



The Word: Saving for Service Psalm 119:121-128

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September 26, 2010 — Trinity 17

There is something very solemn in the reflection that in the heart of every man and woman, God has placed a judge—a judge that is aware of every thought, every emotion, and every action; that knows the character of and the motive for each of those thoughts and emotions and actions; and that passes sentence on them all. You might escape the law, you might escape the notice of your friends or family, but you can never escape the notice of your conscience. It's always there. We all have one. In fact, many over the years have seen it as one of the proof of the existence of God. And yet despite it's presence, men and women who are either self-righteous or somehow ignorant of their sins will say things like, "Thank God, I have a clear conscience!" But in claiming to be sinless, they only dig themselves deeper into the pit.

Brothers and sisters, the only answer to a condemning conscience is the Gospel. The Gospel proclaims the blood of Jesus Christ. In the Old Testament the blood of the sacrificial calves and goats was sprinkled on the altar, on the vessels, on the priests, and on the people as the divinely appointed means to declare them holy and set apart for God's use. The good news of the Gospel is that the blood of Jesus Christ—the once-for-all and perfect sacrifice—is sprinkled on our hearts in baptism, washing them clean from the condemnation of our consciences. And of course, as the writer of Hebrews tells us in that same passage, the blood of Christ washes us clean from sin so that we might finally draw near to God with a true heart and with full assurance of forgiveness (Hebrews 10:22). The wonderful thing about being able to draw close to God, having been forgiven is that even though sin remains, even though it still taints every thought and desire and act, as Charles Bridges puts it so well, "yet, like the motes on the face of the sun in the clearest day, they have little or no influence to obstruct the shining of the cheerful light upon the heart."

But it's also true that as much as sin remains, through the work of the Holy Spirit, we are no longer its slaves. The blood of Christ not only offers forgiveness, but new life too. Jesus clears our consciences in two way: first, through forgiveness of the sins we have committed, but, second, by changing the desires of our hearts and releasing the hold of sin on us and the influence that it has in our lives. We'll never be perfect this side of eternity, but that doesn't mean we don't change. The evidence of true faith is a changed heart and the evidence of a changed heart is that we turn away from the works of the flesh (things like sexual immorality, impurity, strife, fits of anger, dissensions, divisions, and envy) and instead start bearing the fruit of the Spirit (love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control).

So the blood of Jesus has a two-sided benefit: the sins we commit are forgiven by it, but through the new and changed life it gives us, our consciences truly do have less to condemn us for. St. John wrote, "Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence before God." We have confidence through forgiveness—knowing that we can stand before him uncondemned, and we have assurance that we stand uncondemned because our changed hearts and minds and lives are the evidence of the redeeming work of God in us. This is how, for example, Job, when he was accused by his friends of being guilty of some terrible sin in order to deserve God's wrath, could with confidence plead his case and say, "I am not guilty" (Job 10:7). There are lots of other examples in Scripture of men who made similar appeals: Samuel, Nehemiah, and Paul. This is exactly what David does in the next stanza of Psalm 119. This morning we'll be looking at verses 121 to 128. Again, David's experiencing persecution and faced with that persecution he pleads with God in verse 121:

I have done what is just and right; do not leave me to my oppressors.

We've seen him make similar appeals here in Psalm 119, but this is his prayer on a lot of different occasions. In Psalm 37:33 he praises God knowing that, "The LORD will not abandon [the righteous] to [the power of the wicked] or let him be condemned when he is brought to trial." In Psalm

25:21 he prays, "May integrity and uprightness preserve me, for I wait for you."

Was David being self-righteous? We know that he was as much a sinner as we all are. Had he deadened his conscience in order to make a claim like this—that he had done justly and righteously? No. This is the same David who acknowledges his sins throughout the psalms. This is the same man, who when confronted about his sin penned Psalm 51 and wrote the following:

Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions.

Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin!

For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me.

Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you may be justified in your words and blameless in your judgment.

Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me.
(Psalm 51:1-5)

There's nothing self-righteous in that prayer. In fact, it's just the opposite. He confesses his sin and appeals to God to blot it out—to clear his conscience and forgive him. David may have lived a thousand years before Jesus, but he knew the Gospel as well as any of us do. Later in Psalm 51 he prays:

Hide your face from my sins, and blot out all my iniquities.

Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me.

Cast me not away from your presence, and take not your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and uphold me with a willing spirit.

(Psalm 51:9-12)

As much as David could plead his integrity before God, he also knew his own sin and he knew that he stood before God only on the grounds of mercy. His integrity and his clear conscience were themselves the work of God's grace. So when he declares before God in verse 121 that he has "done what is just and right" he's not being like the Pharisee in Jesus' parable. You remember the man who went into the temple, marched to the front, and loudly thanked God that he wasn't a sinner. He proclaimed his good works so

that everyone could hear him and then thanked God that he wasn't like the lowly tax-collecting dirtbag kneeling in the back. No, David's actually the tax collector kneeling in the back, praying for God's mercy. We see that in the next verse. Look at verse 122:

Give your servant a pledge of good; let not the insolent oppress me.

This may be the Old Testament, but here's the Gospel! The older translations read, "Be a surety for you servant for good." David knew the condition of his soul and so he pleads for God's help. It's interesting that this is the only verse in Psalm 119 that doesn't refer to God's law. There are eight different words that David uses throughout the Psalm to refer to the law and at least one is used in every verse except for this one. We're not privy to the mind of David, so it's impossible for us to know for certain what reason he might have had to break his pattern, but the early Christian writers up through the Puritans all saw the Holy Spirit at work here. They saw this as symbolic. David prayed for a pledge or a surety from God and shows us here that where the law fails, Jesus Christ is a surety of a better covenant.

David wanted to be good. The Spirit had regenerated his heart. His desire was to please God, but he knew that desire was only half the battle. The world, the flesh, and the devil were still there, still tempting him, and he knew he was still prone to sinning. He needed the help of God and so he cries out to God for a surety—someone else to help him to stand; someone else to empower him to do good; and ultimately someone else to cover him when he failed. Friends, that what a surety is. A co-signer on a loan gives his surety that if you don't pay back the money, he will. When you pawn something, the thing you pawn serves as surety for your loan. In the court system a bond serves as surety that you won't run away. Jesus stands as surety for us, except that in our case, we've already failed. We failed to pay back the loan a long time ago. We failed to turn up in court on our trial date. And so Jesus has stepped in and paid the debt for us; he stepped in, received our sentence, and took our punishment for us. David prayed to be delivered from his oppressors. Jesus has delivered us from ours—from sin, from Satan, from the world, from death, and

from hell. That's why we can say with St. Paul, "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Romans 8:1).

And yet as we go through life and experience hard times and experience persecution we still struggle. When will it be over? How much longer? Sometimes we begin to lose faith. That's where David seems to be as he makes these pleas to God. He feels spiritually weak and so, knowing that God is his strength and salvation—even when it feels like that strength and salvation is far off—he cries for them. David's cries are like the cry of the father who brought his demon-possessed son to Jesus for healing and cried out to him: "I believe, help my unbelief" (Mark 9:24). Strengthen my faith! Look at verse 123:

My eyes long for your salvation and for the fulfillment of your righteous promise.

Literally he's saying, "My eyes are spent and failing in looking for your salvation—looking for your *yeshu'a*." *Yeshu'a* is the Hebrew word for *salvation*. David had no idea that the promised seed of the woman who would crush the serpents head would be named *Yeshu'a*—Jesus—but he had faith in him anyway—that he would come and fulfil the mission of salvation given him by his Father. That was the fulfilment of God's righteous promise—a promise that he gave to Adam, to Abraham, to Moses, and finally to David himself.

And yet David could only long for the fulfilment of that righteous promise—really God's promise of righteousness for us! David lived on the other side of that promise. He could only anticipate its fulfilment whereas we can look back to it having now been fulfilled. As David struggled with unbelief he could only look forward to *yeshu'a* in a vague sense of God's coming salvation—a man in his own line and still nothing and no one specific, but, brothers and sisters, we can look back on the historical record of *Yeshu'a* the man, God Incarnate, who came and walked and taught among us and who died on the cross for our sake. David placed his hope in a promise. We can look back to those words of Christ on the cross, when he declared: "It is finished!" The promise has been fulfilled and David's hope and faith are now our

reality. If David could find hope and strength for his faith in looking forward to the fulfilment of the promise, how much more faith-building strength can we find in looking back on it?

Looking to the salvation of God—looking to his righteous promise—he prays in verse 124:

Deal with your servant according to your steadfast love, and teach me your statutes.

On the one hand he could plead that he had done what was just and righteous, but he still stands before God on the grounds of mercy. Like Job, he can plead his innocence before his accusing and finger-pointing friends, but before God he humbly puts his hand over his mouth and looks for grace. David looked for God's salvation and he knew that God's salvation was part and parcel of his steadfast love—his *chesed*, his unailing and ever-faithful love, mercy, and kindness. David pleaded for justice when it came to men, but he knew, that were God to deal with him justly, it would mean his eternal damnation.

When I was in seminary we used the Prayer Book one morning a week for our daily services. There was a woman who very vocally objected to it. She had all sorts of complaints about it, but her biggest objection was that she didn't like, as she put it, "all the groveling." She was especially incensed by the Prayer of Humble Access and told us, "I'll never grovel before God like a dog begging for crumbs under the table; I stand before God on my own two feet and demand what's mine!" The problem is that the only thing God truly owes any of us is an eternal death sentence. Like David we need to humbly ask God to deal with us according to his merciful love—according to the love he has shown us through Jesus Christ and the offer he has made to us. And that offer is only available to those who are willing to admit their rebellion against God, to admit that they deserve his punishment, and will humbly come to him through the cross, not pleading their own merits, but the merits of Jesus, who shed his blood for them.

The evidence of that humility—of a desire to come to God on his own terms—and not only that but the evidence of a desire

to please God out of gratitude for the salvation he offers in his steadfast love and mercy is seen in the second half of David's prayer: "teach me your statutes." This kind of desire to please and to glorify God is the evidence of real faith and it's the evidence you'll see wherever the true Gospel of Jesus is proclaimed and believed. This is what lies behind the repeated statements of Jesus and the apostles that those with true and living faith in Christ will always be known by the fruit they bear.

When I was living in the US after the September 11th attacks in 2001, one of the popular slogans that you saw everywhere was "God bless America". That slogan bothered me, but at the time I couldn't put my finger on exactly why it did. It was during that time that I started doing a lot of thinking about the relationship between Christianity and the State and about civil religion. And then one day I saw a bumper sticker that simply said, "America, bless God". And that hit the nail on the head. Demanding that God bless us is the evidence of self-righteousness. Man's purpose is not to seek God's blessing, but to bless—or to glorify—God. God promises to bless those who truly seek to follow after him. To expect God to bless us—either as a nation or as individuals—when we have little or no concern for holiness is foolish—it's to ask God to bless our sin. A holy God will never do that.

But this isn't just a secular or a national problem. Sadly, it's just as prevalent in the Church today. Whole portions of the Church have been taken over by self-help mentalities and prosperity-focused "name-it-and-claim-it" teachings. At the worst these groups have redefined faith into a universal force, which, if you can master it, you can use to demand everything you want from God. (This is why they tell you that if you don't get everything you want, it's because your faith is weak.) But even when these groups aren't teaching outright heresy, they have a subtle and equally dangerous influence on our thinking and focus as Christians. The end result is a self-centred faith in which our focus is on what God can give us instead of what we can give to God. The sermons, the teaching, the books are all about seeking God's blessing. There's very little if any talk about seeking after holiness. Brothers and sisters, the purpose of the Church is

not to seek God's blessing. Our purpose is to glorify God. That is our whole aim and focus. His blessing in return is incidental. Look at what David's concern is in verse 125:

I am your servant; give me understanding, that I may know your testimonies!

First, David reminds us that we are God's servants. He is not ours. God isn't a cosmic genie. He's not here to grant all of our wishes. No. He created us to serve him. We rebelled against that role and the purpose of his salvation is to put us back in place as his servants. Yes, he also gives us eternal life through his salvation, but that's of far less importance than that he restores us to fellowship with himself and to our role as servants. And second, because his greatest desire is to serve God, David pleads for understandings. He wants to know God's testimonies. He wants to know God's character, his rules, his ways—ultimately what pleases God and what doesn't. This is why he threw himself into the Word. This entire psalm is a proclamation of his love for the Word—and consider that David loved it because it taught him how to be a better servant.

In verse 126 he writes:

It is time for the LORD to act, for your law has been broken.

David appeals to God to take action because the world is full of sinners who disregard God's law. It could be a prayer for God to come and bring his salvation to the world, but it's probably a prayer for justice to be done. We've seen David pray before for his holy God to punish sin. But the Hebrew can also be read to say, "It is time to act for the LORD." This could just as easily be David's acknowledgement that because the world is full of sin, he needs to get working—God needs him as a servant all the more. And to read it that way fits in well. It transitions us from his desire to be a better servant into the final two verses that we'll close with. Look at verses 127 and 128:

Therefore I love your commandments above gold, above fine gold. Therefore I consider all your precepts to be right; I hate every false way.

Brothers and sisters, if we're going to be God's servants, if we're going to take action for his kingdom, we need to have a passion for his commandments and for the Scriptures where he teaches them to us. David loved God. His greatest desire in life was to glorify the God who, in his steadfast love, had redeemed him from sin and death. God had given him an eternal perspective and so David valued the things of God more than even gold. His desire was for holiness. He hated every false and evil way, and so he threw himself into the Word that he might learn how to give glory to his Saviour. We need to ask ourselves how we compare to the model that David gives us in these verses. Can we claim that we have done what is just and right? If we're honest, for many of us the truth is the opposite. David declared himself a servant of God. God has redeemed us through Jesus Christ—just as he had David—but have we committed ourselves to his service—and committed ourselves wholly, not half-heartedly or with divided loyalties? David declared that he loved God's commandments more than gold. Can we honestly say that we love God's commandments more than the things of this world? Or do we consume our time, talent, and treasure ourselves and—if we're feeling generous—give God what little might be left over? David hated every false way. Can we say the same? Or is our hatred for sin as half-hearted as our commitment to God so often is? Have we happily given up the sins that we've found easy to give up while secretly holding onto the ones we love? Brothers and sisters, if we truly understand the depth of love that God has shown us, there should be no question in our minds that we owe him our all.

Please pray with me: Heavenly Father, we thank you for your steadfast love and mercy. You sent your Son to die in our place that we who were your enemies might be restored to your fellowship. Our natural response should be total commitment to you, rooted in indescribable gratitude, but we so often fail. Give us grace, we ask, that we might comprehend the breadth, and length, and depth, and height of the love of Christ and become better servants as a result. Give us a love for your testimonies and your precepts, that we might always be learning how to serve you better. We ask this in the name of Jesus Christ, our Saviour and Lord. Amen..