



The Word: Foundation of Faith Psalm 119:49-56

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The verses of the seventh stanza of the 119th Psalm begin with the Hebrew letter *zayin*, which is the word for “dart”. The Fathers saw a connection between what David has to tell us about God’s Word in this stanza and St. Paul’s teaching to the Ephesians about the armour of God. Remember, Paul told them that as they went out to battle the enemy, they were to put on the belt of truth, the breastplate of righteousness, the shoes of the gospel, the helmet of salvation, and to take up the sword of the Spirit and the shield of faith. It’s all imagery of the armour and equipment worn by Roman soldiers. The sword was their key offensive weapon in hand-to-hand combat, but it was the shield, held in their other hand that was at the heart of their defensive armour. And just as the Roman soldier’s shield was crucial to his defences, so our faith is at the centre of ours. Paul tells us in Ephesians 6:16 that it’s the breastplate of faith that will extinguish the flaming darts of the evil one. David writes here about the same kind of protection from affliction that he finds in faith. That’s what this stanza is all about: faith.

Look at verse 49:

**Remember your word to your servant,
in which you have made me hope.**

David grabs hold of God’s Word. He knew it and he knew the promises there. Without the Word neither he nor we would have any reason to hope, because we could never know God, we could never know his promises, and we could never know that his character is always to keep his promises. Brothers and sisters, I’ve met a lot of Christians over the years who lack hope. They despair when they face hard times in life; when they face health problems, marital problems, lost jobs, financial troubles, wayward children, or sick parents. They despair in the face of the world’s troubles: war, poverty, corruption, and economic depression. We’re all prone to worrying about what

might happen and how we’ll deal with it when it does. When we’re in the middle of a problem, we’re all just as prone to despairing of ever seeing our way out of it. But I’ve noticed that those who lack hope the most are those who don’t know God’s Word—those who haven’t taken the time to learn the promises of God that Scripture tells us about or to learn the nature and character of God as he tells us about himself in the Scriptures.

Friends, David had hope in those Scriptures. He knew the promises and he knew God’s character. That’s the result of his love for the Word and of his reading, and studying, and meditating on it: hope—and faith. He knew what was there, and so prayed in faith: “Remember your word.” And he expected God to answer.

Here’s another important point that David teaches us: The Word of God shapes our faith and gives us confidence. Faith has to have an object. As Christians we put our faith in the Triune God and in his promise of forgiveness of sins through the once-for-all sacrifice that Jesus made for us—faith in the Gospel and the God of the Gospel. And yet we can only know the Gospel and its God as we know his Word. You can put your faith in anything you want, but faith itself won’t save you. It’s the object of your faith that saves. You can have all the faith in the gods of Islam or Hinduism, or even in the gods of the Unitarians, the Mormons, or the United Pentecostals, but you won’t find salvation because none of those gods is the God of the Gospel. You can put your faith in the Mormon gospel, or the Adventist gospel, or Social gospel, or the Prosperity gospel, but you won’t find salvation there no matter how great your faith is, because none of those is the Gospel of Jesus Christ that we find in God’s Word.

And yet, even after we have rightly put our faith in the Triune God and in his Gospel as we find them in Scripture, we can still lack confidence in our prayers and we can still find our prayers going unanswered. David shows us that the key is the Word. It’s knowing God and knowing his ways. The more we know the Scriptures that God has given us, the better we will know him, what pleases him, and what his promises are; and as we know all those things better and as the Holy Spirit unites the desires of our hearts to follow him, the more our prayer life will be changed. Our prayers will be infused with greater faith and confidence as we

pray more and more “Thy will be done” and less and less “my will be done.” God has given his Word that we might know him; he’s given us grace that we might hope in him and in his promises as we come to know him, and David teaches us that God will never disappoint those who hope in him. His grace never fails, he never gives it frivolously, and he will never take it back.

So David says in verse 50:

**This is my comfort in my affliction, that
your promise gives me life.**

We don’t know specifically what the affliction is the David’s referring to here. He faced all sorts of afflictions, but all those years that he spent fleeing Saul were probably the worst of them. Whatever the case and no matter how bad it got for David, the life-giving promise of God was his comfort. People cling to all sorts of things when times are bad: money and their earthly “stuff”, friends, drugs or alcohol, and more and more government. It’s especially sad to see Christians trusting so heavily for our security in earthly possessions, in money, and in government. Friends, it destroys our witness to the world. Our earthly possessions and money are someday going to go up in smoke. Earthly government have terrible track records. And yet when we see immorality in the world, it seems that the most common response of Christians today is to say, “Let’s pass a law to keep people from acting that way!” Sadly, we hear that far more often than, “Hey, let’s evangelise those people so that they find Christ and will be changed from the inside out.” And even less do we hear Christians ask, “What can we as the Church do to improve our witness to a world in need of our testimony to Christ?”

No, David’s faith and hope were in the promises of God. I can’t think of a more powerful way to say it than he did: “Your promises give me life.” That’s Gospel hope right there. Matthew Henry paraphrases David’s words and expands on them saying, “[Your Word] made me alive when I was dead in sin; it has many a time made me lively when I was dead in duty; it has quickened me to that which is good, when I was backward and averse to it; and it has quickened me to that which is good, when I was cold and indifferent.” Our faithlessness often turns molehills into mountains, but God’s promises flatten even the biggest mountains into a flat

plain. Joy and life come when we trust in God's promises, but again, remember, the only way to know those promises and the God who makes them is to steep ourselves in his Word. As I've said before, the creative power of God is in his Word. Without it, there can be no true life.

Now look at verse 51:

The insolent utterly deride me, but I do not turn away from your law.

The insolent, the proud, derided and scorned him. Again, he doesn't specifically mention any particular situation here, but if this is David writing, I can't help but think that he has Saul in mind. God took the throne away from Saul because of his sins and gave it to David. And yet instead of just stepping down, Saul fell into deeper and deeper sin. Like Cain who was angry because God accepted Abel's sacrifice of faith and not his own defective sacrifice, Saul became angry, not over his own sin which had disqualified him, but instead he became angry with the righteous man to whom God chose to show his grace—so angry, in fact, that like Cain, Saul decided to try to murder his "rival". The guilty have a tendency to do just that sort of thing when faced with righteousness. We're all prone to dealing with our sin by comparing it to the sins of others. As long as we can find someone with worse sins than our own, we can feel good about ourselves. That's self-righteousness. But when someone who is more righteous comes along, we get bumped off our pedestal. When that happens we should take it as an opportunity for reflecting on our sin and repenting, but far too often we don't. That's especially true of the world. When the righteousness of the Christian shows it up, it more often attacks the Christian than it repents.

David found comfort in his faith in God's promises. God's promises gave him life, as he says in verse 50, and that life is what now keeps him from turning away from God's law in the face of persecution. Persecution and hard times should drive us *to* the Word and through it to God. And yet over and over I meet Christians who are driven away from God when they face difficulties—and even worse, Christians who blame God for their problems. That's the sort of thing that will drive you into a pit of despair with no way out. I've heard

Christian counsellors advise people who are dealing with difficulties that they should forgive God. This is a big flaw in the Twelve Step programme, which at one point requires participants to forgive everyone who has wronged them—including God. Brothers and sisters, none of us will *ever* have occasion to forgive God, because God will *never* do us any wrong. To forgive God is to say that God has sinned against you. That's blasphemy, friends. Blaming our problems on God is nothing more than a form of escape from personal responsibility, either for the situation in which we find ourselves or, in the case of problems we haven't had a hand in creating, it's escape from responsibility for the sinful response we've had to the situation. If you are discontent with God, you will never be able to find life in his promises—*never*. Instead, you will drive yourself further and further away from him as you falsely accuse him of violating the promises of his Word.

Instead, we need to find our life in God's Word. We need to trust in his promises and in the knowledge of who he is and his own goodness and faithfulness. David says in verse 52:

When I think of your rules from of old, I take comfort, O LORD.

When David says he thinks on God's "rules", he's referring to God's judgements or his judicial rulings—the times when he has kept his promises to bless those who are faithful in following him and to punish those who reject him. In the face of sin and death, what better place to find comfort than in the evidence of God's past judgements on sin and death? But let me point out three things here. First, you can't take comfort in things you don't know. David knew because he read, studied, and meditated on God's Word. Second, you can't find comfort when you're unwilling to trust. This goes back to the Gospel itself. Salvation is found when we trust in the redemptive work of Jesus on the cross. Unless you trust in him for your salvation, you won't be saved. And yet there are people who trust in Jesus for their salvation, but reject him when it comes to all sorts of other things. As I said a bit ago, there are Christians who blame God for their problems and are bitterly angry with him. They're turning God's promises

on their heads and proclaiming God to be unfaithful. If you put yourself in the position of denying God's promises and faithfulness to them, you can never find comfort in his judgements. And third, notice that as we take comfort in God's judgements, we find comfort not only in his love and grace, but even too in his divine judgement on sin. It teaches us that God's promise that right will prevail isn't empty and it gives us hope for the future. More importantly his judgement and punishment of sin show us that he truly is holy and give us reason to glorify and praise him for his holiness and justice.

We see this last point vividly in verse 53:

Hot indignation seizes me because of the wicked, who forsake your law.

Literally, David says he's "burning up" because of the wicked. He's angry as he sees people forsake God's ways. Presumably he still has in mind the same situation of personal affliction—maybe Saul's persecution of him. Now, notice his perspective. He's not angry because he has personally been wronged, but because the wicked are rejecting God and his law. This is the perspective of those who know what God's judgement will be on unrepentant sinners. This ties into Jesus' statement in the Beatitudes: "Blessed are those who mourn." Christians should be deeply offended by sin, but because we know the gravity of sin and that the greatest wrong committed by the sinner is always against God, we are angry with the offense and at the same time mourning the fate of sinners. David Brainerd wrote, "I have had clear views of eternity; have seen the blessedness of the godly...; and have longed to share that happy state; as well as been comfortably satisfied that through grace I shall do so; but, oh, what anguish is raised in my mind to think of an eternity for those who are Christless, for those who are mistaken, and who bring their false hopes to the grave with them! The sight was so dreadful I could be no means bear it: my thoughts recoiled, and I said, "Who can dwell with everlasting burnings?"

The knowledge of God's judgements and anger over sin should lead us to tenderness. Spurgeon writes that, "Those who are the firmest believers in the eternal punishment of the wicked are the most grieved at their doom. It is no proof of

tenderness to shut one's eyes to the awful doom of the ungodly. Compassion is far better shown in trying to save sinners than in trying to make things pleasant all round. Oh that we were all more distressed as we think of the portion of the ungodly in the lake of fire! The popular plan is to shut your eyes and forget all about it, or pretend to doubt it; but this is not the way of the faithful servant of God."

How often are we more willing to forget about sin and to shut our eyes to the doom of unrepentant sinners? How often is our anger over sin not an anger resulting from seeing an offense against God, but vengeful anger because we've been wronged or offended? I think that when we're honest, our attitude toward sinners is to be happy at the thought of them roasting in hell, when we should be wanting to see them turning to God through Christ. Of course that's only going to happen as we are faithful to share the Gospel with them. If you're not there yet (and most of us probably aren't), the solution as we see over and over in the psalm is to plant ourselves more firmly in the foundation of God's Word. Look at verses 54 and 55:

Your statutes have been my songs in the house of my sojourning. I remember your name in the night, O LORD, and keep your law.

David made the Word his song. We sing about the thing we value. Secular songs are about the opposite sex. Patriotic songs are about our nation. The Christian ought to sing about his God. But not just *about* his God, because we can't love God without having a passion for his Word too. And so like David it should be the song in our hearts. And, of course, if our hearts are dwelling on the Word, so will our minds. David steeped himself in the Word until eve in the night—the time when thoughts are overpowered by sleep—his mind was still on God. David makes a key point here: He kept God's law, because he always had God in mind. Have you ever noticed that Scripture speaks about sinners saying that they *have forgotten* God? Contempt for God's law is the result of not knowing God himself. I can't say it any better than John Morison did: "Hours of secret fellowship with God must issue in the desire of increased conformity to his holy will. It is the remembrance of God that leads to the

keeping of his laws, as it is forgetfulness of God that fosters every species of transgression."

David ends the stanza, summing it up and saying:

This blessing has fallen to me, that I have kept your precepts.

The Hebrew simply says, "This I had" or "This has come to me" and it's not clear what "this" is. The New Living Translation may not be far off when it reads, "This is my happy way of life: obeying your commandments." The ancient commentators saw "this" as referring to the hope or comfort that David found in his troubles, and as he's been saying, that hope and comfort is God's law. And so he concludes saying that he has found his way through all his trials and tribulations by being obedient to God. And that brings us full-circle, because obedience is the result of faith and trust. He obeyed God, because he knew that he could trust in God's promises. He knew the Word. He saw there the promises that God had made, and he could see there the fulfilment of those promises. And not only that, he saw the fulfilment of God's promises in his own life.

Brothers and sisters, this is especially appropriate in light of our celebration of the Lord's Supper this morning. We have not only the promises of God written for us in his Word, but we have the Sacraments, these signs and seals of his grace that remind us of his faithfulness to his promises. Here we find grace in a foretaste of the great banquet that awaits us on the other side of eternity. Friends, we come to his Table in faith as we trust in his promise—as we trust that this is the down payment of that which he will fully consummate in eternity as he brings our salvation to full fruit. And as he makes his promise here and we receive it in faith, it should change our lives as it renews our faith and send us back into the world, ready to face trials and temptations like David did: with our arms wrapped around the Word of God, the source of our knowledge of his promises of new birth and fullness of life; full of his grace; and ready to share those promises with a world in desperate need of them, that they might share our hope and faith in you.

Please pray with me: Merciful Father, thank you for your promises: for the new birth, for the life-giving work of your Son and the life-renewing work of your Spirit. Thank you for the grace you have given that lets us put our trust in you. Turn us daily to your Word, that we might see afresh your promises and have our faith renewed and strengthened by them. And, we pray Father, give us boldness to take your promises to our family, friends, and neighbours that they might come to trust in them too. We ask this in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.