



## The Word: Everlasting, Immutable, and Infinite in Perfection

### Psalm 119:89-96

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This morning we're going to continue our look at Psalm 119 with verses 89 to 96. We've just passed the halfway point in the psalm and David changes to a very different tone than he had in the last stanza. But that said, he hasn't changed his theme. He's still proclaiming the praises of God's Word. In looking at the eleventh stanza last week, I said that it was the midnight of the psalm. David was overcome by darkness. He was in the bottom of the pit of persecution. He was pleading with God: My soul longs for your salvation; My eyes long for your promise; I'm like a shrivelled wineskin that's been left hanging over a fire; How much longer do I have to take this?; The insolent have dug pitfalls for me; I've been smeared with their slanderous lies; They've made an end of me and I'm at the end of my rope!

And yet in those same verses, we saw David pleading his case before God, not in despair, but in hope. He was in a terrible place, he was at the end of his rope, he was in anguish, but he hadn't given up. He still trusted in God and found hope in him. Just as he pleaded in anguish, he stated his confidence: I hope in your word; I have not forgotten your statutes; I have not forsaken your precepts; my desire is to keep the testimonies of your mouth. Even when he cries out to God for help, he cries out with certainty and faith: When will you comfort me? When will you judge my persecutors? It's not a question of whether or not God will save him, but a question of *when*. No matter how bad it got, we see David living his life in confidence, in faith, and trusting in God, whom he knew to be the source of life.

And David had confidence in God, because he had confidence in God's revelation of himself and his ways and his covenant promises. Look with me at verse 89:

**Forever, O LORD, your word is firmly fixed in the heavens.**

David's been living life on rough seas. The waves have been tossing his ship, but his

ship survived because it was anchored to the solid rock of God's Word. But now David comes into shore and sets his feet firmly on the solid rock and with that under his feet, keeping him steady and sustaining him, he praises God: "Your Word is forever!"

Brothers and sisters, that's an ascription of praise that ought to be on all our lips at all times. If you have found God's salvation and become an inheritor of eternal life, it is because of his Word. It was his Word Incarnate, Jesus Christ who saves us. We affirm every week in the Creed that Jesus is "God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten made, of one Being with the Father," that he not only made all things, but "for us men and for our salvation...came down from heaven" and "for our sake...was crucified under Pontius Pilate." In his death, resurrection, and ascension he bought our redemption from sin and death. Like all God's covenant promises, the promise of Jesus Christ stands firm. And yet we only know about the Gospel of the Word Incarnate and we only understand it, because of the Word Written. Think about the power of God's Word. Earlier this year I preached on the need for preaching to be a solid and faithful exposition of Scripture because God's Word creates life. Think about that. God's Word, the second person of the Holy Trinity, is co-eternal with his Father. He always has been and always will be. It doesn't get any more firmly fixed than that. It was by the creative power of the Word that God created the cosmos. It was by the redemptive death of the Word Incarnate that the Father accomplished our salvation and recreates his elect. And it was the Holy Spirit who communicated through men that God's Word might be written so that in our fallen and sinful state we would have knowledge of him, his ways, his love, his mercy, and his grace. Isaiah would express this same sentiment of praise nearly 300 years later when he wrote, "The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever" (Isaiah 40:8). Lest we have any doubts about it, when the Word became flesh he himself reminded us, "Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away" (Luke 21:33).

This is often one of the places where the enemy hits us. If he can shake our confidence in the faithful and unchanging character of God and his Word, he upsets our faith. He wants nothing more than to put us out to sea, bring up a storm, and leave us without an anchor. This is why so often throughout history the Enemy's most damaging attacks on the Church have been through heresies that deny God's unchanging character or that undermine his

Word. One of the most dangerous heresies in the Church today is what's called "Open Theism." It teaches that God is not all-knowing, that he isn't unchanging, and that he doesn't really know what's going on. Open Theists tell us that while God may be infinitely more powerful than we are, he's still bumbling his way through history and hoping for the best. They teach us that Jesus Christ was a stop-gap measure that God thought up to fix his creation when it got out of his control and that, because God isn't truly sovereign, it remains to be seen if offering Jesus as a solution to creation's rebellion will really work. Now, does the God of Open Theism sound anything at all like the God David praises and whose Word is firmly fixed and whose faithfulness endures forever?

But it's not just God's character that is attacked. In the 19<sup>th</sup> Century scholars attacked the Scriptures, telling us that they weren't really reliable—that God's Word was full of mistakes and errors. Those churches that embraced that view of Scripture have been dying out ever since. And now the enemy attacks the Church from new directions. This past week I was reading a book that one of our local churches has recently been gung-ho about. In fact, they've begun restructuring themselves around the book's core teaching. The problem is that the book's basic premise is false—the book is full of false teaching—but the author justifies his teaching as being "new revelation." Scripture doesn't support what he's teaching, so instead of letting Scripture correct him, he twists Scripture to make it support his ideas and then calls this "prophetic interpretation." What's scary is that it's not just this book. This phenomenon of supposed new revelation and twisting of Scripture with the justification that it's "prophetic" is all over the place these days. But brothers and sisters, it's straight from the Pit. It does nothing more than undermine the very Word of God. Remember, St. Paul warns us to judge everything by the standard of Scripture, but you can't do that if Scripture can suddenly be reinterpreted by the false teachers to say whatever they want it to. Scripture has been established by our unchanging and eternal God and it's no less unchanging than he is!

Now, because God's Word is sure and firmly fixed, David knows that God's faithfulness is just as trustworthy as his Word. Look at verse 90:

**Your faithfulness endures to all generations; you have established the earth, and it stands fast.**

David could see the certainty of God's Word as he looked at the enduring vastness of the heavens, and he confirms it by considering the foundations of the earth. He could reason that since the foundations of the earth—created by God's Word—have stood fast since the day it was created, the foundation laid for us in Jesus Christ must be even more sure. We can't learn God's plan of salvation from nature, but God's creation still confirms his faithfulness. As Jeremiah wrote:

**Thus says the LORD, who gives the sun for light by day and the fixed order of the moon and the stars for light by night, who stirs up the sea so that its waves roar—the LORD of hosts is his name: “If this fixed order departs from before me, declares the LORD, then shall the offspring of Israel cease from being a nation before me forever.”**

Jeremiah looked at the stability of Creation and could see that if God took such care to firmly establish and sustain the world, he would just as certainly do the same with his Church. David does the same thing. Creation, whether it's the vastness of the heavens or the firm sureness of the foundations of the earth, all sing the praise of God's eternal faithfulness. The same Word by whose power the world was created in all its detail and order, is the same Word that has purchased our redemption and that is contained in Scripture itself. If the Word can establish the cosmos so surely, we can trust that the same Word can just as firmly sustain each of us as believers.

A few years ago there was a programme on, I think, the Discovery Channel called “Life After People.” The premise of the programme was to show what would happen if all the people on earth suddenly disappeared—what would happen to our cities, to the roads and buildings, to the water and electrical supply? It looked at how, over time, roads and bridges and buildings would collapse and how nature would gradually reclaim everything. What was remarkable about the programme was that it showed just how much our civilisation depends on our constant upkeep. Within just a few weeks or months lots of things would completely fall apart. It would only take a few years before bridges would fall apart without constant maintenance. At the same time it demonstrated just how enduring God's creation is. You don't have to do anything to let nature take over—it just does. And that demonstrates the difference between God's sustenance of his creation and man's feeble sustenance of ours. Bishop

Cowper wrote: “We daily see his conserving power, upholding his creatures; which should confirm us that he will not cast us off, nor suffer us to perish (since we are the work of his hands) if we so depend on him, and give him glory as our Creator, Conserver, and Redeemer.”

David goes on in verse 91:

**By your appointment they stand this day, for all things are your servants.**

Literally, “by your *judgements* they stand this day.” It's the same word that describes the righteous decrees of God as judge. Again, Creation is sustained and stands firm because of God's Word—his decrees. (You *speak* decrees.) Again, this isn't the “Divine Clockmaker” of the Deists. God didn't create the cosmos, set it ticking, and then stand back to observe, but never to interact with it again. No, our God created it with his Word and keeps it running and holds it together by his Word. And all things, no matter how small, created by his Word obey his Word. There isn't a single part of Creation that doesn't answer to him. Spurgeon says, “No atom escapes his rule, no world avoids his government.”

And in the midst of all that order and obedience to the Creator's decrees, would we choose to be the rebels? Since Adam there has been one part of creation that doesn't quite fit anymore. The human race has done its best to reject the Lord's control so that we can be our own lords. The good news for us is that his indwelling Holy Spirit gives us the grace to be obedient again. We simply need to let the rest of creation serve as our model. The problem is that our sinful and rebellious natures have us convinced that being a servant is a bad thing. What we learn from David, though, is that submitting to God—being his servants—is actually our source of life. Look at verse 92:

**If your law had not been my delight, I would have perished in my affliction.**

The natural man or woman is caught in a lie. He or she thinks that freedom from God is the answer to life's problems, when in fact freedom from God only brings more trouble and ultimately eternal spiritual death. The truth is that submitting to God's law is the only real source of life—and not just good living on earth, but eternal life.

And notice, it's not just a matter of obedience to the law. Anyone can try to submit to the law and yet hate it, but grudgingly obey. The key is a changed

heart. David didn't just obey because he had to or was forced to. No, David obeyed because God's law was his delight. He *wanted* to be obedient. And that's the evidence of a heart that has been regenerated by the Spirit. We're all born enemies of God. That's why we hate his law. But when the Spirit works his change in our hearts, we come to love God and the evidence of our love for him is a desire to do what pleases him—and the law teaches us the things that please him. This is why Jesus said, “If you love me, keep my commandments.”

And David understands that, but he has an appreciation for the law on more practical grounds too: he knows that God's Word is a means of grace. Look at verse 93:

**I will never forget your precepts, for by them you have given me life.**

First, though, notice how David stresses that he's never going to forget God's precepts and the reason is that he's *experienced* them—he's lived them out and they've made an impact on his life. We can read God's Word; we can study it, learn it, repeat it, and yet still forget it. But if we've *lived* it—if it has given us new life and changed our lives—we're never going to forget it.

When I was in seminary I took four semesters of systematic theology. It wasn't the first time I'd read or taken a course in theology, but it was different. When I had studied theology in the past, I remembered some, but I forgot a lot. I ran into other students who dreaded taking theology courses, because they thought it was boring. And yet when I sat down for the first day in Dr. Packer's theology class he said something very profound that changed everything. He made it clear that there was very little point in the study of theology as an academic exercise—which is exactly how far too many people approach it. He said that the purpose of the study of theology is to better know God and his ways and he stressed that the academic study of theology is worthless unless we make personal application of what we learn. That made all the difference in the world and I noticed that it really changed the perspective for some of those students who thought of it as a boring academic study, because with that perspective they understood that the point was to know God and how to follow him better. It certainly made me more attentive and as I applied what I was learning, it changed me. That change imprinted on my heart and mind what I had learned. I didn't forget it. The keys are *application* and *experience*. When the truth of God makes a

change in your life, it firmly establishes that truth in your heart and mind.

Brothers and sisters, that's what we mean when—at least in one sense—when we talk about the Word as a means of grace. When the Spirit speaks to us through the Word he gives us life. The most significant aspect of that is the new birth we receive when we hear and receive the Gospel message—when we make Jesus Christ our Saviour and Lord. But even for mature saints, the hearing of God's Word continues to be a means of grace. We are never too mature to have our knowledge, understanding, and faith deepened and increased by the Scriptures. Now, to be clear, the precepts—the Scriptures—themselves don't save us or give us grace, but they are a means or a channel by which God communicates his grace to us. And once we find that grace, how can we not avail ourselves of it? This is why it's a mystery to me that so many Christians spend little, or even no time at all, in the Word in their day-to-day lives. If we profess love for God, how can we not desire to live for him, and if we desire to live for him, how can we so casually ignore the means of his empowering grace?

In verse 94 we see that David's troubles aren't gone yet. He's still dealing with affliction and persecution. He writes:

**I am yours; save me, for I have sought your precepts.**

David had the confidence to give himself over to God for help. And it makes perfect sense, because as David's taught us, in our creation we were made by God, by our election we have been chosen and claimed by God, by our redemption we have been made sons and daughters of God, and by our own surrender we have been made servants of God. If we've learned nothing else, it's that God cares for his own. We should be just like David in having the confidence to put ourselves in God's care when we have problems.

But David had a second source of confidence: he had sought God's precepts. David had a love for God's precepts and a realised desire to follow them and that was proof for him of the Spirit's work of regeneration in his life. As a priest a lot of people ask me how they can know if they are truly saved. We have assurance of God's gracious promise to us in our baptism, but how do we know that his grace is alive and well in our lives? How do we know that we haven't somehow rejected it? Friends, the evidence is a desire to follow after God and

to do the things that are pleasing to him. The natural man hates the things of God. If he does try to follow the law, he does it because he feels he has to, not because he loves it and desires to follow it out of gratitude for the grace God has given him. This is why St. John tells us that the evidence of love for God is a love for our brothers and sisters. Remember, the whole law is summed up in two commandments: love God and love your neighbour. And loving your neighbour is the evidence that your profession of love for God is real—because the one who loves God can't help but do the things that please God. There is no better evidence of salvation than a seeking after true holiness.

And that was David's passion. He was in the middle of persecution, but he gives us that familiar line again. Look at verse 95:

**The wicked lie in wait to destroy me, but I consider your testimonies.**

It's a prayer: "Lord, my enemies are out to get me. I put them in your hands. You take care of them—and I know you will—so that I can devote myself to studying your Word and following you." When we can do that—when we can give up worrying about the problems of life so that we can devote ourselves to God—we have evidence of saving faith. What David tells us here is an Old Testament expression of what Jesus tells us in the Sermon on the Mount: "Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you" (Matthew 6:33).

Because he knew God's Word, David had an eternal perspective. In verse 96 he writes:

**I have seen a limit to all perfection, but your commandment is exceedingly broad.**

The world's "perfections" are far from perfect. David had seen Goliath, the strongest, killed with a slingshot; he has seen Asahel, the fastest, overtaken; he has seen Ahithophel, the wisest, fooled; he has seen Absalom, the most beautiful, deformed. David had wealth and power and women, but he saw something greater in God's Word—something that surpassed the best and brightest things the world had to offer him and something that would last for eternity while the things of the world passed away.

And that takes us back to the beginning: "Forever, O Lord, your word is firmly fixed in the heavens. Your faithfulness to all generations." Brothers and sisters, those

words really do mean something and if we truly believe them they will make an impact on our lives. If we believe God's Word is the source of life and a means of grace, we will read it, study it, meditate on it, learn it, and ultimately apply it in our lives that we might live by it. It will become the root and foundation of our faith in our Creator and in Jesus Christ as our redeemer, and it will be our guide as we leave the things of the world behind and follow God, seeking after the things his Word shows us are pleasing to him. As we sing in one of our favourite hymns:

How firm a foundation,  
ye saints of the Lord,  
is laid for your faith  
in his excellent  
word!

Please pray with me: Heavenly Father, thank you for your Word. Thank you that it is as firmly fixed as the heavens and as firmly rooted as the earth's foundations. Reminds us daily of the life-giving power of your Word that we might be enriched with the grace you impart through it. Give us life, we ask Lord, and as we learn and follow your precepts grow and strengthen that life within us that we might better serve you and your kingdom. We ask this in the name of Jesus Christ, our Saviour and Lord. Amen.