

Introduction:

- A. *Illus.*: Last week I mentioned the book by Eugene Peterson, who also wrote *The Message*, about deep reading of the Bible. He titled it, *Eat This Book*. In it he tells this story:

Anthony Plakados was a thirty-five-year-old truck driver in my congregation. Anthony grew up in a Greek home, conventionally Catholic, but none of it rubbed off. He left school after the eighth grade. He told me that he had never read a book. And then he became a Christian, got himself an old King James Bible with small print, and read it three times in that first year of his conversion. Anthony was off and running. Mary, his wife, was interested but also a bit bewildered by all this and asked a lot of questions. Mary had grown up a proper Presbyterian, gone to Sunday School all her growing up years and was used to a religion of definitions and explanations. When Mary's questions got too difficult for Anthony, he would invite me to their trailer-house home, papered with Elvis Presley posters, to help him out. One evening the subject was the parables—Mary wasn't getting it. I was trying to tell her how to read them, how to make sense out of the. I wasn't getting on very well, and Anthony interrupted, "Mary, you got to live 'em, then you'll understand 'em; you can't figger e'm out from the outside, you got to git inside 'em—or let them git inside you."

And Anthony hadn't read so much as a word of John Calvin. [p.71-72]

- B. That is exactly what Psalm 119 teaches us. **Turn to Ps. 119:17-32**, the third and fourth sections of this 22-section psalm. As we noted last week, the 176 verses of this psalm are arranged into 22 sections, and all eight lines of each successive section start with a successive letter of the

Hebrew alphabet. What's more, the writer used eight different synonyms for God's Word and most of them appear in each of the 22 sections. Today we're looking at the third and fourth sections—*Gimel* and *Daleth*.

- C. We don't know who this psalmist was or just when he wrote but he was facing the scorn of people who had abandoned God. It was demoralizing and disorienting for him. These two sections are prayers for God's help through the Scriptures.

Listen to the first section, **vv.17-24...** Do you hear his distress over rulers "*who stray from [God's] commands*"? Apparently these were fellow Jews who had no interest in God's word and were actually persecuting those who did. In every generation, those who love and obey God's word will face opposition—all the more for those of us who bow to Jesus Christ as Lord. We're foreigners in this world. "This world is not my home, I'm just a'passin' through." **We live in a world and a culture that does not speak our language and often wants us to shut up.** It can get us down. **But what can you do?** These verses tell us what we can do.

I. WHEN WE FEEL LIKE UNWANTED STRANGERS HERE PRAY THAT GOD LETS YOU HEAR HIS LANGUAGE (119:17-24)

- A. Psalms are meant to be sung or prayed. They are the repertoire of the believer. The way you apply a psalm to your life is to *pray* it! You and I can *pray* this. **He begins, "Be good to your servant."** Other translations begin it with the words, "*Deal bountifully—generously—with your servant.*" Why? "*So that I may live and obey your word.*" (ESV, NLT) It felt to him like the opposition of the wicked was slowly killing his spirit. That happens to us, too. So we pray that God show his goodness to us by enabling us to

live—to thrive—in the God-blessed life and to obey his word. That’s how we get our spiritual mojo back.

How does he pray that God show this goodness? The psalm gives some interesting and unexpected answers.

- B. **V.18...** Pray that our good God would open your eyes to see wonderful things in his law—his Scriptures. Some people come to the Bible looking for stuff no one else sees—secret codes or hidden meanings; like one of those “*Secrets of the Bible*” programs on the History Channel. But that’s not what it means to “*see wonderful things in your law.*” ‘Law’, you’ll remember, is *torah*—teaching; all that the Bible teaches.

Illus.: In my class at TEDS I ask students to submit favorite quotes from a book we’re reading by John Ortberg entitled *Soul Keeping*. This week Anna sent this one: “*The next time you blow something—when you’re frightened, when you’re dissatisfied—instead of mindless self-talk, speak to your soul: ‘Why are you afraid, O my soul?’*” (p.93)

Later in the week I woke with a troubled soul over some things and I remembered that quote. I tracked down the source—Psalm 42:5, “*Why, my soul, are you downcast? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God. My soul is downcast within me; therefore I will remember you.*” I copied that down in my journal. I thought about it; I determined to do it. **V.8** says, “*By day the LORD directs his love, at night his song is with me—a prayer to the God of my life.*” Today, I thought, God is directing his love even in these difficult things. As I went through the day, I keep thinking on these words and consciously putting my hope in God for the outcomes. And my soul was lifted up.

So imitate this psalmist when you're feeling the weight of trouble. Take up your Bible and ask God to show you wonderful things. The “wonderful things” will be insights into the God-blessed life. **That would be so good of God!**

- C. *Illus.*: Did you ever hear of **Bell Baumfree**. In 1826 she and her infant daughter escaped slavery in New York. She was an ardent Christian. Some years later she gave herself the name **Sojourner Truth** after she became convinced that God had called her to leave the city and go into the countryside “*testifying to the hope that was in her*” (a phrase from 1 Peter). She became one of America’s greatest abolitionists. She led many slaves to freedom. **Her name would be a good name for any believer: Sojourner Truth** because a sojourner is someone traveling through a land that is not their home. And it is God’s truth—the hope that is in us—that sets us apart from this world. **V.19...**

So here’s the second way to pray: As sojourners on this earth, pray that our good God would let us hear the beloved language of his laws. Those of you have lived in a foreign country with a language not your own know what it is like to yearn to hear your own tongue. God’s people feel like that. Listen to what he says in **v.20...**

To hear our own language, our spiritual mother tongue, we open our Bibles. Here we learn of our great God. We understand the wonderful laws of love, holiness, truth and grace that give shape to his kingdom. We hear our songs. Remember our heroes. We see pictures of our homeland. And best of all, we hear the wonders of our salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ. **That is so good of God!**

- D. As you’ve heard it appears that this psalmist felt God-fearing people like him were being tormented by their leaders who apparently *knew* God’s commands but ignored

them. **Vv.21-24...** So what is he asking his good God to do? Pray that our good God would lift from us the terrible weight of wicked people's scorn and contempt. This kind of treatment can disorient and distract a believer. We lose our spiritual concentration. He prays that God would rebuke them—give them a word from God they *can't* refuse! And he prays for relief for his own heart even if they keep on yapping. Remember the line in the 23rd psalm, *"You prepare a table before in the presence of my enemies."* **Keeping God's statutes—that is, keeping ourselves away from sinning—invites God to lift that burden of the world's scorn.**

Vv.23-24 seem to take us into council chamber or a courtroom where these tyrants gather like black-robed, gavel-wielding judges to slander us in the name of public welfare. But the godly person prays, *"They can make their decrees but I'm going to meditate on God's decrees. I won't give their scorn and contempt a second thought because God's statutes are my ruling council."*

- E. So when he prays, "Be good to your servant," these are the good gifts he is praying for—open eyes to see wonderful things in God's law, the gift of hearing God's words even though we're sojourners in this dark world, and God's biblical counsel no matter what the wicked say about us.

The next section is another prayer that we need to know: **vv.25-32...** The psalmist may well have been thinking of those same wicked people when he wrote this but his words fit many of our face-in-the-dirt times. That first phrase, *"I am laid low in the dust"* has the sense of a guy flat out on his face with his fingernails dug in the dirt. *"I'm so low I'm clinging to the dust."* He was lower than a snake's belt buckle!

II. WHEN YOU'RE BARELY HANGING ON, PRAY THAT GOD WILL HELP YOU CLING TO HIS WORD. (119:25-32)

- A. Dr. Willem Van Gemeren writes of this section, “In adversities the psalmist becomes more teachable, and so his spirit is renewed within him.” **When you’re under pressure do you become more teachable?** You see that in **v.27**, “*Cause me to understand the way of your precepts, that I may meditate on your wonderful deeds.*” God’s precepts—his rules and promises, blessings and instructions—are like an unfamiliar road we need to learn so we ask God to teach us the way. God’s precepts make sense; they lay out a way of life—*real* life—but we have to think about them.

His precepts are always shaped by God’s own “*wonderful deeds.*” So he adds, “*When God teaches me the way—the route—of righteousness then I can meditate on God’s wonderful deeds that makes that path possible.*” In other words, we learn God’s ways by walking them and then begin to realize how magnificent they are. *Illus.:* I read that the engineers laying out the roads in Glacier National Park went to a lot of extra work to be sure those traveling the roads would have the best views of the scenery. The road is meant to show off the beauty of God’s creation. So it is with God’s routes of righteousness.

- B. Look again at **v.27-31**... There in **v.31** the Hebrew word for ‘hold fast’ is the same word he used up in v.25, “I’m laid low in the dust.” As if to say, “*All I’m hanging on to is dust.*” But now he’s “*holding fast*” to God’s statutes because he put his mind and heart to do that. So that’s where I get this point: **When you’re barely hanging on, pray that God will help you cling to his word.**

I've known Christians who were under tremendous pressure but they wouldn't go to God's word. They'll worry and suffer, cycling deeper and deeper into stress and fear. They'll pray over and over, "*Lord, get me out of this!*" but they won't let God talk to *them*. **They don't become more teachable in adversities, so their spirits are not renewed within them.** I know; I've been like that! But we're missing something wonderful.

Illus.: My good friend Steve Mathewson is pastor of Crosslife Church in Libertyville. We've been in the same small pastors' group for about 10 years. I was mentioning a few weeks ago that we'd be preaching on Psalm 119. He told us how precious this psalm is to him. I asked him to write what he told us.

Several summers ago, I went through a dark period of ministry. One of our church leaders, a personal friend, turned against me. He eventually left the church I was pastoring, and a few families followed him. The church leaders eventually supported me. But they were caught off guard by this leader, and it took them awhile to figure out to decide that his reasons for turning against me were unfounded and unfair.

In the meantime, [in our home] we were under a lot of financial pressure with two cars breaking down and a house that would not sell.

What got me through that summer was living deeply in Psalm 119. There were days I could hardly drag myself to my office or meet with anyone. But God's Spirit sustained me through Psalm 119. I meditated on it deeply throughout the whole summer. I had turned to it because I realized that it was, at its core, a psalm of lament. Throughout its verses, the psalmist talked about how God's Law upheld him in a time of distress and

affliction. I even wrote out verses of Psalm 119 on the back of my business cards and carried them with me to turn to in times of doubt and sorrow. I still keep a few of these cards in my desk. As I write this, I'm looking at the one with the words of Psalm 119:71-72:

*It is good for me that I was afflicted,
that I might learn your statutes.*

*The law of your mouth is better to me
than thousands of gold and silver pieces.*

I experienced the truth of those verses more deeply than ever as I walked through the dark valley that summer. I can truly say that Psalm 119 sustained and refreshed and revived me during those difficult days. God's word is more powerful and more valuable than we can ever imagine.

- C. One more thing: **v.32... Wasn't this the guy who was "laid low in the dust"?** Now he's running in the path of God's commands? How did that happen? He meditated on God's wonderful deeds and was strengthened according to God's word. He chose the way of faithfulness and held fast to God's statutes. And God "*broadened my understanding.*" **Understanding of God's word becomes a highway where y our heart can run.**

Conclusion:

Peterson writes, "*The most important question we ask of [a text of Scripture] is not, 'What does this mean?' but 'What can I obey.'* A simple act of obedience will open up our lives to this text far more quickly than any number of Bible studies and dictionaries and concordances." [p.71]

Remember what Anthony told his wife? "*Mary, you got to live 'em, then you'll understand 'em; you can't figger e'm out from the outside, you got to git inside 'em—or let them git inside you.*"