

The Dark Places of Human Experience

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[0 : 00] Well, we're going to read together in our Bibles now, and the book of Psalms, Psalm 119. Edward has been leading us through some of the sections of this, the longest psalm in the book of Psalms.

And we come this evening to the section beginning at verse 81. Verse 81. And remember, this is a very intricate psalm, which every section begins with a new letter of the Hebrew alphabet.

And it's not just the first line of every section. Every line of that section begins with this same letter, the letter kaf. So it took the psalmist quite some time, I think, to work this out.

And there was good reason. He was trying to be very careful in the words that he was using for our learning and to teach us about the Lord. So let's try and read carefully.

He says, My soul longs for your salvation. I hope in your word. My eyes long for your promise.

[1 : 05] I ask, when will you comfort me? For I have become like a wineskin in the smoke. Yet I have not forgotten your statutes. How long must your servant endure?

When will you judge those who persecute me? The insolent have dug pitfalls for me. They do not live according to your law.

All your commandments are sure. They persecute me with falsehood. Help me. They have almost made an end of me on earth. But I have not forsaken your precepts.

In your steadfast love, give me life. That I may keep the testimonies of your mouth. Amen.

And may God bless to us. His word. Good evening, friends. Very good to see you.

[2 : 05] Let's turn in our Bibles to Psalm 119. 119. If you have sight of a Bible. And our section, as you know, is verses 81 to 88.

I have a rather forbidding title for this evening. Namely, The Dark Places of Human Experience.

But our section of Psalm 119 for today, I think, merits that title. C.H. Spurgeon, the great 19th century preacher, called this section the midnight of the psalm.

Perhaps you and I would think of it as the 3 o'clock or 4 o'clock in the morning of the psalm. And you only have to glance down through the verses again to see why such a phrase might be fitting. Look at verse 81. My soul longs for your salvation. Verse 82. My eyes long for your promise. Verse 83.

[3 : 08] I've become like a wineskin in the smoke. Verse 84. How long must your servants endure? Then verse 85 speaks of pitfalls.

Verse 86. Of persecution. And look at verse 87. They've almost made an end of me on earth. Only in verse 88 is there no specific mention of the extreme trials that our psalmist is undergoing.

Now if you've been here over the last couple of Sunday evenings, you'll know that the two previous sections of the psalm have centered on the psalmist's afflictions.

We noticed last week from verse 75 that it's the Lord himself in faithfulness who has afflicted the psalmist. And if you look back to verse 71, you can see just why, what the Lord was doing.

He was allowing affliction to come so that the writer might learn his statutes. I know that it is good for me, he says. Good for me that I was afflicted, that I might learn your statutes.

[4 : 12] So we've been learning that although affliction is very unpleasant when it comes to us, the Bible is teaching us not to take offense at God, but rather to dig into the Bible so as to learn what it means to trust God even in the direst of circumstances.

As Job once said, Even though he slay me, yet will I put my hope in him. Now these verses are difficult material. So we want to ask, we need to ask, why has God caused these verses to be here in the Bible?

The answer is that they're here for our instruction and ultimately for our great comfort. Of all the books in the world, only the Bible addresses the human condition in all its reality.

Only the Bible penetrates every corner of the human heart. But God wants to take us to all those dark corners, because he loves his people and he wants to equip us to deal with the trials and the sufferings that we simply cannot escape.

Now of course we want to escape them. That's our nature. We don't want to experience too much of this kind of thing. We don't want to lift the lid on this kind of experience too much for fear of what we might see inside.

[5 : 32] As the poet T.S. Eliot once wrote, mankind cannot bear very much reality. And that is what we're like. I know sometimes when I'm listening to the news on the radio, I find that what I'm listening to is so painful that I quickly want to switch over to a music station and just forget what's going on in the world.

I reach a point where I can't bear to empathize with the sufferings that the news channel is forcing me to think about. But our psalmist here is not forcing us.

He's taking us by the hand. And he's inviting us to face realities that we might naturally want to avoid. He's saying to us, The author of this psalm is our friend, not our torturer.

It's good to think of him as our friend. You may have noticed that during these sermons on this psalm, I've sometimes referred to him as our friend, the psalmist. And that's what he is.

Now, of course, he is also our teacher. His words carry all the authority of God. And through them, he's teaching us how to survive the onslaught of adversity.

[6 : 58] But he is our friend. He's a bit like the rugby coach who speaks to his team at halftime when they're 20 points down. You can imagine the situation in the dressing room.

He says to them, Come on, boys. You can do it. You can. You're bruised and you're battered. And you've made a pig's ear of the first half. But you really can survive and win. After all, it's only England you're playing.

So here is the psalmist. He's our friend. He's our coach. And he's saying to us, I'm determined to teach you. God is determined to teach you the secrets of survival and final victory.

So, friends, don't let's balk at these things. Let's not shy away from a passage like this. If we can get hold of what our psalmist is showing us here, it will be the key factor in the survival of our faith when we go through the worst experiences that life can throw at us.

Now, for much of the time, perhaps, we will not be as low and exhausted as the psalmist is in this section. The majority of us here this evening are probably not feeling too low or too exhausted.

[8 : 06] You might even be feeling quite happy. But there will be times when all of us are reduced to a state of great weakness and helplessness. And if we can learn this great lesson of this particular section of the psalm, it will enable us to survive those experiences and to emerge intact on the far side of them.

And the great lesson of this section, verses 81 to 88, is, in the words of verse 81, I hope in your word.

And that means your word of promise. I learn to live by trusting fully in what God has promised for the future. So, friends, let's buckle on our emotional armor and face the music.

We'll look at our section under two headings. First, what the psalmist is actually experiencing. And secondly, what the psalmist is truly trusting.

And throughout these verses, he's inviting us to step into his shoes and feel what he feels and learn the lessons that he has learned. First then, what the psalmist is actually experiencing.

[9 : 20] Well, the first thing to notice is his longing. His longing for a situation to arrive which has not yet arrived. And this longing seems to be simply endless.

Let's look at how he expresses this. Verse 81, My soul longs. Verse 82, My eyes long. Just notice the when and the how long questions.

Verse 82, I ask, When will you comfort me? Verse 84, How long must your servant endure? When will you judge those who persecute me?

Now, we all know what it's like to long for future events. There's the six-year-old child who's sitting in the car being driven away on holiday. You know that sort of feeling. Especially if it's a holiday in Cornwall.

It's a very long way away. Dad, Dad, how much longer until we're there? Oh, pipe down, Richard. Only another seven hours. Oh, Dad, seven hours. Oh, there's the engaged couple.

[10 : 23] How much longer now till you get married? One hundred and fifty-three days and six hours. Oh. But our psalmist, he's not longing for his holidays or his wedding.

He's longing for something much more wonderful. My soul, he says in verse 81, longs for your salvation. And if his soul is longing in verse 81, his eyes are longing in verse 82.

My eyes long for your promise. My eyes. It's as though he's standing on a railway station platform with one of those long tracks that streams away into the distance.

And he's looking down the track because he's waiting for a train that's carrying somebody he loves to him. And he's straining his eyes to see the headlights coming down the track. So what is he longing for?

Verse 81, for your salvation. Verse 82, for your promise. What that means is for your promise to be fulfilled. Now, he doesn't have the clearer and fuller revelation of the New Testament, which we have, but he is well aware that God has promised him eternal life.

[11:34] The believing Israelite of the Old Testament time is exemplified by Abraham. And the letter to the Hebrews, chapter 11, we were hearing this very thing this morning from Willie, the letter to the Hebrews tells us that Abraham set out for the promised land, the land of geographical Canaan, but really he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God.

He knew that finally his home would be in the eternal city. And that's what our psalmist knows as well. My soul longs for your salvation. He was longing to be rescued from his life of suffering and persecution in this world, and he teaches us to long for our final salvation also.

Now, if a Christian says, but am I not already saved? The answer is, if you're a Christian, yes, the Lord has saved you. He has caused you already to be born again, your sins are forgiven, and you have a new identity.

You are now in Christ. But your full and final salvation still lies ahead of you. And it's good for us that we learn to long for our full and final salvation, to long to be seated at the banqueting table of the heavenly bridegroom, Jesus, to long to be there in the city, that dazzling, beautiful city where tears and pain and mourning and death will be no more.

It's good for us to learn to long to be in that glorious realm. The verb used in verse 81 for long and again in verse 82 is apparently a very strong verb which means to faint with longing, to be exhausted with longing, to be worn down and ground down with longing.

[13:23] Now, some of you might be sitting there thinking, but I'm still young. I'm 20 or 25. I want to do something useful with my life. I'd like to be a nurse or an engineer or a preacher.

Or play the violin in the London Symphony Orchestra. Do something like that. I'd like to marry. I'd like to have a family. Is it wrong to want to do that kind of thing? No, certainly not.

It's absolutely right that we should work, that we should serve society and the Lord's people, make a contribution. It's right to want to marry and have children. Marriage is a great gift of God to the human race.

God has graciously given us an allowance of 70 or 80 or 90 years. On purpose. To be used profitably in serving Him and serving other people. But, and this is the lesson of verse 81 and verse 82, beneath all that human activity of work and service and family life, the longing for our final salvation is the undergirding, the strength of the Christian life.

It's the music of our life. It's the great ending of our story, part one. And it's the great beginning of our story, part two. It's the goal.

[14:37] It's the finishing tape. It's the call of the Lord to be finally with Him. King David puts it like this in Psalm 63. Oh God, you are my God.

Earnestly I seek you. My soul thirsts for you. My flesh faints for you as in a dry and weary land where there is no water. One thing which may work against the development of this longing in us is comfort in this world.

Now our psalmist knows very little comfort in this world. That's why he cries out in verse 82, when will you comfort me? But for most of us in modern Britain, not all of us, I realize that, but for most of us, we have the comfort of dry homes, central heating, decent clothes, sufficient money to buy food and pay our bills, and very significantly, an absence of real persecution.

Well, let's thank God for these kind provisions. It's no blessing to be so poor that one can't buy clothes and food. But let's be aware that relative prosperity can dull our longing to be with the Lord. And these words in verses 81 and 82 are there precisely to teach us to long for our final salvation.

All of us, however fit and strong and active today, will one day come to the end of our physical tether through accident or illness or old age or dire circumstances.

[16:10] And if we have been training ourselves to long for our final salvation well before those dark days arrive, we will have allowed our psalmist to coach us in what is really important.

My soul longs for your salvation. That's the cry of the person who belongs to the Lord. Let me make one simple, practical suggestion as to how we might start to train ourselves to long for the Lord's salvation.

Just think for a moment of your daily routine. There are probably places that you go almost every day of the week. If you work, you'll walk to work or to the final part of your work after taking the train. There'll be a walk perhaps of 10 or 15 minutes that you do almost every day. Why not identify a particular landmark on that walk? It might be a post box, might be a restaurant, might be the Kelvin Grove Art Gallery.

Why not get into the habit that every time you pass that landmark, you spend a couple of minutes thinking about the new Jerusalem, about the wedding banquet of the Lord Jesus, about the uncountable multitude of people of every tribe and nation and language gathered around the throne of the Lord.

[17:24] Do that as a daily discipline. You'll find it's quite easy to do after you've tried for a short time. Think of it like this. Do you brush your teeth every day?

That's a discipline, isn't it? It's a daily discipline. It's easy. You've trained yourself to do that because you value having healthy teeth. Why not take on board a small new daily discipline, longing for the world to come?

You might even do it while you're brushing your teeth. Forget Kelvin Grove Art Gallery. Get the toothbrush out and start longing. Longing to be in the city of which you are already a member. Longing for your final salvation to be given to you by the Lord.

How about praying like this? Lord, please whet my appetite. Don't let me be too comfortable with my life in this world. Remind me that my time here is short.

I long for the beautiful city, for the multitude of my fellow citizens in the realm of pure joy where even the shadow and memory of sin and death has vanished.

[18:29] my soul longs for your salvation. What lies behind this longing? What fuels this longing?

Well, we can pick up further clues. Verse 83, for I have become like a wineskin in the smoke. That's a very vivid illustration.

In those days, as you know, wine was not stored in glass bottles. It was kept in shaped pieces of animal skin. Jesus referred to this in Mark chapter 2. New wine, he says, is for new wineskins. Now, I haven't seen a wineskin, but it's not hard to imagine what it's like. A bulbous piece of leather carefully worked and stitched and with an opening at the top for pouring. But what would happen when an empty wineskin is hung up for a long time, perhaps forgotten, in a smoky chimney? Well, soon it would become cracked, desiccated, starting to fall to pieces. It becomes a sad, useless piece of equipment. Once, it was strong and supple and useful.

[19:38] But now, it's finished. I've become like a wineskin in the smoke, laments our psalmist. I'm reduced to a shadow of my former self. I'm done.

I'm at the end of my resources. It's a poignant picture of a person who is played out, ground down by pressure, worn out, unable to rouse himself and rally his strength.

He's an exhausted human being. And why does he feel like a wineskin in the smoke? It's not because of illness or old age. It's his enemies.

They are the source of this pressure. Look at the language our friend uses to describe their activities. Verse 84, they persecute me. Verse 85, the insolent have dug pitfalls for me.

Imagine that, digging a great big pit. It's like a man trying to trap a bear or a lion. Not the sort of thing that you and I do every day, but we've heard that it's done. You dig a deep pit where the lion goes.

[20:38] You cover it with vegetation and the heavy beast comes blundering along and falls in. Now, the enemies of the psalmist are trying to bring the psalmist down in some way to ruin him, to ostracize him, to deprive him of liberty or employment or status.

He says of them in verse 87, they've almost made an end of me on earth. They've almost killed me. And what is their chief weapon? Lies.

Falsehood. Look at verse 86, they persecute me with falsehood. Or look back to verse 69, they smear me with lies. They smear his reputation with false allegations.

Now, this can happen quite frequently to Christian leaders in prominent positions. A leader might be accused of embezzling funds when he's done no such thing. He might be accused of abusing women when his behavior has been absolutely pure.

Prominent leaders, of course, do make these sort of mistakes. It's well known. But if a man is innocent of such behavior and yet is accused of it, it can destroy his work and his reputation.

[21 : 51] Creating false rumors and circulating those rumors is the devil's work because the devil is the father of all falsehood. Why, then, do these enemies behave so hatefully towards the psalmist?

Why should they want to persecute this godly man who wants to uphold the Bible? Well, I think verse 85 helps us to understand why. Having told us that they've dug pitfalls for him, the writer then says, they do not live according to your law.

They don't respect God's law. They have no intention of taking the Ten Commandments seriously. But they see the psalmist living his life in a God-honoring way and they hate it because his life shows up their lives for what they are.

It's a kind of moral jealousy. It's what Cain felt towards his brother Abel. The wrongly motivated life of Cain was suddenly laid alongside the godly life of Abel and the contrast was unbearable to Cain so he killed his brother.

He couldn't bear to have his godlessness exposed so he murdered his innocent brother. It's rather as John puts it in the third chapter of his Gospel. Everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light lest his deeds should be exposed.

[23 : 18] These people in Psalm 119 they hate our psalmist and they try to ruin him because he's a man committed to God's teaching and they are men committed to opposing God's teaching.

They hate those who hate the Lord in every generation also hate God's people and try to trap them and destroy them. The sort of pressures that we feel from godless society today should never surprise us.

It's simply history repeating itself. The experience of the author of Psalm 119 is going to be mirrored again and again in our own experience and through history.

So how does our friend pray from the midst of this pressure cooker of persecution? just look at the last two words of verse 86.

Help me he cries out. That is a wonderful prayer. It's the prayer of the one who is stretched out on the rack who is at the end of all his resources.

[24 : 20] Help me. It's a prayer arising from anguish and unbearable pressure. Let's store that away in the back of our minds and bring it out when the dark day comes.

Help me Lord. Any of us can pray that prayer and I guess all of us will need to sooner or later. Let's turn now from what the psalmist is actually experiencing to what the psalmist is truly trusting.

I think it's helpful to use the terms subjective and objective. There is subjective experience and there is objective reality and objective truth.

Now our psalmist's subjective experience, in other words what he's feeling, what's going on inside his heart and mind, his experience is dark and terrible. But in his pain and anguish he has learnt to reach out to objective truth and he puts his trust in it and that is what makes his faith stable and durable.

Yes, he's reaching out to God, that's why he cries out help me, but God has given him something firm and objective to reach out to, rather like the drowning man who reaches out and grasps the life raft.

[25 : 41] And what is this firm and objective thing? It is God's word, God's promise. Yes, the psalmist is putting his trust in God, but how does he actually do that?

And how do we do it? Well, there it is in verse 81, I hope in your word, which means I put my trust in what you have promised me. The same thing comes out in verse 82, my eyes long for your promise, my eyes are straining, they're scanning the horizon for your promise to be fulfilled.

But what my eyes are longing for is not something that you've suggested or something you've hinted at, it is something that you have promised. Now, this, friends, is the heart of faith as the Bible teaches faith.

Faith is not wishful thinking, it's not some fanciful nonsense like believing that the moon is made of green cheese or that there are leprechauns in Ireland. That sort of thing is fantasy, isn't it?

Not faith. Bible faith, Bible faith is believing that what God has said will happen, will happen. Just to give a simple example from the Gospels, remember that time when a Roman centurion, a Gentile

centurion, came to Jesus because he had a very sick servant, he loved and cared for this servant, and he looked to Jesus for help.

[27 : 06] And Jesus said to him, I will come and heal him. But the centurion replied, Lord, you don't need to trouble yourself to come under my roof, that's not necessary, you haven't got to come and kneel down beside him or lay hands on him, all you need do is speak, say the word, and my servant will be healed.

I know this because I'm in the Roman army, and I know the power of a chain of command, the power of words of command. All I have to say to one of the soldiers under me is, do this, and he does it, or come here, and he comes.

Now, Jesus was amazed at this man's faith. This man believed that what Jesus said would happen, would happen, and it did. Jesus said to the centurion, go, let it be done for you as you have believed.

And the man returned to his house, and his servant was healed. Faith is believing that what God says will happen, will happen. It is trusting his promise.

Verse 81, I put my hope in your word of promise, even when there is no evidence in the psalmist's life of God's future rescue.

[28 : 21] His actual experience of life is terrible, abominable, exhaustion, pain, persecution, shriveled up like a wineskin in a smoky chimney. What sort of promise has God given to us that we're to hold on to then in the midst of difficult circumstances?

It is the promise of final, wonderful salvation, the promise of joy and bliss and being with the Lord forever in the world to come. But there's another feature of this which we'll do well to think about, and that is that it's a promise of salvation and judgment.

The two things always go together in the Bible. The psalmist is longing for salvation as verse 81 makes so clear, but he knows that judgment will come to his persecutors in the end, and that's why he prays in verse 84, when will you judge those who persecute me?

Now, we might want to say, but doesn't Jesus teach us to love our enemies and to pray for those who persecute us? Yes, indeed he does, and we must pray for those who oppose the gospel and oppose the Bible and oppose the Lord's people and oppose us personally.

But Jesus also pronounces a fearful judgment on those who refuse to repent and refuse to follow him, and that judgment will come. In fact, whenever we pray, thy kingdom come, we're praying for that judgment, because the return of King Jesus will bring salvation to those who are eagerly awaiting him, and exclusion from his kingdom, judgment, to those who have opposed him.

[30 : 03] Depart from me, he will say, I never knew you. When we pray for our salvation, and the final salvation of all the Lord's people, we are also praying for the judgment of all who have opposed the Lord, and we mustn't fear to pray, thy kingdom come.

Why must we not fear? because Jesus has commanded us to pray, thy kingdom come. Now, if you're here today, and you're not a Christian, are you aware of this final, eternal separation?

If you haven't yet turned to the Lord, turn to him while there is still time. His blood shed on the cross promises forgiveness of all your sins, if you will but turn to him and follow him as your master.

Everything is at stake. don't harden your heart against him. Don't refuse him. Don't trifle with him.

But for those of us here who are Christians, our psalmist is teaching us how to live, and that is by trusting that what God promises to us, he will surely perform.

What he says will happen, will happen. Listen again to what Jesus promises to every believer. I want to quote you now just a verse from John's Gospel, chapter 6, where Jesus says, this is the will of my father.

[31 : 26] Now just think of him starting a sentence like that. If it's the will of his father, it will happen.

This is the will of my father, that everyone who looks on the son, that is Jesus, and believes in him, should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day.

That's the promise. Everyone who looks at the son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day. That's the promise of eternal life and resurrection.

Bible faith is believing that what Jesus says will happen, will happen. It's believing that he is willing and able to do exactly as he has promised. His words are more durable than the mountains.

Heaven and earth will pass away, he says, but my words will not pass away. So the lesson for us from this section of our psalm is to put all our hope in the promises of God.

My soul longs for your salvation. Verse 81, I hope in your word. I lean the full weight of my confidence on your promise, which is a sure promise for the future.

[32 : 37] It's a promise of eternal life. My life in this old world will experience affliction, at times great affliction, but I know that you will do as you have promised, and I wait for it with glad expectation.

Well, let's bow our heads and we'll pray. My soul longs for your salvation. I hope in your word. How we thank you, dear heavenly father, for giving us such comfort as this. We think of the psalmist, our teacher and friend, going through great dark times and difficult experiences, perhaps harsher and harder than anything that most of us have experienced.

But we thank you that he was able, in the midst of his great difficulty, to cry out to you like this, and to have the assurance, the sure hope, that all that you had promised to him would indeed be given to him in the end.

And we pray that you will fill our hearts with joy as we look forward to the fulfillment of the eternal life in the eternal city that you have promised to every Christian believer.

[34 : 00] And we ask these things in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.