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The Word: Delight of the Sanctified Psalm 119:41-48

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The focus of Psalm 119 is God's law. As I pointed out at the beginning, we need to remember that for the Psalmist—probably David—the law was the only part of Scripture he had. He didn't have the rest of what we know as the Old Testament, and the New Testament—the Gospels and the Epistles of the apostles—was a thousand years away. For that reason, we need to understand that Psalm 119 *is* about the law, but it's *also* about the Scriptures—about the whole Word of God. The remarkable thing is that so many Christians shrug off the Old Testament—and especially the “law”—as being irrelevant for Christians. And yet the Psalmist, having only the law, found grace. Don't ever let anybody tell you that the law isn't relevant and don't ever let anybody tell you that there's no grace in the law. David, not to mention all the other Old Testament saints, found God's grace in the Old Testament and in the law—the same grace we know in Jesus Christ. And they didn't have to go hunting for it the way we so often do. I suppose you might say we're “spoiled” by the New Testament—so spoiled that we don't see the grace in the Old as easily as men like David saw it.

In this next stanza, verses 41-48, David carries this theme of grace a step further as he talks about God's salvation, but even more so in these eight verses, about sanctification—about being made holy and devoting oneself wholly to God. David makes two petitions here: one in verses 41 and 42 and the other in 43. In both cases he's asking God for his salvation, but the rest of the stanza is filled up with David's promises. David asks for God to show him his mercy, but David isn't asking for his own purpose. He asks, but then he promises God that his reason for wanting that mercy is so that he can be a better servant. David's life was founded on something that we too often forget: that God's salvation isn't ultimately for our good, but for his glory. We're prone to

cheapening God's mercy into little more than a “Get Out of Hell Free” card, when the point of God's mercy is to create a holy people for himself who will not only worship him, but give him glory before the watching eyes of the world.

Look with me at David's first petition in verse 41:

Let your steadfast love come to me, O LORD, your salvation according to your promise;

David's plea is for God's steadfast love, or as some translations put it, God's mercy. The Hebrew word is *chesed* and it may well be the richest word in the entire Old Testament. We get an idea of its richness, because it's impossible to accurately translate it into English—the meaning is just that rich. We translate it as “mercy,” “loving kindness,” and “steadfast love” in most cases. It's an idea that's usually associated with God's salvation. It's love from God to us, but not just his love. It's his kindness, his grace, and his mercy too. But again, it's more than that. It's his *steadfast* and *never-failing* love, kindness, mercy, and grace that depend not on any works of man, but on God's character of being always faithful to his covenant promises. That's why in the parallel David prays, “Let your salvation come to me *according to your promise*.” First, it's in God's *chesed* that we find our salvation, but second, it doesn't depend on us. We can't earn it. We can't demand it, because God doesn't owe it to us. All we can do is appeal to God's *promise* and to the fact that we know God is always faithful to do the things he has promised.

Over the years I've found that many Christians are under the mistaken assumption that the Jews in the Old Testament found their salvation in a different way than we do as Christians. That's just not true. The New Testament reminds us over and over, maybe most directly in Hebrews, that the means of salvation in the Old Testament was Jesus Christ just as much as in the New. The Jews in the Old Testament were saved by the same grace that we are—by God's *chesed*, by his steadfast and never-failing love and mercy. As David prays for God's salvation, he grants that he is wholly dependent on God. He can't save himself and he can't merit God's mercy. All he can do is rest on the promise of God's Word. And notice, he wasn't content to just live with the knowledge of

God's promise. He knew the Word. What he's asking for is that God make good on his promise. He saw the words of the promise, he knew them, but he wanted to *experience* them in his own life. How often do we mistake faith for knowledge? Faith is rooted in knowledge. We have to know the promises before we can claim them. But salvation comes when our knowledge becomes faith and leads us to ask God to make those promises real. Spurgeon wrote about David, “He was not content with chapter and verse, he wanted mercies and salvation.” Salvation is the personal experience of God's covenant promises.

Look at verse 42. David knew his need.

...then shall I have an answer for him who taunts me, for I trust in your word.

Some people seem to think that all David was asking for is salvation from some earthly enemy. And while he certainly had his share of persecutors, I have trouble seeing this as anything less than a plea for salvation in the spiritual sense. The language is the language of redemption. Verse 42 is the confirmation for me. He wants God's merciful salvation, so that he can have an answer for the one who taunts or, probably better, *reproaches* him. Maybe that's a reference to some man who is pointing out David's sin. Nathan did just that when he confronted David over his affair with Bathsheba and his murder of her husband, but it could just as well be a reference to the reproach of God in regard to his sin. Either way, David knows that he has sinned and he's feeling the burden of those sins. He knows that the only solution, the only way out, is through God's mercy.

How often do you find yourself living under the knowledge and weight of your sins? David reminds us that God's Word is the answer. Think of how Jesus responded to Satan at the beginning of his ministry. Three times Satan tempted Jesus and each time Jesus responded and rebuked him with God's Word. Think of St. Paul's command in Ephesians 6. He tells us that if we're going to stand firm, we need to put on the armour of God—we need to put on the helmet of salvation and the belt of truth. We need to guard ourselves with the shield of faith, but maybe most importantly, we need to be on the offensive with “the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God.” The rest of the armour is defensive. Stand firm in

God's salvation, in his Gospel, and in his Truth and you won't fall back. But, brothers and sisters, you will never *advance*, you'll never make any headway in your own Christian life and you'll never claim any territory from the enemy if you haven't picked up the sword of the Scriptures. The Scriptures are our answer when we're faced with temptation. St. Augustine said that it's right David puts this in terms of Scripture giving him an answer in the face of being reproached. He wrote, "It is not enough to have Christ in the heart if we have him not in the mouth also."

That leads right into David's second petition. Look at verse 43:

And take not the word of truth utterly out of my mouth, for my hope is in your rules.

If we know the Word, there are only two things that take it out of our mouths. We lose it when we refuse to speak it because of cowardice, and we lose it when we disqualify ourselves by being unrepentant in sin.

Throughout history, many Christians have denied the faith during times of persecution. One of the greatest controversies of the Early Church arose over what to do with those people who, in the face of persecution, had denied the faith, blasphemed God, and even in the case of some priests and bishops, handed over the Scriptures themselves to be desecrated by the Romans. You and I aren't likely to be asked to make a choice between our lives and Jesus Christ, but there are many times when we may have the opportunity to tell out God's Word or to share his Gospel with others, and yet we fear being made fun of or we fear that it will complicate personal relationships, and so we stay silent. We take God's Word from our own mouths. David no doubt faced the same struggle, so he prayed that God would remind him of the true source of his hope and never let the Word be overcome by his own fears.

There are other times, though, when the Word is taken away because our sins disqualify us. There have been times in our lives when we could have spoken out, when we could have shared the Gospel, or when someone needed a strong Scriptural rebuke, but we kept our mouths shut,

because we knew our own hearts were guilty—that we couldn't speak out without becoming hypocrites. When I was in University a group I was part of decided that we would each submit our testimonies to the school newspaper as letters to the editor. We wanted others to hear our stories, so we'd send them in, one each day. We were hoping to keep it going for at least two months. One of my friends had a particularly moving testimony and I was looking forward to his sharing it in the paper, and yet when it was his turn, he refused. And every time we asked him, he continued to refuse, but wouldn't say why. It was a few months later that I found out he was part of a group of students who were involved in a serious case of academic dishonesty in a piece of chemistry research they were doing. They'd all agreed to fudge some numbers and not to tell. My friend was afraid to share his testimony because he knew he had been dishonest. Up to that point the others in his research group didn't know he was a Christian and he wanted it kept that way, because he didn't want to smear the name of Christ.

Brothers and sisters, we need to stand firm in God's Word. David had experienced those situations when his mouth was tied up, but he knew the way out of that situation was through faith. He put his hope in God's rules—in his judgements. It's not rules in the sense that we typically think of them, but rules in terms of God's judicial rulings—his judgements. In verse 41 David wrote about God's salvation in terms of his promise and in terms of his steadfast and unfailing grace and mercy. Here he stands firm in the Word, because he knows that what God promises in the Scriptures can always be trusted. God's judgements are fair and right. When he offers us salvation, we can trust that he will judge us righteously on the last day and we can also trust that he will hold our persecutors accountable. So don't be afraid to take a stand and speak his truth. Don't let cowardice take the Word out of your mouth. If it's hard to speak, speak *something*—speak whatever you can. Charles Bridges wrote, "A stammering confession is better than silence. If we cannot say all we want of or for our Saviour, let us say what we can...A word spoken in weakness may be a word of Almighty power, and a present help to some fainting spirit." And even as you talk about earthly things with people, be

on the lookout for opportunities to turn the conversation to heavenly things. Share your hope of God's promises and don't be ashamed to do so.

David asked for God's salvation and he asked for the sanctifying power of his Word in his life. Now he makes a series of promises starting in verse 43. Again, he knew that God saves us for a purpose. Remember St. Paul's words to St. Titus: "[Jesus] gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are *zealous for good works*" (Titus 2:14). David promises in verse 43:

I will keep your law continually, forever and ever...

A desire to keep God's law should be the natural result of experiencing his promises in our lives as David had. God's faithfulness doesn't just open our mouths to sing his praises or to proclaim his saving acts to the world, it also creates in our hearts love for the things that we know please him. The more we experience grace, the stronger our hearts will be pulled toward holiness. The Spirit regenerates the hearts of sinners and turns them to faith, but as we exercise that faith in the promises of God, it builds more faith, and that faith in turn builds still more. Our Calvinist brothers and sisters call this the doctrine of the "Perseverance of the Saints". Sometimes people will caricature it as "Once Saved, Always Saved"—as if once someone has trusted in Christ, they can never lose their salvation regardless of what they might do. That's a real twisting of the doctrine. The real point is that once the Spirit has put faith in our hearts, that faith can never fail. It will always eventually lead on to greater faith. The issue isn't whether or not someone with faith can lose their salvation by falling into apostasy, but that the man or woman with real saving faith never will fall into that kind of continued unrepentant sin. The more we walk with God, the more we love to walk with him. Jesus described the way to heaven as a hard and narrow path—and he's right, but look at how David's perception of that hard and narrow path changes the longer he walks it:

...and I shall walk in a wide place, for I have sought your precepts.

On the one hand Jesus says, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me” (Luke 16:24), and “Whoever finds his life will lose it” (Matthew 10:39). Giving up your life is a hard thing. Taking up and carrying a cross is not only a hard thing, but a shameful thing. And yet once we’ve made the choice to follow Christ, our perspective changes. Yes, we gave up our lives, but Jesus also says, “Whoever loses his life for my sake will find it” (Matthew 10:39), and “My yoke is easy, and my burden is light” (Matthew 11:30). For David that hard and narrow way turned into a “wide place”. The challenge to follow Christ is in giving up all our other priorities and things in life. It’s often a very difficult decision to make. Jesus calls us to a very, very narrow path. And yet, friends, once we’ve made the choice and begun to walk with him, we find that everything we could ever want and more is in that narrow way. Suddenly it doesn’t look nearly as narrow; it doesn’t look nearly as hard and difficult. It turns into David’s “wide way” and we find our greatest joy walking in it. What looked hard and restricting, is now the place where he finds more freedom than he ever imagined.

Look at the difference it makes in verses 46 and 47:

I will also speak of your testimonies before kings and shall not be put to shame, for I find my delight in your commandments, which I love.

This is what holiness and the love of holiness do—they give us boldness. David had been afraid to speak the Word at all—especially afraid that he would only bring shame on himself and on the Word. Now he’s ready to proclaim it before kings like Saul and Achish of Gath. Remember, it was Saul who persecuted and sought to kill David. And during much of that time, David slinked away to Philistia and worked as a hired thug for Achish, one of the Philistine kings. There were times when he was living in sin and to proclaim God’s testimonies to men like that would have brought shame, but now as he walks in holiness, now that he’s found righteousness through the steadfast mercy and grace of God, there’s no more shame in proclaiming the Word.

Proverbs 28:1 says, “The wicked flee when no one pursues, but the righteous are bold as a lion.” The wicked are always afraid someone’s going to find them out. They’re always on the run, always trying to cover up and hide their sin. But those who pursue holiness have nothing to hide. Like David, they’re free, and so they have boldness. Think of Daniel. Holiness made him bold as a lion, and when he was in the lions den, his holy boldness put the lions at bay. Think of Martin Luther. He was a man known most of all for his boldness, but that boldness was rooted in his holiness, and especially in the Word. When the emperor sent for him to go to the Diet of Worms his friends told him not to go, but he said, “I will surely go, since I am sent for, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ...though there I knew that there were as many devils in Worms to resist me as there be tiles to cover the houses, yet I would go.” Hugh Latimer, one of our own English reformers, was known too for his boldness rooted in holiness. He wasn’t afraid to give a gift of a New Testament to Henry VIII—a man known for his sexual immorality and adultery—wrapped in a paper on which he’d written, “Whoremongers and adulterers God will judge.” This was the same man who was burned at the stake with his friend and fellow bishop, Nicholas Ridley, and as the flames were consuming them called out, “Be of good comfort, Master Ridley, and play the man; we shall this day light such a candle by God’s grace in England as I trust shall never be put out.”

David shows us that our thankfulness to God is shown as we give our tongues to his service, proclaiming his testimonies, and as we give our hearts to him and pledge our affections to his service. But he shows his thankfulness and his love to God a third way. Look at verse 48:

I will lift up my hands toward your commandments, which I love, and I will meditate on your statutes.

He gives his hands up to God’s service too. Bishop Cowper looked around him and saw a Church that wasn’t being what it should have been. He said, “The kingdom of God is not in word, but in power; we are the disciples of the Master, who first began to do and then to teach. But now the world is full of mutilated Christians; either they want an ear and cannot hear God’s word, or a tongue and

cannot speak of it; or if they have both, they want hands and cannot practice it.”

Brothers and sisters, if you have found the gracious steadfast love of God, its because you trusted in the promises of his Word. Keep trusting in those promises. Keep trusting in his Word. And as you plant your feet in his Word, God will grow you; he’ll make you holier day by day. He’ll take that narrow and hard path that might have been such a hard thing for some of us to choose, and as he changes our hearts, he’ll turn it into our greatest love and the place where we find freedom to serve him. Let’s not be “mutilated Christians,” as Bp. Cowper put it. God wants all of us. That’s why he saved us in the first place. He wants not only our mouths, not only our hearts, but also our hands. He calls us to proclaim him, he calls us to love him and have all our affections united on him and on his Word, and he calls us to serve him in all the things we do, that the whole world might see his glory as he works in and through us.

Please pray with me: Heavenly Father, thank you for the steadfast love that you have shown us. Thank you for transforming our hearts, that we might no longer be your enemies, but your friends and faithful servants. Remind us each day that you saved us not so much for our benefit, but for your own glory and let us always commit our all—our hearts, our mouths, and our hands—to serve you and to build your kingdom. We ask this in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.