

FAINTING, BUT FAITHFUL

Psalm 119:81-88

Intro: The writer of the Wycliffe Bible Commentary on this the eleventh stanza of Psalm 119 calls this a series of sobs. As the stanza begins, the Psalmist is in trouble, and there is really no change when the Psalm ends. But the stanza shows how even with the intensity of the persecution he was facing, he always turned to the Word to find his comfort and strength.

Trials are often like this. They seem to have no end. In fact, the trials of many, like those of John the Baptist, can end in death. Even in verses like Phil. 4:6 and 7 where Paul told the Philippian believers not to worry about anything, but to pray about everything, he promised them the peace that passeth all understanding, but gave no word about a change in the circumstances that were causing them to be anxious and to worry. And so we often see the sufficiency of the Lord, not in the removal of the trouble that we are having, but in the peace that He gives us while we are experiencing the worst of the trial.

Let me call your attention again to the fact that the Psalmist is talking to the Lord. This stanza continues, like the others, to be a prayer. The psalmist was not appealing to his fellow-believers, nor to any other source of human help, but his appeal was directly to the Lord. He was desperate. He knew that if the Lord did not help him, there would be no hope at all. His words indicate how serious the crisis was. But over and over again he indicated that he was driven back to the Word.

“Salvation” in verse 81 means *deliverance*. The verb translated here as “fainteth,” is translated as “faileth” in Psa. 73:26 where Asaph said,

26 My flesh and my heart faileth: but God is the strength of my heart, and my portion for ever.

Here in Psa. 119:81 it seems that although the psalmist faith caused him to turn to the Lord, yet the fact that God had not responded to his faith, made him even weaker. It often appears that the Lord is seeking to destroy our faith rather than to strengthen it. However, in spite of his disappointment, he continued to trust in the Lord. He knew that the Lord could help, and that He had promised to help, but he did not know why help had not come, yet, in spite of that, he continued to hope in the word, the written evidence of God’s promises. This was like Job’s, “Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him” (Job 13:15a). It is really amazing how all

of this works. You would think that the psalmist would be so hopeless about his situation that he would quit trusting the Lord altogether. He is discouraged and disappointed, and normally he would quit believing, but here we see evidence of the sustaining grace of God.

Look at verse 82 where the same idea continues, only now instead of speaking about his “soul,” he speaks about his eyes.

The word “fail” is the same word in the original as “fainteth” in verse 81. The psalmist was telling the Lord that he had read and re-read and then continued to read the promises of the Lord over and over and over until it seemed like he was going to lose his sight. The word “when” suggests that he believed that help would come, but the timing was the big problem to him at that moment.

There are three verses in James 1 which give us an indication of what the Lord was doing here. Listen to what James said about the need we have to wait for the Lord:

2 My brethren, count it all joy when ye fall into divers temptations;

3 Knowing this, that the trying of your faith worketh patience.

4 But let patience have her perfect work, that ye may be perfect and entire, wanting nothing (James 1:2-4).

Actually the word translated “patience” would be better translated *perseverance*, and that is exactly what we are witnessing here in this stanza in Psa. 119. God does not want us just to sit with our hands folded, doing nothing. He wants us to wait for Him, but to persevere in doing His will while we are waiting. And James tells us that God is working in such situations to accomplish in us what can be accomplished in no other way. We want the Lord to work *for* us, to deliver us from all troubles, but He puts us in situations where we cannot do anything because He is doing a work *in* us.

God is just as concerned about time as we are, but his timing is different from ours.

In verse 83 the psalmist speaks about his skin – first his soul, then his eyes, and now his skin. When he mentioned “a bottle,” he was not talking about glass or plastic like we have today, but about bottles made of the skins of animals which were dried in smoke. The psalmist’s skin resembled those wine bottles. It indicated that his trials had advanced the

aging process. And yet he did not forget the statutes of the Lord . Remember that the Word of God spoken of as statutes has to do with the Word being as reliable as if it were set in stone!

But what is happening when we remember? That is, when we remember the Word? Do you ever pray as you read the Word that the Lord will bring to your remembrance what you have read in times when you need a particular verse or verses? I do, almost every day, especially when I am reading Proverbs. But there is an important lesson for us here. We need to get the Word in our hearts by reading it, by meditating on it, by memorizing it, so that when we need it the Holy Spirit can bring it back to our memory. Cf. John 14:26.

In verse 84 we learn for the first time in this stanza that the psalmist's problems came from people, from those who were persecuting him. We don't know what the circumstances were in this situation, but we often are more disturbed by the way people affect our lives than we are about the way circumstances seem to be against us. The psalmist was concerned that he was running out of time, that he would not live long enough to see what the Lord would do about his enemies.

What had they done? And who were they? We have at least a partial answer in verse 85.

By "the proud" the psalmist probably meant people in positions of great authority over him. They had set traps for him. But what made it all appear so hopeless to the psalmist was that they were people who had no regard at all for the Law, the Word of God. Therefore, in the psalmist's mind he was struggling with the truth of the sovereignty of God! Is God really in control of all people and all events? Is He really capable to working all things together for the good of those whom He has called to Himself? Undoubtedly these questions have suggested themselves to all of us at some time in our lives. If not, those days are coming.

In verse 86 the psalmist goes back to the Word again. Those who opposed him made no place in their lives for the Word, but the psalmist had been seeking to abide by the commandments of the Word. Note that our troubles do not always mean that God is dealing with us for some of our ways that are not pleasing to Him. Sometimes our troubles come to us because we are seeking to please the Lord. And it can be a source of great strength to us to be able to tell the Lord that we have been seeking to

please Him by being obedient to His Word. And so we are encouraged to ask the Lord to help us, just as the psalmist did here.

In verse 87 we see that the problem had become so severe that the psalmist felt that he was going to die. Interestingly the verb “consumed” in this verse is the same verb that is translated “fainteth” in verse 81 and “fail” in verse 82. One commentator expressed it this way: “The idea is, that their persecutions had been so severe, and so long continued, that his strength was almost exhausted; he was ready to faint and to die” (Barnes' Notes).

But even having reached this extremity, he did not depart from the Lord's precepts. Undoubtedly the greatest illustration we have of this is to be seen in the suffering and death of our Lord Jesus Christ. No one ever suffered like our Lord did, and yet no one ever persevered more faithfully in doing the will of God than He did. Cf. Heb. 12:1-6:

1 Wherefore seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us,

2 Looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith; who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God.

3 For consider him that endured such contradiction of sinners against himself, lest ye be wearied and faint in your minds.

4 Ye have not yet resisted unto blood, striving against sin.

5 And ye have forgotten the exhortation which speaketh unto you as unto children, My son, despise not thou the chastening of the Lord, nor faint when thou art rebuked of him:

6 For whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth.

The greatest example we have of perseverance in sufferings and trials is to be found in our Lord. The patriarchs are examples too. So are the prophets. And the same must be said of the apostles, as well as many who have suffered for their faith throughout the history of the church. But they would agree that the Lord stands above and beyond all of the rest. Therefore, we need to become better acquainted with our suffering Savior.

But now notice the psalmist's prayer in verse 88.

He claimed in verse 87 that he was on the verge of death. In this last verse he prays for a virtual resurrection. “Quicken me,” which means, *make me live, revive me*. It is sometimes translated, *repair* or *restore*. One writer has said that “the Church’s constancy and piety are greatest in persecution” (Cocceius).

But upon what basis could the psalmist, or you or I, pray such a prayer? On the basis of the lovingkindness of the Lord. This is the word that we have recently heard so much about, the word *chesed*. “Lovingkindness” is a good translation, but *mercy* is another translation, and even *grace*. The psalmist was confessing that he did not deserve the blessing of God, but he knew that all of God’s dealings with him had been on this basis, and all future blessings would come to him in the same way.

And how does the stanza end? Exactly as it began – but the psalmist was more concerned than ever that the Word that had been given from the very mouth of the Lord would continue to be his joy and his hope.

Now all of this is a part of what, according to the Apostle Paul, has been written for “our learning.” Cf. Rom. 15:4,

4 For whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning, that we through patience and comfort of the scriptures might have hope.

And so, whatever may be our present trial, let us through perseverance in the Word and the comfort of the Scriptures always be hopeful that God has good purposes even in the difficult things that we go through. We may have our fainting times, but let us be faithful in trusting the Lord.