

# Suffering and Psalm 119

*“I would have perished in  
my affliction if Your words had  
not been my delight.”*



By David Powlison

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When you hear the words “Psalm 119,”  
what are your first associations?

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Do take thirty seconds and ponder what comes  
to mind as you think about that chunk of  
Scripture.

I suspect that your heart did *not*  
immediately come up with the following joyous  
memories and keen anticipation: “Psalm 119 is  
where I go to learn utter and utterly appropriate  
honesty. Here I learn how to open my heart  
about what matters, to the person I most trust. I  
plainly affirm what I most deeply love. I’m  
candid about my deepest ongoing struggles. I  
express pure delight. I lay the sufferings and  
uncertainties I face on the table. I cry out in  
need, and shout for joy. I say what I want, and  
want what I say. I hear how to be forthright—  
without any stain of self-righteousness. I hear  
how to be weak—without any stain of self-pity.  
I learn how true honesty talks with God: fresh,  
personal, direct. Never formulaic, abstract,  
vague. I hear firsthand how Truth and honesty  
meet and talk it over. This Truth is never

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denatured, never rigid, never inhuman. This  
honesty never whines, never boasts, never rages,  
never gets defensive. I leave that conversation  
nourished. I find and experience the brightest  
and sweetest hope imaginable. I hear how to  
give full expression to what it means to be  
human, in honest relationship with the person  
who made humanness in His image.”

Plainspoken wisdom. Truth has grappled  
with everything you think, feel, do, experience,  
and need—changing with the very way you  
process life. And you have grappled with Truth.  
Imagine, now you can “say whatever’s on your  
mind; say what you’re really feeling” because  
insane self-centeredness has been washed away  
from what you honestly think and feel. Such  
honesty is what Psalm 119 expresses and what it  
intends to work in you. Psalm 119 is about life’s  
painful realities. And it is about the gifts of God.  
And it is about how those two meet, talk, come  
to grips, and find life’s highest delight.

But other associations tend to obscure our  
vision, deafen our ears, choke our speech. Most  
people’s immediate reaction to Psalm 119 is  
this: *It’s long*. Really long. If you’re reading  
through Psalms, or through the Bible in a year,  
you take a deep breath and retie your running  
shoes before you trudge, speed-walk, or race  
through Psalm 119. It’s the longest chapter in  
the Bible, by far. It’s the same length as the  
entire books of Ruth or James or Philippians.  
Reading Psalm 119 is too often like watching

scenery along an interstate highway. You glimpsed lots of things in passing, but you mostly remember the long drive.

Here's a second reaction: *It's repetitive and general.* The verses tend to blur together. They seem to say the same thing over and over, in only slightly different ways, with few details. In contrast, Ruth tells a moving story. James sparkles with practical application and metaphor. Philippians links wonders about Jesus Christ with details of Paul's experience, and then connects both of these with direct implications for how you and I live. One way or other, the argument advances as these books go along. But Psalm 119 seems to go round and round, droning on in generalities.

Here's another common reaction: *The parts seem unconnected.* You can remember things that unify around a story line or some other logical progression. Ruth's surprise loyalty to the LORD connects her to a mother-in-law, to a village, to a new husband, to her great-grandson, to the Savior of the world. But Psalm 119 seems like a random collection of disconnected bits.

Or perhaps this Bible fact is one of your associations: *Psalm 119 is not random; it's a tightly structured acrostic.* Twenty-two sections, eight lines each, every line beginning with the same letter, proceeding in order through the letters of the Hebrew alphabet: *aleph, beth, gimel... tav.* The A-to-Z no doubt helped the memory of native Hebrew speakers. But this fact has faint relevance for us who read in English. The alphabetic arrangement gets lost in translation. It makes no lasting impression, and does us no noticeable good. The very thing that gives this psalm order and structure functions for us as little more than a curiosity.

Here's an association that is probably on everyone's list: *It's about God's Word.* That moves closer to something we can take home and live out. In Psalm 119, Scripture discusses Scripture. It has served well as a classic text on the importance of Bible fidelity, Bible knowledge, Bible reading, Bible study, Bible memorization. This vast chunk of the Word of God mentions the significance of some form of that Word in almost every verse.

And then there's a common negative reaction to Psalm 119: *Many people feel a little*

*queasy or burdened down when they approach this psalm.* The seemingly relentless read-your-Bible-memorize-Scripture emphasis can come across as moralistic, like the exhortations tacked on the end of a bad sermon. Your relationship with the LORD seems to hinge on dutiful performance of "quiet time," but somehow you're always too busy or too distracted to ever get it right. Unlike the warm, intimate promises of people's favorite Psalms—23, 103, 121, and 139, for example—this psalm can seem biblicistic. It has a reputation for substituting devotion to the Bible for devotion to the God who reveals Himself in writing. This is a bad rap, of course, but it does accurately reflect how Psalm 119 is often misread, mistaught, and misused.

Finally, here's a more positive and fruitful association: *Perhaps you immediately think of a beloved verse or two.* The psalm as a whole might look like a vast crowd of nameless faces. But some old friends show up and sit down with you: familiar faces, first-name basis, you've got history with each other, you can pick right up and don't have to go through the preliminaries. Maybe verse 11 is on your list of memorable Scripture: "I have hidden Your word in my heart that I might not sin against You." Or maybe verse 18 shows up regularly, shaping your prayers: "Open my eyes, LORD, that I might behold wondrous things out of Your law." Maybe verse 67 has become your summary of the substantial good that came out of the most difficult period of your entire life: "Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I keep Your word." Or verse 105 might be a song in your heart and on your lips: "Thy word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path." When we get on speaking terms with a single verse, we begin to understand something of where the entire psalm intends to take us.

Each of these common associations is plausible. But most of them don't lead in the direction of that utterly candid conversation described in the second paragraph of this article. Psalm 119 itself does lead in that direction. Let's see how it gets there, so that we can follow along.

Earlier I asked you to free-associate. Now let me give you a pop quiz. Here's the question:

“What words are most frequently repeated in Psalm 119?”

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A certain group of closely related words appears in almost every verse. How many of them can you remember off the top of your head?

I admit, it’s a bit of a trick question. The answer that usually comes to mind runs along these lines, “It’s about the Word of God. Almost every verse contains one of the words describing what’s written in the Bible: word, law, commandment, precept, testimony, statute, judgment.”

That’s close—partial credit. But, in fact, the words describing Scripture run only a distant second. Far and away the most common words are first and second person singular pronouns: I, me, my, mine, and You, Your, Yours.<sup>1</sup> Psalm 119 is the most extensive I-to-You conversation in the Bible. Only the first three

words mean in *my* life. That’s the 4:1 ratio and emphasis.

So if someone asks, “What is Psalm 119 all about?,” you only get partial credit if you answer “It’s about the Bible, a meditation on the importance of the Word of God.” This psalm is actually not about the *topic* of getting Scripture into your life. And it’s certainly not a meditation, contemplating a topic in one’s mind. Instead, we overhear the *honest words* erupting when what God says gets into you. We hear someone speaking to the God who speaks, someone who needs the God who speaks, someone who loves the God who speaks. It’s not thinking about a topic; it’s getting down to business. It’s not an exhortation to Bible study; it’s an outcry of faith. This is not hair-splitting. It makes a world of difference in how you read, apply, preach, and teach Psalm 119. A topic is abstract. It informs the intellect in order to influence the will. A topic can be interesting and informative. It might even prove persuasive. But the plain, fluent words you overhear in

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## Psalm 119 is a personal prayer.

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verses talk *about* people-in-general, *about* God, and *about* the Word, stating propositions and principles in the third person: “Blessed are *those* who observe *His* testimonies, who seek *Him* with all *their* heart.” The fourth verse begins to personalize things: we stand accountable to *You*. After that, it’s off to the races. For the next 172 straight verses *I, Your servant, talk to You, LORD, who speak and act, whom I need and love.*<sup>2</sup>

In other words, Psalm 119 is personal prayer. It’s talking to, not teaching about. We hear what a man says out loud in God’s presence: his joyous pleasure, vocal need, open adoration, blunt requests, candid assertions, deep struggles, fiercely good intentions. Yes, those various words for the Word appear once in each verse. But I-You words appear about four times per verse: *I* talk to *You* about what *Your*

Psalm 119 spring from a man already persuaded. He simply talks, fusing his intellect, will, emotions, circumstances, desires, fears, needs, memory, and anticipation. He’s keenly aware of what he’s really like. He’s keenly aware of what’s happening to him. He’s keenly aware of the LORD and the relevance of what the LORD sees, says, and does. Such awareness makes him very direct and very personal. The living heart of a man tumbles out in passionate requests and passionate affirmations. He persuades us not by argument, but by infectious, vocal faith.

Psalm 119 is torrential, not topical. It’s relentless, not repetitive. It’s personal, not propositional: “LORD, You spoke. You acted. I need You. Make me into what You say I should be. Do what You say You’ll do. I love You.” Yes, the form of Psalm 119 is regular. But why this tight discipline of *aleph* to *taw*, the arithmetic regularities that pattern the vocabulary, the unvarying reference back to Scripture? These provide the cast-iron crucible that contains, purifies, channels, and pours forth molten,

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<sup>1</sup> Add to these the nouns for my identity (“servant”) and Your name (“LORD”).

<sup>2</sup> Verse 115, a brief aside, is the only break from this pattern.

living gold. Psalm 119 is the thoughtful outcry that rises when real life meets real God.

It's not just naked candor. That's important to notice. Raw, unsmelted honesty is *always* perverted by the insanity of sin. Should you "get in touch with your feelings and say what you really think"? That will always prove revealing, of course. And you do need to face yourself and your world, acknowledging what is going on. And the opposites of unblunted honesty are other madneses: indifference, busyness, stoicism, niceness, ignorance, self-deception, or denial. But how on earth will you interpret what you feel? Is what you really think true? Where will you go with it? Where is it heading? Honesty in the raw always smells: it's godless, willful, opinionated, self-centered. And, truth to tell, personal honesty never actually faces reality if it does not simultaneously face God. You can be frank and frankly wrong: "A fool finds no pleasure in understanding, but delights in airing his own opinions" (Prov. 18:2). But Psalm 119 is different. It demonstrates the salvation of honesty. When you simultaneously face yourself, your circumstances, and the God who speaks, then even the most painful, sharp-edged honesty takes on the fragrance and sanity of Jesus.

Reading, studying, and memorizing the Bible are legitimate *implications* of Psalm 119—when they aim for this Scripture's desired result. But this passage aims for much bigger game. It aims to rescript the inner logic and intentionality motoring in your heart. That profound result is not a given, an automatic consequence of rubbing shoulders with the Bible. We have a tendency to mishear what God says, to misapply to our lives, to mistake means for ends. Yes, read your Bible. Study hard. Memorize. Done right, these means contribute to a blazingly fluent end. But this psalm does not exhort proper means; it demonstrates the radical end.

So this is what we hear in Psalm 119. A *person who has listened* opens his heart to the Person who has spoken. A person who has listened *opens his heart* to the Person who has spoken. A person who has listened opens his heart *to the Person who has spoken*.

And this is what he says:

- He boldly asserts who the LORD is. (He's been listening hard to what God says about Himself.)
- He lays what he's facing on the table, both within himself and from the outside. (Honest experience is in view, shaped into sanity by what God says about us and about what comes at us.)
- He pleads for God's help in life's fundamental struggles. (Dire need seeks immediate aid because God promises to act.)
- He swears to his core convictions, affirming his identity, his hope, and his delight. (He has taken God's point of view and God's intentions to be his very own.)

Psalm 119 talks straight I-to-You. These four components of what-I-say-to-You are the intertwining strands that form this psalm's inner logic.

#### **Strand #1: "You are..., You say..., You do..."**

This speaker continually describes God to His face: what You're like, what You say, what You do, who You are. Many other psalms, 23 and 121 for example, pick up and develop one memorable theme: in a world crawling with dangers, the LORD provides good for me (23), and He carefully watches to protect me (121). But Psalm 119 scatters truths promiscuously.

Imagine Psalm 119 as a crowded wedding reception, held in a vast banquet hall, from which numerous doors lead out to other rooms. People you mostly don't know are sitting at tables for eight. The seating arrangement is odd. The bride's grandmother is sitting next to the groom's college roommate, simply because their last names both start with S! And how will you ever get to know all those individual faces, names, stories? They're mostly a blur. But work your way around the room, stopping at each table. Ask questions, listen, and get acquainted.

You discover that faith speaks pithy truths. A rich confession of faith can be found strewn throughout Psalm 119. Its form is startling. It's not phrased as the faith that you profess: "I believe in God the Father. I believe in Jesus Christ. I believe in the Holy Spirit." It's faith heard in the act of confessing: "You are my Father. You are my Savior/You are my Life-giver."

*The LORD has arranged the conditions of my existence.*

- You established the earth, and it stands.
- All things are Your servants.
- The earth is full of Your lovingkindness.
- Your faithfulness continues throughout all generations.
- Your hands made me and fashioned me.
- I am Your servant.
- I am Yours.
- All my ways are before You.
- You are near.

*The LORD speaks wonders.*

- Your law is truth.
- Your testimonies are wonderful.
- Your word is very pure.
- Your word stands firm in the heavens forever.
- The unfolding of Your words gives light.
- Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.

listened to what God said in the rest of the Bible, and he lived it. The LORD says who He is, and is who He says. The LORD says what He does, and does what He says. Faith listens and notices. Faith experiences that it's true, and talks back in simple sentences.

We tend to be busy, noisy, distractible people. We live in a busy, noisy, distracting world. In the midst of that, this psalm teaches us to say, "I need time to listen and think if I'm ever to hold up my end of the conversation with God." In a culture of instant access and instant information, this psalm rewards the slow. If you speed-read, all you get is, "Psalm 119 is about the Bible." But if you take it slow and live it out, you find yourself saying things like this: "You are good and do good." Or this: "I am Yours." Learning to say that out loud and mean it will change your life forever. Psalm 119 is not information about the Bible; it's speech therapy for the inarticulate.

Here's another implication. Our self-help culture is preoccupied with "self-talk," with your

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## I need time to listen and think if I'm ever to hold up my end of the conversation with God.

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*The LORD destroys evil.*

- You rebuke the arrogant.
- You reject all those who wander from Your statutes.
- You will execute judgment on those who persecute me.
- You have removed all the wicked of the earth like dross.

*Yet the LORD is merciful to me.*

- You are good and do good.
- In faithfulness You afflicted me.
- Your mercies are great.
- You comfort me.
- You are my hiding place and my shield.
- You answered me.
- You have dealt well with Your servant.
- You have revived me.
- You will enlarge my heart.
- You Yourself have taught me.

How did he learn to be so outspoken to God? Where did he learn these things? He

inner monologue. Does what you say to yourself cheer you up or tear you down? Are you consciously self-affirming or obsessively self-critical? Do you say, "I'm a valid person and I can stand up for myself," or "I'm so stupid and I always fail"? Entire systems of counseling are built around analyzing and then reconstructing your self-talk so you'll be happier and more productive. But Psalm 119 gets you out of the monologue business entirely. It gets you about the business of a living dialogue with the person whose opinion finally matters. The problem with self-talk, whether "negative" or "positive," whether "irrational" or "rational," is that we aren't talking to anyone but ourselves. The stream of consciousness is unconscious of the One with whom we have to do. A stream of conversation ought to be taking place, but we repress conscious awareness of someone who so threatens our self-fascination.

The Bible says radical things about the stream of consciousness that naturally flows from us and through us: "Every intention of the

thoughts of his heart was only evil all the days” (Gen. 6:5); “All his thoughts are, “There is no God”” (Ps. 10:4).<sup>3</sup> This does not only refer to vile and sordid lifestyles. It also means those everyday ways that minds operate without reference to the one true God. Functional atheism is our most natural state of mind. People operate with no conscious awareness that the LORD’s opinion matters decisively, with no sense of need for mercies, with no impulse to call upon Him, with no love for Him dominating heart, soul, mind, and might. Our self-talk is usually like those people talking to themselves on the subway. Their world is very real to them, but it’s disconnected from everyone around them. We sleep-walk, talking in our sleep. The dreams might be pleasant. They might be nightmares. But either way, it’s a dream. The vocal faith of Psalm 119 is what happens when you wake up. It’s not hyper-religiosity. It’s sane humanity. The stream of false consciousness becomes a stream of conscious awareness, of love, of trust, of need. We overhear sanity thinking out loud, and we realize he’s talking to someone. Of course, sanity makes clear affirmations to the person whose attitude and actions prove decisive .

I’ve likened Psalm 119 to a crowded wedding reception, full of guests worth coming to know. But notice also the doors leading out to other rooms. Psalm 119 is not self-contained. It intentionally breaks out toward the rest of Scripture. *How* did this man learn to say with all his heart, “You are good and do good”? *Where* did he learn, “I am yours”? He learned it in other places. Psalm 119 carries you outside of itself to the rest of God’s revelation and to all of life. Eight summary words for His words, each used about 22 times, act as pointers.

Two of the eight words simply mean *word*, everything God talks about. His words are all that He says and writes, all that we hear and read from Him. Understand this and you’ll never treat Psalm 119 in a moralistic way. What

<sup>3</sup> Consider also such passages as Psalms 10:6, 11; 14:1-4; 36:1-4; 53:1-4; Ecclesiastes 9:3; Jeremiah 17:9; Romans 3:10-18. Consider the first great commandment with its total claim on everything going on inside us. Consider the descriptions of what God sees and weighs when He looks at us: 1 Chronicles 28:9; Hebrews 4:12f; Jeremiah 17:10. We are opaque to ourselves until God tells us what He sees.

kinds of things are contained in all these different sorts of words? We hear stories, commands, promises, an entire worldview interpreting everything that is and that happens. We witness who God is, what He is like, what He does. He promises mercies. He warns of consequences. He tells us who we are; why we do what we do; what is at stake in our lives; what He made us for. He identifies what’s wrong with us, amply illustrated. Through story and precept, He teaches us to understand the meaning of both sufferings and blessings. He tells us exactly what He expects from us, the way to live humanly and humanely. His words show and tell His lovingkindness. And so forth.

So what does it mean, then, to say, “I keep Your word” (119:17)? The obvious example is obedience to specific commandments. You keep “Do not commit adultery” by not committing adultery. How do you keep other, different sorts of words, e.g., “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth”? You keep such words by believing, by remembering, by changing how you look at everything. Our psalm keeps Genesis 1 by affirming to God, “*You* established the earth, and it stands. All things are *Your* servants.” That’s faith in action and out loud. You keep His words when you are looking at a goldfinch or a thunderstorm, and you see creatures, dependents, servants—not merely an avian organism, not merely a weather event that means a cold front is coming through—and you praise their maker. You keep Genesis 1 by remembering that you, too, are a creature and dependent, whose purposes are accountable to your maker. You are not merely your resumé, or your feelings, or your web of relationships, or your bank account, or your self-talk, or your plans, or your life-shaping experiences. Our psalm says, “*Your* hands made me and fashioned me. I am *Yours*.”

Another of the eight words is *law*. ‘Law’ also means *everything* God says—though we often mishear the word with a more constricted meaning. When you read ‘law’ in Psalm 119, think “synonym for ‘word’—with special emphasis on the LORD’s authority and our need to listen.” It means teaching that we must heed. ‘Law’ is identical to ‘word’ in scope, but much richer in nuance. It highlights the personal authority of this great Savior-King who speaks

to us as beloved servants.

We tend to mishear 'law' when we read Psalm 119. We depersonalize 'law' into a law code, into rules unrelated to the gracious rule of our Father and Messiah. We narrow 'law' to bare-bones commandments. We forget that "ten commandments" is a misnomer. Those "ten words"<sup>4</sup> reveal our Lord's creating and saving acts, His lovingkindness, generous gifts, good character, promises, warnings, and calling of a people—the interpersonal context for His ten good commands. We forget that these commandments themselves spell out how love works out, towards our God and towards our fellow human beings. We forget that the "law of Moses" includes teaching like this: "The LORD, the LORD God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and faithfulness, who keeps lovingkindness for thousands, who forgives iniquity, transgression and sin; yet He will by no means leave unpunished." When a person like this gives commandments, He spells out how to become just like Him.

Obedience lives out this wise love on a human scale. In the new covenant, Jesus does what we fail to do. He expresses on a human scale this wise love of God, this law. He loves as a neighbor and friend, doing us good. He loves as the Lamb of God, sacrificed in our place. He loves as one of us, the pioneer and perfecter of faith working through love. God writes this law of love upon our hearts. The Father and the Son come to live within us, in the person, by the Holy Spirit, and we learn to love—this law fulfilled.

Psalm 119 opens with a stunning benediction: "Blessed are those whose way is blameless, who walk in the law of the LORD." That convergence between our highest happiness and our whole-hearted goodness sets the stage for everything that will follow. So what does it mean to "walk in" the Lord's law? Again, we tend to remember only the obvious example, obedience to His commandments. And even when we think of obedience, I suspect that most of the time we do not immediately connect all

the relevant dots: "Love God utterly (free from an obsessively willful heart)—because He loves you. Love other people as vigorously as you look out for your own interests (free from compulsive selfishness)—the same way He loves you." To obey God's will is to love well because you are loved well.

We rarely think through what it means to "walk in" other parts of this comprehensive teaching to which God binds us. This law says, "The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make His face shine on you and be gracious to you; the LORD lift up His face on you and give you peace." You walk in this by needing it to be so. You ask for God to treat you this way. You receive. You trust. You treat others in these same ways, as a living conduit of care, grace, and peace. That is what it means to walk in this part of the royal law. No wonder our psalm proclaims, "I love Your law. Your law is my delight."

*Judgments* (or "ordinances") put the emphasis on how God evaluates things. He reveals His decisions—and actions—as He sizes up and deals with common human situations. His judgments teach us to weigh things for what they actually are. For example, in God's judgment, cheating on your spouse is wrong and criminal. In God's judgment, trusting in the free grace of Jesus Christ is the way of forgiveness and life. In God's judgment, compassion for broken and helpless people demonstrates the goodness of His character in human form. In God's judgment, dealing gently with the ignorant and wayward demonstrates His mercy. In God's judgment, He alone is the only-wise God, true and just, the Life-giver, stream of living water, high rock of safety. Interestingly, two of the handful of verses in Psalm 119 that lack a direct reference to God's Word contain the word 'judgment,' but not as a reference to what is spoken/written. They describe the actions that flow from good judgment, and so bring about justice (vss. 84, 121). In several other places, Psalm 119's reference to 'judgments' is ambiguous: it could mean either what God said about things, or what He does in acting on how He judges things to be. The terminus of Psalm 119 is not the Bible; the terminus of the Bible is life.

And so it continues, each synonym adding

<sup>4</sup> Exodus 34:28, Deuteronomy 4:13, 10:4 use the wider term "words", not the narrower "commandments," when they refer to the ten components of the "words of the covenant."

its particular nuance and richness to the unified picture. God's *testimony* speaks of everything to which He bears witness. He witnesses to Himself, to right and wrong, to human failings, to human good, to His saving actions, to His creation of the world, to His will. Those "ten words" we mentioned are frequently called "the testimony," bearing witness to what is true, right, and delightful. *Precepts* give detailed practical instructions. The Lord cares about details, and goes into details. We come to understand exactly what it looks like for us to believe, do, and delight. *Statutes* captures that all these things are written down. They stand. They are engraved as standing truth, standing orders, a permanent constitution. God affixes His words on stone tablets, scrolls, books, computers—that He might write His words on hearts. *Commandments* tell you exactly how to live, what to do, how to love and trust. Because all of God's words come with authority, then even when God promises mercy and help, or

intellectual self-discipline, not about the anguish of life. Again, the reputation is wrong. Psalm 119 is spoken out of fierce, ongoing struggle. This discipline of heart and mind does not rise above the battles; it arises in the middle of battle.

Struggle threads through every one of the twenty-two sections. What does this man find so difficult, so troubling, so painful, so threatening, so dangerous? Let me step into the speaker's shoes and state it in first person words. First, I face something terrible inside myself. My own sinfulness threatens that God would destroy me. Second, I face something terrible coming at me from outside. The sins of others and all of life's troubles threaten to destroy me. Something's wrong with me. Something's wrong with what happens to me. Either way, whether sin or hurt, I suffer threats of pain, destruction, shame, and death. So I talk candidly to God about my double affliction. I deeply feel the inner and outer evils that I face. Psalm 119

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## Psalm 119 is spoken out of fierce, ongoing struggle.

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reveals something of His character, or tells a story of what He did, such words come with the character of a command: you *must* believe, take it to heart, and live out the implications. Every alternative is some species of folly, illusion, self-deception, and destruction.

How do we react to all these things? The verbs in Psalm 119 are consistent: "I keep, I seek, I love, I choose, I remember, I do, I believe, I rejoice in, I meditate on, I cling to, I delight in, I do not forget... I respond in all these ways to Your word, law, judgments, testimonies, precepts, statutes, and commandments." It is striking how every aspect of the word of life elicits the exact same family of reactions. Plain speaking to God about God is one result.

### ***Strand #2: "I am facing a struggle with..."***

Did it surprise you when you read the title of this article, "*Suffering and Psalm 119*"? Other psalms are more obviously in a "minor key," cries of need for mercy at guilt, for merciful protection in sufferings. But Psalm 119 has a reputation for being about moral and

teaches you to say things like this: "My soul cleaves to the dust. My soul weeps because of grief. My eyes fail. When will You comfort me?"

Scripture uses the word 'evil' the same way we use it in English. It describes both sins and troubles. The problem of evil is inside me and it comes at me. It perverts me and it hurts me. So Job "turned away from evil [i.e., sin],... yet evil [i.e., suffering] came" (1:1; 30:26). Ecclesiastes 9:3 nails both: "This is the evil [suffering] in all that is done under the sun, that there is one fate for all men. Furthermore, the hearts of the sons of men are full of evil [sin], and insanity is in their hearts while they live [sin], and then they die [suffering]." Psalm 119 struggles eye to eye with the problems of evil.

First, he finds evil within himself. The moral and intellectual illumination of the word produces a devastating self-awareness. Light makes my darkness visible. As mentioned earlier, the torrent of I-to-You speech begins in verse 5. And it is no accident that the opening sentence asks for help. If felicity comes from fidelity to God's ways, then he must cry out,

“How can I avoid being ashamed when I look at what You command?” He feels keen sense of threat because of his sin’s tendencies. He shocks us—but it is no accident—when the last line of the first section expresses such raw and anxious need, “Do not utterly forsake me!” We tend to be unprepared for the emotional underbelly of Psalm 119. He again shocks us—but it is no accident—when the last line of the entire psalm bursts out with this admission, “I have gone astray like a lost sheep.”

It is notoriously difficult to discern patterns in the overall flow of Psalm 119. But clearly the placement of verses 8 (the end of the first section) and 176 (the end of the last section) intends to highlight something. This honest man suffers in his sinfulness and longs for deliverance. He must voice this struggle because he takes so personally what he stated categorically in the opening lines:

How blessed are those whose way is blameless, who walk in the law of the LORD. How blessed are those who observe His testimonies, who seek Him with all their heart. They also do no unrighteousness. They walk in His ways. You have ordained Your precepts, that we should keep them diligently.

Because this is how life works, his sins afflict him, grieve him, threaten him, frighten him. Will God utterly forsake me? Will I wander away? Will God rebuke me and curse me? Will I be put to shame? Will vanities seduce me and capture my attention? Will I sin? Will I forget? Will iniquity rule me? Will I be thrown away as dross? Will I end up consumed by dread, not filled with joy? Will I be accursed by death, not blessed by life? These questions haunt Psalm 119.

Second, he finds evil coming at him. The discipline of the Word of God produces heightened sensitivity, not matter-of-fact stoicism. God’s sovereign rule and promised grace aggravate a sense of pain, without ever leading to self-pity: “I am small and despised. Trouble and anguish come upon me. I face oppression and utter derision from self-willed people, for no reason but their malice. They are out to get me. They sabotage and persecute me with lies. I am exceedingly afflicted. I’ve been

almost destroyed. I would have perished in my affliction. I don’t fit in—I am a stranger here on earth. I lie awake at night. How many are my days? How long can I take it?”

Examine the inner logic of this man’s distress. He must voice this struggle because he takes so personally the LORD’s lovingkindness. “If You promise blessedness, if You deal bountifully and give life, if You fill the earth with lovingkindness, if You have made me hope in Your promises of good, if Your face shines on Your servant, if You alone make me safe, if You save me, if You teach me, if You revive me... then You must come through for me. What I’m experiencing now is so hard, hurtful, and threatening. It unglues me. I’m dismayed by experiencing the opposite of all Your goodness.”

Notice another pattern to the flow of Psalm 119. The first two sections and the last make no mention of the pains of life that come upon us. Two things predominate: a need for wisdom and a triumphant joy. But in every other section he makes some mention of his situational sufferings. Pain and threat are always present, but with one striking exception, they never claim center stage. That exception occurs as we approach the center of the psalm. In verses 81-88, he hits bottom. He communicates a vivid sense of distress, sinking, vulnerability, and fragility. He feels broken in pieces by his troubles. There is nothing else like this in Psalm 119. Then, strikingly, as the psalm passes the mid-point (verses 89-91), he completely changes direction. Faith’s neediness yields to faith’s affirming trust. Elsewhere in Psalm 119, he never dwells on any one theme. Usually his affirmations to God come staccato, as scattered bits. But here he dwells on one thing, affirming over and over the LORD’s stability and certainty.

Forever, O LORD, Your word is settled in heaven. Your faithfulness continues throughout all generations. You established the earth and it stands. They stand this day according to Your ordinances, for all things are Your servants.

There’s nothing else like that in Psalm 119. It arises from the ashes of the preceding distress. The utter clarity of his hope speaks up from within the utter fragility of his situation. In the center of Psalm 119, he sinks into darkness

and then steps into light. He summarizes what has happened and where he's come out with words paraphrased in the title of this article: "If Your law had not been my delight, then I would have perished in my affliction" (v. 92).

Evils within, evils without. Hence two-fold distress animates this man of sorrows. He knows first-hand both the wickedness and the anguish that trouble the heart of man. Such realistic, candid godliness is quite different from the popular picture of Psalm 119. Does it portray (and enjoin in us) an ideal of unruffled, orderly self-discipline of doctrine and behavior? Does living with your nose in the Bible detach you from the fray of sin and suffering? On the contrary, we import a stoicism and intellectualism that is not there in Scripture. The Word itself disciplines a person to feel and say, "My soul weeps because of grief," not to live in denatured calm. The clarity of this man's awareness of God and of what ought to be produces a painful clarity in both self-awareness and situational awareness. All is not right. The

and wandering? We turn in on ourselves, and turn away from and against God. Even the "little" sins, like complaining or irritability, expunge the LORD from events in His universe. Sin follows an inward-turning inertia, curving in on itself (*curvitas in se*, as the ancients put it). Third, in those with an operative conscience, what is the *usual after-effect of sin*, failure, guilt, that painful sense of coming up short? Again, we turn in on ourselves. We brood about what we've done. We hide from God, or we despair, or we mumble cringing apologies, or we redouble good intentions. All this is to say, evils, whether done by or done to, tend to create monologues in the theater of your own mind.

But Psalm 119 creates a dialogue in the theater of the LORD's universe. We hear cries of focused, specific need in the face of sufferings and sins.<sup>5</sup> No chapter of the Bible asks for more, or asks more crisply. This man takes God at His word, and so he asks for what God alone can do. What does he want? As we might expect, his requests align exactly with his struggles against

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## In the center of Psalm 119, he sinks into darkness and then steps into light.

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truth of God rattles him, producing an accurate and impassioned sense of need. As we said earlier, Psalm 119's candor expresses the salvation of honesty.

### **Strand #3: "I need You to..."**

So far we've heard two things. A man speaks directly to God about God and about his struggle with evils. He naturally puts the two together. The result? He makes some eighty-nine blunt requests of the LORD. He asks for specific help. This is astonishing, when you think about it. It's unnatural.

First, what is the *usual effect of sufferings*, troubles, pain, and threat? We tend to turn in on ourselves. We brood about what's happening. Our world shrinks into inward preoccupation. Physical pain, or the experience of unfairness, or anxieties, or the need for money—these lay claim to our consciousness. In so doing, we implicitly turn away from God—and sometimes even turn overtly against God. Second, what is the *intrinsic effect of sin*, blindness, forgetfulness,

sin and pain. He wants mercy, in both senses of the word.

He pleads for God to deliver him from his own failings. We mentioned earlier how verses 8 and 176 shock us with their keen sense of distress and vulnerability at personal sinfulness. So what does a man with a tender conscience ask? "Don't forsake me utterly! Seek Your servant!" In other words, "Don't give up on me. Don't abandon me. Come after me. Hunt me down and rescue me. Show mercy to me." He is bold to ask for help.

He knows how hard it is to love. "Don't let me wander from Your commandments."

He gets preoccupied with the wrong things and bent the wrong way. "Incline my heart to Your testimonies."

His Bible gets routine. He can read the words, but miss the Lord. "Open my eyes that I may behold wonderful things from Your law."

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<sup>5</sup> In the next section, Strand #4, we will also hear shouts of joy.

He gets hooked on emptiness. "Turn my eyes away from looking at vanity."

Sin can seize the controls. "Don't let iniquity reign over me."

He's vulnerable to making bad choices. "Make me walk in the path of Your commandments."

He knows he needs mercy. "Be gracious to me according to Your word."

It's so simple. Ten times he simply asks, "Teach me." Nine times, "Revive me." Six times, "Make me understand." Is it that he doesn't know what God says? On the contrary, he knows exactly what God says, and exactly what he needs. It's *because* he knows those wonders of judgment, promise, testimony, and command—and *because* he knows his dull heart, and the distraction of his troubles—that he begs God to teach him, to make him alive. "I can read it, I can quote it, I want to live it. You must make me do it. You must awaken me. You must change me. You must teach me."

And, of course, Psalm 119 also pleads for deliverance from painful troubles. As always, he wastes no words. He never meanders in the sloughs of religiosity. He cuts straight to the point.

unreal? Or contorted by the mechanics? Or purveying false promises; creating false expectations; delivering untrue views of God, of us, and of circumstances? Why do they sound so "religious," when this man sounds so real? Why does "prayer" become such a production, or a protocol defining steps to follow and words to recite, or a heightened state of consciousness, or a superstitious ritual for working magic, or a way to be fake, or a way to bend God's ear for personal advantage, or all of the above at the same time? "Teach me. Revive me. Make me different. It is time for the LORD to act!"

The great Augustine, meekest of men, wrote a commentary on the Psalms. He put off Psalm 119 until the end. Then he kept putting it off until his friends made him write it. Beneath the simple surface, beneath the simple requests, he found this psalm too deep for comment: "It always exceeded the powers of my intent thought and the utmost grasp of my faculties." But what he could not grasp, he was able to live. Certainly it is here that Augustine learned to say, "Give what You command, O LORD, and command what You will." The words tell us what to believe, trust, need, and do—and God must make it so. Certainly it is here that Augustine learned the I-to-You communication

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## And, of course, Psalm 119 also pleads for deliverance from painful troubles.

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- Save me.
- Help me.
- Rescue me.
- Plead my cause.
- Look on my affliction.
- When will You comfort me?
- When will you judge those who persecute me?
- Don't let the arrogant oppress me.
- It is time for the LORD to act!

The lovingkindness of the LORD invites such pleas from His servants. Poverty? Bereavement? Sickness? Painful dying? Unfairness? Oppression? Betrayal? God cares, and the needy cry out.

Why do books on prayer often seem so goey in comparison? Or overheated and

that characterizes his *Confessions*. It was unprecedented; it has never been repeated; it's how we all ought to live. Psalm 119 gives a grown-up view of God, expressed through the heart and lips of a child.

### **Strand #4: "I am committed to..."**

We've seen three things: "You are.... I'm facing.... I ask...." Now, fourth, "Here I stand." Psalm 119 makes numerous fiercely committed statements of faith.

This man bluntly states his convictions. He asserts his deepest intentions. He knows who he is and whose he is. He proclaims that he is a child of the light. He knows the light. He wants the light. He will never forget the light. He aims to serve the light.

- I am Yours.
- I am Your servant.
- I have promised to keep Your words.
- I treasure Your word in my heart.
- Now I keep Your word.
- Your servant meditates on Your statutes.
- I shall keep Your statutes.
- I cling to Your testimonies.
- I observe Your testimonies.
- I have done justice and righteousness.
- I have chosen the faithful way.
- I do not turn aside from Your law.
- I have restrained my feet from every evil way.
- I hope for Your salvation, O LORD.
- I believe in Your commandments.
- I do Your commandments.
- I have not forgotten Your law.
- I do not forget Your commandments.
- I shall not forget Your word.
- I will never forget Your precepts.

It is a sweet truth about a Christian conscience that you can say all the following things in the same sentence: “Lord, You seek me out and show mercy because You are good [strand #1]; I have gone astray like a lost sheep [strand #2]; seek Your servant [strand #3]; I do not forget Your commandments [strand #4].” It is a sweet reality that the psychology of living faith includes simultaneous awareness of God’s grace, besetting evils, deep need, and indwelling radiance. “You are merciful,” “I am the chief of sinners,” “That hurts,” “Have mercy,” and “I am Yours” go well together.

Finally, this honest man voices his delight. Within the living conversation of Psalm 119, he gets a lot of what he asks for. He tastes the goodness of the very goods he requests from God. Psalm 119 comes full of savor and pleasure: firmly anchored joy, clear-sighted sense of direction, utter delight. This man experiences grace working within himself, that he has been changed, and is being changed, and will be changed. He tastes how good it is that his own faith works through love. He experiences consolation and protection in the midst of his troubles. He has a vivid sense for how God’s good purposes work out in real time, even in the valley of the shadow. Two-fold grief over evil drove him in anxious need to the LORD. Two-

fold delight at good animates his joy. Some forty times, he rejoices, delights, loves, gives thanks, marvels, sings praise! A person of the Word feels and says things like these:

- My heart stands in awe at everything You’ve said.
- I love what You say—exceedingly, passionately, above all things.
- I love Your commandments more than rivers of gold.
- Your words are sweeter than honey in my mouth.
- Your testimonies are the joy of my heart.
- I absolutely delight in all that You say.
- The things You have written down are my songs.
- I get up at midnight simply to give thanks to You.
- I look forward to lying awake at night so I can ponder Your words.
- I behold wonders in Your law—because I behold You.

All created things, all commandments, all promises, all stories of Your ways with humankind, all events... all reveal You; my joy, my hope, my delight; You, my highest exultation; You, my deep and indestructible gladness.

#### *What will you walk away with?*

Psalm 119 is like a vast, crowded room, as we’ve said. But it richly rewards our efforts to sit down and talk one-to-one with any of the guests present. Let me give one example of making it personal, to give a feel for application. It’s a small example. It’s the sort of problem we often don’t think about very carefully. We get resigned to it. We address it only with drugs. We don’t imagine God cares to make a difference.

How do you handle a sleepless night? You’re lying awake at night. Where do you go in your mind? How do you feel? What do you do? It just so happens that Psalm 119 mentions being awake at night four times.

I remember Your name in the night and keep Your law.... At midnight I shall rise to give thanks to You because of Your righteous ordinances.... I rise before dawn and cry for help; I wait for Your words. My eyes

anticipate the night watches, that I may meditate on Your word. (vss. 55, 62, 147f)

A sleepless night. It's not the most sharp-edged form of suffering. It is tedious. It brings you down by slow erosion, not in one devastating landslide. Sleeplessness is tiresome and tiring. That much is obvious.

Now to the less obvious. What *do* you think about when you lie awake at night?

Does your mind run to tomorrow? Do you churn over your to-do list, trying to remember all the things you need to do? Do you rehearse and presolve every problem that might arise?

Does your mind run to yesterday, brooding in regrets at your own failures. Or do you replay the bitter, hurtful videotape of what someone else did or said to you?

Do you just plain run away, turning to escapist, feel-good fantasies? Do you lie awash in your hobbies, immorality, athletic dreams, vacation plans, and the like?

Do you run every which way with worry? In the long night hours, do you cycle through anxieties: money, kids, terrorists, singleness,

Let me make it personal. Until the 1990s I rarely experienced sleeplessness. Then I started to travel each year to Korea. My body clock would get turned around. I'd work a long day, from breakfast on through conversations into the night. I'd drop off to sleep around 11:00 P.M., but then awaken and lie awake from 1:30 A.M. until 6:00 A.M., when I had to get up for another long day. My instinctive response was to plow and replot the to-do list of tomorrow's responsibilities. (Yes, I know, technically 1:30 A.M. is already "today", but it doesn't feel like it ought to be today yet.) I would endure that numb restlessness until tomorrow arrived. These hours were further darkened by grumbling ("Why me? Why now? Why this?"), and by apprehension ("What will the coming day be like if I am gray with exhaustion?"). I hated not sleeping.

But on my third trip to Korea, I happened to read Psalm 119 on the airplane. Verse 148 arrested me. It was as though I'd never read it before (a common Psalm 119 experience). "My eyes anticipate the night watches, that I may meditate on Your word." Could I face the

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## My eyes anticipate the night watches, that I may meditate on Your word.

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church problems, sickness, loneliness, or all of the above and lots more?

Do you sink into a pool of depressed resignation? Do you simply gut out the long hours in a state of numb restlessness?

Do you attach all your hopes to some promise of sleep? What is your elixir of choice? Warm milk? Quiet music? Sleeping pills? Reading a dull book? Avoiding stimuli? If you pray, is the focus solely on your desire for sleep, based on your life verse, Psalm 127:2?

Does Psalm 119 have anything to say about these parking places for the heart? It changes every one. Whether the hours are marked by tedium or swept into some dark frenzy, those hours are largely God-less. Psalm 119 describes hours full of God. It doesn't promise sleep (though rest is a good and desirable gift); it promises to change sleeplessness.

inevitable night watches with anticipation, not apprehension? God proved true to His word. I awakened on cue that first night, but I went to a new place. I turned over in my mind Psalm 23, and Numbers 6:24-26, the Beatitudes, and Psalm 131, and everything I could remember from Ephesians and John 1. As we saw, Psalm 119 opens doors into the rest of Scripture. Old friends became better friends. Night after night, I remembered, and thought, and prayed, and trusted, and loved, and delighted—and sometimes slept. Of course, I was still fatigued during the days. Faith is not magic. And I felt no particular delight in the mere fact of being wide awake. I'd rather have been sleeping. Sleeplessness is a form of suffering, after all. But the nights had changed.

I learned something—and I did not forget on several subsequent trips. But then what I learned came to my aid in a far deeper way. After heart surgery in 2000, sleepless hours

became an every night occurrence for a long time. I would rather have slept. But in the darkness, I was loved by God, and I loved Him in return. Imagine, in sleeplessness, You are my Shepherd. I lack nothing. You make me lie down in green pastures. You lead me beside still waters. You restore me soul. You lead me in paths of righteousness for Your name's sake. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, for You are with me.... Surely goodness and lovingkindness will follow me all the days of my life. This leaves no part of a sleepless night unchanged.

So how is it with you? Where do you need Psalm 119 to befriend you? Is it the grind of sleepless nights, and the question of where you will park your mind? "I anticipate the night watches."

Does some difficult form of lovelessness repeatedly puncture and distemper your life—worry, fears, sexual lust, bitterness, lying, temper, despair, procrastination? Where do you need grown-up help, not good intentions and quick fixes? "I am Yours. Save me. Teach me."

Is it the sharp-edged pain of some suffering? Have you been betrayed? Are you being betrayed? Is there an insoluble rift in a relationship? Is your body in pain, or failing? Is your child straying or struggling? "I would have perished in my affliction."

Do your joy and delight simply need to become more pointed and vocal? Does your confession of faith simply need to become more articulate and head on? We usually phrase confessions of faith this way, "I believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth...." Such a profession needs to transmute into faith's true confession: "You are my Father. You established the earth. All things are Your servants." Psalm 119 teaches us that way of talking. "Your testimonies are the joy of my heart."

Go back through Psalm 119 on your own (perhaps with four colors of highlighter in hand). Listen for affirmations about God. Listen for struggles inside and out. Listen for cries of honest need. Listen for expressions of conviction and delight. Perhaps go back through this essay. Every section contains some representative "names on the guest list." Find one affirmation about God that you need to say.

Identify one struggle with inner evil or outer pain that maps onto your own struggles. (In fact, usually sin and suffering go together. That's woven into the inner logic of Psalm 119 because it's intrinsic to the way God deals with us.) Choose one request that captures what you need God to do. Select one joyous assertion that expresses what you are in part and long to become in full.

Psalm 119 is the most "individualistic" psalm. We overhear first person singular faith. But what each one of us experiences, needs, and affirms always spills over into what all of us need, experience, and affirm. As faith works through love, then private faith reaches out to embrace the concerns of all of us together. "Open our eyes, LORD, and we will behold wonderful things in all that You have spoken to us!"

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In the pages that follow, you will often read the word "suffering," with its many synonyms and variants. It's basic to human life, basic to counseling ministry. Human beings live their lives in the valley of the shadow of death. Jesus was the man of sorrows acquainted with grief. Only at the end of the story will our God wipe away every tear, and there will no longer be any death, mourning, crying, or pain.

If this is how life is, then counseling always occurs in a context of hardships. Godliness always arises in a context of struggle. As we saw in Psalm 119, "sufferer" is one of three core elements in the identity of every child of the Father. We are sufferers. We are sinners. And, amid both, to the praise of the glory of His grace, we are saints, servants, sons and daughters of the Most High. When you counsel, you are struck hard by the troubles that people face. Ministry breaks your heart. You are struck hard by the chaotic darkness expressed in what people think, want, do, and feel. Ministry weighs you down with perplexities. And you are awestruck at the faith, kindness, courage, sensitivity, generosity, and perceptiveness expressed in what people think, want, do, and feel. Ministry makes your heart soar.

The articles in this issue all had their origin in a conference on suffering: CCEF Living Faith,

in the fall of 2003. We were so struck by the relevance of that topic, that we decided to work with speakers to convert their work into written form.

John 3:16 might be the famous verse, but there's no drop-off in quality in 3:17-21! John Bettler unpacks what Jesus says here in "Far as the Curse is Found." Biblical counseling is redemptive counseling, because the Bible is redemptive. God makes wrongs right. Jesus words are short and to the point, but they contain a world of implications for handling suffering and for helping sufferers.

"Which God is in Your Sufferings?" is the overall title for a five-part series by Steve Estes and Joni Eareckson Tada. Throughout, they aim to intertwine the true God with the honest human story. In "Sugar and Lemons," Estes shows how a satisfying explanation of suffering must wed God's deep love and His high sovereignty. In "Songs for the Soul, Cures for the Heart," Tada tells her own story, capturing how God always meets us mid-story. She goes on to tell another woman's story in "The Cure that Counts for Now and for Eternity," demonstrating how powerfully people are affected by witnessing another person who suffers in hope. Estes then tackles head on the much-argued question of how God rules His world: "From Whose Hand Comes Suffering?" Finally, both authors team up in "To Know Christ, Now, and Forevermore." Christ takes our sufferings personally, and it is in knowing Him that the experience of suffering finds its deepest resolution.

Paul Tripp evokes the experience of life in a fallen world—something is terribly wrong. We are "Living in Job's House." Tripp then goes on to show how meaning is found in a Person. The

living Redeemer who met Job back then continues to meet sufferers right now.

"In the Eye of the Storm: Dealing with Crisis" focuses on one particular sort of suffering: the crisis experience. Ron and Sue Lutz offer tools to address those immediate days and weeks right after hard news breaks. They set a trajectory of ministry for the months and years that follow the crisis.

That's our issue for the fall of 2004. I hope that you find yourself filled with clearer hope, and able to minister that hope more consistently to those you counsel—even this very week.

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You might notice a couple of changes in this issue of *JBC*. First, it is slightly thinner than recent issues, weighing in at about sixty pages, rather than in the neighborhood of eighty pages. This is because we have decided to publish four times per year, rather than three. In the past, we've published issues as "Fall, Winter, and Spring" (though sometimes the seasons got stretched a bit). We'll add a "Summer" issue in the coming year. We'll give you the same quantity of material, and hopefully, an ever-improving quality of wisdom. But it will arrive in slightly smaller doses, a little more often.

Second, we are changing our numbering system so that we will be on a *calendar* year, not an academic year. The issue in your hand is 22:4. The first issue in 2005 will be 23:1.

These changes will not affect what you get for your subscription cost. In fact, current subscribers will get one extra issue "for free." If you paid for three issues, you will receive four.