

5. Psalm 119: The broad vistas of the Christian life

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- [0 : 0 0] Well friends, let's turn to Psalm 119 on page 512, 513. I want to tell you, as we start off this evening, I want to tell you about one of the more unpleasant afternoons of my life.
- I was a junior leader at a scripture union camp years ago in the south of England, and I was asked one day by a more experienced leader to go with him and a group of teenagers on a potholing or caving expedition.
- Now I'd never been on a potholing expedition before in my life, but when we'd driven to our destination, which I think was the Cheddar Gorge in Somerset, we found this hole in the ground that we were looking for, and once we'd put on our boiler suits and I think hard hats with an electric torch up at the front, we then went down into the dark.
- There were four or five teenagers and there were two or three grown-ups of whom I was one. Well, I was just about grown up. And for the next three hours or so, we squeezed ourselves through subterranean passages.
- I don't know how I managed to get through some of them. They were so tight. There were times when we were crawling along in several inches of extremely cold water. We saw underground chambers filled with stalagmites and stalactites.
- [1 : 1 9] We crept about like moles. We slithered around like snakes. And after what seemed an eternity in these cramped and soaking and very cold conditions, eventually we emerged.
- It was summertime. We emerged into the lovely wide-open spaces of the Somerset countryside. And it was a terrific relief to be back there, where the temperature was about 20 degrees warmer than it had been below ground.
- And I can remember stretching out my arms and legs and feeling the most delicious sense of freedom and release. I don't really suffer from claustrophobia, but it was lovely to get out of that pit of darkness into the broad countryside again.
- I'm sure that somebody will come to me after the service and tell me that potholing is the greatest sport in the world and will probably invite me to come with him to the deepest and darkest cave in the whole of Scotland.
- Well, let me tell you, brother, I'm not coming. Once was quite enough for me. But what I do especially remember was that sense of freedom and movement and wide-open space after the constriction and narrowness and sense of impending doom.
- [2 : 2 4] Now, I think we get the same kind of sense in our psalm at verse 45, which I'd like to read again. I'll pick it up from verse 44. I will keep your law continually forever and ever, and I shall walk in a wide place, for I have sought your precepts.
- I will walk in a wide place. Now, our psalmist here, as we've seen over the last couple of weeks, was no stranger to affliction and persecution.
- He's very conscious throughout this psalm of the hostile presence of enemies, people who taunt him and deride him. In fact, he's just mentioned the man who taunts him in verse 42.
- And we know that sometimes he felt very sad and depressed. Look, for example, at verse 83, where he says he has become like a wineskin in the smoke, like a withered up and useless old leather bottle, he feels like.

So his life is complex. It has difficulties in it, and periods of real pain, sharp pain. And yet, he's able to say in verse 45, that because he has sought the Lord's precepts, the Lord's commandments and words, he knows that he is going to walk in a wide place.

[3 : 45] So I want to give tonight's sermon the title, The Broad Vistas of the Christian Life. I want, if possible, to fix that phrase from verse 45 into our minds, I shall walk in a wide place.

Because to be a Bible Christian is to enjoy a liberty and a freedom which is not known to men and women of the world. Now, there's no need to turn up this verse, but you find a very similar expression in Psalm 18, verse 19.

One of David's Psalms. And David says about the Lord, He brought me out into a broad place. He rescued me because he delighted in me. It's the same idea.

He brought me out into a broad place, presumably from somewhere that was very narrow and constricted. Now, in Psalm 18, the broad place is enjoyed because the Lord rescues David.

Here in Psalm 119, verse 45, the wide place is walked in because the Lord, because the psalmist is seeking the precepts of the Lord. So the agency varies between the two psalms.

[4 : 51] It's the Lord's rescue in Psalm 18 and it's the Lord's precepts in Psalm 119. But the experience is very similar. Freedom, relief, ease, liberty, and joy.

Now, that is the Christian life lived under the Lordship of Christ. There is a breadth of vista to it. The Bible opens up to us a panoramic view of what it means to know God and his purposes.

The Bible shows us everything from the creation to the new creation. And so great is this view that we can never take it all in during our brief lives.

This vista is broader than the limits of our sight. But we're only just beginning to see the magnificence of God's plan and purpose, aren't we? You older Christians, those who've been reading the Bible seriously for perhaps 40 or 50 years, I think you'd be the first to say that you've only begun to see how great the view is which the Bible opens up for you.

Isn't that right? It's a little bit like when you go away for a holiday to a new place where you've never been before and you perhaps arrive late at night, it's dark, so you go to bed in your holiday bedroom and in the morning you wake up, you open the curtain and there you open the windows and there in front of you is the view, the vista of this new part of the world that you've never been to but you're so much looking forward to exploring.

[6 : 16] I've had a rather similar experience with Psalm 119 over the last few weeks. I said to Willie Phillip a couple of months ago when he asked me to do some preaching, I said, Willie, can I preach five sermons on Psalm 119?

He said, yes, you do that, you go ahead. But in five sermons I feel I've only just begun to explore it. I've only just put one toe into the water. This psalm is huge.

It opens up a comprehensive and complex view on the believer's life. Now, I don't know whether some of you know C.H. Spurgeon's great commentary on the psalms.

It's a seven volume, at least the version I've got is a seven volume commentary called The Treasury of David. Spurgeon wrote this, I guess, in the 1860s, 70s and 80s in the latter part of his life.

And the part of this commentary which deals with Psalm 119, at least in my edition, runs to 398 pages. Just on this one psalm, 398 pages.

[7 : 17] And I worked out it's roughly 600 words per page. And my mathematics tells me that he has written, Spurgeon, about 240,000 words on Psalm 119.

240,000 words. And I'm quite certain that if we were to ask Spurgeon if he felt he'd covered the whole thing, he would say he'd only just begun to explore the width and the breadth of it.

So the Christian life is like walking in a wide place. And those of you who are new Christians, perhaps you've only been a believer for a year or two, you've got so much to discover.

You've only taken your first few steps into the glorious panorama. And amidst the trials and difficulties which are bound to come your way simply because you're a Christian, there is so much for you to find out about the mind and character of God and of the Lord Jesus.

The comprehensiveness of the Father's plan and purpose and of what it means to live with the scriptures. There is so much to discover about the joy of living under the Lordship of Christ.

[8 : 21] It's the only place to be. As verse 45 puts it, it's as we seek the Lord's precepts, as we seek his teaching, his wisdom, that we walk in the wide place.

And yet there is a paradox here because the only way to enjoy the wide place, this place of liberty, is by entering through the narrow gate and walking along the narrow way or road as Jesus puts it in Matthew chapter 7.

Now the contradiction there is only apparent, it isn't real. The gate by which we enter is narrow because it is only by Jesus and not by some other route that we can come to the Father for salvation.

And the road that we then walk along is narrow because gospel ethics, gospel behavior, is bounded, limited, by the Ten Commandments, by the moral teaching of scripture.

But once we have entered by the narrow gate and once we are walking along the narrow road of Bible ethics, we then discover within those constraints the width and the breadth and the joy of the Christian life.

[9 : 31] It's only within the limitations that we enjoy the liberty. Now I know that's a paradox but that is the truth. And if you're a young Christian here, do ask one of the greyheads afterwards and I'm sure that their experience will bear out what I'm saying.

Well now that we've seen verse 45 and we have in our minds this picture of walking in a wide place as we seek the Lord's teaching, I'd like to try and open up two aspects of Christian living taught by this psalm which are features of the panorama, features of this glorious freedom of the Christian life.

And I'll put them under two headings. First, God's word brings vitality to believers and second, God's word brings stability to believers.

So first, God's word brings vitality to Christian believers. Now this theme of vitality is one of the big themes of Psalm 119 and I want to point out an odd feature of it.

Let's look first at verse 93. Verse 93. I will never forget your precepts for by them you have given me life.

[10 : 49] Now that's a lovely verse, it's a straightforward verse. The psalmist is gladly acknowledging that God has brought him to life through his words. Your precepts, he says in verse 93, are unforgettable.

How could I possibly forget them? Because they have given me life. So God has spoken to him and he's received the words of God and heard them and is now living under their power and the consequence for him is life.

It's the voice of God always that wakes the dead. So this psalmist was spiritually dead but now by the teaching of the Lord he is able to live a new, a revitalized existence.

By your precepts you have given me life. But, now here's the rather odd thing, the interesting feature. Despite verse 93, there are several other verses scattered throughout the psalm where the writer pleads with God to give him life.

So look back just for example to verse 88, in your steadfast love give me life that I may keep the testimonies of your mouth. Or look on to verse 107, I'm severely afflicted, give me life oh Lord according to your word.

[12 : 02] well look at verse 144, your testimonies are righteous forever, give me understanding that I may live. In fact, there are five requests for life in just 16 verses between verse 144 and verse 159.

Now do you see the oddness of this? In verse 93, he gladly testifies that God has given him life, and yet he's also repeatedly asking to be given life.

Now as we try to understand this, let's begin with verse 93. In that verse, our writer tells us how God has given him life. Well it is simply through his precepts, through his words, by them you have given me life.

Now what kind of life is the writer talking about here? Well it must be more than mere physical, biological, life. Because in verse 93, it's God's words to him which have brought him life.

It's the action of God's words upon his heart and spirit and conscience that have brought life to him. Now he was obviously biologically alive before the words of God brought him to life in a different sense.

[13 : 19] He must be talking about spiritual life here, about being alive to God. The Psalms don't quite use the language of the new birth, but we're surely in the same territory here.

This man was spiritually as dead as a dodo until the words of the Lord brought him to life. And he's obviously now very much alive to God. I mean, you couldn't write a psalm like this unless you were alive to God, could you?

This man loves the Lord, he clings to him, he depends upon him, he turns to him in the day and even in the night. The Lord God is like the magnetic north to which our psalmist's internal compass continually turns.

The Lord is everything to this man. The man is alive to the Lord, he's full of life. And yet, repeatedly through the psalm, he cries to the Lord for life.

But isn't that exactly what the believer's life is like? If you're a Christian, you have been born again into a new world, into a new order of things.

[14 : 21] The new birth has come upon you by the power of God's word and God's spirit. You can never, incidentally, you can never separate the agency of God's spirit from God's word, because the spirit is God's very breath, and it's the breath that conveys the words, isn't it?

There are no words without breath. So it's the words of God that come in the power of the breath of God that bring us to life. So from our point of view, when we're coming to Christ for the first time, we hear the gospel, and we repent and believe, and we come to Jesus.

But from God's point of view, we are being reborn by his loving will, through his words, and by the power of the spirit. So this is what happens. We become Christians by the power of the new birth.

And from that moment, we are alive to God. And it shows. We want to get to know him better. We begin to develop a hunger to read the scriptures. We begin to want to serve him rather than ourselves.

That was the old pattern always, to serve self. But we now want to start serving him. We begin to take a real interest in his people and to love them, whereas before we thought them rather peculiar, didn't we?

[15 : 35] And we begin to enjoy not only loving his people, but being loved by them, which is why we so often want to gather together with them. I mean, think of it, you could be in a different place right now.

You could be at home, isolated, couldn't you? with a bag of crisps in one hand and a rather disconsolate cup of cocoa in the other hand. Watching, I don't know, you could be watching the football on the television, watching footballers fall over in the mud, Kilmarnock versus Motherwell.

people. But you're here instead because you want to be. You want to be with the Christians that you love and the Christians who love you.

And you want to hear the words of God. You want to pray to him and to praise him with the singing. Why? Because you're alive with the new birth. You are coming to life more and more. But despite the fact that you are already alive, you want more life, don't you?

Because you're conscious of the down-dragging pressure of the world, the flesh, and the devil. Like our psalmist, you are facing certain afflictions.

[16 : 39] Just about everybody here is facing afflictions. And these afflictions drag you down. They make you sigh. They put bags under your eyes. They take the spring out of your step and the song out of your heart.

And like our psalmist in verse 154, you cry out to God, plead my cause and redeem me, give me life, according to your promise. So we're alive, but we're still battling daily with the world, the flesh, and the devil.

And that's why we cry out to God for fresh outpourings of life. And we have not only the afflictions that come at us from the world and the devil, from outside you might say, but we also are still daily battling with the power of sin within, the sinful nature.

We're battling with sluggishness and hardness of heart towards the Lord, with deeply ingrained bad mental attitudes and habits. We're battling with these dog-in-a-manger, pig-in-a-pig-sty attitudes that are within us.

Now, aren't you like that, full of the dog and the pig? I certainly am. I certainly am. And that's why we cry to God. That's why we cry to God for more life, isn't it? So that the transformation which began with the new birth can become ever more and more pervasive through our whole nature as our new life develops.

[18 : 06] And that is why there's no contradiction between verse 93, you have given me life, and these other verses where our friend pleads with God for more life.

And this is part of the broad vista of Christian experience and joy. If you're a Christian, God has given you life, and you know it, but you want more.

And it may be that in these bold requests, which are almost demands for life, there's a hint also of the longing for the life of the world to come, which is a longing which grows in the heart of growing Christians.

It's a longing which I think grows more insistent as the wrinkles gather and as the steps grow shorter and the world feels less of a place to feel at home in.

Give me life, O Lord, according to your word. Let me be with you in the life of the world to come. Let me see you. Let me see your face. Let me find in it everything that I've desired.

[19 : 11] Give me life. Life in all its fullness. So let's rejoice that God's word brings vitality to believers. Holy Spirit life, the life of the new creation, experienced while we're still here in the old creation.

It is a most invigorating thing to think about. It means that even if life on the human level is not up to much, it means that if you're a Christian, you are already sharing the life of eternity.

So let's say, life on the human level may be rather difficult. You might go home this evening after church, feeling at one level rather grossy. You may notice just how dark it is at the beginning of December, how damp it is and cold.

There may be not much in the fridge when you step through the front door. There may be not much money in the bank account either. And humanly speaking, your prospects may feel a bit thin, a bit gloomy.

But if you're a Christian, God's word has given you life. And as you cry to him for yet more life, your prayers will not go unheard.

[20 : 23] So there's the first thing. God's words bring vitality to believers. And now second and last, God's words bring stability to believers. Stability.

But it's a certain kind of stability and it's not quite the same thing as serenity. Look with me at the section which begins at verse 81. I'll try to show you from that little section what I mean.

Verses 81 to 88 are one of the most agitated and painful sections of the psalm where our psalmist is most conscious of being buffeted and harassed by difficulty.

So in verse 81, he's longing for God's salvation, presumably because life is so rough in the present tense. In verse 82, he cries out for comfort.

He knows God has promised it, but it hasn't yet arrived. And he wonders how much longer he's going to have to wait. In verse 83, his self-description of being like a wineskin in the smoke, that's a cry from the heart expressing how dried up and depressed this believer often feels.

[21 : 36] Then verse 84 expresses his feeling that he can't endure much more. How much more of this opposition can a man take? I'm at the end of my tether. That's what verse 84 is saying.

Then in verse 85, he feels surrounded by man traps. In verse 86, he's surrounded with lies, with falsehoods. In verse 87, he feels almost extinguished.

They've almost made an end of me on the earth, he says. And in verse 88, he begs for life so that he can live by God's testimonies rather than succumb to the fearsome pressures, these pressures which are upon him every day.

So verses 81 to 88 are the self-portrait of a believer under great pressure. They might fit the experience of some folk who are here this evening.

So where does he turn amidst this dog's breakfast of trauma and pain? Well, look at the next verse, verse 89.

[22 : 40] Forever, O Lord, your word is firmly fixed in the heavens. Now notice, he doesn't look within himself at this point.

He knows that there's no stability there. If he looks within, there's only weakness. He's as frayed as an old coat. He's at the end of his resources. So he looks up and there he sees the source of stability.

It's outside himself. More than that, it's outside the world. Your word, O Lord, is firmly fixed in the heavens. And that fact is the source of real, ongoing stability for believers.

That is the fixed point beyond this world on which Christians set our hope. Now I know we have God's words here in physical form, in black and white, in our Bibles.

But their origin is in the heavens. Your word, O Lord, is firmly fixed in the heavens. Within this world, nothing remains the same.

[23 : 46] There is no stability here. A few months ago, I think it was in July this year, an old friend of ours was staying with us briefly. A man who'd driven up to see us from England.

And this is a man of about 75 who's had to adjust to some big changes in his life in the last few years. His wife died not many years ago and just in the last year or so, he's had to leave the home where he and his wife brought up their family and he's had to move into a much smaller place in a town nearby.

And he said to me when he visited us the other day, he said with a wry smile, Well, Edward, there's one thing you can predict for certain. And that is that life is unpredictable. Now, we know that's true, don't we?

We know it's true. Everything changes. And because we tend to be too much wedded to this world and not sufficiently wedded to the world to come, we don't like it.

We want continuity in this world. We want everything to stay as it was when we were children. If I go down to Hertfordshire, where I was brought up to the little town of Radlet, where we lived, if I look at the town now, I see enormous physical changes.

[25 : 02] And I don't like them. For example, I'll see a block of flats standing there in a place where there used to be a lovely old brick-built house. I remember the house. I say, look at this monstrosity that's in the place where dear Granny Greenfields used to live.

I used to go to nursery school with her grandchildren. Where's the house? It's vanished. Then I go down another little road. I look for the little old garage that Jack Wiggs used to own and where he used to service people's Morris Miners and Rover 90s.

And it's gone. It's not there. It's been replaced by a nasty concrete filling station advertising petrol at 103.9 pence per litre. And I shake my head in sorrow.

And remember when I used to buy a gallon of petrol for three and sixpence. Now, we're all like this, aren't we, with the towns which we knew many years ago. And it's the same with our national life.

Our eyes missed over with nostalgic sorrow as we think of subjects like discipline in schools or integrity in the House of Commons. We've been thinking about that this week, haven't we?

[26 : 06] Or the respect that used to be paid to the royal family and other authority figures. We long for the days when you could buy a decent packet of fish and chips for 30 pence. Now, don't get me wrong.

I'm not saying that we should not be concerned about discipline in schools or integrity in the House of Commons or about treating authority figures with respect.

Christians need to be prominent in supporting these things, these buttresses of society. And what I'm wanting to emphasize is that we shouldn't be surprised to find just how rapidly everything changes on earth.

Nor need we be alarmed about it. Why not? Because the Lord teaches us in Scripture that not only are the trappings of life passing and transient, but the earth itself is not going to last forever.

It's not in its present form. So to give you one or two examples, in Jeremiah chapter 1, the Lord speaks to the prophet of nations being pulled down or broken down or plucked up to be replaced by others which are to be built and planted by the word of the Lord.

[27 : 17] In Ecclesiastes, the Lord speaks of a time to break down and a time to build up. The Apostle Peter, in his second letter, chapter 3, speaks of the heavens and the earth being burned up, the elements dissolving by fire.

Jesus says, in Mark chapter 13, heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away. Isaiah the prophet, in his 40th chapter, surely the people are grass, the grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever.

Now, verse 89 in our psalm is expressing just the same thing. Forever, O Lord, your word is firmly fixed in the heavens.

If we look for stability in the things of this world, we shall become disappointed and nostalgic and sad people. People who hanker back to the days of yore, to the days of our youth, feeling that we don't really belong anywhere anymore.

But if we fix our hopes on God's word, which is firmly fixed in the heavens, his word which outlasts the very earth beneath our feet, we shall know the stability of belonging to him and of belonging to the new creation.

[28 : 46] And then, when changes come, as they will certainly do, we shan't be shaken by them. We shan't be shaken by changes in the landscape as the old buildings are brought down and new buildings rise up.

We shan't be shaken as laws change and as social customs change. We shan't be shaken by the changes that will inevitably happen in our families as the children grow up and fly the nest, as the older generation dies, as our own bodies begin, bit by bit, to fall to pieces.

Our stability comes from God's words. And of course, behind the words is the one who speaks them. Our trust isn't just in his firmly fixed word, it's in him, because he is as unchanging as the words he speaks.

And this is why the Christian is able to enjoy such a sense of stability. The world around us is changing all the time and is threatening to fall apart.

Our personal circumstances and family circumstances are changing all the time. And we have that litany in verses 81 to 88 of pressure and affliction and persecution.

[30 : 00] And at times, our lives will feel just like that. But there, in the heavenly places, firmly fixed, beyond the reach of change or decay or trouble is the word of the Lord.

That is the magnetic north for the Christian. God's word and the one who speaks it. If you're not yet a Christian, that is what you need.

Come to Christ and you'll be part of the new creation which is beyond the reach of death and destruction. So amidst the trials and difficulties of life, the Christian has broad vistas and God means us to enjoy them.

As the Bible becomes to us more and more necessary than our daily food, it brings us life, vitality, the life of the new birth and the Holy Spirit.

And it brings us stability. It's not the aloof and passionless serenity of the Buddha. You know, this kind of thing. Nothing can touch me.

[31 : 06] There's no such thing as suffering. It isn't that kind of thing. It's stability amidst the choppy waters of real life. This is why our psalmist in verse 45 rejoices to be able to walk in a wide place, this place of liberty and freedom and joy.

And that's not surprising when we look on to verse 96 and see in that verse that God's commandment is exceedingly broad. So there's the wide place to walk in and there's the exceedingly broad breadth of the commandment.

So the Christian life is entered by the narrow gate. It's pursued along the narrow way. But at the same time, there is a breadth in the Christian life, a sense of glorious fresh air.

It's a wide place that we walk in because God's commandment is exceedingly broad. Well, friends, I hope that our little safari into Psalm 119 will stimulate your appetite to return to the psalm again and again.

We've only seen the tip of the iceberg in these few weeks. But I hope we've realized that the message of Psalm 119 is very much more than read your Bible.

[32 : 19] Now, the message is not less than read your Bible. That's always the heart of the psalm. But there is so much more to it. It's really an encyclopedia of the Christian life.

It deals with almost every aspect of what it means to live a godly life. So let me encourage you to make this psalm a lifelong friend, to keep returning to it.

Because if we give ourselves to it in friendship, our efforts will be greatly rewarded. And it will be to us a comfort and a spur and a joy.

Let's bow our heads and we'll pray. we thank you dear Heavenly Father that it is your desire that we should walk in a wide place.

And we think of your commandment also being exceedingly broad. We thank you for the joy of the new creation and what it means to be brought to life by your word and to be part of the new world.

[33 : 24] And we pray that you'll help us to enjoy the Christian life ever more and more as we live it with more commitment and vigor and desire to serve you. We pray again that you will make us always ready and willing to share this good news with other people as well who are not believers and who know nothing of the new creation.

And we pray that this psalm too dear Father will become a lifelong friend for all of us and we shall return to it and drink from its deep wells and enjoy it. And we ask it all to the glory of your great name.

Amen.