

Psalms 119:49-56, No. 3

“A Relationship with God”

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The Rev. Dr. Robert S. Rayburn

We are reading the short *zayin* section. All the verses in this section, as you remember, that is from verse 49 to verse 56, begin with the Hebrew letter *zayin*, something like our “z”, though it comes much earlier in the alphabet.

Let me begin by telling you two inspiring, even thrilling stories. The first is from the life of John Paton, the celebrated 19<sup>th</sup> century Scottish missionary to the cannibals of the New Hebrides. The early years of his ministry in the islands, were years of conflict with many of the indigenous people. They feared the influence of white outsiders – as was understandable, given their mistreatment by English traders – and missionaries were white outsiders. What is more, the islanders were cannibals, well used to killing strangers. They were suspicious and violent by nature and here was a man seeking to undermine all that they believed in.

On one occasion a group of islanders under the direction of their chief decided to have done with Paton and his family. They made their way in the dead of night up the hill to Paton’s house ready to attack the home by surprise and kill everyone in it. But to their dismay as they neared the home they found that a sizeable group of men surrounded the house. It was obviously impossible to pursue their plans and so they turned and left, the Patons never the wiser. As it happened, by the grace of God, that chief later became a Christian and as a Christian brother he told the missionary what he had once attempted to do and when. But Paton knew that there was no group of men surrounding his home that night or any other night. What, he concluded, could those men have been but the angels of God, usually invisible but made visible to those Pacific islanders that night. God was protecting his servant.

The second comes from a medical missionary with Overseas Crusades. This is the story he shared with his home church when he was back in the United States during his furlough year.

“While serving at a small field hospital in Africa, I traveled by bicycle through the jungle to a nearby city every two weeks for supplies, a journey of two days requiring camping overnight at the halfway point.

“On one of the journeys I arrived in the city to collect money from a bank, purchase medicine and supplies and begin my two day journey back to the field hospital. Upon arrival in the city, I observed two men fighting. One man had been seriously injured so I treated him for his injuries while at the same time witnessing to him of the Lord Jesus. I then traveled back the two days, camping overnight and arrived home without incident.

“Two weeks later I repeated my journey. Upon arriving in the city I was approached by the young man I had treated two weeks earlier. He told me that he had known that I carried money and drugs (medicine). He said, ‘Some friends of mine and I followed you into the jungle, knowing that you would camp overnight. We were waiting just outside your campsite for you to go to sleep. We were going to kill you and take your money and

drugs. But just as we were about to move into your campsite, we observed and counted 26 armed guards standing around you.’

“At this point in the church service – remember, the man is giving his story to his church service and telling us about it – one of the men jumped to his feet and interrupted my story. He asked me, ‘Sir, can you tell me the exact day when this incident happened? It took me a moment to recall, but I could. When I gave the date it happened, the man who had interrupted me told this story.

“‘When it is night in Africa, it is day here. On the night of your incident, it was morning here and I was preparing to go play a round of golf. As I was putting my golf bag in the car, I felt the Lord leading me to pray specifically for you. In fact, the urging was so strong that I called several of the men in this church together to meet with me here in the sanctuary and pray for you. Would all of those who met with me on that morning please stand up?’ The men who met together to pray that day stood. The number was exactly – 26.”

Twenty-six praying men in the United States became twenty-six angels of God in Africa! What stories of faith and of God’s intervention in answer to prayer, of God’s presence in this world! There is only one problem: neither story is true. They have been told by prominent evangelical Christians through the years, they have appeared in Christian ministers’ sermons, and they have been printed in PCA church newsletters. Had they been first circulated in the present day, we would refer to them as “internet legends” and we could check snopes.com to see if the stories were too good to be true. When I first heard the story about John Paton, reading it in the preface to Billy Graham’s book *Angels*, sniffing a riveting sermon illustration, I sought to confirm it in the sources. There is nothing of this story in Paton’s own autobiography. Nothing that I could find in any of the serious history of his missionary work. Perhaps the story is true nevertheless, or so I thought, though my suspicions had certainly been aroused.

But then I kept coming across variations of the same story from various mission fields. And those stories were rather easier to disprove. For example, the second report I read to you, was supposedly from a medical missionary with Overseas Crusades. But the founder of that ministry, Dick Hillis, reported in answer to an inquiry, that Overseas Crusades had no medical missionaries, in Africa or anywhere else. He had never heard the story, as he certainly would have had it concerned one of his own missionaries! As so often in such cases, one person heard it from another or saw it in some church paper and repeated it, but no one, all the way back up the chain, could confirm its veracity. And finally, in all these cases, the trail peters out. The story has appeared many times in many different guises – the details change, the number of angels for example, the country in which it occurred, the specific circumstances – but the gist is always the same.

It is sad that Christians – including Christians who ought to know better – get taken in by such stories, but it is revealing as well. There is a sometimes almost desperate desire on our part to be able *to see* the truth and not always to have *to believe* it. Paul may tell us that we must live by faith and not by sight, but we crave at least a glimpse!

This is what lies behind the seemingly endless accounts of miracles that are supposed to have occurred here and there. When I was a young man, the miracle stories were coming out of Indonesia especially. Of course there were skeptics who doubted the accounts upon first hearing them, but there were also Christians who *really wanted them to be true* and did a careful investigation *so as to confirm the truth of the accounts*. And the result was the same, whether the investigation was carried out by a skeptic or a Christian ready, even hoping to believe: the evidence of a miracle could not be found, the story was impossible to trace to its source, and the details, when examined, undermined rather than confirmed the truth of the account.

Why have Christians been so long susceptible to such stories? Well, surely, in part because we find miracles in the Bible, -- we believe *such things did happen* in the history of the world -- even if only in a few short historical periods and people draw the conclusion that if some people witnessed miracles, we ought to as well. But, I suspect a larger reason is that living by faith *is hard work!* They want, *we want* things to be more obvious, more immediate, more doubtless, and certainly easier than they are. We want God to prove himself. He says that he is near to help us, let him show that he is so! He says that he will never leave us or forsake us, that he will give us grace to help in time of need, let him give us some demonstration. Or, in the case of these stories, the Bible says that the angel of the Lord encamps around those who fear him (Ps. 34:7), well then, if we can't see that angel of the Lord at least let someone else see him and in some other way prove to us that he is there. God did that once for Gehazi, Elisha's servant; let him do the same for us.

Surely we all know how much easier the Christian life would become if just once we were given to see the Lord, or to hear his voice as sometimes did the prophets and the apostles. It matters immensely that *some* have seen him, and some have heard his voice, but why can't *we* as well, even just once? And, whether we articulate this to ourselves or not, we feel that he *ought to* give us this help. We think that this is what we would do, if we were he. I doubt any of us really appreciates how powerful this longing for sight and sense really is. After all, we are people of sight and sense. Our whole life is lived by our five senses, that is, our entire life *except* our relating to God!

Well, this evening I want to consider what it means *to know God by faith*. We Christians rather glibly use the phrase "a relationship with God" to describe what it means to be a Christian. And there is certainly reason to employ that term, though the Bible never does. "Relationship" as denoting some form of interpersonal communion, rather than family connection, is a comparatively modern term and carries with it some implications that can be confusing when used of God or of Jesus Christ. Interestingly, and perhaps revealingly, we rarely use the term -- I suspect we *never* use the term -- in regard to the Holy Spirit's place in our lives. We can envision relationships with the Father and with the Son, those are family names, after all, but the Spirit? When was the last time you heard someone talking of having a "relationship with the Holy Spirit"? But, still, the Bible speaks of our *knowing* God and to know someone is to have some kind of personal relationship with that individual.

As I have read and thought about Psalm 119, it has occurred to me that this great text is a window on what the knowledge of God actually is according to the Bible and how it is experienced by believers. I challenge you to read it through the psalm with this thought in mind.

What, after all, do we mean when we speak of a “relationship with God?” It sounds as if we are comparing our interpersonal association with God to the relationships we have with members of our family and with friends. But it takes but a moment to realize that, in fact, a relationship with God must be very different, indeed at key points utterly unlike these other personal connections and associations.

We talk to our friends and they talk back to us. If we have a misunderstanding, we can discuss matters with them and resolve the problem. If we have a question, they can answer it. If they refuse to answer our question, our relationship is damaged or at least weakened. Indeed, if they refuse to resolve some misunderstanding or disagreement, the friendship is likely to end! If we rarely hear their voice the relationship slowly attenuates. This is the stuff of human life and experience and everyone knows it. On the other hand, if we love them, we can demonstrate that love in a thousand ways and receive love in return from them. We can kiss and hug, we can give and receive gifts, we can talk on the phone or in person, and we can declare our feelings, laugh and cry together, features of almost any serious and valuable human relationship.

But consider the nature of our knowledge of and connection to God, or to the Lord Jesus.

1. *We cannot hear his voice or see his face.* The Bible speaks in these terms, but in regard to our knowledge of God this language is obviously metaphorical. We hear his voice primarily, almost exclusively in the Word of God, the Bible. There are plenty of Christians who would argue otherwise. We hear many Christians say that the Lord “told” them to do this or that. Usually they mean that they received some impression in the mind, but we’ve heard enough of this through the years to be very skeptical. I hear ministers in our own denomination say that the Lord called them away from their present pastorate to another charge, and, I’ll tell you frankly, in many cases I don’t think the Lord had anything to do with it. I doubt very much that the Lord said to him some years before, “I want you to be the pastor of this congregation of my people.” and then came to him a few years later and said, “I don’t want you to be the pastor here anymore; I want you to be the pastor of the congregation over here.” Far too much of the time the Lord’s name is invoked by ministers and by Christians alike to justify a decision made by ministers or Christian lay people for their own reasons. I’m happy to admit that in some cases those reasons may be persuasive and the decision a correct one, but let’s not imagine that the Lord *told* the man to leave his charge and move to another. But, surely, it transforms our “relationship” with God into something very different if there is no verbal and visual give and take as there is in every other relationship we have and when the very nature of those other relationships is direct and mutual communication.

2. Or consider this: the Lord is “hidden” from us not simply because we can’t see him, but in other ways so much of the time, even when we are virtually desperate for him to show himself. Martin Luther’s term for this existential reality, *Deus absconditus*, the hidden God, perfectly describes the God with whom we have to do much of the time. We call to him, but can detect no answer. We pray, we plead, we argue, we even refuse to relent, but often it seems as if none of it has any effect on him. It seems that our prayers die at the ceiling or, in C.S. Lewis’ memorable phrase, as if we were posting letters to a

non-existent address. What human friendship would survive such silence, such apparent indifference to our pleas?

3. More than this, God often acts in ways that seem contrary to his friendship with us. He seems to desert us in our need when he has promised never to leave us or forsake us or turn against us when he promised always to bless us. As Christians we are told we need have no fear of the terror or night or the arrow that flies by day, that a thousand may fall at our side but it will not come near to us. But we have fears and can suffer terrible losses. God himself dashes hopes that he himself has taught us to cherish. Having promised to come speedily to our aid, he leaves us to wait, sometimes all our lives long. And when we plead with him for or demand an explanation, the sort of thing people do in a relationship, he refuses to provide it.

4. But even the happier side of our knowledge of God is highly mysterious. I'm far from denying the reality of the mystical experience that God's people have of their Father in heaven and their Savior. We know of what Paul wrote when he said that the love of God has been poured into our hearts by his Holy Spirit. I have had such powerful experiences of God's love myself and know that many of you have as well. We have been overcome by a sense, almost palpable sense of his presence, of his majesty, and of his loving care for us. Like David we have felt like dancing before the Lord with all our heart uncaring of what anyone else might think. But those moments of ecstasy or of awe in the presence of the divine majesty are relatively rare, and for many Christians, very rare. We are deeply, deeply grateful to have had them, -- I think of mine all the time -- but they make us wonder why we have not had more of them, so much did we feel God's love and so much were we overcome by ours for him. Would you not think, given the happy outcomes, that God would give us experiences like that over and over again? How we would be sustained in times of trouble and sadness if only we knew our next overwhelming experience of God's love was just around the corner.

In this regard, it is also simply a fact that some believers have more of these experiences of God's nearness than others. Peter, James, and John witnessed the Lord's transfiguration – an extraordinary and heart stirring event -- but the other disciples did not. Those same three were asked to go further with the Lord into Gethsemane while the others remained at a greater distance. And so it has continued. Samuel Rutherford speaks in one of his letters, while in exile in Aberdeen, of the Lord coming and going seven times a day. But most of us can only look with longing on such closeness to the Lord. Many great Christians never enjoyed that measure of intimacy with the King of Kings. Many have told us, in their Memoirs and Diaries of long dry spells, of hunger for more intimacy with the Lord, of their frustration at never attaining such closeness and their jealousy of others who did. I remember reading years ago in Andrew Bonar's diary that he finally gave up attempting long periods of prayer and resigned himself to shorter prayers. An hour at prayer was hard work and the work defeated him. But, surely, if prayer is talking to God, if it is having the ear of the almighty any time we want, we should all enjoy doing that for hours on end, wouldn't we? Well prayer *is* earnest and familiar talking with God, but it is, as every Christian knows, not like the conversation we enjoy with one another that easily can go on for hours.

5. And, finally, what actually do we expect even at the consummation of history when we use the term “relationship with God”? Have we thought about this? We are persons and there will be vast millions of us living what will be demonstrably the continuation of the human life we lived in this world. Everything the Bible teaches us about heaven confirms that: mysterious and ineffable as the prospect of that life must be to us now, it will be human life, the natural, moral, and spiritual perfection of the life we now live. Do we think that we are, each one us, to have a sit down conversation with the Lord Christ or our heavenly Father every day? Do we think we will relate to the king of kings as simply a very good friend? Will we clap one another on the back and laugh together at a good joke? I doubt that. I expect it will be something much more like the relationship between proud and very happy and intensely satisfied subjects and their king.

None of this is what we understand, it is not what anyone understands a personal relationship to be, at least a loving, happy, fruitful relationship. The church may be the bride of Christ, but our relationship with the groom is hardly the same as that between bride and groom in a good marriage!

So what *does* it mean to know God? Well look at the man who wrote Psalm 119. He is like the other psalm writers. He’s got serious problems. His life has taken a turn for the worse. His psalm, as we said last time, is a lament, a cry of his heart to God in a time of trouble. The Lord has not yet come to his aid.

“With my whole heart I cry, answer me, O Lord!

“I rise before dawn and cry for help; I hope in your words.

“They draw near who persecute me with evil purpose...but you are near, O Lord.” [vv. 145-151]

How does this man know that the Lord is near? How can he continue to turn to God when God has not turned to help him? Ah, *that is the power of faith!* This man has absolute confidence in God’s Word and that Word teaches him that God *is* near. “I hope in your words,” he says. So God must be near even if this man cannot see or sense his nearness.

There are reasons for that confidence, more reasons than we often remember. Indeed, our confidence in the Word of God, like that of this man, is so rock-solid that we rarely bother to think about why it is.

1. When we read the Bible – stop and think about this, is it not so for you? – we find it describing the world and ourselves *as they really are*. This is actually a remarkable thing, rarely found elsewhere in human life, and nowhere else so thoroughly, accurately, and relentlessly. The Bible un.masks our pretensions, discovers our hypocrisies, and lays bare the full measure of our selfishness. In other words, it tells us the truth about ourselves. No one else does. But it also explains in the only truly satisfying way the inescapably personal and moral nature of human life and the origin of everything that matters so much to us: love, beauty, joy, shame, sadness, and all the rest. The world lies bare before a man or woman with a Bible in his or her hands; and that

can be said of no other book, no other religious teaching, and no other school of philosophy. Believe me, it can't be said of anything but the Bible.

2. Second, with Bible in hand we are clear-headed enough to know that our lives are not some mindless accident, that the world around us and we ourselves have a maker, a creator who has stamped upon the creatures he has made the evidence of himself. We know there is a God and we know he is the God described in the Word of God. You cannot explain anything really important to human beings in any other way.

3. The very nature of the Bible separates it and distinguishes it from all other religious writings. There are people who burn the Koran. My goodness, we don't want people to burn the Koran; we want people to *read the Koran!* Let them see how utterly different it is from the Word of God. The Bible wears its authority on its sleeve. It tells, to be sure, a fantastic tale, but tells it in a way no myth or legend has ever been told. It leads with its chin, making one historical assertion after another, and where it can be checked it has been confirmed. Still today – do you realize how astonishing this is? – with all the historical data that is included in the Bible, a book that began to be written several thousands of years before Christ and continued to be written most of the century after Christ, do you realize there is no statement made in its pages that has been demonstrated to be false. There are, of course, many who claim that this statement or another is false, but there will be others, just as learned, who dispute those claims, believers and unbelievers alike. Whether we are talking about the life of Abraham, 2,000 years before Christ, or the reign of King David 1,000 years before Christ, or the history of Israel in the Assyrian and Babylonian periods, or the cross and the resurrection of Jesus Christ, the arguments for their historicity actually get stronger by the day and year. Astonishing!

4. Supremely, it is the person of Jesus Christ himself as he is described in the Bible who has proved himself real to us. We know that Jesus Christ is no fabrication, we know that no invention would speak or act as he spoke and acted, and that no invention would have inspired the account of him that we receive in the four gospels. We hear the bell-like tone of truth in the Bible's account of Christ's life, death, and resurrection.

5. Then there is the accumulating power of Christian experience, the transformation of life that has accompanied Christian faith throughout the ages. It is so obvious to us and should be obvious to everyone that virtually everything truly good and noble in our private and public life depends on Christian conviction or conviction borrowed from Christianity, so obvious that he who runs may read. What is more, as any Christian will tell you, our life with God and Christ, our life with the Bible, our own interior experience as men and women of faith have only further confirmed our confidence that God is real, Jesus Christ is real, God's grace and salvation are real, and heaven is real. And, of course, I could go on and on, adding further arguments and further support for those I mentioned.

*That is what we find in Psalm 119: an unshakeable confidence in the truth about God that this man finds in the Word of God.* This man's confidence rests not on the circumstances of his life, surely not at all on his feelings. His confidence is that what he has been taught about God and himself, about life, about right and wrong and divine judgment, about the future *is all true!* And

since it is true, his only recourse is to act according to that truth. And, like it or not, much of the time *that is what we really mean when we speak of a relationship with God.*

1. We confess our sins to God and ask for his forgiveness because we have been convinced that we are sinners and only God can forgive us.
2. We know there is forgiveness with God because we are convinced by the Bible's account of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus that he came into the world for no other reason but that we might have life, and have it to the full.
3. We continue to pray when it would seem pointless because we know that God's ways, however mysterious and impenetrable, must be good and right and wise, because he is goodness, righteousness, and wisdom to a perfect degree. He is also love. We know that because of what we have learned about him in the Word of God.
4. We know that he will eventually reward our obedience to him because he is God and so is just. *He told us to pray, so we pray!*
5. We know that heaven awaits the believer in Jesus because God has promised this and God would not lie. We hear the Lord Jesus say, "I go to prepare a place for you, that where I am you may be also," and we realize that no one but Jesus Christ would ever have said that and what he said has to be absolutely true. We realize precisely how and why Christ's resurrection has signified and sealed that promise of eternal life, and it is the inevitable culmination of a host of facts that we are taught in the Word of God and that are confirmed in the life of mankind.

How can we be so sure of this, when many do not believe and when our life experience often challenges our faith? Well, we do not deny that such knowledge is God's gift to us, that he has opened our minds to see what others refuse to see. But we also have lived long enough to know that other views of the world are, when subjected to examination, invariably found to be a mass of contradictions, fail to account for human life as we all know it to be, and require us to believe things we know are manifestly untrue. We are like Peter in the Gospels when asked if he would turn away from the Lord: "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life." There it is again: "the *words* of eternal life," first uttered from the Lord's mouth then written down in his word the Bible. We believe and continue to believe really for the same reasons Peter and the other disciples did. They had advantages that we do not: they saw Jesus, they saw his miracles, they saw him dead, they saw him alive again, they saw him ascend to heaven and we haven't seen any of those things. But they believed finally for the same reason you and I do. They *knew* that Jesus was the Son of God and the Savior of the world! So do we!

As I have read Psalm 119, this is what I find. He can't explain what God is doing or why; he is dismayed with his circumstances, his prayers have so far gone unanswered, but he knows what he knows. As he says in v. 129: "your testimonies are wonderful, therefore my soul keeps them." And then the verses we read at the beginning this evening:

1. "Remember your word to your servant, in which you have made me hope."
2. "This is my comfort in my affliction, that your promise gives me life."
3. "When I think of your rules from of old, I take comfort, O Lord." And so on.

And that is his viewpoint throughout the long psalm. He is counting on the truth and speaking to God in accordance with it and ordering his life according to it.

Indeed, the Bible very thoroughly prepares believers for the mystery of life, for the fact that we will not understand what God is doing in the world or in our own lives or why, that his ways are far above our ways and past finding out. The Psalms, and Psalm 119 among them, bear powerful testimony to this harsh reality. Believing life *is hard*, brutally hard sometimes. It can be dark and believers can come very near to despair. It is not always so, to be sure, it is not even usually so. There is peace and joy and the presence of the Lord known in the soul, and there is a great deal of love as well.

But in, under, around and through those varied experiences of life, is what we know to be true about God, about ourselves, about Jesus Christ, about salvation, about the present and about the future.

And so we pray to God not because our prayers are always answered in a way we can detect, we obey his commandments not because we always very soon see the reward of that obedience, we confess the Lord's sovereignty over the circumstances of his life, not because we can detect his hand orchestrating those circumstances, we rejoice in our salvation, not because our hearts are full to the brim with the joy of the Lord. No. We pray because *we know* God will hear, however little we may be able to see the result. We obey because *we know* that one day we shall be glad to have done so and because *we know* that the way of the transgressor must finally be hard. We confess God's sovereignty because *we know* that the Creator of his world is also its ruler. We rejoice in our salvation because *we know* that Jesus died for sinners and rose from the dead to give new and everlasting life to those who trust in him. *That* is first and foremost, *that* is what most of the time we mean by saying that we have a relationship with God! We have it; it is an objective more than and before it is a subjective reality; that God is there and true to his Word are the things *we know for sure*.