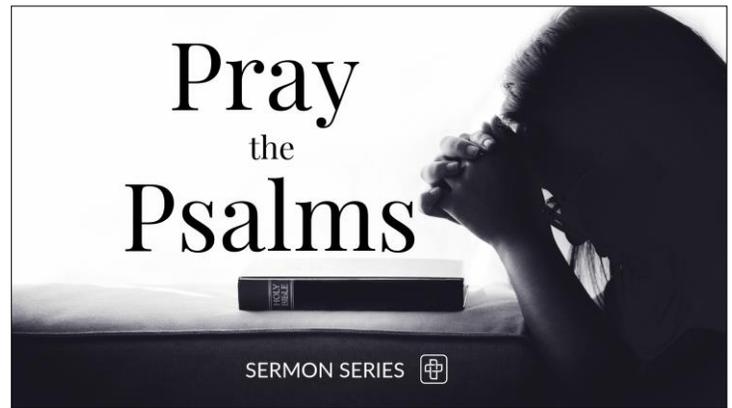




Hope for Suffering Saints

Psalm 119:49-80

Blake Glosson August 18, 2019



Please open your Bibles to Psalm 119. As you're turning there, I'd like to tell a quick story. When I was younger, I used to be able to control my dreams to a certain degree. What I found is that when I wanted something in my dream—like chocolate, for example—all I had to do was walk up to somebody and say, "Hey, where's the chocolate?" They would inevitably respond with, "Oh, it's over there," then poof! There it would be. I don't know why it worked like that, but it did.

One night I realized I was dreaming, so I walked up to somebody and said, "Hey, why is money falling from the sky?" As soon as I asked that, money began to fall from the sky. So I thought to myself, "Okay, I'm going to take a bucket, fill it up with money, then I'm going to cling to the bucket as tight as I possibly can—and then open my eyes and wake up." In my dream, it made perfect sense that as long as I held tightly to the bucket, it would come back into reality with me.

So that's what I did. I collected money, I took the bucket in my arms and grasped it as tightly as I possibly could. Then I opened my eyes and was back in my bedroom. And to my complete surprise, I looked in my arms and the bucket was gone. I was so heartbroken! I was so sad, because literally one second ago I was holding a bucket full of money. I was looking at it. I was feeling it. I was thinking about all the things I could do with it. I had put my hope in that bucket. But then the next second, it was completely gone. It wasn't in my arms, it wasn't underneath my covers—it was just gone. I knew right away, as I was waking up, that my brother must have snuck into my room and grabbed it from me.

Here's the point. No matter how tightly I clung to that bucket, no matter how much I put my hope in that bucket to satisfy me or to solve all life's problems or to fix my suffering—it wouldn't have mattered, because it always would have failed me. It was a terrible object for me to be putting my hope in, because it was inevitably going to disappear right when I needed it the most.

Now, you might be thinking, "Well, that's obvious. You should never put your hope in a dream bucket. It's always going to disappear on you." But I wonder how many things in life we cling to and put our ultimate hope in that are like that dream bucket. I wonder how many things in

life that we put our ultimate hope in, are things that will inevitably at some point fade away and disappear. When I say “ultimate hope,” I’m referring to whatever it is that you finish this sentence with: “I will be okay in life if _____.” However you finish that sentence, that is what you’re putting your ultimate hope in.

For example, one thing I can be tempted to put my ultimate hope in at times is human approval. I might think to myself, “Well, as long as I feel like everyone approves of me, then I will be okay in life.” There are actually moments in my life when I feel like, “Yes, everyone approves of me right now!” I can be tempted in that moment to cling to that feeling of human approval like the dream bucket and just hope it never disappears. But inevitably that feeling disappears while I’m clinging to it. It never lasts.

So you might think, “Well, that’s obvious. Don’t put your hope in human approval. That’s going to fade away on you. That’s going to disappear.” Okay, what are my alternatives? What else should I be putting my hope in? What about other objects of hope? I’m 26 years old, so looking ahead at my life, should I put my hope in marriage? If I get married, then will everything in life be okay? Should I put my hope in my health? Is that something that will never fade away on me. I’ll just trust in my health. That’s a good object for hope. Should I put my hope in my financial stability? Yeah, that will probably never fade away—right? Should I put my hope in my social status?

Won’t all of these things fail me at some point? Won’t all of these things disappear on me at some point in life, if not at my death? Is there anything in this life that we can put our ultimate hope in, that we can be confident will never fail us, that will never fade away?

Now, before we answer that question, I want to ask two questions this morning to orient us before we dive into God’s Word. Honestly ask yourself these two questions.

First of all, what are you clinging to most tightly in this life? What are you putting your ultimate hope in? Once again, if you just want a quick way of figuring out what that is, what is the first thing that comes to your mind to finish this sentence: “I will be okay in life if _____.” What are you putting your ultimate hope in?

By the way, there are many Christians in this room—gospel-professing, Christ-loving Christians. I’m not asking you what you were putting your hope in when you first became a Christian. I’m also not asking what you were putting your hope in last month or last week. But how about this morning? How about right now? What are you putting your ultimate hope in? What are you clinging to in this life, hoping, “If I can just get this or if I can keep this, I’ll be okay”?

Once you have that, here’s the next question. Is whatever you are hoping in something that will never disappear through any trial, any suffering, even death itself? Or is the thing you are

putting your hope in kind of like my dream bucket, something that will disappear on you at some point—probably right when you need it the most? You might think, “I’m not really sure. How do we know which things in life will disappear on us? How do we know which objects we should be cautious about putting our ultimate hope in?”

Jesus gave us the answer in Matthew 24:35 when He said, *“Heaven and earth will pass away...”* In other words, anything you cling to in this life will pass away. At some point it will disappear on you. But then He said, “There is one thing you can cling to in any suffering, any trial—even death itself—and it won’t disappear. It won’t fade away.” Do you guys remember what Jesus said that is? *“Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.”*

In all of our suffering, each of us desperately needs a hope that is not attached to anything in this world. If any of our ultimate hopes are attached to anything in this world, we can be confident they will fade away. They will disappear at some point. But there is one thing we can put our hope in. In all our suffering, there is one thing we can be confident will never fade away or disappear and that is the Word of God.

Notice the first two verses in Psalm 119:49-50. The psalmist is praying to the Lord, saying, *“Remember your word to your servant, in which you have made me hope. This is my comfort in my affliction, that your promise gives me life.”* In this passage, we’re going to see three promises of God that gave the psalmist life-giving hope in his suffering.

If you are here this morning and you have put your faith in Christ—if you’re trusting in Christ’s sinless life and His sacrificial death to save you and make you right with God; if you’re clinging to Christ and His work on the cross—then God has given you these three promises as well to give you hope in your suffering. The best part about it is if you attach your hope to these promises in the Word of God, you can be confident that it will never fade away. It will never disappear. It will never fail.

What are these three promises? God promises to each of His children, “I will be with you in your suffering.” Secondly, He promises, “I will sanctify you and use you through your sufferings.” He also promises to each of His children in this room, “I will one day rescue you from your sufferings.” In other words, if we want to have an unfailing, un-disappearing hope in all our suffering, we must cling to God’s promises of His presence, His purposes and His provision.

Three promises God makes to us in our suffering:

“I will be with you in your suffering.”

God’s presence

“I will sanctify and use you through your suffering.”

God’s purposes

“I will one day rescue you from your suffering.”

God’s provision

Promise #1: God's Presence

Let's look at each of these promises individually, starting with the promise of God's presence: "I will be with you in your suffering." For pretty much everyone in this room right now, regardless of the suffering you have been through in your life, you'll know that one of the hardest parts about any suffering is the feeling of loneliness that so often comes with it. In particular we can feel, "No one understands what I'm going through right now. No one can relate. I'm all alone."

I talked to a friend recently about this feeling of loneliness and he said something that stuck with me: "On the one hand, you always have to suffer alone. No one can suffer with you. Even if two people are going through the exact same circumstance, their suffering is still different. Each person is always the only one in their own head." In that sense, you always have to suffer alone. Undoubtedly the psalmist felt this loneliness in his affliction, so in response, he clung to the presence of God.

I'd like to start by pointing back to a verse at the very beginning of Psalm 119, verse 2. The psalmist says something in this verse that ought to change the way we read the entire chapter: "*Blessed are those who keep his testimonies, who seek him with their whole heart.*" From the beginning, the writer is expressing something very important. When he reads God's Word, he's seeking God Himself. The reason why God's Word brought comfort to this psalmist is because it brought him to the Comforter.

We see this throughout the Psalm:

- In verse ten he says, "I seek You with my whole heart."
- In verse 57 he says, "You are my portion."
- Verse 58, "I have sought Your face."
- Verse 114, "You are my refuge."
- Verse 135, "Make Your face shine upon me."
- Verse 151, "You are near to me, Lord."

When he seeks God's Word, he is seeking God Himself. Every time he found comfort in God's Word, he was ultimately finding comfort in God's presence.

Now, what was it about God's presence that comforts this man in his suffering? To put it another way, what is it about God's presence that can give us hope and comfort in our suffering? If you look back at verses 73-74, we're given some insight into this question. This is powerful. "*Your hands have made and fashioned me; give me understanding that I may learn your commandments. Those who fear you shall see me and rejoice, because I have hoped in your word.*"

We'll come back to verse 74 in a moment, but notice again the first seven words of verse 73: "Your hands have made and fashioned me..." In the NIV it reads, "...formed me..." One of the things that makes God's presence utterly unique is the fact that He is our Creator. Because He is our Creator, He knows us and He knows our suffering better than anyone else in the world. Right now, in this moment, you might be thinking of a suffering you're going through in this life. You might feel as though no one understands. And it's true—no other person in this room understands your suffering, but there is One Who does.

God knows you fully and He knows your suffering completely. According to this Psalm, God knows...

Your hopes (v.114), your fears (v.120), your joys (v.111), your tears (v.136), your loves (v.97), your hates (v.113), your sins (v.67), your shame (vv.31, 39), your longings (v.20), your affections (v.159), your insecurities (v.82), your intentions (v.36), your delights (v.174), your distresses (v.143), your failures (v.67), your successes (vv.99-102), your praises (v.108), your passions (v.139), your needs (v.94), your actions (v.133), your friends (v.63), your enemies (v.98), your sufferings (v.153), your sorrows (v.28), your words (v.13), your thoughts (v.15), your feelings (v.v. 139, 143) and your obedience (v.121).

Oh, and by the way, He also knows every time you have been oppressed (vv.121, 122, 134), persecuted (vv.157, 161), slandered (v.23) or mistreated (v.61).

You might think to yourself, "Well, that's a mouthful. Can you sum that up in one verse?" Absolutely! We have these beautiful words in Psalm 119:168: "For *all my ways are known to you.*" All your ways are known to Him. There is no aspect of you or of your suffering that God does not know completely. To put it another way, you are never less alone than when you are with God.

The psalmist knew this. At least four times in this Psalm he speaks of meditating on God in the nighttime, almost as if to say, "Even in the moments when I feel most alone, You, Lord, are with me." Or in the words of the hymn writer, "Thou my best thought, by day or by night, waking or sleeping, Thy presence my light." In the psalmist's suffering, it was the promise of God's presence that he clung to and that gave him hope. In the words of Tim Keller, "Suffering is unbearable unless you are certain that God is for you and with you."

I'd like to share one testimony, then we'll move on to the second promise. I've been reading a book recently called Hope When It Hurts by Sarah Walton. For anyone who is going through a period of suffering, I would definitely recommend this book. In an interview last year at Crossway

Community Church in Wisconsin, Walton said something really interesting about possibly the hardest part of her suffering. Listen to what she said and as you listen, ask yourself, “Can I relate to her experience and her feelings?”

In my suffering, I started feeling really, really alone. There were those of course who tried to offer help. They tried to offer suggestions or ways they could relate. But it always fell short of any real, substantial comfort. Why? Because no one could fully enter into everything that was going on inside of me.

She goes on to say that it becomes really easy, then, to live resentful lives, to feel like no one can understand where we’re at. We get sucked into our own little world, yet there is One Who is familiar with pain, Who walked a harder path than you and I ever will. He walks before us and beside us. He is with us. Walton says Jesus Christ is the only One Who can fully enter into our pain. He alone knows our hearts, our temperament, our insecurities, our fears, our emotions and our desires. Jesus knows the pain of loneliness. In fact, Jesus walked the loneliest path ever known to man so that through faith in Him, you and I would never have to walk alone again.

Promise #2: God’s Purposes

What promises of God must we cling to in order to have hope in our suffering? First, we must cling to the promise of God’s presence. Second, we must cling to the promise of God’s purposes. He says, “I will sanctify you and use you through your suffering.” If we were to stop this service and have everyone read Psalm 119, then come back together and vote on what the most startling verse in this chapter is, I’m confident the majority of us—if not all of us—would pick verse 71. Here is what the psalmist wrote: *“It was good for me that I was afflicted, that I might learn your statutes.”*

Yes, you read that correctly. This isn’t some weird Hebrew translation; this is what it actually says. *“It was good for me that I was afflicted.”* What in the world is he saying here? We’re given some insight earlier in verse 67: *“Before I was afflicted, I went astray, but now I keep your word.”* We don’t know the full story here about what kind of suffering or affliction this writer was experiencing, but we do know one thing: he recognized that his suffering had a sanctifying effect.

There are currently four groups of people in this room right now.

- There are those who know what sanctification means and it is incredibly sweet to them.
- There are those who know what sanctification means and it is not incredibly sweet to them.

- There are those who do not know what sanctification means and it is incredibly sweet to them—they just don't know it yet.
- Then there are those who do not know what sanctification means and it is not incredibly sweet to them.

No matter which camp you fall into this morning, my prayer is that each of us in this room, throughout the course of our lives, will come to the place where we hear the word “sanctification” and it will become increasingly beautiful to our ears. That’s because it is one of God’s most precious gifts to His children.

So what does sanctification mean again? Well, one great way to define it would be the process of being made more like Christ. Here’s another way to define it: Sanctification is the process of putting my hope less and less in things that leave me feeling empty and putting my hope more and more in God Who makes me full. It means putting my hope less and less in these dream buckets—things that are going to disappear on me at some point in my life—and putting my hope more and more in the only God Who can now and forever make me full.

Now, if we were being honest with ourselves, isn't this what each of us desperately want, more than anything else in the world: to have our hope less and less in things that leave us feeling empty and more and more in God Who makes us full? It certainly was for this psalmist, because understanding the precious gift of sanctification is what led him to say, “Suffering plus sanctification equals net positive.” If you were to ask him, “Oh, then you would choose suffering, right? You would love to suffer, right?” He would respond, “No, absolutely not. But if it led me to sanctification, then I can say it was good for me that I was afflicted.” That’s what he is getting at here.

I will say that not all of our suffering is God disciplining us, but God can discipline us in all of our suffering. If we want to have hope in any suffering, we must cling to God’s promise that He will sanctify us through it. He will use it to help us put off those things that leave us feeling empty and help us cling to the only One Who can make us full. So we must cling to that promise.

There is one other thing I want to point out before we move on to the third promise. You may have noticed that the second promise—“I will sanctify you and use you through your suffering”—has two parts. “I will sanctify you” plus “I will use you.” That’s what I want to look at right now. Notice the fourth and fifth words in Psalm 119:71: *“It is good for me that I was afflicted.”*

For about six years I kept a sign above my bed that I could read when I woke up each morning. The first few words on that sign said, “Today is not about you.” These words helped to

recalibrate my mind each morning when I woke up. When we're searching for meaning in our suffering, when we're searching for God's purposes in our suffering, it might be helpful to remember that your suffering is never entirely about you.

One of the most beautiful parts about God's purposes in our suffering is that it always serves a powerful purpose beyond ourselves. Not only does God promise to sanctify you through your suffering, He also promises to use you through your suffering. Look at what the psalmist says in verse 74. In the midst of his suffering, he says, "*Those who fear you shall see me*"—in my affliction— "*and rejoice.*" Why? Why would someone see me in my affliction and rejoice? He gives us the answer in the second half of the verse: "*Those who fear you shall see me and rejoice, because I have hoped in your word.*"

I absolutely love this verse and here's why. Without question, some of the most powerful moments of encouragement in my life have come when I experienced someone else hoping in God during a period of suffering. I'm not talking about a mask of happiness—"Everything's fine!"—but a real anchor of hope. I was chatting with a friend recently who was going through a pretty intense trial over the last few months. After describing some of the pains involved with this trial, this friend said, "But I'm going to lean into it. For now, this is my cup and I want to know sides of God I haven't been able to see before."

When I heard that, I immediately had two simultaneous feelings. I felt sorrow for what this person is going through, but at the same time I felt this strange, almost indescribable sense of encouragement and joy. When I hear someone say, "Yes, this is incredibly hard, but I am trusting God," and I can tell they actually mean it, my initial response is typically, "What? How is that humanly possible? How can you be hoping in God during this kind of suffering?" The answer, of course, is that it's not humanly possible. Biblical hope in affliction can only come through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Look at what the writer says in verse 49: "*Remember your word to your servant...*" Now listen to the wording here: "*...in which you have made me hope.*" The NIV says, "*...in which you have given me hope.*" I love how Ligon Duncan puts it: "God does both sides. He is the One Who gives us promises and He is also the one who enables us to hope in these same promises."

Do you realize what this means? When I experience a believer truly hoping in God while they are in the fire of affliction, I can be confident that in that moment I am standing in the presence of God, because the Holy Spirit is in that. That encourages me. That increases my faith.

And by the way, if you ever find yourself in a situation where you are suffering, where you're in the fire of affliction, and you say, "Normally this would be just eating me up. Normally this would destroy me, but for some reason right now I feel this sense of hope"—let that encourage you.

Let that increase your faith as well. That's the Holy Spirit in you, because that's not natural. That's not normal. Let that encourage you that the Holy Spirit is working.

Not only does it increase my faith when someone else hopes in God during a time of suffering, but it also increases my confidence that the same Holy Spirit who is in you in your suffering will also sustain me in my suffering. This gives me great comfort. As Paul says in 2 Corinthians 1:3-4, "*Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles...*" Why does He do this? Paul goes on to give us the answer: "*...so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God.*"

In other words, when you are suffering you have unique power to encourage other believers by your hope, especially if they are going through something you have gone through or you are currently going through. Another way to look at it is that when people pray, "O Lord, my faith is weak; please increase my faith," you might be the answer to that prayer. God might use your hope in your affliction as the means by which someone else's faith is increased.

So again, when we're searching for meaning in our suffering, when we're searching for God's purposes in our suffering, it might be helpful to remember that your suffering is never, ever entirely about you. You know what? I am so thankful that Jesus' suffering was not entirely about Him either. I'm so thankful that Jesus chose to suffer, not only for His own glory, but also for my benefit.

By the way, Jesus was a human—just like you and me. There was a period of Jesus' life when He was experiencing suffering and needed something to hope in during His suffering. In Jesus' suffering, He clung to the hope that God was using His suffering, not only for His own good, but also for the good of others. If we want to have hope in our suffering, we must cling to this same promise that your suffering is never entirely about you.

You might be thinking to yourself, "My suffering is never entirely about me? What if I am on a desert island, the only person there, and I'm suffering. If I'm hoping in God during my suffering, how would someone else benefit from my hope in God during my suffering there?" Or maybe a more realistic situation is what about anyone in this room right now who is going through a period of suffering and you're trying to hope in God. You're trying to trust in God through your suffering, but you're not seeing how it's helping someone else right now. You might be thinking, "Is God really using this for the benefit of someone else?"

The psalmist gives us a great answer to that question in Psalm 147:11: "*The Lord takes pleasure in those who fear him, in those who hope in his steadfast love.*" Even if no one else sees

you hoping and trusting in God during your suffering, our heavenly Father sees it—and He’s taking pleasure in that. He is glorified through it. Your suffering is never entirely about you.

So when we’re in the fire of affliction, what promises of God must we cling to in order to have hope in our suffering? We must cling to God’s promise that He will be with us in our suffering. That’s His presence. We must cling to His promise to sanctify us, to cause us to put our hope less and less in things that make us feel empty and more and more in the God Who makes us full. He also promises, “I will use you through your suffering. I will use your hope in your suffering and affliction to encourage those around you and I will take pleasure when you are hoping in Me during your suffering.”

Promise #3: God’s Provision

Third and finally, if we want to have hope in our suffering, we must cling to God’s promise that He will one day rescue you from your suffering. Look back for a moment at Psalm 119:54. The psalmist writes, “*Your statutes have been my songs*”—they’ve given me joy— “*in the house of my sojourning.*” Other translations say, “...in my pilgrimage,” or “...in my earthly life.” As Charles Spurgeon put it, “David knew he was not at home in this world, but a pilgrim passing through it, seeking a better country.”

If we want to have hope in our suffering, we must remember that this sinful, broken world is not our true home. We will not feel like we are home until we are united with Christ in the new heavens and the new earth. So if you’re sitting here this morning and suffering and you feel like, “This doesn’t feel right; I wasn’t made for,” you’re right. It’s not. This world is broken. This world is sinful right now. That’s not the way it was designed to be and by God’s grace, that’s not the way it will be one day when Christ comes back. Every suffering we experience in this life is temporary and every joy we experience in this life is merely an appetizer. You don’t have to cling to it.

I’d like to close this morning with a passage that the psalmist was likely to be very familiar with when he wrote this Psalm—Exodus 3:7-8. I wonder if he had this passage in mind when he wrote verse 54, because these two verses from Exodus 3 contain some of the most hope-giving words in the entire Bible for people who feel like they’re living in a foreign land. This is God speaking to Moses in the burning bush:

The LORD said, “I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering. So I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey...” (NIV).

So in the Israelites' suffering, God says, "I have seen...I have heard...I care...I have come down...I will rescue you." For every child of God, this is God's message to you in your suffering as well. "I have seen your misery. I have heard your cries. I am concerned about your suffering. I have come down in Christ and I will one day rescue you. I will bring you up from this land and I will bring you into an eternal home flowing with every good thing."

The reason why we can have hope in the face of any suffering, including the suffering of death itself, is because we have a God Who faced the suffering of death itself. Not only did Christ face the sufferings of death itself, but He defeated death itself. Christ died the death we should have died so that we can reap the reward that He earned.

In a moment we're going to partake of the Lord's Supper. As we do, we need to remember three things that we do each time we take the Lord's Supper. First, we rest and remember what Christ has done for us on the cross. Second, we rejoice in what Christ is doing in us today. And then third, we ready ourselves for the day when Christ returns and we will see Him face to face.

Each person in this room desperately needs a hope that is not attached to anything in this world. If our hope is attached to anything in this world, we can be confident that it will disappear. It will fade away; it will fail us at some point. But God's Word will never fade away and He has promised us, "I will be with you in your suffering. I will sanctify you and use you through your suffering. And I will one day rescue you from your suffering." So I ask one more time: what are you clinging to in this life? What are you putting your ultimate hope in? May the answer for each of us in this room be the Word of God.

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All Scriptures quoted directly from the English Standard Version unless otherwise noted.

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