

LIFE'S QUESTIONS AND GOD'S WORD
PSALM 119:81-88

It's hard to think about Americans being persecuted for their faith for two reasons:

1. While our country was founded largely for a pursuit of religious freedom, that very pursuit of religious freedom has largely kept believers from being persecuted for our faith since that time.
2. With all the prosperity in our country (and in our churches) and the poverty and weakness of churches in other countries (talk to Jack about the Cambodian church or David about the PNG church), it's hard to think of any difficulties we face as being classified as persecution.

And yet, we hear of increasing kinds of opposition to the church, faith in general, and Christianity in particular. Christian bakers and florists have been sued because they have not been willing to use their artistic and creative abilities to celebrate homosexual marriages. The fire chief of Atlanta was fired three years ago for writing and self-publishing a book that attempts "to help Christian men overcome feelings of guilt and condemnation over past sins. It discusses homosexuality for less than half a page [in a 162-page book]." But he was fired for being discriminatory against homosexuals. And in a similar move, Brendan Eich was fired as CEO of the software company Mozilla because of his faith; and Louie Giglio was removed as a participant from President Obama's inauguration five years ago (he was going to pray).

And in circumstances that are much more relevant to most of us, the mockery of Christianity is not just something read about in editorials and seen on television shows, but it is something most of us have experienced from our own family members. There is a growing intolerance for anything Christian and those who are bold for their faith can expect not just rejection, but even hatred.

Most of us haven't been imprisoned or beaten for our faith, but most of us have experienced mockery, anger, and hatred from those who are against Christ. And the Scriptures put that in the category of persecution, as Jesus says in Matthew 5:10-12, persecution comes in the form of martyrdom (as with some of the prophets) and insults and false and evil accusations. Sometimes persecution leads to death (Mt. 10:21), but sometimes it leads to hatred and hostility (Mt. 10:22). And every believer will face that kind of persecution (2 Tim. 3:13).

When being persecuted it is tempting to ask about God's part in that special form of suffering. Has God made any provision for you when you are persecuted? Yes, He has. And one of the two middle stanzas of Psalm 119 makes clear both the questions and provisions of God when we are persecuted.

In the middle portion of this longest psalm, the psalmist has been focusing on suffering in general (vv. 67, 71, 75). But he has also been speaking about persecution as a form of suffering (vv. 61, 69, 78). And in this stanza particularly, the psalmist emphasizes the persecution that comes from unbelievers. In fact, this stanza has been called a lament, and Spurgeon said "This octave is the midnight of the psalm, and very

dark and black it is.” Dark, indeed.

And yet, there is also hope for the follower of God when he is persecuted. And as the rest of this psalm indicates, that hope is to be found in God and particularly in His Word.

You know that Psalm 119 is about the Word of God. Because of the importance of the Scriptures, we want to constantly remind ourselves of the power and significance of that Word. So twice each year — on the first Sunday and the middle Sunday of the year, we are looking at one of the stanzas in this psalm (we’re on schedule to finish in June, 2023). And none of us knows the exact nature of what we will endure in the next 12 months, we can be certain that there will be some form of persecution, because to be a believer in Christ is to be rejected by the world as Christ was rejected.

How will you respond to your persecution? Let me order our thoughts from this psalm around a series of questions and answers that the psalmist both states and implies about persecution.

We can summarize the theme of this stanza this way:

WHEN PERSECUTED, PURSUE YOUR HOPE IN GOD’S WORD.

How does Scripture answer the questions about God when we are being persecuted? Here are six questions and answers for those who are being persecuted:

1. Will God INTERVENE? (vv. 81-82)
2. Has God FORGOTTEN Me? (v. 83)
3. Will God END the Persecution? (v. 84a)
4. Will God be JUST? (v. 84b)
5. Will God HELP Me? (vv. 85-86)
6. Will God Be GRACIOUS Again? (vv. 87-88)

How does Scripture answer the questions of life when we are being persecuted? Here are six questions and answers for those who are being persecuted:

1. Will God INTERVENE? (vv. 81-82)

- When people are attacking you and your faith, you feel particularly alone. You are being criticized and there is no one to defend you. There is a sense of isolation — even a question of whether God will act on your behalf. Friends and family flee, and when you pray it seems that the heavens are like brass — it is impossible to get a message to God. That appears to be the way the psalmist felt:
 - ✓ He says **my soul languishes**. He could say, “I don’t feel well...” But he identifies himself with the word “soul.” (In v. 82 he identifies himself with **my eyes**). He is suffering in the core of his inner man — this is “soul deep” problem. He is “cut to the quick,” we might say.
 - ✓ Furthermore he says that his soul **languishes**. This is a longing for God’s salvation. The word means “to come to an end,” or “to perish.” We might say, “I’m done in,” “I’m finished,” “I’m dying.” We may not mean that we are literally dying, but there is desperation in this word.
 - ✓ And what he is “dying for” is God’s **salvation**. When you read the word “salvation” it’s tempting to think about spiritual salvation, but the word can be used much more generally to refer to “deliverance” or “victory,” and that’s probably the way the psalmist is using it. The rest of the psalm makes clear that he already is a follower of God (e.g. vv. 73-74, 80). So he does not want spiritual salvation; he wants *relief*. He wants *out* of his circumstances. He wants his problem and persecutor to go away.
 - ✓ He repeats this longing in v. 82 — **my eyes fail...** The word “fail” is the same one as “languishes” in v. 81 (he repeats it again in v. 87, **destroyed**); here he means that he is weary from looking for help in God’s Word. He’s exhausted. And he’s exhausted because he hasn’t found answers (yet). If he had found an answer, he would have experienced relief; he wouldn’t say he’s exhausted.
 - ✓ And this longing culminates in his question in v. 82. This is the first of three questions in the stanza (there are three more implied questions). **When will you comfort me** is really two questions:
 - *When* will You intervene and act to bring me comforting relief? The duration has been too long in the psalmist’s mind and he’s ready for relief *now*; he’s done waiting.
 - *Will* You act and bring me comforting relief? Perhaps because of the length of his persecution he is now wondering if God will act at all. Will God intervene? Will God relieve his distress? (We are starting to get a perspective of why Spurgeon calls this a dark and black stanza). One writer has noted how often the psalmists ask “when?” and “how long?” (4:2; 6:3; 13:1-2; 89:46). It seems that God has left and is late in His answer and provision.
- So what is the answer to the psalmist’s question? He hints at the answer within his own questions:

- ✓ When he asks ***when will you comfort me?*** it is a reminder that God *is* a God of comfort. Relief is found in Him and Him alone. The Scriptures regularly affirm this:

- **Is. 49:13** Shout for joy, O heavens! And rejoice, O earth! Break forth into joyful shouting, O mountains! For the Lord has comforted His people And will have compassion on His afflicted.
- **Is. 51:3** Indeed, the Lord will comfort Zion; He will comfort all her waste places. And her wilderness He will make like Eden, And her desert like the garden of the Lord; Joy and gladness will be found in her, Thanksgiving and sound of a melody.
- **Is. 51:12** "I, even I, am He who comforts you. Who are you that you are afraid of man who dies And of the son of man who is made like grass..."
- **Is. 52:9** Break forth, shout joyfully together, You waste places of Jerusalem; For the Lord has comforted His people, He has redeemed Jerusalem.
- **Jer. 31:13** "Then the virgin will rejoice in the dance, And the young men and the old, together, For I will turn their mourning into joy And will comfort them and give them joy for their sorrow." [Context is the provision of the New Covenant at the end of the chapter.]
- **Zech. 1:17** "Again, proclaim, saying, 'Thus says the Lord of hosts, "My cities will again overflow with prosperity, and the Lord will again comfort Zion and again choose Jerusalem.'""

- ✓ The psalmist knew that comfort was found in God; and we, having more revelation than the psalmist, know that our great comfort is found in Christ, who absorbed God's wrath against sin for us. And that's our great comfort — not that we will find relief from our affliction, but that Christ has freed us from the afflicting wrath of God. So Paul was comforted as he was about to be martyred (2 Tim. 4:16-18). And so we are comforted and able to comfort those who are also in affliction and persecution (2 Cor. 1:3-7). Christ is the source of *all* comfort; His comfort is for those in *any* affliction; Christ's comfort is abundant and effective. When persecuted, hated, and ostracized, remember that as a follower of Christ you are accepted in Heaven.
- ✓ But even more than that, notice the end of v. 81 — ***I wait for Your Word.***
 - The word ***wait*** means more than just being patient. It means, "be hopeful." And even more, "cause to hope." It has the sense of the psalmist compelling himself to be hopeful in God's Word (and when we say, "hopeful," we mean, "confident").
 - He finds assurance in God's Word. He reminds himself of the truth of the nature and character of God as it is revealed in God's Word, and He is strengthened and made confident in God. He has not been left alone; God may be "quiet" at the moment, but God is for him and will care for him. Cf. vv. **74, 43, 49, 114, 147.**
 - A professor in seminary taught me a principle more than 30 years ago that I've never forgotten: "Never give up in the dark what God has revealed in the light." God has revealed Himself as faithful and comforting to His people; don't let the darkness of despair and persecution dissuade you of that truth.

2. Has God FORGOTTEN Me? (v. 83)

- The psalmist further reveals the depth of his despair with a vivid word picture in v. 83.
 - ✓ Goatskins were sometimes used for preparing wine in biblical times. As the grapes fermented, they released gas and the skin would expand. But because it expanded there was a limit to how many times it could be used before it would burst and spill the wine (which was Jesus' point in Mt. 9:17). So before it could do that, the wineskin would commonly be hung from a rafter to be used later for storage. And because it was in the rafters, it would often become shriveled and brown from the smoke of the fire in the room.
 - ✓ So the psalmist is alluding to the fact that the persecution he is experiencing is "aging" him — his soul is becoming "withered" with age; the burden is "wearing him out."
 - ✓ But there is also something else going on in this image. If the psalmist wanted to emphasize that he was "wasting away," we would expect him to say something like, "But Your statutes strengthened me" in the next clause. But instead of saying something about being strengthened, he says, ***I do not forget Your statutes***. And so he is implying that not only is he wasting away, but like a used up wineskin, he has been laid aside and forgotten. Who thinks about used up wineskins? What is their value? Why would anyone think about where they are? The psalmist feels the same way. It seems to him that God might have forgotten about him.
- Has God lain aside, neglected, and forgotten about the psalmist? Two principles:
 1. Even if it seems as though God has forgotten, the believer should respond as the psalmist did: ***I do not forget your statutes***.
 - The word ***statutes*** refers to the permanence of Scripture and that it is a permanent and binding force in the life of the believer. It is not for occasional use; it is for always. It compels our obedience and submission, and the psalmist affirmed his willingness to submit. The statutes of God provide guidance and direction (like a map), but they also compel obedience and submission (like a contract).
 - In spite of his oppression, the psalmist refused to give up on the Word of God; he resolutely clings to the Scriptures. Despite the human propensity to forget, he covenants to remember God and His Word (a repeated theme in this psalm: cf. vv. 16, 61, 93, 109, 141, 176). This clause emphasizes that remembering and acting on the Word of God is not accidental. It is the result of intentional and purposeful activity. No one is accidentally faithful to the Lord; he is faithful because he is vigilant to remember and act on Scripture. So there is an implication to read the Scriptures, know the Scriptures, and submit to the Scriptures.
 2. God does not forget His people. Cf. Ps. 139:1-3, 7-12. He is always aware of all of us and our situations as if we are the only person in His sight, with no strain on his omniscience. Don't mistake His silence for forgetfulness. His omniscience means He is incapable of forgetting. He may choose to be silent for a time, but He has not forgotten you. So don't forget His Word.

3. Will God **END** the Persecution? (v. 84a)

- Perhaps the most common question when suffering and being persecuted is, “Doesn’t God care?” (even the disciples dared to ask that question of Christ, **Mk. 4:38**). The second most common one may be the question asked in this verse — “will it ever end?”
 - ✓ When the psalmist asks, ***How many are the days of Your servant?***, he is affirming several things:
 - God is sovereign over his life — God determines the length of his life (**Ps. 139:16**).
 - He also is acknowledging his submission to God’s sovereignty when he says he is ***Your servant***. This is a common phrase in this psalm (13x; cf. **vv. 23, 65**; also **Ps. 39:4-5**).
 - But he is also making a subtle complaint — “if you don’t act soon, it will be too late. My life will end prematurely.”
 - ✓ The psalmist believes he hasn’t received enough days and that those days are about to end. Is there an end in sight? Will God act on his behalf?
- This is a common question — even the martyrs in Heaven will ask it (**Rev. 6:9-11**).
 - ✓ This largely is the wrong question to ask, because we won’t know if/when He will end the persecution until He ends it (i.e., He won’t reveal it ahead of time).
 - ✓ The better question to ask is, “Is the Lord sufficient to sustain me in my persecution?”
 - ✓ The answer to this question is always, “Yes.” He will give us all we need to endure our trial (1 Cor. 10:13; 2 Pt. 1:3; **Rom. 5:3-4; 15:4**).
 - ✓ And however many days the Lord chooses to give us, it is the right amount of days — even if they are “shortened” through persecution and suffering. Every day the Lord gives us is a gift of grace because we do not deserve or merit even one day from Him.

4. Will God be **JUST**? (v. 84b)

- One of the great complaints that unbelievers have about God is the question of theodicy — how can God be righteous with so much injustice and unrighteousness in the world? This is the question that the psalmist addresses at the end of v. 84.
 - ✓ The persecutors seem to be getting away with rebellious evil and sin. So will God be just and give retribution to those who are afflicting the psalmist? ***When will You execute judgment...?***
 - ✓ The psalmist points to the evil of what they are doing when he says they ***persecute me***. The word persecute is a hunting term — they pursue and hunt people with the intention of doing harm (which he will particularly expose in vv. 85-87; the short version is they want to kill him).
 - ✓ It’s important to recognize what the psalmist is asking for here:
 - He is asking (again) for personal relief from the oppression. And it’s appropriate to ask for that.
 - He is also asking for the final condemnation of these sinners.

- He is not the only psalmist to ask for judgment on the unrighteous (55:23; 59:5-8 13-15; 69:20-28); there is a sense in which we *must* ask for the judgment of God because God must judge sinners if He will be righteous (cf. Jer. 9:23-24). And when we ask for the justice of God, we also understand that this is eternal and unchangeable. This is a sobering request. There is a sense that we should be reluctant to make this request.
- Is God just? Yes. *Will* God be just? Yes. While He has not acted yet, He will one day act against all unrighteousness and every act of unrighteousness will be made right. Either the unrighteous sinner will be condemned eternally, or Christ will have received the wrath of God for that sinner and his sin.
 - ✓ I have noted that this is something like a lament psalm — there is darkness and weariness in this psalm. If the psalmist filled out a PDI for biblical counseling he'd probably say he was depressed. And we see that depression in a particular way in this verse. This psalm exalts Scripture like no other passage of Scripture — and this verse is the first verse in the psalm that doesn't mention Scripture in some way. In 83 verses, the psalmist has affirmed the value and ability of Scripture; but here in his despair, by excluding a reference to Scripture, he almost seems to be momentarily saying, "even the Bible doesn't have an answer for this question." James Boice pondered, "Was it the case, when the psalmist was the most down, that he temporarily lost sight of God's Word?"
 - ✓ Just because God has *not yet* demonstrated His justice does not mean He is unjust. He is not unjust. But He is patient. And the reason for His patience is for sinners (like you and I) to repent (Rom. 2:4; 9:22; 2 Pt. 3:9).
 - ✓ If you are persecuted, rest confidently in the truth that no unrighteous sinner will get away with his sin; until that time, pray that God's patience with them will lead them to repentance and salvation. And you and I do well to ask God for a patience that is similar to His in the interim.

5. Will God **HELP** Me? (vv. 85-86)

- In these verses, the psalmist begins to explain just how evil these men are —
 - ✓ **The arrogant** are presumptuous sinners. They not only do not know God, but they intentionally have rejected God. They have sinned against and killed their consciences. They are hostile to God and because they hate God they hate God's people and seek to destroy them (Jn. 15:20). They cannot abide righteousness or righteous people. (And this could be an encouragement for the psalmist — they see his righteous conformity to God and that's why they want his destruction; their attacks are an affirmation that God is transforming him.)
 - ✓ The extent of their rejection of God is seen in the final phrase in v. 85 — they are **men who are not in accord with Your law**. That is, God has revealed His commands that direct the lives of His followers and they intentionally live differently from what God has commanded. They reject God's authority and set themselves up as an authority. They are law-breakers and they are lawless.

- ✓ When he says that **they have dug pits for me**, he means that they have sought to unjustly entrap him. He is picking up on the imagery from v. 84 — they are hunters seeking his destruction. Like hunters who dig a hole and cover it loosely with brush and then place bait on it hoping to trap a prey that they will kill and devour, so they want to trap and destroy the godly man (cf. 57:6).
- ✓ Part of their entrapment of the psalmist is that they have **persecuted me with a lie** (v. 86). This is the same root word for persecution as in v. 84 — they’re hunting him down. They have maliciously attacked him with deceptive words and trickery. There is nothing true in the persecutors (or in the world). They are proud, rebellious, and deceptive.
- ✓ They are everything that God is not. God and His **commandments are faithful**. The root word of **faithful** means “trustworthy” or “truthful.” The persecutors are devious but God’s intentions are true and forthright; there is no deception or trickery with God (contrast with the next phrase). He does good for His people and that good is revealed in His Word and His particular commands. (When God commands us to do something, it is always and only for our good.) This phrase is in contrast to the arrogance of the persecutors of the previous verse. They seek the destruction of the psalmist. But God in His Word is faithful to Himself and to protect His people.
- Because God and His Word are faithful, the psalmist responds in dependence — **Help me!**
 - ✓ Nothing else will help; if he is to survive, he is dependent on the Lord.
 - ✓ This phrase is a command, but no one commands God. It has the force of a request — “Please help me!” And because it is a request, there is also an implied question, “Will God help me?”
 - ✓ You’ve asked that same question, haven’t you? The psalmist asks it because he knows it is in the very nature of God to help. God is a God of grace (v. 88). And because He is gracious, He helps.
 - ✓ Many Scriptures affirm this reality, but one of my favorite examples is in 1 Sam. 7. Philistia had captured the Ark of the Covenant in a battle recorded in 1 Sam. 4; the ark was then returned in chapter 6, but the Philistines tried to get it back again in 1 Sam. 7 but God sovereignly intervened and routed the Philistines (7:10). To commemorate the victory, Samuel erected a stone and called it “Ebenezer” (v. 12, “the stone of help”). That stone was a memorial to God’s faithfulness. God is a God who helps. That event is the reality behind an allusion which we regularly sing (“Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing”):

Here I raise my Ebenezer,
Hither by Thy help I’ve come;
And I hope, by Thy good pleasure,
Safely to arrive at home.

Jesus sought me when a stranger,
Wandering from the fold of God;
He, to rescue me from danger,
Interposed His precious blood.

- ✓ Will God help me? Yes. He may not answer and give the help I want at the moment. But He will give (and has given) the help that I need (which is why Paul can say this: 2 Tim. 4:18).

6. Will God Be GRACIOUS Again? (vv. 87-88)

- The psalmist makes one final request of the Lord, and as he does so he again explains the evil of his persecutors:
 - ✓ ***They almost destroyed me on the earth.*** The word ***destroyed*** is the same one as “languish” and “fail” in vv. 81-82. In other words, they almost killed me.
 - ✓ Interestingly, he says, “*in* the earth” (not *on* the earth). Why? It seems likely that he’s thinking back to the pit that they dug for him (v. 85) — they wanted to get him six-feet in and under the earth. They wanted to be rid of him and they wanted him dead.
- So how did the psalmist finally respond?
 - ✓ ***I did not forsake your precepts.*** In contrast to those who were attempting to destroy him and their rejection of God, the psalmist says, “no matter what they did, I did not reject You. They could not compel me to abandon You.” The psalmist is concerned to keep all the details of God’s precepts and commands. He will give careful attention to them. And note that this does not mean that he will read the Scriptures or memorize the Scriptures or study the Scriptures or teach the Scriptures, but that he will know the Scriptures so that He will do what the Scriptures demand (cf. **Is. 1:22-25**).
 - ✓ His goal is to ***keep the testimony of Your mouth.*** God has spoken and the psalmist will do it. He is aware that “man lives by everything that proceeds out of the mouth of the LORD” (Dt. 8:3). And he wants to be obedient to that testimony of God’s truth.
 - ✓ And to be obedient He needs the power of God, so he makes a final request: ***revive me....*** Again, this is a command, but it is a command with a request — “please revive me.” The psalmist is asking the Lord to keep him alive — a request similar to the ones in **vv. 25, 37, 40**. He needs the Lord to keep him alive both physically and spiritually (here the emphasis is on physical life).
 - ✓ And if God does that, it will be an act of grace — so the psalmist says, ***...according to your lovingkindness.*** He is not attempting to manipulate God — “You owe me...,” but simply entrusting himself to God’s grace — “You are gracious; if You deem it right, would You preserve my life?”
 - ✓ And the request also has an implied question: “will God revive me?” Again, we don’t know the particular answer in any given situation, but we do know that 1) whatever God does, it will be in accordance with His grace; 2) that ultimately God *will* keep His own alive eternally. We don’t need to fear death from persecutors here, for no one can take the life that only God can give (Mt. 10:28).
 - ✓ As one commentator said, “Your Father in Heaven loves you too much to harm you, and He is too wise to make a mistake.”
 - ✓ Will God be gracious? Yes. Those who are His will always receive only His grace (*whatever* we receive from Him is a gift of His grace).

CONCLUSION: Tomorrow we embark on another new year. For some of you there is much joy and anticipation for the coming year; for some of you there is a forecast of darkness and gloom. Like the psalmist in the middle of this psalm, you find yourself in the middle of life with many questions and problems. Where will you turn for help?

Despite the weight of suffering endured by this psalmist, this stanza is a reminder that suffering is not unique. Other followers of God have also suffered greatly. The psalmist's persecution (and ours) is "common to man." And as the psalmist was able to endure and remain faithful to God through faithful obedience to His Word, so we will be able to endure and remain faithful to Him through adherence to His Word. [Adams, 74.]

It sounds trite, but it is true that all of life's questions are answered in God's Word. When life and suffering and persecution tempts you to turn away from God, turn to God by going to His Word.

This kind of message should compel you to take action. In a moment we will sing a song; after the song I will ask you to be seated again and after I give the benediction, I invite you to take 30-60 seconds to consider this statement: because of what I heard in this message today, in the coming year, in dependence on the grace of God I commit to do this (in relation to the Word of God):

BENEDICTION: Psalm 1