

Psalm 119 – the importance of God’s Word Verses 153 – 160, Resh

I remember when my son was young, he found Egyptian hieroglyphics fascinating. Perhaps it was the idea that each symbol had a meaning as well as a sound, whereas the English alphabet is comprised of letters which only have a sound. Of course, it is not only the Egyptian alphabet that has this characteristic. Many of the Middle Eastern forms of writing have a similar property. The Talmud states: “There is no poor person except he who is poor in knowledge. The resh (the Hebrew letter that heads our section of Psalm 119 today) is far away from God. He entertains flagrant, evil thoughts and speaks negatively. He is beyond the level of having or not having money. He is spiritually bereft; the poorest of the poor.” So says Rabbi Raskin, speaking about the Hebrew letter that covers today’s portion of Psalm 119. In Hebrew each letter of the alphabet has a meaning as well as a sound, and for resh, the twentieth letter of the alphabet, that meaning is poor, or evil, or a bowed head, in much the same sense as we would speak about hanging one’s head in shame.

Throughout Psalm 119, the Psalmist has time and again spoken about the importance of God’s word. This morning we will continue this theme and see the serious consequences when His word is ignored. But let us start by reading verses 153 – 160:

“Consider my affliction and deliver me, for I do not forget Your law. Plead my cause and redeem me; revive me according to Your word. Salvation is far from the wicked, for they do not seek Your statutes. Great are Your tender mercies, O LORD; revive me according to Your judgments. Many are my persecutors and my enemies, yet I do not turn from Your testimonies. I see the treacherous, and am disgusted, because they do not keep Your word. Consider how I love Your precepts; revive me, O LORD, according to Your lovingkindness. The entirety of Your word is truth, and every one of Your righteous judgments endures forever.”

So, it is in the context of understanding that the individual who knows and lives God’s word is rich, whereas the individual who ignores God’s word is poor, that we shall consider these verses. The other point to note before we look at each verse is that three times within this section the Psalmist prays that God will revive him. The dictionary gives four possible shades of meaning to this word revive. Firstly, it can mean to restore life or consciousness. Secondly, it may imply to give new strength or energy to someone or something. Thirdly, it can mean to restore interest in or the popularity of something. Fourthly, it can suggest improving the condition of something. It would be a marvellous thing, as we look at this section of Psalm 119 this morning if God would revive us and our interest in His word. Perhaps you are feeling spiritually tired. Life’s hard sometimes and disappointments can mean that we lose our joy and freshness and that just getting through a day without giving up is about as good as we can manage. Perhaps you have been so busy serving the Lord with no obvious sign of benefit and you are just worn out with the struggle. May He revive each one of us today so that we can face the future with a wholehearted desire to serve Him faithfully in whatever circumstances we may face. So, we will consider this section under the three prayers for revival.

“Consider my affliction and deliver me, for I do not forget Your law. Plead my cause and redeem me; revive me according to Your word.”

Perhaps after this broadcast you can find time to read 1 Kings chapter 19. It is the story of Elijah in the immediate aftermath of his confrontation with the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel. Elijah fled from the presence of king Ahab and escaped to the wilderness. There he rested in the shadow of a tree, wanting to die. He was met by an angel who provides food for him to sustain him in his journey. Elijah made his way for forty days and nights until he came to a cave on Mount Horeb. There he was to meet with God Himself. God asked him what he was doing there, to which Elijah answered that he had been so busy for God and he was so alone. Three powerful events shake Elijah's world but God was not in any of them. Finally, he heard the voice of God speaking to him in a still small voice. That voice told him that God still had work for Elijah to do. It also told him of the many other servants that God had. Elijah's loneliness was perceived not real.

These first two verses of our section of Psalm 119, and beautifully illustrated in the experience of Elijah, are a real word to those servants of the Lord today who are feeling downcast and defeated. It is exciting and uplifting when we set out to serve God. When we see God at work, perhaps in the salvation of others, or by numerical growth or interest in what we are doing then we are sustained and encouraged. However, more often than not, in His service there are times when nothing seems to happen and it becomes monotonous and hard work. We may begin to question our calling, our suitability and our sacrifice. Is it worth it? We may feel just as Elijah did that we serve alone and that it is all too much for us.

We can rest in the sure knowledge that He does consider us and will provide for us the strength for each day. It is such a lovely touch that before recommissioning Elijah, God feeds him physically. We too may need to rest physically before God has further work for us to do. And God will not only consider us but also deliver us. I doubt that Elijah would ever have thought in those dark moments on Mount Horeb that later in life he would be caught up to heaven, without dying, in a chariot of fire. Do we remember in our darker moments that we are waiting for that glorious call to meet with the Lord in the air? Our eventual success and glorification are assured and this must sustain us through times of trouble.

The Psalmist would make remembering God's law a central part of his life and it is the basis upon which he prays for revival in this section. It was not in mighty acts of power that Elijah heard the voice of God but in a still small voice. When we feel down and defeated, it is absolutely imperative that we make time for Bible reading and study. It is vital that we saturate our minds with His word, to allow Him to speak to us. Read your favourite chapters, or listen to His word being read if you are too tired to read for yourself, but let His voice speak to you from the words of Scripture. Perhaps my favourite poem is entitled The Pilgrim, and recounts a conversation between a weary pilgrim and his heavenly Father. Part of the conversation is as follows:

“The way is long, my Father! And my soul longs for the rest and the quiet of the goal; while yet I journey through this weary land, keep me from wandering. Father take my hand, quickly and straight lead to Heaven's gate, Thy child!”

Then God answers the pilgrim.

“The way is long, My child! But it shall be not one step longer than is best for thee; and thou shalt know, at last, when thou shalt stand safe at the goal, how I did take thy hand, and quick and straight lead to Heaven's gate, My child.”

(Henry Cobb)

Let us remember that it will never be one step longer than is best for us. God had further work for Elijah, as He may well have for us. His word is sufficient to feed our souls and sustain us as we live in this world. May we never forget that!

“Salvation is far from the wicked, for they do not seek Your statutes. Great are Your tender mercies, O LORD; revive me according to Your judgements.”

They say that a picture paints a thousand words. I think that there is a beautiful episode in the life of the Lord Jesus that illustrates the Psalmist’s second prayer for revival. In John chapter 8, we read about the time when the scribes and Pharisees brought to Jesus a woman who had been caught in the very act of adultery. Outwardly, they wanted to stone her but what they really desired was to trip Jesus up and undermine His authority. So they ask Him what should be done. Undoubtedly, the law stated that the punishment for adultery was death.

What a terrifying scene this must have been. How frightened the woman must have been, the men’s hatred palpable. Salvation was indeed far from these wicked men. They had no interest in the righteous observance of the law. They certainly had no interest in the woman – she was a mere object upon which they hatched their plot. Whilst outwardly seeking to uphold the law, their hearts were filled with hatred and their actions did not confirm that they were moved by a love for God. Their actions spoke of self interest rather than a desire to honour God.

We live in a world that has not changed from those days. Mankind is still motivated by self-interest and hatred – hatred of those who have more than we do, hatred of the foreigner, hatred of the ones who are different. We say that we have right and just laws but we have no interest in obeying God and being motivated by His desires. The fact that these scribes and Pharisees did not seek God’s statutes is laid bare by the fact that the man involved was not brought to Jesus. If she had been caught in the very act, where was the he? The devil knows that he will miss out on the glories of an eternity in the presence of God. In his malign vindictiveness, he now seeks those who will suffer alongside him. These scribes and Pharisees, dressed up in the robes of religious rectitude, were willing prey and could not have been further from being saved. But the Psalmist then goes on to say, “Great are Your tender mercies, O LORD.”

In John chapter 8 Jesus bends down and starts to write something in the ground. The scribes and Pharisees continue to press Jesus for an answer, to which He challenges them with the words: “Let him who is without sin cast the first stone.” Again, He bends down and writes in the ground. Did Jesus write their names in the dust and perhaps start to write down some of their sins? (see also Jeremiah 17:13). Who could stand such scrutiny? So they left, from the oldest first to the youngest until the woman is left alone with Jesus. He questions her as to where her accusers were before telling her: “Neither do I condemn you; go and sin no more.” That judgement of Jesus, so full of tender mercy, must have had the most profound effect on the woman. Whilst we do not read any more of her, so far as we know, I am sure that her life was radically different as a result of her encounter with Jesus. I am sure that she would have had a very clear recollection of those words whenever she was tempted to stray from marital faithfulness. She who had been a dead woman walking in life, had life restored to her and her condition was much improved. Revival always starts in the heart of the individual!

Perhaps there are things in your life that are not right. We can be assured that as we draw close to the Lord Jesus, we can find reviving strength. Through His word, He will often speak to us and challenge us to be more like Him. The words “Go and sin no more” could not have placed a heavier demand upon the woman. But in meeting Jesus she had met the One who was able to strengthen her so that she could find freedom in obedience. The Lord will never ask us to do something for Him for which He does not also empower us. This woman, and we, need to learn that true freedom is not found in being able to do whatever we like. It is found in willing obedience to Him.

So, we come to our final prayer for revival.

“Many are my persecutors and my enemies, yet I do not turn from Your testimonies. I see the treacherous and am disgusted, because they do not keep Your word. Consider how I love Your precepts; revive me O LORD, according to Your lovingkindness.”

Life can be tough sometimes. You try to do the right thing and seem to be very alone in doing that. I recognise that I am not a very patient person and sometimes I do try to be more so. It is just that whenever I do, everything and everyone conspires against me trying to slow things down and make things difficult. It is all too much! At other times, you read the papers and think how anyone could ever think that what they were doing was right. How has humanity sunk to such a level that shocking events now seem routine and have lost the power to surprise! Perhaps this was how the Psalmist was feeling as he prayed for God to revive him. The events of life had left him feeling grubby and he was heart sick of the sin around him.

In John chapter 13 we read of the time when Jesus took a towel and started to wash the disciples' feet. When Jesus came to Peter, Peter objected, until Jesus explained that Peter could have no part with Jesus unless he was washed. “Then wash me all over”, Peter exclaimed. Jesus explained that it was just his feet that needed to be washed. As those who are saved, we have been washed all over, but as we live in this world, we are exposed to so many influences that leave us feeling dirty and impure. We very much need the washing of His word for our daily living. We ought never to lose the sense of the wrongness of sin – the actions of the sinful should disgust us, but we must always love the sinner, as He does, and we need that daily cleaning effect of daily Bible study and prayer.

After a hot and dusty day's walking, how refreshing it would have been for those feet to be immersed in cool water and gently rubbed dry! As we are exposed to the materialistic influences of our society, the selfishness of the me first attitude, we are going to become ground down and grubby. It is all too easy to start to adopt the standards of those around. Little by little, the dirt builds up and before long we have changed. The Psalmist was aware that those who rejected God were many but he would not turn from what God had said. We will win no popularity contests as we seek to live out a biblical Christianity. That should not alarm us nor should it deflect us from doing what is right.

Just the other day, my wife and I were shopping. She had bought my granddaughter a colouring book amongst other items and as we left the check out she realised that she had not been charged for it. So back we went, queueing up again to pay – yes, it was one of those lessons in patience days. The shop assistant gave her the strangest look as if she could hardly believe that someone was that honest! It was the right thing to do – but sadly illustrates how far society has fallen from doing what is right. So, the Psalmist had three times prayed for God to revive him. That leaves me with a challenge as to how much I long for the life restoring, condition improving revival of God.

So, we come to the summary of this section in the final verse:

“The entirety of Your word is truth, and every one of Your righteous judgments endures forever.”

Well, that is a fairly innocuous statement to finish off, isn't it? But just stop and think about that for a minute. When was the last time you listened to someone telling you the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth? We are so used to hearing part truths, truth with a personal gloss put on or evasive versions of truth that do not ring true. As you listen to politicians, as you listen to business people, as you listen to journalists you are fed a diet

of what is at best something like the truth, and often far worse. Yet here the Psalmist is telling us, without a shade of doubt or barefaced audacity, that the entirety of God's word is truth. Not just that every single verse is true but that when it is put together as a whole, it presents a perfectly true picture. God does not paint a picture of Himself that in any way distorts the truth. Nor does He speak of mankind in anything other than the truth. So, when He calls Himself a Creator God that is exactly what He is. When Jesus speaks of Himself as fully God, that is who He is. His word stands as an absolutely true plumb line against which everything else must be judged. Nor will God act in a way that is not entirely consistent with His word. It is not that His word says that we are sinners – which is true and He is holy, which is also true, but that at the end of the day, He will just overlook all that because He loves us. No! Every one of His righteous judgements endures forever. Abraham knew this to be true of God when he declared: "Shall not the righteous Judge of all the earth do right" (Genesis 18:25). There are many events in life when we just do not understand why. There are things in the Bible that we do not understand as to how they can be. That is because with our finite minds we are trying to understand the infinite. However, we can be fully sure that whenever God does something, He is acting in a way that is perfectly right. It is impossible for Him to do otherwise.

In an ever-changing world when from one day to the next sometimes we do not know what is going to happen or how a matter is going to end, we can find a bedrock of certainty that His word and His judgments are eternal. As I commit myself to Him now, it is a commitment that will last the full length of eternity. There is no risk that He may grow tired of me and change His mind about my deserving a home in Heaven. That promise to make me one of His children is one that will stand the test both of time and eternity. No wonder that our God is unique. No wonder He is a God unlike any other. No wonder He deserves my praise, thanks and worship, both now and in eternity!

Thank you for listening to the Truth for Today talk on Psalm 119, the importance of God's word, verses 153 - 160 talk number T1134.

The New King James Version of the Scriptures used unless otherwise stated.

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