



The Word: Opening Our Eyes to God's Grace Psalm 119:73-80

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August 15, 2010 — Trinity 11

The tenth stanza of Psalm 119 carries on from the point we left off last week, at the end of the ninth stanza, with verse 72. You'll remember that in the last stanza, David praised God for having dealt well with him, but that as we looked at what that meant, we saw that David's experience wasn't always what we'd be inclined to think of as "good." He suffered hardships, he was abused by the wicked, he was slandered by the insolent, and more than once he fell into sin and experienced himself God's discipline. David's life wasn't by any means easy. And yet in light of all that, he praised God for having dealt well with him. David could say that because he had the right perspective on life. There were many times when life was good, but there were other times when God allowed him to be afflicted, but used the affliction to teach him and to draw him closer. He understood that for God's people, life is a sort of bootcamp to train us for heaven. The training programme is sometimes almost unbearably hard, but it makes us fit for God's use. David wrote about the insolent as having hearts that were unfeeling as fat. Their hearts were so clogged with spiritual cholesterol that they had no feelings for God or the things of God. In contrast, David had been put through God's training programme. He was spiritually healthy. God had purged the fat from his heart, and because of that, David developed a heart for God and his desire was to walk in the way of God's Word.

I told you last Sunday about the summer I spent bike commuting to work across the Columbia River. At the end of long days I'd have to ride home up a steep bridge, usually into a strong headwind, all in 35° or 40° heat, and as my legs pumped up and down I'd be chanting in my mind: "I'm gonna die! I'm gonna die!" Sometimes that's how life feels as we experience God's training programme, but in the end all that difficulty is what makes us fit for heaven. Sometimes we just need a change in perspective. That's what David had and so as he experienced hardship, his mantra changed to "I'm gonna live! I'm gonna live!" And it changed

because he knew that God is always good and that God always works in us toward that goal of eternal life.

With that in mind, look now at verse 73:

Your hands have made and fashioned me; give me understanding that I may learn your commandments.

That word "hand" is the keyword of the whole stanza. In fact, each verse of the stanza begins with the Hebrew letter *yod*. It corresponds to our letters "y" and "j", but *yod* is also the Hebrew word for "hand." And in this stanza, David considers the hand of God, first in terms of his own creation, but then in giving him new life and sustaining and renewing him in all things.

Verse 73 is a remarkable passage. I've found myself meditating on it all week and I encourage you to do the same this week, because it's good for us to think about the grace that God has shown each of us in our own creation and what that means for us. David appealed to God: "Your hands have made me and fashioned me." Those are very personal words that are rich, not only with the creative power of God, but also in expressing God's *involvement* in creating each one of us individually. This isn't the divine clockmaker of the Deists, who created the universe with a set of physical laws, set it all in motion, and now sits back to watch, but never involves himself in it. No, this is a God who is interested and active in his creation!

We don't usually think of mass-producing things with our hands. That's what machines are for. Hands mould pottery. Hands craft wood. Hands knit and stitch and embroider. Hands create things that involve our personal attention. God doesn't have literal hands—he's spirit—but David knew, as we should, that God has lovingly crafted each of us the same way the potter's hands mould a pot, the carpenter's hands shape a block of wood, or the seamstress' hands stitch together the pieces of a lovely garment. God's involved, he cares, he loves his handiwork. He doesn't just *make* it—any machine can do that. No, he *fashions* it. That's an expression of intent and thoughtfulness. I was reminded of the old saying that "God doesn't make junk." No, he doesn't. He makes people, like you and me, and he makes us lovingly, masterfully, and purposefully.

Now, what do *you* do with your handiwork? Do you ignore it? Of course not. When I was in junior high I took a woodshop class. Our first project was to make a chequerboard out of strips of light and dark coloured

wood. I was so proud of my chequerboard that I actually started playing chequers, which was a game I hated. I enjoyed my handiwork. When I finished my master's thesis and received the bound copy back from the bindery, I couldn't put it down. I kept picking it up and paging through it. It was the same way when I got my First Corinthians commentary from the publisher. A copy sat on my desk for a couple of weeks, because I enjoyed picking it up and paging through it and thinking to myself, "Cool! I wrote that." Brothers and sisters, if you and I take that much care and pride in our own creations, how much more care do you think God takes in his?

And so David prays, "Lord, I know you will never forget or ignore the work of your hands. *Complete* your creation. Make me holy. I am the vessel you made—and made with purpose. Fill me up and use me." And friends, if we can be sure of God's continued interest in us simply because of our physical creation, how much more can we be sure of his interest in us now that he has caused us to be born again of water and the Spirit? He sent his only Son—the ultimate price—to die that he might create us anew. Do you really think he doesn't care about us? We should be praying, just like David, and asking God to complete the work he has begun in us. If you are in Christ, you have been washed and renewed by his indwelling Spirit. Pray that God will continue to work in you each day, giving you understanding and giving you strength to follow his way.

David reminds us that our increasing maturity isn't just about "us," nor is it strictly about God. Look at verse 74:

Those who fear you shall see me and rejoice, because I have hoped in your word.

When we think about following God, it's easy to remember that we do it to please him and it's easy to remember his promises that he will bless us if we follow him. What I've noticed Christians are very prone to forgetting is the impact that following God has on us *corporately*. Ever since the Enlightenment, Christians have had a growing tendency toward individualism. More and more "Christians" remove themselves from the Church. But even for those who attend or are members of a church, when it really comes down to it, our faith is all-too-often best described as "Me, my Bible, and Jesus." Not only is there little room in our lives for the authority of the Church—if we hear something we don't like, we just ignore it or move on to a different church—but we forget that as individual Christians we are part of Christ's

body and that his body is made up of other Christians. St. Paul warns us about being loner Christians. You might be an eye, but an eye can't accomplish anything without the rest of the body. In fact, without the rest of the body, the eye will die. But Paul also warned that the Church needs the eye in order to function the way God intended. If you take away the eye, you blind the body.

Getting back to our passage: the body benefits as her members follow after God—as they hope in his Word. Just as you share your abilities as an eye or an ear or a hand or foot, we all share with the body our passion for God and for following him. We all weep when a member of the body stumbles and falls into sin, but we all rejoice as we see our fellow members pursuing holiness and growing in their spiritual maturity. The key is for each of us to hope in his Word—to trust the promises there. If we trust God's promises, we trust him, we follow him, and as we do that he build up his body, the Church.

And that, again, moulds and shapes our perspective. Look at verse 75:

I know, O LORD, that your rules are righteous, and that in faithfulness you have afflicted me.

God always judges righteously. His rulings are just. David knew that because he knew God's Word. He knew God's covenant. He knew God's promises. And on top of all that, he had the record of God's having dealt faithfully with his people. And so David could see the hard times in his life and understand them as being just as much a part of God's faithfulness to him as the times when things were going well. Both the good and the bad were God's blessing.

God is always a good Father. When I was a kid I can remember complaining to my parents because So-and-so down the street was allowed to do this or to do that, but I wasn't. My parents would always explain that their rules and their limits were there because they loved me. Sometimes I got spanked. I didn't like it, but my parents always made it clear, even when I didn't want to hear it, that their discipline was rooted in their love for me. That doesn't mean there weren't times that I sat in my room afterward and grumbled about how mean my parents were and how I'd never treat my own kids that way. Sometimes we do the same thing when God disciplines us. We've got his Word. It tells us that he always loves us, that he always cares for us, and that in everything he works for our

good—and that he will discipline us when we need it, because he loves us. But when we actually experience his discipline, we grumble, "If I were God, I'd never do that!" Brothers and sisters, it's a good thing we're not God. It demonstrates a big step in our spiritual growth when we can look at God's discipline, see his faithfulness to us in it, and give him thanks and praise for it.

That doesn't mean it's always going to be easy for us to look for God's faithfulness and love in the hard times, let alone give him thanks for it. It's easier to say, "I'm gonna die! I'm gonna die!" than, "I'm gonna live! I'm gonna live!" And it's easier to get angry with situations or with God than to give thanks in all things. But God never promised that following him would always be easy. His commandments are hard—which is why we often fail and end up having to be taught our lessons through God's discipline. Jesus tells us to love our neighbours and then tells us a parable in order to point out that even the person we're most prone to hate is just as much our neighbour as the people we're naturally inclined to love. People come into our lives and for whatever reason we find that we just cannot love them. The solution isn't to reject God's commands—that's only going to lead to more discipline. The solution is prayer and action. The same goes for those times when we were experiencing God's discipline. The solution isn't to give up and curse God. No, it's to pray for grace and a change of perspective that will let us give thanks.

Throughout the Psalms we see David thanking and praising God in difficult circumstances, but that doesn't mean it was easy for him. He also teaches us to rely on grace, because without grace, we'll never be able to be obedient when the going is hard. Look at what David prays in verses 76 and 77:

Let your steadfast love comfort me according to your promise to your servant. Let your mercy come to me, that I may live; for your law is my delight.

First he appeals to God for his steadfast love. It's that wonderful Hebrew word *chesed* again—the word that describes God's steadfast and never-failing mercy and kindness and love. What we need to remember here is that God's loving-kindness—his *chesed*—is *always* shown in the context of his covenant. And that's the wonderful thing here: David could pray for an outpouring of God's mercy and love with full confidence, because he knew that he was

in *covenant* with God. God had made a *promise* to him through Abraham, and David himself bore the mark of God's covenant in his circumcision. He was one of God's people and God's covenant was an *objective* foundation of his faith and hope.

Brothers and sisters, you and I can appeal for God's love and mercy with the *same* confidence. We are his covenant people just as much as David was and each of us bears his covenant sign that was given to us in the waters of baptism. This was why Martin Luther, whenever he found himself doubting, would put his hand on his forehead and remind himself, "You are baptized!" He bore on himself the covenant sign of God's promise to be faithful to him.

Occasionally I run into someone who was baptized as an infant and later rebaptised as an adult. They'll tell me that their infant baptism didn't mean anything to them because they couldn't remember it, but that their baptism as an adult did mean something because they were old enough to remember it or because they were old enough to give the responses themselves. But friends, if baptism depends on you or me for its validity, it is then no longer a sign of God's covenant faithfulness to us, but of our own fickleness. If baptism depends on us, then we have no sure confidence. Baptism is the sign of God's covenant with us—a covenant that you and I break every single day, but a covenant that God will be faithful to for all eternity. That's why we only baptize once and hold that it's blasphemous to rebaptise. Rebaptising is not only a declaration that God's promise wasn't good enough the first time, but it stands the sacrament on its head by making its efficacy dependent on us instead of God.

God's covenant is dependent on God. He's the source of mercy, not us. We're the ones who are dead in our trespasses and sins without his covenant mercy. And that's the second appeal in David's prayer: "Let your mercy come to me, that I may live." There are two sides to that prayer. On the one hand, he knew that the only way he would ever find eternal life was by God showing him mercy. He knew he was a sinner and that eternal damnation was what he deserved. God's mercy was his only means to life. But the other side of this prayer, in this context, is that he knew that God's chastisement and discipline are evidence of his mercy just as much as the times when God showered him with blessings. He teaches us that if we're struggling with those hard times, we can pray for a change in perspective and God will give it. And we

can approach God in confidence because he has established his covenant with us.

Now notice in verse 78 how David prays in terms of dealing with those who were the immediately cause of his problems:

Let the insolent be put to shame, because they have wronged me with falsehood; as for me, I will meditate on your precepts.

David isn't so much calling down God's wrath on his enemies so much as he's acknowledging God's just dealings with the wicked. His prayer praises God for the fact that he is always just and punishes sin—and in God's economy pride always results in shame. Jesus tells us in St. Luke's Gospel, "Everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted" (Luke 14:11). What David's doing is leaving the punishment of the wicked to God. His ability to do this is a direct result of his knowledge of the Word, his knowledge of God's character that the Word taught him, and his faith that God is just. David wasn't out for revenge. He left that to God. We often do the opposite because we forget that God will take care of things. Having a vengeful attitude ultimately shows our lack of trust in God. So leave it to him. That's what David does. Instead of letting himself be consumed with revenge, he has chosen to be consumed with the Word of God: "Lord, I'll let you bring shame on the insolent men who have wronged me. That's your job. I just want to spend my time meditating on your Word. That's my job."

Charles Spurgeon sums this up very well: "He would leave the proud in God's hands, and give himself up to holy studies and contemplations. To obey the divine precepts we have need to know them, and think much of them, hence this persecuted saint felt that meditation must be his chief employment. He would study the law of God and not the law of retaliation. The proud are not worth a thought. The worst injury they can do us is to take us away from our devotions; let us baffle them by keeping all the closer to our God when they are most malicious in their onslaughts."

In fact, David would rather be a witness to draw others to God than focus on revenge. How's that for a godly perspective on life? Look at verse 79:

Let those who fear you turn to me, that they may know your testimonies.

I'm of the opinion that David was praying this during one of those times when he had fallen into some kind of serious sin. People had looked up to him as a mature saint. Consider how their view of him would have changed when it came out that he had had an affair with Bathsheba and then had her husband murdered. We've all experienced that kind of let down. Maybe it was a mature Christian friend or mentor whom we saw fall into sin. We probably weren't as inclined to look to that person for guidance anymore. If we haven't experienced it personally, we've all seen it happen to well-known leaders in the Church. That seems to be what David was experiencing. He had been an encouragement to the saints, and now he was an embarrassment, and so he prays that God would restore him—that even as God disciplines him and brings him low, that his brothers and sisters would see it, would see his repentance and the change his heart makes, and once again that he would be a faithful witness and an encouragement to the body.

Let me close with the final petition of David's prayer. Look at verse 80:

May my heart be blameless in your statutes, that I may not be put to shame!

Brothers and sisters, if we would have life, it comes down to the heart and whether or not we seeking God's grace in our lives. Neither you nor I can please God on our own. His great desire is to complete the work he has begun in us. The waters of our baptism are the outward sign and seal of the work that God has done in our hearts. Through the blood of Jesus he has washed away our sins and with his Spirit indwelling us he has grafted us into Jesus and given us new life. He has given us his pledge of faithfulness. It's now up to us to live out our baptism—to live out our new life. What we need to realise is that God is always faithful even when we are not. He *will* see his work completed in us and that means that his grace comes easily when we embrace it and it comes hard when we resist it. The more we steep ourselves in God's Word as David did and the more we pray like David that God will turn our hearts toward him, the easier the road will be to life. But even when grace comes through hard and difficult times, the more we've come to know God through his Word and the more we've prayed for his grace, the more ready our eyes will be to see his grace at work in all things and the more ready our hearts will be to give him thanks and praise for continuing to renew our minds and regenerate our hearts.

Please pray with me: Heavenly Father, in our collect today we asked that you would grant us a measure of your grace that we might obtain your promises as we live out your commandments. We ask again, Father, for your grace. For grace to live out your commandments and for grace to see you at work as you train and teach us to walk in your way. We ask this in the name of Jesus Christ, our Saviour and Lord. Amen.