

The Dangerous Journey and its Glorious End

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Date: 24 May 2020

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[0 : 00] We're going to turn now to our Bibles this morning and we're reading in the Psalms. Back in Psalm 119, Edward Lobb is going to be preaching to us this morning. And we've been in and out of Psalm 119 with Edward over some months now.

And this week and next week, we're coming back to a couple of its sections. And we're going to read this morning from Psalm 119, beginning at verse 105. It's the section that begins with the little word, nun.

If you wonder what that is, that's the Hebrew letter of the alphabet. This is an acrostic poem, it's called. Every section begins with a subsequent letter of the Hebrew alphabet.

So it's very carefully worked. It's an artistic piece of work. I suppose that's been done to aid memorization and perhaps to aid teaching. But it tells you that the writer is very concerned that his words are taken seriously.

And we're going to do that now as we read together. Psalm 119 and at verse 105. Your word, says the psalmist, is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.

[1 : 07] I've sworn an oath and confirmed it to keep your righteous rules. I'm severely afflicted. Give me life, O Lord, according to your word.

Accept my freewill offerings of praise, O Lord, and teach me your rules. I hold my life in my hand continually, but I do not forget your law.

The wicked have laid a snare for me, but I do not stray from your precepts. Your testimonies are my heritage forever. They are the joy of my heart.

I incline my heart to perform your statutes forever to the end. Amen. And may God bless to us his word.

Good morning, friends, and I'm very glad to be with you and able to share something from the word of God this Sunday morning. Now, as you know, our passage is Psalm 119, verses 105 to 112.

[2 : 15] And if you have a Bible before you, perhaps you could turn that up to follow along with me. In this section, our psalmist is thinking of his life as a long walk.

And that's why my title for this morning is The Dangerous Journey and Its Glorious End. You'll see that he speaks in verse 105 of my path.

In front of him, stretching to the horizon, is a pathway. His job is to walk down it. And there's a sense in which this pathway is surrounded by darkness.

Because he needs a lamp and a light to guide him. And God's word is that lamp and light. Verse 110 also gives us a sense of journeying along a road.

And this is a dangerous road. Because snares have been laid along it by wicked people. But, says our friend the psalmist, I don't stray and land in one of those snares or traps.

[3 : 16] Because God's precepts, the instruction of the Bible, keep him on course. And then look on to verse 112. I incline my heart to perform your statutes forever to the end.

So the end, you see, is in sight. The road may be long and wearisome and dark at times and fraught with danger. But it has an end. And for the believer, that end is a good and glorious one. Now, you probably know that the Bible often uses this idea of walking to describe our life. It's a most instructive picture to use. Because it combines the thought of endurance over a long period. With the idea of making good or bad moral choices. It's not just a matter of how long the road is. It's also a matter of how we conduct ourselves on that long road.

Think back in the Bible for a moment to Genesis chapter 5. We read there that Enoch walked with God. He was clearly a man who loved the Lord. In fact, Hebrews 11 tells us that he was commended by God because he pleased God.

[4 : 27] To walk with God is to live under his smile of approval. The New Testament also uses the idea of the long walk as a metaphor for how we conduct ourselves.

Paul the Apostle, for example, says to the Galatians, walk by the Spirit. He says to the Ephesians, walk in love. Look carefully, then, how you walk.

The Apostle John urges his readers in his first letter to walk in the light. Which is the same idea as we have in our psalm at verse 105.

So the Bible teaches us to think of our life as a long walk. But it's not a straightforward walk. It's not like simply walking along one of those great long Roman roads.

Which never deviates to right or left. And you can't possibly make a mistake. No, our lives are full of crossroads. And forks in the road. Where decisions have to be made.

[5 : 25] Sometimes it feels as if you're walking along a cliff edge path. With a drop of 200 feet onto rocks below. If you should miss your footing. And of course a time will come.

When in the words of King David in Psalm 23. I shall walk through the valley of the shadow of death. Now it's comforting to know. That our psalmist is our teacher.

Centuries before us. He had learned not to walk the broad road. That leads to destruction. But rather to walk the narrow road. That leads to life. And our verses for today.

Act as a fine commentary. On how to stay on that narrow. But very wonderful road. So we'll take the teaching of the section. Under four headings. First.

The Bible sheds light. On our moral pathway. Verse 105 again. Your word. Is a lamp to my feet. And a light to my path.

[6 : 23] The lamp and the light. Illuminate the path. So that we can see clearly. Where we're going. But there's a right way. To understand this verse. And there's a wrong way.

The wrong way. Is to think that the Bible. Will give us the answers. To questions such as. Should I move to a new place? Should I take a different job? Should I marry Prudence?

Or should it be Gertrude? To look at the Bible like that. Is a bit like looking at a horoscope. Or consulting Gypsy Rose Lee. In the fairground. For example. I might have to make a choice.

Between staying in Glasgow. And moving to John O'Groats. An unlikely scenario. I realize that. But just imagine. That that's your situation. Should I stay in Glasgow.

Or should I move to John O'Groats. To open up a new office. For my work. So I say. I'll consult the Bible. So I pray. Lord. Please show me a passage. Which will make your will.

[7 : 19] Absolutely clear. You open your Bible. And the first sentence you read says. Stay in the city. Thank you Lord. You say. Now I know beyond a shadow of doubt.

That Glasgow is the place for me. But those words. Which come from the very end of Luke's gospel. Were addressed by Jesus. To the disciples. Just before his ascension into heaven.

Their meaning is quite specific. He was saying to them. Stay in the city of Jerusalem. Until you are clothed with power from on high. Until the Holy Spirit comes upon you with power.

So that you are then enabled. To bear witness to me boldly. So to rip those words out of their context. And to use them to decide a career move.

In the 21st century. Is to misuse them badly. Now I know there is a tradition. In some Christian circles. Of using scripture rather like that. You will find it in some of the biographies.

[8 : 16] Of famous missionaries of yesteryear. People who were very fine brave Christians. Whose work was often enormously fruitful. But their fruitfulness and fine example.

Doesn't mean that they were using the Bible rightly. When making decisions like that. About where to work. Or who to work with. The kind of guidance that the Bible offers on our pathway.

Is not about where to work. But about how to work. It teaches us to work diligently. Honestly. Cheerfully. In a way that cuts no moral corners.

A way that is willing to bend over backwards. To help colleagues at work. To be truthful. And hard working. But the Bible won't tell me. Whether I should work in Glasgow. Or Edinburgh.

Or Dundee. I have to weigh up the factors involved. And then take responsibility. For making my own decision. In the same way. The Bible won't tell me.

[9 : 11] Which I should marry. Out of prudence. Or Gertrude. But it will tell me. A lot about. How I should behave. Towards my wife. Once I'm married to her. And how I should behave.

Towards other people's wives. The Bible sheds light. On our moral pathway. It enables us. To make good moral decisions. If I were to see.

A nice bicycle. Propped against the railings. In town. Without a chain. Or a lock. And I'm tempted. To jump on it. And pedal away. Shouting hallelujah. Find us keepers. The Bible very clearly shows me.

That that would be a wrong decision. You shall not steal. Says the eighth commandment. Or if I become aware. That the man who has recently moved in.

Straight across the street from me. Looks like a really nasty piece of work. He's got a face like. Blackbeard the pirate. After a heavy night in the pub. I might ask.

[10:06] Should I kill him? And make the street a safer and happier place? Well the Bible gives me a very clear answer. You shall not commit murder. Says the sixth commandment. The Bible will certainly teach me to be wary of a man like that.

So if he should say to me one day. Lend me 600 quid pal. So I can buy a secondhand fiat. The Bible would teach me to say a very courteous but definite no.

The book of Proverbs often warns us. Not to enter into financial commitments with people that we don't really know. The Bible teaches us moral wisdom.

To use one of Paul's phrases in 2 Timothy. It gives us training in righteousness. It gives us training in righteousness. We need to be trained in how to discern what is the right way to go.

Because we often don't know it naturally. It's in that sense that God's word is a lamp to our feet and a light to our path. Now here's a question.

[11:04] Is there anything in the teaching or the example of Jesus that might shed light on this verse 105? Well yes there is. He says in John's gospel chapter 8 verse 12.

I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness. But will have the light of life. You see Jesus there uses the word walk.

And what he means by follow me is both to follow and obey his teaching and to follow his example. To see his footprints and to place our own in them.

In other words to live a life that is prepared to lay itself down for other people if need be. Greater love has no man than this. That a man lays down his life for his friends.

So we have the light of the words of the Bible to teach us. We have the light of Jesus himself. Both his teaching and his example. In other words we have serious illumination.

[12:05] It's a bit like those moments when you're driving a car after dark. And you suddenly leave an unlit country road where you're peering into the darkness. And you come into a town where the street lights flood the road with light.

And you breathe a great sigh of relief. Because you're no longer peering anxiously into the darkness. You can see everything clearly. And you're much less likely to run into a tree. Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.

It brings clarity and peace to our minds and to our consciences. We learn from the Bible to see the shape, the contours and the profile of true morality.

And we're unable to steer a steady course. So there's the first thing. The Bible sheds light on our moral pathway. Now second.

The Bible nourishes a determination to obey the Lord's teaching. This is what the psalmist says in verse 106. I have sworn an oath and confirmed it to keep your righteous rules.

[13:15] Now do you think that's a rather strange thing for him to say? I have sworn an oath and confirmed it. Swearing an oath is something you do in public in the face of witnesses.

Probably in a court of law. You stand there in full view of other people. You place your hand upon a Bible and you say, I swear to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth.

The very fact that we can be required to take an oath in public bears testimony to our propensity to tell lies. If we never told lies, we would never have to swear that we were telling the truth.

So why should the psalmist tell us that he has sworn an oath to keep God's righteous rules? Do we feel uncomfortable about that verse? Because we wonder if any frail sinner is in a position to swear that he's going to obey God's teaching.

How can anybody be so sure? We might ask. In fact, we might look on to the very last verse of the psalm, verse 176, where the author says, I've gone astray like a lost sheep.

[14:23] And we might then say, well, he hasn't been able to keep his oath, has he? He's confessing here that he hasn't fully kept God's righteous rules. So what was the point of his oath if he couldn't keep it?

Well, I wonder if the answer is this. Yes, he is a frail sinner. He's a straying sheep like the rest of us. But he's teaching his readers to be unafraid to make a public profession of obedience.

Because he knows that it's good for believers to make a public commitment like that. It strengthens our resolve to follow Christ and to obey him. I remember when I was a teenager, I went on two or three occasions to hear Billy Graham preach the gospel.

As you know, he used to hold his meetings in big stadiums like Wembley Stadium or Earl's Court. And at the end of his sermon, he would generally say something like this. All of you who want to come to Christ tonight, I want you to get up out of your seats and to come down.

Come down the staircases. Come down and stand on the grass, on the pitch. Don't worry about your friends, your family, the people that you've come with. They'll wait for you. But you need to come forward now.

[15 : 35] And he went on like this. When Jesus called people to follow him, he always called them publicly. They had to stand up and be counted in front of their friends.

You cannot be a secret, private Christian. To follow Christ is personal, but it can never be private. How right he was and how wise he was to teach people that important lesson.

Now, we do this as well. When you become a member of the church, you have to make a public profession of faith. You're asked if you're willing to attend the meetings of the church regularly, to pray and read the Bible regularly, to give of your time and talents and money to the Lord's work. In short, you are asked if your actual life and conduct are going to demonstrate your verbal profession of faith. And it's good for us to be asked those questions in public.

If you have made public promises in the face of witnesses, you have a strong incentive to keep your promises. You don't want to end up ashamed that you haven't kept your word.

[16 : 42] It's the same with some of the hymns that we sing. Take these lines as an example. Oh, Jesus, I have promised to serve you to the end.

Many of us have sung those words many, many times. Have we kept them? Not entirely. Can we keep them entirely? No, we cannot. But it's still very good for us.

It's very bracing for us to sing those words. Because by singing them, we set ourselves a benchmark. As we stand singing them together, we're saying to the Lord and to each other, this is right.

This is what we want to do. We are together promising to the best of our ability to serve the Lord Jesus right to the end of life. The psalmist is only too conscious of his frailty.

You only have to look at the next verse, verse 107. I am severely afflicted. Give me life, O Lord, according to your word. He's bowed down by the weight of his affliction.

[17 : 43] He knows that trouble and sorrow have reduced his ability to follow through on his oath full-bloodedly. He feels half dead in his sorrows, which is why he cries out, Give me life, O Lord.

You don't cry out, give me life, if you're feeling on top of the world. He's begging for grace so that he should be able to keep the Lord's righteous rules. But that public oath in verse 106 shows how determined he is to obey the Lord's teaching.

And there is something about the Bible that stirs up in us the desire, the determination to obey the Lord's teaching. Jesus, of course, had a very similar determination.

He once said to his disciples in John's Gospel, chapter 4, My food, in other words, the thing that fuels my will, my food is to do the will of him who sent me and to accomplish his work.

And he did accomplish it. His final words on the cross were, it is accomplished. The Bible is full of incentive to us. This incentive comes from the heart of God, the Father, who loves us.

[18 : 56] And as the Bible increasingly conquers our hearts and minds, it stirs up our desire to live by it so that we should please our Heavenly Father and our Savior Jesus.

So the Bible nourishes a determination to obey the Lord's teaching. Obedience always brings blessing. Now, thirdly, the Bible holds us firm in the midst of many dangers.

Now, we've seen already from verse 107 that the psalmist is feeling the painful pressure of affliction. But it's when we reach verse 110 that we discover the main source of his troubles.

The wicked, he says, have laid a snare for me. Now, the intention of laying a snare for the psalmist is not only to catch him, but to destroy him.

In fact, if you look back to verse 87, he says, my enemies have almost made an end of me on the earth. That's what they really want. They want to make an end of him.

[20 : 03] And that gruesome theme of the enemies of God's people comes to its climax in the way that Jesus's enemies regarded him. They laid snares for him.

They were often trying to trap him by making him say something which they could use against him. But their aim was not simply to embarrass him or to make him look foolish.

It was to kill him. They wanted to be able to take him to some kind of a court and accuse him of blasphemy so that they could execute him. And, of course, they succeeded.

Now, in the modern world, people loudly profess to value tolerance above all other things. Let's tolerate every belief system, they say. Let's be inclusive of everyone's faith commitments.

These are the thoughts we often hear in public. But the one position that these folk are not willing to tolerate is the position and teaching of Bible Christianity. Why?

[21 : 00] Because Bible Christianity is non-negotiable on the question of how a person can be saved. The Bible Christian says that salvation is only available through faith in Jesus Christ.

The Bible is utterly clear on that. We can't dumb the gospel down or somehow accommodate it to other positions without dishonoring Christ. And it's our firmness on the truth about Christ that makes us intolerable in the modern world.

And while our modern non-Christian contemporaries in Britain may not actually be wanting to kill us at the moment for our beliefs, they would gladly see the demise of our clear gospel because it doesn't fit with their secularist values.

Now, of course, in some countries, enemies of the gospel do actually want to kill Christians and succeed in doing so fairly regularly. And the murderers of Christians are often not brought to book because the governments of their nations would also gladly see the death of the church.

So when we read in verse 110 that the wicked have laid a snare for the psalmist, we're looking at a form of behavior that has been repeating itself over and over again for thousands of years, coming to its climax in the execution of Jesus, but constantly repeating itself throughout history and right up to the present day.

[22 : 25] It's a reminder to us that it's a risky thing to hold allegiance to a God and a gospel whose truth cannot be dumbed down or compromised.

Look at verse 109. I hold my life in my hand continually. What he means is I take my life in my hands by sticking to the Bible.

The atmosphere of this psalm is so different from the way that I used to think of the church when I was a child growing up in the south of England. Back then, the church was part of village life.

It was as much embedded in the English village as the bowling green and the cricket pitch. I just think of it. There's the pretty little village. There's a cricket match taking place.

It's a Saturday afternoon. The cricket pitch is in front of the old village church. Wood pigeons are cooing in the trees. And you hear from the cricket pitch the delicious sound of willow being applied to leather.

[23 : 31] And there's the vicar. The vicar appears, a rather crumpled-looking man strolling around the boundary with a cup of tea in his hand, smiling hugely at everybody. Oh, good afternoon, Mrs. Fotherington.

The days are drawing out so pleasantly at this time of the year, aren't they? For me, as a child, the church was utterly innocuous. It was a place of music and weddings and carol services and jammy dodger biscuits for the children.

It was a far cry from the hostilities of Psalm 119. But those days of the gentle old parish church are truly past history.

The gloves are off in the modern world, and we're being called on to fight the good fight with all our might. But how do we fight? How do we learn not to fall into the traps that the enemies of the gospel lay for us?

Well, the answer is in verses 109 and 110. Verse 109 teaches us to keep God's words in the forefront of our minds.

[24 : 35] Think of God's words in the world. I hold my life in my hands continually, but I do not forget your law. I'm in dire straits at times. I'm holding my life in my hands.

But God's words are not forgotten. It's they that keep me going. Think of a small boat, a 10-foot rowing dinghy, lying in a harbor during the winter months.

Think of it going up and down on the tide. But it's attached to the harbor wall by a strong cable, which is tied to a huge iron ring embedded in the thick stone wall of the harbor.

And when a storm comes, this dinghy is tossed about all over the place and perhaps gets battered and damaged. But it's held firm by that stout cable. Now, think of yourself as the dinghy and the stout cable as the Bible and the Lord as the harbor wall.

It's the Bible that holds you to the Lord when you're tossed about by the tempests. Verse 109. I hold my life in my hand continually.

[25 : 40] I'm running great risks. I frequently feel utterly fragile and vulnerable, but I do not forget your law. It's the cable which binds me to you, Lord.

Then verse 110 makes a very similar point. There are snares laid along my pathway by people who hate the gospel. But what keeps me from straying and falling into the snare?

Your precepts. The wicked have laid a snare for me, but I do not stray from your precepts. Didn't Jesus himself exemplify this?

Think of his temptations. He was in the wilderness 40 days, tempted, tested by the devil. He was very hungry. The devil said to him, if you're the son of God, command this stone to become bread. There beside him was a great big round brown stone looking like a jumbo sized cottage loaf. Did he feel the power of the temptation?

[26 : 43] Of course. He felt it overwhelmingly. He was starving. Did he have the power to make bread out of a stone? Well, of course he did. He created bread for 5,000 people out of a handful of small rolls.

He had the power. So what gave him the power to resist the devil's temptation? A phrase from the law of Moses. He said to the devil, it is written, man shall not live by bread alone.

So this snare was laid by his pathway, by the fountain of all wickedness, by the devil himself. But Jesus did not stray from the Lord's teaching. He called it instantly to mind.

And he said it out loud to himself and to the tempter. And that shows us how to do it. We see the snare by the pathway. It looks initially attractive, but we recognize it as the devil's trap.

We instantly call to mind the Lord's teaching and we say it out loud if necessary. You shall not kill. You shall not steal. You shall not commit adultery.

[27 : 49] You shall not tell lies against your neighbor. The wicked have laid a snare for me, but I do not stray from your precepts. It's the Lord's teaching, his lovely life-giving commandments that rescue us in the moment of peril.

It is not easy to live as a Christian. We're often under attack. Attacked by the values of the world around us. Attacked sometimes by actual people, individuals who hate the gospel.

And quite often by the temptations that arise out of our own perverse nature. But it's the Lord's teaching that will keep us safe. That's why he gives it to us.

To enable us to keep on walking along the right road. Well, now fourth, lastly and briefly. The Bible keeps our eyes on the finish of the long walk.

And the finish of the long walk is the gateway to eternal life. Look first at verse 111. Your testimonies are my heritage forever, for they are the joy of my heart.

[29 : 00] Now, what is this heritage? Heritage. In the Old Testament, the word heritage, or sometimes inheritance, means an allotted parcel of territory in the promised land.

The promised land was divided up for the people of Israel as they went into it. Now, for you and me, we no longer have an inheritance in geographical Israel. But we have a wonderful final inheritance in the new creation.

The Apostle Peter writes about it like this in chapter 1 of his first letter. He says about all Christians that we have been born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.

To an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for us. Who is keeping it in heaven for us?

Well, the Lord is. Therefore, it is safe. Now, look at our psalmist's words in verse 111. Your testimonies are my heritage.

[30 : 03] That means that the written word of God, the covenant message of the Bible, acts as the title deed of every believer, guaranteeing to us our place in the new creation.

So if somebody says to you, but how do you know that you're going to heaven? Isn't it just guesswork and hope? You can reply, I know I'm going to heaven because the Bible promises it to me.

God promises it. Jesus promises it. My assurance is not based in guesswork. It's based in the written covenant word of God. I have my title deed.

And it is to my heart. Look at verse 111. Joy. We can look forward to our heavenly inheritance with joy. It is a joyful anticipation.

Your testimonies are my heritage forever. They are the joy of my heart. And what further consequence is there for the psalmist? Well, look at verse 112.

[31 : 06] He inclines his heart. Notice the tendency, the direction of his heart. He inclines it not to anarchy, not to self-pleasing, but to perform the Lord's statutes, to do them, to keep them, to love them, to be shaped by them.

For how long? Well, he tells us forever to the end. We don't know how old this psalmist was when he wrote this psalm.

He might have been still quite a young man. But he had his eyes on the finishing tape. And he teaches us to do the same. And it is a glorious prospect. Now, the ending of life for the Christian may well be accompanied by physical weakness, loss of memory, walking sticks, Zimmer frames, all the paraphernalia of old age.

But it is not a descent into a gloomy, dark valley. We don't have to mutter the fierce words of the poet Dylan Thomas. Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

No, for the Christian, it's not the dying of the light. It's the sweet anticipation of the rising of the sun. The prospect of being with the Lord and with all his people.

[32 : 18] That is our heritage. It's that lovely prospect that inclines our hearts to perform the Lord's statutes forever, right to the end. So, friends, it is a long walk, this Christian life.

And at times it's a tough walk. There are enemies. There are afflictions. There are traps and snares. But in the midst of all, there is the Bible, the saving message of the God who loves us.

And it's the Bible that will steady our steps and rejoice our hearts forever to the end. Let's pray together.

How we thank you, our dear Heavenly Father, that you have revealed yourself to us so clearly. Yourself, your will, our future, your gifts to us, our inheritance, all revealed to us so clearly in the words of Scripture.

We pray, therefore, that you will give us bold hearts, hearts that increasingly love and drink in the words of the Bible, so that we're kept steady right through to the very end. And we ask that our lives and our words may bring glory to your name and to the name of our Lord Jesus, in whose name we pray.

[33 : 38] Amen. Amen.