

Psalm 119:129-136 PE

From the Top of the Mountain to the Depth of the Valley

Thy testimonies are wonderful (v. 129); *Rivers of waters run down mine eyes* (v. 136)

We find in this section of the Psalm an emphasis on *keeping* the Lord's testimonies. Three times reference is made to keeping the Lord's word. Only the very first section of the Psalm places a stronger emphasis on this theme. 4 times in the first section of Ps. 119 we find the same kind of emphasis on keeping the Lord's testimonies.

- Ps 119:2 *Blessed [are] they that keep his testimonies, [and that] seek him with the whole heart.*
- Ps 119:4 *Thou hast commanded [us] to keep thy precepts diligently.*
- Ps 119:5 *O that my ways were directed to keep thy statutes!*
- Ps 119:8 *I will keep thy statutes: O forsake me not utterly.*

In the section we are studying this morning we find the word *keep* 3 times. Verse 129 – *Thy testimonies are wonderful: therefore doth my soul keep them*; Verse 134 – *Deliver me from the oppression of man: so will I keep thy precepts*; Verse 136 – *Rivers of waters run down mine eyes, because they keep not thy law.*

In a day and age where the subject of keeping the Lord's word – or if I could put it another way – where the subject of obedience is either sorely abused or completely neglected it is good to note the emphasis throughout this Psalm on the idea of obedience – or keeping the Lord's testimonies, Twenty two times in the course of this Psalm you find that word *keep*. The Lord has not given us His word so that we may take on a casual attitude to the matter of obedience.

The Psalmist sees the authority behind God's word and hence the authority of God to command His precepts be kept. The Psalmist thus expresses in a number of references his resolve to keep God's word. We also find him calling on God for the help he needs to make good his resolve to keep God's word. We noted in an earlier study the wisdom the Psalmist displays in declaring that he will be a companion to those who share the same desire of keeping God's word (v. 63). Verse 63 conveys good advice to young adults that either have left home or are about to leave home. Choose your friends in accordance with what you perceive to be their desire to follow after Christ in the obedience of faith.

Now there is something I want you to see in the section of the Psalm that we're studying this morning. I don't think we've seen anything quite like this in any other section of the Psalm. We have noted some emotional contrasts that are expressed in terms of what the Psalmist loves and what he hates. He loves God's word – he hates every false way (v. 128). But what we have in this section of the Psalm is a very wide contrast of emotions that pertain to the Psalmist's spiritual experience.

Notice what it says again in v. 129 *Thy testimonies are wonderful: therefore doth my soul keep them*. Can you feel how the Psalmist in this verse is exulting in God and exulting in

God's word? God's word is the joy of his heart. God's word fills and thrills his soul and it is this perception of the blessing of God's testimonies that provides the motivation and the strength of resolve that leads to the statement that immediately follows: *Thy testimonies are wonderful: therefore doth my soul keep them.* This is not begrudging or strained obedience being forced under the weight of a heavy burden, this is cheerful obedience that springs from a soul set free – from a soul that has known deliverance from oppression and runs in the power of praise and thanksgiving.

You could say that v. 129 finds the Psalmist on the mountain top of spiritual experience. But now note the contrast to what I've just described with what you find in the last verse of this section – v. 136 *Rivers of waters run down mine eyes, because they keep not thy law.* On the surface of these words compared to v. 129 there appears to be a contradiction. In v. 129 the Psalmist is glorying in the wonder of God's testimonies – *therefore doth my soul keep them.* In the v. 136 we find the Psalmist bitterly lamenting the fact that he doesn't keep them – *Rivers of waters run down mine eyes, because they keep not thy law.*

The contradiction is only on the surface and is easily solved through a proper understanding of gospel obedience or the obedience of faith as it's sometimes called. Gospel obedience is not perfect obedience but is sincere striving for obedience all the while trusting in Christ's obedience as the basis for your acceptance with God.

What I want you to see, now, however, is this strong contrast in emotionalism that is conveyed by the first and last verses of this section. In the first verse of the section we find exultation; in the last verse of the section we find deep and intense anguish. What I would like to do this morning is to consider separately each of these ends of such an emotional spectrum and then close by noting a few of the reasons we go from one end to the other – from high to low, in other words.

A title for the message seems more fitting than a theme or proposition. So I've entitled this message:

From the Top of the Mountain to the Depth of the Valley

Let's begin by considering first:

I. The Blessing of the Mountain Top

This is the place we would love to reach and the place where we'd love to stay. Like Peter, in our Bible reading today we would say *It is good for us to be here, let us make three tabernacles* – which is tantamount to saying *let us stay here.*

This is where the Psalmist finds himself, spiritually speaking, when he says in v. 129 *Thy testimonies are wonderful: therefore doth my soul keep them.*

Spurgeon assimilates many of the Puritan writers when he says regarding this verse: "Thy commands are wonderful. Full of wonderful revelations, commands and promises. Wonderful in their nature, as being free from all error, and bearing within themselves

overwhelming self evidence of their truth; wonderful in their effects as instructing, elevating, strengthening, and comforting the soul. Jesus the eternal Word is called Wonderful, and all the uttered words of God are wonderful in their degree. Those who know them best wonder at them most. It is wonderful that God should have borne testimony at all to sinful men, and more wonderful still that his testimony should be of such a character, so clear, so full, so gracious, so mighty”.

Thomas Manton lists 5 ways in which the testimonies of God are wonderful: “God’s testimonies are "wonderful" (1) In their majesty and composure, which striketh reverence into the hearts of those that consider; ... (2) It is "wonderful" for the matter and depth of mystery, which cannot be found elsewhere, concerning God, and Christ, the creation of the world, the souls of men, and their immortal and everlasting condition, the fall of man, etc. (3) It is "wonderful" for purity and perfection. The Decalogue in ten words comprise the whole duty of man, and reacheth to the very soul, and all the motions of the heart. (4) It is "wonderful" for the harmony and consent of all the parts. All religion is of a piece, and one part doth not interfere with another, but conspires to promote the great end, of subjection of the creature to God. (5) It is "wonderful" for the power of it. There is a mighty power which goeth along with the word of God, and astonishes the hearts of those that consider it and feel it.”

The wonder of God’s word, of course, is the way that such a word brings us to God. Paul writes to Timothy concerning Christ that *He only hath immortality, dwelling in the light which no man can approach unto; whom no man hath seen, nor can see: to whom be honour and power everlasting. Amen* (1Tim. 6:16). God, in His triune persons, you see, outshine the brightest star and outshine the sun which we can’t even look upon for long without damaging our eyes.

But now the testimonies of God through His word enable you to see what you could not otherwise see. *The entrance of thy words giveth light* the Psalmist says in the next verse (v. 130). Have you thought about how you were able, earlier in this service, to partake of the privilege that only the inner circle of Christ’s disciples were able to partake of during the time of Christ’s earthly ministry? You were able, through the testimony of God’s word to behold Christ as He was transfigured in the mount and shown in that glory that was brighter than the sun. You were able, with those privileged disciples to hear the voice of God from heaven say *This is my beloved Son with whom I am well pleased*.

And that’s not all – indeed that is but a single instance of being able to behold God in his glory. You are able, through the testimony of God’s word, to observe the very creation of the heavens and the earth and the stars and the sun and the moon and the birds and the fish etc. Job 38:4 *Where wast thou when I laid the foundations of the earth?* God asks Job in the course of his interrogation of Job. *Declare, if thou hast understanding*.

I would say it humbly and reverently when I suggest to you that through the testimony of God’s word we gain an answer to God. The answer would go something like this: By thy grace, and through thy word, O Lord, I was able to behold thee in the greatness of thine act

of creation. Through thy word I've seen what no man has seen as I beheld thee creating all things of nothing in the space of six days and all very good. Is it any wonder, then, that the Psalmist says *thy testimonies are wonderful*. God's testimonies not only take us to the beginning of time but they take us to the end of time as well.

Through the testimony of God's word we behold heaven and we behold a countless multitude of those that praise the Lamb for sinners slain. We hear, in as much as we have the capacity to hear, the resounding praises of those that sing the song of Moses and the song of the Lamb. We hear, albeit, faintly because of our dullness, the testimony of *many angels round about the throne and the beasts and the elders: and the number of them was ten thousand times ten thousand, and thousands of thousands; Saying with a loud voice, Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power, and riches, and wisdom, and strength, and honour, and glory, and blessing. And every creature which is in heaven, and on the earth, and under the earth, and such as are in the sea, and all that are in them, heard I saying, Blessing, and honour, and glory, and power, be unto him that sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb for ever and ever. And the four beasts said, Amen. And the four and twenty elders fell down and worshipped him that liveth for ever and ever.*

Can you not say with the Psalmist that the testimonies of God's word are wonderful when those testimonies bring you into the very worship of God in heaven? Our worship of Christ in this world is too often dull and strained and weak but through the wonderful testimony of God's word you are able to go to where worship is pure and strong and glorious.

God's testimonies, then, take you to the beginning of time, indeed they take you to the counsel of the blessed Trinity before there was time, and they also take you to the end of time and enable you to see what that end will be. Before leaving this point I should also point out that God's testimony takes you to the fullness of time for it was in the fullness of time that *God sent forth his Son, made of a woman, made under the law, To redeem them that were under the law, that we might receive the adoption of sons* (Gal. 4:4,5).

Through the testimony of God's Word we see redemption being accomplished, we see a high price being paid, we see the greatest manifestation of God's love that Divine wisdom could conceive. We hear His words from Calvary's cross. We behold Him bearing shame and scoffing rude. You are taken to the scene when His body is removed from that cross and laid in a tomb. And you are on hand to behold Him and to hear Him when He says to doubting Thomas in Jn. 20:27 *Reach hither thy finger, and behold my hands; and reach hither thy hand, and thrust it into my side: and be not faithless, but believing.* And like Thomas you find yourself compelled to fall down before Him and exclaim *My Lord and my God.*

Tell me, then, dear believer in Christ – are the testimonies of God not wonderful? Do those testimonies not cause your soul to exult in God and in Christ? I can think of no more fitting an exhortation than the one Thomas Watson gives when he says “Highly prize the Scriptures, or you will not obey them. David said, "therefore doth my soul keep them"; and

why was this, but that he counted them to be wonderful? Can he make a proficiency in any art, who doth slight and deprecate it? Prize this book of God above all other books.”

The testimonies of this book will certainly bring you to the tops of the mountains in terms of your spiritual experience. We would love to stay here and it would not be hard to continue to exult in the testimonies of God’s Word but we must leave the mountain top. Even the disciples had to come down from the mount of transfiguration. Unfortunately for us we have to not only descend from the mountain top but we must descend deep into the valley of humiliation as we consider next:

II. The Dread of the Depth of the Valley

What a vivid display of emotion is given to us in the last verse of this section of the Psalm – a verse that indicates to us plainly that the Psalmist has descended into a valley of anguish and despair. Verse 136 *Rivers of waters run down mine eyes, because they keep not thy law.*

There are two different (and yet not so different) views of this text that are set forth by commentators. Matthew Henry expresses both of these views in his commentary when he notes: “Either because mine eyes keep not thy law, so some (write). The eye is the inlet and outlet of a great deal of sin, and therefore it ought to be a weeping eye. Or rather, they, i.e., those about me: #Ps 119:139. Note, the sins of sinners are the sorrows of saints. We must mourn for that which we cannot mend.”

So a question may arise as to whether the Psalmist has his own sins in mind or the sins of those around him who had made void God’s law. I don’t know that we have to choose between the views – both are true. We lament our own sins and we lament sin all around us. To suggest that we only lament the sins of others without lamenting our own would make us appear to be self-righteous. That familiar verse in Isa. 53 can readily apply to the case I’m describing when Isaiah writes in v. 6 *All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way.* Do you see the inclusiveness of Isaiah’s words? “All we like sheep” – and “every one to his own way.” The Psalmist’s confession in the very last verse of this Psalm fits such a pattern as well. Notice the words of v. 176 where there can be no doubt that the Psalmist has only himself in view when he writes: *I have gone astray like a lost sheep.*

So the Psalmist is distressed by sin. He’s distressed by the sin he sees all around him and he’s distressed by the sin he perceives within himself. He is conscious that in spite of his love for God and God’s ways – in spite of his fervent efforts to do judgment and justice (v. 121) he still falls short of the glory of God. He still transgresses and he still fails to measure up.

This is a sentiment that is also felt keenly by the Apostle Paul in that well known passage in the New Testament – Rom. 7. Let me read to you Rom. 7:14:21 *For we know that the law is spiritual: but I am carnal, sold under sin. For that which I do I allow not: for what I would, that do I not; but what I hate, that do I. If then I do that which I would not, I*

consent unto the law that it is good. Now then it is no more I that do it, but sin that dwelleth in me. For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh,) dwelleth no good thing: for to will is present with me; but how to perform that which is good I find not. For the good that I would I do not: but the evil which I would not, that I do. Now if I do that I would not, it is no more I that do it, but sin that dwelleth in me. I find then a law, that, when I would do good, evil is present with me.

It is this last verse especially, v. 21, that provides us with cause for weeping. Paul makes mention of a law – not a law given by God but a law in the sense that it’s a spiritual reality – what the law of gravity is to us physically this law is to us spiritually this law that says that when I would do good, evil is present with me. This statement is what should ever keep us from any notion of Christian perfectionism. This statement is what should also contribute to the Christian being ever humble before the Lord and before men. So long as this law is in effect we will never attain perfection in this world while we possess carnal natures.

And the reality of this law had a similar effect on Paul that it had on the Psalmist in our text. It led Paul to cry out in v. 24 *O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from the body of this death?* So long as we live in a world filled with sin and so long as we still possess sinful natures we will always have occasion for profuse weeping.

We have learned what is good and true and right and spiritual but we have not yet attained it. And we have also learned, hopefully, in at least some measure that sin is an offence to God – that sin runs so contrary to the character of God that it besmears His glory – that sin rightfully is punishable by death and that sin is what drove the nails into Christ’s hands and feet.

On account of sin the petition in v. 132 will always find ready use in the Christian’s life Ps 119:132 *Look thou upon me, and be merciful unto me, as thou usest to do unto those that love thy name.* Isn’t this verse telling in terms of the Psalmist’s experience? Have mercy on me, he prays, the way you use to have mercy on those that love thy name.

His experience of God’s presence and God’s peace and joy are such that he has to refer to them as a part of history. This is why I say that the Psalmist goes from the mountain top of blessing into the valley of humiliation. Verse 131 shows us how the Psalmist is longing for God. *I opened my mouth and panted* he says *for I longed for thy commandments.*

Deliver me he prays in v. 134 *from the oppression of man.* You begin to see, I trust the progression. The Psalmist has gone from exulting in the wonderful testimonies of God to longing for God – to praying for deliverance from oppression – to weeping profusely over his own failures and the failures of all around him to keep God’s law.

So we have these two ends of an emotional spectrum – exulting in God’s testimonies, and weeping over the presence of sin. The thing we must consider now, in closing is how is it that we can go from high to low – how it is that God allows us to go from the top of the mountain to the depths of the valley. Think with me finally for a moment or two on:

III. The Reasons We Go From the Mountain Top to the Depth of the Valley

It would not be right to harbor the notion that going from the mountain to the valley takes place because we sin. The idea held by some Christians is that the more success we gain in striving for our sanctification the higher up the mountain we're able to climb. By this notion where you are between the mountain top and the valley indicates to yourself and to others what kind of progress you have made in the pursuit of holiness.

The truth is that whether you be on the mountain top of blessing or whether you be in the valley of humiliation, your sin nature goes with you. More importantly – Christ goes with you. I conducted a Bible study a number of years ago on how when the disciples left the mount of Transfiguration the Lord Jesus went down the mountain with them.

So whether you find yourself scaling new heights of joy and peace and communion with Christ or whether you find yourself in despair with an acute awareness of your sin, you have no reason to believe that in any circumstance Christ will forsake you. His promise is to be with you always – not just during the highs of life but especially (perhaps even more especially) in those times of anguish and despair.

It is the Lord, you see, who leads His people. The Psalmist recognizes this when he prays in v. 133 *Order my steps in thy word: and let not any iniquity have dominion over me.* Isn't it interesting to note from this petition how dependent we are on the Lord both in terms of walking in accordance with His word as well as keeping ourselves from sin. We need His help. We need His guidance. We need His grace and strength in order to keep to the narrow way.

And the Lord finds it necessary for our advancement and growth in grace to deal with us at times so that we do remember the reality of sin within our hearts and we do remember our dependence on Him. If He allowed us to remain on the mountain top of blessing where all we did was exult in His testimonies – how long would it take for us to take His blessings for granted and to feel in our flesh that we are somehow entitled to constant euphoria.

We would soon act toward God the way so many in our country act toward government. They expect the government to not simply provide the freedom and liberty to pursue happiness but they expect the government to make them happy and keep them happy. I know I've referred in earlier studies to the propensity of the Israelites to forget God once they had entered the promised land and enjoyed the blessings of the land. They are warned in Deut. 8 not to forget God once they had built goodly houses and had eaten and were full. And so we find in our experience that often times the Lord must deal with us in such a way that we remember Him and don't take His blessings for granted and especially that we don't allow His blessings to take the place of God Himself.

Another reason the Lord brings us from the mountain to the valley is for the sake of the advancement of His kingdom. I know that we're sometimes tempted to think that we are most effective in evangelism when our lives reflect the blessings of the mountain top.

Others have to see me constantly glowing with a countenance of peace and joy and happiness. They must not ever think that I'm some times sad or angry or that I'm facing trials and challenges that are difficult to bear and that I don't always understand or agree with the dealings God takes with my life.

To the degree that Christians strive to convey to the world that they're happy and at peace all the time to that same degree they convey to others that they are either phony or that they're so far aloof from the trials of others that they couldn't possibly relate to others in the trials they experience.

I think it is in this respect in particular that balance becomes so important to the Christian and to his testimony for Christ. His exulting on the mountain top is balanced by his humility and his humility is balanced by his joy and peace so that he doesn't convey the notion that Christianity is nothing but a life of frills and thrills and smiles and laughter – nor does he (or should he) convey the notion that Christianity is gloom and doom and pessimism and discontentment.

He conveys rather that he exults in Christ but that his exulting is tempered by reverence and humility. He lives with an awareness, in other words, that there is cause for joy and rejoicing in salvation but there's also cause for humility because our sins cost God the blood of His Son in order to save us.

I wonder then this morning – are you on the mountain top of blessing? If you are then praise the Lord for it and enjoy it. But know this – so long as you're in this sin-cursed world and have to fight against the flesh you're going to have to descend from the mountain top of exultation and you will have to, at times, descend into the valley of despair. You have cause for joy – the testimony of God's Word is wonderful and you've found it to be so. But alas – you also have cause for tears – even for weeping – you have not yet reached perfection – indeed you have broken God's law.

In the midst of this vast emotional contrast I trust that the thing that you will demonstrate to yourself and to others is a sense of stability – a stability that says I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me. I can rejoice in his strength and I can weep over my sins in his grace. May we know in every circumstance we face whether we be high or low that the Lord is our portion and that all things are for His glory.