

Psalm 119.33-40

- ³³Teach me, O Lord, the way of your statutes;
And I will keep it to the end.
- ³⁴Give me understanding, that I may keep your law
And observe it with my whole heart.
- ³⁵Lead me in the path of your commandments,
For I delight in it.
- ³⁶Incline my heart to your testimonies,
And not to selfish gain!
- ³⁷Turn my eyes from looking at worthless things;
And give me life in your ways.
- ³⁸Confirm to your servant your promise,
That you may be feared.
- ³⁹Turn away the reproach that I dread,
For your rules are good.
- ⁴⁰Behold, I long for your precepts;
In your righteousness give me life!

HOPE
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

PORTSMOUTH, NEW HAMPSHIRE

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21st July, 2010

Introduction

We are becoming aware of a pattern in David as he prays to God in this thoughtful manner, where he chooses every word carefully so as to measure out what is in his heart; joy, anguish, and his understanding of the union between the new man and Holy Spirit dwelling inside of him. The example he sets shows a man who doesn't rush to act out in a rash manner, but focuses his thoughts deliberately on truth before he walks. For that is the apparent theme of this stanza; a desperate need from God to help him rise & walk.

David begins Psalm 119 with a preamble, but as we move towards the 3rd stanza we gain insight into the practical application as he reveals that he is being persecuted – and this theme remains through the entire Psalm. David is deeply troubled...yet, we see the calm resolve as he rests in truth and doesn't worry about the trouble, then in stanza four, we see him dealing with the emotional ruin (Still confident in His redeemer – but He feels the burden of despair). And we hear Christ's words,

Blessed are the poor in Spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted

Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied

&

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

And in this Psalm, we can see the poor man, the mourning man, the meek man, the persecuted man, and the man who hungers and thirsts for righteousness. Yet because of all this, he is on the floor – and needs help to rise.

The fact that he writes these prayers in such a manner gives us Godly instruction on the importance of taking time with pain - with our thoughts - captive to our redeemer - and keeping an eye on the prize.

I cannot help but think this out subjectively; if I were a king, with affairs of state and city plumbing pressed on my mind and the multitude of distractions that go with that – for David to shut the world out long enough to meditate in this manner – so that He could bear fruit – shows a perseverance and discipline of high degree. We are to learn by his mere example of sitting with parchment and pen.

Here we gain a sense that David is pressing his thoughts onward with child-like faith, dependence and extreme need. Though he is a king, he desires a teacher. And who better to teach holiness than the divine king of kings – for he feels that his heart will not learn from anyone less (and he can see every providence and every word around him as teachable moment). He condescends to meter on a page, but in reality he condescends to the slow – as if he knows any other effort but this is futile.

For David does not just want to learn the statutes, but the way of them; the daily use, the tenor, spirit, direction, habit and tendency. David knows that He who made us to long and to learn will be sure to gratify the desire.

Longing. Desire. These things are holy and good; we were created for longing, desire and the pure fulfilling of these passions. And David here – sees that he needs so much more than he has right now...and yet, he has it.

³⁵Teach me, O Lord, the way of your statutes;
and I will keep it to the end.

David wants to walk the path of holiness, hedged in divine law – for the feast must be clearly visible to him – and David is hungry. He knows - if God keeps us, we will keep it to the end. Persevere.

And though David is dependent on God...David keeps watch on his own soul as if the war depended wholly on him. This verse shows that our perseverance rests not on any force or compulsion, but on the teaching of the Lord, which has fallen on a spongy heart.

It requires a spongy heart. No one can teach a man who refuses to learn – and we see, by David's mere asking, that he would agree.

The Lord has taught me many things – and after receiving it - I have been eager to pass that forward – so often with a big fat mouth. David however, does not seem to be as interested in impressing people with his Calvinism. He seems ready, however, to live the word with humility and in action; and a contented soul.

³⁴Give me understanding, that I may keep your law
And observe it with my whole heart.

Didn't he just say that?

It does appear redundant to vs.33 – and yet it isn't, though it is the same prayer – just bigger. It supplements and intensifies his earlier desire to receive instruction from the Lord. His repetition shows the importance of this “understanding” and the relationship it has to his heart - a language that touches his mind, his emotion and his desire.

We who live with folly are encouraged to pray by the faith cry – “Give me understanding...” We need the Spirit to move us in both enlightenment and motivation.

Any teacher can teach us stuff, but only Christ can give us the understanding itself. And he who has understanding will learn, remember, treasure and obey the commandments of the Lord. The gospel gives us grace to keep the law – but the real gift is that the Lord enables us service.

This understanding operates on our affections; for there is no joy in the law if you don't want to keep the law. It's a call to drudgery otherwise. Or blind obedience.

Laws:

“Do Not Steal” – honoring your contracts between man and man requires that you actually have the desire to advance the other persons' estate...this requires love.

“Don't bear false witness” – this requires a love for truth.

“Do Not Commit Adultery” – this requires preservation of your mind and a diligent labor in our callings towards the affections of your heart, your spouse, your God.

If your affections are not directed on the object of love, then you do not love. If you do not nurture your affections, care for them, water them, pull the weeds and fertilize them you are calling yourself to a failing service. Your heart must lead this path. God enables the heart and gives us freedom to nurture these affections.

David repeats that phrase, “whole heart.” That repetition shows the importance of undivided love. The heart is never whole or holy until it is wholly united in proper fear of the Lord

Another way to say that; a heart will never be one with God until it is one with itself, and a heart can never be one with itself until it is one with God.

This requires illumination – Holy Spirit activity. The Holy Spirit illumines the path.

³⁵Lead me in the path of your commandments,
For I delight in it.

We are already seeing a pattern here:

1. Teach me
2. Give me understanding
3. Whole heart
4. Delight - then we see vs. 36
5. Heart not on selfish gain
6. Keep my eyes forward
7. Confirm future Grace in my eyes
8. Protect me from the assaults (my own and others)
9. Longing – give me life.

This is powerful heart language.

David is talking about walking a straight and he knows he cannot do it alone. He knows his affections are tied to his feet. This path requires the internal and external work of Christ.

It says, “Christ – you have made me **love** the way, now make me to **move** in it.”
OR “I admire this path – cause me to travel in it.”

Certainly I will not be happy until I walk in this direction because my soul delights in doing the bidding of my loving father.

The psalmist is not asking God to do for him what he cannot do himself. When he refers to himself, he uses the term “go,” “keep,” “observe...” David wants to walk – if not run. But this is not forced compliance he is seeking here, the walking is an indulgence of whole-hearted passion.

Just as Marshall loves tea and drinks it all day long without any arm twisting - the psalmist is indulging himself in doing the fathers will.

If you don't love the way and try to walk in it, you will be living a lie – --- the law is so knitted to love that all pretend obedience is easily recognizable.

If the law is your delight, then you are really saying Christ is your delight. If Christ is your delight, then your neighbor is a delight, the church is a delight, my children are a delight, my spouse is a delight, my schoolmates...

Of course the order of the 10 commandments helps us see this-----Love God (1st table) then neighbor (2nd table). You can't do one without the other, but the first is paramount.

So, this stanza begins “make me understand...” Now we see “make me go.” A clear understanding is a great assistance towards practical action. Or else you are walking in blindness and probably in bitterness.

³⁶Incline my heart to your testimonies,

And not to selfish gain!

More heart stuff..Does this seem to be redundant – since the author already seems to have his heart set on obedience? Well – at risk of sounding simple; “it’s in the bible, so there must be a reason.” All scripture is useful and none is wasted.

Maybe David is like us - his desires wander – maybe he loves worldly gain – maybe the tempter accelerates his work when David started walking. And yet the author knew that the only way to cure a wrong leaning is to have the soul bent in the opposite direction. A heart well-nurtured in love - loves.

It is a great privilege to pray this prayer (incline my heart to love)– knowing that the father is ready to answer it –“YES!” When we struggle with our affections, we have this awesome relationship with Christ so that if we are failing at any one point, we can ask for help and know he is there before we ourselves pay attention to it.

We can also see – when we are irritable, angry, or impatient, God has given us an opportunity to check ourselves and examine the false object of our affections – so that they can be righted. And they can be righted in Christ!

Our emotions aid in the instruction of the heart. They help in pointing to the areas where we are trying to take the wheel and steer our own path.

But our trust is not in our emotions but in the word of God, which gives us our aim. True North.

But along this path, we often get distracted, thus the prayer in the next verse.

³⁷Turn my eyes from looking at worthless things;
And give me life in your ways.

I was in DC yesterday – walking through the mall next to the hotel where my brother was staying...vendors were very aggressive – most from cultures that get in your face when they are selling. I had no money and so could not purchase any of their goods, which was liberating. I could walk straight with my thoughts and not be distracted by the temptations and allurements. If I had money – I might have had more difficulty walking the path - eye candy everywhere – and none of it tasted as sweet as Christ, who had reduced the size of my wallet so that it did not weigh me down.

Did my heart stumble? Of course; but the ultimate direction was eyes-forward - and where I failed, the Lord protected me.

And a big Halleluiah for that! God not only gives us understanding and moderates our affections, but he protects us when we stumble.

The King James version uses the word vanity – which translates “mist.” We heard a sermon at Presbytery this Saturday, which was timely (God really is God isn’t he) – the sermon was on Ecclesiastes 1: 1-11, on the futility of life – how all things are vanity and how it benefits us to know that:

1. Life is a gift
2. Life on this earth is not ultimate
3. That life on this earth is temporary
4. The kingdom of God is better

We are most content when we do not try to cling to the mist and instead look at the world as it truly is – then God as he really is. Then relish in His pleasures.

The decrees of God become an indulgence rather than a mere item on our checklist.

During the sermon, Pastor Wilson mentioned that it was common practice for Jews to read from this book during the feast of booths. Its wisdom allowed them to truly enjoy the feast for what it really was. It is good to eat, drink and be merry – it is not good to live for these things as if they are ultimate things.

If you make anything other than God an ultimate thing, you are putting your head in a vice as well as the people around you). Charles Spurgeon says, “It is idolatry and dethrones god. It is selfish and cruel and would sell the Lord for pieces of silver. It is a degrading, groveling, hardening, deadening sin, which withers everything around it that is lovely and Christ-like.”

So the appeal to the Lord is that God would quicken our heart with so much life that dead vanity may have no power over us. "Please keep me from loving these things that would steer me off course."

³⁸Confirm to your servant your promise,
That you may be feared.

As if to answer the last prayer, the author checks his compass to its true heading. He is walking down the path towards the promise.

What does a promise do? It says something is going to happen in the future. This is a forward heading. And if we are God’s servants, he will confirm his word in our experience – more joy, lasting pleasure...Final Glory.

The vanity we spoke of is a terrible mist that keeps us from seeing the light in front of us, which is our heading. It causes us to fear – maybe steer in a different direction towards the rocks and shoals. If you find yourself caught in this mist; stop and listen – for there is a constant noise in your heart, which points you back to Christ. It is rooted in the word and it is the voice of Christ himself.

For as far as we know, that may have been what caused David to sit down and write this Psalm... a prompting of the Holy Spirit in the mist. Back now to true north and clear skies.

This forward heading is given to us by the God we fear – and worship. No man can worship a God he doesn’t believe in. More faith leads to godly fear and we cannot head north without it. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.

If He has given you the good grace to fear him, then you know you can approach him confidently to seek anything that is good.

³⁹Turn away the reproach that I dread,
For your rules are good.

The problem with obedience in a fallen world is that the world doesn’t really like it – or at least they are OK with it until it no longer suits their purposes. In today’s society, for example, avoiding regular work on Sunday. TD Bank relishes in its broader hours as if they invented them and created more time in the day. It says, “we don’t care about our own rest or yours, we are available to you at your whim.” This puts pressure on all the other banks – so that they are now doing the same – then before you know it –

they are all slaves to it and no longer winning the rat race. Now everyone is tired. So they hire more people and get burdened further by a bloated work force.

The public's whim is not true North and if you serve it, it will crush you. And if you are NOT serving their whim, they will also crush you. In short – the world will seek to crush you - and the more fervently you live towards righteousness, the more gas you pour on their fires. But they won't have any crime to put on you – though that isn't to say that they won't change the laws so that good becomes bad.

For this is reproach – and David rightly dreads this type of affliction – as Christ did when he said, “take this cup from me.” David was a type of Christ when he prayed this. It is awful. Pain...and we will face it. We often must walk through it to get out of it. But we know who delivers us.

Steer us North and protect us from those who would harm us – while I am walking in your worthy path. The path – and where it leads – is worth the pain.

*⁴⁰Behold, I long for your precepts;
In your righteousness give me life!*

David is deeply bowed down by a sense of weakness and need from grace.

Where our longings are, there we are in the sight of God.

These precepts, which are perfect, are the dread of the ungodly. That is what they dread! When we walk in His way – they fear us – or hate us – because our lives remind them of their shortcomings or denials. But to the saints - it is a sweet nectar.

We who are in Christ – need our hearts on the precepts, on Christ himself...because it is there that life is found. Yet we need quickening every hour of the day – because we are poorly apt – slow – languishing in the ways of God.

It is the Holy Spirit that can quicken us – because even his precepts would seem dead to us when we don't feel life. We cannot walk this path when we are chained by cold affections, self protection – hearts that are guarded with thick steel. For they must go back to the first verse of this stanza – our hearts must be ready to receive teaching from God, moment by moment, word by word...even affliction by affliction. And yet we know that only Christ can make our hearts able to receive him.

Christ makes soft soil where he plants his seed, and he fuels us For in righteousness there is life.

If you are praying these words sincerely - Christ is in you. And he says, "rise and walk."