

Remembrance and Comfort for Weary Pilgrims (Ps 119:49-56)

Preached by Pastor Phil Layton at Gold Country Baptist Church on November 23, 2008

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Psalm 119:49-56 (NASB95) ⁴⁹ **Remember** the word to Your servant, In which You have made me hope. ⁵⁰ This is my **comfort** in my affliction, That Your word has revived me. ⁵¹ The arrogant utterly deride me, *Yet* I do not turn aside from Your law. ⁵² I have **remembered** Your ordinances from of old, O LORD, And **comfort** myself. ⁵³ Burning indignation has seized me because of the wicked, Who forsake Your law. ⁵⁴ Your statutes are my songs In the house of my pilgrimage. ⁵⁵ O LORD, I **remember** Your name in the night, And keep Your law. ⁵⁶ This has become mine, That I observe Your precepts.

You may have noticed the word “remember” 3x (v. 49, 52, 55)

Another repeated word in this passage is “comfort” (v. 50, 52b)

Trying to follow that emphasis of the original, the title of today’s message is “Remembrance and Comfort for *Weary Pilgrims*.”

- The writer of this passage was weary in affliction (v. 50)
- In v. 51, he was weary of arrogant scoffing against himself
- v. 53; weary with anger even more so, for sin *against God*
- In v. 54; weary on his journey, needing songs to carry on
- v. 55, weary when he couldn’t sleep, but remembered God

The remembrances this passage speaks of provide much comfort for weary pilgrims. I’m using the word *pilgrims* because that’s the word and image at the end of v. 54, “pilgrimage,” a rich biblical image of one journeying one place to another. In God’s providence and timing, this is the week our nation commemorates the Pilgrims who arrived on the shores of Massachusetts in 1620 (soon forming Plymouth colony) and who celebrated a harvest festival next Fall thanking God’s Providence for those that survived the first winter.

According to the Pilgrim Hall Museum, there are only 2 primary source documents, Governor William Bradford writing in *Of Plymouth Plantation*, and Edward Winslow, in *Mourt’s Relation*:

‘our harvest being gotten in, our governor sent four men on fowling, that so we might after a special manner rejoice together, after we had gathered the fruits of our labors; they four in one day killed as much fowl, as with a little help beside, served the Company almost a week ... many of the Indians coming amongst us, and amongst the rest their greatest king ... with some ninety men, whom for three days we entertained and feasted, and they went out and killed five Deer, which they brought to the Plantation and bestowed on our Governor, and upon the Captain and others. And although it be not always so plentiful, as it was at this time with us, yet by the goodness of God, we are so far from want, that we often wish you partakers of our plenty.’¹

Of our family vacations growing up, one of my favorite trips was visiting Plymouth Rock and seeing and boarding a replica ship of the Mayflower at Cape Cod, and visiting restored Plymouth Plantation where they have full-time actors that live there just like the original colony and they talk with you like the original settlers.

In the research I've seen, they didn't mention "turkeys" at the 1621 meal or even use the exact phrase "thanksgiving" or maybe even call themselves Pilgrims (the word pilgrim came into common use 150+ years later). But they were certainly thankful believers, in the Puritan tradition subset of non-conformists or separatists (and their sympathizers and supporters) who felt compelled by conscience to not only leave the Church of England but to physically leave England to Holland, eventually some travelling to the new world.

Bradford used the term "pilgrim" from the biblical OT imagery "strangers and pilgrims" who had opportunity to return to their old country but instead longed for a better, heavenly country (Heb 11). He wrote:

*So they lefte [that] goodly & pleasante citie, which had been ther resting place, nere 12 years; but they knew they were pilgrimes, & looked not much on these things; but lift up their eyes to ye heavens, their dearest cuntrie, and quieted their spirits.*²

The Pilgrims could identify with the writer of this psalm more than some of us can; v. 54 speaks of a singing heart in his pilgrimage.

- The Pilgrims knew affliction (v. 50; nearly half didn't make it that first winter) but had hope in a sovereign God (v. 49)
- They knew persecution and derision from back home (v.51)
- They knew indignation against the wicked (v. 53) strong enough that they felt they could no longer live in that place
- They sought to keep God's law as purely as they could (v. 54-55) and found comfort in remembering their God and in their faith that God had remembered them (ex: providence illustrated in the provision of corn and other graces of God)

Our passage in Psalm 119 today begins with the writer referring to himself as "servant" of God. As one source says it: 'The motif of the faithful servant of God as a pilgrim for whom this world is not his final home is deeply rooted in the exil[e] narratives of Genesis (the calling of Abraham) and Exodus. It also finds reflection in numerous psalms, where the motif of the "way" or "path of righteousness" predominates ... psalms [120-134, right after Psalm 119] were likely sung by pilgrims on their way to Jerusalem for Passover and Yom Kippur, since the pilgrim journey to Jerusalem was always referred to as a "going-up." But the pilgrimage motif is also found elsewhere, permeating, e.g., Ps. 119, where the Word of God is said by the Psalmist to be a light to the pilgrim's path (v. 105) and his "statutes ... my song in the house of my pilgrimage" (v. 54). The Hebrew term for pilgrimage, *magur*, derives from *gur*, "to sojourn"; hence pilgrims are by definition "sojourners," a people en route ...

Peter addresses the early Christian community, "Dearly beloved, I beseech you as strangers and pilgrims, abstain from fleshly lusts, which war against the soul" (1 Pet. 2:11). The writer to the Hebrews describes those who were faithful to the first covenant as having seen the promises of God for a spiritual promised land "afar off, and were persuaded of them, and embraced them, and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth" (11:13), and enjoins those to whom he writes to take up the same pilgrim calling ... These concepts were quickly elaborated by the early Church ... The Epistle to Diognetus says of ... Christians that they reside in their own fatherlands, but as if they were non-citizens; they take part in all things as if they were citizens and suffer all things as if they were strangers. Every foreign country is [thus] a fatherland to them, and every fatherland a foreign country. ... They sojourn on earth, but they are citizens in heaven. (Diogn. 5:5, 9)³

It is this God-centered eternity-focused Bible-saturated perspective that helps us journey through affliction (v. 50) and gives us true hope and comfort and life, reviving or restoring our soul (v. 49-50)

John Bunyan's book *Pilgrim's Progress* has the subtitle *From this world to that which is to come*. He references today's passage when a visitor says to Christiana (after her husband Christian died): 'the bitter is before the sweet. Thou must through troubles, as did he that went before thee, enter this Celestial City. Wherefore I advise thee to do as did Christian thy husband [and he gave her a song and said] read therein to thyself and to thy children until you have got it by heart; for it is one of the songs that thou must sing while thou art in this house of thy pilgrimage, Psalm 119:54'

The path to heaven is not trouble-free, but there is great comfort and great thanksgiving the Word produces, even putting rejoicing songs in our heart. Our passage (v. 49-56) gives pilgrims like us **Three Comforting Realities to Remember in Affliction**

#1 God Remembers His Promises and His Servants (v. 49-50)

⁴⁹ **Remember** the word to Your servant, In which You have made me hope.

⁵⁰ This is my **comfort** in my affliction, That Your word has revived me.

REMEMBER – this is the first Hebrew word in vs. 49, 52, and 55, and is clearly an emphasis and theme of this passage.

Now if God knows everything, why does he pray for God to remember? Is there ever anything God doesn't remember?

What's the answer, church? Actually there are some things God doesn't remember, things the Bible says he "remembers no more":

Hebrews 8:12 (NASB95) ¹² "FOR I WILL BE MERCIFUL TO THEIR INIQUITIES, AND **I WILL REMEMBER THEIR SINS NO MORE.**"

Hebrews 10:16-18 (NASB95) ¹⁶ "THIS IS THE COVENANT THAT I WILL MAKE WITH THEM AFTER THOSE DAYS, SAYS THE LORD: I WILL PUT MY LAWS UPON THEIR HEART, AND ON THEIR MIND I WILL WRITE THEM," *He then says,* ¹⁷ "AND THEIR SINS AND THEIR LAWLESS DEEDS **I WILL REMEMBER NO MORE.**" ¹⁸ Now where there is forgiveness of these things, there is no longer *any* offering for sin.

It's been explained this way: 'When applied to the Lord, the word "remember" means "to pay attention to, to work on behalf of." Being omniscient, God cannot forget anything, but He can decide not to "remember it against us" (Isa. 43:25; Jer. 31:34; Heb. 8:12; 10:17). That is the negative side; the positive side is that He "remembers" to do us good and give us His blessing. He remembered Noah and delivered him (Gen. 8:1); He remembered Abraham and delivered Lot (Gen. 19:29); He remembered Rachel and Hannah and enabled them to conceive (Gen. 30:22; 1 Sam. 1:19). [God's] Remembering is not recalling, for God never forgets; it is relating to His people in a special way. The psalmist prayed that God would use the Word to work on his behalf. The writer had hope because of the promises God had given to him, and he prayed that those promises would be fulfilled.'⁴

Calling on God to remember is not based on our worthiness (that's why he uses the term "servant" in v. 49, a term of lowly unworthiness), it's based on the covenant relationship the LORD has committed Himself to, it's praying for the LORD to act in accord with his Word and His covenant, for His name sake, for His glory.

This is how Jeremiah prayed: "Do not despise *us*, **for Your own name's sake**; Do not disgrace the throne of Your glory; **Remember *and* do not annul Your covenant with us.**" (Jeremiah 14:21)

God said in Isaiah 43:25: "I, even I, am the one who wipes out your transgressions **for My own sake**, And **I will not remember your sins.**

So we pray, for Your sake, forget our sin, not us; don't remember my sin but do remember me.

Luke 23:39-43 (NASB95) ³⁹One of the criminals who were hanged *there* was hurling abuse at Him, saying, "Are You not the Christ? Save Yourself and us!" ⁴⁰But the other answered, and rebuking him said, "Do you not even fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation?" ⁴¹"And we indeed *are suffering* justly, for we are receiving what we deserve for our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong." ⁴²And he was saying, "Jesus, **remember me [personal prayer, remember *ME!*]**when You come in Your kingdom!" ⁴³And He said to him, "Truly I say to you, today **you shall be with Me in Paradise.**"

We know God is gracious but *remember* means *show grace to me*. God is always faithful, but we're not; so we pray "God remember us according to Your mercy and Word, not by our merit or works"

To pray *Remember Your Word* is like the church father Augustine said of his mother, "bringing before God his own hand-writing."

The 2nd half of the verse shows that he was expecting God's fulfillment of His covenant commitments and promises. Literally v. 49b is "upon which (promise) You have caused me to hope."

"Hope" as we saw last week is the expectation or trust that gives us confidence of what God *will do* in the future, because He said so. We don't know when or how, but future-oriented hope knows He will.

Look again at v. 49 "Remember your word unto your SERVANT." Verse 49 could have said "remember your word *unto me*" but he uses this humble word "servant," a term that can even refer to a lowly bondservant or slave. This verse is speaking of the Word of the divine King, which He has given to His subject, His slave.

When biblical prayers refer to ourselves as "servants" it helps us remember who we are, and who God is. It helps us remember our relationship before God, and to acknowledge before God a bond-servant's utter need and dependence on his loving Lord and Master. This is a good habit to refer to ourselves as "Your servant" when we pray. A servant doesn't deserve God's graciousness, so He pleads with God to remember His gracious Word, what He had promised to do for even undeserving servants like us.

It also recognizes the nature of our Master. He does not call us to do what He will not provide us with what we need to complete the task. He is not a cruel taskmaster like Pharaoh who commands we make bricks, but gives us no straw. What our LORD expects, He also enables. His grace is sufficient for us, His power and strength is available for us, His Word provides abundant resources, and His Holy Spirit applies them, as we yield our life to Jesus as Master.

Charles Spurgeon summarized well the heart behind this prayer:

‘Lord, it is your grace that has made me thy servant. I was once an outcast. I was once your enemy. Lord, I did not come to you, but you didst come to me. I did not seek employment at your hands; I was too wicked for that, but you didst seek me. It was your grace that made me your servant.

Now, Lord, have you brought me to be your servant to put me to shame? You hast done the greater thing for me; will you not do the less? To take me into your service was great condescension on your part; will you not grant me my rations? ... Will you not be gracious to me?’ This is good pleading, is it not?’⁵

He adds in his *Treasury of David* notes: ‘This verse is the prayer of love fearing to be forgotten, of humility conscious of insignificance and anxious not to be overlooked, of trembling lest the evil of its sin should overshadow the promise, of a desire longing for the blessing, and of holy confidence which feels that that is wanted is comprehended in the word. Let but the Lord remember his promise, and the promised act is as good as done.’⁶

Look now at v. 50. Not only does he have hope, but he says God’s life-giving reviving Word has *comforted* him even in affliction.

A related verb is used in the familiar 23rd Psalm “your rod and your staff, they **comfort** me.” In other words, they *encourage me*. The image is the shepherd helping the sheep to walk through a deep dark wadi where there are wild animals ready to ambush the flock, but the shepherd is with the sheep, which comforts them, even if the shepherd has to poke or prod or use pain to keep in line.

This hope and comfort is one of the reasons God gave His Word:

Romans 15:4-5 (NKJV) ⁴For whatever things were written before were written **for our learning, that we through the patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope** [NASB “**encouragement of the Scriptures**”]. ⁵ Now may the God of patience and **comfort** grant you to be like-minded ...

It’s the Bible alone that give true comfort, lasting comfort, grief-conquering comfort, peace-surpassing-understanding kind of comfort. Jesus said believers who mourn will be comforted (Matthew 5:5).

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 (NASB95) ¹³ But we do not want you to be uninformed, brethren, about those who are asleep, **so that you will not grieve as do the rest who have no hope.** ¹⁴ For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus. ¹⁵ For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. ¹⁶ For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of *the* archangel and with the trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. ¹⁷ Then we who are alive and remain will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we shall always be with the Lord. ¹⁸ Therefore **comfort one another with these words.**

There's a second Comforting Reality to Remember in Affliction:
#2 We Must Remember God's Dealings in the Past (v. 51-53)

⁵¹ The arrogant utterly deride me, *Yet* I do not turn aside from Your law.

⁵² I have **remembered** Your ordinances from of old, O LORD, And **comfort** myself. ⁵³ Burning indignation has seized me because of the wicked, Who forsake Your law.

God remembers, but we must remember as well. He remembers His word, and so must we. Again we see God's sovereignty and man's responsibility interweaving throughout this psalm:

- dependence on God doesn't change our duty before God
- it's not enough for God to remember His Word (v. 49), we must remember God's Word to receive full comfort (v. 52)
- God's remembering of us enables us to remember God
- He earlier prayed for God to incline his heart (v. 36, lit. *turn*) and now at the end of v. 51 he says he does not *turn* (same word) from God's law
- In v. 49, God's comforting Him enables him to comfort himself or to find comfort at the end of v. 52
- The believer's loyalty and love that we saw in last week's section is only possible because verse 41 prayed for God's loyal lovingkindness to come to him first.

The word "arrogant" in v. 51 appears 14x in all the 66 books of the OT, and almost half of all its occurrences are in this one chapter. These guys greatly derided him as the v. 51 says, a word that is usually translated as "scoff" or "scoffer", like in Proverbs 3:34:

Though He **scoffs** at the scoffers, Yet He gives grace to the **afflicted**.

When v. 51 says the psalmist doesn't turn aside, he's not talking about perfection, he's talking about the path pattern of his life. This turning aside can refer to apostasy (like those referred to in v. 53 "who forsake your law"). The unrestrained opposition he receives in the first half of verse 51 is met by his unwavering loyalty in the second half of the verse. He will not deviate or decline one inch from God's law no matter the peer pressure or persecution.

These "proud" are those who refuse to submit to God's Word. They presume to be autonomous, independent of such authority or need. Thus they are defined in verse 21 as those who "stray from Your commandments." The comfort in verse 52 is not found in focusing on the arrogant around him, but in remembering what God has done and written. This repeats the truth of v. 50 that comfort is found in God's Word. *Where is your comfort? How do you try and find comfort?*

I have to quote Spurgeon once more: 'Why do we look anywhere else for [comfort in trouble] but to God's Word? Oh, Brothers and Sisters, I am ashamed to have to say it, but we go to our neighbors, or relatives [or friends] and we cry, "Have pity upon me, have pity upon me, O my friends!" and it ends with our crying ... when the sky is dark and lowering, experience is apt to minister fresh distress! If we were to go at once to God's Word and search it till we found a promise suitable to our case, we should find relief far sooner. All cisterns dry up—only the fountain remains. Next time you are troubled, reach down to the Bible. Say to your soul, "Soul, sit still and hear what God the Lord will speak, for He will speak peace unto His people." ... When you find such a promise, use it at once.'

John Bunyan beautifully pictures a pilgrim laid by the heels in Giant Despair's castle and there beaten with a crab tree [club] till one morning he puts his hand into his [pocket] and cries to his brother, Christian, "What a fool have I been to lie rotting in this ... dungeon, when all this time I have a key in my [pocket] which will open every door in Doubting Castle!" ... the gates of despair shall be opened with that key called Promise, if a man does but know how to hold it firmly and turn it wisely till the bolt flies back.

"This is my comfort in my affliction," says the Psalmist—God's own Word. Dear Friends, fly to this comfort with speed in every time of trouble—get to be familiar with God's Word so that you may do so ... you always take a checkbook with you. So carry precious promises with you, that you may plead the Word of God which suits your case ... it is very handy to know where to lay your hands upon suitable Words of cheer when necessity arises... The comfort of the Christian is the Word of God⁷

Verse 52 gives him comfort when he remembers God's judgments and dealings with sin and sinners in the past, in ancient times, as recorded in God's Word. It's not a coincidence that this verse is sandwiched between 2 verses describing the actions and attitudes of the arrogant and wicked. God will deal with the wicked. In verse 53, he can't restrain his reaction against the wicked rebels: Burning indignation has seized me because of the wicked, Who forsake Your law

As our culture goes deeper in its abandonment of God's Word, there should be times we feel this way – rather than being desensitized (which happens the more you watch wickedness on TV or expose yourself to those who speak it) - we should be disgusted and appalled at the bold sins not only of the pagans, but of even professing believers. The world shouldn't mould us to its shape, we should be revolted and fearful of its sinful shaping influence of our hearts (that are like play-do) – whatever holds us is what molds us ...

In verse 53 of our text, literally he says "raging heat grasps me." The expression has been called an "inflamed zeal" or "hot indignation" or "passionate fury" or "burning anger." One writer described this verse as "violent indignation," "a storm overtaking one," "a burning horror ... burning wind," "most horrid mental distress" ... All these explanations of the Word imply great trouble of mind, a vehement commotion, causing [one] to tremble. Such deep agitation and distress was caused by the peril of those forsaking God's law. [He] was deeply moved by the dreadful misery and fate of those who turn from God and His Word. Does horror fill our heart as we try to imagine the terrible condition of those who die lost for evermore? ... David Brainerd, who literally wore himself out warning the wicked to flee from the wrath to come, was greatly moved by this verse,⁸ and wrote in his *Journal*:

To his brother Israel, at college: written in the time of his extreme illness in Boston, a few months before his death [dated June 30, 1747]

My dear Brother ... what infinite importance is it, that we be prepared for eternity! I have been just a dying now for more than a week; and all around me have thought me so ... oh, what anguish is raised in my mind, to think of an eternity for those who are Christless, for those who are mistaken, and who bring their false hopes to the grave with them! The sight was so dreadful I could by no means bear it: my thoughts recoiled, and I said, (under a more affecting sense than ever before,) "Who can dwell with everlasting burnings?" Oh, methought, could I now see my friends, that I might warn them to see to it, that they lay their foundation for eternity sure.

And you, my dear brother, I have been particularly concerned for; and have wondered I so much neglected conversing with you about your spiritual state at our last meeting. Oh, my brother, let me then beseech you now to examine, whether you are indeed a new creature? whether you have ever acted above self? whether the glory of God has ever been the sweetest and highest concern with you? whether you have ever been reconciled to all the perfections of God? in a word, whether God has been your portion, and a holy conformity to him your chief delight? If you cannot answer positively, consider seriously the frequent breathings of your soul: but do not however put yourself off with a slight answer. If you have reason to think you are graceless, oh give yourself and the throne of grace no rest, till God arise and save. But if the case should be otherwise [if you truly are already a new creature in Christ], bless God for his grace, and press after holiness ... Oh, my dear brother, flee fleshly lusts, and the enchanting amusements, as well as corrupt doctrine, of the present day; and strive to live to God. Take this as the last line from Your affectionate dying brother, David Brainerd.⁹

The Apostle Paul certainly had similar concern for his brothers:

Romans 9:1-3 (NASB95) ¹I am telling the truth in Christ, I am not lying, my conscience testifies with me in the Holy Spirit, ² that **I have great sorrow and unceasing grief in my heart ...** for the sake of my brethren

It was “great heaviness” (KJV), “unceasing anguish” (ESV, NIV). When Jesus looked on unrepentant wicked Jerusalem in Luke 19, it says He wept. God says in Ezekiel He takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked. Scripture says God has not decreed to save all, but it also shows God’s genuine grief over sin and our Lord’s weeping for the lost.

Albert Barnes summed up Psalm 119:53 this way: ‘I see them rebelling against God. I see them exposed to his wrath. I see the grave just before them, and the awful scenes of judgment near. I see them about to be cast off, and to sink to endless woe, and my soul is transfixed with horror. The contemplation overwhelms me with uncontrollable anguish. Can such things be? Can people be thus in danger? And can they be calm and composed, when so near such awful horrors? No man can look on the world of despair without horror; no one can truly realize that his fellow-men are exposed to the horrors of [the lake of fire] without having his soul filled with anguish. Strange that all people do not feel thus — that impenitent people can walk along on the verge of the grave and of hell “without” horror — that pious people, good people, praying people, can look upon their friends in that condition without having their souls filled with unutterable anguish’¹⁰

Many of us will have more opportunities over the Thanksgiving week and Christmas holidays to share and interact about our faith and what we believe, and I pray that you and I will be faithful to speak God’s truth as we have occasion, and that we would not chicken out because we’re more fearful for our ease than for the eternal state of the souls of the lost.

There’s a third and final reality

#3 We Must Remember and Obey God Always (v. 54-56)

Point #2 was remember what God has done, but these final verses focus on remembering what *we must do*, in obeying and praying.

⁵⁴ Your statutes are my songs In the house of my pilgrimage.

⁵⁵ O LORD, I **remember** Your name in the night, And keep Your law.

⁵⁶ This has become mine, That I observe Your precepts.

NIV: “This has been my *practice*: I obey your precepts”

ESV: “This *blessing* has fallen to me, that I have kept your precepts”

The “this” probably refers to the practices of all 3 verses, and debatably may even refer to the whole section (i.e., “this *comfort, remembrance,*” etc.). What’s clear is the blessings spoken of in our passage have direct relationship with obeying, following the Word. The faithful pilgrim in verse 54 is even singing God’s truth as He follows it, a word often used of songs of rejoicing or thanksgiving.

In commemorating the early Christian pilgrims of North America, the initial Thanksgiving Proclamations of our Continental Congress had statements including Psalm 119 truths like gratitude, comfort, rejoicing, remembrance, hope, affliction, humility, recognizing our unworthiness as servants, and our need for grace.

US Congress, Nov. 1, 1777 (first government thanksgiving proclamation):

‘FORASMUCH as it is the indispensable Duty of all Men to adore the superintending Providence of Almighty God; to acknowledge with Gratitude their Obligation to him for Benefits received, and to implore such farther Blessings as they stand in Need of ... It is therefore recommended to the legislative or executive Powers of these UNITED STATES to set apart THURSDAY ... for SOLEMN THANKSGIVING and PRAISE: That at one Time and with one Voice, the good People may express the grateful Feelings of their Hearts, and consecrate themselves ... together with their sincere Acknowledgments and Offerings, they may join the penitent Confession of their manifold Sins, whereby they had forfeited every Favor; and their humble and earnest Supplication that it may please GOD through the Merits of JESUS CHRIST, mercifully to forgive and **blot them out of Remembrance**’

Sound like a good idea for today’s governments and nations?

Our government in 1780 called Americans to observe ‘a day of public thanksgiving and prayer; that all the people may assemble on that day to celebrate the praises of [our benevolent Lord]; to confess our unworthiness of the least of his favors, and to offer our fervent supplications to the God of all grace; that it may please him to pardon our heinous transgressions and incline our hearts for the future to keep all his laws [cf. Ps 119:36] ... to **comfort** and relieve our brethren who are any wise **afflicted** or distressed; to ... build up his churches in their most holy faith and to cause the knowledge of Christianity to spread over all the earth.’¹¹

This should be the prayerful thankful singing heart of all true pilgrims, and we don’t need our government or president to give us a proclamation to do so, this text proclaims it for all of our life. Whatever our “house” is in verse 54, or as one translation says “wherever I lodge” -- we sing of our true home, heaven, in our transitory sojourning here on earth. Earlier in this psalm he said I’m a stranger on the earth – believers are traveling through a world that is out of tune with the “world” of God’s truth. Jesus said to His disciples “You are not of this world.”

We should not feel comfortably at home with worldliness, because we're not residents here, "we're just a passing through" and our passport says we're on a temporary VISA – our citizenship is in heaven. The fact that this man doesn't fit in is not a discouragement that causes him to *sigh*, this fact causes him to *sing* in v. 54. He sings along the journey – there's something about singing when you're traveling.

I said at the beginning of this message, it is this God-centered eternity-focused Bible-saturated perspective that helps us journey through affliction. Verse 55 says remembering God sustained Him in the night, remembering His name (i.e., God's character).

There's a great illustration of someone who applied this in the NT:

Acts 16:23-25 (NASB95) ²³ When they had struck them with many blows, they threw them into prison, commanding the jailer to guard them securely; ²⁴ and he, having received such a command, threw them into the inner prison and fastened their feet in the stocks. ²⁵ But about **midnight** Paul and Silas **were praying and singing hymns of praise to God**, and the prisoners were listening to them;

That's the type of witness that caused the jailer to cry out to them later after the earthquake "What must I do to be saved?" The answer: "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ" Affliction is not unique to Christians – what is unique to Christians is the joyful hope within us, and that we can say to anyone at any time the reason for the hope that is within us (v. 49). If a coworker or friend or someone asks us how we can hold up in our difficulty, our answer should be the answer of this passage (v. 50): *This is my comfort in my difficulty, God's Word gives me life.*

And it gives us the ability to sing and give thanks and declare our witness for Christ in any affliction and difficulty. I want to close with a great modern example of this that I read in *VOM* newsletter this week (their June 2008 issue):

'the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia [FARC is] a self-proclaimed revolutionary guerrilla organization whose philosophies are based on Marxist-Leninism. The FARC have persecuted and killed many Christians throughout their 40-year reign of terror ... The first time Ismael was ordered to kill Christians, he sent 14 of his men. He told them to leave a couple of the evangelical believers alive so they could collect a ransom.

When the men arrived to kill the Christians, the Christians told the guerrillas about Jesus. They told them they were being tricked and lied to, but Jesus would not lie to them. He would be their hope.

Of the 14 men [he] sent to kill the Christians, 14 converted to Christianity. ... Ismael personally took another group of men to execute the Christians. He knew they were having a special event and patiently waited for them all to arrive. His plan was to kill the pastors first and then kill every Christian at the meeting.

"I heard the music coming from the church [they were singing God's truth like Psalm 119, and were singing under persecution like Paul and Silas in Acts 16 and when one of them saw the guerrilla soldiers coming to the meeting] this man approached me and said I had to give my heart to God. He told me God had sent him to tell me Jesus loved me. He told me to kneel down so he could pray for me. It was such a great offense. I would not kneel for my own mother. But I became very weak. I dropped my gun to the floor and fell on my knees while he prayed. His hands felt like fire on my head."

No Christians were killed by Ismael's men that day ... But Ismael's heart remained hard as he [later resumed and] continued his campaign of hatred and violence. During one attack, Ismael stopped a bus ... All the passengers were ordered outside the bus [and] were told to kneel. The guerrillas tied the hands of their victims behind their backs.

One young man was pleading for his life. Another was singing a song to God. The man singing was Alex. Alex knew they were going to shoot all of [them] so he began to sing to God [because he thought] "this is how a Christian should meet God – with a song." [an incredible picture of Ps 119:54, singing God's truth to the end of his journey sojourning as a temporary pilgrim on this planet!]

All 26 passengers were shot. Alex was shot in the face. Ismael then ordered his men to make sure all ... were dead. He came up to Alex's body as it lay limp on the ground and struck his neck with a machete ... It is a miracle he survived.

Ismael was eventually arrested and sent to Bella Vista prison [where he experienced Christians preaching the gospel and extending love to those guerrillas who hated and killed Christians. God graciously saved and changed Ismael, and he became a follower of Christ and willing to die for the Lord who died for him, and he now sang like the those he martyred. As he] continued his study of the Bible, a volunteer at the prison [named Alex], and they became friends. Neither knew their paths had crossed years before.

"Over time, I heard what had happened to Alex and realized I was the one who did this to him [Alex was the only survivor of the massacre, losing one eye and most of his sight in the other eye, barely surviving. Ismael said] I became very afraid. I didn't know how to tell him. And I didn't know what he would do. I thought he would hate me. Others told me he would kill me." One day as the two were talking, Ismael tearfully revealed to Alex he was the one who had hurt him. He had ordered the attack on the bus. He had personally struck Alex with his machete.

"Could you ever forgive me?" Ismael, with a bowed head, asked his friend. It is difficult to imagine the scene that played out in Bella Vista prison between a terrorist and his victim. It is even more difficult to imagine Alex's response to the event.

"I felt happy ... and held no hard feelings. My greatest joy was that I could teach him, and I want to teach by example. I felt, wow; I can die happy. 'Ismael loves the Lord!'"

Ismael recently spoke on national TV in Colombia asking his former comrades-in-arms to stop kidnapping and killing people. [This terrorist "freedom fighter"] found true freedom. A former enemy of the gospel is now a witness for Christ.¹²

That's the transforming power of the Word of God that Psalm 119 celebrates. In any affliction or difficulty, even persecution or prison or the point of a gun, believers can give thanks and sing like this psalmist, or Paul or Silas, or Alex and Ismael, or you and me.

¹ <http://www.pilgrimhall.org/1stthnks.htm>

² http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pilgrims#History_of_the_name_Pilgrims

³ Jeffrey, D. L. "Exile and Pilgrimage," in *A Dictionary of Biblical Tradition in English Literature*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans, 1992.

⁴ Wiersbe, W. W. (2004). *Be exultant* (1st ed.) (115). Colorado Springs, Colo.: Cook Communications Ministries.

⁵ Spurgeon, "Pleading Prayer," *Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, Vol. 33, #1969, (old English pronouns updated).

⁶ *Treasury of David*, 3:240.

⁷ "My Comfort in Affliction," <http://www.spurgeongems.org/vols31-33/chs1872.pdf>

⁸ Herber Lockyer, *A Devotional Commentary on the Psalms*, 555.

⁹ "The Life and Diary of David Brainerd," in *Works of Jonathan Edwards*, 2:438.

¹⁰ Albert Barnes, *Psalms*, Baker Books, Grand Rapids, Mich.: 3:193.

¹¹ <http://www.pilgrimhall.org/ThanxProc.htm>

¹² *The Voice of the Martyrs*, June 2008 newsletter. Alex's story is available on DVD as part of their 2008 Church Resource Kit, available to order at: http://etools.781net.com/a/vomso/bg_vomso_wdbm_350.html