

**"God Is My Help"
(Psalm 119:153-160)
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October 15, 2017**

(Psalm 119:153-160)

¹⁵³ Look on my suffering and deliver me,
for I have not forgotten your law.
¹⁵⁴ Defend my cause and redeem me;
preserve my life according to your promise.
¹⁵⁵ Salvation is far from the wicked,
for they do not seek out **your** decrees.
¹⁵⁶ Your compassion, LORD, is great;
preserve my life according to your laws.
¹⁵⁷ Many are the foes who persecute me,
but I have not turned from your statutes.
¹⁵⁸ I look on the faithless with loathing,
for they do not obey your word.
¹⁵⁹ See how I love your precepts;
preserve my life, LORD, in accordance with your love.
¹⁶⁰ All your words are true;
all your righteous laws are eternal.

It appears that our church is in a season of suffering. It seems as if we are in a season where more of our members are going through some difficulty. Perhaps it's because we are getting older. I'm not sure what it is. Even this morning when I woke up, before getting out of bed, the first thing that came to my mind was those people in our church that are suffering and I took a moment to pray for them.

Suffering of course takes on many different forms. There is the suffering that comes from unfulfilled dreams like childlessness. There is the suffering of going through sickness, like cancer. There is the suffering that's experienced with mental illness. There's the suffering that comes in the form of disdain or ridicule because we are Christians. There's a kind of suffering we experience in strained and broken relationships, just like Jesus experienced when he was betrayed or like Paul, experienced when he was abandoned by some of his closest companions. There's the suffering of going through the death of a loved one. There's suffering that we experience in poverty. There's the emotional suffering over things and people that we care for very deeply. There's also a suffering we go through intentionally for others, especially for gospel ministry. Paul talks candidly about the sufferings he went through for the sake of gospel ministry. Do you remember the resume of suffering he wrote down in 2 Corinthians 11?

²³ I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again. ²⁴ Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. ²⁵ Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was pelted with stones, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, ²⁶ I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my fellow Jews, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false believers. ²⁷ I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. ²⁸ Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches. ²⁹ Who is weak, and I do not feel weak? Who is led into sin, and I do not inwardly burn? **(2 Corinthians 11:23–29)**

You could even say there's a suffering that we experience with our own sinfulness. We suffer with our sinful selves, bemoaning that we are not as holy as we ought to be. We mourn over our sin, confessing as did the Apostle Paul. "I am unspiritual, sold as a slave to sin. I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do...For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For I do not do the good I want to do but the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing."

What is the suffering you're going through?

Our teacher, the psalmist seems to be an expert in the school of suffering. Let's go to him again and learn from our older brother.

As we near the end of this psalm, I did a quick overview of the entire chapter and counted how many of the 22 sections mention some kind of suffering or persecution or deliverance. Can you guess how many? 19 of them. Now, that's very telling isn't it? This psalm, if you remember, is about a man's love affair with the Word of God. He says things like,

"I rejoice in following your statutes"

"I meditate on your precepts"

"I delight in your decrees"

"My soul is consumed with longing for your laws at all times"

"I hold fast to your statutes"

"Never take your word of truth from my mouth"

...and on and on he goes.

But, the context or the situation that the psalmist is in or that he is thinking about is suffering. As he pens each stanza, he's thinking about a difficult time in his life, he remembers the time when enemies were after him, he considers the physical, emotional and even mental anguish he had to go through. He looks back at the toil it took on his spiritual life.

The times of suffering are the hardest, most difficult, most trying times that we go through, aren't they? It's suffering that really reveals the kind of character and faith we have. Anyone can be all fired up for God when the paycheques are rolling in, when you're dating your sweetheart, or when the children are doing well in school. But it's during our dark days that really test the quality of our faith. So if the advice of the psalmist is good for our hardest times, the times of suffering, then surely it is just as good and useful during normal times, or the really good times. *It's like saying that if you can complete a triathlon, then walking around the block is not going to be a problem.* This is why it's so important for all of us to understand how to deal with suffering, because if we can handle suffering then we can handle anything.

For example, in Philippians 4, the Apostle Paul pens what has become one of the most famous verses. It goes like this: "I can do all things through Him who gives me strength." We love quoting that verse at the gym, before an important presentation at work, or during exam week. But did you know that the context of the verse has to do with money? Before Paul says these words he mentions that he has had personal experience having all that he needs and he's also had first hand experience with poverty as well...and then he says, I can do all things through him who gives me strength. What that tells us is that God is able to teach us to be content when we have a lot and to be content when we have very little.

What the psalmist teaches us in this chapter, but especially in this section, are the tools that we need to get us through the toughest situations of our lives. He reminds us that there are two basic tools that we need to get through life's struggles. The two tools are the Word of God and Prayer.

Let's look at the Word of God. What in particular does he do with the Word of God?

First, it's the lens through which he sees the world, especially in terms of good and evil. The psalmist sees a clear line between those who are evil and those who are not. And the thing that distinguishes them apart is their attitude toward the Word of God. Isn't that interesting? Look at verse 155 where he says, "salvation is far from the wicked." Why? Because "they do out seek out your decrees." And then look at verse 158, "I look on the faithless with loathing, for they do not obey your word."

Now, why do you think that's important? I think this is important because when we're going through suffering, we can fool ourselves into thinking that we are the evil ones, that God must be against us. That's why these things are happening to me. But the psalmist never sees it like that. He has the assurance of his own salvation and his standing before God. He knows God loves him and that God is looking upon him with favor, even in his suffering. So he declares, it's not because I'm evil that this is happening. I love the Word of God, which is another way of saying that I love God. I really want everyone to get this. To love God is to love the word of God.

Second, it's from the Word that he remembers who God is.

God is compassionate, God is love. God is my deliverer. God is my advocate. God is my savior. How does he know that? This is the God we discover in his Word. When we are going through hard times, it's easy to forget who God is and all that he has done. It's often times easier to just withdraw into ourselves, to ignore God and to suffer alone. In times of suffering, we have to remind ourselves over and over who God is. We have to return to his word again and again, and reestablish the faithfulness and character of God.

Third, it's from the Word that he claims God's precious promises. In verse 154 he says, "preserve my life according to your promise." The bible from cover to cover is filled with God's precious promises. The suffering that we go through can often times be physical. We go through the pain of an illness, the emotional pain of a breakup, the depression of being laid off, the pain of failure and so on. But the true battle in all of these different kinds of suffering occurs in the mind. Isn't this true? It's in the mind where very different and opposite thoughts occur. We go through a painful breakup and we tell ourselves, I'll never give my heart to another person or will I ever find another person to love or relationships aren't worth the risk and so on. Or if you lose your job your confidence takes a huge hit and you wonder if you got what it takes, what did I do wrong, what could I have done better and on and on and on. You see, the battle occurs up here in the mind. That's why it's so important to go to the timeless and always relevant Word of God. Here are just a few of the promises that we can speak to ourselves and to each other.

Assurance of salvation

I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life. (1 John 5:13)

Assurance of answered prayer

“Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened.” (Matthew 7:7–8)

Assurance of victory over sin

No temptation has overtaken you except what is common to mankind. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can endure it. (1 Corinthians 10:13)

Assurance of forgiveness

If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. (1 John 1:9)

Assurance of guidance

Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight. (Proverbs 3:5–6)

Everyone has this tool in their box, just like everyone might have a hammer in their toolbox. But not everyone knows how to properly hold a hammer, how to properly strike the nail without hitting your thumb. At first it takes you twenty hits, like a newb you hold the hammer near the head. But as you become more proficient with it you realize that the power comes when you hold it at the bottom of the handle. Your aim becomes more accurate. And now you can drive a nail in just a couple strikes. Some of us are newbs with the bible and that's okay, but we mustn't remain newbs. We must learn to become more proficient with it. In fact we all must learn to become experts with it. And this only comes through a lifetime of devotion and learning.

The second tool that the psalmist shows us is prayer.

Let's take a look at the verses:

153: Look on my suffering and deliver me.

154: Defend my cause and redeem me; preserve my life according to your promise.

156: Your compassion, Lord, is great; preserve my life according to your laws.

159: See how I love your precepts; preserve my life, Lord, in accordance with your love.

There are at least three things that the psalmist is going through that causes him to pray to God. Suffering, injustice and looming death. And probably all three of these things are interrelated. The suffering he's going through is the result of some kind of injustice, where his very life is on the line. He's in a very serious and dire situation. Things are beyond his power and ability. He doesn't have the resources to get himself out of this situation. And many times we feel the same way. There are so many situations that are completely out of our control. Take parenting for example. Yes, of course, parents have a tremendous responsibility to care for and nurture our children, but parents also know that no matter how much we try to control and protect and guide our children, it's ultimately in the hands of God to protect, guide and save our children. Our children are beyond our power and ability.

Here's another example:

Consider your health. We do what we can to eat right, sleep right, exercise right, get our annual checkups, but we know that ultimately, our health is in the hands of God. And that's why we pray. We pray because we know that our knowledge and power are incredibly limited and finite and God's knowledge and power are without limit. They are endless. This is the God to whom we pray. But even more than that, the God to whom we pray is a God of compassion. You might ask, "Well if God is so compassionate, why did he allow us to get into this suffering in the first place? Why didn't he prevent it from the very beginning?" The answer to that question on one hand is that we may never know. God is not obligated to answer that question if he chooses not to. But scripture does tell us that when God's children go through suffering it's for the following reasons.

First, it could be that we are going through suffering because of discipline, or punishment. This is not always the case, but sometimes it is. We brought it upon ourselves and God is chastising us for our wrongs, just like a parent does to their child.

Second, all suffering is for our sanctification. Whatever the suffering it is that we are going through, it's meant to make us more holy, it's meant to reveal our sinfulness, it's meant to help us repent, and it's meant to refine and shape our character to become more like that of our Savior. So all suffering is meant to sanctify us.

Third, suffering is meant to give glory to God. The man born blind in the gospel of John we are told that this happened for the works of God might be displayed in him. As well, the bible tells us that whether we eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God. So even in our suffering, the suffering is there so that through it, the way we handle it, we would give honor and glory to God.

In our suffering, in our struggles, God calls us to pray. This is our second tool. The first tool, the Word; the second tool, prayer. The Word and Prayer. The Word and Prayer. These are the most essential and important tools in our toolbox to get through the most difficult situations that we can face.

Ephesians 6 is a famous chapter. It's the armor of God chapter. In this chapter, Paul uses the image of a Roman soldier dressed for battle and he takes everything that's on him and compares it to the Christian soldier.

¹⁴ Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, ¹⁵ and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. ¹⁶ In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. ¹⁷ Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. ¹⁸ And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the Lord's people. **(Ephesians 6:14–18)**

Two of the pieces of the armor of God are in particular offensive weapons: They are the sword of the Spirit which is the word of God. And praying in the Spirit. Here it is again: The Word and Prayer. The Word and Prayer. Isn't it amazing how the bible is so consistent over millennia? What the psalmist wrote hundreds of years before, Paul states in his own way hundreds of years later.

The same was true with our Savior when he went through his sufferings. Consider when Jesus was going through his temptation in the wilderness at the beginning of his earthly ministry, which was a kind of suffering...well what did he do? He went to the Word. In his spiritual battle, he quoted the scriptures. "Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God." "Do not put the Lord your God to the test." "Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only." Even Jesus used the word in his suffering. What about prayer? Before Jesus went to the cross what did he do? He went to the garden of Gethsemane with his disciples. He told them to pray and then he went off by himself to pray. Even when Jesus was dying on the cross, what did he do? He prayed to God. "Father, forgive them." "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" "Into your hands I commit my spirit."

Whether you are going through a season of suffering or not, let's continue to turn to God and these two powerful tools he has given to us.

Let's pray.