

Psalm 119:81-88

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[0 : 0 0] Well, a few hours have passed since the morning, but it's still 11 days and counting.

For those of you who perhaps weren't here in the morning, that's how I began the sermon this morning, obviously in reference to the general election. And picking up on that same theme, I wonder how many of you have read any of the election manifestos of the different political parties. I would imagine that very few of us have spent time reading the actual manifestos. What about the leaflets that have been clogging up your letterbox? How many of those have been opened and read? I wonder. I think that when we returned from holiday, of course, there was a mass of junk mail clogging up the entrance to the house. And among all that, of course, were many election leaflets. And I think in my haste to dispatch them to the recycling bin, I very nearly threw out a very good offer from Domino's, which would have been a very sad outcome. But I managed to realize that the mistake I was just about to make in time. But getting back to the manifestos, the election literature, I wonder why it is that many of us spend very little time at all reading that kind of literature. Is it simply an apathy that we're not interested in the political process, we're not interested in the issues at hand? I hope that that isn't the case. Is it that we're too busy with other things to do and we simply don't have time? That doesn't seem very likely. The leaflets at least don't really require a great deal of time to skim through or even read more carefully. Is it that they're just very boring? And we find what is written in them just very dull, to be quite honest. Or I wonder if it's because we don't believe the pledges and the promises that this literature contains. And so much is promised, but we simply don't believe what it is that is being promised to us. And so we don't read because we don't trust. Now this morning we considered this matter of trust and the invitation, the plea that Jesus makes to us that we would trust in Him as the one who is altogether trustworthy.

And this evening I want to return to the same theme with our thoughts revolving around a statement made by the psalmist in the passage that we read in verse 86. So it's in Psalm 119 and in verse 86. At the heart of this section of this psalm, the psalmist testifies in this fashion. He says, all your commands are trustworthy. All your commands are trustworthy. And our thoughts are going to revolve around this statement of the psalmist, though we'll be considering the whole of this section.

But in due course, we'll come to this statement particularly and contend that it is very much at the heart of this section of the psalm. All your commands are trustworthy. Now the way we're going to tackle this section of Psalm 119 is by, if you wish, interrogating the psalmist and allowing him to answer the questions that we pose to him by means of what he has written in these verses.

And we have four questions that we want to pose to the psalmist and listen to how he answers those questions in the words we find before us. And the four questions are these. First of all, we want to ask the psalmist, where are you? Where are you? And see what answer he has for us. Listen to the answer that he gives to us in these verses. Where are you? But then we're also going to pose this question to the psalmist. What are you doing? In that place where you find yourself, what are you doing? And again, we'll find a very full answer to that question in these verses. Now the third question that we're going to ask the psalmist is this. Why are you doing all that you're doing? I think we'll discover that what the psalmist is doing is somewhat surprising given his circumstances, which is why this third question seems a reasonable one. Why are you doing what you're doing? And then a final question that we'll comment on or seek to answer very fleetingly, and it is this. What will you do? We're speaking to the psalmist, as it were, and we're asking him, what will you do when you get out of this place where you currently are? What will you do? So these are the questions. Let's pose them and find the answers to them in these verses one by one. First of all, then, the question, where are you? Where are you?

[5 : 38] What answer would the psalmist give, or what answer does the psalmist give in these verses? I think if we were to summarize the answer that he gives, it is this, I'm in a very, very dark place. I'm in a dark, dark place. The language that he uses, the images that he makes use of are intense and unremitting.

Let's just go through the psalm, or those parts of the psalm, or this section of the psalm that are relevant in answering this question or in amplifying the answer, I'm in a very dark place. In verse 81, my soul faints with longing for your salvation. And the words that the psalmist is employing here, the translation that is offered here, I don't think does altogether justice to the plight of the psalmist. The idea of what the psalmist is saying here is along these lines, my soul or spirit has come to an end for your salvation, or longing for your salvation. The idea is that the psalmist is dying as he waits. Yes, he longs for God's salvation, but it's not coming. It's not appearing. He longs for deliverance, but deliverance is not to be found. And all his energy, physical and spiritual, is all but spent. There's nothing left in the tank. If he were running, and he certainly isn't running, but if he were running, he would be running on empty. My soul faints. My spirit faints. There's no strength left. But then he continues in verse 82. My eyes fail looking for your promise. And again, the language is very intense and dark, we might say. My eyes have come to an end looking for your promise. I look, and I look, and I look, but nothing, nothing. No light at the end of the tunnel. Comfort is sought.

Comfort is desired. Comfort is desperately needed, but it is not forthcoming. When will you comfort me? You haven't yet. Nothing. When will you comfort me? He's in a dark, dark place. He goes on in verse 83, and here he begins to use some imagery that would illustrate in pictorial form his plight, his circumstances. And how does he describe himself? He says, though I am like a wineskin in the smoke.

Now, it's not a picture that immediately conjures up perhaps an image for us. It is an image that it belongs to the age and the time in which the psalmist was writing, but it's not altogether so difficult to get the idea. The picture that's been painted is of a dry, cracked wineskin, well past its useful life.

You might picture it hanging in the rafters of the home as the smoke from the fire darkens, this useless wineskin day by day. It rather demands the question, what's it doing there anyway? Why is it hanging there at all? It serves for nothing. It's dry. It's cracked. It can't be used. There's no way of recovering it. Why is it not simply thrown into the fire from which the smoke is rising rather than hanging there, burnt out and useless. And the psalmist says, that's me. That's me. Not just that's how I feel. That is who I am, like a wineskin in the smoke. But he goes on, and as the psalm develops, he begins to give us some idea of the circumstances that have led him to this very dark place. In verses 84 and 85, he speaks of those who are opposing him. To add insult to injury, he's under this unrelenting and merciless opposition of those who persecute him without a cause. When will you punish my persecutors? The arrogant dig pitfalls for me, contrary to your law. There's no justification for what they're doing to me. We say that he's been persecuted without cause, but strictly speaking, we'd have to say without good cause. There is a cause for the opposition that he endures, and the cause is precisely his faithfulness to God. It is for this reason that he is enduring all that he is enduring at the hands of his persecutors. And it would seem that God is indifferent. He takes no action. He doesn't lift a finger to protect him, to vindicate him. When will you punish my persecutors? They get off scot-free. They laugh and they mock at me because you do nothing to protect me.

[11 : 05] And the psalm comes to a conclusion where the psalmist recognizes that his life is all but gone. Verse 87, they almost wipe me from the earth. He's hanging on by a thread.

All of what the psalmist shares concerning his somber circumstances is amplified by the seeming unending nature of his plight. He's nearly done at the very end of his tether, and yet the darkness still hangs over him. And so he cries out in anguish, how long must your servant wait? Then in verse 84, how long must your servant wait? Where are you? I'm in a very dark place. I wonder if you can now, or maybe looking back on your Christian experience, if you can identify in some measure with the psalmist. Maybe when you went through that experience, or indeed as you go through that experience, it is a source of confusion for you. Why is this happening to me? I trust in God. I seek to serve him, and yet this is what I am. Well, this is where the psalmist was. This is the answer he gives to the question that we pose to him. Where are you? But let's move on to the second question. The second question we want to pose is this. What are you doing? This is where you are, in this dark, dark place. Well, what are you doing in this place? What would any sane person do in such circumstances? Here we have a servant of God. Everything would suggest a faithful servant of God who is, certainly by all appearances, abandoned by God. What should he do? What would be a reasonable thing to do in such circumstances?

As I was thinking about this in my own mind, the advice offered by Job's wife to her husband would seem to be appropriate and compelling for the psalmist in these circumstances. Curse God and die. Curse God and die. You know, you put so much trust in him. You spoke so highly of him. You served him so tirelessly, and look where you are, and where is he? You cry out for help, and there's no answer. Curse God and die.

That's the best you can do. But of course, this is not what the psalmist does. And so we ask him the question, what are you doing? And if we had to paraphrase or summarize or in one sentence respond to that question for him, drawing from what he writes in this section of the psalm, what are you doing? I think the answer would be, brother, I'm clinging on. I'm clinging on. That's what I'm doing.

I'm clinging on. Notice in his own words what he says in the psalm. In verse 81, yes, his soul faints. But then what does he say? But I have put my hope in your word. All the evidence would seem to suggest that this hope in God's word is an act of folly. Why hope in the word of a silent God? But the psalmist does hope. He is clinging on tenaciously to hope. He just won't let go. His mind is made up, and he will hope against all hope. I have put my hope in your word. Then in verse 82, what do we read there? Yes, my eyes fail, but I'm looking for your promise. I'm looking for that comfort that's not coming, but I'm still waiting. There's nothing to suggest that God is imminently about to come good on his promise. And yet the psalmist still asks the question, when will you comfort me? And the question is not so much in reproach of God as in stubborn hope. I'm still here. I'm still waiting.

[15:17] I'm going nowhere. When will you comfort me? Because I'm not moving until you do. And then in verses 83 and 87, you have a similar statement in both of these verses.

I do not forget your decrees. Remember, we're answering the question, the psalmist is answering the question that we're posing. What are you doing? In the midst of these dark circumstances, what are you doing? And he says, well, I'll tell you what I'm doing. I'm not forgetting God's decrees. I've not forgotten God's precepts. Now, many who surrounded the psalmist perhaps would have mocked at him, mocked at this naive folly of not forgetting the decrees and precepts of a God whose hand, in a perverse reversal of the assurance of the prophet Isaiah, is shortened that it cannot save or will not save or so it would appear. Everything would point in that direction. But the psalmist will not forget. He'll not forget God's decrees. He'll not forget God's precepts, even in the midst of these dark days that he is living. What else is he doing? Well, he's crying out for help. In verse 86, we find him crying out for help. All your commands are trustworthy. We'll come to that in a moment. But then what does he say?

Help me. Help me. For men persecute me without cause. He cries out for help to this God who may seem to him to be such a distant God. And as we think about the circumstances of the psalmist, and indeed the response of the psalmist to these very dark circumstances, and as I was thinking about them myself in preparing this message, I was more and more struck by how the portrait that is painted, though it is of the psalmist. This is a psalmist speaking of his own life, but the portrait that he paints of his own life, how it reminds us of another who suffered the dark, dark agony of abandonment and God-forsakenness. And not only the sensation of such forsakenness of such forsakenness, but the reality. We think, of course, of Jesus, our Savior, who on the cross cried out, Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani, my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

What about you? What are your circumstances? In the words of the hymn, maybe I could pose the question, does your anchor hold in the storms of life when the clouds unfold their wings of strife?

When the strong tides lift and the cables strain, does your anchor drift or firm remain? Listen to what the reformer John Calvin has to say of the psalmist's faith in the face of bitter and enduring suffering as described in these verses, and he describes it or expresses himself in this way, it is a genuine evidence of true godliness when although plunged into the deepest afflictions, we cease not to submit ourselves to God. Here is a godly man who in the midst of affliction and pain and suffering and darkness refuses to abandon God. He does not cease to submit himself to God.

[18:53] What are you doing? Well, the psalmist answers very eloquently what he is doing in the midst of the darkness. But that takes us on to our third question that we want to pose to him, and the question is this, why are you doing all this? We stand bemused at what he is doing.

And so we ask him, why? Why are you doing this? Why are you still hoping? Why are you still trusting? Why are you still waiting? On what grounds did the psalmist continue to cling on to God?

Can we make any sense of his stubborn faith? Well, he gives us a clear answer in this psalm, and the clear answer that he gives us is this central declaration that we referred to at the very beginning. No doubt we could draw out other aspects to the answer, but I want to focus in on this central declaration in verse 86. In answer to our question, why are you doing all this? The psalmist responds, all God's commands are trustworthy. Now, this statement of the psalmist, as we read it in the text there, all your commands are trustworthy. Directing these words to God himself, all your commands are trustworthy. This statement of all the statements in the psalm takes on added significance when we appreciate that it's the only declaration of the psalmist about God in the whole psalm. It's the only time, or in this section of the psalm, where he actually declares something about God. Now, implicitly, he says a great deal about God in the requests that he makes and in the description of what he's doing. But in terms of declaring something that is true of God, this is the one statement that he makes. All your commands are trustworthy.

And as such, this declaration serves to answer the question that we pose. The psalmist in the face, no doubt, of widespread incredulity, answers his interrogators in this way. I'll tell you why I still believe. I'll tell you why I still hope. I'll tell you why I don't forget God and his precepts.

I'll tell you why. Because all his commands are trustworthy. And they are all trustworthy because the God whose commands they are is a trustworthy God. In the darkest hour, in your darkest hour, this is what you must cling to. God is trustworthy. He is trustworthy.

[21 : 37] All your commands are trustworthy. Now, we can do something pretty amazing with this declaration of the psalmist there in verse 86. All your commands are trustworthy. And what I mean by that is as follows. I'll try and explain. In the psalm, or rather in this section of the psalm, we have eight words that, though they're not synonyms, they all point to God's word. Not unlike what we have in Psalm 19.

You can remember Psalm 19 and how you have all these different words that together paint a picture of God's word. Well, you have something similar here. We can maybe find them very quickly as we just scan through the psalm. All these words, though different words, they all really are part of the same description of God's word. Where are they? Well, they're in verse 81. I have put my hope in your word.

In verse 82, it's God's promise that he speaks of. In verse 83, you can find it yourself, your decrees. In verse 84, it's a little hidden by the translation, but it's God's judgments. That sentence or that question, when will you punish my persecutors, is when will you exercise judgment upon my persecutors?

So he's speaking of God's judgments. In verse 85, he speaks of God's law. In verse 86, the word is commands. In verse 87, it's the word precepts. In verse 88, it's the word statutes. They're all different words, but they all point in the same direction. They're all describing God's words.

And given that that is so, this is the cool thing we can do. We can insert any and every of these words into the statement of the psalmist in verse 86. So when we read, all your commands are trustworthy, we have grounds to also say, all your promises are trustworthy, all your statutes are trustworthy, all your precepts are trustworthy, all your judgments are trustworthy, all of your law is trustworthy, all of your promises are trustworthy. The psalmist clings on to God because he is a trustworthy God.

[24 : 00] And he clings on to God also, and this is very related, because God's love is trustworthy and dependable. In the final verse, he speaks of God's love, and he employs this word that's so critical to our understanding of God as he reveals himself in the Old Testament and then into the New.

This Hebrew word *hesed*, variously translated in different translations as grace or love as it is here, or loving kindness or steadfast love. *Hesed* is God's reliable, trustworthy love for his own covenant people.

God has promised to love his own, and come what way, he will love his own. And the psalmist is persuaded of this. And so he clings to God. He clings to his trustworthy God. He rests on God's trustworthy love, even though there seems to be so little evidence of it in his immediate circumstances. Now, of course, we live in the light of Calvary. We live in the light of the coming of Messiah, and in the light of Calvary, we appreciate, we understand so much more of God's trustworthy love, of the God who promised to save a people for himself, to save sinners, and the God who kept his promise, regardless of the cost, even at the cost of the life of his own son. But let's look at or pose the final question to the psalmist that we will look for an answer to in this section of the psalm. And the final question we pose is this. What will you do when you get out of this? He's already told us what he is. He's in a dark, dark place. He's already told us what he's doing in that dark, dark place. He's already told us why he's doing what he's doing. But there's this final question. When you get out of this place, what will you do? You're asking for help. Well, let's imagine that help comes, and you are rescued. What will you do? And what answer does the psalmist give to that question? Well, he answers that question at the very end of the psalm, or at the end of this section. Preserve my life according to your love, and I will obey the statutes of your mouth. He looks forward to those circumstances, to that rescue that he longs for and waits for that is not coming, but it will come. And when it comes, this is what he will do. I will obey the statutes of your mouth. Now, what is going on here? Do we have here, in these words of the psalmist, what we might call a classic life raft prayer? Now, what do I mean by speaking of a life raft prayer? Well, let me explain what I mean by telling you about a film that I saw on the plane, one of the legs of our journey on holiday. And the film that I'm referring to is a film called Unbroken. And it's a film that tells the story of an American athlete, Louis Zamperini, who was the son of Italian immigrants in the United States in the early part of last century. And he ran and competed for the states at the 1936 Berlin Olympics. And then following the Olympics, well, war broke out, war with Japan in the case of the United States. He joined up with the U.S. Air Force, and to cut a long story short, he was shot down by the Japanese over the Pacific. And he and a fellow survivor from the crash survived in open sea for 47 days. That in itself was a remarkable feat of endurance, until finally being captured by the Japanese and spending the rest of the war in a prisoner of war camp. And in the film, it relates how Louis, in the life raft that seemingly was likely to become his coffin, how he prayed what I'm calling the classic life raft prayer. And we're told what he prayed in these exact words. He prayed to God, if you will save me, I will serve you forever. That was his prayer. If you will save me, I will serve you forever. Now my question is, is that what we have here at the end of the psalm? Is the psalmist, in a way, negotiating with God? Is he putting conditions upon God? Or is he entering into some kind of deal with God? If you save me, well, this is what I'll do for you. So it's in your interest to save me, because imagine if you save me, you'll have me serving you all of my life and obeying you. Isn't that a good deal, God? Is that what is going on here? Well, by no means. What the psalmist is saying is that if

God chooses to preserve his life, he will continue doing what he has ever been doing, and that is obeying God. He's not going to begin obeying God if his life is preserved. He's already obeying God. In the midst of all the darkness, he's faithful to God and obedient to God. Well, certainly if his life is preserved, he will continue obeying God. He's clinging to God. Now he'll continue to cling to God if God chooses to preserve his life. He will carry on obeying God's statutes in good times and bad, in sickness and in health, in plenty and in poverty. This is mature faith. This is God-pleasing and God-glorifying faith.

[29 : 39] This is the answer that the psalmist gives to our final question. What will you do when you get out of this? I'll carry on obeying. Let me just go back to Louis for a moment. It's not really relevant to the sermon, but it's such an interesting story that I don't want to leave you without a further part of the story that isn't related in the film. If you've seen the film, well, it's not in the film. If you see it subsequently, well, you'll not hear about this part of the story. The next part of the story is that Louis was eventually rescued by allied forces at the end of the war. He returned to the States. He started a new life. He got married, and then things started falling apart. He had problems in his marriage. It was at breaking point. He was drinking. He didn't know what to do. This was towards the end of the 1940s, so three or four years after the end of the war. His wife went to a Billy Graham rally, and she was converted. She put her trust in Jesus as her Savior, and she returned home, and she said, Louis, you've got to go and hear this man. He said, I've got no time for this man. The promise, of course, that he'd made to

God in the life raft was long forgotten, and now his life's a mess, and his wife is pleading with him, go and hear this man. That's what you need to do, and he had no time for it, but eventually the persistence of his wife paid off, and he made his way to the tent where Billy Graham, a very young Billy Graham was preaching, and let me allow Louis to tell the story from that point on, and I just quote his own words. The message of the gospel is being presented to him, and this is what he says, just then my whole rotten sinful life passed before my eyes, and I began to get an inkling of what I feared I had to do, only I didn't want to do it. I got to the aisle. I stepped onto the sawdust path and knew it was my crossroads of decision. I fought against it, perhaps harder than I'd ever fought, but in the end, I made my decision. But his trust in Jesus, I think we call it irresistible grace that was at work in his life. Well, that's the end, not the end, but a very heartwarming chapter in the story of Louis Zamperini and the character that is portrayed in this film that just came out last year. But back to the psalm, and with this we close. If you're going to take just one truth from all that has been said, all that the psalmist has shared with us in the verses of this psalm, you're going to take up, take with you one truth above all else. Take the one that the psalmist himself clings to above all others. And it is this, God is trustworthy. He really is. Whatever your circumstances, however complicated, however messy, however painful, however seemingly without solution, without end, be assured that God is trustworthy. And there is no better place to be, there is no safer place to be than clinging to a trustworthy God. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we come to you and we do acknowledge and enthusiastically declare and testify that you are a trustworthy God. You demonstrate yourself to be such a God in your dealings with your people in history, and you have demonstrated yourself to be such a God in our own experience. We pray that we would continually discover anew your trustworthiness, and that you are a God worthy of our trust, and so that we would with confidence and assurance deposit our trust in you, even when everything seems to be against us, even when we, with a psalmist, might find ourselves in a very dark, dark place. Help us to have that mature faith, that faith that remains firm, even, and especially in the midst of trial and pain and suffering.

We thank you that in your time, when you take us out of that dark place, we too with a psalmist can look forward to continuing to serve you and to obey you and to be faithful to you. Help us that that would be true of us, and we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.