Lord. Here is your unseen comfort and strength locked up in your mind and heart.

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6. Prayer

‘At midnight I will rise to give thanks to You, because of Your righteous judgments’ verse 62.

Closely linked to the previous verse, here his confidence was focused on the righteous judgments of the Lord. “*Vengeance is mine, I will repay*” says the Lord’ (Romans 12.19; Hebrews 10.30). Let us pray for our enemies and leave the Lord to deal with them in His wisdom.

As he looked back over the battles of the past day and comforted himself in the righteous ways of the Lord, he was motivated to rise from his bed in committed and dedicated prayer. He must show his respect and appreciation. His thanksgiving centred on the liberty of praying for his enemies and leaving them in the Lord’s hands, rejoicing in the Lord with thanksgiving for His righteous judgments that glorify and vindicate His name. Here is a practice that will help a lot to give you a restful night in your mind.

7. Fellowship

‘I am a companion of all who fear You, and of those who keep Your precepts’ verse 63.

Who we keep company with does matter. Notice the discernment of the Psalmist. He was only interested in the fellowship of like-minded brethren that feared the Lord and kept His precepts. He set a standard, not in a self-righteous manner, but for the good of his soul.

Notice the Psalmist says all who fear the Lord. He was not interested in cliques but in fellowship. He saw every member in God’s Church walking with the Lord as one of his companions. This is a good principle for us! Fellowship is not ‘small talk’; it is eternal talk.

8. Appreciation

‘The earth, O Lord, is full of Your mercy; teach me Your statutes’ verse 64.

This verse has both a providential and a spiritual application. The

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providence of God inspires spiritual desires. The Psalmist praised the fact of God's goodness through the earth, and His mercy which is new every morning. There are boundless evidences of the mercy of the Lord upon the earth from generation to generation. In both providence and grace the Psalmist had proved God's mercy reached him anywhere.

For example, God's mercy had reached him when holed up in Cave Adullam; in the land of the Philistines; slaying Goliath; hiding from Saul; running from Absalom; threatened at Ziklag; and rebuked for his sin. Wherever and whatever, David proved the Lord's mercy. The earth is full of the Lord's mercy providentially. This is all of His grace!

A real fruit of this experience and realisation is a hunger to learn more of the ways and Word of the Lord.

9. THE GRACIOUS GOODNESS OF THE LORD

Psalm 119.65-72

These verses are full of praise for the goodness and wisdom of God's dealings with the Psalmist. Amidst all the changing scenes of life the Lord is good and does good – this is the heartbeat of the verses.

'You have dealt well with Your servant, O Lord, according to Your word' verse 65.

By faith we look back over the dealings of the Lord in our life and sing, *'You have dealt well'*; dealings that harmonise with the providence and the promises of His Word. Samuel Medley (1738-99) understood the experience of the Psalmist when he wrote this hymn which I hope you will find helpful:

*O for a heart prepared to sing
To God, my Saviour and my King;
While with His saints I join to tell,
My Jesus has done all things well.
All worlds His glorious power confess;
His wisdom all His works express;
But O His love, what tongue can tell!
My Jesus has done all things well.
How sovereign, wonderful, and free,
Is all His love to sinful me!
He plucked me as a brand from hell;
My Jesus has done all things well.*

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*And since my soul has known His love,
What mercies has He made me prove;
Mercies which all my praise excel;
My Jesus has done all things well.*

*Whene'er my Saviour and my God
Has on me laid His gentle rod,
I know, in all that has befell,
My Jesus has done all things well.*

*Sometimes He's pleased His face to hide,
To make me pray, or stain my pride;
Yet I am helped on this to dwell,
My Jesus has done all things well.*

*Soon shall I pass the vale of death,
And in His arms shall lose my breath;
Yet then my happy soul shall tell,
My Jesus has done all things well.*

*And when to that bright world I rise,
And join the anthems in the skies,
Among the rest this song shall swell,
My Jesus has done all things well.*

This is the song of faith to which every true believer, when in the right spirit, will add their 'Amen.'

'Teach me good judgment and knowledge, for I believe Your commandments' verse 66.

Believing in the goodness and wise judgment of God to him brought about a desire to reflect that in the Psalmist's own life. In the original this desire has to do with being given good taste, deciding for that which is of benefit spiritually. The Psalmist had been given, by God's grace, a holy taste. Note also verse 103:

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'How sweet are Your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth!'

We can see this difference in taste given in a picture for us by God in creation. Bees delight themselves in flowers that give off a beautiful scent, and from these they gather pollen: that is good taste. The bee takes pollen dust from one flower to the stigma of another of similar beauty, and the result is a seed that will produce another flower of rich beauty. Flies are attracted to plants and refuse, which give off an unpleasant smell: that is bad taste. The fly works a similar process on those plants but in the opposite way, and unwholesome, rotting qualities are continued.

This reminds us of what God does in our life when He gives us a new nature. Our tastes and attractions change. There is a blessed and useful effect in being engaged in those matters which are of spiritual good. However, like the fly, the tastes of the old nature are sinful and are attracted to that which is corrupted. If you read one of the tabloid newspapers, invariably your old nature is going to get food from the refuse dump.

So the Psalmist was praying here, 'Teach me good taste; give me good discernment and decision-making. Help me to develop good knowledge, resisting the temptation to fill my mind with sinful knowledge.' The Psalmist understood that good discernment and judgment come through a sincere belief in the commandments. He had testified previously to following, obeying, and now to believing them. This is essential to wholehearted obedience.

'Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I keep Your word'
verse 67.

The Psalmist looked back to a time when he had wandered off track in his health and prosperity, in his independence. It has been well said that prosperity can be the hole in the hedge through which we go

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astray. Here the Psalmist acknowledged the wisdom of God even in times of trial. It was used by God to reign him in.

*God shall alone the refuge be,
And comfort of my mind;
Too wise to be mistaken, He,
Too good to be unkind.*

*In all his holy sovereign will,
He is, I daily find,
Too wise to be mistaken, still
Too good to be unkind.*

*When I the tempter's rage endure,
'Tis God supports my mind;
Too wise to be mistaken, sure,
Too good to be unkind.*

*When sore afflictions on me lie,
He is (though I am blind)
Too wise to be mistaken, yea,
Too good to be unkind.*

*What though I can't His goings see,
Nor all His footsteps find?
Too wise to be mistaken, He,
Too good to be unkind.*

*Hereafter He will make me know,
And I shall surely find,
He was too wise to err, and O,
Too good to be unkind.*

Samuel Medley, 1738-99

The Gracious Goodness of the Lord

We have an example of the Psalmist's teaching in the context of discipline in *Hebrews 12.6-11*, the fruit of the Lord's dealings.

For whom the Lord loves He chastens, and scourges every son whom He receives. If you endure chastening, God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom a father does not chasten? But if you are without chastening, of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate and not sons. Furthermore, we have had human fathers who corrected us, and we paid them respect. Shall we not much more readily be in subjection to the Father of spirits and live? For they indeed for a few days chastened us as seemed best to them, but He for our profit, that we may be partakers of His holiness. Now no chastening seems to be joyful for the present, but painful; nevertheless, afterward it yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.'

In this verse 'But now' indicates a change of attitude; 'I keep' shows a lasting change; 'Your Word' gives a change of direction. It is said that some of the brightest flowers in Switzerland are found in the high and exposed mountain areas.

'You are good, and do good; teach me Your statutes' verse 68.

Here is a line of praise about both the character and the dealings of God. It is so helpful for us to rest on the nature of God's goodness. It is like a refuge in a storm.

'Truly God is good to Israel, to such as are pure in heart' Psalm 73.1.

Goodness in God is not a quality of character, but the very essence of His character; it is Who He is! The goodness that flows from God is from Himself. He is the source, the fountainhead of all good.

When we truly respect a person we desire to learn from them and learn about them. Here, following the adoration of the Psalmist, we

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see him in a teachable state. This is the true test of worship. You will notice all the great men and women of the Bible were teachable and desiring to be taught.

'The proud have forged a lie against me, but I will keep Your precepts with my whole heart' verse 69.

They had derided and defrauded him; now they were defaming him. In the original it has the meaning of patching up falsehoods, like a growing patchwork quilt – lie upon lie. A lie is something, when it spreads, which gathers momentum. Like the fly it spreads germs that are bad for us.

In response the Psalmist resorted to dedication to the way of the Lord. The answer here to attacks upon us is not departure from the way, but greater dedication to the way. Remember the fixed, dedicated response of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego in *Daniel 3*.

'Their heart is as fat as grease, but I delight in Your law' verse 70.

Have you ever had dealings with an older person who has spent their life indulging themselves? I knew of a man who was a print buyer. He was taken out for a meal by suppliers Monday to Friday every week. After a period of time living it up on rich food and wine, this man had a very serious heart attack.

Under the inspiration of the Spirit, the Psalmist wrote of the degenerating condition of the unbelieving heart. It has the effect of being insensible to the danger of sin, gradually becoming clogged up with worldliness. The antidote to this condition is regularly going to the fitness centre of God's law, having different priorities, different tastes and different objectives from the world's way.

'It is good for me that I have been afflicted, that I may learn Your statutes' verse 71.

Here once again is the song of faith that is really unique to the child

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of God. One of the most remarkable prayers in all Scriptures was prayed by Jonah while entombed in the large fish (see *Jonah 2*). Yet what seems worst, under the sovereign permissive will of the Lord, is better for us than the sinner's best. Through these sanctified afflictions God engraves His statutes on our heart. C H Spurgeon said that if we would be scholars we must be sufferers. It is true to say, when we look back over our spiritual lives we have learned more from trials than prosperity.

'The law of Your mouth is better to me than thousands of coins of gold and silver' verse 72.

An amazing expression is used here for God's Word – the law of God's mouth! It is another way of reminding us of its authority over us. God speaks to us through His Word. It is God's voice to us in every generation; faithful and true, wise and just, loving and warning.

As you know, we live in a day and age which encourages us into what is good and right for us. Here the Psalmist tells us from personal experience that God's Word to him is the best for him. Spiritual wealth is vastly superior to material wealth. If David wrote this psalm, he spoke from experience. It is one thing for a poor man to say this for reassurance, but here was a rich man who had experienced material wealth. He said it cannot compare with the Word of God. Spurgeon called the Word of God the library of the Holy Spirit. What a library it is! It is a library which is accessible to all believers. How much time are we spending in the library of the Holy Spirit?

10. FELLOWSHIP GAINED THROUGH EXPERIENCE

Psalm 119.73-80

It is evident that fellowship following experience with the Lord's dealings is at the heart of this stanza. What a blessing true fellowship is to the Lord's people, and what a lot they have to record.

'Then those who feared the Lord spoke to one another, and the Lord listened and heard them; so a book of remembrance was written before Him for those who fear the Lord and who meditate on His name' Malachi 3.16.

The world meets together in pubs and clubs to share their experiences of what the world has to offer. How much more should we magnify the name of the Lord in our conversation and value fellowship together.

'Your hands have made me and fashioned me; give me understanding, that I may learn Your commandments' verse 73.

One of the first requirements for a useful testimony is a deep appreciation for our Creator God. Here the Psalmist had in mind the rule of God over his life as his Maker and Creator. It is a statement of submission to God as the Lord of his life, whatever his condition of health and strength. It is also a statement of faith that God his Creator would take a personal interest in his own development. Above all, while here on earth, he wanted to live by God's Manual and to be a person with a deepening understanding. By faith he placed himself in the school of the Lord as a willing student, believing he was owned by the Lord.

The Psalmist was dealing here with an issue fundamental to our profitable testimony. So much of the decision-making and the choices Christians make these days are really no different from the world. Is

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our decision-making governed by the truth that we are the Lord's, purchased with the blood of Jesus Christ? Do we weigh up the pros and the cons in our decisions according to spiritual values or the worlds values? I would recommend to you Dr Masters' book *Steps for Guidance* ⁶ on this issue – it is a real gem. Do we say with the hymn writer Frances Ridley Havergal (1836-79) 'Take my life and let it be consecrated Lord to Thee'?

Here the Psalmist was like clay in the hands of the potter. 'Mould me as my Maker according to Your ways.' He was not asking to learn God's commandments simply for knowledge alone, but for practice in faith and love.

'Those who fear You will be glad when they see me, because I have hoped in Your word' verse 74.

Without being proud, the Psalmist believed he had something profitable to contribute to fellowship. We need to remind ourselves as believers how important our contribution is to true fellowship. For example, if we are invited to lunch and our conversation is unspiritual, negative, or running one another down, then our contribution means a gloom descends on the gathering. People are left with a spirit of heaviness. When this happens people are not glad in our presence. Maybe they will think twice before having us again. Before we come to a person's house we need to think, 'How can I positively contribute to this kind hospitality and opportunity to fellowship?' It is not only about presenting our bodies to the table; it is about presenting our spirit to the conversation.

The Psalmist knew those who loved the Lord would be glad to see him because he would be a blessing. The kernel of blessing rested in the fact that his testimony of experience would be Word-based. He would be able to show how the Word of God was proved to him in

⁶ *Steps For Guidance in the Journey of Life*, Dr P Masters, Wakeman Trust, from Metropolitan Tabernacle

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trial and affliction. This for profit! Spurgeon says: 'Hopeful men bring gladness with them.'

I know, O Lord, that Your judgments are right, and that in faithfulness You have afflicted me' verse 75.

Once again we are reminded of the Psalmist's supreme confidence in the wisdom of his heavenly Father. Even in a time of adversity, faith shines in the wisdom and faithfulness of the Lord's dealings with him. There is something incredibly liberating in this type of faith. It believes even when it does not have all the answers. This liberating faith trusts in the Lord at all times and leans not on its own understanding (*Proverbs 3.5*).

One of the devil's lies is to get us to think we must understand all that God is doing in our lives as our right. Rather, the Psalmist has said: '*Give me understanding that I may learn Your commandments.*' This is vastly different from calling God to account to explain His personal dealings with us as our right. Our obedience and development in grace is dependent upon our trusting in the Lord, whatever. Faith believes in the principle that God is too wise to be mistaken and too good to be unkind. So the Psalmist found liberation in trusting and praising God for His wise judgment and faithfulness.

See here also the comfort of the experience of the Lord's dealings. The Psalmist could say, '*I know*'. There is then the subjective aspect to faith – I know both in my mind and heart that the Lord is right. The previous verse speaks of faith in the Word and this verse speaks of that faith developed through experience. I have experienced affliction under the sovereign, permissive will of the Lord, yet it has drawn me closer to Him. Through this experience my spiritual life has deepened. I know the Lord has dealt with me personally, yet the way of the Lord in my life has been beyond my comprehension at times. At times I have had to be going along by faith and not by sight.

Sometimes the most we can say of understanding the ways of the

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Lord in our life is by the fruit seen afterwards. It is an after-event understanding, rather than a during-the-event understanding. During the event it is faith. One of the fruits is this supreme confidence in the Lord Who has wonderfully sanctified the affliction.

'Let, I pray, Your merciful kindness be for my comfort, according to Your word to Your servant' verse 76.

In the next verses the Psalmist gives two descriptions of the wonderful ways of the Lord to His people: merciful kindness and tender mercies.

See here again the confidence in the character of God. He had just been through deep affliction but the outcome was not resentment against the Lord, but trust in Him. He looked to the same sovereign Lord, his loving heavenly Father, Who had corrected and disciplined him, knowing His heart of love, pleaded for the comfort of His merciful kindness to be known to him personally.

But notice the parameter of the prayer. It is a prayer which accords with the Word of the Lord. Remember we are talking here about our experience of the Lord's dealings with us. In this verse the Psalmist was praying that the Lord would comfort according to a promise that had been given him – see verse 49. The last part of the verse speaks about the personal application of the Word of God. When the Lord speaks to us through His Word in a personal way in devotion times, or through preaching, His words are meant to be locked up in our mind and heart to be used in times of testing for comfort and assurance.

'Let Your tender mercies come to me, that I may live; for Your law is my delight' verse 77.

These words, truly meant, can only come from the lips of those called by God's grace. Without grace we have no real interest in God's mercy, or indeed in God's Word, as a delight. However here we have the Psalmist in a personal relationship with the Lord of perfect

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relationships. He realised that mercy from the Lord is dependent on the Lord reaching down to him. He realised that his natural and spiritual life depended upon this merciful visitation and intervention of God.

In particular here the Psalmist was concerned for restoring mercies whereby he could feel life in his soul. He desired the mercy of the Lord shown through His Word not only for its comfort but to live by. It is good to desire God's forgiving mercy, His comforting mercy, not forgetting God's living mercy.

He needed spiritual medicine from Heaven suitable to meet his condition. So he went to the Lord as the Doctor of his soul to get suitable medicine from the storehouse of God's restoring mercies. He had no feeling in the soul; it had been a wintertime experience in his Christian life. This prayer has a deep ring of faith. God's law remained his delight whether it corrected or comforted.

'Let the proud be ashamed, for they treated me wrongfully with falsehood; but I will meditate on Your precepts' verse 78.

There is, I believe, a note of intercession here in the tone of the Psalmist's prayer for God's intervention. He did not ask for judgment so much as for the eyes of the proud to be opened to the shame of pride. They had spoken falsely regarding himself, and for this they should be ashamed. This is a prayer that concerns the honour and glory of the Lord. Shame rightly considered has a fruit! If this shame was sanctified in their life it would bring about the fruit of repentance before God.

Here we can see an important principle to remember in dealing with those who despitefully use us: commit them to the Lord in prayer and then cease to dwell on the matter, and resort to God's Word and way. Nothing can be gained in our life by nursing hurt; it only further prolongs the pain of persecution. In this way what Satan means for continued distraction is turned around to deeper devotion.

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'Let those who fear You turn to me, those who know Your testimonies' verse 79.

If this is David writing here there had been times when he had undoubtedly offended the godly. At times his behaviour had brought the name of the Lord into reproach. Maybe, having been restored by the Lord, he longed to know restoration of fellowship with believers. Here again is an important principle for us – the restoration of fellowship to a repenting believer. Forgiveness and fellowship based upon the shed blood of Jesus Christ are the best of friends.

Here in a spirit of humility the Psalmist longs for this renewed fellowship, that faces would again be turned to him. He was no longer seeking the 'well done' and favour of the world – he wanted the fellowship of God's people. They were known to him as those who feared the Lord and knew the Lord's testimonies. Here is a true test of repentance and restoration. What type of people do we want to be with?

'Let my heart be blameless regarding Your statutes, that I may not be ashamed' verse 80.

Here the Psalmist brings us to an issue that we have been reminding ourselves about constantly. Primarily it is a matter of the heart. No manner of regulations will cure the problem in the heart. If the heart is right, then the rest will follow alongside as a fruit. He is seeking a heart that is immersed, moulded and motivated by God's Word. This is the only way to a sound heart.

As we look at this prayer for ourselves we can see its Christ-centred nature. Only in Christ can we be blameless regarding the Lord's statutes. Only in Christ are we not ashamed before our Maker.

'Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need' Hebrews 4.16.

'Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God' Matthew

5.8.

11. THE MIDNIGHT OF THE SOUL

Psalm 119.81-88

These verses are very descriptive of the distressed state in which the Psalmist felt to be in his experience. As we read these verses we may ask the question, ‘Why does God seem to delay His deliverance in trial? Why is it that, like the Psalmist, we need to come to the end of our tether and to the end of ourselves?’ God’s way seems an extreme way to learn about our own insufficiency and the sufficiency of God.

Here the Psalmist is not beyond the knowledge and control of the Lord – yet look at the state of the man in verse 83. Left to ourselves we would prefer the Lord to build our self-esteem rather than wean us from it. We would prefer the Lord to confirm us in our own philosophy of life and preserve us from trials. We would prefer the Lord to take us to Heaven without attending to our needful sanctification.

This type of teaching sadly has enveloped the Church in the UK, but it is not found in Scripture. *Psalm 119* is skipped over. The Word of God is put through the humanistic sieve to avoid the challenging parts. Modern preachers are a bit like the Tesco advertisement in their approach to Scripture – ‘We cherry pick for you!’ Yet the Lord in His wisdom chooses to use trial and persecution to build us spiritually.

Here was extreme trial. The Psalmist was waiting desperately for the appearing of the Lord. Prayer was reduced to two words – ‘Help me!’ It is so helpful that the Lord has left such accounts on record for us. It confirms the reality and truth of God’s Word. In the end his faith was strengthened in the furnace of trial as it learned to fix its hope upon the Lord alone. So we can say God is wise, just, holy and true, and always has a purpose of goodwill to His people. Our delays are not delays with God. Actually God delivers according to perfect timing – not before or after!

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'My soul faints for Your salvation, but I hope in Your Word'
verse 81.

Notice here that this issue is undoubtedly of a spiritual nature as well. Note his soul, not his body, was fainting. The Psalmist could not live comfortably or be at peace all the while his soul felt cut off from the Lord. In his experience he had been brought to the point where only the delivering salvation of the Lord would do.

We are reminded that how we wait on the Lord is a measure of how serious we are about deliverance. The Psalmist was exhausted in his soul as he cried out for the Lord to appear, as he longed for the Lord. Remember the woman who pressed through the crowd just to touch the hem of Jesus' garment. She had an intensity about coming, and supreme faith and trust in the thought, *'if only I may touch His garment'* (Matthew 9.20-21).

In the extremity of his experience in his soul the Psalmist still hoped in the Word of the Lord. Hope in the Bible is not as we understand it in our language to mean, 'I hope so, yet it may not happen.' Biblical hope is certain hope. It was not a matter of whether but when he would be delivered.

For hope to be truly certain, it has to be focused on certain unfailing truth. It is focused on God's Word. It is a cruel deception to encourage people to put wholehearted trust in anything but the Word of the Lord. Remember, when it is midnight in the soul, there is always the Word of the Lord that endures for ever.

'My eyes fail from seeking Your word, saying, "When will You comfort me?"' verse 82.

It was not that the Psalmist had neglected the study of the Word of the Lord. But when he studied the Word at that time in his spiritual experience he could find no comfort for his soul. The promises were there in the Word, but they did not affect his soul inwardly with particular comfort. His distress had rendered his soul unable to derive

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comfort from the Word, despite his search. His problem was in the application of the Word to his soul in the power of the Holy Spirit.

However, note the Psalmist did not reject the Word because he was not receiving the comfort. No; he waited patiently for the Lord to appear and apply His Word with comfort to his soul. Part of faith is evidenced in the Psalmist's waiting for the Lord. Part of believing is waiting. This issue is not whether the Lord will comfort him, but when the Lord will comfort him.

This spiritual experience could be described as waiting on the Word rather than waiting off the Word, a time when studying the Word is a labour of the soul and a spiritual travailing that has a fruitful outcome. The point here for the Psalmist is his absolute trust and hope in the Word as his ultimate source of comfort.

'For I have become like a wineskin in the smoke, yet I do not forget Your statutes' verse 83.

The picture here is of leather wineskin bottles that have been left hanging inside a smoke-filled tent. After a while the skins have become blackened and brittle, seemingly forgotten and no longer of use. That was the pathway the Psalmist felt to be in – shrivelled up in his soul and distressed by the experience, in a suffocating, blackening smoke of opposition, temptation, loneliness, accusations and slander. He felt left on the shelf spiritually in his experience, collecting dust, good for nothing and useless. To him his spiritual life seemed non-existent; rather he felt brittle and dry, embattled by the enemy's smoke. Yet he did not forget the Lord's statutes, His way! This was the only certainty left in his life – God's Word.

'How many are the days of your servant? When will You execute judgment on those who persecute me?' verse 84

Here the Psalmist had come to the point even of asking how long he had to live? If the Lord still had a work for him to do then deliverance

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must come as he felt to be at the very end. Notice how that even in this great distress he still understood himself to be a servant of the living God. However, by using the terminology of faith and submission he was wrestling with the Lord to appear. He belonged to Him and to no one else. By faith he brought himself under the protecting care of the Lord. His desire was not to take matters in hand himself but for the Lord to execute His wise judgment. The exercise in his soul centred on the tension between his timing and God's timing.

'The proud have dug pits for me, which is not according to Your law' verse 85.

What is meant here are the hidden traps, the secret snares, the purposeful honey trap for the fall of a believer; temptations dressed up as beautiful, right for you, reasonable, but really a way to trap you in your testimony. Satan has many types of pits, but all are camouflaged to appear as something else. When the unbeliever is irked by your testimony he will often test your resolve and set a trap. What is meant here is a deceitful trap which is designed to destroy.

'Not according to Your law' means they are unashamed in their actions and pride; contrary to the law of the Lord that commands us to love our neighbour; contrary even to the law of the Lord concerning animals.

'And if a man opens a pit, or if a man digs a pit and does not cover it, and an ox or a donkey falls in it, the owner of the pit shall make it good; he shall give money to their owner, but the dead animal shall be his' Exodus 21.33-34.

This reminds us the devil does not ever 'play by the rules'. He regularly fouls; he is a dirty player, fit to be sent off! This is what the Psalmist was crying out for, that the devil will get 'sent off' from the field of his life.

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'All Your commandments are faithful: they persecute me wrongfully; help me!' verse 86.

Here the Psalmist lays down a very important principle for us in times of persecution and opposition. The source of the problem is Satan. It is Satan who encouraging the enemies of God to attack His people. One of Satan's lies is to get us to blame God and question His faithfulness towards His people. Here the Psalmist made his wonderful statement of faith and then pinned the blame where it belongs.

At the end of the verse the Psalmist travelled the path, in his experience, where prayer was reduced to two words: *'Help me!'* Some of the most powerful prayers in Scripture are very short. For example, *'God, be merciful to me a sinner'* (Luke 18.13). There are many times when the Lord's people have to resort to this short *'Help me!'* prayer.

'They almost made an end of me on earth, but I did not forsake Your precepts' verse 87.

The assurance and the security of the Psalmist in his deep persecution and trial was to remain loyal to God. His witness was brought to this point: whatever is happening in my life, my only hope remains in the Lord. From this we can learn there is such a thing as a holy stubbornness wherein we remain fixed in our faith. This is not a stubbornness arising from ignorance, but a resolute attitude arising from discernment of truth, understanding something of the wiles of the devil set against the pure and faithful character of God.

Here, even though his life was in danger, having been nearly finished off by the enemies of the Lord, he was resolute. The Psalmist understood that forsaking the Lord would damage him more than all the persecution of the world. Here it is good for us to remember to walk in a way that does not damage our soul – be good to yourself!

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‘Revive me according to Your lovingkindness, so that I may keep the testimony of Your mouth’ verse 88.

Notice here how the Psalmist, despite all his troubles, still believed in the lovingkindness of the Lord. The reviving he desired was for his soul, but for the purpose that he could keep the testimony of the Lord, that his life may be lived for the Lord. He longed to know spiritual energy according to God’s grace.

In his prayer of faith notice how it is so Lord-centred. *‘Your loving-kindness’, ‘the testimony of Your mouth’*. Here we are reminded that God’s work of sanctification in our lives will evidence Who is the Lord of our life.

Conclusion

The heading for this stanza was ‘The Midnight of the Soul.’ We have considered a number of ‘dark valley’ experiences of the soul. It is so helpful that the Word of the Lord is faithful in its revelation of all the believers’ experiences. Next we will see light and life dawning once again in his soul.

12. ETERNAL STABILITY – ONLY IN GOD AND HIS WORD

Psalm 119.89-96

In these verses the Psalmist comes from a dark sea storm in his soul into the safe harbour of God's Word. It is as though he is now standing on the quay of solid rock, no longer tossed about and battered by the waves. He is testifying to a deep understanding of the nature of God and His Word.

'Forever, O Lord, Your word is settled in heaven' verse 89.

First, the eternity of God formed the assurance for the Psalmist; the eternal, forever Lord reigning in Heaven. In worshipping the eternal Lord, the Psalmist then developed his praise to include the Word of the Lord. So it is that on this foundation the Psalmist focused on the eternal security of the Word of the Lord.

The Word of the Lord endures for ever. It is established and settled in Heaven from the very throne of God. The word 'settled' in the Hebrew means to be fixed, immovable, established. It has an authoritative military meaning. The Word of the Lord remains despite all the attacks of the enemy; the eternal lighthouse shining in time. No popular uprising can dislodge the Lord from His throne, or change His Word one iota. See *Psalm 2*.

This truth is not like a dictator coming to power and stubbornly hanging on to office. The Lord has always been Lord. There has not always been the universe, but there has always been the Lord. But when meditating on the eternal Word we must remember the eternal Word of God in Person.

'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God...And the Word became flesh and dwelt

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among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth' John 1.1, 14.

This is the Son of God Who is anointed from eternity, and for ever settled and established as the Head of the Church.

'Your faithfulness endures to all generations; You established the earth, and it abides' verse 90.

Safe in the harbour of God's Word and standing on the quay, the Psalmist looked out to the turmoil of the sea. He considered the past, the present and the future and comforted himself in the faithfulness of the Lord. As we look towards an uncertain future, and men's hearts are failing them for fear, we consider what sort of future we can be certain of. Here is the place of certainty. Whatever else changes, God changes not! He is the same yesterday, today and for ever (*Hebrews 13.8*).

Here is our comfort and prayer for the rising generation, our children and grandchildren. *'To all generations'* means to the end of the world. Whatever the ongoing state of the world, God remains faithful. The created world, as we know it, will abide until that time when the Lord will come in glory. The Lord established it, the Lord continues it and the Lord will finalise all things. He has the whole world in His hands, including all the galaxies, stars and planets and the earth itself. The earth only abides because God in His sovereign wisdom permits it to do so.

'They continue this day according to Your ordinances, for all are Your servants' verse 91.

The elements of creation are the servants of the Lord to ensure His sovereign, permissive providence. They are used of the Lord to remind us of His faithfulness in mercy and in judgment. Earthquakes, hurricanes, tornados, floods and thunder storms remind us we live in a fallen, uncertain world. Set against this backdrop, the harvests remind us of the common grace of God to feed rebellious man. The

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beauty of creation reminds us of His majesty. The seasons remind us of God's constant faithfulness. Let creation's elements and events speak seriously to us. They are the servants of the Lord to remind us.

'Unless Your law had been my delight, I would then have perished in my affliction. I will never forget Your precepts, for by them You have given me life' verses 92-93.

Here the Psalmist testified to the absolute significance of God's Word to him personally. It saved his life! Without the Word of the Lord and the standard of the Lord the Psalmist would have been overwhelmed. The Word of the Lord provided him with a standard and a guide by which to make his decisions. The Word of the Lord provided him with stability, the only certainty in his life. The Word of the Lord was his one source of comfort and hope.

In C H Spurgeon's *Treasury of David* he speaks of a very poor widow who only had a few pence for provisions. Very carefully she spent the money for her needs in the grocer's shop until she had one penny left. With that final penny she brought oil for her lamp. She said, 'I need a light to read the Bible which is my one comfort.'

The *Authorised Version* describes his appreciation for the law of the Lord in the plural as 'delights'. He meditated on different aspects of God's Word delighting in its truth, wisdom, guidance and assurance. He could only delight in it because he respected it and really believed it to be God speaking to him. Without the resource of God's Word he would have been destroyed in the trial. It was the Lord's medicine.

Notice here that it was God, through His Holy Spirit, working through His Word to the Psalmist. So it became the Word of life to Him. He went from the channel to the source of the blessing – the Lord.

Here we have one of the deepest statements of appreciation for the Word of God anywhere, by attributing its blessing to saving his life and understanding its spiritual, life-giving purpose. This is one of the

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unique characteristics of the Word of the Lord. It is not only inspired by God, but it requires God to apply it with power to our souls to give us life.

Notice here how the Psalmist focused on the precepts of the Lord, for the walking out of the way of the Lord. The Word applied with power gave him wisdom, direction and strength to walk willingly in the Lord's way.

'I am Yours, save me; for I have sought Your precepts' verse 94.

Here the Psalmist once again comforted himself with Whom he really belonged to. Chosen by the Lord and redeemed by the Lord, he pleaded to be saved from his enemies and saved to the end.

The 'save me' prayer is similar to the 'help me' prayer. It is the realisation of our utter dependence upon the Lord. He was amazed at God's saving grace and realised it was grace and grace alone that had given him holy desires. He considered what had happened in his life, how he had faced the trials and temptations, and realised that God's grace had made a change in his life. Seeking the Lord's way is the evidence.

He considered the reason that he sought the precepts of the Lord and not the way of the world. He was not trying to deal with the Lord saying, 'I have sought Your precepts, therefore You must save me.' No, he was saying, 'I am Yours, and my evidence is in my God-directed, Word-directed desires.' But he put God right at the beginning. Like John who wrote, '*We love Him because He first loved us*' (1 John 4.19), his conclusion by faith was that he was the Lord's. His whole salvation physically and spiritually rested in the Lord.

'The wicked wait for me to destroy me, but I will consider Your testimonies' verse 95.

As Christians we need discernment to understand the ways of the wicked against our souls. We need to remember that we are in a spiritual warfare; we are called to be soldiers in God's army.

Eternal Stability – Only in God and His Word

‘Finally, my brethren, be strong in the Lord and in the power of His might. Put on the whole armour of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places. Therefore take up the whole armour of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand’ Ephesians 6.10-13.

Satan uses people to attack Christians, not only openly but also secretly, in a clandestine fashion. Satan is always on the look-out, waiting for opportunities to destroy our witness and usefulness for the Lord. In the Psalmist’s case the reason they hated him was because of what he stood for. He was persecuted for righteousness’ sake. It was his witness that disturbed their consciences. The fruit of resentment is anger and hatred, leading to a murderous spirit. The Word of God reminds us that if this is the case we are actually in a blessed state and condition spiritually.

‘Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake’ Matthew 5.10-11.

The second part of this verse reminds us of a person secure and stable, taking refuge in the tower of God’s Word. Fear has been replaced with faith. We see this also in *Psalm 56*.

‘I have seen the consummation of all perfection, but Your commandment is exceedingly broad’ verse 96.

The Psalmist has been brought to this solemn realisation of the Fall. Everything is stained by sin; there is nothing perfect in a fallen world. The Fall has affected absolutely everything. This is constantly confirmed by the extent of the law of the Lord. As all in this world and those within it are affected by sin, so the law superabounds all things.

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There is not one aspect of life that does not come under the law of the Lord. Remember nothing slips through the law's net! The law towers above all the actions and affairs of men, but by faith we can see the wonder of the Person of Jesus Christ Who has obeyed the law.

'Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill' Matthew 5.17.

Every aspect of the law is covered and obeyed. So in Christ we move from the exceedingly broad net of the law to the exceedingly broad, indestructible net of grace, which rescues from the towering condemnation of the law.

Conclusion

Our eternal stability is in the unchanging Word of God. Our eternal security is in the Word of God that has been made flesh and dwelt among us, Jesus Christ.

13. GROWING IN THE WAY BY THE WORD

Psalm 119.97-104

The theme of this stanza is growing in spiritual understanding by appreciation and use of the Word of God.

‘Oh, how I love, Your law! It is my meditation all the day’ verse 97.

When the Psalmist testified of his love for the law of the Lord, it was an expression of appreciation for its value. A believer loves the law in Christ because it is holy and reflects the pure character of the Lord; because it is wise and reflects the pure wisdom of the Lord; and because it is perfect and reflects the pure direction of the Lord.

But we can only love the law as we view it in Christ, the One Who has fulfilled it perfectly on our behalf. In Christ the law is no longer a terror to us but a standard that we should obey if we truly follow His example.

This text shows how important it is to see Christ in the Word of God. Our relationship to the law in Christ is one of engagement, not estrangement. Spurgeon said:

‘Those who know the power of the Gospel perceive an infinite loveliness in the law, as they see it fulfilled and embodied in Christ Jesus.’

When David says he meditated on the law all day, it does not mean the Psalmist spent all day in his study. It means that firstly the Word of God was hidden in his heart, so wherever he was the Word was. Secondly, it means the Psalmist applied the Word of God to all aspects of his life as a believer. Thirdly, it means that he took time out in serious meditation of the Word, applying it to his life. Each day was a new day in partnership with the Word. It was not just for special occasions or

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for the Sabbath Day; it was his manual of life. Undoubtedly he greatly benefitted from the Word being in his mind and heart.

'You, through Your commandments, make me wiser than my enemies; for they are ever with me' verse 98.

Here we see a real and positive benefit from the serious study and meditation of the Word of the Lord. The Word of the Lord, when meditated on and followed by faith, brings stability and spiritual strength. It enables our decision-making to be on the solid basis of truth and morality.

The Psalmist was wiser than his enemies because:

- he viewed life from a different perspective to them. He viewed life through the lens of God's Word and in the light of eternity for the good of his whole being. When we think about it, the enemies of the Lord and His people, actually have a very limited focus on life;
- he had the indwelling of the Holy Spirit;
- by faith and obedience his life was moulded by God's Word. As he walked by faith and obedience, with the help of the Spirit he learned the truth of the Lord more deeply;
- he carried the Word of the Lord with him at all times as his guide.
- he respected God and His Word. The Word of the Lord says:

'If anyone wills to do His will, he shall know concerning the doctrine' John 7.17.

It also says:

'Then shall we know, if we follow on to know the Lord' Hosea 6.3 (AV).

There is a link between obedience and growth.

'I have more understanding than all my teachers, for Your testimonies are my meditation. I understand more than the ancients, because I keep Your precepts' verses 99-100.

Growing in the Way by the Word

This is not a proud boast of the Psalmist but rather a note of praise for the Lord's testimonies. Here the Psalmist shows the blessing of living doctrine, by experience, in his life. It is in this context he has more understanding than his teachers. They may have more knowledge of the law than him, technically speaking, but not more experience. The Psalmist had understanding that harmonised with his knowledge.

To illustrate what I mean, there was a lecturer at the Bible college where I studied who knew of a man in the USA who was an expert in Greek, and was a renowned exegete of the *Letter to the Romans*. He studied every word, the context, the teaching of Paul, and could expound and lecture on it most accurately. In fact, he was the leading lecturer on the teaching of *Romans*. Yet this man was unconverted and let people know it. The truth it contained meant nothing to his soul, only his mind. There was no application.

Contrast this with a lady with special needs in my congregation at a previous church, who attended church faithfully each week. This delightful Christian lady was undoubtedly born again and had a faithful testimony, but could hardly read or write. It was incredible. During the sermon she would have her head bowed and would be flicking through the hymnbook. Yet afterwards she would talk about the sermon and come out with simple and yet profound thoughts, so much so I used to wish I had thought of that point as well! She had spiritual understanding and at times she showed additional understanding to her Pastor.

The Psalmist even included the ancients, referring to the aged men who remained spiritually immature. They had a head knowledge of Scripture, but this knowledge had not been personally proven by them through experience. The difference in the Psalmist's life was the application of knowledge in the heart. He meditated on the Word and he walked in the Word. This was his pathway to spiritual maturity. Here is a pattern for us to follow ourselves. The wisdom was proven by his walk according to knowledge.

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Having washed the disciples' feet Jesus said, *'If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them'* (John 13.17).

'I have restrained my feet from every evil way, that I may keep Your word' verse 101.

Above anything else the Psalmist wanted to avoid inconsistency in his walk. His priority was to keep God's Word.

Let us think about the restraint upon the people of God. It is not like a dog straining at the leash to run off, or being restrained against our will. It is rather a restraint that is upon us as a fruit of the renewed will. It is a willing restraint for obedience; a restraint characterised by love. *'If you love Me'*, Jesus said, *'keep my commandments'* (John 14.15). It is a restraint of wisdom. A wise Christian knows the perils of the evil way and restrains his feet from that way. Also it is a restraint of respect and a restraint of integrity. A double-minded man is unstable in all his ways (*James 1.8*). There is a restraint of the new nature; as we feed our new man with the Word so our resistance to evil grows. If we continually feed our old nature with worldliness, then our resistance to evil weakens and the Spirit is grieved. Matthew Henry said, *'The more understanding we get by the Word of God, the more rooted will our hatred of sin be.'*

'I have not departed from Your judgments, for You Yourself have taught me' verse 102.

The Psalmist was not in the business of making himself seem wiser than God. God, in His wise judgment, had ordained a way through which He taught him separation from evil. All the Lord's people have to go to the same school. Using picture language relevant to today, our Teacher is the Holy Spirit of God; our textbook is the Word of God; our Headmaster is Jesus Christ; and the Chairman of the Governors is our heavenly Father. The discipline in this school is always in love, never in anger, nor unreasonable or unjustified. The wellbeing of the pupils in this school is second-to-none. It is whole-being care.

Growing in the Way by the Word

The aims and objectives of this school are to prepare us for the biggest journey of our life, the journey from time into eternity.

When we grasp by faith the sincere, loving, truthful intentions of God towards His people, obedience is a joy. But our security and assurance in such a statement is only by complete faith in Christ our Righteousness.

‘How sweet are Your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth!’ verse 103.

Here we are introduced to a question of taste. Let us pray that our spiritual taste buds will be as strong as the Psalmist’s. You know how sweet honey is to the taste. It has a wholesome, creative sweetness. Yet the Psalmist experienced a unique, spiritual sweetness only known to a saved person. Let us pray for the Lord to give us spiritual appetites, and make His Word sweet to our taste.

The road to renewed spiritual appetite for ourselves may well involve repentance.

‘Come, and let us return to the Lord; for He has torn, but He will heal us; He has stricken, but He will bind us up’ Hosea 6.1.

It may involve a letting go of the past and a humbling of ourselves before the Lord. Calvin put it like this:

‘The Law of God will be unsavoury to us, or, at least, it will never be so sweet to us, as to withdraw us from the pleasures of the flesh, until we have struggled manfully against our own nature, in order to subdue the carnal affections which prevail within us.’⁷

Let us not rest until we can say ourselves with the Psalmist, *‘How sweet are Your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth!’*

‘Through Your precepts I get understanding; therefore I hate every false way’ verse 104.

⁷ *Commentary on the Psalms*, John Calvin, Banner of Truth

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Matthew Henry comments:

“The unspeakable profit and advantage he gained by the word of God:

(1) It helped him to a good head: “Through Thy precepts I get understanding to discern between truth and falsehood, good and evil, so as not to mistake either in the conduct of my own life or in advising others.”

(2) It helped him to a good heart: “Therefore, because I have got understanding of the truth, I hate every false way, and am steadfastly resolved not to turn aside into it.”

Here we are reminded of the blessing and wisdom of a God-given appreciation for the Word of the Lord. The Psalmist realised through the precepts of the Lord (ways of the Lord) that his understanding was enlightened. The more light poured into his soul, the more his hatred of sin grew. Truth shone and revealed the false way for what it was.

When the Psalmist viewed the false ways in the light of God’s precepts, all its ugliness and danger was revealed. Truth brought forth the fruit of a pure hatred for sin. There is such a thing as a righteous hatred in the same way as there is a righteous anger. The reason for such centres on the honour of the Lord. We set out to honour the Lord, not Satan. Spurgeon remarked: ‘May all of us reach this state of discrimination and discernment so that we may greatly glorify God.’

Conclusion

We have sought to see how spiritual understanding grows by appreciation and use of the Word of God, and that our walk is moulded and directed by the Word of the Lord.

14. LIGHT, LIFE AND JOY IN THE WORD OF THE LORD

Psalm 119.105-112

Light

‘Your Word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path’ verse 105.

Ambrose, an early Church father, makes an interesting observation on this text. He likens the lamp to the law, being a lesser, limited light, and the light to Christ, the greater Light. We might say the law is the lamp to guide our feet from falling, whereas Christ is the great Light to direct us onward on the pathway to Heaven.

Practically, the picture is of a person walking along an unlit pathway. There is danger of tripping up, walking in refuse or falling into a hole. A lamp light is essential on this journey:

- to avoid hurt;
- to make progress on the journey;
- to provide the reality about the path before you as it lights up the way;
- to alert you to dangers; and
- to let others know you are on the pathway.

A lamp provides the walker the light in which he can walk in confidence. Here we are introduced to the concept of the Word of the Lord, providing light along the Christian pathway.

First, we must see the Word of the Lord as: the light of truth and knowledge; the light of direction; the light of counsel; the light of comfort and assurance; and as the light that enables progress in the way. Every-day examples are a lamp fixed on your forehead which is of great help to see into dark corners when painting, or fitting a

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kitchen, etc; and so-called 'cat's eyes' set into the centre of the road to guide which are so helpful, but without the light shining on them they are useless.

'The entrance of Your words gives light' Psalm 119.130.

When the Word of the Lord shines on the pathway, the way becomes clear before our eyes. We are to appreciate and respect the Word of the Lord as an essential light without which we come to harm.

'The nature of the word of God, and the great intention of giving it to the world: it is a lamp and a light. It discovers to us, concerning God and ourselves, that which otherwise we could not have known; it shows us what is amiss, and will be dangerous; it directs us in our work and way, and a dark place indeed the world would be without it.' Matthew Henry

Life

'I have sworn and confirmed that I will keep Your righteous judgments' verse 106.

The Psalmist expresses himself in very strong and solemn language to devote himself to the way of the Lord. He says in effect, 'I have solemnly resolved.'

But we need to look upon this statement with New Testament Gospel eyes and application. While the Psalmist uses legal language, his spiritual experience of walking with the Lord was still by grace. The Psalmist was not making a legally binding agreement which depended upon his commitment. We must see it rather as a deep and heartfelt expression of devotion, as a response to grace.

Looked at through New Testament eyes the believer's commitment to God's way is a response of gratitude. It is a devotion and motive inspired by love and respect to the Lord for all His amazing grace and goodness. It is a devotion of gratitude and appreciation for Who the Lord is, and for the inspired truth of His Word. It is a commitment to

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keep God's wise judgments in complete dependence upon His enabling. For the New Testament Christian it means a willing obedience to follow the example of Jesus Christ as Lord. Viewed from a New Testament perspective, the Psalmist reminds us that serious commitment is vital; we are accountable to the Lord and to each other in our commitment to the way of the Lord.

To illustrate this, I read on the internet of an African Pastor martyred for his faith. This statement was found after his death tacked to the wall of his house.

'My past is redeemed; my present makes sense; and my future is secure. I'm finished and done with low living, sight walking, small planning, smooth knees, colourless dreams, mundane talking, cheap living and dwarfed goals.

'I no longer need pre-eminence, prosperity, position, plaudits or popularity. I don't have to be first, recognised, praised, regarded or rewarded. I now live by faith, lean on His promises, walk in patience, live by prayer and serve in God's strength. My face is set, my goal heaven, my road narrow, my way rough, my companions few, my Guide reliable, and my mission clear. I cannot be bought, compromised, detoured, lured away, turned back, deluded, or delayed. I will not flinch in the face of sacrifice, hesitate in the presence of the adversary, negotiate at the table of the enemy, ponder at the pool of popularity, or meander in the maze of mediocrity. I won't give up, shut up or let up because of the cause of Christ. I am a disciple of Jesus. I must go on till He comes.'

'I am afflicted very much; revive me, O Lord, according to Your word' verse 107.

Here we have the effect, in terms of persecution, of the previous statement of devotion. This statement also confirms to us that the Psalmist was not self-reliant in his commitment. It may be the

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Psalmist was afflicted by fear, doubts, threats, temptations, depression, illness, or opposition. It may also have been the devil's tool of discouragement. This is one of his most powerful weapons because it disables. Whatever the brother's problem, it was evidently a great burden to him and it laid him low spiritually.

So it is that he asked not for deliverance from the trial, but for reviving according to God's Word. His soul remained of paramount importance to him. Life in his soul meant everything to him. The trial drove him to prayer that accords with God's way.

Notice the powerful argument the Psalmist presented before the Lord: 'This is my problem – revive me, O Lord, according to Your Word.' This was a prayer of submission and faith. It was a wise prayer, knowing what was really best for him in his situation. While the world drowns their sorrows with beer and entertainment saying, 'What you need is a good night out', the believer turns to the Word of the Lord for comfort, life and refreshment. He pleaded the promises of the Lord to those who seek Him. Later in the Old Testament we have the Lord's promise:

'I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will keep My judgments and do them'
Ezekiel 36.26-27.

The Psalmist knew that to obey the righteous judgment of the Lord wholeheartedly required a spiritual mind. The spiritually-minded man will be dedicated to God's Word, God's will and God's way. The hymnwriter wrote:

*Spirit of faith come down,
Reveal the things of God.*

Charles Wesley, 1707-88

Revelation produces resolution.

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‘Accept I pray, the free will offerings of my mouth, O Lord, and teach me Your judgments’ verse 108.

The term ‘free will’ is not the most common among our Reformed churches, but here we have it in God’s Word. Before the Fall Adam and Eve had a free will, the freedom to choose between obedience or disobedience. They took a freewill decision, when tempted of the devil, to disobey the Lord. Man fell as a consequence.

Every person born after the Fall is born with their will in bondage to sin. By nature we are enemies of God. However, under the influence of the Holy Spirit in Christ, our freedom of will to obey the Lord is restored. Only in Christ can we worship with freedom of will. Only in Christ can we have a desire to worship.

Where there is a free will there must have first been free grace in Christ. Where there is no free will there has been no free grace in Christ. Here is the freedom that really counts – to give praise to the Lord freely and willingly. This is the worship that God delights to receive – the worship of a renewed heart and will.

Four times in *Leviticus* the Lord encourages the fruit of the free will offering, for such an offering shows the fruit of conversion and in turn brings the greatest honour to His name. Only in Christ can we freely pray that the Lord would teach us more of His wise judgments. It is to deepen in our admiration for the dealings of the Lord Who is perfect in all His ways. This comes through studying the Word to trace the Lord’s wise dealings and to trace them in our own life. It seems the Psalmist was constantly understanding his need of teaching.

‘My life is continually in my hand, yet I do not forget Your law. The wicked have laid a snare for me, yet I have not strayed from Your precepts’ verses 109-110.

The Psalmist was living in a state of constant danger from his enemies. Such a time in his life would have been extremely stressful

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for him. Stress within a person can be very disabling. It can be all-consuming. This experience for the Psalmist was not self-induced as with those who magnify things out of proportion. This was a stressful situation caused by the oppression of his persecutors. Uncertainty in life's circumstances can be very stressful.

To illustrate, I read a book recently entitled *Courage Under Fire*⁸ published by the charity 'Combat Stress' which reaches out to soldiers whose lives have been seriously affected mentally by the trauma of war. One soldier who served in Northern Ireland during the 1980s was still living in fear, checking under his car each day for a bomb.

It is possible to become imprisoned by fear, especially if it is continual like the Psalmist's situation. He knew his life was in danger and every day the wicked laid a snare for him. At such times it is natural to be in a state of constant anxiety, constantly watching your back. The Psalmist found his peace of mind and stability in trouble by adherence to the Word of the Lord. Matthew Henry's comment is:

'In the multitude of his cares for his own safety he finds room in his head and heart for the word of God, and has that in his mind as fresh as ever; and where that dwells richly it will be a well of living water.'

Instead of panicking, he was able to plan his days according to the principles and pattern of God's Word. He was not going to use the methods of the world and drown his fear in drink to overcome his enemies. One feels sorry for an unbeliever in trouble. Where can they go? In the book I referred to earlier one man, who had been an excellent and brave soldier but seriously affected in his mind by trauma, turned to drink and ended up in prison, losing his wife. What a tragedy!

In fear the Psalmist was not going to wander from the precepts of

⁸ *Courage Under Fire: True Stories from the Front Line*, Tim Lynch, Combat Stress, Elliott & Thompson

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the Word or drift off into another field. Remember what Boaz said to Ruth: ‘Do not go to glean in another field’ (Ruth 2.8). There is great danger of drifting.

‘Therefore we must give the more earnest heed to the things we have heard, lest we drift away. For if the word spoken through angels proved steadfast, and every transgression and disobedience received a just reward, how shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation, which at the first began to be spoken by the Lord, and was confirmed to us by those who heard Him, God also bearing witness both with signs and wonders, with various miracles, and gifts of the Holy Spirit, according to His own will?’ Hebrews 2.1-4.

The enemy of souls sets his traps like the hunter in the path where he knows the animal is likely to wander. The enemy knows our weaknesses and will play to them as he did to David’s with Bathsheba. Here the Psalmist was able to record, ‘I find my safety and my security in the highway of holiness.’

Joy

‘Your testimonies I have taken as a heritage forever, for they are the rejoicing of my heart’ verse 111.

Once again we are being taught something more of the freedom of the new nature. The Psalmist had made a willing and conscious decision to embrace the testimonies of the Lord, not just for time but for all eternity. Here is a decided choice being taken, a holy leadership of the will. The Spirit of God within him had changed his tastes so he now rejoiced over the Word of the Lord, including its doctrine, commands, guidance, promises, authority and enduring stability.

Here in the United Kingdom ‘English Heritage’ takes great care over ruined buildings. How much more should we appreciate the living, eternal, enduring heritage of the Word of God! Here is the greatest World Heritage Site; the heritage for ever, even in Glory, of God’s

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Word will be precious. Pray that the Holy Spirit will work in our lives to make the testimonies of the Lord the rejoicing of our hearts. Here we have the wonderful effect of truth applied through the mind, affecting the heart. Then we will sing with the hymnwriter Joseph Swain (1761-96):

*Blessed are the eyes that see Him,
Blest the ears that hear His voice;
Blessed are the souls that trust Him,
And in Him alone rejoice;
His commandments
Then become their happy choice.*

'I have inclined my heart to perform Your statutes for ever, to the very end' verse 112.

Spurgeon notes:

'The Psalmist was not only inclined to preach, he was also inclined to practise, his heart being inclined towards obedience. Our inclination is all-important to our direction.'

Sadly the flesh, the old nature, constantly pulls in another direction, so we say with the hymnwriter –

*Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it,
Prone to leave the God I love;
Here's my heart, Lord, take and seal it;
Seal it from Thy courts above!*

Robert Robinson, 1735-90

May the Lord grant to us godly inclinations. Remember the prayer of the Psalmist in verse 36: *'Incline my heart to Your testimonies, and not to covetousness.'*

Calvin comments on verse 112 that this describes:

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‘the right observance of the law, which consists in our cheerfully and heartily preparing ourselves for doing what the law commands. Slavish and constrained obedience differs little from rebellion. The prophet, therefore, in order briefly to define what it is to serve God, asserts that he applied not only his hands, eyes, or feet, to the keeping of the law, but that he began with the affection of the heart. He doubtless acknowledged that it was the peculiar work of the Holy Spirit to incline and frame our hearts to God. But when the prophet says of himself that he inclined his heart, he does not separate his own endeavour from the grace of the Holy Spirit. He completes the stanza with a great prayer.’⁹

⁹ Taken from *Calvin's Commentaries*, available online at www.ccel.org

15. HOW DOES A BELIEVER SHOW HIS RESPECT FOR THE WORD?

Psalm 119.113-120

By hating what God hates, and loving what God loves.

'I hate the double-minded, but I love Your law' verse 113.

The double-minded here are those whose thinking is destabilised by vain thoughts motivated by pride. One of the surest signs of grace is to hate what God hates. Therefore the Psalmist hated vain thoughts.

Pride is an abomination to God, and vanity does more than anything to damage a Christian's viewpoint. It always results in a double-minded approach to life, and renders us without light or witness. Vain thoughts always quench a spirit of humility. They cannot abide with each other, they are incompatible!

Vain thoughts have the bitter fruit of distraction. They often plague us when seeking the Lord. Vain thoughts are the chief hindrance to prayer, to meditation and to liberty in worship. The Puritans characterised vain thoughts in a comprehensive manner so as to provide pastoral warning. Thomas Manton describes them as being set down on a table for display in our mind summarised by:

- uncleanness: speculative wickedness in the mind opens the door for evil. *'But I say to you that whoever looks at a woman to lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart' Matthew 5.28;*
- revenge, which is sweet and pleasant to the carnal nature but is short lived and leaves a greater burden of guilt;
- envy: this is a sin which stirs up the mind to hatred. In this way Saul became jealous of David: *'So Saul eyed David from that day forward' 1 Samuel 18.9.*

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- pride: the lifting up of self in the mind to exalt us above another or before others, leading to self-conceit;
- covetousness: the inclination of the mind towards getting, leading to discontent when comparing ourselves with others;
- distrust: the questioning of God's providence in a manner which dishonours His name and character.

Vain thoughts are always light; they have no substance or weight and in the final analysis they are foolish. We need to cultivate a consistent hatred for these thoughts which beset us. Note he did not say he was free from vain thoughts, but that he hated them for what they were.

But then the Psalmist said, *'But I love Your law'*. He had come from hatred to love, a direct contrast from a commitment to hate to a commitment to love. The Puritan Stephen Charnock wrote 'Ballast your heart with a love to God.' Love for God is the great stabilising influence for good in our lives.

Now the Psalmist did not say he kept the law perfectly, but simply that he loved the law of the Lord. As we have seen before, love is the key to obedience and a desire to follow the ways of the Lord. May the Lord grant us wisdom and discernment to understand the need to hate sin and love the law. May it be true of us that hatred of sin develops in our life, while love for the Lord continues to grow.

By running to the Refuge and hoping in the Word of the Lord

'You are my hiding place and my shield; I hope in Your Word'
verse 114.

Notice here the direction of the Psalmist's thinking as he resisted the problem of instability in vain thoughts. It was to the Lord, with Whom he had a personal relationship, that he fled when beset with vain thoughts. In his spiritual experience he found the Lord invariably encouraged him and assured him through His Word. So he found

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through the Lord his refuge, protection and assurance. God's glorious character provided the sure and certain refuge; God's sovereign grace and power provided his protection against the enemy of souls besetting his mind; and God's Word provided his assurance and the weapon by which he broke through in resisting vain thoughts. So the Christian flies by faith to the Person of Christ, his Refuge. His righteousness is their shield – He is the personal, living Word of God to their soul.

This verse teaches us first resort practice for the Christian, the ultimate comfort and security. Here is something that we can rest upon with certain, absolute hope without any fear of failure.

By separation from evildoers and loyalty to God's way

'Depart from me, you evildoers, for I will keep the commandments of my God!' verse 115.

Here the Psalmist introduces us to the principle of separation. The same words would be used by the Lord Jesus to those who never really knew Him or followed Him. Separation is a step we must take for the honour of the Lord if our relationships compromise the truth. Christians use their God-given discernment to make an assessment of the situation. In the end what is of paramount importance is their personal loyalty to the Lord and His commandments. Separation is required from those who are bent upon evil, who despise the name of the Lord.

Here the Psalmist was telling those who were opposing his walk with the Lord to depart from him. This is real courage. It is one thing to leave the evildoers, but to tell the evildoers to leave us is quite another. It may be you have experienced a time when you have become embroiled in a worldly relationship. A battle ensues between the new and old nature. The flesh fights against the Spirit. The situation reaches crisis point. The words of Moses ring loud and clear: 'Who is on the Lord's side?' (see *Exodus 32.26*).

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There are also sad times when Church discipline has to be applied to a person who now denies the Lord, when the Church must remain true to the Lord and His commandments, when we must align with the commitment of the Psalmist: *'I will keep the commandments of my God.'* Thomas Manton wisely said, 'Depart from them that depart from God.'

By confidence in the Word of the Lord with an accompanying lifestyle

'Uphold me according to Your Word that I may live. And do not let me be ashamed of my hope' verse 116.

I would like us to see here the confidence that the Psalmist had in the blessing of the Word of the Lord. He was not looking for a sign and a wonder to rest upon, but to be lifted up in his soul by the Word of God. Here is supreme confidence in the efficacy and power of the Word of the Lord attended by the Spirit to bless. A sure sign of true conversion is when spiritual life is the desire of our souls, centred on the Word of God.

Another of the surest signs of conversion is when we realise our need to be upheld by the Lord. Remember the Psalmist had just made a resolution to keep the commandments of the Lord. He was asking for help. C H Spurgeon said:

'It is not wrong to make resolutions, but it will be useless to do so unless we salt them with well with believing cries to God. David meant to keep the law of the Lord, but he first needed the Lord of the law to keep him.'

Yet another sure sign of true conversion is when we realise our need to shine for the Lord.

By dependence upon the Lord and loyalty to Him

'Hold me up, and I shall be safe, and I shall observe Your statutes continually' verse 117.

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The Psalmist once again majored on the need for utter dependence upon the Lord. 'Hold me up and I know I shall be secure.' There are a number of ways in which the Lord holds His people up, chiefly centred upon His Word: devotion, preaching, fellowship, answers to prayer, trials (*James 1.2-4*) and ministration of angels. However, when we speak about the security of the Lord's people it has to be viewed ultimately as referring to their eternal security, not physical. The Lord does allow His people at times to suffer tragedy, disease, accidents, disappointment or loss.

Note here that it seems the Psalmist is teaching us the harmony between dependence and obedience. He is saying to us dependence on the Lord is vital but has as its partner our obedience. The word 'observe' has to do with respect for the Lord's statutes. Without respect there is no continuity, for without respect our observing of the Lord's statutes will be spasmodic at best.

By respect for the just judgment of the Lord

'You reject all those who stray from Your statutes, for their deceit is falsehood. You put away all the wicked of the earth like dross. Therefore I love Your testimonies' verses 118-119.

Jesus reminded us that if salt loses its savour it is good for nothing but to be thrown out (*Luke 14.34-35*). In the *Authorised Version* we can notice the contrast in the Psalmist's terminology between verse 117: 'Hold Thou me up', and verse 118: 'Thou has trodden down'.

The deceitful, lying witness of the hypocrites who had strayed from the Lord would come under judgment. They set up their own man-made religion and considered themselves wiser than the Lord. They deceived themselves first, and in doing so then deceived others, bringing upon themselves terrible judgment. An illustration of this is when the vicar at the funeral of one of my unbelieving colleagues assured us all that he was now drinking a pint in Heaven. This was

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considered very funny and so he relaxed the people, telling them not to worry about eternity. He said God is a God of love and this man's good deeds were bound to have allowed him into Heaven at last. This sort of deceit is a terrible enemy to the truth and has sent countless hypocrites to their eternal doom.

Dross is a substance devoid of any good whatsoever. It sometimes looks exactly like the real thing, but when tested under fire remains as dross. A believer under the fiery trial will come forth as gold (*Job 23.10*); the dross separates from the spiritual gold, whereas the unbeliever in a similar trial, unsanctified to them, remains untouched spiritually. Sad to say, spiritually, they go into the trial only as dross and come out only as dross.

Here we are solemnly reminded that when the Lord puts away it is referring to the final eternal state. The openly rebellious and wicked ones come under the judgment of the Lord, assessed as dross. They are like King Belshazzar in the *Book of Daniel* who was weighed in the scales and found wanting (*Daniel 5.27*).

When the Psalmist spoke here of love for the Lord's testimonies it was in the context of justice. The Lord does not allow people to sin with impunity without being finally accountable. The believer loves the assurance of the perfect, righteous and just testimony of the Lord to deal with the wicked. The Lord says, '*Vengeance is Mine, I will repay*' (*Romans 12.19*). The believer rests in that knowledge and judges no man. He rests in the testimonies of God's words of promise to those who do trust in Him.

By godly fear because of the awesome power of God and His judgments

'My flesh trembles for fear of You, and I am afraid of Your judgments' verse 120.

It seems at first glance that the Psalmist was now saying the opposite of what he had just said. It seems as though love and peace are

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replaced by trembling and fear. But here he had been given a glimpse in his mind of the dreadful judgment of the Lord upon the wicked. Like a sudden clap of thunder can shake us up and frighten us, so a tiny glimpse of God's justice and wrath can do the same. A godly fear is a healthy thing to be exercised as long as its character is proven by greater faith in Christ.

Conclusion

How does a believer show his respect for the Word?

- by hating what God hates and loving what God loves;
- by running to the refuge and hoping in the Word of the Lord;
- by separation from evildoers and loyalty to God's way;
- by confidence in the Word of the Lord and an accompanying life-style;
- by dependence upon the Lord and loyalty to Him;
- by respect for the just judgment of the Lord; and
- by godly fear because of the awesome power of God and His judgments.

16. OUR DEALINGS AND GOD'S DEALINGS

Psalm 119.121-128

'I have done justice and righteousness; do not leave me to my oppressors' verse 121.

The stanza opens with the Psalmist's testimony about his own dealings with his fellow men. He could say, *'I have done justice and righteousness.'* He had dealt in a manner that honoured the Lord. It means he had dealt with integrity, with humility, without partiality, firmly and yet kindly.

The word 'justice' here has to do with using discernment in your decisions and dealings, moulded by the Word. The word 'righteousness' has to do with actions which are just and carried through to the end with integrity. It means to be a person of your word, reasonable, stable and reliable. It means you appreciate the importance of how you deal with people as part of your witness and walk with the Lord.

There is another important reason for dealing well with others, this being that our attitude and actions affect our own spiritual wellbeing.

'If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear' Psalm 66.18.

'Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence toward God' 1 John 3.21.

Because of this the Psalmist could in all conscience plead for God's help and protection against his oppressors.

'Be surety for Your servant for good; do not let the proud oppress me. My eyes fail from seeking your salvation and Your righteous Word' verses 122-123.

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This is one of those times when the Psalmist saw by faith the need of a Saviour; he looked to the Messiah. He needed Someone Who would stand surety for him, a Person who would be his protector. John Gill comments:

‘What David prays to God to be for him, that Christ is, for all His people...He is the Surety of a better covenant the Everlasting Covenant of Grace not works...Christ drew nigh to God; struck hands with Him, gave His word and bond to pay the debts of His people; put Himself in their place and stead, and became responsible to the law and justice for them. Christ engaged to make satisfaction for their sins to bring them into everlasting righteousness for their justification, to preserve them and keep them and bring them safe to eternal glory and happiness. This is His being a Surety for His people, “A Surety for Your servant for good.”’

The good the Psalmist desired must be that which came through the Messiah, Christ, the Son of God. He was being led by the Spirit to seek for assurance from the Lord, the inner assurance of his salvation. We have a very similar spiritual experience described for us in *Psalm 86.17*:

‘Show me a sign for good, that those who hate me may see it and be ashamed, because You, Lord, have helped me and comforted me.’

The Psalmist was under attack from the enemy of souls but he must first know his right relationship with the Lord. Jacob felt similarly at Bethel, knowing the next day he would face his brother Esau.

‘And He said, “Let Me go, for the day breaks.” But he said, “I will not let You go unless You bless me!”’ Genesis 32.26.

Assurance will lead him to peace of mind, and a sense of security and protection against his oppressors.

Note the change of tone between verse 121 and verses 122-123. This

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reminds us of the absolute faithfulness of God's Word. There are times when the Lord allows us to be in exercise about our own spiritual state and condition. The Apostle Peter encourages us to '*make your call and election sure*' (2 Peter 1.10). By this he is meaning the assurance of it. This is:

- through the work of the Spirit enabling prayer and the Word to have a reassuring impact on our mind; and
- through us exercising ourselves unto godliness and submitting to the Word, trusting only in Christ.

Note the direction of his cry; he was not seeking support elsewhere.

'O God, You are my God; early will I seek You; my soul thirsts for You; my flesh longs for You in a dry and thirsty land where there is no water' Psalm 63.1.

'Deal with your servant according to Your mercy, and teach me Your statutes. I am Your servant; give me understanding, that I may know Your testimonies' verses 124-125.

This prayer has to be in the 'premier league' of supplications. It is a blessed example of praying by faith. The Psalmist had spoken about his dealings with men; now he was speaking about God's dealings with him. The Psalmist presented himself wholly and willingly before the Lord to deal with him according to His mercy. Mercy is the most powerful plea in prayer, because mercy is the only basis on which God can deal with us. The day-to-day dealings of God with His people are all on the basis of mercy.

*Thy mercy, my God, is the theme of my song,
The joy of my heart, and the boast of my tongue;
Thy free grace alone, from the first to the last,
Hath won my affections, and bound my soul fast.*

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*Without Thy sweet mercy I could not live here;
Sin would reduce me to utter despair;
But, through Thy free goodness, my spirits revive,
And He that first made me so keeps me alive.*

*Thy mercy is more than a match for my heart,
Which wonders to feel its own hardness depart;
Dissolved by Thy goodness, I fall to the ground,
And weep to the praise of the mercy I found.*

*Great Father of mercies, thy goodness I own,
And the covenant love of Thy crucified Son;
All praise to the Spirit, Whose whisper divine
Seals mercy, and pardon, and righteousness mine.*

John Stocker, w 1776-1777

The other part of this remarkable prayer petition is to be taught according to the Lord's statutes. Once again we are reminded of the Psalmist's utter dependence upon the Lord: *'I am Your servant'*. Not only do we have the petition of faith for the Lord to deal with him, but also the petition of consecration for him to serve the Lord. There is an expression that it is dangerous to put 'all your eggs in one basket' as they will all be broken if you fall. However, when it comes to trusting in the Lord, it does mean total dependence upon Him with our whole being.

The Psalmist has two specific requests in his prayer:

1. to be taught. The Psalmist was a willing pupil in the school of the Lord;
2. to be given understanding. The Psalmist desired to put his knowledge to wise use.

To be given the gift of understanding means for us to discern the truth of the Lord and respond accordingly: that I may know Your

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testimonies through personal experience of walking obediently in them; that I may know what are the Lord's testimonies and what are not the Lord's testimonies.

Religion has a habit of putting tradition on the same level as God's testimonies. Discernment is needed also, that I may know the difference between truth and error; what is really of the Lord and His Word.

'It is time for You to act, O Lord, for they have regarded Your law as void' verse 126.

The motivation for this prayer for God's intervention was owing to the state of the world around him; the realisation that the unbeliever had no respect or time for the law of the Lord in their conscience; the realisation that the professing Church was constantly regarding the law of the Lord as void in its teaching; and the realisation that sin was being reprocessed as simply a behavioural pattern with no accountability.

The prayer is that the Lord would intervene both in judgment and mercy. The honour of the Lord was at stake. It is an Old Testament cry for the first coming of the Messiah, Jesus Christ the Lord. In this New Testament era, in the end times, it is a call for the Second Coming of Jesus Christ.

'He who testifies to these things says, "Surely I am coming quickly." Amen. Even so, come, Lord Jesus!' Revelation 22.20.

The motivation for the prayer was the rejection of the law of the Lord. It was the prayer of a man who had the highest regard for the law of the Lord and for the honour of the Lord.

'For the time has come for judgment to begin at the house of God; and if it begins with us first, what will be the end of those who do not obey the gospel of God?' 1 Peter 4.17.

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God, in His loving judgment, at times has to correct, chastise and discipline His Church, and test it through trial. In His holy justice God also has to judge those who are outside of Christ. If the Lord tarries it is also a call for awakening and revival that the name of the Lord and His law be vindicated. Before there is an awakening in a community there is invariably revival in the local church with repentance. Is this a prayer we are ready to pray? Are we ready for our Lord to come? Or are we willing to be stirred up in revival? How and when the Lord in His divine wisdom acts and intervenes does have an impact on the Church.

‘Therefore I love Your commandments more than gold, yes, than fine gold! Therefore all Your precepts concerning all things I consider to be right; I hate every false way’ verses 127-128.

To pray the prayer of the previous verse requires that we ourselves by faith are consecrated to the Lord; that we have the highest respect for the whole counsel of God and believe His way to be right in all things. Notice here the extent of the Psalmist’s language wherein he embraced the entirety of God’s precepts of life. Note also the testimony of the Psalmist here. He was prepared to examine his own life in the light of his prayer.

Now there are two aspects to his consecration: his sincere and tested love for the law of the Lord – *‘Therefore I love’*; and his considered and wholehearted respect for the precepts of the Lord – *‘I consider to be right’*. He measured up, as it were, the best the world had to offer in its finest gold, yet he loved the law more. He could not boast he had always kept the Commandments, but he could testify that he loved them. Notice here once again the clear divide: a love of God’s way, and a hatred of Satan’s way. It is this clarity which is lacking today. The more we love the Lord, the greater we will hate sin. We are often overwhelmed and intimidated with the pressure, sight and sounds of the broad way.

17. THE WONDERFUL LIGHT OF GOD'S WORD

Psalm 119.129-136

*'Your testimonies are wonderful; therefore my soul keeps them'
verse 129.*

The word 'wonderful' is one we probably each use somewhat lightly from time to time. In its fullest sense it will always have a God-centred, God-glorifying meaning. In the original it is used in its strongest sense, also meaning marvellous. The Psalmist could write in all honesty and sincerity that God's testimonies are wonderful. In what way are God's testimonies wonderful? What is it that warrants such a description?

- They are pure and free from error;
- They are true to God's wisdom and way;
- They are inspired of God and blessed to our souls through the Holy Spirit;
- They are wonderful in their harmony, composition, depth, understanding, wisdom and truth;
- They are God's voice to us reminding us He cares for us.

The early Church father Gregory describes them as the heart and soul of God. Thomas Watson, the Puritan, said:

'The Scripture is the compass by which the rudder of our will is steered. It is the spiritual optic glass in which the glory of God is resplendent. The Scripture is the Library of the Holy Spirit.'

All Scripture is described as being 'God-breathed' – given by inspiration (2 Timothy 3.16). The late Robert Sheehan of Welwyn stated:

'The Scriptures do not breathe out God; God breathes out the Scriptures.'

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Scripture is God's truth, wisdom, commandments, justice, grace, mercy and assurance in Christ through His Holy Spirit. Tyndale said: 'The Scriptures sprang out of God.' Coming from God, His Word originally given was both inspired and infallible, being without error. The Scriptures are perfectly reflected in the Person and work of Jesus Christ Who was made flesh and dwelt among us (*John 1.14*), being named Wonderful, Counsellor, the Mighty God... (*Isaiah 9.6*).

A proper and high estimation of the testimonies of the Lord encourages obedience to them. As we have a God-given respect for His testimonies, so we experience God-given help to keep them. C H Spurgeon comments: 'David was always practical; the more he wondered, the more he obeyed.'

Notice how the Psalmist says, '*My soul keeps them*', meaning 'in my new nature I fully ascribe to them.'

'The entrance of Your words gives light; it gives understanding to the simple' verse 130.

The word 'simple' is not meant in a derogatory manner but refers to those who receive the word in sincerity; those who have been given an openness of mind to receive God's truth, whereas before the door of the mind was closed. When the Holy Spirit opens the door of our mind, the light of truth pours into the soul, giving an entrance.

The effect of the light provides stability, gives power to the weak, knowledge, wisdom and understanding to the humble, who have the God-given wisdom to hear it and willingness to take it in. We read in Lydia's conversion that the Lord opened her heart to attend to the Gospel (*Acts 16.14*).

'The entrance of Your words give light'. David wrote in *Psalm 18.28*, '*The Lord my God will enlighten my darkness*.' It is like getting up in the morning and opening the curtains; light floods in – you cannot stop it. May that be our experience with the Word of God in our

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souls! Notice the harmony between entrance and understanding – the effective testimony of the Light of truth.

I opened my mouth and panted, for I longed for Your commandments' verse 131.

This is the wonderful effect of a wonderful Word – desires are changed, and a deep longing for God's Word is granted. In a polluted city people long for fresh air, especially if they suffer from asthma. God's Word is fresh air!

The Psalmist used a creative description of an animal panting to describe the depth of his longing. This experience could also be likened to a deep thirst when the chief desire is for water to drink. In *Psalm 42.1* we read, 'As the deer pants for the water brooks, so pants my soul for You, O God.'

The Psalmist longed to know more of God's Word, to be conformed more to it, and to be able more fully to proclaim it. This verse is very challenging. May the Lord kindle in our hearts warm desires after His Word.

Interestingly, this is the only time this Hebrew word translated 'longed' here is used in Old Testament. It means to desire earnestly. There is no 'take-it-or-leave-it' attitude here. The Psalmist had a desire to grow in the things of God and he knew where to go.

'Look upon me and be merciful to me, as Your custom is toward those who love Your name' verse 132.

History has proved the merciful lovingkindness of the Lord to those who love His name. In various conditions and experiences the believer cries to the Lord to look down in mercy. The writer had two pleas before the Lord in his request for mercy:

1. His deep longing after the Word of the Lord; and
2. His deep love for the Lord.

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By faith in prayer he positioned himself before the Lord and sought the Lord as one of His people. The Lord has a grand and glorious track record of showing mercy to those who look to Him by faith, and of coming down to the oppressed. Note: *Exodus 3.7-8*: 'I have seen... [I] have heard...for I know...I have come down.'

'Direct my steps by Your Word, and let no iniquity have dominion over me' verse 133.

One of the surest signs of conversion is a willingness to come under the direction of the Lord and His Word. Notice here the desire of the believer, that the Lord be his Director and that the influence of sin be quashed. The Psalmist desired a straight path; he desired clarity; he desired to be moulded by the Word.

Every believer must take steps in life: decisions have to be made. Let the Word mould your decisions. There were no 'pet sins' allowed in the Psalmist's life – no iniquity was to have dominion. Here is meant not so much the outward dominion of sin clearly seen to all, but rather sin in the hidden person of the heart – attitudes, bitterness, anger, resentment, self-pity, scheming etc. Thomas Manton said this is 'when you let a certain sin have a quiet reign in your heart.'

'Redeem me from the oppression of man, that I may keep Your precepts' verse 134.

Here the Psalmist was well aware of the terrible hindrances Satan uses to divert us from the way of the Lord. If Satan cannot stop us serving, he does all he can to slow us down, trip us up and discourage us. In the devil's tool box he has tools of hatred, pride, division, materialism and discouragement! The Psalmist resented any diversion from keeping the precepts of the Lord; he did not give up.

This prayer contains within it a recognition of the burdensome nature of opposition to God's way. His desire for deliverance was not for an easy life but to serve the Lord more freely and effectively. Some

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commentators render this verse, 'Deliver me from the oppression of Adam', meaning deliver from the oppression of the flesh, the old nature which rises up to do battle with the new nature. Oppression is like a dark cloud that rises up blotting out the sun and making us feel cold within our hearts. Such an experience troubled the Psalmist because he knew it affected his walk with the Lord.

'Make Your face shine upon Your servant, and teach me Your statutes' verse 135.

The devil does not know how to smile or shine upon anyone because he dwells in the darkness as its king. However, with God comes light and hope, always in harmony with His Word.

'Oh, send out Your light and Your truth! Let them lead me; let them bring me to Your holy hill and to Your tabernacle' Psalm 43.3.

'The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make His face shine upon you, and be gracious to you; the Lord lift up His countenance upon you, and give you peace' Numbers 6.24-26.

In a New Testament context this verse is a description of the ministry of Christ to His followers. He was constantly shining grace and truth upon His apostles, and the fruit was knowledge and wisdom.

'And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth' John 1.14.

'Rivers of water run down from my eyes, because men do not keep Your law' verse 136.

We read that Lot's soul was tormented with the wicked in Sodom (2 Peter 2.8). He was deeply grieved and had no peace. Here the Psalmist expressed deep sorrow because of the rebellion of man. Our Lord Jesus wept over Jerusalem when He considered the rejection

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of Himself by the Jews (*Matthew 23.37-39; Luke 19.41-44*). He wept because He knew what terrible judgment they were bringing upon themselves. He wept because He knew what they were missing by their rejection. Our grief over the rebellion of mankind is first for the honour of the Lord then for the outcome of rebellion.

Conclusion

May the Lord be pleased to bless our souls continually with the light of His Word! May He deliver us all from darkness and into His marvellous light in Christ Jesus (*1 Peter 2.9*).

18. THE RIGHTEOUS GOD WITH HIS RIGHTEOUS WORD

Psalm 119.137-144

*'Righteous are You, O Lord, and upright are Your judgments'
verse 137.*

Making a true statement about the Lord is the surest foundation stone on which to develop a spiritual truth. Here the Psalmist, by living, saving faith, praised the Lord because of His constant rightness. He was stating that the Lord is pure in His being and pure in His dealings. There is no hint of compromise or confusion. The Lord's attitude, authority and actions are in perfect, everlasting harmony. Spurgeon said: 'God is always right. He is always actively right. This quality is bound up in the idea of God.'

Note the last words of Moses in *Deuteronomy 32.1-4*:

'Give ear, O heavens, and I will speak; and hear, O earth, the words of my mouth. Let my teaching drop as the rain, my speech distill as the dew, as raindrops on the tender herb, and as showers on the grass. For I proclaim the name of the Lord: ascribe greatness to our God. He is the Rock, His work is perfect; for all His ways are justice, a God of truth and without injustice; righteous and upright is He.'

Only when by faith we lay hold of the truth of the righteous Lord do we totally trust His upright judgments.

'The Lord is righteous in her midst, He will do no unrighteousness. Every morning He brings His justice to light; He never fails, but the unjust knows no shame' Zephaniah 3.5.

Here is where faith finds its harbour in which to take refuge in the stormy seas of life – the Lord is righteous.

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'Your testimonies which You have commanded, are righteous and very faithful' verse 138.

Not only is the Lord righteous in His being and in His ways, He is righteous in what He commands. His commands are therefore given with a righteous authority. The golden thread of righteousness runs throughout. Let us lay hold of this truth by faith. Notice here the Psalmist's inspired words of encouragement to faith in the Lord's testimonies: they are *'very faithful'*.

There is a remarkable prayer of confession leading to a covenant given in the *Book of Nehemiah*. As they look back over history, there is an acknowledgement of faithfulness and unfaithfulness. The Lord in history has proved to be very faithful, whereas man has proved to be very unfaithful.

'You are just in all that has befallen us. For You have dealt faithfully but we have done wickedly' Nehemiah 9.33.

Notice in the New Testament times the apostles had to lean hard upon the truth that God is very faithful.

a. The security and preservation of the Lord's chosen people

'God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord' 1 Corinthians 1.9.

'He who calls you is faithful, who also will do it' 1 Thessalonians 5.24.

'But the Lord is faithful, who will establish you and guard you from the evil one' 2 Thessalonians 3.3.

b. Faithful promises of God in Christ

'But as God is faithful, our word to you was not Yes and No' 2 Corinthians 1.18.

'For all the promises of God in Him are Yes, and in Him Amen, to the glory of God through us' 2 Corinthians 1.20.

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Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful' Hebrews 10.23.

c. The encouragement of the Gospel of God

'This is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief' 1 Timothy 1.15.

'If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.' 1 John 1.9.

In the context of an unfaithful, unjust world, let us remember the Lord is very faithful.

'My zeal has consumed me, because mine enemies have forgotten Your words. Your Word is very pure; therefore Your servant loves it' verses 139-140.

The Psalmist was consumed with zeal, meaning with fervour for the cause of the Lord. His grief centred on the forgotten Word of the Lord, the rejection of it as a guide for life. It was no longer the basis, the guide, the standard, the measuring-stick for laws and decisions.

The Psalmist responded with zeal to the folly, vanity, pride and spiritual ignorance of such forgetfulness. He was not lethargic to the state of the world and the spiritual state of those who opposed him. He was zealous for the Word of the Lord because of his high respect for it. He saw it as very pure.

Notice here again the emphasis of the inspired Word. The Lord is **very** faithful; His Word is **very** pure. He not only respected it and believed it; he also loved it. It was very precious to his soul. Therefore such admiration and love inspired a holy zeal for the Lord and His Word. He is a type of Christ.

'Because zeal for Your house has eaten me up, and the reproaches of those who reproach You have fallen on me' Psalm 69.9.

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Now the Passover of the Jews was at hand, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. And He found in the temple those who sold oxen and sheep and doves, and the money changers doing business. When He had made a whip of cords, He drove them all out of the temple, with the sheep and the oxen, and poured out the changers' money and overturned the tables. And He said to those who sold doves, "Take these things away! Do not make My Father's house a house of merchandise!" Then His disciples remembered that it was written, "Zeal for Your house has eaten Me up" John 2.13-17.

The Psalmist had been encouraging faith in the Lord's righteousness, His righteous Word and faithfulness. When we grasp these wonderful truths by faith, we ourselves will be ambassadors for the honour of the Lord. Zeal is a manifestation of love for the righteous Lord and His pure Word; it affects our being. Our heart is righteously grieved by blasphemy; our mind is righteously disturbed by atheism; there is a righteous indignation when the name of the Lord is being taken in vain.

When Saul was persecuting the Church Jesus said, '*Why are you persecuting Me?*' (Acts 9.4). It affected Christ. Likewise when the Word of the Lord is despised, rejected and forgotten it affects our hearts. If we have no fervour for the Lord these realities pass us by. But if we do have fervour for the Lord we will be affected. The way we respond to the rebellion of the unbeliever is a test of the state and strength of our fervour.

'I am small and despised, yet I do not forget Your precepts' verse 141.

'Trouble and anguish have overtaken me, yet Your commandments are my delights' verse 143.

Nobody, including Samuel, expected David to be chosen by God to be king. When Samuel visited the family he was sure Eliab the eldest

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would be the one. See *1 Samuel 16.6-13*. When David was anointed he was the least in his father's house. Later Saul, knowing the God-given righteous character of David, was riled against him by the evil spirit within himself. Sadly there were other times when, owing to his folly, David was despised – adultery, murder and temporary exile. However for the most part when David was persecuted it was for righteous reasons as a believer.

David, in a right and humble spirit, considered himself as small like Paul, who felt himself to be the least of the apostles. At these times of feeling small, and also knowing he was despised, David found the greatest comfort from God. When David returned with his mighty men to Ziklag (*1 Samuel 30.6*) they found it had been burned to the ground, and their wives and children had been taken captive by the Philistines. In their grief, anger and frustration, the mighty men threatened to stone David, but we read David, in his danger and vulnerability being small and despised, encouraged himself in the Lord. He did not forget the Lord, His Word and His way in the crisis.

Notice the contrast between the forgetfulness of the unbeliever and the remembrance of the believer. Here the Psalmist gives us one of the secrets to true comfort and strength: it is found in the Word of the Lord. The Psalmist being despised was in good company. Christ was despised and rejected by men (*Isaiah 53.3*). It is the pathway of the Saviour and the believer. Trouble and anguish overtook the Saviour and yet His delight was to do His Father's will (*Matthew 26.39*). He says, 'Follow Me' (*Matthew 4.19*).

'Your righteousness is an everlasting righteousness, and Your law is truth' verse 142.

'The righteousness of Your testimonies is everlasting; give me understanding and I shall live' verse 144.

Here the Psalmist takes confidence in the unchanging nature of

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God. He affirms his belief in the truth of God found in His law. Here is a key statement of faith. We see the perfect fruit and harmony between God's righteousness and God's law – truth. Truth in its fullest sense is the Word of righteousness.

Truth in God's Word is inseparably linked with God's righteousness and essential to sanctification and life. It is through a deeper faith, appreciation and understanding of God's Word that we live spiritually, for in the Word of the Lord is found the truth centred in Christ, the Way, the Truth and the Life (*John 14.6*). Through the Word our lives are sanctified. So Jesus prayed, 'Sanctify them by Your truth. Your word is truth' (*John 17.17*).

Here the Psalmist encourages us to link God's Word with life. This is one of the greatest losses today. When spiritual life is sought outside of the Word it becomes little more than emotional subjectivity. The spiritual heartburning of the disciples was truth alive in the soul from the preached Word of Christ (*Luke 24.32*). They needed understanding, and Christ gave them understanding for life in His Word in power of the Spirit.

Conclusion

The righteous God with His righteous Word – let us hold fast that which is good; let no man take our crown (*Revelation 3.11*).

19. PASSIONATE PRAYER

Psalm 119.145-152

In these verses we have the Psalmist's personal testimony of his prayer life. There are several distinctive characteristics about it which provide a very helpful pattern for us. It is evident that prayer was a vital living part of the life of the Psalmist; it was something he was passionate about.

Spurgeon said: 'Prayer has become as essential to me as the heaving of my lungs, and the beating of my pulse.' It was the secret behind his leadership and the spiritual blessing to others. Isaac Watts said,

'Prayer is a glorious privilege with which our Maker has indulged us, as well as a necessary part of the obedience which He requires of us at all times and in every circumstance of life.'¹⁰

Wholehearted

I cry out with my whole heart; hear me, O Lord! I will keep Your statutes' verse 145.

Prayer for the Psalmist involved his whole being. It was more a matter of the heart than of eloquence. Here is the way in which we show our Lord we respect Him and trust Him. Only as we engage our whole being in prayer do we show proper respect to the One before Whom we stand.

'My son, give me your heart, and let your eyes observe my ways'
Proverbs 23.26.

In some ways this statement, while being challenging, is actually very encouraging. It means if our prayer is nothing more than a thoughtful sigh but from the heart, the Lord will hear. The first fruit the Lord is looking for in us is sincerity in prayer.

¹⁰ *A Guide to Prayer*, Introduction, Isaac Watts, Banner of Truth

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*I often say my prayers,
But do I ever pray?
And do the wishes of my heart
Go with the words I say?
I might as well kneel down
And worship gods of stone,
As offer to the living God
A prayer of words alone.*

John Burton, 1803-77

It is helpful in prayer for us to realise the danger of relying on a certain form of words. When we pray wholeheartedly we will want the Lord to hear. What a wonder – the almighty, eternal God hearing us! In the Psalmist’s testimony of prayer there is an obedient spirit. This is something to be valued and cherished. This is from the Lord and is priceless. It is the outworking of the new nature, the Holy Spirit within. Notice then the harmony between the desire and the direction.

Sincere

*‘I cry out to You; save me, and I will keep Your testimonies’
verse 146.*

It is good for us to remember Who it is we are praying to. For example, when praying in public it can be liberating for us to remember we are praying to the Lord. Often we fall into the trap of praying with half a mind on what others are thinking about our prayer. Pray with this in mind – *‘I cry out to You!’*

However, in the context of our verse, it is a personal prayer of devotion. It is a sincere prayer in faith. A sincere heart is an undivided heart. This will mean our prayers are directed heavenward. In sincerity they are not only directed, but they are dependent – *‘Save me’*.

They are not only directed and dependent, but they are also very

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direct in their terminology. It seems the Psalmist had little time for flowery language; he got straight to the point with a concise ‘*Save me*’. As Spurgeon says, this prayer is very short yet very full. Charles Bridges, the Puritan, stated:

“‘*Save me*’ includes a sinner’s whole need; pardon, acceptance, access, holiness, strength, comfort, Heaven, all in one word.’

Again we can see in this verse the devotion of the prayer – ‘*I will keep your testimonies.*’ He will not only obey the way of the Lord, he will also respect the doctrine of the Lord. The Psalmist had no time for a so-called salvation that leaves us in a spirit of worldliness and error. He wanted an active life that could be described as doctrine alive in the head and in the heart. Matthew Henry commented, referring to verses 145-146:

‘We must cry for salvation, not that we may just have the ease and comfort of it, but that we might have the opportunity of serving God the more cheerfully.’

Commitment

‘I will rise before the dawning of the morning, and cry for help; I hope in Your Word. My eyes are awake through the night watches, that I might meditate on Your Word’ verses 147-148.

It is evident here and in verse 150 that the Psalmist was in some danger from his enemies. The experience of persecution motivated him to urgent prayer. In other words, the trial brought forth the fruit of prayer. It was the first thing on his mind when he awoke. This reminds us of how prayer is such a help for us in a crisis, 24/7.

Three times the Psalmist had testified to his heartfelt cries unto the Lord: ‘Hear me’, ‘Save me’, ‘Help me.’ Never be ashamed of short prayers if they come from the heart!

But notice here how the Psalmist prayed over the Word of the Lord. His hope was in the Word of the Lord; his thoughts were taken

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up with the Word of the Lord. Here we see the blessed partnership between prayer and the Word of the Lord. It is as though the Psalmist meditated on the Word, and then pleaded that Word before the Lord. The Word provided the stability in his life.

When the Psalmist wrote of his hope in God's Word, we should see this in the context of certain hope. The certain hope in the Word of the Lord was the springboard on which his prayer ascended to Heaven.

Desiring revival

'Hear my voice according to Your lovingkindness; O Lord, revive me according to Your justice' verse 149.

Notice here the Psalmist's confidence in the character of the Lord. This is true faith, lovingkindness and justice. This shows that David related to God with total confidence in His ways. He knew the times of trial that God allows did not undermine one iota the fact of His lovingkindness. He knew, even in this time of crisis in his life, that the Lord had all things under His control. In the midst of his trial his greatest desire was to know the spiritual blessing of the Lord reviving him. He pleaded the grace of the Lord in His lovingkindness, knowing this would cover all his own imperfections.

Even though he was unworthy, the Lord nevertheless delighted in mercy. He sought the lovingkindness of the Lord, trusting that He would be gracious enough to hear his prayer. He realised that this was the route through which his prayer would find its way to the throne room of Heaven. His understanding of the lovingkindness of the Lord to him would include the need of an Intercessor. It is through our Saviour that God the Father has chosen to show His love and kindness. Charles Bridges said: 'This is implied in every moment's approach and address to the throne of grace.'

The Psalmist's prayer for revival would include his understanding of the need of the Holy Spirit's help in his life. There is no spiritual life and renewing without the enabling of the Holy Spirit. Real revival is

according to God's wisdom and truth; this is the test for us in revival. Sadly, so much so-called revival these days does not conform to the pattern set in the Word of God. Any reviving must be according to the timing of the Lord, the power of the Lord and the sovereignty of the Lord. This is why we need to be so cautious when we see posters advertising a revival service. Lloyd Jones said: 'A revival never needs to be advertised; it always advertises itself.'¹¹ When there is a revival according to the justice of God we can be sure it is perfect in its timing, in harmony with His Word and Spirit, and that it is Christ-centred and fruitful to holiness.

Alert

'They draw near who follow after wickedness; they are far from Your law. You are near, O Lord, and all Your commandments are truth' verses 150-151.

The *Authorised Version* translates 'wickedness' as 'mischief', and this word describes the nature of the wickedness. The Psalmist realised he was being constantly troubled and threatened by those intent on disturbance. They were constantly trying to trap him. The word has to do with emptiness and worthless deeds.

Notice how he prayed to the Lord about them – they were following after evil, 'far from Your law.' In other words, he was troubled by those who were walking away from God; they were anti-God. One of the greatest needs in the Christian life is to know your enemy.

'For we are not ignorant of his devices' 2 Corinthians 2.11.

'Put on the whole armour of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places' Ephesians 6.11-12.

¹¹ Quoted by Burk Parsons in *True Reformation*, www.ligonier.org

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*‘Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour’
1 Peter 5.8.*

Comforted

Notice the comfort drawn by faith by the Psalmist: *‘They draw near’* – *‘You are near, O Lord.’* Remember this is really a battle between man and God. Man draws near, but the Lord is near.

*‘God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble’
Psalm 46.1.*

‘The Lord is near to all who call upon Him, to all who call upon Him in truth’ Psalm 145.18.

‘Behold, the virgin shall be with child, and bear a Son, and they shall call His name Immanuel, which is translated, “God with us”’ Matthew 1.23.

The Psalmist drew comfort by faith from his security in the Lord and the truth of the Lord’s commandments. Faith rests in Who the Lord is and what the Lord commands. Here we are reminded of one of the reasons why the Lord’s people are persecuted and opposed. It is really an attack on the truth of the Lord. The Lord’s people are raising the banner of truth.

‘You have given a banner to those who fear You, that it may be displayed because of the truth’ Psalm 60.4.

Let us follow the example of the Psalmist and remain loyal to the Lord’s truth which is under attack.

Believing

‘Concerning Your testimonies, I have known of old that You have founded them forever’ verse 152.

God’s truth is eternal; it did not come into being in time. God’s eternal truth has been revealed in time. This is one of the strengthening

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posts of the Psalmist's faith – the eternal nature of God's truth. As much as God is love, so God is truth. Our respect as believers for the Truth will go with us to Glory! God's truth in Christ will be the pure foundation of life in the new Heaven and the new Earth. This is just one of the reasons we need to be men and women of the Truth.

Conclusion

We have noticed the nature of passionate prayer as being whole-hearted, sincere, committed, desiring revival, alert, comforted and believing. Murray M'Cheyne said: 'What a man is on his knees before God, that he is, and nothing more.'

20. PRAYING FOR REVIVAL IN THE SOUL

Psalm 119.153-160

In our previous chapter we considered the Psalmist's testimony of passionate prayer. In this stanza we have a continuation of his prayer which develops into praying for revival.

The prayer is set in the context of his experience as a believer suffering persecution. The Psalmist had a very clear estimate of the enemy against him. It is important to know your enemy. In this prayer he was pouring out his heart to the Lord, expressing his honest and true assessment of the awful state of the wicked who had no respect, reverence or restraint – verse 155. There were many who opposed him and his resolute stand for the Lord – verse 157. He saw the treacherous ones and was disgusted and deeply grieved in his spirit because of the manner of their rebellion. Their dealings as transgressors were dangerous in deceit. They were also perverse, acting covertly, under cover against God's Word. They did not seek the Lord's statutes. Here is the heart of their problem.

This is the context of his prayer for revival with an understanding mind and heart. Three times he asked the Lord to '*Revive me*'. If he was to withstand the enemy, he needed reviving in his soul.

Consider me

'Consider my affliction and deliver me' verse 153a.

Here again we see the essence of faith in the prayer of the Psalmist. He asked the almighty God, in His grace, to condescend and consider him in his need. When the Lord considers us in our affliction and need it is with divine wisdom and understanding. Only God can consider our affliction with a perfect knowledge of the past, present and

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future. See *Exodus 33.12-19* for an example of this, where Moses was interceding for the Children of Israel as the Lord's people.

Deliver me

'For I do not forget Your law' verse 153b.

The deliverance desired by the Psalmist must come from the Lord. When we are in times of affliction and trial Satan will present alternative methods of so-called deliverance. He can do this through friends, who do not counsel us in accordance with the Word of the Lord or His way. The intention of Satan is to leave us feeling as if a victim, consumed with ourselves, and out-of-sorts with God. Alternatively he will present a 'be-good-to-yourself' approach which involves a departure from the Lord. In any event, Satan's deliverances never work for the good of your never-dying soul.

Remember that God's deliverance always works in harmony with our obedience to His Word.

- Deliverance for the better

'So I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians, and to bring them up from that land to a good and large land, to a land flowing with milk and honey, to the place of the Canaanites and the Hittites and the Amorites and the Perizzites and the Hivites and the Jebusites' Exodus 3.8.

- Deliverance according to the Lord's sovereignty

'My times are in Your hand; deliver me from the hand of my enemies, and from those who persecute me' Psalm 31.15.

- Deliverance according to the Lord's knowledge

'Then the Lord knows how to deliver the godly out of temptations and to reserve the unjust under punishment for the day of judgment' 2 Peter 2.9.

- Deliverance that was not possible

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‘He trusted in God; let Him deliver Him now if He will have Him; for He said, “I am the Son of God”’ Matthew 27.43.

Intercede for me and redeem me

‘Plead my cause and redeem me’ verse 154a.

There is undoubtedly both a practical and spiritual application to this prayer. Practically, he needed the Lord to be his Protector as His child, to defend his cause and grant him deliverance from the enemy. But spiritually this plea looked to the Redeemer, Jesus Christ, the Messiah, that He would plead his cause and stand in his place and in his stead. This is a cry of faith looking to the Messiah as his Redeemer.

It is important we do not underestimate the spiritual insight Old Testament saints had of Christ. For example, Job cried in his time of distress, *‘I know that my Redeemer lives’* (Job 19.25). We know Isaiah had a vision of Christ on the Throne (*Isaiah 6*). The Psalmist by faith saw Christ on the cross and wrote *Psalm 22* inspired by the Holy Spirit.

The great assurance for the believer, pleading with the Lord in prayer, is that the Lord is on their side!

‘When I cry out to You, then my enemies will turn back; this I know, because God is for me’ Psalm 56.9.

Revive me

‘Revive me according to Your Word...Great are Your tender mercies, O Lord; revive me according to Your judgments... Consider how I love Your precepts; revive me, O Lord, according to Your lovingkindness’ verses 154b, 156, 159.

We will notice in this stanza the type of revival the Psalmist was praying for in his life: *‘according to Your Word’*; *‘according to Your judgments’*; and *‘according to Your lovingkindness’*. In the previous stanza he had prayed for reviving according to God’s justice and wisdom (verse 149). Here he developed his prayer by coming three times

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before the Lord with the same desire. Each time he submitted by faith for revival in God's way.

'Revive me according to Your word'. *'According to Your word'* means a reviving that accords with His promise. The fruit of this, the outcome, will be the Word of the Lord alive in his soul. So while the Psalmist wanted providential deliverance, at the same time he was taking good care of his soul. The revival he wanted was that mediated through the Word of God and applied to his soul.

'Revive me according to Your judgments' means according to Your sovereign will and way that accords with the tenor of Your tender mercies. Here we are assured that whatever the Lord allows in our lives according to His permissive will can be sanctified in a positive manner in preparing us for a time of reviving spiritually. This will include times of correction, challenge, comfort, uplifting, humbling, filling and emptying. It is an assurance in our life that the Lord will deal with us under His Covenant of Grace. As the tax collector prayed, 'Be merciful to me a sinner!' (*Luke 18.13*), which also has the meaning of 'be mercy-seated towards me', referring to the symbolism of the Ark of the Covenant.

'Revive me...according to Your lovingkindness'. Here the Psalmist brings forth his final and most powerful plea for revival. He pleads according to the perfect characteristic of God's love; the continuing nature of it; the kindness of it; the security of it; and the compassion of it – as in *Psalms 51.1*:

'Have mercy upon me, O God, according to Your lovingkindness; according to the multitude of Your tender mercies, blot out my transgressions.'

He was pleading for revival knowing the Source and Sustainer.

Conclusion – Praise

True faith believes all that the Lord says and does. Any other

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position, however reasonable it may seem to be to the human mind, is unbelief. Here we come to the importance, in a New Testament context, of believing all the Word of the Lord by faith. We do not fully understand all its meaning, but we nevertheless believe all its content to be true. The Word of the Lord is not up for debate; it is given to us as the Word of the Lord to be believed and trusted in.

The Lord is to be praised because He is faithful to His Word, to His promises and to His way and will. It is helpful in our time of praise to always remember the eternal nature of the ways of the Lord. God's dealings in time are all in view of eternity. God's standards are eternal; His Word is eternal; God's decrees are eternal; and God's sovereignty is eternal.

21. HOLDING THE WORD OF GOD IN HIGH ESTEEM

Psalm 119.161-168

‘Princes persecute me without a cause, but my heart stands in awe of Your word’ verse 161.

Here the Psalmist is testifying to opposition from high places in society. Those in the culture of his day who were set aside to lead with dignity and truth, were themselves corrupt. They hated the stand taken by the Psalmist, and without a just cause persecuted him for righteousness’ sake. Note here *‘without a cause’*. In other words, at this time it was not because of folly on the Psalmist’s part.

This testimony reminds us to assess some of our own battles in the secret places of our own heart. Sadly we have to confess there are times when we give opportunity to the unbeliever to criticise us. Maybe our attitude, behaviour or actions have not been in accordance with our Christian profession. Here, however, the persecution was because of the walk of godliness, the believer’s stand for the Lord.

In the midst of his trial his heart stood *‘in awe of Your word’*. The word ‘awe’ here has the meaning of the deepest respect, reverence, fear and submission to God’s Word. Matthew Henry commented: ‘Those that tremble at the convictions of the Word may triumph in the consolations of it.’

By speaking of the heart, the Psalmist is telling us he stood before the Word with his whole being. It means his life was subject to, governed by and spiritually nourished in the Word of the Lord.

‘I rejoice at Your word as one who finds great treasure’ verse 162.

Notice here the harmony between reverence and rejoicing. Here is a sign of spiritual maturity. It is also a sign of great spiritual appetite.

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'Where your treasure is there will your heart be also' Matthew 6.21.

The Psalmist pictures a person who has found great treasure. Poverty is behind them; there are new possibilities for life. The burden of debt has been lifted – no more hassle from creditors! Here the Psalmist found the treasure of the Word of the Lord to be the rejoicing of his heart. In the Word, in the power of the Holy Spirit, he found spiritual life to lift him from his spiritual bankruptcy. In the Word he found the key to lifting his burden of debt in Christ the Messiah. In the Word he learned he was no longer under the condemnation of the law.

'Wisdom and knowledge will be the stability of your times, and the strength of salvation; the fear of the Lord is His treasure' Isaiah 33.6.

'Again, the kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and hid; and for joy over it he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field' Matthew 13.44.

The treasure of the Gospel when our eyes are opened spiritually! We see wonderful things out of God's Word.

'We have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellence of the power may be of God and not of us' 2 Corinthians 4.7.

'I hate and abhor lying, but I love Your law' verse 163.

Here we have the issue of our attitude to truth and integrity, vital to us for a clear conscience. These words were written in a culture where lying was seen as part of life. We also live in such a culture. Here is one of the opportunities to be different. But to be different, we have first to see lying for what it is in God's sight. God hates, abhors and condemns lying. Lying is an abomination to the Lord.

'These six things the Lord hates, Yes, seven are an abomination to Him: a proud look, a lying tongue, hands that shed innocent blood' Proverbs 6.16-17.

Holding the Word of God in High Esteem

'Lying lips are an abomination to the Lord, but those who deal truthfully are His delight' Proverbs 12.22.

'Do not trust in these lying words, saying, "The temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord are these"' Jeremiah 7.4.

There is hypocrisy in depending upon a form or tradition.

'Therefore, putting away lying, let each one of you speak truth with his neighbour, for we are members of one another' Ephesians 4.25.

'But I love Your law.' See again the blessed partnership between love and obedience. This is one of the secrets to hating sin – loving what is pure, God's law.

'Seven times a day I praise You, because of Your righteous judgments' verse 164.

In the Bible seven is viewed as a perfect number, meaning a complete number, as in the creation week. It is not so much that the Psalmist was emphasising he had seven set times in a mechanical sense; he was using seven to emphasise the whole day was lived for the Lord and His praise.

The Puritan William Gurnall stated it was: 'not as if he set seven hours for this duty a day, but rather the statement amounts to this: he did very often in a day praise God, his holy heart taking the hint of every providence to carry him to Heaven in this errand of prayer and praise.'

The apostle Paul used the same thought when he wrote, *'Rejoice in the Lord always. Again I will say, rejoice!'* (Philippians 4.4). He was constantly in a spirit of praise as he contemplated the righteous ways of the Lord.

This statement points us to the serious manner in which the Psalmist

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considered his devotion to the Lord. The focus of his praise was upon the pure and righteous ways of the Judge of the whole earth. When Abraham interceded for his nephew Lot in Sodom, he said: *'Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?'* (Genesis 18.25). The hymnwriter put it like this:

*God's ways are just, His counsels wise;
No darkness can prevent His eyes;
No thought can fly, nor thing can move,
Unknown to Him that sits above.
He in the thickest darkness dwells;
Performs His works, the cause conceals;
But though His methods are unknown,
Judgment and truth support His throne.
In Heaven, and earth, and air, and seas,
He executes His firm decrees;
And by His saints it stands confessed,
That what He does is ever best.
Wait, then, my soul, submissive wait,
Prostrate before His awful seat;
And 'midst the terrors of His rod,
Trust in a wise and gracious God.*

Benjamin Beddome, 1717-95

'Great peace have those who love Your law, and nothing causes them to stumble' verse 165.

This does not mean the Psalmist kept the law perfectly; this is impossible this side of the grave. What it does mean is that he loved it and loved to follow it as his rule of life. Here we have other benefits of love for the Lord and His law; not only hatred of lying, but peace in the conscience and stability.

Holding the Word of God in High Esteem

One of the great benefits of growing in the Word is growing in spiritual strength and stability. It means we are not blown this way and that by every wind of doctrine. This is the main reason for the instability in so many Christian lives today. When truth is replaced by emotional sentiment and the ‘feel-good factor’, then our lives become driven; whereas when truth is at the heart of our thought process and practice, then stability and peace are the fruit. Nothing will offend us; we are not over-sensitive but secure in the Word. We now have, with obedience flowing from love, the additional benefits of peace and stability. View by faith the Lord in the judgment hall – led as a Lamb to the slaughter and dumb before His shearers (*Isaiah 53.7*).

‘Lord, I hope for Your salvation, and I do Your commandments. My soul keeps Your testimonies, and I love them exceedingly. I keep Your precepts and Your testimonies, for all my ways are before You’ verses 166-168.

These final verses link together under the theme of obedience to the commandments of the Lord. They are described as precepts and testimonies, demonstrating adherence to doctrine and practice.

The verses open with a cry of faith – Lord! This is an exclamation of worship, adoration and submission. Can we sincerely come to this point by faith and pray ‘Lord’? This is a most personal exclamation.

‘Yet indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ’ Philippians 3.8.

Here the Psalmist looks to the Lord alone for deliverance, and for his part follows the Lord. C H Spurgeon said: ‘There are two things to do in trouble. First: Hope in God. Second: Do that which is right.’

There are times when we need to speak to our soul, to reason as it were with ourselves.

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'My soul, wait silently for God alone, for my expectation is from Him' Psalm 62.5.

Notice how Lord-focused is the direction of the Psalmist's life: *'Your salvation', 'Your commandments', 'Your testimonies', 'Your precepts', 'Your testimonies'*. It seems that the more he respected and obeyed the Lord and His Word, the more he loved the Lord and His Word. Spurgeon stated: *'The more we store our minds with heavenly truth, the more deeply shall we be in love with it: the more we see the exceeding riches of the Bible, the more will our love exceed measure and exceed expression.'*

Again we see this link between love and obedience. They feed off each other and grow each other. So here the Psalmist could say, *'My soul keeps Your testimonies and I love them exceedingly.'* Although he could not keep God's ways perfectly, his soul, his new nature was all out to serve the Lord.

'For I delight in the law of God according to the inward man. But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members. O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? I thank God—through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, with the mind I myself serve the law of God, but with the flesh the law of sin' Romans 7.22-25.

This same thought comes out in the theology of the Psalmist. On the one hand he was obeying, while on the other hand he mourned because of his wanderings – see verse 176. On the one hand we know we are justified by faith in Jesus Christ and no longer under the law's condemnation. On the other hand we are battling with sin in our sincere walk of obedience to the law we love in Christ. Only as we are viewed in Christ's obedience can we say by faith without fear, *'All my ways are before You.'* It is only in Him the law ceases to be a terror and becomes a law of love to us. The Puritan, Charles Bridges, said:

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‘Let not our consciousness of daily failures make us shrink from this strong expression of confidence. It is alleged as an evidence of grace, not as a claim of merit. Therefore the most humble believer need not hesitate to adopt it as the expression of Christian’s sincerity.’

Conclusion

The blessed effect of having a high esteem for the Word of the Lord is:

- My heart stands in awe of it;
- I rejoice in it;
- I love it;
- I hope in it;
- I keep it, in the Lord.

22. FOCUSED AND FERVENT PRAYER

Psalm 119.169-176

One of the most significant lessons from this psalm is the manner in which it concludes with fervent prayer. In the first stanza there are two prayer requests, while at the end the whole stanza is taken up in prayer. It seems the more the Psalmist contemplated the Word, the more fervent he became in his prayer. Here is one of fruits of the Word of God and a classic sign of spiritual growth: a growing reliance and respect for prayer.

The Psalmist gives a clear message to believers in these final verses: my life is centred on the Lord, His Word and prayer, and therein I gain the inspiration for my life as a believer.

‘Let my cry come before You, O Lord; give me understanding according to Your word. Let my supplication come before You; deliver me according to Your word’ verses 169-170.

See how the Psalmist fervently desired that his prayer would be heard of the Lord at the throne of grace. Here again we can see a hallmark of sincere prayer, not only the act of praying but the sincere desire of acceptance. There was nothing legalistic about the approach of the Psalmist. This was not mechanical, going through a ritual to gain favour with the Lord. Rather it was fervent prayer dependent upon the mercy of the Lord to accept him in Christ.

This whole matter of acceptance becomes increasingly glorious in our minds the more we consider it. In Spurgeon’s *Treasury of David* he uses the symbolism of Esther going into King Ahasuersus for a meeting. She was absolutely dependent upon him raising the golden sceptre to gain acceptance into his presence. Without the

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golden sceptre being raised, Esther could not come near the king (*Esther 4.11*). In prayer our golden sceptre is Christ Who enables our acceptance into the very throne room of God in Heaven.

The Psalmist had two specific requests in harmony with his desire for the acceptance of his prayer. He desired an understanding that was in accordance with God's Word. Humanistic wisdom had failed him; the philosophy of man had proved empty and without substance. So here his prayer was for understanding that is derived and gleaned from the truth of God. The understanding the Psalmist desired is that which is from on high, not that which is from beneath (*James 3.15-17*).

Notice here that this understanding is not a matter of the intellect. See how the Psalmist asked to be given understanding; he desired spiritual understanding. There is common grace that is given to all men to enjoy God's good providence in creation, but there is also particular grace. A saved person is particularly blessed spiritually. He is given spiritual discernment and understanding. But this is a gift from God; it is His sign of grace. It is to view your life as God would have you do, even to some extent as He does.

The second request of the Psalmist was deliverance that is according to God's Word and His holy mind. This means that he wanted a deliverance that magnified the name of the Lord, deliverance wherein he was found to have been walking wisely. There was a time when the Psalmist feigned madness to get out of the Philistines' clutches, after which he prayed the well known prayer, '*Whenever I am afraid, I will trust in You*' (*Psalms 56.3*); my future deliverances will not dishonour the Lord but bring honour to Him. He had learned through experience. This is deliverance from the Lord that fulfils His Word, which leads us perfectly into the thought of the next verses.

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'My lips shall utter praise, for You teach me Your statutes. My tongue shall speak of Your word, for all Your commandments are righteousness' verses 171-172.

Two fruits will come from such a prayer from the Lord's servant – praise and proclamation. The person taught of the Lord has the highest praise for their Tutor. They are so thankful to be taught truth, wisdom and discernment; to be taught in measure to think as God thinks; to learn the right ways of God.

There are times at school where we have to learn things and wonder, 'Whatever is the point of that? How is that going to help me and further my understanding of life and its responsibilities?' Sometimes people give three or four years at university to a degree course that is of little use to them afterwards. Paul speaks to Timothy of those who are ever learning yet never able to come to a knowledge of the truth (2 Timothy 3.7). But here the Psalmist was so grateful for what he was being taught. He saw its relevance, its significance, its suitability and its purpose – it was all so worthwhile. He was showing his appreciation of it.

But then praise will lead on to proclamation. On the foundation of the fact that what he was proclaiming had a righteous authority, the Psalmist would positively speak the Word of the Lord. He realised this was the right response to his instruction and experience of the Lord's dealings with him. In the end the most worthwhile occupation in life is for us to be speaking the Word of the Lord. By this I mean ensuring our conversation is governed by the truth of God's Word and flavoured by it; that we speak a word in season to those in need; that our conversation carries an authority with it.

In this verse it has the added meaning of the Psalmist preaching the Word. We are not all called to preach, but we are all called to make sure our conversation is biblically based. We are called to use the Scripture as a guide for our manner of conversation. The Psalmist not

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only believed that the Word of the Lord is righteous in its teaching, but also it is righteous in its essence. It is holy and unique as a book of the Lord. It is with this respect and belief that he preaches the Word.

'Let Your hand become my help, for I have chosen Your precepts'
verse 173.

The Psalmist was using figurative language to express his desire of close communion with the Lord. There are times in our spiritual walk when we need our hand to be held by the Lord. We know and believe what is the right way but need the Lord's help in walking in it. It is one thing to choose the right way; it is another to walk in that right way.

Peter made the right choice in responding to the invitation to walk to Jesus on the water, but he soon realised in fear that he needed the hand of the Son of God to save him from sinking (*Matthew 14.29-31*).

For the ultimate meaning of what the Psalmist is meaning here, turn to *Isaiah 41.10*:

'Fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you, yes, I will help you, I will uphold you with My righteous right hand.'

'I long for Your salvation, O Lord, and Your law is my delight'
verse 174.

Why does a saved man pray that he longs for the Lord's salvation? Is he not already saved? The Psalmist needed providential saving, deliverance from his persecutors, but he meant much more than this. The Psalmist was looking for the ultimate outcome of salvation. He was maybe weary of his earthly pilgrimage and his own failures and weaknesses. He longed for the time when the battle against the flesh would be over. He longed for the time when he would enter into the fulfilment of salvation to enjoy what the Lord had prepared for him in Glory for ever.

Meanwhile here on earth he longed for a better time spiritually when

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the desert shall blossom as the rose (*Isaiah 35.1*), for the showers of blessing from the presence of the Lord (*Acts 3.19*). This was not a whim; it was a heartfelt desire. He delighted in the law of the Lord. The Apostle Paul used the same expression when he said he delighted after the law of God in the inward man (*Romans 7.22*).

This word 'delight' has the meaning of being spiritually nourished from the healthy diet of God's Word. It has the meaning of being inclined and attracted to the Word of the Lord, to rejoice in it. It means to delight in the standard of God's law, no longer being a terror but a delight.

The Word of the Lord endures for ever; therefore the Word of the Lord will have a place in Heaven. If we have no delight in it on earth, how will we cope with it eternally in Heaven? Delighting in the Word of the Lord is one of the clearest evidences of grace in the life of the Psalmist.

'Let my soul live, and it shall praise You; and let Your judgments help me' verse 175.

Life in the soul is vital for us to enjoy, benefit and grow in the ways and the Word of the Lord. This the fourth time the Psalmist had asked the Lord for something to be so in his life. This is, then, a prayer of total recognition that God was the Lord of his life. It is in total contrast to today's independent spirit.

This part of the Psalmist's prayer is extremely searching and solemn. The Scriptures tell us that no man can keep alive his own soul. How true this is – how special and unique spiritual life is! We cannot manufacture it, we cannot demand it, we cannot earn it and we cannot replace it.

Here we come to the real meaning of true dependence upon the Lord. Here we come onto holy ground. There are many things we can do outwardly in our own strength and appear outwardly acceptable,

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but the Lord knows the heart. Here we come to the most searching element of true conversion – you must be born again (*John 3.3*). Spiritual life is a most wonderful gift; it is an eternal gift; it is priceless. It is a gift which will be most appreciated when we get to Glory.

The Psalmist had asked to learn from God's Word; now he wanted to learn from God's judgments. It is in this spirit that the Psalmist made this petition. He wanted to learn from the permissive will of God, both personally and generally. What is God saying through the circumstances and events of life? Samuel Medley (1738-99) put this desire of the Psalmist in these words:

*God shall alone the refuge be,
And comfort of my mind;
Too wise to be mistaken, He,
Too good to be unkind.*

*In all His holy, sovereign will,
He is, I daily find,
Too wise to be mistaken, still
Too good to be unkind.*

*When I the tempter's rage endure,
'Tis God supports my mind;
Too wise to be mistaken, sure,
Too good to be unkind.*

*Hereafter He will make me know,
And I will surely find,
He was too wise to err, and O,
Too good to be unkind.*

The Puritans had a positive approach to trials, believing that in them was potential for spiritual growth. The first questions were: What can

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I learn from this about the Lord, His Word and myself? What can I gain spiritually?

'I have gone astray like a lost sheep; seek Your servant, for I do not forget Your commandments' verse 176.

This seems a strange and downbeat manner in which to end such a wonderful psalm. Left to man we would leave on a 'high'. What is this final verse telling us about the testimony of the Psalmist and our own spiritual experience? It is telling us that the closer we get to God, the more unworthy we will feel. See *Isaiah 6*.

The Psalmist had been getting closer and closer in his prayer life before the Lord, but in doing so he was overwhelmed by the holiness of God and his own weakness and failures. As a result he did not try to hide; he did not despise or resent God's commandments, but actually as grace shone he remembered the Lord's commandments, the Lord's standards. In such a spiritual state of realisation of his own condition he cried out that the Lord would seek him out. He was looking by faith to Christ, the Messiah, Who said He had come to seek and to save the lost (*Luke 19.10*), Who is ever ready to hear such a cry of faith.

The Spirit's work is to reveal our condition before the Lord and then motivate the prayer of faith. So we learn from the Psalmist that growing in grace is not about cover up, it is about revelation. The fruit of the Spirit's revelation in the life of a believer is always positive, however convicting.

Conclusion

As we come to the conclusion of *Psalms 119* may it prove helpful in increasing our confidence in the Word of the Lord.