

God's Righteousness is Righteous

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- [0 : 0 0] We're going to read in our Bibles now, and I'd love it if you'd turn with me to the book of Psalms and to Psalm 119.
- We've been in and out of this long psalm, the longest psalm in the Bible, for many months. And it's been such a rich mine of blessing and encouragement, challenge, and a great gospel truth.
- So it's lovely to come back this evening. Edward will be preaching this to us shortly. And we've come to the section beginning at number 137, verse 137.
- And we're going to read that little section together. Psalm 119, verse 137. Righteous are you, O Lord, and right are your rules.
- You have appointed your testimonies in righteousness and in all faithfulness. My zeal consumes me because my foes forget your words.
- [1 : 0 5] Your promise is well tried, and your servant loves it. I'm small and despised, yet I do not forget your precepts.
- Your righteousness is righteous forever. And your law is true. Trouble and anguish have found me out, but your commandments are my delight.
- Your testimonies are righteous forever. Give me understanding that I may live. Amen.
- And may God bless to us his word. Well, good evening, friends. Am I switched on?
- The next few minutes, we'll answer that question, I'm sure. Anyway, very good to see you. Some of you I haven't seen for months, and it's particularly good to see some faces again that, well, because of our situation, we haven't been able to see.
- [2 : 1 3] Well, let's turn up this passage, if we may. Psalm 119, beginning at verse 137. God's righteousness is righteous.
- That's my title for this evening. And if you look at verse 142 in the passage, you'll see that I'm more or less quoting straight from that verse. Because there the psalmist says to God, your righteousness is righteous.
- It's a striking thing to say, isn't it? Because it sounds a bit like a tautology, a phrase that says the same thing twice. But you'll see that this idea of righteousness dominates the whole of this section of the psalm.
- Just look with me at the verses starting at the top. 137. Righteous are you, O Lord, and right, or righteous, are your rules. 138.
- You have appointed your testimonies in righteousness. 142. Your righteousness is righteous forever. And 144. Your testimonies are righteous forever.
- [3 : 2 4] So the Lord is righteous. His rules and testimonies are righteous. And his righteousness is righteous. The psalmist is making a rather strong point, isn't he?
- He doesn't want the reader to miss this point. That the Bible and the Lord are righteous. Which means true at every level. Flawless.

Trustworthy. Wonderful. Dependable. And carrying all the authority of heaven. Why is it then that our nation as a whole no longer believes that the Lord and the Bible are righteous?

What has happened to us? About three years ago, I read a novel which stirred me up. I think more than any book I've read in the last ten years or so.

The title of this novel is Robert Ellesmere. And it was published in 1888. Its author was a woman called Mrs. Humphrey Ward. Her name was Mary Augusta Ward.

[4 : 26] But she liked to publish under the name of her husband, Mrs. Humphrey Ward. She was widely read in the last 20 years of the 19th century. As widely as Charles Dickens had been a generation earlier.

Everybody read the books of Mrs. Humphrey Ward. She was a kind of J.K. Rowling of her own day. Now this particular book chronicles the life of a young clergyman. Whose name is Robert Ellesmere.

And he starts off as an evangelical Bible-believing preacher. But he comes under the influence of various friends. Oxford Dons and people like that.

Who introduce him to skeptical thinking about the Bible and the Christian faith. He wrestles with these questions for a few years. But he soon resigns his charge as a parish minister.

He goes to the east end of London. Which has always been an area of social deprivation. And he becomes in effect a kind of social worker. Organizing boys clubs. Seeking the improvement of people's education and living conditions.

[5 : 30] Now those are the bare bones of the story. Everybody read this book. And it became a source of fierce controversy. William Gladstone read the book.

And he was deeply perturbed by it. Now you'll know the name of Gladstone. He'd been the prime minister for many years. He was actually out of office in the year 1888. When the book was published. So he had a bit of extra time on his hands.

And he wrote and published a very extensive review. Of Mrs. Ward's book. His review bore the title. Robert Ellesmere. And the battle of belief.

Capital B. Capital B. Gladstone actually went all the way from his home in London to Oxford. Where Mrs. Ward lived. To visit her and spend a day or two with her. To discuss the book and its implications.

Now you might ask. Why such a fuss over a novel about the life of a clergyman? Well the fuss arose. Because people could see in this novel.

[6 : 30] A portrayal. Of what was happening. In the minds of the intellectual leadership of the nation. And what was happening. Was an undermining of trust. In the divine origin.

And authority of the Bible. And of Jesus himself. This whole movement of thought. As we look back on it. We now call it liberal theology. But this whole movement. Had various strands woven into its beginnings.

But one of the central strands. Cultivated initially. In one or two German universities. Was an interest in the human aspects of the Bible. So scholars were asking.

Who were the people who wrote the Bible? The Bible after all. Didn't just float down from heaven ready made. It was written by human beings. So who were the apostles and the prophets?

What kind of social and cultural. And political environment produced them? Who was the human Jesus? What influenced his thinking? What shaped his teaching? Now these are good questions to ask.

[7 : 30] And we need to ask them. If we're to develop a good understanding of the Bible. But if you get deeply involved. In questions about the Bible's human origins. You can quickly lose sight.

Of the Bible's divine origin. The whole Bible can become. In your thinking. Merely the product of flawed human beings. Each of them no more than a child of his time.

And a product of his own historical human context. And if you move far down that road. You lose touch. With the convictions expressed. By the author of Psalm 119.

Just look again at our section. From the top. From verse 137. See how the psalmist addresses God. Your rules. Your testimonies. Your words.

Your promise. Your precepts. Your law. Your commandments. Your testimonies. If the Bible is merely a human product. You can't say that it carries the full authority.

[8 : 29] Of its divine author. Just look back to verse 89 for a moment. 89. You can no longer say with conviction. Forever oh Lord. Your word.

Is firmly fixed in the heavens. It's no longer God's word. And it is no longer firmly fixed anywhere. Now this is what troubled William Gladstone so much.

He could see that the very framework of British society was trembling. Was teetering on a kind of brink. The pen is so often more powerful than the sword.

Ideas get fed into a society by the pens of novelists and philosophers. Newspaper columnists. Poets. Playwrights. Political commentators.

And these ideas can gather momentum like a snowball rolling down a hill. It's not that everybody in 19th century Britain was a lively evangelical Christian. Certainly not.

[9 : 25] But the framework of national life and thought was different. So if you'd asked a typical group of university students in the year 1850. What they thought of the Bible.

They would say the Bible is the truth. It's the word of God. That's the way our nation understands it. Ask a group of students in 1950. What they thought of the Bible.

And they would say. Well it has played an important role in the life of our nation. But many people are skeptical about it these days. Ask a group of students in 2020.

And they would say. The Bible. The Bible. Does anybody read the Bible these days? Isn't it just the preserve of a weird and wacky niche interest group? It's this massive societal change.

Of the last 170 years. That makes it all the more important. That Christians today. Should think of the Bible in the way. That the author of Psalm 119.

[10 : 25] Thinks about it. Your rules. Your testimonies. Your words. As he speaks to God here. It's personal. It's prayerful.

It's not just the word. Or the law of God. It's your word. It's your law. Is it possible. That Britain could once again love the Lord.

And love his words. And have our national life reshaped by the Bible. Well of course it's possible. It's our commission. After all. To publish the gospel across this country.

This country whose life has been so impoverished. By apathy and agnosticism. It's our Lord Jesus's commandment to us. Commission to us. To pray to the Lord God.

To raise up many new workers. For the harvest field. To bring in the eternal harvest. But if we're to have that kind of determination. To be workers for the eternal harvest.

[11 : 21] We need to believe. What our psalmist is teaching us about God's words. That they're righteous. And right. And true. And authoritative. And about God himself.

That his righteousness is righteous forever. As verse 142 puts it. Forever. Which means. That he and his truth. Are as vital and powerful in the year 2020.

As they were in the days of Queen Victoria. So let's apply ourselves to the passage. I'd like to draw out its teaching. Under two headings. First.

The Bible is righteous. Now what does that mean? Well I've got three subheadings for this. The Bible is righteous. First. It means that the Bible is true.

At every level. It's true historically. We learn to trust what it records. As accurate history. Whether we're reading about the crossing of the Red Sea. When the walls of water rose up to right and left.

[12 : 19] Or the collapse of the walls of Jericho. Or the resurrection of Jesus. These things actually happened. The human authors. Of the Bible's 66 books. Are committed to truthfulness.

There is an unmistakable integrity. In the way that they approach their work. And the Bible is true theologically. The theology of the Bible. That phrase theology means.

What the Bible teaches about God. And the more we read the Bible. And allow it to penetrate our thinking. The more we appreciate. The unity. The oneness. Of the way that it teaches us about God.

We don't get differing. Irreconcilable accounts of God. In different Bible books. Now of course different aspects. Of his character and work. Are highlighted in different books.

But when you've been studying the Bible. For many years. What hits you repeatedly. Is the seamlessness. Of its portrayal. Of God. And that's all the more impressive.

[13 : 17] When you think of. How different the human authors. Of the Bible are from each other. The Bible books. Were written by prophets. Priests. Kings. Poets. Political leaders.

Evangelists. And apostles. Writers as different from each other. As chalk. Cheese. And chocolate. And yet. Their presentation of God. Is flawlessly.

United. The God of the New Testament. Is the God of the Old Testament. The God presented to us. In the law of Moses. Is exactly the God. Who is revealed to us. In the person of Jesus Christ.

And the Bible is true. Pastorally. And personally. Its portrayal of human life. And thinking and behavior. Is utterly authentic. And convincing. It leaves no elephants.

In the room. Uninvestigated. It looks at and probes. The depths of the human heart. It deals with us. You found that haven't you. The Bible deals with us.

[14 : 15] Painful though it can be. It exposes the depth of our hearts. The depth of our sin. Our rebellion against God. It opens up. In a way that no other book. Can.

The deceitfulness. Of the human heart. Our inherent. Deep-rooted. Self-regard. Self-concern. And self-justification. But.

Having reduced us. To despair. There. It then shows us. The overwhelming mercy. Of God. How God has executed. His plan. To put us. Sinners and rebels.

Though we are. Into a state of. Righteousness. In his sight. Whereby we're forgiven. And accepted by him. And we come to see that. And this is. Miracle of miracles. We come to see.

That we're loved by him. And incorporated. Into his eternal. Family. No other book. In the world. Deals with the human heart. And the human condition.

[15 : 09] Like that. Every other body. Of teaching. Is fundamentally. A diet of self-help. Only the Bible. Shows us. That God is our help.

Our helper. Our rescuer. And he has brought about. Our rescue. Through the intervention. Of Jesus Christ. So the Bible is true. At every level. Historically.

Theologically. Pastorally. And personally. Second subheading. The Bible. Is about. God's. Righteousness. The psalmist says.

Righteous. Are you. Oh Lord. Verse 137. Rights. Are your rules. Or judgments. And righteous. Is your righteousness. Forever. Now.

What does it really mean. To call God. Righteous. It's inadequate. To think of God's righteousness. As no more than a kind of. Remote. And static.

[16 : 05] Quality. Think of that. Famous. And much photographed. Mountain. The Matterhorn. I think it's in Switzerland. Isn't it? It stands 14,000 feet high. We've all seen pictures of it.

There it is. Massive. Awe inspiring. A great lump. Of rock. But most of us. Don't have any kind of. Personal dealings. With the Matterhorn. I hope.

I shall never personally. Have dealings with the Matterhorn. I couldn't cope with it. The Matterhorn. Is remote from us. It has tremendous qualities. Of stability. And rockiness.

But it doesn't affect our lives. Or our thinking. In any significant way. Now. God's righteousness. Is not like. the stability and rockiness of the Matterhorn, something remote and austere and unapproachable.

No, his righteousness is an activity of his person. It's about what he does. It's about the right and true decisions he makes as he governs the world. And it's about the way that he has come to rescue us from death and hell. Paul's great epistle to the Romans is about the righteousness of God in action. It answers the great question raised throughout the Old Testament. The great puzzle that comes up through the Old Testament is the question, how can a sinner be saved?

[17 : 25] The problem and plight of mankind is our sin. It's that that makes us abhorrent to God. But in Romans, Paul shows us that God has indeed acted to save the sinner who trusts in Christ.

And he has acted in a way that demonstrates and displays his righteousness. The gospel, the good news about Jesus is a demonstration of God's justice because our sin, everything that makes us abhorrent to God has been truly and justly punished.

Christ in going to the cross has truly taken our sin upon himself and has received the wages of sin, which is death, in our place. Justice has not been fudged or avoided. It's been done.

And in Romans chapter 3, Paul is speaking about the death of Jesus. And he says this, it was to show God's righteousness at the present time so that God might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus. In other words, God justifies the sinner, declares the sinner to be acquitted on the grounds that Christ has borne the penalty of the sinner's sin.

This is the righteousness of God in action. And it shows us just how much God has loved and continues to love the human race that has raised its fist in his face.

[18 : 52] Now, our psalmist, of course, was writing hundreds of years before Paul was writing Romans. Jesus was still hundreds of years in the future to come. But our psalmist, in his gripping reflection on the righteousness of God in this passage, he is showing us the bud of which the gospel is the flower.

God is righteous. The Bible is righteous. And the Bible teaches us how God, in his loving righteousness, has come in the person of Jesus to save those who have faith in him.

Now, you perhaps ask, what about those who refuse to put their faith in Jesus? Well, again, his justice, God's justice, is put into action. He condemns them. He must. He must.

He's a moral God. As John the Evangelist puts it in the third chapter of his gospel, whoever does not believe is condemned already because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God. So the righteousness of God is doubly displayed in the Bible. On the one hand, God righteously saves those who put their faith in Jesus. And on the other hand, he righteously condemns those who refuse to believe in Jesus. And friends, if we're Christians, we must learn to accept both these aspects of God's righteousness. Not just one, but both. The wonderful invitation to heaven is offered in righteousness. And the sending away of some to hell is equally righteous.

And we shall never learn to fear God or to stand in awe of him or to understand the gospel until we accept this double display of his righteousness in action.

[20 : 41] Well, now here's a third subheading. When people forget the Bible, how should Christian people, believers, react? Well, our psalmist is showing us that it should produce a deep sense of frustration in the believer. Look with me at verse 139.

My zeal consumes me because my foes, who are God's foes, forget your words. Another translation puts it like this. I'm overwhelmed with rage, for my enemies have disregarded your words.

Think again then of our nation and what has happened to it since the middle of the 19th century. Is it a matter of indifference to us when we look out and see the great majority of our people living as if God did not exist, as if the Bible was purely a museum piece to be kept in a glass case like a dodo? Keep one eye on verse 139 and then look back to verse 136.

My eyes shed streams of tears because people do not keep your law. Now, in both of these verses, 139 and 136, the problem is the same.

And that is that people in society are forgetting God's words, are failing to keep them. But the psalmist in the two verses shows us two different right responses. In verse 136, he weeps copiously, streams of tears.

[22 : 13] But in verse 139, he's filled with frustration, perhaps even anger. But are these two responses really so different from each other? Aren't they both aspects of the same emotion?

Why is the psalmist so upset as to weep and weep and also to become angry? Well, surely for two reasons. First, because God is so dishonored by the people that he lovingly created for the purpose of loving him and serving him.

People are saying, God? Who is God that I should care about him or listen to him? I am autonomous man. I'm the master of my own fate. I'm the captain of my own soul.

God is dishonored as people cherish the illusion of self-sufficiency. But then secondly, the psalmist shows that those who disregard the Lord are lost.

And the psalmist hates to contemplate their final destiny. Just look onto verse 155. Salvation is far from the wicked, he says. Why?

[23 : 20] For they do not seek your statutes. To them, the Bible is nothing. It's irrelevant. It's a dodo. But the psalmist knows that they are forfeiting eternal life. Salvation is far from them.

Now, friends, our psalmist is our teacher. He's our example. He's teaching us, therefore, to look out on our society with deep concern. Yes, to weep for men and women who, with hardened hearts, are hastening down the broad road to destruction.

And he's teaching us also to be angry, to be deeply frustrated that God's words are so neglected. But can we do nothing about it?

Of course we can help. We can be part of God's labor force. We have bodies. We have brains. We have tongues. And each of us is given a few decades, just a few decades, in which we can actively point people to the Savior.

I was a hard-hearted, careless young man once. And somebody took the trouble to point me to the Savior. And we can be the same to many people during the course of our short lives.

[24 : 27] So there's our first section. The Bible is righteous. It's true at every level. It's about the righteousness of God.

And we should be stirred up to tears and frustration when people neglect it. Well, now, secondly, the Bible is tested and tried.

Look at verse 140. Your promise is well tried and your servant loves it. And I think the logic of that verse is this. Your promise is well tried and that is why your servant loves it.

We come to love and trust things that we have tried and tested again and again. They're safe. They don't let us down. Now, this idea of the tried and tested Bible is beautifully expressed in a verse of an old hymn, which we sometimes sing here.

Oh, make but trial of his love. Experience will decide how blessed they are and only they who in his truth confide.

[25 : 34] Confiding in the Lord's truth. That's what verse 140 is all about. The psalmist is showing us that believers can rest the full weight of our confidence on.

On what? Verse 140. On your promise. Your promise is well tried. The gospel is not only good news of what God has done in the past.

It is also a promise for the eternal future. It has a past and a future. God, think of John 3.16. God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son.

That's the good news about the past. It's what God has done. But why has he done this? So that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.

That's the promise for the future. The past has been accomplished. The future is now promised. And we learn to trust. And as verse 140 puts it, we learn to love God's well tried promise.

[26 : 40] We love it. We love the promise of eternal life. Just think of yourself for a moment on your deathbed. Did he say that? Yes, he said it.

Think of yourself on your deathbed. What can you enjoy at that very late stage of life? Can you enjoy listening to Handel's Messiah? No, your ears are closing down.

Can you enjoy steak and chips? No, your whole gastric apparatus is shutting up shop. Can you enjoy a cup of iron brew? No, your taste buds are disintegrating.

But you croak to somebody who's sitting by the bed. Read me John 3.16, please. And as you hear that promise of eternal life, you smile and you say, I love that promise.

I love it because I know it's true. But our psalmist shows us in the next few verses what it's going to mean to cling in loyalty to God's well tried and trusted words.

[27 : 44] Look first at verse 141. I am small and despised, yet I do not forget your precepts. How do the two halves of that verse fit together?

Isn't he saying this? I'm known as a believer. My colleagues at work know it. My neighbors in my street know it. My family members know it. And my reputation is not standing very high because I insist on sticking to the Bible and its ethical standards.

And those standards do not sit happily with the way of the world. So my neighbors and colleagues and some of my family despise me. They call me a holy Joe. They think of me as an oddball.

Yet, just notice that word in the middle of the verse. It's so important. Yet, I do not forget your precepts, your teaching. Yes, I could recover my reputation if I were to ease off on my commitment to the Lord and his words.

But I'm not going to do it. I'm going to stick with him. The question raised by verse 141 is this. Which do I value more?

[28 : 54] The Lord's words and commands or the way people think about me? Here's an example. Think of a Christian teacher working in one of our schools today.

If you're a teacher, and some of you will know this only too well, there's great pressure coming down on you from the education authorities that you should tick certain boxes, especially boxes that signify your approval of transgenderism and homosexual activity.

Now, if you resist that pressure, you know that some people are going to despise you. You perhaps run the risk even of losing your job. We live in fierce times.

The opposition to the Lord's teaching today is powerful. There's a kind of cultural Marxism at work that seeks to force everybody to toe the line or to risk being denounced.

Are we prepared to stick with the psalmist and say, yes, I'm willing to be small and despised because I'm not going to forget the Lord's precepts? It is very challenging, isn't it?

[29 : 58] That's why we must pray for each other and strengthen each other's resolve to stay true to the Lord. Then look on to verse 143. Here's a second example.

Trouble and anguish have found me out, but your commandments are my delight. Now, again, this is a great pressure, but it's a different kind of pressure from the other one in verse 141.

This time, anguish descends suddenly. It usually is sudden. Anguish descends suddenly on a believer. Your whole life is suddenly traumatized by something.

Financial disaster, bereavement, terrible illness or accident. You realize that your life is never going to be the same again. Something irrevocable has happened.

You wish you could turn the clock back, but you can't. trouble and anguish have found you out. Verse 143. But, see the word but?

[30 : 59] It's yet in verse 141. It's but in verse 143. And those two little words carry all the force of the teaching. Trouble and anguish have found me out, but your commandments are my delight.

So, here I am, troubled, anguished, facing this new, unwanted, painful situation. But is all joy in life gone? Is there no delight left in my life?

The psalmist here, speaking clearly of his own painful experience, he tells us, the Lord's commandments, his words and promises, are the psalmist's delight.

The psalmist is suffering dreadful pain, dreadful, but there is delight in his heart at the same time, simultaneously, and the source of that delight is the words and promises of God.

Isn't there a great lesson for us there? It's not difficult to trust the Lord's words and to obey his teaching when our pathway through life is sunny, when the wind is at our back and the birds are singing.

[32 : 05] But when the north wind blows in our faces and we cry out in pain, that's the time to practice verse 143. Trouble and anguish have found me out, but your commandments are my delight, my solace, my comfort.

It's your words, not my pain, that define reality. And this is why the psalmist says what he says in the final verse, verse 144.

Your testimonies are righteous forever. They're true. It is they and not the world that teach me how to live. And so my prayer at the very end is, Lord, give me understanding of your words.

Deepen my grasp of their meaning. And then I will really live. Let's bow our heads and we'll pray.

Lord God, our Father, you know our lives far better than we know them ourselves.

[33 : 17] You know our joys, our hopes, our sorrows, our fears, our pain. Teach us what it means to rely upon your promises.

Teach us to delight in your commandments, especially when trouble and pain come to us. And give us an ever-growing understanding of your righteous testimonies so that we may live, live the life of the blessed believer, both now and in eternity.

and we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.