

Truth Talk Truth Talk

Psalm 119 – The Word for Life!

Remember to Remember!

Stanza 7 – Verses 49-56

Remember the word to Your servant, Upon which You have caused me to hope. ⁵⁰ This is my comfort in my affliction, For Your word has given me life. ⁵¹ The proud have me in great derision, Yet I do not turn aside from Your law. ⁵² I remembered Your judgments of old, O LORD, And have comforted myself. ⁵³ Indignation has taken hold of me Because of the wicked, who forsake Your law. ⁵⁴ Your statutes have been my songs In the house of my pilgrimage. ⁵⁵ I remember Your name in the night, O LORD, And I keep Your law. ⁵⁶ This has become mine, Because I kept Your precepts.

In the previous stanza the psalmist assured the reader that it is possible to live confidently and consistently before the Lord in the face of external opposition and in spite of a believer's own internal inconsistency. This perseverance is possible because of the enablement God gives to those who humbly petition for strength and life to obey His Law and to walk in the way of the Word!

Every believer will need this assurance at some point in his attempt to keep his commitment to walk in the way of the Word. As you recall, the psalmist is chronicling what he experienced as he set out to walk in this way. In the first stanza, he saw the blessing of God upon the lives of certain men and determined to discover what caused God to bless them. He learned that these men were blessed because of their commitment to observe and obey the Law of the Lord. And, in light of their example, he determined to join them on this path.

The secret to walking the path of divine blessing is revealed in the second stanza of the psalm. These verses identify that secret as knowing and doing God's Word. In staying on the path and not departing to the right hand or to the left, the man of God is assured of success (Joshua 1:8).

However, as the psalmist sets out to follow the path marked out in God's Word, he quickly discovers that this kind of committed walking is easier said than done. Very quickly he encounters major impediments standing in the way of his walk before the Lord. First, in stanza three he encounters opposition and resistance from those walking on the other path – the broad path that leads to spiritual destruction (Matthew 7:13). God's statutes become the object of his mediation and consequently, God's testimonies about life, circumstances, and men become the "counselors" that guide his steps in the way.

The second impediment he encounters is his own spiritual inconsistency. The fourth stanza opens with the man of God knocked off his feet and lying in the dust. He has stumbled and fallen from the path and is desperately crying out for divine aid. He has learned in the bitter dust of his own failure that he cannot walk the path consistently in his own strength. He needs God's power. And this strength comes as a response to his prayer in stanza five where he beseeches God for instruction, illumination, and enablement. He has attempted to walk the path and failed. But even in the dust, he remembers that there were men who managed to walk the path successfully and so he cries out for God to revive his strength. His prayer comprises the eight verses that make up the fifth stanza and his anticipation of God's response is found in the sixth stanza.

But, what will keep the psalmist from slipping in the future? How will God enable him to live confidently and consistently in the face of future opposition or in view of his own spiritual inconsistency? The answer to this question is of utmost importance to anyone who is serious about living for God and walking in the way of His Word. And that answer is the subject of the eight verses that make up the seventh stanza of this psalm. Once again, the answer is wrapped up in God's Word. By observing God's precepts, the psalmist makes them his own (v. 56) and by so doing experiences a reviving of strength, vitality, and spiritual life (v. 50). In short, the psalmist confidently asks God to remember His word to His servant (v. 49) because His servant has remembered God's judgments (v. 52) and His name (v. 55).

This stanza is themed around the concept of remembering. God is called upon to remember and to act in faithful fulfillment of what He has said in His Word. The psalmist points to his own faithful remembrance of God's Word as well as his present remembering of God's character as the ground for this appeal.

Many times believers find themselves in the same difficult situation as the psalmist but lack the confidence to ask Him to remember His Word to them because they have not been living in ways that reflect a remembrance of Him on their part. Sadly, this is often the case with those who have been given the greatest opportunity to avail themselves of God's Word. Pastors can give ample testimony of members in their flock who have made shipwreck of their lives, their marriages, and their ministry because in the midst of their crisis they have refused to "remember" what God has instructed in His Word. Consequently, they live out their lives in the dust of their own failure never experiencing the blessing that comes upon the life of those who, like the psalmist, experience the blessing of being "remembered" by God because they have set themselves to "remember" Him. Sadly, many of these believers have spent years sitting under the sound teaching of God's Word in churches, Christian schools, or Bible colleges and Christian Universities.

Interestingly, the psalmist observes that God has in some way "caused" him to hope or to be confident in God's Word. How did God bring about this confidence and under what circumstances?

I. The Ground of a Believer's Confidence (vv. 49-50)

The Hebrew term "remember" (*zakar*) means much more than to recall something to mind. This is especially true when one considers that the psalmist is asking an omniscient God to "remember." Remembering is more than a function of memory. In the context of biblical literature, "forgetting" and "remembering" have to do with the way a person chooses to act. One can "forget" God's Word in the midst of quoting portions of it by memory. We forget God's Word by refusing to act in conformity to its demands or by rejecting its authority to govern our responses in the circumstances of life. In the same way, "remembering" God's Word is to act in ways that meet His expectations – in other words, to obey.

In verse 49, the psalmist beseeches God to remember His Word. The term "word" used here is further defined in the next verse as the "promise" which has given him life. In other words, the psalmist is asking God to act in accordance with what He has said in the past by fulfilling the commitments and promises He has made to His people. The confident assurance that God will act consistently with His character as it has been revealed in His Word has comforted the psalmist's heart and "revived" his soul in the midst of difficult and dark days. This has always been the case for believers throughout the ages – our confidence is based on God's commitment to consistently fulfill whatever He has said. His Word once spoken is ever valid and thus functions as a source of strength, comfort, guidance, and hope for pilgrims walking the way of the Word.

II. The Formation of a Believer's Confidence (vv. 50-52)

The psalmist has cried out with a strong plea, expressed almost as a demand, asking God to act in accordance with His Word. He has gained life and comfort from his confidence that God will fulfill what He has promised. But how was this confidence formed in his heart? Interestingly, the psalmist states that God caused this confidence in him – a confidence so strong that he boldly petitioned God to “remember” His Own promises. So, how did God cause this confidence to well up in the psalmist’s heart? The answer may surprise us. God often uses the very things we spend most of our energies attempting to avoid in order to produce in us an unshakeable confidence in him. The psalmist identifies affliction and adversity as two primary experiences God uses to drive His people to His Word so they may find strength to continue walking in the way of the Word.

Through Affliction (v. 50)

Often it is in the furnace of affliction that God applies the permanent glaze of confidence in Him to the clay of our lives. There are lessons that can only be learned in the furnace and the psalmist affirms this repeatedly in this psalm. For instance, he testifies that his multitude of affliction (v. 107) was good for him because through affliction he has come to learn the reliability of God’s statutes (v. 71). He readily admits that chief among the benefits of much affliction is that it motivates one to stop straying from the path (v. 67). He notes that at times he has been overwhelmed by trouble and anguish but has found stability in the commandments of God (v. 143). He can confidently call upon God to sustain him in and deliver him from adversity because he has not rejected God’s instruction (v. 153). Finally, at the end of the journey looking back on the experiences of his life, he reminds those who follow after him on the way of the Word that nothing will cause them to stumble if they love God’s Word (v. 165).

How different is the experience of many contemporary believers. In times of suffering and affliction, many turn aside from the path because it leads through a period of suffering. Rather than walk the way God has instead, they lean to their own understanding and turn down a path whose end is death. On the other hand, many of God’s people can attest to the sweet benefit that has become their permanent possession because they were willing to walk with God in the valley even when the path led through the furnace of affliction.

Charles Bridges expressed it well in his helpful commentary on this text when he observed, *One word of God, sealed to the heart, infuses more sensible relief, than then thousand words of men . . . This indeed was the end, for which the Scriptures were written; and such power of consolation have they sometimes administered to the afflicted saint, that tribulation has almost ceased to be a trial, and the retrospect has been the source of thankful recollection.*

Through Adversity (v. 51)

However, the psalmist goes further and specifies the particular nature of the affliction he is experiencing as the adversity that comes because wicked and proud men have him in derision (v. 51).

The grammar of the text makes it clear that the psalmist was under constant and utter mocking and scorning from insolent and arrogant men who were thoroughly godless in their outlook and rebellious in their upward look (v. 157). Nor was their derision limited to mocking words. The nature of his appeals throughout the psalm indicates that at times his life was in danger. For instance, they have dug pits to ensnare him and they almost succeeded in bringing about his death (vv. 85-87). They are actively seeking ways to destroy him (v. 95) and his life is ever in danger (v. 109).

How quickly we are turned aside from the way by those who mock God and scorn His Word. We are warned not to listen to the counsel of the ungodly, nor to live in the way of sinners, and to reject the place of the scorners (Psalm 1:1-3). Yet often the allure of these kinds of people proves to be almost irresistible to many of God’s people. Who can forget the life of Lot who, lured by the counsel of the ungodly, lived the lifestyle of the wicked and was led by scorners to sit in the squalid seat of those who reject God and mock His Word. Sadly, that is the lot of many contemporary

believers. And to keep us from this seat, God often warns us by allowing us to see and experience the truth about these men through the adversity they bring against us! Jesus warned His followers that Satan was a liar and a murder who wanted to kill and destroy them. He still hates the godly man and seeks to destroy his life by means of the adversity of ungodly men. However, if we will let Him, God can use this very adversity to cause us to cling more tightly to the path of obedience revealed in His Word!

And this loyal obedience in the face of adversity was the testimony of the psalmist when he affirmed his commitment to refuse to be diverted from the path set out in God's Word. One commentator put it this way: "In the pressure cooker of all such persecution, he maintained that he had not detoured from the LORD's roadmap for life." What kept him on the path? His intentional recollection of the decisions and judgments God handed down in the past (v. 52). In the face of the derision cast against him by proud scorners and arrogant mockers of God, he recalled the fate of such men in days prior to his own. Perhaps he recalled the fate of those who mocked Noah and were carried away in the devastating judgment God sent through the Flood. Or perhaps he recalled the fiery fate of those wicked men who set themselves against Lot and the angelic messengers. Or perhaps he recalled the affliction and vindication of Joseph. By recalling the just decisions handed down by an all-powerful God, the psalmist strengthened his own resolve to number himself among the righteous! Surely he would echo words that would be inspired hundreds of years after his own time by a fellow pilgrim on the same path who said, "*the Lord knows how to deliver the godly out of temptations and to reserve the unjust under punishment for the day of judgment*" (2 Peter 2:9).

III. The Manifestation of a Believer's Confidence (vv. 53-55)

How is a believer's confidence in God and commitment to the path manifested in daily living? What are the signs that a pilgrim has not lost his way in affliction or been turned aside from the path by adversity?

A Passionate Rejection of Ungodly Men and their Wickedness (v. 53)

The first manifestation of a pilgrim's confidence in God is his response to those who have set themselves against God and against those who have committed to walk obediently before Him. The terminology the psalmist employs is instructive. First, he describes his response as a burning fury that has been ignited in his soul. And the reason for his passionate fury is not what has been done against him but rather what has been done against God and His laws. The objects of his righteous indignation are men who he describes as criminals. Their crime was to forsake God's law. This provides a very interesting insight into the character of these men – they were not pagans who had never understood or possessed God's law. The term "forsake" implies that at one time they possessed this law and were themselves initially placed on the path. However, their arrogance and rebellious heart led them to reject God's instruction (law or "torah") for how He wanted men to walk. And this rejection was criminal in that it turned these men away from the way of God's Word to their own way, a path of wickedness. Sadly, this has been the fate of many pilgrims who started out on the right path but refused to part ways with those who were disobedient to the instruction God had given them. The testimony of Scripture is clear on this matter. Tolerance of disobedient pilgrims leads to acceptance of their counsel and before long, to a turning from the path to join them in their disobedient walk.

The psalmist leaves no question as to where his loyalty lies. He is seized with burning indignation for the right reason – God's Law has been violated. We are often filled with indignation when we have been sinned against by another. But this was not true of the psalmist. He was angry in the right way and for the right reason. Clearly, he was an early example of a much later instruction from Paul who commanded us to "*be angry and do not sin . . . nor give place to the devil*" (Ephesians 4:26-27).

A Personal Rejoicing in God's Word (v. 54)

Not only does the psalmist manifest confidence in God's Word by his response to those who have disobeyed the Law God had given them, he manifests his confidence by a second response – a personal rejoicing in God's Word. He is manifestly upset that God's laws are being spurned but in the midst of this flagrant wickedness he has a priceless possession that delights his inner man. As a pilgrim in an alien land rejoices in the possessions he carries from his homeland, so the psalmist rejoices in the statutes of God as he sojourns in a faraway land.

In his fine work on this passage George Zemek observed that “these were not dirges or a repertoire of the blues . . . they were ‘songs of rejoicing.’ The child of God has at his disposal the Divine resources which allow him to praise even from the pits of persecution and peril.”

In an earlier song about the Scripture, the psalmist echoes this sentiment by exulting in the sweetness and preciousness of God's Word when he cried out, “*more to be desired are they than gold, yea, than much fine gold; Sweeter also than honey and the honeycomb. Moreover by them Your servant is waned, and in keeping them there is great reward*” (Psalm 19:10-11).

A Present Remembering of God's Ways (v. 55)

Not only has his confidence in God manifested itself in his response to those who transgress God's laws and in his delight in God's permanent and abiding statements or statutes, it is manifested in a third response – a present remembering of God's character.

The psalmist observes his intentional practice of meditating on God's name in the night when darkness falls and clouds his vision. It is then that he turns his thoughts to God's character. The Hebrew concept of “name” has reference to the character of a person as it is expressed in word and deed. Having already expressed his commitment to remember God's Words (v. 52), the psalmist now affirms his commitment to remember God's ways that spring forth from His nature. What is God like? How does He act? What are His ways? What is acceptable before His sight? All of this and more were the subjects of the psalmist's thoughts in the night.

The writer of Proverbs reminds his reader that *as a man thinks in his heart, so is he* (Proverbs 23:7). And here we are given insight into what the psalmist was thinking in his heart. This was not idle whiling away of the hours – the implication of the text is that this was the intentional focusing of his mind to reflect on what he knew from Scripture about the character and ways of God, whose path he was committed to walk.

And because he knew God intimately and understood His ways, he was committed to following God's instruction in his daily walk. His meditation produced more than mere mental understanding, it produced a way of life. And remembering meant more than engaging memory, it meant engaging the will in order to produce obedient conduct on an daily basis no matter how difficult the path, how dark the way, or how strong the opposition. No matter what he encountered in the path, the psalmist's meditation on God's character resulted in him keeping God's law even when he could not see the end. Truly his delight was in the law of the Lord and meditating on this law created a delight in and understanding of the Lord who gave the law. And as a consequence, his life was a fruitful, stable tree planted deep in the soil whose roots were watered daily by the Word. Thus he could say, “I keep your Law.”

IV. The Permanence of a Believer's Confidence (v. 56)

“This has become mine, because I kept your precepts!” This is an amazing statement summing up a passionate plea asking God to fulfill His Word to the psalmist (v. 49). But what exactly has become the psalmist's and how did he come to possess it? Of the many possible interpretations, perhaps the one that makes the best contextual sense is this – the psalmist has come to possess the ability to understand and obey God's Word on a daily basis. The result of his meditation

on God's character resulted in an understanding and a keeping of God's instruction (torah). And this has become his permanent possession. In other words, the inconsistency that put him in the dust (v. 25) has been resolved and removed by God and the psalmist has been enabled by God to live a life of consistent spiritual obedience in conformity to God's Ways and in obedience to God's Word. And he can do this consistently in the face of affliction and adversity no matter how dark and difficult the path before him may appear.

But what produced this divine enablement from God? How did he receive such a wonderful boon from God? His answer is in the last phrase of the stanza – "because I kept Your precepts." In other words, faithful obedience to God's instructions when the way is hard and the path is dark is difficult. However, when a man trusts God's instructions and does them, his reward is that God enables him to obey even more consistently. In other words, God rewards obedience by enabling more obedience.

Perhaps this is why so many fall away from the path. The adversity and affliction God sends their way to drive them to His Word demands that they trust God implicitly and obey Him blindly. And when they do so, they find He is trustworthy and His Word is reliable and so they can move forward with increased agility and with greater surefootedness. And this comes as one remembers God's faithfulness in the past during the present crisis in order to move forward in the future. By the same token, doubting God today will lead to greater inability to obey God in the future. Small liberties and disobediences today result in devastating departures down the road of life.

Conclusion:

But why does God do this? Why does He delay His promise and put His pilgrims in a place where they must trust and obey and cry out to remind Him to "remember His Word to His servants?"

Though we will never answer this question fully to our satisfaction this side of heaven, we know that a delay on God's part is not due to weakness, forgetfulness, or disinterest on His part. There are reasons and certain passages provide partial insight as to why God delays the fulfillment and deliverance of His people. One such passage would doubtless have been familiar to the psalmist. Moses reminded the people to "*remember that the Lord your God led you all the way these forty years in the wilderness, to humble you and test you, to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep His commandments or not. So He humbled you, allowed you to hunger, and fed you with manna which you did not know nor did your fathers know, that He might make you know that man shall not live by bread alone; but man lives by every word that proceeds from the mouth of the LORD*" (Deuteronomy 8:2-3).

The Puritan preacher, Thomas Manton explained that God's delays are designed first, to try our faith to the utmost to see if we can and will trust God for things we cannot see. Second, to try our patience to see if we will obey God as children worthy of His promise . . . when it is hard and when we are weak. Finally, to test our love to see if we will hold fast to God when it seems he has abandoned or forgotten us.

Manton went on to remind his hearers that in such times, "believers may humbly challenge God upon His Word and seek the full performance of what He has promised."

Perhaps the reason so many of us never see the full performance of what God has promised is our appalling unfamiliarity with the Word of God that reveals the God of the Word. Plainly put, God does not remember those who do not remember Him! And remembering God demands a passionate and persistent commitment to love, learn, and live out God's will as revealed in His Word. And when we determine to do this, we will be able to say with the psalmist, "***This has become mine!***"