

Belonging

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[0 : 00] Well, we're going to sing to read together now, and it's in Psalm 119. We've been studying this long psalm with Edward in recent weeks, and I hope you have your Bible this evening.

If not, I will let you use your phone once again. After this week, no phones. But Psalm 119, and we're going to read the section beginning, in Lamed, verse 89, that's, as I said before, one of the letters of the Hebrew alphabet.

Each section in this psalm, each line of each section, begins with the same letter of the Hebrew alphabet. So it's quite a work of art, quite a carefully crafted psalm to make it memorable, to make its message remain with us.

So let's read carefully, verse 89. Forever, O Lord, your word is firmly fixed in the heavens.

Your faithfulness endures to all generations. You have established the earth, and it stands fast. By your appointment they stand this day.

[1 : 14] For all things are your servants. If your law had not been my delight, I would have perished in my affliction. I never forget your precepts, for by them you have given me life.

I am yours. Save me, for I've sought your precepts. The wicked line wait to destroy me, that I consider your testimonies.

I've seen a limit to all perfection, but your commandment is exceedingly broad. Amen.

May God bless us. His word. Good evening, friends. Well, if you have sight of a Bible, perhaps you'd turn with me to Psalm 119, and our section begins at verse 89.

This sermon I've prepared for everybody, but particularly I have in mind those who may be new to the Christian faith, and those who may not be Christians, but are feeling your way towards it, and you're wondering what it's all about, and I hope this will be helpful for you.

[2 : 34] My title for tonight is simply Belonging, and I've chosen that title because of the remarkable three words at the start of verse 94.

Perhaps you'd look at those three words with me. The psalmist cries out to God, I am yours. I am yours. Now, I do think that those three words are remarkable.

The writer is saying to God, I belong to you. I'm your possession. Therefore, you are my leader, my lord, my owner. I'm yours. What can enable a human being to cry out to an unseen, unseeable God, I am yours?

How could he be so sure? What makes him so certain that he belongs to God? Well, in a moment, we'll look through this section of the psalm, and I think we'll be able to see why our psalmist is so sure that he belongs to God.

But let me first ask this question. Could you cry out to God, I am yours? Would you want to say such a thing? Or would you prefer to say, I'll hold back on that one, thank you, at least for the time being.

[3 : 49] I'll weigh up my options. I'll sit on the fence for now. You know how we sometimes say about an individual, he's very self-possessed. He's cool, calm, and collected.

He's in charge of himself. He knows where he's going. He knows what he wants to get out of life. Maybe you're that kind of person, self-possessed. You don't want God to possess you, because that would mean submitting to his direction.

You don't want to say, I'm yours, because you'd prefer to say, I am mine. In the words of the famous poem, *Invictus*, you'd like to say, I am the master of my fate, I am the captain of my soul. Now, everybody who later becomes a Christian starts at that point. Self-possessed, self-determining, self-oriented, self-believing, self-authenticating.

That was certainly my position in life before I became a Christian. And for an individual to move from saying, I am mine, to saying to God, I am yours, involves a profound revolution, a miraculous

conversion.

[5 : 01] It's as though the center of our personality before we come to Christ is like a well-fortified citadel. It's the stronghold. It's the keep of the castle.

And then that stronghold gets assaulted by a battery. The gospel, the words of God, the great truths about the glory and power of Christ, they begin to batter at the stonework of the castle walls, until eventually, the keeper of the castle says, I surrender.

I acknowledge your mastery. I acknowledge that I was not made to be my own master, but to be yours, to serve you, to love you, to walk in the way of the Bible and no longer in the way of the world.

I lay down the arms of my rebellion and I say to you, oh God, I am yours. Becoming a Christian involves that kind of transformation.

It is profound and wonderful. But there are reasons for it. Excellent reasons why a person should surrender to the lordship and ownership of God and of Jesus Christ.

[6 : 08] So that finally, that person is glad to say, I am yours. So let's look at our Bible verses and we'll see the cluster of truth that surrounds that cry, I am yours, save me.

Can we notice three things about the psalmist? First, first, he is convinced that the universe is established by God's word.

Look at the first three verses here, verses 89, 90, and 91. They're about the creation, about the universe. Our psalmist has not mentioned the huge realities of the created order in the psalm up to this point at all.

It has all been about the interior landscape of his own heart, his joys and sorrows, his afflictions and persecutions and the power of God's word to steady him, to assure him and to bring him delight.

But suddenly, in verses 89 to 91, he turns his mind to the heavens in verse 89, to the earth in verse 90, and to all things, every part of the creation in verse 91.

[7 : 17] Now, why does he do that? Well, it's partly to encourage himself and it's partly to teach us about the nature of reality, about the true structure of the universe.

And what he says in these three verses fuels his ability to cry out to God, I'm yours, when he gets to verse 94. So let's try and tease this out.

We'll start with verse 89. The psalmist looks up and he considers the heavens, by which he means the sky, vast, immeasurable, going on and on forever.

Just think of the sky here on a clear, starry night. On a cloudy day or a cloudy night, it sits down on us like a low-cut hat. But on a starry night, we get a sense of the immensity and vastness of the constellations.

What is verse 89 telling us? That God's word is fixed into the very structure of the stars. Firmly fixed.

[8 : 21] God has taught the psalmist that as he looks up into the starry night sky, it is redolent of the word of God that created it. Look up at the stars, he's saying, and you'll see what God's word has made.

As another psalm, Psalm 33, puts it, by the word of the Lord the heavens were made and all their starry host by the breath of his mouth. The whole Bible unanimously testifies that everything that exists came into being by the breath of God's mouth.

Just to give one example from Genesis chapter 1, God said, let there be an expanse in the midst of the waters and let it separate the waters from the waters.

And God made the expanse and separated the waters that were under the expanse from the waters that were above the expanse. And it was so. And God called the expanse heaven.

Now our psalmist has been meditating upon Genesis and all the earlier parts of the Old Testament since he was a boy. He knows where the creation has come from. And here in verse 89, he looks up to the heavens and reminds himself and us that the astonishing heavens testify to the power of the word that brought them into being.

[9 : 39] Then in verse 90, he turns from the heavens to the earth. Where did that come from? What is the origin of the earth? Well, the verse tells us, you God, you have established the earth and it stands fast.

And what lies behind the establishment of the earth? God's enduring faithfulness, the faithfulness that endures to all generations. Our psalmist knew, for example, what God had said to Noah back in Genesis chapter 8.

While the earth remains, seed time and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease. And the trustworthiness of that promise is abundantly evident to us still in 2020 AD. Then verse 91 develops the same point further and rubs it into our heads yet further. By your appointment, by your purposeful decision, they, that is the heavens and the earth, stand this day. For all things are your servants. Every created thing from the sun and the moon downwards serves the Lord by fulfilling the purpose for which he made it.

[10:55] Think of that. Everything serves the Creator by being what it is and doing what it does. The rivers, the oceans, the fertile fields, the trees, the rocks, the roar of the lion, the bark of the dog, the squeak of the piglet.

It all serves him. And notice in these three verses the strength and sureness of the words that are used. Verse 89, firmly fixed.

Verse 90, endures, established, stands fast. Verse 91, they stand. This is the language of cosmic permanence.

The heavens and the earth are not jerry-built. Our psalmist deeply believes and powerfully teaches that God is the purposeful Creator of everything.

Now the question is, do you and I believe that? It needs to be asked, that question, because we've all grown up in an atmosphere in which intellectuals and opinion formers mostly reject the idea that the universe has been purposefully created by God.

[12:04] And yet this atheistic history, which we might think has only been going on for a couple of hundred years, has a much longer history. Back in the first century AD, the apostle Paul wrote in Romans chapter 1 about the way in which God has clearly revealed himself in the creation.

Paul writes, God's invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature have been clearly perceived ever since the creation of the world in the things that have been made.

Paul is saying, look at the amazing creation around us. Does it not testify to its creator? But in the same paragraph he says that men, human beings, in their ungodliness and unrighteousness, prefer to suppress the truth, to push it down out of sight.

Paul is saying people know deep down in their hearts that God exists, that he's created everything, but they won't acknowledge it. Why not? Because to acknowledge God as God must entail bowing down to him and submitting to him, must entail in the end saying to him, I am yours.

And men and women by nature want to say, I am mine. In academic circles today, many individual scientists are Christians.

[13:29] But the scientific establishment as a whole placards its atheism everywhere. Now, it's a brittle and defensive kind of atheism. It says, we're pure naturalists, we're pure materialists in fortress atheism.

We're not going to let any supernaturalists creep in here and start probing our defenses. And yet, leading scientists, great scientists like Albert Einstein and more recently Stephen Hawking, neither of them Christians, and yet men like that have been saying that the ultimate goal of science is to find a unifying power or principle that underlies the reality of everything.

The ultimate goal of science is to find a unifying principle underlying the reality of everything. might Genesis chapter 1 therefore be worth reading after all to give us a clue as to what that unifying power might be?

I find this atheistic theory simply impossible to believe. The idea that everything just came into being by chance, by random chance. That seems to me impossible to the power of a trillion trillion.

The great and beneficial disciplines of physics, chemistry, biology, geology, astronomy, and medical research are continually uncovering new and wonderful aspects of truth, showing us what is really there.

[14:55] But whose truth are they describing? Who made that truth? Who made DNA, for example? Who put sight into our eyes and hearing into our ears and laughter into our bellies?

did these things just happen? Look at your face. Well, you can't just at the moment, can you? But you will later on when you're brushing your teeth.

At least you might if you're under 40. You may discover if you're over 40 that the season of self-admiration is now concluded. But just think of your face for a moment.

Doesn't it have wonderful powers? Every face here. You can extrude your tongue if you wish to.

Now, you haven't got to at this very moment, but you know that you can do it.

You can cross your eyes. You can wiggle your ears because you have certain muscles there, don't you? Where did you get those powers from? Was it Dr. Random Chance, Ph.D.?

[15:56] The atheist defensively holds on to his atheism because he doesn't want to admit that God is God. He does not want to say to God, I'm yours.

But the psalmist rejoices in his creator. Firmly fixed in the heavens is the word of God. The earth is established by God and it stands fast.

Everything serves its creator. If this atheistic thinking is somehow lingering in the dark corners of our hearts, let's show it the door. It's a desperate, barren creed.

It's what the prophet Isaiah would have called a refuge of lies. Let's bring our hearts and minds into line with verses 88 to 91. Our psalmist is our true teacher because he speaks the words of God.

The universe is established by God's word. Now the second reason why the psalmist cries out, I'm yours, save me, is that he is aware of fierce opponents.

[17:00] He tells us about them in verse 95. He calls them there the wicked and he tells us what their intentions are towards him. The wicked, he says, lie in wait to destroy him, not just to ridicule him or to try to defeat him in argument, they want to destroy him.

And this painful fact illustrates the level of hostility that real Bible faith can attract. If you're thinking that you might become a Christian, you do need to bear this in mind because to be a Christian is not to engage in some morally neutral activity like becoming a bird watcher or joining a ballroom dancing club.

No, it attracts hostility, even in the worst cases, hostility that seeks to destroy. If you were here last Sunday evening, I know many of you were, you'll remember that delightful Ukrainian pastor Igor who was visiting us.

I got talking to him after the service and we were discussing what life is like in countries that are ruled by totalitarian regimes. And he said to me that typically a totalitarian government will tolerate churches that will keep themselves to themselves, just doing quiet things in a quiet corner, worship and liturgy and songs and candles and so on.

But as soon as a church starts to spread the gospel and to speak out, the authority wants to close it down. In fact, Igor said to me, government officials have spoken to me and they've said, we just want churches like yours to disappear.

[18:34] A very disconcerting thing for a pastor to hear. The wicked, God's enemies, lie in wait to destroy me. Verse 95.

Now think of Jesus. He was all too familiar with this kind of behavior. Jesus, people loved him, didn't they, flocked to him. His company was delightful and infectious.

He was the most sane, balanced, loving, wise, merciful human being who ever walked the earth. And yet after only three years of public teaching, he was executed.

He said to his enemies in John's Gospel, chapter 8, you are seeking to kill me, to kill me, a man who has told you the truth that I heard from God. And that's what they were doing.

It was not enough for them to silence him or to get him sent off into exile. They were committed to a course that would lead to his death. This psalmist's life was cast in the same mold.

[19:34] The wicked lie in wait to destroy me. The writer mentions his affliction in verse 92. That's the affliction that he suffered because of his enemies. No wonder he cries out to the Lord, I'm yours, save me.

What he really means by that is, because I'm yours, save me. Because you've committed yourself to me in covenant. Because I'm your sheep and you're my shepherd, save me.

The opposition on account of his commitment to the Lord is real and powerful and almost overwhelming. Now, until you become a Christian, you don't realize the strength and fierceness of the opposition to the Lord's people.

Let me picture this in terms of rugby. Scotland did rather well last week against France at Murrayfield. You may know that. But just imagine you go to a rugby match like that. If you're sitting in the stands at Murrayfield as a spectator, wrapped up in three coats and four scarves and with a hip flask full of iron brew just to help you while you're enjoying watching the game, that's one thing, isn't it?

But if you're actually playing on the pitch, if you're wearing that dark blue shirt and there's a 19 stone Frenchman running at you at 20 miles an hour, you feel the force of the opposition in a way that you never will when you're just a spectator in the stands.

[21 : 00] When you become a Christian, you find yourself on the field of play. It's exhilarating. To love the Lord and to serve him is the greatest experience any person can have.

But you soon find out that you're involved in a battle, in a war, and the opposition can be very tough and very unfriendly. Why is there this fierce opposition to Jesus and to the Bible?

Why should the finest man who has ever lived and the greatest book that was ever written attract such determined hostility? Why should our psalmist have to cry out in verse 95, the wicked lion weight to destroy me?

The answer is that in our natural unconverted state, we're not neutral towards God. We're determined to resist his claim of ownership upon our lives.

On my shelves at home, I have a book with the title Man in Revolt. It's a good title. That's what we're like by nature, in revolt against the good, kindly, merciful government of the God who made us and who loves us.

[22 : 12] But friends, here's the thing, and I'm particularly speaking now to those who are not Christians. We have not got to stay in that state of revolt. Indeed, to stay in it is to be under sentence of condemnation and ruin.

The wages of sin is death, eternal death. That's all that any of us deserve, which is why the Bible calls to us to come to Christ and be saved from death.

We don't need to stay amongst the ranks of the rebels. Christ has died for us in our place to bear the penalty of our sin, our revolt against God. We all need to be converted.

If you've never done so, will you at last cry out to God, I want to be yours, I am yours, save me. If you cry to him like that, he will certainly save you, and your life will immediately begin to be reconstructed.

You'll discover the joy of belonging to the Lord and the Lord's people. Yes, you'll have to face the opposition, but you'll be in good company because you'll be in Jesus' company.

[23 : 19] He said to his disciples, if the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. In other words, to be on the receiving end of hostility is part of the package.

Jesus was no spectator. He's in the battle with us. Why then does the psalmist cry out, I'm yours? Well, we've seen two reasons so far.

First, because the Lord is the creator of everything, and therefore to belong to him is to belong to the one who has made us and loves us and knows our best interests. And secondly, because the opposition is fierce and relentless, and the psalmist knows that the Lord will protect him and rescue him.

Now, here's a third and final reason. He cries out, I am yours, because the sheer truth and truthfulness of the Bible has overwhelmed him and filled him with joy.

Now, this psalmist, of course, did not have the Bible that we have, the whole Bible. He didn't have the New Testament, and probably about half of the Old Testament would have been written after his day. But he had more than enough Bible to enable him to know the Lord and to get a clear view of his creator and savior.

[24 : 36] And he rejoiced in his Bible because he knew that it taught the most important truth in the world, the truth that makes a man or woman steady and strong and happy and able to live life without being afraid.

Just look at the way he describes his relationship to the Bible in these verses. He uses different words to describe the Bible. He calls it God's law in verse 92, God's precepts in verse 93 and again in 94, God's testimonies in verse 95, and God's commandment in verse 96.

But all of those terms refer to the same reality, God's written words, indestructible words, recorded for us in the Bible. So how does he regard these words from heaven?

Verse 92, he delights in them. They're his joy, he feasts on them. As Moses said, man shall not live on bread alone, man cannot live on bread alone, but by every word that comes forth from the mouth of God.

When you become a Christian, you gradually learn to delight in God's words. you have a continual source of joy and strength operating in your life. The psalmist delights in everything God says.

[25 : 57] Then look at verse 93. He stores them deep in his memory. I will never forget your precepts, he says. Why not? For by them you have given me life.

That's not an exaggeration. It's the Bible that opens up to us the way to eternal life. Then verse 94. I've sought your precepts.

Sort them out like a diamond merchant searching for the best gems, like an art collector seeking out the finest pictures. Like that, our psalmist goes again and again to his Bible, searching out the glorious truths that it contains because they are more valuable than anything the world affords. Then verse 95. I consider your testimonies. I think about them. They engage my brain. I work away at them. I chew at them like a dog working at a bone until they yield up the nourishment that brings joy and strength into my life.

Aren't these verbs interesting? And don't they give us a powerful incentive to be Bible readers? Delighting in the Bible, never forgetting the Bible, seeking out the Bible, considering the Bible.

[27 : 11] And this brings our psalmist to verse 96 where he sums up his view of the Bible. He says, I've seen a limit to all perfection, but your commandment is exceedingly broad.

Now exceedingly broad means without limit. Everything out there is perfect, every perfection he says is limited, but your commandment is not. God's words are limitless.

We never get to an end of them. And indeed, the most perfect and desirable things in this world all come to an end. Shakespeare, that great poet, had to lay down his pen in the end.

Beethoven wrote nine symphonies and could write no more. The finest sportsman in the world has his final victory and then has to hang up his boots. But, says our psalmist, your commandment is exceedingly broad.

We can never reach the end of it. We can never drink its well dry. We never get to a point where we say, shut the book, I've exhausted its treasures. The Bible will nourish us right the way through life.

[28 : 20] It will bring us confidence to the very gates of death and will take away our fears as we approach those dark gates because we shall know then that for the Christian, the gates of death are the gateway to eternal life.

So isn't the psalmist opening up the most powerful reasons for capitulating to the Lord Jesus, for wanting to belong to him and to God the Father and to say to him, I am yours.

God is the creator and the universe stands fast in his hands. The opposition may be fierce but to belong to the Lord is to be sure of final victory.

And the Bible, to deny yourself the Bible is like going on hunger strike. It contains all that is good and nourishing and joyful and true.

Trust the Lord Jesus and trust God the Father. To belong to him and to his people is the very thing that we were made for. You will never pray a better prayer than to say to the Lord, I am yours, save me.

[29 : 29] it's a prayer that he will certainly answer. Let's bow our heads and we'll pray. How we thank you, our dear gracious Father, for calling us to put our trust in you and to turn to you and to say, please be the director, the owner, the Lord, the governor of my life.

I am indeed yours. And thank you too, dear heavenly Father, for your people to whom also we belong, wonderfully. And our prayer is that you'll bless our church and help us as we get to know you better, to trust you more, to love you and your words more deeply, to be nourished by them every day.

Please take us, direct our lives, and help us to bring this gospel of the Lord Jesus, this good news, to many others. We ask it in Jesus' name.

Amen.