
**"Working Through Hardship"
(Psalm 119:25-32)
Pastor Peter Yi
May 7, 2017**

(John 21;15-19)

²⁵ I am laid low in the dust;
 preserve my life according to your word.
²⁶ I gave an account of my ways and you answered me;
 teach me your decrees.
²⁷ Cause me to understand the way of your precepts,
 that I may meditate on your wonderful deeds.
²⁸ My soul is weary with sorrow;
 strengthen me according to your word.
²⁹ Keep me from deceitful ways;
 be gracious to me and teach me your law.
³⁰ I have chosen the way of faithfulness;
 I have set my heart on your laws.
³¹ I hold fast to your statutes, Lord;
 do not let me be put to shame.
³² I run in the path of your commands,
 for you have broadened my understanding.

Psalm 119 is the longest chapter in the entire Bible consisting of 176 verses, divided into 22 sections, following the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet, where each section contains 8 verses. The reason we are spending so much of the year in this psalm is because the entire psalm is a poem about the Word of God, the Bible. And with this year being the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, the foundational truth that came out of the Reformation was the doctrine of Sola Scriptura—scripture alone is our authority for all matters of doctrine and Christian life.

But, why? Why really are we spending so much time on this? Is it just to get us in touch with our spiritual Reformation heritage? Or, to teach a little church history? It is those things, but there is something far more important. It's the question of authority. You see all of us, whether you're a man or woman, single or married, Christian or not a Christian rely on authority in much, if not all of our lives. Now in some areas, where you get your authority has little or no impact on you or on anything else. Such as deciding on who has the correct take on a particular restaurant. Do you trust your friend's recommendation or do you trust Yelp reviews? What's the worst that can happen? A lackluster meal? Some bad service? A bit of food poisoning? Not that big of a deal, right?

But, in other areas, where we get our authority does have significant ramifications and consequences. If you are a Christian, you must settle, once and for all, the issue of authority. From whom, from where, will you get your authority? In our culture the ultimate authority on almost any matter is self. We live in a very strange time, of news, fake news, and fact-checking. We live in a time where there's so much moral fog that most people can no longer discern between what is right and wrong. In fact rightness and wrongness no longer seem to be categories for many people.

Sadly, many, many Christians have lost or broken their moral compass because their source of authority has been challenged. For Christians, our authority is God and his word. As soon as that goes, the house begins to crumble. Everything is up for grabs. If the Bible in its entirety is not your authority, then who gets to decide which parts to keep and which parts to discard? Well that's why we are spending so much time on the doctrine of Sola Scriptura.

Well, let's look at today's passage. There's a flow to this passage that we need to see to understand its meaning. I've outlined this sermon this way, in 3 points. The situation, the prayer, and the commitment

The situation

What the psalmist was going through exactly, we will never know, but perhaps it's better that we don't, that it remains sort of vague and general, so that it can apply to many different situations. However, there are some obvious clues that tell us the situation that the psalmist was in. In verse 25 he says, "I am laid low in the dust." In another translation it says, "My soul cleaves to the dust" which means I have become one with the dust. In the Psalms, the word "dust" often times carries a reference to death, which makes sense. From the dust we came and to the dust we will return. So when he says that he is laid low in the dust, he must be in a situation where his life is in grave danger, that he is very close to death.

In verse 28 he says, "My soul is weary with sorrow." Here again are some other translations. "My soul weeps because of grief" and "My soul melts away for sorrow." That he uses the word 'soul' rather than flesh or body tells us that it is very serious. The word means his very life force, his breath, the very center of his entire being is at risk of being snuffed out. It's at that very center of his being where he is experiencing tremendous grief and pain. Then he uses the word sorrow. Even for us we have a very clear differentiation between the words 'sadness' on the one hand, and 'sorrow' on the other. You're sad when your goldfish dies, you're filled with sorrow when you find out you have cancer. Sorrow is when you can barely hold it together. It's when you feel as if the world is crumbling around you. Sorrow is clearly the stronger word.

And, then in verse 31 he says, "do not let me be put to shame." What I gather from these words is that there must have been an active enemy seeking to destroy the psalmist.

There are more clues. Even in his petitions we see that there is something really serious going on in his life. "Preserve my life" in verse 25. "Strengthen me" in verse 28 and so on. Something very troubling is happening to him, something that is threatening his life.

Perhaps for most of us, we haven't been in a situation like that, but some of us might have. In our society, in our day and age of modern medicine and living in a relatively safe society, we've probably been spared from these kinds of things. And even if we do have enemies, we are pretty sure that they're not going to jump out of the bushes and kill us. But even so, these words can speak to us. In this room there are some of us who have experienced great loss. We've lost a loved one. We may have gone through the pain of betrayal. We may have had enormous setbacks financially. Or we've been diagnosed with a serious illness and I don't doubt that some of us have been persecuted for our faith. So, this passage does speak to you.

But, others may look at this passage and because we've never gone through anything so serious, that we may think that we shouldn't bother God with our small 1st world problems. But that's not what the Scriptures tell us. What it teaches is that we can go to God regardless of the size or scope of our problems and struggles. Consider this wonderful verse,

Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you. (**1 Peter 5:7**)

Thankfully, the psalmist doesn't allow the suffering to get the best of him. In the midst of his suffering he goes to God in prayer. Let's now look at his prayer

The prayer

Why do you think it is that many times when we are going through a difficult situation, we don't go to God in prayer?

Sometimes, we just suffer through the suffering. We don't look for relief, we just bear it, we've sort of resigned ourselves to it, hoping that it would eventually go away, or just thinking that it'll never go away, so I just better suck it up and endure it.

Sometimes we go to substances like alcohol or food to deal with our pain. We try to drink or eat our pain away. Maybe we do that because that's what Korean dramas have told us to do. But we know that nothing changes from approaching our problems that way. All we end up with is a hangover and fat belly.

Sometimes we think we just need to put our heads down, muster up the strength, and plow through whatever it is we're going through. We put on a stiff upper lip, we keep the problem to ourselves and just muscle our way through it. I was like that for much of my younger life and it landed me in the hospital. I was 23, got a full-blown ulcer and was hospitalized for several days, because I didn't know how to deal with the struggles I was going through.

And sometimes, we neglect to pray, and the first thing we do is seek out our friends. We put up a cryptic post on Facebook, hoping, that maybe one of our thousand closest friends will reply.

Well, I think there are several reasons why we don't go to God in prayer, even when things in life are really difficult.

1. We haven't gone to him in the little stuff, we haven't cultivated the pattern or habit of prayer.
2. It may reveal that we don't think prayer or God can or will help. We may believe that either God can't help or doesn't care to help.
3. We may feel like we deserve what we are going through as some kind of punishment.
4. Or we're just really proud.

We must learn from the psalmist. Remember, he was going through some unbelievably hard times and he went to God in prayer. Let's look at some of the verses. Verse 25 says, "Preserve my life according to your word." Verse 26, "I gave an account of my ways, Teach me your decrees." Verse 27, "Cause me to understand the way of your precepts, that I may meditate on your wonderful deeds." Verse 28, "strengthen me according to your word." Verse 29, "Keep me from deceitful ways; be gracious to me and teach me your law." And finally, verse 31, "do not let me be put to shame."

This entire section is a prayer to God for help. Yet what you and I might find unusual about this prayer is it's constant reference to the word of God. It's unusual because that is not how we normally pray. When you and I go through some of life's most intense struggles, how do we pray?

"HELP ME!!!"

"SAVE ME!!!"

"HEAL ME!!"

"PROVIDE FOR ME!"

And, of course those are completely legitimate prayers that we find throughout the scriptures, prayed by the saints that are in the Bible. But this cry, this prayer is unique because it is so saturated with asking God to help the sufferer know God's word. We normally don't do that.

Why do you think he's doing that? I think for a couple of reasons at least.

1. He wants his prayers answered according to God's will and ways, not his own. What does that mean? It means that when the psalmist is praying, he is trusting ultimately in the sovereignty of God. What does that mean? It means this, "Not my will but your will be done." Look at what he says, "Preserve my life according to your word" and "Strengthen me according to your word."
2. It's also saying that he knows that God acts according to his promises. So when the psalmist prays, he's essentially praying something like this. "Lord, in your word, you said..." "Lord, you promised in your word that you would do..." "Lord, according in the Bible, you have dealt with your children in this way, so deal with me in a similar way..."

3. In sorrow, we can be very susceptible to go about solving our problems in other ways, apart from the help of God. As well, when we are weak, we can be vulnerable to the lies and attacks of the evil one. Think about it. When you are depressed, don't our minds get filled with lies about our value and worth, about the hopelessness of the situation and so on? Isn't it during those times when Satan seems to ramp up his attacks? This is why the psalmist prays the way he does. "In my sorrow, strengthen me according to your word."

4. This might be the big one. In the prayers of this psalm, we see a person who not only wants deliverance from his suffering, but he wants to know God in the process. Ahhh, that's huge! Why else would there be all these references to God's word? What is the purpose of God's Word in the first place? It's to show us God!! It's to reveal to us who God is. It's to tell us the person, the nature, the character, the attributes and the activity of God. It's to show us that he is the one Creator and he is our great Redeemer and Savior.

Who prays like that?! We should. In the midst of the suffering that we go through, God always has a greater purpose than to just get you us out of the situation. What else might He want to do in us?

- a. Humble us.
- b. Increase our faith
- c. Refine our character
- d. Discipline us for sin
- e. Grow us in our prayer lives
- f. Give us an eternal perspective toward life
- g. Help us to know our great God more (like Job)
- h. And, so many other things.

So, people of God, children of God, God wants us to pray and pray according to his word, but also to know God through his word. Therefore, in the midst of our suffering, we dare not ignore prayer. Rather we must go to our loving heavenly Father and pour out our souls to him. But at the same time, if we listen to the advice of this psalmist, then we must have our Bibles open while we pray. We must search the Scriptures to discover God's will, God's promises, God's commands, God's love, God's grace, God's presence, and God's discipline, and God's mercy.

Well, before we get to the final point, let's see if his prayers were answered. Look to verse 26. "I gave an account of my ways and you answered me." The first part of that verse is saying that he told God all his petitions, he made all his requests known to God. He's given an account of what's going on in his life, the struggles he's going through and the help he needs, and then so matter-of-factly, he says, "and you answered me." Verse 32 also gives us insight into God's answer. The petition was stated in verse 28 and 20. "Strengthen me according to your word" and "be gracious to me and teach me your law." The psalmist says that the prayer was answered in verse 32, "You have broadened my understanding."

They were answered because they were based on the promises of God found in his word. They were answered because they were appealing to the character of God, revealed in his word. They were answered because the person trusted in the gracious sovereignty of God, also revealed to us in his word.

We too can have that same assurance and even greater assurance that God will also answer our prayers. We should pray in like manner with great faith. Not faith in faith, nor faith in our prayers, nor faith in some spiritual formula, but faith in God, the God who never lies, the God who loves us unconditionally, the God who knows what is best and always does what is best, even when he wounds us. That's the kind of faith we are to have when we pray.

So, we looked at the problem, the situation. We looked at his prayers. Now let's look at his commitment.

The commitment

In verses 30-32 the psalmist makes some strong statements about what he has decided to do. These are his action items. Let's look at them in order:

"I have chosen the way of faithfulness."

"I have set my heart on your laws."

"I hold fast to your statutes, Lord"

"I run in the path of your commands."

When you look at these statements as a whole the sense we get is great resolve and commitment. It's the language of devotion to God. It speaks of a heart that doesn't waver. It's drawing a line in the sand. I think this is important for us to notice because we might be tempted to take too passive of an approach to our struggles and even to our prayers. We, ourselves, must make decisions, we must make commitments, we ourselves need to be determined, we have to make resolutions.

The other thing we notice is that it's the first time the word "LORD" is used in this section. If you remember, LORD is God's covenant name, his personal name, his relationship name. It's the name that says, I'm your God and you're my people.

As Christians this is something we cannot overlook. The names for God that we use in our prayers could be the most important part of our prayers. Perhaps more important than the middle part of our prayers, are the beginning and end of our prayers, where the names of God are used. How do our prayers begin? "Our Father." Now, that was not the normative way to address God, until Jesus showed up and told us that God is not only his father but ours as well. That means we are his beloved children. That means he will answer, whenever we call upon his name.

And, how do our prayers end? "In Jesus' name"

What name do we use when Christians pray today? How do we end every prayer? “In Jesus’ name.” That is no insignificant thing. The only reason we can even pray is because of Jesus’ name. The only reason we can have the confidence that God will hear and listen, and not only listen but also respond, is because of “Jesus’ name”.

Children of God, here is a glorious promise of God about the promises of God. Did you get that? It’s a promise of God about the promises of God, that the Apostle Paul gives to us.

For no matter how many promises God has made, they are “Yes” in Christ. And so through him the “Amen” is spoken by us to the glory of God. (**2 Cor 1:20 NIV11-GK**)

Every promise that God has given to us in Scripture is “Yes and Amen,” every one of them. Why then would we not pray? Go to God in prayer. Cast all your cares and anxieties upon him, for he cares for you.

Let’s pray.