

“A STRANGER IN THE EARTH”

Psalm 119:17-24

Intro: Oftentimes in the various sections of Psalm 119 there is a word, or an expression, which indicates the main emphasis of that particular stanza. I believe that in this third stanza the word is “stranger.” This is how the Psalmist felt about himself. He was “a stranger in the earth.” By this he probably meant that he was not only a stranger to the people of the world, but even a stranger among the people of God within the nation of Israel. Because even though we do not know for sure who the writer of this Psalm was, we must assume that he was a Jew. I would be amazed if that were not the case.

One reason I believe that this may be the key to this stanza is because this is the only time in the whole Psalm that the psalmist called himself “a stranger.” He also referred to himself in verse 17 as the Lord’s servant, but you find the word “servant” twelve more times in the Psalm. So he writes as a servant of the Lord, but in this particular stanza he considered himself to be in a special way “a stranger in the earth.” This meant he felt like he was a foreigner, an alien, that he really did not belong any place on the whole earth. Actually the word “earth” can mean either *earth* or *land*. In the latter case it would mean that he was speaking of his relationship to the people of Israel.

Perhaps this word “stranger” brings to your mind what the writer of the book of Hebrews said about the patriarchs and their families of the OT. I am referring to Heb. 11:13 where we read:

13 These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off, and were persuaded of them, and embraced them, and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth.

But then when you turn to 1 Peter, Peter addressed the Jews who had been scattered throughout the Roman Empire as “strangers.” Cf. 1 Pet. 1:1.

And then when you get to 1 Peter 2:11-12 you find him saying this:

11 Dearly beloved, I beseech you as strangers and pilgrims, abstain from fleshly lusts, which war against the soul;

12 Having your conversation honest among the Gentiles: that, whereas they speak against you as evildoers, they may by your good works, which they shall behold, glorify God in the day of visitation.

“Strangers and pilgrims” – so this is a proper designation for the people of

God. It means that we don't belong here. As Christians we can be treated by non-Christians as foreigners in our own country, that is, if we are living for the Lord.

Now let us go back to stanzas one and two to pick up some thoughts which need to be carried over into this third stanza.

In the first stanza the Lord promised blessing, in fact a twofold blessing, to those who will walk in His Word, and who seek the Lord with his, or her, "whole heart."

Quite evidently the Psalmist took the Lord up on His promise according to verse 5 of the first stanza, and then going on into the second stanza we see the two I will's of the Psalmist in verses 15 and 16. In the second he tells how he will delight himself in the Word of God. And we find when we get to the end of the third stanza, we see by what he wrote that he still was delighting himself in the Word, and that the testimonies of the Lord had been his counselors.

So here we are reading about a man whose whole life was under the control and direction of God's Word.

What, then, did he mean that he was "a stranger in the earth"? Well, he meant that he could not find many, if any others, who felt about the Word of God like he did. This does not mean that there weren't any others, but it probably meant that he didn't know any even though we can be assured that, although those who delight themselves in the Word can be found, yet they are by no means a majority even among the people of God.

This ought to make us think! If you and I had lived in the day when the Psalmist lived, would he consider us a fellow-stranger when he got acquainted with us? We here at Trinity are probably in an environment where we are with people who love the Lord and love His Word like the Psalmist did. But let us make sure that we qualify.

What the Psalmist felt in his heart was a real loneliness in his life as a child of God! And maybe you and I have felt some of that loneliness. I remember that when Lucille and I were in a university together, her roommate, who was also a Christian, told her something to the effect that Lucille just wanted to go farther with the Lord than she was prepared to go. There are a lot of Christians like that. All of us have been that way at

times. As we get into this Psalm farther we are going to see that he spoke of his afflictions, and probably it was through the trials of his life that he turned to the Lord with his whole heart because that was the only place he could go where his needs would be met.

Anyway, I hope this sets the tone for you in stanza three. Here is a child of God who has really found true joy in living by the Word of God, but he hasn't found much comfort, if any, from others of his fellow-believers.

Now let us look at the stanza.

I want you to notice that verse 17 is a prayer; verse 18 is a prayer; verse 19 is a prayer; and verse 22 is a prayer. Half of the eight verses are prayers. This should show us as we go through the Psalm how closely the Word and prayer are related to each other.

In verse 17 the psalmist is praying about his circumstances. As one of our hymns says, that this old world is not a friend of grace, we all know that we don't get any encouragement from the world to trust the Lord, or to turn to Him first in our times of need. In our day the people of the world aren't talking about the Lord unless it is to get rid of anything that has to do with Him. But here the psalmist prayed, "Deal bountifully with Thy servant." The prominence of this word in Psalm 119 means that the one who wrote this Psalm was a true servant of the Lord, a person who was committed to live by the Word of God. And yet he knew that the only way he could live so as to keep, or obey, the Word of God, would be if the Lord was continually supplying and renewing his strength through the Word.

And so his first prayer was followed by a second prayer.

From his language in verse 2 we are to understand that even in the reading of the Word he often felt that there was a veil over his eyes so that he was not really seeing in the Word what he needed to see. So his prayer was for the Lord to lift the veil from his eyes. By the way, this is an excellent prayer for us to pray when we read the Word. This was a man who did not want to miss a single thing that the Lord had given in His Word. To "behold" them is to see them clearly, and they are called "wondrous" because they will make us marvel at them if we really understand them.

And then in verse 19 we see how the psalmist described himself. It was

his feeling of loneliness as a child of God that made him even more intent about the Word of God.

Have you ever felt about your Bible like the psalmist expressed himself in verse 20? Do you know what a breaking soul is? Does the reading of the Word ever cause you to weep for joy. It almost sounds like all this psalmist did was to read the Scriptures, but that is not the point. It simply was that he felt a greater need for the Word than he did for anything else, and when he couldn't get encouragement even from his fellow-believers, he knew that he could get it from the Word.

In verse 21 the psalmist was looking at those who were all around him. "The proud" is a description of people in the world. They do not recognize God. They do not feel any need for God. They feel that they are sufficient in themselves, or in the people around them. It is pride in the human heart that causes people to be content to live without God. And yet the psalmist says here that he can see where the judgment of God has fallen upon "the proud" because they ignore the commandments of the Lord. And yet even in those rebukes which come from God, people are too proud and too spiritually blind to recognize that their setbacks in life are from God.

I often wonder what it is going to take to wake us up in our country. We are like Pharaoh was in Egypt in the days of Moses. God brought plague after plague upon Pharaoh, and time after time Pharaoh stubbornly stood his ground against Moses, apparently not realizing that he was really under the judgment of God. And finally it was his servants who said to him, and you will find these words in Ex. 10:7:

How long shall this man be a snare unto us? let the men go, that they may serve the LORD their God: knowest thou not yet that Egypt is destroyed?

Is the Lord going to have to destroy us before we learn that in all of the problems that we are facing at home and around the world, God is speaking to us? Sometimes this word "rebuked" is translated "reproved," and sometimes "corrupted," but it speaks of God's judgment against those who refuse to recognize Him and submit to His will.

In verse 22 the Psalmist again is in prayer, asking the Lord to protect him from the "reproach" and "contempt" of men. Why has he experienced their persecution? Because he has lived by the "testimonies" of the God of heaven and earth. The psalmist wasn't considering at all that he was going

to change his lifestyle. He expected to keep right on obeying the Lord, but he knew that the Lord was the only one who could protect him from harm, and possible death. Many have experienced physical death whose only crime was that they lived to obey God. Our Lord Himself was the great Example of One Who died because He did the will of God. That is not the only explanation of His death, as we all know, but that was a major part of it.

“Princes,” representing those with the power of life and death in their hands, had declared their judgment against the psalmist, but what effect did it have upon him. It only drove him back again to meditate on the “statutes” of the Lord. Kidner describes the statutes of the Lord as referring to “the binding force and permanence of Scripture (Vol. II, p. 418). Princes may represent the highest human authority, but the statutes of the Lord are *the highest authority*. As the saying goes, “Men rule, but God overrules.” The Psalmist knew this, and so he stood on the authority of Scripture.

I think that it is significant that the Ten Commandments which were removed down in Alabama were engraved in stone (or at least that is what they looked like). Men can rule against God and His words, but as the Lord so often said, “It is written,” meaning that *it stands written and cannot be changed by all of the edicts of governments put together*.

The stanza closes on a note of triumph in verse 24. The Word is referred to here as “Thy testimonies,” that is, the witness of an omniscient God, the Word which is forever settled in heaven which we are told in Psa. 119:89. Princes may disagree with him, but the psalmist continues to find his greatest joy in God’s Word. In fact, they, he said, are “my counselors.” The Hebrew says, *men of my counsel*, probably a reference to the writers of Scripture as well as what the Psalmist had learned about the people of God whose story is given in the Word. One commentator said that “every saint of God possesses a privy council” (Clarke, p. 293), that is, that which is for his own personal and private service – and it is free!

Concl: How different life would be for all of us if we loved the Word like the writer of Psalm 119 did! And there is no reason why we can’t. Read it. Believe it. Meditate on it. Obey it. And keep reading it. Remember that this is the way to the greatest blessings.