

Truth Talk Truth Talk

Psalm 119 – The Word for Life!

Staying Obedient and Faithful in Tough Times

Stanza 3 – Verses 17-24

Deal bountifully with Your servant, That I may live and keep Your word. ¹⁸ Open my eyes, that I may see Wondrous things from Your law. ¹⁹ I am a stranger in the earth; Do not hide Your commandments from me. ²⁰ My soul breaks with longing For Your judgments at all times. ²¹ You rebuke the proud -- the cursed, Who stray from Your commandments. ²² Remove from me reproach and contempt, For I have kept Your testimonies. ²³ Princes also sit and speak against me, But Your servant meditates on Your statutes. ²⁴ Your testimonies also are my delight And my counselors.

In this edition of “Truth Talk” we continue our study of Psalm 119 by looking at the third stanza. The first stanza (vv. 1-8) stresses the priority of personal obedience of God’s word as the foundation for living a life that pleases God. The psalmist further develops this truth in the second stanza (vv. 9-16) by revealing that such obedience will require both an attitude that desires to know God’s Word as well as an aptitude to diligently retain and obey the instruction contained therein. In other words, the first stanza speaks of the blessing that comes to a person who is determined to live in wholehearted obedience to God’s Word and the second stanza reveals that the best time to begin this lifelong pursuit is when one is young.

In the third stanza (vv 17-24) we are, for the first time in this psalm, introduced to the reality that trials and afflictions will be the expected lot of one who chooses the path introduced in the first two stanzas. This has always been the difficulty for believers in any dispensation. We have been so accustomed to thinking that the blessing promised to those who live in accordance with God’s Word necessarily involves ease, comfort, and prosperity when in fact the opposite is true. 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. And, in the midst of his deep affliction, the psalmist lifts his voice to God and prays.

This stanza naturally divides into two sections each reflecting a specific petition of the psalmists prayer as he endures extreme affliction and persecution. In the first half of the stanza (vv. 17-21) the psalmist prays for relief in the face of the spiritual apathy of his enemies. In the second half (vv. 22-24) he prays for respect in spite of the slander against him by his enemies. If our contention regarding Daniel’s authorship is correct than the context for this stanza presents itself easily to our imagination. It is not hard to imagine Daniel, knowing that the Chaldean counselors were plotting his demise and speaking to Nebuchadnezzar, committing himself afresh to his continual practice of seeking out God’s Words and making them his own counselors! And if we are at all correct in this surmising, Daniel’s triumph over the lions (those in the den as well as those in the court) is a comforting reminder that there is indeed bountiful life for those who choose to follow the

path established by God's Word rather than leaning to their own understandings when confronted with fierce opposition and strong affliction.

Prayer for Relief in the Face of Spiritual Apathy (vv. 17-21)

The psalmist's passion is expressed immediately in his plea for God's bountiful provision (v. 17). The term used indicates that the psalmist is not looking for mere deliverance or even for physical provision in the midst of adversity. Rather, he is asking God to give him richness and fullness in life. Obviously, if this is Daniel, he was living in the midst of opulence and was personally enjoying wealth and provision from his favored position as Nebuchadnezzar's counselor. Clearly, Daniel reminds the believer that no matter how favorable his earthly position in life might be, he is still an outcast, an alien, and a stranger on earth (v. 19). The proof of this comes in the attitude and actions exhibited toward God's servant by those around him who have determined to oppose God and who have chosen to disregard His commandments (v. 21). These men are described as proud, presumptuous, rebels against God. And their hatred and rejection of God Who is in heaven is directed to those who serve Him on earth.

Their pride has resulted in an aggressive apathy that manifests itself in a total disinterest and disregard of anything God has commanded or ordained as pleasing to Him. In contrast, the psalmist aligns himself with God and acknowledges that true bountiful living comes solely as a result of obedience to His Word. Interestingly, he begins by asking God for this bountiful spiritual life but the reason he wants this bounty is not to enjoy life but rather to more effectively live in obedience to God's Word (v. 17). It is as though the psalmist is asking for more life in order to render more obedience to God. In other words, his desire for more abundance is to render more abundant obedience. And it is not surprising that God delights to honor requests given with this motivation. However, his desire for abundant life in order to render more abundant obedience is impossible apart from Divine illumination (v. 18). So, he prays that God would "open" his eyes to see more of God's wondrous Word. The term here for "open" is the same one used in the account where God opened the eyes of rebellious Balaam so that he could see the angel standing before him on the path. It speaks not so much of an inability to see but rather of a removal of a covering or a veil. Daniel is acknowledging that in spite of his tremendous learning and academic skill, he is powerless to see and understand God's Word apart from God's enablement.

This illumination is especially necessary because his true position on earth is that of a stranger or an alien. While he is living on the earth and in the context of a fallen culture and society, there is a sense in which he, as a child of God, is completely alien to that culture and society. He cannot find direction for life from the same sources those around him are drawing direction from. Nor does he desire direction from those sources. Rather, his soul is crushed and internally broken by his desperate longing for direction from God's commandments and judgments. Only here in God's Word will he find the relief that he so desperately desires when confronted by those whose lives are lived in total apathy and outright rebellion against his God.

Prayer for Respect in the Face of Slander from Enemies (vv. 21-24)

In this section of the stanza, the psalmist calls attention to his enemies by identifying who they are, what they are like, and what they do. These people are clearly in positions of power and influence and therefore have the ability to directly impact his life in grave ways. The psalmist however comforts himself by remembering that God, Who is mightier than his enemies, has cursed such ones (v. 21). After coming before God and reviewing what his enemies are doing against him, the psalmist appeals that God would "roll" away the heavy burden of their scorn and contempt. And as he does so, he does not hesitate to remind God that in contrast to the rebellion and arrogance of his opponents, he has kept God's reminders before his eyes and guided his path by their testimony (v. 22).

In a powerful statement, the psalmist reveals that his response to affliction and persecution is governed by a deliberate and careful study of God's ordinances, particularly those associated with

what God required for worship and access (statutes in v. 23). No personal vendetta or revenge wrongfully taken was worth losing this access to God in worship.

Finally, the psalmist contrasts the wicked counselors who everywhere attacked him with the counselors who were always with him and who were for him not against him. These counselors were God's testimonies or His works and words. These counselors are always available and their counsel is unerringly accurate and faithful. And in following them, Daniel found life and favor before both the King of Heaven and the earthly monarch he served and at times suffered under.

So it will always be for God's faithful servants. If we are truly living in the way of Heaven we are going to be necessarily strangers and aliens on earth and we can expect to be treated correspondingly. When we suffer unfairly and we need relief from the pressures that come because we are aliens, we must turn to God and continue to lay hold on His Word. When we desperately desire respect we must seek it first from God and only then will we be in a place to receive it from men in due time. In either case, believers must commit themselves afresh to keeping the Word of God as the reason for wanting more life and this will only happen when God opens our eyes and causes us to see that the wonders in His Word far surpass any earthly delight. Then, and only then, will we desire to live for the right reason. May this be our prayer in the days ahead.