

A Sheep's Cry To His Shepherd

Psalm 119:169-176

Introduction: 1) The theme of God as the Shepherd of His people is one of the richest and most loved in the Bible. In Psalm 23 God is the Lord our Shepherd. In Ezekiel 34 God promises His people, "I will appoint over them a single shepherd, my servant David, and he will shepherd them" (v. 23). Micah 5:2-4 continues this theme and informs us this future shepherd will come out of Bethlehem. John 10 reveals to us that Jesus, the Son of God, is the good shepherd who is the promised fulfillment of all these prophetic promises (see also Heb. 13:20; 1Pet 2:25, 5:4; Rev. 7:17).

2) In the 22nd and final stanza of Psalm 119, stanza Taw, the shepherd imagery is subtly but clearly present as the psalmist pours out his heart in prayer to the Lord. He feels like a wandering sheep who has lost his way. His only hope is that the Lord will come after him and rescue him like a loving shepherd (v. 176). This stanza stands in striking contrast to the previous one, stanza Sin and Shin (vs. 161-168). There we see a confession of faithfulness and dedication. Here we find a pleading prayer for understanding, deliverance, help and rescue. The psalmist is confident he will be heard. After all, in harmony with the theme of Psalm 119, his cry for deliverance is "according to your word" (v. 169), "according to your promise" (v. 170).

I. Lord please hear my prayer

119:169-170

- 1) The psalmist comes before the Lord (*Yahweh*) with a “cry” and “plea.” As Alec Motyer notes, “There is no cocky bursting into his presence” (*Psalms By The Day*, 362). And what is the nature of his cry and plea? It is two-fold. First, “give me understanding according to your word” (v.169). Second, “rescue me according to your promise” (v.170). The two ideas are intertwined and related. Michael Wilcock is helpful here when he writes, “I need to know the right things, in the right spirit, at the right time and for the right purposes....I ask that in the way you know is best, you will order my outward circumstance just as you can order my inward thoughts” (*The Message of Psalms 73-150*,218).
- 2) The psalmist has an intimate and personal relationship with his Lord. He can come near to Him and pour out his petition. There is boldness (cry) but also humility (plea). Further, he recognizes the need for grace both inwardly and outwardly. I need you to help my understanding but I also need you to rescue (*ESV*, “deliver”) me. Work on my heart by means of your Word and please help me with the circumstances and situation in which I find myself. I need to understand and see things as you do. I also need your intervention. I need you to act on my behalf. Understanding

will enable the psalmist, and us, not to take matters into our own hands. I will trust God to help me understand. I also will trust God to make things right. Play the fool and my enemies will win the day. Respond with biblical wisdom, and they will go down in defeat. Spurgeon wisely wrote, “The Lord in answer to prayer frequently delivers his children by making them wise as serpents and well as harmless as doves (*TOD*, vol 3, 433-34).

II. Lord please receive my praise

119:171-172

The psalmist’s plea now turns to praise. He is confident that his prayer will be heard and answered by his Lord, the shepherd of his soul. Verse 171 reads like the praise of the heart and verse 172 reads like the praise of the mind, though the two in our practice should never be separated. “My lips pour out praise pictures his worship “like a gushing spring of water” (Ross, *Psalms*, vol. 3, 592). There is excitement and enthusiasm in his praise as he contemplates that the Lord “will teach me your statutes.” Verse 172 clearly parallels verse 171. Lips are paralleled by tongue. Praise is paralleled by sing. Statues are paralleled by promised and commands. The psalmist draws attention to the fact that God’s commands are righteous. No doubt this truth, at least in part, moved him to praise and sing to the Lord. The God that he can come before with his pleas and praise is righteous and just in His ways,

His will and His Word. This is a God that we can trust to do what is right because He is Himself righteous in who He is. Spurgeon once more says it so well, “When a man has so high an opinion of God’s commandments it is little wonder that his lips should be ready to extol the ever-glorious One” (*TOD*, 434).

III. Lord please help me

119:173-175

The psalmist’s plea for deliverance is renewed in verse 173. It is intensified by his “longing for salvation” (v. 174) and his use of the phrase “my soul” (ESV, NASB) in verse 175. We cannot help but notice how he grounds his request in his devotion to the Word of God.

Verse 173: let your mighty hand, your powerful hand be ready to help me, to do for me what I cannot do for myself (Ross, 593). I can ask with confidence because I have chosen to honor and obey your precepts. The *Message* reads, “Put your hand out and steady me since I’ve chosen to live by your counsel.”

Verse 174: I long for your salvation, Lord. I need you to deliver me from my enemies and from myself (v. 176). I need, as James Boice writes, “your deliverance from sin –from its penalty, power, and presence –from the evil influences and outlook of the world, and perhaps even from the power of the devil....We can do nothing to deliver ourselves. So we need to ask God for

salvation, which is what the psalmist does (*Living by the Book*, 166). Once again he can ask in confidence because “your instruction is my delight.” Verse 175” “Let me live” (*ESV*, “Let my soul live”) and my life will be filled with praise (cf v. 171). And, as I live for you and praise you with all that I am, “may your judgments help me.” I need and depend on your help personally (v. 173) and in your precepts (v. 175). Who you are and what you teach will save me and sanctify me. John Goldingay puts it like this, “Our relationship with Yhwh is founded on Yhwh’s grace, commitment, and compassion, and in appealing to Yhwh we appeal to who Yhwh is. Yet our relationship also depends on our obedience...I am myself responsible for walking in Yhwh’s way, yet I depend on Yahweh’s help in doing so” (*Psalms*, vol. 3, 445). The psalmist gladly admits, I need your help to live. I need your presence and I need your guidance. You, oh Lord, are Who I need. Your Word, O Lord, is What I need.

IV. Lord please come and rescue me

119:176

In Psalm 23:2-3, David says of the Good Shepherd, “He lets me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside quite waters. He renews my life; he leads me along the right paths for his name’s sake.” The anonymous psalmist’s of Psalm 119 resonates with this image of our God. “I wander like a lost sheep” he says. I need my Lord, like a Shepherd, to come and get me and “lead me

along the right paths.” I am wandering about like a lost sheep, but I am still the Lord’s “servant.” I do not forget [this] commandments.” But, I cannot find my way home. My Lord must seek me out, he must come and find me and safely return me home. My Lord must seek me out, he must come and find me and safely return me home. John Piper notes that “‘lost’ in Hebrew also means perishing. Sheep will die if not found” (“The Anatomy of Backsliding, “7-5-87). It is significant, and wonderful to point out that even though the sheep has lost sight of his shepherd, the shepherd has not lost sight of his sheep. In fact, not only will the Great Shepherd go in search of His wayward sheep. The Great Shepherd as the Suffering Servant will willingly bear the sins of the sheep as their perfect sacrifice (Isa. 53:6). What a wonderful Shepherd we have indeed!

Conclusion

The great Reformer Martin Luther has words that provide a fitting commentary on Psalm 119:176. They are also an appropriate conclusion to the psalm as a whole. What beautiful words of comfort and encouragement they are!

“Therefore at the end of the psalm he [the psalmist] especially calls to mind the divine pity out of the greatness of his wretchedness. For if he strayed like a lion or a wolf, he would not need to be grieved, but because it is a little lamb that goes

astray, it is a wretchedness that needs a shepherd, pasture, watchmen, a sheepfold, and many other household cares, and the straying one lacks all of them. Indeed, what is most wretched of all is that it does not know how to come back on the way but needs to seek it. Thus this verse is extremely emotional and full of tears, for truly we are all thus going astray, so that we must pray to be visited, sought and carried over by the most godly Shepherd, the Lord Jesus Christ, who is God blessed forever. Amen” (*Luther’s Works*, vol. 11, 534).