

Give Me Life!

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- [0 : 01] We are very happy this evening to be traveling with Edward Lodd back into Psalm 119. We've been in and out of this long psalm, the longest psalm in the Bible over many months.
- And so I'm going to invite you to turn there with me now. We're going to read together. We have, I think, God willing, three more sections beginning this evening before we get to the very last verse, 176.
- And tonight we are reading in the section beginning Resh, which is nothing to do with Rashes, but is one of the letters of the Hebrew alphabet.
- Remember, this is a very, very carefully crafted artistic psalm. Every section, and indeed every line of every section, begins with the same letter of the Hebrew alphabet.
- So it's like beginning, for us, it's like beginning with A and getting to Z. And each section begins with that letter. So the Hebrew letter Resh is the first letter of every word of every line in this psalm.
- [1 : 01] So I can tell you, getting three points beginning with P is quite hard enough sometimes. Getting a whole section of a psalm beginning with the right letter of the alphabet, that is really some achievement. So we should pay careful attention.
- There must be a reason for that. We must want us to appreciate these words and read them very, very carefully. But I'll read them in English, and we'll lose some of the effect. But there we are.
- Okay. Psalm 119, verse 153. The psalmist says, Great is your mercy, O Lord.
- Give me life according to your rules. Many are my persecutors and my adversaries. But I do not swear from your testimonies.
- I look at the faithless with disgust because they do not keep your commands. Consider how I love your precepts. Give me life according to your steadfast love.
- [2 : 16] The sum of your word is truth. And every one of your righteous rules endures forever.
- Amen. And may God bless us his word and teach us many things along with the psalmist as we come to study it together.
- Well, good evening, friends. Let's turn together to Psalm 119, verse 153.
- And my title for this evening is Give Me Life. Give me life. If you ask the question, is the Bible about God or about men and women?
- The answer, of course, is that it's about both. But it's primarily about God. It's a self-revelation of God. It's a self-portrait.
- [3 : 24] A clear revelation, a commanding revelation. But it's also about how men and women respond to the revelation. God speaks in every page of the Bible.
- But what effect does it have upon us? Do we listen? Do we put our fingers into our ears so that we can't hear him? Do we run and hide? Or do we, with a sense of bated breath and joy, listen to him and respond to the royal voice that addresses us from heaven?

Now, Psalm 119 tells us a great deal about God. It's about his voice, his words. But it also tells us a great deal about how the author of the psalm responds to God's words.

This is a profoundly autobiographical psalm. And this is one reason why it's so interesting and so helpful to us. Life for this psalmist is a bit like life amidst April showers.

The sun seems to shine on him one moment, but the next moment he's being deluged with hail and thunder. Look, for example, at some of the sunshine. Look on to verse 162.

[4 : 42] I rejoice at your word like one who finds great spoil. Or look at number 165. Great peace have those who love your law. But now look at some of the hail and thunder.

Look at verse 161. Princes, persecute me without cause. Or back to 153. Look on my affliction and deliver me.

Affliction. He's experiencing painful suffering. So this is realistic autobiography. I don't know whether you sometimes read the biographies or autobiographies of interesting Christian people.

It's a good thing to do. But books of that kind generally fall into two groups. There are some that tell a realistic story of the ups and downs of the subject's life, like Psalm 119.

But there are others that seem to paint a picture of an almost perfect saint. I find that kind of biography rather hard to swallow because I can never quite believe it. I say to myself, did this man never get discouraged or disconsolate or despairing?

[5 : 49] Did he never get so frustrated with his circumstances that he let slip some rude word like b-b-b-bother? Psalm 119 is so attractive because it is so realistic.

This man tells it as it really is. He doesn't pretend that the hail and thunder and lightning don't exist. So when we read a psalm like this, we immediately identify with it.

It's a picture of our own lives. It's about the believer, the Lord, the Lord's words, and how these words of God become the potent and defining force in the psalmist's life.

This is realistic, believing autobiography. Well, let's look at the section under three headings this evening. The pains of the believer, the power of the Lord, and the permanence of the Bible.

So first of all, the pains of the believer. In much of this section, the psalmist is crying out for rescue. And his most pressing request is for life.

[6 : 56] Just look at the verses with me. Verse 154, give me life according to your promise. 156, give me life according to your rules.

159, give me life according to your steadfast love. So in those three verses, he appeals to God's promise, God's rules, and God's steadfast covenant love as he cries out for life.

But here's the question. Why should he be pleading for life? Is he not obviously alive? This psalm is clearly the work of a man who is full of life, a man full of creative ability.

Why cry out for life? Is he an unborn baby, confined in the womb, asking to be let out? Or is he a dead man, confined in his grave, and begging to be allowed to live again?

Well, clearly not. He's a living man. The blood is flowing briskly through his veins. And yet he obviously feels trapped in a web of death.

[8 : 01] He feels that he's a dying man amongst dying men. He feels as if everything about his circumstances and life is somehow in bondage to decay. It's a very poignant cry, isn't it?

Give me life. But it's a prayer for us to pick up and imitate and use ourselves. Lord, give me life. As Paul the Apostle once cried out in pain in Romans chapter 7, Who will deliver me from this body of death?

It's the same cry. It's a cry for rescue from the power of death. I don't know if you've read The Pilgrim's Progress by John Bunyan.

It's a great book. Do read it if you never have. But in that book, the central character is a man called Christian. And at the beginning of the book, Christian is just setting out on the Christian life.

He's just beginning. He's met a man called Evangelist. And Evangelist says to Christian, do you see a light shining over there? And Christian says, I think I do.

[9 : 07] So Evangelist says, keep your eye on that light. Follow it and you will see a gate. And when you knock at the gate, you will be told what to do. So the man Christian begins to run.

And he hasn't gone far from his door when his wife and children, who are not yet Christians, see him running away from them. And they shout after him and try and make him come back and stop.

But, says Bunyan, the man put his fingers into his ears and ran on, crying, life, life, eternal life. And he looked not behind him.

Give me life. I wonder if you've learned to pray a prayer like that. We're not going to pray, Lord, give me life, until we recognize that our present existence is dominated by death.

Paul explains this in Romans chapter 5. If, because of one man's trespass, now he's talking about Adam there. If, because of one man's trespass, death reigned through that one man, much more will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man, Jesus Christ.

[10 : 26] What Paul calls life there, life through Jesus Christ, is obviously for the future. But the present state of the world is that death is reigning here because of one man's trespass, because of Adam's rebellion.

Do you remember the words that the Lord spoke to Adam in the Garden of Eden just after he'd sinned and rebelled? The Lord said to him, cursed is the ground. In other words, cursed is the whole environment.

Cursed is the world because of you. In pain, you shall eat of it all the days of your life. Thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you. By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread till you return to the ground.

For out of it you were taken. Dust you are, and to dust you shall return. That is the pulverization of the human race. Now that is the sentence of death under which the whole human race lives.

It can be hard for us to grasp the reality of the reign of death in a country like ours. We live, after all, in a beautiful country without extremes of climate.

[11 : 35] We have a form of government which may not be perfect, but it's infinitely better than the tyranny and oppression that many nations suffer. Relatively, we're a very affluent nation.

We have access to good food, good shops, good health, good schools. In fact, if you're out of doors on a sunny day in the springtime in Scotland, you might almost think that you're in the Garden of Eden again.

But we're not. We live in the valley of the shadow of death. And unless the Lord Jesus returns in the meantime, each one of us, each one of us, even if we should live to be a hundred years old, will one day be placed in a coffin and somebody will say over that coffin, ashes to ashes, dust to dust.

That's why the psalmist three times in eight verses cries out to the Lord, give me life. He knows that he's living in the realm where death reigns because of the trespass of Adam, a trespass which has infected and corrupted all of us.

And this powerful reign of death has produced other sources of pain for our friend, the psalmist. He speaks of affliction in verse 153.

[12 : 51] And look at the way he writes about it. He doesn't talk of the affliction of humanity, but rather my affliction, my pains and sorrows.

Look on my affliction, he cries, and deliver me. Jesus once said to the apostles, in the world, you will have affliction. It's the same word and it's the same reality.

Then look at verse 154, because there he feels like a prisoner who is facing an unjust trial. He's under suspicion. He's charged with crimes and he seeks an advocate, a heavenly advocate.

Plead my cause and rescue me. Get me out of this prison, this corrupt world. And then in verse 157, he speaks of his persecutors and adversaries.

And there's a whole pack of them. Many are my persecutors, he says. Many. They snap at my heels like a pack of dogs. I can't get away from them. I'm not living in a peaceful, God-fearing, God-loving society.

[13 : 54] I'm being sniped at every day by adversaries, by adversarial opinion. To put this in modern terms for ourselves, I've only got to switch on some channel of news media, even social media, and the persuasive opinions of the devil.

The great adversary are being thrust at me in some way. The adversaries of truth are constantly trying to persuade me to accept their lies. And then look at verse 158.

The psalmist looks out at society around and realizes how faithless it is. How few people are people of faith. And he feels disgust. I look at the faithless with disgust.

Very strong word to use. I feel disgust because, Lord, people are not keeping your commands. The Bible is ignored and disdained. The very honor of God is being trampled underfoot.

Who can free me from this cauldron of deceit, destruction, and death? Give me life, O Lord. He's not a tranquil and serene believer, is he?

[15 : 03] He's under great pressure. Now, he's a man of joy. Just look on to verse 162. And he's a man of peace. Look at verse 165.

But he is simultaneously stressed and pressured and pained. Now, if you're a young Christian, perhaps a young person, you might be thinking, have I really got to endure another 50 or 60 years of this?

The answer is yes. And then you might say, well, is it possible to endure it? The answer is yes, indeed. For reasons which we'll come on to in just a moment.

You must endure. You must endure. The one who is saved, says Jesus, is the one who endures to the end. The life of the believer has always been difficult.

In fact, if you can think of one serious believer in the pages of the Bible whose life was a bed of roses, tell me after the service and I will buy you fish and chips.

[16 : 05] I think my liver is safe. Our psalmist is telling us that the believer's life is a painful life.

But it is also a wonderful life because of our second point, which is that he tells us about the power of God. Why would he call on the Lord as he does here if the Lord were not powerful?

Why would he cry in verse 153, look on my afflictions and deliver me, unless he knew that God would and could deliver him? His affliction is real, but in the end, the deliverance will triumph over the affliction.

So let's see what these verses tell us about the power of God. Now, I said earlier that the Bible, the whole Bible, is a self-portrait of God. God portrays his real character through the words of men who know him, men like this psalmist.

And in this section of the psalm, the writer is appealing to various aspects of God's character because he knows what God is like. He's not appealing to some God of his imagination, a God whom he's invented.

- [17 : 18] He is appealing to the real and true God whom he has come to know through his own experience. And more importantly, through his study of the law of Moses and the other earlier parts of the Old Testament.

So what can we learn from this little section about the power of God? Well, first, he is able to deliver. He's able to rescue. Verse 153, deliver me.

Verse 154, redeem me. Then verse 155 speaks of salvation, which is far from the wicked, but wonderfully available to those who trust the Lord.

Now, our psalmist could not pray like that unless he knew that God is a deliverer or savior. Our psalmist knew the books of Moses. He knew that God had rescued Noah from the flood.

He was a deliverer to him. He knew that the Lord had rescued the whole people of Israel from the Egyptians at the crossing of the Red Sea. That great act of rescue is celebrated right the way through the Old Testament and particularly in the Psalms.

- [18 : 27] It defines and demonstrates that God is above all committed to his people as their rescuer. Isaiah, the prophet, puts it like this in his 43rd chapter.

God speaks through him to the people. God says, fear not, O Israel, for I have redeemed you. I've called you by name. You are mine.

When you pass through the waters, I will be with you. And through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you. For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your savior.

God has form as a savior. He has demonstrated his willingness and his ability to save right the way through the Old Testament story.

And his arm has not lost its power. So he's able to deliver. Secondly, God is a God of mercy. Look at verse 156.

- [19 : 25] Great is your mercy, O Lord. Give me life according to your rules. What is mercy? It's the willingness to bring blessing and comfort to those who don't deserve it.

We had a Cornhill student some years ago who fell in love with a girl and eventually plucked up the courage to ask her to marry him. So I said to this student, well, what did she say?

And he said, she had mercy on me. She said, yes. If you're a married man, you'll know what that feels like. It's rather wonderful, isn't it? But the Lord shows much greater mercy than that.

He shows us mercy in being willing to forgive us, to forgive our defiance and our rebellion against him. Listen to these verses from Psalm 103.

The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities.

- [20 : 31] As far as the east is from the west. As far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us. As a father shows compassion to his children, so the Lord shows compassion to those who fear him.

For he knows of what we are made. He remembers that we are but dust. Our psalmist says in verse 156, give me life.

But on what ground can he make that request? On the ground of God's mercy. Great is your mercy, O Lord. Give me life. And then third, the psalmist appeals to God's power as his advocate in court.

Look at verse 154. Plead my cause and redeem me. In other words, stand by me, speak for me in my defense. So what is the psalmist really asking for in verse 154?

He's asking for a heavenly advocate who will act in such a way as to bring about his acquittal. In the divine law court. So has that prayer been answered?

[21 : 42] Yes, it has. And wonderfully, God the Father sent Jesus to fulfill that very role. As John the Apostle puts it in his first letter.

If anyone sins, we have an advocate with the Father. Jesus Christ the righteous. And he is the propitiation for our sins. His blood shed on the cross.

Pleads with the Father to secure our acquittal and our forgiveness. Now this psalmist was writing centuries before Jesus came. And so he could not know exactly how his prayer in verse 154 would be answered.

But it has been answered. We can see now from our position in history that the psalmist was praying for the cross. He was praying for an advocate for the sacrificial lamb of God whose death would be the means of our forgiveness.

And it's Jesus who is the final revelation and demonstration of the power of God in all these ways. So when the psalmist prays deliver me in verse 153 and redeem me in verse 154, his prayer is answered by God sending Jesus in the fullness of time.

[23 : 00] He is the redeemer and the deliverer as well as the advocate. And Jesus is the ultimate channel of God's mercy to us as well. Everything we need for our comfort and assurance has been given to us in the coming of Jesus into the world.

The power of God to rescue us for eternity, to show mercy to us, to speak for us as our advocate. It's all brought into effect by Jesus.

That is how much God has loved us. John the Apostle puts it so clearly in his gospel. And if these words don't melt our hearts, our hearts really are made of ice.

For God so loved the world, loved the world like this, that he gave his only son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life.

And then in the next verse, John 3, 17, John opens up the father's motive in sending Jesus. He writes, For God did not send his son into the world to condemn the world, but so that the world might be saved through him.

[24 : 13] Now, of course, condemnation will come to those who refuse to submit to Jesus. But God's overriding purpose in sending Jesus was to save for eternity and not to condemn.

Now, think of our psalmist's pressing prayer, the prayer that he keeps on praying, Give me life. He prays it so insistently that you feel he simply won't take no for an answer.

God has answered that prayer far above any expectation that we might have. Give me life, cries the psalmist. And Jesus, in answer, says, I am the resurrection and the life.

I am the way, the truth, and the life. I came that people might have life and have it abundantly. And as John puts it very simply in the first chapter of his gospel, in him, in Jesus, was life.

Friends, have we grasped, are we grasping how wonderful this gospel is? It brings us liberation from the fear of death and from the power of death. Now, let me ask a question.

[25 : 24] I wonder if you've ever imagined yourself as Lazarus, the Lazarus in John's gospel, chapter 11. If you haven't, just try and imagine yourself as Lazarus now.

You perhaps know the story. Lazarus was a good friend of Jesus, and he and his two sisters, Martha and Mary, lived together just outside Jerusalem. And at a time when Jesus was up in Galilee, far from Jerusalem, Lazarus took ill and died.

And they sent a message to Jesus, and he came and joined them. But by the time Jesus reached the sisters, Lazarus had been dead and buried for four days. Now, just imagine that you're Lazarus.

You're dead and buried. You're lying in a cave tomb. You're not covered with six feet of soil in the way that we bury our dead, but you're wrapped up in yard upon yard of cloth, wound around you, so that eventually you look like an Egyptian mummy.

So there you are. You're lying horizontally on a shelf in the back of the tomb in the darkness. You've been dead four days. Your flesh is beginning to disintegrate.

[26 : 31] It's a warm country. You don't smell too good. And as you lie there in the oblivion of darkness, you hear a commanding voice.

Lazarus, come out! You rise to your feet. The rotting of your flesh is instantly reversed. You walk out into the sunshine.

And the one who has made that great cry says to those standing around, take those grave clothes off him and let him go. That's the gospel.

Jesus was sent by a loving father into a world that is disintegrating and rotting. He has come to call us, to command us to eternal life.

How foolish to think of resisting that command. If you're not yet a Christian, don't resist him. Don't say, I'm not the religious type, so this is not for me.

[27 : 31] Don't say, I'm too sinful and too bad to be forgiven. He came to save sinners. We're all sinners. The gospel of life is for everybody. Everybody who is willing to listen.

It's not just for religious people, whatever they are, or for nice people, whoever they might be. It's for the world. It's for all of us. The Bible does not say, for God so loved the religious.

It says, for God so loved the world, that whoever believes in Jesus, whoever, bank robber, thief, adulterer, cheat, fraudster, murderer, whoever believes in Jesus will not perish, but have eternal life.

Give me life, cries the psalmist. Give me life. You and I cry if we've got any sense. And Jesus is the answer to that prayer.

He is life. He gives life. He gives eternal life. And he promises to raise up on the last day every person who puts their trust in him. Now, here's a question.

[28 : 35] How can we be sure of these things? Well, the psalmist tells us in the last verse of our passage. Look with me at verse 160. The sum of your word is truth, and every one of your righteous rules endures forever.

So here's our third point. The psalmist teaches us the permanence of God's words, the enduring quality of the Bible. It's the Bible that assures us of the truth of the gospel.

Now, I said earlier that the Bible is a self-portrait of God, a self-revelation. It teaches us his identity, his character, and his will.

And most Christians understand that aspect of the Bible's nature very well. But what is perhaps less well understood by Christians is that the Bible's great purpose is to assure us of the truth of the gospel.

The Bible brings assurance and certainty and confidence into our hearts. And this is especially important in the age that we live in today, because the modern world disparages truth and assurance.

[29 : 49] Pontius Pilate's notorious question to Jesus, what is truth, is answered by our verse 160. The sum of your word is truth.

The sum means the totality. All of the Bible's constituent parts lumped together. The whole glorious 66 books of the Bible piled one on top of the other.

That is truth. When Pilate asks, what is truth? He's really voicing the same idea that the serpent voiced in the Garden of Eden. When he said, did God really say?

The devil's strategy has always been to diminish people's confidence in the truth of the Bible. The 21st century has inherited a legacy, not only from the liberal theology of the 19th and 20th centuries, but also from the most influential philosophers of the last 300 years or so, because they have been focusing on the question, is truth knowable at all?

Is it possible for the human mind to grasp anything with certainty? And behind those questions lies the strategy of the devil, who wants to unhinge our assurance and make us feel as if we're all wallowing in a treacherous bog of uncertainty.

[31 : 08] But that's not God the Father's will for us. Our loving Father wants his children to know with deep assurance that the Bible is true, that the gospel is true, that Jesus is true, and that every Christian is destined for eternal life, to be set free from this world dominated by death.

What, then, lies behind this thundering statement of verse 160, the sum of your word is truth? Well, let's briefly notice three things.

First of all, from verse 153, I do not forget your law. Now, when he says that, he's not simply saying, I've committed parts of it to memory.

He might well have done that. It's a good thing for us to do. But he's really saying, your law, your truth, is as deeply embedded in my system as are my liver and kidneys.

It's part of me. He's told us back in verse 11, I've stored up your word in my heart. His heart is stocked with God's words as a larder is stocked up with good food.

[32 : 19] Then secondly, from verse 155, the wicked, the godless, do not seek the Lord's statutes. But I do, that's the implication.

And when the psalmist is seeking those statutes, he's not seeking a needle in a haystack, not seeking something that can't be found. When he says, I seek your statutes, what he means is, I have them already in my hand, but I'm seeking to understand them as profoundly as I can.

I'm not content with a superficial understanding of them. I'm digging down. I'm drilling down. I want to find bedrock. I want to devour your words, to relish them, to enjoy them, and above all, to understand them.

Just imagine you were lining up a group of young adults, young people aged about 20 or so, just setting out on the adventures of life. And you line them up and you ask each one of them exactly the same question.

The question is, what are you seeking in life? Well, the answers come tumbling out one after the other. I'm seeking money. I seek fame.

[33 : 29] I'm seeking a happy marriage. I'm seeking a PhD. I'm seeking a place in the Guinness Book of World Records. I'm seeking a trip to Antarctica. I'm seeking the Loch Ness Monster.

Now, the psalmist is the last in the line. What do you seek, Mr. Psalmist? I seek the Lord's statutes. Why on earth should you seek them?

Because I want to know him, the Lord, and I want to know what he says. Now, thirdly, verse 157, notice the but in the middle of the verse.

Many are my persecutors and my adversaries, but I do not swerve from your testimonies. It's the pressure of the adversaries and the persecutors that will tempt us to swerve from God's teaching.

Even our friends, family members, can be adversaries of the truth and can press us to abandon the truth. For example, if your good friend begins to live for money, you can be tempted to follow suit and idolize money.

[34 : 38] If your good friend launches into a same-sex relationship, you can feel a great pressure to collude with your friend and swerve from the Bible's teaching on sex and marriage.

Don't do that, or you'll be on the road to perdition. If your friend begins to idolize partying and pleasure, you'll be tempted to abandon the true God for the sake of partying and alcohol.

The Bible gives us the Bible. The Bible gives us spine, gives us courage to resist the pressures of godless society. So our psalmist here tells us what he thinks of the Bible.

He doesn't forget it. He seeks God's teaching, and he has determined, whatever pressure is put upon him, not to swerve from God's truth. Now that's his experience of life, and he rejoices in it.

And it's that commitment to God's words that enables him to say in verse 160, the sum of your word is truth, and every one of your righteous rules endures forever.

[35 : 44] The power and forcefulness and trustworthiness of the Bible outlasts everything. Everything. As Jesus once said, heaven and earth will pass away.

But my words will never pass away. And it's this truthfulness and trustworthiness of the Bible that gives our psalmist the assurance that when he cries out, give me life, he will not be disappointed.

His present life in this world, like our lives, is a life of affliction and difficulty. He feels the decay of the world all around him and the corruption of human society.

But he knows how to pray and he knows who to pray to. Look at verse 154. Give me life according to your promise.

God has promised him life. And we have that promise spread out for us, made clear and explicit in every page of the New Testament. Jesus is life.

[36 : 48] And to trust him is to know that we shall live forever. Give me life, cries the psalmist. And Jesus replies, I am the resurrection and the life.

Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live. And everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die.

Well, let's bow our heads and we'll pray to him, to our Lord Jesus. Lord Jesus, our life, our joy, keep us true to the Bible, true to you, true to God the Father.

And bring us, we pray, at our last awakening into your presence, that beholding your glorious face and the scars that have won our forgiveness, we may forever rejoice with the multitude that cannot be counted.

And we ask it for the sake of your glory. Amen. Amen.