

Many Prayers In One Psalm

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[0 : 01] Let's turn for a little to the chapter we read in the book of Psalms, Psalm 119. And I want us to look at the last section in the Psalms, Psalm 119, and that last section, from verse 169 to 176.

I won't read it all, but just read at the very beginning and the end of it, verse 169. Let my cry come before you, O Lord, give me understanding according to your word.

And then down to 176. I have gone astray like a lost sheep. Seek your servant, for I do not forget your commandments. This is quite an amazing psalm in many ways, not least because as a psalm, it is longer than some of the books of the Bible.

For instance, it's longer than Obadiah. It's longer than 2 John. It's longer than 3 John. So it is quite remarkable that just this one chapter, as we would say, or this one psalm in the book of Psalms, it's so long.

And it touches upon many things, but probably what it highlights more than anything else is the importance and the preciousness of God's word for our lives.

[1 : 25] It's also what we would term an acrostic psalm, which means that every section begins with a different letter of the Hebrew alphabet.

It runs right through the Hebrew alphabet and begins with a different letter. And each section is working through topics with the different lettering of it.

So it's quite unique in that sense. But as we say, the great highlight of it is the importance of God's word for our life. God's word, it is by God's word that we initially come to faith, and it is by God's word that we grow in our faith.

It is what Jesus prayed. He said, Father, sanctify them through the truth because your word is truth. So it's absolutely essential. And this is part of what this psalm is highlighting, is that for the spiritual well-being, vitality, vigor of the Christian life, God's word is absolutely essential.

It is the beginning. It is the end. It is everything. The word of God is key to our lives. And it highlights so many different aspects of our life.

[2 : 43] In fact, initially when you run through it, you think it's very repetitive because it talks so much about God's laws and statutes and commands and precepts and all these things.

And you say to yourself, well, it's kind of just repeating itself over and over and over again. But while it does, to a certain extent, there's a lot of repetition in it, it is also very, very different.

And it deals with so many different parts of our life. And I think one of the things that God's word does do is it can be repetitive at times because an essential part of teaching is repetition.

We are slow learners and we often have to be taught the same. If you go back to whatever time of learning, within school or university, college and wherever you are, or even at any different part of life, if you're trying to learn something, it's so important that you...

It's very rare to pick up everything first go. You often need to have several times going over and over. And that is so true. That's one of the reasons why God drives home his word to us in different ways because, as I say, we can be very slow to learn.

[3 : 59] Now, as we go through this section, there are three basic prayers in it. And the psalmist really is saying, Teach me, help me, and seek me.

These three things come out in this psalm. Teach me, help me, and seek me. And I would say that these are essential prayers for every single person.

That these are prayers that we should be asking and offering to the Lord, not just now and again, but every day. Lord, teach me. Show me the way to go. Because so often we don't know the right way.

And again, we see here, to help me is obvious. So often in life we need that help. And seek me, which we'll come to at the end.

So the psalmist begins by, Teach me, and he says, Give me, let my cry come before you, O Lord. Give me understanding according to your word.

[4 : 58] And again, really what the psalmist is asking for, is that he would be given understanding and wisdom in how to direct his life. Because as we're very aware, life, as we meet it in all its different forms, in all its challenges, in all its different relationships, in all the different experiences that we go through, we often, as we reflect on life, and we should reflect on life, so often we say, you know, I got that wrong.

Or so often we feel that we've let ourselves down, so often we think to ourselves, you know, I just did not do that in the right way. And so there's often this kind of thinking through life.

And that's why the psalmist is saying, Look, Lord, I need understanding. I need really to know the way to go in life. And that is so important for every single one of us as we journey through life.

And that is why God's word, it is so important to make it the rule of our lives. And as long as we live, we will never, ever outgrow the need of God's word.

Now, again, we have to say that our knowledge of the truth is limited. Nobody, there's nobody I know, and nobody you will ever know, who says, you know, I know the Bible from cover to cover.

[6 : 19] I can tell you anything that's in the Bible. I can tell you, I can explain everything that's in the Bible. Even the greatest minds cannot explain everything that's in the Bible. And there are areas and aspects that we sometimes, we will come to, and we'll say, Well, Lord, this is, this is, this seems to be, I can't quite grasp what this truth is saying.

But anyway, we do need God's word to be guiding us and showing us the way to go. And so he prays in 169 and 170 for both understanding and for deliverance.

And then you'll find in verse 171, after praying for guidance and deliverance, he then, my lips will pour forth praise. And you will often find that an understanding of the truth is liberating.

This understanding of the truth brings not just liberty, the sense of freedom. And Jesus said that the truth will set you free.

And Jesus says, he makes that amazing statement. He said, I am the way, I am the truth. And that truth will make you free. And so there is a sense tied into the idea of deliverance of then where the psalmist just bursts out into praise.

[7 : 44] And again, that should be part and partial of our lives. And you will often find that, that the more that we reflect on God's great works, of his great deliverances, of what he is doing, that we end up praising him.

You'll find that in the Bible, for instance, the Apostle Paul, some of the great theological statements he makes. maybe you go to the likes of Ephesians and there's great verses of doctrine, great verses of doctrinal truth and great theology.

But then following from that, he just burst, as it were, into praise. Because as he is delving into all this great doctrine, these great theological truths, the greatness and the majesty and the glory and the wonder of God becomes more real and more apparent to him.

And he cannot help but praise. You'll find that often in David's experiences. In the Psalms, that David might be going through a dark time and he's struggling with different issues.

And he turns his focus away from the problems and he begins to focus upon God, upon who God is. and sometimes he looks at God in his creative power.

[9 : 01] Sometimes he looks at him in his providential work. And then David, he ends up turning away upwards more and more and he begins to burst into praise.

And he cannot help but acknowledge and praise and thank God for who he is and for all that he is doing. And so the psalmist says, my lips my lips will pour forth praise for you teach me your statutes.

And of course this is one of the wonderful things about God's law, God's commands, God's statutes. They're never changing.

Now, that's very different from the statutes and the laws of our own land. And you know, sometimes we I'm sure all of us at one time or another have, as we look at the laws of the land, we say, who on earth thought up these laws?

Because sometimes it might, as often happens, the laws of our land need changing. As life develops, as life moves on, sometimes laws need altering and updating and changing because that's life.

[10 : 16] And we recognize that and realize that and it would be stupid if we said that the laws that were fixed in 1740 were the same laws that had to govern.

There might be some print that there's often things that will remain the same. But there are things because we live in a different type of world. But God's law is different because God's law is a reflection of himself.

And he's a God he never changes. He remains the same all the time. And so his word, his commands, are timeless. And they govern. They never need updating.

They don't change. We change. But his word has a binding impact upon our lives. As we said, it's like himself, a reflection of himself.

He is the unchanging God. And so his word and his law is unchanging. And we're told indeed that it's perfect. God's law is perfect and converts the soul in sin that lies. And then in verse 173, the psalmist says, let your hand be ready to help me.

[11 : 20] Now as we know, God is a spirit and as such does not have bodily parts as we have. Although the second person of the Godhead, the Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, once he took our nature, continues to have and will always have the body that he took.

But God is a spirit. But the way that is often used in the Bible is in order to help us to understand that although God doesn't have bodily parts as such, yet it talks about God's eyes, about God's ears, about God's hands.

And what that is doing is enabling us to understand the way in which God works to us and for us. When it talks about God's ears, it is simply enabling us to realize that when we pray that God is listening to us.

When it talks about God's eyes, very often it talks that his eyes are upon his people, that his eyes are here, that the eye of the Lord is seeing all.

And when it talks about his hand, we sang that in Psalm 89, that you have a hand that's great in power, that you're an arm that's great in power, your hand is great in might.

[12 : 41] And very often we have this where the Lord talks about his outstretched arm. He talks about having his people engraved in the palm of his hand.

In other words, what you're doing is there, you're giving this description of how God is always looking at his people, that they're there before him, they're close to him. So, when it talks about the hand, it is simply a description of God coming in order to help.

let your hand be ready to help me, for I have chosen your precepts. And as he says again in verse 175, sorry, in 173, let your hand be ready to help me.

And in 174, he talks there about the desire for salvation. I long for your salvation, O Lord, and your law is my delight.

Now, when he talks about salvation, we often tend to think of salvation simply in the sense of when a person comes to faith in the Lord Jesus Christ for the first time and that's salvation.

[13 : 50] But salvation is something that is ongoing. There is a sense, there's a security of salvation at the very beginning when we are safe in Jesus, when our life is committed to him.

but we continue to ask for a greater discovery of that salvation. In other words, a greater discovery of who the Lord is in himself.

And very often we are crying for that salvation with regard to our own lives, for deliverance. How many times we've asked the Lord to help us, to deliver us in a particular situation, in some trial, some difficulty that we're going through and we're saying, Lord, you've got to help me here.

I need your salvation. So, that's what we find here. And again, the psalmist then is telling us that the law is his delight.

But then in the last verse he says, I have gone astray like a lost sheep. Seek your servant, for I do not forget your commands. And, as he comes to this last verse, we find that here is this psalmist and he's using the words lost.

[15 : 04] And it's an urgent word that carries the idea of perishing. That it's our lostness in a really bad way. And you know, that's part of the beauty of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Because the Bible is often using these words of lost and perishing. And that's exactly what God has come to deal with. Our lostness and our perishing. The great version of John 3.16 that so many know, God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son that whosoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life.

Jesus says, I have come to seek and to save those that are lost. And here's your word, seek your servant. I have come to seek and to save.

It's a search and rescue idea. That's who Jesus is. He is the one who has come to search for those who are lost. And lost, it's a horrible word.

It brings with it all the kinds of ideas of confusion and bewilderment and uncertainty. Jesus says, I'm here. I'm here for you.

[16 : 13] Now, we find that this, here's this psalmist and when we go through this psalm, we say, well, this was some, this was some man, this, because he is so committed, so devoted, you would say to yourself, whoa, this man, this man lives at a level up there because he's just so careful about God's law and he just makes his delight every day and such like.

But now we find him saying, Lord, he says, I've gone astray like a lost sheep. Seek your servant. So some people say, ah, this wasn't the psalmist. He's not writing about himself.

He's just writing. No, he is writing about himself. And we've got to remember that that, unfortunately, is part and partial of Christian life is that we stray.

It's not writing in the way that Isaiah wrote. Remember how Isaiah said, all we like sheep have gone astray, which is true. But he is writing here in a personal way.

I have gone astray. I have gone astray. I have gone astray. And so, as I say, we've got to remember that this is part and partial. It's added to it because he says, seek your servant.

[17 : 30] He's not talking here about somebody who doesn't know the Lord. Not talking here about an unbeliever or somebody who, he's talking about the servant. This is somebody who's following the Lord.

Somebody who's in a relationship with the Lord. But he's gone astray. A lot of people will say, surely a Christian doesn't go astray. They do. That's unfortunately, and we stress unfortunately, but it's part and partial of our lives and part of our Christian life.

And so, the psalmist is showing us that he went astray, just like a sheep does. That's one of the things that sheep are absolutely brilliant at doing. It's just going. They just wander off.

And they, it's incredible at times of fanks and so on where sheep from, not just from neighboring villages, but they can, the sheep can just travel.

It's extraordinary how you'll find somebody maybe at a fank and they'll say, this sheep isn't just from the neighboring district. This is from districts away. And that's what sheep do.

[18 : 36] They're, they're notorious for wandering. But that's a picture that is so often given of ourselves that we're wanderers as well. It's, unfortunately, we say part and partial of our nature, this, this wandering.

And the thing is that when we wander, when we stray from the Lord, when we lose our way, you know, there are, there are different aspects of it.

Sometimes the Christian will reach a place and they'll say to themselves, how on earth did I arrive here? How did I get here? The pot process did I go through? There was a day when everything was going well for me and I felt bang on, straight, good with the Lord.

But now, I can't believe they've gone this distance. I feel so far away and I've ended up in this particular place. How on earth has this happened?

And, it can reach the point, you know, there's so many different ways and degrees that can reach a point where the believer can become complacent in their backslidden condition.

[19 : 45] And they're sort of saying, well, this is where I am. I'm kind of stuck with this. And they kind of make their bed in that particular situation. They lie down in that situation. They say, well, this is where I am.

And they're conscious that, yeah, they should try and get back with the Lord, but they say, this is going to be difficult because I've kind of crossed a few boundaries here.

I've kind of put myself out a bit and I don't know how I can really get back. And sometimes a believer who's in a backslidden condition will be scared to open the Bible because they'll say, well, you know, parts of the Bible, in fact, if they open the Bible at all, they'll be very careful where they open it.

They'll open it at a good part, a part that'll give them comfort and they'll say, oh, that's good. But they're afraid sometimes of what God's Word will say because sometimes you and I know God's Word can be really challenging.

God's Word is described in different ways. Sometimes it's described like a hammer. Sometimes like a sword that pushes asunder. And sometimes you can open the Bible and go, ouch, that hurts.

[21 : 01] In fact, we're even told there's an offense within the Word. So, sometimes believers, they say, the mountain I have to climb in order to get back is too much.

I'm just going to make my bed where I am. And although I know I'm far from the Lord, it's not right. Well, it's not a good place to be. So, straying is not good.

And I believe that here it is willful straying. You know, we're not talking here about, and it happens to everybody, where you're caught up in something. Maybe you give in to temptation.

Things come on top of you and you give in and then you say, oh, Lord, forgive me for that. I'm sorry, sorry, and you go back to the Lord. And it's what we would term very short. It's short-term straying.

It's short-term backsliding. But I believe that what the psalmist is talking about here is more willful. It is where you've got into a particular habit.

[21 : 59] You've got into a particular way of life. This is the direction that you're going in. And one of the things about backsliding we find so difficult is that there is this, as we say when we open the world, there's a discovery of what we're really like.

You know, every so often we get a shock at sometimes what we think. You know, the potential for every conceivable sin lies within our heart.

And the Bible tells us that the heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked. Who can know it? Well, you can't and I can't. We don't really know ourselves.

And you'll find some people who've sort of have gone downwards. I remember I never read the actual diary but I read about it in a review of a soldier who was a young during the war as a young lad.

He was one of the most gentle, kind, tender-hearted people that you could ever meet. Literally, who wouldn't hurt a fly. And as he went through the war he kept this journal.

[23 : 18] And one of the things that absolutely shocked him was his developing brutality and his callousness and killing. And he found himself, he was saying, it is inconceivable how, as a young lad, that I have reached this place.

But that is the human heart. That's a potential that is there for going down and down. And the potential for every sin is in there.

And that's one of the reasons why Jesus says to us not to judge. Because he said, you know, don't go on your high horse. Don't stand yourself up there and judgment upon other people. Because it's in there in your own heart.

And so we've always got to be careful. So this whole area, and that's why the Apostle Paul was saying, oh wretched man that I am, who shall deliver me.

But the wonderful thing is that there is deliverance. And that the Lord does want those who have wandered from him to come back. Now as I said, sometimes people can wander so far away that they think there isn't a way back.

[24 : 32] Or think that maybe they weren't with the Lord in the first place. Peter is an example of that. You remember after Peter denied Jesus. And he didn't just say, I don't know who Jesus is.

He denied him with, oaths and with curses. He really was giving it in terrible ways. And we know how he went out and he wept bitterly.

But it tells us in John chapter 21, Jesus says, I go fishing. And that word is literally, I'm going back to the fishing. In other words, Peter had thought that he had blown it so badly, that he had so let Jesus down, that there was absolutely no way back for him, that he had gone too far.

But as we know, he hadn't. And that is the beauty, that is the love of the Lord to us, that he loves us too much to let us go.

Now, I think one of the things that we see here is that the psalmist says, I have gone astray like a lost sheep. seek your servant.

[25 : 41] This is a turning point for him. He's saying to the Lord, I need to get back. And I need you to get me back. Because you know, Lord, I can't get back myself.

And that is so true because our little efforts at reformation don't really work. You know, you can say to yourself, I'm going away, I'll have to get back.

And we might be a token gesture. But the psalmist says, no, Lord, I've really gone astray here. You need to seek me out. Lord, I need you to get me back on track.

And the Lord will answer that. And he answers it. And sometimes again, we have to allow the Lord himself to work out the way to bring us back. Sometimes he does it with a kiss. Sometimes he does it just with the warmth of his word, of his presence.

Sometimes it's with his rod. Sometimes he does so in different ways. But the psalmist here doesn't lay down the law and say, Lord, seek me, seek your servant, and this is how I want you to seek me.

[26 : 50] He just prays that the Lord will restore him. And then he says, for I do not forget your commandment. God's word. And this is part of where he's at, is that even although he's gone astray, he still remembers God's word.

And if you're here today and you felt that you've gone far from the Lord, and you yourself know where you're at, you know, a person can at one level be back slidden and still come to church, and yet their heart is a million miles away.

And there are others who can be close to the Lord, and others may think that they're far away, but that's not the point, is that we have to come to the Lord and say, right, Lord, I need you, I need to get back, because even although, as I said, you may have made your bed, and you may lie down on that bed and say, well, this is where I'm at just now, the one thing is you're not comfortable there.

If you have known the nearness, the joy of the Lord, the fellowship of the Lord, the closeness of the Lord, and you're far away, you are not in the place of contentment and happiness and peace that you once were, and you need to get back, and the Lord will take you back, because he he, he, he, he, he, you know, this is one of the beauties of the Psalms, he gives us a prayer, and so we have an authority, we can go to the Lord, every single one of us, and say, Lord, I have gone astray like a lost sheep, seek your servant, and there's repentance in this, because there's an acknowledgement of where he is, and how he would like to be, and you and I know that there's nothing like the sense of peace that comes with forgiven sin, guilt, you know, guilt is a hard thing to be, you know, when you're guilty, you go back, I remember as a boy growing up,

I suppose like all little boys, you were mischievous and used to do things that you shouldn't do, just all kids do, do things to, like raiding gardens and all that kind of stuff, and then when you'd see somebody that you'd done wrong, you'd run a mile, you'd say, boy, in case, because you didn't want to face up, or that he would get hold of you, or whatever, because guilt, guilt is a horrible thing, and you know, so many people today are carrying guilt, and they're carrying shame, they're carrying all these things around with them all the time, and Jesus says, listen, you don't need to, because that's part of what he dealt with on the cross, when Jesus went on to that cross, he took our guilt, our shame, he took all these things upon himself, in order that we may have the liberty and the freedom of life, because that's what he wants to give us, and so it's imperative that we make our way back, just like the prodigal, and as you remember, and we're finishing here, you remember the prodigal, he said,

[30 : 17] I will arise and I will go to my father, and he was saying, you know, I'm not worthy to be a son anymore, I just need to get home, he couldn't wait to get away, but then they reached the point he couldn't wait to get home, and he said, you know, I just got it so wrong, and I'm quite happy, as long as I can be at home, to be a servant, rather than a son, he was wondering how he would be received, you know what the beautiful part of the whole thing is, that the father, when he saw him, a long way off, in other words, the father was looking out, looking for him, waiting for this day, and it tells us he ran to him, threw his arms around him, and that's always how the Lord will take you back, don't doubt about it, that's the kind of Lord he is, and if you've never come to accept the Lord as your own saviour, then even today he's saying to you, I'm here for you, just ask me, ask me to come into your life, and to know the peace that pardon and forgiven sin brings, let us pray,

Lord we pray to bless us, giving thanks for every good thing you do in us and for us, we pray that you'll be with us, that you'll take us to our home safely, that you will keep us throughout this week, that we will know your guidance and your grace, that we will know your presence and peace, and help us in all that we are about, all that we do, all the challenges we face, we pray Lord that you will enable us by your grace to be overcomers in life, forgive us then our every sin we pray, in Jesus name we ask it, Amen.