



The Word: Graciously Written and Graciously Incarnate for Our Salvation

Psalm 119:169-176

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Today we finally come to the last stanza of Psalm 119—verses 169 to 176. As we've been seeing for the last twenty-one weeks, the 119th Psalm is a poem or a hymn in praise of God's Word, but in each stanza David shows us a different aspect of the Word: that it's the source of happiness for those who walk in it; that it's the source of the knowledge of the truth; that it the source of life; that it's the place where we find knowledge of God's grace; that it shows us holiness. The list is a long one, but David doesn't just tell us what the Word is or what it can do for us, he draws us into his own personal experience of the Word: how it showed him his sins; how it gave him a knowledge of holiness; how he found new life in it. Ultimately we see that the Word drove David to God—to cry out for truth, for holiness, for blessing, for comfort, for peace, for salvation, for life and then we see him praising God for granting him all these things in faithful fulfilment of his promises.

I've always found Psalm 119 very rich, but despite the fact that I've read through—even meditated on it and memorised parts of it—more times than I can possibly count, I always tended to approach these twenty-two stanza as all being variation on the same principles. I was challenged when I read Martin Luther's statement that he wouldn't exchange one page of it for the whole world and then accused those who thought of it as merely twenty-two variations on the same theme of being fools. Working our way through this psalm has, I hope, proved him right about just how rich this psalm is.

It's fitting that this last stanza is constructed around the last letter of the Hebrew alphabet, which happens to be *tav*—which represents a cross. In the ancient Hebrew and Canaanite alphabets, that's how *tav* was written—with a cross. David had no idea how significant that was when he wrote the psalm. He didn't know that the Messiah he hoped for would one day die on a cross, but God did. And so Verses 169-176 bring us to the cross.

David cries out to God—he cries out a Gospel cry, confident in the Word—in the promises and precepts of God—because he was desperate for grace. Look at verse 169:

**Let my cry come before you, O LORD;
give me understanding according to your
word!**

As we make our way from the beginning to the end of the psalm—as David considers the things that the Word of God teaches him—his prayers become more earnest. The better he understood God and understood God's ways, the more desperate David was for them. The Word humbled him the same way it should humble us and the more humble we are before God, the more we know how much we depend on him, not only for our physical life and physical needs, but for spiritual life and vitality too. David was acutely aware of his *need*, so he cried out in *faith*. That's what the Word taught him to do.

Think of Esther. She knew her people were going to die if something wasn't done. She didn't have the power to stop it in and of herself, but the king did. The problem was that no one was allowed to enter the king's presence without an invitation. And yet in her desperate need she risked the death penalty and went before the king, praying that he would receive her. Brothers and sisters, you and I have a need even more desperate than Esther's. We face an eternity of spiritual death and only God can meet our need—only he can give life. But unlike Esther who had no way of knowing if her petition before the king would be accepted or not, we can seek life from our King on the merits of Jesus Christ. Through his Son, who died for us, we can enter his presence with full confidence and with full acceptance. And that's what David did here. Even though the Messiah was a thousand years away, David confidently entered the Father's holy presence in prayer on the merits of his Saviour.

And notice what he prays for. He asks for understanding—the spiritual light promised in the Word, that proceeds from the Word, and that enables us to be obedient to the Word. This is what's remarkable to me: Through the last 168 verses we've heard David talking and praying and praising all about the Word. It's safe to say that David had an understanding of the Word of God greater than that of any of us. And yet the more he explored and came to know the depth of its riches, the more he knew was there that he hadn't grasped and that he hadn't yet come to understand. The understanding that he had already taught him to be humble—to admit that he hadn't

spiritually arrived—and so he prays for more and greater understanding.

Every once in a while someone will saying something to me like, “Yeah, I read the Bible through once. I understand it. I don't need to read it anymore.” When I hear that I wan to laugh and cry at the same time. It's absurd and sad. Going back to my teen years, I've been reading the Bible through at least once almost every year. Some of you are more than twice my age and I'm sure have read it at least two or three times as many times through as I have. And our common experience has been that the more we read, the more we also realise that we've only just scratched the surface—that there's far more to understand and to apply to our lives. Understanding that, David pleads for more understanding. He knew that he had none on his own—that understanding was a gift of grace. Friends, lots of people are wise in worldly understanding, but are fools before God. We need to cry out with David for spiritual understanding and then immerse ourselves in his Word. As believers he has promised us his Holy Spirit to open our spiritual eyes to the truths he's written there, but understanding doesn't come through osmosis. It's not enough to own a Bible. It's not enough to fellowship with people who read it. You have to read it yourself—and commit to a lifetime of reading and study and meditation.

Now in verse 170 he prays:

**Let my plea come before you; deliver me
according to your word.**

“Let my plea—my supplication, my *humble request*—come before you.” The word he uses for “come before” is one that's associated with worship and was used of the priests “coming before” the presence of God in the Holy of Holies in the tabernacle and the temple. “Let my humble prayer enter your presence, O Lord.”

The Word taught David the sinfulness of man and the holiness of God; it taught him about grace; and so he comes humbly before God. Like the tax collector in Jesus' parable, he kneels far off and humbly prays the only prayer he can pray: “God be merciful to me, a sinner.” Jesus said that this man, not the self-righteous Pharisee, was the one who went home that day justified. And that's exactly what David prays for. He knew the promises God had given in his word and so he prays, “Deliver me—save me!” He prays with St. Paul: “*Deliver* me from this body of death, wretched man that I am” (Romans 7:24).

David uses this word “deliver” a lot. In fact, he uses it more than any other biblical writer does. He prays for deliverance from his enemies and persecutors, from the troubles and afflictions of life, but most importantly from his sins and the consequences of his sins. We quote his words in Psalm 70 in the opening versicles of Morning and Evening Prayer when we say, “O God, make speed to save us. O Lord, make hast to help us.” That’s a prayer for deliverance—he uses the same word. God delivers his children from all sorts of things, but most importantly he delivers us spiritually from our sins and from the eternal death and damnation we justly deserve.

We quote Psalm 51:15 in those same opening versicles of the Daily Office when we pray, “O Lord, open thou our lips. And our mouth shall show forth thy praise.” That was David’s prayer when he had sunk into the depths of sin and after he’d been confronted with the adultery and murder he thought he had covered up. He pleaded with God, “*Deliver* me from bloodguiltiness, O God, O God of my salvation, and my tongue will sing aloud of your righteousness” (Psalm 51:14). He’s prayed here, “Deliver me as I know your the promises of your Word,” and now he prays the only response we can give in the knowledge that God has so graciously redeemed us. Look at verses 171 and 172:

My lips will pour forth praise, for you teach me your statutes. My tongue will sing of your word, for all your commandments are right.

This is true worship. We have all sorts of upside-down ideas today of what constitutes true worship or how to evaluate worship. We use all sorts of subjective criteria to judge our worship. We say it was good because we felt a certain way afterward. We judge whether or not the Holy Spirit was present with us based on similar feelings. Brothers and sisters, Jesus has promised us that his Spirit is with us. Period. It’s an objective fact. Where Christians are gathered, his Spirit is with us regardless of how we feel. And true worship isn’t judge so much by how it makes us feel, but by what we put into it—really based on the feelings of love and gratitude for God that we *bring* to our worship. The real question we need to ask ourselves when our times of worship are over is whether or not we did a good job. Worship is our offering to God, not the other way around. Does he meet us here? Yes. He even comes to us through his Word, read and preached, and given at his Table. But the fact is worship is *our*

offering to him. He doesn’t worship us, we worship him and we worship him because we can do nothing else when we think of the deliverance he offers, when we consider that he has taught us to walk in the way of righteousness.

The versicle from the Office is a wonderful summary of how it works: God delivers us and in that experience of his love, mercy, and grace we can do nothing but praise him. Again, “O Lord, open thou our lips. And our mouth shall show forth thy praise.” David gives us a picture of man who can’t open his mouth without the praises of God flowing out almost involuntarily because his love and gratitude are so great.

God saves and we praise. God teaches us his statutes—something that often causes us grief and pain as it calls us to change our lives—and yet as he teaches us to walk in holiness, we’re motivated to praise him. And as we walk in God’s ways—as we *experience* the life he calls us to—we see over and over again that he knows better than we do and that all his commandments are in fact righteous. As hard as his call to holiness often is, as we live it and experience it he teaches us that it’s worth the sacrifice and, again, we praise him. We can do nothing else!

And our telling out our gratitude for God isn’t limited to praise as we think of praise when we gather together for worship. The word that the ESV translates “sing” in verse 172 was translated “speak” in the older translations. It’s a word that refers to a response and usually refers to speaking. God delivers—he shows us grace—and in response we talk about it. David didn’t just praise, he preached. We should be sharing what God has done for us with the people around us. God has been so good to us and we live surrounded by people who haven’t experienced that goodness—in fact, who will face eternal death without our knowledge of God’s grace—and yet our mouths are silent. Our affections are set on all sorts of things. We can spending time with unbelievers and tell them all about all our other interests, and yet when it comes to the single greatest thing in our lives, we’re too often quiet.

And, brothers and sisters, remember that worship isn’t something we can isolate from the rest of our lives. Our greatest act of worship is to live in obedience to God. That may be why we so often come to church unprepared to worship. Gratitude and thanks and love for God should be overflowing from our hearts, but often at best it’s a little

trickle and so we sing, but we don’t really mean it. We rely on music to manipulate our emotions so that we feel something, even though that something isn’t what it really should be. We come and we pick and choose: I’ll sing this; I like that song. Oh, but not that one; I don’t really like the style. Friends, a heart *overflowing* with gratitude is *desperate* to sing praises and to tell out the mercies of the Lord. It isn’t picky. That kid of heart is attached to a mouth that needs only to be opened for the praise of God to spill forth out of the heart’s overflow! And just consider how that same overflowing heart motivates evangelism, love for the body of Christ, and holy living!

David goes on in verse 173:

Let your hand be ready to help me, for I have chosen your precepts.

Isaiah echoes David when he prays, “You meet him who joyfully works righteousness, those who remember you in your ways” (Isaiah 64:5). David knew God’s promises, he had trusted those promises and put himself in God’s hands, he’d experienced God’s salvation and so he joyfully threw himself in serving God. And he knew that God was ready to help his children. Spurgeon put it this way: “A man may fitly ask help from God’s hands when he has dedicated his own hand entirely to the obedience of the faith.”

Without God, we can do nothing pleasing to him. He even gives us the grace that’s necessary to turn our hearts toward him in the first place. And yet how often, even though we’ve experienced the power of his grace, do we forget to ask for his help to continue on in the Christian life? How often do we even reject his help and try to go it on our own? When St. Peter stepped out of the boat and onto the water, he knew that it was Jesus who made it possible. When he took his eyes of Jesus he sank. But notice that as soon as he sank, he called to Jesus for help. He knew who had the power—and it wasn’t Peter! At one point Jesus called each of us out of the boat. We chose his precepts—we chose to follow him—and he led us on the water. And yet after a while we sometimes get too self-confident. We forget that the power to walk on that water—the power to live in obedience and to grow in the faith—comes only be the grace of God. We try to do it on our own and we start to spiritually sink. Sometimes we’re sinking and we realise it so we go back to trying to do all the things we know to do, but we do them without asking for and without trusting in God’s grace and none of it works—we keep

sinking. Our spiritual lives need the grace of God to truly prosper. Abraham Wright wrote, “There is preaching, but for the most part without profit; there is prayer, but it prevails not; there is hearing of the word, but without edifying; and all because in spiritual exercises instant prayer is not made unto God, that his hand may be with us to help us.” Again, we need to trust in the grace of God. Going through the motions of religion isn’t enough. God’s the one who graciously makes them efficacious to us.

David knew he needed God’s help and so he asked for it, knowing that if he devoted himself to God, God would devote himself to David. We need to do the same. Don’t just go through the motions of religion. Ask God to bless everything you do. Ask him to bless your time spent in the Word. Ask him to bless your time spent in prayer. Ask him to bless your time in praise. Ask him to bless the time you sit listening to the sermon. Ask him to bless your coming to his Table. Ask him to bless you as you take the Word from this place into the world to be salt and light.

He goes on in verses 174 and 175:

I long for your salvation, O LORD, and your law is my delight. Let my soul live and praise you, and let your rules help me.

Again, David reminds us that God’s salvation isn’t just a “Get Out of Hell Free” card. We’re saved for service. He had experienced a taste of God’s salvation and he wanted more. He experienced the spiritual life God gives us through the Saviour, but knew that that’s just an earnest—just a down payment—on the eternal spiritual life that waits for us on the other side of eternity. He had been a sinner living apart from God, but through God’s salvation had experienced what it’s like to be restored to fellowship with his Creator and he couldn’t wait to experience full restoration—he couldn’t wait for that scene that we read about in today’s Epistle for All Saints’ Day, where we see the great multitude from every nation and tribe and people gathered before the throne and before the Lamb waving palms and crying out, “Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!” (Revelation 7:9-10).

And yet in the meantime, while he waited to live for eternity before the throne of God and in the presence of the Lamb, he committed to two things: to delight in and to be obedient to God’s law and secondly to live a

life of praise. In a sense those are one and the same. The greatest praise we can give to God is to live in obedience to him. We need to say with David, “Grant me your salvation—let my soul live according to your promise—that I might live in obedience to your precepts and give you praise not only with my mouth, but with my whole being!

Finally, look at verse 176:

I have gone astray like a lost sheep; seek your servant, for I do not forget your commandments.

It might seem like an odd note to end on after all these acclamations of praise, and yet David ends here because he knew that this is where it begins. “All we like sheep have gone astray, we have turned every one to his own way” (Isaiah 53:6). Our experience of salvation begins with our recognition that we need God’s salvation—that we are all sinners in need of grace. David knew that over and over he had wilfully gone astray. He had once been living in darkness and death. And yet God’s Word had become a light to his path that led him out of darkness and into life.

And notice that he asks God to seek him. He knew he was lost, but he also knew that he wasn’t like a dog who gets lost and can find his way home. There’s a reason why he thinks of himself as a sheep—why throughout the Bible we’re likened to sheep. Sheep are stupid. They wilfully wander off, but they don’t find their way back. The more they wander the farther they go. It takes the shepherd to track them down, to discipline them, and to bring them back to the flock. David knew that we can’t live the Christian life on our own. We need the Good Shepherd to track us down, sometimes even to discipline us and knock some spiritual sense into our heads, and to bring us back to the sheepfold. He says, “I don’t forget your commandments, but you know how stupid and wilful I can be. I’ve strayed before and I’ll stray again. I don’t want to, but when I take my eyes off you, that’s what happens. And when it happens, in your grace, seek your servant, bring him back.”

Brothers and sisters, that’s an amazing prayer for grace. And if we’ve immersed ourselves in the Word the way David had, we can be confident that even when we stray, God will graciously bring us back. He loved us enough to send his Son to die for us. That’s what the cross is all about. He will never leave nor forsake his sheep—his children for whom his Son shed his blood. And yet as we take consolation in the fact

that God will keep his sheep—that he forgives and restores when we stray—remember how David started this psalm. In verse 1 he wrote: “Blessed are those whose way is blameless, who walk in the law of the LORD!” The greatest blessing isn’t in being restored when we wander, but in being upheld as we walk in righteousness. We need to commit ourselves to walking down the centre-line of the road—not walking on the edge of the pavement, not rubber-necking at the enticements that pass by on the side of the road, not seeing how close we can get to the edge without actually falling into the ditch—but walking with both feet firmly planted on the King’s Highway. God has promised us the grace to keep us walking in his way to the end. And yet remember, that when we reach the end, there’s no boasting with the Pharisee. Blessed is the one who can kneel before the throne of God with the tax collector and say, “God be merciful to me a sinner,” and with David, “Seek your servant.” Blessed is the one who lives in has immersed himself in the Word of God, who has learned his promises and precepts and put his trust in both, who has experienced grace, and who lives the life the cross made possible by the Word Incarnate.

Please pray with me: Father, thank you for this amazingly rich psalm. Thank you that by your grace, David had such a passion for your Word. Graciously give to us, we ask you, that same passion, that we might immerse ourselves in the Word and learn to trust your promises more fully and live more obediently in your precepts that we might experience the blessings of new life through Jesus Christ, the Word who became incarnate for us, our Saviour and Lord. Amen.