

LESSON 5

BIBLICAL SUPPORT FOR THE DOCTRINE OF VERBAL PLENARY PRESERVATION (III)

-- Psalm 119:89

(by Rev Dr Quek Suan Yew)

I. INTRODUCTION

Psalm 119:89 LAMED: *“For ever, O LORD, thy word is settled [Niphal participle] in heaven.”*

This is the beginning of a new section (verses 89-96) in the treatment of the Word of God. This is easily seen in the Hebrew Bible where all the eight verses begin with the letter Lamed (the letter “L” in English).

The focus of this new section on the Word of God is that “the Word of God is forever settled.”

II. INTERPRETING PSALM 119:89 – The forever settled Word

A. Meaning of “forever settled”

“Settled” means “to set up” or “to establish”. It is in the Niphal stem which makes the verb passive i.e. “to be set up or to be established.” As a participle the emphasis would be on the action of the verb.

The qualifier to this verb is the word “forever.” The meaning of the two words combined together emphasizes the fact that the Word of God will be established forever.

The word of God will not change. It will not be lost, every part of it. It will be established forever.

B. What is “forever settled”?

What is forever settled is the Word of God, all of it. Although most of the OT and the entire NT were not written yet when Psalm 119 was penned, the truth of this doctrine is by way of application extended to the entire Bible from Genesis to Revelation. All sixty-six books of the Bible are the very Word of God. Therefore the forever established Word of God would definitely include all the books of the Bible.

Barnes have this to add, “The word rendered ‘settled’ means properly ‘to set, to put, to place;’ and then, to stand, to cause to stand, to set up, as a column, Gen. 35:20; an altar, Gen. 33:20; a monument, 1Sam. 15:12. The meaning here is, that the word - the law - the promise - of God was made firm, established, stable, in heaven; and would be so forever and ever. What God had ordained as law would always remain law; what he had affirmed would always remain true; what he had promised would be sure forever.” [Albert Barnes’ Notes of the Bible—Swordsearcher 4.7]

Barnes is correct to make the observation that the law of God will be established forever and it is good that he added “what he had promised would be sure forever.” To this it must be added that the phrase used in Psalm 119:89 is “God’s Word” which means all the words of God. In other words, the scope of the forever settled word is every jot and tittle without exception.

The Word of God must not be dichotomized into some parts more or some parts less inspired than others, where the parts that are less inspired may have mistakes but that which is more inspired cannot have mistakes. The measure of those parts which are supposed to be “more inspired” are mostly defined as those parts that pertain to “man’s salvation.”

However, God has never at any time in the Bible teaches different levels of inspiration. Inspiration is absolute and has only one standard. ALL of the words of God are equally inspired, including the numbers, names of places and people. These letters and every word including their tenses, person, gender, and number are all inspired and are inerrant, infallible. They are divinely inspired and preserved.

The dichotomizing of the Word of God into different levels of inspiration and also preservation is a deadly presupposition and teaching. This deadly approach is compounded by the notion that man’s salvation becomes the sovereign yardstick of what constitutes as more inspired or more preserved. Such man-centered theology is a ploy of the Devil to inflate man’s ego and to deceive man. The whole Bible is always God-centered.

Every word of God is inspired and of equal value in the eyes of God. Man has no right to segmentize God’s Word into less important and more important according to his whims and fancies.

C. Forever Settled in Heaven

On earth everything changes. The world continues to decay with every passing year. It is said that the ozone layer has increased in size and the temperature is rising. The second law of thermal dynamics teaches that all matters decay and break down. Multi-billion-dollar companies that used to be the life line of thousands of employees are now bankrupt. All human beings grow old and die. Nations that used to be superpowers are now minions. For example Babylon used to rule a vast empire in the Middle East but now has become a weak nation. Greece was a superpower in the days of Alexander the Great where he thought he had conquered the whole world and there was nothing left for young Alexander to conquer. Today Greece is a small insignificant nation not ranked among the superpowers. Superpowers come and superpowers get replaced! Everything on planet earth is never settled.

But the Word of God is settled in heaven. It means that the Word of God will not be like the ever changing earth, which changes all the time. The Word of God is settled in heaven. It is constant and not afflicted or affected by the variableness of the earth. The constancy and veracity of the Word of God is emphasized here. Christian must find his comfort in the immutable and perfect Word of God. It is settled forever in heaven untouched by the whims and fancies of evil men. No matter how man may attack God’s holy and perfect Word, it will never dent it or affect it. It is permanently

secured by God Himself, settled forever in heaven. Be comforted and continue to trust the immutable God by trusting His inerrant, infallible and inspired and preserved perfect Word.

John Calvin observed correctly when he wrote, “Many explain this verse as if David adduced the stability of the heavens as a proof of God's truth. According to them the meaning is that God is proved to be true because the heavens continually remain in the same state. Others offer a still more forced interpretation, ‘That God's truth is more sure than the state of the heavens.’ But it appears to me that the prophet intended to convey a very different idea. **As we see nothing constant or of long continuance upon earth, he elevates our minds to heaven, that they may fix their anchor there.** David, no doubt, might have said, as he has done in many other places, that the whole order of the world bears testimony to the steadfastness of God's Word - - that Word which is most true. **But as there is reason to fear that the minds of the godly would hang in uncertainty if they rested the proof of God's truth upon the state of the world, in which such manifold disorders prevail; by placing God's truth in the heavens, he allots to it a habitation subject to no changes.** That no person then may estimate God's word from the various vicissitudes which meet his eye in this world, heaven is tacitly set in opposition to the earth. Our salvation, as if it had been said, being shut up in God's Word, is not subject to change, as all earthly things are, but is anchored in a safe and peaceful haven. The same truth the Prophet Isaiah teaches in somewhat different words: "All flesh is grass, and all the godliness thereof is as the flower of the field" (Isaiah 40:6).

“He means, according to the Apostle Peter's exposition, (1 Peter 1:24) that the certainty of salvation is to be sought in the Word, and, therefore that they do wrong who settle their minds upon the world; **for the steadfastness of God's Word far transcends the stability of the world.**”

1 Peter 1:24-25, *“For all flesh is as grass, and all the glory of man as the flower of grass. The grass withereth, and the flower thereof falleth away: But the word of the Lord endureth for ever. And this is the word which by the gospel is preached unto you.”*

The Psalmist did not stop at verse 89 but restates the same theme of verse 89 in the next two verses. Psalm 119:90-91 reads, *“Thy faithfulness is unto all generations: thou hast established the earth, and it abideth. They continue this day according to thine ordinances: for all are thy servants.”* In the event that some might think that the Word of God is only constant in heaven and of no earthly good, verses 90 and 91 argue and answer this question. The earth may change but it changes within her own constancy. This constancy of the earth is in God's sovereign power and control. God revealed to us that this constancy of the earth's overall disposition has its foundation in the unchanging Word of God. It is according to the forever settled Word of God in heaven that the earth finds her constancy!

John Calvin is right when he commented that, “. . . the Psalmist repeats and confirms the same sentiment. He expressly teaches that although the faithful live for a short time as strangers upon earth, and soon pass away, yet their life is not perishable, since they are begotten again of an incorruptible seed. He, however, proceeds still farther.

He had before enjoined us to peer by faith into heaven, because we will find nothing in the world on which we can assuredly rest; and now he again teaches us, by experience, that though the world is subject to revolutions, **yet in it bright and signal testimonies to the truth of God shine forth, so that the steadfastness of His Word is not exclusively confined to heaven, but comes down even to us who dwell upon the earth. For this reason, it is added, that the earth continues steadfast, even as it was established by God at the beginning.** Lord, as if it had been said, even in the earth we see Thy truth reflected as it were in a mirror; for though it is suspended in the midst of the sea, yet it continues to remain in the same state. **These two things, then, are quite consistent; first, that the steadfastness of God's Word is not to be judged of according to the condition of the world, which is always fluctuating, and fades away as a shadow; and, secondly, that yet men are ungrateful if they do not acknowledge the constancy which in many respects marks the framework of the world; for the earth, which otherwise could not occupy the position it does for a single moment, abides notwithstanding steadfast, because God's Word is the foundation on which it rests.** Farther, no person has any ground for objecting, that it is a hard thing to go beyond this world in quest of the evidences of God's truth, since, in that case, it would be too remote from the apprehension of men. The prophet meets the objection by affirming, **that although it dwells in heaven, yet we may see at our very feet conspicuous proofs of it, which may gradually advance us to as perfect knowledge of it as our limited capacity will permit. Thus the prophet, on the one hand, exhorts us to rise above the whole world by faith, so that the Word of God may be found by experience to be adequate, as it really is adequate, to sustain our faith; and, on the other hand, he warns us that we have no excuse, if, by the very sight of the earth, we do not discover the truth of God, since legible traces of it are to be found at our feet.** In the first clause, men are called back from the vanity of their own understanding; and, in the other; their weakness is relieved, that they may have a foretaste upon earth of what is to be found more fully in heaven. [Taken from http://www.ccel.org/c/calvin/comment3/comm_vol11/htm/xxviii.xii.htm]

III. CONCLUSION

Let the comments of Spurgeon on Psalm 119:89 be our summary:

“The strain is more joyful, for experience has given the sweet singer a comfortable knowledge of the Word of the Lord, and this makes a glad theme. After tossing about on a sea of trouble, the Psalmist here leaps to shore and stands upon a rock. **Jehovah's Word is not fickle nor uncertain; it is settled, determined, fixed, sure, immovable. Man's teachings change so often that there is never time for them to be settled; but the Lord's Word is from of old the same, and will remain unchanged eternally.** Some men are never happier than when they are unsettling everything and everybody; but God's mind is not with them. **The power and glory of heaven have confirmed each sentence which the mouth of the Lord has spoken, and so confirmed it that to all eternity it must stand the same — settled in heaven, where nothing can reach it.** In the former section David's soul fainted, but here the good man looks out of self and perceives that the Lord fainteth not, neither is weary, neither is there any failure in His Word.

“The verse takes the form of an ascription of praise: the faithfulness and immutability of God are fit themes for holy song, and when we are tired with gazing upon the shifting scene of this life, the thought of the immutable promise fills our mouth with singing. **God’s purposes, promises, and precepts are all settled in His own mind, and none of them shall be disturbed. Covenant settlements will not be removed, however unsettled the thoughts of men may become; let us therefore settle it in our minds that we abide in the faith of our Jehovah as long as we have any being.**”
[<http://www.eternallifeministries.org/psalm119l.htm>]

Two other verses that support the teaching of Psalm 119:89 are:

- (a) Psalm 119:152: *“Concerning thy testimonies, I have known of old that thou hast founded them for ever.”*
- (b) Psalm 119:160: *“Thy word is true from the beginning: and every one of thy righteous judgments endureth for ever.”*