



SPEAKING TRUTH IN LOVE

C O U N S E L I N C O M M U N I T Y

DAVID POWLISON

SPEAKING TRUTH IN LOVE:
COUNSEL IN COMMUNITY

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PREFACE
GOOD INTENTIONS

We pray for you always, that our God will . . . fulfill every desire for goodness and the work of faith with power.
(2 Thess. 1:11)

It's hard enough to think right, but it's harder to live right. This is a book on how we are to live together. What ought to be the quality and dynamic of our relationships with each other? What is right and true, good and loving, lovely and desirable? We want that.

This book is also about how we *can* live. Of course our achievements will be imperfect, halting, erratic. But we can do this to some measure by the grace of God. We can go forward in this direction and grow in these ways. Any progress at all is solid joy, lasting treasure, radiant wisdom. We want that.

This book is also about how we *will* live. When all that we can now barely imagine becomes reality, we will fully savor what we have already tasted. No eye has seen, no ear has heard, and no heart has imagined what God has prepared for those who love him – yet he lets us glimpse, overhear, and catch a sense of things. We want that.

This book is about how we treat each other, how we work together, how we help each other. It's about constructive relationships: how we counsel and encourage one another. It's about what church really is: how we all grow up together. Paul's request early in 2 Thessalonians recognizes that even our *desire*

for what's right counts. It's better to want what's right than to want what's wrong, or not to know what's right, or not to care. We may fall short of turning intention into action, but intentions matter. Even our "willing of his good pleasure," wanting what is right, is something God works in us. In effect, we can ask, "Our Father, please make our good intentions actually happen, for your sake."

This is a book of good intentions. A James Ward song puts it this way: "Faith takes a vision, turns a dream into a mission." This book presents vision seeking realization in mission. I will describe a *direction* and trace out a few steps in that direction. Direction matters. In effect, we can ask, "Lord, for your name's sake, please make the work that faith imagines a reality."

COUNSEL AND COUNSELING

Speaking Truth in Love is the second in a series. It builds upon *Seeing with New Eyes*.¹ That previous book was an attempt to think right. I sought to bring Scripture to life and to reinterpret common life struggles through God's gaze. It was about "counsel," the content of truth. This second book is about "counseling," the process of love. Part I will wrestle out how to speak the truth in love in order to do counseling ministry well. Part II will hammer out ways to shape and reshape communities of faith in order to do church well. In other words, this second book describes living right. We will glimpse essential dynamics of relationship and sketch the shape of communities that pursue such relationships.

It's hard to *do counseling ministry well*. How do we converse with others to make the right kind of difference? How do we understand the problems of life so that we can offer real help? We all know that wise, mutual, life-changing counseling means that "speaking the truth in love, we . . . grow up . . . [speak] only such a word as is good for edification according to the need of the moment, so that it will give grace to those who hear . . . encourage one another day after day" (as Ephesians 4 and Hebrews 3 put it). But *how* do we do something so easy to say and so hard to do? A counseling model designs relationships

and methods to facilitate the change process; it is counseling as well as counsel.

It's hard to *do church well*. Church so easily becomes . . . well, becomes "church" (you fill in whatever ruts are most familiar). But if Jesus is full of grace and truth, it must be possible to form communities more full of grace and truth. The flourishing of wise, mutual, life-changing counseling is one proof that everything else about church is accomplishing what it's supposed to. Every counseling model entails a "delivery system," a social structure. Ideas and practices inhabit *institutions*. The most magnificent institutional structure imaginable is a community living out how Ephesians 4 weds pastoral leadership with every-member mutuality.

This book is not an exposition of Ephesians 4 – or, more exactly, of the words we now identify as Ephesians 3:14 to 5:2. But that is the thought unit that most shapes these pages. Grab a handful of verses in either direction from Ephesians 4 – we might call it "Ephesians 4+" – and you capture to perfection a half dozen questions that fill libraries with books. These questions ponder the dance between God's immediate power and our significant choices, between our dependent faith and our active love, between individual experience and the dynamics of the social group, between leadership and mutuality within the social group, between the relationally destructive dynamics of sin and the constructive dynamics of gracious love, between remnant sin and emergent love. These are six perennially perplexing questions. Paul does not so much "answer" them as illustrate how the answers work out in reality. These words from Christ via his messenger will occasionally be visible, but they will always provide the living, invisible structure that informs this book. We might say that Ephesians 4+ forms the neuro-electrical grid, cardiovascular network, and musculo-skeletal system for everything in the pages that follow. In that spectacular revelation, we witness the essential elements of a church functioning as a community characterized by the dynamics of fruitful mutual counseling.

Or we might put it the other way. *Speaking Truth in Love* seeks to recapture how the dynamics of fruitful mutual counseling characterize a church that functions as a community.

PART I SPEAKING TRUTH IN LOVE

I suppose that all of us who try to help people find ourselves marveling at how mere words, the simplest actions, and the most subtle interpersonal attitudes can have such profound effects on others. Human beings affect each other – for good or ill. If we want to help, not harm, we must consider what affects others for good.

All of us have experienced how an insightful, humane voice can work for good in our lives. (And certainly all of us have experienced how false or callous voices have harmful effects.) It is a fine thing when another human being takes you seriously. Someone wants to know how you are really doing, listens to what you say, and cares enough to respond constructively, saying what is both true and helpful. By word and deed in relationship, one person truly helps another.

LOVE IN ACTION

Wise counseling embodies the human and humane impact of relevant truth. It gives a new perspective and opens up new choices. It both sustains and redirects. For decades, counselors of all stripes have debated the question: Is counseling essentially a matter of *technique* or is it essentially an *art*? Of course, there are elements both of craftsmanship and artistry, but neither is the core. Wise counseling is essentially a way of loving another person well. It is a way of speaking what is true and constructive into *this* person's life right now. Good counseling

is essentially wise love in action. It is the image of God made flesh among us, full of grace and truth. Questions of love and truth are foundational and primary for understanding how to counsel. Questions of methodology and artistry are significant but secondary.

Wise love is often both skillful and creative, but it cannot be reduced to a skill set or to creative imagination. I have seen wrecked lives changed simply because a friend cared and was willing to speak honestly like this: "I love and respect you as a person, and I want what is good for you. But you are destroying yourself with what you believe and how you are living." Those were precisely the words that changed *my* life. The cruise missile of wise love blew apart the bunker of self-will in which I lived. My friend's words were not a product of technique. They were artless. But they had four things going for them. They were true, loving, personal, and appropriate.

The living God himself brought my friend's words home with power. He was right. Out of the collapse of core willfulness, I could hear for the first time the voice of another, even greater friend: "I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh" (Ezek. 36:26). This Wonderful Counselor's approach is best described as true, loving, personal, appropriate – rather than by categories describing technique, skill set, methodology, or imaginative intuition. Speaking the truth in love comes first. And those words of the Life-giver, the merciful Shepherd, my Father, were precisely the words that changed my life forever.

COUNSELING: PURPOSE, PERSON AND PROCESS

Part I of this book focuses on the counseling conversation between two (or more) people. We will explore several elements that make such conversations fruitful. Think of these chapters as a series of core samples, not a complete excavation of the construction site. I'm not trying to present a model but to give a feel for what it looks like, thinks like, and talks like to counsel

biblically. Each chapter is a “for instance,” not one segment of a textbook.¹

But there is a logic to the progression of these nine chapters. The first three concentrate on what you bring to the table as you enter into counseling relationships. Do you know where you are going? What you are aiming for and why? Who you are and your role? The later chapters portray the actual questioning, and listening, and responding. What are you listening for? What do you say? What makes a substantial difference in another person’s life?

I think of Chapter 1 as the “Surprise!” in this book. “Suffering and Psalm 119” turns upside down how we think about “counseling.” It is my favorite chapter. By instinct, habit, and enculturation, all of us tend to think of counseling as a human-with-human interaction. But in fact a human-with-Savior interaction must come first. When I as a counselor don’t get that straight, I inevitably offer others some sort of saviorette. If my counseling does not help others rely upon Another (upon whom I also rely), I will inevitably teach them to rely on themselves – or on me, or other friends, or medications, or techniques, or pabulum “truths” (that are in fact empty or even fictional). This cornerstone chapter explores Psalm 119: “If your law had not been my delight, then I would have perished in my affliction” (v. 92).

Chapter 2, “The Facts of Life,” explores our resistance to knowing ourselves. Wise counseling helps people face themselves honestly. It helps them look in the only true mirror: What does God see in me? It helps people look suffering in the eye: What is the scene in which God has placed me, and how am I going to respond? We humans fiercely resist seeing ourselves as God sees us. The breaking of our resistance to that light opens the door to God’s goodness, intimacy, and grace.

Chapter 3, “Hearing the Music of the Gospel,” brings in a third essential ingredient. People who relate their lives to God and who look evils in the eye need something: grace. You can’t do life right without the mercies of God in Christ. Wise counseling knows that and brings it. We don’t just need a perspective or a strategy. We need a Savior, right here, right now.

The first three chapters tackle the largest matters concerning what you bring to the table in any counseling conversation. Chapter 4 explores the tiniest matters. “How Healthy is Your Preparation?” looks at the simple things you do to prepare to talk to another human being. Your responses to those larger issues are revealed in these little corners of life.

From your foundation, the ten thousand particulars of wise counseling method are built. Chapter 5 moves into the actual human-with-human interaction. “What Questions Do You Ask?” uncovers the deeper questions that must thread through the swarms of particular questions and comments by which you get to know another person. The most commonplace questions – “What happened?” “How do you feel about that?” “What is your problem?” “What do you think would make a difference?” – are altered when we align our agenda with the way that Jesus Christ probes people.

Chapter 6, “Think Globally, Act Locally,” presents a case study in how to use Scripture within a counseling conversation. By necessity, to be human means that we do not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God. Wise counseling must be biblical counseling. Counseling that offers no word from God will parch, starve, mislead, and ultimately kill the very people it tries hard to help. But how does counseling present and work with Scripture?

“Illustrative Counseling” (Chapter 7) provides one small illustration of how “speaking the truth in love” gets up close and personal. Biblical counseling is not the mere citation and recitation of Bible verses (any more than biblical preaching is). Truth always adapts, comes down to earth, wears the clothes of this person’s life experience. Listen well to people, and you will find stories and metaphors that will help you to speak well into their lives.

Chapter 8 takes up the problem of how to talk with people who talk-talk-talk-talk-talk. Have you ever tried to converse with someone who talks at you? Such monologues make for some of the most maddening counseling imaginable. “Talk Incessantly? Listen Intently!” works on how to turn monologues into dialogue.

Chapter 9 takes on a problem common in contemporary western cultures. You will counsel people who have already been listening hard to other counselors. Those counselors have persuasively misinterpreted life and earnestly offered saviorettes. “How Do You Help a ‘Psychologized’ Counselee?” considers a woman who needs to radically reframe the way she understands herself, her sufferings, her motives, and her God.

I SUFFERING AND PSALM 119

I would have perished in my affliction if your words had not been my delight.

When you hear the words “Psalm 119,” what are your first associations?

I suspect that your heart does *not* immediately come up with the following: “Psalm 119 is where I go to learn how to open my heart about what matters, to the person I most trust. I affirm what I most deeply love. I express pure delight. I lay my sufferings and uncertainties on the table. I cry out in need and shout for joy. I hear how to be forthright without self-righteousness. I hear how to be weak without self-pity. I learn how true honesty talks with God: fresh, personal, and direct; never formulaic, abstract, or vague. I hear firsthand how Truth and honesty meet and talk it over. This Truth is never denatured, rigid, or inhuman. This honesty never whines, boasts, rages, or gets defensive. I leave the conversation nourished by the sweetest hope imaginable. I hear how to give full expression to what it means to be human, in honest relationship with the Person who made humanness in his image.”

Such a response reflects that Truth has grappled with everything you think, feel, do, experience, and need, changing the way you process life. And *you* have grappled with Truth. Imagine, now you can say what you’re really thinking and feeling, because insane self-centeredness has been washed away! Such honesty is what Psalm 119 intends to work in you. It is about life’s painful realities,

the gifts of God, and how those two meet to find life's highest delight.

OTHER REACTIONS

But most people's immediate reaction to Psalm 119 is this: *It's long*. If you're reading through the Bible, you take a deep breath before you trudge through it. It's the same length as the books of Ruth, James, and Philippians. Reading Psalm 119 is too often like watching scenery along an interstate highway. You glimpse lots of things, but you mostly remember the long drive.

Here's a second reaction: *It's repetitive and general*. The verses seem to say the same thing over and over, with few details. In contrast, Ruth tells a moving story. James sparkles with practical application and metaphor. Philippians links wonders about Christ with details of Paul's experience, and then with direct implications for how you and I live. But Psalm 119 seems to drone on in generalities.

Here's another common reaction: *The parts seem unconnected*. There is no story line or logical progression. Ruth's surprise loyalty to the Lord connects her to a mother-in-law, to a village, to a new husband, to her great-grandson, to the Savior of the world. But Psalm 119 seems like a random collection of disconnected bits.

Or perhaps this Bible fact is one of your associations: *Psalm 119 is not random; it's a tightly structured acrostic*. Twenty-two sections, eight lines each, every line beginning with the same letter, proceeding through the letters of the Hebrew alphabet: *aleph, beth, gimel . . . tav*. The A-to-Z no doubt helped the memory of Hebrew speakers. But it has little relevance for us who read in English, where the alphabetic arrangement gets lost in translation. To us, it is little more than a curiosity.

This association is probably on everyone's list: *It's about God's Word*. Scripture discusses Scripture in almost every verse. It is a classic text on the importance of Bible fidelity, knowledge, reading, study, and memorization.

One common negative reaction is that *many people feel burdened by it*. The seemingly relentless read-your-Bible-memorize-

Scripture emphasis can come across as moralistic. Your relationship with the Lord seems to hinge on the dutiful performance of “quiet time,” but somehow you never get it right. Unlike the warm, intimate promises of favorite psalms like 23, 103, 121, and 139, this psalm can seem biblicistic – that is, it has a reputation for substituting devotion to the Bible for devotion to God. This is a bad rap, but it reflects how Psalm 119 is often misread, mistaught, and misused.

More positively, *perhaps you think of a beloved verse or two*. Maybe verse 11 is on your list of memorable Scripture: “I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you.” Maybe verse 18 shapes your prayers: “Open my eyes, LORD, that I might behold wondrous things out of your law.” Maybe verse 67 summarizes the good that came out of suffering: “Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I keep your word.” Or verse 105 might be a song in your heart: “Thy word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path.”

Each of these associations is plausible. But most don’t lead to the candid conversation described earlier. Psalm 119 itself does lead in that direction. Let’s see how it gets there so that we can follow along.

THE HEART OF THE PSALM

Let’s begin with a question: “What words are most frequently repeated in Psalm 119?” The answer that usually comes to mind? “It’s about the Word of God. Almost every verse contains a word describing what’s written in the Bible: *word, law, commandment, precept, testimony, statute, judgment.*”

But when you look more closely, the words describing Scripture run a distant second. Far and away the most common words are first and second person singular pronouns: *I, me, my, mine, and you, your, yours.*¹ Psalm 119 is the most extensive I-to-you conversation in the Bible. Only the first three verses talk *about* people-in-general, *about* God, and *about* the Word, stating propositions and principles in the third person: “Blessed are *those* who observe *his* testimonies, who seek *him* with all *their* heart.” The fourth verse begins to personalize things: we stand

accountable to *you*. After that, for the next 172 verses, *I, your servant, talk to you, LORD, who speaks and acts, whom I need and love.*²

In other words, Psalm 119 is personal prayer. It's talking to, not teaching about. We hear what a man says out loud in God's presence: his joyous pleasure, vocal need, open adoration, blunt requests, candid assertions, deep struggles, fiercely good intentions. The various words for the Word appear once in each verse, but I-you words appear about four times per verse. That's a 4:1 ratio and emphasis.

So Psalm 119 is actually not about the topic of getting Scripture into your life. Instead, it is the honest words that erupt when what God says gets into you. It's not an exhortation to Bible study; it's an outcry of faith.

This makes a world of difference in how you relate to Psalm 119. A topic is abstract, informing the intellect to influence the will. It can be interesting, informative, and even persuasive. But Psalm 119 springs from a man already persuaded. He simply talks, fusing his intellect, will, emotions, circumstances, desires, fears, needs, memory, and anticipation. He's keenly aware of what he's really like and what's happening to him. He's keenly aware of the Lord and the relevance of what God sees, says, and does. This makes his heart tumble out in passionate requests and affirmations. He persuades us not by argument, but by infectious faith.

Psalm 119 is torrential, not topical. It's relentless, not repetitive. It's personal, not propositional. Yes, the form of Psalm 119 is regular. But why this tight discipline of *aleph* to *tav*, the arithmetic regularities that pattern the vocabulary, the unvarying reference back to Scripture? These provide the crucible that contains, purifies, channels, and pours forth molten, living gold. Psalm 119 is the thoughtful outcry that rises when real life meets real God.

It's not just naked candor. Raw honesty is always perverted by the insanity of sin. Should you "get in touch with your feelings and say what you really think"? You do need to face what is going on in yourself and your world. And the opposites of honesty are other madresses: indifference, busyness, stoicism, niceness, ignorance, self-deception, or denial. But how will you

interpret what you feel? Where will you go with it? Honesty in the raw is always godless, willful, opinionated, self-centered. And personal honesty never actually faces reality if it does not simultaneously face God: “A fool finds no pleasure in understanding, but delights in airing his own opinions” (Prov. 18:2). Psalm 119 demonstrates the salvation of honesty. When you truly face yourself, your circumstances, and God, even painful honesty takes on the sanity of Jesus.

Reading, studying, and memorizing the Bible are legitimate implications of Psalm 119 when they aim for this desired result. But this passage really aims to rescript the inner logic and intentionality of your heart. That profound result is not an automatic consequence of rubbing shoulders with the Bible. We have a tendency to mishear what God says, to misapply it, and to mistake means for ends. This psalm demonstrates the radical end.

So this is what we hear in Psalm 119. *A person who has listened* opens his heart to the Person who has spoken. A person who has listened *opens his heart* to the Person who has spoken. A person who has listened opens his heart *to the Person who has spoken*. And this is what he says:

- He boldly asserts who the Lord is.
- He lays his life on the table, both his inner struggle and what comes at him from the outside.
- He pleads for God’s help in life’s fundamental troubles.
- He asserts his core convictions, affirming his identity, his hope, and his delight.

These four components of what-I-say-to-You are the intertwining strands that form this psalm’s inner logic.

STRAND 1: “YOU ARE . . . , YOU SAY . . . , YOU DO . . . ”

This speaker describes God to his face: what you’re like, what you say and do, who you are. Many psalms develop one memorable theme. Psalm 119 scatters truths with abandon.

Imagine Psalm 119 as a crowded wedding reception, held in a vast banquet hall from which numerous doors lead to other rooms. People you mostly don't know are sitting at tables for eight. The seating arrangement is odd. The bride's grandmother is sitting next to the groom's college roommate, simply because their last names both start with S! How will you ever get to know all those individual faces, names, stories? But stop at each table. Ask questions, listen, and get acquainted.

You discover that a rich confession of faith is strewn throughout Psalm 119. Its form is startling. It's not phrased as the faith you profess: "I believe in God the Father. I believe in Jesus Christ. I believe in the Holy Spirit." It's faith heard in the act of confessing: "You are my Father. You are my Savior. You are my Life-giver."

The Lord has arranged the conditions of my existence.

- You established the earth, and it stands.
- All things are your servants.
- The earth is full of your lovingkindness.
- Your faithfulness continues through all generations.
- Your hands made me and fashioned me.
- I am your servant.
- I am yours.
- All my ways are before you.
- You are near.

The Lord speaks wonders.

- Your law is truth.
- Your testimonies are wonderful.
- Your word is pure.
- Your word stands firm in the heavens forever.
- The unfolding of your words gives light.
- Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.

The Lord destroys evil.

- You rebuke the arrogant.
- You reject those who wander from your statutes.
- You will execute judgment on those who persecute me.
- You have removed all the wicked of the earth like dross.

Yet the Lord is merciful to me.

- You are good and do good.
- In faithfulness you afflicted me.
- Your mercies are great.
- You comfort me.
- You are my hiding place and my shield.
- You answered me.
- You have dealt well with your servant.
- You have revived me.
- You will enlarge my heart.
- You yourself have taught me.

How did the psalmist learn to be so outspoken to God? He listened to what God said in the rest of the Bible, and lived it. The Lord says who he is, and is who he says. The Lord says what he does, and does what he says. Faith listens, experiences what is true, and talks back in simple sentences.

We tend to be busy, noisy, distractible people in a busy, noisy, distracting world. This psalm teaches us to say, "I need time to listen and think if I'm ever to converse with God." In a culture of instant information, this psalm rewards the slow. If you speed-read, all you get is, "Psalm 119 is about the Bible." But if you take it slow and live it out, you find yourself saying things like this: "You are good and do good." Or this: "I am yours." Learning to say that out loud and mean it will change your life forever.

Here's another implication. Our self-help culture is preoccupied with "self-talk." Does what you say to yourself cheer you up or tear you down? Do you say, "I'm a valid person and I can stand up for myself," or "I'm so stupid and I always fail"? Entire systems of counseling revolve around reconstructing self-talk so you'll be happier and more productive. But Psalm 119 gets you out of the monologue business entirely. It gets you talking with the Person whose opinion finally matters. The problem with self-talk is that we aren't talking to anyone but ourselves. A conversation ought to be taking place, but we repress our awareness of the Person who threatens our self-fascination.

The Bible says radical things about the stream of consciousness

that talks inside us: “Every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the days” (Gen. 6:5); “All his thoughts are, ‘There is no God’” (Ps. 10:4).³ This does not only refer to vile lifestyles. It includes the everyday ways our minds operate without reference to God. Functional atheism is our most natural state of mind.

Our self-talk is usually like the people who talk to themselves on the subway. Their world is real to them, but it’s disconnected from everyone else. We talk in our sleep. The dreams might be pleasant. They might be nightmares. But either way, it’s a dream. The vocal faith of Psalm 119 is what happens when you wake up. The stream of false consciousness becomes a stream of conscious awareness, love, trust, and need. Sanity makes clear affirmations to the Person whose attitude and actions are decisive.

I’ve likened Psalm 119 to a wedding reception full of guests. But notice also the doors leading to other rooms. Psalm 119 breaks out toward the rest of Scripture. How did this man learn to say with all his heart, “You are good and do good”? Where did he learn, “I am yours”? Psalm 119 carries you to the rest of God’s revelation and to all of life. Eight summary words for his words, each used about twenty-two times, act as pointers.

Word

Two of the eight words simply mean *word*, everything God talks about. His words are all he says and writes. Understand this and you’ll never treat Psalm 119 in a moralistic way. What is contained in all these different words? We hear stories, commands, promises, a worldview interpreting all that happens. We witness who God is, what he is like, what he does. He promises mercies. He warns of consequences. He tells us who we are, why we do what we do, what is at stake in our lives, what he made us for. He identifies what’s wrong with us. Through story and precept, he teaches us the meaning of sufferings and blessings. He tells us exactly what he expects from us. His words reveal his lovingkindness. And so forth.

So what does it mean then to say, I “keep your word” (v.17)? The obvious example is obedience to specific commandments.

You keep “Do not commit adultery” by not committing adultery. How do you keep other sorts of words, like, “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth”? You keep them by believing, remembering, and changing how you look at everything. Our psalm keeps Genesis 1 by affirming to God, “*You* established the earth, and it stands. All things are *your* servants.” That’s faith in action. You keep Genesis 1 by remembering that you, too, are a dependent creature whose purposes are accountable to your Maker. You are not merely your résumé, your feelings, your relationships, your bank account, your plans, or your experiences. Our psalm says, “*Your* hands made me and fashioned me. I am *yours*.”

Law

Another of the eight words is *law*. This also means *everything* God says. It’s a synonym for *word* – with special emphasis on the Lord’s authority and our need to listen. It means teaching we must heed. *Law* is identical to *word* in scope but richer in nuance. It highlights the personal authority of the Savior-King.

We tend to mishear *law* when we read Psalm 119. We depersonalize it into a law code unrelated to God’s gracious rule. We narrow *law* to bare-bones commandments, forgetting that “ten commandments” is a misnomer. Those “ten words”⁴ reveal our Lord’s creating and saving acts, his lovingkindness, generous gifts, good character, promises, warnings, and calling of a people – the interpersonal context for his ten good commands. We forget that these commandments spell out how love works out towards God and our fellow human beings. We forget that the law of Moses includes teaching like this: “The LORD, the LORD God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth; who keeps lovingkindness for thousands, who forgives iniquity, transgression and sin; yet he will by no means leave the guilty unpunished” (Ex. 34:6-7). When a person like this gives commandments, he spells out how to become just like him.

Obedience lives out this wise love on a human scale. In the new covenant, Jesus does what we fail to do. He loves as a neighbor and friend. He loves as the Lamb of God, sacrificed in

our place. He loves as one of us, the pioneer and perfecter of faith working through love. God writes this law of love on our hearts. The Father and the Son come to live within us, by the Holy Spirit, and we learn to love – this law fulfilled.

Psalm 119 opens with a stunning benediction: “Blessed are those whose way is blameless, who walk in the law of the LORD.” The convergence between our highest happiness and our wholehearted goodness sets the stage for everything that follows. So what does it mean to “walk in” the Lord’s law? It means, “Love God utterly (free from a willful heart) – because he loves you. Love other people (free from compulsive selfishness) – the same way he loves you.” To obey God’s will is to love well because you are loved well.

We rarely think through what it means to “walk in” other parts of this comprehensive teaching. This law says, “The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face shine on you and be gracious to you; the Lord lift up his face on you and give you peace” (Num 6:24-26). You walk in this by asking God to treat you this way. You receive. You trust. You treat others in these same ways, as a living conduit of care, grace, and peace. No wonder our psalm proclaims, “I love your law. Your law is my delight.”

Judgments

Judgments (or “ordinances”) put the emphasis on how God evaluates things. They teach us to weigh things for what they actually are. For example, in God’s judgment, cheating on your spouse is wrong. In God’s judgment, trusting in the grace of Christ is the way of forgiveness and life. In God’s judgment, compassion for helpless people demonstrates the goodness of his character. In God’s judgment, dealing gently with the ignorant and wayward demonstrates his mercy. In God’s judgment, he alone is the only wise God.

Interestingly, two of the handful of verses in Psalm 119 that lack a direct reference to God’s Word contain the word “judgment,” but not as a reference to what is written. They describe the actions that flow from good judgment, and so bring about justice (vv. 84, 121). In several other places, Psalm 119’s reference

to “judgments” could mean either what God said about things or what he does in acting on how he judges things to be. The end point and goal of Psalm 119 is not the Bible; the end point of the Bible is life.

Testimony, Precepts, Statutes, Commandments

And so it continues, each synonym adding its richness to the unified picture. God’s *testimony* speaks of everything to which he bears witness. He witnesses to himself, to right and wrong, to human failings, to human good, to his saving actions, to his creation of the world, to his will. Those “ten words” we mentioned are frequently called “the testimony,” bearing witness to what is true, right, and delightful. *Precepts* give detailed practical instructions that help us understand exactly what it looks like for us to believe, do, and delight.

Statutes capture the fact that all these things are written down. They are standing truth, standing orders, a permanent constitution. God affixes his words on stone tablets, scrolls, books, computers – that he might write his words on hearts. *Commandments* tell you exactly how to live, what to do, how to love and trust. Because God’s words come with authority, they all have the character of a command even when God promises mercy, reveals his character, or tells a story of what he did: you *must* believe it and live out the implications. Every alternative is some species of self-deception and destruction.

How do we react to all these things? The verbs in Psalm 119 are consistent: “I keep, I seek, I love, I choose, I remember, I do, I believe, I rejoice in, I meditate on, I cling to, I delight in, I do not forget. . . . I respond in all these ways to your word, law, judgments, testimonies, precepts, statutes, and commandments.” Every aspect of the word of life elicits the same family of reactions. Plain speaking to God about God is one result.

STRAND 2: "I AM FACING A STRUGGLE WITH . . ."

Were you surprised by the title of this chapter, "*Suffering and Psalm 119*"? Other psalms are more obviously cries for mercy and protection. But Psalm 119 is thought to be about moral and intellectual self-discipline, not the anguish of life. The reputation is wrong. Psalm 119 is spoken out of ongoing struggle. This discipline of heart and mind arises in the midst of battle.

Struggle appears in each of the twenty-two sections. What does this man find so difficult, so troubling, so painful, so threatening and dangerous?

Let me state it in first person words. First, I face something terrible inside myself. My own sinfulness means that God could destroy me. Second, I face something terrible coming at me. The sins of others and life's troubles threaten my life.

Either way, whether sin or hurt, I suffer threats of pain, shame, and death. So I talk candidly to God about my double affliction. My suffering goes deep. Psalm 119 teaches you to say things like: "My soul cleaves to the dust. My soul weeps because of grief. My eyes fail. When will you comfort me?"

Scripture uses the word "evil" the same way we use it in English, to describe both sins and troubles. The problem of evil is in me and comes at me. It perverts me and it hurts me. Ecclesiastes 9:3 nails both: "This is the evil [suffering] in all that is done under the sun, that there is one fate for all men. Furthermore, the hearts of the sons of men are full of evil [sin], and insanity is in their hearts while they live [sin], and then they die [suffering]." Psalm 119 struggles with both problems.

First, the psalmist finds evil within himself. The illumination of the Word produces a devastating self-awareness. The torrent of I-to-you speech begins in verse 5. And it is no accident that the opening sentence asks for help. He must cry out, "How can I avoid being ashamed when I look at what you command?" He feels threatened because of his sin's tendencies. He shocks us when the last line of the first section expresses such anxious need, "Do not utterly forsake me!" He again shocks us when the last line of the entire psalm bursts out with this admission, "I have gone astray like a lost sheep."

It is notoriously difficult to discern patterns in the overall flow of Psalm 119. But clearly the placement of verses 8 (the end of the first section) and 176 (the end of the last section) intends to highlight something. This honest man suffers in his sinfulness and longs for deliverance. He must voice this struggle because he takes so personally what he stated categorically in the opening lines:

How blessed are those whose way is blameless, who walk in the law of the LORD. How blessed are those who observe his testimonies, who seek him with all their heart. They also do no unrighteousness. They walk in his ways. You have ordained your precepts, that we should keep them diligently.

Because this is how life works, his sins grieve and frighten him. Will God utterly forsake me? Will I wander away? Will God rebuke me and curse me? Will I be put to shame? Will I sin? Will I forget? Will I be thrown away? Will I end up consumed by dread, not filled with joy? Will I be accursed by death, not blessed by life? These questions haunt Psalm 119.

Second, he finds evil coming at him. The discipline of the Word of God produces heightened sensitivity. God's sovereign rule and promised grace aggravate a sense of pain, without self-pity: "I am small and despised. Trouble and anguish come upon me. I face oppression and scorn from self-willed people, for no reason but their malice. They are out to get me. They sabotage and persecute me with lies. I've been almost destroyed. I would have perished in my affliction. I don't fit in; I am a stranger here on earth. I lie awake at night. How long can I take it?"

This man voices his struggle because he takes so personally the Lord's lovingkindness. "If you promise blessedness, if you deal bountifully and give life, if you have made me hope in your promises, if your face shines on your servant, if you save me, if you teach me, if you revive me . . . then you must come through for me. What I'm experiencing is so hurtful and threatening. I'm experiencing the opposite of all your goodness."

Notice another pattern in the flow of Psalm 119. The first

two sections and the last make no mention of the pains of life. Two things predominate: the inner struggle of our need for wisdom, and a triumphant joy. But every other section mentions sufferings. Pain and threat are always present, but with one striking exception, they never claim center stage. That exception occurs at the center of the psalm. In verses 81-88, the psalmist hits bottom. He communicates a vivid sense of distress, sinking, vulnerability, and fragility. Then, strikingly, as the psalm passes the mid-point (vv. 89-91), he completely changes direction. Faith's neediness yields to faith's trust. Elsewhere in Psalm 119, he never dwells on any one theme. But here he affirms over and over the Lord's certainty.

Forever, O LORD, your word is settled in heaven. Your faithfulness continues throughout all generations. You established the earth and it stands. They stand this day according to your ordinances, for all things are your servants.

There's nothing else like that in Psalm 119. It arises from the ashes of distress. His hope speaks within the fragility of his situation and steps into light. He summarizes what has happened with words paraphrased in the title of this chapter: "If your law had not been my delight, then I would have perished in my affliction" (v. 92).

Evils within, evils without – both animate this man of sorrows. Such candid godliness is quite different from the popular picture of Psalm 119. Does it portray an ideal of unruffled self-discipline, detached from sin and suffering? On the contrary! The Word itself disciplines a person to say, "My soul weeps in grief." The clarity of this man's awareness of God and of what ought to be produces a painful clarity that all is not right. The truth of God produces in him an impassioned sense of need.

STRAND 3: "I NEED YOU TO . . ."

So far we've heard two things. A man speaks to God about God and about his struggle with evil. He puts the two together.

The result? Some eighty or ninety requests for specific help. This is astonishing when you think about it.

First, what is the *usual effect of sufferings*, troubles, and threat? We turn in on ourselves. We brood about what's happening and our world shrinks. In so doing, we implicitly turn away from God – and sometimes even turn overtly against him.

Second, what is the *intrinsic effect of sin* and wandering? We turn in on ourselves and away from God. Even the “little” sins, like complaining, expunge the Lord from his universe. Sin curves in on itself (*curvitas in se*, as the ancients put it).

Third, in those with an active conscience, what is the *usual after-effect of sin*, that painful sense of coming up short? Again, we turn in on ourselves. We brood about what we've done. We hide from God, or despair, or mumble apologies, or redouble good intentions. In short, all evils tend to create monologues in the theater of our own minds.

But Psalm 119 creates a dialogue in the theater of the Lord's universe.⁵ We hear cries of specific need in the face of sufferings and sins. This man takes God at his word and asks for what God alone can do. His requests align with his struggles against sin and pain. He wants mercy in both senses of the word. He wants mercy for his sin. He wants mercy in his suffering.

He pleads for God to deliver him from his own failings. As a man with a tender conscience, he asks, “Don't forsake me utterly! Seek your servant!” In other words, “Don't give up on me. Come after me and rescue me.”

He knows how hard it is to love. “Don't let me wander from your commandments.” He gets preoccupied with the wrong things. “Incline my heart to your testimonies.”

His Bible gets routine so that he can read but miss the Lord. “Open my eyes that I may behold wonderful things from your law.” He gets hooked on emptiness. “Turn my eyes away from looking at vanity.”

Sin can seize control. “Don't let iniquity reign over me.” He's vulnerable to bad choices. “Make me walk in the path of your commandments.”

He knows he needs mercy. “Be gracious to me according to your word.”

Ten times he simply asks, “Teach me.” Nine times, “Revive me.” Six times, “Make me understand.” He knows exactly what God says, and exactly what he needs. It’s *because* he knows those wonders of judgment, promise, testimony, and command – and *because* he knows his dull heart, and the distraction of his troubles – that he begs God to make him alive. “I can read it, I can quote it. I want to live it. You must make me do it. You must change me and teach me.”

Psalm 119 also pleads for deliverance from painful troubles. As always, he wastes no words.

- Save me.
- Help me.
- Rescue me.
- Plead my cause.
- Look on my affliction.
- When will you comfort me?
- When will you judge those who persecute me?
- Don’t let the arrogant oppress me.
- It is time for the Lord to act!

The lovingkindness of the Lord invites such pleas. Poverty? Bereavement? Sickness? Painful dying? Unfairness? Oppression? Betrayal? God cares, and the needy cry out.

Why do books on prayer often seem so gooey in comparison; purveying false promises; creating false expectations; delivering untrue views of God, of us, and of circumstances? Why do they sound so “religious,” when this man sounds so real? Why does “prayer” become such a production, or a formula of steps to follow and words to recite, or a heightened state of consciousness, or a superstitious ritual, or a way to be fake, or a way to bend God’s ear for personal advantage, or all of the above at the same time? “Teach me. Revive me. Make me different. It is time for the Lord to act!”

When the great Augustine wrote a commentary on the Psalms, he put off Psalm 119 until the end. He kept putting it off until his friends made him write it. Beneath the simple surface, he found this psalm too deep for comment: “It always

exceeded the powers of my intent thought and the utmost grasp of my faculties.” But what he could not grasp, he was able to live. Certainly it is here that Augustine learned to say, “Give what you command, O Lord, and command what you will.” The words tell us what to believe, trust, need, and do – and God must make it so.

STRAND 4: “I AM COMMITTED TO . . . ”

We’ve seen three things: “You are. . . . I’m facing. . . . I ask. . . .” Now, fourth, “Here I stand.” Psalm 119 makes numerous statements of faith.

This man states his convictions. He knows who he is and whose he is. He is a child of the light. He will never forget the light and aims to serve it.

- I am yours.
- I am your servant.
- I have promised to keep your words.
- I treasure your word in my heart.
- Now I keep your word.
- Your servant meditates on your statutes.
- I shall keep your statutes.
- I cling to your testimonies.
- I observe your testimonies.
- I have done justice and righteousness.
- I have chosen the faithful way.
- I do not turn aside from your law.
- I have restrained my feet from every evil way.
- I hope for your salvation, O Lord.
- I believe in your commandments.
- I do your commandments.
- I have not forgotten your law.
- I do not forget your commandments.
- I shall not forget your word.
- I will never forget your precepts.

A Christian conscience can say the following things in the

same sentence: “Lord, you seek me out and show mercy because you are good [strand 1]; I have gone astray like a lost sheep and I feel battered and vulnerable [strand 2]; seek your servant [strand 3]; I do not forget your commandments [strand 4].” Living faith includes a simultaneous awareness of God’s grace, besetting evils, deep need, and indwelling radiance. “You are merciful,” “I am the chief of sinners,” “That hurts,” “Have mercy,” and “I am yours” go well together.

Finally, this honest man voices his delight. Within the conversation of Psalm 119, he gets a lot of what he asks for: firmly anchored joy, clear-sighted direction, utter delight. This man experiences grace working within him. He has been changed, is being changed, and will be changed. He experiences consolation and protection amid his troubles. He has a vivid sense for how God’s good purposes work out. Twofold grief over evil drove him in anxious need to the Lord. Twofold delight at good animates his joy. Some forty times, he rejoices, delights, loves, gives thanks, marvels, and sings praise! A person of the Word feels and says things like these:

- My heart stands in awe at everything you’ve said.
- I love what you say – exceedingly, passionately, above all things.
- I love your commandments more than rivers of gold.
- Your words are sweeter than honey in my mouth.
- Your testimonies are the joy of my heart.
- I absolutely delight in all that you say.
- The things you have written down are my songs.
- I get up at midnight simply to give thanks to you.
- I look forward to lying awake so I can ponder your words.
- I behold wonders in your law because I behold you.

All created things, all commandments, all promises, all stories of your ways with humankind, all events . . . all reveal you; my joy, my hope, my delight; you, my highest exultation; you, my deep and indestructible gladness.

WHAT WILL YOU WALK AWAY WITH?

Psalm 119 is like a vast, crowded room, but it richly rewards our efforts to talk with any of the guests present. Let me give one example. How do you handle a sleepless night? You're lying awake; where do you go in your mind? How do you feel? It just so happens that Psalm 119 mentions being awake at night four times.

I remember your name in the night and keep your law At midnight I shall rise to give thanks to you because of your righteous ordinances I rise before dawn and cry for help; I wait for your words. My eyes anticipate the night watches, that I may meditate on your word. (vv. 55, 62, 147-148)

A sleepless night is not the harshest form of suffering. It brings you down by slow erosion, not devastating landslide. Sleeplessness is tiresome and tiring. That much is obvious.

Now to the less obvious. What *do* you think about when you lie awake at night? Does your mind run to tomorrow? Do you pre-solve every problem that might arise? Does your mind run to yesterday, brooding over your own failures? Do you replay the hurtful videotape of what someone else did or said?

Do you just run away, turning to escapist, feel-good fantasies? Do you lie awash in your hobbies, immorality, athletic dreams, or vacation plans?

Or in the long night hours, do you cycle through anxieties: money, kids, terrorists, singleness, church problems, sickness, loneliness, and lots more? Do you sink into a pool of depressed resignation? Or do you attach all your hopes to some promise of sleep? If you pray, is the focus solely on your desire for sleep, based on Psalm 127:2?

Does Psalm 119 have anything to say about these parking places for the heart? It changes every one. Whether the hours are marked by tedium or swept into some dark frenzy, those hours are largely God-less. Psalm 119 describes hours full of God. It doesn't promise sleep (though rest is a good gift); it promises to change sleeplessness.

Let me make it personal. Until the 1990s I rarely experienced sleeplessness. Then I started to travel each year to Korea. My body clock would get turned around. I'd work a long day, and drop off to sleep around 11:00 P.M., only to awaken and lie awake from 1:30 A.M. until 6:00 A.M., when I had to get up again. My instinctive response was to plow and replot the list of the new day's responsibilities, which led to grumbling and apprehension ("What will the day be like if I am exhausted?"). I hated not sleeping.

But on my third trip to Korea, I happened to read Psalm 119 on the plane. Verse 148 arrested me: "My eyes anticipate the night watches, that I may meditate on your word." Could I face the inevitable night watches with anticipation, not apprehension? God proved true to his word. I awakened on cue that first night, but I went to a new place. I turned over in my mind Psalm 23, and Numbers 6:24-26, the Beatitudes, and Psalm 131, and everything I could remember from Ephesians and John 1. Psalm 119 opened doors into the rest of Scripture. Night after night, I remembered, thought, prayed, trusted, loved, and delighted – and sometimes slept.

Of course, I was still fatigued during the days. Faith is not magic. And I felt no particular delight in being wide awake. Sleeplessness *is* a form of suffering. But the nights had changed.

I learned something – and it soon came to my aid in a far deeper way. After heart surgery in 2000, sleepless hours became a nightly occurrence for a long time. I would rather have slept. But in the darkness, I was loved by God, and I loved him in return. Imagine, in sleeplessness, you are my Shepherd. I lack nothing. You make me lie down in green pastures. You lead me beside still waters. You restore my soul. You lead me in paths of righteousness for your name's sake. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, for you are with me. . . . Surely goodness and lovingkindness will follow me all the days of my life. This leaves no part of a sleepless night unchanged.

Where do you need Psalm 119 to help you? Is it sleepless nights? Does some form of lovelessness repeatedly puncture your life – worry, fears, sexual lust, bitterness, lying, temper,

procrastination? Where do you need real help, not good intentions or quick fixes? "I am yours. Save me. Teach me."

Is it the sharp-edged pain of some suffering? Have you been betrayed? Is there a rift in a relationship? Is your body failing? Is your child straying? "I would have perished in my affliction."

Does your joy simply need to become more vocal? Does your confession of faith simply need to become more head on? "You are my Father. You established the earth. All things are your servants." Psalm 119 teaches us that way of talking.

Go back through Psalm 119 on your own. Listen for affirmations about God. Listen for struggles and cries of honest need. Listen for expressions of conviction and delight. Find one affirmation about God that you need to voice. Identify one struggle with inner evil or outer pain that maps onto your own struggles. Choose one request that captures what you need God to do. Select one joyous assertion that expresses what you long to become in full.

Psalm 119 is the most "individualistic" psalm. We overhear first person singular faith. But what each one of us experiences, needs, and affirms always spills over into what all of us need, experience, and affirm. As faith works through love, private faith embraces the concerns of all of us together. "Open our eyes, Lord, and we will behold wonderful things in all that you have spoken to us!"