



## The Word: Everlastingly Righteous

### Psalm 119:137-144

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David ended the last stanza in verse 136 by expressing his grief—grief over his seeing so many people who did not keep God’s law. He grieved over their eternal state, but he also grieved to see such treason against our holy and loving Creator. And, brothers and sisters, that’s what sin is: cosmic treason against our loving God who gives us life. David gives us perspective in these verses—a perspective that our generation of Christians far too often lacks. David grieved—really grieved—over the sin he saw. Think of Jesus weeping over Jerusalem because of her sin and coming destruction. Now ask if you grieve sin that much. Too often we don’t even grieve over the sin in our own lives. We’re more prone to making light of both our sins and those of others, making jokes about them, talking about our sins as if we’re proud of them, and sometimes even glorifying the sins of others. Even when we’re sorrowful, all too often it’s not so much because we’re grieved that we have offended God, but because we got caught. And when we grieve the sins of the world, I’ve noticed that more often than not, it’s less grief that God has been offended than it is self-righteous pride. Looking at the sins of the world lets us feel better about ourselves—we allow a “holier than thou” attitude into our lives. The problem is that we forget that no matter how holy we may be, we still fall far short of the perfect standard of God.

No, David grieved over the sin he saw, both in himself and in the people around him, because he knew that God is righteous. And that’s the theme of the next stanza, verses 137-144. David makes a little word play. Each verse of this stanza begins with the Hebrew letter *tsadhe*. *Tsadhe* is the word for fishhook, but instead of using some kind of fishhook symbolism, David plays on the sound of two words, because in Hebrew, the word for “righteousness” is *tsadiq*. They sound almost alike. And that’s the theme of the stanza: *tsadiq*, righteousness.

Look at verse 137. David presents a night-and-day comparison, going from the people who break God’s law and who cause his

mourning, to God, who is the source of his joy.

### Righteous are you, O LORD, and right are your rules.

God’s righteousness should be the source of joy for the Christian. We miss the joy found in meditating on the righteousness of God, because modern Christians seem seldom to emphasise his righteousness. We emphasise God as love or as the author of grace. Our lop-sided view of God crops up when we read about an Uzzah or an Ananias being instantly struck dead by God and our first reaction is to say, “Hey, that’s not fair!” We’re bewildered by it. First, we think, “Well, their sin wasn’t so bad.” And then we ask, “Where was the ‘God of Second Chances’?” Friends, Uzzah and Ananias leave us scratching our heads precisely because we don’t understand what *real* righteousness—*real* holiness—is. We have a cavalier attitude toward sin and we worship a caricature of God—a God whose holiness is compromised so that we can celebrate and worship him for his characteristics that make us feel good while we ignore the ones that convict and condemn.

The God of Scripture is righteous and holy. He punishes sin. And while, in his love and mercy he often offers gracious second chances, he’s under no obligation to do so. David had a clear picture of God’s righteousness. That’s why he grieved sin. And yet in the middle of his grief, David could take comfort in the same thing that brought about the grief. It’s because God is holy that David mourned, but it’s also because God is righteous that David could find joy in the midst of all that sin. When God struck down Uzzah for touching the Ark, David didn’t have any question about why. He didn’t ask where the God of Second Chances was. He knew: God is holy. And so even as a man was punished for sin, David could praise God—because he is righteous. When life was hard, when he was persecuted, when the world seemed out to get him, David took comfort by meditating on the righteousness and holiness of his God.

Brothers and sisters, if we would cultivate a biblical understanding of God in our hearts and minds—a balanced view of him that is not just loving, merciful, and gracious; but that also recognises that he is just, holy, and righteous—that our sins do cause his wrath to burn—we could meditate on that biblical understanding of God just as David did and find comfort in who he is and what he does, and that he’s always perfectly righteous.

Thomas Brook put it this way and I can’t say it any better:

“David’s great care, when he was under the afflicting hand of God, was to clear the Lord of injustice. Oh! Lord, saith he, there is not the least show, spot, stain, blemish, or mixture of injustice, in all the afflictions thou hast brought upon me. I desire to take shame to myself, and to set to my seal, that the Lord is righteous, and that there is no injustice, no cruelty, nor no extremity in all that is righteous, and that there is no injustice, no cruelty, nor no extremity in all that the Lord hath brought upon me. He sweetly and readily subscribes unto the righteousness of God in those sharp and smart afflictions that God exercised him with.”

Being firm in the knowledge that God is wholly and eternally righteous and that he has acted, continues to act, and will always act righteously gave David the faith to trust in God—to know that even in the worst of situations, God was dealing well with him. We can see that faith amidst his trials in verse 138.

### You have appointed your testimonies in righteousness and in all faithfulness.

David often refers to the Word as God’s testimonies. The Word testifies of God, his character, and his ways. It’s the only reliable way to know him. But it’s also the only reliable way to know what his will is for us. That’s why it’s so important for each of us as Christians to steep ourselves in the Word. Not only will it lead us to God, but it will lead us in life. The world’s problem is that it looks everywhere but the Word of God for guidance. It’s in our nature to want guidance. God created us to be reliant on him. We’re not all knowing. We’re not all powerful. We need God’s direction, but ever since Adam and Eve sinned, the human race looks everywhere for guidance but to God. Even Christians still struggle with all sorts of wrong—even pagan—ideas about how to discern God’s will. My dad and I were talking about eschatology a while back. (That’s the ten-dollar word for “doctrine of last things”.) He asked me why it was so hard to find books that take a balanced, biblical, and sound approach to prophecy and the “end times”. I told him that it’s because the crazy stuff caters to our desire to know it all and for the sensational. Writers and preachers who pray on our fears, who come up with yet another crazy new timeline every couple of years, who tell us this or that’s going to happen and exactly when, and who can somehow tell you which of today’s headlines is found in which Bible verse, well, those guys are popular because

they appeal to our nature to want to know—and often to know that which God has chosen not to reveal. Since Adam and Eve our greatest problem has been a desire to take God’s role on ourselves and to know the things that he has hidden. What’s really disturbing, though, is how often Christians focus on the future and show hardly any interest in how to live now. I used to know the manager of one of the Christian bookstores down in Portland and he said it was sad that books on the “end times” by writers who are basically just Christian fortune tellers sell fifty times better than practical books on how to follow God and live in holiness today. Bp. Cowper wrote, “Men by nature are curious to know their end, rather than careful to mend their life; and for this cause seek answers where they never get good: but if they would know, let men go to the word and testimony; they need not to seek any other oracle. If the word of God testify good things unto them, they have cause to rejoice.” And, of course, David reminds us here that the Word of God *always* testifies good things to us!

David’s faith—his trust in God—was strengthened by the knowledge that God’s testimonies are appointed in righteousness and that they are always faithful—that they will always be true. Instead of worry about his end, David focused on today and how today he could make his life an offering to God. Think about those words: God’s testimonies are appointed in *all faithfulness*. That means that every last word we find there is true. It means that God will keep every promise down to every last detail. It means that we can do the things he tells us to do without regret, knowing that in following him we aren’t making a mistake or missing out on something better. Brothers and sisters, if God’s Word is appointed in *all faithfulness*, that we means we can risk everything on it—on him. We can put ourselves in his hands. We don’t have to worry about tomorrow, let alone the final judgment. Forget the fortune tellers—not just the pagan palm readers and astrologers, but forget too the ones that pander to us in the name of Christ with crazy mathematical schemes and Bible codes. Don’t worry about the future. Just trust God’s faithful testimonies and follow him today. Follow the path that the light of the Word lays out in front of you and you can trust that he will take you where he wants you to be and see you through to the end.

Be zealous for holiness. Consider that David’s praise of God’s own holiness wasn’t left to words. He set his hands and feet to practice holiness. That’s true worship. And

it grieved him that so many didn’t follow God and didn’t worship him. Look at verse 139.

**My zeal consumes me, because my foes forget your words.**

Think of the things that you’re zealous about. Usually we’re zealous not just about the things we like or that interest us, but the things that we have a clear picture of. David had a very clear picture of the righteousness of God and his Word and that clear picture fired his soul. But the clearest evidence of being on fire for something comes when we see it’s opposite. David got just as fired up about God’s righteousness when he saw those who were unrighteous—when he saw men trampling on holy things.

I was at a local clergy meeting this past week and the subject of the Lord’s Supper came up and one of the ministers there started making jokes about it—laughing at the expense of God’s holy gift to us. It made me angry, but the reason I was angry was that I understood and had a clear picture of just how holy these gifts are that God offers us—how they represent his Son and serve as the sign and seal of the new life he gives us. This other guy there had no real concept of the holiness of the Sacrament, and so he could turn it into a joke and laugh about it.

David was seeing men around him who had forgotten the holiness of God. Notice he says they’d forgotten the Word. As much as he grieved when he saw the sins of the world, he especially grieved when he saw the sins of God’s people. He lived in Philistia for a while—with pagans who sacrificed their children to fertility goddesses and horrible things like that. And yet the Philistines had never been privy to God’s Word. His fellow Jews, however, were God’s elect. They had God’s Word. They existed as a people because God had called them. They all knew that they were the result of the miraculous birth of Isaac to Sarah when she was 90 years old. They knew that they lived in a land that was only theirs because God had given it to them. They had a tabernacle at the centre of their life in which God himself visibly manifested his presence. They *knew* God’s righteousness. They *knew* his faithfulness. They had every reason to trust in him—but they didn’t. They chose to reject God’s words, to reject God’s ways, and ultimately to reject God himself. So can you imagine why that fired David up with righteous anger?

But brothers and sisters, we too live with the knowledge of God’s righteousness and the righteousness of his Word. We too are the inheritors of God’s promises to Abraham. We have new life only because of him. We too have his presence among us as his Spirit tabernacles in each of our hearts and as Jesus comes to us in the bread and in the wine each week. And yet do we have a real zeal for righteousness? Men and women around us claim the name of Christ, but engage in every imaginable sort of unrighteousness. They engage in the whole list of St. Paul’s “works of the flesh” from sexual immorality to dissensions and division to jealousy and anger. They hate their enemies instead of loving them. They joke about and blaspheme the holy things of God. They claim to trust Christ as Saviour, but demonstrate little or no trust in God for anything else in life and refuse to make him their Lord. And we sit idly by. Precious few churches practice any real form of discipline as directed by Scripture. We wink at sin in our midst. We let all sorts of false doctrine, blasphemous teaching, and heresy go by us with hardly a word. And then we wonder why our efforts at evangelism fall on deaf ears in the word and why unbelievers have little, if any, interest in the Church.

Friends, this is why David was zealously consumed when he saw people forgetting or ignoring God’s Word. He knew that the Church is called to be a witness to the world of the righteousness and faithfulness of God. Friends, the Church has two missions: to give glory to God and to be his faithful witness to the world. That hasn’t in changed in 3500 years. That was the mission of the Church in David’s day just as it’s the mission the Church in our day. We each need to ask how we’re doing in helping the Church to fulfil those to goals, but we also need to be outraged when we see brothers and sisters failing. And not failing just because none of us is perfect, but failing to even try—failing because they’re deliberately rejecting and ignoring the Word.

In verse 140 I think David expresses what many of us wonder. Why would someone who had heard the Word forget it? Why would they not value it as their greatest treasure? He goes on:

**Your promise is well tried, and your servant loves it.**

Literally, the Hebrew describes God’s promises as pure. The language is that of refining or distilling. It’s not that God’s Word at one point had some problems, but they’ve been purged out by fire. God’s

Word is righteous and always has been. It's been tried; it's been in the crucible, but there was no dross to burn away. Test it all you like and it will always hold up. Lean on it with everything you've got when times are hard and it will always hold you up and see you through. God's Word is pure and because of that, David loved it. So why would anyone forget it? How could they? We still ask that question. How can people who have heard the Word walk away from it? David valued it because he valued righteousness and holiness. Jesus makes us holy and his Spirit changes the desires of our hearts. If we have been saved by Christ and are indwelt by his Spirit, our desire will be for him—to know him and to follow him. And if our desire is to know and to follow him, his Word will be our treasure. The fact is that lots of people claim the name of Christ, but have never truly known him, but it's also true that many of us truly know him, but we've let our priorities get out of order; we've lost our eternal perspective and have forgotten the Word. Earthly things have crowded it out. If that's happened to you—and I think it's safe to say that it happens to all of us—pray for the grace of God. Ask the Spirit to renew your passion for him, for following him, and for his righteous Word. If holiness is your goal, remember that holiness attracts holiness and you won't be able to ignore God's holy Word.

Even when David was feeling crushed down, he says:

**I am small and despised, yet I do not forget your precepts.**

We see this over and over. Not only do the distractions of life not distract him from the Word, but neither do the problems of life and the troubles caused by the unrighteous who persecuted him. No matter what happened he was sure of God. He says in verses 142 and 143:

**Your righteousness is righteous forever, and your law is true. Trouble and anguish have found me out, but your commandments are my delight.**

David was in double trouble and yet he found his delight in the commandments of God. Spurgeon said, "This is the joy and glory of the saints, that what God is he always will be." Not only will he always be what he is, but his way of dealing with us, his children, never changes.

The attitude that David expresses in these verses is a total enigma to the world—to those whose hearts have not been

regenerated by the Spirit. But that also means that believers should be able to identify with what he says here. As much as we find ourselves in trouble and anguish because of sin—especially our own—we're also lifted up by what we see in God's Word. The believer delights in God's commandments, even though we each know that we can't perfectly keep them. Those commandments shine their light into our lives—we have light in the darkness—but that light also shows up all the dark corners we've let remain in our lives and we mourn the fact that we don't measure up. So if you're a believer, you've experienced these spiritual struggles and can identify with David. In fact, our spiritual struggles show us where we stand with God. If we can mourn our sins and delight in the Word with David, we can be assured that the Holy Spirit is at work within us—and that means we can also be assured that what God starts, he *always* finishes. He will not leave us, nor forsake us.

David expresses his trust in the final verse of the stanza. He writes:

**Your testimonies are righteous forever; give me understanding that I may live.**

We see David praying this prayer over and over throughout the Psalm in one form or another: "O Lord, give me understanding." David knew that the only way to find true and everlasting life is to know and understand the things of God. He knew that even as difficult as his life was, full of trouble and persecution, that that was on the earthly plane. The more he studied the Scriptures, the more he knew God and the more he came to know God's ways, and with that came an eternal perspective and with that eternal perspective came true happiness—he found true life. David reminds us that if we want to find everlasting life, we need to look for it not in the things of the world, but in the Word. We acknowledged in our collect this morning that without God we can never please God. We asked the Holy Spirit to direct and rule our hearts in all things. And yet, brothers and sisters, that's not just a prayer for some kind of vague guidance that comes as the Spirit indwells us. Yes, the Holy Spirit gives us a desire for God and to live righteously, and yes, he gives us understanding so that we can grasp the things of God. But friends, more than in any other way, the Holy Spirit directs and guides us through the very Scriptures he inspired and caused to be written for us. If you want the Spirit to guide you, you need to listen to him and we listen to him by reading,

studying, memorising, and meditating on—steeping ourselves in—his Word. There we find not only our righteous and faithful God, but also his righteous and faithful commands and testimonies.

Please pray with me: Lord, as we prayed earlier, guide and direct our hearts by your Holy Spirit that we might walk your path of righteousness. Give us a hunger for your Spirit-inspired Word and through your Word, give us a passion for righteousness—a passion to glorify your righteousness, a passion to see your righteousness prevail in your Church, and a passion to walk in your righteousness ourselves. We ask this in the name of Jesus Christ, who covers our sins with his own perfect righteousness. Amen.