

The Strength of Comfort
Psalm 119:25-32

Well brothers and sisters, as you've heard me say over the past couple of weeks, this current sermon series is a response to a word of encouragement that was given to us a number of weeks back – directing us to look to the Lord for His strength because we would need His strength.

And I pray that as we are learning about God's strength – that you are actually being strengthened by it - and also being equipped to receive even more strength from the Lord.

And so far we've looked at the strength which comes from God's grace, focusing on the passage from Isaiah 40 about waiting on the Lord to renew our strength... and last week we learned about His strength which comes from Wisdom, focusing on what we can learn from the example of Super-wife in Proverbs 31 and how she puts on strength.

And we called her the "super-wife" because the scriptures present her as an inspirational example of being very strong

and capable and powerful... because of Wisdom, in the same way that movies like Wonder Woman and Captain Marvel portray the strength and power of their superheroes as an example to inspire us to rise to life's challenges and do great things.

However as we continue on in this series we need to recognize that even powerful super-heroes have their limits don't they... Sometimes their enemies, the circumstances and challenges they face are simply too much - and our heroes are defeated, and last year's big superhero movie, Avenger's Infinity War, ended in this way.

Thanos was able to capture all six infinity stones which gave him infinitely more power than all the Avengers and their allies combined and he simply snapped his fingers and half of all living beings in the universe disintegrated into dust – including some of our favorite heroes.

And we had to wait a whole year for the sequel, Avengers Endgame, to be released so we could find out what happens

next and how it all ends. Now I won't give away the ending – but at the beginning of the sequel the surviving heroes are all struggling to deal with this defeat and the loss it entailed.

Some of them give up the super-hero role and try to have a normal life, others throw themselves back into the work of running the Avengers organization, some of them try to help people move on with motivational encouragement, and some of them turn to eating, drinking and self-pity.

And I thought that raised an interesting question - When you are the superhero... who do you turn to when you need a hero... when you need help to process grief and loss, to make sense of what has happened, to regain your confidence after a defeat.

Now one of the heroes finds such encouragement from an unexpected encounter with his mother and what she says to him is of great comfort and he finds a sense of renewed strength and purpose in it.

So the point is that even super-heroes need heroes – and brothers and sisters as we grow in strength from God's grace and wisdom this is important for us to remember because the strength of grace and wisdom are not a guarantee that our lives will be exempt from disaster and tragedy.

Now I don't mean to frighten anyone who is feeling anxious about their circumstances and worried about what the future may hold – this is precisely where we need to receive the strength that comes from God's grace and His wisdom so that we are able to face that uncertainty and endure and persevere.

What I'm speaking about is a sense of complacency and over-confidence that can develop in us because life has been going well, we are strong and capable, we have some significant accomplishments under our belt - and we effectively use God's strength to deal with the daily challenges and obstacles that life throws at us - like any super-hero would.

And we start to believe and become convinced that for all practical purposes we are invincible and self-sufficient – oh sure we know that disasters and tragedy happen, but it happens elsewhere and to other people – not us. Do you understand what I’m getting at here?

Now the problem with this scenario is not so much that we are left unprepared for disaster and tragedy; but that should a disaster or tragedy occur in our lives it will effectively pull the rug out from underneath our belief and understanding and trust in God. Do you see how that would happen?

And the questions that we ask in the aftermath of such an event show how it has compromised our foundations. *“Why didn’t God step in and do something? If God is good why did He allow this to happen?”*

And the answers which these questions seem to imply: God **isn’t** good, or if he is then He’s **not** all powerful, or maybe God **doesn’t** exist at all... will wash away the foundations of our

belief... and leave us floundering in despair, cynicism, anger and depression.

And we are left trying to process the tragedy or disaster we’ve experienced by throwing ourselves into our work, or trying to prevent someone else from experiencing this, walking away from our belief and trying to have a “normal life” or wallowing in self destructive eating and drinking and other addictive behaviors.

So – brothers and sisters – when we are the super-heroes, who do we turn to when we need a hero? When we need to be comforted and strengthened by that comfort?

In the Endgame movie the solution is triggered by the random actions of a rat... it comes about completely by chance – but in our reality brothers and sisters the good news is that solution is intentionally provided for us in the scriptures, so let’s take a closer at what God reveals to us in Psalm 119:25-32 about turning to Him for comfort and strength.

Now this first step might seem to be counter-intuitive, if we are struggling with our belief and understanding about God why would we turn to Him after a tragedy which he could have prevented?

But one of the things we learn from this scripture is that we're not the first people to struggle with this dilemma, the person who wrote Psalm 119 is struggling with this as well.

We see this in vs. 25 where he says *"I am laid low in the dust..."* or a more literal translation of the Hebrew is *"my life clings to the dust,"* dust being representative of death and loss. And certainly as we struggle with loss and the depression and cynicism and anger it brings we know it's not something that we can just get over and pull ourselves out of – right? We stuck, it clings to us.

And in vs. 28 he says *"my soul is weary with sorrow"* or more literally translated *"my life leaks out because of grief."* And if you've experienced a particularly tragic loss you know what it is like to feel like your life and will to live is just draining away.

What a powerful description of the trauma that a tragedy or a disaster can have upon us... and what tragedy has the Psalmist experienced that has affected him in such a way?

It was seeing his nation, God's chosen people, being defeated by King Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians... and watching as the city of Jerusalem and the temple where presence of Yahweh dwelt, was captured and destroyed...

And then He experienced being made captive and taken away from the only homeland he had ever known and exiled to a foreign land – to live out the rest of his life among strangers in a culture that would always be threatening to assimilate him and eliminate any remaining sense of who he had known himself to be as an Israelite.

And with this example brothers and sisters, and many others throughout the Old Testament – we should realize that nobody understands better than Israel the questions of "where was God... and why did God allow this to happen?" and what it is like to struggle with this.

But - because God had been so direct and specific in creating Israel to be His Covenant people – and there were so many markers He instituted to reinforce this as their identity and remind them of His Covenant promises - Israel could never quite conclude that God wasn't all-powerful or that He wasn't good, or that He didn't exist.

Thus, even as the Psalmist laments that his *"life clings to the dust"* he immediately asks God to *"preserve me, restore me according to your word"* (vs 25) and with the same breath that he cries out that *"his life leaks out because of grief"* he also cries out *"strengthen me according to your word!"* (vs. 28)

Because while there was no denying the tragedies and disasters that Israel and its people often experienced and how traumatic it was for them, there was also no denying they had a Covenant relationship with God and that He spoke to them and claimed them as His own people.

And what this teaches us brothers and sisters is that when we have experienced tragedy and disaster and we are dealing

with trauma and questioning God and what we believe about Him – we can take that trauma to God and spell it out to Him in graphic details and we can hold God accountable to His promises and what He's said to us and ask Him to speak to us.

And I pray that you hear this now... and that the Holy Spirit ingrains it into your heart and mind now... so that it becomes something unquestionable for you as it was for the Psalmist.

So that if you endure a tragedy this reaction of crying out to God and asking God to speak to you will be expressed as a force of habit.

Because brothers and sisters when you are in such trauma it's very hard to find the strength to make yourself do something that you are not accustomed to doing – do you understand what I'm saying?

So hear this now – and ask the Holy Spirit to put it deep into your heart and mind... Amen?

And the basic truth in calling out to God to speak to you during such situations is that it brings comfort to us, and in that comfort we find strength.

Just as one of the Avengers was comforted by what his mother said to him...

Just as it was comforting when we could have our parents speak to us when we were younger and facing challenges and they could tell us that everything was going to be ok.

It is comforting for us to have God speak to us and speak into our situation, and brothers and sisters the good news that we need to hear and believe this morning is that God wants to speak to us, He does speak to us, and He has spoken to us and we can receive His word and be comforted and strengthened by it.

So here is another truth that we need to ask the Holy Spirit to ingrain into us: The scripture is God's Word to us, the Bible is

God speaking to us, believe it and read it and expect and allow God to speak to you and into your situation...

Listen to some of the things that God had said to Israel as part of the scriptures that the Psalmist could receive as God speaking to him in his situation and find comfort in and be strengthened by.

Isaiah 51:3 *"The Lord will surely comfort Zion and will look with compassion on all her ruins; he will make her deserts like Eden, her wastelands like the garden of the Lord. Joy and gladness will be found in her, thanksgiving and the sound of singing."*

Jeremiah 29:11 *"For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future."*

These are specific Words spoken by God through His prophets, recorded as scripture for the nation of Israel in their time of exile to comfort and strengthen them.

So how do we determine which specific parts of the Scripture are spoken for us and our situations to comfort and strengthen us? Well brothers and sisters I believe we find some guidance from studying our scripture passage in Ps 119.

Now Psalm 119 is composed of 22 sections, one for each letter of the Hebrew alphabet and each section contains eight verses for a total of 176 verses, and every verse, except vs. 3, 37, 90, 122, contains one of eight words used to describe how God speaks to us.

In the section that we read this morning it looks like this:

²⁵ I am laid low in the dust;

preserve my life according to your **word**. (*dabar*)

²⁶ I gave an account of my ways and you answered me;

teach me your **decrees**. (*hoq*)

²⁷ Cause me to understand the way of your **precepts**, (*piqwud*)

that I may meditate on your wonderful deeds.

²⁸ My soul is weary with sorrow;

strengthen me according to your **word**. (*dabar*)

²⁹ Keep me from deceitful ways;

be gracious to me and teach me your **law**. (*torah*)

³⁰ I have chosen the way of faithfulness;

I have set my heart on your **laws**. (*mishpat*)

³¹ I hold fast to your **statutes**, Lord; (*eduth*) do not let me be put to shame.

³² I run in the path of your **commands**, (*mitzvah*)

for you have broadened my understanding.

The point here is that there are nuances and variations in how God speaks to us - and if you look you will see that each description has a corresponding and appropriate action for it. For example in vs. 26 the psalmist describes how he lives, and God answered with His “decrees” (*hoq*) which is a word that is very close to the Hebrew word for Wisdom. There is a very strong biblical connection between how one lives and wisdom... they need to go together.

And in vs. 30 the psalmist says he’s chosen the way of faithfulness, so he has set his heart on God’s laws (*mishpat*) which is often translated as justice. Again there is a very strong connection in scripture between being Faithful to God as a covenant partner and treating people justly as an expression of that faithfulness to God ... they go together.

So brothers and sisters, I see this as scriptural teaching which confirms God has different ways of speaking to us in the scriptures, and this lines up the fact that we find different kinds of writing in the scripture – like Wisdom writings, Law, Historical Narratives, Gospel, Letters and so on - which

correspond to the different needs we may have or how we need to be spoken to.

There are times we need God to speak to us about his (*hoq*) wisdom, there are times we need God to speak to us about his (*mishpat*) justice – and as we have been discovering this morning, there are times we need God to speak to our spirit and with His Word revive us.

And we see that dynamic in both vs. 25 and vs 28. They start out describing how life is close to death and fading away and so God's Word (Dabar) is requested, and in vs. 25 the effect of the Word is (*chayah*) to revive and quicken back to life to take it away from death, and in vs. 28 the effect of the Word is (*quwm*) to cause to stand up, rise up, to put the vigor and strength back into life!

So brothers and sisters we can determine which parts of the Scriptures are specifically spoken by God for us and our situations where we need comfort and strength, by specifically

listening for Him speaking in the scriptures about bringing life back from death.

Now – don't misunderstand me, I'm not saying that the rest of scripture isn't important or relevant or that we can ignore it. What I'm saying is that when we have gone through a tragedy or a disaster and we struggling with the depression and anger and cynicism and loss that we have experienced and we feel like we are dying... we need to hear God speak to us about resurrection!

Brothers and sisters is it not a coincidence that verses 25 and 28 in Psalm 119 connect bringing life back from death with God's Word (Dabar). It is a prophetic foreshadowing of how God's Word will become flesh in Jesus Christ and how Jesus went through death and God raised Him back to life – eternal life... a life that will never again be affected by death.

In Jesus Christ we have an everlasting demonstration by God that His Word brings life back from death – and all who put their faith and trust in Jesus Christ can be comforted and

assured that tragedy and disaster in this life do not have the last word for how our lives will turn out.

Rather we can be comforted and strengthened by hearing God speak to us in the scriptures that He is the God who brings life out of death, good out of evil, and He is able to work in any and all circumstances to bring about life and good! Amen?!

So brothers and sisters – whatever circumstances you may find yourself in this morning... I invite you to listen and hear the good news as God speaks His Word to us from the scriptures to comfort us, give us life and be strengthened.

Let me close by reading Romans 8:31-39...

³¹ What, then, shall we say in response to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? ³² He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?

³³ Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. ³⁴ Who then is the one who condemns? No one. Christ Jesus who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us.

³⁵ Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? ³⁶ As it is written: “For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.”

³⁷ No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. ³⁸ For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, ³⁹ neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Hear the Word of the Lord – and receive comfort and strength. Amen!