

Truth Talk Truth Talk

Psalm 119 – The Word for Life!

Staying Obedient and Faithful in Spite of Sinful Inclination

Stanza 4 – Verses 25-32

My soul clings to the dust; Revive me according to Your word.²⁶ I have declared my ways, and You answered me; Teach me Your statutes.²⁷ Make me understand the way of Your precepts; So shall I meditate on Your wondrous works.²⁸ My soul melts from heaviness; Strengthen me according to Your word.²⁹ Remove from me the way of lying, And grant me Your law graciously.³⁰ I have chosen the way of truth; Your judgments I have laid before me.³¹ I cling to Your testimonies; O LORD, do not put me to shame!³² I will run the course of Your commandments, For You shall enlarge my heart.

In this edition of “Truth Talk” we continue our study of Psalm 119 by looking at the fourth stanza. The first stanza (vv. 1-8) stressed the priority of personal obedience of God’s word as the foundation for living a life that pleases God. The psalmist further developed this truth in the second stanza (vv. 9-16) by revealing that such obedience requires an attitude that desires to know God’s Word as well as an aptitude to diligently retain and obey the instruction contained therein. The third stanza (vv. 17-24) revealed this kind of life will encounter strong resistance from those who opposed God and His Word.

While it is an assured promise from God’s Word that the man who seeks God and commits to His Word will be blessed, that blessing does not at all preclude trial and affliction. This stanza demonstrates that the psalmist who so passionately exhorts his readers to pursue God through His Word is not exception. Yet, even in the midst of the affliction and trial, the psalmist reveals that the path to blessing and bountiful life is found in a continued obedience and dedication to God’s Word rather than to the natural responses arising in one’s heart at such times and under such circumstances.

The fourth stanza reveals yet another obstacle standing in the way of the man who chooses to walk the path of righteousness—his own sinful inclination. Whereas in the third stanza the opposition was external, here in this stanza the psalmist is confronted by an internal opponent, his sin nature. The terms he uses and the intensity with which he expresses his anguish (vv. 25, 28) all point to his realization that his worthy aspiration has been assailed by sinful failure on his part. Yet, even in abject humiliation and deep soul anguish, the psalmist refuses to give up his quest. In his brokenness he cries out to God for aid, and with confidence borne out of past experience, he sets out on the path with renewed resolve anticipating both forgiveness and enabling grace so that he might run where he once was content to walk—in the way of God’s commandments.

This stanza divides naturally into two sections, each introduced by a question born out of failure and desperation. In the first section, the Psalmist expresses his humiliation (v. 25), and in the second he cries out in the agony produced by his humiliation (v. 28). Not only has he found the path he has chosen to be difficult, he has failed in some unstated way and departed from the “way.” A mark of a true believer is how he feels about his sinful failure. Often it is easy to excuse failure and sin precisely because it is hard to walk the path of righteousness and stay righteous. This is especially true when faced with affliction and scorn on every side. However, for a man to be blessed, he must deal with even his own failures in a righteous way—by taking them to God rather than covering them, excusing them, or ignoring them.

I. Help When Facing the Humiliation of Failure (vv. 25-27)

The psalmist acknowledges his deep humiliation and repentance in an unforgettable image—“my soul cleaves to the dust” (v. 25). Later in this stanza will cleave to God’s testimonies (v. 2), but here the image is that of a person prostrated on the ground with his entire body and face pressed hard into the dust. Clearly he has been brought low by his failure and he has bowed low in submission to God. Interestingly, he does not mention his sin or the point of his failure. Reading through Daniel there is no mention of failure or sin ascribed to the prophet. This does not mean Daniel had no sin, clearly as a sinner, he did struggle as do all men. However, perhaps we should consider that what may have appeared to be a very slight infraction to others, not even worthy of mention, to a man desiring to seek God and obey him from the heart – even a slight sin is a serious offence against God and not to be passed over lightly.

How often have you come to God with some sin or failure and treated it as a minor matter hardly worth mentioning. Charles Bridges in his famous commentary on Psalm 119 made this observation: “Men often make this same confession but there is no ‘striving’ – not humiliation, no prayer, no faith in God’s Word. Rather, we are almost glad to admit our state with no real desire to exert ourselves to avail the single necessary cure! We will not get better by mere mourning over our sin or our deadness. Our indisposition to our spiritual duty is not a weakness . . . it is a sin to be confessed and abandoned. So, sift the character of your confession. Is it a habitual, persevering overcoming conflict with sin? Or do you engage in fruitless bemoaning of your state when you would be better served by exercising yourself to come to God’s Word to obey what you find therein?”

The Psalmist was not content with such meager repenting, instead he cries out to God for reviving (v. 25). The term he utilized expresses more than just a desire to live and survive. It expresses the desire to live a full and blessed life – the kind of blessed life he observed in stanza to which he himself had aspired! Further, he is under no misconception as to what will bring life to his fallen state. He will be enlivened by God but it will be according to God’s Word. Again, the psalmist points to the centrality of God’s Word for living that pleases God. Earlier, he noted that the Word could cleanse a man from sin – now he stands in need of that cleansing and he comes confidently to God seeking it for himself.

His confidence stems from past experience. He has recounted his “ways” to God in the past, and God has answered him (v. 26). The idea of coming to God with “words” when one has sinned is an important biblical principle. Hosea instructs God’s sinning people to return to Him and to take “words” with them as they went (Hosea 14:1-2). However, mere words were not enough. These people had come once before with “words” and were met with silence from God (Hosea 6:1-3). Words had to come from a heart broken over sin and humbled before God. Those words would be heard and the psalmist gives personal testimony of God’s faithfulness to forgive him in the past (v. 26).

His past experience with God has given him the confidence to come again in this present time of need. And, he is bold to pray for instruction in the thing that will give him life and vigor again – God’s statutes (v. 26). Specifically he is asking God to for present help in understanding and embracing the ethical demands of the way of God’s precepts. The term “precepts” speaks of God’s orders or expectations. The psalmist has departed from the way prescribed by these orders and is now desiring divine assistance in returning to that path and remaining on it. He is asking for more than just intellectual understanding. He is asking God to give him internal, ethical insight into what pleases God. This insight belongs exclusively to God Who can choose to reveal it or to hide it from men (Isaiah 29:14). Recognizing his need of Divine assistance, the Psalmist cries out for God to teach him and to make him understand the right way. He is confident that the result of God doing this for him will be a continual meditation on God’s wonders.

God’s past faithfulness emboldened him to come in his present need and ask for the very thing he needed to continue his walk in the path of the righteous – a return to obeying God’s Word produced by a renewed enablement to delight in and meditate on the Law of the Lord.

II. Comfort When Facing the Anguish of Failure (vv. 28-32)

Not only was the Psalmist humiliated by his failure, he was deeply grieved. He expresses his grief as though his soul were melting away in tears (v. 28). Earlier in the stanza he asked the Lord to revive him; here he asks God to strengthen him. What is the solution for a soul being crushed by grief over sin? God's strength and support. And like the reviving (v. 25), this strength and support is also from God's Word (v. 28).

But the psalmist wants something specific from God. He wants to be delivered or turned away from a "way" or path – the false path, the way of lying/falsehood (v. 29). Instead, he desires that God would grant him His law. In other words, the psalmist wanted God to turn him away from the path of lying by causing him to obey His law. Again, deliverance from sin is found only in obeying God's law and strength for such obeying comes only from God.

Again, the psalmist points to his past record as grounds for his present request. He has chosen the faithful way and he has placed God's ordinances before him (v. 30). The idea expressed here is that of an carefully thought-out choice based on full agreement to God's righteous rules. His present request is that God would not allow him to come to shame because of a refusal on God's part to act on his behalf in answer to his prayer for revival and strength according to God's Word.

This present request is accompanied by more than the record of a past choosing on his part to obey God. It is accompanied by a present commitment to keep obeying. He describes his present commitment as "clinging" to God's testimonies. The idea expressed by "cling" is to conform to, to hold on to something – in this case, God's testimonies. In the opening verse of this stanza he was "cleaving" to the dust, here he is cleaving just as hard to God's testimonies. And, in light of both his past record and his present commitment, he cries out, "Yaheweh! Help me!" "Don't let me come to shame!"

The reason he is desperate for God to intervene is found in his future desire to "run" in the way of God's commandments. In other words, the psalmist is making his case along these lines. "I have a present desire to "run" or to live my life according to your commandments. I have had a past record of doing so. That past record is grounded in both my choice to walk this path as well as my commitment to do so in spite of opposition and trouble. However, I have failed at some point in the journey and I am now humiliated and anguished by my failure. I am coming to you for help to continue walking—no, running—on the path. I can't do this unless you revive me and strengthen me. What I most need is for you to enlarge my heart (v. 32)."

What is an enlarged heart? It is simply increased capacity that comes from God to obey His commands with a whole heart! The New Testament reminds us we have not because we ask not. Although the Psalmist did not have that verse, he understood the concept and he did not fail to come to God in faith and ask. Nor should we!

We often desire to walk the path but are so easily derailed by opposition or by our own internal sinful inclination. The answer to both is the same – Divine assistance. But, that divine assistance comes from God's Word. Therefore we must ask, as the psalmist asked, for God to instruct us and to enable us to do His Word in our lives. In other words, we need to ask God to enlarge our heart's capacity to understand His word more so that we can obey Him more! May that be your prayer in the weeks ahead.