

BASIC THEOLOGY

Psalm 119:137-144

Intro: Originally this Psalm did not have verses numbered, nor was it divided into stanzas like it is in our translation. But the change in thought was indicated when the first lines were started with the next letter in the alphabet. So we know how the thought of the psalmist moved progressively to another idea or thought.

We might think of this stanza as teaching us what to do when we are in trouble. Trouble is mentioned in v. 139, and then again in v.143. The psalmist had his enemies, and we learn here how he dealt with it in his own heart. Troubles are that way. We seek for a cause. It is not unusual for us to want to blame God. We know that He is powerful enough to keep us trouble free. So, if He doesn't, it is natural for us to lay the blame at His feet. But the psalmist tell us here where we should start, not blaming God, but recognizing that He is righteous. As we think about God as He is revealed to us in the Word we know that He is not only righteous, but that He is incapable of any unrighteousness. If God is to be blamed for doing something wrong, then He is not God. So we come to the end of that road quickly. We have to recognize that whatever the problem might be, physical, or persecution, or whatever, God, our sovereign God, is always righteous. This is basic theology. This is where we start. If this is not true, then we have no hope. But since it is true, always true, then we look for other reasons for the trouble that we might be facing. But God is not the problem.

Neither is He a disinterested bystander. He is in total control of all that is going on, and we can be sure that His Word is just like he is: righteous, upright, true down to each letter. "Upright" means *right*. It means that they are *straight*, never deviating from that which is consistent with God Himself. And this is a statement full of comfort.

So we learn another lesson about what we need to do in times of testing. Not only do we need to remember God, but we need to turn to His Word.

But we need to recognize something that is very important in all of this. We need to be preparing for those testings which are sure to come by getting acquainted with the theology of Scripture, that is, what the Scripture reveals to us about God, and we need to form the habit of keeping our eyes on the Lord. There are people today who speak about theology

as “that dreaded ‘t’ word.” It is thought to be that which theologians need to study, or perhaps seminary students, and sometimes even pastors. But somehow the regular run of Christians feel that they need to stay away from it. But theology, true theology, is nothing but seeing what the Scriptures have to say about God. The blessing comes when we believe what we read in the Word, and then we can have the support of that truth when trials come along – which in some respects is every day! Cf. God’s promise in Isa. 26: 3 and 4. To keep your mind stayed upon the Lord means that you are looking to Him at all times and dwelling upon His glorious attributes, among which is His righteousness. It is a great source of blessing to know not only that God never does anything wrong, but also that it is impossible for Him to do anything wrong. We need to go to the Lord like the Psalmist did in this instance, and say to Him, “Righteous art Thou, O Lord.” And then follow that up with, “and upright are Thy judgments.” This word is sometimes translated “ordinances,” but it has reference to the decisions which the Lord makes concerning situations that we find ourselves involved in. And this is confirmed over and over in the Word of God. The character of God is reflected in the Word of God.

In confirmation of this cf. Neh 9:33 where the Levites confessed before God where the blame was to be laid in the troubles that had come upon the people of Israel. This is what they said:

33 Howbeit thou art just in all that is brought upon us; for thou hast done right, but we have done wickedly:

And we have a similar confession from Daniel in a prayer he prayed during the Babylonian captivity. Listen this part of his prayer:

7 O Lord, righteousness belongeth unto thee, but unto us confusion of faces, as at this day; to the men of Judah, and to the inhabitants of Jerusalem, and unto all Israel, that are near, and that are far off, through all the countries whither thou hast driven them, because of their trespass that they have trespassed against thee.

8 O Lord, to us belongeth confusion of face, to our kings, to our princes, and to our fathers, because we have sinned against thee.

9 To the Lord our God belong mercies and forgivenesses, though we have rebelled against him;

10 Neither have we obeyed the voice of the LORD our God, to walk in his laws, which he set before us by his servants the prophets (Dan. 9:7-10).

Now not all of our trials are punitive, that is, punishment for wrongdoing,

but there are always things in our lives which need to be changed so that we are living more in conformity with the will of God as it is expressed in His Word. I remind you again of what the writer of this psalm said in Psa. 119:71: "It is good for me that I have been afflicted; that I might learn thy statutes." There may have been failures in our lives, and the Lord has been dealing with us, but we have not given our immediate attention to them. And so the Lord gets our attention through some trial.

Verse 138 is a confirmation of what has been declared in the preceding verse. It is a good exercise for us to tell the Lord this about His Word. It will strengthen our faith and make us more submissive to God's will.

Verse 139 should remind us of the last verse of the preceding stanza. Although the psalmist had obviously suffered at the hands of his enemies, yet what troubled him the most, as he expressed in both of these verses, was that, as he said, "Mine enemies have forgotten thy words." It was not that they did not know the Word, not that they had not been instructed in the Word, but they had deliberately set aside the Word to do to the psalmist what they wanted to do. This caused the psalmist more distress than the suffering which his enemies had inflicted upon him.

So we are dealing, not with a backslidden child of God in the psalmist, but a man who loved the Lord, who lived to please the Lord, but still he had trouble from his enemies. We are inclined to think that obedience to the Lord makes us immune to difficulties, but that is not the case. On the surface it appears unrighteous of God to allow such a thing to happen. But it was happening, and that is why the psalmist had to exercise his soul in turning to the Lord, and to the Word.

And so as we get down to verse 140 we see that the psalmist was more convinced than ever that there was no defect in the Word of God. It was, as he said, "very pure," all pure, only pure. It was like metal in the refiner's fire, except metal has to be purified, but the Word of God is pure from its origin.

One thing that is very important about this psalm is the way the psalmist expressed more than once his humility of heart. And he does this again in verse 141. We are inclined to feel, because of God's promises, that He is obligated to us. That He has no right to let us experience the trials that we go through. But if He is righteous (and He is), and if His Word is equally righteous, then our only claim upon God is His love for us, and it doesn't

take much of a trial for us to realize how insignificant we need to be in our own estimation. By “small” he meant that he felt completely unworthy of any attention from the Lord; “despised” means that he viewed himself with contempt. But this did not drive him to despair. It just made him recognize how he could not afford to forget the “precepts” of the Lord. This is how Paul must have felt when he referred to himself as *the chief of sinners*. He meant that if he were to head any list, it would be the list of sinners. Remember that calling the Word “precepts” emphasizes every detail of the Word, those points that we are all inclined to overlook. *E.g.*, Rom. 14:13. An important detail in that verse is in the words “any more.”

We see the eternal and unchanging character of the Word of God. As it is and always has been, it never needs to be rewritten. It needs no revision. It is true for every generation. No truth need to be redefined, no doctrine omitted. The righteousness of God is stamped upon every page of Scripture from Genesis to Revelation, and woe to the person who ignores any of it, or who feels that some things need to be added to it. Truth for the psalmist’s generation was no different from any other generation. What has been written, stands written as it is. The trials of the psalmist only served to deepen his conviction in the unchanging righteousness of the Word, and the unchanging righteousness of God. People who feel that the Bible has no application to the moral standards of our day, or that they have no application to the immorality of our day, are making the most tragic effect that can be made. What was sin in the past, is still sin, and will always be sin. So we must leave it as it is, or face the judgment of God.

Verse 143 tells us that the psalmist’s troubles were not over. Barnes says that the two words, “trouble and anguish,” speak of “deep affliction.” They mean that he had no room to move. That he was completely closed in with no apparent way of escape. But even there, while the trial raged on, whatever it was, he found real pleasure in the authority and power of the Word. He meant by this, among other things, that he had no regret for the way he had lived even though it had brought on the rage of his enemies.

And then as we come to the end of the stanza in verse 144 he is more convinced than ever before about the righteousness of the Word and its eternal character, yet he cries out to God for greater understanding so that he can survive the troubles that have come upon him. It is understanding

the truth that brings life and strength to face whatever may come. Cf. v. 34.

Matthew Henry believed that the psalmist meant by “and I shall live,” that he was referring to the fact that understanding the Word of God would be what would carry him through to his eternal home.

If this stanza does nothing else immediately for us, it ought to make us realize how much we stand in constant need of the Word of God. I remember when I first sat under the ministry of Dr. Mitchell at Central Bible Church, those of us who were there had been richly blessed and spiritually fed by Dr. Mitchell’s ministry of the Word. It was the kind of a message that made you wish that you could get away from everyone else and seek to digest what you had just heard. One of the men in the church, who obviously had been greatly blessed by the message, came up to me afterwards, and said, “Well, do you think that we have gotten enough to get us through another week.” But I had to say, “No.” And it was not because there was anything lacking in the message. But God’s intention in blessing us so richly was to make us realize that we needed blessing like that every day! God could have given the children of Israel enough manna in one day to last them all week, but instead He gave them manna every day, so that daily they would look to him for the feeding of their bodies. The same is true for our souls. Understanding the stanza that we have had before us tonight, ought to make ask the Lord to help us to love the Word, and understand the Word, the way the psalmist did, so that we will be able to have the strength and the joy and the hope that he had. Don’t wait for another week. But get your Bible out and read it before you go to bed tonight, and then keep reading it every day this week. That’s what I need, and that’s what you need. Take your stand on the basics of theology, and never move away from them.