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Sermon preached by Mr J H Gosden
at the Aged Pilgrim's Home, Brighton
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Psalm 119 v 116

Uphold me according unto Thy word, that I
may live, and let me not be ashamed of my hope

One of our greatest sins, and the most fruitful source of weakness, is our strength, our independence, and our consequent prayerlessness. To live for long without prayer means, where the life of God is, a very unhealthy state of soul; and yet it is natural to us to desire to be independent. To be compelled to apply to the unseen God, to pray to One who is invisible, intangible, and to ask Him for communications that can be received and felt and known, this is contrary to fallen reason, contrary to our fallen nature. And I say this is one of the most fruitful sources of weakness, when we feel strong, and in consequence of that strength, do not pray. I do not mean now, of course, that we should leave the form of prayer. We may often use the form without praying. Perhaps not often do we really pray. Prayer comes from heaven. It is the life of God in the soul. The liveliness of that life is greatly manifested in prayer. But in order that our carnal strength and confidence should be overcome, God sees it fit and necessary to bring nature into weakness, to cause us to know the strength of our opposers, our enemies, to know the power of the devil, the weakness of our resistance, causes us to realise something of the power of our old man, with all its depravity, and that weakens us, and makes us cry out, and we have to say again and again, "Can it be possible that the Spirit is in us, that we have an interest in redeeming blood, that we are going to heaven?" And so we are compelled to pray for very weakness, feeling that if God does not strengthen us, communicate strength to us, and uphold us, we shall fall, we shall be utterly thrown down and undone. It is a very solemn truth, that very little prayer escapes our hearts unless we are in need. And our felt need is principally the result of the Spirit's instruction of our heart into our

sinner'ship, the difficulties of the way to heaven, the solemn importance of being right for eternity, and our utter unworthiness of any notice of God. It is a mystery, is prayer. Weakest souls can wield the weapon of prayer best, one said. It is difficult to believe it, and yet it is the truth. It is when God weakens people, and especially by giving them to see and feel that they are sinners, that they cannot do anything adequately, properly, or without sin, that their best is dyed and stained with sin, that they cannot keep a blessing, nor can they keep themselves near the Lord, nor their affections stayed on things above, without the Lord's mercy and continual revivings. And this is very solemn and shameful, and yet brings one into a state where prayer is acceptable. The way of prayer is desirable to such a man. Oh, the sins that are in us, and we have committed in averting ourselves from prayer, turning even away from promptings! Our self-confidence and independence make prayer obnoxious. But the same man sometimes deems it a mercy to be allowed to pray.

The Psalmist asks here, "Uphold me according to Thy word". Here is a weak man who cannot stand without being upheld. Can you stand without being upheld? You may stand in forms and ceremonies, you may stand in self-confidence and a profession of religion, without feeling weakness, and therefore without needing to be upheld; but if you are living people and the Lord does not communicate with you, and lets the angry powers of hell assault you, and lets your corruptions rise, and you find yourselves cleaving to the dust, and that your strength decays, then you will be glad, as you are enabled, to pray for upholding mercy. "Let me not fall; take me by the hand; uphold me according to Thy word". This is the rule that faith goes on, in prayer. The word of God is the rule of faith. We can never really pray for anything that is not according to the word of God. If we do, it is not prayer. Submission to God's revealed will is a principle of grace, and it operates by the Holy Spirit, and men pray only by the Holy Spirit.

"According to Thy word". What has the Lord said in this connection? Well, one word that runs through the Scriptures is

this, a gracious invitation to sinners to put their trust in the Lord at all times: "Ye people, pour out your heart before Him; God is a refuge for us." And through the Scriptures, again and again, you will find the Holy Spirit taking pains, as it were, to encourage weak, helpless, defenceless sinners to put their trust in Him. And another word in the 40 Isaiah enables one sometimes to come to the Lord, where it said, "They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength". And God, when He says, "They shall", pledges His faithfulness, and the sinner says, "Lord, do as Thou hast said". "I have called upon Thee", said the Psalmist, "answer me according to Thy faithfulness, and Thy righteousness". And it is a wonderful thing (you will find it so) to find that the Lord does not forbid the sinner to trust in Him, that your weakness is the result of your sinnership, though not of allowed sin, of your sin, your corruptions, disallowed, but rising. May we never have peace with sin, never be strong in the prevalence of sins. If we are enabled to fight, and fighting makes us weak, then we shall need the Lord to uphold us in this, to uphold us in fighting the good fight of faith. Oh, the temptations there are to give in, and the solemn Scriptures that manifest that many do give in, fall back, walk no more with the Lord; give themselves over, and God gives them over, to hardness and impenitence! You may say, perhaps, the Lord never gives His own children up to that. But when faith is weak, and we can hardly exercise it at all, and when many troubles corrode our mind, and temptations come in thick and fast, then what can you do without God, without prayer? Is not this a suitable prayer, "Uphold me according to Thy word, that I may live"? My life, Lord, my soul's life, is in danger, that is, as to living; for all sin, and all temptation and all carnality, and all the devil's power, are against the real life of the soul.

"Uphold me according to Thy word, that I may live" If we give way, if sin has the victory over us, then our life has gone, and often it smites us down to the ground, and this is the direction faith takes: "Uphold me according to Thy word". And the life of the word is this also, the Lord has said in His blessed word ^{look 4 v 4. and elsewhere} Oh, the use of the Scriptures! Some of us lose a

great deal by inattention to the Scriptures. I am perfectly aware that, unless the Spirit makes them spirit and life to us, they do us no present good, but if we are enabled to pay due regard to the Scriptures of truth, we shall find them speak to us, and they will be a life to us. I refer to this Scripture for the moment, where the Lord says that when the enemy cometh in like a flood the Spirit of the Lord shall raise up a standard against him. Now, that will uphold a man, a poor weak trembling sinner, with the enemy coming in like a flood, enough to sweep him into destruction, and making him sometimes literally shiver. "The Spirit of the Lord shall lift up a standard against him". In the margin it is: "Shall put him to flight" How does He put him to flight? Why, he lifts up before the eye of the poor sinner, before the eye of faith, a precious Christ, a mightier than the devil, and that strengthens the sinner and rallies him to the Lord Jesus. And the Holy Spirit lifts up this standard. When men are rallied to Christ by faith, the devil goes. Faith is strengthened and the devil slinks off. "Uphold me according to Thy word." Now, when the tempter comes against the object of your faith, it is a weakening thing. When he suggests against the reasonableness of a sinner resting his eternal interests upon One who is invisible, who was crucified, upon the merits of His death, - O, the dreadful suggestions the devil makes upon the reasonableness of this! I would not enlarge, but a hint is enough. If this is gone, we are gone. We have no life, no hope, and no ground to stand on, and our religion is undone, and so the devil seeks frequently to assail the believer on the ground of the Object of his faith. And now what we want is to be upheld according to the word of God, and that is that the Spirit should take of the things of Jesus and show them to us, that they should be made real to us. They are real. O, but faith, when assailed, is very weak: And the best thing that weak faith can do is to pray to be strengthened. If you are enabled to ask the Lord to uphold you, He will do it. "Whatsoever ye shall ask in My Name, I will do it". "The Spirit shall receive of My things and show them unto you". Now when He does that, when He, for instance, reveals just a glimpse of the immortal Person of the Lord Jesus, you can never express what you see in a glimpse of Christ by the

Spirit. How it strengthens you! How glorious He is in His Person! Though you cannot comprehend infinitude, you believe He is God, and how you see that His work is eternal and infinitely virtuous. "With Him is plenteous redemption. Let Israel hope in the Lord." Such a word will strengthen you and do you good. "Uphold me according to Thy word". And the man endures in resisting evil, in the way of prayer, in hoping in God's mercy, by seeing Him who is invisible as He is made again and again real to faith by the Spirit.

Then we need the Lord to uphold us in the way of His commandments, to uphold us in His ways, that we may not tire in them. He charges His people with growing weary. "Oh, Israel, thou hast been weary of me". A terrible charge. A charge that some of us dare not resist. We would say that the Lord is just in making that charge sometimes to us, of us. It is not only weariness of the flesh. The Lord knows the difference. He, in great kindness, said to His disciples, "The spirit is willing but the flesh is weak". But sometimes we may so get cleaving to the dust and so corroded with the difficulties, burdens, of this life, as to be unsavoury. That is a perilous case. You may look into the Scriptures and get many a shock as you see your case described. Then you need the Lord to uphold you. And how does He do it? "According to His word"; and what is that? To revive you. "Wilt Thou not revive us again, that Thy people may rejoice in Thee?" What is reviving? It is communicating freshness, that is a refreshing of the Lord's presence. Ah, my friends, if you get a visit from the Lord, a little touch, if He gives you to taste a little of His grace, and feel a little of those sacred winds from the everlasting mountains, that will uphold you in His ways and afresh detach you from sublunary joys; and we need the Lord to do it. The Psalmist said "All my springs are in Thee", and it is so. Every renewing must come from the Lord. We have no springs in ourselves. The Lord has promised though, that respecting His people, the Spirit shall be in them as a well of water, springing up in them as a well of life. But the well must be replenished from the spring, and that spring is in God.

"Uphold me according to Thy word". We need the Lord to uphold us in the way of love. Iniquity abounding, the love of many waxes cold, and alas, in these days so much iniquity is seen, so many disappointments are had, so many times one has to drink the wine of astonishment, that one almost understands what David said in one place, "All men are liars", and you may find your heart quite unresponsive. You feel there is no going out to the people of God, the things of God, the truth of God, and a sad case it is - lack of love. Now, if the Lord does not uphold us in our love, we shall get into that condition. And how does the Lord do it? Why, by rising with the warm beams of His own love upon the heart, giving you to feel a little touch of it, and that melts the heart. Just the least sensation of redeeming love, a hint of it even on your conscience by the Spirit, will move you, and you will begin to flow out to Him. And He does it too by showing you the excellency of the people of God. It is very sweet to love the people of God because they are the people of God. But when we are in an unsavoury condition, and begin to think that all men are liars, that is a very sad state, and we need God to come and show to us that His grace is a beautiful work, that His people are redeemed, and that we trust we are redeemed by the same blood, that the same hope, the same Lord and Master, the same desires, the same troubles, fears and comforts are enjoyed sometimes, the same truth of God's word, and this unites the heart, and then that Scripture assumes a particular significance in the word the Lord has said to His people: "Endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" Now we may grow very careless in that matter if we are left to a censorious harsh judgment. When iniquity abounds and the love waxes cold, we may forget that Scripture. Suspicion may be rife, and malice even may rise in the heart, and O what a havoc the devil will make, and your comfort will go, your spirit will be eaten up by it, and you will be in a tottering condition. It is in love and union that hope and joy and peace increase. It is the unity of the Spirit, it is having one common hope, one Redeemer, one Object of love, and trust, which is the basis of the union; and says the Lord "Endeavour to keep it." Now, that endeavour, is to be only by the Spirit's help. O, have you never

gone aside to confess your coldness, your hasty judgment of them? And then, when you see the work of grace in this one and that one, the contrition of heart, the humility, the love of God, it draws out your heart to them, and you are strengthened by it. Unity does strengthen. It is a proverb, "Unity is strength"; but the people of God only have this spiritual union. They are united in the truth, and when that is preserved in the bond of peace, that will strengthen those who are thus bonded together. And this strengthens, edifies, binds up. O, but we feel that we need the Lord to uphold us in it! The people of God have a relationship, a sacred, spiritual, and eternal relationship, one with the other, because they are related to the Lord Himself. They are called "Holy brethren, partakers of the heavenly calling", debtors to mercy, hoppers in God's goodness in Christ, and hope one day to be in heaven under one Shepherd. Why, my friends, there is every reason to love the people of God. Not that you will love their crooked ways, but for what they are, and for Him in whom they trust, and whom they desire to honour.

"Uphold me according unto Thy word". And there is another thing, and that is very close. We need the Lord to uphold us in secret prayer. The beginning of a bad state of soul is the neglect of secret prayer, and the devil will, with your old nature, seek to prevail against you in this, suggesting many things that need attention, that so much secret prayer is not compatible with your busy life, that you must be up and doing. Or he may, as Huntington says, be like a sleepy devil in you. Now we need the Lord to uphold us. No one who knows what the life of God is could say that secret prayer is an easy matter. It is one of the most spiritual and secret things one can be occupied in, and it is well if we are exercised in the matter of the proportion between our public religion and our secret religion. And you may be assured that, if your public religion is the principal part, there is something wrong. The real life of the child of God is hidden in secret. Jesus Christ is most worshipped then, and the most spiritual exercise in prayer is in secret. Then you need the Holy Ghost. And it is the most easy thing, according to nature, to grow weary of this continual

seeking after the Spirit of prayer. You will often have to pray for a prayer in secret. It is easy for a man to say "I cannot pray. I will go and do this and that", and the devil will get you in that snare. And if he drives you from your knees, he may ensnare you to a great extent.

Uphold me in this, to approach the throne of grace with respect to my soul's case, its health, and my walking before God. We need to be held up in this most unnatural, rather supernatural, or spiritual exercise of secret prayer. And it is a most profitable exercise. You may get so driven, so pent up, so turned inside-out, so weakened, so darkened, so corrupted, you may feel so distant from God, that you are compelled to pray. And you feel sometimes a little help in it, and then you say, "I will give myself unto prayer; every occasion must go, I will get to my knees". Not merely formally, but really, you will be after God. And there is profit in it. The Lord does not always let you seek His face and not find it, but gives you access, looks, smiles, touches, attracts. There is real profit in secret prayer. It makes your face shine sometimes, whereas it was foul when you went to prayer. O, but we do need to be upheld in this. I don't for a moment suggest that one may not be busy in their lawful calling, and be at the same time engaged in prayer; but do see that your secret prayer is in proportion to your public profession.

"Uphold me according to Thy word". Now, one other thing. It is really implied in what I have said, but I feel particularly at times the need of upholding in a willingness to receive conviction, and to make acknowledgement of sin. O, but how much need there is for conviction! If we have peace with sin, and the Lord does not upset that peace and bring us in guilty, if we have life at all, it will be a poor life. One of the most healthy things is to fall under conviction, and to make acknowledgement. And, dear friends, do let me mention to you what James Bourne says: "Seek short reckonings". You may not have much outside religion, but you will have a better root. Seek short reckonings; seek to have discovered to you your sins. It is gospel, this. The child of God loves to be convicted of sins and

to be allowed to clear himself in confession. This will make you acquainted with Jesus Christ and the virtue of His atonement. O, and it will make you deeply thankful that the atonement that He has made is a fountain always full, and free, and effectual, a fountain opened for sin and uncleanness. Dear friends, don't be afraid of conviction; be afraid of sin, but not of conviction. It is healthy, and to confess sin is the next best thing to enjoying the forgiveness of it. "Only acknowledge thine iniquity".

"Uphold me according to Thy word, that I may live". And this living that the soul wants is not a poor miserable dragging life. We often, many of us, grovel rather than live. O, but if the Lord uphold us according to His word, the words of His precepts and testimonies, inclining our hearts to His testimonies and not to covetousness, we shall live, and be diligent and be made fat. All the fears, the feelings and hopes you have are within divine sovereignty; but there are real sinkings, and you must feel the sinking in order to pray to be lifted up.

"That I may live". Live near the Lord, near the throne of grace, the fountain opened for sin and uncleanness, near the footstool of the Lord Jesus

Live near His heart, upon His bosom lean,
Obey His voice, and all His will esteem

and motive to live like that you will derive from Himself. Love is the motive. It destroys the yoke that you feel, whereby you are irritated with this kind of religion. "His yoke is easy, and His burden is light". He says, "Come unto Me all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you, and learn of Me; and ye shall find rest unto your souls." Live? Why, the sinner lives by the death of Christ, and he lives in His soul's experience when Christ and Him crucified is with him, in his heart, the hope of glory, when he sees death conquered, and sees a fulness of merit in the work of the Lord Jesus. Ah, if you get His presence for five minutes, and His truth in your heart for ten minutes, you will want to live with

Him. I have thought sometimes, when I have been a little favoured "O that I could get away from sin, and be with Him." That will be living. But here people live sometimes, have the life of God given to them more abundantly, by having closer communion with Christ.

"And let me not be ashamed of my hope." What is your hope? My friends, what is your hope? Well, the child of God would say, "My hope is to be one day a holy person with the Lord, in His likeness, enjoying the holy pleasures that are at His right hand for evermore, having something of the fulness of that joy eternally. That is before him, being without sin, without a disposition to sin, without weariness, without any possibility of defilement, without opposition by the devil, without any fears, any pain or sickness. Your hope is to be with the Lord, to enjoy redemption, to know how much you owe the Lord, and pay Him the debt you owe Him eternally in praises. Hope? It is the anchor of the soul. It is a great grace. You hope more than you can understand sometimes. But, says the man here, "Let me not be ashamed of my hope". It looks then as though his hope were assailed. Well, he referred it to Him in whom he hoped; and that is the very best thing you can do, my friends. If you say, "I will not let go of my hope", you may be acting in a very carnal way. But if, when you feel your hope assailed, if mountains seem between you and that blessed state, and place, and kingdom, you will want the Lord to come over the mountains to make it a lively hope, as Peter says: "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, which according to His abundant mercy hath begotten us again unto a lively hope", and I do not take it that he means particularly their regeneration, but a new begetting of that hope by a fresh manifestation of a risen Christ.

Dear friends, it is true with the people of God that the Lord Jesus is their life in the fullest sense of that term. "When Christ, who is our life shall appear, we shall also appear with Him in glory". That is our hope. Now, not to be ashamed of that hope means that we need to have it revived, to have tokens for good, to have the Lord coming to us, manifesting Himself

through His word in the ministry. He may do it, and you will feel your hope sweetly revived.

It is a good prayer then, though it spells weakness, opposition. O, but opposition does the people of God good when they can take it to the Lord, and He upholds them! If the Lord should lead us in this way and give us something of the substance of what I have mentioned, then it will do us good. May He grant it to us.

AMEN.