

Truth for Today

The Bible Explained

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Psalm 119 - The importance of God's Word: Yod - Psalm 119:73-80

Introduction

"To be a Christian without prayer is no more possible than to be alive without breathing." So wrote Martin Luther sometime in the sixteenth century. It remains true today. The people of God have always needed to communicate with Him by prayer, and we can learn a great deal from the many prayers recorded in the Bible. After the first three verses of Psalm 119, the whole text is addressed directly to God. We can therefore consider this section, as nearly all the rest of the psalm, to be a prayer, making it, arguably, the longest prayer recorded in God's word. As we read it and work through its meaning, we need to consider whether we could, or should, pray to God along similar lines in our day.

Let's read the eight verses that make up our text for today, Psalm 119:73-80: *"Your hands have made me and fashioned me; give me understanding, that I may learn Your commandments. Those who fear You will be glad when they see me, because I have hoped in Your word. I know, O LORD, that Your judgments are right, and that in faithfulness You have afflicted me. Let, I pray, Your merciful kindness be for my comfort, according to Your word to Your servant. Let Your tender mercies come to me, that I may live; for Your law is my delight. Let the proud be ashamed, for they treated me wrongfully with falsehood; but I will meditate on Your precepts. Let those who fear You turn to me, those who know Your testimonies. Let my heart be blameless regarding Your statutes, that I may not be ashamed."*

We are now in the tenth section of this poem, and each of our eight verses in Hebrew commences with the letter "yod". This derives from the Hebrew word "yad", meaning hand. There is an obvious reference to this meaning in the first verse of this section, Psalm 119:73, *"Your hands have made me."*

We might think of verses such as:

- Isaiah 49:2, *"In the shadow of His hand He has hidden me"*;
- Ezra 7:9-10, *"The good hand of his God [was] upon [Ezra], for [he] had prepared his heart to seek the law of the LORD and to do it"*; and
- 1 Peter 5:6, *"Therefore humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you in due time."*

We will certainly see the hand of God on the psalmist's life as we work through each verse of this section.

Psalm 119:73 - God knows me

"Your hands have made me and fashioned me; give me understanding, that I may learn Your commandments" (Psalm 119:73).

God knows me inside and out because He made me. He knows all about mankind as a whole, because He is our Creator. He knows all about me as an individual, because it is God who gave me life and formed me before I was even born. He therefore knows all my weaknesses and strengths; physical, mental and emotional. God knows my "drivers" and the things with which I struggle and am apt to fail. Since my birth, He has overseen the whole of my experience and circumstances until now, and so knows everything that has shaped my thinking and reactions. He knows why I do what I do, both good and bad. All of this means that the Lord knows perfectly what is best for me at every level. This gave confidence to the psalmist to pray that God might give him understanding, and it should give us the same confidence.

Our Father knows what we are capable of understanding. He knows the best ways for us to learn and how to move us and keep us on a new course. We often want more understanding: about the world, about our lives, about the future, even about the Bible. But do we want to learn God's commandments with a view to obeying them? Notice it is the commandments, things to do, or not do, that the psalmist wants to understand. We know from the rest of this psalm that the writer is always interested in knowing more of God's commandments for two principal reasons:

1. So that he can do them; and
2. So that he can know God better.

Mere intellectual curiosity about God's word, or the ability to win arguments and debates with other believers, or a desire to reinforce what we already know we want to do, are never good reasons to study God's word, and we cannot expect prayers with such motives to be answered.

Psalm 119:74 - Others see me

"Those who fear You will be glad when they see me, because I have hoped in Your word" (Psalm 119:74).

Are you being a help and an encouragement to other believers? The New Testament has some great examples for us. **Philemon** lifted the spirits of his fellow Christians, as recorded in Philemon 1:7. *"The hearts of the saints have been refreshed by you, brother."*

Seeing how **Paul** was strengthened by God in his difficulties encouraged others to follow his example, as Philippians 1:14 tells us. *"Most of the brethren in the Lord, having become confident by my chains, are much more bold to speak the word without fear."*

Epaphroditus was worthy of honour and imitation in his service for Christ. *"Receive him therefore in the Lord with all gladness, and hold such men in esteem; because for the work of Christ he came close to death"*, Philippians 2:29-30. What impact do we have on other Christians when they look at us? Some Christians only have to walk into a room to be an encouragement and an uplifting influence. Others can quench the joy of a whole company by their presence. Which kind of believer am I?

The meaning of the psalmist in Psalm 119:74 is that others would look at him, remember that he had hoped in the Lord and not been disappointed, and receive encouragement to trust, or continue trusting, themselves. The others were being directed towards God rather than the psalmist. They saw the writer, recognised that his God was trustworthy, and therefore followed his good example of faith. Isn't that what we should all aspire to do for other people? It reminds me of a verse from a hymn by Kate Wilkinson,

*"May His beauty rest upon me
As I seek the lost to win,
And may they forget the channel,
Seeing only Him."*

Where is our hope placed: is it firmly in God and His word? We can't aspire to point others towards God if all our hopes are based firmly in this world.

Psalm 119:75 - God is right

"I know, O LORD, that Your judgments are right, and that in faithfulness You have afflicted me" (Psalm 119:75).

Psalm 119:75 sets out an important, basic principle: God is right whatever may have happened!

The writer is looking at first causes, and is able to say, *"You have afflicted me"*. Now he could probably have phrased it as "the wicked have afflicted me", or, "Satan has afflicted me", or just, "bad stuff happens"! But, instead, he looks right through all those secondary causes and recognises that God is directing everything, and the affliction therefore comes from Him. Judging from Psalm 119:76, it seems that the psalmist had done something wrong, and he acknowledges that God's response is both reasonable and deserved. Are we also ready to acknowledge that God is always right, whatever He may send into our lives? Not only does the psalmist accept that the affliction is fair, he also considers it to be "faithful". It is a part of the Father's faithfulness to us that we are corrected and admonished. *"Whom the LORD loves He chastens ... If you endure chastening, God deals with you as sons"* says Hebrews 12:6-7.

I've been reading through the book of Proverbs recently and it has a great deal to say about the right and wrong ways to handle chastening.

- *"A scoffer does not listen to rebuke"*, Proverbs 13:1;
- *"Poverty and shame will come to him who disdains correction"*, Proverbs 13:18; and
- *"A fool despises his father's instruction, but he who receives correction is prudent"*, Proverbs 15:5.

I could go on quoting these for some time! The wise respond positively to affliction and correction; those who reject it are fools!

Psalm 119:76 - God comforts us

"Let, I pray, Your merciful kindness be for my comfort, according to Your word to Your servant" (Psalm 119:76).

When we have been afflicted and responded correctly with humility, contrition and a readiness to learn from the experience; we need to be comforted. A child who has received a telling off from mum or dad, once contrite, will come back for a hug, and to be reassured that mum and dad still love him!

Kindness is a much underrated virtue! It is a characteristic of God, and one that we ought to copy. Kindness is one part of the fruit of the Spirit described in Galatians 5:22-23. According to Romans 2:4, the kindness of God is meant to lead people to repentance. It consists of acting generously towards people even when they don't deserve it, just like God did towards us before we repented. In Psalm 119:76 God's merciful kindness produces comfort. In 2 Corinthians 1:3-4 Paul describes God as, *"The Father of mercies and God of all comfort, Who comforts us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort those who are in any trouble, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God."* So the comfort that God brings to us, through his mercy and kindness, is to be shared with others who are in any trouble.

With the phrase, *"According to Your word to Your servant"*, Psalm 119:76b. The psalmist reminds God of His promises. This is very much a scriptural type of prayer, to base our requests on what God Himself has already promised. The writer reminds God that he is God's own servant, i.e. he belongs to Him, and is His to direct and protect.

Psalm 119:77 - God is tender

"Let Your tender mercies come to me, that I may live; for Your law is my delight" (Psalm 119:77).

God doesn't just show mercy, He has **"tender mercies"** (Psalm 119:77). God always has them; the psalmist just needs them to come to him. The tenderness of God is a beautiful thing, and all the more remarkable given His greatness and power. We don't often associate tenderness with the mighty and powerful, but God has the tender care of a mother for her vulnerable child.

We are truly totally dependent on God. We cannot live without Him. This is true, physically.

- God is the only Sustainer of the universe, *"... In Him all things consist"*, Colossians 1:17.
- He holds our breath in His hand. *"In Whose hand is the life of every living thing, and the breath of all mankind"*, Job 12:10.
- It is also true of our life of faith - we need the Lord to keep us and maintain us. *"You will keep him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on You, because he trusts in You"*, Isaiah 26:3.
- *"The life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, Who loved me, and gave Himself for me"*, Galatians 2:20.

The basis of this request for God's tender mercies is the writer's delight in God's law. It is those that love God, as He has revealed Himself through His word, that God gives life to in this particular way. Of course, God is the source of life for every man and every creature in a general way, but He particularly gives and sustains life for His children.

Psalm 119:78 - God witnesses injustice

"Let the proud be ashamed, for they treated me wrongfully with falsehood; but I will meditate on Your precepts" (Psalm 119:78)

The proud think highly of themselves and want everybody else to think highly of them as well. Proverbs 16:18 reminds us that, *"Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall."* In fact, the book of Proverbs has a great deal to say about the proud, and none of it is good! The essence of the proud man is that he thinks himself to be important, relies on himself and his own resources, and therefore feels no need of God.

This takes us right back to the fall of mankind when Adam declared human independence from God and set himself up as a kind of rival to God's sovereignty of His own universe. Shame is the very antithesis of how the proud feels, and yet the writer asks that the proud be ashamed. They should be ashamed, because they treated the psalmist badly with no justification. Let's face it, sometimes we deserve the poor treatment we receive. We don't always do what is honest and proper. We can even do the **right** thing in a proud and haughty manner and so alienate other people. Our aim should be to live in the manner described in Titus 2:7-8, *"In all things showing yourself to be a pattern of good works; in doctrine showing integrity, reverence, incorruptibility, sound speech that cannot be condemned, that one*

who is an opponent may be ashamed, having nothing evil to say of you." It is best if others have nothing evil to say about us, but sometimes they will still speak evil of us anyway. 1 Peter 3:16 covers this situation. *"Having a good conscience, that when they defame you as evildoers, those who revile your good conduct in Christ may be ashamed."* Our enemies should have nothing they can rightfully accuse us of. They will either be ashamed that they can find no accusation, or ashamed that their accusations are unfounded, and that they are criticising what is good and right. In either case, our response should not be to complain, or to gloat, but to meditate on or consider thoughtfully God's word. It is meditating like this that will both help us live in ways that give no cause for accusation, because our life is being shaped by God's word, and also ensure that we can face any accusations calmly should they come, knowing we can trust God to maintain our reputation and plead our cause.

Psalm 119:79 - Others turn to me

"Let those who fear You turn to me, those who know Your testimonies" (Psalm 119:79)

This verse contains similar thoughts to Psalm 119:74. It is about our impact on other believers, but in Psalm 119:79 the impact is more active. Psalm 119:74 states the position rather passively, *"Those who fear You will be glad when they see me."* Psalm 119:79 views the others being more active, *"Let those who fear You turn to me"*, they are visualised as actively turning to the psalmist. This seems to be for fellowship and active support, rather than simply being encouraged by his experiences with God as in Psalm 119:74. So how much do people want to fellowship with me?! Do they find it a positive experience? This isn't about being "men-pleasers" or compromising to make people like us. Being genuinely like the Lord Jesus will make other Christians want to spend time with us. I read in some Bible study notes recently, the story of a man who had travelled a long way from home and was looking forward to a meal with friends of friends who lived in that area. As they welcomed him in, he immediately felt a sense of peace. He felt at home, comfortable and valued. Later, as he wondered why he had felt so much at home in a strange place, he read 2 Corinthians 2:15, in which Paul says, *"We are to God the fragrance of Christ among those who are being saved."* "That's it", the man said to himself, "they smelled like Christ!" That man is still telling the story forty years on!

Let's not be doctrinally right, but cold, hard and unapproachable. Don't compromise at every turn to please everybody. Be faithful to Christ, while being gentle, kind and showing genuine love. That will attract the right people for the right reasons. Those who know God's word and character will be attracted to us.

The flip side is in 2 Corinthians 2:16, *"To [those who are perishing] we are the aroma of death leading to death, and to [those who are being saved] the aroma of life leading to life."* I dread to think what the aroma of death might be - what a dreadful stench! - but that is how we will appear to those who want nothing to do with Christ and are determined to reject Him.

Psalm 119:80 - I should be blameless

"Let my heart be blameless regarding Your statutes, that I may not be ashamed" (Psalm 119:80).

As we noted earlier, the psalmist is never satisfied with a knowledge of God's word that doesn't get worked out in how he lives. He wants, not just to **know** God's statutes but to be blameless concerning them. In fact, not just the outward details of his life to be blameless but his heart as well. Previously, the writer requested that the proud be ashamed. Now he requests that he **not** be ashamed himself. We should always remember that it is frighteningly easy for us to fall into any number of sins. If we condemn the proud while exhibiting pride ourselves, we are both hypocritical and self-deluding. The psalmist recognised this possibility and prayed that he be kept from shame. The only way to achieve that is to be kept from fault, hence his request for his heart to be blameless. I'm sure he was under no illusions about being able to reach some higher spiritual state where it would not be possible for him to sin! In effect he is asking the LORD to keep him from failure in the spirit of Jude 24, *"To Him who is able to keep you from stumbling, and to present you faultless before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy"*, Jude 24. Knowing that he will, no doubt, have to return to the Lord for His *"merciful kindness"* (Psalm 119:76) when he next slips.

Several New Testament verses talk about our ultimate condition of being blameless at the Lord's return. 1 Thessalonians 5:23 is a good example. *"Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you completely; and may your whole spirit, soul and body be preserved blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ."* There is a similar passage in 1 Corinthians 1:8, *"[The] Lord Jesus Christ, who will also confirm you to the end, that you may be blameless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ."* We might be tempted to think we should aim a bit lower while we are still living in this world! However, Philippians 2:14-15 cuts across such thoughts when it says, *"Do all things without complaining and disputing, that you may become blameless and harmless, children of God without fault in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world."*

Clearly, there is a kind of perfect blamelessness that awaits the Lord's return and our new bodies, but there is also a level of being blameless and without fault that we should definitely be aiming at here and now. It is part of our

testimony in a world that lives in a totally different way, and should point people towards God, whether they accept Him or not.

Closing prayer

Our God and Father, we thank You once again for your word. We thank You that it contains all that we need for instruction, correction, encouragement, and that we might know how to live in a way that pleases You. We pray that we might have the same thirst for, and delight in, your word as the psalmist who lived so long ago. We know You have not changed in the slightest since then, and are as reliable and lovingly tender as ever. Indeed, through the Lord Jesus, and the indwelling Holy Spirit, we can know You in ways that the psalmist could never imagine. May our lives reflect such knowledge and such grace, Amen.

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