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Sermon preached by Mr J K Popham
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Psalm 119 v 144

"The righteousness of Thy testimonies is
everlasting; give me understanding,
and I shall live"

This extraordinarily beautiful Psalm is one continuous praise of the Word of God; praise, arising from an experience of it, an experience of its power, its purity, its excellency, of the instruction it gave to the Psalmist; an experience which each child of God, in his measure knows.

The words "testimonies", "Word of God", "statutes", "judgments", "precepts", appear to be used almost as synonymous throughout the whole Psalm and they express one thing, namely that the Word of God is above all other words, and also that the entrance of the Word of God gives light and gives understanding to the simple. No greater judgment could befall this congregation and any congregation, any person, than that should take place in them that is written - "Go make the heart of this people fat" What for - "That seeing they might not see, and hearing they might not understand". With this divine Book in your hands, and nowhere else, without the Holy Spirit teaching you, you can never understand what it means. Critically, you may know it, so know it as to talk about it, but the power of it, the enlightening influence of it in the hand of the eternal Spirit of God you must have in order to enter into the spirit and the meaning of it and be saved by it.

The Psalmist had a view of the settled Word of the living God in its purity, in its justice, justness. He found it to be everlasting. "The righteousness of Thy testimonies is everlasting". And this being so, he realised that everything contrary to, or contradicting the testimonies of God's Word, must be utterly, fatally, terribly false. You young people think of this. You have the Bible in your hands, keep it there, look at it, read it, read it diligently, read it

carefully, constantly. O, but may the Lord cause you to see the spirituality of it and feel the power of it. Do not think that, if you are in some measure acquainted with the Scripture as a Book, if you have some critical acquaintance with some parts of it, therefore you know the Bible. The labourer who cannot read a chapter well, but has the Holy Spirit for his teacher, knows more than you do if, whatever critical knowledge of the Bible you may have, you are ignorant of its spirit and its power. The Apostle Paul told his son Timothy that the Scriptures were able to make him wise unto salvation. The Scriptures which he had known from his youth, which he had heard from his grandmother, but which, without the Spirit, he could not know, he said they are able, in the hand of the Spirit, to make thee wise unto salvation. The Scriptures will inform you of all that is needful for you to know. You can leave the sciences which, without grace, issue in some denial of the Scriptures. You can become the most accurate scientist if you believe, rightly believe, the Scriptures. You can enter into creation and leave all the dignitaries of the Church of England and others in their denials of the creation and of the resurrection, and you can say "through faith we understand that the worlds were framed by the Word of God, so that things which were seen were not made of things which do appear". O this Book, may we understand it. May we value it, may we handle it reverently. May we believe it does not contain the Word of God, but that it is the Word of God, the very immediate Word of the living God, and that, by the Holy Spirit using it, it is "quick and powerful and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit and of the joints and marrow and is a discernor of the thoughts and intents of the heart". Infinitely better for the Word of God to search and criticise and examine and measure and weigh you, than that you should take the Word of God to criticise it. Mind how you handle the Word of God.

The testimonies of the text form the foundation, so to speak, are the very reason, of the petition. "Give me understanding that I may live". Give me understanding in the testimonies in the Word of God that I may live. Now the Word of God treats of all necessary subjects, necessary for our good, necessary for eternity, necessary for conformity to the will of God, necessary to the answering of the ends of God in creation and in redemption. Let us therefore look, as

enabled, at some of the testimonies which are everlastingly righteous. Passing the testimonies respecting creation, respecting providence, I will confine myself to two classes of testimonies and the first is that which relates to sin. A gloomy subject, but he who is ignorant of it is also ignorant of the other subject. If you know not yourself, how can you know Jesus Christ? Therefore this is a great thing. What is the testimony of the Scripture concerning sin? Why, first, that it entered by one man. By one man sin entered into the world. A solemn thing that pure, beautiful creation of God, that noble creature man, created in the image of God, after His own likeness, with no sin, no curb, no astigmatism, no stubbornness, but just purity and conformity to the mind and the revealed will of the Creator, worshipping and pleasing God, holding communion with God, in the terms of the law under which he was made. O what a beautiful creation, what a noble creation. We have not grown upward, we have grown downward. We are not improving; we could never improve on God's creation. We fell, and one man introduced sin into the world, infused into the heart and the mind of his wife by Satan. Adam, with his eyes open, followed her. He was not deceived, and he brought sin into the world. What is sin? Not merely, nor first, your passions, not the upbubbling and boiling over of some corruption, not the manifestation of covetousness and idolatry and all dreadful lusts and evils, not first of all these things, but the indwelling corruption of our nature, the deep deceit, the terrible, the unfathomable deceitfulness of the heart, the enmity of the mind, the darkness, the blindness of the understanding, the corruption of the whole affections. What we see is the fruit; the root is in the nature. Men may be tempted of the devil and be ignorant of sin. They may be carried away of violent temptation and inclination and yet be ignorant of the nature of sin. The nature of sin is measured, not by this temptation or that, but by its rebellion against, and non-conformity with, the revealed will and the holy nature of God. Sin is the transgression of the law. Sin is non conformity with God. Sin is contrary to His nature. Sin is a terrible evil.

Now these testimonies, the Scriptures are. "Give me understanding that I may live". You may read of enmity in your nature without feeling it. Then you do not understand it. You may read of covetousness and never think that lust lives in you as it is in the

sight of God. You may read of the wages of sin and never expect to have these wages paid to you unless you have understanding given you, and the Giver of the understanding is the Spirit of whom we read this promise "He shall convince of sin". Paul had the law and he was continually, as a Pharisee, reading that law, and he knew well that the law said "Thou shalt not covet", but that lusting evil of his own heart he only understood when the commandment came. Came how? How could it come to him who had it? He had it in his hand, how could it come to him? By the Holy Spirit. So it must come to us if we have a proper knowledge of sin. So it must come to you, you dear young people, if you ever know sin rightly. It came to me many years ago, sixty years ago, and I am still a sinner and learning by the statutes of God more and more of what sin means. O turn not away from the mention of this. If you do, it will only prove how ignorant and dead you are. This is the thing - "Give me understanding that I may know what unbelief is, that I may know what a grievous thing it is to question God, to question His holy nature, to rebel against His revealed will, against His holy providence; that I may know what an awful thing unbelief is which turns away from the Lord Jesus, and every testimony of the Bible concerning Him. May you pray this prayer. May we be continually praying this prayer.

"Give me understanding" in the nature of sin, of sin in three respects, to which please give your attention. First in respect of its guilt. Sin done becomes guilt, is guilt; guilt is death. The murderer in England is a dead man in the law. Though he lives, though he may escape judgment and punishment, he is dead in the law. We are dead in the law because we are sinners. Guilt is death. It is a fearful thing to be ignorant of this. O to be condemned and not know it; to be condemned and think that you are just; to be condemned and think that God is so merciful that if you do your best He is not so hard as to punish you for any little delinquency of which you may be guilty. O it is a fearful thing to misjudge God like that. He who thus misjudges God, misjudges himself and lives, yet he is dead while he lives.

Secondly, sin as to its dominion, its dominion over every faculty of your nature. The will, the understanding, the affections, the conscience, all under sin's dominion. The will made perverse so

that what was said of old is true today and true of us by nature. "We will not have this Man to reign over us". In the understanding it reigns. "Who is the Lord", said Pharaoh, "that I should obey Him?" Pharaoh lives today, lives this morning in this chapel. Where death reigns, there that spirit of Pharaoh is. "Who is the Lord?" Am I not my own? May not I do as I will? May not I come to chapel if I will? May I not remain at home if I will? You may do these things. Who is the Lord? That God who made you, in whom you live and move and have your being, and whose claims on you in the law are universal and will never be abated.

Sin, thirdly, in its everlasting continuance in your being and in banishment if grace come not. Yes, sinner, you are digging your grave, you are making yourself fuel for hell while you are living in sin, nothing better. O may God cause you to pray this prayer - "Give me understanding" in the nature of sin, in the guilt of it, in the dominion of it, in the punishment of it. It will be in you, else you would not be punished. No man will be punished unjustly, no sinner will ever feel God's wrath unjustly. If there be no sin, there will be no punishment, but if sin be there - and where is it not - there will follow of necessity that holy punishment, that just infliction of the law in its curse. Now where there is understanding there will be what we read this morning, mourning and weeping. You can well understand how - when reading such a passage of Scripture as we were just now reading and the people, hearing the words expounded, and being made to understand by that exposition that their seventy years of captivity had been procured by their sins, and the loss of all their privileges and their life and the centre of their life was all the fruit of sin - tears would trickle down their faces. O what have we been doing? What did we, what did our fathers, to bring us into this condition? They mourned and they wept, and that explains the hot tears that some of God's people sometimes feel running down their faces. That explains their sighs, their grief. That explains why they say "O wretched man that I am, who shall deliver me from the body of this death?" I would do good, but evil prevents me. I would not do evil, but I am driven to it. "O wretched man that I am". How many of us can sympathise with the Apostle Paul in that lamentation of his? How many can go along with him, and thus speak "O wretched man, O wretched sinner, wretched transgressor, always stepping aside and

stepping over and breaking statutes and getting through the limitations of God's Word.

But this, this mourning and weeping, will make way for something else. Therefore, secondly, "Give me understanding" in the matter, yea, rather in the very Person and work of the Lord Jesus. In the Person of Christ, we have, first, the fulness of the Godhead dwelling bodily. Christ is God. He is God, very God, the Son of God, the eternal Son of God, and He took into union with Himself our nature. The Person of God took human nature and joined it to Himself in order that all the grace the church should need, all the righteousness in which she is to be justified, and the grace by which she is to be sanctified, and the redemption by which she is to be made free, might come to her. He is, as Paul tells us, "all in all". I suppose this congregation agrees with me in that statement. Perhaps some of you can find nothing against it in your hearts. The thing is this, have we had given to us an understanding in this testimony? Has it entered our hearts? "The entrance of Thy word giveth light; it giveth understanding to the simple". It tells him that, while he is mourning over his filthy garments, there is a spotless robe to justify. It tells him that while he is too weak to resist any sin, there is power in Christ that will save him from all sin, and a promise that sin shall not have dominion over him. It tells him that, though by nature, by sin, he is far from God, in Christ he is made nigh, even by the blood of Christ. Now an understanding of this is very sweet. It fits; it fits, as no key ever fitted a lock. It fits more than bread fits hunger, more than thirst can be satisfied with water. O, how wonderfully fitting is the testimony of God concerning His Son, Jesus Christ. And, therefore, when the Day of Pentecost was fully come, the commission that Christ gave to His disciples began to have wondrous fulfilment. The Apostles preached peace by Jesus Christ who is Lord of all. Let us look at this. To understand this is to enter into it and to enter into it in that way is to believe it, and to believe it is to have life in your soul, and peace, sooner or later, more or less powerfully working in your conscience.

"Give me understanding" in the gospel. The gospel is the

revelation of God's heart toward the Church, the revelation of the Mediator between God and men, the Man Christ Jesus, the revelation of the foundation on which the Church is built. "Other foundation can no man lay than that is laid which is Jesus Christ". It is the revelation, further, of the Holy Spirit in His precious gift, in His divine work. This Spirit gives an understanding. He it is who opens to the heart and understanding what the weeping eyes have often looked at and did not understand or enter into. He brings near, with such light and inshining and power, the Lord Jesus in His Person, as that the blessed One shines gloriously in the eyes. "O", says the sinner who has understanding, "how wondrous is the Person of Christ. How suitable He is to me. All I need is that He should come in and take possession and tell me that He gave Himself for me because He loved me." And the understanding here becomes very operative. It fills the soul with hope; it draws the spirit after the Person who is seen, and you who have had this, want it from time to time, and you can well enter into what I say. There is such an attraction in this that is understood by faith as that no obstacles, no guilt, no death, no feeling of the wrath of God, can hinder you from crying mightily for the mercy of God, through Jesus Christ, to come to you. Nothing can hinder. Death and hell may stand in the way, but after the Lord you will cry. Once you by faith have entered into the ruin of your nature and then by faith have seen the Lord Jesus, you have found this, you could not, could not, keep away from the throne of God's heavenly grace. The beauties of Christ in His suitableness, in the infinite merit of His Person and His vicarious worth and death; the beauties of Christ in His resurrection, in His ascension into heaven, in His prevailing intercession there, are such that the sinner, though he is burdened and though he is ignorant and stumbles at many things in his ignorance, runs while he reads the blessed gospel of the grace of God.

To have an understanding in justification; is it not wonderful. Here is a sinner, unjust. You could not call him a bad name to which he would not own, as to his spirit, whatever he may be or may have been in his conduct. You could not call him an evil name which he would say did not belong to him, so is his sin in his feeling; so is his ruin and his depravity. Now, for this sinner to see, in God's teaching, a robe so perfect, as spotless as God's law, as broad as God's law, as wide as

God's law in all its demands, a righteousness that answers absolutely to God's nature in His requirements, to see such a righteousness and have a living understanding in it, so as that the righteousness itself becomes yours and you say "Surely in the Lord have I righteousness and strength", O this, this is deliverance, this is real deliverance. This is what Solomon speaks of when he says "Righteousness delivereth from death". How could a prison hold a righteous man? The law cannot condemn a righteous man. God cannot condemn a righteous man. O sinner, if ever you stand up in this robe you will understand then what it is for justice to be on your side, for the smile of God to be a summer to your soul, and for the water of the gospel to make you as a garden of the Lord, and for the sweet favour of God to be in you better than life. Give me understanding in justification. May I understand it to be God's act on my soul. May I understand it to be Christ's righteousness imputed to me, without works. Sinner, no heaven without this; no hell with this. Give me understanding, then, Lord, you may be saying. Give me understanding that I may live, live in Christ's righteousness, live in Thy sight, live under Thy smile, live in Solomon's Song, where the Saviour says - "Rise up My love, My fair one, and come away. For, lo, the winter is past, the rain is over and gone; The flowers appear on the earth; the time of the singing of birds is come, and the voice of the turtle is heard in our land." Come with Me, My love, come with Me. Come from the law and from death and from condemnation. Come with Me from the barrenness of the wilderness and the barrenness of your nature, and the unjustness of your nature. Come with Me into a righteousness that is complete and fruitful in all godliness. Then the sinner is happy. Yes he is happy. He says - "I'm happy, all is well". This would be a wonderful congregation if all in it had understanding in this matter of justification. Mind, it is not profession of the doctrine, proper as that is. It is just a spiritual reception of that divine act of God in passing a sinner away and from under a broken law into the Lord Jesus as His righteousness. It is a reception of Christ. It is a belief on Him to the justifying of your soul; a passing from death felt to life enjoyed. Happy the sinner who has understanding given to him in this testimony that God justifieth the ungodly which believeth in Jesus. He does it.

Give me understanding in respect of the power of the blood of

Christ. Defilement is terrible to a pure heart. "Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God". Such people, and only such, weep because of defilement. They do feel defiled. Every sin is defilement. Every improper thought is defilement. The law tells us this, and still more does the gospel make us know what defilement is. Now what can remove this? What can make you feel this day, were it applied to you, that the blood of Christ so purifies the conscience to which it is applied, that the sinner says, why, my sins have gone. My pollution is gone and now there is open to me a way of access to the Father and he enters into that wondrous word in Ephesians "For through Him", that is Jesus Christ, "we both have access by one Spirit unto the Father", and that is by the blood of Christ by which He made peace. He hath made peace by His blood. O peace, how it penetrates, how pervasive, how persuasive it is, how powerful it is. It is like rain that percolates, soaks into the roots of things. This peace soaks into a sinner's conscience and his heart and his affections and his spirit and brings him to understand a little of what it is to have free access, a door set open before him that no man can shut. A door set into the very presence of God who has reconciled the sinner to Himself by Jesus Christ. I do not preach an impossible experience when I preach this. It is not only possible, but it is an experience felt. Some here have known it, may be knowing it now. It is inexpressible, it is beyond understanding, as saith the Scripture - "The peace of God which passeth all understanding", so wondrous, so penetrating, so universal in your very soul, that you cannot understand it how God could stoop to you, how such an enemy as you could be made a friend, how such a rebel, with the law rankling in your conscience, could ever have that law and its rankling removed, and the perfect peace of conscience that you feel. O how God could do it, how the Saviour could do it, how the Spirit could do it, you cannot understand, but you know it, you feel it, there it is. No external trouble for the moment could disturb this peace. "When He giveth quiet who then can make trouble". Of all the happy people in this world they are the happiest who have this peace, whatever their circumstances may be. "Pain without pain". Good Halyburton said on his death-bed "Pain without pain", for the peace of God was in him, and you may be the same, facing death and no shock. Looking eternity in the face and no tremor for the moment, just because this holy, penetrating peace is in your conscience. One may say, I cannot think

that such a sinner as I am can ever be brought to that. You can be brought to it in one moment. All you need is not to get one bit better in yourself, not to be pleased with one single duty you have done, not to think you have got a victory over some lust in a moment or two. All you need is the blood of Jesus Christ applied to your conscience. "Give me understanding" in this. Let me not hang about it, let me not look at it as a picture, let me not regard it as a doctrine, doctrine though it is and beautiful and everlasting, but let me feel it, let me enter into it, let me know it in my soul's experience, let me live. And when this sinner lives, he lives not to himself, nor for himself, nor in himself. He lives before, and he lives unto, God. He lives as in His sight, lives as in the eye of God. He has been searched and tried and the eye of God on him and the sound of God's law against him, frightened him, and made him enter into the language and feeling of terror that the Jews had and uttered when they said to Moses "Speak thou with us and we will hear. Let not God speak lest we die". Now that same person says - "There is no terror in God for me". The greatness of God is bearable, the glory of God is bearable, yea, welcome, soft, mild, veiled to bearableness in Jesus Christ and the peace of God fills the heart and mind.

"Give me understanding" in this matter of forgiveness of sins. And this introduces the person who is so favoured, into communion with the Forgiver of all his sins. Having forgiven you all trespasses. He has blotted out the hand-writing of ordinances that was against us and contrary to us, nailing it to His cross. And this has produced such holiness in his affections that now all he wants for the time being is that he might walk with God in peace and equity. He has had to walk before God in condemnation; now he would fain walk with Him in holy peace, in sweet submission. He would walk with Him in knowledge, knowing who has reconciled him, knowing who bought him with His blood, knowing who brought him into this state before God. He would walk accordingly.

"Give me understanding" of how it is that a sinner can walk with God. Walking with God is not being excluded or removed from your natural duties. Noah walked with God but he lived as a man, and the people of God walk in their matters well when they walk with God. O it is a great thing to have understanding in this. It has that in it -

"Whether therefore ye eat, or drink, or whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God". The eye is on Him, the heart is up to Him. "Show me the way wherein I should walk". You bring your providential things, your families and your business, and all your matters, you bring them to this great God, and you have to do with Him in these things. Before you may have felt, O I cannot bear this, and you may have gone further than this, you may have said, I will not. Now you can say, Lord I can take this cross up, I can bear this trouble. I am resigned. "Thy will be done". Now you feel the reality of things. God is real, Christ is real, the Spirit is real. You see the Trinity in unity in salvation and you walk with God. It is not some vamped up sort of affection or excitement that a person has. It is just a gracious and humble walk in the sight of God in those matters which come daily on us. As the Apostle speaks of the care of all the churches coming daily on him, so the things which come to you day by day, whenever you walk with God in them, you find His mercy in them, you receive His sustenance, you can bear the cross, you can humble yourself under His mighty hand.

Give me understanding that I may live. May the Lord help us to pray this prayer. All these beautiful, blessed, divine and abiding testimonies in the Scriptures - give me understanding in them that I may live by them, by their power, their efficacy, their holiness; that I may live in Thy sight.

AMEN.