**Psalm 119**

**Expository sermons**

**Dennis K. Muldoon 2017**

**Blessed are the blameless** Psalm 119:1-8

Psalm 119 is well known as the longest of the psalms; although the actual words of the psalm are not so well known. Years ago my father-in-law offered his grandchild an amount of money if she learnt this psalm, and she valiantly set out to do so; I think he settled with her learning Psalm 1! Boice relates stories of men who committed Psalm 119 to memory, men like William Wilberforce, Henry Martyn and David Livingstone. Wilberforce, the statesman largely responsible for the abolition of slavery, wrote in his diary in 1819: ‘Walked today from Hyde Park corner repeating the 119th Psalm in great comfort’. Livingstone, the pioneering missionary to Africa, won a Bible from his Sunday school teacher for learning Psalm 119 by heart. I think my father-in-law was preaching from Psalm 119 when he asked our daughter to learn it, because I came across a lot of underlining in a commentary I inherited.

Why is Psalm 119 so long? There are no rules about the length of a poem; it is doubtful that this psalm was sung in one sitting! This psalm has a particular form; it is an acrostic, but instead of each verse beginning with the next letter of the Hebrew alphabet we have eight verses beginning with each letter. The first letter of the Hebrew alphabet is ‘*aleph*’, as written in most Bibles, even in the Hebrew script. The first word of the first eight verses begins with ‘*aleph*’, and the next eight verses begin with ‘*beth*’.

This must have been a huge challenge to the writer, but a challenge that sharpened his mind. You may have noticed the alliteration I often have in the points of my sermons. I try hard to find words that begin with the same alphabet. This may help you to remember the points- or it may annoy you! I do this because it sharpens my understanding of the text. I scan the passage and the comments of scholars looking for the right word, which I go to explain with other words.

The other constraint the psalmist seems to have placed on himself is that of mentioning God’s law in every verse. Just one or two verses fail to contain the word ‘law’ or a synonym; that is verse 122 and maybe 84, 121 and 132. The psalm is all about the righteous words of the righteous God, and the blessing that comes to those who live in obedience to these words.

The Hebrew language had at least eight words which the psalmist could use as synonyms for the word ‘law’. The word ‘law’ (‘*torah*’) can be used in the narrow sense of the ten commandments or the Mosaic law but also in the wider sense of the Pentateuch, ‘the Law and the Prophets’, or even the whole Bible, including prophecies and promises. Everything that is written is the wisdom of God; it is written for our correction and training in righteousness (2Tim 3:16).

While calling these other words referring to God’s law synonyms, they each have a distinctive nuance which, as Leupold writes, ‘convey the many-sidedness of the Word of God’. ‘The use of the various terms is the writer’s way of securing variety of treatment of his subject’. These eight Hebrew words are:

1. *torah* meaning ‘law’ is the most frequently used. This refers to God’s written revelation, the revelation God gave for us to read and obey.

2. *hedot* meaning ‘testimonies’ or ‘witness’. The Book of the Law was placed beside the Ark of the Covenant to be ‘a witness against you’ (Deut 31:26). God’s word is a faithful and true witness.

4. *piqqudim* meaning ‘precepts’. This refers to rules given to a ruler or boss to be implemented in his realm.

5. *miswot* meaning ‘commandments’. This word emphasises the authority and binding nature of what is spoken.

6.*mispatim* meaning ‘ordinances’ or ‘judgments’ handed down by the all-wise judge in common human situations.

7. *dabar* meaning ‘word’. Next to *torah*, this is the most frequently found word in this psalm.

8. *imra* meaning ‘promise’ or ‘word’. This comes from the verb ‘to say’.

There are other words which some scholars include as synonyms, namely those translated as ‘your ways’ (119:3) and ‘your name’. In verse 132, one of the exception verses, the Hebrew ‘*mispatim*’ is translated ‘custom’ in our NKJV.

One more thing to note about this psalm before looking at our text is that it is a prayer addressed to God, like many of the psalms. The first three verses are statements or beatitudes, and after this the psalmist addresses the Lord in prayer. These beatitudes remind us of Psalm 1: ‘Blessed is the one who walks not in the counsel of the wicked’ (Ps 1:1). Here we read, ‘Blessed are the blameless in the way, who walk in the law of the Lord!’ (119:1). We are also reminded of the second half of Psalm 19 which refers to ‘the law of the Lord’, ‘the testimony of the Lord’, ‘the statutes of the Lord’, ‘the commandment of the Lord’, and ‘the judgments of the Lord’. The theme of God’s judgments being more desirable than gold (19:10) also comes up here in Psalm 119 verses 72 and 127. Psalm 119 is like an exposition of these five verses of Psalm 19.

Our exposition of the first stanza, the first eight verses of Psalm 119, will be taken up in four brief points: walk, way, want, will.

**1. Walk**

‘Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked’ is the first line of the Book of Psalms. Psalm 119 is a wisdom psalm like the first psalm. It is about living the right way in this sinful, fallen world, living the right way up in a world turned upside down by sin (cf. Acts 17:6). Some translations have ‘happy’ instead of ‘blessed’. Living in obedience to God’s commands is the recipe for a truly happy life. Happiness is delighting in God and his word.

The blessing promised by the psalmist is upon those wholeheartedly seeking the Lord, and who keep the testimonies of the Lord (119:2). This is a settled, steadfast happiness not a superficial, seasonal happiness. As the chorus goes, ‘Happiness is to know the saviour, living a life within God’s favour, having a change in my behaviour, happiness is the Lord’.

God has not given us his holy law to satisfy our intellectual curiosity; he has given it for us to meditate on and learn, and live by. ‘Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path’ (119:105) is one of the better-known verses from this psalm. May it be even better known and heeded by all of us. This psalmist was not interested in any half-hearted following of the Lord. Half-hearted followers are easily distracted; they are soon lost. Does a bush walker doubt the map he is following? If he thinks he knows better he is sure to get lost. So it is with those who doubt the word of God thinking they know better. Too many have gone down this path, the pathway to perishing.

When the psalmist speaks about the ‘blameless’, and about ‘doing no wrong’ (119:1, 3) he is not referring to sinless perfection. The Lord spoke of Job as blameless and upright. David was a ‘man after God’s own heart’ (Acts 13:22). But neither of these men were without sin. They were men who knew God’s holy law and willed to obey this law. They committed themselves to living in obedient submission to the demands of God as revealed in the Scriptures.

**2. Way**

There are two types of walk we can undertake: we can walk for exercise or we can walk to get to a certain place. Most days I walk around a track near home; it is a pleasant walk and the exercise is good but I end up back home. By contrast, years ago I was dropped off in a village in Nepal and had to walk back to town the next day. It was a tough walk up and over mountains from daylight to dark. I was not interested in the exercise; I was only interested in getting to my destination in time. Thankfully I was given a Nepali lad to guide me.

Wisdom is about the walk but we do not forget the way and the destination. Some Christians are more interested in religious exercises than in actually getting to the destination. We must be walking with purpose not just for pleasure. The talks at a conference were mostly from the book of James. This letter can be understood as being all about deeds; ‘Be doers of the word and not hearers only’ and, ‘faith without works is dead’ (Ja 1:27, 2:20). But works or deeds without faith are useless. The wise person understands that, ‘all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags’ (Isa 64:6).

What the psalmist tells us is that God has given commands and we are to keep these diligently (119:4). We do not keep them in our own strength, as we will see next, nor do we keep them to our own glory. They are God’s precepts, and we keep them to please and glorify his holy name. Keeping God’s commands draws us nearer to God. The way of obedience is life. ‘Do this and live’ is what Moses and the prophets urged upon the people (Deut 30:16).

Jesus said, ‘I am the way, the truth and the life, no one comes to the Father except through me’ (John 14:6). Jesus is the living word. He is our living guide. He did not change God’s holy law but fulfilled it. He sent the Holy Spirit to be our guide; ‘He will guide you into all truth’ (John 16:13).

I was so thankful to have that Nepali boy to guide me out of the treacherous Himalayan Mountains. But I am infinitely more thankful to have Jesus guiding me out of the darkness of this world. Jesus is the way out of the misery and meaninglessness of this sinful world. Jesus is the only way.

**3. Want**

‘Oh, that my ways were directed by your precepts’ (119:5). The writer has turned to prayer, personal prayer. This psalm is not a lecture in philosophy; it is a personal cry for help in obeying God’s law. Only the Lord can help him. Like the apostle Paul writing in Romans 7, he cannot do what is right because he is a weak, miserable sinner. He delights in the law of God but the flesh is weak. Only the Lord can help him overcome the law of sin in his flesh.

In the very last line is another appeal for help; ‘Oh, do not forsake me utterly!’ (119:8). Walking in the way of the Lord we encounter trials and difficulties; we encounter sickness and poverty and enemies. The psalmist often speaks about his enemies. The wicked are always trying to trip up the righteous man (119:61, 69). We cannot overcome in our own strength. We must draw near to the Lord; we must cling to him and to his promises, promises we find in God’s word.

The psalmist prays that he will not be ashamed when he looks at God’s commandments (119:6). All sin is against God, and we all sin. When we realise we have sinned we hang our heads in shame. We might put on sackcloth and sit in ashes. God is pleased when we confess our sin, and he is ready to forgive us. But our enemies will take full advantage of our failure to practice what we preach. David fled Jerusalem in shame with Shimei cursing him, after his sin and the rebellion of his son. Many a servant of God has been publically humiliated after they sinned, failing to conform to God’s law. In Psalm 25 there is the prayer, ‘Let me not be ashamed, let not my enemies triumph over me’ (Ps 25:2).

**4. Will**

Prayer for God’s help does not lessen our responsibility to be serious about keeping God’s law, and making up our mind to trust and obey. It is a matter of the will. ‘I will praise you… I will keep your statutes’ (119:7,8). Psalm 1 tells us not to walk, stand, or sit with the ungodly (Ps 1:1). The Israelites were commanded not to make a treaty with the Canaanites and not to intermarry with them. What did Samson do? What did Ahab do? We must listen to God’s word, not to feelings or emotions.

Sometimes we are told that God is love so you can divorce your spouse if you really love another person. If you love someone of the same sex that is okay, they say, because God is love. ‘God is love’ does not mean ‘love is God’. God, in his love, gave us commands to obey. God’s law is holy, the commandments are holy, just and good (Rom 7:12). The psalmist believed this and delighted in God’s law, God’s unchanging law. We disobey to our shame and our peril.

**Start right- start young** Psalm 119:9-16

I often play tennis with a man in his early eighties. He learnt to play when he was young, even before he went to school, and has played all his life. He loves his tennis, playing two or three days a week. I think he would like to play every day. If you learn tennis when young you can play it all your life. If you learn the Bible when you are young you will remember it all your life, especially if you meditate on it every day and practice what you learn. If you love Jesus you will delight in God’s word. This man loves his tennis but his tennis days are coming to an end. You who love the Lord will never grow tired or weary of hearing his word and singing his praises. You will be singing his praises in heaven.

We come to the second stanza of Psalm 119- the ‘beth’ stanza. This entire psalm is focussed on the law of the Lord, with the word ‘law’, or one of eight synonyms, being found in all verses except one or two. Within this constraint, and the acrostic constraint, most stanzas have a particular focus; for example ‘teth’ focuses on affliction and ‘resh’ on being revived. This second stanza focusses on the young person. Some think the writer is referring to himself but addressing the young is a feature of wisdom literature, as seen in the opening chapters of the Book of Proverbs.

We will examine this second stanza of Psalm 119 under three headings, and pray that the Holy Spirit helps us in applying these truths to our own hearts. Firstly, ‘wander not from the way’, secondly, ‘word in the heart and on the lips’, and thirdly, ‘remember and rejoice’.

**1. Wander not from the way**

Moses told the people to follow the way of life, not the way of death. The way of life is the way of the Lord. Living in obedience to the commands of the Lord is the way of life. Before followers of Jesus were called Christians they were called people of the Way (Acts 9:2). Jesus said, ‘I am the way’. Jesus said, ‘if you love me you will obey my commands’.

Every loving parent teaches their child not to take drugs because drugs will ruin their life. But many parents do not give their child a proper alternative for life. They spend money on a good education, sports training, a new car and a good job, thinking such things will satisfy their child. But material things can never satisfy the soul. Life for many is a daily grind, a circular path of pains and pleasures, an endless cycle of life and death. Their focus is often on escaping this tragic treadmill which is the cycle of life. Followers of Jesus are not going around in circles; they are on the Way, the way of hope and glory, the way of Jesus. While Hindus and humanists want to get off the treadmill, the psalmist says, ‘Oh, let me not wander from your commandments’ (119:10). Keeping the commands of God is the way of happiness and heavenly glory.

While the world teaches young people to follow their dreams, to go off and discover their destiny, the Bible teaches the young to come near and listen to the wisdom of God. Parents would never think of throwing their child into deep water without first teaching them to swim, yet they throw them into the world without teaching them how to live. Children are ready to learn but modernist teachers say they must be left to find their own way. The Bible says, ‘Train up a child in the way he should go and when he is old he will not depart from it’ (Prov 22:6).

Jesuits apparently have a saying, ‘Give me a child till he is seven and I’ll give you the man’. The atheist Richard Dawkins accuses Christians of ‘dangerous indoctrination of children’ but his atheist friends behind the ‘Safe schools program’ want to teach children in primary school how to be a homosexual. Do you know what your child is being taught? Are you teaching them to follow the way of Jesus by example and by word? My tennis friend’s parents were eager to teach their son this sport but they neglected to teach him the word of God. His days of playing sport are almost over- what’s next?

Children must be taught the Bible. They must be taught from the day they are born. We hear stories about babies in the womb responding to music. The Bible does not tell us to teach the unborn but it does tell us to teach the child when it is born. I urge you to bring your baby to church. Let them hear praises being sung to God. Let them hear prayer and Bible reading. If they grow up accustomed to worshipping God they will continue in the Lord’s house all their days.

Some children have never seen inside a place of worship. One day a young girl asked to look inside this church- she had never been in a church and wondered what weird things might be inside. The man from the press came looking for something to photograph but was somewhat disappointed; there were no pictures on the walls or windows, or candles for him to photograph. Do not bring your child to marvel at such things; bring them to marvel at the beauty of the Lord and his word.

If you are a believer your child is a covenant child of God. In the Bible you will find promises regarding your child. We find lots of promises in the Bible; one of the Hebrew words translated ‘word’ actually means ‘promise’ (119:11). Take hold of these promises as you read and meditate upon God’s word. You must also take seriously the instructions God gives you about teaching your child. The child cannot obey God’s commands if they do not know them. The young man keeps his way pure by obeying God’s word. He does not wander from God’s commands because he has sought the Lord with his whole heart (119:9, 10). This is wisdom for both parent and child.

**2. Word in the heart and on the lips**

‘Your word I have hidden in my heart that I might not sin against you’ (119:11). Have you learnt this verse? Do you pray this verse? Can you honestly pray this verse? How much of God’s word have you hidden in your heart, as in memorised. If you know the Ten Commandments and the Lord’s Prayer that is a good start, provided you understand the words and are determined to obey them. There are many other words for you and your child to commit to memory. There are wonderful Psalms to learn, like Psalm 1, Psalm 23, and even these words of Psalm 119. There are precious promises to learn, promises that will keep us from being discouraged in times of difficulty, words that bring light to the soul when dark clouds come over you. Are you learning the Catechism yourself as you teach your children?

Do you have Bible verses stuck on the fridge for your children to learn? Moses said, ‘You shall write them on the door posts of your house and on your gates’ (Deut 6:9). Do you have Scripture songs playing in your car? Do you sing Scripture songs to your children as they go to bed? I know some of you do. Having God’s word hidden in your heart will help you avoid sin (119:11). Learning Scripture is not just an exercise for the mind; it is that you might know God’s will and avoid sin. It is that this word might come forth when needed; that it might be on your lips in times of temptation.

Verse 12 stands out as a doxology: ‘Blessed are you O Lord! Teach me your statutes’. We bless the Lord because he has shown us the way of life and has given us commands that will keep us in this way. It is a narrow way, but it is the pure way and the way of blessing. The psalmist asks the Lord to teach him these blessed commands. He submits himself to the Lord as a servant to his master. He says, ‘Speak Lord, for your servants hears’.

Joseph was a young man when he ended up working as a slave in the house of an Egyptian man. This man’s beautiful wife tried to seduce Joseph. Did Joseph say, ‘What’s to lose’? Did he say, ‘I am a long way from home; no one will know’? No! He said, ‘How can I do this great wickedness and sin against God’ (Gen 39:9). So young and so vulnerable, yet so well trained in the commands of God.

Daniel was also taught God’s word when he was young. He was captured and taken to a foreign land. Yet he determined to live according to God’s commands even in this heathen land. Are you living live like Joseph? Will your children live like Daniel? If this is your hope then train them when they are young. Teach them and pray for them, and keep on praying for them when they leave home.

Jesus said that out of the heart proceed false witness and blasphemies, among other sins (Mat 15:19). Sinful thoughts and actions arise from a sinful heart. Every child is born with a sinful heart but you, with God’s help, with prayer and faithful teaching, will see the child’s heart change. When they tell lies correct them, when they blaspheme correct them, when they are violent correct them. Do all this when they are young. Be diligent in teaching them but remember, they not only listen to what you say but watch what you do.

Let God’s word be on your lips. Read the Bible aloud. Say prayers aloud. Recite God’s word and in this way commit it to memory. ‘Let God’s word dwell in you richly in all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one another in psalms, and hymns and spiritual songs’ (Col 3:16). With God’s word firmly planted in your heart it will be the first word that comes to mind when you face trials and temptations- and the last word also. A pure, godly thought, not an evil thought, will come to mind and pass to your lips. Be ready to speak the very word of God when you are tempted- Jesus did! Jesus answered Satan saying, ‘It is written’. Will you do the same? Will your child do the same? Remember that to do so they must know what is written.

**3. Remember and rejoice**

You may be saying, ‘I try to teach the Bible but my child says it is too hard or too boring’. Is learning God’s word dull or boring? ‘Listen to what the psalmist says: ‘I have rejoiced in the way of your testimonies, as much as in all riches… I will delight myself in your statutes’ (119:14, 16). And in Psalm 122: “I was glad when they said to me, ‘Let us go into the house of the Lord’”. If the psalmist could say this why can’t you? Do you delight in God’s word more than in riches? Why then do you put making money before worshipping God? I am talking to you parents because your children will take note of the choices you make. If your greatest delight is worshipping God then your child will share that delight.

Children love to please their parents- just like you love to please your heavenly Father. If learning the Bible pleases you, they will learn it. Learning the Bible or singing Bible songs together is a great family activity and a great blessing, as many can testify. Having said this, we must do all we can to make God’s word a delight. Bible stories are so interesting; let us not make them boring. Teaching Scripture in song is a delight. Is this not what the psalms are? We do not have to adopt popular, worldly music, but we should be making a joyful noise to the Lord.

In closing let me say that in learning a foreign language you must use it- even teach it! When I was learning an Indian language I prepared Bible stories and taught children in that language. They loved the stories, even though correcting my language at times. I urge you parents to teach your children the word of God- in so doing you will learn or be reminded yourself. I invite you to teach others in this fellowship. Let us be learning God’s word, meditating on God’s word, sharing God’s word and teaching God’s word. In this way we will all, both young and old, delight in God’s word and walk in his ways all our days.

**Sojourner on the earth** Psalm 119:17-24

My mother was a fan of the gospel singer Jim Reeves, and one of her favourite songs was, ‘This world is not my home’: ‘This world is not my home, I’m just a-passing through. If heaven’s not my home then Lord what will I do’. I don’t remember having a record player; my mother just had the sheet music and played the piano while we sang.

The life of a child of God is pictured as a journey, a journey towards home, our heavenly home in Christ Jesus. We are not to make this world our home, meaning we are not to get settled and start conforming to this world. We are in the world but must not let the world get into us and start controlling our lives. Jesus prayed of his disciples, ‘They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world’ (Jn 17:16). He went on to pray, ‘Sanctify them by your truth. Your word is truth’. The psalmist expresses this same belief; God’s word is truth and as such is the way to holiness.

The psalmist also saw himself as a stranger or sojourner on this earth (119:19). He did not belong to the culture and belief systems of this world. He was not like those building the tower of Babel, wanting to make a name for themselves. He was like Abraham who left his country to sojourn in a foreign land. Most of the notable men of the Bible had no earthly home; Jesus himself had no place to lay his head.

Jesus also spoke of himself as a servant; ‘The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and give his life a ransom for many’ (Mark 10:45). In our meditation upon this stanza of Psalm 119 we will consider the psalmist as a servant, a sojourner and as one scorned by the world.

**1. Servant**

The psalmist describes himself as the Lord’s servant in verses 17 and 23, and in many other verses in this psalm. He saw the Lord God as his master, a good and just master whom he delighted to serve. This master demanded faithful service while at the same time providing for his servant and protecting him. In some societies servants live in the master’s house; they look to the master for help and guidance in every aspect of life- education, money, health and even marriage.

The Lord describes Moses, Joshua and David as his servants. These men became leaders of the people and of the nation but they remained servants of the Lord. In the NT believers are referred to as servants of the Lord. We are to follow the example of Jesus in serving rather than being served by others. But the focus of the term here in Psalm 119 is that of looking to the master, looking to the Lord for help and guidance. The psalmist prays for the Lord to deal graciously with him or, in some translations, ‘do him good’.

God promises his servants that he will never leave us or forsake us (Josh 1:5, Heb 13:5). He promises to supply our needs (Ps 37:25, Phil 4:19). He promises to protect us from our enemies. The servant for his part must listen to his master and obey his commands. The wise servant accepts his side of the covenant; he appreciates his master’s blessings and wholeheartedly serves his master. The psalmist knows that by keeping the Lord’s commands he will live. He delights in the law of the Lord because the words of the Lord are words of life.

‘Open my eyes that I may see wondrous things from your law’ (119:18). Two disciples on the road to Emmaus listened to Jesus telling them how all the Scriptures point to him but it was only when Jesus broke bread that their eyes were opened and they knew him (Luke 24:31). Their eyes were opened to the wonderful truth of the gospel. The psalmist prays that the Lord would open his eyes to see the wonderful truth revealed in the law of God. Reading the Bible, meditating on it, and learning it was not a chore or burden to the servant of the Lord. He was like a prospector finding a gold mine. He was reluctant to put down his Bible- I guess he had to go to work and go to sleep but God’s word was his constant companion. He was not like some today who think God’s law is a burden, something to stop them having fun.

If the servant could pray, ‘Open my eyes that I may see wondrous things in your law’, how much more will the sons of God pray the same thing- and rejoice in all that the Lord reveals to them. The apostle Paul says that as believers we are more than servants- we are sons of God: ‘Therefore you are no longer a slave but a son, and if a son then an heir of God through Christ’ (Gal 4:7). A son calls his master ‘Father’. He knows him better; he knows his love and his will more intimately. He knows he will receive an inheritance. Wonderful things indeed are found in God’s word. Do you read your Bible with the eagerness of one who has found rich treasure, or a son reading his father’s will?

**2. Sojourner**

‘I am a stranger on the earth’ (119:19 ESV has ‘I am a sojourner on the earth’). This is an important theological truth. Abraham, Isaac and Jacob are spoken of a being ‘strangers and pilgrims on the earth’ because they desired ‘a better, that is a heavenly country’ (Heb 11:13, 16). The apostle Peter addresses believers as elect pilgrims, as ‘sojourners and pilgrims’, as he urges them to ‘abstain from fleshly lusts that war against the soul’ (1Peter 2:11). ‘Lust’ and ‘war’ are strong words. But they are words that apply to the earthly life of a servant of the Lord. Anyone who finds such words an exaggeration or a bit ‘over the top’ needs to consider how closely they are following the way of the Lord, the narrow way, the way of life.

‘Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind’ declared the apostle Paul (Rom 12:2). He urges us to find out the will of God, which is just what the psalmist is trying to do. His prayer is, ‘Do not hide your commandments from me’ (119:19). God’s commands get hidden from us when we sin. Sin separates us from God. God’s law loses its delight when we refuse to repent or when we start following the ways of the world.

The psalmist was anxious not to be denied access to the word of God. This may well have been his situation because he writes, ‘My soul is consumed with longing for your rules at all times’ (119:20 ESV). His very soul was crushed as he longed for the ‘authoritative declarations of God’s will’. He does not tell us his exact situation but does go on to speak about reproach and persecution. We might think of Daniel when he was cut off from the place of worship; he longed to return to the house of God. Christians who are imprisoned for their faith desperately cling to their Bible; they risk smuggling it into prison.

What does it mean to be a sojourner in the earth? Firstly, it means our time here on earth is brief. A stranger or sojourner does not stay in a place very long. He is on the move; he is on the way to his destination. As Jim Reeves sang, ‘this world is not my home, I just a-passing through’. Some Christians get too settled in this world, especially those living in comfort and prosperity -that’s us! Some have ‘adapted’ their theology to the so-called prosperity gospel. When they read, ‘deal bountifully with your servant’ they think of the riches and comforts this world offers.

Secondly, a sojourner, like a traveller or a runner, does not let himself get weighed down with unnecessary things. The believer must not get burdened with worldly or sinful things. ‘Let us lay aside every weight and the sin that so easily ensnares us…looking unto Jesus, the pioneer and perfector of our faith’ (Heb 12:1, 2). As the saying goes; ‘Only one life and it will soon be past. Only what’s done for Christ will last’.

Thirdly, the sojourner is an alien, a non-conformist. He does not fit into the ways of the world. In following God’s holy law he is walking contrary to the world. The majority, the mob on the broad road are rushing headlong to destruction but the stranger fixes his eyes on the Lord and resolutely follows the narrow path to life (Mat 7:13,14). Are you aware that obeying God’s word puts you in the minority? You will be the odd man out, just like the prophets of old, and like our Lord and Saviour himself.

**3. Scorned and slandered**

The psalmist experienced reproach, contempt and persecution. He had princes speaking against him (119:23). As mentioned, we do not know his circumstances but we can imagine they were like various other godly people found in the Bible. Just think of prophets like Elijah and Jeremiah. When they spoke God’s word, the word of truth, the king rejected that word and tried to silence them. The psalmist was keeping the testimonies of the Lord when princes or rulers sat together to slander him. Verse 21 probably refers to such men- proud men rebuked by God as they stray from God’s commandments; although it may be the psalmist reminding himself not to stray from God’s commands. We might think of Pharaoh who, although not a Hebrew was still cursed by God for his pride and arrogance. Babylonian kings also suffered at the hand of Almighty God.

The servant of the Lord will face scorn and slander. It happened to our Lord himself, the Son of God, who lived a sinless life yet was scorned, was spat upon, and was hung on the cross to die. Jesus said, ‘If the world hates you remember that it hated me before it hated you’ (Jn 15:18). It is because you are not of this world, it is because you do not walk in the ways of the world but according to God’s word that you are hated. Do you know what it means to be hated by the world, hated and ridiculed for delighting in the word of God and obeying God’s holy law? If not, you soon will be! Even those in high places will burn with anger against you. Try telling the world what the Bible says about creation, about God making the world in six days. Try telling the world what the Bible says about homosexual or same-sex marriage.

And how does the servant of the Lord respond when slandered and persecuted? ‘But your servant meditates on your statutes’ (119:23). Leupold writes, ‘In such meditation lies the source of his strength’. This person continues to delight in God’s word because that word is his counsellor. This person finds peace in the words of the all wise God. While the worldly person is ranting and raving, the believer knows the peace of God in their heart, peace given by God through his word and Spirit.

Jesus promised to send the Holy Spirit upon all believers saying, ‘He will guide you into all truth… he will take of mine and declare it to you’ (Jn 16:13, 14). The Holy Spirit, like Jesus, adheres to the word of God found in the Scriptures. Boice writes, ‘The Holy Spirit is not given to make our study unnecessary but to make it effective’.

David knew the peace of God as he walked in obedience to God’s commands. When surrounded by enemy forces he wrote, ‘I lay down and slept, I awoke for the Lord sustained me. I will not be afraid of the tens of thousands of people who have set themselves against me all around’ (Ps 3:5-6). Do you know such peace? Do you know the peace that Jesus gives? Or do you get upset when people speak against you or gossip about you? Do you get angry and plot revenge? You know this is not the way. Open your Bible, read and pray and you will find God’s peace flood your soul. You will stop losing sleep as you commit all your ways, all your family, all your friends, and even all your enemies into the Lord’s hands. Remember, the way to get wise counsel is to read God’s word; do this prayerfully and in the power of the Holy Spirit.

**Cling to the truth** Psalm 119:25-32

‘My soul clings to the dust’ (119:25). The ‘Daleth’ stanza of Psalm 119 begins with these weird words, this strange saying. The words are an accurate translation of the Hebrew, but what do they mean? Leupold writes, ‘they are scarcely an English way of speaking’. He points to Luther’s translation, ‘My soul lies prostrate in the dust’. As a translation of dynamic equivalence, the NIV has, ‘I am laid low in the dust’.

The psalmist is using a vivid metaphor for being stricken with grief. When we are depressed or despairing because of grief or sorrow we struggle to get off our bed. The psalmist may not have had a bed, apart from a mat on the floor. He was curled up on the ground with sorrow as he cried out to God, ‘Revive me according to your word’ (119:25). His sorrow may have come from people speaking against him, from slander and persecution as a servant of God (119:23).

In times of grief and sorrow Hebrew people literally put on sackcloth, and sat in dust and ashes. Job suffered the sudden and unexpected loss of all his property and his children. All his children were killed in a storm. Then he was afflicted with painful sores. In his misery he threw dust on his head and sat on an ash heap. What was Job to do? We might compare and contrast Job’s response to affliction with that of the psalmist here in Psalm 119. We do not know the precise reason for the grief and sorrow of the psalmist, but we are told his soul was clinging to the dust and he was wasting away with sorrow.

David went and lay ‘all night on the ground’ (2Sam 12:16). People tried to get him up from the ground but he lay there refusing food for seven days. Why was David in such a state? He had sinned against the Lord and the hand of the Lord was heavy upon his soul. Again, we do not know what brought the psalmist to be ‘cleaving to the dust’ but we can compare and contrast his response to that of this other great servant of the Lord, King David.

Before looking into the words of the psalmist, we also reflect on the acute suffering of our Lord and saviour, Jesus Christ. The prophet spoke most profoundly of Christ’s suffering saying, ‘he was oppressed and afflicted yet he opened not his mouth’ (Isa 53:7). He opened not his mouth against his oppressors, but he did open his mouth to cry to his Father in heaven. In the garden he knelt down and prayed, ‘and being in agony he prayed more earnestly’ (Luke 22:44). We read that an angel appeared to strengthen him (Luke 22:43). How did the Lord strengthen the psalmist? How does the Lord strengthen us in times of grief and sorrow? Let us see what the psalmist tells us. We will look at these verses under two subheadings: ‘cling to the dust’, and ‘cling to your testimonies’.

**1. Cling to the dust**

The psalmist was brought low; he was utterly devastated; he had no strength whatsoever in his soul. It may have been because of sin, because of something he did or said. Later on, in verse 67, he confesses, ‘Before I was afflicted I went astray’. More probably it was because of personal attack and humiliation. Back in verse 23 he said, ‘Princes also sit and speak against me’. He goes on to say, ‘I have declared my ways and you answered me’ (119:26). Whatever it was, he confessed to the Lord, or again more probably, as Leupold writes, it was ‘many difficulties that had befallen him’.

When we face trouble and difficulties it is not always because we have sinned. David’s suffering was because of sin but not Job’s. Both suffered great loss and painful humiliation. The psalmist said the Lord heard his prayer as he cried out from the dust, ‘Revive me according to your word’. It is God’s word that we turn to for counsel when we are brought low (119:24). Job’s friends were of little help. Jesus’ disciples were of little help. It was when the Lord spoke that they were strengthened. Nathan was a prophet speaking God’s word to David.

The psalmist was a man who daily meditated on God’s works and his words. The works of God are works of creation and providence. We see God’s handiwork in the stars, as well as in the mountains and the seas. Some people shake their fist and curse God when they are brought low. Job’s wife told her husband to curse God and die. She suffered the same losses as him, but his response was very different. Even those close to us may not always give us wise counsel. No matter how traumatic our suffering we must never accuse God of leaving us or forsaking us because his promise states otherwise. God never fails to keep his promise. The one thing we can depend upon in times of affliction is the promise of God.

In the creation we see God’s power and glory. God’s power is way beyond our power, the power of any man or the power of any machine. It was a hail storm sent by God that gave Joshua victory over his enemies. Still today, the power of man is often rendered weak and puny by God’s power revealed in the creation. It is God’s power that we need when we are ridiculed or persecuted. It is God’s power that we need when our ‘soul clings to the dust’ with grief and sorrow. The sooner we and others understand this the better it will be for us, and for hundreds and thousands of lost souls in our society, men and women and young people despairing of life, people unable to face the new day or the terrors of the night.

With God-given wisdom the psalmist meditated on the works of the Lord in creation. He also meditated on God’s works of providence. This is what we do when we read God’s word and pray. We have mediated on the life of Job and David, and most importantly on the life of Jesus here today. Moses taught the people to remember the mighty works of the Lord such as crossing the Red Sea, and God’s provision of food and water in the wilderness. The Lord gave them songs to sing to help in remembering these mighty works. The psalmist might have mediated on God’s goodness towards him over many years.

David sang, ‘Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits’ (Ps 103:2). Your soul will be richly blessed when you meditate on God’s works of creation and providence. If you make it your habit to mediate every day, and you keep meditating when troubles and difficulties come upon you, you will be counselled and comforted. Do not be like some who drift along in life, only turning to the Lord or only coming to church when they face some trouble. Such people do not really understand the wonderful works of the Lord. They are trusting in a ritual, or an experience, rather than trusting in God’s word. God’s promises are of no help if you do not know them!

The psalmist refers to his soul again in verse 28 saying, ‘My soul melts from heaviness/sorrow’ (199:28). With another vivid metaphor he speaks of his distress. The fiery trial is melting his soul like butter, leaving him with insufficient strength to get off the ground. He cries to the Lord to strengthen him, strengthen him according to his word (119:28).

The Book of Proverbs is full of wisdom for us all. How different our life and our society would be if this wisdom was known and heeded. What proverb, if it was obeyed, do you think would have the greatest impact? Given the attention James pays to the tongue in James chapter 3, we could reflect upon Proverbs 15:1 where we read, ‘A soft answer turns away wrath but a harsh word stirs up anger’. Our propensity to hurt fellow humans with words is distressing. Revenge is such a powerful force in our sinful hearts- it stems from pride.

We see this at the community or national level, as well as the personal level. We might be surprised at thoughts which come to our mind when we are slandered or humiliated. When people tell lies about us we may be tempted to tell lies about them. Do we sometimes have to stop ourselves taking such a path? The psalmist did. He prayed, ‘Remove from me the way of lying’ or, ‘Keep me from deceitful ways’ (119:29 NIV). For the wicked, lying is often the way of life. When people no longer fear the Lord their souls become hardened by sin. When people depend upon their own power they resort to lying to defend themselves and to get what they want. This is a way that seems right to many because ‘everyone is doing it’, but the word of God says, ‘There is a way that seems right to man, but its end is the way of death’ (Prov 14:12).

God does not condone deceitful ways, even if the world does. How thankful we are that God has given us the commands that we have in the Bible. God graciously teaches us his ways when we look to him and seek his ways. The Lord is near to all who call on him, all who call to him in faith.

**2. Cling to your testimonies**

In the last three verses the thinking of the psalmist turns from fear to faith, from sadness and sorrow to determination and perseverance in the way of truth, from his soul clinging to the dust to his soul clinging to the word of God. This is what happens when we meditate on God’s works and words. Leupold says, ‘In the midst of affliction the psalmist seeks deeper insight into God’s word’.

Not only does the Lord strengthen us during the affliction but he draws us closer to himself. He reveals more of himself to us as we suffer for Christ’s sake. Paul prayed to know more of Christ’s suffering so that he would know Christ better. He did not do things his own way or in his own strength; he learned to do things Christ’s way and in Christ’s strength saying, ‘when I am weak then I am strong’ (2Cor 12:10).

The way of Christ means firstly to choose that way. The psalmist said, ‘I have chosen the way of truth’ (119:30). No one is ever born into doing things Christ’s way. No one ever drifts into doing things Christ’s way. It is not the default way. It is not our natural way. God’s word informs us of this way, and God’s Spirit convicts and convinces us to choose this way. We must actively chose the way of truth.

Secondly, we must cling to the testimonies or truths of God’s word (119:31). ‘In times of acute distress there is nothing to cleave to but to God and his testimonies’ (Boice). ‘On Christ the solid rock I stand, all other ground is sinking sand’ (Edward Mote). God’s word is truth. Christ is truth (Jn 17:17, 14:6). God’s way is the right way, the way that leads to glory rather than shame. It is not a way without pain but is the way without shame. Clinging to the Lord and his word requires determination and the help of the Holy Spirit.

Marriage counsellors tell us that to have a successful marriage we must work at it. Love is there, and love is essential, but love must be nurtured to keep it alive. In a marriage we keep learning about each other as long as we live. Some say that married people become more and more like each other. Our relationship to the Lord is like marriage, although the Lord knows all about us from day one. We keep learning about the Lord but he knows us perfectly. Moreover, becoming like one another is a one way process; we become more like the Lord the longer we live in the covenant relationship he established with us in Jesus Christ. Let us leave all others and cleave to the Lord. ‘Let us abhor what is evil and cling to what is good’ (Rom 12:9).

Thirdly, we are to run the race in the way of God’s commandments (119:32). Choose the way of truth, cling to the testimonies and run according to the commandments. The psalmist knew how easy it is to fall away. We must run with perseverance and not give up, lest we suffer shame and ultimate disaster. There is no place in the race for half-hearted runners. Yet this is what we see with so many who call themselves Christians. They are half-hearted in their worship, joining in public worship only half the time. Some think such a practice is commendable. They only read their Bible once a week, if that. These are simple indicators of a person’s level of commitment to running the race.

The race is one of grim determination, but ultimate joy. We keep our eyes fixed on Jesus and run with perseverance the race set before us (Heb 12:1, 2). Unlike a race at the Olympics, the outcome of this race is assured. A crown is promised to all who run according to the rules and finish the race. The psalmist’s final word is, ‘you shall enlarge my heart’ which means, ‘you have exercised my understanding’ or ‘you have set my heart free’. This is an expression of joy. Freedom means joy. Finishing the race means joy. A heart that is enlarged is a heart bursting with the joy of the Lord. Let us be those who rejoice in the Lord always, rejoice in the salvation of the Lord and the strength he gives to us each and every day.

**Worthless things** Psalm 119:33-40

Being involved in non-formal education can be interesting because one may be teaching someone who is older than you; or from the other perspective, you may be learning from someone who is younger than you. It is tempting for an older person to think they know more than the younger person - as well they might in many things, but not necessarily everything. A wise person admits that they do not know everything. A wise person remains teachable even as they enter old age. We do not know how old the psalmist was when he said, ‘Teach me, O Lord, the way of your statutes’ (119:33), but if you cannot say this whatever your age you are in grave danger. To have a teachable heart is a great blessing, while an unteachable heart is a great curse.

To become a lawyer or doctor you have to study many huge textbooks over many years. And you will keep learning all your working life. As Christians we have just one book to study, and a small book at that. Some people read the Bible once and think they know everything; some think they know it all even without reading it. But the Bible is not like a medical textbook. Who is the author of the Bible? God! Reading the Bible takes us into the infinite mind of God. Moreover, the Bible does not go out of date because God does not change. New knowledge does not affect the Bible because the author knows everything. The Bible tells us about the kingdom of God, which Jesus speaks of as hidden treasure. The Bible is like a gold mine; the more you dig the more you find. Have you found any of the riches of God’s word? Are you looking for more?

Not only do we read the Bible but, like the psalmist, we meditate upon the words, upon the law of God. We do this because these words inform us how we must live. The psalmist speaks of life as a journey, a walk, and a race. The Bible is like the map that guides us on this journey, to the place Christ has prepared for us. We redraw the map to our peril. The Bible is like the rule book telling us how we must run. If anyone does not run according to the rules he does not receive a crown (2Tim 2:5). And so we keep reading the Bible all the days of our life.

**1. Teach me, O Lord**

While most religions, and even some branches of Christianity, despise knowledge, true Christians have always stressed the importance of reading and understanding the Bible. Years ago Sunday Schools were the only schools for children- they were started by churches for teaching children to read so that they could read the Bible. Missionaries conduct literacy classes so people can read the Bible. Sadly, some branches of the Protestant church today have departed from the discipline of reading and understanding the Bible, preferring ‘experience’ or ‘spirit leading’ or sometimes ‘majority opinion’. The Roman Catholic Church strenuously opposed the Bible being translated into the language of the people- they did not want people reading the Bible.

Some Christians are not satisfied with the ‘old stories’ of the Bible; they want something new. But, as Boice aptly puts it, we are to be imitators not innovators when it comes to living the Christian life. God’s revelation, as we have it in the Old and New Testaments, is complete and final. It must not be added to. It may be old but it is what gives us new life when we prayerfully read and, with the help of the Holy Spirit, understand what we read, and believe it in our heart.

The psalmist asked the Lord to teach him, to give him understanding and make him walk in the paths of these commands (119:33-35). As a wise man he knew that God’s way is best. From reading the Scriptures he knew God as his creator and redeemer. He knew that God is holy and just. He knew that God is gracious and compassionate. He knew that God is much wiser and more powerful that any man. Consequently, the way to live is in obedience to God’s holy law.

Yet he could not live in this way without God’s help. He, like you, needed God’s help to set him on this path. It was his choice but not a move he could make in his own strength. He needed the Lord to forgive his sin and establish him in the path of life. Jesus spoke of this as the narrow path, the path which few find (Mat 5:14); but those who seek will find. If you confess your sin you will be forgiven and will be born again as a new creation in Christ Jesus. With a new heart you will delight in God’s word which directs you in this narrow way.

While asking the Lord to teach him, the psalmist determines to observe God’s law with his whole heart (119:34). With a new heart he delights in God’s law (119:35). He is a new man with new desires and delights. He previously delighted in the ways of the world, but left those ways behind- although, like us, was not yet removed from the world and its attractions (119:36-37). The true Christian will follow the Lord whole-heartedly and delight in the Lord. Half-hearted followers lack understanding and do not delight in the Lord. They may be legalists trying to keep God’s law in their own strength. They may find no delight in God’s law because they are looking back to old ways, like the children of Israel in the wilderness. They are the most miserable of people, those who, having tasted that the Lord is good, return to old ways; they are like the dog returning to its vomit (Prov 26:11, 2Peter 2:22).

Although our translation, and most translations of verse 33 have, ‘I shall keep it to the end’, scholars tell us that the last word should be translated ‘reward’. The Hebrew word ‘often indicates the consequence of something or a reward’ writes Harman. ‘What pleases the Lord is regarded by the psalmist as in itself a satisfying reward’. If we think of a race, we have to get to the end to get a reward. In the Christian life there is no reward if you do not get to the end. I say ‘if’ not ‘until’. God blesses us along the way- this is what the psalmist was praying about- but these blessings amount to nothing if we fall by the way or return like the washed pig to the mud (2Peter 2:22).

There is great reward in keeping God’s commands but only at the end of life will this reward be fully realised. Only then will we see Jesus as he is and be like him. John goes on to say, ‘everyone who has this hope in Him [Christ] purifies himself, just as He is pure’ (1John 3:2-3). Are you asking the Lord to make you pure and holy? Are you asking the Lord to teach you how to live? Are you reading your Bible with the help of the Holy Spirit? Do you get up from your knees determined to observe all the commands of Christ? Understand that it is ‘God who works in you both to will and to do for his good pleasure’ (Phil 2: 13).

**2. Turn my eyes away from worthless things**

The wise man remains teachable all the days of his life. The wise person recognises that they can sin even into old age. In fact, aging saints often pray more earnestly to be kept from sinful ways as they face the trials of old age. As saints we are saved from the penalty of sin through the death of Jesus Christ. We are saved from the power of sin through the victory of Jesus in his resurrection and the gift of the Holy Spirit. But we are not yet saved from the presence of sin. That will come with the return of Jesus.

Here in verse 36 and 37 the psalmist speaks about the sin of covetousness or selfish gain. He speaks of looking at worthless worldly things. He is not confessing sin as such but asking the Lord to keep him from such sin- which is really idolatry (Col 3:5). He rarely speaks in these negative terms but it is encouraging to hear such a prayer. No one is immune from sin. No one in the Bible is spoken of as without sin except for Jesus.

The apostle Paul speaks of struggling with covetousness in Romans 7. Few Christians today speak of such a struggle- is it because they have succumbed to this sin? The world portrays covetousness as normal – which it is for sinners. Paul said, “I would not have known covetousness unless the law had said, ‘You shall not covet’” (Rom 7:7). James refers to it as the sin of spiritual adultery, as longing for the things of the world instead of God (Ja 4:4). John similarly warns against the lust of flesh and the lust of the eyes (1John 2:16). As believers we still have eyes that see the things of the world. Like Eve we see things that are pleasing to the eye and seemingly good to the flesh, but to partake of such things means death.

So let us make the psalmist’s prayer our prayer: ‘Lord, turn away my eyes from looking at worthless things’ (119:37). Worldly things are all around us. We pray the Lord to keep us from lusting after these things, to turn our eyes away from the things of the world. The psalmist has taken the first step in calling them ‘worthless things’; or ‘vanity’ in old language. In his allegory, ‘Pilgrim’s Progress’, Bunyan has Christian and Faithful crying, ‘Turn my eyes away from beholding vanity’ as they enter Vanity Fair on their way to the Celestial City. Vain things have no lasting value. They are passing away; the things of this world are passing away. It is the things that are not seen that are eternal (2Cor 4:18).

‘The only way to cure a wrong leaning’ writes Spurgeon, ‘is to have the soul bent in the opposite direction’. He goes on, ‘Holiness of heart is the cure for covetousness. Our hearts must have some object of desire and the only way to keep out worldly gain is to put in its place the testimonies of the Lord’. The Bible does not advocate a monastic life; it teaches a holy life. It does not teach a simple shutting of the eyes but a turning of the eyes. It is a new and enlightened heart, not a blindfold that keeps us from viewing worthless things. The psalmist delighted in God and his word. Having such affections, as the Puritans put it, he did not find pleasure in the things of the world. As a teenager I went to a disco with some friends. It was the first and last disco for me; it gave me no pleasure whatsoever.

Years ago John Stott wrote a booklet called, ‘Your mind matters’. He wrote, ‘Has God renewed our mind through Christ and shall we not be wise and build our house upon this rock?’ Christianity is not a mindless religion. It is not just about emotions and experiences. A true Christian, like the psalmist, will be reading the Bible and asking the Lord for understanding. He will be wanting to know more and more about God so that he can live and worship God acceptably, with reverence and awe (Heb 12:28).

Believers will not turn to their own imagination and worship in a way that pleases self. Worship is about honouring God and pleasing him. It is when we are walking according to the commands of our heavenly Father that he is pleased with us, and we as his children are blessed.

**3. Turn away my reproach**

The psalmist not only faced temptation, the lust of the eyes and of the flesh, he also faced reproach or disgrace as he walked the narrow way. Some scholars think the reproach he suffered was before God because of sin, but most see his reproach as coming from his enemies ‘because of his faithful adherence to God’s law (Boice, Harman and Leupold). The narrow way is not ‘out of this world’. It is, in a sense, in the midst of the broad way, with mockers throwing scorn and vitriol upon those living according to God’s holy law. Such ridicule is not easy to bear- hence the prayer, ‘turn away my reproach’. Another experience I had as a teenager was water skiing on the Darling River at Burke. On the river bank near town was a bunch of people drinking. As I went past they hurled beer cans at me.

In the last thee verses the psalmist prays for the Lord to establish or confirm his word or promises, and turn away his reproach. Are these bold requests? The more we know God, the more we know his love and his power, the more we will ask of him. We can ask the Lord to fulfil his promises, knowing that he never fails to keep his promises. We can ask the Lord to protect and preserve us in the face of opposition because he is all powerful to do so.

The psalmist makes these requests from a sincere heart, from a heart that fears the Lord, and a life of observing God’s judgments or commands because they are good (119:38, 39). Bridges writes of holy fear as having an abhorrence of sin, and a dread of grieving the Holy Spirit of God.

‘Revive me in your way… revive me in your righteousness’ (119:37, 40). Jesus has been in this world and he overcame the world. In his imputed righteousness we will overcome. Let us not be those who look sideways to the worthless things of this world, nor those who look back when the going gets tough. Looking to Jesus we will reach the end.

**A good confession** Psalm 119:41-48

How do you respond when you see a politician or celebrity at some function? How do you respond when you actually meet a VIP? A friend was showing me photos of a visit to Government House to receive a medal from the Governor. Another friend once met the President of India, and he asked her age. She told him that it was not appropriate to ask women their age. Some try to avoid such meetings but sometimes they are unavoidable.

The apostle Paul was brought before King Agrippa as a prisoner, and invited to speak (Acts 26). He was not overcome with awe or fear. He spoke with humility and honesty. He told the king how he was converted from being a violent Jew to a loving servant of Jesus. In making a good confession he urged King Agrippa to also believe in Jesus. Maybe Paul remembered the words of Jesus, ‘You will be brought before kings and rulers for my names sake. But it will turn out for you as an occasion for testimony’ (Luke 21:12-13). Or did he remember the words of the psalmist, ‘I will speak your testimonies before kings’ (Ps 119:46).

In writing to Timothy Paul says, ‘Fight the good fight of the faith’. He recalled Timothy’s good confession before many witnesses. He reminded Timothy of the good confession of Jesus before Pontius Pilate (1Tim 6:12-13). Jesus was not intimidated by kings or rulers. He spoke to them with humility and honesty- although he refused to speak to hypocrites or half-Jews like King Herod. Are you ready to witness the good confession before mates, bosses or kings? Even if men have power over you, remember there is a King above all earthly kings. An earthly king can only kill the body; the King of kings is able to destroy both body and soul in hell (Mat 10:28).

The sixth or ‘*waw*’ part of Psalm 119 has a particular focus on speaking, found in the words ‘answer’, ‘mouth’ and ‘speak’. All lines in this section begin with the Hebrew letter ‘*waw*’ which is mostly found as the conjunction ‘and’. So almost every line begins with ‘and’. Our first subheading will be, ‘steadfast love’, our second, ‘respond to mockers’, our third, ‘speak before kings, and finally, ‘shame avoided’.

**1. Steadfast love**

The psalmist begins with a word of prayer, as in the previous section: ‘Teach me, O Lord, the way of your statutes’ (119:33). Here his prayer is, ‘Let your steadfast love come also to me, O Lord’ and further, ‘let your salvation come according to your promise’ (119:41 ESV). This man wanted to know more about God’s love for him. God cannot love us anymore that he does because he loves with perfect love. It is just that we do not always see or understand his love, his steadfast love, his unfailing love, his loving-kindness. These are all translations of the Hebrew word ‘*chesed*’.

In verse 41 we note the word ‘*chesed*’ or steadfast love for the first time in this psalm- although it is very common in the Psalms. It is found 240 times in the OT, especially in the Psalms. Vine writes in his dictionary of OT and NT words, ‘This term is one of the most important in the vocabulary of OT theology and ethics. The entire history of Yahweh’s covenant relationship with Israel can be summarised in terms of *hesed*’. God sets his love upon and loves us with covenant love.

God love does not wax and wane like human love. God never ‘falls out of love’ with us. Sadly, some people ‘fall out of love’ with God; they do this when they ‘fall in love’ with other things, things of this world. Apart from other human beings, the things of this world cannot return our love- despite what pet lovers like to think. And while fellow human beings

may stop loving us, God never does because his love is steadfast love. God’s love is not dependant on our beauty or our behaviour. He loved us while we were still sinners (Rom 5:8). He loves us even when we disobey his commands- though in love he will discipline us.

How could the psalmist know more of God’s love- by looking into his word! How can we know more of God’s love- by looking into his word! We see God’s love in Jesus Christ. ‘God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son’ (Jn 3:16, 1Jn 3:16). God so loved you who believe that he gave his only begotten Son to take the penalty for your sin and die on the cross. If that is not the greatest love, what is? Yet so many reject this love, the love that saves from sin and death, the love that gives new life. It was a matter of grief to the psalmist that people rejected God’s love and disobeyed his law, as it is a matter of grief to us. God has given us the task of making his great love known to those around us, whether they accept the gospel of grace or not.

Knowing the grace of God in salvation, the psalmist was strengthened in his faith and resolved to tell others of the love of God. With grace and courage from God he would answer those who taunted him, and would even be bold to speak before kings (119:42,46). Not only did God’s word encourage and strengthen him, it gave him words to say when he was in such situations. Even the Son of God, when answering Satan’s taunts and temptations, referred the arch-adversary to what is written (Luke 4:4, 8). Can we not do the same? We can if we know what is written and know it to be the inspired and infallible word of Almighty God.

**2. Respond to mockers**

The psalmist often speaks of afflictions and the reproach of certain people- in verse 23 he referred to princes speaking against him. In such situations he found counsel in the word of God. He did not meet fire with fire, as we say. Instead he met fire with water. ‘A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger’ (Prov 15:1). Sometimes we can suffer in silence, but when the name of Jesus is involved we should give an answer. As already mentioned, Jesus was silent before Herod the heretic, but gave a good confession before Pilate the pagan.

The psalmist wanted to have an answer for the person who taunted him because of his faith (119:42). He wanted wisdom from God. He wanted God to put words into his mouth- stated in the negative (119:43). He prayed like this because he himself delighted in God’s word- his hope was in God’s word. He read that the Lord was with him to strengthen him in such times. We read this even more clearly in the gospels where Jesus told his disciples not to worry about what they would say when brought before rulers, either religious or secular, because ‘the Holy Spirit will teach you in that very hour what you ought to say’ (Luke 12:12). The Holy Spirit will remind you what is written in the Bible.

Clever men may be able to debunk human reasoning but they face difficulty debunking words of Scripture. As Gamaliel pointed out to the court of the Jews, they will find themselves fighting against God (Acts 5:39). An adulterer or adulteress hates to hear the words of Malachi 2:16: ‘the Lord God of Israel says that he hates divorce’. Homosexuals hate 1Corinthians 6:9-10: ‘Neither …homosexuals nor sodomites … will inherit the kingdom of God’ - yes, thieves and drunkards are included in this exclusion. Moreover, exclusion from the kingdom does not apply to those who repent and are justified, who are washed in the blood of Jesus and are sanctified (1Cor 6:11). Those who abort babies hate to hear the commandment, ‘You shall not murder’.

The answer to those who ridicule Christians for daring to speak against sin can be brief but powerful when we depend upon God and his word. It is of course, important that we be ‘above reproach’ when we speak to such adversaries. Like the psalmist, we must be walking at liberty, or in a wide place, and not be hiding sin or carrying guilt ourselves (119:45). We do not pretend to be perfect but confess that we are sinners saved by grace. Again, relying on what is written in God’s unchanging word allows us to be humble yet resolute in answering our critics.

**3. Speak before kings**

October 31 is celebrated as Reformation day by many Protestant churches; it is a holiday in some parts of Germany. More commonly the celebration is transferred to the nearest Lord’s Day. It was on October 31, 1517 that Martin Luther sparked the Reformation by nailing his 95 Theses to the door of the Wittenberg church. He was later summoned to appear before the emperor Charles V and leaders of the church at the Diet of Worms. Luther appeared but refused to recant on what he had written. He concluded saying, ‘Here I stand. I can do no other. May God help me. Amen’. His very life was in jeopardy as he stood before such powerful men.

In this way Martin Luther did exactly what the psalmist says here in verse 46: ‘I will speak of your testimonies also before kings’. He was not the first of God’s servants to speak before kings. We have mentioned the apostle Paul and our Lord Jesus himself. We could have referred to Moses appearing before Pharaoh, prophets like Elijah and Jeremiah. In Reformation times there was also John Knox in Scotland.

Whether or not the psalmist gave a good confession before kings we do not know, but it was his resolve to do so, with God’s help. Can we not resolve to do the same? Worldly people are prone to exalt one another -and pull one another down. Worldly people are prone to flattery, to lies, and to lording it over others. Some think of themselves as above the law, and even as gods. Yet all men are but dust, and will return to the dust. May the Lord give us eyes to see all men, great and small, as he sees them, which is as lost sinners in need of salvation? May we be ready to speak before kings telling them of the true and living God, and his holy word?

**4. Shame avoided**

The psalmist was anxious to avoid shame (119:46). When we tell the gospel to people around us, including rulers or kings, we will rejoice and praise the Lord. It is when we fail to do so that we feel guilt and shame. We will always think we should have said more, or used different words, but still we find joy in making the name of Jesus known. When we fail to speak up we ask ourselves, why? Personalities and spiritual gifts can be considered, but what does the psalmist consider? He concludes saying he will delight in God’s commandments ‘which I love’, and, ‘I will lift up my hands towards your commandments’, and, ‘I will meditate on your statutes’ (119:47, 48).

The psalmist’s heart was filled with joy and praise as he read and meditated on God’s word. He did not enter the presence of a king or ruler ‘cold’ as it were. He was hot because he was on fire for the Lord. Jeremiah was like the psalmist when he said, ‘His [God’s] word is in my heart like a burning fire, shut up in my bones’ (Jer 20:9). Peter and John were like the psalmist when they said, ‘We cannot but speak the things we have seen and heard’ (Acts 4:20). The apostle Paul was like the psalmist when he said, ‘Woe is me if I do not preach the gospel’ (1Cor 9:16).

When we are eagerly reading our Bible every day, meditating on the words and learning the words, we cannot but be speaking out these life-saving truths. May the Lord increase our love for him, as well as our love for the lost who need to hear these words that they might live and not die.

**Remember** Psalm 119:49-56

Dementia is a distressing illness. It is distressing to the one afflicted as they struggle to remember words, objects, events and people. It is distressing to friends and family, especially when the sufferer forgets the name and even the identity of a loved one. The loved one meets this person that they know so well, maybe as a spouse, a mother or father, but this person no longer remembers them; they are like a complete stranger. Some understand the nature of this disease but others fail to understand and are deeply hurt.

How does the Lord feel when his own do not remember him? Every human being is made in the image of God and as such belongs to God. The Lord God demands that every human being acknowledge him as their creator. Many deny this truth. They deny that God exists, or ignorantly refuse to acknowledge him. One day, of course, every person will acknowledge God. ‘All ends of the world will remember and turn to the Lord, and all the families of the nations will worship before you’ (Ps 22:27). One day every knee will bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father (Phil 2:10, 11).

It is even more distressing when God’s chosen people, his own children, forget and turn their backs on God. Harman says that in this psalm, ‘the wicked are not Gentiles but those within Israel who, though knowing the law, have wilfully chosen to reject its claims’. Imagine a young person suffering dementia and failing to recognise his or her parent. How distressing this would be for the parents. How distressing it is when a child refuses to speak to his or her parents, or to have any contact with them. Will God not feel the same when we forget him or fail to acknowledge him?

God’s children, in effect, adopt another father when they start worshipping idols. Idols can be whatever turns us away from God; covetousness is idolatry (Col 3:5). In our ‘busyness’ we have no time to communicate with God. We become a stranger to the One who loves us so dearly that he gave his only begotten Son to die for us. We can forget how the Lord saved us from sin and death. Israel failed to remember the Lord just months after he saved them from Egypt (Ps 78:42, 106:7). They turned to idols. Failing to trust in God and his word, they were overcome with fear.

‘Jesus came to his own but his own received him not’ (Jn 1:11). When God sent his Son into this world his chosen people, the Jews, did not receive him. They did not acknowledge Jesus as the Son of God. This was distressing to Jesus. At one point he wept over Jerusalem saying, ‘If you had known, even you, especially in this your day, the things that make for your peace!’ (Luke 19:41). Thankfully the psalmist was a man who remembered the Lord. What about you? Do you remember the Lord?

In the seventh or ‘zayin’ section of Psalm 119 a key word is ‘remember’, probably because it begins with the Hebrew letter ‘zayin’; ‘remember’ is ‘*zakar*’ in Hebrew. Another key word in this section is ‘comfort’. ‘Law’ and its synonyms is, of course, the main word in the section, as in the whole Psalm, occurring in almost every verse. So in brief we have the psalmist finding comfort through remembering the word of the Lord. His first point is actually a prayer asking the Lord to remember his own word, the second is a declaration that he the psalmist has remembered God’s word, and the third we will call, ‘I remember in the night’.

**1. Remember Lord**

The Lord threatened to destroy Israel when they made a golden calf to worship. But Moses pleaded with the Lord saying, ‘Remember Abraham, Isaac and Israel’ and the covenant he made with them. The psalmist Asaph, also pleaded, ‘Remember your congregation which you purchased of old’ (Ps 74:2). Here in Psalm 119 the psalmist is not asking the Lord to remember his people as such but to remember his word to his servant (119:49). The word of the Lord is precious to him. The Lord’s word has given him hope (119:49). The Lord’s word has given him life; the Lord’s word has given him comfort (119:50). The Lord’s word was, as he famously puts it in verse 105, ‘A lamp to my feet and a light to my path’.

While we see God’s power and majesty in the works of creation, it is only when God speaks, only when we have his written word that we have hope and comfort, and indeed, life. Before knowing God’s word we walked in darkness. We walked without hope. Lots of people continue to walk without hope. They do so because they walk without God. Writing to believing Gentiles, Paul says that before they believed in Jesus they were ‘strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in this world’ (Eph 2:12).

The psalmist is writing before the coming of Christ; he is referring to the covenants of promise. God is a covenant-making and a covenant- keeping God. This is the starting point of any relationship we have with God. God has made himself known; in the past he did this through the prophets (Heb 1:2). God made a covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. On Mt Sinai he made a covenant through Moses: ‘I will be your God and you will be my people’. To Joshua he promised, ‘I will never you or forsake you’ (Josh 1:5). After the days of the psalmist, and in the last days in which we live, God spoke through his Son Jesus Christ.

God’s promises have not changed; many have been fulfilled in Jesus but many remain active. The promise made to Joshua remains, as seen in Hebrews 13:5. You may have had cause to remember this promise during a difficult time in your life. Have you ever doubted that the Lord is with you? Have you ever doubted the goodness of God, or his power to deliver during a period of darkness in your life- a time of sickness, of separation from a loved one, of opposition or persecution as a believer? Did you remember this promise to Joshua? Did you recall Romans 8:39, or Romans 8:28: ‘we know that all things work together for good to those who love God and are called according to his purpose’.

This is what the psalmist is talking about here in Psalm 119. He was being ridiculed for his faith by proud people who had turned away from God’s law. They were mocking him for clinging to God and his ancient laws (119:52, 53). So often we hear people telling us that science has shown the Bible to be false so forget it, or people telling us to get with the times. They fail to see that modernity is leading so many to despair. People were mocking this man for clinging to God when he was in trouble. Like Job’s wife they were telling him, ‘Curse God and die’. These people may have been proud and rich- the two things are often found together. ‘Forget God and enjoy the things of the world’ they said. In Psalm 73 Asaph writes of being envious of the wicked in their prosperity until- until he went into the house of God. In the house of God he would have heard God’s word being read, and so he understood the end of the wicked.

We, like the psalmist, can ask God to remember his promises- given that we know his promises. We can do so understanding that God is faithful and never makes a promise he cannot or will not keep. What a great comfort it is to know this in times of affliction (119:50). Not just knowing God’s promises but knowing the God who makes the promises. This is vital if we are to really find comfort. It is no use reciting God’s word like some mantra or magic.

**2. I remember**

We have noted the importance of remembering God’s promises ourselves. We cannot ask God to remember his promises if we don’t remember them. God has spoken and he expects us to listen and remember his word, just as he expects us to remember his works. The children of Israel were continually urged to remember the works of the Lord. They were rebuked for forgetting his works, even while still in the wilderness (Ps 106:13). Moses warned them against ‘forgetting the Lord who brought you out of Egypt, out of the house of bondage’ (Deut 6:12). Do you remember being delivered from bondage to sin and death?

We remember the Lord by remembering his works and his words. How do we do this? By reading the Bible and meditating on what we read. We cannot remember if we don’t know in the first place! I often counsel students doing exams saying, ‘Read your text book and ask the Lord to help you remember it in the exam’. If you have not read anything how can you ask the Lord to help you remember and pass the exam?

‘Your statutes have been my songs in the house of my pilgrimage/ sojourning’ (119:54); this house may be the house of the Lord or it may be the world. In verse 19 he spoke of being a sojourner or stranger on the earth meaning, ‘this world is not my home I’m just a passing through’. But while in this world we have God’s word to comfort us- in heaven we will have God’s presence and will not have to suffer ridicule from the wicked. Moreover, we will be singing songs of praise to the Lord day and night in heaven (Rev 4, 5).

God delights in songs being sung to his glory, songs recalling his deeds, his love and his grace. Songs help us remember the works of the Lord and his words. This is what the Book of Psalms is, songs to remember the Lord and his works. Poems or songs are a huge aid to memory. There is a children’s song that lists all sixty-six books of the Bible; it was a great help to our granddaughter in learning all these books. When dementia sufferers forget most things they might still remember the words of a song firmly planted in their memory in

their youth. You, like me, may have witnessed eyes light up when you sing the words of Psalm 23 to a suffering saint.

Songs are powerful to comfort and strengthen us in times of affliction- as the ancients knew. They can even disarm our enemy. When Paul and Silas were in prison they burst forth in song, and that at midnight! (Acts 16:25). They found comfort in singing psalms. Moreover, the other prisoners were listening; hardened criminals, men who would have spat in their faces, were listening and were transformed. Our worship service includes the singing of praises to God. We do this both to glorify God, and to comfort and strengthen our own hearts. That is why we sing words that we can understand. It is a shame that in so many churches today so few are actually worshipping God. They are watching a performance; they are spectators rather than participants. And even the words they do sing often have no depth of understanding of our great God.

The psalmist speaks of indignation or righteous anger at the wicked for forsaking God’s law (119:53). Through remembering God’s word he has changed from fearing the taunts of the wicked to being indignant at their ignorance and their failure to keep God’s law. With boldness he stands against the wicked and is ready to rebuke them in the name of the Lord. It is when we forget God’s law that we become vulnerable to the taunts of the wicked and to the fiery darts of the evil one. The armour of God includes truth as your belt, the shield of faith, and the sword of the Spirit which is the word of God (Eph 6:16).

**3. I remember in the night**

Someone once said, ‘Don’t doubt in the darkness what God has revealed in the light’. He was probably talking about spiritual darkness, but darkness is darkness. Physical darkness is a time when the spiritually dark come to life as it were. Physical darkness, as in the night, is also a time that some dread- and not just children. To be able to sleep in peace is a blessing many do not enjoy because they have not learnt to remember the name of the Lord in the night (119:55). In other psalms we also find the writer remembering the Lord in the night (42:8, 77:6, 92:1-3). What do you do if you cannot sleep? Do you get up and read your Bible? Do you meditate on God’s word while on your bed? Maybe you sing psalms in your head. Singing psalms or spiritual songs is the best way to comfort children who are troubled by the darkness.

The psalmist concludes, ‘This has become mine’ (119:56). He has made God’s word his own. It is, as we said at the beginning, a lamp to his feet and a light to his path. He will not fear the night or the day because God’s word is written on his heart to counsel and comfort him at all times.

**The Lord is my portion** Psalm 119:57-64

A book I read many years ago was, ‘The pursuit of holiness’ by Jerry Bridges. Last week in the book shop I saw another book by this man called, ‘The practice of godliness’. As I flicked through this book I noticed the heading of one chapter was from Psalm 119:10; the chapter title was, ‘Seeking a deeper devotion’. I also noticed on the flap that Jerry Bridges died this year, 2016. What I have read so far in this book has been encouraging and challenging. He begins talking about the fear of God, saying this attitude must balance the love of God as we practice devotion to God. Over-emphasis on the love of God leads to an imbalance and a failure to humble ourselves before Almighty God.

The apostle Paul writes of believers being ‘in Christ’ (2Cor 5:17). He was a man who sought to know Christ (Phil 3:10), to know him more all the days of his life. In doing so he writes, ‘Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners of whom I am chief. However, for this reason I obtained mercy’ (1Tim 1:15-16). The psalmist similarly confessed his sin and cried to the Lord for mercy. God’s mercy or grace was fully revealed at Calvary. Jerry Bridges writes, ‘The love of God has no meaning apart from Calvary. And Calvary has no meaning apart from the holy and just wrath of God’.

Looking at Psalm 119 we are learning so much about devotion to God, devotion based on God’s revelation in the creation and especially in his word. The psalmist, like the apostle Paul, wanted to know the Lord. He wanted to be ‘in Christ’ to use Paul’s words. Neither the psalmist nor Paul were men whose religion was kept for Sundays. They were not ‘Sunday morning’ Christians as we say- and certainly not just ‘Christmas and Easter’ Christians. They were men devoted to God with their whole being and walking in the ways of the Lord 24/7. The psalmist delighted in God’s word. He said, ‘This has become mine’ (119:56).

In the eighth or ‘*Heth*’ section of Psalm 119 we find the unusual but interesting expression, ‘You are my portion, O Lord’ (119:57). We could translate, ‘You are all I want O Lord’. But the word ‘portion’ is found in many other places, and often refers to an inheritance. ‘O Lord, you are the portion of my inheritance and my cup’ (Ps 16:5). ‘God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever’ (Ps 73:26). ‘You [Lord] are my refuge, my portion in the land of the living’ (Ps 142:5).

The Lord told the Levites in particular that he was their portion and their inheritance (Numb 18:20). In Canaan all the tribes were allocated an area or portion of land, except for the tribe of Levi, the tribe of priests. The Lord gave them the tithes of the people because they had no portion of land (Deut 14:29). The psalmist may well have been a Levite. But it is also true that every child of God should regard the Lord as his portion. All believers should be saying, ‘You are all I want, O Lord’ as they turn away from the things of the world. Jesus said, ‘Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness’ (Mat 6:33). This is what the psalmist is doing. Is this what you are doing? Charles Bridges, who lived almost 150 years before Jerry Bridges wrote, ‘Portion implies not a source of ordinary pleasure but rest and satisfaction such as leaves nothing else to be desired’.

**1. Commitment**

The psalmist knew about having the Lord as his portion because he read about it in God’s word. He read God’s word and made a commitment to obey God’s word. ‘I have said that I would keep your words’ (119:57). The Lord promised the Levites of old that he would be their portion or inheritance. They did not complain about not getting any land as their inheritance; they accepted the word of the Lord through Moses. The psalmist likewise accepted God’s promise and made the Lord his portion. Have you made the Lord your portion?

He goes on, ‘I entreat your favour with all my heart’ (119:58 ESV). Having an inheritance does not mean we sit back and wait for this to fall into our lap. Some do this with their earthly inheritance. They sit around waiting to become rich through their inheritance, and when they get their inheritance they quickly lose it- like the prodigal son. Bill Gates says his children will not get a huge inheritance because he wants them to work like everyone else- it will be interesting to see what happens. Having the Lord as his portion or inheritance led the psalmist to entreat the Lord for his favour and asking the Lord to be gracious towards him, according to his word (119:58).

This inheritance is, of course, all of grace, but grace does not rule out active devotion and service. Faith without works is dead. By grace through faith we, as sinners, are brought into a relationship with God. We are made alive in Christ and must demonstrate signs of life, even as we live in this world. We first of all seek the Lord; we seek to know more of God’s infinite love. Jerry Bridges writes, ‘One of the wonderful things about God is that He is infinite in all of His glorious attributes, so never in our desire for him will we exhaust the revelation of His person to us’.

As we grow in our knowledge of God, so we will grow in our love for him. Is this your experience? Are you earnestly seeking God’s favour, or literally ‘God’s face’? Are you seeking to comprehend more of the love of Christ, its width and length, it depth and its height? (Eph 3:19). To do so you must humbly bow the knee to the Father, listen to his word, and be led by the Holy Spirit all day every day.

**2. Consider my ways**

‘I thought about my ways and turned my feet to your testimonies’ (119:59). It is amazing how some people never stop to consider their ways. They keep busy in their work, some doing two jobs, and then they are busy spending their money the rest of the time. The only time they stop to consider their ways is when they get sick, or even when on their death bed. As much as we hate being sick, this may be the only time we stop to consider our ways and turn to the Lord. Isaiah said, ‘The Lord will send leanness among his fat ones; and under his glory he will kindle a burning’ (Isa 10:16). Hezekiah was sick and near death when he cried to the Lord. The wise person makes time in his busy life to stop and consider his ways. If you take time each day to read your Bible and pray you will be less likely to take wrong turns in your life.

The psalmist considered his ways and turned his feet to following the ways of the Lord (119:59). To turn means to repent; he must have fallen into sin or been going astray in some way. It was probably God’s word that brought him to his senses, as with Asaph in Psalm 73. Asaph was envious of the wicked in their prosperity- covetousness is a sin. Turning ones feet involves turning of the mind- just as turning of the mind must lead to turning of the feet.

Years ago a young man told me he wanted to go to church and that he intended to go to church. Just the other day I was pleased to hear he was actually going to church. His feet were responding to his thoughts such that he was present in church. I wonder how many others have similarly good intentions but fail to get their feet moving. Many intend to spend more time in prayer each day but have trouble bending their knees. In all this we need God’s help- and we will get his help when we ask with our ‘whole heart’ (119:58).

‘I made haste and did not delay’ (119:60). We mentioned people on their death bed being compelled to consider their ways. It is foolish, but nevertheless common, for people to say they will think about religion when they old. While they are young they want to have a good time. Yet in many parts of the world disease and disaster claim many young lives. Our society thinks children and young people should not die, but they do. The wise person will not delay in considering their ways, and turning to the Lord that they might live. Do not be like some in their thinking about marriage: they will get around to it one day but before they know it they are grandparents. Procrastination is a curse- a deadly curse when it comes to believing in Jesus.

The prodigal son did not stop to consider his ways until, as a Jew, he ended up feeding pigs. Having a good time quickly came to an end. He was starving, thinking he would die in that place, but he came to himself and considered his ways. He said, ‘I will arise and go to my father’ (Luke 15:18). And what did he do? Did he procrastinate? Did he fear what his father might do? No! ‘He arose and came to his father’; he did not delay. He set off to confess his sins and accept the will of his father. The main point of this parable is the love and forgiveness of the father, but it includes this truth of considering your ways and making haste to turn around, just as the psalmist said.

By contrast we look at Lot and his wife. Lot was slow to escape the judgment of Sodom. He was told to arise, take his wife and daughters and escape, but he lingered (Gen 19:15-16). In God’s mercy, angels of the Lord brought him out of the city of sin. Tragically, Lot’s wife looked back and became a pillar of salt. Her feet were not fully turned towards escaping the city. Following the Lord must be with your whole heart. There must be no looking back. And again, there must be no delay. ‘Follow me’ said Jesus, and Matthew arose and followed Jesus (Mat 9:9). He didn’t say, ‘next time’. He didn’t say, ‘wait till I say goodbye to my family’ or, ‘wait till I sort out my finances’. He immediately left everything and followed Jesus.

Although the ‘cords of the wicked ensnare me’ the psalmist was not distracted (119:61 ESV). He pressed on in the strength of the Lord. Those who say, ‘let me say goodbye to my family’ face the danger of changing their mind. In ‘Pilgrim’s Progress’, Christian set off without his family. His neighbours came out to mock him and threaten him. The psalmist had men mocking and threatening him. It seems they even bound him with ropes. ‘Binding with ropes is not just literal oppression but any form of scheming which restricts or impedes’ (Harman). Many who turn to the Lord face opposition and threats from family and friends. If they are the only person in their family or community to believe in Jesus they may be ostracised and even beaten. In the strength of the Lord they, like the psalmist, press on, saying to God, ‘I have not forgotten your law’.

**3. Companion Christians**

When a person turns to the Lord from within a hostile community they need the fellowship of other believers. When anyone turns to the Lord they need a fellowship of other Christians. Satan’s attacks are not limited to openly hostile or violent people. When, by grace through faith, we are brought into a covenant relationship with God, we are at the same time brought into the fellowship of believers (1Jn 1:6-7). To hate your brother or deny this fellowship of believers is to turn from the light of the Lord. The Bible tells us not to forsake the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but to encourage one another all the more as we see the Day of the Lord approaching (Heb 10:25). The fellowship or church is God’s provision for our mutual encouragement, as well as His glory.

The psalmist turned to the Lord without delay. He refused to be distracted by the wicked. He sought the fellowship of believers. He did all this wholeheartedly. He was not just giving lip-service to the laws of God. He was not a moralist; nor was he a legalist. He was a man who loved the word of the Lord because he knew and loved the Lord. He was saved by the mercy of God. He was filled with the fullness of God (Eph 3:19). He looked to the Lord day and night. Even at midnight he would rise up to give thanks to the Lord- like Paul and Silas in the Philippian prison. He was no ‘Sunday morning’ Christian; he was an all-day-every-day Christian.

**4. Creation witnesses the mercy of God**

In closing, the psalmist says, ‘The earth, O Lord, is full of your steadfast love’ (119:64 ESV). After the Flood, God made a covenant with all living creatures (Gen 9:16). All men and women are made in the image of God. But we sinned and brought creation down with us. We are born dead; born lost and without hope. As sinners we lack wisdom to rule over the creation (Prov 12:10). That is why we see the mess and confusion today. In the end, God’s way is the only way to live in this world.

God’s power and majesty are on show in the creation. And ‘God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in him will not perish but have everlasting life’. This is what God’s word tells us. This is why we love God’s word. This is why the psalmist concludes, ‘Teach me your statutes’ O Lord.

**God is good and does good** Psalm 119:65-72

Words of Otho Wermullerus reminded me of my days growing up on the farm. His writes of clipping the wings of hens to stop them flying out of the pen. This is what we did- just one wing so they could not fly straight. If their wings were not clipped they would escape the safety of the pen and be taken by a fox. We speak of clipping a person’s wings, often a young person, when we deprive them of money or resources to party with their friends. Jonah had his wings clipped as he tried to run away from the Lord. The prodigal son did not have his wings clipped but no doubt regretted that he was allowed to run off and go astray as he did. The psalmist says, ‘It is good for me that I was afflicted’ (Ps 119:71). This man Otho comments, ‘As prosperity blinds the eyes of men, even so does adversity open them’. Leupold writes, ‘God’s goodness, manifested in the affliction he permits his servant to suffer, drives him closer to the Word’.

What is this affliction the psalmist refers to? It refers to any sort of difficulty or trouble we experience as we sojourn on this earth. It may be loss of health, loss of property, or loss of persons. Job faced all of these afflictions at the same time. He did not like being afflicted; no one likes being afflicted, but with hindsight we might see how the affliction kept us from a dangerous path. With divinely-given insight we will see how the Lord not only saved us from a dangerous path but turned the affliction into a blessing. It is always a blessing when we are drawn closer to the Lord, and this is what affliction or suffering often does. In the NT, the writer to the Hebrews reminds us that the Lord’s chastening or discipline, though painful at the time, nevertheless yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness and leads to holiness (Heb 12:11).

Not all suffering or affliction is the Lord chastening us. Not all affliction is because of specific sin. In this fallen, sinful world, it is common for human beings to suffer. It is by God’s goodness that we do not suffer more than we do. Some affliction, like that of Job, has a cosmic cause; it results from Satan challenging God. Some affliction, like that of the man born blind in John 9, is for the glory of God. Affliction is part of living as sinners in this fallen world; there will be no affliction in heaven. The wonderful truth taught in this psalm, and all through the Bible, is that God is able to bring good out of evil. This is seen supremely in the cross and resurrection of Jesus our Lord. God is good and does good, as our title, taken from verse 68, declares.

‘Good’ is the key word of this ninth or ‘*teth*’ stanza of Psalm 119. Every line in this stanza begins with the Hebrew letter ‘*teth’*, the letter that begins the Hebrew word ‘*tov*’ meaning ‘good’. This stanza begins with the psalmist declaring that the Lord had dealt ‘good’ or ‘well’ with his servant. This is because, as we have in our first point, ‘God is good’. Secondly, we note the prayer to be taught ‘good judgment’, and our third point is, ‘good to be afflicted’.

**1. Good God**

God has many attributes, some of which are listed in the fourth question of the Catechism. In this list we find the word ‘goodness’. Goodness is of the very nature of the Lord God, as He himself declared to Moses on the mountain (Exod 34:6). We use the word ‘good’ in a relative sense meaning ‘not bad’. People think they are good if they don’t murder or steal. With the Lord however, the word has an absolute sense. God is the very definition of good. Because God is good all that he does is good. So when God created everything it was all ‘good’ or ‘very good’ (Gen 1:9, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31).

When the rich young ruler called Jesus, ‘Good teacher’, Jesus responded, ‘Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone’ (Mat 19:17). In this sense we should not think of ourselves as good, or be calling anyone good- as we do not call rabbis or church leaders ‘father’ because, ‘One is your Father who is in heaven’ (Mat 23:9). Jesus went on, ‘If you want to enter life, keep the commandments’. This is exactly what the psalmist said back in verse 50- ‘your word has given me life’. God is good; his commandments are good and if we want to enjoy life we must obey his commandments.

We must never think that God is out to harm us. Those who worship idols think like this. Since goodness is not a characteristic of man, and they make their gods like men; as man-made gods, their gods are without goodness. They are tricky, vindictive gods that have to be appeased with sacrifices and offerings. The God of heaven will judge sinners with absolute justice, and unless we see and believe God’s goodness and grace in the cross of Jesus we will be condemned. Jesus ‘propitiated’ the wrath of God in his once-for-all sacrifice.

God is good and acts according to his good and wise word (119:65). We can actually hold God to his word, as the psalmist did in verse 49: ‘Remember your word, O Lord’. This is why the psalmist pledged to learn God’s word and meditate upon God’s words. This is why he prays, ‘Teach me your statutes’ (119:64, 68). God’s word brings light to our soul. This light drives out the darkness of fear and evil. When the Lord is my shepherd I will fear no evil (Ps 23:4). When the good God who is all-powerful and all-loving is watching over you, you have nothing to fear in the day or the night, in the present or in the future, in this world or the next. If you do not believe that God is good and that he sent his only begotten Son into this world to die in your place, then you have every reason to fear evil at every turn and especially in death.

**2. Good judgment**

The psalmist admits his need for knowledge and wisdom, as we all must do. We are all born ignorant. Whatever we know we have learnt. The trouble with living in a fallen, imperfect world is that much of what we learn is either false or harmful. Technological advances are beneficial, but often harmful also. Nuclear fission can produce lots of electricity- it can also be used to make a devastating bomb. The internet has improved communications greatly - it has also brought us harm, with some 30% of internet traffic being pornography. Our knowledge is increasing but what sort of knowledge? Is it knowledge that helps us to live in the way God our maker intended? What about the wisdom we need to use this knowledge? What wisdom and knowledge is involved in the push for euthanasia? The ungodly think that killing old people will progress our society!

The psalmist has made the first step towards life as a servant of the Lord; he is teachable (119:33, 64, 68). He does not claim to know everything, as many people do, even at a young age- or especially at a young age! As some wise person once said, ‘Man’s greatest need is to know what is his greatest need’. The psalmist knew his greatest need when he prayed, ‘Teach me good judgment and knowledge’ (119:66). King Solomon knew his greatest need when he asked the Lord for wisdom (1Kings 3:9). ‘Good judgment’ is literally ‘good taste’; ‘not in our sense of artistic judgment, but of spiritual discrimination’ (Kidner). The writer to the Hebrews speaks about ‘solid food’ being taken by those who are mature, ‘who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil’ (Heb 5:14). Knowledge must be tested. It must be used with wisdom and discernment. Where do we get such wisdom and discernment? From God’s word (119:66). No wonder the psalmist ends up saying that God’s law is better than banks of silver or gold (119:72).

With ‘good judgment’ learned from studying God’s word, the psalmist can see through the lying words and ways of the proud (119:69). Words are powerful weapons, used most cleverly by Satan and his agents. The lie, in all its variations, is the most powerful of all; the blatant lie, the twisting of the truth, the deception and the suggestion. Did you hear about the new word in the dictionary- ‘post-truth’? This word conveys the idea that truth is no longer objective fact but can be subjective; it can be what you feel to be true. Is this idea really new? Has not this idea of truth been around since the Fall? It is what the Bible calls a lie! Fallen and proud men do not like the word ‘lie’ because it sounds like sin. So let’s call it post-truth! Proud men and women do not like God’s word because it speaks of sin, but the psalmist delighted in God’s word and in the truth (119:70).

He refers to proud men who love telling lies as men having hearts ‘as fat as grease’ (119:70). What a vivid phrase! The NIV translates as, ‘callous and unfeeling’ hearts, which is rather dull, although it is what is meant. We imagine a fat person who is unresponsive to being poked and prodded. Isaiah was told to ‘make the heart of this people dull and their ears heavy… lest they understand with their heart and return and be healed’ (Isa 6:10). Do you know someone who habitually tells lies? It is tragic, especially when it is a young person. We need to be discerning in this matter; we need to correct the young, and ourselves, when tempted to speak anything but the truth.

**3. Good to be afflicted**

In a stanza with the key word ‘good’ it seems strange that the other key word is ‘affliction’. But this is what we find; we find the psalmist not rejoicing in affliction but recognising affliction as good for his soul. Firstly, he says that before he was afflicted he went astray (119:67). Does this mean he was caught up in sin? Not necessarily, although we must recognise covetousness as sin, the sin of idolatry (Col 3:5). When Asaph envied the wicked in their prosperity he was coveting. We can be involved in family, in study, in sport, in a hobby or a holiday without sinning, but if such activities take priority over the word and worship of the Lord they become idolatry. They can lead us astray. In such situations the Lord may allow us to be afflicted that we might cease going astray and return to him.

Affliction brought the psalmist back to the Lord and his word; ‘But now I keep your word’ (119:67). In verse 71 he actually says, ‘it is good for me that I have been afflicted’. Affliction stopped him going further astray. How often has the Lord stopped you going astray? Was it an illness? Was it the loss of employment? Was it a robbery or loss of possessions in some other way? Not that such losses are always intended by God for your correction. I was going to say loss of a spouse through divorce but this is never an affliction from God. Why? Because God’s word says, ‘I hate divorce’ and, ‘What God has joined together let not man separate’ (Mat 9:6). You see how important it is to know God’s word, and not just know it but obey it- all of it!

In closing, remember that Jesus suffered in this world. He suffered at the hands of wicked men, like the psalmist and like every servant of the Lord. ‘Though he was a Son, yet he learned obedience by the things which he suffered’ (Heb 5:8). Jesus was fully human so he suffered and learned obedience. But he was also fully God so he was perfect and did not sin; and so he ‘became the author of eternal salvation to all who obey him’ (Heb 5:9). The blood of Jesus Christ is more precious than all the gold or silver in this world (1 Peter 1:19).

**Blessed and a blessing** Psalm 119:73-80

The Lord God called Abraham to leave his home and go to a land he would show him. The call included a number of promises. The Lord promised to make Abraham a great nation, living in their own land. But this would be a nation under God. The essential promise was that God would bless Abraham and his descendants, and would make him a blessing; through his descendants, or descendant, all the families of the earth would be blessed (Gen 12:2-3).

So it is with all whom the Lord calls; he promises to bless us that we should be a blessing to others. Too often we forget the second part of the ‘blessing promise’. But the psalmist did not forget, and nor did the apostle Paul. The psalmist prayed, ‘those who fear you will be glad when they see me, because I have hoped in your word’ (119:74). Are the people of God glad when they see you? The apostle Paul said, ‘Imitate me, even as I imitate Christ’ (1Cor 11:1). He, like the psalmist, sought to live a blameless life, a life that was pleasing to God and a blessing to those around him.

Verse 73-80 of Psalm 119 make up the ‘*yod*’ stanza of this psalm. ‘*Yod*’ is the smallest letter of the Hebrew alphabet (cf. Mat 5:18). This stanza is largely a prayer with most verses beginning, ‘Let, I pray’. The psalmist prays that fellow believers will be encouraged by his example of a blameless life, while the proud will be put to shame. We will draw out the following points: 1. Belong to God, 2. Blessed by God, 3. Blessing to others, 4. Blameworthy or blameless.

**1. Belong to God**

The psalmist begins where we must always begin- in Genesis 1. We must acknowledge God as our maker. ‘In the beginning God made the heavens and the earth’. On the sixth day of creation he made man in his own image, male and female, or man and woman. In Psalm 139 David reminds us that God formed us in our mother’s womb, and that we are fearfully and wonderfully made. Here he says that God ‘made and fashioned’ him (19:73).

God is like a potter making a beautiful vessel out of a lump of clay. To complete the fashioning of a vessel it has to be ‘fired’; it has to be subjected to high heat in an oven. In the same way, God’s people need to be ‘fired’ to make them strong and beautiful. Our beauty before the Lord has nothing to do with what we look like in the mirror. It is the beauty of an obedient, God-fearing heart. It is the beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit which is precious in the sight of God (1Peter 3:4). Unlike proud people, many of whom walk the streets of our city going to gyms, beauty parlours and cosmetic surgeons, the God-fearing person looks into God’s word. In awe of God this person seeks greater understanding of God’s commands and asks for an obedient heart.

The person who knows God’s commands, and obeys these commands, will experience God’s blessing and will be a blessing to all they meet. They will be a blessing to all of creation, unlike the wicked who, despite all their best efforts, end up being cruel to animals and messing up the environment (Prov 12:10). God made man to have dominion over the creation or to manage the creation, but sin broke our relationship to God, to other human beings, and to the whole creation. It made us blind to the truth. Only with God-given wisdom can we fulfil the creation mandate. Only through Christ, who is the wisdom of God (1Cor 1:30), and in the light of God’s word, can we love one another and wisely regard the life of all creatures.

The psalmist understood his position before Almighty God. He walked humbly before the Lord, knowing that only God could lift him up and open his eyes to the truth. Knowing God and his word, the psalmist, like us, could please God and live at peace with other people. Those who do not know God cannot please him (Rom 8:9).

**2. Blessed by God**

What do you think of when asked to list some of God’s blessings? Good health? Money in the bank? Safe travel? Good friends? It is right to be thankful for such physical blessings. Or do you think of blessings like: the knowledge of God, peace in your heart, the cross and resurrection of Jesus? Again, it is proper to be thankful for such spiritual blessings. But the psalmist lists a blessing we tend forget, something we might never have thought of as a blessing. He says that God, in his faithfulness, afflicted him (119:75). He previously said, it was ‘good for me that I was afflicted’ because affliction stopped him going astray (119:67, 71).

With even deeper insight he understands that God was behind the affliction, that God in his covenant love was doing him good. He understands and accepts the affliction as a blessing from God. As the writer to the Hebrews reminds us, through the words of Solomon, God disciplines or afflicts those whom he loves. He does this individually and corporately. The apostle Paul was given a thorn in the flesh to keep him from getting proud, and to remind him that God’s grace is sufficient always. God was behind Israel being taken into exile in Babylon. He was afflicting his people because of their sin, as he said he would through Moses. Daniel acknowledged and confessed the sins of the people, asking the Lord to forgive and bring the exiles home (Dan 9) - which God did with the edict of Cyrus, king of Persia.

Affliction is often redemptive. A mature believer, like the psalmist, will see God’s hand of blessing in the trials and temptations he faces, even in the suffering he has to endure. We rejoice in God’s grace, and in hope of the glory of God; but not only that, ‘we also glory in tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance, and perseverance character, and character hope, and hope does not disappoint because the love of God has been poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us’ (Rom 5:2-5).

We find the same thought in this psalm. The writer goes on to pray about finding comfort in the steadfast or covenant love of the Lord. He prays for God’s compassion or mercy to be upon him that he may live (119:76, 77). ‘As strange as the definition may seem, to be the recipient of God’s mercy is to live’ (Leupold). This side of the Cross we know that it is only because of the grace of Jesus Christ that we live. We know that ‘nothing can separate us from the love of God that is in Jesus Christ our Lord’ (Rom 8:39). This is the greatest blessing we can know as a child of God, the blessing that brings comfort and peace to our hearts. No matter what troubles we face, no matter what trials or temptations Satan throws at us, we know that the steadfast love of the Lord never ceases. We know that no one can pluck us out of his hand.

How do we know this? Because, like the psalmist, we read this in God’s word. Like the psalmist we pray, ‘according to Your word to Your servant’ (119:76). When we read and understand God’s word in this way we will find God’s law a delight. We will see the rich and abundant blessings the Lord pours upon us every day, even in days of affliction.

**3. Blessing to others**

The psalmist did not live in isolation. Of first importance to him in his life was the covenant the Lord made with him. The terms of that covenant are set down in the word of God, which he meditated on day and night. But other people came under the same covenant. And the terms of that covenant included being a blessing to others. The Lord told Abraham he would be a blessing to all the families of the earth (Gen 12:3).

Abraham’s ultimate descendant was Jesus Christ, the Son of David. In Jesus all the families of the earth are blessed, to the extent that they repent and believe in him. ‘The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and give his life a ransom for **many**’ (Mark 10:45). Moreover, Jesus summarises the commandments as, ‘love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul and all your mind’, and, ‘love your neighbour as yourself’.

As a servant of the Lord, as man who feared God- to fear the Lord is the beginning of wisdom- the psalmist had fellowship with fellow God-fearers. He saw his responsibility towards such people being twofold; firstly, he would encourage them (119:74). They would be glad when they saw him, when they saw him hoping in God and his word. As believers we should be positive people, we should be rejoicing in the Lord always. Paul and Silas prayed and sang psalms while in prison. From prison Paul wrote to the church in Philippi, especially to bickering sisters, encouraging them to be of the same mind and rejoice in the Lord always (Phil 4:4). Hearing such words from the apostle must have caused them to stop and consider their ways.

Secondly, the psalmist prays that those who fear God would turn to him (119:79). He wanted his life to be an example to others. He does not cover up his faults, but knows the grace of God in forgiveness; he knows this because God declares it in his word. Maybe he invited fellow believers to join him in Bible study, or in prayer. When people love the Bible they want to be with others having the same love. Those who love football want to get together with fellow football lovers. Those who love cricket want to get together for a game. Families love to get together because of family ties. But what about those who love the Lord and his word? Are we as eager to get together with fellow believers as we should be?

**4. Blameless or blameworthy**

The psalmist prayed that he would be blameless and unashamed before the Lord, and indeed before other people (119:80). What is shame? ‘The ultimate shame would be being found out by God himself- the shame of being a hypocrite and being exposed on the Day of Judgment’. Allan Harman comments, ‘To pray for a blameless heart is to ask for a God-given devotion to his statues. If that is given, then the psalmist knows that he will suffer no shame because of his commitment to God’s directives’.

Daniel lived according to God’s precepts, even as he lived among pagans, and he suffered no shame. He suffered being thrown into the lion’s den, but he suffered no shame. Is this something you pray for? This is why the psalmist spent so much time meditating on God’s word. This is why he wanted to be with God-fearing friends- Daniel had his fellow Jews. The psalmist was a discerning man when it came to friends. Are you?

‘Let the proud be ashamed’ he prayed (119:78). He often speaks of those who oppose and persecute him, of mockers and blasphemers who despise the word of God. He withdraws from such people and prays to the Lord to vindicate him. We do not gloat over the downfall of our enemies but we do note God’s hand of judgment upon them, according to his word; just as we note God’s hand of blessing upon us as children of God, even through chastening affliction.

**How long O Lord** Psalm 119:81-88

Our title is taken from a book of the same name by Don Carson. He in turn took it from Revelation 6:10. In his book Carson reflects on suffering and evil. His central chapter reflects on the book of Job, but he also refers to various psalms, like Psalm 73, which speaks of the prosperity of the wicked. He does not refer to these verses from Psalm 119 but could well have done so. In these verses the psalmist cries to the Lord, ‘When will you comfort me’, and ‘when will you show me justice’ (119:82, 84). He is ‘at the end of his tether’ as we say. The psalmist is suffering at the hands of wicked men. He is suffering relentless persecution such that he fears for his future. He was faced with the choice of giving up or going on. What would it be?

You may well have faced such a choice at some time in your life. If so, the fact that you are here worshipping the Lord today shows that you made the right choice, the choice to go on, to press on in the strength of the Lord. If you have not yet faced such a choice you surely will at some time in your life. Job had to make such a choice, as did his wife. Tragically many make the choice that Job’s wife made. They are not here worshipping the Lord today because they gave up. If they are still alive they are not following the Lord.

When faced with opposition or trouble in your workplace, in your marriage, in your family or in your church, what will you do? A man once told me he could not say for certain what he would do if forced to deny Christ at the point of a gun. While respecting his honesty, I told him that what was important was to know what you **should** do, and do it in the strength of the Lord. This is what we find with the psalmist. He knew what to do and he cried to the Lord to help him do this. ‘They persecute me wrongfully; Help me!’ (119:86). we must not look to ourselves asking what will I do and then trust in our own strength. We must look to the Lord saying with the apostle Paul, ‘I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me’ (Phil 4:13).

**1. Fainting soul**

Personal independence and self-rule are features of a sinful heart. Such characteristics can even mark the life of a Christian. They can begin to serve the Lord in their own strength instead of depending on the Lord. We all want to be in control of our own lives, or at least feel that we are in control. We do not want to be anyone’s slave. You, like me, may have seen this desire to be in control of everything actually bring people down. If they feel that they are not in control they go into melt-down. If they are not in control they think everything is out of control. They fail to trust other people, and most tragically, fail to see that God is in control.

To some degree we are all prone to such feelings. It is feature of our sinful nature, as mentioned. At some time we say with the psalmist, ‘my soul faints’ or ‘I am worn out’. We feel we cannot go on because of the huge obstacles we face, or think we face. We feel overwhelmed. Thankfully those who came to India with me survived but some were close to being overwhelmed by the circumstances and by the feeling that they were not in control. We weary ourselves with worry. We feel our feet slipping (Ps 73:2); we become like ‘a wineskin in smoke’ or like old shoe leather. Some people literally age years during a short period of worry. Fainting of the soul can have physical effects.

Money can solve many of our problems but not all. In fact, it is those with lots of money who seem to suffer most from fainting souls- probably because they are used to controlling their lives with money. But the old saying, ‘money can’t buy you love’ comes to mind. Most fainting souls relate to our failure to control other people. The psalmist had proud people digging pits for him or trying to trap him (119:85). He had people opposing him and persecuting him, and he could not stop them (119:86). Too many marriages fail because people try, and fail, to control their spouse. No one wants to be a slave, remember. Or it may be in the workplace they we try and fail to control other people. We do not know who the enemies of the psalmist were but they were out to bring him down- down to the grave (119:87).

Many followers of Jesus have suffered persecution or lived under the threat of death- beginning with Stephen and the apostle Paul. Before this David spent years escaping the sword of King Saul. During the exile God’s people were at the mercy of wicked and violent rulers. What did these men do? They did what the psalmist did. They prayed to the Lord, ‘Help me!’, ‘when will you comfort me’, ‘revive me’ (119:86, 82, and 88).

**2. Forget not**

‘My soul faints for your salvation, but’ (119:81). Trouble and affliction are part of life in this fallen world, even for God’s people. ‘In this world you will have tribulation’ said Jesus (John 16:33), but Jesus had a ‘but’, and so does the psalmist. Jesus said, ‘but I have overcome the world’. The psalmist said, ‘but I hope in your word’ (119:81). The thought is the same. Jesus is the living word of God. He is the fulfilment of God’s word of promise.

The psalmist had God’s word. He believed all that was written in the Bible. He clung to every promise and every prophecy in God’s word. These words gave him hope. These words took the psalmist into the realm of God’s providence and God’s eternal purposes. The more his soul fainted the more he searched God’s word. ‘My eyes faint from searching your word’ (119:82).

It is easy to start depending on our own resources- it is a control thing. But the wise person draws closer to God when faced with troubles- even if it is to question God as Job did. Searching God’s word may yield immediate relief. Many of our troubles are of our own making. Many of our worries have no basis in reality. In reading God’s word we might see things from a new perspective- God’s perspective. But our problem may be real just as the psalmist’s problem was real.

The psalmist was being persecuted wrongfully according to God’s word (119:86). He had enemies who were not obeying God’s commands. They were dishonest and corrupt. They were not concerned with justice. Their only concern was for personal gain. If personal gain meant destroying others then so be it. There are lots of people like this- but not you I trust! As believers we are to imitate Christ and Christ is always just.

It is not always easy to judge situations justly but again, turning to God’s word we find wisdom in dealing with such matters; remember Solomon who as king was called upon to exercise justice. Jesus’ words about the plank in our own eye and the speck in our brother’s eye is a good place to start in exercising justice. ‘Oh to see ourselves as others see us’, or as the psalmist says in another place: ‘in your [God’s] light we see light’ (Ps 36:9). Oh to see ourselves as God sees us!

The psalmist knew from reading God’s word that God is just. Abraham knew this when he said to the Lord, ‘Shall not the judge of all the earth do right’ (Gen 18:25). God’s judgment is always right. God does not make mistakes. Unlike human judges, he does not have to rely on the words of men. God sees into the secret place, even judging the thoughts of our hearts. God knows what is in your heart and he knows what is in the enemy’s heart, and he will judge justly. So take care when making personal judgments (James 4:11-12).

God’s judgment is however, mixed with mercy. Again we see this from reading God’s word. God in his mercy came to save the righteous people in Sodom. God gives the wicked time to repent. He is slow to anger, slow to execute judgment because of his mercy. But this does not mean God is unjust. God’s justice may be delayed; this is something God’s people find hard to accept. We are not as merciful as God. We, like the psalmist, want to see our enemies brought to justice sooner rather than later. We are prone to pray with the psalmist, ‘when will you execute judgment on those who persecute me?’ (119:84).

**3.’When, O Lord?’**

When David was anointed king of Israel by Samuel he did not expect to be kept waiting for ten years before taking office, and certainly did not expect to be a fugitive for all these years. David had opportunity to take matters into his own hand and kill King Saul. He could have argued that he was acting justly- in self-defence. But David was a man who feared God and a man who believed what was written in the Bible. He knew it was for the Lord to take vengeance; for the Lord to execute justice. David was only a young man at that time, but still the persecution and the waiting were not easy for him.

The psalmist prayed, ‘How many are the days of your servant?’ (119:84). He had been suffering persecution for some time it seems. Would he have to endure such suffering to the end of his days? Indeed, his enemies threatened to shorten his days! (119:87). We are not told if the psalmist saw judgment executed in his lifetime. But we know that many of God’s people have not seen justice in their lifetime. Martyrs like Stephen and James died unjustly at the hands of wicked men. Does martyrdom mean that that the enemy has won and that God, who promises never to leave or forsake his servants, failed? Certainly not!

A well-known verse in Revelation 6 answers this question. John sees the souls of martyrs under the altar in heaven crying out, ‘How long O Lord, holy and true, until you judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth’ (Rev 6:10). God’s judgment may be delayed but it is never avoided. Those souls are told, ‘a little longer’. The wrath of the Lamb will be revealed on the Last Day and none will escape his judgment, his just judgment.

The psalmist was man who hoped when other men lost hope. We read of the different ways prisoners of war kept hoping for deliverance. They thought of loved ones back home, they kept busy reading or writing and so on. But the surest hope of all is the hope of God’s word. If your hope is in God’s word you will be able to endure great suffering- indeed any and all opposition and persecution with which men can afflict you. You will keep trusting in God’s word. You will not forsake his precepts (119:87). You will press on in praying, ‘Lord, revive me according to your lovingkindness’ (119:88). You will not depart from God’s word despite all the suggestions or threats of Satan and his agents.

Such is the way of the wise person. Cling to the promise of Jesus found in John 16:33: ‘Be of good cheer. I have overcome the world’. This is the promise the apostle Paul knew when he wrote, ’thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ’ (1Cor 15:57).

**God’s unchanging and enduring word** Psalm 119:89-96

Until a few years ago people were keen to invest in the stock market. Returns were so high that some even borrowed money to buy shares. Then came the crash. Property is seen as a more secure investment so people are speculating on price rises to secure high returns. But property prices can also crash; remember what happened in the USA and other places in the Global Financial Crisis. Nowadays you can engage an expert to search for safe investments anywhere in the world. But where? Where is a secure place to invest?

Years ago there was a saying, ‘safe as the bank of England’, but I don’t hear this being said today. Some say, ‘as safe as houses’, but how safe are houses? What about ‘as safe as a rock’? People living in earthquake zones like NZ are not so sure about rocks being safe and secure. Our very planet is under threat from nuclear bombs or a meteorite impact. Is there any place where we can be safe and secure for eternity?

The psalmist says, ‘Your word, O Lord, is eternal; it stands firm in the heavens’ (119:89 NIV). What has the word of God got to do with being safe and secure? We have our Bible but it has nothing to do with getting land or building a house, about getting educated or getting a job, you say. Many Christians find their security in such things rather than in the word of God. Maybe this is because you do not believe that God created the heavens and the earth. Maybe you believe in the godless theory of evolution.

In this passage we see the psalmist link the creation to the word of God, as Jesus also does. The God who spoke the heavens and the earth into being is the same God who spoke to give us the Bible. So it is natural to link the physical creation to the written word of God that we have in the Bible. Jesus did this when he said, ‘Heaven and earth will pass away but my words will by no means pass away’ (Mat 24:35).

**1. Word for eternity**

In studying the Book of Isaiah we said that chapters 40 to the end were like a mini-Bible. In the same way Psalm 119 is like a mini-Bible. Here in the twelfth stanza we have reference to creation and also to salvation. The psalmist continues to mention his affliction, affliction at the hands of wicked men. Affliction is a product of the Fall. Our great enemy is Satan. When Eve and Adam chose to listen to Satan instead of God, God gave them up to corruptions and perversions. He cast them out from his presence in the garden. Our affliction therefore is indirectly caused by Satan. We need God’s help if we are to be saved from this spiritual enemy. The psalmist says, ‘I am yours, save me’ (119:94).

As mentioned, Jesus also links creation to salvation in Matthew 24:35, and in the Sermon on the Mount where he says, ‘till heaven and earth pass away one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled’ (Mat 5:18). We have seen the ‘jot’ as in the *‘yodh*’ of the Hebrew alphabet in the tenth stanza. You may also remember the ‘tittle’ as the small serif that distinguishes ‘*waw*’ from ‘*zayin*’ or ‘*daleth*’ from ‘*resh*’.

What Jesus said, and what the psalmist says here, makes no sense if you believe in the popular theory of evolution- presented as scientific fact in most schools. If you believe the universe came into being through a ‘Big bang’, and that life evolved by chance over millions or billions of years, you will not understand what is written in the Bible; which is that in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth (Gen 1:1). In fact, the theory of evolution is designed to remove God from his position as creator and sustainer of this universe. It puts man in charge of his own destiny. It removes the truth of the Fall and of sin, allowing men and women to indulge their sinful natures.

God cannot be removed from his position as creator without removing him from his position as saviour of the world. If you believe in Jesus as your saviour you must believe in his supremacy as creator and sustainer of all things visible and invisible (Col 1:16). Do not be ashamed to speak this truth before men, even if it means being ridiculed and afflicted. The psalmist was being afflicted because he was standing for the truth in the midst of a corrupt and violent society.

This psalm is all about God’s word. God’s word directs the path of this wise man (119:105). God’s word comforts him in his suffering. He finds in God’s word an immovable foundation for his life. Ungodly evolutionists do all they can to preserve life in this world but in denying God they deny the truth of eternity, and of heaven and hell as the eternal home of God’s friends and God’s enemies respectively. The only security of the ungodly is in the things of this world, and we have seen the uncertainty of everything around us. Paul writes, ‘the things that are seen are temporal, but the things that are not seen are eternal’ (2 Cor 4:18). He wrote these words in the context of affliction in this world.

God made the heavens and the earth. He made everything that exists. He made everything out of nothing (Heb 11:3). He made man in his own image, breathing into him the breath of life- eternal life. God made everything by the word of his mouth; we read, ‘God said’, ‘God said’, and so on for the six days of creation. God spoke the world into being. God’s word is the same as his work- unlike us in our fallen state.

The psalmist states clearly that God made or established the earth and that the earth remains. The earth continues to this day because of God’s sustaining power or God’s sustaining word. He pictures everything in the creation as the servant of God (119:91). If we believe that God spoke everything into existence (Rev 4:11), we will also believe that God controls everything by his word, and indeed will one day speak the end of his creation. The disciples were amazed and afraid when Jesus, the Son of God, spoke and the wind stopped. Jesus rebuked them for their lack of faith (Mat 8:26).

The psalmist acknowledged that all the ‘laws of nature’ are God’s laws or ordinances, and that every created being is God’s servant; God can make the donkey speak if he chooses. Above all, the human beings he created in his own image are his servants, created to have dominion over the creation and to worship him.

Yet above and beyond the creation is the word of God, the word firmly fixed in heaven (119:89). This word is eternal. God chose us from before the foundation of the world (Eph 1:4). He has revealed his eternal word to us in the Scriptures. God came down and spoke to Moses on the mountain. He gave him covenant commands; he revealed to Moses his own attributes and his plan of salvation- salvation from Egypt as a type of salvation from death and hell. When God gave Moses the plan of the temple it was a copy of what was established in heaven (Heb 8:5, 9:23). The earthly copy did not remain. It was fulfilled in Jesus.

So it is that every word of God will be fulfilled. Not one word will be changed and not one word left unfulfilled. This is the word that sustained the psalmist in his time of affliction, and indeed every day of his life. Do you feel the same way about the word of God? Are you finding comfort, conviction of sin, strength and guidance in God’s word? Do you believe what you read in 2 Timothy 3:16 (NIV): ‘All Scripture is God-breathed, and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness’.

**2. Word of life**

The psalmist goes so far as to say, ‘Unless your word had been my delight I would have perished in my affliction’ (119:92). He does not say how he would have perished, but we know how readily some perish when faced with trials and afflictions in life. A friend called the other day to tell how troubled he was, and that he was close to taking his own life. He was troubled and unable to sleep because the share price of one of his stocks had crashed. I reminded him of what Jesus said about where to put your treasure.

Some of our secular leaders think that everyone should be allowed to take their own life if they feel their affliction is unbearable. This is the outcome of evolutionary thinking. The psalmist was not an evolutionist. He believed that God created all things and sustains all things, including our own life. It was this belief that kept the psalmist from perishing. His hope was in God and his word, not his shares, his property, his popularity or even his family (119:81). Nothing and no one could take away that hope.

The apostle Paul writes, ‘I am persuaded that neither death nor life… nor any created thing shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord’ (Rom 8:38-39). He also wrote, ‘I know whom I have believed and am persuaded that He is able to keep what I have committed to Him until that Day (2Tim 1:12). Paul, like the psalmist, was a man who committed himself into the hands of the Lord, and believed everything written in the word of God. What commitments have you made concerning your life?

‘I am yours, save me; for I have kept your precepts’ (119:94). Are you able to say such words? Do you believe the Lord has chosen you, chosen you in Christ before the foundation of the world’ (Eph 1:4), and that you belong to him forever? Do you remember this truth when you face trials and difficulties, or do you start thinking, ‘I am no good, my life is not worth living and I want to die’? You might also remember these words when you sin against God- your trial may well be because of your sin! The psalmist teaches us to run to the Lord at any time, and at all times, because we belong to him. Like a father, he listens and is ready to forgive and comfort us. This is what we read in God’s word.

**3. Word of perfection**

The closing verse of this stanza strikes a different note with a reference to perfection. Just in case you think life is perfect and cannot get better, listen to what the psalmist says. ‘I have seen the consummation/limit of all perfection’ (119:96). What does this mean? In the first place it means that perfection does not belong to this world. Those who worship the creation speak of pristine forests and waterways; they are misguided. To think that the forest is perfect before man arrives is foolish. The only time creation was perfect was before the Fall. In the forest things die and creatures kill each other. The whole creation is in a fallen state. For sure, man is good at messing up the creation, especially ungodly men and women.

The prophet writes, ‘The grass withers and the flower fades’ (Isa 40:8). Flowers are among the most beautiful of created things. Some flowers are spectacular in colour and array. But all flowers fade and die. Human beings are the climax of creation, being made in the image of God. We see beautiful human beings, especially in the mirror! But we all grow old and wrinkly, and eventually die- despite the best efforts of beauty creams and cosmetic surgery. People speak of perfection in beauty, in exams, in sport and so on, but nothing we do is perfect by God’s standard of perfection. Only his Son, Jesus Christ, lived a perfect life and only in him are we made perfect.

Jesus lived by every word that came from the mouth of God- not by bread alone. This was of course, the word of God to Moses (Deut 8:3). Jesus said, ‘You shall be perfect just as your father in heaven is perfect’ (Mat 5:48). If Jesus lived in such a way, you should be striving to do the same. The psalmist certainly was! And Paul who wrote, ‘Imitate me, even as I imitate Christ’, certainly was (1Cor 11:1). Both the psalmist and Paul meditated on God’s word day and night. Do you?

The psalmist saw God’s word as ‘exceedingly broad’. He saw it as essential to every aspect of his life. In times of affliction he found comfort in God’s word. In times of blessing he thanked God according to his word. In times of rejoicing he rejoiced in the Lord. ‘Rejoice in the Lord always and again I say rejoice’ (Phil 4:4); so wrote the apostle Paul as he spoke of our names being written in the Book of Life, and of the Lord being at hand. The last ones standing will be those who trust in the Lord and delight in his word.

**Heavenly wisdom** Psalm 119:97-104

Have you enjoyed any good books of late? For our daughter, holidays mean time to read a book. The book she had last holidays was not very good, she said, as she skipped long, boring parts. But sometimes she has a book she cannot put down. She reads it in bed, at the table, in the car and other places. The psalmist found the Bible to be so interesting he could not put it down. ‘O, how I love your law! It is my meditation all the day’ (119:97).

Do you find such words challenging? Do you love reading your Bible? Do you read your Bible at all? If not why not? Do you think only special people like ministers and elders can read and understand the Bible? The pope in Rome might teach such things, but the Reformers repudiated such teaching. They made the Bible available to everyone to read, through translation and the printing press. Still today the Bible is being translated. Why? So people can read it for themselves.

One man wrote on the cover of a gift Bible, ‘This book will keep you from sin, or sin will keep you from this book’. Profound words! Reading the Bible in and of itself will not save you of course, but, as Paul wrote to Timothy, ‘from childhood you have known the Scriptures which are able to make you wise unto salvation through faith in Jesus Christ’ (2Tim 3:15). In the Bible we learn how to be saved and how to live as people saved by faith in Jesus Christ. A mark of being saved is the desire to flee from sin and live in a way that pleases God. ‘Sin is any want of conformity unto, or transgression of, the law of God’ (Shorter Catechism Q14). This is why the psalmist wanted to know God’s law- that he might not sin against God. If all this sounds like going around in circles, it is, because we can only know God through his word, and we can only be saved by knowing and believing in God. As Spurgeon writes, ‘This was both the effect of God’s love and the cause of it’.

‘Oh, how I love your law! It is my meditation all the day’ (119:97). This verse is the theme of the whole psalm; it is a wisdom psalm, and true wisdom belongs to God. ‘The law of God, if truly loved, imparts wisdom’ writes Leupold. What makes the psalmist wiser than other people? Knowing God’s commands. And in obeying these commands he walks uprightly before God and man, just like Jesus (Luke 2:52).

**1. Heavenly wisdom**

Modern man is blessed with an abundance of knowledge, and all this at our fingertips, literally. Young or old we simply tap the screen and ‘google’! But knowledge is different to wisdom. Are we blessed with an abundance of wisdom? Worldly wisdom maybe, but not heavenly wisdom. Worldly wisdom is all about surviving in this world- it is ‘me’ wisdom, full of envy and self-seeking (James 3:16). Such wisdom can be dishonest and destructive. Did you read about one of the richest men in this country? He was a clever property developer, but not so clever when it comes to driving, it seems. As he racked up many driving fines he passed the blame to a ‘friend’; but the authorities discovered that this friend had no car and no driving licence, so this clever man is now in prison! Please note that a lot of today’s science, so-called, is contaminated with worldly wisdom, wisdom about ‘me’ surviving in this world.

The psalmist was being afflicted in some way by proud enemies. They were ridiculing him and threatening him. There is no shortage of people ridiculing the Bible today- educated and powerful people. They boast of their scientific knowledge and humanist philosophies. How do we respond? How does the psalmist respond? He says that God’s word makes him wiser than his enemies. He is ‘plugged into’ the wisdom of God! The apostle Paul also faced opposition from Jews requesting a sign and Greeks seeking the wisdom of the age. His answer was that even ‘the foolishness of God is wiser than men’ (1Cor 1:25). In the gospel of Jesus Christ he preached wisdom from above not the wisdom of this age. Where is the wisdom of the Greeks today?

The psalmist goes on to say he understands more than his teachers and more than his elders (119:99-100). We expect elders to be wiser through experience-although some elders can be quite foolish. We generally respect the wisdom of our elders but wisdom from experience is not the same a heavenly wisdom. We also respect our teachers and the wisdom they have through their studies. But again, knowledge is not the same as wisdom. They may have learnt things that are false and be passing on what is false. There is a saying that if you repeat a lie often enough it becomes true, as in everyone believes it to be true. The other way to make a lie true is to say that almost all educated people believe it. This has happened with the theory of evolution, and it is happening with the theory of man-made climate change. It has been tried with the whole Bible itself.

A good teacher, like my science teacher, will admit to what is theory and what is fact. He taught evolution but said we did not have to believe Darwin’s theory about the origin of man. Many teachers arrogantly assert this theory as fact and demand their students agree. This is where students can declare with the psalmist, ‘I have more understanding than my teachers’ (119:99). If their teacher is an unbeliever they can say this many times- respectfully of course. The psalmist said it because he knew God’s word; so make sure you know God’s word before opening your mouth.

The apostle John says much the same thing in the context of false teachers in the church. He tells believers, ‘you have an anointing from God and do not need anyone to teach you’ (1John 2:27). He is not saying ‘no’ to all religious instruction but is saying that all instruction must be according to God’s word, and that you have God’s word. Do not blindly follow your teacher- as the pope and many teachers would like you to do. Search God’s word for yourself. This is how the psalmist became wiser that his teachers, and how you can be wiser than your teachers.

**2. Right path**

Not only does God’s word make the psalmist wise, wiser than his enemies, his teachers and his elders, it also directs him in the path of right living. How does a young man keep his way pure? By walking in the way of the Lord. God has not left us in the dark. He has shone his light upon us in his word. Without this light we are in the dark. Boice writes, ‘the path is dark because the world is dark, but the Bible clarifies the issues and shows us how to walk through the darkness’. God has given us a torch as it were, but we must turn this torch on.

Jesus spoke a parable about five wise and five foolish virgins or wedding attendants. All had a lamp but only the wise brought sufficient oil to keep their lamp burning. Are you a wise or are you a foolish wedding attendant. Are you like so many today who have a Bible but never read it? People today know so much about music, about sport, about politics and about everything except the Bible. Just listen to trivia sessions and quiz shows. Some have not even heard about Noah! Knowledge of the Bible is appalling. And so the darkness continues for many. What about you?

Reading the Bible was not a chore for the psalmist. He delighted in God’s word. With God’s help he obeyed what he read. He kept his ‘feet from every evil way’ (119:101). Remember the words written on the cover page of the gift Bible: ‘this book will keep you from sin’. If you want to walk in the light; if you want to live a life that is pleasing to God; if you want to live, then read your Bible and do what God says. We tell our children that if they listened to us and obeyed we would not get so angry and they would have an easier life. But some children, and some adults, never learn. They do not read their Bible and do not obey God’s word, and then wonder why their life is such a mess.

We must love the right way and hate the false way (119:104). We keep slipping off the right way because we keep looking over to the wrong way. We envy the wicked in their prosperity (Ps 73). When I got home from holidays I saw my neighbour had a new car; that’s two new cars since I bought mine, and they are not cheap cars. What has your neighbour got that you don’t? We can become envious if we do not cling to God and his word.

Because God loves us we should love him and obey his commands; we should not be flirting with the world. ‘If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him’ (1John 2:15). We do not let our eyes stray from looking to Jesus and gazing on his beauty. We want to know him more and more. We want to walk in the way that he leads us. We hate every other way, every false way. This is the outcome of heavenly wisdom. ‘Wisdom from above is pure, peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality and without hypocrisy’ (James 3:17).

**3. Taught by God**

Some people like to boast in the school they attended- a rich, private school, or maybe a selective school. Some boast in the university or college they attended. Others boast in the teacher they had. Students travel the world looking for a famous teacher. The apostle Paul was taught by a famous Rabbi (Acts 22:3) - although he did not exactly boast about this. In fact, like the psalmist, he boasted that the Lord was his teacher: ‘You yourself have taught me’ (119:102). The ‘you’ is emphatic and hence the ‘you yourself’.

God himself was the psalmist’s teacher. He did not boast in earthly wisdom or knowledge that famous men had taught him because he had the all-knowing and all-wise God as his teacher. No one could trump such a boast! Can you claim this same teacher? Have you told anyone and everyone about your teacher? If you study the Bible like the psalmist you can do so. In God’s classroom the Bible is your textbook, so study it day and night.

Are you proud to have God as your teacher, or are you ashamed? Some Christians are ashamed to mention the name of God, or speak words from the Bible, because worldly people might ridicule them. They might say the Bible is old and out of date. And what will you say? ‘The Bible may be old but it is ageless. It is the word of the eternal, omniscient God who made the heavens and the earth and all that exists, the God who rules over the nations and over my life’. Try saying something like that. Or better still, point them to 2Timothy 3:16.

**4. Sweeter than honey**

The fourth reason the psalmist gives for loving God’s word, and meditating on it all the day, is that it is sweeter than honey to his mouth (119:103). In Psalm 19 David similarly speaks of God’s law as being, ‘sweeter than honey and the honeycomb’ (Ps 19:10). In India most meals consisted of rice and curry with some chapattis. Knowing that we from the West are used to sweet foods, our hosts put butter and honey on the table. And so, to their amazement, we consumed lots of chapattis coated with butter and honey. That honey made life in India a lot sweeter for us! The psalmist found God’s word made life much sweeter for him.

A wise word from the Bible is found in Deuteronomy: ‘Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God’ (Deut 8:3). It was given to God’s people as they journeyed in the wilderness. Even Jesus found this word helpful in combating Satan (Mat 4:4). If you are wise you will remember this word and use it. You will not start thinking, like so many, that life is all about food. Most religions, including our secularism, stipulate what you can and can’t eat. Religion can be all about eating. But the Bible says we are to live by the word of God. Jesus said he is the bread of life sent down from heaven (John 6:35). Would not the psalmist have said, ‘How I love Jesus, he is sweeter than honey and the honeycomb’.

**Light** Psalm 119:105-112

In the beginning there was darkness. Then God said, ‘Let there be light and there was light’. On the fourth day of creation God made two great lights, the sun and the moon, to rule the day and the night respectively. And so it continues until the end of the world. The sun in the sky gives us light and life. We are enjoying the long days of summer. In winter our lives will change, although not greatly because of artificial light. Many Asian villages have no electricity; people eat by the light of a candle or kerosene lamp. Our children ate many meals by candle light- so much so that an intimate, candlelit dinner no longer appeals to them. Some villages are now getting solar-electric lights. There are celebrations when the first electric light is turned on.

The sun in the sky gives us light and life which we all enjoy. But still our lives are shrouded in darkness, inner darkness. While the sun brought light and life, sin brought darkness and death. Darkness and death prevail in this fallen world; sinful hearts are ruled by darkness. As sinners we are lost; we grope about as if in a dark room. We stumble from one object to another, from one idea to another. We see this most clearly in the realm of political ideas, but it is also seen in science, in education and even in religion. One minute people are lining up behind one person and their ideas, and the next they are lining up behind another, having thrown out the former leader or guru.

We need inner light or spiritual light to guide us in our thinking, in our behaviour, in our suffering, in our relationships and in our worship. That light comes in Jesus Christ. Jesus is the light of the world. Jesus, the Son of God, brought light and life to the world (Jn 1:4). That light shines upon all people but many persist in walking in the dark. When you believe in Jesus that light shines into your heart giving you true life, giving you faith, hope and love, the key elements of an abundant life. Is this light shining in your heart today? Soon you will be singing about the coming of this Light into the world. Zacharias prophesied of this divine visitation ‘to give light to those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace’ (Luke 1:79).

Long before the true Light actually came, the Lord God spoke about his coming. He spoke through the prophets, making a covenant with his chosen people and giving them commands by which they were to live- remembering that Adam and Eve had plunged the world into moral and spiritual darkness. Without this divine intervention, without this condescending grace of God, the darkness would have continued and no one would have received the light of life.

When Jesus came he did not throw out the commands given through the prophets; He came to fulfil them. We have much to learn from the prophets of old, just as we learn from the true Light himself. When the psalmist delights in God’s word, and calls it a lamp to his feet and a light to his path, we can do the same. We benefit from a ‘fuller’ revelation in the NT, but still have much to learn from the revelation of God in the OT.

Towards the middle of this great wisdom psalm we find this well-known verse: ‘Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path’ (Ps 119:105). It comes in the fourteenth or ‘*Nun*’ stanza. The Lord in his grace puts us on the right path, the ‘narrow way’ as Jesus calls it, and expects us to follow this path using the directions given in his word. He gives us his Spirit to guide us also, but the Spirit does not guide us on a new path- he guides us in the only true way; he guides us through the unchanging word of God. ‘The Spirit will guide you into all truth’ said Jesus (Jn 16:13). God’s word is truth. Jesus, the incarnate word, the ‘word become flesh’, is truth.

How is God’s word like a lamp to our feet and a light to our path? The psalmist goes on to explain various ways God’s word guides and comforts us. It is like a map or compass we take on a hike. It is also like a raincoat we take to protect us from the elements, and the tent and sleeping bag in which we take rest. In the light of God’s word, the psalmist was able to understand the following features of life.

**1. Righteous rules**

Some years ago my wife put up a list of rules on the bathroom door; and another list on the door of the fridge. I am not sure if the children were being rebellious or if it was me being difficult! Parents have to establish rules for the house. Schools have rules, sports have rules, roads have rules, and the kingdom of God has rules. God’s rules are good rules because God is good. They are rules by which we are to live as his people in this world. God gave these rules in the context of the covenant he made through Moses; ‘I will be your God and you will be my people’.

In order to live as God intended us to live, he gave us rules. We have creation ordinances like marriage and the Sabbath day. Marriage between one man and one woman is God’s design and demand for all people, not just ‘religious’ people. The Sabbath rest is the same, although nowadays not even Christians keep the Sabbath day holy. God gave further rules to his chosen people, rules about worship and about living in the community of God’s people- again, some Christians no longer know, or keep, the Ten Commandments. All God’s commands are wise and good for all people, even if we are not able to keep them without his help. This is why the psalmist prayed, ‘Teach me your statutes’ (119:64, 68).

At the same time as he asked the Lord to teach him, he determined in his own heart to keep God’s righteous rules (119:106). God has given us his rule book, but we must open it and read it. Write his commands on the door if you need to, teach them to your children and talk about them (Deut 6:5-9). Ask the Lord help you learn and obey his commands.

When we walk according to God’s commands we will enjoy God’s blessings. We will enjoy fellowship with God and fellowship with God’s people- even before we get to heaven! How determined are you to keep God’s rules? Do you know his rules? Daniel did and as a young man he purposed in his heart not to defile himself even in a foreign land (Dan 1:8).

**2. Affliction and suffering**

The psalmist was greatly afflicted (119:107). Breaking God’s rules is sin and leads to suffering, directly or indirectly. In the light of God’s word he could see God’s hand behind his affliction (119:75). In the light of God’s word he could say, ‘It was good for me to be afflicted’ (119:71). Not all suffering is because of specific sin. Again, God’s word helps us understand this. Where would we be without the book of Job in our Bible?

In the midst of affliction or suffering we might think that God has left us, or that he no longer cares about us; we might listen to Job’s wife instead of Job. But God’s word assures us that he never leaves us. God promised Joshua, and all like him, ‘I will never leave you or forsake you’ (Josh 1:5). Remembering this promise we can endure suffering. We can pray with the psalmist, ‘Revive me, O Lord, according to your word’ (119:107).

The narrow way on which we walk as God’s people is not an easy way. We are often confronted with trials and temptations. Thoughts of going back may enter our heart. But God’s word tells us to press on. It tells us that, ‘Underneath are the everlasting arms’ (Deut 33:27). It tells me that, ‘I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me’ (Phil 4:13).

**3. Worship**

God’s word shines a light on how we are to worship God. Many think they can worship God in any way they like. Men dream up some amazing ways of worship. The children of Israel thought a golden calf would help in worship. The Church of Rome thinks images help in worship, even though God’s word says not to make images. Such things might please men but they do not please God. The psalmist at least stopped to ask the question- is our worship acceptable to God? He prays, ‘Accept the free will offerings of my mouth, O Lord, and teach me your judgments’ (119:108). How do we know what worship is acceptable to God? God tells us in his word.

Verse 108 is amazing in that it refers to ‘the offerings of my mouth’. Under the Old Covenant, worship involved bringing sacrifices and material offerings to the temple. At times this was all their worship involved; people brought their offerings but kept on sinning. But the psalmist speaks of praises being offered to the Lord. God does not need material things but he delights in the glory given to him through songs of praise- as long as the songs are in praise of God not man. James Montgomery Boice, who died in the year 2000, criticises much modern worship for being emotional, theologically shallow, and repeating words endlessly. He must have been in a church where all he could hear was the banging of drums. He writes, ‘We cannot even know what might please God in our worship unless we find it in Scripture’. The offering we bring God today must focus on a ‘sacrifice of praise, the fruit of lips that confess his name’ (Heb 13:15).

**4. Life threatening situations**

In the light of God’s word we get a greater understanding of affliction and suffering- not a full understanding because ‘God’s ways are higher than our ways’. In this light we also understand death. Those who are biblically illiterate do not understand suffering or death. They say, ‘How can God be good when he allows so much suffering’. They have no understanding of why we die or what comes after death. But the psalmist was clinging to God’s word even in the face of death (119:109). He understood, what I trust you as a believer understand, namely that heaven and earth will pass away but God’s word will by no means pass away (Mat 24:35).

He also understood that after death comes the judgment- the judgment of God. He knew this from God’s word, and knowing this did not fear the judgment of men. See how knowing God’s word and obeying it makes a huge difference to how we live. The wicked might condemn you as they did the psalmist; they might set a trap to destroy you. Will you however, like the psalmist, continue and not stray from God’s holy law? Daniel’s enemies set a trap for him but he kept on in prayer. He was thrown to the lions but still he prayed. Like Abraham, like Job, and like Daniel, the psalmist believed in the resurrection.

**5. Inheritance**

These verses are a veritable textbook on theology. The last point we note is that of God’s word being our heritage or inheritance forever (119:111). People today are confused as to where to put their money. They fear losing it on the stock market or in property. In India, the Government suddenly declared all Rs500 and higher denomination notes invalid. Some people had wads of these notes stashed under their bed- literally. There has been a great outcry.

Through Moses, God led his people out of slavery and to the Promised Land. He gave them this land as their inheritance, or their ‘portion’. God later drove them from this land because they forgot him who was their true portion or inheritance (119:57). ‘The law of God is the very word of God; it is actually part of God, just as our words are part of us’ (Boice). Imagine forgetting the One who brought you out of bondage, giving you freedom in your own land. Imagine forgetting the words of life. How could anyone do such a thing? Yet millions do. They forget their true inheritance as they get caught up in the things of this world. They no longer find time to read the Bible or come to church. The light grows dim and they start stumbling.

If you are such a person, open your heart and let the light of God’s word shine afresh on you today. The Lord can keep you from stumbling, and he will when you allow his light to shine on your path. Will you, like the psalmist, say today and every day to the very end, ‘Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path’.

**Hold me up, O Lord** Psalm 119:113-120

Many years ago I trekked in the Himalayan Mountains with my son and some friends. We went up through the forest with our heavy backpacks, expecting to be gone a week. We came to the treeless zone, a zone of steep, grassy slopes. It was so steep that I was down on my hands and knees clinging to tufts of grass and looking for rocks to step on. The view was terrific but the cliff below was scary. As we went higher we came to the snowline, close to 4000m. But it was climbing this grassy cliff that scared me most. I was clinging to tufts of grass lest I fall down the cliff. I believe that the Lord was clinging to me, holding me tight as I scaled this steep and dangerous ground.

Spurgeon writes of this stanza of Psalm 119, ‘David meant to keep the law of the Lord, but first needed the law of the Lord to keep him’. We previously noted profound words written on the inside cover of a Bible: ‘This book will keep you from sin or sin will keep you from this book’. The psalmist loved this book, the Bible, because it kept him from sin. In this stanza he begins by boldly claiming the Lord as his shield and shelter, and telling evil doers to get away from him. Such commitment and determination is to be admired, but he also realised he could not do this in his own strength. The focus of the stanza is on the Lord holding him up or sustaining him. We do not run the race alone. The third point we find in these verses is ‘standing in awe of God’.

**1. Strong man**

Many a young man or woman has set out to follow Jesus only to stumble and fall because they were doing so alone. Some think the Christian life is easy, and/or pride themselves in their own strength to make their own way. The world tells us that our destiny is in our own hands, and that life is there for the taking; ‘just grab hold and run!’ The psalmist saw life differently, although these initial verses show a degree of self-dependence. The Christian life is not just about taking hold of Jesus and running; it is about Jesus taking hold of me, and about running with, or in, Jesus.

Commitment and determination is necessary, of course. There is no point entering a race if you are not determined to finish. Some people start but lose heart and give up when the going gets tough, or when they see others getting ahead. The proverbial race of the hare and the tortoise comes to mind. Pastors see people come, and they see people go. They ask themselves, ‘will so-and-so be here next week or at the end of the year?’ Like some marriages, people begin with enthusiasm but the enthusiasm runs out. Why? Because of a lack of commitment. Some, or today most, do not want to commit themselves to anything or anyone. They do not consider the other person, even if it is to Jesus that they have made a promise.

The psalmist begins by declaring his love for the Lord: ‘I love your law’ (119:113.cf. 119:97). He probably said this every day, or every time he prayed. He made reading his Bible a habit, a good habit, a joyful habit. If you read your Bible first thing in the morning you will know what a blessing it is to start the day this way. Some dread getting up and going out each day; reading God’s word will change everything. Whatever worries we have, we bring them to the Lord (1Peter 5:7). We put our hope in the Lord that he will hold us up. ‘Those who wait upon the Lord will renew their strength’ (Isa 40:31). ‘Draw near to God and he will draw near to you’ (James 4:8). Have you taken hold of these promises? Note that you are told to draw near to God and wait up him.

The psalmist not only declared his love for God’s law; he declared his hatred of the double-minded, of evildoers and who do not keep God’s commandments. Evil doers are God’s enemies, and therefore our enemies. We do not listen to such people. We pray that God will change them or bring them down. We hate the way they speak against God and his word. They may well be ridiculing the psalmist because of his love for God’s word, but he is not concerned because he finds God word a shield that protects him. He finds God’s word a hiding place in times of such affliction.

Hatred of the double-minded is interesting. If the Lord is a rock, a pillar to hold on to, as this stanza later indicates, then the double- minded person is completely the opposite. He cannot be depended upon for anything. Moreover, with a divided heart he is no use to God. Elijah called the people of Israel double-minded, a people wavering between two opinions. Some call it being open-minded, but God calls it being double-minded. He told Israel they had to choose: ‘if the Lord is God follow him, but if Baal, follow him’ (1Kings 18:21). Israel had become a pluralistic society, just like ours. They prided themselves in being open-minded, in worshipping different gods. Maybe they wanted to keep everyone happy. God told them they had to choose but they kept quiet.

Are there people in the church today keeping quiet when God demands they choose, they chose between whole-hearted worship and half-hearted worship, they choose between God and other gods. Are you still struggling with such a choice? ‘I have no other gods’ you say. Jesus says that he who does not deny himself and take up his cross and follow me cannot be my disciple. He also says that the person who does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, cannot be my disciple (Luke 14:26). The cost of following Jesus is high. The Lord demands our whole heart, the totality of our worship.

What would Elijah say if he saw you going to a friend’s party or to a big game rather than to the house of God on the Lord’s Day? Would he not say, ‘If the Lord is God, follow him, but if family or friends, or your sport or your work is god, then do not think you are worshipping Jesus. You don’t want to offend your friend but are happy to offend God. Stop being double-minded, being torn between God and other things or people. The double-minded person cannot expect to receive anything from the Lord (James 1:7).

**2. Sustain me**

The NT book of James speaks about wisdom in a similar way to this psalm. It warns against being double-minded, in the context of asking God for wisdom and of asking in faith without doubting. James pictures this double-minded person like a ship being tossed about in the waves when they should have their anchor in the Lord (James 1:6, Heb 6:19). We must resist temptation; we must reject false teaching. In chapter 4 James again refers to the double- minded person, urging us to draw near to God, to humble ourselves before the Lord and he will lift us up (James 4:10).

In the second part of this stanza the psalmist turns to prayer. He prays, ‘Lord, hold me up and I shall be safe’ (119:117). It is as if he heard the words of the apostle Paul: ‘let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall’ (1Cor 10:12). Love and determination are necessary but this can never be done in our own strength. We must humbly depend upon the Lord at all times. We must pray, ‘Lord, sustain me’ or ‘Lord, uphold me according to your word’ (119:116). The Lord protects us and keeps us safe that we might glorify and enjoy him for ever.

The apostle Paul, like the psalmist, tended to depend on his own strength. He was a man of great courage and determination. He was a man of great intellect. He had the experience of being caught up into Paradise and hearing inexpressible words. But, as he himself writes, lest he become proud in the abundance of these revelations he was given a thorn in the flesh as a reminder that he was weak and needed the grace and power of God at all times. Each of us can admit to the same thing- not the revelations, but of depending on our strength. We love to be self-dependant. Some trust in their physical strength, some in their wealth, some in their heritage and some in their intellect. But we must humble ourselves before the Lord and let him lift us up. Pulling up your socks is one thing, but lifting yourself up by you boot straps is another.

How tragic it is when great servants of the Lord fail to humbly accept the grace of another believer. I met such a man; he was struck down with a debilitating illness, yet he did not ask for prayer. He had prayed for many sick people over the years but did not seek prayer for himself. It is written, ‘if anyone is sick let him call the elders of the church and let them pray for him’ (James 5:14). James goes on, ‘confess your trespasses to one another and pray for one another’ (James 5:16). Humility before men is a reflection of humility before God, is it not? Let us not think that we are super Christians who can do everything in our own strength, even if we have been serving the Lord for many years. Remember the words, ‘take heed lest you fall’, and pray, ‘Hold me up, O Lord’.

**3. Standing in awe of God**

One reason for failing to trust in God’s sustaining grace and power is that we fail to understand and appreciate God’s grace and power. If you feel that you made the decision to follow Jesus you have not understood the grace and power that was needed to save you from your sin. You have not understood the depth of your sin. The Bible says you were ‘dead in trespasses and sins’, and that while we were without strength and still sinners Christ died for us (Eph 2:1, Rom 5:6-8). You never were and never will be good enough or strong enough to save yourself. If you are saved remember it was God who made you alive in Christ; it was God who gave you the faith to believe. Do not depend on your ‘decision’ or your baptism. You must depend on God, on his word and his Spirit.

Another way we fail to trust in God’s sustaining grace and power is to bring God down from the lofty heights he inhabits (Isa 57:15). The psalmist does not ignore the great distance between the Creator and the creature. Preaching the love of God without referring to the fear of God has led to an imbalance in a lot of today’s preaching. God is love, and his love is wonderful, but it is not the emotional, feel-good love the world knows. God’s love is a father’s love, a love that disciplines those who go astray. The Bible says that the fear of God is the beginning of wisdom, so if there is no fear of God where is the wisdom? The Bible tells us to serve God, the God of grace, with reverence and godly fear, ‘for our God is a consuming fire’ (Heb 12:29).

The psalmist knew the fear of God. He knew that God rejected those who strayed from his statutes (119:118). Through Elijah, God dealt decisively with the prophets of Baal. He dealt decisively with the inhabitants of Sodom, as well as the inhabitants of Jerusalem when they rejected him. God hates and rejects cunning and deceitful ways. God will separate the sheep from the goats. God will remove the dross, the slag or the refuse from his world as he looks for and prepares a purified people for himself (119:119).

The psalmist trembled at the truth of God’s judgment. He trembled for fear of God (119:120). Psalm 1 tells us that the ungodly will not stand in the judgment but will perish. Is such teaching part of today’s preaching? Some people hear that they don’t have to change when they follow Jesus. They are told ‘come as you are because Jesus is waiting for you’. It’s like, you are doing Jesus a favour by believing in him, and that Jesus becomes your good mate. This is a far cry from what the psalmist teaches us, and the gospel that the apostle Paul preached.

I conclude with words of James Montgomery Boice: ‘verse 120 should be read carefully and prayerfully and with repentance by every Christian, particularly evangelical Christians of our day. It is speaking of a reverent awe of God, an important element of walking uprightly before him. There is precious little of this spirit today. Instead of being in awe before God, many in our day seem to regard him more as a buddy, which only shows that we do not know much about God at all.’

**Loyalty** Psalm 119:121-128

Is there any particular passage of Scripture that comes to mind when you begin your prayer? Someone said the Lord’s Prayer comes to mind; you may begin with the Lord’s Prayer. I often think of Hebrews 4:12 which speaks of coming boldly before the throne of grace. God is on the throne of thrones, and it is a throne of grace. Another verse that often comes to my mind is found in Psalm 123: as a maid looks to the hand of her mistress, or a servant looks to the hand of his master, so we lift our eyes to the Lord.

In India it is common to have household servants. The servant often becomes close to the family that hires them, depending on them for many things- they may even live in a room in the house. If the servant gets sick the employer pays medical expenses, even for the servant’s family. They may help in arranging a marriage or, to my surprise, be obliged to employ someone from the servant’s family if the servant dies; they may be the only bread-winner in that family.

In this stanza of Psalm 119 the psalmist refers to himself as ‘Your servant’, the Lord’s servant, and that three times (119:122,124,125). Because of this relationship he calls upon the Lord to be surety or guarantor in his struggle against oppressors. He often refers to enemies persecuting him, apparently because of his love for God’s word and commitment to obeying God’s commands.

He was not the first person to suffer for living an upright life, nor the last. Even the Son of God suffered, and was put to death by wicked men while living in perfect obedience to God’s commands. In the book of Acts we see the apostle Paul being persecuted for his belief in Jesus, and his conduct in accord with God’s commands. Some decades ago Boice wrote, ‘The time is probably coming when Christians who hold to absolute standards will be considered criminals’. Is such a time near, or even here.

**1. Surety or guarantor**

Parents sometimes go guarantor for a son or daughter when they are buying a house. They promise, often through a mortgage on their own house, to come to the aid of their child should they get into financial difficulty. A master may do the same thing for a loyal servant. As just mentioned, the servant may get into difficulty because of sickness or possibly a court case, and he comes to his master for help. The psalmist prayed to the Lord, ‘Be surety for your servant for good’ (119:122). He was in great difficulty because of proud oppressors. They were a threat to his life (119:87).

The wicked are proud, but righteous people like the psalmist are humble. He came to the Lord claiming, ‘I have done what is right and just’ (119:121), but this is not boasting. We come boldly or confidently because we come to the God of grace (Heb 4:12). When we confess our sin we know that the Lord is faithful and just to forgive us from all unrighteousness (1John 1:9). The apostle Paul spoke of having a clear conscience before God (Acts 23:2) - a claim which offended the Jewish high priest. It was not a claim to perfection but a humble acknowledgment of forgiveness through the blood of Jesus Christ and a sincere effort to walk according to God’s commands. A servant who knows his master’s love for him and who is loyal to his master can expect his master to go surety for him. God should deliver the psalmist because he is a loving God, because he is God’s servant and because God’s name is at stake. He is praying to the covenant making and covenant keeping God, not to a capricious, self-serving God.

Verse 121, along with verses 121 and 84 are the only verses in this psalm that do not refer to the law of God directly or indirectly. Using synonyms like ‘statutes’, ‘precepts’ and the like, eight in all, the psalmist refers to the law of God that was his delight in every other one of the 176 verses. Some suggest that he lost sight of God and his word for a moment but this is not the only place where he speaks of oppression at the hands of the wicked, and there is no indication in these verses that he has slipped in any way.

Before going on, let us remember that in Jesus Christ we an advocate with the Father (1John 2:2). This same Jesus comes to our defence when Satan, our adversary, brings accusations against us (Rev 12:10). In fact, our accuser has been cast down by our Saviour and Lord so we can, in the name of Jesus say, ‘Get behind me Satan’. Like Jesus we can answer Satan with words of Scripture. We answer the wicked, or agents of Satan, in the same way. ‘Depart from me you evildoers’ (119:115).

**2. Servant’s plea**

These days almost every business has a loyalty program. How many loyalty cards are you carrying around? Years ago I had a frequent flyer card. Whenever I flew I was loyal to this airline. Guess what happened? That airline collapsed! All my frequent flyer points were worth nothing. So much for business loyalty! Are you loyal to your employer? Are you loyal to your family? I hope so, but such loyalty can fail. No one can say, ‘I will never leave you’, but the Lord does, and only the Lord can. Jesus is risen from the dead; he is alive for ever more. You can trust him never to leave you or forsake you.

The psalmist knew the Lord in this way. He knew that the Lord had made him his servant, and that he would be a faithful, loving master. It is in the master’s interest to care for his servant, and in the servant’s interest to faithfully serve his master, even in difficult times. I wonder at the logic of some married people who, when they get into financial difficulty, decide to get a divorce. How will leaving the marriage help their finances? Anyway, the psalmist was not so foolish as to turn away from the Lord when he was set upon by his enemies, bullied and threatened with death. Kidner writes very few words on this passage but what he does write is profound: ‘It is the logic of loyalty to be more devoted the more the pressure grows’.

The psalmist kept on looking to the Lord. In fact, he looked more intently when afflicted; he looked so hard that his eyes got sore. ‘My eyes fail from seeking your deliverance’ (119:123). He was looking into God’s word day and night, and praying day and night seeking help from the Lord. He knew that looking for help in other places was futile. ‘Where does my help come from? My help comes from the Lord, the maker of heaven and earth’ (Ps 121). Where do you go for help when the pressure builds up? Do you, like Jacob and like the psalmist, wrestle with the Lord in prayer saying, ‘I will not let you go until you bless me’ (Gen 32:26)?

The writer of a book on prayer said to a friend that he reckoned a third of American women were on anti-depressants. The friend, who knew the facts, said it was closer to two-thirds. We are blessed to have such good medicines, and most of them have their place, but we come again to the question: who or what do you turn to in times of trouble? The psalmist cried out to the Lord, ‘deal with your servant according to your mercy’ (119:124). We can simply cry out ‘Lord, have mercy’, but do remember your relationship to the Lord.

What do you understand by the name ‘Lord’? Are you just praying into the air, hoping some god or other will hear you? Or are you able to say, ‘Lord, I am your servant’. Three times in these eight verses the psalmist reminded God, and himself, that he was God’s servant. In Jesus Christ we can go further and say we are God’s adopted son or God’s children (Gal 4:6). Parents go to great lengths to help their children when they face trouble in life- even mortgage their own house, as we said! But Jesus said, ‘If you, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him? (Mat 7:11). All you have to do is ask!

Jesus was telling his disciples that God is merciful and good. He will not let his servant or his child be tempted or suffer beyond what they are able to bear. The psalmist was under great pressure but had already acknowledged it was good to be afflicted (119:71). Being under pressure pushed him closer to the Lord. He was clinging even tighter to the Lord in his time of trouble.

In this stanza he asks the Lord to teach him God’s word or statutes, and to give him understanding of the same. The starting point is knowing God’s word. We cannot avoid the task of reading or listening to God’s word. Some people ask God to speak to them in a dream or vision. Is this because they have no time, or are too lazy, to read their Bible? God will not tell you anything new or different from is written in his word- and beware that your dream does not come from another place!

Reading is essential, but it is also essential to understand what you read. The psalmist prayed, again coming humbly before the Lord as a servant; he prayed for understanding of God’s word (119:125). The Bible is not like other books that you read and return to the shelf; it is always on my desk, and open! We must pray for the Holy Spirit to help you understand what we read. You will also benefit greatly from studying the Bible with other believers.

**3. Solid gold**

The psalmist loved God’s word more than gold, ‘yea than much fine gold’ (119:127, 19:10). God’s word is sweeter than honey and more precious than gold. Gold is still the most precious of metals. Some keep their wealth in gold, especially when the stock and property markets are crashing. But if you want your soul to be safe and secure it is God’s word that you need to invest in. Do remember that gold does not fall from the sky; it is found after searching and digging. Jesus spoken a parable about hidden treasure, about the wise man who sold all he had to buy the field with hidden treasure (Mat 13:44).

The psalmist called upon the Lord to act (119:126). Does that seem a bit presumptuous? Is that any way for a servant to speak to his master? Do note the context and why the psalmist is calling upon the Lord to act. It is not just for personal deliverance but because God’s law is begin broken by the wicked, by those who are oppressing him. Such was the nature of the covenant relationship that the servant got upset when his master was derided and disobeyed. How do you feel when workmates start ridiculing your boss behind his back and start ripping him off? Do you ask for more respect and loyalty from your mates? Such was the psalmist’s love for God and his word, such was his sense of loyal service, that he hated those who disregard God and his word to practice and propagate a false way (119:128).

Do not be surprised if you find yourself being ostracised or ridiculed for believing the Bible and obeying God’s commands. We live in evil days, days when people are ‘lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful and unholy’ (2Tim 3:2). Expect to be different if you are following Jesus. Spurgeon writes, ‘the censure of the wicked is a certificate of merit, and that which they sanction [approve] we may justly suspect’. We pray, ‘Your kingdom come’ because we hate the ways of the wicked, of those who despise and disobey the word of God.

**The Light has come** Psalm 119:129-136

As I open the cupboard where the dog biscuits are kept the dog begins to salivate. He loves his food so much he starts jumping for joy and panting as I open the door. At the end of the lane where we take him for a walk is a man who also feeds Joey. When we enter this lane Joey races off to this man’s house; it is a struggle to hold him back.

I am not suggesting you are, or should be, like this with your food! What I am suggesting is that you should be like this when it comes to spiritual food, to the bread of life sent down from heaven. The psalmist describes his longing for God’s word as opening his mouth and panting, not unlike Joey’s longing for his food (119:131).

In the seventeenth stanza of Psalm 119 all the verses begin with the Hebrew letter ‘*pe*’. One Hebrew word beginning with ‘*pe*’ is ‘*pethach*’ which means ‘door’ or ‘unfolding’, depending on the length of the first vowel. Hence the slightly different translation: ‘entrance’ in the NKJV and ‘unfolding’ in the ESV. The first word of the stanza is another ‘*pe*’ word meaning ‘wonderful’ or ‘marvellous’. God’s word is wonderful. Is ‘wonderful’ a word you use to describe the Bible. These days we hear words like ‘wonderful’ and ‘awesome’ used all the time. To call a meal tasty or delicious is not good enough; it has to fantastic or awesome. Everything has become awesome or wonderful. But in the Bible there words are reserved for God (cf.Heb 11:28).

The word ‘wonderful’ is ‘used primarily with God as its subject, expressing actions that are beyond the bounds of human powers and expectations’ (Vine’s dictionary). No man is called wonderful but the Messiah is called Wonderful, Counsellor, Mighty God (Isa 9:6). God delivering his people out of Egypt is a wondrous act. The miracles of Jesus are acts of wonder. This is the sense in which the psalmist uses this word in verse 129. If you start calling your meal wonderful or awesome what are you going to call Jesus? Our dog thinks his meal is wonderful and awesome because that is what dogs live for.

The psalmist never found God’s word boring; he described it as ‘wonderful’ (119:129). It is wonderful because God is wonderful. It is wonderful because of the blessings that flowed into his life when he obeyed God’s wonderful word. We will briefly outline four reasons why the psalmist saw God’s word as wonderful.

**1. It gives understanding to the simple**

I am sure you have heard the story about the truck that got wedged under a bridge. The overloaded truck was so tightly stuck it could not move forward or back. Engineers from universities and government agencies were called in to give advice on removing the truck. One said a powerful tow-truck should be able to dislodge the truck, while another said that parts of the bridge would have be cut away. While they were making their reports a boy came by on his way home from school. He spoke to the driver and soon the truck was on its way; he told him to let some air out of his tyres!

Every day we listen to experts from universities making comments in the media because the media calls them up on any and every issue. These ‘experts’ have a lot of knowledge in their field no doubt, but they often lack wisdom, and sometimes what they see as facts is just theory. While expecting some light from them we often end up more confused on the matter- indeed the ‘experts’ often disagree. You will never be disappointed or left in the dark when you turn to God’s word for enlightenment. Listening to God’s word and walking in obedience to his commands will always bring understanding and blessing into your life.

The psalmist describes the entrance of God’s words as giving light (119:130). If he was living in a tent without windows the only way the light could come in would be when the tent flap was drawn back- this Hebrew word is used of Abraham sitting in the door of his tent (Gen 18:1). Opening his Bible was like opening up his tent. When the light enters we can clearly see what is inside and what needs to be done to clean up the mess.

Sin brought darkness to the human heart. Sin closed the door on God. Sin lead Adam and Eve to hide from God, and then to them being expelled from Paradise and from God’s presence. But God in his mercy did not cast them from his presence for ever. He extended his mercy to Adam and Eve with the promise of redemption. He spoke to Noah and saved him and his family through the flood judgment. He spoke to Abraham and redeemed his descendants from Egypt. He spoke to David, promising redemption through one of his descendants. In these last days God spoken to us by his Son (Heb 1:2). God stands at the door ready to shine his light into your life. Have you found that the entrance of God’s words gives light?

After the death of Jesus, two disciples were walking home to Emmaus. They were talking about what happened to Jesus, how he was condemned by the chief priests and crucified by the Romans. They were sad and confused after all that Jesus had said and done. They heard reports that the tomb was empty and that Jesus was alive. What was going on! The risen Jesus had drawn alongside them as they walked, and listened to their story. They did not recognise him even when he explained all that was written in the Scriptures about Jesus the Christ. But then their eyes were opened and they knew Him (Luke 24:31). The Light flooded their hearts. They understood the gospel and rejoiced.

Has that Light flooded your heart? Are you rejoicing in the Light of the gospel, namely Jesus Christ? If so, you will say with the psalmist that God’s words are wonderful, and the entrance of God’s word has dispelled the darkness from your heart. You will rejoice that it is all so simple that even a child can understand the truth of the gospel. Do not think you have to be highly educated before receiving this light. The highly educated Paul walked in darkness, until brought to his knees before the super-bright light of the risen Jesus. Pray for the educated people in our society. Universities, and even some seminaries, can be places of great darkness.

**2. In it we discover God’s mercy**

‘Look upon me and be merciful to me, as your custom is towards those who love your name’ (119:132). How could the psalmist say it was God’s custom to be merciful? How do we know God is merciful? We do not see his mercy in the creation. We do not learn about mercy from other gods. We know about God’s mercy from the Bible! In fact, we read of his mercy again and again when his people broke his covenant again and again. To Moses God said, ‘I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy’. He told Moses that he was merciful and gracious, and uniquely so (Exod 34:6). No other god showed mercy like the God of Israel. The psalmist knew it was God’s custom to be merciful to his people so he prayed with boldness and assurance for mercy.

God has not changed but we know the magnitude of his mercy even more from reading the NT. God, ‘who is rich in mercy’ (Eph 2:4), sent his only begotten Son into this world to die in order that we might be saved, that we might be made ‘alive together with Christ- by grace you have been saved’ (Eph 2:5). God in his mercy has delivered or redeemed us through the substitutionary death of his Son, Jesus Christ our saviour and Lord.

Jesus himself points us to God’s mercy. In a parable he portrayed a tax -collector humbly praying, ‘God have mercy on me a sinner’ (Luke 18:13). ‘This man’, said Jesus, ‘went home justified’. Justification or salvation from sin and death, is all of God’s mercy. Do you know God to be a merciful God? Have you cried to him for mercy? Do you appreciate that you are here today only because of God’s mercy? Why? Because the wages of sin is sin death but the merciful gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord (Rom 6:23). Without God’s mercy you are dead.

**3. It directs my life**

The Bible is God’s rule book for his children. A family without rules is a disaster. A child left to its own will self-destruct. Children actually want rules, or ‘boundaries’ as they are called these days. As a child of God, the psalmist wanted boundaries to live by: ‘Direct my steps in your word’ (119:133). When God made a covenant with his children he gave them covenant commands. We find these commands in God’s word. God wrote these commands on two stone tablets with his own finger. From the time of Moses, God’s children have had these commands. Jesus summarised them into two positive commands but did not change them.

In previous generations the Ten Commandments served as the code of conduct for all in our society. A new generation thought they could live without rules- and left their children without rules for life. Needless to say they got lost; they wandered the world looking for something or someone to guide them. The new age in which every man does what is right in his own eyes, resulted in chaos. Now we see institutions making up codes of conduct for their members. We see governments writing more and more laws and changing laws because people have rejected the laws of God. Imagine a family, a church, a school, a business or a parliament in which the Bible and its commands were the code of conduct! Dare to imagine if we all obeyed these commands.

The psalmist knew God’s commands are holy and righteous, and that his life would be blessed if he obeyed them. He loved God’s rules and prayed for God to help him in obeying them. He knew he was not able to do so in his own strength. He knew the power of sin and the weakness of the flesh. He knew about the temptations of Satan and the oppression of evil men, men who say you can do what you like because God will never see (Ps 10:11).

Those who think God does not see or know everything need to read the Bible more carefully. Those who think they cannot sin need to do the same. They should pray like the psalmist, ‘Let no sin have dominion over me’ (119:133- we find the same prayer in Psalm 19:13). He knew about besetting or habitual sin. We all have a particular ‘flesh weakness’ that we struggle with. Other people may not know but God knows, and he is able to help you if you ask him. You may or may not be aware that you are asking such a thing when you pray the Lord’s Prayer: ‘deliver us from evil or the evil one, for yours is the kingdom, the power and the glory’. Learn from the psalmist; he was not trying to hide his sin. He wanted victory over all sin and was confident God would help him. As one who looked to the kingdom of God, he wanted to please the God of mercy and glory that he knew and loved.

**4. It reveals God himself**

The fourth reason why God’s words are wonderful is because ‘God himself is in them and because he reveals himself to the one who studies them’ (Boice). ‘Make your face shine upon your servant’ he prayed (119:135). This reminds us of the Aaronic blessing in Numbers 6: ‘The Lord bless you and keep you, the Lord make his face shine upon you’. Psalm 27 speaks of gazing on the beauty of the Lord. Being a child of God is not just about following God’s rules; it is about a personal relationship with God. The Lord is more than a master; he is a Father.

Moses asked to see the glory of God. He could not see the face of God but this was his desire. By meditating on God’s word we get a glimpse of his glory. One day we will see Jesus in his glory (1John 3:2), but for now we see him in the Scriptures. John writes that ‘everyone who has this hope purifies himself just as He [God] is pure’ (1John 3:3). This is exactly what the psalmist is saying and praying.

The psalmist’s love for God and his word was such that he hated seeing men or women misusing God’s holy name or disobeying his holy word. Did such hatred lead to angry outbursts or to violence as seen from zealous Jews and people of other religions? No. This man wept (119:136). Jesus wept over Jerusalem because of the people’s blindness (Luke 19:41). Matthew Henry wrote, ‘The sins of sinners are the sorrows of the saints’. Let us cry to the Lord, cry with tears for unbelievers in our families, in our street, in our nation or wherever they may be.

**Righteous Lord and laws** Psalm 119:137-144

In a study of theology we usually begin with the doctrine of God and move on to the doctrine of man before looking at other doctrines. We look at God himself and at his works. We look at what are called the attributes of God. In Psalm 119 we learn a lot about the attributes of God, or more specifically, the attributes of his word or his law. God’s law is, in fact, a reflection of his attributes. ‘Righteous are you, O Lord, and upright are your judgments’ (119:137)

In any kingdom, the laws are a reflection of the king’s attributes and ideas. A new king is likely to change the law in some way. In the kingdom of God there is no change in the king so the laws do not change. Psalm 119 also teaches us the doctrine of man, in particular man’s relationship to God. As the psalmist opens his heart to God so he opens it to us reading the psalm. We get insight into the relationship between God and his servant. We see that this relationship revolves around the word of God.

In looking at Psalm 119 one commentator (Kidner) draws it all together into a type of theology, looking at the attributes of Scripture, which reflect the attributes of God, and at the attitudes of the psalmist as he struggles to live an upright life in a society that is far from upright. We are going to look at just one stanza in this way, stanza eighteen, which has the Hebrew letter ‘*tsadhe*’ as its acrostic constraint. This alphabet is found in the word ‘*tsedek*’ which means ‘righteous’. You will notice this word occurring in half of the verses in this stanza. It is, of course, a word found throughout the Bible; over five hundred and fifty times, if we include the noun ‘righteousness’. You would have to read a lot of newspapers, lots of history books or lots of fiction before coming across this word.

**1. Attributes of God and his word**

As already pointed out there is a direct relationship between the attributes of God and the attributes of his word. If you read the holy book of another religion you will find it vastly different to the Bible. You will struggle to understand what you read because the words are not the words of a righteous God, in contrast to we have in the Bible. You will find rigmarole or rambling rather than righteousness; you will find confusion rather than clarity. Through reading the Bible the psalmist knew God to be a righteous God.

What does it mean to be righteous? Basically, it means to be right. Since God is the creator of all things, and judge of all people, he is the definition of what is right and just. The Lord is righteous, as the psalmist says; Jeremiah says the same thing (Jer 12:1). God is righteous and his laws are righteous. Those who turn away from God and his laws turn away from a knowledge of what is right and what is wrong.

We have a sense of right and wrong even in our sinful nature, corrupted as it is by sin. Some want to tell us that nothing is right and nothing is wrong- it all depends on the situation and on your feelings. Children are told the answer to a question is right even when it is clearly wrong because their emotions are more important than truth. They grow up being proud and refusing to accept they are ever wrong. If told that they have broken a rule they say the rule is wrong.

I spoke about confusion found in religious books other than the Bible. Such confusion is found schools, parliaments and courts across the land. Rules keep changing so people don’t know what is right and wrong. But this is not the case with God and his word because God’s righteousness is an everlasting righteousness (119:142), and the righteousness of his testimonies is everlasting (119:144). Men who make laws die and their laws are changed. Some argue that the Bible is old so its laws should be discarded or modified for modern man. But the One who gave us the Bible is not dead. God is the everlasting God. If he thought modern man needed a new set of laws he could give us new laws.

The psalmist lived some five hundred years after God gave his covenant commands to Moses, but God saw no need to give him new laws. Jesus lived some fifteen hundred years after Moses and he saw no need to give new laws (Mat 5:18). When he said, ‘But I say to you’ he was reminding the Jews of the essence and spirit of the law. So why do people think we need new laws today - for instance about marriage, or about murder as seen in abortion and euthanasia. God’s law is everlasting. It will remain in force until Judgment Day.

Further attributes of God and his law are faithfulness and truth. God’s word is very faithful (119:138). ‘Your law is true’ (119:142). When the Jews returned from exile, Ezra and Nehemiah had them read the Book of the Law. The Levites said, ‘You [Lord] came down on Mt Sinai and spoke from heaven and gave just ordinances and true laws, good statutes and commandments’ (Neh 9:13). God did not make unnecessary or impossible laws just to catch us out. He did not make laws for the sake of making laws. He made laws for our good. He made laws that would result in blessings when obeyed. God is faithful to his promises and his laws. He will bless those who obey him. Not that he promises a trouble-free life. Blessing does not mean health, wealth, and happiness. The psalmist was far from having such things. But still he knew that God’s word is true and faithful because God the Lord is true and faithful, and he was not going to turn away from God.

God’s word is ‘very pure’ or ‘well tried’ (119:140). God’s word has been thoroughly tested; it has been refined in the fire and is completely free of impurities or error. This does not mean that man has tested it but that God himself has done so. This assures us that no one will ever find any error in God’s word. God has not given us a draft for us edit for him. He has given us the final copy that is without defect and without error. Elsewhere God’s word is described as being like gold, pure, refined gold (119:127).

**2. Attitude of the psalmist**

Knowing this doctrine or truth about God and his word, a wise man like the psalmist says, ‘Your servant loves your law’ (119:140). He says, ‘I do not forget your precepts’ (119:141). He says, ‘your commandments are my delight’ (119:143). Can you understand what he is saying? Do you share his attitude towards God’s word?

The psalmist also expresses some personal anxieties but these do not deter him from obeying God’s law. Times of testing come to all who love God’s law because the world has no love for God’s law. Worldly people will think you strange, even mad. Festus shouted at the apostle Paul, ‘You are mad. You are out of your mind’ (Acts 26:24). Jesus said that if you follow him you will face tribulation (John 16:33), and according to the apostle Paul you will also suffer persecution (2Tim 3:12).

The psalmist was very zealous for God’s law; so much so that he got upset with people who forgot or ignored God’s word (119:139). At times he expressed a righteous anger toward those who disobeyed or despised God’s law, at others times he wept with sorrow (119:136). Zeal is good but, as Paul wrote to the Jews, it must be based on knowledge (Rom 10:2). Zeal must also be properly directed. When Jesus got very zealous it was for God’s house (John 2:16-17). Some Christians express a lot of zeal but the focus is not always on God’s house or God’s law. Sometimes it is about them, about their plans or their traditions. The psalmist’s zeal was not about him but about people who forget God’s word.

Oppression from wicked men threatened to bring him down. Their tongues were sharp and bitter. They may well have made threats of violence also (119:85, 87). The psalmist took these threats to heart saying, ‘trouble and anguish have overtaken me’ (119:143). He was pouring out his heart to God and he was promising not to depart from God’s law. As he prayed he asked for greater understanding; not more revelation but more understanding of what is written in God’s word (119:144). He was leaving things in God’s hands. The Lord says, ‘Come to me all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest’ (Mat 11:28). Some people are very sensitive to anything spoken against them. They are often zealous for the Lord, but sometimes that zeal is actually ‘me’ doing this or that for the Lord. It is not really depending on the Lord. Zeal is good but let it be zeal for God’s righteousness not for self-righteousness.

The psalmist saw himself as ‘small and despised’ (119:141). He is not talking about his stature but about being insignificant in the eyes of the world. We live in a narcissistic world in which people value themselves in relation to other people, successful or famous people who make it into the news. People are open to giving and receiving flattery. They are also open to giving criticism but not so open to receiving criticism. The slightest indication of criticism brings some crashing down. Spurgeon advises, ‘we should not be carried away by flattery so as not to be overcome by shame’.

If you, like the psalmist, feel small and despised in the eyes of others do not be overcome by this feeling. Turn to the Lord, like the psalmist, and be assured that you are not small or despised in the eyes of the Lord. Read about how much the Lord loves you. We must not measure ourselves against other people. Do not covet anything that is your neighbours. The psalmist referred to himself as the Lords’ servant (119:140). A servant looks to their master to supply their needs and for approval. Even more, a child looks their father for approval. A child of God does not look for the approval of men. They do not crumble under a barrage of ridicule or accusations from the wicked. They know that underneath are the everlasting arms of the Lord (Deut 33:27).

If you love the Lord and his word you can be sure that the Lord loves you and will never leave you or forsake you. You do not have to prove yourself to God because he knows your heart anyway. The Bible tells us that God dwells in the high and holy place, and with him who is contrite and humble in spirit (Isa 57:15). He dwells with those who are lowly, those who are despised and rejected by the world. Remember your Saviour and Lord was despised and rejected by men (Isa 53:3, Ps 22:6). So being insignificant and despised in the eyes of the world makes you more like Jesus. Be content with who you are in the eyes of God, and with all that he has done for you, and given you, in Jesus Christ.

**Pointers for prayer** Psalm 119:145-152

As we approach the end of this lengthy psalm the words of the psalmist turn more and more to prayer. All through the psalm we have noted words of prayer but none more personal and desperate than in this stanza. He continues to be afflicted, primarily by wicked men. He is upset at their blatant disregard for God’s holy law. Moreover, they come near to oppress and threaten him. Do you get upset at the wicked and what they do? Why do they persist in promoting immorality and homosexuality? Why do they persist in putting their sport and their parties on the Lord’s Day?

When Israel turned away from God and his commands they became corrupt and immoral, and started oppressing the poor. Do we not see increasing corruption in our increasingly wicked society? We see men pocketing millions at the expense of poor widows waiting for their mail to be delivered. In some countries corruption and oppression is so rife that even the postman asks for a bribe to deliver your letter. We see banks closing branches, making the elderly travel further just so the CEO can be paid another bonus. And we see children suffering in broken homes because their parents refuse to obey God’s commands. Maybe you are not yet oppressed or threatened, but it may not be long.

In the nineteenth stanza of Psalm 119 the psalmist cries out to the Lord. The Hebrew letter governing this stanza is ‘*qoph*’. Hebrew words beginning with ‘*qoph*’ include ‘cry’, ‘before’ and ‘near’. As we learn about prayer from the psalmist we will focus on four points: pleading, perseverance, promises and proximity.

**1. Pleading**

Do you find that you have your daily prayer, and then you have your earnest prayers? We might pray for someone every day but when we hear that they are in great difficulty we pray more earnestly. Or maybe it is when we get into great difficulty ourselves that we pray more earnestly. The psalmist speaks of crying to the Lord with his whole heart. It is literally crying out with a loud voice; but not a ‘put -on’ cry as in a Pharisee-like prayer. It is prayer from the heart. It is heartfelt prayer. This man is not praying for others to hear; he is praying for God hear.

In a previous stanza the psalmist spoke of hating the double- minded man; literally a divided-heart man (119:113). How often you do pray with a divided heart, which we saw at the time is a doubting heart (James 1:6-8)? By a divided heart we are not talking about not knowing what to ask for; should I ask for this or for that? This will often be the case, and so we ask the Lord to show us his will. We do not know what to pray for as we ought but ‘the Spirit himself’ helps us (Rom 8:26). This is okay.

What is not okay is doubting that God will hear and answer your prayer. What is not okay is doubting that God can deliver what you ask. What is not okay is doubting that God will answer your prayer because you are a sinner. For sure you must confess you sin when entering into God’s presence. But remember that it was while we were still sinners that Christ died for us (Rom 5:8). It is not because we are good that God answers our prayer; it is because of his grace. God is not like Santa Claus.

The earnest plea of the psalmist was, ‘Hear me, O Lord!’ and, ‘Save me!’ (119:145,146). Earnest prayers are usually short prayers. When children really want something they don’t beat around the bush making you guess what they want. They come straight out with, ‘Mum, can I go to my friends place, please, please’ or ‘Dad, please get me a cricket bat, please’. You might even hear, ‘Mum, if you really love me you will let me go’. Prayer is all about your relationship with God. Do you really know God and his covenant love? (119:149). Do you believe God loves you? Children plead with their father because they know their father loves them. You do not see them pleading with a stranger in the same way.

The cry, ‘Save me!’ is probably a cry for God to save him from immediate enemies; they were threatening him with violence. But it can also be understood as a cry to be saved from our arch enemy, Satan. In warning the Ephesians of the ‘wiles of the devil’ the apostle Paul urged the believers to pray always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit (Eph 6:18). The Philippian jailer was speaking to Paul and Silas when he earnestly asked, ‘What must I do to be saved’. Knowing God’s word, they answered him, ‘Believe on the Lord Jesus and you will be saved, you and your household’ (Acts 16:30-31). You will find the answer to your prayer in God’s word, or it will come to you while you are meditating on God’s word. Do not sit waiting for a dream or a vision!

As the psalmist cried to the Lord he confessed his sin and promised to keep God’s commandments (119:145,146). ‘If we cherish sin in our hearts the Lord will not hear’ (Ps 66:18). This is another aspect of a divided heart; not only a heart divided by doubt or lack of faith (James 1:6-7), but a heart compromised by unconfessed or cherished sin. We must come before the Lord with clean hands and a pure heart if we want him to hear our prayer (Ps 24:4). It is not necessary, though not wrong, to fast or to make a vow when pleading with the Lord, but it is necessary to be walking in obedience to God’s commands.

**2. Perseverance**

A few weeks ago the children were learning about perseverance in prayer. They read the parable of the persistent widow in Luke 18. Jesus was teaching his disciples not to lose heart but to persist in prayer. In the parable a powerless widow pleads with a proud, unjust judge for justice. He takes no interest whatsoever in her case but she keeps pleading and he finally grants her request. God is neither proud nor unjust, but the point of parable is that persistence pays off. Persistence proves you are serious about your request. Again, a child knows that by pleading every day with his dad he will get what he wants- providing it is not something he should not have. If you really want the Lord to do something you will plead with him every day- indeed, night and day!

The psalmist got up early in the morning to cry for help. He stayed up late crying for help (119:147,148). Earnest prayer consumed his life. Paul wrote of being steadfast in prayer and of praying without ceasing (Rom 12:12, 1Thess 5:17). The psalmist would have had to work as we do, but there were still many hours in the day when he could pray. When we are earnest in prayer we find time to pray. It when we are half-hearted in prayer that we struggle to find time to pray.

The psalmist got up early to pray and to meditate on God’s word. From God’s word he learnt about God and he learnt how to pray. In God’s word he found promises from God; these brought him comfort and assurance. God’s word gave him a different perspective on his problem with the wicked, their ways and their oppression.

**3. Promises**

Just as we to worship God according to what he has revealed in his word, so we pray according to what he has revealed in his word. Indeed, Jesus gave us a model prayer, telling us to pray to our Father in heaven (Mat 6:9), and to ask for things in his (Jesus) name (John14:14). We pray to our Father knowing he loves us with a steadfast or covenant love (119:149). God has shown his love for us in giving us his only begotten Son to die in our place. ‘This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us’ (1John 3:16 NIV).

When Jesus took the cup he said, ‘This cup is the new covenant in my blood which is shed for you’. God sealed his covenant with his elect in the blood of his only begotten Son. This is the confidence we have when we cry to the Lord in prayer: that he hears us, and that in his love he will answer us (1John 5:14). However he answers our prayer it will be for our good. God is powerful to bless and he will bless his covenant children.

The other attribute of God, which came to the psalmists mind as he prayed, is justice. ‘O Lord, revive me according to your justice’ (119:149). The parable Jesus told was about an unjust judge giving the widow justice. If an unjust judge eventually gives justice how much more will the God of justice give justice to us when we ask him? David suffered injustice at the hands of King Saul for years. But he kept on praying. He did not take matters into his own hands even when tempted to do so. He committed his ways to the Lord. He prayed in the knowledge that, ‘Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord’ (Deut 32:35, Rom 12:19). The apostle Paul spent two years in prison praying for justice. His enemies wanted him dead even though he had done no wrong. The Lord preserved him and he got to Rome.

A further confidence the psalmist had was that God’s word is unchanging (119:152). If you are not absolutely certain about the truth of the Bible, if you think science casts doubt over key parts of the Bible, you will not be able pray with the confidence of the psalmist. He believed every word that is written in the Bible. He believed what Jesus said: ‘Heaven and earth will pass away but my words will never pass away’ (Mat 24:35). Jesus was speaking about the law, the word of God (Mat 5:18).

**4. Proximity**

A popular hymn, in the days when hymns were sung, was: ‘Nearer my God to thee, nearer to thee’. Prayer is often spoken of a drawing near to God. We lift out voice in prayer, not because God is far away or because he is deaf but because we cry from the heart. God dwells in the high and holy place, but also with those who are humble and contrite in heart (Isa 57:15). When we pray God looks on our heart. When we pray the Lord draws near to us. ‘The Lord is near to all who call upon him, to all who call upon him in truth’ (Ps 145:18). Our prayer should indeed be, ‘nearer my God to thee, nearer to thee’.

As the psalmist prayed he felt the nearness of God: ‘You are near, O Lord’ (119:151). Do you feel the nearness of God when get down on your knees to pray? If we truly felt that God was near to us when we prayed would we not be all the more eager to pray, and the more earnest in our prayers?

Before he prayed the psalmist was more conscious of the nearness of his enemies (119:150). The wicked were surrounding him; they were pressing in on him. They were not obeying God. The Jewish leaders crying out for Paul to be killed had no concern for God’s law. The wicked lie and steal and murder. They have no regard for truth or justice. But as the wicked got nearer, threatening the psalmist’s life (119:85, 87), so the Lord drew near promising to deliver him. When Paul was almost murdered by the Jewish mob, then thrown into prison and almost scourged by the Romans, the Lord came and stood by him in a night vision. (Acts 23:11).

You may feel discouraged, not because enemies are threatening you but because friends as deserting you. You may feel abandoned and alone in this world. If so, remember the Lord’s promise to be near to those who call upon him. He hears your prayer and will grant you the desires of your heart.

**Let God be true and every man a liar** Psalm 119:153-160

How is truth established in our society? Some things are objectively true because they can be observed; the sun, for example. A person who denies objective truth is classed as mentally ill. But many truths are not directly observable; God, for example. Even so, the Bible says that God can and should be known from his works (Rom 1:20). The origin of the species through the process of evolution is not observable yet it is widely held to be true. How did evolution come to be accepted as truth by the majority? We might look at the process by which man-made climate change is becoming accepted as truth. It is not by observable facts, but by the process of majority opinion. If the vast majority say it is true then it is accepted as truth.

Democracy is good in terms of governance but not for determining truth. Some scientists have bravely stood against popular opinion, and been vindicated through repeatable experiments and observation. They are brave because they are denied funding, are thrown out of universities and ostracised by their peers- until they receive a Nobel Prize! Popular opinion is not a reliable way of establishing truth.

The psalmist found himself being opposed and afflicted by many enemies; he was vastly outnumbered (119:157). The prophet Elijah stood alone against King Ahab and all the people of Israel who had turned away from the Lord to worship Baal. On the mountain it was him against four hundred and fifty prophets of Baal. How could Elijah stand against the majority? In the face of such opposition did he doubt the truth? What would you have done in such a situation? We know that many in the church succumbed to majority opinion about Darwinian evolution. They are succumbing again today to ‘majority opinion’ about homosexual marriage. The promoters of such immorality do not want to look at the facts regarding the homosexual lifestyle and the impact of this evil on children. They just keep saying that this is what the majority want.

For many, the truth of the Bible also comes under this test of popular opinion. People think science had proved the Bible wrong. But the Bible itself declares that every word in it is true. A proper study of science will show it has not proven any of the Bible to be wrong. If popular opinion is that the Bible is not true it is because of ignorance and sin. With regard to sin being universal and God dealing with sin in a just manner, Paul writes, ‘Let God be true but every man a liar’ (Rom 3:4). Like Paul and like the psalmist, we confidently declare that God’s word is true. Let us listen to the psalmist and learn from him as we stand against enemies of truth as it is revealed in the Bible.

Here in the twentieth stanza of Psalm 119, the ‘*resh*’ stanza, we find the psalmist looking to the Lord to revive him while in the midst of persecution from many enemies. He looks to the Lord while loathing the wicked. He knows his life is from God and that God’s word is true in its entirety.

**1. Look on my affliction**

In the previous stanza we heard the psalmist crying out to the Lord as the wicked drew near. As they drew near he did not fear but cried to the Lord for help. He was a man who feared God, not man. He feared the One who could destroy both body and soul in hell, not those who could only kill the body (Mat 10:28).

He cried to the all-powerful God to deliver him. Defend and vindicate me ‘for I do not forget your law’ (119:153). He wanted the Lord to be his advocate, to stand beside him and represent him in court. He was upholding the truth of God’s word in an evil society. Although vastly outnumbered, he knew that if God came to his defence he would be victorious. His struggle was not something personal but for the truth of God’s word.

The Lord came to the aid of Elijah when he was making a stand against King Ahab and the people of Israel. God answered Elijah with fire from heaven. God also came to the aid of Elisha when a vast Syrian army surrounded the town of Dothan. Elisha’s servant was overcome with fear, but not Elisha. He told the servant, ‘Do not fear for those who are with us are more than those who are with them’ (2Kings 6:16). When you stand on the word of God you never stand alone. We read that God struck the Syrian soldiers with blindness.

The wicked men who hated Jesus, the Son of God, thought they were victorious when they had him crucified. They gloated as they watched him die on the cross. But this was not the end. In the most amazing of all God’s vindications, he raised Jesus from the dead after three days. The giver of life could not be destroyed. He defeated death itself when he rose from the dead. He was not just revived in the way the psalmist speaks about but was resurrected from the dead.

**2. Life from God**

The psalmist’s enemies were many, and they were hostile towards him. They threatened to bring him down. They had dug pits for him (119:85). This was probably literal although persons can be destroyed without violence. Concerned for his life, he cried out to the Lord to save him. He knew the Lord was powerful to save because he read of God’s salvation in the Bible. Three times in this stanza we find the words ‘revive me’, or in other translations, ‘give me life’ (ESV) or, ‘preserve my life’ (NIV).

The wicked did not know God’s salvation because they do not seek or obey the law of the Lord (119:155). The wicked have no hope. It is no surprise to hear that the ungodly are increasingly taking their own lives. As people turn away from God we will see the call for euthanasia or assisted suicide increase, and become one of involuntary euthanasia; we will see the rate of suicide increasing. Despite the services offered to people contemplating suicide the tragedy continues. Why? Because the cause is not being addressed. The psalmist calls upon the Lord, ‘let me live’ not, ‘let me die’.

His prayer for the Lord to revive him was based on his knowledge of God, of His word and His ways. He said, ‘revive me according to your word or promise’ (119:154), ‘revive me according to your judgments or laws’ (119:156), and ‘revive me according to your steadfast love’ (119:159). He knew God had the power to save him from harm and danger because he is the sovereign, omnipotent God of all that exists. With God nothing is impossible. When King Nebuchadnezzar threatened Daniel’s friends with death in the fiery furnace they replied, ‘Our God, whom we serve, is able to deliver us from the fiery furnace’ (Dan 3:17). Note the reference to serving our God, their personal, powerful and loving God.

Daniel’s friends were absolutely certain that God was able to deliver them; they were not double-minded doubters. They were not testing God, saying that if he saves us we will serve him. They were serving God because they believed his word. Whether or not God chose to save them from the furnace was another matter. Their faith was not based upon what God did for them but upon his unchanging word. Theirs was not a fickle faith but a faith with foundations in the word of God.

In addition to God’s power to apply his rules in judgment we also learn of God’s steadfast or covenant love (119:159). In the context of this covenant the psalmist prays for the Lord to revive him. Covenant love is a two way street. God initiated this covenant, and he is faithful to his covenant, but he demands faithfulness on the part of the one he loves. Jesus said, ‘If anyone loves me he will obey my commands’ (John 14:23). The psalmist expressed his love for God and his word even as he prayed to be revived under the terms of the covenant.

**3. Loathes the wicked**

The psalmist’s love for God and his word led to a loathing or disgust for those who dismissed and disobeyed God’s word (119:158,159). If we truly love someone we will not sit back while they are ridiculed or abused. We will not remain silent when we see God’s name being dishonoured or blasphemed. We do not become violent like those in other religions, of course. They do so because their god cannot defend himself. We pray to the Almighty God to deal with the wicked according to his word. We pray that he will preserve the life of the innocent for the sake of his glory. We pray that men and women would listen to God’s word and turn from their wicked ways and live.

‘Great/many are your tender mercies, O Lord’ (119:156). The trouble with the wicked is that they forget the blessings they enjoy from God’s hand. Sometimes, like God’s people of old, they attribute God’s blessings to other gods and then worship other gods. In our day they attribute God’s blessings to themselves and the cleverness of human beings- this is what we call humanism. Modern man thinks he can solve all his problems through science and technology. He is blind to the fact that we all die, and to the tragedy that so many are living such miserable lives that they are taking their own life. We have clever men telling people how to take their own life. Is this the best science can do? Not long ago a man in Germany was deciding who was fit to live and who was not. Will this happen again? Failure to acknowledge God as the giver of life means our society is heading in this direction.

**4. Let God be true and every man a liar**

I was reading of the tragic decline in the Church of Scotland in recent years, especially since they approved homosexual practices in the church. But the rot set in long ago when the truth of God’s word was questioned in the light of Darwin’s theory of evolution, and the associated liberalism that entered the church. When the foundation is eroded the structure must eventually fall. The foundation of the church is the word of God, not the teaching or the traditions of men. We are members of God’s house which is built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, and Jesus Christ himself as the chief cornerstone (Eph 2:20). No other foundation can be laid (1Cor 3:11).

The teaching of the prophets and the apostles, and of Jesus Christ himself, is all here in the word of God. We do not have to go searching behind this word or outside this word; we do not have to go looking for truth in other religions or in our traditions. God’s word is truth, as the psalmist keeps telling us (119:142, 151, 160), and as Jesus himself said (John 17:17). Here in verse 160 the psalmist says, ‘the entirety of your word is truth, and every one of your righteous judgments forever’. Every part of God’s word, every word of God from Genesis to Revelation is true, absolutely true. It always has been and always will be because it is the inspired word of God (2Tim 3:16).

The closing words of the last three stanzas focus on the unchanging and everlasting nature of God’s word (119:144, 152, 160). Our world may be changing but God does not change. Our knowledge may be increasing at a rapid rate but remember, it is only knowledge of the world that God made. Men think they are clever when they discover something about this world or this universe but let us remember God has known about it since he made the world. Men think they are clever when they find an apparent error in the word of God but they will not enjoy the limelight for long.

There is a story about a liberal scholar preaching that the Red Sea which Moses crossed was just a shallow swamp, a puddle as it were. As the preacher went, on a man at the back of the church jumped up saying, ‘Praise the Lord’. The speaker asked what it was that he was so excited about. The man said, ‘Praise the Lord that he drowned the whole Egyptian army in a puddle’.

The psalmist loved God’s word because it is the word of God, because it is true in its entirety, because it is unchanging, and because it is the word of life. Despite majority opinion and threats upon his welfare and his life he would not turn from this word. If only our previous generation of church leaders had clung to the word of God as the psalmist did, and not given way to liberal teaching and the theory of evolution, we might not be seeing a decline in the church in Scotland or here in Australia. May the Lord be pleased to bring revival in our day? Revival will necessitate a return to the Bible as the inspired and infallible word of God, the only rule to direct us how we may glorify and enjoy him.

**Loving God’s law and keeping it** Psalm 119:161-168

In the book on prayer that I am reading there is a story of a woman struggling with unanswered prayer. She had leukaemia and her three children ended up in trouble with the law, abusing drugs and alcohol. The writer said that while sympathetic with this woman he would have liked to ask her about how she views prayer. He noted that she talked about prayer as something separate from her life. He concluded, ‘prayer life is inseparable from obeying, loving, waiting and suffering’. For many prayer is about asking God to give something, or do something they want, while they continue to live in the way they choose. They may be praying but not reading the Bible.

The world tells us that we are who we are and cannot change- it is all in our DNA. When this idea meets with the demands of God’s word to walk according to his holy law, what is the outcome? The psalmist tells us what the outcome must be. He speaks of living God’s law and obeying God’s law. He speaks of the Lord knowing everything we do and say and think- so much for those secrets! It is with this understanding, it is in the context of a covenant relationship with God that he prays, asking the Lord to help him.

We have come to the penultimate stanza of this great psalm. This is the twenty first stanza, the ‘*shin*’ stanza. Every verse begins with the letter *‘shin*’, so we have the well-known word ‘*Shalom*’, meaning ‘peace’ (119:165). Another ‘*shin*’ word is that for ‘spoil’ or ‘plunder’, a better translation than ‘treasure’ that we have in the NKJV (119:162). This stanza has a more positive outlook than those preceding it, although the psalmist does remind us that he is being persecuted. In many of the psalms you will find the ending more positive than the rest of the psalm; look at the closing words of Psalms 69 and 22. This ‘*shin*’ stanza focuses firstly on praise, then on peace and hope, and finally on practicing or keeping God’s precepts.

**1. Praise**

The situation of the psalmist has not changed. Enemies, including princes or kings, continue to persecute him without cause. As previously noted, it seems they hated him because he was committed to keeping God’s law. He hated the way they openly disobeyed God’s law but there is no indication that he rebuked them for this. Despite persecution, the psalmist was not afraid of such men. It was the Lord he feared. ‘My heart stands in awe of your word’ (119:161). His situation had not changed but his heart had. Through prayer and meditation on God’s word he saw things differently; he came to a position of quiet trust in the Lord. He turned to praising God for the comfort and strength he found in God’s word.

This man praised God because God’s word was such a blessing to him. He rejoiced in it like a person finding great treasure, or literally, like a soldier taking home lots of spoil from a battle. The focus is on the spoil not on the battle in which it was obtained. Spurgeon writes, ‘The profits made in searching the Scriptures were greater than trophies of war’. We could liken his rejoicing to that of the gambler getting a jackpot or winning the lottery- not that we condone gambling.

God’s word did not make this man rich with money but rich with wisdom. Solomon knew the value of wisdom; this is what he asked for when he became king. He asked for wisdom, not long life or riches for himself (1Kings 3). The psalmist was also a man who valued wisdom above riches and long life. Do you find yourself being influenced by the ungodly as they go after the things of this world? Or do you hear the words of Jesus saying, ‘seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness and all these things will be added to you’ (Mat 6:33).

The psalmist was so busy praising God that he had no time to go chasing after the treasures and pleasures of the world. He loved the Lord and the Bible more than the things of this world, including friends and family, and even himself. ‘Seven times a day I praise you because of your righteous law’ (119:164). We understand ‘seven’ as the number of completeness. In his heart he was praising the Lord continually. He enjoyed times of outward praise. He loved going to the house of God to praise him in the Assembly of God’s people. He praised God because of his righteous laws. These laws reflect the Lord himself. These laws guide us in the path of life. It is through meditation on God’s word and praising him that we move closer to the Lord. We are drawn into the place of rest, the place of peace.

**2. Peace and hope**

The Hebrew word for peace is ‘*shalom*’. It is beautiful word. It is a beautiful way to greet people. But peace is very elusive- not just peace in the Middle-East but, above all, peace in one’s heart. People cry out for peace but cannot find it. Why? Because they look in the wrong places. It is as the Lord says, ‘there is no peace for the wicked (Isa 48:22). Yet the psalmist speaks of great peace coming to the heart and life of those who love God’s law (119:165) - it is not those who keep God’s law but those who love God’s law. He is not talking to legalists striving to keep the law. Nor is he talking to antinomians who reject the law to do their own thing. I wonder if the woman we spoke of earlier loved God’s law in the way the psalmist did. She had a lots to pray about but was getting confused and upset because God did not seem to answering her prayers. She did not seem to be enjoying peace in her heart.

In the Bible we read of a child being born who is the Prince of Peace (Isa 9:6). The Son of God has come into the world as the Prince of Peace. He says, ‘My peace I give to you; not as the world gives’ (John 14:27). We have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus spoke these words while telling his disciples that those who love him will obey his commands, and that the Holy Spirit will come upon them; it is always good to look at verses in context.

Peace is part of the package, part and parcel of the covenant of grace. God loved us while we were still sinners. He chose us, called us to himself and made a covenant with us. As his adopted children we call him our Father; we worship and adore the most awesome and wonderful Father. We love God’s commands because they right, because they are good for us and keep us from stumbling as we walk in this fallen world. May you know and enjoy the peace of God in your heart today. You will if you love the Lord and his word.

Next to peace, or along with peace, every human heart needs hope. Without hope we die. Many live with worldly hopes, which is better than no hope at all. They hope for a happy family, a new house, a new car, a new job. These hopes may or may not be realised but they are hopes. However, when it comes to the end of life they have no hope. Those who think about the big picture see the emptiness of life, and indeed the ultimate hopelessness of life. It is as the Bible says, without God and without hope (Eph 2:12).

We see people reaching out in hope, a vain hope, for life on other planets. It they reached out to God, the creator of all that exists, they would have a sure and certain hope like the psalmist. He hoped for God’s salvation. He, like everyone, knew that this planet is doomed, but unlike many, he knew the truth: it is doomed because of sin. He knew that only God can save us from sin and death and so he cried out to God to save him. He comes to God knowing who God is and knowing about salvation from reading God’s wonderful word.

**3. Putting words into practice**

God’s commandments are not simply to be read or hung on our wall. They are not in the Bible to be admired as great wisdom or philosophy. We are to look at them, to pray for understanding and pray for the Lord to help us obey them. We are to be doers of the word, not hearers only (James 1:22). We do not just look into the mirror but act upon what we see. When we understand God’s law as being given in the context of the covenant of grace we will love these commands. We will find them a delight not a burden. The psalmist said he loved God’s law exceedingly (119:167). Do you say the same thing?

‘If anyone loves me he will keep my word’ said Jesus (John 14:23). We keep the commands out of love for Jesus. We keep the commands out of love for God, who sent his only begotten Son to the cross for us. On another occasion Jesus said to Jews who believed in him, ‘If you abide in my words you are my disciples indeed. And you shall know the truth and the truth will set you free’ (John 8:31-32). The psalmist would have replied ‘Amen’, but the Jews listening to Jesus got very upset. They said they were free because of their heritage, because they were Jews- a fatal misunderstanding of the Bible. ‘We have never been slaves to anyone; we are free to do as we like’ is the protest of many when told they are sinners.

If they read God’s word they would understand what sin is. They would understand, as the psalmist understood, that God sees and knows all about them: ‘all my ways are before you’ (119: 168). God does not need to search out phone records or internet usage to find out what we have been doing. He is the all-knowing God, the God who knows are very thoughts. We read in the Bible about the word of God being living and powerful, like a sword. We read that it is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart (Heb 4:12). God not only knows what you do but knows why. Nothing is hidden for the sight of the one who will ultimately judge each one of us. The sooner we understand this, the sooner we will humble ourselves before the Lord, and the sooner he will forgive our sin and lift us from the depths of guilt and despair. This is how Jesus sets us free, free from ourselves and from the burdens we bear.

Jesus says, ‘Come to me all you who are weary and burdened and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls’ (Mat 11:28-29). Is this not what the psalmist found, rest for his soul? He loved God and his word and so he had great peace in his heart. From his heart he praised God day and night. From his heart he obeyed God’s word. Through meditating on God’s law he drew nearer to God. As he drew nearer to God he saw his sin more clearly but at the same time he saw God’s love and grace more clearly. Jesus speaks of being yoked to him which means being close to him indeed. Being yoked to Jesus means you learn from Jesus, it means you have someone to help you when you feel faint. It means you will not stumble and fall.

You have this wonderful invitation from Jesus; what is your response? Are you going to proudly hang on to your burdens until you fall, fall into the grave? Only a fool would reject this offer from Jesus, the offer of rest for your soul, the offer of hope, the offer of life, life everlasting. It is a free offer. Jesus has paid the cost of your salvation. He simply says, ‘come to me’, come and be yoked to the one who never sinned, the one who died for you but is now risen from the dead and will lead you all the way to heaven.

**Sheep gone astray** Psalm 119:169-176

Haman hated Mordecai the Jew and threatened to kill him and all Jews in the Persian Kingdom. He bribed the king into signing a decree to annihilate the Jews. Esther the queen was a Jew. Mordecai informed her of the decree and asked her to go and plead with the king for her life, and the lives of the Jews. But no one could even approach the king unless called. To do so meant death, unless the king held out his golden sceptre (Esther 4:11).

Does this story have anything to teach us about approaching God in prayer? Many would shrink from such a comparison but our God is holy and dwells in unapproachable light (1Tim 6:16); and we are sinners are we not? How can we in our filth come before the King of kings who is pure and holy? Sure, we call God our Father as Jesus tells us to. And we can approach the throne of grace through Jesus our mediator. In the name of Jesus we can come to God at any time, but never forget that you are coming before ‘the High and Lofty One who inhabits eternity, and whose name is Holy (Isa 57:15).

We come to the last stanza of this great psalm, Psalm 119. It is the twenty-second stanza and the last because ‘*tau*’ is the last letter of the Hebrew alphabet. We expect the closing stanza to summarise and conclude what has gone before. As a psalm in which the Lord is petitioned for help in time of need, we might expect it to end on a high note, a note of praise and thanks for answered prayer, and this is what we find. We find this in many psalms. As the psalmist cries to the Lord with his Bible open in front of him, he gets more understanding of his problem. He is drawn nearer to the Lord and the Lord lifts him up. He is able to praise the Lord. Is this what you find when you pray and meditate on God’s word? Do you find worries and fears disappear, and peace returning to your heart?

The closing stanza begins with a cry for salvation, and then we see the psalmist engage in sincere worship as he receives strength from the Lord to persevere. The final verse, somewhat unexpectedly, throws in the lost sheep metaphor, familiar to us from the teaching of Jesus.

**1. Salvation or deliverance**

Some people think they know everything about everything- or they give that impression! The psalmist read and meditated on God’s word day and night but still he cried out to the Lord for understanding. Sometimes he seems rather bold, like Job in his prayer, but boldness is how we are to come before the Lord; not bold because of our own merit but bold because of the covenant relationship we have through the Lord Jesus Christ. He was not like the Pharisee who proudly thanked the Lord that he was not like other men and then listed his good works. The psalmist was more like the tax-collector crying out for mercy; ‘deliver me according to your word’ (119:170).

Boldness in prayer does not mean coming before the Lord as a ‘buddy’ or ‘mate’ either. It means knowing our place before Almighty God and knowing his steadfast love towards us ; ‘God is a Spirit, infinite, eternal and unchangeable, in his being wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth’ (Shorter Catechism Q4). Our understanding and wisdom does not even make it onto the scale when it comes to God’s infinite knowledge and wisdom. Referring to God’s thoughts, David writes, ‘How great is the sum of them! If I should count them they would be more in number than the sand’ (Ps 139:17-18).

Those who humbly admit their lack of knowledge are open to learning but those who are proud will never learn. How often in our prayers do we start telling the Lord what is best for us? How often are we like the man James writes about, saying, ‘Today or tomorrow I will go to such and such a place’ (James 4:13)? We make our plans and then we ask the Lord to bless us in doing what we have decided ourselves to do. The wise person will seek God’s will because God knows much more than we do. So how can we know God’s will? By reading his word and asking him!

From reading God’s word we learn that the Lord is powerful to deliver or save us. This is actually the second petition (119:170). Like all fallen men and women, the psalmist needed ‘to know God and to be saved from sin’ writes Boice. The great story of the Exodus is the story of God delivering his people from the grasp of the most powerful man on earth. There are other accounts of the Lord delivering his prophets from the hands of the wicked. These historical accounts of physical deliverance from enemies point to spiritual deliverance from slavery to sin and Satan.

The psalmist was aware of his sin, as the closing verse of the psalm shows. He cried out for salvation from his enemies but they were not his final enemy. The final enemy is death from which only the Lord can deliver. Death came into the world because of sin- as written on the second page of the Bible. And on the third page God declared that ‘the seed of the woman would bruise the head of the serpent’ (Gen 3:15). The psalmist was crying to the Lord many years before the coming of Jesus but he believed God’s promise of Messiah or Deliverer.

**2. Sincere and right worship**

We worship the Lord because of who he is and what he has done. We worship in response to his mercy. We worship because the Lord tells us to worship. We do not worship in order to get things from God; worship is not about arm-twisting. We cannot earn our salvation by good works, or even good worship. We are to worship God with a sincere and thankful heart. Our worship must be focussed on God’s word; this is what we see in verses 171-172. Worship is about pleasing God by glorifying his name. ‘Man’s chief end is to glorify God and enjoy him forever’ (Shorter Catechism Q1). To please God we must worship in a way that is acceptable to him, as our Confession reminds us (Westminster Confession of Faith XXI.1), and as we learn from the OT. Men like king Uzziah learnt the hard way not to go worshipping God as he liked (2Chron 26:16-21).

There is a lot of confusion about worship these days; as there was before the Reformation. The Reformers not only reformed doctrine, they reformed worship. Calvin insisted on the pulpit being at the centre of the church with a Bible on it, because God’s word must be at the centre of services of worship. But what do we see today? We see the pulpit and the Bible being moved aside for drums and guitars. Many services begin with a couple of people up the front singing with the backing of loud music in what is called ‘worship’; what comes after this is not called worship. To the extent that ‘lips’ or ‘tongues’ are involved it may just be a few people, and with little input from God’s word.

The audience enjoys such ‘worship’ but what about the Lord? Jesus warns against praying with vain repetition like the pagans; can we include singing with vain repetition under this warning? When this type of worship came into churches people said, ‘why should the devil have all the good music’? The psalmist did not have the devil teaching him how to worship; he had God’s word.

When we look into the Bible we will discover what sort of worship is acceptable to the Lord. The psalmist says, ‘My tongue shall speak of **your word**’ (119:172). Has not God given us words that are pleasing to him? Reading the Bible was central to OT worship, and to worship in the NT church. When asked about the place of worship, Jesus told the woman about worship that the Father is looking for: ‘God is Spirit and those who worship must worship in spirit and truth’ (John 4:25).

Because God is Spirit we dare not represent him with images. We worship him in spirit or with our heart, but with our minds also; we do not use language we cannot understand. We worship God in truth; how do we know it is true if we cannot understand what we are singing or saying. The psalmist has repeatedly told us that God’s word is truth (119:142, 151, 160). Jesus said, ‘Your word is truth’ (John 17:7). Jesus is the truth. Our worship must be acceptable and pleasing to the Lord. If this is the case it will be edifying to us because we are obeying God’s word.

**3. Strength from the Lord**

It is one thing to know God’s word, to know how we are to live in the right way before God, but another to actually do so. The psalmist confessed his need for help, help from the Lord. His most immediate need was help to stand against his enemies, but in this stanza he is speaking about salvation more broadly, salvation as spiritual salvation. To rightly worship the Lord he needed God’s help. In praising the Lord he asked that God’s judgments or rules help him (119:175). God’s word is the channel through which God helps us. Do you ask the Lord to help you when you come to worship him?

The apostle Paul realised his inability to obey God’s law without God’s help. As a Pharisee he thought he was keeping the law; he was blameless as far as outward keeping of the law was concerned. We have mentioned the Pharisee boastfully praying about his fasting and tithing. But like the tax-collector, and like the psalmist, Paul cried out for mercy and for help. He knew the law was holy, just and good but he struggled to keep this law. ‘The good that I will to do I do not do’ (Rom 7:19). How does he resolve this difficulty? ‘Who will deliver me from this body of death’ he cries. And the answer is, ‘Jesus Christ our Lord’! (Rom 7:24-25). The Lord is my helper. He helps me stand against the enemy. He helps me live in obedience to his commands. He helps me to praise and worship him acceptably, with reverence and godly fear.

**4. Sheep**

The closing verse of the psalm is somewhat unexpected with its reference to a lost sheep. While the rest of the stanza covers familiar themes and draws the psalm to a conclusion, this verse is unlike any other in the psalm. But it is like others in the Bible. Isaiah writes, ‘we all like sheep have gone astray’ (Isa 53:6). Even so, some commentators think this cannot be referring to the psalmist departing from the Lord and the path of righteousness. In the words of Leupold, this would make ‘all the profession of loyalty met with in the psalm a mockery’. Such writers think this verse means that the psalmist somehow finds himself beyond the shepherd’s care. But he actually says, ‘I have gone astray’, not ‘I suddenly found myself lost’.

The psalmist makes many claims to love and delight in God’s word, and to being committed to following God’s law, but he never claims to be without sin or that he is in any way perfect. Martin Luther spoke of ‘believers in Christ being at once both justified and a sinner’. He wrote of the entire life of a believer being one of repentance because we continue to sin. The person who walks closest to the shepherd is the one who knows how susceptible he is to going astray.

Jesus’ parable about the lost sheep in Luke 15, and his teaching about being the good shepherd who gives his life for the sheep in John 10, is consistent with the words of the psalmist- or the psalmist words are consistent with those of Jesus. He confessed that he had gone astray like a lost sheep and prays for the Lord to seek him because he is the Lord’s servant. Jesus said he came to seek and to save the lost (Luke 19:10). The psalmist knew the Lord as such a shepherd, a good shepherd who seeks his sheep when they go astray. In the words of a hymn by Richard Mant

*Though like a sheep estranged I stray,*

*Yet I have not renounced thy way.*

*Thine hand extend; thine own reclaim,*

*Grant me to live, and praise they name.*

The closing verse, like all but one or two others in this great psalm, refers to God’s holy law, or in this case God’s commandments. The psalmist concludes by pledging not to forget the commandments of God (119:176). As stated many times, to remember God commands we must know them in the first place. And how do we know them? By studying the Bible. The Bible is at the centre of our worship in this church. Let it remain so. Is the Bible at the centre of your family worship? Is it at the centre of your life? The psalmist meditated on God’s word day and night, and he was greatly blessed.