

Psalm 110 The Importance of God's word. Verses 137-144, Tsaddi

Greetings and welcome to *Truth for Today*, where we are continuing with the study of Psalm 119. Regular listeners to this programme will recall that we have studied this psalm by devoting each session to a limited number of verses. As is well known, Psalm 119 is an alphabetical acrostic psalm, consisting of twenty-two sections of eight verses each. Last week, my colleague Jonathan Hughes, commented on verses 129 to 136. Our section today, verses 137 to 144, is the eighteenth of these twenty-two sections and is entitled, in some Bibles, as Tzaddi. Unlike many of the psalms which are headed by the name of an author, such as Moses or David, our psalm is anonymous though Cheyne, in his study of the psalms, suggests that it was written by an older man with, 'a rich and varied experience behind him; persecution and captivity have long been his portion, but he trusts in the salvation of Jehovah, and looks forward to witnessing for God before kings.' Whether or not this is true, what is certain is the author's confidence and trust in God and His Law.

Though the various words used for the Law in this psalm have been explained previously, I am a great believer in repetition, so I shall briefly go through them again. They are 'word', 'statutes', 'commands', 'laws', 'law', 'decrees' and 'precepts', though these might differ slightly according to the translation used.

After that brief introduction we now move on to consider the verses of our passage at a greater depth. Using the *English Standard Version* of the Bible, verse 137 reads:

"Righteous are you, O LORD, and right are your rules."

We cannot ignore the preceding verse if we want rightly to understand the reason for the psalmist's definite claim that God is righteous, as are His rules or judgments. Verse 136 states that streams of tears flow from the psalmist's eyes, because the people did not keep the law of God. It greatly concerned him when his people deliberately disobeyed the Lord. He knew in his heart that as God was righteous He required that those who claimed to believe in Him should not deliberately ignore His law. Notice also, in this verse, that God's word and rules are what God is. God is righteous; therefore everything that emanates from Him is righteous, or as another has written '... the law is a true transcript of the righteous character of God.' We are not meant to wobble around the moral universe seeking differing answers as to how God would have us live. He has given to us the moral law and instructions to enable us to live as He would wish and to walk a pathway that is pleasing to Him. This does not turn us, as believers, into automatons, for we have to work out how to express our faith in the society in which we live. When I was young, I was involved in *Youth for Christ*, which was established in the UK by Billy Graham. Seventy years ago its motto was, 'Anchored to the Rock: Geared to the Times.' The writer of the letter to the Hebrews knew something of the certainty and stability of our links with God:

"...so that by two unchangeable things, in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled for refuge might have strong encouragement to hold fast to the hope set before us. We have this as a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters into the inner place

behind the curtain, where Jesus has gone as a forerunner on our behalf..." (Hebrews 6: verses 18 to 20)

If these words, from the Hebrew epistle, are strange to you I urge you, from personal experience, to study this letter, as it brought me to a better understanding of the spiritual essence of Christianity.

If there was an anchor for the soul in the early days of Christianity, we must reckon it as true now, for God cannot change. Of course, if we do not accept Scripture as a revelation of God, from God, we can change our beliefs as often as we change our socks. I trust that all who are listening now have, by grace, concluded that the Bible is the Word of God and believe in the eternal, immortal God: the God who was finally and fully revealed to us through Jesus of Nazareth. This means that all that was revealed to the psalmist has been revealed to us. What it does not mean is that our personal faith in and understanding of God never changes. As we move through the various experiences of life, our faith in the Lord must deepen and our knowledge of Him, as revealed in Scripture, must increase. Over the years has our faith been deepened and our knowledge increased? I address this question to myself, as well as you, dear listener. The last words that the Apostle Peter wrote to his fellow Christians were:

"But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. To him be the glory both now and to the day of eternity. Amen". (2 Peter 3 verse 18)

Though Peter had a personal knowledge of the historical Jesus, and had witnessed the resurrected Christ, he still valued the written word, which for him would be the Old Testament, including Psalm 119:

"...since you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable through the living and abiding word of God..."

That quote is from Peter's first letter chapter 1 and verse 23.

We now move on to verse 138 of our psalm:

"You have appointed your testimonies in righteousness and in all faithfulness."

Again, I am reading from the *English Standard Version*, as will be all my quotes from Scripture. Please notice the word that the psalmist used for God's written word. Here in verse 138 it is "testimonies." In the previous verse, and I ought to have pointed it out when we were considering verse 137, it was "rules", which the NIV translates as "laws". Whatever the word or synonym used, we must consider it as the authoritative Word of God, which as I have just pointed out was the stance that the Apostle Peter took.

Reading the appointed section of our psalm, one must notice the emphasis on "righteousness", which must impress upon us the importance of this in the sphere where God dominates our thinking. There is a tendency in most of us to live just inside the rules and regulations. If they can be bent to our convenience and advantage so be it. Before I started writing these comments I read in the daily newspaper of the Queen inviting some guests to shelter in the Royal Tent during a heavy shower of rain. Sadly, she was disappointed to find that some of the gold-plated tea spoons were missing, when the cutlery was counted at the end of the day. Obviously, the erring guests had no intention of stealing when they entered the Palace grounds. Even though they were not habitual thieves, they could not resist the temptation of taking such souvenirs. If not a life threatening misdemeanour or a major crime, it was still an unrighteous action.

Not so with our God. His testimonies and laws reflect His righteousness. The emphasis on "righteousness" is not merely a technical argument or discussion of theological words. I believe,

along with many others listening today, that it can affect our lives for the better. Isaiah was confident of this because he wrote:

“And the effect of righteousness will be peace, and the result of righteousness, quietness and trust for ever.” (Isaiah 32: 17)

The Apostle Paul takes up the theme of righteousness in his letter to the Romans:

“But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it – the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus,” (Romans 3 verses 21 to 24)

The miracle of God’s grace and love has accomplished what nothing else could do, as Romans 8 verses 3 to 4 inform us:

“For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.”

The greatest display of God’s righteousness and love is seen at Calvary.

If I want to cover the whole of our section, I must rush on, but before I do, can I welcome anyone who has just joined us and inform you that you are listening to a programme from *Truth for Today*, where we are considering some verses from Psalm 119. Our next verse is 139 it says:

“My zeal consumes me, because my foes forget your words.”

In verse 136 we saw that the psalmist was sorrowful, to the point of tears, when he witnessed ignorance of and disobedience to, God’s law. Now it was his regard for the Law which caused him distress when others ignored it. Do we have zeal for the things of God, so that we feel injured when the cause of Christ is mocked? We should not feel persecuted if the scoffing is aimed personally at us, as the Lord said that as He had been treated so His followers would be. We should, however, feel it when His name is mocked and His sacrifice despised. Verses 140 & 141 repeat the same regard for God’s word that the very first psalm highlights, when it states that the man who is blessed delights in the law of the LORD and meditates on it day and night.

“Your promise is well tried, and your servant loves it. I am small and despised, yet I do not forget your precepts.” Verses 140 & 141

How different is the attitude of the writer who loves the promises of God, whereas there were those who forgot His words. How precious to read that the psalmist considers the Word “well tried” or “pure”, as the *King James Version* states, and that he “loves it.” There is a thought in the word “pure” that suggests it has been refined. Over the years, countless Christians have proved the preciousness of the word of God. We are not being fed with fables and myths, rather that which builds up and increases our knowledge of God. When she was aged twenty-four, my mother lost a son aged twenty months. Many years later, at the cemetery where he was buried, she pointed to some words carved into the stone work above the mortuary chapel door, which read: “As one who his mother comforteth, so will I comfort you.” Her comments still remain with me. ‘When we buried Derek those words meant something to me.’ Time and time again grieving people have been helped by the word of God energised into our lives by the power of the Holy Spirit. There is a hymn that I have not sung for many years, as we use Mission Praise and it is not in that book. I quote a couple of verses:

“O may these hallowed pages be
My ever dear delight!
And still new beauties may I see,
And still increasing light.

Divine Instructor, gracious Lord,
Be Thou for ever near;
Teach me to love Thy sacred Word,
And view my Saviour there.”

Anne Steele 1716 - 1778

Do we love the Word of God? If we do, we shall regularly read and obey it. In our age, if we are not careful, the comments on Facebook, Twitter or some other online platform, will engage our attention and monopolise our time.

Some commentators use verse 141 to suggest that the writer of this psalm was young. I do not belong to this group as I feel the psalm is the product of a mature, spiritual mind; it is the consideration of one who has long walked with God. Such a walk does not make him proud, or lifted up, for he is conscious that he is small. This is a facet that we need to emulate, for humility and a humble spirit are valued by God.

In our section of Psalm 119 the psalmist never wanders far from the theme of righteousness for he takes it up again in verse 142:

“Your righteousness is righteous for ever, and your law is true.”

Bishop Ellicott translated this verse slightly differently: “Thy righteousness is right for ever, and thy law is truth.” This makes it easier for me to understand, though, perhaps, you might disagree. Whichever view you take, it certainly means that God’s standard of righteousness is an abiding one, even if the entire world rejects it. We all need to acknowledge the fact that God requires righteousness from each one of us. Psalm 15 verses 1 & 2 state:

“O LORD, who shall sojourn in your tent? Who shall dwell on your holy hill? He who walks blamelessly and does what is right and speaks truth in his heart;”

It must be said plainly that our standard of righteousness never reaches that which God requires. Paul distinguishes between our righteousness of moral effort, which he terms the “righteousness of the law” or “his own righteousness.” (See Philippians 3 verse 9.) In that verse Paul talks of the righteousness from God, which is ours as a gift from God, through the sacrificial death of Christ. Are we still trying to work our way into God’s good books or have we received the gift of Christ’s righteousness, which comes to all those who believe in Jesus, the Son of God? The glorious truth that God has provided this righteousness for sinners is the central message of the Gospel. Do we believe it? Do we live it? Do we preach it?

We have now arrived at our penultimate verse which is verse 143:

“Trouble and anguish have found me out, but your commandments are my delight.”

This verse encloses the enigma of bad things afflicting good people. Sometimes we are apt to think Christians should be free of trials and tribulations. That such thoughts enter our minds is a device of the enemy of our souls. If God really loves us, we think, why have I lost my job, suffer with a severe illness, or lose a loved one? He (Satan) seeks to reduce our faith to nil, so that we cease to believe. We live in a world where such adversities can affect anybody at any time. The psalmist suffered a deluge of troubles, which could have caused him to swerve aside from his godly path. However, as the verse affirms, he never ceases to delight in the living Word of God.

The people of Isaiah's time were going to face severe distress when the Babylonian army entered Judea, killing many and taking back others as slaves. Isaiah had to tell them that God was aware of their pain. They thought that God had forgotten them and that their circumstances were unknown to Him. Isaiah went on to remind them of a long forgotten truth that we do well to remember:

“Have you not known? Have you not heard? The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He does not faint or grow weary, his understanding is unsearchable. He gives power to the faint, and to him who has no might he increases strength.” (Isaiah 40: 28 & 29)

So then dear friends, when the evil days come and the light fades, do not lose heart and claim that God has let you down. Our God neither slumbers nor sleeps, so let us have the attitude of our psalmist and continue to trust in the Lord and delight in His Word. Don't be like the people of Isaiah's day who said that God had forgotten them. God being aware of our sinful state, did not turn His back on us. Instead, so great was His love that He sent His only begotten Son to suffer bleed and die to bring salvation to our reach, enabling us to live in the power of the endless life. The clock is telling me that our time together is almost gone, so I must quickly move on to verse 144 which is our last verse:

“Your testimonies are righteous for ever; give me understanding that I may live.”

Though I did not mention it earlier, “testimonies” is one of the synonyms for God's Law or Word. There is also a sense in which it bears witness to the one who speaks. A witness in a court of law swears to tell the truth. Sometimes we know that this is not always the case. He or she should bear testimony to what they saw or knew. This verse bears witness to the eternal God, whose righteous pronouncements reflect His righteousness, for He is a righteous God. They do not change with the intellectual fashions of the day. We Christians are definitely not obscurantist; we are not against enlightenment. We are, however, followers of the God whose promises have been tested time and time again, sometimes in the most dreadful of circumstances.

The last stanza of our verse is a prayer for understanding. The psalmist wants to tread further into the limitless knowledge of the God, who according to Paul is:

“...the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone has immortality, who dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see. To him be honour and eternal dominion. Amen.” (1 Timothy 6: verses 15 & 16)

The wonder and charm of the grace of God is that this unknowable God is revealed to us in the Person of Christ. Paul's great ambition was to know the Lord Jesus and the power of resurrection. I trust that each one of us are seeking to do the same thing to know Christ, and Paul had renounced everything for his knowledge. We also should seek to read and understand the Scriptures, for only then, as empowered of the Spirit, will we know Him in whom we have believed.

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