



The Word: Power for Transformation

Psalm 119:57-64

Fr. William Klock

August 1, 2010 — Trinity 9

This morning I want to continue our look at the 119th Psalm with the eighth stanza, beginning at verse 57. Two weeks ago we looked at the seventh stanza, where David wrote about God's Word as being the foundation of faith. God's Word contains God's promises, but it also shows us over and over how God is always faithful to keep his promises. Now in verses 57 to 64 David expands on that. It's because of his faith in God that he can say what he does in verses 57:

The LORD is my portion; I promise to keep your words.

In Hebrew his statement: "The LORD is my portion" is really more of an exclamation: "The LORD! My portion!" Think of soldiers dividing the booty or the spoils after a victorious battle. As they see all the treasure each one jumps in, grabbing the things that appeal to them and shouting out his claim: "This is mine!"

Because of his faith in God, David could look at everything around him and claim the Lord as his portion. Again, consider that he was the king. He had money, he had power, he had women, he had access to all sorts of worldly stuff, and yet he proclaims: "The LORD is my portion!"

Let me get off-topic for just a few minutes. If you have your Bibles open to this passage, how many of you see that LORD is in all capitals? Depending on your translation, some of you might have "Jehovah" or "Yahweh". Someone asked me this week what it means when we see "LORD" in all capitals in the Old Testament. The short answer is that it means that this where God's proper name was written in the original Hebrew text. The proper name used for God in the Old Testament goes back to Moses' experience at the burning bush. When he asked God whom he should tell the Israelites had sent him, God told him, "I AM WHO I AM." And he said, "Say this to the people of Israel, 'I AM has sent me to you.'" (Exodus 3:14). God's name expresses his perfect state of being. His name is "I Am" or "I Am

Who I Am". God's name is a form of the verb "to be". Over time, the ancient Hebrews became afraid that they might blaspheme God's name by saying it lightly or by saying it incorrectly, so they adopted the practice of replacing it with the title "Lord". So when a Jew was reading the Scriptures and saw the name "I Am", he would instead read "Lord". Most of our English translations continue that practice. Now, here's where it gets more complicated. Like most ancient languages, Hebrew isn't written with any vowels. In the middle ages, Jewish scribes were concerned that people might forget how to pronounce the words since they were written only with consonants, so they came up with a system of dots and dashes that they would write underneath the letters to show what the vowel sounds were. When it came to God's name, they left the consonants alone, but they wrote the vowels for the word "Lord" underneath them.

This wasn't a problem for the Jews. But at around the time of the Reformation, Christians started taking an interest in the original Hebrew text of the Old Testament. They didn't know that the Jewish scribes were writing the consonants of one word with the vowels of another. They just read it all as one word and got the name "Jehovah". And of course, "Jehovah" is a nonsense word. It doesn't have any meaning. I always cringe a little when it comes up in some of the old hymns. It would be like taking the consonants of my last name: (Klock) KLCK and combing them with the vowels of my title: (rector) EO to make Klecok, or something like that. It wasn't until the early 19th Century that Christian Hebrew scholars figured this out and started trying to determine exactly how the Hebrew should be pronounced. The problem is that since no one has spoken the word for thousands of years, no one really knows. Scholars think that the most likely pronunciation is "Yahweh", but there's no way for us to really be sure and there's still disagreement, which is why the best practice is probably to stick with the practice of the Jews and simply read "Lord" as most of our English Bibles do.

And so it was the Lord in whom David trusted and whom he claimed as his portion. And the practical application of that was that David promised to keep God's word. David was able to find his satisfaction in God precisely because, as we saw last time, God keeps his promises, but in response to God's faithfulness, his people serve their Lord by living their lives in obedience to his Word. Think of Jesus' words in John 14:15: "If you love me, you will keep my commandments." Doing the things that Scripture tells us are

pleasing to God isn't optional for the Christian. We don't earn our salvation by pleasing God, but desiring to please him is the evidence that our faith and love for him are real. If you love your husband or your wife, it naturally shows as you do things that you know will please him or her. There are lots of couples we know love each other and of whom it would almost seem silly to ask, "Do you love each other?" because it's obvious from their actions that they do. It ought to be like that when people see our relationships with God; it ought to be obvious that we love him, because we keep his commandments. We don't pick and choose. We don't ignore the things he tells us that we don't like. In fact, more and more, there's nothing he can tell us that we would object to, because we love the things that he loves.

This struck me as I was reading the headlines this past week. As some of you may have seen, author Anne Rice announced that she is no longer a Christian. She's the author of a bestselling series of books about vampires and made headlines about a decade ago when she became a Christian. And yet this week she announced that she was leaving—not leaving Christ, but leaving the Church. At first she said that she couldn't be part of such an infamously hostile and quarrelsome group, but what was more telling was that later in her statement she noted that while she wanted to follow Christ, she couldn't adhere to the various moral and doctrinal standards of the Church. She rejects the Church's condemnation of sexual immorality; she rejects its pro-life stance; she rejects its teaching on the roles of men and women; and she rejects its stance against secular humanism. And yet those aren't just the Church's positions; the Church holds to those positions, because they are God's positions and because we, the Church, desire to please him. Rice wants the benefits of life in Christ without the obligations. But friends, you can't claim to love him while rejecting his commandments or spurning his body. Bishop Cowper wrote, "Many will say with David, that God is their portion...how do they prove it? If God were their portion they would love him; if they loved him they would love his word; if they loved his word they would live by it and make it the rule of their life."

People reject the Church all the time, while still claiming to love Christ. What their statements, like Rice's, really demonstrate, is that, first, they're full of pride—they think they're better or more mature or too good to associate with all the people in the Church who are still struggling to obey Jesus; and, second, in rejecting the teachings and commands of Jesus, they demonstrate that

they really don't love him the way they claim to.

The bottom line is that it's a matter of the heart. God listens to your heart whether your mouth speaks or not, but he'll never listen to your mouth when your prayers aren't from the heart. Look at verse 58:

I entreat your favor with all my heart; be gracious to me according to your promise.

David teaches us the key to prayer and I can't think of anything more important for us to understand about prayer than this: pray according to God's promises—pray according to his Word. As David has said, God's word is the foundation of his faith and his confidence, because the Word lays out God's plans for us. His Word tells us that he desires to show us mercy and grace—and that's what David is praying for—but it also tells us that we can only come to him through Jesus Christ as we repent, believe, and obey. This is the world's problem as Anne Rice showed us this week. Many people want the benefits of God's mercy, but they want to come to him on our own terms. It doesn't work that way. And yet when we do come on his terms, when we accept his promises and take him at his word, we can have confidence that he will do what he has promised.

And notice that David's prayer is for grace. The closer we get to God and the more we take in and come to know his Word, the more each of us realizes that we desperately need his grace. As we grow closer to him, the light of his holiness and the knowledge of his Word never stop showing up our sins and shortcomings. The more we mature, the more we realize how far we are from his standard of perfection and the more we humbly fall back on his grace as our only source of redemption. Look at verse 59:

When I think on my ways, I turn my feet to your testimonies;

How often do you take time to examine your life? It's really something we should each be doing daily as part of a vital life of prayer and meditation on God's Word. We need to consider how we've been living and ask if it's in accordance with what Scripture tells us is pleasing to God. But a major part of that work of self-examination depends on being firmly rooted in the Word, because the Word is the only reliable place to find out what is truly pleasing to God.

We've all heard people say things like, "If what I'm doing is wrong, the Holy Spirit

would tell me." Or, "If what I'm doing is wrong, God wouldn't let me be comfortable with it." Friends, let us never be so presumptuous. If you want to know if something is right or wrong, the Spirit has already spoken through Scripture. It's spiritually presumptuous and lazy to demand God give you some new revelation when he's already spoken clearly.

Study the Scriptures. Do it daily. Do it with depth. Meditate on them. Memorise them. Let them fill your heart and mind. Let them change your thought patterns and inform your conscience. And as you do that compare the way you live your life to the path laid out in God's Word. And as the Holy Spirit opens your eyes to the things in your life that need to change, pray for grace that you might turn your feet to follow the testimonies of God.

We have two problems doing this. The first and most basic problem is that we often don't bother with the Word. Our Bibles sit on the shelf collecting dust and often when we do read them, we do so haphazardly or we don't really take the time to ponder and meditate one what it says. God's Word is the source of life. If you don't know it, you won't grow as a Christian. But the other problem is that we often do know the changes we need to make, but refuse to make them. We take a smorgasbord approach to Scripture. We embrace the things we like or that are easy, but we reject the things that really challenge us and the things that require major changes in how we think, or how we live. For one person it may be a refusal to give up some form of sexual immorality, for another it could be a refusal to be generous with their possessions, or for another it might be a refusal to give up bitterness and anger toward someone who wronged them many years ago. In each case it means making a drastic change and giving up something in which we've found pleasure or security or even some kind of strength, and yet as long as we are knowingly unrepentant in sin, we push God away, put ourselves in a spiritual stall, and will eventually begin to backslide. God will never force us to do anything, but he will graciously help us to make the changes we need to make. We just have to ask, and that's what David does here. As Charles Spurgeon put it, "God will turn his saints when they turn to him."

That said, don't drag your feet when it comes to doing this. Look at verse 60:

I hasten and do not delay to keep your commandments.

We've all had those times when we wish we'd done something sooner and missed out because we waited. When I was a kid I somehow got the idea that cheesecake was made with cheddar cheese. That was an absolutely disgusting idea and I wouldn't get anywhere near cheesecake. I wouldn't listen to anyone who tried to tell me that it wasn't made with cheddar cheese and that it was, in fact, delicious. It wasn't until I was in my early teens that I finally decided to try some...and, of course, I discovered that I'd been missing out for years. We do the same thing with God, but when we do it with God we miss out on a lot more than a delicious desert. We hold onto our sins and earthly goals, finding our security in them, and go for years missing out on the great blessings God has for us if we would only follow him. Brothers and sisters, when the Spirit or the Word he's caused to be written for us pricks your conscience, do something about it *now*. The longer you wait, the longer you put it off, the more you will gradually deaden your conscience and harden your heart toward God. Take advantage of the opportunities God gives you to put off sin and to clear your conscience. Those are things within your control and if you let God help you deal with them, you'll be better prepared to deal with the things that are out of your control. Look at verse 61:

Though the cords of the wicked ensnare me, I do not forget your law.

Think of all the passages in the book of Proverbs that warn us against getting dragged into sin by the snares of the wicked. Proverbs 5:22-23 tells us:

The iniquities of the wicked ensnare him, and he is held fast in the cords of his sin. He dies for lack of discipline, and because of his great folly he is led astray.

David reminds us that there are forces in the world that want nothing more than to ensnare us and drag us into sins. Proverbs refers over and over to the snares of the harlot and the gang of thieves and ne'er-do-wells, but those aren't the only forces with the ability to coax us into sin and then trap us with their cords. We can face the temptations of the world and the devil much better when we've first learned not to delay in keeping God's commandments and as David says here, the knowledge of God's law is the safeguard against all these snares and entrapments.

David closes the stanza with three statements that tell us three ways we can

keep the Lord as our portion. First, look at verse 62:

At midnight I rise to praise you, because of your righteous rules.

First, David's love of God's Word was so great that he was happy to get up in the middle of the night to praise God for the grace he found there. Does this mean we have to get up at midnight to praise God? No. But it tells us something about the character of David's relationship with God and his Word. God came first, even before the necessities of things like eating and sleeping. This is the principle behind the traditions of fasting and night or early, early morning prayers that today are rarely observed outside monastic communities. Getting up in the middle of the night is a spiritual discipline for many Christians that demonstrates their devotion to him. We don't know if this was a nightly practice for David, but clearly from what he tells us in the Psalms it was a regular practice. The fact that he says he rises tells us it was deliberate too. He wasn't just dealing with insomnia. He was choosing to rise at midnight for the purpose of praising God.

That kind of devotion only comes as we commit ourselves to God and to the knowledge of him we find in Scripture. A sign of increasingly maturity in the faith is a desire to commune with and praise God that is greater even than our desire to eat or to sleep—greater than our desires for the things that are necessary to live. God was truly David's portion—his treasure. His devotion is seen in his willingness to give up something like sleep, but that devotion was first rooted in God's Word.

Second, what company do you keep? Look at verse 63:

I am a companion of all who fear you, of those who keep your precepts.

Love of God and love for God's people always go hand in hand. This is what Anne Rice is missing. You can't claim love for Jesus, but reject his body. The two always go together. St. John wrote:

He who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen. And this commandment we have from him: whoever loves God must also love his brother. (1 John 4:20-21)

Scripture tells us over and over that as we gather together we build each other up. We saw that in our study of First Corinthians.

God gives us all gifts for the purpose of building each other up. The writer of Hebrews warns us:

And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near. (Hebrews 10:24-25)

We all have probably heard the story of the pastor who went to visit one of his straying parishioners. He didn't say anything, he just took the fireplace poker and pulled a coal out of the fire. Within seconds that coal that had been glowing red-hot, cooled and turned black. The pastor then pushed the coal back into the fire and it began to glow again. As Christians we're each like that coal. When we are with the rest of the body our vitality is renewed and we're, as Hebrews tells us, exhorted to love and to good works. When we stray off and start living alone, it doesn't take very long before the things of God are put on the shelf and we not only begin to live for ourselves, but we throw the doors open wide to temptation and sin. Worse, when we do fall into sin, we no longer have our brothers and sisters around us to give us warning and to help pull us away from it.

Finally and third, David had learned to see the world through the lens of God's loving-kindness. This is that word *chesed* again—the one so rich with meaning that we can't accurately translate it into English. The more he knew God, the more he saw the steadfast and unflinching love and mercy and kindness of God around him, the more he saw God providently at work for the good of his saints, and the more he was at peace trusting in God's promises. And as he saw the loving-kindness of God surrounding him, he craved more. "Teach me your statutes" became his prayer just as it should become our prayer, brothers and sisters. David claimed God as his portion, and as he steeped himself in God's Word, it changed him: who he was, how he lived, and how he saw the world around him. The same should be true of us. The wonderful thing is the way in which all these changes sort of tumble together, and if we let them, they feed on each other as we feed on Christ, and his Spirit propels us along as we change and grow and mature in the faith. The more we feed on the Word—both written in Scripture and offered here at the Lord's Table—the more we see the goodness and loving-kindness of God at work in us and around us. And as we see his loving-kindness, we draw closer to him, we give him praise and glory, and he feeds us more from his Word,

which changes our hearts even more and again we see his loving-kindness at work in ever-new ways and go back again to him to give him more praise and glory and to feed even more on the Word. To start the cycle, all we have to do is *wholly* commit ourselves to him and to his Word.

Please pray with me: Heavenly Father, we prayed in our collect this morning that you would grant to us the spirit to think and do those things that are right, because without your gracious help we can never live according to your will. We ask this again. Strengthen us with your gracious Spirit that we might desire to do your will, that we might commit ourselves wholly to you, and that we might daily feed on your Word and be wholly transformed. We ask this in the name of Jesus Christ, our Saviour and Lord. Amen.