
**"The Word of God in Times of Trouble"
(Psalm 119:17-24)
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(Psalm 119:17-24)

- ¹⁷ Be good to your servant while I live,
that I may obey your word.
- ¹⁸ Open my eyes that I may see
wonderful things in your law.
- ¹⁹ I am a stranger on earth;
do not hide your commands from me.
- ²⁰ My soul is consumed with longing
for your laws at all times.
- ²¹ You rebuke the arrogant, who are accursed,
those who stray from your commands.
- ²² Remove from me their scorn and contempt,
for I keep your statutes.
- ²³ Though rulers sit together and slander me,
your servant will meditate on your decrees.
- ²⁴ Your statutes are my delight;
they are my counselors

Sometimes we read the Bible and we think it is irrelevant, that it doesn't address the issues that I'm going through. When we read it seems really removed from what we are going through, especially when it comes to struggles and suffering. What would you say to a friend that came to you with that concern?

Here's what I would say:

1. You may lack the basic and really easy tools that help a person to read a text of Scripture, know what it is saying, know what it means, and know how to apply it to our lives. Let me show you those tools and how to use them.
2. You might be coming at the Bible with a chronological prejudice. You may think that the problems of modern people are so much more complex and sophisticated than the problems of ancient people. To that I would say that the most fundamental problems and issues of people in all generations are the same. Who am I? Why am I here? What's wrong with me and the world? What will make me happy? Why am I so bad?
3. You might be approaching the Bible for the wrong reason or with the wrong motives. You may be looking to the Bible to be some sort of book that contains "the positive thought of the day" or like an advice column...what to do when I'm sad, what to do when people don't like me, how to be happy. And though it does address these questions, it isn't the primary purpose of the Bible. The Bible is given so that people might know God, what God requires of us, what went wrong with us, and how God has made it right. So the Bible is much more about God than it is about us. And the way to solve our problems is not to merely look within ourselves, we must look to God.
4. You may not be a Christian. You may not have the Holy Spirit in you. Your heart of stone has not yet been changed into a heart of flesh. If we constantly find the Word of God boring, not useful, irrelevant...if we find ourselves avoiding the Bible more than going to the Bible, it might be because we're not Christians yet. So, then we must become Christians by turning from our sins and turning toward Jesus Christ.

Well, I want to propose to you that the Bible is relevant, in that it addresses the most important issues and questions for humankind. This section of the psalm addresses some serious questions and gives us the answers.

Well, to best understand this section of psalm 119 we have to look within the text to understand the background of what he is experiencing and feeling. Let's look at some of the clues. Look with me to verse 21.

- ²¹ You rebuke the arrogant, who are accursed,
those who stray from your commands.
²² Remove from me their scorn and contempt,
for I keep your statutes.
²³ Though rulers sit together and slander me,
your servant will meditate on your decrees.

So, some serious things are going on in his life. He's going through ridicule, slander and persecution. People are looking down on him. People are after him, they're out to get him. They want to drag his name through the mud. These people look upon him with scorn and contempt. Those are very strong words filled with hatred. And it doesn't just stop at having strong negative feelings about him, it leads to negative and hurtful actions toward him, like slander.

From this negative experience and how he describes it we can get an idea of how he views the world. In his world there are two, and only two groups of people. There are those who obey God's laws and there are those who despise them. There are those who love God and those that hate God. There is no third group.

And, those two groups are at odds with each other. They are incompatible. Why? Because so much about these two groups are different. Their frame of reference is different. The Christian's reference point is monotheism. There is one God who exists in three persons.

Their view toward morality is different. The morality of Christians is founded and rooted in God and his revealed Word, called the Bible. This is where we go for the final word on all things related to morality. But the world and culture we live in, it appears goes to all sources, except God and the Bible.

Their view toward the world that they live in is different. Many people in their ignorance say that all religions are essentially the same, we just differ on the details. Nothing could be further from the truth. As far as the psalmist is concerned, the major aspects of his understanding of reality are totally different from that of his culture. He says, "I'm a servant and a stranger." When he describes himself as a servant he's telling us how he views his relationship with God. God is his Lord, his master, his king, his boss, his Father and he is God's servant, meaning that his existence on this planet and for all eternity is to do what pleases God, to do what God wants him to do. Do people in our culture think that? The worldviews are completely at odds.

Then, he describes himself as a stranger. What does that tell us? If being a servant tells us how he sees his relationship with God, then calling himself a stranger tells us how he sees his relationship to the world in which he lives. Throughout the Bible God's people have been wanderers, travelers, sojourners, foreigners, and aliens. It's always been that way. The people of God have always been at their best not when they settle in and get all comfortable. Rather, they have always done their best when they consider themselves strangers and wanderers. The psalmist knows that he is not a permanent resident of earth. His permanent residence is in heaven with God. If that's the case, then the values of our culture will always feel a bit strange. If that's the case, then we'll really never feel at home here. Happiness, fulfillment and purpose, will never ultimately be found here. It can only be found in God.

This is what the psalmist is telling us. Christian friends, it's so important that we also feel this tension while we live on this earth. We should never get so comfortable thinking this will be our permanent home. We should feel like we're living in tents. We should live like a deployed soldier on foreign soil, knowing that when the battle is over, we'll be going to our eternal home.

We Christians must also realize the differences between these two worldviews and how utterly incompatible they are. That's usually where the struggles are...because we try to keep one foot in each of these worldviews.

For the psalmist, because of these two very different worldviews which are almost always hostile to each other, he is going through persecution. It should be no different to us.

Listen to how the Apostle Peter talks about it:

Dear friends, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come on you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. **(1 Pet 4:12 NIV11-GK)**

What kind of situation are you in? Don't we also at times echo the words of the psalmist? Don't we also feel the same stresses that he's feeling? Don't we often times feel out of place at the workplace and on the campus?

One Christian author Richard Niehbur wrote a seminal book called *Christ and Culture* and in it, he poses the question, What should a Christian's relationship be to the world in which he or she lives? So he goes through different ways in which Christians have done it over the centuries. One way is assimilation, where Christians become like the host culture. Another is isolation where Christians remove themselves from their culture. And another is transformation where we engage our culture and change it for the better. Well, we're all smart enough to know which is the best way. But we should ask ourselves, how are we doing? Are we assimilating, isolating or transforming?

Now, let's look at how the psalmist responds to the situation he finds himself in where the culture is against him. The world is against him. He's going through some serious obstacles. Where does he go? What does he do? **He looks to God and his Word.**

Take a look at his desires:

He wants to obey the Word of God
He wants to see wonderful things in the Law of God
He longs for the laws of God
He meditates on God's decrees
He delights in the law.

Let's just pause there for a moment. We can't read this and merely think that reading the Bible is some mechanical formula or exercise. It should be, it has to be, something deeper than that. What do you think it is about this psalmist that makes him go on, verse after verse, all 176 of them, talking about his love affair with the Word of God? Wouldn't you agree that if at the end of the year, when I finish preaching all these 22 sermons and you complete hearing all 22 of these sermons, and if our hearts are not more inclined to love the Word of God, to long for the Word of God, that something is terribly amiss with our lives, and with our hearts? What I'm trying to say is that it isn't enough to just read the Word, I think what we all want, and what we all need, is to love the Word, and love the God who gave us his Word. This is where we should be. At the end of these 22 sermons, we should be able read all 176 verses again and say to ourselves, you know what, this chapter is not as foreign as it was when we first began. I resonate and echo in my being the sentiments of this psalmist.

How do we get there? We have to pray. That statement, that answer is probably sounding a bit repetitive by now, but it's so important, that the psalmist himself keeps going to prayer, not only for insight into God's Word, but for his heart's attitude to be softened and changed toward the Word.

Now, let's look specifically at his prayers:

- 119:17 Be good to your servant while I live,
that I may obey your word.
18 Open my eyes that I may see
wonderful things in your law.
19 I am a stranger on earth;
do not hide your commands from me.

There are three parts to his prayer. Let's look at them one by one.

The first prayer in verse 17 tells of the kind of living he wants to do as a servant of God. He wants to obey. God's love language, I've said before, is obedience. We express our love to God by obeying God. This is spiritual act of worship. In order to do that he needs God's help, his grace, his blessing. Apart from God's goodness, his grace and his blessing, we cannot possibly obey his Words, nor can we love his Word, nor can we love obeying his Words. What we are asking for here is a change of heart.

How about the next part of his prayer in verse 18?

- 18 Open my eyes that I may see
wonderful things in your law.

The psalmist is telling us that there are some amazing and wonderful things to be seen in the Word of God. What sort of things?

What might some of those wonderful things be?

And what other nation is so great as to have such righteous decrees and laws as this body of laws I am setting before you today? **(Deut 4:8 NIV11-GK)**

I find it amazing the things God says about family, about community, about mercy and generosity. I find what God reveals about himself, about his utter moral purity, his complete uniqueness and the one and only true God, about his just judgments. Consider the Ten Commandments that we looked at last year. It begins with commands related to God and then commands related to our relationships with others. It refers to areas of religion, work, rest, family, society, business, all in 10 short commands. It reminds us that God will not be marginalized, he will not be thrust to the periphery of our lives, but he and his laws will guide all the various components of our lives.

What about words about God's love. As we've been reading Deuteronomy in our reading plans we came across these words.

⁷ The Lord did not set his affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples. ⁸ But it was because the Lord loved you and kept the oath he swore to your ancestors that he brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the land of slavery, from the power of Pharaoh king of Egypt. ⁹ Know therefore that the Lord your God is God; he is the faithful God, keeping his covenant of love to a thousand generations of those who love him and keep his commandments. **(Deut 7:7-9 NIV11-GK)**

Isn't that a wonderful thing? And there are so many other discoveries to be made.

But, the only way we can see these wonderful things as wonderful, valuable, useful, and precious is if God opens our eyes. In other words, we are blind not only to what the Bible says, but our hearts are hardened to it as well. That's why we need the help of God to open our eyes. This is so vitally important for all of us.

Here's how the Apostle Paul says it:

¹⁴ The person without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God but considers them foolishness, and cannot understand them because they are discerned only through the Spirit. **(1 Cor 2:14)**

Listen to how Jesus says it to Peter,

¹⁶ Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." ¹⁷ Jesus replied, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father in heaven." **(Matt 16:16-17)**

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. **(Matt 5:8 NIV11-GK)**

Here's how we can apply this:

Every time you go to church, pray for the preacher, pray for others and pray for yourself. Pray for God to use the preacher to faithfully and powerfully preach the Word. Pray that he would be preaching it to himself and not just to the congregation. Pray that every other person in the room, that God would speak some truth to them. Pray for our friends that come to church who are not yet Christians that their hearts and minds would be open. And, pray for yourself -- for humility. Perhaps this is the greatest prayer you can pray for yourself before you listen to a sermon.

Oh Lord, I am going to church today. I will be sitting under your most authoritative Word. Grant me humility, to accept your Word as truth. Grant me humility to see my sins and faults. Grant me humility to allow your Word to address my life. Grant me humility to have a softened, and not a hardened heart. Grant me humility to make my relationships right, so that nothing hinders this worship. Grant me humility to seek the benefit of others even if the Word doesn't speak to me today.

Now, finally, what about the last part of his prayer?

¹⁹ I am a stranger on earth;
do not hide your commands from me.

Well, it's saying pretty much the same thing. God, in his sovereignty, can and does hide his Word from some. And in his sovereignty he reveals it to others. What does this tell us? It tells us that we have to throw ourselves upon the mercy of Almighty God. Unless God does something, I'm ruined. Unless God has mercy, I'm lost. Unless God reveals, I'm in utter darkness, but our God is so rich in mercy. He is so kind to sinners. He knows we are weak. He knows how prone to wander we are. He knows that our hearts get so easily calloused. That's why he will answer these three prayers for illumination.

Conclusion:

No matter what the trouble we are facing, the place to go is to God's Word. The Word of God is not merely the best place to go, it is the only place to go. We must not run away from God. We mustn't ignore God's Word. We must run to God; we must dive into his Word.

If you're going through a terrible sorrow, don't go alcohol, don't medicate with food, go to God and to his Word.

If you're going through persecution, don't run away, don't cower, go to God and to his Word.

If you're going through loneliness, don't suffer alone -- go to God and to his Word.

If you're suffering under the pressing burden of your sin, don't ignore it, go to God and his Word. There you will find Jesus, his one and only son, who loved you so much, he died for your sins, so that you could be with God forever.

The Word of God is the only place where the answers, the real answers will be found.

Let's pray.