

Truth Talk Truth Talk

Psalm 119 – The Word for Life!

Safe in the Storm

Stanza 12

Verses 89-96

Forever, O LORD, Your word is settled in heaven. ⁹⁰ Your faithfulness endures to all generations; You established the earth, and it abides. ⁹¹ They continue this day according to Your ordinances, For all are Your servants. ⁹² Unless Your law had been my delight, I would then have perished in my affliction. ⁹³ I will never forget Your precepts, For by them You have given me life. ⁹⁴ I am Yours, save me; For I have sought Your precepts. ⁹⁵ The wicked wait for me to destroy me, But I will consider Your testimonies. ⁹⁶ I have seen the consummation of all perfection, But Your commandment is exceedingly broad.

In the last stanza we walked with the Psalmist through perhaps the darkest part of the path thus far on his pilgrimage. We listened in to the cry of his soul as the little boat of his life was ravaged by the fierce storm of persecution and affliction. During this “dark night of the soul” our Psalmist cried out to God but received no immediately answer. In fact, to the Psalmist, it appeared as though God not only was not listening, even worse He had abandoned His servant to the mercies of the storm itself. In one anguished metaphor the Psalmist opened a window revealing the unstated desperation, agony, and loneliness that sometimes comes to those who pursue God Who for a time remains hidden as well as silent. Even God’s providence seemed to have turned against our man. Confused, alone, and desperate the Psalmist told the Lord he felt like a forgotten wineskin that over time had become dry and brittle.

One wise commentator observed that the first eleven stanzas of the psalm lead us down a path that is progressively more difficult and dark until at last we wonder whether the Psalmist is right is asking God if he has been forgotten and abandoned. We can almost hear his question: “Has the Lord brought me thus far only to abandon me?” The same commentator noted that the answer comes in stanza twelve and the rest of the stanzas in the psalm develop the concept that comforted the psalmist during his soul’s dark night: “His Word is reliable and He will complete His work in me!”

When the psalmist arrives at the twelfth stanza (vv. 89-96), he has reached the nadir of his experience and he has survived! He has not perished at the hands of the insolent, wicked men who have plotted against him at every turn of the path. Instead, he has emerged even more committed to walking the way of the Word that he might please the God Who gave that Word. In fact, it is precisely his unshakeable confidence in the Word that has helped him remain faithful to the God who for a time remained unseen and unheard.

Where did our Pilgrim friend find solid ground on which to plant his feet in the midst of the storm? What strong anchor held his soul secure as the waves threatened to inundate his little boat? What hiding place gave him safe and secure? And perhaps more importantly, where can we find such help in our own struggles?

Swiftly comes the answer. “Forever, O LORD, Your word is settled in heaven. Your faithfulness endures to all generations!” It is Yahweh Himself that is his security and stability. This comes as no surprise to any true child of God. After all, we all recognize that God is our refuge and strength. We know Him to be a very present help in time of trouble. But – what do we do when we can’t find our way to Him in the storm? When He is silent no matter how loud or long we cry? When He is absent no matter how hard we look or how often we come seeking His comfort and help. In short, if God is our refuge and our strength, then we must have some sure way of accessing that ground when we most need it. In other words, we must be able to find our way to God in the midst of the stormy waves at 2:00 a.m. on Thursday and not just from the safety of our pew on Sunday! Where is that access and how do we procure it for our own in time of need? The Psalmist unfolds the answer in his own testimony articulated in the eight verses that comprise this stanza.

We See Solid Ground by Remembering God’s Character (vv. 89-91)

Forever! The language of the Psalmists points to something that is fixed and unalterable. Unchangeable no matter who or what comes with the determined intention of bringing about a change or a reversal. Firm. Strong. Lasting. And what is this forever thing? God’s Word! In the midst of a life that is being blown about by the winds of persecution, the Psalmist sees solid ground and seizes this ground in an unbreakable grip. God’s Word is forever fixed in Heaven. It is unalterable, unchangeable, always the same. And therefore it is an anchor that can secure the soul even in the most violent storm. God has spoken in the past and what He has said is unchangeable. And because it has this forever quality, God’s Word is supremely reliable ground on which to stand in the midst of crisis, especially one as devastating as that of our Pilgrim.

But what makes the Word of God such sure ground? What gives it this kind of reliability? What makes it “forever” settled in heaven? The answer might seem almost too simple at first blush. However, upon further reflection, the psalmist’s statement takes on a level of profundity that is actually enhanced by its simplicity. What gives God’s Word its “forever-fixed-in-heaven” nature is its source. God. In other words, the reason God’s Word has this quality is because of Who God is and what He is like. And the quality that the Psalmist immediately points to is the one we most need in a crisis – His faithfulness. Our Pilgrim observes that God’s faithfulness continues from generation to generation. There never has been a generation from Adam to our own where God has been unfaithful to His character, His Word, His promises, or His people. From generation to generation since the creation of the world, God’s faithfulness has continued.

This is important because in the midst of a crisis when we are overwhelmed by the darkness of the night around us, we actually wonder about this very thing – the faithfulness of God in general and to us in particular. God’s everlasting faithfulness is the ground on which His Word is forever fixed! So, given the importance of this ground, how do we verify that God has indeed been faithful? The evidence the Psalmist presents in verse 90 is God’s creation.

Here is the progression thus far in the stanza. God’s word is firmly settled in Heaven. God’s faithfulness has been evidenced continually from generation to generation. God’s creation has been permanently established and it stands. The terms here speak of the earth as something that God ordained and from that time to this it has remained in place exactly as God planned and ordained it to be. And this is exactly what the Psalmist points to by describing the creation (earth) as servants of God (v. 92). In other words, all of creation has and continues to do exactly what God ordained it to do. It works and has been sustained exactly as God planned and according to His purpose. Creation was created by God’s powerful word. It is being sustained by God’s faithful Word. And it functions and operates according to God’s authoritative Word.

Creation therefore is a visible and undeniable evidence that God is indeed faithful and that His faithfulness endures from generation to generation. As long as there is a creation, there is a Faithful One who is sustaining that creation by the word of His power (Hebrews 1:3). And the place that reveals this Faithful One is the authoritative Word He revealed that is forever fixed in heaven! A

more theologically complex way of stating this truth would be: God's special revelation is grounded on God's Character. God's general revelation affirms and confirms God's Character. But, in order to know the nature of His character, we must rest on God's special revelation, the Bible, especially when it evaluates our character as that character is revealed by our circumstances.

We Reach Solid Ground by Reviewing Our Character through the Lens of Circumstance (v. 92)

As our Pilgrim reviewed his circumstances he observed he would have perished but for one thing – his personal commitment to God's instruction (law). The terms he used are graphic and powerful. The term "perish" is used in Job 6:18 to describe the horrible fate of caravans that turn aside from the road in the desert to paths that lead them nowhere but to the barren wasteland where all are brought to destruction. The term "affliction" portrays an abject humiliation or devastation that comes when a person has been reduced to nothing in the sight of his enemies. This would have been his fate but for one thing – his delight in God's law. Escape from the snares craftily set to entrap him came about as our Pilgrim was guided and instructed by God's law! Years earlier, Moses had reminded Israel that the book God had given would be their wisdom (Dt. 4:5-6). Centuries later, our Pilgrim has found that God's faithfulness in that promise had indeed been true from that generation to his own. And in light of his own personal experience of God's faithfulness, our Pilgrim renews his commitment to remain faithful to the God Who had given such a wonderfully reliable Word!

We Remain on Solid Ground by Recommitting to Godly Character (vv. 93-94)

As our Pilgrim slowly gains stable spiritual footing, he looks back on all that he has reviewed regarding God's faithfulness and as revealed by God's faithful Word and he cries out, "I will never forget your precepts!" The term "forget" as we have already observed in this psalm does not mean just that the psalmist will retain a mental knowledge of the content of God's precepts. Rather, in using this term the psalmist is committing himself to the ethical and moral expectations of those Divine precepts. More than just knowing what God expects, the psalmist recommit himself to his original quest – to walk in the way of God's Word! To live according to its mandates. To measure up to its expectations. To be guided by its instruction. To wait confidently for its promises. To never abandon in conduct or in character all that God's Word reveals as God's desire for His children. And the reason our Pilgrim is so ready to recommit to the way of life revealed by God's precepts is that by them, God gave him life spiritually in the first place. In this he is not arguing that his spiritual life (salvation) was earned by keeping these precepts. Rather, he is arguing that through this Word (precepts) and genuine belief in what it teaches, God granted him spiritual life (cf. Rom 1:16; 10:17).

This commitment becomes the ground for a solid conviction on the part of the Psalmist – "I am Yours!" (v. 94). His heart for God's ordinances revealed the psalmist's true paternity. He belonged to God. His love for and relationship to God's "forever-settled-in-heaven-word" revealed conclusively the Psalmist's identity as truly belonging to God. And this identity becomes the basis for a strong cry – "Save me!!" Interestingly, though he grounds his cry in his confirmed relationship to God ("I am Yours") that is not all he appeals to when he cries for deliverance. He grounds the front end of his cry for help on his relationship to God. But the back end of his cry is firmly established in his consistent walk of obedience before God (v. 94b).

Our pilgrim can cry for help and argue that God should give it on more than just the fact that God is faithful and His Word is reliable. He can give an important additional reason for why God should deliver him and act on his behalf. "Because I have sought your precepts." He has made variations of this argument before and he uses it again here because, frankly, it is powerful. Why should God deliver him? Because of how he has used the life God has given him thus far in his journey. Rather than squander his life and energy on worthless things or worse, sinful things, our Pilgrim has diligently invested himself in seeking to learn, understand, and do God's precepts. No wonder he can cry so boldly and confidently for God to deliver him!

Just as creation has been faithfully serving God and God has faithfully preserved it (vv. 89-91), the Psalmist has also faithfully served God by seeking and doing His precepts. Consequently, he can expectantly appeal to God to do for him as He has done for creation for all of these years. And at the heart of his appeal is his relationship to God through His Word. Which brings us to the final observation our Psalmist makes as he regains his footing once again on the solid ground of the pathway of God's Word.

We Rest on Solid Ground by Recognizing the Character of God's Word (vv. 95-96)

Our pilgrim closes this stanza by observing that his circumstances have not changed at all. The wicked almost destroyed him (v. 92) and they have not given up in their attempts (v. 95). Like fierce predatory beasts they patiently stalk their prey waiting for an opportune moment to pounce and destroy him. Knowing this makes his response even more amazing. Rather than focus attention on discovering their plans and identities, our Pilgrim focuses all of his attention to God's stated reminders of how life will unfold when certain actions are taken by His children. "I will consider thy testimonies." This speaks of much more than a casual glance or mindless hearing of those testimonies. To consider means to study like Ezra did as a prepared scribe in the Law of Moses (Ezra 7:10). It means to meditate on these testimonies day and night like the psalmist spoke of doing in Psalm 1:2. Rather than react in fear to what the wicked were plotting, our Pilgrim mediated on what God said life would be like for those who lived according to His precepts and were guided and directed in their responses and in their ways by His testimonies. In other words, God's Word provides solid and stable ground in the midst of a fallen and depraved society.

It also provides solid and stable ground for people living in a finite and limited society. The Psalmist ends this stanza by noting that he has seen the end of perfection (v. 96). This means that as he looks at life and sees the very best that exists in creation or among men, it is inherently limited. He has seen and observed the limitations of all earthly perfections. If our Pilgrim is indeed Daniel of old, think of the perfections of human wisdom and culture that existed all around him in ancient Babylon. Babylonian culture was legendary for the wisdom of its wise men, the Chaldeans. Yet Daniel saw the limitation of that wisdom in the inability of those wise men to interpret the King's dream (Daniel 2). Daniel saw the awesome power and might of Nebuchadnezzar to conquer and rule the world of his day come to a humiliating halt as the king spent seven years in shocking madness (Daniel 4). He saw the awesome wonder of the hanging gardens of the city and the massive impregnable walls of that city and they were brought to nothing in one night by the Persian invasion. Truly he had seen all earthly perfections and discovered their limits. But, there was one thing that was broader than all earthly wisdoms – a wisdom from above that is exceedingly broad! A perfect wisdom not bound by the limitations of all earthly wisdom – the commandment of God! A Word forever settled in Heaven and therefore not limited by the same constraints that bound the wisdom of fallen men.

And it was this wisdom to which our Psalmist attached himself. By it he would chose to live and be instructed. To it he would flee for protection. Under it he would rest and find shelter in the storm. In it he would find life and joy. From it he would gain strength for another day's journey.

To this book we must also flee. In this book we must also rest. It will be our wisdom as well. And in its instruction we will find all that we need for life and godliness no matter how dark the night or how violent the storm may be that assails us on the journey. We stand on solid ground when we stand on a Word from God that is forever settled in heaven. Because it is so, it is a secure standing place for us during our pilgrimage on earth.

