

Strength Under Pressure

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[0 : 00] Well, folks, with that passage open in front of you, Psalm 119, I wonder if you've heard the joke about the man who went for a job interview. And after the pleasantries were over, one of the panel opened with this question.

They said, this is a high stress job. Attention to detail and maximum concentration are required at all times. So first question to you. How are you at performing under pressure? And the man paused and thought about it for a moment before replying. Replying, I'm okay, I guess. But in all honesty, I'm better at performing Bohemian Rhapsody. And listen, I love that joke for two reasons.

Number one is that it separates those who know their queen from those who don't. But reason number two is that the man at the center of the joke clearly isn't all that good under pressure. And this Psalm is, this portion of it, it's all about pressure. And you might be here today and pressure may well be the slogan that you'd put over your life.

[1 : 05] Someone around the pew asks you in that break, how are you doing? If you had one word to sum it up. Perhaps it's pressure. There's all sorts of reasons that you're feeling pressure. Your health isn't what it used to be.

Your future feels so uncertain. The kids are a handful. You're not getting enough sleep. Family relations are chaotic.

The world news, every time you look at it, it just causes your heart to sink. And maybe add to that the fact that you're here today and you follow Jesus.

Maybe your friends think because of that that you're an absolute space cadet for your faith. Maybe you're here and in all honesty, your sin and guilt and shame, it all feels like a sumo wrestler is sitting on you and you cannot find any room to breathe.

And you don't know where to turn or where to run. You under pressure? Friends, I think that's why we need to listen to what these verses are telling us.

[2 : 14] Because the advice that the psalmist is going to give us here is that the word of the Lord proved to be the most precious thing to him. Because it was there that he encountered the Lord of the word.

Here's Martin Nimler, German pastor imprisoned for eight years in a Nazi concentration camp for his opposition to the Nazi state control of the churches. And he said this reflecting on his time there. Get this. He said this of the Bible. The word of God was simply everything to me. Comfort and strength, guidance and hope, master of my days and companion for my nights, the bread which kept me from starvation, and the water of life that refreshed my soul.

And get this line. And even more, solitary confinement ceased to be solitary. And so as we take this in today, there's two big things that we're going to learn about our gods.

Number one, he is the God, in the words of Francis Schaeffer, he is the God who is there. It was in Rachel's prayer, wasn't it, at the start? He's the God who is there. Meaning that God has revealed himself sufficiently in creation, fully in the person of his son Jesus, but maybe for our purposes this morning, perfectly in the pages of the Bible.

[3 : 39] That's why Psalm 119, this psalm, has been one of the most treasured parts of the Bible for believers down through the ages. Because it's here that we see the beauty of God's words.

And we began last week. Ian took us through it with the psalmist having constructed this most beautiful and intricate piece of poetry. Almost in kaleidoscopic fashion, he's talked about God's word and the beauty of it.

He's coming at it from so many different angles. We thought about those eight words that he's going to keep repeating. To talk about the different angles of God's word. His laws, his precepts, his

judgments.

And on and on it goes. And what he's doing is he's inviting us to read on and to come and to share in this celebration of the God who has revealed himself.

The God who speaks through that which he has spoken. Our God has made himself known. And wonder of wonders, not just known, but knowable.

[4 : 47] And this is the words of Amy R. Ewing, Christian apologist down in Oxford. She says this. At the heart of the Christian faith is the revelation of a personal God who can be known and related to.

So there's the first thing. Our God has made himself known. But number two reality, I think this tells us, is that just because you believe in him and follow Jesus, doesn't mean that life is going to be easy.

But the surprising thing here, we're going to come to the sources of pressure in just a minute. The surprising thing here is that the psalmist doesn't ask God to remove those pressures.

Take it away, Lord. And it's a real challenge to the things that we pray for, isn't it? We so often pray, God, would you make things disappear? Would you make life a little bit easier?

And of course, there's no harm in praying those things. But in stark contrast, the psalmist here is praying that God would help him stand firm through the pressures.

[5 : 51] And he's telling us, the witness here is that he came to find new delights, new contours of praise, not despite and around those pressures, but through and because of those pressures.

And so here's the two sources of pressure, and this will be real quick. Number one is pressure from without. A pressure from a world that feels hostile.

So come with me to the text, verse 21, where the psalmist is telling us about the arrogant. Do you see it? He elaborates on that.

Those who stray from your command. So here is a world that the psalmist sees that mocks God and his ways. You're wasting your time. What are you doing? And because they mock God, verse 23, they turn that mocking to mocking God, never going to mock you.

See how he talks about it there? They slander him. Verse 42. I know we're going through this quick, but stay with me. They taunt him. Now, we don't know exactly what he was facing, but we're beginning to build up a picture that if you're believing here today, if you're following Jesus, a picture that is beginning to sound familiar.

[7 : 14] And I was watching, you guys know I'm into my comedians. I was watching a Scottish comedian called Daniel Sloss. I give it a month and his posters will be all over the city because he'll be performing at the Edinburgh Fringe.

One of his great jokes in his latest pieces, he's mocking. Well, he's talking about how thanking God for a medical miracle was the same thing as a child thanking Santa Claus for presents on Christmas morning.

And I felt, as I'm watching this short, I'm feeling the hostility as the audience is in hysterics. So, as you see, the psalmist here, he's feeling a pressure from without, from a world that feels hostile.

And number two, and I think this is maybe the one that's going to relate more to us today. He's feeling a pressure from within. A pressure that's coming from a heart that feels heavy.

So, verse 25, and hear the emotion in his voice as he recounts how he was laid low in the dust.

[8 : 21] Do you see that? Verse 28, he talks about how his soul was weary with sorrow. And all of a sudden, you realize as we enter the Psalms, we're not reading Paul.

Right? This is not A plus B equals C. And you think, oh, I get it, because in the West, we kind of think like that logically. No, the Psalms are full of emotion. Right?

Lord, I feel like this. Full of emotion. And he's saying, my soul was weary with sorrow. And this is one of the reasons that Christians down the years have loved the Psalms.

And I was listening to an interview with a Scottish footballer called Billy Gilmore. He was supposed to be on the plane to America going to the World Cup last Saturday, I think it was. We're playing in a friendly.

Sorry, we. We're playing in a friendly. And a guy gets a knee injury. His dream is over. He's not going on that plane that leaves the next day. And he's being interviewed afterwards. I hate it when interviewers right after the game, when the emotions are high, stick a camera in front of people and say, how are you feeling?

[9 : 22] But anyway, he's going for it. How are you feeling? And he says, I don't have words to describe how I'm feeling. And we kind of get that, don't we, in our world. Sometimes there are occasions in life when we are flat on the face, flat on our faces, and we think, I do not have the words.

But the wonderful thing about the Psalms, and I think why they continue to be so cherished and have been down the generations by believers, is that here God gives us words.

He gives us words. It's as if not only is God saying, here is permission for you and I to feel what we feel.

But here are words inviting you to come to me with your emotions. Right? It's not, it's almost as if the Psalms, it's like God giving us sheet music.

And he's saying, I want you to sing it back to me. One of the great functions of the Psalms, I think, is to shape our emotions and desires and our feelings.

[10 : 35] But isn't it wonderful? That's why the book of Psalms has been called the songbook of the soul, down the generations for Christian believers. Because it's here God gives us words. Now, the Psalmist is struggling emotionally.

Why? He doesn't tell us. But having hung out with this guy for the past few weeks, can I have a guess? Look at verse 39. Where he's talking about the disgrace that I dread.

Now, can I read between the lines a little bit? That could well be his confession. God, you know what? I've royally messed it up.

And the weight of his sin and mistakes and that guilt has him in the dust. But there's another connected admission in the text here as he hits rock bottom.

Do you see verse 36 and verse 37? Where was he tempted to run? What was he tempted to look for?

[11 : 42] Do you see him described there? Take my eyes off of what? Paraphrasing that a little bit. Off of worthless things. Do you see it? Worthless things.

So where was he tempted to run? What he knows. He's tempted to run towards worthless things. And this question from the text asks us, dear friends, where are we tempted to run when we're at rock bottom?

Now for some of us, let's be honest. For some of us in here, it'll be all sorts of different things. For some of us, it will be the bottle. For some of us, it will be the telly. For some of us, it will be our bed. For some of us, it will be comfort eating. For some of us, it will be doom scrolling. For some of us, it will be shop till you drop on Amazon. For some of us, it will be porn. For some of us, it will be online betting.

But do you feel the emotion here? He's saying, in my darkest moment, I was tempted to run towards worthless things. And I was reading an article a few years back written by a person who was investigating the sharp rise in the number of stand-up comedians in Ukraine.

[12 : 50] And the article concluded the number one reason. What do you think? It was to escape the reality of the war. Of course, that's where the whole idea of the king's court jester came from, wasn't it?

When life gets hard, the king wanted to just escape what's happening outside of the palace. He just gets the jester to come in to perform. Would you take my mind off of it? But what this is telling us is that quick fixes that offer us immediate security and comfort are in the end nothing but salt water for the soul.

Take my eyes off of worthless things. Because those things will leave us even more parched in the desert of our experience.

But see, when you bring all of this together, see the psalmist, he's feeling a pressure from without. He's feeling pressure from within. Where does he go? There's a story told of the famous Welsh pastor and preacher Martin Lloyd-Jones and how he was speaking to a member of his congregation one evening and he's been listening for a good few hours and he's hearing about the difficulties that this man is facing, his sin and his shame in particular.

And having listened for a long, long time, he turns to the man and he says, Have you not realized that so much of the unhappiness in your life is because you are listening to yourself instead of talking to yourself?

[14 : 21] And that's what the psalmist is doing, I think, at verse 18. If you want to come there, I don't realize we're jumping all over the place, but I think this is how the emotion of this works.

Verse 18, and Erica prayed this at the start. Open my eyes, Lord. Open my eyes that I would see wonderful things in your law.

Now, what does that presume? It presumes that he's saying, Lord, I can't do it on my own. I'm so low. Help me see it.

I want to see it. I don't see it. But you know what? I need to see it. And so he prays, Open my eyes that I'd see wonderful things in your law. So the question is, what did he find in the Bible that strengthened his weary soul during his time of pressures?

Now, these are five really quick things. They all begin with S because I'm like Ian last week. I like alliteration too. I want us to see really quickly these five sources of solace that he found as he turned to the Bible.

[15:27] And then I want us to think really quickly about how we can sing this song even more with gusto because of Jesus. You with me? Here's the first one. The first one, what did he find in the Bible? The sound of his name.

By his name, his being God there. The sound of his name. Who is he pouring out his soul to? Who's on the other end of the phone, if you like, as he prays as an Old Testament believer?

Scan your eyes. Verse 31, verse 33, verse 41. It is the Lord. Do you see it? Capital L, capital O, capital R, capital D.

When you see that name in the Bible, that is the covenant name of God. So it's a name that is jam-packed with meaning all the way through the Old Testament. So this word Lord hyperlinks all over the place.

This is, the psalmist is saying, you are the Lord. You are the God of all grace. You are the unchanging one. You are the rescuing God. You're the providing God. You're the God who leads.

[16:29] You're the God who protects. You're the loving God. You're the promise-keeping God. And you're the God who has said to your people that you will be our God and we will be your people.

So that's who he's praying to, the Lord. And the covenant is the wallpaper that's all over the background of this psalm. It only makes sense that way.

Grace is all over through this psalm. So the psalmist is saying, when I was down and when I was nearly out, I remember, Lord, that this is not first and foremost about my grip on you.

This is about your grip on me. This is about your love, about who you are, way before it's about me. But that is a wonderful source of strength, the Lord. Here's the second thing. Firstly, sound of his name. Secondly, he's strengthened by the sum of his deeds.

[17:32] What will he do? Verse 27. Verse 27. He will meditate. Now, Ian helped us think about that word last week and about how the biblical idea of meditating stands in complete contrast to Eastern spirituality.

So this isn't about emptying our minds out. When the Bible talks about meditation, this is about filling our minds up. That Hebrew word, it means to chew something over.

So think less doing what you do with a tablet you got from the doctors and think more doing what you do with a gobstopper that you brought from the news agent. That's this word. Chew it.

Not swallow it. Chew it. And the psalmist is taking God's words. He's chewing it. He's savouring it. He's swallowing it. He's chewing it. He's savouring it. He's swallowing it.

And he's doing this whole process on repeat. And what is he meditating on? The Lord's wonderful deeds. And that is not so much a reference to the God who's revealed himself in creation.

[18:42] Well, you could spend ages meditating about that. Oh, Lord, my God, when I am awesome wonder, consider all the works thy hand hath made. This is specifically about God's acts of rescue.

And that's how he's revealed himself. He's the God who rescues. And so he's meditating on God's track record of coming through for his people.

I always love how the late Pastor J.I. Packer, the thing he always used to say to people, and I've tried to carry this through my experience as a Christian, he always used to say, live slowly enough to think deeply about God.

Yeah? Live slowly enough to think deeply about God. The psalmist is strengthened by the sum of his deeds. Thirdly, he's strengthened by the shape of the path.

Verse 19, again, pouring out his soul. What does it feel like in amongst this hostility? What does he feel like? He feels like a stranger. Do you see that?

[19 : 52] Or maybe your translation is a souljourner. In other words, that feeling is he feels the hostility. That feeling that I don't belong here. I don't fit in here.

I feel different from everyone else. And not only that, I feel like my life is not just about something else. Actually, my life is headed somewhere else.

And it's almost as if God has used this hostility as the psalmist walks the narrow path to remind him that that's exactly what he is.

The shape of the path. This is not your home. You're passing through. The shape of the path.

Fourthly, he's strengthened by the scale of his needs. Do you see how he doesn't have the answer to two great things? Verse 24. Guidance. Verse 24.

[20 : 54] Your statutes are my delight. They are my counselors. Like a sherpa leading me up the mountain. I've got not a scooby where I'm going. But I'm trusting that you know this mountain.

Every square inch of this mountain way better than I ever will. And so I'm going to follow you. Is that not a wonderful admission? Your word is my counselors.

Your words are my counselors. You know, the more I go on in life, and there'll be way more stronger testimonies to this than I have. The more I go on in life, I realize how much of my life I actually have zero control over.

And how little of the big picture I actually see. And that's what the psalmist is saying here. I need your word. I don't know where to go. I don't know where I'm headed. I don't know what tomorrow holds.

Have you ever had that experience of driving through a new housing estate? And your sat-nav hasn't quite updated it yet. And it's telling you to turn right and turn left. And you're looking at your map thinking, no, this isn't what I see.

[21 : 59] There's a disconnect between here and here. And that's what the psalmist is saying. Your word, Lord, your word is the only reliable map of the world that I have.

And I know. Friends, the Bible makes sense of us. It makes better sense of us than we can make of ourselves. And that's why he says, verse 29, keep me.

Keep me. He knows his propensity to wander. Verse 33, teach me. Verse 35, direct me. Verse 36 and 37, turn me.

Because he doesn't rate his own ability to navigate his way through life. What a wonderful lesson that is. And because God has answered that prayer, verse 32, he says, your word has broadened my understanding.

Verse 45, I walk about in freedom. And the wonder of this psalm is that he says, I'm experiencing those things as I come to your word, as I meditate on who you are, Lord.

[23 : 01] At the same time as the hostility from without and within continues to rage on. Is that a paradox? How does that work? The world outside is raging. In my heart, I'm all over the place.

But I'm settled because I know who you are, Lord. Doesn't have an answer to his guidance problem. He doesn't have an answer to his sin problem.

Do you see verse 39? Take away the shame I dread. And he's pleading there that God would be faithful to his promise to act.

To fully and finally atone for my sin. And that leads him fifthly to celebrate. And lastly, the sweetness of his words. Do you see verse 24?

This will be real quick. Your statutes are my delight. Verse 47, I delight in your commands because I love them. So do you see in his time of pressure, he doesn't run away to worthless things.

[24 : 02] He doesn't sit there and try and work out this puzzle of what I do. But he runs to the Lord. He comes to God's word.

And he meets there, a God who is an utter delight to know. You know, just as we close, I went to visit a dear friend the other day. And my friend's going through a really difficult time.

And something of what they said really struck me. They came out with this line. That I've no idea what tomorrow's going to bring.

The only thing I'm trying to do right now with each day is stick real close to the one who does. It's not a wonderful admission.

We feel pressure from without pressure within. Where do we go? We stick real close with the one who does. Friends, what do we find as we come to the Bible? What do we find fully that the psalmist didn't quite fully know yet?

[25 : 06] And yet I take it has trust in. Who do we find as we come to the Bible? How much more can we sing this because of Christ, who is the Psalm 119, ultimate man.

We can talk about that afterwards if you want. But we find Christ. Where do we find solace in the sound of his name, the sum of his deeds, the shape of the path, the scale of our need, and the sweetness of his word.

The call here as New Testament believers is to come here and be reminded about his heart. And come and meet Jesus and be reminded of his wonderful deeds of rescue.

To come here to meet him and be reminded that he paid the full price of our sin on the cross. To come here and be reminded that you are forgiven and a blood-bought child of the living God.

Come here and be reminded that our home is in heaven, not on earth. We're just passing through. Come here and be reminded that he alone has the words of eternal life.

[26 : 19] How often we're tempted to run to worthless things. When we come to the Gospels and we meet an all-sufficient Christ. Friends, why don't we just pray?

And I'm going to read the words from John chapter 6 to us. And hopefully this will lead us really well. Into the next part of our service, which is communion.

Why don't we just be quiet before I read these. And let's just bring our own prayers and requests and confessions to God. Knowing that he hears and that in Christ we have a fully sufficient Savior. After this, many of his disciples turned back and no longer walked with him. So Jesus said to the twelve, do you want to go away as well?

Simon Peter answered him, Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life and we have believed and have come to know that you are the Holy One of God.

[27 : 29] And so Father, it's our simple prayer this morning as we hold here, hold our Bibles in our hands. Lord, thank you that we have your word in our language.

We have it in English. We have it in all sorts of different languages. We can pick it up and read and understand. But Father, thank you here that we meet an all-sufficient Jesus. Lord, would you help us in our own individual ways run away from worthless things.

And instead find our all in all. Not in how together we have it. But in how wonderful and sufficient and brilliant a Savior Jesus is.

So Father, we pray all of these things in his precious and in his wonderful name. Amen.