

The Ongoing Tensions of the Believer's Life

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Date: 29 November 2020

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[0 : 00] But we're going to turn together now to God's Word and back to Psalm 119. And it's a milestone this evening because we have come to the very last section of the longest psalm in the Bible.

And we've so enjoyed being back and forward in this psalm with Edward over many months now in chunks. And these last few weeks have come towards the end.

And tonight we read this very last section of the psalm beginning at verse 169 and right through to the last verse, 176.

So here we are, the final section of this great majestic psalm. Let my cry come before you, Lord. Give me understanding according to your word.

Let my plea come before you. Deliver me according to your word. My lips will pour forth praise.

[1 : 04] For you teach me your statutes. My tongue will sing of your word. For all your commandments are right. Let your hand be ready to help me.

For I've chosen your precepts. I long for your salvation, O Lord. And your law is my delight. Let my soul live and praise you.

And let your rules help me. I've gone astray like a lost sheep. Seek your servant. For I do not forget your commandments.

Amen. And may God indeed bless to us his word. Well, friends, if you have a Bible, let's turn up Psalm 119 and to this final section beginning at verse 169.

Psalm 119.

[2 : 32] And you have a pastor. Who have been given the task of identifying and appointing a new minister for your church. So your small group gets together. And you discuss the important question.

What kind of man should we be looking for to appoint as our next pastor? So somebody says, well, let's think of some biblical models.

Surely the Bible is the place to turn to for inspiration. Well, nobody disagrees with that idea. And people then start to make suggestions. Somebody says, I think we need a man like Moses.

A great leader. An inspirational leader. Yes, says somebody else. But remember Exodus chapter 4, where Moses says to the Lord, oh, Lord, I'm not eloquent.

I'm slow of speech and of tongue. Clearly, Moses was a poor preacher. We need a better man than that. In fact, Moses goes on to say, oh, my Lord, please send somebody else.

[3 : 33] We need a more robust go-getting man than Moses. Okay, says somebody else. How about John the Baptist? John the Baptist. Oh, no, brother, says another member of the group.

That would be a big mistake. Look at John the Baptist's CV. I mean, think of his preaching. You brood of vipers. Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?

We can't have a pastor like that scorching the congregation every Sunday morning. We need a gentle and affirmative, kindly man, one that we can regard as a kind of beloved uncle.

At this point, somebody else says, I know, I've got it, I've got it. We need a man like the apostle Paul. His CV is laid out for us in full length in the book of Acts.

What a man. What a hero of the faith. Steady on, says somebody else. Hold your horse. Look at the personal confessions in his letters. For example, I was a persecutor, a blasphemer, and a violent man.

[4 : 38] And let's face it, he was a religious terrorist, hounding Christians to prison and even to death. Can a leopard really change its spots? What if he were to revert to type?

Dangerous to have a man like Paul in our pulpit. Well, then finally, a member of the group says, I know the best model of all. How about the author of Psalm 119?

A wonderful teacher. That psalm contains all the colors of the theological rainbow. It's the Encyclopedia Britannica of the Christian life. It touches on everything.

No man could be better fitted to stir up our church to delight in the Bible and to obey the Bible. But then another member of the group says, I am dubious.

Look at the last verse of the psalm. What kind of a man are we really dealing with here? That last verse of a long piece like this surely carries a great deal of weight.

[5 : 38] It's the final punchline. But look at what he says there. I have gone astray like a lost sheep. I would just imagine a new pastor like that standing in our pulpit on his first Sunday and saying to the congregation, I'm afraid I have gone astray like a lost sheep.

He'd be sitting there wondering what on earth he's going to say next. I have been an embezzler, an adulterer, a liar, a cocaine sniffer. Could we trust a man like that to pastor our church? Surely we need a clean-cut, upright Christian man who has no skeletons in his cupboard, dresses decently, has a nice wife and delightful children who all play the violin beautifully.

Now, friends, let's leave our group of elders who are searching for a pastor and turn to the text. That final verse, 176, is surprising, isn't it? Does it unsettle us a little?

We've been reading through this psalm for many months now, thankful for the author's teaching. And yet here at the very end, he tells us that he is a lost sheep who has gone astray, who needs to be sought and rescued.

[6 : 54] Let's look back to verse 67, if you'd like to turn back to that. Verse 67. He says there, Before I was afflicted, I went astray.

But now I keep your word. Which suggests that he was straying from the path of godliness. So the Lord sent him a time of affliction to curb his wanderings and bring him back to his senses.

So verse 67 makes us think all is now well. The prodigal son has returned. He's no longer a straying sheep. And yet here at the very end of the psalm, he asks the Lord to seek him again, to rescue him again, because he is again straying from the flock.

It's not what we expect, is it? I think we might have preferred it if the psalm had ended on a different note, rather like this. I have strayed, Lord, from the right path.

I have indeed misbehaved in various ways. And you sent me some sharp discipline to jolt me, to force me to realize the error of my ways. And it worked.

[8 : 01] Your discipline was tough and painful, but it has brought me back to you. And I now live on a new plane, a golden plane of godliness. I'm at peace now.

My battles with sin and temptation are over. I have discovered the secret of unbroken godly living. Amen. Would we have wanted him to end like that?

Really, that's perhaps the kind of pattern we'd like to follow ourselves, isn't it? Peace after pain. Relaxation after struggle.

We sometimes think, if only I could discover a way of living that was golden and sun-washed, at peace with everybody, free from temptation, filled with prayer and praise from sunrise to lights out. But it's not like that, is it? It's no credit to me at all, but I've been a Christian now for more than 50 years. And you might think that a person who's been living pretty closely to the Bible for half a century might have arrived at a place of peace, serenity, and unruffled godliness.

[9 : 15] But I haven't. The Christian life just isn't like that. There are ongoing tensions which are precisely that. Ongoing. If you lived to be a hundred, those tensions would still be there.

Just notice the difference between this final section of the psalm and the previous one, the one that we were studying last week. That previous section, 161 to 168, is perhaps the happiest section of the whole psalm.

Now, it is true, as verse 161 tells us, that princes, people in high places, are still persecuting our psalmist. But look at the great positive points that he makes in the next few verses.

Look at his joy in verse 162. I rejoice at your word like one who finds great spoil. Praise in verse 164. Seven times a day I praise you for your righteous rules.

Peace in verse 165. Great peace. Not simply peace, but great peace. Have those who love your law. Nothing can make them stumble. Nothing.

[10 : 23] And he expresses love for God's words three times. Verse 163. I love your law. The same phrase comes again in verse 165. And it's even more full of delight in verse 167.

I love your testimonies exceedingly. He speaks in verse 166 of his sure hope of salvation. And he speaks of his obedience to God's words in verse 168.

I keep your precepts and testimonies. You feel throughout this penultimate section of the psalm that he's just about to enter the broad sunlit uplands of Christian experience.

But then you come to verses 169 and 170. Let my cry come before you, O Lord. 169. Let my plea come before you. 170.

He's wobbling. He's as weak as water again. He's crying and pleading. And look at verse 173. Let your hand be ready to help me. In other words, put your hand out close to me, Lord, because I fear I'm about to fall.

[11:31] You don't cry out for help if you're throwing your chest out and swaggering along like a sergeant major. Now, isn't the psalmist showing us in his loving way that tensions will always be there in the believer's life?

It's in the new creation that pain and tears and mourning have no place. That glorious experience is reserved for the world to come. But this world is always going to be a place of risk and threat and danger.

I don't know whether you've read John Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress. It's a great Christian book and do let me recommend it. But throughout the book, he describes the dangers so well. The main character is called Christian.

He's the pilgrim. And he's journeying on from one difficult experience to another. He encounters the slough of despond where various people are wallowing about in misery.

He encounters the giant despair and doubting castle and lions and a most fearsome enemy called Apollyon with whom he has a desperate fight.

[12:39] Now, the Lord, his rescuer, brings him through all these things in the end and carries him finally across the river of death up into the celestial city with all its dazzling beauty.

The Christian life is a life of danger, temptation and difficulty. But the celestial city is in sight, even as we walk through the valley of the shadow of death.

So let's look a bit more carefully at the text so as to see the tensions that our psalmist is describing. And I want us to notice three.

First, there's the tension between longing to understand and truly understanding. See how it comes out in the psalm.

Look at verse 169. Let my cry come before you, O Lord. Give me understanding according to your word. Now, that is not a shapeless, purposeless cry.

[13:38] It's specific and focused in which he pleads to the Lord for understanding. Give me understanding. In fact, that is one of the prayers that keeps surfacing throughout the psalm.

For example, no need to turn this up. But in verse 27, he says, make me understand the way of your precepts. It's not a plea to understand everything.

He's not asking to be able to understand mathematics or geography. He wants to understand the Lord's teaching. Or verse 34. Give me understanding that I may keep your law and observe it with my whole heart.

It's not an abstract intellectual understanding of God's law that he wants. It's very practical. He wants to understand it so that he can keep it. His concern is to obey the Lord, not just to observe the Lord from a safe distance and write a PhD thesis about the Lord.

No, he wants to learn to conform his life to God's will. That's what lies behind his urgent requests for understanding. Another example comes in verses 124 and 125, where he says, teach me your statutes.

[14:54] I am your servant. Give me understanding. Teach me. I'm your servant. Give me understanding. Now, the servant wants to understand how to please his master.

Just to illustrate that, think of the old days when the great houses of Scotland and England had servants to look after the wishes of the noble family. A young servant, starting out as a valet or a junior butler, wants to learn the wishes of the master.

At your lordship, when I adjust the girth on your lordship's horse, am I getting the stirrups at just the right length? Was your lordship comfortable in the saddle while out hunting yesterday?

Yes, Tomlinson. Yes, Tomlinson. You had it just right. Thank you very much. And when would your lordship and my lady want me to bring the Rolls Royce round to the front of the house tomorrow morning?

Is 10.15 the right time? No, Tomlinson, no. Make it 10.25. Her ladyship likes a little extra time for her final slice of toast and marmalade.

[15:59] You do understand, don't you? Yes, your lordship. Yes, sir, of course. You see, young Tomlinson wants to learn to please his master. That's why he wants to understand his master's wishes and get them absolutely clear in his head.

But our psalmist serves a more glorious lord. And so do we if we're Christians. But we need to understand his will. There's a lovely old hymn which begins with the words, teach me thy way, O Lord.

It was written by somebody called B. Mansell Ramsey. I'm not sure whether it was a he or a she. Could have been Bertie, could have been Bertha. Anyway, B. Mansell Ramsey was born in the 1840s and died in the 1920s.

You perhaps know the hymn, but I'd like to read you the last verse. Long as my life shall last, teach me thy way. Where'er my lot be cast, teach me thy way.

Until the race is run, until the journey is done, until the crown is won, teach me thy way. Now I think that hymn writer must have based that hymn on Psalm 119.

[17:10] That insistent plea, teach me thy way. It's the heartbeat of the psalm. Teach me, give me understanding, as our psalmist puts it in verse 169. But the Lord does teach him.

Look at verse 171. My lips will pour forth praise, for you teach me your statutes. So the plea to be taught is answered by the Lord's ability and willingness to teach.

We cry, teach me, and he does teach us. Think of our young adults and students who come to our Thursday evening, release the word groups.

Now they come partly for friendship and support, which they find in their groups, and that's specially appreciated at this difficult COVID time. But they principally come because they want to be taught the Bible.

They sit in their groups of eight or ten, and they study a passage for the best part of an hour. They study it partly so that they can understand the Bible, but also partly so that they can live the Bible and do it and obey the Lord's teaching, which you can only do if you really understand it.

[18:24] So there's a tension here which is never fully, finally resolved. On the one hand, we want to be taught. We cry out like our psalmist for understanding.

But on the other hand, we are taught. We do truly make progress. Look again at verse 171. For you teach me your statutes.

You do indeed. And what does your teaching do to me? Verse 171 again. My lips will pour forth praise. For you teach me your statutes.

And look at the next line. My tongue will sing of your word. So as the Bible sinks into our hearts and teaches them and grips them, we pour out praise to its author and we sing for joy at its teaching.

And that is authentic Christian experience. Joy and praise because of the Bible's teaching. This is what verse 162 is expressing. I rejoice at your word like one who finds great spoil.

[19:28] Your word is a source of great joy to me. Yes, I struggle to understand it at times. And I certainly struggle to obey it at times. But it's spoil from the battlefield.

It's priceless treasure. There is nothing like it in the world. So friends, let's learn to live with this tension. On the one hand, a hunger for understanding of God's word.

Verse 169. Give me understanding. But on the other hand, the satisfaction expressed in verse 171.

You teach me your statutes. Every Christian heart can and should develop a hunger for God's truth. So that every time we sit down at home to read the Bible, open the Bible up, we pray to him, Lord, teach me. Give me understanding of your word. When we meet here on a Sunday, we come to church with that same prayer in our hearts.

Lord, teach us. Help us. Help me to understand your word so that not only I, but all of us together can put it into practice and learn to be a church characterized by obedience and joy.

[20:40] My lips will pour forth praise for you teach me your statutes. So there's the first ongoing tension between longing to understand and truly understanding.

Now, second, the psalmist shows us the tension between longing to be saved and knowing that salvation is certainly coming.

Look at this longing in verse 170. Let my plea come before you. Now, plea is a very strong word. It's the same idea as pleading.

I'm pleading with you, Lord. So what am I pleading for in verse 170? For deliverance. Deliver me according to your word.

Now, you don't plead for deliverance if you have already been delivered. Look on to verse 174 because it's making a similar point. I long for your salvation, O Lord.

[21 : 42] You don't long for salvation if you've already been saved. When the Titanic sank in April 1912 in the icy waters of the North Atlantic, many people were drowned, but very many were rescued.

They were able to get into lifeboats, hundreds of them, in dozens of lifeboats. As you probably know, the weather that night was very calm, and the passengers who managed to get into the lifeboats sat there for hours, wrapped up in blankets, waiting for dawn and waiting for rescue. A liner called the Carpathia eventually got there and picked them up. Now, when they were sitting in those lifeboats through the long hours of darkness, were those passengers saved?

Well, they were, and they weren't. They'd been rescued from death, but they hadn't yet reached final safety, not until they got to New York City. They were rescued, but they weren't rescued. Now, that's our position if we're Christians. We have been rescued, but we have not been fully and finally rescued. The Lord Jesus has rescued us decisively.

[22 : 58] He came to earth, sent from heaven by God the Father for that very purpose, and he succeeded. And we know this with certain assurance. Our assurance is grounded in his death, his resurrection, and his ascension.

His death assures us that our sins are forgiven and dealt with. His resurrection assures us that he has broken the power of death, not only for himself, but for all who belong to him.

And his ascension into heaven assures us that he is the monarch of the universe, seated at the right hand of God the Father, God who has given him all authority in heaven as well as on earth.

Jesus has decisively rescued us. And yet we're not finally rescued. In Paul's words to the Thessalonians, we are still waiting for his son from heaven, Jesus, who delivers us from the wrath to come.

Now this means, because we live on this side of the event of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, it means that we have a level of assurance which the psalmist could not have because he had no knowledge of the death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus.

[24 : 12] But we are still essentially in the same position as the psalmist when he cried out to the Lord, Deliver me. You and I have been decisively rescued, but not finally delivered.

I mean, look at us. We're not delivered. We're still here. This is Glasgow. It's winter. We are still inhabiting bodies that are falling to pieces. In fact, if you're past the age of 21, your brain is already losing its little gray cells hand over fist.

This is no enduring city that we live in. And this is no enduring carcass that we are currently inhabiting. So we cry, like the psalmist, Deliver me.

And we cry, I long for your salvation, O Lord. But we know that it's coming because we know that he is coming. Would he have taught us to pray, Thy kingdom come, if the kingdom was not going to come?

Of course not. That would have been a cruel joke. And think of his words to the apostles and to all of us in John chapter 14. Don't let your hearts be troubled.

[25 : 24] Believe in God. Believe also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?

And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am, you may be also. Don't let's doubt his words.

There are guarantee. We're not yet finally delivered. But if we belong to him, nothing is more certain in heaven and earth than that we will be finally rescued.

So let's cry with our psalmist, deliver me. And let's pray as Jesus taught us, thy kingdom come. So if the first ongoing tension is the tension between longing to understand the Bible and growing in our understanding, the second tension is between longing to be delivered from this world of pain and sin and knowing that salvation is certainly coming.

Psalm 119 is structured around two great prayers. First, teach me, give me understanding. And second, deliver me, give me life.

[26 : 44] And these two great prayers are the fundamental basis of Christian living. We plead with God to teach us because we want to know him and we plead with him to deliver us because we want to see him and to be with him.

But there's a third tension, the one that comes out in that striking final verse. And that is the tension between our disposition to stray from the sheepfold and the Lord's determination to keep us in the sheepfold.

I'm actually very glad that the psalm does not end on a note of triumphalism or complacency. I mean, just imagine the last verse reading like this.

I'm so glad, Lord, that you fashioned me into a man of unstoppable godliness and I rejoice that I'm a wonderful example to your people. I would find that so depressing because I would realize that I had nothing in common with the psalmist if that's the way he ended.

But the relief is I have everything in common with the psalmist. And yes, he is our example. Not an example of triumphalistic perfection, but an example of how a sinner prays to a gracious God.

[28 : 03] What then does he mean when he says, I have gone astray like a lost sheep? He doesn't mean that he's abandoned the faith of the Bible or renounced it.

No. What he means is that he is frequently straying into forbidden territory. The roots of sin are deeply embedded in his heart and they're constantly breaking out into fresh growth.

And our experience shows that we're exactly like the psalmist. Let me put it like this. Think of everything that has gone on in your mind today since you got up this morning, just in the last 12 hours or so.

Think of the thoughts that you've been nursing. Sometimes the words that you've been saying may be under your breath or perhaps out loud to other people. Angry, bitter thoughts against somebody who has dealt shabbily with you.

Lustful thoughts about somebody you're not married to. Thoughts of grumbling and complaint.

Thoughts expressing a determination never to forgive somebody.

[29 : 10] Thoughts of unbelieving despair, fear which imply that God is not able to rescue you.

Idolatrous thoughts in which you twine your soul around some commitment or practice which cannot sustain you or help you.

Something which at heart is empty. Isaiah, the prophet, cries out in his 53rd chapter, all we like sheep have gone astray.

We have turned everyone to his own way. And our psalmist here is saying exactly that. I've gone astray like a lost sheep. Yes, he knows his Bible.

He teaches the Bible. He loves the Bible. He delights in the Bible. But he is a straying sheep. His heart has a fundamental disposition towards sin.

What Paul the Apostle calls the sin that dwells within us. But he doesn't despair. He knows where to turn. Look at the next three words in verse 176.

[30 : 11] Seek your servant. He knows the Lord's merciful character. Now, of course, he had not read Jesus' parable about the lost sheep that the shepherd looks for in the wilderness and eventually finds.

But he knows what the Lord is like. He knows that the Lord will answer his prayer, that the Lord will seek him out and find him and bring him back to safety. And that is what Jesus does.

That is his work. He is the shepherd who seeks out the lost sheep. As he said to Zacchaeus, the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.

Not only to seek but to save. So, friends, do be encouraged. This last verse is a great comfort to us. We're so like the psalmist.

We're such a mixture. Look at the mixture in him. Look at the whole of verse 176. On the one hand, at the very end, he does not forget the Lord's commandments. But on the other hand, he's constantly straying like a lost sheep.

[31 : 16] Isn't that exactly you and me? When somebody asks you, how are you getting on in the Christian life? What is the honest reply?

The honest reply will always be, I'm a mixture. I'm a mixture of good things and things that are very nasty and very undesirable.

Yes, I'm learning to love the Lord and the Bible. But deep in my heart, there are some intractable forces, powerful elements of which I'm ashamed. I don't forget the Lord's commandments.

I do not. But I'm a straying sheep. When all is said and done, the psalmist relies upon the grace and mercy of God.

He prays, seek your servant because he knows that the Lord will finally find him and rescue him.

Our life on earth is provisional, temporary.

[32 : 15] We're like the Titanic passengers who are sitting in the lifeboat wrapped in blankets, waiting. and we cry out, Lord, teach me. And we cry out, Lord, deliver me.

And he will. He will come for us. He will bring us in the end to his heavenly home with great rejoicing. Let's pray together.

Dear God, our Father, we do rejoice in you and thank you that you have not left us without comfort but have given us the grace to wait for your son, Jesus, to come from heaven, to deliver us from the wrath to come.

We are indeed straying sheep. Seek us, for we are truly your servants. Bless us. Give us grace to persevere. And as we wait for our final salvation, help us to delight in your words and to submit and to submit to your teaching.

We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.