



## The Word: The Sojourner's Help Psalm 119:17-24

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Last Sunday, in looking at verses 8-16 of Psalm 119, we heard the Psalmist acknowledging that God's Word is the only sure for guard for a young man who tries to keep his way pure. We heard him pleading with God to keep him living according to his commandments. We heard him declaring his delight in God's testimonies and that he would meditate on them and keep his eyes fixed on them, again, all that he might keep his way pure.

I want, this morning, to look at the third stanza: verses 17-24. Here the Psalmist is no longer the young man whose ways would be anything but strait without the Word; now he's the maturing servant of God. He's following God and as he follows him, he's learning to count the cost of walking in God's ways instead of the world's. And he's also discovering that more he grows the more he finds himself walking through enemy territory.

Maybe you've noticed the same thing in your own life. The more you mature in the faith, the more you ground yourself in God's Word, and the more you commit to walking according to his ways, the more you find yourself walking apart from the world, and the more you realise that your real citizenship is heavenly, and not so much an earthly citizenship. The more careful you are to follow God, the more you find that you long to be close to him and the more you can identify with the Psalmist's delight in God and his Word. That's exactly what we see happening to the Psalmist here. In fact, we'll see that this stanza has a structure that parallels the previous stanza and that emphasises his movement from spiritual immaturity to growing saintliness. Look at verse 17 (if you're following in the Prayer Book, you'll find this stanza on page 422):

**Deal bountifully with your servant, that I may live and keep your word.**

Notice first that he addresses himself to God as his servant. The Old Testament uses this word often to describe God's worshippers, but it also uses the same word when it talks about slaves and subjects. This is the same

word that described the Israelites as slaves in Egypt. It's the same word used to describe conquered nations that owed tribute to a conquering king. To be in fellowship with God is to follow him, but to follow him is to be his servant and to be under his command—to owe him your all. If you follow God, you can never again be your own master. Adam and Eve fell into sin because they put themselves before God when they started listening to temptation instead of following his commands. This means that if we're going to follow God, he requires that we follow him wholly. Think about it: a slave doesn't decide when he's going to obey. A conquered king doesn't decide when he's going to pay tribute. But a lot of Christians decide when they're going to serve God and when they're not. A lot of people are happy to proclaim Jesus as their Saviour, but they aren't willing to make him their Lord. Jesus sacrificed himself for their sakes, but they aren't willing to sacrifice themselves for him. That's what St. James was getting at when he said that faith without works is dead. We aren't saved by our works and we're not saved because we've made Jesus our Lord, but real saving faith in him as Saviour is *always* going to show its genuineness by our making ourselves his servants. There's no fence sitting in God's kingdom. Either you follow him or you don't. Following him part-time isn't an option.

Consider what this word, "servant", means coming from David. God himself had chosen David and had him anointed as king of Israel. He had made David powerful and rich. And yet when David comes to God, he comes to him not as a king declaring his greatness. He comes to God as his servant. He asks God to deal with him bountifully not because he's a great man, but because he's doing his best as a faithful servant. And notice too, that David doesn't ask God to deal with him bountifully so that he can do his own thing. How often do we approach God with our own agenda in hand? David asks for God's bounty so that he can live to keep that Word to which he's devoted himself. He's asking to be enriched so that he can not only continue as God's servant, but day by day become an even better servant. Bishop Cowper wrote, "To an elect man, life is a great benefit; for by it he goes from election to glorification, by the way of sanctification. The longer he lives the more good he doth, to the glory of God, the edification of others, and confirmation of his own salvation; making it sure to himself by wrestling with victory in temptations, and perseverance in well doing." The Christian knows that he owes God for his physical life, he knows that he owes Jesus for his new spiritual life, and he knows that without the

ongoing work of the Spirit in him, he can never live out the real purpose of his life, which is to live by God's Word. And so the true Christian prays, "Lord, deal bountifully with me—*equip* me—so that I can devote myself to you even more."

But as we saw him say in the last stanza, we need help to follow God. No one becomes holy by accident. Look now at verse 18:

**Open my eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of your law.**

"Open my eyes." That's the greatest prayer we can pray. It's the prayer of the blind man who, in verse 10, prayed, "Let me not wander." It's our first need as sinners, because every one of us is born spiritually blind. Jesus said, "No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him" (Matthew 11:27). Unless God opens our eyes to the wonders of the Gospel, no one can ever be saved. And yet it doesn't stop with salvation. He continues to open our eyes. The more we walk with him, the more we see. But he has to open our eyes. Last summer when Veronica and I were over in Vancouver for a few days, we took in the "Dutch Masters" exhibit that was at the Vancouver Art Gallery. It was an amazing exhibit to me. Ever since I studied art history in college, I've been fascinated by the Dutch Masters. They were the first painters to really begin painting in intricate and realistic detail. Until you're very close, many of their paintings can almost be mistaken for photographs. I could have easily spent an hour or more in front of some of the paintings there, and so it was humorous to watch some people rushing through the exhibit and taking no more than a few seconds to take in each painting, and then complaining about how much it cost. Their problem was that their eyes were closed to the wonders that were there. A lot of those people had no idea why the Dutch Masters were important. They'd look at a painting and just say, "Yep, it's a vase of flowers," or "Yep, it's a portrait of some rich guy." A lot of the time we're prone to approaching Scripture the same way. We rush through it and we don't pay much attention to why it says what it does. Our physical eyes may be open, but our spiritual eyes are closed and we miss what God is telling us. We need to ask the Spirit to open our eyes that we might take it all in and understand the wonders that are there. The guarantee here is that with every bit of the wonders of the Word we see, the more we'll want. The riches there are amazing. I've talked with people who won't even read one of the Gospel accounts because, as they say,

“They’re *so* boring!” The Gospels boring? And consider that David didn’t have the Gospels. He had only the law, but it was his delight and in it he found the greatest spiritual riches. A friend of mine preached through Leviticus a few years ago. When I tell people that they usually groan at the idea of a year of sermons on Leviticus. David’s perspective was the polar opposite. Why? Because the Holy Spirit had opened his eyes. The day will come when the veil will be taken away from our eyes entirely, but until then pray for God to give you the eyes to see the riches of his Word. He has a purpose for each of us here, but if we don’t immerse ourselves in his Word, we’ll never really be able to walk in the way he has for us. Don’t squander the time you have.

Now look at verse 19. This is what begins to happen as our eyes are opened and as we live according to God’s Word.

**I am a sojourner on the earth; hide not your commandments from me!**

The more we walk with God, the more we’re going to feel like this world and its ways no longer belong to us. The more we walk in the ways of heaven, the more we’re going to realise that our true home is heaven. That’s what “sojourner” meant to the ancient Hebrews. A sojourner was a foreigner living in the land, but one who had no inherited rights to it. He didn’t really belong and was only there temporarily. That’s what God’s people are here.

Now, think about the fact that this is probably David—*King* David—writing this and calling himself a sojourner. First, David was living in the very land that God had given to his people. David had an inherited right to it. But he wasn’t just an average citizen; he was the king of that land. If anyone belonged there, it was David. Can you imagine the Queen describing herself as a mere sojourner in England? The Queen *is* England! And yet that’s what David is saying here. The more his eyes were opened to the riches of the Word, the more he knew that this earth is nothing more than a temporary home, even for the richest and most powerful.

With that in mind think about living abroad. I’m not the only one here who has lived in a country that isn’t my own. Thomas Manton put it well when he wrote, “A man’s greatest care should be for that place where he lives longest; therefore eternity should be his scope.” I’m an American and I lived almost ninety per cent of my life in the United States. Even after a couple of years, it’s a

challenge for me to take an interest in Canadian politics. My interest is still in the politics and goings on in my own country. I’m sure that those of you who have lived abroad have had similar experiences. But I do find that the longer I’m here, the more I actually do start to care about Canadian politics. Now, if that’s true of our earthly interests, how much more should it be true of our spiritual interests? You and I might at most live a hundred years in this world, but we’ll spend an eternity in heaven. David realised this and that’s why he pleaded with God to show him his commandments. God’s commandments were the guide that led him through this strange land. Imagine being in a strange place where you’re not only not a citizen, but where you don’t understand the language and where you don’t understand the customs. It’s a scary place because it’s so different. You desperately want to get home and so you hold your passport tight to remind yourself of home and you follow your map as you walk down strange streets and roads, knowing that if you follow that map, it *will* get you home. Brothers and sisters, that’s how we Christians should feel in this world. It’s not to say that we should be escapists whose only thought is for the day that Jesus will come and take us home. He’s left us here so that we can do the work of his kingdom and make this strange land a better place and introduce more and more people to his kingdom, but as we do that, his Word is our passport—the reminder of our true citizenship—and it’s also our guidebook and roadmap to show us the way home.

Now with this whole sojourner idea in mind, look at verse 20:

**My soul is consumed with longing for your rules at all times.**

Is that something you can see yourself telling God? I know I can’t say that. I certainly pray that I would, but I’m not there yet and that’s why I’m still not as holy as I should be. My problem, and yours, is that for all practical purposes we’re really only part-time sojourners. We’re sojourners when we’re here at church and when we’re reading our Bibles and praying during the week, but the rest of the time we live pretty much as if we belong to the world. We live just like the people around us. But if our minds were constantly cognizant of the fact that we’re sojourners here, we’d spend a lot more of our time longing for our real home and being consumed with God’s Word—a lot more time clutching and studying our map home. Remember, friends, that true godliness depends on our desires. Godliness

isn’t just about doing the right thing. There are lots of time we do the right thing. Our problem is that we often do it for the wrong reason. True godliness is doing what we know to be pleasing to God, not because it benefits us, but simply because we desire to please God. Here’s another spiritual reality check: How do you feel about God’s rules? Do you long for them like the Psalmist did? He longed for them because he knew that God reveals his will in his rules—in his judgements, and anyone who longs to be in God’s will is naturally going to long for his judgements.

Now in verse 21, the Psalmist gives a warning:

**You rebuke the insolent, accursed ones, who wander from your commandments.**

This is the problem of the whole human race: insolence. Some versions translate it as “proud”. “Insolent” actually sums up best the meaning of the Hebrew word, which describes a person as being more than just proud. It describes a wicked rebelliousness that’s rooted in wilful opposition. In fact, there’s a special verb form of this word that refers specifically to the Egyptians and that has Pharaoh in mind when he wilfully rejected the commands that God gave through Moses. That’s our problem. Ever since Adam and Eve wilfully disobeyed God, we’ve all been doing the same. No one sins out of indifference to God. We sin because, whether we realise it or not, we’re his enemies. *Sin is insolence*. Think of Cain who murdered his brother and then insolently tried to hide it from God. Think again of Pharaoh. Think of Haman who deliberately struck out at God by trying to murder the whole Jewish population of Babylon. Think of Nebuchadnezzar who declared himself to be god. Think of Herod who was so fearful of any challenge to himself as king that he tried to kill the Messiah and in the process had all the baby boys of Bethlehem murdered. Sin is always wilful. It’s always an attack against God. And God always punishes sin, because it’s an affront to his holiness.

Notice that if insolence is the problem, the solution is humble submission. The humble man is willing to seek to please God instead of himself. The humble man is willing to admit his sins and for that reason, only those who are humble will ever find salvation, because salvation from our sins only comes as we admit we are sinners, that we cannot save ourselves, and when we turn to the sacrifice offered by Christ.

In verses 22 and 23 David comes back to earth. He's a sojourner here and that means that he has to deal not only with his own sins but with the sins of others against him:

**Take away from me scorn and contempt, for I have kept your testimonies. Even though princes sit plotting against me, your servant will meditate on your statutes.**

These verses give us one of the best arguments for David having written Psalm 119, because they describe his unjustified persecution by men like Saul, Abner, and Ahithophel. Take some time to read through the life of David in the second half of 1 Samuel and in 2 Samuel. If any man suffered for all the wrong reasons, it was David. Every time he tried to do the right thing, someone was after him for it. None of us has ever had it as bad as David, but as Christians we can all identify with him. We've all had times when we got into trouble with the world because we chose to follow God's ways. Like David we can pray to our righteous Judge: "Take away their scorn and contempt." But be careful before you make that prayer. Remember that the man praying that here is the same man who has been proclaiming his delight in God's Word and that his whole being is consumed with love for it. David wasn't perfect, but he did truly desire to follow after God and for the most part he was pretty successful in it. When it came to these men persecuting him he knew he was innocent and he could be confident in pleading his innocence because he was thoroughly steeped in the Word. He knew what pleases God and what doesn't. Before we plead our innocence with God, we would do well to know his Word well enough to be sure of our own innocence. I've met a lot of Christians who have claimed they were being persecuted for things they'd done, but what they had done was wrong. In some cases they sinned out of ignorance, but I've seen quite a few instances where these people knew the Scriptures, but they claimed that God had given them some kind of prophecy or personal revelation that they liked better. Friends, the Holy Spirit will never contradict himself. Our first rule is his Word. It's presumptuous to ask for God to speak again on that which he's already spoken about in his Word and its both presumptuous *and* lazy to bypass his Word and ask for some kind of personal revelation instead.

But if we are blameless, we can plead our case with God and trust in him to clear us and deal with the situation. There's no guarantee that God will resolve the problem

the way we'd like him too, but remember, as his servants we submit our wills to his, not his to ours. The key is to trust him, regardless of how things work out. At the time David prayed these words, he didn't know what God would do. He could have prayed and then taken worldly tactics to try to clear his name. That's something we'll often do. We have a problem so we pray and ask for God's help, but then we do something very worldly to try to deal with it ourselves. Think of Abraham. God had promised him a son, but decades went by and the son never came, so Abraham and Sarah decided to take a very worldly course of action and Abraham chose to father a son with Sarah's maid, Hagar, and made a mess of things. If we're going to plead with God, we need to let God act in his own way and in his own timing. David pleaded with God for help, but look at what he did. He follows his prayer saying, "Your servant will meditate on your statutes."

Here's the practical application: If you've got problems with the world, give them to God, then get back to God's Word and to his work. Don't give it to him and then take it back. Give it to him and leave it with him and get on with the task of getting to know God and his ways better and of being his servant in the world. If people are persecuting you for following God, *follow God all the more closely!*

Look at the final verse of the stanza:

**Your testimonies are my delight; they are my counselors.**

David's enemies were taking counsel against him. What did he do? He took counsel with God. He was living in the world and at every turn the world tried to counsel him just like it tries to counsel us, but he remembered his true citizenship was in heaven and continued to turn to God's Word as his counsel. Brothers and sisters, if you are a Christian, it's because the Holy Spirit has baptised you into Christ Jesus and given you new life through him. He parts the veil that blinds us to God, and opens our eyes, but that isn't enough. He opens our eyes for a reason, and that's that we might now delight in the very Word that he himself authored—a Word that without him we could never appreciate. The Spirit makes us citizens of heaven and sojourners on earth. For our part, we need to let that Holy Spirit be our counsellor and guide, but that will only happen as we delight in the Word he has written for us.

Please pray with me: Heavenly Father, thank you for the new life you have given each of us through your Son and for your Spirit who joins us to him as our source of life. But Lord, we thank you too for your Holy Word, inspired by your same life-giving Spirit, that you have given that we might know you and that we might have a guide as we sojourn away from our heavenly home. Give us a passion for your Word, that we might always be coming to know you better and always walking according to your ways. We ask this in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.