



## The Word: Promises and Precepts

### Psalm 119:153-160

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Last Sunday we looked at verses 145 to 152 of Psalm 119 and saw David as he earnestly cried out to God with his whole heart. We saw his lesson for us, that as our hearts and minds are given understanding and shaped by the Scriptures our faith grows and we come to hope more and more in the promises of God. And as our faith and hope in those promises grow, prayer becomes our passion as we plead the promises of God back to him. Passion for prayer grows out of a vibrant and living faith, but faith itself becomes vibrant and living as we come to know God and his promises as he reveals them to us in Scripture. And yet it's not just a matter of looking to the *promises*; David shows us that the more we know and experience the promises of God, the more we seek to live according to God's eternal *precepts*—the more we seek to walk in his ways and to follow the path he lays out before us. That's why when David poured out his heart to God—when he expressed the deepest desires of his heart and his deepest and most profound need—we saw him praying simply for the grace to be a better servant—to better walk in God's ways.

This morning we'll be looking at verses 153 to 160 and we'll see at least part of the reason why David was so earnest in his prayer. He *could* be earnest because he had faith in God—faith is the foundation of our prayers—but he was earnest *because* he was in need. Look with me at verse 153.

#### Look on my affliction and deliver me, for I do not forget your law.

Remember that this is a prayer made in faith and with that in mind notice the first thing David prays. He asks God to “look”—literally “to see”. And David asks God to look on him because he knows that this is what God does. One of my friends once told me he believed that God existed, but he said that he couldn't possibly believe that God had any interest in him personally. There are far too many other things to take up God's time and attention, he said. There are other people who believe in the God of the Deists—the divine Clockmaker, who created

the cosmos, set it all in motion, and then walked away from it. But David knew that that is not the God of Holy Scripture. He knew that God was not only *watching*, but that God takes an *active role* in his creation. Brothers and sisters, all of us should be just as confident of this fact as David was. If there's any doubt in your mind that God sees his people in their affliction, immerse yourself in his Word. Read the same stories that David had read. Read how God *looked on* the childless Abraham and miraculously gave a son to a man who had had no future. Read the story of Joseph and how God *looked on* him, saw his trouble, and delivered him. Read how God *looked on* the Israelites in their Egyptian slavery and delivered them. The Scriptures are full of examples of God looking on his people in their trouble. Most importantly, he has *looked on* us in the greatest affliction of all—he saw us dead in sins and trespasses—and he lovingly, mercifully, and graciously sent his Son to die that we might have life.

So knowing God—knowing that he watches and that he cares—David prays and asks him to do the very thing that he knows he's already doing: “Look on me in my affliction.” And then he asks God to do that which the Scriptures taught him God always does for his children: “Deliver me.” Deliver me the way you delivered Abraham; deliver me the way you delivered Joseph; deliver me the way you delivered Moses and the Israelites. Ultimately he prays in accordance with the promise that God gave to Adam and Eve when they fell into sin, that he would deliver them and provide a means of redemption—a way back to life and a way back into his fellowship. But notice also that David leaves the *means* to God. He says, “For I do not forget your law.” The law was his source of faith; again, it was how he knew God and knew God could be trusted to deliver him. But in a very real sense, this is David's way of saying, “Look on me, deliver me, but *thy will be done*—do it *you're* way.” He knows better than to tell God what how to do his work.

Friends, that's a lesson we can learn from David. How often do you approach God in prayer, asking him for deliverance from this situation or from that problem, and then tell him exactly how he's going to do it. Sometimes it's hard not to do that, because so often we see the situation and it's very clear to us what the way out is, even if we know it'll take a miracle. We trust God for the miraculous, and yet ironically we try to tell him what he needs to do—as if we know better than he does. The fact is that God knows more than us, he sees more than we do, he can work the miraculous, and ultimately he knows better than us. So

David presents his problem to God, he prays in faith for deliverance, but he leaves the means to God. Again, he was steeped in the Word and he knew all those situations where people thought they knew better than God and, like Abraham and Sarah trying to force God's hand in giving them a son, got themselves into trouble.

This is also an expression of obedience. In telling God that he hadn't forgotten the law, he was praying the covenant promises back to God. He was praying, “I'm one of your covenant people. I trust you to be faithful to your covenant.” I like the way Charles Spurgeon put it: “If we do not forget his law the Lord will not forget us. He will not long leave that man in trouble whose only fear in trouble is lest he should leave the way of right.” Is that our concern when we're in trouble? Are we more concerned about the immediate problem than we are about staying in God's will?

David goes on in verse 154:

#### Plead my cause and redeem me; give me life according to your promise!

“Be my advocate, O God, because I cannot redeem myself!” Remember last week I said that David reminds us that prayer for redemption doesn't end once we've been redeemed. Our justification—our being declared righteous before the Father through the cross of Christ—is once and for all time, but the spiritual redemption we find through Jesus, our Advocate with the Father, leads us into a new life in which he *continues* to act as our Advocate. We pray through him. He gives us access to the Father's ear. We take our case to him in humility, knowing that we cannot save ourselves and we continue to trust in him for life and sustenance. Think about what an advocate does. He stands for you, he fights your fight—the fight that you can't win on your own. That's precisely what God does for us, especially through Christ. David again pleads the promises of God back to him. “Give me life *according to your promise!*” That's faith; that's trust in God rooted in the knowledge of the Word and the experience of grace.

In contrast, he says in verse 155:

#### Salvation is far from the wicked, for they do not seek your statutes.

Those who oppose God have no advocate. There are two important truths we need to realize based on this fact. The first is that there's no spiritual fence-sitting in this world. Salvation is far from the wicked. And, brothers and sisters, we are all wicked. As St. Paul tells us in Romans, “None is

righteous, no, not one” (Romans 3:10). None of us naturally seeks after God or his statutes. Lots of people seek the blessing or the benefits of God—they want the promises—but they don’t want the precepts. In their pride, they don’t want to admit their wickedness. They aren’t willing to humbly ask for the Advocate that David asked for. They want God on their own terms. They want his blessings and his life on their own terms. But David reminds us that as long as we reject the precepts, we will never be heirs to the promises. Again, there’s no fence-sitting. Either you embrace the precepts and approach God on his own terms, or you reject his precepts and with them the salvation he offers. Either you are God’s enemy or you are his friend, by grace through faith.

Second, David reminds us that salvation comes not through the law, but through the knowledge of it. Before any of us will ever humbly approach the Father through faith in Christ as our Advocate, we have to know that we are sinners, that we are wicked. The law holds God’s standard of perfection before us. It reminds us that we can’t meet it. It humbles us and points us to the Saviour who has kept it for us. We can never truly understand the Gospel and the grace, mercy, and love that God shows us through Christ until we first understand the depths of our sinfulness that the law shows us.

When confronted by the law we have two choices: We can repent and turn to the gracious Advocate God offers us in Jesus Christ or we can harden our hearts and continue in sin. David shows us these two choices. The righteous pleads for life according to God’s promise, while the wicked turns his back on God’s statutes and digs himself further and further into a pit of his own making.

David knew he’d done his own share of pit digging. I think all of us can identify with him on some level. He knew that he was often guilty of opposing God and of ignoring his precepts, and so he praises God in verse 156:

**Great is your mercy, O LORD; give me life according to your rules.**

When we consider just how much we have offended God—even the most saintly of us—we have to praise God for the greatness of his mercy. John Newton, the slave ship captain who found new life in Christ penned those famous words:

*Amazing grace, how sweet the sound  
That saved a wretch like me  
I once was lost, but now am found  
Was blind, but now I see.*

David would have understood the significance of those words. David the adulterer. David the murderer. And yet despite his sins, David had experienced the mercy and grace of God. We have a phrase: “But for the grace of God, there go I.” Even with the grace of God, David had on a few occasions still “gone there”—still strayed. The same can be said of us too, even if we didn’t stray into something as terrible as murder. But even greater than the grace that keep us walking in righteousness is the grace that forgives us when we stray off the path and fall into sin. David knew that the only difference between himself and “the wicked” was God’s grace. He was just as wicked as they were, but he had been redeemed—given new life and a second chance. Think of the time that St. Peter approached Jesus and asked him how many times he had to forgive someone who had offended him. Peter knew that God expects us to show our enemies the same mercy and grace he has shown to us and so he asked Jesus, “If someone offends me, should I forgive him even seven times?” And Jesus answered him and said, “No, Peter, forgive him seventy times seven times—490 times!” Don’t stop forgiving! Jesus’ point wasn’t that that we can stop at the 491<sup>st</sup> offense, but that there should be no end to the forgiveness we’re willing to show others. Why? Because there is *no* offense that anyone can show us that compares to even the smallest of our offenses against God—and God has forgiven us through Christ—forgiven all. That God expects us to show that kind of forgiveness is a big thing, but look at it from the other side and consider that if God expects us to be so generous in forgiving in order to mirror his grace and mercy for the world, we can start to grasp, even if just a little, just how great his mercy and grace are! God’s grace is truly amazing.

So David praises God for his great mercy and pleads: “Give me life according to your rules.” (Literally, according to your “judgements”.) The Scriptures are full of the righteous judgements of the righteous Judge. They show us the path of righteousness and they lead us to the Gospel, where we find that the Son of the Judge offers us life through his own death so that when we stand before the Judge on the Last Day, he will judge us based on the merits of his Son, not our own, and declare us righteous and usher us into everlasting life with him.

He says in verse 157:

**Many are my persecutors and my adversaries, but I do not swerve from your testimonies.**

There’s a reason David orders his prayer this way. In the last verse he praised God for his many mercies and in light of those *many* mercies he can now say, “I have *many* persecutors and adversaries too.” But because he knew God’s mercies he could say with confidence, even when surrounded by all those enemies, “But I’m not going to swerve from your testimonies. I’m going to continue to walk according to your word. The Enemy wants nothing more than to get me to stumble and fall, but now that I’ve experienced your life, Lord, I’m going to walk in it no matter what happens!”

Friends, the fact is that the closer you walk with God, the more the Enemy is going to attack and try to make you stumble. The good news is that we can walk in confidence, knowing that God has already won the victory and knowing that if we’re walking closely enough with God to experience such attacks, we must also be steeping ourselves in his Word, the very source of life and sustenance.

David’s passion for the holiness of God and for personal holiness was so great that it pained him to see sin in the world. Look at verse 158:

**I look at the faithless with disgust, because they do not keep your commands.**

On the surface that might sound kind of self-righteous. Here he was, a sinner saved by grace, and yet when he saw other sinners sinning he looked on them with disgust. The Hebrew word used here is really strong and to translate it as “disgust” isn’t as extreme as the original, but it gets the idea across. But David’s point wasn’t self-righteousness. We can tell that from everything else he’s written here. He understood his own sinfulness and he understood grace. What David’s expressing is a righteous indignation and anger over the fact that so many live in blatant disregard for God and for his commands. Consider especially that David was referring to his fellow Israelites—people who were a part of God’s covenant community just as he was. He was angry that people to whom God had made a promise of life simply chose to take the promise for granted and live their lives for themselves. He was sad that walking away from God’s covenant, they were unwittingly

rejecting the gracious redemption God had offered to them. And he was troubled to see people so nonchalantly offending the holiness of God.

David knew that Israel was called to be a light to the Gentiles. Their mission was to show the world what it meant to be followers of God and to live in his grace. And it made him righteously angry to see so many people being such bad witnesses. And it only went downhill from David's time. The sins of the kings and of the people compounded with almost every generation. The prophets condemned them because they made a laughingstock out of God among their pagan neighbours. When all that time they were supposed to be witnesses of the faithfulness of God, they were living as if he didn't exist. The pagans mocked them, saying, "Where is their God?" Now consider the state of the Church. We need to ask ourselves if we're just as outraged at the sins that take place in the Church and the ungodly attitudes and lifestyles that we often openly tolerate. Our goal should be to grow in our love for God, our love for each other, our love for sound doctrine and teaching, and our love for holiness, and yet too often too many of us put God last on our list of priorities, we show little care for our brothers and sisters, we run after every wind of false doctrine, and we become obsessed with pursuing God's blessing with little or no thought for blessing God ourselves. Just as those ancient pagans looked at Israel and mocked them with those words, "Where is their God?" many of the pagans in our own community look at the Church and ask the same question—because too often too many of us live as if God doesn't exist. We need to have David's perspective when it comes to sin, and especially so when it comes to sin within the Church, where we are called to be salt and light to a world in desperate need of Jesus.

David started out praying for God to look on his *affliction*, now he prays that he would look on his *affections*. Look at verse 159:

**Consider [or "look"] how I love your precepts! Give me life according to your steadfast love.**

So many of his fellow Israelites loved the promises of God, but they took them for granted. David knew the promises, but he didn't just know them, he had experienced them, and because he had experienced and lived them out, he had a passion for God's precepts too. You can't have one without the other. Think of the hymn "Trust and Obey". We trust because we have the

promises, but we show our trust by being obedient to the commandments. It's not always easy. Sometimes, just as David did, we find ourselves getting into trouble with the world because we choose to follow God's ways instead of its ways, and yet the fact that we're willing to do things God's way demonstrates our trust in him.

We see David's faith in his plea for life—life according to God's steadfast love. In verse 154 we saw David plead for life according to God's promises. In 156 we saw him plead for life according to his rules or judgements. Here he appeals to the real root of the life God gives—to his steadfast love. In the context of this prayer about mercy, David appeals to the steadfast love of God that undergird his mercy and grace.

Finally, David closes the stanza praising the sureness of God's truth.

**The sum of your word is truth, and every one of your righteous rules endures forever.**

Whatever the world may say, God is true and his Word is true—and they always will be. Why did David trust the Scriptures? Because he knew they were true. Why was he content to walk in God's way—to follow his rules and statutes and commandments? Because he knew that those rules are righteous.

And yet as much as David knew that the Word is true and as much as he knew that God's rules are righteous, he didn't just take the word of others. He put it to the test. He lived it. That's what we need to do. St. Paul wrote to Timothy: "The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners" (1 Timothy 1:15). That's a truth that we all should receive with assurance. But consider the Israelites. When God sent them manna, they weren't content to just look at it and ask, "What is this?" or to know that it came from heaven. No, they made it their daily bread. They trusted their lives to its ability to nourish them. And so with our spirits and the promises of God. It's not enough to know that the Word is true, that the Gospel is true, that Jesus is the Advocate for us sinners. The Enemy knows that! We each need to take that Word, take that Gospel that we know to be true and entrust our lives to God's promises. We need to make those promises our spiritual daily bread. As we come to the Lord's Table this morning, remember that what he offers us here in the bread and wine is the sign and seal of the life he offers us in himself. This

is the manna of the New Covenant—this is the bread that will give us life in the wilderness. And here he reminds us that if we will only trust his promises and obey his precepts, he will see us safely through this wilderness to our eternal home. Here he offers us his body and blood for the preservation of our bodies and souls to life eternal. We eat and drink here in remembrance that Christ died for us. We feed on him in our hearts by faith—that's trust in the promise of the Gospel—and we continue in lives of thanksgiving—lives of praise and faithful witness to his grace as we walk in his precepts.

Please pray with me: Heavenly Father, you have looked on us in our affliction and delivered us. Let us never forget your great mercy or your amazing grace. Give us grace that might never forget your promises and strengthen us that in faith we might always walk in your precepts and be faithful witnesses of your steadfast love to the world around us. We ask this through Jesus Christ, your Son our Lord. Amen.