

The Pleadings of a Struggling Believer

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[0 : 0 0] But it's great to be back here together, isn't it? And we're going to turn to our Bibles now. I hope you brought your Bibles with you. Edward is going to be taking us once again through this portion of Psalm 119.

Last week, we were in that section beginning, I end at verse 121. This morning, we come to verse 129. And so I'm going to read for us Psalm 119 at verse 129.

Psalm 119 says of the Lord, Your testimonies are wonderful. Therefore, my soul keeps them.

The unfolding of your words gives light. It imparts understanding to the simple. I open my mouth and pant because I long for your commandments.

Turn to me and be gracious to me. As is your way with those who love your name. Keep steady my steps according to your promise and let no iniquity get dominion over me.

[1 : 1 2] Redeem me from man's oppression that I may keep your precepts. Make your face shine upon your servant and teach me your statutes.

My eyes shed streams of tears because people do not keep your law. Amen.

May God bless us his word. Well, friends, good morning. It's very good to see you. Delightful to see your faces.

It's a sight for sore eyes. Anyway, let's turn together to our passage. Psalm 119 verses 129 to 136.

One of the joys of reading the Bible over many years is that you gradually become friends with the Bible's human authors as you get to know them.

[2 : 2 0] So you read Paul's letters and you get to know Paul. You read Luke's gospel and Luke's other work, the Acts of the Apostles, and you get to know Luke. Now, these are not cozy friendships.

They're always challenging. But the Bible's human authors gradually, as it were, take shape before your eyes. You come to feel what they are feeling.

And to some degree, at least, you come to experience what they are experiencing. And this is certainly true of the author of Psalm 119. Throughout this long psalm, he is letting us into his inner life.

He's opening a window on his thinking and his emotions. He's showing us how he relates to God, how he prays, how he values God's written words, how he values and loves the Lord God himself.

And this is such precious information. Because one of the main purposes of the author of Psalm 119 is to show us an example of how to live as a believer.

[3 : 2 6] He's very self-conscious about this. He didn't labor to produce this carefully crafted psalm just to get something off his chest. He was wanting to teach other people. He's saying to us readers, this is what the life of faith is like.

Learn from me. I know the Lord. I know the delights of living by his words. And I know how difficult it can be to be loyal and true to him. One of the most attractive things about Psalm 119 and its author is that he speaks so openly about his struggles.

And that's why it's so easy for us to identify with him. If we felt that his life was completely tranquil and calm and serene, we couldn't identify with him at all.

We would say, this man and I are living on different planets. But we read him and we say, yes, I know what you're talking about, brother. You are hard-pressed, sometimes only just managing to survive as a believer.

That's how my life often feels. So I know that you can teach me. Your experience and my experience have a great deal in common. Now, what are the reasons for his struggle?

[4 : 42] There are two main reasons which emerge throughout the Psalm. First of all, there are hostile opponents of his faith, individuals who are gunning for him, even trying to kill him sometimes.

And then secondly, there is temptation from within his own heart. And you see both of these in our section for today. Look at verse 134. Redeem me from man's oppression.

That's the pressure that comes at him from without. But then look at verse 133. Let no iniquity get dominion over me. That's the pressure that comes from within his own heart.

Now, isn't that the story of our own struggles? We have the hostility that comes to us from without, the hostility of secularism and its spokesmen. But we also have the power of temptation that arises from within our own hearts.

Those are the sources of struggle. And verses 129 to 136 record the Psalmist's pleadings to God because of these twin pressures. Just look at the pleadings which either lie behind each of these eight verses or are actually expressed in them.

[5 : 54] Verse 129. Help me to keep your testimonies because they are wonderful. Verse 130. Give me more light, more understanding from your words.

131. I pant and long to know your words better. Verse 132. Be gracious to me. I need your grace and your strength because I'm weak.

Verse 133. Help me not to be overcome by these temptations that assail me. 134. Deliver me from hostile human pressure so that I can be true to you.

Keep your word. 135. Look in my direction. Bless me with your smile of encouragement. And then 136. The pressure of living in a largely godless society makes me weep rivers of tears.

Help me, Lord. He is not a tranquil man, is he? And that's why he's our brother. He's like us. He's a struggling believer who brings his pleadings to the Lord.

[7 : 03] So if you're feeling to some degree the struggles of the Christian faith today, thank the Lord for this fellow struggler. He's our teacher. He's our example. We can learn from him how to pray and how to live and how to survive in the midst of our struggles.

So we'll look at these pleadings of an embattled believer under three headings. First, he pants and longs and pleads for the Lord's commandments.

Look at verse 131. He's like a dog. He says, I open my mouth and pant like a dog. There's something visceral about this.

This psalmist is not a cool, aloof intellectual. The sort of chap who wears a velvet jacket and picks up a magazine article off his coffee table and says, well, I might glance at this.

Probably not worth reading, but I might just pick up a new idea or two from it. He's not like that. This psalmist is hungry. If you said to him, man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God, he would reply, don't I know it, brother?

[8 : 11] The words of the Lord are my necessary nourishment, my daily bread. Without them, I shall die. Now let's look back to the previous two verses which help us to understand verse 131 better.

Verse 129. Your testimonies, everything you've written in the Bible, your words and commandments, your testimonies are wonderful. They are full of wonder.

They are indeed one of the wonders of the world. That's a fact which is recognized in the coronation service of the British monarch. You may know this, but partway through the coronation service, the new monarch is presented with a copy of the Bible.

And the person presenting it to her or him says to the monarch, accept this book, the most valuable thing that this world affords.

Here is wisdom. Here is the royal law. Here are the very oracles of God. The most valuable thing that this world affords.

[9 : 17] Now if our psalmist heard those words from the coronation service, he would toss his cap in the air and he'd shout, hallelujah. He would say, yes Britain, you've got it right. The testimonies of God are wonderful.

They're wonderful in their origin because they come from the very mouth of God. They're wonderful in their nature because they're utterly trustworthy and true. And they're wonderful in their effects because they convey the truth of eternal salvation to their readers.

The Bible is one of the wonders of the world. As I'm sure you know, there are people in various countries in the world today who would give almost anything, almost an arm and a leg to get hold of a copy of the Bible.

But the regime of their particular nation forbids it and the Bible is banned. Wonderful, precious. That's why our psalmist opens his mouth and pants with longing.

There's a moment in Jeremiah's prophecy, Jeremiah chapter 15, when the prophet says to God, your words were found and I ate them and they were to me the joy and delight of my heart.

[10 : 28] I found your words, Lord, and I devoured them. That's what he's saying. So friends, let's develop an appetite like Jeremiah's. And if that appetite is not quite there yet, let's pray, Lord, give me an appetite for the Bible.

Let the Bible be to me beef and horseradish and strawberries and cream. It is the source of our life and health. It's the source of our ability to persevere in the faith.

The Bible is the fuel of perseverance. Now look at verse 130. The unfolding of your words gives light.

It imparts understanding to the simple. Now in this verse, the word light and the word understanding mean very much the same thing.

In our ordinary conversations, we might say to somebody, can you shed some light on this particular problem? And that means, can you help me to understand this problem? Or we might say, I'm in the dark about this.

[11 : 30] What we mean is, I don't understand what's happening. So what is it that brings light and understanding of the truth? The answer is in this verse, the unfolding of God's words.

So what is the unfolding of God's words? another Bible passage, a well-known one, I think will help us here. Think of the account at the end of Luke's gospel, Luke chapter 24, where Jesus, on the evening of Easter Sunday, he's been raised from the dead just a few hours, he slips out of the shadows and walks alongside two disciples on the road to Emmaus from Jerusalem.

And they're sad and initially they can't recognize him. But as they walk along, he begins to teach them from the Old Testament. He takes passages from the law of Moses and from the Old Testament prophets and he explains to them how these Bible passages describe the role and the person of the coming king, the Messiah.

A bit later, they reach the village, Emmaus. They sit down to have a meal together. Jesus breaks the bread, gives thanks, and at that moment, they recognize him and he vanishes.

And they say to each other, did not our hearts burn within us while he talked to us on the road, while he opened to us or unfolded to us the scriptures?

[12 : 58] That's what the unfolding of God's words means. The scriptures are opened up to us. It's a bit like opening a sealed or locked door so that you can then see everything inside the room.

The meaning, the truth of the Bible is displayed so that we can grasp it and understand it. And the more clearly we grasp it, the more our hearts burn within us.

We recognize the truth. We rejoice in it. It reconstructs our view of everything. Now, if you've been a Christian for any length of time, you'll know what I'm talking about.

You'll have had the experience of light filling your mind as the scriptures are unfolded. Just think of a typical Sunday morning. This isn't quite a typical one, but think of a typical Sunday morning in church.

The service begins. We sing a hymn together. Then somebody, usually the minister, leads us in prayer. We sing again. Then, the Bible passage is read.

[13 : 59] The passage which is later going to be preached on in the sermon. Now, if you're like me as I sit there in the congregation, you're only half awake, really, as the passage is being read out loud.

You pick up bits and pieces from it, but you're feeling dull. You're feeling as dull as a plate of cold porridge. But then, a few minutes later, the preacher begins to preach.

He takes the Bible passage. He forces you to engage with it. Look with me, he says, at verse so-and-so. What is this verse saying? So you look at the verse and you think, not sure, I'm clueless.

But then the preacher tells you. He explains it. And then you say, of course, that's what it means. And light begins to dawn and understanding is clarified.

A whisper of joy is felt in your heart and you're strengthened to persevere. Now, you can be pretty sure that the preacher himself was clueless about that passage a few days previously.

[15 : 02] So what he did Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, he worked at it. He read it over thoughtfully, time and again. He consulted commentaries and gradually, after some hours of blood, toil, tears, and sweat, he began to understand it.

His mind began to connect with the mind of the human author of the passage. So the moral of the story is, let's subject ourselves as regularly and frequently as we can to the unfolding of the words of God.

Do we want light? Do we want understanding? Of course we do. It's the unfolding of God's teaching that gives us an ever-accumulating understanding of how to live the Christian life with purpose and joy.

So it will mean, for example, on a freezing, foggy December Sunday morning, just cast your mind forward a few months, what do you want to do on a freezing morning?

You want to stay in bed, don't you? Because you're a natural sluggard. I speak for myself. But anyway, I get up out of bed, I round up the family, if there's any family left to round up, and I come to church.

[16 : 10] It would also mean buying a good Christian book from time to time, which will open up the Bible's teaching in some way. It will mean joining a Bible study group, a growth group, if that's possible, so as to unfold the words of God and discuss them with Christian friends.

But there's something important to notice in verse 130, and that is the kind of people to whom light and understanding are given as the words of God are unfolded.

Do you see who they are? There they are at the end of the verse. The simple. The unfolding of God's words gives understanding to the simple. And that means not to the proud, not to those who pride themselves on their Bible knowledge, not to those who say, I've been a Christian for quite a long time now, so there's not much for me to learn.

No. It's those who know how little they know about God's will and word who gain light and understanding. It's good for you and me to say, I am a simpleton, therefore I come to the word knowing that there's so much for me to pick up from it.

Jesus once prayed like this to God the Father, I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children.

[17 : 31] Yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. Now, he wasn't talking there about the under-tens. He was talking about adults who were willing to acknowledge their deep, inherent ignorance of God.

So let's learn to pant and long for the Lord to give us light and understanding through the regular unfolding of his words. Now, second, the psalmist pleads that his steps should be kept steady.

Just see how he expresses this in verse 133. Keep steady my steps according to your promise and let no iniquity get dominion over me.

Now, really, the two halves of that verse are each saying the same thing in a rather different way. If my steps are kept steady, it means that iniquity is not getting dominion over me.

But if my moral steps, this is about our moral life, if my moral steps become unsteady, it shows that I'm being overcome by some particular sin. Now, in this verse, the psalmist is plugging into the very familiar Bible metaphor of the believer's life being a walk.

[18 : 47] It's a long walk, isn't it, the believer's life? It's a long walk from John O'Groats to Land's End, but it's a much longer walk from cradle to grave. What the psalmist is longing for is to complete the walk with steady steps.

What he fears is that he might fall by the wayside, and be unable to carry on. And that's what would happen to him if some iniquity were to get a grip on him, to get dominion over him.

Here's a sad little conversation between two old friends, the kind of conversation that occasionally takes place. One says to another, is Archie Telfer still at your church?

No, says the other, I'm afraid not. Really? But he was such a keen member when I knew him. Did something happen to him? Yes, I'm afraid he gave way to a temptation that was just too strong for him.

Oh, I'm so sorry to hear that. This sort of thing happens, doesn't it? You'll be able to think of people to whom it's happened. It's desperately sad. Money, sex, alcohol, frustration and anger, self-indulgence.

[20 : 02] let's allow our psalmist to teach us something here. Just look with me at verse 133. Keep steady my steps according to your promise.

That phrase according to is better translated by. Keep steady my steps by your promise. In other words, it's your promise that is going to keep my steps steady.

Your promise of eternal life will be the power by which I can keep walking with a morally steady step. Let me try and illustrate this.

If you're steering a small boat across some open water, maybe near the sea coast, how do you hold a steady course and not get blown all over the place?

What you do is to identify a point on the land. It might be a tower or a clump of trees or maybe a house. It could be two or three miles away, but you can see it clearly.

[21 : 00] So you fix your eyes on that distant point and you hold your core steady to it. You keep looking at that distant point and you drive your craft towards it.

Now back to verse 133. That distant point is God's promise of eternal life. If I keep my eyes fixed on that great promise, if I value it above all things, remembering what it cost the Lord Jesus to win it for me, I shall press on towards it.

And when some powerful temptation comes at me like a fierce dog, I shall keep looking at that promise. I shall say to the dog, do you think, you beast, that you can deflect me from the goal of spending eternity with the Lord Jesus and all his people?

Scat! Get out of my sight! Keep steady my steps by your promise. Think of Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 2 about that promise.

What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined, what God has prepared for those who love him. Do we want to lose that promise by giving way to some wretched, self-indulgent passion?

[22 : 16] What madness that would be. But the psalmist gives us further encouragement to keep steady by showing us how gracious God is towards the struggling believer.

Look at verse 132. It's very personal. Turn to me, he says. Turn to me, Lord, and be gracious to me, as is your way with those who love your name.

Turn to me. Don't look away from me or withdraw yourself from me in my struggles. Turn to me. And then look at verse 135. Make your face shine upon your servant, servant, and teach me your statutes.

Those words are picked up from the famous priestly blessing in Numbers chapter 6. Make your face shine upon your servant. For God to look with shining countenance on his struggling servant is blessing.

As verse 135 puts it so clearly, the shining face of God means that he teaches his servant his statutes. And the servant who is taught by God is the one whose steps are kept steady in times of temptation.

[23 : 27] So friends, let me ask this. Might there be some fierce dog of temptation snapping at your heels as you walk along the long road? That's what our psalmist surely was experiencing.

He feared that iniquity might get dominion over him. He had that fear. He wouldn't have written this otherwise. He feared that he might abandon walking with steady steps along the narrow road that leads to life.

But he knew how to pray and that's what he's teaching us here. Keep steady my steps by your promise. Turn to me. Be gracious to me. Make your face shine upon me.

Teach me your statutes and then I shall be able to hold to the road and not be overwhelmed by iniquity. So far then we've seen first the psalmist pleading and panting for the Lord's commandments and secondly pleading that his own moral steps should be kept steady by fixing his eyes on the Lord's promise.

Well now thirdly something rather different. We see him pleading for the lost world around him. He's pleading over the disobedient. Look at verse 136.

[24 : 44] My eyes shed streams of tears because people do not keep your law. That is a striking and very challenging verse.

It's not expressed as a prayer or a plea but it could so quickly turn into a pleading prayer for the psalmist's lost contemporaries. He looks around himself.

He looks around at Israelite society. He analyzes what is going on just as we need to do as we look around at British society. We need to ask ourselves what is happening. What he sees is his fellow Jews, Israelites called by the Lord's name.

Those who have the title deeds of the Lord's covenant. He sees their lives unfolding before him. He sees them waking and sleeping, doing business in the shops and the market squares.

He sees them eating and drinking, marrying, having families, burying their dead, making money, losing money. And he weeps because they're ignoring the Lord's beautiful life-giving instructions about how to live a happy and a holy life.

[25 : 53] What he sees around him is greed, violence, robbery, adultery, pride, self-indulgence. And he cannot bear it. He cannot bear it.

The verse puts it so strongly. His eyes shed streams, rivers of tears. Not just a tear or two, such as you might shed when you're watching some powerful film, but channels of tears, canals of tears.

Why these tears? Why such powerful grief? Surely for two reasons. The first is that God is dishonored.

The people around him are treating him and his law with contempt. He is Israel's maker and redeemer. He is the one who rescued them at the Red Sea, who instructed them at Mount Sinai, who looked after them during the wilderness, wanderings, who brought them into the promised land, the land flowing with milk and honey.

And now they're saying to him, I have no interest in you. The psalmist cannot bear to see the Lord dishonored like that. But the second reason for his grief is that he knows that those who rebel against the Lord will not enjoy eternal life.

[27 : 10] Just look on to verse 155. 155. Salvation, he says, is far from the wicked, salvation, eternal life.

That's what our psalmist longs for and prays for. Give me life. Give me life. That's one of his constant prayers throughout the psalm. But those who turn their backs on God's teaching are inevitably lost.

So our friend the psalmist, our brother in the Lord, weeps for his contemporaries. Jeremiah the prophet, he was a man with the same kind of tender heart and the same kind of love for the Lord.

Listen to him, no need to look it up, but this is Jeremiah chapter 9. He says, oh that my head were waters and my eyes a fountain of tears, that I might weep day and night for the slain of the daughter of my people.

For they are all adulterers, a company of treacherous men. They bend their tongue like a bow. That means they can't tell the truth. They bend their tongue like a bow. Falsehood and not truth has grown strong in the land.

[28 : 20] For they proceed from evil to evil and they do not know me, declares the Lord. Oh that my head were waters and my eyes a fountain of tears.

Or listen to this from Luke chapter 19. When Jesus drew near and saw the city of Jerusalem, he wept over it, saying, would that you, even you, had known on this day the things that make for peace, but now they are hidden from your eyes.

For the days will come upon you when your enemies will set up a barricade round you and surround you and tear you down to the ground, you and your children within you, and they will not leave one stone upon another, because you did not know the time of your visitation.

In other words, you did not know who I was when I came to you, and you refused to recognize me. the tears of the psalmist, the tears of Jesus, the tears of Jeremiah should teach us that the departure of our own society here in Britain from the Bible, and the departure of much of the church should call forth our own grief, and should drive us not to despair, but to keep announcing to the world that there is wonderful good news for those who have an ear to hear it.

And the good news is that we have been visited, we recognize the time of our visitation, we've been visited by a Savior whose death and resurrection stand there, immovable, at the center of history, and he calls us to leave the broad road that leads to destruction, and to travel the narrow but glorious road that leads to life.

[30 : 07] Are our hearts capable of that kind of longing for our friends, colleagues, family members who are not Christians? Or do we look at the godless world and just shrug our shoulders with indifference?

Let's allow our psalmist to soften our hearts and teach us to weep over those who turn away from the Lord. And let's not forget to mourn over the sin in our own hearts.

Our psalmist remembers his own wanderings. If you look onto the very last verse of the psalm, verse 176, he puts it clearly. He says, I've gone astray like a lost sheep.

Seek your servant. In other words, be to me the shepherd I need when I'm tempted to stray. He's not looking at his contemporaries from any kind of moral high ground.

He can't afford to and neither can we. But we can learn to weep like the psalmist, like Jeremiah, like Paul the apostle, like Jesus. The Christian can never be fully happy in a world that is filled with rebellion against our creator.

[31 : 17] The Christian life is a mixture of great joys and painful tears. But the Christian will finally be met by the one who will wipe every tear from our eyes and will bring us into the peace of his eternal kingdom.

kingdom. Let's bow our heads. We'll pray together. Dear God, our Father, please open our mouths to pant and long for your commandments and to love your teaching.

Steady our steps by your promise of eternal life and make our hearts tender to weep for sin and hardness of heart and help us to proclaim and go on proclaiming boldly the glorious news of eternal salvation won for us by Jesus, your Son, in whose name we ask it.

Amen. Amen. Amen.