

A WINESKIN IN THE SMOKE

Text: Psalm 119:81-88

Readings: 1 Peter 4; 2 Timothy 3

Theme: The psalmist cried out to God because of his enemies but he put his hope in God's Word.

Purpose: To explore the trials of believers and to direct you to hope in God and his Word.

Some of you may have heard of Blaise Pascal, a man who lived in France in the 17th century. He was a brilliant mathematician, a scientist and an inventor. He was also a Christian, a theologian and a philosopher.

He suffered much sickness all through his life and died in 1662 at the age of 39. The last six months of his life were filled with intense physical suffering. He sold everything he had, including most of his library and read deeply in the Scriptures, especially Psalm 119, which gave him great encouragement and hope.

It is not hard to see why this psalm would give such comfort and help to a man who was sick and suffering, because it was written out of a similar situation. This psalm gave Pascal the words he needed to express his own thoughts and feelings to God. It also gives us words to say to God in our own suffering and trial; and all of us will experience such times.

It is a false spirituality to teach or claim or pretend that we will always be happy.

A Sunday School song goes;

I am H-A-P-P-Y, I am H-A-P-P-Y,

I know I am, I'm sure I am, I am H-A-P-P-Y!

It is a cheerful and catchy song, but it is not realistic, it is not true all of the time. There are times when we are very happy but there are also times of sadness and sorrow, grief and depression, pain and persecution.

This stanza of this psalm reflects such a situation. This is the middle of the psalm and this is its lowest point, "the midnight of the psalm", expressing the great anguish of the writer.

In this section he laments his suffering and out of that he longs for God's Word. These two aspects are mixed through these verses; for the sake of clarity we will examine them separately.

1. HE LAMENTED HIS SUFFERING

a. In the opening verses he **describes how he felt.**

Verse 81: "*My soul faints with longing for your salvation.*" The phrase "faints with longing" translates one Hebrew word which means to come to an end. It can also be translated as "fails".. He was waiting for God's salvation, longing for God to deliver him, but it had not happened. He felt as though he was almost finished, that his life was coming to an end.

In verse 82 he expresses a similar feeling using the same Hebrew word (although the NIV uses a different English word); "*My eyes fail, looking for your promise.*" He had been looking for God to fulfill his promises to him and had looked so hard and long that he had strained his eyes and they were failing.

So he asked; "*When will you comfort me?*" (v82b) The words "when" and "how long" are repeated questions in the psalms and in the history of Israel. Abraham asked this as he waited for God to fulfill his promise of a son. The people of Israel asked this during their slavery in Egypt, and during their 40 years in the desert, and during their 70 years in exile; "How long, O Lord?!"

The psalmist asked this question in verse 84; "*How long must your servant wait?*" Literally he asked, "How many are the days of your servant?" He was aware that his days on earth were short-lived, only a few, and he uses the brevity of his life to plead with God to rescue him.

In verse 83 he gives a graphic picture of how he felt; “*I am like a wineskin in the smoke.*” In the Ancient Near East they did not have plastic or glass bottles to hold water or wine or milk, so they used the skins of animals with the holes sewn up. When these skins were not in use they were hung on the rafters of the ceiling or on the walls of the tent. They hung there in the heat and cold and in the smoke of the inside fires. Over time they became dry and brittle, wrinkled and worn, black and sooty. This is how this man felt – like a wineskin in the smoke.

Sometimes we feel like this as well. We feel as though we have been hung out to dry, rejected, discarded; we feel we have gone past our use-by date; we feel useless, worthless, worn out.

One of the lessons of this psalm is that when we feel like this we need to pray to God and tell him how we feel. The psalmist did this. He was honest with God. He was not complaining or grumbling, nor did he speak out of unbelief or anger. This is a lament, an honest expression of his thoughts and feelings. He was like a little child who says to his mother, “My tummy hurts”, or “I don’t feel very well.” In the same way God wants you to go to him and tell him how you feel.

b. The psalmist also described **the cause** of his suffering, which originated in **the persecution of his enemies**. (v 84-87)

i. In verse 85 he wrote, “The arrogant dig pitfalls for me, contrary to your law.”

People dig pits, or holes in the ground, to capture wild animals. These ungodly and lawless men were seeking to capture him.

He describes these arrogant men in earlier verses of this psalm; they taunted and mocked him, smeared him with lies and wronged him. (v 42,51,69,78)

ii. This opposition, which had been mounting against him, now reaches a peak, it comes to a climax.

In verse 86 we read; “...men persecute me without cause.” Literally the phrase reads, “men persecute me with falsehood” or “with a lie”. Their persecution was treacherous and false; it was based on lies! Some of you know what this is like; to be slandered with falsehood.

iii. And in verse 87 we read, “They almost wiped me from the earth.” The words “they almost wiped me” translates the same word used in the opening verses for “fail”; “They almost made an end of me..” We don’t know who wrote this psalm but this was the experience of David as he was fleeing from King Saul, but God enabled him to escape. This almost happened to Daniel in the lion’s den, but the Lord shut the mouths of the lions! And it almost happened to the prophet Jeremiah when he was thrown into a well and sank deep into the mud, but God sent men to rescue him.

iv. This persecution by wicked men was fulfilled in the attack on the Lord Jesus.

The arrogant Jewish leaders dug pitfalls for him trying to trap him with their tricky questions. He was persecuted without cause.

David, in Psalm 22, anticipated Christ’s suffering when he wrote,

“My strength is dried up like a potsherd,
and my tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth;
you lay me in the dust of death.” (Ps 22:15)

Isaiah prophesied about Christ’s anguish and his death; “He was oppressed and afflicted.... He was led like a lamb to the slaughter.... He was cut off from the land of the living.” (Is 53:7ff)

The persecution described in Psalm 119 reached its climax in the Lord Jesus who suffered and died for the sins of his people.

v. Followers of Jesus can also expect persecution. Jesus warned his disciples; “All men will hate you because of me” (Lk 21:17). He said, “Anyone who does not carry his cross and follow me cannot be my disciple” (Lk 14:27). Paul warned Timothy, “Everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted” (2 Tim 3:12). And Peter wrote, “Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ” (1 Peter 4:12f)

The suffering and persecution of godly men and women in times past, and the suffering of Jesus, warn us that we too can expect to suffer. Many of our brothers and sisters in Christ are enduring severe persecution in Indonesia, Africa, China, and in many Islamic countries. One day we too may be persecuted. Psalms like this help prepare us for that day.

c. As this man lamented his suffering he **pleaded for God's help**.

He expressed that simply and powerfully in verse 86, "Help me!" Spurgeon wrote; "The words are few, but the meaning is full. God's help is our hope.... Many a time have these words been groaned out by troubled saints, for they are such as suit a thousand conditions of need, pain, distress, weakness and sin. 'Help Lord', will be a fitting prayer for youth and age, for labour and suffering, for life and death. No other help is sufficient, but God's help is all-sufficient and we cast ourselves upon it without fear."

God's help is found in his Word. Having considered how he lamented his suffering we now consider, more briefly,

2. HIS LONGING FOR GOD'S WORD

a. In the opening verse of this stanza (v 81) he expressed his longing for God's salvation and he put **his hope in God's Word**. This is the theme of this great psalm, this is the refrain, this is repeated over and over with many variations. He put his hope in God's Word. This, says Calvin, "is the foundation of all."

We need to do the same. Are people slandering your name? Are you going through a great trial? Are you enduring a prolonged sickness? Put your hope in God's Word.

b. The psalmist also **looked to God's promise**. (v 82) There were many dark clouds in his life but he believed that there was sunshine behind them and he held out for the fulfillment of God's promises. Charles Bridges wrote; "We depend not on what we see or feel, but on what the Word promises." We need this reminder. So often we do depend on what we see and on what we feel; our emotions go up and down, our thoughts are all over the place. Instead we need the stability and anchor of God's promises in his Word.

c. In his suffering this man declared, "**I do not forget your decrees**." (v 83b)

It seemed to him that God had forgotten about him but he had not forgotten about God. He remembered God's decrees, he held on to the teaching of the Scriptures.

When you feel very low you may feel like giving up reading the Bible and praying; Satan will tempt you to forget about God. When you feel like this, remember the resolve of this man and say with him, "I do not forget your decrees."

d. Not only would he not forget God's decrees but he also wrote; "**I have not forsaken your precepts**." (v 87) Despite all that the wicked were doing to him he was going to hold on to God and his Word. The prophet Hanani spoke to King Asa; "The eyes of the Lord range throughout the earth to strengthen those whose hearts are fully committed to him" (2Chr 16:9).

The psalmist wanted to hold on to such encouragements of God's word.

e. What he has expressed negatively twice over (not forgetting, not forsaking) he then puts positively; "**I will obey the statutes of your mouth**." This is the end of the first half of this psalm. This is his resolution, his desire, his intention – he will obey God's statutes, he will keep his laws. This will be the declaration of every believer, or every Christian who has experienced God's deliverance in Christ.

This stanza closes as it opened, by looking to the promise of God's salvation. In verse 88 he prays; "**Preserve my life according to your love**."

This is not a prayer for mere survival; he is not just asking that God will keep him alive; no, he is asking for the fullness of God's salvation; "Give me life!" This is his prayer.

As New Testament believers we know that this life is found in the Lord Jesus Christ. The word “salvation” in verse 81 is the broadest term for all that God gives to the believer. It covers all the blessings and benefits of eternal life. All of these come to us through the Lord Jesus and are applied to us by the Holy Spirit – forgiveness of sins, being adopted into God’s family, receiving the righteousness of Christ, peace with God, the promise of eternal life in heaven.

The source of all these benefits is the love of God, or his lovingkindness. The Hebrew word is *chesed*, which describes God’s covenant love.

The people of God celebrate this love in the repeated refrain of Psalm 136, “*His love endures forever.*”

The full extent of that love is seen in the Lord Jesus. “But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions and sins.” (Eph 2:4f) “Together with all the saints” we need “to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ and to know this love that surpasses knowledge.” (Eph 3:18)

Blaise Pascal, in his time of great suffering, knew the love of Christ.

The psalmist, writing in the midst of a great trial, put his confidence and hope in the love of God.

So did the apostle Paul, who wrote; “For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (Rom 8:38f)

Are you also convinced of this love of God in Christ?

Is this your confidence and hope?

Amen