

THE PSALMIST'S STORY: PSALM 119

WEEK 1: THE PSALMIST

I wouldn't blame you for being shocked or extremely sceptical about the choice of Psalm 119 to be dealt with in 6 weeks. After all, it took six weeks last year to deal with just 6 verses in Psalm 23. In fact, a Bible study on Psalm 119 was the furthest thing from my mind when I found I had a bit of time on my hands and decided to take a closer look at this psalm. It's probably not in anyone's top ten of psalms because it is very repetitive and apart from a couple of memorable verses, it is hard to follow the psalmist's train of thought. Admittedly, it is a risk to use the psalm for a Bible study, but I thought that once there was a framework to it, then, when you have a bit of time on your hands, maybe it would be worth another look. Having said that, unless we had all the time in the world, it would be impossible to study the psalm verse by verse in a series of talks. Even if we took one stanza per week, it would take 22 weeks. In one sense, it would be very tempting to do that. For David and I, 22 weeks plus Lenten and Advent talks would virtually cover the Bible studies for the whole of the church year. I very much doubt though if you would find it very beneficial or stimulating. Think of how irritated you can get when somebody keeps repeating the same thing over and over again. Can you imagine the explanation and discussion over the same words for 22 weeks especially, when you feel that they all mean exactly the same thing only using different terms? The breakdown from the NIV gives this count. There are only 5 verses in the whole psalm that do not contain one of these words - Verses 84, 90, 121, 122 and 132.

Law/s	45
Statutes	23
Precepts	21
Decrees	22
Commands/s/ments	22
Word	27
Promise	13

Now, the last thing we want to do is make you fed up or irritated with constant repetition and that's why a verse by verse or even stanza by stanza approach is not appropriate for Bible studies. But the most important reason for avoiding these approaches to the psalm is that it could obscure and even blind us to the key issues the psalmist raises, not just about God and the word of God, but how it affects the life of the one who believes and relies upon both in the circumstances of their lives. So, what I hope to do in these 6 weeks, is to pick out the story in the psalm, so that when you do have all the time in the world to go back to it, you will have an overview that will enable you to go deeper into what the psalmist has said, and be able to see how and why he consistently sticks to his main theme, and how everything else is connected to it. You'll find that his story reflects the circumstances of many Christians today. And, the way he dealt with his circumstances has a lot to teach us and also challenges us about how we deal with ours.

Every story has a main character and we all like to know as much as we can about him or her. What makes them tick often determines how they act and react to the situations they face. It's exactly the same with this psalm. What is the psalmist like? What motivates him? How does he deal with the things going on in his life? Well, firstly, we know he is an educated man. The structure and length of the psalm is proof of this. The 176 verses are divided into 22 sections

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which correspond to the letters in the Hebrew alphabet. Each section is comprised of 8 verses and each verse in each stanza begins with the same **Hebrew letter**. For example, the first letter in the Hebrew alphabet is aleph, so each of the first words in the first 8 verses begin with that letter. That pattern continues through the whole alphabet. This kind of composition is known as an acrostic and it is found in much shorter forms in other parts of the Old Testament. We really have to admire the writer for being able to maintain this pattern right through the psalm, because it indicates that a great deal of thought went into the planning of what the writer wanted to convey to those who would read or hear it. Scholars agree that what was possibly uppermost in mind when it was composed was to aid memory of its contents. If you know the order of the psalm follows the order of the alphabet then it is much easier to remember where each section of the psalm is placed. But, even if that was the original purpose, this does not detract from the fact that the way the psalm is composed, and what is said in it, indicates a person who has more than a passing interest in God's word. It is also an indication that the psalmist wants to pass on the necessity of knowing and understanding God's word to give meaning and guidance to life. In this, the psalmist echoes the wisdom writing of proverbs.

Psalm 119:9 How can a young person stay on the path of purity? By living according to your word.

Proverbs 1:1-4 (NIV) The proverbs of Solomon son of David, king of Israel: or gaining wisdom and instruction; for understanding words of insight; for receiving instruction in prudent behaviour, doing what is right and just and fair; for giving prudence to those who are simple, knowledge and discretion to the young—

In promoting the benefits of that knowledge and understanding the psalmist uses several terms for God's word. I did realise that in spite of the repetition of them, something needs to be said about all of these different terms, because, if we are honest, they are what obscures the meaning of the psalm for us. Consciously or unconsciously, there is the notion that if we knew exactly what the psalmist meant by the different terms we could better understand the point he was making. While their use shows the psalmist knew the subtle differences in meaning, there is no point in going into detail because different versions of our Bibles don't always use the same terms in exactly the same places. These are just two examples.

Nehemiah 9:13-14 (NIV) You came down on Mount Sinai; you spoke to them from heaven. You gave them regulations and laws that are just and right, and decrees and commands that are good. 14 You made known to them your holy Sabbath and gave them commands, decrees and laws through your servant Moses.

Nehemiah 9:13-14 (MSG) You came down onto Mount Sinai, you spoke to them out of heaven; You gave them instructions on how to live well, true teaching, sound rules and commands; 14 You introduced them to your Holy Sabbath; Through your servant Moses you decreed commands, rules, and instruction.

In addition to the words in the NIV there are "regulations" and in the Message version "instructions", "rules" and "teaching". In other versions you would also come across "judgements", "ordinances", "testimonies" and "oracles". I know I would find the psalm very

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hard going if I had to constantly think of the exact meaning of all these terms. What can be said for certain is that they all refer to laws which fall into one of the two categories of law that God gave the Israelites at Sinai. The technical name for the most important kind is apodictic law. This is law that must be obeyed without exception. The Ten Commandments fall into this category for God's people; acts of parliament would be the equivalent in our ordinary lives. The laws in Leviticus are examples of the second type of law. A form of case law. They relate to the consequences for breaking of the rules governing right and wrong behaviour in any given situation. The Highway Code is a modern example for road users. Also, the likes of health and safety or food hygiene laws which govern behaviour so that no harm comes to others through the wrongful actions of another person. What we can say about the psalmist is that he is fully acquainted with both types of law. The fact that he distinguishes between the nuances of the types of laws, and his insistence on his adherence to them all, indicates that he follows not just the letter, but the spirit of the law as well. We will see evidence of this when we come to explore his feelings about them.

So, who is this man that seems to know so much about them? The psalmist doesn't identify himself, but scholars have suggested David, Daniel or Ezra, all of whom were conspicuous in the Old Testament for their knowledge of and adherence to God's word. David is an obvious choice because he wrote other psalms and we assume that two of the most familiar verses in psalm 119 came from the pen of David.

Psalms 119:11 (NIV) I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you.

Psalms 119:105 (NIV) Your word is a lamp for my feet, a light on my path.

Ezra and Daniel are possible candidates because Hebrew scholars think it may have been written as late as what is called the second temple period. They believe this because of the level of the language used and because it was unlikely to have existed in oral form before it was written down. This is the period after the Babylonians had destroyed Solomon's temple and when the exiles had returned from Babylon and had started to rebuild Jerusalem and the temple. Although it appears that Daniel chose to remain in Babylon rather than return with the exiles, chapters 7, 8 and 9 of Nehemiah relate how important the Book of the Law of Moses was to the restoration of the Jews as a distinct community of God's people.

Nehemiah 7:73 - 8:18 (NIV) When the seventh month came and the Israelites had settled in their towns, **1 all the people came together as one in the square before the Water Gate. They told Ezra the teacher of the Law to bring out the Book of the Law of Moses, which the Lord had commanded for Israel. **2** So on the first day of the seventh month Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly, which was made up of men and women and all who were able to understand. **3** He read it aloud from daybreak till noon as he faced the square before the Water Gate in the presence of the men, women and others who could understand. And all the people listened attentively to the Book of the Law.....**7** The Levites.....instructed the people in the Law while the people were standing there. **8** They read from the Book of the Law of God, making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people understood what was being read.....**18** Day after day, from the first day to the last, Ezra read from the Book of the Law of God. They celebrated the festival for seven days,**

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and on the eighth day, in accordance with the regulation, there was an assembly.

This extract records that once the Israelites had settled back in their own land, the first major public event was a reminder of their religious roots. The Book of the law of Moses refers to the first 5 books of the Bible and what is also known to us as the Pentateuch and to the Jews as the Torah. These writings were read aloud for six hours every day for seven days. The rest of the day was taken up with the Levites instructing the people in the law, with the emphasis in verse 8 on making it clear and giving its meaning, so that people understood what was required of them in response to it. The events of that time reminded them of who they were, who they were answerable to and what was expected of them. So while we do not know the exact identity of the Psalmist, the regard for God's word is prominent in the lives of the men scholars suggest. For, regardless of who wrote the psalm or the date of its composition, what is not disputed is that its words extol the Torah. Today the Torah is as important to the Jews as it was in the days of Nehemiah. It is as important to us today for it is now part of our Christian bibles. But can you ever imagine a week of Bible reading and instruction taking place like that in our world today?

The suggestion of David, Daniel or Ezra is plausible too, because what we can definitely say about the psalmist is that he was a troubled Jew. I'm not giving too much of the story away when I tell you that as you read through the psalm you very quickly realise this man has major problems in his life. We all know of the troubles faced by David and Daniel. If Ezra wrote the psalm, he would possibly have been referring to the problems Nehemiah faced when he started to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. In fact, the troubles mentioned by the psalmist was experienced by each of these men and are as common today as they were then. The problems I'll take a closer look at next week. His Jewishness, however, is more prominent because, apart from the 5 verses mentioned above, the frequent repetition of the terms for God's laws are derived predominantly from Exodus, Leviticus and Deuteronomy which reinforces the view that the psalm extols the Torah. We are left in no doubt that it is written by a Jew with a deep commitment to his religious heritage and a thorough-going knowledge and understanding of its Scriptures.

And that presents us with a bit of a problem. You know how first impressions count. Well, if this man is writing from personal experience, first impressions would point to a man who flaunted his knowledge of the law and boasted of his obedience to it. After a while this can become irritating and you might start to think of this man as a self-righteous know-it-all. If any of you ever get the time, try to count the number of times "I", "me" and "my" occur in the psalm. I didn't - so no prizes for coming up with an answer. His whole attention seems to be on himself. We can almost find an echo of the New Testament parable Jesus told about the Pharisee and the tax collector.

Luke 18:11 (NIV) The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector.

But first impressions are very often wrong and that is what we find about the psalmist on a more careful reading of what he says. His self-assessment completely does away with this view of him. For example, twelve times he calls himself a servant of the Lord. This is a man who has humbled himself before his God.

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Psalms 119:17 (NIV) Be good to your servant while I live, that I may obey your word.

• verses 23, 38, 49, 65, 76, 84, 124, 125, 135, 140, 176

Mark 10:45 (NIV) For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

Philippians 2:7 (NIV) rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.

Titus 1:1 (NIV) Paul, a servant of God and an apostle of Jesus

James 1:1(NIV) James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ,

2 Peter 1:1 (NIV) 1 Simon Peter, a servant and apostle of Jesus Christ,

Jude 1:1 (NIV) Jude, a servant of Jesus Christ and a brother of James,

If the psalm was written to instruct others, it is a reminder that humility is needed when God is approached. On the one hand, it is a recognition of the kind of relationship which exists between God and himself. On the other hand, it is the attitude of mind of a true believer. As the texts from the New Testament show, that attitude of mind is as relevant today as it was in whatever time the psalmist lived. Each of the letter writers in the New Testament introduce themselves as servants of God and/or Jesus Christ. Like, the Lord Jesus Christ who humbled Himself to servant status and came not to be served but to serve, so the primary identification characteristic of a Christian is one of servanthood, first to God and then to our neighbours. In this respect, the psalmist becomes our role model.

And, in my usual way of stating the obvious, the primary duty of a servant is obedience to his/her master's commands.

44 I will always obey your law, for ever and ever.

60 I will hasten and not delay to obey your commands.

101 I have kept my feet from every evil path so that I might obey your word.

129 Your statutes are wonderful; therefore I obey them.

167 I obey your statutes, for I love them greatly.

The psalmist, time and time again, returns to the fact that he has not only read and understood God's laws, he has followed that by obedience to them. He has many ways in the psalm of describing his obedience including delighting and rejoicing in following God's statutes, precepts decrees etc. But, just these texts which specifically mention 'obey' indicate that the psalmist is not obedient out of a sense of duty or obeying in a legalistic way of outward conformity. The law is so important to him that he can never see a time when he should not obey it. To him, the

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law is wonderful and something he loves. That's why verse 60 shows an eagerness and readiness to follow whatever command he has been given. His willingness to follow is demonstrated in verse 101 by his continuing determination not to do anything contrary to God's law. Throughout the psalm, we are left with the impression that being a faithful and obedient servant of God is his life's ambition, and that is something all true believers aspire to be.

Three further texts, would reinforce the suggestion that the psalmist's focus was Godward. Verses 19, 37 and 141 refer to his assessment of his earthly existence.

Psalms 119:19 (NIV) I am a stranger on earth; do not hide your commands from me.

Psalms 119:37 (NIV) Turn my eyes away from worthless things; preserve my life according to your word.

Psalms 119:141 (NIV) Though I am lowly and despised, I do not forget your precepts.

Being a stranger means that he does not regard the world as his home. In this context, the psalmist regards the world as his temporary residence he is just passing through. He is therefore not being taken up with its ways and values. In fact, as we shall see later, much of what he sees and experiences in the world is worthless in comparison to God's way of doing things. And even though he is regarded as lowly and despised by others, he does not try to make himself worthy by following their paths. His worth is determined by God's evaluation of his life, lived in accordance with God's word.

It can be seen from these texts, that far from blowing his own trumpet about how obedient he is in keeping God's laws, this man can speak in the way he does because they are part of his very being.

Psalms 119:97 (NIV) Oh, how I love your law! I meditate on it all day long.

Psalms 119:164 (NIV) Seven times a day I praise you for your righteous laws.

Psalms 119:55 (NIV) In the night, Lord, I remember your name, that I may keep your law.

Psalms 119:148 (NIV) My eyes stay open through the watches of the night, that I may meditate on your promises.

They are what govern his life. God's laws are like a lodestar directing his heart and mind continually day and night. There is a verse in Proverbs 21:2 which says "A person may think their own ways are right, but the Lord weighs the heart."

Now, it's right and proper to study God's word and seek to obey it, but we know how it can be distorted and misinterpreted. So, how do we know the psalmist hasn't done this? We've already seen that he has come to God with the right attitude and an eagerness, readiness and willingness to obey the light he has been given. The texts mentioned completely reverse our first impressions of him, but how can we be sure his knowledge and understanding is keeping him on

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the right track? Well, we can be sure that it is, because what becomes even more apparent is that it is not only the daily and nightly meditations of his mind that are engaged with God's word. It is his heart as well.

As you all know the greatest commandment starts with 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart.....'

Psalms 119:2 (NIV) Blessed are those who keep his statutes and seek him with all their heart—

Psalms 119:34 (NIV) Give me understanding, so that I may keep your law and obey it with all my heart.

Psalms 119:58 (NIV) I have sought your face with all my heart; be gracious to me according to your promise.

Psalms 119:112 (NIV) My heart is set on keeping your decrees to the very end.

Deuteronomy 4:9 (NIV) Only be careful, and watch yourselves closely so that you do not forget the things your eyes have seen or let them fade from your heart as long as you live.

God's laws were not just outward conformity for the psalmist. Thirteen times he mentions his heart in connection with the law of the Lord and we are left in no doubt that all that he wrote in this psalm was coming from the heart. It was coming from the core of his being which was totally taken up with God's word. The very fact that he starts with a beatitude of blessing on those who seek God with all their hearts is the understanding that God's word written on the heart is the mark of the true believer. This is where the psalmist starts and especially in verse 112, it seems that he has taken literally, Moses' command to the Israelites to never let God's laws fade from their hearts. He is resolved to keep them to the very end regardless of what that end for him might be.

We can see from this why scholars suggest David wrote the psalm because he was described by God as a man after his own heart. David's words in Psalm 19 could be regarded as a summary of the view of the writer of psalm 119. Even if it was written after the exile, whether it was Daniel, Ezra or someone else, it would still represent the view of one of the remnant who had remained faithful throughout the 70 years of exile, to his religious heritage.

Psalms 19:8-9 (NIV) The precepts of the Lord are right, giving joy to the heart. The commands of the Lord are radiant, giving light to the eyes. The fear of the Lord is pure, enduring forever. The decrees of the Lord are firm, and all of them are righteous.

Isaiah 10:20-21 (NIV) In that day the remnant of Israel, the survivors of Jacob, will no longer rely on him who struck them down but will truly rely on the Lord, the Holy One of Israel. A remnant will return, a remnant of Jacob will return to the Mighty God.

By trying to get to know the psalmist we have therefore, learned a lot about the psalm itself. In

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terms of its subject matter, is nothing less than a paean of praise to God and His word as it is contained in the Torah. It is an exhortation to others to “taste and see that the Lord is good.” It is the psalmist’s testimony, a testimony that could be matched by true believers through the ages, that God’s word is the only reliable and sure guide to how all the circumstances we face in life can be dealt with. We will see that in terms of the psalmist’s story, because that word becomes the vital and strategic instrument in his quest to live a life in which the knowledge of the existence of God and his ways enables, him to persevere in his faith and even be victorious through and over life’s circumstances. Had he been around in the time of Paul, with the benefit of hindsight he would probably have agreed with these words, for, as we shall see next week, in his personal circumstances, he really needed the Lord to be on his side to help him overcome the difficulties he faced.

Psalms 34:8 (NIV) Taste and see that the Lord is good; blessed is the one who takes refuge in him.

Romans 8:31 (NIV) What, then, shall we say in response to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us..... No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.

WEEK 2: THE PSALMIST'S SITUATION.

From what was said last week, it seems safe to conclude that the psalmist was living a life fully dedicated to God and giving evidence of that through his continual striving to live according to God’s word. We could identify with his praise of that word in times when he was at peace with God, with himself and with all the external circumstances of his life. The psalm, however, gives no impression that this is the case. In fact, it depicts the complete opposite. There is so much repetition of the psalmist’s references to obedience that other words in the verses fade almost in the background. But around 40 verses in the psalm speak of dire circumstances and the psalmist’s struggle to hold on to his integrity and his faith. Bringing these verses together starts to give you a sense of the stress and tension that exists in the psalmist’s situation. I need to constantly remind myself that people in the Bible, whether anonymous or not, were real people, living in the real world and experiencing all kinds of situations that people face in different places at different times. This psalm is not fiction. It is about a real-life experience. What the psalmist is experiencing or has already been experiencing are the kinds of pressures that all believers will encounter in this world. Not everyone will experience them all, but we know from past and present persecutions of Christians, there are those who have suffered them all and have even lost their lives, rather than betray their Lord. Yet, regardless, of how serious the affliction is manifested, it will affect our whole being, and, to my mind, what is mentioned by the psalmist would leave any normal person in mental and emotional turmoil and fearful for their very lives. So, underlying all that the psalmist says, is his human state of being and what his reactions are as a result of it.

The psalmist’s inner concerns involve two other parties and he has to react in an appropriate way to both. How does he fulfil his obligations to God while having to deal with enemies? Simply put, the enemies are giving him serious grief. He takes the situation to God and asks Him to deal with the enemies. That part is straightforward. At the same time, however, the psalmist knows

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God's response is dependent on his relationship with Him through obedience to the law, which in Old Testament times was the only way to be in right standing with God. He also knows that his attitude to his enemies and his reactions to their attacks will have a bearing on what God will do and, significantly, when He will do it. The tension of consistently holding on to these fundamental principles feed into the turmoil that is going on in the psalmist's life. We can note here a relationship between God and the enemies is non-existent. This in itself, is also a fundamental part of the problems he faces.

In Job 5:7 we read that man is born to trouble as surely as the sparks fly upward. Millennia later Jesus said in John 16:33 "I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world." Our psalmist's situation is a graphic illustration of both these texts because he is experiencing virtually all the kinds of trouble the people of God will face if they remain true to Him.

When you analyse the types of affliction he is undergoing, several reasons for assuming the psalmist is in serious danger come to the forefront. He gives examples of this in verses 61, 85, and 110. We may regard what he mentions as things which he could escape from or recover from, but in other Bible references, each one of them is life-threatening.

61 Though the wicked bind me with ropes, I will not forget your law.

Judges 16:11 (NIV) He said, "If anyone ties me securely with new ropes that have never been used, I'll become as weak as any other man."

85 The arrogant dig pits to trap me, contrary to your law.

Proverbs 1:12 (NIV) let's swallow them alive, like the grave, and whole, like those who go down to the pit;

110 The wicked have set a snare for me, but I have not strayed from your precepts.

Proverbs 7:23(NIV)like a bird darting into a snare, little knowing it will cost him his life.

Although, he was lying about the effect on himself, what Samson told Delilah about the effect binding with ropes had would have severely weakened any normal man and left him at the mercy of his captors. Binding with ropes would have been the prelude to further mistreatment. The Biblical reference to the pit is a euphemism for Hades, the realm of the dead, and the psalmist envisages meeting his death in this graphic way. Is it any wonder he is fearful for his very life? Unlike the bird who is unaware of its danger, the psalmist is only too aware that snares have been set, and he has to be on constant guard not to fall into them, for they are death traps

25 I am laid low in the dust; preserve my life according to your word.

Genesis 2:7 (NIV) When the Lord God formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being.

Genesis 3:19 (NIV) since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return."

87 They almost wiped me from the earth, but I have not forsaken your precepts.

Genesis 7:22-23 (NIV) Everything on dry land that had the breath of life in its nostrils died.

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23 Every living thing on the face of the earth was wiped out;

He expresses this when he talks about being in the dust and almost being wiped from the earth. Again, his words are given meaning by words echoing those in the Torah. The psalmist was well aware that humankind was formed from dust and the curse of Adam was that our bodies would return to dust after death. The Flood, when only Noah and his family were saved was the most spectacular example of what it meant to be wiped from the earth.

Now, sometimes, because we are human, our fears can be irrational or unfounded. There are many phobias that people genuinely suffer from, but the thing feared cannot actually inflict physical harm or minimal harm at best. We can ask if psalmist only perceives that these threats exist and the might be overreacting to that perception. The answer to that becomes clear when we find out about his enemies.

Psalms 119:23 (NIV) Though rulers sit together and slander me, your servant will meditate on your decrees.

Psalms 119:161 (NIV) Rulers persecute me without cause, but my heart trembles at your word.

Luke 12:11-12 (NIV) When you are brought before synagogues, rulers and authorities, do not worry about how you will defend yourselves or what you will say, for the Holy Spirit will teach you at that time what you should say.”

Luke 21:12 (NIV) But before all this, they will seize you and persecute you. They will hand you over to synagogues and put you in prison, and you will be brought before kings and governors, and all on account of my name.

How the psalmist describes his enemies give us a clear indication of what he is facing. His enemies are powerful people. The Old Testament gives a catalogue of how ungodly rulers treated the people of God, including the prophets. He mentions rulers in verses 23 and 161. Coming to the unwelcome attention of anti-Christian ruling authorities has never been safe for God's people. This is what the psalmist is finding out and what Jesus, Himself said would happen in the future. We see how true Jesus' words were, because within a short time after His ascension Peter and the other apostles faced the wrath of the rulers, which led to Peter's imprisonment. Paul faced the same harassment, imprisonment and threats to his life. Both suffered martyrdom. So, from Old Testament times, through the Roman empire's persecutions; and right down through history to the present day when Christians still face death from anti-God rulers, we can see that the psalmist is not exaggerating the threat he faces. This becomes even more apparent when the psalmist records that it is not just one ruler, there are many lying in wait for him in order to do him physical harm. He describes them as wicked and as arrogant oppressors.

150 Those who devise wicked schemes are near, but they are far from your law.

157 Many are the foes who persecute me, but I have not turned from your statutes.

95 The wicked are waiting to destroy me, but I will ponder your statutes.

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121 I have done what is righteous and just; do not leave me to my oppressors.

122 Ensure your servant's well-being; do not let the arrogant oppress me.

Exodus 1:11 (NIV) So they put slave masters over them to oppress them with forced labour, and they built Pithom and Rameses as store cities for Pharaoh.

Exodus 23:9 (NIV) 9 "Do not oppress a foreigner; you yourselves know how it feels to be foreigners, because you were foreigners in Egypt.

Amos 5:12 (NIV) For I know how many are your offences and how great your sins. There are those who oppress the innocent and take bribes and deprive the poor of justice in the courts.

So, the way the rulers and presumably, the people who supported and helped them, are described, tends towards the psalmist realistically recognising a clear and present danger. He has solid grounds for being alarmed. Their reputation for oppression is further evidence for his assessment of his situation. Calling them oppressors signifies that they used their authority to keep people in subjection and hardship. With his knowledge of his heritage, the psalmist would have been aware that his ancestors in Egypt suffered the oppression of the Egyptians. And God's law given at Sinai expressly prohibits the oppression of others, especially foreigners. The psalmist has already described himself as a stranger in this world in verse 19. In view of this knowledge and understanding of the term 'oppression', the psalmist is indicating his treatment by his enemies is of major concern. Amos' tirade against the social injustices of his time lays the blame at the door of oppressors. If this is the normal form of governance of people in general, then the psalmist is among the helpless and powerless who are likely to suffer at their hands. How often do we feel we are in the same position, when the powers that be make decisions and act in a way that is contrary to the well-being of people who are affected? It may be on a much smaller scale and less threatening than what the psalmist faced. But, nevertheless, there are times when we feel threatened, exploited, used, or simply treated as of no account, when more powerful and influential forces adversely affect our lives.

But the psalmist is perceptive enough to look behind the manifestations of oppression. He recognises that their oppressive acts are the result of their inner characters.

21 You rebuke the arrogant, who are accursed, those who stray from your commands.

51 The arrogant mock me unmercifully, but I do not turn from your law.

Proverbs 21:24 (NIV) The proud and arrogant person— "Mocker" is his name— behaves with insolent fury.

70 Their hearts are callous and unfeeling, but I delight in your law.

Psalms 73:7 (NIV) From their callous hearts comes iniquity; their evil imaginations have no limits.

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They are arrogant, have callous and unfeeling hearts, and are wicked. Their arrogance implies their sense of self-importance, which when accompanied by their total disregard and disrespect, not just for those subject to them, but more importantly, towards for God and His ways, taints them with the kind of pride that is hated by God. This text in Proverbs is appropriate because in verse 51 the psalmist specifically mentions how they mock him for clinging to his godly beliefs and principles. They are also callous and unfeeling. In other words, they have no empathy or sympathy for the suffering they inflict on others, which as psalm 73:7 explains, means their cruel and brutal insensitivity towards others has no boundaries. When we hear of the many examples of 'man's inhumanity to man', which so called Islamic state seems to have taken to a new level of barbarity, we get an idea of the merciless treatment that he can expect if God does not come through for him.

Then, as well as the fear of imminent physical attack, the psalmist has to bear the relentless and constant verbal abuse directed at him.

22 Remove from me their scorn and contempt, for I keep your statutes.

23 Though rulers sit together and slander me, your servant will meditate on your decrees.

69 Though the arrogant have smeared me with lies, I keep your precepts with all my heart.

78 May the arrogant be put to shame for wronging me without cause; but I will meditate on your precepts.

86 All your commands are trustworthy; help me, for I am being persecuted without cause.

161 Rulers persecute me without cause, but my heart trembles at your word.

It, in itself, is so vitriolic that it could easily be seen as a sharp reminder of the physical attacks that could follow. It is obvious that the rulers and/or their supporters regard the psalmist as utterly worthless. This assessment of his person applies equally to his beliefs and the lifestyle he leads. In other words, their evaluation of him is also an evaluation of God's laws of life. What makes the situation worse for the psalmist is that he is being slandered. His reputation is being destroyed by lies, and the persecution arises from the fact that he has done nothing to deserve what they are doing to him. Here is a vivid picture of unjust suffering.

We do not have to stretch our imaginations too far to see that the greatest tragedy of unjust suffering was the Lord Jesus Christ. He was treated with scorn and with contempt. He was slandered too when He was accused of casting out demons by Satan's power.

John 8:44-45 (NIV) He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies.

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John 15:20-22 (NIV) If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also. If they obeyed my teaching, they will obey yours also. 21 They will treat you this way because of my name, for they do not know the one who sent me.

1 Peter 3:16-17 (NIV) keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behaviour in Christ may be ashamed of their slander. For it is better, if it is God's will, to suffer for doing good than for doing evil.

In Jesus' words too, we see who the lies can be traced back to because Satan was and still is the father of lies. The psalmist's situation speaks very loudly to Christians today because they experience the lies and slander that the world hurls against them. As Jesus, said, if the world did it to Him, it will do it to us too. And the text in 1 Peter 3:16-17 points us back to the example of the psalmist, for in each of the verses where he laments his difficulties, he maintains, as far as lies within him, a clear conscience in regard to obedience to God's laws. You've got to admit that this is easier said than done and the psalmist realises this as well. Remaining faithful in the face of the opposition he faces is remarkable for this involves facing up to his own shortcomings.

5 Oh, that my ways were steadfast in obeying your decrees!

10-11 I seek you with all my heart; do not let me stray from your commands. I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you.

67 Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I obey your word.

176 I have strayed like a lost sheep. Seek your servant, for I have not forgotten your commands.

Romans 7:22-23 (NIV) For in my inner being I delight in God's law; 23 but I see another law at work in me, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within me.

It is true that sometimes we bring trouble upon ourselves by careless or deliberate words and actions which are wrong. Sometimes, difficulties come because we do not realise how far we have wandered away from the correct path or direction. This could be through engaging in what might be harmless in itself, but could give people the wrong impression of what was acceptable to God. I don't think any of us have to be reminded of the fact that we are the sheep of God's pasture and as sheep, it is our natural tendency to wander off on a frolic of our own. But as the psalmist in verses 10, 67 and 176 shows, wandering off does not mean we have forgotten or ignored completely God's guidance in our lives. Jesus' parable of seeking to find the one sheep that was lost because it wandered off echoes the psalmist's plea in verse 176. The psalmist realises that it is only God who can keep him steadfast in obedience and in this context, his greatest fear is that he will sin against God, and in doing so, will dishonour God. He fears that because the opposition and threat he faces is so overwhelming, that it is becoming a total distraction, diverting him from staying as close to God as he desires and needs to be. We all know that worry, temptations, traumatic events in our lives and the normal and necessary

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business of our lives can push God into the background. In this, the psalmist pre-empted the words of Paul, who also sees that seeking to come closer to God involves an inner struggle that can itself be debilitating and distressing for those who struggle to maintain their closeness to God.

We may wonder why this should loom large in the psalmist's mind when he has much more serious things to worry about. When we understand that in the psalmist's day, the only way that God could overlook the sins of His people was through keeping His laws, the anxiety and distress over failure or falling short of God's standards was of major concern. But it's not only distress about the possibility of personal failure to follow God's laws. He is striving to give 100% allegiance to God by living by the commands God has given, and by doing so, fulfilling God's intention of giving them in the first place. This was not only as the rule of life for His chosen people, but as a witness to all the surrounding nations. Peter echoes this when he exhorts Christians to live a Christlike life which would also serve as a witness to pagan neighbours.

Deuteronomy 4:6-7 (NIV) Observe them carefully, for this will show your wisdom and understanding to the nations, who will hear about all these decrees and say, "Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people." 7 What other nation is so great as to have their gods near them the way the Lord our God is near us whenever we pray to him?

1 Peter 2:11-12 (NIV) Dear friends, I urge you, as foreigners and exiles, to abstain from sinful desires, which wage war against your soul. 12 Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.

The psalmist shows a keen awareness that how he conducts himself in his situation will also reflect on God's reputation and honour. For that reason, too, his perseverance is taking its toll on his emotional and mental well-being.

28 My soul is weary with sorrow; strengthen me according to your word.

46 I will speak of your statutes before kings and will not be put to shame,

109 Though I constantly take my life in my hands, I will not forget your law.

143 Trouble and distress have come upon me, but your commands give me delight.

Our souls can be weary for many reasons and although this statement comes near the beginning of the psalm, by verse 143, nearer the end, we see that the troubles and distress wearying his soul have not gone away. In spite of that, we see him facing his situation with courage and integrity. It takes courage to face kings with God's truth and the psalmist refuses to be ashamed of that truth. Knowing that being outspoken about his faith means he takes his life in his hands does not deter him from holding on to what he believes. Not being ashamed of proclaiming God's laws before kings, the highest authority in the land, is reminiscent of how Daniel and his three friends were prepared to face the lion's den and the fiery furnace rather than betray their Lord. It reminds us of how the apostles and Paul, the Reformers and Christians through the ages spoke before the rulers in their generations. But we can see that the effort of maintaining this stand is

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adding tiredness and weariness to the psalmist's troubles and there are indications that this man is coming to the end of his tether and fearing he will be unable to cope with the pressures at hand.

Yet, he is not so totally self-absorbed that he forgets there are wider issues and repercussions to what is happening to him. What is equally troubling and distressing for him is the attitude of his enemies towards God. God's law is all in all to him. He sees in it nothing but good in every sense of that word. Yet it is ridiculed by his enemies and totally ignored.

53 Indignation grips me because of the wicked, who have forsaken your law.

139 My zeal wears me out, for my enemies ignore your words.

136 Streams of tears flow from my eyes, for your law is not obeyed.

We could almost say that knowing how it will impact on the psalmist, his enemies are going out of their way to break God's laws. There is righteous indignation, zeal is taking its toll, and the streams of tears indicate heartfelt distress. Not only is he soul-weary, he is heart-sore as well. Bearing false witness is already a weapon being used against him and if God doesn't act on his behalf, murder is an imminent possibility. As we look around us today, we see these same attitudes towards, God, towards the Bible, towards Christian principles, values and the lifestyles based upon them. And, if we are not saddened and grieved by it, then we have to question our level of commitment to God's ways. The psalmist's situation gives us a picture of unjust suffering. We have a picture of distress, despair, even desperation because his inner turmoil is not one-dimensional. It's almost as if the competing claims of God, himself and his enemies are keeping his mental and emotional anguish at the highest levels of disturbance, confusion and uncertainty.

All of what has been said in the psalm shows that the Psalmist's situation is a serious, life-threatening one. I could summarise the reasons why we can accept this conclusion, but found that Psalm 142 does a much better job of describing the stress he is under than I could ever have done. This is from the Message translation.

Psalms 142 (MSG) I cry out loudly to God, loudly I plead with God for mercy. 2 I spill out all my complaints before him, and spell out my troubles in detail: 3 "As I sink in despair, my spirit ebbing away, you know how I'm feeling, know the danger I'm in, the traps hidden in my path. 4 Look right, look left— there's not a soul who cares what happens! I'm up against it, with no exit— bereft, left alone. 5 I cry out, God, call out: 'You're my last chance, my only hope for life!' 6 Oh listen, please listen; I've never been this low. Rescue me from those who are hunting me down; I'm no match for them.

And yet, in the midst of the darkness, his words about light shine through in these amazing statements of faith.

105 Your word is a lamp for my feet, a light on my path.

130 The unfolding of your words gives light; it gives understanding to the simple.

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71 It was good for me to be afflicted so that I might learn your decrees.

75 I know, Lord, that your laws are righteous, and that in faithfulness you have afflicted me.

In spite of all he is going through, he maintains that God is good and God is faithful. That is why, despite all his difficulties, he turns to the only Person he knows who can make sense of it all. In that too, he gives us the right direction to take when we find ourselves in stressful situations. His three solutions, which I'll look at over the next three weeks, are exactly the same solutions we can apply today.

WEEK 3: THE PSALMIST'S SOLUTION 1

We left our psalmist last week in a pretty dire situation. How is he going to cope with it? The psalmist gives absolutely no indication that his friends are rallying around him, or that he has any human source of help. It is almost as if he is on his own and under some kind of siege because of the opposition he faces. There are times when it is possible for someone to feel their troubles are so overwhelming and they know they have to face them alone, because, either they have no one to turn to, or they know no human being can do anything about their situation. In the secular world we know that sometimes it is only when non-believers reach a stage of desperation that they suddenly remember God and try prayer. God is their last chance as it were. But because we know where the psalmist's heart lies, and we know what he is passionate about, it therefore comes as no surprise to find him doing what Stephen pointed out to us last week - looking at things from a different angle. In fact, the psalmist gives us the practical means by which we do this when we are under stress or feel threatened by forces beyond our control. The very first way we do this is, like the psalmist, make God our first port of call, not the last one. Again, this psalm gives us many reasons for turning to God first, and it is perhaps true to say that Christians today have even greater reasons for making God their "very present help in trouble." We have so much information about God, particularly about what theologians call the attributes of God. While we may learn about them in theory, it would appear that this psalmist, who refers to the most important ones, had an instinctive and convicting knowledge that the words he uses to describe the God he has turned to, have been practically experienced in his life.

One indication of this is the thirteen times, he refers to God's promises. Verses 38, 41, 50, 58, 76, 82, 116, 123, 140, 148, 154, 162, 170. You can see from the verse numbers that these references re-occur throughout the psalm, as if the psalmist was constantly reminding himself that his God keeps His promises. The word promise is a devalued word these days, mainly because so many promises are broken by the powers that be, either to change things for the better, or learn lessons from often fatal mistakes they have made. Even very sincerely made promises sometimes are not fulfilled due to extenuating or unforeseen circumstances. But when the psalmist refers to God's promises, he grounds his appeals in what he believes to be certainties. The psalmist is relying on God to fulfil the promises He has already made either to him personally, or to His chosen people according to His covenants with their ancestors. Words from the book of Numbers in the Torah and of Moses successor Joshua would have given him grounds for his reliance on these means of support. If David wrote the psalm, it could be the promise David reminded Solomon of when he was on his deathbed, that his house would never be without a successor. Both Joshua and David, before their deaths, referred to God's promises. Joshua reminded the people of Israel that not one of God's promises had failed. David reminded Solomon that keeping to God's ways made fulfilment of the promises of an everlasting kingdom

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certain.

38 Fulfil your promise to your servant, so that you may be feared.

Joshua 23:14 (NIV) Now I am about to go the way of all the earth. You know with all your heart and soul that not one of all the good promises the Lord your God gave you has failed. Every promise has been fulfilled; not one has failed.

1 Kings 2:2-4 (NIV) "I am about to go the way of all the earth," he said. "So be strong, act like a man, and observe what the Lord your God requires: Walk in obedience to him, and keep his decrees and commands, his laws and regulations, as written in the Law of Moses. Do this so that you may prosper in all you do and wherever you go and that the Lord may keep his promise to me:

Whatever promises the psalmist was referring to, however, he is depending on the promises of God to get him out of his difficulties. And, his dependence is not misplaced because of what he knows about God's nature and character. Promises could simply be another term he uses for God's words, but what he says about the promises of God make them particularly special. In verse 49, one ground for hope is the fact that God remembers what He has promised.

49 Remember your word to your servant, for you have given me hope.

Exodus 33:13 (NIV) If you are pleased with me, teach me your ways so I may know you and continue to find favour with you. Remember that this nation is your people."

Leviticus 26:45 (NIV) But for their sake I will remember the covenant with their ancestors whom I brought out of Egypt in the sight of the nations to be their God. I am the Lord."

Ezekiel 16:60 (NIV) Yet I will remember the covenant I made with you in the days of your youth, and I will establish an everlasting covenant with you.

Hebrews 8:12 (NIV) 12 For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more."

Because God is all-knowing, He cannot forget anything. But He can choose not to remember. Since God is infallible, His memory can never be in error. What He chooses not to remember are our sins; what He will always remember are His promises. Those promises were enshrined in the covenants He has made and, regardless of when this psalm was written, the most important covenants had already been established. Both the Old and the New Testaments testify to God remembering His promise to forgive and remember our sins no more. For the psalmist, this depended on obedience to the law. For us, it depends on the blood of our Saviour Jesus Christ.

Numbers 23:19 (NIV) God is not human, that he should lie, not a human being, that he should change his mind. Does he speak and then not act? Does he promise and not fulfill?

86 All your commands are trustworthy; help me, for I am being persecuted without

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cause.

Psalms 145:13 (NIV) 13 Your kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and your dominion endures through all generations. The Lord is trustworthy in all he promises and faithful in all he does.

John 8:25-26 (NIV) Just what I have been telling you from the beginning,” Jesus replied. 26 “I have much to say in judgment of you. But he who sent me is trustworthy, and what I have heard from him I tell the world.”

They also could be guaranteed to be everlasting because other interconnected attributes of God. God cannot utter anything contrary to His nature so when He makes a promise, He speaks truth. Pilate asked Jesus “What is truth?” A good question, for in the context of what God says, truth means more than abstaining from telling a lie. Behind God’s promises is sincerity. God will never make a promise He doesn’t intend to keep or knows that it cannot be kept. That means that absolute trust can be put in every promise God has made. While the psalmist states God’s commands are trustworthy, this trustworthiness applies to every word God has spoken. The greatest endorsement of this are the words of Jesus, who affirms that He only tells the world what the One who is trustworthy has given Him to say.

Closely related to trustworthiness is faithfulness which the psalmist expresses in verse 90.

90 Your faithfulness continues through all generations; you established the earth, and it endures.

Deuteronomy 32:4 (NIV) He is the Rock, his works are perfect, and all his ways are just. A faithful God who does no wrong, upright and just is he.

Joel 2:23(NIV) Be glad, people of Zion, rejoice in the Lord your God, for he has given you the autumn rains because he is faithful.

Zechariah 8:7-8 (NIV) This is what the Lord Almighty says: “I will save my people from the countries of the east and the west. I will bring them back to live in Jerusalem; they will be my people, and I will be faithful and righteous to them as their God.”

In Malachi 3:6 God states that He does not change. He is always consistent in what He says and does and, because of this, His people can trust His faithfulness and dependability. The texts in Deuteronomy, Joel and Zechariah give credence to what the psalmist says. These texts span the centuries from the covenant at Sinai to the exiles return and re-settlement in the land of Judah. From this perspective, the psalmist does not exaggerate when he asserts that God’s faithfulness continues through all generations. Joel’s reference to the giving of the autumn rains is a clear indication that God has been faithful to His covenant with Noah which promised the endurance of the natural seasons. In the case of Palestine, this meant the annual arrival of the spring and autumn rains.

As if remembrance, trustworthiness and faithfulness regarding His promises were not good

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enough reasons to turn to God, the psalmist adds the context of God's love.

41 May your unfailing love come to me, Lord, your salvation, according to your promise;

88 In your unfailing love preserve my life, that I may obey the statutes of your mouth.

64 The earth is filled with your love, Lord; teach me your decrees.

76 May your unfailing love be my comfort, according to your promise to your servant.

124 Deal with your servant according to your love and teach me your decrees.

Deuteronomy 7:9-10 (NIV) Know therefore that the Lord your God is God; he is the faithful God, keeping his covenant of love to a thousand generations of those who love him and keep his commandments.

Again, he can go directly to the Torah for his reliance on the love God was that promised to His covenant people for thousands of generations. Very often in Scripture, God's love and faithfulness go together. The psalmist appeals to God's love because according to the words of the covenant, he does love and keep the commandments. Unlike many people today, the psalmist realised that there was a conditional element to God's love. God's love is both general and particular. It is general in the sense that God loved and still loves and will continue to love everyone in the world. He proved that love by giving His Son to die for the sins of the world at Calvary. But if people refuse to respond to that love and reject the One who gave Himself to show God's love, then they face God's judgement on unforgiven sin. God's love in these circumstances has to be balanced with His justice in rewarding right and punishing wrong. Since He has set the standards of right and wrong, He is the only One who can ensure there are no miscarriages of justice when He condemns those who have refused to follow His ways. In the Old Testament God's showed His particular love for His chosen people by giving them the laws at Sinai and declaring that obedience to them would enable Him to overlook their sin and thus remove them from His punitive judgement. Christians come under that same particular love through commitment to the salvation offered to us through the Lord Jesus Christ.

Unlike the psalmist we have the benefit of hindsight and a greater revelation of God's promises being fulfilled in Christ.

140 Your promises have been thoroughly tested, and your servant loves them.

Romans 4:20-21 (NIV) Yet he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God, 21 being fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised.

We could even claim to have a better knowledge than him that God's promises have been thoroughly tested and that they inspire an even more grateful love for what God has done in Christ. The psalmist could only look back to the Torah, where one key example of all the

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promises that were fulfilled were those made to Abraham of descendants and land. As a result of that evidence and the many others made to individuals and the people as a whole, the psalmist would have endorsed Paul's words in Romans 4:19-21. Not only was he relying on the promises being fulfilled, he was convinced that God had the power to do what He had promised.

In these four verses aspects of God's power are indicated. Verses 73, 90 and 168 affirm God as Creator and Sustainer of people and of the earth.

73 Your hands made me and formed me; give me understanding to learn your commands.

90 Your faithfulness continues through all generations; you established the earth, and it endures.

132 Turn to me and have mercy on me, as you always do to those who love your name.

168 I obey your precepts and your statutes, for all my ways are known to you.

When the 'name' of the Lord is mentioned in verse 132, there is the implication, too, of the knowledge and recognition of the whole nature and character of God, for the psalmist expresses his love for all God is as a divine Person. The 'Name' signifies all that He is. Not only is God's word of promise, His bond, He is the almighty, all-powerful God who established the earth and sustains it and knows exactly what kind of person the psalmist is both in physical existence and the way he lives his life.

Yet, in affirming God's faithfulness and love, it does come as a bit of a surprise when the psalmist claims that it was not only God's faithfulness that has permitted his affliction, but also God's goodness.

71 It was good for me to be afflicted so that I might learn your decrees.

75 I know, Lord, that your laws are righteous, and that in faithfulness you have afflicted me.

James 1:2-4 (NIV) Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, 3 because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. 4 Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.

1 Peter 1:7-8 (NIV) These have come so that the proven genuineness of your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may result in praise, glory and honour when Jesus Christ is revealed.

Surely, there's a bit of a contradiction here, because if God is faithful, loving, good and righteous, why is the psalmist suffering to the point of his life being threatened? Yet the psalmist never asks why this is happening to him. There is one part where he appears to be panicking a

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bit, but what comes through to the greatest extent is his conviction of the character of the omnipotent and omniscient God he has turned to for help.

It is hard to separate all the adjectives he uses to describe the attributes of God because they are all integrated so perfectly in God's holiness. God's goodness and righteousness are manifestations of His love and faithfulness. The psalmist's reason for believing in God's goodness in his situation was that he might gain something beneficial through learning more about God through His word. He learns through adversity. There are lessons God wants His people to learn and sometimes, it is only through suffering that God can gain our attention in order to bring us closer to Him to learn them. Sometimes it is only through suffering that we learn to appreciate what God is doing for us and have a more keen sense of His presence with us. Sometimes it is a test of faith, which Peter and James mention. But, even in these texts, good comes out of the suffering. When God's people suffer without cause, it is always hard to understand why. Like the psalmist, all we can do at times is persevere in our faith by continuing to believe that God is good, and what we are going through is for a good and righteous purpose.

Delitzsch, quoted in Ross' commentary on the psalms makes the very perceptive statement: **"It is just in the school of affliction that one first learns rightly to estimate the worth of his word and comes to feel his power."**

That is true when we especially take time to explore what an attribute of righteousness really means. We accept it as being right and doing right. Sometimes human beings can do wrong things for right reasons. For example, to tell a lie in order to spare someone great hurt or pain they would suffer if they heard the truth. Sometimes human beings do right things for wrong reasons. An example is giving to charity in order to be looked up to and praised for being so generous. Jesus condemned the Pharisees for this very reason. But with God, His righteousness means never falling into either of these categories and never being wrong in the decisions He makes or the rules He gives. It means what He says or does is never arbitrary in the sense of a random choice or a personal whim. And God's righteousness means He never 'bends the truth' or is 'economical with truth. There is no 'fake news' in the Bible. God's righteousness means that everything He says is literally the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. For that very reason anything based on and acted upon in compliance with God's word, cannot be anything else but good. That is why the psalmist can assert, "You are righteous Lord and your laws are right."

In human terms, it is possible to have goodness and righteousness on your side, but it is the way in which both are employed in certain situations that can do more harm than good.

- 137 You are righteous, Lord, and your laws are right.**
- 77 Let your compassion come to me that I may live, for your law is my delight.**
- 156 Your compassion, Lord, is great; preserve my life according to your laws.**
- 114 You are my refuge and my shield; I have put my hope in your word.**

Exodus 33:19-20 (NIV) And the Lord said, "I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you..... I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion.

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Psalms 103:13-14 (NIV) As a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear him; 14 for he knows how we are formed, he remembers that we are dust.

Lamentations 3:22-23 & 31-33 (NIV) Because of the Lord's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.for no one is cast off by the Lord forever. Though he brings grief, he will show compassion, so great is his unfailing love. For he does not willingly bring affliction or grief to anyone.

Nahum 1:7 (NIV) The Lord is good, a refuge in times of trouble. He cares for those who trust in him,

Mark 6:34 (NIV) When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. So he began teaching them many things.

There is no danger of God's goodness and righteousness becoming inflexibly legalistic because they are tempered by His compassion and protection. Throughout Scripture there are many references to God's people going through terrible trauma. Jeremiah, who wrote Lamentations, had a lot to bear in his life, yet in the midst of all he suffered, comes these great verses of faith. Our psalmist did not have these words, but his appeal to the faithfulness, goodness and righteousness of God led him to know these qualities would also include compassion. God had made him, knew his ways and had made promises that would endure for generations. Above all, God's love for His people meant that, together with all the other attributes he mentions, the psalmist had the conviction that God would eventually bring an end to the bad times he was experiencing.

What these references to God's compassion is telling us is that God has sympathy, pity and concern for the sufferings or misfortunes of His people. He knows, our weaknesses. Psalm 103 states God remembers we are like dust - easily blown away by the slightest breeze. In the New Testament Peter, quotes Isaiah 40:6 & 7, in the very first chapter saying that people are like the grass that withers away.

Isaiah 40:6-7 (NIV) A voice says, "Cry out." And I said, "What shall I cry?" "All people are like grass, and all their faithfulness is like the flowers of the field. 7 The grass withers and the flowers fall, because the breath of the Lord blows on them. Surely the people are grass.

1 Peter 1:24 (NIV) For, "All people are like grass....."

Jeremiah's words in Lamentations assert that God does not willingly bring affliction or grief to anyone. However, if He permits affliction or grief to come to our doors, then it is for a reason that will benefit us if we turn to Him and learn what He wants us to know. It is interesting that Jesus' compassion for the people resulted in Him teaching them. No suffering is pleasant and it seems that it is only the knowledge and belief in the character and nature of God that helps the

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psalmist to persevere through it.

It is obvious that the writer of this psalm has thought long and deeply about the attributes of the God he serves. In fact, until he was sure that those qualities already existed, there was no point to him being so zealous about God's word.

57 You are my portion, Lord; I have promised to obey your words.

Psalms 119:57 (MSG) Because you have satisfied me, God, I promise to do everything you say.

30 I have chosen the way of faithfulness; I have set my heart on your laws.

58 I have sought your face with all my heart; be gracious to me according to your promise.

59 I have considered my ways and have turned my steps to your statutes.

Verses 57-59 implies a decision and a determination to rely solely on what he knows about God's character which ensures all the promises He has made will be kept. To seek God's face with all his heart indicates His confidence was grounded in what God had revealed about Himself. This convinces him that his best course of action was turn, to God in believing faith. A portion is something that is separated from something else, and to say that God is his portion demonstrates that this is a deliberate choice of God's ways as opposed to others. The Message translation of this verse, indicates that the psalmist has made his choice because he is satisfied God will respond to him and address his situation. Verse 59 suggests he comes to God having examined himself to assess whether or not it is appropriate for him approach God, especially if there is something that would prevent a positive response from Him. We saw last week that he had admitted he had gone astray. And, while we cannot read too much into the word, the fact that he says he has 'turned his steps to God's statutes', suggests that he had repented of anything that had displeased God and had turned away from it. In spite of not finding anything in himself that prevents him coming before God, he nevertheless recognises that God response to him will be a matter of grace. It's been said many times that grace is God's favour to the unworthy and undeserving. The psalmist, in spite of his committed obedience, still sees any response that comes from God as a gracious favour to an undeserving servant.

Until that comes, however, there is something else the psalmist can believe about God. Those who threaten him may be near in the physical sense, but God is very near to him too. In fact, nearer, for God is in his heart and his mind. He is illustrating for us the words in other parts of Scripture that assert that God is present even in the midst of affliction and suffering.

150 Those who devise wicked schemes are near, but they are far from your law.

151 Yet you are near, Lord, and all your commands are true.

Psalms 23:4 (NIV) Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.

Isaiah 43:2-3 (NIV) When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you

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pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze. 3 For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Saviour;

41 May your unfailing love come to me, Lord, your salvation, according to your promise;

166 I wait for your salvation, Lord, and I follow your commands.

The psalmist, too, recognises that God is his Saviour and that salvation will come according to God's promises. So, in spite of the severity of his situation, in spite of the fact that he wants a speedy response from God, which has not yet come, for towards the end of the psalm, he is found waiting for God to save him from his enemies, he waits expectantly. Waiting for God to act is one of the hardest things for Christians to do, especially in times of desperation or despair. But, even today, the only thing that makes such waiting bearable is to learn from the psalmist, and, like him, put all our trust in the wonderful attributes of an all-knowing, all-powerful ever-loving and faithful God, who has nothing but our best interests at heart.

WEEK 4: THE PSALMIST'S SOLUTION 2

I couldn't help but smile to myself when I thought of starting this talk with the question: Who do you call on when you face difficulties? Many years ago, in a class, if I had ever been stupid enough to ask that question - knowing some of the students, I could have given odds on some smart Alec loudly muttering 'Ghostbusters.' To which I would have had to reply, 'But they didn't have ghostbusters in those days, can anyone think of a theological alternative? Yet, there is a point to an answer like 'ghostbusters', because, even Christians, will sometimes turn to others or even inappropriate ways to escape from their adverse situations. We have a saying that 'a dying man will clutch at a straw.' It's human nature to try to regain control of the circumstances yourself and, it's only when these means are exhausted does the mind think of taking whatever, fears, frustrations and foes to the Lord, and asking for His help to resolve matters. Then, mention of students also brings the psalmist back to mind. How did he know to turn to God? How was he so sure this was his best option to get a resolution to his problems? The first week we saw that the arrangement and the length of the psalm indicated that he was an educated man. We can also say he had studied what theology consisted of in his day. Scholars have no doubt that this was the Torah - the first 5 books of our Bible, and have also found some familiarity with the wisdom literature, particularly the Book of Proverbs. People study different subjects for various reasons - because the subject interests them; because their intended career requires qualifications in that subject; or because it was the only subject available to them at the time. Even theology falls into these kinds of categories, and is often viewed today as just another academic area of research.

Our psalmist, however, is a completely different kind of student. For him, theology is not just a subject of academic interest. He doesn't need it to advance a career. What comes through time and time again is that he needs the information involved in order to live in a particular kind of way. What he has learned governs how he lives his life. Millennia before the writer to the Hebrews described the dynamic quality of the word of God, the psalmist already knew and had experience of the living word, given to Moses, which Stephen reminded the Sanhedrin of before he was stoned to death.

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Hebrews 4:12-13 (NIV) For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.

Acts 7:37-38 (NIV) “This is the Moses who was in the assembly in the wilderness, with the angel who spoke to him on Mount Sinai, and with our ancestors; and he received living words to pass on to us.

It is because of what he has learned from that living word that he has shunned all alternative means of dealing with his situation and appears to have immediately taken it to God. Today, we are so much more privileged for we know about the Word becoming flesh in the Person of the Lord Jesus Christ, who told all the weary and heavy laden to come to Him for rest for their souls. We sing “What a friend we have in Jesus, all our sins and griefs to bear...” It was because of what God had revealed of Himself in the words of the Torah that the psalmist went straight to God. In spite of having the greater revelation, can we say we have always done that too? Do we believe the words written on the pages of our Bibles are the words God is actually speaking to us at any given moment? We should, because that is the primary way God communicates with us today. The psalmist believed this of the Torah, and taking God at His word, he was able to bolster his resolve to persevere with God’s way, by adding to his knowledge of the character and nature of God, other relevant things in His word.

Given his unshakeable vision of all the attributes of the God he served, none of us could deny he chose the right means to start to resolve all the trauma he was facing. Jesus stated categorically that He will be with us even till the end of the age. He is in heaven pleading our cause before the very throne of God right now. If we don’t turn to Him first, what does that say about our knowledge of Him or our faith in Him? Very often our level of faith depends on our knowledge of God. And if we feel we fall short in either knowledge or faith, then the psalmist shows the remedy for that through seeing how his pre-occupation with God’s word gave the knowledge he needed to encourage his faith, which, in turn, led him to a greater trust and confidence in the One whose help he was seeking.

So, the simple answer to the question of how the psalmist knew and was convinced God was the right Person to go to is - God’s word. He got his knowledge and understanding of God from the divine revelations that existed in his day and what he knew of the history and religion of his people from the time of Moses. What he learned fed his faith because he believed the revelation he had been given and acted upon the strength of it. We have far more knowledge and understanding of the redemptive plan of God, so we have no excuse for not taking God’s word as seriously as the psalmist. And, we have to do it for the same reason he did - to know it and to obey it. Examining what the psalmist says, tells us a great deal about how God’s word should be affecting what we say, do and think, for the more you look at what is said, you realise there is something much more profound than mere knowledge of religious texts.

Although an educated man, our psalmist is still a student. In terms of learning how to live a life pleasing to God, we will remain students of God’s word for the whole of our lives. Regardless, of how far he had come in knowledge and understanding of God, the psalmist wants and feels the

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need to go even deeper into His word.

- 52 I remember, Lord, your ancient laws, and I find comfort in them.**
152 Long ago I learned from your statutes that you established them to last forever.
- 18 Open my eyes that I may see wonderful things in your law.**
129 Your statutes are wonderful; therefore I obey them.

1 Corinthians 2:14 (NIV) The person without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God but considers them foolishness, and cannot understand them because they are discerned only through the Spirit.

It is obvious the psalmist has come a long way on his journey, because he talks of learning from God's statutes 'long ago', possibly from childhood. He has already seen wonderful things in God's law. But he wants God to open his eyes further, and only God can inspire that kind of desire. While the Holy Spirit is not mentioned in connection with this psalm, with the benefit of hindsight, we know that Paul's words about discernment of the things of God come only through someone who is spiritually receptive.

The frequency with which the psalmist promotes the attributes of God and the wonderful things he perceives in God's word are not the thoughts of the worldly person. Paul's words put this into perspective for us, and we have commented before in these meetings, that we cannot understand how people can ignore the Bible. Like the psalmist, we see wonderful things in it. God's statutes are wonderful because if they were obeyed, this world would be a wonderful place to live in. It is, however, only the Holy Spirit who can convey this sense of wonder to us. And it is only the influence of the Holy Spirit that puts into us the desire to know more about God through His revealed word. It would appear that this psalmist was completely open to receive the spiritual teaching that only God could give. The evidence for this is that, when it comes to how life should be lived, the psalmist turns to the One who created life in the first place.

This desire in the psalm stands out for 12 times there is a request for the teaching of God.

- 12 Praise be to you, Lord; teach me your decrees.**
- 33 Teach me, Lord, the way of your decrees, that I may follow it to the end.[b]**
- 64 The earth is filled with your love, Lord; teach me your decrees.**
- 102 I have not departed from your laws, for you yourself have taught me.**
- 171 May my lips overflow with praise, for you teach me your decrees.**

John 6:45(NIV) It is written in the Prophets: 'They will all be taught by God.'

In verses 102 and 171 the psalmist explicitly states the Lord, Himself has been his teacher. 12, 26, 29, 33, 64, 66, 68, 102, 108, 124, 135, 171. Here is a man with a teachable spirit, receptive

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to spiritual leading and guiding, and a role model for those of whom Jesus said would be taught by God.

Now, being taught is one thing, remembering what you have been taught is a different ball game, especially as you get older!

- 52** I remember, Lord, **your ancient laws**, and I find comfort in them.
55 In the night, Lord, I remember your name, that I may keep your law.
61 Though the wicked bind me with ropes, I will not forget your law.
93 I will never forget your precepts, for by them you have preserved my life.
109 Though I constantly take my life in my hands, I will not forget your law.
153 Look on my suffering and deliver me, for I have not forgotten your law.

John 14:26-27 (NIV) But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you.

Hebrews 13:8 (NIV) Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.

It is impossible to remember everything you learn in a lifetime. It is impossible for us to remember every single text in the Bible, but the psalmist finds comfort in the fact that even ancient laws can be recalled from his memory bank. But, equally, there are some things you never forget. Both the words 'remember' and 'forget' play an important role in showing how God's word is contributing to the psalmist's faith and confidence that God will eventually deliver him from his difficulties.

Verses 52 and 55 combine the Person of God with the word of God. In this he has shown his understanding that the two are inseparable. The Person of God is indicated by the psalmist remembering His name. Jews regarded the God's name as so sacred that they did not use it. By writing 'the name', the psalmist was stating he was remembering who God was and all the aspects of His character and nature. By remembering His laws, the psalmist was confirming that those laws reflected all that he believed about the Person of God, and by concentrating on them he was showing his absolute allegiance to God and to His ways. We might ask why the psalmist relied on his ability not to forget God's word. The true test of allegiance to God and reliance on His word is whether or not they are sufficient to support and sustain us in times of great stress. It is remarkable that the psalmist emphasises his determination not to forget in exactly this kind of situation. In the midst of his affliction he is determined to put his trust in what he knows of God through His word. Because it is impossible to remember everything, we do need aids to our memories. Filofaxes used to be the in thing. Now it's your life in your smart phone or tablet. But when it comes to spiritual matters, Jesus tells us it is the Holy Spirit, Himself, who will aid our memories and bring back to mind any particular word from God that is appropriate to our circumstances at any given time. Since the Holy Spirit, like God and the Lord Jesus is the same yesterday, today and forever, we can justifiably attribute the psalmist's memory capacity to the influence of Him.

However, as has been said before, the Holy Spirit cannot remind us of something that has never been learned in the first place. The psalmist had learned the secret of gaining comfort from

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God's words even in his dire situation. He presented a teachable spirit to God, not to make himself an expert on God's word, but in order to live his life in obedience to it. One of my favourite quotes from Oswald Chambers is his statement that it is obedience, not intellectual ability, brings us close to God. It is this psalmist who shows us the way to get so close to God that we can completely entrust our fate to Him in times of trouble. In general, that means we have to take time to discern God's ways through His word and then obey the light we are given from it. In the psalm we find the right way to go about this.

The psalmist shows us he possessed an unshakeable belief in what his Scriptures told him.

89 Your word, Lord, is eternal; it stands firm in the heavens.

91 Your laws endure to this day, for all things serve you.

160 All your words are true; all your righteous laws are eternal.

96 To all perfection I see a limit, but your commands are boundless.

What he has learned has given him an assurance which could not be found in any other writing, because all that the psalmist says about God's word is a reflection of the Person, character and nature of God. Those ancient laws, mentioned in verse 52 had endured to his day and had not changed. Add to these verses the 10 times God's laws are described as righteous; the twice more he calls them eternal and true; plus, as the word of truth, trustworthy and good then you can see why his confidence is so strong. And to crown his description is verse 96. God's commands are boundless. In other words, they encompass every single person, place or thing that a human being will encounter in his or her life. We can but marvel at the psalmist's understanding of the vast scope of God's word. That scope is still the same today. This made me wonder, even after decades of being a Christian, if I was anywhere near this level of understanding and confidence.

The thing is, that can come if we follow up on the psalmist's perspective. Learning from and being taught God's word wasn't enough for him. It wasn't just a theoretical exercise to be studied for its own sake. To him it was a living word which gave a dynamic purpose to his whole being. This can be seen in several ways in the psalm. When we looked at covenants, we saw that one of the ways of describing the relationship between God and men like Enoch, was that they walked with God. They brought their lives into conformity with His ways. That is the inference we can draw from verse 105.

105 Your word is a lamp for my feet, a light on my path.

Job 34:21 (NIV) His eyes are on the ways of mortals; he sees their every step.

130 The unfolding of your words gives light; it gives understanding to the simple.

We all walk different paths in life and at different paces, but it is God's word that directs us to the right paths for us as individuals. Light in the Bible in association with God's word always leads to knowledge and understanding of how we build a relationship with Him and live accordingly. Our feet can only take one step at a time and one of the examples of how the

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psalmist's words echo references in the wisdom books of the Old Testament, is Job's statement that the Lord's eyes are on every step we take. We often refer to God knowing the number of hairs on our heads, but here is an even greater and more practical way in which He can provide a word to guide and guard every step we take in life. The light of His word helps us to avoid the pitfalls that will endanger not only our physical lives, but our spiritual ones as well. And, as we walk in the light of understanding He gives of that, further light will be given to take us further along the paths of the ways He has planned for us. The provision of the right word to those willing to listen and obey it is available regardless of age or intellectual ability, for the word 'simple' can mean a child, someone new to the faith, or those with limited capacity for learning.

Yet, willingness to listen and obey does require a level of personal commitment.

2 Blessed are those who keep his statutes and seek him with all their heart—

Jeremiah 29:13-14 (NIV) You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart.

Matthew 5:6 & 8(NIV) Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled....Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

Matthew 6:33-34 (NIV) But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

Even in the psalmist's day that meant a change in the inner being - a commitment in the heart, soul, mind and will. In fact, he starts off by saying that the only way to have a happy and satisfactory life is to seek and obey God wholeheartedly. Depending on when the psalm was written it could be said to either echo or pre-empt words given by God and spoken by Jeremiah in the Old Testament. It definitely pre-empts the words of Jesus in the New. The centrality of the commitment of the heart to God, is a continuous theme throughout the whole Bible. It represents the dedication of every fibre of a person's being to Him. For example, we glimpse the psalmist's emotional investment in it when 9 times he says how much he delights in God's word. (16, 24, 25, 47, 70, 77, 92, 143, and 174). A further 9 times he affirms his love for it (48, 97, 113, 119, 127, 159, 163, 165, 167). Because of that delight and love for it we see how it leads to him longing for (40, 130), reaching out for (48) and seeking it (94). Such a yearning for God's word that can be inferred from these verses demonstrates an intense desire to come closer to God and to learn even more about Him, rather than just a passing or superficial interest.

There is further evidence that we are drawing the right inference, because the psalmist's heart is mentioned thirteen times in the psalm. I mentioned the heartfelt commitment of the psalmist the first week, but I have given the Message translations of these verses because they bring out the powerful and fervent passion he has for God's word and also his determination to obey it whatever befalls him.

**11 I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you.
(MSG) 11 I've banked your promises in the vault of my heart so I won't sin myself bankrupt.**

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20 My soul is consumed with longing for your laws at all times.

Psalms 119:20 (MSG) My soul is starved and hungry, ravenous! —insatiable for your nourishing commands.

80 May I wholeheartedly follow your decrees, that I may not be put to shame.

Psalms 119:80 (MSG) And let me live whole and holy, soul and body, so I can always walk with my head held high.

112 My heart is set on keeping your decrees to the very end.[d]

Psalms 119:112 (MSG) I concentrate on doing exactly what you say— I always have and always will.

Although the psalmist recognises his tendency to stray, the strength of his inner desire for total commitment to God is unmistakable. A careful reading of the psalm can almost make you feel the natural desperation about his situation is running parallel with an intense desire for his life to be brought into total conformity with God's laws. Verse 11 has the force of pointing to God's word being so deeply ingrained in his nature that it almost automatically and immediately is recalled to mind to govern every thought, word and deed in case any of these would cause offence to God. Verse 20, taken together with his constant requests for teaching bears witness to him persistently seeking what Hebrews 5:14 (NIV) calls solid food, which is "for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil." Doing good and avoiding evil are the means by which he can walk with his head held high because he would have nothing to be ashamed of. In other words, no skeletons in his cupboard and no reason to be accused of hypocrisy for not practicing what he preached. Verse 112, given his situation, points to the fact that even if his enemies carry out their threats to his life, he will maintain his allegiance to God's word.

The intensity of his commitment is also borne out by the toll it is taking his mental and emotional energy. Being consumed, eaten up with longing is one expression of this. These are others.

106 I have taken an oath and confirmed it, that I will follow your righteous laws.

28 My soul is weary with sorrow; strengthen me according to your word.

53 Indignation grips me because of the wicked, who have forsaken your law.

139 My zeal wears me out, for my enemies ignore your words.

158 I look on the faithless with loathing, for they do not obey your word.

Take the burden of the oath he has voluntarily given. Because an oath entailed not only the obligation to fulfil it, but had a direct impact on a person's character and reputation, to undertake such an oath at all was a very courageous step. To have been seen to have broken that oath, under the pressure of the abuse he was suffering, would have led to shame, because he would have failed God and could therefore not be a reliable witness to God's provision and protection

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in the affliction affecting him. Not only is he suffering the dangers and abuse from enemies, he is suffering because of their total disregard for God's laws. His distress about this is genuine, and we cannot help but think that his soul, weary with sorrow, and his zeal wearing him out through trying to maintain his witness of God's support, is as much to do with his indignation and loathing of his enemies' rejection of all God stands for. This additional burden of righteous grief however, only serves to show how deeply committed the psalmist is to all that is meant by the various terms he uses for God's utterances.

There is such a strong conviction and determination in the psalmist's heart that can only be attributed to the power of the Holy Spirit who brings such assurances to the hearts of believers. The words of Paul about the gospel could justifiably be applied to what the psalmist believed about what would have constituted the gospel in his day.

1 Thessalonians 1:4-5 (NIV) For we know, brothers and sisters loved by God, that he has chosen you, because our gospel came to you not simply with words but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and deep conviction.....

Whether the psalmist attributed the power of God's word that he had internalised with such deep conviction to the Holy Spirit is not an issue here. What we can be absolutely sure of is that there was a divine source of the strength of that power and conviction as he faced suffering that was bringing him to a state of collapse.

How was he managing to keep going? By the same means we can employ today - by keeping God's words including His promises in the forefront of our minds. The psalmist mentions meditating on God's word 8 times (15, 23, 27, 48, 78, 97, 99, 148) and ponders it once (95). And he does so at all time of the day and night.

55 In the night, Lord, I remember your name, that I may keep your law.

62 At midnight I rise to give you thanks for your righteous laws.

148 My eyes stay open through the watches of the night, that I may meditate on your promises.

164 Seven times a day I praise you for your righteous laws.

In the busyness of our 21st century world, an emphasis on meditation is more likely to arouse feelings of guilt or exasperation because demands on our time make it impossible for us to withdraw from our obligations and duties. While it is very beneficial to have what is now termed a 'quiet time' to be alone with the Lord, if we understand meditation to mean just bringing God to mind, and concentrating on some aspect of God's being or His goodness to us, then this can be done at any time or in any place. The psalmist does not mention where he was when he meditated, or how long he did so whether during the day or night. You can turn your thoughts to God while waiting for a bus or a train. One, maybe flippant example, but nevertheless relevant quote, is when you can't sleep - don't try counting sheep, talk to the Shepherd. Opening our minds to God's word is the same as opening our minds to let the power of it strengthen and comfort us as it did for the psalmist. That's why and how, he turned to God's word for a solution

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to his situation. It's why and how we should do the same today.

WEEK 5: THE PSALMIST'S SOLUTION 3

This phase is a direct result of phase 1 and 2. Because of what the psalmist knows about God and His Word, he then takes the appropriate action - he prays. And his prayers give rise to issues that our prayer lives face in the present day. Probably the most distressing one for us is the problem of unanswered prayer, especially when we are in dire need. We've already reviewed the psalmist's situation and the psalm leaves us in no doubt of the severity of it. We can, therefore, understand why he turns to prayer. Given the psalmist's total commitment to God's word, and the godlessness of his enemies, two verses from the New Testament would apply to his situation.

James 5:16-17 (NIV)The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.

1 Peter 3:12 (NIV) For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous and his ears are attentive to their prayer, but the face of the Lord is against those who do evil."

121 I have done what is righteous and just; do not leave me to my oppressors.

132 Turn to me and have mercy on me, as you always do to those who love your name.

It would be nice to be able to say that psalmist's prayers were answered, in accordance with what is said in these texts, but there is no indication in the psalm that this was the case. That means we are meeting the psalmist at the point where he is in critical need, but God does not appear to be attentive to his prayers. Every Christian, at some point in their lives, will be in the position of thinking God isn't listening and that He is not answering prayer. And, here in this psalm we have a picture of the reality of unanswered prayer at that moment in time. There is no doubt God did answer those prayers eventually, but we are seeing the psalmist when he is desperately waiting for those answers as verses 82 & 84 would indicate.

82 My eyes fail, looking for your promise; I say, "When will you comfort me?"

84 How long must your servant wait? When will you punish my persecutors?

We've already looked at the kinds of opposition the psalmist was facing, and, when it comes to examining his prayers, these verses add another distressing dimension to his situation. Verse 82 gives us the sense of tension between belief that God will come to his aid, and the time he has spent waiting for his deliverance. Failing eyes is a way of expressing the weariness that comes from waiting for some sign of God's intervention. In terms of time, when the question 'How long' or 'When' is asked it means that a time of praying and waiting for answers has already passed. That means that his affliction has been on-going for some time previous to the writing of the psalm. We know that any of the possible authors suggested by scholars, faced the problems the psalmist mentions. When you read about the lives of those suggested authors - David, Daniel or Ezra about Nehemiah - you find there was always a build up to the opposition they faced. The progress from the scorn and contempt to verbal taunts, and then to the threats of physical harm that could end in death, were hardly likely to have occurred overnight. The

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psalmist's knowledge of the characters and actions of his enemies also suggests that he was aware that, sooner or later, he would come under their scrutiny and suffer at their hands. The prayers in the psalm therefore appear to come when what had been ongoing had reached a crisis point. Again, because we do not know the identity of the psalmist we don't know what prayers had preceded the ones recorded in the psalm. If the psalmist had prayed for relief during the build-up to his current situation, those prayers had obviously not been answered, because as yet, relief had not come: he was now at the point of asking God to put a timeframe on when He would intervene and answer his prayers because the situation was now extremely urgent.

There are times answers do not come because the pray-er, for some reason, is not in right-standing with God. If, as James says the prayers of a righteous man are powerful and effective, then we have to assess if the psalmist can be considered a righteous man. We know, if we are deliberately sinning and asking for something that goes completely against God's character and nature, then it is obvious that answers we want will not come. You've got to admit, that as Christians, there is something very hypocritical and arrogant about asking God to come through for us in times of crisis, if we ignore how He wants us to live the rest of the time. But, if, in all conscience, we have done what God expects of us, and still don't get answers, we can experience doubt and loss of faith. These past weeks leave us in no doubt that the psalmist justifiably could have claimed, in good conscience, to be a righteous man. So, how does he deal with prayer that seems to be anything but powerful and effective? I found the answers to that question quite remarkable.

I can only give you the nearest estimate of figures here, because different Bible translations may produce a different number. In the NIV version I counted 63 verses of petitionary prayer directly related to God and His word.

18 Open my eyes that I may see wonderful things in your law.

27 Cause me to understand the way of your precepts, that I may meditate on your wonderful deeds.

35 Direct me in the path of your commands, for there I find delight.

43 Never take your word of truth from my mouth, for I have put my hope in your laws.

66 Teach me knowledge and good judgment, for I trust your commands.

80 May I wholeheartedly follow your decrees, that I may not be put to shame.

125 I am your servant; give me discernment that I may understand your statutes.

By far the greatest number of petitions request God to keep his heart and his mind concentrated on all aspects of God's word. He wants more knowledge, understanding, discernment of it and guidance in it in order to obey it more fully. These verses show the variety of ways in which the psalmist expresses his desire to come closer to God through His revealed word. I could not help drawing a comparison between the psalmist's priority and the priority in the Lord's prayer -

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Hallowed be thy name. Throughout the psalm God's glory is his main concern. Of these verses, only 3 do not refer to some aspect of God or His word. 84, 121-122.

84 How long must your servant wait? When will you punish my persecutors?

121 I have done what is righteous and just; do not leave me to my oppressors.

122 Ensure your servant's well-being; do not let the arrogant oppress me.

126 It is time for you to act, Lord; your law is being broken.

These verses do illustrate for us that no matter how dedicated we are to God, our normal human sense of urgency, desperation or despair will rise to the surface in times of pressing need. The words of the psalmist show the stress of the effort of maintaining a God-glorifying life in the midst of his personal suffering. And the distress over the godlessness of people around him, was contributing to his increasing loss of strength to withstand the persecution and oppression of his enemies. He is finding it difficult to hold on to his witness, and it appears that those who have no time for God's laws are going to win. This is what motivates the urgency implied in verse 126.

In contrast to the 'how long' or 'when' questions, regarding his personal plight, verse 126, on first reading, there is a suggestion that the psalmist is beginning to demand and even command God to act. It is true this is a very bold statement, but it comes, not just because of the peril facing the psalmist, but because his enemies' utter disregard for God's law is horrifying him. This prayer, although in the form of a statement, is a plea for God to vindicate His own laws which the arrogant oppressors have broken or nullified. If we are honest, don't we wish God would do the same at the present time, when we see how far the nations and even our own local community have departed from God's laws? Yet, the psalmist's zeal for God's reputation and the upholding of His laws help us to realise that although the answers have not come when the psalm was written, answers will come in God's time.

His concern for God's glory and putting everything else in reference to it, is the main reason we can regard his petitions as those of a righteous man. In general, effective prayer requires exactly what the psalmist's life demonstrates. He affirms his faith, he lives an obedient life and he maintains his love for, and loyalty to, God's word even in the face of personal danger. We do not know who the psalmist is, or his situation, or the outcome of his prayers, but this general impression alone would suggest he had prayed effectively and God had eventually delivered him. What would have made that positive outcome even more certain, however, is the particular aspects which make prayer effective, all of which the psalmist refers to in his petitions.

In the first place, he comes with the right sense of his standing before God. He comes once as a supplicant and, as previously mentioned, 13 times as a servant.

170 May my supplication come before you; deliver me according to your promise.

17 Be good to your servant while I live, that I may obey your word.

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23 Though rulers sit together and slander me, your servant will meditate on your decrees.

38 Fulfill your promise to your servant, so that you may be feared.

49 Remember your word to your servant, for you have given me hope.

(+ Servant verses 17, 23, 38, 49, 65, 76, 84, 122, 124, 125, 135, 140, 176)

When we looked at the character of the psalmist the first week, we saw that there was no tone of self-righteousness, deserving of God's attention in how the psalmist sees his status. In the Bible, a supplicant is one who humbly and earnestly petitions for favour from someone of a higher or superior status. It's not used very often in the Bible, and with only two exceptions (Jer. 37:20; 38:26), supplication is always made to God. The use of petitions in our own day help us to see supplications can only be made to someone who has the power and authority to grant what is requested. Similarly, the psalmist's designation of himself as a servant, is an expression that he approaches God with his petitions in humility, acknowledging that only God has the power and authority to resolve his problems and only God can decide when and how that is to be done. Servant can mean slave, but in the context of a relationship with God, it usually means a person who worships and obeys Him.

If supplication has to be made in all earnestness, we are left in no doubt of it in the psalm. Given his situation, we wouldn't expect him to be anything but earnest.

145 I call with all my heart; answer me, Lord, and I will obey your decrees.

146 I call out to you; save me and I will keep your statutes.

149 Hear my voice in accordance with your love; preserve my life, Lord, according to your laws.

169 May my cry come before you, Lord; give me understanding according to your word.

The psalmist petitions God to be attentive to his prayers, to hear and to listen to them. Verse 145 shows he has poured his heart into supplication. Both calling out and crying in the context of the psalm are means of expressing the distress and increasing desperation of the psalmist's situation. Crying could infer weeping or, like the call coming from the heart, express his inner anguish. But whether they were manifested in either inner turmoil or outwardly in tears or audible calls for help, they both indicate that the psalmist's prayers were passionate and intense.

He also comes with the right frame of mind. There are two aspects to this confession and repentance; faith and confidence

113 I hate double-minded people, but I love your law.

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128 and because I consider all your precepts right, I hate every wrong path.

1 Kings 18:21(NIV) Elijah went before the people and said, "How long will you waver between two opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal is God, follow him."

James 1:6-8 (NIV) But when you ask, you must believe and not doubt, because the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. That person should not expect to receive anything from the Lord. Such a person is double-minded and unstable in all they do.

Elijah in the Old Testament and James in the New illustrate for us a line of meaning which corresponds with how the psalmist regards those who pay lip service to God but expect Him to answer prayer. He knows that those who pray must come before God with a confident faith and not doubt. He realises the pernicious nature of doubt and the untrustworthiness and unreliability of those who halt between two opinions. Hence, he puts his trust fully in God's word.

Not only does the psalmist come before God in confident faith; he comes with a clear conscience. He can do so because, as mentioned before, striving with all his being to live in accordance with God's laws and giving God the willing obedience of his heart constituted the righteousness conferred by the covenant of law given to Moses. At the same time, however, the more he has explored the righteousness of God through His word, the more he seems to have become aware of areas in his life that fall short of that righteousness. And, that leads to another key element of effective prayer.

29 Keep me from deceitful ways;

36 Turn my heart toward your statutes and not toward selfish gain.

37 Turn my eyes away from worthless things;

133 Direct my footsteps according to your word; let no sin rule over me.

67 Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I obey your word.

176 I have strayed like a lost sheep. Seek your servant, for I have not forgotten your commands.

1 John 1:9 (NIV) If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.

The psalmist comes acknowledging sin and, praying for deliverance from it. We don't know if the psalmist had actually fallen into the sins inherent in what he mentions in verses 29, 37 and 37. What we can say is that he is quite specific about temptations coming to him that could still affect him. The fact that he admits straying in the past may be connected to yielding to such temptations. However, the importance of verses 67 and 176 is that he has turned his face against them to come back to the obedience God's commands which have been imprinted on his mind. His shunning of potential sin in his life, indicated in verse 133, his love and delight in God's laws and his emphasis on obedience, points to true repentance of any wrong doing. The psalmist appears to have done what 1 John advises Christians to do in the present day.

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Another key indicator of why his prayer would eventually be effective is that he comes with the right expectation.

**25 I am laid low in the dust; preserve my life according to your word.
+28, 37, 65, 107, 133, 169**

**41 May your unfailing love come to me, Lord, your salvation, according to your promise;
+76, 116, 154, 170**

**149 Hear my voice in accordance with your love; preserve my life, Lord, according to your laws.
+ 124, 156, 159**

Deuteronomy 11:26-28 (NIV) See, I am setting before you today a blessing and a curse—the blessing if you obey the commands of the Lord your God that I am giving you today; the curse if you disobey the commands of the Lord your God and turn from the way that I command you today by following other gods, which you have not known.

1 John 5:14-15 (NIV) This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us.

Sixteen times, the psalmist makes his requests according to what he knows of the character of God and what has been laid down in His word. There are no demands that God answer his prayers in a certain way. The psalmist is demonstrating a complete reliance on the understanding that since God's word, promises and laws come from a loving God, whatever happens will be only what will be the best result for him. And, from his knowledge of the Torah, he knows that his obedience carries with it the promise of blessing. These 16 verses leave us in absolutely no doubt that the bedrock of the psalmist's confidence and trust in God stems from taking God at His word. Last week we saw how that word was described as enlightening, eternal, righteous, true and enduring. Couching his petitions in accordance with the boundless goodness in God's word, is the mainspring of the faith and trust he has put in making prayer a major part of seeking a solution to his problems.

Taking the Torah as his point of reference, we can see evidence of how he is praying in accordance with God's word.

Exodus 6:6-7 (NIV) Therefore, say to the Israelites: 'I am the Lord, and I will bring you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians. I will free you from being slaves to them, and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgment.

154 Defend my cause and redeem me; preserve my life according to your promise.

Exodus 34:6 (NIV) And he passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, "The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness,

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- 76** May your unfailing love be my comfort, according to your promise to your **servant**.
77 Let your compassion come to me that I may live, for your law is my delight.

Numbers 6:25 (NIV) the Lord make his face shine on you and be gracious to you;

- 58** I have sought your face with all my heart; be gracious to me according to your promise.
135 Make your face shine on your **servant** and teach me your decrees.

God defended the cause of His chosen people when He preserved the lives of the descendants of Abraham in Egypt and redeemed them from slavery there. At Sinai, He revealed Himself as a loving, compassionate and gracious God, who would be faithful to all that He had promised to the Israelites. And in verse 135 the psalmist uses the words of the Aaronic blessing to plead his case before God. So far, then, the psalmist cannot be faulted in his use of prayer as a solution to his problems.

Can the same be said of the content of his prayers? The psalmist asks for deliverance using a variety of terms. What is quite remarkable is that, comparatively speaking, his direct pleas for help and the verses directly mentioning his enemies and the suffering they are causing, are quite sparse. The pleas include save me (94, 146), strengthen and sustain me (28, 116), be good to me (17), have mercy on me (132) defend my cause (154) do not let me be put to shame (31) and take away my disgrace (39) Direct references to his human persecutors and/or oppressors are in verses 22, 86, 121, 122, 134 and 153.

- 22** Remove from me their scorn and contempt, for I keep your statutes.
86 All your commands are trustworthy; help me, for I am being persecuted without cause.
121 I have done what is righteous and just; do not leave me to my oppressors.
122 Ensure your **servant**'s well-being; do not let the arrogant oppress me.
134 Redeem me from human oppression, that I may obey your precepts.
153 Look on my suffering and deliver me, for I have not forgotten your law.

There is not time tonight to look into what he expected from each of the pleas he makes, but one, in particular, is needful if he is to benefit from however God chooses to manifest all these other ways of asking for deliverance. 8 times the psalmist asks God to preserve his life.

- 25** I am laid low in the dust; preserve my life according to your word.
37 Turn my eyes away from worthless things; preserve my life according to your word.

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- 40** How I long for your precepts! In your righteousness preserve my life.
- 88** In your unfailing love preserve my life, that I may obey the statutes of your mouth.
- 107** I have suffered much; preserve my life, Lord, according to your word.
- 149** Hear my voice in accordance with your love; preserve my life, Lord, according to your laws.
- 154** Defend my cause and redeem me; preserve my life according to your promise.
- 156** Your compassion, Lord, is great; preserve my life according to your laws.

The wording of these verses strongly imply that the psalmist is not just concerned with his physical life. Verse 25 indicates a very low point because nothing is lower than the dust of the ground and since returning to dust is the result of death, we are getting an indication here of a man who sees himself as near death. It is likely that the 'much suffering' he mentions in verse 107 has brought him to such a low ebb. The petition to defend and redeem or rescue him in verse 154 is what he needs to preserve his physical life. Perhaps the words of another psalm came to mind because, given his great attachment to God and His word, we could imagine him agreeing with Psalms 6:5 (NIV) "Among the dead no one proclaims your name. Who praises you from the grave?"

And that is why it is reasonable to suggest that the prayer to preserve his life would also apply to a need for a renewed vitality and strength to his spiritual life. Evidence for that comes from the reasons the psalmist gives. He wants his life preserved in order to serve God. Indeed, this is the reason he gives for all the various ways he asks God to grant relief for his plight. As we have seen, he bases the appeals for the preservation of life on God's word, promise, and laws, but also on two great characteristics of God - His love and compassion.

Examining the way the psalmist prays leaves us in no doubt that his prayers are those of a righteous man. He comes before God acknowledging the greatness of God and forming his petitions in accordance with God's character and word. God's word takes pre-eminence in his heart and mind and it governs his life. It is hidden in his heart to keep him from sinning. G. Campbell Morgan used to say of this verse, "It tells us about the best book- 'Thy Word'-in the best place- 'my heart'-for the best purpose- 'that I might not sin' against God." That is why we find him coming confessing and repenting of his own failings. Not only does God's word guard against sin, the psalmist's words give more explicit reasons for adhering to it. He wants to live in order to learn even more of God, to love, worship and obey Him. He prays that his witness under persecution and through his hope of personal deliverance, to see God vindicated and victorious over the godless people and the godlessness of their ways that are opposing him. In view of this approach to prayer, it would be hard to deny that the psalmist's prayer would not be effective. It appears that he has done everything the right way to generate a positive response from God.

Because there are no answers to prayer about his external circumstances forthcoming in the psalm, it might cross our minds to question if his confidence was misplaced or his method was

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defective. One other verse in the psalm suggests otherwise.

26 I gave an account of my ways and you answered me; teach me your decrees.

If this has always been the pattern of the psalmist's prayers, then he knows that God will answer, because He has done so in the past. His confidence is therefore based on God's faithfulness and goodness to him in the past. The psalmist went to the right Person in the right way to find the right solution to his problems. In that he has given us a perfect pattern, when we too find ourselves in dire need and waiting for answers.

WEEK 6: THE PSALMIST'S SOLACE

Over the last three weeks we have seen how the psalmist sought a solution to his plight in God's character and word and prayed on the basis of what he knew from his scriptures of both. Did doing this resolve the situation in any way? The overall impression of the psalm is that there was no relief from the external threats he faced.

84 How long must your **servant wait? When will you punish my persecutors?**

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

174 I long for your salvation, Lord, and your law gives me delight.

166 I wait for your salvation, Lord, and I follow your commands.

We saw last week an increasing concern of having to wait for deliverance. By verse 173 he is asking for the Lord's hand to help him to do what he cannot do for himself and in the following verse he expresses he is still longing for salvation. Yet, in verse 166, there is a calmer statement, which points us how the psalmist is dealing with the situation while he is waiting for God to intervene.

Given that we have the prayer of a righteous man and scripture's assurances that God will honour and answer such prayers, we know that the psalmist would eventually receive deliverance from his enemies, one way or another. From our own personal experiences, we are aware, too, that God does not always answer prayer in the way we expect Him too, or in the time we want Him to. Because of the length and the arrangement of this psalm, it is not easy to find any indication that God was already answering his prayer. In the end, I was glad it took some time to figure out because, if the psalmist had reported that all his problems were solved and his enemies had got their just desserts, we would have lost some very valuable teaching about how to wait on and what to look for while we wait for God to answer prayer.

There is a saying 'prayer changes things' but, very often, it is not the situation that changes, but the attitude and inner state of the pray-er. And we find this is what was happening to the psalmist, for in the midst of the darkness and danger of his plight, God was providing him with solace.

The dictionary defines solace as comfort or consolation in a time of great distress or sadness. And we cannot doubt that the psalmist needed a lot of that given his situation. From what he

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writes in the psalm we find that external relief has yet to arrive, but he was receiving the resources he needs in his inner being. It is only when you gather together the verses that reflect the kinds of solace available to the psalmist that you realise the extent to which God is already answering his prayers. This starts in the first two verses which echo the first verse of the very first psalm and finds corroboration in the beatitudes of the New Testament.

1 Blessed are those whose ways are blameless, who walk according to the law of the Lord.

2 Blessed are those who keep his statutes and seek him with all their heart—

BLESSED is the man that walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor standeth in the way of sinners, nor sitteth in the seat of the scornful. But his delight is in the law of the LORD; and in his law doth he meditate day and night. (Psalm 1:1-2)

Matthew 5:3 (NIV) “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Matthew 5:10-12 (NIV) Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. “Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Some translations of the Bible translate the word ‘blessed’ as ‘happy’, ‘fortunate’ or ‘favoured’. From what we have already seen of the psalmist’s situation, he could not be described as any of these. He was being persecuted and oppressed. His very life was in danger. The problem is that there is no English word that encompasses the meaning of a Biblical beatitude. As can be seen in these texts from the Old and New Testaments, blessedness is something that can only come from God. It is an act of God’s grace in believer’s lives and that grace can be manifested in many different ways. As Jesus recognises in the Sermon on the Mount, Old Testament believers who walked by the light they were given put themselves in the position of receiving grace, which we interpret as the unmerited favour of God. Also, those who were persecuted for maintaining their allegiance to God fell under this same gift of God’s work in their lives.

Thus, in the very first verses of the psalm, the psalmist is directing our attention to the grace of God which is extended to those in his circumstances who obey God and are suffering for it.

26 I gave an account of my ways and you answered me; teach me your decrees.

59 I have considered my ways and have turned my steps to your statutes.

168 I obey your precepts and your statutes, for all my ways are known to you.

Acts 24:16 (NIV) So I strive always to keep my conscience clear before God and man.

2 Corinthians 13:5 (NIV) Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves. Do you not realise that Christ Jesus is in you—unless, of course, you fail the

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test?

Hebrews 4:16 (NIV) Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.

Having examined his own life, he is aware that it is an open book before God. Having studied God's statutes, laws and commandments, he knows he has a clear conscience because he is living according to the paths God has ordained for true believers to follow. Because of this, he knows that, in spite of his straying, he is a man under grace, not condemnation. While we cannot say that the psalmist had the understanding of grace that we have today, there can be no doubt that he believed himself to be in right standing with God and therefore in the place where he could receive whatever means of grace God was prepared to give to him. Like Christians today, on the basis of that standing he was able to take his troubles to God in his time of need.

As with everything else in the psalm, the means of grace came through God's word. For the psalmist, grace came in the form of comfort. Reliance on God's promises and laws brought consolation to him.

50 My comfort in my suffering is this: Your promise preserves my life.

52 I remember, Lord, your ancient laws, and I find comfort in them.

76 May your unfailing love be my comfort, according to your promise to your **servant.**

He found in God's word a powerful spiritual resource that ministered comfort to his soul. The basic concept for comfort in both the Old and New Testaments is encouragement, whether by words or the presence of another to help in time of need. Synonymous words are console, help, give relief, cheer up, exhort, and fear not. In the psalm, comfort is sought from God alone and comes from knowing a loving God will not do anything contrary to that love. This knowledge helps to encourage his confidence that God will in the end preserve his life, whether or not he intended the meaning of the phrase as physical or spiritual. You can see how God's word would have been a comfort when you contrast it with the verbal abuse he was receiving from his enemies. If his mind had been focused on what people were unjustly and untruthfully saying about him it would have resulted in the complete opposite of comfort and increased his fear instead of allaying it. In the verses we have already looked at, his enemies had brought nothing but distress and this is put in sharp contrast with the solace of comfort found in knowing God's character and word.

And that comfort fed into his hope. Again, we see how hope is grounded in God's word.

43 Never take your word of truth from my mouth, for I have put my hope in your laws.

49 Remember your word to your **servant, for you have given me hope.**

74 May those who fear you rejoice when they see me, for I have put my hope in your word.

81 My soul faints with longing for your salvation, but I have put my hope in your word.

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114 You are my refuge and my shield; I have put my hope in your word

116 Sustain me, my God, according to your promise, and I will live; do not let my hopes be dashed.

147 I rise before dawn and cry for help; I have put my hope in your word.

Isaiah 49:23(NIV) Then you will know that I am the Lord; those who hope in me will not be disappointed.”

We have to ask what is the nature of the psalmist's hope because hope in the Old Testament had a different focus to the kind of hope we find in the New Testament. Hope in the New Testament centres on all the spiritual blessings we are promised as a result of being 'in Christ'. Hope ultimately looks to the future eternal life as the heritage of believers. Hope in the Old Testament, however, appears in different guises. There are too many references to discuss, but the psalmist demonstrates the key aspects of what hope meant to people of his time. Hope was closely associated with trust in God and the psalmist has given us plenty of examples of his trust and confidence in God's word. Hope is also associated with waiting for God to act. But it is the expectant hope that faith generates not a state of resignation. In general, before messianic prophecies entered the theology of the peoples of the Old Testament, hoping for God to intervene in personal situations related primarily to their individual circumstances. Hope related to resolution of practical problems. Externally, our psalmist's hopes centred on God giving his relief from persecution and oppression. That hope was practical and tangible. Internally, his hope focused on him not being put to shame. Five times, in verses 6, 31,46,78 and 80, he asks specifically that this will not happen. While it could relate to his reputation, in the Old Testament references it is a plea that his hopes will not be disappointed.

It is hope that enables the psalmist to wait expectantly for God's deliverance and which gives him the strength to endure in his time of trouble. No one can live without hope and resting hope on God's promises leads to confidence and trust that hopes will not be dashed, will not be disappointed and will not be in vain.

Comfort and hope are essential if trials are to be borne. What we do not expect the psalmist to be experiencing in the midst of his suffering is pleasure which puts love into his heart and gives him joy and peace, which results in rejoicing, singing and thankfully praising God. The references to each of these in the psalm stand as a testimony to the grace at work in the psalmist's life. As Christians, we know that this is mediated to us through the Holy Spirit and once again we can believe this of the psalmist too because in verse 151 it asserts that the Lord is near. In other words, he has a real sense of God's presence. Especially, in the psalmist's situation these means of grace are crucially important to his ability to expectantly wait for God's deliverance.

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

116 Sustain me, my God, according to your promise, and I will live; do not let my hopes be dashed.

175 Let me live that I may praise you, and may your laws sustain me.

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Taking pleasure first. I don't think I need to repeat all the verses that speak of the psalmist's delight in and love for all aspects of God's word. None of us would deny that you can't love or delight in something that you find unpleasant. People who love and find delight in their hobbies, for example, derive a great deal of pleasure from their enthusiasm and passion for what they spend their time on. The psalmist clearly shows from his repetition of delighting in and loving God's word his passion for it and the pleasure it gives him. That is why he prays for an even deeper knowledge and understanding. But from verse 92 we can also see how his passion had become a means of grace in his inner being. His prayer to be sustained is being answered through the pleasure he has in meditating on God's word.

And that, in turn, gives him an inner joy and peace in spite of the sorrow of his situation.

165 Great peace have those who love your law, and nothing can make them stumble.

Galatians 5:22(NIV) But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace,

James 1:2-4 (NIV) Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, 3 because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. 4 Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.

1 Peter 1:6 (NIV) In all this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials.

2 Thessalonians 3:16-17 (NIV) Now may the Lord of peace himself give you peace at all times and in every way. The Lord be with all of you.

Philippians 4:7 (NIV) And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

It was very hard not to think of these New Testament verses in connection with what the psalmist was saying. The fruit of the Spirit as love, joy and peace and Paul's other references to the God of peace. Especially relevant were the words of Peter and James who speak of joy and rejoicing in times of great trial. We know how the Holy Spirit assures us of these things, and it appears that this is what was happening in the psalmist's experience as well.

Inner joy and peace, particularly in bad times, is very hard to explain. We just know it is there. In Old Testament times, however, the joy of a pious Hebrew came from God's acts in history, with the rescue from slavery in Egypt and the Sinai covenant revealing to them an almighty God who was totally committed to their welfare.

14 I rejoice in following your statutes as one rejoices in great riches

111 Your statutes are my heritage forever; they are the joy of my heart.

162 I rejoice in your promise like one who finds great spoil.

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Deuteronomy 16:11-12 (NIV) And rejoice before the Lord your God at the place he will choose as a dwelling for his Name—you, your sons and daughters, your male and female servants, the Levites in your towns, and the foreigners, the fatherless and the widows living among you.

Deuteronomy 16:14 (NIV) Be joyful at your festival—you, your sons and daughters, your male and female servants, and the Levites, the foreigners, the fatherless and the widows who live in your towns.

Joy was an integral part of worship, these two referring to the celebration of the Passover and the feast of tabernacles. This is the kind of heritage that brings joy to the psalmist's heart.

It was this heritage too that brought peace. It came from meditating on those ancient laws that spoke to him of the faithfulness and trustworthiness of God and the promises that God would be the means of how salvation would come to him. The psalmist mentions salvation 6 times - verses 41, 81, 123, 155, 166 and 174. Because salvation would not mean the same to the psalmist as it does for us, all that can be said is that the waiting and longing for salvation had more to do with his current plight, than a direct reference to spiritual salvation in the present in preparation for the afterlife, although that was a belief in Hebrew theology. What we can say for certain is that the psalmist's peace and joy came from what he knew of the God of his forefathers and through his own past experiences as he meditated and obeyed God's word. And that led to placing great value on God's word.

103 How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth!

114 You are my refuge and my shield; I have put my hope in your word.

72 The law from your mouth is more precious to me than thousands of pieces of silver and gold.

127 Because I love your commands more than gold, more than pure gold,

These verses illustrate why the psalmist has reason to rejoice. Verse 103 tells us he is a man who has tasted and seen that the Lord is good. Then in verse 114, he has found a place of sanctuary in God's word because it is eternal and enduring and will be the means of preserving his life. He knows there he is protected, because an omnipotent God will not allow any lasting harm to come to him. On these grounds alone, we can see why he feels he had found and acquired something of immeasurable value. Gold and silver are still precious metals today. Thousands of pieces of gold and silver signify unimaginable riches. Even gold, purified of all base materials, doesn't compare to the wealth he possesses in God's word. What a difference it would make to the church today, if Christians put this kind of value on the Bible.

To value his scriptures to that extent also gave the psalmist the consolation of knowing he had chosen the right lamp for his feet and light for his path through life.

98 Your commands are always with me and make me wiser than my enemies.

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118 You reject all who stray from your decrees, for their delusions come to nothing.

99 I have more insight than all my teachers, for I meditate on your statutes.

100 I have more understanding than the elders, for I obey your precepts.

At first reading these verses could be seen as boasting of the psalmist's own intellectual ability, but what he is extolling is the superiority of God's word to earthly wisdom and knowledge. Proverbs asserts that true wisdom comes from above. Wisdom was characterised by righteousness, justice and equity. It helps him to discern how not to live his life for he sees the dangers and pitfalls of a fallen world when he sees the characters and actions of his enemies. He is wiser than his enemies because he realises rejecting God's word is the height of foolishness, as his reference to their delusions in verse 118 shows. He can claim to have more insight than his teachers, because God is his teacher, and what God teaches surpasses all the intellectual knowledge of earthly teachers. His understanding comes from the same source and that is why he can claim more understanding than the elders. Unfortunately, in western society, the age and life experience of older people is regarded as of no account. In the psalmist's day, the opinions of aged people were greatly respected and they were consulted on important issues and difficult circumstances because of their experiences throughout their lives. It was this insight and understanding that enabled him to see through the smokescreen of the attraction of the world's values. He recognised the deceitfulness of the world's ways in verse 29; the temptation to selfishness in verse 36; and the worthlessness of material things in verse 37. In other words, he had a very clear sense that God's ways and values were right and those of the world were wrong.

The solace that came from that wisdom, insight and understanding was the realisation that those who did wrong would, one day come under judgement. Throughout the psalm we find a righteous anger and loathing (158) for his enemies because everything about them was obviously a contemptuous disregard and rejection of God's laws. There is nothing wrong with being indignant, angry and having a loathing for those who purposefully engage in blatant blasphemy and gross disrespect for God. Yet, as the psalmist shows, we counteract and contradict all that is done in this way by being even more diligent in living God's way and maintaining His standards and values. The one thing the psalmist does not do is indulge in, or encourage others to indulge in, violent retribution against those perceived as offending God. Instead, his solace lies in knowing that one day the Lord will bring righteous judgement to bear such people. In this he pre-empts the New Testament maxim - Vengeance is mine, says the Lord.

84 How long must your **servant wait? When will you punish my persecutors?**

21 You rebuke the arrogant, who are accursed, those who stray from your commands.

78 May the arrogant be put to shame for wronging me without cause; but I will meditate on your precepts.

119 All the wicked of the earth you discard like dross; therefore I love your statutes.

155 Salvation is far from the wicked, for they do not seek out your decrees.

The psalmist finds consolation in the fact that God's righteousness and justice will not let wrongdoing go unpunished. Today, how many of us are relying on the psalmist's conviction. What wouldn't we do if we thought the personal, local, national or international injustices would never be judged and the

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wrongdoers would not get their just desserts? And while the psalmist's solace lies in his hope that God will vindicate him before his enemies and will give him victory over them in the present, his overwhelming concern is that God and His word will be mightily vindicated and the victory will be the Lord's alone.

The psalmist's story has taken us from knowledge of a desperate situation to a note of vindication and victory. This is the final kind the solace that he was given in the face of troubles that threatened to overwhelm him. We can see that God was already answering his prayers through the pleasure he had in meditating on God's word, the comfort and hope, the peace and joy leading to rejoicing, his precious possession of God's word; and the wisdom, insight and understanding he had about the consequences of right and wrong living. The fact that he is aware of all of these things stands as a testimony to the source of his solace while facing a traumatic and dangerous situation.

And the psalmist shows us the right response to that.

- 7 I will praise you with an upright heart as I learn your righteous laws.**
 - 12 Praise be to you, Lord; teach me your decrees.**
 - 108 Accept, Lord, the willing praise of my mouth, and teach me your laws.**
 - 164 Seven times a day I praise you for your righteous laws.**
 - 171 May my lips overflow with praise, for you teach me your decrees.**
 - 175 Let me live that I may praise you, and may your laws sustain me.**
- 62 At midnight I rise to give you thanks for your righteous laws.**

Much more could be said, but I hope this overview has given you a new perspective on Psalm 119. For me, approaching it as the psalmist's story raised so many issues that relate to Christianity today, as the use of some New Testament verses shows. Everything that the psalmist says about God and His word applies to Jesus. Everything that he faces was suffered by Jesus. All the ways he sought to resolve his situation are lessons of how to resolve ours, because, being in Christ, we know the Holy Spirit has been given to us. Our Scriptures can be regarded as even more precious because we have the whole revelation of what salvation is in the present and for the future. We know that judgement will come for those who are not in Christ, and, over and above everything else, we know that vindication and victory belongs to the King of kings and Lord of Lords. And that is why, like our psalmist, we too, will live to praise and thank God, not in terms of day or night, but for all eternity.

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