

HOW I LOVE YOUR LAW, O LORD!

MEDITATIONS ON **Psalm 119** ABOUT LIFE IN THE WORD



ROBERT A. SNYDER

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The picture on the front cover is taken from a set of samples provided with Microsoft Works.

To the congregation in Christ known as
Open Door Bible Church,
in the desire that we will love the word more deeply together—

*How I love Your law, O Lord!
Daily joy its truths afford;
In its constant light I go,
Wise to conquer ev'ry foe.*

*Your commandment in my heart
Truest wisdom can impart;
To my eyes Your precepts show
Wisdom more than sages know.*

*While my heart Your word obeys,
I am kept from evil ways;
From Your law, with You to guide,
I have never turned aside.*

*Sweeter are Your words to me
Than all other good can be;
Safe I walk, Your truth my light,
Hating falsehood, loving right.*

—a paraphrase of Psalm 119:97-104,
author unknown to Open Door Bible Church

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Introduction

“I opened my mouth, and panted: for I longed for thy commandments” (Psalm 119:131).

At first, a very long poem on the word of God may strike one as boring. Certainly, this was true in my own life for many years. I knew of this psalm--how it was the longest chapter in the Bible (one hundred and seventy-six verses!), how almost every verse had a reference to the word of God using different labels, and (later) how every stanza of eight verses begins with the same Hebrew letter (often put at the heading in our English translations)--but it remained a forest of undifferentiated trees to me. Almost every verse appeared the same as the last, just as almost every inhabitant of a strange land looks so similar to the last fellow. Then God began to open this psalm to me (v. 130).

It perhaps started with a message on the life of J. Hudson Taylor, given at our church by Jason Janz, pastor of Providence Baptist Church in downtown Denver. Instead of simply describing the life of the great missionary chronologically, Jason interwove verses of Psalm 119 into the narrative, forming an interfusion of word and life that moved me to tears. So beautiful! Then, over a year later, stanzas started speaking to me *very intensely*, resonating with my own inner desires and confirming my outer experiences. As a result, the Log College prayer group I lead began our year together by reading a stanza apiece of this great psalm, in round-robin fashion, and then going to prayer. It was gripping. Truly, this psalm is one of the masterpieces of the Hebrew Bible. God be praised!

Before beginning your journey through this psalm, let me give you some hints as to its larger meaning. First, the psalm is indeed a long poem on the word of God, but it so much more than that: it is also a long prayer. Interwoven in this psalm is the life-pleadings of the psalmist, who is often asking God for deliverance (“salvation”) from persecution (a recurrent theme in this psalm), as well as expressing his intense desire to know, obey, and keep the commands of God. Often, the emotion is shockingly strong, as exhibited, for example, in the verse given above. Moreover, the statements made about God’s word indicate a full human engagement, describing the word as sweeter than honey and more precious than 24-karat gold, having delights described as sport and containing wonders that exceed natural human understanding. Anyone not stirred by the statements of this psalm must recheck the reality of their own spiritual condition.

Second, it is not only a prayer, but also a demonstration of life as it should be. The balance in this psalm is remarkable. For example, while the psalm is full of emotion, but it is not unbridled or inordinate emotion, for it is all packaged within the orderly arrangement of a large acrostic, with intricate figures of speech that in the Hebrew use internal chiasms and wordplays that suggest a mastery of the language and a lot of design. Moreover, the psalm is no mere academic description or use of the word of God. It is life fully lived, with the word of God so intimately interwoven in all experience that it cannot be extricated from this life. That is the way God made us: to *live* by means of the word of God (cf. Matthew 4:4). No wonder these words are not merely poetry, but lyrics meant to be sung! The entirety of life and the entirety of man is meant to be lived in the word of God. What a strong message for us today!

Ultimately, this psalm finds its greatest fulfillment in the life of Jesus Himself. Though there are a few statements that would not seem to apply (for example, the reference to going astray in v. 176), for the most part, Jesus is the embodiment of this intense life in the word. Even the references to salvation have apt fulfillment in the experience of the Cross, when Jesus refused to save Himself, but instead, entrusted Himself as fully human to God (cf. Hebrews 5:7; 1 Peter 2:23). To read this psalm as the deeply personal aspirations and prayers of Jesus Christ lends great aid to our worship. It also aids our own personal walk, for we fulfill this psalm as individuals only in Christ--not by directly imitating this psalm, but as yearning that the Spirit of this psalm, the Spirit of Christ, will once again breathe in us these same aspirations and prayers. May all the servants of Christ who read these words find more and more a taste of these things in their own personal experiences, to the glory of God in Him. Amen.

A Note to the Reader:

Since these meditations are separate units printed without the biblical text, you may find it helpful in personal devotions first to read the eight-verse stanza, then to read the meditation, taking one stanza per day. God bless you as you carefully observe His testimonies and seek to know the Living God Himself (Psalm 119:2)! Amen.

Aleph • The Blessedness of Blamelessness (vv. 1-8)

“Blessed are the undefiled in the way, who walk in the law of the LORD.”

Do you wish to feel no shame the next time you open your Bible or hear a sermon? Then pray for a complete walk, a stable walk, with set patterns of obedience and an established lifestyle. No, do not just pray, but yearn, yearn with Spirit of the Christ, who cried to God in the prophetic psalms, “O that My ways were directed to keep Thy statutes! Then shall I not be ashamed, when I have respect unto all Thy commandments” (Psalm 119:5-6).

Thus begins the largest chapter in the Bible--a psalm with ocean swells of deep spiritual emotion, all in prayer around the law of God. As a wisdom song, this psalm teaches us through personal example where success is found--in living our lives by the guidebook of God. Just listen to the opening declaration:

“Blessed are the undefiled in the way, who walk in the law of the LORD.
Blessed are they that keep His testimonies, and that seek Him with the whole heart.
They also do no iniquity: they walk in His ways.
Thou hast commanded us to keep Thy precepts diligently” (vv. 1-4).

Literally, the Hebrew phrase “Blessed are...” signifies the group to be envied with desire. It is a father with his hand on his son, pointing and saying, “Oh, be like those men! They may not be happy now, but watch them in the end.” How necessary is this pointing! The first thing in wisdom is to know the goal, but how many go through life aimless, hoping for happiness, but either having no goal or striking out at the wrong goal--a goal often given by the media of our day! We desperately need our Father’s advice.

In short, **ultimate happiness comes through universal holiness**, which is not sinlessness, but a life characterized by *integrity* and *investigation* into both the commandments and character of God (vv. 1-2). In both cases, the order is important. If we are not sincere, really wanting to obey, our investigations will be futile, for the blessed are those who research Him “with the whole heart” (v. 2). Moreover, if we fail to observe what He says, we will fail in researching who He is, for His commandments are “testimonies” of His intrinsic character (v. 2). Amazingly, strict obedience is a pathway to knowing God, which may be why the section ends with God commending those who “do no iniquity,” in accordance with God’s desire that we “keep [His] precepts diligently” (vv. 3, 4).

At this point, the psalmist’s *declaration* yields to *aspiration*:

“O that my ways were directed to keep Thy statutes!
Then shall I not be ashamed, when I have respect unto all Thy commandments.
I will praise Thee with uprightness of heart, when I shall have learned Thy righteous judgments.
I will keep Thy statutes: O forsake me not utterly” (vv. 5-8).

What is true of blessed men in general, he longs to be true of himself: “Oh!” he says, or as the Germans would say (more akin to the Hebrew), “Ach!” He aches with longing to do exactly what God desires--*to keep His rules*, a concept repeated three times (vv. 4, 5, 8). That is his wish. For this wish to come true, he needs to learn, which will be the basis of hearty praise (v. 7), and he needs God Himself, which is the final petition of the stanza: “O forsake me not utterly” (v. 8). As indicated perhaps in the Hebrew, it is *God* who must establish his ways to keep His statutes (v. 5).

Is this legalism? It is legalism to focus on the law of God in our Gospel age? No. The Psalm itself is the Spirit of Christ Himself, breathing out His perfect prayers through the prophet David (cf. Acts 2:29-31). Further, we who are truly Christians have been justified by His blood and sanctified in His Spirit that “the righteousness of the law might be fulfilled in us” (Romans 8:4). True, in Christ, the Sabbath and other cultural and ritual practices of the Old Testament have now been fulfilled, taking on new shape due to the New Order (cf. Galatians 4:1-11; Colossians 2:16-23); however, the moral law, rooted in the nature of reality, is just as relevant today as ever, and the more we are filled with the Spirit of Christ, the more we also will breathe out the aspirations of the psalmist *to obey that law*. This is so important, for God has not given His commandments to be left unexamined or dismissed as irrelevant. He expects us to keep them “diligently” (Psalm 119:4).

Do you? Do I? Do we yearn to learn, and long to obey His law? Jesus did. He delighted to do God's will, whose law was within His very heart (Psalm 40:8; cf. Hebrews 10:5-10). It is my conviction that such a spirit is not common today. To observe God's testimonies and to research God Himself is not the heart-throb and dogged commitment of many, but it is of the blessed (v. 2). Such are the *blameless*--not those who are absolutely sinless, for none are (Ecclesiastes 7:10), but those who live a life of integrity before God and men, having no gaping inconsistencies between heart, hand, and mouth. That such a life is possible for us now is shown by the plural adjective of verse one: "Blessed are *the blameless* [plural] in way, who walk in the law of the LORD" (author's translation). According to God's estimation, this is the norm: for us to have heart-felt longing to be stable in obedience, giving careful attention to God's testimonies and character, and thus having much gratitude in being taught. Such a life may not be *common*, and many may call it *radical*, but God considers it *normal*. It is the life of His Son.

May the Lord bless us with such aspirations today! We will find yourself isolated, *but we will have Him with us*--and the prayer at the end of the paragraph will make much sense: "I will keep Thy statutes: O forsake me not utterly" (Psalm 119:8).

Beth • Delighting the Dirt out of Youth (vv. 9-16)

“Wherewithal shall a young man cleanse his way? by taking heed thereto according to Thy word.”

Are you young? Or, are you concerned about the young? This stanza asks and answers a very important and relevant question: *How will a young person preserve his purity?* Answer: By the word--*the word of God*. By nature, we all start out dirty; it is only by the word that we become clean and then preserve our purity.

But how many young people today know the word? Many attend church or Christian school, and some read their Bible regularly, but how many *know* the word? The mechanics of this stanza are simple and, to the wise in heart, quite sweet: **memorization, recitation, and meditation** (vv. 11, 13, 15). We first conceal the word in our heart as a treasure, and repeat it on our lips with pleasure, before we are able to rehearse it in our mind with profit. Necessary and simple. *But why do these steps so often fail to take hold of a young life?*

If you are young, I want you to consider this question: Do you know the message God has given you in the Scriptures? Can you parrot back to Him what He has given to you? In other words, do your lips repeat what came from His mouth (v. 13)? If not, why not? Why have you not retained what you have so often heard or read, after so many hours of training? Or, if you have never been trained, why have you so often passed by the opportunity, as if the Bible were not at least worth a hearing? Please consider these missing factors.

First, put your heart into it. Both verses ten and eleven begin with the heart, even once with the *whole* heart:

“With my *whole heart* have I sought Thee: O let me not wander from Thy commandments.
Thy word have I hid in mine *heart*, that I might not sin against Thee” (vv. 10-11).

In other words, be sincere; or as Jim Elliot once said, “Wherever you are, be all there.” Whether in the pew or in the desk, watch where your heart is (cf. Proverbs 4:23). So amazing is our design by God that in our heart, we can be all over the universe while not moving a muscle--and only God knows! Oh, let your heart go out to God and let His word come into your heart.

Second, direct your pursuits to God. Seek Him. Make Him your pursuit in life--and not to *find* Him merely, but to *know* Him, as indicated by the Hebrew word for “seek”. In other words, it is not enough to be good or even to obey, but rather to know *Him* and to not sin against *Him*. When you are sincerely able to exclaim, “Blessed art Thou, O LORD!” then you will be able to say with gusto, “Teach me Thy statutes!” (v. 12).

Third, pitch all your delights towards His word. In the final analysis, your delights will make or break you. So many learn and learn and learn (or so it seems), and never retain the word in their memory because deep down they take no delight in it. If they *did* delight in His rules, then they would not *forget* His word; then their meditation and investigation would bring accumulation, and their accumulation would fuel even more delight, as a man rejoices in great riches (vv. 14-16). As it is, other delights have caught the imagination and they remain in their sin.

This business of delight shows how utterly essential it is to watch over your entertainment choices. Far from the taboo-ridden rules of what is permitted or forbidden, the question here is more simple: *What do you delight in?* It could be G-rated and saccharine-sweet, a favorite game or a quiet past-time, but if it takes the center of your affections, you could sit for hours under the word of God and receive very little benefit. You have got to *love* the word for the word to cling to you! But oh, if you do!

So how about you? Will you be among the fools, who “despise wisdom and instruction,” treating most other things as more important than spiritual learning (Proverbs 1:7)? Or, will you be among the few, who take pleasure in the word and thus treasure the word, retaining it in their hearts and retraining their lives according to its truth? Only they are clean, and give evidence that their souls have been born of God by the Spirit of God through the word of God (1 Peter 1:22-25). They alone resemble the Son of God, who never shared our dirty nature, who yet perfectly preserved His purity through delighting in the word. Only in Him and by His word are we able to have clean hearts like His (cf. Proverbs 20:9; Acts 15:9; Romans 10:17). Oh, what a blessing is the word of Christ! Hallelujah!

Gimel • “Lord, Treat Me Well!” (vv. 17-24)

“Deal bountifully with Thy servant, that I may live, and keep Thy word.”

In asking God for anything, one key ingredient is motive. “You ask, and do not receive,” explained James, “because you ask amiss, that you may consume it upon your lusts” (James 4:3). In other words, selfish prayers go unanswered. Why should God sustain the life of someone who denies Him His glory, either through defiant disobedience or through disinterested negligence? Why supply the enemy with ammunition, or give the ball to the opposing team!

In this stanza, the psalmist models proper motivation. He asks God for general welfare--literally, “Treat Your servant well!”--and then adds as his motive: “I will live, that I may keep Your word” (v. 17, literal translation). In other words, we must *live to obey*, and then expect to receive what we pray. Then logic will work in our favor. Why would God not supply resources for an obedient servant to do the job? Jesus certainly had this expectation. Being ever obedient, He knew that the Father heard Him always (cf. John 8:29; 9:30-32; 11:42).

In this stanza, the psalmist is away from home in a hostile land, not unlike ourselves, who are “strangers and pilgrims” on the earth (1 Peter 2:11). As such, *what should we ask from God?* Having already determined that we too must live to obey, what specifically should we ask for, and what would embody the good life now, while we are yet far from home?

First, we need to ask for and long for spiritual vision (vv. 18-20). Within the pages of the written word of God are *wonders*--realities that go beyond our natural understanding, such as the Trinity, the Atonement, and the great mysteries of God’s incarnational interactions with mankind in His Son, His word, and His sovereignty. To behold these things requires God to uncover our eyes, as much as Balaam needed unveiled eyes to see the angel in the way, or as Elisha’s servant, to see the armies of God (v. 18). In the New Testament, praying for this spiritual vision is a recurrent theme (see Ephesians 1:15ff; 3:14ff; Colossians 1:9ff).

This gift of sight is necessary because we are on earth, and not in heaven. If we were in heaven, we would see clearly, and not “through a glass, darkly” (1 Corinthians 13:12); but we are not. We are sojourners here, even as Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; and therefore, we pray, “Do not hide Your commandments from Me” (v. 19). **Please note:** This psalm was written after the Israelites had settled in the land. Not even the promised land of Palestine stopped God’s people from identifying themselves as resident aliens, looking for a heavenly country (Hebrews 11:14-16; cf. 4:7-9). Even the Messiah Himself was a Sojourner in Israel!

Longing, ever longing so intensely for this vision, the psalmist ends his personal prayer for his own welfare by saying that his soul is crushed like grain into grits out of constant longing for the decisions of God in heaven (v. 20). Oh, experienced Christian! Consider the prophetic fulfillment of this verse. Far from coasting on His past knowledge, your Lord and mine was *ground up* with intense desire to know more, learn more, and see more; yet are we, who possess His very Spirit, to sit complacent Sunday by Sunday as if no wonder remained in God’s word yet to be seen or yet to be seen more clearly? *Oh, to be graciously ground to grits with desire!*

Second, we need to entrust our reputations to God, and trust in His word for direction (vv. 21-24). In contrast to the soul longing to see into God’s word stands *the autonomous soul*--the “proud that are cursed” (v. 21). How emblematic of modern man! Oh the praise that is given to independent genius, while reliance on divine revelation is smeared as a shameful crutch! Granted, it is shameful to rely on other human beings to the detriment of one’s own mind; but to rely on God, who sees all, is wise, especially in contrast to relying on the limited vision of human science, so cramped by the confines of space and time. Rightly did the wise man say, “He who trusts in his own heart is a fool” (Proverbs 28:26).

In such a shameful context, *what should we do?* Should we rebuke the proud and defend our honor? What does this stanza prescribe?

Amazingly, there is both keen interest and disinterest. On the one hand, the psalmist is keenly interested in his reputation, to the point of asking God, “Remove from me reproach and contempt” (v. 22). On the other, this very prayer shows his disinterest. Not preoccupied with repairing his own reputation, he entrusts it to God, who routinely

rebukes the proud (v. 21), and instead turns to his chief delight: God's testimonies (v. 24). Let the ruling officials say what they will, he is determined to contemplate God's statutes again and again (v. 23).

What a beautiful picture of the life of Christ! Jesus never spoke a word apart from His Father, nor did He act one whit outside His Father's will. In complete obedience to God, He sought no personal glory, and yet instead, He gained public shame. But when government leaders talked about Him--and of course, plotted to destroy Him--still, so far was He from minding men, that He continued to mull over God's rules and to take delight in His testimonies. Far from being distracted by politics, Jesus kept to His mission. In contrast to the circle of conspiracy in high places, God's testimonies were His "men of counsel" (v. 24, literal translation). Being wondrous, these "men of counsel" outnumbered the circle of princes arrayed against Him, and now look who is Lord!

Living to obey. Yearning to see. Longing till crushed. Single-focused, even in a hostile political environment. The Spirit of the Messiah is still speaking to His people today.

Daleth • Revival along the Way (vv. 25-32)

“My soul cleaveth unto the dust: quicken thou me according to Thy word.”

What do you do when you feel close to death--either literally, due to chronic illness or peril, or emotionally, as here, due to grief sapping the moisture from your soul (v. 28)? What do you do when you feel trapped, like there is no place to run, no option but to disobey, and death itself appears to be the only way out--the unpleasant option you seem unfortunately stuck with? *What do you do?*

Before answering, let me clarify that I am not asserting that I have known your circumstances, nor that I have been brought to the dust of death in suffering. As the writer of Hebrews chided his readers, I too have “not yet resisted unto blood, striving against sin” (Hebrews 12:4); *but I know One who has!* Jesus is truly able to sympathize with your circumstances, for He “was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin” (4:16; cf. 2:18). More than once He was troubled, and in the garden His soul was “exceedingly sorrowful, even unto death” (Matthew 26:38; cf. John 12:27). He is able to help you, *really* help you, and in what follows, you will hear how the Messiah Himself dealt with being brought to the dust of death. Therefore, in relying on His Spirit to help you, what should you do?

According to this stanza, you need *inward renewal* and *outward resolution*, in that order.

First, you need inward renewal (vv. 25-28). In general, the means of this renewal is always the same. The Holy Spirit uses prayer and the word to revive our souls: “Quicken thou me according to thy word” (v. 25). As for the word, it is God’s will to give life to each believer (John 6:40). As for prayer, it is God’s delight to hear us when we pray according to His will, and to give the promised life (1 John 5:14-16). Nothing is sweeter to the lifeless soul than the settled conviction that God *can* and *will* give me life through the cross and grace of our Lord Jesus Christ!

Then what? Rather than leaving us with a general prayer, God instructs us on the specifics of revival. *What is your orientation in life?* In other words, what is your “way”? (This word that begins five of the eight lines in this stanza.) Begin the process of revival by recounting your past way to God step-by-step, expecting Him to answer you and inviting Him to teach you His rules (v. 26). This last attitude is crucial. You must be willing to do anything He wants you to do. Next, having considered your way, now consider God’s appointed way, asking Him to give you understanding so that you may consider His wonders (v. 27). In this way, God will pick you up from the dust (v. 28).

Please note: This is the second time in Psalm 119 where beholding the wonders of God is said to require divine illumination (vv. 18, 27). In each instance, seeing these wonders is foundational to the entire process under consideration. Here, seeing the wonder in God’s way is necessary for life to return to your soul, and for hope to revive your spirit. You may feel boxed in unto death, but God is not boxed in. His ways go beyond the reach of human imagination (cf. Ephesians 3:20-21).

Second, you need outward resolution (vv. 29-32). Having considered your way and God’s way, you are now faced with a choice: *Will you choose the false way or the faithful way?* (vv. 29-30). Appearances will deceive you. Too often we think that to avoid inevitable death, we have no other option but to renege on a promise or to pose in a posture, as David did before the king of Gath. Armed, however, with the wonders of God, you now realize new possibilities and have the courage to choose faithfulness over fraudulence. It is time to ask for His law and to agree with His decisions.

The results will be amazing. Instead of sticking to the dust, you will now stick within His testimonies (v. 31a). Instead of relying on yourself to keep face, you will trust God to keep you ultimately from shame (v. 31b). Even more, instead of feeling lifeless and boxed in, you will *run* in the way of God’s commandments, for God will have given your heart *room to run* (v. 32). How freeing! How precious is His grace!

He • Utter Dependence for Inner Obedience against Outer Worldliness (vv. 33-40)

“Teach me, O LORD, the way of Thy statutes; and I shall keep it unto the end.”

In Hebrew, the letter *he* (pronounced “hay”) can be added at the front of a verb to make it speak of causation. There is nothing like this in English, but it works something like this: Add *he* to the verb “return” and it becomes “bring back” (literally, “cause to return”). Similarly, add *he* to the verb “pass over” and it becomes “turn away” (literally, “cause to pass over”), which is how verses 37 and 39 begin. All the verses in this stanza begin with *he*, as indicated by the heading, and many of these verses refer to causation--a feature the psalmist uses to stress *our utter dependence upon God for perseverance in obedience and resistance to worldliness*.

First, with regard to **inner obedience**, consider these requests for causation, translated here into idiomatic English:

- “Direct me, O Jehovah, [regarding] the way of Your statutes, so that I will observe it to the end” (v. 33).
- “Cause me to understand, so that I will observe Your direction,--so that I will keep it with all [my] heart” (v. 34).
- “Cause me to step in the pathway of Your commandments; because in it I take pleasure” (v. 35).
- “Stretch out my heart to Your testimonies, and not to extorted-gain” (v. 36) (Note: *he* is not added to “stretch”).

In each line, the psalmist asks God to *cause* him to obey. For some in the church, this language may seem scandalous, as if man has no free-will. It certainly was to Pelagius, a fourth-century British monk, who reacted sharply to Augustine’s prayer, “Command what You will; give what You command.” To Pelagius, it made no sense for God to command something that *in ourselves* we had no power to obey. Augustine, in response, emphasized man’s absolute need for grace in order to obey. We have a will, but it must be freed by God in order to obey. This need for grace ultimately became the official doctrine of the church at the time of the Reformation.

Please note: The psalmist already delights in the commandments of God (v. 35). In view here is not the disloyal heart of an unbeliever, but the potential of a believer to have a divided heart. It is similar to Psalm 86:11, which says, “Teach me Thy way, O LORD; I will walk in Thy truth: *unite my heart* to fear Thy name.” For Christ, these prayers for causation represented His human need for the grace of perseverance, even as He possessed the human need for instruction. For those of us in Christ and yet still in the body, these prayers represent the remedy to our sinful malady. We “delight in the law of God after the inward man,” as Paul confessed, but we see “another law in [our] members,” a law of sin that wars against our mind, and enslaves us till we die (Romans 7:22-23). We are a divided being. By the Spirit, we make progress in our sanctification; but due to our flesh, we cannot and will not reach perfection on earth (cf. 7:24-25; 8:12-14). Therefore, we cry to God, “Command what You will; give what You command,” and he will do it through the working of the Holy Spirit (8:1-4, 13-15).

Is this your heart-cry, to have grace sufficient for lasting and full obedience? If not, could it be that deep down, you do not delight in the law of God? In other words, you are not yet born again. If so, you need to receive Jesus as Lord and Savior *from your sin*, in order to be born again (John 1:12-13). If, however, your heart-cry is to obey, and to obey to the end and with all your heart, ask God specifically for His *causing-grace* in Christ through the Spirit: “Orient me! Enlighten me! Cause me to walk in Your paths, and extend my heart to Your testimonies!” Ask Him not only for the grace to *will*, but also for the grace to *understand*, for the battle over sin is fought in both realms, and not solely in one or the other, as so many today seem to assume. These prayers of causation are prayers that God loves to hear and loves to answer, for they are in accordance with His will (cf. 1 John 5:14-15).

Second, having sought out grace for inner obedience, you are ready to seek for grace against **outer worldliness**:

- “Cause my eyes to pass over from seeing vanity [i.e. idols]; in Your way, make me alive” (v. 37).
- “Bring into effect Your saying for the benefit of Your servant, which [saying] is for the fear of You” (v. 38).
- “Cause my reproach to pass over, which I fear, for your judgments are good” (v. 39).
- “Behold! I long for Your appointments! In Your righteousness, make me alive” (v. 40).

At the heart of all sin is the façade of life. How much greater is that façade, when amplified by the world! We see the world, and we are tempted to chase after its goods and its approval. This we must resist, and the psalmist turns his attention to this resistance. The switch of focus is signaled by the word “extorted-gain” (v. 36), which is money gained through violent means. It is the gain of short-cut means. Instead of waiting on God to meet his needs, the

man of extorted-gain disregards the needs and rights of others in self-pursuit. At first, he often succeeds, and in that success, he casts reproach on the man who holds fast to God's ways. Therein lies the worldly temptation to defect from God's way.

The psalmist asks God for two things. Against the allure of gain, he asks God to turn away his gaze from *vanity*, for not all that glitters is gold. God's word is golden, for His promises are ever good. In that promise of goodness he has learned to fear God (vv. 37-38). Then, against the allure of respect, he asks God to turn away his reproach, which he fears, due (apparently) to what could result from being wrongly accused. Instead of the world's assessment of his life, he relies on God's good judgments. In both requests, he asks for *life*--for life to stay in God's way, and for life as a sign of God's praise (vv. 37, 40).

Please note: If you are struggling with inner obedience, you will not win against the world. If you are harboring an Achan in the camp, do not expect to gain a victory in the field. God deserves your undivided allegiance, and it is only those who are led in *that* Spirit, who put to death the deeds of the flesh, and *live* (Romans 8:13-14). The good news is that God is eager to give you His precious *grace of causation*--first to unite your heart, and then to overcome the world. The Spirit of Christ, who fulfilled these prayers, is the gift to anyone who asks sincerely (Luke 11:13).

Do not delay. The ending of this psalm puts worship in the context of danger--the danger of idolatry on the one hand, and the danger of slander on the other. Both exert pressures on your allegiance to God, and both threaten to take away your life. "Behold," the psalmist ends, "I long for Your precepts! In Your righteousness, make me alive!" (v. 40). May obedience, worship, and revival--"*Make me alive!*"--be your heart-cry today!

Waw • The Rewards of Patient Obedience (vv. 41-48)

“Let thy mercies come also unto me, O LORD, even thy salvation, according to thy word.”

Easily unnoticed, this stanza begins with the Hebrew letter *waw*, which implies is a continuation of the prayers of the previous stanza: “Let thy mercies come *also* unto me” (v. 41). For this reason, we should see both stanzas as part of a larger unit, with the first stanza giving the prayers for causing-grace and the second stanza giving the prayers for the resultant-grace. In other words, the second stanza answers the question: *Having emerged from the vanities and reproaches of this world, what is the reward of dependent obedience and worship?*

Three rewards are cited:

First, *tangible salvation is the true answer to reproach* (vv. 41-42). Instead of immediately answering reproach, in a vain attempt to clear his name, the psalmist chose rather to pray for deliverance (v. 39). Since God’s loyal-love is eternal, salvation must come eventually; and when it does, the psalmist will be given tangible proof of his integrity in the face of his accusers (cf. Psalm 103:17; 13:5). Therefore, as the apostle Paul also counseled, let us not be bothered by the opinions of men, as if their judgment counts; rather, let us wait “until the Lord come, who both will bring to light the hidden things of darkness, and will make manifest the counsels of the hearts: and then shall every man have praise of God” (1 Corinthians 4:5). In the glory of that day, all false charges will melt away.

Second, *thoughtful recitation is the true hope of longevity* (vv. 43-46). The psalmist makes persevering obedience, secure freedom, and unashamed testimony the result of this prayer: “And take not the word of truth utterly out of my mouth; for I have hoped in thy judgments” (v. 43). It is as he states, “Even in old age, when my memory may threaten to fail me, do not take the word of truth out of my mouth!” Not even parroting will do, for he is not speaking God’s *words*, which can be mindlessly recited, but God’s *word* (singular), that is, His overall message, revealed to us in the Scriptures (cf. John 17:17). Until he dies, he desires the seamless incorporation of God’s word into his everyday conversation.

Are you able to pray that God will not take His word from your mouth? To pray thus, you must first have hidden God’s word in your heart (cf. v. 11). Second, you must also have had God’s word regularly upon your lips, which is a condition that cannot be faked. The heart may hide for a season, but speech is known to all men. *Do they hear God’s word from your mouth?* If not, please note the consequences: You will not have obedience that is steadfast and lasts (vv. 43-44). We may claim to obey, but empty speech reveals an empty heart, for “out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh” (Matthew 12:34). And if the heart is empty of God’s word, true obedience is impossible, for the bulk of Psalm 119 teaches that obedience requires thoughtful education in God’s word (e.g., vv. 33-34). Let us not be like those so-called Christians, who attend church for thirty years and cannot yet give a reasoned explanation from the Scriptures for right behavior. Instead, let us resolve today, by grace, to incorporate the word into our everyday conversation. Then we will be able not only to obey, but also to “walk at liberty” and to “speak...before kings” (vv. 45, 46).

Third, *delightful meditation is the true sport of the righteous* (vv. 47-48). Almost as a postscript, the psalmist adds, “And I will delight myself in thy commandments, which I have loved” (v. 47). The Hebrew word for “delight myself” is used elsewhere for children at play (Isaiah 11:8). Rather than television or athletics, the wise and holy man finds sport in the commandments of God, for he *loves* them (a point repeated). As a result, his reward is further meditation: “...[so that] I will meditate in thy statutes” (v. 48).

Imagine! Finding the commandments of God a *sport*! To the regenerate soul, this is not imagination but sweet experience. Rather than take pride in his “devotions”, as if it were some arduous task to accomplish, the forgiven child of God enjoys listening to the Father’s word of instruction, and eagerly seeks to please Him, finding pleasure in “proving what is acceptable unto the Lord” (Ephesians 5:10). As with all lovers, to those who love God’s commandments, meditation is a salient reward that well repays the patience of dependent obedience and worship.

How about you? In a culture that worships sports, how deeply have you been infected? Does ten minutes in the word seem harder than two hours at the arena, even though deep-down, you really do delight in God’s word? If so, go back to the previous stanza, and pray for causing-grace. Life lived in the word brings its own intrinsic reward, and part of that reward is *sheer delight*.

Zayin • Comfort as We Wait (vv. 49-56)

“Remember the word unto Thy servant, upon which Thou hast caused me to hope.”

Every journey has an element of waiting--the next town, the long stretch of prairie highway, the back-up. The journey of the Gospel is no different. Having heard the good word, and having banked everything on the reality of that word, we now wait for heaven, asking God to remember that word for our sake.

But as we wait, what shall we do? We are afflicted, scorned, and landless, sojourning in the midst of a dark culture that forsakes God's law. *What shall we do?*

Having called upon God to remember His word, we must remember our comfort.

Look ahead. While sapped and drained now, we must remember that one saying of divine truth gives life. “This is my comfort in my affliction: for Thy word hath quickened me” (v. 50).

Look behind. While tempted to stretch beyond the bounds of God's law, due to the taunting pressure of the pride of man, we must remember God's eternal judgments--so settled compared to the shifting pressure of man--and having remembered, comfort ourselves: “I remembered Thy judgments of old, O LORD; and have comforted myself” (v. 52).

And what if the world derides us as penniless? Intense heat has seized us due to the wicked. This place is not our home, for we are set on a pilgrimage to heaven. Though we are traveling light, and often at night, we are not traveling empty-mouthed or empty-handed. God's statutes have become our songs; and obeying His statutes has become our belongings (vv. 54, 56). We remember His name (Jehovah!) as the summation of His character, and His law as a precious possession, in stark contrast to the wicked, who forsake that law (vv. 55, 53).

Therefore, in short, we **remember** as we **wait**, so that we may be **comforted** and reckon our true **possessions**:

- One word of His future promise revives us in affliction (v. 50),
- One remembrance of His past decisions comforts us in the present (v. 52);
- Our melodies are His statutes (v. 54), and our possession is obedience (v. 56).

With promise for our future, and comfort from the past, with our mouth filled with song, and our hand filled with obedience, *what do we lack in this land of affliction?*

Now, imagine! To seek life from a promise, and comfort from a remembered judgment! To sing of His rules, and to reckon obedience to these rules as our lasting possession! What scale of economy is this? Who reckons such things as truly valuable? But the Spirit of Jesus never lies. From ideas such as these, we see where Jesus Himself learned His radical outlook and language, in testifying such things as “My meat is to do the will of Him that sent me, and to finish His work” (John 4:34). Like His precious apostle, Jesus Himself was reckoned “as having nothing, and yet [was] possessing all things” (2 Corinthians 6:10).

How about you? Where do you seek comfort in the midst of social pressure? What do you possess as you sojourn through this life?

Your answer will tell us a lot about who you are. According to Southern agrarian Richard M. Weaver, in his book *Ideas Have Consequences*, our private property identifies us. It is said to be *private* by force of this identification. For Jesus, His obedience identified Him. He owned it, and He was rich indeed. The same can be true for us, who are alive in Christ. Instead of getting downcast over present afflictions, we should seek to enhance our true possessions in song and obedience. To make this transition, we must first comfort ourselves. Comfort is the charm that relaxes the constriction of present affliction, enabling us to grab hold of new possessions.

This overall life of remembrance is our responsibility; but once we do remember, by His grace, we can then turn to Him again and say: “Remember the word for Your servant, on account of which You have caused me to wait” (v. 49, author's translation). Amen.

Cheth • Private Devotion and Public Association (vv. 57-64)

“Thou art my portion, O LORD: I have said that I would keep Thy words.”

This stanza has two clear sections: **private devotion** (vv. 57-60) and **public association** (vv. 61-64). In the first section, the psalmist declares that God alone is His portion; therefore, he pledges to keep His words, he asks to receive His favor, and he returns to His testimonies with thought and haste. Having thoroughly repented, he announces in the second section that he will not capitulate to the dark bands of wicked men, but will freely associate with those who fear and obey God, declaring that the earth is full of God’s loyal love. In both the opening and closing lines, obedience is predicated on *a radical God-only-ness*: “On earth, I own nothing but You, and I find nothing but Your love everywhere; therefore, teach me Your rules! I pledge to obey!”

From this analysis, the implication is clear: *If you do not have God as Your portion and His love as Your vision, you will not have the resolve to obey*--to pray, repent, and persevere in a wicked and dark culture. Half-hearted love to God will lead to half-footed obedience. Instead of looking to God alone for favor, you will pray as a duty, but bank on worldly means for deliverance. Instead of thinking carefully of your ways, you will thoughtlessly disobey or delay, not realizing how far you have fallen. Worse, you will tend to forget His law and blend in with the crowd, dropping out of church attendance and genuine Christian fellowship--and all because you want something more than God as your portion in life.

In contrast to this dismal life, listen to the Messiah speak in Psalm 16:

“Preserve me, O God: for in Thee do I put my trust.
O my soul, thou hast said unto the LORD, Thou are my Lord; my goodness extended not to Thee:
But to the saints that are in the earth, and to the excellent, in whom is all my delight.
Their sorrows shall be multiplied that hasten after another god:
Their drink offerings of blood will I not offer, nor take up their names into my lips.
The LORD is the portion of mine inheritance and of my cup: Thou maintainest my lot.
The lines are fallen unto me in pleasant places; yea, I have a goodly heritage” (Psalm 16:1-6).

Do you see the connection between private devotion and public association? If we say to the Lord Jesus, “You alone are my Lord, and You alone are my treasure,” then we will view the saints on the earth as excellent and delightful, but the idolaters we will not even mention by name, nor join in with their idolatries.

It is troubling to see how many professedly Christian people come to church sporadically; and even then, it is to “attend church,” as if it were a program and not a family. *Why is that?* According to the logic of the Psalms, divided interests reveal a divided heart. If God were their sole possession, they would readily pray, repent, and persevere with all the saints; but since other things claim their heart--yard work, recreation leagues, overtime, or even family--public worship is not attended, and God’s people are not befriended.

It is amazing how few really pray or consider thoughtfully their ways! What will the half-hearted do when the bands of the wicked encircle tighter, and public worship is outlawed? Having neglected Him now, will they rise then at midnight to give thanks unto God for His righteous judgments (v. 62)? Will they dare unite with those who fear God and keep His precepts (v. 63)? Instead of seeing the world as full of God’s loyal love (v. 64), will they not see evil on every side and withdraw in self-protection?

If this is you, listen to the word of warning, and return without delay (vv. 59-60). “Behold, now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation” (2 Corinthians 6:2). Now is the opportunity to renounce your idols and to seek Christ as your only portion in life (cf. Philippians 3:8). If not, *what will you do?*

Teth • True Goodness Consists in Learning the Rules of God (vv. 65-72)

“Thou hast dealt well with Thy servant, O LORD, according unto Thy word.”

What is good for you? For instance, is it good for you to miss a flight? Most of us would say no; but what if the plane then goes down? Within a larger picture, small afflictions often appear good.

This insight must be grasped: The plane called Earth is going down, and few of us are finding the path of life (Matthew 7:13-14). Most of us are oblivious to the danger, even though death surrounds us daily, and threatens to claim us all. Instead of learning to prepare, we lull ourselves until forced to learn in the School of Affliction. And yet how do we often consider affliction? That it is an evil to be avoided, rather than a good to be welcomed.

Granted, in and of itself, affliction is not good. However, since affliction can be the means of great good, we need to pay close attention to the way this stanza interweaves affliction and goodness. Listen to the psalmist acknowledge that God did good to him in affliction:

“Before I was afflicted I went astray; but now have I kept Thy word” (v. 67).

“It is good for me that I have been afflicted: that I might learn Thy statutes” (v. 71).

Literally, before affliction, he continually erred, due to some combination of ignorance and negligence. It was as if he were oblivious to the big picture. Then, along came affliction. He learned, and it stuck. Habits were changed and values were recalculated. (Incidentally, this is the one place in the psalm where a strict Messianic interpretation is difficult, for when did the Messiah continually go astray? See also vv. 59-60 and v. 176 for possible support.)

What was the secret that caused the psalmist to acknowledge the goodness in affliction?

Learning. The secret to thankfulness in affliction is to value the learning of God’s rules. Three times the psalmist repeats the goodness of learning (vv. 66, 68, 71). In one instance, he even defines goodness as the acquisition of good taste and knowledge, which is somehow buried in the commandments of God (v. 66). Since this revelation of goodness is not immediately apparent, it is something we must believe, and then learn. Often, we discover this goodness in the crucible of affliction.

Can you do this? Can you thank God for affliction as a means of learning His rules? Perhaps you also are one of those who went astray, until the School of Affliction taught you to obey. It may not have been the bonds of exile that taught Manasseh to repent of his idolatry (2 Chronicles 33:10-17), but it may have been some loss of freedom. It may not have been the blinding rebuke that made Saul into Paul (Acts 9:1-22), but it may have been some word of conviction. Whatever it was, in word or in deed, praise God for the wounding rod that healed your soul! However severe, it cannot compare to the burning indignation that meets the unrepentant in hell--and even that *negative* focus (the lesser of two evils) is not what is in view here, but the *positive* focus of the goodness inherent in the commands of God. So many of God’s children have such similar stories, of first being humbled before receiving grace!

In contrast to those who value learning as true goodness, this stanza also describes the autonomous, proud, so-called self-sufficient of the world as those who smear our character with falsehood, while their own understanding is loaded with fat (vv. 69-70). As fat bodies are unfit for work, so their fat heart remains insensitive to the true nature of things. To them, God’s law holds no interest and yields no insight. They do not need Him--or so they think. But to the grateful, who have been schooled in affliction, God’s law is better than bullion, and is the object of their recreation (vv. 72, 70). Instead of falling asleep in church, or skipping altogether, they look forward to sporting in Scripture, for affliction has made them wise--by the grace and goodness of God.

Are you enrolled? Are you currently in the School of Affliction? Ask for God to teach you the goodness you need to learn. Then, having believed in His goodness, obey His apostle, and “count it all joy,” as James directs, knowing that the testing of your faith, through perseverance, will make you mature in Christ and give you wisdom unto final salvation (James 1:2-5; cf. 3:13-18). You will miss your flight, but the plane is definitely going down.

Truly, O Lord: “Thou art good, and doest good; teach me Thy statutes” (v. 68)! Amen.

Yodh • The Outlook and Prayer of an Afflicted, Mature Christian (vv. 73-80)

“Thy hands have made me and fashioned me: give me understanding, that I may learn Thy commandments.”

Affliction is often used by God to correct us; and used in this way, affliction makes the most sense to us: “Before I was afflicted I went astray: but now have I kept thy word” (v. 67; cf. v. 71). But what if affliction does not come as correction? What if we are mature Christians, who walk with God? *How should we, as mature Christians, consider and respond to affliction?* This stanza gives us an outlook (vv. 73-76) and a prayer of response (vv. 77-80).

The outlook of stable faith is learning, waiting, and knowing (vv. 73-76). Even though the psalmist is stable (“Thy hands have made me *and established me*”), he still asks for greater discernment that he might learn God’s commandments (v. 73). The goal of learning is not mere stability, although that should be achieved early (cf. 1 Thessalonians 3:2; Ephesians 4:11-14); rather, one goal of stability is greater learning. Once the foundation is set, real learning can begin, just as a stable marriage lays the platform for a healthy, growing relationship. Therefore, mature Christian, beware of thinking that your learning is complete; instead, embrace your affliction as an opportunity to learn more of the law you love.

As aids, consider these added incentives. First, know that those who truly fear the Lord will approve your patient wait for Him on the basis of His word (v. 74). So many afflictions have the temptation for a quick-fix pill, which worldlings and immature Christians shortsightedly advise, even though Scripture counsels, “Let patience have her perfect work, that ye may be perfect and entire, wanting nothing” (James 1:4). In denying the quick fix, you will suffer the criticism of the short-cutters. Ignore them, and look to the future, when you will enjoy the company of others like you, who feared God and eventually walked in *His light* (cf. Isaiah 50:10-11).

Second, make God happy by telling Him of Your confidence in His justice, faithfulness, and love: “I know, O LORD, that Your decisions are right; and in faithfulness You afflict me” (v. 75). This one verse is so powerful. The “I know” resounds through the pain and displays the rock-firm substrate of faith in the soul, now scoured clean by the blighting winds of affliction. Then, as if the “I know” was not confident enough, the psalmist follows with a “Let it be” plea: “Please let your loyal-love be for my comfort, according to Your word to Your servant” (v. 76). Affliction is good, but comfort is better--only let it be in *God’s* timing, because His faithful, loyal-love is perfect.

Having expressed this outlook, stable faith next turns to earnest prayer for a change (vv. 77-80). So strong is this desire, the second half of the stanza leaves behind the verbs of stability (“know” and “be”) for verbs of motion (“come” and “turn unto”). We may need to wait for change, and we are willing to do so (v. 74), but we want God to know that our strong desire and earnest expectation is for change; therefore, we pray. Mature Christian, listen to the counsel of these verses.

First, pray for concrete expressions of God’s compassion to enter your life, adding as incentive that you delight in God’s law as your sport (v. 77). (Incidentally, let the worldlings have their athletic and hunting clubs; since God’s word is your sport, take delight in His church as your own special *Bible club*.) Second, pray for the shame of the proud, autonomous boasters, who entice you with short cuts and quick-fix schemes that are false, while God’s afflictions are true and faithful. On His precepts, keep your eye (v. 78). Third, pray for faithful companions--those who fear God and know His testimonies enough to counsel you well and to encourage you (v. 79). Finally, pray for a heart of integrity in God’s statutes, in order that you may not be put to shame in anything (v. 80; cf. v. 5).

At the heart of affliction is God’s loyal-love (v. 76). In a strong way, this theme forms a bulls-eye within rings of matching pairs (called a “chiasm”), in which stability and integrity match (vv. 73, 80), those who fear the Lord are mentioned twice (vv. 74, 79), and even false subversion is matched and contrasted with faithful affliction (vv. 75, 78). Therefore, at the heart of this stanza is God’s loyal-love bringing acts of compassion to our afflictions, so that we may live (vv. 76, 77). This is also at the heart of the book of Lamentations (see 3:22-23), from which we have the encouraging hymn “Great Is Thy Faithfulness.” It can also be your heart, mature Christian. Please do not give in to the pressure or to the critics. God is faithful. Change will come. Confess the one, and ask for the other, and watch how God will continue to teach you even years after your conversion. To Him be the glory forever! Amen.

Kaph • The Point of Exhaustion, a Doorway of Hope (vv. 81-88)

“My soul fainteth for thy salvation: but I hope in Thy word.”

What do you do when your soul is at the point of exhaustion? Having held out for some time, your strength is now gone, and you cry out in desperation, “How long, O Lord? When will you comfort me?” Perhaps you are persecuted, or maybe it is your finances, health, family, or personal sin that has drained your energy and led you say, “I’m done! I can’t go on anymore!” *What do you do?*

In this stanza, the psalmist has been persecuted to the point of exhaustion--both exhausted in waiting for deliverance and almost exhausted in physical life itself. This theme word *exhausted* occurs three times, and literally means “to finish,” that is, to bring a process to completion, either positively (through filling to the full) or negatively (through emptying to exhaustion). In this stanza, the negative sense dominates:

“My soul *fainteth* for thy salvation” (v. 81a).

“Mine eyes *fail* for thy word” (v. 82a).

“They had almost *consumed* me upon the earth” (v. 87a).

Added to this word-theme, the psalmist drives home his point with two other literary effects. First, for the first time in Psalm 119, the psalmist employs direct speech. It is as if he has been silent for so long--waiting, *waiting*, WAITING--until now, at the point of exhaustion, his power to plug the pressure gives way and he cries out, “When wilt thou comfort me?” and “How many are the days of thy servant? when wilt thou execute judgment on them that persecute me?” (vv. 82b, 84). Second, he pictures himself as a leather skin-bottle in thick smoke, apparently useless due to the loss of elasticity (v. 83). In our slang, he snapped. He’s done.

Can you relate? What should you do? Three things are suggested to us by this holy example.

First, see your point of exhaustion as a doorway of hope. Having left one room, you are about to enter another, and the door between the two is a word of hope, a saying from the Scriptures that speaks with certainty of a better future. Do you have such a saying? Do you have a word of hope?

For each one it will usually be a different saying, and often a different saying for different times of exhaustion. In His rich goodness, God has provided His people with a storehouse of promise, a Book of over a thousand pages. In addition, He has placed His very own Spirit within us as a soul-physician, who skillfully selects the perfect medicine for us from such a rich medicine cabinet. Will you pray today for the Holy Spirit to give you a word of hope from His holy word?

Second, concentrate on obedience. Due to the pressure of persecution, or the emptiness of exhaustion, the psalmist surely must have felt keenly the temptation to slack off, give in, or give up. Instead, he affirmed:

“...yet do I not forget thy statutes” (v. 83b).

“...but I forsook not thy precepts” (v. 87b).

In all waiting, we must concentrate on something. If we concentrate on the wait itself, we only aggravate the wait, and tempt ourselves to disobey. It may not be the main point of these interjections, but one lesson learned here is to concentrate on obedience. In the Hebrew text, the word “I” in “I forsook not” is stressed (v. 87b). It was deliberate. It was concentration. It was a grace given by God to watch not the boiling pot, but to turn back again to the will of God in His word. In this way, we resist the victim-mentality and embrace the victor-mentality. Instead of simply being passive--waiting, waiting, waiting--we actively engage in obedience.

Interestingly, this concentration on obedience seems to be one of the secrets of our brothers suffering persecution in communist countries. Commands such as loving an enemy or praying for a persecutor form the active resistance to the acid of persecution. In this way, the apostle’s injunctive is fulfilled: “Be not overcome of evil, but overcome evil with good” (Romans 12:21).

Third, resist the lies of the persecutors. At first, this advice seems more limited than the previous two, which

apply to all situations of exhaustion. However, if the truth be told, much of our problems in finances, family, or even health are either aggravated or caused by lies coming from the evil one, who persecutes us constantly. Too often, we assume something false is true, and then wrongly assess our situation in the darkness of the devil's deceit. Therefore, to learn how better to resist the devil by faith, consider the nature of persecution.

According to 1 Peter, the most basic form of persecution is not beating or imprisonment, but slander. If the devil, whose name fittingly means "accuser", can first succeed in forming an atmosphere of falsehood, he can then justify other forms of persecution as just and wise. Remember, the devil masquerades as an angel of light. He likes to pose as the good guy, doing the right thing; therefore, he first creates an atmosphere of falsehood before he closes in for the kill.

In this stanza, after the psalmist asks, "When wilt thou execute judgment on them that persecute me?" he asserts:

"The proud have digged pits for me, which are not after thy law.
All thy commandments are faithful: they persecute me wrongfully; help thou me" (vv. 85-88).

Illegal pits, wrongful persecution--that is the stuff of the devil. Do not believe his ruse. The atmosphere of falsehood may be a family member who keeps hanging the guilt around your neck; it may be a coworker who keeps asserting that you are the troublemaker, as Ahab did to Elijah; or it may be the general culture that keeps presenting Christians as the intolerant bigots who need to embrace the relativism of this Age in order to be *nice*--whatever it is, beware Christian! Do not give in. Though purporting to be lawful, the pits are not lawful according to *God's* laws. His commandments are faithful--*all of them*. Forget not His statutes, and forsake not His precepts, for someday a Pit will be dug for the wicked, who will then be ashes under your feet (Malachi 4:3).

If anyone understood the pressures of persecution due to an atmosphere of falsehood, it was Jesus Christ. Imagine the Savior saying these words prophetically:

"They had almost consumed me upon the earth; but I forsook not thy precepts.
Quicken me after thy lovingkindness; so shall I keep the testimony of thy mouth" (vv. 87-88).

The devil had *almost* finished Jesus off; but Jesus, instead of crying out, "I am finished," cried out, "It is finished!" indicating that He had accomplished all that the Father had given Him to do (John 19:30). Then, having done the will of God, Jesus prophetically cried out, "Quicken me after thy lovingkindness," which is to say, "Make me alive, Father, according to Your loyal love" (v. 88). This occurred three days later, when Jesus rose from the dead, never to die again. His point of exhaustion became the doorway of hope. In Him, the same thing can be true for you. Rest on the finished work of Jesus on the cross as your full and only payment for sin, and then hope in His loyal love to give you life again and again and again.

"This I recall to mind, therefore have I hope.
It is of the LORD's mercies that we are not consumed, because his compassions fail not [lit. do not finish off].
They are new every morning: great is thy faithfulness" (Lamentations 3:21-23).

Lamedh • The Eternity, Infinity, and Reality of the Word of God (vv. 89-96)

“For ever, O LORD, Thy word is settled in heaven.”

“Get your head in the game,” he yelled, and the players knew exactly what the coach meant. Daydreaming, young Johnny had let the ball go past him into right field.

“Get your head out of the sand,” he warned, and the wife knew exactly what the counselor meant. Her husband had been ignoring their children’s unruliness for years, and it showed.

“Get your head out of the clouds,” his dad advised. Unrealistic and full of pipe dreams, the boy needed a reality check before heading out into the real world.

Three sayings. *Which is the wisest?*

It depends which one is the most real--the game, the sand, or the clouds. For most of us, the game seems the most real. The results are immediate and felt. Success is seen, applauded, and enjoyed. To win the game seems wiser than dreaming about the clouds or hiding in the sand. *Correct?*

Forever, God’s word stands firm and tall in the heavens (v. 89). By that same word, the earth below received its permanency and stands (v. 90). Both realms reflect the enduring faithfulness of God to generation upon generation of human inhabitants, playing their little games in their little arenas. Both stand to this day according to the sheer authority of the Sovereign God, because both are His servants (v. 91). Therefore, if we ourselves wish to endure, we need to get our head out of the *sand* and out of the *game*, and *into the clouds*, where His words stands and never falls. There alone is certainty. There alone is reality, and the wise take it to heart.

Forever, the wise take it to heart, *never to forget* (v. 93a). They have seen that the precepts of God are a matter of life and death--life, because “with them thou hast quickened me” (v. 93b); and death, because “unless thy law had been my delights, I should then have perished in mine affliction” (v. 92). Please note: The key ingredient is *delight*. Mere knowledge, let alone dutiful church attendance or ignorant parroting, saved no one. Many will “perish,” noted the apostle, “because they received not *the love of the truth*, that they might be saved” (2 Thessalonians 2:10). In contrast, those who research the word and pay careful attention to it, with an eye towards obedience, may cry out with confidence, “I am thine, save me!” (v. 94; cf. 1 John 3:18-22).

Delight. Love. Research. Attentive consideration. These are the marks of the saved. The rest perish.

In light of such facts, how shall we be comforted? When the majority of churchgoers remain ignorant of their Bibles and attend church with less and less frequency, asking no questions and seeking no answers, are the faithful pastors of our land supposed to take heart from the mere name “Christian” or the claim of a decision made years ago. Where is the delight? Where is the love? Where is the research and the careful attention to God’s word? Alas, the world is full of sports and frivolous entertainment. *Is it not time for us to get our head out of the game and into the clouds?*

The bookends on this stanza are breathtaking, due perhaps to the position of this stanza as the midpoint of the psalm:

“For ever, O LORD, thy word is settled in heaven” (v. 89).

“I have seen an end of all perfection: but thy commandment is exceeding broad” (v. 96).

Time and space. In both, the word is boundless. Eternal in time; infinite in space. No matter what you compare to the word, let that *something* go the max and make it last as long as it can, it will still fall short. In contrast, the commandment is not only broad, but *exceedingly* broad (v. 96).

In light of the contrast between perishing and being saved, it is intriguing to ponder the possibility that the “commandment” here is eternal life, which God promises through the reign of His Son Jesus Christ, on the basis of the Cross, to all who believe (cf. Psalm 133:3; John 3:16; 12:49-50). If so, who would not research it, pay careful attention to it, and delight in it? *Is it not time for you* to embrace the love of the truth, so that you too will be saved?

Mem • To Love the Law of God (vv. 97-104)

“O how I love Thy law! It is my meditation all the day.”

In driving, cooking, and even reading, *at some point*, the mechanic becomes the artist. Gone are the step-by-step procedures. Gone are the frustrations over buttons and levers, precise calculations, and the sounding out of words. Instead, all concentration now is given to the drive, the flavor, and the story. At that point, the fundamentals have been absorbed into the bigger process. They are still there, but they are no longer the *conscious* focal point. This process mirrors a person’s entrance into the world of wisdom.

For many, their experience of the law of God remains on the pedantic level. “Tell me the rule,” says their attitude, “and I will obey it.” This is not wisdom. The psalmist loved the law of God because it gave him wisdom, along with understanding and discernment (vv. 97-100). Not content with a paint-by-numbers approach, he saw in the law of God *wonders* that fascinated him, even glory that reflected back to him the characteristics and attributes of God (cf. v. 18). Through this divine law, he became wiser than his enemies, more successful than his teachers, and more discerning than his elders (vv. 98, 99, 100). No wonder he loved this law, and mulled it over daily (v. 97)!

Which man do you most resemble: the *pedantic rule-keeper* or the *wise psalmist*? If left without a rule, could you discern from first principles your right and wise course of action, or are you left without direction in a city of details? Sadly, we live in a day when many Christians have grown dull of hearing. Inoculated by a simple “gospel message,” they have remained in church learning little and needing still their cookbook. Even though by now they should be chefs, they have need to be taught again the basics, for it is only by *practice* that our senses are trained to discern good and evil: “I understand more than the ancients, because I keep thy precepts” (v. 100; cf. Hebrews 5:11-14).

To encourage YOU to grow beyond the rules into a wisdom that absorbs both the rules and your attention, consider these three aspects of the psalmist’s delight:

First, the psalmist loved the law of God. Hearing, reading, knowing, memorizing--all are fine. But do you *love* God’s law? If so, you will *frequently* return to it, as bees to their honey--and the law is sweeter (v. 103). If you love the law of God, you will *talk* about it, as you would your favorite dessert with your dinner host (vv. 97, 103). Moreover, if you love the law of God, you will *hate* everything opposed to it (v. 104). Though many will charge you with exaggeration, it will due to their lack of understanding, for they never sat in this school. *Do you love it?*

Second, the psalmist loved the law of God. Though this phrase may (and probably does) refer to the entire Old Testament (e.g. John 10:34-35), it is in the capacity of *law* that the Bible drew forth the psalmist’s love. The Bible is an immensely practical book, and should be viewed solely in that capacity. Literally, “law” means that the Bible is giving us direction in life, pointing us away from sin and back to God through the blood sacrifice of the Lamb of God, Jesus Christ. *Do you love this law?* Are you sick of aimless existence and empty fulfillment, yearning for direction back to the Author of your being? Praise God, you have that saving direction in the Bible!

Third, the psalmist love the law of God. Overlooked, taken for granted, but marvelous in its grace, God actually spoke and speaks to us in His holy word, the Bible. Imagine. To *us*. Worse than any Seuss’s “Who” down on “Whoville” in a field of clover that Horton must find, we are on less than a speck in the Greater Cosmos of God’s creation, and though His word itself retorts, “What is man, that thou art mindful of *him*?” (Psalm 8:4), God actually loves us, communicates with us, and teaches us in Christ. It is this thought--being *taught by God*--that caused the psalmist to break out again in wonder, “How sweet are thy words unto my taste!” (vv. 102-103). All who experience this sovereign, inner instruction, through the word and by the Spirit, come to Christ, and are kept by Him unto Eternal Life (John 6:44-45; cf. Isaiah 54:13; 1 Thessalonians 4:9; 1 John 2:27).

Do you love the law of God?

If not, you are not saved. Having no taste for God, He will have no affection for you. Only those who embrace “the love of the truth” are on the road to salvation (2 Thessalonians 2:10). **Please note:** This warning does not mean that you are without hope. By its very nature, love is not dependent on social status, education, age, or gender (cf. vv. 99, 100). Anyone may love. But since “love is from God,” it is not something you yourself can conjure up (1 John

4:7). You need to seek it from Him, and believe in Him that He will give it to you, as you soak in the law of the Lord. Again, I ask, *Do you love the law of God?*

Interestingly, there are no petitions in this stanza. It is pure praise, coming from pure delight. Such is the attitude of all those who have moved from pedantic rule-keeping into the wisdom and wonder of the law of God. Through obedience, it is sheer delight, and they desire no other path (vv. 101-102).

Is this your delight? Is this your path? *Do you love the law of God?*

Nun • The Oath of Obedience and the Vow of Praise (vv. 105-112)

“Thy word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path.”

Every year, about 1.5 million immigrants join the United States of America. On the court date of their naturalization, these new citizens are required to take, not the *Pledge of Allegiance*, but the stronger *Oath of Allegiance*--to swear to God, in promising to

renounce and abjure all allegiance and fidelity to any foreign prince, potentate, state, or sovereignty; to defend the Constitution and laws of the United States of America against all enemies, foreign and domestic; to bear arms on behalf of the United States when required by law [though some, for religious reasons, omit this part]; to perform noncombatant service in the armed forces when required by law; to perform work of national importance under civilian direction when required by law; and to take the oath freely.

While such solemnity is often lost on us native-born Americans, for the immigrant, the break with the past can be as absolute as it is solemn. As one Armenian survivor of the Turkish holocaust put it: “One moment you belong with your fathers to a million dead yesterdays--the next you belong with America to a million unborn tomorrows” (quoted from Mindy Belz, “A Million Unborn Tomorrows,” *WORLD*, 29 August 2009, 42).

Such is the solemnity of the psalmist: “I have sworn, and I will perform it, that I will keep thy righteous judgments” (v. 106). In other words, “My obedient allegiance to Your law is as certain as the fact that You, O God, live.” I have sworn it, and I have begun to fulfill it.

Then, if the oath were not enough, the psalmist also seems to add a vow: “I am afflicted very much: quicken me, O LORD, according unto thy word. Accept, I beseech thee, the freewill offerings of my mouth, O LORD, and teach me thy judgments” (vv. 107-108). Literally, the “freewill offerings” are votive offerings, the pledged paybacks for a bargained-for deliverance of his life. Thus, in both deed and word, in both keeping the law and offering praise with his mouth, the psalmist has solemnly pledged himself to God--wholeheartedly and unreservedly. How about us? *Have we?*

We live in an age of little commitment. Vows are more and more rare, and even then, are rarely kept. Apart from marriage, who hears of a vow? And even within marriage, how many still *cherish* each other, *till death do us part*? In church, the situation is little better. It used to be that churches were formed by covenant, when members solemnly pledged before God to walk together in His commandments as a body and toward one another. Now, membership mean little more than a voting formality, with hearts fearful of any intrusion into private dealings. It is as if we want to retain a way out, if things should go bad, and so we are unwilling to devote ourselves unreservedly and publicly to God, country, church, or one another.

Let me challenge you, and in doing so, challenge myself. Why do we act this way toward God? His word is “a lamp unto [our] feet, and a light unto [our] path” (v. 105). In this dark world, there is no other light (2 Peter 1:19). Why then do we hesitate? Of what are we afraid, if we truly believe that His word is the only way?

Perhaps it is affliction. Perhaps it is danger. Both are mentioned, and both are dealt with in a striking way. Regarding affliction, we have the power of prayer for preserving our life, and the preciousness of offering God praise from the furnace. If anyone thinks that “the freewill offerings from my mouth” are cheap gifts to God, he has not yet felt the force of affliction deep enough and the preciousness of faith to praise God still, *though He slay me*.

Regarding danger, it is not mitigated, but affirmed. Often the lamp of the word leads us to walk voluntarily into danger--to take our life into our hand, as if to throw it away (v. 109). The wicked, in turn, are like hunters, who know exactly where we will be walking--in God’s commandments. Though their trap may tempt us to get off the path, we must press on like praying Daniel, and believe that God can shut the mouths of lions. We must not forget (v. 109). We must not wander (v. 110).

Interestingly, it is not resolution alone that keeps us on the path, but the preciousness of the word. In communist countries, where Bibles are scarce, the word is precious held by believers as their highest possession. At times, individual members can quote whole chapters, enabling the church to have a partial audio Bible! It is these

believers, like the immigrants mentioned earlier, who understand the solemnity of the oath and the preciousness of the word. Like the psalmist, they too can say, “Thy testimonies have I taken as an heritage for ever: for they are the rejoicing of my heart. I have inclined mine heart to perform thy statutes always, even unto the end” (vv. 111-112).

To *have* the word forever. To *do* the word forever. This is the echo of an oath, the heart of a vow--*to have and to hold from this day forward*.

Is it not time for you and I to make that pledge--to hesitate no longer--to commit ourselves to the word of Jesus, for “there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved” (Acts 4:12)? Affliction, yes --danger, yes--but now we have *the words of eternal life*, the true beginning of a million unborn tomorrows. God be praised!

Samech • Strong Protection through Strong Affections (vv. 113-120)

“I hate vain thoughts: but Thy law do I love.”

Literally, this stanza begins: “Branched ones, I hate; but Your law, I love.” In other words, I *hate* those who cannot make up their mind about You, O God, whether You are good enough and wise enough to obey or not; but as for Your law, I *love* it. What a way to begin a stanza that was written to be sung!

Two things here are striking. First, it is sometimes right to hate a fellow human being. Such hatred is found elsewhere in the Psalms, and should be interpreted according to its context (e.g. 139:21-22). Second, if we do not hate certain individuals, we do not love God’s law. In other words, there is something important about hating these “branched ones” in order to maintain a love for God’s law. Given this importance, we must ask, *Who are these “branched ones”?* *And what makes them so dangerous to my spiritual health?*

In the world of sinners, there are different kinds. Some sinners are out-and-out wicked. They have strong affections, but they are unholy affections, having wrong objects or wrong motivations. It seems that the psalmist had this kind of sinner in mind when he wrote, “Thou puttest away all the wicked of the earth like dross: therefore I love thy testimonies” (v. 119). In the smelting pot of judgment, God puts an end to all those who foul the silver of His world.

In some ways, the out-and-out wicked are not as dangerous as the “branched ones”. While the wicked may be more dangerous to our bodies, these “branched ones” are often more dangerous to our souls. These “branched ones” have a forked heart, with divided affections. In the New Testament, they are called “double minded” and are noted for their outer instability and inner impurity (James 1:8; 4:8). According to Jesus, they are the “lukewarm” professing Christians that cause Him to hurl (Revelation 3:15-16). This same revulsion should be in our heart. We should hate these individuals the way some children hate broccoli: *Get them away from me!* In the words of the Psalm: “Depart from me, ye evildoers: for I will keep the commandments of my God” (v. 115).

But what makes the “branched ones” so dangerous? After all, it hardly seems right to identify as “evildoers” those who spend their lives waffling between two opinions! What makes them so harmful?

While not explicitly spelled out in the text, there is a subtle contrast in this stanza between the “branched ones” and the strong protection of the psalmist through strong affections. In a word, the “branched ones” deaden our affections for God. Coming to no firm conclusion about God, these individuals come to no firm conclusion about sin. As a result, their lives are characterized by a mixture of God’s word and human opinion, of religious rites and social wrongs, of pious talk and misplaced trust. Instead of out-and-out rebellion against God, they simply “err” (v. 118), that is, they slowly go astray. In the words of one commentator, “They simply nibble their way to lostness” (Victor P. Hamilton). As a result, God Himself treats them in the same way, and simply sloughs them off, seeing so omnisciently that “their deceit is falsehood” (v. 118).

In contrast to this putrid indecision, we must strongly assert to God, “Thou art my hiding place and my shield; I hope in thy word” (v. 114). Instead of mixing our religion with worldly wisdom or with talk of “financial security,” we must make God and God alone our hope of future safety: “Uphold me according unto thy word, that I may live,” and “Hold thou me up, and I shall be safe: and I will have respect unto thy statutes continually” (v. 116, 117). Literally, the goal of our safety is to *gaze* upon God’s rules *continually*.

This gaze stands in sharp contrast to the “branched ones” who go astray. Instead of *gazing* at God’s word, they nibbled their way astray through alcohol (Isaiah 28:7), sexual sin (Proverbs 5:20, 23), or just plain ol’ poor listening (Proverbs 19:27). (These references also come from Hamilton’s article.) It is tragic to note how many youths of Christian parents never rebelled, but nonetheless went astray through the worldly pleasures of a sensual culture! And how many of those young people did so through a poor choice of friends? Instead of *hating* those who waffled, and wishing them to *go away* in order to better concentrate on the word of God, these tragic youth chose the “branched ones” as friends and acquaintances, and thus eventually went astray themselves.

Ultimately, the only strong protection is found through strong, holy affections. It was Jonathan Edwards, who once asserted, “True religion, in great part, consists in holy affections.” Love. Hatred. Fear. In the words of the Psalm,

we must hate the double-minded; we must love the law of God; and we must fear His judgments to the point that *our flesh bristles up for fear of Him* (v. 120). In these strong affections comes our strong protection, for it is out of a single heart that we enabled to assert, “You alone are my hideout; therefore, lean me up that I may live, and sustain me that I may be saved.”

How are your affections? Whom do you love? Whom do you hate? Whom do you fear? On these questions largely hangs your assurance of salvation.

Ayin • Help for the Oppressed (vv. 121-128)

“I have done judgment and justice: leave me not to mine oppressors.”

Oppression is the abuse of authority in trampling those underneath. According to the apostle Peter, oppression often occurs within slavery, whenever slaves under a harsh master “endure grief, suffering wrongfully” (1 Peter 2:19). Broadening this principle, oppression occurs whenever lawful authority turns into unlawful slavery, whether it be dictatorial heads of households or totalitarian governments, which treat citizens as slaves. In all three arenas--family, government, and the workplace--we see elements of oppression.

What should we do when we are oppressed? Or, how should we counsel and pray for those who are oppressed?

According to this stanza, there are three specific answers.

Fundamentally, we should stress our identity as slaves of God. After introducing the topic of oppression (vv. 121-122), the psalmist identifies himself three times as “thy servant” (vv. 122, 124, 125). This self-identification has occurred several times in this psalm, but never in such a cluster, nor with such an assertion as “I am thy servant” (v. 125). This assertion is the centerpiece of the stanza, highlighting the theme here as “The LORD is thy keeper” does within the eight verses of Psalm 121. Therefore, the identification is self-consciously chosen and asserted: “I am thy servant.” *Why is this identity so important to assert within the context of oppression?*

Before answering that question, it should first be noted that this identity is not often chosen and asserted by many American Christians. If asked to identify themselves spiritually, most American Christians would probably say, “I am a Christian,” or “a believer,” or perhaps even “a disciple” or “a saint.” How many would say, “I am a slave of God” or “a slave of Christ”? Even though the apostle Paul often described himself as such (Romans 1:1; Philippians 1:1; Titus 1:1; cf. Galatians 1:10), and told others to regard him as such (1 Corinthians 3:5; 4:1), we American Christians rarely use such a designation in public for ourselves. Interestingly, we often identify Jesus as “our Lord” (literally, “our Master”), but then do not identify ourselves as His slaves. How ironic! According to Paul, those of us called to Christ in the land of the free are truly Christ’s slaves, for we were “bought with a price” (1 Corinthians 7:22-23). Peter also commands us to do good “as free [men], and not using your liberty for a cloke of maliciousness, but as servants of God” (1 Peter 2:16). Truly, we are slaves of Christ and slaves of God.

For Paul, it was very important that earthly slaves thought of themselves as slaves of Christ, doing their work “as to the Lord [the Master!], and not unto men” (Colossians 3:23; cf. Ephesians 6:5-8). Though men may not notice or repay, Master Jesus both notices and repays, to both “bond” and “free” (Ephesians 6:8). The slave could work sincerely and heartily, knowing that he was serving (literally, “slaving”) “the Lord Christ” (Colossians 3:24). Taking this principle, but making a different application, it is important for the oppressed believer to assert that he is not so much the slave of an earthly lord, but the slave of the Lord of lords. While oppression may make a person feel hopelessly enslaved, as if the oppressor were saying, “You are mine and I am never letting you go,” the believer can assert in prayer, “I am *Your* servant, O God, and I know that it is only a matter of time before You hear my groaning and deliver me from this earthly Pharaoh.”

With this identity in place, the psalm models two specific actions for the oppressed: *prayer* and *precision*.

First, the oppressed should resort to prayer (vv. 121-124). Pray for a change of location (v. 121). Pray for oppression to cease (v. 122). Continue to look for deliverance (“thy salvation”), and to hope in the word of promise, even if it should delay in coming, for God’s lovingkindness (“thy mercy”) is the loyal love of a covenanted relationship (vv. 123-124). *You are His servant--His property.* How could He let you go!

It seems to be on the basis of this relationship that the psalmist boldly asks God to become the collateral (“the surety”) that guarantees His own promise to do good to His servant (v. 122). In other words, the psalmist is saying, “If good does not come, may You, O God, be held personally accountable.” How bold! How audacious! What a reminder this is, that believing prayer should respectfully, yet boldly, reason with God on the basis of truth. Even our relative merit should be brought forward (v. 121a). As sinners, we have no absolute merit before God; but as human beings, we often do have rights, having done nothing to deserve such oppression (cf. Romans 4:2). This relative merit should be argued as well.

In all, we should remember that prayer is our first recourse. This stanza has no hint of retaliation, whether verbal or physical. Granted, those with opportunity to become free should become free (1 Corinthians 7:21), and those who need to flee physical abuse should do so (cf. Matthew 10:23), but to repay evil with evil is something forbidden both by precept (Romans 12:19-21) and by our Lord's very own example under the oppression of the cross (1 Peter 2:21-23). As His slaves, we must not "strive," but answer oppression with patience, kindness, and non-defensive words, knowing that the oppressor himself is a slave of the devil, and that God may use our response to grant this oppressor repentance unto freedom (2 Timothy 2:24-26). Certainly God heard Stephen's prayer and saved Saul.

For us under the New Covenant, we should remember that God has given us His very own Spirit as the collateral or pledge that He will make good on His promise to redeem us (Ephesians 1:14). Moreover, our Judah, the Lord Jesus, became surety for us in Egypt, the Land of Oppression, when we, like Benjamin, were threatened with permanent slavery under Pharaoh (Genesis 43:9; 44:44:32). How precious then, that we, like Simeon, can hold up the Lord Jesus by faith, and say to God above, "Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word: for *mine eyes have seen thy salvation*" (Luke 2:29-30). Instead of our eyes "finishing off" (a Hebrew idiom), in looking for the "consolation of Israel," we can gladly say that we have "seen the Lord's Christ" by faith, and that we will see Him soon face-to-face (cf. Psalm 119:81-82, 123; Luke 2:25, 26).

Second, the oppressed should resort to *precision* (vv. 125-128). Contrary to our intuitions, prayer for deliverance is not enough to counteract oppression. As slaves of the Lord Jesus, we not only belong to Him, and thus expect deliverance, but we also must obey Him--not just in generalities, but in the kind of precision that requires divinely-given discernment (v. 125; cf. Philippians 1:9; Hebrews 5:14). Moreover, as servants of such a gracious and good Master, we *love* His commandments more than money, finding His orders more precious and beautiful than 24-karat gold (v. 127).

This attitude stands in stark contrast to the autonomous proud, who oppress others under the guise of self-made law. Like both the Pharisees, who nullified the commandments of God with man-made technicalities (cf. Matthew 15:6), and the chief priests, who justified the murder of Jesus on the basis of expedience (John 11:50), oppressors justify their oppression in their own eyes (cf. Proverbs 16:2; 21:2). To us, who are servants of a perfect Lord, *all* His commands are perfectly straight (v. 128); and since we love them more than beautiful gold, we are loath to mar them with even a slight twist in order to justify our own disobedience. Only love gives such attention! May all the oppressed in Christ, who are *His* slaves more than they are men's slaves, resort to such *looking prayer* and to such *loving precision*! Amen.

Pe • From the Light of God's Word to the Light of God's Face (vv. 129-136)

“Thy testimonies are wonderful: therefore doth my soul keep them.”

It is not uncommon for Christians today, especially older Christians, to bemoan the rebellion of our culture. In its purest form, it is grief over the moral death of a nation, and is well expressed by the words that close out this stanza: “Rivers of waters run down mine eyes, because they keep not thy law” (v. 136; cf. Jer. 13:17). Amid such darkness, what is the Christian to do, especially with the threat that such a culture poses to personal safety? This stanza teaches that *the Christian needs to move from light to light*--from the light of God's word to the light of God's face.

Let us consider these two lights in reverse order.

Second Light: The Christian should supplicate the light of God's face (v. 135). In the context of the stanza, this light is the counterpart to perpetual sadness:

“Make thy face to shine upon thy servant; and teach me thy statutes.
Rivers of waters run down mine eyes, because they keep not thy law” (vv. 135-136).

My face is dark with sadness; therefore, shine Your face and bring me gladness. Such a light is the assurance of personal attention coupled with favor. God is looking at me and smiling; therefore, I know that eventually good will come (cf. Psalm 80:3, 7, 19, where salvation is the result of God's shining face).

What solicits God's gracious gaze? According to the psalmist, it is a deep desire for God's commandments, which is a reflection of love for God's name (vv. 131-132; cf. Isaiah 66:1-2). The description here is almost shocking. As a runner panting for breath after his race, or a mother-to-be forced to open her mouth to pant for breath during labor, so deeply does the psalmist pant after God's commandments. No wonder God turns His head to favor such a person! No wonder such a person has confidence to ask God for outward liberty from vain trouble and oppression, in order to walk obediently for the rest of his life (vv. 133-134; cf. 1 Timothy 2:1-2). (Note the subtle echo of the last psalm with “oppression” followed by a reference to “thy servant”.)

Here is a missing link for today's Christian. While many of us rant about the culture, how many of us pant after the commandments of God? Perhaps this is why we lack confidence in our prayers, when we ask God for safety concerning the future (cf. 1 John 3:21-22). Moreover, in considering the culture, are we more maddened than saddened, shedding angry words more than grieving tears? Part of the reason may be our subtle concern over personal loss more than a concern for God's name and His law. After all, if we deeply love His name and pant after His commands, we will be deeply grieved when His law is not kept. This truth does not discount a place for anger, as the “zeal” of the next stanza will show (v. 139), but it does present us with a word of caution. It would be wise for us to imitate our Lord, who first wept over Jerusalem before His zeal cleansed out the temple.

How is such a deep desire for God's law fostered? After all, if it is so important to gain God's gaze, and if He turns to gaze upon one loving His name and desiring His law, then how do we gain such a desire and love? The opening lines of this stanza give the answer, bringing us back to the first light.

First Light: The Christian should appreciate the light of God's word (v. 130). The opening two verses are resplendent with glory and ripe with application:

“Thy testimonies are wonderful: therefore doth my soul keep them.
The entrance of thy words giveth light; it giveth understanding unto the simple” (vv. 129-130).

Literally, the opening line states plainly: “Your testimonies are wonders” (v. 129a). In other words, whatever God testifies to in His word is full of wonder, being beyond our natural capacity to ascertain or master. It is only those who hold the words of the Bible in reverent awe, who then obey those same words with detailed observation. A truly high view of Scripture breeds a deep desire for more understanding. Therefore, if we are lagging in our desire, we must examine our true doctrine of Scripture. We may say that these are God's words, but do we really believe that these words are wonders, which is what we would expect when God speaks?

But if His words are wonders, exceeding our capacity to understanding, why should I give them any attention?

After all, many people find the Bible confusing. Is this verse also not an affirmation that the Bible is confusing, and that it is discouraging to consider its contents?

Obviously, the psalmist did not think so. He tells us point-blank that his soul obediently observed God's testimonies precisely because they were wonders. How then did he understand what he was observing? He tells us in the next verse:

“The entrance of thy words giveth light; it giveth understanding unto the simple” (vv. 130).

In the Hebrew, the word “entrance” is found only here, meaning not a static doorway, but a dynamic, active process of opening the words of God, making them clear to our minds (as the Greek translation indicates). Coupled with an earlier verse in the psalm, that God not only opens His words, but also opens our eyes to look at wonders from His law (v. 18), we learn that there is hope, even for the simplest and naïve among us. Truly, as one earlier psalm states, “The testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple” (Psalm 19:7b).

In applying this hope, it is important to note that God commonly uses the hand of another believer, often a preacher, to open His words to us, rather than opening them directly unto us. The apostle Paul, as one minister of the word, actually requested prayer on his own behalf, that he would “make [the mystery of Christ] manifest [lit. clear], as I ought to speak” (Colossians 4:4). This clarifying purpose for the ministry is especially useful to us when we are “simple,” that is, immature and naïve in our faith (Ephesians 4:11-14). Therefore, we should be careful not to despise church or treat the ministry of the word as somehow separate from the Spirit's working. By paying close attention to Spirit-empowered ministers, who open the word of God to us, we receive light and gain discernment.

This hope is also a strong encouragement to ministers of the word, prodding them to solicit prayer and to spend more time expositing the Scriptures, expecting light to break forth again and again (as the Hebrew participle indicates). It is as if we hear Pastor John Robinson, speaking to the departing Pilgrims, “The Lord had more truth and light yet to break forth out of his Holy Word.” Indeed, He *has* more light to give us!

May God grant us all grace to appreciate the wondrous light of His word and thus to solicit the turn of His gaze and the joyful light of His face, even in the midst of a dark culture! Amen.

Tsaddai • Righteous God, Righteous Law (vv. 137-144)

“Righteous art Thou, O LORD, and upright are Thy judgments.”

In our culture, we Christians often feel small and insignificant, due to the relentless pace of relativism. What was true and right yesterday is no longer true and right today; and what is true and right today for one person may not be true and right today for another, or so says our culture. Against this rationalized forgetfulness of God’s word, we appear frozen in time, adhering to an old Book, which the culture despises as long outdated. Consequently, we are marginalized, caught in “trouble and anguish” as between the proverbial rock and a hard place (v. 143). *Given such a cultural context, what should we do?*

At the very least, we should resist the temptation to assert our own significance. In light of the world’s pride, and in the context of a self-esteem “gospel,” which is not a gospel, it would be tempting to fight fire with fire, answering their proud words with our own proud words; however, this temptation must be resisted. The psalmist points to a better way. Instead of asserting *ourselves*, let us instead assert *God*, as the implicit contrast in the two halves of the stanza demonstrates:

“Righteous art thou, O LORD” (v. 137a).

“I am small and despised” (v. 141a).

Regarding ourselves, we agree, “I am ‘last-born’ (as if I were born yesterday) and despised by fellow men;” but, as the verse continues, “I do not forget Your precepts.” Ultimately, it is not our own word that counts, but God’s word. Specifically, it is *the righteousness of God* in His word that must be asserted against this present culture. Five times in eight verses, the psalmist uses the word “righteous” or “righteousness.” *Why is the righteousness of God so necessary in combating a culture of relativism?*

First, the righteousness of God guarantees the perfection of His word (vv. 137-140). Please note the logical sequence in the opening verse: “You’re right, Lord; and Your decisions are right on.” All that God decides upon (or judges) is perfectly straight and smooth (“upright”), having no kink or dip, strictly because He Himself is *righteous* (cf. v. 68). Imagine! What if we wholeheartedly believed in God’s righteousness and confessed it the next time God crosses out our plans for His own! Such “crosses” are indeed hard to bear sometimes, but what an act of worship it would be, if with sincere lips, we are able to confess the perfect rightness of God to decide as He has decided! Oh, our faith still has far to go!

Indeed, the psalmist is so enamored with the rightness of God in deciding and speaking, he elaborates on its implications with two statements having “very” as an adverb. In the second verse, he asserts that the testimonies of God are not only right, but “very faithful” (v. 138). God is not merely technically accurate in His commands, as a slick salesman might be, but He is also fully trustworthy. What He tells us to do is truly for our best. In the fourth verse, the psalmist declares, “Thy word is very pure: therefore thy servant loveth it” (v. 140). Like smelted ore, refined seven times of all impurities, God’s words are “pure words” (Psalm 12:6). Very pure, very faithful. We have every reason to believe and to obey.

Is this how you feel about God’s words, that they are *very* faithful and *very* pure? If so, you will *love* them, and you will be jealously upset—even pressed flat with jealousy—when the world not merely disobeys, but forgets God’s words (v. 139). Beware of criticizing your brother for getting strongly upset over our culture’s relativism. Granted, there may be in him an admixture of unhealthy anger or even a touch of pride, but if deep down, the heat is stoked by love, it is at its core the same zeal that consumed the Lord Jesus, when He cleansed the temple, and did it *twice* (Psalm 69:9; John 2:13-17; Matthew 21:12-13). Heaven knows we need more love for the word of God!

Second, the righteousness of God guarantees the longevity of His word (vv. 141-144). Technically, what is stressed is not the longevity of the *words*, but the longevity of the *righteousness* of those words (vv. 142, 144). To explain the importance of this distinction, it is first necessary to explain the concept of righteousness itself.

The idea of righteousness is closely related to truth, and can be illustrated with a simple math lesson about apples:

A teacher sets five apples on the desk, and asks the class for the sum of two plus three. One student answers, "Four," to which the teacher responds, "Your answer is not right, for it does not conform to the truth. The truth is: Two plus three equals five." At this point, the teacher sets forth two apples, adds three more, and then counts

them individually--one, two, three, four, five. "There!" announces the teacher, "In reality, adding two apples to three apples gives us five apples; therefore, the statement that 'two plus three equals five' is true, for it represents reality. Moreover, the answer 'five' is right, for it conforms to the truth."

Granted, first-grade teachers are probably not so philosophical with their classes, but hopefully the point has been made that reality grounds truth, and truth grounds righteousness. To ascribe righteousness to God means that He always acts in accordance with truth, and truth is the representation in word or deed of what is really existing.

In our culture, the relativists assert that reality is changing, and changing so fast that what is true for one person is not necessarily true for another. This presumption of change receives much of its credibility through the rapid advance of technology, which has blinded us to areas of degeneration in our culture, such as in the arts, as J. Gresham Machen pointed almost a century ago. In reality, this assertion of change is a mirage. For all our technology, man still lives to be about seventy or eighty, as Moses asserted over three millennia ago (Psalm 90:10). Moreover, the fundamental cause of death remains unchanged: sin (Romans 6:23). In his essence, man has not changed, either constitutionally, as if he were evolving, or morally, as if he were good. The twentieth century was not the utopia predicted by the nineteenth century, and the twenty-first century does not bid much better. Therefore, against the postmodernist cries of relative "truth," we assert, "Thy law is the truth" (v. 142), and take delight in all God's commandments (v. 143).

This very delight, however, poses a problem. *Are there not aspects of the Law that have ceased to be in force?* For instance, what about the sacrifices, the food laws, and even the Sabbath? Are Christians to obey such things? Moreover, how are we to differentiate between laws that cease, such as not wearing garments with two kinds of thread, and laws that remain, such as not lying with a man as with a woman, which is the "abomination" of homosexuality? After all, both laws appear in close proximity (Leviticus 19:19; 20:13).

Although this is a very broad question, it actually has a simple answer: When reality changes, truth about the current situation changes; and when truth changes, what is right changes with it. For example, because the Cross removed the guilt of sin once and for all time, reality changed; therefore, animal sacrifices and all atoning sacrifices (including the Catholic Mass) are no longer right (see Hebrews 9:1-10:18). Moreover, because the Cross removed the wall of partition between Jew and Gentile (Ephesians 2:13-18), all codes designed to create an artificial distinction between Jew and Gentile have ceased--codes that forbade the mixture of traits, whether in food (having a cleft hoof but not chewing the cud) or in clothing. Jesus pronounced all foods clean, and He Himself is "Lord also of the Sabbath" (Mark 7:19; 2:28). In contrast to these laws, all laws regarding marriage and sexual morality are still in force today, for the reality of man and woman has not fundamentally changed since God instituted marriage with one man and one woman for a lifetime (Genesis 2:24). Therefore, until that reality changes, which it will in the resurrection (Luke 20:34-36), we are still bound by God's laws over marriage, and the rightness of those laws is everlasting.

God is righteous, but we are small; therefore, everything God decides is right--everything He commands is faithful--everything He says is 100% free from all error--and His righteousness endures forever! Why, then, should we have any trouble with anything that He tells us? Let us take all our hesitations to Jesus and ask that He would melt them away in the heat of His zeal for His Father's words. Amen.

Qoph • Confidence through Continuance (vv. 145-152)

“I cried with my whole heart; hear me, O LORD: I will keep Thy statutes.”

Are you frustrated with your prayer life? Does it seem to be lacking in confidence, being more of a routine than a reality? How blessed would it be to pray, “Hear my voice!” (v. 149), and then to know that God on high not only hears but is eager to answer! *What gives the psalmist such confidence in his praying?* Thanks to an insight given through Alexander Maclaren, two causes for confidence can be discerned. Both of them are loosely marked by a play on the Hebrew words *qiddam* and *qedem*, which begin with the Hebrew letter for this stanza (*qoph*).

First, confidence in prayer comes through continuance in sincere, regular prayer (vv. 145-148). Please mark the word “continuance.” The reality of God is not to be judged on the basis of a short-term experiment. When the Bible says, “O taste and see that the LORD is good,” it does not have in mind a session of cheese sampling, where nibbling comes before committing, but rather the start of a lifelong trust in the Lord (Psalm 34:8; cf. 1 Peter 2:3). In other words, the proof of God comes to those who abandon their skepticism and cast themselves on the Lord. Then, and then only, as they believe and persevere in believing, they begin to see again and again how faithful God is--that “the LORD is good” (cf. Hebrews 6:11-12).

Prayer is no different. The confident cry of the fifth verse (“Hear me!”) does not occur without the habits of the previous four verses--habits of sincerity and regularity. How silly, then, are we, to act as if prayer were somehow magically different than all other habits of life, which gain confidence through continuance! Yet, how hopeful we should be that through perseverance in the power of the Holy Spirit our prayer life can be truly changed! Let us consider, then, the habits of *sincerity* and *regularity*.

On the one hand, the psalmist asserts his **sincerity** (“with my whole heart”), which he amplifies as a commitment to obey (“I will keep thy statutes”). In the next verse, the sincerity is so great, it becomes the motivation for salvation: “I cried unto thee; save me, and I shall [literally, *so that I may*] keep thy testimonies” (v. 146).

Here we have our first clue to ineffective prayer: *We may be praying without the heart to obey*. We may be asking God to deliver us from temptation, but inwardly wishing He would not. We may be asking God for something spiritual, but inwardly eying something carnal. According to James, the famous rubric “Ask and ye shall receive” had some assumed conditions, such as proper motivation: “Ye ask, and receive not, because ye ask amiss, that ye may consume it upon your lusts” (James 4:3; cf. Matthew 7:7). Similarly, a psalmist acknowledged, “If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear me” (Psalm 66:18). Conversely, if, in general, we do obey the commandments of faith in Christ and love to one another, we will have confidence in prayer (1 John 3:21-23). Therefore, prayer must be sincere.

On the other hand, the psalmist asserts his **regularity**:

“I prevented the dawning of the morning, and cried: I hoped in thy word.
Mine eyes prevent the night watches, that I might meditate in thy word” (vv. 147-148).

The word “prevent” (Hebrew *qiddam*) means to come before, or to confront someone or something. Literally, the psalmist is saying that he prays in the twilight before dawn, and then meditates before the night watches, which would seem to imply evening twilight. Therefore, in the *twilight zone*, both morning and evening, the psalmist regularly turned his attention to the Lord.

What a practical insight! If you are frustrated with your lack of praying, please heed this clue: *Make prayer the first item of the day*. In fact, if you are able, imitate your Lord, and rise before dawn (cf. Mark 1:35), to make the morning twilight a season of uninterrupted prayer. After all, who speaks to you then, other than morning songbirds? Furthermore, if you are frustrated with having nothing to pray, especially with having no promise to fuel your faith, but yet find it too time-consuming or distracting to imitate George Mueller’s method of reading Scripture before prayer, then imitate the psalmist: *Meditate in the evening twilight, and then pray in the morning twilight*. Please note: This sequence will only work if you truly *meditate* on God’s word, that is, go over and over in your mind what God has said in His word. Instead of meditating on your worries as you go to bed, which is the miserable habit of many, fall asleep with a promise on your heart. In so doing, by God’s grace, you will find that the promise

rehearsed in the evening becomes the promise prayed in the morning--and praying the promises in faith becomes the fuel for continuance in prayer.

Second, confidence in prayer also comes through continuance in God's word (vv. 149-152). While mere habits in prayer may give a stock of words, it is continuance in God's word that gives a confident heart. Merely to pray many words ourselves, or to garner many prayers through lots of people praying, is not the road to effectual prayer, for our Lord warned us against the mere multiplication of words (Matthew 6:7-8). For prayer to be heard, it must be according to God's will, and God's will is best expressed in His holy word (cf. 1 John 5:14-15; John 15:7). It is in God's word that we learn of His character, and thus can pray with confidence, as the psalmist does here--that God would not merely give life, but do so in accordance with His holy character of loyal love and justice (v. 149). Therefore, confidence in prayer will also come through continuance in God's word.

Specifically, by continuing in God's word and by learning from God's testimonies, the psalmist came to know *long ago* (Hebrew *qedem*) that God had founded them forever (v. 152). In other words, he came to see that the only permanent foundation in all of life is God's word. Therefore, on that basis, the psalmist locates all others with respect to the topography of God's word:

“They draw *nigh* that follow after mischief: they are *far* from they law.
Thou art *near*, O LORD; and all thy commandments are truth” (vv. 150-151).

In this geography of certainty, the evil schemers may be near for now, but they will not be for long, since they are far from the foundation of life! God, in contrast, will remain near, for all that He commands is true; and, *blessed be God*, one of the greatest of His commandments is “life everlasting,” granted to all who have faith in His Son, Jesus Christ (John 12:50; cf. 3:16; Psalm 133:3). If Jesus' words abide in us, as we abide in Him, then we will indeed have great confidence in prayer (John 15:7)! May the Lord grant us all such confidence through continuance! Amen.

Resh • The Fight for Life (vv. 153-160)

“Consider mine affliction, and deliver me: for I do not forget Thy law.”

Life. The word itself speaks of all that is good, of all that makes existence worth having. Not all who exist truly *live*. Those in hell exist, but they endure endless punishment in what is called “the second death.” Not even all who exist on earth truly live, for “she that liveth in pleasure,” says the Bible, “is dead while she liveth” (1 Timothy 5:6); and, even among those who live, having been born of God, there is a significant difference between having life and having it more abundantly (John 10:10). *How precious is this gift called life!*

Not only *precious*, but how *precarious* is this gift called life. Threatened on earth by evildoers, and threatened in judgment by one’s own guilt, the gift of life is not automatic. It also a matter of justice, for not all deserve to live on earth, and not all deserve to live after earth.

It is within this context of justice that the psalmist cries out three times, “Cause me to live!” (vv. 154, 156, 159), which is often translated archaically as “Quicken me!” or “Revive me!” Afflicted and trapped, accused and impoverishly enslaved, he cries out to God:

“Consider mine affliction, and deliver me: for I do not forget Thy law.
Plead my cause, and deliver me: quicken me according to thy word” (vv. 153-154).

Literally, he prays, “See my affliction!” as if to say, “Lord, take note! Is this the way that one who does not forget Your law should be treated? Take up my fight, pay the price, set me free, and get me out of here.” In a word, “Cause me to live!”

Is this your predicament? Is your life threatened or sapped unfairly, as if you deserved not to live? If so, pay close attention to the wisdom given in this stanza.

First, rest in the management of God, and resist the manipulation of the flesh. In all situations of injustice, it is tempting to rationalize our own efforts of escape, instead of holding firm in faith to the justice and mercy of God. The psalmist resisted this temptation. Instead of manipulation, he prayed and prayed for God to take note. That is the simple lesson of the twice-repeated plea of “See!” placed prominently in this stanza (vv. 153, 159). Moreover, he encouraged his own heart, pitting fact with fact. If his persecutors be “many,” then so are the “tender mercies” of God (vv. 157, 156). How precious are the multitude of God’s mercies, for multiple are our needs!

Second, cling to the law of God as the basis of justice. Deep down the psalmist knew that salvation from death rightfully belonged to him, for he did not forget God’s law (v. 153). In contrast, he also knew, “Salvation is far from the wicked: for they seek not Thy statutes” (v. 155). The contrast was stark. Moreover, he also knew that those who caved in, and defected from the side of God’s law, in order to follow the expedience of compromise were also in trouble. When he saw these traitors, he was sickened (v. 158). Rather than join their defection, he did not stretch or budge one bit from God’s testimonies (v. 157). Therefore, on the basis of God’s merciful management and watchful justice, the psalmist could confidently repeat his main prayer: “Consider how I love Thy precepts: quicken me, O LORD, according to Thy lovingkindness” (v. 159). Underneath all of life was the bedrock of God’s flawless word, so wondrously described at the end of the stanza in both its totality and its details: “Thy word is true from the beginning: and every one of Thy righteous judgments endureth for ever” (v. 160).

Now, if you are sensitive to your sin, this two-step approach still poses a problem. It provides an adequate basis for human-to-human injustices, but what about our wrongdoings before God Himself? How can I say to Him, against whom I have sinned, “Please my cause!” when He Himself is my Accuser? Who will stand up for me against the just fury of Almighty God?

The answer, of course, is *Jesus*, the one Mediator between God and humans, who died for our sins in order that He might ransom us for God. In love, God the Father sent His Son to us; then, in justice, God the Father sentenced His Son to death for us. Because Jesus bore our sins, He died; because He Himself had done no wrong, He lives again. Therefore, justice put Him to death, and justice raised Him to life. In truth, Jesus is the perfect embodiment of this stanza, and the only One who could pray it in full. It is just as Peter wrote, concerning Christ the Lord:

“Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that ye should follow His steps: who did no sin, neither was guile found in His mouth: who, when He was reviled, reviled not again; when He suffered, He threatened not; but committed Himself to him that judgeth righteously: who His own self bare our sins in His own body on the tree, that we, being dead to sins, should live unto righteousness: by whose stripes ye were healed” (1 Peter 2:21-24).

Not manipulating, He trusted. Leaving self-reliance, He left His case with God, who delivered Him out of death. Thus, having left His case with God, He also left us an example to follow in His steps:

“Wherefore let them that suffer according to the will of God commit the keeping of their souls to Him in well doing, as unto a faithful Creator” (1 Peter 4:19).

Once you are forgiven of your sin in Christ, you are then able to say to God, “See, O Lord, and cause me to live! As You heard Your Son in justice, so now hear me in grace, and save me from my accusers!” And He will, for He is “a *faithful* Creator.” May the Lord bless you as you turn from sin to the Son, from manipulation to trust, and from disobedience to unswerving allegiance. Amen.

Shin • How to Endure Unjust Persecution (vv. 161-168)

“Princes have persecuted me without a cause: but my heart standeth in awe of Thy word.”

If we hear of persecution, we should not assume that those persecuted have done something wrong. *Unjust persecution by a government is a reality.* In Muslim countries like Iran, and in communist countries like North Korea, Christians are being unjustly persecuted for their faith, with full sanction by the leading officials (the “princes”). Jesus Himself experienced such persecution from the *chief priests*. In explaining this treatment, Jesus not only explained to His disciples, “They hated me without a cause” (John 15:25; cf. Psalm 69:4); He also forewarned them, “If they have persecuted Me, they will also persecute you” (John 15:20). And so it has come to pass. Christians from the apostles onward have been persecuted for no legitimate reason.

How should we endure such persecution? This stanza gives us two key insights.

First, the battle in persecution is won or lost in the affectionate domain (vv. 161-164). In other words, what you fear, what do you love, and what do you hate will ultimately foretell your victory or defeat at the hands of government officials. Be warned: Demas “loved this present world;” therefore, he deserted Paul (2 Timothy 4:10).

Specifically, we must be in *dread* of the word of God, not the word of the government (v. 161). When the government gives orders in accordance with God’s law, we obey (1 Peter 2:13-14); but when the government gives orders contrary to God’s law, we must be empowered, as the apostles were, to say, “We ought to obey God rather than men” (Acts 5:29). As Jesus taught us, we must fight the fear of man with the fear of God (see Matthew 10:28).

Moreover, we must *rejoice* over the word of God with the same intensity as one who has just won the lottery (v. 162). How would you feel if right now I handed you a \$1000 to do with as you please? Would you be indifferent, or in danger of falling asleep? How blind we are, as the people of God! Week after week, we hold in our hand and hear in our ears the precious words of God, which open to us the way of Paradise and introduce us into the fellowship of the Holy Trinity, and to think, we cannot stay awake, let alone *rejoice*! Unless we repent, we are sitting ducks to future persecution. No. Let those princes nab what they will, if we have the sayings of God, we are amazingly rich still.

Finally, we must *love* God’s law and *hate*, even *abominate*, all that is false (v. 163). While it is tempting in the face of danger to lie, as Abraham did twice, we must resist all falsehood as something to detest. Again and again, even “seven times a day,” let us praise the God of Heaven, whose judgments are always right (v. 164). In time, He will plead our case and save us from unjust persecution.

Second, the only safe road is a full, robust love of the law of God (vv. 165-168). Out of all the affections, love is the greatest; and in this stanza, it is love for God’s law that is cited three times (vv. 163, 165, 167). Please note: What is emphasized is not *doing* the law, nor *keeping* the law, but *loving* the law. *What specifically makes loving the law of God so important?*

The answer is found in the fifth verse of the stanza, which is the only verse of the eight that makes a general statement--a statement that upholds the hope of the psalmist:

“Great peace have they which love Thy law: and nothing shall offend them” (v. 165).

Peace is the absence of hostility, and implies a state of safety. At first, it seems odd to describe one who is persecuted as having not just peace, but even *great* peace. *How can this be?* After all, to be hounded for one’s life seems to be the opposite of having great peace.

The peace envisioned here concerns outer safety in light of inner danger. Here is the great secret of surviving persecution: *The dangers are not without, but within.* The prince of this world came to Jesus, but could ultimately do nothing to Him, because he had nothing *in Him* (John 14:30). Jesus loved the will of God more than food and rest, and made it His highest aim, to glorify the Father by finishing the work He had been given to do (cf. John 4:34; 17:4; 19:30); therefore, what could the devil grab in Christ? Similarly, the persecuting prince can do nothing to those truly born of God, for it is written, “He that loveth his brother abideth in the light, and there is none occasion

of stumbling in him” (1 John 2:10; cf. 2 Peter 1:10-11). For those who love God’s law, there is ultimately no danger, for “nothing shall offend them” (v. 165).

The word “offend” refers to a *stumbling-block*, something that causes you to fall. In the New Testament, this concept is used of anyone who gets in the way of your strict allegiance to God, either by example or by counsel (1 Romans 14:13-21; Corinthians 8:9-11; Matthew 16:21-23; 18:6-10; cf. Malachi 2:8). If it is a particular sin, you must radically remove it from your life (Matthew 18:8-9). If it is a person, even a close friend, you must rebuke him (Luke 17:1-4; e.g. Matthew 16:24). If it is something about Jesus or His words that offends you, then you must do some major soul-searching before God, for you cannot remove Jesus! Something in *you* must change. Specifically, you do not love the law of God as you should, for if you did, nothing would offend you! Amazingly, this is quite common, for Isaiah prophesied that Jesus would be “a stone of stumbling” and “a rock of offence” to the self-righteous Jews (Isaiah 8:14).

Paradoxically, only those loving the law of God take no offence at Jesus Himself or at His commandments. While it may seem like legalism to stress a love for God’s law, the legalist actually hates the law, because it condemns him. That is why he is so offended by the cross (cf. 1 Corinthians 1:23; Galatians 5:11). Not loving the law of God, the legalist constructs his own law that he can *supposedly* keep (cf. Matthew 15:1-9). In contrast to the legalist, the person renouncing self-righteousness and trusting Christ alone for justification receives the liberating Spirit of Holiness, who inclines him to obey God freely (cf. Romans 8:3-4). Only those trusting in Christ can aspire to say with the psalmist:

“LORD, I have hoped for Thy salvation, and done Thy commandments.
My soul hath kept Thy testimonies; and I love them exceedingly.
I have kept Thy precepts and Thy testimonies: for all my ways are before Thee” (vv. 166-168).

What we love, we keep. And if we love, we have no cause of stumbling in us. How blessed are all those who are not offended at Jesus (Matthew 11:6)!

Christian, please grasp this point. For the devil to trip you up on the highway to Zion (cf. Isaiah 57:14), he must have an angle to work. If it is your love of the world, he can entice you like Demas. If it is your love of money, he can ensnare you like Judas. If it is your pride, he can offend you like the Jews who left Jesus in John chapter six. Whatever it is, he must have an angle, *but what can he grab in the man who loves the law of God?* The devil has nothing in him.

Therefore, please watch your heart carefully (cf. Proverbs 4:23). Do not let any pet project or secret sin replace Jesus and His will at the center of your affections. It troubles me to see church people upset by a particular point of biblical doctrine or practice that somehow touches on some darling idea or practice. Yes, we all disagree on specific points, but when a particular point is made that has some visible basis in God’s word, and is made in the balance of God’s word, why should we be offended by it? Should we not rather give it some serious consideration, as those who love God’s word so much, that we want to know all the details? Instead, people switch churches, perhaps to find sooner or later something in the next church to offend them, just as one who divorces and remarries, only to divorce again. How much better to love the law of God, than to keep the little darling! Is anything worth more than Jesus?

“Little children, keep yourselves from idols” (1 John 5:21). In the day of persecution, you will be glad that you did.

Taw • A Spiritual Cord of Three Strands (vv. 169-176)

“Let my cry come near before Thee, O LORD: give me understanding according to Thy word.”

You are now at the end of the longest song in the Bible, having heard the voice of this psalmist again and again cry out to God in intense fervor. What would you expect to hear as the grand finale? In light of this psalm’s messianic application, what would you expect to hear as a foreshadowing of Jesus Christ? More personally, what is this psalm saying to you and to me about the nature of an authentic walk with God?

Three pairs begin this stanza, followed by a summary line and then a mysterious ending that breaks up the cadence:

First, the psalmist pleads for his prayer to reach God, asking for understanding and deliverance (vv. 169-170).

Second, the psalmist pleads for his mouth to praise God, knowing he will be taught and be saved (vv. 171-172).

Third, as Maclaren has noted, the psalmist pleads for help on the basis of choosing God’s word (vv. 173-174).

Prayer for salvation, praise in salvation, and the word behind salvation--in other words, the means of, the result of, and the motive of salvation--all reappear in the summary line, as if to reiterate their importance: “Let my soul live, and it shall praise thee; and let thy judgments help me” (v. 175). Then, as stated earlier, the mysterious ending appears.

Before addressing the ending, let me speak a bit about the significance of prayer, praise, and the word. The preacher of Ecclesiastes once wrote, “Two are better than one;...and a threefold cord is not quickly broken” (Ecclesiastes 4:9, 12). What we have here in this stanza is the threefold cord of an authentic walk with God--prayer, praise, and the word. All three complement each other. If we are in prayer, we are asking on the basis of His promises in His word (vv. 169-170). If we believe these promises, we will pray with thanksgiving, find peace, and praise Him throughout (vv. 171-172; cf. Philippians 4:6-7). If we experience prayer, praise, and salvation, we will learn of His word in the context of living in His world, for true learning cannot occur without real living--a truth that is woven throughout this psalm (e.g. v. 71). These three strands make a strong cord.

Please note: If we lop off one or two strands, we will miss out on all, for the cord will not hold. It is not enough just to pray, or just to praise, or just to love the word. Such imbalance leads to barrenness, as we have probably tasted in certain individuals or in certain churches. A strong individual and a strong church grabs all three and interweaves them so tightly, they can hardly be separated, but form the streamlined cord of spiritual strength. Moreover, a truly strong individual and a truly strong church makes each strand radically intense. Listen closely to the literal language of the psalmist, somewhat muted in our English translations:

“Let my *ringing cry* draw near to Your presence...” (v. 169). The focus here is on sound, not content.

“Let my lip *gush out* Your praise...” (v. 171). Think open fire hydrant.

“I *strongly long* for Your salvation, O Jehovah; and Your law is my *sporting delight*” (v. 174).

Oh, that God would once again fan the flame of spiritual intensity in the lives of His people, and do so in such a way that each strand of authentic spirituality would be strengthened proportionate to the other two! Three strong strands make a very strong cord.

Such a strong cord tied Jesus to His Father. Listen to the writer of Hebrews:

“In the days of His flesh, when He had offered up prayers and supplications with strong crying and tears unto Him that was able to save him from death, and was heard in that He feared...” (Hebrews 5:7).

The prayer-life of Christ was fuelled by strong crying, godly fear, and tears, indicating an intense desire for salvation--not salvation from sin, for He had none, but salvation from death, which He suffered on account of our sin. Such was the prayer-life of Jesus. As for praise, the writer of Hebrews quotes the voice of Christ in the Psalms:

“I will declare Thy name unto my brethren, in the midst of the church will I sing praise unto Thee” (Hebrews 2:12; cf. Psalm 22:22).

Can you imagine Jesus singing? He will, when the great church is assembled someday. Oh, the solemnity of that moment when millions of redeemed souls are silent to hear the Messiah Himself sing solo the praises of God His Father! Oh, I want to be there for that day! And then, as for the word, in a life of learning by living, the writer notes:

“Though He were a Son, yet learned He obedience by the things which He suffered; and being made perfect [that is, mature], He became the author of eternal salvation unto all them that obey Him” (Hebrews 5:8-9).

So you see? Do you see how Psalm 119 embodies the aspirations, the longings, the delights of the suffering Son of God, as He matured in His human nature into our Source of Eternal Salvation?

But if Christ embodies this psalm, what are we to do with its final verse? In broken cadence, the final verse reads: “I have gone astray like a lost sheep; seek Thy servant; for I do not forget Thy commandments” (v. 176). After one hundred and seventy-five verses of obedience, are we to assume that the final verse ends with a confession of sin? Only one other verse lends possible support to such an assumption (v. 67), but even there, the word “astray” is a different word, which may allow for *innocent* ignorance. Therefore, is this psalm the testimony of a sinner, or the words of the sinless Savior?

In one sense, it does not matter, for even if this psalm were the words of a sinner, Jesus would fully embody its righteous aspirations; however, three reasons incline me to say that the final verse is not a confession of sin. First, the word “lost” refers to perishing, which would be the opposite of the “salvation” mentioned earlier (v. 174). If the salvation is salvation from *death*, then “lost” refers to dying, rather than going to hell. Second, the verse ends with an affirmation of fidelity as the reason why God should search for him: “I do *not* forget Thy commandments.” Third, the only time this word “astray” appears elsewhere in the psalm is when the psalmist testifies, “I erred not from Thy precepts” (v. 110). Therefore, the psalmist is roaming about as a lone sheep in danger of dying; but he has not strayed from God’s law, but is ever mindful of His commandments, and on that basis, he asks God to find him and to save him.

It is this isolation that indicates a unique fulfillment to this psalm. Yes, those who fear the Lord are out there (as in vv. 63, 74, 79), but the dominant note of this psalm is an intense communion with God in the presence of evildoers, who are quite near (v. 150). Jesus fulfills this vision. While we, like sheep, wandered from God, in that we each turned to our own way, the Servant of the Lord, Jesus Christ, wandered from life, in that He was “oppressed” and “afflicted” due to our sins (Isaiah 53:6-7). Instead of crying out to His oppressors, He remained silent as a sheep before its shearers, and cried out to God, “Seek Your servant” (v. 176). God did. And our hope of eternal life is forever sealed in the living hope of Jesus’ resurrection.

A cord of three strands--prayer, praise, and the word--pulled the Savior from the jaws of death. Christian, do not neglect your hope.