

The Pilgrim's Heart
 Psalm 119:169-176
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We are now to the last stanza of Psalm 119, the *Taw* stanza. We are coming to the end of our journey through Psalm 119 on the last Sunday of the year.

As we come to the end of this amazingly, beautiful, powerful poem, you might expect to hear language that validates the authors understanding of God's word. You might expect the poet to sound like someone who has just conquered Mt. Everest and sticks his flag on the peak of the summit and says, "*There! I have made it! Now top that!*" But instead we hear quite the opposite. After examining God's word from A to Z, he steps back and like a man in awe realizes how far short he falls of God's glory as it is seen in God's word. His experience is like the parable that Jesus told of the tax collector and Pharisee. You know the parable; the tax collector and the Pharisee are standing before the Lord in the temple in prayer. The Pharisee who thinks he is better than everyone else and that he has arrived but the tax collector sees himself as a sinner and cries out for mercy. The poet sees himself not as the Pharisees who thinks he has conquered his sin. Instead he sees himself as the tax collector who realizes he has still has a long way to go.

The psalmist realizes he is a pilgrim in his life. He realizes much of his journey still lays before him. He also realizes he now has the most important necessity for his journey. He has God's word hidden in his heart.

What we hear at the end of Psalm 119 is the heart of the pilgrim's prayer as he makes his way to God. There is one practice that God's pilgrims need to do to finish their journey and that is pray. In this last stanza we see two prayers the pilgrim needs to continually pray: petition and praise.

You are not going to hear anything new in this stanza. Instead we will be reminded of two important prayers as we journey through this life that is fraught with dangers, toils, and snares: desperate prayers of petition and overflowing prayers of praise.

For our study, I have grouped the petition prayers together and the praise prayers together. But when you think about it, life most often unfolds in the rhythm of this stanza: Petition-vv. 169-170; Praise-vv. 171-172; Petition-vv. 173-174; Praise-v. 175; Petition-v. 176a; Praise-v. 176b. Again, for our study, I have grouped them in two groups.

I. Pilgrims Pray Desperate Prayers of Petition on Their Journey (vv. 169-170, 173-174, 176a)

In vv. 169-170, 173-174, and 176, we hear the desperate prayers of the psalmist.

¹⁶⁹ *Let my cry come before you, O LORD;
 give me understanding according to your word!*

¹⁷⁰ *Let my plea come before you;
 deliver me according to your word.*

¹⁷³ *Let your hand be ready to help me,
 for I have chosen your precepts.*

¹⁷⁴ *I long for your salvation, O LORD,
 and your law is my delight.*

176a I have gone astray like a lost sheep; seek your servant."

In these verses, we hear desperate prayers of petition. Specifically, he prays for understanding of God's word in God's world. In v. 169, he is not naive about his journey in this world. He knows it can be a difficult one when you follow Jesus. Let's be honest, sometimes things are so hard on this journey you wonder if the Lord is listening to you.

Have you ever been there? Hard things happen in your life: a loved one dies, you have a chronic illness, you lose your job, your child is rebellious, or some other struggle. It just seems like one thing after another and you secretly begin to think, *"Is God even listening to my prayers. Are my prayers just hitting the ceiling and that is as far as they go?"*

When that happens v. 169 is a great prayer to pray. You see . . . it is not that the Lord does not hear, it is that we do not understand the Lord's wisdom and sovereign plan. It is a hard place in which to be in life. It seems the pain or the struggle or the memories will not end. We ask God over and over for relief but it seems out of reach. It seems God is not listening.

On this side of the cross, our desperate prayers of petition are not quite like the psalmists. We must remind ourselves that our cry goes before God because Jesus' cry went before God. Jesus' whole life was a struggle and one spiritual battle after another. In the Garden of Gethsemane, in His hour of greatest need, Jesus asked the Father to remove what lay before Him but it was not God's will. Jesus' last prayer was one of trust in the Father's sovereign plan, *"Not my will be done but Your will be done."*

God hears our prayers not because we have earned the right to be heard but because Jesus earned the right to be heard. Jesus' submission to the Father's will purchased our prayers that go before our Father in Heaven. Yet, it does not mean we get everything we pray for in life. We look to Jesus and remember His prayer and follow in His steps and make our request known to God and end it by saying, *"Not my will be done but your will be done."*

The understanding we seek comes through Christ—the ultimate Word of God. The word *understanding* means *to give attention to*. This means we must study the word of God. We must think deeply about it. What we find is that Jesus is working His word in us *to will and to do His good pleasure*. So . . . we may not ever understand our circumstances but God gives us understanding of His word in order to give us wisdom for how to live in this broken world as we travel through it on our journey home.

Verse 170 reminds us that as pilgrims in this world there will be times when we will be praying desperate prayers of deliverance. Notice what he prays, *"Let my plea come before you; deliver me according to your word."* He does not tell us what he is desperate to be delivered from only that he is desperate to be delivered. He feels the brokenness of this world and he is asking God to give him wisdom.

So, as we consider his desperate prayer of deliverance, I think our minds immediately go to being delivered from suffering. Certainly, the psalmist has addressed suffering but I think the deliverance he desires should be broadly applied. It is not simply suffering but many of the struggles we have in life take us from *suffering to sanctification*.

Listen to what he says in vv. 173-174, and v. 176a. The psalmist knows he is weak so he prays, *"173 Let your hand be ready to help me, for I have chosen your precepts. 174 I long for your salvation [deliverance], O LORD, and your law is my delight . . . 176a I have gone astray like a lost sheep; seek your servant . . ."*

The psalmist has no confidence in his ability to obey God in his own strength so he asks God to work in him what he cannot do. He knows his only hope is to press into the grace of God through the word of God and to ask God to hold him fast.

Application: If you're seeking grace to obey when you are weak, tap into God's the well through the word of God. God's well is deep and filled with fresh grace to meet every need and temptation.

Verse 176a is very good news for those of us who are prone to wander. Listen to it one more time, "*I have gone astray like a lost sheep; seek your servant.*" The psalmist calls on God, who is the Good Shepherd to seek him, find him, and deliver him. The good news is God will not let you go. He will hold you fast as we sing in the hymn *He Will Hold Me Fast*:

*When I fear my faith will fail
Christ will hold me fast
When the tempter would prevail
He will hold me fast
I could never keep my hold
Through life's fearful path
For my love is often cold
He must hold me fast.*

*Those He saves are His delight
Christ will hold me fast
Precious in His holy sight
He will hold me fast
He'll not let my soul be lost
His promises shall last
Bought by Him at such a cost
He will hold me fast*

*For my life He bled and died
Christ will hold me fast
Justice has been satisfied
He will hold me fast*

*Raised with Him to endless life
He will hold me fast
'Till our faith is turned to sight
When He comes at last!*

*He will hold me fast,
He will hold me fast;
For my Savior loves me so
He will hold me fast.¹*

¹ <http://www.hymntime.com/tch/htm/h/w/i/hwilhold.htm>.

The psalmist feels like the prodigal son who has gone astray. He fears he has made such a mess of his life that he cannot come back to God but he longs for his Heavenly Father. If this is you today, come back to the Father. He is waiting for you with open arms.

Application: A prayer of deliverance is also a prayer of repentance. The psalmist prayed of deliverance but deliverance is not just a change of our physical circumstances because the heart must be delivered too.

Here is what I mean. Often times we want to be delivered from some kind of struggle or problem. For example, we may want to be delivered from our financial problems but do we want our hearts to change toward how we actually spend money? Do we want to be good stewards of the finances God has given us? The issue is we want deliverance from the problem but we really have not considered that the priorities of our hearts must be brought in line with God's word.

This means the heart and mind must be renewed by the word of God. This means our minds must change so our worldview will change. We must be transformed from the inside. The Spirit of God must open our eyes so that we see the heart issues that need to change. Bottom line: it is not only actions we repent of but we also repent of the corrupt desires in our hearts.

The temptation to sin is subtle so we need the Spirit of God to take the wisdom of God's word and the wisdom of God's people and press it deep in our consciousness and hearts. We need to be about to recognize the temptations that lead us astray and then resist them.

C. S. Lewis, in his book, *The Screwtape Letters*, wrote from the perspective of an old demon writing to his young demon apprentice. He was giving him advice on how to tempt and lead astray the human to which he has been assigned. Listen to his advice to this young demon about the best way to tempt a person.

*"Like all young tempters, you are anxious to be able to report spectacular wickedness. But do remember, the only thing that matter is the extent to which you separate the man from the Enemy [remember the enemy is God from the demon's perspective]. It does not matter how small the sins are provided that their cumulative effect is to edge the man away from the Light and out into the Nothing. Murder is no better than cards if cards do the trick. Indeed the safest road to Hell is the gradual one—the gentle slope, soft underfoot, without sudden turnings, without milestones, without signposts."*²

Brothers and sister, as 2019 comes to a close, what heart issues do you need to see in your life that lead you to sin? Are you praying desperate prayers to be delivered from them? Are you taking steps of obedience to God's word?

The Puritan Theologian John Owen said, *"We must be killing sin or it will be killing us."* Why not commit to praying desperate prayers of deliverance for 2020 and begin by committing to being delivered by having your heart and mind transformed by the word of God.

II. Pilgrims Pray Overflowing Prayers of Praise on Their Journey (vv. 171-172, 175, 176a)

¹⁷¹ *My lips will pour forth praise,
for you teach me your statutes.*

¹⁷² *My tongue will sing of your word,
for all your commandments are right.*

¹⁷⁵ *Let my soul live and praise you,*

² C. S. Lewis, *The Complete C. S. Lewis Signature Classics: The Screwtape Letters*, 220.

and let your rules help me.

176b . . . I do not forget your commandments.

Desperate prayers of petitions result in overflowing prayers of praise. The psalmist has been crying out to God to deliver him, change him, and give him understanding of his word to live in this broken world and God has done it. Yahweh has changed him, sanctified him, and delivered him by His word. As a result, the psalmist is filled with gratitude, with awe, and he is overflowing with praise.

Remember Psalm 119:11, *"I have stored up your word in my heart that I might now sin against you."* He hid God's word in his heart and now his heart overflows with praise. His soul was an overflowing well-spring of praise. *The rules of the Lord have helped him.*

Have you ever experienced what the psalmist is describing? Think about it what he was describing. He had been writing about the excellencies of the word of God. He wrote about how beautiful it is. He wrote about how the power of God's word keeps God's people from sin and will lead them to follow God.

The psalmist knew the truth but he also knew he struggled. So . . . he prays and writes over and over in this whole Psalm phrases like: *help me, make me, teach me, hold me, deliver me, save me, redeem me, keep me, and draw me near.* He had begged God to do in him what he is too weak and unable to do and then God does it and now, as he reflects on his life, he sees gradual and sometimes great progress in holiness.

When he looked back he was overwhelmed! God had done it! He could not help but declare the glory of God. He could not contain His joy. The very joy he had been looking for was wrapped up in his obedience to God all this time.

Do you ever look back over your life and take an account of what God has done to deliver you from sin and grow you into the image of Christ? I think often we live in discouragement because we cannot see our spiritual growth. Sometimes it takes time to progress in holiness and become like Jesus. Sometimes our growth is slow so what we need to do is look back over the years in order to see our growth. As the year ends, take time to look back over your life for this year, five years, ten years, or even since you first became a Christian to see where you have grown spiritually. See if you have become quick to repent from the heart and then become obedient to Christ. See if you have grown in your prayer life. See if you love God's word more and more. See if you love the church more and more. Then give praise to God for your growth and set your eyes on Christ in order to grow more over the next year.

John Newton, was a 17th century slave trader who was miraculously saved by God. He left slave trading and became a pastor and wrote some of the most cherished hymns like *Amazing Grace*. John Newton knew his struggles and as an old man he looked back on his life and he said:

I am not what I ought to be;

I am not what I wish to be;

I am not what I hope to be;

But by the grace of God I am not what I was.³

The Apostle Paul says much the same thing about his life in Romans 7. Paul knew it was futile for him to try to live the Christian life in his own strength. He knew he needed the grace of God. He knew he needed

³ Christopher Ash, *Bible Delight: Heartbeat of the Word of God: Psalm 119 for the Bible Teacher and the Bible Hearer*, 197.

the Spirit of God to take the word of God and work it into his heart for him to have any hope of becoming like Christ.

Listen to what he says as he takes his life into account in Romans 7-8, *“I am unspiritual, sold as a slave to sin . . . For what I want to do, I do not do, but what I hate to do, I do . . . I know nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature . . . What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?”*

Thankfully, the Apostle Paul knew the answer to his question, *“Thanks be to God—through Jesus Christ our Lord!”* The only hope we have of living a life obedient to God is through Christ.

Here is how this works. Becoming obedient to God through Christ does not mean reading the Bible and then beginning to obey God. *Adopting the ethics of Jesus without union with Jesus will fail.*

In order to become obedient to God you must be in Christ through faith in Christ. This is the reason Paul says, *“Thanks be to God—through Jesus Christ our Lord!”* It is Christ in us that enables us to be obedient to God and results in overflowing praise.

If you have never trusted Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior, as 2019 comes to a close, why don't you confess your sins to Jesus today, turn away from those sins and place your faith in Christ alone. Then look to Christ as your only hope and help.

Finally, listen to what the psalmist says in v. 175 says, *“let your rules help me.”* How do rules *help us?* The Hebrew word for *help* means *to come to and give assistance.*

How do rules or commandments written on a scroll or on paper help us . . . unless . . . these rules are more than mere words. The psalmist is talking about more than the commandments. God commandments written on stones, scrolls, and paper had no power to change me until Jesus came to this earth as the embodiment of the Word of God gives power to the word of God.

When Jesus came to this earth He kept this word perfectly and fulfilled it completely. When He went to the cross as the Word of God and died for sinners, Jesus purchased power for us to keep the word because now the Spirit of Christ comes to live within His people. The Word of God is now living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword. There is power in the word of God.

When we are struggling and we call on Christ help us He comes as the Word of God to deliver us. You see, the Law commands us to obey but does not give us power to obey but the greatest news comes in the gospel of Jesus. The gospel calls us to fly and it gives us wings. So . . . our call is to be in the word of God and tap in to the power of the Word of God embodied in Christ.

When we do we see the power of God in our lives and we will overflow with praise as we see what Christ did to save us and sanctify us in Him.

Conclusion:

In John Bunyan's classic book, *Pilgrim's Progress*, Christian is the pilgrim who is on his journey toward heaven. His progress was slow and cumbersome. In the beginning, he carried a heavy burden on his back. As he moved forward, he faced obstacles at every turn. He almost drowned in the Slough of Despond. He was tripped up by a character named Mr. Worldlywise. He forgot the Promise of His Savior along the road. He traveled through the Valley of the Shadow of Death. He faced the demon Apollyon. He was seduced by wealth in Vanity Fair and when he rejected it he and Faithful were imprisoned and eventually the people of Vanity Fair killed Faithful.

Bunyan understood the dangers that stood in the path of every Christian. He understood the temptations and pitfalls. But he also understood two very important truths about the Christian life: We are pilgrims and we are making progress and for this progress with give God praise.

In his book, Christian passed through the Valley of the Shadow of Death. Christian's struggle in the Valley of the Shadow was great. He felt hopeless and alone. Yet, he kept petitioning God and reminding himself of the gospel when he was in it. Then after he came through the Valley Christian he overflowed in praise and exclaimed:

*O World of Wonders! (I can say no less)
That I should be preserv'd in that Distress
That I have met with here! O blessed be
That Hand that from it hath deliver'd me!
Dangers in darkness, Devils, Hell, and Sin,
Did compass me, while I this Vale was in:
Yea Snares, and Pits, and Traps, and Nets did lie
My Path about, that worthless, silly I
Might have been catch'd, entangled, and cast down:
But since I live, let Jesus wear the Crown.*

Friends, let Jesus wear the crown in 2020 and from this time forth in your life. May your journey with God in 2020 be one where you petition God for growth in Christ and His word that results in overflowing praise as you experience spiritual growth.