

# Psalm 119:49-56

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Date: 13 October 2019

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[ 0 : 0 0 ] We sometimes ponder on the problem and the reality of suffering from a philosophical perspective. How can a good God allow His people to suffer? Indeed, how can a good God allow anybody to suffer in the measure that so many do suffer? It's a fair question. It's one that merits careful thought. But the psalmist is grappling with the problem of suffering from a much more personal and experiential perspective. It's about my suffering, to use his own language there at the beginning of the section in verse 15. My comfort in my suffering is this. He's not philosophizing.

He's not trying to find clever answers for those who have posed in this quandary about suffering, the problem of suffering, the problem of evil. He's talking about my suffering, the suffering that he is experiencing in his own life. It's very personal. And in this, we can surely relate to the psalmist.

Each of us, in different ways and in different measures, can speak about my suffering. I would be surprised if there's anybody here this evening who would say to me, I know nothing of suffering.

I can't share any testimony of suffering in my life. I can't speak of my suffering. We all can, as I say, in different measures, but we can all speak about my suffering. What is your suffering?

What causes you pain and distress and hurt? What have you cried about, even in these past past days? Maybe solitary tears that you have shed and nobody else even knows about? How are you suffering? How do you respond to your suffering? How do you cope? Do you cope? The psalmist, in his suffering, is not looking for clever answers. He's looking for comfort and hope. And in these verses, the psalmist shares his experience of how God has helped him in his suffering through his word. How God has helped him in his suffering through his word, through God's word. And we can learn a lot from the psalmist's experience. So, if this is relevant for you, and if you know something of suffering, then it's relevant for you. Then listen carefully as we learn from the experience of the psalmist and his own very personal experience of suffering. What we'll do is explore the psalm and its treatment of the subject of suffering and the word of God, employing the following headings which will help us navigate a path through the section of the psalm. First of all, we'll think about what we experience. Then we'll think about what we need in the light of that experience.

[ 3 : 2 7 ] Then we'll think about where do we find what we need. And then we'll think about what we need to do. Now, as bare headings, it's maybe not altogether clear what's going on there, but hopefully as we think about each in turn, things will become clearer. First of all, what we experience. Well, we've already really touched on that, or it's very clear what we're speaking about here.

We're speaking about suffering. We suffer. The psalmist suffers. He begins this section, acknowledging that. Remember your word to your servant, for you have given me hope. My comfort in my suffering is this.

Your promise preserves my life. The psalmist is suffering. This is his experience. Now, the psalmist doesn't share with us the nature or cause of his suffering. Now, verse 51 might suggest that he is suffering for his faith.

You know, we read there, the arrogant mock me unmercifully, but I do not turn from your law. This reference to the arrogant mocking him unmercifully might suggest that his suffering is related to his allegiance to the Lord.

But it's also possible that the nature of his suffering is different, of a different kind, and yet even then there are those who taunt him and mock him as they see him suffering and as they see the pain that he is enduring. But he doesn't tell us, certainly not explicitly. We're not told the nature cause of his suffering. But it's possible that his suffering is the suffering that he endures for simply being part of this fallen world in which we live, that suffering that is simply part and parcel of the human experience. Suffering is no respecter of social station or of boundaries or of borders or cultures.

[ 5 : 31 ] Suffering is common to the human experience. We suffer. We suffer ill health. We suffer the consequences of broken relationships. We suffer the pain of loss. We suffer from loneliness. We suffer from being the victims of injustice. We suffer perhaps from witnessing and feeling a sense of indignation, just like the psalmist did, as we see others who are the victims of injustice and oppression. We suffer. And we suffer when we see those we love suffering, or when we see those we love making foolish decisions that we know that sooner or later will lead to pain and suffering for them, and as it is for them, so we will share in it. And suffering varies not only in its nature, but also in its intensity. That's pretty obvious. We know that. There is suffering that is real, but relatively light, and there is suffering that is deeply oppressive and heavy. On the news yesterday, there was an item on the funeral of a wee boy who died in northern Syria as a result of the mortar attacks from Turkey. And the wee boy was being buried in this little coffin. There's something very poignant about a little coffin. And there's this tiny little coffin, and the wee boy was being buried. And the mother was there at the funeral, and she had, I think, six children. She had five daughters, and then finally a boy had been born.

And this boy was cruelly snatched from her by the mortar shell. And we witness that from afar, and we can, in a measure, sense something of the intense suffering. So, first of all, what we experience? We experience suffering, different kinds and of different intensities. Now, the next thing I want to think about as we draw truths from the psalm is, what do we need? In the face of suffering, what do we need? Well, we need relief of some kind. The psalmist identifies three particular needs that anybody who has suffered will be able to relate to. He speaks about the need for preservation, life. He speaks about the need for comfort, and he speaks about the need for hope. Now, there is quite a lot of overlap between these, but we're going to think of them separately, though we acknowledge that the overlap that exists.

Preservation, comfort, and hope. First of all, preservation in verse 50, we read, my comfort in my suffering is this, your promise preserves my life. Now, the very fact that he uses this language and acknowledges that God, and through the promises of God, his life has been preserved, does give us a clue as to the intensity of the suffering. It was life-threatening. It's not necessarily that it was the danger of physical death, but whatever it was, it was draining life away from the psalmist. He felt that his life was ebbing away, and what he needed at the very basic level was to be preserved, for his life to be preserved, and he testifies to God preserving his life. But then also, and perhaps really this is maybe what we would first think of when we think about what do we need in the face of suffering, he needs comfort in that same verse. As he addresses God, he expresses himself in this way, my comfort in my suffering is this. He needed comfort, and we need comfort. And notice how, I think very significantly, the comfort received is, in the language of the psalmist himself, in my suffering. My comfort in my suffering. The significance of that is, of course, that the psalmist is acknowledging that the comfort he received did not remove the suffering. He speaks of comfort in his suffering. Now, we would often long for the suffering and the cause of the suffering to be removed. Of course, God is able to do that if he so chooses. But in the ordinary run of things, in the ordinary manner in which God operates, if you wish, is to bring comfort to us in our suffering, to give us grace to be able to withstand and to persevere in our suffering. The comfort that he receives is, in his own words, comfort in suffering. When we think of receiving comfort, there perhaps can be few experiences more painful than suffering alone, deprived of any comfort.

So, he needs to be preserved, but he needs comfort. But he also needs hope. In verse 49, remember your word to your servant, for you have given me hope. Hope, I would suggest, takes us on a stage from comfort. Hope allows us to believe that there is light at the end of the tunnel. Hope gives us strength to persevere. Hope brings light in the darkness. We can hold on to hope. Preservation is the most basic need to survive. Comfort is what brings a measure of warmth and support in the midst of the suffering. But hope takes us that step further of being able to look ahead and seeing that God is in control. And in his time and in his way, he will order things for our good, even as we are burdened and laden down with suffering or whatever it is that is causing our suffering. In the face of suffering, we need to be preserved, we need comfort, and we need hope. Now, none of these is a magic wand that makes the suffering disappear. And if anybody comes peddling ideas that somehow God can make your suffering disappear, if only you do this or say this prayer or whatever it might be, then dismiss such empty promises. God promises to be with us and to comfort us and to bring us hope, but he does so in our suffering. So our experience is one of suffering. What we need is preservation, comfort, and hope. Where do we find this relief? Where do we find preservation, comfort, and hope? Well, the psalmist shares how we find relief and help from God through God's Word. The help is from God. Let's be very clear on that. But God mediates his help, channels his help, as it were, through his Word. The help is from God, but mediated or administered through God's Word. Now, the Bible is not a self-help manual with clever ideas to combat suffering.

It is God's personal communication with His people. Listen to the psalmist. He begins this section of the psalm. Remember your Word to your servant. This is the language of relationship. This is the psalmist acknowledging that God has spoken to him. The Word that he has received was from God to him.

[13:17] And in the Bible, God is speaking to you. And this personal aspect is confirmed by the way the psalmist parallels your Word then in verse 49 with your promise in verse 50. Remember your Word to your servant.

And then in verse 50, my comfort in my suffering is this, your promise preserves my life. In his suffering, the psalmist remembers the promises the Lord, His covenant God, has made to him as His child. Promises are given in the context of a relationship. In the Bible, the promises of God are given almost entirely. You can maybe find one or two promises that are broader than this, but the bulk of the promises in the Bible are given to God's people in the context of that personal relationship with God of being part of His people. For us, in the light of the coming of Jesus, resting in the promises of God involves placing our trust in Jesus, who is God's amen, God's yes to every promise, to use that very vivid language that Paul uses when he speaks to the church in Corinth. Jesus, God's amen, God's yes to every promise. So we find relief, this relief that we need, preservation, comfort, hope, we find it in God's Word.

Martin Niemöller was a Lutheran pastor who was imprisoned by the Nazis and is perhaps best known for a poem he penned, though different folk would argue that perhaps it was or has been adapted somewhat through time. But you'll probably, I'm sure you'll recognize this, even though you perhaps wouldn't have been able to identify who wrote this. First they came for the communists, and I did not speak out because I was not a communist. They came for the socialists, and I did not speak out because I was not a socialist. Then they came for trade unionists, and I did not speak out because I was not a trade unionist. Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out because I was not a Jew.

Then they came for me, and there was no one left to speak out for me. I'm sure you're familiar with those words. Well, they were written, or words very similar to those, by this Lutheran pastor, Martin Niemöller, imprisoned in very desperate circumstances by the Nazi regime.

Now, I mention that simply to kind of identify who this man was. Less well known is what he wrote about his experience of imprisonment and the comfort and hope he received from God's Word.

[ 15 : 57 ] And Martin Niemöller wrote as follows about that experience. The Bible, what did this book mean to me during the long and weary years of solitary confinement?

The Word of God was simply everything to me, comfort and strength, guidance and hope, master of my days and companion of my nights, the bread which kept me from starvation and the water of life which refreshed my soul. And as we read these words, we find a kindred spirit with the author of the psalm. I'm sure the author of the psalm would say amen as he hears the words of this man. Where do we find this relief that we need? Preservation, comfort, hope. We find it in God's Word. Certainly that was the experience of this man. But there's a final thing that I want us to just think about, and it is this. What do we need to do? It's all very well to say, well, we can find comfort and hope in the Bible. But how does that work? How do we actually, in our own experience, receive that comfort and hope and preservation in God's Word? Or perhaps if we're thinking of others who are suffering and we want to be of help to them and maybe counsel them. For example, would it be helpful to say to a believer, you have a believer friend who is suffering and you can see how much they are in pain and suffering. And would it be helpful to go to them and say, well, you know, friend, just read the Bible more and you'll be fine. Just read the Bible more and everything will be fine. I think we'd agree that that would be unhelpful. Not that it's not a good thing to read the Bible, but to simply say to somebody, read the Bible and it will all work out fine isn't really adequate.

There is life. There is preservation. There is comfort. There is hope to be found in God's Word and in God's promises. But how do we experience this for ourselves? What do you need to do? Well, you need to ask for and receive God's help through His Word. Now, this is only possible in the context of a relationship with God. We've already touched on that somewhat, but I just want to stress that.

If you are not part of God's family through faith in Jesus, then there is little for you in the psalmist's experience. Because this is the experience of a child of God. And the example that he gives is only of help to us if we share with the psalmist that spiritual identity as members of God's family. The promises he speaks for are directed to those who are God's people. So, that's the starting point. If you are not a believer this evening, if you are not trusting in Jesus as your Savior, then there is where you must begin. But if you are, then what do you need to do to receive the relief that you need, the preservation, the comfort, and the hope? Let me suggest four things that we can draw from the psalm. First of all, it is important, I might even say necessary, but certainly important for you to keep God's Word resolutely. God's Word will minister to us in the measure that we are living and keeping God's Word. The psalmist testifies that he does not turn from God's law there in verse 51, and when he speaks about being the victim of mockery and taunting, and then he says, but I do not turn from your law. He keeps God's Word, or he endeavors to keep God's Word resolutely.

At the end of the psalm, he speaks about how I obey your precepts. We will receive comfort from God's Word in the measure that we are those who are taking God's Word seriously. Imagine the scenario.

[ 20:11 ] You know, you have a Bible in your home, and it's gathering dust, seldom read, seldom opened, and then there's a crisis, a big crisis, whatever that might be. What will I do? I'll grab the Bible, and somehow, in some mystical, magical way, by grabbing that Bible, and opening that Bible, and finding a psalm, and reading a psalm, suddenly all will be fine. It doesn't work like that.

The psalmist's experience of receiving from God comfort, and strength, and hope is in the context of endeavoring to live a life where he keeps God's Word resolutely. But there's something else I think we need to do, and these are all quite connected. The second thing let me suggest is this. Search God's Word expectantly. Keep God's Word resolutely, but also search God's Word expectantly. Notice what the psalmist says in verse 52, and it's really quite striking when we just think about it for a moment.

He says there in verse 52, I remember, Lord, your ancient laws, and I find comfort in them. You know, we focus a lot on this word comfort, God granting us comfort. But notice how he gets comfort. He says, I find comfort in them. I find comfort in your ancient laws. The psalmist doesn't wait for comfort to be mystically dispensed from on high. You know, he's not, you know, in tears, weeping in the face of his suffering, and somebody cry out to God, God, I need comfort, and then just waits for God somehow to deliver this comfort to him. And all he has to do is passively wait to be comfort. No, he says, I found comfort. I find comfort in your promises. You know, it involves effort on his part. It involves initiative on his part to go into God's Word and find the comfort that he needs.

Where does he find comfort in God's Word? Well, he finds comfort in God's promises, the promises that he finds in God's Word, but not only in the promises, but also in the evidence of God keeping his promises in the saving acts that are recorded in the Word. You know, we focus a lot, and rightly so, on the promises, and there is comfort in God's promises. But you know, where there is greater comfort is when those promises are married with the examples of God keeping his promises that we find throughout the Bible. The Bible is a story of God dealing with his people, and we find time and time again God keeping his promises. And so you have the promises, then you also have in God's Word the evidence that God keeps his promises. And as we find those things, as we search God's Word, then we find comfort in God's Word. So keep God's Word resolutely. Search God's Word expectantly.

And also do this, sing God's Word permanently. In verse 54, your decrees are the theme of my song wherever I lodge. And the picture that the psalmist paints is very vivid. The psalmist is a stranger on earth, to use the language that he has already used in verse 19. I am a stranger on earth. And this language where he speaks of wherever I lodge is from the same root word. It has this idea of a pilgrim, of a stranger wandering from place to place. And he says, wherever I am in my wanderings, wherever I am, what I do is I reflect on your Word, and they are the theme of my song.

[ 24 : 03 ] In the long, dark nights, he sings God's Word to God in praise, and I would suggest to himself in encouragement. You know, to sing God's Word can be sung in those two directions. In corporate worship, we might say that there is a sense in which we sing it to others also. But in the context of this psalm, yes, we sing to God in praise, but we take God's Word and we can sing it to ourselves to encourage us and to lift us in those long, dark nights. And the songs that he sings, no doubt, he doesn't say the nature of the songs, but the songs that he sings will not only be songs of joy, they will also be songs of lament. But he sings, and as he sings, he experiences comfort and hope.

But then, finally, this is the final thing we need to do if we are to be those who receive God's life and comfort and hope. Obey God's Word consistently. The final verse is an intriguing one in terms of what the psalmist testifies. This has been my practice. I obey your precepts.

As I was making my way through the section and reading it and trying to draw out some thoughts and ideas, this was perhaps what struck me most. Now, depending on your circumstances, there may be parts of the psalm that strike you more vividly. But for me, this was very striking.

This has been my practice. I suppose it struck me because I paused for a moment. I thought, well, could I say that? You hear the psalmist, he's before God. You know, he can't deceive God, and he knows that. And yet he's able to say, this has been my practice. I obey your precepts.

Is that something that you can say? This has been my practice. This is what I do. Obedience is his practice. Obedience is his thing. That's what he does. And I think what the psalmist is saying, or in any case, what is implicit in what the psalmist is saying, is that obedience brings with it a greater capacity to receive comfort and hope when we turn to God's Word. The obedient believer, the obedient man, the obedient woman is in tune with God. And so, such a man, such a woman, hears God's voice more clearly when he turns and looks for and searches for comfort and hope.

[ 26 : 50 ] And he finds it in the promises of God. He finds it in the record of God's faithful dealings with his people in history. He finds comfort. Who finds it? Well, very particularly those who can echo the words of the psalmist, this has been my practice. I obey your precepts.

Well, as we draw some of these thoughts together, do you suffer? Do you need relief, preservation, comfort, hope? Well, God will preserve you. God will comfort you. God will give you hope through His Word. But you need to ask, and you need to receive, and you will receive in the measure that you keep God's Word resolutely, that you search God's Word expectantly, that you sing God's Word permanently, and you obey God's Word consistently. May God help us so to live and enjoy the blessing that comes with that. Well, let's pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank You for Your Word. We thank You that it is a living Word. We thank You that it is the very Word of the living God. We thank You that You speak to us personally through Your Word. And when we open the Bible and read the Bible, we hear You speaking to us, to each of us, where we are. We come and we recognize that as with everybody else, really, in one way or another, we know what it is to suffer. We thank You for the measure in which we have been spared much suffering. Perhaps for some of us, we look around and we're struck by how good You have been to us in sparing us much in the way of suffering. For others, that will not be the reality. But we thank You that whatever our experience is, we can turn to the One who is able and willing to preserve our life, to grant us comfort and hope in our suffering. We pray that that would be our experience. We pray for those here this evening who are suffering in some particular way, that You would grant that comfort and that hope that we need. Help us with the psalmist.

And we will always fall short. We will never do these things perfectly, but we do pray that You would help us to take Your Word seriously, to keep Your Word resolutely, to obey Your Word consistently, that we would be able to testify with the psalmist, this has been my practice, to obey Your precepts. Help us to search in Your Word and to find comfort in Your Word. And help us, yes, also to sing Your Word in praise to You, but also in encouragement to ourselves. And we pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen.