

Psalm 119:81-88 (CAPH)

A Bottle in the Smoke

I am become like a bottle in the smoke... v. 83

The emblem *a bottle in the smoke* is a very interesting figure of speech that can make you thankful for the development of modern technology in the area of home building. In ancient times, you see, there were no such things as chimneys. According to a Wiki-pedia article on chimneys real chimneys did not appear until the 12th century and industrial chimneys did not become common until the late 18th century.

Imagine, then, what it must have been like to live in an ancient home or hut at a time when a fire would be built in the middle of the floor of the hut to provide heat for the house but there would be no chimney. There would have been a hole in the roof that could be opened to let out some of the smoke, and doors and windows could be kept open to also let out smoke but, as you might imagine, much of the smoke would simply permeate the entire dwelling and you would, more or less, have to acclimate yourself to that smoke if you wanted the benefit of heat in your dwelling. We've come a long way in home development and when you think of such progress it should move you to be thankful for so many modern conveniences that we enjoy in our homes – things like running water, and modern heating and cooling systems, electricity, refrigerators, freezers etc.

But to return to that ancient dwelling – our text draws our attention to a bottle in the smoke. The bottle in view here would not be a glass bottle, the way we think of bottles today, it would be, rather, a leather bottle made of calf-skin or goat-skin. We find Christ referring to such bottles in the gospels when he says that new wine could not be put into old bottles or the bottles would burst.

This is the kind of bottle that the Psalmist has in view. Such bottles would be hung up on the wall or suspended from the ceiling and the effect that smoke would have on these bottles would be that the soot of the smoke would blacken the bottle and the heat from the smoke would dry out and shrivel the bottle.

With this background in mind, then, we are able to picture in our minds a bottle in the smoke. We're dealing with a leather bottle that is blackened, dried up and shriveled – something that was once useful but has become useless – something that was once clean and supple but had become blackened and hard.

This is the emblem, then, that the Psalmist is using to describe his spiritual condition when he says *I am become like a bottle in the smoke*. There are other references in the Psalms that add to the description:

In a verse that points us ahead to Christ's suffering but at the same time describes the suffering of the Psalmist we read in Ps 22:15 *My strength is dried up like a potsherd; and my tongue cleaveth to my jaws; and thou hast brought me into the dust of death.*

In Psalm 102:3-5 *For my days are consumed like smoke, and my bones are burned as an hearth. My heart is smitten, and withered like grass; so that I forget to eat my bread. By reason of the voice of my groaning my bones cleave to my skin.*

Job 30:30 *My skin is black upon me, and my bones are burned with heat.*

You begin to get the picture, then of the spiritual condition that is depicted by these verses and especially by the emblem of our text *a bottle in the smoke*. The thing we must note also about the condition that is set forth by this emblem is that it's a condition that the Psalmist contracted the way one contracts a disease. Note the words *I am become like a bottle in the smoke*. Such a condition was not the norm for the Psalmist but it was, rather, something that took hold of him and afflicted him.

What I'd like to do this morning is to look more closely at this spiritual condition so that we may diagnose it in our own lives and know what to do and what to expect when we find ourselves becoming like bottles in the smoke. I don't think it would be a stretch to say today that such a condition is very common among the people of God. There are undoubtedly those here this morning that could make the same confession as the Psalmist – *I am become like a bottle in the smoke*. If you have not become like a bottle in the smoke you can probably relate to the emblem as something you have experienced in the past as well as something you in all probability will have to confront in the future.

Let's look more closely, then, at this statement of the Psalmist:

I am Become Like a Bottle in the Smoke

Let's look first at:

I. The Symptoms of the Condition

There's a very close connection between v. 83 with the previous two verses. Note the words of vv. 81-83 *My soul fainteth for thy salvation: but I hope in thy word. Mine eyes fail for thy word, saying, When wilt thou comfort me? For I am become like a bottle in the smoke.*

Here are the symptoms, then, that lead the Psalmist to say he's become like a bottle in the smoke. His soul faints for salvation – his eyes fail for God's word – and he does not experience the comfort that comes from God through his word.

When I think of a soul fainting for salvation – two different and contrasting scenes come to my mind. One scene illustrates the condition – the other stands in contrast to it. By way of contrast I think of the lame man that is found in Acts 3. You remember the story – he was lame since the day he was born. Evidently there were those who took enough pity on him to come and fetch him and then lay him at the gate of the temple where he could spend his time begging for alms.

Along came Peter and John one day and we read how Peter said to the lame man in Acts 3:6 *Silver and gold have I none; but such as I have give I thee: In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth rise up and walk.* You know the story – Peter takes the lame man by the hand and yanks him to his feet and in that instant the man is healed. Now here comes the contrast to the condition depicted by the bottle in the smoke – we read Ac 3:8 that *he leaping up stood, and walked, and entered with them into the temple, walking, and leaping, and praising God.*

Here is a man, then, that following 40 years of being lame regains the use of his feet. What joy he manifests on that occasion – what vitality he shows when he not only walks but leaps and praises God. I say this is the very opposite of the condition depicted by the emblem of our text. You could say that the bottle in the smoke depicts the very opposite or the absence of what is present in the scene of the healed lame man.

And so it is with many followers of Christ – there was a time when you walked and leaped and praised God. The joy of salvation was your strength. You were exuberant with spiritual vitality. New life in Christ filled and thrilled your soul and you were most anxious to praise the Lord and to tell others about the Lord. A great burden had been removed from your back and you were very much aware of a new atmosphere of freedom in your salvation.

This, I say, stands in contrast to the condition of our text. Now the Psalmist's soul faints for salvation – i.e. he longs for that spiritual vitality that he once knew to be renewed. The very memory of that earlier vitality has become painful for the Psalmist because his present condition stands in stark contrast to what he once knew.

His present condition resembles more the children of Israel in the wilderness. We read Numbers 21 earlier in the service. This is a chapter that tells how the Israelites went from place to place and how they met resistance in their wanderings. Verse 4 of Numbers 21 tells us that *they journeyed from mount Hor by the way of the Red sea, to compass the land of Edom: and the soul of the people was much discouraged because of the way.*

The next verse tells how they grumbled against Moses and accused him of bringing them into the wilderness to die. The manna that was provided daily for them had become loathsome to them and in their hearts they longed to return to Egypt. What a contrast, then, between the two scenes I've brought before you. The first scene is filled with joy and strength and vitality, the second scene is filled with discouragement and anguish and weariness with God. The second scene is represented by the bottle in the smoke, the first scene stands in stark contrast to it.

But we can add to the picture depicted by the bottle in the smoke. Verse 82 says *Mine eyes fail for thy word, saying, When wilt thou comfort me?* It appears that the Psalmist gains no comfort from God's word. Whereas that word had been the means to refresh and revive him now his eyes failed for that word – i.e. he might read the word or hear the word or think on the word but all to no avail. You know that condition. It's revealed to you when you drag your eyes over the words of Scripture but it has no impact on your soul. It's

as if the Bible has become a sealed book to you. You've lost your vitality and it doesn't seem that any amount of devotional exercise renews it. Like the Psalmist your eyes fail for God's word and your soul longs for that lost vitality of salvation.

In this kind of spiritual condition it becomes easy to set aside your Bible and set aside the place of prayer. You are truly a bottle in the smoke. Inwardly you've become hard and your soul has shriveled up to the point that you wonder if such a condition is the norm for your walk with Christ.

The next verse in Psalm 119 indicates to us that the Psalmist's patience is sorely tried and that the time for being a bottle in the smoke was long. Notice what he asks in v. 84 *How many are the days of thy servant?* Job expresses the Psalmist's feeling when he complains in Job 7:6 *My days are swifter than a weaver's shuttle, and are spent without hope.* Life is flying by – that's what Job is saying and yet I feel such a sense of hopeless despair. Life is passing me by. Life, in this condition is characterized by what seems to be an endless sense of weariness, discouragement, and a sense of being helpless and useless. There's a deep sense of longing and yet doubts that such a longing can ever be satisfied.

And so we have the symptoms that are depicted by the emblem of a bottle in the smoke – a fainting soul – longing eyes – the absence of comfort and a sense of endless weariness. What a dreadful condition to have to confess. And yet even in the Psalmist's confession there is encouragement to the believer. Doesn't this emblem of a bottle in the smoke indicate to you that God knows about such a condition?

The fact that the Psalmist knows and describes this condition means that when you find yourself in this condition you are not in a condition that God doesn't know about or can't understand. Indeed, the very fact that we find such a condition set forth in Scripture is a sure indication that when you and I become as bottles in the smoke we are not in a condition that is unusual for which there is no remedy.

And this leads to my next point. We've seen the symptoms of the condition depicted by the bottle in the smoke. Would you consider with me next:

II. The Actions We Must Take in this Condition

Notice again what the Psalmist says in v. 81 *My soul fainteth for thy salvation: but I hope in thy word.* There's the Psalmist's action – he continues to hope. He doesn't give up, in other words. He doesn't cave in to despair but instead he continues to hope. We've considered in previous studies that hope is that aspect of faith that looks ahead. And so the Psalmist does not accept the bottle in the smoke as being the norm that he has to simply learn to live with – he anticipates better days ahead.

In an ultimate sense, of course, we know that there are better days ahead. Even if we were to live out our days as bottles in the smoke we affirm that there are no bottles in the smoke in heaven. Whatever bottles in the smoke we know will be known only this world. In heaven there will be nothing to rob us of our vitality – our strength will never fail and we'll never grow faint.

In this world we'll told in Isa. 40:30 that *Even the youths shall faint and be weary, and the young men shall utterly fall.* Those that are naturally strong will eventually faint and those that are spiritually strong will eventually faint and be weary. Not so in heaven – In heaven we will be made perfectly blessed in the full enjoying of God for ever. We will not grow weary of praising the Lamb who was slain. We'll apply ourselves with all our hearts to worshipping Christ and he will be our portion forever.

So even if you thought you must spend your entire life in this world as a bottle in the smoke you would still have cause to continue to hope in God's word. But I believe there's a practical side to the Psalm as well. I don't believe that we have to harbor the notion that there's nothing left but to be a bottle in the smoke while you're in this world.

I believe the Psalmist is anticipating better days ahead even in this world. And so in that anticipation he says in v. 83 *I am become like a bottle in the smoke; yet do I not forget thy statutes.* Even though he may be sorely lacking in spiritual vitality he will nevertheless continue to strive for the obedience of faith. This is the second course of action we must adopt – don't forget God's statutes, but strive instead for the obedience of faith.

It's a wonderful thing when you can run after God and strive to obey when your heart is filled with praise and thanksgiving for God's greatness in salvation but whether or not such vitality is your portion it is nevertheless still your duty to render obedience to God. Paul exemplifies such a spirit when he writes to the Corinthians in 1Cor. 9:16,17 *For though I preach the gospel, I have nothing to glory of: for necessity is laid upon me; yea, woe is unto me, if I preach not the gospel! For if I do this thing willingly, I have a reward: but if against my will, a dispensation of the gospel is committed unto me.*

Paul recognized a sense of his Christian duty whether he felt like performing it or not. His obligation to Christ was not simply to preach the gospel during those times when his heart was filled to overflowing with praise and thanksgiving and his spiritual vitality was at a high level. No – he must preach the gospel period. A ministry had been committed to him. And what is true of Paul in particular is true of us all when it comes to our Christian duty in general. Responsibilities are committed to us.

This becomes an easy thing to apply in the realm of parenting. You know that whether you feel like it or not, you remain a parent and must meet your obligations to your children. This is equally true of all that is involved in being a Christian. You must continue to commune with God. You must continue to spend time in the word of God. You must continue to seek the Lord in prayer. Even when you are become like a bottle in the smoke you must apply yourself to these things.

And so we find the Psalmist, even though he's like a bottle in the smoke, he continues to hope – he continues to remember God's word and render obedience to that word and he continues to call upon God. Notice how in this section of the Psalm he is addressing God.

My soul fainteth for thy salvation: but I hope in thy word – v. 81

Mine eyes fail for thy word, saying, When wilt thou comfort me? – v. 82

For I am become like a bottle in the smoke; yet do I not forget thy statutes – v. 83

Do you see how the Psalmist is addressing these statements to God? This is the freedom we have before God in the place of prayer. He invites us to come before him and voice our complaints to him. He wants to hear you say – Lord, my soul faints for your salvation – Lord, my eyes fail for your word – I long to know your comfort. In the mean time, Lord, my hope is in your word and I'll continue to strive to remember your word and obey your word, but O Lord I am become like a bottle in the smoke.

And if there is one petition in this section that you need to utilize when you become like a bottle in the smoke it is the petition of v. 88 *Quicken me after thy lovingkindness; so shall I keep the testimony of thy mouth*. This leads, then, to my final consideration this morning. We have seen the symptoms of this condition and the action we must take. We must continue to hope, continue to strive, continue to remember, continue to pray and to commune with God through his word. Consider with me finally:

III. The Expectations We Should Have in This Condition

The very worst thing you can do when you find yourself to be like a bottle in the smoke is to accept it as the norm. Unfortunately I can't help but wonder if many that profess to be Christians do exactly that. They reach a certain hardness and conclude that whatever vitality they might have known in the past, they don't know it now nor will they ever know it again.

Such as find themselves this way, whether they know it or not, they have great cause to fear. Could it be that at the end of the day they'll prove to be what the Lord Jesus referred to as stony-ground hearers or shallow-ground hearers? There are those, you know, that initially are effected by the gospel. They receive it with joy. They know a little of that lame man's experience from Acts 3 but eventually the emotional effect wears off and the cares of the world come to dominate their hearts and spiritual vitality leaves them altogether and they accept it. Are they really Christians at all? That's a question they would do well to seriously consider before the Lord.

A real Christian, you see, will not accept being a bottle in the smoke. It will bother him and he'll bring his complaint to the Lord and he'll pray and he'll devote himself to God's word. And by applying himself to the means of grace he can fully expect some things to happen.

He can expect that his condition will not last but that he'll know deliverance eventually. The Lord does answer prayer. And even though he may bear long with the Christian it will be in answer to prayer that the Christian will be quickened. We've seen already how often this word *quicken* occurs in this Psalm.

My soul cleaveth unto the dust: quicken thou me according to thy word – v. 25

Behold, I have longed after thy precepts: quicken me in thy righteousness – v. 40

Quicken me after thy lovingkindness; so shall I keep the testimony of thy mouth – v. 88

No fewer than 9 times we find this petition. And as I've pointed out in earlier studies the word *quicken* means to be revived or to be made alive again. *Give me life* another English Version translates the petition. *Revive me* another translation renders the phrase. And when the Christian is quickened or made alive or revived he regains a lost vitality – the gospel reaches his soul with power once again. He experiences anew and afresh in new ways something of the length and breadth and depth and height of the love of Christ.

In v. 86 the Psalmist's cry is for help – *help thou me* he prays. When a believer becomes like a bottle in the smoke he may fully expect that the Lord will give him help. The Lord will give him wisdom to understand his trials. The Lord will give him enabling power to sustain him in his trials. And the Lord will give him assurance that even in his trials he has not been severed from Christ. He'll know the truth that Paul expresses in Rom. 8 that nothing can separate us from the love of Christ.

He'll be given that spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of Christ so that Christ's love won't be simply a part of his creed – it will become the driving force of his life. He'll go from being a bottle in the smoke to one who, in the words of Psalm 18:29 can run through a troop and by the power of God will leap over a wall.

So we see the symptoms of the condition depicted by a bottle in the smoke. It's a dreadful condition to be hard and blackened and shriveled up inwardly. Our text lets us know that it's not unusual to be in such a condition. So long as we live in a sin-cursed world and have to fight against inbred sin, such a condition will become the believer's portion.

You can be thankful, therefore, that such a condition is recognized in God's word. When you find yourself in that condition you should, nevertheless, apply yourself to the means of grace which means simply that you keep reading God's word and you keep seeking communion with Christ and you continue to be mindful of your Christian duty to follow Christ in the obedience of faith.

And don't accept the condition. But instead go to the Lord and confess to him that you're like a bottle in the smoke. And as you continue in God's word and continue in prayer you should fully expect that your condition will pass and you'll know the power of the gospel yet again. You will gain new power from on high. You will gain fresh visions of Christ's glory. You will gain new assurance that you belong to Christ and Christ belongs to you.

And you will, to use the familiar verse in Isaiah 40:31 – you will, as you wait on the Lord mount up with wings as eagles, you will again run and not grow weary and you'll walk and not faint. May the Lord help you then to face such a spiritual condition squarely and honestly when it afflicts your soul and may you be given the grace to persevere as well as the faith to expect that the trial will pass and Christ's love and grace will again become the sources for your strength and zeal.

