

# Truth for Today

The Bible Explained

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## Psalm 119 - The importance of God's Word: Waw - Psalm 119:41-48

My Christian youth was spent in a church in Byker, which is in the east end of Newcastle upon Tyne. Byker became well-known through the screening of the television programme, *Byker Grove*, with its Geordie characters. There were several characters in my church in Byker. One of these was a man who'd been converted from being a drunkard. His son once asked me if I noticed how his dad began his prayers when he prayed. He said that they always started "And Lord". When I asked why, the son said the reason was that he was simply continuing where he'd left off in his previous prayer for he had ongoing conversations with his Saviour! This brings me to Psalm 119:41-48 because each verse of this stanza of the psalm begins with the Hebrew letter, Waw, as indicated by the section heading in our English Bibles. Waw occurs as the word 'and' throughout the Old Testament. But first I'll read these verses from the English Standard Version: *"Let your steadfast love come to me, O LORD, your salvation according to your promise; then shall I have an answer for him who taunts me, for I trust in your word. And take not the word of truth utterly out of my mouth, for my hope is in your rules. I will keep your law continually, forever and ever, and I shall walk in a wide place, for I have sought your precepts. I will also speak of your testimonies before kings and shall not be put to shame, for I find my delight in your commandments, which I love. I will lift up my hands toward your commandments, which I love, and I will meditate on your statutes"* (Psalm 119:41-48).

Let's consider Psalm 119:41-48 verse by verse.

Psalm 119:41: *"Let your steadfast love come to me, O LORD, your salvation according to your promise."*

This verse continues the prayerful theme of many previous verses of the psalm, especially the prior section (Psalm 119:33-40). The psalmist continues to ask the LORD to assist him to live a godly life. He commenced this psalm: *"Blessed are those whose way is blameless, who walk in the law of the LORD! Blessed are those who keep his testimonies, who seek him with their whole heart, who also do no wrong, but walk in his ways! You have commanded your precepts to be kept diligently"* (Psalm 119:1-4). Here in Psalm 119:41, he shows that the godly rely upon the LORD'S steadfast love to be blessed. Whilst this love is extended in a general way to all mankind (see Psalm 36:7), the godly personally experience, and benefit from, it. The NIV translates 'steadfast love' as 'unfailing love'. It's a love that will never turn away from you nor let you down! Other translations use the word 'mercies' to indicate that the LORD'S love also provides for our short-comings.

The psalmist addressed God, "O LORD" - the living God revealed to Israel as the great "I AM" (see Exodus 3:14). God's steadfast love was the theme of the praises of Israel, especially at high points in the nation's history. For example, at the dedication of the temple they sang, *"For he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever"* (2 Chronicles 5:13). In this Christian dispensation, believers know God as the Father, whose great love has been fully revealed to us in the person of His Son, Jesus Christ.

The psalmist was in great need of the LORD'S steadfast love in a special way, which he calls, "your salvation". Throughout Psalm 119, the psalmist expresses the many dangers which the godly encounter. They are:

- The fear of not practically living up to his professed faith in God, especially during times of illness (Psalm 119:6-8, 29-31, 67, 83, 92, 101, 133, 143, 153-154, 176);
- His concern of slipping into evil ways due to the ongoing problem of sin within his heart despite his repulsion of it (Psalm 119:9-11, 36, 104, 163);
- The attractiveness of things of the world, which are really of no lasting value (Psalm 119:37);
- The loneliness of being a pilgrim (Psalm 119:19-20, 126-128, 136, 139); and
- The reproach, scorn, contempt, false accusations, oppression and persecution from the ungodly, including worldly authorities (Psalm 119:21-23, 39, 61, 69-70, 77-78, 86-87, 95, 98, 107, 110, 115, 118-119, 121, 134, 141, 150, 157, 161).

The last danger is the predominant danger. It's also identified in many other psalms because the world is in open opposition to God, and consistently targets the godly. In reality, the world never changes, but all of these dangers continue for believers today. If anything, matters are getting worse as a reading of Open Doors' most recent 'World Watch' will demonstrate. And the intensity of opposition to God will only increase as the world heads towards those last days identified in Psalm 2:1-3: *"Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the LORD and against his Anointed, saying, 'Let us burst their bonds apart and cast away their cords from us.'" And it will be in those last days that the godly remnant of Israel will use prayers (such as Psalm 119:41) which are found throughout the entire Book of Psalms.*

Believers from every dispensation can pray these prayers and receive God's salvation, whatever the problems are that assail them - persecution, illness, disease, isolation, bereavement, difficult circumstances, etc. The salvation in Psalm 119:41 is about deliverance from problems or being sustained through them. It's not about salvation from the judgment of God. That's an already settled issue for believers. Note also, that this deliverance is *"according to your promise [or your word]"*, are current phrases throughout the entire Psalm:

- *"How can a young man keep his way pure? By guarding it according to your word" (Psalm 119:9);*
- *"My soul clings to the dust; give me life according to your word" (Psalm 119:25);*
- *"My soul melts away for sorrow; strengthen me according to your word" (Psalm 119:28);*
- *"I entreat your favour with all my heart; be gracious to me according to your promise" (Psalm 119:58);*
- *"You have dealt well with your servant, O LORD, according to your word" (Psalm 119:65);*
- *"Let your steadfast love comfort me according to your promise to your servant" (Psalm 119:76);*
- *"I am severely afflicted; give me life, O LORD, according to your word" (Psalm 119:107);*
- *"Uphold me according to your promise, that I may live, and let me not be put to shame in my hope" (Psalm 119:116);*
- *"Keep steady my steps according to your promise, and let no iniquity get dominion over me" (Psalm 119:133);*
- *"Plead my cause and redeem me; give me life according to your promise" (Psalm 119:154); and*
- *"Let my plea come before you; deliver me according to your word" (Psalm 119:170).*

Yes, the psalmist had faith in God's word and in the many promises of salvation it contains. One of my favourite psalms is Psalm 91 because it's about Messiah and how God protected Him during His life upon earth as the devil acknowledged at the Lord's Temptations (see Luke 4:9-13). Here are some of its promises, which we, too, can rely on: *"He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will abide in the shadow of the Almighty. I will say to the LORD, 'My refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust.' For he will deliver you from the snare of the fowler and from the deadly pestilence. ... 'Because he holds fast to me in love, I will deliver him; I will protect him, because he knows my name. When he calls to me, I will answer him; I will be with him in trouble; I will rescue him and honour him. With long life I will satisfy him and show him my salvation'" (Psalm 91:1-3, 14-16).*

One final point on the promises of God. In 2 Corinthians 1:20, Paul stated that *"all the promises of God find their Yes in [Christ]."* Therefore (in 2 Corinthians 1:10) Paul was confident in his assertion that, with respect to dangers, God has delivered us in the past; He does deliver us now; and He will deliver us in the future. To which we add our "Amen!"

Now let's consider Psalm 119:42: *"Then shall I have an answer for him who taunts me, for I trust in your word."* I stated earlier that Psalm 119:41-48 are a sequence of thoughts. In English, Psalm 119:42 begins with the word 'then', or 'so'. The psalmist knew that God would answer his request for salvation (Psalm 119:41). The consequence was that he would be able to defend his faith in the LORD against anybody who taunted him. Most translations suggest the idea of being reproached for simply trusting in God. An extended meaning is to pull down the believer's faith, to carp at and in so doing speak against God or blaspheme. We discovered this to be the predominant danger that the psalmist faced when we looked at Psalm 119:41. Perhaps, the psalmist intuitively knew that it was the LORD who was being targeted. But he was in danger of being completely overwhelmed: *"My zeal consumes me, because my foes forget your words" (Psalm 119:139).* How comforting and reassuring it is to know that God's word has the answer in these difficult situations; and to know that you'll be given the right thing to say in response to those who attack you and your faith in God and His word.

Christian believers encounter many such opposers these days:

- Cynical evolutionists, who deride those of us who believe that God instantly created all things by the word of His power. We're dismissed as being 'unscientific', when the opposite charge is true! The answer we have to these cynics is found in Genesis 1-2 and other passages of Scripture such as John 1, Colossians 1 and Hebrews 1.
- Aggressive secular atheists, who match the description of the fool in Psalm 14:1-4, who *"says in his heart, 'There is no God.' They are corrupt, they do abominable deeds; there is none who does good. The LORD looks*

*down from heaven on the children of man, to see if there are any who understand, who seek after God. They have all turned aside; together they have become corrupt; there is none who does good, not even one. Have they no knowledge, all the evildoers who eat up my people as they eat bread and do not call upon the LORD?"*

Let's remember the advice in 1 Peter 3:15: *"But sanctify in your hearts Christ as Lord: being ready always to give answer to every man that asks you a reason concerning the hope that is in you, yet with meekness and fear"* (Revised Version [1881]). And that of Hebrews 12:3: *"Therefore, if you would escape becoming weary and faint-hearted, compare your own sufferings with those [the Lord Jesus] who endured such hostility directed against Him by sinners"* (Weymouth New Testament).

Now let's consider Psalm 119:43: *"And take not the word of truth utterly out of my mouth, for my hope is in your rules."* Psalm 119:43 is more or less a repeat of the prayer of Psalm 119:41. But the emphasis is on the psalmist's expressed utter dependence on the truth found in God's word. His prayer is the practical consequence of considering those who are so vocal in their derision of the godly and of God himself. What hope of survival has he outside of believing and following God's word? And how can he objectively know what's right and what's wrong in situations where the people discard the truth and embrace/promote error, with the accompanying promotion of evil? This is very much a real issue for the faithful in the so-called enlightened twenty-first century. Like the psalmist of old, our only hope is in God's word - His rules, that is, what He states to be right and to be wrong. Other translations call these "judgments" to convey the meaning that these are divine pronouncements, which are clearly stated in unmistakable terms. The psalmist put his hope in them, in the knowledge that everybody will have to give account of themselves to God at His judgment seat (see Romans 14:11-12).

The subsequent verses (Psalm 119:44-48) exude with renewed confidence in the LORD and a determination to be pious. Four times the psalmist says *"I will..."* and twice *"I shall..."*

I will now take Psalm 119:44-45 together because they form one sentence: *"I will keep your law continually, forever and ever, and I shall walk in a wide place, for I have sought your precepts."* Psalm 119:44 is the psalmist's commitment based on his confidence that the LORD will do as he requested in Psalm 119:43. He commits to keeping the Law - always, as a continual habit and adds forever and ever to emphasise the seriousness of his vow. The psalmist promised to guard and to attend to all the demands of the law, the Torah. Strict observation of the law marked out the godly in Israel. Whenever I read through the Pentateuch, I always think how difficult it must have been to remember all the details of it, never mind total compliance! But the Lord Jesus did say that He had come to fulfil it - every iota and dot of it (Matthew 5:17-18). He did much more than that; He magnified it and made it honourable (Isaiah 42:21)! He was the only One who could and did. Nevertheless, the psalmist's attitude and commitment were both admirable and correct. In Psalm 119:45, to *"walk in a wide place"* is to have liberty to keep the law, to be free to serve God - liberty to speak about Him (Psalm 119:42) and to live for Him (Psalm 119:43). David similarly experienced the LORD'S salvation: *"[The LORD] brought me out into a broad place; he rescued me, because he delighted in me. The LORD dealt with me according to my righteousness; according to the cleanness of my hands he rewarded me"* (Psalm 18:19-20). With respect to Christian believers, the Lord Jesus insists that we must obey His commandments (John 14:15, 21, John 15:10 with 1 John 2:3 and 1 John 3:22, 24). *"And his commandments are not burdensome"* the Apostle John assures us in his first letter (1 John 5:3). Romans 6:20-22 state that Christian believers have been set free from sin to serve God. The Lord Jesus told the Jews who had "believed" in Him that His word is the power for this liberty. *"If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free ... Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin. The slave does not remain in the house forever; the son remains forever. So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed"* (John 8:31-32, 34-36). Commenting on Psalm 119:45, Matthew Henry wrote: *"The service of sin is perfect slavery. But, the service of God is perfect liberty!"*

In Psalm 119:46, the psalmist is now confident in God's salvation and brave in his testimony: *"I will also speak of your testimonies before kings and shall not be put to shame."* The psalmist now sees himself walking in the liberty of saints who have complete confidence in God's salvation. He's delivered from the fear of man and knows that he won't feel ashamed even when he testifies before kings, who may not acknowledge God's authority. Our thoughts immediately go to those saints who actually stood before kings: Daniel and his three friends who risked their lives before Nebuchadnezzar and Darius (Daniel 3 and Daniel 6); and the Apostle Paul's testimonies before King Agrippa (Acts 25:13-27), Festus (Acts 25:1-9) and Felix (Acts 24:10-21). As he wrote to believers in Romans 1:16 and Romans 10:10: *"For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes ... For with the heart man believes unto righteousness; and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation."*

Psalm 119:47 gives the reason why the psalmist is so bold: *"for I find my delight in your commandments, which I love."* The psalmist can speak God's word (Psalm 119:43); live a life that exemplifies it (Psalm 119:44-45); and give faithful witness to God from it (Psalm 119:46) because his heart is full of delight in, and love for, it. This thought is expressed throughout Psalm 119 and also in other psalms, for example, Psalm 19:7-11.

Psalm 119: 48 concludes this stanza with two more "I will's": *"I will lift up my hands toward your commandments, which I love, and I will meditate on your statutes."* This verse conveys the psalmist's reverence for God. The whole tenor of it is an attitude of worship. It also indicates that he was determined to maintain his godliness by prayerful meditation on God's word, a statement which is repeated throughout the psalm:

- *"I will meditate on your precepts and fix my eyes on your ways"* (Psalm 119:15).
- *"Your servant will meditate on your statutes"* (Psalm 119:23).
- *"Make me understand the way of your precepts, and I will meditate on your wondrous works"* (Psalm 119:27).
- *"As for me, I will meditate on your precepts"* (Psalm 119:78).
- *"Oh how I love your law! It is my meditation all the day"* (Psalm 119:97).
- *"I have more understanding than all my teachers, for your testimonies are my meditation"* (Psalm 119:99).
- *"My eyes are awake before the watches of the night, that I may meditate on your promise"* (Psalm 119:148).

I've already said that Psalm 2 gives the prophetic context of the Psalms. Psalm 1:1-2 describe the stark distinction there'll be in those days between the godly and the ungodly: *"Blessed is the [godly] man who walks not in the counsel of the [ungodly], nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers; but his delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night."* As we approach those times, you and I will only be equipped to live for the Lord if we too, like the psalmist, love, delight in and meditate upon God's word. Meditation means that our minds are constantly full of God's word so that our thoughts and actions are in tune with it.

So I finish my talk with the questions:

- Are we experiencing God's daily deliverance by His word? and
- Are we willing to serve the Lord?"

Finally, a prayer adapted from similar words to Psalm 119:48 found in Psalm 19:14: *"May the words of our mouths and the meditation of our hearts on your word always be acceptable in your sight, O LORD, our rock and our redeemer."* Amen.

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