

3. Psalm 119: Sorrow in the Believer's Life

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[0 : 0 0] Let us pray together again. Dear God, our Father, it is your words that bring life and light and understanding. And therefore we pray that you will open them up to us tonight.

That you will deepen in our hearts our longing to love you and to serve you. And that you will help us to receive your word readily and gladly. And we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.

Well, let's turn to Psalm 119 again. We're continuing our series in this psalm, the longest of all the psalms this evening. A fortnight ago we were looking at the psalm's teaching on delighting in God's words.

And then last week we followed the theme of obedience or obeying God's words. Or really we saw how the psalm teaches the believer to grow in obedience. Now tonight, and I think probably next Sunday as well, I want us to look at the twin themes of first of all, sorrow in the believer's life.

And then secondly, how the words of God strengthen the believer in times of sorrow. Now when I tell you that that's going to be our theme, sorrow in the believer's life, that may send your heart dropping into your boots.

[1 : 1 6] Maybe you gulp a little bit and think, oh dear, dear, this is going to be a tough one tonight. We shall all need a glass of double strength, Lucas Aid, at the end of the service. But oddly, friends, I hope it won't be really like that.

I think on the contrary, that we may go home really rather encouraged. And let me put it like this. The Bible is full of joy, and the Bible is full of sorrow.

And it teaches that the believer's life will have plenty of both. And in the Bible's view of things, joys and sorrows are not like oil and water, two things that can never mix up.

On the contrary, somehow joy and sorrow in the believer's life are whisked up together in the divine blender. And Psalm 119 is a classic example of this.

A great deal of it bubbles with joy, but much of it is impregnated with sorrow and difficulty. And the two elements are there together in the mind and experience of the godly man who wrote this psalm under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

[2 : 2 0] So a church that is taught by the Bible, and not least by Psalm 119, is never going to be a happy, happy, happy, all the day church. It's going to be a happy and sad, happy and sad, happy and sad type of church.

The things mixed in together. One of the reasons why the Bible is so encouraging and so comforting is that it is so realistic. If the Bible taught us that to become a Christian transported you into a world of unsullied, untainted, perfect happiness, you would soon be throwing your Bible away because it would be obviously not telling the truth.

But the Bible teaches this constant intermingling of joy and sorrow in the believer's life. A great example is Paul the Apostle. You remember his words in 2 Corinthians 6, verse 10.

He says that he is sorrowful, yet always rejoicing. Now the writer of Psalm 119 is exactly the same. Now it's possible that you're sitting there in your particular row, and you can see somebody sitting in the row in front of you who looks thoroughly happy.

Now you're not feeling thoroughly happy. You're feeling a bit worn down, worn out, and run ragged. But there's a young woman or a young man in the row in front who looks like a blissfully perfect specimen of robust humanity.

[3 : 44] Fit and healthy and youthful. Happy in their work. Belonging, as far as you know, to a lovely, stable Christian family. A family without skeletons in the cupboard. And you think, that person sitting there, that lovely, healthy, blossoming youngster, is as happy as the day is long.

But it's not so. It's not so. Now why not? Because that young person, although healthy and stable, lives in a world that is full of pain and cannot be insulated from it.

That healthy youngster could only be thoroughly happy by cocooning himself or herself in an envelope of self-centeredness. And by refusing to interact with the sufferings of mankind.

But he or she lives in the real world. Listens to the news. Knows something about the sufferings in Iraq and the Sudan. Thinks about the beggars who sit on the pavements of Renfield Street.

And being a Christian, that healthy young person is learning to love those who are suffering. And in doing so, is beginning to enter their world and to feel something of the pain and despair of that world.

[4 : 54] Those who want unadulterated joy will end up as very self-centered people who protect themselves from the sorrows of a fallen world. So to start us into our theme, let's look together first at Psalm 119, verse 92.

Verse 92. If your law had not been my delight, I would have perished in my affliction.

Now do you see there how in the one verse we have both delight and affliction. The writer is almost there like a drowning man. He's just about to go under. But God's law and his delight in God's law keep him afloat.

Or look on to verse 143. Trouble and anguish have found me out, but your commandments are my delight.

You see, the sorrows and the joy there are simultaneous. Trouble and anguish have found out our friend the psalmist, but they don't rob him of his delight in the Lord's commandments.

[6 : 02] The delight and the pain are experienced at the same time. I think it's in Herman Melville's great novel, Moby Dick, the great hunt by Captain Ahab for the white whale.

Some of you will know it. It's a great novel. I can recommend it. But I think I'm right in remembering that Ishmael, the sailor, the man who writes the story in the first person, says at one point that when you're sleeping in a very narrow bunk on board a 19th century whaling ship, the best way to be warm in bed or the best way to appreciate being warm in bed in this very narrow bunk is when a small part of you, possibly an arm or a foot, is sticking out from under the covers in the cold night air.

So most of you is warm, but a little part of you is cold. Mind you, I suppose you haven't got to go to a 19th century whaling ship for that kind of experience. Just spend the winter in Scotland and you'll come across the same thing.

You know, when you wake up sometime in the middle of the night and your leg is dangling out of the bed and it feels freezing cold. Now that's a trivial illustration, I know, but I'm just trying to make the point that the comfortable and the uncomfortable are experienced simultaneously.

Our psalmist, throughout the psalm, is sorrowing and rejoicing at the same time. He's under great pressure. Those words trouble and anguish in verse 143 are words that suggest real mental pain.

- [7 : 27] But at the same time, he's able to feel great delight in the words of the Lord. Now that is typical of the experience of believers as the Bible describes it.
- It's quite different from the world's way. Now to get the world's view of a pressure-free life, go to the travel agents and look at the photographs that are up on the walls.
- The world's view of delight is the Caribbean paradise island. Palm trees, white sand, a delicious blue sea, and a barbecue on the beach. But absolutely no clouds in the sky, no litter on the sand, no money worries, no health problems, and certainly no tax forms to fill in.
- Simultaneous delight and trouble. That's the believer's life, according to Psalm 119. Well, let's look more carefully now at the varieties of sorrow that our psalmist has to experience.
- The main source of his troubles in this psalm is persecution from people who despise God and the words of God. But we'll come to that in a few minutes' time. I want us to notice, first of all, one other source of sorrow which we could quite easily overlook.
- [8 : 40] It's described first in verse 19, back towards the beginning of the psalm. We could easily pass over this and not think about it.
- But look at verse 19. I'm a sojourner on the earth. Hide not your commandments from me. Now, a sojourner, sojourner, is a person who doesn't stay very long.
- If you're a student at one of our universities, you may have come to Glasgow from Ireland, perhaps, or from Germany, or from England. You're a sojourner in Glasgow. You're here just for a few short years and then you're gone somewhere else.
- Now, our verse 19 here does not say that we're sojourners in Glasgow. We're sojourners on the earth. So our home on this planet is strictly temporary.
- And our psalmist is not saying hip, hip, hooray that I'm a sojourner. It's a rather different tone. There's something of the lament in it. He's saying, alas, feel how misogyn are on the earth.
- [9 : 43] It's because I'm only here for a few years that I need your commandments. My life is precarious and fragile. That's why I need to know the words of God. Let me tell you of a moment when this came home to me.
- I was a young minister, a junior minister, working in Manchester. And in our congregation, there was a Christian woman who would have been, I think, about 75. She came originally from Armenia.
- And if you know your Armenian names, you'll know that most of them end with the three letters I-A-N. And this lady was called Takui Bohosian. She'd been an actress when she was younger, but she was now retired and living in a flat in South Manchester.
- And one day, I went to see her to pay her a pastoral visit. And she welcomed me into her little flat, and she said, oh, sit yourself down, Edward. I'll go into the kitchen and make a cup of tea. So she went to the kitchen and put the kettle on, and I was sitting there in the sitting room, and I was looking around at the various things in the room.
- And I noticed, sitting on the television top, there was a black and white framed photograph. And it was the photograph of a very beautiful young woman.
- [10 : 53] The sort of young woman that P.G. Woodhouse would have described as easy on the eye. Anyway, a couple of minutes later, Takui came back from the kitchen with the cups of tea, and she noticed that I was looking at this photograph.
- And she said to me, do you know who that is? And the moment she asked the question, I knew the answer. I said, yes, it was you, wasn't it? She said, yes, that was me.
- And a pain, pain went through my heart as I saw how the passage of about 50 years had transformed the beautiful young woman into this frail and wrinkled old lady.

She was a sojourner on the earth. Well, that was 25 years or more ago. I imagine that her sojourn is now ended and she's with the Lord. Now, just look at verse 19, both halves of it, both halves.

Why should the psalmist say in the second half, hide not your commandments from me, immediately after saying, I am a sojourner on the earth? The second half of the verse is an urgent request.

[11 : 56] And I think the psalmist is saying, Lord, I'm only here for a very short while, just a few short decades. So I beg you, don't hide from me your mind and your intentions.

I need to see the big picture of your purposes. Otherwise, am I of any value at all? Is there any point in my scurrying about for 70 or 80 breathless years if it's all without significance in the end?

It's because life on earth is so transient that I need to know your mind. Tell me. Don't hide the truth from me. Now, God has wonderfully answered that urgent request of verse 19 over the centuries.

The great answer, of course, is the sending of Jesus. And the whole of the New Testament opens out to us in rich detail God's answer to that prayer in verse 19.

It's the New Testament who tells us just how Jesus has blown death out of the water. or to use a biblical metaphor, Jesus has the keys of death and Hades. So those who belong to him, not those who are not Christians, but those who belong to him, are promised a glorious bodily resurrection to have new bodies just like his glorious body in the new creation.

[13 : 10] To all who are Christ's people, the resurrection of the dead is the final answer to the painful problem of verse 19. And yet, and yet, even when we know about the resurrection, even when we know the meaning of Christ's death and resurrection so deeply that we could recite it standing on our heads, there is still a poignancy and a sorrow about our being sojourners.

And that sorrow all stems from Genesis chapter 3 where God, with sorrowful resolution, has to pronounce the sentence of death on Adam and Eve for their rebellion.

Dust you are, he says to them, and dust, to dust you will return. And Moses, reflecting on these things in Psalm 90, says to God, you sweep men away as with a flood, they are like a dream, like grass that is renewed in the morning.

In the morning it flourishes and is renewed, in the evening it fades and withers. The devastating consequence of the fall of man is man's pulverization.

pulverization. Now the great ultimate answer is the resurrection. But in the meantime, for these few short decades, we are sojourners and we need to live with that fact and face it, be reconciled to it.

[14 : 34] It is part of the outworking of God's righteous judgment upon our rebellion. And therefore, let us not behave as if we were not sojourners. Now certainly, let us enjoy the many lovely things, the many blessings that God gives us in our life on earth.

Good food and hard work and family life and all our lovely Christian friends, all gifts from God. But let us never forget that we might be called to the departure lounge at any moment and told that we take off in ten minutes.

It is dangerous to sink our roots too deep into this world. Ultimately, if we are Christians, we do not belong here. But look on to verse 54.

54. Your statutes have been my songs in the house of my sojourning.

Now doesn't that shed a lovely light on our sojourning? The verse is telling us that the soundtrack of our sojourning is the words of God. The Lord's statutes, his words and laws become our songs.

[15 : 46] So as we walk up the road towards the new creation from our temporary home, we sing the Bible. The verse doesn't say dirges or laments, it says songs.

So the sojourning may be poignant, but the Bible fills our mouth with song. As the hymn writer John Kenick put it in the 18th century, children of the heavenly king, as he journey, sweetly sing.

We are travelling home to God in the way the fathers trod. Lift your eyes, ye sons of light, Zion's city is in sight. There our endless home shall be.

There our Lord we soon shall see. That's the song of the sojourner. Well, let's look now at the psalmist's main source of sorrow, and that is his persecutions.

When I first began to study this psalm a few weeks ago, I sat down, as the preacher should at the beginning of sermon preparation, with a couple of big sheets of blank paper.

[16 : 49] That's the way you have to start. And as I sat down with my big sheets of blank paper, I decided that I would list about 25 topics that the psalm deals with.

And then against each of those topics, I listed all the verses that made reference to that particular topic. And when I'd completed my lists, I saw that it was the topic of persecution, which had the greatest number of verses.

In other words, in the framework of this psalm, which is all about the word of God, persecution proved to be the dominant theme. Now, I was quite surprised to discover that.

And I had to ask myself why I found it surprising to discover that the dominant theme of the psalm was persecution. And I think the reason that I've been forced to is that I've simply never been persecuted myself.

And because I haven't, my eye, I've read the psalm many a time, of course, but my eye has tended to slide off those verses that speak about persecution, rather like water sliding off a duck's back.

[17 : 50] I've been aware that the verses have been there, but I haven't been gripped by them because they haven't spoken to any reality that I've personally known. Yes, I've received a little bit of, not persecution, but I suppose opposition.

I've been called a Bible basher. I've been dismissed with mild scorn in Church of England circles as a narrow-minded, blinkered evangelical. But the experience of real persecution that our psalmist writes about here is unknown to most Christians in modern Britain.

Now, we know that times are changing, and we may need to brace ourselves against the effects of anti-Christian, anti-Bible legislation, which is increasingly being passed these days, both in Westminster and in Edinburgh.

But most of us don't know what real persecution feels like, and therefore we need Psalm 119 to teach us, because many Christians in many parts of the world know only too much about it, and they're our brothers and sisters, and we need to stand with them.

That's why our links with the Barnabas Trust are so valuable. That's why it's good that some of the missionaries that we support are working in countries where there is painful persecution.

[19 : 04] So what can we learn about the persecuted writer of Psalm 119? Well, let's notice first his friends, his kindred spirits, because thankfully he's not alone.

Look with me at verse 63. I am a companion of all who fear you, of those who keep your precepts. And then verse 74.

Those who fear you shall see me and rejoice, because I have hoped in your word. Now that verse is telling us that the psalmist's firmness in believing God's words brings joy to other believers.

So he's persecuted, he stands firm, and that brings joy to other believers as they see him not keeling over, not turning belly up. His hope in the word of God strengthens their hope in God as well.

So our psalmist is not isolated, and that's a real comfort. But he still has a lot to contend with. So let's look at the component parts of the persecution that he's under.

[20 : 09] First, there seem to be people around who have one foot in the Lord's camp and one foot in the world's camp. Look at verse 113.

113. He says, I hate the double-minded, but I love your law. The double-minded man is somebody who's split down the middle.

Half of him is drawn to the Lord, but the other half is still in love with the world. And our psalmist, and remember he's writing under the Holy Spirit here, our psalmist says that he can't stand that kind of attitude.

And of course he's in tune with Jesus and the apostles, who likewise give short shrift to double-mindedness. Next, there's scorn and derision.

Look back to verse 22. Take away from me scorn and contempt, for I have kept your testimonies. Now why is the psalmist held in contempt?

[21 : 12] Because he has kept the Lord's testimonies. There's something about the obedient and godly life which will arouse contempt. Think of Daniel. Why did Daniel end up in the pit of lions?

The reason was that his enemies were jealous of him and in the end had only scorn for his godly and faithful way of life. So there's that derision, contempt.

Next, our psalmist is subjected to a smear campaign. Have a look at verse 69. There's something very modern about verse 69. The insolent smear me with lies, but with my whole heart I keep your precepts.

Notice how the first and second halves of the verse fit together. The insolent smear me with lies, but with my whole heart I keep your precepts.

In other words, the pressure of their smear campaign is designed to make me stop following the Lord. But despite that pressure, I'm still keeping the Lord's precepts. That's what he's saying.

[22 : 16] I've just read in the current issue of Evangelicals Now, which is an excellent monthly Christian paper, that a church in Laos, in Southeast Asia, which once had nearly 2,000 people, I think 1,900 people attending regularly, has shrunk to just 20 or 30 who attend now because of government policies.

Apparently 200 of the local Christians there were arrested and were falsely accused of being separatist rebels by the authorities. And so the other church members stopped coming to church because they were living in fear that the same thing would happen to them.

Now what often lies behind these smear campaigns? The answer is the hostility of the powers that be, the hostility of the authorities. Look at verse 23 here.

Even though princes sit plotting against me, your servant will meditate on your statutes. Princes. Persecution generally starts at the political top and the henchmen who carry it out on the ground do so because they live in fear of their rulers.

Do you remember Psalm 2, verse 2? The kings of the earth set themselves and the rulers take counsel together against the Lord and against his anointed, saying, let us burst their bonds apart and cast away their cords from us.

[23 : 43] Now why does this happen? Why do secular authorities so often want to suppress the freedom of believers? Believers whose lives would contribute so much to the community.

Isn't it because they feel that their ruling position is threatened, not so much by the believers, who are often very humble and poor people, but by the Lord.

It's the Lord's bonds that they want to burst apart in Psalm 2. They don't want to submit to him. But also, they don't want their citizens who are believers to submit to the Lord because they realize that those believers are acknowledging an authority higher than themselves.

And they want to rule the roost. They don't like to think that Joe Soap, who's a Christian, loves the Lord more than he loves the secular government. And so they clamp down on him and try to compel him to tow the government line.

It's an interesting thing that in the Indian subcontinent these days, it isn't only Islamic extremists, but increasing numbers of Hindu extremists who are persecuting Christians.

[24 : 52] I've just read that in India at the moment, there are four states, I think India has 10 or 12 states in all, but there are four states which have now passed laws prohibiting conversions.

And we used to think of Hinduism as being quite gentle and genial towards the Christian faith. But it's changing its tune, at least in some parts of India. Then look at verse 95 in our psalm.

95. The wicked lie in wait to destroy me, but I consider your testimonies. In its more developed forms, persecution doesn't merely make life difficult for Christians, it's determined to destroy them, actually to kill them.

In Iraq today, Islamic extremists are stating their intention to drive Christians and Christianity completely out of the country.

And apparently they're giving Christians three options. Either convert to Islam or leave the country or die. Now that's not government policy in Iraq, but it's the reality on the ground.

[26 : 05] And the fact is that two-thirds of the Christian population of Iraq have left Iraq since the first Gulf War in 1990. About a million Christians out of one and a half million have left the country in the last 17 years.

Now these are very uncomfortable things, aren't they? But I'm raising them because my study of Psalm 119 has forced me to think about them afresh. I've had to ask myself why I was surprised to discover that so much in this psalm is about persecution.

When I decided, I guess a couple of months ago, that I would preach on this psalm for these few Sunday evenings, I thought that the message would really be all about the delights of personal Bible study and congregational Bible study.

Well, of course it's going to lead us in that direction as well. But if we are to read this psalm honestly, we cannot avoid this bleak and distressing element. This is the believer's life in so many parts of the world.

The protection that British Christians have enjoyed for so long is not normal. Let's thank God for it. It's the fruit of centuries of gospel preaching in the British Isles.

[27 : 20] And it's the fruit of the legislation that that gospel influence has produced. But it's abnormal. What we have in Psalm 119 is much more the common experience of Christians.

Now take a deep breath because I want to press this a little bit further before we can relax and enjoy our Lucas Aid. Let's notice what this persecution and ungodliness does to our psalmist.

It doesn't leave him unruffled. It doesn't leave him cool and calm. It produces three reactions in him. First of all, it grieves him and it deeply upsets him.

Look at verse 136. 136. My eyes shed streams of tears because people do not keep your law. Not just a sigh, not just a moment of unease, but prolonged sadness.

Streams of tears. Now the Lord has surely put that verse into the Bible to teach us how believers ought to react to ungodliness. Not with indifference, but with grief.

- [28 : 32] Our society trains us to be self-sufficient and self-protective. Another murder, another act of violence, another injustice. Let's not think about it too much.

Let's put some music on and crack open a can of lager. And then even when we're out of doors, out in the streets, let's put our earpieces into our ears from our little boxes. Forget what you call them.

And let's fill our minds with our music so that we're protected from engaging with the sharper edges of human life. You see, if I fill my head with music as I walk up Socky Hall Street, I won't have to notice the evidence of sin and despair and idolatry all around me.

I can lock myself into my cozy, protected little world. Isn't that the danger? But our psalmist here shows us that he does not protect himself from the evidence of ungodliness.

He looks at it. He notices it. And it makes him weep streams of tears. But grief is not his only reaction to godlessness.

- [29 : 38] Also, secondly, he begs God to intervene in judgment. Look at verse 84, for example. How long must your servant endure? When will you judge those who persecute me?

In other words, are you going to let this all run on forever, O Lord? Aren't you going to judge wickedness? Are you going to sit there and do nothing? You find the same strain in verse 1, 2, 6.

It is time for the Lord to act, for your law has been broken. That, again, is such a biblical expression of feeling.

Think of the prophet Habakkuk, who cries out in Habakkuk chapter 1, verse 2, O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not hear, or cry to you, violence, and you will not save.

In other words, aren't you going to do something about it? Or then think of the souls of the martyred Christians in the book of Revelation, Revelation chapter 6, verse 10, who cry out with a loud voice, O sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?

- [30 : 47] So our verse 126 here is part of the believer's cry to the Lord to act, to call the godless to account. Now, the Bible makes it quite clear that the Lord will judge everything in the end.

And when he judges, it will be with perfect and consummate justice. But believers have to wait patiently until that judgment is carried out.

And that brings me to a third consequence of the pressure of godlessness on the believer's life. And that is simply the need to endure, to go on, to keep on persevering in the midst of it all.

Look again at verse 84. How long must your servant endure? So endurance is an unavoidable element in the Christian life.

The Christian life is a double marathon, a quadruple marathon. The need to endure the pressures of a godless world is normal for Christians. Endurance is normal.

- [31 : 50] And if we want to know how the psalmist felt as he endured, just look at the preceding verse, verse 83. For I have become like a wineskin in the smoke.

Wine was bottled in those days, not in glass bottles, but in flasks that were made from animal skins, goat skins, sheep skin, and so on. Just imagine a sheepskin wine bottle hanging up in the chimney breast for months and months with the smoke curling up around it every day.

That wineskin eventually would be shriveled up like a prune, ready to fall to pieces, wouldn't it? Do you sometimes feel like a particularly shriveled prune as you endure the buffetings of the godless world?

If you do, it's normal. This is what living in a godless society does to believers. It brings grief. It makes us cry out to God, when will you act to judge?

And it makes us endure. Sometimes it will call forth every ounce of stickability in our characters. This is the normal life of believers. If you're here and you're not yet a Christian, think about these things.

[33 : 03] Now friends, I've deliberately focused this evening on the sorrows of Psalm 119. looking at this aspect of the Bible's teaching is sobering and it may even seem to be a little bit disheartening.

But in the long run, it helps us greatly and strengthens us. This big strand within the Bible will prevent us from being cloud-cuckoo land Christians.

It will prevent us from walking around with a fixed and ghastly grin on our faces, pretending that everything in the world is sweet and lovely when everything in the world is not sweet and lovely.

Now of course, beyond the day of judgment, if we belong to Christ, we shall then be part of the new creation where there is no longer death or mourning or crying or pain.

The judgment then will be passed and it will have been carried out to perfection. But in the meantime, Christians live with this mixture of joys and sorrows.

[34 : 04] So if I should see you walking up Socky Hall Street in the next few days looking particularly radiant and happy, I shall be very glad and I shan't be surprised because there is much in the Bible to make us radiant and happy.

But equally, if I see you walking up Socky Hall Street looking miserable, I won't be surprised either. I will assume that you are feeling the pressures of living life in a largely godless world.

and as I see your face, I will say to myself, my friend has been reading Psalm 119 and has not been filtering out its difficult verses.

Shall we pray together? my eyes shed streams of tears because people do not keep your law.

How long must your servant endure? When will you judge those who persecute me? dear God, our Father, we thank you so much for this psalm and the experience of the writer, whoever he was.

[35 : 38] And we thank you that this has been written here for our instruction and our encouragement. We pray indeed that you'll help us to take these things to heart. And we remember again those many Christians, perhaps the great majority in the world, who live in societies where the gospel is looked at very much askance, even as a danger, even as a subversive and anti- anti-the national interest kind of thing.

And we pray that you will help them to stand firm and to take comfort from all that the Bible teaches. And these things we ask in Jesus' name.

Amen. Amen.