

Christ's followers know that true engagement with the word of God involves prayer. What is not as well known is that Psalm 119 serves as an effective guide to prayer. The longest psalm in Jesus' Prayer Book is an extended meditation on the significance of the word of God. Each of the twenty-two stanzas of this elaborate acrostic psalm serves as an effective prayer for Bible study and meditation. In the torah tradition of Psalm 1 and Psalm 19, the psalmist poetically crafted these twenty-two prayers in a single psalm to deepen the people of God's devotion, delight, and dependence on the word of God.

Disciples of all ages and levels of spiritual maturity can begin here in prayer when they open the Bible. Whether it is a young parent sitting down for morning devotions or a pastor preparing a sermon, Psalm 119 gives each and every disciple the words to express their deep, heartfelt desire to understand and obey the word. To pray these eight-verse stanzas is to be reminded that we are blessed to be dependent on the Bible for wisdom and direction. The Bible is not an inanimate object of scholarly inquiry and debate, nor a consumer product bolstering religious sentiment, nor an emotive catalyst for self-revelation. The Bible is God's word guiding God's people in God's way.

Each of the twenty-two acrostic stanzas consists of eight alphabetized verses constructed around eight synonyms for God's word. These eight descriptive terms for Scripture anchor the truth upon which the believer's concerns are suspended. Picture a suspension bridge firmly anchored in bedrock of the word with the roadway representing all of our circumstances, situations, desires, and emotions. There is room in this framework to pray through our hopes and fears. Yet all desire and lament bend toward obedience to the will of the Lord. These eight synonyms for the word of God are listed here in order of their occurrence: *law* (*torah*, 25 times), *word* (24 times), *decision* (or *judgment*, 23 times), *testimony* (23 times), *command* (22 times), *statute* (21 times), *precept* (21 times), *saying* (or *oracle* or *promise*, 19 times). All eight words are used in four stanzas (Ps 119:57-64, 73-80, 81-88, 129-136) and all the stanzas have at least six references to the word of God.¹ Furthermore, every reference to the Scripture, all 178 of them, relate "explicitly to its Author."² The word is never abstracted from its personal source in God. Each word is described in relation to God: *your* commands, *your* statutes, *your* word of truth, and *your* laws.

Each word contributes to the kaleidoscopic impact of the Bible and invites the believer to action. We are not passive recipients of divine revelation but active followers of the way. We seek to know and live the word. Understanding yields to devotion and devotion to obedience. Through meditation and study the word is internalized. Disciples love the word of God and it shows in how they live. Psalm 119 is "a medley of praise, prayer and wisdom" dedicated to discerning, applying and enjoying the wisdom of God in every aspect of life. "There is no hint of legalism . . . It breathes a spirit of devotion and celebrates the closest of relationships between the psalmist

¹ Ross, Psalms, 460.

² Kidner, Psalms, 419.

as ‘your servant’ and Yahweh as ‘my God.’”³

1. *Blessed Followers*

*Blessed are those whose ways are blameless,
who walk according to the law of the Lord.
Blessed are those who keep his statutes
and seek him with all their heart –
they do no wrong
but follow his ways,
You have laid down precepts
that are to be fully obeyed.
Oh, that my ways were steadfast
in obeying your decrees!
Then I would not be put to shame
when I consider your commands.
I will praise you with an upright heart
as I learn your righteous laws.
I will obey your decrees;
do not utterly forsake me.
Psalm 119:1-8*

We are with Jesus on the way. We accept his easy yoke and we seek to learn everything we can from him (Matthew 11:28-30). Psalm 119 begins the way Jesus began the Sermon on the Mount with a blessing, – a series of blessings known as the beatitudes. His blessedness is “not discernible in the ordinary course of things.”⁴ It is hidden in the will and word of God. We will not find it talked about in the press or on campus or in the office.

In sync with the psalmist Jesus drew on the Old Testament roots of the word blessed. The Hebrew word for blessed is *ashr* which meant to find the right path (Prov 3:13). Jesus’ description portrays his followers from the inside out, a down-to-earth character sketch of spiritual maturity and authentic discipleship. The Beatitudes and Psalm 119 reflect a theology of grace. They are not a list of legalistic prerequisites or moralistic preconditions for conversion. They are a description of the attitude of heart and the condition of the will that turns to God and is open for God’s blessing. They describe a *state* of grace, not a *means* of grace. These are not *prerequisites* for grace but the *evidences* of grace. To be redeemed by God’s grace is to be freed from the torment of our own beginnings.⁵

The psalmist’s profile of beatitude-based belief begins with forgiveness. To be “blameless” is to be forgiven and free from the burden of sin and death. This makes walking according to the law of God, keeping his statutes, and seeking the Lord wholeheartedly possible. This is not to say that

³ Allen, Psalms, 140, 142.

⁴ McCullough, Finding Happiness in the Most Unlikely Places, IVP, 23.

⁵ Bonhoeffer, Meditating on the Word, 96.

we have no sin, because “if we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. But if anybody does sin, we have an advocate with the Father – Jesus Christ, the Righteous One” (1 John 1:8-9). The psalmist’s bold statement, “They do no wrong but follow his ways,” means that God’s way is the path of freedom and righteousness. The way is not shrouded in mystery and confusion. God in his word and in the Living Word lays it out for us and bids us “follow me.” Karl Barth reminds us, “I believe—not in myself—I believe in God the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost.” Faith delivers us from trust in ourselves, in our circumstances, and in any other anchor. “We shall never be true to ourselves. . . .In God alone is there faithfulness, and faith is the trust that we may hold to Him, to His promise and to His guidance.”⁶

Walking along the way is as straight-forward as putting one foot in front of another. Barth continues:

“Jesus goes, and the disciple accompanies Him on the same way. It is Jesus who chooses the common way, and treads it first. The Christian follows Him on the way which He has chosen, treading in His steps (1 Peter 2:21: ‘To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps.’). [The disciple] believes in Jesus, not in a theoretical and general way, as in a good leader alongside whom there might be others, but in such a way that He is the inescapable Leader who leaves him no option but to go after Him on the way which He has chosen. And believing in Him, he obeys Him, again not in a general or theoretical way which enables or even perhaps constrains him to think and speak and act in detail according to some standards of his own, but in such a way that his own sovereignty is completely forfeit and he does exactly as he is told even in detail. And obeying Him, he confesses Him, again not just theoretically—and whether or not in words is only a secondary question—but quite unequivocally by publicly entering the way which is chosen by Him, by thus compromising himself with Him, by making himself a fool for His sake, as we must add for the sake of clarity. Hence he does not belong to Jesus in a purely general way. [The disciple] lives his own life in a fellowship with His life which is not ordered by himself but by Him. His discipleship, which is the history of the relationship of the Christian to Him, embraces the whole life of the Christian.”⁷

To begin with God’s blessing is to acknowledge that our beginning is in the past and “that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus” (Phil 1:6). We were not meant to have multiple beginnings. We are committed to a long obedience in the same direction. We have set out on the way and we have no desire to go back to the beginning. We cherish the testimony of our conversion but now our attention is drawn to “the perfect law of freedom.” We continue in it – not forgetting what we have heard, but doing it, because we know we will be blessed in what we do (James 1:25). The apostle Paul delighted in sharing his Damascus road experience but his devotion was never fueled by nostalgia. He was

⁶ Karl Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline* (New York: Harper & Row, 1959), 19.

⁷ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics: The Doctrine of Reconciliation*, vol IV, 3, 1 (Edinburgh, Scotland: T & T Clark, 1976), 510; 535-536.

emphatic, writing, “Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus” (Phil 4:13-14).

Dietrich Bonhoeffer began his meditation on Psalm 119 by emphasizing that we must go beyond beginnings. “God has once and for all converted me to himself;” he wrote, “it is not that I have once for all converted myself to God. God has made the beginning; that is the happy certainty of faith.”⁸ Only the Holy Spirit has the power to convert the old creation into a new creation. The *Creator Spiritus*, who began the world’s *creation* (“the Spirit of God swept over the face of the waters,” Gen 1:2), and who now begins the world’s *new creation* and its definitive salvation.”⁹ Beatitude-based believers know that their new creation beginning lies not in themselves but in God. We are all the least likely candidates for conversion and all of us need a miracle to believe. “Every conversion is a virgin birth.”¹⁰ The apostle John wrote, “Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God—children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband’s will, but born of God” (Jn 1:12-13).

We do not go back to the beginning, we go forward in commitment to “follow his ways” (Ps 119:3). Psalm 119 weans us away from a preoccupation with the start of the Christian life and redirects our focus to finishing well. Faithfulness to the end affirms faith from the beginning. “Today we emphasize the New Birth,” writes Peter Gillquist, “the ancients emphasized being faithful to the end. We moderns talk of wholeness and purposeful living; they spoke of the glories of the eternal kingdom. . .the emphasis in our attention has shifted from the completing of the Christian life to the beginning of it.”¹¹

Beatitude-based believers accept what God has done for them. We embrace the law of God not as a burden that induces guilt but as a blessing that gives freedom. We hear Jesus say to us, “If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free” (John 8:31-32). To be Jesus’ friend involves obeying his commands, not out of compulsion and duty, but out of love and devotion. “You did not choose me,” Jesus said, “but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit. . .” (John 15:14-16). Mercy, not merit, induces the desire and the gift of obedience.

The humility of the believer is well attested to in this first stanza. “Oh, that my ways were steadfast in obeying your decrees!” (Ps 119:5). This is the earnest sigh of a person in “the state of grace” who wants to remain forever in the company of Jesus. This yearning for God and his ways is a reflection of God’s Spirit at work in the life of the believer. The real possibility of shame, which is the opposite experience of God’s blessedness, enters the human heart with a sense of dread. Instead of being directed by God’s decrees, commands, and statutes, the believer contemplates the inevitable consequences of living by one’s own passions and ambitions. Humility is expressed in the sigh, in the fear of shame, and in the dread of being forsaken by

⁸ Bonhoeffer, *Meditating on the Word*, 93.

⁹ Bruner, *Matthew*, 24.

¹⁰ Bruner, *Matthew*, 24.

¹¹ Gillquist, “A Marathon We Are Meant to Win,” 22.

God. This holy fear of being abandoned by God is not induced by anything God has said or done, but by our own sinful inclinations. We pray with the hymn writer, “Let Thy goodness like a fetter / Bind my wandering heart to Thee / Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it, Prone to leave the God I love / Here’s my heart, O take and seal it; Seal it for Thy courts above.”¹² The stanza closes with a declaration, “I will obey your decrees.” This is not the wilful, self-centered “I will” that we so freely used and depended upon before “the beginning,” but the “I will” that says “by the grace of God I am what I am” (1 Cor 15:10). This last verse reminds Christ’s followers that we are commissioned to “make disciples of all nations . . . teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matthew 28:19-20).

2. *Embrace the Word*

How can a young person stay on the path of purity?

By living according to your word.

I will seek you with all my heart;

do not let me stray from your commands.

I have hidden your word in my heart

that I might not sin against you.

Praise be to you, Lord;

teach me your decrees.

With my lips I recount

all the laws that come from your mouth.

I rejoice in following your statutes

as one rejoices in great riches.

I meditate on your precepts

and consider your ways.

I delight in your decrees;

I will not neglect your word.

Psalm 119:9-16

The path of purity may imply to some a forced march of religious scrupulousness or a steep ascent to moral perfection, but for the psalmist this path meant freedom – freedom from sin’s contamination and pollution. Purity meant soul-cleansing forgiveness and single-minded faithfulness. This purity is not squeaky clean obsequious piety but a prophetic freedom to pursue God unencumbered by sin and divided loyalties. This is the purity of heart that wills one thing: to follow Jesus along the way. The apostle James wrote, “Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded” (James 4:8).

Nominal Christianity assumes that young people’s rite of passage into adulthood involves ignoring and violating the revealed will of God. British abolitionist William Wilberforce made clear in his 1797 treatise on Christian character and conduct that it was naive to think that it was normal for youth to sow their wild oats. To say flippantly that youth will be youth and make light

¹² Robert Robinson; adopted by Margaret Clarkson, “Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing.”

of sin overlooked the grave danger of God's displeasure.¹³ Wilberforce warned that "we devise some means or other for stifling the voice of conscience. 'We cry peace, when there is no peace!'"¹⁴ Dietrich Bonhoeffer claimed that "we have become accustomed to a very godless conception of youth. . . .It is very presumptuous and wrongheaded to think that the human being has to become entangled deeply in the guilt of life in order to know life itself, and finally God. We do not learn to know life and guilt from our own experience, but only from God's judgment of humanity and his grace in the cross of Jesus Christ."¹⁵ The apostle Paul may echo Psalm 119:9 when he writes, "Flee the evil desires of youth and pursue righteousness, faith, love and peace, along with those who call on the Lord out of a pure heart" (2 Tim 2:22).

The whole of the second stanza seeks to answer the psalmist's question "how" can a young person stay on the path of freedom. Seven ways are clearly stated, beginning with "By living according to your word." This fundamental truth is followed by six supporting assertions.

"I seek you with all my heart. . ." / "I have hidden your word in my heart. . ." / "I recount with my lips all the laws that come from your mouth." / "I rejoice in following your statutes. . ." / "I meditate on your precepts. . ." / "I delight in your decrees. . ."

Without a hint of self-centeredness, each first-person assertion emphasizes responsibility and submission. The psalmist is dedicating himself personally to seeking God with his whole heart. His mental, emotional, spiritual, and physical energy is poured into knowing God through his word, laws, statutes, precepts and decrees. The object that is sought is never abstracted from the person of God. The psalmist's "I" never masters the object of desire, but is always mastered by the Lord and his word. To embrace the living Word impacts one's whole being. The heart is a metaphor for one's true self – the inner you. The lips represent the relational self – the social you.

In the middle of this grace-inspired effort the psalmist breaks out in praise, "Praise be to you, Lord; teach me your decrees." The psalmist is convinced that nothing can be done apart from God's initiative and instruction: "Do not let me stray from your commands. . . .Teach me your decrees." The final three assertions are emotive. The psalmist is hardly a passive consumer of biblical teaching nor a reluctant participant in worship. Obedience to God's statutes is cause for real joy and inner delight. The mental work of understanding God's precepts and paying attention to God's ways is accompanied by a deeply satisfying emotional experience. Mind and heart rejoice together. The stanza concludes with a vow: "I will not neglect your word."

The psalmist offers a counter-cultural path to wisdom. Sociologist Robert Wuthnow calls this generation in their 20s and 30s a generation of tinkerers. They put life together "by improvising, by piecing together an idea from here, a skill from there, and a contact from somewhere else." They have a "do-it-yourself" mentality, as they cobble together a customized lifestyle.¹⁶ Today's

¹³ Wilberforce, *Real Christianity*, 115.

¹⁴ Wilberforce, *Real Christianity*, 115; Jer 6:14.

¹⁵ Bonhoeffer, *Meditating on the Word*, 109.

¹⁶ Robert Wuthnow, *After the Baby Boomers: How Twenty-and Thirty-Somethings Are Shaping The Future of American Religion* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), p. 14.

student believes they are their own best authority. They are in charge of piecing together a customized world-view that works for them in a pluralistic culture.

The Oscar winning movie *Slum Dog Millionaire* serves as a kind of parable for this new way of knowing. Jamal Malik is a street kid (or "slumdog") in Mumbai who has landed an appearance on India's version of the hit TV game show *Who Wants To Be a Millionaire?* Jamal's ability to get the right answers exceeds all expectations. The producers suspect that someone is giving Jamal the answers, so they alert the police. Jamal is arrested and questioned. In the course of the interrogation Jamal's story is told through harrowing flashbacks that help explain how he knew the answers to the *Millionaire* questions. All of his knowledge is derived from random personal experience. The miscellaneous and haphazard collection of information that had been acquired along life's perilous journey was just what he needed to answer the odd assortment of game show questions. Jamal managed to construct a world view out of street savvy survival skills and a relational drive to be reunited with family. With a few lucky breaks along way he had learned how to adapt to an ever-changing, life-threatening world.¹⁷

The Jesus way is different. We have his word. The search is over. Thanks be to God! Embracing the wisdom of God is a joyous commitment and a delightful discipline that counters the various ways of knowing and acquiring knowledge in the culture. We're not trying to find our way by rummaging through the junk yard of pop culture or relying on the latest trends in academia. Instead, we're seeking God with our whole heart. We are articulating his laws, rejoicing in his statutes, meditating on his precepts and delighting in his decrees. We're letting the word of Christ dwell in us richly as we teach and admonish one another with all wisdom (Col 3:16). And the Father is answering the prayer of the Son for us: "Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth" (John 17:17).

3. Resident Aliens

*Be good to your servant while I live,
that I may obey your word.
Open my eyes that I may see
wonderful things in your law.
I am a stranger on earth;
do not hide your commands from me.
My soul is consumed with longing
for your laws at all times.
You rebuke the arrogant, who are accursed,
those who stray from your commands.
Remove from me the scorn and contempt,
for I keep your statutes.
Though rulers sit together and slander me,
your servant will meditate on your decrees.
Your statutes are my delight;*

¹⁷ Webster, Text Messaging, 21-22.

they are my counselors.

Psalm 119:17-24

What is living for but to glorify God and enjoy him forever. The psalmist knows that such joy is only possible through God's bountiful mercy and practical guidance. The abundant life is God's doing, not ours. If God does not hold evil in check and give to his servant wisdom he doesn't stand a chance. The premise of the third stanza is not that we defend God, but that we need God to defend us. The opposition is great. God's servant is an alien in her homeland, surrounded by the proud who willfully stray from God's commands. She is slandered by the rich and powerful who are united in their ridicule of God's word.

The psalmist pleads, "Open my eyes that I may see wonderful things in your law." Words such as "law," "commands," "statutes," and "precepts," may convey a "necessary but soon-learned rule of life, about which there is not much more to think, to say, or to be amazed at."¹⁸ But nothing could be further from the truth. All revelation points to Christ, as Bonhoeffer saw so clearly, "The great wonder in the law of God is the revelation of the Lord Jesus Christ. Through him what is written comes alive, contradictions are resolved, and the revelation is given its unfathomable depth. Lord, open my eyes."¹⁹ The apostle Paul may have had this specific verse in mind when he wrote to the church at Ephesus and said, "I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in his holy people, and his incomparably great power for us who believe" (Eph 1:18-19). God's answer to the psalmist's prayer came in the person of the living Word and in the form of the New Testament. "Concerning this salvation. . . Even the angels long to look into these things" (1 Pet 1:10,12).

The wonderful things in God's law refer to the great invisibles, the supernatural truths that cannot be known apart from God's revelation. Eugene Peterson writes, "At some point we realized the immensity of God and of the great invisibles that socket into our arms and legs, into bread and wine, into our brains and our tools, into mountains and rivers, giving them meaning, destiny, value, joy, beauty, salvation."²⁰ The wisdom of the world is sensible and reasonable and does not concern itself with the wisdom of God. This is why the world thinks Christians are weird, and who can blame them? Of course the world thinks the followers of the Son of God are strange. The gospel of Christ speaks of truths that the world finds utterly inexplicable. Divine revelation is the determinative factor for human destiny, whether personal or global, whether ancient or modern. God has spoken and is speaking and this makes all the difference in the world. God breaks in with his compelling, convicting truth and we yield.²¹

The wisdom of God makes us strangers on earth, but instead of shunning our strangeness we embrace it. We become resident aliens in our home culture, because "the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God." The wisdom of this age is coming to nothing, but the wisdom of God "searches all things, even

¹⁸ Bonhoeffer, *Meditating on the Word*, 119.

¹⁹ Bonhoeffer, *Meditating on the Word*, 121.

²⁰ Peterson, "Lashed to the mast," 56.

²¹ Webster, *Preaching Hebrews*, 24.

the deep things of God” (1 Cor 1:18; 2:10). We re-enter our home culture as immigrants and foreigners, who for all practical purposes are now strangers without status in our home culture. . We are resident aliens by virtue of our faith in Christ and the sheer contrariness of the good news of Jesus Christ. We have been given new birth into a “living hope,” into “an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade.” We live into a new reality and we eagerly await “the coming salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time” (1 Pet 1:3-5).

4. Grief Sanctified

I am laid low in the dust;
 preserve my life according to your word.
I gave an account of my ways and you answered me;
 teach me your decrees.
Cause me to understand the way of your precepts,
 that I may meditate on your wonderful deeds.
My soul is weary with sorrow;
 strengthen me according to your word.
Keep me from deceitful ways;
 be gracious to me and teach me your law.
I have chosen the way of faithfulness;
 I have set my heart on your laws.
I hold fast to your statutes, Lord;
 do not let me be put to shame.
I run in the path of your commands,
 for you have broadened my understanding.

Psalm 119:25-32

The arc of devotion begins in the dust and ends on the run. The first line sends a chill up the spine. A grief observed is a hard reality to face. The dreaded, “don’t go there, don’t even think about it,” echoes in my brain. Yet we have all been laid low, as low as the dust, and we face the crisis of what to do next. Do we run from the darkness, or run through the darkness to the light? Do we escape by trying to drown our sorrow with pills or porn or something else, anything to distract us from our pain. We have choices. The psalmist chooses prayer. He clings to the word of God. He does not seek to manage grief but to sanctify grief. He looks to God to grow his soul, to make it stronger and more resilient.

The psalmist’s experience brings to mind the story of Job lying on an ash heap, feverish and friendless, homeless and hounded, scraping his sores and mourning his losses. Job’s journey from despair to devotion, from weakness to strength, reminds us that a deepening understanding of God and his ways is costly. Job persevered in his integrity, by clinging to his God-centered understanding of righteousness. He persevered in his freedom, by remaining true to God when he had no humanistic reason for doing so. He persevered in his lament, by insisting on making his case before God. Like the psalmist he sought to give an account of his ways (Ps 119:26).

By allowing Job to walk on his own in the midst of pain, without the benefit of soothing answers, God let him acquire powerful new strength. Job knew that he had no other place to turn but to God and his word. By faith—by sheer, naked, teeth-gritting, soul-clinging faith, Job remained faithful to God and expected justice from God. Job's ash heap faithfulness is vindicated by Almighty God and when God and Job finally meet there is no doubt who is the Master and who is the servant. This is what Job wanted all along. He wanted to be back in fellowship with God. When God speaks, "Brace yourself like a man; I will question you, and you shall answer me" (Job 38:3). Job does not cower, he bows. This is communion, not condemnation. He receives God's word as an invitation, not a threat. The yearning of his heart is satisfied when God finally says, "Listen now, and I will speak." Resolution and renewal are expressed in his line: "My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you. Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes" (Job 42:5-6). In the awesome presence of God, Job is both delighted and ashamed at the same time. This is what it means to love God with your whole being, body, mind and soul. This is worship at its best.

In the tradition of Job, the psalmist expresses a passionate determination to stay in the word. Since only the truth of God will preserve his life, he looks to the Lord for instruction, understanding, and strength. But the psalmist isn't after head-knowledge. His deep desire is for spiritual renewal – a transformation from the inside-out. "Keep me from deceitful ways; be gracious to me and teach me your law" (Ps 119:29). He renews his commitment to the way of faithfulness with four definitive statements: "I have chosen, I have set, I hold fast, and I run" (Ps 119:30-32). The initial image of being laid low in the dust is eclipsed by the psalmist's passion for the word. The psalmist's arc of devotion anticipates the poetry of the prophet Isaiah: "He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak. / Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall; / but those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. / They will soar on wings like eagles; / they will run and not grow weary, / they will walk and not faint" (Isa 40:29-31).

5. Teachable

*Teach me, Lord, the way of your decrees,
that I may follow it to the end.
Give me understanding, so that I may keep your law
and obey it with all my heart.
Direct me in the path of your commands,
for there I find delight.
Turn my heart toward your statutes
and not toward selfish gain.
Turn my eyes away from worthless things;
preserve my life according to your word.
Fulfill your promise to your servant,
so that you may be feared.
Take away the disgrace I dread,
for your laws are good.*

*How I long for your precepts!
In your righteousness preserve my life.
Psalm 119:33-40*

The psalmist's longing to learn from the Lord is intense. His straightforward imperatives make it personal, "Teach me. . . . Give me. . . . Direct me." His forceful demands are best heard as humble pleas, "Turn my heart. . . . Turn my eyes. . . . Preserve my life. . . . Take away the disgrace I dread." The focus of the fifth stanza is on our teachability. When we pray these words we are yearning along with the psalmist to understand and obey the will of God with our whole being. And the reason we are asking earnestly for the Lord's instruction, direction, and protection is because our very lives depend on it. "We are not to seek this blessing that we may be famous for wisdom," wrote Spurgeon, "but that we may be abundant in our love to the law of God. He who has understanding will learn, remember, treasure up, and obey the commandment of the Lord. The gospel gives us grace to keep the law; the free gift leads us to holy service; there is no way of reaching to holiness but by accepting the gift of God."²²

Do we share the psalmist's enthusiasm for the word of God? Are we ready to abandon ourselves to all his decrees, laws, commands, statutes, and precepts? When we say, "Give me understanding, so that I may keep your law," do we mean, "Give me information, so that I may debate your law" or "Give me scholarship, so that we may promote your law?" The teachers of the law in Jesus' day failed to see the purpose of the law. They valued the law as an end unto itself. Jesus said, "You study the Scriptures diligently because you think that in them you have eternal life. These are the very Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life" (John 5:39-40). Being a diligent Bible student is not enough. We must follow the living Word along the path of obedience, not in the strength of our righteousness, but in the strength of his righteousness. For only in him is our life preserved.

If we share the psalmist's enthusiasm for the word of God we will accept his binary logic. Teachability has both a positive focus and a negative discipline. We believe that "whoever looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom" will turn their "eyes away from worthless things" (James 1:25; Ps 119:37). We can't do both. We can't embrace the will of God and pursue selfish gain. The psalmist implies a costly either/or decision that forces the Christ-follower to choose between the way of the world and way of God. We cannot fixate on "worthless things" and focus on the word of God.

The psalmist describes God's pedagogical method in three ways:

1) Logistical, "Direct me in the path of your commands." We ask God to immerse us in his will. We are walking and conversing with him along the way marked by the cross. We are like the two disciples who encounter the risen Lord Jesus on the road to Emmaus who exclaimed, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?" (Luke 24:32).

²² Spurgeon, *The Golden Alphabet: a devotional commentary on Psalm 119*, Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit, 1969. 91 in the Pilgrim Publications (Pasadena, TX).

2) Personal, “Turn my heart toward your statutes.” The heart signifies the whole person in the depth of our being devoted to God. We require careful parental nurture. Turning the heart toward God’s will does not happen automatically. No matter how old we are it is always challenging to be the Lord’s obedient child. It is not our second nature to fear the Lord and love one another deeply. The apostle Peter likens old believers as well as young to newborns crying for their mother’s milk (1 Pet 2:2). It is not in our DNA to be selfless and sacrificial. It takes hard work and years of prayerful discipline. There is more to this craving for nourishment and growth than hearing sermons and attending Bible studies. It is not about exposure to Christian information or even adherence to the word of God, as much as it is about truly growing in the word of God.

3) Practical (ethical), “Turn my eyes away from worthless things.” We need God’s help to turn our naturally covetous eyes away from the enticing “visibles” that corrupt the soul. Jesus said, “Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” He then added, “The eye is a lamp of the body” (Matthew 6:21-22). If the treasure is a metaphor for ambition, the eye is a metaphor for vision. “If you open your eyes wide in wonder and belief, your body fills up with light. If you live squinty-eyed in greed and distrust, your body is a dank cellar” (Matthew 6:22-23, The Message). With the eyes of faith, we can discern light and darkness, good and evil. Like a trained artist, we can see what is really there. We can begin to see the world as God sees it, “and God saw that it was good” (Gen 1).

Even the list of synonyms for the word of God cited seven times in this stanza implies a specificity of meaning and a practicality of obedience that resists spiritualizing and sentimentalizing. If we want to equivocate on what the word says about love and lust, fidelity and infidelity, chastity and promiscuity, reconciliation and revenge, and honesty and dishonesty, we will have to pretend that the clear word of God is confusing and ambiguous. It is not. “For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart” (Heb 4:12).

Teachability is not an easy gift to come by and especially at the outset it can be a fragile state of being. The psalmist knows that we are not naturally teachable. We defend our anonymity and privacy even when we hide behind an outwardly extroverted behavior. Like a wild animal the soul is inherently shy and easily scared off. We resist receptivity, finding it easier to close down than to open up. We are more defensive than submissive and pride overrules humility. It is as if a strong-willed two-year-toddler is running around inside of us insisting, “I’ll do it myself.” In an effort to make unlearning possible and true learning enjoyable the psalmist concludes the fifth stanza with a prayer for personal affirmation, vindication, and preservation.

Teachability is gift to be sought after in prayer and worship. We need God to act on our behalf, confirming his love and deepening our sense of awe at his saving grace. In worship we look to God to “take away the disgrace [we] dread.” Through praise and prayer we express our need for his reassurance “that nothing will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom 8:39). Through the preaching of the word and in the celebration of holy communion we experience the Lord’s reassurance. We even need God to affirm our desires for

God and to bolster our confidence and delight in the things of God. We agree with Jesus and echo his words, “By myself I can do nothing . . . for I seek not to please myself but him who sent me” (John 5:30).

6. *Confident Witness*

*May your unfailing love come to me, Lord,
your salvation, according to your promise;
then I can answer anyone who taunts me,
for I trust in your word.
Never take your word of truth from my mouth,
for I have put my hope in your laws.
I will always obey your law,
for ever and ever.
I will walk about in freedom,
for I have sought your precepts.
I will speak of your statutes before kings
and will not be put to shame,
for I delight in your commands
because I love them.
I reach out for your commands, which I love,
that I may meditate on your decrees.*

Psalm 119:41-48

The sixth letter in the Hebrew alphabet is *waw*, a conjunction, which can be translated as “and” or “but.” The shape of the Hebrew letter and conjunction look like a tent peg or hook (Exod 38:28). It is intriguing to think that what appears to be a repetitive conjunction without poetic value may suggest and symbolize to the psalmist’s original readers the wilderness tabernacle that housed the ark of the testimony.²³ Each of the eight verses begins with this *waw* conjunction which connects and compounds the meaning of the sixth stanza until it concludes with the delight of meditating on God’s decrees.

This beautiful prayer for confidence in sharing God’s word is based on the believer’s experience of the Lord’s steadfast love and personal deliverance. The believer knows that her trust, hope, obedience, and freedom depend exclusively on the word of God. The reason the believer has the freedom and boldness to speak of God’s binding statutes and eternal truths even before kings, is because she loves God’s commands and meditates on God’s decrees. She can bear witness to the word because “first of all the word is appropriated (Ps 119:41), trusted (42b, 43b), obeyed (44), sought (45) and loved (47f).”²⁴

Confidence in sharing God’s word with skeptics is always a byproduct and never the goal of loving the word of God. For without the love, trust, hope, obedience, freedom, and delight in

²³ Hywell R. Jones, *Psalm 119 For Life*, (Darlington, England: EP Books, 2009), 61.

²⁴ Kidner, *Psalms*, 425.

God's word the believer's witness will always be hollow and humanistic. In his spiritual direction to resident aliens the apostle Peter echoes the sixth stanza when he writes, "Do not fear their threats; do not be frightened. But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander" (1 Pet 3:14-16).²⁵

Peter warns against falling for these fear tactics and challenges believers to cultivate the fear-of-the-Lord (see Isa 8:12-13). Forget about the culture wars and the hand-wringing over gay marriage, legalized marijuana, and abortion. Yes, these are serious issues that call for unity in truth and practice among confessing believers, but in terms of relating to the culture they are side issues. Peter is not calling for Christians to make their best case against evolutionary materialism, gay marriage, and smoking pot. He is calling Christians to live so radically under the Lordship of Jesus Christ that people are bound to ask the reason for their hope in Christ. Our identity in God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit cannot be stolen. Our eternal salvation, experienced now and in the future, cannot be taken from us. Our destiny cannot be diverted. This is the hope that "does not close doors to relationship with other people out of either fear or hate. It turns, rather, in openness to others just as it turns to God."²⁶

The sanctifying process of setting apart Christ as Lord in our hearts is evident in how well we have internalized the word of God and how well we have learned to live for Christ in a hostile world. Effectiveness is measured not in eloquence or brilliance, much less in manipulation or coercion, but in gentleness, respect, and a clear conscience. Peter's apology (*ἀπολογία*) is rooted in a believer's transformed life and delivered with the utmost courtesy.²⁷ The medium of gospel communication is gentleness, respect, and good behavior. Ordinary people with whom we work and play are asking for an explanation "concerning the hope that is in you." This is the hope that sets believers apart and arouses their neighbors' curiosity and even their antagonism and slander.²⁸ Karl Barth commented on how Christians ought to speak to non-Christians:

We must not sit among them like melancholy owls, but in a certainty about our goal, which surpasses all other certainty. Yet how often we stand ashamed beside the children of the world, and how we must understand them if our message will not satisfy them. He who knows that "my times are in your hands" (Ps 31:15) will not haughtily regard the [people] of the world, who, in a definite hope that often shames us, go their way; but he will understand them better than they understand themselves. He will see their hope as a parable, a sign that the world is not abandoned, but has a beginning and a goal. We Christians have to put the right Alpha and Omega into the heart of this secular thought and hope. But we can only

²⁵ Webster, *Outposts of Hope*, 110-113.

²⁶ Goppelt, *1 Peter*, 243.

²⁷ Harink, *1 & 2 Peter*, 94. Harink writes, "The Christian theological discipline of apologetics is often tempted to locate the social, cultural, and intellectual strongholds of a given society and then argue from them to the gospel, or assimilate the gospel to them, or render the gospel in their terms, in order to show that the Christian faith is aligned with and supported by, rather than alien to, such strongholds. But that strategy usually amounts to the cancellation of the gospel rather than the defeat of the strongholds."

²⁸ Elliott, *1 Peter*, 628.

do so if we surpass the world in confidence.²⁹

The true spirit of Peter's apologetic message is captured in Cormac McCarthy's dramatic novel *The Sunset Limited*. The one-act play is a conversation between a Black man and White man which takes place in a tenement building in a black ghetto in New York City. In the movie version, Samuel Lee Jackson brings the white professor played by Tommy Lee Jones back to his apartment after rescuing him from an attempted suicide. Black tries to convince White that life is worth living, because he wants assurance that White won't throw himself in front of a train again. The ensuing conversation is a brilliant back and forth point-counterpoint between an ex-con who has found real hope in Christ and a professor who has given up on life. Black's simple faith is in dialogue with White's sophisticated nihilism. In the end, White says,

"I'm sorry. You're a kind man, but I have to go. I've heard you out and you've heard me and there's no more to say. Your God must have once stood in a dawn of infinite possibility and this is what he's made of it. And now it is drawing to a close. You say that I want God's love. I don't. Perhaps I want forgiveness, but there is no one to ask it of. And there is no going back. No setting things right. Perhaps once. Not now. Now there is only the hope of nothingness. I cling to that hope. Now open the door. Please."³⁰

Black reluctantly undoes the bolts, opens the door and the professor exits. Black collapses to his knees, all but weeping. He feels utterly defeated in his attempt to rescue White and convince him of the hope he has in Christ. In desperation, he looks up, and cries out to God, "He didn't mean them words. You know he didn't."

And then he says something that corresponds to Peter's exhortation "to always be prepared to give an answer. . . for the hope you have." Black says, "I don't understand what you sent me down there for. I don't understand it. If you wanted me to help him how come you didn't give me the words? You give em to him. What about me?" Black kneels, weeping back and forth. Then, he says, "That's all right. That's all right. If you never speak again you know I'll keep your word. You know I will. You know I'm good for it." He lifts his head. "Is that okay? Is that okay?"

Black's sense of inadequacy and apparent inability to meet the professor's intellectual arguments are feelings commonly shared by Christians who seek to give an answer for the hope they have. We feel Black's deep sense of defeat, even despair at our inability to convince the world of our hope in Christ. We ask along with him, why doesn't God give us just the right words to knock down the nihilist's arguments or the hedonist's philosophy or the religionist's system? But Peter wasn't looking for a bullet-proof apologetic. On the contrary, he called believers to live humbly, boldly, without fear. He encouraged them to set apart Christ as Lord in their innermost being. He challenged them to obey the Word, not have all the right words. Black acquired this insight painfully, but expressed it beautifully, when he says to God, "If you never speak again you know

²⁹ Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline*, 132.

³⁰ McCarthy, *The Sunset Limited*, 141.

I'll keep your word."³¹

7. *Comfortable Words*

*Remember your word to your servant,
for you have given me hope.
My comfort in my suffering is this:
Your promise preserves my life.
The arrogant mock me unmercifully,
but I do not turn from your law,
I remember, Lord, your ancient laws,
and I find comfort in them.
Indignation grips me because of the wicked,
who have forsaken your law.
Your decrees are the theme of my song
wherever I lodge.
In the night, Lord, I remember your name,
that I may keep your law.
This has been my practice:
I obey your precepts.*

Psalm 119:49-56

Each stanza is a meditation on the word of God that when prayed prepares us to receive the comfortable words of the gospel of Jesus Christ. The bottom line, "I obey your precepts," is the achievable aim made possible by the Lord's sustaining grace ("Remember your word to your servant") and by our embrace of the word of God ("I remember, Lord, your ancient laws"). Obedience navigates a journey through troubles of many kinds. The seventh stanza begins with hope and ends with obedience but in-between the psalmist struggles. His faithfulness is mocked by the arrogant and the wicked provoke his indignation. Fear and anger threaten to undo him. If the Lord doesn't remember him and if he doesn't remember the Lord he's not going to make it. Comfort is the stated benefit of being remembered and remembering. Comfort is never a product that can be taken like a pill it is always the peace and wisdom that comes from God and is received as a gift. The psalmist wants us to understand that comfort is rooted in the soil of the word of God. It is not optimism or a flight of fantasy; it is the organic fruit of faithfulness.

Christians pray Psalm 119 with a specific understanding of comfort. Jesus effectively summed up the meaning of this eighth stanza when he said to the disciples in the upper room, "Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God; believe also in me" (John 14:1). When we entrust ourselves to God and his word we are empowered to obey the command, "Don't be troubled." The imperative to trust without the promise of the Living Word turns the command into a cruel joke. But trouble gives way to comfort when the word of the three-personed God is heard and heeded. The promise of Jesus' coming defines the deep meaning of his comfort. Four distinct comings shape Jesus' theology of comfort: his final coming, the Parousia; his gift of the Spirit,

³¹ McCarthy, *Sunset Limited*, 142.

the Paraclete; his death and resurrection, the Passion; and his abiding fellowship, the Presence. These four comings are the ways in which Jesus draws near to us. They are meant to shape the relational expectations of Christ's followers and give our lives meaning and purpose all because we belong to Christ. Jesus reassures his followers that they are not alone. Sin separates us from God, from his creation, from one another, and from ourselves, but in Christ we are reconciled, reborn, reunited, and renewed.³²

The apostles rework the message of this psalm with a redemptive trajectory marked by the cross. Even when the arrogant mock the believer unmercifully, the believer does not turn away from obeying the word of the Lord. Peter wrote, "Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us" (1 Pet 2:12). The apostles believed that "suffering puts goodness into bolder relief."³³ Paul made a similar appeal when he praised the God of all comfort, "who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves received from God. For just as we share abundantly in the sufferings of Christ, so also our comfort abounds through Christ" (2 Cor 1:4-5). Even when indignation grips the believer because of the wicked, she does not grow resentful and bitter. By the grace of God she turns her anger into praise; her sorrow into a song. "Your decrees are the theme of my song wherever I lodge" (Ps 119:53). She sets God's word to music and sings them as she walks this pilgrim way (Ps 119:53, The Message). The comfortable words of the gospel have taught us to sing, "Through it all, through it all, I've learned to trust in Jesus, I've learned to trust in God. Through it all, through it all, I've learned to depend upon His Word" (Andrae Crouch).

8. *All In*

*You are my portion, Lord;
I have promised to obey your words.
I have sought your face with all my heart;
be gracious to me according to your promise.
I have considered my ways
and have turned my steps to your statutes.
I will hasten and not delay
to obey your commands.
Though the wicked bind me with ropes,
I will not forget your law.
At midnight I rise to give you thanks
for your righteous laws.
I am a friend to all who fear you,
to all who follow your precepts.
The earth is filled with your love, Lord;
teach me your decrees.*

Psalm 119:57-64

³² Webster, *The God Who Prays*, 42.

³³ Thomas C. Oden, *Pastoral Theology: Essentials of Ministry*. New York: HarperCollins, 1983, 237.

To pray, “You are my portion, Lord,” and mean it, says it all. “You are my joy, my desire, my satisfaction, my all-in-all.” It means that the Lord is his enduring inheritance, his coming salvation, and his living hope. “The metaphor signifies that everything he possesses is bound up in his relationship with the Lord.”³⁴ The psalmist has stressed his determination to revere the word of God, but in the eighth stanza the emphasis shifts from determination to demonstration. Reverencing the word of God is coupled with the intentional responsibility to obey the word. The real proof of the psalmist’s loyalty to the Lord’s statutes, precepts, and decrees is demonstrated in heart-felt faithfulness. This is why the psalmist parallels knowing the Lord with obeying the Lord. The psalmist knows he is in a state-of-grace. He is inspired to seek the face of the Lord with all his heart. He prays, “be gracious to me according to your promise.” These two words, “portion,” and “promise” sum up the gift of grace, and in-between the psalmist clearly states, “I have promised to obey your words.” The rest of the stanza dwells on what it means for those who revere the word of God to promise obedience.

Honest self-examination is the psalmist’s first priority. Have we earnestly and practically acted on our decision to follow Jesus? The sign of true repentance is to turn away from sin and turn toward God’s way. An early advocate of self-examination was the great preacher John Chrysostom. In his *Treatise on the Priesthood*, written in the fourth century, John exposed the problem of pride and duplicity among all who follow Christ, especially those who have positions of authority in the church. John was fearful of the responsibility of being a pastor for what it might do to his own soul. He wrote, “I know how weak and puny my own soul is. I know the importance of that ministry and the great difficulty of it. More billows toss the priest’s soul than the gales which trouble the sea.”³⁵

In *The Reformed Pastor* (1656), Richard Baxter hammered away at spiritual complacency among pastors. Acts 20:28 was his key text: “Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers.” Baxter warned that God never saved a person for preaching the gospel. On the contrary, it was possible for someone to be in a position of offering salvation to others, while refusing it himself. “It is the common danger and calamity of the Church” for people to become preachers before they became Christians.³⁶ Baxter’s driving concern was pastors, but his call for self-examination applies to all those who follow the Lord. “Take heed to yourselves,” he pled, “lest your example contradict your doctrine . . . lest you unsay with your lives, what you say with your tongues.”³⁷ He insisted, “We must study as hard how to live well, as how to preach well.”³⁸ What Baxter says to the pastor ought to be said to everyone in the congregation. We are all equally responsible to follow the Lord Jesus as committed disciples.³⁹

The psalmist expresses a sense of urgency: “I will hasten and not delay to obey your commands.” The psalmist sets aside all distractions and excuses and commits himself to action. Not even the inevitable interference and obstruction of the wicked will cause him to forget the will of God.

³⁴ Ross, Psalms, 516

³⁵ Chrysostom, *Six Books On the Priesthood*. Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1964), Bk III:8, 77.

³⁶ Richard Baxter, *The Reformed Pastor*, ed. William Brown (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2007), 56.

³⁷ Baxter, 63.

³⁸ Baxter, 64.

³⁹ Webster, *Living in Tension*, 124-129.

Even in the middle of the night he remains thankful for God's law and faithful. His reference to "midnight" causes us to remember Paul and Silas who were jailed in Philippi because of the gospel. Luke writes, "About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them" (Acts 16:25). Their joy and confidence were so evident that it led to the salvation of the jailer.

The psalmist distills the basics for meaningful obedience in just a few, quick poetic lines: personal self-examination, a sense urgency, a commitment to perseverance, and a twenty-four-seven gratitude for God's word. His final attribute of obedience is the fellowship of believers: "I am a friend to all who fear you, to all who follow your precepts." Herein lies the relational support and encouragement that is necessary for sustained biblical obedience. Luke captures this truth in his description of the early church (Acts 2:42). He is seeking God's will with all his heart in the company of all who fear the Lord.

This is the *all* that must not be evaded but embraced by all who desire to please God, because God's holy claim rests equally on all. This is the *all* that believes that Jesus accomplished *all* on the Cross. This is the *all* that is willing to *suffer all* for God. This is the *all* of a covenant love that is grandly inclusive of all we are and will be.

The eighth stanza corresponds well with Jesus' sixth beatitude, "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God" (Matthew 5:8). This is the purity of heart that wills one thing and that one thing is to do only those things that can be done through Christ and his strength (Phil 4:13). It means becoming all things to all people, "so that by all possible means [we] might save some" (1 Cor 9:22-23).

"Father in Heaven! What are we without You! What is all this human knowledge, vast accumulation though it be, but a chipped fragment if we do not know You! What is all this striving, even if it could rule the world, but a half-finished work if we do not know You: You the One, who art one thing and who art all!

So may You give to the intellect, wisdom to comprehend that one thing; to the heart, sincerity to receive this understanding; to the will, purity that wills one thing. In prosperity may You grant perseverance to will one thing; amid distractions, concentration to will one thing; in suffering, patience to will one thing. Oh, You who gives both the beginning and the completion, may You early, at the dawn of the day, give to the young person the resolution to will one thing. As the day wanes, may You give to the old person a renewed remembrance of his first resolution, that the first may be like the last, the last like the first, in possession of a life that has willed only one thing."⁴⁰

⁴⁰ Kierkegaard, *Purity of Heart Is To Will One Thing*, 31.

9. Pedagogy of Pain

*Do good to your servant
according to your word, Lord.
Teach me knowledge and good judgment,
for I trust your commands.
Before I was afflicted I went astray,
but now I obey your word.
You are good, and what you do is good;
teach me your decrees.
Though the arrogant have smeared me with lies,
I keep your precepts with all my heart.
Their hearts are callous and unfeeling,
but I delight in your law.
It was good for me to be afflicted
so that I might learn your decrees.
The law from your mouth is more precious to me
than thousands of pieces of silver and gold.*

Psalm 119:65-72

Whether we like it or not affliction plays a significant role in our understanding of God's word. As it turns out the work-out mantra "No pain, no gain" applies even better to Bible studies. The psalmist credits affliction with causing him to confront his aimless wandering and the motivation to learn the Lord's decrees. It would be wonderful if we could grasp the goodness of God without the pedagogy of pain, but our sinful disposition predisposes us to apathy and arrogance. Left to ourselves we are often oblivious to that which matters most and indifferent to obedience. The apostle James echoes the meaning of the ninth stanza when he writes, "Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything" (James 1:2-4).

The psalmist and the apostle are convinced that suffering is used by God to build character. Instead of devising ways to escape our suffering, we need to grow through suffering. When people come to me seeking counsel about their involvement in homosexual relationships, I often don't have to convince them that this sexual practice is wrong. They are already convinced on biblical grounds and personal experience that homosexual practice is sinful. The counsel they seek is encouragement and support to end sexual relationships that are wrong. If I compromise biblical truth by denying the sinfulness of homosexual practice, I am as guilty as if I committed the sin myself. But if I make light of the personal suffering and emotional pain involved in breaking off homosexual relationships I am a deceptive spiritual director. To resist a deeply instilled – though misguided – sexual drive is a very painful test of faith. We must neither deny the sin nor minimize the pain involved in overcoming it. There is no short-cut around suffering, but the journey through it affirms and internalizes the word of God.⁴¹

⁴¹ Webster, *Finding Spiritual Direction*, 39.

The goodness sought and experienced by the psalmist is the goodness of good judgment and applied wisdom. It is the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living that the psalmist longs for (Ps 27:13). He's not asking for theoretical knowledge – the kind that impresses people with how smart they are. He desires humble, heart-felt wisdom, wisdom that is pure, wisdom that contrasts with arrogant know-it-all's who use smear tactics to put down others and promote themselves. Job's unfriendly friends are a good biblical example of the type of arrogant described by the psalmist. They are callous and unfeeling. Their pat answers and simple formalisms are no match for reality. Such people are quick to assign blame and condemn others. They honestly believe that truth is on their side when they have in effect twisted the truth to fit their self-serving ways.

If Jesus, “the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being,” who knew no sin learned “obedience from what he suffered” (Heb 1:3; 5:8) how much more should we expect to learn obedience by the things that we suffer? As Jesus said, “A student is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his master. It is enough for the student to be like his teacher, and the servant like his master” (Mark 10:24).

The psalmist emphasizes God's goodness in five different ways in eight verses: the Lord is good to his servant; his judgments are good; the Lord is good in his being (“You are good”) and good in his actions (“What you do is good”); and in the providence of God the psalmist confesses that affliction has been good for his understanding and growth. When we suffer it may be a struggle to see the goodness of the Lord, but the psalmist encourages us to reflect on the Lord's goodness even when we are troubled. His affliction-filtered understanding and obedience to God's word is more precious to him “than thousands of pieces of silver and gold” (Ps 119:72). This is tantamount to saying that there is no amount of money that he would give in exchange for God's personal revelation.

We are reminded of the rich young ruler who approached Jesus eagerly saying, “Teacher, what good thing must I do to get eternal life?” (Matthew 19:16). Jesus was quick to reframe the question: “Why do you ask me about what is good? There is only One who is good. If you want to enter into life, keep the commandments” (Matthew 19:17). Jesus clarified the encounter and redefined goodness. The sought after goodness was not a “what” but a “who.” Goodness is not a set of rules, or a list of priorities, or a memory of good times. Experiencing goodness is all about knowing God. Then, Jesus stated the bottom line in terms the rich, young ruler could understand. “If you want to be perfect go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me” (Matthew 19:21). When the young man heard this he turned away sad, “because he had great wealth” (Matthew 19:22). The call to radical divestiture exposed his self-justifying religious ways. Outward conformity to the law, with its shallow interpretation and superficial application, bore no resemblance to Jesus' call to heart righteousness. The young man valued his material possessions over knowing God. The divine initiative failed to compete against the allure of materialism. We are told that Jesus looked at the rich young ruler and loved him (Mark 10:21). But the love of Jesus was not enough for this man. He wanted it all: health, wealth, self-satisfaction and control. He knew no other way to see himself than the words we use to describe him—a rich young ruler. Yet he knew exactly what was being asked of him, because “Come, follow me,” allows for no mystery. But he chose his

way over the Lord's way. May we be like the psalmist who welcomed the divine initiative and learned through the things that he suffered to value the revelation of God more "than thousands of pieces of silver and gold" (Ps 119:72).

10. Friends of the Word

*Your hands made me and formed me;
give me understanding to learn from your commands.
May those who fear you rejoice when they see me,
for I have put my hope in your word.
I know, Lord, that your laws are righteous,
and that in faithfulness you have afflicted me.
May your unfailing love be my comfort,
according to your promise to your servant.
Let your compassion come to me that I may live,
for your law is my delight.
May the arrogant be put to shame for wronging me without excuse;
but I will meditate on your precepts.
May those who fear you turn to me,
those who understand your statutes.
May I wholeheartedly follow your decrees,
that I may not be put to shame.*

Psalm 119:73-80

Praying Psalm 119 is an important way to prepare for studying God's word. Each stanza draws out the truths and convictions that encourage faithfulness to the commands and statutes of the Lord. In this tenth stanza the psalmist reminds us that we are made in God's image and that our entire being, body, mind, and soul, is designed to resonate with the will of God. Our fallen, sin-twisted human condition makes that difficult but by God's redeeming grace we can be born again, "not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God" (1 Pet 1:23).

What was true for the psalmist and the prophet is true for the followers of Christ. The Lord's word to the prophet Jeremiah relates to us: "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations" (Jer 1:5). On all four counts we can identify with Jeremiah. Christ's disciples are created, commended, consecrated, and commissioned "to go and make disciples of all nations . . . teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you" (Matthew 28:19-20). As the author of Hebrews affirmed, the prophecy delivered to Jeremiah has been fulfilled: "I will put my laws in their minds and write them on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will they teach their neighbors, or say to one another, 'Know the Lord,' because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest. For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more"(Heb 8:10-12).

The psalmist continues to reflect on the role that affliction plays in spiritual growth. He acknowledges, “in faithfulness you have afflicted me” (Ps 119:75), but even as he highlights this truth, he prays for the Lord’s comfort and compassion in the midst of the affliction. He knows that only the Lord’s unfailing love will sustain him and he knows that one of the chief ways the Lord’s steadfast love is experienced is through true friends in the word. “May those who fear you rejoice when they see me. . . .May those who fear you turn to me” (Ps 119:74, 79).

The blessing of friends who share in your deep desire for God’s word and who respect and love you for it are a great gift. We need the company of fellow sojourners who rejoice with us because of our commitment to God and his word. They turn to us and we turn to them for insight into the word of God. The psalmist celebrates our life together centered in the word of God. Sadly, it is precisely in this area that many pastors feel alone. When power struggles and personality conflicts arise within the church, pastors often feel abandoned by the very people who love to hear them preach. Instead of rejoicing when they see the pastor coming, they distance themselves from the pastor.

Anyone who has ever been through this kind of unsettling loneliness can identify with the psalmist’s longing for friends who rejoice in his company and turn to him for wisdom. Many pastors would survive the nit-picky criticism and obnoxious personalities that seek to undermine their work if they were surrounded by friends who feared the Lord and shared their desire to honor the word of God in faith and practice. If we want our pastors to put their hope in the word and meditate of the Lord’s precepts we had better join them in the battle. One of the ways God has designed to shame the arrogant is through the solidarity of those who fear him and love his word. But in any case, the psalmist pledges himself to the Lord. “May I wholeheartedly follow your decrees, that I may not be put to shame” (Ps 119:80).

11. Resilient

My soul faints with longing for your salvation,
but I have put my hope in your word.
My eyes fail, looking for your promise;
I say, “When will you comfort me?”
Though I am like a wineskin in the smoke,
I do not forget your decrees.
How long must your servant wait?
When will you punish my persecutors?
The arrogant dig pits to trap me,
contrary to your law.
All your commands are trustworthy;
help me, for I am being persecuted without cause.
They almost wiped me from the earth,
but I have not forsaken your precepts.
In your unfailing love preserve my life,
that I may obey the statutes of your mouth.

Psalm 119:81-88

In spite of his suffering, which the psalmist attributes to God's delay and his adversaries' unrelenting persecution, he affirms his uncompromising commitment to the word of God in the strongest terms. His eyes are failing looking for the salvation of God, but his hope in God's promises persist. He feels like a shriveled up old wineskin, blackened and smokey from being hung by the fireplace. He's been close to the fire for too long. The image is especially apt for us aging believers whose bodies are wasting away. Like the psalmist we want to be faithful to the end, but it feels like our health and strength are slipping away.

The psalmist does not question God's steadfast love or the trustworthiness of his commands, but he laments, "When will you comfort me?" He asks, "When will you punish my persecutors?" His convictions are firm, deliberately stated in prayer, "I have put my hope in your word. . . I have not forsaken your precepts" (Ps 119:81,87). What the psalmist questions is not the word of God, but his ability to persevere in the face of persecutors who would like nothing better than to wipe him off the face of the earth.

The psalmist is bone-weary with longing for salvation and frustrated with waiting for vindication. He questions his resilience in the face of resistance. The psalmist makes a vital distinction in this eleventh stanza between God's reliability and his own weakness and vulnerability. The psalmist echoes the conviction of Job who said, "My joy in unrelenting pain – that I had not denied the words of the Holy One" (Job 6:10).

Those who read their Bibles for a nice spiritual "pick-me-up" are not reading the Bible the way the psalmist is reading the Bible. Nor are they identifying with the psalmist's angst, because they are not looking and longing for the salvation of the Lord. The Bible is a dangerous book but only for those who take it seriously. The word of God is meant to lead us into a life-transforming relationship with God, where everything about us is shaped by the grace of God and obedience to God's commands and precepts. Those who limit faith to positive sentiments and good ideas cannot identify with the psalmist. They read the psalmist and say, "What's the big deal?"

The eleventh stanza applies to Christ's followers of all ages. It is not easy being faithful to the word of God when the culture opposes "the reason for the hope you have," and speaks "maliciously against your good behavior in Christ" (1 Pet 3:15,16). Take for example a believer's daily experience on a typical university campus. She starts her day in English class where her professor lectures the class on the myth of absolute truth and mocks the notion of divine revelation in the Bible. He argues that the educated mind cannot tolerate dependence on obsolete creeds and truth claims built on thin air. Her next class is Introduction to Psychology taught by the faculty advisor for the GLBTQ club on campus. Class begins with a discussion on repressive sexual patterns in society and family. The professor makes it clear that she will not even entertain the notion that marriage between man and a woman is normative for society. After class our student heads to her dorm, but to her surprise she finds her roommate in bed with a boyfriend, so she heads for Starbucks. Over a latte she reads for class, Tom Wolfe's latest, *Back to Blood*. If Wolfe is right we are a far more decadent culture than she had ever imagined. He describes a

world devoid of friendship and even common decency. His characters are over-sexed adult adolescents. Later in the day she meets up with friends and heads to an evening meeting of an on-campus ministry. The speaker's title was "Breathing Room." It was a nice talk with some good jokes and stories about messy roommates and busy schedules, and the need to clean up the clutter in our lives, but it all left her feeling empty.

On a typical day Christians on a university campus face a constant verbal and mental assault on their faith and ethics. Believers are subject to a constant flood of perspectives that threaten to overwhelm and undermine their faith. Outright deception, accusation, and slander flow in the same cultural current as innocuous speech about sports, fashion, business and pop-culture. The propaganda stream against the people of God can be both intense and pervasive. Christians who "suffer for what is right" (1 Pet 3:13) experience an angst similar to what the psalmist describes. What is important to note is that this is normal. This is what it means to live for Christ in a fallen and broken world – a world that persists in rejecting God and resisting his will. To "suffer for what is right" may specifically mean for you rejection by other professing believers because you have seemingly taken Jesus and his teaching too seriously and passionately. It may result in scorn and ridicule from those who deny God's clear commands regarding sexuality and the maintenance of physical and psychological health. Putting your hope in God's word and seeking to obey his statutes may result in a job demotion because you are not willing to sacrifice your life and family for the sake of the company. It may result in dismissal because you will not permit a specific injustice to go unnoticed.⁴²

Those who look to God and his word for life testify that God is far more than they bargained for. The Bible endangers our old way of living and draws fire from those who resent God's truth and the Jesus way.⁴³ The cause of the psalmist's "sad trouble" was his faithfulness, not disobedience. He pays a high price for his resilience. Spurgeon wrote, "Whatever the command might cost him, it was worth it; he felt that God's way might be rough, but it was right; it might make him enemies, but still it was his best friend."⁴⁴

12. *Eternal Word*

*Your word, Lord is eternal;
it stands firm in the heavens.
Your faithfulness continues through all generations;
you established the earth, and it endures.
Your laws endure to this day,
for all things serve you.
If your law had not been my delight,
I would have perished in my affliction.
I will never forget your precepts,
for by them you have preserved my life.*

⁴² Webster, Outposts of Hope,

⁴³ Webster, The Living Word, 9.

⁴⁴ Spurgeon, The Golden Alphabet, 179.

*Save me, for I am yours;
I have sought out your precepts.
The wicked are waiting to destroy me,
but I will ponder your statutes.
To all perfection I see a limit,
but your commands are boundless.*
Psalm 119:89-96

The eternal word of God that created the heavens and established the earth is the same enduring word that saves us and directs our steps. The laws, precepts, and statutes are as designed for living well. The word of God is designed for life. We live to obey and we obey to live. The Author/Artist/Composer of all creation and the Savior/Redeemer/Lord of all salvation are one and the same. The history of nature and the history of redemption are revelations of the same God. All of life is of God and belongs to God. Creation and Redemption converge to infuse life with sacred significance.⁴⁵ There is order, beauty, meaning, and joy woven into the very nature of creation, because all things serve the Lord (Ps 119:91). Everything points to a significance that is neither random nor lucky. There is an inherent revelatory quality in all aspects of life. The world is called into existence by the will and word of God.⁴⁶ In Hebrew, “word” and “deed” are expressed by the same noun. “This is a consequence of the fact that what God says he does (see Gen 1:3,5; Luke 1:37). This is so with regard to both the creation of the world and the redemption of his people (see Ps 33:4-9).”⁴⁷

The twelfth stanza of the psalmist’s prayer focuses on our response to the *forever* quality of God’s revelation and the eternal nature of God’s faithfulness. As real and as enduring as the visible physicality of God’s material world appears to be, creation only lasts because it is sustained by God’s powerful word (Heb 1:3). “By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God’s command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible” (Heb 11:3). Nature’s glory is a reflective glory pointing to the glory of God. The temporal glory bows to the eternal glory: “The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God endures forever” (Isa 40:8).

There is an emotional intensity embedded in the psalmist’s repeated references to “your word,” “your faithfulness,” “your laws,” “your precepts,” climaxing in the psalmist’s exclamation, “Save me, for I am yours!” The divine possession is not cause for resentment or resistance but cause for celebration. In the presence of Jesus, the Living Word, Peter discovered the truth that all Christ’s followers must come to: “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and to know that you are the Holy One of God” (John 6:68-69). The path of freedom is found in Jesus and his laws, precepts, and statutes: “If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free” (John 8:31-32). The secret of human flourishing is found here: “I have come that [you] may have life, and have it to the full” (John 10:10). The psalmist embraces this truth and so should we.

⁴⁵ Webster, *Second Thoughts for Skeptics*, 113, 120.

⁴⁶ Webster, *Ibid.*, 128.

⁴⁷ Jones, *Psalm 119 For Life*, 95.

The psalmist states his commitment explicitly: “I will never forget your precepts. . . .I am yours. . . .I have sought out your precepts. . . .I will ponder your statutes.” He acknowledges that without the guidance of the word of God he would have perished in his affliction and he would have been destroyed by the wicked. The word that is *forever* has become his delight, his never-to-be-forgotten focus, and his top priority. If we expect to understand the word, we must go beyond mental assent and intellectual effort, and grasp the truth experientially and emotionally. “When we have felt the quickening power of a precept,” wrote Spurgeon, “we never can forget it. . . . Experience teaches, and teaches effectually.”⁴⁸ The psalmist’s concern corresponds with the apostle Paul’s admonition: “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God” (Col 3:16).

Internalizing the word of God not only nourishes the soul but it also makes the heart sing. As Henry Mitchell, an African-American pastor, liked to say, “If truth goes into your heart on the arm of emotion it will stay. But if it enters your heart unaccompanied, it will only visit for a short while and then leave.” My father was a math professor at a community college teaching calculus and other inscrutable mysteries. He spent his days exploring the mathematical nature of the universe. He knew that to number something, devise an equation, map a distance, measure the volume, and analyze discrete units, meant that we come closer to touching reality and accounting for it. My father was a linguist dedicated to one of God’s many languages, mathematics. But he was also a student of God’s laws, precepts, and precepts. He rejoiced in the totality of God’s precise and glorious wisdom. In his daily work and worship he gave himself over to the integration of creation and redemption. He taught his sons that all truth is God’s truth. I remember my father’s tenor voice singing hymns of the word more than I recall him speaking about the word. He never gave a sermon, but he sang from his soul. One of his favorite songs reads, “All that thrills my soul is Jesus he is more than life to me; // He, the fairest of ten thousand is my precious Lord to me.”

The eighth verse of the stanza asserts the boundless impact of the *forever* word. There is an end—a limit, to all things, but of the word of God there is no end. The psalmist sings to God, “I see the limits to everything human, but the horizons can’t contain your commands!” (Ps 119:96, The Message). Jesus echoes this same truth in his Sermon on the End of the World when he says, “Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away” (Matthew 24:35). We should not be surprised to hear that “every earthly enterprise has its day and comes to nothing” and “only in God and His commandments do we get beyond these frustrating limits.”⁴⁹ God would have us give ourselves to music and math and mountain climbing, but always with the realization that they can never be life’s goal. They can never substitute for the one thing necessary that gives meaning to all that we do. We are called to a life of faithfulness, fellowship, and fidelity, and only in this way can we prioritize and enjoy life’s challenges and endeavors.

The world’s perfectionism sees no limit. It reduces life to a compulsive self-preoccupied performance. Perfectionism flattens life out and makes flower arrangements as important as

⁴⁸ Spurgeon, *The Golden Alphabet*, 188.

⁴⁹ Kidner, *Psalms*, 426.

feeding the hungry.⁵⁰ This is not the perfection that Jesus had in mind in the Sermon on the Mount when he admonished, “Be perfect. . . .as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matthew 5:48). Nor is it true to the apostle Paul’s understanding when he wrote, “We proclaim him, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone perfect in Christ” (Col 1:28). The biblical understanding of perfection involves growth and maturity. It has to do with holiness and righteousness. As Kathleen Norris writes, “To ‘be perfect,’ in the sense that Jesus means it, is to make room for growth, for the changes that bring us maturity, to ripeness. To mature is to lose adolescent self-consciousness so as to be able to make a gift of oneself, as a parent, as teacher, friend, spouse.”⁵¹

13. You Yourself Taught Me

Oh, how I love your law!
I meditate on it all day long.
Your commands are always with me
and make me wiser than my enemies.
I have more insight than all my teachers,
for I meditate on your statutes.
I have more understanding than the elders,
for I obey your precepts.
I have kept my feet from every evil path
so that I might obey your word.
I have not departed from your laws,
for you yourself have taught me.
How sweet are your words to my taste,
sweeter than honey to my mouth!
I gain understanding from your precepts;
therefore I hate every wrong path.
Psalm 119:97-104

At first glance, you might be less than impressed with the psalmist’s seemingly presumptuous self-assessment. His claim to be smarter than his enemies and to have more insight than all his teachers as well as the “old men” could come across as a proud boast. We have all met people who try to impress us as know-it-alls. If we picture the psalmist as a sophomoric student, who doesn’t know what he doesn’t know, we may even question whether he truly loves the law and hates every wrong path. He may be overestimating his devotion and delight in the word. He may think he knows a lot more than he really does. As one cynical seminary professor says, “The purpose of seminary is to help students move from unconscious ignorance to conscious ignorance.” This psalm raises an important issue: how can we distinguish between a self-confidence founded in acquired knowledge and natural intelligence and a person’s humble and thoughtful submission to the word of God?

⁵⁰ Webster, *The Living Word*, 96-97.

⁵¹ Kathleen Norris, *Amazing Grace*. New York: Riverhead, 1998. 56.

Is the psalmist more confident in himself than in the word of God? G. K. Chesterton observed a shift in how people think about humility. In the past people were humble about themselves and confident in the truth, but now they promote themselves at the expense of the truth. “A man was meant to be doubtful about himself,” wrote Chesterton, “but undoubting about the truth; this has been exactly reversed. Nowadays the part of a man that a man does assert is exactly the part he ought not to assert – himself. The part he doubts is exactly the part he ought not to doubt – the Divine Reason.”⁵²

The key line that challenges any hint of presumption and puts everything in perspective is the psalmist’s statement, “for you yourself have taught me” (Ps 119:102). He uses the pronoun “you” twice, once as part of the verb and then by itself, so as to emphasize the fact that the Lord is his teacher.⁵³ Everything the psalmist says about his love and devotion to the law flows from his conviction that he is being taught by the Lord. His confidence lies not his ability but in the Lord’s wisdom. He boldly asserts his devotion and faithfulness as a credit to the word of God and the pedagogy of his Teacher. His boldness is without bravado; his confidence is without conceit. H. Richard Niebuhr captures the psalmist’s perspective when he refers to the unique character of a humility derived from Jesus. He calls it a kind of “proud humility and humble pride” because, “the humility of Christ is not the moderation of keeping one’s exact place in the scale of being, but rather that of absolute dependence on God and absolute trust in Him. . .”⁵⁴

I remember the night that John Stott preached to our southern California congregation as being very special. His gifted exposition of Scripture was so clear and compelling that he could have preached through an entire Biblical book that night as far as I was concerned. His straightforward manner focused on the text without regard for himself. He finished by applying the text in a way that was both practical and pastoral. I thought the understated beauty of his powerful biblical exposition was evident to all. But I was mistaken, not everyone was impressed. One angry young man came to me after the service and complained. “Who does this old man think he is? He acts like he is the sole authority on the truth. He acts like a know-it-all.” What I had received as genuine biblical authority the young man had equated with authoritarianism. I explained that the sermon we had just heard was a testimony to John Stott’s humility before God. His task was not to voice his own opinions and feelings, nor was it his job to entertain us with anecdotes and human interest stories. John Stott’s responsibility was to preach the Word of God. He was submissive to the truth as stated in the Bible and he proclaimed it with compassion and conviction.⁵⁵

The psalmist’s unfettered love and devotion to the word of God fills him with a sense of meaning and purpose that is unlike anything the world has to offer. With God as his teacher, how can he not praise the gift of wisdom, a wisdom superior to his enemies, of insight, an insight greater than his teachers, and of understanding, an understanding truer than the thinking of “old men”? It is to the credit of his Teacher that he finds the law worth meditating on all day and sweeter than honey to his taste. The psalmist is filled with wonder, “for you yourself have taught me.” No

⁵² Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (New York: Image Books, 1959), 31.

⁵³ Jones, *Psalm 119 For Life*, 101.

⁵⁴ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 27.

⁵⁵ Webster, *Preaching Hebrews*, 19.

wonder he keeps his feet from the evil path; no wonder he has determined to obey the Lord's precepts. The apostle Paul's description of the wisdom of God resonates well with the psalmist's thirteenth stanza. Paul writes, "What we have received is not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, so that we may understand what God has freely given us. This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, explaining spiritual realities with Spirit-taught words. . . .The person with the Spirit makes judgment about all things, but such a person is not subject to merely human judgments, for, 'Who had known the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him?' (Isa 40:13). But we have the mind of Christ" (1 Cor 2:12-16).

14. Faithfulness to the End

Your word is a lamp unto my feet,
a light on my path.
I have taken an oath and confirmed it,
that I will follow your righteous laws.
I have suffered much;
preserve my life, Lord, according to your word.
Accept, Lord, the willing praise of my mouth,
and teach me your laws.
Though I constantly take my life in my hands,
I will not forget your law.
The wicked have set a snare for me,
but I have not strayed from your precepts.
Your statutes are my heritage forever;
they are the joy of my heart.
My heart is set on keeping your decrees
to the very end.

Psalm 119:105-112

When Christ's followers pray the fourteenth stanza they remember that the light of the world is Jesus. "In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it" (John 1:4). The psalmist's light metaphor is transposed into a higher key. The light and life of Christ is the ultimate guidance in a dark and gloomy world. This is not the physical kind of light that impacts seasonal affective disorder nor is it of a therapeutic variety that seeks to "shed a little light" on relational concerns nor is it the natural light of common sense that helps with career choices. This is the light of God's revelation that shows the way to salvation and clarifies moral choices.

This psalm invokes a particular memory for me. One summer I was a high school camp counselor at a rustic camp in Wisconsin. Up until this time I had never been to a camp without electricity in the cabins. I was dropped off after midnight on a moonless night without a flashlight. A groggy camp staffer pointed in the direction of the cabins and said mine was the last cabin at the end of the path. I remember it being pitch black. No starlight or ambient light was

coming from anywhere. I felt my way down the path, bumping into trees as I went. I could hear people snoring in some of the cabins as I made my way down the path. I found the door on what I hoped was the last cabin. Once inside I felt around for my plywood bunk, unrolled my sleeping bag, and crawled in. In the dark I had no idea where I was or who else was in the cabin. The memory is a parable for me of what it's like to live in the dark without the light of Christ. I am so thankful to say with the psalmist, "Your word is a lamp for my feet, and light on my path" (Ps 119:105).

To believe in the Light is to walk in the light. The apostle John summed up the meaning of this stanza when he wrote, "God is light; in him there is no darkness at all. If we claim to have fellowship with him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live out the truth. But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin" (1 John 1:5-7). Christians remember in turn that the Light of the world said to them, "You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven" (Matthew 5:14-16).

The rest of the stanza guides our understanding of what is involved in walking in the light as Christ is the light. We begin with a solemn resolve to obey the word of the Lord. We state for the record and we let it be known to all that we are committed to the righteous ways of the Lord. We believe that "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work" (2 Timothy 3:16-17). This commitment is not a joyless duty but a deep-down delight. The disciplined habit and rhythm of obedience invokes from the psalmist a freewill offering of out-loud praise and a genuine desire to learn more: "Accept, Lord, the willing praise of my mouth, and teach me your law" (Ps 119:108). This is true even when obedience gives rise to opposition and resentment. The psalmist states, "I have suffered much; preserve my life, Lord, according to your word . . . I constantly take my life in my hands" (Ps 119:107, 109). If we remain faithful, we should expect it to be true for us what was true for the apostle Paul, "We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God" (Acts 14:22).

Fallen human nature cannot resist retaliation. Goodness is red meat to the wild dogs of evil, but instead of outright in-your-face opposition it often goes underground. "The wicked have set a snare for me, but I have not strayed from your precepts" (Ps 119:110). The prophet Daniel's faithfulness provoked envy and jealousy from among the ruling class in Babylon. His administrative colleagues could find "no corruption in him, because he was trustworthy and neither corrupt nor negligent." So they gave up trying, saying, "We will never find any basis for charges against this man Daniel unless it has something to do with the law of his God" (Daniel 6:8). To get around Daniel's faithfulness and integrity the administrators had to set a trap. They petitioned the king to issue an edict that made prayer "to any god or human being during the next thirty days, except to you, Your Majesty, shall be thrown into the lion's den" (Dan 6:7). You know the story, the edict didn't change Daniel's commitment to prayer. He continued to pray "asking God for help" and his enemies used his devotion to God against him, using the law to

have him thrown into the lion's den. The question for us is whether we are willing to remain faithful even when the laws of the land or the policies of the corporation contravene God's righteous laws.

The psalmist is resolute, reaffirming his commitment to the *forever* word of the Lord *forever*. This is his heritage from the past and his future for eternity. The arc of his life is encompassed by God's decrees from beginning to end. Like the psalmist, those who follow Christ have no other place to turn for guidance other than the Lord. As the apostle Peter said to the Lord Jesus, "You have the words of eternal life and we have to come to believe and to know that you are the Holy One of God" (John 6:68). The final word of the fourteenth stanza affirms the psalmist's faithfulness to the end: "My heart is set on keeping your decrees to the very end" (Ps 119:112). God's call is more demanding than we bargained for. We enter into a hostile environment filled with tests, temptations and dangers, but it is here in the midst of the struggle that we meet not only the enemy, but God. There's more pain and sorrow to life than we ever imagined and a far greater need for prayer and trust in God than we ever anticipated. The end in faithfulness to the end may be a long way off but it is the only end worth pursuing, because faithfulness to the end proves faith from the beginning.⁵⁶

15. The Love/Hate Tension

I hate double-minded people,
but I love your law.
You are my refuge and my shield;
I have put my hope in your word.
Away from me, you evildoers,
that I may keep the commands of my God!
Sustain me, my God, according to your promise, and I will live;
do not let my hopes be dashed.
Uphold me, and I will be delivered;
I will always have regard for your decrees.
You will reject all who stray from your decrees,
for their delusions come to nothing.
All the wicked of the earth you discard like dross;
therefore I love your statutes.
My flesh trembles in fear of you;
I stand in awe of your laws.
Psalm 119:113-120

The twenty-two stanzas of Psalm 119 are prayers to be prayed before beginning Bible study. Taken together these prayers shape our understanding of the word of God and inspire our study and meditation. They deepen our understanding. They challenge our obedience. In each stanza the psalmist develops a critical idea that underscores what it means to devote ourselves to the word. The fifteenth stanza reflects on the angst felt by those who seek to love and obey God's

⁵⁶ Webster, *Living in Tension*,

word though they live among people who are double-minded. These people are of two minds when it comes to the Bible. They have one foot in the world and another foot in the word and invariably the world wins. When the psalmist says, "I hate double-minded people," he doesn't have in mind pagan secularists as much as regular church-going believers. His concern lies with those who claim to follow the law of God, but don't. Their passive aggressive rejection of God's decrees may be subtle and discreet. Instead of open rebellion, the double-minded "stray" from the Lord's decrees. They hold delusional opinions about their faithfulness and goodness. Instead of paying attention to the word of the Lord, they drift away. Instead of loving the law, they debate the meaning of the law. Instead of obeying the commands of God, they follow the spirit of the times.

When the psalmist wrote this fifteenth stanza he may have had in mind Elijah's confrontation with the people of Israel when the prophet said, "How long will you waver between two opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal is God, follow him." And as if to confirm their double-mindedness, "the people said nothing" (1 Kings 18:21).

The apostle James explored the either/or challenge of this love/hate tension; the difference between being dedicated to the law of God and being against the law of God. He wrote, "If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you. But when you ask, you must believe and not doubt, because the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. That person should not expect to receive anything from the Lord. Such a person is double-minded and unstable in all they do" (James 1:5-8). If we are not careful, we may find ourselves caught between two worlds. An old Chinese proverb captures the predicament. It likens the double-minded person to someone trying to balance with a foot in two boats. We vacillate between the mind of Christ and the mind of the world. The value system of the world has permeated every pore and seeped into our bloodstream. Success and pleasure seem far more important than easily quoted but challenging to obey biblical commands. We are tempted to spiritualize our worldly desires and rationalize away biblical truths.

When Jesus prayed Psalm 119 he must have had the Pharisees and teachers of the law in mind. He accused them of nullifying the word of God for the sake of their tradition. He said, "You hypocrites! Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you: 'These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are merely human rules'" (Matthew 15:7-9; see Isa 29:13). Those who love the word of God, who put their hope in this word, who seek to keep God's commands, and who look to God for deliverance will experience this love / hate tension among the people of God. On one side we have those who put their hope in the word of God and stand in awe of God's decrees and commands. And on the other side we have the double-minded professing believer who drifts away. The psalmist calls them "evildoers" and "the wicked" who eventually in the judgment will be discarded like dross (Ps 119:115, 119). It would be naive of us not to identify with the psalmist angst. It appears impossible to keep the law without raising opposition. Obedience draws the fire, even if it is only resentment and envy. The conflict and the struggle to obey the word of God runs through every church context and every believer's heart. This is all the more reason for us to double-down on

our love for God's word.

Two trial-tested emotive statements come toward the beginning and end of this stanza. First, "You are my refuge and my shield," which can be translated, "You are my hiding place and shield," followed by, "My flesh trembles in fear of you, I stand in awe of your judgments" (Ps 119:114, 120). Although these two statements may appear contradictory they are in fact consistent and coherent for anyone who has found their rest in God and who has submitted to the wisdom of his word. Christ's followers can identify with the psalmist, because Christ is our hiding place and "our God is a consuming fire" (Heb 12:28). There is a positive tension between Christ's abiding love and working out our salvation with fear and trembling. Jesus said, "If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. . . . If you keep my commands you will remain in my love. . ." (John 15:7, 10). Therefore, we "continue to work out [our] salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in [us] to will and to act in order to fill his good purpose" (Phil 2:12-13). And the only reason we can work out our salvation with fear and trembling is because God has worked in us to will and to do his good pleasure. When we realize that God is our hiding place – our only true refuge and shield, "a frank and free fear" of God leads us "to a deeper and more weighty consideration" and reverence for God's word.⁵⁷ We cry "Abba Father" and stand in utter awe of God's judgments. And this only deepens our concern for those who chosen to be a friend of the world and become an enemy of God (James 4:4). We should not be surprised that this love/hate tension runs through every church and truth be told we struggle with it in ourselves. We would be naive to think otherwise.

16. Our Pledge

*I have done what is righteous and just;
do not leave me to my oppressors.
Ensure your servant's well-being; [Give a pledge of good to your servant]
do not let the arrogant oppress me.
My eyes fail, looking for your salvation,
looking for your righteous promise.
Deal with your servant according to your love
and teach me your decrees.
I am your servant; give me discernment
that I may understand your statutes.
It is time for you to act, Lord;
your law is being broken.
Because I love your commands
more than gold, more than pure gold,
and because I consider all your precepts right,
I hate every wrong path.*

Psalm 119:121-128

The commitment to obey the word of God is not enough for the Lord's servant. He needs help.

⁵⁷ Calvin, Sermons on Psalm 119, 308-309.

Unless the Lord intervenes and reassures him, he fears that he will fail. Obedience alone cannot sustain the servant's hope and ensure his well-being. Only the Lord can relieve his vulnerability. He fears he is a soft target for the arrogant who oppress him. His zeal alone is not enough. He laments, "My eyes fail, looking for your salvation." He pleads, "It is time for you to act, Lord; your law is being broken" (Ps 119:123, 126). At the heart of this sixteenth stanza is the confession, "I am your servant." Three times the psalmist refers to himself as the Lord's servant (Ps 119:122, 124, 125). His testimony is solid. He has done "what is righteous and just" (Ps 119:121). He loves the Lord's commands more than gold, more than pure gold, and he considers all the Lord's precepts to be right (Ps 119:127-128). In so many words, he is declaring to the Lord, "I am yours, I belong to you." But his own obedience and testimony is not enough. He needs more. He needs the Lord.

The psalmist requests a pledge from the Lord, a formal, legal agreement that will guarantee his welfare. It is as if he is asking the Lord for a binding, legal covenant to "ensure his protection and deliverance."⁵⁸ But what he really wants is something far more personal than a legal contract. He wants the Lord's word, his personal pledge, and his intimate advocacy. He wants the Lord's companionship; his partnership. Only this relationship of trust and love will give the psalmist reassurance that his well-being will be secure in the face of opposition and oppression. "Deal with your servant according to your love," sums up the psalmist's request.

The psalmist's pivotal plea, "It is time for you to act, Lord," resonates with all that God has revealed in the Word that was made flesh and dwelt among us (John 1:14). To pray the sixteenth stanza is to be reminded of the Lord's pledge in the promise of the Holy Spirit. In Christ we are the recipients of a guarantee that expands and deepens the psalmist's request, "Ensure your servant's well-being" or "Give a pledge of good to your servant." The apostle Paul elaborated on this promised pledge in his overture of praise to God in his letter to the church at Ephesus. Paul reminded the believers that they were chosen, predestined, loved, adopted, redeemed, forgiven, and sealed. His symphony of praise builds to a crescendo, highlighting the work of God the Father, Son and Spirit. Blessed with all blessings by the Father. Chosen in Christ. Sealed by the Spirit. Paul concludes, "When you believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession – to the praise of his glory" (Eph 1:13-14).

In the upper room Jesus explained that his resurrection made the coming of the Holy Spirit possible: "I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you. Before long, the world will not see me anymore, but you will see me. Because I live, you also will live. . . . When the Advocate comes, whom I will send to you from the Father — the Spirit of Truth who goes out from the Father — he will testify about me" (John 14:18-19; 15:26). The Holy Spirit is God made personal, our Advocate, in the daily struggle of obedience and faithfulness. The AV version (KJV) of the Bible refers to the Spirit as the "Comforter," suggesting to today's believer personal reassurance and emotional support. But derived from its Latin root, *confortare*, meant "to strengthen." The Spirit of Truth strengthens the fellowship of disciples by inspiring biblical insight and faithful obedience. The Spirit helps make obedience possible: "When you love me, you will be keeping

⁵⁸ Ross, Psalms, 563.

my commands.” The Spirit encourages believers through theological understanding and ethical discernment (Ps 119:125). The fullness of the Spirit has more to do with obeying the Sermon on the Mount in practical Jesus-like ways and making disciples globally than it does with feeling a spiritual high – much more!

The Spirit is the most self-effacing member of the Trinity, even more so than the Incarnate One! You might say that the Holy Spirit is the shy member of the Trinity. Good lawyers tend to do most of their work behind the scenes to save their clients from public confrontation and litigation. The best lawyers never draw attention to themselves. They have their client’s back and they have their client’s best interests at heart. In the upper room, Jesus made it clear that it is impossible to believe in him and not have the advocacy of the Spirit. We are the passive recipients of Jesus’ active asking. Jesus asks the Father for the Spirit and the Father gives the Spirit because Jesus asks. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are locked in together, absolutely interdependent and mutually supportive. The triune God is the best description possible for the line “all for one and one for all.” The gift of the Spirit of Truth means that we are always at home with Jesus.⁵⁹

17. Kept by God

Your statutes are wonderful;
therefore I obey them [therefore my soul *keeps* them].
The unfolding of your words gives light;
it gives understanding to the simple.
I open my mouth and pant,
longing for your commands.
Turn to me and have mercy on me,
as you always do to those who love your name.
Direct my footsteps [*Keep* steady my steps] according to your word;
let no sin rule over me.
Redeem me from human oppression,
that I may obey your precepts.
Make your face shine on your servant
and teach me your decrees.
Streams of tears flow from my eyes,
for your law is not obeyed [because people do not *keep* your law].
Psalm 119:129-136

To be kept by God that we might keep his statutes is the essence of the psalmist’s plea in the seventh stanza. The testimonies of the Lord are wonderful. They are extraordinary. The psalmist is totally convinced of their amazing value.⁶⁰ Personally, he treasures them above all else, but to his deep sorrow not everyone shares his enthusiasm for the law. To him the commands of God are priceless because they are light and life to the soul, but for others the law is despised and

⁵⁹ Webster, *The God Who Comforts*, 35

⁶⁰ Ross, *Psalms*, 568.

disobeyed. He is convinced that these commands, statutes, and precepts are essential for society to flourish. In keeping God's decrees the darkness of human depravity and the sin of human oppression is overcome. The psalmist has a "Go for the Gold!" philosophy of life. He is like the man in Jesus' parable who finds a treasure hidden in a field and when he found it, "he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field" (Matthew 13:44). "Jesus knows that the human heart hankers after a treasure," wrote Bonhoeffer, "and so it is his will that we should have one. . . . Jesus does not deprive the human heart of its instinctive needs — treasure, glory and praise. . ." ⁶¹ The psalmist has found that treasure in the law of God.

The psalmist likens his longing for God's word to an insatiable hunger and an unquenchable thirst: "I open my mouth and pant, longing for your commands" (Ps 119:131). The image invokes in the Christian's mind the fourth beatitude in Jesus' Sermon on the Mount: "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled" (Matthew 5:6). He links his physical longing for water to his spiritual longing for living water (John 4:14). The psalmist causes us to ask ourselves if our appetite for God and his word is as real as physical hunger and thirst? Our thirst for life cannot be met in any other way than through Jesus Christ, who made this clear when he said, "I tell you the truth, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. For my flesh is real food and my blood is real drink" (John 6:53-55).

The psalmist's high view of the word of God is not enough. It is one thing to value of the law, it is another thing to keep it. He has not fooled himself into equating his beliefs with his practice. The statutes of the law are wonderful, but the psalmist is not feeling all that wonderful about himself. He needs God's help and he spells out the help he needs in four specific ways: (1) "Turn to me and have mercy on me" – The psalmist requests the active, personal attention and companionship of God himself; (2) "Keep steady my steps according to your promise" (ESV) – He looks to God for immediate, daily guidance from his word in faithful obedience; (3) "Redeem me from human oppression" – The psalmist pleads for God's redemptive grace to forgive him and free him from the grip of systemic sin so that he can obey God's precepts. (4) "Make your face shine on your servant and teach me your decrees" – The word "shine" is translated as "light" in verse 130, and knits the stanza together. The psalmist's request recalls the blessing of Aaron: "The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face shine on you and be gracious to you; the Lord turn his face toward you and give you peace" (Num 6:24-26). Whoever confesses a high view of Scripture ought to pray for these four things right along with the psalmist. The key to living well is to be kept by God. As Luther sang, "Lord, keep us steadfast in your Word."⁶²

The seventeenth stanza concludes emotionally, "My eyes shed streams of tears, because people do not keep your law" (Ps 119:136, ESV). My sense is that these are not self-righteous tears. The psalmist is not crying over the indignity of the word of God suffered by those who shun its wisdom and insist on disobedience. He is not upset and offended on behalf of God over the reputation of God's word. If this were the case his tears would be mixed with anger against those

⁶¹ Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, 195.

⁶² Luther, "Lord, Keep Us Steadfast in Your Word."

who desecrate the word. No, his deep sorrow is for those who are lost and helpless. His sheds tears of compassion and remorse for those whose lives are ruined because of their ignorance of God's word or because of their rebellion or resentment or refusal to respond to God's word in obedience. The psalmist does not weep over the dignity of God and his word, because he knows no matter what God's honor cannot suffer loss. He weeps for those who refuse to come to God.

Jesus may have had this psalm in mind when he wept over Jerusalem. He was moved to tears because he saw judgment looming over the city. He said, "If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace – but now is hidden from your eyes." He prophesied judgment because they did not recognize the time of God's coming to them (Luke 19:41-44). Jesus wept tears of compassion because the people are "harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd" (Matthew 9:36). Jesus wept at the tomb of Lazarus, not out frustration with the people, nor out of sorrow for Lazarus, but because of the desperate hopelessness of the human condition without faith in God and his word.

Those who have friends and loved ones who refuse to honor God's word know what it is to cry "rivers of tears" (Ps 119:136). Ask the godly parent whose son or daughter has committed adultery or become addicted to drugs or in some way turned their back on the faith whether they have shed rivers of tears. Ask the innocent children of parents who have divorced and pursued their quest for self-fulfillment at the expense of others whether they have shed rivers of tears. Ask the prophet Jeremiah what it is like to cry rivers of tears for the people of God. He cried, "Oh, that my head were a spring of water and my eyes a fountain of tears!" He explain to a people unresponsive to the word of God, "If you do not listen, I will weep in secret because of your pride; my eyes will weep bitterly, overflowing with tears, because the Lord's flock will be taken captive" (Jer 9:1; 13:17). The psalmist is heart-broken over the sins of God's people, and we should follow his example.

As young boy I remember hearing a guest preacher preach on "keep on keeping on." This tag line was the sum and substance of the sermon and the running refrain throughout the sermon was "keep on keeping on." On the ride home my father was dismissive of the guest preacher's effort to inspire the congregation's faithfulness. He wrote the sermon off as all hype with little help. My sense is that the psalmist would agree. There is little to be gained by telling ourselves and others to "keep on keeping on." Such self-talk is simplistic. It encourages self-effort and contributes to another round of emotional ups and downs. What we need instead is what the psalmist describes in this stanza, to be kept by God so that we might keep his statutes: "O Lord, turn to me. . . .Direct my footsteps. . . .Redeem me. . . .Make your face shine on your servant. . ." We need to be kept if we are going to keep.

18. Lived Righteousness

*You are righteous, Lord,
and your laws are right.
The statutes you have laid down are righteous;
they are fully trustworthy.*

*My zeal wears me out,
for my enemies ignore your words.
Your promises have been thoroughly tested,
and your servant loves them.
Though I am lowly and despised,
I do not forget your precepts.
Your righteousness is everlasting
and your law is true.
Trouble and distress have come upon me,
but your commands give me delight.
Your statutes are always righteous;
give me understanding that I may live.*

Psalm 119:137-144

The revelation of righteousness builds throughout the drama of salvation history until it reaches its climax in Christ. The psalmist declares, “You are righteous, Lord,” and “Your righteousness is everlasting.” God alone defines righteousness because only he is the Righteous One. Who God is and what God has done is altogether righteous, but we are not. Try as we might we cannot set things right. “All our righteous acts are like filthy rags” (Isa 64:6). Only God in his mercy can make us righteous. “Christ is the culmination of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes” (Rom 10:4). Only Christ in and through his sacrifice can make us righteous. “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor 5:21). To drive this truth home Paul wrote off his pride of heritage, his torah perfectionism and his religious zeal: “I consider them *garbage*, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith” (Phil 3:7-9).

We pray the eighteenth stanza of Psalm 119 with gratitude in our hearts for the gift of righteousness given to us in Christ. Through the crucified and risen Lord Jesus, Christ’s righteousness makes us righteous before God so that God does not look upon our sin, but upon Christ’s righteousness. Moreover Christ’s righteousness is training to live righteously in a sinful and evil world. By God’s grace we are empowered “to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness” (Eph 4:22-24). In the Spirit, the psalmist grasps God’s covenant of faithfulness and righteousness, but Christ’s followers pray this psalm with a deeper, richer meaning because of the incarnation of God. Jesus made the truth, “You are righteous, Lord,” come alive in person. Not only did he give us his righteousness, but he leads us in the way of righteousness. His righteousness is not a vague, ethereal other-worldly ethic, but . As the apostle Peter said quoting from Isaiah 53, “‘He himself bore our sins’ in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; ‘by his wounds you have been healed.’ For ‘you were like sheep going astray,’ but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls” (1 Peter 2:18-25). Jesus and his disciples define righteousness in a specific and definite way. We are not left to our whims and preferences but to

the Spirit's revelation. We are beatitude-based believers who have salt and light impact. In Christ we have chosen love instead of hate, purity instead of lust, fidelity instead of infidelity, honesty instead of dishonesty, reconciliation instead of retaliation, and prayer instead of revenge (Matt 5:1-48). The divine goal has always been deep obedience, "so be holy in all you do; for it is written: 'Be holy, because I am holy' (Lev 19:2). This goal is in sync with Jesus Christ's, "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matt 5:48), and only in him can this goal be realized. The way of righteousness is not a vague, ethereal other-worldly ethic. Jesus and his disciples define righteousness in a specific and definite way. We are not left to our whims and preferences but to the Spirit's revelation.

It is not difficult to see how Jesus identified with this stanza in three ways. First, he saw himself in the description of the Righteous One. When we pray, "You are righteous, Lord," and "Your righteousness is everlasting," we feel the chasm between our fallen human condition and God's holiness, but when Jesus, the Holy and Righteous One, prayed he could not help but feel his oneness with the Father. Second, Jesus practiced the law as it is described in this stanza. He embodied, taught, and practiced the "fully trustworthy" statutes of the Lord. He proved his love and delight for God's life-tested promises. Thirdly, he experienced adversity and opposition from a fallen and sin-twisted world, because he obeyed the law of God. The psalmist prayed, "My zeal wears me out, for my enemies ignore your words." But no one fits this description better than Jesus, who was consumed by his zeal for the Lord (John 2:17; Ps 69:9). And who better than Jesus to say, "Though I am lowly and despised, I do not forget your precepts"? The psalmist prayed, "Trouble and distress have come upon me," and then we hear Jesus pray, "Now my soul is troubled, and what shall I say? 'Father, save me from this hour'? No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour. 'Father, glorify your name!'" (John 12:27-28).

We pray this eighteenth stanza today covered with the righteousness of Christ and committed to his righteousness in our daily lives. In Christ, we identify with Jesus in these three ways. Since he is our righteousness we are called to embody, teach and practice the "fully trustworthy" and "thoroughly tested" statutes and promises of the Lord. And as result, we experience opposition from a world bent on ignoring and disobeying the word of God. Like our Lord, we may feel worn out, humiliated, and distressed, precisely because we have taken up our cross to follow him, but in the end we pray as the psalmist prayed, "Your statutes are always righteous; give me understanding to live" (Ps 119:144). For we know that lived righteousness is the only way to live.

19. Spirit-Formation

*I call with all my heart; answer me, Lord,
and I will obey your decrees.
I call out to you; save me
and I will keep your statutes.
I rise before dawn and cry for help;
I have put my hope in your word.
My eyes stay open through the watches of the night,
that I might meditate on your promises.*

*Hear my voice in accordance with your love;
 preserve my life, Lord, according to your laws.
 Those who devise wicked schemes are near,
 but they are far from your law.
 Yet you are near, Lord,
 and all your commands are true.
 Long ago I learned from your statutes
 that you established them to last forever.*
 Psalm 119:145-152

Grace-based obedience has its roots in a personal relationship with the Lord that is whole-hearted and all encompassing. Prayer is the subject of the nineteenth stanza, but not the type of prayer that is wordy, rote, religious, and perfunctory. On the contrary, the way the psalmist calls on the Lord is intimate and deeply personal. His whole-heart is in it. His prayer is neither arbitrary or indifferent, but necessary and essential. He prays, “save me.” His prayer is intense, even desperate. He rises before dawn to cry for help and throughout the day he affirms his hope in God’s word. He is alert through the night meditating on the promises of God. The psalmist proves his passion for obeying, keeping, hoping, and meditating on the word of God by how he prays: “I call with all my heart. . . I call out to you; save me. . . I rise before dawn. . . I meditate on your promises.” Real prayer is a first person Spirit-discipline. In previous stanzas the psalmist has expressed his need for God’s help to keep his statutes, decrees, and commands. But in this stanza he describes how he goes about seeking God’s help. The description of his devotion, passion, and discipline is consistent with his quest for obedience and ought to inspire our own.

Obedience does not come without a deep desire and a disciplined struggle. Even Christians, who profess belief in universal truth and moral order, sometimes push-back against the call to be holy. Some Christians encourage a “live-and-let-live,” “just be-yourself,” “don’t let anyone tell you what to do” morality. The thought seems to be that Christians will spontaneously do the right thing. The Holy Spirit is credited with a “be-yourself” ethic, as if the indwelling presence of the Spirit will automatically cause Christians to do what is right. N. T. Wright observes,

“This whole way of thinking has become entrenched in many parts of our world, not least in many parts of many churches. Some people mistake it for the gospel itself, supposing that the romantic and existentialist rejection of rules is the same thing as Paul’s doctrine of ‘justification by faith apart from works of the law,’ or the same thing as what Jesus was advocating when he confronted the law-bound Pharisees.”⁶³

Given human nature and our propensity to sin, holiness does not come naturally. To think and act Christianly about sex and intimacy, leisure and sports, success and money, will not happen if we are fed a steady diet of pop Christianity. The challenge to take “captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ” (2 Cor 10:5) involves real prayer, the kind described by the psalmist.⁶⁴

⁶³ Wright, *After You Believe*, 51.

⁶⁴ Webster, *Outposts of Hope*, 41.

The psalmist prays to the Lord, “Hear my voice in accordance with your love; preserve my life, Lord, according to your laws.” For the psalmist love and law are in a dynamic relationship. To be heard in love is to obey the law. God’s love for us and in us makes obedience to God’s law possible. The apostle Paul understood the synergy between love and law in his prayer for the church at Philippi: “This is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ – to the glory and praise of God” (Phil 1:9-11).

The psalmist acknowledges that “those who devise wicked schemes are near,” as if to say the pressure to conform to the world and squelch the passion to obey is always near at hand. Excuses, temptations, and distractions are never far away. But the psalmist has the good sense to affirm that those who are out to get him “are far from the law.” This is the heads-up wisdom that we pray will be cultivated in believers who go off to university or enlist in the military or enter the workforce. There is no safety in seclusion and withdrawal. We cannot go outside of the world to serve the Lord, and the morality of the age enshrines relativism and selfishness as ethical absolutes. In the name of enlightened freedom the world approves divorce on grounds of incompatibility, accepts abortion if the mother wishes, supports fetal tissue research if it will enhance health, encourages around-the-clock commerce seven days a week to improve the economy, approves gay sex and gay marriage, promotes death-induction, uses conspicuous material consumption as a sign of career success, backs mandatory genetic screening for genetic diseases and deformities, condones sexual promiscuity, and sponsors state supported gambling.⁶⁵

“Those who devise wicked schemes are near,” but God is nearer. The psalmist prays emphatically, “Yet you are near, Lord, and all your commands are true.” But isn’t the Lord nearer because the Lord is answering the psalmist’s whole-hearted, around-the-clock, ever-trusting, always-hoping, constant meditating, quest for the Lord. And isn’t this seeking after the Lord his long-standing conviction? As he says, “Long ago I learned from your statutes that you established them to last forever” (Ps 119:152). When the pastor who wrote Hebrews prayed this psalm he undoubtedly said, “Amen,” and added, “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever” (Heb 13:8).

20. Give me Life

*Look on my suffering and deliver me,
for I have not forgotten your law.
Defend my cause and redeem me;
preserve my life [give me life] according to your promise.
Salvation is far from the wicked,
for they do not seek out your decrees.
Your compassion, Lord, is great;
preserve my life [give me life] according to your laws.
Many are the foes who persecute me,*

⁶⁵ Webster, Choices of the Heart, 39.

*but I have not turned from your statutes.
I look on the faithless with loathing,
for they do not obey your word.
See how I love your precepts;
preserve my life [give me life], Lord, in accordance with your love.
All your words are true;
all your righteous laws are eternal.*
Psalm 119:153-160

We are nearing the end of this great psalm and we sense in this stanza a tone of personal desperation. As he has done throughout Psalm 119, the psalmist expresses his complete confidence in the revelation of God which he describes in various ways as, law, promise, decrees, statutes, and word. The rich fullness of God's life-giving word is set in contrast to the psalmist's acute sense of vulnerability and danger. His life is in jeopardy. He feels persecuted and reviled. He is in need of rescue, redemption, and reviving.

The themes of the previous stanza are woven into this stanza. The "save me" prayers given previously take on a specific plea for salvation in this stanza. We are given a deeper understanding of what the psalmist was praying for and in need of. The Lord is nearer than the nearness of his many foes (Ps 119:151), but he is in trouble. He pleads for deliverance on the basis of his long obedience to God's laws. His faith and faithfulness are bound together in his life. The preservation he calls out for is according to God's covenant promise, God's unfailing laws, and God's steadfast love.

The psalmist has a clear view of the opposing culture that has forgotten the law of God and turned away from God's statutes. The edges of his faith are sharp and distinctive. He faces real opposition and persecution for his faithfulness to God's word. If we follow his example we will not compromise the faith and "gradually sand down all the sharp edges of the gospel."⁶⁶ Like the psalmist our feelings of alienation with the culture must come from Christ and his word rather than our cultural biases and prejudices. We cannot afford to confuse the American Dream with the Kingdom of God. We do not want to suffer an "alien alienation" in the name of Christendom because we are unwilling to follow the path of Christ. The apostle Peter quoted from Psalm 34 to make his point, "Who would love life and see good days must keep their tongue from evil and their lips from deceitful speech. They must turn from evil and do good; they must seek peace and pursue it. For the eyes of The Lord are on the righteous and his ears are attentive to their prayer, but the face of The Lord is against those who do evil" (1 Peter 3:10-12; Ps 34:12-16).

Peter continued, "Who is going to harm you if you are eager to do good? But even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed. 'Do not fear their threats; do not fear what they fear' (Isa 8:12). But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander" (1 Pet 3:13-16).

⁶⁶ Timothy Tennent, <http://timothytennent.com/2017/10/16/on-the-need-to-be-prophetically-irenic/>

Under threat from his foes, the psalmist lashes out at his persecutors. He tells God, “I look on the faithless with loathing for they do not obey your word” (Ps 119:158). Such a line makes me think of the angry faces of Pharisees looking down on Jesus more than it makes me think of Jesus reaching out to sinners whom he came to seek and to save. Is there any justification for showing our disgust, even our loathing, toward those who casually, even flippantly, disobey God’s word? I doubt that the psalmist had any intention of giving us a verse that could be construed as a justification for hate. Nor did the psalmist intend to encourage a self-righteous disdain for the lost. This line does not justify anger and outrage against evildoers, but it does reveal the psalmist’s deep passion for God and his word. The apostle Paul wrote, “Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good” (Rom 12:9). We don’t want to equivocate on God’s revelation. We want to love the good and hate the evil, but we also want to “bless” our persecutors; “bless and not curse” (Rom 12:14). We don’t want to repay anyone evil for evil. But as far as it depends on us, we want to live at peace with everyone and leave judgment to God (Rom 12:17-19).

The phrase, “Give me life” is repeated three times in the stanza. It is a single word in Hebrew that is translated in a variety of ways: “preserve my life,” “revive me,” “restore my life,” “quicken me,” and “give me back my life.” “The verb is the causative stem (piel) of ‘to live.’”⁶⁷ Spurgeon on the psalmist’s plea to be “quicken” wrote, “It is a desire which cannot be too often felt and expressed.” The psalmist wants “more life,” and more life means “more love, more grace, more faith, more courage, more strength; and if we get these we can hold up our heads before our adversaries.”⁶⁸ The basis for the psalmist’s threefold request, “give me life,” is not based on his faithfulness and diligence but on God’s promises, on God’s law, and on God’s love. To be revived by God is to be renewed in our inner being. “Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day” (2 Cor 4:16).

When Christians sing, “Give me Jesus” they ought to sing it mindful of the psalmist’s prayer, “Give me life.” For the God-given revival envisioned by the psalmist is neither shallow nor sentimental but deeply rooted in the costly grace of God’s salvation and in the redemptive love of God’s compassion and in the living, eternal word of God that lasts forever. The principles of revival contained within these eight verses correspond beautifully with the promise of Jesus, “I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full” (John 10:10). The psalmist’s hope resonates with the apostle’s testimony, “I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (Gal 2:20).

21. *Shalom*

*Rulers persecute me without cause,
but my heart trembles at your word.
I rejoice in your promise*

⁶⁷ Ross, Psalms, 582.

⁶⁸ Spurgeon, *The Golden Alphabet*, Pasadena, TX: Pilgrim Publications, 272.

*like one who finds great spoil.
I hate and detest falsehood
but I love your law.
Seven times a day I praise you
for your righteous laws.
Great peace have those who love your law,
and nothing can make them stumble.
I wait for your salvation, Lord,
And I follow your commands.
I obey your statutes,
for I love them greatly.
I obey your precepts and your statutes,
for all my ways are known to you.*

Psalm 119:161-168

The psalmist's love for God's word and his passionate commitment to obey God's will in all he does transcends every form of persecution, opposition, and stumbling block. Stanza twenty-one is the psalmist's liberation theology in eight poetically crafted verses. For many believers the first line of the stanza would be their defining lament: "Rulers, princes, politicians – the powers that be – persecute me without cause." But not the psalmist. He is defined not by the opposition he experiences, but by the word of God he loves. Before God (Ps 119:168) he trembles at his word, that is to say, his heart stands in awe of the word. The whole stanza is taken up with the psalmist expressing his joy, love, and praise for the word. And he proves that this is not just pious rhetoric by his commitment to follow and obey God's commands, statutes, and precepts in all he does.

Two quick references define the negative tension between the powers that be and the psalmist's devotion to God's word. The psalm begins with the authorities that persecute without cause followed by a one word description of their modus operandi, "falsehood." That's all the psalmist has time for in what amounts to peon of praise to God for his faithful promises, righteous laws, life-giving commands, and never-failing statutes. He doesn't let the world's opposition get to him. He refuses to be discouraged and disoriented by those who seek to oppress him and put a stumbling block in his way. He drives out the fear of worldly powers with the fear of the Lord and his word. Instead of expending his energies and emotions hating his enemies, he rejoices in God's promises. He likens this joy to a soldier rejoicing in the triumph of a military victory. The apostle Paul envisioned something similar when he pictured himself and others "in Christ's triumphal procession" spreading "the aroma of the knowledge of him everywhere" (2 Cor 2:14).

The psalmist gives those of us who proclaim the authority of Scripture a reality check. It is one thing to say, "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work" (2 Tim 3:16-17), and another thing to be committed to the word personally and practically. The psalmist's passion for God's word means more to him than great material success. He'd rather rejoice in the word than strike it rich. Nor is he shy about using the sharp edge of God's law to distinguish truth from error and right from wrong. Seven times a day, which is to say, all

day every day, he expresses gratitude in his heart to the Lord (Col 3:16). In spite of threats and obstacles, he experiences “great peace” because it is “the peace of God, which transcends all understanding” (Phil 4:7). This is the only time “shalom” is used in Psalm 119, and its use foreshadows the peace of the Messiah, that peace that only Christ can give. Jesus said, “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid” (John 14:27). Shalom on the lips of Jesus is more than a salutation, it is salvation. Jesus transforms a simple one word greeting or farewell – *peace*, into a summary of all the comfort and blessing he promised. This is the peace of Christ’s atoning sacrifice and the peace of his new commandment love. When we pray this stanza today we pray it in the light of Christ’s “great peace.” This is the peace of the loving Father and the peace that empowers our loving obedience.⁶⁹

All of the first person singular affirmations (“I rejoice. . . . I praise. . . . I wait. . . . I obey”) that make up this stanza are centered in the gift of shalom. It is God’s “great peace” that energizes, empowers, and enables the psalmist to live out his devotion to God’s word with joy and confidence. He is not a dispassionate scholar of Scripture who feeds his intellectual curiosity and nurtures his penchant for debate. The psalmist is not the kind of scholar that “evades decisiveness” or “hesitates to praise or condemn.” He is not “tentative, skeptical, uncommitted.” On the contrary he “hates indecision and confusion; he firmly distinguishes right from wrong, good from evil; he is at home in a world of clearly demarcated categories and proven conclusions; he is dogmatic and committed; he works towards decisive action.”⁷⁰

The psalmist offers one more reason for his and our devotion and obedience when he concludes, “I obey your precepts and your statutes, for all my ways are known to you.” The knowledge that we are fully known and kept by the grace of God motivates our faithfulness to the will and word of God. “Now I know in part;” wrote Paul, “then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known” (1 Cor 13:12). We are not alone and we are fully known. Our self-understanding takes shape in relationship with the three-person God, who leads us in a process of confession and commitment based on the word of God. Like the psalmist we are ever-mindful of living before God, knowing “that from him and through him and for him are all things” (Rom 11:36).

22. *Help me, I’m Yours!*

*May my cry come before you, Lord;
give me understanding according to your word.
May my supplication come before you;
deliver me according to your promise.
May my lips overflow with praise,
for you teach me your decrees.
May my tongue sing of your word,
for all your commands are righteous.
May your hand be ready to help me,*

⁶⁹ Webster, *The God Who Comforts*, 63.

⁷⁰ Blamires, *The Christian Mind*, 51.

*for I have chosen your precepts.
I long for your salvation, Lord,
and your law gives me delight.
Let me live that I may praise you,
and your laws sustain me.
I have strayed like a lost sheep.
Seek your servant, for I have not forgotten your commands.*
Psalm 119:169-176

In the previous stanza the psalmist expressed his passionate commitment to obedience with confidence. But in this final stanza, a humble and needy psalmist cries out to God for help. His bold assertiveness for God and his word is matched by his heartfelt dependence on God's help. While the two stanzas may appear to be contradictory they are in fact consistent in the daily experience of sincere believers who confidently seek to obey God's word and who humbly depend on God's help to do so.

We live in the tension between deep commitment and real vulnerability. For the people of God there is a dialectical balance of counter-veiling tensions. We can confidently say with the apostle, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me" (Phil 4:13) and in the next breath say, "I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me" (2 Cor 12:9). The twenty-second stanza is a reminder of our strength and our weakness in Christ. If the Master said, "The Son can do nothing by himself" and "By myself I can do nothing" (John 5:19, 30), then how much more should we feel our total dependence upon the Lord. We join the psalmist in seeking the Lord earnestly for understanding, deliverance, and inspiration.

The range of need articulated by the psalmist corresponds to every aspect of our being: understanding for the mind, assurance for the soul, fellowship in the spirit, and inspiration for the heart. The psalmist needs what we all need from the Lord, instruction, companionship, love, and wisdom. We are not self-made, self-sufficient, men and women who measure the value of our lives by what we achieve. We are creatures made in God's image who measure the value of life by what we receive. By God's grace we are situated in a universe designed for discovery and worship, and endowed with the capacity for love and reason, intelligence and creativity, purpose and meaning. We are "hard-wired" for communion with God and community with one another. Our fallen and sinful human nature makes praising God difficult but with God's help we can embrace our mother-tongue and break into song. This is why the psalmist prays, "May my lips overflow with praise," and "May my tongue sing your word for all your commands are righteous" (Ps 119:171-172).

Throughout Psalm 119 the psalmist compares his passion for obedience to his foes who have no regard for God's law and who seek to persecute him for his faithfulness. But in this last stanza his attention is turned entirely toward the Lord. His true and bold passion for God's word is juxtaposed with deep feelings of inadequacy and insecurity. The psalmist reminds us of Job who rightly and tenaciously maintained his innocence before his "friends", but when he went "head-

to-toe” and “face-to-face” with God he could do nothing else but plead for mercy. Job persevered in his integrity, by clinging to his God-centered understanding of righteousness. He persevered in his freedom, by remaining true to God when he had no humanistic reason for doing so. He persevered in his lament, by insisting on making his case before God. But when God and Job finally meet and go one on one there is no doubt who is the Master and who is the servant. Job is speechless, “I am unworthy—how can I reply to you? I put my hand over my mouth” (Job 40:4). In the awesome presence of God, Job is both delighted and ashamed at the same time. This is worship at its best. This is what it means to love God with your whole being, body, mind and soul. “My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you,” cried Job. “Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes” (Job 42:5-6).

In the presence of God and with his faithless foes in the shadows, the psalmist feels free and safe to make his plea for God’s help. This last stanza is a reminder that the faithful never outgrow their need for this kind of prayer. We are like the father who said to Jesus, “I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!” (Mark 9:24). We will never outgrow the Beatitudes. The blessed state-of-grace always consists of being completely dependent on the Lord for his mercy. Being poor in spirit, mourning over our sin, and hungering and thirsting for righteousness will always be the spiritual profile of the follower of Jesus Christ. We sing two hymns side-by-side, “Blessed assurance Jesus is mine oh what a foretaste of glory divine,” and “O to grace how great a debtor / Daily I’m constrained to be! / Let Thy goodness, like a fetter, / Bind my wandering heart to Thee: / Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it, / Prone to leave the God I love; / Here's my heart, O take and seal it; / Seal it for Thy courts above.”

No matter how deeply spiritual and biblical wise we may become, we never rise above this plea: “Let my cry come right into your presence, God; provide me with the insight that comes only from your Word” (Ps 119:169, *The Message*). So when the psalmist says, “I have strayed like a lost sheep,” he is not lamenting his lostness as much as he’s picturing his neediness before God. He is not like the lost sheep in Jesus’ parable nor is he harassed and helpless like a sheep without a shepherd” (Luke 15:1-7; Matthew 9:36). By God’s grace the psalmist is a faithful, devoted, obedient, lover of God’s word. He is a wise, disciplined, and resilient servant of the Lord. But that doesn’t change the fact that he stands in need of God’s sustaining grace. Luther commented on this concluding verse, “This verse is extremely emotional and full of tears, for truly we are all thus going astray, so that we must pray to be visited, sought, and carried over by the most godly Shepherd, the Lord Jesus Christ, who is God blessed forever. Amen.”⁷¹

⁷¹ Luther, *First Lectures on the Psalms*, II, 534.