

# Loving the Bible in a Time of Disorientation

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[ 0 : 00 ] So we're going to turn now to our reading, and Edward is almost concluding his series in Psalm 119. So this is our penultimate week, I think, and we are in verses 161 to 168.

So Psalm 119. So please do turn there in your Bibles, and we'll read this section together. Psalm 119, and reading from verse 161.

The psalmist writes,

This is the word of the Lord, and may he bless it to us this evening. Well, good evening, friends.

Very good to see you all, and very good also to be in touch with those that I can't actually see, but I think are listening via one means or another.

Now we're continuing in our Psalm 119 studies, so perhaps you'd like to turn to that with me. Psalm 119, and it is the penultimate section. We hope to do the last section next week.

[ 2 : 06 ] But the penultimate section, beginning at verse 161. I have an old friend who regularly sends me his prayer letters and family news.

And in a letter that I received from him quite recently, about three weeks ago, he was reflecting on the effects of the pandemic. And I was struck by this sentence in his letter.

If you're anything like me, these days feel disorientating. I thought to myself, yes, brother, that is the right word to use, disorientating.

That's what it's like at the moment. Life for all of us is out of kilter. You can't even pop into the newsagents for a Mars bar without putting on your gas mask these days. And people that you pass in the street quite often look frightened of you, don't they?

And give you a wide berth and even sometimes seem unwilling to catch your eye, lest you might transfer the virus by simply looking at them. Well, all of us are feeling the power of disorientation, not so much because of the virus, but because of society's reaction to the virus.

[ 3 : 21 ] All of us, to some degree, are feeling gloomy and frustrated. But some of us, as well as the virus problem, some of us are having to cope with other disorientating pressures.

Pressures that persist over a long period. The sort of thing that makes you wish you could just snap your fingers and bring the pressure to a complete and sudden end. But you can't do it.

And you're having to live with it. And it may take a very long time before the problem is resolved. It might be a serious illness or bereavement. At one level, that's never resolved.

It might be a painful situation at work that you can't just step away from. Or an ongoing financial pressure. Or a family relationship difficulty.

Am I depressing you? It's going to get better in a couple of minutes' time, I promise. But let me give you one more example of disorientation. A little while ago, I was talking to a middle-aged Christian woman who had been living under severe pressure for several years.

[ 4 : 29 ] And she said to me, and I could see the tears welling up in her eyes. She said, you know, I was walking in the park the other day with my dog. And I felt something which I haven't felt for at least five years.

And I said to her, what was that? And she said, a little shaft of happiness. And most of us, I guess, haven't had to suffer such extreme disorientation.

But all of us are going to experience painful periods, shorter or longer, during the course of our lifetime. And the author of Psalm 119 can help us.

He knew the painful power of disorientation. Just look at verse 161. Princes persecute me without cause. Back at the beginning of the psalm, in verse 23, he says, princes sit plotting against me.

So this psalmist must be a man of some influence and standing to attract the hostility of political leaders. But he clearly feels very uncomfortable to know that these powerful people are gunning for him.

[ 5 : 41 ] In verse 69, he says, the insolent smear me with lies. He's the object of a smear campaign. In verse 85, he says, the insolent have dug pitfalls for me.

And many times in the psalm, he speaks of his afflictions. At one point, in verse 83, he says, I have become like a wineskin in the smoke.

In other words, like an old leather bottle hanging up in the chimney. Useless, shriveled, desiccated. I wonder if you've ever felt useless and shriveled and desiccated.

Well, if you have, you're in good company because our psalmist has been there before you. Our psalmist, like Jesus, is a man of sorrows, acquainted with grief.

And yet, our passage for tonight, this passage beginning at verse 161, is a passage full of joy. And if we can grasp what the psalmist is teaching us here, we too will be able to steer a steady course and a joyful course in the midst of our disorientations.

[ 6 : 49 ] The pressures never leave the psalmist, never. These wretched princes are still persecuting him. And they're not likely to stop their persecutions until he dies.

But he has learned how to live. He's learned how to survive in the midst of pressure. And it's all to do with his relationship to the words of God.

Verse 161 introduces the stanza, sets the scene for us. Princes persecute me without cause, but my heart stands in awe of your words.

Now, what is the logic of that verse? Well, think of these powerful people who hate the psalmist.

What are they trying to do to him? They must be trying to get him to conform to their set of values.

They must be pressing him to abandon his devotion to God and to God's words. Now, we know this kind of pressure very well in our own day.

[ 7 : 51 ] The pressure to abandon our adherence to the words of God and give way to the pressures of powerful people in society. I'll give you one example. Just the other day, I heard of a difficulty which a university Christian union in England is having to face at the moment.

This Christian union has been severely criticized for being unwilling to endorse the LGBT agenda. And the leaders of the CU, who are very young people, age 19 or 20, they're being threatened with dire consequences if they refuse to sign up in support of that agenda.

Now, we know this is one of the big persecuting pressures in our own day. And institutions of all kinds, up and down the country, are keeling over and giving way to this pressure.

Not only universities, but schools, businesses, supermarkets, political parties. You couldn't possibly become the leader of a political party in this country unless you subscribe to that agenda.

The armed forces as well. And alas, many churches too. And all these institutions are giving way to fear. They fear the consequences of holding to true Christian ethics on sex and marriage.

[ 9 : 08 ] Now, look again at verse 161. The Christian union leaders at that English university have a choice. Are their hearts going to stand in awe of God's words?

Or will they, in the end, stand in awe of society's pressure? That is the issue that our psalmist had to face. Would he give way to the agenda of his persecutors?

If he did, they'd be off his back immediately. And they'd be saying to him, I'm glad you've come round. I'm so glad that you're seeing things our way at last.

Would he do that? Or would he say, no, no. Because my heart stands in awe of God's words. It does not stand in awe of your godless agenda.

The psalmist says no to these people who are pressing him so hard. And if you and I are going to stand in awe of God's words, that word no needs to be a word that we are never frightened to say.

[ 10 : 13 ] No. Now, if we go the way of the psalmist, if we train our hearts to stand in awe of God's words, great blessings will come to us.

The blessings described in verses 162 to 168. All of these blessings depend on our willingness to follow the teaching of verse 161.

But once we have fixed the stance of our hearts, once we have fixed our determination to live in awe of God's words, many blessings will follow and we'll trace them now.

I'd like to trace five in these verses. First, there's the blessing of joy. Verse 162. I rejoice at your word like one who finds great spoil.

We're never going to rejoice in God's words if our hearts are refusing to stand in awe of God's words. But once verse 161 and its teaching grips our hearts, the joy will come.

[ 11 : 16 ] So how does the psalmist describe this joy? Well, he uses an illustration from the battlefield. Spoil. Spoil means the spoils of war. So he's imagining a soldier, a foot soldier, a soldier

in the infantry.

And this soldier and his army have just won a great victory. The enemy have fled the field of battle, so the victorious soldiers swarm forwards and they pick up everything which the retreating enemy has left behind.

That's the spoil. And it's valuable. It's all yours to enjoy.

Suddenly, your hardship has changed to riches. You're rejoicing at your great new possessions. It has been said that spoil is valuable for three reasons.

First, because it's found in a time of victory. Second, because it's of great value in itself. And third, because it is unexpected.

[12:16] Now, when you become a Christian and you then start growing as a Christian, you find all sorts of joys in the Bible that you would never have expected to find before you became a believer.

Before becoming a Christian, you would never in your wildest dreams think that the Bible would be of any interest to you at all. You would rather have read the doomsday book or a railway timetable than the Bible.

But you begin to read it and you begin to understand it. And that's when you begin to smile and rejoice because you're beginning to realize that through every page of the Bible, the Lord God is saying to you, you belong to me and I love you.

Yes, you're a sinner. You're a rebel by nature. You deserve judgment indeed. But I have given my son Jesus to save you, to rescue you, so that by his death, you can know that your sin is forgiven. And by his resurrection, you can know that he has disarmed and destroyed the power of death. And by his ascension to glory, you can know that he rules the universe. And you are therefore an heir of eternal life in the glorious kingdom of heaven.

[13:27] Have you got that into your thick skull, Edward Lobb? I love you. Now, what can you feel but joy as you begin to understand the message of the Bible?

Jesus said to the apostles just a few hours before he was crucified, he said, I've spoken these things to you that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be full.

Let me give an example of joy. A Christian friend of mine died some six or seven years ago. He was in his early 60s. Having become unwell, he went for tests to the local hospital.

And after the tests were run, eventually the consultant called him in. And the consultant said to my friend, Well, Mr. So-and-so, I'm sorry to have to tell you that you're suffering from a terminal cancer, and I'm afraid it's impossible for us to operate.

So my friend looked the consultant in the eye, and he said, Well, that is a sentence of life. Nothing could take the joy out of that Christian man's heart.

[14:33] It's the Bible and understanding the message of the Bible that brings joy. The psalmist says to God, I rejoice at your word like a soldier who has just found great spoil.

Now, second, the heart that stands in awe of God's words, the verse 161 heart, if you like, is blessed with love. I wonder if you noticed that three times in this section, the psalmist speaks of loving God's words.

163, I hate and appore falsehood, but I love your law. 165, great peace have those who love your law.

And 167, my soul keeps your testimonies. I love them exceedingly. He loves the words of God.

Now, if you love somebody's words, it's because you love the person who speaks those words. You can't separate the words from the one who speaks them. To hear God's words is to hear him. Imagine that you're a young man, and you're falling in love with a delightful girl.

[15:45] So you're on the phone to her. You don't yet quite dare to call her sweetheart or darling, but you just love to talk to her. So you ring her up and you say to her, what have you done today?

What did you do in your lunch break? Well, she says, I went to Greg's and I bought myself a ham sandwich with mustard spread on the ham. So you say to her, say that again.

And she says, I went to Greg's, it's a sandwich shop, and I bought a ham sandwich. It had Belgian made grainy mustard on both sides. And you say to her, say that again.

And she says, you daft bat. Why do I need to say it again? And you say, because I love to hear your voice. He loves her voice.

Now her voice may not be the most beautiful voice in the world. It may sound like two cats fighting in an alley at midnight, but he loves to hear it because he loves her. Isn't that what the Psalmist is saying?

[ 16 : 45 ] I love your law. I love your words. I love your testimonies exceedingly. He can't divorce the words from the one who speaks them. He loves the words because he loves the Lord.

So looking again at verse 161, when our hearts learn to stand in all of God's words, so that we fear we might disobey them.

When that happens to us, we begin to love his words. Jeremiah, the prophet once said to God, your words were found and I ate them and they became to me a joy and the delight of my heart.

Then third, the heart that stands in all of God's words is blessed with praise, praise for the Bible. Look at verse 164.

Seven times a day, I praise you for your righteous rules. Now, when he says seven times a day, I praise you. He's not advocating some rigid daily routine, such as you might find in a monastery, being forced to get up at three o'clock in the morning and go to the chapel and mumble a few prayers.

[ 17 : 54 ] No, it's just a way of saying that his daily life is full of praise. There's a constant whisper of praise that runs through every part of his daily routine, rather like an underground stream that quietly bubbles and burbles beneath the surface of the ground.

His heart has learned to praise the Lord, even though the persecution of princes is a constant reality for him. Just notice the exact words of verse 164.

Seven times a day, I praise you for your righteous rules. So in this verse, he's not praising the Lord for the creation or for his food or for his health or his family or friends.

He's praising the Lord for the Lord's righteous rules, for these written words of God, which bring him so much assurance. It's the fact of the Bible's existence and the fact that he can read it and understand it and live by it and be nourished by it that causes him to praise the Lord.

Of course, it's good for us to praise the Lord for many other things, too, for the creation, for our food and health, our church, everything else. But this verse is specifically about praising him for this book that we are holding in our hands, without which we would have no hope, no understanding of the world and our place in it, and no sense that anything really means anything.

[ 19 : 24 ] Without the Bible, we can only be at the mercy of the world's philosophies and agendas, which really can be summed up as eat, drink, get as much pleasure as you can, and then die.

But don't ask me what it all means. But the Bible, and only the Bible, gives us a wonderful and coherent account of the meaning and purpose of human life.

The meaning of all these things, the meaning of food and drink and work and love and sex and marriage and illness and suffering. And death. And the purpose of God to save forever those who love him and trust his son.

That's what the Bible is about. Seven times a day, I praise you for your righteous rules. Isn't there a message for us there in our time of disorientation?

That our hearts can have in them a constant underground stream of praise for the Bible. I'm not going to put on the face of a deeply disoriented man.

[ 20 : 28 ] A gloomy man. Does that look terribly awful? I'm trying to look as awful as possible. My name is Eeyore. I'm a deeply disorientated donkey.

I'm a miserable creature. Until, until I read verse 164. And my misery turns to praise for the God who put the Bible into my hands.

Because it's this book that makes all the difference. Let me read you a quotation that I found in one of my commentaries concerning William Wilberforce. You'll know the name of Wilberforce, I'm sure. Wilberforce died in the 1830s, having been a member of Parliament, member of the House of Commons, for 30 or 40 years, a very long time. And during that long period in the House of Commons, he fought tirelessly for the abolition of slavery throughout the British Empire.

And just in the months before his death, he succeeded. Now, Wilberforce suffered a great deal from political opponents. And he was vilified by many people.

[ 21 : 31 ] And he also suffered physically. He was a tiny man, about 4 foot 10 or 4 foot 11 inches high. He was bent in his back and somewhat deformed. And throughout his life, he suffered a great deal of pain.

But Wilberforce was a Christian. He loved the Lord and he loved the Bible. And here's what a friend of his wrote about him after his death. Wilberforce's friends will never cease to remember that peculiar sunshine, which he threw over a company by the influence of a mind perpetually tuned to love and praise.

As he walked about the house, he was generally humming the tune of a hymn or psalm, as if he could not contain his pleasurable feelings of thankfulness and devotion.

Isn't that a lovely example? Seven times a day, I praise you for your righteous rules. It's the message of the Bible that brings warmth and praise into our hearts.

Then fourth, the heart that stands in awe of God's words, the heart that has taken on boards of verse 161, is blessed with peace.

[ 22 : 44 ] Look at verse 165. Great peace have those who love your law. Nothing can make them stumble. Great peace, not just a teaspoonful of peace, but great peace, deep peace, have those who love your law.

And how do they experience this peace? Well, the second half of the verse tells us nothing can make them stumble. So why is it that nothing can make them stumble?

Well, what makes a person stumble as they walk along? It's a problem, usually some hidden problem on the pathway, something you don't see, which is why you fall over it and stumble. It might be an uneven paving slab or a tree root.

In the city of Delhi, you're in danger of falling over a sleeping dog. They lie everywhere on the pavements. How can you avoid stumbling? By seeing things clearly.

So if you see the wobbly paving slab, if you see the half-asleep Rottweiler, you're in no danger of falling over it. And it's God's law, God's truth, that enables us to see the potential stumbling blocks.

[ 23 : 56 ] It's just as we read back in verse 105. Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path. It's the words of God that light up our pathway.

God's words shine a focused light on the possible dangers that could make us stumble and fall. So, for example, if we can see clearly the danger of pride and vanity, we'll be able to avoid pride and vanity.

If we can see clearly from the Bible the danger of adultery, we'll be kept from falling into adultery. If we can see the danger of loving money because of the Bible's clear warnings, then we'll learn to be content with what we have.

It's the Bible that shows the temptations which litter the pathway of life. And there are others too.

Greed, gluttony, resentment, anger, bitterness, unwillingness to forgive, and in a time of pandemic, fear and anxiety.

Don't stumble into fear and anxiety, says the Bible, because the God of heaven is in charge of the 21st century. Great peace have those who love the law of God, who love the words of God.

[ 25 : 11 ] If we love his words, we shan't be like the blind man who falls over, who ends up flat on the ground, bruised and despairing. We'll be able to walk the pathway of life with confidence.

And then fifth, the heart that stands in awe of God's words is blessed with hope. Look at verse 166. I hope for your salvation, O Lord, and I do your commandments. Now just look at the two halves of that verse for a moment, because this verse speaks both of the future and of the present.

The future is there in the first half of the verse. I hope for your salvation. The present is in the second half. And I do your commandments.

And the connection between the two is that when we know about our sure and secure future salvation, we will express our trust in the Lord's provision of that salvation by doing his commandments in our life here and now.

[ 26 : 15 ] So what does the psalmist mean when he says, I hope for your salvation? Is it a wistful, frail hope?

Not at all. When I was a youngster, aged about 10, there was a fish and chip shop in our town, which had a magnetic effect upon me and my friends.

It was called the battered mermaid. In the shop front window, a little sign was hung. And the sign read, Don't just stand there hoping for the best.

Come inside and get it. That little sign assured us that beyond the barrier of the plate glass door, there was something wonderful and solid, something to be enjoyed.

Now, that's what the Bible means by the hope of salvation. Something solid and wonderful is waiting beyond the barrier, beyond the boundary of our life on earth, something waiting to be enjoyed.

[ 27 : 15 ] But it's assured to us on the authority of the God who never makes a promise that he cannot fulfill. But notice again the powerful connection between the first and second halves of verse 166.

Just look with me at the verse again. If I am active in doing the Lord's commandments, my hope and assurance of enjoying eternal life will be strong.

But here's the question. Which half of the verse describes the cause and which half describes the consequence? Is it cause in the second half of the verse and consequence in the first?

In other words, is it because I do God's commandments and live a godly life that I earn the right to have an assured hope of salvation? No, it is not.

It's the other way around entirely. It's the promise of God's salvation that comes first. And my active obedience to his commands is my response to his promise.

[ 28 : 19 ] It's because I'm assured of the Lord's salvation that I respond by rolling up my sleeves and seeking to live a life that pleases him. Now, this is one of the biggest surprises that the Bible reveals to our naturally untutored hearts.

Our natural hearts will always imagine that God will reward us with eternal life because we have behaved well. No. The trouble is none of us has behaved well.

That could never be true. We're incapable in our natural state of pleasing God. We don't have a naturally obedient bone in our body. We're sinners. All we like sheep have gone astray, says the prophet Isaiah.

And this psalmist also has gone astray like a lost sheep, as he's going to tell us in the very last verse of the psalm. The desire to do the commandments of God is stirred up in us by God's prior promise, a promise that is freely given by him because he is merciful.

Look back to verse 154. Give me life, cries the psalmist, according to your promise. He doesn't say, give me life because I've been a good boy or give me life because I've been a morally unstained, upright specimen of humanity.

[ 29 : 38 ] No. His assured hope of eternal life is grounded in God's prior promise, not in his own moral track record. And it's the same logic that shapes the last verse of the section, verse 168.

I keep your precepts and testimonies for all my ways are before you. Now, we might read that verse and initially feel very worried.

All my ways are before you. Help, we might think. God knows every last thought, word and deed that I've spoken and done throughout all my life. How awful that is.

If he knows every last thing about my moral life, I'd better call for the mountains and rocks to fall upon me in the hope that I might be able to hide from him on the day of judgment.

And yet our psalmist is not writing verse 168 in a spirit of fear. On the contrary, he's happy. He's pleased. He's rejoicing. He's telling the Lord in verse 167 that he loves the Lord's testimonies exceedingly.

[ 30 : 45 ] How then can this man who knows that he's a sinner feel so glad that the Lord knows all his ways, knows everything about him? It's because of the covenant, the covenant promise that the Lord has made to his people.

Now, the covenant comes to its fulfillment in the cross of Jesus, but it's expressed very clearly in many parts of the Old Testament and particularly in the Psalms. So, for example, in Psalm 32, King David writes, blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered.

Blessed is the man against whom the Lord counts, no iniquity. David goes on, I said, I will confess my transgressions to the Lord and you forgave the iniquity of my sin.

Later in the Old Testament, Jeremiah the prophet speaks of the coming days when the Lord will make a new covenant with his people Israel, the covenant which will eventually be sealed by the blood of Christ.

And God says about the new covenant, I will be their God and they will be my people. I will forgive their iniquity and, now friends, listen to this, I will remember their sin no more.

[ 32 : 07 ] Yes, God knows everything about us, but because of the covenant promises, we can be assured that the death of Jesus, the sacrifice of the cross has brought forgiveness and our sin has been erased from the very memory of God.

That is an unfathomable mystery, but it's an unfathomable joy. Just think for a moment of the worst thing that you have done, the very worst thing in your whole life, something which perhaps haunts your conscience, sometimes fills you with a sense of foreboding.

Well, if you're a Christian, that thing, whatever it is, has been dealt with. It's been forgiven. God says, I will remember their sin no more.

David says in another Psalm, as far as the East is from the West, so far does he remove our transgressions from us. Now, this is why our Psalmist is so happy in verse 168. All his ways indeed are before the Lord. The Lord knows his every thought and action. But although the Psalmist, living centuries before Jesus, could not know about the crucifixion of Jesus, which sealed his forgiveness, he knows the Lord's covenant promises.

[ 33 : 27 ] He knows, as Paul the Apostle expresses it, that if God is for us, who can be against us? The Psalmist knows that God is for him, and we know that too, if we belong to Christ.

We can be assured of it. So to come back to verse 161, the pressures of influential godlessness will always be coming at us.

In this world, we shall never escape them. In the end, those pressures are much more disorientating than COVID-19. But if we follow our Psalmist's example, if our hearts are willing to stand in awe of God's teaching and not in awe of the deceptive voices that are shaping much of modern society, we will then know the blessings that the Psalmist knew so powerfully.

Joy, love, praise, peace, and the sure and certain hope of final salvation. Well, let's bow our heads and we'll pray together.

Dear God, our Father, thank you for all that you taught our Psalmist. Thank you that he was given strength to persevere firmly in the midst of pressure and affliction.

[ 34 : 53 ] give us the grace through believing his words to follow in his footsteps and to know the joy of your salvation. In Jesus' name, we ask it.

Amen. Amen.