



The Word: Hope in Times of Persecution Psalm 119:81-88

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As we've made our way through the last several stanzas of Psalm 119 we've seen David appealing to God in the face of persecution. He's been slandered and reviled. In verse 61 he appealed to God because the cords of the wicked had ensnared him, in verse 69 the insolent smeared him with lies, and then last week, in verse 78, they put him to shame, wronging him with falsehoods. As I've said before, we don't know the specific circumstances under which this psalm was written, but assuming it was written by David, we know his story. We know how for years he was persecuted by Saul—persecuted not for doing Saul any wrong, but persecuted for doing right and for having been shown God's favour.

I've never experienced persecution as desperate as David's, and my guess would be that none of you have either, but that doesn't mean we never will and it doesn't really make the persecution we have experienced any less. We all deal with hard times and problem people. And the fact is that anyone who takes a stand for Christ in this world *will* eventually face opposition of *some* kind. Jesus warned us that if the world persecuted him, it *will* just as certainly persecute us (John 15:20). When persecution is severe, though, we can take comfort in God, because Jesus also told us in his Sermon on the Mount that God blesses—he makes happy and well—those who are reviled, slandered, and persecuted on his account (Matthew 5:11). What we need to remember is that the good times don't always come right away. One of the things that David teaches us is that God's people need to share God's perspective on life. First and foremost, we need to have our hearts shaped and moulded by Scripture so that the desires of our hearts conform more and more to the will of God—to the things that he desires, that he loves, and that he values. Secondly, we need to have an eternal perspective. The second tends to follow the first. The more we pray "Thy

will be done" and the more our desires are in tune with what Scripture teaches us about God, about his character, and about his desires, the more our eyes are going to be focused on the things of heaven and on eternity instead of being focused on the things of earth. We start doing what Jesus told us: We start focusing on laying up treasures in heaven instead of laying up earthly treasures that aren't going to last. We begin to realise that the time we have here on earth, no matter how long we may live, is nothing compared to eternity. And as we develop a heavenly and eternal perspective, we start looking at this life more and more as God's training ground for eternity. This is what we've been seeing in David. This is how he could sit in the midst of affliction and still give praise to God for having dealt well with him (v. 65). That's how he could leave his persecutors to God's just judgement and instead focus his attention on meditating on God's Word, as we saw in verse 78 last week.

As we come to the eleventh stanza this week—which, by the way, means we're now at the half-way point in the psalm—we see David's source of hope as he faced persecution. It keeps getting darker for David—at least from a worldly perspective—and this stanza is the midnight of the psalm, and yet in the midst of the darkness David is able to look upward and see that the stars are still shining—he still has hope because God's Word has taught him. In this stanza each verse begins with the Hebrew letter *kaph*, which is also the word that describes a cupped or hollowed hand. The Fathers saw the significance in two ways: First, they saw David coming into the presence of God in humility and with his hands humbly out, reading to receive God's gracious blessing even amidst his trials. But second, they also saw that as a child of God, David found security and hope knowing that despite whatever difficulties he might be facing, God held him in the hollow of his hand, sustaining him and giving him life.

Look with me at verse 81. David writes:

My soul longs for your salvation; I hope in your word.

Literally, in the Hebrew he says, "My soul is failing." It's a cry of desperation to God. David was at the end of his spiritual rope. He was finished. He was in a bad spot and he knew that there was absolutely

nothing *he* could do to fix the situation. If it were simply up to him there was nothing more than to just let go of the rope. And so he longs for *God's* salvation.

This is the same place we have to be in to find redemption in the first place. We have to come to God as humble sinners, knowing that we can never offer him anything in and of ourselves to compensate for the sins we've committed against him. We can come and appeal only to his mercy. In the famous words of Augustus Toplady, we come to God acknowledging: "Nothing in my hand I bring, simply to thy cross I cling." But if we will do that—if we will come to God humbly, seeking the life he mercifully offers us through the cross, his Word tells us that he will forgive our sins and unite us to his Son by the gift of his indwelling Spirit.

But brothers and sisters, David reminds us that it doesn't end there. The way in which we come to God for our initial salvation is the model for how we come to him for everything. David was already a believer, but again, as he faced persecution and was at the end of his spiritual rope, he came to God—humbly and looking to God for help, knowing he could never help himself, and trusting in the promise of God that he knew through the Word. And David looked again for God's salvation, because he knew that trying to find our own way out of the problems of life inevitable gets us into trouble. Think of Abraham. He had God's promise of a son, but his trust in that promise failed. When the promised son didn't come according to Abraham's timing, he took it on himself to get a son. Instead of having a child with his wife, he had a child with her maid. In his own timing, God honoured his covenant promise and did give Abraham a son through Sarah, but because Abraham took matters into his own hand instead of trusting God to solve the problem his way, there has been conflict between those two sons and their descendants for four thousand years. David knew better. He needed help, but asked God for it and trusted in the promises he had in God's Word. William Gurnall wrote, "David knew where he moored his ship. Hope without a promise is like an anchor without ground to hold by; but David's hope fixed itself upon the divine word." He knew he was being held in the hollow of God's hand. To climb out and look for

an earthly solution was only to make things worse.

In verse 82 he writes:

**My eyes long for your promise; I ask,
“When will you comfort me?”**

No matter how bad it got, he kept his eyes fixed on God. And his eyes were fixed on God because he knew that God was the great covenant promise keeper. And David had been waiting for what seemed a long time—just as Abraham had. Nothing seemed to be happening or changing, but he still kept his eyes on God. He still put his faith, hope, and trust in God’s promises.

Brothers and sisters, we need to do the same. Over and over Christians face hard times, they don’t see answers to their prayers, and so they take their eyes off God. Part of the problem is that our eyes are only very loosely fixed—or maybe not fixed at all—on God in the first place. We spend most of our time looking to the world. As I talk to people, I’m convinced that the primary reason we spend so much time with our eyes on the world is because we spend so little time in God’s Word. We don’t trust in his promises, because we don’t know them in the first place. In verse 81 David wrote that his hope was in God’s Word. But that was only because he *knew* God’s Word. Polls today tell us that only ten percent of Christians spend time reading and studying the Scripture on a daily basis. As long as that continues to be the case, Christians are going to be looking at the world more than they are God. And that means that Christians are going to put their hope in the world more than they’re going to hope and trust in God. Is it any wonder then that so many Christians are just like the rest of the world in looking to government to be our saviour? Is it any wonder that Christians look pretty much just like the rest of the world when it comes to worrying about the future or when it comes to living our lives in general? Our eyes are on the world, not on God and not on his promises.

But trusting in God also teaches us patience. It reminds us that God’s timing is not our timing. How long had David been waiting? Long enough that he was at the end of rope, and yet in faith he hung on. Bp. Cowper made the observation that

God often takes his time in answering our prayers, not because he’s not willing to answer them and not because he’s sadistic or finds joy in our suffering, but because he wants us better prepared to receive.

His desire is to teach us to be fervent in our prayer—to be just like David here. How often are our prayers like his? How often do you kneel before the throne of God and express to him this kind of longing and this kind of personal need? How often do you express with such candour your helplessness to help yourself and your trust in God to care for you?

Some Christians think we’re supposed to be slap-happy all the time or that expressing this kind of need, like David does, somehow shows a lack of faith or a lack of maturity. And yet Jesus told us that it’s those who know their great poverty of spirit and those who mourn their sinfulness who will be blessed. Again, look at how David expresses his need, now in verse 83:

**For I have become like a wineskin in the
smoke, yet I have not forgotten your
statutes.**

In the world David lived in, wineskins took a lot of abuse. First, it was common for people to hang wineskins full of new wine around the ceilings of their tents where the smoke would collect, because it helped to artificially age the wine and make the flavour more mellow. You can imagine that it wouldn’t take long for the skins to become covered in soot and to start to harden and dry out on the outside. But then, once the wine had been drunk and the skins were empty, they’d hang them over the fire, exposing them to more smoke and heat, in order to dry them out. Over time they’d shrivel up. David had been smoked with slander and parched with persecution, and he was half afraid that he’d end up useless—that people would look at him the same way they looked at an old, dried-up wineskin: no good for anything. There are times when you and I have probably felt like that—like someone’s been dangling us over the fires of hell and there’s nothing of us left to be useful to anyone, let alone God.

But David affirms: “I have not forgotten your statutes!” That’s the patience of God’s saints and the victory of faith. No matter how bad the lies of his enemies had left him on the outside, the truth was still

inside him. Spurgeon writes, “The worst circumstances cannot destroy the true believer’s hold upon his God. Grace is a living power which survives that which would suffocate all other forms of existence. Fire cannot consume it, and smoke cannot smother it. A man may be reduced to skin and bone, and all his comfort may be dried out of him, and yet he may hold fast his integrity and glorify his God.”

In verse 84 he goes on:

**How long must your servant endure?
When will you judge those who
persecute me?**

Literally in the Hebrew we cries out, “How many are the days of your servant?” David was really at the point of giving up. “I can’t live like this much longer.” And yet he would continue on, because of his faith in God. And we see his faith, because he asks how long it’s going to be before God judges his persecutors. Notice he doesn’t ask *if* God will judge them. It’s just a matter of when. He knew from Scripture that it is God’s essential character to be holy and just—that God will *always* judge the unrighteous. And so he trusted that God would judge them. In fact, he trusts God enough to leave the judgement of the wicked to God instead of trying to settle things himself. We saw that last week in verse 78, where he prayed that God would shame or punish the insolent, while he, David, devoted himself to meditating on God’s precepts. This is an important point we need to remember: Leave vengeance to God. The worst thing our enemies can do is not to afflict us, but to distract us from our devotion to God. God’s job is see that the evil comes to justice. Our job is to be devoted to God and to following after him.

As I was studying this stanza this week it struck me how repetitive these verses are: My soul longs for your salvation; My eyes long for you promise; I’ve become like a dried out wineskin; How long must I endure; The insolent have dug pits for me; They persecute me with lies; They’ve almost made an end of me. He’s more or less offering up the same pleading prayer over and over. But brothers and sisters, those repetitions demonstrate David’s faith. That he would keep petitioning God for the same thing over and over show us just how bad the situation was and just

how much David trusted God to save him. David knew God held him in his hand and was looking out for him.

He goes on in verse 85:

The insolent have dug pitfalls for me; they do not live according to your law.

The proud and wicked really are out to get him. This isn't just someone taking advantage of a chance opportunity to do David some harm. These are premeditated attacks against David. And that makes them all the worse. These men don't live according to God's law. Think about that. If we're Christians, our desire is to live according to God's law. We do our best to follow him. Sometimes we make mistakes. Sometimes situations come up, we aren't prepared to combat the world, the flesh, or the devil, and we fall into sin. That's different from planning out our sins in advance and making preparations for it. That's what David's describing when he says they've dug pits for him. These are truly lawless men. In contrast, look at his description of God's Word in verse 86:

All your commandments are sure; they persecute me with falsehood; help me!

The problem was lawless men. There was no fault with God. In fact, even though David was in trouble because he had followed God's ways, the problem wasn't God or his ways. God's way might be hard, but it's always right. It might make him enemies, but it's still his best friend. David knew—and was confident—that to follow God's commands was the right thing to do and that he'd never lose by obeying them. And that was why, in the midst of being wrongfully persecuted by the insolent and lawless, he cried out to God, "Help me!" Again, he knew God was his only true source of help. To step out of God's hand would only bring more trouble.

In verse 87 he pleads:

They have almost made an end of me on earth, but I have not forsaken your precepts.

These men were ready to eat him alive, and yet he knew that he had an eternal position, and eternal life, and an eternal hope that they could never even nibble at.

He had confidence in the promise and covenant of God. And that's the same confidence we have. God has established his covenant promises with you and me just as firmly as he had with David. God will never forsake you, so don't forsake God—not matter how bad things look. Keep your eyes on him and hold onto that eternal perspective. I like Charles Spurgeon's comment: "If we stick to the precepts we shall be rescued by the promises."

And when we get to the final verse of the stanza, we see again that for David, it really does come down to assurance in God's covenant.

In your steadfast love give me life, that I may keep the testimonies of your mouth.

"Steadfast love" is always about covenant. When God establishes a covenant to show us his love and mercy and kindness, he always keeps it. Again, David bore the mark of God's covenant in his circumcision just as you and I bear it in our baptism. God has given us his pledge and for God to take it back, for God to break his promise, is for him to cease to be God. It won't and it can't happen. That's what God did with Abraham in Genesis 15. He told Abraham to sacrifice a bunch of animals and then to cut them in half and lay the halves out on the ground opposing each other. Then when night came, God appeared to Abraham as a flame and made his way back and forth between those sacrificed animals. God used the covenant ceremony imagery that people used in Abraham's day. To men—typically a king and his vassal—would covenant with each other: the king to rule over and protect the vassal, and the vassal to serve the king. Then they would cut the throat of a sheep or goat or cow and as the blood poured out they would pledge to each other: "Should I fail in keeping my end of the covenant, may this be done to me." God passed through those dead, sacrificed animals and made his pledge to Abraham, effectively saying: "Should I ever fail to keep my end of the covenant, may this be done to me—may I be slaughtered like these animals." When God says that, you can count on him to be true. In covenanting with us, he places us in the palm of his hand, and as Jesus said, no one can snatch us out of his Father's hand (John 10:28).

But David also reminds us that God saves us for a purpose. He shows us his steadfast and unfailing covenant love and mercy so that we will serve him out of gratitude and give him glory. In saving us he regenerates our fallen and sinful hearts so that we can once again do the very thing he created us for in the first place: he makes it once again possible for us glorify him and to enjoy him forever. Brothers and sisters, that's the Christian life. And David teaches us that it's no some abstract or pie-in-the-sky philosophy. It's not just something to sing about on Sunday mornings in church. It's something to live out in our lives each and every day. If we can see it here, in the depths of his affliction and persecution, we can see it anywhere. He was at the end of his rope—at a place where many of us would probably be inclined to forget about God—and yet he cries out to God in faith. Even in his agony and pleading, he proclaims his trust, he finds his life in the testimonies of God's Word and he gives God glory for the salvation he knows will inevitably come.

Please pray with me: Loving Father, thank you for the promises you've written for our benefit in your Word. Thank you that we can rest secure in the knowledge that no matter how bad things may get, we are always in the hollow of your hand. Give us grace, we ask, to trust in you and in your promises and give you glory no matter what. We ask this in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.