Hope when you are at your limit

Text: Psalm 119:81-88

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**Scriptures:** Matthew 26:36-46; Psalm 119:81-88

**Songs Chosen:** [SttL] 160, 73c, 119:81-88, 446, 291, 331

Series: Psalm 119

Theme: Faithfully trusting in God in dire circumstances

Proposition: God gives hope when we are utterly spent

**Introduction**

After almost a year living with COVID-19, there are many people, especially, in places like the USA, UK and parts of Europe who are exhausted and wonder when and how the pandemic disruptions and threats will end. This year, many more people may feel like they are at the limit of being able to cope. Have you ever felt so overwhelmed by difficulties in your life that you reach the limit of your own physical, mental and spiritual resources? When an animal, say a goat, is tied up with a rope to a peg in the ground, eventually all the grass within reach will have been eaten. Then hunger, weakness and eventually death follow. The expression “being at the end of your tether” describes both the goat and also the person who exhausts the supply of what they need to carry on living.

God’s people can, at times, find themselves at the ‘end of their tether’, as the psalmist did in Psalm 119:81-88. Kaph is 11th letter of Hebrew alphabet – the first word in each of the 8 verses of this section begins with the Hebrew letter ‘k’. The word describing being at the end, completely spent of resources begins with “K’. v81a “*My soul longs (is spent) for Your salvation*”; v82a “*My eyes long (are spent) for Your promise*”. This section of Psalm 119 describes a near-to-death experience. The psalmist is in desperate straits. There is a complete lack of inner resources. Not just within his body, but also his soul is at the very limit of endurance.

Think of Christ in the garden of Gethsemane. *“And being in an agony he prayed more earnestly; and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down to the ground*” (Luke 22:44). Perhaps you have felt like that at time(s) in the past year or earlier? Perhaps you will be at the end of your tether in the future, even at some point in the year to come. Perhaps you know someone who has lost hope. This sermon is for you. This sermon is for all of us. To know, to be reminded, that God gives hope when we are utterly spent. The three points this afternoon are:

1. Persecution to the limit of endurance
2. Suffering at the limit of endurance
3. Hope at the limit of endurance
4. **Persecution to the Limit of Endurance**

We usually get to the limit of our ability to cope by stages/degrees, as troubles pile up upon troubles. One blow follows another. Think of Job who lost 10 children, almost all his servants, and his livestock in one day. Then he lost his good health and then wished that he had never been born. Perhaps you’ve experienced a loss, then another one, and another, until you find yourself “at the limit” ... not sure if you can go on.

That’s where we find the author of Ps 119 in the Kaph section. But how exactly did the psalmist get to the end of his tether? He was pushed and pursued there. Opposition against him has been mounting you can see this in Psalm 119:

* In v 42 He is being taunted by others. The pressure on him escalates from the proud and insolent: v51 *“The insolent utterly deride me”.* He is mocked.
* v69 “*The insolent smear me with lies*”. He is slandered. v78 “*Let the insolent be put to shame, because they have wronged me with falsehood*”. He is deeply wronged with falsehood. His name is trashed.
* Now the persecution against him has reached a critical point: v85 *“The insolent have dug pitfalls for me; they do not live according to your law*”. The ungodly seek to trap him like an animal is captured in a carefully concealed pit in the ground. v86b “*They persecuted me with falsehood*”. The attacks against him are not physically violent. They are much worse! They are verbal. The truth about him is being challenged with falsehood
* v87 “*They have almost made an end of me on earth*”. They are very close to bringing me to an end. ‘*I have been persecuted to the limit of my endurance*’.

So the plea to God is a simple one “help me!” This psalmist is like Christ against whom plots were made, lies were told, false accusations fabricated. Isaiah 53:3 “*He was despised and rejected by men*”; **v7** “*He was oppressed and He was afflicted*”; v8 “*By oppression and judgment He was taken away*”. We do not know the depths of the agony of Christ in Gethsemane, the anticipation of death on the cross was a heavy burden on His soul. Those to whom He had spoken the truth in love desired to pull him down, to set a trap for him and destroy him. Remember he said, "*My soul is very sorrowful, even to death*” (Matt 26:38)

How about you? You might have had the experience of the psalmist, of having been attacked with lies through slander and gossip. You may be in different a situation today. Perhaps your pain is physical, and you don’t know how much more you can endure. Your pain may be mental or spiritual and you don’t know if you can go on. Your pain may be that of a fractured or strained relationship.

Christ, who, in His humanity, reached the ‘end of His tether in Gethsemane’, invites all who are in physical, mental, and/or spiritual need to *"come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest”* (Matt 11:28). He understands the reality of living life in this world; better than anyone else. He is available to all who will call upon His name and come to Him. So let’s come to the Christ, the Living Word, to learn more about suffering at the limit of endurance.

1. **Suffering at the Limit of Endurance**

The Bible doesn’t hide the reality and the intensity of the pain which comes at times to those who live as part of this creation which groans under the effect of sin. Jeremiah cries out in Lam 1:12 “*Look and see if there is any sorrow like my sorrow*”. The psalms in many places express the pain which God’s children experience in this life. We see this in our text this afternoon: e.g. v81a “*My soul longs for Your salvation*”; v82 “*My eyes long for Your word*”; v83 “*I have become like a wineskin in the smoke*”. Wineskins were leather bottles that contained water (Gen 21:14,19), milk (Judges 4:19) or wine (1 Sam 16:20). When exposed to smoke from a fire they become tainted; no longer fit for purpose but useless, ready to be thrown away. It’s like buying a car previously owned by a heavy smoker. It is impossible to remove the smell completely. Or burnt soup on the bottom of a cooking pan which taints whole batch and must then be throw out.

Just as smoke renders objects useless, so being at the end of your tether can strip you of your purpose and sense of value. That’s why some people try to take their own lives, sadly some succeed. At times when they are so low that they can see no purpose or point in carrying on living. The pain of ending their life appears to them to be better than the state of living no more.

The psalmist is at the end of his rope. He feels useless, spent, and without sufficient strength to carry on. But see; this near-death experience is not only due to the harmful activities of his enemies. It comes to his mind because of the seeming inactivity of His Lord. The lack of apparent answers to prayer: v82 “*When will You comfort me?*"; v84a “*How long must your servant endure?*”; v84b *“When will you judge those who persecute me?*”

When we suffer, questions arise in our minds about the Lord’s part of what we are experiencing. Think of Job. He had many questions. The great suffering of our soul is that the Lord seems to have abandoned us. This is expressed in Psalm 22:1-2 *“My God, my God, why have You forsaken me? Far from my deliverance are the words of my groaning. O my God, I cry by day, but You do not answer; And by night, but I have no rest”.* Christ cried out these words on the cross in an intensity of suffering of body and soul that we (thankfully) will never experience.

Why can we be sure to be spared such pain brothers and sisters? Because He experienced it for us; in our place. He was far more ‘at the end of His tether’ than you or I will ever be. He was beyond the limit of His endurance. God did abandon His own Son to death and to the pains of hell. This was an awful separation of the Heavenly Father from the Heavenly Son. The breaking of a bond of perfect love which had always been there. Before the cross Christ had only ever experienced pure union with God His Father. No wonder then that in Gethsemane in anticipation before the cross His agony was so great that: “*His* *sweat became like great drops of blood falling down to the ground*” (Luke 22:44).

I proclaim to you this evening that there is a Saviour, a man who understands your pain, because He himself has gone through what you are going through, only to a far greater degree and with perfect endurance. This Saviour, the Servant who suffered says: *"Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and YOU WILL FIND REST FOR YOUR SOULS”* (Matt 11:29). How did the psalmist find rest for His soul at the limit of his endurance through the Word of Christ? He had hope through prayer.

1. **Hope at the Limit of Endurance**

Some people respond to great pressure in their lives by withdrawing into themselves, or by relying on drink, drugs, or worldly pleasures to get them through. That’s why there are so many people addicted to substances, internet media, sex and money in our society. How deeply saddening it is when God’s people stop coming to church when they are at the end of their tether. How deeply saddening when they stop reading and meditating on the living Word. How deeply saddening when they stop praying. Charles Bridges has written that **“***very often prayer is the casualty of suffering, whereas it is in reality the surest remedy”.*

This psalmist is at the limit of his endurance, but He hasn’t stopped praying. He finds hope in the Word of Christ; a hope firmly based on God’s lovingkindness - His covenant love. Notice then that the psalmist neither gives into the wicked nor does he end his devotion to his Lord. He seeks the comfort which only His God can give:

* I’m at the end of my bodily strength **but** (81b) “*I hope in Your word*”.
* I’m at the very limit of spiritual life, **yet** (83b) “*I have not forgotten your statues*”.
* My enemies have persecuted me **but** (v86a) **“***All Your commandments are sure*”.
* My life has almost been destroyed by my enemies, **howeve**r, (87b) “*I have not forsaken your precepts*”. Others have done evil to me, but I desire to do what is right according to your word.

Sometimes the Lord does not remove suffering, but wills that we persevere whilst continuing to live at the limit of our endurance. That was the ongoing experience of the Apostle Paul. He had received a “thorn of flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me – to keep me from exalting myself!” We don’t know what this was. Paul relayed the Lord’s comfort to Him in His suffering: *"My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness"* (2 Corinthians 12:9).

If you or I were an animal on a tether, we’d die once we had got to the end of the rope and eaten all the grass. But here’s the difference, as Jesus said: *"It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh profits nothing; the words that I have spoken to you are spirit and are life”* (John 6:63). So the psalmist, knowing of the covenant love of God, anticipating the Saviour who was yet to come prays: v88 “*In your steadfast love give me life, that I may keep the testimonies of your mouth*”. Refresh my life, because you have promised to be my God. Not so that I can seek revenge on my enemies, or enjoy a trouble-free life BUT So that I can live for you according to your will.

So then what? (PAUSE) Did the psalmist find hope at the end of his tether? YES! We **know** that the Lord answered this prayer! How? you ask me, simple mathematics! There are another 176-88=88 verses in this psalm! The end he fears is actually not the end. There’s more rope! He’s actually right in the middle of the psalm, at the lowest point. His fears are real, but they are without ground. Because His God, Our God, is greater than his enemies, greater than our enemies. The old wineskin did not crack and fail, but was renewed (Mark 2:22). Here at the end of his rope, the psalmist found the beginning of a new experience of God’s grace!

May you too find renewed hope and strength today as He did and as you look forward to the year ahead. You may well be at the limit of your own strength of body and soul, but you most certainly are not at the end of God’s love, for His love towards us in Christ has no limit.

In Christ we share the same hope as our psalmist. This is the same gospel hope that the Apostle Paul expressed in these words: “*For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:38-39).*

AMEN