

*Dealing with
Stressful Times*

Carl H. Stevens Jr. is pastor of Greater Grace Church located in Baltimore, Maryland. Pastor Stevens is also chancellor of Maryland Bible College & Seminary and host of the international Christian radio program "The Grace Hour." This booklet was created from messages preached by Pastor Stevens.

Pastor Stevens can be seen weekly on cable television stations throughout the United States. Call us for information regarding programming in your area.

All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise noted, are from the King James Version. Italics for emphasis are ours.

GRACE PUBLICATIONS

P.O. BOX 18715

BALTIMORE, MD 21206

Printed in Baltimore, Maryland, U.S.A.

Copyright © 1997

Cover Photo: © 1996 SoftKey International Inc. and its licensors

Grace Publications is a ministry of
Greater Grace World Outreach, Inc.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION 5

Chapter 1 7

THE STORY BEHIND THE PSALM

Chapter 2 12

REMEMBER THE WORD

Chapter 3 18

INNER RESOURCES AND OUTWARD REFLECTION

CONCLUSION 23

INTRODUCTION

Psalm 119 has always been one of the most loved psalms in the Bible because of its supreme emphasis upon the Word of God. In one way or another, almost each of the 176 verses in Psalm 119 makes reference to the Word. Perhaps the central verse would be verse 89: “Forever, O LORD, thy word is settled in heaven.”

We live in an age of stress. In 2 Timothy 3:1, Paul describes “perilous times” in the last days: “But understand this, that in the last days will come (set in) perilous times of *great stress* and trouble [hard to deal with and hard to bear]” (Amplified Translation). Why are the last days characterized by “great stress”? I believe it is because many Christians—though they may have good knowledge of the Bible—do not have sufficient *inner resources* in the Word of God. Instead of internalizing daily pressures, we must learn to internalize God’s Word through meekness and humility. Then we will have an inner,

spiritual bulwark of truth, ready to face whatever comes our way from the world around us.

Few believers in this day and age have been delivered unto death because of their faith. Unless we “study its mysteries and slight not its histories...,” it is possible to read the Bible without identifying with the suffering of the children of God throughout time.

As individuals, families, and churches face the inevitable troubles and temptations that will come, it is important that we face them with inward strength, inward joy, and inward recall of the Word of God. We are not only to remember words of truth but also to live in the power and authority of that truth.

In this booklet, we will discover the unique story behind the writing of Psalm 119 and gain insight into how the believers at that time in history dealt with the unparalleled pressures and stresses that they faced.

Chapter One

THE STORY BEHIND THE PSALM

Though most people assume that David was the author of Psalm 119, ancient isagogics reveals a very different story. This psalm was probably written by Ezra's father, Seraiah, and later completed by Ezra during the march of the nation of Israel into Babylonian captivity.

Every nation, whether professing to know God or not, is still subject to the laws of God (Ezra 6:22, Jeremiah 4:9). As great nations rise and fall, throughout history we can trace a pattern to understand *why* they fall. There is a definite progression, which we refer to as the five cycles of judgment or cycles of discipline.

In the first cycle, the spirit of Laodicea creeps in (Revelation 3:14-17). People settle on their lees, and evil trends go unchecked as people who once had convictions lose their edge. Secondly, the trends of socialism, liberalism, and immorality are endorsed by the society at large.

Thirdly, because the foundations have been weakened, that nation suffers violence and crime, including perverted sexual behavior. The fourth cycle of discipline is economic disaster. Finally, in the fifth cycle, comes military insurrection.

Israel was under the fifth, and *last*, cycle of discipline as a nation. Under this cycle, individuals lose personal freedom, as well as national freedom, and may be taken captive by a foreign nation, as was the case for the nation of Israel.

The Setting for the March

It is vital that we understand the conditions that the Jewish people endured during their march to Babylon. The march was in two parts: from Jerusalem to Lachish, then from Lachish on to Babylon. In the daytime, the captives were chained together as they marched. All babies and children under ten years of age were killed because they were unable to march. Most of the older people and the infirm died on the way, unable to tolerate the hardship.

To add to the difficulty of the march, the people were given no change of clothing, no provision to wash, and what food they were given was indescribably bad—including rotten

raw pork. The Chaldean soldiers would mock their prisoners, eating their fare in full view of the Jewish people.

Every night when they set up camp, the soldiers would get drunk. They would beat their male prisoners and force them to watch as their wives were brutally raped and molested in front of them. These perverted soldiers also raped and molested the teenage girls and boys. Can you imagine the horror of knowing that every day you would have to march for twelve or thirteen hours with practically no food, and then to face being beaten or raped every night?

A Teenager Named Ezra

Among the multitudes of Jewish people on the march to Babylon was a teenager named Ezra. Ezra was about fifteen years old at the time of the captivity. Here was a young man who fell in love with the Word of God. He had already received extensive teaching in the Scriptures for at least six years. Because Ezra had internalized what he had been taught, he was able to face this crucial time with inner resources—he had the mind of Christ! External pressures and trials were unable to destroy him.

Though Ezra's father probably wrote most

of Psalm 119 during the march, he was later killed in Babylon. Careful study reveals that Ezra probably took his father's writings, put them into files, and finished the writing himself. Ezra 7:6 says he was a "ready scribe in the law of Moses, which the Lord God of Israel had given" when he went up from Babylon.

Every day as the people of Israel marched, Ezra's father would teach them the Word of God. Remember, the people were chained to each other, and the soldiers, following close behind, didn't prevent the people from saying whatever they wanted. Because of the raping, molesting, and beatings that went on at night in the enemy's camp, Ezra's father would wait until late at night and early in the morning to meditate on the Word that was hidden in his heart. During the day, he would teach all that he had learned from God in the dark and quiet times.

It was this daily teaching of the Word of God that preserved a remnant of the people on the march to Babylon as well as during the long years of captivity. Eventually, God reversed the captivity of Israel, and the remnant was allowed to return to their land. Nehemiah led the first group back to Jerusalem and successfully rebuilt

the wall around the city. Later, Ezra led a second group back to Jerusalem and rebuilt the temple.

The Files

Psalm 119 was written in twenty-two “files,” each containing eight verses. There was one file for each of the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet. Every file had a specific theme. In the remainder of this booklet, we will consider the *zayin* file (verses 49-56 of Psalm 119). The King James spells it *zain*, but the correct rendering is *zayin*. This file deals with the power of the Word of God. Originally, *zayin* meant “weapon,” and later came to mean “sword.” Here in Psalm 119, it speaks of the Word of God as an offensive sword. The Word of God must be inside the soul of every believer as an offensive weapon against an invisible enemy.

Chapter Two

REMEMBER THE WORD

“Remember the word unto thy servant, upon which thou hast caused me to hope” (Psalm 119:49). The first word I want to consider is “remember.” In Hebrew grammar, this word is a *kal imperative*. The *kal* stem speaks of a simple action, and the imperative is a command. This could be translated, “It is imperative that I be able to recall your Word.” To the Holy Spirit, this would be a simple thing.

Then the psalmist uses the word “hope.” Here, the grammar indicates the *hiphil* stem and the imperfect tense. That’s why he says, “thou hast *caused* me to hope.” The *hiphil* is the causative stem. It is only God’s Word which causes us to have hope. The imperfect tense indicates that this hope would continue.

Try to imagine with me what Ezra’s father was saying. He has seen terrible things happening all around him—the men being beaten, the

women and the young people being raped and molested. He has seen his own son suffering in the midst of these devastating trials, and he realizes that the only way they will ever get through it is to have inner resources—divine, inner resources from the Word of God.

Satan can attack your body, but he can't affect your soul unless you *let* him. People can kill your body, but they can never take away your inner resources. When circumstances overwhelm us, just as with Ezra and the people of Israel, we too can use the Word of God as an offensive weapon to protect our souls.

Quickened by the Word

“This is my comfort in my affliction: for thy word hath quickened me” (Psalm 119:50). “This” refers to the Word of God. The word “affliction” is not the best translation in the English. It really speaks of unbelievable supernatural pressures. Please remember their predicament: They had no change of clothes, no way to wash, very little (and barely palatable) food—all compounded by nightly rape, battery, and molestations. That would equal supernatural pressure for anyone! And yet, the writer finds something to comfort him—the incomparable Word of God.

Then comes the great confession: "For thy word hath quickened me." The Hebrew word for "quickened" is *chayah*. Though it can be translated as "Thy Word has *caused me to live*," here the meaning is more closely rendered, "Thy word has *refreshed* me." Ezra's father was a man who fell in love with the Word of God. The Word ruled his soul and controlled him. The external pressures were unable to affect his spirit.

Sometimes when I see people crying over their circumstances, and then I read this psalm, I realize that we don't know a thing about *real* problems. We've never had troubles to this degree. Think of it. Your wife and daughter are dying, weakened from the abuse; you are tortured daily, eventually to be killed by your captors; your son is raped and there is nothing you can do. These are real problems! But the writer of this psalm was so rooted and grounded in the Word that he was able to say, "This is my comfort in my affliction: for [the Word of God] hath quickened me."

"The proud have had me greatly in derision: yet have I not declined from thy law" (Psalm 119:51). "The proud" were the Chaldean soldiers who were doing all these horrible things to God's people. But the writer says that he did not

decline from the *law*, speaking of God's categorical doctrine. It would have been so easy for him to fall into decline under all the adverse circumstances, but his confession was, "This is my comfort. I have not declined from Your Word under severe stress and outward disaster and tragedy."

Comforted by Remembering

"I remembered thy judgments of old, O Lord; and have comforted myself" (Psalm 119:52). "Judgments" refers to the Scriptures. The revelation and explanation of the Scriptures will make a judgment. For example, the Scriptures tell me how to be blessed. They give me a judgment for blessing, a judgment for favor, and a judgment for promotion. Often in the Old Testament, the Scriptures were called judgments (plural) because they produced decisions for the people who chose to receive them.

We could translate verse 52, "I remember thy *Scriptures* of old, O Lord...." But the most beautiful part of this verse is "...and have comforted myself." This will make you weep when you understand the story behind it. "I have comforted" is in a *hithpael* stem in the Hebrew text. The *hithpael* is reflexive. Ezra's father is saying, "I don't

have a single person that can help me—not one. So what am I going to do? I’m going to comfort myself, in my soul, with the Scriptures I have on the inside. My body is going through hell, but my soul is focused on the Word of God through the endowment of the Holy Spirit.” In spite of his circumstances, he was able to receive the comforting provision of the Word of God.

A Plan to Surpass the Problem

There will never be a situation under heaven where a trial or a little detail of life will be greater than God’s perfect plan for you. God’s perfect plan for us may include all kinds of things happening—both good and bad. But when our hearts are fixed (Psalm 57:7), and we speak to ourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, making a melody in our hearts unto the Lord (Ephesians 5:19), then we can celebrate a fellowship with God *Himself* inside our souls, even when bad things do happen.

The truth is, we are not always going to have people around us as support systems. At one time or another, every one of us will come to a place where we will not be able to have friends or family with us. The things that happened to the nation of Israel in the fifth cycle of discipline

could happen to us in our lifetime. I'm not saying that it will. It is not a threat against America or any other country. I'm just saying that the possibility is there.

In the midst of outward calamities, the psalmist was enjoying an inner celebration. God had placed a wall around his soul, but not around his body. Doctrine builds up spiritual walls to protect the soul. Certainly, Ezra's father understood truth like few people ever do.

"Horror hath taken hold upon me because of the wicked that forsake thy law" (Psalm 119:53). The sense of the word "horror" could be better expressed by saying, "Suddenly, all at once, something shocking, something completely unexpected happened to me; I never thought it would happen." That is the way accidents are. That's the way cancer is. Or death. You're sitting next to someone at the table. He's fine. He doesn't have any pain, and the next thing you know, he has a heart attack and God takes him home. It's so sudden.

Chapter Three

INNER RESOURCES AND OUTWARD REFLECTION

“Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom; teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord” (Colossians 3:16). This verse teaches us the principle of inner strength. It is the reason we must have the Word of God dwelling richly in our souls. It’s an absolute must! Only then can we go from strength to strength, leaving a dry, barren desert place as a well of water (Psalm 84:6-7). That’s exactly what Ezra’s dad did, and that’s what Ezra did later on. After going through this devastating trial, they left the treasure of Psalm 119 for us today.

It’s disturbing to me that, with all of the material provisions we have in America, we can still find something to complain about. Even those with lower incomes have access to receiv-

ing aid in this country, though the provision may be very humble. Yet, we find reasons to complain. Contrast that with the nearly inhuman conditions experienced by the writer of Psalm 119. Nevertheless, the Word was dwelling richly in those who received it. They magnified God's inner provision over the outward adversities.

"Thy statutes have been my songs in the house of my pilgrimage" (Psalm 119:54). After doing some research on the word "statutes," I learned that it speaks of the Scriptures correlated into orderly themes. In other words, Scriptures were arranged in an orderly fashion, compacted and condensed into very specific and precise themes or subjects. Today, we would call them "categories." These scriptural themes became the psalmist's songs in the house of his pilgrimage. He didn't have an earthly house, not even a bed to sleep in, but he had heaven as his home, his only dwelling place, his only covering.

Songs for the Night Seasons

"The words of God, dwelling in my soul in categories, have given me songs," said the psalmist. The New Testament commentary on Psalm 119:54 is Ephesians 5:19: "Speaking to yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual

songs, singing and making melody in you heart to the Lord.” The unusual thing about Ezra’s father was that not a single thing caused him to react.

“I have remembered thy name, O Lord, in the night, and have kept thy law” (Psalm 119:55). The psalmist was thinking about the *name* of God. Perhaps he was thinking about Exodus 33:19, or Exodus 34:5-6: “And the LORD descended in the cloud, and stood with [Moses] there, and proclaimed the name of the LORD. And the LORD passed by before him, and proclaimed, The LORD, The LORD God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abundant in goodness and truth.”

To think upon kindness, mercy, and forgiveness at a time like this was incredible! He could have been thinking about how the soldiers would come and rape the women and the young people that night. He could have been thinking about how much his stomach ached from hunger. But he didn’t. He thought about lovingkindness, mercy, and grace when there was no outward expression of these attributes from anyone—it was all a treasure that he possessed on the inside.

It is very significant that the writer said he

remembered the Lord's name "in the night" because the soldiers inflicted all of these atrocities on the people at night. He was saying, "When I see them coming to abuse us and rape us again, my soul just thinks of you, Lord. Whatever happens will happen. I cannot change it. In my soul, I will think of you and celebrate inside with what you have said in your Word, with your promises!"—all that he learned from the teaching of the prophet Jeremiah (Jeremiah 31:15-17).

Statutes, Precepts, and Testimonies

Verse 55 ends with the words "[I] have kept thy law (*torah*)."

One of the many meanings of the Hebrew *torah* is *doctrine*—how to think with God precisely.

Remember, God's "judgments" refer to the revelation of the Scriptures, guiding us to make proper decisions. "Law," in simple terms, means the whole Word of God as it was kept at that particular period in history, the totality of all the inspired books written. "Statutes" means scriptures correlated into orderly, precise themes.

The *zayin* file concludes with verse 56 as a declaration of God's faithful provision: "This I had, because I kept thy precepts." Now, we add one more word: "precepts," which means the

authority of God ruling in our souls through His Word. In precepts, the Word of God becomes the inner authority of the soul through grace. As a result, our lives declare the *testimonies* of the Lord—evidence that the authority of the Word of God is our provision in stressful times.

CONCLUSION

Psalm 119:49-56

Remember the word unto thy servant, upon which thou hast caused me to hope.

This is my comfort in my affliction: for thy word hath quickened me.

The proud have had me greatly in derision: yet have I not declined from thy law.

I remembered thy judgments of old, O LORD; and have comforted myself.

Horror hath taken hold upon me because of the wicked that forsake thy law.

Thy statutes have been my songs in the house of my pilgrimage.

I have remembered thy name, O LORD, in the night, and have kept thy law.

This I had, because I kept thy precepts.

These words will never be the same to me.

The reason Ezra's father was able to remain so relaxed and so peaceful in the face of natural

and supernatural pressures was because he simply accepted the Word of God as his provision. There is no indication in Psalm 119 that he ever prayed for God to remove the pressures and trials. If he did, it is not recorded. All we can see is one reference after another to the awesome power of the Word of God. He lived with a song in his soul, and a celebration in his heart. He was able to comfort himself when no one else could because he drew upon the inner resources of truth stored in his heart (Psalm 119:11).

How do we as Christians deal with stressful times today? The same way Ezra and his father dealt with them nearly 2,500 years ago—through the authority of the Word of God becoming resident inside the soul. This comes through receiving daily instruction from the Word of God and allowing it to dwell in us richly until the Word becomes an inner resource to draw upon for any outward pressure or circumstance.