



The Word: Grace for the Journey Psalm 119:33-40

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As we've made our way through these first stanzas of Psalm 119 over the last month we've seen the meditations of a man whose heart has been changed by God. St. Paul reminds us that the natural man or woman, following after Adam and Eve, our spiritual parents, lives a life of enmity with God. Friends, there's no spiritual fence-sitting in this world. Either you are for God or against him. The problem is that because of our inherited sin, none of us is capable of changing loyalties. Our hearts are evil and corrupt. It takes the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit to turn a heart and to place in it a desire for God and to follow him. And that's what we've seen has happened to David. But God's Word is the key to fulfilling the desire that the Spirit works in our hearts. To know God, to desire God, is to follow him and that's what we see David desiring to do. And yet here this man who had access to a tabernacle full of priests knowledgeable in God's Word and who was himself a great prophet, roots himself not in the wisdom of others or personal revelations, but with both feet firmly planted in the Scriptures. And rooted in the Word, we've now seen him maturing from a young and foolish man into a mature saint. We've seen him acknowledge that even rooted in God's Word, he's still prone to wandering. In the last stanza we saw him falling into a spiritual depression as a result of his, wandering, but we also saw him pull out of that depression as he returned to the way of God's Word. Like all of us, David is growing, but learning as he grows. He's experiencing the reality that none of us will ever "make it" spiritually this side of eternity. We're always and will always be dependent on God's help. And that leads us to the fifth stanza, the stanza centred on the letter *he*, the Hebrew "H". *He* probably originated from the Hebrew word for "window" or "fissure" and the Fathers saw in this stanza a prayer for a window to be opened in the law—a window that let the light of God's grace into the soul.

We need this window that gives us a glimpse of grace. Many Christians have seen a disconnect between law and grace—as if the

law has no significance for the Christian. But the fact is that we can't have grace without the law. The law was given to show us God's impossibly holy standard—a standard we can never keep. The law condemns us all, and yet we find grace in it as it drives us to the righteousness of Christ. Without the law, there can be no Gospel. People have asked me why the liturgy reminds us so often of our sins. It reminds us because without the knowledge of our sins, we're prone to ignoring our need for the perfect righteousness of Christ—we're prone to self-righteousness and spiritual pride. Brothers and sisters, the Gospel is only for those who are humble enough to admit and confess their sins and who are ready to leave behind their own righteousness, which is as filthy rags. Owing up to our sin is never pleasant, and yet in our humility we find the grace of God and the greatest joy ever. If you struggle with confession and with admitting your sinfulness, ask God to humble your heart, because as long as your heart is full of that spiritual pride, you'll be pushing away God's grace. Like David, kneel before God and lay your pride before him and ask him to humble you that you might walk in his ways and not your own. He prays in verse 33:

Teach me, O LORD, the way of your statutes; and I will keep it to the end.

This is the prayer of a humble man who knows that he has no righteousness of his own and who knows that he's utterly lost if he tries to go it on his own. St. Ambrose commented on this verse saying that "He who is his own student has a fool for his master." He also used the illustration of a soldier. A soldier doesn't give himself marching orders, he doesn't set off marching whenever he feels like marching, and he doesn't go forging his own path apart from the army. No. He takes his orders from his commanding officer and he stays in rank, because the commanding officer is the one who knows the ultimate goal. If he breaks rank and goes off on his own he loses his rations and his quarters and eventually gets lost and maybe even captured by the enemy—one man does not constitute the whole army and is only going to get himself into trouble or maybe even killed. But more importantly, a soldier knows that he follows his commander not for his own benefit, but for the benefit of the whole army—without him the army is not as strong.

Brothers and sisters, God has a plan. We know it leads ultimately to the New Jerusalem, but along the way we, at best, only get little glimpses of the plan that will ultimately get us there. David knew this so he humbly—like a child who trusts his

parents—asks God to teach him the way of his statutes. He knows there's no better teacher and he knows there's no better way. And we know that this prayer is one that pleases God. Think of King Solomon. When he became king of Israel, I'm sure he had all sorts of his own ideas of how to govern the people. He certainly had no end of advisors ready to tell him what to do. But instead of trusting in himself or in worldly wisdom he prayed:

And now, O LORD my God, you have made your servant king in place of David my father, although I am but a little child. I do not know how to go out or come in. And your servant is in the midst of your people whom you have chosen, a great people, too many to be numbered or counted for multitude. Give your servant therefore an understanding mind to govern your people, that I may discern between good and evil, for who is able to govern this your great people? (1 Kings 3:7-9)

Brothers and sisters, that's a humble plea for grace. The next verse tells us: "It pleased the Lord that Solomon had asked this." It pleases God when we pray for his grace too. And consider that the desire to learn God's ways is assurance that he will teach us. Again, unless God first turns our hearts towards himself, we will always be his enemies. If he puts a desire for him and his ways in your heart, you can ask with assurance, knowing that he who gave you the desire will gratify it too.

But not only to gratify it, but as David says, to "keep it to the end." That's the wonderful thing about God's grace: it always *perseveres*. God doesn't put grace in your heart to regenerate it just so that you can fall away and go back to your old ways. As St. Paul wrote to the Philippians: "I am *sure* of this, that he who began a good work in you *will* bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ" (Philippians 1:6).

But notice that David didn't just ask God for the rules, as if he could mechanically do this or not do that and expect God's blessing. He asked for God to teach him the *way* of those statutes—the wisdom to know how to *apply* the Word to the situations that come up in life. It's a lot easier to woodenly follow a rulebook than it is to truly understand those rules and to know how to apply them broadly. When I was in seminary I took a wisdom literature class from Bruce Waltke. It blew me away. Dr. Waltke, who was also my Hebrew professor and thesis advisor, more than anyone else I've ever met, exemplified the results of this prayer of David. At the time I would read

Proverbs and didn't see much beyond the specific situations mentioned in those wise sayings, and yet he was so steeped in the Scriptures and had let it so permeate his thinking that he could go on for hours on the practical applications of a single proverb to all sorts of situations in life. That's what David is praying for when he asks God to teach him not just his statutes, but the *way* of them. This happens as we not only read Scripture daily, but as we *meditate* on it.

He intensifies his prayer in verse 34:

Give me understanding, that I may keep your law and observe it with my whole heart.

St. Paul wrote to the Corinthians: "The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned" (1 Corinthians 2:14). We need the light that the Holy Spirit gives in order to walk in God's ways. That happens on two fronts. The Spirit speaks through the Scriptures he has caused to be written for our instruction, but that same Spirit regenerates our corrupt hearts and renews our dumb minds so that we can understand what he has written. Without the Spirit indwelling us, as St. Paul tells us, God's wisdom as he has laid it out for us in Scripture is foolishness.

As our understanding grows, our hearts are changed even more. Charles Spurgeon wrote, "The understanding operates upon the affections; it convinces the heart of the beauty of the law, so that the soul loves it with all its powers; and then it reveals the majesty of the lawgiver, and the whole nature bows before his supreme will." Understanding of the Word unites our heart—it gathers up all our affections and pulls them from all the different things we desire and focuses our *whole* heart on God and following him. The Spirit-inspired Word gives us direction, and the Spirit-regenerated heart has the undivided desire to follow it.

In verse 35 he continues his prayer:

Lead me in the path of your commandments, for I delight in it.

The Coverdale translation in the Prayer Book is more accurate. David prays not so much to be lead, but to be made to go—to be made to march—in the path of God's commandments. The word has military overtones. He's praying for God to march him in the way of his commandments the

way a commander marches his troops in the way leading to victory: "Command me—give me marching orders—in the path of your commandments, O God."

There are lots of different paths out there, but there's only one that leads us to the New Jerusalem. It's a narrow one. As Jesus said, "The gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life" (Matthew 7:14). But even though the way is hard, we can take comfort in the knowledge that many have been led down that path before us. When the Greek-speaking Jews translated this passage they used a Greek word that specifically denotes an old and well-worn path or rut. Brothers and sisters, the path may be a hard one to follow, but know that God not only leads us, but the entire Church goes with us. Your brothers and sisters here walk it with you. Our brothers and sisters from around the world walk it with us. And the path has been well worn by the feet of all the saints from throughout history whom God has led down the path before us. A hard path is much easier to walk when you know that you're not alone and when you can see that others have walked it before you and that your friends are walking at your side. David reminds us that there's no such thing as a loner Christian. We walk together as the Church, to strengthen and exhort each other.

And yet even walking in a well worn path with all our brothers and sisters around us for company, how often do we still stray? It's not like we suddenly push our way out of the crowd and immediately head off in the opposite direction. No. When we stray it's usually more subtle than that. We get bored walking in the bottom of the rut. In one of my old history textbooks, there's a photo of a part of the Oregon Trail in the Rockies. The traffic was so great at one time that the wagon ruts are feet deep. *That's* a well worn path. As we follow God's path, sometimes we get tired of the view down in the rut, so we step out of the rut and onto the edge of the path to get a better view, but before long we notice the grass growing off the worn path and stray a little further away to rest our feet on softer ground, but the further we get, the more easily we can then be led astray to other paths. David understood this reality and he prayed in verses 36 and 37:

Incline my heart to your testimonies, and not to selfish gain ["not to covetousness" as the old translations put it!] **Turn my eyes from looking at worthless** [or "vain"] **things; and give me life in your ways.**

Covetousness is that "soft" sin that begins in the heart and that lets us stray without

straying too far—at first. Covetousness might be the last of the Ten Commandments, but it's often the first sin to lead us astray. Clement of Alexandria called it the citadel of the vices. Covetousness is dangerous because it's a sin of the heart. It's a sin that easily allows temptation to turn into sin without us even realising it and yet that sin festers and grows and eventually breaks out into every other imaginable sin. It's a sin that turns the heart, but turns it so slowly that by the time we notice we've strayed off the path, it's too late; we've already sinned.

The feet go where the heart leads them, so David prays that God would incline his heart to his testimonies and away from covetousness—away from selfishness and selfish gain—ultimately, away simply from *self*. St. James tells us: "For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice" (James 3:16). It's the gracious work of the Spirit as we steep our hearts regenerates hearts in his Word—in his testimonies—that he inclines our hearts away from self and wholly toward God—that he sets our ways firmly on God's path.

But the heart is fed by the eyes. I had a friend in high school who walked to school and would get there early so he could check out all the cute girls getting off the buses. He said, "The Bible says not to take a second look, so I want to make sure the first one counts." It wasn't surprising to me when all that looking got him into trouble. The eyes are our first source of temptation. You can't covet what you haven't seen. And so David prays for protection over his eyes too: "Turn my eyes away from worthless and vain things and keep them focused on you, O Lord."

Both of these prayers—to turn first the heart and then the eyes—are prayers for grace. God doesn't meddle with our eyes. If you choose to focus on material possessions or on money or on members of the opposite sex, God isn't going to suddenly turn your head away when a nice car or an attractive guy or girl walks by. What he will do is change your heart. We focus our eyes on the things our hearts desire. What David's really praying for is the continuing work of God's grace to change the desires of his heart. He wants to be so absorbed with—to have his eyes so focused on—God's Word and on the way God has for him, that all the things of the world go by unnoticed simply because he no longer has any desire for them. He already knows that the things of the world are vain and worthless—that's already evidence of a Spirit-changed heart.

Now he's praying for that renewal to continue so that he'll no longer have eyes for them, but instead focus himself on the things of eternity—to be able to ignore all the things that give the illusion of life and blessedness on earth and instead focus on real life in Christ and the joys we find in him. To that end David prays in verse 38:

Confirm to your servant your promise [or “word” or “commands”], **that you may be feared.**

St. Peter reminds us that God's Word stands sure and firm (2 Peter 1:19), but that doesn't mean our faith in his Word is always as sure and firm as it should be. It's okay to express our doubts and fears to God. Jesus said that the way is narrow and hard. Our assurance comes from the promise of God's Word. We're often like the father of the demon-possessed boy who brought his son to Jesus. Jesus told him that all things were possible to those who believe. The father believed enough to trust Jesus, and yet he still had his doubts. He spoke that familiar plea: “I believe; help my unbelief!” (Mark 9:24). We need to be like that man and like the apostles who cried out to Jesus, “Lord, increase our faith!” (Luke 17:5). None of us believes so fully that we can't believe more and so we should pray for God to graciously increase our faith. But that said, the surest way to confirm God's Word and to see our faith increased is to continue to follow and serve him. And of course, the more we follow, the more our faith to follow him is confirmed the more our devotion to the fear of him will grow as we exercise it.

And the more our faith grows and the more the desires of our hearts are turned toward God, something interesting happens. When we start out, we desire to please God, but our primary motive for avoiding sin and obeying God is to avoid the personal consequences of those sins. But as we mature and as our focus on God becomes sharper, we begin to fear sin not because of the negative consequences it might have for us, but for the damage our sin can do to the reputation of God and his Church. Have you ever noticed how the world loves to dwell on the sins of big-name leaders in the Church or those whom everyone considers great saints? I've often hoped that I would never become a well-known pastor, because it's clear to me that Satan focuses an enormous amount of his attention on prominent Church leaders. He knows that if he wants to tarnish the Church and the Gospel in the eyes of the world, taking down a big-name leader is the best way. When a Christian sins, the world typically shames God and our faith more

than it shames the sinning Christian. David was a high profile man and he had a hot temper. He was passionate and that passion got him into trouble more than once—big trouble. And so he prayed that he would be kept from sin—not so much for his own sake, but to keep from tarnishing the good judgements and rules of God. He prayed that he would not give the world cause to bring any truthful accusation against him and his testimony.

Brothers and sisters, we fall down here more than we realise. The Church today in the West is pretty impotent. Church growth comes mainly as the result of people playing ecclesiastical musical chairs and shuffling around from one church to another. We don't engage in evangelism as much as we should, but what evangelism we do is too often undermined because we're hypocrites. We preach a holy God who demands holiness from his people, but as his people we engage in all sorts of sins. St. Paul gives us several lists in his epistles of sins that bar people from heaven, and yet not a few of those sins have now become completely acceptable amongst Christians in the West. We gossip and slander, we revile and fail to stand up for justice, we undermine the unity of the body and hardly anyone says a peep about it. Brothers and sisters, we need to pray with David that we would not give the world any reason to slander God's good Word, his law, or his Gospel.

The solution is in the final prayer in verse 40:

Behold, I long for your precepts; in your righteousness give me life!

David prayed that God would increase his faith and confirm his promises, but here he also longs for God's precepts—his commandments. Our problem is that we often long for God's promises, but we don't walk in his precepts. We should be obeying God's precepts in dependence on his promises. If we longed to follow God as much as we long for his promises and his blessings, we would give the world far fewer occasions to sneer at God and his Church. And even though we have eternal life through the perfect righteousness of Christ, we can always pray for a greater measure of life that we might walk in closer obedience. David prays this same petition over and over throughout his psalms and we ought to pray it too. We need to the quickening power of the Holy Spirit every hour of every day. We don't use that word “quicken” anymore, but we should, because there's no modern English word that adequately describes the

life- and vigour-giving work of the Holy Spirit within us. Because of our fallenness, we're always tending to slow down and to fall away. We need that quickening work of the Spirit. He's the one who fills us with life; let us never stop crying out to him. Let the life he has put in us daily cry out for more.

That brings us full-circle—back to grace. Brothers and sisters, the Christian is the one who knows his sins and knows how woefully inadequate he is to follow God on his own. He knows he needs the righteousness of another, and so he leans not on himself and his own understanding, but on the perfect righteousness of Christ and the understanding and quickening strength that comes from the indwelling Holy Spirit. But we don't stop there. Grace is one of those things, as we see in David's prayer here, that causes us to want more. The more we have the more we want. The more we realise our inadequacy and our sinfulness, the more grace we desire, and yet as God is faithful in giving us more grace, it simply opens our eyes to the fact that we're still even more inadequate and sinful than we thought before, and so again, we cry out for an even greater measure of grace—every day leaning less and less on ourselves and more and more on God. Every day becoming more faithful in following his path as God focuses our eyes and hearts on himself.

Please pray with me: Heavenly Father, thank you for your grace. Thank you for sending your Son to be for us the righteousness we lack. Thank you for your gracious life-giving Spirit and thank you for the Scriptures he has caused to be written as our only sure guide. Open our eyes each day to our need for your grace, that we might more and more lean on the righteousness of Christ, find our source of life in your Spirit, and take our orders from your Word. We ask this through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.