

Psalm 119:25-30

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[0:00] Well, turn with me to that passage in Psalm 119, reading from verse 25, or rather considering this section that begins at verse 25. If I had to choose one word to capture the essence of this section of Psalm 119, I think the word would be resurrection.

Now, maybe that doesn't immediately strike you as the likely word to use, but let me explain why I think the word resurrection captures something of what the psalmist shares in this section.

Notice how this section of the psalm begins, I am laid low in the dust. I am laid low in the dust. It's the language of a near-death experience.

It's the language of one who is, to simply repeat the words, laid low. The verb here is one that speaks of clinging to the dust.

I cling to the dust. That's where the psalm begins. But where does the psalm, or this section of the psalm, end? Well, we read there in the final verse, I run in the path of your commands.

[1:11] I run in the path of your commands. It's the language of one who is alive, of one who is running in the service and worship of God. And so, I think this word resurrection perhaps captures something of what is being described for us, something of the journey that the psalmist shares with us from the depth of his own soul and experience to encourage us and to help us when we find ourselves perhaps in similar circumstances.

From the dust of death to the breath of life, from a soul that is weary to a heart that is enlarged. As I suggested in the reading of this section, this final phrase with which the section ends, for you have broadened my understanding, trying to capture this language in Hebrew of a heart enlarged.

You have enlarged my heart. And perhaps that expression, it is poetry after all, is one that perhaps better gets across the sentiment and the intention of the author.

From death to life, from weediness to a heart enlarged. Well, let's explore this journey from death or near death, from sorrow to joy.

Anyway, let's examine it with the help of the following headings that perhaps in a measure describe or track the journey of the psalmist. We want to think first of all of where he is, certainly as he describes his circumstances, where he is.

[2:53] Then we want to think about who he turns to. But then we want to think a little bit about what he seeks. What is it that he's looking for? What does he ask for? But then also in the psalm, notice how he receives that which he asks for.

And then finally, notice what it is that he resolves to do. In the light of God's answer to his cry, what does he resolve to do? That's the manner in which we want to think about this section.

And it really follows almost chronologically the material that we have in these verses. First of all then, where he is. There's really two verses that we focus on as we think about this.

Where he is or where he begins. We've already mentioned verse 25. I am laid low in the dust, or I cling to the dust. The language describes a man or woman on the very precipice of death or the grave.

From dust we came, and to dust we will return. It's not the first time in the psalms that dust is used poetically to portray death.

[4:01] Just notice with me just very quickly what we read in Psalm 30 and in verse 9. You can look it up, or you can just listen as I read the verse. Psalm 30 and verse 9 we read, What is gained if I am silenced?

If I go down to the pit, will the dust praise you? Will it proclaim your faithfulness? And he goes on. And so there, the pit or death itself compared to the dust.

The word dust used almost as a poetical representation of death in the pit. And here we find the psalmist clinging to the dust.

Now the issue here I don't think is principally physical. It's not that he's on the border of physical death, though his condition no doubt impacts on his physical well-being. He's not about, it would seem, to breathe his last breath, but he is laid low. He is laid very low. He's in the depths of dejection, perhaps even despair.

[5 : 06] And what is the cause of his prostration? What is the cause of him being laid low in the manner that he describes? What has driven him to the dust? We don't know.

We're not told. Perhaps we find a clue in verse 28. What we read there at the beginning of verse 28, my soul is weary with sorrow.

My soul is weary with sorrow. The picture painted is of deep distress and profound sorrow, but we're still left asking the question, what is the cause of this sorrow?

Why is this man laid low? And again, we have to answer, we're not told. Sorrow can have many causes. When we think of sorrow, perhaps we're immediately drawn to, perhaps, a circumstance where we've lost a loved one, and the sorrow that accompanies such a loss.

Perhaps the sorrow of witnessing the foolish decisions of a wayward child and the consequences of those foolish decisions. Perhaps a broken relationship, a relationship that we had cherished and valued, and for whatever reason, it is rent asunder, and there is sorrow, there is sadness that accompanies such a breaking of a relationship.

[6 : 28] Perhaps dreams that are dashed, or aspirations frustrated, and maybe we could go on. There are many causes of sorrow. But perhaps we do need to add to that list of causes of sorrow.

We need to add to that list what we might call godly sorrow. That godly sorrow produced by our sin and its accompanying guilt. This is the sorrow of grieving the one who loves us so, who so loved us that He sent His one and only Son to be our Savior, and yet we grieve Him, we rebel against Him, we disappoint Him, we hurt Him by our sin and by our rebellion, and as we become conscious of what we have done, there is, and rightly so, sorrow that accompanies that disobedience.

The sorrow, perhaps, also witnessing the pain and the hurt caused by our sin and folly in the lives of others. Our sin is not without consequences for ourselves, but also, sadly, often for others also.

Whatever the cause, this is where the psalmist is. He is laid low in the dust. He is weary with sorrow. Let me read you part of a poem by a poet by the name of Janet Ix, spelled I-K-Z, so your guess is as good as mine as how you pronounce I-K-Z.

But it's a poem that's inspired by and modeled on this portion of the psalm. You might almost call it a poetic paraphrase. It's recorded in a book that I've been kind of looking through because it's a book that deals with this Psalm 119, but from a very curious perspective.

[8 : 13] The title of the book is His Testimonies, My Heritage, Women of Color on the Word of God. And each section is dealt with by a different woman who reflects on the content of it. And some of the sections are accompanied by a piece of poetry.

And the beginning of this section of the psalm is captured by this particular poet in these words. Found, lying helpless, face down, choking on earth, joined in oneness with dust, dust which once formed me.

Face down, choking on earth. Do you know this place? Perhaps for some of you, this is where you are this evening, laid low and weary with sorrow.

Where he is. But we also want to think about who he turns to. Who does the psalmist turn to as he clings to the dust? Of course, we know the answer, don't we? We know the answer to the question. He turns to God. He turns to his Lord. He cries out to the Almighty. There in verse 1, I am laid low in the dust. Preserve my life.

[9 : 20] Preserve my life according to your word. What does this turning to God reveal or look like? Well, maybe we could highlight two things. It certainly reveals trust.

In the midst of the darkness, he turns to the one he cannot see, but he knows that he is there. He cannot perhaps even lift his head or perhaps even utter an audible cry, but his soul can whisper a cry of faith, preserve my life.

It reveals trust in this man clinging to the dust, weary with sorrow. But I think it's also marked by honesty. The words of the psalm itself are striking in their honesty, but we also have the testimony of the psalmist where there in verse 26, he shares with us what he did.

He says, I gave an account of my ways and you answered me. I gave an account of my ways. The psalmist opens up to God.

He tells God everything. His ways, his pain, his fears, his doubts, his burden of guilt, how he had messed up big time in whatever way it might have been.

[10:34] I gave an account of my ways. I told you everything and you answered me. It's marked by honesty. And we can do the same.

When we are laid low, when we are weary with sorrow, may God grant us to continue trusting in him and turning to him, being honest with him, sharing with him that which perhaps we would not be able to share with anybody else, where he is and who he turns to.

We also want to notice what he seeks. What does he seek? Well, in the psalm, as he prays to God, he does ask of God for different things.

I want to just highlight three of the things that he asks of God, that he seeks from God. First of all, he seeks life. There at the very beginning, I am laid low in the dust.

Preserve my life. Now, to begin with, all he's asking for is preservation. Don't let me die. Don't let my faith expire.

[11:41] It's just preservation. That's all he's asking for. He's not asking at this point for abundant life, victorious life, triumphant life. He's just saying, preserve my life. That's all I'm asking for.

Preserve my life. Keep me alive. Keep me breathing. Don't allow the frickering flame of life or even faith to be snuffed out. Don't allow the dust to asphyxiate.

Don't allow me to melt away altogether under the burden of sorrow. Preserve my life. If it's life we seek, we do well to turn to the Lord of life, the creator and giver and sustainer of life, the God who breathed life into the dust of the earth.

In the language of dust, surely there's an echo of the creation account of how God took from the dust of the earth and he breathed into it and from that created Adam.

And maybe if we even visualize God acting in that powerful way, at the very beginning of history. And remember that it's the same God who sees us as we are face down in the dust, clinging to the dust.

[12:52] If he could breathe into that soil and produce Adam, how much more can he breathe into his own people and revive us and preserve our lives?

This is the God who raised Jesus from the grave. This is the God who is the God of the living, not of the dead. Again, I just share with you some of the content of that poem that I read a moment ago or the beginning of which I read a moment ago.

Oh God, turn me over, lifter of my head, Genesis life into these lungs that I might inhale revelation, exhale eternity.

capturing something of the sense of the psalmist in this section of the psalm. He seeks life, but he also seeks understanding. In verse 27, he directs his plea to God, cause me to understand the way of your precepts.

Now this is a plea not only for bare knowledge, but the wisdom to discern and understand in a measure perplexing providence. How do we understand perplexing providence?

[14:03] Well, a good place to start is to ask God to grant us that discernment, to grant us a measure of that understanding. Cause me to understand the way of your precepts.

He doesn't say, cause me to understand your precepts, so that would be a perfectly valid and good request to make of God, but there's a subtlety to this. Cause me to understand the way of your precepts.

He doesn't only wish to know God's precepts, chapter and verse, to memorize a hundred verses. It would be a very good exercise to do that, to saturate our minds with the word of God.

It's a good thing to do, but that's not all he wants to do. He wants to understand the way of your precepts. And there's a humility in his plea. He knows that he cannot work it out for himself.

He can't simply open the Bible, persuaded that it is God's word, and then as he applies his intellect and reasoning faculties, he's able to draw out understanding.

[15:05] He couldn't do that. We can't do that. We can have a very high view of Scripture, and we ought to have a high view of Scripture, but however high it is, let's not imagine that by turning to it, believing it to be the word of God, and applying our intellect, our God-given faculties of reasoning, that we will be able to draw out understanding.

No, we need to ask of God, cause me to understand the way of your precepts. Is this not what we often need?

A measure of understanding, not full understanding. God may choose not to grant us full understanding, but a measure of understanding, or some inkling into the why of God's providence. And for that, we need to ask God for understanding. And as we are granted understanding, we are able to delight in the providence of God. We are able to meditate on His wonderful deeds, which is what He goes on to say in this very verse.

Cause me to understand the way of your precepts, that I may meditate on your wonderful deeds, on your word, and on your deeds that are recorded in your word, that I would meditate on them, that I would stand in grateful awe at the admiration of them.

[16:28] We meditate on the deeds of God in our own lives. And as we do so with understanding, we can do so gratefully and with wonder. But of course, we also, and perhaps preeminently, we meditate and delight on the saving deeds of God in history as recorded in His word.

And of course, reaching their climax in the person of Jesus. We meditate on Jesus, on His person and work. So what does the psalmist seek?

Well, he seeks life, but he also seeks understanding. But he also seeks strength. Notice in verse 28, My soul is weary with sorrow. Strengthen me according to your word.

He seeks the strength to lift his head, to rise up, to carry on, to walk, to run, to live, not just survive. He began by asking simply that his life would be preserved.

But he knows that that is not enough. Not enough just to survive. Not enough for his life simply to be preserved. That's a good start. But he then needs to lift up his head.

[17:34] He needs to walk. He needs to run. He needs to live. And so he seeks strength to do so. Let's also think a little bit about how he receives.

He asks all this of God. That God would preserve him. That God would grant him life. That God would grant him understanding. That God would grant him strength. But how does he receive those things that he asks for?

Well, he receives from God. That's a given. But how? How does God dispense life and understanding and strength to him? Well, what is his experience that he shares with us?

Well, the common theme is, of course, God's word. I am laid low in the dust. Preserve my life according to your word. Cause me to understand the way of your precepts, that I may meditate on your wonderful deeds.

My soul is weary with sorrow. Strengthen me according to your word. God answers and delivers by and through his word.

[18:35] And this truth is beautifully captured in verse 29. Verse 29 in the translation that we have in the version that we're using states the matter in this way.

Keep me from deceitful ways. But then particularly the following expression. Be gracious to me and teach me your law. Again, if we were to capture the economy of language with which the author wrote, one way of doing so, and I think it's the translation that the ESV opts for, is simply this, graciously teach me your law.

How does God dispense understanding and strength? Well, he does so as he graciously teaches his people his law. That is what we need.

This is how we receive. This is how God dispenses. He graciously teaches us his law. God's motivation for answering our cry is grace. It's grace-driven and grace-grounded.

But even the manner in which he answers our cry, the manner in which he dispenses that which we need and seek, is gracious. That's what he asks for. Graciously teach me your word.

[19:46] God gives graciously. But there's also another matter in this question of how we receive that which we seek. And it has to do with our capacity to receive. I think we'd all be agreed that there is a limitless capacity on the part of God to give.

God has a limitless capacity to grant life, to grant understanding, to strengthen. I'm sure we're agreed on that. God does not have some diminishing supply of these resources for us.

But there is a reality. There is this element that we need to grapple with, and that is our capacity to receive. Maybe if I could just kind of try and illustrate that by sharing with you something that happened to us when we were in Israel last week.

Now, the temperature was soaring on some days, reaching 36 or 37 degrees. On my phone one time it said, I think it said 36, feels like 41.

And as we were touring and we're out in the open, not always with shade available, we needed to be constantly on our guard against dehydration and replenish our water supply.

[20 : 59] Now, thankfully, at the different places that we were visiting, there were watering stations with ample supplies of cold water. And the issue wasn't the supply of water.

There was plenty water. But the issue sometimes was the capacity of my 500 milliliter water bottle to receive. There was only so much the bottle could take.

And once it was full, it was full, and then we would move on, and we didn't know when the next opportunity would be. The water was plentiful, but the bottle was small. And sometimes we simply needed a bigger bottle.

We lacked in the capacity to receive this refreshing water that was available. I wonder, is that not true sometimes of us as believers?

The supply of strength and life and understanding is limitless. But our capacity to receive is sometimes limited, or not sometimes, always limited.

[21 : 58] And I think the psalm ends with the psalmist testifying to how God graciously dealt with His capacity to receive. I think that's the sense of this final expression that we have, where in verse 32 we read, I run in the path of your commands, for you have broadened my understanding.

Or as I've indicated already, it can be translated perhaps more literally or just capturing that the actual Hebrew words, you have enlarged my heart.

And indeed, this translation, you have broadened my understanding, also captures in a sense this idea of increasing the psalmist's capacity to receive from God.

But the poetic language of an enlarged heart, I think, is more in keeping with the genre of the psalm.

You have enlarged my heart. And we need a heart enlarged to receive all that God has for us.

Sometimes our problem is that very small heart with a reduced capacity to receive. H.G. Wells, the science fiction writer, famous for a number of well-known works of science fiction, The Time Machine, War of the Worlds, He was very antagonistic to Christianity.

[23 : 13] But in 1937, at a party given for his 71st birthday, he announced to the guests who had gathered for the occasion, and I quote, Gentlemen, I am 71 years old today, and I have never found peace.

The trouble with people like me is that the man from Galilee, Jesus of Nazareth, was too big for my small heart. That was a very candid admission in the part of H.G. Wells, and I'd love to be able to quiz him on what he actually meant by that.

But the language is striking. The man from Galilee, Jesus of Nazareth, was too big for my small heart. Now, we don't stand where H.G. Wells stood because we, like the psalmist, are believers.

But we also need to have our heart enlarged that we might be able to more and more receive from God and so delight in the unsearchable riches of Christ.

How does he receive? Well, he receives from God, from God's unending supply. But God graciously not only gives, but He enables him to receive.

[24 : 21] He enlarges his heart. May God enlarge our hearts, our capacity to receive from Him. But let's finally and just very briefly notice what he resolves.

The psalm ends, well, we've looked at the very final statement of the psalm, but verses 30 to 32 provide us the testimony of the psalmist regarding his resolve, presumably having called out, having received, having had his life preserved, having received a measure of understanding and strength.

He now resolves to live in a certain manner. And we have this language of resolve, of decision there from verse 30. I have chosen the way of faithfulness.

I have set my heart on Your laws. I hold fast to Your statutes, Lord. I run in the path of Your commands. Perhaps three of the verbs there together serve to mark and distinguish what a godly life looks like.

I have chosen the way of faithfulness. I have made a decision that that is the way I will walk. I have chosen. I hold fast.

[25 : 33] There in verse 31, I hold fast to Your statutes. It's interesting, and no doubt it's deliberate on the part of the psalmist, that the verb that he uses there is the verb cling that we have at the very beginning in verse 25.

On neither occasion in our version is that the verb that is used to translate. But for you to see the contrast, in verse 25 he says, I cling to the dust. But then in verse 31 he says, I cling to Your statutes, Lord.

You see the transformation. You see the change. You see the striking contrast. No longer clinging to the dust, but rather resolving to cling to God and to His statutes.

I have chosen. I hold fast. And then very strikingly, I run in the path of Your commands. The title of the poem that I quoted from is Run Ablaze.

And I think that captures the sense of what the psalmist is resolving to do and perhaps beginning to experience. I run in the path of Your commands.

[26 : 32] I am alive, and I run in the path of Your commands. I delight in Your commands. I delight in obeying You and serving You. I run in the path of Your commands.

I have the strength to run. I have the understanding to know where to run. And I run in the path of Your commands. In the light of Jesus, we can maybe adapt this language and this intention, this resolve, not in any way departing from what all that He says concerning God's Word, but approaching what He says in the light of Jesus.

And we can resolve in similar vein to the psalmist, I have chosen Jesus. I cling to Jesus. I run in the path Jesus has set for me.

What a journey He shares with us. And we're grateful to the psalmist for doing so, from clinging to the dust to running ablaze. And God would have You, God would have us run.

Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank You for Your Word. We thank You for the honesty of the psalmist in sharing his experience of being weary with sorrow, of being laid low in the dust.

[27 : 48] We thank You how in his experience, His faith was kept alive, a flicker but alive, and He was able to turn to You and cry out to You, preserve my life. Help us in those dark days, in those dark nights, perhaps never seeming to end, to know what it is, perhaps even as we cling to the dust, and even when we find it difficult to lift up our head, even when we find it difficult to verbalize our cry, that from the depth of our soul we would know what it is to cry out to You, preserve my life.

And as we experience that preservation, so we would move on and ask of You for understanding, that we would delight and marvel at Your wonderful deeds, that we would ask and receive the strength that we need to walk and to obey and to serve.

And we do pray that You would indeed enlarge our hearts, grant us a greater capacity for Yourself, a greater capacity for Your Word, a greater capacity to receive Your understanding and Your strength, that we might live and run in Your service and to Your glory.

And we pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen.