

Truth for Today

The Bible Explained

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Psalm 119 - The importance of God's Word: Kaph - Psalm 119:81-88

Isn't the Bible just some dusty old relic? It might be useful as an example of English literature, or as a summary of how people used to think but you can't take seriously a book written so long ago can you? That's the way many people think today. Fair enough if someone enjoys reading the Bible, and somehow it helps them, but no one can really look to the Bible for moral guidance can they? After all, we've moved on so much in the last 2,000 years haven't we? The Bible might have been OK for people two or three hundred years ago, but surely it's past its sell by date today? Surely it has nothing relevant for us today?

Well, despite the loud claims of many in public life today, the experience of millions of Christians, both today and through the ages, is that in fact the Bible is entirely relevant for us. Far from being outdated and a dusty relic, they've found that it contains absolutely relevant and up to date words. They would agree with the Apostle Paul who said that *"the word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two edged sword"* (Hebrews 4:12).

Today, we continue our series on Psalm 119. If you've heard any of the previous talks in this series you'll know by now that this Psalm is all about God's word, and how it is to be treasured. It's the longest Psalm in the Bible, and is split into 22 sections of eight verses. In each of the sections, all the eight verses begin with the same letter of the Hebrew alphabet, and by the end of the Psalm, all 22 letters have been covered. In each section the psalmist says something about God's word.

If you read the whole psalm, you'll notice that today's section, Psalm 119:81-88, is one of the darkest sections of the psalm. Our section today is all about someone who is in desperate need of comfort in the face of intense persecution. Where could they turn? We'll see as we work through Psalm 119:81-88 that they turn to God's word. What an important lesson for us today. Many people around us might feel that the Bible is fine for learning quaint moral lessons, or for teaching us some nice stories. But they wouldn't dream of reading it, and meditating on what it says in times of intense persecution. After all, they'd be too busy trying to work their way out of whatever problems they were enduring.

What an opportunity they were missing! What a resource they were turning their back on! According to the Psalmist, they should keep God's word at the very centre of their thinking, even in intense suffering, and it should be the source of their hope. Countless Christians through the ages would agree and in very difficult times have found encouragement and strength in the Scriptures.

So as we look at another section of Psalm 119 today, I want us to learn to keep God's word central in our lives. I want us to be challenged to think about what the Bible says, even during difficult times. And I believe it will be for our help and blessing. That's my prayer for all of us: that we would see that the Bible, God's word to us is not some useless dusty relic, but is a source of hope and encouragement in life.

Listen carefully to today's section of Psalm 119, Psalm 119:81-88: *"My soul faints for Your salvation, but I hope in Your word. My eyes fail from searching Your word, saying, "When will You comfort me?" For I have become like a wineskin in smoke, yet I do not forget Your statutes. How many are the days of Your servant? When will You execute judgment on those who persecute me? The proud have dug pits for me, which is not according to Your law. All Your commandments are faithful; they persecute me wrongfully; Help me! They almost made an end of me on earth, but I did not forsake Your precepts. Revive me according to Your lovingkindness, so that I may keep the testimony of Your mouth."*

The Psalms don't tend to break down into neat little sections the way some of the New Testament epistles do. That's not surprising since they were written as poetry. But I want us to notice in Psalm 119:81-88 four responses to God's word that will help us as we endure difficult circumstances.

1. In Psalm 119:81-82, we're told to **hope** in God's Word.
2. In Psalm 119:83-85 the challenge is to **remember** God's Word; there are things not to forget whilst we endure suffering.
3. Psalm 119:86-87 teach us to **treasure** God's Word, and finally

4. Psalm 119:88 reminds us to **keep** God's Word.

Let's work our way through Psalm 119:81-88 then, and look out for what God wants to teach us about His Word.

1. Hope in God's Word

The psalmist was enduring great suffering. Listen again to Psalm 119:81, *"My soul faints for Your salvation"*, and Psalm 119:82 *"My eyes fail from searching Your word."* Whatever circumstances he was in the middle of they were certainly difficult. Difficult enough to make the psalmist feel as though he was fainting. He had run out of strength. Difficult enough to make the psalmist say that his eyes were failing for looking out for signs of God's deliverance. He was constantly looking out for some end to his circumstances, some evidence that God would intervene to help him. He longed for some salvation from God. You get the impression reading Psalm 119:81-82 that we're not being told about some mildly difficult circumstance, the kind that we might face that tire us out for a day or two. Instead the psalmist is describing the exhaustion his whole being was enduring in those difficult days. He longed for relief from the suffering he experienced.

Even in such intense suffering, did you notice how the psalmist reacts? *"I hope in Your word"* (Psalm 119:81). The Psalmist has been clear that as far as he was concerned no help had come to him in his suffering. There was no sign of any respite any time soon. That's why he says that his eyes were failing looking for the coming of the help God had promised in His Word. That's why he has to cry out, *"When will You comfort me?"* (Psalm 119:82). You can hear the longing in that question. And yet, in spite of all this, the psalmist doesn't lose faith in God. He doesn't give up on trusting God. No, he says, *"I hope in Your word"* (Psalm 119:81).

What a statement of faith!

- No matter the difficulty, ***"I hope in Your word"***;
- No matter how far off help seems, ***"I hope in Your word"***; and
- No matter how alone and exhausted he may feel, ***"I hope in Your word."***

Does that sound impossible or unrealistic to you? Could the Bible contain sufficient hope for us that if we were experiencing all the circumstances that caused the psalmist's soul to faint, we would say with the psalmist *"I hope in Your word"*?

The psalmist was confident that God would keep His promises. He was confident that God would help him, and that God knew best how and when that help should come. That doesn't come easily. When we look at Psalm 119:83-85 in a few minutes, we'll see that even whilst he was waiting with this hope in God's word, he frequently calls out to God asking, *"How many are the days?"* and *"When will You execute judgment?"* The fact that the psalmist ultimately had this hope in God's word and confidence that God knew best, didn't stop him wondering and questioning whilst the suffering continued. But the important point for us to see here is that he didn't give up on God! He didn't stop believing the promises of the Scriptures.

When we face hardship, it can be easy to feel as though God has forgotten about us, that He doesn't care, that all of His promises somehow don't apply to us. Don't believe that lie of the devil! Don't be tempted to throw your Bible into the bin at the first sign of trouble. In fact, those are the times when more than ever we need to read the Bible. We need to be reminded of God's great love for us. We need to be reminded of the greatness of the Lord Jesus, and the wonder of all He's done for us, and all that has been accomplished for us by His death on the cross. We need to be reminded that one day God will judge all sin, one day all wrong will be dealt with righteously and justly and fairly. We need to be reminded that through all of the circumstances of life, God promise to be with His people, to help them and guide them. We need to be reminded of these things and place our hope in them.

So, as you listen today, can I encourage you to hope in God's word? Read it. Let the truths it contains firmly take root in your mind and your heart. And when difficult times come, don't throw away your Bible, hope in God's word.

2. Remember God's Word

As we move into Psalm 119:83-85, we can see again the intensity of the suffering the psalmist felt. Listen again to the thoughts of the psalmist:

"For I have become like a wineskin in smoke, yet I do not forget Your statutes. How many are the days of Your servant? When will You execute judgment on those who persecute me? The proud have dug pits for me, which is not according to Your law."

The reference to being like a *"wineskin in smoke"* is probably a reference to the animal skins that the people in those days used to store wine in. When these were empty and left to hang in a room, the smoke from the house fire, and the heat in the house would dry out the skin and cause it to shrivel up. I guess they wouldn't be much use for carrying wine anymore. That was how the psalmist felt. The suffering he endured seemed to have so affected him that he felt all dried up, all the life sucked out of him, so that he felt shrivelled up like this wineskin bottle. Calvin says that he was "parched by the continual heat of adversities"

The psalmist carries on by asking *"How many are the days?"* (Psalm 119:84) How long will I suffer like this? How long will it be before You stop those who persecute me? Ungodly people were causing the psalmist trouble. These people had no interest in God's law. They were out to trap him. Would God not intervene and help him? We can sense some of the psalmist's anguish in Psalm 119:83-85.

Waiting for anything is hard. Have you noticed how easy it is to get frustrated waiting in a traffic jam? Or how hard it is for young children to wait until Christmas day once they see presents accumulating by the Christmas tree? Smartphones and the internet are great tools, but perhaps you've become impatient waiting for someone to respond to an e-mail or text? If waiting for fairly trivial things is hard, it's so much harder to wait for the end of difficult times. It's not easy to wait patiently for the end of a loved one's suffering. It's not easy to wait until the end of some difficult period at work, or in family life. We can begin to understand the difficulties the psalmist faced as he waited for his suffering to end. It was hard! But in all of his waiting, the psalmist did not forget God's statutes. He **remembered** God's word. We've already considered how he hoped in God's word. Now we're reminded that he didn't forget it.

When struggling, don't forget what God says in His Word. Instead remember it, and allow God's Word to give perspective to all that you are enduring. Meditate on God's promises and let them encourage you and point you away from your circumstances and towards the almighty and all loving God, who stands beside you in your suffering. I remember reading once a quote that said something like "Don't forget in the darkness what God has taught you in the light." I think there's something in that. The things you know about God today, won't be any less true tomorrow when you endure hardship of whatever kind. God is not any less able to help you in difficulty than He is in good times. When the dark times come, when your soul faints and longs for God's salvation, remember God's promises.

Elisabeth Elliot, the missionary and author, whose husband was killed as he tried to take the good news of the Gospel to jungle tribes in Ecuador said, "If He died to let us live in His company, is He likely to abandon us just because things look so dark?" If you are listening to this broadcast today and you are a Christian, then always remember that God has already acted to bring you the best salvation. He has already sent His Son to bear the judgment for your sins. The Lord Jesus has already intervened, not to save you from the consequences of some ungodly people, but from the consequences of your own sin. He has not just delivered you from some sticky patch, but from eternal judgment for sin. No wonder the writer to the Hebrews writes of this as *"so great salvation"* (Hebrews 2:3). I want to ask you to consider with me: if God has cared for you and me so much that He has provided this wonderful and great salvation, with not just temporary, but eternal consequences, do you not think that He will be with you in the trials and suffering we face in life? Don't forget in the dark what you have learnt in the light!

Of course, this all assumes that you have learnt something in the first place. You can't forget what you don't know. This reminds us of the importance of reading the Bible. If we don't take the time to read, think about and learn the Scriptures, what will the Holy Spirit be able to remind us of in times of difficulty? I know we all have busy lives. There are always so many things to do. But can I encourage us all to find some time in our day to read the Scriptures. If your reading of the Bible is patchy and very infrequent, can I challenge you to find some small part of each day over the coming week to read a few verses of the Bible. You don't need to read the Bible cover to cover by next Sunday. You'd be amazed at how much you can take in over time just by reading a few verses a day and thinking about them and trying to apply them to your own life, and enjoy the truths they contain in your own heart. Perhaps some of you are not currently enduring much difficulty. Compared to the experiences described by the psalmist in today's section, I'm certainly not. But perhaps the Lord will use some of the verses I read this week to prepare me for difficulties I may face in the future. Or perhaps when I do face suffering, the Lord will remind me of something I read today and it will help me. Read the Scriptures!

3. Treasure God's Word

If Psalm 119:81-82 reminded us to **hope** in God's Word, and Psalm 119:83-85 remind us to **remember** God's Word, then Psalm 119:86-87 teach us to **treasure** God's word. Listen to them again: *"All Your commandments are faithful; they persecute me wrongfully; help me! They almost made an end of me on earth, but I did not forsake Your precepts."*

On first glance, Psalm 119:86 seems a bit strange doesn't it? Why are God's commandments described as faithful? Perhaps just or right or perfect might have been more understandable. I think the Psalmist saw all of God's laws as a testimony to God's faithfulness. They reminded him, by the fact that God's laws had a "rightness" about them, that

God was always faithfully interested in the best for His people. He always wanted good things for them and He sovereignly knew what those good things would be. The psalmist knew that God would be faithful to keep His commandments. Faithful obedience would be rewarded whereas sinful disobedience would be judged and punished. God was faithful and it must be so. So even though the psalmist was enduring very hard circumstances, he could look at God's commands and be reminded that those who persecuted him would be held to account by God for their sins, and that God would help him at just the right time. So the psalmist treasures God's commands. He views them almost like faithful promises and is able to await God's deliverance at the right time. For the time being, he is content to simply say, "*Help me*".

Do we similarly treasure God's commandments? Do we love them enough to remember that they are right and a reminder of God's faithfulness? As we, like the psalmist, endure difficult times, do we remember the commandments of God and by faith believe that God will send the necessary help at just the right time?

Then in Psalm 119:87, we are reminded that even though the psalmist's circumstances were so severe that they had almost made an end of him, he hadn't forsaken God's precepts. He hadn't given up on God and His word even though times were more difficult than most will ever have to endure.

When life is difficult, we might be tempted to give up on the instructions of the Bible. After all, sometimes it seems as though, if we were just willing to compromise our obedience to God and His word, then our difficulties would be over so quickly. Wouldn't it really just be easier to ignore some small part of the Scriptures? That would be the advice of so many today. Just discard some small, seemingly inconsequential part of the Bible and some of your problems will disappear. The psalmist didn't think like that. Even though his difficulties almost made an end of him, he didn't forsake God's precepts. Will you? Do you treasure God's word so much that you will cling to it and not forsake it no matter what? Will you look for comfort and help in the Scriptures no matter how hard the challenges you face?

I wonder, did you notice the little encouragement in Psalm 119:87, "*They almost made an end of me on earth*"? "*Almost*"! But not quite! In spite of the fact that the psalmist endured such terrible circumstances, the worst that they could do to him was "*almost*" make an end of him. That was the extent of the psalmist's confidence in God and in His Word. The very worst that the world could do to him was to almost destroy him. But he had confidence that God would deliver him in whatever way God knew was best.

That's a good point to keep in mind as we endure hardship in life. The very worst that circumstances can do is "*almost*" destroy us. The very worst that people around us can do is "*almost*" make an end of us. If we are a believer and have faith in Christ, then our hope in God is so great that it can endure even the worst the world can throw at us.

Many Christians have died as a result of their faith. I mentioned a quote from Elisabeth Elliot earlier. Her husband, Jim Elliot, was killed taking the Gospel to people who had never heard it before. He once said, "He is no fool who gives up what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose". That's how much Jim treasured the salvation he received from God. That's how much it affected his life. I suspect that he would have agreed with the psalmist that the worst that can happen is that he be almost destroyed. Jim's faith really did cost him his life, but the risk of that happening didn't stop him trusting God and trying to reach people with the good news of salvation in Jesus Christ. He valued his eternal inheritance more even than his own life. He didn't forsake God's word.

Remember, as you endure hard times that if you are a believer, you have a great hope that endures even beyond this life. Your hope is of spending all eternity with Jesus Christ our Lord. How wonderful that will be! The worst that hardship can bring to us is temporary to this life. That's not in any way to minimise the terrible suffering that many believers in the world endure. I can't begin to imagine how some believers endure the hardships they face. The only answer must be that they, like the psalmist, have learnt to love God's word and find comfort in it.

Warren Wiersbie wrote, "When the Father allows His children to go through the furnace of affliction, He keeps His eye on the clock and His hand on the thermostat. He knows how long and how much" (*Be Exultant [Psalms 90-150]: Praising God for His Mighty Works*). Circumstances may seem to be overwhelming, like they were in the psalmist's day. But God cares for His people. He won't abandon them. Keep that in mind always.

4. Keeping God's Word

We've come to the end of today's section of the psalm and only have Psalm 119:88 to consider together. Let's remind ourselves what it says: "*Revive me according to Your lovingkindness, so that I may keep the testimony of Your mouth.*"

We've already seen this morning that the psalmist found help in God's word in difficult times. Now this section ends with a prayer for help. He needed help from God to be able to keep God's commandments. He needed to be revived. How good that he wasn't asking for help from some mean spirited source. Instead he asked for help "*according to*

Your lovingkindness.” Isn't that interesting? In spite of the fact that the psalmist had endured such hardship that his soul fainted, he still thought of God as being lovingly kind to him. Even during great persecution, the psalmist still saw evidences of ways that God had been kind to him and loving towards him. And it's to this lovingly kind God that he now appeals for help. How crucial that is for us if we are to endure hardship and faithfully keep God's word. Look for evidences day by day of how God has been kind to you. Treasure reminders that God loves you. Keep them often in your thinking. And as you do so, look to God for fresh help daily to keep His word.

Responding faithfully to all that life throws at us isn't easy. Living in a way that honours God can be hard, especially if people set out to make that difficult for us. But we're not left alone to do so. We have a God who is characterised by lovingkindness, ready to help us. We have a God who has already shown us the greatest lovingkindness in giving His only begotten Son for us. Do we think that He won't then help us to keep His word and live faithfully in difficult days? Do you remember how Paul put it in Romans 8:32, *“He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things?”*

So ask for help. Look to our lovingly kind God today, and ask for help to keep His word and live faithfully, in a way that honours Him, no matter what circumstances you face.

I started by asking if the Bible was a dusty old relic of no use to us today, especially as a source of help in suffering. Don't you believe it! Take comfort from the experience of the psalmist in Psalm 119:81-88. It's an experience that is shared by countless believers through the ages. No matter what circumstances you face this week, look to God's word:

- **Hope** in it;
- **Remember** it;
- **Treasure** it;
- **Keep** it.

May our lovingly kind God help us to do so.

Thank you for listening to this *Truth for Today* talk on Psalm 119, The importance of God's Word, Psalm 119:81-88, talk number T1068.

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