

How God Comforts Us on the Long and Winding Road

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Date: 10 November 2019

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[0 : 00] But we're going to turn now to our Bibles and Edward is going to be preaching to us this morning from Psalm 119. We've been going through this Psalm in little sections in fits and starts over recent months.

And this morning we're going to read the section from verse 49 to verse 56. Psalm 119, it's page 513 if you are one of the church visitors Bibles.

And if you're wondering what that heading above it, Zion, is, it's one of the letters of the Hebrew alphabet. This is a psalm where each section begins with a succeeding letter of the Hebrew alphabet.

And indeed each line in each section begins with that. So it's quite a work of art, perhaps to help people to remember it and to commit it to their memories for use in their devotions.

Psalm 119 at verse 49. Remember your word to your servant in which you have made me hope. This is my comfort in my affliction that your promise gives me life.

[1 : 11] The insolent utterly deride me. But I do not turn away from your law. When I think of your rules from of old, I take comfort, O Lord. Hot indignation seizes me because of the wicked who forsake your law.

Your statutes have been my song in the house of my sojourning. I remember your name in the night, O Lord, and I keep your law. The blessing has fallen to me that I have kept your precepts.

Amen. And may God indeed bless to us. This is his word. Good morning, friends.

Good to see you all. Let's turn to Psalm 119, which you will find on page 513 in our big hardback Bibles. And our passage is verses 49 to 56.

And my title this morning is How God Comforts Us on the Long and Winding Road. Psalm 119, 49. Remembrance Sunday comes to us but once a year.

[2 : 29] And if you're like me, its annual appearance sends a blast of the north wind into your heart. There is something very sobering about being reminded of the ferocity and savagery of which we human beings are capable.

Think of those two great wars of the last century. Millions of young men shot to pieces or burned to death or drowned in sinking battleships. Millions more badly wounded or maimed, having to go through the remainder of life with scars and amputations of the body and even more terrible scars in the mind.

Warfare is a wretched business. Sometimes, of course, it simply cannot be avoided. For example, Adolf Hitler had to be resisted in 1939.

Britain and her allies simply had to take him on because his ambitions and his agenda were wicked. But for all that warfare is sometimes unavoidable, it is a foul business.

And Remembrance Sunday rightly and properly forces us to think about it. It reminds us that we live in a world characterized more by conflict than by harmony, more by sorrow than by joy.

[3 : 47] Is it possible then to smile in a world like this? Is it possible to live the Christian life with purpose and even with joy in a world like this?

Well, let's look at this section of our psalm beginning at verse 49. Now, one of the most striking features of Psalm 119 is the mixture of joy and sorrow experienced by the psalmist.

He seems to be experiencing joy and sorrow simultaneously. Look at verse 50, for example. This is my comfort in my affliction.

He is comforted and afflicted simultaneously. This is not comfort after affliction. It's comfort in affliction. And the whole psalm is like this.

The author suffers great afflictions and persecutions at one level in his life. And yet joy and delight at another level. Joy in the Lord. Delight in the Lord's words and promises.

[4 : 51] But the joys and the afflictions are experienced simultaneously. And this is why the psalm is so encouraging to modern believers. Because our lives are often under strains and stresses for different reasons.

But we can learn from this psalm how to rejoice in our hearts while simultaneously having to battle with problems and ongoing difficulties. So let's look down at the passage now.

Let's get out our magnifying glasses and look at these words and allow our psalmist to teach us. And I want us to notice four things. First, we learn to trust in God's promises.

We learn to trust that God will deliver on everything that he has promised, even though we may have to wait patiently for it. Here's verse 49 again.

Remember your word to your servant in which you have made me hope. Remember. Remember. Why should the psalmist ask the Lord to remember something?

[5 : 53] Is the Lord apt to be forgetful? Well, of course not. When the Lord remembers his word, it means that he acts on a promise that he has never forgotten. He puts the promise into effect.

He delivers on it. Our politicians are sometimes accused of not delivering on a promise, especially those promises made in pre-election manifestos. And of course, sometimes that criticism is deserved.

But God is not like that. In fact, one of the most fundamental truths of the Bible is that God will always keep his promises. As Joshua said to the Israelites at the end of his life, I'm about to go the way of all the earth.

And you know, all of you, that not one word has failed of all the good things that the Lord your God promised concerning you. If God says that he's going to do something, we can trust that he will do it.

Now, back to our verse 49. Remember your word to your servant. That means your word to me in which you have made me hope. That word translated hope could equally well be translated wait.

[7 : 05] In which you have made me hope or for which you have made me wait. You have made me hope. You have made me wait. That's God's way.

He often makes us wait. He is not in the business of instant gratification. Of course, in this day and age, we love instant gratification. So a child will say to its mother, for example, mother, please give me that Malteser.

Now, mother, I'm starving. In fact, I might die within five minutes of starvation. And then you would have a murder on your conscience. I must have my Malteser now. Naughty boy.

Needs a clip around the ear, doesn't he? But God makes us wait for many of the best things that he's promised us. And it's for our benefit that he makes us wait, because waiting builds up our powers of endurance.

Waiting whets our appetite for the great future beyond this world. That's what we're waiting for ultimately. As the author of Hebrews puts it in his second chapter, it is of the world to come that we are speaking.

[8 : 11] The whole of the Christian life is angled towards the future. Christians are gentlemen in waiting and ladies in waiting. Now, we have plenty to get on with in this life, in this world.

But our eyes are always on the horizon because we are waiting for the one who is coming on the clouds of heaven with great power and glory. So let me ask this question.

If you're a Christian, have you grasped that your life at its most important level is a life of hoping in God's word and waiting for him to fulfill his promise?

What then is his promise? It's the promise of eternal life lived in his very presence. Now, the New Testament is full of this promise.

It bubbles up everywhere. For example, Jesus says in John chapter six, this is the will of my father. Isn't that a great way to begin a verse? This is the will of my father.

[9 : 08] This is what God wants, that everyone who looks on the son of God and believes in him should have eternal life. And I will raise him up on the last day.

I will raise him up. Doesn't that promise cast a shadow of glory over our whole humdrum everyday existence? Just think for a moment of your humdrum daily existence.

Think of your daily grind. It's Monday morning and it's November. It will be very soon, won't it? So you get up in the dark, don't you? And the rain is battering against your windows.

You stagger down to the kitchen. You have a tasteless bowl of Weetabix. Then you get the bus or the train to work. Everybody around you is coughing. You face the challenges of the working day and somehow you get through them.

Then you get the train back home again. Everybody is still coughing. So you try to avoid their breath. You get back home. You kiss your wife. Or you wish you had a wife to kiss.

[10 : 08] And then you eat your meal. Something happens in the evening. Then it's bedtime. And then it's Tuesday. And what keeps you going? Spring, summer, autumn, winter, year after year after year.

The answer is God's promise. Remember your word to your servant. This word that you've made me put my hope in. You've compelled me to trust it.

Well, let's thank God for that compulsion. If God has made us put our hope in his word, we are wonderfully blessed. Because he's opened our eyes to what the Bible is all about.

Think of it like this in terms of the Old Testament and the New Testament. The Old Testament is full of the promise of the coming Messiah. The believer in Old Testament times was waiting for the Christ to come.

But it's just the same for New Testament people. The New Testament is full of the promise of the return of the Messiah. To gather up all those who've been waiting for him and to take us to glory.

[11 : 11] The Old Testament looks forward to his first coming. The New Testament looks forward to his second coming. God kept his promise to bring the Messiah the first time.

Therefore, he has form in promise keeping. We can trust him to keep his promise to bring the Lord Jesus to us for a second time. God promises us something which we don't yet have.

And if we learn to live the Christian life trusting that promise of eternal life, we will grow strong as Christians. It's a superficial Christianity that promises us everything now in this life.

Health and wealth and happiness. That's not the Bible's way. All the great servants of God in the Bible lived lives of real hardship and real difficulty. Think of them.

Moses, Samuel, Job, Daniel, the Lord Jesus supremely. Paul the Apostle. They are our models. They endured affliction because they knew that God would bring them through to glory and peace in the end.

[12 : 21] Verse 50 explains this further to us. This is my comfort in my affliction that your promise gives me life. Imagine having a conversation with the psalmist.

You say to him, Mr. Psalmist, are you experiencing health, wealth, happiness, peace of mind, and all the trappings of a cushioned and gentle existence? No, he says, no.

I'm afflicted. Verse 50. I'm treated with derision. Verse 51. I'm surrounded by crooks and cutthroats. Verse 53. That is his actual experience of life in this crooked world.

He's a believer. Indeed, he is. And he's living with affliction. And yet he's alive. He is very much alive. And the secret of his life is spelled out in verse 50.

This is my comfort in my affliction, that your promise gives me life. Now, what does that really mean? Your promise gives me life. It means that he thinks often about the one who makes the promise.

[13 : 25] And he thinks often about the thing that is promised. For us in the New Testament era, it means that we think much about God who gives us his great promise.

We think about his reliability, his integrity, his power, and his love. And we think much also about the eternal life that he's promised us. And we're comforted in our afflictions because we know that he will deliver on his promise, even though we may have to wait a long time for it.

Your promise gives me life. Verse 50. This is why I can live and function and flourish, even in times of real affliction. By contrast, the person who is not a Christian has no such hope.

What does a man look forward to as he gets older, if he's not a Christian? What does your 70-year-old Uncle Cuthbert talk about when he comes to visit you for his annual visit at Christmas?

Hello, Uncle Cuthbert, you say. What are you planning to do next year now that you're retired? Oh, well, I've got great plans. There's going to be a trip to Florence and Rome in the spring. I want to see Michelangelo's work, not just in reproduction.

[14 : 41] I want to see the real thing. I want to see the real color of his paint. Then in the summer, a little golfing tour up the east coast of Scotland. It'll start at St. Andrews, you know, pay homage to the old place.

And up to Carnoustie. Maybe I'll go up to Dornoch and Brora, those lovely little courses up there. And then I'll trickle back through the highlands, popping into a distillery here and there to stock up for the winter.

Uncle Cuthbert, is there no more to your life than golf, whiskey and fine art? No, I suppose not really, if you put it like that. Perhaps not.

What does Paul the Apostle say about a man like that? About Gentiles who are strangers to the gospel?

He says this, They are strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But the believer is full of hope.

[15 : 43] Verse 49 in our psalm, You have made me hope in the word of promise given to your servant. Verse 50, Your promise gives me life. Believers live with the great promise of eternal life, ringing in our ears day by day, especially in times of affliction.

Life is tough. Sometimes we feel as if we're just hanging on in there by our fingernails. But you know what the Lord has promised you for the great future. And that's why you can live and be joyful and grateful, even in times of real suffering.

We learn to trust in God's promises. We don't have it all now. As Paul puts it in 2 Corinthians, we walk by faith, not by sight.

We don't see the new creation now. We don't see the new Jerusalem in all its dazzling beauty. Not yet. But we trust God's promise that one day we shall be with him.

We shall be with the Lord Jesus in that glorious realm from which mourning, pain, tears and death are forever banished. We learn to trust in God's promises.

[16 : 51] It's the way to grow strong in the Christian life. Now, secondly, we learn perseverance in the face of contempt or derision.

Look at verse 51. The insolent utterly deride me, but I do not turn away from your law. Just notice the contrast between verse 51, where the psalmist does not turn away from the law of God, and verse 53, where the wicked, the godless, do turn away, do forsake God's law.

Those two verses, 51 and 53, they describe the greatest divide in our society. The greatest divide in our society, according to the Bible, is not between Tory and labour.

It's not between the middle class and the working class. It's not between men and women. It's not between the young and the old. It's between those who forsake the law of God and those who cling to it and refuse to turn away from it, even when they're being derided for holding on to the Bible.

When I was a young Christian, the big challenge we had to face back then was to stick to the Bible in the face of society's indifference and apathy, whereas today's young Christian has the challenge of sticking to the Bible in the face of society's derision.

[18 : 16] Indifference has given way to derision. Just to give one example, I know a Christian university student, a girl, who was cultivating a warm and loving friendship with two other students who were not Christians.

But when those two other students discovered that the Christian girl believed that active same-sex relationships were wrong in the sight of God, they were so scandalized, so horrified, that for a long time they threatened to break their friendship with the Christian girl.

The idea that somebody might stick to the Bible's teaching like that simply astonished them and drew forth their fierce opposition to the Bible and to the Christian who was sticking to the Bible.

This verse 51 has a very contemporary ring to it. It raises a challenge that we must all face, older people as well as younger.

Will we stick to the Bible's teaching in the face of derision? I've already mentioned people's derision in the face of the Bible's teaching on sexuality, but let me mention another cause of derision.

[19 : 23] An opponent of the gospel might say to us, the Bible, the Bible surely is as dead as the dodo, as dead as the woolly rhinoceros.

It was written 2,000, 3,000 years ago. It's ancient history. How can you possibly fashion your beliefs and lifestyle on such an antiquated book? To which the Christian replies, Dear Mr. Critic, you need to read the Bible for yourself.

Don't dismiss something that you've never seriously tangled with. Don't dismiss the book which has molded everything that is best in Western civilization. Those who read the Bible seriously discover that it's the only book that really makes sense of human life.

And those who read it seriously discover a peace, a joy, a contentment in life which is found nowhere else. The Bible answers all the hardest questions thrown up by human existence.

Questions about the meaning and purpose of humanity. Questions about suffering and pain. About frustration and guilt. Questions about the stubborn fact of our mortality.

[20 : 34] The Bible alone gives satisfying answers to all these questions. Look again at verse 51. The insolent utterly deride me.

Some of us, of course, will receive more derision than others. Young Christians almost certainly will receive more than those of us who are older. But, verse 51 goes on, I do not turn away from your law.

That is the psalmist's resolve. And he's our example. We may get splattered by the mud of human derision, but our psalmist calls us to endure any amount of mud.

Let the mud come on. I'm going to stick to God's word. That's the Christian's response. But in the midst of this pressure and sometimes derision, verse 52 holds out a great word of comfort.

When I think of your rules from of old, I take comfort, O Lord. A better translation might be when I remember your judgments from of old, your judgments from everlasting, O Lord.

[21 : 41] I take comfort. What he means there is that he remembers the many times in Old Testament history when the Lord has acted in judgment against the enemies of his people, against those who have held the Lord's people in derision.

The times, for example, when God judged Pharaoh and the Egyptian army at the Red Sea, or the Midianites who were defeated by Gideon, or the Philistines who were put down by Samson.

Our psalmist knows that God will always, in the end, call his opponents to account and crush them. He rescues his people from those who deride them.

And we can be sure in our own day that God will bring to book all who deride the gospel and deride the people who believe the gospel. It is a dangerous thing to ridicule the Lord's people who refuse to forsake the Bible.

But just notice a further reaction in the psalmist in verse 53. Hot indignation seizes me because of the wicked who forsake your law.

[22 : 46] That is a very strong reaction, isn't it? The psalmist is passionately furious. Not because these people are opposing him, but because they're opposing God and forsaking God's law.

It is God's honor that our psalmist is so concerned about. God's honor and the honor of God's words. The psalmist looks around at his contemporaries, those who are forsaking God's words.

And he notices that they're living in God's world. They're enjoying all God's good gifts. The sunshine and rain, food and drink, work, companionship, marriage, music and art and sport and every good thing.

And yet they are refusing to honor the gracious God who has given them all these gifts. They're a bit like the young child who tears open his Christmas present in a great hurry, but never thanks the kind person who bought it for him and wrapped it up.

And the psalmist is grieved to see people living in the world like that, using and exploiting all God's generosity, but never acknowledging him or thanking him.

[23 : 54] Now again, the psalmist is our example. We too should burn with indignation as we see the Bible being despised and rejected in modern society. How dare people treat the precious words of God as if they had nothing to say to the 21st century?

And how should we then deal with this sense of indignation inside ourselves? Our response surely should be to preach the gospel to those who have turned away from the Bible, to preach it with determination and love as we try to call them back from the brink of the abyss.

Turn back, we cry. Turn back to the God who is ready to receive you and to forgive you. So we learn perseverance in the face of contempt.

Thirdly, we learn to sing on our pilgrim journey. Look at verse 54. Your statutes, God's commandments and laws and so on, your statutes have been my songs in the house of my sojourning.

What our psalmist is saying is your statutes have been the soundtrack of my life. I guess that most of us have various songs which we've known and loved for many years which somehow are written into the very fabric of our being.

[25 : 16] as a feature on radio two called the tracks of my years where some well-known person talks about the music which has formed the background of their life.

Well, our psalmist here, he loves the words of God so deeply and sings them so often that they have become the soundtrack of his life. They've become the music of his heart and soul.

Again, he's our example. Let's imitate him. Let's keep singing the words of God in our psalms and hymns and songs until they grip us deep within. The Christian faith has always been a singing faith because there's so much to sing about.

There's so much that wells up in our hearts. Emotion and feeling, we want to express it and to sing it is the best way. As the lemon juice is drizzled into a drizzle cake until the whole mass of the cake is lemonized so our Bible songs cause the gospel to permeate to the very roots of our motivations and desires.

Let's sing the Bible and keep singing the Bible. There's a lovely little hymn in our hymn books. I didn't choose it this morning but it comes somewhere towards the very end. I think it's 960 something but it starts like this.

[26 : 34] Children of the heavenly king as you journey gladly sing. Great little hymn. And they're journeying. They're journeying on their way to the Lord's presence himself.

Now that expresses the thought of verse 54. As you journey gladly sing. Our psalmist knows that he's journeying. He's a sojourner and he sings as he travels.

Now it's important to understand what this word sojourning means in the Bible. it does not mean journeying through a territory to which I will never return.

It means journeying through a territory where I'm a stranger now but which one day I will possess forever. So for example God says to Abraham Genesis 17 I will give to you and to your offspring after you the land of your sojourning.

He was just a temporary resident then but the promise was that the people of Israel would have it forever. Or God speaks like this to Moses in Exodus chapter 6 I established my covenant with the people of Israel to give them the land of Canaan the land in which they lived as sojourners.

[27 : 52] Sojourning now possessing later. It's just the same for Christians. Jesus says to us the meek shall inherit the earth.

We're strangers and sojourners on the earth at the moment but one day those who belong to Jesus will reign with him forever in the new creation in the new heavens and the new earth.

Think of this lovely land of Scotland. We're passing through it at the moment all of us whether we're Scots Irish, English or Outer Mongolian but one day we shall possess all of it in its perfection and restored beauty.

So notice again the tensions of the believer's life. We experience insults because of our devotion to God's words and we feel indignation at the neglect of the Bible in our modern world but we're able to sing on our journey.

We love the words of God we sing them. In this church our minister regularly turns the words of God into songs and helps all of us to put verse 54 into practice.

[29 : 00] Keep doing it Willie. Do not stop writing those hymns they help us so much. So here we have joy and sorrow simultaneously. We have indignation and song simultaneously.

That is the Christian life. It's a great mixture. And look how broad and deep our psalmist's devotion to the Lord runs. Verse 55 I remember your name in the night O Lord.

Another translation puts it I reflect at night on who you are O Lord. He's trained himself to dwell on the beauty and power of the Lord even at 3 o'clock in the morning.

That's a good example for us. The Lord is never far from our thoughts 24 hours a day. When you're awake in the wee small hours why worry about tomorrow?

If you can think about the God who has lavished his promises on us think about him remember his name all that he is in the night. So we learn to sing on our pilgrim journey.

[30 : 05] There are tensions and there are pressures but we sing in the midst of them. Now fourthly and very briefly in verse 56 our psalmist writes of the blessing of hindsight hindsight 56 this blessing has fallen to me that I have kept your precepts.

Now he may not be a particularly old man when he wrote this but he's lived long enough to be able to look back and to see how the Lord has blessed him by enabling him to keep God's precepts.

He realizes that a life conformed to God's teaching is a blessed life. Now when you're young you can find yourself rebelling rebelling against the idea of bringing your life into line with God's teaching.

You might say I want to rule my own life thank you very much. Do I want to keep the Ten Commandments? Do I want to have no other gods but God? Do I want to not murder not steal not commit adultery not tell lies not covet?

I want the freedom to do all these things if I want to. But our psalmist has learned the road of blessing. He has learned to keep God's teaching.

[31 : 20] Verse 56 this blessing has fallen to me that I've kept I've been enabled to keep your precepts. Just think of yourself at the age of 90 leading a very quiet life.

You'll have to when you're 90. There you are sitting up in your high back chair a large cup of tea at one side of you and your open Bible at the other side and you think back over your life you think of all the twists and turns in the long and winding road that you've been traveling.

You read verse 56 and you say to the Lord what a blessing it has been to me Lord to have kept your precepts. I used to think that they would be restrictive that they would hem me in and make my life dull.

How foolish I was to think that. I see now that you gave them to men and women to liberate us from the folly of self-rule. You've helped me to love them and to walk in them and to keep them and they have brought me the joy of walking with you.

They've taught me to love you. So verse 56 teaches us the blessing of hindsight and learning to keep and to love God's commandments. So our psalmist is teaching us that it is possible to keep going in this war-torn and war-weary world.

[32 : 43] There is real comfort for us on the long and winding road. We trust in God's promises as our anchor into the world to come. We persevere with the Bible in the face of derision.

We learn to sing on our pilgrim journey and we learn what a blessing it is to keep God's precepts. Well, let's bow our heads and we'll pray together.

Blessed Lord, you have caused all holy scriptures to be written for our learning. Grant that we may so hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them that by patience and the comfort of your holy word we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life which you have given us in our Savior, Jesus Christ.

Amen.